

‘THE THREE BAD BOYS GO TO THE MATRIARCHY’: TRIPLE AAA AT THE DUNEDIN SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY

Carl A Mears

*A privileged overview with a slight apology to Enid Blyton.
And another to ‘the matriarchy’ – which is no more!*

A1 was André Stitt – the youngest, but most hardened by extreme world experience. Perhaps and maybe. Though both soft and hard. Masquerading always behind his meticulous Akshun Man cargo pant- and uniformed-cleaner persona. But the hard man ever there, bred in Belfast’s East, London’s building sites, and the lower levels of the Lower East Side, N.Y., in the eighties. Now gripping the reins of the Cymru Academy, a wild child at the wheel through disciplined circumstance. Never letting go.

Redeemed. A joker. Staunch.

A2 was Alastair MacLennan, always relaxed but ever engaged. Twinkling in a kind of cocoon of indefinable spirituality. Prepared to talk much more than 30 years ago. Surprisingly. Lurking there with gentle humour and eagle eye. Impervious. Son of crofters on a western Scottish isle, somewhere near but not near Skye. A McKay-McLennan, only just his generation this side of English as a first language. A postgraduate of the esteemed Chicago School of Art, U.S. of A., a two-year Zen research graduate dishwasher. Sifting his koan – “How to better the world through painting?” Then being turned back after those two years by being told – “You are not an artist yet.” Now though 50 years on from then, an artist living his creed of testing balance ...

A walking candalabra. A joker. Staunch.

A3 was Adrian Hall – in this trio of nostalgia, arbitrary personæ and archaeology, maybe the hardest to frame. Peripatetic: self-conscious. Varied. A gabbler, sceptic, self-proclaimed non-intellectual. Striver for clarity but failed logical positivist: as with “But now I’m not so sure.” Still trying to evolve. Paradoxically restraining more latent violence than the other two, but needing to. A deliberating schizoid, a mediator, a rash provocateur; calm but frenzied. No compromise. Did rather be a motor-cycle courier through a London winter than fake it in a fraudulent art school as a head of ...

Bloody-minded. A joker. Staunch.

A3 also somewhat overawed that A1 and A2 had interrupted their distinguished and manic trajectories to deliberately deviate in this direction. To play in the sandpits of Dunedin, somewhere near the South Pole, with someone they had once known 30, almost 40 odd years ago back there in the War Zone, mid-seventies. Bel-Fiastre, Norn Irn.

THANKS TO:

They made it happen, though, with the help of many – British Council, Otago Polytechnic, and notably the enthusiasms of Professor Leoni, most favourite head of ... pirate captain, proud empress of a new Dunedin School of Art Gallery. Brand new, splendid. Now to be entrusted to the three bad boys. Kieran Lyons, artist U.K., commented on the poster: “like three bad boys from a reform school!”

Thanks also to the students and staff of the Dunedin School of Art, to the Photo Media team: Kim Pieters, Campbell Walker, Sally Macintosh, Joe Worley, Cath Cocker, Edward Wittaker, Pam McKinlay and to André, Alastair, Adrian. Thank you and to all the others.

Triple AAA also were generous with their time, giving half a dozen lectures and seminars and interviews on their histories and philosophies during their brief visit. Thanks also to those tireless time travellers.

Snippets of the overheard should start this overview. Might help illuminate the bloomin' obvious:

"Smells like a lot of very sweaty men in there."

"Too scary by far."

"What a mess."

"Look like three very traumatised Men ..."

Then of course at first there was the very self-consciousness of the fellers themselves; self-conscious of their own hetero-gender, three old blokes in our fallible postfeminist world. (Pardon?) Those years of the seventies had helped, like all the other 140 years of their combined professional experience, to further forge their sensitive artist souls. It did though become evident, Miranda – the discipline and crust and scars from deep and bloody learning which still goes on. Everyday. Everything. It all goes on. The perennial learning: of which this fortnight was to be but another Coliseum day.

They are workers. They are skeptics. They are anarchists, they are anarcho-humanists. They are pig-headed, strong-minded. They are deadly freaking serious. They are painters, exquisite draftsmen, installation-, sculptural-, time-based film and video makers, readers and reciters, rabble-rousers and thoughtful jokers. Benign beyond their noise. They make nothing into something. They are children. They toy with time, they use their Selves as human sacrifice. They use the fabric of their being as the medium, their souls as message. Not one of them believes in those words 'Performance Art,' for there is never 'acting,' no theatre. Instead – *Akshuns, Realisations, Live Works*. They stalk a mysterious truth.

