

Billy Apple

The Business of Art, by Patrick Smith

Billy Apple is a corporate man, his name is his corporate legend, red and green are his corporate colours, and the apple is his corporate logo. His business is art. Or to be more precise, his business is the business of art.

Thirty years ago, as a pop artist in London, he adopted his corporate mantle by changing his name (from Barry Bates) and bleaching his hair. Since then he has been tirelessly turning his art deals into art statements.

As Good as Gold: Billy Apple Art Transactions, 1981–1991, which has just opened at the Auckland City Art Gallery after two months at the Wellington City Art Gallery last year, and at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth last month, surveys 10 years of Apple's corporate output. The exhibition, said the WCAG before its opening there, is "a major statement of faith in the national and international significance of Billy Apple".

That the gallery should feel pressed to explain itself in this way says something about the suspicion with which his work has been viewed here. As Good as Gold is the first public survey of Apple's work in this country. London's prestigious Serpentine Gallery surveyed 14 years of his career back in 1974.

The man himself is heartily sick of the debate over whether he's a "real" artist or not. In New York City, where he lived for many years, it's a non-question. Here, it seems, Apple's cat is still among the pigeons.

Apple has never been much in awe of "art". Even during his Royal College of Art days in London, in the early 60s, he was dissatisfied with the "emotional gestures" he saw in his colleagues' work. "To me it was like playing a violin while you're trying to chat some woman up to take to bed that night. Like, it has nothing to do with the real thing.

"It's not that I didn't want to paint. I did attempt to but I couldn't achieve what I wanted to do; there was always something getting in the road. Whereas if you took a photograph and printed that onto canvas, that arty brushstroke, or all the gestural aspects of things, wasn't there. You could look at what it was – like a bleached blond."

Apple cannot be accused of romanticism. The works in this show are not food for dreams. They are bald statements in bold-type plain English about the deals the artist enters into: with collectors ("Sold", "Commissioned", etc); dealers ("AC/DC", which spells out the artist's cut – AC – and dealer's cut – DC); merchants ("Bartered"). sponsors ("Sponsored") and the public.

You don't need a programme to tell you who owns "From the Jenny & Alan Gibbs Collection" or that you can't buy "NFS" (not for sale). A work he swapped with friend Robert Ellis for one of that artist's paintings tells us it was "Exchanged". Another painting which was given away is "Complimentary".

The Golden Rectangle series of 1988 at first seems to depart from this mercantile obsession. It uses the venerable ratio of the divine proportion (1:1.618) to create five works on passivated steel. Each work is made up of seven separate parts, spiralling down in size from 61.8 percent of the total area (618 mm by 1000 mm) to 0.3 percent.

Exhibited, though, the completed works sold for \$10,000 each, or proportionately less if you bought only a segment (the 0.3 percent bit cost \$30), raising questions about the integrity of an art work and also whether size should determine price, as it usually does.

Apple's inspiration is the marketplace. It's a world that has fascinated him for 30 years and his observations on its codes and practices – distilled over the years – are especially ironic when applied to the lofty realms of art.

Ideas, and an eye for effective design, are Billy Apple's great strengths as a conceptual artist.

"Good ideas are wonderful things, whether they be art, or an ad, or whatever," he says. "An idea's a wonderful thing to celebrate. Haven't got much time for things that don't have ideas. Haven't got much time for people who don't think about ideas, either."

His ideas are made concrete with the help of a team that includes a signwriter, a typesetter and a canvas preparator. His demands as creative director are high and he chooses experts in their fields. Wystan Curnow, art critic, poet and English professor, has been on the team since 1979, checking or writing the texts for Apple's designs.

Then there are the people who buy his works, most of which are commissioned these days. So the collectors and curators have become increasingly important members of the team. Not only do they assure the continued health of the corporation, their requests stoke its creative coffers. Apple himself has become a sort of broker for works which reflect the increasingly complex deals he's presented with.

"I'm like an actor – and the movie company says, 'Here's three scripts. Will you read them and tell us which one you're interested in? Then we'll cast you,'" he explains. "It keeps constantly opening up one's thinking. I'm not bogged down with anything. I'm really very fortunate."

Auckland art consultant Hamish Keith was "astonished" by his first encounter with Apple's work in New York in 1967. Lately though, he feels its "power to

confront” has been numbed by “a curatorial earnestness” in the way it’s presented.

“Billy’s work was outrageously part of the world in the 60s and 70s,” says Keith. “And it has become part of a kind of critical/curatorial context in the 80s and 90s, which has numbed its reach. That’s no fault of Billy Apple, by the way.”

But Apple says his works are as potent today as they’ve ever been. A month before this show opened at the WCAG last year, six of his works appeared in the National Art Gallery’s UK Works show of artists who lived and worked in England in the 1960s.

“They looked bloody modern, I tell you now. Unbelievable that they still looked like they were done today... I’d say they’ve more than held their own. In fact they look very, very contemporary.”

Certainly their dollar values continue to climb. The centrepiece of the show, an apple made from 103.599 ounces of pure gold and bearing the stamp of the ill-fated Auckland Coin and Bullion Exchange, was bought for \$85,000 in 1983. Today, says Apple, it’s insured for “twice that much”.

Apples, art and gold. What could be a better emblem for this show than “The Golden Apple”? It’s also a reminder of the ephemeral nature of the marketplace; the Auckland Coin and Bullion Exchange went bust in 1988.

Apple Co, on the other hand, has been trading for 30 years and is still making deals. But, as the chairman is fond of saying: “There’s no business like art business!”

Notes

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