



Working Towards Meaning (977_0024.MXF) (2020). Digital print on tyvek, aluminium frame.
Still generously supplied and reproduced with permission by Chris Dudman and Bridget Hackshaw. Photo by Tim Wagg.

Interview: Tim Wagg

In 2019, soon after artist Tim Wagg completed his McCahon House residency, he was captured within the documentation of the restoration, framing and installation of the chapel windows for Auckland Art Gallery's McCahon centenary exhibition, *A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*.

Born out of coincidence and selection rather than traditional artistic labour, Wagg's series of selected prints reveal the way art can oscillate between object and artefact.

Working towards meaning reflects on Wagg's blurred relationship to McCahon and employs a series of subtle visual cues around the works that consider the labour structures that exist around art.

The following conversation between Wagg and Te Uru Curator, Chloe Geoghegan, is an opportunity to learn more about Wagg's practice, as well as some of the latent themes that exist within *Working towards meaning*.

Chloe Geoghegan (CG): Tim, I first saw your work at The Physics Room in Christchurch in late 2014. The exhibition was titled *One does not pet a rattlesnake until it has been defanged; only then does one take it on the road so that one and all can marvel at its natural beauty.* It was an ambitious and beautiful installation. It was cinematic in presentation, but it crossed into other genres such as the music video — seen in the way you used a hand-held camera to film the subject exploring an abandoned strip club.

Tim Wagg (TW): That work came out of The Physics Room residency programme. I was in Christchurch for a month and over that time I spent a lot of time walking around the city, especially late at night. I would take a camera and see what I could find. The city was in the early stages of rebuilding and I was able to explore places I wouldn't be able to now. Originally, I had a vision of making a work that considered urban tension by looking at the heavy amount of tagging and the privatisation of public space via the advertising walls

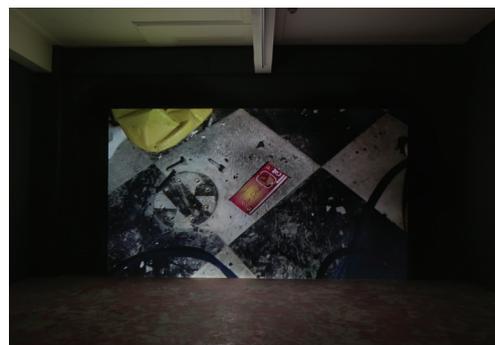
that were going up. However, when I stumbled across the location in the film (the strip club), I was instantly compelled. This was probably the first time I based a work on the affect of a particular space, a space people wouldn't usually have access to.

CG: You then went on to create *I would rather be the worst at something than the best* (2014) shown at Blue Oyster, Dunedin as part of *Probstian Aesthetic*, curated by Dan Arps. The exhibition was created from Arps' sociological interest in the show *Survivor*, hosted by Jeff Probst. For Arps, your work displayed the kind of 'persistent energy' inherent in *Survivor*, as a figure can be seen enacting what looked like physically intense, imaginary power moves across an industrial landscape, reminiscent of the character of a game.

TW: I think reality television is one of the most compelling genres of the 2010s. The structures it creates and the way people have to buy into various levels of fiction, makes for really dynamic content and an unusual kind of human insight. *I would rather be the worst at something than the best* was shot on a desolate section surrounded by apartments and new commercial developments in central Auckland. For this (and for other works I was making at this time), I was looking for spaces in the city that were unproductive and placing nomadic figures within them, focusing on body movements and actions as awkward attempts to move through these unstable spaces. The narration was a mix of found text and things I had written, all spoken with a really low energy. A lot of the time, the narration was about the sensations, feelings or position of the body. The phrases Arps used to describe the subject of the exhibition, for example 'persistent energy' and 'emotional toughness', were similar to the character traits I felt people needed to survive and 'outlast the competition'. I was trying to create my own subject, born of the same environment, considering what goes along with those characteristics.

CG: You mentioned the notion of privatisation in relation to your exhibition at The Physics Room, and your 2016 video *1991*, commissioned for *New Perspectives* at Artspace Aotearoa also looked at this theme as a political force that has affected our generation greatly. *1991* was a unique study of the generational shift that took place as a result of sweeping social policy changes made by Ruth Richardson, who was Minister of Finance for the National government (1990-93).

TW: *1991* came out of reading Andrew Dean's *Ruth, Roger and Me* (2015). My works at the time were an attempt at articulating certain values, and coming across this book connected certain traits I was trying to articulate in my work with defining events in modern New Zealand history. *1991* was a chance to map the origins of values created throughout our history, which have greatly influenced my life and the



One does not pet a rattlesnake until it has been defanged; only then does one take it on the road so that one and all can marvel at its natural beauty (2014). Single channel HD video (8 min), shown at The Physics Room (13 December 2014 – 15 February 2015). Photo by Daegan Wells.



