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8 April - 9 May 2020

Preview: Tuesday 7 April, 5-7pm



Image: Two Huia, 2020, bronze & 24 carat gold, 2650 x 1800 x 815mm

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Art New Zealand

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ISSN 0110-1102

Nigel Brown

Elizabeth Rees / Anne Noble / Kate van der Drift / John Vea / Hamish McLaren

Louise Henderson / Christopher Perkins / Len Lye / Anthony Stones

Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua at Waikato

Sympathetic Resonance at Nelson

Alan Pearson (1929–2019)



9 415006 101933 >



Theo Schoon, *Done Up In Pins and Curlers*, oil and ink on paper, c.1965
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2013

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7 March – 31 May 2020

Opening function: Saturday 7 March, 4pm

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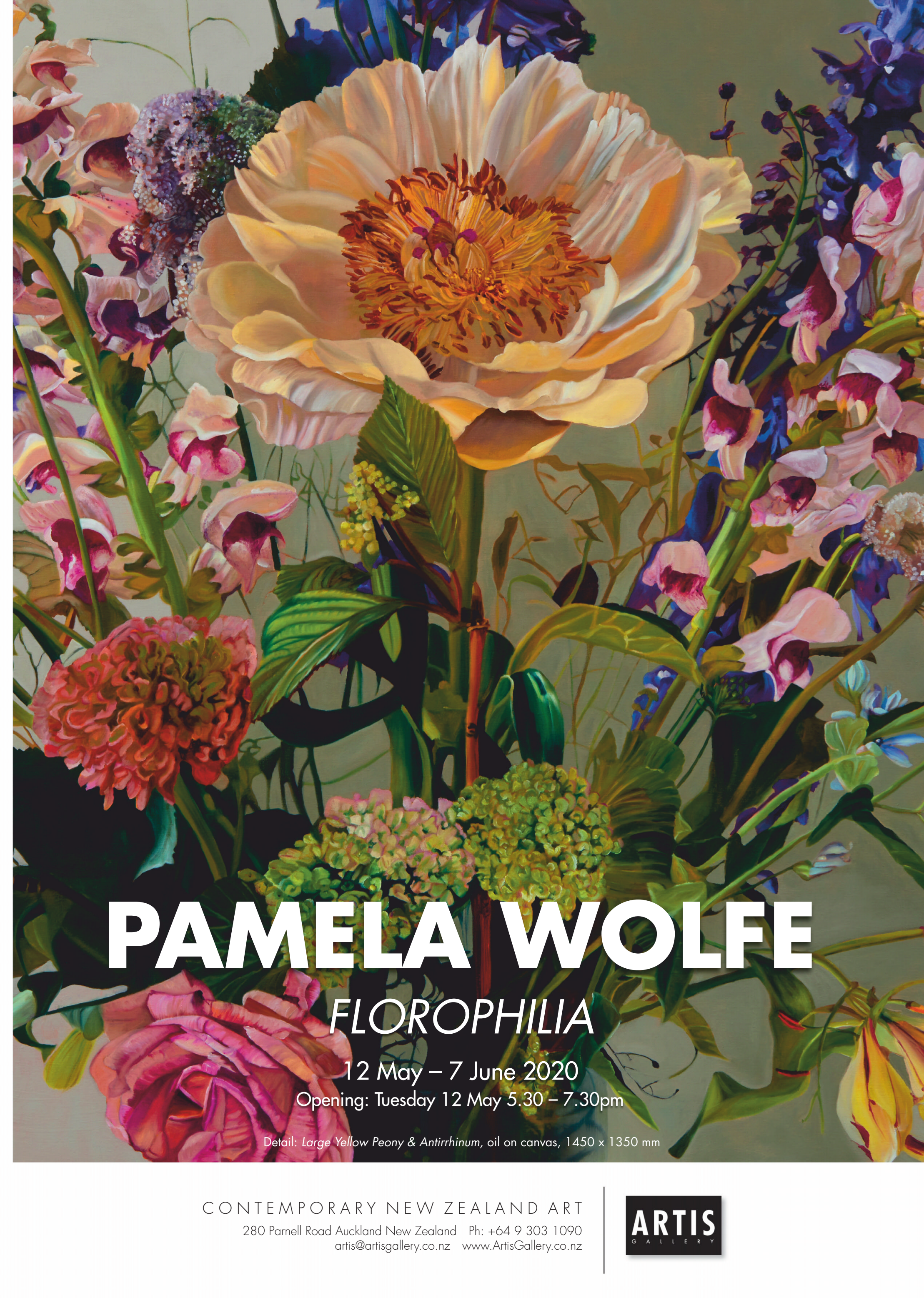

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PAMELA WOLFE

FLOROPHILIA

12 May – 7 June 2020

Opening: Tuesday 12 May 5.30 – 7.30pm

Detail: Large Yellow Peony & Antirrhinum, oil on canvas, 1450 x 1350 mm

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URSULA NAPANGARDI MARKS, *Dancing Stick Dreaming - Tururu Jukurpa (detail)*, acrylic on canvas, 400mm H x 300mm W.

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Jeffrey Harris, *Within the Tides*, 1986, oil on linen, 5 panels.



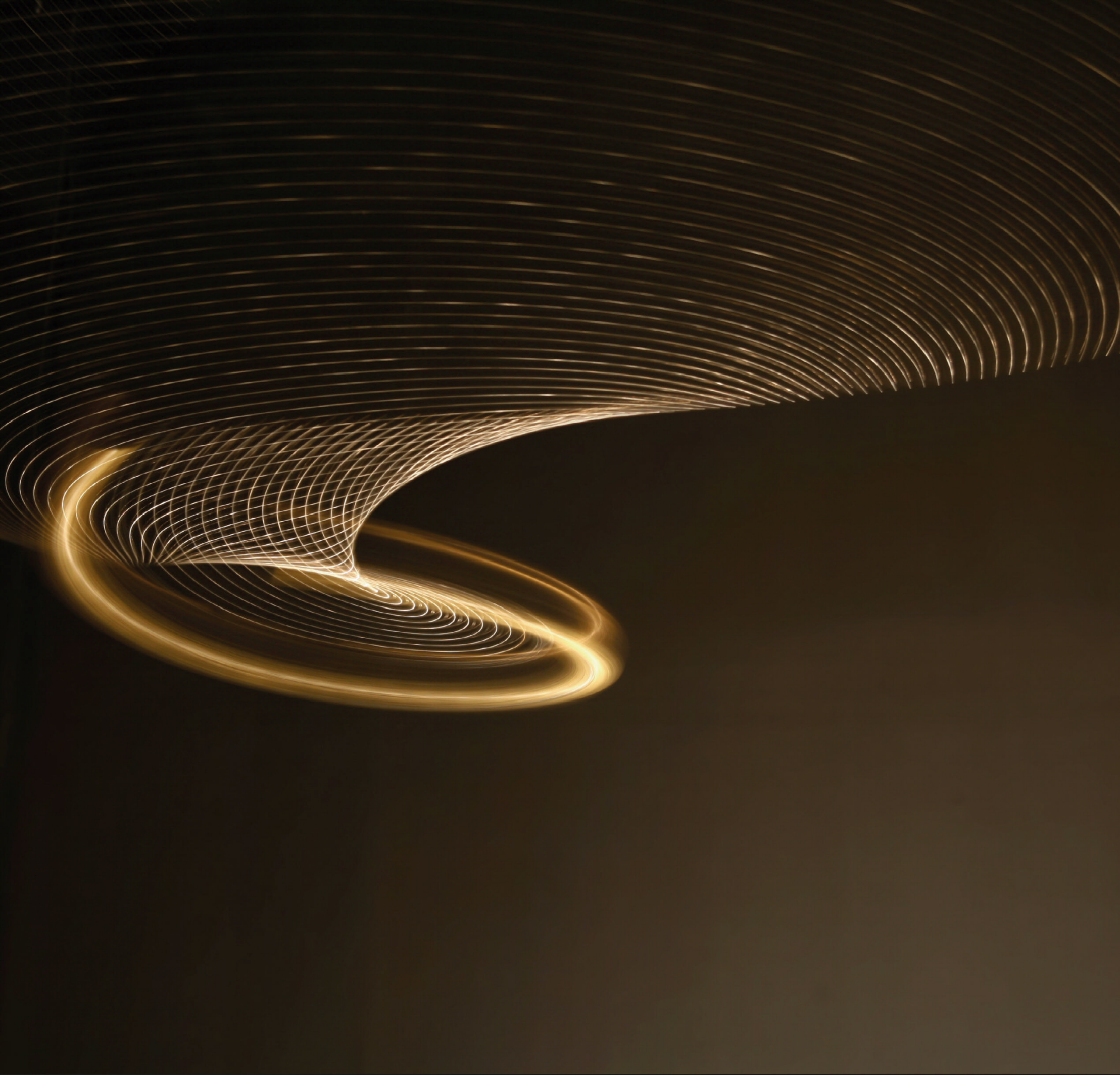
JEFFREY HARRIS: *WITHIN THE TIDES*

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Len Lye, *Sky Snake*, 1965 Len Lye Foundation Collection,
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo Bryan James

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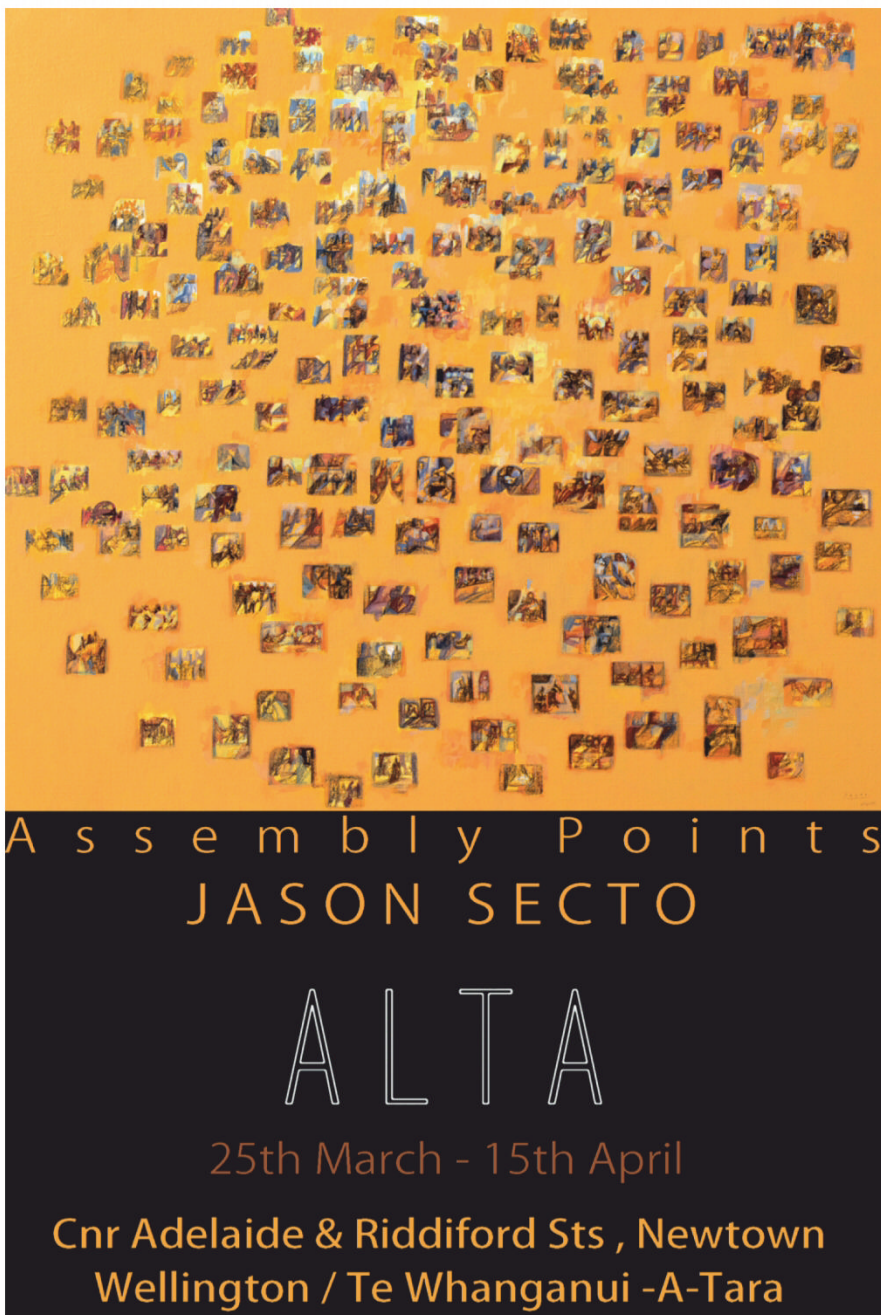


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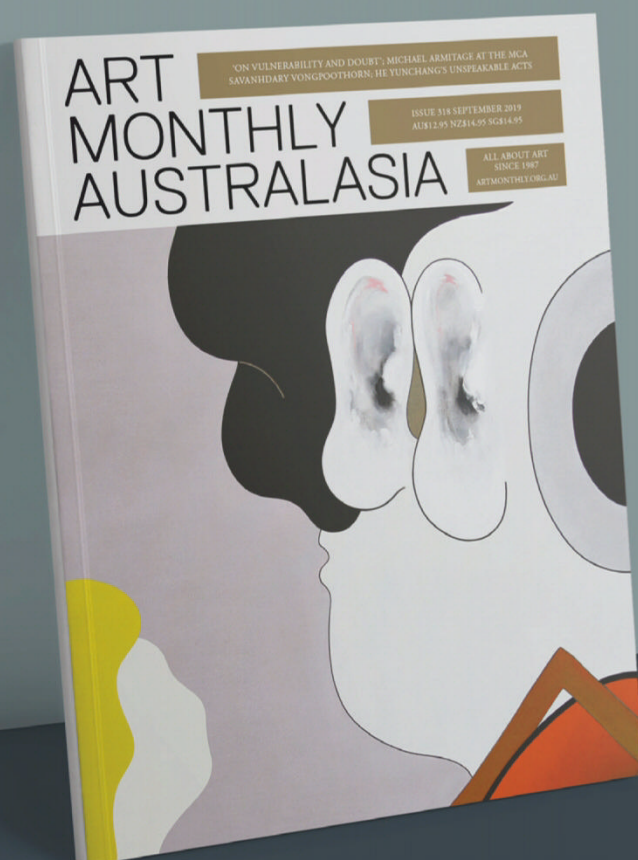
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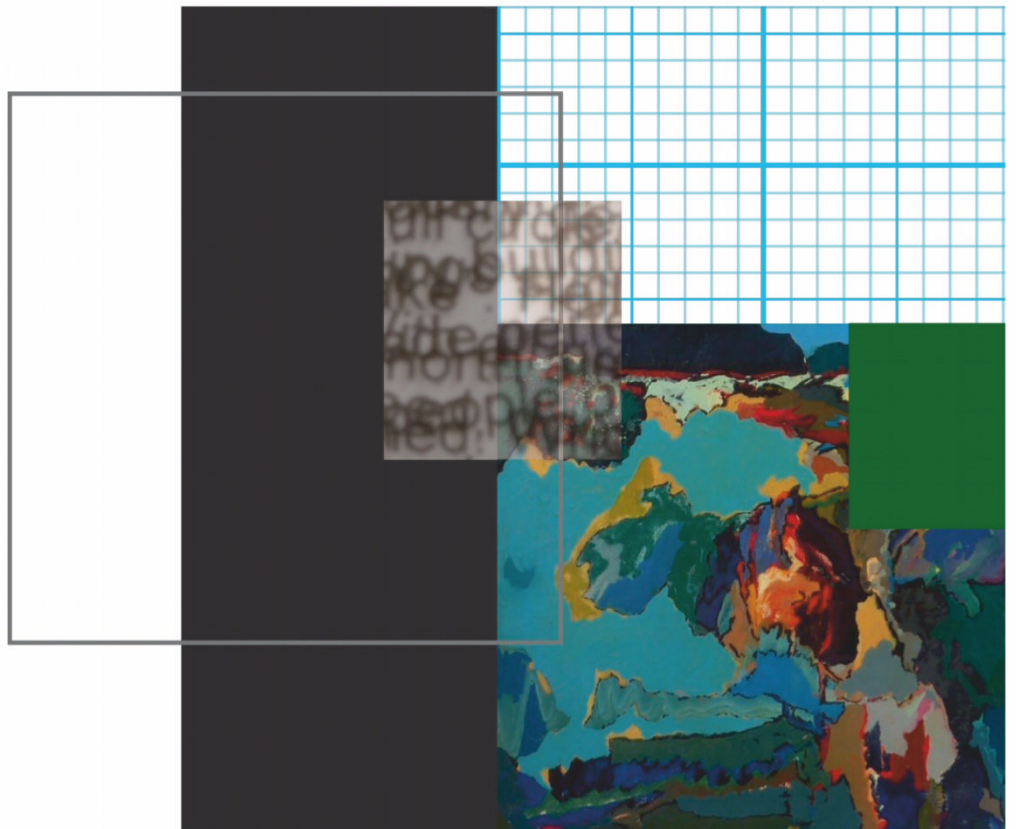




ROSS GRAY_ THEN AGAIN

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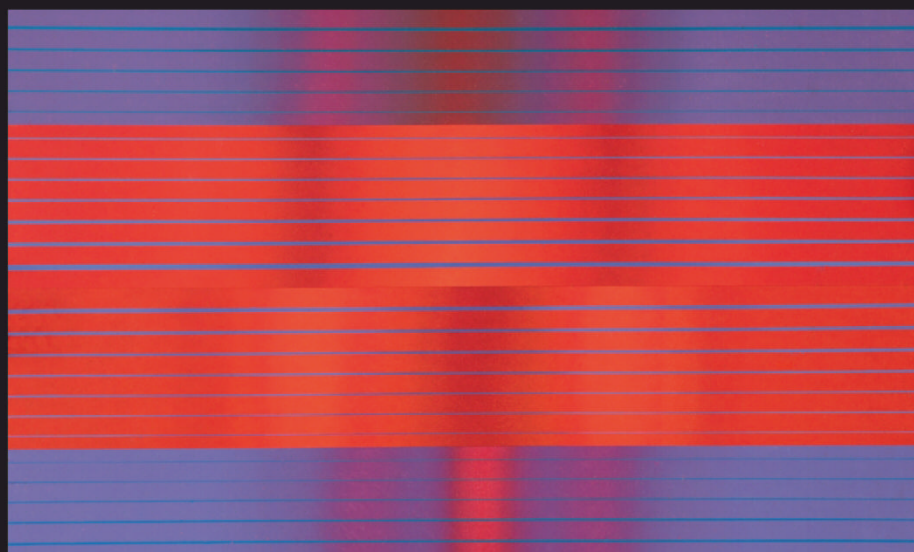


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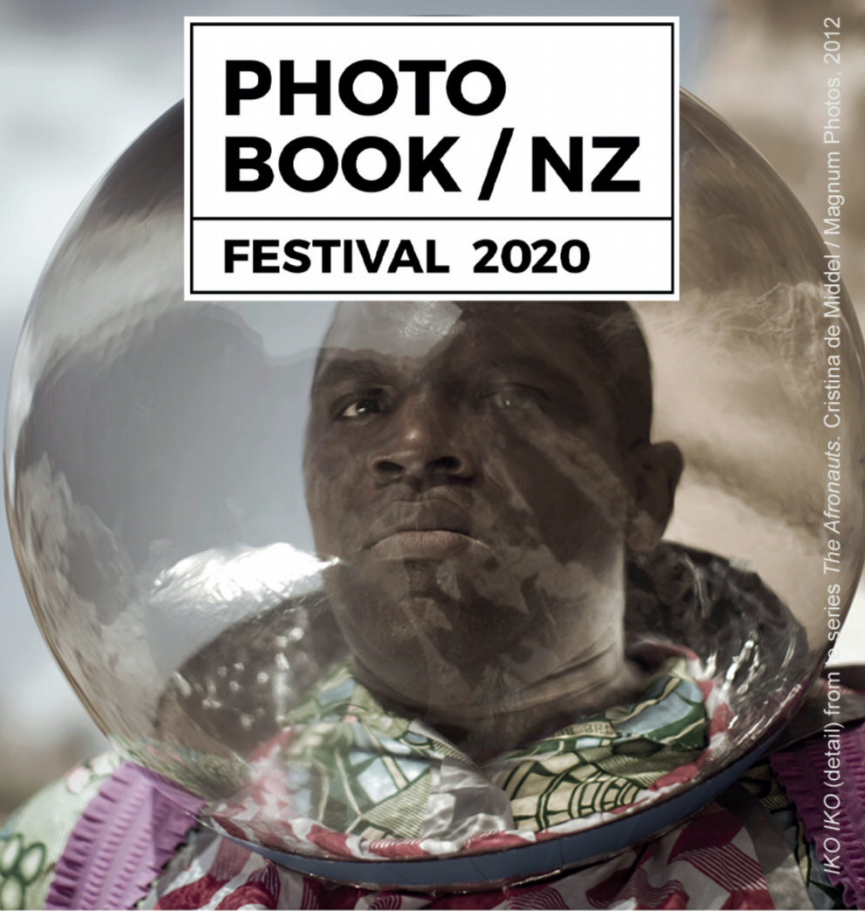


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IKO IKO (detail) from series The Afonauts, Cristina de Middel / Magnum Photos, 2012

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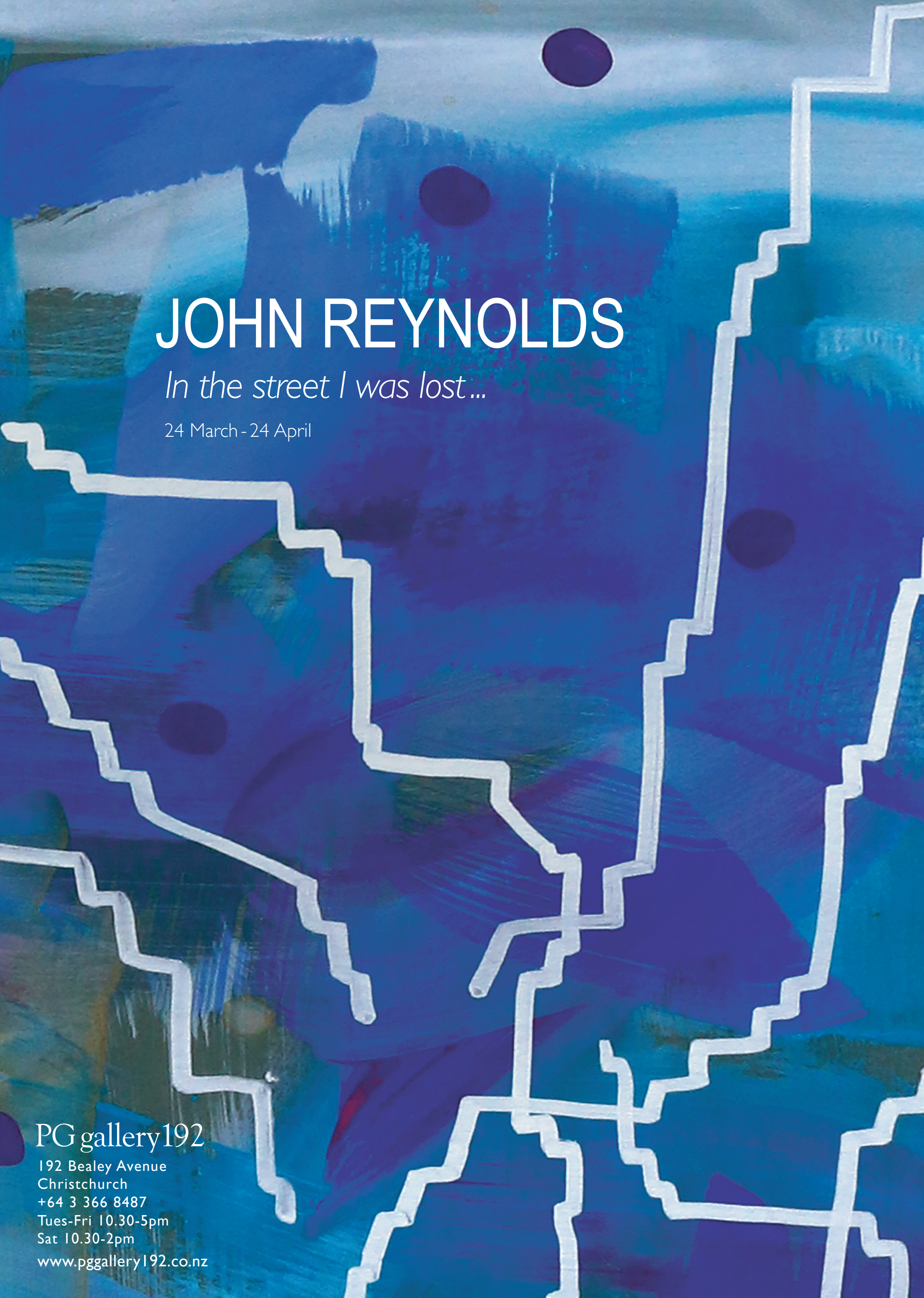
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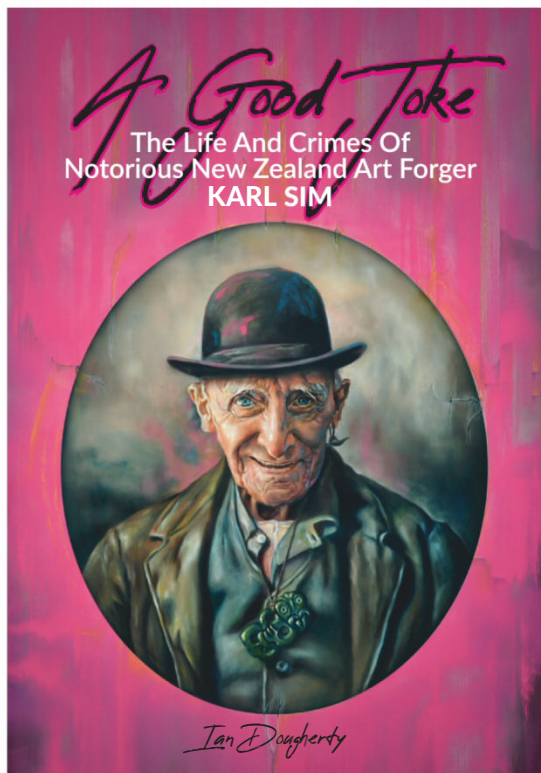
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by
Ian Dougherty



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Fiona Amundsen and Tim Corballis,
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John Nixon, *Untitled (Pair)*, 2019



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Art New Zealand

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Nigel Brown, in his Dunedin studio, with Louis, January 2020
(Photograph: Adrienne Martyn)

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Alan Pearson

(1929–2019)

Last year I was setting up an end-of-residency exhibition at the Dunedin School of Art when a call came through to my cell phone from the UK. It was from my old art-school classmate Alan Pearson; he needed to talk to someone as his father, the artist Alan Pearson, had just passed away. It was kind of ironic; in 1986, Alan Pearson the elder had held the same Dunedin residency that I had just finished.

I went through Ilam Art School at Canterbury University with Alan the younger in the 1980s. His dad had been a student there in the 1950s. Through my friendship with Alan I became very aware of his father as a formidable and unrelenting artist. Listening to him talk at school about the day-to-day methodology of his father's practice, I soon became aware of the tenacity that would be necessary to even contemplate entering that profession. It was a definite grounding and as important a lesson as anything I ever learnt as a student.

One time my friend Alan asked me to give him a hand to pick up a chest of drawers from his father's house in Lyttelton. Pearson was away at the time (probably at the Dunedin residency, I assume). I was desperate to check out a real and serious artist's studio. Some of our lecturers at Ilam had art practices and Riduan Tomkins, head of the painting department, even had a studio at the school itself. It just looked like someone's office. There was a suspicion that our full-time lecturers were too safe as artists, nurtured within the comfortable bubble of academia.

Pearson was a different kettle of fish altogether. He put it all on the line and you could see that risk factor in every brushstroke. It looked like he meant it and didn't care whether you liked it or not. His studio in Lyttelton seemed somewhat chaotic with paintings stacked carelessly over top of each other, inside a messy and dark space with detritus strewn about. It was a bit of a shock for me. It was definitely not *House & Garden* and made art school seem positively salubrious. His son just shrugged and thought it was normal. As I found out much later, it was.

I only ever met Alan Pearson the painter once. He came up to visit his son in a studio I shared with him in Auckland early in 1994. On entering my space he looked hard at all the work. He said some critical and honest things, which were actually quite helpful once I recovered from his observations. However, he did hover in front of one work and pointed at it as he said, 'Now that's damn good!' He looked at the painting for quite some time and never said another word. Later that evening we went to his exhibition at RKS Gallery and when he saw me, he dragged me over to one of his paintings. He leaned into me as he said, 'I put that



one up for you'. He was being both charming and terrifying at the same time. I liked him.

Pearson worked as a full-time artist for most of his adult life. He went out of fashion. He went out of this country, moving to Australia in 1999. He has now gone out of this world. His paintings remain and will be dissected in due course. More important, for me, is that he never lost his desire nor his defiance. It's there in virtually all of his self-portraits. Pearson had his followers and he didn't do it alone but the man threw his life totally into his art and he deserves utmost respect for that. He always had mine. Cheers Mr Pearson, you were the real deal.

MARK BRAUNIAS

(above) Alan Pearson, 2014
(Photograph: Sam Hartnett)

Exhibitions



Auckland

Freeman White *Call of the Ocean*

Sanderson Contemporary

22 October–10 November

RICHARD WOLFE

When the European easel painting tradition was transplanted to nineteenth-century New Zealand, it was hardly surprising that the surrounding ocean would prove a popular subject for artists. As well as claiming some 15,000 km of coastline, no part of this country is more than 120 km from the sea.

By the late 1870s, Scottish-born Christchurch artist John Gibb had established himself as this country's premier marine painter with his estuarine, coastal and harbour views. More recently, Napier-based Freeman White has brought the tradition into

the twenty-first century. He came to national prominence in 2006 by winning the Adam Portraiture Award, and three years later began painting the New Zealand landscape. Since then, rolling hills have given way to breaking waves, the subjects of these eleven seascapes painted in 2019.

With one exception, the location of all these paintings is the beach adjacent to Napier's Marine Parade, and within earshot of the artist's home. White confronts the ocean head-on, catching it in all its restlessness and relentlessness, and the endless succession of waves simultaneously forming and breaking. Each canvas deals with a single moment in time, a unique and random arrangement of elements which makes the viewer aware of this subject's infinite possibilities.



Cadenza/Call of the Ocean, one of the two largest works, is a study of wave peaks and troughs interspersed with spattered flecks of spray and spume, while a slather of thick white foam advances up the beach. There is a smaller and similar version of this painting, as there is of the other large canvas in this series, *Aria Song of the Shingle Shore*, which is a study of the same wave at a slightly different stage in its brief lifecycle.

There is no romanticising here; no intimation of the picturesque or sublime. Rather, it is the everyday mundane action of the sea, faithfully observed and recorded. These paintings give the artist ample opportunity to demonstrate his expertise with a limited palette, and reliance on his eponymous white pigment. The latter dominates the small and more impressionist *Reprise*, apart from glimpses of the oily grey / green underbelly of an approaching wave and the dark wet sand in the foreground. An exception in terms of colour is *Duet* where the sea takes on a turquoise hue as it approaches the horizon, and there is a sliver of mauve sky above. Other transient effects immortalised in pigment include the translucency produced when sunlight shines through a breaking wave, as in *Bel Canto*. And here too, the horizontal band of clouds above appears to echo the tranquillity of the sea beneath.

Although White's images of waves have an everyday quality, there is an element of romanticism in their titles, for each has been given a musical connotation. In addition to those already mentioned, there is also *Prelude*, *Coloratura*, *Cabaletta* and *Obligato*, collectively responding to the call of the ocean and providing an aural dimension to these visual records.

The exception in this series of otherwise pure seascapes is *Mahia / Call of the Albatross*, a view from Opoutama, in north-eastern Hawke's Bay, looking across to the Mahia peninsula. But while the sea is not the main focus here, its effects are dramatically apparent, evident in the succession of sheer white eroded cliffs which fringe this rugged landform.

