



Simon Ogden, *Last Supper*, 2012, found linoleum, 22k gold, plywood, 260 x 890 cm. Private Collection, Seattle, USA. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

# *The Accidental Archivist*

*Simon Ogden's works function as an archive of time and invented spaces, as well as fragments and a multitude of histories. His linoleum constructions are lyrical and thoughtful and suggest the interconnectedness of everything.*

By Cassandra Fusco

An archivist is one skilled in the collection of records containing primary source materials selected for preservation on the grounds of their unique, enduring cultural, historical, or evidentiary value. Traditionally, archives were founded by the state, to serve the state, as part of its hierarchical structure and organizational culture. The modern archivist, building upon the twin pillars of appraisal and arrangement/description, is charged with constructing inventories of impartial evidence.

Simon Ogden did not set out to be an archivist—not in the manner of Owen Jones (1809–1874) or William Morris (1834–1896) with whom he has been critically aligned,<sup>1</sup> or Fredrick Walton<sup>2</sup> who invented linoleum (Ogden's favored medium). Nevertheless, in common with these antecedent practitioners, Ogden is committed to producing work relevant to his time; modern yet mindful of underlying legacies. His work is literally constructed from fragments of the past—old linoleum—the patterns of which he reworks in a 'grammar

of ornament' that Morris and Jones may well have appreciated.<sup>3</sup>

Simon Ogden, who was born in Bradford, England, in 1956, is a graduate of Birmingham Polytechnic (First Class Honors in Sculpture, 1976–1979) and the Royal College of Art (Masters in Painting, 1980–1983). In the early 1980s, Ogden was studying painting at the Royal College of Arts, London; he had work exhibited at Christie's and was working part-time for the Council of Westminster as a street sweeper around the National Gallery, "a daily retreat." In 1983, following an archaeological excavation near Ngapuhi pa at Pouerua near Kaikōke in Northland, New Zealand, Ogden was offered a teaching position at the University of Canterbury. The opportunity, he says, gave him "the chance and the privilege of following a studio practice moving freely between the disciplines of printmaking, painting, and object-making, the fascinating interface these can present, and the opportunity to impart a curiosity of practice and intention to students, grounded in research."<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-1990s, happenstance (mortgage heavy and cash light) led Ogden to search for specific materials in builders' yards in Melbourne where, ironically, he had been awarded a placement at the prestigious Dunmoochin Artists Residence (1994–1995).<sup>5</sup>

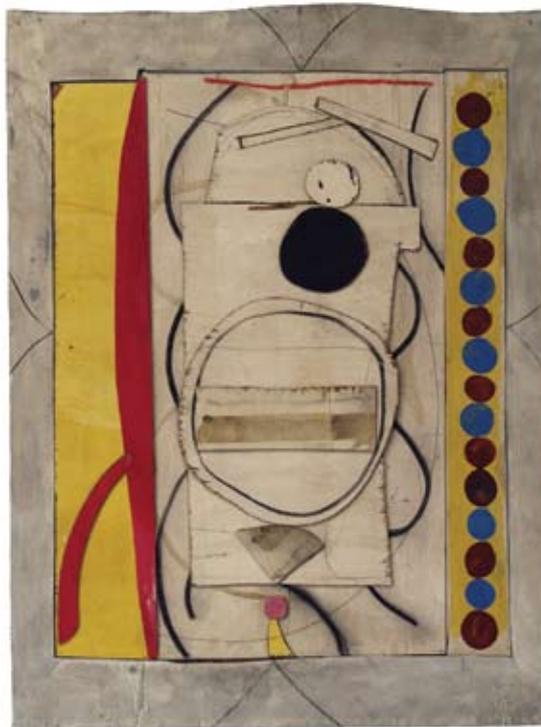
During his residency, Ogden worked prolifically, producing over 30 color-saturated timber inlays subsequently exhibited in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> "In retrospect," he says, "the initial necessity to search for materials, as much as the Australian landscape, and the work of Rover Thomas Joolama in particular, left an indelible, inspirational impression."<sup>7</sup>

"It is difficult not to ascribe enormous weight and value to travel for anyone. Travel grants and residencies are potentially invaluable and I encourage my students to pursue them. I was fortunate enough to participate as expedition artist to Labrador and Greenland in the early 1980s, and worked with the Smithsonian Institute on an excavation of a pre-Dorset dwelling; and enjoyed two periods of travel in

Australia in mid-1990s and Morocco in 2007. These opportunities allowed me to gain a first-hand understanding of these unique environments.

