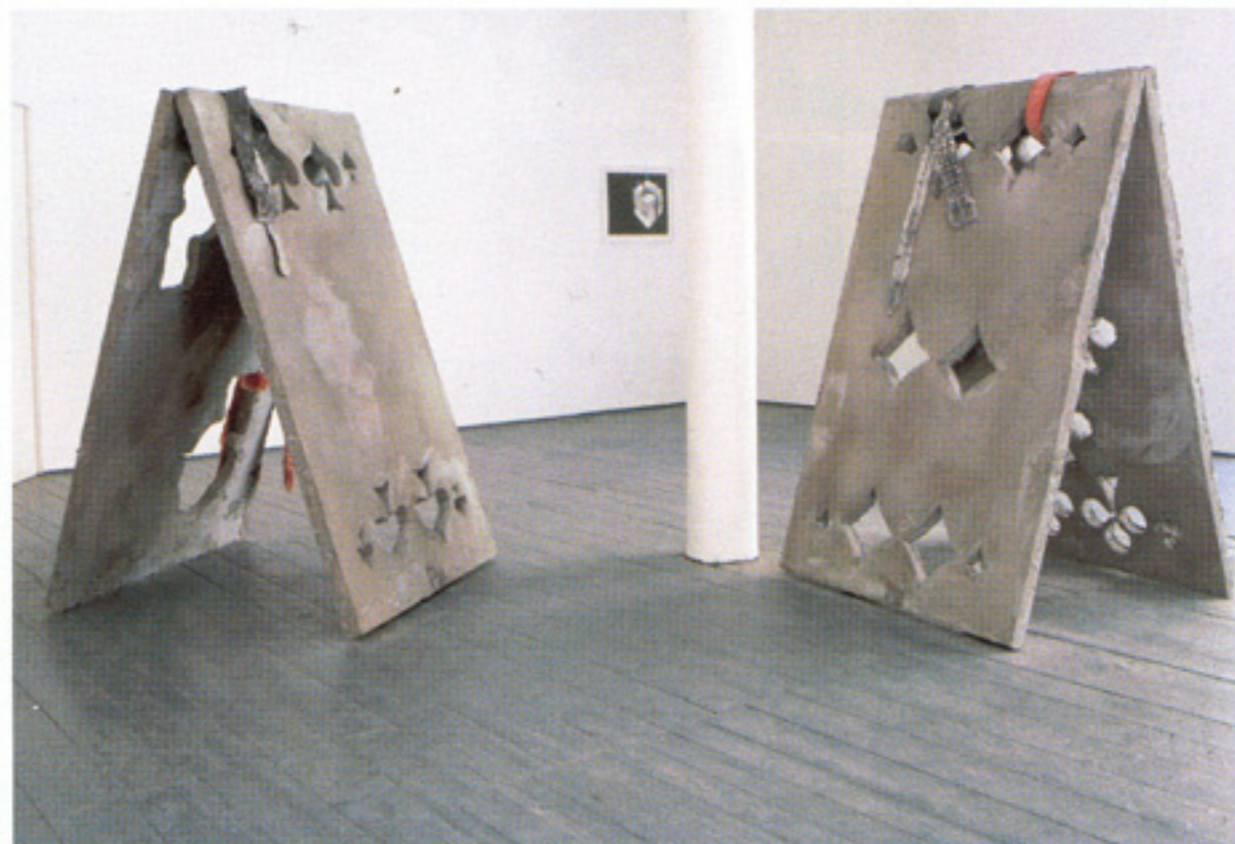
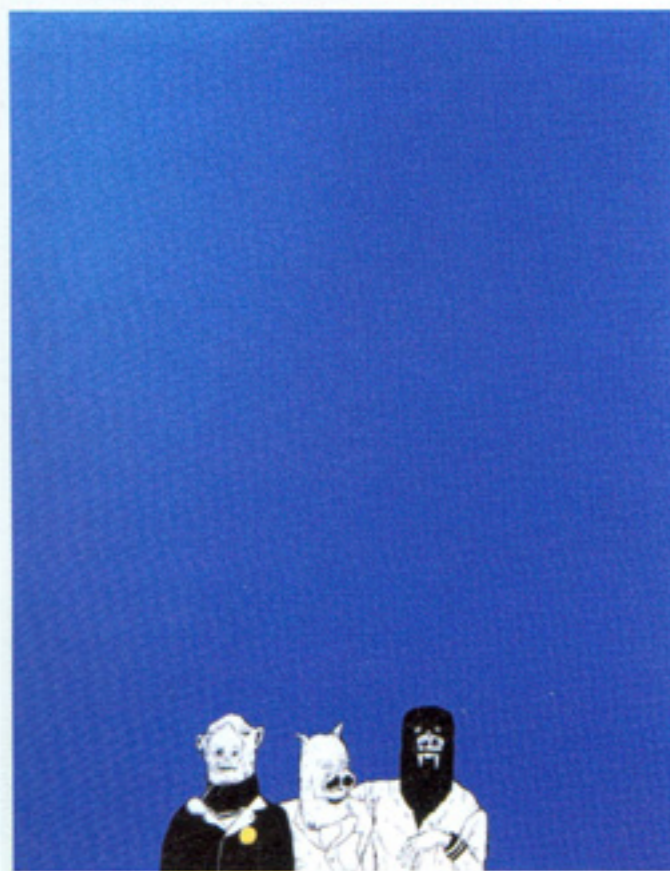


