

## Up Close & Personal.

### Stephen Bambury.

As one of New Zealand's leading contemporary artists, Stephen Bambury's layered, reductivist paintings continue to chart new ground. **Nicole Stock** chats with the painter about his influences and inspirations.

PHOTOGRAPHY — PHILLIP SIMPSON.

**URBIS:** How did you get into art?

**STEPHEN BAMBURY:** I was unemployable. Completely unemployable. I didn't really have a clue what I was doing. I ended up doing supermarket design for Bond and Bond, and I realised I didn't want to do that. It was more a question of what I wouldn't want to do, and really, the only thing that interested me was art. I was very fortunate, I actually had Arnold Wilson as a teacher at Mt Albert Grammar. He's the kaumatua of the art gallery here, and he didn't exactly take me under his wing, but he just let me use the art room. It was the first time I'd had access to freedom like that. He just let me use the room, and I did a huge amount of work, and his encouragement was crucial. He took us to Elam on an open day, he took us to galleries. I didn't even know there was such a thing as contemporary art or dealer galleries. It was just a complete revelation for me.

I was trying to get into advertising, but I looked like Charles Manson. No one would hire me, but no one would tell me why. I looked dangerous, I suppose. But then I made a rash decision and applied to art school and got in. And completely changed my life at that point. My wife Jan and I had a piece of land; we were going to build a house. Sold the land, bought a shack in Titirangi and I went through art school.

**U:** How does art school form ideas about art? Does it shape people into being certain types of artists?

**SB:** Well, art school was something I enjoyed hugely. And I think I was very fortunate in my first year I had Gordon Walters as my first teacher. He immediately gave me a sense that I came from somewhere that has a history and you use books and libraries to look back at that. Because we all come from somewhere. He was a great example and became a

Right.

The artist Stephen Bambury photographed in his studio.

personal friend. And Alberto Garcia Alvarez. He had come from teaching in California after he had just managed to escape Franco Spain and he had a big knowledge of European history, European art history and abstract traditions both in Europe and America.

I still hugely admire his work and his thinking. He's coming from this informal art tradition, which Judy Millar, who was also taught by him, kind of gravitated to, but I was a completely different personality. But I think what you react to and react against are equally important. There aren't many people who are child geniuses. It's, you know, 95% perspiration, 5% inspiration, as choreographer Laura Dean said. You have to be prepared to work and work comes from work, and the vision comes from putting in those hours.

**U:** So does all good art need to have an intellectual element, but not necessarily an academic element?

**SB:** Hopefully through the acquisition of knowledge, someone learns how to think and how to think creatively. I learnt how to think critically, which was quite crippling for a long time. However, more recently I've managed to make a transformation from critical thought to creative thought. And I've learnt to welcome and feel comfortable with the discomfort of uncertainty and risk. There is meant to be a lot of uncertainty if you are really pushing yourself in your work. So, for me, the necessary discipline to put alongside the visual arts would be philosophy most probably.

**U:** Is there a philosophical element in your work?

**SB:** Undoubtedly, yeah. I mean, it's not an illustration of a philosophical position but Nietzsche's contention that art makes life tolerable is a useful tool to have. He talks about life



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"WHAT I WANT YOU TO HAVE IS A PAINTING EXPERIENCE."



being justified by art, rather than justifying art into life, which is the position that most people take.

My teacher Alberto, he really came out of existentialism to a huge extent. Not that I was particularly enamoured by existentialism, but he talked about philosophy all the time, so it just became natural to me. It wasn't just about how something looked, it was something inside it, something else again that was a type of constructed thought.

**U:** You're talking a lot about how you draw many ideas from text. What is the importance of words and definitions in your practice?

**SB:** I don't call myself an abstract artist, but I don't call myself a figurative artist. I don't call myself a modernist any more than I call myself a post-modernist. Epistemology is a bit of dead end in a way; it confuses people. Other people define me as a minimalist or an abstract painter. Language is out there in the public domain. I mean, those terms don't mean anything to me, really, but they may be helpful to other people.

There are some terms that I definitely push away because I find them limiting in the parameters they allow. Formalism is one term so contaminated now through the use and misuse and rhetoric of post-modernity, so it's a word I'll always challenge. 'Global' is another word I'll always challenge.

I'm completely engaged with words because words are a tool for thinking, but I'm also engaged in the idea of thought that extends beyond the parameters of what we can say, or we're looking for new ways of putting it, and while that may be clumsy, I think it's a critical part of our humanity. Wittgenstein says at the end of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence." I've always thought of that as a very full statement. Silence isn't the end of sensation or feeling.

**U:** What is the significance of not giving emotive titles to your works, but rather coding them and removing text?

**Above left:**  
*Slightline XXVII* 2006;  
chemical action on  
copper panels,  
Lumley Tower,  
Auckland.

**Above right:**  
*Site Works: Second Series*  
2011, acrylic on  
21 aluminium panels,  
250 x 395 cm (courtesy  
of the artist and Two  
Rooms, Auckland).

Facing page.  
Stephen Bambury in  
his Auckland studio,  
designed by Pip and  
Nat Cheshire.

**SB:** The idea of 'no title' or 'untitled' was a convention of late modernism that was already loaded, so I didn't want to do that. But I didn't want to load down the paintings with a lot of language, I didn't want to point too specifically. I like to put down a scent that can be followed. Just as in the paintings, the thought I had behind them is there, and some people may be interested and some people may not be, but it doesn't mean they can't engage with the paintings.

