

# FOCAL PLANE

March 2005



Auckland Photographic Society Inc Est 1883

## News & Muse

Hello and Welcome to the March edition of Focal Plane. Well after a few technical hitches and a long period of time, we're back with you (and good to be!).

This month there is the calendar of upcoming dates to remember, more new members to announce, some great photographic exhibitions showing currently and we acknowledge a long serving current member of the Auckland Photographic Society.

Self Help nuts. You know the type. They have the spare room bookshelf laden with a healthy selection of "How to Win Friends and...", "Rich Dad, Poor Dad ..." type of books. Fewer Picador or Wilbur Smiths' present. Probably even been on a course or two.

Well, I'm *Not* one.

At least I don't *think* so. But I've started to wonder. You see ... my name is John and I buy photography books. Not the "Photographers Guide to Stunning Landscapes" or "Digital for Dummies" (as anyone who knows me might attest to). More like "EarthWorks" by Steve Mulligan, "Rites and Passages" about Minor White, or "New Zealand Photographs" of Scott Freeman (believe me the imagination applied to the title does not reflect that applied to the photographs within ... take a look), or "101 Cataclysms" - Rachael Hale. Though I have to admit; this one because when we were both too small to lift a Mamiya or know a Gaussian Blur from a bag of sherbet, we used to trudge a mile to school together. Brilliant book too (and much better title).

Recently I bought another photography book. It was one I had been wishing to own for quite a while. But as I forked over my months petrol money to the convivial owners of the photographer-friendly little corner bookstore, I just *knew* the price had gone up by a good 30% since Henry's death a few months earlier. But I couldn't help it. So I guess I am a photography book nut. Even been on a course or two.

Was it Sir Isaac Newton who once said, "*If I have seen farther than others it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants*". Being ever hopeful that one day I may see further than someone else; I use picture books/writings/whatever I can lay my hands on and interests me, for ideas and inspiration. Occasionally I find something profoundly helpful or interesting and I like to share it. So be warned, it's coming!

Recently I came across an article about *good taste* in design. Although not specifically about the design of photographic images, the basic principles that Paul writes are clear and have (in my opinion) considerable application to photography. Though necessarily long, it makes good reading. It is near the end, so any who have a distinct aversion to things 'self-help' can avoid it. ▸

## New Members

A big welcome to the new members who have joined the Auckland Photographic Society!

Eva Kozub

Marcus Kramer

Annael Ward

Taufil Omar

Chris Piper

Looking forward to getting to know a little and trust you will enjoy your time with us.

## Thanks to

Thanks very much to our patron Jack Sprosen for judging our January club night competition.

Also big thanks to Alan Bilham for judging the February competition night.

Thanks very much to Martin Kitzen and Phil Shaw for their excellent slide and AV presentations of Africa, Vietnam and Cambodia at the March 3rd Meeting.

## Upcoming Competitions, Workshops

**Back to Basics Workshop/Matt Cutting and Image Mounting Demo**

**When:** Thurs April 7th from 7.45pm

**Where:** Lounge Room, St Lukes Community Centre, 130 Remuera Rd

## **Colour Management Workshop with Hans Weichselbaum**

**When:** Sat April 9th 1-5pm

**Where:** Lounge/Activities Rooms, St Lukes Community Centre, 130 Remuera Rd

Cost: \$45 (includes training notes and afternoon tea).

## **APS Trip to Great Barrier - Register your interest now!**

A trip is currently being organised to Great Barrier for the weekend of 16-17 April. Places are limited so please register your interest to either:

Dharmendra Krisson PH: 817-9899 /dharmendra@clear.net.nz  
Or Chris Morton PH: 376-0603 / chris@mortonproperty.co.nz

## **PSNZ National Convention 2005**

It's not too late to register. The 2005 Convention will be held in **Mt Wellington - April 21-25**. Full details including registration can be found at [www.howickcameraclub.org.nz](http://www.howickcameraclub.org.nz). John on 360-1691 or Dharmendra can provide details if unable to view the website.

