

signs of the time

Painting remains an integral part of life for Christchurch contemporary artist

Philip Trusttun who, at 80, routinely produces six or more works a week.

Inspired by day-to-day experiences and observations, his art is both technically disciplined and playfully experimental. Over his long career, he has explored many different styles and techniques and made them his own. Through clever use of colour, technique and perspective, he transforms the mundane to reveal the strangeness of ordinary life.

WORDS **Kim Newth** IMAGES **Charlie Jackson**

It is exciting to step into Philip Trusttun's Christchurch studio and discover new work, fresh and bright, hanging there. I can see a huge yellow electric plug painted on loose canvas. Dominating another wall is a towering stylised figure with scissor legs.

He explains that the plug and the large letters 'EV' next to it came from a car park stencilled with an electric vehicle sign. The scissor figure references a sign on the side of new council rubbish bins. The figure has a hatchet through its head and, along with its symbolic handful of litter, looks as though it's about to be sucked into a rubbish bin vortex. It's simultaneously funny and sad; a sign of the times.

This is how it is with Philip; he'll start with something mundane before slipping it sideways to produce a work that's surprising and unexpected.

Philip is like a squirrel when it comes to city street signs. He'll go out with his camera, hunting them down and photographing them from all different angles – much to the bemusement of passers-by – with images stored up for later use in his pop art stash. He's done dozens of street sign works including arrows, 30 km/h and 50 km/h speed limit signs, stop signs and 'no dogs' signs.

'In about 20 years' time, when people want to find what signs were being used in Christchurch, they'll come and look at Trusttun's work,' he says, smiling. 'I've been looking at signs for some time. I try to get meaning out of them; something to see or discover. Most people don't even notice them but they carry so much intrinsic information.'

His fascination with signs first kicked in after the Canterbury earthquakes, when road cones mushroomed across the city delineating zones and dangers. 'To me the road cone is a sign: even though it's three-dimensional, it's very much a graphic image.'

One of his works, gifted to the Christchurch Art Gallery – *Here We Go Again*, full of randomly pointing arrows and a cluster of road cones – really gets inside the reality of life in Christchurch back then.

Philip and his wife Lee lost their stately two-storey home in the central city to the earthquakes and, after coming out on the losing side of a lengthy insurance battle, had to adjust to life in a small two-bedroom unit at the same address. This used to be Philip's old studio; they built a new studio to replace it in 2014 and today use a shipping container to provide additional storage.





ABOVE / In Philip's Christchurch studio, new works appear weekly on the plywood walls. Photo books, paints and CDs are stored within easy reach.

He's philosophical about the upheavals of life over the past decade, including the latest COVID-19 virus crisis. 'We're okay. Our home is good and warm; it cost a fortune to heat our big old house. Awful things happen but they only stay bad for so long.'

For Philip, art is a state of mind, as much as a process. His thoughts become preoccupied with the work and the choices he's making. 'It's something you move into and it takes you out of your own personal problems. I don't have many shows now. There's no ambition involved; I just paint and then I put it away.'

Also up on the wall of the studio is a painting of a grinning goblin-headed figure in a *Tool* T-shirt. Philip says it's actually a portrait of his grandson William wearing a mask from a \$2 shop. Philip bought a whole load of cheap monster/Halloween-style masks that he loves 'dismantling and rejigging' in his work. There are masked self-portraits peering down on us too, part of a large series of masked works. Another features his granddaughter wearing a huge horse head mask. It looks like something out of a pagan carnival or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

'It's nothing new,' says Philip, shrugging. '[German Expressionists] Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde used masks and Picasso used traditional African masks in his figurative work. It's another way to look at reality.'

A pivotal early influence on Philip's work was Rudolf Gopas, one of his lecturers at Canterbury's School of Fine Arts. In the 1960s, he introduced Philip to the world of contemporary international art and the work of artists like Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Joan Miró.

It was a huge awakening for Philip, who had spent a fairly itinerant childhood with his family in various rural communities, including Raetihi (where he was born), Oxford, Hawarden and Rangiora. Along with a talent for rugby and show-jumping, he had shown an obvious flair for art that was encouraged by his mother and grandmother. In his early teens, he had several years of tuition with a methodical art teacher in Oxford, painting various English scenes.

