

Finding Base in Absurdity: Peter Robinson – Back from Ack

For more than twenty years Peter Robinson has been creating scenarios that seek out the limits of material and form. He has focused his explorations on how form can inflect space with narratives of the consumption of culture and the culture of consumption, and their aftermath. Robinson's work understands the language of sculpture and the various accounts that art history tells of this medium. His exploration is invested in the cycle of consumption as a way to find a base to these times – from the desire to ingest, to the process of digestion and to the production that completes the cycle back to further insatiable feeding.

Robinson's work exhibits a reflexive understanding of the process that went into its making, and allows this to be seen somewhat performatively, although he ensures that the work never simply has one definable strategy. His work is formal, yet extends beyond a pursuit of pure abstraction. Meaning, here, is a function of the form given to the residue, the peripheral, the unseen and intangible – certain experiential dynamics are wrought from gallery spaces that are as personal as the internal body and as unfathomable as the universe.

Navigating the formal arrangement of his work inspires consideration of the way that systems are built on the desire to consume – be it the lived experience of enacted economic theories and political systems of governance or the moral rules that underpin social relations. In turn, the work reflects on the state of being a consumer – including a consumer of art – during the time described as modernity (which is both now and then, and has had many different iterations in between). However, instead of sculpting form to represent these ideas, Robinson has been building an understanding of the work's meaning as a function of the form itself. It's this reflexivity that continues to make Robinson's project complex, and that reveals its alignment with the characteristics of Modernism: a conscious embrace of dissonance across a lineage of incessant experimentation.

More recently Robinson has been investigating the formal possibilities of polystyrene as a material. The realisation of the exhibition *Ack* was the beginning of this particular material exploration. The work was a cohesive installation that engaged directly with the gallery space, extending the environment and its architectural parameters. Crossing over the three galleries of Artspace, the anthropomorphic forms, white and light, projected from the walls, each room containing a sculptural assertion that filled the gallery space to its edges. As a whole, its form was that of an organic, anthropomorphic, quasi-archetypal entity that

continued to confound representation, redirecting the viewers' consideration back to the formal properties of the work.

Every large form was produced by carving a polystyrene block with a chainsaw, while smaller, more detailed forms were wilted into shape. To experience the installation was to reflect on the act of perception – the form of *Ack* became unformed and reformed; shapes shifted in and out of focus, yet always back to the properties of the material. A substance ubiquitously associated with the packaging of consumer goods, polystyrene is also used, more generally, as a space filler and insulator. (It is also a material commonly used by the film and theatre industries to create tableaux, and is a substance of highly-publicised toxicity and non-biodegradability.)

To narrate the scene: The work seemed to speak to us as viewers about our drive for visual consumption. Similar to a Rorschach test – where shapes shift in and out of representation and reform into a myriad of possible images dependent on the viewer's associations – the work gave play to the idea of interpretation as an act of re-production. The installation's theatre allowed it to be about everything and nothing: another take, and it was as though the forms became the extension of the collected residue of prior activity in the gallery; its whispered pasts and ghost patterns of thought.

Citing British sculptor Anthony Caro as an influence on the *Ack* installation, it seems Robinson located his framework of enquiry in a formalist study of negative space and the void. In the late 1950s Caro moved sculpture off the plinth placing it directly on the ground, and built up a language of abstraction from linear elements to describe negative space. This framing of form by the edge was taken up by Robinson in his employment of negative or unseen space to make the formal give frame to the political. The stuff of it, polystyrene, could be seen as a reminder that the ice caps are melting and that we must look elsewhere to find an intimate, personal space away from consumerism.

These connotations were most evident in the smallest gallery – a room often treated as an annex space – where the form of the work became dioramic, in effect presenting a single iceberg with a mounted duck head. Consideration of this vignette led to a reading of the work as a nod to the history of industrialisation, and of colonisation, a major project of the former. Further, it could be seen as an environmentalist comment on the effects of capitalism's incessant production and its destructive lack of regard for consequences – that is, other than the generation of economic surplus, a process in which we are all implicated to one extent or another.

The abstract shaping of the material also obliquely indicates the tendencies of the work's direct context – the colonising function of the institution. Echoing conceptual art's concern with the frame of the institution and with deconstructing the power of the white cube, the gallery became implicated, altered, and its frame brought into focus by Robinson's amorphous forms. Robinson's installation produced an anarchistic sketch on the possibility of the gallery to fragment as a result of material

excess, the white cube becoming a splintered cubist form of itself. It was almost as though *Ack* gave license to the gallery to return to its internal 'animal' so to speak.

An examination into the 'base' processes of consumption and production is evident in Robinson's 2005 works *The Humours* and *Sweet Thing*. Leading up to *Ack*, these works apparently explored another scape – the unseen spaces of our bodily insides, the fluids within them and the body's by-products. *Sweet Thing*, particularly, extended sculpture through a painterly engagement with form, these floor works collecting an accumulation of defecated paint spots and shapes – a deliberate mess. Or, as Jonathan Bywater put it, "This abdication of sculptural control seems to have encouraged some impolite, infantile behaviour where forms have been fashioned, they encode the basest of symbols: simultaneously faecal and phallic"¹.

