



Peter Stichbury is painting perfect

KIM KNIGHT – 08/03/2014



PETER MEECHAM/Fairfax NZ

PARTICULAR AESTHETIC: Peter Stichbury in his studio at home at Auckland.

"They're wax," says the artist, pointing to the perfectly round, perfectly iced, perfectly cocoa-sprinkled chocolate cookies cooling in neat rows on the baking tray in the nothing-out-of-place kitchen.

They're not wax. They're delicious. But they are also strangely Stichbury. Like the Siamese cat that sits like an installation in the gap above the hot water cylinder, the living room walls with only a large Jae Hoon Lee photograph and a set of animal horns, there's a particular aesthetic at work in this home.

Peter Stichbury made his name painting perfect. "Faces of nearly oppressive flawlessness," recorded Justin Paton, arts writer extraordinaire. "They all have hair like sable, clear veinless eyes and skin that doesn't sweat."

Back in 1997, as an Elam School of Fine arts graduate, Stichbury won the James Wallace Art Award. His first dealer show reportedly sold out on opening night. He is represented in New York and last week, as he prepared for his first local solo

exhibition in seven years, one art auction house was listing his work at \$30,000-\$40,000.

Actor Anna Paquin and singer Natalie Imbruglia featured in his collections of beautiful people. Later models were composites of beauty. Then the cracks began to appear. Sticking plasters. Bad skin. A blackened eye.

"In the first shows I made, it was like this big subversion of beauty, and that just got really boring," Stichbury says. "I still love the anatomy and way beautiful people look, but now I use them like a director would use them in a Hollywood film."

A fortnight ago, in that elegantly spare Auckland living room, Stichbury revealed his newest obsession: UFOs and the associated folklore.

He's preparing for two solo shows. Sources and Methods opens at Auckland's Michael Lett Gallery on Thursday. Stichbury says it's "hopefully" the drawn skeleton of the painted version that will show at New York gallery Tracy Williams Ltd.

"I've been making them concurrently. I want to participate with what's going on here. There are so many amazing New Zealand artists, and I want to be in that mix."

He's still, mostly, focusing on the portrait. New subjects include Thomas F Mantell - an American pilot who died in 1948, while chasing a UFO. And Frederick Valentich, who disappeared in 1978, while flying a Cessna over Australia's Bass Strait.

"The drawings are basically really interesting UFO witnesses." As a 7-year-old, growing up in Wellington, Stichbury saw a UFO. "A huge, white object in the sky and we followed it up the road and it went behind a small hill . . . I'd go to school and draw it on my pencil case or whatever."

Today, he believes he saw a weather balloon. "I was totally disappointed!"

Stichbury knows he is "the guy who paints faces" but says, with each series of work, there is a slight shift. This time, he's also replicating American government agency conspiracy-themed logos.

"I thought, this year, it would be a good idea to really start to move things in some sideways directions and do things that people wouldn't necessarily associate with a style of work, because I think style can be a real trap.

"I think as you grow older you realise you don't have to be this particular person, 'Peter Stichbury'. You can smash it down and rebuild it. That's fine."

Because what he really wants to do, he says, is to become a better artist. "I would really like to be a great artist and I fail miserably at it. Some of the work is really successful and I can see that, and some of the work is 'oh my God,

disaster, what the f... happened?" In 2001, Stichbury fell victim to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

Today, he says, "I pace myself, and all that stuff . . . you just find a way to weather it, cope with it, adapt and do the best you can with what you've got left over." Wonder if the spare, clean space of his home life is a necessary reaction to this disease and he shoots down the pop psychology.

"I think that is, maybe, a style thing, to keep things clear when you work at home. So when you leave the cut and thrust of the studio, that's a sort of sanctuary. You're not polluting the rest of the house with your art!"

In the room where Stichbury makes art it is, reassuringly, kind of messy. Source material taped to the walls includes a series of photographs of Ella Yelich-O'Connor - aka singer Lorde.

"I think somebody posted a link to her Soundcloud page. I downloaded them, and thought this is strangely good . . . I said to my friend, 'I'm going to start a record label so I can sign this girl!'"

Someone had, of course, beat him to it. So he asked if she'd pose for a painting. "I said to her when we took the photos, I'm going to do one of you, and [another] one is going to be - and I haven't made it yet - of an alien abductee, which is more in line with the next lot of shows."

Stichbury says he's an artist, partly because he enjoys "making things for people".

"Once the audience views it, hopefully some people can connect with it, enjoy it, comprehend it. You're offering something to society that isn't just another piece of hot trash. Another burger; another shitty car. Something that hopefully has some meaning to people."

**Sources and Methods, Michael Lett Gallery, August 7-September 6.
- Sunday Star Times**