An interview with Martin Basher

by André Hemer

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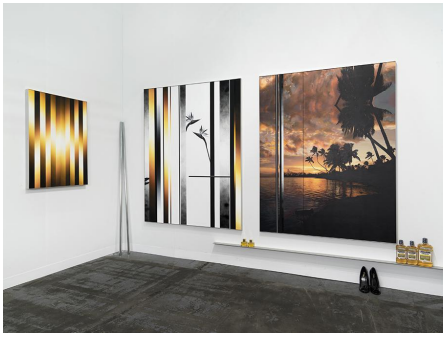
Long friends, Martin Basher and André Hemer have been in artistic conversation for over a decade. While Basher has made New York his base since 1999 and regularly exhibits in the United States, Hemer was there for six months, while completing an artist residency at ISCP in late 2017. At the dawn of the new year, they met for a chat at Martin Basher's studio.

ANDRÉ HEMER We're on Bedford Ave in Brooklyn on the second day of 2018, and I'm here with Martin Basher in his studio. So maybe a good place to start is 2017 and how the year played out for you within the general context of how things unravelled locally?

MARTIN BASHER Yes, a crazy year. It's been hard to digest everything. I recall talking with my LA Dealer Anat Ebgi 12 months ago, both of us stunned, and discussing how to approach art making in the Trump era. There was definitely a sense that 2017 was going to present some fundamental, foundational questions—the goalposts completely shifted. The climate of the previous eight years had essentially been progressive, but it turned out a lot of people in the world, especially in America, had a

different set of priorities—antithetical to my own. So from the start, 2017 begged new questions for me about what might constitute an engaged, resistant, and productive practice, and what the right mix of politics and aesthetics should be in my practice. I had to reassess my work and consider the question of what (if any) responsibility you have as a cultural producer when the world is going in a bad direction. Should your work resist, or is that resistance better channeled in other ways, like through political action? or both? Some days in the studio, I have the news on the radio going for hours; I guess the question has been whether that information ought to be embedded in the work. Or if it isnt, am I just pissing about being frivolous? The field is so fluid right now. No one answer is forthcoming. I guess all you can do is keep going.



Martin Basher, solo presentation with Anat Ebgi gallery, *The Armory Show*, installation view, 2017.



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AH Over the year you had several solo exhibitions and presentations in different parts of the world. You completed your doctorate back in New Zealand at Elam and you had your life in America and the domestic moves you had to do as well as operating within the broader social conditions here. So it seems from my perspective to be jam-packed with a lot of making, a lot of reacting, a lot of thinking.

MB It was a stacked year. The shift in the political and social landscape was like an earthquake, and that really framed everything else. But yes, I bought, renovated and moved house, consolidated two studios into one, got pregnant with my wife, completed the doctorate and somewhere in there still managed to get quite a lot of work complete. It was productive.

AH And I wonder specifically with regard to the doctorate; how that functions within your practice.

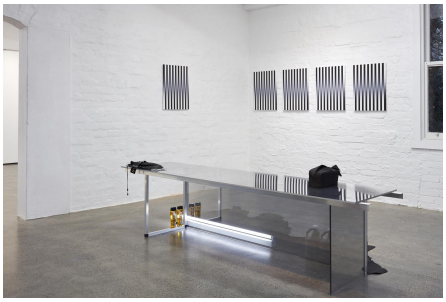
MB You've been through this process so you know that doing a doctorate in art is a strange thing. It's a really valuable exercise, because it requires a thorough examination process. But it does mean the questions setting the academic parameters of your practice are laid out almost five years before you're actually *defending* the research, and moreover, you are supposed to come to some kind of conclusion at the end. It's tricky: there is real potential in a doctorate to wring out all your artistic juice. My doctorate approached my broader project from a couple of angles, first looking at the political potentiality of display-based practice —primarily coming out of New York City from the 80s onwards; starting off with people like Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and then moving through time to artists who are contemporaneous practitioners to myself. So that was roughly, about form and tactics. Second, the doctorate dug into some of the sociological and psychoanalytic thinking around desire, consumption and retailing. That was about concept.

AH Could you elaborate on this idea of display-based practice? I'm wondering maybe what works you would place within that context, because what I'm imagining is what happens when you put a bottle of Hennessy on a pedestal for example. What does that say or do?

