

'My Own Private  
Idaho & Pots'

by Gavin Chilcott

Trust Bank Canterbury/Arts Council  
Artist in Residence 1991

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McDougall Art Annex  
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## AN ART OF APPLICATION: A BACKGROUND TO GAVIN CHILCOTT'S 'MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO & POTS'

Vases, as a rule, are composed of a number of simple forms or parts. These are usually the foot, the Body, and the neck; to which a handle, a lid, and a spout, may also be added. The most important part is the Body. In the majority of cases it determines the fundamental form of the vessel.<sup>1</sup>

In Gavin Chilcott's supremely stylish art, consciousness of style is not so much a limitation as a liberation. For Chilcott, style is both a content and a context: an application, which nullifies boundaries between the fine and the applied arts. Looking at Chilcott's work, the traditional hierarchies of art are dissolved in a process of democracy, which renders all art objects equal: a pot or a rug may be conceived with the same values as a painting, though designed to sit on a table or lie upon the floor, while a painting may be constructed with decorative forms belonging to interior design.

In this easy translation from one medium to another, Chilcott's art may be set against the background of interior design. Earlier works by Chilcott recalled the interiors of his childhood and adolescence in provincial New Zealand during the 1950s and 60s: an art of surfaces and veneers, of wood-grain, deco-inspired linoleum, blond oak, rounded corners, 'designer' furniture and lamps. His first solo exhibition, held in Christchurch in 1976, recreated this mid-century modern environment. This was the recreation of a style which was in itself a recreation, an International Style available for domestic consumption in provincial New Zealand thirty years after its heyday as a 'fine art' movement.

Chilcott's work is engaged in what Ian Wedde has described as a "traffic in styles".<sup>2</sup> Chilcott quotes a quotation, borrowing a style which already exists as a borrowing, what Hal Foster has termed in the neo-expressionist context, "second-degree image repertoires".<sup>3</sup> Chilcott's images have thus drawn attention to the life-cycle of style.

Modernism begins in this cycle as fine art practice and a source of elite status. Its subsequent dissemination into the world of the domestic interior is as the moderne object of the applied arts context. Again it transforms, into the limited shelf-life of the mass produced object, a commodity available for all. It falls then into the realm of the unfashionable and kitsch. Finally, if a final point can in this cycle be declared, it re-emerges in appropriation as source material for the contemporary (fine) artist. This circular traffic is extended and released by Chilcott's refusal to admit boundaries between the applied and fine arts, between the crafted and the created, between process and vision.

Chilcott's applied language of style translates readily not only from medium to medium, but from one context to another. Working with a number of craftspeople<sup>4</sup> to produce objects which are simultaneously 'fine art' and 'luxury furnishing', Chilcott's art makes itself equally at home within the context of a gallery or a restaurant or a domestic interior. Drawing inspiration from the components of a room, Chilcott's art relocates itself within the context of a new room. It is both a stylish furnishing and a furnishing of style<sup>5</sup>, where we understand furnishing as the production and possession of an aesthetic.

Chilcott's concern for the identities of style has frequently led him to be labelled a regionalist artist. The styles he applies to his work are drawn from a particular time and place: they call attention to context and location. While his works allude to the



international and exterior (both in their reference to the importation of the modernist style, and in their articulation of issues concerning the construction of that style, for example, its use of the so-called "primitive", a postmodern dialogue shared internationally), their concern is equally with the interior and regional, with issues pertinent to this location and with memories of its immediate past.

Through his appropriation of the simple stories and simplistic styles of a provincial past, Chilcott would seem ostensibly a regionalist. There is, however, self-consciousness and a certain irony in his employment of this vocabulary. Chilcott is not so much reconstructing nostalgia as reworking and reissuing it. The stylistic context of his work is not one of provincial naivety but cosmopolitan sophistication. Consciousness of the past is illuminated in regionalist cliché, imagery codified to a point which draws attention to its codes. Distanced in time, location and context from its starting point, Chilcott's work is not so much regionalist as a quotation of regionalism, the regional in inverted commas. The result is imagery loaded with subjective irony: at once suburban and urbane.

Elsewhere, Chilcott's preoccupation with the provincial and domestic has resolved itself in the depiction of ambiguously fictional anecdotes from a reconstructed early life: *Our Old Horse Smokey*, *Digging Pipi*, *Holiday Work in the Orchard*. The characters of these anecdotal works of the mid-1980s are animated (though featureless) blocks of wood, grainy fence-posts with arms and stage props, which re-enact the dramas of memory. These are images suffused with a gentle irony, which chronicle the making of a persona: a selective memory is at work here, sifting the past for a pseudo-Romantic significance, and setting about moulding and re-shaping those siftings.

In Chilcott's recent work, a consciousness of the Pacific environment has emerged - regionalism in its broadest sense, and a reference again to the development of

style, to style's return to its 'primitive' source. Backgrounds of dramatic orange and yellow washes recreate idyllic Pacific sunsets: the idealized weather patterns of childhood memory, or of a past that never really happened, a past mis-remembered and redefined, an image which becomes its own code.