(above) FREEMAN WHITE
Aria Song of the Shingle Shore 2019
Oil on linen, 925 x 1540 mm.

(left) FREEMAN WHITE *Duet* 2019
Oil on linen, 370 x 280 mm.
(Photographs: Sam Hartnett)



Auckland

Sculpture in the Gardens 2019

Auckland Botanic Gardens
17 November 2019–1 March 2020
MICHAEL DUNN

There is no doubt that sculpture benefits greatly from an outdoor setting, especially if the works are large and three-dimensional. Away from the art gallery spaces, surrounded by light, air and nature, things happen that are unpredictable and magical. The viewer becomes more of a participant than in the gallery, able to move freely through the landscape towards, around and away from the works. An interaction takes place through movement, sight, sound and touch. This contributes to the success of events like *Sculpture in the Gardens* held biannually at the Auckland Botanic Gardens. And the audience can be different, too, from the usual art gallery goers, being often family groups who encounter the works more by chance than design. There is talking, laughing and informal comments that sometimes cut through to the essence of the works in a way

that can be inhibited by the art gallery situation.

But this does not mean a popular or amateurish experience. *Sculpture in the Gardens* this year displays a selection that allows diversity without compromising quality. There are some big names here, including Marté Szirmay who won the Supreme Award with her assured bronze work *Contained and Protected*. Conceived in reductive terms, the enclosed vessel, sand cast in two parts but welded together, is entwined by an encircling bronze rope. The work is understated yet memorable. Szirmay and some other participants such as Tanya Ashken and Sasha Reid belong to the modernist tradition of sculpture focused on formalist issues rather than representation. Yet the sculptures are capable of expressing contemporary concerns to do with protection of threatened species and degradation of the natural environment. Theirs is meditative rather than polemical work.

Other artists have taken an individual approach. Jeff Thomson's *Islands* is constructed from corrugated-iron containers shaped and placed in the landscape to recall islands in the Hauraki Gulf. They have plants and water protected inside the containers without which neither would survive. Thomson raises concerns about the health of our marine environment and the fragility of the ecology of its many small island communities. He displays here an innovative application of his iconic use of corrugated iron to extend his range of ideas.

Equally striking and thought-provoking is Jane Downes' *Bee Haven*, a structure placed around the framing of a garden pergola and made in part from plastic honey jars which are ordered to suggest the cells of honeycomb. She has placed bees made from steel on and around the central structure. The rusted ochre colour



(left) MARTÉ SZIRMAY
Contained and Protected 2019
Bronze, 850 x 850 x 420 mm.

(below left) JANE DOWNES *Bee Haven* 2019
Mild steel & discontinued plastic honey jars

(below right)

AARON FRATER *The Safety Gardener* 2019
Plastic mesh, cable ties, warratahs & safety barrier, 1000 x 500 x 2000 mm.

(opposite above) GINA FERGUSON
If Ever I Should Walk on Water . . . 2019
Recycled rubber, plastic, wire & fabric, 1200 x 10000 x 100 mm.

(opposite centre)

CHRIS MOORE *Entwined* 2019
Forged, fabricated & painted steel, 4000 x 3000 x 4000 mm.

(opposite below left) JOHN FERGUSON
Breathe 2019

Corten steel, 2500 x 1300 x 4200 mm.

(opposite below right) JAMES WRIGHT
Hand in the Dirt 2019
Corten steel, stone & bronze, 2800 x 5000 x 3250 mm.

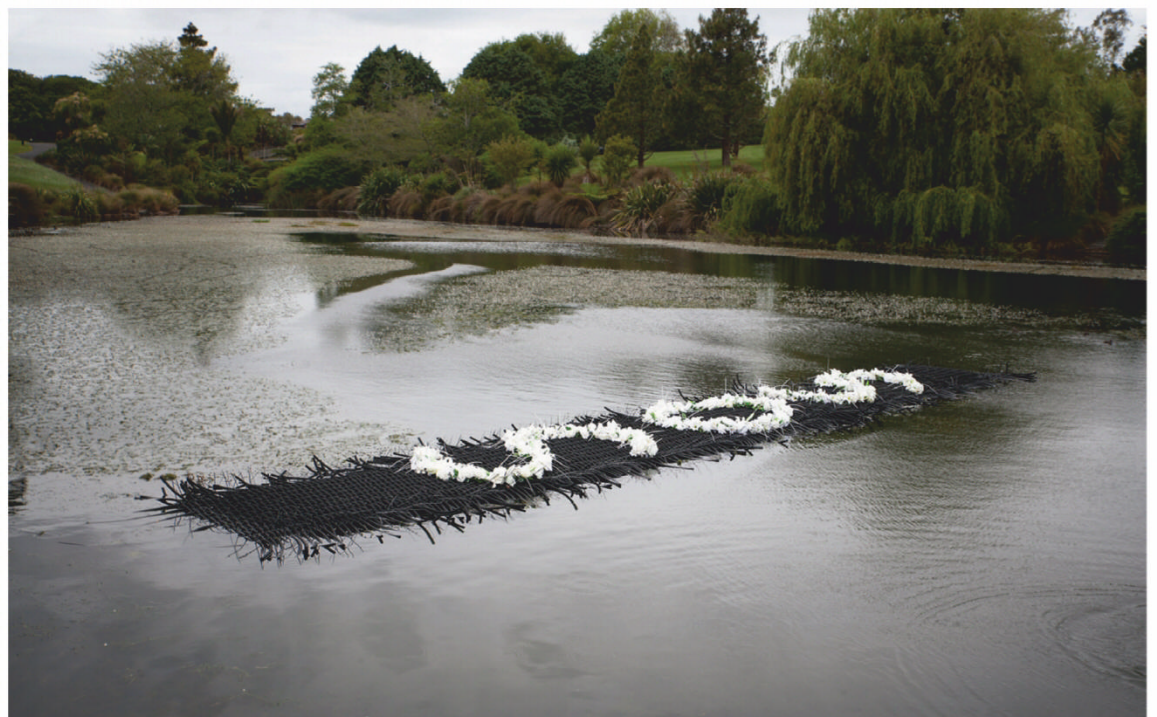
and textures of the steel, as well as the conviction of her rendering of the bees, make for an original and effective sculpture. Placed in the garden where bees are sorely needed for pollination, her work explores its ecological theme to good effect. How better to reflect on the sad demise of these creatures than in a working garden environment?

Comparable concerns can be found in the works of John Ferguson and James Wright, both of whom use corten steel with a rusted ochre patina. Ferguson's *Breathe* creates on a large scale an image of the human respiratory system displayed in a diagrammatic way against the sky, held by a central, supporting pylon. It metamorphoses into the image of a tree with branches and trunk so as to extend its message to both nature and to people. *Breathe* encapsulates ideas about the importance of oxygen and fresh air for the environment in a strong and memorable work. While



being symbolic, the fine filigree-like design of the formation inside the lung is elegant in its own right. *Hand in the Dirt* by James Wright is also a large and unusual conception. Held by a huge 'hand' that lies on the ground like a plinth is a large stone seed, from which a vine-like plant takes life and grows. Its tendrils of steel rope are amazingly energised and spread like roots across the hand while one tendril sprouting leaves spreads upwards to the zone of sky and 'birds', some of which have alighted on it. Realised with simplicity and grandeur, the sculpture offers a range of effects from different vantage points. It has great visual beauty in its diverse forms, colouration and textures. The hand of man is seen here as protecting and nurturing nature rather than exploiting and degrading it. For me this was one of the outstanding works in the exhibition.

Aaron Frater's *The Safety Gardener* is one of the more engaging and informal pieces. Made of bright orange barrier mesh and cable ties, it is a full-length standing figure that holds a tool as if at work in the garden. The sculpture raises questions about the activities of the gardener such as whether they enhance the environment or make it less diverse, healthy and sustainable. The bright red / orange barrier mesh creates discord against the green trees and vegetation where the work is set. Barrier mesh is normally used to screen off dangerous zones in the environment; here it sends a message calling for care in our interventions with plants and the garden through sprays, chemicals and their side effects on the soil, insects and bird life. As a sculpture it has a light, see-through aspect and playful conception that makes it approachable to all viewers and more effective for that.

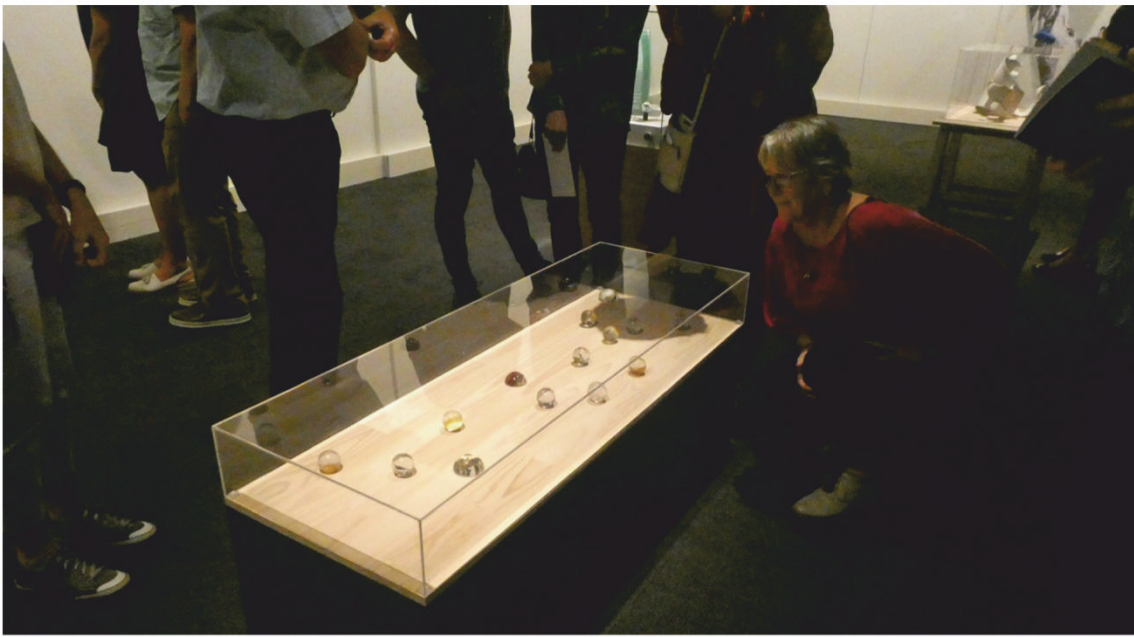


In contrast Chris Moore's *Entwined* is a solidly constructed work made from forged, fabricated and painted steel. It comprises naturalistic leaves and branches which entwine to make an organic canopy. The spectator can walk through and under them. Open in form, the sculpture occupies a space in the landscape without obscuring it. We can see through and beyond the piece from all directions. The artist explains in a caption that it is 'a work that people want to be part of, engage with and shelter under'. This accessible work was purchased to become part of the Gardens' permanent collection.

Further contributing to the variety of the exhibition are several pieces set in the waters of the lake, one of which by Gina Ferguson is made from abandoned waste and white flowers that spell out the letters SOS. It deals with the issue of refugees making dangerous sea crossings in an attempt to find a safe haven from war and violence. The work is shaped like a pontoon bridge, but leads nowhere and is marooned in the lake. It has a grave and somewhat pessimistic message.

In total there are 20 works in *Sculpture in the Gardens* that require several hours to walk around, contemplate and compare with one another. It offers something to a wide range of visitors with different backgrounds and interests. The helpful map and excellent illustrated guide makes navigating the show easy and the experience more enjoyable.





Whakatane

Molly Morpeth Canaday Award: 3D Artform

Te Koputu Whakatane Library and
Exhibition Centre

16 February–12 April

DON ABBOTT

I am sure that shipping companies resent the Molly Morpeth Canaday Awards. For an intense period, packages that are oversized, fragile, oddly shaped and, in some instances, overweight, arrive at the depot, to be delivered to Te Koputu Whakatane Library and Exhibition Centre.

The curators at the gallery and a small army of local volunteers turn this wave of arrivals into a stimulating and provocative exhibition, making the eastern Bay of Plenty one of the hottest places to be in late summer. The 2020 show was judged by artist and Elam senior lecturer Ruth Watson, who spoke at the awards ceremony with warmth, charm and wit. This is also the last to be brought together by exhibition coordinator Heather Hourigan; she is an organisational force who has marshalled the MMCA

for the last 11 years, and its success is the result of her skills and enthusiasm.

Sorawit Songsataya is a worthy winner of the main award this year. *Morning Dew* is a series of resin orbs, inside which can be seen organic matter: petals, leaves, small sticks from a tree. Displayed in a glass case, close to floor level, the work is elegant enough to absorb any interpretations and projections, be they meteorological, geological, botanical, anatomical, or lacrimal. Each orb is a small world unto itself, reflecting not only its resinous neighbours, but the other works in the competition too. These small clear globes fascinate; at one glance they are toxic balls of plasticity, trapping nature, and stunting its growth; at another they are Petri dishes from a moment in time, to be examined and admired, samples of the wonders of the natural world. Their curvature and transparency means their contents appear to shift, like liquid, so they combine movement and stillness. They draw you in and exert a dreamy, poetic aura.

Songsataya spoke movingly at the awards ceremony, explaining how the

\$10,000 prize money, sponsored by Molly Morpeth Canaday Trust, would allow him to get started on his next project. Sponsors of such awards are of immense value; they are more than just patrons of art, they are active enablers.

Chauncey Flay's architectural form *Pink Coralscape IV* won a merit award and could well be a prop for a Sophoclean dialogue, so pure and refined does it appear. Its combination of coral from a Rarotonga beach and ADOS builders' fill from Bunnings is a coup of contradiction, each ingredient making the other look good. Its humour veers from the sardonic to the serious; this belongs on the mantelpiece in the pool room of the climate-changed future.

Delicacy and fragility are the immediate impressions of Linda Clews' *Bridge Between Two Walls*, which won the local artist merit award. This filagree also exudes a complexity and strength that make up a beguiling visual appeal, aided by imaginative lighting.

Stuart Forsyth won a merit award with *Useful object—remnants from a breakup*, a piece of rudimentary carpentry, that arrived with a back story that would prick up Quentin Tarantino's ears. Judge Ruth Watson admitted that this piece had irritated its way onto her prize list; if unsold, it will presumably return to the artist's home, where it will go back to its initial purpose of storing toilet rolls.

The other merit award went to Lisa Passmore's kete, a clever combination of ways and means, of two seemingly incompatible weaving methods combined in the one object. Ruth Watson commented in her judge's notes that 'this everyday item stands in for something more abstract, even as it simultaneously embodies the bringing together of difference in its very fibre'.

Hannah Valentine creates hybrid gym equipment to investigate concepts surrounding vanity and perfection as well as the nature of sculpture





itself. With *Anytime (I.G)*, which won a highly commended award, the bronze bits look more like weapons than barbells, their weight increasing the threat of instability, or even collapse, posed by the trolleys beneath. Valentine's layers of platforms-on-wheels are anxious-making and menacing, despite that reassuring blue table top.

Telly Tuita also won a highly commended award. *Three Graces—U'ufoasini, Akale'a, Ta'alea* is a bold and vibrant invitation to enter the world of Tongpop, Tuita's self-invented fictional realm. In a mix of the traditional—both Pacific and classical—and a fast-and-loose high-street aesthetic, Tuita creates a drama that is both fun and earnest, one of warmth and inclusion.

Watson awarded Madeleine Child's *Like Topsy* with the runner-up award. A range of ceramic appendages that appear to come from a long line of ugly-made-pretty, Child uses glaze and colour to decorate her object, and a witty take on balance and poise to give it shape. This is exuberant in its exploration of free-form construction; the artist imbues her clay with an organic aura, moulding it to express a fecundity and a fruitfulness that are not automatically benevolent.



The youth award went to Oliver Cain's *Fruit Bowl II*. Here, a white ceramic urinal overflows with white ceramic bananas, in a work that nods to art history and a more secret tradition of gay hook-ups. Both judge and audience responded to this work's sly humour, its multi-levelled ironies and its double entendres.

Amongst the other works, several made use of repurposed materials in ways that were surprising and inventive. Volker Hawighorst contributed two entries made up completely of bread-bag clips, both of which rewarded close study. Kim Logue added pewter and steel wire to a series of chainsaw blades to create a wall-based web that was agreeably more biotic than metallic.

Other pieces rested quietly amongst the competition. Jewellery by Mary Curtis impressed, not only in its presentation—handmade lined boxes, fitted to perfection—but also in the dark and unsettling intent of the pieces themselves. Marie Strauss' porcelain goblet was similarly troubling, with its primordial etchings, seemingly in search of a cave wall, combined with nuggets of gold. The vessel connected the very high with the very low, the honourable with the base, presenting

itself as an object of complicated desire.



(opposite above left) Viewers with Sorawit Songsataya's winning work *Morning Dew*

(opposite above right) MADELEINE CHILD *Like Topsy* 2019
Ceramic, 310 x 310 x 130 mm.

(opposite below) Telly Tuita zhushes up his *Three Graces* before prizes are awarded

(above left) LINDA CLEWS
Bridge Between Two Walls 2019
Bird netting & cable ties, 1500 x 850 x 30 mm.

(above middle) VOLKER HAWIGHORST
Self-Portrait #5 2019
Polystyrene on MDF board, 330 x 280 x 35 mm.

(above right) MARIE STRAUSS
For the Love of Gold 2019
Handbuilt multi-fired porcelain, ox ideas & gold leaf, 298 x 140 mm.

(below left) HANNAH VALENTINE *Anytime (I.G)* 2019
Cast bronze, Beal cord, powder-coated steel, ply & castors, 880 x 750 x 500 mm.

(below middle) STUART FORSYTH
Useful object—remnants from a breakup 2019
Macrocarpa, acrylic paint, UF resin, ligate bio adhesive, detritus from the garage floor (fibre, dirt, dust) & brass screws, 440 x 415 x 400 mm.

(below right) CHAUNCEY FLAY
Pink Coralscape IV 2019
Coral & filled polyester composite, 380 x 300 x 240 mm.





Everyman and his Dog

A Conversation with Nigel Brown

Nigel Brown was born in Invercargill in 1949, grew up in the Bay of Plenty, then lived in Auckland for several decades before moving to the remote western Southland settlement of Cosy Nook in 2001. Now, he resides in Dunedin, working in a two-level, multi-room studio in the industrial harbourside area, amongst the hubbub of machinery, trucks and a horde of hard-hatted, high-vis-vest-clad labourers. In the 1970s, factory jobs were the means by which Brown supported himself and his family, while the ‘everyman’ Kiwi labourer became a recurring figure in his art (along with more illustrious characters such as the controversial and contrasting Jameses, Cook and Baxter). One might be forgiven, too, for thinking that the surfaces of some of the paintings were achieved with a

concreter’s trowel rather than a paint brush. Brown does down-to-earth, heavily political, earnest expressionism, but across a large body of paintings, prints and sculptures, he is equally witty and provocative. His career has seen him study under, and be hailed as a worthy—and wordy—successor to Colin McCahon; get mixed up with the ‘neo-expressionists’ of the 1970s–80s, including a challenging friendship with Philip Clairmont; be dismissed as too insular and awkward in a New Zealand art world increasingly leaning towards an urbane internationalism; receive the inaugural Artists to Antarctica Award in 1998; and have his exhibition at Waitangi, *Concerning Nurture*, opened by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in February 2019.

Edward Hanfling: Your most recent exhibition at Artis in Auckland was called *DOG*. The dog is a motif you have used frequently. Why?

Nigel Brown: I've had three black dogs in my life—spent a lot of time with them, walking down the street. Some people think of black dogs as to do with depression, but I don't, I think about Colin McCahon: to paint is to contrast. When you're doing a streetscape, you're thinking: 'What's the black element going to be? Oh, my dog, versus the white.' When I lived out at Titirangi, the harbour was the light—you know, the intense light on the water. The very beginning, for my dogs, was my childhood, living on an orchard. My father had a bow and arrow—he was influenced by Howard Hill, a well-known American archer who shot crocodiles and things—and as a child I'd go on deer-shooting trips with him. At home, for practice, my father had made a mock-up deer out of pieces of timber, with stick-like legs and antlers wired on the top. It was a classic, crude sort of schematic animal. And that idea of the schematic has been pivotal to all my work over the years.

E.H.: Can you talk more about this 'schematic' quality, and why it's important to you?

N.B.: It's about the simplified and symbolic in expressionism, and relates to children's art and so-called 'primitive art' in an affirmative way. I'm fully aware I am neither a child nor an indigenous artist, but mentally I mix ancient questions of belonging and identity with broader issues of my contemporary situation. Behind it all is a will to find meaning, and be emotionally and graphically strong. In my work, I've also seen New Zealand as part of the Pacific, and looked a lot at Aboriginal art. You do find, though, that you come up against certain constraints, which

are in art history. For example, a critic who is stuck in a Renaissance western perspective is really looking for something based on their specialisation. Of course, critics are entitled to have specialisations. Why shouldn't they? You wouldn't be interested in art if you didn't have areas of enthusiasm.

E.H.: I do tend to come from a sort of formal angle, and in fact I was thinking about that, last night, when I was coming up with some questions to ask you. I ended up writing a whole essay in my notebook. Can I read you some of it?

N.B.: OK.

E.H.: I wrote: 'No one seems to talk about the space in your work. This is about me, perhaps—that I veer towards the abstract, the formal, rather than what your paintings are supposed to be *about*. But my thinking is that the space in your paintings is remarkably flexible and variable. Just taking the works in your most recent Artis show, there are spaces that recede to a distant horizon, with volcanoes and wharehau stacked up the picture plane, and luminous but palpably flat surfaces of rugged paint plugged with beads, framed spaces and intricate, patterned spaces. In a couple of the dog paintings, a blocky 'I' shape at left or right buttresses the scene, sitting in no man's land, at odds with other things in the picture, stopping the eye, preventing the scene from escaping the frame. The vertical text of *Climate Anxiety* (2018–19) does something similar . . .'

N.B.: Just to answer you on some of that: When I was taught art history, I found the Early Renaissance painters interesting—Cimabue was one of them. But the presumption seemed to be that, after that, western art got *better*. It's the same presumption with modernism—that everything gets refined down, and



(opposite) Nigel Brown in his Dunedin studio, December 2019, with *Climate of Change Triptych* (2019) in progress

(left)
NIGEL BROWN
Opposite Dogs 2019
Acrylic & mixed media
on canvas, 600 x 800 mm.

we get a better, uncluttered world, related to our love of shiny cars and devices. That's our prejudice, I'm well aware of that, and when I buy a shirt, I want the pattern to be consistent. Modernism now, at worst, is containers of imported mass-produced objects. We are stuck with it, because we are overpopulated and we can't all have the unique object. But I'm drawn to the unique object, more than ever.

E.H.: So that's the variability I see in your pictures?

N.B.: Yes. With modernism, think about the perfect Mondrian. McCahon said the only way past Mondrian was more involvement in the human situation.

And when you look at Mondrian, you're aware the guy's wanting to remove you from your own human organic self, and move you to a higher plane. Mondrian was influenced by theosophy and, funnily enough, in the 1970s, my parents-in-law were high up in the Theosophical church. So I used to get lots of theosophical diagrams and books by way of that, though I was quite anti-religious. I say 'anti-religious', but when you're taught by McCahon . . . ! I'd been exposed to a lot of his most recent work at Barry Lett Galleries, but I got heavily influenced by a Manawatu

Art Gallery exhibition catalogue of his earlier paintings.

E.H.: Biblical scenes in the New Zealand landscape?

N.B.: Yes, but the biblical subject wasn't the thing.

It was the way they were made. I saw them as expressionist. McCahon's *Crucifixion According to St Mark* (1947), which, on the exhibition catalogue, had been cropped down to just the head, influenced quite a few paintings of mine. It was a bit perplexing, this impact of McCahon's early work, because there's an idea that McCahon really matured after he went to America, when he opened up the space in his paintings: the *Walk* painting (*Series C*, 1973), where you go out on that huge space, and the *Fourteen Stations of the Cross* (1966). Whereas there's part of me that's always wanting to hold things in, put a frame round them. I was influenced earlier on by Georges Rouault too, and the way he contained things. And I remember when Jim and Mary Barr's *Contemporary New Zealand Artists* book came out, there was Rita Angus—an old lady, as she seemed to me at the time—doing these tight *little* paintings. How could this possibly be significant? At Elam, we used to look at Garth Tapper's genteel John Leech-framed works, and find them pretentious. The worst word we used then was 'sophisticated'. You didn't want your painting to be sophisticated.

E.H.: I'll just go back to what I wrote . . . now where was I . . . ?

N.B.: The space . . .

E.H.: Yes: 'I ask myself about the significance of this flexible space. And the answer I come up with is that it makes everything seem at home in your pictorial world.' Maybe this relates to the internal framing thing you're talking about.

N.B.: Early on, McCahon, looking at one of my paintings, said: 'You could do borders.' So I did. I think he knew I had pictorial tendencies that were always going to clash with the surface or abstract form. So one solution was to put things in borders. With the words in my paintings, having them floating in space can be a real problem. In McCahon, you just accept the infinite space. And when we go to our computer screens, things float in space there—you don't question it. But you rapidly question it if you find yourself floating in space!

E.H.: Actually, I have written down here about *your* work: 'We don't question the space. We barely think about it. We accept it, whether or not it's more or less naturalistic.'

N.B.: Yet I can't entirely escape from the foreground-background mentality. I see other painters sometimes can, even if they're steeped in another tradition. For example, Robin White made a career here of hills and sky, but in recent years she's been involved with tapa. Well, tapa involves laying out an unlimited space. You can go on for ever, or as long as the table is. One thing that has influenced me a lot lately is a Sepik work, which I've had since I lived in Auckland. The artist is unknown, and it was only about 60 bucks



(opposite) NIGEL BROWN *Are You Bloody Listening* 2012–13
Acrylic and oil on board, with frame, 2528 x 1270 x 54 mm.
(Photograph: Glenn Frei)

(right) NIGEL BROWN *Climate Anxiety* 2018–19
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm.

(below) Nigel Brown's Dunedin studio, December 2019, with
Survival Dog 2019–20 (unfinished state), acrylic and collage on ply,
1200 x 1600 mm.

or something. They're called 'story boards'. What intrigues me about it is that there are things, like fish in the sea, laid out on top of each other. It comes out in my paintings. You know, part of me is a retreat artist who's blocked out certain developments in paintings for their own purposes. And retreat artists—well, you can recognise them. Francis Bacon was one. There's an interview with him where he's shown American colour field painting—Morris Louis and that—and he doesn't criticise it, he just says: 'It doesn't interest me.' Anyway, what were we going on about? That spatial thing. People can be put off my work if they don't like the space . . .

E.H.: I don't know. I feel it's overlooked. What most people focus on is the *stuff*—there's a guy in a black singlet, there's a bird, and so on. But—I'll go back to my bit of writing: 'Maybe what the paintings are really about is the space around the things more than the things themselves . . .'

N.B.: I hate to bring up the guy again, but McCahon used to say you can't teach composition. You feel your way. In abstraction, if you're unhappy with the space, you put in a shape. In figuration, you go:



yeah, the whole thing is unbalanced, I need to have a bird up there, or a sun, or whatever. I use some quite simplistic things in my work, like suns and birds, which irritate some commentators. But, you know, we all have to cheat sometime! No, there's more to it





(opposite) NIGEL BROWN *The Sun Also Rises* 2019
Acrylic on ply cut out, 1050 x 700 mm.

(right) NIGEL BROWN *Inner Truth* 2006–09
Acrylic on linen, unstretched canvas, 1680 x 1810 mm.

(below) NIGEL BROWN *Poetry Is How Our Minds Work* 2013
Oil & acrylic on linen, 800 x 600 mm.

than that. This painting [*Survival Dog*, 2019–20] was going to be a simple large dog painting, and it was going to have simple elements in it. It got to a certain stage—it was quite colourful, quite simplified. Then, I re-cluttered it, because I'd been going to a park and seeing a particular plant—a lancewood (horoeke) that is talked about as a bit of a mystery. There's a marked difference in the juvenile and adult stages of the plant as an adaption to different climatic conditions in the forest canopy. It seemed perfect for my climate change subject, so it ended up in the painting. Right, but other painters—McCahon, and Walters and all these people—there's no going back, for them. The viewer—the critic, and everybody else—can embrace the idea of an artist developing a simple range of things. I'm not saying I'm better because I'm complex, but I am quite complicated. I recognise that in myself, because I've hardly come to terms with what I've been about. I haven't written much theory about what I'm doing. I've just sort of gone on, from place to place, and not had too much commentary getting in the way.

E.H.: OK, but what I was thinking about . . .

N.B.: Sorry, I'm not giving you much!

E.H.: No, no, I'm not really asking a question. OK, I'll go back to my text again: 'They [the paintings] are pointing, questioning, provoking, and feeling towards our thoughts and opinions and feelings and uncertainties, towards the problems attached to the tangible things we think we all know. Maybe this thing about the space relates to how your work may be wrongly seen as straightforwardly depicting, and thereby endorsing, those things.'

N.B.: Don't worry, if I hear another person go 'I like his black singlet . . .!' On the other hand, people who follow Baxter religiously can be extremely irritated by my Baxters! Or people collect them thinking they *are* just about Baxter.

E.H.: So, do you see yourself as posing questions, or provoking, more than symbolising? After all, you have a series of text-dominated paintings called *Provocations* (2011–13).

N.B.: I'm always trying to provoke, in the same way that has happened at different times in our society; events have led people to question things. At the moment, I'm working on a painting based on Nietzsche, who was questioning institutions. Now, with Donald Trump, and extreme social inequality and all that, we should really be questioning. But if we're looking at an Ian Scott lattice or a Gordon Walters, those questions don't come up. And I'm sure those artists would have said it's good we keep away from social issues, because art should have its own world, set its own boundaries, and not be politically



interfered with. I understand that mentality and where it's coming from.

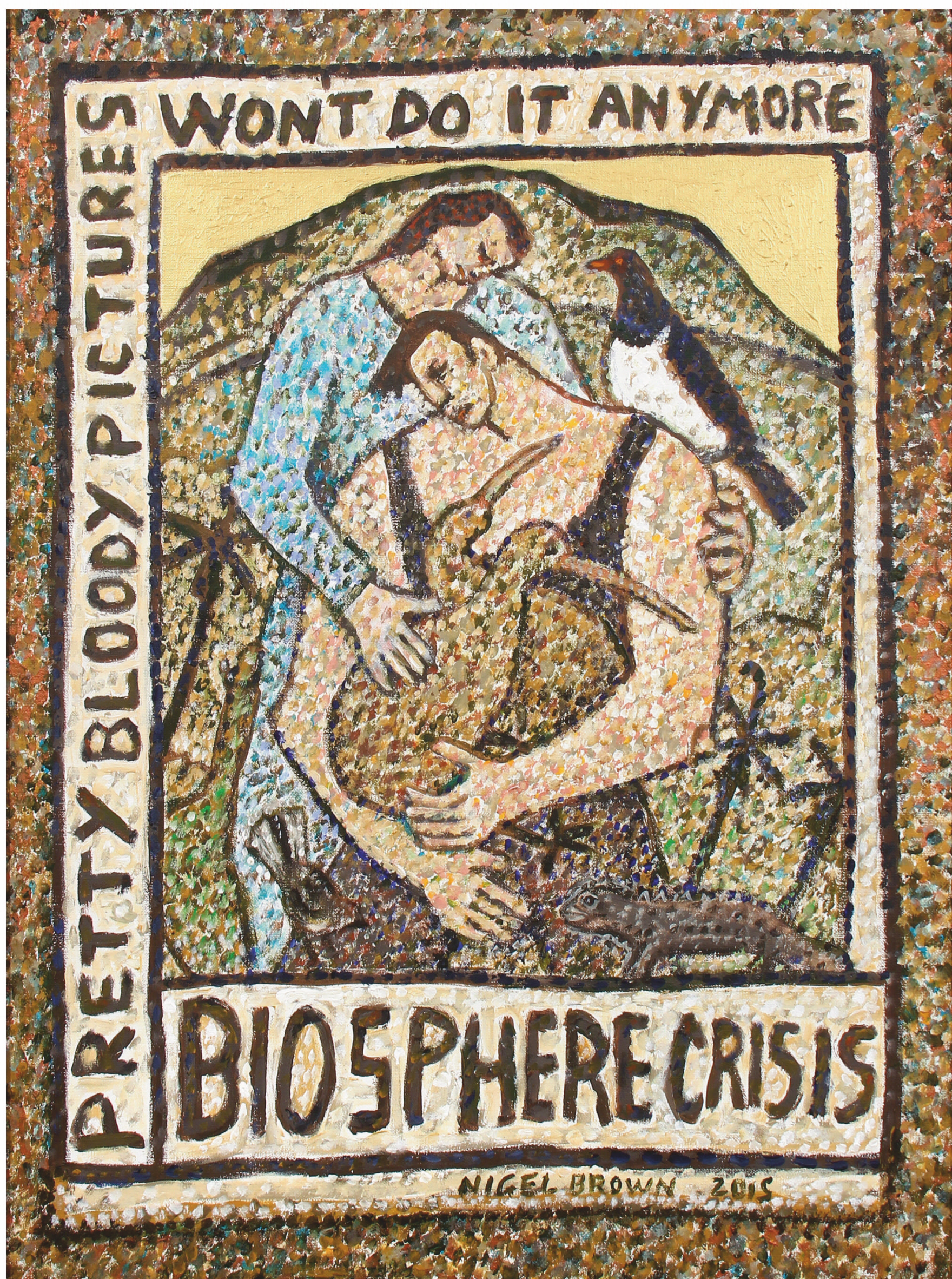
E.H.: It's just not you.

