

Aesthetic destruction: At home with Ian Strange

Interview by Jan Zahl
Arts Editor at
Stavanger Aftenblad.



Ian Strange (previously known as Kid Zoom) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores architecture, space and the home, alongside broader themes of disenfranchisement within the urban environment. His practice includes large-scale multifaceted projects resulting in photography, sculpture, installation, site-specific interventions, film works, documentary works and exhibitions. His studio practice includes painting and drawing as well as on-going research and archiving projects. Ian's work is held in private and public collections including The National Gallery of Victoria; Art Gallery of South Australia; Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the Canterbury Museum. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Jan Zahl: You only started reflecting on home once you'd left your own home, when you got to New York. Why didn't you reflect on your own home when you were home?

Ian Strange: When you are in something, you don't have that perspective. I grew up in Perth, Western Australia. For me that was a very isolated place, particularly in my early adolescence. It was kind of just pre-internet, so it really felt like, as an artist, you couldn't escape – or really, you had to leave to actually see the world and be an artist. So, I was really defined in the negative space of the place I grew up in. I wanted to escape this suburban upbringing and it was something that I didn't want to make work about. I wanted to go to these urban centres. And I think the moment – you know, be careful what you wish for! – the moment I got to the States was the moment I was thinking, "well what's unique about me?" and "what kind of work do I really want to make?"

That was when I started reflecting on my origins in suburbia – what is that suburban angst, that suburban detachment that maybe motivated me to paint graffiti in the first place, that made me want to react to the environment in that way as an adolescent, and then

that motivated me to want to leave. It made me want to react to my environment in that way. That for me, was a starting point, it was a fertile ground, for a more personal exploration that I was interested in taking.

And going back to Perth – growing up there – how did you end up doing graffiti in the first place?

It was high school and all my friends were into skateboarding and riding bikes round at night, and a couple of my friends got into graffiti, and they knew that I was good at art, so they took me out and I started being their lookout for them, and then I started painting. And then very quickly my ability to be able to draw and paint translated into aerosol – and then I just got completely hooked and really competitive – to try to be the best I could be with that medium.

Martyn Reed has described you as "the embodiment of the development of the street art culture." Because you started out on urban walls, with tags and graffiti, and then you've moved up to being invited to art institutions – and now you work with huge teams on major projects. There's a development there – is that how you see it yourself?

Tag on Bear (self portrait of the artist straight fronting). Ian Strange (Kia Zoom)
This City Will Eat Me Alive, New York 2010. Photograph ©Jaime Rojo/B&A (www.brooklynstreetart.com)



I think it would be dangerous to say I was representative of a movement, or where a movement was going. For me, that was my personal journey. The DIY attitude that comes from painting graffiti, and the fact that you just get out and you make something – and if you can't get something done through the front door, you go round the back door. You do it illegally if you have to – you beg, borrow, steal – do it in a guerrilla way, if you have to.

That's something I take into all my projects and art practices. If you need to get something done, you just work out how get it done. If you have to do it by jumping a fence, you do it by jumping a fence. That attitude – in the same way that the DIY punk movement inspired a bunch of artists, and skateboarding inspired a bunch of artists – it builds an ethos, and that's something I definitely take with me, into my work.

I still spray, I still mark walls, I still use paint to antagonise this object of the home. That for me still has that ethos of trying to antagonise people, aesthetically. Because I'm not destroying these houses – you know, you can still live in these houses (OK, not the one I burned down) but for the most part, it's an aesthetic destruction. And so, if we're thinking about this, why is it that aesthetically shifting something is seen as destructive?

And that's really interesting – it has a relationship with graffiti as well – if there's this big mark across a house – why is this object so sacred? Why is this object held up with such esteem? And this allows you to question it

by antagonising with these markings. This is definitely something I have taken from my graffiti background.

“I wanted to cut these homes and split them open... and draw in the space with light.”

In 2013, Ian produced a collaborative work in Christchurch with cinematographer Alun Bollinger (Lord of the Rings, Heavenly Creatures, The Frighteners). These film and photography-based works incorporated suburban houses slated for demolition post the devastating 2011 earthquake that demolished 16,000 homes. FINAL ACT is an “emotive archive”, and also a continuation of Ian's exploration of home as a quotidian symbol of safety and security.

What happened in Christchurch was in response to an extreme situation – but at the same time, did this provide an extreme possibility for you, as an artist?

Yes. The point was, actually that I could have gone out and done whatever I wanted, but the process was really collaborative. So, during the earthquake, one of the main buildings where people were killed was a TV station there. A lot of the people in the film industry who worked with me on that project, personally knew people who had died in that quake. So, there was this aspect of the project that was about engagement with the community and developing the work with them, and being part of a team – that was making work within the community, that was then exhibited in the community. There was a level of catharsis there.



