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walters  
prize 2006

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STELLA BRENNAN:



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AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI  
02 SEPTEMBER – 19 NOVEMBER 2006

This catalogue is dedicated to  
Margaret Rose Orbell 1934 – 2006



## FINALISTS



### STELLA BRENNAN

born 1974, Auckland  
lives in Auckland, New Zealand

*Wet Social Sculpture* 2005, mixed media  
Courtesy the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland  
First exhibited St Paul ST Gallery, 2005

### PHILIP DADSON

born 1946, Napier  
lives in Auckland, New Zealand

*Polar Projects* 2004, video and audio installation  
Courtesy the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland  
First exhibited Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2004



**PETER ROBINSON**

born 1966, Ashburton  
lives in Auckland, New Zealand

*The Humours* 2005, mixed media  
Courtesy the artist, Sue Crockford Gallery,  
Peter McLeavey Gallery and Brooke Gifford Gallery  
First exhibited Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2005

Exhibition photographs by Bill Nichol

**FRANCIS UPRITCHARD**

born 1976, New Plymouth  
lives in London, UK

*Doomed, Doomed, All Doomed* 2005, mixed media  
Courtesy the artist, private collections Auckland,  
Christchurch, New York and the Govett-Brewster  
Art Gallery. Courtesy of Ivan Anthony Gallery  
and Kate MacGarry Gallery  
First exhibited Artspace, Auckland, 2005

Artist photograph by Jet

## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

It is clear with the third Walters Prize, that this exhibition has become a marker in the story of New Zealand art – a point of public convergence that stimulates reflection and incites discussion about the contemporary. Named in honour of pioneering modernist painter Gordon Walters, the Walters Prize presents a fresh and often provocative take on the most significant shifts or moments in recent New Zealand art. Every two years a jury of prominent national critics and curators nominates four artists for a body of work, which has made an outstanding contribution to New Zealand art. Their critical evaluation sits outside the usual decision-making structures of public galleries. This is precisely what makes the Walters Prize such a vital part of what this Gallery is doing, opening contemporary art to a wider and more diverse audience

Founding benefactors and principal donors, Jenny Gibbs and Robin and Erika Congreve, generously provide for the prize in addition to supporting the Auckland exhibition. From 2004, gallery patron Dayle Mace developed the prize's scope by contributing a finalist's award of \$5,000 to each artist. Each of the Walters Prize artists re-presents their work in an exhibition at the New Gallery, from which an international judge selects the winner who receives a prize of \$50,000. In addition, Saatchi & Saatchi support a trip to New York for the prize winner to exhibit their work at their world headquarters.

The 2002 and 2004 exhibitions featured a mix of both highly regarded and less well-known artists, all of whom have continued to build critical reputations. 2002 prize winner Yvonne Todd, and et al. 2004, were choices that generated a surge of coverage and discussion. This year's prize has already revealed an intriguing list of nominees, from well-respected intermedia artist Philip Dadson, and 2001 Venice Biennale representative Peter Robinson, to artists from a younger generation with growing international reputations – Stella Brennan and Francis Upritchard. The exhibition surely reveals the diversity of artistic practice that is constantly redefining what constitutes contemporary art today. We are equally excited about this year's judge and are honoured to have secured highly regarded contemporary art curator and writer, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

I would like to acknowledge Robin and Erika Congreve and Jenny Gibbs for stimulating the creation of the Walters Prize, and thank major donor Dayle Mace for the role she has played in broadening the nature of the prize's recognition. My thanks go to founding principal sponsor Ernst & Young, founding sponsor Saatchi & Saatchi, and major sponsor Simpson Grierson for their support of the judge's travel. I want also to thank the jury and judge for what they contribute to the on-going success and standing of this project.

Finally and most particularly I wish to thank the four artists who are this year's finalists – Stella Brennan, Phil Dadson, Peter Robinson and Francis Upritchard – who are at the centre of this project and whose singular contributions are all to be celebrated.

## DONOR'S FOREWORD



Robert Storr and et al. representative

The Walters Prize combines our passion for contemporary art with our belief in the value of public/private partnership. We established the Prize to promote interest in New Zealand contemporary art, and to demonstrate the value of such partnerships. For us, collaboration with the Gallery has proved extremely rewarding, and we trust the Gallery feels the same way.

It is our hope that the Walters Prize brings a huge range of benefits, to the winner, the finalists and to New Zealand contemporary art. We hope that New Zealand art and artists in general gain from the interest and exposure it brings. We'd also like to acknowledge Dayle Mace, whose generous Finalists Awards means that now all the nominated artists benefit financially from the Prize.

