

# PETE WHEELER



RDS GALLERY  
2020

# **Folk Art of the Apocalypse**

**PETE WHEELER**

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

Cover Image:

*Same old thing* (Pete Wheeler, 2020, oil on paper, 80cm x 60cm)

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*Published July 2020 by RDS Gallery, on the occasion of the exhibition 'Folk Art of the Apocalypse', 3 July – 1 August 2020, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin.*

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# **Painting in the Time of the Virus**

## **The Art of Pete Wheeler**

Alistair Fox

In January 2020, the world entered one of the major catastrophes of modern history with the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic. Apart from delivering a psychic shock on account of its virulence and the rapidity of its spread, this deadly virus has prompted many artists to address it, working in the context of an enforced lockdown. Pete Wheeler is one such artist, the paintings in this exhibition being either created during the lockdown, or else presented to be viewed in the context of the pandemic.

Pete Wheeler's paintings characteristically arise out of a complex nexus of intersecting influences: his personal history, his itinerary as an artist who was trained in the South Island and has lived in Berlin, his knowledge of art and cultural history, and an awareness of the historical moment and the issues that confront contemporary societies and polities.

The paintings in the current exhibition display the effects of these converging influences. Stylistically, they reflect the influence on Wheeler of his exposure to German Neo-Expressionism in their painterly sensuousness, emotive use of intense, contrasting



*Figure one*  
The man who could cry  
Oil on paper  
80cm x 60cm(framed)  
2020

© images, Pete Wheeler



colours, figurative subject matter, and narrative imagery.

Thematically, they draw on folklore and cultural history to provide a highly subjective yet politically charged comment on the present moment, during which the world has begun to suffer the catastrophe consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In articulating his response to the time of the virus, Wheeler invokes motifs from the cultural past in order to harness and rework their associations for a new expressive purpose. This can be seen in his treatment of the Harlequin figure that anchors the show.

Harlequin, a stock figure in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, is traditionally presented as a light-hearted, witty, mischievous trickster. Here, Wheeler follows Pablo Picasso in depicting Harlequin as a dejected, abject figure whose whitened face also associates him with Pierrot, his melancholy, joyless rival, who competes with Harlequin for the love of Columbina (figure one). Pictorially, Wheeler's Harlequin paintings are saying the same thing as Canio the clown at the end of the opera *I Pagliacci* after the comedy has turned into a tragedy: '*La commedia è finita*' (the play is over).

In addition, the flute in Harlequin's hand evokes the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who, in another plague, rid a town of rats and then punished its citizens for their ingratitude by depriving them of their children. Fancifully, one might also see the red, white, and blue diamond-checked costume of one of the Harlequins as a Union Jack that has been rendered into fragments, thus providing a



Figure two  
Hot air  
Oil on canvas  
80cm x 60cm (framed)  
2020



sardonic commentary on the failure of leadership that allowed the virus to inflict so much havoc and death on Great Britain.

Other paintings exhibit Wheeler's characteristic expressive procedures, both severally and in relationship to one another. One of his favourite devices is to create visual puns, as in the work that shows a young boy literally 'blowing hot air', which at a symbolic level provides an ironic comment on the empty rhetoric of politicians (figure two). Like George Baselitz, one of the German Neo-Expressionists who inspired him, Wheeler also gives us an inverted painting, which in this case depicts the dismay of an adolescent whose world has literally and symbolically been turned upside down (figure three).

