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By Barney MacDonald

"Asylums with doors open wide, where people had paid to see inside. For entertainment they watch his body twist. Behind his eyes he says, 'I still exist.'" - Joy Division, Atrocity Exhibition

If you looked up Auckland artist Peter Stichbury on Facebook all you would find is a fabricated presence that only exists so he can scour the social networking site for subjects and subject matter for his art.

Akin to a modern Steptoe, Stichbury plunders identities and ideas from the Internet, popular culture, cultural anthropology, psychology and his childhood to develop a body of work that explores, interprets and reflects the very nature of identity.

Contrary to common opinion, Stichbury's stunning paintings and sketches of gorgeous waifs and nerdy yet strangely cool boys aren't merely the musings of an artist obsessed with surface aesthetics. He's certainly fascinated by appearances, but ever the sociologist, his interest cuts deeper and a little darker. His talent lies in making beautiful people look interesting and interesting people look beautiful. And it's proving lucrative, at least for the collectors. "It's gratifying that collectors who supported the work early on can benefit from their investment," concedes Stichbury from his quaint abode in Auckland's St. Mary's Bay. "We're hoping to show the shoebox of accolades at the Blenheim RSA this summer," he wryly jokes. "They've agreed to pay us in sausages but we'll have to buy our own bread."

To get into the spirit of Stichbury, it's fun to imagine him as one of his own paintings. In fact, it's not difficult to make the leap, especially since he kindly produced his first self-portrait for this feature. In person, he's a somewhat slight fellow, with a good head of dark hair lightly brushed with grey, and he has a gentle nature that reflects the fragile beauties and physically non-threatening fellows he paints. Aged 40, the father of wide-eyed youngster Sebastian, and still in the process of building his art empire, Stichbury is the spitting image of, well, Stichburys.

"Many of them have physical characteristics that could be considered similar to me," he says of his portraits. "The psychology of certain characters is probably me. But they're also you."

To be more precise, the way he presents his portraits - doe-eyed, passive, quasi-caricatured features - suggests his subjects are virtual clones, a dichotomy gaining more intellectual resonance as his work evolves. Collectively, the portrait subjects appear as subtle yet perceptible variations of a singular being created in the laboratory of their maker's mind. A mad scientist with a passing resemblance to Young Frankenstein, the aptly named artist stitches his subjects together using his equivalent of a surgical instrument: the paintbrush or pencil.

"The portrait offers a constant," says their master. "It allows for non-narrative readings, is inexhaustible as a subject and can be used politically or personally. In theory, you could paint the same face forever and never run out of material."

In a sense, he's actually done this. For one exhibition, *Less Than Absolute Zero*, at Auckland's Starkwhite in 2007, Stichbury created a series of a dozen heads, titled *Man Pretending to be Nick Jank*, the specific number equating to the members of a jury. "He's loosely based on Nick the American from high school," says Stichbury. "I imagined him as a successful Bill Gates figure." More recently, he issued a limited edition run of prints of his painting *Glister*. And his 2006 bowling ball series, *Passport to Magonia*, was virtually a production line of mechanically reproduced characters.

"The new works for LA, the *Estelle* series, are like life sized avatars," says Stichbury. "I've painted her four times now but each work has its own specific characteristics and emotional qualities. I'm thinking about the way a tiny online avatar can hold meaning and give visual clues to who the person behind a digital facade really is."

If that doesn't sound like someone accused by sceptics of prioritising style over substance (a term Stichbury himself has used to confound critics), then you're probably one of a growing number of observers who understands that with this artist's work what you see isn't entirely what you get.

Let's see what the art critics say:

"Eugenic fashioning of human figures," suggests Misha Kavka.

"Creating a geography of physiognomy from his own mental map," offers John Hurrell.

"The cult of celebrity, and our obsession with it, is stamped across [his] work," contributes Emma Bugden.

"Archetypes rather than individuals," adds Serena Bentley.

Bentley also suggests that, for Stichbury, "the models are stripped of their identity - and integrity - at their very source", a claim that strikes at the core of the artist's work, yet fails to take root because the portraits are striking back. They've transcended the canvas by becoming cultural icons that hang in galleries, offices and homes - Andrew Harnos, chairman of the NZX and a trustee of McCahon House, and business partner Greg Horton own eight between them: four bowling balls and four portraits - whilst their creator reintegrates the portraits into cyberspace and even the magazines from whence they came.

Since graduating from Elam School of Fine Art in 1997, the same year he won the James Wallace Art Award, Stichbury has become a portrait painter by the skin of his teeth; or more accurately, plaster cast teeth.

"Late one night during my first year of university, I found a box full of plaster cast teeth on the street outside a dentist's office," he recalls. "I made up liters of plaster and stuck them onto panels."

Each set of teeth came with a brown folder that constituted information about the patient. I remember the plaster smelling great."

More than a decade later, he's using the Internet to construct his casts and creating elaborate online identities for his subjects to give them an existence beyond the surface of the canvas. Even though each profile is only contained in cyberspace, the subjects - predominantly male at this point - gain characteristics that blur the boundary between fact and fiction and test the dimensionality of the mediums he's toying with.

