

M^E,
AccorDING **TO**
THE **H**i**S**tory **oF**
ART

M^E,
A_cCOR_DING TO
THE HISTOR_Y OF
ART

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'The universe exists independent of human self-regard.'

D. H. Lawrence

'The past has written a letter to the future, and we're it.'

Tracy Griddler

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Dick Frizzell, *Am I*, 1997

We dream ourselves up.

FORWARDED

Art history's shit, isn't it? Part of the problem is the way it's projected: an arcane world of lofty scholarship filtered through a dense web of mysterious medieval masters, workshops and grandiose attributions. The names of the artists alone are enough to make your head spin: Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña, Melchior Broederlam, the Master of Flémalle, Gentile da Fabriano . . . Are they even real names? And that's before you get to the ultimate Dumbledore, Leonardo da Vinci, with his secret codices, backwards writing and Nostradamus-like science fictions. The myth of the 'Old Masters', with their ancient secrets that only a lifetime of monkish swot in a stone cell can reveal, is an enduring one. 'Tell me the secret of the 500 glazes so that I too may paint like [insert favourite old master here].' It drives me nuts.

A couple of years ago, I witnessed a fabulously extravagant display of deep art connoisseurship in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. I was standing in front of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, marvelling at the compositional management of the advancing posse, when the people around me started thinning out, as if it were closing time. Puzzled, I turned around to see a soberly dressed gentleman standing at what would have been the *back* of the crowd (very strategic) in the most perfect art-observing pose: one foot in front of the other, body leaning back, one hand on chin, the other on hip, head tilted on a slant so that the serious squinting eyes could aim down the proud and haughty nose. Clearly he was *A Scholar*. Such was the power of his authoritative stance that the crowd was silently parting to allow the laser beam of inquisition no obstruction. Even *I* moved. I have no idea who this wally was, but he put on a helluva show. Such is the weird world of art historical scholarship.

I'm not implying (much) that it's a deliberate strategy, but there must be such intense satisfaction in thinking that your scholastic labours are carrying you deeper and deeper into life's infinite mysteries. It must feel like an initiation into some ancient Masonic order. The temptation to encourage an air of mystery and obfuscation must be irresistible. I find myself having to resist the urge even in this crude account. Consequently, the artists these scholars write about so reverentially have become almost cartoon heroes, part of a sort of intellectual Marvel Universe. The golden glow placed around them obscures the fact that these artists were just people like us — very talented people, to be sure — up ladders trying to get pots of pigmented mud to the brush and then to the wall. Or the ceiling. Once I was in the Sistine Chapel with my oldest son, Josh, staring up at the famous ceiling, when he said, teasingly, 'I know a set painter in Wellington who could do that.'

I bridled for a second — because I'm a 'serious' artist — until he expanded thoughtfully: 'It's pretty straightforward stuff if you break it down to one spandrel at a time.' (He didn't actually say spandrel; I just threw that in for authenticity.) And I got to thinking that it really *did* come down to that, if only you tried to stop looking at the whole mind-boggling thing all at once.

Michelangelo wasn't doing anything mysterious by the standards of the day. He was just doing a lot of it, and doing it lying on his back (well, that's how Charlton Heston did it). And he wasn't necessarily the best at ceiling work, either: he was about an eighth of the way through before he realised he'd got the scale wrong and could in fact leave out about 20 per cent of the content and enlarge the main characters to considerably greater effect. (The guides at the chapel love telling this story.)

It's this giddy idea that the whole ceiling flowed from Michelangelo's golden brushes as if he was the conduit to something beyond human understanding that I'm hoping to shed a bit of light on in this book. That's why Josh's comment that day sheeted home to me in such a direct way. Perhaps I can make this story an entertaining and straightforward read without sounding as if I'm bashing scholarship. Because a big part of me *is* confounded and beguiled by it all. Perhaps I can be reverently irreverent. Actually, one thing I've learnt about this business of demystification is that the harder you try, the more mysterious it gets. So I guess I can relax on that one.

