



BOAT 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS

James Robinson
new works

Bath Street Gallery
Auckland
November 03



PIG LIEB CONTROLLER 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



LANDMARK 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANNAS



TRAVELLER 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



UNDERGROUND 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



DEMON 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS

*God, it is all dark
The heart beat but there is no answering hark
Of a hearer and no one to speak*

These lines, written by the New Zealand poet, John Caselberg, were admired by the country's leading artist, Colin McCahon (1919–87), who transcribed them onto his paintings. Caselberg's poem is called *Van Gogh*, but it uses the tortured, visionary Dutchman, as a symbol for the artist in New Zealand – a land where physical and cultural isolation has pushed painters and writers to extremes. McCahon's case is exemplary, but think also of the poet, James K. Baxter, or the painter Tony Fomison, to name but two famous examples.

For the artist, New Zealand is a kind of earthly paradise, a land of rolling green hills and sublime scenery – but with a human landscape that displays all the characteristics of a small village community. In such a setting, artists have come to feel, and to express themselves, with extraordinary intensity. New Zealand's art and literature is filled echoes of the Old Testament, with works that may be ruthlessly modern in style but medieval in content. There is a monastic dimension to the place, and no prophet seems to avoid martyrdom – whether it be McCahon and Baxter drinking themselves to death, or Fomison's heroin addiction.

Enter James Robinson, a young artist in that extreme, New Zealand tradition, who draws, paints and writes with an intensity that makes one think of Van Gogh, or perhaps Antonin Artaud. Like those

artists, he seems devoid of those social and psychic skins that allow us to exist as cool, autonomous beings in the workaday world. We make choices and decisions about our lives on a daily basis, but for these skinless creators, even the smallest events may lead to ecstasy or catastrophe; may open a window onto the void that has to be neutralized by frenzied, creative activity.

It is difficult to avoid comparisons with the kind of lukewarm, 'radical' art so beloved by today's public galleries. Look for example, at the supposedly scandalous work of young British artists such as Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, currently showing in museums all around the world (including Sydney), and then look at Robinson's work.

If New Zealand were a medieval monastery, James's home town, Dunedin, would be the dungeon. The nine large paintings in *Set Fire to Self – Drown*, are not so much a descent into the lower depths, as a circuit of the walls of a cave from which there is no way out. Like Virgil guiding Dante through the *Inferno*, Robinson takes us on a tour of his private heavy-metal hell: the distillation of a life spent on the edge of psychosis. All the bad things that have happened to James – and the catalogue is a long one – have been transmuted into a viral outbreak of signs and symbols, a splattering of cosmic graffiti, built up layer upon layer.

Robinson's cave walls seem to be covered with animal hides – the residue of some bloody ritual – stitched and nailed together by a latter-day caveman. Yet they are also visionary landscapes, reminiscent of the teeming vistas of Bosch or Breugel. The artist

has mined the drawing books he has kept since 1995, to provide the thousands of individual images that lurk beneath his dark, resinous surfaces.

On the facing wall there are hundreds of other images, spread over dozens of tiny canvases. The pictures are disturbing and violent, the artist's working methods compulsive and spontaneous. It approaches a form of Art Brut, but Robinson cannot simply be classified as an 'Outsider' artist. Beyond all the frenetic activity, there is a creative intelligence at work – a hyper-literate, passionate imagination that leaves its mark on all these images.

Reviewers in New Zealand have themselves been driven to extremes, trying to find ways of describing Robinson's work. It has been called brooding, nightmarish, confrontational, anarchic, and "somewhat surreal", but nobody seems to have left one of his exhibitions without feeling stirred and impressed. To brave the initial onslaught and enter into Robinson's universe, is to discover a vision of exceptional delicacy, vitality and humour. It is as though all the shadows are ultimately cancelled out by the sheer superabundance of his invention.

In this work, we recognize an art to blow the lid off a world where everything is progressively more sterile, pre-packaged and bureaucratic. It is a convulsive surge of the psyche, an angry monster art that refuses to doze quietly on a gallery wall.