N.B.: I can't do it naturally. I would like to, but there's too much of the black dog in me!

E.H.: And you believe that art does have a social responsibility?

N.B.: Well, no, I think it *can* do. We should allow artists to reflect variety. I've seen people—Maddox, Clairmont and Fomison were good examples—locked into a certain anger towards other types of art. And while modernism was vital, it tended to deny certain kinds of art completely. Surely, the idea is to realise diversity in art, just as we recognise social diversity.





One of my early enthusiasms was L.S. Lowry, who, for a long time, was not collected by the Tate, and was problematic in relation to abstract painting. But the thing about him was, he rejected time, and he refused to update his taxis and things. You look out the window here: there are no black singlets. I *know* all

the workers are wearing fluorescent vests, and I know that the black singlet is a symbol of cruder times, cruder attitudes to trees and nature, homophobia, and so on. But I'll have the black singlet person holding a bird, so they've evolved—or that's what I hope.

(opposite) NIGEL BROWN *Biosphere Crisis* 2015
Acrylic on canvas, with frame, 833 x 632 x 47 mm.

(right) NIGEL BROWN *Water Woman* 2017
Acrylic on plywood, 1856 x 520 x 297 mm.

E.H.: You mix up different historical moments, in your work, which implies that time is not linear. By the same token, that 'retreat artist' idea you mentioned earlier questions the belief that a certain style of art belongs to the past, or that time is always moving forward. The figures in your work—there are Pakeha icons, such as Captain Cook and James K. Baxter, but they make me think of Maori ancestors, transforming and crossing time. They're not really specific people.

N.B.: Yes, and a polarising figure—Cook, for example—can be very different in different works. Of course, the latest upset around Cook has been the Tupaia thing, which turns history upside down. With Baxter—well, when he came along and talked at Elam, he made me feel that the whole art school was tame by comparison. He read his 'Ballad of Sugarguts [Ballad of the Stonegut Sugar Works]', about a sugar factory, and it was quite radical. Because there we were, four years at art school doing a painting degree, and here's this person emphasising all the downtrodden people in factories. And what did I do? I ended up in factories, from 1972 until 1978, and met all these people who were ground down, hopeless—the brutal reality of life, well away from art. Then I'd go to Barry Lett Galleries, and be in an art cocoon—quite a contrast.

E.H.: Your work does tend to cross between those worlds, and to register the issues of the day. There's been the anti-nuclear movement, the Springbok tour, and now climate change.

N.B.: Ian Wedde once wrote a review about my work—a good negative review—saying it's no use Nigel Brown pretending that his work is didactic, social stuff is not really the role of painting now. So there was a dismissal, and that's been a strong tendency in New Zealand art writing.

E.H.: Perhaps that's because art is so marginal to broader social concerns. Every man and his dog wants to say something about climate change. How do you deal with that as an artist?

N.B.: OK, right. My approach is to talk about 'climate of change', which is subtly different and more flexible, beyond the dominant concern for the planet. While now we may see ourselves in a rapidly deteriorating situation, everybody understands that their own life is dramatically changing all the time, from day to day. And human anxiety is nothing new. I have always been aware of deterioration and change in a pronounced way, and of a need for constructive witnessing. You can make art as a way through things. To paint about climate change, it's the same thing I had with the anti-nuclear thing. You could only paint so many burnt bodies and Hiroshimas. It was much more interesting to relate it to masculinity: I saw the bomb in relation to men and their penises and all that sort of thing. And I updated Munch's *Scream* to the bomb screamer—the person who couldn't cope with

things. You do find you're walking a tightrope when you deal with issues. I haven't had many incidents or real anger towards me, but occasionally I do have paintings that I think I'll just tuck away, or I'm not sure about. I remember reading some things of yours, and I thought 'that's a bit reckless'. But perhaps it's better to be reckless than dull. I wouldn't stand up in front of my paintings and say: 'All these paintings are a marvellously coherent theory of how you should live your life.'

E.H.: What prompted you to move down to Cosy Nook from Auckland—from that cultivated environment where you had other artists and writers around you?

N.B.: It got tired, it felt time for a move. I could have gone up north—would have been a better climate. Could have gone to the East Coast, because I went a lot to Tolaga Bay in the 1990s. But we discovered this place down south. I was always looking for a retreat. 'A retreat artist looking for a retreat'—that's a good title for the article, isn't it?! When an artist retreats, you go, as Richard Killeen used to say, out of sight, out of mind. It was an adventure. A lot of my work is about adventure.

E.H.: Did it change your work?

N.B.: It did, because I had all these remnants around of earlier farming life. Lots of fence posts—you can see one in that painting there, *Climate of Change*. I started doing sculptures. I saw a lot of Picasso sculpture in France, and the marvellous thing is the





(left) NIGEL BROWN *No Golden Age* 2001
Oil on board, with frame, 817 x 616 x 30 mm.
(Photograph: Glenn Frei)

(below) NIGEL BROWN *Barn at Cosy Nook* 2010
Oil on canvas, 590 x 740 mm.

(opposite above) Nigel Brown's Dunedin studio, December 2019

(opposite below) Nigel Brown's studio with *I Am Tower* 2006–08,
metal, cut out ply, bone & acrylic on wood, 670 x 440 x 440 mm.

and he motivated me to keep those old bits of tin and nails and things. I know I'm not a craftsman, but when you look at Picasso's sculptures, you see that they're not always perfect. He keeps them raw, doesn't over-polish them, and that's why they succeed. Look at this one of mine. It's quite a random thing; there are bits I've cut out, a piece of stainless steel, a bone I've found . . .

E.H.: And a crib board—makes me think of rural New Zealand, as in the *Me and Gus* stories, by Frank S.

Anthony. There's a painting from 2001, *No Golden Age*, just after you moved to Cosy Nook, which seems to capture a duality in your work—bleak and hopeful at the same time.

N.B.: Yeah, 'golden age', and 'golden mean', and 'golden weather', and the idea of a happy, positive place. My paintings are sometimes seen as bleak. I've been in galleries and stood next to people who go 'I can't stand Nigel Brown, he's so depressing!' The thing is, I don't suffer from depression much at all, actually!

E.H.: There's not so much of the black dog in you, after all.

N.B.: No, I enjoy life quite a lot.

endless innovation, from one thing to another, the artist *playing*. So that appealed to me—forcing myself to move in different directions. When you bring up Picasso, people say: 'Well, you're not Picasso!' You know, how dare you! But he was a great enthusiasm,







Soft Light

Elizabeth Rees Paints the Coast

MICHAEL DUNN

According to Elizabeth Rees, 'The most mundane aspects of our lives are often majestic, if only we knew it. In New Zealand we live in such overwhelming beauty that we so often take for granted and seldom stop to take in.'¹ This statement recalls remarks made by others about our assumed indifference to the beauty of our natural environment. For example, the painter Colin McCahon asked us in 1971 'Do you believe in the sunrise?' However, in this age of the smartphone camera, we find a seemingly infinite number of people seeing and photographing natural beauty spots and recording sunrises and sunsets from Waikiki to Palmerston North, where Rees grew up.

Landscape has been a well-explored subject in New Zealand art, in particular, and still is, as we can see with painters as diverse as Stanley Palmer and Dick Frizzell. Increasingly the photographic image is used as the reference point by artists, so that the difficulties faced by the open-air painters of the past are removed

and the works can be made in the studio. Currently the environmental and Maori dimensions of the New Zealand landscape are receiving increased attention and the older Kelliher-style landscapes appear dated, reflecting the politics of an earlier era.

We might ask how Elizabeth Rees relates to this tradition and whether landscape is still a viable subject for her to paint. Years ago Milan Mrkusich regarded landscape as outmoded for artists, remarking famously that if he wanted landscape he would take a drive in the country. And indeed most of the current landscape painters do drive to the country or seaside to take their shots. For them, the landscape is a kind of resource for motifs which are waiting to be exploited. A lot of landscape art is of specific sites and identifiable country towns or coastal regions with iconic features such as Piha's Lion Rock. Typically these paintings have a representational dimension and are set in an atmospheric and perspectival space. Rees' new works in her exhibition *Sealight* conform to a conventional spatial layout but eschew the topographical kind of landscape in favour of a

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(opposite) ELIZABETH REES *Best Friends* 2019
Oil on canvas, 1200 x 1500 mm.
(Private collection)

(below) ELIZABETH REES *Local News* 2019
Oil on canvas, 600 x 1000 mm.
(Private collection)

(right) ELIZABETH REES *Sanctuary* 2019
Oil on canvas, 600 x 600 mm.

generalised representation of landforms and seashore. Descriptive drawing of identifiable buildings and landmarks gives way to non-specific forms that celebrate the typical rather than the extraordinary. She celebrates the commonplace rather than the remarkable.

Of this series she writes: 'Walking on a beach, participating in the most prosaic day-to-day stuff is to participate in a world of natural splendour.'² It is the stuff 'on our doorstep and fundamentally a part of us' that concerns her in this show. The paintings all depict the seashore, sandy beaches with headlands in the middle distance. Everything is conceived in an atmospheric haze, with forms soft and never hard-edged. Her images are the diametric opposite of the harsh New Zealand light school of painting. There are no Don Binney black outlines or sharp contours to be seen. Her works are tonal in style with a dominance of subtle greys. Rees was taught at the Canterbury School of Art by William (Bill) Sutton who was a master of the grey palette and who used strong local colour sparingly. She can be seen in a direct lineal descent from this tradition, which also included large areas of sky filled with cloud forms that recede into a light-filled distance. However, she does not have his preoccupation with regional effects of weather and tints of ochre characteristic of Canterbury.

A good example of these paintings, and a large one, is *Best Friends* (2019). Broadly brushed in with



thin paint, the canvas depicts an extent of black-sand beach with a shadowy headland in the middle distance. There is a marvellous sense of space and soft light suffusing the scene which has a fine expanse of sea with breaking waves. A solitary figure with a small dog can be made out on the sand, set back in the space. Figure and dog are indistinct and dark in appearance. Her title *Best Friends* encourages an everyday association for what is a well-known experience of the power and grandeur of nature and one's smallness beside it. Also, there is scope for a projection of one's self into the role of the dog walker and to experience his walk along the shore. The extensive view and smallness of the figure allow a symbolic view of the subject. The walk evokes the journey of life and the forces of nature, the perils which beset us and our frailty before them.





Local News (2019) has a similar type of composition with a warm light in the sky and reflections on the breaking waves. The two foreground figures are male which is usual with Rees. They are presumably walkers who have met by chance, walkers who know one another enough to have a chat and who live in the area. This painting has the ingredients Rees writes about. It has 'the beauty on our doorstep' that is characteristic of her New Zealand. All her locations seem to be civilised, inhabited and rather reassuring despite the elements. There is no sense of wilderness. Instead the relationship between viewer and the landscape is a comfortable one. The figures are not clearly defined. They remain anonymous, known to each other but not to us. They are almost like actors on a stage engaged in a real-life drama.

In her earlier paintings, Rees often used the figure, close-up faces and the stage. She dealt with concepts such as identity, relationships and the psychological implications of her characters. In the new paintings

her figures are small but their presence remains pivotal. For it can be argued that in her landscapes she projects human feelings and aspirations through her imagery rather than celebrates the natural world for its own sake. She writes: 'Each to one's own path and motivation, we are in motion in the passage of life and time. Each painting freeze-frames a moment, the last step has gone and the next is yet to come.'³ The beauty she seeks to capture is fleeting. 'Beauty is as summer fruits, which are easy to corrupt, and cannot last' as the seventeenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon noted in his *Essays*.⁴

One of the works is called *Daily Walk* and shows the same features but in an extended horizontal format. This together with the title suggests the process of walking and its duration in time. We can recall that McCahon based serial paintings on this idea, using separate panels that extend along the gallery wall and which encourage us to walk along as well as look at the land and sea. He reduces land, sea and sky

(opposite) ELIZABETH REES *Beach Light* 2019
Oil on canvas, 600 x 600 mm.

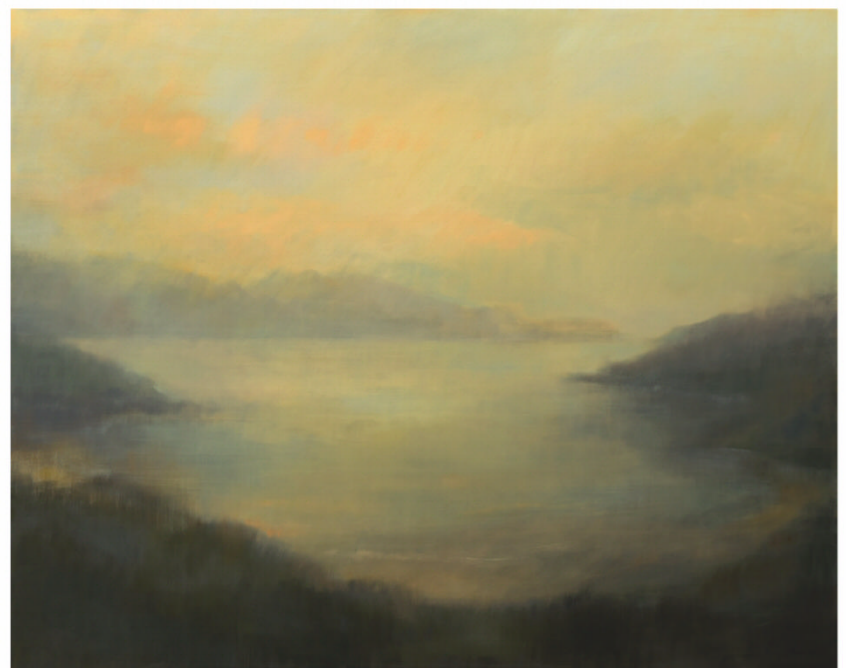
(right) ELIZABETH REES *Haven* 2019
Oil on canvas, 1200 x 1500 mm.

(below) ELIZABETH REES *Daily Walk* 2019
Oil on canvas, 900 x 2000 mm.

to featureless and repetitious strips. Comparatively McCahon's panels are more abstract, more minimal and more unsettling. Rees is less willing to reduce her landscapes to their elemental essence. They have an almost old-fashioned quality—an effect enhanced by the soft focus and generic forms she uses. We are encouraged to reflect, to imagine a world that is almost dream-like rather than real. In some cases, as in *Beach Light*, the foreground figures and trees seem too illustrative to give the introspective dimension we require for the paintings to succeed.

While the *Sealight* paintings are assured and fluently painted, they lack the bite of some of her earlier works and can appear undemanding, almost too nice. There is also a repetitious aspect to them when the works are seen together in the gallery. *Local News* recalls her 2017 painting *Conversation*, from a previous series, in the deployment of the two figures and the mellow light of sky and waves. Two years later, the mundane overrides the mystery found in her best works and makes the viewing experience less exacting.

Because Rees does not make preparatory drawings or work directly from photographs, she must rely on her own imagination and memories at the time of putting brush to canvas. She depends on generalised landforms, clouds and waves to construct her imagery. Inevitably they conform to a pattern that gives universality to the landscapes but denies them a specific identity. Like her small faceless figures, who remain anonymous, her landscapes are generic and tend to evoke similar responses from one to another. This conflicts with our expectations of difference between artworks. She must rely on colour, tone and brushwork to deliver an authentic note to each of her



landscapes. The usual default setting of a distinctive building or landmark is not available.

Because the figures in these works are small we are no longer close enough to them to experience an encounter of a personal kind. Consequently the psychological dimension of early images like *Passing Through* (2016) is removed. There, a young man is large enough and sufficiently identified to evoke a response from us, or a question. We are now distanced. Even the symbolist devices of the solitary road, the darkened landscape and enigma of the identity or meaning of the larger figures, seen in previous series, are no longer present.

1. Quotation from *Sealight* exhibition checklist, Artis Gallery, September 2019.

2. Ibid.

3. Artist notes, Artis Gallery, 2019. See also Don Abbott, *Elizabeth Rees: I Paint*, RF Books, Auckland 2016.

4. Francis Bacon, 'Essay on Beauty', 1625.





As Above, So Below

Recent Photographs by Anne Noble & Kate van der Drift

EMIL McAVOY

Recent exhibitions by Anne Noble and Kate van der Drift engage endangered ecologies by exposing photographic film, not to light, but to chemicals in fragile environments. Film is buried underground or in wetlands for a period, and then unearthed, cleaned, processed and printed. The resulting cameraless abstractions—spooky, even cosmic in appearance—make visible the often unseen impacts of the Anthropocene and offer personal responses grounded in a form of critical poetics.

Anne Noble's *Observations from the Critical Zone* was created by burying a roll of film in the topsoil—the so-called 'critical zone'—between two trees. In her exhibition text for Two Rooms the artist describes this critical zone as 'a descriptor for that living, breathing, near surface layer of the earth that is experiencing catastrophic (and invisible) loss of biodiversity'.¹ A leading cause of this invisible catastrophe is the intensive use of herbicides and other toxicants, compounded by the multifaceted and accumulative impacts of climate change.

Attempting to address these unseen phenomena, Noble's six large prints make visible the traces of underground chemical reactions. The artist's film was buried for 330 hours and then excavated, dried, brushed, gently washed, developed and scanned. The resulting rusty brown palette appears distinctly earthy, punctuated with regions of black in which the

film emulsion has been completely eaten away by the chemical environment. The colour profile of Noble's scanner was balanced for human skin tone in daylight, a gesture aesthetically implicating humankind in these images; the photographs become oblique portraits of humanity and its unseen impacts—in this case, embedded in their own skin.

The film was buried at night in April–May 2018 at the historic Arthur Boyd Estate during a residency in Bundanon, near Nowra in the south coast hinterland of New South Wales. On the banks of the Shoalhaven River, it is a registered wildlife refuge, and once home to pioneer Australian modernist Arthur Boyd.² The January 2020 fires swept through the region and came within one kilometre of the gallery building.³

Although Noble's work was conceived and executed before these recent Australian megafires, the catastrophic scale of their devastation to human, animal and plant life—with current estimates of one billion animals killed, for example—adds a significant dimension to its story. This is particularly prevalent given that media coverage now clearly links these fires to both extreme weather caused by climate change and government inaction. Here the burnt siennas and blacks of Noble's images evoke scorched earth and the bodies of the dead. Although alluding to the unfolding of climate change in general terms, critic John Hurrell also prophetically noted: 'These shots of soil look fiery; the earth is smouldering. Our planet is on fire.'⁴ Clearly, a parallel between

(opposite) Anne Noble's *Observations from the Critical Zone* at Two Rooms, Auckland, November 2019
(Photograph: Sam Hartnett)

(right) ANNE NOBLE *Observations from the Critical Zone* #1 2019
Pigment print on Canson Baryta paper, 1280 x 922 mm.

(below) ANNE NOBLE *Observations from the Critical Zone* #2 2019
Pigment print on Canson Baryta paper, 1280 x 922 mm.

decayed film and decayed earth resounds. Curator and writer Lucinda Bennett notes of the images: 'They feel, and the title implies, that these panels are post-apocalyptic remnants, fragments from a civilisation now destroyed.'⁵

There are also other ways of viewing and interpreting this work. We may read the images side-on: as a cross-section of soil, a poetic measure of its health—an aesthetic index or litmus test. Their appearance also suggests an aerial view, akin to astrophotography of the sun, or to satellite photographs of desert regions, indeed resembling aspects of the land in which the work was made. Hurrell also notes that Noble's photographs appear vaguely 'like leaf litter peppered with scattered ash, interspersed with small black lakes that seem to come from a topographic map'.⁶

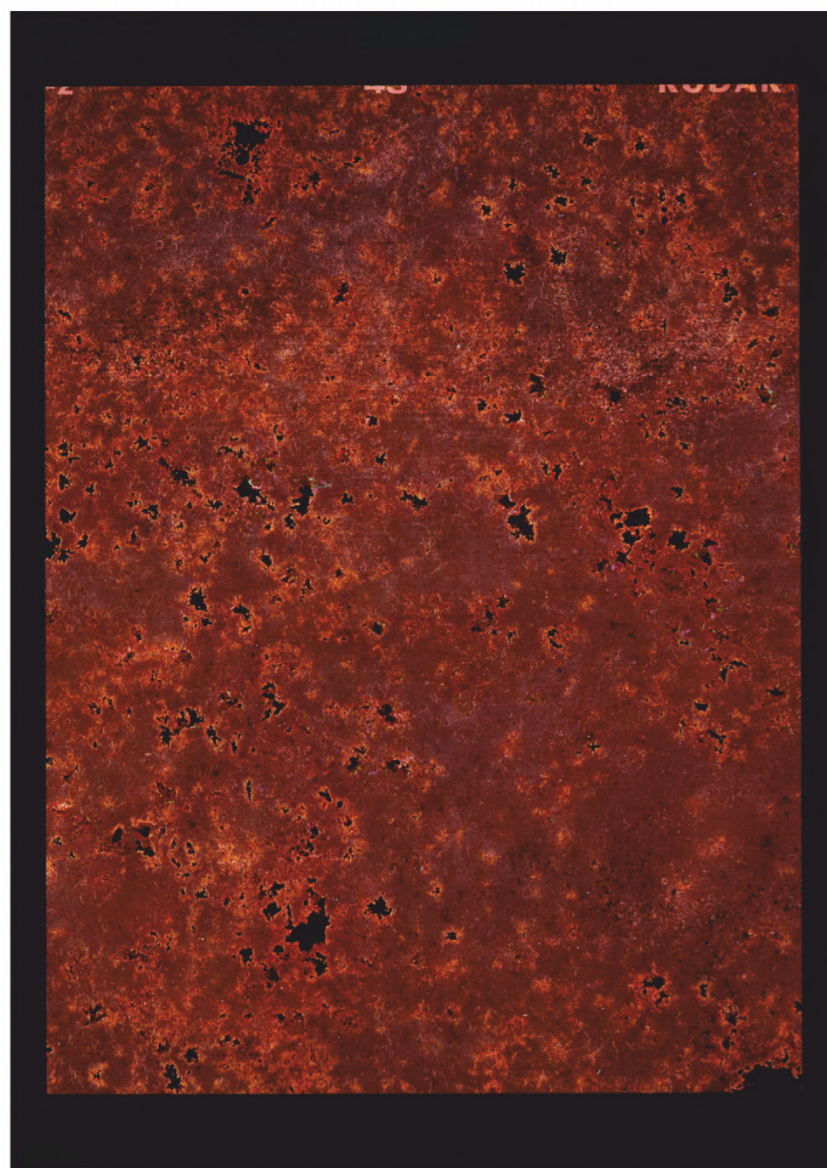
These black forms might also appear as windows—or puncture wounds—onto a void below. This sense of a void is reinforced in the photographs' presentation, mounted, floating in deep black frames. One might feel not only as if looking down from an omniscient view, but back up at the surface and towards the sky, as if inhabiting the point of view of the earth below—and by implication, granting it a kind of consciousness. The earth—or the void—stares back.

We may also see *through* the images, the blacks evoking the cosmos, death, oblivion. This celestial impression is echoed, on closer inspection, as a veritable rainbow of colours opens out. Within the earthy brown palette, fields of maroons, pinks and oranges mix and meld, flecked with a galaxy of reds, yellows, lime greens and violets. And yet, resisting the propensity for viewers to immerse themselves entirely in the images, Noble's decision to print the film full-frame—with part of the Kodak branding visible at the top—pushes the eye back to the surface and to the method of their making.

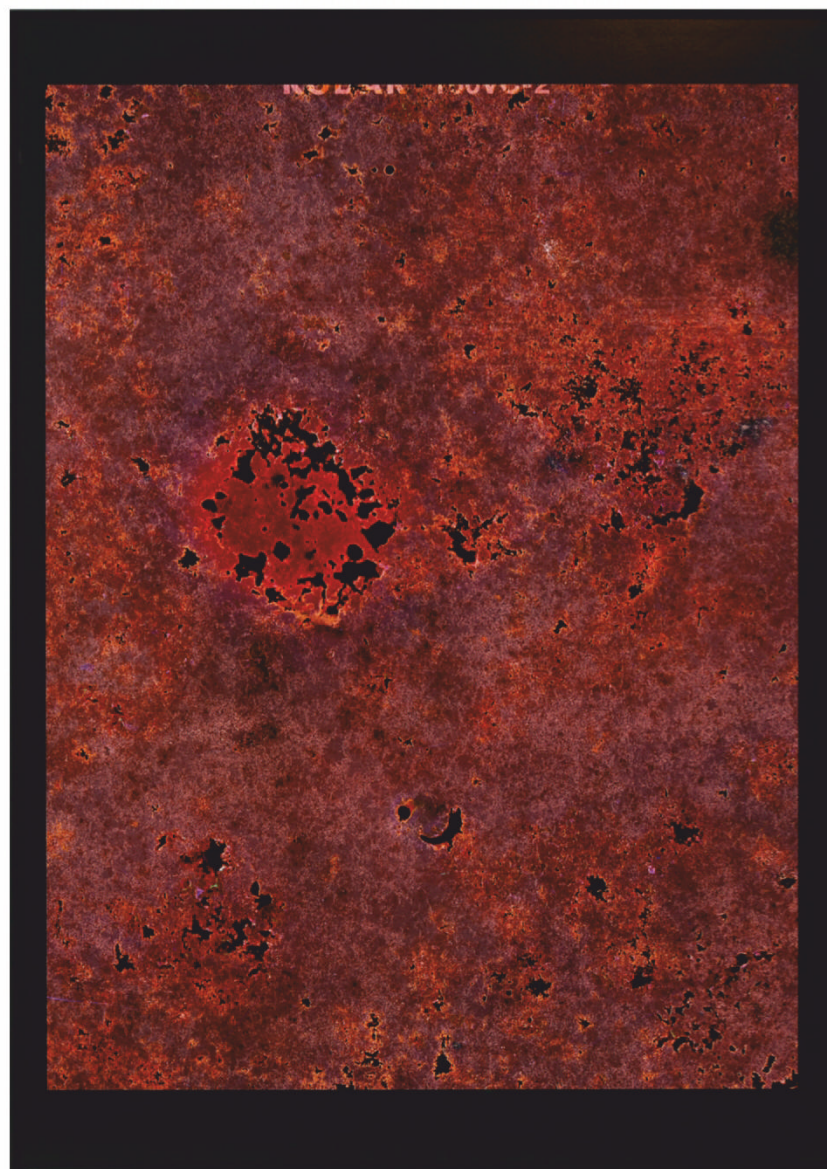
In conversation, Noble describes her interest in overlooked aspects of human experience, and her work as 'transcribing the surfaces of the world . . . but also offering something else'.⁷ While she notes that this is also a condition of photography in general, in her practice there is a determined 'attempt to speak to realms both unseen and beyond our comprehension'.⁸

Noble describes herself as both a lover and interrogator of science.⁹ She also asserts, 'behind the discoveries are invisible "mad" scientists'.¹⁰ In this work, her method courts science's unlikely bedfellow: magic. In response to the exhibition, Bennett asks: 'Why not explore the possibility of magic, why not ask questions of the world? If we cannot do this in the realm of art, where can we?'¹¹

This brings us to Noble's original premise. For the artist, an initial and important aspect of the work



was to 'investigate, adopting, with quasi scientific seriousness, a method to measure the tenor of the conversations between trees'.¹² Noble describes being inspired by a quote from poet Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*: 'What did the tree learn from the earth / to be able to talk with the sky?'¹³ The artist describes her





(left)
KATE VAN DER DRIFT
*New Moon to Waxing
Gibbous, September,
37°25'47.4"S 175°30'39.2"E*
2019

C-type photographic
handprint, 600 x 500 mm.

(opposite above)
KATE VAN DER DRIFT
*First Quarter Moon to New
Moon, July, 37°25'47.4"S
175°30'39.2"E Contact Print*
2019

C-type photographic
handprint, 440 x 360 mm.

(opposite below)
KATE VAN DER DRIFT
*First Quarter Moon to Third
Quarter Moon, August
37°25'47.4"S 175°30'39.2"E*
2019

C-type photographic
handprint, 500 x 400 mm.

own subsequent questions: 'Do trees talk? And if they talk how might we understand them?'¹⁴

Noble asserts that this work is a 'playful riposte to science' and revels in 'the absurdity of certain endeavours'¹⁵—logical given the poetic framing of her premise. However, while there is emerging research and some contestation in the science community, the field of 'plant intelligence' is steadily moving from the realm of the formerly absurd to that verified by the scientific establishment.¹⁶ A number of recent studies have demonstrated how trees and other plants communicate with one another in sophisticated ways through chemical and electrical signals, both above and below ground.¹⁷ Trees are highly networked, and hence forests have been likened to a kind of biological internet. This concept has also been taken further by researchers such as ecologist Dr Suzanne Simard, discussing how humans might learn to better understand trees' forms of communication and adapt practices such as forestry to maintain their heritage networks and ecosystems.¹⁸ The question of understanding how trees talk appears no longer one of 'if' or 'how', but when?

Kate van der Drift's recent practice also employs cameraless photography and, although in an entirely different way, shares parallels and connections with Noble's work. For the last three years van der Drift has worked in the wetlands and tributaries which flow into the Piako River in the Hauraki Plains near Thames. While she has photographed waterways for some time, more recent work has seen her embed sheets of unexposed large-format film in lightproof containers in these wetlands.

Although she is currently based in Auckland, the Hauraki Plains region is a place that van der Drift has repeatedly encountered on her travels, over time developing a keen interest in its ecology, history, and a closer relationship at a personal and artistic level. Of particular interest is the Kopuatai Peat Dome, a freshwater wetland area covering ten thousand hectares, the largest unaltered restiad peat bog in New Zealand, which is also unique globally.¹⁹ Surrounded by swampland and lagoons, it is integral to the flood management of the region, is an important carbon sink, and contains a large stand of kahikatea trees, despite widespread logging. Much of the region is

difficult to access, with some areas only reachable by boat—the domain of duck shooters and other hunters—and represents a world hidden to most.

