PETER ROCHE

TRIBAL FICTIONS

AN INSTALLATION COMMISSIONED BY THE FISHER GALLERY

VIOLENT BODIES.
An Approach to Peter Roche's TRIBAL FICTIONS

There's a figure who appears again and again in the history of twentieth century fiction. The story goes like this: a man with a violent past is pushed too far, exposed to an overload of mechanical horror and degradation. He loses civilisation behind, becoming a tribal outlaw with a heart of darkness. Alienated from his human nature, he is transformed into an evil destroyer.

One of the first sightings of this man is in 1899, as Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; he escapes effortlessly into the jungles of Vietnam, as Fred Corporals's Colonel Kurtz immersed in a vision of apocalyptic horror; he is Ivors Bickle, a taxi-driver turned assassin, lost in the killing fields of New York; he is Max from Schwartz's *Days Faber*, a technological expert who controls the worst of social crimes after failing his peace in the South American rainforest; he is Dr No, Ming the Merciless, Tom Bombadil, or *Platoon*, the faceless corporation in the *Alien* movies. He inhabits a world of hostility, a place where, pushed by technological developments, the fragile links of civilisation unravel into the unspeakable primitive.

Over the last hundred years, Peter Roche has assimilated the heart of darkness that lies dormant in Western society's civilised body. Psychologically disturbing and physically menacing, his work reveals the savage mindless powerdrive that is embedded in our understandings of order and civilisation. Roche's work is informed by a violent compulsion, locates in a critical axis between technology and primitivism. This is outlaw territory, a national place inhabited by all manner of cowboys and renegades, from Robocop to Pat Garrett, from Captain Kirk to Billy the Kid. Mad Max, Mickey and Mallory or the replicated humanoids Pris, Sonn's *Blade runner*, It's a place where survival of the fittest is the only law, where natural order and artificial systems collide in a desire for mutual annihilation. In the ensuing dead zone, alienation and paranoia are the only keys to psychic survival. These are the emotional mechanisms that activate Roche's work, and have been present throughout his practice from the gritty blood-and-guts nihilism of his early performances to the recent slick emblems of corporate power amassed for *Tribal Fictions*.

Roche's performance works have been compared to "witnessing a murder". He executed a series of semi-public self-mutilations, including carving his skin with razor blades and sewing raw kidneys on to his naked body. These acts of aggression, which took place in the late 1970's, saw Roche exaggerating the self-conscious gestures of punk nihilism into a savage ritual of self-abuse. Other performance works by Roche explore psychologically risky states of isolation and dependence.[1] In each, Roche casts his audience as players in a dangerous game, sadistic voyeurs in a spectacle of bodily degradation. His viewers were confronted with three choices – the walk away, to intervene, or to witness – to react in some way to the extreme situation in which they found themselves.

A similar sense of paranoid engagement was demanded of the viewer by Roche's subsequent series of kinetic sculptures, *Trophies and Emblems*. Constructed with an industrial hi-tech aesthetic, these works were machines with a bad attitude, intelligent devices which responded to the proximity of the viewer with volleys of taped machine-gun fire, dogs barking and alarm bells ringing. One work featured a circular saw which started up when a person came near. Bristling with weaponry, decorated with cannibalised military emblems, the exhibition looked like the weapons graveyard of a barwise military regime, a collection of final prototypes for a family of machines designed to elicit compliance. The gallery was transformed into the power warehouse for a 2.12 inch noir movie – *Tetsuo the Iron Man* pulsing with apocalyptic visions of a mechanised future.

With *Trophies and Emblems*, Roche tapped into the deep vein of ambivalence towards technology which has been a constant theme in twentieth century fiction. The works appeared to be in wait for the viewer, autonomous animals of a totalitarian regime, poised to pulse transgressive desires. Beautiful and dangerous, seductive and repellent, these works stared the spectre of technological society out of control; a world where machines rule and people are enslaved by their own inventions.

This updated version of the Frankenstein myth is a fitting first device in contemporary science fiction. The 'monster' can be cast as villain or hero; in Roche, his fundamental human nature will eventually triumph over the automated forces of darkness, as the space cowboys shoot it out in the ultimate showdown. Yet his human nature is also the source of his greatest weakness, a point exploited by his enemies: humanity implies a frailty in the face of compassionless mechanisation. In the *Trophies and Emblems* works, the bloodletting of Roche's earlier performances is transmuted into the implication of latent damage for the viewer.

Roche's manipulation of physical discomfort is underpinned by a sense of moral unease. Science's moral dilemma, "we can, but should we?" surfaces here. The tech noir fictions which provide the closest point of analogy to Roche's work share amongst themselves a common position on development and corruption. Roche leaves it up to the viewer to take a moral standpoint. His works are dispassionate analogies, subject to the imagination rather than the powers of advice.

