

PETE WHEELER



**RDS GALLERY
2020**

**RDS GALLERY,
6 CASTLE STREET, DUNEDIN**

**LIFE PUZZLE
IN TECHNICOLOR**

PETE WHEELER

Cover Image:

Untitled (Pete Wheeler, 2019, oil and oil stick on canvas, 220cm x 170cm)

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A Painter – Pete Wheeler

Peter Wheeler (b. 1978, Timaru, New Zealand) holds a BFA (2000) from the Otago Polytechnic and an MFA (2009) from the U of Canterbury. He has exhibited widely in New Zealand and internationally in galleries such as Buia Gallery, NY, Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, Poggiali e Forconi, Florence, and Whitespace Gallery, Auckland. He currently resides in Berlin with his wife and three children. For him, painting is his 'job' – he works regular hours and prides himself on his mastery of his craft, developed over twenty years. 'I am a painter' is a phrase that he habitually repeats when describing himself.

Wheeler's fundamental engagement is with painting as an activity that seeks no other justification outside itself. He works primarily in oil on canvas, which he primes with rabbit skin glue on the reverse side of the fabric. He specifies: 'Somehow, I just love putting colour on a surface. It's just the way it is. I think art is just something inherently in us as kids, and some of us carry that through life.' His later paintings are often developed with reference to photographs, which he may find or take himself and which he re-interprets liberally; he is drawn to a particular image (to which he frequently returns more than once) because of the way it suggests a potential painting as a play of colour, texture, form and composition metastasized in the materiality of the medium.

'I used to be an abstract artist,' claimed Wheeler in 2011. In consequence, perhaps, he explains that

. . . my painting style is a constant struggle between abstraction and figurative defined and redefined. It is a game between colours, surfaces, and images and something that deals a lot with manual skill. All this reminds me that I have to be aware as an artist, to let the paint be the paint, that it has its own characteristics and is not always under the control of something else.

Art critic, Lorenzo Bruni, thus, views Wheeler's project as resonating with that of 'artists such as Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig and William Sasnal who have always worked upon the attempt to discover a third approach to interpretation, between figurative and abstract. . . .'

Wheeler's large-scale oil paintings serve as a constant reference to the body and its exertions as critical to his practice. In the artist's words:

To create these paintings a lot of physical movement is necessary and the sense of motion continues to be present in the finished work. The extraordinary thing I want to immortalise . . . the comparison between the movement of the colour strokes and the movement of the figures within the illustrated space of the canvas. Painting reveals images, but it also reveals its own genesis through colour and contrasts.

In this context, these paintings also offer the traces of a performative act, or series of actions, that are at the heart of their origins as objects with an empirical existence. Wheeler himself states that ' . . . I never abandoned abstract. I use it like a composition or isolating figure to create a perfect equilibrium in the representation.'

His current work remains, nonetheless, largely figurative and fundamentally enigmatic. He comments that 'I am interested in a narrative that considers the relationship between our reality and the metaphysical'; yet, he steadfastly refuses to elaborate on the nature and import of that relationship. He is a painter – but what he paints remains, perhaps deliberately, obscure. He leaves to the individual viewer the task of defining what he as the artist wishes to 'figure forth' – of unravelling the signifying kernel hidden within his majestic elaborations and exchanges between medium and subject that characterise these canvases.

Hilary Radner

Dunedin, April 2020

References

- Bruni, Lorenzo/Peter Wheeler. *Paths of the Destroyer*. Florence: Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, 2011.
- Sisterson, Craig. 'pushing paint around', latitudemagazine.co.nz. Consulted <https://thecentral.co.nz/usr/library/documents/main/101/pete-wheeler-latitude-mag.pdf>
- Wheeler, Pete. Conversation with the artist. Dunedin, New Zealand, 10 March 2020.

Pete Wheeler

'Life is that much brighter when you can put some colour on the surface,' Pete Wheeler, 10 March 2020

If there is one word that best describes Pete Wheeler's work, it is "painterly." In Wheeler's own words, he "wants painting to be exciting as painting." To that end, his canvases, which tend to be large, exploit strong, bright colours applied with a spontaneous freedom. Commensurately, the artist is opposed to the excessive intellectualization and theorization of art. He dislikes it when paintings are interpreted and evaluated solely in terms of the extent to which they embody contemporary political discourses. Instead, he wants each viewer to find in his works something that speaks to them in their own personal language.

To this end, Wheeler thinks of himself as almost "schizophrenic" when it comes to the relationship between himself as a private person, and himself as an artist. He sees a parallel between his own sense of this relationship and the way that Johnny Cash, the famous American country-western singer, was regarded: to the world, Cash was "Johnny," but at home, he was 'JR'. So, too, with Pete Wheeler the artist, in relation to "Pete," the private man.

