

**File 1
Critical text**

Written by: Jon Bywater

**In response to the
exhibition: Jorge Satorre
Emic Etic? at Artspace,
October–November 2013**

Interesting failure to adapt on islands,
Taller but not more fallen than I, who come
Bone to his bone, peculiarly New Zealand's.
— Allen Curnow ¹

¹ "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch" (1943)

After the snack franchises, on the way to baggage claim at Dunedin Airport the interested visitor can step aside to size up the natural and social history of the plains visible through the window. Star artifacts in a display mounted by Otago Museum are the skeleton of a smaller species of moa and reconstructions of its improbably teapot-sized egg. A large, flightless bird, it grazed in many parts of Aotearoa New Zealand before it met the first human population to settle here, the indigenous Māori. Hunted for food, and with chicks vulnerable to the dogs and rats that also arrived on the canoes from Oceania, it was extinct by the arrival of Europeans. It may not have even occurred to you to look any of this up on your mobile device before printed text panels, enriched with diagrams, artist's impressions and historical photographs weave these bones into an easily browsed, scientifically accurate, culturally sensitive account of your destination.

Jorge Satorre's *Emic Etic?* relates to this contemporary experience of information, but evokes museum conventions of a more austere, earlier variation. A toy-scaled tin model of every extinct species of bird from the islands of Aotearoa makes up one of the five works in the Auckland show. The moa readily identifiable amongst them, these numerous victims of contact between the outside world and what were for eons all but mammal-free and so predator-less

landmasses are ranked in a perspex case. In the white-walled gallery, with titles and notes reserved to a handout, the display is closer to the Victorian vitrines mimicked by Marcel Broodthaers' bird typology, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968). The contrast to the airport example is a reminder that a well-worn interpretive path has come to connect such cabinets to *wunderkammeren*, the fetish, and science's implication in colonial violence and exploitation. The possible resemblance to Broodthaers suggests art as much as museology could be in question here.

As it happens, an eagle does feature amongst the metal figures, as well as being at the centre of another work. A giant like the moa, the hokioi or Haast's eagle falls at a mathematical limit; the largest eagle known to have ever lived, with an estimated mass exceeding 10kg. Satorre models its remains mathematically, using the fact that clay shrinks on firing to iteratively cast then fire models of a rib, a femur and a talon to produce a series of them that ranges down to the scale of the hokioi's diminutive genetic ancestor, an Australian eagle, fifteen times smaller. Also laid out under glass, like the four other pieces in the show it shares the overall title, *Emic Etic?*

The source of these esoteric terms is detailed in the gallery sheet. Coinages from mid-twentieth century anthropology, they essay a methodological distinction between recording data about a culture in its own terms (emic) and in those brought by the researcher, external to it (etic). Satorre's question mark could present us with an oddly punctuated choice: what—in whatever it may be that these works observe—is rendered in its own terms, and what is translated into an outsider's? Alternately, given the elided comma, the suggestion could be that this constellation of works embodies a possible, modified form of an etic approach, i.e. an *emic* etic. In either case, an anthropologist might be the first to agree with the artist that the distinctions are hard to get clear cut; that these have the character of trick questions.

Arguably typical of an artist is Satorre's deployment of concepts from *outside* his own field. Foreign as they may be to us as in audience for this work, unusual in art talk, linguistic artifacts like “emic” and “etic” are nonetheless the kind of borrowings at home in art. Where the anthropologist is obliged to be alert to the criticisms and discussion of them on the record before using them publicly, the artist can be free of such concerns for currency and correctness. So, if the title asks us to question what is internal and what is external to a position or framework, what lies outside *art's* disciplinary bounds? In its Western modern form,

its terms of reference seem by definition open, to take up material from somewhere else its essential freedom. The implications of this scope—and the way it might contravene the sensitivities to cultural particularity that anthropology has had to learn—could be what, at base, *Emic Etic?* invites us to consider.

Two rock samples square off against one another on matching plinths, holding the floor on their own in Artspace's main room. Apparently identical slabs, each broken into a larger and smaller piece, they appear to be kawakawa pounamu (as the common opaque form of local greenstone is known in Māori). The notes reveal, though, that one only is local stone, a commissioned copy of the other, a Guatemalan jadeite. On closer inspection, whichever is the copy reverses the proportions of the two pieces, so that they could be seen as opposites or one another's mirror as much as equivalents. As an external observer of New Zealand, the Mexican artist matches something from his own locale with stone that registers immediately to local eyes as a signifier of this place and, with something like a conjuror's sleight of hand, gets the Māori and Pākehā icon of whenua or country to vanish in plain sight.

While careful scrutiny of the surfaces will reveal a right answer to which is which, the question of what here is represented here and in whose terms is not

so easily settled. Given the involvement of Auckland carver Joe Sheehan in the production of the piece, there is something local in the work. The equation of appearances it is based on, though, suggests a frame as general as the geological category that might also group the two specimens. Things like the tikanga, or protocols, appropriate to pounamu and its status as taonga, or precious object in Māori tradition, are rendered less visible by this implied point of view, in a way that is entirely unsurprising, through having been so well rehearsed by the museum history alluded to earlier.

