

Briar Holt & Zina Swanson

Musings on Dunedin: A Conversation Between a Writer and an Artist

Since being displaced by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, artist Zina Swanson has lived and worked in various New Zealand cities. In 2013 she moved to Dunedin to undertake the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, established by the University of Otago in 1962. The annual year-long fellowship provides a studio space for a New Zealand artist in Dunedin. Frances Hodgkins Fellowship alumni include Ralph Hotere, Jeffrey Harris and Fiona Pardington. The 2015 fellow is John Ward-Knox.

In this interview with Dunedin-based writer Briar Holt, ideas about living as an itinerant artist, differing art communities throughout the country, and salsa classes in New York come up in conversations with Swanson. The interview provides insight into the life of a contemporary New Zealand artist and how various occurrences can have an impact on the trajectory of an artistic practice, from natural disasters to unexpected artist residencies. Swanson and Holt sat down over a few coffees to talk, one rare sunny day in New Zealand's southernmost city.

Briar Holt: I know you've moved around the country quite a bit in the past few years after the earthquake in Christchurch. What was it like, as a practicing artist, to be displaced so suddenly? What was your experience with your first move to Auckland?

Zina Swanson: Prior to the earthquake James (Oram, Swanson's partner and fellow artist) and I had talked for a long time about leaving Christchurch. We procrastinated



Zina Swanson in her studio, 2014. Courtesy of Zina Swanson.

so much. Mainly because we had a studio full of ten years of accumulated materials, work, and to be honest, quite a lot of junk. The thought of having to deal with it all was always quite stressful, so in some ways the earthquakes made the decision to leave for us. I really enjoyed being in Auckland. Being surrounded by so many artists with such enthusiasm and drive was really refreshing. Also I found people to be more interested and willing to talk about art and have discussions about work. People were very open there. It was just bigger and there was a lot going on. There are lots of different scenes, groups within groups—very different to Dunedin where everyone sort of congregates together.

BH: So Auckland was always on the cards in a sense? Or was that just the easiest place to go at short notice?

ZS: We would have left eventually and gone to Auckland. The earthquakes just made us actually do it. I don't know if we'll go back to Christchurch permanently. If I hadn't been awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship we would probably still be in Auckland.

BH: You were selected as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow in 2013; this meant another move, back to the South Island. Did you have any preconceptions of Dunedin and the art community here?

ZS: To be brutally honest, I never would have chosen to move to Dunedin. However, being selected for the Fellowship gave me the opportunity to give it a chance. And I am still here! It is such a beautiful place. I feel silly that I never realised. I knew Dunedin was small and that the art community was small. But the thought of that didn't bother me at the time. I was really just focused on moving into the studio and establishing a rigorous routine again after a year or so of quite severe disruption. It was very easy to get started again. I think what I had really missed was the routine of getting up and going to the studio, having somewhere to be and to focus. The collection of bits and pieces I used to have was integral to assisting in the development of new sculptures, so having a studio again enabled me to start to see, collect and contemplate new materials in the way I used to pre-earthquake.

BH: You and James decided to stay in Dunedin after the fellowship ended, something we have seen before with previous fellow Nick Austin. How did you come to that decision? As you said, having a studio where you could start to collect and store materials and objects again was important for your process. It seems as though after moving around for a few years, a bit of stability would have been an attractive possibility.

ZS: It just happened to be honest. The end of the Fellowship exhibition always occurs after the Fellowship itself finishes so you do end up hanging around for that. We ended up signing a lease for a really great old house. James and I each have our own studio rooms. I had always thought working from home wasn't for me but so far it seems to be going really well. I am enjoying always having my work close at hand. I will often have a quick look at what I have been working on just before I go to bed, perhaps in the hope that things will miraculously resolve themselves in the night!