What's the biggest stumbling block to a clear understanding of this rich and rewarding subject? Well, mostly, it's the Renaissance, isn't it? How do I plan to deal with that? Renaissance. Such a scary word. Is it two 'n's, two 's's? 'Ence' or 'ance'? What is it? Italian? Sounds French. What's that about? Wasn't the thing mostly Italian? And what a lot of baggage that word carries with it. What does it even mean? Something came back again? What came back, and did it come back better? Was it a 'neo' thing? A 'retro' thing? Retro-Greek? Neo-Roman? Why were things so shitty that people felt that something somewhere had to be better? And such a flowery word. Sort of foppish, like a Mozart dance routine, frilly handkerchiefs fluttering. Academics even talk about the 'flowering of the Renaissance', which doesn't help. In fact it seems that one of those very academics made the whole thing up. A nineteenth-century Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt, took this chaotic and serendipitous conflation of history and opportunity and decided that it was to be called the Renaissance, although a French historian called Jules Michelet actually used it first — hence the distinctly non-Italian nature of the label. Who knew?

So, whatever you call it, how do you explain all this? How do I help in my comic-cuts Frizzell sort of way? What, exactly, was 'Renaissed', and how? I'll give you a clue, but you're going to have to read the rest of the book for the full story. Mostly it was the outcome of a yearning for better days, of the nostalgic notions of Greek perfection. A dream of a better, idealised world. A bit like the depictions of Superman's home planet, Krypton: peaceful people drifting about in belted togas and gold headbands. See how these Renaissances work out? Moving on by getting it wrong.

If we can unlock this little mystery we're on our way. After all, 'it's just one damned thing after another', as some wag said about life. So sit back and enjoy the ride. Don't be put off by all the tricky

names (I've slipped in a bit of a glossary at the back that might help if the '-isms' get too exotic) and mangled timelines. You won't remember them anyway, so just go with it and enjoy the stories.

OK, we're nearly there, nearly at The Introduction. My aim in writing this book — and painting the reproductions of all the works that appear in it — is to clarify, demystify and deobfuscate this mad business of smoke and mirrors we call art. And I'm going to tell that story against *my* background, which means that it's a very Eurocentric, Western story. Politically or historically correct or not, this is the story I feel behind me. It explains who I am as an artist. You could call it The Anatomy of Dick. Because art history might be shit. But the history of art isn't. It's the story of my life — and yours.

BOOK ONE

Laying out the line



Bible Moralisée, c. 1220

God measuring up for a bit of creation.

Introduction

Creation myths

I initially set out to write this book for one specific reason: to respond to requests that I lay out a guide to my cunning survival strategies and explain how my contrarian philosophies have actually allowed me to last this long in a business famous for jumping on any sign of weakness or hesitation. As soon as I started the forensic work it quickly expanded into ‘Why was I even lucky enough to have figured out all this?’, ‘Did I invent myself, or was it inevitable?’, ‘Was it me or my mum?’ And we’ll get on to that in a minute.

I was pondering all this when I serendipitously (story of my life) came across an ancient interview from the fabulous 1980 book *Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, text by Jim and Mary Barr and photographs by Marti Friedlander. I was struck by how weirdly it had laid out a sort of blueprint for my curious career.

I was damned lucky to even be in the book. I had only just managed to focus my philosophy sufficiently to illustrate it, which had led to invitations to exhibit on a couple of occasions. These had attracted enough acclaim to bring Jim and Mary to my door in St Marys Bay. At the end of the interview I got a bit moony on the doorstep as they were leaving. Staring dreamily into space, I said, ‘You know, I love being an artist!’ And I meant it — being included in that book really meant something back then — but I was also winding them up a bit. I’d never met, let alone been interviewed by, two people so potty about art. We artists were all deadly serious about what we were doing, but we also had a healthy scepticism about how others seemed to regard that ‘doing’. Jim and Mary, who are more perceptive than most observers, were still, in my view, adding two and two and getting five. Everything they latched on to in my studio would be sitting there doing what I was accustomed to it doing, but suddenly, for the Barrs, it seemed to be required to do a whole lot more. I understand this: the artist can’t possibly be responsible for every level of meaning that their work might generate. But these interviewers were having such a semiotic picnic with all my junk that I couldn’t help feeding the machine a bit.

