



The first thing I notice is that there are no trees and in a strangely disquieting way, the feel of the show is light and airy. So how is it that the title is so apt? In dark trees. The very words conjure a cold foreboding, a forest - dank, drifts of leaf litter and earthy scents. Most unsettling is that sense that there could be something out there lurking just beyond my apprehension, shuffling through the leaves, and it's exactly that sense of the unknown and the unknowable that finds its way into this show.

## In dark trees

Three large digital photographic prints, each a found black and white (colonial) illustration of an individual native New Zealand bird in flight;<sup>1</sup> three large digital photographic prints of illustrations of canaries being hand-held that look like they were appropriated from a sixties 'how-to-care-for-your-canary' book.<sup>2</sup> One small flat video monitor mounted on the wall cycling through a series of what on first glance seems to be short, disparate video clips including the famous 'crane shot' from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, 50s science footage of two unknown men watching a flock of birds fly overhead and a plane crash scene from an episode of the X-files. It's only if you know the gallery that you notice that the skirting board of two of the walls of the gallery have been painted from white to

brown. Only then do you see sitting on the wooden floor behind the door, a small plaster cast rabbit painted the same brown as the skirting board.

So back to that light and airy feeling that pervades this show. It seems to come about through the images floating on large glossy white sheets of photographic paper. The illustrations of the native birds are devoid of any contextual information and the canaries are held by a flesh-toned hand that reaches into the image from the edge of the frame, again with no additional background information. The silver-edged flat screen monitor fits perfectly into this ontology. Strange in its neutrality, mounted to the wall as a companion to one of the images of a native bird, its video clips are all tightly selected collections of frames; static shots of an almost photographic sensibility. Yet again we are denied the contextualising background information, this time the panning shift and additional scenes of the source narratives. Gillam presents us with an upturning or an inversion; a dark disquiet formed through 'an ungrounding in whiteness.'

Gillam however, does not present us with an easy equation as we cannot simply see the birds as metaphors of the alien or the other or the unknown. Yes, darkness lurks in the white walls and the



reference to Hitchcock's birds suggests that they (Gillam's birds) may indeed know that sinister dark force. Our (human) presence is also noted, and we cannot simply read these images as iconic of our engagement with nature (both present and historic). The role we might be playing in the unfolding conspiracy of our relationship to (animal) nature is questioned. While the illustrations may have, in their original contexts, been celebrations of just that engagement, Gillam herself acknowledges that it is unclear just what the relationship between the human and animal elements of this work are. The hands which firmly but gently grasp the canaries may be protecting them, or they may be engaged in some other activity - perhaps related to selective breeding (possibly the X-files-esque conspiracy of the canary world).

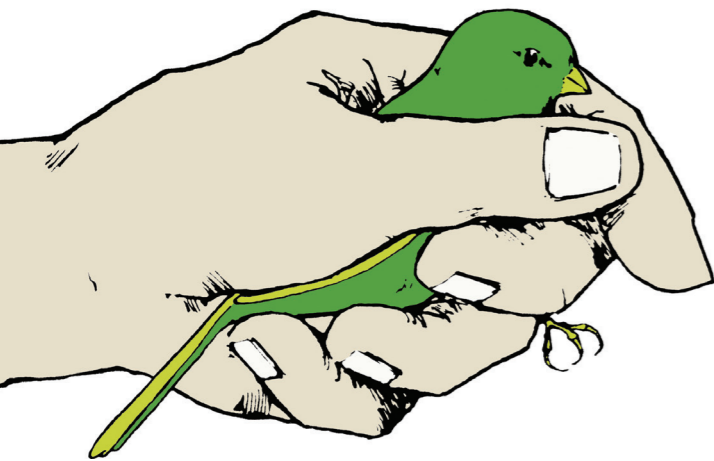
This is where I must ask myself that disturbing question, in this world of flight and light; is it me who is alien? Perhaps because of my particular socio-political sense of self<sup>3</sup> I have a tendency to easily see myself as other. Yet I believe that in this work as in her earlier work,<sup>4</sup> Gillam is deliberate in forcing that uncomfortable gap between our understanding of the human/animal relationship and our realisation of the complexity of the roles we might play in relation to our animal counterparts. What is particularly interesting about this work is the way in which the complexity of this

relationship is played out with very minimal means; it is achieved through allowing each element to signify a multiplicity of possible positions.

