

Treaty artists a powerful response

TWO significant events have occurred in the area of art this year in which the Wellington City Art Gallery has been directly involved.

The first is the Mana Tiriti exhibition, held in Wellington from April to June and now showing at the Fisher Gallery, in a modified form, until the end of October.

The second is the publication which accompanies the *Now See Hear* exhibition, which finishes in Wellington at the end of the month.

The book brings together about 40 writers of art history, contemporary criticism and art practice. Each provides a substantial contribution around the theme of the exhibition: art, language and translation.

Included is an essay by Mairee Goodall, titled *Translating and the Treaty* which, taken with *Mana Tiriti* substantiates the 1960 debate at the forefront of critical inquiry. Like the artists in the exhibition — six Maori and four Pakeha — Goodall's writing is a response to the state's atti-



Art

by Richard Dale

tude to the treaty as well as suggesting measures of redress.

Such measures are more implicit in the works exhibited at Pakuranga, yet clearly the preparation and organisation of the exhibition is in accordance with a perceived spirit of how the treaty should operate.

The exhibition was initiated in Wellington by the City Art Gallery, Project Waitangi and the Haeata Maori Women's Art Collective.

It is unfortunate that Diane Prince and Barbara Strathdee are not included at Pakuranga and that the installation of a whare by the Haena Collective is also absent. This installation was central to the Wellington exhibition as a collective act and for uniting separate artists' contributions.

Yet one can impose a

conceptual framework on the exhibits at Pakuranga. Each exhibit can be read as an architectural component of a whare, unifying them spatially and thematically.

The entrance is Robert Jahake's wood and metal wall sculpture based on the meeting house lintel, which takes as its reading a reference to the late 19th century prophetic movements.

It fuses Maori spirituality and symbolism with the Christian, drawing analogies between the plight of the Israelites at the beginning of the *Old Testament* and the treatment of the Maori by the European.

The main support structures of my imagined whare are provided by Philip Kelly and Emily Karaka, and by *Treaty Time-line* is Kelly's chronology of Maori contact since 1840. It is political without forced intent, merely so in fact by virtue of collecting in one readily assimilable display of events normally kept silent.

They are given voice in the appropriate 150 panels and have a row of suspended four objects relating to Maori economy.

Each of Karaka's works has a rectangle of material over two gate posts over which is superimposed the word "lo", the Maori god, and intimations of a binary system.

Fenced in by these four works we are subject to multi-vocal discourse on usurpation, land, fishing and cultural rights, summed up in the imperatives "alienate, confiscate, legislate, assassinate." This is urban art with a graffitist's sense of urgency and protest.

The political backbone of the exhibition is arranged by Paparangi Reid and Irihapeti Ramsden. Crosses of photo-copied treaty are being ironed out in front of sheets of "Pakeha legislation" hanging out to dry. It is called *150 years of Dirty Laundry*.

It can be paired with Juliet Batten's *Against Broken Promises*, where colour xerox and paint are employed to record alterations on special sites on the West Coast. As montages they function as autonomous art; but they might be seen as records of performance, ritual acts given a programmatic edge which would rail against the Pakeha's response to the treaty.

Inside the whare are wall decorations. Kura Rewiri-Thorsen's triptych *The Covenant* has clear and open colour experiments and reductive landscape which include Maori signatories of the treaty, a legacy of the missionary, and further crossing-out — all as documentation placed over the land.

Similar processes occur in Gerda Leonards' vertical three-panel painting *The Awakening*, where issues of appropriation are caught, both in form and subject, within a land/body dichotomy.

Rob Taylor's efforts at finding bicultural resolution through a desire for an essentialist art of Aotearoa results in a highly constricted geometric and hard-surfaced abstract painting.

Finally, beyond my imagined architecture, is the earth and the sky. For the earth see Roma Potiki's triptych. Panels use gathered material from nature — seed pods and shells — and a method of creating single tonal areas by processing punga and pumice. Mythology and the life/death cycle are reclaimed both for the Maori and for women.

The sky is represented by Robert Pouwhare's brilliant green neon and steel kite, *Te Kaea*; an *Angelus Novus*, his back is turned to the future to transmit records from the past, signalled in two diagrammatic paintings. Both record the confiscation of thousands of acres of land.

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These are by no means the only artists to address the issue of the treaty. Camilla Highfield, at the Betty Wallis Gallery, takes it as a collage component in her paintings. Colourful enamel paint is on corrugated iron, seared and cut, the basis and metaphorical substitute for symbolic documentation of the land, in the developing tradition of McCahon and Horeore.

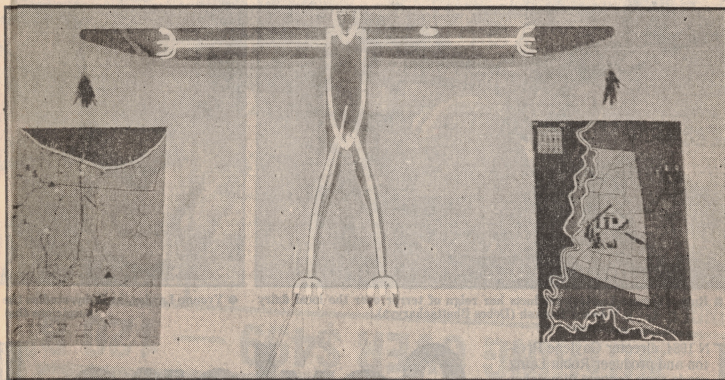
In Terence Hanscombe's work at Gregory Flint Gallery the dominant Gaelic script is but one of a number of systems in symbol and letter.

Whether it is necessary to be familiar with the languages used is not so vital as having an awareness of the transformations that they undergo, through erasure, reduction, augmentation, typological variations and quasi-figurative groupings.

In whatever form, our own consciousness is invited to play within his paintings, to choose and exclude at will.

Christine Webster's exhibition at Artis is significant, merging the political and psychological. These large black and white photographs from her *Hong Kong* series are very much in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, two of which, *Toll Tale* and *Red Yolk*, were banned when first shown in Hong Kong.

The full-length figures, which at times approximate to real size, are in staged and metaphorical guises. They emerge from the seamless.



● *Te Kaea*, the neon and steel kite installation by Robert Pouwhare at the Fisher Gallery.

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