

Art

BY ANDREW PAUL WOOD

Under his thumb

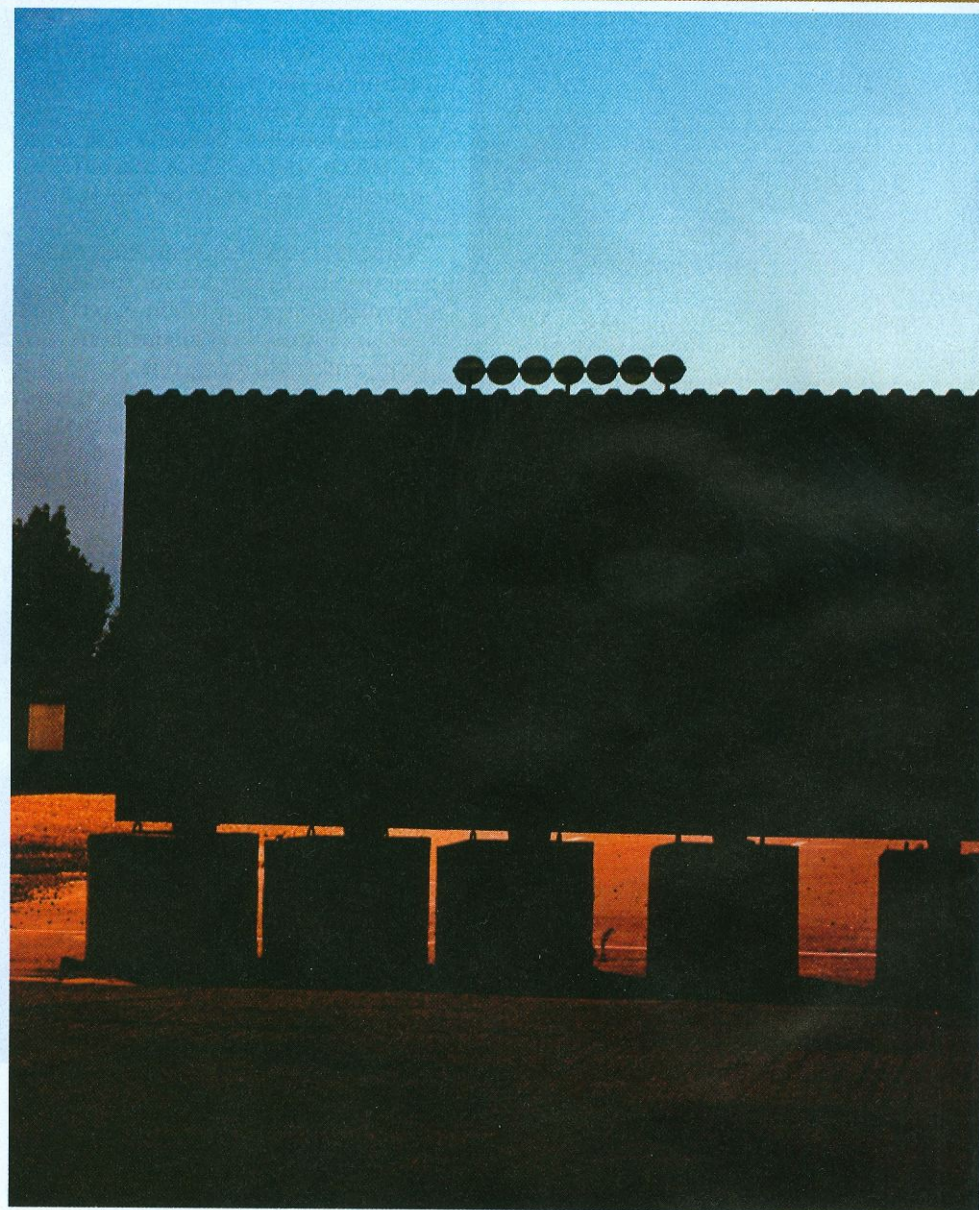
Mladen Bizumic brings new life to old culture, whether it's the Rolling Stones or Jean-Luc Godard.

“Berlin is poor, but sexy,” said Klaus Wowereit, the city’s famously flamboyant mayor, glossing over the German capital’s €60 billion (\$130b) debt on national television. And it’s absolutely true. Cheap to live in and rich beyond words in texture, Berlin is the perfect city for art-worlders from around the globe – including New Zealand.

