



# (are we there yet...?)

Editors' Note: The following five texts respond to the same exhibition, Neil Emmerson's (*are we there yet...?*) installed in The Blue Oyster Art Project Space during 2007 in Dunedin. The exhibition was specifically configured for The Blue Oyster as a response to the space while using the subterranean nature of its location, the history of previous installation strategies and its particular audience and their habits to support its own agenda. Apart from the image introducing Ben Smith's text, all the images included across the five texts are from this exhibition, courtesy of the artist.



## Exhibition Response #1

### (are we there yet...?)

Judith Collard & Neil Emmerson

The question posed in the title of this installation of works by Neil Emmerson spanning the past twelve years provokes more than it answers. Not only is it unclear where we are going, but also where we have been or even who the 'we' is that he refers to.

Much of the work, and what is made clear from an overview of the artist's practice, focuses on the machinations of a semiotic encounter with the construction of the modern homosexual. Some of these signs are more obvious than others. Some are tuned to slip beneath the radar. An abandoned, civil service, brogue shoe emits the sounds from a dark corner of a public park, the leather mouth conjuring the absent masculine body through this tentative aural residue of place. In another room the same shoe is cast to mimic the red shoes that Dorothy inherits from the Wicked Witch of the East and then shrouded in the multicoloured, flickering glow of an obscured imagery played out on the hidden television screen. Dorothy is there creating the technicolour glow but like the

fugitive figure signalled by the original lone shoe, her singing and dancing is neither seen nor heard. There is a dissolution of certainty here. All these references to Oz, the rainbow, the yellow brick road, Dorothy and her friends, are implied but not overt.

Locations are important here. There are allusions to the closet, to the beat, and to the spaces where certain male sexualities and relations of power are enacted. The gallery itself has become transformed into an uninhabitable dream of domesticity; bedrooms, dining and living areas are indicated. Yet for all that it may signify – the prissy, controlled, even anally retentive environment of the closeted queen – the exhibition occurs in a basement, off the street and hidden down a dingy alley, the smelly arse-end of restaurants and bars its only neighbours. Dichotomies are set up here to be dissolved and challenged.

In the bedrooms desire is as much about anonymous encounters as it is about domestic bliss. Here there are references to the hunt, to heroic military victories,



to love and to death. The boudoir is transformed into the public garden, a midnight rendezvous where self-identities can be suspended and men can meet beyond the scrutiny of sanctioned public behaviour... to fuck. These innocuous scenes of garden settings and war memorials, typical of towns and cities across New Zealand and Australia, are also, ironically, hunting grounds where men cruise at night for contact. As if in ghillie-suits they seek to blend into the background, to merge with the scenery (flowerbeds, shrubbery borders and fabricated woodlands) to avoid attention even as they seek it. Yet the image of the small adobe building, now famous for a notorious celebrity outing, reminds us of the thrilling possibility of discovery. It is all done in the best possible taste.

Emmerson brings together a carefully orchestrated array of transhistorical signs that illustrate the terms of polarised modern masculinities. By analogy Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley are juxtaposed with scenes from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where Red Army soldiers hold high Huysmans's bible of decadence, *Against Nature*. Just as fin de siècle artists used Eastern art forms in an attempt to transform Western culture, so the Chinese drew on Western ideologies to fuel their own revolutions. Cultural boundaries are dissolved as much as sexual ones in these works. The mirror literally reflects the metaphors played out here. This is an exhibition anchored in anxiety and uncertainty, where the coherence created by the balance of form and colour is disrupted by the images presented and the relationships between them. It highlights shifting identities and challenges a misleading homogeneity. Perhaps what he might be asking by (*are we there yet...?*) is what happened to the transgressive and liberatory function of identity politics and if we are 'there' yet how can we tell and what were 'we' expecting to find? After all, Dorothy just ended up back in the comfortable, chromophobic world that she had come from.

If to be queer is to be other, uncertain, in between, self-constructed, free within the confines of power; aware of your body and afraid of its limits, conscious of your own construction and amused by its pretensions,

can there be a queer space still?...Can there be an opening that is queer toward what cannot be known?...To refuse to accept one's conditions, to build in the full knowledge that one will never finish and never live in peace, is human. It is also...a tantalising (queer) speculation.<sup>1</sup>

...are we there yet...?

