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RUSS FLATT. JACQUI STOCKDALE. DAVID GRIGGS. CINDY SHERMAN. LUCAS GROGAN. DENISE GREEN + MORE

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IN-BETWEEN SPACES

There's an unflinching honesty in the photography of Russ Flatt. Tender yet dangerous, **Mark Amery** discovers the artist's complicated fictions are wide open to different readings. Portrait by **Kallan Macleod**.

Riding the night bus home from my first nightclub experience at the roller skating rink, listening to my Walkman (waiting to be noticed), hanging out with a best friend in a solitary patch of bush, my first crush (on a marching girl); photographer **Russ Flatt**'s work transports me back to the suburban hinterland of a 1980s teenage-hood.

But something is awry. As curator **Ron Brownson** notes, this is no easy nostalgia. Flatt's constructed scenes are complicated fictions. They are both stagey and unflinchingly honest. Tender yet dangerous – wide open to different readings. These are in-between spaces, full of unspoken diversity. Spaces where identity starts to form. Where we learn to trust people other than our parents and teachers. Where we slouch in ill-fitting clothes.

Australian readers may think of **Tracey Moffatt**'s suburbia, or **Bill Henson**'s darkness on the edge of town. Flatt himself mentions the inspiration of American **Cindy Sherman** and another fashion photographer turned artist who made large fictional tableau works, **Philip-Lorca diCorcia**. In Flatt's work, however, there is something refreshingly heartfelt and truthful – reflective of his own story.

Now in his mid 40s and a 2013 graduate of Auckland University's ELAM School of Fine Arts, Flatt is a late blooming talent who has come to the art world as an outsider. Lighting, composition and a natural way with his actors speaks to decades of work in New York as a fashion photographer. But that background doesn't prepare you for the ambiguities and tenderness in these works. He returned to New Zealand to come to terms with his own identity, after his father passed away and his mother and sister were diagnosed with terminal cancer.

"I would have these very lucid dreams or nightmares and they were always around family scenarios," he says, "so I decided to make images that were coming out of my head. It was a therapeutic way to process what was happening. I made a body of work and sat on it for a few years. I needed to contextualise it, and that's when I decided to go to art school. That's why the work has been so personal. But as it grows, it's becoming way more fun."

That first body of work, *Paper Planes,* was finally shown at Auckland's Pah Homestead in 2014. There have been two series since, *Perceiving Identity*, shown at Mangere Art Centre, and *Nationals,* shown at Tim Melville Gallery in August/September last year.

Flatt says a series starts from the questions: "Who am I? Who are we? Where do we come from? Why we're here, I guess." Autobiography is an important departure point, but it then "gets twisted around in my head," he explains. The young lead protagonists in *Paper Planes* and *Nationals* are, like Flatt, Maori. And like his characters he grew up in suburbia, divorced from his mother's tangata whenua roots.

In *Perceiving Identity* Flatt reflects the diversity of perceptions by working in a different genre, from reportage to black and white portraits. They were hung to evoke how pictures of ancestors hang on the wall of the wharenui (Maori meeting house). "There were things I guess reflective of me as a gay Maori male. Like the marching girl – I wanted to be a marching girl growing up. It was important for me to gather these things that were resonant for me when I was a kid and reimagine them; figure it out."

With a narrative based around a national roller skating championship, for *Nationals* Flatt approached Auckland's Mount Wellington Roller Skating Club. There were still people who remembered him skating there as a kid. Yet the scenarios depicted aren't comfortable and while the location is real, none of the models were skaters. The work is entirely fictitious. "I really wanted to create something brand new," says Flatt. He likes to work with actors who haven't done anything before, building a relationship with them and their parents and often working with them across series. He gives them characters and they become part of the story making.

In a recent powerful work, *Half a Person,* a pair of twins are photographed, one comforting the other. They are pictured in bush close to where Flatt lives, where he likes to go with his own son. The emotion feels very real and open to different readings: the one being comforted may have suffered deep trauma, or simply fallen over. Their close relationship is difficult to define. "I was thinking about puberty and those friendships we form and bond, says Flatt. "Holding your friend closely when it's not in a weird sexual space." Flatt's next series *Night Bus* will be the story of a young boy in suburbia, coming of age, going underage nightclubbing.

As I write, Flatt has discovered he is the winner of the Auckland Festival of Photography's annual commission. Mid year he travels to Vermont in the United States for a residency as one of last year's winners at the Wallace Art Awards. "I won't have my people with me," he laments, but he looks forward to the new challenge. "I'll have to think creatively about how to make work that comes from a similar place, but is somewhere else."

