

Exhibiting the Unwritten Future¹ **By Abby Wendy**

Anarchy.
Revolution.
Earth shaking.
Glass smashing.
Life changing.
Door opening.
Hiding in plain sight.
Destruction.
Construction.
Exposure.
Silence.
Waiting.
Watching.
The future...?

The Future is Unwritten, curated by Laura Preston, opened 10 July 2009 at the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington. The gallery is hidden in plain sight. It nestles between academics, students, books, and classrooms like the school nerd that tries to appear aloof, mysterious and cultured but only looks lonely, weird and uncool. Maybe it is trying too hard?

I like it. I care about it. I wish it well. It would never have occurred to me to throw a brick through the window of Adam Art Gallery.

Standing outside the gallery on a cold, dark winter's night, Daniel Malone heaves a brick. Spray paint and flying glass. He breaks and enters, not by following his brick through the window but by following the crowd through the front doors that open in welcome for the guests to the opening of *The Future is Unwritten*. They come in. They enter this space reserved for creative expression and leave the world outside in the cold.

Outside is the world of politics and economy. Outside there is a war on terror. Outside there is a financial crisis. Outside people are hungry, cold, afraid and dying. Outside the trees are melting off the earth's surface. The fish are dying. Deserts expand. Tides rise. People lose their homes. People lose their jobs. People lose the love of their life. People lose their direction.

¹ Thanks to Laura Preston for a candid and generous interview.

Is the Adam Art Gallery a haven? Does this exhibition have the answers to the problems of our present? Is there a vision to inspire our future?

The Future is Unwritten is a Forrest Gump box of chocolates, 'You never know what you are going to get'. Nine artists answered Preston's call to exercise their skill, philosophy and intuition to the time, space and movements of a shared moment. The artists are Fiona Connor, William Hsu, Daniel Malone, Kate Newby, Martyn Reynolds, Peter Trevelyan, Amit Charan, Narrow Gauge and Kelvin Soh.

When I stepped inside *The Future is Unwritten*, a scarlet carpet lit my body from below in a wide open, bare walled space that exposed me – clueless, searching, hoping, and self-conscious. Already lost and confused. My nerdy friend (Adam Art Gallery) was sexed up in this racy red number designed by Kate Newby, which was presented along with a sanctuary – a private inside loft with space for one or two intimate people – hidden up a narrow flight of stairs, away from the public gaze. Inside the gallery, inside the exhibition, inside the cubby hole was a place to hide, to think and to be safe. Or perhaps to be cornered, trapped and imprisoned. Perhaps it depends on your point of view. Does the public gaze threaten or protect?

Perhaps it depends on your ability to assimilate and belong. Peter Trevelyan's almost invisible pyramid made of pencil leads lurked shyly in a grey, windowless exhibition room. The fragile structure relied for protection on its own aesthetic beauty and the self-imposed restraint and care of gallery visitors. As Katie Musgrove reports as she played her part in the artwork of Martyn Reynolds, 'When I first walked in I thought it was a hologram. I approached slowly and had a good look; I kept my hands at my sides as I would have loved to touch it. I looked at it from all angles, bending over, tilting my head sideways, and peering closer'.²

² Katie Musgrove, Report from Adam Art Gallery performance for the artist Martyn Reynolds at the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten*, 6 August 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/reynolds/>

Laura Preston asked the artists to consider the gallery existing inside the university campus 'to consider the shape of power, and the appeal to 'un-write' and model alternatives to the institutions we know'.³ William Hsu imagined an earthquake powerful enough to change the topography of Wellington. Victoria University currently perches on a hill overlooking the city of Wellington but Hsu created a simulation of an earth movement that would bring the institution back down to ground level. This is a long way to fall but theoretically the change could occur in the future. Why suggest this? Who would gain? Would it lead to greater equality? A better future?

I emailed the nine artists of this exhibition and asked them what they believed about the role of artists in the present and for the future. 'To inspire! Spiritual enlightenment! Philosophical dialogue! Experiential sensationalism! Catalytic empathy!'. I hoped they would reply. Three of the artists replied but sadly none of them had the time or inclination to respond to my questions. As a viewer I am left to speculate and form an independent hypothesis. Do these artists know their own role? Why do they do what they do?

For *The Future is Unwritten* Fiona Conner made recommendations for reducing the energy consumption of the Adam Art Gallery. She hoped her recommendations for the gallery's policies on air conditioning, lighting, paint, travel and solar panels would have a long term effect to reduce negative impacts on the environment. During the exhibition, the offices of the gallery staff were moved into the gallery itself putting Christina Barton, the Director, Laura Preston, the Assistant Curator, Anton Berndt, the Exhibitions Officer, and Thomasin Sleight, the Gallery Administrator, under the scrutiny of the gallery visitors.

In an interview after the exhibition finished, Laura Preston talked about the desire to make 'situations that are slightly unpredictable', shaping a transition through a time of uncertainty and acting a little more intuitively. The Adam Art Gallery was her blank canvas and the artists were arranged through the

³ Laura Preston, *Another form of the three-act structure: Proposal, proposition, reflexivity*, Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, 2009.

space, and on the website, to create a multi-layered, multi-purpose, art experience that was intimately personal. Preston said, 'I'm kind of aware that curatorial practice in New Zealand is really in need of dialogue and criticality and self-reflexivity but everything I believe, any change or every sense of revolution, has to come from within'.