Like the silvery bird statuettes, the polished stone has overtones of the gift shop elsewhere in the terminal, with its stacks of fluffy sheepskins and pots of manuka honey. However, these are in fact the inverse of tourist souvenirs: with only research and correspondence to moderate preconceptions about the place they are shown and to which they refer, all the works have been conceived *in advance* of any visit. Through this process, the works incorporate conditions of their production that obtain quite generally into their subject: the expanding planetary circulation of artists and art, as well as the way in which we know the world beyond our usual localities.²

² Co-curated by Caterina Riva and Claudia Arozqueta, *Emic Etic?* is presented simultaneously in the North Island's two leading public contemporary art project spaces, where they are the respective directors. Like Satorre, Arozqueta is originally from Mexico, but has worked elsewhere abroad before her position at Enjoy Gallery, Wellington. At Artspace, Auckland, Riva, too, is several stops along on an international professional itinerary that begins in her native Italy.

The CV downloadable from Satorre's Paris gallery lists six countries in which he has studied and held residencies over the past fifteen years. Solo shows in Spain, Ireland, France, Mexico and England lie on a similar peripatetic path. It was while Satorre was beginning his studies, in the first years of the popular uptake of the Internet, that critic Miwon Kwon named the emergent type of the 'itinerant artist', someone whose site-responsive practice reflects "contemporary life as a network of unanchored flows", moving beyond simplistic or nostalgic conceptions of place by "addressing the differences of adjacencies and distances *between* one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment *next* to another, rather than invoking equivalencies via one thing *after* another."³

³ "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997), MIT Press, pp. 85-110

Her description may seem apt, but pace Kwon, it seems unlikely that Satorre here pretends to turn "local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks" in the sense she argued for them then. The work (and representations of it such as this one) can and will be accessed in other places, so the obvious sense of what in this case is "local" is destabilised. Developed remotely, but with intelligent, critical care, the acuity of this work includes the artist's eschewal of such established steps in these cosmopolitan flows as the

research visit or preliminary residency to intensify the relations through the page and the screen that increasingly prevail between, for example, Aotearoa and Mexico.

In Auckland, the foreign and the homegrown are clearly contrasted in two murals on the walls surrounding the greenstone plinths. Although I might not have been able to put a name to the signature style, having lived here for years I recognise in one the hand of *NZ Herald* cartoonist Guy Body. A rotary washing line and the pitch of a New Zealand state house's roof also locate the mural of a child playing in the backyard of a quarter acre section, poking a stick over the edge of a crumbling cliff. Around the room, a corpulent turkey in a ball gown faces towards him out of the frame of another drawing. She sings from a stage, supported by a chorus made up of fighting dogs, an enthusiastic small goose, and a sheep. From my position, there is little to give away its origins, but this composition is the work of El Figsòn, we learn, Body's counterpart at the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*. Satorre has asked each to translate something personal into the mass medium of their shared profession, including an unrecoverable biographical element in their allegory.

A primarily personal significance is also suggested by the series of eight drawings by Satorre himself. These small, monochrome acrylics could be travel sketches. In two of them, what might be wild pigs, loose on a road, are captured in flight, as if from snapshots (the darkly-worked paper as if from under-exposed film). The roadside signage appears contemporary, but not to be from here. Another pair repeat a street scene, two men in the foreground. Again, it is not clear where we are, but judging by the buildings, not in New Zealand in this case either. A blot of distorted pigment sits on the page like an emanation between the figures, an accidental figuration of perhaps extrasensory communication. The fact that it exists in both versions presses for its interpretation, though. It has the psychic weight of a location or incident that recurs in dreams. Whether these are real situations, objectively rendered, or something imaginary, literal, or with some kind of symbolic significance, the fundamental ambiguity of the decontextualisation effected by representation is heightened.

Especially given the sparse hang, El Fisgòn's turkey becomes a point of comparison not only for the other cartoon's protagonist but for the other birds in the show. The *monero's* anthropomorphism—that may or may not be a self-deprecating figure for his own public performance—blurs the line between non-human

species as objective scientific classifications and more obviously symbolic categories. Even the clay bones of the hikioi, and the extra-cultural timescale its largely pre-human existence invokes, thus present nature as a human concept. The individual works' apparent statuses as relatively subjective or objective, more personal or more scientific, infect one another. The show, like a slowly-loading gif, starts to animate the give in the frames that accompany such conceptual oppositions. In this experience, my apparently settled, theoretical clarity about this blur is tested. I am allowed to glimpse the way that it is in its opacity or ambiguous relationship to truth that an art work can gain the allure of the exotic and the power to kindle something new.

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