

**CANVASES TO BE NERVOUSLY ADORED:
THE PORTRAITURE OF**

**PETER
STICHBURY**

The compelling portraits of this Auckland-based artist explore the glamour of beauty and fashion magazines as well as a smorgasbord of clichéd personality types – nerds, jocks and eggheads – straight of out a high school yearbook

WORDS: John Hurrell



When we meet a new person for the first time and nothing is spoken, what are the factors that affect our first impressions – that make us feel either hostile antagonism, empathetic loyalty or dull indifference?

Sometimes in a visage we find something that triggers within us deep visceral affection or sexual attraction. If such “chemistry” is purely visual, and not olfactory or aural, then is it the formal arrangement of facial components that strikes a chord, or some little detail that reminds us of someone else? Maybe it’s a surprising asymmetry that appeals, or an intensity of gaze that seems so utterly special and bestowed only on us?

Peter Stichbury is an Auckland-based painter. He graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland in 1997, went on to do a postgraduate degree, won various awards and never looked back. He is highly regarded for creating stylish, satirical portraits of his own generation, rendering them with startling

precision. Many of these acrylic works show him contemplating the theme of female beauty and the nature of sexual and social desirability.

Stichbury’s reputation has grown over the past decade through a series of exhibitions of his work at Anna Bibby Gallery and Starkwhite in Auckland. Dense in their references to magazine, television and film culture – as well as art history – his works have attracted collectors who feel so passionately about the artist’s hybrid depictions (the physiognomies come from several sources) that they often acquire several, feeling such affection for the works that they become like members of their own family.

There have been two particularly important exhibitions of Stichbury’s paintings over the past year. The first was *Less than Absolute Zero* at Starkwhite in October 2007, in which significant changes in his practice were evident. A series of 12 heads, alternating between grey-hued works and those with a richer chroma, explored incredibly nuanced expression as well as clichéd stereotypes. Like *Mad* magazine covers, these graphically flat visages were as if the cartoonist

Dan Clowes had merged with the painter John Currin. They marked a shift from Stichbury’s earlier intense portraits of wide-eyed, glamorous women towards an interest in character – more often male – rendered as illustration.

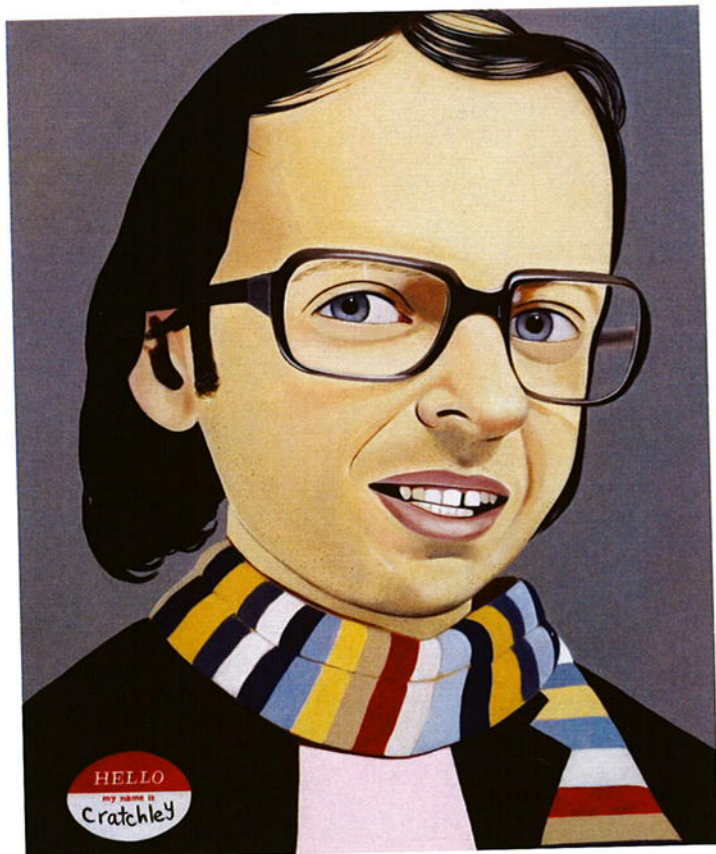
The other notable exhibition of Stichbury’s work is currently on show at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Auckland. Titled *The Alumni* and comprising 30 portraits under the banner of a class reunion, the show is a reasonably large survey of the artist’s work. Most of the portraits were completed before 2007 and include a number of portraits painted on bowling balls.

