

Milburn, Felicity, NDE, *101 Works of Art*, Christchurch Art Gallery, ISBN 978-877375-40-8, 2015

CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O WAIWHETU

It's odd when your immediate reaction to a painting is to look away and over your shoulder instead. That's how I felt when I first encountered Peter Stichbury's unsettling NDE. When someone fixates anxiously on a point behind you it is undeniably off-putting - a classic schoolyard ploy - and what's more, it disrupts comfortable art viewing protocols: rather than returning, or receiving, our gaze, the immaculate woman's intense concentration elsewhere makes our presence seem somehow superfluous. It's creepy intriguing and, yes, even a little insulting.

NDE made its first public appearance as a glowing, seven-meter-wide billboard on Christchurch Art Gallery's exterior as part of our post-earthquake Outer Spaces program. Looming over Worcester Boulevard, her unnerving gaze rested squarely on the Christchurch City Council's Civic offices, and no sooner was she installed than we began receiving expressions of alarm via our blog:

At 12:28 PM on 19/04/2013, Gus wrote: The painting is scaring people.

At 8:14 PM on 19/04/2013, Gus wrote: This is spooky! Take it down!

Mission accomplished, Stichbury may well have thought, given he'd previously admitted his hope that NDE would 'induce an uneasy response, like witnessing a UFO'. The artist, in fact, had been managing some anxieties of his own - this was his first public artwork and also the first time he's made a painting with the intention that it be translated into vinyl and blown up dramatically in scale. From his comments at the time, it's clear the work received even more than his usual forensic attention to detail:

'It feels slightly strange knowing it will be transformed into a huge illumination. All those small hairs and tiny details I've been sweating over will end up as scruffy foot-long gestural brushstrokes. I should really be painting with a microscope. Actually, once it's blown up, even the linen will look like the moon's surface.'

Back in the Gallery, the subsequently acquired original exudes an enigmatic perfection reminiscent of Hitchcock's icy blondes, though closer scrutiny suggests she might have more in common with the fretful, too-perfect, 'valids' of Gattaca, Andrew Niccol's 1997 sci-fi classic about a eugenically designed society. That initial, synthetic flawlessness unravels further every moment, revealing a series of subtle manipulations calculated to maximize our discomfort. First, those haunted, haunting eyes - enlarged and widened in the chilling 'objective' tradition of Lucian Freud, who Stichbury cites as a key influence - but also sunken, red rimmed and ringed with shadows. And the strangely ambiguous look within them - is this a woman who is startled, afraid or merely processing some life-changing new information? Her clothing (chic trench or lab coat?) is similarly inconclusive. Our viewpoint is so low and close we can almost see her pupils dilate, and Stichbury's fascination with testimonies of near death experience, documented and analyzed in countless internet forums. Across age, gender and religion, several core motifs recur: a sensation of bodily detachment, a feeling of serenity and the presence of a light, traveled through or toward. Have we stumbled across someone on the cusp of the hereafter? Her implied, inaudible gasp seems to support it. Whatever she has seen or experienced, it has, at least temporarily, removed her from our sphere into another - leaving us uncomfortably close, but worlds apart

Perhaps Stichbury's work is linked, however, not only via explanation but also via continuing mystery. Just as the UFO phenomenon is shrouded in layers of disinformation, conspiracy theory, and myth that no amount of investigative reporting or academic debunking seems able to conclusively penetrate, so too do Stichbury's portraits depict the citizens of an alternate reality that hovers just out of reach, visible but partially suppressed. The stony-faced likes of Milton Torres, a military pilot who was ordered to open fire on a UFO over England, and Gordon Cooper, an astronaut and repeat experiencer, confront the viewer with a seeming candor that ultimately repels helpful analysis. The photo paintings too are self-consciously frustrating, offering only tantalizing glimpses, never the longed-for head-on view. The UFO *phenomenon* is real in the sense that it continues to generate reportage and debate (not to mention entertainment), but, as with the "phenomenon" of art, its interpretation is unfixed, perhaps unfixable. It is, like the photographs on Barbara Robbins's government-confiscated camera, removed from common view.



Peter Stichbury, NDE, 2013, Acrylic on linen, Purchased 2013, 850 x 1203mm, 2013/067