**U:** The other part about your work is it seems so rich in physicality in the layering of the paint, the brushstrokes, which is almost completely separate to words and philosophy. How is the making important?

**SB:** What I want you to have is a painting experience. So it's something that comes into being through the act of painting. For me, the laying on of hands is crucial – the paint is often made here, the cutting is made here, the fabrication is done here. Almost all of it is things I can do here. There is a philosophical position, or proposition, in the idea that the work can be made by hand, by my hand.

**U:** Does that craft element of art, with your interest in art and architecture, move your work towards design? Or are art, design and architecture all quite distinct?

**SB:** I'd like to come at that for a slightly different angle. And while I was rebuffing epistemology before, if we look at the words 'art' and 'architecture', they both come from 'ar', which had tectonics added to it. 'Ar' is the making, the craft you refer to, and the rest the tectonics they come out of.

My thesis is the image and the space in earlier histories were interlocked and one and the same thing. They've become separated and disjointed from one another. Particularly as consumerism and the portable picture painting canvas were invented. There used to be a time where we travelled to art, now we're used to art travelling to us. Well, I'm more interested in reversing that flow, although my work is

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portable in many ways. Someone like Donald Judd, who embodies those joint spectral qualities you talk about – art and architecture – when he did Marfa, Texas, clearly saying, I want to leave a trace when we install something, it stays in place and we come to it. We don't take it out of that place, we don't then vandalise the work and send it off to another place it doesn't know or doesn't want to be in. It may sound odd but if you think of something like the Sistine Chapel, Da Vinci's frescos, the idea of cutting them off the walls and sending them around the world is completely ridiculous, yet, in a sense that's what's we do. And yet, that reintegration between art and architecture interests me, and it has nothing to do with design. If all you see is design, you've missed it. You've missed the point.

Also, with architecture, it's expressive of a range of things that can't be considered in terms of design, if it's good architecture or great architecture. The thing that architecture is most concerned with is space, and it's the least possible thing to capture in any way. You can't capture it in a photograph, you have to experience it. And that's the same thing as what I'm talking about with experiencing a painting. I can't experience a painting looking at it in a book. I may be interested in it, but I can't understand it.

**U:** Your house, designed by Pip Cheshire, is quite an important example in New Zealand architectural history. What was the relationship with Pip in designing it? Did you let him go, or was it a strong collaboration?

**SB:** I have to say it's a very special kind of relationship. I've known Pip for years, we go surfing together and we still do. It was an incredibly intense relationship that had a subtext that went well before any discussion of the house. We defined our terms, we defined the moments historically that we found ourselves in. So we had an incredibly complex and richly textured conversation about those sorts of issues over many years. So when it came to the house, the platform was already there and kind of approached, thinking backwards and thinking forwards. How do we do a house now that is neither a post-modern nor modernist house? That is the challenge we have today.

**U:** Do you think that New Zealanders [and Australians] have less of an appreciation of art than, say, those in Europe, who have more of a history behind them?

**SB:** There's just more people. I mean, there's an incredibly vibrant and interested audience for art in this country.

Above left.  
*ICo89343 2008*,  
1200 x 1200 x 800 mm;  
acrylic and iron filings  
on aluminium  
(courtesy of the artist  
and Two Rooms,  
Auckland).

Above right.  
*Ghost (LXXVII)*  
2010/2011,  
chemical action and  
12k white gold on two  
aluminium panels,  
900 x 1800 mm  
(courtesy of the artist  
and Two Rooms,  
Auckland).

I don't know how far it wants to extend itself intellectually, however, that's perhaps another question, but certainly there are a huge number of people in Europe who never go to art galleries, and yet, the population is so large that there are huge galleries everywhere, the opportunities are huge, they have those depositories of history. Our repositories don't go back that far and I'm including the repository of taonga Maori from that cultural point of view as well. It's still very young. I don't think that people aren't interested. I think there are some fairly stupid ideas about about what art's function is.

**U:** The way you label your works puts them in a series or time context. How important is that acknowledgement of time, a history of work building up over your career?

**SB:** They sit individually until something else comes and disrupts it. It's like that Tom Waits song, we all start out as strangers... I can't remember the song now. So, things that start out being strange or out of character in your work, it usually doesn't take long for them to connect to the strand that runs through all of the practice. Just because you can't see a cord, doesn't mean there isn't one. The idea is trying to see these groups or families, which I relate to more than as a series, but I think of them as families, I guess, so they are sharing a kind of community.

I started really thinking about finding a way to deal with the complexity of not trying to see myself in that notion of a depressing 'getting better each year', but in a much more detailed way of dealing with one's own history. I was much more interested in discovering ways to go through these number of identities that I found that were me, aspects of me, and keep those things alive. The idea of grounding them, noting the year it was done and also the year the idea started, was a clear way to embody that kind of notion. There was clarity to it. So these codes, they are like barcodes, they tell you a huge amount about the work if you deconstruct them, but they are not important as titles.

**U:** Do you think that an essential part of being an artist is that you enjoy art?

**SB:** Some artists love art, and there are some artists that I think hate art, and they do kind of anti-art. I'm an artist who loves art; those who love it are less afraid of it. It's the difference between being an idolater and an iconoclast. The iconoclast is the one who's afraid, not the other way round. I can't get enough of it. I just want the stimulation of looking at exciting things. ☺

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