



Lawnmower (2010)

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

This year's Auckland Festival of Photography Annual Commission recipient, Russ Flatt, discusses his interpretation of the theme of 'Home' with Adrian Hatwell

Speaking of photography's duty to capture a moment before it vanishes, Henri Cartier-Bresson once cautioned, "We cannot develop and print a memory." But we can certainly give it a go, as Auckland photographer Russ Flatt has made beautifully clear over the last few years. Flatt, a highly regarded fashion shooter, recently turned his attention to art photography, with a series of personal projects mining his childhood memories to produce arresting photo-tableaux. The works have met with no shortage of acclaim, including netting Flatt the coveted Annual Commission as part of the 2016 Auckland Festival of Photography.

Established in 2011, the Annual Commission was the first award of its kind specifically

for photography-based artists in Aotearoa. Recipients are commissioned to create new work that is unveiled during the city-wide festival, which will this year take place during June 2–24. The award tends to mark a significant step in the career of the receiving artists; past winners include Roberta Thornley, James K Lowe, Jennifer Mason, Tanu Gago, and PJ Paterson. Flatt is happy to be keeping such company, the award coming at a perfect time in his unfolding fine-art practice.

"One of the great things is, because it's a commission, I have a budget to play with, which is quite a new experience for me," Flatt explains cheerily, adding that his usual funding strategy involves the punishing of personal credit cards.



Bedroom (2013)

"It's really nice to have a little bit of time and space to develop some ideas and execute them."

Each year, the festival is themed around a concept, which the commissioned artist is encouraged to engage with. For 2016, that theme was Home, and a better fit to Flatt's artistic leanings you could not want, with many of his intricately constructed scenes playing out across quintessentially suburban backdrops. Flatt's first solo show, *Perceiving Identity*, was made up of detailed environmental recreations of remembered moments from Flatt's adolescence, including intimate slices of home life.

One of these images sees an adult couple being intimate in a bedroom, while a young boy lies hidden beneath the bed. Lit and staged to suggest the aesthetics of documentary, it is a fine example of the photographer's playful mingling of authenticity with the constructed nature of memory and identity. Flatt included this image in his submission to the Annual Commission's judging panel, and it has since been used prominently in publicizing the event.

"That image has given me a starting point for where the work I make for the commission will come from. I'm taking ideas of suburban home life as a kind of anchor to the work," Flatt explains.



Half A Person (2015)

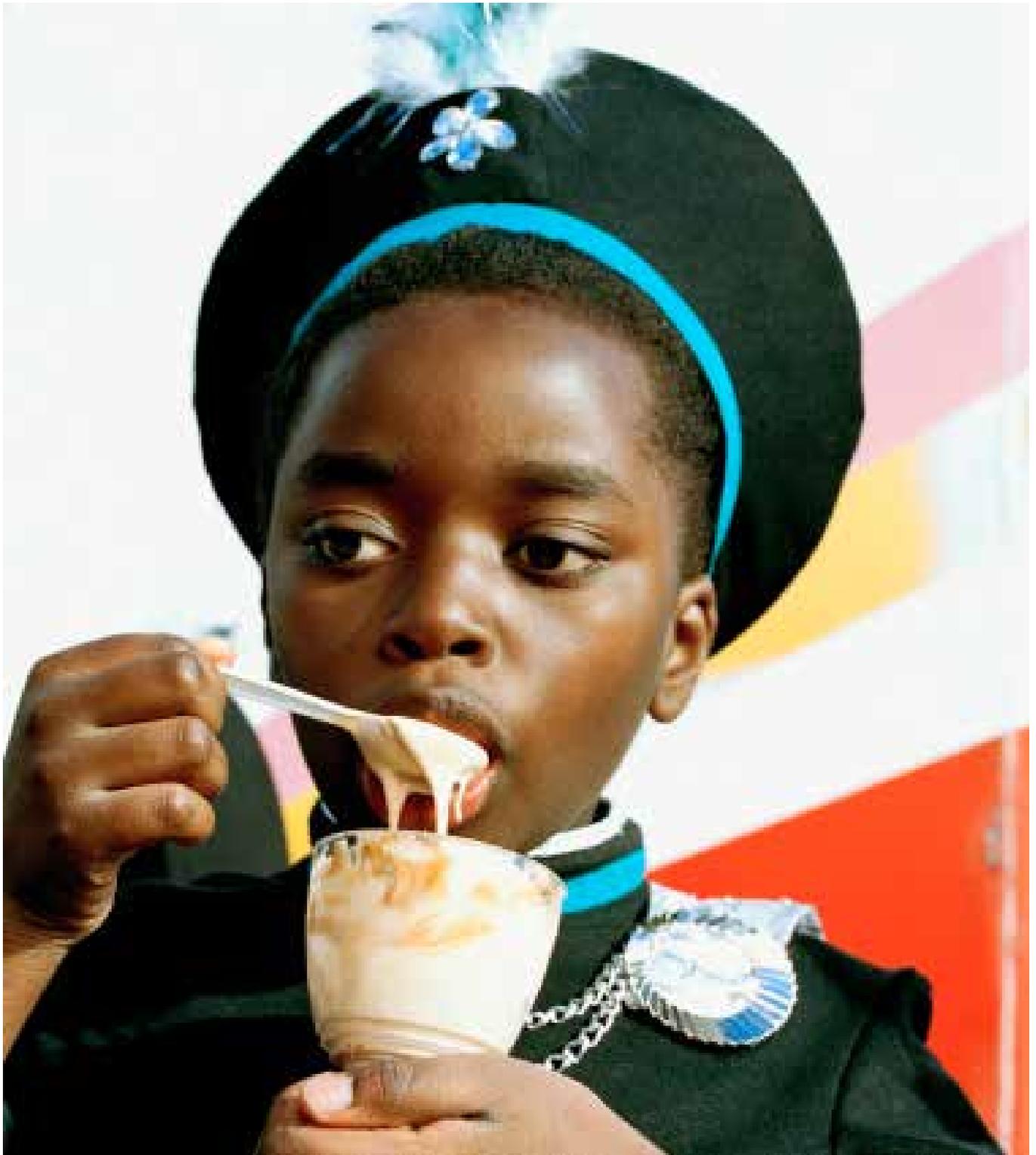
While the *Perceiving Identity* exhibition also comprised some portrait and documentary images, the photographer will stick solely to environmental tableaux for his commissioned work.

