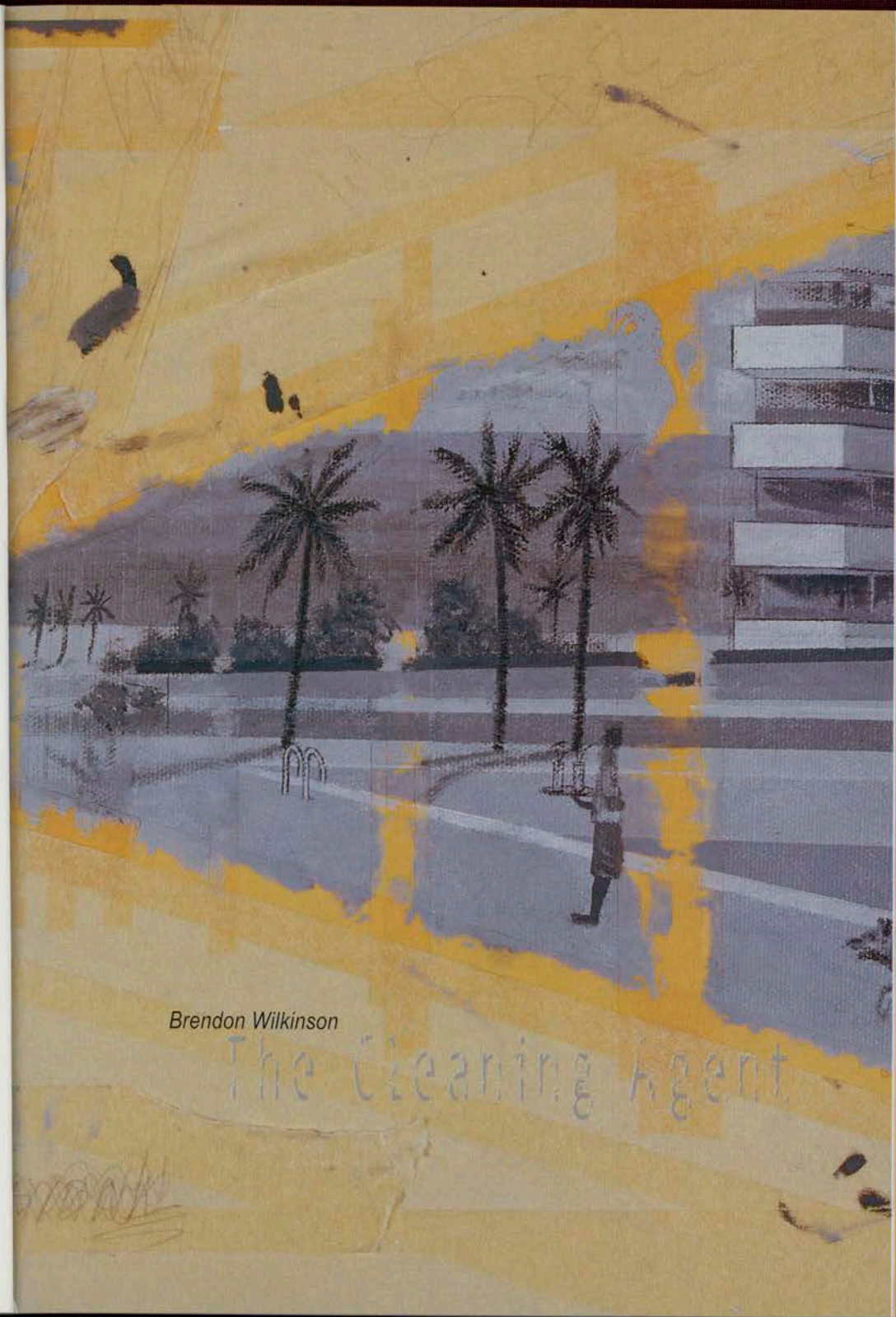


Brendon Wilkinson

The Cleaning Agent.



