

## The raw power of the line

*The rhythmic and repetitive imagery in Andrew Blythe's paintings creates a taut beauty, hovering between structure and spontaneity.*

Andrew Blythe's studio is not your average artist's space. It's a corner area, about two by three metres, with an easel, chair and storage rack for artworks, in a large room with six people sitting round a large table nearby, chatting, weaving kete, painting and writing. Upstairs there's a dance class under way, and somewhere a couple of guitar players strum their instruments, their music floating around the space. But Andrew Blythe is not your average artist – he's been turning up at Toi Ora Live Art Trust in Newton almost every day for the past 12 years, settling into his space and quietly getting into his work.

And his work has been getting out there in the past decade. His paintings have been shown at the past three New York Outsider Art Fairs, a group show at Galerie Impaire in Paris in 2009, and they'll be included in a four-artist show which is about to travel to Liège, Belgium, this month. His Sydney dealer, Darren Knight, held a successful

show of Blythe's paintings in March this year; his Auckland gallerist, Tim Melville, has his second exhibition coming up in June this year, and his works have been acquired by collectors in the United States and Europe, and by the Chartwell Collection and James Wallace Art Trust in New Zealand.

But it's been a circuitous route to the success of the present day. "I was brought up with art in our home," he recalls. "My father was a graphic designer with a top advertising agency, but left that life to become a potter. I enjoyed art and also wrote poetry as a child."

His adolescence was troubled – he had drug and alcohol issues, lived rough on the streets and spent periods in hospital after a nervous breakdown in his 20s. He returned to writing poetry and painting as he faced down his challenges – first at Outreach, then attending the still life art classes at Ponsonby's Artstation.

Opposite page: *Untitled*, 2011, acrylic on paper, 890 x 1175mm. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery. Photo: Kallan McLeod

All artworks in this story are by Andrew Blythe

"I'd started painting in hospital, then at home in my spare time. I'd seen some works by Tony Fomison and Philip Clairmont, and really liked them, and it just started from there. I paint from a personal perspective; I'm mainly self taught."

A recent exhibition of Blythe's new paintings at Corban Estate Arts Centre provided an insight into his trademark graphic, linear and layered mark making. On close examination his works become multi-dimensional, as the eye hovers above the world of Blythe's imagination. Like a satellite view of the world at night, his paintings exude pinpricks of light in a dark void; striations of dim, distant roads show through the dense patternmaking, and undulating, unseen landforms push restlessly against his lines of repetitive text and symbols. His typically monochromatic palette creates a mesmeric op art effect – as if you're flying over a landscape created from layered strands of the word "no" repeated over and over, and the occasional X punctures the flow like a tear in the fabric. Where he occasionally uses colour, like a massed matrix of X's against a vivid road-sign yellow background, the effect is disconcerting. He seems more familiar and more at ease with black and white, shades of grey, light and dark, positive and negative.

As he paints there's a channeling of energy as he builds up a pattern, tracking symbols across the paper. The work is spontaneous and the acrylic paint is laid on delicately with the brush, *alla prima* style, allowing no retouching or reworking once it has been applied. To the observer, the surface seems to undulate as the marks build, line by line, creating an unseen cityscape with invisible energy-lines, corridors of movement, places of calm and stillness.

Though Blythe is quick to emphasise his subject matter isn't necessarily drawn from his long inner-city walks. "I don't really see my works as landscapes – the patterns could just as easily be the lines of 'white horses' during a storm in the harbour. They're really no particular subject, but everyone can see in them what they want to see."

Stuart Shepherd is an artist and art advocate who's familiar with Blythe's art, having taken his work to the New York Outsider Art Fairs, and will soon take the group show to Belgium. Ten of Blythe's paintings will be included in the exhibition at the MADmusee in Liège, Belgium, from June to September this year. The exhibition will include the late Jim Dornan's surrealist figurative folk art paintings, Susan King's extraordinary childhood drawings, and Martin Thompson's mathematically precise drawings on graph paper.



