

# Fun, fakery and deceit

*Though Erica van Zon's tributes to pop culture look distinctly satirical, they are in fact made with great love, tenderness and sincerity. Virginia Were reports.*

In a world increasingly dominated by digital modes of representation, it's refreshing to meet Wellington-based artist Erica van Zon whose object-based art is visceral and handmade and looks to the past for its inspiration. In her paintings, ceramics, rugs and installations she consciously reclaims methods of making traditionally seen as craft, re-positioning them in a conceptual contemporary art framework.

Like New Zealand artist Francis Upritchard she's less interested in technical virtuosity than in the raw, expressive and emotional potential of crafts that are often associated with the domestic and feminine realm. Her work mines pop culture, referencing iconic movies, books and television shows, and its flirtation with the kitsch and the cute might suggest a parody but there's a complete absence of

irony. Instead it makes sense to read van Zon's work as homage – a celebration of shared cultural knowledge. The fact that we, as viewers, quickly recognise and identify her references makes her art an intensely enjoyable and nostalgic experience.

In 2007 van Zon won the inaugural Iris Fisher scholarship awarded by Te Tuhi and she followed up in 2008 with an exhibition at the gallery titled *Shock! Horror! Suspense!* – an installation of objects based on props and memorabilia from films of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. However, rather than focusing on the main dramatic action, van Zon set about re-creating humble, overlooked artefacts in these films. Included in this installation were dozens of hand-painted retro film posters – roughly made and naively drawn recreations of posters for classic films such as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Buñuel's *Belle du Jour* and Antonioni's *Blow Up*. This series of film posters is nostalgic in the sense that we know the originals come from an era when posters were drawn by artists rather than being mechanically or digitally produced as they are today.

Some of the posters will feature in May in a group show at Melanie Roger Gallery in Auckland. Like her film props and sets, which are rendered in a charmingly clumsy, thrown-together and approximate way, using whatever low-rent materials come to hand, the posters are rough yet utterly sincere facsimiles of the originals. They originated in *Props Room* (2007) her Masters graduation exhibition at Elam School of Fine Arts, and though they're distinctive for their homely handcrafted aesthetic, they also have a conceptual underpinning.

Van Zon explains that *Props Room* was a documentation of her attempt to get up to speed with film history by watching five new films a week. "I saw it as a way of educating myself in things I'd missed out on. I'm drawn to looking at things well made and then remaking them with my own signature style. I'm paying tribute to those things that have gone before."

She says initially she felt frustrated at her inability to make three-dimensional objects and so she recreated props from some of these films as a way of giving herself a coherent conceptual framework within which to experiment with different ways of making objects; as a way to find her own aesthetic language.



*Beijing Children's Ride Character (Bunny)*, 2011, modelling material, acrylic and enamel. All artworks in this story are by Erica van Zon

Opposite page: *Shock! Horror! Suspense!* Installation at Te Tuhi, 2008, hand-painted film posters, handmade objects, props and memorabilia. Photo: John Collie









The reality of these objects, which layer artifice upon artifice by transforming fictional objects in films into further fictionalised objects within an art gallery setting, prompts us to reflect on the nature of fakery and deceit.

In an article about her work by Emma Bugden and Paula Booker, titled *Not Quite, Almost, Once More With Feeling*, Bugden writes: "Deceit is an interesting idea. Erica's deceit is somehow so sincere though – it's something about the honesty, the clumsiness of her making. The hand crafter, the hobbyist, the amateur fan. Like a teenage devotee she creates painstaking homage to the original films, seeks to occupy them herself, inserting herself into the picture. Yet, perversely, the items she seeks to remake – the cat from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), a hanging chain from Almodovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) – are incidental, peripheral to the narrative. Redundant. A democratisation of product over plot."

Booker replies: "... Often Erica's porcelain figures or soft props seem drawn not only from films, but from classic cinematic tropes – in particular the device Hitchcock called the MacGuffin. He saw these particular key props as narrative devices and in themselves almost incidental, unimportant to the audience: merely a steering point for the central plot and motivator for his characters."

Among the many opposing tendencies that lend an edge to van Zon's practice – sincerity versus parody; art versus craft; ideas versus the materiality of objects; male versus female – is the constant tension between the 'high' and the 'low', and a recent series of rugs represent an unruly marriage between the two. Her gloriously purple *Rothko Rug* (2010), for instance, is based on the paintings within



the sublime Rothko Chapel, yet it's rendered in a distinctly crafty and domestic medium – a handmade acrylic wool rug.

"With the Rothko Rug I was thinking about basing it around an art practice that's really tortured, serious and austere – and there's an absolute beauty in that which I really love – but I wanted to translate that into something that's tactile, practical, domestic and feminine. Those were the sorts of things I was trying to encompass in that work, and I invested a lot of time and domestic energy into it."

Likewise, her *Figure Eight Rug* (2008) can also be read as a counterpoint to the lofty ideals of modernist (and predominantly male) painting by tapping into the pared-back visual language of artists like Colin McCahon, Barnett Newman and more recently Ralph Hotere and Peter Robinson – who have both used the infinity symbol in their work.