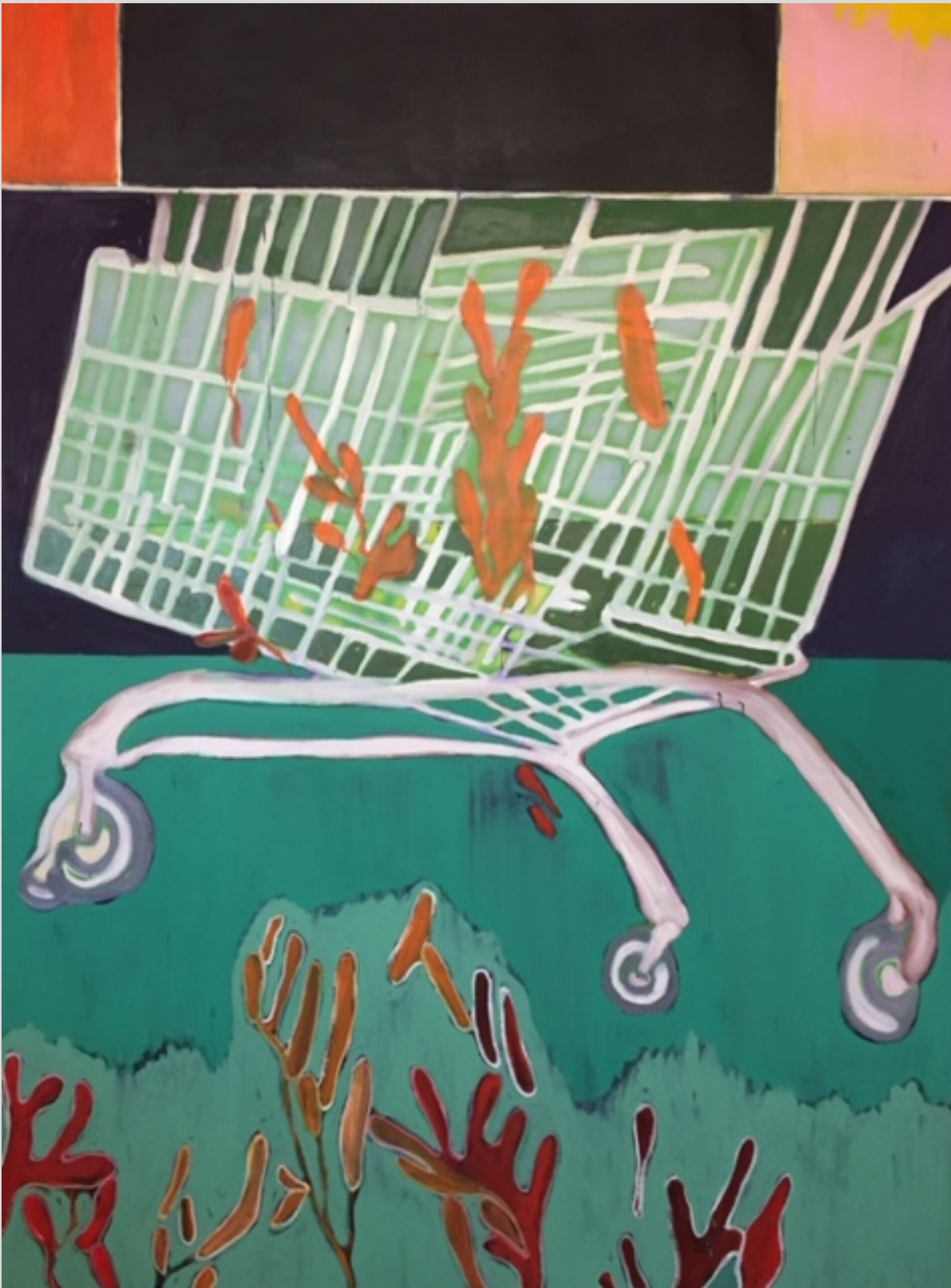
One of the most striking elements in this show is Wheeler's paradoxical juxtaposition of contraries. Within a discrete painting, this can be seen in the image that depicts a supermarket trolley that has leaves superimposed below and against it, which suggests the discordance between the excesses of contemporary consumption and the natural world that those excesses threaten to destroy (figure four). Another instance of juxtaposition occurs in the arrangement of a skeletal hand that crosses over the hand of a living youth, thus creating a *memento mori* that reminds us of the fatal reality of the pandemic (figure five).

