

REPORT FROM NEW ZEALAND

A Change of Empires

As New Zealand seeks its cultural and economic identity less in the British Commonwealth and more on the Pacific Rim, a corresponding shift in its art scene is beginning to be felt.

BY RICHARD KALINA

Even though New Zealand is a long way from New York and has only 3½ million people living in an area slightly larger than Oregon, it does not feel particularly remote or desolate. The country consists, for the most part, of the North Island and the South Island, separated by the rough and windy Cook Strait. As far as natural beauty goes, the South Island clearly comes out on top. Blessed with snow-capped mountains and rolling, fertile hills, misty fjords garlanded by towering waterfalls, glaciers glowing with eerie turquoise light, gravel-bedded rivers, fluorescent-blue lakes and white-sand beaches, rain forests and huge stands of pines and hardwoods, the South Island can be a bit overwhelming. The roads seem to offer scenic turn-offs every 15 minutes or so, and they are well worth your while, but where to draw the line, especially if you want to arrive at your destination before dark? All this uninhabited splendor does come at a price. With less than a million people on the island, there doesn't seem to be enough populace to support the kind of cultural life that the more densely settled North Island offers. But this is not to say that the South Island is artistically barren. My wife and I started our New Zealand journey in Christchurch, the South Island's main city and the second largest in the nation.

Christchurch is a pleasant, easily navigable semi-metropolis set along the curving banks of the Avon River, where ducks swim and punters pole along in flat-bottomed boats. It boasts a new museum, the Christchurch Art Gallery, an airy concoction of curved and tilted glass walls, polished stone and elegantly structural oval steel struts, with tall-ceilinged lobbies and inviting galleries. Designed by David Cole of the Buchan Group in Melbourne, the museum clearly tries to make its mark as architecture, deploying torqued and skewed planes in a way reminiscent

of Frank Gehry. That could have been a problem if the result had been a showy, metallic, computer-generated nexus of odd twists and turns. Fortunately for Christchurch, the building's materials, its overall feeling of lightness and its sensitive relation to its site—the museum's gently warping forms echo the nearby river and sit in counterpoint to the grid of the town—make it an imaginative and well-liked addition to the city. An added bonus is the presence, just around the corner, of the Centre of Contemporary Art, which is a lively showcase for emerging New Zealand artists. Nearby is a third public venue, the Arts Centre. Resisting developer pressures to demolish the lovely Gothic Revival town campus of the University of Canterbury, with its gray stone buildings and leafy quadrangles, the local authorities turned the entire comfortably scaled campus into a venue for all the arts. Crafts predominate at the Centre, but there also is a pleasant exhibition space used by local painters and sculptors.

The Christchurch Art Gallery is clearly the main player in town, and it features a program of self-generated and traveling shows, plus a rotating exhibition of its own collection, mostly works by New Zealanders. While we were there, it presented, in one of its large ground-floor spaces, an installation by veteran Canterbury artist Judy McIntosh Wilson: an arrangement of shells, driftwood and grasses that she had gathered on local beaches. Wilson laid the delicate items out on the floor in careful configurations. These echoed the tracks left on the beaches by passing humans and animals, as well as tidal and growth patterns. The installation radiated elegance, precision and restraint, especially in its subtle use of color. It seemed to reflect the attitude of appreciation, combined with careful stewardship, that New Zealanders have for their environment.

In another of the ground-floor galleries, we came across a large traveling exhibition of German conceptual photography, with work by Anna and Bernhard Blume, Sigmar Polke and Klaus Rinke, among others. The current ascendancy of German photographers like Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, with their emphasis on crispness, technical virtuosity and chromatic lushness, has tended to overshadow the scrappier, less formally buffed work of artists like Rinke. These photographers have often worked in black and white, with scant regard for fine textures, strategic lighting or niceties of composition. Clarity of thinking is their concern, not ravishing presentation.



Christchurch Art Gallery, completed 2003, designed by the Buchan Group.

