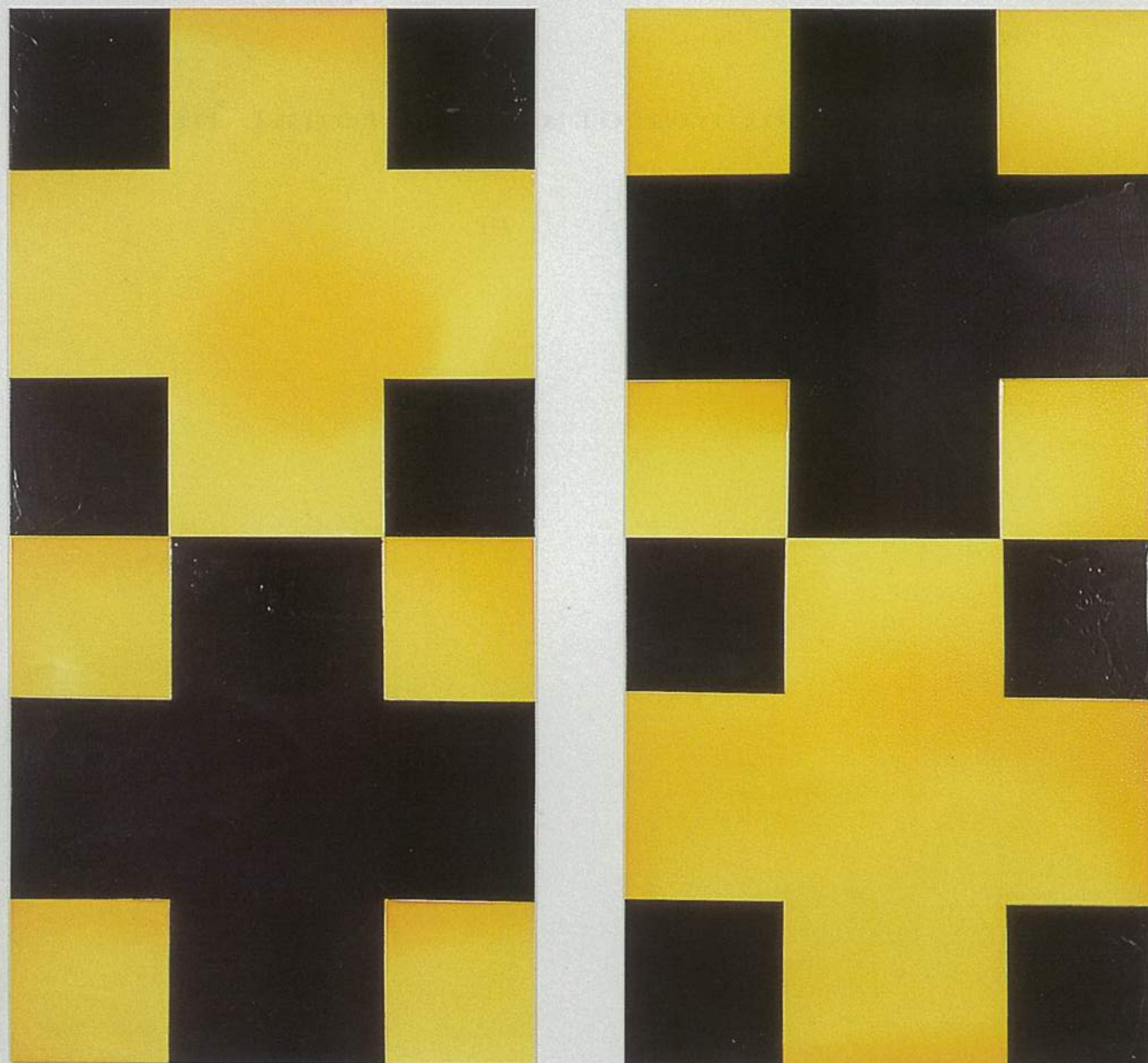


# staunch ART

Noses have been put out-of-joint and eyebrows raised at Wellington's City Gallery's cheeky face-lift by artist Stephen Bambury for his quarter-century retrospective. The controversial Bambury was visited at his Auckland studio by writer J P COWEY. Photographs by MICHAEL NG and JULIA BROOKE-WHITE.



