

# PETE WHEELER



*LONGER THAN DIRT*

**RDS Gallery  
2021**



*Bigger Than Words, Wider Than Pictures*, Pete Wheeler (2021), oil, oil stick and pigment on canvas, 1140mm (h) x 860mm (w).

**PETE WHEELER**

LONGER THAN DIRT

An Essay on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
Held at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
3–25 September 2021

Occasional Essay Series

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Getting Old Sucks*, Pete Wheeler (2021), oil, oil stick and pigment on canvas, 1700mm (h) x 2200mm (w).

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RDS Gallery Occasional Essay Series, editors: Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

*First published on the occasion of the exhibition Pete Wheeler: Longer Than Dirt, 3–25 September 2021, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin. This edition published 3 September 2021 by RDS Gallery, Castle Street, Dunedin.*

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*Content Not Being Known, But Just For A Little While*, Pete Wheeler (2002), oil on canvas, 1800mm (h) x 1800mm (w). Courtesy of the University of Otago Art Collection.

# Pete Wheeler: Painting and the End of Art

*By Hilary Radner*

Edward Hanfling, New Zealand art historian, comments: “You can tell straight off the bat that Pete Wheeler is serious about painting. But is he serious about what he paints?” Later in this same article, commenting on “what he [Wheeler] does with paint,” Hanfling remarks: “Wheeler sloshes it up against all kinds of things, so that they collapse onto each other and you cannot quite tell if the outcome is stupid or profound.”<sup>1</sup>

In response to Hanfling’s questions, one can affirm that Pete Wheeler is indeed serious about his painting, despite his apparent reluctance to reflect explicitly upon his practice. Hanfling is correct in identifying him as “an artist who does not separate the thinking from the doing.”<sup>2</sup> Wheeler loves to emphasize to his interlocutor that he is a painter—meaning, one senses, that he feels a need to paint at some sort of intrinsic, existential level, even though he refuses to provide further information about his thematic motivations. This position springs from his belief that painting is an activity that is justified in and of itself, one that needs no explanation beyond the fact that “...[w]alls demand images to be on them.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Hanfling, “Return of the Prodigal Painter,” *Art New Zealand*, 176 (2020–21): 54, 57

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Pete Wheeler, conversation with the artist, 15 June 2021.

upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that Wheeler's paintings offer a sustained and complex commentary on the social terrain that he traverses as an artist in the contemporary New Zealand art scene.

Occasionally, Wheeler admits, with a touch of anxiety, that he does not know what he would do if he did not paint. Pressed further, he reveals that his current work is, at least in some ways, a response to his return to New Zealand, to the challenges that this represents to him.<sup>4</sup> These challenges are inscribed symbolically in the almost hallucinatory repetition of specific images—birch trees, which reference the paintings of Gustav Klimt, and brick and stone walls and (*Bigger Than Words, Wider Than Pictures*); various figures culled from popular culture, such as Quasimodo (*Bigger Than Words, Wider Than Pictures*), and animals of prey (*I Won't Crumble*)—across the impressive number of paintings that he has produced (one might say compulsively) over the last six months, subsequent to his return to New Zealand.

In these paintings, Wheeler indirectly expresses the disappointments of a generation. The beautiful new world that the baby boomers promised their children has become a nightmare of diminishing expectations and a series of predicted impending natural disasters, exacerbated by a pandemic that refuses to come to any conclusion. In many professions, with an older generation clinging to its position in response to extended life expectancies, and a

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<sup>4</sup> Pete Wheeler, conversation with the artist, 8 July 2021.



proliferation of young and inexpensive applicants, the generation that came of age at the beginning of the new century finds itself in an increasingly precarious economic position in the face of a rising cost of living, ballooning housing prices, and inflation.

Let me start with a 2002 painting by the then very young painter, two years out of art school, *Being Content Not Being Known, But Just For A Little While*, which hangs in University College, a student residence, the work having been purchased for the University of Otago Art Collection (referred to as an embellishment collection). The painting hangs above a stage on which sits a grand piano (an object that has appeared repeatedly in Wheeler's paintings) and the University of Otago banner—both tokens of the life to which students aspire upon successful completion of their degree.



University College, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2021.

In this exuberant abstract painting, small, roughly executed, multicoloured rectangles, or near-squares, which mimic the shape of the canvas, swirl across the picture plane on a crimson (tinged with black) expanse of loose brush strokes that do not fill the canvas. At many points, the crimson paint appears to overflow the frame, while at others, the uneven brush strokes leave space for a concatenation of underlying shapes in other colours (black, white, and blue dominating). Crudely executed letters are unevenly dispersed, some taken from the painting's title, others incomprehensible, including one that, perhaps, reads "mess." On a jagged surface of black (two thirds down the canvas, centre left), emerging beneath the crimson, the words "death blow" are repeated with varying degrees of legibility. The vitality, the barely controlled energy, conveyed through the seeming randomness of the brush strokes, and the vivid colours, evokes youth—its confusion ("mess") and anxieties ("death blow"). The title expresses hope—a degree of confidence—ambition and hubris—but, also, the need to be seen at an existential level—to be able to say, in the words of New Zealand writer Sylvia Ashton-Warner, "I passed this way."

Now contrast this painting with the one completed in 2021 *Getting Old Sucks*, the centerpiece of the exhibition *Longer Than Dirt*. Writ large across the face of the work—yet almost "ghosted out," the background remaining visible—the viewer reads the words "GETTING OLD," written in gothic lettering, that recalls a Europe from which the artist recently departed. I jocularly asked if the lettering referred to me (I am considerably older than the artist). He riposted—

—that, no—he felt “old,” he said, with a faint, but noticeable, hint of fatigue.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with the earlier work, the painting is rigidly and insistently controlled, having a degree of visible and calculated symmetry—a painting within a painting, in one-point perspective. A tiger-skin rug, with head, is splayed against a back wall of stones, or bricks of uneven sizes (rectangles, more frames within the frame), in improbable reds and fuchsias. The tiger-head seems to protrude close to the frame within the frame at the bottom of the work, exaggeratingly foreshortened, its mouth wide-open, one fang missing.

