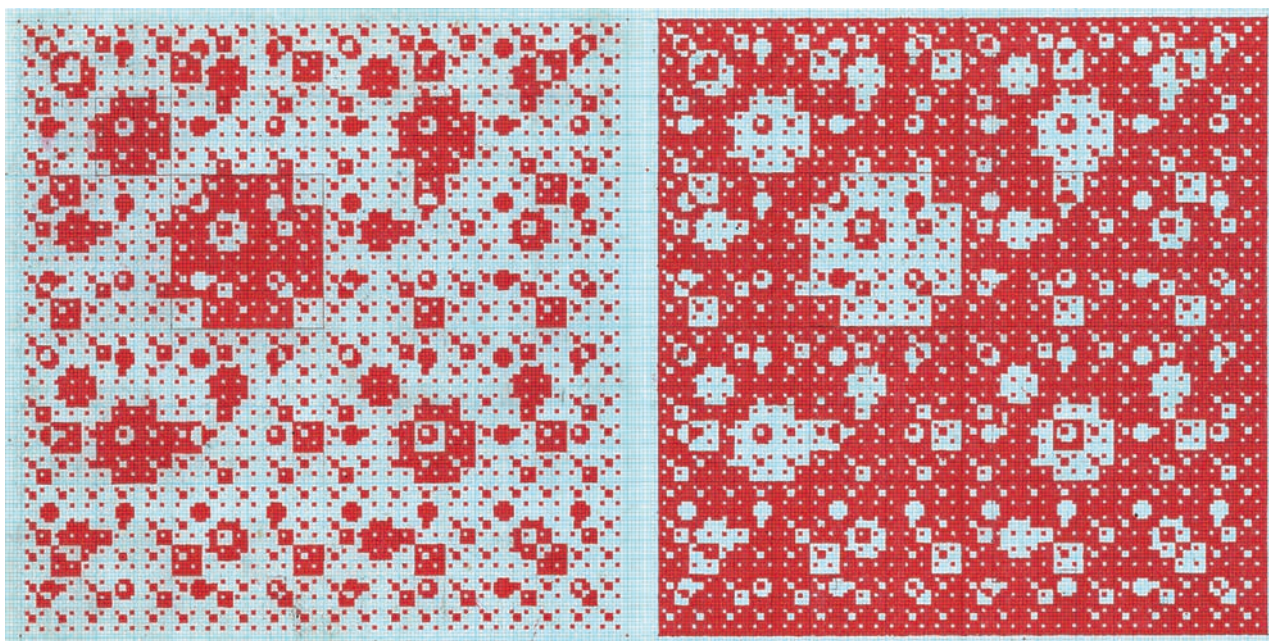
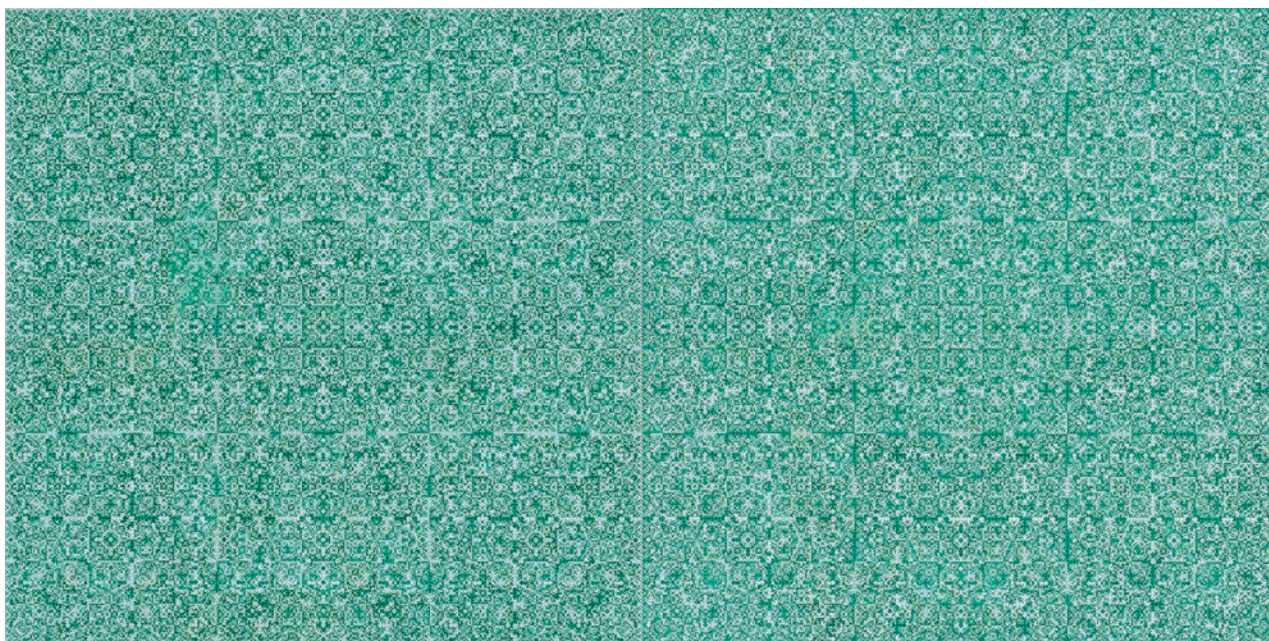