Van der Drift also follows the work of outspoken academic Dr Mike Joy's investigation of New Zealand's freshwater crisis, the site of her fieldwork subject to these environmental stresses. She notes that the current state of this region is seeing some positive developments such as riparian planting; however, the chemical spraying of other plants deemed undesirable also poisons these waterways, leaving this fragile ecology in a precarious state of flux.²⁰

In satellite maps, the Kopuatai Peat Dome appears as if a god had left a giant muddy footprint in the green earth. Human footprints in this region may suddenly break through the undulating, spongy surface until one finds oneself thigh-deep in water. Van der Drift walks the wetland in waders, perceiving walking as an artistic methodology, a slowing down, a space to listen and to encounter ecologies which inform new ways of seeing.²¹

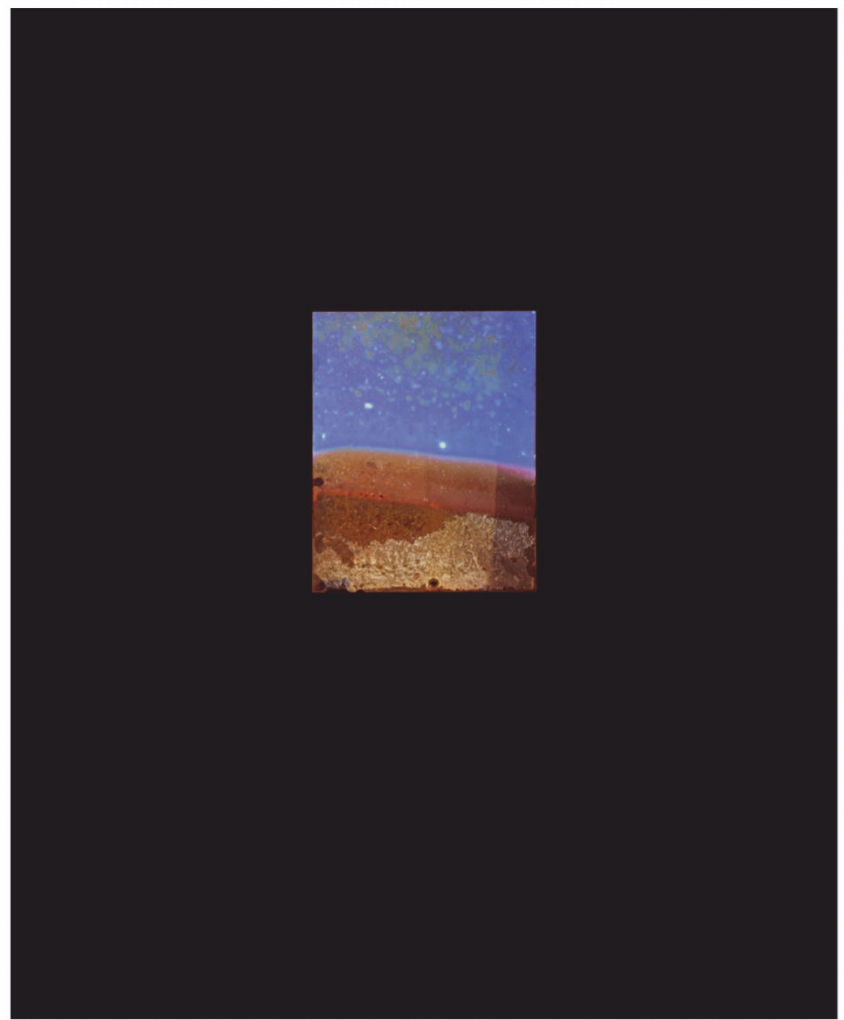
Once stuck in the mud, the artist reflected: 'A desire emerged to put my ear to the riverbank. I remembered Barbara Hurd's poetic essay about listening with her head in the dirt. Eavesdropping on the landscape. Attentive. "How often, after all, have our own deaf ears been a cause of hostility and longing?"'²²

Directional Listening: Fluvial Field Notes, van der Drift's recent exhibition at Sanderson Contemporary, featured a series of contact prints and enlargements from negatives which were buried for two to four weeks, in order, as the artist notes 'for the film to collect the landscape'.²³

In conversation, she reveals that her film was buried in the 'liminal zones effected by the tides'.²⁴ The term 'liminal' can denote an initial or transitional stage of a process, while also indicating the film's placement at, or on both sides of, a threshold or boundary. The edges or margins of the wetland, bordered by tributaries to the Piako (where some of the films have been placed), represents a threshold between water and land, and between the two states of this wetland (peat and mineralised).

Liminality also appears in her images. In *First Quarter Moon to New Moon, July, 37°25'47.4"S 175°30'39.2"E* (2019), the portions of negative embedded in sediment or exposed to chemicals in the water (farm run-off and bacteria, for example) are clearly visible. While such titles reference location coordinates and the passage of time, they also evoke the celestial realm, a quality echoed in the images' nebulous glow. One might think of photographs of interstellar space recently released by NASA. Here the liminal may also carry an associative dimension, speaking to thresholds between the visible and invisible, material and immaterial. The artist's swirling, murky palette of blues, indigos, violets, reds, pinks, earth tones, black and gold suggest there is a deeper presence to be encountered, and communicated, here.

While some photographs are enlargements, others are contact prints made to the scale of the negative



and framed with a generous black border. Van der Drift tries to refrain from aesthetic decisions other than location and the time the film is immersed in it, favouring a dispassionate indeterminacy. They are painstakingly hand-printed using a technique the obsolescence of which renders it almost inaccessible and forgotten.

Van der Drift describes 'the colonisation of the surface of the negative by bacteria and algae', an idea that could conjure a kind of European colonial residue, with the environmental impacts felt upon these wetlands and the result of a dominant and

(continued on page 112)





Being Present

John Vea at Sydney's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

ZARA STANHOPE

We should not be defined by the smallness of our islands, but by the greatness of our oceans.

Eveli Hau'ofa

Migration has been an issue on which politicians and political parties have staked their identity since 1901, when the idea of the White Australia policy came into being. Subsequently dismantled only to have asylum seekers become another part of political identity, Australian immigration policy is driven mainly by agendas of economic growth and boosting human capital, and only secondly concerned with humanitarianism, development or expanding cultural diversity.¹

John Vea's first Australian exhibition, *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?*, provokes awareness of migrant workers, often through the lens of labour conditions. Curators Micheal Do and Mikala Tai at Sydney's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art have brought together many of Vea's key works and supported research for a new commission, a work in public space in which Vea extended his concerns with the constrained conditions of diaspora life as determined by law and commerce.

At 4A the exhibition layout led visitors to experience Vea's works from newest to oldest. Two recent offerings situated at the entry evidenced the

deepening of his interests. Continuing an immersive experience of subjects in a precarious labour economy, *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* (2019) is set up as a lunchroom, and only accessible at hours designated as 'rest breaks'. The title references the New Zealand Act of Parliament that requires rest breaks for employees, the minimum legislated time aligning with the opportunity to access the room.²

Commissioned by 4A, the work develops from the artist's 2018 installation at Te Tuhi in Pakuranga, "you kids should only experience this for a moment—don't be here for life like me", which was informed by Vea's own exposure to factory work. The yellow room, an odd colour that suggests left-over paint, is complete with stereotypical furnishings: a tin of International Roast coffee and cans of Palm corn beef, Talofa Pe'epe'e Coconut Cream and Tai-Yo fish. A copy of the *Samoa Times* rests on a table and free call numbers for Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are handwritten on a note by the phone. Occasionally a segment of ABC news emits from a portable radio on a table, relating the offensive statement made by Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack in August 2019, suggesting that Pacific nations need not be concerned about climate change as they can come to Australia to pick fruit, which coincided with the Morrison government's refusal to address climate change at the Pacific Islands

(opposite & right) JOHN VEA *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* 2019

Participatory installation, commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

(Photographs: Kai Wasikowski)

(below) JOHN VEA *Finish this week off and that's it!* 2014

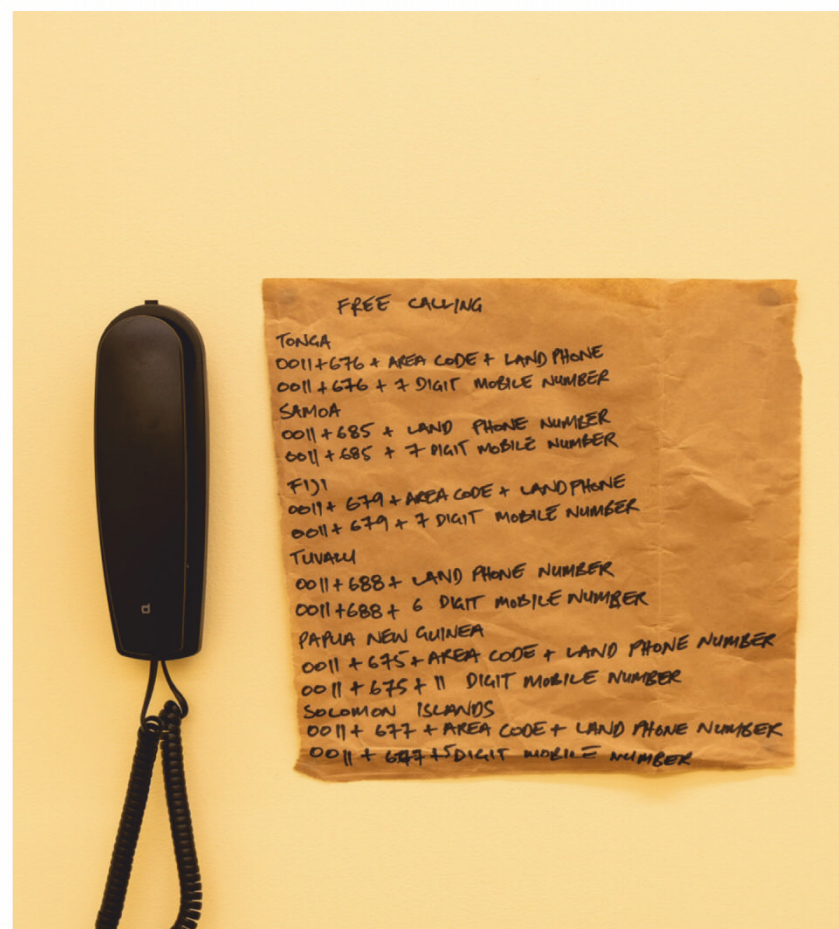
Five-channel video, 1°59'00"

(Photograph: Kai Wasikowski)

Forum.³ A pinboard contains photocopies of articles about seasonal working, climate change and the larger field of labour politics. The walls are decorated with posters of island beaches printed with principles that counter the crude statements of the Australian politicians, reproducing quotes from eminent Pacific thinkers Epeli Hau'ofa, Teresia Teaiwa and Albert Wendt on the value of connections to cultural spirit and place.

The broadcast and reported information does not, however, fill the vacuum created by the absent workers. *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* makes the point that its inhabitants spend most of their time at their labour and highlights the laws, political thinking and racism that control conditions and discriminate against Pacific and other immigrants in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet even in its empty state *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* is pervaded with communal as well as economic relations. The conviviality of the tearoom, the warmth of rapport and the unbreakable bonds between people and place, whether here or there, are affecting. The environment places the visitor as an outsider, an interloper, unable to enter the room most of the day. The sense of being a spectator heightens the feeling that this is not your place.

With the other work that could be viewed from the street frontage of 4A, Vea encourages empathy with a different topic. The video titled *she sows this aina with*



her younger siblings, yet she cannot inherit that same aina (2017) depicts family members playing the classic game of Eggs in a Basket in his mother's backyard in Auckland to the sound of Vea's grandfather's band Funga'onetaka performing a song from his Tongan village. The accompanying image of Vea's grandfather's Tongan land title deed indicates a shift in subject to other forms of exchange away from the politics of labour and diaspora towards, in this case, the patriarchal transfer of land in Tonga, a situation that is contentious in the small island nation. This inequality sees females unable to inherit land. This work gains strength in coming from a personal place as Vea, as the eldest male relative, inherited land



which otherwise would have gone to his mother. While land is central to culture and life, neither the law, nor the free play that might be associated with the market system, are without bias: the rules based system that determines the laws of the land as well as migration is a counterpoint to the competition represented by Eggs in a Basket, a game that favours the fastest and wildest or even most corrupt.

Vea's earliest works are at the back of the gallery. If bodies were absent from the lunchroom, the artist himself appears in two videos, *29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga* (2013) and *Finish this week off and that's it!* (2014). In the first, Vea repeatedly stacks breeze blocks on the shore at Piha only to have them knocked over by the incoming sea; in the second, he valiantly lifts a rock over a five-week period, while existing only on a diet affordable on the World Bank's poverty line wage.⁴ Both highlight the solitary nature of the endeavour. Vea's method of researching and thinking through *talanoa*—drawing on conversations to share stories to understand and consider collective situations—was made clear with the quotes from factory workers in the label text in *Finish this week off*. Yet, in each video the artist/worker endures his tasks alone, with dignity despite the sense of an unending challenge.

This aloneness is heightened by the framing of the video, the close cropping offering little context. We know he is in Auckland, in Aotearoa. Stacking blocks at the edge of the Pacific, he labours in the waters connecting the homelands of all Pacific diaspora. The same element threatens many lands with rising sea levels and extreme events such as the tsunami in the title, aspects of climate change denied by the leaders

(below) John Vea's *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney October 2019 with *seasonal worker survival kit* (2015) in foreground & *29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga* (2013) at rear (Photograph: Kai Wasikowski)

(opposite) Documentation of John Vea's *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?*, participatory installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph: Micheal Do)

of the nation in which Vea is exhibiting.⁵ The sense of alienation and insensitivity is heightened by the protagonist's invisible bonds to people and places on both sides of the water.

The six-channel video *Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't* (2017) also maximises the use of multiple views, off-camera action and lack of colour to sustain the ideas of absent labour. The sound of bricks clicking together accompanying views of an almost empty grassy landscape encourages attentive looking. Vea and a collaborator move in and out of sight as they lay and re-lay a short section of brick pathway in the grass, another seemingly endless and futile task, with the suburbia of Maungarei (Mt Wellington, Auckland) in the background. Playing with the history of performance art the work also rouses a level of empathy towards the dedication of the workers. Inspired by the concern of Kanaka Maoli Hawaiian activist Imaikalani Kalahale regarding the impact of the concrete-built environment on his land, Vea's use of the format of Colin McCahon's 1950 painting *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* also references western nationalist and spiritual connections with the landscape and ideas of creation and sacrifice.⁶

The sensation of absence extends also to Vea's familiar factory-made UMU cardboard boxes. A wall of





them confronts the viewer in the space and determines the available route. The umu pack is approved by New Zealand Customs as a means for importing food cooked in the umu oven. The wall of boxes, *Seasonal worker survival kit* (2015) stands tall. Oranges in a nearby opened box are branded with fruit stickers detailing New Zealand visa stipulations: 'Maximum Visa / 7 months limit / \$17.70 per hour'. This seasonal working visa is typical of the short-stay permits offered by various countries (similar to Australia's Seasonal Workers Program) to attract a workforce for agriculture while excluding other residency or visa benefits such as longer stays or bringing partners or children.⁷

The sense of absence evoked by *seasonal worker survival kit* also haunts the associated exhibition component at Sydney's Carriageworks that was commissioned for Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art. *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* comprised a stand or small marquee, inserted amidst the weekend Farmers Market, mimicking recruitment booths for temporary workers or immigrants to be found in Pacific nations, displaying the appeal of the destination country. Photographs of workers in high visibility clothing were accompanied by slogans in Tongan and Samoan praising a fertile destination but also offering reminders of home: *Fonua 'oe mahu'* (Land of plenty) and *'Fanua mo le tama o aiga'* (Land for the son of the families). At the centre, life-size figures with faces cut out invited Sydneysiders to place themselves in the role of immigrant worker for a moment. While playful, *If you pick my fruit* also

invites a more bodily, direct engagement. While some may not have understood the intention of the ironic role playing, the work received mainstream media coverage and inserted art into a site of an economy which it critiqued.⁸

Mikala Tai's ambition for Vea's exhibition was for recognition of what often goes un-noted, such as whose hands picked or packed the orange in our fruit bowl. Vea works empathetically in showing ways of being for both individuals and communities, while highlighting the factors that influence those ways of being. Straddling the faceless and the personal, *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* suggests a broadening trajectory of interest and a heightened provocation for his audience to respond.

1. See Sam Roggeveen, *Our Very Own Brexit*, A Lowy Institute Paper, Penguin, Australia 2019.
2. Break times were 10.00–10.10am, 12.00–12.30pm and 3.00–3.10pm.
3. Ben Smee, 'Pacific Islands will survive climate change because they "pick our fruit" Australia's Deputy PM says', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/aug/16/pacific-islands-will-survive-climate-crisis-because-they-can-pick-our-fruit-australias-deputy-pm-says>.
4. The equivalent of \$2.25 per day in 2013, according to Vea.
5. The 2009 tsunami claimed almost 200 lives and injured as many people.
6. McCahon was a seasonal worker when he painted this response to the landscapes of Nelson and Canterbury.
7. See Ioana Gordon-Smith, 'Planting Objects, Yielding Stories', 26 October 2015, <http://ioanagordonsmith.com/2015/10/26/planting-objects-yielding-stories/>.
8. Teresa Tan, 'Pacific migrant workers the focus of confronting artwork by New Zealand-based Tongan artist John Vea', *ABC News*, 5 November 2019, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-05/pacific-migrant-workers-artwork-by-tongan-artist-john-vea/11664882>.



Making Memories

Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua and The Gathering

KARL CHITHAM

The nature of gatherings by definition is for a group of people to come together for a shared purpose. They can often be energising, inspiring and provide the perfect conditions for building meaningful connections and to exchange knowledge. This was exactly the impression I was left with having attended the international indigenous artists gathering *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua* held in November 2019 at Turangawaewae Marae, Ngaruawahia.

The event was organised and hosted by Te Atinga, a collective that came into being as part of a Maori and South Pacific Arts Council (MASPAC) initiative in the late 1980s. It was conceived by the six founding members—Sandy Adsett, Manos Nathan, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Robyn Kahukiwa, Aromea Te Maipi and Ross Hemera—as a conduit to provide support for the advancement of contemporary Maori visual art. Over the subsequent years the organisation, through its changing committee of practising artists, has endeavoured to encourage opportunities to raise the profile of contemporary Maori art practice through exhibiting, providing funding to artists and through

the encouragement of exchange with other indigenous artists from the wider Pacific region and further afield.

Based on the Maori concept of a wananga, this event, which is in its ninth iteration, was first held in 1995 at Apumoana Marae in Rotorua. It was Adsett who suggested the term ‘gathering’ was more inclusive as it reflected an international indigenous understanding of coming together. As current Te Atinga Chair Nigel Borell describes it, ‘the cross-indigenous gatherings have set in motion an integral way of relating to each other whereby our connections, customs and kinship ties are reignited and reaffirmed as a uniquely indigenous way of collective conversation’.¹

I was invited, with three other indigenous curators, Reuben Friend, Julie Nagam and Heather Igloliorte, to participate in a panel discussion as part of the opening-day celebrations of the accompanying exhibition at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, and to be at the marae with the many artists in attendance. Having arrived the day before, I was able to spend time at the impressive Turangawaewae Marae complex and get a sense of what it might be like to be one of those fortunate enough to be invited

(opposite) Sandy Adsett at *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua*, Ngaruawahia, November 2019

(right) *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua* at Waikato Museum, November 2019, with James Webster's *Hinetuahoanga* in foreground

to share in this week-long experience. The participants formed discipline groupings; some elected to stay within their field, while others used the opportunity to branch out and explore the possibilities and new connections that might come in a different artform. Each group was allocated a space within the complex and it was clear from the practical set-ups for those working in uku (clay), digital media, painting, printmaking, fibre arts, adornment, or sculpture that this was a well-oiled machine where all of the technical requirements had been taken into account. Alongside any individual works they had planned, artists were invited to participate in collaborative projects and give nightly presentations that helped encourage everyone to become better acquainted with each other and their respective practices. It also increased the wider group's knowledge of skills, ideas and approaches, creating even more potential for exchange. Shared meals and excursions around the local region created opportunities for dialogue and understanding of the local context, contributing to a feeling of community and companionship.

There were 120 artists invited to participate in the gathering and over 90 of those submitted work for inclusion in the exhibition. While the overarching curatorial premise was to reflect the diversity and creative potential of the gathering, it is not difficult to imagine the challenge for the three curators—Borell,

Marie Mills and Leafa Wilson (Mills and Wilson being curators at Waikato Museum)—to bring these works together in a way that made sense to the visitor.

At the curators' floor talk which formed part of the exhibition opening celebrations, they discussed the structure of the exhibition that, from as early as 1988, has proven to be an essential consideration for Te Atinga, who have consistently pushed against the structures and preconceptions of the white cube gallery space, viewing it through a uniquely Maori lens.

The curators of *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua* framed the exhibition within the notion of complementary currents. This idea reflected the literal, metaphorical and physical ebb and flow suggested by the puhoro design, a recurring motif for Te Atinga and one that is reiterated in the title of the exhibition and the gathering. Puhoro has many interpretations, but when it was first incorporated into the logo for Te Atinga in 2009 by Adsett, it was chosen to express cultural strength and artistic refinement, two ideas that have been reflected in abundance throughout this event. Te Atinga committee member Chris Bryant-Toi suggests that the international nature of the gathering means that, 'These groups form their own spiral core . . . with others to articulate a dynamic artist-led contemporary visual art movement that philosophically operates like a puhoro pattern spanning across nations.'²

The works in the exhibition were loosely curated into a series of groupings that Mills described in her floor talk as moving 'from transgressive notions to contemporary conversations'. With themes such as resistance and the politics of colonisation, reclamation





of indigenous motifs, indigenous cosmologies, matauranga renaissance and sustainability and the importance of water, the exhibition charts its own narrative unrestricted by a linear chronology, revealing a more complex indigenous approach to how art and history might operate across time and space.

The placement of works within these sections also referenced Te Atinga's first exhibition in 1988 called *Te Huihuinga* that was held at Forum North, Whangarei where the implementation of a Maori kaupapa became a defining approach to decisions about layout and curation. As Kura Te Waru Rewiri described it, '... art pieces would be set up (or be oriented) in a way that the roles would be reflected in the wharenuī and on the marae when you are taking in manuhiri. So the wero, the karanga, whaikorero, waiata ... this type of structuring.'³ For *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua* the first work at the entrance to the show is James Webster's pou entitled *Hinetuahoanga*, a tekoteko form representing the maiden of sandstone, a material used in the sharpening of tōki (adze). The curators described it as a wero or challenge to those moving into the space, but the work also played a much more pivotal role as a symbol of the core threads that this gathering and exhibition have come to represent:

the exchange of knowledge and wairua, across time, geographical space and generations.

What might not be immediately obvious to visitors is the number of intergenerational whanau relationships involved. Senior Maori artists showed alongside established and emerging makers, while parents and mentors presented new and existing works next to their sons, daughters and those who have been inspired to follow in their footsteps. These connections reveal the living lineages within contemporary Maori art, encouraging the passing on of knowledge and the responsibility of keeping important stories alive for future generations. Wi Taepa, a frequent participant in the gathering and one of the founding members of Nga Kaihanga Uku—New Zealand Collective of Maori Clay Workers—shows one of his distinctive uku forms called simply *Ipu* (2003), while his son and former Te Atinga committee Chair Ngataiharuru Taepa exhibits his innovative reinterpretation of kowhaiwhai and whakairo rakau traditions with his work *Te Tini a Pitau* (2015).

What many of the whanau pairings showed were the strong relationships between practices that are not always evident on first inspection, but that are drawn out when thinking about the subjects and influences



(opposite above left) CHRISTINA HURIHIA WIRIHANA *Juxtaposed* 2016
On left, muka, harakeke, toroa feathers, 350 x 275 x 75 mm., on right, copper, muka, harakeke, toroa feathers, 280 x 190 x 100 mm.
(opposite above right) MATEKINO LAWLESS *Kete Pingao Tuatahi & Kete Pingao Tuarua* 2019
Pingao, muka & harakeke, each approx. 300 x 260 x 50 mm.
(opposite below left) MAIOHA KARA *Christmas Table* 2019
Rimu ply & glitter, 2300 x 1100 mm.
(opposite below right) EUGENE KARA *Te Nehenehenui* 2019
Oak & graphite, 1800 x 200 x 40 mm.

they each investigate. A case in point is Donn Ratana with his work entitled *Weapons of Mass Confiscation 1840–2020* (2019). This installation responds to the use of surveying and the arbitrary division of Maori ancestral lands as one of the most harmful and arguably disenfranchising tools used by Pakeha during the colonial settlement phase of Aotearoa's history. His daughter, Aimee Ratana's appliquéd blanket called *Rua Kenana's Arrest Maungapohatu 1916* (2012) operates along similar lines, making reference to an event that demonstrated the singling out and unfair treatment of Maori early in the twentieth century and led to the eventual demise of a once prosperous community in Te Urewera. Both of these works focus on the injustices Maori have suffered and continue to experience as a result of New Zealand's colonial past. While many in Aotearoa may feel that time has moved on and that these histories are no longer relevant, it is through artworks like these that society can gain insight into events that have had seriously detrimental impacts on Maori and other indigenous communities around the world.

Included in the exhibition is a work called *Te Nehenehenui* (2019) by Eugene Kara. The name refers to a tongi or saying from the second Maori King, Tawhiao as he retreated across the Punui River and into Te Nehenehenui (the great forest) during the New Zealand Wars leading to the confiscation of 1.2 million acres of Tainui land by Sir George Grey in the 1860s. Kara talks about his carved figurative form depicted lying horizontally, slender and black apart from the flash of a bright red tongue, as being a metaphor for the consolidation of his own goals for the future. He likens it to how Tawhiao must have felt as he went into Te Nehenehenui, looking back at the horizon and his ancestral lands that he was being forced to leave behind. The notion of defining what is important and reassessing your place in the world also flows through into Maioha Kara's work entitled *Christmas Table*. A current student at Massey University, like her father, she is taking stock and reflecting on whanau and special memories such as the annual abundant spread created by her grandmother at Christmas time. Glittering dots of colour create a whetu (star) pattern that uses the centre line of the rimu ply as the manawa or heart line, a reference to her tupuna and the tradition of whakairo rakau that runs through Kara's whanau.

Matekino Lawless, now in her nineties and likely one of the oldest participants in *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua*, is one of the early advocates for the

reclamation and continuation of raranga and raranga whatu. In the exhibition she shows her delicate pingao kete alongside her daughter Christina Hurihia Wirihana who has also played a significant role in the development of this artform as the former Chair of Te Roopu Raranga Whatu o Aotearoa—National Weavers Collective—and in the establishment of cross-cultural connections with other indigenous groups. One of the important early relationships that came out of these connections was with Ojibwe artist Tina Kuckkahn-Millar, who hosted the third international indigenous art gathering called *Asta'bsHil3b axW ti qa'qtu—Return to the Swing* as director of Evergreen State College, Washington state. As the first of the gatherings to take place outside of Aotearoa, this was an important event that, in conjunction with other previous and future exchanges, cemented the international nature of these occasions. Over more than 20 years these relationships have grown to include many indigenous colleagues from the United States, Canada, Hawai'i, Guam and Australia to Tahiti, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and others.

While a number of the parents and senior artists in the exhibition have worked hard to break through the boundaries imposed by the conventions applied to both western and Maori artforms, it is arguably their children and grandchildren who have the harder job to make headway in this world filled with the visual and cultural noise of the internet and social media. How can you be innovative, have a point of view that is relevant and meaningful and create impact when you are competing with global crises across cultures, geographical locations and shifting social strata? What stands out amidst this morass of weighty concerns is how *Puhoro o Mua, Puhoro ki Tua* creates an island of calm that is focused, connected and open to the positive nature of the creative process. It embraces the good stuff in the world—sharing ideas, working together and inhabiting the same space without predetermined expectations.

What was clearly evident throughout my first experience of this impressive assembly was a palpable sense of unity that is becoming increasingly difficult to inspire in the current climate of anxiety and fear for the environment, social stability and the retention of cultural traditions. There was a comradery and openness, in which artists from different generations, cultures, backgrounds and disciplines could communicate and share ideas and experiences without bias. Make no mistake, this was not a utopian lovefest, but for someone deeply imbedded in the art world, it gave me reason to pause and reflect on ways to make a difference in how we work together for the common purpose of keeping our stories and traditions alive for future generations.

1. Nigel Borell, 'Te Atinga: 25 Years of Contemporary Maori Art' in Nigel Borell (ed.), *Te Atinga: 25 Years of Contemporary Maori Art*, Toi Maori Aotearoa, Wellington 2013, p. 25.
2. Chris Bryant-Toi, 'Ko Te Ra Puhoro—Te Atinga Gatherings' in *ibid.*, p. 47.
3. Kura Te Waru Rewiri, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 20.



Decisive Moments

Louise Henderson: From Life

PRISCILLA PITTS

Towards the end of her life, Louise Henderson declared 'I . . . think that the people who practise [art] should be devoted to it . . . to do good art, it's a lifetime really.'¹ *Louise Henderson: From Life*, fittingly, devotes itself to a lifetime's work by this determined, sometimes surprising and in recent years largely overlooked artist.

The title of both the exhibition and the accompanying publication is also fitting, not only because Henderson's work almost always refers in some way to the world around her but also because certain key events in her life shaped important changes in her practice. The first of these was emigrating from her native France to this country in 1925 following her marriage to New Zealander Hubert Henderson. At her mother's insistence Henderson had trained, not as an artist, as she wished to do, but in the decorative arts, principally embroidery. While this stood her in good stead both as a teacher and in her understanding of design principles, it was her move to New Zealand that gave her the opportunity to become a painter.

The Hendersons lived initially in Christchurch and for a time Louise had connections with The Group, that collection of artists who were pushing beyond the prevailing conservatism of the 1920s and '30s.

She became friends with Rita Angus with whom she went on painting trips, but for the most part the fluid forms and softer outlines of her landscapes from that time have more in common, stylistically, with those of Oliva Spencer Bower. At times there is a sense that she is feeling her way as a painter and early cityscapes such as *Manchester Street, Christchurch* (1930) and *Wellington* (c.1942), with their precise and rather dry delineation of architectural forms, seem like academic exercises in perspective and tone.

The final work in a selection of Henderson's Canterbury and Wellington paintings is *Still Life with Arum Lilies* (c.1948) which heralds a marked stylistic shift. Its transparent overlapping of forms and the origami-like folds of the patterned tablecloth are precursors to Henderson's more sustained exploration of cubism and were almost certainly influenced by her contact with John Weeks.² Even so, it is a big jump to the first work in the next group, *Untitled [Cubist Portrait Study of a Woman]* (1954). Without the clue offered by the title one would be hard put to identify this elegant and beautifully controlled composition in buff, grey-blues and black as representing a female figure. This too is the result of another decisive moment—Henderson's departure in late 1951 for Europe and, in particular, her choosing to study in Paris with the cubist painter Jean Metzinger after seeing an exhibition of his there. It seems that she was attracted to a style that would push her own practice in terms of form and composition yet remained committed to representing the visible world.

Cubism was, by then, no longer considered avant-garde in Europe but it was very advanced in terms of

Louise Henderson: From Life

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2 November 2019–8 March
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 20 June–11 October
curated by Felicity Milburn, Lara Strongman & Julia Waite

(opposite) LOUISE HENDERSON
Suddenly a Lake Appeared Among the Trees 1991
 Oil on canvas on board, 1242 x 2352 mm.
 (Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the McKegg Family, 1999)

(right) LOUISE HENDERSON
Untitled [Cubist Study of a Woman] 1954
 Oil on canvas, 510 x 432 mm.
 (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 2017)

(below) LOUISE HENDERSON *Cubist Still Life* 1954
 Oil on canvas, 530 x 845 mm.
 (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 2019)

New Zealand painting and on her return in early 1953 Henderson was hailed as one of the most progressive artists in New Zealand.³ Here, Henderson's cubist works include several paintings of women, three of them double portraits. In *Les Deux Amis* (*The Two Friends*) (1953), the title a term in European art circles for a lesbian couple, one woman appears to be sitting on the other's lap and the interlocking angles and planes of their clothes and bodies express a physical intimacy. The two figures in *Maori Matrons* (1953) are seated on the ground, much as are Maori in some early New Zealand paintings; however, Henderson invests them with a strong presence that is quite different from those renditions of seemingly acquiescent figures.

