

Martin Basher

b.1979

Master of Visual Arts: Columbia University, New York, USA

At the heart of Martin Basher's work is a desire to question our everyday behaviour toward the environment. In *I'm The Only Hell My Mother Ever Raised*, a garishly coloured dance floor in the middle of a pine plantation is empty, the mirror ball almost still twirling, the music fading.

Basher was thinking about dance parties when he painted this work in 2005. He was thinking about 'the morning after' and the way abandoned social spaces comment on our relationship with the natural environment. He used the party as a metaphor for the contemporary preoccupation with shopping and consuming – instant gratification. But what happens when the fun's over? When we are left with an abandoned dance floor at sunrise and a big mess to clean up?

The setting of the dance floor is important too. It is not located in native bush but in a pine plantation. In New Zealand, thousands of acres are planted in pine plantations. Land covered in native bush was cleared to make way for farmland and later planted with pine trees. Pine trees in Basher's work represent wilderness now farmed, harnessed to our needs regardless of the cost to the environment. In fact everything in this impeccably painted work is artificial. Both the dance floor and the pine trees have been 'planted' there. Something about the clash of the dance floor colours and the green of the trees points to this, casting an atmosphere over the work so that when you look at it you are both wowed and disturbed.

And then there is that title! *I'm The Only Hell My Mother Ever Raised* is a line from a song by country singer, Hank Williams III. Basher has said that he chose it because of the way it plays with the idea of the party. 'Raising hell' at a party suggests things taken to excess; while 'mother' in this context might invoke Mother Earth. Basher presumably means 'I' in the universal sense, which means everyone. In which case the title might mean: We are all raising hell on the planet – having a great big party without thinking about the consequences for the future...

Basher is part of a generation of young artists whose work questions our assumptions about how we live in the environment. He was born in New Zealand but has spent periods of time in the United States where he saw a huge amount of environmental degradation and pollution. In his mind, New Zealand became the antithesis of this. That is until he returned home in 2004 and was shocked to find the beginnings of environmental problems here. Basher's art cautions the viewer, and asks us to rethink our attitudes and behaviour. But, despite these forebodings, his work also contains a dose of optimism. It's not too late to change and go on, have a dance.

Mary-Jane Duffy

Artist website:

www.martinbasher.com

Galleries and museums:

www.marynewtongallery.com

www.starkwhite.co.nz

