

City Gallery Wellington
16 Nov. 2013—26 Jan. 2014
Free entry

The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon



Hirschfeld Gallery

Artist talk
Saturday 16 Nov., 2pm
Free entry

Erica van Zon
Melted Ice Cream and Cones (Neapolitan),
2013, modelling material, acrylic.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Caroline Atkinson.



The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon

Joan Didion's 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*' first chapter opens with Maria Wyeth driving the freeway, San Diego to Ventura and back each day. She wears a cotton skirt, sandals, a hair ribbon. She drives fast, compulsively and without braking, and at night, as she sleeps by the pool under a beach towel, she dreams of the great road signs soaring overhead. The Beverley Hills setting is as slick and opaque as a movie scene, and as readers we are instantly watchful for clues to who this person is, how she thinks, what will happen next. While it is through close third person perspective and Maria's internal monologue that we navigate the plot, her voice is increasingly alienating, the dialogue painfully stark and vacuous.

In this bleak landscape, almost empty of adjectives and character description, it is the settings and objects that are most plainly evident. A general conversation about the novel quickly moves to discussion of its telling particulars: Maria's Dexadrine, Maria's ubiquitous bikini, Maria's Corvette, the hard boiled eggs on the front seat and the sun-warmed Coca Cola she drinks on gas station forecourts during her relentless drives. The synthetic haze of her Hollywood life is given form in a series of objects: an artificial lemon, plastic plants and air conditioners, while her nihilistic psychological state is emphasised through frequent references to blankness and whiteness: immaculate white sheets, white crepe pyjamas, a white chenille bed spread and Princess telephone. These details take on increasing symbolic weight. At some point it seems we might almost erase the character from the plot entirely, considering in her absence the objects as vehicles of the story.

Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948) by Truman Capote opens on the road bound for Noon City, desolate except for signs advertising Red Dot 5 Cigars, Dr Pepper, Nehi soda and Grove's Chill Tonic. Before we meet the main character, any of the characters, we are offered a cinematic picture of the setting, and the images of products which punctuate the horizon. Worldly, masculine, and quintessentially American, these images foreground a narrative

that hinges on the coming of age of a young boy, Joel Knox. The world he enters is high Southern Gothic, surrealistically bedecked with gloves and pianolas and girandoles, cotton candy and porch hammocks, gold-teethed gentlemen and giant watermelons. Even minor characters come with distinguishing props—Zoo Fever the house girl has a silk neckerchief and an accordion; Joel's father rolls red tennis balls from his sick-bed to call for attention.

For Erica van Zon, the novels of Didion and Capote are an intensely visual experience, one defined by objects. Reading three of her favourites, Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and *Run, River* (1963), and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Capote, she began listing the objects which inhabit them. For her these were the most significant element of the narrative, setting the stage for the characters to occupy and events to unfold on. A number of common motifs quickly became apparent: snakes, blood, the desert, guns. Despite their many and fundamental differences, these books share territory. Risk, loneliness and desire are sub-text in all three. They also share in an essentially American idiom, and an often conflicted nostalgia for youth. In van Zon's project these commonalities are inflected in an array of objects, isolated from their origins and then offered back as a kind of material refrain to the original texts.

Early in her research van Zon established the tonal signature which would ultimately underpin the exhibition: a kind of decadent squalor, where sweetness is always saccharine, the light is always gold, where Coca Cola and tobacco and melancholy are omnipresent. The objects she identified and constructed were literal translations of what she found in the novels, and it is these small recognisable pieces which form the greater part of the exhibition. Remakes have long been a core part of the artist's practice. Early projects included the reconstruction of a film set from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, a performance piece lip-synching as Connie Stevens singing the 1960 hit single 'Sixteen Reasons', and numerous painted film posters.¹ In these works the 'fake' becomes a new form, dislocated from its origin, and apparently sincere in its formal intent.²

The quotation is wilfully heavy-handed, realism tempered or compromised by the demands of the medium chosen for re-making.

This determinedly DIY aesthetic carries through in *The Light on the Dock*. Van Zon's use of air drying clay, paint, foam, fabric and other cheap and accessible materials lends an inherent humbleness to all of the objects. The remakes' consistently amateurish aesthetic has the effect of rendering them familial, and relates to earlier works by the artist in which fandom and homemade tributes to celebrity feature prominently. Across a widely diverse range of objects—mussel shells to stationery—there's a distinct hand and sensibility at work which homogenises the pieces, despite their varied sources, originary time periods, and materiality. This is intensified by the selection of objects, where kitsch potential is always in the foreground, and by a sculptural treatment that is slightly exaggerated, slightly simplified. The effect is one of mild humour, and the first hint of a divergence from the source texts.