This group of paintings culminates in Henderson's lively *Portrait of Betty Curnow* (1954). Nothing could be more different from Rita Angus's well-known painting of Curnow with its precisely delineated wealth of detail and personal symbolism and the sitter's rather stolid demeanour. Henderson portrays Curnow as a vamp, sultry and voluptuous in a red dress, holding a white rose in one hand and nonchalantly dangling a cigarette in the other. Playing into Henderson's cubist treatment of her subject, the cactus print blouse of

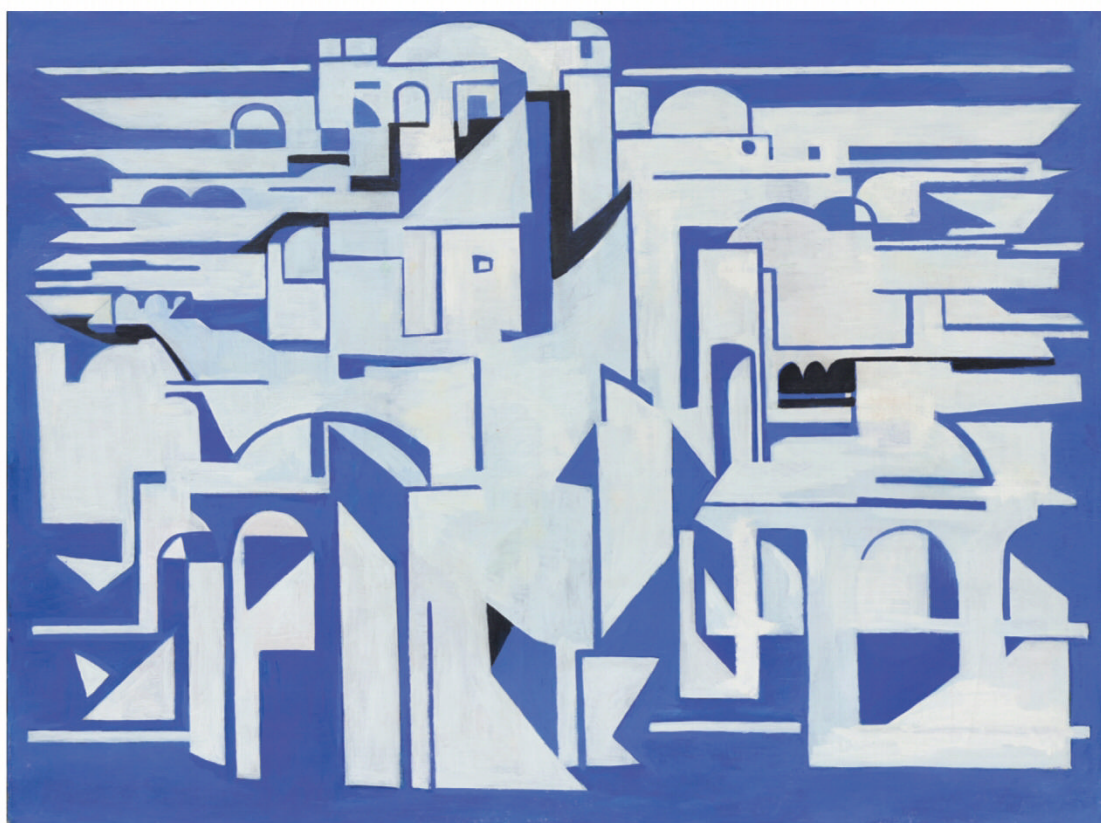


Angus's depiction is replaced with a loosely draped chequered shawl.

Still-life was a key cubist subject. This exhibition includes three by Henderson, although she painted many more and clearly delighted in anatomising and recombining the shapes of tables, cloths, jugs, glasses and fruit. As with Betty Curnow's shawl, her choice of overblown globe artichoke flowers and their spiky leaves in *Cubist Still Life* (1954) is singularly apt and surely deliberate.

Henderson continued to explore new ground. During the 1950s she moved towards abstraction, though almost always with reference to what she





(left) LOUISE HENDERSON

Jerusalem No. 2 1957

Oil on canvas on board, 1242 x 2352 mm.

(Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the McKegg Family, 1999)

(below) *Louise Henderson: From Life* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, November 2019, showing from left *Les Deux Amis* (*The Two Friends*) (1953), *Maori Matrons* (1953) & *Samoan Woman in Yellow* (1954)

(opposite) LOUISE HENDERSON

Garden 1977

Oil on canvas, 1730 x 1730 mm.

(Private collection)

could see around her. The hard-edged abstraction to which she was drawn was particularly suited to townscapes and architectural subjects and was perhaps a logical development from her cubist project—indeed *The Farmhouse, Cornwall* (1957) still has a suggestion of this earlier approach. However, the abutting angular forms of *Façade in Florence* (1959), *Roofs of Rome* (1959) and *Dieppe* (1959) are so extreme in their abstraction that each work reads more strongly as a flat plane than as a representation of three-dimensional structures.

Henderson spent time in the Middle East where Hubert was employed from 1956–59. There she painted more townscapes, specifically the city of Jerusalem. Their layered accumulation of silhouettes and outlines, white or cream against largely monochrome backgrounds, and the push and pull of positive and negative shapes, produce an almost vibrating optical effect, capturing perfectly the glare of bright sunlight on white-washed surfaces and the contrast of deep shadow. Henderson's training in design is very evident here and I am reminded of the



needlework technique of reverse appliqué in which an upper layer of fabric is cut, turned under and stitched to reveal a simple shape in a different colour underneath. It is unclear whether the subject matter drove this new approach or whether Henderson's rethinking of composition led her towards these subjects. Either way, for me, the *Jerusalem* works are among her most striking and individual paintings.

There is also a strong design element to her large *Three Women of Jerusalem* (1956), with its supremely confident handling of colour. The three figures, their statuesque quality emphasised by the jars placed on their heads, are built up from abutting, simply shaped patches of colour to form a complex and satisfying composition.

Hubert Henderson died in 1963, leaving Louise utterly bereft. After a time and with encouragement from others, she found the strength to continue painting but her grief and the alteration in her life circumstances once again wrought a significant change in her work. The 41 *Elements* canvases that emerged from this new situation see a re-engagement with New Zealand landscape but now using the vocabulary and techniques of gestural abstraction. Less analytical than her earlier works, they are characterised by great swathes of paint, transparent washes of colour and forms blurring into one another. She played with texture too: *Sullen Sea and Sky* (1965) seems to have grit embedded in the paint; in *Untitled, Elements* (c.1965) the weave of the canvas is very visible in places, while in *Untitled, Elements* (1964) there are dribbles, obvious brushstrokes and irregular horizontal scratches.

Her focus then moved from the wider landscape to a more intimate exploration of the New Zealand bush, including the environment immediately around her newly extended studio. In her *Bush Series*, the brushwork is still fluid but describes clearly recognisable forms, predominantly in deep greens, although some works are enlivened by flashes of white and light yellow. *December 26th* (1970), with its two dark-skinned women enjoying a post-Christmas siesta in verdant surroundings, harks back in subject matter to *Two Maori Matrons* and *Samoan Woman in Yellow* (1954) and, once again, there is the sense of women quietly enjoying one another's company.

In 1963 Henderson had designed for the New Zealand Room of the Hong Kong Hilton a six-metre-long woollen mural, a complex patchwork of tufted carpet in vivid colours.⁴ Following the *Bush Series* she adapted this technique to a new series of paintings. The approach is similar to her earlier abstracts but the shapes are more various and organic, the colour richer and more intense. In contrast to the almost somnolent greenness of the *Bush Series*, works such as *Urewera Series* (c.1976) and *Garden* (1977) are bold, dynamic and exuberant. A later painting using a similar 'patchwork' approach is *Suddenly a Lake Appeared Among the Trees* (1991) in which the exquisitely subtle browns, golds and greys of tree trunks are counterpointed by the startling blue of the unexpected lake. This was a work I returned to again and again



and was intrigued to read that Henderson had painted it with her left hand following a mild stroke. She was nearing the end of her life yet this painting conveys her continuing delight in her experience of the natural world.

The exhibition concludes on an extraordinary high note—*The Twelve Months* (1987). These huge canvases, roughly 2.5 x 1.5 metres, were painted in a single year when the artist was in her mid-eighties. She wrote: 'Big pictures are extremely interesting and very demanding. I wanted to do them big because I hadn't done this before. I want to keep doing what I haven't done. Stretch myself to the limits.'⁵ She varied colour, forms and composition and, in places, the way she applied paint to convey a sense of how she experienced each month in her adopted country: the chill of winter skies in *June* and *July*, the harvest moon at the end of autumn, the sparkle and fresh colours of spring in *September* and the activity and festive colours at Christmas time.⁶

The making of *The Twelve Months* was not simply an impressive physical feat by a petite and elderly woman, though it certainly was that. As Felicity Milburn writes: '*The Twelve Months* compellingly asserts her talent, but also demonstrates her willingness to assess and engage the true strengths of her practice, harnessing the clear-eyed analysis of cubism, the expressive potential of colour and the finely calibrated harmonies of design.'⁷

The exhibition focuses primarily on Henderson's career as a painter over more than six decades, although her designs for an altar mosaic and stained-glass windows⁸ are included, as is a video which looks at her wider oeuvre. It is accompanied by a handsome book, rich in archival material and excellent reproductions, together with a selection of informative essays. For the most part the texts do not follow the linear thread of the exhibition but expand on and contextualise various aspects of her work. They include an essay by Linda Tyler on Henderson's textiles and Maria Lluïsa Faxedas' 'In Pursuit of Universality' which positions Henderson



(left) Louise Henderson in front of the New Zealand Room mural, Wellington, 1963
(Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Photographer unknown)
(below) LOUISE HENDERSON *Sullen Sea and Sky* 1965
Acrylic on board, 910 x 1530 mm.
(Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, purchased 1965)
(right) LOUISE HENDERSON *September* 1987
Oil on canvas, 2535 x 1535 mm.
(Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the McKegg Family, 1999)

in the international context of modernist abstraction by women artists. As Faxedas notes, increasing attention has been paid in recent years to these artists (and, indeed, to other older women artists) and this acknowledgement of Henderson's place in New Zealand's art history is timely. *Louise Henderson: From Life* not only makes the breadth of Henderson's work better known than previously but also contributes significant scholarship to our understanding of her practice.

1. Louise Henderson, interview with Nicholas Gresson, *Art News*, 9 October 1992, pp. 7–9, cited in Felicity Milburn, Lara Strongman and

Julia Waite, *Louise Henderson: From Life*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki & Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Auckland & Christchurch 2019, p. 232.
2. Weeks was by then based in Auckland but had studied overseas, including with the cubist painter André Lhote in Paris.
3. She was the first living artist to have a solo exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery (*Louise Henderson: Pastels, Paintings and Drawings*, 1953) and Colin McCahon included her in several significant exhibitions including *Object and Image* (1954, along with Ross Fraser, Kase Jackson, Milan Mrkusich, Michael Nicholson, John Weeks and McCahon himself), *Unit 2* (1955) and *Three Abstract Painters* (Henderson, McCahon and Kase Jackson, 1959). Francis Pound later wrote that her 'contribution to New Zealand Modernism in its formative moments was fundamental' (Francis Pound, 'Louise Henderson: The Cubist Years: 1946–58', *Art New Zealand* 61, Summer 1991–92, p. 67).
4. The work is represented in the exhibition by a photograph.
5. Louise Henderson, letter to Elizabeth Grierson, 4 December 1988, quoted in Elizabeth Grierson, 'The Art of Louise Henderson', unpublished Master's thesis, University of Auckland, 1990, cited in *Louise Henderson From Life*, p. 149.
6. Two of the works—*April* and *August*—are not included. *April* was thought to be missing, but was recently discovered hanging at Mt Albert Grammar School (see http://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=12308381). *August* was reduced in size after being damaged while in the care of a dealer. In the Auckland presentation their absence is subtly but effectively alluded to by empty spaces where they would otherwise have hung.
7. Felicity Milburn, 'I follow Unruly Nature', *Louise Henderson: From Life*, p. 152.
8. The mosaic was commissioned for the Church of St Joseph, Otahuhu, the windows, depicting St Peter and St Paul, for the Church of the Holy Cross, Henderson. She also designed a crucifix for the latter, a rare foray into sculpture.







Who was Christopher Perkins?

Reflections on a Recent Exhibition

LEONARD BELL

All through the decade of our growing up, the black cloud of Nazi-ism had hung over Europe . . . Yet there was a dreamlike quality about those stories, as though they had happened long ago as well as far away. There was not only a great distance between us and Europe, but a time-span incomprehensible today.

Ruth Park (1992)¹

Looking for a New Country: Christopher Perkins in New Zealand offered an array of 30 or so paintings and drawings never before seen together and new for many viewers: portraits, Maori subjects, landscapes and cityscapes, scenes from urban life (a road gang, café, beach) and domestic life (homework), plus reproductions of the lost major oil paintings, *Brickworks: Silverstream* and *Activity on the Wharf*. There were a few well-known pieces, such as *Taranaki*, *Meditation* and *Maori Meeting*, although

Looking for a New Country: Christopher Perkins in New Zealand
Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, 6 November 2019–22 March
curated by Christina Barton & Lachlan Taylor

most of Perkins' New Zealand works, especially his accomplished drawings, have not had a public life here.² Wall texts and captions made good use of quotations from his and others' writings in an exhibition that enabled a comprehensive view of the range and variety of his work in New Zealand.

The English artist Christopher Perkins lived in New Zealand from 1929–33. Schooled at London's Slade School of Fine Art, where his fellow students included prominent artists such as Paul Nash, Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer and David Bomberg, he was recruited to teach at the Wellington Technical College. According to a close friend, Perkins envisaged New Zealand 'in his enthusiasm as a temperate version of Gauguin's Tahiti . . . [with] a vigorous native art. It was something of a shock therefore when he discovered on his arrival a strip of Victorian England [with] a native art concealed for the most part in dark museums and little appreciated by the white inhabitants.'³ When his teaching contract expired in 1931, Perkins and family shifted to Rotorua and then returned to England at the end of 1933.

(opposite) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Self-Portrait* 1954
Oil on panel, 349 x 270 mm.
(Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki)
(below) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Taranaki* 1931
Oil on canvas, 508 x 914 mm.
(Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1968)

Earlier that year Perkins, alone, spent three successful months in Sydney. Numerous important portrait commissions came his way and his exhibition at the Macquarie Gallery was described as 'the most striking "one-man" exhibition for some time'.⁴ His new realist painting, informed by the post-impressionists, especially Cézanne, attracted strong comment, both negative and positive. In New Zealand, too, it generated some controversy—too modern, it seems—in a prevailing conservative cultural climate. *Art in New Zealand's* September 1931 issue featured a lead article by Professor Robertson of Victoria University College extolling the qualities and modernity of Perkins' works. They 'advanced our local art much more than a single generation . . . making us conscious of ourselves as a nation'⁵—a somewhat grandiose claim. Eighteen of Perkins' paintings and drawings, with four in colour, were reproduced and dominated the issue. Robertson's essay was also published in the catalogue of Perkins' one-man exhibition of 23 oils and 29 drawings held at Kirkcaldie & Stains department store in 1931, not, as initially planned, at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, the primary exhibiting venue for Wellington's small art world.

While Perkins did exhibit at Academy shows, his daughter Jane later noted that 'the parting of the ways' between her father and established Wellington painters took place early and that he was 'somewhat isolated' in the capital; perhaps not helped by his 'attitude of intellectual exclusiveness due to their firm conviction that they were in some unspecified way "different"'.⁶ Perkins, however, inhabited a small circle

of ardent supporters. Besides Robertson, it included Ivan Sutherland, who taught psychology at Victoria University College, Harry Tombs (the publisher and founder of *Art in New Zealand*) and the dancer Madeline Vyner, who had worked with the Ballets Russes in Europe and was also an artist. Perkins exhibited elsewhere; in 1932 with the self-consciously progressive The Group (four oils, three drawings) and the 1933 Society of New Zealand Artists (six oils, six drawings) in Christchurch, as well as at the Otago Society of Arts. In 1933 he considered applying for a vacant lectureship at Auckland's Elam School, but decided against doing so because he did not fancy his daughter marrying in New Zealand.

Eric McCormick, reflecting on the country's art scene in the 1930s in his *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940), observed that little of any note was going on. He regarded T.A. McCormack as the most accomplished artist, and mentioned briefly the impact and influence of Perkins during his short stay.⁷ Few of Perkins' paintings and drawings remained in New Zealand after he departed; none in public collections. He disappears until his resurrection in Hamish Keith and Gordon H. Brown's seminal *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting* (1969), the first major publication in this country's fledgling art history. A chapter is devoted to Perkins, by which time the Auckland City Art Gallery had acquired in 1967–68 six of his major New Zealand paintings, through the detective work and persistence of Keith. Five came from Perkins himself and one, the soon famous *Taranaki* (1931), from an American advertising executive, Michael Stiver, then residing in Cannes. Stiver, like Perkins, had lived briefly in Wellington (1930–33), until his multinational employer J. Walter Thompson & Co. closed its branch there as a result of the Great Depression. Brown and Keith observed that 'the qualities that mark [Perkins'] work are those that dominated New Zealand painting for the next





twenty years' and that while other factors contributed to this stylistic direction, Perkins demonstrated 'more than any other painter of the thirties that New Zealand painting could be an actuality, and that New Zealand landscape could be painted for its own sake alone and not merely as a pale reflection of some other place'.⁸ Subsequently *Taranaki* came to be seen as the local acme of the modern, the most important of his works here. An icon of 'New Zealand-ness', it allegedly visualised qualities distinctive and essential to the country's culture and society—for instance, the primacy of agricultural production, the hard light and

the consequential hard-edged rendering of forms. *Taranaki*, along with the artist's *Frozen Flame* (1931; acquired by the Auckland City Art Gallery a little earlier, in 1961), have been characterised as symbols of national identity. That conception of Perkins' New Zealand work has maintained a tenacious hold.

In short: a Christopher Perkins was constructed, dare I say invented (that overused word), to suit the purposes of various cultural moments. He became a legendary rather than actual figure. A few of his works—primarily landscapes—received a lot of attention and framed how his art was generally

(opposite) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Portrait of Professor P.W. Robertson* 1930
Oil on canvas, 520 x 425 mm.
(Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, purchased 2013)
(right) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Portrait of Nancy Webber* 1937
Conté on paper, 346 x 240 mm.
(Sutherland Family Collection)

characterised and where it fitted into New Zealand's art/history. The city and industrial scenes, social genre drawings and portraiture, his primary foci here, were either overlooked or not known about by art writers attuned to a culturally nationalist perspective. His Maori subjects generated ambivalent responses. For instance, Brown and Keith did not regard *A Maori Meeting* as a successful work.⁹ In contrast, this exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery reveals the wide range of Perkins' interests and subjects, so generally setting the record, such as it is known, straight. In the gallery's setting, Perkins' portraits commanded space: those of Annette Stiver in stunning red and craggy-featured Professor von Zedlitz almost bounce off the walls. Portraits of his close friends Robertson and Ivan Sutherland are near-living presences, while his portrait drawings of women friends, such as Stiver and Nancy Webber, their faces filling the frame, their gazes interrogating the viewer, exert an assertive impact.

Looking for a New Country: so what did Perkins find here? Daughter Jane wrote in 1986 that

our first impressions of Wellington City were also rather depressing. Because we had all lived in places where permanence and long history were taken for granted it was the rawness and flimsiness of the place that struck us most forcibly. Wellington . . . still had the air of a frontier town, and a frontier town, moreover, grown rather shabby and down-at-heel. No one seemed to care what it looked like, and a curious greyness pervaded even the main shopping streets.¹⁰

Perkins was more upbeat in his essay, 'Arrival', in *Art in New Zealand*:

[A] new land discovered by a Zeelander and by me: a new heaven and a new earth . . . Kelburn Observatory. Twenty-first wonder of the world . . . Enough, I have finished arriving. Confound it, why do you ask me to write about Art for your magazine. You can see that I am a theatre of war within and can't speak of the horrors there.¹¹

Witty, flippant, ironic, Perkins managed to ruffle a few feathers with his reviews of New Zealand Academy of Art shows in the same magazine, besides 'putting a cat among the pigeons' with his own art. His lost, un-picturesque paintings, *Silverstream: Brickworks* and *Activity on the Wharf*, featuring the urban and industrial in a modernist-informed manner, offended the sensibilities of those who favoured rural landscapes, beautiful and picturesque.

Disenchanted with England, Perkins landed in Wellington full of zeal:

This is a new country. It will produce a new race which will eventually have its own school of art. I look upon my task in New Zealand to sow the seeds of this new vision [which] will help me turn the stark facts of this country, such as the tin dairy shed, into a unit of living design . . . No dulcet nostalgia for the softness of old England must stop us using what we have before our eyes as it is and why it is.¹²



Such rhetoric contributed to the later mythologising of Perkins as the harbinger of a new mode of progressive, formalist neo-realist picture-making that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and held a strong sway until at least the early 1970s. In this scheme of things it is Perkins' rural landscapes, especially *Taranaki*—sharp-edged, the light as hard, or more so, than that in the south of France—that take pride of position.

But Perkins was not a New Zealand artist and his art was not really rooted in the soil. Nor did his style equate with some New Zealand distinctiveness. The portraits belong to a European pedigree. They echo a range of 1920s portraitists in Britain: Anne Estelle Rice, James Cowie, Meredith Frampton and Gerald Brocklebank, for instance. There are German connections too; Perkins was once offered a job at UFA film studio in Berlin, and his portrait of Professor von Zedlitz eerily brings to mind the work of Otto Dix. While living in St Tropez and its environs from 1923 through to 1927, Perkins was impressed by the art of Gleizes, Leger, Matisse and Kisling and there are traces of their impact in various of his paintings and drawings. Perkins had a keen interest in Japanese and Chinese art—Hokusai's *Mount Fuji* (c.1830) is behind *Taranaki*. Invited to contribute a piece about himself for *Art in Australia* by editor Sydney Ure Smith in early 1933, Perkins wrote, with admiration, that 'the Egyptians, Greeks, Tang Chinese and Florentines produced art of universal and permanent appeal. Their roots in natural law seemed simpler and deeper.'¹³ That is, Perkins was a cultural internationalist.



In the period between the wars, Perkins was nomadic and unsettled. He was a short-time visitor here, an émigré, unsure whether to stay or go. He recalled his time in St Tropez, where he felt that 'London now seemed repulsive and provincial. Here we lead an ideal life',¹⁴ while from Rotorua he wrote that 'Australia seems impressive and I look forward to going there. But it does not do to plan too far ahead these days. . . . It is impossible to return to England under the present state of things.'¹⁵ Yet by early 1934 he was back there, his fare paid by his father. Sudden changes in direction marked his interwar life—not unusual among those who survived World War I. Perkins was one of those arty British people from upper-middle and middle-class backgrounds, who led vaguely bohemian, unconventional lives in various parts of Europe, notably Paris, the south of France, Italy, Berlin, Spain (until and even during the 1936–39 civil war). Some of them, besides the Perkins family, found their way to New Zealand. For instance, artist and writer Margaret Jepson (married name Birkinshaw), here from 1930–46, was the author of the novel *Via Panama* (1934), the story of a boatload of immigrants from Europe to New Zealand.¹⁶ One of her characters claimed fewer talented people travelled to New Zealand than any other country in the world and that those of talent in New Zealand left as soon as possible. During the war years English writer and artist Anna Kavan, writer Greville Texidor and playwright and pacifist Ian Hamilton pursued their irregular lives here, temporarily for Kavan and Texidor.

Those who were New Zealand-born and members of the same socio-cultural milieu in Wellington as Perkins, were generally disaffected from mainstream society. Robertson, who was especially close to the Perkins family, was not only a chemistry professor, but also a polymath, intensely engaged with philosophy, metaphysics and Chinese and Japanese, besides European, art. He considered New Zealand

a culturally impoverished country and shifted to England when he retired. Perkins' friends, the Pharazyns, regarded the Soviet Union as the promised land—until they went there. Ivan Sutherland, later Professor of Philosophy at Canterbury University College, deplored the inequities and disadvantages that many Maori experienced. His book *The Maori Situation* was published by Harry Tombs in 1935. In 1952 he died tragically by his own hand.¹⁷

Perkins too was well aware of the social and economic difficulties that many Maori faced. Seen from this perspective, his Maori pictures take on ambiguous and latently unsettling inflections. His *Maori Meeting*, for instance, has a Gauguinesque dimension, although filtered, perhaps, through Charles Strickland, the English artist protagonist and stand-in for Gauguin, in Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919). In this novel, Maugham's character, alienated from English society, seeks existential redemption in Tahiti, but remains disillusioned. Perkins, too, in the interwar period, was often out of step with prevailing sentiments. Consider his reflections in 1929:

But I saw, too, a painting, bareheaded, in Wanganui, which thrilled me, of a woman feeding a *tapu* chief. Not easily to be seen—they would not hang it in their model 'art' gallery, because, they say, Lindauer used photographs. Clever chap; hardest thing to do. Ask Utrillo [extremely alienated]. That was modern and/or ancient art, no matter by whom or how.¹⁸

After Perkins returned to England he had a well-praised show of New Zealand and Australian scenes, plus portraits, at London's Wildenstein Gallery in 1935. Thereafter he made his living primarily through portraiture—not surprising, given the outstanding examples in *Looking for a New Country*. His daughter Jane noted that it was often said that Perkins' best work was done in New Zealand. She felt that that was an overstatement, even if he 'responded to the challenge of initially feeling that he was among the chosen few called upon to bring light into cultural darkness'!¹⁹ Perkins himself had a level-headed view of his own work and career. In a valedictory poem (reproduced on the wall in the Adam show) he reflected:

Now I am old I cannot make the grade . . . the genuine genius touch / Was never mine . . . It's pure sophistry / To say that every soul has the power to make / Original art if given the means and will.

He was not a self-mythologiser and may well have been surprised at the high status his work attained in New Zealand from the late 1960s. Indeed he could be very hard on himself—for instance, in a letter to Hamish Keith in 1966 he wrote, 'I am not in the least an original artist . . . I am very tame and academic when at home.'²⁰ That, however, is an understatement.

Where should Perkins be placed in the art historiographical canon? The Adam Art Gallery's presentation was balanced. The exhibition does not exaggerate his stature or fit him into that largely fictional central genealogy of landscape painting in New Zealand, one in which, for instance, Charles

(opposite) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS

Portrait of Professor George William von Zedlitz. First Professor of Modern Languages 1902–1915 1933

Oil on canvas, 822 x 725 mm.

(Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection)

(right) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Road Gang* 1931

Graphite & ink on paper, 378 x 266 mm.

(Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, gift of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, 1936)

(below) CHRISTOPHER PERKINS *Maori Meeting* 1932–34

Oil on canvas, 914 x 1829 mm.

(Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1967)

Heaphy and John Buchanan in the mid-nineteenth century, Perkins and Rita Angus in the 1930s, and Don Binney and others in the 1960s are all linked together as visualisers of some essence of New Zealand.²¹

The show reveals Perkins as a marginal figure in any narrative of New Zealand art history, although this marginality facilitates a new and refreshing perspective on what was happening in art here in the 1930s. In detaching Perkins from his previous narrow characterisation, *Looking for a New Country* amplifies the range and qualities of his other works. They now await further scholarly excavation.²²

1. Ruth Park, *A Fence Around the Cuckoo* [first published 1992], Text Publishing, Melbourne 2015, p. 309.

2. In 1998 John Gow organised a show at John Leech Gallery in Remuera, made up of 16 oils and 26 drawings from Jane Garrett's collection in England. I didn't see the show. Nor, I guiltily confess, did I even know that the show took place.

3. Professor J.W. Robertson, 'The Art of Christopher Perkins', *Art in New Zealand*, vol. 4, no. 13, September 1931, p. 9.

4. 'Christopher Perkins: Some Striking Pictures', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1933.

5. Robertson, op. cit., p. 21.

6. Jane Garrett, *An Artist's Daughter: With Christopher Perkins in New Zealand 1929–34* [sic], Shoal Bay Press, Auckland 1986, p. 68.

7. Eric McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington 1940, p. 192.

8. Gordon H. Brown & Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, Collins, Auckland 1969, p. 128.

9. Ibid.

10. Garrett, op. cit., p. 29.

11. Christopher Perkins, 'Arrival', *Art in New Zealand*, vol. 2, no. 2, September 1929, p. 13.



12. Address at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, 1929, cited in the Adam Art Gallery exhibition.

13. Christopher Perkins, 'The story of Christopher Perkins', *Art in Australia*, 1933, 3rd series, no. 48, September 1931, p. 37.

14. Ibid., p. 34.

15. Ibid., p. 37.

16. Margaret Birkinshaw (née Jepson) was the mother of the English novelist Fay Weldon. Fay (born 1931) and her sister, Jane, feature in Rita Angus' double portrait painted in Christchurch (1938).

17. For Ivan Sutherland, see Oliver Sutherland, *Paikea: The Life of I.L.G. Sutherland*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch 2013.

18. Perkins, 'Arrival', p. 15.

19. Garrett, op. cit., p. 103.

20. Christopher Perkins in a letter to Hamish Keith, 27 December 1966, Perkins' artist's file, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery.

21. In his *Letters and Art in New Zealand* Eric McCormick linked Heaphy and Perkins. Heaphy's *Mt Egmont from the Southward* (1840) and Perkins' *Taranaki* were reproduced on the same page.

22. To date there has been one thesis on Perkins in New Zealand: Eily Lawton, 'Christopher Perkins: The New Zealand Years', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1975.





Len Lye: Motion Composer

A Report from Museum Tinguely

PAUL BROBBEL

In 1966 Len Lye and the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely were included in *Directions in Kinetic Sculpture* at Berkeley Art Museum, an exhibition that signalled that the medium of kinetic art was beyond its halcyon days of the early 1960s. *Artforum* editor Philip Leider dismissed the Eurocentric movement, noting ‘the measure of our technological age is more accurately taken in a Warhol soup can than in all the kinetic sculpture from here to Dusseldorf’.¹ Leider singled out Lye as the single artist ‘who seems to transcend all the confusion . . . utterly beyond the petty limitations of the other artists in the exhibition’.² A similar point would be stressed the following year by the critic Clement Greenberg dismissing pop art, land art, op art and kinetic art as ‘Novelty art’.³

The Berkeley exhibition closed a period during which Lye and Tinguely’s work intersected regularly on their very different approaches to kinetic art. Both featured together in a number of exhibitions, starting even before Lye’s 1958 turn to sculpture with Parisian gallerist Denise René including Lye’s experimental films in support of the 1955 exhibition, *Le Mouvement*. The seminal *Bewogen Beweging* (*Moving Movement*) curated by Pontus Hultén in 1961 included Lye’s *Fountain* as part of a large survey of kinetic art travelling from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,

to Stockholm’s Moderna Museet and Copenhagen’s Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

Leider’s criticism of kinetic artists (almost *en masse*) came six years on from perhaps the movement’s most infamous moment, Tinguely’s performance of the self-destroying sculpture *Homage to New York* in the Museum of Modern Art’s sculpture garden on 17 March 1960. Len Lye followed Tinguely just a year later on 5 April 1961 with his own evening performance at MoMA. *An Evening of Tangible Motion Sculpture* would serve as a public unveiling of a suite of sculptures developed by Lye over the previous two years. The *New York Post* described *Homage to New York* as a ‘gargantuan mess of a machine’, observing Tinguely’s chaotic, Dada-esque critique of technology, while Lye’s choreographed and sensual figures of motion were considered ‘uplifting . . . a gift of radiance to the human spirit’ by the same reviewer.⁴

Nearly 60 years on we have a reunion for the two artists and their differing approaches to kinetics with Museum Tinguely presenting *Len Lye: Motion Composer* (23 October 2019–26 January 2020). Located in Basel, Switzerland, the Mario Botta-designed Museum opened in 1996 and presents a permanent collection of Tinguely’s work alongside a programme of sympathetic modern and contemporary artists that have recently included Stephen Cripps, Wim Delvoye and Rebecca Horn.

(opposite) *Len Lye: Motion Composer* at Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland, October 2019

(Photograph: Nicolas Lieber)

(right) LEN LYE *Sky Snake* 1965 (2019 reconstruction)

Stainless steel & electric motor, 6000 mm. in height

(Photograph: Evan Webb)

(below) LEN LYE *Grass* 1965

Stainless steel, wood & electric motor, 914 x 905 x 216 mm.

(Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

(Photograph: Paul Brobbel)

International survey exhibitions have been relatively frequent since 2000 for Lye when both the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney and the Pompidou Centre in Paris presented substantial projects with respective touring in Australia and Europe. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne produced the most substantial effort to date in 2009, notable for a number of newly reconstructed sculptures and a very thorough presentation of paintings and archival materials. Birmingham's Ikon Gallery delivered the UK's first true survey of Lye in 2010 while the Drawing Center in New York in 2013 presented Lye *sans* sculpture.