The exhibition draws out the elaborate personas that Stichbury concocts for each of his paintings, including the highly inventive names he gives his fictional subjects, such as Debbie Bloomquist, Vernon Frisbie or Herman Brittle. The visual details – including facial peculiarities, garments and other body ornaments – are wrapped around little narratives that the artist decides on before he starts painting.

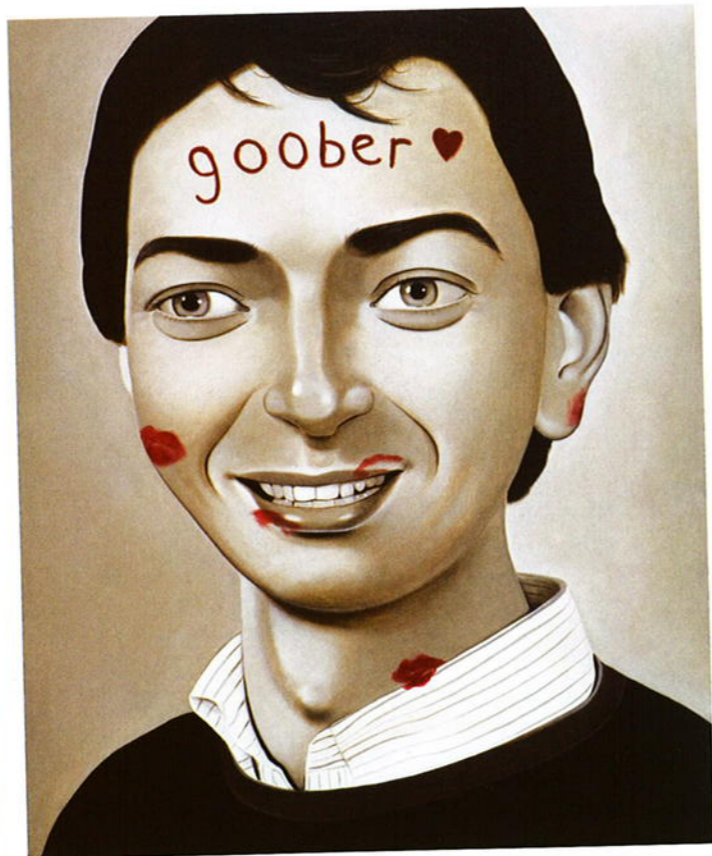
Stichbury first came to prominence with his early portraits of young women. Confidently