The Cleaning Agent



Brendon Wilkinson

The Cleaning Agent

Acknowledgements

Principal Funder:

New Plymouth District Council

Exhibition Supporters:

Creative New Zealand

Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki

Director: Gregory Burke

Exhibition Preparation:

Jessica Gommers, Bryan James, Simon Ross, Kate Roberts

Publicity and Administration: Antony Rhodes, Angela Parr

Information services:

Chris Barry, Jane Collins, Ellen Gombert, Johanne Cuthbert, Chazni Keenan, Sally Luke, Michaela Ngata, Cathy Parkes, Barbara Valitine

Published in 2002 by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in association with the exhibition Brendon Wilkinson: *The cleaning agent* 28 September – 1 December 2002, at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. The exhibition was an outcome of the Taranaki Artist in Residence programme a partnership between the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki, supported by Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa

Copyright © 2002 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, the writers and artist. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be produced without the prior permission of the publisher.

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Queen St, Box 647,
New Plymouth, New Zealand.

www.govettbrewster.com

ISBN 0-908848-57-9

Editor: Gregory Burke

Designer: Jessica Gommers

Photographer: Bryan James

Proofreader: Kate Roberts

Printer: Graphix Press & Packaging Ltd, Levin

Foreword Gregory Burke

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is delighted to publish this catalogue to accompany the new body of work produced by Brendon Wilkinson as an outcome of the 2002 Taranaki Artist in Residence Programme. The Govett-Brewster runs an ongoing residency programme that affords artists dedicated studio time and resources to produce major bodies of work.

Wilkinson, who was born in Masterton and lives in Auckland, spent 10 weeks in New Plymouth working on *The cleaning agent* exhibition. Until now Wilkinson was best known as an acclaimed model maker, he used the residency to create a large suite of paintings that extend the scope of his practice. It is the first time that Wilkinson has produced such a consolidated body of canvases.

Wilkinson has also produced a significant new scale model for this exhibition. Titled *Pile of illusions* it is based on the renowned Julius Shulman photograph of architect Pierre Koenig's famous *Case study house # 22* in Los Angeles. The home in the Hollywood hills is generally considered to be the world's most photographed home, it has appeared as a backdrop in numerous advertising campaigns, fashion shoots, and movies. If in the past Wilkinson has made models depicting 'dead zones' — abandoned buildings and derelict railway yards — the new model reflects a new subject for critical enquiry that has developed out of the residency: consumer culture's relationship to architecture and design.

The cleaning agent presents Wilkinson's vision of the flipside to a designer life. It reads as a warning to the excessive materialism of our dreams, in which we match our waking life to pictures of houses and holidays presented in glossy magazines. The paintings are based around fantasy examples of ideal architecture, the sorts of condominiums and apartments where perfect inner-city lives are led and resort holidays are enjoyed. Yet in each of the canvases something is slightly amiss, whether the buildings look deserted or the sky napalm orange, that acts as a warning to the pursuit of lifestyle perfection.

The Gallery thanks all the people who assisted the project. In particular, Donna Willard-Moore and the staff of the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki for their support of the project, and Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa for their generous assistance. Finally, I thank the artist for producing an exhibition that reflects contemporary concerns with a combination of political acumen and humour.

Building and schizophrenia: Brendon Wilkinson's *The cleaning agent*

Simon Rees

"Self improvement is masturbation. Self-destruction is the answer."¹

Brendon Wilkinson's exhibition *The cleaning agent* breaks with critical expectation about contemporary installation practice as it is possessed with a narrative. The 'cleaning agent' is the fictional character whose dreams comprise the works in the show. According to Wilkinson the agent is suffering a breakdown, which explains the dark visions. The visions are of hi-style contemporary architecture, and tropical resort settings. (There is also a scale model of a famous modernist house).

Narrative is reserved for cinema and lately, science.² Not painting, and hardly contemporary literature (as the fortune of book publishing is in constant decline). The nine paintings in the show can be read as stills.