*John McDonald, Director
newcontemporaries February 2003*

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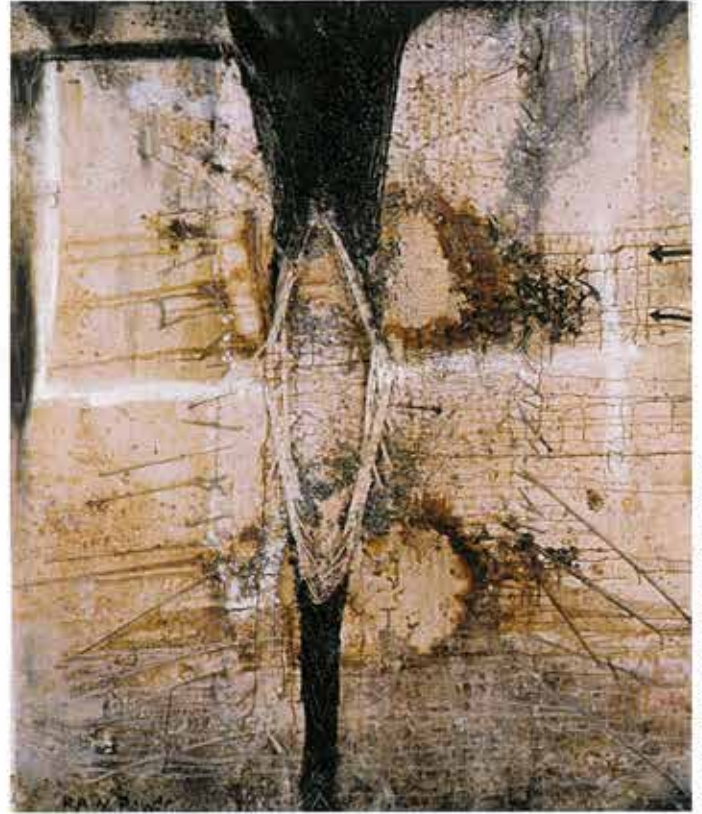
Georgina Ralston, director of Bath Street Gallery

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...and friends and other artists and anyone who has supported me in my art process in any way ...especially JO! THANKS!



TWO IN A STORM 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



RAW POWER 170CM X 140CM MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS

Jean-Michel Basquiat lives in Dunedin

"Yeah, we go to the hurt places first, because they hurt; we only know we're alive because we hurt, sometimes." Coming on like some skateboard punk, some feral streetkid raised on video games and precious little else, James Robinson has clawed his way to notice with some of the most confrontational painting currently being produced this side of the Tasman. Earlier this year he had an exhibition, *Set Fire to Self – Drown*, in Sydney's Queen Victoria Building, curated by Australian art critic John McDonald, complete with a fulsome catalogue essay.

At Dunedin's Temple Gallery, Robinson reprises the title, but features different paintings – yet Robinson's paintings are less about seeing than about feeling and the incandescent feelings remain the same. These canvases are so raw that you want to reach out and staunch the bleeding.

Born in the 70s, brought up in an urban commune in Christchurch and resident in Dunedin for a number of years, Robinson is a youngish painter from an impeccably dysfunctional background, carrying a swag of influences that he has condensed, shredded and collaged to establish his own signature. Robinson's artwork is at once bombastic like that of Anselm Kiefer, scumbled like that of Julian Schnabel, graffiti-scrawled like that of Keith Haring, ostentatiously dumbed-down like that of Jean-Michel Basquiat and death-haunted like that of early Philip Clairmont. There are links, too, to the school of Bill Hammond, and

devouring such a huge legacy with such gusto creates its own problems. In the past, Robinson's work could resemble regurgitated pavement pizza. But also one sensed an artist driven by a quality absent from a lot of today's art, and that is powerful overt emotion: anger, sadness and, above all, a sense of grievance.

Here, rebelliousness and self-contempt have slugged it out in a saga of self-medication and the result is fugitive, fleeting images drawn from a personal demonology boiling with horror and fear and loathing, as well as dark humour. These paintings harbour a menagerie of folk monsters, a phantasmagoria of apparitions that might be beatific angels or might be ghoulish extraterrestrials. Armies of stick figures, of ant-like people, swarm across the margins, while galvanised nails, rope fibres and bits of costume jewellery glisten in among gunk, resembling body fluids dripping from a cadaver on an autopsy table.

Festooned with doodles – a pointy-eared gargoyle over here, a flaccid balloon head on a thin neck over there – and hung on walls like flayed hides whose scraped and stitched-up surfaces evoke sacrificial victims, fundamentalist martyrs and crucifixions, Robinson's paintings are built up out of so many found objects and recycled substances that they seem as much fabricated as painted, and beyond that seem to have taken on organic life, seething and festering like wounds, or pullulating like psychotic states of mind. You imagine the artist as a theatre or movie director ordering up more running sores, more rotting flesh.

So Robinson's paintings don't offer eye candy or

cuddly-toy comfort. Instead they suggest how the utopian dreams of our recent past might be turning into dystopian nightmares. Robinson's trampled-on scraps and sewn-on shards – his landfill offerings – manage to get at the contradictions of the modern condition: our simmering shopping-mall discontent in the teeth of the bright shining lie of advertising, the teasing sense of shame and ignominy that coexists with globalisation's overdriven technologies, the awkward knowledge that one person's hood-wearing terrorist is another person's freedom-fighter. Scorched, soaked and scavenged, Robinson's paintings are a testimony to modern life as a chapter of accidents, where menace mingles with grief, and aggression with abjection. Studiously fragmentary, sometimes deliberately indecipherable *Set Fire to Self – Drown* offers art that is beautiful, harsh and weirdly heroic.

David Eggleton,
Listener July 5, 2003

James Robinson

James has been an exhibiting fulltime artist since 1989 and has works in collections around New Zealand and Australia including newcontemporaries gallery, Sydney, Australia and the new Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu contemporary collection. James has a B.F.A. from Otago Art School. For a full C.V. of artist's activities and archive of pictures and writing visit www.jamesrobinson.co.nz

Bath Street Gallery

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