

From the collection



Peter Robinson (Ngai Tahu, b.1966), New Terrain on Old Ground, 2006. Ink and graphite on paper, triptych, each panel measuring 2000 x 1400, total size 2000 x 4200mm.

Anyone venturing to Taranaki in the next few months would be advised to visit the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and be wowed by Peter Robinson's *Snow Ball Blind Time* exhibition.

This is the first time a single artist has occupied the entire gallery since it opened in 1970 with *Real Time* by Leon Narbey, who is now a renowned cinematographer but was then a student at Elam School of Fine Arts. The gallery is now even bigger than it was then and Peter Robinson, Associate Professor at Elam, has filled the entire building with an eye-popping white-out of giant polystyrene chains that plummet, cascade and snake through the gallery's seven labyrinthine levels.

Throughout his career Robinson has consistently reinvented himself, establishing distinct chapters to his evolving practice. *Snow Ball Blind Time* is the culmination of two years' exploration for Robinson, beginning with his explosive polystyrene work *ACK*, which was first shown at Artspace in 2006 and is

now a finalist for the prestigious Walters Prize.

Graduating from the University of Canterbury in 1989, he soon earned a reputation for his infamous "bad boy" exploration of bicultural politics, deploying loaded symbols like the swastika alongside such seemingly benign figures of pop culture as Mickey Mouse or corporate slogans such as "100% Pure", usually crudely painted in a binary palette of black and white. This developed into a numbers game, calculating the exact percentage of his Māori heritage as 3.125%.

A time spent living in Europe resulted in a shift from the specifics of cultural identity into a more universal, philosophical discussion of existence. More formal work followed, translating text into binary 1s and 0s (positive and negative, on or off), also readable as the Māori supreme being of genealogical origin, *Io*. One of these formed a serpentine spiral of digits and was titled "*Sartre's Worm*", referring to existentialist ideas of being and

Art

nothingness. Contemplating the cosmology of black holes and creation mythology, voids became a major preoccupation for Robinson resulting in linked chains of zeros as well as stacked circles punched from the interior space of an "0" – the void in a void.

This phase culminated in *The Divine Comedy*, his work for the 2001 Venice Biennale, after which he felt his exploration of emptiness was becoming hollow, essentially circling into nowhere. He responded with the messy, abject sculptures of *The Humours*, nominated for a Walters Prize in 2006. These crude forms made way for *ACK*'s aggressively sprawling white limbs which shifted the focus to a more formal yet raw exploration of sculptural properties such as form and scale, solidity and lightness, and the bodily experience of the viewer.

It was at this pivotal moment, immediately after *ACK*, that The University of Auckland Art Collection commissioned Robinson to produce *New Terrain on Old Ground*. In retrospect, being able to consider Robinson's development of new forms of expression through the subsequent exhibitions that led to *Snow Ball Blind Time*, one can see the artist tentatively exploring these same issues with this large-scale drawing.

The flowing swirls and curls shift between positive and negative forms. What could be seen as reminiscent of the pimply protuberances of *ACK* or *The Humours*, could equally be the icy cavernous landscapes that came later. Jagged lines repeat craggy forms last seen in *ACK* but it is the circular exploration of positive and negative space that would prove most fruitful in following years. There are also traces of cartoon speech bubbles from much earlier in his career, but these have been blacked out as if muting their linguistic proclamations to create a more physical language of ambiguous meaning.

Andrew Clifford