

WORLD FAMOUS IN NEW ZEALAND

Saskia Leek, Daniel Malone, Richard Maloy,
Sriwhana Spong, Yvonne Todd, Terry Urbahn,
VJRex
Curator Stuart Bailey

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The phrase “New Zealand gothic” has been around for a while, often used to describe a distinctive film-making aesthetic running from *The Piano* [1993] through to *Perfect Strangers* [2003], but already evident in Alison Maclean’s fourteen-minute horror gem *Kitchen Sink* [1989]. Recent art from New Zealand seems to have run with the cinema gothic idea, but ditched its art-house pretensions to celebrate the guilty pleasures of the B-movie [think early-career Peter Jackson]. The result is a distinctive mixture of gothic dread, gritty realism and camp humour. Dread, because that’s the prevailing atmosphere of the gothic—a kind of nameless, free-floating fear. Realism, because it often explores positions of cultural and economic marginality. And humour, because it’s hilariously tasteless, improvised and wilfully incompetent—fast, cheap and out of control.

Stuart Bailey’s exhibition captures this trashy gothic quality in New Zealand art across the range of its stylistic manifestations. His irreverent title is inspired by the slogan for local soft-drink manufacturer Lemon & Paeoroa [now owned by Coca-Cola]. Daniel Malone’s *Untitled [Global in the Local]* wittily re-purposes these ‘World Famous in New Zealand’ L&P bottles by melting Maori kowhaiwhai designs into the plastic, creating a junk sculpture that literally re-brands a national corporate icon with genuinely world-famous indigenous symbolism.

Yvonne Todd’s photographs embrace the uncanny, presenting images that seem to have something ‘off’ about them, without it being possible to say what it is. A thin pale woman in a white lacy dress stands in front of [what looks like] a massive white Ford hearse, clutching a pillow to her stomach. A girl in a white bikini thrusts her hips against the steering wheel of a tractor in a farm shed. A gaunt woman in a quilted dressing gown and lace gloves stands in a field, looking like a wax dummy [perhaps she is?] Each of these images captures the unsettling physicality of the uncanny, its blurring of the boundaries between living and dead, familiar and strange.



Sriwhana Spong’s peculiar video *For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky* features animations of random place-names—Blackpool, Tehran, Kansas—rendered in 3D lettering and spinning against a black background of deep space. Invoking the ‘other-worldliness’ of the real world itself, it suggests isolation and the insuperable distances that imagination travels.

VJ Rex’s installation *Outer Nebular Drifter* fetishises leaf-blowers and vacuum cleaners [like the T-shirt—‘You suck’; ‘Blow me’], while his forty minute live video and sound performance remixed video samples and New Zealand gothic movies to create a broad narrative arc, travelling from innocence to fear to acts of sexual violence and ending with an ambiguous reflection on the mixed emotions of the survivor.

Saskia Leek’s paintings, which suggest the so-called ‘thrift store’ aesthetic, are currently hot sellers in the Australian market. They feature subjects culled from the image repertoire of kitsch—alpine landscapes, horses prancing on beaches, sunsets over

the sea—but executed in a studiedly weak, nervous and graceless style, often in a muted palette of pearly greys and blues offset by patches of raw yellow or pink. The effect is maudlin and vaguely unpleasant. It’s difficult to decide how these paintings relate to the outsider art they inevitably invoke—deadpan parody, ironic homage, or ‘genuinely naïve’ attempt to explore the expressive possibilities of the medium?

A studied incompetence is also behind Terry Urbahn’s *Twin Peaks Revisited*, its title directly invoking small-town gothic. Two grotesque lumps of plaster, glass beads and string, sprouting ‘antlers’ of broken twigs, sit above speakers which play a soundtrack of distorted samples from Led Zeppelin and Isaac Hayes. For some reason it suggests the morning after a demented night on kegs and bongos, strange unremembered goings-on behind the suburban garage roller-door.

But a special award for incompetence should go to Richard Maloy, who appears in two photographic series wearing his own cardboard ‘constructions’, one resembling

a giant poo and the other a giant bum, or perhaps a pair of testicles. The poo-suit is so flimsy it has to be held up by hand, performatively enacting its status as ‘crap’. Maloy’s equally badly made *Kissing Booth/Touch Cage* advertised its services for one and two dollars; on opening night punters got to line up on both sides of the cardboard counter.

The best of this work is hilariously silly or engagingly unsettling, without being ‘edgy’ in a way that could be linked to familiar critical platitudes. Instead it’s adolescent, irreverent, knowingly clueless and intelligently wasted. You get the impression that these artists don’t give a fuck about making art and that is a fine way to make art.