



IAN BURNS
DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

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DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

Spirit (2008) is an image of an idealised natural Irish landscape, with unblemished green hills and a calming clear sky crowned by a perfect rainbow. It is also a tall assemblage, constructed from buckets, brushes and brollies combined in a colour scheme of green, white and orange. Its long central stem is made from an ornate outdoor wrought-iron parasol outdoor umbrella base, to which children's hurleys and builders' spirit levels are bolted, supporting a miniature TV studio on high. Up here, a composition has been created from an assortment of synthetic materials: a patch of astro turf, a white plastic showerbase and a light tinted and diffused by a rotating fake Waterford crystal bowl and an electronically generated 'rainbow in your bedroom'. A small camera nuzzles amid these components and the image it steals is fed live onto a monitor mounted on the assemblage's backside: the image of an idealised natural Irish landscape, with unblemished green hills and a calming... Our discovery that this image of manicured nature belies its origin as a collection of synthetic objects provokes a reappraisal of the relationship between this two-dimensional screen image and the seemingly incongruous components that create it. The incongruity displayed within this mechanised assemblage, also replicated in the other works shown by Ian Burns in his first solo Irish exhibition, *Don't Try This at Home*, at mother's tankstation, provides the viewer with a series of playful and rewarding ontological adventures.

Many of Burns' works are conceived, assembled and constructed in the site or city in which they are exhibited. In preparation for *Don't Try This At Home*, Burns took up residency in Dublin for one month, during which time he became intimately acquainted with the inexpensive household items that were commonly available, from pound shops to B&Q Hardware, identifying a difference in variety, colour and purpose to those available in his native Australia or New York base, in spite of their common source of mass production in China. In *Spirit*, the assemblage of orange and green spirit levels, a green umbrella (which also assists in diffusing the light and suggesting the artificial studio on high), the fake crystal, green floor brush and orange buckets creates a medley of national colours, which combine a tokenistic image of a 'lucky Irish' landscape (replete with rainbow and proverbial pot of gold) with a newer Irish landscape of industrial ambition and an economy centered on property development. These elements come together in pastiche, exploring how political identity might be filtered down aesthetically and purposefully through the design of the most common quotidian object and how a culture might recognise itself as much through these objects as through more celebrated or elevated artifacts.

Several of the works in the show are assembled in a similar manner to *Spirit*. Each of them addresses a different set of concerns, expounded through a taxonomy of found objects, colour schemes and titles, creating narratives specific to each work that relate to particular social or political phenomena, philosophical concerns or current events. Burns, who previously trained as an engineer, created assemblages as well as making experimental video works before bringing both modes together in mechanised kinetic sculptures that explore, as Ross Woodrow recently observed, 'the challenge of the screen image to our innate or immutable understanding of materiality and three-dimensional form.'¹ (Burns has asserted that there is no major cinematic effect that he cannot reproduce for a few dollars.)

The Blank Slate (2008) is similarly colour-themed in red, white and blue, the palette of superpowers. The frame of a child's blackboard is bolted to a small stepladder. A monitor, attached to the blackboard, shows the view from inside an airplane, through the cabin window and out to the wing and passing sky. Behind the blackboard, a mini camera has been secured to a miniature Boeing 747 mounted from the ladder, around



Spirit Found-object sculpture generating live video and audio feed 235 x 90 x 80 cm 2008

The Blank Slate Found-object sculpture generating live video and audio feed 120 x 120 x 65 cm 2008

Snowshoe Found-object sculpture generating live video and audio feed 160 x 70 x 85 cm 2008

which the artificial sky has been engineered. The toy spuriously carries the livery of Air Force One, the US presidential carrier, an iconic image used by Burns in number of key previous works including *Showtime* (2008) and *Extreme Makeover* (2007) – in fact, Air Force One stands as a mental image that has fascinated Burns since childhood. Here, a logical trail can be followed from the work's title to the blank blackboard, to the angled ladder, to the presidential plane. *The Blank Slate* performs a charade of empty political rhetoric, from policy-making, to public campaigning to final election, placing the viewer in the presidential hot seat.

