

BILLY APPLE

Blonde Ambition, Wystan Curnow

Invitations for the recent Billy Apple exhibition "As Good as Gold" at the Wellington City Art Gallery, featured a 1983 work, *The Golden Apple*, a signal survivor of the boom-and-bust culture of the 80s. Stamped with the insignia of the Auckland Coin and Bullion Exchange, where it was first exhibited, it accrued an ironic twist when, in July 1988, the Exchange went into receivership, taking with it millions of dollars of depositors' bullion.

Quite apart from any value that may be attributed to it as art, *The Golden Apple* has great worth, since it consists of more than 103 ounces of pure gold. It embodies the trinity of money, art and bullion, whose inherent instability as both signs and materialisations of value was thoroughly explored in this exhibition. "As Good as Gold" surveyed Apple's work of the past ten years, bringing together for the first time a body of work of striking relevance to an account of the art of the last decade.

Billy Apple began his career in London as one of a group of rising young Pop artists fresh out of the Royal College of Art. Along with David Hockney Ron Kitaj, Peter Phillips and Derek Boshier, his work was first seen in the influential "Young Contemporaries" exhibitions of 1960-62. British-style Pop emerged from the coalescence of the work of these artists and that of the more established Independent Group - notably Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton - and Peter Blake. Apple's contribution to the genesis of British Pop is seldom documented, largely because histories tend to confine themselves to those artists who stayed with or returned to the British scene. Apple left for New York in 1964. His Royal College contemporaries were fundamentally painters; he produced sculptures, photographs, documented activities and films as well as paintings, a diversity which reflects his Conceptualist

orientation. To Apple, a student of the School of Design, the work of his painter contemporaries was far too enmeshed with art.

Born Barrie Bates, he assumed the name of Billy Apple in 1962. With the help of Lady Clairol Instant Cream Whip he began his new life as a blonde; and as a commodity. Both were launched the following year at his first solo show, "Apple Sees Red" at Gallery One in London. This included a number of self-portraits, a cast bronze Granny Smith apple and several other actual such Smiths, titled *Top Brass*. Its combinations of art and artist, nature and culture, the real and the simulacrum, surrounded both name and product with multiple ironies. In 1969, he established Apple, one of New York's first alternative galleries, and was later director of 112 Greene Street Workshop. His own work, which he presented at Clocktower and the like, as well as in his own gallery, was increasingly concerned with making changes to the exhibition spaces themselves. These changes, sometimes permanent, were designed to identify and isolate the expectations *built in* to gallery spaces. The most notable of these interventions took place in a series of New Zealand galleries from 1979-80, and at Leo Castelli, New York, between 1977 and 1980.

In 1981, Apple turned to painting. For him, the change from sculpture to painting represented a shift more in attention than medium: from the gallery as frame, or sculptural support, to the gallery as commercial outlet for the work; from the work as formed by the gallery to the work as formed by the market. In the work of the last decade he has brought together his early Pop conflation of artist, art work and commodity, with his later Conceptualist conflation of art object and gallery space; of contained and container.

Apple does not paint his own paintings. For typesetting, canvas preparation, hand-lettering and silk-screening, he relies on a group of craftsmen and technicians whose skills he admires. Apple has, in fact, never made his paintings and sculptures himself, even as a student. While today this

strategy is fairly commonplace, Apple is one of very few artists who can claim to have used it consistently since the 60s. Apple's refusal to fabricate his own work, together with his name change, represents the idea of the artist not separate from or outside the cultural context so much as complicit in and a construct of that context.

Pop art began in good part as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, to painting in which the individual touch and gesture of the artist served as a signature of the self. Even those of Apple's paintings which carry that seemingly indisputable sign of the artist's making, his signature, by that very token, make sport of it. Even his name is an assumed one, although legal. A-is-for-Apple. The name suggests children's alphabets and thus the beginnings of language, and of knowledge. In abandoning the scene of their fabrication, Apple empties his paintings of the usual content, and prepares the scene for the viewer's, or more particularly, the possessor's arrival. By siting the work firmly in the context of its reception, he fills it with a different content: the structures and conventions of the art market and the parties who engage with it on the occasion of a specific transaction. And it is here that the signature resumes its relevance; no longer a sign of personal creativity, or the unique individual, it returns as a mark of the artist's legal identity and guarantor of the "currency" of his work.