The block-of-wood characters which populated his earlier works have been replaced by silhouetted pot and vase forms reminiscent of Matisse's cutouts. The vases stand in for the presence of human bodies, animating the compositions, endlessly reproducing themselves in a variety of shapes. These painted vessels are not so much empty as closed: they are silent, alluding to functions of containment while containing no more than their own form. They appear in Chilcott's paintings as relics of a classical past, recontextualised as the luxurious ornamentation of the present. Elsewhere, Chilcott applies the decorative vase forms to his other art objects: a rug may be shaped like a pot, or a painted vessel imposed on furniture: both the subject and the object of these works is the ongoing dialogue between the production and possession of commodities.

The essence of Gavin Chilcott's art, then, would appear to be an appreciation of the fine ironies of context, defined by the application of style: the making of new from old, the relocation of the provincial within the urban, the 'primitive' within the urbane, the regional within the international, the modern within postmodernism.

Lara Strongman

Assistant Curator, Robert McDougall Art Gallery

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> F.S. Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, seventh ed., London, 1892, p.300.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Wedde, 'Furnishing a Style: The 'Very Rich Hours' of Gavin Chilcott', *Art New Zealand*, no.42, p.52.

<sup>3</sup> Hal Foster, 'The Expressive Fallacy', in *Recordings*, Washington, p.59.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Chilcott has collaborated on the production of art objects with Dilana Rugs of Christchurch; with Australian potter Errol Barnes; and with cabinet maker David White.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Wedde, *op.cit.*





# GAVIN CHILCOTT SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

Born Auckland, New Zealand, 1950

Education Auckland Technical Institute (Graphic Arts), 1967  
Elam School of Fine Arts, 1968-1970

Awards Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, Major Grant, 1980  
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, Travel Grant, 1984  
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, Short Term Project Grant, 1986, 1988, 1989  
Trust Bank Canterbury/Arts Council Artist in Residence, Arts Centre, Christchurch, 1991

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Gregory Flint Gallery, **Chilcott/Hammond**, Auckland, New Zealand, 1991  
Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1990, 1988, 1986, 1985  
Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 1989, 1984, 1983  
Southern Cross Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 1989, 1988  
Gregory Flint Gallery, **Chilcott and Paine** (paintings in collaboration with Ralph Paine), Wellington, New Zealand, 1990  
Fisher Gallery, **Survey Exhibition**, Pakuranga, Auckland, New Zealand, 1989  
Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, 1988, 1987  
Pam Adler Gallery, New York, USA, 1984  
Hamilton Centre Gallery, **Gavin Chilcott 1977-1984 - A Survey**, Hamilton, New Zealand, 1984  
Red Metro, Auckland, New Zealand, 1985  
Red Metro, Dunedin, New Zealand, 1984, 1983  
RKS Art, Auckland, New Zealand, 1984, 1983, 1982, 1981  
Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 1986, 1985, 1983, 1982  
Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1986, 1985, 1983, 1976  
Galerie Legard, Wellington, New Zealand

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Waikato Museum of Art and History, **Cross Currents**, Hamilton, New Zealand, 1991  
Queensland Art Gallery, **Decorated Clay**, Brisbane, Australia, 1991  
Galleria San Vidal, Venice, Italy, 1990  
Ninth National Gold Coast Ceramic Award, Gold Coast, Australia, 1990  
Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, 1986  
Rotorua Art Gallery, Rotorua, New Zealand, 1986  
Bishop Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, New Zealand, 1986  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, 1984  
RKS Art, Auckland, New Zealand, 1983, 1982, 1981  
Janne Land Gallery, Wellington New Zealand, 1986, 1985, 1983, 1981  
Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, 1985, 1982, 1978, 1977  
Wellington City Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 1980  
Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, New Zealand, 1980, 1979, 1978, 1977  
Galerie Legard, Wellington, New Zealand, 1979, 1978  
Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, New Zealand, 1978

## COMMISSIONED GALLERY PROJECTS

Wellington City Art Gallery, **Scheme** (commissioned collaborative project, with Ralph Paine), Wellington, New Zealand, 1990-91  
Museum of Contemporary Art, **Furniture and Ceramics**, Brisbane, Australia, 1989  
Auckland City Art Gallery, **Setting a Table**, Auckland, New Zealand, 1989  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, **Miscast in the Role**, New Plymouth, New Zealand, 1984

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand; Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia; Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; Chartwell Collection, Hamilton, New Zealand; Bank of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand; Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt, New Zealand; Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand; Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand; Fletcher Challenge Corporation, Auckland, New Zealand; Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum, Napier, New Zealand; Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, New Zealand; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, New Zealand; Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand; Ministry of External Relations and Trade, various countries

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brennan, Betsy. 'Off the Wall', *Vogue Living*, Australia, May 1990, pp.130-135.  
Holder, Vikki. 'Hints and Myths', *New Zealand Home and Building*, August/September 1991, pp. 116-118.  
McCarthy, Lynne. 'Creative Partnership', *New Zealand Home and Building*, December/January 1988, pp.25-27.  
Pound, Francis. *Forty Modern New Zealand Paintings*, 1985.  
- *New Image; Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, pp.20-21, pp.48-49.  
- 'Gavin Chilcott, Portrait of an Artist', *Metro*, July 1983, pp.98-101.  
Risley, Tom. 'Setting a Table', catalogue essay, artist's project, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1989.  
Spense, Michael. 'Monet not Maori: Art in New Zealand', *Studio International*, vol. 198, no. 1010, 1985, p.52.  
Wedde, Ian. 'Furnishing a Style - The Very Rich Hours of Gavin Chilcott', *Art New Zealand*, no.42, Autumn 1987, pp.50-54.

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