

born Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1974
lives and works in Auckland

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 05 *Wet Social Sculpture*, St Pauls Street, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand
- Live Stock*, Starkwhite, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand
- 04 *Tomorrow Never Knows*, Starkwhite, Auckland and The Physics Room, Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand
- 03 *End User*, Room 103, Auckland and The Calder-Lawson Gallery, Waikato University, Aotearoa New Zealand
- 02 *Another Green World*, Artspace, Sydney, Australia
- Selected Group Exhibitions**
- 05 *Breaking Ice*, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand
- Dimensions Variable*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, Australia
- Snake Dill*, Auckland Art Gallery – Toi ō Tāmaki, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand
- 04 *Everday Minimal*, Auckland Art Gallery – Toi ō Tāmaki, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand
- 00 *In Glorious Dreams*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, Aotearoa New Zealand

Selected Bibliography

- Stella Brennan and Sophie O'Brien, *Another Green World*, Artspace, Sydney, 2002
- Andrew Clifford, 'Dive Into A Suburban Fantasia', *New Zealand Herald*, 21 September, 2005
- Sean Cubitt, 'Cities at the Edge of Time', and Robert Leonard, 'History Curator', *O-10*, Ondine Publishing, Auckland 2005
- Andrew Paul Wood 'Past, Present, Future', *Urbis Magazine*, AGM Publishing, Auckland, February 2005, pp 104–108
- Allan Smith, 'Nostalgia for the Future', *Eyeline Australia*, May 2000

Orchestrated Litanies

Stella Brennan mediates binaries, fashioning oxymoronic couplets to explain both her curatorial and artistic practice. *Nostalgia for the Future* (1999) examined 'retro-futurism', *Dirty Pixels* (2002) explored digital entropy, while *Live Stock* (2005) looked at 'extraterrestrial pastoralism'. In each case, the true subject was the artist's own conflicted relationship with modernism.

Brennan adores the clean lines of the white cube – whether exemplified by an art gallery or an iMac, it's the holy grail of Zen purity she covets. Yet she describes this fetishism as a 'guilty pleasure', well aware that these vacuum-sealed worlds attain their beauty through exclusion. Modernism has become the cultural scapegoat of a polyvalent world, but Brennan is far too fond of its signifiers to disengage altogether. Her strategy becomes a reconciliation of opposites, a binding of binaries into uncomfortable unity.

In three recent videos, the artist forces cohabitation between the organic and the digital. *Theme for Great Cities* (2003) combines images of Lego skyscrapers with Situationist Raoul Vaneigem's 1961 treatise *Comments Against Urbanism*. The model buildings are fed through software that refracts them into a vertiginous eternity of hard edges, while Vaneigem's words are dolefully intoned by a computer voice known as 'Ralph'.

Citizen Band (2004) features a solarised slow pan across a collection of warty 1970s night-class pottery, while Hundertwasser's *Mould Manifesto* is read by another automaton, the soothing 'Vicki'. The artist has played a cruel trick on these impassioned proto-hippies, feeding their words through lifeless machines. Brennan has no time for Luddites – she founded and coordinates the new media collective Aotearoa Digital Arts, or ADA. Taunting the manifesto makers for their own totalitarianisms, Brennan allows their syntax to be garbled by parodies of humanity.

With *White Wall / Black Hole* (2005), Brennan replaces the computer voice with a crawling telex, as if written, or thought, in real time. The dot-matrix aesthetic nods to early L. Budd video works, in which messages written on a Mac Classic emerged from bursts of snow.

This work is an elegy to the victims of the 1979 Erebus disaster, a black smudge both on the blank landscape of Antarctica, and on the history of New Zealand, where the disaster and its aftermath created a 'cultural crisis' that informed some of the artist's most profound early memories. Justice Mahon, who headed the Commission of Inquiry into the accident, famously described Air New Zealand's attempts to divert the inquiry as an 'orchestrated litany of lies', and the phrase entered the local lexicon.

While Brennan's imaginative depiction is not false, like Albrecht Dürer's rhinoceros it is necessary fabulous, an orchestrated litany of subjectivities. Without reducing the disaster to an aesthetic trope, it's easy to see its fascination for Brennan, for, like dirty pixels, or Hundertwasser's mould, it left an indelible mark. Once again, modernity is 'messed up'; utopia shattered. Brennan's attempt to communicate the unspeakable belies 'objective' reportage. Her heartfelt response is, however, depersonalised by the mechanical text, unless we concede a subjective agency to the machine.

Brennan co-opts her viewers into a speculative empiricism reminiscent of the Turing test, designed to fathom whether or not a computer is capable of thought. As proposed in 1950 by British mathematician Alan Turing, an examiner sifts messages from two sources via a Teletype machine, deciding which source is human, and which synthetic. If that proves impossible, the computer has passed the test. Likewise, in Brennan's works, the viewer can be fooled into believing that it is the machine and not the artist who is speaking.

Turing suggested that humans might savour the mistakes of machines, and perhaps this is why Brennan courts crashes and corruption – those instances in which machines demonstrate the human quality of failure. These ghost-typing, shadow-talking automata speak across the no-man's-land of artificial intelligence. In this space between, this glitchy Erewhon, we question the boundaries between hysterical computers and human error.

Tessa Laird

Auckland-based artist and writer who lectures in Contextual Studies at the Manukau School of Visual Arts



Stella Brennan research material for *White Wall / Black Hole* 2005
[photograph of Air New Zealand Flight 901, DC10 wreckage, Antarctica, 1979]
Image courtesy and © Antarctica New Zealand Pictorial Collection: HRx