

CHAPTER 18

MARTIN POPPELWELL

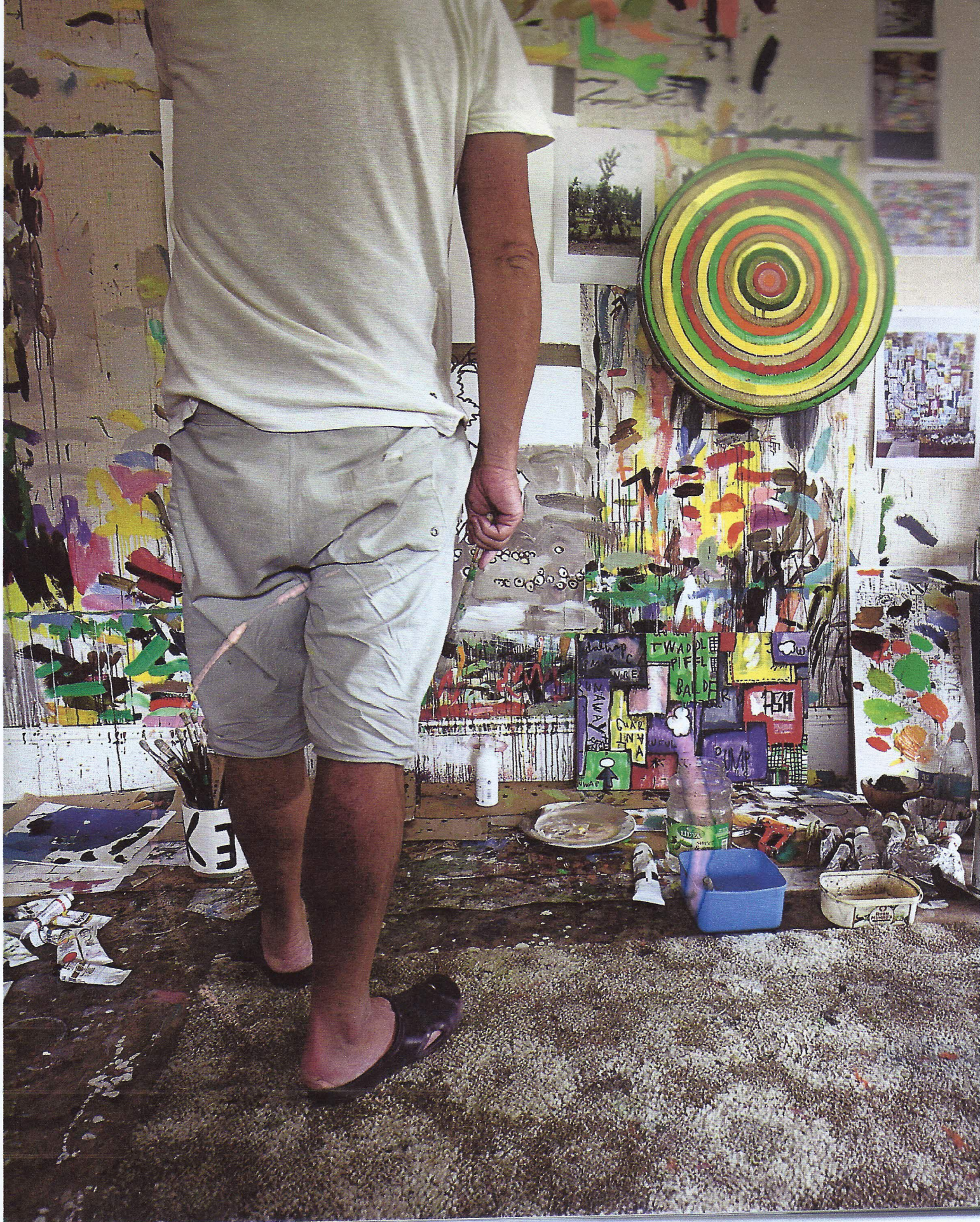
> BEING THERE WHEN IT HAPPENS

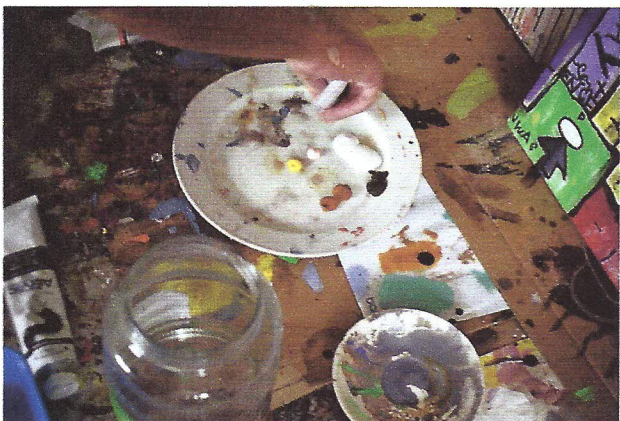
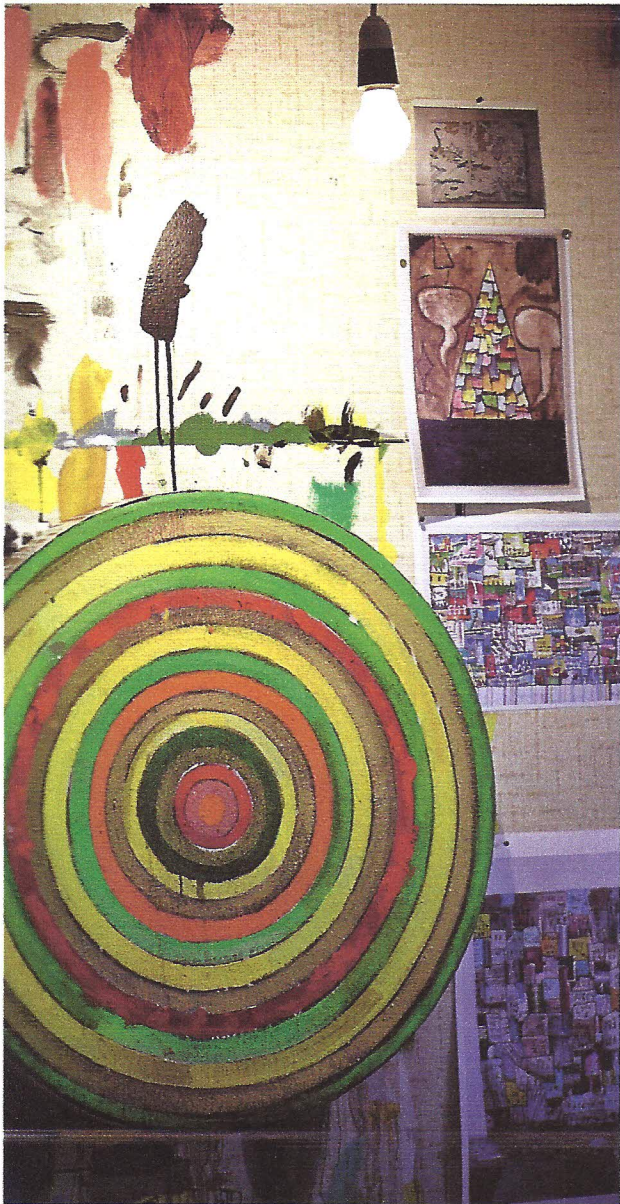
AS BOTH A PAINTER and a potter, Martin Poppelwell maintains two studios. He is also qualified to comment on the relationship between these creative activities: 'For some reason we get tricked into thinking that different mediums have different statuses, and we all know it's not true ... the proof's in the pudding.'

Poppelwell's current painting studio is in his house on Napier's Bluff Hill. He bought the 1881 vintage cottage in 2007, and has had to adjust to its low ceilings and small spaces: 'I use every room, except my bedroom, although I've been using that to store some things ... you have to try and find areas you can operate as practically as possible, because the practice of making art is very elusive ... so it's a matter of how do I make it as easy for myself as possible?' No doubt it will become easier in his new painting studio, which is currently under construction in the lower corner of his property.

