

Bill Culbert

b.1935

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This sculpture is made from materials that could be found in almost any household. Five plastic bottles identical in form, three of them green, two of them black. A wired-up white fluorescent tube pierces the bottles and, when switched on, imparts a constant glow from within. The bottles become containers of a trace of energy. The light brings colour to life and reveals the unexpectedly pleasing inner contours of the bottles. Because the bottle is a moulded shape, these visual notes are repeated, creating a rhythm.

The materials have not been altered much. They are not made to look like something else. The artist Frank Stella famously remarked of his own work: "What you see is what you see". Yet, what we see here is not 'exactly' what we see. The effect of the materials on our perception and imagination has been manipulated by the artist – by his conjuring of light. With the lightest of touches, Culbert works the metaphoric possibilities of his materials. We might think of the natural world – of sunlight penetrating pounamu or icy green waters. Or, at another extreme, we might be reminded of the hokey special effects seen in B-grade sci-fi movies.

But then, what are we to make of that mundane title, *Green 3 Black 2*? Doesn't it undercut a 'poetic' reading of the work? It's useful to know that Culbert's work is also about our perception of light and colour as purely optical phenomena. A more objective, even scientific, purpose might be inferred from the title. *Green 3 Black 2* may be one of a series of chromatic variations, each creating a different perceptual effect.

Light and openness to perceptual experience have been at the core of Culbert's art since the late 1960s. He left New Zealand in 1957, initially to study painting in London. But Culbert was influenced by Pop art assemblage, Minimalist sculpture and the Italian movement, Arte Povera. (His work with light-pierced vessels is comparable to the Arte Povera artist Mario Merz's found objects, such as umbrellas, pierced by a glowing neon tube.)

Culbert has developed a practice incorporating sculpture, black and white photography and installation. He uses fluorescent tubes, light bulbs, neon tubing, plastic bottles, lampshades, old suitcases and other humble materials, often from the recycler's or demolition yard. His work makes us

conscious that what an object is made from, and how it is made, affects its meaning. *Green 3 Black 2* may have a basis in the science of optics, but the artist has deliberately shunned technologically advanced production and precious or fine materials that would have been just as effective and more opulent.¹ Why? As with Arte Povera (translated literally: poor or impoverished art) artists of the 1960s, Culbert's choice of materials can be interpreted as a criticism of art-as-advanced design object for a consumer culture.

Gerald Barnett

¹ An exception to Culbert's attitude towards advanced materials and production techniques is in the realm of public sculpture, where durability and safety are of paramount importance. The monumental *SkyBlues* (2006) in Wellington's Post Office Square is a fine example of Culbert's abilities in this sphere.

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www.govtbbrewster.com
www.roslynnoxley9.com.au
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www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

Paton, J. (1999). 'Frequent Flyers'. *Art New Zealand*, 92, Spring 1999, pp. 46–51.

Web search:

Mario Merz
Pop art assemblage
Andre Povera
Frank Stella