New Zealand's artistic history is not broad. The country's museums seem to collect predominantly work made by New Zealanders, although as a result of its English colonial past, there are also some very fine late 18th- and early 19th-century British portraits, as well as a good deal of sentimental Victoriana. This is not to say that there are not some splendid examples of historical Western art to be found; it's just that a museum visitor cannot get anything approaching a comprehensive view of art history. As for the modern period, the same core group of New Zealand artists is represented in all the museums. By far the most important of these artists is Colin McCahon (1919-1987). I had seen a small painting of his at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, where the wall text described him as New Zealand's best-known artist. I had not heard of him before, but in New Zealand it is impossible to escape his presence. Emblematic of McCahon's status was our experience at the Adam Art Gallery of the Victoria University of Wellington. This small, adventurous university gallery had a contemporary Chinese show on view during our visit, but its narrow entry space was completely dominated by a huge (ca. 10-by-35-foot) McCahon painting, *Gate III* (1970). Roughly executed in a combination of gritty whites and dark, brooding browns and blacks, the painting spells out "I AM" in big capital letters. The installa-

Detail of Judy McIntosh Wilson's Making Tracks 2, 2004, pipi shells. Images this page courtesy Christchurch Art Gallery.



In contrast to Australia, where aboriginal formats seem to be off limits for nonindigenous artists, New Zealand fosters artists who more readily associate their work with things identifiably Maori.



Colin McCahon: Gate III, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 10 by 35 feet. Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection. Photo Michael Roth © Colin McCahon Trust.

tion appears to be permanent and comes across as rather forbidding.

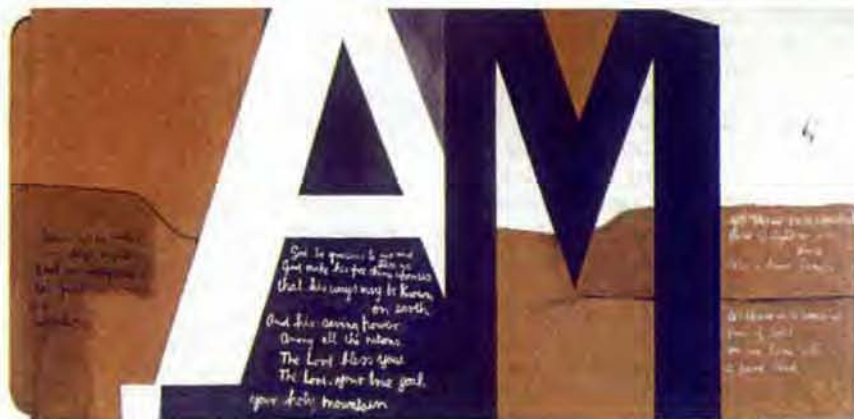
McCahon's earnest, painterly productions, sometimes figurative and sometimes abstract, often emblazoned with cursive script and almost always tinged with strong spiritual and religious feelings, would seem to lend themselves to critique, if not outright parody, but they are universally esteemed by his compatriots. Indeed, McCahon is treated with such respect that I felt that I was being discourteous to my hosts in not sharing their admiration. Rather than addressing the paintings themselves, McCahon's champions point to his vaunting ambition to make an art that truly expresses the character of New Zealand. Frequent mention is also made of the derision and abuse that his paintings attracted in the popular press until relatively late in his career. By 1984, when he was given a prominent place in the Sydney Biennale, he had stopped painting, and he died three years later. I soon learned to leave the topic alone.