1 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 16.

## Exhibition Response #2

### Are we there yet? Bridie Lonie

To use the title (*are we there yet...?*) for the transformation of a gallery space into a gay man's single apartment with a generous living area is to signal very clearly that the division of public and private is dodgy at the best of times and won't work here. Neil Emmerson has furnished three rooms with works from the last twelve years. All exploit the doubling, reversals and repetition intrinsic to print media. And all equally remind us that print is the most public and political of forms, introducing into the domestic space the public realm first by its presence and then by its content. From the entry chamber, with its round looking glass (isn't a reflection the original print?) to the bedroom with its single bed surrounded by pendant letters whose rotational flow cruelly differentiates the space between articulation and experience, the print form acts as an integrating force. This enables a constantly doubling meditation on the consciousness engendered

by living in the queer lane. And Emmerson's way with colour is to bleach strong colours through light printing, translucent overlays or their use on reflective surfaces, always suggesting something lost, not quite there, or coming to light.

The mirror in the atrium area immediately suggests the gaze and narcissism, and a reversal that is entirely naturalised in the everyday organisation of our self-image. Public space is signalled by the formality of a very phallic obelisk centred on a large table, referencing prints of a war memorial in a park celebrated for its public toilets. Large blankets with intaglio and printed text and images curtain what one imagines are plate-glass windows, an implied vista beyond. Images of parks and their accompanying public toilets reside in this space, and a shoe plays the sounds of foot traffic.

The obelisk introduces the motif of the soldier and the war-zone. This is played on both an individual and collective level. Sexuality can be a war-zone, but it's not as simple as that. Emmerson's work reminds us that fantasy is also a constructed, public zone that operates using tropes and metaphors that can be astonishingly over-determined. The three greyed-black images of the Abu Graib atrocity; the abstraction produced by repetition and tonal reduction; and the metaphoric resonance of the use of three, bring home, literally, that particular atrocity's dependence upon imagery of the crucifixion and the lynchings of the Ku Klux Klan. Racism and fundamentalist intolerance have their end in the projection of a fetishised image onto an individual.

A curved wall covered with Emmerson's prints of the late 90s plays with another dialogue, another mirroring: an adroit conversation between the revolution in decadence of *fin de siècle* Europe and Chinese appropriation of European revolutionary tactics during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Oscar Wilde

and Aubrey Beardsley meet the Chinese Courtyard Sculptures, those ceramic life-size figures which image the revenge taken on the landlord class by the peasant. Beardsley's angular face is seen through images of lacquered screens; Mao's soldiers hold a copy of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours*. There seems to be no 'nature': all is culturally determined, but also all male, even when images of hermaphrodites emerge, reinforcing the constructed nature of gender and the persistence of sexuality and desire. These images move lightly between different cultural registers, suggesting links between sequestration and domesticity. Screens obscure and reveal as characters play hide and seek between their own and others' politics of liberation.

Relations between domesticity and childhood are there too: behind a soft focus screen *The Wizard of Oz* plays, duplicating itself only in its registers of colour and sound. The curtains in this section reference Oscar Wilde and Jean Genet; Wilde in Beardsley's image of him in the nursery chair, his book loose between his fingers, his head fallen in sleep. Here intimacy and domesticity come closest together.

But, in the bedroom things are more stringent. Hanging letters spell out *the heart is a lonely hunter*, and the text runs like an acrostic across and between other words: art, alone, he, one. The narrow bed with its incised blanket faces three images – the most recent of Emmerson's works – of young soldiers in camouflage suits, visually teasing through the text, like a Lacanian meditation on the beauty of the image and the bleak horror of the Symbolic Order. The room also opens onto a bleak subterranean alley.

Indeed, the cohesion of (*are we there yet...?*) lies comfortably within its understanding of the ways that post-structural theories both articulate and produce queer experience.



