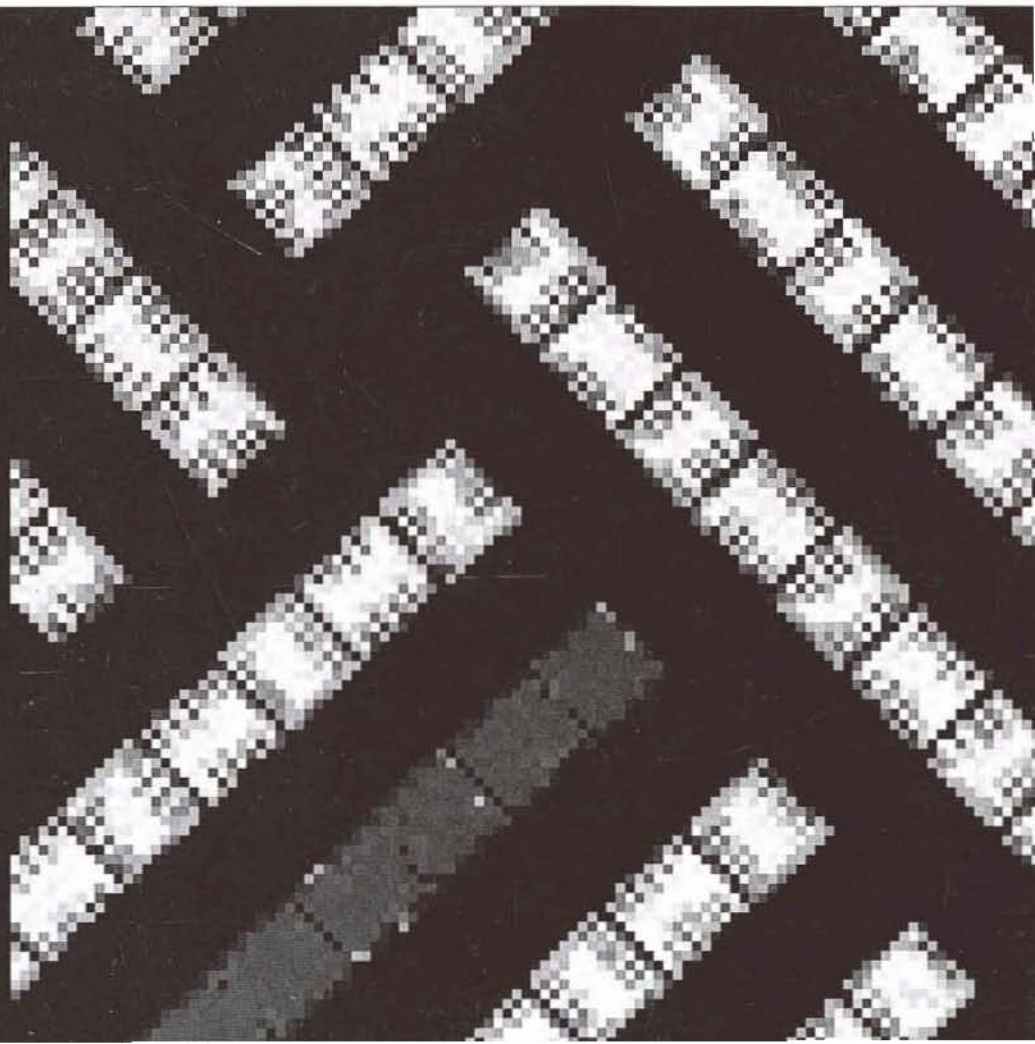




# THINGS TO COME

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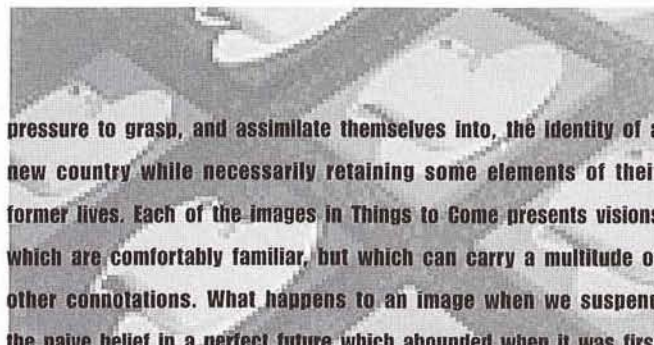


