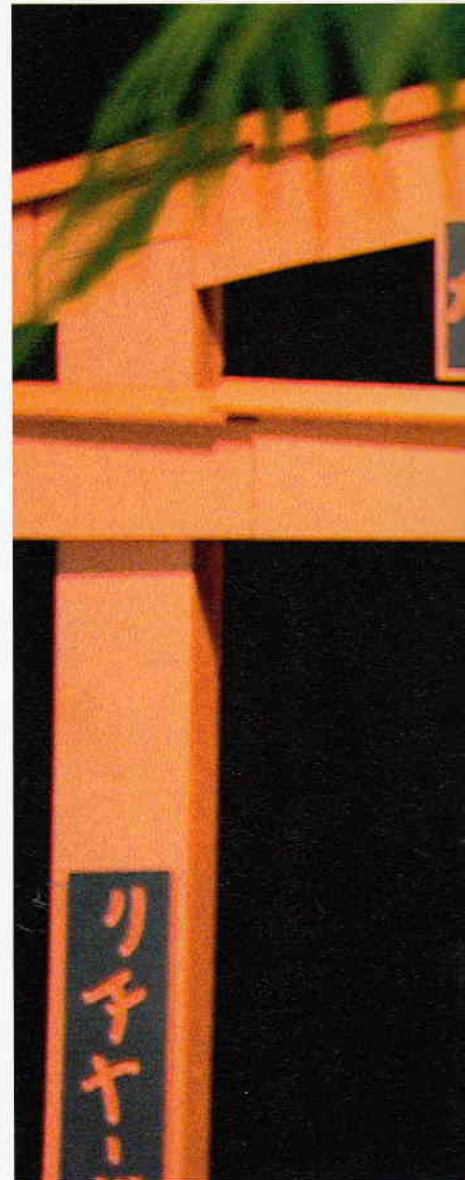




**DARREN
SYLVESTER**



Above: *I Was The Last In The Carpenters' Garden* (2008) (details), two-channel digital video, sound, duration 13:14mins

With a sprawling practice that embraces photography, video, sculpture and music, Darren Sylvester is considered one of Australia's most promising artistic talents. His work has been shown at major institutions throughout Australia and is held in state and national collections, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia. Recently, Sylvester's most ambitious work to date – a video referencing the '70s pop group The Carpenters – was featured in the Optimism exhibition at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art. Sparing no effort in his rigorous re-creations, this young Melbourne artist elevates pop-cultural references to universal truths.

WORDS: Anthony Carew

Previous pages: *You Should Let Go Of A Dying Relationship* (2006) (details), two-channel DVD, duration 3:31mins



In Darren Sylvester's video work, *I Was The Last In The Carpenters' Garden* (2008), the artist himself – all stove-pipe jeans and plastic bracelets – wanders through an eerie unreality: a garden constructed on a naked, black-backed soundstage. As piped-in running-water sounds seem to mock “calming” new-age tropes, Sylvester walks tentatively, almost reverently, through the unnatural, unconvincing set. As its title alludes, this ersatz Garden of Eden is Sylvester's own temple of worship: a tacky replica of the backyard belonging to cheesy '70s pop siblings The Carpenters.

When the Downey, California house that Karen and Richard Carpenter grew up in was undergoing radical renovations in 2007, the Japanese-styled garden was to be razed. So, in a Melbourne studio, Sylvester built himself a mock-up – rolling out reams of coloured fabric and hysterically green fake grass, hand-carving the

same Romaji [Romanised Japanese] (which, in the garden, read: “Karen”, “Richard” and “Superstar”) on wooden plaques, and building his own bridge over troubled waters; all to painstakingly exact, Google-map'd proportions. But why? As a critique of cultural appropriation, whereby The Carpenters' transplantation of a traditional Japanese garden was steeped in inauthenticity? As a commentary on the emptiness of hero-worship, and the comic inability of genuinely connecting with those pop-cultural icons you adore from afar? As a representation of the Second Life-ing of modern existence, where the not-real can be equal to – or, indeed, be more significant than – the physically genuine? Or, like those unending ranks of musicians that set out to re-create the exact sound of their favourite 1968 LP, was this Sylvester's naked attempt to summon an imaginary, mythical time from pop-culture's past that never really existed?

