
Studio Autumn 2015



Gregor Kregar's studio with *Polyhedron Dwelling*, 2005, cast glass, steel, LED light boxes, in Gregor Kregar's studio (foreground)

A magical process of transformation

Visiting Gregor Kregar's studio, Dan Chappell talks to the artist about his latest public sculpture commissions and his interest in visual perception, utopian architecture, geometry and kitsch.

One of the Oxford Dictionary definitions of the word “alchemist” is “one who possesses a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation or combination”. When you visit Gregor Kregar's New Lynn warehouse studio, this word seems an apt description of the artist, as you're confronted with the sheer virtuosity of his practice. There are huge neon-lit, mirror-surfaced polyhedron and protoplasmic shapes suspended from the rafters, translucent glass orbs, rows of porcelain figures of the artist clad in overalls, glowing glass gnomes, clusters of ceramic pigs and sheep peering from shelves, and much, much more.

In the 18 years since Kregar moved to New Zealand from his native Slovenia, he has achieved a lot – one year after gaining his MFA at Elam, he was Paramount Winner of the James Wallace Art Award in 2000 with his

giant steel and glass orb, *Prstan* (1999). The artist had well and truly arrived. Since then he's had numerous residencies in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and China, with commissions and exhibitions in Slovenia, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Australia, Egypt, and Italy as well as throughout New Zealand.

When I visited, Kregar was in the final stages of installing a new outdoor sculpture, *Transit Cloud* in a New Lynn laneway. The work, commissioned by the Auckland Council Public Art team and a collaboration with artist wife Sara Hughes and architect Davor Popadich, consists of four protoplasmic structures suspended between buildings, and a design of porcelain tiles set into the footpath below, transforming a bland transit lane into an intriguing creative artery in the town. Next up is another collaborative project with Hughes for MTG Hawkes Bay, in Napier, where the couple will install a wall relief on the seaward side of the recently re-opened gallery. This consists of 5000 giant, coloured pinheads creating an image of a fabric pattern held in the museum's collection. He's also fabricating a nine-metre high stainless steel sculpture, which will be soon installed on Melbourne's Southern Way. It won the prestigious 2015 McClelland Commission, worth \$A250,000.



Gregor Kregar



Transit Cloud, 2015, a collaborative work by Gregor Kregar, Sara Hughes and Davor Popadich. Aluminium, neon flex, porcelain tiles. McRae Lane, New Lynn, Auckland. Photo: Patrick Reynolds

It seems trite to divide Kregar's practice into 'objects' and 'figures' as he has explored many diverse subjects, yet on closer examination there's a constant interweaving of the separate elements of his work. As he explains, "I'm interested in the reinterpretation of the everyday. Now, that might be perceived as mundane, and sometimes people may not even notice, but then it's transformed into the focus of your attention. With the geometric works I start with a simple 'building block' – an equilateral triangle that I can then create a really complex system out of. Even going back to the orbs and balls, while they were a round shape, they had triangle and trapezoid shapes, and then got more specific, then split into hexagons and pentagons and back to triangles." He's had a long-time interest in geometry, and how it shapes the world, from basic structures, like cells, molecules and crystals, through to complex building shapes, like Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes and the 'floating cities' of the Russian Constructivists. He continues, "An important part of my geometric work is the idea of reflection – I'm interested in the whole idea of looking or seeing – how we look at art and how we perceive art. You take something as interesting as a cloud or a tree – but we never stop and see or look at clouds or

trees. I like to position these mirrored works so that when we look at them, the trees or the clouds get mixed into that stereoscopic view and we start to think about how we look at things. And when you start moving around the work you become aware of the movement more, the works are semi-interactive, so I like that aspect of it. If I shine light on them at night, the light gets bounced around in a surprising array of reflections – it's a visual delight but also interesting to me how the optics work."

