



## a fine line

Martin Poppelwell's home and pottery studio in Napier looks like a dilapidated commune. Inside, the artist behind a best-selling range of homeware spends his days toeing the delicate line between art and commerce

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**HOMEWARE - THE HEART SINKS** at the mention of the word. It seems every one-time hardware merchant, gift shop and discount red barn has jumped on the bandwagon of cheap pastel dinnerware and matching lampshades. What started as the promise of good domestic design has become the catch-all phrase for shelves lined with cheap imports. Sadly, many local artists and designers, drawn in by the initial promise of a new income, have subsequently seen their artistic reputations evaporate.

How is it then, that Hawke's Bay artist Martin Poppelwell has been able to chart these tricky waters safely? He is an artist who makes pots but also one who paints paintings. He makes prints and also designs cushions, tea towels and duvet covers - largely for his former Sandi Reefman's Esther Diamond range. Yet his reputation as an artist continues to grow. In other words, homeware has

clearly done Martin Poppelwell no harm.

Success comes in part through the seriousness with which this artist takes the notion of house and home. Our houses are, in the end, our greatest art projects. This doesn't just apply to professional artists but to all of us who over a lifetime will create a living environment that both reflects and energises our lives. A carefully furnished room says much more about us and our fit within contemporary society than does any specially created art gallery installation.

This theory - mine, not Martin's - is not a popular one, not least among those contemporary artists who create deathly gallery installations under the misapprehension that they are profound occurrences. But in the end, few contemporary art projects have the complexity and passion that a good house has, and even fewer have the ability to reflect



**OPPOSITE PAGE** The studio in Poppelwell's Napier home where he produces paintings and prints, and designs cushions, tea towels and duvet covers. **ABOVE** The artist at his front door. **TOP LEFT AND RIGHT** Various works by Poppelwell and other artists, including the 'Rooster' by Jeff Thomson.





TOP Various ceramic works by Martin Poppelwell. ABOVE Poppelwell's pottery studio is in the basement of his villa where his works are created among sketches, broken shards of earlier works and a fine layer of white dust. ABOVE RIGHT The house was unaffected by the Napier earthquake, meaning it has retained architectural features from the 19th century. The studio is furnished with items rescued from Napier Hospital. OPPOSITE Main work by Martin Poppelwell. Bottom row, second from left by Gavin Chilcott.

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contemporary life so directly. It's interesting to observe just how often contemporary artists make great decorators.

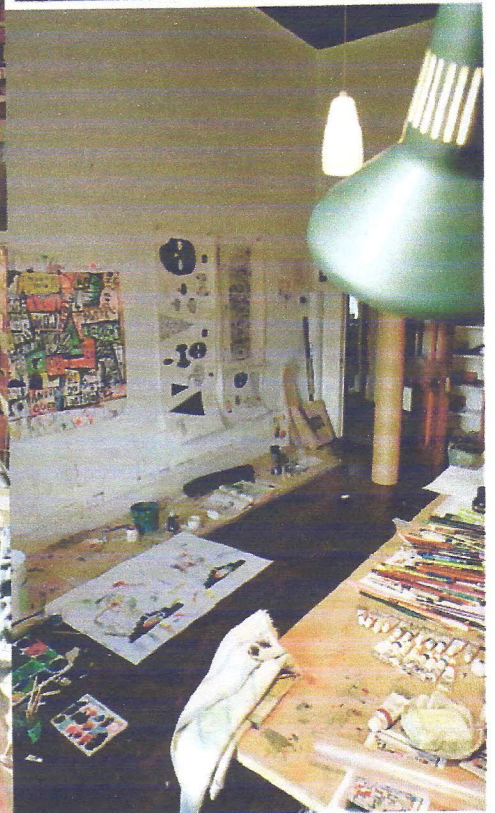
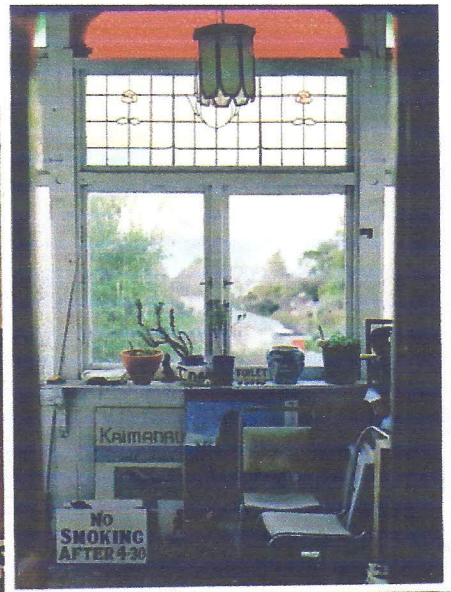
Martin Poppelwell lives in the little-known part of Napier that remained unaffected by the earthquake and thus remains largely unchanged since the century before last. His home is a large-scale rambling villa set high above a steep hill road. The house is large enough to contain a pottery studio in its basement and a handsomely sized painting studio that opens onto an overgrown paddock of grass that was once a garden. With its faded exterior paint and rampant vines pressing against the weatherboards, the house reminds viewers of one of those legendary student flats of the 1970s. In this case, a dwelling that

would once have housed a commune now houses an artist, his possessions and a long list of visiting friends.

Inside, visitors are confronted with layers of decorating history and a general air of dilapidation. This is one of those houses where you initially yearn to get your hands on the place and renovate it. Yet once you spend a few hours here you soon realize that if you were to change anything, you would lose what makes this place special.

Poppelwell's approach is to add layers rather than attempt any real change. Paintings and objects accrue over surfaces dotted with Poppelwell's own works and those of his friends and mentors. He has an unerring eye. Objects found in unexpected





ABOVE The rambling villa is located up a steep Napier hill and is reminiscent of the huge student flats of the 1970s. TOP The bedroom features Esther Diamond linen with a Poppelwell print, designed by his partner Sandi Reefman. TOP RIGHT The pottery studio. ABOVE RIGHT The house is large enough for a painting studio to be housed in the old formal function room.

places are hauled home to take their place among works by Ralph Paine, Gavin Chilcott and Daniel Malone. Many objects from his most recent haul of finds from the evacuated Napier Hospital site have newly esoteric meanings in their new setting, feeding complexity into Poppelwell's artwork, which is produced in the surrounding rooms.

Poppelwell's painting studio takes up one of home's old formal function rooms and its lofty scale and grand proportions make a spectacular setting for the works that he props against the wall or lies on the floor as he works. Old furniture, again rescued from Napier Hospital, gives the room an unexpectedly functional appearance.

Yet the real functional powerhouse here is the pottery studio, wedged under the house in far less grand circumstances. Here, half-

finished pots mix with broken shards of earlier works – many of which come from the kiln in twisted and tortured forms. The artist's own distinctive hand-written texts or sketches are pinned to the match-lined walls of the space, or lie covered in a coating of thin white clay dust on the bench. New works, from the latest firing, perch on almost any flat surface while others works placed on the ground do battle with the encroaching weeds.

The best works, or the ones Poppelwell decides he is pleased with (or perplexed and disturbed by) are relocated upstairs to a small room adjacent to the kitchen, where they will be arranged in the middle of the floor as part of a casual viewing space. Here, works get visually tested, but like all good homeware – the rarest of things – the true test is one step away, through the kitchen next door. H