A notably complex aspect of New Zealand life is the relationship between those of European descent and the native Maori people. It stands in sharp contrast (as New Zealanders are prompt to point out) to the long history of genocidal abuse that the Australians inflicted upon their indigenous Aboriginal population. The Maoris are a Pacific Island people, and though their arrival predated European settlement, they can be seen as relative newcomers to the area—certainly compared to the Aboriginal people, who have lived on the Australian continent for some 40,000 years. Aboriginal culture is nomadic, whereas Maoris tended to settle in fixed (and fortified) communities. They are large, muscular people, with a warlike and aggressive culture, and the English found them much more difficult to control than the Aborigines. The history is

complicated, but by and large the Maoris fared reasonably well for a colonized people. Today most New Zealanders are proud of their bicultural identity, and anything remotely official is rendered in both English and Maori. The Adam Art Gallery is also known as Te Pataka Toi, and the Christchurch Art Gallery is Te Puno O Waiwhetu. There are design motifs (certain leaf forms) and colors (tones of reds and browns set next to black) that are read as distinctly Maori. In contrast to Australia, where Aboriginal formats seem to be largely out of bounds for nonindigenous artists,

stretches around a curving bay on the south end of the North Island. This is where the ferry from the South Island, after a queasy three-hour ride, deposited us. A hilly, windblown town, Wellington doesn't have the genteel, English feel of Christchurch, nor the bustling, cosmopolitan air of Auckland (also on North Island). It makes up for that with a scruffy, no-frills directness, a sense of purpose appropriate for a hardworking and not particularly attractive midsize city.

The Gascoigne show was held at the City Gallery



New Zealand fosters artists who more readily associate their work with things Maori. In addition, there has been significant intermarriage, and one need have only a small amount of Maori blood to be considered as partaking of that heritage.

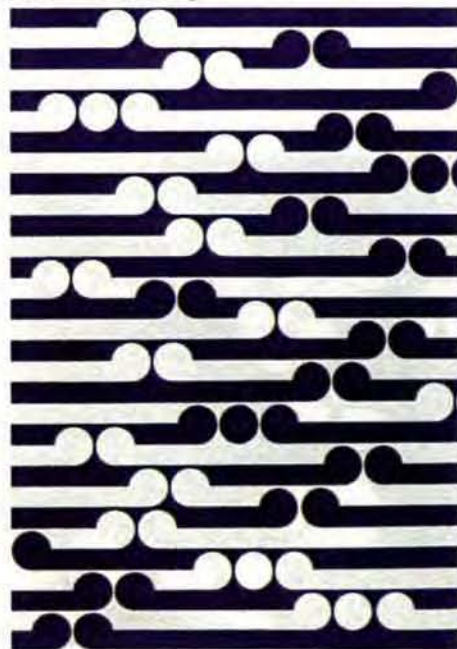
Gordon Walters (1918-1995), one of New Zealand's best artists, made frequent use of a classic Maori symbol, the *koru*, a curving form derived from the curled tip of the young tree-fern frond. In his paintings he stylized and geometrized the *koru* further, producing two-color, hard-edged compositions of horizontal bars of equal width, terminating in ball-like forms. These linear elements function as both positive and negative space, with the intuitive placement of the curving elements setting up a rhythmic counterpoint to the regular cadence of the bars. Walters's work bears some resemblance to the optically oriented geometry of Bridget Riley and was developed at approximately the same time. Walters's adherence, however, to a culturally embedded motif and the paintings' air of contemplation and composure put them at odds with the self-conscious dazzle of much of the work of the Op artists. His blend of geometry, perceptual play and cultural references make him a talent of considerable interest today, and one who deserves more exposure outside of his country.

An artist who most definitely merits wider recognition is Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '99]. Although Gascoigne was born in New Zealand, she left for Australia in 1943 when she was 26 and never lived in her homeland again. She is considered an Australian artist, but was the subject of a full-scale retrospective that we visited in Wellington, New Zealand's capital. Wellington

Wellington, one of New Zealand's most respected noncollecting public galleries. Housed in a large, open, nicely refurbished Art Deco building on Civic Square downtown, the City Gallery was an excellent venue for Gascoigne's powerful and original work. The show, organized by Gregory O'Brien in association with Paula Savage, was Gascoigne's first major exhibition in her native country.

Gascoigne's story is an intriguing one. University-educated but untrained in art, she married an astron-

Gordon Walters: Maheno, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 60 1/2 by 45 1/4 inches. Auckland Art Gallery.





