Profile Summer 2017

Daniel Unverricht, Steam, 2015–16, oil on linen, 560 x 710mm.

Mean Streets

You can take Daniel Unverricht out of Hastings but you can't take Hastings out of his art. Megan Dunn meets the painter known for stark, intimate street scenes in oils.

Turn a corner in one of Daniel Unverricht's hardboiled paintings and you might find yourself in a tight spot. In the dark, on your own and down on your luck. His carparks, derelict streets and shops after hours paint a picture of night-time in a small town and night-time as a small town, shutters rolled down on the day, streetlights glaring onto pavement; a cash machine starkly lit, awaiting a withdrawal. Unverricht was born and bred in Hastings and in his art he can't get out.

"There was always that conflict there. It's just odd that Hastings has still stuck with me, even though I am removed from the location," he says.

On the morning of our interview, Unverricht flags down the No.18 bus and I step off at the top of Rongotai Hill, the day grim like the face of the bus driver. "He wasn't too sharp," I say. "Not many of them are," Unverricht replies, ushering me down a long, steep path towards one of those hard-to-find Wellington houses on the hill overlooking Evans Bay. He doesn't recommend the walk at night, drunk.

Unverricht works from home, with his partner, the sculptor Angela Singer, an animal rights activist who has an international following for her vintage taxidermied artworks. Their living room is a maze of small artworks: a Laurence Aberhart near a light switch; a painting of a blurry redhead waiting at a bus stop. The couple met in Hastings while studying at the Eastern Institute of Technology and moved in together after a day. "He used to drive around at night, like lonely guy, just taking photos, in the early hours of the morning when there wasn't anyone around," Singer says, only half joking.

Daniel Unverricht, Tread, 2017, oil on linen, 300 x 250mm.

Unverricht has been photographing Hastings since 1994. I flick through a folder of his snapshots and recognise a corner pub from the neon-brilliant Nite Club (2014), a work now owned by his dealer. The photos have always formed the basis of his compositions. He started out with a disposable Fuji camera concealed in a plastic bag. He cut a hole in the bag for the lens to poke through and walked around Hastings incognito, taking shots.
"I'm in every photo here," he says.

Sure enough, I stare at one Polaroid and the reflection of Unverricht emerges in a shop window. "It sounds creepy," Unverricht says, but the plastic bag was a strategy for self-protection. Hastings is dodgy. Especially at night. It's where the Mongrel Mob started out.

"I took photos of suss people," Unverricht says. He's an artist with no blather, no bullshit. Shoulders hunched into sweatshirt, he looks a bit like Kurt Cobain. "Couldn't shake the grunge."

For Crush, a show in 2016, Unverricht named all the paintings after Nirvana songs. Bloom is a tuft of grass growing by a blue wall next to a drain, in an empty park.

The figures who populated his earliest paintings – dodgy or otherwise – soon filtered out. Unverricht found they took over the composition, so he "stripped them away". He was a good drawer in school, encouraged by artist parents; his grandfather was a photographer. "Maybe the genes collectively pooled." The secluded alleyways and industrial wastelands Unverricht paints are loaded with memories. He points to an impasto oil of a white shop hung above the lounge doorway. The shop's window poster reads: '500 cards $44.'

"That used to be Stanton's Paper Stationery shop, and for my 14th birthday my old man went in there and said, 'Do you want a birthday present?' and I said, 'Sure,' and he slipped a brush up his sleeve. So I associate that painting with that memory, that's why it's up there."

In 2003 Unverricht and Singer completed their Masters at Elam School of Fine Arts. It was the first year Elam had trialled the degree by distance and the couple did it from Napier. In the next three years he moved up, from small-scale works to 6-by-6-foot paintings. But Unverricht found works on this large scale lacked the same intensity. The small scale of his works is a device to pull the viewer in, to force them to look at the work. "If it is a small work you have to go and inspect it," Unverricht says.

Laurence Aberhart tracked Unverricht down after seeing his painting Fight Night Clive (2000) in the 2003 Wallace Art Awards. Aberhart wanted to acquire the work, but it had already sold to Dick Frizzell, a judge of that year's awards. (The painting is now in the collection of Sir James Wallace, who quickly got it back from

Frizzell.) Unverricht painted another boxing scene for Aberhart and the Aberhart on the living-room wall is a one-off photograph of an abandoned boxing gymnasium. "So that's how I met Laurence and we've been good friends ever since."