*Don't miss it!* This is a fantastic opportunity to see an extremely high caliber of photographers presenting, including Heather Angel, Andy Rouse, Colin Prior, Joe Cornish and Richard White. Right here in New Zealand! Any APS member may attend.

*Is there any particular topic(s) you would like the club to offer in a workshop please do send your ideas to [info@aps.net.nz](mailto:info@aps.net.nz)*

## **What's On ...**

### **Auckland Art Gallery**

#### **MIXED-UP CHILDHOOD**

An Exhibition for Grown-ups 24 February - 22 May 2005  
Facts and fictions collide in Auckland Art Gallery's stunning new show. Mixed-Up Childhood features 20-plus artists from all over the world, some never seen in this country before. The show sees artists exemplifying, exploring and challenging prevailing ideas about childhood. Ranging from the romantic to the scientific, from the idyllic to the gruesome, their works show how complex and conflicted our thinking about childhood is.

Hits include AES+F's films mustering "stolen" children; LOUISE BOURGEOIS' spooky Cell installation - part prison, part lair - where she tames childhood traumas; the CHAPMAN BROTHERS' freakish two-headed horror-child, poignantly titled The Return of the Repressed;

LORETTA LUX's too perfect photos of too perfect children; cross-dresser GRAYSON PERRY's autobiographical punk pottery, bringing up his bad upbringing; SALLY MANN's sensual photographs of her children growing up in woodland Virginia; and SHINTARO MIYAKE dressed as a Teddy Bear. Brought to you by Simpson Grierson.

## **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY OF K' ROAD**

Karangahape Road's contribution to the AK05 festival is to turn itself into a gallery presenting a composite portrait of the street's zany diversity. Two dozen life size portraits now hang in the shop windows the length of the street.

Come and browse through this street exhibition - see anyone you know?

Pick up a photo location map from any host shop or download from [www.streetphotographystall.co.nz](http://www.streetphotographystall.co.nz) where you can view all 400 photographs taken last week in Ralph Talmont's marathon 24 hour photoshoot in St Kevin's Arcade.

Telephone 377 5086 or email [business@kroad.com](mailto:business@kroad.com) and give your address if you would like a map posted out.

*Presented in association with Fujifilm and K'Road Business Association.*

## **BOYS WITH ASTHMA**

Natasha Cantwell's friends and immediate surroundings.

Spiral Gallery, 260 Queen St, Auckland 4th - 19 April.

Boys with Asthma is Natasha Cantwell's second solo exhibition. She photographs her friends and immediate surroundings, but never lets the truth get in the way of the desired aesthetic.

Boys with Asthma is the geek-chic version of Auckland City, where everyone seems to have pet rats, and an eye-patch is a fashion statement!

## **HIGH CHAIR: NZ artists on childhood**

St Paul Street exhibition, Auckland 23 February - 2 April.

Laurence Aberhart, Gary Blackman, Glenn Busch, Bruch Foster, Anne Noble, Max Oettli, Peter Peryer & Ava Seymour.

## **BACKGROUND: LANDSCAPES**

Lopdell House Gallery, Titirangi, Auckland until 3 April.

Laurence Aberhart, Mark Adams, Paul Johns, Ian Macdonald, Natalie Robertson & Len Wesney.



## Taste for Makers - Paul Graham

(Abridged)

"All of us had been trained by Kelly Johnson and believed fanatically in his insistence that an airplane that looked beautiful would fly the same way."

- Ben Rich, *Skunk Works*

I was talking recently to a friend who teaches at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His field is 'hot' now and every year he is inundated by applications from would-be graduate students. "A lot of them seem smart," he said. "What I can't tell is whether they have any kind of taste."

Taste. You don't hear that word much now. And yet we still need the underlying concept, whatever we call it. What my friend meant was that he wanted students who were not just good technicians, but who could use their technical knowledge to design beautiful things.

