

# Journey to suburbia's dark side

**ARTS:** John Gregory has peeled back the layers of popular culture to reveal a nastier element. Andrew Clifford reports

## » Exhibition

- **What:** John Gregory by Marcus Williams
- **Where and when:** To Tūhi Te Maru, 13 Reeves Rd, Pakuranga, to Nov 2
- **On the web:** www.tetuhitearoma.org.nz

**I**N HIS suburban bedroom John Gregory becomes a nocturnal 30-minute hero, picturing himself silhouetted in leather against the gothic, dry-ice nightscapes of a music video. But the closer he will get to this fading teen fantasy of rock stardom is reminiscent about the time he snuck into a Mt Smart concert with his mates.

Now in his early 40s, Gregory lives with his mother and works as a car dealer in Pakuranga. His one moment of glamour is the hazy memory of trading a Ford Fairmont for 75 bundles of sticks with the infamous drug dealer Tony Benetti (aka Martin Johnstone) in 1974.

Artist Marcus Williams, fascinated by the way our minds create and negotiate reality, has constructed an exhibition around Gregory's suburban world.

"He's kind of jaded and he's a character who lives very much in his fantasies," says Williams.

"So much so that who he really is and the world around him has sort of passed him by. He lives in the past and he's not very engaged at all."

Williams intentionally blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and first, second and third person narrative with his gallery installation of bedroom furniture, video sequences, photographs and text.

"The videos play around with the relationship between mental space, imagination, fantasy, and physical presence."

"That slippery relationship is something that I'm really interested in and it's something that Charlie Kaufman plays with in his movies, particularly *Adaptation*," he says, also citing William Burroughs' book *The Naked Lunch* as an earlier example.

"It's an extremely interesting literary phenomenon that has served the purpose of discussing the difficult nature of the construction of identity, and that's really what the show's about."

Included in the exhibition are enormous photos of cigarettes, which add a glamourised, seedy allure. "Smoking is associated with sex, death, rock'n'roll, evil, coolness, liberal intellectualism, sophistication, pleasure, power and all other forms of subversion," he says.

"It's about playing with clear-cut photographs rather than the classical rectangle — actually cutting out the photographs and placing them in the space in different ways."



"I'm interested in physically playing with the images as a sculptural object as a way of blurring that relationship between what it represents and what it actually is, which is a print."

Highlighting the contrast between the banal realities of domestic life and the violent world romanticised by the media, Williams has created a soundscape with appropriated elements from movies such as *Apocalypse Now*, James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* and the INXS song *Devil Inside*.

"There's quite a few layers of popular culture — movies and music — that sort of allude to this constant

theme of the underbelly; the subversive counterculture of crime and drugs and, perhaps, a slightly nastier element," he says.

"It's been really dawning on me how, in a way, music videos, cinema and just popular culture in general have really appropriated evil. Evil has become personified by Hollywood in traceable and codable ways."

"I remember in the 70s, when Mr Asia was a huge phenomenon in New Zealand — New Zealand was a lot different to New Zealand now — and he was an international figure and had international aspirations. It was very romantic, especially for a teenager."

Williams' career is also becoming increasingly international. Last year he had a residency in Estonia. On Sunday he left for a month in Russia.

While there, he will be working with a curator he met during last year's trip and meeting artists in St. Petersburg, Siberia and Moscow for an exhibition that will explore a particularly Russian custom of characterisation.

"It's loosely looking at the Russian tradition of the absurd and the god's fool, which is sort of like the Shakespearean jester but it's a more extreme character. Particularly under the tsars, but also in the Soviet context, where there was a totalitarian

regime, a jester or a fool played a pretty important role — where no one else could say things, the fool could."

Williams says an ongoing interest in his work is the ambiguity between abstract and actual space and the role language has in relating and defining our sense of reality.

"If you imagine a newborn baby, it's getting the same data, roughly, [as an adult] but it's just nonsense. As it develops, it develops language, and as it develops language, the data starts to make sense. So, you could argue that therefore the world is essentially language. The only way we can comprehend or interface with

the world is with language. Without language, it's nonsense. "If we were to imagine language as being much broader than the spoken word, also taking on board, for example, the language of photography or the language of cinema and the language of popular music or fashion, then it would follow logically that we were constructed by these things as much as we constructed these things.

"If that's the case, it begs the question, where does the real person begin and finish? At what point are we constructing the music video and at what point is the music video constructing us?"

**HAZY RECOLLECTIONS:** Marcus Williams' music video *Silhouetted* explores how our minds create and negotiate reality.