One of the key features of the Walters Prize is that it enables us to import a distinguished overseas judge, who can bring an international perspective to bear on our art and take a view of it back to the rest of the world. From the beginning, we set our sights high: our first judge in 2002 was Harald Szeemann, director of two previous Venice Biennales. The judge in 2004 was internationally renowned curator Robert Storr, for many years a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art and director of the 2007 Venice Biennale. This year Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, chief curator at Castello di Rivoli and artistic director of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, follows in their footsteps and promises to be an inspiring choice for the Prize.

ROBIN AND ERIKA CONGREVE AND JENNY GIBBS

## JURY STATEMENT

**Jury:** **CHRISTINA BARTON** – writer, curator and art history programme director at Victoria University, Wellington.  
**ANDREW CLIFFORD** – freelance writer, curator and broadcaster, and a member of the Electric Biorama Spectacular.  
**WYSTAN CURNOW** – writer, curator, co-director of Jar Space and English Professor at Auckland University.  
**HEATHER GALBRAITH** – senior curator and manager of curatorial programmes at City Gallery, Wellington.

In deciding which artists have had the biggest impact on New Zealand art over the last two years, we left no stone unturned. After extensive deliberations, it was surprising to find that four projects had logically found their own way to the top of our list. Without dispute, we had settled on an exceptional group of works and we unanimously agree that this exciting group of projects represent the best produced in New Zealand since the last Walters Prize.

**STELLA BRENNAN** converted St Paul ST gallery into a public spa with dubious restorative intent. *Wet Social Sculpture* is an irreverently layered result of Brennan's interest in the fate of modernism and the idiosyncratic ways that art draws on and is absorbed by popular culture. Neatly combining her ongoing explorations of abstract cinema, psychedelic escapism, suburban consumerism and utopian architecture, *Wet Social Sculpture* is a witty and engaging critique of how concepts age and are translated into contemporary culture.

**PHILIP DADSON** is currently at the top of his game. A 2003 residency in Antarctica resulted in *Polar Projects*, a large body of video and sound works, drawings and photographs that have been variously installed around the country. The selectors were especially struck with the video works, which powerfully demonstrate how Dadson uses technology, found materials and the body in his distinctive way to capture and channel the rhythms that resonate in any and every environment, even one as unrelenting as this icy landscape.

**PETER ROBINSON**'s work has always been a challenge to 'good taste' and *The Humours* is no exception. Here sculptural form simulates consumer excess, a veritable feast of cigarette smoke and junk food and their nasty after/side effects. This installation feels like a comeback piece, drawing together Robinson's earliest sculptural pieces with his ongoing examination of the insidious ways in which society is structured: to exclude and prohibit but also to seduce and compel, using the visceral qualities of his materials to get right under our skin.

**FRANCIS UPRITCHARD**'s *Doomed, Doomed, All Doomed* reveals a particular take on history. While the title of this mini-survey evokes an apocalyptic gloom, its contents speak of the past as she creatively re-imagines it. Upritchard combines tatty remains of domestic items with half-baked trinkets and museum vitrines, challenging distinctions between sacred and profane, hobbyist and artisan, bric-a-brac and artefact. By compiling this past with its strangely pathetic cultural inheritance, Upritchard reminds audiences of what is invested in all efforts to hold on to history.

**JUDGE**  
**CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV**



Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is chief curator at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, Italy, where she has put in place an impressive programme of contemporary international art. In 2005 she co-curated *The Pantagruel Syndrome*, the first Turin Triennale with Francesco Bonami, and since 2002 has curated major new projects on Francis Aljls, William Kentridge and Pierre Huyghe. Prior to 2001 she was senior curator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, New York, where she initiated and co-curated the first *Greater New York*, a survey of a new generation of American artists. Her curatorial endeavours reflect an interest in the relationship between the historical avant-gardes to the contemporary. She has written extensively on Arte Povera including the major Phaidon Press publication in 1999. She is currently the artistic director for the 2008 Biennale of Sydney.