*Getting Old Sucks* points to the artist's sustained interest in painting as a medium. Thus, in response to a 2004 exhibition (at which point the artist had already shifted his interest towards figuration), Hanfling opined that “it is Wheeler's style that makes these works compelling.” He continues, “...Wheeler stops short of the specific, and uses colour and form to build up the picture (in the sense of composition as well as scene or action)... Even the ... stencil style texts ... are evocative in their style as much as in their signification.”<sup>6</sup> Such concerns, I would argue, are already evident in the 2002 painting; the 2021 painting, however, demonstrates the evolution and maturation that one would expect from an artist of Wheeler's calibre over a period of twenty years.

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<sup>5</sup> Pete Wheeler, conversation with the artist, 8 July 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Hanfling, “Exhibitions Auckland,” *Art New Zealand* 112 (2004), accessed 17 August 2021, <https://www.art-newzealand.com/Issue112/exhibitionsak.htm>.

Unusually for Wheeler, *Getting Old Sucks* creates a sense of three-dimensional space—but it is a box, or perhaps a display case, claustrophobically enclosing the remains of what was once a magnificent beast. On the one hand, the use of one-point perspective might be considered a stylistic convention, an attribute of the artist's concern with the formal capacities of painting (and its relations to drawing) as a medium. On the other, this strategy is redolent with symbolic interpretations, given the iconic status of the tiger as an image in contemporary culture. Has the artist tamed the beast? Or does he fear that as he himself ages, he too, like the tiger, will furnish nothing more than trophies for the walls of the rich. Or—is it the art world itself that is “getting old”—no longer relevant—merely, perhaps, a tiresome mast of politics, back-stabbings and hyped-up poses?

Even though “getting old” may be the message, the sense of energy and vitality conveyed in these current paintings remains undiminished. *Getting Old Sucks* retains a vibrant palette (even verging on the lurid), but this vibrancy has been re-formulated within a strictly controlled set of planes and images, repeated in other paintings of this same period, that highlights the artist's engagement with the history of art and his technical prowess as a painter and colourist. Simultaneously, almost paradoxically, the same work also underlines the capacity of the visual arts to figure forth emotions through the manipulation of the formal properties of a given medium.

Significantly, the 2021 painting, as opposed to the one produced almost twenty years earlier, suggests a self-conscious awareness of the status and role of art in contemporary society, in New Zealand as elsewhere, and the ambiguity of the artist's position. Philosopher and art writer Arthur Danto, provoked by the proliferation of what he called the "indiscernibles"—objects that could not be designated as "art" or "not art," such as Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes—announced what he called the "end of art" in the 1960s—a line of thought that would lead writers such as Barry Schwabsky, decades later, to accuse the international art world of snobbery and elitism, dependent upon arbitrary judgments of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>7</sup> In such a world, to what, then, can artists aspire except to adorn the walls of the rich? Or, should their practice resonate with current policies, those of public institutions in which the nation itself is glorified (as opposed to the status of a wealthy individual)? Is this the "death blow" that the artist feared in his younger days?

The works in *Longer Than Dirt*, all produced since Wheeler's return to New Zealand in February 2021, manifest an insistent sense of self-confidence combined with defiance, evidenced in the title of another work in this exhibition—*I Won't Crumble*. The fluid virtuosity with which he controls his medium—paint, colour, and composition—gives depth and muscularity to Wheeler's stance as an artist. Yet, the compulsive return of specific images associated with frustration and threat in these same works, complicates this position. It suggests

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61:19 (October 1964): 571–584; Barry Schwabsky, "Agony and Extasy. The Art World Explained: What We Talk About When We Talk About Art," *The Nation*, 13 November 2008, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/agon-y-and-ecstasy-art-world-explained/>, accessed 14 August 2021.

the presence of a vision that oscillates between a point of view in which the artist sees himself as a hunter who nails the beast to the wall, and, simultaneously, as the hunted beast itself.

This repetition of certain images further conjures up the quality of mechanical (now digital) reproducibility that for more than a century has been the mark of that which is “not art”—of modernity and mass production. This same insistence on these particular identifiable and identifying figures, and their repetition, also alludes, paradoxically, to the need to paint as an existential gesture, or indexical “mark,” that signifies the continued existence of the human individual through time. The manner in which Pete Wheeler makes his mark as an artist is intimately imbricated in his desire to be “known,” to be “seen”—to affirm his existence and that of his generation—to inscribe with resolute steadfastness the contradictions of his times. Such desires are often more poignantly expressed through images than through words, as the paintings in Pete Wheeler’s current exhibition confirm.

## Contributors

**Pete Wheeler** (b. 1978, Timaru, New Zealand) holds a BFA (2000) from the Otago Polytechnic and an MFA (2009) from the University of Canterbury. He has exhibited widely in New Zealand and internationally in galleries such as Buia Gallery, New York; Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch; Poggiali e Forconi, Florence; and Whitespace Gallery, Auckland. He lives in Dunedin, having recently returned from Berlin with his wife and three children.

**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). She and Alistair now run RDS Gallery in Dunedin.



*I Won't Crumble*, Pete Wheeler (2021), oil, oil stick and pigment on canvas, 660mm (h) x 660mm (w)