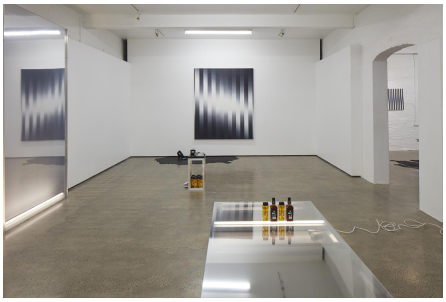
MB Roughly, display-based practice employs the aesthetics and forms of display to artistic ends rather than for the

categorical or commercial ends they are usually employed for. It's a way to interrogate hierarchies of knowledge, value, class, culture and taste. I'm looking specifically at retail display, and the formal corollaries retailing has with sculpture; the plinth, an arrangement of exalted and desirous objects set out on show. There's also something of a relationship with painting; the composition of retail windows, advertising imagery, billboards, it's all in the same family as traditional painting composition.

Specifically considering my doctoral research, I focused quite a bit on the political potential of display practice—hence the preoccupation with the election etc. Display is an expedient and interesting way of bringing real-world things into the liminal space of art. Setting a thing on a pedestal or shelf in a way that breaks with its normal logic creates potential for other kinds of meanings. Objects can be set in dialogue with each other, a text can be created, a shelf becomes a line in a visual poem or essay. At its best, that's a powerful way of dealing with things in the world and interrogating their meaning. The politics of objects can be laid legible. But at the same time, display work that invokes politics—or for that matter any art making that invokes politics—also has potential to be didactic; acting as instruction rather than as question. I should also say here I'm thinking about politics in its broader sense; in terms of power relations rather than just governance. I'm talking about the way politics of race, gender, power and economics play out. The research for me was in part a question of how to have a practice with political energy while keeping mystery.



Martin Basher's PhD presentation, *Devil at the Gates of Heaven*, George Fraser Gallery, University of Auckland, 2017. Courtesy Starkwhite.



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AH When I look at your installations; whether it be a mix of paintings, found objects, architectural structures... there's never anything easy about them operating at the same time. So the legibility that you're speaking about—that didactic reading—, it reads like that in singular elements. But, as a collective experience it's often a combination of image and forms that seemed diced and spliced to a point where there's something much more ambiguous at play.

MB Absolutely—ambiguity is front and center for me. I guess I'm looking for a point of resistance or pushback moment where there's something both seductive and queasy in the work—ambiguous and ideally, implicatory. I've been thinking particularly about the economies of desire in display. The work has a lot of contact with the world of luxury commodity—I'm especially interested in the fetishistic attractions of form, surface and reflection. Getting back to the question of what and how to make in the Trump era, I think the politics in this work is less about the question of who is in office, its more involved with the underlying questions of economics and consumption; *who* gets to consume, and what gets consumed.

Actually ambiguity is also particularly pertinent to this question of politics in art vs say in an activist context. With activism, the objective is to communicate with the least amount of ambiguity, right? 'Politician X must go'. But art ideally elides the concrete for something contingent—producing a '*what am I looking at and why does this make me puzzled yet invigorated*' sensation. One artist I particularly love in this respect is Cady Noland. In her work,—all from the 80s and early 90s—she lays out a pretty select set of references, mostly applied with display-type strategies; budweiser cans, some S+M stuff, some American police paraphernalia, crowd control barriers etc. You get this real low-down, aggressive, queasy energy, a suggestion of violence, mob mentality and angry white masculinity etc. But its not overt, it's just a mean ugly cloud. And it is so relevant right now, her work feels like the detritus of a Trump rally.

It's such an interesting time right now. I think we're going to see a shift from an initial period where people's responses are immediate and directly resistant, to more nuanced modes of art making that still fold the political in. My immediate reaction was to make work that pointed fingers; that specifically named what I was as the immediate problem. But in time I think the work is better if it is more oblique. Not opaque though.

AH And so of the works you made this year, what was the most political piece in your mind?

MB I wouldn't point to a single piece. But like I say, I've been dealing with this idea of complicating spaces of consumption and desire. A successful work would produce a scenario that presents particular personal, private longings, and perhaps exposes the vulnerabilities of those longings, hanging that all out in the baldly commercial framework of display. I see my recent work toying with a particular kind of subjectivity that suggests something specifically, rich, male, probably white—a particularly privileged, smug, uninformed, unreflexive ego. I'd say the show I put together for my doctoral defence at Auckland

University, which was reshown at Starkwhite and titled *Devil at the Gates of Heaven* would be a good starting point…

AH I suppose that ultimately, ego is the driver of most consumerist desire. So then what's the sensation within this aspirational path that your work tries to reveal?

