

Stephen Bambury in the studio he's worked in for 20 years.



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A CROSS TO BEAR

Artist Stephen Bambury prepares to say goodbye to the Auckland studio that has served him so well.

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It could be that he's working on one of his cross paintings, but there is something reverential about ascending the stairs to the top floor of Stephen Bambury's bright, white studio in Eden Terrace, Auckland, as if at any moment angels will appear.

Rain is thrumming on the rooftop and a jazz record is playing as Stephen, with the help of his daughter Nicola, applies 16-carat gold leaf to each of the seven panels of the painting. After a hot, clammy morning, it's cooler now, which means he has a short window to do the work – “if you miss it, you can't get it on”, he says of the gold leaf.

For 40 years, in a career that has taken him to the United States, Europe and Asia, Stephen has explored painting as an “experiential exchange”, creating and recreating the symbols of square, circle and cross – not just in its religious sense but as a reference to the cross of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist art movement, and Colin McCahon's Tau Cross.

His technical investigations have redefined the idea of painting, incorporating precious and non-precious metals, chemical patinas, timbers, even rust. He has also produced photography and screen prints, and satiates an abiding love of architecture with site-specific work.

His neighbours here include a printer, an electrician, makers of “some sort of defensive equipment” and, today at least, a semi alright rock band. At one end of the room is a garden of succulents and along one wall there is a cupboard stuffed with pigments, brushes, and all manner of gadgets and potions, like a medieval alchemist's laboratory. At a yawning 2000 square feet, Stephen says he sometimes finds the studio too cramped.

“I spend so much of my life in here, so I really want it to be a place I can come to. I can cook here, I've got music, it's really nice to be in. I've had a lot of studios over the years and it's such a luxury, it helps so much to have a space like this.”

It wasn't always so glorious – when he moved in, the lower floor had been leased out to cabinetmakers, while



Above Workbenches are covered in the diverse tools and materials that Bambury uses in his work, including resins and timber. The organic light that the artist desired for his workspace floods in through the skylight and door. **Right** The studio, which is spread over 2000 square feet, was designed by Bambury's friend, the architect Pip Cheshire, who worked on the upstairs level, while his son Nat Cheshire designed the lower level, which includes storage and a library of about 3000 books. The symbols Bambury has worked with throughout his career, such as the cross, can be seen in the artwork that lines the studio's walls and floor.



upstairs, a clothing manufacturer had been using it as a cutting floor – “It was just block walls, a raw tin roof, like something out of a Dickens story.”

He asked his old friend, surfing buddy and co-philosophiser Pip Cheshire to design the upstairs level. “The brief for Pip was that I wanted organic light, and I wanted light that shifted on a daily basis, an annual basis, a monthly basis.”

He says he “feels” colour; that it is almost a form of synaesthesia. “Seeing is so complex: one of our most present faculties and perhaps the most overlooked because of its presentness. It’s not a question of the purity of a colour but of the experience of colour. This experience is particular to painting and what I want to share.”

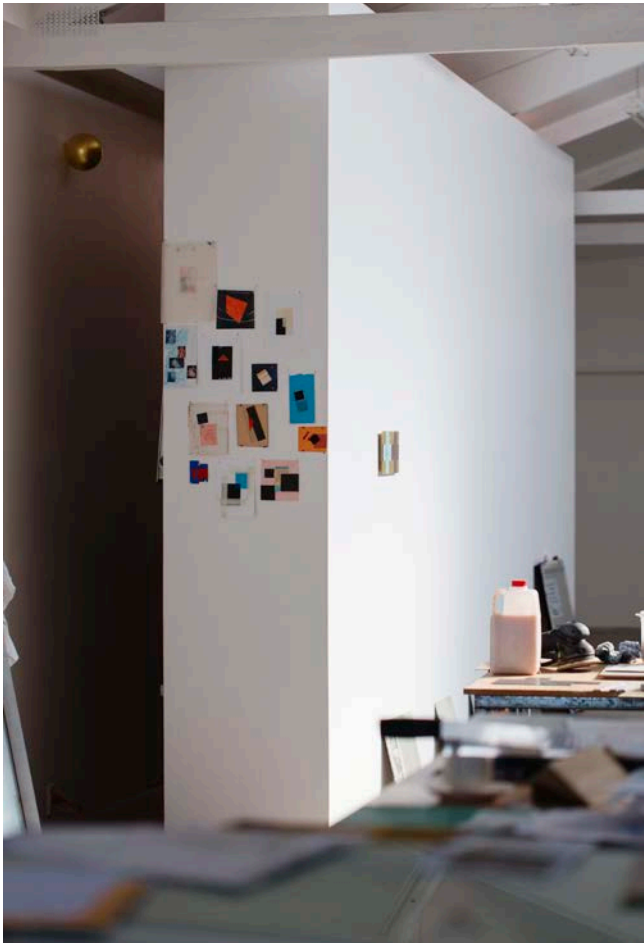
Pip’s son Nat designed the lower level, a warren of installation crates, records, a library of about 3000 books, and chairs with the arms bitten off by the Bambury whippet. Big roller doors open up to the street. Where the upstairs space is calm and contemplative, down

