

# Stella Brennan.

Artist.

The installation works that Stella Brennan has created over the last decade have incorporated a wide range of sculptural pieces, illuminations, video projections, and soundscapes. She also has a keen eye for incorporating found objects and has gone so far as to install a spa pool in an art gallery for her piece *Wet Social Sculpture*. Her work is driven by a mix of deliberate ideas and chance discoveries:

'Sometimes I start out with a strong idea of what I'm going to do and other times there's more room for things to change as I go along. For example, the work I made for the "Dirty Pixels" show was an embroidery of my computer desktop. I had in my mind the first day what it was going to look like, and I knew what I had to do, but it took a year of constant work — with my mum and my friends helping me — to actually make the embroidery that I had in my head at the beginning . . . So that was one case where if I could've downloaded it from my brain, it would've appeared exactly the same as it ended up . . . though the actual process of producing it altered the initial idea in some ways, because it was important to me that the labour of making the piece was undertaken by people I knew — no one was paid to be involved. So it was a labour of love and that changed how I viewed the work . . .

'In other cases, there can be a lot more chance elements involved in the creative process . . . For example, I found these Lego blocks in a garage sale recently and I could instantly see that they might be useful to incorporate into one of my works. On another occasion, I might come across a book in the library that sets me off in a different direction. So I guess it's intention combined with happenstance. The work you do the rest of the time and the practice you engage in is preparation so that when that chance event occurs, you're able to make use of it in a productive way . . . Being an artist you never escape your practice. You never get to a point where the day's over and you take off your beret and you put away your palette and it's done! Your mind is always thinking about your work and everything you come across is aestheticised. Everything you see and read has a relationship to your practice, which is interesting, but it can also drive you a bit crazy.'

Brennan has also written for a number of art journals and popular magazines, and is therefore thoughtful about the text that she supplies to accompany each exhibition:

'Writing those kinds of documents is part of making the process public. Quite often, there is a complexity to the ideas, which makes it necessary to give people some assistance in understanding why you've chosen those ideas and how they fit together. But then you don't want to over-determine that and crush all of the life out of the experience for them. So it's really a fine line between not providing people with an unnecessarily frustrating experience, but allowing them to complete the ideas themselves and not baby them along. The key to that is writing with clarity. I think that having some background in journalism or writing for a general audience can really help, in terms of speaking in a way that doesn't oversimplify things that aren't simple, but does allow people access.'

Due to the wide-ranging nature of Brennan's work, she is constantly learning new skills and drawing on the expertise of those around her to move into new areas:

'Finding the right collaborators is really important. And I love computer manuals! It does help to be situated within an institution, like teaching at AUT, because there are always colleagues you can ask questions of. In my last few years, I've also set up the Aotearoa Digital Arts Discussion List, which is a way for artists to share their knowledge. So if you're having a particular problem, you can ask if anyone else knows the answer . . . Working in this field, you do need to rely on other people — whether it's someone at the gallery painting the walls for you or someone helping you make the sound. The complexity of the type of work that I do means you can't be an expert in everything, but that's the really nice thing about being an artist — you don't have to be. In a culture of ever-increasing specialisation, mashing together all these separate realms in ways that might drive the experts crazy is, for me, part of the value of artistic practice . . . The exciting thing about the advances in digital technology in the last ten years is that there is a lot more you can do, just working on your home computer.'