The same principle of contrast can be seen between several paintings in the exhibition. If the figure of Harlequin is compared to



*Figure three*  
History doesn't repeat / But it rhymes  
Oil and oil stick  
On canvas  
200cm x 170cm  
2019/20

© images, Pete Wheeler



*Figure four*  
Allow me decode / I've come to download  
Oil on canvas  
200cm x 150cm  
2019/20

© images, Pete Wheeler





*Figure five*  
Clean hands / Dirty hands  
Oil on canvas  
80cm x 60cm (framed)

© images, Pete Wheeler



that of the young boy blowing fire, the contrast in their body language is very striking. Whereas Harlequin looks down, the boy looks up; and whereas Harlequin's body is stiff, with his shoulders hunched forward, that of the boy is fluid, with his shoulders spread back in a gesture of freedom and vitality. The coexistence of these two paintings in the same space thus highlights a generational failure – the failure of the older generation to provide a world in which the young can thrive (figure two, figure six).

Harlequin is no longer the happy mischief-maker; the mischief he has created through his trickery has become deadly, and the young know it, as they blow the 'hot air' away in the hope of a better future.

## References

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Wheeler, Pete. Conversation with the Artist. Dunedin, New Zealand, 24 June 2020.

## Images

*The man who could cry* (Pete Wheeler, 2020, oil on paper, 80cm x 60cm)

*History doesn't repeat / But it rhymes* (Pete Wheeler, 2020, oil and oil stick, on canvas, 200cm x 170cm)

*Hot air* (Pete Wheeler, 2020, oil on canvas, 80cm x 60cm)

*Same old thing* (Pete Wheeler, 2020, oil on paper, 80cm x 60cm)



*Figure six*  
Same old thing  
Oil on paper  
80cm x 60cm (framed)  
2020

© images, Pete Wheeler





Figure two  
Hot air  
Oil on canvas  
80cm x 60cm (framed)  
2020

# Conversing with Pete Wheeler

Michael Greaves

*So many of the pictures refer to abroad as it used to be called, seasons in their foreign plumage, fruit, palm trees, a searingly coloured sky. It may be that this painter needs to travel. You need the separation from home and then you need the return home to consider what you have stored up. What is worth painting is what is in and what is transformed by memory.*

Susan Sontag

This introduction to Pete Wheeler emerges from a short conversation with the artist in his Dunedin Studio – one of a number of such conversations held over years in various locales. It is an introduction from a place that differs from the usual catalogue essay, aiming to give a little insight into the workings of the painter: the differing rhythms and motivations of his work.

Pete and I have mostly always talked about painting for the twenty-some years that I have known him, from our days at The Dunedin School of Art, to Berlin, and now back in Dunedin where Pete and family have been in residence since late 2019. Most of these conversations have taken place in the studio, his or mine, and have involved serious and not so serious discussions about painting, both the material and the intangible. They follow a



rhythm akin to the development of a practice, a turning and returning of the earth that at the time feels like a purification, but usually manifests itself as a recalculation of roads already travelled. What remains constant in these discussions is a conversation between things, a figuring out in concert with issues and ideas already in circulation. When you are making new things for the world, such as painting, these conversations and positions take on a new and necessary importance.

I sat down with Pete in his studio in late June 2020 to ask him about his trajectory through painting, noting that there are consistencies in the works; we still talk about colour, the image, and painting though. He chooses his words carefully, slowly. There is a gravity to what he says – about painting, and about life. These two things for him are intertwined, there is no difference. On first encountering Wheeler, one might see him as an outlier, as a man in black leather, who has a confrontational and maybe aggressive imagery that might identify him as a stereotype in a particular context. These characteristics, however, do not isolate, or define him. There is a languid metre to his responses; rarely does he get overly animated about things, but when he does it is because he thinks the matter at hand is important. He is a painter of contexts and of things, eternal things that relate to the past, the present, and the future:

‘I am drawn to certain images and certain things I see as paintings, and I don’t know why I see those things as

paintings, and I don't really need to know why, and I think that that is kind of the mystery of it'.