FIRE ESCAPE:
THE ARTWORK OF
MARTIN THOMPSON

ESSAY & PHOTOGRAPHY KIM GUTHRIE



02

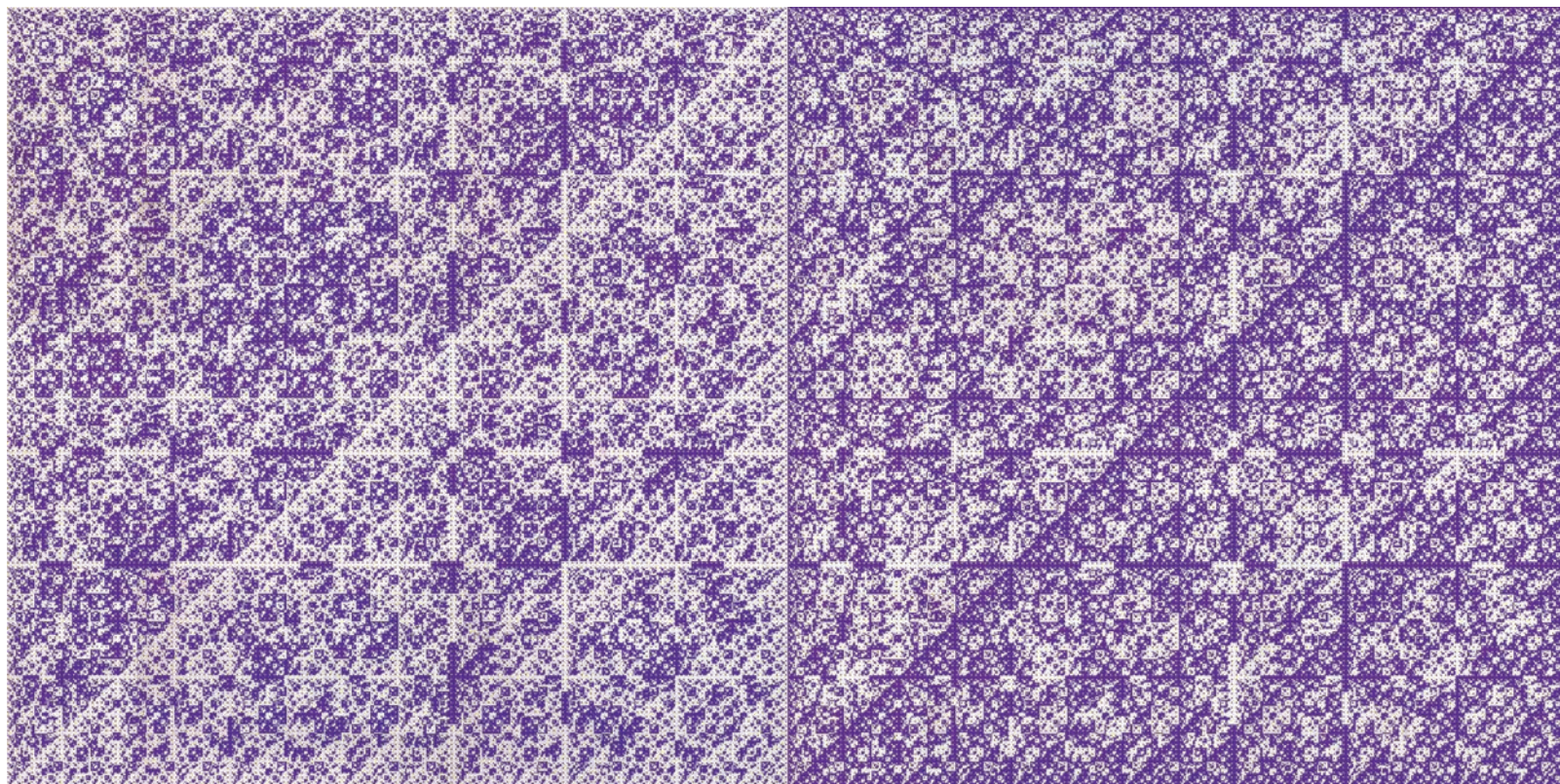


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At first, reclusive New Zealand artist Martin Thompson proved to be a hard person to track down, but our persistence paid off, as he allowed Kim Guthrie to spend time with him and gain some insights into how his complex works are created.

