

TEACHER NOTES

Peter Madden

‘Coming from all the places you have never been’



Corona (detail) 2010
The University of
Auckland Art Collection

31 August – 23 November

Peter Madden has become an undisputed master of the art of collage – on the wall and free-standing.

PATAKA has brought together twenty-five of his key works over the past decade for this important survey: *Coming from all the places you have never been*, which reveals an artist fascinated with visual spectacle, mystery, darkness and beauty.

Education resource compiled by Linda Fordyce, Education, Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, 2014.
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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

- Peter Madden was born in Napier, New Zealand in 1966.
- He studied at Auckland Institute of Technology, Auckland (1992—1995) gaining his Bachelor of Visual Arts, and then his Masters of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, Auckland (2002—2004).
- Solo Exhibitions since 1997 in private and public galleries in Hong Kong, Brisbane, Auckland, Wellington, Melbourne, Tokyo.
- Group Exhibitions in Christchurch, Wellington, Dunedin, Auckland, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Miami, São Paulo, Malmö (Sweden), New York, Rotterdam.
- He now lives and works in Auckland.



EARLY INFLUENCES - photomontage

*"To say that Madden cuts up and rearranges photographs from National Geographic magazine is like saying that Hendrix played the guitar."*¹

Peter Madden recalls that his uncle gave him a subscription to the National Geographic magazine as a young boy – and that every month he felt as if "the world arrived" on his doorstep. This iconic magazine and its "pseudo-scientific photojournalism", albeit from the perspective of white American culture, has remained a favourite source for his imagery and he has collected piles of old issues (some rescued from mildew in garages), from Trade Me and waiting rooms to repurpose their images in his fantastical, intricate collages and elaborate sculptures. From its pages he cuts, deconstructs, glues and reconstructs worlds from his own perspective.

¹ Tessa Laird, 'Far from the Madden crowd', *NZ Listener*, Nov. 26-Dec. 2, 2005



Autumnal 2013

Found recorder and mixed media
Collection of The James Wallace
Arts Trust

Madden travelled overseas after finishing his Fine Arts degree and it was in New York, where the photographic image “ was a big thing”, that he came across the work of the German Dada artist Hannah Höch who was one of the creators and driving forces of the art of photomontage. Splicing together images taken from fashion magazines and illustrated journals, she created a humorous and moving commentary on society during a time of tremendous social change. During the early twentieth century, Hannah Höch’s technique of collage, as well as Surrealist Max Ernst (who brought collage into greater focus with his 1934 graphic novel/book ‘Une semaine de bonté’ – A week of kindness), challenged and helped to change the whole notion of what fine art could be and include.



Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic* 1919
Collage of pasted papers
Berlin Museum

A member of Berlin’s **Dada** movement in the 1920s, Hannah Höch is best known for her work which became her personal and political expression about the role of women in the Weimar post-war period (1919-1933) in Germany. Höch cut out images and text from catalogues, newspapers and magazines and pasted them into a kaleidoscopic, yet carefully orchestrated composition and comment about her ‘modern’ world. Collage has since evolved into a socially relevant form of expression – a medium well suited to mix the real and imagined, past and present, fact and fantasy into a reassembled world within the same frame. Höch provided the inspiration Madden needed at that time to redefine his art practice and take it even further.



Butterfly Book (aka The Missing) 2007
Found object and found images
Collection of The James Wallace Arts Trust



Butterfly Book 2007
Found object and collage
Private Collection



TECHNIQUE and TOOLS

Madden describes his practice as 'sculptography'. He uses found photography of the flora and fauna derived from the real world in old books, magazines and encyclopedias: birds, reptiles, flowers, butterflies, moths, spiders, snakes, tropical fish and plants - to create magical inventive 2D and 3D collages.

Madden deftly cuts out the chosen images from their backgrounds using a scalpel with such patience and skill that the cut-out pages are usually left intact – often becoming artworks themselves. He also takes great pains to bevel the edges of his often-miniscule fragments of photographs so that they are only about one tenth of a millimetre thick.