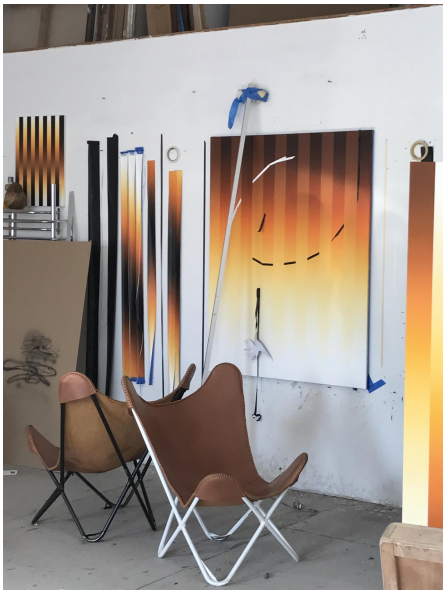
I've never found quite the right words to describe this—we are all reaching for something ineffable, quasi-sublime, the grace-note...that undefinable thing that people reach for through spirituality or drugs or whatever. And through sex—especially through sex. And power. Greed.

That sensation is what I'm most interested in regarding the display space; because we use all manner of consumer choices to negotiate and satisfy those desires, to constitute self. I mean, consumer choice is the sole way we get from being cold, naked and hungry to people who have stuff, right? To being individuals distinguishable from others. Those choices are sometimes clear, other times unconscious, automatic. I often catch myself making those decisions unconsciously, choices that are uninformed by practicality. Why buy these shoes and not those? Why choose this detergent not that one? The negotiation of self is spelt out in such minute decisions. So in the work, display compositions can talk about much bigger urges and desires.

There are also bigger implications of those choices. Like how our throwaway consumer choices have knock-on impacts on individuals and the environment globally. For example, our demand for new phones is fueling this crazy, deleterious demand for coltan and other rare metals mined in Africa. People's lives rise and fall on the consumer whims of people on the other side of the world. The oceans are choked with garbage, and don't get me started on the air. Climate change and global warming are super pressing for me—and they are the direct result of what? Consumption. Desire for things.



Martin Basher's studio, New York, 2018.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Martin Basher's studio, New York, 2018.
Image courtesy of the artist.

AH I think we're seeing just the very edge of the periphery of that in the last week in New York with this ridiculously cold weather, although that's just the tipping point on this huge iceberg.

MB Absolutely...we've had a week of weather that's probably ten degrees colder than it normally is, there are major shifts in weather patterns. Basically the Arctic is melting up and the cold has just fallen down here. My palette has had a lot of blisteringly hot yellows and oranges this year. And formally the work this year has shifted too, with super-concentrated, white-hot eyes in the middle of a lot of the paintings that I'm making. I feel there's a sense of getting blasted; fried by a pitiless sun. Meanwhile the landscaped-based work that I've been making for years (the beaches) have flipped, with the landscapes getting tipped sideways. The color has been leached out.

AH Yes, I was just thinking about that because there's a painting behind you that's vertical in format with a pair of trees against a beach or landscape and it's tilted on its side. And I see that repeated around the room in the different works.

MB There's a sense like the world's gone sideways. Maybe that nature is being bleached. My wife has recently directed several tv shows on climate change, that conversation is very present at home…

AH Maybe they've become artefacts of this image that used to be, and they're getting further away from reality. There's something about your imagery, especially the palm trees, which is inherently false or fake. It's like looking at a brochure for Contiki holidays, where they'll use the most saturated version of a teal blue seascape they can find. In a sense it's already not real. The other facet of these works is that they're grayscale. They've lost that hyper-reality and perhaps they've almost become used remnants of consumerism.

MB Yes, these paintings reproduce a particular kind of hyper-saturated, cliché image of nature. Screensaver nature. It's nature imagery that has the associative qualities of tropical breeze laundry detergent or some rum ad.

AH And to ideas of nature and the sublime. It becomes a product in itself.