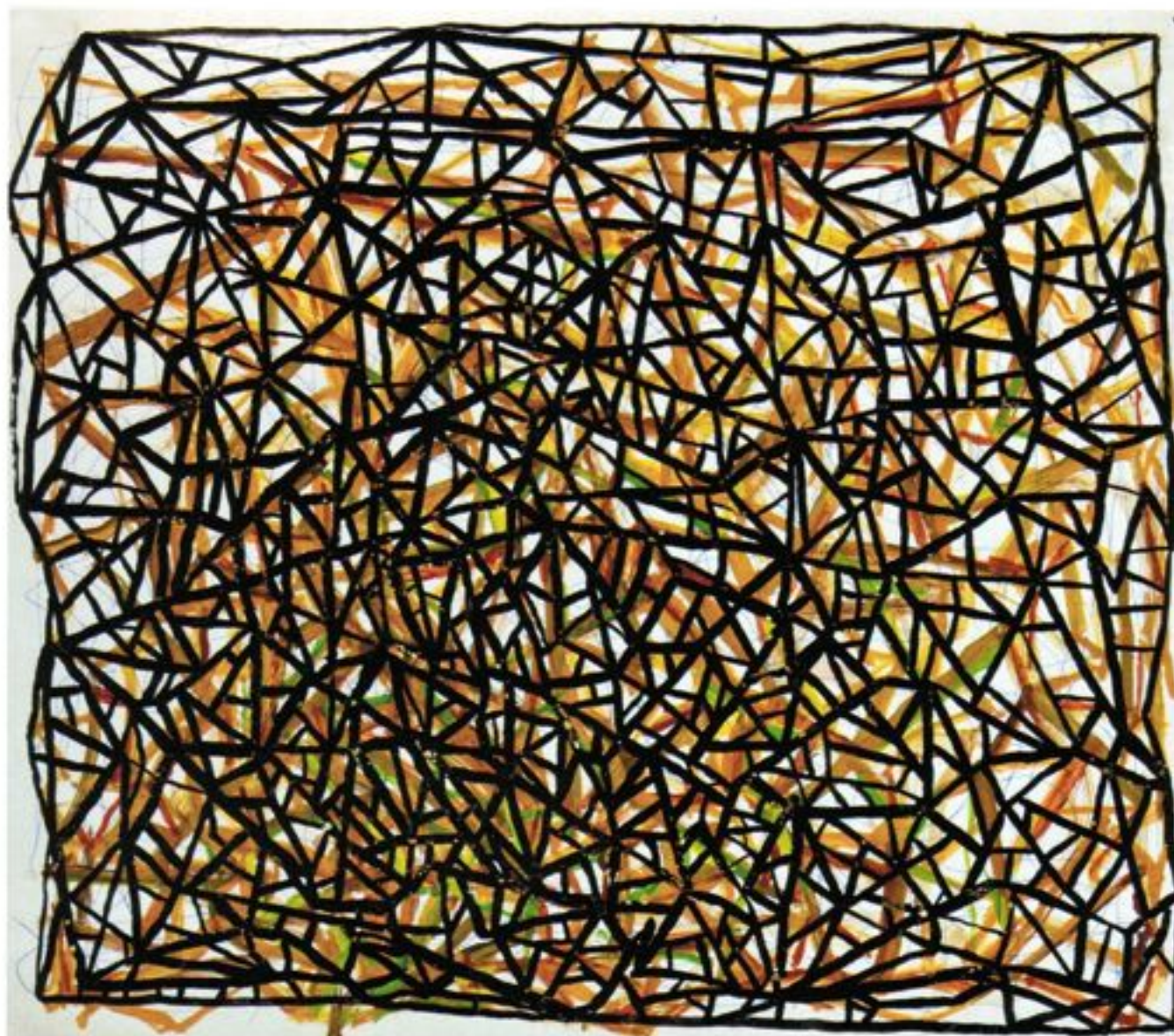
Andrew Blythe



*Untitled*, (detail), 2011, acrylic on paper



Andrew Blythe's studio at Toi Ora



*Untitled*, 2003, indian ink, acrylic, ballpoint pen on card, 820 x 900mm. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery. Photo: Kallan McLeod

"I've chosen Andrew's abstract works to complete the group exhibition," says Shepherd. "The museum specialises in work by artists who create in group workshop situations, and all four of these artists have had some experience in such an environment. I feel it's a sensational selection of work that will be seen for the first time in Belgium, and it may be picked up by other galleries in Europe."

He sees Blythe's work teetering between structure and spontaneity, commenting, "I feel as though Andrew is often throwing the dice with each painting he does – he has a repertoire of marks, and has great experience and ability with handling paint – but when he begins a work, it seems that the outcome is determined by decisions made along the way, not planned in advance. Pattern and rhythm play a big part in his work, but pattern-breaking also happens – and sometimes a layering of other patterns occur, so that visual 'accidents' happen. If Andrew's work could be transcribed

