



Parallel Histories

Lat: 36° 55' S Long: 154° 02' E

an installation by Nancy de Freitas

AAA Artist In Residence

In collaboration with Kapka Kossakova and Mark Storey

sponsored by Woods Glass (NZ) Limited

WISHER GALLERY

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Foreword

How do we as people experience and interpret a single moment or event? Is there such a thing as a unified human response to stimuli? A million people may see the same sunset, but each individual experience of the moment will be different – coloured by the sum of their personal experience and history. Nancy de Freitas says:

A lifetime is not lived, in the mind it is an intense method with the past and with the future. All of the personal histories are concealed beneath appearances. The language of personal histories is layered and complex.

There is one thing that we have in common philosophically but which is as unique to us individually as our fingerprints – we each have a personal history that is fundamental to who we are. We each live 'parallel histories', inhabiting the same place and time, but often with vastly different experiences of this life.

The writing in this publication also reflects the diversity of our individual experiences and responses. Paul Johnson's 'Memory of a Journey to Miraflores Bend' is a very personal account of a familiar excursion, imbued with the sights, sounds and smells that make his memories of the journey so vivid and real.

Language allows us to communicate our personal experiences and interpretations of our lives with our fellow 'parallel historians'. Nancy de Freitas and Kapka Kandareva have incorporated spoken and written language into *Parallel Histories*, triggering personal, parallel memories and experiences in the reader/observer.

We find ourselves considering our lives, not only in relation to contemporary cultural and national parameters, but also in relation to the parallel human journeys of time past and those to come in the next millennium. New Zealanders of all ages and cultures, many of us young citizens, are increasingly challenged by the complexity of the contemporary cultural environment.

Memories of experiences that shape the form of our personal histories are often intertwined to a time and a place. Tracy Gilbert's 'Generational and the Arts' explores the concept of an individual's perceptions of their environment, drawing strong parallels between the memory and experience of time and place by both the artist and viewer, and the representation of landscape in art.

The language of representations, metaphor and symbol are explored in the physical configuration of *Parallel Histories*. The transparent, parallel layers of the glass can be seen as representing layers of meaning, experience and memory. The long, undulating form of the installation suggests travel, journey, the passage of time. Landscape forms are echoed in the form of the glass studs – a river, the sea, mountains, coastline.

The changing, varying lighting of *Parallel Histories* reminds us of the passage of time, shifting light and darkness. Any and every. The lighting is also somewhat theatrical, recalling the idea that we are all life-long players in some sort of 'cosmic play'. Enjoy the show.

CAROL ELLIOTT
Director, Peter Gallery

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Geomentality and the arts

TERESA ELLIOTT, ANNA HALL, ANDY DUFF,
WILLIAMS, AND AN HISTORY AND ARTS COLLECTIVE

'It is not so much a portrait of a place as such but a memory of a time and an experience of a particular place'

CRON IN CAUTION (referring to *Take Sight and Stay!*)

'...it represents a crossing of my own sense of identity in this country. It speaks for the place and time in which I have produced a family, a stake in the future.

This marks the space in which new journeys are begun that will, nevertheless run parallel with those of the past, on this soil and in other parts of the earth.'

ARMY IN THE AIR (on *Parallel Histories?*)

'For the immigrant, and for all those who oscillate the ocean is a doorway. Standing in the draughty doorway in what those poems are about'

NAPOLEON BONAAPARTE (on his boat of poetry
all that's level to the land')

Geomentality is an 'established and lasting sense of mind regarding the environment' which is embedded in the construction of the landscape. It can be identified through an analysis of the differing ways in which groups of people or individuals interact with, respond to and perceive their environments. These differing attitudes can reflect cultural, social and professional perceptions and can be seen in the day to day treatment of the landscape, such as placement of buildings and houses and garden designs. It can also be revealed in art that engages with the landscape and the land, whether the artistic works with it physically as do landscape sculptors or refers to it directly or indirectly in painting, sculpture and poetry.

Hung-Kay 'Sue' in his paper, 'On Geomentality', illustrated differing geomentality by creating a hypothetical comparison between the garden designs of a French gardener and a Japanese gardener who were both given a blank of land to transform into the most 'beautiful garden they could think of'. 'Sue suggested that the French gardener might create a French Formal garden in which 'beauty' is created through controlling and dominating nature, modifying it to make it more beautiful than nature in its untouched form. The formal French garden is characterised by artificial shapes and highly ordered plants. They are products of a mindset in which humans remain in awe and superior to nature. The Japanese garden, on the other hand, tried to give the illusion of nature subordinated by the human hand by trying to retain and imitate natural shapes. The aim of the Japanese gardener was to create the 'essence of nature herself.'¹ This type of garden reflects controlled nature is more beautiful than anything humans kind could manufacture.