In the early 2000's, an important period in Wheeler's development, and one that still leaves traces in this new work, his paintings, then as now, were informed by books, which contribute to the formation of his images. Books like Barry Schwabsky's 2002 curation of painting titled *Vitamin P* were devoured by painters in art schools looking for a kind of revitalisation and a language that could validate often new and uncertain forays into painting. Art school in New Zealand in the late 1990s had a particular flavour, and seeing the works in these books made resolute the excitement for the possibility of painting outside of the collections of what was to be found in New Zealand:

'In order to do anything, you have kind of got to work yourself through it and put your own twist on it, because essentially you are putting colour on a surface and you find your own voice in doing that, you know ... everyone uses the same words, but they write their own stories'.

This outward view is one that has been documented again and again in the history of art making in New Zealand and probably provided the impetus for Wheeler to fly abroad and set himself up in Berlin, where he has resided largely for the last twelve years. Now that he is 'home' so to speak, and experiencing a kind of homecoming, the memory and image evoked in Sontag's text become, I believe, the central node for the body of work he has created for this exhibition. In thinking through this motivation, you begin to notice memory, the sedimentations of experience

unravelling again through a location and awareness of past travels. There is no need to identify and to name these things, they are felt and burst forth. In encountering Wheeler's later work, as exhibited here, there is an instantaneous feeling that there is something familiar, something already seen. It is not often the case that you can tell what, but you do know it. The motifs that Wheeler's paintings engage in are simply common, and deal with those things we all understand and experience. They are not overly academic, they '... are not propped up by tons of ink being spilled', and in this way they are accessible, open and full.

These paintings are in conversation with other makers – ones that have sustained him in his practice – and are frank, at times brutally honest, but always conducted with purpose and sincerity. Early paintings resonated with the image and were a direct response to current events and situations; more recently, though, his paintings convey the sense of a well-developed lineage, arising from years of toil, and evoke a feeling of understanding his craft as a painter intimately. Images are worked and reworked, erased and reconsidered as devices in the moment of painting, beyond the recognisable. Attuned with this history and material intelligence, there is now a sense that he has breathed through painting, managing colour, scale and motif in a dance that evokes, embraces, and distinctly presents a serious interaction with the act of painting.

# Pete Wheeler – A Painter

Hilary Radner

In a preface to the catalogue for *Pete Wheeler: Painting out of time*, a major exhibition being held by the Wallace Arts Trust at The Pah Homestead between 30 June and 6 September 2020, Sir James Wallace observes that Wheeler 'is by no means as well-known in New Zealand as he should be. In fact, he is recognised much more in Berlin and Florence, where he had a major exhibition in 2011'. It is timely, therefore, to acknowledge his status as one of the significant artists of his generation.

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...'.<sup>1</sup>

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.

These paintings, then, 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.

## References

Bruni, Lorenzo/Peter Wheeler. *Paths of the Destroyer*. Florence: Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, 2011.

Sisterson, Craig. 'pushing paint around', [latitudemagazine.co.nz](https://thecentral.co.nz/user/library/documents/main/101/pete-wheeler-latitude-mag.pdf). Consulted <https://thecentral.co.nz/user/library/documents/main/101/pete-wheeler-latitude-mag.pdf>

Wallace, Sir James. 'Foreword'. In *Pete Wheeler: Painting Out of Time*. Auckland: Wallace Arts Trust: The Pah Homestead, 2020, 9.

Wheeler, Pete. Conversation with the artist. Dunedin, New Zealand, 10 March 2020.

# Pete Wheeler

## Curriculum Vitae of the Artist

Pete Wheeler was born in 1978, New Zealand, lives and works Berlin, and 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 Italy<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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



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 26<sup>th</sup> 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, UK

Martin Sosnoff Collection, New York, USA

Eileen Kaminsky Family Foundation, New York, USA

Arturo Sutter Collection, Zurich, Switzerland

Sir James Wallace Collection, New Zealand

Jan Warburton Arts Trust, New Zealand

Lincoln University Art Collection, Christchurch, New Zealand

University of Otago Artworks Collection, Dunedin, New Zealand