Constituting a definite shift in his practice, this work began to let materials loose to behave as they will. It was as though Robinson was seeking sculptural rendering's lowest common denominator, drawing on the most fundamental and visceral relationship to material, the process of ingestion and digestion. This could be seen partly to contend with the weight of history – be it the residue of historical events, the linear narrative told of Modernist art history, the long-term effects of consumerist behavior, or indeed the relationship of the artist to his own exhibition history. As Bywater observed, this work reflects on the way "our attitudes to and experience of consumption and reproduction are reproduced by material social conditions. Both in our body chemistry, and in the larger flows of history, the material, like Robinson's runaway plastics, may always escape complete control"².



Peter Robinson, *Sweet Thing*, 2005, polyurethane, pigment, Fimo, Plasticine, dimensions variable. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph courtesy Michael Lett.

The structural framework, the conceptual mise-en-scène in which Robinson chose to play out the material explorations of *The Humours*, was the ancient Greek philosophy of bodily constitutions. 'The humours' were four fluids thought to course through the human body and determine a person's temper, imbalance among the humours supposedly creating a similarly imbalanced personality. *The Humours*

1 Jonathan Bywater, 'On the Genealogy of the Sugar Buzz: ***SPAM*** get all the mads you need in one place' in *Peter Robinson*, Auckland: Michael Lett Gallery, 2005, np.

2 Ibid.



Peter Robinson, *Das Es*, 2005-6, mixed media, 3500 x 1500 x 1500mm. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph Bill Nichol, courtesy Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

became an intense layering and anarchic overflow of material, which layered up a flux of connections that continually fed back into the work's concern. Attentive to the dysfunction, the seduction and the compulsion of excessive consumption, Robinson seemingly created a mash-up of deliberate imbalance as a comment on the unobtainability of relational balance and bodily equilibrium. This work also appeared to show an understanding of knowledge as predicated on a confluence of indirect and untranslatable forces. While *The*

Humours worked within the framework of a philosophical theory, his shake-up and manifestation of excess in both *The Humours* and *Sweet Thing* was a formal sketch towards discovering a way out of direct representation and an understanding of how the visceral can engender material with meaning.

For the Venice Biennale exhibition *Divine Comedy* in 2001, negative space was also the focus of Robinson's study of form via an acknowledged didacticism in which the numerical form of zero became a graphic sign, rendered through the slickness of photographic paper, enamel and fibreglass. Tightly controlled and focused, these sculptural and graphic studies took as their premise the binary code that forms the basis of digital communication and, by extension, the pursuit of a globalised network of free-market economies.

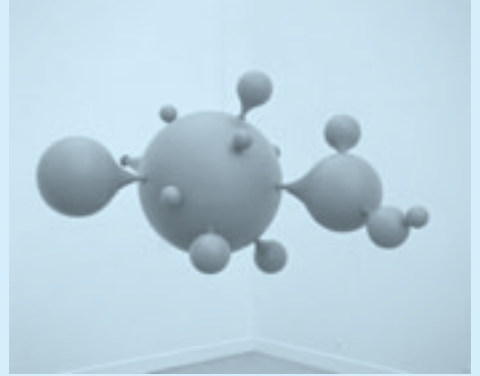
Deceptive in its minimal veneer, *Divine Comedy* employed an abstraction that accumulated and accelerated theories of the structure of the universe, sucking all its content into the void of visual surface. Part of a continuum of concern for Robinson, the theories of time and space explored in *Divine Comedy* drew on multiple cultural and philosophical contexts, conceptualising ideas as vast as genealogy and evolution. The installation shifted registers perpetually under this weight of reference, its elements seeming disconnected and the relationship of figure and ground continually changing. Or, as Gregory Burke remarked, "rather than reserving the direction of Modernism, Robinson takes it to the limit and beyond. Calling on contemporary cosmologies, the elements of his installation act as figures of abstraction that reference different theoretical depictions of time, space and matter"³.

3 Gregory Burke, 'Bi-Polar: Divine comedy and a demure portrait of the artist strip-searched' in *Bi-Polar: Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson*, Wellington: Creative New Zealand, 2001, p14.

This continually reforming state of meaning could also be seen to model the internet's hyper-linked passageways of information. Furthermore, it was an intended overload that gave a particular and reflexive commentary on the accelerating market for the consumption of art and its attendant industries. In one of the installation spaces a glass model – a series of spheres figuring concentric expanding universes suspended in space – gave form to this ceaseless production of meaning.