There’s even a bit of a Kiwi art mafia in Berlin. Hamish Morrison, for example, is an expat who has become quite a successful dealer. Both Ronnie van Hout and Peter Robinson have put in time here, and still living in the city is Michael Stevenson, who represented New Zealand at the 2003 Venice Biennale with *This is the Trekka*. (Berliners find it difficult to believe we were anything like the GDR under Robert Muldoon.)

Kiwi artists have been regularly drawn to Berlin by Creative New Zealand residencies at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in the slightly run-to-seed area of Kreuzberg, and one such artist is Aotearoa wunderkind Mladen Bizumic.

Bizumic was born in 1976 in a country that no longer exists, the former Yugoslavia. His parents moved to Auckland in 1987, where he graduated from the Elam School of Fine Arts with a first-class masters degree in 2003. Since taking up a Künstlerhaus Bethanien residency for a year in 2006-7, he divides his time between

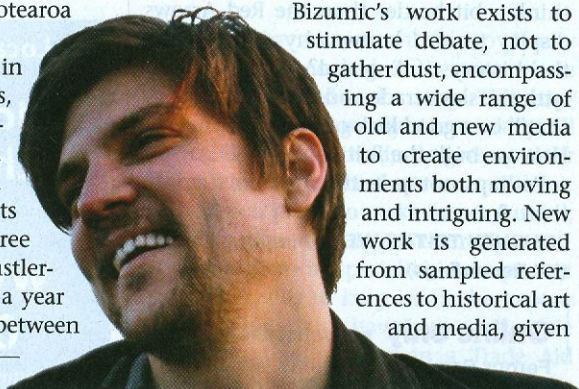


Auckland, Vienna and Berlin. His work is found widely in public and private collections, and recent exhibitions include *How If a Translation in III Acts* at Künstlerhaus Bethanien and PROGRAM: Initiative for Art and Architectural Collaborations in Berlin; contributions to the Venice, Moscow, Istanbul and Lyon Biennales and *Art of the Nation* at Te Papa; and solo shows at Two Rooms in Auckland and Physics Room in Christchurch.

Bizumic’s work exists to stimulate debate, not to gather dust, encompassing a wide range of old and new media to create environments both moving and intriguing. New work is generated from sampled references to historical art and media, given

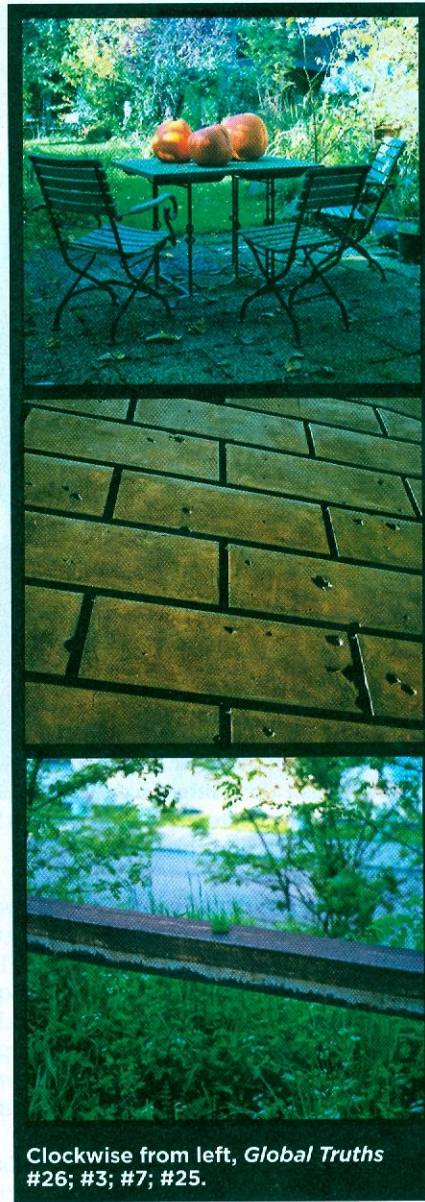
new life in collaboration with friends and family. The suggestions of nostalgia and romanticism can be deceptive, as Bizumic sets out to create new contexts for the past that intrigue him, and allows the new beast to organically shuffle off to Bethlehem or sail to Byzantium depending on how the audience reacts. He likens this process to expanding the intellectual room to give people, art and himself space in which to be free. There is a parallel here with the way Berlin has given Bizumic room to experiment and develop away from the straitjacket confines of New Zealand’s often uncomfortably close art world.

