

PHILIP JARVIS



Captain Paradise

**RDS Gallery
2021**

A Friend of Dorothy

by Pippi Miller

An Essay on the occasion of the exhibition

Philip Jarvis

Captain Paradise

16 April – 15 May

RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin

Occasional Essays Series

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Crazy Crazy Love*, Philip Jarvis (2021), traffic tape, cable ties and gold lustre, 53cm h x 42cm w x 50cm d.

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Why didn't they just go to the Emerald City?, Philip Jarvis (2021), ceramic, paint and tennis balls, 48cm h x 52cm w x 50cm d. [back]

A Friend of Dorothy

by Pippi Miller

When I first met Philip Jarvis, I realised that I had seen him before. It is hard not to have; his figure stands out against Dunedin's grey skies and streets like a bird of paradise. When I sit down with Philip he tells me that he intends to be noticeable—he is playing with the art of being visible. And in Dunedin, with its unofficial uniform of crow-like clothing, even a splash of colour stands out in a crowd.

But Philip does not just wear a pop of colour, he layers bright sweaters over patterned shirts, vibrant socks with neon strapping tape, and places atop his ensemble a pair of sunglasses, concealing his eyes behind tinted plastic. Philip's vivid clothing draws the onlooker's focus to the colour before looking to see the person hidden behind the shades. Philip tells me that he applies the same philosophy in his artwork—the bright colours, and chaotic arrangement distracting the viewer. The link between Philip's personal use of bright colour, and his artistic use of it helped me to see the artist in relation to his work.

In getting to know Philip's work, I felt I was peeling back layers of colour, distraction, and chaos to find a cohesive, thoughtful, and emotional exhibition. Do not misunderstand me; to remove the colour, energy, and vibrancy from Philip's works would be to strip

away their essence. What I am trying to convey is that Philip's works give first impressions that are intended to be fun and bright, but when studied, you will find layers of meaning which add to them. This exhibition has a particularly special meaning. Philip is a well-established artist with an extensive practice behind and ahead of him. But for him this exhibition feels raw and new: like a first solo show; a beginning; a coming out. Welcome then, to the art of coming out, all done up in neon, gold lustre, clay and paint. Philip realised that he was gay as a boy at school in 1970s England and felt that he alone was different. He has spent much of his life hiding from that identity.

In this exhibition, Philip is no longer hiding. On the walls, we see pictures of young Philip, with tiaras and earrings, nestled against a gold background. As we meet his eyes, we see what Philip might have been as young gay man coming of age in the 1980s, looking to stars like Boy George, Elton John, and Andy Warhol, speakers blaring Duran Duran, Abba, New Order, and Boney M. The contrast between the straight face of the passport photos Philip used for this imagery and the studded tiaras and earrings he has added feel as if Philip is bedazzling his past. He is placing upon his head the crown he couldn't wear as a young man from a middle-class background in England, where being gay was not something to be celebrated.

Look and you will find a neon homage to the Emerald City from the *Wizard of Oz*, an icon of gay culture. Look for the ceramic sunglasses, no longer shielding Philip's self, instead, blasting it out. Find also a litany of unrequited 'Heys' imitating the brutality of

dating apps like Grindr. To top (and bottom) it all, Philip has made an S&M snail orgy, valve-penises pushing through the innertube gimp suits. For all that coming out is a vulnerable affair, Philip's work shouts about the joys and pleasures of being gay, and it is a joy to look at his delight. Joy and fun are easily forgotten in our urge to take art seriously, and forget that it too, can play.

Philip also plays with words. Arches of clay, looped over one-another like lovers, read 'Please Like Me'—correction, tilt your head to find 'Please Don't Like Me'. I mention this work because it holds much of the same tension that I discussed earlier; between visibility and invisibility, distraction and vulnerability. Philip tells me that he wants to be liked, but also expects not to be, almost eliciting pleasure in the dislike he receives. He also speaks to me a lot about that unreachable cool crowd many of us feel an urge to be a part of.

Philip tells me particularly about the unreachable cool of surfers and surfing. He has always wanted to learn to surf. He likes the appeal of the surfers in Saint Clair with their tan skin, riding the waves. I too have tried to surf and know what it feels like to struggle in the shallows while the elite swing effortlessly past, ignoring your floundering. I am reminded that coolness is not always about likeability—it is cool to not need approval, reject attention, and to remain aloof. But Philip and his works are not aloof, and they do call for attention—but that is what is so joyful about them. They, like Philip, are very much themselves.

I try not to look for a resolution in Philip's work, as this exhibition feels more about opening up than coming to any kind of conclusion. But something he said in our last conversation sticks with me, a lull amongst the waves of his life. Set the scene. You are walking along the breakwater at Aramoana. Out to sea, looking like misshapen seals, the surfers bob, waiting for the next wave. One of them, seeing a curve of ocean threatening to peak, paddles forward desperately, and then pushes to standing. You watch them slide into shore, then turn back to the gravel and the rocks and keep walking, enjoying the air on your skin, and the salt.

Contributors

Philip Jarvis (b. 1968) completed a BA at the Camberwell School of Art (1987- 1990). Born in Winchester, U.K., he has spent the last 24 years making art in Dunedin, which he considers his home. He has been awarded numerous residencies, including the Cowwarr Art Space (2016, Victoria, Australia), the Lochmara Lodge Artist Residency (2012, Marlborough), Wild Creations (2011, DOCO/CNZ Rotorua Lakes), Sturt Craft Centre (2009, Mittagong, NSW), AIRVallauris (1997, Vallauris, France). The Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa, the James Wallace Trust, the Frans Hal Museum (the Netherlands), A.I.R. Vallauris (France), the Shepparton Art Gallery (Australia), the Canterbury Museum, and the Otago Museum are among the institutions that own examples of his works. He has a reputation as an artist with a singular vision, while fostering collaboration with other artists as part of his project. His work has earned him a Portage Ceramics Premier Award (joint) in 2009 and a Sidney Myer Fund Premier Art Award in 2000 (joint). Recent exhibitions in Dunedin include 'Toothpaste Tubes Doing Parkour' (Rear Window, DPAG, 2017), 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cactus' (White Box, Dunedin, Fringe HQ, 2019), 'Life Puzzle' (RDS Gallery, 2020) and 'Cargo Bike Art Space' (Dunedin, Fringe, 2021). He also runs marathons.

Pippi Miller (b.1997) was born in Wellington but grew up in Dunedin. She attended Logan Park High School, finishing in 2015. A scholarship swayed her toward attending Otago University, and she emerged after four years of study in 2019 with a BA(HONS) first class in English literature, and an unexpected love for Dunedin. Pippi is currently enrolled in her MFA at the Dunedin School of Art, following on from the graduate diploma that she completed there in 2020. Her drawing and painting-based practice focuses on exploring line and colour, illustration, and children's literature.

