

Construction that defies convention

IT IS a great week for constructions. There are four interesting exhibitions that fall into this category of sculpture that lies outside the use of conventional materials.

The works that come closest to the usual expectations of sculpture are the pieces that make up *Crossings* by Peter Nicholls at the Fisher Gallery in Pakuranga.

Since his earliest shows in Auckland in the 70s Nicholls has been concerned with wood in its natural form and in the ways it can interlock. This exhibition is dominated by two large works that are exceptionally long and narrow. These works, *Whanganui* and *River Crossings* take this shape because they are made from long, twisting branches of old wood which are dovetailed together to make snaking, shapes that reach as much as nine metres as they flow across the floor.

River Crossings is the more subtle of the two works. On the flat side of half-rounds of branches of elm and rata is inlaid a trail of bronze.

The choice of wood, natural and deciduous, is significant in itself. This shaped and man-made trail is intersected by seven crossings where eroded pieces of driftwood full of natural curves and grain interrupt the journey.

Also inlaid into the flat surface are parts of a bride, a spur, a knife and, inconspicuously, a battery torch.

The result is a fascinating interaction between what is found and what is made, what is natural and what is shaped by hand.

As it undulates across the floor, the piece also takes on other layers of meaning, references to pioneers shaping the land and to any journey that is intersected by the unforeseen, the untidy and the illogical.

The other work has much more specific references to the history of the artist's great-great-grandfather on his mother's side, Richard Taylor, a missionary who travelled extensively on the river.

The work is inset with a

paddle, then a saw and a billhook. Where it loops over an obstacle, a tiny metal cross is fixed in the wood and then, as the piece changes direction there is a compass and a waterbottle close to an adze and an axe.

The whole work suggests exploration and cultural interaction and its form is fascinating, highly original and closely linked to the land.

With these two works is *Levels*, a six-part work made of steel.

This piece has the peculiarity of being very effective if you allow your eye to come down its levels. But it is dead if you try to battle up the slope.

The rest of the work is made up of wall reliefs in forged steel. The hammered and torched

These have the length of massive size and the delicacy that comes from flowing, car-like shapes that reveal the natural colour of the wood.

The bolts that hold these works together are intrusive — the steel pipes in *The Bird Gateway* even more so, though the carving on the lintel of this work is superb. Tenon and mortise and binding would suit the context better.

The delicacy extends to the particularly effective patterns on *Peppere 1840*, and here the bolts fit the work better.

There is one other superbly confident work in the show, an end-post called *Pou Tahu*. The rest is made up of a dozen or more wall reliefs where a heavy piece of log forms

Hotere has done many works that feature an intense, polished blackness. Culbert's work has been with light. Much of his work uses fluorescent tubes.

These works have a black frame, usually from a window. These enclose a surface, sometimes reflective stainless steel, sometimes transparent, sometimes intensely black.

Engaged with this surface are fluorescent tubes.

They can frame the surface and dominate it; they can be almost lost in the surface; they can thrust right through the surface; or they can be vanquished by the surface and hang limply from it.

At times they produce an almost unbearable white light. At other times the light is reduced to a gleam.

These works are at one level a series of formal exercises, variations on a theme that works well except where the surfaces are plain panels without a frame. They are also metaphors for life where sometimes night is more important than day, where sometimes looking inward is more important than outward expression, where sometimes vivid light needs dark introspection to make it shine more clearly.

When the light drops from the surface and hangs slackly, as in No 8, tension is lost and the work is merely a demonstration.

At its best, exploiting the simplicity of the means and despite the obviousness of wires and connection boxes — these works have an astonishingly resonant layers of meaning.

Another construction which is a whole rather than a series of individual works is *Broken Journey* by Morgan Jones. This is at Airspace in Quay St, where it occupies the whole of a very large room.

There are two wall pieces which are dark and

barred, suggesting public architecture of an authoritarian regime.

Then there is a column and pediment forming an arch like that at La Defense in Paris and equally anonymous in feeling.

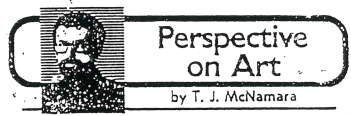
Spreading out from these dark constructions are 60 much smaller pieces that are warmly coloured and sit on the floor. They range from simple cubes to complex, stepped structures and they have all the variety of democratic, domestic structures.

Jones' work has in the past been mostly related to farm landscape. Here he addresses the urban situation.

Whereas before his work spoke of constrictions on the individual, here he is expansively speaking of possibility of individuality in the face of grim official structures.

While all these admirable ideas are expressed, in a huge work that has been carried through with tremendous conscientiousness and skill, there is also something rather deadly and stiff about the whole project so that it is an intellectual demonstration — without the pull of emotional involvement.

The forms that suggest imprisonment are more decorative than menacing.



shapes are always inventive and vigorously worked, but the ideas have none of the complexity of the large works.

Nicholls' big work *Spine*, outside the City Gallery, has become a much-admired part of our cityscape and this fine exhibition gives compelling evidence of the variety of his expression.

Wood in the form of weighty slabs of timber are the main parts of the largest and most impressive works in an exhibition by Ross Hemera at Te Taumata Gallery in the Finance Place on level 3.

This exhibition is called *Ki Raro i Te Pare*, Below the Lintel. The lintel is a reference to doorways, windows and thresholds. Passing under the lintel releases a visitor from intense tapu; crossing a threshold can be, on many occasions, a time of wonder and anticipation.

This sense of magic is particularly marked in two of the artist's big gateway structures, *The Mouth of the River* and *The Tautiwha Gateway*.

the lintel at the top of each.

Beneath this lintel, framed in sackcloth or in iron, are little stylised vignettes in watercolour, based on Maori motifs.

These are not so much a threshold as a window. Although individual works are appealing, the effect of them all together is very repetitive. The real power of the show — and it is a compelling power — lies in the large works.

Details of artists' lives are usually irrelevant to art criticism which should concentrate on the work of art itself. But in *Post Black*, a collaborative exhibition by Ralph Hotere and Bill Culbert at the Sue Crookford Gallery at Achilles House, it is worth noting that one artist is a Maori who has chosen to live and work mainly in New Zealand and the other is a Pakeha who has done most of his work in Europe.

This exhibition is about contrasts and polarity, about light and dark, about white and black. It is also about total equality.