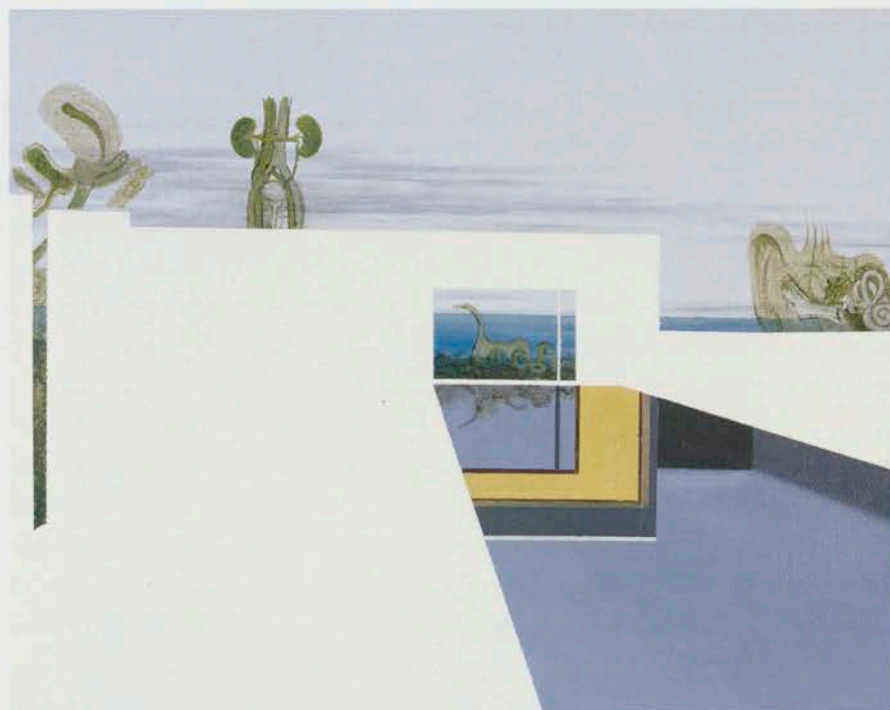


Criminal Intent 2002

oil paint on canvas

sequence, left-to-right/start-to-finish, they combine to create a clear storyboard. Similarly, recent cinema has loosened linearity. Films no longer unfold in a simple beginning-middle-end, establishing-fleshing-climax fashion. In fact, a new breed of movies has developed that have picked up the thread of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) and started destabilising/revealing the simulated chronology of the cinematic experience.³ Consequently, the audience is [slowly] learning to read films in a gestalt rather than plot driven way.

Films such as *Fight Club* 1999 (dir. David Fincher), *Open Your Eyes* 1999 (dir. Alejandro Amenábar), and *Eyes Wide Shut* 1999 (dir. Stanley Kubrick), *Mulholland Drive* 2001 (dir. David Lynch) that comprise this 'new' cinema are a touchstone for Wilkinson in conversation. Along with time, the movies play with the splitting of ego, the fracturing of self into multiple and/or antagonistic parts. Splicing occurs at several levels. (Dr. Strangelove was a precursor in this regard as well). In addition, these films contain critique of bourgeois values and lifestyles, some more trenchant than others, by mixing Marxism and Freudianism. Moreover, all of the films I have mentioned — like *The cleaning agent* — comprise apocalyptic visions (destruction is their solution). The genre I am referring to could be called the cinema of schizophrenia.



