



Silver gelatin print from the performance *Five Minute Peephole*, 2006, Matt Gillies. Photo courtesy of Anne Basquin

Young talent hits the streets

Art News talks to four talented recent fine arts graduates – all meeting the challenge of making work after leaving the supportive art school environment.



The Dunedin Beautification Project, 2006, cast aluminium water valve cover, Matt Gillies. Installed on the corner of Hanover and Great King Streets, Dunedin. Photo courtesy of the artist

Twenty-six-year-old Otago Polytechnic School of Art graduate, **Matt Gillies**, describes himself as a cigarette-smoking vegan whose work comes from a counter cultural standpoint. His subversive *Dunedin Beautification Project* earned him the top mark of 100 per cent when he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in sculpture, in 2006.

Gillies, who has a day job as a postman, mostly takes his practice outside the gallery, making performative work that often involves illegal acts and focuses our attention on public spaces that are normally taken for granted.

For the *Dunedin Beautification Project* he dressed in overalls, posing as a council worker, and removed existing sewer covers at different sites around Dunedin City in broad daylight. After removing the covers, he melted them down and sand-cast them using his own imagery, replacing about 16 over a year. The new images hint at the darker side of cleansing and reflect Gillies' interest in the city's sewerage system as an invisible yet vital part of our daily cleansing rituals and a metaphor for man's humanity. Amazingly, throughout the duration of the project, no one asked him what he was doing!

"The Homer Simpson plate was a way for me to 'cleanse' myself of the influence of this father figure because Homer is such a testament to white male superiority," says Gillies. "Another plate shows a businessman getting attacked and washed by those

‘enzymes’ from a Persil ad; another says, ‘Without competition there can be no success’.

“Day to day objects, such as drain outlets and plugholes, when scrutinised, are of the utmost importance; these banal objects are the artefacts that mark the path in our domestic lives from private to public.”

By donning a uniform and acting outside the law, Gillies re-focusses attention on the public spaces we often take for granted, and on a more serious level, asks questions about bureaucratic power structures and the way their outward signs, such as uniforms, are used to legitimise certain acts.

“I wanted to explore the idea of pluralism coming into the aesthetics of public space. Public artwork is whatever the council says goes, and because public art is in theory tied to notions of democracy, I wanted to look at it in another way where it could be about pluralism; an individualism coming into the design of public space,” he says.

Before going to art school Gillies was interested in the way punk culture challenged the status quo and empowered people to defy accepted norms, a provocation he wants to continue in his own practice. “I want to get more people into art because I think it’s such a powerful means for people to create their own culture instead of succumbing to an authoritative force.”

Like the *Dunedin Beautification Project*, his performance, *Five-Minute Peephole*, 2006, tested legal and social boundaries. At the crowded opening of the group show, *Intermission*, at 256 George Street, he chiselled through the gallery wall into the adjoining Subway restaurant. For five minutes both the 100-strong crowd in the gallery and the workers in the restaurant were able to stare through the six-centimetre chiselled hole that opened above the cash register. After making the hole Gillies walked around to the restaurant and told the workers it was all a big mistake; he would fix the hole immediately. He then ordered a sandwich, paid for it and walked back to the gallery where he pushed the sandwich into the wall space and smoothed polyfiller over the hole. Returning to the restaurant, he filled that hole too with polyfiller and left the restaurant.

“That work was a way for me to say there’s a humungous gap between everyman’s understanding of contemporary art and where art is now. It was a way for me to try to bridge that gap.”

Funny, beguiling, uneasy – Elam School of Fine Arts Masters graduate **Layla Rudneva-Mackay**’s photographs are surreal short stories whose characters interact with each other and the landscape, creating moments that resonate strongly in the viewer’s subconscious.

Defying logical explanation, 32-year-old Mackay’s staged photographs of her friends enacting strange dramas make visible what can’t be expressed in language but instead is felt on an intuitive level. Intangible aspects of personality and of the mysterious relationships



