

BILLY APPLE

For almost five decades this senior New Zealand artist – a central figure in the Pop art movement in London and New York in the '60s – has explored the concept of “artist as brand” and the business of life as art

WORDS: Andrew Clifford



1 Billy Apple Bleaching with Lady Clair (1962), black-and-white photograph, 40.8 x 57.5cm
2, 3, 4 Apple and Warhol with their “products” for The American Supermarket exhibition; Roy Lichtenstein’s “turkey” bag for the same show

A \$1.5 million McLaren M8A-2 racing car; film footage of an historic car race; diagrammatic outlines of famous race tracks; and text-based portraits of the legendary New Zealand racing-car drivers Bruce McLaren and Denny Hulme – such a tribute to car racing seems an unlikely find in the context of a commercial art gallery. But for New Zealand artist Billy Apple – who presented all this in a solo exhibition, The Bruce and Denny Show, at Auckland’s Two Rooms gallery earlier this year – it was business as usual. That is, the business of life as art.

Apple’s five-decade-long career has focused on the idea of the artist as a “brand” with his own everyday activities elevated to the status of art. For The Bruce and Denny Show, however, he shifted the spotlight from himself to Bruce McLaren and Denny Hulme, the New Zealand-born racing-car drivers whose spectacular successes in the late ‘60s Apple elegantly illustrated in a series of canvases and prints and – spectacularly – a fully-restored historic M8A-2 racing car displayed in the centre of the gallery space.

Between 1967 and 1969 teammates McLaren and Hulme dominated the world of the Canadian-American Challenge Cup car racing (the “Can-Am”). They took turns to place first and second in nearly every race: McLaren won in 1967, Hulme in 1968, McLaren in 1969 and Hulme again in 1970, following the death of McLaren in a car crash in 1970. The media dubbed the unstoppable duo “The Bruce and Denny Show”.

McLaren cars made a splash when they appeared at the South African Grand Prix in 1967, outfitted in the new “McLaren Orange” livery and making their mark in a traditional field – in the days before advertisements appeared on racing cars – of Italian reds and British racing greens. It was only with the launch of the Can-Am series in 1966 that racing cars became, as Apple says, “like moving billboards... with sponsorship from companies such as Reynolds Aluminium and Gulf Oil.” By 1966 Apple had also made branding a fundamental component of his own work.

Born as Barrie Bates in 1935, Apple left New Zealand for London in 1959 to study at the Royal College of Art (RCA). With his classmates David Hockney, Derek Boshier and R.B. Kitaj, Apple arrived in London at the start of what the art critic Lawrence Alloway coined in the ‘60s as “Pop”. In 1962, in preparation for his first solo exhibition, Bates established a new brand and look, changing his name to Billy Apple and bleaching his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes blond. His transformation is documented in Billy Apple Bleaching with Lady Clair (1962), November 1962 (1962), a photograph showing the newly branded Billy Apple looking at himself in the mirror for the first time. Barrie Bates was never seen or heard from again.

Another important change was percolating at this time. On arriving in London, Bates quickly became preoccupied with all things American, rather than assimilating himself into the European old world as expatriates were inclined to

do. During summer breaks he and Hockney would take trips to New York where they made the acquaintance of artists Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol and experienced for the first time the dynamic world of American advertising.