Mathematicians call good work "beautiful," and so, either now or in the past, have scientists, engineers, musicians, architects, designers, writers, and painters. Is it just a coincidence that they used the same word, or is there some overlap in what they meant? If there is an overlap, can we use one field's discoveries about beauty to help us in another?

For those of us who design things, these are not just theoretical questions. If there is such a thing as beauty, we need to be able to recognise it. We need good taste to make good things. Instead of treating beauty as an airy abstraction, to be either blathered about or avoided depending on how one feels about airy abstractions, let's try considering it as a practical question: *how do you make good stuff?*

If you mention taste nowadays, a lot of people will tell you that "taste is subjective." They believe this because it really feels that way to them. When they like something, they have no idea why. It could be because it's beautiful, or because their mother had one, or because they saw a movie star with one in a magazine, or because they know it's expensive. Their thoughts are a tangle of unexamined impulses.

If you make fun of your little brother for colouring people green in his colouring book, your mother is likely to tell you something like "you like to do it your way and he likes to do

Your mother at this point is not trying to teach you important truths about aesthetics. She's trying to get the two of you to stop bickering. Most of us are encouraged, as children, to leave this tangle unexamined.

Like many of the half-truths adults tell us, this one contradicts other things they tell us. After dining into you that taste is merely a matter of personal preference, they take you to the museum and tell you that you should pay attention because Leonardo is a great artist.

What goes through the kid's head at this point? What does he think "great artist" means? After having been told for years that everyone just likes to do things their own way, he is unlikely to head straight for the conclusion that a great artist is someone whose work is *better* than the others'. A far more likely theory, in his Ptolemaic model of the universe, is that a great artist is something that's good for you, like broccoli, because someone said so in a book.

Saying that taste is just personal preference is a good way to prevent disputes. The trouble is, it's not true. You feel this when you start to design things.

Whatever job people do, they naturally want to do better. Football players like to win games. CEOs like to increase earnings. It's a matter of pride, and a real pleasure, to get better at your job. But if your job is to design things, and there is no such thing as beauty, then there is *no way to get better at your job*. If taste is just personal preference, then everyone's is already perfect: you like whatever you like, and that's it.

As in any job, as you continue to design things, you'll get better at it. Your tastes will change. And, like anyone who gets better at their job, you'll know you're getting better. If so, your old tastes were not merely different, but worse. Poof goes the axiom that taste can't be wrong.

Relativism is fashionable at the moment, and that may hamper you from thinking about taste, even as yours grows. But if you come out of the closet and admit, at least to yourself, that there is such a thing as good and bad design, then you can start to study good design in detail. How has your taste changed? When you made mistakes, what caused you to make them? What have other people learned about design?

Once you start to examine the question, it's surprising how much ideas of beauty in different fields have in common. The same principles of good design crop up again and again.

**Good design is simple.** You hear this from maths to painting. In maths it means that a shorter proof tends to be a better one. Where axioms are concerned, especially, less is more. It means much the same thing in computer programming. For architects and designers it means that beauty should depend on a few carefully chosen structural elements rather than a profusion of superficial ornament. (Ornament is not in itself bad, only when it's camouflage on insipid form.) Similarly, in painting, a still life of a few carefully observed and solidly modelled objects will tend to be more interesting than a stretch of flashy but mindlessly repetitive painting of, say, a lace collar. In writing it means: say what you mean and say it briefly.

It seems strange to have to emphasise simplicity. You'd think simple would be the default. Ornate is more work. But something seems to come over people when they try to be creative. Beginning writers adopt a pompous tone that doesn't sound anything like the way they speak. Designers trying to be artistic resort to swooshes and curlicues. Painters discover that they're expressionists. It's all evasion. Underneath the long words or the "expressive" brush strokes, there is not much going on, and that's frightening.

When you're forced to be simple, you're forced to face the real problem. When you can't deliver ornament, you have to deliver substance.