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# THINGS TO COME

Rudolf Boelee's recent travelling show, *Visions of Utopia*, linked the aspirations of the Russian constructivist art movement with the socialist values of Michael Joseph Savage's Labour Party. The direct catalyst for this exhibition, however, came from an experience Boelee had while at a Christchurch garage sale in 1996. He was surprised and saddened to come across a bundle of family photographs for sale, the abandoned and disembodied evidence of a now forgotten personal history. What unknown circumstance could remove such treasured mementoes from a household and bring them here, to be leafed through and pawed over by strangers? That scattered pile of pictures is like the ramshackle collection of memories we all hold within our minds, which gets together to form a complex layering of time and experience. Throughout our lives, we re-examine these moments in an attempt to piece together an entire story, re-evaluating the importance and meaning of each as we try to fit everything into a single, unified context. The importance of these memories (whether they are accurate flashbacks or random associations) to our own personal sense of self, and to our sense of identity as a nation, is vital. Such recollections come in many forms, and are not limited to photographs or letters or newspaper clippings. For some people, the mental impression of a certain time or place depends entirely on the vague remembrance of a smell, a public figure, or a particular brand of soap powder. The familiar names and products of the 1950's are essential to our ideas and feelings about that era, however different and erroneous those memories may be, and whether we lived through them or not.

The icons of popular culture have always had a tremendous power to lodge in the mind and to define, and even personify, particular eras or situations. In an attempt to consolidate our own sense of "New Zealandness", the representation can replace the real in a bizarre echo of Baudrillard's simulacrum. The Man from the Prudential, the elegant graphics of fashion designer 'Eric' Ericsson, and the New Zealand racing hero, Phar Lap, have all become inseparable from the memories of actual existence that 1930's and 1950's communities hold. This is especially true for immigrants, like Boelee, who feel the



pressure to grasp, and assimilate themselves into, the identity of a new country while necessarily retaining some elements of their former lives. Each of the images in *Things to Come* presents visions which are comfortably familiar, but which can carry a multitude of other connotations. What happens to an image when we suspend the naive belief in a perfect future which abounded when it was first published, and view it with the jaundiced eyes of the late 1990's? Some of Boelee's works are especially conducive to this experiment, such as the image of "Rebecca and the Maoris" from the Rangī and Papa triptych, which contains many ambiguities. When it was first presented, this picture of a young, waving Maori girl as an exotic and friendly ambassadorial native seemed appealing and positive, whereas many will now regard it as distasteful, oversimplified and patronising. The legend of Rangī-e-tu-nei and Papatuanuku (the sky father and earth mother of Maori mythology) itself assumes new connotations as the issues of Maori land rights and environmental concerns take on a renewed importance within our society.

## In an attempt to recreate and reassess some of the things our memories hinge upon...

Boelee has created a series of images, some icons of assurance, others enigmatic pictures of unrest. The long horizontal and vertical formats suggest landscapes, and that is no accident - it is Boelee's intention that we re-visit the terrain of our past, studying the ground for flaws or unnoticed detail with the eyes of the present, comparing our expectations of the future with what has eventuated. He describes his work as "history painting"; an attempt to seek social significance from events and situations from 1950's New Zealand, and to relate them to present conditions. *Things to Come* aims to contribute to some understanding of contemporary society and, while exploring the fashions and belief-structures of the past, locates its disquiet in the here and now. Like all good science fiction films, our predictions for the future seem to hover between an affluent and altruistic Utopia and a terrifying Orwellian underworld and, despite the huge advances we have made in technology and science, it remains anybody's guess as to what the future will hold for us, or the generations to come.

