

Gavin Hipkins

The Domain

Extra info

The Domain is a 25-year survey of the work of New Zealand artist Gavin Hipkins, from art school experiments to the present day.

Early in his career, Hipkins made a purposeful decision to avoid being tied to a signature style. Instead, he makes use of the diversity photography as a medium has to offer, drawing out the nuances of different genres and techniques. As a result, a tour through his work is a tour through the rich history of photography, from slide shows to video, photograms to Photoshop.

Hipkins' work is also distinguished by his ongoing engagement with a core set of ideas. *The Domain* is not organised chronologically, but instead brings together bodies of work made at different times on similar topics, allowing us to see how Hipkins' explorations of themes such as the expression of national identities, the impacts of colonisation and the communication of utopian ideals have developed over time.

An expansive exhibition filling The Dowse's ground floor galleries, *The Domain* is organised into two halves, linked by the 40 images that make up *The Next Cabin*, which lead from one side of the building to the other.

One half of the exhibition sees the formal inventiveness of Hipkins' work brought to the fore. Early experiments with appropriation art are represented by *The Vision*, while works like *Zerfall* demonstrate his strategy of massing small images into large visual statements. *The Field* and *The Crib* show how Hipkins has evolved his use of the grid, and his ongoing fascination with circular forms. Manipulations of scales appear throughout the galleries, most notably in the radical magnification of the *Block Paintings* and two *Shaman* works.

The second half of the exhibition concentrates on two themes in Hipkins' work. Hipkins' frequent investigation of architecture as a symbol of 20th century modernist aspirations is demonstrated in works such as *The Trench* and *The Habitat*. His ongoing reflections on colonial history and settler identities are presented in *The Homely*, *The Next Cabin*, and *This Fine Island*, and related series *The Sanctuary*, *Empire* and *Second Empire*.

Traversing time, place and history, *The Domain* is an opportunity to explore the breadth of Hipkins' work, and to discover one of our most innovative investigations of photography—its power and its shortcomings.

There was once such a thing as a tourist photographer who could retrieve images of nature. Now there are only tourists within photography. There's no point anymore in being a photographer, at least in the sense of a photographer who attempts to distinguish themselves by producing a certain 'type' or 'style' of photograph. That's hopeless because the more photographs there are in existence—and there are millions added every day—the less chance there is for any individual image to detach itself from the photographic mass. The specialist-photographer today is like someone trying to chop down a forest of trees with an blunt axe: they'll eventually die of exhaustion.

—
GIOVANNI INTRA, 'PHOTOGENIC: GIOVANNI INTRA ON GAVIN HIPKINS',
SIGNS OF THE TIMES, WELLINGTON: CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON, 1997

The Habitat

GALLERY 1

At the end of the 1990s Hipkins toured New Zealand universities, photographing Brutalist and late modern buildings constructed during the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s to accommodate the post-Second World War generation as it entered tertiary education.

Art historian Christina Barton describes *The Habitat* as having “an aura, a decrepit atmosphere”. Rather than taking conventionally pristine architectural shots, Hipkins lingers on details, often signs of wear—cracked window panes, snaking vines, grimy surfaces. The sense of decay is heightened by his choice of materials: the 72 silver gelatin prints are printed on expired photographic paper, over or underexposed, each imprinted with an archival-style stamp.

The Habitat is an early example of Hipkins’ interest in evoking multiple historical moments in a single artwork. Three time periods are brought together: the 1950s, when the Brutalist style emerged in Britain amidst a post-war spirit of democratisation; the 1960s and 1970s, when New Zealand’s post-war generation took advantage of state-funded education and flooded into universities; and the end of the 1990s, by which time student loans had been introduced and dreams of a free education were rapidly fading. A style of architecture comes to stand in for a set of social ideals, and we are left wondering whether these hopes remain, or have themselves decayed away.

The Habitat 1999–2000

Silver gelatin prints
Courtesy of the artist

For all its formal diversity, on an aesthetic level Hipkins’ work does possess a certain unity. Whatever its format, his work is unashamedly good-looking. Even at its rawest—for instance, The Habitat (1999–2000), a series depicting the ‘rough poetry’ of New Zealand universities’ brutalist architecture, that was printed without refinement on expired photographic paper—it is still stylishly raw. Some have viewed this stylishness with a measure of distaste. Writing about The Habitat, one critic found herself unable to locate ‘anything other than a perfectly vague aestheticism’. Hipkins, however, sees his aestheticism as keyed to photography’s inherent seductiveness. It’s a seduction that defines our everyday consumption of the medium, whether in advertising, editorial or fashion images.

—
WILLIAM MCALOON, ‘MODEL WORLDS: A DECADE OF WORK BY GAVIN HIPKINS’, *ART NEW ZEALAND*, NO. 109, SUMMER 2003/2004

The Trench

Hipkins has frequently been described as a ‘tourist of photography’. The phrase encompasses two fundamental aspects of the way he works: the importance of travel to his practice; and the way he explores the history and formats of photography.

