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# He's only just begun

An artist's obsessive love of the Carpenters has turned an art project into a pop album. **Dylan Rainforth** reports.

**A**RTIST Darren Sylvester lingers on every personal pronoun as he describes the full-scale replica he built of the Japanese garden originally enjoyed by '70s sibling pop duo the Carpenters at their Los Angeles home.

"I was the closest to Karen, I was the last there, no one else has gone to as much trouble as I have to build this," he says.

In the art world, Sylvester is already a star: one of *Art Monthly's* "most collectable artists", a cover star in *Art World* magazine, his hyper-real photographs have been bought by everyone from the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art to Elton John.

For Sylvester, obsessive fandom is just part of an artistic practice that has recently moved from photography, video work and sculpture to the release of a self-titled debut album by music label Unstable Ape/Remote Control.

The first track on the album? *Newville Avenue*, an elegy to the Carpenters' home and its doomed owners.

"Newville Avenue was the place the Carpenters lived and [the song's] got the refrain 'no one was close to you' [which echoes one of their hits] and it mentions Karen and it talks about her garden which she loved."

Even knowing that Sylvester resides on the pleasant side of eccentric does not diminish his obsession. Learning that the house where Karen Carpenter lived and eventually died of anorexia-related complications was due for demolition, he spent four months building the 60-square-metre reconstruction, determining measurements from the blurry images on Google Earth while consulting with other fans on web forums who generously shared reference photos.

Too bad you can't visit it. The eerily artificial garden was videoed against the black-walled void of a soundstage — with Sylvester walking moonily through it — and then selfishly and deliberately destroyed. Sylvester is nothing if not the consummate possessive fan; he's just like those who boast about owning rare white-label bootlegs or how a performer touched them during a concert. The video's title says it all — *I Was the Last in the Carpenters' Garden*.

Recorded as a soundtrack for the video, the album was initially conceived to complement the artwork, commissioned for the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art's 2008 exhibition *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*. It was produced as a limited edition of 500 pressed on red vinyl with full-colour cover and lyrics sheet and played back from

a turntable. A collectable fetish piece. Its more recent incarnation as a mass-produced CD is evidence of the faith of the record label. "No, they're not art people," Sylvester confirms: Darren Sylvester (the album as well as the artist) has crossed the divide between art project and the music industry.

Sylvester's earliest exhibitions harnessed the high production values of commercial photography, combined with aphoristic titles such as *Don't Substitute a Life to Satisfy Mine*, to create scenarios of emptiness, ennui and longing played out among plastic-looking people. He sees these themes as continued by the record. "I was quite conscious that lyrically it would quite closely follow a similar theme to some of the photographic artworks... and most of the songs are quite heavy and are

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about bad times and death. I'm surprised that no one has picked up on that."

But the artist rejects the association of his work with advertising that has been prevalent in much art criticism. "Visually, the advertising aesthetic is just me being a control freak, they're just not out of focus and they're lit very well."

Fetishisation and control are subjects germane to the album's production. There's a song named after the ultimate musical control freak, convicted murderer Phil Spector.

Reading that Spector's favourite chords were C, A minor, F and G, Sylvester wrote a song that names them in its chorus. The Spector thing is in keeping with an obsession with musical production that saw Sylvester taking a bowerbird's flight through his personal canon. As his label's press release states: "He uses the same microphone as Fleetwood Mac, mimics the Carpenters' left-to-right tom fills and double-tracks his vocals simply because John Lennon did." He also built, from scratch, the same type of sexy Simmons suitcase-contained drum machine used by New Order.

Sylvester says he has been surprised by how much this has been commented on, arguing that it was just a practical way of going about learning the trade — and that other producers suggested he should start by playing favourite albums back through the monitor speakers and copying them. He points to engineer Bob Clearmountain's work on Roxy Music's final album, *Avalon*, in particular as something he tried to emulate. "It's probably the wettest and most luxurious bath of an album that you could imagine... it sounds so good." And though he's absolutely wrong — the album sounds every bit as forlornly plastic as the heartache of *Avalon* song *More Than This* — Sylvester goes on to say, "My album sounds absolutely nothing like *Avalon*, my record is a brittle, home-recorded piece of crap, but you have to aspire to something."

Darren Sylvester launches his album on Saturday at Toff in Town.