## De Stijl

Boelee's art draws, for form and mood, on the Dutch art movement of De Stijl, or "the Style", which flourished in the early part of this century. The aim of the De Stijl group, which included the painter Mondrian and the furniture designer Gerrit Rietveld, was to evolve a purely abstract art which would be "the direct expression of the universal". The key philosophies of this movement were: an insistence on the social role of art, design and architecture; a utopian faith in the transforming abilities of new technologies; and a conviction that art and design have the power to change the future. De Stijl members also regarded art as a complete human experience - not content to merely create self-contained and elitist art objects, their intention was to blur the boundaries between the artistic disciplines in a fusion of art and life. They did not regard one type of artistic expression as holding inherently more value than another, and consequently, their number included architects, painters, philosophers and designers of graphics, interiors and furniture.

This blending of what is traditionally considered to be 'high' and 'low' art is illustrated in Boelee's "Popular Mechanics" panel, which borrows from what is believed to be the first Pop Art work, Richard Hamilton's collage, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* Pop Art centred upon the presentation of popular culture as something which was fit to be displayed in an art gallery, and in many ways Boelee's sensibilities are aligned with this philosophy, as he considers the icons of daily life to be important indicators of social values and concerns. Another important influence on *Things to Come* is the Decorative Modern style of the 1950's. Regarded as a backward-looking style by the more high minded adherents of formal modernism, this approach thrived in a time of great affluence, a period which can accurately be described as the first decorative era of the consumer's society. Boelee's work attempts to blur the distinctions currently held between pop culture and 'serious' culture, different genres and different art forms.

## CROWN LYNN

Changing times mean changing values - good and bad are constantly altering and alternating, and that which is considered favourably in one period will have its evils exposed in the next. This has been dramatically demonstrated throughout history with the industrial revolution, the emergence of fascism, and the atomic bomb. The story of Crown Lynn Potteries acts as a poignant domestic example of this phenomenon. Once considered the 'crowning glory' of the New Zealand ceramic industry, Crown Lynn offered "a touch of elegance and perfection", qualities which quickly became dated and unfashionable in the crassly commercial 1980's. Unmarketable in a time when marketing was everything, the company crumbled into obscurity until its principles were revived by Boelee when, on 31 August 1993, he incorporated a new body, Crown Lynn New Zealand Limited, as a company. Reassessed in the nostalgic, retro-minded 90's, the symbolic importance of the company to the New Zealand sense of identity can be recognised, and its spirit has been reborn within a new media and a new context. Crown Lynn products represented not only the hard-fought success of a small New Zealand firm within a country which generally showed a fond contempt for locally made goods, but suggested security, solidity and technical progress. The reassuring bulk of the New Zealand Rail cup, or the cereal bowls and vitrified mugs produced for American forces stationed in the Pacific (which needed to be of such robust construction that they could be loaded into the holds with a shovel) has remained with many people to this day, symbolizing a particularly prosperous and assured period of New Zealand history. From its inception, the Crown Lynn mark has meant everything from quality to kitsch, with products which, once considered prized household items, were later thrown away, and now are eagerly retrieved by collectors from junk sales. History passes by us like the frames of a film, and it is only by viewing the entire roll that we can see the whole picture.

The Crown Lynn image appears throughout *Things to Come*, but perhaps it is most deliberately placed in the work entitled "Mother

England". Sandwiched between the Union Jack and New Zealand's flag, the cups suggest not only the nurturing - and smothering - parent/child relationship which existed between Britain and New Zealand (an important stimulus in our search for identity), but also the distortions and transformations of view which can come with distance and time. From the antipodean perspective, the industrialisation of production in England seemed to be the epitome of positive progress, assuring both prosperity and expansion, whereas, for many in Britain it promised only a grimy hand-to-mouth existence in the Bosch-like shadow of endless smoke-belching factories. The imbalance in attitude is also affected by time, the dreams of the future inspired by the revolution were very different to the actual outcome; and by status, because the image of the factory would mean very different things depending on whether you were the company director or the factory hand. By exploring these images, Boelee encourages us not only to look, with the benefit of hindsight, at our expectations of the future, but also to judge how that future will affect the various strata of society.