Preston created an opportunity for artists and gallery visitors to criticise the power institution of the gallery itself and by giving up a little control she allowed changes that impacted her personally, the gallery and the staff. Martyn Reynolds asked people to write about an experience outside the gallery and then had them re-enact part of that experience inside the Adam Art Gallery allowing a direct contrast between the different experiences, as well as insights into the exhibition's reception.

Ray Goldstein said, 'The cloth wall painting reminded me of a stained handkerchief, and I almost automatically took out a tissue from my pocket and blew my nose... I went up the stairs to nowhere and was disappointed at the lack of much to see, inside or out. Perhaps my poor vision, or just lack of imagination?'⁴

Karen Munroe wrote of her Goldilocks-like exploration trying out three different chairs in the gallery situated office space, '...the second chair which was facing the reception area in the central table made me feel as if I was in the interview room. It felt a bit harsher and more confrontational than the first chair. The chair facing it, gave a feeling of greater authority and I had fun coasting around on the wheels of the chair and twirling around in the chair.'⁵

Katie Musgrove found the experience uncomfortable saying 'I really struggled to find the 'art' so seemed to walk aimlessly through areas sighing often and getting bored... The gallery was pretty quiet – I am quite a noisy person, I

⁴ Ray Goldstein, Report from Adam Art Gallery performance for the artist Martyn Reynolds at the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten*, 6 August 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/reynolds/>

⁵ Karen Munroe, Report from Adam Art Gallery performance for the artist Martyn Reynolds at the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten*, 6 August 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/reynolds/>

struggled with the silence.”⁶ In her ‘home suburb performance’, Katie visited a mall and watched the shoppers but also had little patience with that experience, ‘I put my hands together then touched each matching finger to each other, backwards and forwards for about three times. I sighed loudly again, I was getting bored; I checked my mobile phone for the time. It had been twelve minutes but seemed like an hour.’⁷

Kelvin Soh’s contribution to the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten* was a series called *9 Mirrors*. This consisted of online dialogues about being a conceptual or experiential artist which were linked with images of the sky:

FEMALE: You can take a map, for instance, and ride in certain areas, cover certain areas in certain days, and maybe record what you’ve seen in these areas and write it down in a notebook, or something...

MALE: I don’t know. I don’t know.

FEMALE: It could be very stimulating to the mind.

MALE: Nah, I just want to get on the bicycle and ride, man. I just wanna ride all over. I just wanna go riding around. I’m gonna feel the sunshine, you know, I just love it.⁸

Art and life do not have to involve a choice between philosophy and experience. The layered nature of this exhibition and its focus on multiplicity speak of a desire for a greater connection between art, life, artists and audiences, with the art gallery and curator playing a facilitating role that enables the meeting place between creation and experience. People crave information because they are seeking meaning in life and in art but they also desire entertainment. Artists, on the other hand, are in the difficult position of needing to generate income and forge a career but simultaneously retain autonomy and be true to their creative inspiration. Fostering an air of mystery and subversive behaviour may balance the inner truth with outer necessity.

⁶ Katie Musgrove, Report from Adam Art Gallery performance for the artist Martyn Reynolds at the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten*, 6 August 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/reynolds/>

⁷ Katie Musgrove, Report from Adam Art Gallery performance for the artist Martyn Reynolds at the exhibition *The Future is Unwritten*, 6 August 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/reynolds/>

⁸ Kelvin Soh, *9 Mirrors: Mirror 3*, Adam Art Gallery, *The Future is Unwritten*, 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/soh/>

Laura Preston said, 'History proves that revolution and its abrupt overhaul only end up with a shifting back to the same model of power. How then does any rewriting of the status quo occur and avoid being co-opted, marketed back to us, and used by the powerful?' This statement puts a finger on the act of knowing without knowing that artists tap into for inspiration. Sometimes an attempt to articulate a vision for the future will be twisted and used against the people who need change the most. Leaving an artwork ambiguous allows for a dialogue and a multiplicity of meanings to associate with the work.

Yet this 'freedom' of interpretation can become sheer confusion when an artist's vision is inaccessible or incomprehensible to the viewing public. It is elitist to expect an art gallery visitor to have the tools and knowledge to interpret cryptic symbolism and references to art history. A balance should be struck between the needs of the artist and the needs of the viewer. The role of the curator is to strike this balance and to meet these needs for the benefit of the discipline of art, humanity in need of inspiration, and artists in need of opportunities for expressive creativity.

Daniel Malone threw a brick, smashing the window of the Adam Art Gallery on 10 July 2009. Not because he was angry, not because he disregards the law, not in rebellion, but simply to open up an opportunity for creativity in the uncertain space created by destruction. Humanity has cause for unhappiness with the status quo in art and reality. I respect the courage and humility of the Adam Art Gallery and Laura Preston in breaking down barriers to change, and encouraging criticism and dialogue as a first step in the process of improving the present and rewriting the future.