“**G**rowing up in the Lake District in England gave me an appreciation of nature that remains central to my life and work. I have a catholic curiosity of the past, of places, people and their expressive endeavors. It might be graven images or stones found in a quiet lane; the music of Aboriginal clapsticks, of Mahler and Pink Floyd, and children; and the dynamics of movement, whether it be caught in the lines of a drawing, a central activity to studio practice, or the illuminated color of momentary light in a Vermeer painting; or drifts of leaves, or the fissures opened in landscape by natural hazards or through hydraulic fracturing by energy companies. These curiosities inform my work conceptually and philosophically.

“Throughout my time at the Royal College I was an avid mudlarker on the foreshore of the Thames, just opposite the building that is now Tate Modern. I’d collect fragments of smooth surfaced, rich red-brown Samian ware, the tableware of Roman Britain; fragments of blue and white Delft and salt-glazed German-ware from the 16th century and then I’d look for examples of the complete item in the Victoria and Albert. In some respects my subsequent collecting of linoleum in New Zealand continued my mudlarking inclination toward the past and its



**Simon Ogden, Port Side Link** (from *Norwich Quay* series), 2005, gouache, acrylic, chalk, and charcoal on found wood on plywood, 130 x 98 cm. Collection of the Artist. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

decorative arts and I’m proud that I have now work in the V & A collection.”

Ogden is a practitioner of several visual languages: painting, collage, print-making, sculpture, ceramics, and, especially, constructions out of old linoleum. Up until the late 1980s, painting predominated: large abstracts, hard-edged and almost primary in color with suggestions of an underlying natural order. His subsequent efforts, co-incidental with his migration to New Zealand and travel in Australia,

remained abstract but grew more sculptural and color-saturated, often constructed from found materials.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to timber inlays, this period also produced whimsical assemblages.<sup>9</sup> In these a salient new element of vocabulary emerges: uneasy accommodations. Obsolete furniture, tools or parts thereof, share proximity with natural elements, diminutive desiccated branches evocative of the natural whole. Godot-like spaces yet somehow social.

In 2009, these edgy quasi-environs were redrawn in a series of oval base relief plaster casts. The form alone is telling, drawing close attention to the content. In appearance, these organic, low reliefs have the distilled authority of regal cartouche. The difference is one of tone and intention. They talk of birds, trees, seedpods, and butterflies, humble chairs and farm implements. And while these medallions do not contain Pharonic names or ‘offering formulae,’ they evoke analogous considerations: the reconciling power and cycles of nature, and the conservation of resources.

This language of nature and conservation, refined over three decades of practice, reaches a new level of clarity in Ogden’s most recent body of work collated in two exhibitions in Wellington this year: *Crossing the Border*<sup>10</sup> and *A Table to Dine For*,<sup>11</sup> with an almost restorative accent. They included: an inlaid table; several handcrafted rugs; seven large panels, and 81 small, synoptic works. The last, collectively titled *If you don’t use your leftovers*,



**Simon Ogden, Pearl** (from *Polling Booth* series), 2007, acrylic, charcoal, ink, found materials on canvas, 100 x 120 cm. Collection of Fiona Campbell, New Zealand. Image courtesy of Bowen Gallery, New Zealand.



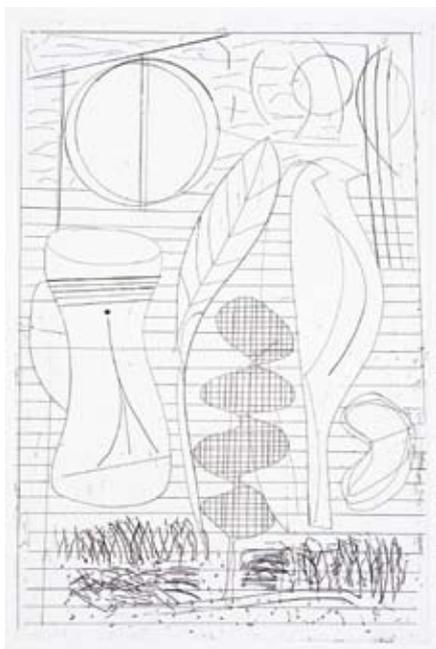
**Simon Ogden, Firefly Sweet Mackay**, 1994, paint and plywood on board, 198.4 x 198.4 cm. Private Collection, New Zealand. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

*you won't have any pudding*, echo and distill in miniature the themes played out in the larger compositions and the earlier ceramics. When asked what was the impetus or stimuli behind these various works and their various media, Ogden said, "They're a mixture; the lyrical and the antithetical, the real and the imaginary, the unpredictable and the intoxication of possibilities."

