

August 26, 2017

Erica van Zon: Opal Moon, Local Lime

**This essay was first published to
accompany Erica van Zon's exhibition
Opal Moon, Local Lime at the Sarjeant
Art Gallery Te Whare O Rehua
Whanganui, 26 August–19 November
2018.**

Start somewhere: Chernobyl, a bánh mì sandwich, the light of the moon refracted through glass, a cream bun from a Gonville bakery, the Tasman Sea, batik fabric. There are myriad ways to begin Erica van Zon's *Opal Moon, Local Lime*; each of the works in the exhibition are a potential entry point into a network of wide-ranging ideas, motifs, and prompts. If *Opal Moon* were a book (and I

often find myself returning to literary metaphors when thinking about van Zon's work) it would be a pick-a-path, but one in which you can begin anywhere and traverse the narrative, and all the parts have an equal weighting—a new kind of story, then.

van Zon was artist-in-residence at Whanganui's Tylee Cottage in 2016 and, as is often her approach, began gleaning ideas, colour palettes, patterns, and forms for this exhibition from her immediate environment. Those with some local knowledge and an eagle eye may be able to spot parts of Whanganui flickering throughout *Opal Moon*: the fabulously '80s teapot found in the Tylee Cottage (*Tylee Teapot*), Whanganui architect Don Wilson's modernist family home (*Speaker Cover*), the arches of a Gonville house (*Gonville Arches*), a cream bun from a bakery in the same suburb (*Raspberry Special*), and the benches outside the Whanganui District Library.

The exhibition, however, unfurls outwards from Whanganui, in an ever-widening international network. Starting from the date of the Tylee Cottage's inaugural artist-in-

residence—photographer Laurence Abernart in 1986—van Zon began researching significant world events: the Chernobyl disaster, which occurred in the same year. From this nuclear meltdown, she turned to the more recent catastrophe at Fukushima in Japan, that then led to a teapot made in Japan, then to silk scarves with a similar pattern, then to a paper napkin found at a party at the photographer Peter Peryer's house. Each of these interests or objects prompted an artwork: van Zon enlarged images of the sky above Chernobyl and layered them behind security glass; sculpted (possibly hoax) images of fruit deformed by radioactivity from the Fukushima disaster; and the napkin's pattern was stitched in beads.

Such is the way in which van Zon makes art, in connected chains of travelling and looking and thinking and making, that level the serious and the mundane; the quirky cute with modern design. *Opal Moon* feels like the thought sequences you have when you're in between places: standing in the shower; or waiting at a bus stop; or lying in the dark, before falling asleep at night—the mind wanders, follows a hazy logic, leaps from thought to thought. In a recent interview on The Pantograph Punch website about her

2016 exhibition at The Dowse Art Museum, *Coffee Perhaps*, van Zon said, ‘I’ve already started thinking of the next thing while I’m working on the current one using similar materials.’ Objects and ideas aren’t autonomous in van Zon’s art, they’re dependent on those which come before, and they anticipate those which follow. They make meaning all together. If some exhibitions are structured as a story (with the conventional narrative elements of an introduction, a climax, and a denouement), others an exploration of material or form or aesthetic, or others as the outcome of a research project, *Opal Moon*, *Local Lime* manifests as a web, the exhibition as a whole, contingent, and networked system.

In its structure, *Opal Moon* reflects wider cultural shifts in the way narrative and aesthetics are increasingly interconnected and modular. I’m interested in the juggernauts of the Marvel and DC comic book empires and the never-ending stream of big-budget super hero movies that flow from them. In a movie market eroded by the ease of online downloads and subscription streaming services, production companies make movies about characters and worlds that people

already know, and therefore come with a guaranteed audience. Following this logic, some super hero movies are made solely with the purpose of introducing ancillary characters to audiences, so that they can then go on to have their own series. Driven by the market, mainstream movies are no longer allowed to be autonomous, but instead occur in a carefully managed ecosystem and point backwards and forwards to other possible franchises (and their attendant revenue streams). Prequels, sequels, and counter-narratives are invented for much-loved films; villains get their own spin-off TV series; and the voices of background characters rewrite accepted stories.