“Aotearoa is producing an incredible number of good artists,” says Bizumic. “What we need to advance is a critical discussion around art. I’m talking here about journalists, critics and media. We need to allow critical voices to come forward and functionally discuss underlying cultural issues. Not just funding of arts (which is, of course, crucial), but what does art do?”



Mladen Bizumic

COURTESY OF SUE CROOKFORD GALLERY



Clockwise from left, *Global Truths* #26; #3; #7; #25.

describe what you see right in front of you, you will be able to relate to it. In my work, there is no manufacturing of mysteries. I make 'things' that relate to our environment, our built world or nature, and I often collaborate with other professionals because new ideas often come up in discussion with others. Then some people come and say, 'Hey, I think this could be art!'"

The concrete elements of a Bizumic installation are always immaculate, even elegant – as if taken from some avant-garde design catalogue. There is always an inherent sense of high seriousness tempered with a conceptual humour and playfulness (without wanting to diverge off on some tangential twaddle about being a meta-critique of art) inherited from Bizumic's intellectual heroes such as Marcel Duchamp and John Cage.

"The art of the present is probably bound to 'formulate an escape that wouldn't be escapism', seeking alternatives to consequences of mass culture, and to build new perspectives. Art needs to manifest active engagement with the phenomena. It can open up other dimensions in life by showing us different modes of communication."

Of course, back in New Zealand, so much contemporary art is at a remove; descriptions and photographs in books and magazines. While distance may very well look our way, it doesn't often pay much attention. Bizumic likes to play with the meaninglessness of location and place in our hyperlinked 21st-century existence: "Alongside my other works, I've been working on a series of photographs entitled *Global Truths* during the past few years. *Global Truths*' photos are chosen very carefully, so I print only four or five a year.

"These photos are all unique – no editions – and all the same size. What's unusual about them is that they are not identified by location or by date of production, but by number only. They ask, how do we 'read' an image without the subtitle?"

"The majority of images in our daily lives, as for example in magazines – and yes, the *Listener* – function as illustrations for specific scenarios. That can be fine, but with the *Global Truths* photographs I want to liberate the image, make it be autonomous but also socially relevant. It is about the viewer's vision – not just about mine, the artist's ... It's what you bring to it." ■

Andrew Paul Wood travelled to Berlin on a Creative New Zealand professional development grant as a guest of the Goethe-Institut and Federal German Government.

We need to be more articulate, and perhaps less fearful, and certainly less cynical about the power of art."

This is why Berlin – the melting pot of Europe and basically central station for the European art world's trains (rapidly gazumping the hegemony of New York) – is the ideal spot for him and hundreds of other artists from around the world.

"Berlin is a great city for artists because it allows a cheaper, slower but culturally rich lifestyle. That's important for artists. This city had a turbulent history, but today it's an art capital of the world. I was fortunate to arrive in Berlin on a CNZ residency grant and meet many friendly, helpful people here. A lot of my work relates to architecture and this city is pretty much under construction, so that's kind of perfect.

"On Saturday, I went to a party and I spoke to people from New Zealand, Australia, France, Norway, Italy, Sweden, Russia, Croatia, the UK, Mexico, Turkey, Singapore, Japan and, of course, Ger-

many. It's just amazing how multicultural Berlin has turned out to be. Paradoxically, though the capital of Germany, it's the least German of all German cities. Some people compare it to New York City during the 60s."

A Bizumic installation can only exist in the exchange between artist and audience – an intellectual tennis match. It is art that dies when locked away and not experienced, whether fantasy pavilions for a fantasy biennale in Fiji (at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth in 2003), or a reimagining of a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Week End*, or a slowed-down orchestral cover of a 1966 Rolling Stones hit (*Under My Thumb to open up dialogue on the utopian ambitions for culture in a kind of limbo where time becomes a loop*).

Everything is always open to interpretation – that's the way Bizumic likes it. "I don't make ambiguous art. If you just