

# Infusing Fresh Blood

AA JH

John Hurrell – 18 August, 2010

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## ARTSPACE

Auckland

**Mei Cooper, Trenton Garratt, Claire Harris, Jess Johnson, Jeremy Leatinu'u, Scott Satherley, Tiffany Sigh**  
*Knowing You Knowing Me: New Artists*  
Curated by Emma Bugden

10 July - 21 August 2010

New artists shows often can be tedious. You can get young recent graduates desperately trying to show 'attitude' by offering brattishness and little else, or the national selection being so disparately freewheeling as to be incomprehensible in terms of theme. Is that what we expect? Exhibitions that just show the curator's taste, with no attempts at linking? Can a student who has exhibited outside the university ever be 'new'? And does 'new' have to mean 'young' and does 'young' have to mean 'graduated from a university'?

This show of Bugden's though is a goodie - even though three of the seven artists are not new to me. It is interesting, entertaining and has cohesion. The parts interconnect, oddly, for since it is rarely taught now in art schools, drawing is the dominant feature. Yet it is mixed with performance and to a lesser degree video, installation and sculpture.

This is most obvious in the main gallery with the work of Jess Johnson, a Kiwi who is a co-director of Hell Gallery, a venue that doubles as a performance and music space in Melbourne. As well as organiser, Johnson is a wonderful graphic artist who makes striking zines and posters for the gallery's shows and events. Her drawing is in the satirical manner of comic artist Dan Clowes, similar in its stiff stillness (not fluid in its use of rendered motion like say Robert Crumb or Joe Matt) but less cynical and more engaging. Her installation uses laminated posters to make a carpet on which stand four new easels back to back, holding bigger drawings. She provides here a very compact but richly detailed exhibition with which it is possible to spend a lot of time. My favourite image is of two cats called Mike and Kelly, where minders are told 'If they vomit feed them more, if they cry feed them less.'

Most of the drawing in this show is unlike Johnson's in that it is 'abstract', to do with process, not representing objects or people. The notable exception is that of Mei Cooper who presents a series of watercolour and pencil drawings showing a tattoo on her back that references the line Santiago Sierra had tattooed on the backs and arms of six Brazilian prostitutes. She also painted a version of it with



wine spilt on to the ARTSPACE floor.

Cooper also has another work, a large hanging paper scroll where pink watercolour italicised letters elucidate various phrases barked at competing girls by a coach for water polo - in an attempt to inspire greater energy. In vivid contrast to these imperative instructions the videos of Jeremy Leatinu'u present the more gentle and infinitely friendlier word 'Welcome', dramatically written by the artist on a field close to the runway of landing aircraft, using carefully positioned scoria, and also printed on a card directed by the artist directed to unnamed visitors near the international arrival door at Auckland airport. The airport video is funny because of the consternation of some visitors wondering who *is* he waiting for.

This is a send up of Samoan community pressures to always be nice to guests, and is a more subtle and engrossing work than the food market video he recently displayed at Te Tuhi, where he was sitting on a road obstructing pedestrians. Here he is mixing with other 'genuine' welcomers and he just seems a bit simple, as if he has forgotten to get the card completed correctly with the name of the person he is paging - and he hasn't yet noticed.

The other video work is by Claire Harris from Christchurch - the only nonAuckland. She is interested in stand up comedy, its methods of delivery, and techniques like the knowing smirk. Harris tells the viewers a knock knock joke about girls climbing trees without underpants and then gleefully charges the camera in said state. Of course her actions are not shocking - for art audiences are used to anything, especially nudity or genital exposure - but they have an appealingly goofy silliness. Barely funny as an act of confrontation, but interesting as an action that is openly nutty yet logical.

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Satherley's drawing looks a bit like cursive writing, or the scribbled jumbled writing of say Cy Twombly. Printed writing though is used by Trenton Garratt on a takeaway stacked sheet of 'out of' phrases continuously linked as if poured out of a tap, separated only by commas. The work is unidentified, so it is 'out of nothing', 'out of production' and 'out of left field': to quote some of the 3-400 expressions on the page.

Garratt also has several dense grey pencil drawings on the walls, of straight marks pouring into (or out of) a central vortex, and on a set of beautifully made small stools (with inlaid crosses, made by another artist unidentified by the gallery flier) he has on Sundays given one-to-one story readings. There he has been reading a fable by Peter Carey about a famous mime known for his ability to induce terror. The tale tells of the disastrous consequences when he tries to change his style, and how he commits suicide by walking (in mime) into a river.

Garratt's interactive project attempts to draw you (the visitor) out in conversation, and as Carey's linguistically slippery text is very rich in its interpretative nuances about art, artists and their audiences, it is easy to chat. It goes well with the content of Garratt's written 'out of' text and his symbolic 'abstract' pencil drawings.

Tiffany Singh's performance and installation uses the floor as a support for an orchestrated 'community' drawing. With a grid of paper origami 'bombs' suspended from the ceiling and loaded up with all sorts of aromatic and colourful materials that reference the Indian Holi festival, participants pull strings to let the petals, lentils, spices, powders and leaves fall onto the salt covered floor. Unfortunately after the performance a horde of feral children seem to have vandalised the work. It looks like art institutions now have to put up electric fences to protect their displays.

This thoughtful, humorous and vibrant exhibition is unusual in the way it overlays mark making with social and public connectivity. I think I much prefer it to other New Artist shows I have seen at ARTSPACE in other years. The placement of the work and the linking underpinning conceptual threads make it particularly satisfying.

**John Hurrell**