His pottery studio is in a shed beside the house: 'I've always wanted to have a pottery handy to where I live, simply because the nature of the process requires you to be at close hand ... You don't want the kiln to be separate from your home when you're firing on a regular basis ... it's just too difficult.' He describes pottery as the art form with 'the lowest emission rate ... it takes a long time to get a sense of what the object is trying to do. And the more basic and subtle and reserved the object is, then the longer it often takes ... Whereas, with painting, graphics or printmaking, the medium itself demands a much more instant sensation.'

He considers his own pottery work 'a bit funky', and part of a movement away from the main studio pottery tradition in this country. After studying at the Elam School of Fine Arts in 1991–2, Poppelwell went overseas, and returned to spend two years living and working in Whanganui. He was interested in the idea of applying drawn or painted images to clay forms, a process which demanded 'one take full responsibility for the object and make it oneself'. From Whanganui potter Ross Mitchell-Anyon he learned how to 'make very basic ready-made traditional shapes and then use those as a surface or a structure that could receive information in the form of lines or diagrams. I really see them as three-dimensional diagrams that happen to be made out of clay ... First of all I made them and lived with them—I didn't want to go and buy them—cups, plates and vases, which were quite primitive.' He then moved to Hawke's Bay, to continue his pottery, painting and drawing.





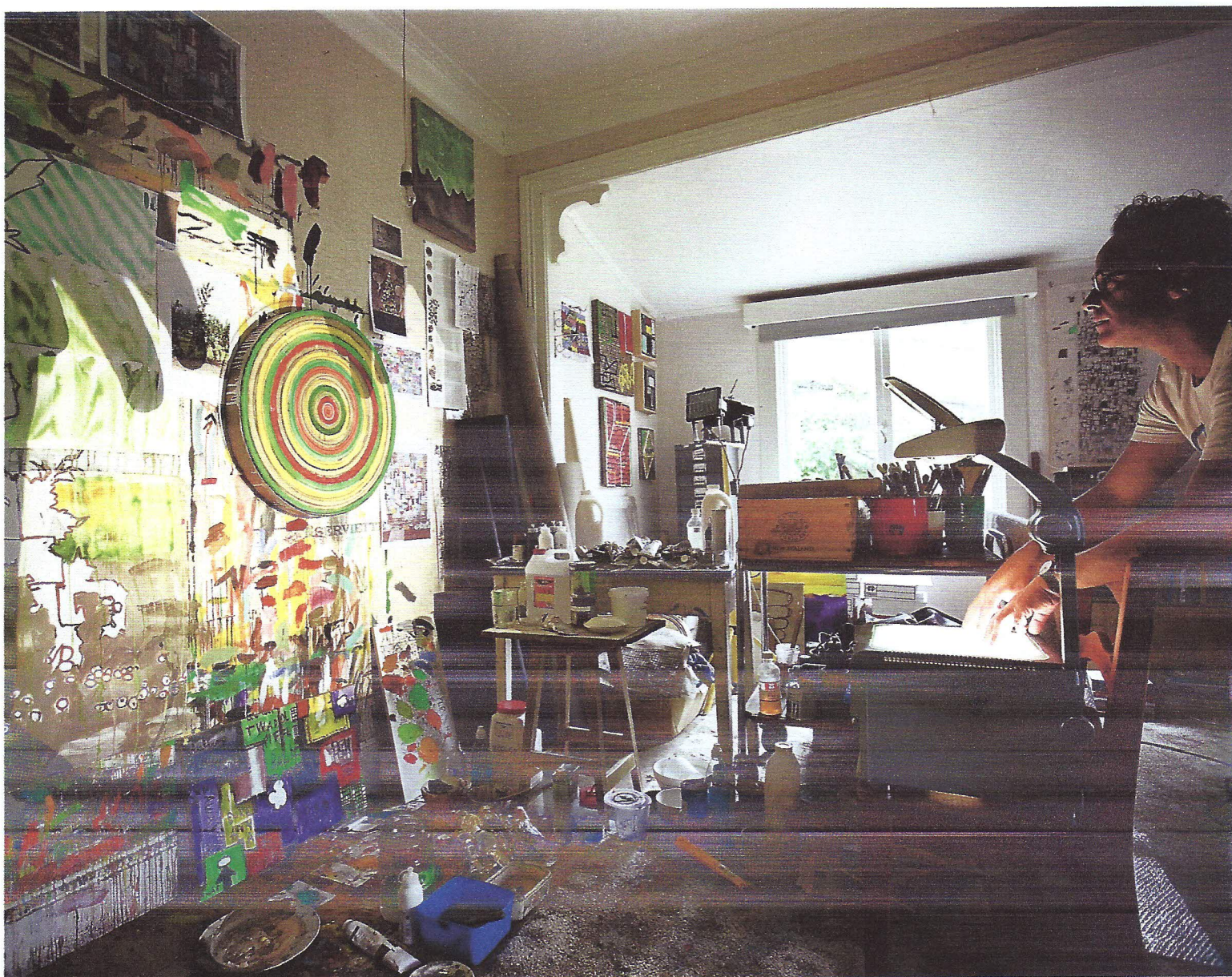
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His paintings, which largely reflected his environment, were land- and seascapes in the manner of German artist Gerhard Richter: ‘They had that blurry feel to them.’