The photographs that make up *The Trench* were taken on Hipkins’ second trip to India in 1997, when he visited Chandigarh, the city established following the 1947 partitioning of India. French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier was commissioned to design the city, creating a radical modernist plan intended to embody the utopian ambitions for the city.

Le Corbusier laid Chandigarh out as a series of sectors peppered with gardens. In a prominent site in the Capitol’s sector 1 (the governmental compound) he placed one of his signature giant Open Hand monuments, to suggest ‘the direction of the wind (that is, the state of affairs)’.

The Trench consists of 80 images of Le Corbusier’s monument, double-exposed with blooms from Chandigarh’s famous rose garden. The grandiosity of the monument is brought down to a domestic scale, and softened or obscured by the roses. Suffused by a fading beauty, like *The Habitat* (1999–2000), *The Trench* suggests a dimming of utopian visions at the end of the 20th century.

The Trench 1997–1998
80-part looped slide projection
Courtesy of the artist

Gavin Hipkins is a photo-tourist. Literally, pilgrimages play a major role in his work, and, metaphorically, he is a tourist of photography itself, of the spaces defined by its histories, its modes, manners and mechanics.

—
ROBERT LEONARD, ‘GAVIN HIPKINS: THE GUIDE’,
ART AND TEXT, NO. 65, 1999

The Domain 2017

Vinyl print
Courtesy of the artist

City of Tomorrow 2017

Single channel digital video
Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland

TORBEN TILLY

City of Tomorrow 2017

6.1 sound installation
Endless loops, variable duration
Courtesy of the artist

The Homely

The 80 images that make up *The Homely* (of which almost half are shown here) were taken in New Zealand and Australia over a period of four years. The photographs were shot from the roadside, on day trips, at friends' houses: in some cases, museum dioramas are substituted for the real landscape. While no narrative thread connects one image to the next, collectively *The Homely* plays with myths about national identity put forth in what Hipkins describes as 'the turbulent wake of British imperialism': New Zealand as clean, green and beautiful; New Zealand as a physically and psychologically dark landscape; New Zealand as a place where people are happily at work and play in the great outdoors.

Aside from one photograph of a weathered waharoa (gateway) in a Rotorua tourist park, indigenous cultures are largely absent from the photographs. As curator William McAloon wrote:

The revisionism of the work—Hipkins' search for what was absent from earlier photographic models of national identity—was, however, ambivalent. Rather than seeking to correct those absences, The Homely deliberately heightened them, concerning itself with the activity of repression rather than its subject.

A sequel to *The Homely*, *The Homely II*, is currently being produced and will be displayed at City Gallery Wellington in March 2018.

The Homely 1997–2000

Framed C-type prints

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased with funds from the Graeme Maunsell Trust, 2002

LEFT TO RIGHT

Melbourne (Cross) 1999

Dunedin (Landscape) 1999

Auckland (Model) 1998

Sydney (Dogs) 1998

Wellington (Museum) 1998

Porirua (Village) 1999

Westport (Curtain) 2000

Sydney (Heads) 1998

Melbourne (Wood) 1999

Rotorua (Gateway) 1999

Sydney (Lion) 1999

Sydney (Flower) 1999

Christchurch (Corridor) 1998

Rotorua (Mud) 1999

Christchurch (Museum) 1998

Christchurch (Icicles) 1998

Huka (Falls) 1999

Wellington (Fern) 1998

Te Wairoa (Falls) 1999

Hokitika (Rocks) 2000

South Island (House) 1999

Wellington (Path) 1999

Rotorua (Fountain) 1999

Auckland (Mount Eden) 1999

Napier (Tree) 1999

Sydney (Museum) 1999

Sydney (Harbour) 1999

Auckland (One Tree Hill) 1999

Christchurch (Mask) 1998

Near New Plymouth (Clouds) 1999

New Zealand has a long tradition of landscape representation—as long as European colonialism in this region. Illustrations of idealised landscape helped entice my migrating forebears to make the long sail from Europe in the 19th century to a new colony called New Zealand. At this time, handpainted hybrid landscape scenes of gently rolling hills and still bays were infinitely more alluring than a gritty authenticity read in black and white photographs of the land and peoples to be ‘broken in’.

—
GAVIN HIPKINS, 2002

The Garden 2003–2017

Framed silver gelatin prints

Courtesy of the artist

KARL FRITSCH & GAVIN HIPKINS

Der Tiefenglanz (Palme) 2013

Archival pigment print, fine silver

Courtesy of the artists and Hamish McKay Gallery

Empire & Second Empire

The *Empire* and *Second Empire* series emerged at a time when the artist was becoming weary of the realist mode of photography—the constant travel required to make works like *The Homely* (1997–2000), and the repetitive act of searching the world for things that could be turned into photographs. To make them, Hipkins returned to an art school strategy of appropriating existing imagery, exchanging physical travel for flipping through books and catalogues, and his camera for a flatbed scanner.

