



DON DRIVER: MAGICIAN

A documentary on the controversial art and career of New Zealand's greatest assemblage sculptor and pop artist.

Directed by Paul Judge

Produced by Paul Judge and Bridget Sutherland

Narrated by Elizabeth Smither

A Three-To-One Films production in association with Faraway Films

**Produced with the assistance of Creative New Zealand and
Waikato Institute of Technology**

Duration: 67min.

Don Driver (1930-2011) is New Zealand's foremost assemblage sculptor and collage artist. He lived and worked in the town of New Plymouth in Taranaki, an area that is rural in character but with strong trade links to the rest of the world through a busy seaport. Driver's prolific output reflects the complex character of the region. He drew on the visual richness of his rural 'gothic' environment but with the sophistication and awareness of the modernist movements in international art. His work is represented in the major galleries and collections throughout New Zealand and is sought after by international collectors.

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A record of the artist working in his studio is the starting point for a discussion of the far-reaching implications of his art, how he represents a line through the central themes of modernism and into the cultural elaborations of pop and abstraction.

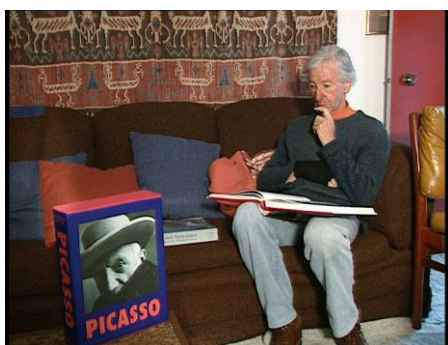
Driver's work has always been controversial for its sheer shock value and its play with sensitive and disturbing issues. Yet his ability to create vibrant, joyful formal beauty from found and discarded materials is always a constant.

The principle narrative of the film is to follow the artist's creative development and progress through his varied styles and use of materials throughout his prolific career. Working with cultural signs and the multiple layers of meanings in visual languages, he places recognisable shapes and objects within the formal planes and arrangements of abstraction. Driver is often creating meanings and associations that the viewer will interpret as they wish. His drawing on the psychic dislocation of surrealism and building on his experiments in formal abstraction creates profound juxtapositions and readings.

The narrator of the documentary is Elizabeth Smither, notable New Plymouth novelist and poet and life-long friend of Don Driver.

Driver's installation work of 2010, *Elephants For Sale*, was the last work he was involved with. It was a re-installation of a work done in 1986. Consisting of clay elephants mounted on a rack and set amidst an array of cloud shapes and hanging industrial drums, it evokes a theme common in his work; an identification with animal consciousness and the idea of personal responsibility to the wondrous and mystical creation around us.

The documentary provides a rich analysis of Driver's work in relation to the artistic traditions and movements that have influenced him. It relates his work to important developments in American art through the 1960s and 70s, as well as to earlier modernist movements such as Dada and Cubism. Commentators note the profound knowledge Driver had of 20th century art, from Picasso to Pollock, Oldenburg and many others. The profound knowledge and understanding he had of contemporary art is evidenced in the sophistication of his practice.





Background to the project

My film project on Driver came about as a result of the 'With Spirit' retrospective show at the Govett-Brewster in 1999. This show included many of his more famous pieces; *Produce* (1982), *Yellow Tentacle Pram* (1980), *50Kg* (1977). Creative New Zealand provided a small fund for me to document the show as it toured the country. I gathered a small crew to work with the artist who gave us incredible access, directing us to works around New Plymouth, taking us through his studio, even letting us film him at work. This footage forms the basis of a documentary focused on Driver's career and creative output, which touches on almost every important 20th century art movement.

It was as a wide-eyed teenager that I discovered Driver's art. It spoke to me about what art should be able to do, what it should be about. Everything the world is and should be is suddenly turned on its head, confronted by this wonderful, weird and colourful otherness. His art presented a vibrant, arresting alternative to the rational world and was a revelation to me.