Crack of time 2002

oil paint on canvas

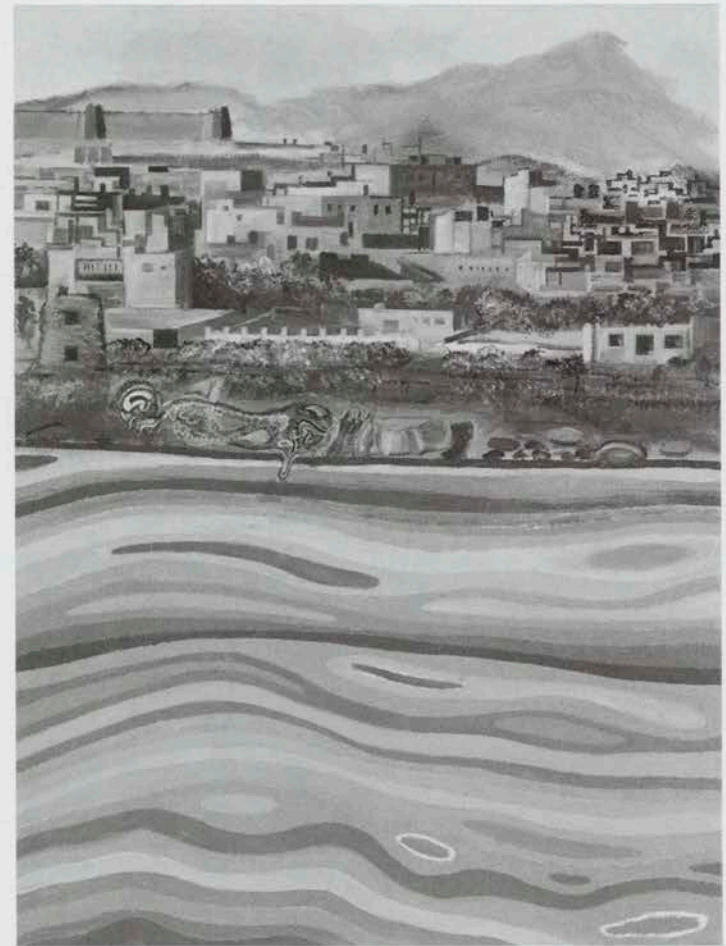
The 'cleaning agent' is a character that belongs to one of these films. While his nomenclature suggests a military or intelligence 'operative' there is equal chance that he is a domestic/commercial cleaner. Choosing between these two possibilities unravels the narrative in different ways. In both cases the buildings comprise work-sites, the nature of the work is radically different, as is the impetus of the subconscious recollection though both interpret an excess; of consumption; or violence.

The domestic cleaner is probably acting out of disgust or envy. As the voiceover in *Fight Club* puts it the cleaner is either "Jack's raging bile" or "Jack's bitter envy". And he notices things, because of proximity, that might otherwise fall beyond the frame. In the painting *Optimum habitat* he sees that the servant at the tropical resort is black, while all of the guests are white. In *Pile of illusions*, the model of the house in the installation, the sink unit probably costs more than the cleaner's car (one of the occupants is copulating with it, and the cleaner will doubtless be wiping away the stain). The pool is half-empty. We might figure that the pool-man is on holiday, how dare he. The dog depicted in the foreground of the largest canvas, *Props and comforts*, has been atomised entering the pool-deck of an imposing apartment block. Wishful thinking on the part of the cleaner; so he never has to scoop again; or is the obliteration enacted by a tenant who can't bear the thought of shit, domestic servants or not.

