

*I'll be your mirror – one of us cannot be wrong* (note the Andy Warhol reference) straddles the line between Romanticism and Expressionism. Collage and Bricolage feature prominently in Edwards + Johann's visual diaries and in the series of works *Frivolous poozlings* ('frivolous appropriations' in the artists' surreal language). These creations playfully reference a glorious twentieth century avant-garde tradition of *objets trouvés* and the random ranging from Käthe Kollwitz and Dada to the delicate boxes of Joseph Cornell. Each is a constructed world unto itself. The poozlings appliquéd over an underlying foundation found black and white photographic reproductions of artworks by Fragonard, Signac, Bellini and Raffaelli, mounted on card and once used to teach High School art history in an earlier age. The self-references to the history of art are irresistible in these works, which are as light and fluffy as a Ronald Firbank novel or an uncut blancmange.

The other significant component consists of photographic self-portraits of the artists themselves, in extraordinary headgear (referencing everything from Renaissance Europe, to the costumes of Oriental theatre, Victorian colonials and the Ottoman seraglio) set against dramatic landscapes. These are printed on metallic paper, lending an almost Byzantine lustre to the images, but the lone figure in the desolate and/or dramatic landscape mode is something that derives from the annals of German Romanticism. Specifically it is what the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe beautifully called *Erdlebenbilder* ('earth-life images'). Goethe was, above all, a visual creature: "The eye, above all, was the organ with which I laid hold of the world," he writes in Book VI of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and a little later, "Wherever I looked, I saw a picture".

These compositions – a figure in a landscape or *Erdlebenbilder* – have much in common with the work of a contemporary of Goethe, Caspar David Friedrich. In 1823 Goethe described a dichotomy he saw in Mantegna's *Triumph of Caesar* – a paradoxical conflict between sublime Nature and the Platonic Ideal (fantasy, imagination). He coined the neologism *Doppelleben* – 'dual life' – to describe this perceived dichotomy. Friedrich is very much an artist of the camp dominated by Nature, artists Goethe praises in the essay "Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil" ('Simple Imitation of Nature; Manner; Style', 1789) and ten years later in "Der Sammler und die Seinigen" ('The Collector and his Friends,' *Propyläen*, 1799). It is a dichotomy that Edwards + Johann eagerly attempt to toy with and subvert.

Meanwhile Edwards and Johann adopt defensive and defiant attitudes to the camera, self-aware and seeming to take on the personae as a kind of self-reflexive self-defence. The artists seem almost overwhelmed by the photographic context as Friedrich's figures always seem threatened by their solitude and the Sublime hyperreality of Nature (with a capital 'N'). The fictions imposed are diversionary subterfuges. The impression is of similar games with portraiture as those played – by Rita Angus and Leo Bensemann in 1930s Christchurch – a kind of dress-up and play-acting, and exchanging of masquerade conventions – and the intimate collaborations of the likes of Pierre et Gilles, Gilbert and George, and duos Robbinschilds, and the joyous history of any number of Dadaist, Situationist and Fluxus groups of yesteryear. The adoption of other fully realised personae (as the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa well knew) liberates the creative potential of the artist from the burdens of professional expectations and the self.

And that, really, seems to be what Edwards + Johann are all about; liberating the creative potential by constantly challenging each other and re-inventing the tricky proposition of self, exchanging faces and reinventing new worlds for old wherein anything can happen.

Andrew Paul Wood, Christchurch 2009