



Neither sentimental nor romantic

Painting in Vermont, Graham Fletcher continued his potent reconstructions of retro architectural interiors from a period that exemplified the height of Western materialism and excess.

In 2010 I was delighted to receive the Wallace Arts Trust Development Award, which comprised a generous two-month artist's residency at the Vermont Studio Centre (VSC). Founded in 1984, VSC claims to be the largest international artists' and writers' residency programme in the United States, accommodating up to 50 residents every month from across the country and abroad.

It's been almost 20 years since I last travelled to America and some things never change. The people are still warm and friendly and everything is still oversized. I was amused to discover that a small problem I experienced on my last visit still persists; whenever I introduce myself, Americans, for some peculiar reason, hear "Brian".

"Hi, I'm Graham from New Zealand."

"Hi Brian, nice to meet you ... did you fly or drive here?"

It must be something to do with the vowel sounds we

make. I'm reminded of that *Flight of the Conchords* episode where Brett is introducing himself to a New Yorker:

"Hi I'm Brett."

"Britt?"

"Brett."

"Britt, like Britney?"

"Nah, B-R-E-T-T."

"Ohhh, Brett!"

On first impressions VSC seemed more a retreat than a residency. Located in the sleepy township of Johnson, a town far smaller than I'd imagined, I soon realised its small scale and paucity of retail outlets and other 'attractions' made it an ideal place to get away from the distractions of urban life and fully immerse myself in art-making.

The VSC's facilities are very good. The centre provided three hot meals a day, and after a few weeks of dining there,

Opposite page: Red Mill building,
Vermont Studio Centre, Johnson.
Photo courtesy of VSC

I was familiar with certain aspects of the menu: bacon and eggs for breakfast every Tuesday and Thursday, and waffles, bacon and fruit, or salmon and bagels for Sunday brunch. Needless to say, those meals were unmissable. One of the more memorable dining experiences was on the fourth Thursday in November when we celebrated Thanksgiving. This was a novelty for many of the international residents, including myself, and what a treat: turkey, ham, stuffing, cornbread, mash, cranberry sauce and all the other trimmings. It was an impressive spread that we consumed with enthusiasm.

My studio space had great lighting, generous wall space, good ventilation and heating; a considerable advantage when using oil paint. Other extras included a life drawing model, available for morning or afternoon sessions during week days, yoga sessions, a meditation room, a well-stocked art store located at the centre, and a comprehensive library full of art and design books.

The only problem I foresaw before taking up the residency was how to deal with transporting artwork and materials to and from the centre at a reasonable cost. In the last few years I've been working almost exclusively in oils on mid- to large-size canvases. For practical reasons, I decided to opt for making works on paper, instead of on canvas, while I was in Vermont. Beyond the occasional preparatory sketch for a painting, I've never painted seriously on paper before, so the process proved to be an exercise of trial and error for me.



Untitled, oil on paper, 2011. All artworks by Graham Fletcher

I also considered changing to acrylics, but decided against it, reasoning that learning another medium would take up valuable painting time. So, decisions made, I packed as many art materials into my luggage as possible, hoping that US Customs officials wouldn't pull me up for carrying palette knives, a staple gun, a gas mask and latex gloves, among other things.

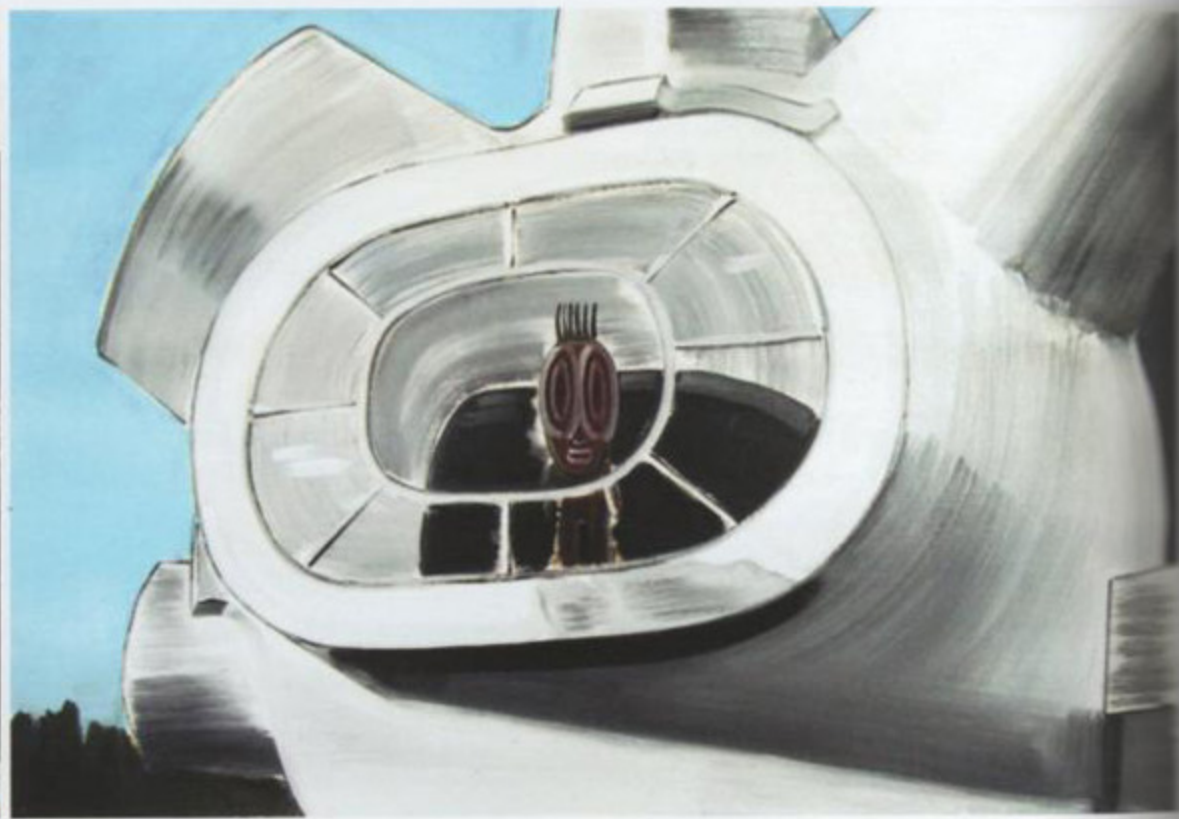
When I first visited the Johnson Studio Store I was relieved to find they had a good stock of paper of various sizes and weights as well as a good selection of oil paints. The only technical hitch I experienced was the lack of tools that I usually use when I paint, including a range of large rulers, T-squares and mahl sticks. The art store didn't stock these items, so, in good Kiwi fashion, I was