Rosalie Gascoigne: Feathered Chairs, 1978, swan feathers, salvaged chairs. Collection John Buckley, Melbourne. Images this page © Gascoigne Estate, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.



Gascoigne: Metropolis, 1999, retro-reflective road signs, 7½ by 10½ feet. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

mer and spent the middle third of her life uneventfully as a faculty wife and mother in Canberra, Australia's inland and extremely quiet capital. In late middle age, finding her comfortable life insufficiently stimulating, she thought, as many women in her circumstances have, of doing something artistic. She settled on *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arranging. She found that she was good at it, and that people liked what she did. By the early '70s she began making constructions from found objects—pictures of parrots that she glued to plywood and then cut out, dolls, glass bottles, dried plants, bits of metal and the like. These objects were often displayed in weathered wooden boxes originally used for bee-keeping. Her gently poetic assemblages bring to mind the work of the Surrealists, and she was clearly stimulated by the several assemblages, including two by Joseph Cornell, purchased by the National Gallery of Australia in the '70s. Her work progressed, and in 1974, at age 57, she had her first solo show. Four years later she was given a survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, one of Australia's leading museums. The pace of success picked up, and Gascoigne's art got better and better. She did her strongest work from her 60s on, and when she died unexpectedly, in her early 80s, was still

McIntyre. Not only was the exhibition artistically interesting, it highlighted New Zealand's increasingly pronounced economic and cultural tilt toward Asia and the Pacific Rim. Australia, from its beginnings as a convict settlement, has had a complex and sometimes fraught relationship with Great Britain. New Zealand's relations with the mother country were, in many ways, more straightforward. As far away as it was, Great Britain was still "home," and when it was attacked, both New Zealand and Australia rushed to its defense. In World War I, for example, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) forces sustained per capita casualty rates that considerably exceeded those of the European combatants. These sacrifices remain fresh in the minds of New Zealanders, and in recent decades, as Great Britain moved closer to the European Union and away from the Commonwealth, the slights, some of them quite callous, have rankled. For example, Germans, as citizens of the European Union, can work in the UK without difficulty, whereas New Zealanders, who considered themselves the most loyal of the Queen's subjects, now have to jump through innumerable bureaucratic hoops to be allowed any-

actively engaged in art-making. Although little known outside the region, Gascoigne's work is to be found in all the major museums and collections in Australia, and her place in Australian art history remains assured. I hope that the Wellington show, with its beautiful and thorough catalogue, will help move her art onto a wider stage.

Although Gascoigne made more traditional-looking collections of objects, her most powerful efforts are flat wall pieces. They are constructed from wood—often painted and lettered—that she salvaged from roadside farm stands, old soft-drink crates, signboards and reflective traffic signs. She would tweak things unobtrusively, sanding or adding some paint if necessary, but the art lay in the cutting and arranging. Gascoigne used a power saw, and the often-uneven rectangular pieces that she cut are arranged in loosely sprung grids. Her grasp of tone, contrast, placement and color was uncanny, and words and letters, when she used them, make for a low-keyed concrete poetry. Gascoigne's work in this vein combines directness and strength with subtlety, and never falls into self-consciousness or artiness.

Wellington, as I mentioned earlier, has an excellent university gallery, the Adam Art Gallery of Victoria University. On display during our visit was "Concrete Horizons: Contemporary Art from China," curated by the gallery's director, Sophie

thing more than tourist status there. Rather than remaining bitter over this state of affairs, however, New Zealand consciously decided to seek its economic and cultural identity as a Pacific Rim country. While Australia has taken the lead in dealing with Asia (with New Zealand concentrating more on the Pacific Islands), New Zealand is trying to better its position, particularly in regard to China. Art exchanges form an important part of this new policy.

The exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery addressed an issue of great concern in contemporary China, the massive and intrusive urban renewal programs, particularly in Beijing, in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics. It is estimated that 80 percent of the capital will be rebuilt in this time. This relentless program of modernization, with its excitement, and also its sense of disquiet and dislocation, recalls the wholesale rebuilding of Paris under Baron Haussmann in the mid-19th century. That earlier activity ran parallel to the beginnings of modernism in French art, with artists like Manet and Degas responding to the anxious and unsettled urban environment they inhabited.