At its simplest, this maker's alembic is a bird in a bush (or tree or cactus) often beneath or beside dots or moons and a modicum of abstract geometry (some resembling exclamation marks, sometimes upended) and, occasionally, an aleatory dribble of paint.

From ancient times to the present, certain birds have been considered both as symbols (of endurance, freedom or immortality) and as forecasters of events.<sup>12</sup> Their unique ability to navigate land, sea, and air is celebrated in universal myths; in Inuit, Norse, Maori, and Egyptian art, and in the work of modernists such as Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) and Paul Klee (1879–1960). And yet they are also amongst the most vulnerable of creatures. Their habitats are constantly under threat.

In Ogden's work birds appear crucial and are as variously exotic as their habitats. In *Black Tree/Cacti Siesta* (2010), *Jeweled Forest* (2011), *Secret Garden* (2012), *Nine Songs* (2012), and the eighty-plus intimate *Leftovers* works, they face east and west and hang around upside down in arbors of the imagination. Like sentinels in profile, mostly stationary yet almost audible, they are individualized by 'plumage,' by a slight or deep swell of the chest and by subtle alterations to footing. Through a reduction of detail, and a synthesis



Simon Ogden, *Bird, Vase and Moon*, 2004, hard-ground etching on 250gm rag paper, 55.7 x 37.8cm. Public and private collections in New Zealand, USA, and Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

of precedents drawn from myth and memory, and the artist's own imaginative response to form, these birds and their environs, childlike in their 'fantastic' possibilities, coalesce in new orchestrations constructed from debris.

In these spaces center and periphery ripple, like the fusion of shared history and private memory, so that each work forms a play of parts. Cut and cant symbols and abstractions traffic freely in propinquity and invite endless circumnavigations. And while such spaces are spatially flattened and descriptively enigmatic (non-ranked and non-prescriptive,) they exude

a sense of innocence and artlessness. Like the eager, impulsive music of children before they've internalized the 'rules.'

This same innocent spontaneity animates both the magnified hopscotch world of Ogden's table and rugs. Both are ironic craftings turning lowly linoleum into a luxuriant tabletop and companion rugs. Little or large, these works convey a sense of serendipitous possibilities.

Yet, in spite of any initial appearance of fortuitous accident or naive ease, these are complex compositions. Whether it is a bird, butterfly, flower, or tree cut from or incised into an historical fragment, or an abstract off-cut resembling a hand-mirror or figure, once placed by the artist, each element is potentially oxymoronic: simple yet intentional, autonomous *and* allegorical, hermetic *and* collective. This is, perhaps, both the drama and the undercurrent played out across Ogden's largest work to date, *Last Supper* (2012).

While the title, *Last Supper*, appears to lean toward art history, this is another of Ogden's play of parts. The idiom (of natural and abstract possibilities) is established. And, indicative of any living language, there's something extra. In addition to the iconic bird in the bush, still sentinel, there's a crested cicada. Or is it a grasshopper? There's also a plethora of berries (?) and a new architectural element reminiscent of a gallows or a gibbet garden fork. Is *Last Supper* a retelling of a particular feast, or a cautionary narrative about depletion?

The constituent materials of all of these works have been retrieved by the artist from derelict or demolished colonial dwellings throughout New Zealand, as well as habitations in Australia, England, Holland, and France. Collated and re-vitalized, each work possesses a unique



Simon Ogden, *Base Reliefs (toward bronze)* Nos.1–5 of 16, 2006, plaster cast, approx. 73 x 25 cm. Collection of the Artist. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

provenance. Each is potentially a material archive: of its origins, the formative technologies, the designer, the owner, and perhaps even something of the socio-cultural context. Each has been diluted by time: wear and tear underfoot in someone's kitchen, round the walls of a derelict barn open to the elements or ripped from their surface by the shudder of an earthquake to reveal underlays of newspaper.<sup>13</sup>

With a Nabis-like touch,<sup>14</sup> synthesizing nature and personal symbolism, these materials are recast as prompts; pensive compositions aware of the power and potential of memory to commemorate, transcribe, and comment: but upon what?