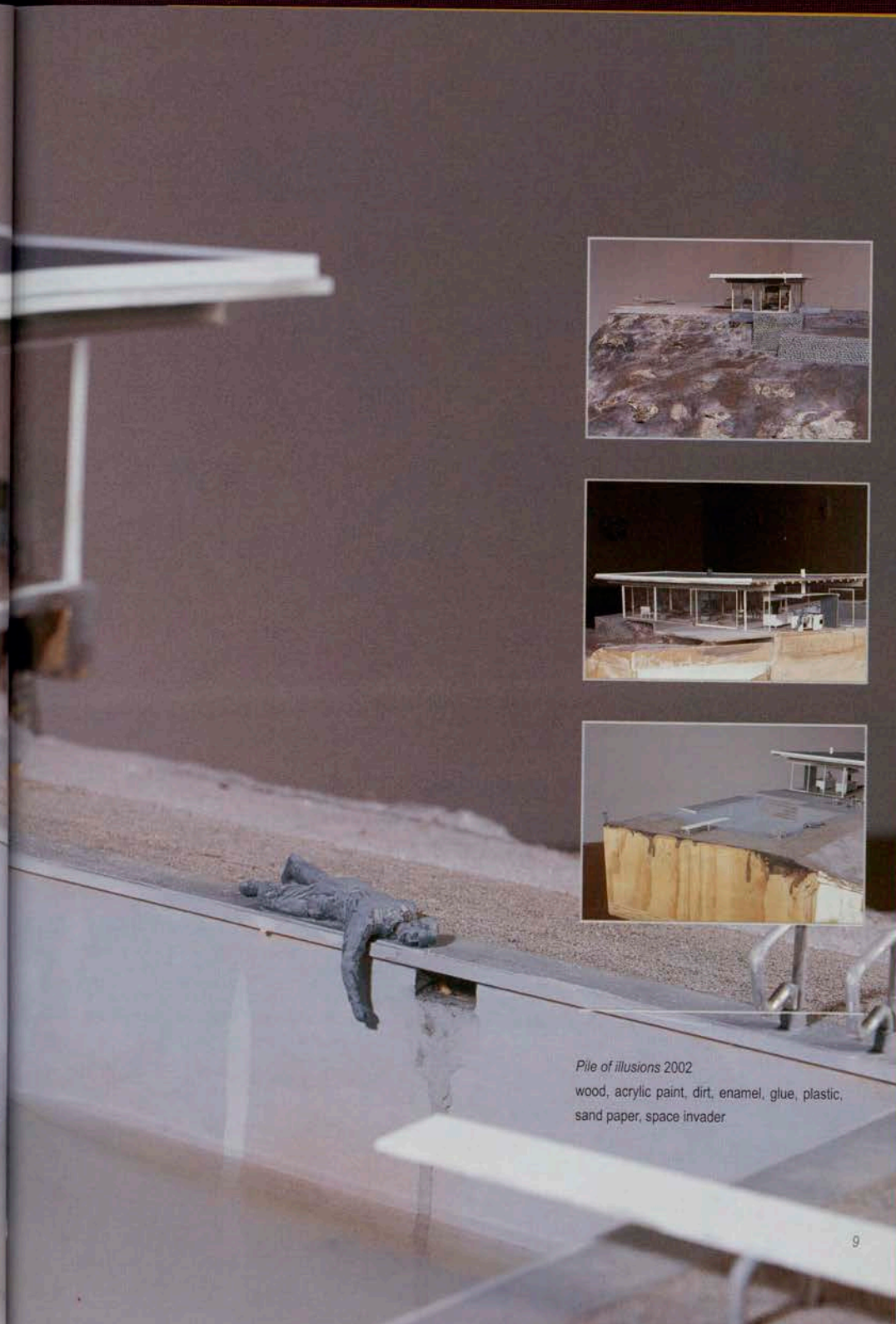
The double agent on the other hand is experiencing a post-traumatic stress syndrome. The paintings and the scale model are proof of his action. The model is scattered with body parts and corpses. The sky is stained war zone red in *Crimson thrombosis*. One of the paintings, *Somnambulant monocline* even depicts the city of Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, the world's most recent theatre of war and mass destruction. The negative spaces in the paintings, the blank spots, mask the proof. The absences reflect the knotholes in his memory testament to repression. Only during sleep do the nightmare visions walk.⁴

We shouldn't forget the artist and his antecedents. For some time now Wilkinson has been building intricate models of non-sites or border zones, spaces rarely reconfigured in architectural models. Generally architectural models represent the ideal or the shiny and new — Wilkinson's depictions represent the reanimation (or gentrification) of these depreciated locations: rail yards are a favourite. More often than not architectural models only make their way into art museums as representation of architectural competitions for rebuilding programmes. (Museums are now the world's most famous buildings and sought after architectural commissions).⁵ Wilkinson's models have a closer theoretical association with the photography of Canadians Jeff Wall and Roy Arden, who often explore suburbs or buildings on the wrong side of town.