I would rather be the worst at something than the best (2014, still). Single channel HD video (3:38 min), shown at Blue Oyster (19 November – 20 December 2014). Courtesy of the artist.



1991 (2016). Single channel 4K digital video (12 min). Produced with support from Artspace Aotearoa and The Chartwell Trust, shown in *The Tomorrow People*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi (22 July – 1 October 2017). Photo by Shaun Matthews.



1991 (2016), still.

attitudes I hold. What fascinated me the most was the shift in perspective that has occurred since Richardson's tenure. Richardson was seen as radical at the time, however, I would argue that the values she tried to impart are now the mainstream. I know many people who want to win and very few who are interested in joining organised labour movements.

CG: Seeing an artist investigate the issues normally left to a journalist to float into the world as a thinkpiece — often hidden within an entertainment-heavy news cycle — is significant. Matthew Galloway's [recent study](#) of John Key's statement that New Zealand should become the ultimate Pacific bolt hole for wealthy global citizens, and Simon Denny's [work on Peter Thiel](#) are both timely, but to have a twenty year lead-in to *1997* makes this work stand apart. As well as being able to interview Richardson, your subject.

TW: These are all studies of people who hold levels of real power. They have visions of how the world should be and are not afraid of actually enacting the change they want. There is something incredibly compelling about that, and it was definitely something that made me want to meet Richardson. In person, Richardson was very open to talking about her views, values and visions for the future. As an artist, I was able to create a very different interview environment, putting me in an unique position to ask quite different questions and create different insights.

The moment you actually engage with someone, things become rich but messy. You can go in with preconceived notions, but once you're in the room, they will bring different or unexpected things to the table, and because there is another person involved you have a level of responsibility to represent what they have to say. To have made a piece about Richardson without her would not have been as interesting. I want to know what she thinks, how she was able to do what she did because of what that has meant for me growing up in a much more market-based, competitive environment.

CG: For *Working towards meaning* at Te Uru, you have turned the camera on yourself. Perhaps this project is autobiographical, but not exactly a self-portrait — at least in a traditional sense. This is disguised by the presence of McCahon — he is the object but you are very much the subject. In some ways, this work is about generational shifts as well. You come well after McCahon in the history of art, and you've had the opportunity during your McCahon House residency to reflect on his influence, 100 years after his birth.

TW: The project came from a serendipitous series of events. I work as a casual exhibition technician at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Right after finishing the residency, I went to work on the exhibition *A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*. For a week, I was tasked with the process of framing McCahon's recently restored chapel windows into custom made lightboxes for the exhibition. While working on these, a documentary crew showed up to document this process as part of their own project, which centred around chapel architect James Hackshaw, the chapel and the windows painted by McCahon.

Calling it autobiographical is a much better descriptor than self-portrait. I was put in front of the lens as part of my job as a gallery technician, performing for a different kind of art project. The decision-making process, shots and framing were not in my control, I was just a figure to help animate the footage. It's also interesting to think that these images were only captured because they are by McCahon. This resource is not given to other works and installations; it's a work that can happen because of his standing within the canon of art.

Over the days of shooting, I started to think there might be something compelling in the footage taken that could be recontextualised into a different form, to foreground the relationship of art to labour, and the structures that exist around the conservation and presentation of work.



Working Towards Meaning (2020) install shot. Digital prints on Tyvek, aluminium frames. Photo by Sam Hartnett

By using content featuring myself, I felt that I had some ownership of the images and I could develop my own narrative with them. I am depicting a very specific experience with McCahon's windows. It's a relationship where the windows operate as objects, not as artworks. I am there to move and handle them as you would a multitude of other objects at different jobs. Through this process, they lose a certain level of aura when seen placed on a table in this behind-the-scenes area of the gallery. That said, you are also seeing artworks before wall texts or gallery gimmicks and interpretive or promotional material, and this lets you consider what is actually present.

These works require large teams, care and labour hours to get to their final display on the gallery walls. So many highly skilled conservation, registration, design and technical workers have been involved in getting McCahon's chapel window paintings to a stage in which they can be exhibited. I think it's worth considering this when considering art.

While on the McCahon residency, I was asked a lot about McCahon's influence on my work. This led me to ask, what is it that I see, consume and experience that helps to shape my worldview and what materials and images do I feel can describe this view? I realised it was not so much the landscape, but the digital realm that has really influenced my worldview. I think *Working towards meaning* references this in the sense that I am essentially trawling a digital archive of footage and images to find my own connections and narratives.

All works courtesy of the artist
Photos by Tim Wagg and Sam Hartnett

Tim Wagg: Working towards meaning
Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery
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