Ogden's constructions restore and review the past implicitly, critiquing the values and relations these cast-offs signify. Thus, a fragment of discarded linoleum—retrieved, cut, and placed—becomes highly significant: simultaneously referencing former *and* future possibilities.

Ogden says, "The past has presence. Nothing happens in isolation; every choice or action involves consequences—it's all interconnected. We live within the shadow of uncertainty, the collapse of certain values. What we discard, whether it is resources or the opportunity to negotiate, characterizes us. I assemble found fragments and from these try to construct spaces in which the mind can respond to itself, an individual, capable of community."

**T**his, then, is the ethos and agency behind Ogden's works. He does not discern nor 'angst' over why the constituent materials have been discarded. The mind that orients and orders these remnants moves them beyond any single narrative; beyond what might initially be perceived as avian whispers of dismay in disturbed forests cut through with paths and pauses constructed from crazy-paving.

Couched in the idiom of nature, one that apparently owes little to any single tradition, Ogden reviews his materials, searching for and finding patterns and connections in place of fragmentation and compartmentalization. Like an archivist, in the sense that he appraises and assembles materials rich in cultural information, Ogden demonstrates that they can still serve as references of past-shared spaces and more. "Art records and reflects upon past and passing trends variously. But within this creative plurality, it also affirms identity and proposes critical models," Ogden says.

Simon Ogden archives glimpses of life and history in a language of fragments. Archetypal symbols and architectural elements co-exist with amorphous abstract shapes, open and closed arcs; reflections



**Simon Ogden, *If you don't use your leftovers, you won't have any pudding*, 2011, 81 individual works, linoleum on plywood, all 20 x 15 cm. Private collections, New Zealand.**

of the real (old linoleum) rescored in imaginary plays of plurality wherein illusions of perspective, depth, and distance are abolished.

If Ogden's re-visioning presupposes a lost ideal, the loss of a redeeming political perspective, how can he offer a shared social space without being prescriptive? Is he likely to be discounted as naïve or decorative?

"I try to construct spaces in which there are no 'signposts' or prescriptions. Art must offer this freedom of interpretation. Otherwise, no matter how well intentioned, it runs the risk of dogma," says Ogden. "There is no programmatic manifesto in my work. At best, it's invitations to curiosity. And if it is decorative, then it is in the spirit of all artifacts, of *adding* to life. We have to be able to imagine new ways."

Irrespective of this call for the

'new,' there is an enduring tension in the work, between the decaying materials and the invented spaces they offer. The underlying tone is one of quiet melancholy and nostalgia, perhaps inherent in the materials themselves: debris dense with history. Yet these are not landscapes of dislocation or existential awkwardness like his early assemblages of the period between 1990 and 2000—poetically elegant though they may be. Here, in Ogden's linoleum constructions, symbols and shadows amalgamate in sequences of great musicality. Layers of lines, colors, and textures are literally redrawn in an iconography of time, borrowed and new, ruminative and conceptual.

Much of Ogden's ability to conjure and archive the transience of time stems from at least two energies: from his innate sense of wonder of the natural world with its rapid and almost surreal shifts, and also



Simon Ogden, **A Table to Dine For**, 2011, inlaid table: found linoleum, 24k gold leaf, silver and copper leaf on plywood, 95 x 240 cm.

from his absorption with humankind's efforts to make sense of this, often through aesthetic endeavors such as patterns.

"For me," says Christchurch Art Gallery curator Felicity Milburn, "Ogden's greatest strength is the way he retains a palpable sense of discovery, the jubilant 'aha!' of the bricoleur, while delivering precisely constructed balances of pattern, texture, and color."<sup>15</sup>

Ogden's work is not about preserving the past. Through restoration he aims to revitalize "drop-dead gorgeous designs and patterns." They are not inventories of impartial evidence. They are synaptic works in which abstract conceptions such as memory and curiosity are rendered traceable through fragments and converted into innovative investigations and expectations. Within each work, abstractions and references coexist in an open system: of the individual imagination (that of the artist and viewer) and collective experience, restoring the past in spaces in

front of us—the present. This is the unitary intention *and* the innocence behind Ogden's work.