Slightly closer is as much as they get. Certainly no standard 'acts' are rehearsed. Never just entertainment practised. Most always though with the humour draining like a catheter. Definitely human sacrifice. A peculiar distillation of reality – from the real. And this particular Dunedin triple-wammy, never before attempted in the history of the known universe: two old blokes, A2 and A3, and one younger, fitter, with grey flat-top hair, and some attitude – A1. No rules, no wasted talking, no leader.

Three working-class lads, all graduates of the Butler Education Act of 1947, all grewed up – all believing that 'maturity' is merely finding out that which seems no longer worth doing. And not doing it.

SUNDAY, 19 JUNE 2011

Three old fellers. One empty space. Thirty-six years in three separate worlds, Old and New: and who can count now their colleagues already 'gone?' The perennial and recurrent 'Big C' – over-enthusiasms in various forms. Alcohol, and despair the rest. It is a long hard road without compromise, to forge one's own pathway. They had each known some, many even, who had succumbed.

So.

They entered the Arena, the White Room, and entered the Sunday Silence. They walked the floors of that deadliest of dark dead spaces. An empty art school. They felt the chill of echoing footsteps. They rescued a table, they felt

their way. Then they found the harbour, drove the perimeter, and felt again together the distant, distant presence of Northern Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland.

MONDAY, 20 JUNE 2011

They tip-toed round one another making lumpy jokes. Susing out the passage of time, then cruised the thrift shops and the city dumps together. The magnificent detritis of a privileged society spread out, one which lives by and off the old institutions. Sneaking glimpses at each others' treasure, so they were. Meaning – meaningful scrutiny, but not one failed this rigorous test of mutuality. They laughed a lot.

Some citizens would swallow the scent of their hunt and join in. "So where is the other swim-flipper?" "I only need one. (Jimmy.)" "Ach, you can have that one then." "Why don't you take my picture too?" "Then smile then." Looking up into the booth at Greenisland, then showing the gatekeeper the digi-pic: "Why d'you make my beer-gut so big then?" "And that will be fourteen dollars and another dollar-fifty dangling from the glasses you have got on, you're not getting away with them!" More laughter from the three rollicking trauma men. On this 24-hour tourist spree, delighting in all the commonalities, this was to be their Reality Check and their Theory. "Greenisland? – That's where I live in Antrim, in Nor'n Irelan! We have to go there." "Look, the Arthur Daley Bar. Quick – a photograph!"

Above all, they are three believers aligned enough that no questions are to be asked regarding belief or action. There is a strangely united family reforming. No word save the grapevine, and fragmented art-writings over the decades, to convey the gist of it. But nevertheless there is a flicker of flame from the forge of '73, '74, '75, '76, '77, '78, and there is the intense energy which feeds the extreme generosity of these old chums as they later on talk and talk more, to the young artists around them. Good craic. They are wholly on a mission.

Those young artists are invited to the first day of public engagement in the almost empty gallery. This is to be 'The Press Conference.' An audience assembles and takes seat in the official, formal style after a parade of chairs, individually dispensed. Those younger artists are asked to participate in a sober choreography with which their mobile bodies delineate that which is to become the Arena. They zip around the perimeter on murky missions of their own. Two of their brothers are the security guys, with rip-off Ray Bans and Miami yellow sweaters: The Yellow Men. The audience is bullied and seated. Formal introductions are made by A3 wearing the grey pinstripe – white shirt and tie.

A1 and A2 enter, just a little jolt, but from behind a screen from within a window recess. They each introduce themselves. Then things start to mutate. One journo is lifted and roughly frisked; a Yellow Man darkly surveys the situation, searches bags, while a wi-fi camera on his colleague's head throws images of the goings-on onto a wall from a video projector. The contents of a bag, details of a giant image of the clock on the table. Close-ups of our faces. The formalities degenerate quite swiftly – megaphone ranting, poetry, random-seeming word-reading.

Astonishingly, these shy young Southern Kiwis join in mouthing and chanting chapel-style the cut-up word porridge fed them. Is this the Karaoke Generation? Even the hip media men join in, at least with sheepshaped moving mouths. André recycles lists of the materials and things he has denigrated, destroyed and sanctified over the years through his Akshuns. Now verbally and physically, with shreds of scissored text. Alastair has a constant mantra for all their actions to come, which is the complete list of names of the murdered victims of the Troubles in the North. Bi-gendered stereo voices reversed perform the litany: names of ordinary men and women and children slain by bombs and guns and knives and bricks and rubber bullets. The non-mortal kind of rubber bullet which only punches out eyes, breaks bones and maims the brain. The fat rubber bullet which, despite the best of humane intentions, does wound, does rip off parts of jaws and does kill. A wordy jumble ensues, with the gallery space patrolled at the border by darting young and lithe. The Yellow Men survey.

Anxiety ensues as A1 starts his own rant on a wicked little megaphone, and A2 starts to balance things on his pure and perfect pate. Is that a large mangled rusty bar? An oxide accent from a modernist sculpture on his naked head?

