

## TJ McNamara: Memories of past still have plenty of appeal

By [T.J. McNamara](#)

9:28 AM Saturday Jul 16, 2011

Lopdell House is host to an exhibition of the work of **Sir Peter Siddell**. It is a rare thing in New Zealand for a painter to get a knighthood but it was a fitting honour for the creation of an iconic body of work tied closely to our life and psyche. The work bridges the gap between what is genuinely popular and what appeals only to those actively interested in art.

His images grace our public galleries as much as they do private collections. They even found their way into the office of the mayor. You will also find one on the cover of a respected history of art in New Zealand by Michael Dunn.



White Verandah by Sir Peter Siddell at Lopdell House. Photo / Richard Robinson

The exhibition at Lopdell is not a full retrospective but it contains enough fine paintings to convey the nature of Sir Peter's achievement. There are some early works from his beginnings, including state houses from 1972. The choice of these spartan dwellings emphasises the democratic nature of his work.

Also from the early period is *Avril with Kauri Trees*, a landscape that includes his first daughter. This is the only figure in the show although Sir Peter is a competent portrait painter. The exclusion of people, movement or narrative in the painting helps to create the sense of absolute stillness which is a quality of his work. What is often admired is the detail, particularly of weatherboarding, coloured glass windows, staircases, doorways and verandahs which contribute to the concept of each painting.

In a painting called *Doorway* (1984), an open door with patterned coloured glass looks out across a verandah towards a wide panorama of a city. It is characteristic of front doors in older parts of the city. Inside the house, the newel post, banister, floor and carpet have a special reality that will make every viewer think, "I remember something like that". It is this sense of memory of the past allied to the stillness that gives the work its atmosphere.

A major part of the work, early or late, is connected with Auckland. The views containing a multiplicity of houses show how leafy the suburbs are along with the city's sudden green volcanic hills, and the interpenetration of sea and land. A superb work like *White Verandah*, done in 2006, which seems so familiar to Aucklanders, is a combination of many elements. It is not a particular place, but a distilled essence of the era of bay villas.

There are other strings to Sir Peter's artistic bow. He has long loved the west coast, notably Karekare, and the show includes one of his long panoramas with a great sense of how the cliffs reveal the strata of rocky inclines.

Another wonderful painting is a recollection of the painter's passion for mountain climbing. *The Coast from Aoraki* provides the extraordinary sensation of being high in the Alps, yet able to glimpse the coast from the summit of mountains.

This show contains enough artistic and intellectual riches to make a trip to Titirangi something of a pilgrimage.

It takes another trip up a hill, this time Shortland St, to the Gus Fisher Gallery to see *Collateral*, an

exhibition of printmaking as social commentary curated by Elizabeth Rankin.

"Collateral damage" is one of those weasel expressions like "friendly fire" where soft words cover atrocity – not only war but also events and institutions that are considered good. The end of apartheid or the church can produce collateral damage and this is the theme of these prints.

Because they can be reproduced and they have an easy alignment with text, prints, woodcuts, etchings, engravings and lithographs have always been a vehicle for social comment and political commentary since the earliest days of printing. This international show is the work of four print makers: **Daniel Heyman, Diane Victor, Sandra Thomson** and **Michael Reed**.

Victor is from South Africa and her medium is etching where a sharp needle cuts a fine line into a copper printing plate. It often seems there is a connection between these sharp lines and bitter material. It certainly showed in Goya's famous *Disasters of War* about the struggle in Spain against Napoleon which are almost too horrible to look at. Victor's work, called *Disasters of Peace*, dissects brutal aspects of present-day life in South Africa in black and white communities. The victims are often children and the sharp line conveys pathos as well as brutality.

The victimisation of children is also part of the work of Thomson, a Christchurch printmaker. Her work, for the most part screen-printing on fabric, is ironically opulent. Its richness references the hangings and vestments of the church. A series of tall hangings called *Dirty Linen* show clerical regalia and crosses of sticking plasters designed to cover up and conceal injuries to children in care.

The force of these works is matched by a set of singlets with images of birds bound, their songs suppressed and of insects crawling under fabric, with almost everything touched by smudged fingerprints. Elsewhere, shaky pillars and crushed roses vividly suggest a tottering institution and the demands made on women for self-sacrifice.

The most raw and direct work are some dry point etchings by American Daniel Heyman that are direct portraits of men confined in the notorious prison of Abu Ghraib in Iraq. The work includes transcripts of their accounts of brutal treatment. The roughness of the lettering reinforces the nature of their ordeals and the pain of their memories. The effect of the artist's indignation so directly conveyed is very compelling.

Christchurch artist Michael Reed reserves his indignation for the activities of arms-makers and their vocabulary. A screenprinted banner quotes the industry's publicity that says "the innovative Cluster Bomblet is the ultimate three-in-one weapon". His protests extend to carpets that he calls *Runners for the Corridors of Power* and to long drapes where the rich patterns are skulls and bombs and where the names of countries producing military weapons are accompanied by insignia that invoke Nazi militarism. The whole exhibition is a startling reminder of many things we are reluctant to confront. The works are visually compelling and offer a great deal of food for thought.

At Two Rooms, no political points are made but there is a remarkable use of that ubiquitous technique – making art from found objects. **Judy Darragh** has been doing it for years but seldom on such an impressive scale.

On the floor is a march of 60 sculptures that look like loudspeakers all blaring in one direction. These scores of sculptures are all made from found, polished, stainless steel domestic cookware. Only one of them has a touch of copper bottom. The pieces include cake trays, jelly moulds, bowls, cake stands and eggcups. They are all similar in form yet totally different in detail. It is a triumph of invention.

This extraordinary, witty display is matched by 12 vivid abstract paintings where one of the principal elements is patterns of paper stickers combined with fluorescent paint and bits of string. It is the pinnacle of Darragh's skills and career to date.

## **At the galleries**

**What:** Paintings by Sir Peter Siddell

**Where and when:** Lopdell House, 418 Titirangi Rd, to August 21

**TJ says:** A fine retrospective show by the painter who has educated our eyes about Auckland's houses, the west coast and the Southern Alps.

**What:** Collateral: Printmaking as Social Commentary, curated by Elizabeth Rankin

**Where and when:** Gus Fisher Gallery, 75 Shortland St, to August 20

**TJ says:** Artists from New Zealand, South Africa and the US use traditional and modern print mediums to comment on the damage big events and interests inflict on ordinary people. The show is supported by a catalogue that is a model for such things.

**What:** Sculpture and painting by Judy Darragh

**Where and when:** Two Rooms, 16 Putiki St, Newton, to July 22

**TJ says:** The transforming invention of Judy Darragh is working at top speed as she produces 60 variations on a theme and transforms labels into vivid abstractions.

Check out your local galleries [here](#).

By [T.J. McNamara](#)

**June (United States) | 11:36AM Sunday, 17 Jul 2011**

I wish I could come see the exhibitions. Sound like I could spend a long time browsing Sir Peter Siddel's work. I love paintings that take one to places in the memory. Thank you, T.J., for the vivid write up.