The seven artists in the show come from Beijing and Shanghai, and they each have been witness to the great changes around them. They work, perhaps not surprisingly, in the more immediate mediums of photography, video, installation and performance. The art in the show was all strong, but I was particularly taken with Wang Wei's piece *Temporary Space* (2003). The work consists of 12 horizontal black-and-white photographs of a large room in a warehouse. Each photo is taken from the same left-of-center point of view, setting up a strong sense of perspectival space. They document a most interesting performance. The artist hired 10 migrant laborers, whose normal job it is to clean and re-sell bricks scavenged from the ongoing demolition of old Beijing neighborhoods. He bought 20,000 bricks from them and had them build, over the course of 20 days, a roughly 10-foot-high, 1,000-square-foot room. Only a small space was left (but wide enough for a person to walk gingerly through) between the wall of the warehouse and the wall of the new structure. The finished structure was a potent, claustrophobic combination of Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman, but its building was only part of the task. Despite its solidity, it was meant to be temporary. We see the completed, sealed-in room in frames six and seven of the photographic series. The other photos document the structure's methodical dismantling. The final touch was a piece of economic performance art, and a savvy comment on how things work in China. The agreement was that once the room was taken down, the workers would buy back the bricks from the artist (for less, due to depreciation, than they had sold them for). They were then free to sell them all over again.

The Adam Art Gallery is a familiar and comfortable place, a forward-thinking university gallery that can be counted on to give visitors a well-presented, intellectually solid art experience. The main museum in town, the Museum of New Zealand—or Te Papa, as it is commonly known—is an entirely different story. Opened in 1998, the huge, rather ungainly structure is the country's national museum, and it looms over the waterfront. I had been warned by

people to expect something unusual, and I must say that I have never seen anything quite like it. You can feel the governmental mind at work, deciding to put everything together under one grand organizational umbrella, in one über-department. It's all there at Te Papa—art museum, natural-history museum, ethnographic museum, science museum, children's museum, industrial and agricultural exposition, popular culture showplace, you name it. And much of it is interactive.

In keeping with the theme of breaking down boundaries, each space seems to interpenetrate its multiple neighbors, resulting in the sensory overload that you experience in a trade fair or a particularly hyperactive suburban mall. The sheep-and-wool exhibition comes across fine, but the paintings and sculptures on display during our visit—a beautiful and sensitively curated show of the spiritual in art, titled "Signs and Wonders"—were not well served by this treatment. This show consisted of more than 160 objects drawn from Te Papa's collec-

particularly impressed by the abstract paintings and installation works of Sara Hughes. Although she also works in acrylic on canvas, I was more taken by her use of painted vinyl, which she applies in decal-like fashion to the wall. Her exuberantly colored dots and paisley forms command a large amount of space with very little effort. They explore the nexus of the decorative and the conceptual, and their lightness of touch in no way diminishes their seriousness.

Leaving Wellington and driving toward Auckland, we hit upon two places where the artistic impulse was wonderfully evident. The first was Napier, a seaside community on Hawke's Bay. Billed, perhaps more hopefully than was warranted, as the Nice of the Pacific, it was a pretty resort town with attractive English colonial-style buildings—at least until Feb. 3, 1931, when in two and a half minutes an earthquake registering 7.8 on the Richter scale leveled it. If that wasn't cruel enough, a fire immediately broke out and destroyed what was left. Napier's citizens, however,