A3 found it a good time to relearn the semaphore alphabet, there in his whistle and flute and tie, in the light of a projector. Shadows quietly projecting way back, from the Wolf Cubs. He poned about in his suit, and looked in his executive tie somewhat out of place. At least as much as each and every single other one there.

In later days that empty suit was retained by request as another kind of history – was also abused by fragments of the revolving urgency of the ever-present present. The students recognised anarchy when they felt it. And they went with their own. Beautifully. Other punters peered in and generally moved on. A few entered through the architectural gesture of the massive white, pivoting door. The formal gallery, the white cuboid, had transformed into a sprawl of garbage, broken glass and fractured histories of the two visitors. Through photocopies of drawings (A2) and articles and photo-histories (A1). No *a priori* knowledge is presumed there. The image of a young and naked and hirsute André, from a time when Jim Morrison was large in his life, was a gem to behold; contrasting neatly with his authoritative Janitor-Commando present self. Past into present – through palpable objects and their effects on neural triggers.

TUESDAY, 21 JUNE 2011

By now, a party pleasantness was maintained while younger denizens of the Dunedin School of Art in general had creative fun. They pushed at times to points of provocation, while the old fellers rationalised their responses and became more cunning. Their invention became an interpersonal set of triadic references, which over the first week caused the student improvisations to seem more distinct and more formal. In the second week the students had become spectators. They had self-consciously been trying, and been interesting, but remained isolated in islands of individuation, unlike the larger discursive behaviour of Triple AAA. Their chaos was to form patterns in time though, through redisposition and night edits and recycle, and through differing intuited action strategies.

Other participants had brought in all kinds of arbitrary junk. How could this be? It was all in the shopping choice. Destruction, and redisposition. Chaos re-ordered the cuboid.

The genuine garbage gradually became both eloquent and resonant. Later in the third week it became a vivid history of process indicative of the personalities and the force of their actions. It also became tuned with a symbology emerging from culling and editing. With an intrinsic power independent of a priori knowledge, but with the power of imaginative restitution, based on individual experiences personally supplied. So the detritis spoke volumes, mediating with the graphic actions frozen into the wall drawings from the second week, which in themselves were a static, visual counterpoint to confident, trusting actions between A1 and A2.

WEDNESDAY, 22 JUNE 2011

The present is tense and only a live, attentive engagement is presumed – which some garrulous and ignorant visitors learn to their embarrassment. In later weeks one of the mystery visitors materialised elsewhere to proclaim that it was “really great to have a good, old-fashioned ‘Happening,’ happening again, where anything and everything goes!” Obviously the irony of her ignominious eviction, after unexpected expletives were delivered brilliantly in context, was lost on her, and no lesson was learned from a practical demonstration of that which was not to be tolerated within the arena. Anything definitively did not go. Tension forms like cobwebs, some students withdraw.

The heightening of tension underscored the sensitivity and sensibilities of the artist trio. They were searching. In the days to follow visitor numbers fluctuate, but those remaining become aficionados beyond expectation.

The ante had upped as the time had ebbed. A1 took more liberties with his own body, A2 became more versatile with unlikely small corpses. Manic and cretinous self-abasement became the dharma of A3. An odd unity through independent action was formed. The last restraints between the artists were diminishing, and the unconstrained audience were free too. They participated in an engagement born of respect and an appreciation of the unfolding, unpredictable phenomena. Old-fashioned wonder perhaps, outside the expected parameters of a gallery-void/showcase.

On this afternoon A1 became more vocal in counterpoint to A2. A3 became more mobile, in some kind of motorvated zombie mode. He got caught up with things, walked into and over things. Dragged over a set of steps, nearly fell and froze. A2 found more remarkable things to balance on his head – a branch, a huge salmon, draped over his pinkness. A3 finished the day ringing changes on tin cans tangled in string round himself. He was braced against a wall, bent close banging his head repetitively while cans jangled at each contact. This went on for a while. A2 enunciated past participles clearly. A1 cut paper, read portions of the *Belfast Telegraph*. Tin produce cans jangled, and then again through silent consensus – things ceased. Even despite the alarming clocks.

THURSDAY, 23 JUNE 2011

This was a day of a natural climax. There was no negotiating their shared weariness, but it was to be the last of it. The night before, A2 had acquired two frozen stoats from a man who set and cleared traps at the yellow-eyed penguin colony on the northwest harbour. Stoats are the most vicious and voracious predators on native fauna – there happened to be two in that man's deep-freeze. Which he happily donated to A2 and his heady cause. They appeared, de-frozen, limp, somewhat cute even, suspended from the large tree branch on the head of A2. Their cuteness was ensured by a sensitive looping of string under their armpits. A less respectful person might have placed the loop around their throats. This gave a recreational aspect to their morbidity. They hung out. And downward. Balancing them on other ends of the twiggery were the two stripped skeletons of the large salmon, tails down, huge heads up and proud. At the end of their useful lives. Also in suspension footwear of unknown women.