STELLA BRENNAN







When first arriving at *Wet Social Sculpture*, there is one compelling question for you, and it's not the usual 'can I take your bag, would you like a ticket?', but rather: 'would you like a swim?' Should you decline, you are a watcher, albeit a more regular art consumer. Should you accept, there are preparatory exercises required. Start with gathering a robe, take a trip to the shower-room, change your attire, pad back wet-footed to the spa and now you are in the pool and also *in* the work. The full wet-social experience is all of the following: this decision-making, the preliminary actions, the defining regulations, the necessary state of undress, and the accoutrements to aid your mental state. These accompanying mood enhancers include a looped cut of psychedelic imagery from the film *Altered State*, the pool's own multicoloured light show and a sound-scape of whale music. If you are just relaxing and enjoying yourself then the why, where and how of these additional elements is probably far from your concern. If you remain an observer and are trying to figure it all out, you may need to track this artist's particular perspective.

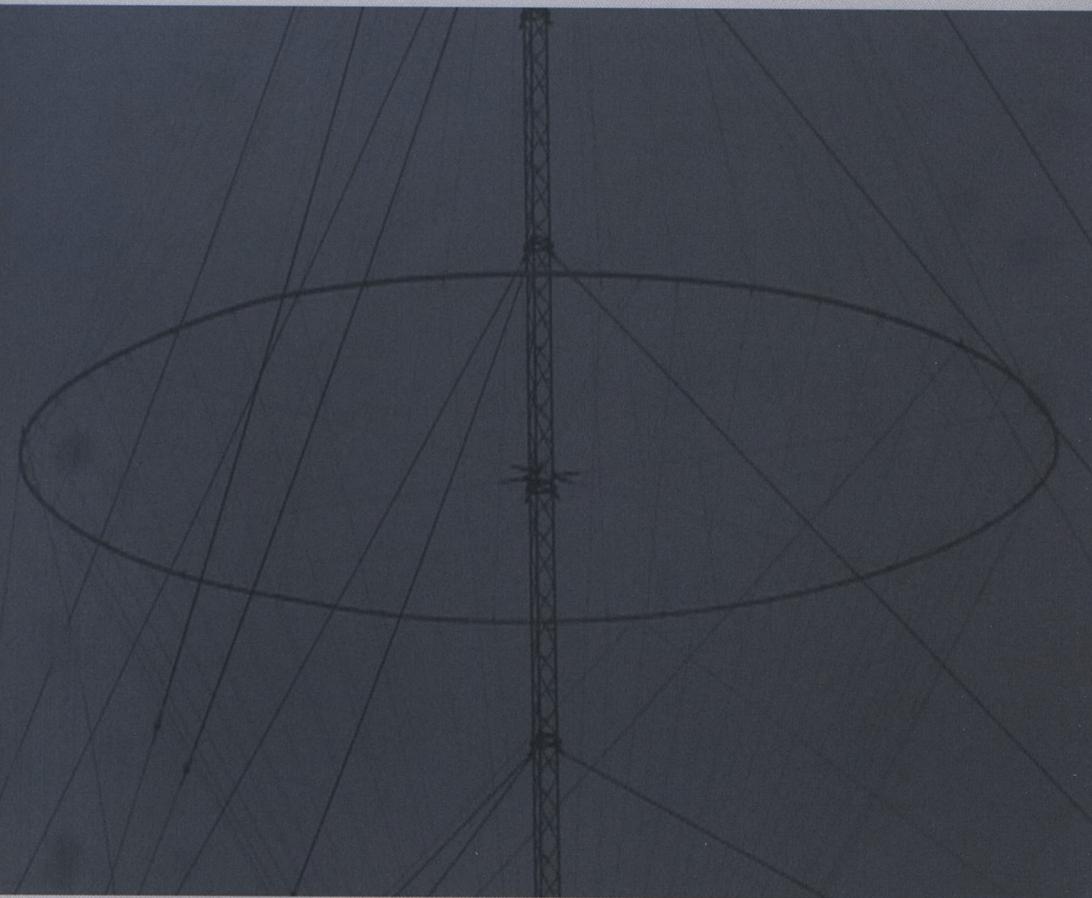
Brennan was born in 1974, in the ebb of the cultural revolutions and before the digital age. Her work enquires into our relationship with technology and the possibilities for contemporary utopia. This enquiry often finds her routing backwards to the utopias present in the era of her birth. Her approach is a kind of personal revisionism, recasting personal history and historical memory. For those outside the logic of the work, the links between German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, the domestic hot tub, psychedelic film-making and whale music might need disentangling.