The *Empire* works originate in mid-20th century British *Commonwealth* and *Empire* annuals, designed to inspire and educate children of the Commonwealth with the success of Britain's colonial activities; books that were already relics of the past by Hipkins' own childhood. Hipkins copied and manipulated illustrations from the annuals, and then digitally overlaid them with scanned and enlarged embroidered patches: symbols of subcultural identity or protest.

In *Second Empire*, illustrations are taken from sumptuous travelogues published in the late 19th century, and scanned, cropped and inverted before being overlaid with badges. As well as foregoing the camera, the *Second Empire* works are produced as printed canvases, further distancing them from Hipkins' previous photographic series.

The connections between the finely drawn illustrations and the gaudy patches seem nonsensical (in another series titled *Bible Stories* (2009), illustrations from a children's bible are overlaid with fragments from Goethe's play *Faust*, often to ironic effect). Hipkins describes the layering in terms of absurd juxtaposition, and is interested in the spaces created between the layers, where different time periods and cultural allegiances are brought together.

Empire (Track) 2007

C-type print

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland

Empire (Scrub) 2007

Pigment print

Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington

Empire (Ship II) 2007

C-type print

Collection of Tana and Dane Mitchell

Second Empire (Liner) 2008

Pigment print on stretched canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland

The Sanctuary

These images were shot in public gardens, parks and zoos, in cities as diverse as London, Shanghai and New Plymouth. While some of the gardens Hipkins visited come from other traditions, most are influenced by the British and French enthusiasm for garden construction, which colonists transported around the globe.

In these constructed landscapes Hipkins focuses on manmade aspects: paving, fencing, clipped hedges, artificial caves. Highlighting these instances of artifice, Hipkins underlines that these 'natural' environments are actually carefully cultivated to shape how we use and appreciate them.

An eerie, otherworldly note is introduced by the bright white form that hovers in each image. Writer Heather Galbraith has connected *The Sanctuary* series to spiritualist photography, in which materialisations of the spirit world were 'captured' in photographs, in the form of filmy, floating presences. Hipkins uses the reverse photogram method in *The Sanctuary* works: skeins of sequins, doilies, strings of beads and other haberdashery items are laid directly on photosensitive paper and then exposed to light. The resulting apparitions suggest a heavenly (or ominous) visitation in each of these garden settings.

The Sanctuary 2004–2006

Unique silver gelatin prints

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

Rotorua (Fence) 2005

London (Cottage) 2004

Shanghai (Field) 2005

Los Angeles (Ruins) 2006

London (Garden) 2004

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

Hong Kong (Garden) 2004

Los Angeles (Fort) 2006

Hong Kong (Pond) 2004

Hamilton (Cave) 2005

Santa Barbara (Cave) 2006

The employment of the photogram in The Sanctuary is a playful nod to early photographic experimentation, in particular to English gentleman-polymath William Henry Talbot Fox, who announced to the Royal Society in London his process of 'photogenic drawing'. In 1839 he revealed images which resulted from placing objects on top of photo-sensitised paper which had been exposed to sunlight (photograms) and in 1840, images printed from negatives made in a camera obscura (what we have come to call photographs).

—
HEATHER GALBRAITH, 'THE VERDANT IS VOLATILE', IN GAVIN HIPKINS: *THE SANCTUARY*, AUCKLAND: RIM BOOKS, 2006

This Fine Island

This Fine Island is Hipkins' second short film. He started making experimental video works at the end of the 1990s, but his proper debut as a filmmaker was with 2010's *The Master*.

Hipkins' transition towards filmmaking was driven partly by artistic interest and partly by the desire for new outlets for his work. By this time he was an established artist, and had become somewhat frustrated with the politics of the art world, where networks of curators, dealer galleries and museums determine an artist's progress. Filmmaking, with its alternative opportunities for production and distribution (particularly internationally), became appealing.

This Fine Island suggests how the concerns and methods that Hipkins pursued in his still photography would be translated into his film work. As with the *Empire* (2007) and *Second Empire* (2008) works in this gallery, *This Fine Island* is a collage of sources and time periods. Extracts from Charles Darwin's account of visiting the Bay of Islands in 1835 published in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) are read by a narrator as we watch a Pākehā girl and Māori boy on a camping trip today. As they pitch a tent, explore the landscape and visit an old kāinga (settlement), Darwin's condescending observations about Māori are followed by his delight in finding an English-style farmhouse surrounded by gardens, which gives him hope for the future of 'this fine island'. As curator Robert Leonard observes, the young couple "stands in for us, as viewers, pondering colonialism from the other end of history".

This Fine Island 2012

Super 16mm film transferred to digital video

Running time: 12 min

Courtesy of the artist

Hipkins knows that colonialism and photography were connected intimately. Photography provided the evidence for colonial expansion, documents of the now and the to-be. Colonial photography was modernist, expansive, aggressive. Bring the modern to the colonies it argued, shift to a new place, tame nature, clear forests, build dams, create lakes. Its images are both strange ('What will I find?') and familiar ('a home of my own').