I had a tiny book on his work, with an essay by Michael Dunn, containing just a few colour plates of powerful early assemblages like *Battery Case Sculpture* (1966) and, on the cover, a huge colour field painting. I could tell the scale because Don was standing in front of it, comically nonchalant, an expression that would become familiar as I filmed him many years later. It is a demeanour he carries brilliantly, not unlike Buster Keaton walking away from some mayhem he has unknowingly, or knowingly, caused.

I first met Don at the Old Ferry Building Cafe in Auckland which art students in the 80's used to frequent for the excellent fish chowder. He was there with Tom Kreisler, who had been my art teacher during my brief stint at New Plymouth Boys High School. That is where I became acutely aware of the pop sensibility, practiced in different ways by both Tom and Don.

Don Driver's career and development

Driver's collages of Hollywood movie posters, the method in which he was working when we were filming, engage with the Dada tradition of radical social

commentary, similar to photomontage artists like John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch.

Don is also a true inheritor of Cubism. His work delights in the collision of shapes and colours, dislocations and juxtapositions that are visually and emotionally arresting. These collage works, sourced from posters, are ambiguous and enigmatic, often stunning in the sheer beauty of their arrangement, as are his larger, more three-dimensional works, his wall-hangings and free-standing sculptures.

The phases of Driver's career are documented. From the wood carvings of his early 20s, mostly African influenced, to the first experiments with aluminium, fibre-glass and concrete, he shows a rapid development, largely self-taught and based on reproductions of British and European artists. The role of the reproduction is critical, especially the introduction of colour printing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Don was always a "voracious consumer of books", as Jim Barr says of him in the film. But also important was a 1965 trip to the United States, where the vastness of the landscapes impressed him as much as the overwhelming scale of works by Pollock, Newman, De Kooning and Rothko. Influenced by Picasso's early assemblage pieces, Duchamp and the Dadaists' 'readymades' and the new wave of American Pop, Op and Colour Field painters, Don was single-handedly taking New Zealand art into a new phase with works like the crucial *Battery Case Sculpture*, while the New Zealand public was still coming to terms with Henry Moore.

Driver's art has never been far from controversy. In 1967 he exhibited a work in the New Plymouth Public Library. It utilised a female shop dummy with a watering can head and a phonograph mounted at waist level, a very surrealist piece that could have come from the famous show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1936. It caused a furore and John Maynard, Director of the newly established Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, was forced to remove it. Shock factor is often part of the works' rationale and derives from the stunning juxtaposition of sometimes prosaic elements, as in *Yellow Tentacle Pram*.

Don delights in puns, verbal and visual, and a work like *Plastic Planes* (1994) exemplifies his urbane humour. He has always been concerned with planes and forms in space. The colour field experiments from the late 1960's and through the 1970's are painted or made from found industrial surfaces and are of course planes, flat surfaces of vibrant, often primary colour. These flat colour works fit well with developments he saw in the US and contribute to the radical reassessment of modernism at that time. In the aeroplane works of the 90s there are connotations of the machine, of transport and accidents, of boundaries, territories and borders, and also of transcendence, of the spirit in flight.

His work taps into the unconscious in similar ways to the Surrealists. His output reflects a complexity through its evocation of the visual richness of the rural 'gothic' in the context of the international. There are frequent allusions to the use of the land, issues of isolation and contact, economics, industry and pollution, and the links between industrial waste and cultic artefact - for example his use of pitchforks, feed sacks, or heavy plastic drums complete with 'toxic/danger' signs.

His installation works of the 1980's were ahead of their time, utilising gallery spaces in defiance of boundaries and fixed perspectives; *Burnt Out* (1985) with its imagery of environmental devastation, its tarpaulins suggesting feeble human attempts at protection or recovery, or *Bicycles* (1986), not only an hilarious art in-joke playing on Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), but also implying a sense of loss.

Driver has had considerable impact on younger artists: Judy Darragh's magnificent icons of found plastic kitsch, Julian Dashper's elegant, regal drum-kit, *The Don Drivers* (1992), or New Plymouth's own Christine Hellyar, with her unique aesthetic of valuing objects and story-telling. These artists feature in the documentary as inheritors of Driver's legacy of manipulating objects, working with cultural signs and visual language, exploring narratives of humour, menace and social relevance, and creating works of joyful invention and delight.

