

Quality of Life Improvements

Dan Arps in conversation with Victoria Wynne-Jones, on the occasion of his exhibition “*The Floral Maze*.”

Saturday 20 March, 2021.
Michael Lett,
Karangahape Road,
Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland.

VICTORIA WYNNE-JONES
Would you like to talk about your title, “The Floral Maze?”

DAN ARPS
Yeah I guess... I’ve been living in Mount Roskill for about two years and before that I’ve been in New Lynn for a couple of years and I’ve been really just trying to dig into the feeling of being in the suburbs. The fences, the dead-end streets and alleyways, things like that. There’s an ornateness to the layout of the streets, I guess it’s kind of like a maze. Trying to think of a way of describing the space that was opening it up, rather than closing it down. Because I think when you start talking about ‘the suburban’ and ‘the everyday’ it feels like a very, “capitalist realist” way of looking at it that doesn’t quite match up.¹ Trying to find a way of talking about it like it’s a nice thing, or it’s fun or it’s playful or...

Generative?
Generative! Yeah.

So it’s the suburbs as seen from on foot?
Yeah.

I remember you saying that when you’re on your bike, you like to go up the back streets.

You’ve got to go along the back streets, otherwise you’ll get run over.

Walking around, looking at the suburbs and thinking of them as generative, there’s an idea of inside and outside or looking at places from the boundaries.

I think that’s a big thing about it, peeking over somebody’s fence, or I’ve got this real thing for finding the alleyways. There’s usually a direct route from where I am to where I’m going and it’s hidden, especially in Auckland. There will be a really great way to walk somewhere so that you completely avoid the road, that you won’t know about. For years I’ve been obsessing about how to find that other network.

There are weird paths and pocket parks.
The pocket parks and the reserves that

go through to another street and the alleyways. There are all these little things that unless you just go there and risk ending up in the wrong place, you wouldn’t know. And there’s not really a lot of maps.

I guess it’s like thwarting the Google Maps Street View because you’re looking at the places that the van can’t get through, secret places. So this work *The Floral Maze* (2021) you can almost see this as a fragment of a fence?

Yeah that’s how I see it, it’s like a fragment of a fence and there’s a visual language of fencing structures. There’s a million different little variations and different mounts, is it spikey? Or is it really tall? Or is it low? Is it just a sort of threadbare outline?²

When you watch films set in the 1980s in America there are those leafy suburbs with no fences, they just have sweeping, grassy front-yards and there are no divisions. That idea of being in a suburb with no fences, seems quite bizarre now. But I think that’s how it all started isn’t it? Because there were Housing New Zealand subdivisions in these areas, so where I was in New Lynn, with these Housing New Zealand houses, nobody had a fence on the whole street because that’s, I think that’s how you get a house, you get it without a fence and everything else is added on later. I guess the fence is that one area as well where people can express their individuality, but it’s also keeping you in that space.³

I guess there are professional fences, the vernacular of fences and lean-to, less professional fences... and there was that moment when everyone liked to stain their fences in black. That DIY, reality TV moment when people wanted to zhuzh up their backyards. And all the structures had to be stained black. That black stain and darker colours. Dark brown, brown, whites and off-whites. There is a whole range of colours within that, it’s like an everyday minimalism I guess?

1 — Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester, UK; Washington D.C.: Zero Books. 2009.

2 — To elaborate, all the fences in the suburbs are connected, making up a network of objects, perhaps a private-property *hyperobject*, to use Timothy Morton’s term. Morton’s *hyperobjects* are large, complex things that recede from view when approached and can only be seen in fragments, one example is climate change (as opposed to the weather). See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013

3 — Additionally, an investigation of fences and fencing could also be read as an interrogation of colonial systems and settler ways of managing spaces and places. There is also a relationship to indigenous art forms, the fence post or pou and public art commissions throughout the suburbs of Tāmaki. Inspiration was also provided by the work of Arnold Manaaki Wilson (1928-2012) and Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi.

Definitely. There are lots of browns in this show, do you want to talk about brown?
A while ago, when I was making free-form wall reliefs, a lot of people would say they looked edible, or they're chocolatey and I just thought well, what would it be like to go with that and to go into that space and be chocolatey?

That one, *Baffling* (2021) is really cakey.
Yeah, it's like a cake. I mean, there was even an event at the Christchurch Art Gallery a couple of years ago where there were cakes based on works of mine, it was sort of a bit odd.