LAURENCE SIMMONS, 'EREWHON: FILMING NOWHERE', *PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW*, VOL. 21, NO. 2, 2015

The Next Cabin

The Next Cabin is a continuation of the approach Gavin Hipkins took in the preceding series *The Homely* (1997–2000). *The Homely* was shot in New Zealand and Australia: *The Next Cabin* was created when Hipkins was studying at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and documents North America's Pacific Northwest region.

The Next Cabin was partly inspired by the Republic of Cascadia, a movement that proposed a sovereign nation based on the bioregion of Cascadia, stretching along the coastline from southern British Columbia in Canada through Washington and Oregon to northern California in the United States. The breakaway movement is based on the political, social and environmental similarities of these states, as well as a historical sense that the northwest region is not well served by the far-off government in the east. In this light, *The Next Cabin* could be read as a fragmented portrait of a nation that does not exist.

Canadian writer Trevor Mahovsky identifies the underlying themes of *The Next Cabin* as “wanderlust and the pioneer spirit”. Symbols of frontier life, such as the log cabin, are mixed with surreal jolts, like the menacing faceless fur-trimmed anorak and the coffin-shaped marker dedicated to ‘Blinky’. Like New Zealand and Australia, Canada and the United States are nations with unresolved colonial histories: as with *The Homely*, *The Next Cabin* concerns itself with hints and glimpses of settler communities, while communities of indigenous people are conspicuous in their absence.

The Next Cabin 2000–2002

Framed C-type prints

Courtesy of the artist; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington;
and Starkwhite, Auckland