Museum Tinguely's effort is the largest showing of Lye's work ever mounted in the Northern Hemisphere and although containing fewer objects than ACMI's landmark exhibition, the approach to sculpture and film produces an overall larger affair with eleven of Lye's tangible motion sculptures and 29 film works—a selection that reinforces these two formats dominating Lye's story.

The sculpture selected by curator and museum vice-director Andres Pardey presents a more historically attuned group of works than is usual in the Southern Hemisphere, with three vintage pieces loaned from American museums. Only a handful of Lye's tangibles were collected by museums in his adopted United States, partly undesirable due to kinetic sculpture being difficult to maintain but also on account of Lye's sometimes cantankerous attitude towards museum professionals. In 1963 his dealer, Howard Wise, successfully secured a place for Lye's *Loop* in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and it appears in *Motion Composer*, newly conserved by the Len Lye Foundation and on display for the first time in nearly five decades.

Loop is an earlier version of the well-known *Universe* but without the heft. It offers the viewer who knows the latter a rare experience of seeing Lye's work *descale*. Of course, most visitors to the exhibition will be seeing these works for the first time. In the case of *Grass* (1966, on loan from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and recently conserved by the Len Lye Foundation), it does not drastically depart from the larger example familiar to those in New Zealand yet it delights with a more audible clash in its swaying wires. A restored *Fountain* (1959) from the Whitney Museum of American Art completes the vintage trio and marks *Motion Composer* as a rare assembly of all currently operating Lye sculptures in American collections.

A new reconstruction by the Len Lye Foundation adds a further element to the historicity in this display



of kinetics. Similar in operation to Lye's *Twister*, familiar to many as an element in *A Flip and Two Twisters* (1977), *Sky Snake* spins a 4.5-metre length of ball chain from a ceiling-mounted motor. The figures of motion have a shimmering and elegant quality closer to the flicker of *Moonbead* or the flashes of Lye's scratch film than the more weighty presence of *A Flip and Two Twisters*.

Sky Snake has been an obscurity with Lye's 1965 original archived in the Len Lye Foundation collection at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. *Motion Composer* offered the opportunity to reconstruct the work for exhibition and adds a further historical facet to the show, performing publicly for the first time since *Bounding Steel Sculptures* at Howard Wise's New York gallery in 1965. That exhibition was a concluding counterpart to *An Evening of Tangible Motion Sculpture*,





demonstrating Lye's sculpture with programmed control systems. *Motion Composer* featured all five of the sculptures from the 1965 exhibition except the logistically challenging *A Flip and Two Twisters*.

The approach to Lye's filmmaking in the exhibition can be said to be exhaustive with the *de rigueur* Lye film work featured beside a handful of lesser-known latter-period experimental pieces such as *Ariel's Song* (1953) and *Prime Time* (1958). Perhaps the most curious inclusion was a corner reserved for Lye's wartime propaganda films for the Realist Film Unit (rarely seen as a complete body of work) alongside the truly obscure *Mad About Money* (1937), a British-made comedy musical featuring special effects by Lye.

Film and sculpture substantially bookend any reading of Lye but Museum Tinguely has presented the space in between with the most comprehensive view of Lye's practice yet seen in Europe. Early works like the batik *Polynesian Connection* (1928)

and the direct-carved marble *Unit* (1925) recall Lye's involvement with the Seven and Five Society and remind us how quickly he settled into the British vanguard, but also stress Lye's atypical modernist origins in the South Pacific. The latter point is reinforced with the inclusion of Lye's *Hei-Tiki* (1922) and a generous consideration of his two 1920s sketchbooks—both on display and readable via digital touch screens—in which sketches of Maori, Aboriginal Australian, African and Pacific artworks accompany transcriptions of Sigmund Freud's *Totem und Tabu*, the vorticism manifesto and illustrations of works by Mikhail Larionov, Fernand Léger and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

The inclusion of 40 examples of Lye's automatic drawing exercises reinforces Lye's 'old brain' theory and its proximity to surrealism. One room over and Lye's colourful 1930s abstract animations are accompanied by several batiks and the paintings *King of Plants Meets First Man* and *Snowbirds Making Snow*. These two paintings were part of Lye's contribution to British surrealism and, here with three associated photographs, represent his contribution to the 1936 London International Surrealist exhibition *in toto*.

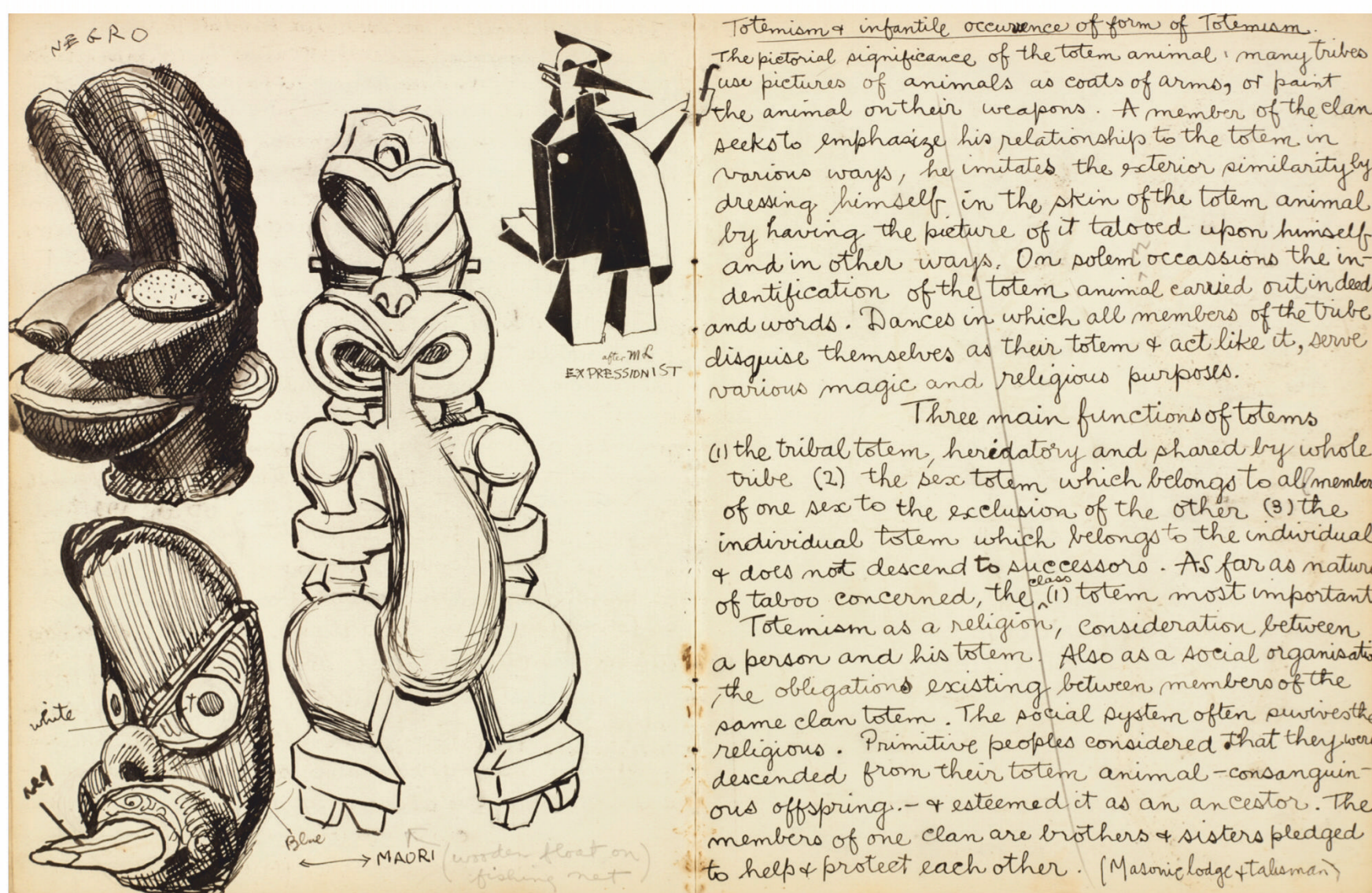
Museum Tinguely accompanies the exhibition with a three-volume catalogue. The first offers nine essays; the second is a hefty illustrated compendium



(above) *Len Lye: Motion Composer* at Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland, October 2019
(Photograph: Nicolas Lieber)

(left) *Len Lye: Motion Composer* at Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland, October 2019
(Photograph: Paul Brobbel)

(right) LEN LYE 'Totem und Tabu' sketchbook 1920s
(Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Len Lye Centre)



of the works in *Motion Composer*. While the catalogue reprints a couple of recent and enlightening texts from other publications, by Ann Stephen (University of Sydney) and Scott Anthony (Cambridge University), it is an opportunity to hear from writers covering Lye for the first time.

Lye's paintings, particularly the overlooked works from the 1970s (two of which feature in the exhibition), are discussed by New York critic Barry Schwabsky. Artist Janine Randerson addresses the environmental aspects of Lye's monumental sculpture projects such as *Universe Walk* and the *Temple Project*, represented in the exhibition through models and drawings. Curator of Contemporary Maori and Indigenous art at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Megan Tamati-Quennell discusses Lye's engagement with Maori art in his brief period of artistic activity in Aotearoa. The latter essay is a long-overdue text and crucial in the context of this project with Museum Tinguely using the third volume of the exhibition catalogue to reprint Lye's *Totem und Tabu* sketchbook in its entirety.

A day after opening celebrations the University of Basel hosted a two-day symposium in support of the exhibition. Film and sculpture dominated the presentations and among these, the most enlightening presentation was Alla Gadassik's (Emily Carr University) consideration of labour in Lye's hand-made film techniques.⁵ Beyond film and sculpture, Ann Stephen's presentation concerned Lye's engagement with Aboriginal Australia and Polynesia in his first film *Tusalava* (1929) and his sketchbooks. This phase of Lye's career remains one of the most obscure and rewarding for consideration and Stephen's close scrutiny here provided some crucial

clarification on the chronology of Lye's *Totem und Tabu* sketchbook.

Tamati-Quennell spoke the following day on Lye's engagement with Maori, carefully placing the conversation away from Lye and on the taonga embodied in Lye's early work and that taonga's whakapapa. While Rangihiroa Panoho's critique of Gordon Walters on the charge of appropriation in the 1991 *Headlands* catalogue has not quite loomed over Lye in recent decades, the recent flare-up around Theo Schoon reminds us that Lye's relationship with indigenous cultures has yet to be critically addressed.⁶ For a mostly young European audience unfamiliar with Lye and perhaps equally or more unfamiliar with the indigenous cultures of the Pacific, Tamati-Quennell's approach signalled that Museum Tinguely's exhibition will introduce Europe to some of the Len Lye they have missed, but equally set some groundwork for the future.

1. Philip Leider, 'Kinetic Sculpture at Berkeley', *Artforum*, May 1966, vol. 4, no. 9, p. 44.

2. Ibid.

3. Clement Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture' (1967) in John O'Brian (ed.), *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, p. 252.

4. Bennett Schiff, 'In the Art Galleries', *New York Post*, 16 April 1961.

5. Alla Gadassik, 'Twenty-Four Signatures per Second: Direct Animation and Gestural Repetition' in Scott MacKenzie and Janine Marchessault (eds), *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal 2019, pp. 21-39.

6. Rangihiroa Panoho, 'Maori: At the Centre, On the Margins', in Mary Barr (ed.) *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1992, pp. 123-34; and Lana Lopesi, 'The debate over Theo Schoon, who built his career on the backs of Maori artists', *The Spinoff*, 8 August 2019, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/art/08-08-2019/the-debate-over-theo-schoon-who-built-his-career-on-the-backs-of-maori-artists/>.



Out of this World

Len Lye and the Quicksilver Collaboration

RICHARD WOLFE

The Seven and Five Society was a London-based group of seven painters and five sculptors established in 1919 with the initial aim of encouraging traditional approaches to art. It held annual exhibitions from 1920 until 1935, and over time became more modernist in outlook. At the twelfth exhibition, at the Leicester Galleries in February 1933, the reviewer for *The Times* identified Frances Hodgkins as the artist who had ‘made the most satisfactory terms between the subconscious and conscious powers involved in painting’, praising two of her entries as ‘excellent pictures’. Showing alongside Hodgkins was another New Zealander, Len Lye (1901–1980), who had arrived in London in 1926 after living for several years in Samoa and Australia. He exhibited regularly with the Society from 1927 until 1934, and on this occasion the reviewer noted only: ‘Mr. Len Lye is a good joker’, before going on to record that Henry Moore was represented by hieroglyphics of the human figure ‘which are worth a deal of study’.¹ Such a brief comment on Lye’s contribution was not unusual; the same newspaper’s review of the Society’s eighth exhibition in 1928 had noted merely that the same artist was showing ‘some toys’.² But the report on the ninth exhibition, in 1929, was more enlightening, acknowledging Lye’s long-standing interest in indigenous cultures and suggesting that his ‘African-looking textiles’—which were in fact batiks—‘should suit bucolic interiors’.³

Anne Kirker has identified the origins of Lye’s contact with the Seven and Five Society to a number of his sculptures, among them a wooden tiki, which he had brought from Australia. These items were seen and admired by sculptor Frank Dobson, and eventually led to his introduction to Ben Nicholson, who had joined the group in 1924.⁴

Also showing in the 1933 Seven and Five Society exhibition was British painter John Aldridge (1905–1983), who received a modest mention for his painting *Sunday Afternoon*. Lye may have met Aldridge at an earlier Society exhibition, and in the early 1930s the pair began a collaboration with Basil Taylor (1902–1935), formerly a costume designer for the Sadler’s Wells Company, to produce a science-fiction ballet. Lye was the driving force behind this ambitious concept which they hoped would be presented both on stage and in film. Originally titled ‘Life Under the Sea’, it soon became known as the *Quicksilver* project.

The original stimulus for the project was Lye’s friend, the Australian contemporary music composer Jack Elitt, who had produced sound effects that evoked rocket travel to the moon. Another member of the London artistic community to which Lye belonged, American-born poet Laura Riding, suggested the theme would lend itself to a fantastical musical comedy. As explained by Lye’s biographer Roger Horrocks, the idea appealed to Lye, who was becoming increasingly interested in the creative possibilities of film-making. A science-fiction story, as proposed, would suit the colour film stocks

(opposite) LEN LYE *Untitled (Life under the sea)* c.1930

Oil on canvas, 354 x 460 mm.

(Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand)

(right) LEN LYE *Suggested Costume for Quicksilver* c.1932

Oil on board, gouache & silver foil collage, 510 x 360 mm.

(Private collection)

(below) JOHN ALDRIDGE, LEN LYE & BASIL TAYLOR *Untitled* 1930s

Gouache on paper, 333 x 384 mm.

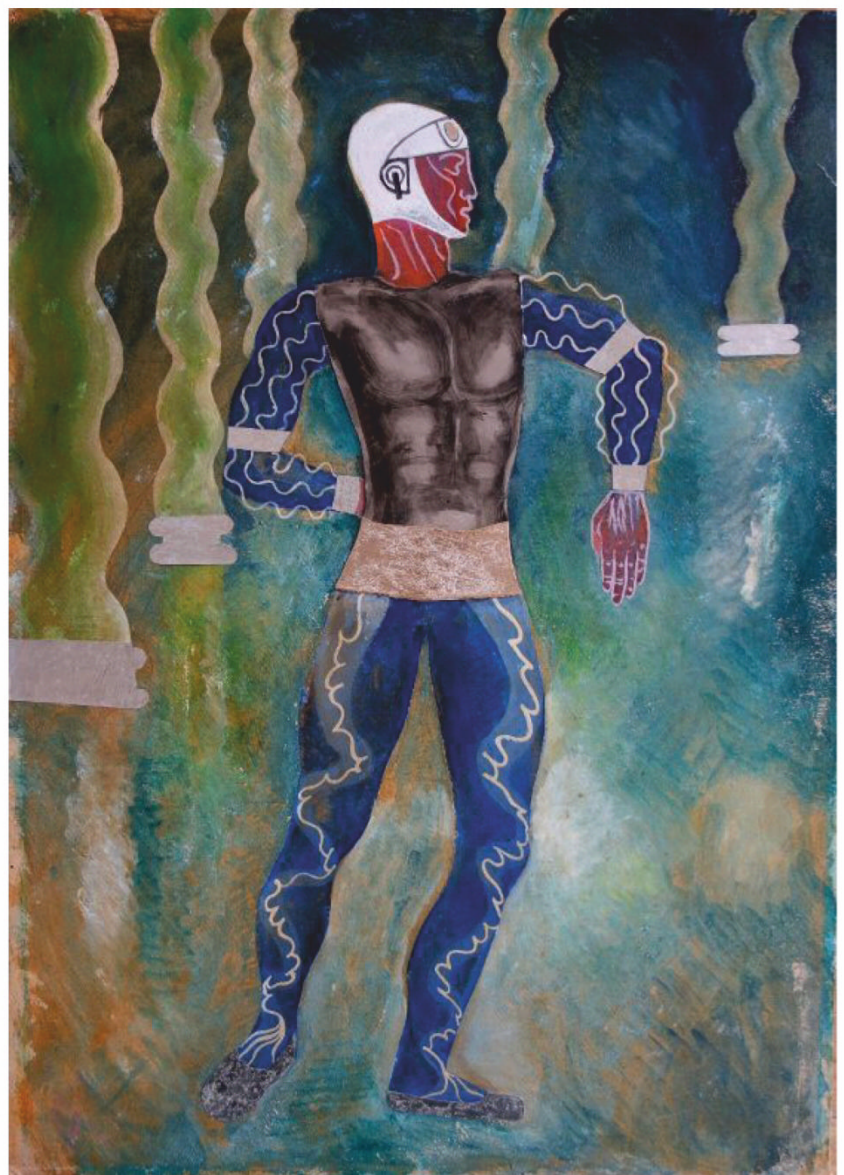
(Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery)

then available, and provide him with ample opportunity to experiment with visual effects.⁵ He therefore persuaded Aldridge and Taylor to help prepare a portfolio of sketches which would be used to promote the project and, hopefully, attract financial backing for its full realisation.

Over the next four years the trio produced a number of scripts and over 68 costume and set designs as they sought the necessary funding.⁶ But those were the early days of the Great Depression and hardly conducive to undertaking such an extravagant project, so the much-needed financial support was not forthcoming. Nevertheless, some of the *Quicksilver* works were shown in public in 1933, when included in an exhibition by Aldridge at the Leicester Galleries. He was subsequently selected to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1934, and when he died, in 1983, many of the original *Quicksilver* works were in his estate. A number were titled and inscribed verso in Lye's hand, and a selection formed the basis of a 2014 exhibition at the Whangarei Art Museum.⁷

The *Quicksilver* project reflected the three collaborators' engagement with the new world of surrealism. Encompassing themes from undersea to outer space, it suggested the imaginative range of Jules Verne's classic *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). More recently, Scott Pothen has suggested that the project anticipated, by nearly four decades, the Beatles' song 'Yellow Submarine', David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' and Elton John and Bernie Taupin's 'Rocket Man'.⁸

The resulting *Quicksilver* portfolio contained preliminary sketches as well as fully developed images. In general they were characterised by strong colours and their rapid execution, no doubt to convey the excitement and drama of the proposed production. There was a dominant marine theme throughout, hardly surprising in view of Lye's own background. At the age of six he and his family lived for a period in the Cape Campbell lighthouse, south-east of Blenheim. Here he experienced at first hand the typically wild seas and sudden storms associated with Cook Strait. He described his home environment as a 'marine Garden of Eden',⁹ where seaweed, rock pools, shells and driftwood on the foreshore were part of everyday life. These early marine observations had already made an impact, in Lye's c.1930 oil painting *Untitled (Life under the sea)*, depicting a community of highly colourful amoeba-like denizens of the deep engaged in a biomorphic ballet. This painting, which also came from the estate of John Aldridge,¹⁰ displays Lye's penchant for surrealism, and in 1936 he would be included in the landmark International Surrealist



Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, London, alongside Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Joan Miró and others. Lye's experimentation with surrealist forms was extended in the *Quicksilver* project, encompassing elements of marine life—shells, anemones and coral—along with cloud formations and more otherworldly meteorological effects, plus the unlikely juxtaposition of a rocket ship and a submarine.

The main image in the sequence, the costume for the leading character, *Quicksilver*, depicted the cosmic voyager clad in a metallic bodice with blue arms and leggings with what appeared to be electrical wiring attached, all topped by an equally modernist helmet. Perhaps there was an autobiographical element, for British painter Julian Trevelyan had described Lye as 'like a man from Mars who saw everything from a





very different viewpoint'.¹¹ But outer space was hardly a new idea for Lye; the rocket ship was a theme he had used previously in several of his batiks.¹²

In another image a figure reclined on a cloud, adrift beneath the moon in an azure sky and accompanied by an assortment of objects strangely suspended in the stratosphere. They included a suitably surrealist alarm clock (showing two o'clock), a toothbrush and tube of toothpaste, along with a reference to Lye's tribal art interests in the form of a wooden club from the Pacific.

The marine influence was also apparent in several of the costumes; one, for a female performer, was another and obvious memory of the Pacific, consisting largely of strategically positioned seashells.

Otherwise, performers were almost entirely engulfed in outfits inspired by monsters of the deep, such as the pastel-coloured translucency of a jellyfish and anemone, and a five-legged white-spotted red starfish.

Arguably the most imaginative was a giant orange lobster, pre-dating by a few years one of the best-known and more outrageous surrealist objects, Salvador Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* of 1936.

Quicksilver was also the common name for a chemical element, mercury, so perhaps this rocket man's mission was to the planet of the same name, the smallest and innermost in our solar system. His launch vehicle had a glazed upper section which revealed its sole and tightly confined occupant; as John and Taupin's own *Rocketman* would later observe, 'It's lonely out in space'. And perhaps the cylindrical form of the rocket owed something to the lighthouse of Lye's youth. The same projectile reappeared in another image within a swirling vortex, while back on earth was the ominous profile of a submarine surfacing on a polychromatic sea. But perhaps the most spectacular of all the images in this



sequence was that of the submarine, with a pair of whales in attendance, entering an Arctic inlet, where the welcoming committee included a colony of curious seals.

Following the failure of *Quicksilver* to gain traction, Lye immersed himself in other projects, including a three-minute black-and-white film *Peanut Vendor*, in which a home-made monkey puppet danced to a piece of popular jazz music. Lye had hoped that this completed film would lead to his obtaining sponsorship to produce a series of musical shorts or advertising films, but these aspirations also came to nought. As summarised by Horrocks, Lye was a 'non-stop innovator who lacked the right sort of support group'.¹³ The chief problem was that film-making demanded complex equipment and big budgets, but the ever-resourceful Lye would find a solution. He now began making films by working directly on clear strips of celluloid, scratching and painting images using lacquer pigments. In so doing he continued to draw on his knowledge of tribal art, such as patterns of Pacific tapa cloth. One such early film production, on this occasion a collaboration with Jack Elitt who provided the music, applied a surreal mood to further underwater imagery associated with Lye's memories of Cape Campbell and Samoan coral. This c.1935 film drew its title from six lines of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the first of which, 'Full fathom five thy father lies', would, a dozen years later, also provide the title for one of Jackson Pollock's first 'drip' paintings.

In 1937, with the unrealised *Quicksilver* project now well behind him, Len Lye once again came to the attention of *The Times*, on the occasion of the showing of a series of his films to members of the London Film Institute. The newspaper described the presentation as 'a most interesting and comprehensive survey of the work of an original and inquiring mind', and hailed Lye as 'a poet and a creator'. The reviewer noted that the beat and rhythm of the soundtrack music and the kaleidoscopic effects on the screen combined to produce a 'strangely hypnotic effect'. In acknowledging the film-maker's interest in tribal art, this writer also wondered 'how the negro, with his



great love of rhythm, would react to this strangely forceful expression of it'.¹⁴

1. 'Art Exhibition/Leicester Galleries', *The Times*, 8 February 1933.
2. 'Beaux Arts Gallery', *The Times*, 17 February 1928.
3. 'Seven and Five Society', *The Times*, 8 March 1929.
4. Anne Kirker, 'The Early Years in London', *Art New Zealand* 17, 1980, pp. 48-49.
5. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, Auckland University Press, Auckland 2001, p. 129.
6. Scott Pothan, 'Len Lye: Lost in Space', exhibition publication, Whangarei Art Museum, Whangarei 2014, unpaginated.
7. *Lost in Space: Len Lye's Unfinished Science Fiction Quicksilver*, 24 February–20 April 2014, Whangarei Art Museum.
8. Pothan, op. cit.
9. Horrocks, op. cit., p. 13.
10. Information provided by Kevin O'Keeffe, 28 August 2019.
11. Horrocks, op. cit., p. 82.
12. Ibid., p. 129.
13. Ibid., p. 133.
14. 'Mr. Len Lye's Films/Experiments in Sound and Colour', *The Times*, 8 December 1937.

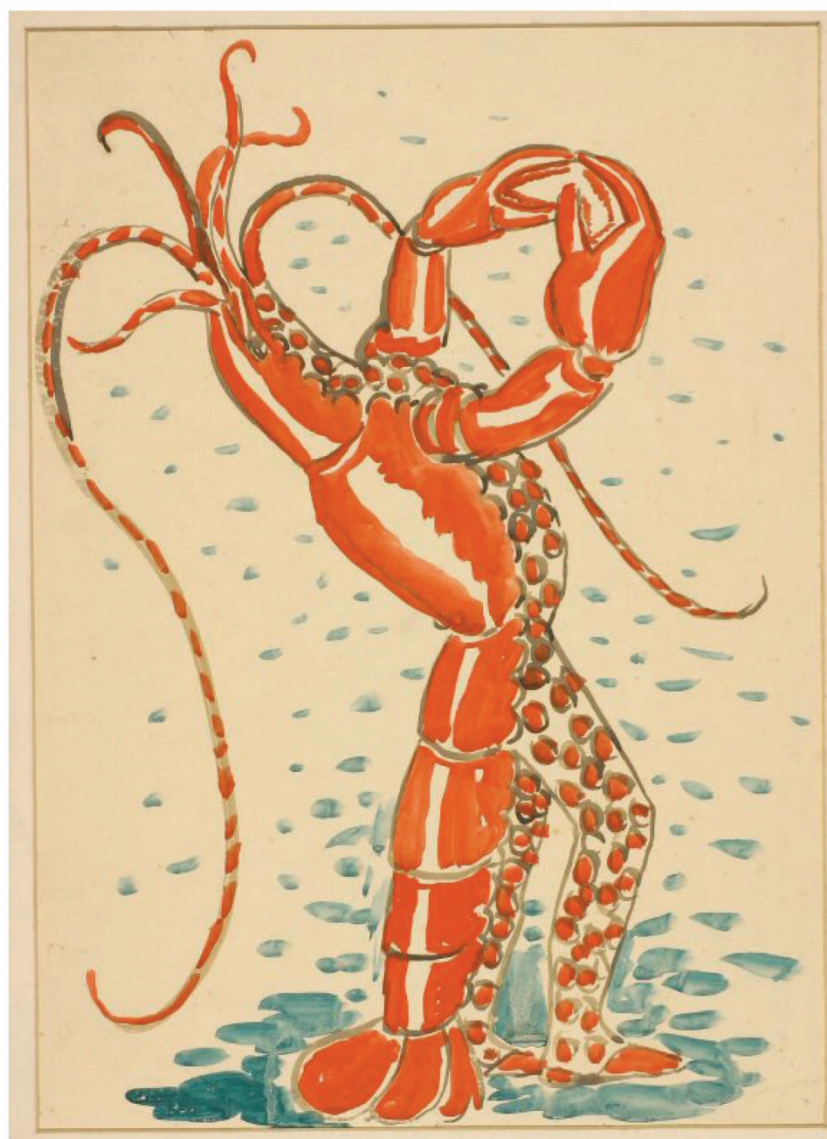
(opposite above left) LEN LYE (attributed) *Finale rocket. 1st Cabaret. Arrangement of sparks train, as Speedy ascends sky steps* 1930s
Watercolour & gouache, 335 x 450 mm.
(Private collection)

(opposite above right)
LEN LYE (attributed) *Discorama Anemone* 1930s
Watercolour 370 x 550 mm.
(Private collection)

(opposite below)
JOHN ALDRIDGE, LEN LYE & BASIL TAYLOR *Untitled* 1930s
Gouache on board, 373 x 550 mm.
(Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery)

(above)
JOHN ALDRIDGE, LEN LYE & BASIL TAYLOR *Untitled* 1930s
Gouache on board, paper, 310 x 368 mm.
(Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery)

(right) JOHN ALDRIDGE, LEN LYE & BASIL TAYLOR
The Conceited Lobster 1930s
Gouache on board, 490 x 350 mm.
(Len Lye Foundation Collection, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery)





Ambitious & Diverse

Sympathetic Resonance at The Suter

JASMINE GALLAGHER

Sympathetic Resonance is a diverse group show and the eighth in a series of contemporary art projects at The Suter Art Gallery in Nelson since 1999. Designed by curator Sarah McClintock to ‘deconstruct the hierarchies which tether art to people, material, place and time’, *Sympathetic Resonance* includes a collection of works that reject labels often applied to artistic practices like that of being a painter or sculptor and Western cultural binaries like artist and audience, male and female, individual and collective, form and function, landscape and portrait, past and future, mass culture and high culture and so on. The metaphor of two tuning forks is used to articulate how the individual artworks relate to each other, and in the exhibition catalogue this is explained further: ‘These two objects are attuned to each other and the manipulation of one affects the other without physical intervention. Their connection is unseen but visceral . . . their meanings become entwined as they influence each other through their physical proximity.’

Sympathetic Resonance
The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatu, Nelson
19 October 2019–9 February 2020, curated by Sarah McClintock

However, this tuning fork metaphor is rather obscure and the common ideological thread of critique inherent to the works in *Sympathetic Resonance* (as a key theme of much contemporary art) might have been explained further to provide a clearer context for understanding the show as a whole.

Upon entering the gallery, via the side entrance, I was first drawn to a rainbow-coloured structure made of long sticks piled into a tall tapered shape and leaning on the wall next to a large sign reading ‘DEAR NELSON’. This was one aspect of Shannon Novak’s prominent contribution to the show, which is part of a wider long-term project that explores the experiences of the LGBTQI+ community in New Zealand, including a lack of acceptance that is severely affecting the health and wellbeing of its members. This Nelson iteration includes four interventions inside the gallery, with *Dear Nelson* consisting of community-driven work in association with Q-Youth, a Nelson-based organisation that provides support and advocacy for queer youth. An open letter of sorts to the town, *Dear Nelson* is also an ode to equal rights for the LGBTQI+ community, in the form of a hypothetical text conversation between ‘Nelson’ and a polyamorous admirer. This has been printed on paper and displayed alongside a range of black-and-white

(opposite) *Sympathetic Resonance* at The Suter Art Gallery October 2019, with works by Project 21 in foreground & Shannon Novak's *Dear Nelson* on rear wall
(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

(right)
MONIEK SCHRIJER *Mara Tranquillitatis—Sea Of Tranquillity* 2019
Cement clay, bronze, aluminium, stainless steel, cardboard, cork paint, leather, 9ct yellow gold, smoky quartz & patina, 350 x 270 x 80 mm.

(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

(below) KIRSTY LILLICO *Doomsday DÉCOR* 2019
Wool carpet, sisal rope, twine & dye, 2200 x 1550 mm.
(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

photographs of androgynous or gender-fluid young lovers smoking cigarettes, embracing and lounging around together in poses and outfits that suggest a BDSM kink. There is also an overhead projector casting questions and phrases on the wall written by Q-Youth and a little whiteboard and pen available for the public to write messages in response, which had several of encouragement and welcoming on it when I was in the gallery. Underneath 'SIMMERING' is spray-painted, adding to the edginess of the photographs and sexual connotations of the works displayed above. However, Novak extends this theme into a range of brighter works in all the colours of the rainbow—a symbol of LGBTQI+ pride—including the aforementioned structure made of sticks and an intervention on the ceiling-to-floor glass window at the main entrance of the gallery titled *Safe Space*, inspired by a stained-glass window, *The River of Life*, at Nelson Cathedral.

