

PETER GETS OLD COPIES OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC FROM SAM MITCHELL AT MAGAZINO

It may come as a surprise that Auckland-based artist Sam Mitchell has no tattoos, given her fascination with them in her artwork. But then Mitchell's work itself can seem contradictory. Her seemingly naïve portraiture is decorated with finely detailed tattoos that more often than not seem inappropriate in their setting, producing images that are provocative but also great to look at and intellectually stimulating.

Mitchell was born in the United States, the daughter of an American father (an architect), and a Russian mother (a baking-extraordinaire "Betty Crocker in flares"). The family migrated to New Zealand when she was a young girl. Mitchell attended Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland in the 1990s, where she was mentored by New Zealand artists Dick Frizzell and Louise Fong. Since leaving Elam with a Master of Fine Arts, Mitchell has been making waves with her unique blend of styles and materials.

Mitchell says her character studies are mainly based on real people, painted cartoon-style and embellished with tattoo designs. In applying these tattoos, she creates a manufactured personal history for them. Around the turn of the 19th century, sailors who had drowned and washed ashore were often identified by their tattoos, tattoos that told a story about not only who they were, but also where they had been and what they'd experienced. The inked images served as a travelogue of their life's voyage. The sailors would have come across the practice of tattooing among various tribal groups throughout their travels, and adapted the art to suit their purpose – something Mitchell has in turn done herself. She points out that the images depicted in the sailors' tattoos, and indeed in tattooing today, are not always based in truth. Tattoos are often seen as a sign the wearer is strong and courageous, but, of course, this is not always the case. Mitchell explores this in her use of tattoo designs, and of these images she says: "Some are truths, some are lies."

These portraits, which constitute a kind of subversive take on traditional portraiture, are inspired also by vintage tattoo 'flash' – the practice of drawing the designs onto paper or cardboard. Mitchell's images are reverse-painted;

meaning acrylic paint is used to paint onto Perspex, which is then turned over for display. The resulting image is slick and intense. The works replicate not only the way a tattoo can seem to float, suspended on an otherwise bare stretch of skin, but early cartoon sketching, and the use of a series of images. Jim Shaw, an illustrative pop artist and member of the Chicago Imagists art movement based in the group's namesake city, who began experimenting with acrylic reverse painting around the mid-20th century, is named as an influence. Mitchell also professes to a love of cartoons and while seemingly naïve at first glance, her images often deal with a darker subject matter. In the ironically-named *Nice Day for a White Wedding* (2008), a smiling '50s bride is 'tattooed' with a skull and crossbones on her forehead and a bannered heart that warns 'love lies'.

Another theme throughout Mitchell's work is the use of various animals. Some of the images again have deeper meanings, such as the snakes that unfurl from women's open mouths and the frog that has gone in for more than a kiss and seems to have all but consumed his princess, but in some of them, her drawing and painting skill is perhaps more obvious. *Canary Row* (2005) is a straightforward image of two birds, depicted in luscious jewel-like colours. These works are painted onto the covers and title and end pages of old library books, which references back to the tattoo flashes and cartoon sketches. The decision to use old books (often withdrawn library books) was initially a practical one, with it being a cheap source of paper, but Mitchell also recognised the ability of the stained, stamped paper to provide a pre-existing personality which in turn influenced what she chose to paint on it.

Mitchell's work has not gone unnoticed in New Zealand art circles. As well as an upcoming solo show at the Anna Bibby Gallery, named *Brides & Budgies*, starting May 27, her work is also featured in two new publications, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Portraiture*, compiled by Richard Wolfe, and *100 Top New Zealand Artists*, by Warwick Brown.

Interview Tessa King *Image Girls Just Wanna* by Sam Mitchell



