



# PAST PRESENT FUTURE

Tomorrow never knows or the thousand dreams of Stella Brennan, as observed by Andrew Paul Wood.

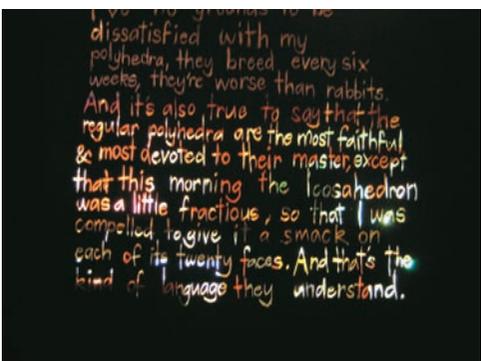




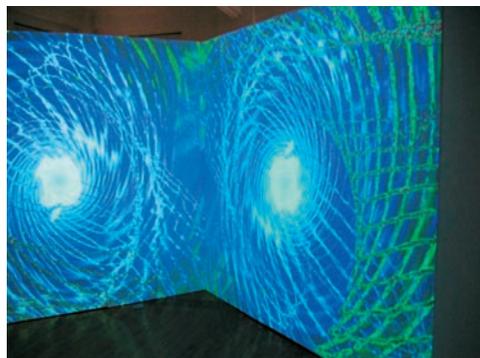
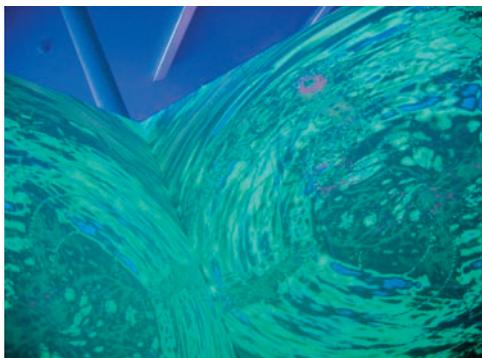
PHOTO: BRUCE NICHOLSON

Since at least the 1936 film version of H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come*, science fiction has depicted future interior design as a series of minimalist white interiors of the Walter Gropius/Mies van der Rohe pattern. After Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the form became set, complete with 1960s biomorphic furniture. This in turn influenced interior design of the time. The trend has more-or-less continued to this day, a notable example being Andrew Niccol's 1997 film *GATTACA* with its stylised retro-modernist 1940s decor. But is this really what the future looks like, or just what the movies tell us it should look like? It all looks a bit retro now, a bit kitsch – but if imaginary futuristic interiors aren't informing contemporary design, they are informing contemporary art.

Take the work of Stella Brennan (left), for instance, and her impressive portfolio of recent works. The Auckland-based artist, writer and curator's 2003 project, *Dirty Pixels*, toured Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin and Hamilton. Another installation, *Theme for Great Cities*, showed at Ramp Gallery at Wintec in Hamilton. Her work also featured in *Everyday Minimalism* at the Auckland Art Gallery. Her installation, *Tomorrow Never Knows*, showed at Auckland's Starkwhite gallery in April 2004, and Christchurch's Physics Room in May 2004.

*Tomorrow Never Knows* is based on J.G. Ballard's collection of short stories, *Vermilion Sands* (1971), a future sprawling resort-cum-artists' colony sandwiched between a vast desert and a barren coast. It is home to legendary femmes fatale and languidly decadent aesthetes who wallow in carefully cultivated neuroses, ennui, spleen and impotence – a bit like Ponsonby, really. One of the stories, *The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista*, describes something called psychotropic architecture – houses that respond to the moods and emotions of their owners. It's interesting how Ballard makes modernist architecture the enemy. You can imagine how things could go horribly wrong in such an unconsciously interactive environment: "The room was now a grey sphere, ten feet in diameter. Thick veins, as broad as my arm, were knotting across its surface, crushing the end boards of the bedstead.

"As the cocoon bisected itself, I could see the twisted mouth of the corridor bending into the room below the sagging outline of the dining room ceiling. Feet skating in the molten plastex, I pulled myself



up onto the corridor. The whole house seemed to have been ruptured. The walls were buckled, floors furling their edges. Water was pouring out of the pool as the unit tipped forwards on the weakened foundations. The glass slabs of the staircase had shattered, the razor-like teeth jutting from the wall.

“I ran into Fay’s bedroom, found the cut-out switch and stabbed the sprinkler alarm. The house was still throbbing, but a moment later it locked and became rigid. I leaned against the demented wall and let spray pour across my face from the sprinkler jets. Around me, its wings torn and disarrayed, the house reared up like a tortured flower.” (J.G. Ballard, *The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista*, 1962.)

