

Cornucopia?

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New Zealand was blessed by nature as a land of mineral wealth and rich soils. Through the hard work of the noble pioneers the land had been tamed and it had become a veritable garden of abundance.¹

Prospect would seem to be a benign, albeit obligatory, title for a survey exhibition of new New Zealand art. As Ian Wedde has pointed out, it follows a well-trodden path. Internationally, the last thirty years has seen a plethora of exhibitions sharing similar titles and credos – *Perspecta*, *Documenta*, *Prospect* (Düsseldorf).² Hypothetically speaking, the premise for these shows is quite straightforward: to create an exhibition that, through sampling a variety of artists' work, maps current art practice, formulating a coherent narrative that epitomises the concerns and fashions of art now. Yet if one looks a little closer to home, the word *prospect* also alludes to something quite different; to actions we associate not with the present but with the past. It calls to mind the imperialist colonisation of New Zealand by the British – the search for new pastures and gold. It could easily be said this title would be equally well suited to an exhibition of colonial landscape paintings.³

Perhaps *Prospect* curator Emma Bugden was thinking of the retrograde implications of the term when she put the show together. Her emphasised inclusion of some of New Zealand's older artists such as Ian Scott, Dick Frizzell, Bill Culbert, Ralph Hotere and Don Driver offers a questioning to the relevance of the *new*, when positioned in relation to *prospect*. However, considering the fact that the contemporary references in these artists work is relatively inconsequential, newness is limited to that of simply being physically constructed in the last two years.⁴

And while it is possible to postulate that the inclusion of these artists is a conscious decision to investigate the concept of the new, other aspects of the exhibition contradict this claim. The decision to only include work that has been made recently, by living artists, is antithetical to such lines of enquiry. It opposes the possibility of reinscribed value and meaning being attributed to existing work as a result of a shift in context – such as the work of Henry J. Darger, included in the 2002 Sydney Biennale. Furthermore, rather than tying itself back to any distinct critical position, *Prospect* presented a diverse range of art practitioners of highly varied levels of experience and exposure, whose work speaks of an equally broad set of concepts and contextual frameworks.⁵ Existing within such a broad position, the potential for *Prospect's* criticality was quickly limited to a series of vague assumptions and guesswork on the part of the viewer. *Prospect* seemed to be more interested in pursuing a literal understanding of new – as merely being anything that physically came into being within the last two



or three years – than considering the more complex, interesting and problematic implications of the word.

Though the exhibition en masse may have failed to adequately address this concept of the new, the work of particular artists in the show did. Darryn George, whom Bugden gave pride of place in the upper gallery of Adam Art Gallery, is perhaps one of the best examples of this. His hard-edge geometric paintings based on tukutuku⁶ – rendered in a jarring palette of beige, cream, maroon, fluorescent yellow and black – recall the work of Gordon Walters. But where Walters' use of Maori motif (in his case, kowhaiwhai) constitutes appropriation, George's does not. Instead it is formulated from a place where both Western hard-edge abstraction and customary Maori art are equally established and revered traditions. George's work draws upon both of these with a pronounced sense of reciprocity, respect and understanding, presenting a hybridity that posits biculturalism as praxis.

If we consider *Prospect* to be a neo-colonial enterprise – wherein artists and their work are 'searched out', to then be claimed by Bugden, the City Gallery and 'New Zealand' – then Francis Uprichard and Daniel Malone are two artists whose work in *Prospect* is worth discussing. Like many artists before her, Uprichard discusses the present through addressing the past. Her work, contemporary Pakeha incarnations of moko mokai and patu, not only serves to remind us of the ethically and culturally unsound practices underpinning the collection and presentation of indigenous artefacts during colonial times, and the subsequent current issues of cultural redress; it co-opts the curio trade into contemporary art, suggesting that it is not the distant past that we would like to think it is; that the young artist has taken the place of the indigenous person as The Other: whom is looked upon with curiosity, whose wares are collected for their mystifying qualities that shock, appear obscene and grotesque. It is fitting that Uprichard is now based in London, where perhaps the most extreme example of this cultural phenomenon has taken place – Charles Saatchi and the Young British Artists: Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman, et al.⁷

In *Mythopoeia – There and Back Again*, Malone also addresses the neo-colonial, directly responding to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the media fanfare that has surrounded it. Through presenting a range of counterfeit *LOTR* collectables (postage stamps, coins, Telecom calling cards, beer, etc.), Malone's work questions the authenticity and credibility of *LOTR*. It poignantly acknowledges the way that its reality is one that conflates fiction and fact; firstly, by Tolkien's fantasy being enacted within the New Zealand landscape, albeit somewhat altered; and secondly, through New Zealand laying claim to *LOTR* – "New Zealand is Middle Earth"⁸. *Mythopoeia* presents a pointed attack upon the uncritical acceptance of the trilogy by mainstream New Zealanders; their willingness to accept its Aryan narrative and depictions of landscape – wherein New Zealand is seen to be a blank canvas, devoid of peoples and their cultures.