**Good design solves the right problem.** The typical stove has four burners arranged in a square, and a dial to control each. How do you arrange the dials? The simplest answer is to put them in a row. But this is a simple answer to the wrong question. The dials are for humans to use, and if you put them in a row, the unlucky human will have to stop and think each time about which dial matches which burner. Better to arrange the dials in a square like the burners.

A lot of bad design is industrious, but misguided. In the mid twentieth century there was a vogue for setting text in sans-serif fonts. These fonts *are* closer to the pure, underlying letterforms. But in text that's not the problem you're trying to solve. For legibility it's more important that letters be easy to tell apart.

It may look Victorian, but a Times Roman lowercase g is easy to tell from a lowercase y.

Problems can be improved as well as solutions. In software, an intractable problem can usually be replaced by an equivalent one that's easy to solve. Physics progressed faster as the problem became predicting observable behaviour, instead of reconciling it with scripture.

**Good design is suggestive.** Jane Austen's novels contain almost no description; instead of telling you how everything looks, she tells her story so well that you envision the scene for yourself. Likewise, a painting that suggests is usually more engaging than one that tells. Everyone makes up their own story about the Mona Lisa.

**Good design is often slightly funny.** This one may not always be true. But Durer's engravings and Saarinen's womb chair and the Pantheon and the original Porsche 911 all seem to me slightly funny. Godel's incompleteness theorem seems like a practical joke.

I think it's because humour is related to strength. To have a sense of humour is to be strong: to keep one's sense of humour is to shrug off misfortunes, and to lose one's sense of humour is to be wounded by them. And so the mark-- or at least the prerogative-- of strength is not to take oneself too seriously. The confident will often, like swallows, seem to be making fun of the whole process slightly, as Hitchcock does in his films or Bruegel in his paintings - or Shakespeare, for that matter.

Good design may not have to be funny, but it's hard to imagine something that could be called humourless also being good design.

**Good design is hard.** If you look at the people who've done great work, one thing they all seem to have in common is that they worked very hard. If you're not working hard, you're probably wasting your time.

Hard problems call for great efforts. In math, difficult proofs require ingenious solutions, and those tend to be interesting. Ditto in engineering.

When you have to climb a mountain you toss everything unnecessary out of your pack. And so an architect who has to build on a difficult site, or a small budget, will find that he is forced to produce an elegant design. Fashions and flourishes get knocked aside by the difficult business of solving the problem at all.

Not every kind of hard is good. There is good pain and bad pain. You want the kind of pain you get from going running, not the kind you get from stepping on a nail. A difficult problem could be good for a designer, but a fickle client or unreliable materials would not be.

In art, the highest place has traditionally been given to paintings of people. There is something to this tradition, and not just because pictures of faces get to press buttons in our brains that other pictures don't. We are so good at looking at faces that we force anyone who draws [or photographs!] them to work hard to satisfy us. If you draw a tree and you change the angle of a branch five degrees, no one will know. When you change the angle of someone's eye five degrees, people notice.

When Bauhaus designers adopted Sullivan's "form follows function," what they meant was, form *should* follow function. And if function is hard enough, form is forced to follow it, because there is no effort to spare for error. Wild animals are beautiful because they have hard lives.

**Good design looks easy.** Like great athletes, great designers make it look easy. Mostly this is an illusion. The easy, conversational tone of good writing comes only on the eighth rewrite.

In science and engineering, some of the greatest discoveries seem so simple that you say to yourself, I could have thought of that. The discoverer is entitled to reply, *why didn't you?*

Some Leonardo heads are just a few lines. You look at them and you think, all you have to do is get eight or ten lines in the right place and you've made this beautiful portrait. Well, yes, but you have to get them in *exactly* the right place. The slightest error will make the whole thing collapse.