Beuys' ideals for 'social sculpture' emerged in the 1970s at a time when he was carrying out tree planting, asking us to consider creative acts within the public space and outside the gallery's conventions. The man who inspired the film *Altered States* was John Cunningham Lilly, a psychological researcher who used psychedelic drugs and sensory deprivation chambers to research consciousness. When these things connect together in the comfort of the spa, the logic and also humour of Brennan's endeavour becomes apparent. Brennan is interested in the combination of utopias and their effect on us as viewers more than three decades after their origination. She has created this 'high maintenance' *Wet Social Sculpture* at a time in which community based ideology is again desirable in art, if not in life. You might ask to what extent is utopia now achievable, for which the answer lies in the very act of pool maintenance; for its work is never complete.

PHILIP DADSON







In many ways *Polar Projects* feels like the digital after-effects of exploration; documents of an artist's experience in real time. While watching these time-based audio and video tracks, one is made vitally aware of the artist's first-hand engagement with place. What makes these documents so unusual is that they are descriptions by an artist highly attuned to sound. The visual language is concentrated towards capturing sound locations, often creating a distorted visual cue as a result.

There are seven video and audio works in *Polar Projects*, which when installed together create an audio montage of Dadson's 2003 Antarctic residency. Isolated as visuals they each have a singular focus, but the interplay of sound in space creates links and compositional tracks through these works. Unexpectedly, for Dadson is an artist networked to an international sound-art community rather than the local modern, one is reminded of other great 'walks' within the New Zealand tradition, such as McCahon's series of painterly walks from the early 1970s. Both artists put the viewer in their lens, requiring you to locate the landscape as they do, and in their timeframe.

In *Polar Projects* there is no mistaking Dadson, the democratic artist-composer from the tradition of Scratch Orchestra, who finds music in objects most of us find inanimate. Yet here in *Polar Projects*, he is also riffing with his body's experience of this place. After all, for a long-time practitioner of intermedia art, it is clearly about engaging all faculties. Like previous explorers of the Antarctic region his diarised thoughts are crucial to his and our imagining, "January 28th 2003: ...the sound continuum is silence, broken into by the birth of a rock onto a surface littered with jutting boulders, rocks, stones, gravel and sand. Stones are living things with voice; knock or grind one and you'll know what I mean".

A primary motivation for Dadson's travel to Antarctica was his interest in researching the sonic properties of ice and stone. Stone sites and performance have been part of his engagement with the environment since the 1970s, and it is clear that this journey into the Dry Valley region of Antarctica had a powerful impact on him. Two works in the *Polar Projects*, 'Echo Logo' and 'Stone Map', relate directly to this. The former captures an impromptu sound performance with the on-site scientific team; the latter is a three-channel work, with two channels featuring an active explorative lens over sculpted rock and stone surfaces. This work is accompanied by an audio track of environmental noise, cracking ice and a brittle stringed instrument – a Dadson invention. While for most of us, stone and ice speak of the blank and inanimate, a familiar metaphor for Antarctica, Dadson subtly inverts this metaphor by orchestrating silence into being.

PETER ROBINSON







Not exactly amusing, 'the humours' in medieval and renaissance times were believed to be our physical constitution, the stuff flowing in our veins: bile, choler, phlegm, and sanguine properties. As psycho-physiology they were also a means of diagnosis, and a potent iconography within art history partly because artistic types were known to have too much of certain properties. As Panofsky taught (or warned) us, Dürer's famous *Melancholia I* depicts no ordinary melancholy but "Melancholia Artificialis", the artist's melancholy. According to Dürer, the artist's imbalance could be cured by the "cheerful tunes of the lute" in case "a young painter should overwork, from which his melancholy might exceed". Certainly in Peter Robinson's *Humours* there are signs of excesses, as sculptural motif and form appear to be leaking and projecting across the floor. However, in contrast to this romantic tradition, the effect of Robinson's bodily extrusions, sculptural bile and imbalance is a bit of actual humour coupled with a pleasing sense of ineptitude.

The sculptural works that make up *The Humours*, are not characteristic or descriptive of these states, and the works carry individual titles which do not all reference them. They do however share a certain outward physiology, something we might recognise as an inner state, something for which words will not suffice – unless they're short and blunt! Robinson's work through the 1990s was filled with language and modes of address that were to the point, direct, and often polemical. This language (not necessarily the artist's) typically concentrated on identity politics, and the control and authority over that identity. The identity in question was cultural but also increasingly artistic. The work in *The Humours*, no longer displays any overt questioning, rather the air appears to have gone out of the bag. The spleen has spilled.