RUSS FLATT, *NIGHT BUS*, EXHIBITS AT TIM MELVILLE GALLERY IN AUCKLAND FROM 7 JUNE TO 2 JULY 2016 AS PART OF THE AUCKLAND FESTIVAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

1. // Russ Flatt, *Girl #2*, 2013. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 182 x 91cm.

2. // Russ Flatt, *Half a Person*, 2015. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 101 x 101cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TIM MELVILLE GALLERY, AUCKLAND

2.

THESE ARE IN-BETWEEN SPACES, FULL OF UNSPOKEN DIVERSITY. SPACES WHERE IDENTITY STARTS TO FORM. WHERE WE LEARN TO TRUST PEOPLE OTHER THAN OUR PARENTS AND TEACHERS. WHERE WE SLOUCH IN ILL-FITTING CLOTHES.

3.

3. // Russ Flatt, *Bicycle*, 2010. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, unique edition, 114 x 140cm.

4. // Russ Flatt, *Lawnmower*, 2010. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 59 x 75cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TIM MELVILLE GALLERY, AUCKLAND

4.

5. // Russ Flatt, *Portrait*, 2010. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 59 x 75cm.

6. // Russ Flatt, *C5 H11 ONO*, 2015. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 59.4 x 84cm.

7. // Russ Flatt, *931*, 2016. Inkjet photograph on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 118 x 84cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TIM MELVILLE GALLERY, AUCKLAND

5.

6.

TIM MELVILLE
Director, Tim Melville Gallery

It's hard not to be struck by the similarity in the life journeys of **Russ Flatt** and his dealer **Tim Melville**. Both changed career paths midlife after returning to New Zealand from London in the 2000s. Yet Melville and Flatt have only recently met, Melville starting to represent Flatt in 2015. For both, their new careers are an exploration of identity.

"The gallery has grown organically into something that now feels more like me," says Melville. "**Peter McLeavey** [the late renowned New Zealand dealer] once said to me that his career has been about finding out who he is, what he's about. When I came back to New Zealand [from London] there'd been a resurgence in Maori tino rangatiratanga [sovereignty]. I left a place where being brown was kind of okay, but came home to an Aotearoa fizzing with positive Maori energy."

Artists like Flatt and **Star Gossage** in Melville's stable are, like him, Maori, but their work speaks to their mixed heritage: "I'm both cultures and want to find my way through." Melville loved the truth and vulnerability in Flatt's work when he first saw it. "There was some of my own experience in it. There were images that pulled me in and I didn't know why – I always have to follow that. Russ' work has an emotional content that breaks my heart in the same way that Star's work does.

"It's early days for Flatt's career," says Melville. "People still don't know what he's about. That's still to come. He's getting great traction. His career is on a steady trajectory and I don't want to be an obstacle."

Mark Amery

7.

RON BROWNSON
Senior curator,
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

Ron Brownson, a senior curator at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, was struck by **Russ Flatt**'s series *Perceiving Identity* when first presented as part of Flatt's Elam School of Fine Arts end of year presentation. "Many New Zealand artists are interested in history – their own history, their country's history – and I see Russ fitting into that sense of self-consciousness," he says.

Brownson agrees that part of the success of Flatt's work is how open it is to different interpretations. "I'm aware that a lot of people perceive Russ' works differently. I see his works dealing with gender and sexuality but I don't necessarily see them as dealing with eroticism. There's a difference between those things.

"Russ' photographs are fictions," he continues. "They are about reality, but distorted through its recreation and increased in intensity. I like the way he uses the traditions of snapshot photography and mixes them with a controlled use of lighting, a traditional methodology associated with fashion photography. Technically he is so skilled that he can transition from a studio to an outdoor setup and be equally efficient.

"He chooses people for a truthful action rather than a made-to-be photographed fabrication. And the subsequent relationships between people are frequently complicated. I think he's a very brave artist."

Brownson points to photographers like **Cecil Beaton**, **Richard Avedon**, **Edward Steichen** and **Diane Arbus** as precedents of fine artists who have worked in fashion. In New Zealand he sees connection with the likes of "time capsule" documentary photographer **Ans Westra** on the one hand, and on the other **Spencer Digby**, a pre-eminent portrait photographer of the mid 1950s.

Brownson also singles out *Half a Person* as a work that moved him: "The mutual support that twins give each other is expressed lyrically in that image. That photograph is a secret shared between twins." It is also a memorable example of Flatt's attention to the male character: "Flannel shirts and grey woollen shorts are no longer the contemporary school uniform! Some people don't read such photographs with those details of time, but Russ certainly inflects them with it"

Mark Amery