For those artists introducing the now ubiquitous 'selfie' into their oeuvre, the news is all bad – Kregar got there first, though he wryly acknowledges his selfies are in a more prehistoric material – clay. He started with 20 self-sculptures, ranging from full size, down to 30 centimetres, in *I Appear and Disappear*, (2003-4) at Dunedin

Public Art Gallery. In his 2008 commission *Vanish*, at Connells Bay Sculpture Park on Waiheke Island, 160 Kregars, ranging in size from 1.4 metres down to 0.4 metres, stand defiantly in rows in a bush-surrounded glade. He acknowledges, “People might go ‘what is it with this guy?’ but the way I see it the more of me I make, the less of me there is, and that’s the nice point about those works, because the more I make of myself, the inevitable conclusion is that I disappear. The bigger the group of myself that there is, then there’s less individuality that I have, and I look more like a general crowd – and that’s a nice aspect to the works as well.”

From the mid 2000s Kregar’s sculptures explored form, scale and utopian architecture in works like *Shelter Structure*, which was made during a residency in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2006. For the Cairo Biennale in 2011, he made *Liquid Geometry* which merged neon lighting within a geometric stainless steel framework.

Usually restricted by budget and space constraints, he was limited to smaller scale models and computer simulations, but his 2012 project, *The Dream House Project* at Te Tuhi in Pakuranga, gave him a larger canvas to work with. Kregar had seen an immense pile of discarded timber at the Henderson refuse station, much of it from the ‘leaky homes’ being demolished around Auckland. “I knew I had to build something out of this. I’d been approached by the gallery’s director James McCarthy and curator Bruce Phillips to create a work in the entrance foyer, which isn’t usually utilised in their shows, but we also wanted to make it a collaboration with the local school children. So we had workshops where the students created drawings and cardboard models of their own utopian or dream houses, and these were shown along with The Dream House Project.”

Curator Phillips describes the work in the project’s catalogue: “The resulting installation was an enormous timber structure that engulfed Te Tuhi’s foyer in a complex web of wooden refuse... The structure was conceived to inhabit the building like a giant bird’s nest or a beaver dam that might create a space of sanctuary but also a functional space that visitors to Te Tuhi could walk through, sit and socialise in.”

This work was soon followed by an even larger architectural form, *Pavilion Structure*, for the 2013 headland Sculpture on the Gulf event on Waiheke Island. The work won both the Lexus Premier and People’s Choice Awards. Initially he planned to create an intimate work, but was given a huge, open site and had to reassess his design.



Clockwise from top left: *Pavilion Structure*, 2013, recycled timber, 9 x 11 x 11m, at headland Sculpture on the Gulf, Waiheke Island, courtesy the artist; *Vanish*, 2008, 160 glazed stoneware figures ranging from 1.4m to 0.4m in height, installation view, Connells Bay Sculpture Park, Waiheke Island; *New Structures*, 2013, refuse timber, paint and 200 neon lights, 11 x 3.5 x 5m, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland; *I Wish I Were What I Was*, *When I Wished I Were What I Am*, 2004, 366 x 152 x 30cm, glazed stoneware in Gregor Kregar’s studio

“I usually want my sculptures to have an element of surprise but that site could be seen from the ferry, so I was concerned some people might feel hot during the walk and think, ‘I don’t want to walk down there’, and perhaps

think they knew what the sculpture was about. For me the experiential part of sculpture is very important. Fortunately this didn't happen and the work became a shelter, an attraction, and the size and scale worked. It was a substantial building effort, using 11 tonnes of timber and ending up nine metres tall and 11 metres in diameter. We just started with wooden pegs in the ground and went up from there, and because of the sloping ground, it took a while to get the levels right. Once we got the first canopy up, I realised it needed the extra height so we kept going. It reminded me of an old Romanesque church design."

He made his most recent timber structure at dealer gallery Gow Langsford, merging the haphazard wooden construction with sharp slashes of vivid neon in the work *New Structures* (2013). "I wanted to make something out of rubbish in a sleek gallery space, but paint it white to capture the subtleties of the light. Neon is very magical – it's old technology but very revolutionary – it lasts a long time and uses little electricity. I decided to marry the two because I had this collection of neon I've been accumulating for some time. A friend has been dismantling signs all around Auckland and giving them to me. So like the timber it was all recycled – from banks, warehouses and shops."

Throughout Kregar's work has been an endless flow of transformation – from the mundane to the sublime, from a kitsch object to the symmetry of order and structure. And the ideas are still coming fast. With over 300 neon pieces stored in his studio, he's thinking of an even larger project. "At some stage I'd like to do an installation where I dress a whole building in neon, perhaps as part of a public art project."

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