Looking more closely, it becomes apparent that in a number of instances realism is sacrificed altogether, in favour of a semi-abstract shorthand. Van Zon has constructed a range of 'portraits', composite pieces which bring together several objects or raw materials to evoke a single character. Miss Amy (*Other Voices*) is reduced to a silk glove and velvet cushion while elsewhere in the gallery we find a pool of 'morning light' with the feathers of a blue jay she killed; Lily McClellan (*Run, River*) is a ceramic pear on pink tiles while her lover Ryder Channing is strips of plaid fabric, triangles of pegboard and a deconstructed atomic diagram. The seeming realism of individual objects becomes increasingly troubled, juxtaposed as it is with incongruous configurations, and with 'pure' abstractions where any literal, identifiable connection to the story is absent.

It's here that the sculptor's decision-making becomes most visible, and that the project asserts a fictional or improvisational character of its own. Departing from the lines of the original, van Zon's project cartwheels into an ad lib interpretative strategy that is expansive rather than tightly scripted, and emphasises visual evocation over literal denotation. There is a point at which it is no longer necessary to cite the 'source' for these objects, and discernible connections are negligible. Not only does this work reveal (and reveal in) the inevitable dissonance between authorial intention and the reader's experience, it also highlights elements of active editorial choice in the artist's

process. As the project evolved, faithful replication frequently became non-representational riff, the original texts offering stylistic and narrative precedents rather than blueprints. The final work in the gallery is a series of sculptures rather than props or remakes, and in its wholeness it establishes a situation that is new. If this is a narrative proposition then it is one with different points of complication, sources of elation and longing than those in the stories which originally nourished it.

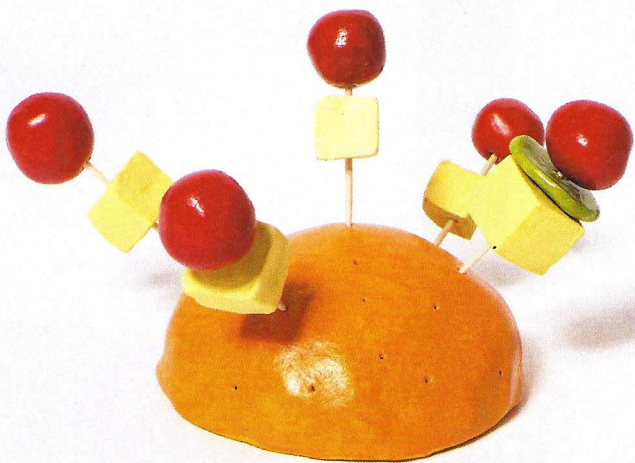
In the second chapter of *Run, River*, the main character Lily hears a gunshot while she is brushing her hair. Running to the dock near the house, she finds her lover Ryder Channing lying dead. Reading this, van Zon immediately began to make plans for the construction of the dock, the gun, and to think how Lily's vulnerability might be represented in the materials she had to hand. She leaves us with only the pieces of a story, broken open. Yet somewhere in the space opened up by that narrative fracture are the lingering reverberations of a gunshot, its aftermath, and a whole new scene.

Abby Cunnae Hirschfeld Gallery Curator

- 1 The *Mulholland Drive Film Set*, *Props Room* and *Sixteen Reasons* performance were all presented as part of van Zon's MFA portfolio at Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland, in 2007.
- 2 '[T]he faked-up fake seems to be a part of Erica's project—to remove all content from these objects...it is quite a difficult thing to produce new non-items in the world. Judd and Co. tried to make their objects unobtrusively perfect to steer us away from reading meaning...could these lumpy, handcrafted forms of Erica's be read in a direct lineage from minimalism as de-objectified, de-materialised non-objects?' Paula Booker (in conversation with Emma Bugden), 'Not Quite, Almost, Once More With Feeling', *The Physics Room Annual 2008*, p.10.

Erica van Zon
Rattlesnake, 2013,
wire, papier mâché, acrylic and vinyl.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Caroline Atkinson.





Hirschfeld Gallery

City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi

Open daily 10am–5pm
www.citygallery.org.nz

The Hirschfeld Gallery is dedicated to exhibiting work by Wellington-based artists and designers.

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Erica van Zon

Grapefruit Cocktail, 2013,
modelling material, toothpicks, acrylic.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Caroline Atkinson.



Erica van Zon

Cigarettes (studio image), 2013,
modelling material, gouache, acrylic.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Caroline Atkinson.