I Was The Last In The Carpenters' Garden is a little of all of these things: Sylvester calling it a

“fan-based” work, steeped in the earnest geekery of pop-cultural devotion, yet also taking inspiration from the spartan sound-stages and sharpened mass-cultural criticism of director Lars von Trier's sermonic cinematic studies in ironic Americana (*Dogville* [2003], *Manderlay* [2005]). But, in truth, in building his own shrine to The Carpenters' shrine, Sylvester has outed himself as a pure “perp”, an artist embodying one of the new millennium's most popular modes of social miscreancy: the stalker.

“I did actually say to myself, sometimes, in my head, whilst carving bits of wood out and building bridges: ‘this is for Karen.’” Sylvester confesses. “It's like stalking.”

The 34-year-old Melbourne-based artist's stalkery shone bright on *You Should Let Go Of A Dying Relationship* (2006), a video work in which he fastidiously re-created the video-clips for David Bowie's *Heroes* (1977) and Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights* (1978), casting himself, both times, as each respective star.



bove and right: *Doomed* (2008), lightjet prints, each 90 x 120cm

Frocked up in near-authentic pantomime, the videos seek to summon the spirit of their authors, but inadvertently dredge up the spectre of disposable pop-cultural dross; reminiscent of MTV's short-lived, early-'00s reality show *Becoming*, where the irony-free bastion of global teen monoculture took "lucky fans" of MTV-approved acts and gussied them up to look just like the figures of their obsession.

"It's a form of mimicry, and mimicry's a form of flattery," Sylvester explains, of the works of wanton idolatry that have screened at Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) and Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). "It's as if I can learn to mimic that person, to build this altar-like state to them, I feel I can become close to them. They're studies in obsession: becoming engrossed in this person – their mannerisms – learning everything I can about them. I feel good about myself in doing it, almost self-satisfied; like I've become an expert on them, and I know more about them than other fans might."

Sylvester has a reputation as a "voice of Generation Y", but it hasn't come from his creepy

displays of devotional, adolescent-esque fandom. He's earned his "collectible" status (yes, Sylvester must routinely answer, Elton John has indeed bought his work) through ongoing photographic studies of youth, which simultaneously summon advertising's high-gloss sheen and the cavernous ennui lurking beneath the façade of fantasy.

In the kind of hyper-glossy, brilliantly-lit style so familiar from an era's worth of advertised aspirationalism, Sylvester's precisely focused images catalogue so much youthful yearning. Specifically, he hones in on symbiotic cycles of identification/alienation, wherein feeling mystically close to song lyrics, or high-tech devices, or branded iconography, drives human beings further into loneliness and emptiness.

The sister shots *Humans Evolve To Be Completely New* (2005) and *Humans Evolve To Break And Disappear* (2005) are those ideas incarnate: the interior-design lifestyle-magazine-type images showing first – in the former – a lass languorously lounging on her bed, gazing lovingly into her laptop; then "later" – in the latter – sprawled forlorn, computer pushed aside. Sylvester categorises his still images as



1 Menard Exstretch (2007), jelutong, 25 x 19 x 9.5cm, collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia
 2 Misscoria Crystal Collagen (2008), white beech, brass, 24 x 19 x 60cm, collection: University of Queensland Art Museum



"one-liners", single ideas openly communicated via evocative, near narrative titles, which often offer a contrasting comedy/tragedy to the images' polished sheen. Sometimes, they're literally one-liners: *The Object Of Social Acceptance Is To Forfeit Individual Dreams* (2003), *For The Most Part Humans Seem Ugly And Annoying* (2003), *The Performance Wage Cannot Motivate Me Anymore* (2000).

Wanting to move on from his photographs' singular statements, Sylvester has taken to different media. In 2007 he began work on a series of carved wooden masks, built to resemble the facemasks of various forms of "anti-aging" pharmaceutical snake oil; even naming these horrific, gaping maws after such chemical sludge: *Menard Exstretch* (2007), *Sofina Whitening Memory White* (2008), *Misscoria Crystal Collagen* (2008).

