

Middens and Marshmallows: the magical world of Steve Carr

A relative newcomer to the New Zealand art scene, Steve Carr is no stranger to Dunedin. Before obtaining his Masters degree from the Auckland University Elam School of Fine Arts in 2003, he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Otago Polytechnic. He also went on to co-found the now iconic Blue Oyster Gallery, hidden in the depths of Moray Place. Carr has had numerous shows, ranging from solo exhibitions at High Street Project in Christchurch and Sherman Galleries, Sydney, to partaking in the Busan Biennale in South Korea. Now living and working from Auckland, Carr is a multi-media artist in every sense. Alongside photography and film, he has produced sculptural forms in materials as diverse as wood, blown glass, porcelain, 18ct gold plate, spun cast alloy, popcorn and even old pizza boxes.

Carr's current show on the ground floor of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, *Goes Nowhere Like a Rainbow*, is a very minimal exhibition, comprised of only a single short piece of film and three sculptures made of clear blown glass. Even the sculptural forms themselves have been rendered down to bare essentials, suggesting rather than depicting real-world objects by mimicking their form in such a translucent material. Still, it makes a big impact. The space itself is initially silent, if one enters at the opportune moment, but more on this to come. Each sculptural piece is illuminated by direct light, causing the surfaces to glint and gleam. A good thing, too, as without this slight sparkle the glass would almost disappear into the wooden panels of the gallery floor. Add unsuspecting gallery-goers and you have a recipe for a glassy disaster. As it is the pieces come into focus quite suddenly, eyes drawn in by the light to a miraculous discovery. One feels as though they have entered a world slightly beyond our own, a world where the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary.

Before entering this world, however, the movement of Carr's film piece draws the viewer momentarily away. It seems the exhibition begins here, for, as you will see, it demands your attention over and over again. In the film *Tablecloth Pull* (2007) Carr presents his audience with a spectacle, the old parlour trick of swiftly pulling the cloth out from under an elaborately set table, with the intention that the setting remains intact. Carr, playing the obviously anxious and not at all confident magician, has his viewer on the edge of his seat as he mutely prepares himself for the seemingly impossible feat. Then, CRASH!! The respectful silence of the gallery is destroyed as violently as the glasses and plates as they fall to the floor, the magician's trick having failed miserably.

If you are unlucky enough to enter the space unprepared, as I was, and are not immediately drawn to the film, the abrupt and unexpected sound of shattering glass from *Tablecloth Pull* makes you jump a mile high. This serves to put you on edge, a dangerous state to be in when surrounded by delicate objects of that very material. From here, one proceeds with caution.

Once discovered, Carr's three sculptures look like the archaeological remnants of some magical campsite. A pile of glass "wood", stacked orderly into a corner, provides fuel for an invisible fire. The central fire itself is suggested by the presence of two separate glass logs, the kind we have all sat on around a campfire as kids, complete with roasted glass marshmallows on skewers. Then, in the opposite corner, the remnants of many a meal, a heap of discarded, or perhaps hoarded, glass wishbones. These three pieces immediately appear distinct to *Tablecloth Pull*, in both a different medium and a different realm, one static and the other full of sudden motion. Each is seemingly life-size, as if the glass has simply been moulded around real-life objects. But their uniformity, their precision, belies the irregularity of natural forms.

Carr's titles state the obvious. The hollow, perfectly formed glass tubes of *Log Stack* (2007), each of varying size and many punctuated by the extending base of an off-shooting branch, are indeed evocative of the contents and structure of any backyard woodshed. The stack itself is running slow, perhaps already half used-up or containing what remains at the end of the bitter Dunedin winter. Natural wood, logs, houses, furniture. Such things are a part of everyday life, taken for granted, and immediately associated with the solid and the structurally sound. Yet when rendered in such fragile material, those assumptions of strength and stability are undermined. They are stacked so precariously against the gallery wall, one on top of another, and the two perfect vertical "logs" look far too insubstantial to contain their smooth and slippery-looking counterparts. Everyone knows the experience of removing a log of firewood from the stack and unwittingly disturbing its neighbours, wood suddenly crashing down onto your feet. Carr's stack looks like it could collapse at any moment. Carr's *Marshmallow Logs* (2007) is again what it says it is. Take any kiwi childhood camp, any open fire on the beach, and it is not complete without that favourite sticky, sickly and often burnt-black roasted confectionary. Yet here Carr turns it on its head, translating the soft, fluffy treats into brittle and sharp glass. Biting into these roasted marshmallows would disturb, rather than delight. Even the sharp stakes impaling them look lethal yet alluring, as only glass can. As a substance it can so easily be transformed from the elegant into the dangerous, as it is pulled from the dinner table to smash into splintering pieces.

The precision of form seen in the perfectly tubular logs of Log Stack and Marshmallow Logs transforms the everyday into the magical, the biological, the scientific and beyond. Carr's work is what you make of it. The roasting sticks of Marshmallow Logs take the form of scientific apparatus, test-tubes and boiling tubes, while when viewed frontally the Log Stack appears to be a series of orderly and eternal bubbles, a store of arteries and nerves, or a pile of plumbing waiting to be installed. But mostly they look beautiful and ephemeral, like at any moment they will dissolve into the thin air.

Wishbones (2007) takes on a different nature to the transparent, geometric tubes of Carr's log structures. Another kiwi tradition; keeping the fused clavicles or "wishbone" of the roast chook, drying them and then making a wish while pulling at either side with a partner. Once broken, whoever obtains the part where they join will have their wish fulfilled. Collected in the corner of the gallery, these elements manipulate the qualities of beauty and magic in glass rather than its dangerous fragility. Like a cache of precious treasure, they tumble against each other, more like a pile of Swarovsky crystals than a make-believe midden. Importantly, perhaps, the wishbones are all intact, potential wishes not yet made. The tradition of breaking the wishbone returns us to the broken glass of Tablecloth Pull, relentlessly punctuating our observation of Carr's mysterious campsite.

These sculptures, or their association with one another, open up a multitude of questions. Who collected the wood? Why has the site been deserted in such a way, with wishes left behind and fire abandoned? Or does Carr construct an elaborate and precious stage set for us to act out our own dreams and memories? The experience of viewing these works is repeatedly interrupted by that alarming sound of shattering glass coming from the looping film. Despite telling yourself each time to expect it, you cannot help but be so drawn into Carr's magical world that you grow complacent, only to be rudely and shockingly awakened. The constant disruption of expectations eventually becomes mocking as the viewer is taken unawares time and time again. Carr sets his audience up, playing on their anxieties, making them extra careful not to tread too close or lean too far.

Goes Nowhere Like a Rainbow is a cautionary tale. A sense of peril and fragility is imposed on objects of everyday life that are usually associated with stability, tradition and fun. The multi-media aspect of Carr's work creates an environment and experience for the viewer, bringing them into a world that is unsettling yet dazzling and magical. As the title of the show suggests, this world never really goes anywhere. Each piece is linked, relying on and referring to each other, beginning and ending with the sound of shattering glass. Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,

always just out of reach, the secrets of the campsite remain a mystery. Despite the sense that nothing, or at least nothing beyond a mixed sensation of delight and apprehension, is achieved, viewing this exhibition is oddly satisfying. As Carr perhaps intends, you walk away smiling.

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