

City Gallery Wellington
16 Nov. 2013—26 Jan. 2014
Free entry

The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon



Hirschfeld Gallery

Artist talk
Saturday 16 Nov., 2pm
Free entry

Erica van Zon
Melted Ice Cream and Cones (Neapolitan),
2013, modelling material, acrylic.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Caroline Atkinson.



The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon

Joan Didion's 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*' first chapter opens with Maria Wyeth driving the freeway, San Diego to Ventura and back each day. She wears a cotton skirt, sandals, a hair ribbon. She drives fast, compulsively and without braking, and at night, as she sleeps by the pool under a beach towel, she dreams of the great road signs soaring overhead. The Beverley Hills setting is as slick and opaque as a movie scene, and as readers we are instantly watchful for clues to who this person is, how she thinks, what will happen next. While it is through close third person perspective and Maria's internal monologue that we navigate the plot, her voice is increasingly alienating, the dialogue painfully stark and vacuous.

In this bleak landscape, almost empty of adjectives and character description, it is the settings and objects that are most plainly evident. A general conversation about the novel quickly moves to discussion of its telling particulars: Maria's Dexadrine, Maria's ubiquitous bikini, Maria's Corvette, the hard boiled eggs on the front seat and the sun-warmed Coca Cola she drinks on gas station forecourts during her relentless drives. The synthetic haze of her Hollywood life is given form in a series of objects: an artificial lemon, plastic plants and air conditioners, while her nihilistic psychological state is emphasised through frequent references to blankness and whiteness: immaculate white sheets, white crepe pyjamas, a white chenille bed spread and Princess telephone. These details take on increasing symbolic weight. At some point it seems we might almost erase the character from the plot entirely, considering in her absence the objects as vehicles of the story.

Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948) by Truman Capote opens on the road bound for Noon City, desolate except for signs advertising Red Dot 5 Cigars, Dr Pepper, Nehi soda and Grove's Chill Tonic. Before we meet the main character, any of the characters, we are offered a cinematic picture of the setting, and the images of products which punctuate the horizon. Worldly, masculine, and quintessentially American, these images foreground a narrative

that hinges on the coming of age of a young boy, Joel Knox. The world he enters is high Southern Gothic, surrealistically bedecked with gloves and pianolas and girandoles, cotton candy and porch hammocks, gold-teethed gentlemen and giant watermelons. Even minor characters come with distinguishing props—Zoo Fever the house girl has a silk neckerchief and an accordion; Joel's father rolls red tennis balls from his sick-bed to call for attention.

For Erica van Zon, the novels of Didion and Capote are an intensely visual experience, one defined by objects. Reading three of her favourites, Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and *Run, River* (1963), and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Capote, she began listing the objects which inhabit them. For her these were the most significant element of the narrative, setting the stage for the characters to occupy and events to unfold on. A number of common motifs quickly became apparent: snakes, blood, the desert, guns. Despite their many and fundamental differences, these books share territory. Risk, loneliness and desire are sub-text in all three. They also share in an essentially American idiom, and an often conflicted nostalgia for youth. In van Zon's project these commonalities are inflected in an array of objects, isolated from their origins and then offered back as a kind of material refrain to the original texts.

Early in her research van Zon established the tonal signature which would ultimately underpin the exhibition: a kind of decadent squalor, where sweetness is always saccharine, the light is always gold, where Coca Cola and tobacco and melancholy are omnipresent. The objects she identified and constructed were literal translations of what she found in the novels, and it is these small recognisable pieces which form the greater part of the exhibition. Remakes have long been a core part of the artist's practice. Early projects included the reconstruction of a film set from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, a performance piece lip-synching as Connie Stevens singing the 1960 hit single 'Sixteen Reasons', and numerous painted film posters.¹ In these works the 'fake' becomes a new form, dislocated from its origin, and apparently sincere in its formal intent.²