Although he enjoyed life at Hawarden Area School, his first year at Rangiora High School was not a happy experience so he wound up dropping out after only a year and then spent the next five years working at a department store in Christchurch, Hay's Ltd.

Not having any school qualifications effectively delayed his entry to the School of Fine Arts; he finally started his studies there at age 20. His transition to becoming a recognised artist was rapid. By 1970, he was a professional artist who'd had five solo exhibitions and had already sold three works to the Auckland City Art Gallery. 'I got chosen for a Commonwealth art exhibition in London in 1965 when I was still at art school. It was like being selected for the All Blacks while still at high school. It led to a couple of art galleries asking me to join them – I chose New Vision Gallery [where he was to exhibit for more than 20 years].'

He and Lee, who was the daughter of prominent Christchurch clothing designer Fanny Buss, met at Arts



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TOP LEFT / As he gets older, Philip is changing and exploring new possibilities. Resene house paints are currently getting a run in the studio. "I like its flatness and also if you put say yellow next to another colour it doesn't bleed into it." **ABOVE** / A private meditation ... *M Dég*, 1800x1220, acrylic/canvas. **BOTTOM LEFT** / Lee and Philip in front of their gracious two-storey home that was lost to the February 2011 earthquake. The couple still live at the same address in a small two-bedroom unit. **BOTTOM RIGHT** / There is no set routine involved in painting for Philip. One day he will start work in his studio at 10 am, the next at 5 pm. "It doesn't matter when, but I paint every day."



'I'm always driven to the next work. The artist is always asking the same question – "What do I want to paint?"'

School and married in 1965. They were soon busy juggling creative careers with raising their two young children, Martin and Hannah. Lee worked with her mother while Philip worked from home, with a nanny providing part-time childcare.

Not surprisingly, Philip's work from the mid-1960s revolved around his personal world, producing pieces such as *Martin's Playtime* (1966) and *Woman* (1965). Later work, dating from when the family lived in Waimate (1986–2001), reflects a preoccupation with the physicality of life on the land.

It's interesting to see Philip's personal world still playing out in his most recent work, but now infused with observations on the impact of an inherited demyelinating nerve disorder in the family. Subjects include grandson William wearing a big moon boot following surgery and Lee with her walking frame. These are private meditations, not for sale.

Philip rejects the notion that these works say anything profound about the human condition. In a very different style

to the signs series, they are intricately detailed studies made using cut-off acrylic paint tubes like oil sticks and with a forensic focus on leg bones and the brain.

'I'm always driven to the next work. The artist is always asking the same question – "What do I want to paint?" They have to come to some agreement in their minds that what they are doing is important, if only to themselves. All I need is a glimpse and that can produce a painting. I must leave it to the viewer to decide whether the work has any merit.'

What a career he's had though: he's one of New Zealand's most recognised contemporary painters of major works and has shown internationally in Sydney, Melbourne, Edinburgh and New York. In 2000 he was awarded the Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant – only the second New Zealander to gain this prestigious award. There have been many fabulous projects, such as the monumental body of work he produced for *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a multi-media concert at the Christchurch Town Hall in 2003. (By 2004, the series had expanded to 140 images.) In 1986, he was commissioned to create two storeys of stained glass for the Unisys Building in Wellington. In 1999, he produced an 84-metre mural, made up of 138 panels, to mark the new millennium (recovered from the quake-damaged Christchurch Convention Centre in 2012). Many of his works are valued treasures, held in private and public collections.

Looking ahead, Philip is pleased that the Arts in Oxford Gallery plans to hold a biennial exhibition of his work into the future, 'dead or alive'. He is the gallery's patron and helped organise the highly successful *Moving On* exhibition there, showing the work of many Canterbury artists affected by the earthquakes. A must-see in October 2020 will be an exhibition of his work there. ●



ABOVE LEFT / *I Love Earthquakes* (2014), image courtesy of the Ashburton Art Gallery. ABOVE / *To Go* (2014), image courtesy of the Ashburton Art Gallery.