

# AN ARTIST'S PROGRESS

For most artists, a purpose-built studio is an impossible luxury. But Martin Poppelwell felt he had no other choice.

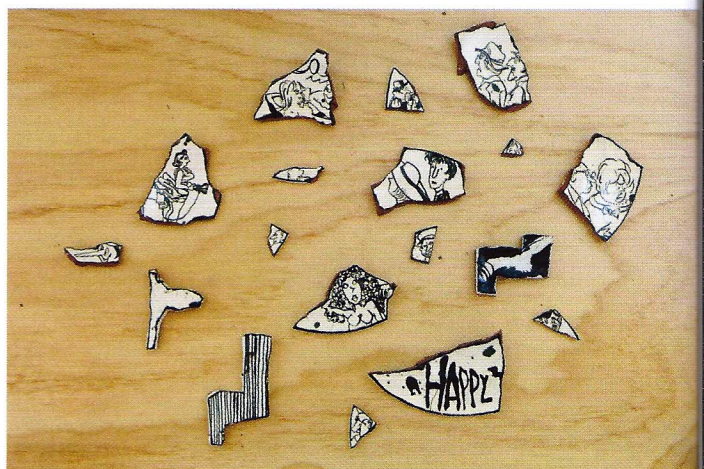
TEXT JEREMY HANSEN PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL McCREDIE

Until recently, artist Martin Poppelwell's studio was a room in the cottage he owns on Napier Hill. He moved there a little over two years ago after selling a rambling, much larger villa nearby, but soon found the smaller space was starting to affect his work. "Working in confined conditions confirmed I couldn't even make a mistake properly," he says. He began to hanker for wall space for eight-by-two-metre canvases and an area for storing and drying artworks but most of all, he needed space to think. One option was to move house again, but "the sheer thought of moving

Artist Martin Poppelwell in his new Napier studio, designed by architect Ashley Cox.



INSIDE



INSIDE

**The studio looks out into the garden of Martin's Napier cottage (top left); he uses the three levels of the studio for research (above left), making work (top right) and drying, storing and dispatching works respectively. When he is working with ceramics (above right), Martin shapes and fires them in another shed then brings them to the studio for painting. The studio opens onto a terrace (opposite page, far right) and has a distinctive profile from the street (opposite page, middle).**

made me feel physically ill," he says, "so I decided to feel physically ill with the amount of money I would have to borrow to not move for a while".

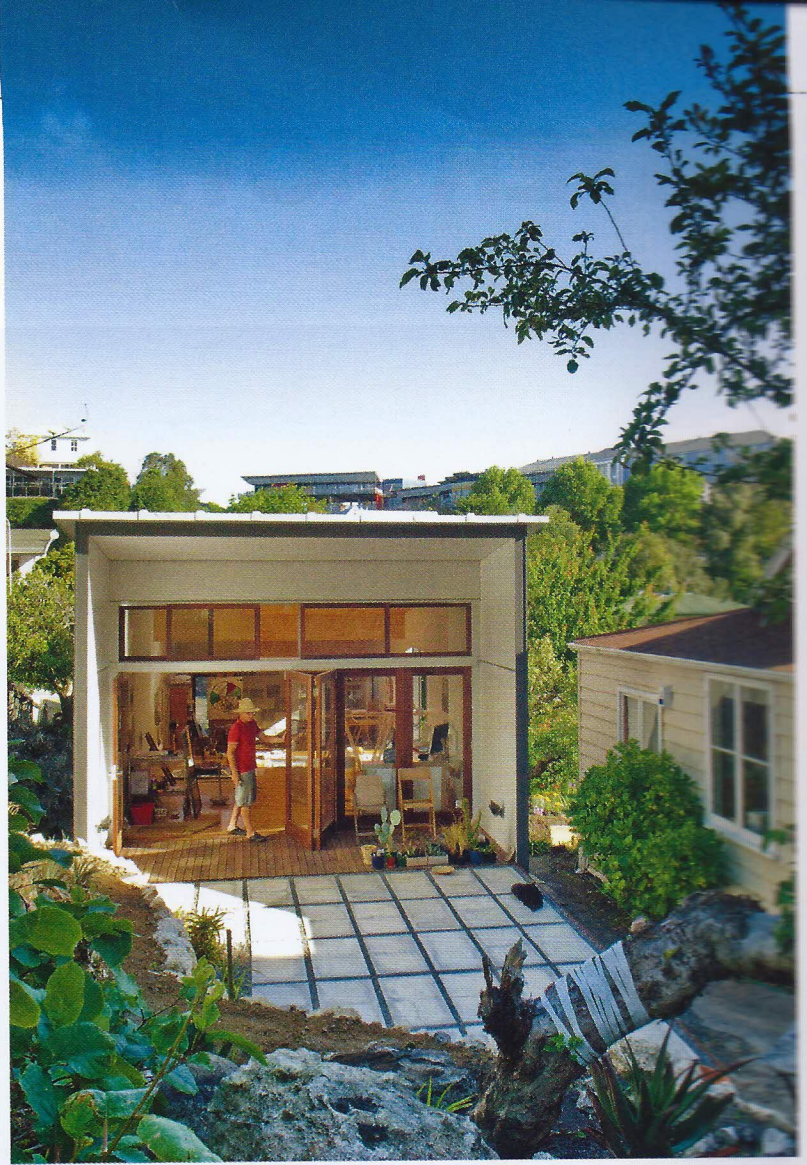
As a grossly generalised rule, New Zealand artists are known neither for their optimism nor their affluence, so it is bracing to see an artist make a bet like this on his future. The way Martin sees it, he had very little choice. "It was really obvious that in order to make bodies of work that are strong enough, and to make enough of them, I needed a purpose-built space from which to work," he says. "You want to push your [art] practice and really test it and see what it will find in ideal conditions. If you can't do it in ideal conditions, you're not going to do it." In other words, he has deliberately left himself no excuses for not succeeding.

Martin's cottage may have been too small to work in, but the

property on which it is located offered plenty of room for a stand-alone studio. Initially he considered building it on the lawn in front of the house, but his friend (and the studio's designer), Wellington-based architect Ashley Cox, persuaded him to leave the lawn intact and make the studio look out onto it.

Ashley wanted the studio to be "a building that would have some positive effect on [Martin's] practice... you want a building to work with the [artistic] process, but on another level". In some ways, the design of the studio was a pure exercise in creating space, blissfully free of logistics such as plumbing and other domestic accoutrements (although it does have electricity). Constructed by local builder John Briggs, it steps down the property's slope in three gentle, 30-square-metre increments; Martin uses the different levels for thinking about,

making, and storing and dispatching art respectively (he seems to like the production-line ethos this hierarchy implies). Sawtooth-shaped, south-facing skylights, an echo of the rooflines of the old industrial buildings in nearby Ahuriri, fill the studio with light, while glass doors offer views into the garden and the sunny terrace at one end of the building. White fibreboard wall panels allow Martin to hang works as they might be seen in a gallery, a luxury he says he has never had before. (Another luxury: insulation and double-glazed joinery mean the studio is warm in winter). A blank canvas is a tempting metaphor for such a space, but for its occupant the studio feels more inspiring than that. "When I started to move things in and unpack it was like fresh oxygen," Martin says. "For a while, it's going to be hard to make work that feels as good as this place." •



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