

LIFESTYLE | Canvas

Portrait of an artist: Billy Apple

14 Mar, 2015 7:00am

15 minutes to read



"Sold", 1981, acrylic on canvas. Photo / Billy Apple archive
NZ Herald

More than 50 years ago an artist from Auckland changed his name to Billy Apple and became a living brand. On the eve of a major retrospective of his life's work, he talked to Greg Dixon about his past, his present and his future. The artist Billy Apple, who turns 80 this year, said, "I think I'm going to be a late finisher".

From his living room's leather couch, surrounded by old papers, exhibition catalogues and art-works encased in bubble wrap he eyed me quietly, almost puckishly, as I sat by the living room window on a straight-backed chair. In his short silence, we could hear the cicadas singing in his Mt Eden garden. They couldn't quite drown out the howling irony of what he'd just said.

Apple, after all, has been making art for well over half a century. He was there when art went pop in the 60s, when he hung out with Hockney in London and Warhol in New York. He was there when art went conceptual later that decade. He was shown by perhaps the most famous dealer in New York and had a London show shut down by the British cops for indecency. In the 80s he made a golden apple with a price tag of \$85,000, and went on to "barter" his art for everything from coffee to legal advice. By 2007 he was a registered brand - though of course he's been a registered original all his life - and, in 2010, cells from the body of this man who may well be New Zealand's most successful artist were made immortal.

A late finisher? Was he joking? Not a bit. My question might have been about art and immortality but his answer was clearly about the thing that was most

on his mind: will the man Billy Apple survive long enough to see the brand Billy Apple set in what he sees as its rightful place?

"You know what I mean?" he continued. "I think where things are now, and the interest that people are taking in what I'm doing, and the people wanting to buy things, is doing this" - he made an upward line with a hand - "and that's nice at the end of one's time."

Today the Auckland Art Gallery (AAG) opens its doors on what is being billed as the most substantial survey of the artist's work to be held here, an exhibition spanning more than 50 years of practice and more than 150 works. It will run for three months. It follows a major two-part exhibition of his works at Rotterdam's Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in 2009, two major solos shows at London's old and prestigious Major Gallery - the esteemed James Major is Apple's Northern Hemisphere dealer - and next month the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis will include him in its survey of Pop Art. His work, meanwhile, is held by major museums and galleries around the world, including Te Papa in Wellington, the National Galleries of Scotland, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Tate Britain in London.

This is the brand's upward line. As for the finishing - late or otherwise - of the man, he's showing few outward signs it's imminent. Wearing shorts, a grey T-shirt with an unbuttoned blue dress shirt over the top and his trademark amber-framed glasses, he seems a bit fragile but not frail. He moves a little slowly - this perhaps due to a recent fall - and appears to rely heavily on his partner, Mary Morrison. But he doesn't look his age, and his hair, which has spent much of his adulthood threatening to leave him, is still hanging on for dear life; as grey as a cloud it rests on the back of his head like a Roman laurel.

If the body has weakened somewhat, his voice is still strong, his memory clear, his opinions sharp and if he grows a little tired during our nearly three-and-a-half-hour chat, he shows no sign of it.

Yet time is running out, and preparations must be made. And he's quite upfront about this retrospective in his hometown's largest public gallery being less an excitement to him than an opportunity to be prepared.

"What it does do is it allows you to review your work, it allows you to review where you've been. At some point people like to get their 'affairs in order', so it's like getting your affairs in order in your mind."

And there is much to be remembered before the finishing - not least how it all began.

Billy Apple the brand, the idea, the artist, was forged in the white heat of Swinging London in the early 1960s. And the story of how he came to be there and how he came to be the brand is a unique story in New Zealand art.

The man who became Billy Apple was born at the other end of the world, in Auckland, with the rather more prosaic name of Barrie Bates, on the last day of 1935. His parents Albert and Marija's first born (of four), he was not sent to a school in Orakei where the family lived, but to Mt Albert Grammar. He did not thrive. Instead he was bullied. Bates left the school as soon as he could, in 1951 aged 15, without a qualification. He quickly found a job working for a paint manufacturer, but the boy clearly had artistic talent. His father encouraged him to take night classes in drawing at the Elam School of Fine Arts. It was there he encountered possibly the most important person in the Billy Apple story, Robert Ellis. A British painter and product of the famed Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, Ellis taught, encouraged and finally assisted Bates to apply for and gain his own place at the RCA, in the college's graphic design school.