LEFT TO RIGHT

Vancouver (Petroglyph) 2000

Vancouver (Figurehead) 2000

Vancouver (Barrel) 2000

Vancouver (Anchor) 2000

San Francisco (Ship) 2001

Los Angeles (Panel) 2000

Mount Seymour (Photos) 2000

Vancouver (Ducks) 2001

Harrison (Sign) 2000

Victoria (Fur) 2001

Vancouver (Cabin) 2000

Harrison (Knitting) 2000

Victoria (Log) 2001

Vancouver (Trail) 2002

Vancouver (Stable) 2001

Eureka (Model) 2000

Los Angeles (Sign) 2000

Eureka (Wood) 2000

San Francisco (Pet Cemetery) 2001

Vancouver (Notice) 2000

Near Miranda (Carving) 2000

Oakland (Valley) 2001

Vancouver (Fish) 2000

Capilano (River) 2001

Whistler (Landscape) 2000

Vancouver (Frisbee) 2001

Point Roberts (Farm) 2001

San Francisco (Grave) 2001

Bolinas (Flies) 2000

Whistler (Road) 2000

San Francisco (Hood) 2001

Vancouver (Van) 2000

Los Angeles (Light) 2000

Near Seattle (Sky) 2001

San Francisco (Sign) 2000

Pasadena (Tree) 2002

Victoria (Cave) 2001

Vancouver (Door) 2000

Victoria (Landscape) 2001

Vancouver (Hedge) 2000

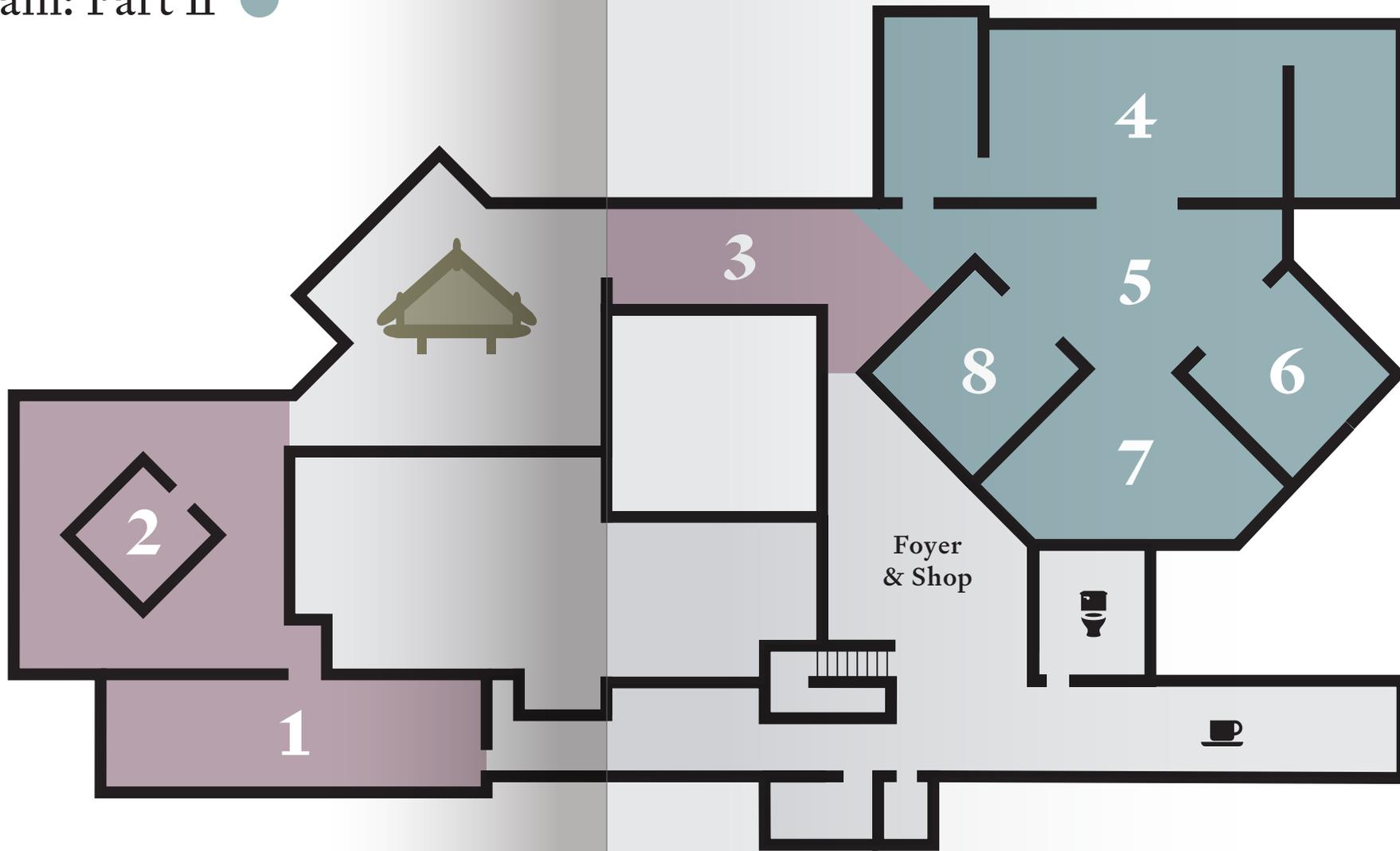
The Map

The Domain: Part I ●

GALLERIES 1-3

The Domain: Part II ●

GALLERIES 4-8



The quality of Hipkins' project is in his careful process of photographically recording fleeting encounters with the visible world, in his collecting and then his reconstituting these visual fragments over and over again in new configurations like some form of compelling but irresolvable puzzle. We might speculate then that Hipkins makes images not to order the world, but simply as a means of thinking a passage through it.

—
BLAIR FRENCH, 'THE BIG PICTURE: GAVIN HIPKINS AND INTERNATIONAL PHOTO-ART', IN *GAVIN HIPKINS: THE HOMELY*, WELLINGTON: CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON, 2001

KARL FRITSCH & GAVIN HIPKINS

Der Tiefenglanz (Kristall) 2014

Archival pigment print and mixed media

Courtesy of the artists and Hamish McKay Gallery

The Vision

GALLERY 4

The Vision is a restaging of an installation made for Hipkins' first public gallery solo show, *The Vision*, held at Palmerston North's Manawatu Art Gallery (now Te Manawa).

To make the works for the original show, Hipkins selected from a stockpile of 1970s posters found in a West Auckland bargain basement store—the kinds of decorations you find in a teenager's bedroom or student flat. The posters were arranged into groupings of four or five, each of which seemed to emphasise an underlying sentiment: visions of the good life, escapist fantasies, repressed desires. As Hipkins recalls, the posters lent themselves to a “remarkably coherent aesthetic statement”; they were also a cheap and efficient way for a recent graduate to make a large visual statement. For this recreated installation, the posters were sourced online and shipped from Ukraine.

Hipkins started reprinting found images while at art school in the early 1990s. Ironic appropriation of mass media imagery was part of the zeitgeist, with the lingering influence of the ‘Pictures Generation’, a loose grouping of American artists, including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince, who in the 1970s and 1980s re-used existing images from sources both high and low to make artworks that challenged assertions of power, value and identity.

In retrospect, *The Vision* looks a lot like juvenilia. Its overt tackiness seems at odds with Hipkins' later works, which share a distinctive elegance. In *The Domain* however this early installation can be seen alongside works like *The Port* (2014), which draws on H.G. Wells' 1895 novella *The Time Machine* and the *Empire* (2007) works with their illustrations from mid-20th century publications, showing how Hipkins has continued to draw on strategies of borrowing and coupling to make his works.

The Vision 1995/2017

Found vinyl prints

Courtesy of the artist

Falls & Zerfall

Hipkins produced his first *Falls*—works made of uncut commercially-printed strips of film, shown pinned to the wall—while still a student at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland.

Each ‘fall’ consists of approximately 24 images from a roll of film, shot in one session and printed without editing. To begin with, Hipkins turned the camera on himself and his immediate surroundings, seeming to casually document his domestic environment. In this way, the *Falls* become something of a performance: what we see is the result of how the artist moved, where his attention was drawn.