In contrast to the austerity of *Figure Eight Rug* is the recent blazingly colourful fibre work, *Need More Fire* (2011) inspired by a fringed piece of fabric draped over a Buddha figure in China, which reminded van Zon of a polychromatic painting.

Another modernist-inspired work is *Three Cats* (2012) – a bizarre looking group of felines that look like a failed home-craft project that has been donated to an opportunity shop.

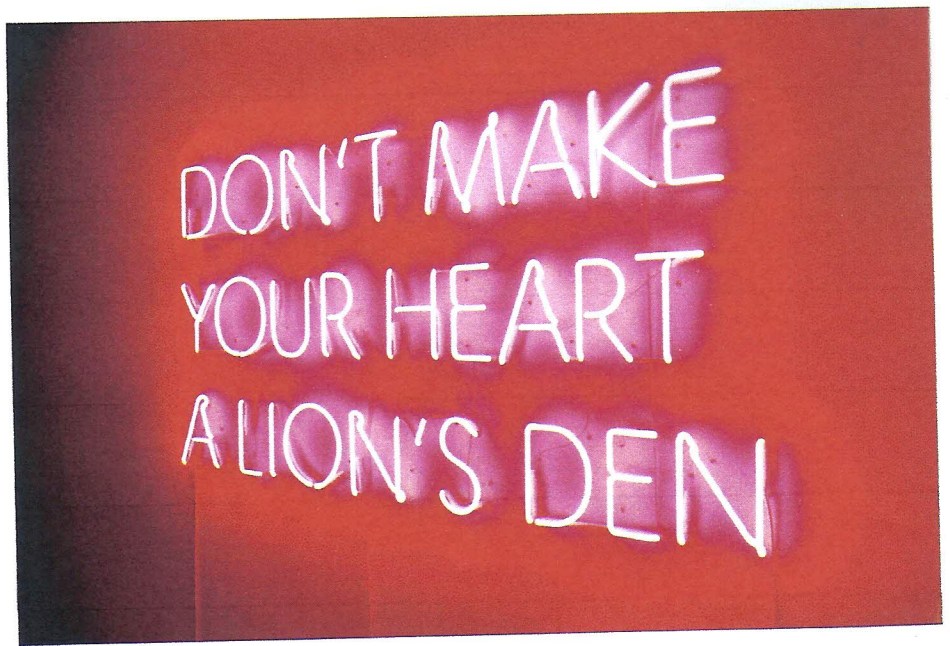
"I was thinking about the austere modernist houses I've seen in the magazine *World of Interiors*," says van Zon, "and about the coffee table objects that exist in those sorts of places, and wanting to recreate them for myself. The work is quite new and I wanted to see how a grouping of similar things worked together as one artwork."

Last year was an exciting one for van Zon. She did a two-month residency at the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing,



Opposite page (from left): *Three Cats*, 2012, modelling material and gouache; *Figure Eight Rug*, 2008, acrylic and canvas

This page: *Untitled*, 2009, neon.  
Photo: Alex North



on a Wellington Asia Residency Exchange (jointly run by Wellington City Council and Asia New Zealand Foundation). While there she became fascinated with the Chinese people's obsession with astrology and how it shapes their everyday lives. Having curated an exhibition of work by artists responding to the symbols of the Western horoscope at Enjoy Gallery in 2011, she was keen to follow up with a group show responding to the Chinese equivalent. The resulting *Chinese Horoscope Show* at Enjoy earlier this year included 13 New Zealand and international artists, who were asked to respond to their own zodiac signs.

Van Zon came home from Beijing with several new series of works, including some ceramic pieces based on a children's park ride featuring the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, and she feels the ideas generated by the residency will continue to pollinate her work for a long time to come.

Last year her work *Untitled* (2009) – a neon text work stating “Don't Make your Heart a Lion's Den” – was included in the group exhibition *Tender is the Night*, curated by Heather Galbraith for City Gallery Wellington. Referring to van Zon's Dutch heritage the work represents a softened version (and a mistranslation) of the Dutch phrase “Maak van je hart geen moordkuil”, which literally means: “Don't make your heart a murder hole”. *Untitled* traces its lineage back to American artist Bruce Nauman's neon text works, which took a playful and mischievous approach to the inherent problems and slipperiness of language.

When confronted with the challenge of “What to do?” in his studio soon after graduating, Nauman had the simple but profound realisation that “if I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must



Erica van Zon. Photo: Brett Wood

be art. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”

The same might be said of van Zon's predominantly research and project-based practice, and therefore it's entirely fitting that for her solo show, *Moving Forward*, later this year at RM – an artist-run space in Karangahape Road, Auckland – she plans to exhibit her personal archive spanning over ten years.

Her work's distinctive materiality sets it apart.

“I feel like I'm working against the grain in many ways,” she says. “I can't stop making objects; I really enjoy it and I think it's valid. I think eventually objects are going to re-emerge and artists are going to reinvest in making them again. Currently art schools are teaching a lot of skills, like painting. At the moment I'm teaching students how to draw – and that might indicate a shift back into more object-based projects happening in the future.”

*Erica van Zon's work is in a group exhibition, including artists Kirsty Bruce and Sam Mitchell at Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland, from 16 May to 9 June.*