- 01 Martin Thompson, 2018, photograph Kim Guthrie
- 02 Untitled, c. 2000, ink on graph paper, 18.5 x 37 cm
- 03 Untitled, 2014, ink on prepared paper, 51 x 102 cm



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110

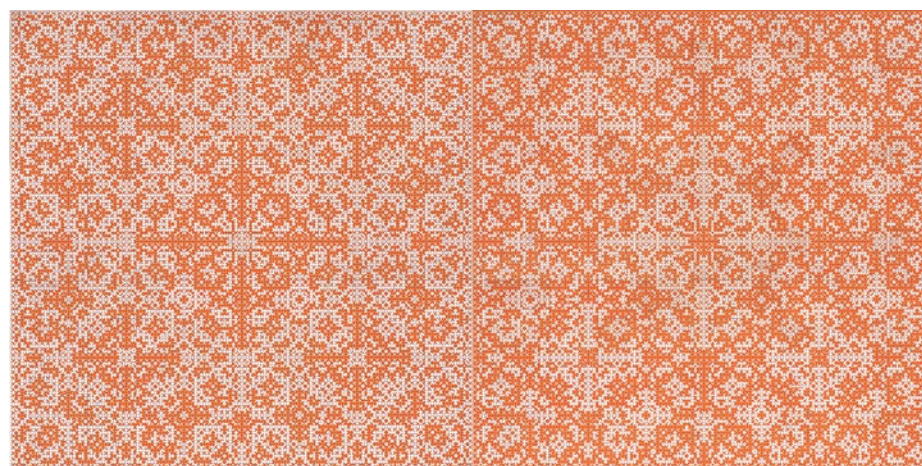
YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE IT, AFTER

arriving at Dunedin International Airport at 1:30am on a drizzling dark March morning in 2018, what strikes me immediately about Dunedin (Otepoti) is a lot of its Edwardian colonial architecture has been retro-fitted with Film Noir-esque steel fire escapes that zigzag up and down the exterior of buildings in the inner city.

I am in Dunedin to learn what I can about the reclusive Martin Thompson and his phantasmagorical artwork, attempting to breach his own particular protective and restorative scaffolding, you could say.

Brett McDowell of the Brett McDowell Gallery, Martin Thompson's dealer, had arranged for Martin to meet with us at his gallery at 11am. Brett and I turn up, we leaf through his stock of Martin's available artworks, and we talk until about 1:30pm. Martin still hasn't made an appearance. Brett has an appointment to attend, so he kindly walks me to the Whakamana Cannabis Museum, a favoured haunt of Martin's, where the guys who run the Museum indulge Martin's obsession with whoopee-weed and their mutual crusade for decriminalisation.

I wander in, introduce myself and tell them what my business is being there. We talk for a while then sure enough, as predicted, Martin unapologetically slinks in, sits down



05

and immediately sets to work. He is accepted as a friend and comrade here and is kindly allowed the space to sit and work unhindered. Thompson is an anarchist, not a punk rock fashion-victim anarchist; he's a genuine non-conformist and consistently rails against 'The Man'.

Martin Thompson was born in January 1956 in Wellington, Aotearoa. Attending Catholic boarding school that he absolutely despised, he dropped out as soon as he could and started an apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker, and hated that too. He relocated from Wellington to Waitati outside Dunedin in 2007, and he currently resides in one room in North Dunedin. He has shown annually

with Brett McDowell for 10 years. Martin reeks of a smoke-drenched bar room, when smoking was permitted; he's long ago given up any pretence to cleanliness, part of his belief that to conform to societal norms is an admission of defeat. His sullen, bashful presence is unnerving at first, but gradually it becomes endearing while I sit transfixed alongside him watching the confounding ritual of his art-making. It takes time to gain his trust, enough to coax halting conversation from him, and eventually I'm allowed to take the photographs I was told would be impossible to get.