'Like an unlicensed eye surgeon ever so carefully, I cut along the edge'.¹

Madden refers to this cutting-out process as the liberation of photographic fragments from their original aperture or "snap and capture setting." Some of these fragments – so small they can only be held by tweezers - are glued onto layers of transparent sheets of Perspex or glass. These liberated images are often trapped between up to five or more layered sheets of clear perspex which help to create an important depth of field. Madden constructs new 'beings' out of the juxtaposition of and the interplay between the images on the separate layers. In other works, photographic fragments are mounted on wires to become fantastic constructions and mounted in relief and overlapping layers to become intriguing portraits. Each artwork takes hours, even weeks of work.

¹ Artist statement, 2008.

Madden also uses found objects in his work as well as photographs. The found everyday objects he uses act as a kind of support or scaffolding for the explosion of collaged-objects (his images are called objects) around them. Something as ordinary as a pair of old worn-out shoes or a chair from his studio is magically transformed with the cut-out objects and given a new life. For example; a chair is covered in foliage, an animal head sprouts a profusion of flowers, snakes multiply amid the pages of an Oxford dictionary and a crouching skeleton is covered with moths.



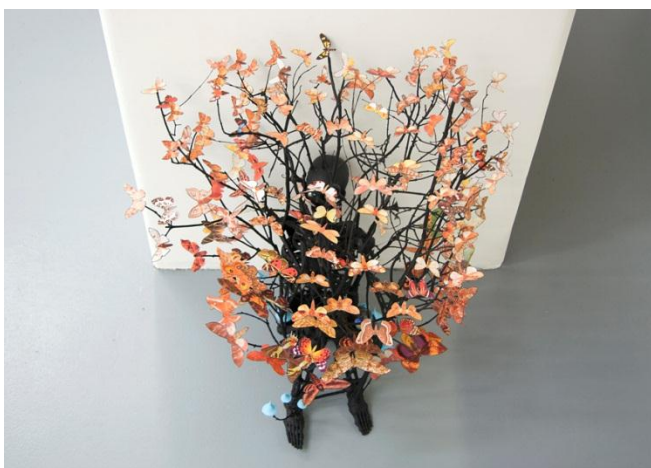
Leave 2004

Leather shoes and found images,
Chartwell Collection,
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki



The Sparrow's Mind 2013

Found object and mixed media
Courtesy of Robert Heald Gallery,
Wellington



Crouches with Moths 2010

Found object, mixed media and collage
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Madden has also been painting on dead flies since the early to mid-2000s, preserving them by using glue and gesso. His assortment of flies includes those with painted flags, one with a painted small but precise skull, some wrapped in silver-leaf, some with collaged plane wings and others done with light watercolour washes.



Assorted flies from Lord of the Flies installation 2012 - 2014
dead flies, gesso, watercolour & resin
Collection of the artist.



ARTIST THEMES AND SUBJECT MATTER

“I’m not a photographer standing on the edge of the world....
In my work, I’m cutting into a body of knowledge, poetically releasing the images”.¹

Peter Madden prefers to leave his work open to interpretation and likes to have a sense of mystery surrounding his artwork. Many of his works reflect his own social and ecological concerns about the state of the world. He uses images (objects) that remind us about the fragility of life - including the threat of extinction for some of our earth’s flora and fauna.

¹ Peter Madden, quoted in Sue Gardiner, ‘The Unbuilt Realm’, Artnews Autumn 2004.

Like rats leaving a sinking ship, we see flocks of birds, schools of fish and swarms of creatures fleeing a kind of white 'black' hole in space where the planet Earth should be in *The Leaving*. In this work as well as *Corona* his exploding or imploding compositions can also become a kind of halo or a crown around the reflection – in the space in the middle - of the viewer's face.

A sense of impending disaster and a fascination with death and transformation accompany many of Madden's magical 2D and 3D universes. In the 17th century European Vanitas tradition, symbols of the transience of life and the passage of time are ever present in his work: moths, butterflies, skulls, rotting fruit are all reminders about fleeting beauty and its eventual withering.