The strategy also reflects the earlier work of American artist savant Robert Smithson, and in particular his performative essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967).⁶ In the essay Smithson combines a travelogue of a daytrip to his hometown, a neighbourhood on the outskirts on New York, in which he posits non-sites and commercial detritus (waste water pipes, a dilapidated



Somnambulant monocline 2002
oil paint on canvas



Pile of illusions 2002
wood, acrylic paint, dirt, enamel, glue, plastic,
sand paper, space invader

playground sandpit) as sculptural/architectural monuments. Making the association stick, Wilkinson's *Untitled 2001* a model of a scree-strewn whare recalls Robert Smithson's classic *Partially Buried Woodshed* (Kent State University, 1970); it is in fact a depiction of the remains of a Maori village buried by volcanic eruption.

The new exhibition grafts new layers on the dialogue with Smithson. The painting *Somnambulant monocline* goes underground and depicts the striations of earth underneath a desert city (monocline is the scientific term that describes layering of matter).⁷ The picture plane cuts a person in half revealing their anatomy as well. Smithson, in the *Passaic* essay, was permanently fixated on geological structure: convinced that knowledge of the earth beneath a site would reveal a clue to its psychic and historical character. As Wilkinson is depicting Kabul, and the figure in the foreground has his face buried in the earth, he seems to reflect Smithson's theory: that if we could gain knowledge of that city's geology we could decipher the root of its tragic history.

The scale model *Pile of illusions* based on a modernist icon, Pierre Koenig's *Stahl House/Case Study House #22* (1960), opens a discrete conversation with photography. The initial reference is the structural shearing of the model — one end of the building is left open at a 45 degree angle — to reflect the Julius Shulman⁸ photograph, it was rendered after. The photograph doesn't capture the entire house, and Wilkinson has made the negative space a physical character of the work. Wilkinson, in a sense, reworks a technique used by Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen and the Eames's who would tape photographs onto scale models, or cardboard cut-outs onto photos of their buildings to visualise alterations. The appendages create negative spaces. Wilkinson creates a similar negative spaces effect in the paintings within the show.⁹

Wilkinson's shift, to an examination of international style architecture, aligns him with a new generation of artists working with models and architectural critique: in particular, the Australians James Angus and Callum Morton. Both Angus and Morton have constructed scale models of iconic modernist buildings by Mies van der Rohe (on a much larger scale than Wilkinson). Morton's recent work engages a black humorous underbelly of modernist building, where, like Wilkinson, he makes flip-side conjunctions. (Angus tends toward a formalist sculptural and architectonic critique). The relationship therefore, is closer between Wilkinson's work and Morton's production. In the work *International Style* (1999) Morton lights-up and soundtracks a model of Mies's *Farnsworth House* (1951) as if there is a party inside, the party ends when a gunshot rings out. Morton's most recent work *Gas and Fuel* (2002)¹⁰ reconstructed the two state housing commission buildings (border zones) levelled to make way for Melbourne's new art museum complex — it included a soundtrack of someone crying for help.

When playing with non-sites — railway yards, satellite station and housing estates — Wilkinson, and Morton, are caught in a schizoid position. The artists activate aberrant architecture from within the architectonics of the museum. (Though, Robert Smithson thinks the inverse is actually the case, that the non-site valorises the centre — artist's studio, art gallery and museum). By shifting the focus, and critique, of *The cleaning agent* to international style architecture (the proximate of living in a museum) Wilkinson can aim more wholly on his target: the leisure classes who opt for good design and good living ahead of art.

International style architecture is perfect game. The signature glass curtain wall construction leaves little room to hang photography or painting from. Charles and Ray Eames had to hang their two Hans Hoffmann paintings horizontally from the ceiling.¹¹ The architects of these houses also designed the furniture and fittings (think Gröpius, Eames, Mies, Niemeyer, chairs) with little room for deviation; installing models or sculptures for instance.