So it was that in 1959 Bates boarded a boat for England and the start of another, almost entirely unexpected, life as an international artist. It was not what his family wanted.

"Billy's father didn't want him to go," Morrison says as Apple sits silently. "Bob Ellis told me this: [Albert, Billy's father] was on the dock and turned around to Bob, who had been instrumental in getting Billy into the RCA, and he said 'why have you done this to our family?'"

If it hurt the father, the son didn't look back; he didn't return to New Zealand for 16 years.

Did it take guts to go, to leave family and country far behind for London as not much more than a kid back in 1959? It must have done. But the old Apple says of the young Bates, that even then he knew exactly what he was about. "There was a purpose at the end of it ... it wasn't like 'I'm going to go and have a look' ... [if that had been the case] maybe I wouldn't have had that courage."

Bates' boldness in getting on that boat turned to good fortune when he stepped off it. He happened to arrive in London just in time for a revolution. British fashion and music were about to discover the miniskirt and the Mersey beat and, thanks to Apple and a small group of young artists at the RCA, including David Hockney, British art was about to go pop.



"Sold", 1981, acrylic on canvas. Photo / Billy Apple archive

Taking inspiration from consumerism and commercial art, the work done by the young RCA students helped create the Pop Art movement and made a star of Hockney.

For Bates, who completed his three-year diploma in graphic design in 1962, Pop Art and the RCA (where he was uniquely allowed to work across the various art departments and facilities) opened his mind to a different kind of artistic approach. Drawing insight from methods used in advertising, where creatives generate ideas and others make the advertising material, he developed an art practice whereby he used the technical skills of others to realise his ideas. Why be a painter or a sculptor or photographer, he thought? It wasn't the medium that mattered but the idea.

"[The RCA] allowed me to have a 'hands off, head on' [art practice]. I didn't want to spend 10 years learning how to mould a peeled banana. There were people around who were fantastic at doing it ... It has always been like that: the idea is paramount."

And so, too, was the identity of the artist having the ideas. On November 22, 1962 - Thanksgiving Day, he later discovered - the artist born Barrie Bates decided he wanted to do something more radical still: to break down the barrier between "art activity and life activity". After kicking the idea around with British painter Richard Smith, whose warehouse he was temporary crashing in, he decided to change his name and remake himself. To mark this rebirth, he bleached his hair with Lady Clairol Instant Creme Whip. Not long after, Robert Freeman, who would go on to photograph The Beatles, took a few pictures. Billy Apple had been born.

He shed Barrie Bates like a skin; he changed his name, he changed his look and he trained himself not respond if people referred to him as "Barrie"; he didn't contact his family. In fact his parents, wondering if he was alive, contacted the British police and asked for them to find out if he still was.

"I suppose it's like coming out," he says about inventing Billy Apple half a century ago. "It gave me freedom, it was my own subject matter ... It was a brand new thing."

Or, in fact, a brand thing. The coming out of Billy Apple was a solo show, "Apple Sees Red" at Gallery One off Grosvenor Square in April the following year. "My very first show in London in 63 opened on April the first. It just turned out that way, but I was a bit worried at the time: April 1st, people will think it's a joke."

The reviews - including those in The Times, The Guardian and the Listener - were "enormous", he says now. The trouble was his first show as Billy Apple "didn't sell a bloody thing". On the bones of his arse, he got work teaching at Maidstone College of Art for the then stonking sum of £20 a day - "It was rags to slight riches," he deadpans - but the money and the terrific pub lunches weren't nearly enough for one so driven. Was he ambitious from the very beginning?

"Absolutely, [I was] very competitive and quite envious of other people's success. But eventually that went away and I realised that I didn't need to be envious of anybody and that Billy Apple is Billy Apple and I'm inventing my rules and my game and what not, and it has nothing to do with anybody else, I couldn't care less. And today, wherever I go, I feel the same way. I don't give a shit."

Within a year of becoming Apple he was in the Big Apple. He'd already visited New York with his friend Hockney (they still keep in touch) three times since 1961 - there's a wonderful picture of them both smoking cigars on a beach at Coney Island - and he'd made art world contacts. As 1964 drew to a close he decided to move there permanently.



"Floor Painting 6 November 1971" at 161 West 23rd Street in New York. Photo / Jacky Apple

Christina Barton, a Wellington art academic and also the curator of the AAG's Apple retrospective, has written that Apple headed across the Atlantic partly because he was an avid consumer of all things American, but also because he was frustrated by the "staidness of the British art world". He tells me that when he saw famed London art dealer Robert Fraser's eyes "glaze over" at Apple's idea for a neon rainbow installation he thought "'f*** it, that's it'. So I went to New York."

