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Art

Darkness Visible

In Kaukapakapa, New Zealand, a New York artist takes on the biggest, darkest project of his career—as well as a larger-than-life patron hell-bent on building himself the most outlandish private art playground on earth. By Dan Halpern



There was a 100-foot-tall nude woman, her white shoulders like clouds, rolling around on the hill to our right. Below, on the mudflats coming up to the harbor's banks, huge eyes and mouths popped out of the wet ground, growling and chirping. To the left, on the trees, a gigantic skull twisted and changed, now human, now simian, now some terrible distortion of a head, a tour of death and birth and evolution all at once.

As part of Oursler's wildest installation, a constantly morphing collection of skulls is projected on a Pohutukawa tree. (Photo: Todd Eberle)

The American artist Tony Oursler, who was responsible for all this—video projected onto the landscape—was watching over his creation one evening last November from the deck of the Kaukapakapa country house of Alan Gibbs—at 68, one of the wealthiest men in New Zealand and one of its leading art patrons. The house itself, overlooking Kaipara Harbour, an hour or so north of Auckland, is a modest enough affair for someone reported to be worth over \$450 million, even if little else here is particularly unassuming. A sample fun weekend activity at the Farm: sit inside the caged ball at the top of the world's largest Tesla coil while several million volts of electricity spin around you before they burst into 40-foot-long lightning bolts. "It'll knock your socks off," Gibbs told me a month later, his voice resonating like a pistol shot over the phone. "We've all been inside the damn thing: It's scary as hell."

As night fell it started raining a bit and it was getting colder, despite the fact that this was the end of November, the beginning of summer in New Zealand, and Oursler—a mellow, six-foot-tall, 50-year-old New Yorker who gives the impression that he is both larger and younger than he actually is—was worrying that someone would get electrocuted by all the cables he had running around. His unruly gray hair and bright, boyish eyes complement a grin that looks as if it must be just the same now as it was when he was eight. "Can we move the one on the knoll down a little?" he called down to an assistant on a scaffold beneath the deck that supported three enormous projectors beaming images onto the landscape. "If we move it down, do you think we'll need to cut that tree back?" The woman was replaced by a pair of great white hands, kneading the hill beneath them. "The hands look good," he said. "I think that's perfect."

These projections—made up of a series of wondrous images of twisting, crawling, sitting, and floating women, as well as an arm and hammer, an arm and knife, writhing snakes, pyrotechnics, and bullet holes in the sky—form the latest art object for Gibbs's sculpture park. Gibbs has been installing art pieces on the Farm, a sort of private Storm King—the upstate New York institution that expanded the concept of a sculpture garden into a sculpture landscape—since 1992, on some 1,000 acres of grassy land, more than twice the size of its American counterpart. The acreage is home to sheep, goats, cows, pheasants,

llamas, yaks, and two giraffes, in addition to the extraordinary sculpture collection—most of it abstract Minimalist work—Gibbs has commissioned, made up of roughly half international and half New Zealand art. Sculpture is Gibbs's main interest, though he does have a Warhol painting of a gigantic black-and-yellow dollar sign inside the house. Pieces include Sol LeWitt's *Pyramid (Keystone, NZ)*, made of narrow concrete steps rising 25 feet into the sky; an Andy Goldsworthy series of terra-cotta arches creeping out into the tide; a nearly half-mile-long hand-painted functional livestock fence made by Daniel Buren; and a kind of covered gateway by the Maori artist Ralph Hotere, which leads to the historical grave site of Maori chief Te Hemera Tauhia on the hill above. Ground will break soon on an Anish Kapoor piece that will reportedly tunnel through a hill, and in November the English sculptor Antony Gormley, known for placing haunting, blank-faced figures in the landscape, paid an exploratory visit to the site. Gibbs already has one of the largest works Richard Serra has ever done, the *Te Tuhirangi Contour*, a 20-foot-high, 843-foot-long ribbon of rust-red Cor-Ten steel. "The first thing Alan said to me was, 'I've just been to Storm King,'" Serra has explained. "I have a very large piece at Storm King, and I think it's a fairly consequential piece. Alan said, 'I want a more significant piece than that. I don't want any wimpy piece in the landscape, I don't want any small bullshit like that.'" Gibbs told me, "I've had more arguments with Richard Serra than probably anybody has."

A seminal figure in new media and video art who is still pioneering the form, Oursler had put together a piece for the Farm that was also the biggest he'd ever made, its huge images projected over tremendous distances. He had been working on the Gibbs installation for two years, and now he had come to New Zealand for what he hoped would be a final test run, to see what the piece did in context.