Initially, the *Falls* were hung individually, or in small groups. Over time, the groupings became larger and more cohesive. Hipkins started incorporating coloured blank cells and purpose-bought objects, and then imagery copied from books and websites. *Zerfall* was Hipkins’ first major international work, shown at the 1998 Biennale of Sydney. The title refers to a term used by German philosopher Theodor Adorno to describe a state of cultural exhaustion or decay. At the time, Hipkins’ choice of the word *Zerfall* resonated with a growing sense that the world had become confusingly, even exhaustingly, awash in images.

The *Falls* have a strongly cinematic quality: they look like strips of film hanging at an editor’s desk, waiting to be cut together into a narrative. They prefigure both the frieze format used in works like *The Homely* (1997–2000) and *The Next Cabin* (2000–2002), as well as Hipkins’ later move into filmmaking. Likewise, the small cheap objects Hipkins bought for inclusion in the *Falls* prompted another line of enquiry: glamorous, tightly cropped ‘portraits’ presented at monumental size, such as *The Shaman (Yellow)* (2006) and *The Shaman (Red)* (2006), shown in this gallery.

The Falls reference documentary photography, not its aesthetic, not even its content, but rather its ethic. Documentary photography revolves around the idea that the viewer gets an unedited and disinterested report of the scene photographed. Of course, this never happens—out of rolls of film only a few images ever tell the right truth. Hipkins has taken the concept more literally than the documentarists themselves. He refuses to edit. He appears to photograph so quickly that only some of the images in each sequence are focused, but he prints them all. He courts an element of chance.

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BARBARA BLAKE, ‘IMAGE SAMPLER: RECENT PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS BY GAVIN HIPKINS’, *ART NEW ZEALAND*, NO. 71, WINTER 1994

Falls 1992

Zerfall 1997–1998

C-type prints

Courtesy of the artist

The Colony

The Colony was produced for the 2002 São Paulo Biennial. An open-ended work, it can be hung in any order so long as the overall form is that of a city skyline. The 100 individual photographs are of polystyrene models that the artist has painted, glued together, then photographed in front of makeshift paper backdrops. Without cues for scale, we could be looking through a microscope at spores on a petri dish, or through a telescope at habitations in an alien landscape.

This work brings out the sci-fi undertones latent in many of Hipkins' images. "Science-fiction," Hipkins has written, "is marvellous because the styles date so quickly and become classic in that same fashionable moment." *The Colony* presents a model world, a vision of the future shared by sci-fi movies and 1960s counter-cultural propositions, where cities of geodesic domes symbolise new social structures and freedoms. The cheap materials evoke the endearingly low-cost stage sets of sci-fi tv series, while the work's title (like many of Hipkins' titles) mimics the portentous titles of sci-fi and horror films: *The Shining*, *The Omen*, *The Thing*.

Of course, the communities of geodesic domes proposed by 1960s dreamers never transpired. As Hipkins has said himself, parodying this failed idealism would be easy, but "not so interesting". Instead he chooses to work with the optimism of the period and the sci-fi genre, while also acknowledging that stories of discovery and adventure are usually told from the colonist's perspective. He writes:

In their shapeliness, these photographs of small models aspire to slot into the category of generic mounds, hybrid forms and nowhere colonies that are found under the scientist's microscope, the astronomer's telescope, or the captain's periscope. Anywhere, but always, like history, at the end of a lens.

The Colony 2000–2002

Unique set of 100 C-type prints

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

The Shaman

The inclusion of the *Shaman* works in *The Domain* represents another strand of Hipkins' practice: lush, large-scale depictions of seemingly unremarkable everyday objects.

Hipkins' interest in photographing small store-bought objects was piqued when he began collecting trinkets—usually cheap, round and tactile—to incorporate into his *Fall* works. Where in the *Falls* such items are often chopped or smeared over a number of frames, in these portrait-like works they are isolated, even idolised, by his careful treatment.

The aesthetic of these images capitalises on the inherent seductiveness of photography, and its ability to feed our desire. Hipkins has an appreciation for the late American photographer Irving Penn's photos for cosmetics brand Clinique, and in the *Shaman* works we see the hyper-groomed aesthetic of high-end editorial photography.

Curator Athol McCredie has drawn a connection between the *Shaman* works and the theory that photography has the power to find a subject's 'true essence'. In the words of 20th century American photographer Edward Weston, the photographer aspired to capture "the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh". However, the way Hipkins manipulates scale and removes context from these images does not suggest a drive for the quintessential image; instead, once more he seems to be testing photography's capacity for creating ambiguity.