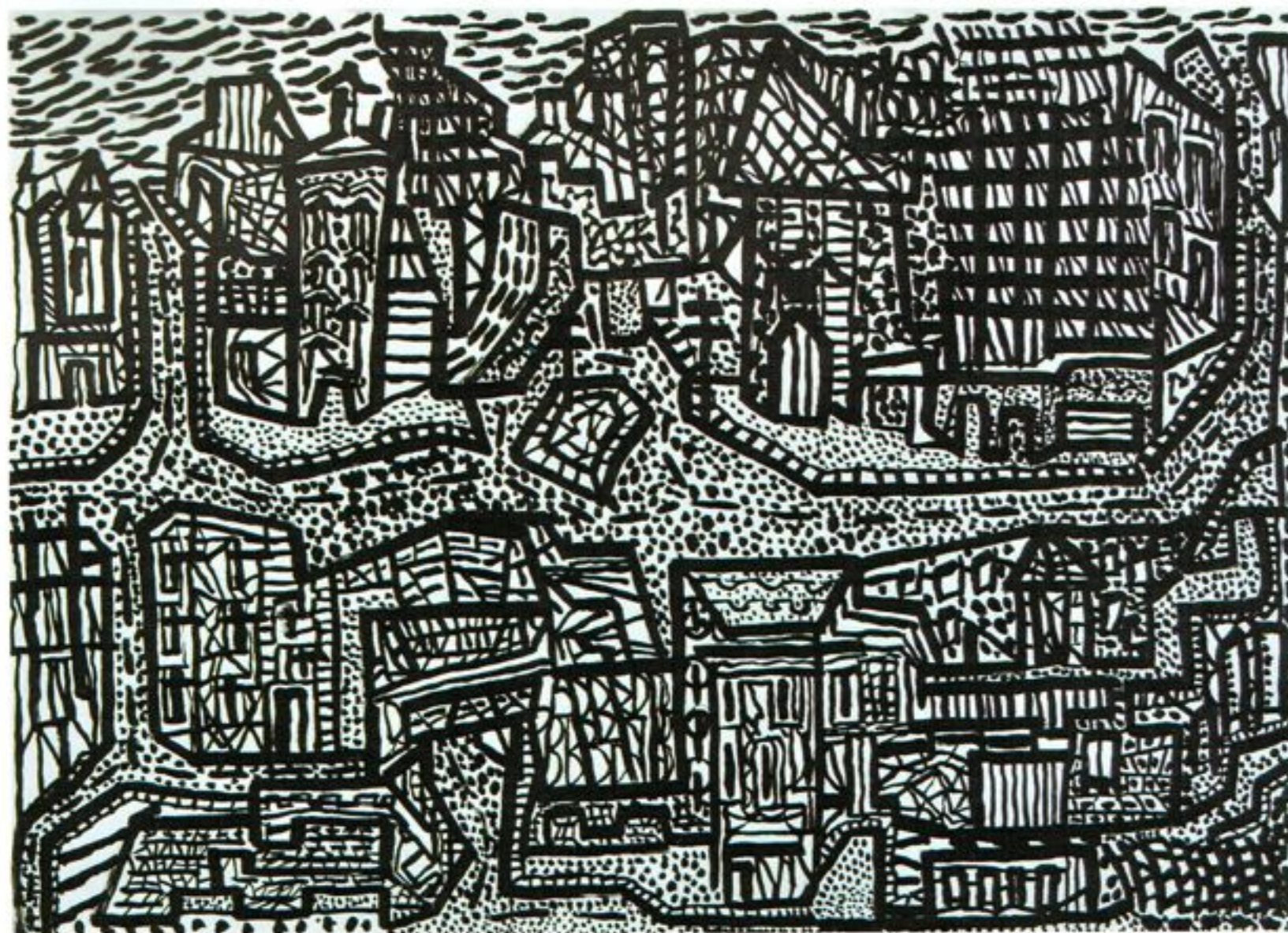
as music, it would sound like some kind of improvisational jazz, with a strong jungle backbeat."

Shepherd has also witnessed Blythe's transition from exhibiting in community art venues to being represented by international dealers. When asked whether there had been any shift in the artist's work to facilitate this change, he says, "I don't think Andrew's very intense engagement with the process of painting has changed at all. There has been a shift in the marketplace – and the social consciousness around marginalised cultures and art practices – and dealer galleries are part of that shift."

Though Tim Melville, Blythe's Auckland dealer, feels the shift in the marketplace has further to go. "If we're being honest a big part of an artist's credibility comes down to where their work is seen by curators and collectors. Galleries, fairs and museums that specialise in 'outsider' artists do a fantastic job, but it could also be argued that the artists



Above: works in Andrew Blythe's studio



*Untitled, 2004, indian ink on paper, 810 x 1030mm. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery. Photo: Kallan McLeod*

they promote are still ghettoised as being 'other', or worse, patronised as being 'novelties'. In order for their work to be normalised, valued and collected it's critical that artists of Andrew Blythe's calibre exhibit in the same dealer galleries and public institutions as their art school-trained colleagues."

Another keen observer of Blythe's work is Erwin Van Asbeck, manager of Toi Ora Live Art Trust, a supportive creative environment for people who experience mental health issues. He has seen Blythe thrive within the artistic environment the trust provides, and observes, "While he is predominantly self-driven, and enjoys his own company, Andrew appreciates the opportunity to discuss art, and informally mentors other artists, giving supportive and insightful comments to other members of the Toi Ora community. For me, it's been a privilege to witness his self-assured creative process, and while at times he may express doubt at the end result - he's always striving to

paint the perfect painting - his art is wonderfully intricate, fluid, exciting and spontaneous."

Earlier this year Blythe was one of a group of Toi Ora's artists who contributed to the Colour of our Community Mural Project, painting the hoardings surrounding the failed Soho Square building development project in Ponsonby. The other artists collaborated on a large mural encompassing the theme of 'mindfulness' while Blythe and another artist 'bookended' the larger work with their own wall paintings. For Blythe it was a fulfilling exercise. "It was a good break from my normal scale of painting, and as I see a lot of paintings and graffiti on my walks around Ponsonby and Grey Lynn, it was good to be able to put some of my own work up."

/Dan Chappell

*The exhibition, New Works by Andrew Blythe, is at Tim Melville Gallery, Newmarket, from 19 June to 7 July, 2012.*



*Untitled, 2011, acrylic on paper*



*Colour of our Community Mural Project, Crummer Road, Ponsonby, 2012*