RAW CANVAS Tony Oursler made three trips to New Zealand to prepare his phantasmagoric projections, which include eyeballs that will bubble up from the low-tide mudflats of Kaipara Harbour (Photo courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures)

Oursler's work does tend to do things: A gigantic eye, for instance, projected onto a fiberglass sphere, watches television; a psychotic doll in red pajamas with a video of a woman's face projected onto its head says things like "More anesthetic, Doctor"; an uncanny little creature, lying with its head pinned by a sofa to the floor, draws viewers into its suffering until suddenly it spits out, "What the fuck are you looking at?" Oursler's muttering dolls and fractured effigies, his video projections of babbling bodiless faces and faceless eyes and disembodied mouths cast onto sculptures, onto bubbles and spheres and blocks and walls and trees, have, over the last few decades, contemplated mass media, distortion, perception, neurosis and psychosis, drugs, sex, dread and desire, mesmerism, parapsychology, surveillance, telecommunications, the separation of mind and body, chaos, soap operas, love, death, and punk rock. Often they're disturbing. Sometimes they're funny. Oursler wasn't sure, though, how the Gibbs project would come off. "This one's pretty dark, man," he told me. "It's coming together. But I don't know exactly what it is yet."

His patron began amassing his fortune in importing and manufacturing, making everything from bras to stoves before moving on to buy New Zealand's largest car dealership and his own merchant bank. But Gibbs was trained as an engineer and is probably best known internationally for the aquatic car he invented. Sick of bothering with the tractors and trailers he needed to bring a boat in over the mile-long low tide in the harbor, he built his first amphibian in 1995 and founded Gibbs Technologies a year later. The company's flagship, so to speak, is the Aquada—which looks like a Lotus made by Nike and senses when it needs to switch from land to water or vice versa—but it also produces a four-wheel ATV that converts to a Jet Ski and a souped-up tanklike number called the Humdinga.

Gibbs plans to begin North American production next year (the Aquada will retail for around \$85,000) and recently teamed up with Lockheed Martin for his new venture, Gibbs Military Amphibians, which has already won a test contract from the U.S. Department of Defense to produce amphibious combat craft. (About this particular success, Gibbs said at the time, "It's a major milestone for the company, because we have solved a problem which has beset every major general since Alexander the Great.")

Gibbs wasn't on the Farm himself in November—he dedicates most of his energy to business in London and Detroit. But he does know how to play, clearly, and with a sort of 007 panache; he owns a \$35 million yacht, its interior designed by Philippe Starck, and his idea of tourism is to drop into Afghanistan. (After the American invasion, he took a commercial flight to Kabul and, after some sightseeing, ended up the guest of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, a general in the Afghan National Army, at Dostum's lavish compound in Mazar-I-Sharif.) Gibbs also dabbles in politics: He was involved in the founding of ACT, a New Zealand libertarian opposition party. When he advised New Zealand's Labour government in the eighties, it imposed hard-line, hard-nosed commercial reforms. He led the syndicate that privatized New Zealand Telecom. The move into military contracting is almost certain to increase Gibbs's wealth and influence, and he is—as evidenced by the hushed reverence at galleries in Auckland and a general uneasiness at the notion of speaking about him too much—the King Kong of an increasingly sophisticated New Zealand art world.

For the moment, Gibbs was being represented by Noel Lane, the sturdy, plainspoken architect who is the director of the Farm and Gibbs's son-in-law, and who was overseeing the production. Oursler was accompanied by his wife, Jacqueline Humphries, the abstract painter—who had an opening of her own in Auckland that week—and their fearless four-year-old, Jack. Oursler's Auckland gallerist, Andrew Jensen, who had set up the commission, was also on hand to see that everything went according to plan. So was Josh Thorson, who had done all the video editing and computer work for Oursler.

Now the 100-foot woman had given way to a gigantic arm, slowly swinging a mallet down on the hill, which in turn gave way to a crawling nude. The skull on the canopied Pohutukawa trees—coastal evergreens native to New Zealand—

continued to morph. "The trees add a lot of texture," Oursler said, "and your brain fills in the rest."

Considering the crawling woman—there are several different female nudes in the piece—Lane laughed. "I reckon you need a bloke, not just these chicks," he told Oursler. "You've got to knock the old boy's socks off at some point."

Soon the eyes and mouths were replaced by a silent spinning bone.

"Check out the femur," Thorson said.

"A simple bone is a good bone," Oursler said.

"The first weapon," Thorson said, which cracked Oursler up.

"I'm not sure the images are dominating the landscape," Lane said. It wasn't clear if he had outsize expectations or not.

