



Dick Frizzell, *Mickey To Tiki* (1997). Limited edition silk-screen print. Courtesy the artist. From *Dick Frizzell – The Painter* by Dick Frizzell and Hamish Keith.

Prior to the 'A-fishial art show', Frizzell had done the unthinkable for any self-respecting Marxisant art school product of the 1960s. He had successfully operated as a commercial artist, helping to create, for example, the animated characters singing the praises of Chesdale processed cheese, an iconic if inedible kiwi product. Frizzell never regrets this experience: indeed, advertising 'taught me how to communicate an image, it taught me how to make shapes speak, to find the most eloquent profile rather than get caught up in gratuitous fiddle-faddle'. Recently, I supervised a bubbly thesis that celebrated this avowed commercialism, wickedly likening Frizzell's recent designs for cushions, tea-towels and tableware to the work of William Morris and the furnishing of his Red House.

The Morris parallel is not so absurd when we consider Frizzell's incorrigibly Victorian workaholicism. Yet it is precisely his prolificness that arouses intellectual mistrust. The charge is, if anything, compounded by Frizzell's breathtaking versatility; having devoured this volume, I feel I have tasted every single dish off an à la carte menu and am at a loss as to recall the most memorable mouthful. What will the chef's special be next month or next year? Frizzell himself is probably the least able to predict. A case in point is his landscapes, which seemingly came from nowhere in the late 1980s. Frizzell had been experiencing what he calls 'a bit of a midlife crisis' and had probably painted

nothing for three weeks: 'I ran out of theoretical drive . . . one day in desperation I thought I'd take a photograph of a tree and a bit of road and just paint it up'. The rest is (art) history. While it is sometimes claimed that the landscapes were ironical in intent, I believe that Frizzell aimed at a kind of painterly integrity. 'Teach yourself' amateur art tips, the unfashionable scenic 'pictorialists' of 1950s and 1960s New Zealand, Yugoslav naive artists and museum diorama displays were all grist to the Frizzell mill. Critics versed in fashionable theory reacted to the paintings with baffled hostility. At the time, an earnest reviewer keen to 'place' Frizzell asked him whether he was a regionalist. With a nod at Gustave Courbet, the artist replied: 'Sure, show me a region and I'll paint it!'

New Zealand is catching up with Frizzell, and the public has got there before the curators and critics. This is evident in his initially controversial explorations – or, as their indignant critics claimed, appropriations – of the hallowed Maori tiki (ancestral) motifs of the 1990s, culminating in the screenprint *Mickey to Tiki*. Is Frizzell a subversive postmodernist or the Warhol of Waimarama? An overgrown schoolboy punster or a redneck? Or, as he claims, is he paying tribute to the protean fertility of this motif? *Mickey to Tiki* posters and postcards are permanent favourites in gallery and museum shops, and this book, already into its second printing, shares their success. Engrossing though it is, the production quality compromises something that runs consistently through Frizzell's oeuvre: his technical prowess and consummate command of paint surfaces. This lends his best art a

gravitas, sensuousness and professionalism that belie its jokiness. A deluxe limited and signed edition is therefore clearly required!

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SYNTHETIC TIMES: MEDIA ART CHINA

FAN DI'AN AND ZHANG GA (EDS)

MIT Press 2009 £28.95 \$ 44.95 (P)
358 pp. 209 col/mono illus
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In the book *Synthetic Times: Media Art China*, art is about interactive experiences, video displays, soundscapes, data structures, and mobile communications. Art is born of electronic pulses – a melding of technology and vision. It is *new art*. Edited by Fan Di'an, director of the National Art Museum of China, and Zhang Ga, a new media art curator, *Synthetic Times* is rich with content, handsomely produced, and serves as a comprehensive documentation of an art exhibition that was presented by China at a pivotal time in the country's history.

In 2008, at the time of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the National Art Museum of China presented an exhibition of new media art called *Synthetic Times: Media Art China 2008 International Media Art Exhibition*. It showcased inventive, otherworldly and striking works from selected artists from around the globe. The exhibition was ambitious. It involved the international coordination of varied and complex art works; the design and construction of an 'active architecture that invites and shapes flow and activity' to house the exhibition; and, the public presentation of these works at a time when all eyes were on China, during the Olympics.

Synthetic Times, the book, is also ambitious, as there is much going on in both its content and mission. The book, written in both English and Chinese, has first-rate photography of the exhibition's new media art works; detailed descriptions of the works and the artists' concepts; a collection of essays that provide philosophical, historical and factual context for the works; information about ancillary programmes associated with the exhibition, such as satellite exhibitions; and, prose that aims to create an understanding of the

themes of the exhibition and the integration of these themes into the book.