The Shaman (Red) 2006

Unique state pigment print
Collection of The Dowse
Art Museum, purchased 2017

The Shaman (Yellow) 2006

Unique state pigment print
Courtesy of the artist
and Starkwhite, Auckland

The Field

GALLERY 4

At first glance *The Field* could not be more different from *The Vision*, the other major work Hipkins showed in 1995. *The Field* is abstract where *The Vision* is narrative; hand-made where *The Vision* is appropriated; black and white where *The Vision* is garishly coloured. Yet the works are connected by a key characteristic seen throughout Hipkins' career: the massing of discrete elements to take over and transform space.

As with *The Vision*, in *The Field* Hipkins found a cost-effective way of making a large-scale, high impact work. Produced when he was a technician at Wellington Polytechnic's School of Design with access to free chemicals and darkroom facilities, *The Field* makes use of a stash of expired photo paper that had been donated to the Polytechnic. In a mammoth undertaking Hipkins produced 1,500 photograms, each made by placing a polystyrene ball on a sheet and then exposing it to light. The finished work is hung in random order, and the number of sheets used is dependent on the size of the wall: approximately a third of the total are used in this installation.

The overall effect of *The Field* is of visual dazzle. The work could be seen as reaching for the sublime, but writers have tended to challenge straightforward interpretations. Curator Robert Leonard wrote in 1999 that the work "suggests a hollow, weary, denatured sublime—the sublime as a trope that can be routinely summoned, restaged, wheeled out, to satisfy the masses." Or as art historian William McAloon observed: from a distance *The Field* looks like a spangled sky—up close the stars become eyes, and suddenly the sublime is looking back at you.

The Field 1994–1995

Silver gelatin prints
Courtesy of the artist

The Well

These rarely seen works show how Gavin Hipkins has engaged with the history of his medium as an emblem of the modern period.

The years between the First and Second World Wars were a productive time in the development of photography. In the 1920s and 1930s a host of innovative forms and techniques emerged. Many artists were attracted to the possibilities of the photogram, a photographic image made without a camera by placing objects directly on to the surface of a light-sensitive material and then exposing it to light. Using this 'lens-free' method released artists from the common view that photography's true value lay in its capacity to make accurate reproductions of the external world, and opened up space to create playful, poetic and deceptive artworks.

The *Well* works also represent another strong theme in Hipkins' practice: the use of the grid as an organising principle. Even more so than photograms, the overt use of the grid was a signature of 20th century art. As art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss observed in an influential 1979 essay, the grid emerged at the start of the century in Cubist painting, and rapidly became the shaping feature of abstract painting. Krauss described the grid as an emblem of modernity: "the form that is ubiquitous in *our* century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one."

The Well (Black) 1999

Silver gelatin prints
Collection of the Dunedin Public
Art Gallery, purchased 1999
with funds from the Dunedin
Public Art Gallery Society

The Well (White) 1999

Silver gelatin prints
Courtesy of the artist and Hamish
McKay Gallery, Wellington

It is impossible, surveying the full expanse of Hipkins' work, not to notice the pervasiveness of circular forms. They are there in every format and at every scale: the round light-switches in the Falls, the spheres that give form to photograms like The Field and The Coil, the gravid bobbles of The Colony, the ghostly doilies in The Sanctuary, sheeny buttons in The Terrace, embroidered ovals in Empire and Second Empire, the painted semi-circles of the Block Paintings. Writers have hypothesised on the circle in many ways, but one intriguing possibility emerges from Hipkins' own childhood. As an eight-year-old, he nearly drowned in a motel swimming pool. He retains a visceral memory of seeing from beneath the surface of the water the circle of an inner-tube floating above him, dark against the sunlight. A subliminal memory, perhaps, that has directed his vision ever since?

—
COURTNEY JOHNSTON, 'VIEW FINDER', IN *GAVIN HIPKINS: THE DOMAIN*, WELLINGTON: VICTORIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017

The Field (Part II)

While cinematic references—like the scrolling film-strips of the *Fall* works—abound in Hipkins’ early work, he only made his first moving image works in 1999. The two videos he made that year were studio experiments, exploring transformation in materials. In *The Relay* Hipkins recorded bath bombs dissolving one after another in a tub of water in a long single take; in *The Rim*, coloured jelly crystals dissolve in milk. Curator Justin Paton saw an unsettling physicality in *The Rim*, writing in an essay that “crystal-sodden plates of milk bloom to resemble both wounds and eyes”.

The Field (Part II) is more elaborate than these earlier videos, but much simpler than the narrative short and feature-length films Hipkins would begin making in 2010. A field of coloured polystyrene balls is suspended in a darkened room; Hipkins negotiates the array with a camera that has a torch fixed to its underbelly. Studio fixtures—a ladder, a tripod—are glancingly revealed, but the focus is on the camera’s up-close point of view, nosing its way through the hanging globes.

The physicality Justin Paton saw in that earlier film work is accentuated here, as the camera winds and jostles its way around the balls. Hipkins was well aware of an erotic charge, later writing:

The (hidden) lens in its phallic glory probes and toys with the suspended balls in a sexually charged (and at times) aggressive manner. A rhythmical rimming and swaying occurs as polystyrene balls spill around and around the lens hood; as if it were in a prolonged tease.

