

ART

The object of her reading

The physical world of novels by Joan Didion and Truman Capote inspired Erica van Zon's new exhibition.

by GUY SOMERSET

Erica van Zon has it on reserve but Wellington City Libraries' copy of Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1971) is still out on loan so she is only able to show me the other two novels – Didion's *Run, River* (1963) and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) – that have inspired her latest exhibition, *The Light on the Dock*.

Van Zon is “obsessed with making stuff by hand” and we are in the tiny studio where she has made the objects for her City Gallery Wellington show drawn from visually minded close readings of Didion's and Capote's novels.

So close are the readings I had assumed she'd own the novels, but van Zon is content to borrow these and the other books in her life from the library. It's the reading that matters, not the *thing*. Although things are very much at the heart of her exhibition.

Working with a variety of materials – from textiles to clay to wood to papier mâché – van Zon has taken objects, characters and themes in the novels and interpreted them to differing degrees of abstraction, getting, as she puts it, “quite fruity with it”.

As she talks me through the works she has chopped from the show (“I've got so much stuff. It's out of control”), she mentions the fortnight she spent making a life-size coyote: “When I look at him, I kind of cringe. It goes into this soft-toy

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realm. It doesn't feel as sophisticated as some of the other objects.”

With human characters, she was less literal-minded. “I haven't painted their portrait or taken a photograph of how I imagined them or got a model to do it. I've actually put objects in place of them.

“A good example of that is my portrait of Lily from *Run, River*, which is these pink tiles and this pear. It references a couple of key things in the novel I associate with her. She vomits on some pink tiles and she was making pear marmalade on the day her father died, and I thought that would provide a nice simple abstracted portrait of her. I guess you could read even more into it about family relationships and four people making up a whole and four tiles.”

As the title of the exhibition suggests, F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was originally part of the project, but the bombast of Baz Luhrmann's film version

and the realisation “there aren't actually that many objects that stick out, because it's a very short story, very refined” put paid to that.

Working on the show has refocused van Zon's reading eye. She's a romantic, so before “would probably have got lost in the narrative as opposed to the physical world that's portrayed”.

And once she starting homing in on that physical world, did she find the objects significant to the meaning of the novels, more than decorative?

“Definitely. Especially when it comes to Didion. I think they are really strategic. Because they are actually quite sparse, especially in *Play It As It Lays*. So I think she's used them very carefully. Whereas with Capote, it's all just over-abundance. There's just so much of it.” ■

ERICA VAN ZON: THE LIGHT ON THE DOCK, City Gallery Wellington, November 16-January 26.



Melted Ice Cream and Cones (Neapolitan) (2013); below, Erica van Zon.