In most fields the appearance of ease seems to come with practice. Perhaps what practice does is train your unconscious mind to handle tasks that used to require conscious thought. In some cases you literally train your body. An expert pianist can play notes faster than the brain can send signals to his hand. Likewise an artist, after a while, can make visual perception flow in through his eye and out through his hand as automatically as someone tapping his foot to a beat.

When people talk about being in "the zone," I think what they mean is that the spinal cord has the situation under control. Your spinal cord is less hesitant, and it frees conscious thought for the hard problems.

**Good design uses symmetry.** I think symmetry may just be one way to achieve simplicity, but it's important enough to be mentioned on its own. Nature uses it a lot, which is a good sign.

There are two kinds of symmetry, repetition and recursion. Recursion means repetition in subelements, like the pattern of veins in a leaf.

**Good design resembles nature.** It's not so much that resembling nature is intrinsically good as that nature has had a long time to work on the problem. It's a good sign when your answer resembles nature's.

It's not cheating to copy. Few would deny that a story should be like life. Working from life is a valuable tool in painting too, though its role has often been misunderstood.

The aim is not simply to make a record. The point of painting from life is that it gives your mind something to chew on: when your eyes are looking at something, your hand will do more interesting work.

**Good design is redesign.** It's rare to get things right the first time. Experts expect to throw away some early work. They plan for plans to change.

It takes confidence to throw work away. You have to be able to think, *there's more where that came from.* When people first start drawing [or photography], for example, they're often reluctant to redo parts that aren't right; they feel they've been lucky to get that far, and if they try to redo something, it will turn out worse. Instead they convince themselves that the drawing is not that bad, really-- in fact, maybe they meant it to look that way.

Mistakes are natural. Instead of treating them as disasters, make them easy to acknowledge and easy to fix. Leonardo more or less invented the sketch, as a way to make drawing bear a greater weight of exploration. Open-source software has fewer bugs because it admits the possibility of bugs.

**Good design can copy.** Attitudes to copying often make a round trip. A novice imitates without knowing it; next he tries consciously to be original; finally, he decides it's more important to be right than original.

I think the greatest masters go on to achieve a kind of selflessness. They just want to get the right answer, and if part of the right answer has already been discovered by someone else, that's no reason not to use it. They're confident enough to take from anyone without feeling that their own vision will be lost in the process.

**Good design is often strange.** Some of the very best work has an uncanny quality: Euler's Formula, Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*, the SR-71, Lisp. They're not just beautiful, but strangely beautiful.

I'm not sure why. It may just be my own stupidity. A can-opener must seem uncanny to a dog. Maybe if I were smart enough it would seem the most natural thing in the world that  $e^{i\pi} = -1$ . It is after all necessarily true.

Most of the qualities I've mentioned are things that can be cultivated, but I don't think it works to cultivate strangeness. The best you can do is not squash it if it starts to appear. Einstein didn't try to make relativity strange. He tried to make it true, and the truth turned out to be strange.

At an art school where I once studied, the students wanted most of all to develop a personal style. But if you just try to make good things, you'll inevitably do it in a distinctive way, just as each person walks in a distinctive way.

Michelangelo was not trying to paint like Michelangelo. He was just trying to paint well; he couldn't help painting like Michelangelo.

The only style worth having is the one you can't help. And this is especially true for strangeness. There is no shortcut to it. The Northwest Passage that the Mannerists, the Romantics, and two generations of American high school students have searched for does not seem to exist. The only way to get there is to go through good and come out the other side.

**Good design is often daring.** At every period of history, people have believed things that were just ridiculous, and believed them so strongly that you risked ostracism or even violence by saying otherwise. If our own time were any different, that would be remarkable. As far as I can tell it isn't.

This problem afflicts not just every era, but in some degree every field. Much Renaissance art was in its time considered shockingly secular: according to Vasari, Botticelli repented and gave up painting, and Fra Bartolommeo and Lorenzo di Credi actually burned some of their work. Einstein's theory of relativity offended many contemporary physicists, and was not fully accepted for decades-- in France, not until the 1950s.

