

James Robinson

b.1972

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James Robinson does not so much make paintings as torture them. His rough and ready canvases always look strung up rather than displayed, more worked over than worked on.

Robinson's paintings always bear the marks of the actions and processes of their making. His best-known works are slashed, stitched, cut, seared and burnt. Cryptic messages are inscribed into heavily textured and layered surfaces, that are often bloated with foreign objects such as sand, stone, grass, nails and broken crockery. Robinson grants free reign to the imaginative and instinctual processes of art-making. His art never sits still, and is highly charged with a manic energy.

While *Sci-Fi Paranormal Set* is a scarified painting evoking process, it trades some of the distinctive qualities of Robinson's hulking canvases, which seem to groan and strain under the weight of their own materials, for a more symbolic, pictographic approach to image-making. A number of forms and totems are arranged like specimens across the front of the picture plane, creating a complex visual code that taunts the viewer with its dissonance. Cultural references and signs clash. What looks like cave painting becomes urban graffiti. The totems could refer to non-Western art forms, or horror and heavy metal iconography. Robinson uses these symbols to confound and complicate, rather than to aid interpretation.

In this collision of signs and symbols, *Sci-Fi Paranormal Set* is more akin to Robinson's drawings. Drawing holds an important place in Robinson's practice, as both a medium and a process. He exhibits drawings by themselves and in conjunction with the larger paintings. These drawings tend to be more figurative, symbolic, and confessional – opening up the vast reservoir of images and signs that Robinson taps.

Large paintings and small drawings are not seen in opposition. Robinson sometimes binds and stitches drawings together to form larger works, creating unusual combinations and formations. This technique further intensifies the physical experience of the work, and the clash of forms, styles and

materials that Robinson seeks. He constantly attends to the art-making process itself, intuitively following the direction it takes the work.

Robinson has used a head-mounted camera to make a film that documents his studio practice from a 'painter's eye' perspective. This suggests the high value he places on the processes of making art, and intense physical engagement with the artwork.

These are all characteristics of an expressionist approach to art-making. This tradition was especially prominent in New Zealand through the 1970s and '80s, led by artists like Rob McLeod, Tony Fomison and Philip Clairmont. Robinson is often presented as an inheritor of this tradition, whose difference comes from being raised on a contemporary diet of video games, punk rock, comic books, and the myths surrounding these earlier artists. It's a label Robinson simultaneously wears and shrugs off. Like most expressionists, he's more interested in making art than offering explanations.

Aaron Lister

Artist website:

www.jamesrobinson.co.nz

Galleries and museums:

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.mhgallery.co.nz

www.milfordgalleries.co.nz

Web search:

Philip Clairmont

Tony Fomison

Rob McLeod