"A crowning glory for your table setting,  
A touch of elegance, perfection you are getting,  
In a range, in your choice, in the quality you'll find in - Crown Lynn"  
(Crown Lynn advertising (ingle, 1960's))

### Geometric Shapes

Boelee's embracement of the geometric is undoubtedly linked to his exposure at a young age to the restrained principles of De Stijl. As a child he lived in a Rotterdam apartment building designed by J.J.P. Oud, the pre-eminent architect of the movement and the Chief Municipal Architect at that time. Geometric forms were at the heart of De Stijl philosophy, and one of the group's most celebrated members, painter Piet Mondrian, advocated the use in art of basic forms, particularly cubes, verticals and horizontals, suggesting that such an art best expressed universal spiritual values. Geometric shapes were the perfect vehicle for a movement which believed in the interdependency of art and life: the universal meaning of orthogonal lines (those intersecting at right angles) is a quest for an equivalence of opposites, a metaphor for the spiritual unity of humanity and the universe.

### Painted Frames

Boelee's distinctive technique of painting straight onto the walls of the McDougall Art Annex in Things to Come is the result of a natural evolution in his style. In the 1980's, he began a gradual progression away from the frame, first letting the paint encroach onto the casing, and then moving on to frameless boxes which projected out from the wall. In the work for this exhibition, he has created flat screens of laminated transfers and small, raised, silk-screened panels surrounded by accent colours applied in geometric shapes directly onto the walls. These colours become another layer in the interwoven structure of Boelee's work, which brings together diverse content to create a visual wall of sound. The artist's intention to bring art "off the walls" in an attempt to deconstruct the gallery space and provide an holistic art experience, has links to his previous work as a set designer for the theatre. The colours themselves are significant, Boelee's choices of hue were directly influenced by those of 1950's ceramics in a desire to manufacture a nostalgic atmosphere of times gone by, of times, perhaps, which never were.

Felicity Milburn

"They believed art could be capable of guiding mankind toward a brighter future, a new and revolutionary Utopia". (Visions of Utopia)

## RUDOLF BOELEE

Rudolf Boelee was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1940. He arrived in New Zealand in 1963 as a Merchant Seaman, and has worked at a variety of occupations in the hotel, freezing, dairy and paper manufacturing industries in both New Zealand and Australia. Boelee first began to paint in 1969. He was a finalist in the Tokoroa Painting Award in 1971, 1973 and 1976; a finalist in the Air New Zealand Centennial Art Award in 1980; and a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards in 1995. He was employed on Christchurch City Council Mural schemes in the years 1982, 1984 and 1985, and has been involved in both book illustration and record cover design. Boelee has also been associated with stage design, set painting, mask-making and acting for numerous Christchurch productions by the Court Theatre and the Free Theatre. Group shows in which Boelee has participated include: 50 Years, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1982; Erotic Art, Manawa Gallery, Christchurch, 1986; and The Chair, C.S.A. Gallery, Christchurch, 1991. He has also held solo shows at various venues throughout New Zealand, including: Rotorua Art and History Museum, Rotorua, 1971; Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch 1983; C.S.A. Gallery, Christchurch, 1985; Left Bank Art Gallery, Greymouth, 1994; Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, 1995; Southland Museum and Art Gallery, Invercargill, 1995; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1996; High Street Project, Christchurch 1996; and the City Gallery, Wellington, 1996-7. Boelee's work is held in many public collections throughout New Zealand, including: Left Bank Art Gallery, Greymouth; Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; Rotorua Art and History Museum, Rotorua; National Library of New Zealand, Wellington; the Museum of New Zealand / Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. His work was also purchased by the Haags Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, The Netherlands and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

### LIST OF WORKS

- Rangi and Papa
- Crown Lynn - Homage to Keith Murray
- The Shape of Things to Come
- Acropolis
- Mother England
- Left Bank - Homage to "Eric"
- Popular Mechanics
- The Man from the Prudential

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CHRISTCHURCH CITY COUNCIL



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It is possible to believe that all the human mind has ever accomplished is awakening. We cannot see, and there is no need for us to see, what the world will be like when the day has fully come. But it is out of our race and the lineage that will reach back to us in our littleness to know us better than we know ourselves, and that will reach forward fearlessly to comprehend this future that defeats our eyes. All this world is heavy with the promise of greater things, and a day will come, one day in the unending succession of days, when beings, beings who are now latent in our thoughts and hidden in our loins, shall stand upon this earth as one stands upon a footstool, and shall laugh and reach out their hands amidst the stars.

The shape of things to come - H.G.Wells



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