Apple's return to painting stemmed from a desire to make art for sale which would document the transaction of which it was itself the object. His production over the last ten years divides into three continuing series: "Transactions", "From the Collection" and "The Golden Rectangle". The first of these, "Transactions", began in 1981 with an exhibition at the Peter Webb Galleries in Auckland, New Zealand, titled "Art for Sale". It comprised a canvas *Sold*, and ten works on paper with the same title, all of which were bills of sale, ready to be filled out with the details of their transaction. Without those details, the works were regarded as incomplete, and Peter Webb was unable to open his gallery to the public until every one had found

a buyer. *Sold* obliged both dealer and collector to make a spectacle of their business. N.F.S. (genuinely not for sale) opposed the rather brutal demands of *Sold* with an equally definitive assertion. Large, and sharply turned out in black and white, this declared: here is one Apple that can't be bought. It refused transaction, and its *raison d'être* rested on that refusal. N.F.S. seems to signify that this artist has an investment in his project which is other than mercenary.

Initially Apple's objective was to develop a group of works which document all the ways a work of art conventionally changes hands. Besides *Sold* and N.F.S., the series included *Auctioned*, *Exchanged* and *Gifted*. Then it seemed there could be other ways in which the painting might document its destiny as property. *AC/DC* documented the relationship between artist and dealer, while *1/2 Price* and *Complimentary* placed their owners in the position of a bargain hunter and someone who had (somehow) managed to get something for nothing. *I.O.U.* distinguished itself from *Sold* and N.F.S. by offering a deal which was disconcertingly inconclusive.

The "From the Collection" series represents a kind of transaction whose content grows with repetition. As the collection of "From the Collection" increases, so too does the network of associations each separate work comes to carry. Each is a kind of commissioned portrait; besides the name there is some other identifying quality, be it the company colours, or the material of which it is made. From the *Fay, Richwhite Collection*, for example, is painted on a piece of sail from the New Zealand yacht, *KZ-7*, which almost beat Denis Connor to the America's Cup in 1986. *Fay, Richwhite*, a leading New Zealand banking firm and part-owner of the Bank of New Zealand, has been the major backer of the campaign to win the Cup. New Zealanders, more than most, seek salvation through international sporting achievement; *From the Fay, Richwhite Collection* is thus a potent relic, a fragment of the "true cross" of nationalism. While "From the Collection" implies displacement, and the necessity of permission for reproduction or public exhibition of a work,

the collector's name on the work draws around itself whatever other works the collector happens to own, serving as a banner under which they march and claiming among them a unique and privileged relation to their owner.

Doesn't Apple's art pay a price for the special relation it claims to have to its owner, one which, since it mediates, limits its relation to other viewers or possible owners and thereby its authority in the world? The problem is more apparent than real. If any of these works were obliged to establish once again their exchange value, they would fall into the hands of people for whom they were not meant; to the degree that the original owners possessed art expressly (and somehow excessively) theirs, such new owners will have acquired works which effectively disown them. The meaning of the work will have changed, so that "from" in "From the Collection", will have gained added force, and a different weight. The new owner might just as well be in possession of stolen goods - for the work insists on its origin as the property of some other person. Thus its purchase could amount to a confession of interest not only, or not so much, in Billy Apple's work, as in those who own it. The purchaser becomes a collector of collectors. As the provenance of each work lengthens and the destiny of the series as a whole unfolds, each separate work finds an independence defined within the terms of the wider reception of art. An exhibition like "As Good as Gold" offers a sneak preview of that destiny. It is a portrait collection of contemporary collectors. Who is there and who is not? What is the picture it presents of art collecting in the 80s in New Zealand?

In their mimicry of the paperwork and sign-systems of commercial life, Apple's paintings employ a standard Pop manoeuvre: they simultaneously lower themselves below and elevate their models above the threshold between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, art and non-art. As Roy Lichtenstein enlarges and revises the comic strip frame, so Apple supercharges the document so that it assumes a visual authority surplus to requirements. But, and this is the point, Apple's transactions have specific

requirements of their own; for example, to convince as objects of desire they must look good. Constrained as they are to work with their contextual givens, Apple's paintings must find beauty in an apotheosis of the typographic function.

