



PETER STICHBURY

# IS A BIRD'S SONG BANAL ?

Peter Stichbury, one of New Zealand's most successful contemporary artists, is known for his distinctive portraits, most notably of a series of fashion models, but more recently, of an eccentric collection of misfits, artists, entrepreneurs and other social outsiders. On the surface Peter's portraits seem perfectly smooth, a painterly pastiche of the airbrushed perfection of a *Vogue* cover. But look deeper and the cracks that exist behind every surface façade begin to emerge, highlighting the tension that exists between the duality of reality and fiction. Where does the subject stop and the artist's interpretation begin? One of the artist's recent fascinations is individual identity in the online world and the ubiquitous rise of social media. One day while randomly surfing the Internet, Peter landed on the website of Internet entrepreneur Zach Klein, founder of Vimeo. Klein's homepage features a photographic portrait of Klein by Noah Kalina. Captivated by the portrait, Peter sketched, and then painted a portrait of the photo, reproduced here for your enjoyment on the left hand page. From this unlikely starting point, Zach and Peter have struck up an online friendship of sorts, and for the purposes of this feature, the pair agreed to provide *PILOT* with a transcript of a recent online chat...

LEFT / ZACH KLEIN





ZACH / *I've got an hour; I have to pick up my brother from the airport.*  
PETER / You have two brothers?

ZACH / *Yes.*  
PETER / It is seriously weird knowing things like that about you, from your websites. I feel like a stalker.

ZACH / *I publish these things: there are very few fences for you to climb to sneak a peek.*  
PETER / Well, that makes me feel slightly better. Do you think you'll tighten things up? Do you ever worry about your privacy?

ZACH / *What are the advantages of privacy?*  
PETER / Apart from the obvious basic human right for privacy and its corresponding peace of mind, I don't know. Certainly personal and political safety is risked by having a breach in one's privacy. I think the central advantages being freedom, independence and control over your own life. You only have to look at any beleaguered celebrity to get a sense of what it would be like having very little privacy. Actually if anyone wants to trade privacy for enough cash I have no problem selling mine.

ZACH / *I've retreated. I'm aware that I was over-sharing, that I lived for a need to create content.*  
PETER / It's hard to know what over-sharing is.

ZACH / *Which must be why I have a pixelated idea of what you look like, while you probably know more about my adult life than my mother. Are you reclusive for purposes of voyeurism, or is it a feature of your personal brand?*  
PETER / I suppose there's a degree of voyeurism involved when you're researching a subject like this but I do share some personal information on my blog, just not photos - not yet anyway. It's an ideal way to put emphasis on ideas and keep the focus on you guys. Anyway I'm just some boring guy sitting by his easel/computer eating cereal, hardly riveting.

ZACH / *You claim that you're not qualified to have a public image because you're 'hardly riveting', but isn't that missing your own point? Technology has knocked down barriers. You don't have to be popular to live in public. Anyone can have an image.*

PETER / You're twisting my arm. Cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch points out that we are indeed amusing ourselves to death - awash in a sea of triviality and mundane personal dress, and probably like many of us, I'm calculating exactly how much to add/share to this swirling mix of banality. I was hoping less was more, but as I'm finding out the further I delve into social networking, the more information I have to give over - otherwise I'm just some kind of weird Machiavellian sock-puppet feeding on the carcass of our collective narcissism.

ZACH / *Is a bird's song banal?*  
PETER / Absolutely not. Are you suggesting that humanities stream of consciousness twittering is a kind of song?

ZACH / *Yes. Our 'swirling mix of banality' is the natural result of our innate need for self-expression, just as birds sing. All of the noise seems trivial now, but someday we'll know how to make sense of it.*

PETER / Time has a way of putting things in perspective, but I hope when the anthropologists start digging, our birdsong is more than 'Charlie Bit My Finger' and 100 billion tweets about Justin Bieber's hair.

LEFT / CHLOE CROWNE



PETER/ Would you agree that the ideal is to be in control of the evolving technology, use it collaboratively for intellectual and creative advancement and not be seduced into wasting too much time on triviality? Focusing our attention on what content we upload into the machine seems like a safe bet - you get out what you put in.

ZACH/ When I think about the global population learning to use the Internet, I like to imagine giving a group of kindergarten children a video camera. They will experiment by trial and error. Inevitably, however, they will be creative. And at least a few - I hope very many - will become passionate about making videos and one day make something very fascinating and beautiful to watch. Similarly the Internet is still very new to us - what a sweeping technological event in such a short period of time, it's only been around for a quarter of a generation and we're still practicing with it. Surely it's only a matter of time, albeit generations, before we've challenged its potential. So, are you not sharing because you uphold the virtues of privacy, or your fear the cost of expectations?

PETER/ Both reasons. And I am genuinely concerned that we are living in Huxley's Brave New World.

ZACH/ What was the tipping point? Why Brave New World now?

PETER/ Clearly the Internet was the final straw.

ZACH/ I'm not sure that's so clear.

PETER/ But it's true, this time we are more advanced. We have to act responsibly with the advent of each new technology, usual story - split atom good - create bomb, not so good.

ZACH/ Are you truly alarmed, or amused?

PETER/ Alarmed yes, very alarmed. But it's darkly humorous.

ZACH/ The sky is falling, I'm possibly an over-sharer, what should I do?

PETER/ Electro-therapy for over-sharing infringement?

ZACH/ Really, what are the consequences for our generation? Is this worse than nuclear proliferation?

PETER/ We'll be fried. Time will be frittered away. I think nature is a real alternative - it's nurturing in a way that screen technology can never be. Wesch teaches his students to question how we use our time online - don't let the machine dictate content. Our generation could be drowning in a sea of trivia. So many lost ideas. Hawking saw it coming a few years back.

ZACH/ Why aren't you in the woods?

PETER/ I'm the same as everyone else - hooked into a competitive way of living and thinking - I'm still on the mouse wheel, it might be time to hop off. The good thing about living in New Zealand is that you're only a few minutes away from something that, at least looks like Utopia.

ZACH/ I've got to go. Any edits before I send this off?

PETER/ You can rewrite my answers if you want. I'd still read it.

RIGHT / MARK ZUCKERBERG