For 25 years artist Stephen Bambury has religiously adhered to his circular path exploring a few iconic images. Champagne flowed into his garret in 1989 when he was the inaugural recipient of a Moët & Chandon NZ Art Fellowship, awarding him a year in a studio in a small village outside Paris. This was followed by nearly two years of travelling widely, extending international connections and encountering major museums and dealer galleries in the flesh.

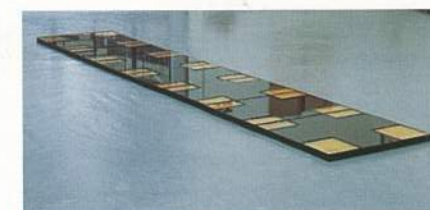
Wellington art dealer Peter McLeavey once commented to me that he was unsure of Bambury, "I like to know what makes an artist bleed. With Bambury I don't know where his wound is." Bambury sees his work being all about idolatry and doubt, and McLeavey's doubt being a "finger in the wound".

Despite the years working with the figure of the cross, these are not religious pieces – Bambury refers instead to contemplation. There is a Russian iconic element to the pieces that extends on from the work of Kazimir Malevich, a Modernist in the early part of the 20th century. Bambury follows a cerebral practice, where "the size of the question is more important than the veracity of 'the truth'." References abound to Colin



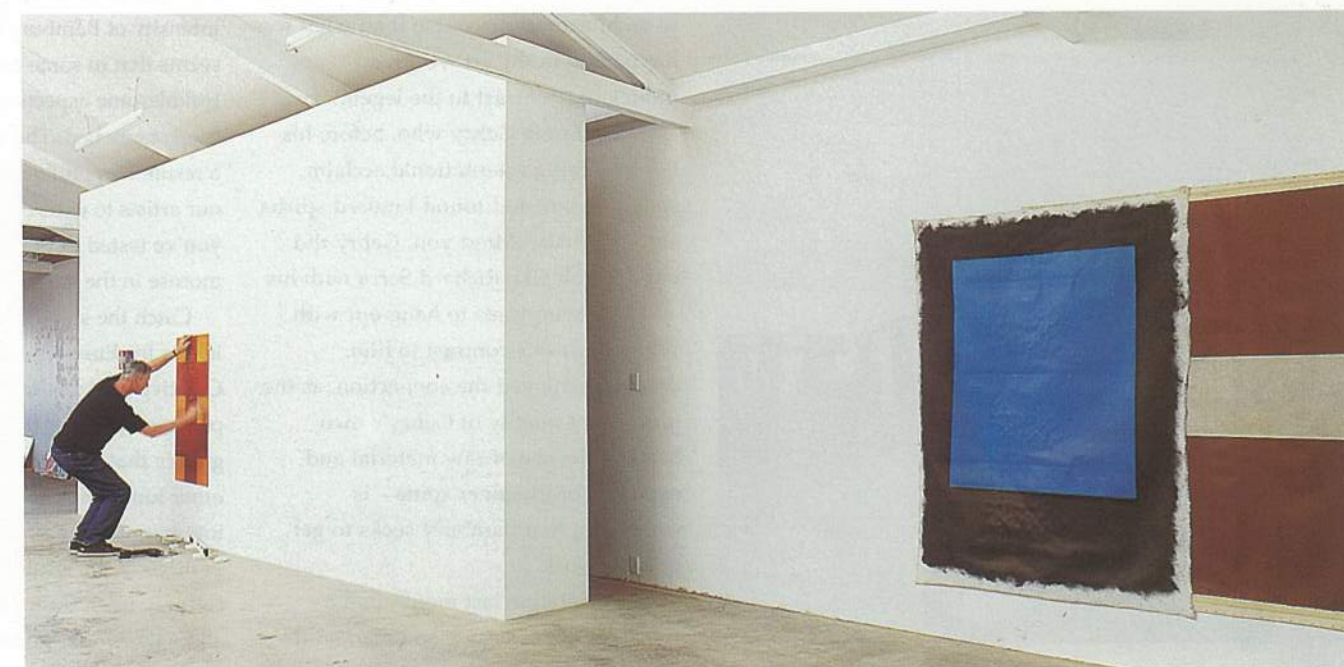
McCahon also, in both the images and titles. But Bambury doesn't live within a secure faith. Christian images are contrasted with tantric Buddhist elements, such as in the Ladder and Chakra series. Curator Wyston Curnow talks about the work being "imbued with an unshakeable conviction as to the value of the image" and believes Bambury sees his role as "making images of wonder, icons for the exercise of your Contemplative Thought".