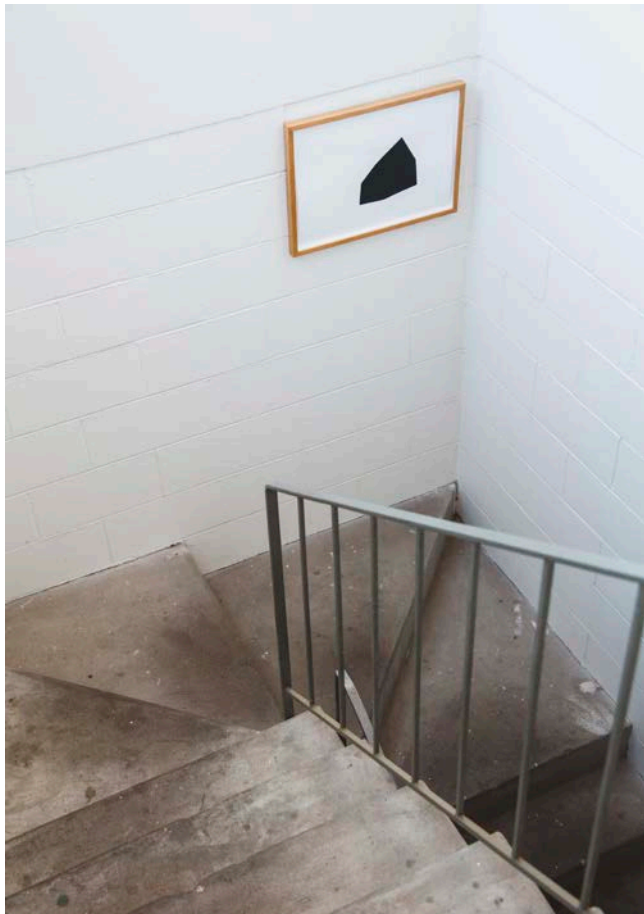
here is where the messy stuff happens: chemical processing, sawing.

The Cheshires’ clear admiration of Stephen’s talent is matched only by his of theirs. “I’m often more interested in talking to architects than a lot of artists. They’re more generous. They deal with clients so they have to have a more robust attitude and perhaps not be too precious about it. I don’t know why people go to a Gothic cathedral and thank God. They should be thanking the architect.”

The separation of home and work is important to Bambury. As a student at Elam art school, a lot of his peers painted in their back gardens. “But I knew I had to make a huge effort to get out of that pattern. At the beginning I was living and working in Titirangi but I got depressed, I didn’t like it. You’ve got to go to work.”

Last year was a hectic and sometimes tortuous year in the artist’s life. In October, at the conclusion of a gruelling five-year process, the Auckland High Court found he had been short-changed in commissions by his former dealer.





Above left The uniformity of the concrete, brick block and steel stairwell is broken by 'XXXX' by XXXX.
Above right Bambury likens his experience of colour to a form of synaesthesia and uses it to great effect in 'XXXX XXX'.



Bambury says that every studio he's worked in has produced different results: "I'm actually ready to leave this studio now. I've been here 20 years and it has worked really well for me, and I know the new studio is going to have a new kind of influence on me."

"I took a stance on what I believe to be artists' rights and my rights. I guess the most positive experience is realising the sustenance I get from my work, my own strengths and weaknesses, and I think I've changed as a person for the better. I don't regret the course that I took. People will make up their own mind but I don't actually give a toss what people think, as long as I can do my work." His former dealer has appealed the judgement.

A happier experience was a recent trip to Basel, where he worked with Swiss artist Daniel Göttin and his partner, curator Gerda Maise, on a show called Upfall (a play on *apfall*, German for rubbish) at their gallery Hebel_121. An example hangs on the wall: some grey bits of Gib board banged together that he found near his home in Western Springs.

"This idea of rubbish is a very serious idea about looking after the pool of inspiration, trying to be alert as possible, not letting anything slip through. Because often what's happening on the peripheral, which is the rubbish on the floor, is better than what's going on in your head.

"We basically turned the room itself into a collage, then we started to arrange our rubbish around the rubbish we'd brought in with a history of Hebel, and it was kind of an exercise in collecting histories. It was interesting that none of us had a clue what we were going to do. It was all just done on the wing. It was a really nice experience."

The modern adoration for making from scratch is old news to Bambury, who has always done his own fabrication. "Smart people are beginning to realise that might be where the bacon's cooking. There are still a lot of people producing work that looks to me like it comes out of factory. But there seem to be more and more people giving attention to those more humanistic ideas, because they have to.

"I work with chemicals, patinas, paints, colours, but here in the studio is where the alchemy of these things can take place. You set up a process and then the process starts to have a voice. So this is the first time I'll see this painting today because up until now it's never had the

gold. Who else gets to be the first person in the world to see something? Not many. That's an incredible privilege and that gets me out of bed every day."

It all seems enormously labour intensive, and it is. "People might think I produce a lot of work but I actually don't, given the hours I'm in here. I'm not a fast worker, just a hard worker. But I'd pretty much rather be here than most other places."

His daughter Nicola tells me that at the age of 10 she came home from school and asked Stephen what he was going to do when he grew up. "All the other dads wore suits and had briefcases, so I was quite embarrassed," she says. "One of the mothers said to me, what does your dad do? And I said a painter. She said, a house painter? And I said no, he paints rectangles."

Although she resisted it at first, Nicola is now an artist too. "I now really appreciate that I don't have parents that are like other parents," she says.

This year marks the beginning of a new era, as Stephen packs up his studio and heads to a new space

off Rosebank Road, while his Eden Terrace building makes way for the new City Rail Link.

The idea of transitioning was painful at first, "but as with the court case, in adversary you can find an alternative. You can turn it up the other way. I took the first load to the new studio and it feels like it's going to be very exciting. I'm moving from the city into a more industrial area. It's a beautiful light, white space – a blank canvas.

"Every studio I've worked in has produced different work. I'm actually ready to leave this studio now. I've been here 20 years and it has worked really well for me, and I know the new studio is going to have a new kind of influence on me. I always paint both the country I'm in and the studio I'm in. I can't help it. It's to do with the light, the volume of the architecture."

The evening has come, the rain has stopped and the painting is complete; the alchemy achieved. As he brushes it down, it twinkles in the air before covering me in gold dust. ④