Mick Peter**Phrygian bonnets and dunces' caps; dice, cards and concrete**

by Tom Morton

On the Steps2006
Ink and spray paint
on paper
57×45 cm**Two Clerks (4, 6, 8)**2006
Concrete, polystyrene
and coloured rubber
Dimensions variable**Bab**2004
Guitar parts, clay,
cocktail sticks, rubber
and chains
Dimensions variable

The poster designed by Mick Peter to advertise his recent solo exhibition at Transmission, Glasgow, depicts two wooden butcher's blocks, scarred by heavy cleaver blows. The block on the left takes the form of a pig giving a piggyback to a man in a Phrygian bonnet, while the block on the right reverses this tableau. In the first image both human and animal frown, while in the second they break into broad grins. We might read the poster as a pedagogical device, or even as a carnivore's revision of the Yin-Yang symbol's symbiotic orbs. At any rate it seems to be a statement about how the world works, or should work: buck the food chain, bucko, and we'll soon see that smile wiped from your face. For all this, though, there's also something in this image that undermines its authority. Those Phrygian bonnets (which during the Enlightenment served as emblems of a reasonable mind) are, with their pointed tops, awfully close to dunces' caps. Perhaps the smirking, pig-touting man is an idiot, playing by idiot rules.

Peter's sculpture *Two Clerks (4, 6, 8)* (2006) takes its title from Gustave Flaubert's unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), in which two friends make use of a newly acquired fortune to pursue the life of the mind, rapidly cycling through almost every intellectual discipline known to man, and finding each one equally intractable and confounding. Despite their numerous set-backs (including, memorably, the time 'they were seen running along the main road to town, wearing sopping wet clothes under

the broiling sun [...] to verify whether thirst can be quenched by applying water to the epidermis' and return home 'panting and both suffering from colds'), Bouvard and Pécuchet have the relentless forward motion of the overconfident, under-reflecting art student who paints like a Mark Rothko clone in the morning, only to whip off an *ersatz* Martin Kippenberger in the late afternoon.

In Peter's sculpture each of Flaubert's characters is represented by what appear to be two huge concrete playing cards that lean against each other like the first unit in a faltering house of cards. Both decorated with cast-rubber belts that hint at Bouvard and Pécuchet's odd-couple co-dependency, one set of cards comprises the six of diamonds and the nine of clubs, while the other consists of the four of spades and the two of an impostor suit – human heads (hearts, here, are conspicuous by their absence). In card games, of course, skill is trumped by luck, knowledge is useless in the face of the unknowable and the future is always in doubt. It's appropriate, then, that beneath the concrete fascias of Peter's *Two Clerks* lurk slabs of brittle, lightweight polystyrene. If our universe fails to yield to human understanding, why commemorate this understanding in any other substance?

The material deceptions of *Two Clerks* are repeated in a number of Peter's sculptures, notably *Nope* (2005) and *Buckets and Planks* (2004). Fabricated again from concrete-slathered polystyrene, *Nope* resembles a medallists' podium from some now fashionable Modernist Olympiad, topped with a huge dice. The word 'nope' runs around the sculpture's edge, as though in utter

refutation of the cosmic significance of winning gold, silver or bronze – as the dice indicates, it's fate that decides who finishes first. *Buckets and Planks* is a somewhat different creature. Made in paper, cardboard and rubber, Peter's attempts at simulating the objects in his sculpture's title appear to be deliberate failures, as though he realized half-way through their manufacture that all human effort is meaningless but pressed on regardless in a combination of resistance, decadence and pure spite.

In his *Bab* (2004) Peter suspends the three letters that make up the work's curmudgeonly moniker in hanging baskets. Like much of his work, the piece feels at first glance nihilistic (surely 'bah' is the suburban equivalent of a death rattle?), but it is in fact nothing of the sort. There's too much going on here – too much activity, too many decisions to be or not to be – to allow the possibility of metaphysical paralysis setting in. Rather, what Peter's practice argues for is simultaneously the weirdly transcendent stupidity of Flaubert's protagonists and their creator's antipathy to received ideas. This is not the contradictory position it at first appears. To think about the universe demands intelligence, sure; but to turn those thoughts into art demands a certain blindness to the void.