Number Thirty-four: Ian Strange, 2013. Photograph © Ian Strange.

Harvard Street. Ian Strange, 2012. Photograph © Ian Strange.



It's not like my previous work – where there are big red X's painted on houses and black dots painted on houses – and markings on them that look quite aggressive.

That's not the kind of work that I could make in Christchurch at that time. But absolutely, there is definitely this aspect of possibility in the houses there as well – as a raw material to work with.

How do you do this in practice? Coming to a place – how do you work with the local community?

About 8 months before I went in to film I did a scout trip – I met with all the community leaders there, community volunteer groups, government organisations, everyone – before I could say yes to working with the Rise festival and the Canterbury Museum on it. Because I didn't want to be seen as an outsider coming in and exploiting the situation. And I wanted to make sure that I'd be welcome, and also that I could make something that would be contributing.

Overwhelmingly I was told by people that "this is three years on." There was a sense of disaster exhaustion. There's actually a tracked level of exhaustion that kicks in after three years. And people said, "this is the time to make this work." These houses were just getting demolished. So, they wanted to see something positive made with them.

The process of creating that work was about pre-production. Then being on the ground for 2 months, getting buy in from everybody and getting access to the houses. But that slow process and getting the permissions, means that you bring everyone

on board with you. Someone like Alun Bollinger, the cinematographer. I met him on my first trip, and we started talking about a collaboration then. So, it grows, and he brought his community with him. It became something that grew organically.

You work with 'home' – and potentially painful and complicated issues – in this case, a disaster, in the US, the rust belt, and the consequences of the financial crash. But yet when I google "Ian Strange + controversy" nothing shows up – is everybody just happy about everything?

The way that I go into communities is with community leaders and existing community groups. So, there are artists who have social practice – like Swoon – who are committing to a city and will stay in that city. As an artist, I am not someone who is going to go into a city and stay there – so the way that I can do that is by working with existing art organisations and community groups – who already have those relationships and want me to come into those cities, to work. I've had a lot of houses that I've had access to but as soon as I've scouted them and met with the community – and taken the temperature of the community – there's no way I'd go in there, because I wouldn't be welcomed.

There are places in Detroit where I've worked which are really hard hit neighbourhoods. We spent weeks fixing those houses up first. So, I'll go in with a team of 10 people, and they'll meet us because we are mowing the lawn and fixing up this house that's been dilapidated for 7-8 years – they are just happy something is happening with the house. For the most part, they want that house demolished – but the city hasn't demolished it. We are fixing the house

up, we are creating an artwork on it, and then it gets demolished soon afterwards.

But there are other places where I work with really affluent neighbourhoods, and that's probably where I've had the most controversy. I painted a house on Lake Michigan, in Ohio, which was this big three and a half storey house, in this really rich neighbourhood, and the neighbours lost their minds – they did not like a crew in there, they didn't want anyone filming – we did everything we normally do, but they just did not want us there. I think they were just angry that the house was being demolished. But this house was being demolished because the land was worth more than the house. The house was getting demolished to build an even bigger house on that block.

As an artist, would you like there to be different kinds of reactions? When you're talking about the communities it sounds almost therapeutic for them, and that's one way that art can work, but do you want to be provocative as well?

Absolutely. There is something that has shifted over the years of me making this work. I'd started working with houses, and I thought of ideas in the studio, and

I'd say, "this is what I want to make" and I'd go into communities with a really aesthetic idea of, "I want to create this minimalist abstract work directly onto this house." But then, in the process of doing that, of course, there is always this community collaboration. And I thought, "well, that's process, but what I am trying to do is get a photo. And what I'm trying to do is get a film." And that, for the first few years of making these projects – right up to FINAL ACT – I thought about it as, "I am trying to get an image that is arresting, that is challenging, to our ideas of the home and the sense of safety it represents." It's this elevated object, and I wanted to create something with film or photography that is an attack – or which questions – this sense of safety. And that I wanted as a photo to challenge people. But I did not want to go in and antagonise neighbourhoods while I was making it.

But as I have gone forward with my work, I've started to think more and more about the process of making it as the work – so my last exhibition included interviews with neighbours, family photos I found inside houses, my own research – this idea that it's not just about getting a photograph, it's about an experience: it's about the story of those neighbourhoods and those houses being represented too.



Installation view 'ISLAND' exhibition. FAC (Fremantle Arts Centre) 2017. Photograph © Ian Strange.