

OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

An old church in Te Aroha has become a shrine to “creative eccentrics”.



Compulsive hoarding, art collecting and junk recycling are eclectic predilections. Combine them with a profound love of folk art, as Stuart Shepherd does, and you get something rather sensational.

Shepherd is a passionate champion of self-taught art, loosely described as work by artists who have no formal training and don't follow the style of any particular school.

An artist himself, and a long-time New York resident, Shepherd encountered the concept when he attended the first Outsider Art Fair there in 1994. A year later, back in New Zealand, he met Martin Thompson, a homeless man who frequented Wellington's Cuba St. “At this time he was uncommunicative, a loner,” he says. “And he was always walking around with this huge bundle of drawings.”

Catching a glimpse of one of the drawings, Shepherd became very excited – here was exact mathematical logic melded with technical wizardry. One of Thompson's techniques involved creating numerical sequences and equations on graph paper, then cutting out errors with a scalpel, replacing them with clear tape and making another perfectly aligned picture of his corrections on the back.

“Marty was a man living in chaos, creating absolute perfection with 1mm graph paper and a fine-point pen.”



Stuart Shepherd

NICOLA FEENEY

Shepherd eventually landed Thompson – once known as “Mad Marty” in Wellington art circles – a spot in a 2005 show in New York called *Obsessive Drawing*, which led to his work becoming sought after internationally. In 2009, he took Thompson (who's now based in Dunedin) and four other self-taught artists to two art fairs in New

York, and another in Paris. All made windfall sales and their work has since become part of major collections.

By this time, Shepherd was a tenured professor at Massey University's School of Fine Arts in Wellington. “Teaching full time, promoting self-taught art and producing my own work was becoming too much of a juggle. I needed to find some kind of change,” he says.



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In 2011, he bought a grand villa and accompanying church in Te Aroha, a pretty spot midway between Thames and Shepherd's native Hamilton. He and his partner, Philippa McDermott, moved in last year. Both the affordability of the old vicarage and the generous space it provided proved attractive: “It gave me the ability to show and test new work without applying for funding to do so.”

After a lifetime spent trawling antique fairs, car-boot sales and flea markets, Shepherd has created a showroom in the front of the house celebrating the creative spectrum – from high art to folk art; from retro to bric-a-brac and “priceless” junk. There are pieces by New Zealand artists such as Robert Rapson (the latest winner of the prestigious Portage Ceramic Awards) and self-taught artist Ray Ritchie, as well as some of Shepherd's own design objects, which he once sold in New York.

Through the showroom and his website (www.selftaughtart.org.nz), Shepherd has developed quite a following, with sales to Australian, American and local collectors. Still a practising artist himself, he “upscales” furniture and junk into “parlour art” – decorative sculptural pieces with a nostalgic touch – with a sense of humour and irreverence never far from his work. In 2012, he curated a project in Belgium; last year, he showed a sculptural project at the Waikato Museum and exhibited three new works as part of the Hamilton Fringe Festival.

Institutions, he says, do not “own” art as an experience. “It is much bigger; it comes from living. Self-taught New Zealand artists should not need to get the approval of offshore authorities before their originality, authenticity and cultural value are recognised. Creative eccentrics should be celebrated for being different, not shamed – as Martin was for 30 years.” **PETER FEENEY**



Top: After a lifetime of collecting all manner of art, Stuart Shepherd has transformed an old Baptist church (pictured opposite page) and vicarage in Te Aroha into a showroom and working studio. Above: Shepherd found this mannequin's head on a New York street.