Biographical info on the Director Paul Judge

Paul is a practicing filmmaker and a film tutor. His experimental video production at Elam School of Fine Arts led first to the documentary *Trapp on Tape* ('best film', Fringe Festival, 1988) and then to the ambitious short film *The Last Surrealist* (nominated for 'best short film' in the Film & Television Awards, 1993). *The Last Surrealist* was aided in its completion by the late Jim Booth.

In 1996 Paul had the unique opportunity to make a film adaptation of the James K Baxter poem, *Lament for Barney Flanagan*. The film was selected for the Melbourne Film Festival and has been published by Reed and used extensively as a resource for education.

Paul teaches screenwriting and film production in the School of Media Arts at the Waikato Institute of Technology. He is developing further documentary projects and has a number of feature film scripts in progress.

Selection of films from Paul Judge & Bridget Sutherland

Far Off Town – Dunedin to Nashville. Feature length documentary on NZ musician David Kilgour. Director/co-producer/camera. Nashville Film Festival 2006. **Nominated for 'Best Feature Documentary'**, NZ Documentary Film Festival 2007, Raindance Film Festival London 2006, Noise Pop San Francisco 2007, Santa Cruz Film Festival 2007, AFIA Film Festival, Denmark; Finland; Don't Knock the Rock Film & Music Festival, Los Angeles. CNZ Directed by Bridget Sutherland. Produced by Bridget Sutherland & Paul Judge

Living In Space – Music video for David Kilgour. Directed by Bridget Sutherland, Produced by Bridget Sutherland & Paul Judge. **Gold Remi Award, Houston Film Festival, 2005.**

Lament For Barney Flanagan - a 16mm film adaptation of the poem by James K Baxter, funded by Creative NZ and the NZ Film Commission. Selected for the Melbourne Film Festival, 1998. **Finalist for 'Best Art Direction', NZ Film Awards, 1999.** Starring Tim Balme and John Yelash. Produced by Tony Simpson. Photographed by Rewa Harre. Edited by Chris Todd. Directed by Paul Judge.

2000 Beauties - an experimental documentary on Auckland Sculptor and performance artist Peter Roche. Directed by Bridget Sutherland. Art direction and editing by Paul Judge.

The Last Surrealist - a 16mm film drama funded by QEII Arts Council of NZ. Starring William Trapp, Adele Chapman. Photographed by Rewa Harre. Producer, Director, Writer – Paul Judge
Finalist for 'Best Short Film', NZ Film and TV Awards, 1993.

Credits for Don Driver: Magician

Directed by
Paul Judge

Produced by
Paul Judge & Bridget Sutherland

In order of appearance

Don Driver
John Maynard
Bryan James
Tom Kreisler
Michael Smither
Rae Priest
Greg Burke
Wystan Curnow
Brian Muir
Allan Smith
Jim Barr
Christine Hellyar
Justine Driver
Louis le Vaillant
Judy Darragh
Julian Dashper

Narrated by
Elizabeth Smither

Camera
Lucy Bowie
Paul Judge

2nd unit, Australia
Director – Anna Bilalis
Camera – Jon Blum

Editors
Paul Judge
Bridget Sutherland

Post-production supervisor
Stuart Page, Brilliant Films

Sound post-production
Chris Burt, Inside Track

Music by
Matthew Bannister
David Kilgour
Swampshack (Chris Foreman & Gareth Ratcliffe)
Martin Lodge
Lester Silver

Historical consultants
Joyce Driver
Jan Driver
John Hurrell
Aaron Kreisler
Marie Shannon
Gallery collections assistance
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tāmaki
Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga O Waikato
Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare O Rehua
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu
Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts
Artis Gallery
Adelaide Festival Centre
Brooklyn Museum, New York

Private collections assistance
Joyce Driver
Jan Driver
Terry Boon
Virginia Adams
Paul & Suzette Goldsmith
Jim Barr
Warwick Brown
Fiona Campbell – Real Art Roadshow
Bruce Hammonds
David Aitken

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Creative New Zealand
Waikato Institute of Technology
Real Art Charitable Trust
Hamish McKay Gallery

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