

NZ Listener

January 6-12 2007 Vol 207 No 3478

Take it as read

by Tessa Laird

Christina Read's intriguing and wry textual works.

Recent winner of the National Drawing Award, the aptly named Christina Read, has made intriguing textual works over the past couple of years, including *The Book Project* at Wheelers bookstore: a series of “important” books by Wittgenstein, Freud et al, painted shut with sticky enamels.

Forlorn and goofy, the books' unreadability seemed a literalisation of the artist's struggle with “doing theory”. Read included a video of her reading Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, over and over for a total of 16 hours, her head completely obscured by the book, bristling with yellow Post-It notes.

A video work for window in the appropriate venue of the University Library called *Untitled Book List* featured the titles and authors of books scrolling endlessly, like the credits of a movie. With an innocuous, movie-style soundtrack, these “credits” lulled you into a numb terror over the impossibility of reading all the things that you'd like to, or feel you ought to.

Read's winning entry for the National Drawing Award continues her wry textual humour with the phrase “I should have been a detective”. She makes use of film noir's stock trick – rubbing a pencil over a notepad to reveal traces of the last note written. Read asks the question: who is writing these smart-arse messages? Has a crime taken place, or is it about to? And is the artist criminal, detective or comedian?

Also an Elam masters graduate and also darkly comedic, Amelia Harris recently exhibited *To the moon!* at the Film Archive. Harris's slideshow of moon-writing is tongue-in-cheek: for the past year the artist has taken her camera out every full moon and attempted to “teach the moon the alphabet”. That is, she wiggles the camera in a letter-shaped fashion so that the trace of light spells out a neon

alphabet. Her work reminds me of Californian conceptualist John Baldessari trying to teach a plant the alphabet (the grainy 70s video portrays the artist seriously engaged in showing his potplant letter cards and repeating the sounds ad infinitum). It's also reminiscent of local photographer Darren Glass and his frisbee pinhole cameras, which trace their trajectories across the sky and look like the spidery writing kids make with sparklers.

Harris's enterprise is charmingly vainglorious. Her lunar pupil proves wilful and unpredictable, inserting the occasional numeral or scribble into the lesson. Perhaps *To the moon!* is a more accurate portrait of Harris herself than the celestial body it purports to represent.

Harris's art-school career was punctuated by controversy, involving her running up enormous library fines as a conceptual artwork. Her final submission in the Mount St building (formerly the Dadley Trust for Crippled Children) featured a bedridden lump of clay with horribly mismatched legs, and another lump of clay with a beaky nose sporting the misnomer "Mozart", perhaps to honour the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth, but more likely to confound music- and art-lovers alike.

Another standout from the recent wave of masters graduates is AUT's Sam Morrison, who continues the grand tradition of homemade instruments pioneered by such stalwarts as Phil Dadson but gives Dadson's earthy style a mechanical twist.

Using compressed air to power his sound-making machines, Morrison created a roomful of perpetual-motion cacophony at AUT. Bottles filled with sand at different levels spun atop record turntables while the air whistled over their mouths. These pan-flute loops repeated rhythmically, referencing sampling with the most simple technology. Other inventions included ping-pong balls bouncing on a bass drum, straws and balloons whining, and seedpods dancing in trumpets.

John Cage's adage that anything can be music is illustrated here with playful exuberance, minus the po-faced seriousness of some contemporary sonic explorations. Morrison will be participating in the Govett-Brewster's Break: Construct, curated by the recently appointed gallery director, Rhana Devenport.

THE NATIONAL DRAWING AWARD, Artspace (January 16-27), also showing at the Physics Room in Christchurch
TO THE MOON! Amelia Harris, the Film Archive, Auckland
BREAK: CONSTRUCT, Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth (to February 18)