Consequently, drawing an analogy with literature, he describes his paintings as functioning like a 'third person narrative' rather than a 'first person' one. In other words, any personal investment in his work is placed at a considerable distance from the experience that generated it.

Stylistically, Wheeler's paintings tend to be large for a purpose: he means the scale of these works to be provocative, to present a confrontation in which the viewer is brought face-to-face with difficult subjects. Frequently, in these large works, meaning is generated by striking juxtapositions of disparate subject matter within discrete works, and also in the relationship between them when viewed in contiguity. For example, one of the paintings in this show depicts a cat, a familiar domestic image, but upon closer inspection, one notices that the cat is lounging in a German helmet such as those worn during World War II. In addition, there are eucalyptus leaves overhanging this central image, which evokes the relationship between the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere, along with the history that goes with it. The result is an activation of contradictory associations that are latently complex in their interaction.

Another example in the current exhibition of the way strategic juxtapositions can generate meaning can be seen in the relationship between two large paintings that have been placed adjacent to one another. One shows a young boy swimming

joyfully in the flume of an amusement park, while the second shows an old man, white haired and stooped, as if he is staggering towards his grave. The colour contrasts between the two paintings silently convey everything that needs to be said: the vibrant, life-infused colours of the boy swimming contrast radically with the dominant black of the background in the second painting, which in turn throws into highlight the white of the old man's hair. Concomitantly, the brown of the overhanging leaves in this second painting contrast with the vernal green that dominates the first one.

Wheeler professes himself, indeed, to be concerned with the universal truths of human life, such as the reality that we are all going to grow old, and die. He realizes that art dealing with such themes can be discomfoting. As he puts it, 'Truth is like poetry, and most people hate poetry.'

Alistair Fox

Dunedin, April 2020

Contributors

Alistair Fox. Professor Emeritus, University of Otago began his career as a lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and three volumes translated from French into English.

Hilary Radner began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), and the Biennale of Sydney (1982). In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 2002 she was appointed Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018). With Marie Strauss, she currently directs RDS Gallery, Dunedin.

PETE WHEELER – Curriculum Vitae

Born 1978, New Zealand

Lives and works Berlin

Currently resides in Broad Bay, Dunedin

Education:

2000 BFA, Otago Polytechnic, School Of Art

2009 MFA, University Of Canterbury

Select Solo Exhibitions [2020]:

2020 Kuenzler Weder, Zurich, Switzerland

2020 The Central, Christchurch, New Zealand

2020 Survey Show, Pah Homestead, Auckland, New Zealand

Select International Exhibitions:

2016 *Ride The Lightning*, General Store at Art Brussels, Belgium

2014 *Exodus*, Teapot Art Galerie, Cologne Germany

2011 *Paths of The Destroyer*, Galleria Poggiali e Forconi Florence Italy¹

2011 *Liste 2011*, Basel, Switzerland

2011 *When I Roll, I Roll Deep*, Peres Projects Kreuzberg, Berlin

2009 *These Are Not Dark Days*, Buia Gallery, New York

2005 *Vitamin P*, Mark Woolley Gallery, Portland, Oregon

Select National Exhibitions:

2019 Whitespace Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2017 *Blue Sleeps Faster Than Tuesday*, Jonathan Smart Gallery,
Christchurch, New Zealand

2014 *Busy As Hell*, Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand

¹ See *Paths of the Destroyer: Pete Wheeler*, Lorenzo Bruni/Pete Wheeler (Florence: Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, 2011).

2009 *All Bets Are Off*, Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand

2008 *Last Stop Before Timelessness*, Whitespace Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2007 *Losing The War on Images*, Whitespace Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2007 *History Will Be Kind To Me*, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand

2006 *Home Before Dark*, Whitespace Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

2006 *Don't Believe the Hype*, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand

Select Group Exhibitions:

2019 28th Wallace Art Awards, Pah Homestead, Auckland

2018 NGORONGORO II, Berlin, Germany

2017 OSME Fine Art, Art Basel Miami, Miami

2017 26th Annual Wallace Art Awards, Pah Homestead, Auckland

2017 Till Richter Museum, Schlosse Buggenhagen, Germany

2011 *The Dicks*, Teapot Art Galerie, Cologne Germany

2010 *Art Barter*, .HBC, Berlin, Germany

2010 *In Fifteen Minutes Everybody Will Be Famous*, Tape Modern, Berlin Germany

2009 *Cloud 9*, Christchurch Public Gallery, Christchurch New Zealand

2009 *Lynchmob*, .HBC Kollektiv, Berlin, Germany

Collections:

Zabludowicz Collection, London

Martin Sosnoff Collection, New York

Eileen Kaminsky Family Foundation, New York

Arturo Sutter Collection, Zurich Switzerland

Sir James Wallace Collection, New Zealand

Jan Warburton Arts Trust, New Zealand

Lincoln University Art Collection, New Zealand