gamata, a small town on the southern end of the semi-tropical Coromandel Peninsula. Whangamata was a detour for us, but it purportedly had a great surfing beach and seemed like a good place to have lunch. The main roads in mountainous New Zealand, except near the big cities, tend to be narrow and twisty, but a small, out-of-the-way track is guaranteed to be a much trickier affair. Halfway there, I began to have serious doubts about our choice of lunch spot and would have turned back had I found a place to stop safely and do it. Something, however, intrigued me. There seemed to be an awful lot of old American hot rods on the road—those chopped and channeled, flame-decaled, custom jobs. And the closer we got to Whangamata, the more of them we saw. Was it a coincidence, or was something happening here? I pressed on, and when we finally made it to town, we saw them: some 1,500 obsessively maintained and customized pre-1970 American cars, along with 350 big bikes, all assembled for the annual Whangamata Beach Hop. If a gleaming carmine-and-black '56 DeSoto or a hunkered-down, boatlike '48 Hudson Hornet in screaming taxicab-yellow isn't art, I don't know what is. (I'm one of the few people I know who truly loved the Guggenheim's motorcycle show.) I lingered for several highly pleasurable hours, inspecting paint jobs and body work, and if every room hadn't been spoken for months before, I would have gladly spent the night and stayed for the next day's grand parade.

Auckland, on the other hand, was a bit of a disappointment. It's the largest city in the country, and it feels big. (The city itself is home to about 10 percent of the nation's population, while Greater Auckland comprises slightly under 30 percent.) Its size gives it some real disadvantages: it's crowded and hard to get around in, traffic is bad, and the noise level and air quality are real irritants. However, getting together with some people I'd been in touch with soon made up for all that, and we began to enjoy the city for what it was. Of immense help was Max Gimblett, an Auckland-born painter who divides his time between New York and New Zealand, and I was sorry to miss, by just a short while, his first retrospective in his native country [see article this issue]. The show, organized by the Auckland Art Gallery, opened last

View of Sara Hughes's installation *For My Darling*, 2004, acrylic on aluminum; at Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington.



tion, including works by Dürer, Rembrandt, Blake and other European masters shown alongside the art of New Zealanders such as McCahon, Rita Angus, Ralph Hotere and Robin Kahikiwa. Unfortunately the chaotic atmosphere of the place made it all but impossible to concentrate on any of these works. It's not that museums must always be hushed, contemplative spaces—bigger museums are always up against demands to engage the general public—but art museums, even splashy ones, need a sense of separation from the hustle and bustle of the world at large—a frame, if you will. This apartness is what separates the arena of public art from that of the museum. Public art, if it is to be successful, must exist in the everyday world and hold its own there. Alexander Calder can handle a plaza or a food court; William Blake cannot.

After visiting Wellington's museums, we stopped in at the well-regarded Bartley-Nees Gallery and saw some quite interesting work by younger artists. I was

were undaunted. Determined to rebuild their town and transform it into the world's most modern (or *moderne*) municipality, they succeeded. And so Napier exists today—an intact and beautifully preserved Art Deco time capsule, a mélange of colorful, modestly scaled, lovingly ornamented structures, a town that puts Miami's South Beach to shame. Strolling along its streets, promenades and squares, all filled with people going about their daily lives, is like being transported into a dream of California in the 1930s.

Something not entirely dissimilar happened in Whan-

Wang Wei: *Temporary Space*, 2003, one of 12 black-and-white photographs, 15% by 23 1/2 inches each; in the exhibition "Concrete Horizons" at Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington.





Lauren Lysaght: *Trifecta*, 2004, mixed-medium installation; at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Courtesy Whitespace Gallery, Auckland.

June and traveled to the City Gallery Wellington in December. Nevertheless, I was able to see a number of Gimblett's works on my trip. He is an inventive artist with a broad technical and referential reach. In the '70s he worked more or less monochromatically; his paintings of the period typically consist of a field of solid color cut by a thick, vertical, iconlike central bar. By the early '80s, he began to spread out, incorporating gesture (sometimes subtle, sometimes flamboyant), rich and variegated surfaces and shaped, symmetrical canvases—notably a quatrefoil shape. Gimblett, like a number of New Zealand artists, has pronounced metaphysical leanings, and in fact one of his strongest paintings, *Pearl of the Pacific II* (1984), was in the "Signs and Wonders" show at Te Papa.

