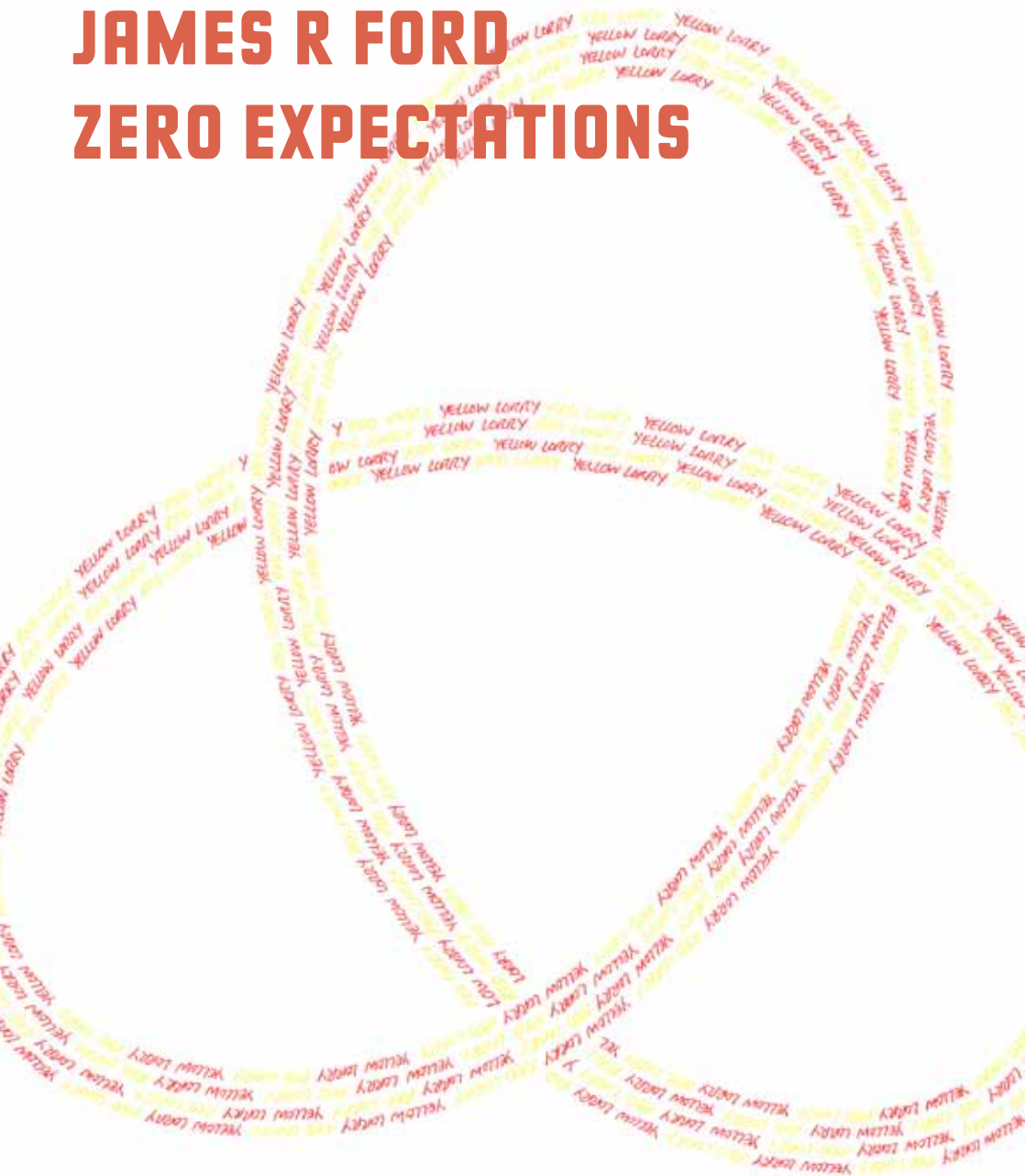


JAMES R FORD ZERO EXPECTATIONS



31 MARCH - 21 APRIL 2011

There is an equivalent to stage fright for visual artists. The performance anxiety that an actor feels on stage is shared by artists in their studios. The proscenium arch exists in the space around the canvas, a canvas that stares back with the intensity of a sell out crowd. Pollock literalised this arena when he moved the canvas from the easel to the floor, but it was always there. Artists create work to be seen.