One large mixed brown sculpture with a mixed allusion to artist Franz West and pre-teen graffiti carries the title *Das Es*. Made before *The Humours* exhibition, the title echoes twentieth century psychology, this time Freud's writings on the ego's relationship to forces of control, morality, social-values, bodily urges and so on. Within the exhibition, *Das Es* is an opposing force to *Sweet Thing*. Both have the appearance of excretions, but they have fed, swallowed and digested differently. It is no accident that while *Das Es* appears to hold up the mantle for sculpture, performing its role with form and three-dimensions, *Sweet Thing* appears to have vomited out the contents of Robinson's studio. *The Humours* are outcomes and ends, and it appears that after carrying the weight of language, rhetoric and all its responsibility, Robinson has settled back into some old-fashioned humanism. With simple hand-held materiality he wades into living, breathing and balance.

FRANCIS UPRITCHARD





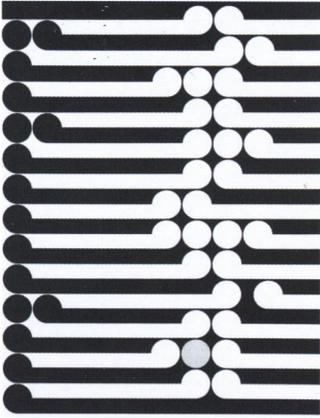


Here's one difference between Francis Upritchard and us (her audience). By necessity, we look at an old tennis racket, strings buckled, frame warped, and make a decision – is this alive and useful, or dead and gone? Junk? Or maybe you avoid this decision, and leave it undecided, but with the multitude of things around us we are making constant decisions about their currency. Upritchard stands in the fast current of those decisions: use to waste; or even retroactive re-consumption, waste to use. Instead she has a compelling way of transitioning objects into a state of in-between-ness. The striking part of this transition, which turns a disused tennis racket into art, is that it forces us to consider the usefulness of art. In other words, has it fully recycled into being, does giving the racket 'a face' make it 'undead'?

In her exhibition at Artspace, *Doomed Doomed All Doomed*, Upritchard brought together an enormous amount of recycled, retro-fitted materials. They were mostly domestic in categorisation: from the home, a household ornament, a tamed beast, a friendly pet. But there was also a drastic confusion of these definitions. So that a friendly pet might be a disused piece of attic-sports equipment, or an animal made from an old coat. A tame beast might be a lion made from domesticware. An ornament might be a severed head for the bureau, or an old spectacle case with a landscape slipped inside. In the context of the exhibition these objects were highly attuned for display, housed in museum vitrines and arranged for spectatorship rather than use.

Offsetting the cute and the brave were a small number of objects with strong relationships to the culture and history of trade (the pakeha shrunken heads, trophy beasts, and a cluster of balata (rubber) men). These helped to tip the balance of all objects from display into the hazy light of consumption. Strictly speaking, aligning the dead with consumption also obtains a use value for them, however quite clearly Upritchard's consumption is not straight-faced. The pakeha heads, (inversions of Mokomōkai, the Maori shrunken heads traded through New Zealand's colonial history) are ridiculous creatures, grisly rather than heroic; the beasts have sloppy seams and a home-spun quality befitting the garage sale rather than the salon; and the 'balata men' are precarious in their composition and support.

Rather than *Doomed* these once abandoned or devalued objects are resurrected by the artist, who plays something between shaman and fix-it, calling forth their character and altering their sensibility. Perhaps in her very resourcefulness she forces us to consider the pleasure in having things around us without quantifiable use-value. In addition, for the indecisive amongst us who neither recycle nor discard, we can see it's possible to convert the order of things and to grow the domestic into new consequences.



## GORDON WALTERS

*Patere* 1977, PVA and acrylic on canvas

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki  
Gift of the Ministry of Foreign  
Affairs and Trade, 2005

Gordon Walters was born in Wellington, New Zealand in 1919 and trained at Wellington Technical College in the 1930s. He travelled to Australia in 1946 and again in 1947, living in Sydney until 1949. In 1950, Walters left for London and Europe to study first-hand the abstract art he admired, returning to New Zealand in 1953. Throughout a career spanning six decades, he resolutely pursued geometric abstraction at a time when landscape was the required subject in New Zealand painting.

**Walters Prize 2004**

**WINNER**

et al.

**FINALISTS**

Jacqueline Fraser  
Ronnie van Hout  
Daniel von Sturmer

**JUDGE**

Robert Storr

**JURY**

Christina Barton  
Dr. Deidre Brown  
Greg Burke  
Justin Paton

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