Poppelwell’s arsenal of devices includes his signature grid, which he first applied to a pot in 1993. He describes it as ‘just a wonky, slightly dishevelled grid . . . after a big night out’. He paints in a black stain on a fired pot, which is then refired and glazed. Under the influence of French/Swiss artist Ben Vautier, Poppelwell began to overlay his pots with numerals. Next he introduced words, as he had been using in his paintings: ‘You’ve got this background in New Zealand with a key artist [Colin McCahon] who incorporated text in his paintings, so you’ve got something that you can very quickly bounce off. What happens if I wrote about Virginia Woolf on a plate, or Katherine Mansfield? These new areas start opening up . . . and so you occupy them, and you get a sense of how they work.’

Poppelwell does his painting in a cluttered front room: ‘I’ve always liked having a lot of information around me, some of it I’m happy that it feels ordered, and some of it I’m happy to be kind of chaotic.’ He explains his process: ‘I go from just a basic sketch or pencil drawing and then I do a study. When I’m happy that it’s got something going for it, I’ll make a transparency and project it up and see how it looks. I use a transparency because I’ve often ended up having to do five or six paintings at the same time, and it’s about getting a lot of information up really quickly. It’s also to do with scale. Scale is one of the key things I find with painting—it’s how do you get the idea, and whether the idea is going to feel as if it’s not trying too hard.’





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Poppelwell undertook the first of his boldly coloured ‘patchwork’ paintings largely ‘as a reaction to a lot of the monochromatic work being done in New Zealand’. He admits that because he didn’t know much about colour, ‘the best thing to do was to limit my palette to ROYGBIV [red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet]. Also, I didn’t want to make paintings that have titles that relate to anything to do with New Zealand, so I started titling them about areas of the world that I happened to be reading about, or where friends and others may have been visiting.’

He hangs his large canvasses on the wall for painting, and another original technique is his use of that surface for testing effects: ‘I like to leave traces of each process around the work that I make. I’m quite happy to put marks on a wall . . . whether it’s colour, or just to see the thickness of the paint surface, and use those as references. A lot of the time I know what I want to happen, it’s just that I don’t know how I want it to happen . . . So in a way I don’t really separate the palette and the

