



Stud Flight

A Retrospective of New Work (2003 – 2013)

Mike Hewson

Blue Oyster Art Project Space

26 November – 20 December 2013

Structure #0.5: The butterfly effect OR A time machine to alter the past and change the future

Support Structure embodies the temporary through an aesthetic positioned between ad hoc and permanence.¹

Examining the oxymoronic subtitle of *Stud Flight, A Retrospective of New Work* is a good way into the exhibition. One question in particular seems to demand an answer: how does an artist so young justify a retrospective (in a project space)? The answer comes in two related parts: firstly, Hewson's prolific output has traversed extremely varied media. And secondly, most of this output, or at least the work that has garnered most attention, has been produced outside of, and without a studio or gallery. This exhibition is an opportunity to appraise the work Hewson has created over the past decade, but re-imagined and recreated, as if the artist now has the chance to experiment within a studio. Working with Hewson and activating certain exhibition strategies: re-presentation, re-situation, as well as the creation of new work, *Stud Flight* investigates an artist whose practice *is* praxis.

In a broader sense, the exhibition is a study of changing contexts, disciplines, and places: a chance for the artist and the gallery to explore the structures within which they both operate. The artist whose practice was once characterised by two dimensional works created in the studio and destined for the white cube, but who now operates publicly, itinerantly, site-specifically, and often on a massive scale.

Structure #1: The Studio / An Easel

...feeling out of place is the cultural symptom of late capitalism's political and social reality, to be situated is effectively to be displaced...experience as a state of flux which acknowledges place as a shifting and fragmented reality.²

In most cases the studio is more necessary (crucial) to the artist than the gallery or the museum. As a matter of fact, it precedes both...the gallery and the museum are completely linked...They are two foundations of the same building and the same system.³

We pick up the story in the Government Life building in Christchurch's Cathedral Square in 2010, in the studio that Hewson shared with his brother Andy among a wider community of artists. In this studio Mike continued work he'd been developing steadily since 2003, capturing subjects dear to him: painting the sublime landscapes in which he grew up, photographing and sketching his studio mates and the quotidian activity within the studio. From this period come the previously unexhibited paintings of South Island vistas including *Maniototo Series 1, Lindis* (2008), and *Mt Tasman* (2003). True to the region and painted with clarity of light and form, they are indicative of an artist positioning himself in relation to the world—admiring beauty from afar. Hung in a snaking, salon-esque style in the same small gallery space are Hewson's ink drawings and photographs. In these drawn and photographed snapshots—still-lives and composites of studio activity—there is a growing sense of agency, and increasingly confident mark making. In both the rural scenes and in his 2010 *Studio Series*, there is an intimacy in Hewson's early work evocative of an artist making meaning out of a direct relation to place. On 22 February 2011, Hewson watched from the pavement below his studio as the spire of the Christchurch Cathedral collapsed into dust. His studio, while remaining upright, was in the central city's red zone and deemed unsafe to re-enter. All of Hewson's possessions, including his artwork, were trapped in the studio. Later, using his engineering credentials he gained access to the stricken building and rescued his work. He was, however, now without a studio, and in the possession of the majority of his sizeable back catalogue of work. Hewson's studio, the ersatz gallery for the display and scrutiny of work, had been taken away from him, forcing a dramatic reconsideration of his practice.

Structure #2: Urban Canvas

One faces the following shortfall: either the work is in its own place, the studio, and doesn't take place (for the public), or it finds itself in a place which isn't its place, the museum, where it takes place (for the public).⁴