Curator Wyston Curnow believes Bambury (above) sees his role as "making" images of wonder, icons for the exercise of your contemplative thought".

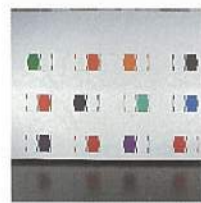
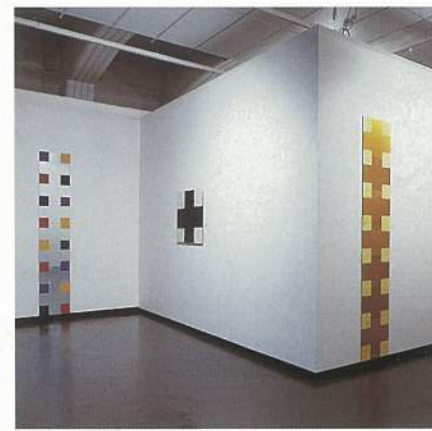


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Commentators make much of the recent departure from Bambury's single-minded explorations with the cruciform. In 1994 at a time when unseen wounds were being quietly dealt with, Bambury received a formidable commission. He was asked to create a monumental work to be installed in its own room. (Check it out on page 29 of your back issue of *Urbis* 02). Throughout that dark winter I visited Bambury's studio and watched with







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fascination as the gigantic piece was created layer by layer on the aluminium sheet, having telescoped from the little cardboard model and work on paper. It felt like Bambury had cranked things up a notch. The companion piece that was shown publicly was a more ephemeral resin work on canvas that leaned informally against the gallery wall. The use of text, the scale and materials all served to give notice that Bambury could not be easily pigeonholed.

The City Gallery in Wellington is home

to a major 25-year retrospective of Bambury's work, curated by his friend Wyston Curnow, entitled "Bambury. Works 1975/1999." Initial shock and horror about the taking of flagrant liberties with the gallery spaces has given way to stunned acclaim. Buying a Bambury normally involves the artist turning up with his tradesman tools and installing it precisely and deliberately. So it should not have been such a surprise that Bambury would spend a year designing in his head custom-built interior spaces in which gallery-goers would experience the 68 pieces.

Bambury had always flirted with the architectural elements in his work and his European exhibitions explored this. Throughout the 80s he felt more drawn to architectural discourse than what was happening in the art world; an interesting contrast to the legendary architect Frank Gehry who, before his late-blooming international acclaim, sought solace and found kindred spirits among artists. (Mind you, Gehry did have people like Richard Serra with his 40-tonne sculptures to hang out with.) When I put this contrast to him, Bambury enjoyed the connection, as the unfinished quality of Gehry's own house – the use of raw material and exposure of the inner spine – is something that Bambury seeks to get into his work.