The collective approach to making art and the idea of being part of a larger project is also reflected in the works of Project 21: a group of three Nelson jewellers including Katie Pascoe, Kay van Dyk and Joel Fitzwell. This trio collaborated over seven months to exhibit a different body of work each month in various venues across Nelson, including shop windows, bookstores and other galleries. In giving power to each other in the development of these resulting objects, and by showing in various different places over time, these artists challenge the boundaries of the singular artist or exhibition. The distinction between jewellery (as an object made for sale and to be worn) and contemporary art is also questioned in this part of the show, because these objects are reminiscent of jewellery, yet rather ambiguous. This can be seen in the materials, including metals, pearls, string and crystals, which have been used to make precious little things that look like they could be worn, such as a brooch, necklace, earring and even a glove. However, they are displayed in unusual ways, including being applied to a brightly painted part of the wall and as part of a larger installation on the floor, where the carpet has been removed to reveal the concrete underneath.

Gemstones are also present in the work *Surface Studies*, by another jeweller, Moniek Schrijer. However, these are in the more familiar form of framed paintings hung on a wall, like landscapes seen from above, such as from in an airplane or via satellite. Representing remote environs manipulated by



geological forces to create glistening lakes or craters, desert mineral pools or wetland oases, and inspired by dynamic places like The Pink and White Terraces





and the smouldering hydrothermal landscape of Dallol, Ethiopia, each of these five works has a distinct character of its own. This is achieved through the use of an individual palette for each, including

deep green, candyfloss pink, amber, light emerald and black, as well as a range of different materials, including hair-like textiles such as lambskin and fake fur, gemstones like greenstone and rose quartz, as well



(opposite above) EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Fancy Goods* 2018–19
Mixed media, including oil on linen, custom PVC packages, inkjet
prints on backlit film & readymade light boxes
(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

(opposite below) *Sympathetic Resonance* at The Suter Art Gallery
October 2019, with Russ Flatt's *Remembering Forward* (2018)
(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

(below) RUTH THOMAS-EDMOND *Soft Thrum* 2019
Mixed media, dimensions variable
(Photograph: John Paul Pochin)

as clay, paint and various metals. Framed and hung in the traditional orientation of a portrait, the works in *Surface Studies* tease the distinction between landscape and portrait, ultimately giving human qualities to Schrijer's depiction of the non-human world. As a result, these geothermic pools peer back at the viewer like shining eyes.

Ruth Thomas-Edmond also embraces uncertainty in her sculptures, which are designed to disappear when the exhibition closes, rather than be stored for perpetuity like many works shown in or collected by galleries, museums, archives and libraries. The bases of her sculptures in *Soft Thrum* are cardboard boxes. These found biodegradable materials have been covered by a thick dripping layer of bright yellow or white glue, and are accompanied by similarly coloured paintings applied directly onto the wall. So, rather than being hung and then removed for storage, they are designed to be painted over again at the end of the exhibition. Similarly, Kirsty Lillico's large abstract carpet painting, or textile collage, is created from found materials: carpet offcuts. Bound to the

wall, but dropping down onto the floor, *Doomsday DÉCOR* speaks to the notion of textile art having been considered a craft of the home or hobby, rather than a serious fine art, thus disrupting another hierarchy of the art world, this time one that is tied closely to issues of domesticity and gender.

An attention to the discarded is also present in Emily Hartley-Skudder's *Fancy Goods*. Here the plastic waste created in contemporary society is represented by 64 small paintings of plastic objects. However, these are in fact a set of eight commissioned works of art painted by Chinese artists, each one repeated eight times. While this method of production might seem at first to be out of kilter with what we expect from an artist, *Fancy Goods* alludes to a long history of collaborative art-making that has been hidden by the cult of the artist as an individual genius. With each painting packed in a clear plastic case and hung on a hook, alongside illuminated versions of each painting on a small advertising-like light box in the centre, *Fancy Goods* poses as mass-produced consumer goods, thus blurring the distinction between fine art and mass culture.

Warwick Freeman's *Plinth* ties in with the theme of disrupting art-world hierarchies too, as his contribution to the show is in the form of something that is usually designed for the utilitarian purpose of displaying art objects, rather than being a work of art itself. However, leaning precariously, this Flintstone-like basalt and tin plinth does not really look as though it could hold anything up safely. And in this instance, it is not supposed to. A sense of instability



is likewise present in Ana Iti's untitled language-based work made of Matauri Bay clay. Applied directly onto the white wall, the pale clay-stencilled text is frustratingly difficult to read, but snippets are decipherable: 'WHAT REMAINS / WAS SAID / WHAT IS MEANT . . . A HANDPRINT . . . THE SILT . . . DRAWING A PATH . . .'. In a sense Iti's work is an erasure poem, and thus a metaphor for the sense of loss of te reo Maori due to colonialism. Attempting to read her stencilled text also alludes to the feelings of vulnerability and confusion we get when learning a new language, as many people are now doing in New Zealand with te reo.

This sense of vulnerability and recovery also lies at the heart of Russ Flatt's contribution *Remembering Forward*. These large portrait photographs of youths on the brink of adulthood are set outdoors, at what looks like dawn or dusk. However, other than this crepuscular feature, it is almost impossible to tell when these photographs were taken, because the teens are wearing a minimal and timeless form of dress and the photographs are set in natural surroundings that evade the characteristics of our contemporary world. As a result, *Remembering Forward* challenges the idea that photography can effectively capture a truthful moment in time and these works take on a sense of mystery that was historically more associated with

(below) SHANNON NOVAK *Safe Space* 2019

Transparent vinyl

(Photograph: Shannon Novak)

painting—a form of high art that has also often been seen as 'above' photography.

An engagement with temporality is also present in the contributions by three artists associated with The Physics Room in Christchurch—Daniel Shaskey, Phoebe Hinchliff and Luke Shaw—who all involve recording or documentation in their practice. When I visited the gallery it was Shaskey's *System to system* that was present, because new works made in response by Shaw and Hinchliff were staggered to show at different times afterwards. *System to system* consists of a text-based, chapterised work, printed and hanging on hooks like Hartley-Skudder's works. However, these are hanging on a black monolith, rather than the outer wall of the gallery, and they are also available for the viewer to take home and, if they like, return to the gallery at a later date to pick up the next chapter. This time-delayed method of distribution ties in well with the overall theme of The Physics Room's itinerant programme of partnering with various South Island galleries, and thus building relationships that branch out over space and time.



The Weight of Stuff



Hamish McLaren's Workshop Photographs

Is it possible to re-create a spirit from mere possessions? Hamish McLaren does not directly pose this question through his images of Auckland workshops, but it is unavoidable, the further down the rabbit hole one goes.

Sanctuary is a curious project—through the medium of large-format photography, the minutest details of discrete lives are brought to life, without actually showing those lives in question. Absent subjects are obliquely captured through their accretions, in a sort of slow-motion photography on the timescale of a human lifespan.

McLaren says the main idea behind the project is how these spaces can describe their owners in an intimate and personal way, without revealing them in the photographs. 'I think the spaces represent the people that inhabit the spaces as well as these types of individuals in general, the types that tinker with things, fix things themselves, people who have ingenuity.'

Without resorting to anything so dubious as Kirlian photography, McLaren nevertheless engages in paranormal activity, a sort of ghostbuster, deploying his camera in a way reminiscent of that movie's fabled ghost traps.

The first workroom certainly seems lived in. With its two grandfather clocks, square piano (c.1825), motorcycle and leather jacket, it is infused with the spirit of *Back to the Future* and perhaps even *Amadeus*. A particular marvel of this shot

is in the packing—just how did anyone get so much stuff into such a small place, if not by breaking some serious laws of physics?

The lair of a clockmaker lays bare an array of mankind's most torturous efforts to tease and probe Old Father Time. The detritus in this workroom is so orderly, one is reminded of those exploded diagrams of the internal workings of intricate machines, as epitomised by the photographs of Todd McLellan in his series, *Things Come Apart 2.0*.

The owner of another room is clearly highly attuned to patterns, to the exclusion of much else. Artfully placed towers of plastic containers and cardboard boxes rise precipitously, the attention to detail painfully palpable, though it is impossible to determine what it is that is being ordered.

In another, we find a lovingly restored Edison phonograph, and next to it, some wax cylinder records. This is without a doubt the most chilling of McLaren's set-ups; who knows how many lost souls are imprisoned within these nightmares on wax, awaiting the chance to release their warped, plaintive cry.

Floating above all these anonymous altars of focus, obsession, retreat, and forgetting, is one particular soul, of course. This is the photographer's grandfather, who passed away in 2017, and whose workshop was the inspiration for McLaren's Whitecliffe BFA graduation show, for which all these images were made.

MALCOLM BURGESS

(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 5* 2019
120mm negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1030 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 1* 2019
4x5" negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1280 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 2* 2019
4x5" negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1280 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 6* 2019
120mm negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1030 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 7* 2019
120mm negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1030 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 3* 2019
 120mm negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1030 mm.



(above) HAMISH McLAREN *Untitled 7* 2019
120mm negative, digital scan, inkjet print, 1030 x 1030 mm.



A Vital Record

The New Zealand Subjects of Anthony Stones

RICHARD WOLFE

In 1983, echoing Joni Mitchell's 'you don't know what you've got till it's gone',¹ *New Zealand Herald* reviewer T.J. McNamara observed: 'Sometimes one does not realise the extent of an artist's contribution until he has gone away.' The occasion was a retrospective exhibition by Anthony Stones (1934–2016), who had 'departed for fresh fields and pastures new'.² Stones had recently relocated to England, where he was born, to pursue his career as a sculptor. He subsequently undertook major commissions and received recognition both in the United Kingdom and, from the early 2000s, China. At the same time he continued to work on projects involving New Zealand subjects, which are the focus of this article.

Born in Glossop, North Derbyshire, Anthony Stones showed an early aptitude for drawing,³ and attended the Manchester Regional College of Art for a year. But his art education was terminated when his father, a dyer in a cotton mill, decided there were better prospects for his family in New Zealand. They emigrated in 1952, settling in Henderson, West Auckland, and for 16-year-old Stones the move was 'a crushing blow' to the new-found freedom he had enjoyed in the art-school environment.⁴ However, the Elam School of Fine Arts records that Cyril Anthony Stone [sic] did enrol as a part-time student in 1953 in four subjects: Common Objects [drawing], Lettering, Still Life, and Modelling.⁵

At first Stones undertook a succession of labouring jobs, but was soon meeting and mingling with local

writers and artists. In September 1957 he began an association with literary publication *Mate*, providing cover drawings and designs for the first 14 issues, from September 1957 to August 1966, and also acting as assistant editor to Robin Dudding for the 13 issues from December 1960 to May 1970. From the outset *Mate* published literary works by the likes of Frank Sargeson, R.A.K. Mason, Barry Crump, Kevin Ireland and Hone Tuwhare, all of whom would later become subjects for Stones' drawings and/or sculpted heads. His involvement with *Mate* ended after the May 1970 issue, and the following year one of his drawings was used to illustrate a story by Maurice Gee in *Landfall*.⁶ Dudding also left *Mate*, and in 1972 established *Islands*, which provided further opportunities for Stones; in 1974 his drawings accompanied contributions by writers Patricia Grace,⁷ Frank Sargeson⁸ and Janet Frame's 1984 tribute to Sargeson.⁹ The latter was a particularly important early influence for Stones, exemplifying the 'commitment to what was excellent'.¹⁰ In 1978 Stones would recall how he had considered Sargeson 'the most distinguished-looking person' he had ever met: 'I thought his brow magnificent and imagined modelling his head in clay.'¹¹

In addition to providing drawings for publication, Stones had begun exhibiting publicly. Two of the earliest recorded occasions were the Festival Exhibition at the Auckland Society of Arts in 1959 and the following year's Devonport Festival, by which time he was attending Auckland Teachers' College.¹² Four years later Stones joined what was then the NZBC

(opposite) Anthony Stones with his bronze head of C.K. Stead, based on an approximately life-size cement fondu head, c.1978. (Photograph: Dave Roberts. Courtesy C.K. Stead)

(right) ANTHONY STONES *R.A.K. Mason 1905–1971* c.1968
Bronze, 330 x 230 x 220 mm.
(Auckland Library Collection)

(below) Cover of *Mate* 9, May 1962 showing Anthony Stones' drawing *The Three Graces*

as a designer for television, at the Auckland studios of AKTV2, and by 1966 he had become a regular exhibitor at Moller's Gallery, then on Karangahape Road.

Since arriving in Auckland, Stones had been employed variously on the wharves, in a plaster factory and in vineyards, all of which provided opportunities for him both to observe fellow workers in action and develop an awareness of the human condition. An early public display of the results of those experiences was at Moller's Gallery in June 1966. At the time Stones' stated intention was to 'wake up people's minds to man's inhumanity to man', and whereas he had earlier felt the way to express this was through images of the horrors of war—as in the then current Vietnam conflict—he had now settled on interpretations of Christ's Passion as 'a better generalisation'.¹³ In a hint of things to come, a press release advised that the artist's primary interest was sculpture, and that some of the exhibited drawings were either 'studies or clarifications of ideas for future works'.¹⁴ To this end Stones commented that he would like to develop his drawings into relief panels and cast them in bronze but, he lamented, 'where do you get the money in Auckland to cast in bronze?'¹⁵ The collection drew favourable comments from T.J. McNamara, who described Stones as 'a splendidly competent and quick draughtsman for whom problems of form and foreshortening hold no terrors'. But while the drawings of the Crucifixion revealed 'a deep concern for suffering' and could develop into something 'very impressive' on a large scale, McNamara suggested that the collection in itself did not amount to 'a considerable body of work'. He felt Stones was at his best when his subject was 'part of the New Zealand scene', as was apparent here in his studies of plasterers and a crowd at a taxi rank.¹⁶

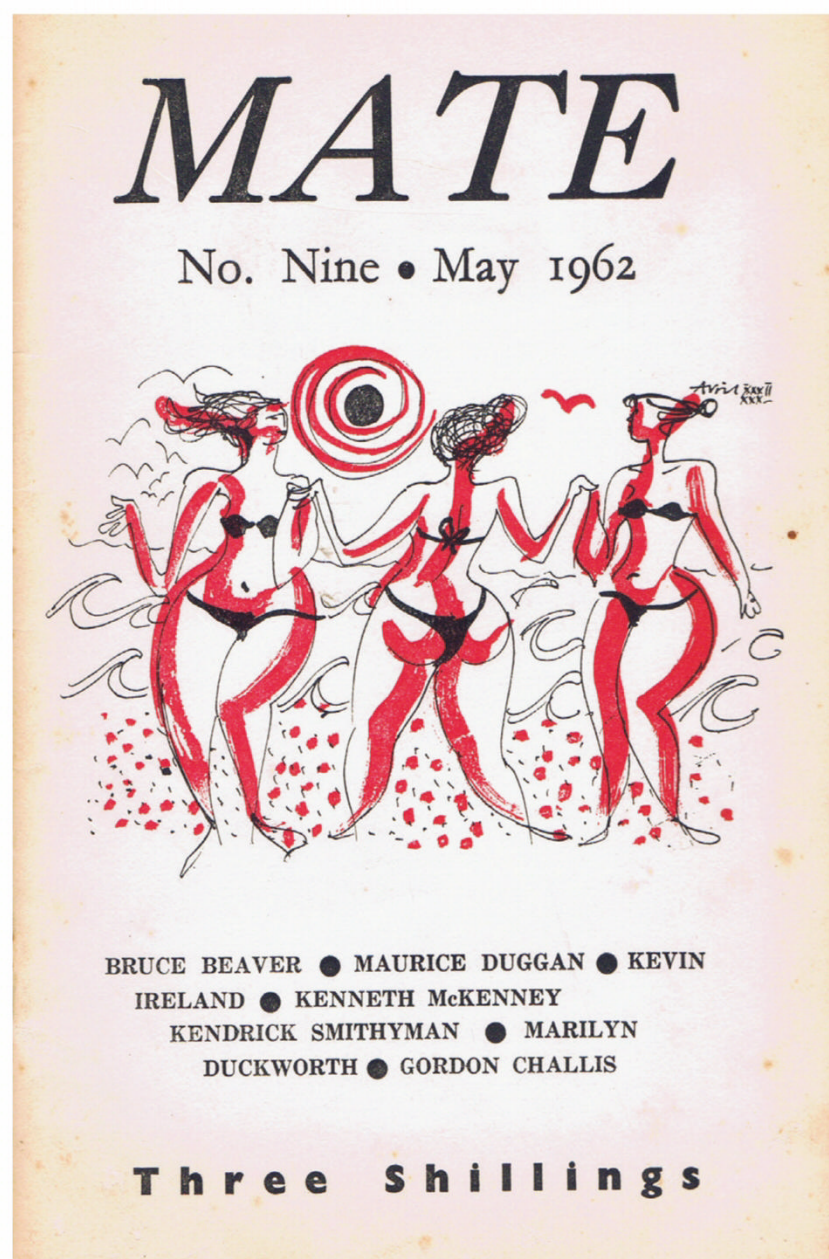
Similar sentiments were expressed on the occasion of Stones' next major exhibition, some 17 months later. His draughtsmanship and ability to capture the movement and atmosphere of a sly grog den or 'an old blind man and his cobbler', for example, received favourable comment. However, the overall impression was that he had not found his 'full expression' and did not match the achievement of Garth Tapper, another Auckland artist working in a similar area.¹⁷

No doubt for reasons of economy and saleability, Stones' exhibited work to date had been largely two-dimensional, consisting of drawings and paintings. But it was increasingly obvious that his main interest lay in sculpture, and this would be encouraged by critical responses to his work.

In 1968 the two watercolours he contributed to a group show at Moller's were described as 'slight' and reminiscent of the American Ashcan School, but they



did have 'an immediacy'.¹⁸ The following year the *Auckland Star* reviewer found an exhibition of Stones' drawings 'attractive' but with less impact than his





work in sculpture and suggested, presciently, that his heads of writers such as Hone Tuwhare and R.A.K. Mason would make ‘an impressive exhibition’.¹⁹

In 1970 T.J. McNamara could report that Stones had ‘found his true metier’. The occasion was his Auckland Festival exhibition, *Portrait sculptures and drawings*, at Moller’s. It included eight (male) heads in clay—among them writers R.A.K. Mason and Maurice Shadbolt, poet Hone Tuwhare and artist Colin McCahon—and one female portrait. It represented the first major display of Stones’ intention, revealed in 1978, of ‘building up a collection representing the foundation members of New Zealand literature and arts’.²⁰ The head of Mason, cast in bronze, was later presented to the Auckland Library by staff to mark the opening of the new building on 25 November 1971. Although McNamara considered the handling of the work in the 1970 exhibition ‘a little spotty’ in parts—a result of Stones’ distinctive technique of covering surfaces with small compressed spheres of clay—the heads were ‘all excellent likenesses’ while also portraying the character of the sitter. In all it was ‘a splendid collection’.²¹ However, *Auckland Star* reviewer Hamish Keith was less impressed, writing that ‘the show scratches only the surface of the sculptor’s raw material’, and that the heads lacked both ‘energy’ and ‘creative vitality’. Instead, Keith singled out two watercolours of Frank Sargeson, suggesting that if Stones were to carry over the vigour of these into his sculptured heads he would have ‘a great deal to offer’.²²

In time, Stones was able to realise his early aspiration to model a head of Frank Sargeson, which was cast in bronze in 1969. But when offered to the Takapuna City Council the following year, it was

declined, and Auckland City Art Gallery director Gil Docking was asked for an opinion. His view was that the head was ‘a strongly modelled work, which captured the personality of the sitter’.²³ Subsequently the sculpture did find a home in the Takapuna Library, thanks to \$300 subscribed by the public and the balance of the \$350 cost provided by the local City Council.²⁴ Another version of Stones’ Sargeson, cast in bronze in 1980, is in the collection of the National Library, Wellington, along with ten other heads by the same artist.²⁵

Apart from an exhibition of paintings and drawings in 1971—a collection which T.J. McNamara wrote ‘reveals talents and some weaknesses’²⁶—Stones had fewer exhibitions in the first half of the 1970s. But he was no less busy. In 1972 he, fellow artist Michael Smither and writer E.H. McCormick picketed the *Mediaeval Arts in France* exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery (December 1972–February 1973),²⁷ Stones believing that it had a political agenda, and was intended to mask French nuclear testing in the Pacific.²⁸ The following year Stones also took issue with Auckland City Art Gallery director Richard Teller Hirsch’s decision to purchase *Sappho*, a sculpture by Greek artist Aleko Kyriakos. In a letter published in the *Auckland Star*, Stones described the acquisition as ‘merely a commonplace example of modern decorative sculpture’ and ‘an insult to New Zealand sculpture’.²⁹

In the mid-1970s Stones recommenced his annual shows at Moller’s Gallery, among them 1978’s *Sculptures and Drawings*, another Festival exhibition. His drawings, which included workers in vineyards and sketches of ‘Mr Ordinary’,³⁰ were described by Gordon H. Brown as ‘good journeyman work’ and, once again, it was Stones’ sculpture that was singled out as best demonstrating his skills. His ability to combine natural forms with psychological insight was most evident in his bronze heads of R.A.K. Mason, Hone Tuwhare and Bill Pearson.³¹ On the other hand, T.J. McNamara recognised the head of Colin McCahon—now in the collection of the University of Auckland—as evidence of Stones’ ability to catch a likeness, while that of poet Allen Curnow displayed a sensitivity that went ‘beyond likeness’.³²

That Stones was now gaining a reputation was suggested by the fact that the works in the 1978 exhibition—which covered the period from 1955—included sculptures on loan from public institutions. And in addition to several new works there was a model for his sculpture of Lord Freyberg proposed for Auckland’s High Street,³³ presumably the 30-inch plaster model reproduced in the May 1978 issue of *Islands*.³⁴ T.J. McNamara urged his *Herald* readers to visit Stones’ 1978 exhibition and his soon-to-be-installed statue of Freyberg, all evidence of the sculptor’s ‘protean abilities’.³⁵

The Freyberg maquette was one of 13 of Stones’ sculptures reproduced in that issue of *Islands*, which now also included the head of novelist and poet C.K. Stead. In an accompanying article, Denys Trussell saw these works as standing apart from ‘the transient

(opposite) ANTHONY STONES *Lord Freyberg* 1981
Bronze, 2450 x 850 x 650 mm.

(right) ANTHONY STONES *Jean Batten* 1989
Bronze, 3000 x 1000 x 800 mm.
(Photograph: René & Peter van der Krogt
<http://statues.vanderkrogt.net>)

(below) ANTHONY STONES *Peter Fraser* 1989
Bronze, on Coromandel granite plinth, 2400 x 116 x 120 mm.
(Photograph: René & Peter van der Krogt
<http://statues.vanderkrogt.net>)

stylism of contemporary art' and having their ancestry in the ancient sculpture of Central America, the Mediterranean and Northern Africa. Stones had produced 'vital records' of a number of well-known New Zealanders; they were both 'representational and expressionistic' with the subjects' inner selves emerging 'through their everyday faces'. There were 'no inert facets or surfaces' on these portrait heads, and Freyberg's great-coated back was as revealing of character as the details of his face. Trussell noted New Zealand's preoccupation with landscape and that in the depiction of character we were 'still naive', a deficiency Stones was now rectifying.³⁶

Stones was working in what Gordon H. Brown called a 'conservative' form,³⁷ and in late 1970 his portrait head of painter Ted Smyth was described as 'strongly modelled . . . if a little archaic in its approach'.³⁸ Stones' realism was out of step with the more fashionable modernism and abstraction; it was a time when much was changing within the world of sculpture and how it was being taught. At Elam, following the retirement of John F. Kavanagh as head of sculpture in 1968 and his replacement by Jim Allen, the modelling of portrait heads in clay was no longer a central part of the course. New techniques and materials were introduced, and performance was now an important part of the new emerging post-object art. Perhaps it was just such developments that Stones had in mind when speaking at the opening of the exhibition *John F. Kavanagh: Sculptor* at the Auckland City Art Gallery, in late 1979. He noted that those were 'bewildering and barbarous times' and Kavanagh had continued to work in the midst of this 'contemporary chaos'. This was represented by one of his sculptures, *Tanith*, 'a lyric poem in bronze' which did not acknowledge any 'current trend or style'.³⁹ This adherence to portrait sculpture was no doubt responsible for Kavanagh and Stones receiving the barest of mentions in Michael Dunn's 2008 history of New Zealand sculpture. Described as 'an isolated figure . . . unsympathetic to modernist sculpture', Kavanagh was credited with influencing a number of practitioners, notably Stones, who is said to have studied portraiture with him in the late 1950s. Stones however received less recognition here, apart from two of his public commissions, *Lord Freyberg* (1981) and *Jean Batten* (1989).⁴⁰

In September 1979, Stones' exhibition, *Recent Portrait Sculptures and Water-Colours*, at Moller's, Queen Street, received a generally unenthusiastic review from Gordon H. Brown, who felt that the modelled heads suffered from unsympathetic



lighting.⁴¹ However, the artist's skills were apparent in his survey show of drawings and paintings in 1982, when two portrait busts reportedly demonstrated his 'unfailing ability to catch a likeness'.⁴² Stones' next exhibition was not as usual at Moller's (which, after 23



(below) ANTHONY STONES *Early Settlers Memorial, Nelson* 2000
Bronze, 2000 x 1600 x 800 mm.

years, would close in August 1984) but at Whitecliffe Galleries in Parnell, which began business in October 1981. But by the time Stones' exhibition had opened, on 21 March 1983, he had probably already left for England. On show were 60 works, almost all portraits or figurative subjects, including writers James K. Baxter, Allen Curnow and artist E. Mervyn Taylor, while others reflected Stones' early years in New Zealand: studies of axemen, vineyard workers, a plasterer with a bucket, a newspaper seller, people in Ponsonby Road and a young itinerant in Queen Street.⁴³

In February 1983, after almost two decades of service, including five as head of design for TV2, the 49-year-old Stones resigned from TVNZ, now determined to make his living as a portrait sculptor in England. As he told the *Listener*: 'the odds of getting commissions are much better where there are 60 million people rather than just three'.⁴⁴ Before long he was established in Oxfordshire, and could report that in late 1983 he was anticipating displaying 13 heads of New Zealand writers at New Zealand House, London, and thereafter in the new library at Exeter University.⁴⁵

In 1989, eight years after Freyberg, Stones was able to realise two more major public projects back in New

Zealand. He described the first, of aviator Jean Batten at Auckland International Airport, as one of his most interesting challenges; there not being many precedents for commemorative statues of women, apart from Queen Victoria. His figure of Batten was constructed after studying photographs of his subject from the archive of the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon, England, film clips from the National Film Unit archives, and resources from the Turnbull Library and New Zealand newspapers.⁴⁶ Stones took a model of his proposal with him on one of his return visits to New Zealand,⁴⁷ and the finished statue was unveiled on 5 October 1989.⁴⁸ It was shortly followed by Stones' memorial to Peter Fraser, prime minister from 1940 to 1949. Located in front of Old Government Buildings, Wellington and unveiled in early 1990, it depicted a stooped Fraser, as if leaning into the Wellington wind, who was seen to reflect the qualities of 'decency, modesty, and integrity, as well as that of hard work' that the Labour leader championed.⁴⁹

In early 1990 the United Kingdom was in recession and Stones reported that 'work of our kind [is] difficult to come by'. He was grateful for having secured the commission to sculpt seven slightly larger-than-life Pacific navigators for the New Zealand display at the Seville Expo in 1992. He was well placed for the preliminary research—'the Oxford libraries have everything one needs'—while he also drew on



the resources of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. But when it came to the actual modelling of the figures, Stones had a struggle to prevent the clay freezing overnight from the Oxfordshire cold.⁵⁰ Following Expo, in late 1994 the seven statues were included in *Familiar Faces*, an exhibition of Stones' work at the Southland Museum and Art Gallery. Reviewing the event, Janet Wilson described Stones' Cook as 'imperial, with legs astride, impeccably clad in tricorne hat, knickerbockers and swashbuckling flared coat', alongside Kupe ('naked, muscles bulging, intensely staring'), the Spaniard De Quiros ('imperiously arrogant') and Magellan ('majestic despite his buckled leg').⁵¹ Two years later the seven statues, of resin, bronze paint and iron, were gifted by the New Zealand Expo Commission to Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand.

Further to the Cook which now languishes in storage at Te Papa, Stones produced two other versions, in bronze. One was presented by Scottish-born businessman Sir Arthur Weller to the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, in 1994, and was on display until around 2009 when removed due to building work.⁵² The other version of Stones' Cook was commissioned by the Gisborne District Council, and in 1994 was placed near the mouth of the Turanganui River, marking where Cook and his men came ashore in October 1769. The statue has been subjected to vandalism and opposition from local iwi, and in July 2019 it was announced that it would be removed and relocated to the Tairāwhiti museum by the end of the year.⁵³

A version of another of Stone's navigators, Dutchman Abel Tasman, has also been the subject of some controversy. Commissioned by the Abel Tasman Statue Trust, it was gifted to the people of Nelson from Dutch descendants who have made the region their home, and since early 2000 has stood at Tahunanui Beach, looking out to Tasman Bay. But in recent years concerns have been raised by local iwi as to whether it is there legally and is an accurate portrayal of local history.⁵⁴ Less controversial has been Stones' other sculptural commission in Nelson, his meticulously detailed *Early Settlers Memorial* (2000) on Wakefield Quay, depicting a young migrant family arriving in the settlement around 1842.

February 1996 saw the unveiling in Henderson of another of Stones' sculptures, *The Pioneer Winemaker*, standing over a barrel and carrying a spade and a sack over his shoulder. Stones noted that much of his youth was 'invested' in that part of Auckland, where he had worked in vineyards and alongside 'old timers' who had been on the gumfields.⁵⁵ He would later write of Henderson in the 1950s: 'There was a kind of marvellous innocence about it. And there was a stunning variety . . . It was full of Yugoslavs, Lebanese, Irish—you name it.'⁵⁶

In Britain, Stones was awarded a number of significant commissions and, among other achievements, became president of the British Portrait Sculptors Association (1999–2004). In the 2000s he lived increasingly in China with his wife,

palaeontologist Lily Feng, where his sculpting commissions included a series of seven larger-than-life bronze statues of *The Running Man* for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Following his death in 2016, Stones' strong links with China were marked by a retrospective of some 200 sculptures and paintings held at the National Art Museum, Beijing.⁵⁷

Having spent some 30 years in New Zealand, Anthony Stones surely qualifies as our most successful expatriate sculptor. In this country he is remembered both as a pioneering designer for television, and the creator of a number of major civic sculptures as well as a unique and valuable record of our leading writers and artists.