## Exhibition Response #3

### Prints Charming and the Gobbet of Spit...Hushed Tales and Deadly Precision... Neil Emmerson at the Blue Oyster Carl A Mears

Emmerson has had a distinguished career as an artist in Australia. His singular practice extends far beyond the parameters expected to be met by even such a consummate printmaker, or one with a more cautious reach. In tailoring a politically complex exhibition, (*are we there yet...?*) for Dunedin, New Zealand, he employed a distinct synthesis. This allowed a glimpse of his sensibility toward materials, his experience with regard to spatial organisation, and an historical knowledge of extended sculpture practice which led to an experience far beyond the feckless arranging which often passes for "installation art", an unfortunate term whereby a volume of space is frequently transformed into a refuge for scoundrels.

The cultish Blue Oyster Art Project Space in a dank basement of central Dunedin is a mixed gruel of avant-tradition and assertive innovation, which often offers no challenge to the low ratskeller spaces, the crumbling décor, or the audience. Twilight Zone openings here are often furtive grabs for free beer and a hopeful chance to make a new friend...in the more conservative galleries near-by, comparable and other expectations are filled by similar knowing-codes and coding of knowledge. Culture there sloshes by in clean Chinese crystal.

*are we there yet?..* Emmerson's opening with people included was a beautifully modulated and cunningly installed object, improvisation, image and

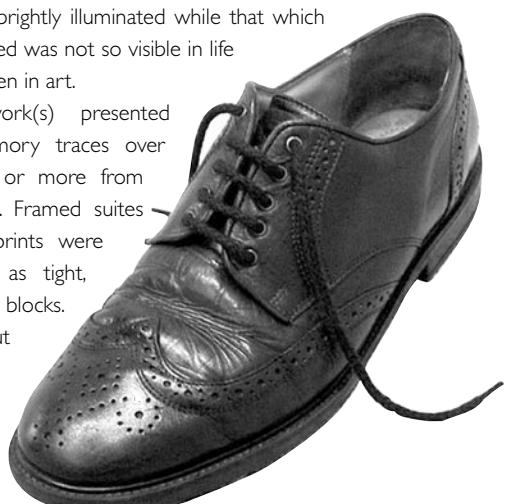
cryptography presentation. It offered no beer for the grabbing. It was very clearly an installed work of many parts whose needs made simple redecorating urgent in terms of work-content, and the alcoholic need of the punters was far less urgent than the extremes and needs of the matters at hand. The local and esteemed Emerson's brewery lucked out big time, but the poise and hushed poignancy of the work deserved this necessary discipline.