The Field (Part II) 2004

Single-channel digital video

Running time: 11 min 21 sec

Courtesy of the artist

The Crib

As Hipkins' practice develops, we see an evolution in the way he uses accumulated elements and the grid format. The strategy of clustering seen in earlier works like *The Field* (1994–1995) and *Zerfall* (1997–1998) began to resolve into simpler forms like the *Well* works (1999) next door; in *The Homely* (1997–2000) and *The Next Cabin* (2000–2002) the frieze format suggests a single thread of thought drawn out of the crowd for closer inspection.

The Crib is one of the final massed photogram works Hipkins made. Less visually dense than earlier works, rather than having a dazzling effect *The Crib* has the sense of a rhythmic beat. There is also no denying that the globular shapes resemble a pair of breasts; ambiguous rounded forms can be detected across Hipkins' works, including in *The Colony* (2000–2002), where colourful humps suggest everything from breasts to cupcakes to pup tents.

The Crib 2000

Silver gelatin prints

Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington

Block Paintings

GALLERY 7

Gavin Hipkins made his first *Block Painting* photographs in 2015. As with *The Colony* (2000–2002), the artist creates his subjects by hand: miniature wooden blocks are painted and then photographed with a very shallow depth of field, rendering every touch of the paintbrush in brilliant detail.

Where *The Colony* is full of warm 1970s tones, the *Block Paintings* are crisp and cool in their colouration: cream, white, crimson, black, grey, azure blue. *The Colony* has a bouncy, almost childish energy: in contrast, the *Block Paintings* appear to be held in a moment of suspended animation. The vast inflation of size distances the toy blocks from their origin as play things, and turns them into something more akin to abstract sculpture.

As with the two *Shaman* works included in *The Domain*, the radical magnification of the *Block Paintings* invites us to luxuriate in close observation. We see how the paint enfolds the wooden surfaces, clinging to every bump and striation. Corners lose their geometric perfection and spatial relationships distort: the blocks seem almost to hover against each other, rather than sit one atop the other.

When we look at the *Block Paintings*, we are clearly looking at photographs, but we are also looking at paintings, and at sculptures. As with so many of his works, in this series Hipkins continues to test the edges of what photography can be and do.

Block Painting XIX 2016

Block Painting XX 2016

Unique state pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington

The Port

The Port shows how much Hipkins' approach to filmmaking changed in the ten years after he made *The Field (Part II)* (2004), also shown in this gallery. The film has an ambitious reach, seeking to take in subjects including urban design, the charting of the solar system, time travel, environmental fragility, the vagaries of memory and the occasional uncanniness of familiar places.

The Port mixes times and sites, both real and imaginary. Footage from Stonefields (a suburban community recently built in an ex-quarry in Auckland) is interspersed with documentation of India's Jantar Mantars, large-scale astronomical devices built in the early 1700s to tell the time at an incredible level of accuracy. The narrated soundtrack is drawn from H.G. Wells' novella *The Time Machine* (1895), the book credited with popularising the idea of time travel using a machine to control the explorer's path and destination. Victorian science-fiction, 18th century scientific aspiration and contemporary city planning are meshed together in an ambiguous way, leaving us to weave our own meaning from their intersections.

The Port 2014

Digital video and separate audio track

Running time: video 20 min 14 sec; audio 17 min 24 sec

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland

The history of empire and its resistance finds a mirror in the entangled histories of photography and cinema. Throughout Hipkins' work, we see an intelligence seeking connections across the personal and subjective, the industrial and commercial, the abstract and expressive, and colonial and nationalist regimes' use of images. From his early project The Field (1994–1995) onwards, images exist in relation to other images, in sequences and constellations of what is shown and what is not. Images are always situated within this flow and fold—between images made in the past and images that will be made in the future.

GEORGE CLARK, 'THERE IS NO MOTION IN A MOTION PICTURE: ON CINEMA, PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ESSAY FILM', IN GAVIN HIPKINS: *THE DOMAIN*, WELLINGTON: VICTORIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017

GAVIN HIPKINS (born 1968, Auckland) holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia. He is currently Associate Professor at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland.

Hipkins has shown extensively in exhibitions and film festivals throughout New Zealand and internationally. He has held a number of residencies, including the inaugural New Zealand artist residency at Artspace Sydney, the McCahon House Residency, and the International Studio and Curatorial Program artist residency in New York, and in 2002 was nominated in the inaugural Walters Prize award.

Gavin Hipkins is represented by Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington and Starkwhite, Auckland.

Gavin Hipkins: The Domain is accompanied by an extensively illustrated book published by Victoria University Press and featuring three new essays alongside a selection of past writing on Hipkins' work. Supported by Creative New Zealand, Starkwhite, Hamish McKay Gallery and The Dowse Foundation. Available for purchase in Mine: The Dowse Shop.