After a time it dawns on me that Martin is completely aware of his own presence and

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The diptychs he employs emerged on a modest scale at first: mind-numbing mathematic calculations of paired, mirror-reversed, opposed conundrums.

predicament and my guess is he wears his uncommunicative, unwashed armour to keep a hostile world at bay. He's a deeply sensitive man, very shy and distrustful of people initially. Brett tells me he has a low tolerance for what he considers conventional people and their dull conversation.

I tell Martin something I'd read from the late Stephen Hawking: 'The quietest people have the busiest minds.' He immediately engages with this, saying he hears a relentless hissing, like machinery in the background, permanently. Being focused on his artwork goes some way to alleviating this insidious distraction. He mentions he has self-diagnosed Asperger's Syndrome, and when I ask how he knows, he says simply, 'I have all the symptoms'.

He describes himself as an 'old hippy', discovering his personal manifesto in the book, *The Greening of America* by the American legal and social scholar, Charles A Reich, published in 1970 when it topped the *New York Times* bestseller list. It is often described in reviews as a hippy bible. Or as one reviewer cynically but accurately put it, the title, *The Greening of America* might as well be 'Let's All Smoke Pot and Love One Another', because that's what his argument boils down to. It appears Martin took this to heart. Reich has many good and valid points to make about our society and its failings that Martin instinctively understands.

The ultimate revelation that was to determine the direction of his 'life's work' as an artist, was reading Benoit B Mandelbrot's 1977 book *Fractals: Form, Chance and Dimension*. Martin tells me he read this in 1979 and says, 'I couldn't understand the mathematics but I do understand the basic principles.'

It was then he began making his complex artworks. The fully formed diptychs he employs to this day emerged on a modest scale at first: mind-numbing mathematic calculations of paired, mirror-reversed, opposed conundrums. The final images are rigorously applied and realised on gridded graph paper. The *rule* is the lighter coloured work, it's always on the left. Martin completes five of his larger works a year, working eight to 10 hours a day, every day. He uses a scalpel blade to surgically remove



06

mistakes and harvest replacement patches from elsewhere, imperceptibly inserting the repair into his artworks.

Martin is often seen wandering the streets of Dunedin clutching his brightly coloured folder, carrying the alchemy of works in progress and recently finished artworks. He is frequently found, lost in the complexity of his creation at a favourite café, Kiki Beware, or more recently, the Cannabis Museum.

His work recalls Aldous Huxley's 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*. It exposes the life within the life of everything, invisible most of the time unless Huxley's 'doors' are opened and walked through, then we see a parallel universe that exists, and it's life changing. Martin's artwork is part of that awakened world. It's an infinite world of pattern akin to the endlessness seen in the fractal geometry of mathematics, also known as expanding symmetry or evolving symmetry.

'If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.'
– William Blake (from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Being surrounded by and immersed in Maori culture's sophisticated patterns may have been a subliminal influence. There's a powerful lineage of intricate pattern-making in art. Dali painted a psychedelic expanded world in his exploration of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*. Astonishingly beautiful, intricate, Islamic patterns seen in mosques and carpets, invoke something higher. Contemporary Australian artists Robert Hunter, Elizabeth Gower, Lesley Dumbrell, Howard Arkley or international artists Bridget Riley, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Jackson Pollock,

Vera Molnár all employ universal systems of pattern and repetition in their work.

Thompson's work encompasses elements of Islamic Art, Outsider Art, Conceptual Art, Op Art, Folk Art, Colour Field Painting and Minimalism. So it's nothing new; in fact very traditional but none of those, it's his. And forced to contextualise his work somehow diminishes its wizardry.

Martin Thompson is real; he's incapable of artifice, captive to a personal purgatory that can only be quenched by obsessively making his all-consuming, mathematically boggling pictures that serve as a distraction from the inferno in his head that can't be extinguished by any other means.

He wanders in this private netherworld, silently mocked by the ubiquitous fire escapes climbing the walls around him in the city of Dunedin, clutching his ever-present personal fire escape; a battered folder of the miraculous artworks he must make at every opportunity, day and night. He's compelled by the focus only a truly driven artist understands. I love Martin Thompson and I love his work, he subscribes to no-ism and his works are transcendent. ■

Martin Thompson is represented by Brett McDowell Gallery, Dunedin, NZ

Kim Guthrie would like to acknowledge the assistance of Arts Queensland with this story.

04 **Untitled**, 2010, ink on prepared paper, 67 x 134 cm

05 **Untitled**, 2010, ink on prepared paper, 48 x 96 cm

06 Martin Thompson, 2018, photograph Kim Guthrie

Courtesy the artist, Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, and Brett McDowell Gallery, New Zealand