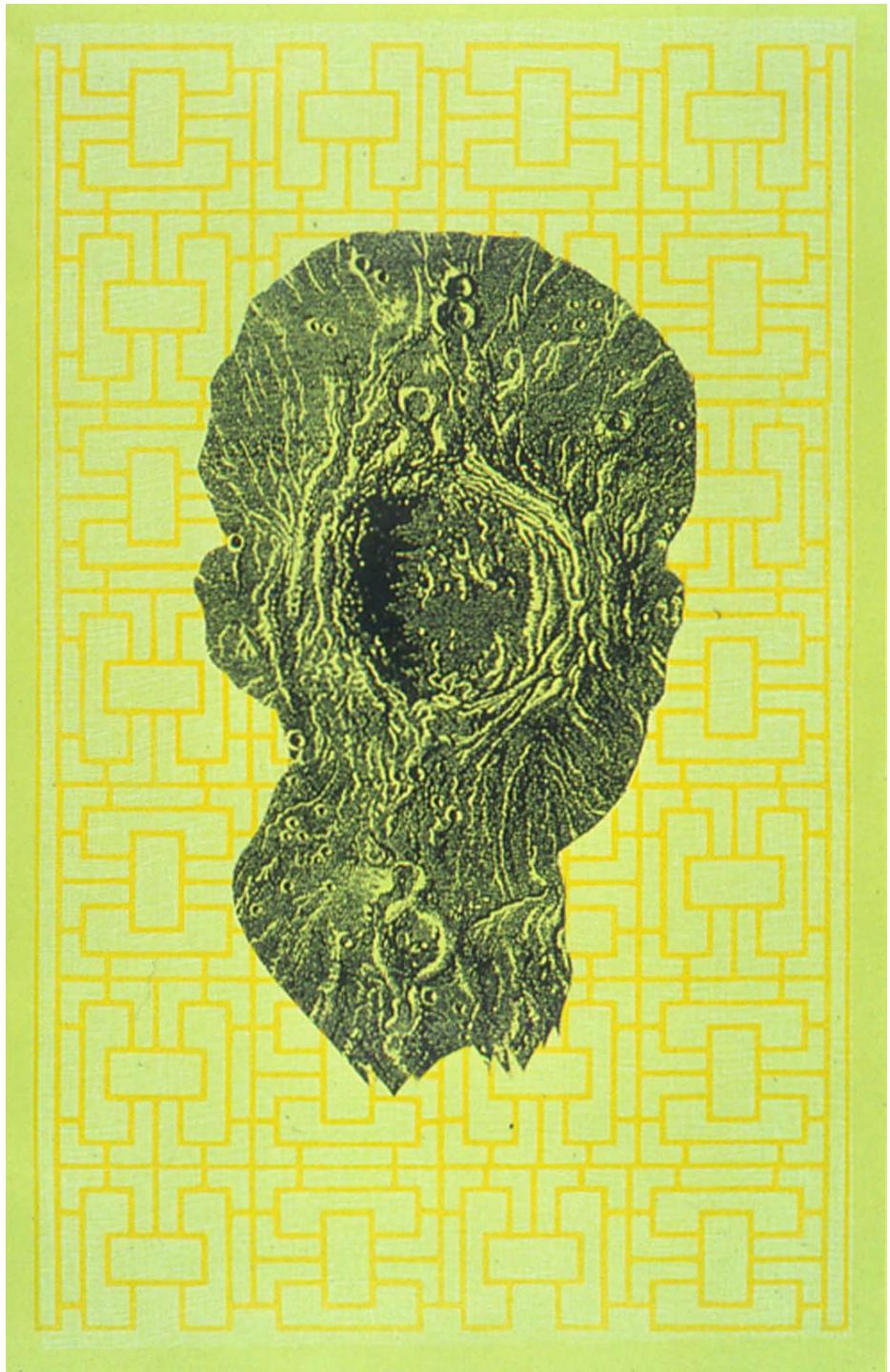
The most particular lighting allowed unusual glimpses of the shoe leather of cultural cruisers alongside those nifty, talking brogues of the artist. Part of the work – those leather singletons being loose acute accents from Emmerson's secret alphabet of signs, sat like anxious monitors awaiting the other to form a pair. Those shoes accommodated male feet only, nugget brown and spleen green. They conjured sounds of crunching gravel, and authoritative echoes of many yesterdays down many a garden path or up a gum-tree. Mumbled conversations, missed assignations, new propositions hovered about. Mix and match, maybe indicative of mutual failure, they drew the eyes down to the new greyed floor. Even the lamentable cracks there were drawn into things, annexed by dumb eloquence and a strong aesthetic of material and method.

For a gentle man he cracks a mean whip, and that space had jumped out of its skin and into another. But the light within the several gallery spaces was acute to the point of hurt, because it was the antithesis of the expectation of gloom and lazy hot-spotted small pools of glory in the blue histories of the Oyster. All the scars were now in relief. In Emmerson's show every thing was brightly illuminated while that which was revealed was not so visible in life – rarely even in art.

The work(s) presented were memory traces over a decade or more from Emmerson. Framed suites of small prints were presented as tight, large-scale blocks.

Muted but bright felt drapes





held experience in stasis with laser-burn lines. Intaglio burns to set the short hairs standing, depicted other historic and cultural images alluding to the politics of innuendo or to unspoken knowledge; shaven-back green bas-relief made its felt presence as curtain, privacy, secrecy. Excess was evident – nothing was skimped but nothing was superfluous. It was all just right. The particularity of the laser drawings, the recognised buzz of shaven fabric, the urgency of the work ethic and the unique personality and generosity of the artist, revealed us to each other and maybe even to ourselves.