MB Yes, a reduced, consumable image of nature. I'm not painting them as a depiction of the real, rather as a reproduction of an idea. And at the moment, these paintings are feeling quite...tenuous in a way. Tilted, reduced to monochrome. The newest ones I'm working on now, which I'll show with Anat Ebgi in May 2018, are getting considerably more chopped up.



Martin Basher's studio, New York, 2018.
Image courtesy of the artist.



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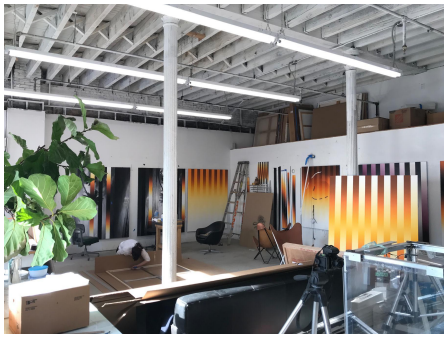


Martin Basher's studio, New York, 2018.
Image courtesy of the artist.

AH Maybe the cooler palette will creep in sometimes.

MB Perhaps, yes. Perhaps the images will also be rendered as faded and broken, as degraded.

AH When I look at an artist's practice and I see that they have used a certain kind of imagery for a decade or more, I think there's something about it that must be inherently nostalgic. Or personal at the very least. And therefore I'm wondering if there's something that connects your imagery—and I suppose that I'm thinking of the landscape imagery here—to some particular personal nostalgia?

MB Well it's funny you mention this. Earlier this year I did a similar Q and A with Chris Wiley and this same question arose. I've been painting palms and sunsets obsessively for years, somewhat subconsciously. And then as Chris was doing a little bio the dots connected. When I was a kid I lived in Fiji, and I saw a version of that view almost daily. I was little then, and those beaches were pure and uncomplicated, just total paradise. It was a very formative period for me. And to some extent that same beach, minus the palms of course, was the thing that bookended every year of my childhood in New Zealand too. So yes, there is something profoundly personal there. My own desire for Eden.

There's been a landscape arc in my work since the beginning. When I came to America I was mind-blown by the scale of landscape here.

As a very young and very earnest young artist, I started doing a lot of painting that was really heavily influenced by the Hudson River School, in the Great American Landscape tradition. Super earnest and embarrassing, like Caspar David Friedrich in the Colorado Rockies. Ridiculously romantic.

AH Yes, I remember many of your paintings ten years back were exactly that; paintings of American landscapes in that Hudson River School convention; very naturalistically painted, and very painterly.

MB Yeah... But over time the source imagery developed, getting closer to the question of the consumption of landscape. Eventually that led to the idea of nature as commodity, and the use of nature as a means of selling purity…

AH So it's from the fantastical to the commodity...

MB Exactly. That's the arc. And now I think the work is edging toward something new from a formal standpoint. I've been working with that hot palette; oranges, yellows and blacks, and reducing the landscape to monochrome and flipping it sideways—on a formal level, this gives you a lot of leeway and a lot of compositional problems to work with and onto. For a long time the paintings always had to be direct copies of images I was pulling from the internet; I didn't embellish or change them, much like I wouldn't alter the consumer goods I was putting on display. They were ready-mades in that sense. Any compositional or color decisions had to precede me, those were the Photoshop decisions of the menthol cigarette or laundry detergent company or whatever place I pulled them from. Now it's getting looser.

AH And how do you make these then; how do these elements come to be as one work. For a starting point, where do

you source your imagery from? Are these scans? Are they from the internet? Are they from magazines?

MB I don't generate the imagery myself. It has to come out of the public digital space.

AH Are they images that present themselves to you or do you go looking for them?

MB I go looking for them on the internet. But the search parameters involve language that will pull these images up. Search terms like 'good times beach' or 'tropical heaven' or 'perfect holiday escape.'

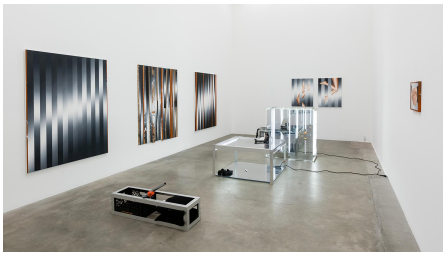
AH You mentioned Photoshop just then and I wonder how do you go about composing these elements together? Are the geometric bands all done in the same way? What is your way of working? That's something I've never really considered about your paintings; maybe because when you see them exhibited, they nearly present themselves as ready-mades.