In discussing the Christchurch Exhibition of 1905, Jock Phillips states, "international exhibitions provide an opportunity for governments and people to determine deliberately and consciously how to represent themselves and their countries to the world. Of course the representation which they produce is always puffery and self-promoting propaganda."⁹ *Prospect* and *LOTR* both present New Zealand much as it was in these earlier national expositions, as a cornucopia. And though it may not quite have the fantastical monumentality of *LOTR*, *Prospect* presents a view that is no less neo-colonial – for its emphasis of on largeness in scale and scope, and its highly competitive, nationalistic agendas (showing the best New Zealand art, which is in keeping with international art trends but still retains its local identity).

As Bugden states, "This is my list... a Top Ten, a Wish List, a Who's Who, a Top of the Pops"¹⁰; and while this shows the curatorial selection process to be based on little more than unabashed connoisseurship, it is equally telling of the City Gallery's own agenda creating *Prospect* in the first place. *Prospect* appeared to be a mishmash of successful solo shows from other institutions all lumped together – Et Al's *Abnormal Mass Delusions?* (Govett-Brewster), Ronnie Van Hout's *I've Abandoned Me* (DPAG), Scott Eady's *Delia* (DPAG), Maddie Leach's *Gallery Six* (Waikato), etc. And as the City Gallery seems to be more focused on showing retrospectives, design/craft and touring shows rather than contemporary New Zealand art, it appeared that this was an act of institutional 'keeping up with the Joneses', that *Prospect* was the City Gallery's last ditch attempt to prove that they are still relevant.

Notes

1. Phillips, J., "Exhibiting Ourselves: The Exhibition and National Identity", [in] Phillips, J. & Thomson, J. (Ed), *Farewell Colonialism*, 1998, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, pp. 18
2. Wedde, I., "Prospect: No Worries", [in] *Telecom Prospect 2004 website*, (retrieved 25/9/04), www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz/opinions/ian.asp
3. John Kinder's *New Zealand* (an exhibition at Te Papa, which was shown simultaneously to *Prospect*) serves as a perfect illustration of this point.
4. For his work *White Drip* (2003), Hotere, using his uniform

corrugated iron painted gloss black, pours a line of white paint down the length of it and writes "TO MISTER Paul Holmes" – alluding to the recent scandal of Holmes calling Koffi Annan a "Cheeky Darkie".

5. Moore, M., "Episode 2: *Telecom Prospect 2004 New Art New Zealand*", [in] *Art New Zealand*, No. 112, Spring 2004, Auckland, Art Magazine Press, pp. 64
6. Farrar, S., "Darryn George", [in] *Telecom Prospect 2004 website*, (retrieved 25/9/04), www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz/artist/georgedarryn.asp.

Tukutuku are panels that line the interior of wharehenui (meeting houses). George specifically looks at the Poutama motif.

N.B. Poutama is translated as 'stairway to Heaven' on the *Prospect* website – I would like to point out is not a translation but rather a Christian interpretation of this word. The closest translation that I am aware of is 'steps of knowledge'. It represents a process of linking: of whakapapa (genealogy), and states of being – Te Aomarama (the world of light) and Te Po (the world of dark); in this regards it is worth noting that tukutuku also means cobweb.

While George's work makes reference to the work of Walters and Theo Schoon (as well as Ellsworth Kelly, Daniel Buren and countless other European and North American artists) I do not see this as constituting appropriation. Appropriation, by definition, means to take possession of or make use of exclusively for oneself, often without permission (<http://dictionary.reference.com>). Furthermore, in using the word 'tradition', it is not my intention to say that mahi toi and hard-edge abstraction are 'traditional' – implying that they are practices that have ceased (this is not the case at all) – rather I wish to acknowledge that they are both practices that have history.

7. Saatchi has also collected Uprichard's work.
8. Woods, E., [in] Sibley, B., *The Lord of the Rings Official Movie Guide*; Limited Collector's Edition, London, HarperCollins, 2001
9. Phillips, J., op cit, pp. 17
10. Bugden, E., "Welcome In: *Telecom Prospect 2004: New Art New Zealand*", [in] *Telecom Prospect 2004 website*, (retrieved 25/9/04), www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz/opinions/curator.asp

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