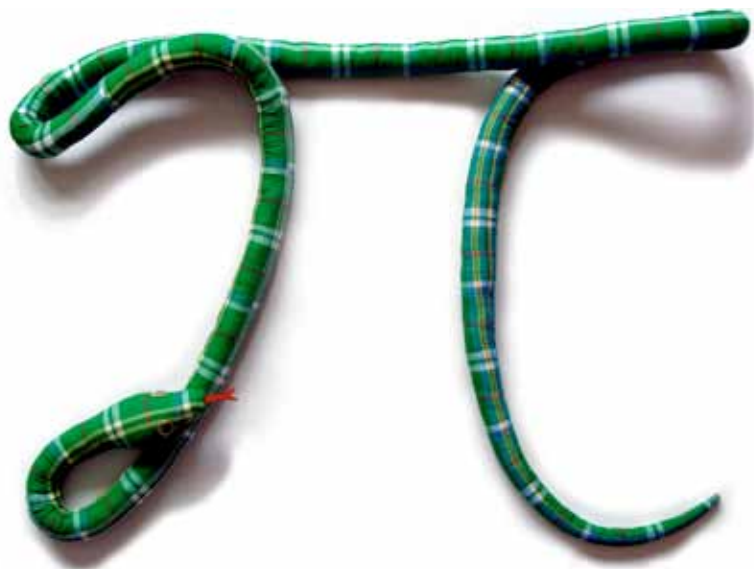
Whether it is a nadir of creativity or exhaustion from repetition every artist will at some point feel *Tongue-Tied and Tired*. For most it typifies a period of reduced creative output rather than forming the basis of a body of work.

James Ford has a history of making work out of not making work. In 2008 Ford exhibited *A Thousand Cranes* as part of his solo exhibition *Duchamp Played Chess; I Made Cranes*. The work consists of 1000 carefully folded Origami cranes made as a distraction, a reification of lost time. The thousand cranes arranged neatly in their grid form an impressive object that continues to surprise on closer inspection, as each crane differs from its neighbour in colour or pattern. Similarly in *Only Boring People Get Bored* (2009) Ford focused on doodling; using a behaviour indicative of an absent mind or boredom to create a body of work. Although the doodling may appear absent

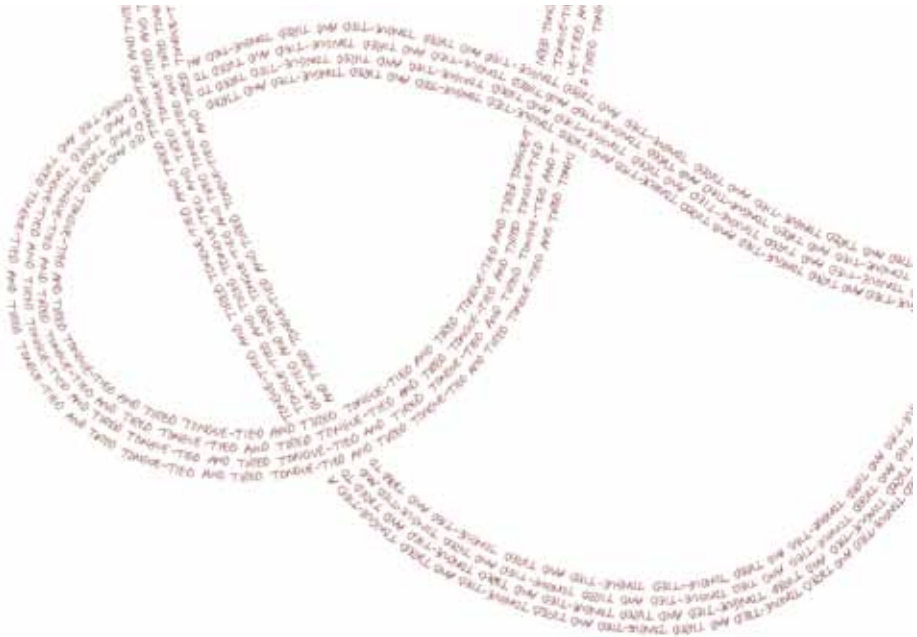
minded, it conforms to strict boundaries filling in various shapes, suggesting that the mind is not entirely absent. It raises several themes that recur in Ford's work; order within chaos, chance and obsession.