To Sylvester, wooden masks, video-clip

mimickings and replica gardens are all birds of a feather. "They're about time invested," he says. "The videos, in trying to get as close to replicating something as possible, are about my investing the time in them, in much the same way as there's a lot of physical labour in carving a mask, or building a garden."

Sylvester has tried to take that "manifest effort" effect back to his photography. *Doomed* (2008) finds the artist re-creating a single image from the movie *Doom* (2005), whose translation of a popular shoot-'em-up videogame is the epitome of lazy, cross-promotional Hollywood fodder. Though the film is set in 2046, a character is glimpsed playing *Galaxian 2*, a hand-held videogame from the late 1970s. It's a gamers' in-joke, but one gone wrong: the actor holds the game sideways. This inspired Sylvester, via equal parts nostalgia and absurdity, to make the moment into a photographic portrait. "I've tried to re-create this movie still exactly, just to point out that he was playing the game wrong," Sylvester offers. "It's this quite inconsequential moment in life itself, this nick in time that I've chosen to enshrine. I don't know if that's a stupid idea or not."

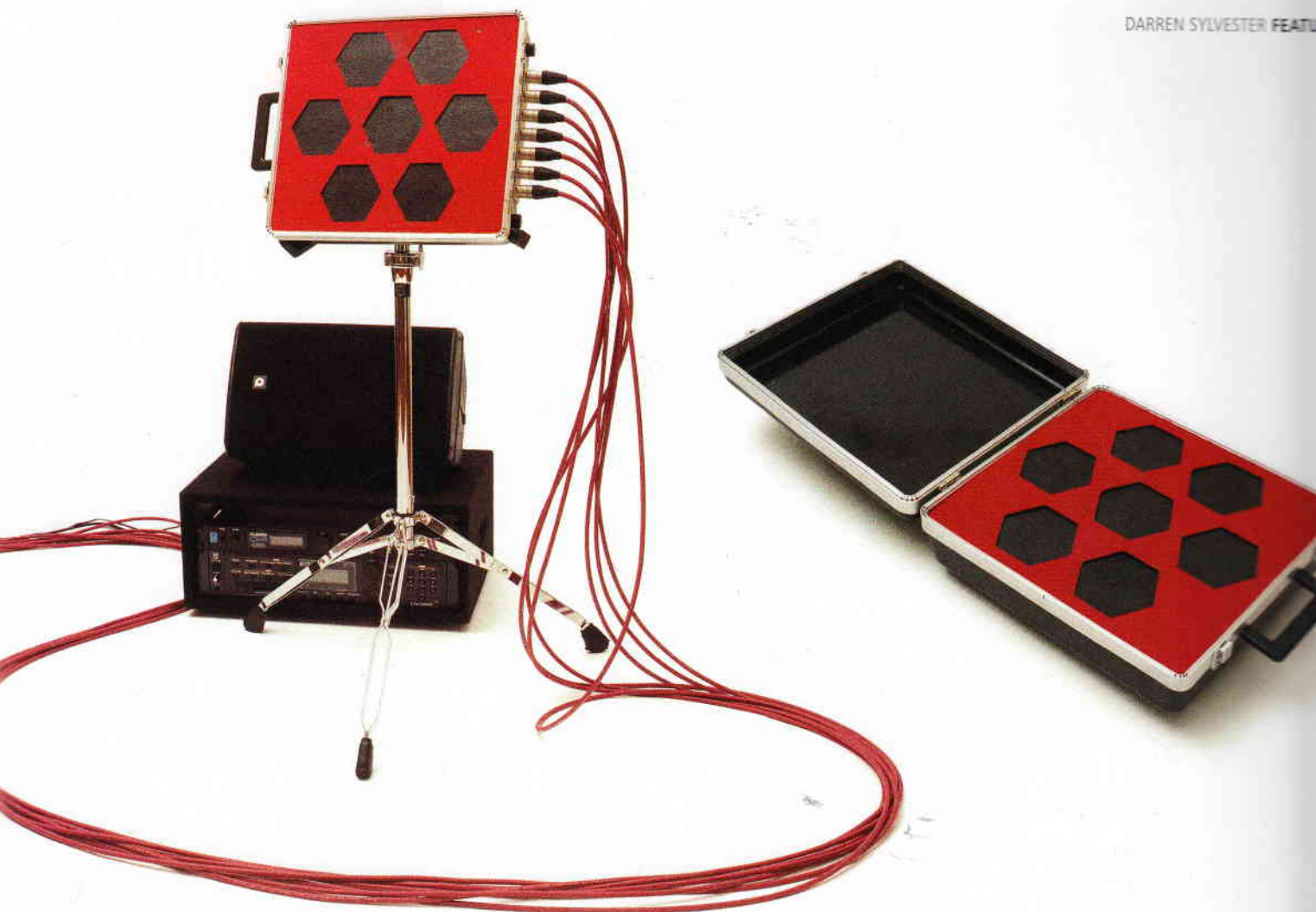


Take Me To You (2009), lightjet print, 90 x 120cm



Above: **Take Me To You** (2009), lightjet print, 90 x 120cm

Opposite: **Drum Machine** (2009), custom ABS plastic case, foam, wood, vinyl, wool, aluminium, electronics, mixed media, case: 37 x 34 x 12cm



SYLVESTER ON VINYL



As part of his work for the 2008 Optimism exhibition at GoMA, Sylvester created a vinyl album that played throughout the show. All the songs on the album were written, performed and recorded by the artist and include *Newville Avenue* (a paean to Karen Carpenter) and tracks performed by the Melbourne acts *Jessica Says* and *Nathan Hollywood*. A CD will be released by Unstable Ape records in mid-2009 – but visit the Art World website now to download two tracks for free!

In seizing on this meaningless moment in a meaningless movie, the artist comes off as a strange sort of romantic. As in his ambitious video-art re-creationism, Sylvester hopes to save these lost incidents, to instil them with a personal significance that can arrest their inevitable slide into pop-cultural oblivion. "It's the effort I've put in [that] means I've rescued it," Sylvester beams. "It's not doomed, nor dead. I can cheat death of an object and bring it back to me."