If Oursler wanted them to, could they? Although this is, by demand, his biggest work ever, it could only command a small piece of a place like the Farm. The scale here is magnificent and enormous. The Richard Serra—over a million pounds of steel rising out of the ground—appears as but an interruption in the landscape. (The sheep seem to feel the same way: They use it to shelter from the wind, and their huddling and rubbing against it has created a stripe of a much lighter, washed-out color at the base.) But even if these projections could dominate the landscape, it's safe to say that Oursler wouldn't want them to. The images on the hill, on the mudflats, and on the trees look wholly different from the way they appeared on the computer screen back in New York. Three trips to New Zealand helped him make them speak specifically to their context—to interact with the scenery, not overwhelm it.

"At first, it never crossed my mind that his work could be relevant on the scale of the Farm," Gibbs told me. But he liked Oursler's art very much and brought him to New Zealand to discuss possibilities. "When he came back with a proposition that he could light up the whole landscape, that seemed like a lot of fun," Gibbs said. "That landscape's tough to stand up to. You've still got to get yourself up to the level that the land asks of you here, to interact with it powerfully. Tony's

achieved that."

Oursler pointed at the mass of squirming snakes. "Yeah, in this place, the thing transforms itself entirely," he told me. "That's the point. The dumb snakes, they're just dumb snakes by themselves. But here it's something else. It's something wonderful."

Oursler's Lower East Side studio, in New York, is on the ground floor of the building in which he lives with Humphries and their son. It's filled with all manner of oddness. A massive magnifying glass, broken chairs in wooden barrels, old trunks, large weird white tubular constructions all over the place, snapshots of UFOs and spirit photographs, wires and cords and video cameras and plexiglass and a large cleaver. It's a place dedicated, in some way, to seeing the invisible and the unseen, and to investigating things that don't quite look right.

His family history has a more pronounced literary streak than an artistic tradition, but it's one with a long-standing interest in the unseen. His grandfather Fulton Oursler, for many years an editor at *Reader's Digest*, was the author of a best-selling life of Jesus, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1949); Oursler's father, Fulton Jr., who also worked for *Reader's Digest*, for some 30 years, later ran the inspirational magazine *Guideposts* and founded *Angels on Earth*, a magazine dedicated to encounters with heavenly messengers.

Fulton Oursler III was born in 1957 in New York City, the second child of Fulton Jr. and Noel Oursler, a nurse. (He has always gone by Tony; his son, Jack, is in fact Fulton Oursler IV.) The family moved upstate to Nyack shortly after he was born. Both his mother, a gifted painter who never pursued a career in art, and his great-aunt, a painter and art teacher, stoked his early interest. In 1975, he headed for the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles.

"CalArts was just mind-bending," he told me in Auckland. "I had all these preconceptions: I'm going to learn to paint photo-realistically, and then maybe I'll learn abstraction after that—like I was going to repeat all of art history. How I got the notion that that was a good idea, I don't know. For a writer, maybe that would be a good idea, but for an artist it's retarded." Oursler discovered, he says, that making art wasn't going to be what he thought it was. At first, he tried everything from painting to performance pieces, until a teacher suggested he

might be interested in video.

It was a revelation. The way Oursler describes them, his early tapes were essentially send-ups of soap operas, with sets he painted himself and production values purposely made even crummier than necessity demanded. (His first tape was called *Joe, Joe's Transsexual Brother and Joe's Woman*.)

Oursler kept returning to New York whenever he could, and came back full time in 1981. Entranced by the punk and postpunk subcultures, and in particular No Wave—an art and music movement that rejected the commercialism of New Wave—he moved happily into the now mythic eighties East Village scene.

It was mostly fun, if not necessarily easy. "I think I sold like two watercolors in the first 12 years out of school," he said. "It used to be that young artists could never expect to make any money, though now, obviously, that's all changed." Oursler did, however, make an impression: In 1981, the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave him his own screening, "Video Viewpoints." And for the rest of the decade, Oursler got plenty of shows, but he made little money. He paid the rent partly by freelance film editing (including work on a commercial for Stayfree Mini-Pads directed by a pre-*Drugstore Cowboy* Gus Van Sant).

The nineties changed all of that, both for Oursler and in many ways for new media. Oursler dates his own turnaround from the 1992 incarnation of the avant-garde German art exposition Documenta, where he showed a gigantic installation called *The Watching*, which included videos projected onto five levels of a stairwell. To make it, Oursler used a number of small portable video projectors, allowing him to free the images from a fixed projection box. "I really think it needs to be pointed out that he's made a singular, major contribution," the writer and performance artist Constance DeJong told me. "He released the moving image from the rectangle. Tony did that."

