

Dan Arps
Sleepers

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That isolated but not alone feeling that you get in the suburban Auckland suburbs and that particular sensation of being somewhere a little grimy and run down but every house is over a million and the haphazard array : themes and variations of the domestic ramparts that mark the boundary between public and private space -shabbily formal paranoid structures- have become the face of capital.

Sleepers are an iconic suburban form -a particular dimension of timber- recycled from a job supporting train tracks - useful for garden edges and fencing, solid and repeatable, a standard scale. Good also to think about the sleepers in their original configuration laid out horizontal at a regular interval. In my recent work I have been repeatedly casting pieces that are assembled into solid rectilinear frames or fences. *Sleepers (Chocolate)* for example is made from six casts of the same original sleeper (if there is an original) forming a kind of porous barrier that strikes a classical balance of solidity and nothingness that belies the assemblage of polyurethane casts' essential hollowness - it is all facade.

The title has a certain resonance with Bill Pearson's 1952 essay, *Fretful Sleepers: A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist*, which approaches an analysis of the contemporary dominant Pakeha culture. Although the 'New Zealand now' he is talking about is a long time in the past, some of the argument still resonates like this passage about NZ's relation to authority: "The New Zealander delegates authority, then forgets it. He has shrugged off responsibility and wants to be left alone. There is no one more docile in the face of authority. He pleads rationalisations, 'doesn't want to make a fuss' or 'make a fool of himself,' but generally he does what he is told, partly because everyone else is doing it, partly because he wants to be sociable and co-operate in a wishfully untroubled world."

The other resonance that I want to mention is with the late German artist Martin Kippenberger's carved wooden reliefs held at a distance from the view by small picket fences. Titled *Don't Wake Daddy*, the work shows suburban peacefulness always at the point of being disturbed - by the crying baby, the lawnmower, the chainsaw, the party next door.

When I started this series of work in late 2019, first exhibited at Sydney, Sydney in March of 2020 as MDF constructions smothered in body filler, a new reading of the fence emerged as it became clear that our global connectedness had become a threat. Coming home on the last flight before the borders closed and then the perspex barriers went up and the social distancing intensified. It became clear that any barrier always has a level of porosity, that the filter doesn't catch every particle. If, as in the Māori concept of Hauora, a house is used as a metaphor for the body, then maybe the fence represents the porous skin or the weave of clothing: the outermost layer of defence.

Dan Arps, November 2021

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