

Gavin Chilcott

b.1950

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Gavin Chilcott is a kind of ‘slacker classicist’. His ambiguous forms, often resembling fragments of Greco-Roman statues, columns and vases, litter pastel landscapes that recall 20th century Surrealists like Yves Tanguy, Jean Arp, Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali. In this drawing his coloured pencils seem to mimic the naive line of an especially gifted and exuberant child.

Chilcott means to evoke childhood, but his symbolic landscapes are anything but childish. Here, what looks like an inflatable Christian cross casts a more traditional crucifix-shadow. Pillars of flame shoot skyward. The shape hovering above resembles both a crucified torso and a stylised version of the ‘Sacred Heart’ of Christ.

The drawing is dominated by a faceless, limbless cipher who seems to have been hewn from wood: possibly from the tree whose stump is in the distance. This weird figure is wearing a racoon-skin cap complete with tail. These hats were coveted by many children of Chilcott’s generation, who saw them featured in the 1950s Disney TV series about the American historical and popular hero of the colonial Wild West, Davy Crockett. With this reference to the ‘fetishism’ of childhood, and the title – *The Awakening Conscience?* – the artist seems to encourage an autobiographical reading of the image. Furthermore, the drawing was in Chilcott’s exhibition titled *Auto-Portrait: The Early Years*, which strongly suggests that the racoon-skin cap-wearing figure is in fact the artist. Can we therefore assume that Christian symbolism was part of his upbringing and education? Is the title meant ironically? (It comes from a famous Victorian genre painting, reference to which suggests at least some ironic intent on Chilcott’s part.) And what are we to make of the book on the desk, open at what appears to be an illustration or figure depicting the sign ‘X’. It is, in fact, a direct visual quotation from a 1913 self-portrait by Giorgio de Chirico, but does it have a symbolic purpose here? Of course the sign ‘X’ has a number of connotations.

Chilcott’s parents owned a drapery shop when he was young, and textiles and patterns often appear in his works. In this drawing many of the forms have soft, rounded lines

suggestive of fabric. Chilcott was one of the first artists to blur the distinction between the so-called fine arts of painting and sculpture and the decorative arts, such as fabric and furniture design, ceramics and interior design. The bright ‘Miami Vice’ pastels and boldly exuberant forms in this drawing recall designs of the 1980s. They can also be found in the objects and rugs that Chilcott designed at around the same time.

Chilcott was also prescient in his treatment of drawing, treating it not merely as preparatory to painting, but as image-making in its own right. He seems to value the lightness, immediacy and un-preciousness; qualities that have seen drawing become central to contemporary art-making in the first decade of the 21st century. *The Awakening Conscience?* is a deft piece of ‘ironic-clunky’ draughtsmanship, but it remains a symbolic teaser. Is there an obscure narrative here, or is it simply a bunch of iconic and personal symbols that appeal to the artist?

Andrew Paul Wood

Artist website:

www.gavinchilcott.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issues21to30/image.htm

Web search:

Jean Arp

Salvador Dali

Giorgio de Chirico

Yves Tanguy