What was behind those grubby old windows? Or was it in front? What lay beyond them now while we were secret together here in public? Heavy felted folds hinted at Robert Morris or not. Joseph Beuys fitted the old space but not this new meticulous empire. Aesthetics of domestic life gave comfort to the wounded, insulated temperature, shielded sound; and gave instant intimacy to strangers. A spare procession of tiny, editioned images metred out a pointed pæn of praise to Goya and a strident anger at the torturers of Abu Graib. Was that already three years ago? Three hundred? All our Demons were there. Or here? The up-front honesty of the man is heroic. The boiling politics of experience is served with elegant insight, decisive thought and such particularity that on this rare occasion the warts, bags, bumps and spots on each one of the audience were revealed in counterpoint

to our attempts at costumed elegance. We became simply simpering odd souls at odds with the ceiling, and as self-conscious in a way, as the art of Emmerson is in self-knowledge. Were we really posing? And for whom? are we there yet...? said Emmerson.

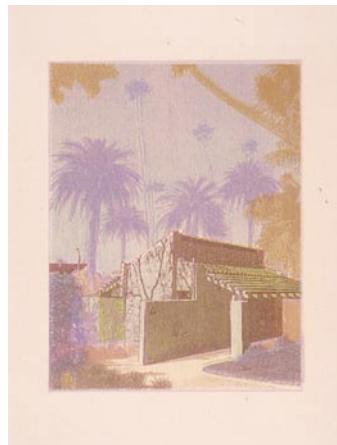
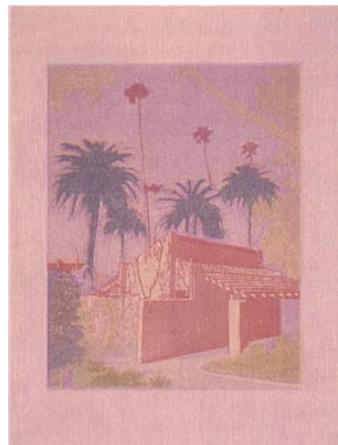
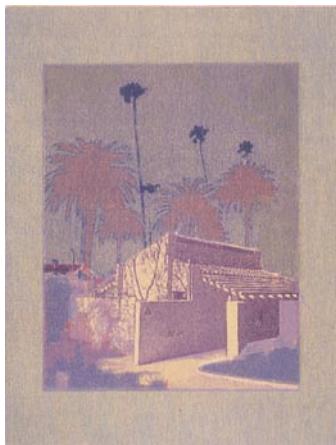
## Exhibition Response #4

### WHAM! BAM!

**Ben Smith**

In the Blue Oyster Art Project Space show entitled *(are we there yet...?)* Neil Emmerson transformed the gallery into a domestic space: the private interior world, the safe family haven, the chores that are executed for one's own bodily needs, the private lives of the people of the world played out behind closed doors with the curtains drawn shut.

Emmerson's domestic space is created through a tableau of domestic objects – pictures on the wall, a table, and a bed. The most striking are the curtains, large and weighty in both form and concept. These curtains, made from blankets, are drawn closed and have engravings pressed, and text shaved into them. They act as the delineation of the interior/private and



the exterior/public, the subject and the socio-political. Here the curtain is liminal and epidermal.

So to whose world have we, the viewers, gained access? Yes, another's personal realm, but why and in relation to what? And here we find the crux: this is not the nuclear family's domestic environment but the heterogeneous private world of an other. However, I do not feel like an invader of privacy on entering this other's world (it is an art gallery after all), I feel more a twinge of guilt, the guilt of rifling through someone else's closet. The sexualised closet is created by the dream of the middle-class family and is constructed from the outside by a moral code that prescribes any subject that deviates from the norm as an other. Indeed, in Western metaphysics one thing is always dialectically defined by its other.

A group of four prints entitled (*IWYS*) hangs in the 'living area' and features a small adobe building nestled amongst palm trees. The prints (lithography and woodblock, 1999) are re-worked in different colour separations. (*IWYS*) is a buried reference to a song by George Michael entitled *I Want Your Sex*. The original image was sourced from tabloid newspapers. Through subsequent publication of this image on the Internet, the building became widely known as the site of a major celebrity 'outing', when an undercover policeman coerced George Michael into a 'lewd act' and then arrested him<sup>1</sup>.