Glass box architecture is theatrical. By working with the Case Study House an audience can imagine, and see, its occupants. There is an invitation to drama. Maybe they, like the artist, can see themselves reflected and register the crosshairs of the artist's critique. This renders Wilkinson willing to recognise that modernism's failures, are to an extent, contemporary art's inheritance. Maybe this is why Wilkinson created the cleaning agent. Wilkinson might be separating the blame, getting on with the production of the work, while the agent deals with the museum and the market. Not even Robert Smithson wanted to live in New Jersey despite his eulogising: "I'm so remote from the world that it seems uncanny to me when I go out there... I'm all for fabricating as much distance as possible. It seems that I like to think and look at those suburbs, and those fringes, but at the same time, I'm not interested in living there. By a distance, I mean a consciousness devoid of self-projection."¹²

Writing in *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*¹³ artist Jeff Wall surmises the whole scene: modernism, death, spectre. He describes a view of the Philip Johnson Glass House (1949) at night, in which the modernist house dwellers are vampires and are scared of seeing their (non)reflections in the curtain wall as the glass inevitably becomes reflective. To Wall, and Dan Graham, the vampire symbolises not only the 'unwillingness of the old regime to die, but the fear that the new order has unwittingly inherited something corrupted and evil from the old, and is in the process of unconsciously engineering itself around an evil centre. This presence of the phantasm of the vampire in the modern signifies an unresolved crisis in the creation of the modern era itself.' Brendon Wilkinson is in good company.

Simon Rees is Curator of Contemporary Art at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