The Auckland Art Gallery is the main venue for art in Auckland, a serious museum that balances numerous traveling and temporary exhibitions with a permanent collection that is displayed in rotation. The museum is committed to public outreach (ranging from a well-funded children's program to a 12,500-image online database of its collection), but it manages to be accessible without sacrificing either scholarship or a properly contemplative atmosphere. I was given an extensive tour by its energetic director, Chris Saines, which included a visit to its storage facilities and to the conservation lab. I saw some superb work in the museum's permanent collection, including Pieter Brueghel the Younger's *A Village Fair* (one of a group of paintings on this subject he executed between 1616 and 1635), a small George Stubbs of a hound chasing a hare in a seemingly endless circle of pursuit and escape, and an extraordinary 1874 James Tissot painting titled *Still on Top*, which depicts two fashionably dressed women and an elderly red-capped servant raising a colorful line of flags in the artist's London garden. This coolly painted, precisely observed work is one of the museum's proudest possessions. In 1998 it was stolen at gunpoint (in what was New Zealand's first major art theft) and severely damaged. Recovered shortly afterwards, it underwent three years of intensive restoration before it was put back on display.

Although a number of temporary shows were in

Kabakov, Laurie Anderson, Jenny Holzer and the British music-video director Chris Cunningham—but also included were many artists new to me. Shows like this, with catchy and wide-ranging rubrics, are able to shoehorn in pretty much anything the curators deem worthy. I'm not sure, for example, whether Jenny Holzer's pronouncement "The Future is Stupid," wrapped around the top of the city's gargantuan space-shiplike Skytower, makes any particular sense in this context, but then again, thematic consistency is not really what festival shows are about.

Lauren Lysaght is a New Zealand artist who caught my eye. Her installation at the Auckland Art Gallery, *Trifecta* (2004), dealt in a deceptively light-hearted way with gambling, apparently something of an obsession with New Zealanders. (It has been estimated that by 2005 the total annual sum spent there on gambling will equal the nation's gross export revenues.) Horse racing is big in New Zealand, and, before the advent of electronic displays, the bookmakers lettered horses' names on white wooden boards in heavy black sans-serif characters. Lysaght resurrected these boards and carpentered them into simple structures: a bridge, a wishing well, a coach and tree planters. The names are oddly evocative and a bit absurd: SIR ZEUS, SPOT DE BALL, SWIFT FOX, LORD DAKAR, GRAY WINGS. The structures carry with them a tinge of fairy tales and magical thinking, a mindset well-suited to the gambler. Their air of unreasonable hopefulness is augmented by the almost incantatory rhythm that the parade of names sets up. A very nice touch is provided by the globular red-and-white topiary "trees" that sprout from the planters. Their tightly bunched leaves are made out of carefully folded racing forms.

Another interesting artist is Sangeeta Sandrasegar. A young Australian of Indian-Malaysian heritage, she makes small, layered, extraordinarily intricate paper cutouts that explore sexuality and identity. She often employs images of body parts,

The structures of Lauren Lysaght's installation "Trifecta" carried about them a fairy-tale air of magical thinking quite appropriate to the subject of gambling and its practitioners.

typically hands or feet, as her outward forms. These are then obsessively filled in, in much the same way that henna body ornamentation is, with figures and swirling lines, often cut from a single sheet of paper. These delicate objects are then pinned a bit away from the wall, so that the linear patterns are rendered even more complex by the shadows they cast.

Auckland supports a number of galleries. The



Judy Millar: *And the me-toos*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 6½ by 9½ feet. Courtesy Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

Gow Langsford Gallery, located next door to the museum, was showing the work of Judy Millar, an Auckland-based painter with a growing international reputation. Millar's richly colored abstract paintings overlay long, translucent swipes of thinned paint. The brushstrokes are broad, clearly delineated, and seem, in the manner of contemporary conceptually oriented abstraction, to be as much about the idea of the brushstroke as they are about generating form or carrying feeling. Her tangled calligraphic networks manage to remain simultaneously cool and hot, engaged and distanced.