Before Documenta, Oursler had been teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art, feeling left out in the wilderness, struggling and miserable. His New York gallery had closed, and he thought his career was over. ("I was bored out of my mind in Boston," he says. "I don't know. I should have been fucking all my students or something.") But now began an enormously productive and publicly lauded period. Through the mid- to late nineties, he had a truckload of shows all

over the world, and his work began to be bought both by major collectors and for the permanent holdings of big museums. He also continued to collaborate with CalArts friends like Mike Kelley, as well as DeJong, Dan Graham, Stephen Vitiello, Glenn Branca, Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, and even David Bowie.

John Baldessari, who was one of Oursler's mentors at CalArts and whose influential Conceptual work certainly had an effect on his former student, had long been a supporter, but particularly remembers the first time he was struck by Oursler's mature work. "It was an art fair at the Chateau Marmont, with various dealers showing in hotel rooms, and Tony had one in a closet: Here you look in this dark void and this strange thing is speaking to you," Baldessari said. "I think the highest accolade is to look at something and say, 'Wow, I wish I did that.' And I don't have that feeling about a lot of work. But with Tony's I do."

Oursler had been transformed from an unsellable radical into a major figure. But he was still trying new things. In 2000, he opened a piece unrestricted by gallery walls, *The Influence Machine*, in Madison Square Park in New York, "a psycholandscape" made up of images of faces and ghosts and spirits projected onto smoke, fencing, and trees. He had already taken the image out of the box; now he was extending it onto natural surfaces.

"I'm still trying to figure out how to project video onto a flame," Oursler told me.

As the 90 minutes or so of the New Zealand installation went by, the visions that had come out of Oursler's brain and onto Gibbs's land seemed to go from the beginning of time to the end of it. "The mud always signaled to me some sort of fossil bed of old creation/new creation, and we were signing into it, etching into this fossil bed," Oursler told me. "There's an up-and-down motion: Things sprout out, then die back into the mud, and other things emerge from it. "

Even at this eleventh hour, he was contemplating changes. It is partly for this reason that the issue of working specifically for a private collector—for a large and potentially obtrusive presence—hasn't bothered him too much. It's true that Gibbs had not been hesitant about saying what he liked and didn't like: In fact, none of the original work for the project remains in its present incarnation. ("My impression is that Alan mostly kept saying, 'More explosions!'" one Aucklander familiar with the project joked.)

But Oursler had little interest in pitting his ego against his patron's, and didn't feel any defeat whatsoever if he made Gibbs happy. (Certainly, Gibbs wasn't paying him peanuts, though Oursler preferred to remain discreet on the subject.) Though Oursler may come off as easygoing, modest, and flexible, he doesn't accept just any suggestion. When someone proposed at a dinner in Auckland that he forget the mud and trees and so forth and just project the images onto the Serra sculpture, he snorted with amusement, then briefly looked appalled. "Richard would hunt me down and kill me with his bare hands," he said. "Look, Richard is a big rooster," Lane told me concerning Gibbs and Serra's discussions. "And it's been easy with Tony. But he's a rooster too, honestly. If Alan had said anything that Tony felt compromised the art he wanted to make, I think he'd have fought it to death."

"People like to think that everything is sprouting from some genius head—strike the rock and out will come the water," Oursler said. "But actually it's just, you're down there with a bunch of help."

That help comes, of course, both during the process and after the object is finished. "The difference between art and pop culture is, I think, something that has to be defined," Oursler told me. "And my definition is that there's no position for the viewer in pop culture. What makes art radical is a respect for the viewer. The viewer is part of the picture. That's where it gets really interesting, the translation somebody makes, somebody who just walked up to this thing you made, someone who comes up and just says, 'What's this?' and starts from there."

The Oursler piece on the Farm won't need anyone to ask, "What's this?" The Gibbs family, when they flip the switch on his projections, will have a big head start. But in this case, the work also involves a different sort of translation. "My whole family has visited Tony in New York, and our family's mixed up in the work," Gibbs told me. In fact, Oursler filmed Gibbs's children and grandchildren and used that video to fashion the eyes and mouths that pop out of the mud—making them actually a part of the artwork. "He pulls it all in, he feeds off that, any input he can find," Gibbs said. "This work's got our eyes in it, and our ideas in it, and that's what all good art is, in a sense: a social process. And we love that parts of us are incorporated. That was Tony's idea, of course. Tony wants to make his work part of the place, and part of the people."

Earlier, when Oursler had told me this, that he'd put Gibbs's family's eyes and mouths in the work, I reminded him of a story he's told in the past—how his great-aunt had made a painting of a shipyard, when he and his brothers and sisters were small, and given it to them. When the kids looked closely, they could see that all the ships were named for the Oursler children. "I hadn't even thought of that," he told me. "Yeah, we were totally overwhelmed, the kids, totally drawn in by those boats with our names on them. Maybe that's it. Maybe one of the most basic things, among all the different sorts of things I've been trying to do, that I've wanted to do, is to make people feel something like how we felt then."