Drum Machine can't, of course, physically be in the Carpenters' garden. Not the original backyard in Downey, which was long ago bulldozed. And not Sylvester's remaking thereof. For, after finishing his video work, he, too, demolished it. "It's greedy," Sylvester admits. "I could have made the garden and had it as a sculpture for all of us to be in. But you wouldn't understand them like I do. So, I was the last, and then I pulled it down."

When I Was The Last In The Carpenters' Garden was displayed at GoMA, it was matched to a musical soundtrack: Sylvester's own debut album. Beginning by writing a song for his subject (Karen, *Newville Avenue/There's a garden for you*), Sylvester hoped to make a "MOR [middle of the road] background record", playing layers of instruments in a rudimentary, home-recorded fashion reminiscent of the tape-op experiments of one-man warped-pop alchemist Ariel Pink.

Exhibition: Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney, until 19 Apr

Darren Sylvester is represented by Johnston Gallery, Perth; Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney; and William Mora Galleries, Melbourne

As neophyte to audio recording, Sylvester took a magpie's approach: using the same microphone that Fleetwood Mac did in the '70s, copying Karen Carpenter's panned-from-left-to-right drum fills,

sampling the same drum-machines New Order used in the '80s. The latter directly inspired Sylvester's latest work, *Drum Machine*. As its title implies, the work involves the literal rebuilding of the Simmons Suitcase Kit; an archaic, proto-drum-machine actually built within a suitcase. Used by New Order in the video-clip for *Perfect Kiss* (1985), then consigned to the musical graveyard, it's yet another object Sylvester is out to rescue from death. "When I learnt it was a rare, hand-made item that didn't work very well and doesn't exist anymore, I started thinking: 'Why? Why can't I bring it back? Why can't it be in the Carpenters' garden?'"

In this way, *Doomed* shares a sentimental sensibility with *I Was The Last In The Carpenters' Garden*, wherein Sylvester hopes that the garden of his heroes can, via the artist's apparent physical labour, live on just a few frames longer.

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