

Thursday Arts

Landmarks in fibre art

Echoes and Reflections, by Malcolm Harrison, at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, until September 15.

FIVE years ago Malcolm Harrison had a solo retrospective exhibition at the Fisher Gallery.

I nervously reviewed it, nervous because I was aware that I was in the presence of work that went far beyond the traditional approach to craft.

Here was work that was breaking boundaries, some of which I was just

his work, Harrison nonetheless offers a good deal to contemplate in the images he has created. Here at last he describes the work as "allegories, echoes and reflections of the experiences" in his life.

The work fits well into three groups defined by the gallery spaces.

In the small gallery, Harrison's work is at its most vibrant and is uniformly intense. The works are of a moderate size, the colours often primary, and the surfaces are worked all over with only a little variation in tone. Depth is often created by fragmentary "shadows" of

free." Interestingly, the swimmer is not the focus of the work, rather the focus is the surrounding environment from which the swimmer needs to be freed.

In the large gallery, the works are significant for their diversity and scale.

Two huge contrasting semi-circular cloaks divided into quadrants are overlapped in *Eclipse*. Wonderful discoveries are to be made in the potent imagery, which is spare rather than lush as in the smaller gallery. Dynamic appliqued lines of varying width, a sense of sailing, organic structures, a figure in a coffin-like box and a bowed figure at the base all allude to a mysterious story left for the viewer to tell.

A work that has a totally different impact is *Mortal Angels*, a theme Harrison has used before. Here, the recurring motifs of hearts, crosses and six-pointed stars are repeated on 17 vertical black panels. Colour is applied on five of them, the intermediary ones being richly textured with stitchery.

There is a strong graphic quality to this work and immediate visual impact. However, despite the scale there is less to discover here than in many of Harrison's other works.

The *Sonnet Cloaks* in the foyer of the gallery are the most subdued and contemplative. In contrast to the heavily worked pieces bursting with energy in the small gallery and the monumental expressions in the large gallery, these seem passively contained.

They are in the form of semi-circular cloaks, a favoured format for Harrison, the text of the sonnets and the hand-dyed fabrics providing the texture. These pieces seem like a coda, as if Harrison is collecting his energy for a new direction.

— Helen Schamroth

Around the Galleries

learning to identify.

Harrison has been a frequent exhibitor, defying the notion that quilts take forever to make. Over the years his work has become more painterly, occasionally figurative, less obscurely abstract and more obviously identifying life in the Pacific.

The current travelling exhibition on view at the Fisher Gallery is a landmark in fibre art. Initiated by the Manawatu Art Gallery with the assistance of the QEII Arts Council, it is a significant body of work that goes far beyond the notion of craft or indeed of quilting, charting new territory in Harrison's development.

As always, Harrison's quilts are extraordinarily beautiful in their execution — meticulously stitched, generally by machine. He is a master of rhythms of machine-stitched texture and uses random motifs and regular patterns with ease and appropriateness.

But his work is far more than about technique or judicious selection of fragments of fabric. Always coy about the content of

some of the dancing motifs.

The effect is as though a huge narrative work has been cut into smaller digestible components. Fragments of text are intergrated into the images, which feature recurring motifs including hearts, often crossed, and reflected silhouetted faces.

There are references to Harrison's time spent as artist-in-residence in Nelson in *A Quiet Meal at the Chez*, the central figures separated by a vase of flowers like characters in a play, framed by a curtain. There is a wistfulness in this work with its crossed hearts and floating flowers.

Another part of the narrative is captured in *The Letter*, with "Yes, I'm alive!" emblazoned on one of the horizontal bands. As in so many of Harrison's works, he suggests three-dimensional space without using perspective drawing, and leaves the viewer to interpret the story.

One of the richest works in this group is *Night Swimmer* with its cryptic comment, "If you love somebody, set them