Whether chess or Origami, or a household chore, it is in the distractions of everyday life that our ideas are born. It's a myth perpetuated since Dionysus that artists have a divine link to epiphany that others cannot grasp. For Dionysus the link was aided by the annual grape harvest and the consumption of wine, for others it is through hard work. This divine link that artists are suggested to have is perhaps a significant part of the basis of art. Where artists are supposed to make sense of the complexities and chaos in the world it is only possible if there is a natural order, or a higher being that creates this for artists to gain a sense of it. For without any natural order artists are just adding to the chaos.

Stephen Hawking and Richard Feynman have previously suggested that due to the unstable nature of our universe any object could form at random and then obliterate itself with its anti-matter. Thus there is just as much chance for a snake curled into the shape of Pi to occur as any other object. The irony in Ford presenting this as an art object cannot go unnoticed; the snake which should be



Snake Pi (version 1) 2011 fabric, felt, cotton stuffing, goocly eyes diameter 7cm, dimensions vary (3.14 m when straightened)



Tongue Tied and Tired (6_2, brown) 2011 Fineliner pen on paper 42 x 59 cm (detail)

a product of chaos is introduced as an art object sitting ambiguously between fields.

Tongue-Tied and Tired is the series of drawings included in *Zero Expectations*. Tongue twisters and alliterations form the lines that coil into loops. With each work done with Fineliner pens Ford retains an astonishing amount of consistency throughout the series. The words are all equally sized and spaced and the ink never deteriorates, making it difficult to see where Ford began, and impossible to believe that he ever gets tongue-tied or tired. Starting from Escher's trefoil knot and increasing in complexity they all share the property of having neither end nor beginning. The tongue twisters repeat themselves to infinity. Although theoretically possible to follow the line back to where you began, it soon becomes a chore irrespective of it being verbalised or repeated in the audience's mind.