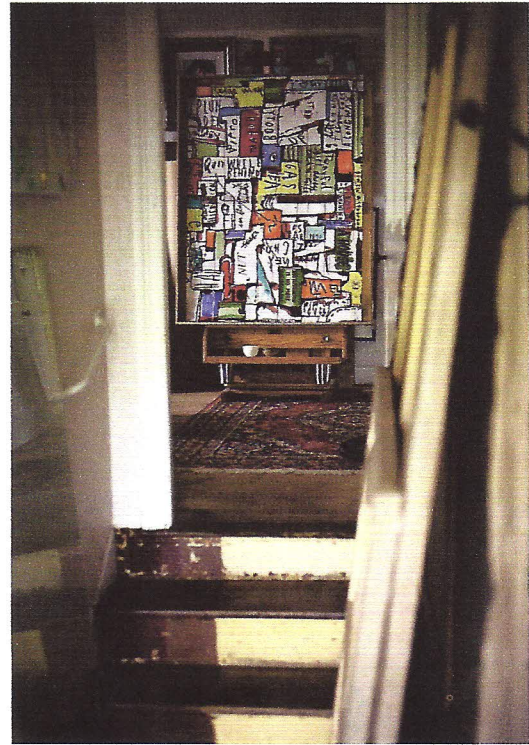
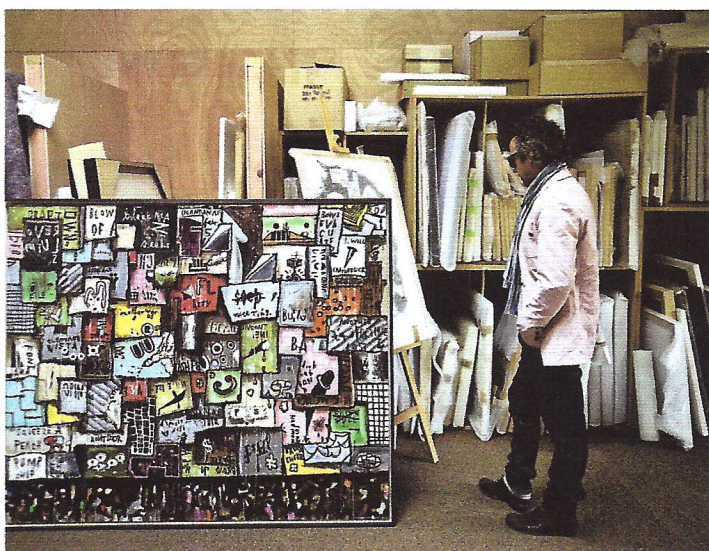
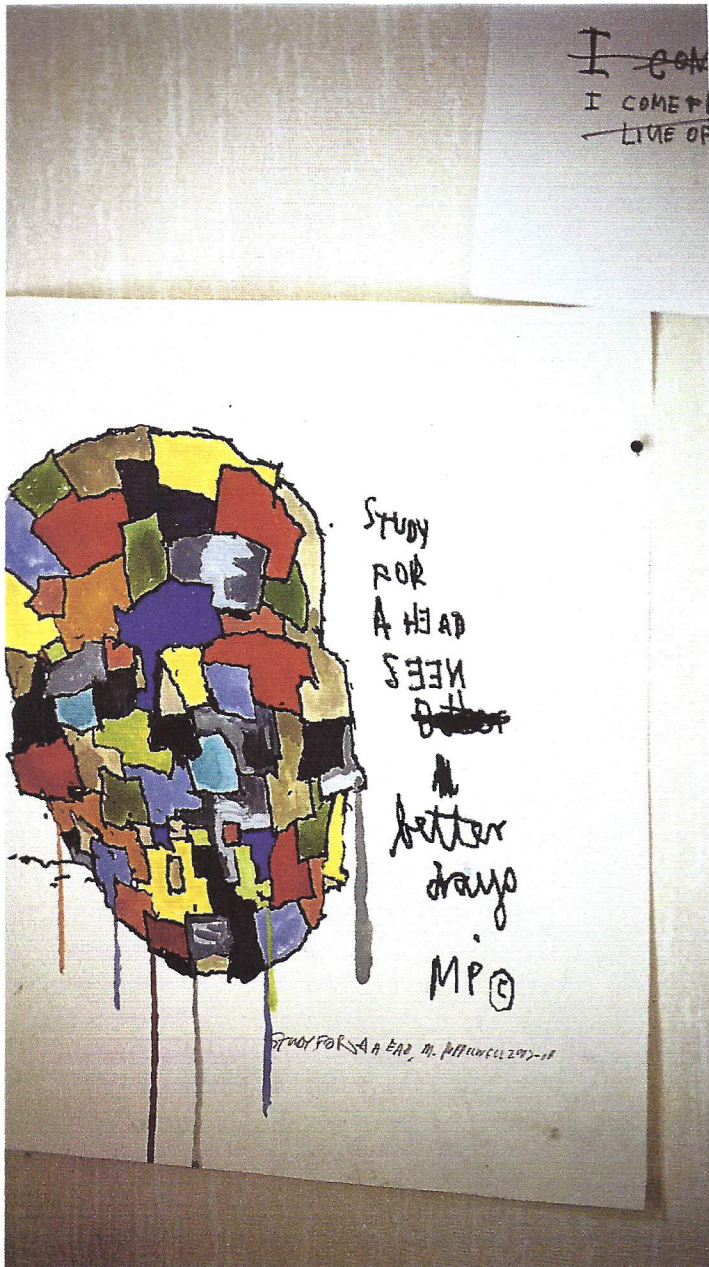