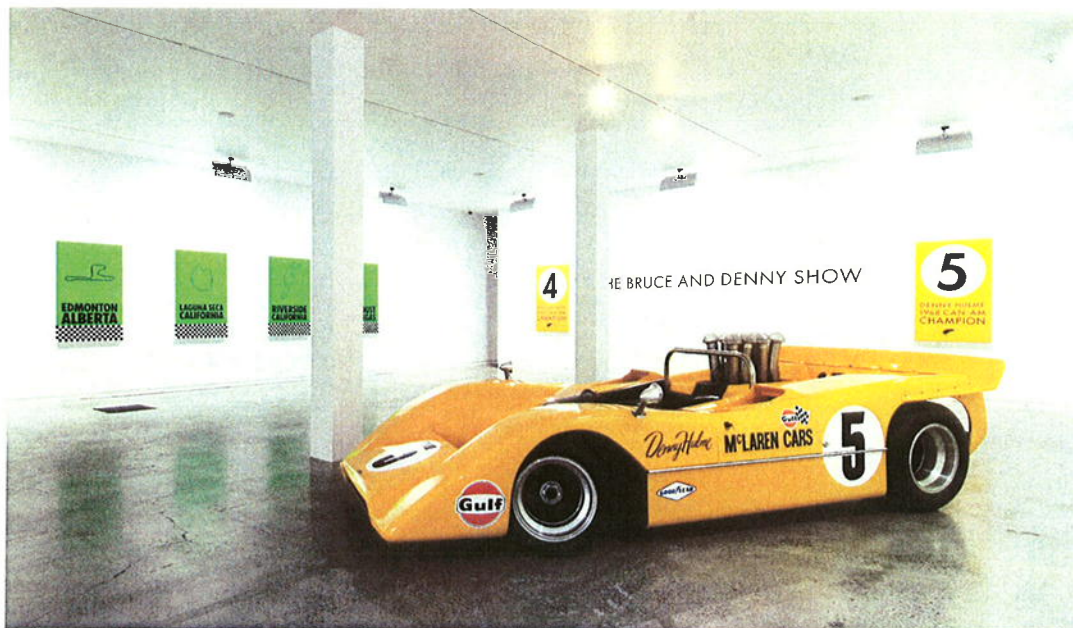
Apple recalls: “Bates used to go around to Andy Warhol’s place every now and then when he was in town. Warhol lived with his mother. She was a very nice lady – she used to bring us coffee and donuts. I realised that these people were just like me. Not like in Britain where it was a bloody great struggle all the time, with that whole terrible ethic of the Commonwealth. I thought, ‘Fuck it. You can have your European baggage. I’m off to the Brave New World where anything’s possible.’”

Like Warhol, Apple had studied graphic design and regularly produced promotional material for exhibitions and other events. The poster he designed for the 1962 Young Commonwealth Artists 4th Annual Exhibition, for example, comprised an outline of a partially coloured-in Union Jack and was an early example of the then sacred British flag being put to profane use. Says Apple of the poster: “It was posted in the underground all over London. I used to see people waiting for trains who’d whip out a blue pen and [start colouring in] and then jump away when their train arrived. Then someone else would come along and fill in a bit with red pen... They were beautiful. There must have been hundreds of people who had a crack at filling in this great big poster on all the different underground platforms.” It won the award for Best Poster in the first Design and Art Directors Awards in London.

I n 1964 Apple moved permanently to New York, by which time Warhol had progressed from his paintings of Coca Cola bottles and Campbell’s Soup cans to photographic screenprints on canvas and mass-produced Brillo boxes. Apple had made a similar shift from painting to photolithography by 1961, most notably with a 1962 suite of “self-portraits” taken by the celebrity photographer Robert Freeman. From his time in London to the present Apple has subcontracted the production of his work to photographers, signwriters, printers, foundries, writers and anyone else he deems skilled enough to execute his ideas – a strategy that he says fascinated Warhol when they met in 1961.

An important moment for American Pop was The American Supermarket exhibition at Bianchini Gallery in New York in 1964. Everyday shoppers could have been forgiven for thinking that a new and expensive supermarket had just opened, with Warhol selling Brillo boxes for US\$350 and cans of Campbell’s Soup for \$18. Apple sold a slice of cast-bronze watermelon for \$500; Jasper Johns presented painted bronze cans of Ballantine Ale; and Robert Watts offered chrome-plated fruit.