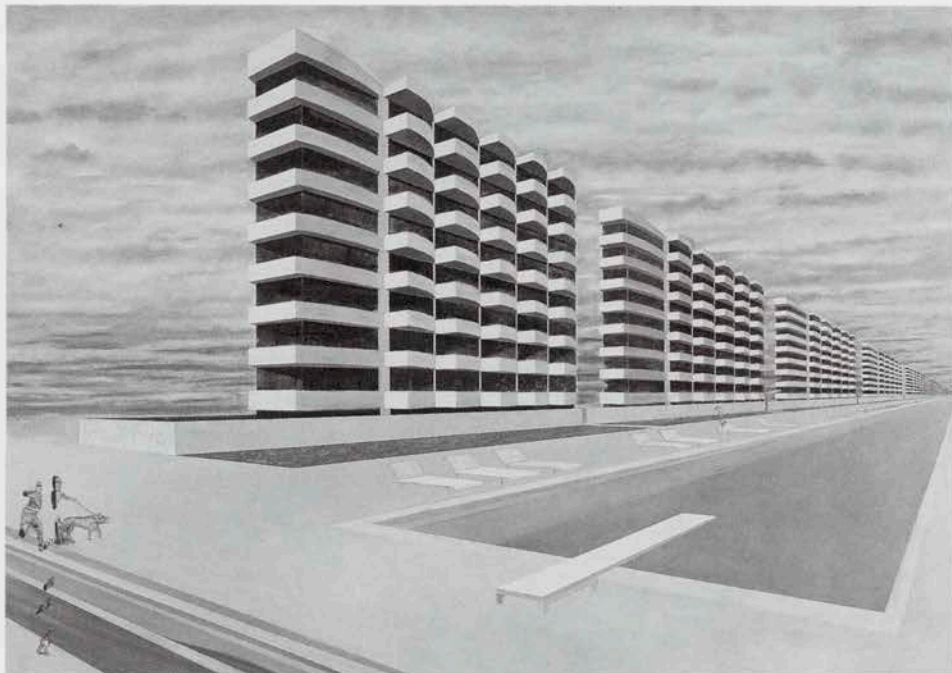


*Recurring coincidence,
split any need. 2002
oil paint on canvas*

- 1 Voiceover by Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) from *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999. Adapted from the novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk.
- 2 Gregory Burke curator of *Bi-Polar: Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson*, The New Zealand Pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale 2001, argues (after Gilles Deleuze and Stephen Hawking) of the narrative potential of science.
- 3 Kubrick's film lasted the same duration as the actual time taken to fly a B-52 bomber from the U.S. to airspace over Moscow. In the film actor Peter Sellers plays three characters at once, each one riffing on a different established mode of Sellers' reputation as hi-camp or high serious actor/comedian. The concept of splicing raises it's head(s).
- 4 This narrative stream is helped along by association, as has made a scale model of the U.S. spy base in New Zealand, *Untitled (Waihopai/Echelon HO scale)* 2001.
- 5 More architectural criticism has been spilled about Richard Meier's Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, and Frank O. Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim, than any other buildings in recent years. (Tadao Ando has just completed a new museum in Texas that is bound to generate a similar response).
- 6 Jack Flam ed., *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkely, 1996, pp 68-74.
- 7 Wilkinson is a tireless reader of *New Scientist* has expressed the opinion there is more inspiration/material to be gleaned from these publications than books on art per se.
- 8 Julius Schulman was a Los Angeles based photographer renowned for his architectural photography, in particular his collaboration with L.A. architect RM Schindler.
- 9 Smithson's essay 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' includes *Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments Along the Passaic River* in which half the gridded map is blotted out along the diagonal plotting of the river.
- 10 The work's title is derived from the industrial Gas and Fuel storage tanks that were located on the site prior to the state housing – a site where the middle- classes would never consider living.
- 11 Beatriz Colomina, 'Reflections on the Eames House,' in Alex Coles ed., *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity de-, dis-, ex-* volume two, Backless Books, London, 1998, p.130.
- 12 'What is a Museum? A dialogue with Allan Kaprow,' in Jack Flam ed., *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p.45.
- 13 Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1991, p.61.



*Octimum habitat 2002
oil paint on canvas*



Pile of Illusions 2002
oil paint on canvas

Brendon Wilkinson

1974 born in Masterton, New Zealand

lives and works in Auckland

Education

1998-1994 Bachelor of Fine Arts

Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Selected solo exhibitions

- 2002 *Somnambulant perimeter*, Peter McLeavy Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2001 *Naked adolescence*, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2000 *Cabin fever*, Peter McLeavy Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
Nooks and crannies, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 1999 *Cleaning up*, Peter McLeavy Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
- 1998 *Malcontents and memory*, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

Selected group exhibitions

- 2001 *After Killeen: social observations in recent art*, Artspace Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand (catalogue)
Alive! still life into the 21st century, Adam Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand (catalogue)
Te Maunga Taranaki views of a mountain, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand (catalogue)
Leaping boundaries a century of New Zealand artists in Australia, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney, Australia (catalogue)
Bright Paradise: 1st Auckland triennial, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand (catalogue)
- 2000 *Uneasy spaces*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand (catalogue)
Multiples, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
3 New Zealand artists, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- 1999 *Only the lonely*, Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand
- 1998 *Leap of faith*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
Art players, Fiat Lux Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

Further reading

- 2001 Gregory Burke, '1st Auckland Triennial,' *artext*, no. 74 August – October 2001, p.83
Anna Miles, 'Model Behaviour,' *Pavement magazine*, October-November 2001, p.44
Simon Rees, '1st Auckland Triennial,' *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 27 November 2001, p.83

List of works

All works listed in millimetres,
height before width before depth

Crack of time 2002
oil paint on canvas
200 x 250
courtesy of the artist

Crimson thrombosis 2002
oil paint on canvas
300 x 400
courtesy of the artist

Fortune teller 2002
oil paint on canvas
550 x 450
courtesy of the artist

Optimum habitat 2002
560 x 700
oil paint on canvas
courtesy of the artist

Pile of illusions 2002
wood, acrylic paint, dirt, enamel, glue, plastic,
sand paper, space invader
1200 x 1500 x 950
courtesy of the artist

Props and comforts 2002
oil paint on canvas
300 x 400
courtesy of the artist

Props and comforts 2002
oil paint on canvas
1000 x 1400
courtesy of the artist

Recurring coincidence, split any need 2002
oil paint on canvas
250 x 200
courtesy of the artist

Recurring coincidence, split any need 2002
oil paint on canvas
500 x 400
courtesy of the artist

Somnambulant monocline 2002
oil paint on canvas
400 x 300
courtesy of the artist

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is a museum that fosters the development and interpretation of contemporary art.



NEW PLYMOUTH
DISTRICT COUNCIL
newplymouthnz.com



ISBN 0-306848-57-9



9 780908 848577