Graham Fletcher at his exhibition at VSC Red Mill Gallery. Photo: Howard Romero



Untitled, oil on paper, 2011



Untitled, oil on paper, 2011

forced to improvise. I bought various lengths of dowel and broomsticks from the Johnson hardware store as well as a drywall T-square. With the dowel and broomsticks, I constructed makeshift mahl sticks by attaching foam enclosed within a piece of chamois to make up the ball-shaped pads, and I attached these with twine to the end of the sticks. Crude but effective.

Once all the materials and tools were sorted, I got on with painting. I had sourced much of my subject material before the trip, knowing that I would continue with variations of my *Lounge Room Tribalism* series (2009), in which I created imaginative combinations of ethnographic objects set within lounge rooms of the 1950s and 1960s.

The new body of work would continue to explore the legacy of the widespread European tradition of housing collections of Oceanic or African tribal art within domestic settings. Many of the interiors I reference in both my recent and new body of works are adapted from images in old design periodicals from the 1950s to the 70s. My painted reconstructions of rooms from these periods are not meant to be viewed as sentimental or romantic, but as a reference to a period in history that exemplified trends in Western materialism and excess.

I'm interested in ways of appropriating and subverting this legacy through the creation of new intercultural spaces. The combinations of cultural elements that result in the paintings talk about aspects of authenticity, cultural interaction and the assimilation of indigenous peoples within the Western landscape.

One image I've wanted to use for some time was of a bedroom/study with storage cupboards based on Mondrian's paintings. This image was the first to be adapted into one of my new series of paintings on paper.

After a couple of weeks in Johnson, I realised the Vermont winter environment outside my studio window had subconsciously seeped into my painting. Before I knew it, I was painting exterior-scapes and my colour palette was far more subdued. I was pleasantly surprised with the results.

This transition from inside to outside led me to start researching exteriors and landscapes of the same period as the interiors that I was adapting, and to incorporate these settings into my new body of work. I looked at a range of wooded landscapes and unusual architectural forms as part of my continuing process of building new worlds from the fragments of the old.



Johnson township



Wolf Kahn Studio Building. Photo: Dexter Fernandez



Graham Fletcher's studio in Wolf Kahn Studio building.
All photos by Graham Fletcher except where indicated

As residents, we were given free rein to do almost whatever we wanted. We could beaver away in our studios if we chose to, having little contact with the outside world, but the VSC staff encouraged a collegial atmosphere by organising activities such as artists' slide talks, writers' readings and 'open studio' visits. These activities were voluntary, but those of us who took part benefitted enormously from sharing our creative experiences with fellow residents.

Each month VSC organised six artists and writers to visit and give lectures on their work followed by a tour of the studios to view our work. I particularly enjoyed meeting New York painter, Chuck Webster, whose work features in the book *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* (Phaidon, 2009). He was generous with his time and advice and I greatly appreciated his thoughts on my work.

Without a doubt, the other residents were what made this residency so great. At any given time there were 50 residents, including painters, sculptors, writers, potters and new media artists. You might think that such a concentration of creative types and egos in one place could be a recipe for disaster, but every day, like clockwork, we would congregate for breakfast, lunch and dinner in the Red Mill dining hall, and the conversation was always good-humoured, lively and stimulating.

In December I was invited to exhibit my new work at the VSC Red Mill Gallery, as was Dexter Fernandez, a talented young artist from the Philippines. The invitation to exhibit

was only extended to international residents on fellowships, and this was just the motivation I needed to complete work in the time remaining to me. Dexter was first up, and he produced a layered and complex show with wall drawings, paintings on large photos and video. In contrast, my small show of seven completed oil paintings on paper was a little more conventional, but was well received nonetheless.

When the residency ended, I flew to New York City for four days and visited as many museums and galleries as possible. What a change of pace from Johnson to Manhattan! Highlights were the de Kooning retrospective (MoMA); James Turrell (MoMA PS1); Maurizio Cattelan (Guggenheim); the Oceanic collection (The Met); and Neo Rauch and Michaël Borremans (David Zwirner Gallery).

The trip to New York was a great way to end my stimulating and productive eight weeks abroad, and I wish Bronwynne Cornish, the 2011 winner of the Wallace Arts Trust Development Award, all the very best for her eight weeks in Vermont later this year.

Graham Fletcher would like to thank the Wallace Arts Trust and Creative New Zealand for their support, as well as the founders and staff of the Vermont Studio Center for their kindness and generosity. The works Fletcher created during his residency at VSC will be exhibited at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts from 11 February to 15 April 2012. Graham Fletcher – Lounge Room Tribalism is on at Mangere Arts Centre from 21 April to 3 June, 2012.