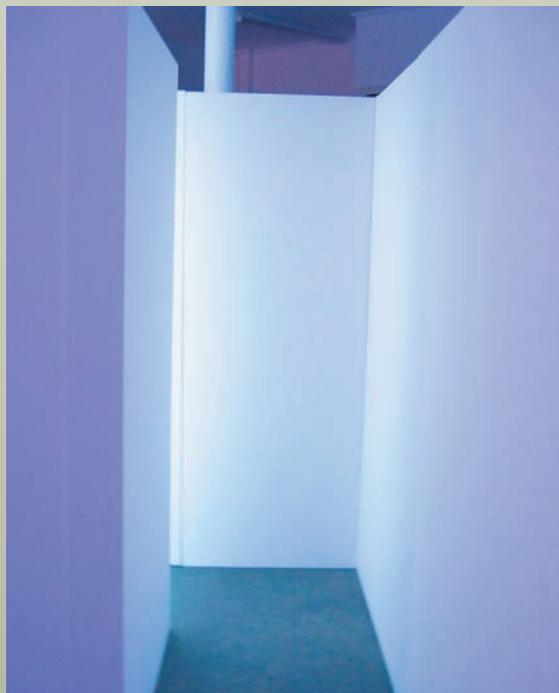
Named in reference to one of the most psychedelic of The Beatles’ songs (“turn off your mind, relax and float downstream”), *Tomorrow Never Knows* explores utopian architecture and psychedelia through the visualisation feature in audio player software. This creates a room of swirling shape and colour from a computer voice reciting the Ballard story. Brennan describes this sound visualisation as a contemporary evolution of the bubbling, glowing lava lamp. “The software takes the image of the sound wave and applies real-time transformations, converting sound into a streaming field of stoner imagery. In the installation these images are projected from four ceiling-mounted data projectors. The effect is of moving, morphing, psychedelic wallpaper.” Gene

Youngblood’s influential 1970s book, *Expanded Cinema*, imagined: “kinetic wallpaper, which could be rear-projected onto the translucent walls of a room at close range in ultra-high resolution using large format film with special lenses.” Imagine a home whose walls were alive with silent kinetic activity, “of the highest graphic integrity and psychic relevance”. A kind of visual music.

This kind of deconstructed formlessness made concrete, or soft architecture, is a broader trend in 20th and 21st century architecture. The Italian architect, Manfredo Tafuri, observed that what he called “formlessness” could be associated with the works of the architectural avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s. The soft cities, robotic metaphors, and quasi-organic urban landscapes associated with these architects dramatised the liberating aspects of technology. Remember the futuro-optimism of David Greene’s Living Pod and the staged, post-mechanical seductiveness of Greg Lynn’s Embryological House, the simulated social reflexivity of Kolatan and MacDonald’s Resi-Rise Skyscraper, and the open-ended hyper-functionalism found in Ron Herron’s Seaside Bubbles or Peter Cook’s Plug-In City of 1964? These days we have the likes of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao, Experience Music Project in Seattle and his new concert hall in Los Angeles.

Such irregular structures were impossible before the advent of computer aided design. Diller and Scofidio’s Blur Building, part of the Swiss Expo 2002 at Lake Neuchatel in Yverdon-les-Bains,

It’s more about  
blobitecture than  
window treatments  
or colour charts.



Switzerland, is an even more radical example. Using state-of-the-art lighting technology and computer controlled mist generators, the structure of the building itself is an ever-changing mass of water vapour. Along with David Rockwell's Mohegan Sun casino in Montville, Connecticut, this style of building has become known as 'Blobitecture': architecture-as-spectacle. I think that's what this installation is very much about. Also part of the installation, as framed images, is a potted history of the geodesic dome via 19th century absurdist writer/artist Alfred Jarry (inspiration to the Surrealists) and a long-past World's Fair. Geodesic domes have been a ubiquitous staple of sci-fi architecture since Buckminster Fuller came up with the idea for the most energy efficient form of prefabricated construction possible, back in the late 1940s. Such domes are ingrained in popular culture. In 1969, David Bowie sent a copy of the design plans for his Beckenham Arts Lab, which was based around geodesic domes, to disc jockey John Peel (sadly now dead). Three years later, he wrote them into the song, *Drive-In Saturday*.

Like British artist Damien Hirst's combination restaurant/bar-art installation, *Pharmacy* (1992), *Tomorrow Never Knows* is ambiguous. Is it purely a work of art, or a functional space as well? So do we look at it, or do we live in it? If nothing else, it allows us to speculate that technology will make art and architecture (and perhaps even the mind itself) utterly indistinguishable from each other.