Today's experimental error is tomorrow's new theory. If you want to discover great new things, then instead of turning a blind eye to the places where conventional wisdom and truth don't quite meet, you should pay particular attention to them.

As a practical matter, I think it's easier to see ugliness than to imagine beauty. Most of the people who've made beautiful things seem to have done it by fixing something that they thought ugly. Great work usually seems to happen because someone sees something and thinks, *I could do better than that*. Giotto saw traditional Byzantine madonnas painted according to a formula that had satisfied everyone for centuries, and to him they looked wooden and unnatural. Copernicus was so troubled by a hack that all his contemporaries could tolerate that he felt there must be a better solution.

Intolerance for ugliness is not in itself enough. You have to understand a field well before you develop a good nose for what needs fixing. You have to do your homework. But as you become expert in a field, you'll start to hear little voices saying, *What a hack! There must be a better way*. Don't ignore those voices. Cultivate them. The recipe for great work is: very exacting taste, plus the ability to gratify it. →

**You can see more articles written by Paul and this article in its' entirety at his website**

<http://www.paulgraham.com/articles.html>

## Notices

At the 2004 annual general meeting last year (the 118th!) Norma Petit was congratulated for her nomination to Honorary Life Membership for her services to the Society by fellow member, Peter Patten.

This month, at the Annual General Meeting we paid tribute also to a long standing member of the Committee - Peter Patten with the President awarding Honorary Life Membership for his very significant services as treasurer. As Peter notes; when he first joined the Society (further back than he will admit to) the accounts consisted of a simple list of bank balances and an apology.



Peter Patten congratulated by friend Norma Petit.  
This image used with reluctant permission from the photographer ;-)

Quickly they were whipped into shape, and stand now as an exemplary set of bookkeeping. The committee and general membership are indebted to you for the tireless dedication over the years. On that note Peter hands the reigns of Treasurer to Terrie Buick. Good on you Terrie!

**Magazine Swap Table** Are you a magazine nut? If you are, chances a high you'll have a collection of previously thumbed editions taking up space in a cupboard, spare room or bursting out of the garage windows. Starting next month we'll have a table set up for a magazine swap. Simply bring along some mags that you think may be of interest (to photographers!), and take away some editions you have not read before.

**Gradings** A reminder; although the regrading of members happens once annually at about this time, you can ask the committee to be bumped up to *Advanced* or *Salon* at any time during the year. Just let a committee member know (if you are not currently feeling challenged enough!).

**Labelling Prints** Proper labelling of prints, slides and digital files makes the Convenors jobs much easier! Please include:

Name

Grade (Nov, Adv, Sal)

Title (optional)

Set Subject (or) Open

### The Committee 2005

The new committee stands as elected at the March AGM.

Patron	Jack Sprosen	Ph (09) 486 2844	jackspros@xtra.co.nz
President	Alka Krisson	Ph (09) 817 9899	president@aps.net.nz
Vice President	John McCallum	Ph (09) 360-1691	editor@aps.net.nz
Secretary	Andy Pryce	Ph (09) 589-1243	
Treasurer	Terrie Buick	Ph (09) 480-8987	
Hostess	Katharina Nobbs	Ph (09) 817-6598	
Print Convenor	Janet McLeod	Ph (09) 522-7115	
Slide Convenor	Robert Jaques	Ph (09) 443 1907	
Digital Convenor	Jack Sprosen	Ph (09) 486 2844	jackspros@xtra.co.nz
Membership	Chris Morton	Ph (09) 376-0603	membership@aps.net.nz
Editor	John McCallum	Ph (09) 360-1691	editor@aps.net.nz
Webmaster	Darrin Smith		

Special note - if you have something that you feel may be of interest for Focal Plane readers, drop an email to editor@aps.net.nz or post to 'Ed', 3B Webber St, Coxs Bay, Auckland

'till next month - E d

*"Each artist going in his (or her) own direction ... at some time ... walks on water"*

- Minor White