It's interesting if you think about cake, the surface, chocolate and the edible because a sense of taste is evoked. If you think about minimalism, it's always about perception and visual stimulus but you're bringing in an almost haptic kind of tastiness.

I mean minimalism is great. I really like it. I really like Judd.⁴

***Equivalent* (2021) is very Judd-y.**
Very Judd-y. And I think also because my work's often a reaction to what came before, I'm trying to bounce off amorphousness and find the structure. I try to aim for a whole so that there are threads and strands that stay over time, so rather than make a big move, I like to inch my way towards something. So I wanted to go more structured, but probably what's interesting is that half-way point, where it's almost structured or it's nearly structured.

So you're nudging minimalism, or being nudged by minimalism?
Minimalism is so dominant, it's like the dominant style so I feel like I've just got to fully commit. When I was at art school I was quite interested in minimalism but I also had a real relationship to the Melamine toilet partitions you get in public toilets. I was all about that for a long time, it's really just about the industrial, like what you can do with the technology, right? You know, let's make a box! We're really good at making boxes! I was always really interested in that Judd idea that you can order a sculpture on the phone, by saying a series of dimensions, that's quite interesting. But it's also not really how I operate and I want to be much more hands-on. When you make it like that, it makes things that are a little bit more amorphous, it's like they're coming out of the mud rather than coming out of a Platonic ideal.

There's this idea of concretion.
Yeah...

Concretion as something almost cosmological, like you're taking the matter and you're forming it and making these shapes.
Yes.

Like cleavage as the first sign of life. Apparently in biology, something just starting to form itself, like crystals... That kind of generate themselves?

Yeah, exactly.
I'm quite interested in that idea of a geometry of generative form. I think this show's quite good for that, because you take a motif and repeat it and that makes a structure.

Which is I guess what a suburb is.
Yeah that's what a suburb is and the maze has that fractal thing where if you look very closely at a maze, you'll see that it's made up of a tiny, little maze.

Also the suburb as a series of series. Things repeated slightly differently, theme and variation.
The serial quality of it. The endless procession of the next variation. And I think it's also good to have a logic like that in the work, so then it makes sense to keep trying it.

As a way of thinking and making. So I guess you have this way of thinking about minimalism and manufacture, a quite unique, almost idiosyncratic way of making that you've adopted for these works?
It's something I've been developing for a few years now with big, one-part moulds, but there's also been a shift to these new, two-part moulds and casting in the round. That's been quite nice for me because when you make a one-part mould, there are these things that look solid but they're actually hollow. They have a back that is functional rather than aesthetic, it's cast in the round even if it's facing the wall. It's still got a good face and it gives the object a different kind of completeness.

It's very interesting how these fundamentals of sculpture, like the additive or the subtractive or moulding and the wall-relief have such a long history. Relief sculpture is pretty cool actually, I like relief sculpture. But I think also it's almost like relief sculpture has come about because I want to be a painter, but I don't want to paint flat.

You're flirting with very conservative ideas about the wall-relief, casting, minimalism and then messing with them? That's the thing with art is that it is

4 — US based sculptor Donald Judd (1928-1994).

incredibly conservative, the history is long. But with this show I think cross-cultural connections could be made or different readings could come into it, that relate to the house or relate to the fence structure.

It's really accessible. Most people have an idea of a fence or have had interactions with a fence.

It's one of those rare things that you could almost say is universal, it's universal in the 'parameter' sense.

But there's also that spectre with sculptural minimalism, that it was a-political. If you think about how so much of it took place in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, to be a-political then was quite a privilege, are you trying to re-politicise minimalism by making it more grimy or gritty?

I'm not sure, I was always really interested in the Robert Hughes argument that minimalism is about military precision and technological supremacy.⁵

Exactly.

And I was also quite taken with Sam Durant and after Robert Smithson, the more chaotic post-minimalists. So, using entropy, or the force of decay, I think that's probably more where I would situate myself.

But this work, *Divided Base* (2021) is very Apollonian, do you want to talk about that one?