In the current climate of ephemeral records, virtual documents, decontextualized information, and increasing incidents of unscrupulous record destruction (witness the historical-cultural devastation in Iraq),<sup>16</sup> archivists face many challenges. They must be able to determine what records have enduring value as reliable memories of the past and help people find and understand the information they need in those records which in turn may well shape the future. And, while art does not necessarily hold a vigil on or archive the past, it will be interesting to see how modernist work such as Ogden's will be read in the decades to come.

As George Steiner has written, "Each new historical era mirrors itself in the picture and active mythology of its past."<sup>17</sup> Ogden's work appears to be drawn, literally, from fragments of the past. But through appraisal and rearrangement it is concerned with possibilities. Each

construction affirms this artist's endless, inventive conversation not only with the past but also with the mind's eye. Use up your 'leftovers' they urge; build something new. Whether naïve or fanciful, Simon Ogden's is a sustained effort. Δ

*Notes:*

1. Robin Neate, 'A Modernist Dot, The Moon' (2012), catalogue essay accompanying *Crossing the Border*, Bowen Galleries, Wellington, New Zealand.
2. Rubber manufacturer Fredrick Walton invented linoleum in 1860 and, together with Fredrick Thomas Palmer, went on to invent Anaglypta (made from cotton pulp) and Lincrusta (made of a linseed oil mixture), embossed wall coverings. The Scottish flooring manufacturer Michael Nairn introduced inlaid patterning that linoleum, later replaced in popularity by the vinyl (plastic-based) floor coverings of the 1960s.
3. Nineteenth-century Britain and its colonies, giddy with mass-production and economic profit, were dominated by



Simon Ogden, **Nine Songs**, 2012, found linoleum, 24k gold, plywood, 90 x 222 cm.

historical revivals: Neo-classicism and/or Gothic Revival overlaid with religious and social connotations. Such circumstances, impoverished design and shoddy mass-production, galvanized the reforming endeavors of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Less anti-industrial, Owen Jones sought to improve British manufacture through modern design and to teach the key principles of this at Britain's first School of Design (1837). Toward this end, Jones produced *The Grammar of Ornament* (1868), a summary of his design theories and a selection of the 'best' examples of ornament and decoration from diverse cultures and eras. It proved influential in the work of artists as diverse as William Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright.

4. This and all subsequent quotes from a series of interviews, 2008–2012, between the artist and writer.
5. 'Dunmoochin', the Cottles Bridge home of artist Clifton Pugh, passed into the custodianship of La Trobe University in 1992.
6. See: *New Works* catalogue essay by Adrienne Rewi, University of Canterbury Fine Arts Gallery, 1995.
7. Ogden comments the work of aboriginal artists Rover Thomas Joolama and his friend, Paddy Tjamati, were inspirational in their break with the tradition of producing tribal art on canvas and instead painted landscapes on dismembered tea chests. See: *New Works by Simon Ogden*, catalogue essay, Adrienne Rewi, 1995.
8. See: 'The Choreography of Abstraction' by Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, *Art New Zealand*, No. 61 (1991–1992) pp 38–41.
9. Assemblage and collage, *New Works* exhibition at the Brooke Gifford, and linocuts exhibited at The Ginkgo Gallery, Christchurch, 1985.
10. Bowen Galleries, Wellington, 2011.
11. Installation exhibition at the Martin Bosley's



**Simon Ogden, Black Tree/Cacti Siesta**, 2010, found linoleum, 24k gold, plywood, 88.6 x 111.6 cm. Collection of the Artist.

- Yaught Club Restaurant, Wellington, 2012.
12. From ancient times to the present, certain birds have been considered both as symbols (of endurance, freedom, or immortality) and as forecasters of events. In ancient Egypt, the direction east was considered the direction of life, because the sun rose in the east. West was considered the direction of death, of entering the underworld. Ogden's birds in the main face west.
13. Ogden has obtained such materials from buildings demolished in the wake of earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand.
14. *Les Nabi* was a group of post-Impressionists who rebelled against the confines of academic constraints and sought to integrate art and daily life through a synthesis

of nature and a personal aesthetic and symbolism. Their theories paved the way for the early 20th century development of abstract and non-representational art.

15. Christchurch Art Gallery holds four works by Ogden.
16. See: *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, edited by Peter Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly, Boydell & Brewer, 2008.
17. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, 1971.

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**Simon Ogden, Kaitareti Rose**, 2009, wool rug 4 panels: 250 x 720 cm, handcrafted by Dilana Rugs, Christchurch. Installation view at the *Floor wall floor wall* exhibition at Peloton Gallery, Sydney, Australia.