

Richard Orjis



Garden Cities of Tomorrow



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From February to June 2014, artist Richard Orjis returned to Whanganui where he spent the first six years of his life to be artist-in-residence at Tylee Cottage. In conversation with Greg Donson, Curator and Public Programmes Manager at the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua, Orjis discusses his post-residency exhibition *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* which was on view at the Sarjeant from 28 February – 24 May, 2015 and at Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland from 26 August – 19 September, 2015.

Greg Donson: How was it coming back to the place where you were born? What were your memories of growing up on Durie Hill?

Richard Orjis: I was born in Whanganui and left with my family when I was six years old. I have always remembered it fondly, the long cloudy river, the Durie Hill Elevator and the pole house my parents built on Durie Hill amongst the trees. I hold a fondness for the city; my identity is wrapped up in the place, even though I had only returned a handful of times in the intervening thirty years. It was in Whanganui that I discovered how magical gardens can be. As a child I remember getting lost in our neighbour's garden, following winding paths in what seemed like a jungle of vegetation and discovering a hidden place - a circle of bricks surrounded by trees. Plants and circles have become a recurring theme in much of my work.

How did the idea of exploring the 'Garden Suburb' for which Durie Hill was one of the first in New Zealand come about?

I discovered the original plan for the suburb which was designed by Samuel Hurst Seager while I was

researching during my residency. An initial conversation with historian Wendy Pettigrew sparked my interest in this unique piece of urban planning and then I followed this up with further research and discussions with locals, the Sarjeant Gallery and Whanganui Regional Museum staff. I was interested in exploring the evolution of the suburb. From its planning by architect Samuel Hurst Seager and its layout in the 1920s when Whanganui was a thriving provincial town (which was ultimately thwarted by WWI & II and the depression) to the mid 1970s when my parents moved to the city for work. For them the move was where they began a family and built a home with all the hopes and expectations of a young couple. In contrast there is now a certain level of anxiety rather than optimism about the possibilities and opportunities that life in provincial New Zealand can offer. As an artist I found the artistic community and the city's rich history creatively stimulating.

Did the ideology of a 'Garden Suburb' tie in with areas of interest that you have been exploring in your work in recent years, ie community gardens and ideas of communities working together?



When I came to Whanganui I knew I wanted to explore the idea of gardens so discovering Hurst Seager's plans for Durie Hill as a 'Garden Suburb' was the perfect link. The act of gardening is inherently optimistic, planting a seed is an act that communicates a belief that there will be a tomorrow. I think there is a general understanding that the more green spaces a city offers then the better it is for its inhabitants. During my time in Whanganui there was a lot of debate around the retention of the plane trees along Taupō Quay and this was indicative of just how much importance people do place on trees as something that contributes to the beauty of their city and their wellbeing. I love the beautiful oxygen / carbon dioxide exchange which illustrates our relationship to plants. All of my work is searching for a way to understand our links with the natural world. The idea of the 'Garden Suburb' originated in the 19th century as a result of Ebenezer Howard's important publication *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* and ideas of building communities through shared spaces, the natural environment and affordable housing are all issues that are still topical today and are being explored by city planners and contemporary artists.

Tell us about the work that features in the exhibition, you've used the word 'optimism' in relation to the work, how do you think this is expressed in the works?

When we plan or think of the future it can only ever be a guess as it is impossible to know what will unfold in front of us. So the idea of being pessimistic seems counter-productive. Nature is always in motion, evolving, adapting and thinking of its survival. In creating the work for the exhibition I wanted to hold onto this notion of optimism, an act of drawing from history and creating a metaphor for a sort of hopefulness.

The still life photograph that features in the exhibition is anything but still and feels energetic and quietly confident in its seeming haphazardness. Would you say the residency allowed you to free up your photographic process, is there a stylistic shift or a continuation?

My practice is constantly shifting and there is a desire to explore new modes. The use of light has changed and the compositions have become less formal. The still life in the exhibition features a ceramic work that I created while I was on the residency and a member of the local Potters Society.

The plants were gathered from the garden of a house on Durie Hill where I stayed over the Christmas period and it was important to me that the plants were gathered from the hill and were home grown. To me it references one of my favourite artworks *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. The frantic composition alludes to the chaos of nature and the act of creation and procreation.

What is it about working in textiles that appeals? The banner you produced for the exhibition is beautiful and detailed, what is it you enjoy about this process and why textiles? Was it a nod to the Arts and Crafts sensibilities that were fashionable at the time of Hurst Seager designing the suburb of Durie Hill?

I'm attracted to the simplified and coded language of flags and banners. They are often used to warn us of danger, express national pride or political positions. The banner in the exhibition features the original circular plan devised by British urban planner Ebenezer Howard and illustrated in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* Samuel Hurst Seager designed Durie Hill using similar principles to Howard's, curvilinear streets, green areas and recreational areas. It was a utopian vision that combined the best of town and country living and sought to balance individual and community needs.

I wasn't consciously thinking about the Arts & Crafts movement but it is a very valid reference point, just as the original artists and craftspeople were reacting against mass industrialisation I too see the appeal of re-establishing our links with the natural world, the handmade and the slowing down of contemporary life. There is something unique about working with our hands in this day and age when everything is so mass produced and machine made. A simple hand stitch, a thumb print in a ceramic bowl humanises an object. I like the idea that just as we can never be perfect, neither can objects, by accepting or finding beauty in the 'faults' of the handmade I hope that we may find a gentler way of approaching our own shortcomings.

What about the gold plated tools that feature in the exhibition?

Gold is used to indicate value and the sacred, the work is a juxtaposition between these two notions and the everyday. Working with the land is often viewed as a humble activity and the work is an act of renegotiating that status. Gardening links us with the earth, our survival and ultimately ourselves and mortality.

The raft is perhaps the work in the show that visitors might find perplexing, Whanganui has a history of raft races on the river, but what was the broader idea of featuring a raft in the exhibition?

The river is ever present 'Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au' - 'I am the river and the river is me'. Given that the Whanganui River is at the foot of Durie Hill I felt that it was very important to reference it in the exhibition. The river is such an integral part of the city's pre and post-colonial history and has played a major role in transportation and trade. From the early 1970s an annual raft race took place on the river and I liked how this event embodies the New Zealand tradition of DIY and ties in with Seager's desire for people to be more engaged with their natural environment and leisure pursuits. Throughout natural and human history the raft has been an essential component of migration for plant, animal and human life. It is a symbol of survival, freedom and self-discovery as in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The biblical ark of Noah is also a metaphor for ecological and spiritual survival.

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