



Opposite page: *Screenshots*, 2011, HD file transferred to Blu-Ray, 26 min 22 sec. edition of 3 + AP. Above: *A shot in the dark (Bear Rug)* 2008, kauri, stain, acrylic paint. 2400 x 2200 x 400mm. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna o Waiwhetu. All artworks in this story are by Steve Carr

## Between the sweet and the malevolent

*Inviting, friendly and innocent on first glance, the work of Auckland artist Steve Carr packs an unexpected punch as it explores the overlooked details of the everyday.*

An art critic wrote of Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, who is considered to be one of the most influential artists of recent times: “His works aren’t invariably beautiful, but they all bespeak beauty as an operating principle: the catch in consciousness when mind and body merge in a state of praise for existence, just as it is.” (Peter Schjeldahl, *New Yorker*, December 21, 2009).

The same is true of Auckland artist Steve Carr whose practice orbits around performance, sculpture, photography and film, often combining these disciplines to create visual narratives and experiences of poetic beauty, which are also disarmingly modest in their references to the overlooked objects and rituals of everyday life – a game of Cowboys and Indians in a suburban backyard, the visual delight of cherry blossoms against a blue sky, the delicate, lacy form of a shuttlecock, the creased and worn texture of a baseball glove, or a slowly dissipating cloud of smoke made by a car completing a burn out.

Carr makes no secret of the fact that the manufacture of his work – all of it highly crafted and refined – is outsourced to professional photographers, cinematographers, wood carvers and other crafts people, and it’s no surprise to hear he completed his MFA at Elam School of Fine Arts under the tuition of Michael Parekowhai, whose work also stems from complex production processes involving other people, though it functions in the realm of the ‘spectacular’ rather than the ‘modest gesture’ typical of Carr’s practice.

In Carr’s most recent work, *Screenshots*, 2001, from the series *Mystical Realisms; Modest Gesture*, several screens showing movies shot with a scientific camera were arranged in a grid on the gallery wall. They showed paint-filled balloons being popped in extreme slow motion. Carr describes this visually luscious work as “a painting that moves” in which we see the paint exploding and trickling from the punctured balloons. Like an earlier film, *Burnout*, it was inspired by amateur footage posted on YouTube,

though its high-end production values are anything but amateur. This work is yet another of Carr’s ‘modest gestures’ which exploits the childish pleasure derived from popping a balloon and the visual delight of sensual colours and glossy surfaces; it’s also a sly joke about the power struggle between the new kid on the block, video – and the old stalwart, painting.

Looking at his work *Shuttlecocks and Sakura* – a carved bare branch with a shuttlecock emerging from its wood like a strange flower, which was made in 2010 during a three-month residency in Sapporo Japan (Sakura is the Japanese word for blossom and Carr was lucky enough to be there during the brief period when the snow melted and the blossoms came out) – I mention Australian artist Ricky Swallow’s unforgettable work, *The Arrangement*, 2004, a carved wooden sculpture of a bike helmet entwined with writhing snakes, as an interesting comparison. Both works represent a tour de force of craftsmanship and a poetic and unexpected juxtaposition of living and inanimate objects to create forms that are tremendously satisfying on both an imaginative and a formal level, and which somehow feel ‘just right’.

Carr says, “The difference is that Ricky’s work is in part about his technical skill and ability, whereas mine is an acknowledgement of the person I’m working with; it’s not about creating replicas; it’s about what others bring to the project.” Carr clearly delights in the richness that working collaboratively with other people brings to his practice.

*Shuttlecocks and Sakura* was carved by an 80-year-old Japanese man who also made *Hanging Gloves*, three pairs of worn, creased and palpably ‘leathery’ baseball gloves hanging from a metal rack. Both works were shown in Carr’s ‘open studio’ during the Sapporo residency and subsequently at Carr’s dealer gallery Michael Lett.

During the residency Carr also made *Majo*, a self-portrait performance of the artist blowing bubbles, using a commonly found Japanese children’s toy, which he uncharacteristically filmed on his laptop camera rather than hiring a filmmaker as he usually does. *Majo* embraces Lo-Fi genre and is set to the soundtrack of Dario Argento’s 1977 Italian horror film *Suspiria*.

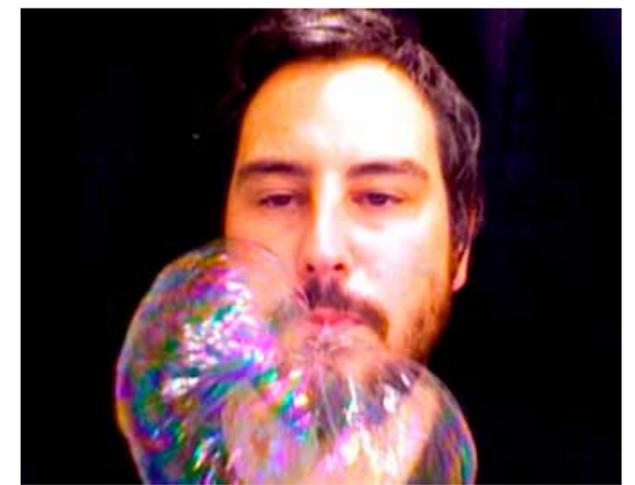
In Carr’s work there are always more literal and pop culture references than meet the eye – *Majo* is the Japanese word for witch – and *Milk and Honey* (a series of photographic portraits of Carr with a shuttlecock in his mouth, which were also made in Japan where badminton is a popular sport) refers to the title of an album by John Lennon and Yoko Ono which was the first posthumous release of Lennon’s music and refers to the couple’s move to the US: ‘the land of milk and honey’.

