

# Artist uses meatworks gear to create records of a golden age

- ❑ Alpha Omega by Robert Jahnke, at Te Tuhi, Auckland, to September 18
- ❑ Reviewed by John Daly-Peoples

The main works in Robert Jahnke's new exhibition at Te Tuhi (previously known as the Fisher Gallery) are seven large lead installations works in glass cases. He has constructed six identical sets of freezing workers' apparel consisting of hat, apron, a pair of boots and belt with knife and sharpener.

Each of these six works is titled with the names of one of the many meat works which have closed in recent years – *Hawera, Mamaku, Waitara, Whakatu, Patea* and *Takaka*. The seventh case contains a life-size carcass, *Agnus*, also made of lead.

The artist had always had an interest in creating an exhibition based on the freezing works with several threads of his life related to the industry. The project had its genesis in 1986 with the dramatic closure of Whakatu. Jahnke had worked in the freezing works as a young man and had family and friends who had also worked there.

This was the domain of Maori working men who took pride in their skills and their work. The demise of the freezing works was a blow both to individuals and communities.

The exhibition itself draws together many threads about the lives of rural Maori, our lamb exports, US meat tariffs and our



ROBERT JAHNKE: Alpha Omega: at Te Tuhi

reliance on agriculture. There are the links to Christian iconography and the failure of Christianity, particularly for Maori.

The accoutrements of the freezing worker are displayed in glass cases as though they are museum exhibits, records of activities and events which have passed. They are records of what for many is a golden age that has passed.

They are presented like the clothes and vestments of another time and refer to the rituals of both the meatworks as well as the alar, the shedding of blood as record of work, sacrifice and tradition.

The works also reference the many other artists and works that form a record of the agricultural industries – such works as Dick Frizzell's *Cleansed by the Blood of the Lamb*, Peter Peryer's *Dead Steer* and Joanna Braithwaite's paintings of sheepheads.

Constructed of lead, the objects are perceived as both soft and tactile as well as harsh and immutable. Their realism is disconcerting, with the six sets of leaden grey gear like ghostly apparitions.

The centrally placed lead lamb carcass, *Agnus* is a visible reminder of the purpose of the freezing works. The welded sections of the lead replicate the division of lines the butcher makes on the carcass but they are also like the rough raised incision marks the scalpel or knife makes in flesh.

The title of the work is Latin for lamb, a reference to the body and blood of Christ (*Agnus Dei*) bringing in the links to Christian iconography.

The lamb carcass also has links to the practice of the English artist Damien Hirst, notorious for presenting animals preserved in formaldehyde and his slicing of animals into sec-

tions. Two of the other works in the show indicate Jahnke is also interested in pushing that connection. One is entitled *Damiens Last Supper* and the other *Damiens Conversion*.

In both these works there are 13 sheep constructed of steel wool standing in a row but one looking the other way. These individuals gaze from their glass case at each other. A Christ confronting his Judas.

Jahnke appears to be suspicious of Damien Hirst's art practices which he sees as parading for voyeuristic consumption. In his catalogue notes he asks: "Do the creations of Damien Hirst and the YBA (Young British Artists) signal the death of art? In the game of art will the death of humanity provide the ultimate reality?"

But Damien Hirst is in one respect only engaging in the practice of his namesake. St Damien, a doctor of the fourth century, successfully performed a leg transplant using the limb of a black man to attach to a white man.

As with Jahnke's previous work there is a threading together of the personal, the political and the aesthetic. He deals with ideas which are complex and problematic. He approaches his work using visual images, Latin, English and Maori texts which refer to history and current events. Simple objects become metaphors that deal with issues of power, religion and the status of Maori.