Again his timing was impeccable. Although, as Apple had hoped, the famed New York dealer Leo Castelli didn't take him on, Castelli did introduce Apple to another top dealer, Paul Bianchini, who invited him to contribute to a new show. Two months after moving to New York, Apple had four works in one of the most influential and extraordinary Pop Art exhibitions ever mounted in New York. Called *The American Supermarket*, it transformed the Bianchini Gallery into what appeared to be small supermarket, but everything in it had been created by artists including Apple and some of American's most important artists: Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol.

"That show was very successful," Apple says. "It was in *Life* magazine. It was like a big launch for me. I am a non-American in *The American Supermarket* - it's bizarre - and I'm the youngest of all of them."

Over the next two and a half decades Apple would make his home New York, would marry and divorce American designer and artist Jacky Apple and would support himself financially by periodically working, not quite *Mad Men*-style, for some of New York's top advertising agencies. He would exhibit his art around the world, including at his own eponymously-named space in New York, at the Leo Castelli gallery in New York and at the Serpentine in London (the controversial

survey show which was closed for three days while used tissues and earbuds were removed from display because of complaints to police) and in New Zealand, where he began revisiting for art projects from 1975 onwards and returned to permanently in 1990.

His life's work, from neon light sculptures in the late 60s, to his work examining the notion of gallery spaces in the 1970s and, in the 80s and 90s, the relationship between the dollar and art, to his most recent works exploring branding and intellectual property, is too voluminous and too diverse to detail here; the AAG show is certainly the best place to start for those unfamiliar with Apple's unique oeuvre.

But if it is a life's work quite unlike any other made by a New Zealand-born artist, what worries the man is whether this will be enough to be remembered.

BILLY APPLE has already achieved a kind of immortality. If his first incarnation, Barrie Bates, was killed off during the summer of 62, his 52-year-old heir, Billy Apple, or least millions of his cells, will never die, even when the artist is long gone.

In 2008, Apple was approached by a scientist, Craig Hilton, to create a project dubbed "The Immortalisation Of Billy Apple®" in which cells taken from Apple's blood were then scientifically altered using a virus so that they will keep regenerating forever. These modified cells are now held at both the University of Auckland's School of Biological Sciences and the US-based bio-resource centre, the ATCC. Some of these cells will also appear, in an incubator, of course, in the AAG show.



Billy Apple (then Barrie Bates) and David Hockney at the wedding of a fellow RCA student in Cornwall, 1961. Photo / Billy Apple archive

"I think about death all the time," he says when I ask if he's conscious of his age. "I haven't told Mary. But you know, you can't help it, you know it's going to happen. I'm hiding behind the immortalisation ... "

If "The Immortalisation Of Billy Apple®" is, in its own fashion, a way of cheating death, so, too, is the registration of the Billy Apple brand and the continuing search for and development of branded products, which includes a special Billy Apple cider and a Billy Apple coffee blend, both served at the AAG opening ceremony last night. There are three books on the way, too, he says, including a major monograph by Barton.

However it's clear that Apple is concerned about his legacy. He is clearly exasperated that in the past he has been left out of shows and books charting the rise of Pop Art.

"I was in the Pop Art book that [art critic] Lucy Lippard did in New York [in 1966]. But then when they did Pop Art books in London I was left out of all of them. They've got a show in Sydney right now, a Pop Art show, and I'm not in it. I'm the only f***ing one from the Southern Hemisphere and I'm not in the show! It's outrageous! I wouldn't want to be in the bloody thing, but it is full of Australians who did Pop Art in the 70s and 80s - [after] it was all f***ing over. The American Supermarket was it!"

However, a 2013 Pop Art show at London's Christies, titled "When Britain Went Pop", did include his work - "So finally we're in this bloody show" and he is also in the the lavish book that accompanied it; his chapter sits along side those of such old RCA colleagues as Hockney and R.B. Kitaj.

Did he feel like he'd been written out or forgotten?

"Well I wasn't there [in Britain], and if you're not there ... You'd think your friends would sort of say something ... "

As he said this he picked up and opened the Christies' book and began flicking through it, looking for his chapter.

"Here we all are, just a few of us together," says the late finisher. And then: "I've waited years for that to happen."

Billy Apple®: The Artist Has To Live Like Everybody Else is at Auckland Art Gallery until June 21. Entry is free.