

From the collection

Art



Richard Orjis (b.1979), *Flower Idol*, 2006
C-type photograph, 1450 x 1240mm
The University of Auckland Art Collection

After two years in New York, preceded by study at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Richard Orjis returned to New Zealand in 2004 and began a Master of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts. *Flower Idol* featured in his 2006 graduate exhibition but was already familiar, having appeared on the invitation card for that year's postgraduate information evenings. Purchased for The University of Auckland Art Collection in 2008, *Flower Idol*

continues its close association with the University, hanging prominently in the NICA Student Centre.

Orjis' striking portraits and distinctive tableau perhaps owe much to his commercial work, photographing advertising and editorial shoots for magazines such as *Interview* or *Pavement*, and designers including Miss Crabb and Natalija Kucija. No surprise considering his teen obsession with glossies like *The Face* and *i-D*, which he acknowledges in a *New Zealand Herald* cover feature about a new generation of photographers emerging from Elam. He also acknowledges that the line between commerce and arts is not always clear with some of his fashion work later appearing in gallery shows.

Other important influences include the sweet-yet-disturbing work of American photographer Anthony Goicolea, whom he worked and lived with in the United States, and the erotically charged surreal images of celebrity photographer David LaChapelle, who took him on as an intern.

From photographing young men in American forests and agricultural environments an earthy interest arose, hinting at strange rituals and ancient rites that underpin working the soil. *Flower Idol* is from the series *My Empire of Dirt*, which also includes drawings on paper literally made from mud. Combined, they seem to capture the iconography and activities of a pagan cult. Characters are smeared in dirt and dressed

with flowers, many of which suggest phallic forms. They are dark, organic and beautiful, much like the fecund ripeness of nature, invoking both fertility and decay.

In an artist's statement, Orjis says: "Nature here is beautiful and dark, a dangerous spectacle of devourers and devoured; yet still the starting point for religious experience." He describes the gothic activities of his fictive contemporary cult as trying to "make links with nature in a world that is increasingly destroying the natural [environment] it seeks to control".

The suggestive forms of orchids continue to feature in his latest work, a solo installation exhibited in the K' Road window spaces of Starkwhite, a dealer gallery that occupies a building once used as a brothel. Surprisingly deadpan after the lush colours of his earlier work, black-and-white photos of an indoor orchid farm demonstrate the elaborate processes of massed cultivation with flowers all trussed up and hydroponically drip-fed. These are juxtaposed with a white sculptural structure resembling both the formalist angles and shapes of De Stijl paintings and furniture, but also the narcissistic benches, bars and balls of gym equipment. The ever-present candle arrangements drip wax over the otherwise pristine surfaces. Another large circular form hanging on the wall and painted gold invokes the utopian explorations of the alchemists, an old chemistry obsessed with improvement.

Andrew Clifford