I think it's a case of trying to find a thread, I like to find threads in the work that link to previous excursions and the last time I was showing in this space it was with Fiona Clark. She had her photographs of body-building competitions in the early 1980s and then I had all these things on plinths.⁶ Quite often when I get work back from a show, I will just keep it in the studio, I keep going with it and at some point I cut a plinth in half, on the diagonal. I think part of it was I was trying to figure out how to cast something in the round, you can see on this orange piece *Equivalent* (2021) that it has a seam line on the diagonal, that each side is cast on the diagonal line, so that there's a mould line on two edges and on the short end it's diagonal. So it was a technical thing about how you cast something in the round. It was just a really simple, stupid idea, or it's sculpture on the wall, it's just a plinth. It's a combination of wanting to have a thread and finding this way of making it into a painting, to fit into my painting show that I wanted to do. And it just sits really nicely on the wall, it's really happy in the space, I think. It's got a nice coincidence with the splash of light leaking from the lantern.

5 — Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the new: art and the century of change*. London: Thames and Hudson 1991.

6 — "Dan Arps & Fiona Clark" 31 July — 31 August 2019, Michael Lett, Auckland.



Dan Arps
The Floral Maze
2021

MELANIE ARNOLD

I find it interesting, the divide between sculpture and painting, and how you've combined both of those, is that how you see them? As both sculptures and paintings?

DAN ARPS

Yeah, I just think of it as sculpture-on-the-wall or, chunky painting.

HAMISH CONEY

Do you have a sense as to why you're on this journey? Who would ever have said that your work is becoming quite elegant?

This is quite an elegant show, five or six years ago you might not have said that.

Do you have a sense yourself, as to why you are on this journey to elegance?

I think elegance comes about when you have a really good solution to a problem. A lot of what I do in the studio is wrestle with quite banal or technical problems. But I think also, in terms of it relating to the world and trying to have a relevance outside of art discourse, I think it's becoming more and more important because when I was growing up and studying, images of artworks were quite hard to come by, especially the artwork that I was interested in. It was very hard to find, you had to go through the library, spend all day in the library looking at books. I would be trying to get a comprehensive idea of what was going on and was all overseas, somewhere. And as time's gone on, those kinds of images are actually like, I can turn on my Instagram and I can see, you know, 20 or 30 of these kinds of images all in a row and now I can't hold, can't grasp onto any of them. It's all so fleeting and dissipative. So I think that makes it more important to latch onto the immediate environment, and things that are actually happening here and now. Rather than trying to think about what art is like in some other place in the world, what else is going on. That's been an important part of the journey, from looking out with a telescope or something, to being able to see my own environment.

HC

And do you feel, that actually, in the suburbs, you know, we have all had this experience of going to the suburbs that you almost feel that you can date it by the decramastic tiles or a certain style of letter box or fencing or whatever it might be, do you feel that there's a kind of poetry in that kind of vernacular, built environment?

Ah yeah definitely in the butting up of incongruous moments, I'm a real fan of any house that's been renovated in

a different style or a later time. And Auckland's so full of that, it has this whole mish-mash of architecture that, especially out in West Auckland, sort of fantastic combinations, it even extends to wrapping their carport in a tarp or something like that, super-interesting architectural situations.

SARAH SMUTS-KENNEDY

You've actually spent a lot of time as a supervisor and a teacher and I know that now you're doing less of that. I'm really interested in your personal experience of making work, your satisfaction in terms of where you're at right now, in regards to that use of time.

I think it's been good the last few years because I've really come around to just working the way that I work and trying to make quality of life improvements. To use that available day in the studio and then, I don't have to work on a \$60 plastic trestle-table, I can make a work bench. Things like that have been coming along and that's really improving things. And making it easier to make work. Teaching is great, I think nothing else really sharpens your critical faculties as much as teaching somebody else, and it's also one of those things where you start making connections to other things. Trying to join the dots for somebody else can relate to something else I've had bubbling away on the back-burner. So I find that really helpful, to have a good amount of it, but then not too much.

MA

I'm interested in scale. A lot of the works for me almost have a painterly scale.

When you're thinking about fences and things, how do you choose the scale of the series?

Probably the most off-scale is this thing (*The Floral Maze*, 2021) which seems to have cartoonish proportions. I feel like it would be too literal to just cast a fence, I wanted to make it myself and I wanted to have that connection to the studio and to the making processes that I'd already been using. And I came up with this cartoonish shape so that it could be both a vertical structure and a horizontal structure, and it would be a little bit wider than I wanted it to be. I thought it should be on the side but it's ok because it's thick, wider and the front and it just is something, it just seemed to work. I could do it at that scale and it would work, it's six units, identical casts, cast in the round and assembled. So it's almost a trick or something, it's a small mould made into a bigger object. Theoretically endless I guess...

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& Dan Arps
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