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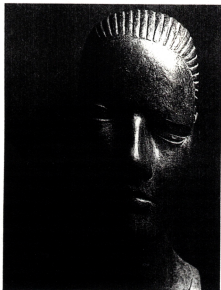
Maybe you think you do, but sculptor Terry Stringer masterminds double takes.

Anyone who has visited central Auckland's Aotea Square will know Terry Stringer's *Mountain Fountain*, an edgy bronze peak and waterfall apparently erupting through the Hinuera stone paving. Much loved by seagulls and skateboarders, it is the only redeeming feature of an otherwise bleak public space. In Wellington, his huge *Pacific Head* stands outside the new Elders Building, close to the Civic Centre. The first work represents the wild and powerful landscape of New Zealand; the second was conceived as an "heroic statement" about the country's mixed cultures — a combination of European ideas, face shapes from the Pacific and echoes of its art, like the Easter Island heads.

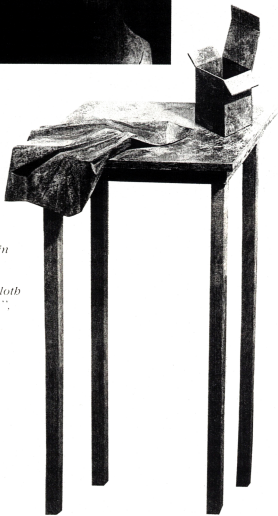
These monumental public pieces are only part of Stringer's commissioned work. The sterility of marble canyons in corporate lobbies is softened by his elegant wall sculptures — a detail of nikau palm fronds, a wind-bent tree with autumn-curved leaves scudding along the length of a wall. They fit Stringer's belief that "the best of these sort of works have to have a decorative quality".

"At its best," he adds, silently acknowledging the pejorative overtones of the word in the art world, "decorative doesn't imply that it is second-rate. Public works should enhance the space in which they are placed."

The courtyard exhibition



Above: "Two Views Head", a 1988 work in bronze, 33cm high. Below: "Table with cloth and open box", bronze, 1982, 114cm high.



currently showing at Auckland's Fisher Gallery shows the other side of his work. It marks a return to his first interest, the human figure, after a break of several years. In the '80s he turned to still life, an area traditionally the domain of the painter. At the time he felt he had nothing more to add to the exploration of planes and corners which had given his figures a cubist feel. "I turned to still life to loosen up my approach."

His artistic preoccupation, however, remained the same: perception and the way we see things. Stringer began experimenting with distortion after graduating with honours from the Elam School of Fine Arts in 1967. At a time when his contemporaries were dealing in abstract forms, he worked at more figures.

His early work revolved around the conflict between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional. Figures that were basically flat cut-outs were painted to create the three-dimensional appearance expected of sculpture.

"I painted all my work for 10 years. I thought the material, plywood and resin with fibre-glass reinforcing, could carry the paint. I like the idea of painting sculpture. Sculpture has always been painted. Everything was going to be painted. Then after a while I stopped colouring and left them just white. That was when faceting, planes and corners, took over the work. The form [more truly



Terry Stringer, maker of heroic statements that challenge one's perceptions.

three-dimensional] took over and I didn't need paint. The play of shadows, of light and shade, was enough."

It was at this point Stringer felt ready to start working in bronze. The paint returned but as a thin patina, often barely there.

His recent still lifes — tables, chairs, the domestic impedimenta of cloths, bowls, jugs, flowers and fruit — are witty plays with perspective. From one angle a table appears completely normal. Shift your viewing angle slightly and that depth and reality is lost: the table top is only centimetres long, what appeared round is flat. The distortions of the biased perspec-

tive, not visible a moment before, are suddenly revealed.

Stringer's domestic still lifes worked on the way the human eye, unlike the camera which separates every detail, every proportion, interprets what it sees.

"When we look at things in the real world we're reading a series of expected images from them," he says. "So in a work of art you can unbalance proportions and relations and the human perception is still of the whole, though the parts are broken."

This idea of preconception works quite differently with figures. "When you look at a person," Stringer continues,

"you read some strong signals but you don't necessarily read everything. You see their expression, the way they present themselves. When you look at a sculpture you don't look at it like a person and you don't react to it in the same way. So I try to build in some of those responses with controlled signals or messages.

"What I am doing at present with figures is mixtures of movement, perceptions and the expected basic form they sit on. The head of the figure of a woman I am working on now is much bigger than the classical idea — one in six rather than one in eight. We have reached a point when our society is coming around to seeing personality as more important than physical attributes. The head is much bigger because it asserts the personality, whereas the body dominates our attention otherwise.

"I am trying to see if I can get away with this (change in the traditional proportions). If people will accept a big head. I see this figure as a totem pole, too."

Stringer works from a small, light studio at the back of a big old villa in the Auckland suburb of Mt Eden. The walls of the house are hung with the works of Richard Killeen, Neil Dawson's wall sculptures and paintings by the late Lois White and other friends.

"I'm not a serious collector. I'm more a 'can't live without it' collector, whether I can afford it or not. I find it hard to look at my own work. It's a continuing process and I want to keep working on it. So when I look at someone else's work I want to see a complete set of ideas. I like artists with a strong statement. A work of art should have an altar feel to it, an obsessive, cherished or painfully disclosed feeling."

Stringer describes his own work patterns as erratic but he puts in long hours working and re-working his clay models before they are ready to be cast at Art Works, a specialist arts foundry. As well as exhibiting regularly throughout the country since the early 70s, he has also had several exhibitions in Los Angeles and Sydney. He now ranks as one of the top sculptors in the country. ●
LOUISE CALLAN