In post-earthquake Christchurch, psychological fragmentation and displacement are exacerbated by massive physical dislocation: whole city blocks wiped out along with any attendant memories and the ability to orient oneself

in relation to landmarks. The notion of collective memory and experience of public place enters a newly contested field, with businesses, organisations, and individuals vying to re-colonise spaces. Place and site-specificity become even more central to contemporary art practice. And it is in this context that Hewson developed his now iconic large scale photographic 'paste-ups'.⁵ In early examples, *Homage to the Lost Spaces* (2012) on the side of Cranmer Courts and *Visions of the View* (2012) on the side of Victoria Mansions, he transposed private scenes onto public spaces. Personal images of time spent in the studio were overlaid onto tangible remnants of the city about to be lost. While the 'paste-ups' could be considered as architectural interventions—sculptural and spatial in their nature—there is also a case to approach them as a primarily photographic: more concerned with surface, image and representation. But perhaps the most fruitful ground to examine Hewson's practice is at the nexus of object and image; at the interface where photographs are pasted back onto their subjects in a kind of semiotic somersault where the viewer is left grasping at a very real illusion.

Hewson did not know how long the work would remain standing; Cranmer Courts was slated for demolition, but a date had not yet been set. Such a grand gesture of a highly technical and complex presentation could be seen as a work of great folly. That these works were self-funded and self-directed contributed to the sense of a *beau geste*; a quixotic quest in a city of crumbling windmills. Hewson embraced the temporary environment where both the subject and the documentation would cease to exist when the building/structure supporting the work was demolished. In doing this, and by working from an open-ended, consciously outward-facing perspective, his work created opportunities for new and authentic experiences of the urban landscape.⁶ This was particularly evident in his guerrilla installation of a cleverly placed and subtly manipulated PACE Project Management banner on the façade of Shand's Emporium—an iconic heritage building threatened by the prospect of a swiftly managed demolition.⁷ Hewson changed the text on the banner to read: "Another Art Project Managed by PACE Art Project Management": a nod towards the inevitable connection between capital, the redevelopment of Christchurch and the possibility of a commodified, commerce-controlled future, where decisions are farmed out to project management companies and even the authenticity of art projects is ordered into oblivion.

In 2012, soon after *Homage to the Lost Spaces* (2012) was completed, Hewson was selected for a public commission and residency in The Rocks district, a heritage area in central Sydney undergoing major regeneration, featuring major public art installations. Hewson's final work was a to-scale facsimile 'paste-up' of the façade of the Unwins building with a gestural sweep of dripping white paint added in post-production. Part graffiti-style attack, part homage to the history of the area, Hewson's project challenged the proliferation of 'legacy' projects—big budget public installations that demand to be the centre of attention, garnishing squares or vacant lots, designed to define spaces as areas of 'improvement'. Hewson's projects, far from seeking to create monuments, re-imagine place as situation as he straddles the gap between past and present, tangible and ephemeral.

Structure #3: Stud Flight

The studio becomes commodity to the organiser. He can compose the exhibition as he pleases...⁸

As part of its retrospective function, *Stud Flight* seeks to bring together work created in, and outside of the studio in order to interrogate the development of a contemporary practice across two very different modes of making and displaying. This relationship is presented with studio works overlaid onto offcuts of one of Hewson's Christchurch 'paste-ups'. In the gallery situation, each form of display is rendered as redundant as the other. But, in the production of a new installation from these components—unexhibited paintings from 2003 exposed next to leftover strips of self-adhesive vinyl from 2012—the retrospective is able to activate self-reflexive comparison rather than nostalgic reflection. This strange combination of site specific, studio, and gallery centric work, which occurs throughout *Stud Flight*, foregrounds Hewson's shift of focus from content to context.

Situated in the back corner of the front space of the Blue Oyster is a roll of vinyl wrapped and packaged for the storeroom. Its exterior is marked with an 'O'. It is a lonely object, and with good cause. It has been separated from its companions, 'I', 'T', 'H', 'L', 'D', 'S', 'U', and 'P', who have remained in storage in Sydney after being exhibited on the façade of the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of a collaborative 'paste-up' project Hewson completed in April 2013 with Melbourne-based artist Agatha Gothe-Snape. More than Hewson's Christchurch works, there was a deeper dialogue between image and materiality in *IT XXXX XX* (2013). The scaffold on which the work was mounted became (in)visible as a framing structure—a work in progress, like a canvas on its stretcher bars. The printed message was an open proposition, and could be read as a question of success and failure. In its diminished state inside the gallery the question remains, perhaps becomes even more pressing. Does this work, removed from its original situation, changed, and displayed in a completely different manner retain its power?

