

Brit Bunkley: How They Dream / The Gilded Age

Born in New York City, Brit Bunkley immigrated to New Zealand in 1995 to take up a teaching position as head of sculpture at the Quay School of the Arts, Whanganui.

He has multiple accolades to his name - a US National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1980, the 1985/86 Rome Prize fellowship, winner of the Connells Bay Temporary Installation Project in 2008/09, winner of Sculpture Whanganui in 2011, third prize at *Now&After 2012* at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, and second prize in the Sustainability Short Film Competition in Gainsborough, North Carolina in 2019.

In 1979, reacting to the metamorphosis of modernist specificity into postmodern anything goes, the art historian Rosalind Krauss published her essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field". This text laid out in a diagram what Krauss saw as the structural relationships of sculpture, architecture, and landscape art. Brit would have been her worst nightmare. His work stops at all stations, often all at the same time.

Brit started out as a more or less traditional sculptor and made large public art projects in the United States commemorating regional and historical events. Eventually, though, he grew disenchanted with the tropes of public art and distrustful of the political motives behind it. This was well in advance of the movement today to tear down any signifier of the problematic past.

Brit's work is contradictory, wry and meditative, riffing on history and social commentary. He is the master of the postmodern folly, a maker of *emblemata* - a learned but fantastical recreation of symbols by humanists steeped in the aesthetic past.

Since his move to Aotearoa, his monuments are mostly built in cyberspace for subversive purposes where the possibilities are open and endless.

Attempting to put his work into a categorical box is nigh on impossible, and probably a disrespectful exercise in futility anyway - it simply refuses that sort of crude treatment. It encompasses sculpture, installation, public art, architecture, digital video, virtual environments and 3D printed sculpture.

Brit continues to explore the dynamics and intentions of public space, but now it is with a more cynical eye, sensitive to its ironies. There may be references to Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, Albert Speer's *Germania*, or Disneyland.

Increasingly Heideggerian distinction between art and brute technology has decayed, beauty is no longer truth, and the boundaries of public and private no longer certain. That is the territory Brit works in, making the inscape an outer scape.

In a moment the viewer can be reduced to the position of Kafka's cockroach (or giant computer-rendered Avondale Spider as in Brit's 2015 *The Huntsman*) scuttling through the cultural detritus and ruins of the modern world. The 3D renderings are as hollow as consumer endgame capitalism. There is always a hint of *memento mori*, of *vanitas* - the skull beneath the skin, and the apocalypse behind the sublime.

References to the neoclassical in Brit's work invoke the spectre of the architecture of totalitarianism and violence. In the video work *The Waxing of Joy* (2014) he put footage of Cuban salsa dancing to a slow cello as a commentary on what he saw as the internal ironies and stultifying nature of Anglo-Pākehā culture.

The public monument *Primitive Accumulation* (2008) consisted largely of an enormous cube of tightly stacked garden gnomes. The title was a reference to Marx's *Das Kapital* and the popularity of garden gnomes among the East German proletariat despite them being banned by GDR. Other works concern themselves with landscape and environmental degradation.

Underlying it all is a kind of architectural metaphor for the way the clever fake, the ersatz, the Baudrillardian simulacrum, is shoving the human out of public space. That's not new - Walter Benjamin warned us in the 1930s of arcades as places for distracting the masses from the space being stolen out from under them. That was before the ultimate fakers and kitschmeisters, the Nazis, got him.

Now shopping malls are the stage where Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" is enacted, insulated by a Potemkin village crust. Brit's art is too uncanny, too *Unheimlich* to be hidden behind such distractions.

The artist's carefully conceived, playful ambiguity, is a kind of uncanny valley that keeps us guessing about what is CGI and what is physical model. He cocks a snook at the abounding ironies in the idea that an ahistorical fake carries with it the same emotional authenticity as the original. Hence the Prince of Wales' Poundbury and Disney's Stepford-esque town of Celebration are kitsch.

Brit's work thrives on the rich manure of gothic Pākehā anxieties about identity and influence. Coming from outside the neurotic fishbowl he sees it all too clearly: a colonial society barely coming to terms with past, held hostage by a brooding, sublime landscape that has always been more interesting than any settler culture emergent here, resentful of the authenticity of the indigenous.

Things are, perhaps, a little more comfortable and complacent these days, so Brit, through the medium of art, turns it up to a hundred so we can remember and process it. There is very likely a kind of therapeutic value in this, although there's a lot of trauma and baggage to get past first before reaching the breakthrough.

It is never all horror and condemnation in Brit's work, though. There is always room for beauty and wit. Popular culture is celebrated even as it is autopsied. We might be amusing ourselves to death as a civilisation, but Brit's corrective medicine is even more fun.

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