Likewise, when you start to decode Carr’s deliciously blokey and funny installation, *A Shot in the Dark*, shown at Michael Lett in 2008, you don’t need to know that the title of the photograph, *The Bachelor*, refers to a television sitcom of the same name, in order to enjoy the work’s many visual and linguistic puns.



Opposite (left): *Hanging Gloves*, 2010, carved, stained shina, 290 x 140 x 200mm approx. Collection of Wallace Arts Trust, Auckland

Opposite (right): *Shuttlecocks and Sakura*, 2010, carved shina, dimensions variable. Collection of Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki



*Majo* (looped), 2010. SD transferred to DVD, 3 min 40 sec

Initially Carr planned to show the carved kauri floor sculpture resembling a bear rug – another tour de force by a master carver – on its own, but decided that rather than ‘monumentalise’ this single object he would pair it with another. The photograph of the big, hairy chested man pulling his tee shirt up and making a pair of ‘moose antlers’ with his hands faces the bear rug, setting up a playful conversation between the two objects.

*A Shot in the Dark* is an intensely allusive and enjoyable work – from its quirky, self-effacing title, which refers not only to hunting but also to the act of taking a photograph, and also to the speculative and downright risky nature of the art-making enterprise in general – to the lovely visual associations between the two objects: the texture of the bear’s fur with the man’s ‘furry’ chest; the bear rug’s status as a trophy and the man’s rather pathetic and unsuccessful attempt to impersonate a moose; the way large, hairy gay men are referred to as ‘bears’; the plywood backdrop of the photograph contrasting with the highly worked surface of the bear rug, and so on. “I remember looking at the bear rug and being incredibly excited by how wood can so convincingly look like leather,” says Carr.

During his MFA at Elam, which he completed in 2002, Carr focussed on performance and discovered that equally important as the live event itself is the way an artist chooses to document it. His films and videos are often strongly autobiographical and performative, featuring the artist as the central protagonist – playing a game of Cowboys and Indians with children in a suburban backyard, for instance.

This film combines the rawness and sentimentality of the home movie with the slickness of advertising footage. But this is not its only ambiguity; in *Cowboy and Indians*, 2004, we see an adult male (Carr wears a sheriff’s badge) frolicking with children in an apparently innocent yet highly ambiguous enactment of the power relations embedded in this familiar childhood game, so the experience of watching becomes palpably uneasy for the viewer.

As well as ideological danger, Carr’s work often evokes a sense of physical danger for the viewer, such as the exhibition *Goes Nowhere Like a Rainbow* (at te tuhi in 2006 and 2007) in which a life-size stack of logs made from scientifically blown glass, which might easily break if they were knocked, were exhibited on the gallery floor.

Interestingly, in an earlier work – *Dive Pool*, 2003, a video of the artist submerged in a swimming pool wearing scuba gear as bikini-clad women swim above him – Carr set out to provoke a sexually ambiguous reading of later works he intended to make involving children, such as *Cowboy and Indians* and *Pillow Fight* – another film based on a childhood game.

Commenting on the unsettling aspects of Carr’s works, Sarah Farrar writes (in her 2007 article “A Hobo’s Paradise: Popcorn Mountain, Sausages on Sticks and Cigarette Tree”): “Approaching Steve Carr’s works can elicit a similar trepidation to what you can experience approaching a stray dog; it looks inviting, friendly and innocent, but boy can it pack an unsettling and surprising growl. Steve Carr has played with the tensions between the sweet and the

malevolent, particularly in relation to objects or images that take us back to our childhoods, through sculpture, film and photography.”

Looking at his work you can’t help noticing that language, narrative and humour are a big part of the engine that drives Carr’s work, making it ‘alive’ for the viewer, who’s constantly being nudged towards certain scenarios and speculations, though nothing is ever unequivocal.

When I ask him about this, his answer is surprising. “I have a mild case of dyslexia so I’ve always struggled with words. I find books very difficult to read; I can read theoretical books really well but when they’re about the imagination I struggle. So when I read descriptive words: for instance a sentence telling me to ‘imagine a pink elephant’ – I can’t imagine it. And that’s why I love making art that has a narrative-based theme; I’m using visual objects that build the work in your head as opposed to describing stuff. When I’m asked to describe my work I find that really difficult. I find that talking around the work, uncovering the back story is more rewarding.”

Since his first solo show at Michael Lett in 2004 Carr has achieved an impressive track record, exhibiting

nationally – at te tuhi, Auckland; Adam Art Gallery and City Gallery Wellington; Dunedin Public Art Gallery – and internationally – at the Busan Biennale, South Korea; the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts; Frieze Art Fair, London; and Rencontres Internationales at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. He was a founding member and director of Blue Oyster Gallery Dunedin from 2001–2 and is now a lecturer at Whitecliffe School of Art and Design in Auckland.

*This year Carr will exhibit on Michael Lett’s stand at Art Cologne, 17 April; Kaliman Rawlins, Melbourne, 21 June; Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin/ Madrid, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 18–26 November.*



*Burn Out*, 2009, 16mm transferred to DVD, 4 min 53 sec. All images courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland