

eyeline

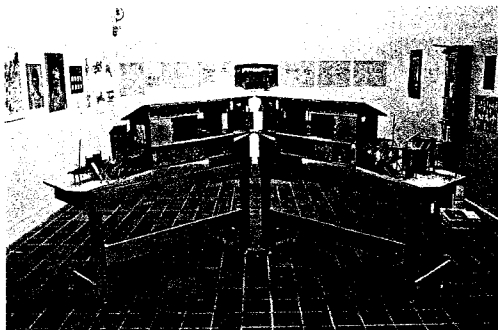
contemporary visual arts

- number 43
 - spring 2000
 - australia \$9.90
- includes GST
new zealand \$9.95

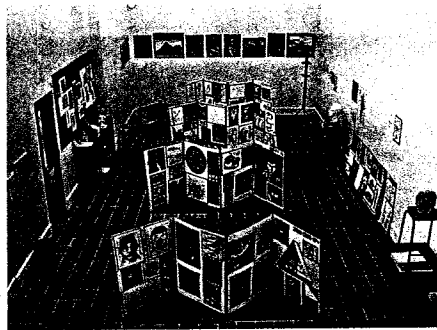
genealogy mike stevenson and steven brower

Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth,
New Zealand

Genealogy was a collaborative project between Mike Stevenson and Steven Brower, the culmination of a joint residency at the Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, in May and June 2000.



Steven Brower, *Genealogy*, 2000. Installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo: Bryan James. Courtesy Govett-Brewster Gallery.



Michael Stevenson, *Genealogy*, 2000. Installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo: Bryan James. Courtesy Govett-Brewster Gallery.

The genealogy industry is huge these days, with whole sections of public libraries devoted to lineage enthusiasts. Each time I look up an artist on the Internet (Steven Brower, for example) I am just as likely to pull up the family tree of some 18th Century North American land-owner, as the biography of a contemporary artist.

Perhaps genealogy does such good trade in colonial outposts because people feel cut off from their histories. In New Zealand there is a degree of rootless Pakeha angst, experienced in direct contrast to the seamless whakapapa of many Maori, who possess the ability to trace back their ancestry for countless generations. Peter Robinson took this mania for identification with the past to its zenith when he magnified his own racial descent on giant canvases, with the numerical precision of a genetic diagram.

In *Genealogy*, Stevenson and Brower team up their own art with artworks by their parents. Unlike Robinson's family tree, it is a personal, rather than statistical, gesture, though you could argue that 'white trash roots' have become the latest trendy tribal affiliation (witness Eminem's 'Not straight out of Compton, I'm straight out of trailer', and the ludicrously popular www.geocities.com/trailerpark page). In *Genealogy*, though, 'parochial' might be closer to the truth than 'trash'. Stevenson and Brower were raised outside of main centres (Inglewood and West Virginia respectively) by parents who had been to art schools and who used their artistic know-how for community or commercially oriented projects. In memoriam to this artistic legacy, the artists have created two separate rooms from their childhoods. Stevenson replicates his High School art room. Our first encounter is with a noticeboard covered in clippings about the School Certificate art syllabus and about his father Alan Stevenson 'the art teacher at Inglewood High School for the past twenty years (his wife Margaret had the job until he married her)'. In those days of guaranteed employment for white males, we learn that father Alan spent six hundred voluntary hours on a rimu relief carving for St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Inglewood. Alan is pictured with son Michael (in standard-issue roman sandals) aged thirteen. According to the article, father and son used an overhead projector, chalk, and masking tape for precision, and the work represented 'Christians of both races'. Truly, a black and white era in more ways than one.

Below the notice board sits an 'art room storage unit' full of lino prints, cardboard models and warty pottery. Further along the wall are paintings by the entire Stevenson clan, including sketches of a church, and landscapes very similar to the naïve oils of rural scenes with which Stevenson first gained repute. Stevenson has come far from these initial works, nowadays dealing solely with art world politics and imagined cultural conspiracies, as seen, for instance, in his charcoal drawings of famous art moments that, when activated, glowed with ultra-violet subtexts: Jeff Koons with 666 across his forehead; From Scratch with a Masonic symbol emblazoned across their PVC pipes, and so on. Stevenson's work is always so reli-

ably *arch*, that it is refreshing to revisit the artist's unpretentious origins, although there is always the sneaking suspicion that 'rustic charm' is just another of his feints.

A master of the mock-up, Stevenson has built 'recreations' (from 'lost originals') of School C portfolios as they *might* have been, by various well known New Zealand artists: Michael Parekowhai, Julian Dashper, Paul Hartigan and Christine Hellyer. Stevenson's own 'real' School C folio is on show as well, to add a dubious note of 'authenticity'. With incredible attention to detail, Stevenson has made prints, paintings and sketches of a range of motifs, some 'compulsory' (like Maori art, in a strict palette of red, black and white), some hinting at the artists' future predilections. For example, Parekowhai is already interested in the plastic adding blocks he will later turn into giant sculptures; Dashper's already turning himself into a star with three self-portraits, as well as pictures of drum-kits and chains, (two of his most famous motifs), while Hellyer, well known for her take on museumification, is already collecting shells, at the tender (imagined) age of fifteen.

The folios are expertly aged to look like the genuine products they are not. Ranging from 1963 to 1984, they are faded, stained, and some of the pictures have been ripped off, either to enjoy pride of place in the family dining room, or trashed in a fit of pique by the ever-evolving adolescent. Looming above the cardboard efforts are 'reconstructed' instruction sheets for the various School C projects, charting monoprint methods, a 'mountain project' (New Plymouth's main claim to fame is the stunning Mt. Taranaki which presides over the city like a slightly smaller Mt. Fuji), and the 'ZOOM' technique which encourages children to create abstract compositions from details in real life.

Brower's room offers a very different atmosphere, exchanging the controlled chaos of the classroom for the disintegration of a family home. The entrance is cluttered with books from Brower's father's collection, with titles too richly associative to be coincidental: *The Privacy Invaders* (us in the Brower family home), *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline* (Stevenson's investigation of School Certificate), and Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*. *Totem and Taboo* has pride of place, the book in which Freud postulates his Oedipus theory, whereby the adolescent male must symbolically kill his father in a coming of age ritual. Even Christian communion, says Freud, is merely a relic of cannibalism, when young males overthrew the dominant male so they could gain unrestricted access to the females of the tribe.

Certainly Stevenson and Brower seem to be involved in some kind of ritual exorcism or rite of passage which they feel compelled to share. Brower articulates this act of violence on the house which he grew up in, by recreating it in perfect detail, and then hacking it in two with callously surgical precision, so that we as viewers can peer into every recess of this metaphoric familial body. We examine this 1:12 scale model with a delirious mixture of delight and despair, because the books we have just seen repre-

sent only a very small portion of an out-of-control nightmare. Every room in the house is full of books, and the basement is stacked, floor to ceiling, with hundreds, maybe even thousands of boxes of more of the same. Out the back a shed which was initially designed to store the books has been totally reclaimed by nature. The precise control with which this replica of complete *lack* of control has been constructed is bittersweet, and creates a parable of the divergent paths of inherited tendencies.

Further along we see that this is not the first time Brower has gotten artistic mileage out of his dysfunctional family home. *The Falling Lumber Brochure*, 1997 dryly extols the virtues of a "three-tiered insulation system: the "Beer Can Water Pump Wall Section", the "styrofoam collection", and the "Cardboard Box Collection". In a tongue in cheek cross-breeding of architectural and advertorial 'speak', Brower fondly pokes fun at a familial disaster zone. 'The most significant feature of Falling Lumber is its group of outbuildings. Intended to act as a foil to the rational harmony of the main house, these "sheds" are designed to supply the resident with the liberty necessary for creative activity. By allowing the lush West Virginia flora to radically occupy the structures, the resident will be able to truly coexist with nature.' In case we want to invest in such an architectural masterpiece ourselves, we're urged to call 'Jaques Avaltrade'.

Punning pranksterism reaches a frenzy with the fake broadsheet that accompanies *Genealogy*. Styled after the opinion section of a daily newspaper, it features letters from outraged locals, excessive word-play with artist's names, and even a quote from the Bible about 'the children of E'lam' (Elam School of Fine Arts is the one Stevenson and his parents attended). Brower is a funny guy. In 1999 he did a show at Lombard Fried in New York (which also represents Stevenson, and where the two artists met) called *Utility*, because, according to Brower, 'Utility is very close to futility'. This is the same brand of logic that spells art with an 'f', but I guess an investigation of juvenility is concomitant with *Genealogy*.