Like Aberhart, Unverricht is also masterful at rendering light, even though his canvases extract little warmth from it. Homing (2015) is a blue plastic corrugated fence, blazing under the wattage of a naked bulb, the rest of the composition in darkness. Embed (2014) captures the 80s mint-green glow of a digital watch screen, and Heat (2016) is a reflection of the temperature trapped in the pavement. "Hastings gets really hot." Scientific studies equate heat with violence.

But it's at night Unverricht's paintings reach fever pitch. In Steam (2015–16), a car is parked on the road, beneath a harsh streetlight; at the end of the road, blue fluorescent steam rises from a factory. Steam evokes a working-class reality that matches the blue-collar brilliance of writers like Raymond Carver, for whom masculinity is a wrench.

What does Unverricht read? Noir – John D MacDonald, author of The Executioners which the film Cape Fear is based on – and horror. Stephen King. His favourite films? "Taxi Driver. Mean Streets. Early Scorsese."

"You talkin' to me?" I picture De Niro's Travis Bickle driving through Unverricht's lonely painted streets, peering in on the red punch bags in the open doorway of Drop (2014) and clenching his fist. Unverricht's Hastings is a no-man's-land. "Something has gone down or is about to go down, and you're there and have to navigate that space," he says. "Placing the viewer there is what I am trying to achieve."

Daniel Unverricht, Drop, 2014, oil on linen, 150 x 200mm.

"What is it about night-time?"

"What's that Raymond Chandler quote?" Unverricht pauses. Singer replies, "The streets were dark with something more than night."

Next to the lounge is their shared studio. Beneath the window is Singer's current piece, a rabbit, flayed open, its intestines a tangle of red and pink jewels. "This is our split, here on a diagonal," Unverricht says.

Along the right-hand wall are works in progress for an upcoming exhibition and several close-ups from Google Maps. "I cruise around Hastings and get little screen shots." His new works are less aggressive, more formal. He shuffles the compositions, combining details from different sites. He works on several paintings at once; by

one new work is a note, "Buildings colour of bone." "I thought a chalky warm white would look better," Unverricht says.

On the wall is a postcard of David Hockney – a close-up of his serious face – painted by Lucian Freud. Unverricht uses Old Holland and Williamsburg hand-made oil paints, describing the colours "as much punchier than the cheaper ones". But the colours in one painting might be too bright. "I think I might need to knock the wall back, darken the whole image." How does he know when a painting is working? "Occasionally I know it's working when I see a glimpse of a shadow move."

He has painted other cities, including Wellington, but it's Hastings he returns to. In 2016, at the opening of his exhibition Ghosting at the Hastings City Art Gallery, a local policeman approached Unverricht and said, "I know exactly what you're doing here and this is exactly what Hastings feels like. And when I am on my beat at night, this is it."

"I thought perhaps that show last year could have exorcised those demons," he says.

But the ghosts are still close. Park (2015) is a work in the Wellington City Council's art collection. It's a site in Napier that Unverricht's Dad once got into a skirmish in. "You have to enter the gates to get to this oasis on the other side." His father passed away late in 2015, just a month after Peter McLeavey, the Wellington dealer who Unverricht had been employed by for five years.

Daniel Unverricht, Park, 2015, oil on linen, 455 x 555mm.

Of Unverricht's paintings, Peter McLeavey once said, "Very, very edge of town." "So he hit the nail there."

Unverricht currently works mornings for the Post Office, which is where he first met McLeavey. "I used to talk to Peter at the door and I'd give him his Artforum." Colin McCahon, Toss Woollaston both worked as posties. "I like knowing that James K Baxter did the Karori run," Unverricht says.

Before I leave the studio I ask, "What's the most afraid you've ever been?" And Unverricht tells me about a day out in Riverlands with his friends, when he was only about 13 years old, and a car of neo-Nazis pulled up and beat the shit out of two of their friends. They could do nothing but stand, frozen against a car, and watch. "I remember walking back home discussing it. We knew we needed to get ready for anything like that in the future."

Daniel Unverricht at The Met, New York, 2016

Daniel Unverricht's latest exhibition, Dominion, is on until 25 November at {Suite}
Art Gallery, Wellington.
All paintings courtesy of the artist.

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