The reclamation and recycling of cultural tropes is not a new activity and artists have been picking apart the inherited codes of representation since well before Disney princesses started giving postmodern winks to the camera. Two local examples are Judy Darragh, whose art revels in found objects and reworked clichés. In the late 1990s, in a series of related exhibitions, Darragh took posters of serene landscapes, Dali paintings, pin-ups, and Luke Skywalker, and covered them with paint and clouds of coloured stickers. Schlocky

and sexual (imagine jism-like fountains of white paint), these works use stock images to, as Jon Bywater wrote in *Log Illustrated* magazine, ‘play up the not so subtle desires that drip and bulge forth from bedroom and workshop walls.’ Or, we could also look to the Cantabrian artist, Ronnie van Hout, whose photographs, such as ‘Evil’ and ‘Undead’ (1995) repurpose the aesthetics of B-grade horror films and comic books. An interest in the remake also runs through van Zon’s exhibition history, and she can be overt about the source material that has been inspiration. In a 2008 exhibition at The Physics Room, *Props Room Configuration #2: Hollywood Regency*, van Zon repainted a series of old movie posters (such as Hitchcock’s ‘Vertigo’, and Antonioni’s ‘Blow Up’) and presented these alongside props from the movies which she had sculpted in clay, wool, and other materials. van Zon’s posters, deliberately painted with acrylic on newsprint so as to emphasise their ‘handmadeness’, reduce the abstracted movie-land glamour of Jimmy Stewart or Audrey Hepburn, and seem to subtly satirise and poke fun at the drama, romance, or action that these posters are designed to evoke.

Beyond the repurposing of familiar imagery, the structure and presentation of van Zon's exhibitions seems to have shifted in recent years to emphasis her works' relationships to each other. This change can perhaps be tracked back to *The Light on the Dock* (2013, City Gallery Wellington), where van Zon made objects in response to three books, 'Play it as it Lays' (1970) and 'Run River' (1963) by Joan Didion, and Truman Capote's 'Other Voices, Other Rooms' (1948). Laid out in sequence on a low plinth, only just raised off the gallery floor, the eclectic mix of hand-crafted objects read like a long sentence: each object the next word in a funny story. Her 2015 exhibition, *Dogwood Days* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, was presented in a similar way, a low plywood plinth showcased van Zon's small sculptures: teeth, eggs, gourmet carrots, puddles, a coil of rope, a golden snake. Critic David Eggleton noted in his *Art New Zealand* review of the show, 'Sprawling rather than stacked, one notion they provoke is that of a non-hierarchical inclusiveness...'. An anti-hierarchy of objects and ideas, as posited by *Dogwood Days*, is further developed in *Opal Moon, Local Lime* where the works are now hung, free flowing, salon style, on the wall. All of the works are balanced, pointing to each other, networked in a web of associations

and subtle visual repetitions. In this knowing rejection of the autonomy of the artworks, *Opal Moon* reflects a moment when many cultural products no longer exist solely as things in themselves (movies are not-so-subtle adverts for other movies), but it is through their relationships and alliances that meaning is made.

One metaphor which I keep returning to when thinking about this show is the hyperlink, and the way in which information is constantly deferred online. The works in *Opal Moon* seem to hyperlink; each work explains or references the next. The Gonville cream bun (*Raspberry Special*), is mirrored in the shape of the bánh mì sandwich happily eaten on a holiday in Vietnam (*Banh Mi*), which leads to the patterned tiles seen in Hoi An (*Hoi An Temple Tile 1 & 2*), and so on. When I mentioned this hyperlinking idea to van Zon, she told me that sometimes, when she is bored, she googles ‘Marie Antoinette’ in order to follow the associated links wherever they take her, following circuitous paths of history, drama, and fiction. This energy and curiosity about the world is characteristic of van Zon and evident in the humour and playfulness of *Opal Moon*, an exhibition which keeps on

going, regardless of where you begin.



PREVIOUS

The 24 hours plan: 3
commissions for Masons
Screen

NEXT

Murray Hewitt: The Rising
Gale



The text on this website is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License.

Powered by Squarespace