All this ambition seems to underscore the political determination of a nation, China, to show the world that the 2008 Summer Olympics, held in its capital city, were more than a sporting and media event. To the Chinese, the Olympics were also an artistic event, and one of tall order. The exhibition showcased art that was fresh and forward thinking. It was art fused with science: computers infect and disinfect themselves digitally; telematic installations allow people in different physical spaces to interact using their bodies; robotic agents express themselves emotionally by sweating when touched by human hands; pulsating furniture objects display user-generated content supplied via the Internet. This art is inventive, as China is inventive.

Synthetic Times is several things: catalogue of a museum show; tome of contemporary art philosophy; and coffee-table book. The four themes of the book, which were the same for the exhibition, are: 'Beyond body', 'Emotive digital', 'Recombinant reality', and 'Here, there and everywhere'. In the book these themes provide four main sections for the presentation of art works. There are no set criteria for what is *emotive digital* or *beyond body*, so the placement of works in certain sections can seem subjective. Nonetheless, this subjectivity adds to the evocativeness of the works, allowing readers to interpret meaning and contemplate the thematic connections among the works.

As presented in *Synthetic Times*, the collection of artists' works is interesting, consequential and visually appealing. There is emphasis on experiential and participatory art. The group of artists selected for the exhibition appear to be a who's who of new media artists from around the world. Their works vary in style and employ an array of new media technologies and platforms: screen, installation, smart backend, multimedia, etc. Of special mention are Aristarkh Chernyshev's *Urgently!*, an 'info-sculpture' that explores information overload as it 'metaphorically represents digital data as an endless flow of information updated every second and trashed immediately afterward' (Russia, 2007); AL and AL's *Eternal Youth*, a multimedia/blue screen work that with the use of video 'reappropriates pop culture through an inventive use of celebrity icons, live-action performance,

and animation special effects' (UK, 2008); and, Sissel Tolaas' *Fear 9*, a sensory/smell installation in which samples of sweat odour from men's armpits were micro-encapsulated through nanotechnology and integrated into a wall of white paint (Norway, 2006).

Synthetic Times' editor Zhang Ga, who also served as curator of the exhibition, describes the mission of the exhibition as:

Synthetic Times probes the role of art in the high time of cultural determinism ... The exhibition calls for the rethinking of the fundamental alienation manifested by the perpetual struggle in which control and submission, exploitation and revolt are the underlying dynamics that rubricate complex human conditions.

China may be using art to persuade the world that it has the cultural sensibility, not just the political will, to lead in the twenty-first century and beyond. It makes you wonder if 'control and submission, exploitation and revolt' are things of the past, and if the future will bring good times or just synthetic times.

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IAN MCKEEVER: PAINTINGS

MARJORIE ALLTHORPE-GUYTON
ET AL.

Lund Humphries 2009 £35.00
208 pp. 110 col/45 mono illus
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When I discussed a slim catalogue on paintings by British painter Ian McKeever (*The Art Book* vol. 16 issue 1), the review concluded 'Let us

hope a major publication on McKeever is not far behind'. That publication has now arrived. *Ian McKeever: Paintings* surveys the artist's paintings since his gradual break with installation, photography and Land Art in the mid-1980s, concluding with work from 2008.

Ian McKeever RA (b 1946) has developed a language of forms and effects that might be loosely described as organic. Oval shapes are like cells; dilute paint dries like fluvial sediment; washes of paint soften like mist. Starting from a palette centred on black and white, the painter has since mastered the use of deep hues, especially ultramarine and crimson. His three primary mediums are large oil-and-acrylic canvases (generally executed in series), delicate wash drawings in gouache, and printmaking (mainly aquatint and lithography), each exploring complex spatial effects using semi-organic forms. For a time resident in London, he now lives in rural Dorset, an environment which has informed his work.

This volume comprises four essays (with extensive footnotes), a thorough chronology, exhibitions lists, bibliography and index, as well as over 150 illustrations, and is the most complete view to date of the painter's output. Wisely, early work, more conceptual in character, is alluded to only briefly. A complete study of McKeever's career would be an undertaking quite different to that of this volume. The publication was partly occasioned by a display of recent paintings

Ian McKeever, *Temple Painting* (6). From *Ian McKeever: Paintings* by Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton et al.