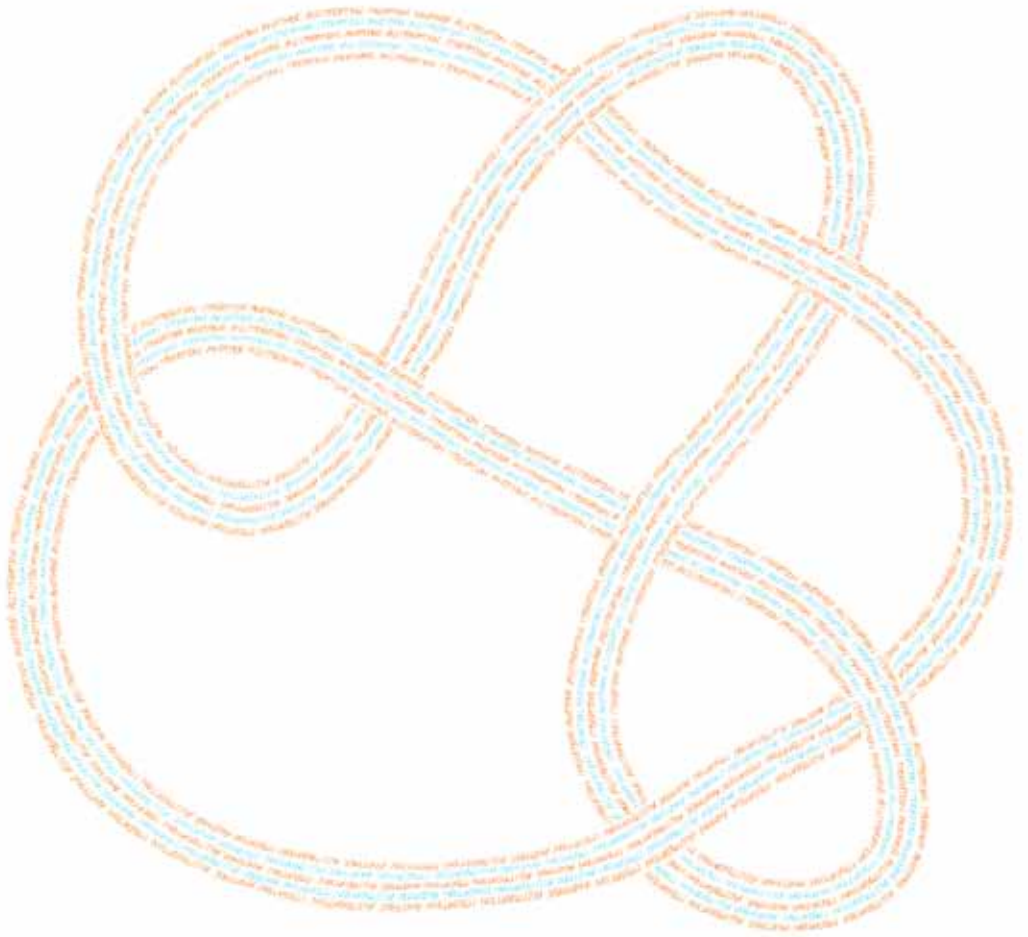
Like Gordian knots they are impossible to disentangle, safeguarding a secret. It's a common objection to art that meaning is created out of packaging a rather banal idea in convoluted terms, quoting French philosophers and Greek mythology, making any meaning quite difficult to disentangle,

regardless of what lies behind the mess. Here it appears these secrets are bound behind endless knots rather than imposing texts.

But audience accessibility is a priority in Ford's work, and has been addressed in the past by including the audience as collaborators or more simply in finding subject matter in the everyday. Strategies such as focussing on processes or more conceptual aspects risks alienating the viewer unprepared to engage with the work. But here having *Zero Expectations* is encouraged as there is little reward for following the loops to eternity and no amount of repetition will lead the viewer to the secret behind the knot, as the knot is the secret itself.

There may be one reward to following the endless loops, and that is due to their power of distraction. By being absorbed in the work, with *Zero Expectations*, the viewer is able to inhabit a space where they too are free from distraction, while distracted from everyday life, whether they know it or not.

Adrian Gebers



Ford's first show in Australia has an appropriately ironic title, adapted from a well known quote by Stephen Hawking. In this context it is relevant to the lo-fi aesthetic of the works and the use of mathematical/scientific iconography. The exhibition is peppered with never ending knots, word play and a sense of redeemable idiocy.

The artist's interest in visual, verbal and conceptual forms of repetition and patterns is evident in his new series of drawings, *Tongue Tied and Tired*. Aural, alliterative pairings and sequences are transformed to visual forms by laboured textual rendering. The act of writing lines as a punishment is given a new purpose – the words form intertwined threads, flowing into the shapes of imaginary knots that loop on infinitely. Ford takes Escher's famous trefoil knot as a starting point and moves onto to more complex, theoretical knotted shapes. There is a metaphorical tying of the tongue and a visual tying of the knot. In addition to these drawings there is a sculptural work that can be found flopped and twisted on the floor of the gallery – the first in the *Snake Pi's* series. In a universe according to Hawking and Feynman, where particles pop in and out of existence, taking on random forms, the likelihood of a stuffed snake appearing, curled into the shape of Pi, is a likely as anything else. And, as Ford states, "there are not enough snakes in contemporary art". The *Snake Pi* in this show is concerned with length; others in the series will consider mass and time.

James R Ford is a British artist currently living in Wellington, NZ. Ford studied at Goldsmiths, London, and has exhibited and been published internationally.

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cover image *Red Lorry, Yellow Lorry (3_1, yellow, red)* 2010 Fineliner pen on paper 42 x 42 cm (detail)



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