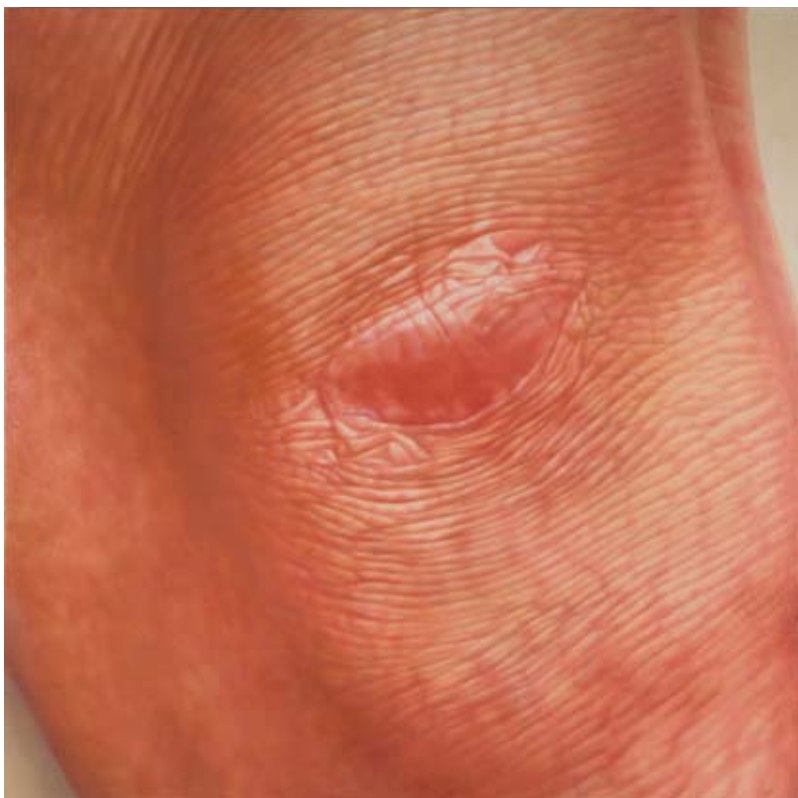
Untitled, 2007, black and white C-type photograph, Layla Rudneva-Mackay. Courtesy of Starkwhite



A moment with the wind on the pass to the point; the thought, I can’t balance any more, 2006, C-type photograph, Layla Rudneva-Mackay. Courtesy of Starkwhite



Above: *Vanitas III*, oil on canvas, 2007; below: *Vanitas V*, oil on canvas, 2007, Jennifer McRorie. Photos: Chris Kitson



between people find form in these works, which Mackay describes as “performative sculpture”.

Mackay completed her undergraduate degree at Otago Polytechnic in 1998, where she majored in sculpture, and her photographs can be seen as portraits as well as documents of live performance or sculpture.

“The photographs are a place where the body, environment and thoughts all meet,” she says. Their sense of intimacy and enigma comes from the fact the

characters never meet our gaze, never engage directly with the photographer; they seem lost in a world that will forever remain a mystery.

Walking a line between the documentary and the staged – it’s not immediately clear which tradition they belong to – the images are highly considered portraits of individuals and couples. And the landscapes Mackay has chosen for the characters in these mini dramas reflect aspects of personality or circumstance in very specific ways. Mackay’s long poetic titles too reinforce our reading of the images as narratives. For instance in the work, *A moment with the wind on the pass to the point; the thought, I can’t balance any more*, a woman in a yellow jacket leans forward, her movement reflected by windswept tussock grass at her feet.

Mackay says, “I was trying to describe a feeling I was seeing in my friend who was pregnant; watching her constantly changing and trying to work it out. She is being pushed by the wind and going with the environment, toppling forward, but I’m not trying to make it look scary; it’s warm and the light is on her back; the grass reflects her movement. It’s a very human thing she is going through.”

The choice of landscape is anything but arbitrary, though a fleeting glance of a figure alone on a path such as this doesn’t seem out of the ordinary. Or does it? Therein lies the enigma of these photographs.

Telling visual stories seems effortless to Mackay, yet she has a severe reading disability that has meant, unlike most of us, she hasn’t had access to text and stories for most of her life. Recently she began using a computer programme that allows her to read and write. Perhaps the reading disability has honed the acute visual awareness and sensitivity to the nuances of character and place so evident in her photographs.

“Until recently, I’d never read stories, so my life has been about really observing my own environment. Because I don’t have access to all the stories that are out there in the world, from a young age, I’ve created them in my head. I couldn’t access the escapism of reading a book so instead I spent time visualising places”.

Untitled, 2007, a monochromatic photograph of two blonde sisters shimmying up the wall is a strange blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The intimacy between the two girls is literally reflected in the position of their bodies, posed like mirror images, facing each other across the hallway. They seem oblivious to the camera and the laws of gravity, caught up in an intimate world of play and make believe that young girls typically inhabit. Looking at this image, we can’t help wondering what happened in the moments before and after the photograph was taken.

Mackay will have a solo exhibition at Starkwhite in 2008 and is currently developing a billboard project with Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts.

University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts Masters graduate, **Jennifer McRorie**, also focuses on the body. Her photo-realist paintings of scars are exquisite in their sensuous evocation of naked human skin, yet also repellent and disturbing because of their associations with ageing and the wounds caused by surgery or accident. They make us reflect on the passing of time and its ravages on our skin; the havoc that chance can wreak on our lives and the impermanence of life in general.

McRorie, who completed her undergraduate degree in Canada, where she is from, speaks highly of the University of Canterbury Masters course where she was taught by Roger Boyce and Julia Morison, commenting that painting as a discipline is undergoing a renaissance at Canterbury.