The rabbit is an excellent example of this multiplicity of signification. On a surface level it is stylised and simplified and so engages metaphors of innocence and purity - a reading which is underscored by it being painted a chocolatey colour and it making links with the Christian religious symbol popularised as the chocolate Easter Bunny. An inevitable connection to child-like joy, innocence and celebration is established here and this celebratory love of the animal becomes one of the background emotive resonances which underscore that pervasive sense of inversion in this show. This is further complicated by the formal, spatial and kinaesthetic characteristics that the rabbit contributes to the show. During my initial contemplation of the rabbit I asked myself 'Is the chocolate bunny hiding?', and 'why is the brown on the skirting boards sneaking out the door?'. The question of whether the rabbit is hiding comes about because it seems to be doing just that - its matt brown paint allows it to blend into the shadow behind the door and the wooden floor. Is it because the rabbit is painted the same colour as the altered skirting board that they draw attention to each other? Cast from a mousse mould, it has a flat base and acts

to anchor the installation. Your eye flits from this one small but weighty brown blob to the skirting boards and back again, engaging gravity as if it were a counterpoint to the flight of the birds above. So, the animals are both flight and weight in our world. A simple equation that Gillam then inverts by fragmenting the space of the gallery. Only half of the skirting board of the gallery is painted so either that is all the gravity needed in the work, or gravity can't hold the whiteness of the walls. In fact, by sneaking out the gallery door in the way that it does, the whole illusion of the work, or the illusion of the whole work, is inverted as the hermetic seal of the gallery is fractured.

The iconic colonial references of the rabbit cannot be ignored either. It is a theme made famous throughout the New Zealand art world by Michael Parekowhai with his gang of Beatrix Potter-esque 'rabbitkins'<sup>5</sup> of which Justin Paton wrote 'The official line on these feral cuties is that they dramatise the tussle between the indigenous and the imported in New Zealand culture<sup>6</sup> and 'But anthropomorphism, or the cult of the Cute, is among our most hard-wired cultural reflexes, and this show's achievement was to make that reflex fire so many times that the circuit shorted right out.'<sup>7</sup> While Gillam's rabbit certainly engages the post-colonial condition, it does so perhaps from the position of the introduced species, the alien in the landscape. For me, one of the most telling significations of the rabbit is that it is allowed to be cute without being anthropomorphised. So, humanely the rabbit is allowed to be animal and is not vilified for its non-human characteristics, or made to carry the burden of one hundred and fifty years of colonisation. These important cultural issues are all embodied in the work for



the rabbit is allowed to do what rabbits do - hide - camouflaged by its surroundings in a dark corner.

The video component of this work also operates in an understated and deceptively simple manner. As previously suggested, this tight selection of clips which do not pan, tilt or zoom, operate in a manner we would expect of the photographic rather than the filmic or cinematic. This 'stilling' structure is again an inversion of the current conventions of practice where we often see frames extracted from projected video content printed and framed as digital photographic stills, often in an attempt to direct the viewer's reading of the video's content. This more often than not results in either a patronising underestimation of the ability of the viewer to read the video content, and/or highlights the artist's inability to successfully exploit video media. Here instead, Gillam inserts a framed video into an existing suite of flat-to-the-wall digital photographic prints



(photography's kinaesthetic equivalent of the video projection) - not in an attempt to isolate particular references and direct readings, but as a counterpoint to them. This is achieved precisely because the video can sit within the body of still images due to its photographic nature, and because of their cycling through what is clearly a series of clips (defined by their to-and-from black). Rather than presenting a narrative construction, the viewer is asked to read each clip in relation to the suite of images on the wall. It is only after further contemplation that the viewer attempts to relate the clips to each other, and moves from an initial reading of the exhibition as one of simple visual associations towards a reading of complexity that eschews directed and reductive references.

