

Mark Braunias

b.1955

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Mark Braunias's painting *Ladez-z* reminds me of that phrase people use when ambitious plans they have made fall through: "Oh well, back to the drawing board". This painting is a drawing board. It's a jumble of flat, schematic doodles, which seem to be try-outs for properly finished cartoons.

There are side-views of human heads, an outline of what looks like a long-eared basset hound, the curvy shapes of body parts — bladders, lungs, intestines — and lettering spelling out the word *Ladez-z*. But most of these painted-on sketches are smeared, partly rubbed-out or faded-looking. They belong to an earlier era, to times past. There's a young person running who is wearing 1970s clothing: a waistcoat, bell-bottom trousers and stack-heeled cowboy boots. Everyone has old-fashioned hairstyles. In fact, the style of these drawings is that of comic books and newspaper cartoon strips from the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

You could have a garage sale with this painting's contents, or donate the lot to a museum of popular culture — one celebrating ordinary things and 20th century memorabilia before the arrival of the digital age, with its computer-aided design and slick, shiny three-dimensional cartoons.

These are clunky drawings — done to calculated effect. Braunias conceals his drawing skills, only revealing what is necessary to his purpose. What the painting shows is rough yet honest, each drawing crafted with affection. It's about childhood memories: a favourite pet dog, the big slow-moving man who lived down the street, the ladies who worked behind the counter at the bank or visited the beauty salon. It's also a tribute to classic comic strips of the past such as *Dennis*, *The Menace*, *Peanuts*, and *Archie*.

By taking us back in time, Braunias is commenting on now, on the continuities of life, on growing and changing, and yet in some ways staying the same. His painting shows a young man running and an old man plodding. They could be the same person at different times. And some shapes have been drawn over and over, as if to reflect the repetitiveness of the everyday and the communality of what is shown. The deadpan, understated way of drawing and painting all reflect the Braunias world view — his droll sense of humour.

Braunias is a great people-watcher, an observer of mannerisms. There's a woman talking, her hand up in front of her; a man sitting self-consciously in a fancy armchair; a half-

sketch of someone wearing a long overcoat, pointing, and then shown pointing again as if the artist is trying to get it right. His ensemble of characters combines his own memories of visits to the cartoonland of yesteryear with a stroll down to the town centre just yesterday.

If Braunias's painting seems like mismatched pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, or a collection of two-dollar-shop fridge magnets, it's important to realise that, beyond the joke intestines, the empty speech balloons and sad sack faces, the artist is making work that connects with a long tradition of art depicting communities in a humorous way, from Pieter Bruegel to Edward Kleinholz to Bryan Dew. Braunias's characters are soulful, hopeful, vulnerable and absurd, and amongst them we glimpse aspects of people we know.

David Eggleton

Artist website:

www.markbraunias.co.nz

Galleries and museums:

www.artbash.co.nz

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.bathstreetgallery.com

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.jonathansmartgallery.com

Articles:

Blundell, S. (2005). 'The Travelling Cartoon Show'. *Art New Zealand*, Winter 2005, 115, pp. 84–86.

Blundell, S. (2007). *Visual Bank*, Tauranga Art Gallery.

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Paton, J. (1995). 'Closing Focus: Ten Takes On Mark Braunias'. *Art New Zealand*, Spring 1995, 76.

Paton, J. (2002). *First-Time Caller*, Dunedin, Public Art Gallery.

Web search:

Pieter Bruegel

Bryan Dew

Edward Kleinholz