MB That's exactly what I've been trying to do: produce things that are highly rendered and handmade but yet also essentially reproducible. The logic being that they should work as commodity objects as well as 'art'. The banding follows the logic of the composition—either echoing or contrasting the image underneath. They are done the same way as the abstract work, in oil, a one-shot blend. The stakes are reasonably high in that because it's not really easy to alter them once the oil paint is laid down.

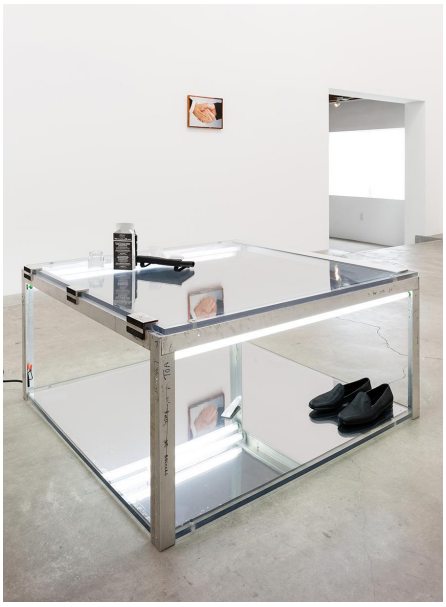
There is a parallel with the purely abstract work. I've been making those in various guises for about a decade now. Even though each work is different, they are all bound by a series of standardised process decisions. Most of the paintings have 14 vertical bars in them. I keep it an even number because they stay a little bit

unbalanced that way. If you have any kind of diagonal gradation in the work it shifts so that your top right corner and your top left and your bottom left corner offset... The composition has a balance but the edges wobble nicely. I just like the way that they start to tilt a little. But why's it 14? Because it's about right... If you do ten, the stripes are too wide and if you do 18, they're too narrow so it just... is what it is.

Even though I have a well-established process now, it still remains a very manual endeavor. Sometimes I still just fuck them up completely. And I'm still never quite sure what they are going to come out like. I've got to the point where probably four out of five come out right but there are plenty of discards that just don't work.



Martin Basher, *A Guide To Benefits* (exhibition view), Anat Ebgi gallery, Los Angeles, 2015.



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AH Yes, it's really interesting that your straddle this line, where on the one hand you're a sculptor—you deal with objects—but on the other hand you're somewhat of a painter's painter in terms of the way you dedicate yourself to the craft.

I'm not sure there's many people working to combine those two things. Someone I thought of in New Zealand as having a connection to that would be Dan Arps, in the way his installations

seem like explosions of artefacts that all look like they could have come from the same source material—and yet are rendered out in different ways. And at the same time, he makes paintings which retain their own objecthood.

MB I like Dan's work a lot. I've learned a great deal from him actually—in particular the way he makes shows out of multiple discrete objects. He's really very deft, uses space in a way that is both casual and ruthlessly precise. Kate Newby is like that too. They both employ a casualness that can only come from years of practice.

I feel like installation is a dirty word—slightly too positive or earnest or something. But in terms of making spaces, the trick is to activate the room... in the way Carol Bove talked about: making work in the 'shady spaces' of installation.

AH You've been away from New Zealand for quite a long time. When did you first arrive here?

MB I first came to America in '99, so it's eighteen, nearly 19 years. I've been back and forth a lot, but I'm pretty settled with NY as my base for now.

AH So you are on the path to being more American than you are New Zealander in some ways; or at least having lived equal parts of your life in both. I wonder how it is when you go back to New Zealand to do work and projects now; both personally but also in terms of how your work might function and the way people respond to it. Is there a difference?

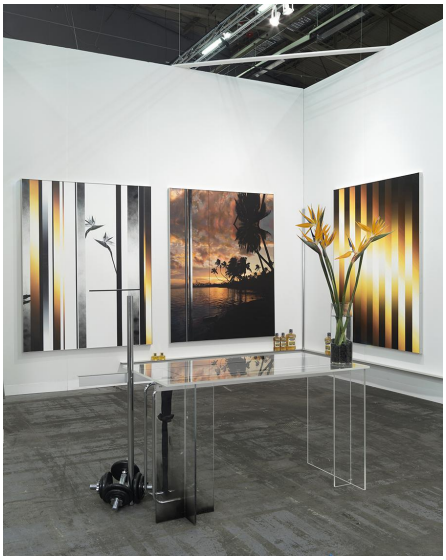
MB It's a good question. I still feel very much like a New Zealander. My wife is a New Zealander, our families are back there. We go back at least once every year. But yes, it's curious. The world is global but there's no question that there is geographic specificity too. I'd hope that the work is resonant and makes a

certain degree of sense there—I've had fantastic support from New Zealand so something is working.