And we cannot argue with genetic heritage. Brower, best known for making a Frank Lloyd Wright architectural model out of pizza boxes, and a show in which a miniature damn burst every time the gallery's phone rang, displays paintings by his father which are wickedly witty. William Brower's lurid cartoon satires of Hitler, Freud, the Clintons and the Bush family, in nery lines and lurid colours, are the epitome of American paranoia, but they are also funny and clever. And they nearly shut down the whole show. Director Greg Burke had the Chief Censor check out *Genealogy* and two of William Brower's paintings (featuring child abuse) were deleted from the line up. Viewers instead saw two empty pencil squares on the wall where the paintings would have sat, and the titles remained in the catalogue, *Painting of a beauty contest winner arriving home to find her husband abusing their child*, and *Painting depicting a family*. I found William Brower's works anything but sick, with unglamorous, raw, reptilian protagonists and

clear moral messages. The portrayal of inter-familial sexual acts in the context of a family show, under the watchful eye of Freud (actually, William Brower's Freud is having a douche-bag emptied onto his head) is an extremely gutsy proposition, perhaps too edgy for a public institution.

Also represented is William Brower's commercial work as a paid graphic artist for organs such as *The Washington Post*. There is an illustration of *The graphic artist as knight in shining armour* from the 1960s that reminds me of Don Quixote, the bumbling and misguided emissary for high ideals. Brower Senior charts, over the years, a utopian dream shattered. Even his paintings of nature portray the environment as a series of paranoid systems, with manic roots and desperate branches representing an endless network of conspiracy. In *Art for Christmas Card 1970*, his sad, convoluted pen drawings of arrows going nowhere reveal a bleak world of no joy, where social interaction is impossible.

It is not just Freud who rears his (dripping) head in *Genealogy*, but Lacan, with his notion of the mirror stage. Stevenson and Brower are drawn to each other as twin images from opposite sides of the world. There is a curious doppelganger effect, like the intertwined strands of the DNA (twinning and twinning come from the same meta-root). Comparisons between the two rooms, and within each room, abound. William Brower's *Painting of a mountain* is hung opposite his son's composite painting, *House in West Virginia with Mt. Taranaki*. Time and distance telescope as the 'Take me Home, Country Road' anthem of West Virginia gets superimposed into New Zealand's 'heartland'. In the same spot in Stevenson's room, the family's landscapes and portraits of the mountain are also hung. Both families have included portraiture of each other, and Margaret Stevenson used family as models for figure studies for her major painting *20th Century Attitudes to the Cross* from 1955. One of the most striking instances of visual doubling is Alan Stevenson's dolls' house from the 1970s which is split down the middle just like Brower's model. And Brower's literal 'cleavage' of his family home is directly facing the 'cleavage' on display in one of William Brower's portraits, in which an SS Officer has a black woman's breasts draped around his neck.

William Brower's paintings are so explicit, that going back into the Stevenson room feels like taking a cold shower. But here too there are elements of sexual suggestion: the School C portfolios, made by ostensibly adolescent males, give off whiffs of testosterone in their manic portrayal of tool kits and clenching fists. A juxtaposition that is perhaps unintentional, involves Margaret Stevenson's nude figure studies coupled with a lettering study which reads 'Fresco: a painting done on freshly spread moist plaster'. It is hard to tell whether this is wholesome or intentionally fulsome, or whether, standing in this room, I have somehow regressed to the humour level of a hormone-fueled teenage boy.

Another of the lettering exercises spells out 'Design and lettering must be practiced to be appreciated' which,

along with the mantra of '600 hours work' in Alan Stevenson's rimu relief, and the painstaking nature of both installations, reiterates the notion that only via mimesis and recreation of past history, can we truly know or understand ourselves. It is a technique as antiquated as sketching plaster casts of classical Greek sculpture, and it is rarely practiced today. But Brower and Stevenson are living testimony to the fact that old ideas come around again, and that there is a certain unquantifiable value in laborious endeavour.

This intimate display of two families could have been cold-hearted, a cashing-in on inherited kookiness for a public hungry for Oprah-style confessionals. But what may sound like a cynical gesture on paper, is touching in the flesh. The only genuine letter in the broadsheet is by William Brower. It says simply, 'I am the owner of the cabin that was the model for Steven Brower's autobiographical conundrum art-piece object sculpture. The house is now empty but my heart is full'. After viewing *Genealogy*, I could say the same.

tessa laird