

Elvis, Guns 'n' Roses, Prince and Steve Carr

The slightly naughty spirit of pop music can be found in the good-bad, not-evil sexiness of STEVE CARR's art.

Carr has been photographed wrestling with a young female model – both of them wearing spotlessly clean white underwear. He has been publicly massaged by three strong men in an Auckland art gallery. And he has parked up in scuba gear at the bottom of a swimming pool watching bikini-clad women breaststroke.

A board member of Auckland's Artspace, Carr's recent shows at the Michael Lett Gallery and Downtown Skywalk were well received. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, some people see his work as pervy.

Carr says he is a nice boy that you could take home to mother, and that there is more to his work than the sexiness you see on the surface.

"The works are simple moments. Everything is read into them. It is less about me and more about the person looking at the picture," Carr says.

"The enjoyment for the artist is understanding that perverse nature that is coming across. [Perviness] That's what the audience read into the works," he says.

His works have a voyeuristic attraction similar to that of the television show Fear Factor, in which underdressed male and female gym bunnies are put in terrifying situations. While the rationale for the show is overcoming fear, the actuality is a girl in a low cut top straddling a large pole high in the air. But behind that, Carr sees the spirit of pop music.

"Dive was actually about Elvis. He used to sit at the bottom of his Memphis pool and watch girls swim about. If that's what you want, get in your scuba gear and do it."

There is nothing explicit in his work. The presentation's clean cut and the erotica is not emphasised. For Carr, Prince is a role model in the making of "pervy" art that is acceptable to the mainstream.

And, like Prince, he is not afraid to use other artists in the realisation of his vision. He has a loose group of friends – photographers, filmmakers, sculptors – who work on his projects.

If Carr is Prince, his crew is The Revolution.



Dive, Steve Carr



From group exhibition, 911 (2001), Steve Carr.

“Prince knows the band members are shit hot. He can turn his back on them and they will do the job. I’m a little bit like the director of a movie.”

Along with pictures and video, Carr creates art objects. One remarkable piece is a scientifically blown glass fire extinguisher which was blown in one piece. Carr is the source of the idea, but he got another artist to make it.

“It’s either that or spend the next 30 years learning how to blow glass.”

For Wrestling, Paris, in which Carr is photographed wrestling with an attractive model called Paris, he brought in another photographer. The most notable thing is how clean their white underwear is.

“It takes on advertising, Calvin Klein-style imagery. Then it becomes a dance. And it is also like a typical book on wrestling. What I like about those books is that there is no sweat on the models.”

The wrestling photos are a performance. Carr comes from a performance background and videos and photography are for him “little performances for the camera”.

(It was while performing Elvis impersonations that he found out about The King’s scuba and swimming pool antics.)

Growing up in Dunedin, Carr wanted to be a rock star. His parents owned a petrol station and the young man was a bit of a bogan – but a particularly South Island kind of bogan, he says.

“That romantic bogan who listened to Guns ‘n’ Roses but also read Richard Bach’s Jonathan Livingston Seagull and played chess. That is very much South Island bogan. They really influenced me because they were dating my sisters.”

It stimulated a series pictures based on heavy rock album covers. Carr called it his Boganne series. It looks like the art of that 18-year-old “boganne” whose friends all thought he was a choice painter, Carr says.

“I threw out all the techniques I had learnt. It’s not a Tony de Latour or Seraphine Pick.”

His Boganne side came back to the fore while he was at Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts. For the 911 group show, he got his old heavy metal band back together.

“I wanted to dominate the space, physically. One of the ways I



From the Boganne series, Steve Carr.

thought of was through sound.”

The “art” was totally authentic, he says.

“A guy who, I think, delivered the beers came up and said that we were amazing. ‘My girlfriend’s having her 21st can you play...’ I love those little moments.”

For Carr, such misunderstandings are part of the fun. He is not a practical joker, but he likes to play with audience expectation.

“It’s played pretty straight. Everything I do is believable. It’s uneasy humour.”

His films and pictures are a way to capture the energy and ambiguity of live performance, he says.

“As a performance artist, I was always surprised at how different a documentary [video] was to the actual performance. People who saw the performance wouldn’t remember it as it had been captured. I thought it would be nice to do something that was not for the audience, but for the camera.”

This method has its own problems. During a Cowboys and Indians shoot, Carr found himself at the mercy of children.

“They took control and suddenly said ‘let’s drag him to the clothesline’. I grabbed their hands and took them to the clothesline – a reversal of power. They started spraying me with cold water and bang, it’s really uncomfortable and they’ve got all the power. You get sprayed in the face and you get a shock. There’s a moment when the artist is going ‘oh’.”

Carr is currently working on objects again – 1,000 glass cherries and castings of marshmallows on sticks.

“There are objects that are lacking in metaphor – it’s not barbed wire. An ice cream with a sausage? You wonder what it’s about. By themselves there is not much happening. You put them together, they start to have a dialogue.”

To enjoy such art, you have to share Carr’s taste for the slightly absurd, and the slightly mysterious. If you don’t, it doesn’t bother him.

“I think it’s funny when people don’t get it. It’s an exclusive club. What’s he on about?”