

# Beside the old sea wall

Stephen Bambury's copper wall, *Sight Line*, is a watery, mutable zone that ebbs and flows, reflecting passers-by and changing weather. Gil Hanly photographed the work as it progressed.

When you ask painter Stephen Bambury to describe his new work *Sight Line* (xxvii), inside the new multi-storey Lumley Centre, in Shortland Street, Auckland, he comments the 14-metre-long copper work "is not on the wall it is the wall".

It's an important distinction because the 54-year-old painter, who is revered for his longstanding and single-minded interrogation of abstraction, has created a contemporary fresco that talks about landscape and collapses boundaries between cool formalism and a more heated subjectivity.

*Sight Line* is the closest Bambury, who is a keen surfer and has a passionate interest in architecture as well as art history, has come to talking directly about landscape. The work's three horizontal zones represent earth, sea and sky, making it an intense, meditative landscape with the stark horizon lines and watery swathes we have come to recognise through McCahon's work. But rather than using paint, Bambury, the wizard, has cooked up a complex set of chemical and mathematical interactions to create the work's three zones.

"I had zones of colour in mind and it was a question of whether or not those chemicals would achieve those things and I had a sense of trying to create a recollection in the mind of places, of nature. Copper and the processes I used are organic, from the earth, and I want people not to look at the work but to feel it; to be around it and lost in it."

The blue/green zone in *Sight Line* continues Bambury's experiments over the years with patination applied to different metals and is a way of delving into the unknown and creating the possibility of accident and chance. In the studio he developed a system of applying patinas and dipping the copper sheets that comprise the work into vertical and horizontal tanks containing hot or cold chemicals.

"I had to invent new ways of doing patinas so there was a huge amount of research for the project. I took the commission on the basis that if I couldn't satisfy myself that I could get some answers to the technical questions, then I would be able to withdraw from the contract. I had no idea whether or not this (the work) would even be possible when I took it on."

When you paint with chemicals on metal you can't see what you're painting and there's a sense of working blind. In fact this is what Bambury referred to in a recent exhibition, *Blind Painting/Painting Blind*.

"It's about setting up and enacting a kind of alchemical ritual, which is going to go somewhere. Then it's a question of being inside that process, attending to the process but also letting the process attend to you."

Bambury, who worked on the project with two studio assistants and other design professionals, including architect Pip Cheshire, says his biggest challenge was overcoming his own fear.

"My biggest fear was I'd make the work and put it up and be horrified by what I'd done. Normally I can do that privately (in the studio) but you can't here."

Once the process of applying chemicals to the copper began, he knew there would be no turning back.

"I ended up making the work from 45 sheets of copper and so I couldn't turn around and start again. Every decision I made was going to be there in the final piece. You can't change it. As Ad Reinhardt said, 'The idea of the painting should exist in the mind before the brush is taken up'."

The Lumley Centre was built on the site of the Northern Roller Mills building by Manson Developments and, during excavations for the foundations, parts of the old sea wall were uncovered. The façade of the original Roller Mills Building on Fort Street has been retained and the site's history as the old waterfront before it was reclaimed provided the key for Bambury's work.

The concept and design for the centre's level-nine foyer and exterior was developed by consultant/curator Trish Clark in conjunction with architect Thom Craig and landscape architect Rod Barnett.

Clark felt it was essential to integrate the foyer's artworks with the building itself and her brief from Ted Manson was to "do something fabulous" in the foyer.

Beginning two years ago with the premise that the foyer had to be welcoming, relate to the site, have a timeless quality and some kinetic elements, Clark chose her artists. They were John Armleder (Switzerland), Lyonel Grant (New Zealand), Len Lye (New Zealand), Nike Savvas (Australia), Stephen Bambury (New Zealand), Jim Speers (New Zealand) and Bill Viola (United States). Some works, like Bambury's, were commissioned and others, like Len Lye's and Bill Viola's, already existed.