His exhibition last month in the Jensen Gallery in Auckland marked the

beginning of a more exuberant phase. The austere graphite markings of an earlier work, "Leaden Echo", being matched now with the stunningly lush tones of "Golden Echo". I paired the latter with my memory of the former, and was intrigued to discover that Bambury and Curnow had positioned these two works in the retrospective at opposite ends of the longest gallery.

Rumours suggest the show might make it to Auckland within a year or two, and all this Bambury exposure coincides with the launch of the definitive book: Bambury. Also available is a 50-page catalogue that was published after the opening to allow the installation aspects to be documented.

There is no cause yet to doubt the intensity of Bambury's production, but it seems that to some extent the more troublesome aspects of the wound have been staunch. The art hasn't suffered as a result. Hopefully we no longer require our artists to excise an ear; anyway, once you've tasted bubbly it is hard to be morose in the garret.

Catch the show in the Capital before it leaves for Europe (with help from Creative NZ) where Dr Margrit Breehm is placing a show at Baden Baden in a gallery that featured Donald Judd and other luminaries. Success in the international art world beckons, and perhaps in the refined waters of the quiet German town the art dealers will allow the wound to be cured.



Architect Pip Cheshire designed Bambury's studio - a light and open-plan space.

Cheshire also designed a house for Bambury, which will appear in a future issue.

Bambury struggled to settle on his return from Europe. The initial bare concrete walk-up apartment in Anzac Ave was later swapped for the banality of a St Mary's Bay town house. Grand plans were then hatched to add a third floor apartment to his studio in Eden Terrace. Architect Pip Cheshire, designer of the studio, produced an agreed plan before the strategy changed once again. A leafy section in Western Springs was bought with enough space to build in front of the existing house. Cheshire has created a dwelling that clearly thrills Bambury. It is fresh and original yet with the multitude of references we expect from a Bambury. A house that had 12 months debate about access to and the layout of a bathroom is likely to evolve further during and after construction. Watch out for a public airing of the Bambury house when the various players determine that it has reached that somewhat arbitrary designation – completion.

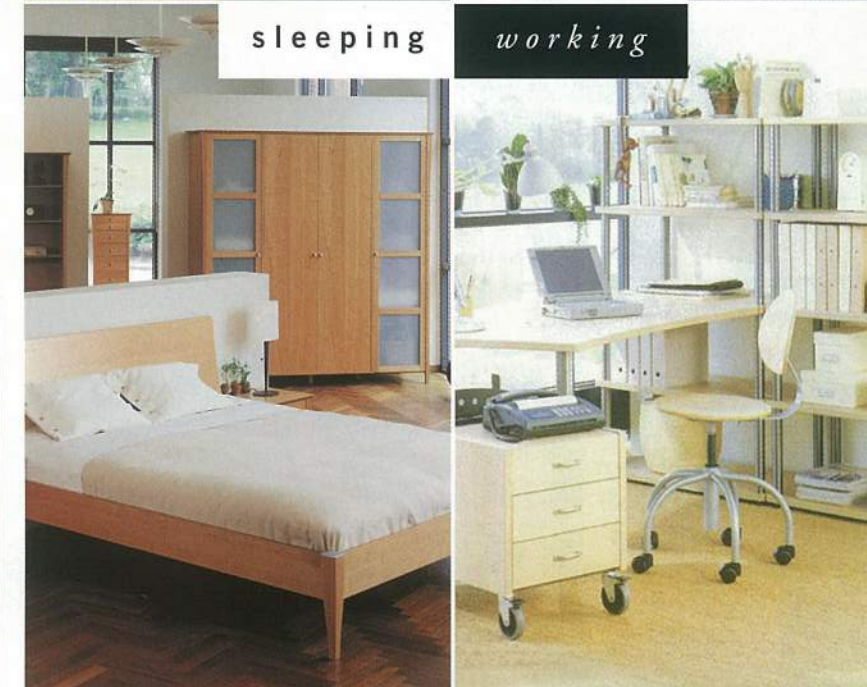


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