Dark and edgy though her paintings seem, there's also a sense of the body's indomitable spirit; its ability to heal and remake itself despite all it endures during the course of a lifetime. In a strange sleight of hand, McRorie draws us in by revealing what is often private and hidden and then, just as we are about to see something we're not meant to, she denies us. Because these images are so tightly cropped, you're not sure which part of the body you're looking at. Is it a wrist or an elbow; a man or a woman? What event has led to these gruesome scars? The flat backgrounds don't give away any clues either.

What began as a series of paintings documenting the scars on her own body has widened beyond the autobiographical into a much larger project, says McRorie. Last year, encouraged by Boyce to push her ideas further, she began to talk to students on campus about their scars; these conversations lead to McRorie documenting a wide range of scars with her camera, while promising their owners anonymity.

This year she began to paint scars caused by self-cutting, an area which interested her because of its association with 1960s and 70s Body Art. Artists at the time subjected themselves to physical extremes, enduring pain and even injury, to talk about control and agency and to explore boundaries between public and private.

"The discourse surrounding Body Art and abjection provides a strong context for my work," writes McRorie. "One of the key concerns driving the discourse of Body Art is the artist's assertion of self-production over biological and social determinism. My work situates the body between these polarities... The exhibition *Skin Show* (at Campbell Grant Galleries earlier this year) presented scars on the skin as both acts of contingency, the arrival of accident on the body, and those of agency, through self-cutting. Thereby the paintings situated the body as a mediation between chance and self-production."

On a formal level McRorie's paintings straddle photo realism and abstraction and the blurred areas, where the detail is lost, reference the photographs that are her source material. The expressionistic blur – a pictorial device strongly related to German painter Gerhard Richter's work – adds to the complexity and richness of these visceral psychologically challenging works.

An intriguing, somewhat mystical sounding framework surrounds the multi-disciplinary practice of **g. bridle**, a Bachelor of Fine Arts graduate from Massey University in Wellington.

Majoring in painting at art school, g. bridle works within a conceptual system, complete with its own rules, to facilitate art making. This involves spending time in a place called The Retreat that is a physical as well as a metaphorical space. "It can also be a collaborative platform – I'm happy to approach or be approached by



Clockwise from top: Jennifer McRorie, g. bridle, Matt Gillies and Layla Rudneva-Mackay



One Boy Standing, 2004, photograph of a performance, g. bridle

another artist wanting to come through into The Retreat and make work on their own or make work with me,” he explains. While in The Retreat, 25-year-old g. bridle receives visions from his Aesthetic Spirit and his duty then is to reproduce the vision given him as faithfully as possible in the form of a tangible object.

“During my fourth year at art school I was at a particular site making work and I was given an image that encompassed everything I was thinking about at the time. Ever since, I’ve been offered these types of visions.”

Many of g. bridle’s highly crafted sculptures have a hermetic, even secretive quality. The birdhouse represented in one of his sculptures is modelled on a Napier Masonic Lodge.

“I’m very interested in the hermetic; those sorts of insular communities. The objects and the art I’m making make no excuses for not letting someone engage; I think

they’re very sure of what they’re doing and they’re not necessarily trying to explain themselves too much.”

The shiny black owl sculpture *M.L.L.* has a slick aesthetic that references Pop culture and advertising, bringing to mind works, like *Puppy*, by art superstar Jeff Koons. The phenomenon of the highly successful white male artist, and the myth-making machine that surrounds such stars, fascinates g. bridle. His performance, *One Boy Standing*, performed at Reading Cinema in Courtenay Place, Wellington, in 2004, satirises this phenomenon and also seeks to recreate it.

“The performance lasted just over an hour, and in that time, I progressively applied hair products – DaxWax, Gel and Vaseline, with the intention of merging and hanging out with the youth culture and regaining a youthfulness that had been lost.

“When I was doing that work I was younger and I really wanted to be an art star; I wanted to talk about the fact that I’d do anything to be an art star, including going through public ridicule – standing in a busy Wellington mall and lathering myself up and having people laugh at me.”

“I’m completely sucked in by places like Nike stores and the Reading Cinema because of the materiality of those environments; they’re so luscious. They look so perfect and it would be great to be able to make work like that. I see the lure of finish and the complete otherworldly spectacle of those stores in relation to painting. You can have a particular finish on a painting and it just sucks you right in. Perhaps the materiality in the performance was a type of merging; maybe I wanted to have that kind of glossy finish.”

Segregated Enlightenment: A Critique of The Retreat by g. bridle is at Michael Hirschfeld Gallery, City Gallery, Wellington, from 31 August until 28 September.

/Virginia Were



M.L.L., 2007, wax candle, g. bridle