

## Thursday Arts

## Feast of life's fine things

● A work from Robyn Kahukiwa's *Whiteout Series*.

**T**HIS week is one of those times when art in Auckland is exceptionally rich in quality and variety.

At the Fisher Gallery in Pakuranga is a long-overdue memorial exhibition of Nelson Thompson's work.

After war service from 1941-45 Thompson studied at the Central School and at the Chelsea School of Art in London. When he returned to New Zealand he became a teacher and eventually became a lecturer and head of Department at the Secondary Teachers' College in Epsom where he had a considerable influence on the course of education in art. He retired in 1979 and died 10 years later.

Thompson was a fine draughtsman and his teaching went hand in hand with his artistic practice. His convictions about the value of art in society were unwavering.

He exhibited his work on a regular basis and his activity increased after his retirement. His work shows an interesting series of developments based on his skilful drawing and all clearly shown

in the handsome exhibition in the Fisher Gallery.

Earliest works go back to Gisborne where he was born. Deft pen and water-colour drawings of wharf scenes and the sculptural quality given to eroded sea forms show the kinds of attitude cultivated by the English Neo-romantics such as John Piper and, in New Zealand, by Eric Lee-Johnston.

As the work develops a quiet sense of local colour is replaced by stronger colour with more emotional loading as in *Desolate Kauri* in 1957, a fine example of the burnt-out tree which was such an evocative symbol for painters at that time.

Landscape remained the main source of his inspiration. By 1962 he was producing tightly knit, mature and painterly works such as *Northland Landscape*, a dark painting unified by the skill with which the brushstrokes are handled and give life to work.

Along the way there were such excellent works as the fine charcoal drawing of the refinery at Marsden Pt, done in a cubist manner.



## Perspective on Art

by T. J. McNamara

Suddenly there was a change and, literally, a blossoming of Thompson's art.

Under the influence of Emil Nolde, the German Expressionist, the artist launched into a series of saturated watercolours in intense colour on wet paper. Subjects were close-up details of flower centres.

These energetic and vivid works, which required great experience in the making to bring them off, are represented by outstanding examples, notably *Purple Flower Centre* painted about 1966.

**T**HOMPSON extended this technique to wide, rich landscapes, particularly of Fiordland, then to wide panoramas.

Then, in response to some need for system, his art changed to a very tidy and ordered pattern of esplanade scenes made with a very inventive use of templates.

He was on the point of combining the rich, loaded colour of the flower paintings with the order of the coastal scenes at his untimely death.

The exhibition is a welcome tribute to an involved and consistent painter and is accompanied by a very useful catalogue.

A feature of contemporary New Zealand art has been the gathering power

of Robyn Kahukiwa, whose origins are Ngātoru. Kahukiwa has an exhibition at Te Taumata Gallery in the Finance Plaza on Level 3.

This show is called *E Hine* and is devoted to Maori women. The theme Te Manawa (the heart) runs through the work and the heart symbol is very prominent in many of the paintings.

What also gives the paintings their extraordinary power is the sense that the past, the present and the future are gathered into one image that suggests a continuum.

This is particularly apparent in the huge paintings of the *Whiteout* series which are over-whelming in their force.

These paintings were made after discovering a large file of photographs of unidentified Maori women taken by British and American photographers in the late 1800s and early this century.

These photographs are the basis of paintings in a large format in black and white. Each woman from the past is shown with a woman from the present whose image has the colour that the picture born of the photo lacks.

This is the present and this image of the contemporary woman is obscured by a white overlay. Both women look out severely from the canvas to a future that contains both.

This moving series of works is supported by some dark, brooding paintings such as *Tangi Mai*, by the heart paintings, and by an enormously rich and complex work, *Taniwha Wounded* but not Dead.

This huge, roaring work has a still centre of a woman figure with the female spirit of principal supporting her and at one with her. The canvas sweeps toward an uncertain future.

Also part of the exhibition are drawings soon to be published as part of a collection of the writings of Maori women.

In this identification of the woman with the land is wonderfully conveyed by the strata-like textures in *Papa* and the link between woman and spirit given memorable form in *Mana Wahine*.

The paintings and drawings make this surely one of the most important exhibitions of the year so it is surprising that the two three-dimensional sculptures on show should be unconvincingly over-worked and busy without attaining directness and force apparent elsewhere.

Of a quite different order of things is the copious and very witty exhibition by Paul Hartigan at the Claybrook Gallery in Claybrook Rd, Parnell.

This is art about art. Without some knowledge of recent New Zealand painting the point of many of these works would be lost.

Surfaces and colours of the work of Gordon Walters, Milan Mrozuch and Ralph Hotere

are brilliantly evoked by beautifully mounted strips of sandpaper which come in a variety of grades and colours.

What could be no more than a feeble gimmick becomes, in the inventive and admiring hands of Paul Hartigan, a comment and a tribute.

Only the dreadful colour of the repainted McCahon seems to have an element of mockery which is supported by additional writing on the image and strikes a sour note.

**R**EFERENCES go beyond New Zealand to Duchamp and to Pop Art. One piece is literally, "pop" art since it is made up of 14 cans of soft drink. The trick here is to support the posterlike vividness of beer and drink can labels with the cartons of fast food enshrining them in the frames of fine art with all the appurtenances of brass name plates — making them a special, ironic kind of fine art icon.

Reminiscence of Hartigan's early work with fluorescent tubes is particularly amusing in the icon devoted to Picasso.

There is a kind of brittle brilliance throughout this show that adds a special tart flavour to the variety of work this week. And variety is further extended by the work of five young sculptors, four just out of art school, at the Gregory Flint Gallery in The Strand, Parnell.

The established artist in the group is Andrew de Boer whose works in wood and in bronze range up tall and dancing with

open spaces as important as the forms.

There is a hint of menace in the dance of *Kaiti*. Rearing forms of *Vulcanus* are linked with that folk-art technique that supports letter-boxes on a twisting length of welded chain.

Much the same technique is used in the linked guns of *Simon Endress' A Handsome Ransom* where the weapons support big coins inscribed *Spend More, Save Less*.

Irony and social comment of this work are also found in two works by Monique Redmond. One is an unbearably loud vacuum cleaner dedicated to Mrs Hoover and the other a little box with some neat role-reversal images. The show is completed by confident work by Michael Parakeowhal and Anton Parsons.

A printmaker completes the spectrum of expression. Brenda Hartill, a New Zealander with a very considerable reputation in Britain, is showing her deeply embossed collagraph prints at the Portfolio Gallery in Lorne St.

Images reflect the land-forms and brown terrain of Spain where she spends much of her time. They are made from plates built up with plaster, glue and cork and run through a big press to make impressive three-dimensional images. Those images gain from the play of light and complex terrain of their surface emphasised by colour and touches of gold.

The single most impressive work is the large print, *La Crestaluna*.