

# The Finalist

**F**ROM the living room in his Brooklyn house, Augustus Firestone is trying to make art history.

There are examples of his work on the walls — what he calls sculptural relief paintings — scenes of people walking into the sea, of mothers cuddling children, of landscapes.

But it's not just his own work that concerns him. With fellow artist Aaron Frater he's creating an art movement.

For Picasso it was Cubism, with Monet it was Impressionism. For Firestone, it's Finalism.

"I asked Aaron if he'd ever seen any sculptures with paint on them, and he said hardly ever. I said, let's get together and do some. And that started a creative surge with both of us," Firestone says.

"After that we got together and pushed the idea further. We started a website and had a philosophy, a base idea of what we are doing. And now we have 13 members. Six of them are overseas, and it just keeps on growing."

Members include New Zealanders Harry Watson, Davey McGhie and Robert Rapson, as well as artists from Britain, Lebanon and Egypt.

They met through the website that Firestone and Frater set up — [www.sculpturepainted.com](http://www.sculpturepainted.com) — where the artists' works are displayed and can be purchased.

"I don't think I would have met these artists if it hadn't been for the Internet. The exciting thing is meeting these artists who are doing painted sculpture and who are excited by the idea of the movement."

Though painting on sculpture isn't a new concept, Firestone says it's



**KIMBERLEY ROTHWELL**

never been the focus of a group before.

"Previously, in Roman and Greek sculptures, they painted them, but over time, the paint slowly flaked off and it was a forgotten art as such. Leonardo and Michelangelo certainly didn't put any paint on their sculptures. So it kind of got lost, especially during the Renaissance period and onward."

**S**YDNEY-born Firestone studied art at the Australian National Art School and at Fortman Studios in Florence before settling in Wellington with his New Zealand-born wife. They have a one-year-old son, Leo, and Firestone left his job as studio coordinator at Vincent's Art Workshop to be a stay-at-home dad. He paints most afternoons.

"I go down to Vincent's and do an hour or two a day, and I keep that rhythm going. I also work weekends as a chef to pay the bills. As you can imagine, most people would be incredibly exhausted, but I'm also very inspired."

He describes the art scene in Wellington as "incredible", and has met a lot of people through his work at Vincent's.

"I sort of thought when I finished art school that I should hunker down somewhere and hide and paint and it

didn't quite work that way. Coming here [from Sydney] and experiencing an amazing supportive environment, where people openly talk about their art — really, it's been like being born again as an artist, it's quite liberating."

The art world can be frustrating, though, Firestone says.

He has called the painted sculpture movement Finalism because it represents the final point between painting and sculpture. "There have been a lot of art stages called modernism, post-modernism, post-post-modernism, which I find completely frustrating. So, basically, naming it is one way of having control over it as artists in an art group. But also it seems like a lot of academics have taken over the art world, rather than the artists defining what it is they do themselves. All art groups did start out with the artists naming their own group, like the Surrealists, Cubists, Dadaists. This whole takeover by academia produces art works like the pile of popcorn at the City Gallery. I see a lot of thought in it, but I don't see a level of artistic creativity involved in that artwork."

"Theory has become more dominant than the artworks or the art process itself. I think the average person recognises that and gets just as frustrated as I do."

The Finalists exhibited their work at Thistle Hall late last year and have another exhibition there in October.

But how far would Firestone like to see his art movement go?

"I would like to go on tour with the group — Sydney, Wellington, New York, London — if I could find the funding. I would like to have books out, like most artists and groups have



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**Finalism represents the final point between painting and sculpture.**

done, and create discussion."

With the website providing a point of contact for buyers and artists, could we be looking at the end of galleries?

Firestone doesn't think so.

"You need to show your work to the public. The Internet is two-dimensional and we are dealing with painted sculpture, so there is the problem. It's very hard to get a feel or a dimension for the work unless it's right in front of you.

"I'm a big fan of galleries, there's nothing more exciting than having your work up or being part of a group show that you've organised. I'm particularly passionate about it."