In this apparent attempt to bridge quantum physics with Einstein's relativity, Robinson it seems was commenting on the inevitable failure to control meaning, and the implausibility of producing unified theories. As Burke observed, "If Robinson's installation de-scales the universe, it also flattens time by tracing Modernism's trajectory as a form of manic convolution... Wall prints show fields of one and zeros and models of expanding universes that are in the process of begetting further parallel universes."⁴ Furthermore, the binary code of digital communication presented in the related ASCII prints also spun a connection to *tukutuku* patterning and to the Maori conceptualisation of creation – the on/off of the binary formed *Io*, the name of the supreme being from which everything descends.

Often, critical commentary would formulate a reductive reading of these works, positioning his exhaustive referencing as nihilism in reaction to cultural construction, and, in the context of the Venice Biennale, to the pressures of national representation. Being Maori is an ever-present concern for Robinson – it is one of the underlying threads that make up his complex and multi-stranded works – and it seems that he certainly reflected on these complexities in the exhibition premise of *Divine Comedy*. Knowing that the promotion of his identity was, in part, motive for his selection, he juxtaposed philosophical theories of existence with cultural constructs, the optical with the textual, creating a disjunctive visual encounter. By emphasising contradiction as a



Peter Robinson, *Inflation Theory 1* from *Divine Comedy*, 2001, fibreglass, aluminium, enamel paint, 1060 x 1640 x 1500mm. Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photograph Bryan James, courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.



Peter Robinson, *Fag Time*, 2004, papier-mâché, wire, polyurethane, pigment, steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph Sarah Smuts-Kennedy.

4 Ibid., p9.



Peter Robinson, *Tongue of the False Prophet*, 1992, tar, wax, earth, pasta, glass, wool, fibreglass, polystyrene, 4 units: 1350 x 300 x 210mm; 1700 x 300 x 220mm; 1800 x 300 x 450mm, 1650 x 300 x 300mm. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.

strategy he actively resisted the meaning of his work being subsumed by the political agenda of others.

Robinson's practice is motivated by, and has developed from, a process of moving from one particular material to another, enacting his own cycles of consumption. This methodology is rooted in one of his first series of works – his tar paintings, first shown in 1992 at the Claybrook Gallery in Auckland, alongside works by Shane Cotton in an exhibition entitled *Tract*. This

work connoted the measurement of vast time and history, of the unnamed and the immeasurable, their canvasses mounded up with a thickness and dimension that propelled their plural political message forward. When William McAloon wrote about this work at the time, he recognised Robinson's engagement with the visceral nature of substance and how he would exhaust the material's potential: "Robinson's work remains on this point of cataclysm, re-enacting it"⁵.

In the early nineties Robinson was interested in stirring up debate about what he saw as political complacency in contemporary art by bringing peripheral issues to the centre. His work soon became vernacular assaults that confounded and critiqued modernist primitivism via an ambiguous mimicry of New Zealand abstraction. Establishing a conceptual distance from the easily consumable identity politics of the day, Robinson took up a renegade position from which he could tackle the hard realities of representation, through investing in the surface value of the statement.

Moreover, despite this period of issue-related assertion, you could see the impetus for Robinson's future practice and his accumulating anxiety of being codified. For example, the self-aware 3.125% painting, its numerals spelled out in thick tar, created commentary on the added value that the art market placed on him as a Maori artist, ironically teasing out the nonsensical measurement of identity in terms of fractions. The 'strategic plan' paintings of 1996, in which inverted European monuments attached to indistinct corporate-style messages, were overt critiques of the establishment and its insidious hegemonies. The sculptural red-white-and-black patchwork surface of the plane in *Untitled* (1994) was a direct reference to the veneer of cultural production, and became a marker of Robinson's enquiry into the inevitable readjustment and repositioning of cultural values.

It is as though Robinson's practice as a whole is a constant re-enactment of his early workings with tar – his consumption of material until it is no longer useful

5 William McAloon, *Tract: Shane Cotton and Peter Robinson*, Auckland: Claybrook Gallery, 1992, np.

feeding into his excavation of the operations of Modernism. By delving into vast philosophical and cultural concepts, the history of art and politics, and how these ideas relate to an act of consumerism, Robinson has found an apparent framework or tableau in which to pursue form and its distillation.

In the attempt to understand Modernism and find a way out of its frame – with an escapist laugh – Robinson has been getting closer to its experimental basis and dissonance. *Ack*, and his work since, has been a way to get beyond instructive meaning and the weight of historical reference. It is work that is loose, malleable, speaks to its present, yet acknowledges that the power of representation lies in residual depths, in unseen spaces. It is in these spaces that he locates the possibility of reinventing both personal and collective histories of modernity and colonialism. By ingesting these relayed accounts, and, in turn, making a cipher of his own lived experience, Robinson has been increasingly making form speak; and coaxing us, as consumers of the work, to re-produce its meaning through the immediacy of a visceral relationship with material stuff.



Peter Robinson, *Untitled*, 1994, polystyrene, fibreglass, glass, wool, velvet, linen, 1620 x 4500 x 4100mm. Photograph courtesy City Gallery Wellington. Collection Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Photograph Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.