It’s like not wanting to let people’s expectations down when they get on a roll, and so you start playing things up. Perhaps we were looking at each other in a slightly guileless way because there *was* a lot of newness in the air that we were all trying to find our own ways into.

The interview is revealing about all of us. At one point in the text the Barrs noted my relationship to my commercial work — I did a lot of it back then to make ends meet — by pointing



Marti Friedlander, *Dick Frizzell in his studio, St Marys Bay, Auckland, 1977*, image courtesy Gerrard and Marti Friedlander Charitable Trust

Working on the colour separations for the silkscreen print *The Will to Love*. The pool table is doing double duty.

out the toy-gun packaging lying on the work table and emphasising its commercial nature by quoting the legend on the box: 'Star Battle game: Pistol shoots cork fifteen feet, safe harmless fun for all the family, knocks targets into orbit.' They suggested that 'other artists' might have tucked such a crass artefact away somewhere for fear it would lower the tone but not Frizzell, etc. Well, how true, but it was 'there' only because it was probably waiting for me to run it over to Lincoln Industries in Penrose, who had commissioned it.

My philosophy was that you could quickly get into what my old colleague Don Binney used to call 'a bugger's muddle' if you thought you were actually making *art*, and that you had to invent contrary strategies to ambush yourself into picking up the brush. If I somehow could trick myself into thinking that I was just mucking about, I stood a greater chance of getting something done that might or might not end up being art. Nowadays — now that I'm getting to the end of it and seem to have made my point, more or less — I just go over to the easel and do it. I get something in my head and I can't wait to get it out so I can have a look at it. I've been thinking about the whys and wherefores of this business for 50 years now, and I can pretty much relax over the question about whether it's art or not, whether it's worthwhile or not. I'll let others decide that. As long as it seems like an idea worth the investment of time and trouble I'll keep responding to my own enthusiasms . . . as long as I have any. Moving faster than the speed of thought, I call it. If you have to think about it then something's not working. It usually means you're straying too far from home, trying too hard.

The interview with the Barrs was also the first time I trotted out the line 'You don't go far without PR'. That — employing crass commercial language in an art interview — was a bit of a wind-up too. But I believe it. All artists do it, even the art hermits who like to dissemble about their mute status, to communicate their loathing of communication. It began to dawn on me back then, too, that even an anti-theoretical stance is a theory.

Where was I going with all this great unravelling? We seem to have jumped from the introduction straight to the meat of the book. First things first. At primary school my classmates would get me to decorate the plain brown paper covers of their exercise books with depictions of either Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck. I became The Boy Who Could Draw. For some mysterious reason I seemed to be the only person at school who understood the fabulous mobius strip that is Donald Duck's upper beak, or had figured out the circular symmetry of Mickey Mouse's head. And it never stopped.

My father worried that I would end up as a lonely poofster starving in a garret somewhere (where did he *get* all this stuff from, I now wonder), a scenario I found profoundly exciting. It only hardened my resolve to the extent that I deliberately failed School Certificate so I would have to sit it again the following year, dropping the dreaded maths for the, hopefully, self-destructive art. Before I 'became an artist' — when I was that drawing boy — I used to spend hours copying images (pictures) out of



Here's one Mum didn't get. Sixth form design project. An early interest in fonts and all things 'modern', including spelling my first name without the 'c'. I see I've even included the record label top right. I was always looking for authenticity.