1. Joni Mitchell, 'Big Yellow Taxi', 1970.
2. T.J. McNamara, 'Picture of What NZ Has Lost', review of Anthony Stones exhibition *People and Places*, Whitecliffe Galleries, Auckland, 21 March–1 April 1983, *New Zealand Herald*, 28 March 1983.
3. Jacqueline Amoamo, 'Artist in Profile', *NZ Listener*, 7 February 1969.
4. Marcia Russell, 'Tony Stones: A Lot Ploughed In', *NZ Listener*, 22 January 1983.
5. 'Terms and check lists of Elam students, 1950- onwards [item 90-039], Records of the Elam School of Fine Arts, MSS & Archives FA 2012/08.
6. Maurice Gee, 'The hole in the window', *Landfall* 100, December 1971, p. 424.
7. Patricia Grace, 'Between Earth and Sky', *Islands*, vol. 3, no. 1, Autumn 1974, p. 10.
8. Frank Sargeson, 'Brixton', *Islands*, vol. 3, no. 1, Autumn 1974, p. 94.
9. Janet Frame, 'A Last Letter to Frank Sargeson', *Islands*, New Series, vol. 1, no. 1, July 1984, pp. 19, 21.
10. Marcia Russell, op. cit.
11. Anthony Stones, 'The Temptation of St Oedipus', *Islands* 21, vol. 6, no. 3, March 1978, pp. 324–26.
12. Anthony Stones, handwritten note, personal details provided for catalogue, *New Zealand Painting and Sculpture Exhibition*, 1960, Artist's file, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.
13. 'Man behind TV design', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June 1966.
14. Typed biographical notes, Moller's Gallery, 17 May 1966, Records of the Elam School of Fine Arts, MSS & Archives FA 2009/1 Beverley Simmons research papers 1/17.
15. 'Man behind TV design', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June 1966.
16. T.J. McNamara, 'Works Show Potential', *New Zealand Herald*, 17 June 1966.
17. T.J. McNamara, 'Main Aim An Outburst of Colour', review of exhibition by Anthony Stones at Moller's Gallery, Karangahape Road, *New Zealand Herald*, 28 November 1967.
18. Gordon H. Brown, 'New Gallery Show is Diverse, Impressive', *Auckland Star*, 27 November 1968.
19. R. Horrocks, 'Attractive drawings by Anthony Stones', *Auckland Star*, 27 February 1969.
20. *Northland Advocate*, 17 July 1978.
21. T.J. McNamara, 'Eight Busts Confer Immortality', *New Zealand Herald*, 5 March 1970.
22. Hamish Keith, 'Sculptures that lack vitality', *Auckland Star*, 13 March 1970.
23. 'Council Decides Against Buying Sculpture', *New Zealand Herald*, 17 June 1970.
24. 'Sculpture of Author To Be Displayed', *New Zealand Herald*, 28 January 1971.
25. The 11 bronze heads of New Zealand writers by Anthony Stones in the collection of the National Library, Wellington, are: Rewi Alley, Allen Curnow, Dan Davin, Janet Frame, Denis Glover, Kevin Ireland, Michael King, Eric McCormick, Frank Sargeson, Keith Sinclair and Phillip Wilson.
26. T.J. McNamara, 'Three Small Art Displays Have Their Attraction', *New Zealand Herald*, 27 August 1971.

(continued on page 112)

Books



Home and Hearth

Crafting Aotearoa: A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania

written & edited by Karl Chitham, Kolokesa U. Mahina-Tuai & Damian Skinner

Te Papa Press, Wellington 2019

DAVID EGGLETON

Te Papa is one of our great cultural gatekeepers, a central repository of New Zealand's self-image as a nation, as represented through a history-bound agglomeration of crafted objects. Te Papa Press is one of the national museum's proselytising arms: its gladhanding task as a publisher, as this hefty tome confirms, is to recycle fervently canonical symbols of nationhood by repackaging them so as to tell 'our story' afresh for audiences near and far.

While the main text, a renovated master-narrative, has been written by a small committee of three with a sure grasp of rebarbative jargon—albeit giving off a warm glow—the book also features dozens of pop-up essays on an eclectic grab-bag of craft topics by what amounts to a roll-call of many of the country's leading craft historians, including Margery

Blackman, William Cotterell, Sean Mallon, Rosemary McLeod, John Perry, Helen Schamroth, Michael Smythe, Ane Tonga and Richard Wolfe, who in turn acknowledge in various ways writing forebears, from Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) to Sir Sidney Hirini Moko Mead, to Peter Cape to Michael King. The suggestion, then, is of an ecumenical broad church or of a gallery of heterogenous tastemakers. And yet this book has anxiety about identity politics stamped all over it, even as it works hard to extol its mission statement as a compendium of significance.

The objects illustrated in multitudinous categories are not all held by Te Papa, but overwhelmingly they are significant acquisitions in public collections nearly all in this country, or else they are taken from the very recent collections of makers. The intention here is to confirm the archipelago of Aotearoa New Zealand as at the artefact-collecting hub of what is generally known as the South Pacific. The Introduction contains an elaborate rationale for the use of the neologism 'Moana Oceania', which 'empowers and privileges Indigenous perspectives', and yet underneath

or at the back of this assertion there is a sense of the old imperial project of hegemonic cultural colonialism continuing by other means.

The term 'craft' is functional and refers to making, but it also generates questions about politics and value judgements. One of the most significant essays in the book in terms of providing a fresh perspective is 'Pulota, Hawaiki and Lapita' by the Tongan scholar and philosopher Hufanga 'Okusitino Mahina. He tackles head-on the vexing question of the location of the centre of the Polynesian Imaginary with a clear argument about the plastered-over labels of names and naming. He challenges the use of the term Lapita, created in 1952 by American archaeologists working on a site in New Caledonia, who misheard a word in the local language which they then used to name an entire prehistoric culture that stretched across the islands of the Moana-nui or the Pacific. He advocates for a renaming which features linguistic fusions such as 'Polymoana', and advocates also for a Moana-nui-centric world view of history, where the past is located in front of people and the future is

(opposite) The Faunteni 'o e Mo'ui collective in the church hall
(Photograph: Brendan Kitto)

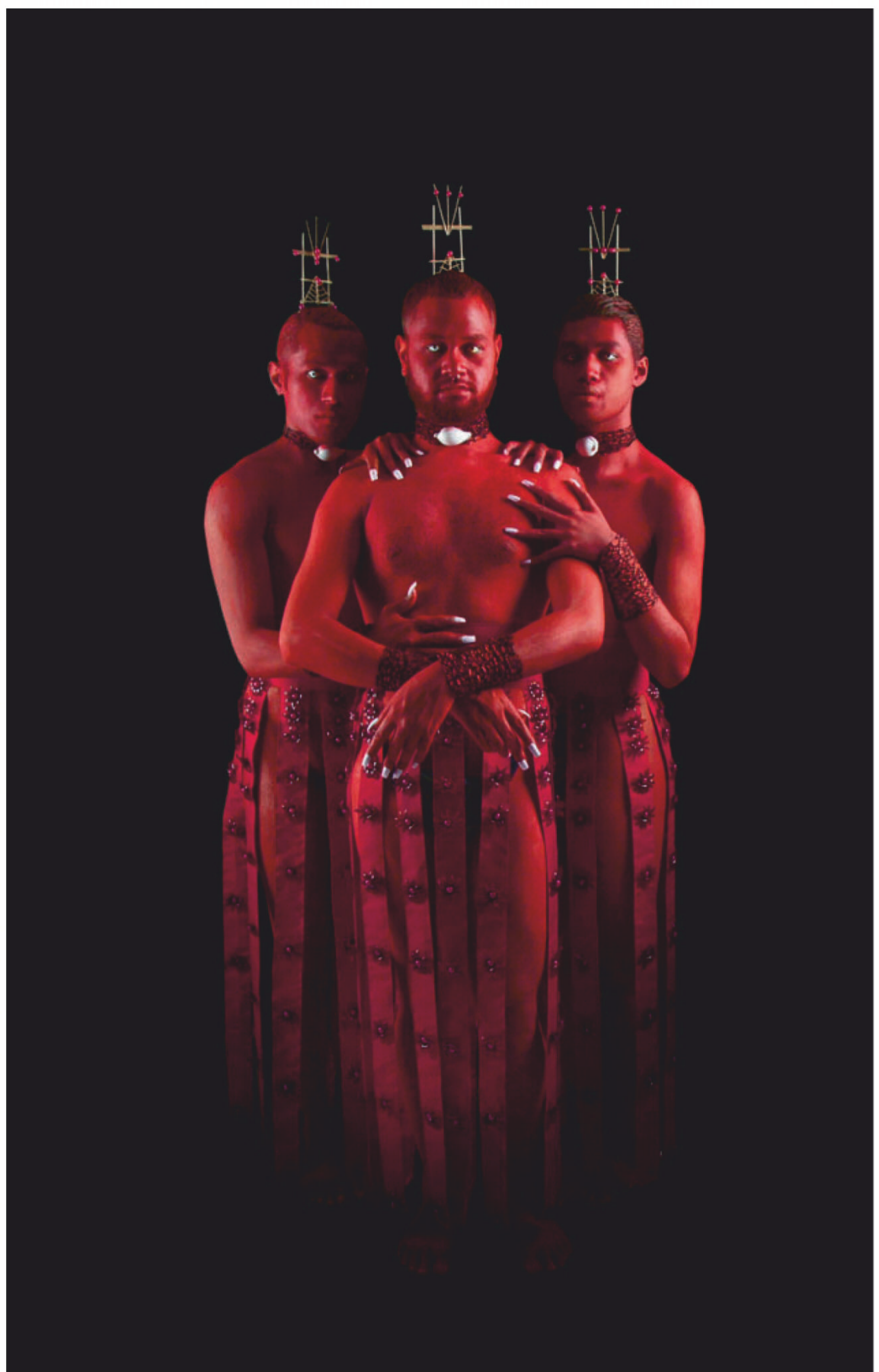
(right) Fagogo costumes
(Photograph: Pati Solomona Tyrell)

(below) Kauri gum hair plait
(Kauri Museum, Andrew Rintoul Collection)

behind. This metaphorical circularity is taken up by *Crafting Aotearoa* in its first chapter which opens with traditional 'Polymoana' dance moves and costume adornment recrafted by the Samoan fabulist Pati Solomona Tyrell in his multimedia work *Fagogo*. In this he reanimates the past, making it slithery, shape-shifting, phantasmal: a living tradition, and a hybrid cousin to the performances discussed elsewhere in the book by Pasifika artist Rosanna Raymond's carnivalesque SaVage K'lub, with its post-punk mash-up of glam and disco elements and 1990s Pasifika fashion statements. What these performance artists exemplify with their enactments are fertile collisions of ideas and tropes that stretch back to a time before European encounters, a time as much mythological as historical. As craft practitioners they seek to channel mythic fabricators of ancestral heirlooms, but serve in the end to confirm the 'entangled objects' status of Moana Oceania revivalism centred on Aotearoa New Zealand.

Paging through *Crafting Aotearoa* feels a bit like wandering through the ceremonial shed of Te Papa itself on the Wellington waterfront, with its labyrinthine proliferation of objects, leaving an impression of flotsam and jetsam pitched up by the oceanic swell: all those made-over objects, second-hand cargo from northern Europe washing up on a South Pacific littoral, arriving on a yammering breeze with a salty tang to be regarded askance by Maori a long time in residence and with their own ontological world-view and expressive command of truth to local materials.

Across the Pacific, ghostbusting Christian missionaries made bonfires of exquisitely carved effigies in order to install their own savage god. A solitary pre-contact example rescued from the holocaust—A'a from the island of Rurutu—remains a totemic ancestor figure of enormous artistic potency and is currently housed in the British Museum. Other images are redolent of colonialism's ruthless extractive industries: the joints of a whale's backbone which serve as stools, the silky filaments of kauri gum teased out to represent a keepsake of blonde hair in a macabre display of museological Victoriana.



Gradually in New Zealand, toi Maori took on the role that medieval and folk traditions played in the British Arts and Crafts Movement, the master-narrative of this book argues. This is partly true, but up until at least the 1970s craftwork from Great Britain was emulated to the very echo and it echoes still, as this chronological account illustrates. Britain's idea of Arcadia, of Utopia, as expressed through crafted objects of desire was mythical Albion. British settlers carrying this notion out to New Zealand and passing it on to their descendants, considered the colony as dystopian, a kind of Erewhon. Only in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of identity politics did craftmakers and artists begin to assert the name of the Utopian project as Aotearoa, no longer a pagan benighted Nowhere, subjected

to the tyranny of distance from the mother country. And yet Aotearoa remains a mythical destination, a state of mind as much as an envisioned place.

Craft, along with its utilitarian essentialism, its pragmatic role for



home and hearth, always asserts one ideology or another. It is endlessly fascinating in its ability to contain complexity and paradox, in its capacity for expressing a society's values. Amid much else, this book acknowledges New Zealand's new empire which it began inheriting from the end of the nineteenth century: the Cook Islands, Niue, Nauru, Western Samoa and Tokelau, along with a patronising benevolence towards Tonga and Fiji. Now, in the era of globalisation and neo-liberal commodification,

it is migrants from these New Zealand-administered territories who contribute much vitalism to the contemporary craft scene, alongside bustling and thriving local flax-roots movements, virtuous circles of craft activists, and evergreen workshop-based collectives in steadfast revolt against industrial standardisation. Throughout the twentieth century, studio craft was a form of soft diplomacy for successive governments as they sought to promote biculturalism.

Although this book aspires to be a comprehensive craft history, studiously showing patterns of development and change, with its discordant miscellany of short commentaries and its three different author perspectives and its tick-box agenda, it is perhaps better envisaged as an editorial digest which captures a cultural moment: the iteration of a radiant iconography aggressively asserting the robustness of the applied and decorative arts in 'Aotearoa'.



Always Song in the Water

by Greg O'Brien

Auckland University Press, Auckland 2019

One Year Drawn

by Pete Bossley

Point Publishing, Auckland 2019

Out There: SCAPE Public Art 1998–2018

by Warren Feeney

SCAPE Public Art, Christchurch 2019

This Joyous, Chaotic Place: He Waiata Tangi-a-Tahu

Mokopopaki & Spiral, Auckland 2019

Melvin Day Artist

by Greg O'Brien et al.

Victoria University Press, Wellington 2019

DON ABBOTT

Greg O'Brien subtitles *Always Song in the Water* an *Oceanic Sketchbook* and it is a collection of memories, meditations, observations and anecdotes stemming from two journeys: the first, a land-based trip through Northland with his friend and artist Noel McKenna; the second, an ocean-going voyage with a small group of artists to Raoul Island, in the Kermadec group. Arranged around his words is an array of paintings, poems and photographs by O'Brien and others (notably McKenna,

who produced several drawings expressly for this publication).

The first journey is a return to a place he knows—O'Brien started his writing career as a court reporter with the *Northland Times*, based in Dargaville—and his journey from Auckland to Ahipara becomes a voyage back in time as well as a geographic one, as the perspective shifts from how it was to how it is. The second voyage has elements of an adventure story, as O'Brien and his colleagues go to an area virtually unmapped since Cook, swim in open ocean under the protection of a shark gunner and walk barefoot on rarely trodden paths.

Using a wide range of symbols and metaphors, O'Brien shifts between the quotidian and the universal, the witty and the poignant, the trivial and the profound, illuminating each along the way. His train of thought is clear and fascinating to follow; his references to both New Zealand and world literature and arts are wide-ranging and pertinent; and whatever his subject, he creates a remarkable sense of intimacy with the reader.

O'Brien should be congratulated for the inventive use of the book's

margins. Generous enough to provide space for selected artworks, they also house captions, and excerpts of relevant poetry and prose. Keely O'Shannessy's attractive design allows these textual and visual elements to coexist, combining them to create a seamless whole.

Each entry into this rich diary is kept focused and to the point, combining to create a gentle, meandering discourse that also has a purpose, not unlike the great currents of the ocean that inspires the author.

One Year Drawn is also the result of a journey, only this time it lasted a whole year. At the age of 32 architect Pete Bossley left behind a broken marriage, as well as a fledgling career and a young family, and embarked on a year's solo OE. While travelling he kept a sketchbook, in which he would draw and write. He filled up ten sketchbooks in the time that he travelled to Europe and back, and these provide the chapter headings around which *One Year Drawn* is organised.

Several elements contribute to this book's success, the first of which is a split narrator. Bossley's comments and observations from his 1982

(opposite left)
Tropic of Capricorn swim, May 2011
(Photograph: Jason O'Hara)

(opposite right)
NOEL McKENNA *Horse in Field* 2001
Oil on plywood

(right) PETE BOSSLEY *Ephesus* 1982
Crayon on paper

(below)
JANNA VAN HASSELT *Buzz Carpet* 2016
Asphalt & road paint, installed at RE:Start
Mall, Cashel Street, Christchurch
(Photograph: Ron Thow)

sketchbooks offer the enthusiasm and adventure of first-time encounters and, with a simple change of font, the 2019 author comments on his earlier self in the third person, adding the wisdom of hindsight, as well as the maturity achieved in the intervening years. This novelistic technique fills in the gaps, provides continuity and offers a compelling dual perspective.

Bossley enjoys the process of looking back, watching himself develop and change and learn—and so do we. He is a pretty good artist and turned out to be a very good architect too; there is a tension within the younger man as he wrestles with the two disciplines, sometimes struggling to let one consciously influence the other. Architecture won out in the end, but Bossley has always made art on the side.

The book's design incorporates several threads of text and pictures,



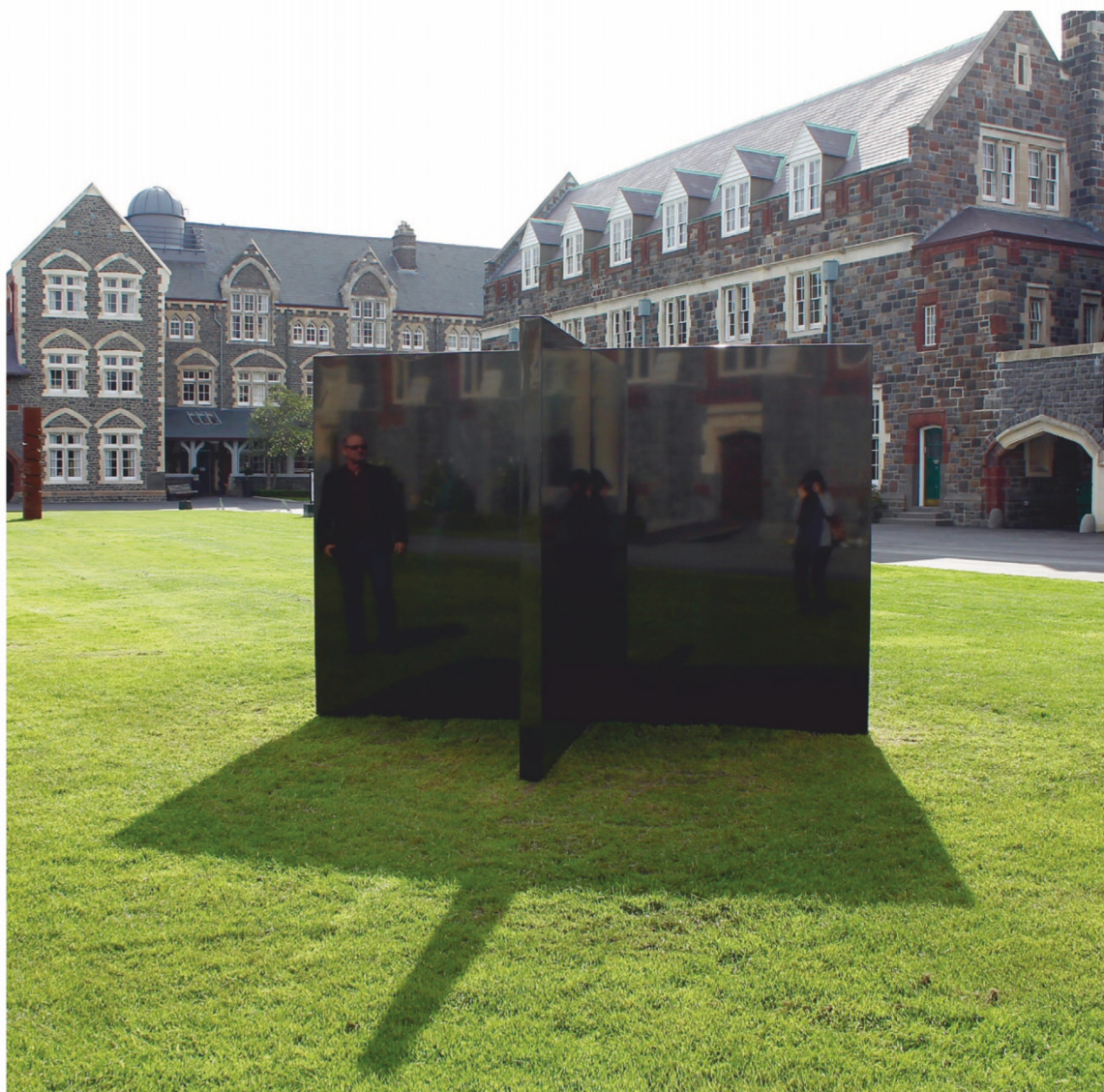
allowing a sense of flow as words and images take their place on the page in an unstructured and seemingly random way. The reproduction of pencil sketches is spookily good, so much so that you check routinely your fingertips for graphite smudges. There are a few colour images, and they impress; for example the view of the valley at Ephesus, an ancient site that the author broke into after he had arrived when it was closed. Bossley's eye for abstraction and detail is a pleasure to scrutinise, as is his penchant for portraiture. And when he considers architecture, he illuminates

New Zealand traditions and practice as much as the old-world varieties he is contemplating. Such knowledge is the point of anyone's OE; *One Year Drawn* was a year well spent.

Sculpture event SCAPE is a Christchurch phenomenon turned institution. It has been running for 20 years and is documented assiduously by Warren Feeney in *Out There: SCAPE Public Art 1998–2018*.

The tale of SCAPE is made up of many chapters, protagonists and stories, and likewise this book fulfils several functions. It is an exploration of the role that contemporary art





(left) GILL GATFIELD *The Kiss* 2015
Absoluto nero/black granite, installed at
Christ's College Quadrangle
(Photograph: Gill Gatfield)

(below) MELVIN DAY *Walled City II* from
Piero della Francesca series 1970
Oil on canvas, 845 x 845 mm.
(Private collection)

(opposite above)
ALLIE EAGLE *Heather McPherson* 1979
Watercolour, charcoal & crayon on paper,
730 x 540 mm.
(Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
Photograph: Adrienne Martyn)

(opposite below)
MELVIN DAY *Kaikoura No. 9* 1992
Oil on canvas, 915 x 1525 mm.
(Collection of The Suter Art Gallery Te
Aratoi o Whakatu)

has played in Christchurch over two decades, and the way that the city has matured in its responses to it. It is a portrait of an organisation that has struggled as so many arts entities do, and has adapted to suit the circumstances in which it finds itself. It is an argument for the acquisition

of public art, proof that its civic role goes beyond the beautification of urban spaces. It is also a testament to the people involved—in particular Deborah McCormick and Dame Adrienne Stewart—and their tenacity to get the job done. It is a documentary on how to get art made, and the

kinds of negotiations—financial, civic, bureaucratic, logistic, artistic, collaborative, environmental—that might be required. It is an investigation into public art, its potential, its impact and its importance, as well as the tensions it can engender. And it is a story of 20 years in the life of Christchurch, pivoted around the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011.

Feeney's book is generously and beautifully illustrated, and stitch-bound so that the gutter does not interfere with the large images. His text is scholarly yet readable, and is interspersed with short excerpts from interviews with artists who have contributed works to SCAPE, such as Liz Allan, Ronnie van Hout, Neil Dawson and Gill Gatfield amongst others. Also included is a list of works, in which all 197 pieces of art produced under the auspices of SCAPE are pictured and annotated. This book is an essential resource on public art in Christchurch and New Zealand.

This Joyous Chaotic Place was an exhibition held at Auckland's Mokopopaki in early 2018, a show that celebrated the life and work of poet, lesbian feminist and activist Heather McPherson (1942–2017). The exhibition featured contributions by more than 20 women with connections to McPherson and was extraordinary; a collection of ephemera and art objects, it fairly hummed with a tangible human presence, of those who made the objects, and of those about and for whom the objects were made. Jaimee Stockman-Young wrote about the show in *Art New Zealand* 166; now the gallery has joined up with the Spiral imprint (which McPherson co-founded in 1975) to produce *This Joyous, Chaotic Place: He Waiata Tangi-a-Tahu*, a book that reproduces artworks from the exhibition of two years ago, as well as telling some of the stories surrounding it.



In a series of short chapters various writers remember time spent with McPherson and acknowledge the impact she made in their lives. A common thread is the preparations for the Mokopopaki exhibition. M (Marian Evans) and Dr P (Cushla Parekowhai) contribute the majority of the stories, but Allie Eagle and Tiffany Thornley pay heartfelt tribute, referring to art they made with McPherson in mind. McPherson herself is present with a short history of feminist publishing in New Zealand, and an overview of how the imprint Spiral worked.

A sketchbook of sorts, this book brings together themes of weaving, activism, art-making, poetry, and publishing with love and respect. It is proof of its conviction: a sturdy belief in the written word, in the power of publishing and the impact that such permanence can make. Generously illustrated, and unusually orientated (landscape, with 4 columns of justified text), it is a significant addition to this country's literary and artistic landscape.

Those who visited Waikato Museum's *Melvin Day: A Modernist Perspective* last year know that he was an artist whose long career was characterised by variety and vitality. These different aspects to his art are well served by a line-up of contributors to *Melvin Day Artist*, the sumptuous publication produced by the museum and Victoria University Press, with support from the charitable trust established in Day's memory.

Gregory O'Brien supplies nine of the 14 short essays that deal with aspects of Day's oeuvre, such as portraiture, landscape, still-life and the inclusion of text; Julia Waite writes on his role within New Zealand cubism; Vincent O'Sullivan covers his London years; and Tony Mackle surveys Day's difficult, but in terms of the institution, defining decade as head of the National Art Gallery. Exhibition curator and Day's former dealer Mark Hutchins Pond investigates the artist's obsessive pursuit of Italian Renaissance painters Uccello and Piero della Francesca, as well as the suite of paintings *Stabat Mater*, placed on permanent display at Wellington's St Paul's Cathedral in 2018.

These essays are readable, pertinent and succinct, allowed to be so through the inclusion of an outstanding chronology at the rear of the book, made up of facts, images, reviews, commentary and tributes. It is the result, one might guess, of a mountain of research, representing just the peak of a huge amount of work. It is an invaluable addition to this volume.



This book is big, heavy and a joy to read; its paper is solid and glossy and the reproduction of Day's many paintings is lush, especially for those that extend over two pages.

Day deserves greater recognition in New Zealand's art history; when Michael Dunn reviewed the Waikato

Museum show in *Art New Zealand* 172 he pointed out that 'among modernist painters Melvin (Pat) Day (1923–2016) has been somewhat undervalued by art historians and critics, or ignored altogether'. This book goes a long way in putting that right.



As Above, So Below

(continued from page 59)

long-standing western industrialist approach to agriculture.²⁵ This region has long been drained and transformed by Pakeha settlers attempting to convert it into farmland. A member of mana whenua Ngati Hako remarked to the artist that they believe, due to rising sea levels caused by climate change, this land may in time return to something more closely resembling its pre-colonial state.

It appears trees, rivers and even the earth may ‘talk’—if we listen hard enough to hear them. Noble and van der Drift’s projects suggest an experience of deeper connection to the natural environment is available to humankind—and may well be required in order to save it from us. Yet one need not necessarily believe in the existence of the spirit to engage what Noble describes as the ‘human capacity for wonder’.²⁶ After all, as she puts it, ‘reality is profoundly deep and rich’.²⁷

1. Anne Noble, ‘Exhibition text’, *Observations from the Critical Zone*, Two Rooms, Auckland, 1–30 November 2019, <http://tworooms.co.nz/exhibition/observations-from-critical/>.
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4. John Hurrell, ‘Incandescent Earth’, *Eyecontact*, 28 November 2019, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2019/11/incandescent-humus>.
5. Lucinda Bennett, ‘The Unmissables: Three Exhibitions to see in November’, *Pantograph Punch*, 14 November 2019, <http://www.pantograph-punch.com/post/Unmissables-November-2019>.
6. Hurrell, op. cit.
7. Anne Noble, in an interview with the author, 12 December 2019.
8. Ibid.
9. Noble, Exhibition text.
10. Noble, in an interview with the author, 12 December 2019.
11. Bennett, op. cit.
12. Noble, Exhibition text.
13. Pablo Neruda, *The Book of Questions*, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend 2001, quoted in Noble’s Exhibition text.
14. Noble, op. cit.
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17. See, for example, Wudan Yan, ‘The Secret Lives of Trees’, *JSTOR Daily*, 3 March 2016, <http://daily.jstor.org/secret-lives-trees/>.
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20. Kate van der Drift, in an interview with the author, 11 December 2019.
21. Ibid. The artist also finds parallels in Rebecca Solnit’s writings on walking. See, for example, *Wanderlust*, Verso, London 2001.
22. Barbara Hurd, *Listening to the Savage: River Notes and Half-Heard Melodies*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2016, p. 34, quoted in Kate van der Drift, Exhibition text, *Directional Listening: Fluvial Field Notes*, Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland, 22 October–10 November 2019, <http://www.sanderson.co.nz/ExhibitionDetails/574/Kate-van-der-Drift/Directional-Listening-Fluvial-Field-Notes.aspx>.

23. Kate van der Drift, in an interview with the author, 11 December 2019.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Anne Noble, in an interview with the author, 12 December 2019.
27. Ibid.

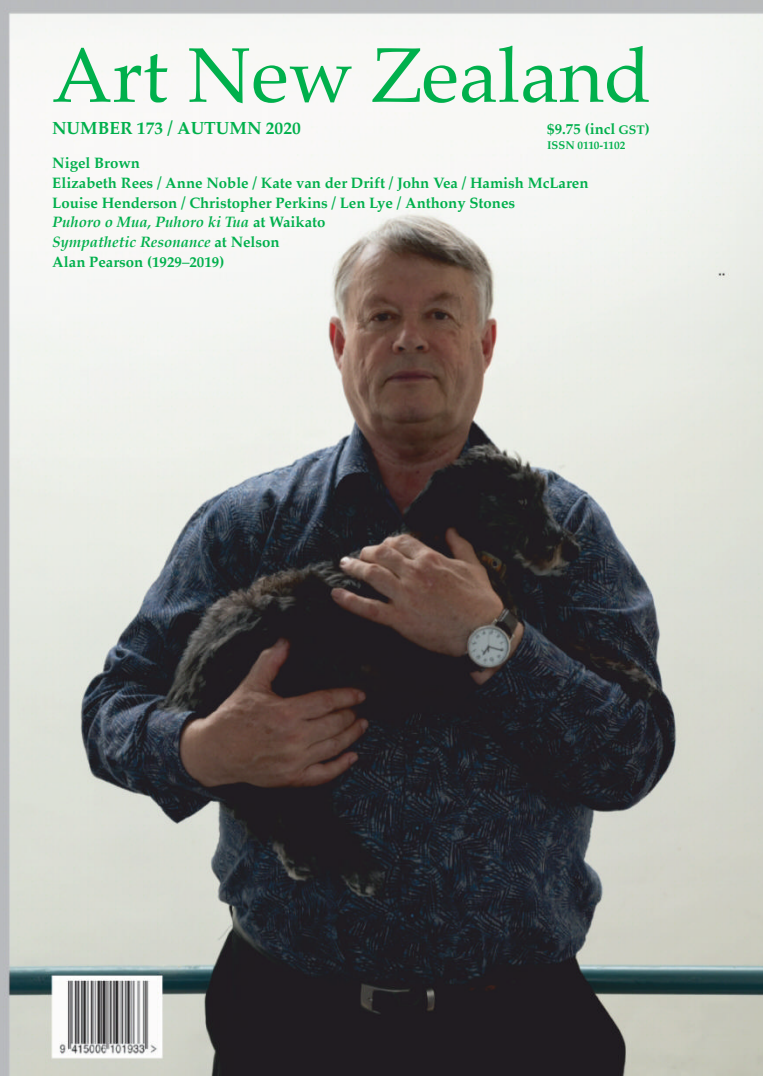
A Vital Record

(continued from page 105)

27. ‘Eminent writer joins picketers’, *The Hawke’s Bay Herald-Tribune*, 4 January 1973.
28. ‘Sculptor plans to picket French art exhibition’, *The Dominion*, 6 December 1972.
29. Anthony Stones, letter to the Editor, *Auckland Star*, 17 February 1973.
30. T.J. McNamara, ‘Art Notable for Tension’, *New Zealand Herald*, 12 April 1978.
31. Gordon H. Brown, review of *Sculptures and Drawings* by Anthony Stones, ‘The Basement’, Moller’s Gallery, Queen Street, *Auckland Star*, 11 April 1978.
32. T.J. McNamara, ‘Art Notable for Tension’, *New Zealand Herald*, 12 April 1978.
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34. *Islands* 22, vol. 6, no. 4, May 1978, p. 404.
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38. Hamish Keith, ‘Uneven Mixture in Group Show’, *Auckland Star*, 12 December 1970.
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42. T.J. McNamara, review of *Something Old—Something New*, a survey show of drawings and paintings by Anthony Stones at Moller’s Gallery, 313 Queen Street, *New Zealand Herald*, 3 May 1982.
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47. ‘From Tony Verdon, in London’, unsourced newspaper item, c.1989.
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