Apple was quick to employ new technologies in his work. Influenced by Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in the ‘60s he began using coloured neon, plexiglass and lasers. Says Apple:



"There was a window when art and technology had a romantic edge – when art, science and engineering could get together to do things. [Robert] Rauschenberg was working with [the engineer] Billy Kluver at Bell Telephone Laboratories and I had a wonderful association with GT&E [General Telephone & Electronics Corporation]. They poured liquid coatings into fluorescent tubes for me – it was like a Jackson Pollock. I had all these tubes with incredible coatings of pink and green and blue. I then went to another section of GT&E to make my early laser pieces with Dr Stanley Shapiro."

As well as his own branding, most aspects of the conditions of art-making have come under Apple's close scrutiny. From 1969–73 he ran one of New York's first alternative gallery spaces – known as Apple – where he presented conceptual and performance works ranging from autobiographical artefacts (such as a daily presentation of excretory wipings) to routine gallery maintenance as "art", such as a series of photographs documenting the sweeping and scrubbing of the gallery space.

Apple undertook these site-specific reductive works in other dealer and public galleries too, increasingly focusing on

the conditions under which art is made and sold. In some cases he removed or fixed parts of the gallery space – such as polishing windows, exposing walls, lifting carpet or adjusting the lights. And in 1979 he used red paint to censure gallery features that didn't meet his exacting standards, including a misaligned door catch at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.

This same obsessive attention to detail was evident in The Bruce and Denny Show. All seven of Apple's green screenprinted racetrack outlines from the 1967 and 1968 Can-Am seasons have Golden Ratio compositions and are exactly to scale, reconstructed from satellite images from the period. McLaren's and Hulme's racing numbers – 4 and 5 – appear on both the car and in the screenprints according to FIA (Federation Internationale de L'Automobile) specifications, and the "McLaren Orange" was painstakingly re-created, Apple taking a panel from the car to the screenprinter to sample.

In the '80s, after a decade of experimental work that defied the art market, Apple's attention returned to Pop's exploration of commodities. But rather than appropriating the theatre of retail, he zeroed in on the very idea of trading. As always, the

Above: **The Bruce and Denny Show (2008)**, installation view with McLaren M8A-2 racing car and screenprinted portraits, Two Rooms, Auckland



Top: Trade Marked, 29 March 2007 (2007), Billy Apple's logo Above: **\$100,000 Credit Held** (2005), acrylic and vinyl text, 258.6 x 418.5cm, Minter-Ellison Rudd Watts, Auckland

nature of the artwork's existence was thrust into the foreground so that from this period it was the exchange between collector and artist that became the work itself. Apple established several product lines for what are known as his "transaction" pieces, including *Sold*, *Bartered*, *Commissioned*, *Exchanged*, *From the Collection* as well as the enigmatic *N.F.S.* and *P.O.A.* – all of which echo an earlier 1961 text work called *For Sale*, which Apple made at the RCA with Hockney's assistance.

Apple continues to put every aspect of the production and consumption of his work under intense scrutiny. Editions are numbered, works sized and prices set with specific meanings in mind. Even the division of revenue between the artist and dealer – that is, the artist's cut and the dealer's cut, or what Apple has termed *AC/DC* – is determined by the Golden Ratio. The canvas screenprints in *The Bruce and Denny Show* were priced at \$40,000 in recognition of the 40-year anniversary of McLaren's and Hulme's race wins, and an edition of seven screenprints depicting seven racetracks and McLaren's and Hulme's Group 7 cars were priced at \$7000 for each print.

The New Zealand-born curator and writer Wylan Curnow has been collaborating with Apple since the artist's 1975 trip to New Zealand, and in 1991 he curated a retrospective of Apple's work from the '80s. Curnow considers the solid-gold cast apple that the artist was commissioned to make for the managing director of the Auckland Coin & Bullion Exchange – a company that was in receivership by the end of the decade – as an iconic work of the '80s. "Billy's work of the period almost alone directly engaged with money and value – the central issues of the time," says Curnow. "The Golden Apple, because of its peculiar provenance – which makes it part and parcel of the business of money – is a key work." Indeed, the extreme cost of the raw materials for this work meant for some time that it was quite literally worth its weight in gold. (It's value as art now exceeds its value as bullion.)