Burns' exploration of the relationship between the three-dimensional object and its moving image bears resemblance to the development and sensibility of earlier kinetic sculptures. In the late 1950s, Jean Tinguely (1925–1991) responded to an increasingly ordered and mechanical mode of mass production by creating machines that were 'agents of disorder'.² *Homage to New York* (1960) was a mechanised assemblage constructed from miscellaneous junk collected from disused motors on Canal Street, dumps in New Jersey and second-hand stores in New York. *Homage* deliberately displayed 'no regard for engineering principles', but instead encouraged 'total anarchy and freedom' – at the end of a thirty-minute performance for the guests of MOMA New York, being designed to self-destruct, it exploded. According to writer and curator Pontus Hulten, 'just as in every moment we see and experience a new and changing world, Jean's machine created and destroyed itself as a representation of a moment in our lives.'³

Like Tinguely's sculptures, Burns' works display a deeply human sense of the absurd. Repeatedly, the images are exposed as phonies, bruised sideshow performers, flipping between self-deprecation and insanity. *Snowshoe* (2008) hosts a screened image of a brooding mountain snowstorm as if filmed by time-lapse photography. It is animated and supported by a structure which mildly resembles a crooked, asymmetric human, its two odd legs formed by a banister rail, cemented and trapped into an ornamental waste paper bin, and a tall silver squeegee mop. Many of the materials here were specifically chosen for their affectations toward grace and grandeur, but collectively fail, their clumsiness being both tragic and droll. Spliced between the banister rail and another mini TV studio is a tennis racquet, a surrogate for a snowshoe, as if this ramshackle entertainer might at some point descend into the elegant snowscape its components generate and attempt to walk away.

A Poor Excuse (2008) is a major three-part installation which occupies three gallery spaces. In the front gallery a faux Barbie and Ken stand side by side elevated above a plinth on two wire armatures, in front of a camera, watching the footage of a plastic bag being blown around in circles as if caught in a slipstream. The footage resembles the short faux video insertion within Sam Mendes' feature film *American Beauty* (1999) that was watched by the characters Ricky and Jane (for whom 'Barbie' and 'Ken' now stand in) and which Ricky claimed to have observed and recorded by chance. In the main gallery space, the conceit of this video is revealed. The plastic bag is forced into this current by an elaborate arc of twelve electric pedestal fans. Red, oversize cartoon bricks have been painted onto the white walls (outside the lens' frame the scene painting remains rough and unfinished) and the leaves that litter the gallery floor are real, but seem all the more alien for this. All the 'natural' elements which the original outdoor scene claimed to capture have been dragged inside, reconstituted and exactly deconstructed. In the gallery's back space, the work's final part is screened; we see 'Barbie' and 'Ken' shot from behind apparently watching the 'live' footage from the main gallery. Burns' re-enactment mordantly alleges a knowing sham in the original, seemingly artless footage of 'beauty in the everyday': the high camera angle at which the bag is filmed in the second gallery indicates the impossibility of 'Ricky's' serendipitous hand-held filming and problematises any faith in *camera veritas*.

Burns' practice was recently described as 'paracinematic' by Jonathan T. D. Neil, in reference to the experimental cinema of the 1960s and 1970s pioneered by avant-garde artists and filmmakers such as Tony Conrad and Anthony McCall.⁴ Like Burns, Paracinema's innovators tested the fundamental properties, conceits and effects of cinema, by using simple alternatives to film to create moving images. By screening a series of live feeds, Burns' works playfully enact the potential discrepancies between a two-dimensional moving image and the three-dimensional object it claims to represent, uncovering both as potential assemblages in a manner that engages both the viewer's sense of humour and natural curiosity.

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¹ Ross Woodrow, *Aesthetics from the Greek Temple to Freddie's Fishing World*, exh. cat. (Queensland College of Art, Queensland, Australia, 2008)

² Schöffer, Nicolas and Jean Tinguely, *2 Kinetic Sculptors, Nicolas Schöffer and Jean Tinguely* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1965), p. 9

³ Hulten, Pontus, *Jean Tinguely, A Magic Stronger than Death* (Abbeville Press, New York, 1987), p. 167

⁴ Jonathan T. D. Neil, 'Future Greats', *Art Review*, March/April 2008



Facing page **A Poor Excuse** Top: front gallery - live feed to monitor, dolls, tripod and camera.
Bottom: back gallery - projection; **The Blank Slate** Found-object sculpture generating
live video and audio feed 120 x 120 x 65 cm 2008



A Poor Excuse 10–12 fans, leaves, plastic bag, painted wall, two 2-stage live-feed videos, projector, monitor, dolls. Dimensions variable. 2008