BH: I can imagine. I think sometimes we can take Dunedin for granted. Where else can you have a studio space in the central city for such a reasonable price? Sure, Dunedin's art community is small. I don't necessarily think that it is a negative attribute, but it is certainly different to other New Zealand cities. There is just something about those hills that encircle the city; the gothic architecture; and the concentration of galleries and studios in the city that seems to draw people in and hold them here. It did for me, anyway. It's a pretty welcoming place for creative people.

ZS: I completely agree. It is small. However I think there is a lot going on here at the moment. Spaces like the Blue Oyster seem to be going in quite an interesting direction. The new space is so good. That window!

BH: The window is great. And having a project space on Dowling Street is quite refreshing, breaking up the reign of dealer galleries. Having the Dowling Street studios next door adds to that. The street seems more lively and exciting. The beginnings of an 'arts precinct' I suppose. All the development in that area and down to the wharf seems to feed into that idea.

ZS: Yes, and I feel like there have been a lot of interesting people here lately too. Sadly they do come and go. We need them to stay, although I shouldn't say that as I still don't know what we are doing long term! I do really like it here though. It's certainly affordable.

BH: You've recently completed a short residency in New York through Apex Art. How did that come about and what did the residency actually entail? What do you think about the New York artist that is coming to Dunedin with the same program in terms of a cultural exchange?

ZS: You have to be recommended for the residency; it isn't open for applications. Justin Paton [then Senior Curator of Christchurch Art Gallery] recommended me. I got this email out of the blue saying, 'you've been recommended for the Apex Art residency.' I was then required to write a paragraph saying why I thought it would be good for me; why I should get it. And I got it. They're sending someone here to Dunedin for the first time in a few months. It was never meant to be a cultural exchange between New York and Dunedin; usually the American artists go to Bangkok. But I suppose I seemed rather enthusiastic about New Zealand and they recently got in touch to see if I could facilitate a New York-based artist in Dunedin. Initially I wasn't sure if there would be enough for them to do but there's quite a lot. Working with a budget is hard. In New York it was actually easier because there are so many free things to do. In saying that, the museums and art galleries here are free so that will give them a good idea of our history and what the art community is like here. And there will be lectures they can sit in on, things like that. Not to mention the myriad of free outdoor activities.

BH: Having links with the University and the Hocken will help with that. There are always decent talks at the School of Art and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery too. And that will be a great opportunity for them to meet people here—those things are usually well attended.

ZS: It will be a completely different experience for them. I did things like a salsa class and aerial yoga over there. So it was a residency without the expectation that I would create work, which was quite strange.

BH: That's an interesting concept for a residency. One would assume that there is a definite expectation to create new work in order to fulfill a residency's requirements. In one of the blog posts you wrote while you were in New York, you said (of a visit to a Catholic church) that it 'felt odd to actively *not* participate in something.'¹ Which is perhaps a comment on the residency itself in terms of creating work.

ZS: Well, they told me it was a residency that wasn't so much art-focused, but I didn't really realise what that meant until I got there. I took materials over with me but didn't actually make anything. There was no time. I did see quite a lot of work in galleries over there though. I didn't make it to MoMA PS 1 because I got lost in Queens. And the Whitney Biennial was pretty rubbish.

BH: I feel like that has been a recurring theme lately with these larger, all-encompassing international exhibitions. Everyone expects some sort of enlightenment after seeing them. Maybe we're expecting too much....

ZH: Yeah, I think there was a general consensus that it wasn't great. But I did see some amazing shows. In particular was an exhibition at the New Museum of work by Camille Henrot, a French artist who works in New York. She'd created a whole lot of ikebana (Japanese flower arrangements) in relation to her personal library. So each ikebana was related to and shared a title with a book that she owned. I am so predictable! Although not everything that uses plants gets my attention. This show certainly did. Not to mention her video *Grosse Fatigue!*

1. Zina Swanson, 'Old St Patrick's Cathedral', May 2014, URL: <http://blog.apexart.org/post/85522234702/old-st-patricks-cathedral> (accessed 15 July 2014).



Otago Harbour, 2014. Courtesy of Zina Swanson.