It is in this second reading that you notice that the dialogue of the X-files Dana Scully and Fox Mulder<sup>8</sup> is sometimes their own and is sometimes flawlessly over dubbed by a line from the main protagonists of Hitchcock's *The Birds*.<sup>9</sup> It is when these two conspiracy epics are conflated with the other clips in the video component (which appear to be of scientists), that the true darkness of the content of this work is revealed. It is in this conflation of narratives that the cinematic is evoked, oddly, a very New Zealand kind of cinema. Here again is the entrance of the 'dark trees,' for this sense of the conspiracy of nature resonates with many New Zealand films in its positioning of man as alien in, and alienated by, nature<sup>10</sup> - a mainstay of Antipodean or New Zealand Gothic narrative cinema. I find myself asking if the antipodean gothic is an inscribed poetics of compassion for that which is alien.

Gillam, like many other artists who work with collected imagery (particularly photographic images), is concerned with the time signature of images and the manner in which they affect possible attendant readings in the work. Here again Gillam manages to seamlessly integrate the video and the digital photographic prints in this work. This is not achieved through having the elements hold equivalent time signatures but by having the elements each hold multiple time signatures. That is, both the prints and the video use contemporary developments in digital media to present images, loops and samples from a variety of time periods. This stretching of content across time differs both across and within



the two genres of media and again allows for a complexity of relationship to be established, or multiple positions to be held. Speed ramping<sup>11</sup> (a technique Gillam explores explicitly in the work she has developed directly after this exhibition)<sup>12</sup> is exploited here through the use of subtle slow motion. This has the dual effect of forcing distance into the subject/object relationship of audience and artwork, evoking the surrealism of cinematic temporal displacement, and, to paraphrase David Cox, underscores the psychological effect the object has on another character.<sup>13</sup> In the context of this show, it is the reiteration of the internalised relationship between the elements of the installation that again evoke the inherent alienation of the subject in the subject/object dialectic.

What unsettles me most is that the show as a whole adds up to be somehow less than the sum of its parts. I don't mean this in the reactionary anti-minimal cliché 'sometimes less is just less' sense of the statement. Quite the contrary, it is the elegant and economic use of means that makes this work so compelling and forthright. In this show I am less sure of my place in nature, of my relationship to animals and perhaps even of my sense of subject-hood. I can empathise with each element of the work and see myself, but always I am the alien ungrounded in this whiteness.

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Power, *Small Birds of the New Zealand Bush*, Auckland & London: Collins, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> *All About Canaries*, Australia: Rigby Ltd, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> I have often been characterised as and characterise myself as 'urbanised, globalised, de-tribalised Maori'.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically *Another Green World*, 2004, Michael Hirschfeld Gallery, City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> *The Beverly Hills Gun Club*, 2000, Gow Langsford Gallery Auckland, New Zealand.

<sup>6</sup> Justin Paton, 'Special Agent Michael Parekowhai's Generous Duplicity' in *Art New Zealand*, issue 103, 2002, p.59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *The X-Files File 8 Tempus Fugit*, Los Angeles: Ten Thirteen Productions, 1997. An episode involving a plane crash, alien abductees, and the usual covert forces.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, *The Birds*, USA: Universal Pictures, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly *Vigil*, *The Piano* and *UTU*.

<sup>11</sup> A process in which onscreen characters and events are shown to suddenly speed up and slow down.

<sup>12</sup> Video component of Gillam's exhibition *August Moon*, 2005, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin, New Zealand.

<sup>13</sup> David Cox, 'Speed Ramping' <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=340> 2002 'This has the effect of cinematically underscoring the psychological effect the filmed person has on another character.'