While A2 severely, almost blindly it seemed, negotiated the cluttered space, A1 began to slowly follow the course of his scissors previously used to snip and clip texts. They came to feast upon his uniform trousers and consumed strips and increasingly dangerous portions of fabric which were laid out. Self-evidence, perhaps. Meanwhile A3 in zombie mode again found himself trapped by suspended shoes and cans and lots of strings. He was impelled to go round and round relentlessly while casually reminiscing over a lengthy, tense story of an execution in the room over a bar, in which he had been drinking with A2 until early in the morning once 38 years before. A2 had reminded him of that night within two hours of their meeting again – neither had referred to it ever before. A3 took 40 minutes to reconstruct that tale. He walked widdershins, on a leash of tangled memories, as his memories over all that time were spun out through the microphone into a large megaphone. He for one seemed entranced by his own slow rhythms as he unwound 32 years.

Outside the vision of A2, A1 had resumed cutting operations. Now with a scalpel. Upon his forearm. Half denuded, he carefully cut strokes into his own flesh which, despite the trickling blood, spelt out in capital letters the vernacular pronunciation "NORN IRLD." A2 maintained his gentle vigil. His pendant creatures had become less shocking, even friendly/normal through familiarity. There had been beauty in his barefoot delicacy of movement and a large audience which had convened waited in silence, as motions slowed down, and a loud silence ensued which lasted more than ten minutes. Two unsynchronised alarm clocks rudely then interrupted the dead-set silence while A3 moved slowly around the rapt visitors, crudely pushing a small camera at their faces to take a portrait of every single witness. Surprisingly, there appeared to be tears on the faces of a number of the audience.

Evocation. Reconstruction. Reconstitution. Restitution.

FRIDAY, 24 JUNE 2011

A1 and A2 flew out from Dunedin, to return to Norn. Ireland and Cymru.

A2 drove them to the airport for their 5.30am flight.

They talked of meeting in another 35 years to make another work together.

MONDAY, 27 JUNE 2011

Triple AAA had left the space as a rich static coagulation of 'detritus' from their actions, to be viewed at leisure until the following Friday. Suspended shoes of mixed gender, age group and kind. Spread banners. The empty suit. News clippings stained by red wine and florid gesture. Documents to be displayed, to be used, had been trashed, abused, sliced and diced and quoted from. They were grisly records of tortured victims and other sad, mad, histories. They loomed larger in import as the days went on, feeding the verbal rants and the actions. Now that large innocent space seemed full of the most disturbing content, but curiously resolved, stasis.

A3 had permission to modify that detritus at will. This though was too rich, too complex, to apply any individual or personal rules of taste or tidiness. It seemed to him sacrilegious. It was what it was and had to be as it was. Actual history. Agincourt after the fact. A stale barroom after a night of frolic. A forensic site waiting for the C.S.I. Multifarious logic systems, causality and profound evocation, waiting, recovering, still pregnant, redolent, realisable, reiterative. It heaved with the breath of dead souls but trembled with the live optimism of attainment.

So on the following Thursday, A3 entered with a pistol crossbow, having taken a cue from a photo-moment in the history of André in the States. And A1 shot up the suspended footwear, and static footwear, in a truly perverse but Achillean moment of whimsy. Leaving it all literally shafted by the sadistic punctuation of anodised gold crossbow bolts. Golden light refracted off the shafts, illuminating the sad sweat stains on the old sport shoes, singling out the scuff marks on the smart suspended court shoes of unknown women, and querying the whereabouts of the tiny owners of the cute pink flip-flops. Again the twin gendered voices on Alistair's tape gave velvet wallpaper sound to the giant shoebox, which held so much time, so many times. So much distance brought close and so many, many persons who are somewhere else. But not there.

Lacan, and Patty Smith and Coltrane. Iris Murdoch and Guy Debord, Prince Kropotkin, Michel Foucault, Three Blind Mice, Three Wise Pigs, Three Little Plonkers, buffoons and heroes. Profound failures everywhere at the lock-step, two-step, two-faced suburban shuffle and all those other lawn-mowing games. We salute ye, Lads!

Carl A. Mears hailed from New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A. sometime in the mid-sixties. He gleaned a lot in the ambiance of a great university, and from its superior art-collections and libraries gained a love of culture, learning and librarians. He is a Veteran of a Foreign War, and served in a junior officers' mess somewhere or elsewhere. Until recently peripatetic, he lives now at Walden Pond.