Perhaps it is going to change over time—the kind of hyper-consumer's logic might be more resonant here than in New Zealand at the moment. And yet on the other hand going back to Auckland, it's big, brash, expensive, luxuriant...

AH New money dare I say...?

MB New money, yes... it's all happening in New Zealand too. In some ways even more. Auckland has a bit of that cheesy Los Angeles flash, you know? Yellow Lambroghinis and guys with huge watches. I think the landscapes get understood much more earnestly by a lot of people in New Zealand because that is a local reality. It's similar to sending this work to Miami. Beaches and palm trees all around. And there's certainly a little less awareness of the European/US east coast art history that the work is referencing.



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AH Conversely in the States it feels like in this moment people are starting to realise the gradual decline of that

great American hyper-capitalist experiment; I wonder if that might be coming to an end. I think that poses interesting problems or questions for your work? I mean obviously it's still very much alive in terms of how society and culture operate, but I wonder if your works might read like an epilogue to that time.

MB I'd say hyper-consumerism seems alive and well, but yes I do think about the epilogue. I've found artistic nutrition in literature for a long time, and two writers who feel enduringly relevant are J.G. Ballard and the French writer Michel Houllebecq. He's this fabulously fucked up puerile, depraved futurist/ satirist. I feel like his writing touches on much of what I'm doing in physical space. Both of them are writers that are absolutely dealing with the epilogue.

AH So what are your plans this year? What do you have coming up?

MB Well the next solo show will be in May with Anat Egbi again in L.A. It'll be my second with her and I'm looking forward to that.

AH Are the works here now?

MB No. The dates are coming up fast but it's fine, I work well under pressure and I have a couple of people helping me in the studio now. I am thinking about something more sculpturally weighted. Moving studios recently, I've dug out a lot of stored material that isn't really doing anything for me, just hanging around. I need to make it into stuff. So I'm thinking shiny surfaces, a lot of plexiglass, maybe some lights. And some paintings of course.

AH And then beyond that...?

MB The rest of the year's still shaping up. It's necessarily a little vague still, but I've been in discussions about curating a show in New Zealand at the end of the year that considers the role of display as an ongoing strategy in contemporary practice. Early days...but hopefully some of my heroes will be in that with some historical work, alongside some of my peers who are really pushing display as a form today. In March/ April, I have a small pop up solo show in Wellington with some of the work thats in the studio right now. Then the show at Anat Egbi in L.A. is in May, and several art fairs to produce for, possibly including solo presentations later this year. And then leading into 2019 I'll be prepping for solo shows in London and New Zealand. Somewhere in the middle of this I'll become a dad to twins, which is incredibly exciting and pretty daunting, and I have a half renovated house to deal with too. So it's going to be a full deck!

Biographies



Martin Basher was born in 1979 in Wellington, New Zealand. Now based in New York, Basher holds his BA (2003) and MFA (2008) from Columbia University, New York, and will shortly earn a Doctorate in Fine Art from the University of Auckland. Basher's work has been exhibited widely both in dealer and institutional settings, and his work is held in public and private collections worldwide.



André Hemer (b. 1981) is a New Zealand/German artist who is currently based in Vienna, Austria. He holds a Master of Fine Arts (Distinction) from the University of Canterbury (2006) and a PhD (Painting) from the University of Sydney (2015). Hemer is the recipient of several awards including The National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum (2011) and the Bold Horizons Contemporary Art Award (2011). In 2016 he was the Paramount Award Winner at The Wallace Art Awards, and recipient of the Arts Foundation New Generation award. His work has appeared at international art fairs such as the Melbourne Art Fair; Sydney Contemporary; Code Art Fair, Copenhagen; and Art Basel in Hong Kong, and features in public and private collections including the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Seoul Art Space Geumcheon, Wallace Arts Trust Collection, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū and Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Florida.

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