



FOCUSED . . . Aberhart's photograph of a Portugese grave, Happy Valley, Hong Kong in 1997

Celebrating the obscure

By MARGARET PERKINS

CEMETERIES and war memorials are reminders of times gone by. Laurence Aberhart enjoys photographing them because, he says, "they remain a constant".

He too has remained constant — to a style which sets him apart. Northland-based Aberhart has been a photographer for more than 30 years, making the seemingly obscure appear more significant. He brings a certain magic to images of objects many of us wouldn't look at twice. Yet he says his work hasn't always been acknowledged.

"I've been doing what I do for such a long time and finally people are beginning to understand my language. I think if an artist's innate style is quite strong, and it's not the same way of looking at things as people are used to, it takes a long time for them to understand it."

Aberhart employs equipment and craftsmanship unmatched by modern techniques. He uses a bulky turn-of-the-century Corona view camera which produces negatives the same size as the printed image. This eliminates the need to enlarge, and so he loses very little information in developing the negative to the

print. Then he manipulates the tonality of the print with metals like gold, silver and selenium.

"I regard it as careful craftsmanship," he says. "To practice the art there's a certain fundamental method which uses chemistry, physics and a testing of the medium which can bring the images to life."

Aberhart taught himself by studying books and learning by trial and error. Then John Fields came into his life. "At key points in your life you meet a person who gives you pointers to develop further. It happened for me through John Fields, an American photographer who lived in Auckland. I learnt a lot from him and he was very generous in what he taught me."

Aberhart first exhibited in 1975 when his work was included in *The Active Eye* at the Manawatu Art Gallery. But it wasn't until 1982, when he got a grant from Creative New Zealand, that he was able to focus solely on his photography. That grant was the first of many which have helped him financially.

He has exhibited many times in New Zealand, America, Australia and Hong Kong. He has also received significant awards such as a Fulbright Travel Fellowship in 1988 and a Moet &

Chandon Fellowship in 1994. His touring self-curated show, *All Gates Open*, is an accumulation of 10 years of photographs, taken here and overseas. They include some of his favourite subjects — cemeteries and war memorials — plus other images which convey a constancy of place and atmosphere yet are not confined to any one country. "The show conveys a universality. I've photographed aspects of New Zealand and overseas which aren't necessarily about being here, or there. It is my way of blurring over the distances."

He is working on a new exhibition for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery which will be a collection of photographs taken in the South Island over the past 20 years.

"I used to photograph extensively in the South Island. Occasionally I'm able to go back to places visited then and discover I'm still interested in the same things. I can read the changes in them and in my own work."

● *All Gates Open, Whangarei Arts Museum, to September 12; then touring to Suter Gallery, Nelson, Hawke's Bay Cultural Trust, Manawatu Art Gallery and Waikato Museum until July 2000*