One of two new pieces in the exhibition is *Norwich Building* (2013); yet, it too has generative roots in an earlier work: Hewson's installation at First-draft in Sydney in 2012.⁹ Both installations reinterpret the way we experience

the communal exhibition space by creating three-dimensional art objects from the recognised exterior forms of each of the galleries. Engaging with traditions of conceptual minimalism and installation practice, Hewson tests the boundaries of sculptural materials and architectural space. In the Blue Oyster, the *Norwich Building* structure is wedged into the front space. The physicality is only apparent in the gallery—from the street and through the reflective window the perspective of the printed façade distorts and flattens out, successfully tearing a hole in Dunedin's urban environment. Hewson's older work: the paintings, the rolled 'paste-up' ready for storage, the studio photographs serve as a kind of anchoring for the structural mirage of *Norwich Building* (2013). The historical and physical weight of the collected work—taken out of its original context—provides a support structure for the final realignment of Hewson's site-specific practice.

While place has always been Hewson's central occupation, his recent work is more concerned with the *process* of forming place. In particular, our apprehension of the constant physical and psychological reconstitution of sites and structures in our immediate environments. In *Stud Flight* he challenges the architectural manifestation of the gallery space, as well as the intangible, and unratified rules of exhibition making. Exhibiting pieces from forgotten oeuvres alongside contemporary work reveals the layers—and changing dynamics—of Hewson's relationship to, and perspective of, the world around him. In doing this he eschews a static history for one that is malleable and available for reinterpretation. It is a statement that both openness and risk are inherently valuable in contemporary practice.

Jamie Hanton

1. Celine Condorelli and Gavin Wade, 'Support Structure Manifesto (2004) Structure MCondorelli, *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2004), 58.
2. Miwon Kwon in ed. Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 35.
3. Daniel Buren, 'The Function of the Studio' in ed., Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 16.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. Paste-up seems like an entirely inappropriate way to describe Hewson's work here. Its connotation of hastily (and often sloppily) applied material belies the preparation and the craft present in Hewson's work. The entire process from site research, through large format photography, perspectival construction in post-production, printing and installation often on scaffolding or with a cherry-picker takes over a month.
6. Guy Debord extols this kind of urban experience in his 'Theory of the Dérive' in *Les Lèvres Nues* 9 (Paris, November 1956). Republished in *Internationale Situationniste* 2 (Paris, December 1958), translated by Ken Knabb.
7. These banners began to appear en masse throughout the central city, and would signify that a building had been successfully bid on by a company to demolish in the coming months.
8. Daniel Buren, 'The Function of the Studio', 17.
9. The second new work is *Front Door (Blue Oyster)*, an A3 colour print taped to the inside of the gallery's front door like a poster, depicting the glass door along with a reflection of the artist and the streetscape. Visitors were able to take a print from a pile next to the door throughout of the exhibition.

Mike Hewson completed a Bachelor of Engineering in 2007 at the University of Canterbury and lives and works between Christchurch, Sydney and Port Hedland, Australia. Hewson's work has been shown in a number of group and solo exhibitions, and his most recent collaboration was shown on the façade of the MCA, Sydney in 2013. He has recently been accepted into the Columbia University MFA programme.

Jamie Hanton holds a BA Hons in Art History and is a curator and a critic. He was Director of the Blue Oyster Art Project Space from 2011–14. He is currently Curator, Art Collections at the University of Canterbury.

Blue Oyster Art Project Space
16 Dowling Steet, Dunedin 9016
New Zealand
www.blueoyster.org.nz

Gallery hours: Tuesday – Friday 11am – 5pm, Saturday 11am – 3pm

Front image: *Norwich Building*, digital print on backlit vinyl, framing timber, 3100 x 6000 x 4000 mm, Dunedin (2013)

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space.

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