There is a lively gallery scene developing somewhat away from the center of the city, on Karangahape Road. This was (and in parts still is) one of the town's seedier districts, and the most interesting gallery in the area, Starkwhite, has set up for business in the former home of the Pink Pussycat Club. Starkwhite is part alternative kunsthalle and part commercial gallery. John McCormack, its founder, has been an important art-world presence in New Zealand and Australia for many years now, and his decision to open a new

While Auckland supports a number of galleries, there is also a lively scene developing on Karangahape Road, in what was (and in parts still is) one of the town's seedier districts.

sort of hybrid space has generated considerable excitement. In the upstairs commercial space I discovered the work of Peter Peryer. One of New Zealand's most highly regarded photographers, he here showed small, sharply focused silver-gelatin prints that are powerful and affecting. Particularly successful is *Dead Steer* (1987), which, at the center of its frame, shows a big beast keeled over on its side, its feet sticking stiffly out as if it were a statue that has just toppled over. On the right side is an empty road, receding in sharp perspective. On the left is a hedgerow, similarly receding, and above the steer is a line of telephone poles, diminishing into the distance. The contrast between speed and stasis couldn't be more eloquent. The image jumbles up pathos and humor and is a perfect example of that happened-upon moment that "straight" photography is able to render with such poignancy and clarity.

Being in the country just two weeks, I could only begin to get a sense of the place. The arts figure importantly in the country's vision of itself, as one might expect given the progressive tenor of the society. It's clear that without the resources to amass much in the way of important historical art, collections and galleries here elected to concentrate on the contemporary. New Zealand has made real efforts to open its museums and galleries to the art of the Pacific Rim and Asia. (During our visit, for example, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery of New Plymouth hosted "Mediarena," the largest exhibition of con-

Peter Peryer: Dead Steer, 1987, silver gelatin print, 9 1/2 inches square.



Michael Parekowhai: The Story of a New Zealand River, 2001, paua and capiz shells, lacquer and wood on concert grand piano, approx. 40 inches high. Courtesy Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland.



View of Parekowhai's Kapa Haka, 2003, fiberglass, automotive paint, 15 figures, each approx. 6 feet high. Courtesy Michael Lett Gallery.

porary Japanese art to be held in New Zealand.) The country also nurtures its own artists, and to a lesser extent, artists from Australia.

In looking at the art of New Zealand, one cannot help comparing it to that of Australia, a bigger, richer country with a deeper art tradition. While there may be more artists today in Australia, and consequently greater variety in the work produced, in many ways the two countries are artistically similar. Both have excellent art-education systems that turn out young artists who are well-grounded technically and theoretically, and both countries are embracing global strategies in art as well as commerce. The area of greatest difference that I saw was the position of indigenous art. As I mentioned, in Australia it forms a major esthetic force, but one approached by nonindigenous artists with a certain degree of anxiety and ambivalence. It is the proverbial elephant in the living room. New Zealanders have a more open and fluid relationship with the Maori and Pacific Island people, and a conceptually oriented Maori artist like Michael Parekowhai, with his elegant sculptures and photographs, uses this cultural interplay to his advantage. His photographs of floral arrangements commemorating World War II battles in

which Maori fought deal with Maori experience in an indirect but evocative way, as does his *The Story of a New Zealand River* (2001), the main component of which is a shell-inlaid black concert grand piano. The title of the piece is that of a classic 1920 New Zealand coming-of-age novel by Jane Mander, believed by many to be the source of Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*—hence the piano. The Maori elements are to be found in the bands of symmetrically ordered paua shell inlay, a customary ceremonial and artistic material.

The future of art in New Zealand feels open-ended, animated by a strong sense of optimism. Far away from the art centers of North America and Europe, the country is also far from Australia. Its artists, however, are well traveled, and the institutional support system is strong. In the interconnected world we now inhabit there is no reason that a geographically remote place must be a cultural backwater. New Zealand enjoys an undisputed place in the society of forward-thinking developed nations, and it sustains an artistic production very much in keeping with that position. □

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