"WHAM! BAM! I AM! A MAN! [...]  
I choose, to cruise.  
Gonna live my life, sharp as a knife,  
I've found my groove and I just can't lose."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the bravado of his lyrics, on this occasion he did lose. Michael was recently reported to have said that he initiated the arrest intentionally, as it finally

settled the media's and the public's speculation about his sexuality, so he could finally "make my life about me"<sup>3</sup>. Emmerson's appropriation and its referents highlight the nature of the social queering inscribed on innocent bodies and the political (abusive) power mediated images can exert over society, groups, and subjects. The subtle use of this image can be seen in terms of a subcultural appropriation, where Emmerson quietly recodes a cultural sign rather than insisting on a more confrontational program.

Different but not quite other, the subcultural nevertheless attracts the sociological gaze. Indeed, it is often dismissed as a spectacle of subjection, but this is precisely its tactic: to provoke the major culture to name it and in so doing to name itself.<sup>4</sup>

Through this appropriation all viewers are in essence 'put in their place'. Through our decoding, we – the subject – are contextualised.

However, on another level, it is a queer re-appropriation, a taking back, where the image itself has been claimed by Emmerson as 'ours'. Using the visual art traditions of printmaking and this iconic image, Emmerson constructs a queer community of memory. The work acts as a monument – 'Lest We Forget'. In this way the image becomes highly politicised, as it not only represents the space where a cruel trick was played against a now publicly gay celebrity, but also highlights the methods that the socio-political gaze operates through continuous phases of marginalisation and alienation. And this is what the entire installation, this private/public space, implicitly asks of us - where do we subjects position ourselves, and will we ever get there?

1 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1879596.stm> as last visited on 30 May 2007.

2 George Michael's lyrics for the Wham song *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do?) [Unsocial Mix]* (6:36) 7": Innervision / IVL A 2442 (UK) 1982.

3 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1879596.stm> as last visited on 30 May 2007.

4 Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1985), 170.

## Exhibition Response #5

### Act Natural Neil Emmerson

One of the more difficult things to do, whether you are challenged or feel involuntarily obliged, is to *act natural*. More often than not it will be in front of a camera that the suggestion is made and somehow you have to strike a pose that might best indicate the comfortable relationship that you have...with yourself. As if the camera wasn't there and you weren't being observed you struggle to develop the demeanour associated with the word *natural*. Like an inversion of the chameleon changing its surface to suit its exterior environment you conjure a pose that is considered your very own, a reflection of your true nature, the private architecture of your interior.

In 1830, Balzac attempted one of the first scientific approaches to the study of self-representation. He claimed that through the study of a person's habits, lifestyle, profession, carriage, gesture, speech, and dress one could be decoded and classified. He believed that there was a direct correlation between an interior essence and an exterior signification. He also hypothesised that these codes of signification, if subjected to a self-reflexive and individual practice, could render one a living work of art.<sup>1</sup> Now, if these codes were read in terms of a specific interiority producing a corresponding exteriority then one could imagine the reverse to also be true...that a singular, contrived exteriority could produce a corresponding interiority. In our regular, everyday lives, we are continually in the process of the construction, the maintenance, consolidation or the rearrangement of that construction of ourselves.

To *act natural* then is oxymoronic. If it is an act, then surely it's not natural...unless of course acting itself can be considered natural. "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing"<sup>2</sup>

If you are an artist (whatever your individual means of cultural production or expression might be) this struggle is often carried out in the same terms through

your work. Are we obliged to consider what we make an expression of what we are? Can we, do we, construct ourselves through our practices or can/do we construct our practices through ourselves? Is it possible to construct, through a conscious manipulation of signs, a kind of practice to equally erase our natures as well as we might expose them? "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim."<sup>3</sup>

This double movement is a fundamental signifier in the production of a space that might secret a queer presence. But that presence is invariably an absence in the scheme of this theory. A queer space is like the space in a mirror; uninhabitable, and the audience is more likely to see themselves reflected in that space than see the artist. The mirror is crucial and refers away from itself to the spectator in its two-dimensional spatial appropriation. The distinction between private and public (interior/exterior; same/different) is fundamental to a spatialised concept of modern subjectivity and playing with those codes can create slippages, doublings like in a mirror. If the terms are inverted then outside becomes inside and so the artist and the viewer have the same (different) interior; populated by incalculable others, ghosts of the cultural machine, the media, all the things that we share but that we don't imagine that we have to take responsibility for.

