

Tony de Lautour

b.1965

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Balance Of Power depicts our national icon – the kiwi – in a way which is deliberately unflattering, calling into question ideas of patriotism. This creature has the head of a kiwi, but the arms and legs of a human. No longer a shy, flightless forest dweller, the artist has created a monster – a drunken half-bird hooligan balanced precariously on a bottle and a syringe.

Tony De Lautour's sickly-coloured, cartoonish paintings – often sporting cigarettes and liquor bottles – talk frankly about human fallibility and bad habits. His chunky painting style is deliberately rough and ready; a critic once christened his style 'bad white art'. He has been influenced by tattoos and graffiti – art made by people without professional training. He slaps paint on crudely. His works have a sense of urgency – as if they were created in a hurry. The white paint is thick and makes the scene seem a little queasy, appropriate given the subject matter.

Overt references to drugs and alcohol spell out to the viewer that all's not well in New Zealand. Hardly the clean, green image that the media would like us to project to the world, de Lautour uses the colours of the flag, red, white and blue, to tell a very different story. Across the top of the painting, the year 1996 is emblazoned, which is the year the painting was made. It's also an important election year in New Zealand history, when MMP, the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system came into effect. This was a controversial move, designed to create more fairness within Parliament, but it also meant that there would no longer be clear winners, and compromise and adjustment would always be necessary.

De Lautour's kiwi exemplifies this tricky political situation, and the 'balance of power' between the two major parties is symbolised by a blue bottle for National and a red syringe for Labour. Neither option seems particularly savoury, and the kiwi makes an effort to stay upright atop this dangerous pile-up. A tiny kiwi at the bottom left of the painting, which points in the opposite direction of the big kiwi, might represent a minor party

affecting the overall balance of Parliament under MMP. The large kiwi's clothes are a patchwork of blue and red – echoing the way that the map of New Zealand is portrayed during election reports. The visible stitches could also be interpreted as sutures in wounded body parts. The 'carving up' of the land is always a sore point in this country; land wars are a part of our history.

De Lautour has made a range of kiwi paintings in the same 'patriotic' palette of red, white and blue over a number of years. His birds are always drunk, stoned, or beaten up: society's refuse. De Lautour's maltreatment of our national icon is a process of catharsis – his paintings are the place where he can exorcise his demons about the country he lives in. Through his violent, albeit cartoonish imagery, we can make up our own minds about the state of the nation.

Tessa Laird

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