Unlike Robert Barry or On Kawara, Apple uses a standard font. The "Transaction" works, with the exception of *N.F.S.*, are in Gill Extra Bold Condensed, the typeface favoured by Richard Long. *N.F.S.* is in Futura, the Bauhaus face Apple uses throughout the "From the Collection" and "The Golden Rectangle" series. As to layout, form follows function in classic Modernist fashion; the texts are organised in blocks, and computer-adjusted in size, spacing and weight to achieve a maximum balance, impact and legibility. Because they are painted from "camera-ready flat art", as it is called, his works look startlingly legible, almost as though faked-up, in reproduction. This is an indication of their ambiguous relation to photographic reproduction as such; for while they originate in the processes of mass production, at a certain point they opt out and revert to a technologically primitive existence as hand-made products of high art. Apple hands the film to his sign-writer, Terry Maitland. The ambivalence produces a typical irony; for while the transactional character of Apple's work defends the aura of each piece as a unique work of art, the aesthetic qualities which bait the hook of the transaction have their immediate origins in methods of reproduction which in the long run serve to undermine it.

Increasingly Apple uses the Golden Ratio, or more particularly the Golden Rectangle, as a given measure. Called "golden" by the Greeks because it was one of the two treasures of geometry (Pythagoras' theorem being the other), this measure has served art and architecture as a design or compositional principle since the Egyptians. In *AC/DC*, short for Artist's Cut/Dealer's Cut, it provided not only the composition and the colour of the canvas, but also the division of the proceeds of sale. Thus the artist set aside the usual arrangement (33% to the dealer in New Zealand, 50% each way in New

York), and replaced it with a ratio akin to the Golden Section: 38.2: 61.8. Depending on where the work was put up for sale, there would be a loss or a gain for either party, but the artist's sense of proportion would be preserved.

From a Private Collection is in two tones of grey, the darker is 61.8% black, the lighter 38.2% black. This ratio, by which the removal of a square leaves a rectangle of the same proportion as the original rectangle, also determines the composition of "The Golden Rectangle" works which are painted on gold-passivated (a process akin to electro-plating) steel sheet. Each work is divided into seven portions, or shares, which may be purchased separately at a price determined by its relation to the work as a whole. This procedure raises questions not only about price - why do small works cost less than large ones, at least when they first come up for sale - but also about the separateness and integrity of an individual purchase and the unity of the individual work.

Apple's unwillingness to fabricate his own work makes it difficult to identify its unity with its author and origins and his willingness to disassemble it at the point of sale makes it difficult to identify its unity with its destination. For all that they are bathed in gold, in transaction, these pieces, like most of the canvases, prove to be completely slippery, two-faced, resisting as much as acquiescing in their fate as property.

The 80s were one long bull market for art. Although tiny, the New Zealand market followed a very similar, if somewhat shorter curve, to that of New York. Media and public interest grew quickly; by the mid-80s there was a steady stream of articles in the popular press on collectors, consultants, dealers, blue-chip artists, record-breaking auctions and the like. In 1984, the highest price paid at auction for a New Zealand art work was \$50,000, although only a year before on the open market, Billy Apple's *The Golden Apple* had sold for \$85,000. The most successful auction in 1984 did \$500,000 worth of business in one night; only two years later auctions had

hit the £1 million mark. This was news. In 1981, you could buy a 200 x 150 cm Apple canvas for \$3,000, although it seemed a lot to pay. In 1985 a 100 x 70 cm work on paper cost you more than that. Between 1985 and 1987, prices doubled every year, but since the crash of 1989 they have barely moved.

Billy Apple's art provokes and confronts the contradictions in our conceptions of the relations between art and money. Because it is never just for sale, but in part constituted by the transaction, because you can never just buy an Apple but must *buy into* his system, each of his works seems intent upon locating the exchange value of art *per se*, seeking an endorsement by, and at the same time a restatement of, authority over the market.

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