test and the painting from the process . . . and sometimes I have no idea where the painting starts and stops.'

One of the problems Poppelwell experiences with his small house is not being able to view his paintings from a distance. Of a recent work he observes: 'I've been moving that all over the house to try and get a take on it, and I probably won't touch it again . . . it can do its own thing now. I can leave it alone.' For larger paintings where a long view is not possible: 'I've found those really hard to finish . . . and so I'm relying on a lot of instinct.' Smaller works that Poppelwell feels are the right scale for his present studio are such a happy combination of elements—type and amount of materials and time expended—that he suggests they conform to some sort of Newtonian equation. And accordingly, 'Once you're putting in too much force or it's taking too long, then it just doesn't feel right.'

Perhaps as an accumulative result of painting beyond the canvas, Poppelwell has never had a white wall to work on. But when a painting leaves his studio for a gallery environment he finds it gains 'an extra glow', an additional 'ping' that 'makes hanging shows exciting—especially when you haven't seen the work in a gallery before.' He paints on raw linen, generally in three sizes, and once he made those basic decisions he found his materials 'started to become less important. Getting the drawings, information, composition and the





sense of what the work was about became much more prominent'.

For Poppelwell, an idea for a painting can be stimulated by a word or phrase: 'Usually I like things that have an element of humour in them ... ideas that consume themselves—like a snake eating its tail—so they're always starting and stopping and you never feel as if you're getting to the end of an idea ... The words have to transform themselves into a drawing—they have to look good as a drawing. So if they make no sense, if they're reversed and if they're upside down, they still have a graphic quality that means they are taking part in a composition. That's most important—it has to look good as a drawing. It has to stand up.' He regards his patchwork compositions as 'essentially lists ... clumped together'. He jots down potential ideas while reading or listening to the radio, and some of his recently collected specimens include 'love in a fowlhouse', 'the bed with the traffic problem', 'if only', 'multi-talented', 'show me your gold' and 'self-serving tripe'.

Poppelwell describes painting as an activity that demands 'a lot of grunt work ... You know you've just got to get up and try not to put your best clothes on and stand in front of the work, and get some paint on to a plate or something so you can find a point to start from ... Often I find painting is about keeping on painting until I actually know what to do. It's not often that I know what to do to begin with ... You've just got to get stuck in, to start to meet the form that you're making ...'. Poppelwell works every day: 'There's always the possibility that something might happen, and so you want to make sure you're



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around when it does . . . I don’t mind that some days it appears that nothing happens, because that is very often the case. You just know that a good day’s work can sometimes take two weeks, and sometimes a good day’s work can take half an hour. You just have to be around to find out which one it’s going to be.’

Poppelwell’s new studio will be on three stepped levels, with specific areas for painting and storage, and will include racks where oil paintings can be put aside to dry. His pottery will not be housed here because of the nature of the materials—fine powders and dust: ‘I don’t mind grubby studios, but paint and pottery just don’t mix.’ He hopes to be using his new studio by the end of summer, and anticipates making work that has the sense of being larger: ‘It has a different sense of purpose . . . if you’re too close to it, you’re noticing too much. And the studio or the workshop or the laboratory—whatever you want to call it—becomes an area where things might happen. It doesn’t matter whether they do or they don’t, but things might. And the whole reason for that space to be set up is so that they can.’