"Initially, I exclusively used university faculty profiles as source material, looking at stereotypes of appearance and spinning them semi-fictional stories," he explains. "Painting a portrait via the Internet is an odd experience anyway, as you have no absolute sense of the person, only assumptions made by pieces of disparate information.

"I like the idea of taking ephemeral and virtual online photographs and solidifying them, bringing them out of the machine and back into reality through paint," he continues. "Rescuing them from disposability, I suppose. The irony is that the drawings live another life back online through blogs. Since 2009 I've been making each painting its own blog, further deepening the fiction."

This approach has been applied voraciously to a pet subject of Stichbury's: aging professors. With a fascination for the high school films of John Hughes (Ferris Bueller's Day Off surfaces repeatedly in his conversation and correspondence) and a fondness for his own years at Wellington's Onslow College, Stichbury expands on his exploration of "socially awkward but intellectually formidable" guys by imagining their geriatric equivalent. In essence, it's more a celebration of brilliant old men than a dissection of their corpses, since the subjects he's selected - fictionalised or real - are still happily participating in their chosen field.

"The academics seem loaded with purpose, as though they're begging for our attention or approval and yet quietly satisfied," says Stichbury's wife of six years, Hilary, who was immortalised in a portrait in 2006. "To me, they represent real achievement. They're scientists, scriptwriters, inventors. They've bowed out of the race of appearances in favour of a more intangible one: discovery, learning, academia."

"They're underrepresented," adds Stichbury. "Plus, many aging professors look incredibly beautiful to me."

One such obscure object of Stichbury's desire is Michael Wesch, Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Kansas State University. Unlike Dr Kundu (one of just a couple of non-European Stichbury subjects) and Mr Phil McEwan (an homage to Stichbury's science teacher, who had a speech impediment and was dishevelled and under-confident in class), Wesch doesn't wear glasses and is sketched rather than painted. Plus, he's agreed to Stichbury's appropriation of his image, if not his online identity, while the others are more figments of the artist's fancy.

"I'd never seen Peter's work when he approached me and I really had no idea why anyone would want to paint me," says Wesch. "He told me he was doing a series of Internet-based portraits and thought one of me could complete the circle since I'm an anthropologist studying Internet culture.

"Later, he expressed a more complex vision of solidifying the ephemeral imagery of the Internet and, in his words, making it real. I'm glad he did this with my image because it allowed me the first-hand experience of being 'made real'.

"Something about the awkwardness of the portrait is what makes it feel real to me," adds Wesch. "The portrait doesn't quite look like the me I see in the mirror or in photos, yet it seems to have cut my self away from the everyday in a way that's more me than me."

"I knew I belonged to the public and to the world, not because I was talented or even beautiful, but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else." - Marilyn Monroe

Then there are clever young guys like Ian Broyles, Noah Kalina and Zach Klein that Stichbury also discovered on the Internet. The natural successor to the fictional characters the artist has spawned throughout much of his career, these chaps are alive and kicking up a storm online through blogs, websites, YouTube and wherever else information technology sends them and their audience.

Contrary to the found images of indeterminate origin dominating the first decade of Stichbury's career, these modern go-getters have staked their claim on cyber identity. In Klein's case, it's even something of a vocation. An American with multiple websites and an innate affinity with the blogosphere, Klein heard from Stichbury out of the blue when the artist emailed him to say he'd made a sketch and wanted to send it to him.

"When he wrote me, I assumed he was a fellow Tumblr who was making friends with others in that little online scene," says Klein from his New York City base. "I've grown up entirely on the Internet and subsequently I'm conditioned to think that collaborating with strangers online is normal."

The interaction between artist and subject intensified in the real world when Klein visited the ArtLA fair in 2009 to visit his own portrait. Wearing the same shirt as his acrylic alter ego, Klein posed with himself, though sadly not with Stichbury, who didn't attend.

"There were many double takes from patrons," recalls Klein; "the kind you'd see in campy hidden camera videos. Even after noticing the surreal similarity, many folks thought it was nothing more than coincidence."

Amplifying the concept of coincidence, however, was a strange yet compelling moment of serendipity involving the person who purchased his portrait.

"I received an email after the buyer Googled the painting title and found my homepage," writes Klein on his blog: "'We just bought you ... Your new home will be in a mid-century modern house in Santa Monica, CA.'

"I received another email from the same person a few days later," he continues: "'This is getting weirder and weirder... Are you from Fort Wayne, Indiana? Because I'm from Fort Wayne.'

"It turns out the buyer grew up less than one mile from where I did, although she moved away before I was born. She attended the same high school where my siblings graduated. She's now a

fashion entrepreneur in LA. She later wrote back, 'Maybe that's why I was so attracted to your portrait. There is something very nostalgic in it for me.'

"I like the idea that I'm metaphysically linked to that place and it remained intact in Peter's rendering," he says.

Klein also acknowledges that the Internet's plethora of blogs - not to mention the multitude of networking sites - has a significant anthropological and sociological function that endures far beyond its seeming vacuity.

"At first glance, it's a stream of minutiae and pseudo-intellectual bullshit," he says. "But in hindsight, far down the road, I think it'll represent the expression of an Always On generation archetype, as I believe it should be."

Stichbury, who has his own intriguing blog, likes this statement very much.

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