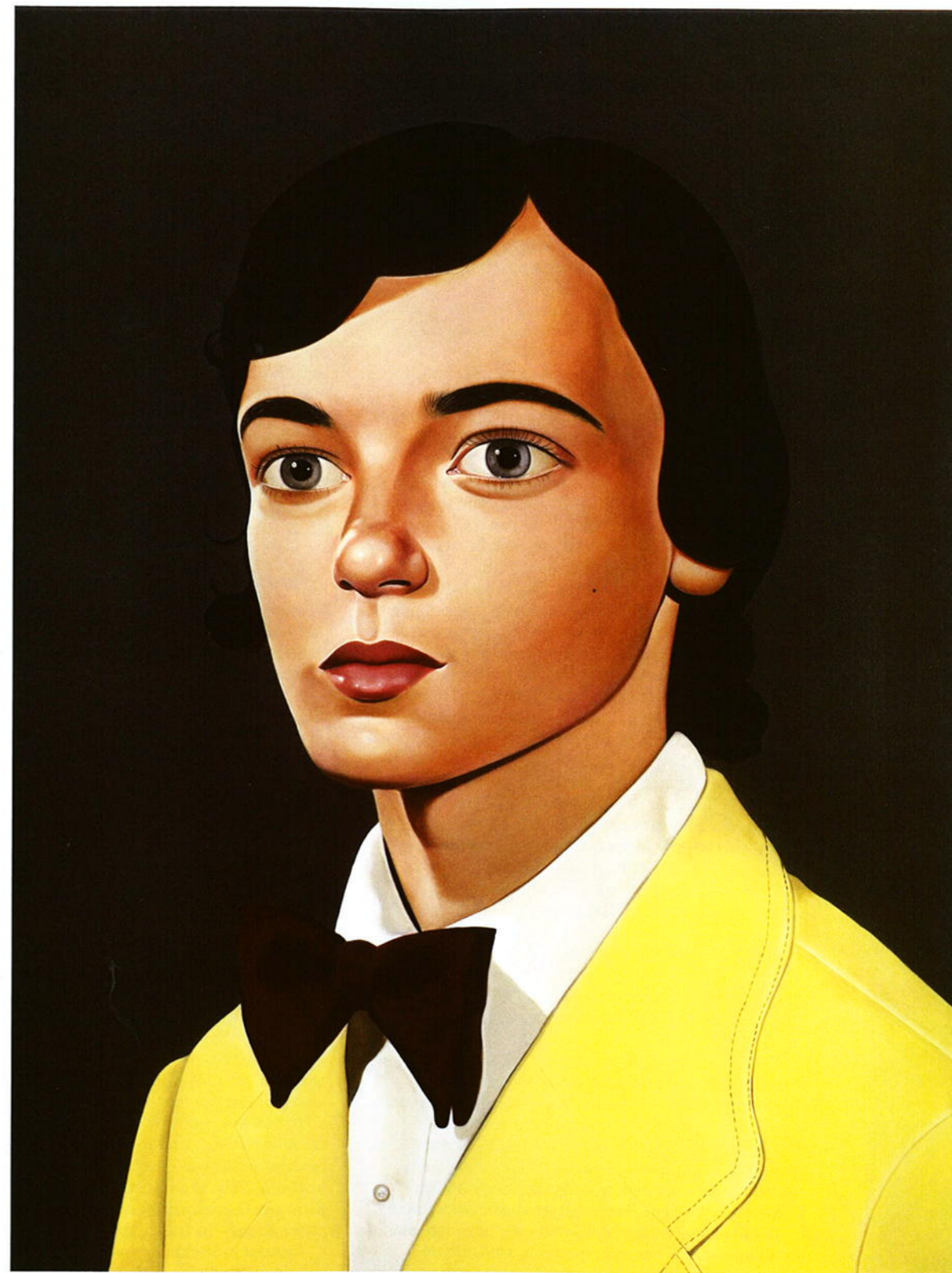
Above: *Cratchley Wagstaff* (2006), acrylic and gesso on lawn bowl, 25cm diameter Opposite: *Liberty* (2001), acrylic on linen, 66 x 56cm



Cratchley goes to speed dating (2007), acrylic on linen, 50.5 x 60.5cm

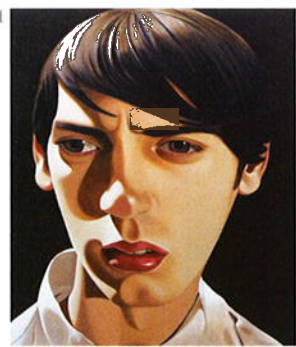


Vernon Frisbie (2007), acrylic on linen, 50.5 x 60.5cm



Jim Jewel (2008), acrylic on linen, 65 x 85cm

Confidently poised, erotic and radiating privilege, these Paris Hilton-types are oddly, though not always, vacant.



poised, erotic and radiating privilege, these Paris Hilton-types are oddly, though not always, vacant. The portraits exploit the glamour templates of magazines like *The Face* or *Vogue*, and the women do not have a strong sense of individuality.

Stichbury's method when painting these faces is to render highly sculpted heads, with chiselled facial features, glistening irises and glossed lips. Their large Bambi-like eyes are invariably spaced far apart, with meticulously rendered eyelashes. The head shapes tend to be triangular, with large foreheads, pert chins and small ski-jump noses. They look slightly mantis-like, as if out of an animated Pixar production.

The result is a strange tension between their allure – large eyes, succulent mouths, silky skin – and their subtle insect-like attributes. Their plasticity and size makes them loom larger than life, as if poised to burst out of the picture plane and hover in real space in front of you. It's a kind of sexual confrontation but also threatening, with the wasplike faces suggesting a kind of *vagina dentata*.

Stichbury constructs the portraits by combining the facial features of models in fashion magazines with images found on the internet, or with his memories of certain high-school classmates. He is attracted to generic types, those popular clichéd categories of glamour and personality that individuals get casually sorted into, such as nerd, hottie, egghead, jock.

Some viewers might see the female portraits as ciphers for vacant personalities typical of a certain class, or as a send up of the conventions of magazine glamour, while others will consider them as simply a meditation on all surface appearance. Perhaps a handful see the portraits as genuinely individualistic – true studies of authentic personality – even if the sitters don't actually exist.

