



Gavin Hurley

[PROFILE]

**PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST
AS A YOUNG MAN:**

Gavin Hurley

By Nicola Saker

GAVIN HURLEY works in a cafe cum kitchenware shop run by his partner in Ponsonby. It is small and carefully arranged, with unused Poole china for sale alongside Crown Lynn swans and tins of Italian tomatoes.

We meet in the shop after hours. The light is dim and the space has the odd feeling of a stage set that's waiting for actors to light it up. There is an air of quiet resolution about Gavin Hurley; a thought out quality. Words are carefully measured and weighed and, once spoken, allowed to rest. He is a young man used to working on his own:

"I went to St Peter's College (I think Ralph Hotere went there) and it didn't have an art department beyond 5th form. I was the only student doing Bursary Art and I had to do it by correspondence, which was a perfect setup for university."

Having the run of the place at Elam appealed, as did tutors such as Dick Frizzell, Denys Watkins, Luise Fong, Fiona Pardington and Seraphine Pick. "They were established but not right out there. It was pretty amazing to be a young student and

invited to the opening of their shows." Art school was always where he wanted to be: "The only way I got through school was doing covers for every project."

Portraiture is a vehicle he uses a lot, but not without qualification: "It's not really portraiture. When I'm shredding for collage I often come across an image that interests me – a face – and I'm interested in their stories. Nothing starts out as a portrait – it just ends up like that." A series of Captain Cook started with one of George Washington: "I thought that it needed to be closer to home. I was reading a lot about Cook, and found him fascinating. It's intriguing to think of how he would be judged today." Sydney Parkinson, a naturalist on one of Cook's voyages, also features.

He picks up on odd men out. One portrait, of a handsome but dangerously intense male "was in a Renaissance nativity scene. I just looked at this face amongst the adoring women and thought 'What are you doing there? He just looked so dodgy.' ". The images are naive, flattened, and

'Prof Code' 2002, 1370mm x 1015, oil on hessian.

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details he's not interested in, such as clothing and hair, simply disappear "and become as flat as the paper."

"I don't really draw. I was always the one whose drawings were singled out in class as 'bad drawings'. I never understood what a 'bad' drawing was – it's a drawing." Uninterested in traditional methods, he uses collage to explore portraiture. Not far from his workplace is Trash Palace, where encyclopaedias are sold alongside novels – and all for a dollar each: "It's great. I can spend \$5 and shred them for collage."

In his final year at Elam he exhibited in the Airmail, Exchange Show and the George Fraser Gallery as well as at Ilam School of Fine Arts. Since leaving Elam almost five years ago, he has exhibited mainly with the Anna Bibby Gallery, but also at the Gus Fisher Gallery, in the Wallace Art Award and with the Hawkes Bay Cultural Trust. His work is increasingly recognised and appreciated: "A lot of people who are saying good things about my work weren't interested at all a few years ago. My last show wasn't instantly appealing – pictures of a lot



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'After Cook' 2003,
405mmx305mm, oil on hessian.

of pale, sickly looking kids with gappy teeth"

When he's not working in the cafe or with his art, Hurley scours shops and galleries, looking for new ideas. He professes to having a very short attention span – for everything, it would seem – film, books: "I read lots of parts of books but never finish them" but enjoys crime on television.

His latest portraits are of suspect characters – CIA agents, spies, criminals, and – Christine Keeler. He works with oil on hessian, enjoying the roughness of the surface and the polish of the paint.

There is a sense of momentum in Gavin Hurley's life and work. He says "I'm doing a few random things and they all seem to be coming together at the moment. Five days a week I'm just working day by day, but the other two I may set goals for myself.

I think I went for years painting the same mistakes and now I've got more idea." As we finish and he prepares to close up the silent shop, he says something rather lovely: "I think Anna (Bibby) finds me slippery, reluctant to be an artist. It's not that. I just don't know how yet."