There has been a clear evolution in Roche's practice, from the visceral to the mechanised to the electronic. He has discarded the Grunge aesthetic of the inventor's workshop in favour of the slick styling of mass production. It's as if the anarchist street punk grew up and became a corporate ad-man. His recent works are animated by light rather than blood or motors. Roche's new works are cool and serene. Their engagement with the viewer is tacit rather than aggressively confrontational. The leaden vein of anger has here been refined to a delicate tracery of nerve endings. In the *Kinetic Sculptures* series of 1993, Roche used light to draw networks based on architectural floorplans, national flags, and space-age countdown systems. The works exude a smug power, their perfect simplicity redolent of wealth, like the logos of international corporates, or the emblems of expensive engineering, they describe systems of dominance and authority, electronic maps asserting the rationality of a closed system, exerting control and mastery over the chaos of the natural world.

However, in *Tribal Fictions*, a disquieting note of disorder has crept in. These works picture illuminated robots in various stages of disarray; the technology is rioting, the machines turning on themselves in a fight to the death. It's electronic carnage in body parts fly around in all directions. Technology has been pushed too far: the heart of darkness has stared beating again, compelling its mutant body to engage in primitive excess, splitting the thin skin of civilisation.

Like the earlier mechanised works, these images draw analogies between technology and biology, figuring the body as a complex system of disquieting impulses. Both share reductivist principles: they exist as bodies only in a limited field of information – whirling arms, a trunk with limbs, a tornado of facial features. The body-styling of *Tribal Fictions*' murderous androids, however, exhibits an odd air of nostalgia. These are joke robots, unwieldy beasts with square heads and bodies made of stacked componentry – early prototypes, like the friendly robot of TV's *Lost in Space*, or the first clumsy videospace pirates of the Space Invaders machines. These are obsolete models, a forgotten tribe of primitive renegades far from the stand-in humans of *Bladerunner*, *Cherry 2000* or *Terminator*.

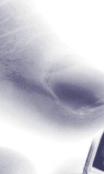
Nostalgia is an important principle in technological design. It takes us back to a time when machines were the servants rather than the masters, when mechanisation seemed to signal a life of ease and liberty. The future looked bright back in the 1950s, and people anticipated it by diving cars equipped with space-age rocketship fins and decorating their homes with atomic symbols. Machine dreams soured in the light of the Cold War: military technology became the enemy of the people rather than their salvation, a symbol of their worst fears. Instead of shoring up civilisation, technology appeared to herald its destruction. Whereas it has seemed that machines possessed the power to realise ancient human desires for god-like dominion, it became increasingly clear that it was the machines themselves, operating outside the human limitations of mortality and mortality, who were the gods. Retro-styling, returning to the optimistic industrial design object of the 1950s, thus removes techno-fear from the customer.

Equipping the design object with a humourous humbling 'personality' un-machines it, placing it in a nostalgic context where technology is fun and exciting rather than dangerous and menacing. By contrast, Roche's kitsch retro-humanoids dispel the myth of a once-friendly technology it is as if the friendly robot from *Lost in Space* suddenly opened fire on the Robinson family.

There are many narratives circulating in *Tribal Fictions*. The works appear like film stills, or cells from a cartoon, fragmentary moments of action caught and imaged. We are compelled to make sense of the linear narrative, searching for sequential relations between the panels. The kinesis of these works is in the restless gaze of the viewer, scanning back and forth through the black battalion lined up in the gallery. They appear at once frighteningly alien and disturbingly familiar, the products of an encroaching technology in which the human body has become redundant. They reference a future which is happening now, a mechanised world of electronic communication proliferating beyond human control. The dark power of the works recalls the futurist-military iconography of contemporary space fictions: we bring these pieces of cultural detritus to our reading of Roche's works, seeing them as illustrations of a disturbing modern fable: the primitive heart of darkness which beats in the artificial body of technology, as the inventor is destroyed by the creation.

Lara Strongman 1995

[1] Bridget Sutherland, 'Known and Unknown Territories', in *Peter Roche: Trophies and Emblems*. Exhibition Catalogue, Peter Roche, 1990, p33.
Giovanni Intra, 'Where are All the Bloody Red men?', in *Stamp*, p6.
[2] In collaboration with Linda Bee.



This catalogue was produced on the occasion of the exhibition TRIBAL FICTIONS at the FISHER GALLERY Friday 28 July – Sunday 20 August 1995

In this exhibition, Peter Roche has shifted from singular works to an occupied environment. It is his largest project since TROPHIES AND EMBLEMS in 1990. This exhibition continues to allude to the position of the human or the biological within the powerful discourse or arena of developing technology.

Developing out of recent works that used icons reminiscent of fascist ideology on lacquered surfaces, TRIBAL FICTIONS extends beyond individual works into an installation of illuminated, obsolete circuitry, mounted on circular disks two metres in diameter.

These electronic, figurative forms on disk are built out of circuitry patterns like personal signposts. Mechanised totemic symbols, they vary in position from work to work, pushing to the limits of the disk or reduced to a minimal existence. It is a strategic exhibition, the figure is enclosed but more importantly, it is also inscribed or overwritten in the circuitry of the electronic machine.

TRIBAL FICTIONS continues the Fisher Gallery's interest in issues for contemporary artists, providing in sights into current art practices. I would like to thank the artist for his commitment to this project and Lara Strongman the writer as well as our corporate sponsors: Cavalier Bremworth, ECC Lighting, Air New Zealand, Levene & Co Ltd and our partner Manukau City Council.

TIM REMNER, CURATOR JULY 1995

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