"I'm going to make it quite tight. I only have three wall spaces, so I can make between three and five works. My goal is for each work to be able to sit alone as a powerful image," he says.

His second solo show, *Paper Planes*, showcased his body of work that most explicitly deals with the idea of home. The photo series continues to explore memories

of childhood through intricately constructed narrative scenes, this time in a range of domestic settings: a family assembles in the living room for a group portrait, lawns are mowed, a young boy rides on the back of his father's bicycle, fences are chatted over, bedroom windows are escaped through. Each image is heavy with its own ambiguous story.

"I think the works need a certain tension, a strong family narrative, to be successful in my eyes," Flatt explains. "Then it's up to the viewer to figure out what it means to them. I try not to give too much away in the narrative, to leave it open to interpretation."



Sundae (2013)

A distinct trait tying all of the photographer's personal work together is his use of recurring cast members — most prominently, a young model who stands in for the artist as a child. When I catch up with Flatt to discuss the commission work, he has not yet begun shooting, but the ideas are all there. It will be set in the late 1980s, and will again feature the boy and his parents, and probably the inclusion of a grandmother and a childhood friend.

"It's going to be fraught with comedy and anxiety," Flatt says.

Using a returning cast presents the photographer with certain difficulties. The young boy at the centre of the series is now 15 years old, which means he has outgrown the artist's remembrance of that time period. It's a challenge that Flatt looks forward to grappling with. "It's good, the memories are not so literal now, they are getting to be very mashed up and fragmented. More experimental. It's fun now. In the beginning it wasn't, but it is now," he says.

At the time of our interview, the photographer's top priority is finding a location for the project. With Paper Planes, he



When I say jump (2015)



Swimming Pool #3 (2013)



Car (2013)

was lucky enough to happen upon an ideal space at the perfect time: a street of heritage houses that had been completely cleared out for relocation following the closure of the Royal New Zealand Air Force base in Hobsonville, Auckland.

"The following week after I shot, they basically cut the houses in half and shifted them off and sold them," Flatt says. "I was lucky I had that street to play with. But they made me pay for it, for sure."

To shoot the newly commissioned work, he's hoping to find a house already infused with

a late '80s vibe, to cut down on the need for set dressing. His hunting ground has been the property listings on Trade Me, where he hopes to find an empty house with owners who are open to the idea of a shoot before selling. It's not an approach the photographer has used before, but he feels it makes sense: "I kind of figure, if somebody is selling a house and it hasn't sold yet, and it's sitting there, and they want some money ... I would do it."

Property hunting is far from the only thing on the busy photographer's to-do list. As well as creating new work for the



Dais (2015)

Auckland Festival of Photography, Flatt is also working on another solo project entitled *Night Bus*, which explores the world of underage nightclubbing.

"It's about a young boy [who] ... travels from suburbia on the night bus to a club on a school night," explains Flatt. "The only way to gain admission to the nightclub is to be underage."

Swerving from the memory-based practice that informs his Annual Commission work, *Night Bus* will be a fictionalized exploration akin to Flatt's third solo show in 2015, *Nationals*, which delved into the world of competitive artistic roller skating. A mix of in-the-ring portraiture and formally posed environmental studies, the series takes viewers

into a world of skates and sequins infused with a heady adolescent mix of awkwardness and confidence.

Although the scenario for *Nationals* was completely fabricated so Flatt could have complete control over the narrative, there is a personal connection to the niche '80s sport — the photographer himself was a figure roller skater in childhood. That experience no doubt contributed to the strong documentary feel of the project, which leaves viewers wondering if they are looking at real roller skaters or models.

Flatt's Annual Commission work will be unveiled on June 2 at Auckland's Silo Park, where attendees will view the works inside



Bicycle (2010)



Positive Mental Attitude (2015)



CSH11ONO (2015)

one of the now-empty waterfront silos that once housed the cement from which much of Auckland City was constructed. From there, the work will wing its way to China to be part of a group show, thanks to the Auckland Festival of Photography's connections with the Asia Pacific Photoforum organization. The international prospect has the photographer very excited, as he had been thinking about his career in a very local context up to this point: "You get in that space, and you make, and you show, and you forget there's the rest of the world out there. That's the beauty of living here."

And it's not just the photographer's images that will travel, either. As a winner in last year's Wallace Art Trust awards, Flatt will fly to the US later this year, where he will embark on a three-month artist residency in Vermont.

With a practice rooted deeply in experience and memory of childhood in Aotearoa, Flatt will export exquisite, specific slices of home throughout the world. And we of the hometown audience will watch eagerly to see what international eyes make of these regional peculiarities and universal similarities.