Preoccupations about life, death and notions of truth aside - Madden also infuses his work with poetry and humour and a sense of the 'delightful' and 'whimsical'. Children especially are captivated by the black miniature cityscape mounted on a black table in the middle of the gallery. It is called *The Unbuilt Realm of Indeterminapolis*, an imaginary complex fantasy world drawing upon photographs of the real world to recreate dreams, nightmares and histories of past civilisations (regular features of National Geographic magazines) with a touch of gothic fairyland. Children can identify with the feeling that the city could come alive at night. Madden has commented that creating cityscapes or dioramas made him feel like a writer developing a novel. Most of his works contain 'untold' stories and children are able to let their own imaginations take over while viewing all the objects.



The Unbuilt Realm of Indeterminapolis, 2003
Found objects and mixed media
Collection of The James Wallace Arts Trust

Using second-hand magazines and images and 'found' objects, Peter Madden is an artist who has become passionate about the concepts of visual recycling and multimedia upcycling. "A resourceful New Zealander, I reuse and make my work with a simple economy of resources – no special technologies are involved. Everyone can do it. I see my role as an artist as creating a different economy out of society's detritus." ¹

¹ Personal communication 8 June 2009, Pataka catalogue : *Coming from all the places you have never been*, essay by Helen Kedgley

ARTIST STATEMENT

I suppose I am an altogether different collagist, maybe a collagist of difference. My primary source is National Geographic, a pseudo-scientific magazine, a coffee table Carle Andre gone mad. It is a magazine of which 6 billion exist and 23 million are added every month. Washed up in second-hand stores and the digital pages of Trade Me these treasures contain fantastic stories of lost civilisations and exotic butterflies that smell like orchids once dead. My supply would seem to have no limit. Indeed it is this limitlessness that I fold in on itself as I make art.

Like an unlicensed eye surgeon ever so carefully, I cut along an edge of possibilities. The scalpel locates and dislocates, creating from this body of knowledge a poetic space, individualised and liberated from the frozen stillness of those pages. Fragments totalling in the thousands, slip between sheets of here and there. Seeded in fields of imagination, a dark flower opens in the compassionate space of you my viewer (the infinite propels itself into the mundane). Here, a reluctant artwork unravels its untold story.

Peter Madden, 2008.



Ram Mount 2004

Found object and found images
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2004

PRE AND POST VISIT ACTIVITIES

- ❖ **COLLECT** together National Geographic magazines (that you are allowed to cut up) and begin to create image banks - 'subject and size groupings' of images to use.
- ❖ **CREATE** some composite pictures combining separate images together to create magical fantasy animals etc.
- ❖ **DECORATE** some everyday objects with collaged images – try to make it look as though it is magically and naturally sprouting/growing the images.



Joseph Cornell, *The Hotel Eden*, 1945

- ❖ **FIND OUT** about other influential collage artists including: Joseph Cornell, Hannah Höch, Man Ray, Kurt Schwitters and Jessie Treece - have a close look at their work.
- ❖ **THINK** about the different ways you can use 2D images to make 3D sculptural artworks – e.g. Peter Madden uses wire, foam and found everyday objects.
- ❖ **HOW WELL** can you cut around an image and lift it out to reveal the negative space from where it had been? Practise your cutting techniques – You may need a scalpel to do this well or special pointed craft scissors.
- ❖ **WORK** together to create a magical cityscapethink about who lives there and how they move around in your city. Make it tell a story!
- ❖ **RESEARCH** the 'Vanitas' tradition of the 17th century – a genre of art which uses symbolic objects (such as skulls, rotting food, butterflies and fading flowers) to remind people about the cycle of life. Make dioramas that use some of the symbols.
- ❖ **INVESTIGATE** the use of scale in Peter Madden's work to add depth to your work.



A Man's Past 2012

Found images and mixed media on board
Private Collection, Wellington