

68. sam mitchell

Born United States 1971

MFA Elam 2000

Lives in Auckland

Sam Mitchell works in a bookshop, exposed to a constant flood of illustrations. Not coincidentally, she is a figurative artist with an obsessive drive to create images. In a show in 2005 she exhibited 320 small drawings on one wall and 150 paintings of canaries and budgerigars on the other.

For the 2005 show, *Weeping Wall*, Mitchell used old book endpapers, with their years of accumulated stains and foxing, for the drawings. Done with a fine-tipped brush, watercolour and wash, the paper works were a surreal mix of images, with a cartoonish edge. As Virginia Were, writing in *Art News*, commented: 'The drawings held our gaze with their graphic, illustrative and sometimes wonky detail — you could have been forgiven for thinking you had stumbled into a tattooist's parlour or the pages of a super-sized comic book.' There were snakes and copulating frogs. One repeated image was the head of the 1930s socialite Nancy Mitford, with her tight cloche hairdo, cupid's-bow lips and cocktail shoes (all the rest of her body being omitted). A number of these works were overtly pornographic, creating an odd feel because of the old papers and dated drawing style. Mitchell used cloth-bound, hardback book covers for the birds, rendered in acrylic. The cute domestic pets, beloved of elderly ladies, made a strange audience for the mass of drawings opposite. If any strait-laced viewer found the drawings shocking, the paintings offered an immediate, safe alternative. These drawings are an ongoing project.

In 2006 Mitchell took up an idea she had worked on in art school — painting on the reverse side of sheets of acrylic in the manner of eastern European naïve glass painters. This demanding technique involves doing everything backwards — what would







normally be the last touches to be made are actually the first, and the background is painted in last. This gives the finished work something of the layered effect of a screenprint, a discipline Mitchell also learned at art school. The process came naturally to Mitchell, who is dyslexic. The first works in this style were tattoos drawn on nudes taken from 1960s girlie magazines. More recent work, from 2007 and 2008 depicted determined-looking men's and girls' heads in unnatural colours, and children's torsos. Tattoo imagery, such as skulls, scrolls and snakes, was rather incongruously 'superimposed' (actually underimposed) on the forms.

In 2008 Mitchell exhibited her *Bearded Men* series, applying her reversal technique to male subjects, such as US general Ulysses S Grant. This show was in association with her former art-school colleague Gavin Hurley (44). Both artists have an interest in the human head, but their styles could hardly be more different. Mitchell's interest in comics and tattoos also aligns her with Freestone (32).

Above top: *Electric Eyes*, 2007. Acrylic on Perspex, 1000 x 1000 mm.

Above bottom and right: *Untitled (watercolour series)*, 2008. Watercolour on paper, each 148 x 210 mm.

