

## A Reading of four paintings by Marc Blake:

*Fucking Paradise* (2010), *Everything I've ever known* (2009), *Fleeting* (2009) and *ECHELON* (2010).

'My work is an ongoing response ... to my own life and to the lives of others. It is a response to the choice of what to include and what to omit. It is a response to an awareness of the moment and to an ongoing, inevitable change. It is a response to what has been and what may yet come. It is a response to the existing and to the imagined, to the experienced and the uploaded, to the digital and the hand. It is a response to chance and the unintended and to a reasoned, deliberate contemplation. It is a response to time and to light and to process. It is a response to nature and decay. It is a response to emptiness and to space and the things that bind us. It is a response to wood, pencil, ink, paint and varnish'.

(Marc Blake)

**Viewers who look closely at Marc Blake's work see through his elegant images to the raw boards on which he works and realize that his paintings draw their contours of land and waterscapes from organic growth patterns in the wood.<sup>1</sup>**

In the drift to sleep, knots and shadows on familiar walls may similarly assume new meanings: troubling or distracting. Strange, because formed from visual texts whose customary aesthetic has leached away. Or images may attach to inscrutable surfaces, 'making them over' in an intimation of how the brain, its operating system on show, arbitrarily shapes reality.

Blake extends this disconcerting awareness by placing into the shifting ground of his paintings an exactly rendered iconography: images traced from printed subjects *imprinted* on his boards' coloured surfaces. So, from the neuro-metaphysical sands, emerge animal figures and vegetal motifs whose vivid authority is only partly explained by the fact that they begin life as photographic texts.

Specific locations for the work may also be evoked intuitively. In *Fucking Paradise* (2010), where the 'f-word' is both verb and adjective, waves come ashore in perky ponga curves; with a taniko precision emblematic of the Pacific. They march along a strand where a yellow-crested penguin gazes 'out-of-shot', seemingly as aloof from the ghostly gas-masked figure before it, as from the fleshy man at its back.

Typically, Blake's accurate depiction of the bird makes poignant its ignorance of human designs on

its ecological niche. Behind this perfectly suited penguin stands a representative of the only species culpable in its own endangerment. This man, on the edge of realization about the poisoned atmosphere he inhabits, nearly, but not quite, achieves eye contact with the human ghost in the gas mask. But his smartly penguin-toned trunks and his big gut imply that he still feels free to take or leave this 'paradise' of last resort.

Above, unbeknownst to him, in outlines dropped into the substrate of the picture, there hangs two, upside-down, self-absorbed 'bungie-adventure' tourists. In the right background, signaling 'surrender to the moment' in quite another register, there is a pale horse. Dead. Its swollen shape alludes grotesquely to 'Shore-Man's' rude physique.

Below the horizon, where nature is overtly fetishised in a classically pruned tree, there comes a last awkward contrast: the half suppressed explosion of jagged palms. Trouble in paradise.

A more scattershot sense of 'leisure' tension, is evoked in *Everything I've Ever Known* (2009), where the serene ambience of a golfing resort is made menacing. Its turf is patrolled by white topped, gun-toting 'femmes'. Violence is so sexy. A divided rainbow is

realigned producing a disjointed horizon. An ape stands aghast, arms wide, over the body of a supine, bleeding human. Elsewhere, infection-masked figures dot arid stretches of landscape between the 'greens'. Overall, this scenario evokes the idea of 'business as usual'. Though what effect this 'business' is having on the people who encounter it, is harder to say.

Perhaps reading a report in the *New Zealand Herald*<sup>2</sup> we get a little closer to understanding. A newspaper in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, after yet another staff shooting, addressed an editorial to the drug cartels running the city: 'You are the de facto authorities....to keep our colleagues from dying... we ask you to explain what you want from us...what we should try to publish or not publish; what you expect.'

Like life in many regions unwelcoming to tourists, Blake's pieces have no frames. Their 'borderless' state makes them easy to read as incomplete

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fragments cut from larger scenes. Work somewhat aligned to the sublime civic authoritativeness of historical scroll paintings. His — rendered as *global* ‘village life’.

In keeping with the information-sharing tone of Blake’s aesthetic, however disturbing, the work is executed in a style of finely etched, pastel shaded decorativeness — really ‘nice’ wallpaper designed to give the bedroom’s occupants the night terrors.

*Fleeting* (2009) works this ‘Bambi-fied’, ‘pet-the-nice-horsy’ shtick, to death: A mother-and-baby deer drink, disconcertingly, from the ‘board’ river that winds across the upper reaches of their picture space. In the foreground, ‘National Velvet’ imagery draws the eye to where the patting woman’s arm is absorbed like some monstrous pedicle stalk, into the horse’s head. Obscured by this interspecies conjoining are tracings of inexplicably tangled bodies.

To the right there is visual relief in an obliviously blossoming tree.

In the same way that Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’<sup>3</sup> notes how ‘unwilling horses’ are spurred forward in the attack on a fleeing slave; whatever’s being done to the horse/woman in Blake’s *Fleeting* (2009), this flowering tree, artist’s tool, innocent bystander, must be forgiven its nature.

Issues of innocence and guilt are also in play here.

*Echelon* (2010) foregrounds the busy visual harness of a boy riding a donkey. In front of him, like a guide, or totem, a white wolf turns its head to watch the crane sailing on gold tipped wings across

an improbable lemon board sky. Two fetish-pruned trees give the composition a balanced formality. Between them, on a green sward, float the low white barracks and hermetically sealed domes of a ‘listening’ station.

Since the 2009 *Ploughshares* political action at Waihopai<sup>4</sup> (which deflated the cover of one of the spy dishes) we have become party to what lies beneath these sublime exteriors. So now, paradoxically, it is the boy on the donkey richly exposed in his framework of pink, blue, caramel and brown animal quadrants, that seems down in the dirty foreground of Blakes’ painting, the exemplar of aesthetic integrity.

It is the business of the domes to trawl ceaselessly through the currents of cyberspace, eavesdropping on us, one and all. It is *their* inscrutable surfaces which here seem ‘made over’; *their* once ‘pristine’ singularities which appear swollen with every unauthorized meaning they import.

<sup>1</sup> Marc Blake’s paintings from 2008-2012 are now available to view online or download as a free version optimised for iPad at: [http://www.marcblake.co.nz/Marc\\_Blake/book.html](http://www.marcblake.co.nz/Marc_Blake/book.html) These materials are also available in a hardcover large format print version at: <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/3385135>

<sup>2</sup> See: ‘Newspaper’s Plea to Drug Cartels’ reported in *NZ Herald*, World, A18, 22.9.10.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Song of Myself’ in *The Works of Walt Whitman*, The Wordsworth Poetry Series, Ed. David Rogers, Wordsworth Editions Ltd. Cumberland House, Crib St. Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9ET, section 33, p 63.

<sup>4</sup> <http://ploughshares.org.nz/>

# Marc Blake

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*ECHELON* (2010). Acrylic, graphite, colour pencil and pigment ink with UVLS varnish on board, 46 x 75cms. (Finalist, 19th Annual Wallace Art Awards.)



*Fucking Paradise* (2010). Acrylic, graphite, colour pencil and pigment ink with UVLS varnish on board, 60 x 60cms.



*Fleeting* (2009). Acrylic, colour pencil, pigment ink and posca with UVLS varnish on board, 50 x 53cms.



*Everything I've Ever Known* (2009). Acrylic, graphite, colour pencil and pigment ink with UVLS varnish on board, 120 x 240cms.