"If it is anywhere, the public is 'in' me, but it is all that is not me in me, not reducible to or containable within 'me', all that tears me from myself, opens me to the ways I differ from myself and expose me to that alterity in others."<sup>4</sup>

1 See Moe Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde" in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Moe Meyer, ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 76.

2 Oscar Wilde, from *The Importance of Being Ernest* as quoted in *The Wit and Humour of Oscar Wilde*, Alvin Redman, ed. (New York: Dover, 1959 ), 138.

3 Oscar Wilde, from *The Picture of Dorian Grey* as quoted in *The Wit and Humour of Oscar Wilde*, Alvin Redman ed. (New York: Dover, 1959), 62.

4 Tom Keenan, quoted by Fraser Ward in *Jeff Gibson's Taste in Men*, exhibition catalogue essay accompanying *Legends: Jeff Gibson*, shown at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1997, s.p.



**Judith Collard** is a Senior Lecturer in Art History and Theory at the University of Otago.

She studied at Melbourne University and La Trobe University in Australia, and her PhD was on Medieval Art. She teaches courses on Medieval Art, Gender Issues and Contemporary Art and has published widely in these areas in Europe, the USA and Australasia.

**Neil Emmerson** is an Australian artist living and working in Dunedin, New Zealand. He is a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Print Studio at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic/Te Kura Matatini ki Otago.

**Bridie Lonie** is the Head of Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin. She is a writer and has completed a master's project on theoretical frameworks for the art therapy encounter at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

**Carl A Mears** hailed from New Haven, Connecticut, USA sometime in the mid-sixties. He gleaned a lot in the ambience 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. He enjoys his own micro-radio commentary on life and on the arts where he hypothesises and hyperventilates fortnightly on a local radio station. Sometimes he writes things on paper; sometimes on walls.

**Benjamin Smith** is an artist and arts writer who completed a BFA majoring in Sculpture in 2006 at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic. Having directed the Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin, he recently relocated to Glasgow, Scotland, where he is developing a research-based practise that explores processes of othering by dominant cultures. He also likes to climb mountains.

#### IMAGE DETAILS: PAGES 18 - 27

Page 18: Entrance to the Blue Oyster Art Project Space off Moray Place in central Dunedin, 2007.  
Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 18 below left: Installation view: *Curtains: (I was his...)* 2005, dyed and shaved woollen blankets (x2); *(falling boy)* 2000, printed laser engraving on woollen blanket (x1) each 230 x 160cm; *(black obelisk)* 2007, marquette, grey board, 75 x 18 x 18cm; *(table)* 2007, covered by *(red book cover)* 2000, dyed and shaved woollen blanket, 230 x 160cm; *The Rape of the Lock*, 1996; *(red shoe)*, 2005. Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 18 below right: Installation view: *(black obelisk)*, 2007; *(table)* 2007; *(red book cover)*, 2000; *Mirror*, 1986; *(IWYS)* 2000.  
Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 19 left: Installation view: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 2006, laser cut acrylic, brass swivels, lead weights, dimensions variable; *Wood Nymph Triptych*, 2006, screen prints, 112 x 76cm each. Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 19 right: Installation view: *(are we there yet...)*, TV monitor, acrylic sheet, video loop; *(penance)*, 2000, laser cut acrylic, plastic beads, lead weights, dimensions variable; *The Rape of the Lock*, 1996, 45 unique state colour lithographs from a suite of 123, 47 x 30cm each; *(red shoe)*, plaster, laces, red acrylic paint, 2005. Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 21. *Mirror*, 1986, (containing installation view), glass mirror, 150cm diameter. Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.

Page 22. *(shoe)*, 2002, containing sound piece - minimitter, cd player and fm transistor radio. Photo: Neil Emmerson.

Page 23. *The Rape of the Lock*, 1996, unique state colour lithograph, from a suite of 123, 47 x 30cm each.  
Photo: Christopher Snee.

Page 24: *(IWYS)*, 2000, 3 unique state colour wood block and lithography prints, from a suite of 13, 40 x 30cm each.  
Photo: Neil Emmerson.

Page 27: *(penance)*, 2000, laser cut acrylic, plastic beads, lead weights. dimensions variable.  
Photo:Yvonne Caulfield.