Others find Stichbury's faces desirable – like the museum guard who once told the artist that he'd leave his wife for one – suggesting that the canvases are a kind of fetish surrogate for the beautiful women they depict. In an article published recently in

Frieze, Jennifer Allen writes about people who are "objectum-sexual" – meaning "emotionally and sexually attracted to objects." She cites as examples the German woman who so loved the Berlin Wall that she married it, becoming Mrs Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer, and – more confrontingly – her own amorous fixation on Wim Delvoye's excrement producing artwork *Cloaca* (2000).

To fall in love with a "shit-producing" arrangement of bubbling tanks, tubes and pipettes is, well, a little strange. But it's easy to understand why people might become enamoured with Stichbury's portraits – particularly his alluring images of women, which seem to encourage such a *gaga* response in viewers.

Stichbury, however, is pushing quite a different set of buttons with his more recent portraits. The new works,

which began to emerge in 2007, are less lustful (with no skin on show) and more about a kind of wry humour. They have a more graphic style and less tonal manipulation – not unlike comic book imagery or graphic novel covers. The personalities – usually male – are still generic as human types and even more immaculately detailed. The eyes, head shapes and bone structure don't dominate like they do in the portraits of women. Instead, Stichbury lavishes attention on an odd assortment of features, including whiskers, scratches, bruises, Band-Aids and even pimples. Again, the clothing worn by each subject correlates to a predetermined story.

The flatness of these works suggest that Stichbury is creating a geography of physiognomy from his own mental map. There is a definite sense of a physical facial terrain that he is traipsing over with his little brush and paint pot, manipulating the pitted or creviced surfaces of the subject's epidermis. He is also exploring the possibilities of colour more thoroughly, with the delicate hues of the eyes much more nuanced in these works.

Stichbury's achievement is that he has given the skills of magazine or comic-book illustration the gravitas of studio painting so that the content of each image, and its formal "abstract" properties, are considered worthy of sustained thought.

His recent works are multi-layered, rather than one-liners. The relationship to narrative has also reversed: the works aren't simply appendages to some casually contrived text, but the other way round. It's the images that first attract attention, after which Stichbury, if so inclined, can articulate a verbal narrative that the image can support. The fabricated anecdotes are not pushed in your face.

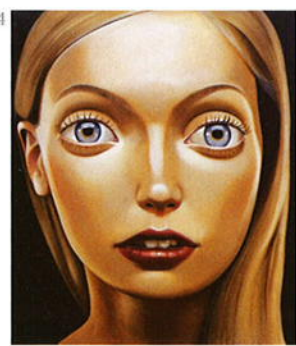
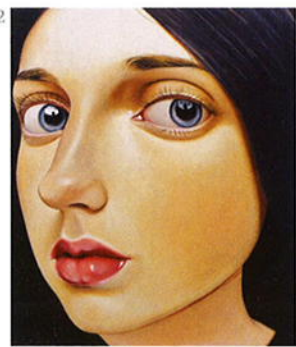
There is a renewed interest in portraiture in New Zealand at the moment, evidenced not only by the blossoming popularity of Stichbury's work, but also by the recent survey exhibition of the work of modernist painter Rita Angus at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; and the growing interest in the practice of artists like Gavin Hurley, Richard Maloy and Layla Rudneva-Mackay. Portraits are very current.

Before he acquired a sophisticated computer, Stichbury was an avid collector of magazines – he hoarded hundreds – from which he sourced imagery for his work. Now, in an a fitting reversal, it's Stichbury's paintings that adorn the covers of fashion and art publications – including this issue of *Art World*.

Interest in Stichbury's work continues to grow, and rightly so. It's fitting that a book on his work, published by Te Tuhi and Starkwhite, will be released in mid-November.

Peter Stichbury is represented by Starkwhite, Auckland

Exhibition: The Alumni, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Pakuranga, Auckland, 12 Jul – 21 Sep; Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, 29 Nov – 22 Feb 2009



1 *Swoon* (2000), acrylic on linen, 91 x 106cm 2 *Juvenile* (2000), acrylic on linen, 66 x 55cm 3 *Charity* (2001), acrylic on linen, 66 x 56cm 4 *Glister* (2000), acrylic on linen, 76 x 66cm