

Bill Hammond

b.1947

Self-taught

*On Calvary Street are trellises
Where bright as blood the roses bloom,
And gnomes like pagan fetishes
Hang their hats on an empty tomb
Where two old souls go slowly mad,
National Mum and Labour Dad.*¹

Since the rapid growth of the middle classes in Europe during the second half of the 19th century, writers and artists of the Avant-garde have been struggling with a paradox: on the one hand their work challenges what they see as the complacency of middle-class values and yet, on the other hand, they depend on that class for their audience and their livelihood. Contrary to the old stereotype, most artists would rather not starve for their art and they are not immune to the comforts of a suburban lifestyle.

Nevertheless it is a persistent tension in Western culture and one that has spawned many rebellious gestures, sometimes resulting in powerful art. Think of the late 19th century decadent poetry of Baudelaire and his bohemian lifestyle, which rejected middle class morality. Think of the Dada movement which, largely in reaction to the horrors of World War I, rejected rational thought. And think of the late 20th century Punk movement, which blamed the middle classes for universal boredom.

Often rebellion takes the form of movements like those mentioned, but individuals rebel too. Think about your own life. Do you sometimes feel so strongly about the state of the world that you want to express your individuality and independence – even your anger?

In the 21st century New Zealand is a predominantly suburban, middle class culture. Painter Bill Hammond is by nature a rebel. Before he became known for his bird paintings, he made savage satirical paintings, such as *TV Suburba*. It is worth noting that Hammond is a Christchurch artist and that Christchurch has a reputation (perhaps unfairly) for being particularly conservative, suburban and middle class in its values.

When Hammond painted this work he was influenced by rock music – the soundtrack of rebellion in the second half of the 20th century. He would often inscribe fragments of song lyrics on paintings, almost like captions. At this time (the early 1990s) he was closely associated with a group of Christchurch-based painters who had been labelled the ‘Pencil Case Painters’

because their paintings sometimes resembled the kind of grubby, rebellious graffiti you might make on your pencil case at school. This group included Tony de Lautour, Saskia Leek, Séraphine Pick, Shane Cotton and Grant Takle.

What is this painting of? Does it trigger any memories for you? How can the painting tell you what is going on? The cartoonish style suggests that the artist is being ironic or satirical. The use of the colour red, the twisted perspective and the grotesquely angular gestures of the bodies, transform a relatively mundane scene into one that feels somehow freaky and weird.

What is going on? You must search for clues like a detective to figure it out. The plant in the macramé hanger on the left of the painting, the draperies and the furniture suggest we are looking at a middle class suburban lounge room. A man and a woman. Who are they? What are they doing?

Beside the woman is a laid table – or is it? Look more closely at the cutlery. The man seems to have unpacked a toolbox – but look more closely at some of the tools. Look again at the woman slumped in her chair. Look closely at her feet and face. The uncomfortable or disturbing feeling you get from the image has a special name: it’s called *unheimlich* – German for ‘un-homely’. Contemporary artists often seek to create this sense of unease in their work in order to unsettle the viewer and to make them question their assumptions about the world.

Andrew Paul Wood

¹ Baxter, J.K. (1960). *Ballad of Calvary Street*.

Galleries and museums:

www.artaustralia.com
www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.chartwell.org.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.fernergalleries.co.nz
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Hay, J. & et al. (2008). *Bill Hammond: Jingle Jangle Morning*, Christchurch Art Gallery.

Web Search:

Shane Cotton
Dada
Tony de Lautour
Saskia Leek
Séraphine Pick
Punk movement
Grant Takle