Money has been the subject of more recent works by Apple. In 2005 he completed a commission for the Auckland legal firm Minter Ellison Rudd Watts. Installed in their offices is a large wall painting proclaiming "\$100,000 Credit Held". Apple went on to use the firm's legal services to develop his trademark brand Billy Apple™ – a shrewd move at a time when copyright issues are becoming increasingly important and complicated. By trademarking his brand Apple was also one step closer to fulfilling one of his 1962 Pop ideas: to develop an actual apple – specially bred in collaboration with horticultural scientists – for the international marketplace. Says Apple: "In '64 we took the supermarket to the art gallery and now we're going to take the art gallery to the supermarket. The circle will be complete."

The Billy Apple™ logo has already infiltrated the wider

New Zealand consciousness through Apple's involvement in an advertising campaign for the Radio Live talkback host Marcus Lush. In this double-branding work, Apple's trademark logo appeared throughout New Zealand on billboards and in the press alongside a series of objects representing the idiosyncratic collecting obsessions of Lush. Because of this campaign Apple's work has had a level of exposure normally beyond the grasp of artists. Similarly, Radio Live has gained a degree of cultural kudos as a result of Apple exhibiting the billboards in public galleries.

Which brings us back to the business of car racing. Apple's interest in the relationship between artists and collectors now extends to his own personal collection of racing cars and motorbikes. Known as *The Billy Apple Historic Racing Collection*, the artist's collection of British racing cars and motorcycles includes a 1971 Lola T212 sports car that was the subject of a text-based portrait by Apple in 2004. As well as being driven on the track, Apple's cars and motorcycles have attained the status of "art" because of their frequent gallery appearances.

More recently, Apple has paid tribute to other people's collections. In 2007 he staged *The Art Circuit*, a sound performance for motorcycles in the forecourt of Auckland Art Gallery, including a solo "guest performance" by a 1968 Hailwood Honda 4 motorbike from the collection of California's Solvang Vintage Motorcycle Museum. The *Art Circuit* was originally proposed in 2004 as a street performance for the 2005 Auckland Festival, circumnavigating Auckland's traditional "circuit" of art galleries centred around Auckland Art Gallery. However, because of logistic difficulties, *The Art Circuit* in this form was not realised. The 2007 performance was instead a static "recital". With Apple's typically dry wit, the Gallery's forecourt was as much the circuit's start line and pit-stop as it was an orchestra pit, with four motorcycles revved up by the champion riders Hugh Anderson and Ken McIntosh.

The M8A-2 McLaren in *The Bruce and Denny Show* was also on loan from a collection, in this case *The Bruce McLaren Trust* in Auckland. The car – which Denny Hulme drove in 1968 – was rebuilt by the Trust and is a national treasure for racing fans. The Group 7 McLaren sports car Bruce McLaren raced at Mosport Park, Ontario, can be seen – alongside the M8A-2 – in a 1967 film about the race that was made for ABC Television and which Apple showed during his exhibition at Two Rooms. The sound of cars racing permeated the gallery space for the duration of the show. *The Bruce and Denny Show* goes on, and – as is always the case with Apple's work – life becomes art.

www.billyapple.com

melbourne art fair

Billy Apple at Hamish McKay Gallery,
Stand D02



Photo: Mary McKeon

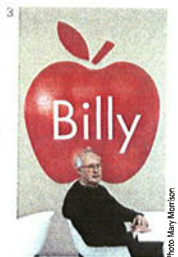


Photo: Mary McKeon

- 1 Billy Apple's billboard campaign for Radio Live, Eden Park, Auckland, 2008
- 2 LUNCHES (2005), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40cm, to be shown on Hamish McKay Gallery's stand at the 2008 Melbourne Art Fair
- 3 Billy Apple at Cala Café, Auckland, 2007