Like quattrocento fresco – in particular Fra Angelico's cycle of frescoes in Florence's Convent San Marco, which Bambury loves – *Sight Line's* impact comes from its scale and its interaction with its site. Angelico's frescos integrate the windows in the monk's cells into their compositions, suggesting a collision between two worlds



*Sight Line* (xxvii), 2003–2005, chemical actions on 45 copper panels, 14 x 4 metres, Stephen Bambury. Installed at the Lumley Centre, Shortland Street, Auckland City. Photo: Gil Hanly



– the real world outside the window and the imaginary world of the fresco inside.

Likewise, Bambury wanted to create a fresco that would flicker between the illusory and the real. Because of *Sight Line's* massive scale, passers-by literally inhabit the work, moving in front of a vast backdrop that hovers somewhere between the figurative and the abstract – a zone where inner and outer worlds collide.

Though he wrote a development phase into his contract, Bambury felt he was running the risk of failure on a massive scale. And perhaps this is what makes the work so exhilarating. As you walk past you feel its pull on your body like that of the ocean where it meets the land.

"*Sight Line's* sheer size means one has a physical bodily reaction to the work. You walk past it the way you walk along a beach or past a cliff. There is no privileged place from which to see this work. Perhaps a privileged place might be looking at someone else looking at the painting so there is a sentient presence there as well."

Interestingly, *Sight Line's* apparent ease and undoubted beauty is subverted by the asymmetrical grid that hovers below the surface and forms the work's skeleton. Following the road less travelled is a given for Bambury and *Sight Line* is no exception.

Instead of using 45 sheets of copper in an orthodox grid, Bambury messed with conventional geometry. The challenge was figuring out how to get fourteen by four metres of copper, weighing two-and-a-half tonnes, onto a wall. The copper was supplied as one by two-metre sheets and creating a symmetrical grid would have been the logical and easy solution for the artist.

Using an architectural CAD programme, Bambury drew a grid in which none of the units had four square corners and none was identical to any other. He explains, "In some ways, because of the supply of the copper, I could have bought into the Platonic order that is running profoundly through the building. It's a Miesian pavilion; all the building materials – marble flooring, ceiling tiles – are supplied as modules that fit together at 90 degrees. I had to throw out the notion of Euclidian geometry that's so evident in the building. I wanted to challenge that programme in the work itself and so the grid couldn't be a practical decision; it had to be a painting decision. Eventually that's what it became."

"I began to test these ideas years ago – but always on the outside of the paintings – and this time I thought I'd get them into the inside of the painting. I could put the sense of uncertainty right into the middle of the work and make it incredibly visceral – a visual challenge to the order of Euclidian geometry and building generally."

Euclid was a Greek mathematician living in 300BC whose text *Stoicheia* (*Elements of Mathematics*) was used until recently as the foundation of all modern geometrical textbooks.

"I choose the way I work with materials because they are already corrupted with meaning. I'm looking for ways out of the anonymity of paint being squeezed out of a tube. I often feel, going into a paint shop, that all the creativity has been used up. I feel suffocated by it. I've always been involved in mixing paint and knowing the materials. As a culture I think we're being drawn further and further away from any kind of connection with the things we touch."

By foregrounding *Sight Line's* unorthodox geometry, Bambury argues against western culture's tendency toward binary thinking and its love of linear narratives – the interpretation of history, for example, as a continuum of enlightenment – from the Dark Ages through to the High Renaissance.

"Now the work looks easy. I had this incredible experience when we put the final panel in. There was someone in behind the wall, squashed inside a space that was barely 500mm deep for two hours while we tried to fit the last panel. Finally the air just squashed out and the last panel fitted like a glove. Dammit, it was as close to a birth experience as any man can ever get."

/Virginia Were



Above: the last panel goes in and, after two years, the work is complete. Opposite (clockwise from top): Bambury applies the patina to the middle section; a vertical hot dip underway in the studio; part way through the installation process; the copper panels are supported by brackets; one of many horizontal dips. All photos by Gil Hanly.