While the previous analysis reveals the different geomentality of the two gardeners, a similar approach can be

applied to art that deals with the landscape, creating a relative assessment of the geomentality of artists. We could trace 19th century New Zealand landscape artists as an area of study, as an example. Landscapes of this time have been categorised into genres such as the Romantic, the Sublime, and 'The Ideal'. These genres reflected the perceptions of the landscape that were typical of the culture and time in which they were created. They also clearly reflect the geomentality of the cultures from which they emerged.

These geomentality were exemplified by characterised by a sense of 'detachment' from the landscape and nature. As Francis Pound pointed out, the generation of a pictorial view of the landscape, for a start, reflects the European concept of contemplating nature, seeing and capturing it 'in a picture'. In the 'Ideal' landscape nature was tamed and modified to create a 'paradise which could never occur naturally. Elements were presented harmoniously representing this splendour as seen in the canoe gliding out into the gentle, soft hills waters in Lake Arrowak, Rem. 1846, by William Fox. In the 'Sublime' landscape a raw powerful and extreme nature was presented which entailed and embodied God's almighty power. While those works were intended to inspire wonder and admiration of God's work in the viewer they also represented a fearfulness of the overwhelming power of the creature and the creator.

Even in the landscape paintings of New Zealand in the 1830s – 70's this binary approach to the landscape is still evident. While the small scale panoramic figures of the early New Zealand landscape artists gave, humans are still presented 'against' a landscape background. 'Against' and dominant. In Robin White's *Flowers and Harbour Cove*, 1875, and *Rua Angai* Rem. 1911, the spaces look out at us. While the figures and the landscape were treated in a similar manner

shutter down
scrolling shutter



to hide
to stop

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thus suggesting a close connection and relationship between the sea, the landscape and sea artists like a landscape as a writing which contextualises and characterises the figure.

There is another geometric orientation which can be seen across the range of art practice however that reflects a different perception and understanding of the landscape, revealing it as an internal element rather than an opposing force. The work of these artists, writers and crafts people goes beyond describing nature in a detached manner; they are instead interested in how the landscape lives within us. Their landscape based works becomes a 'landscape of experience' embodying emotions, feelings, representing time, transience and memory.

The landscapes of Colin McCubbin are probably New Zealand's most well known example of this expanded perception of the landscape. He referred to his landscapes as an intersection of the temporal, the geographical and the personal, a 'memory of a time and an experience of a particular place'.⁶ McCubbin's landscapes embodied his identity as certain points in time. They were often used to reveal his inner thoughts, feelings and conflicts, especially his religious concerns. In a wider context, the symbolism in his landscapes, created through the use of opposing elements such as black/white, solidity/transparency day/night, also refers to issues of duality contained within human nature.

Kapka Kawahara is an immigrant from France, Bulgaria who often refers to the new landscape of her adopted home New Zealand. To her, the New Zealand landscape, especially its weather conditions, embodies and is a weak

physical reminder of her homeland in its difference. She refers to the sea as a barrier and also a connection to her past. It separates yet also represents a 'doorway'⁷ to her homeland. She is concerned yet separated by the expanse of the ocean.

In the autobiographical essay *There is Where Every Memory Stays*,⁸ 1994, Kawahara reflects on her return visit to her hometown of Sofia. She refers to Sofia as if it is a component of herself, not as an external separate element. She writes:

'What I see of Sofia is myself... I see myself in the installed nature of Sofia... My reflection slips away in the yellow currents of the canal.'

Nancy de Freitas also acknowledges the impact that her childhood experience in the West Indies and her emigration to New Zealand has had on her. It is reflected in her approach towards the landscape as well as in her art making. Because the New Zealand landscape did not contain for her a sense of familiarity created through associations with the past she refers to a connection with its essence, its underside, as opposed to its external features. It is an internalised perception of nature that reflects the sense of change de Freitas experienced as a child, memories of the past and emotional responses. It is this complex relationship which she referred to in her paper, *Geomateriality: Reframing the Landscape*.⁹

Our entire culturally and social nature, that is, the physical land as the representational landscape of painting and photography is a complex mix of observation and emotional and emotional perception.¹⁰

Through an understanding of the term Geomateriality, new ways of viewing and understanding art which deals with the landscape can be found. It allows for an acknowledgement of diverse perceptions of nature, which can extend beyond cultural and established concerns. While contextual analysis of landscape art is valuable it does not always allow for individual approaches which reach beyond its boundaries; approaches which could have evolved from a developing global understanding of and knowledge of other cultures or perhaps from universal understandings and experiences. It provides an avenue for cross-cultural connections as well as cultural differences to be recognised in this field.



Memory of a journey to Manukau Heads

PAUL R. JOHNSTON, writer and lecturer at the School of Visual Arts, Massey Institute of Technology

Twenty nine kilometres at the cross files from Queen Street to the Manukau Heads.

Above a foreground of windweeps stand and a narrow band of broken water hang swirling grey clouds.

Across these clouds, faded and broken, in Times Roman lettering, are the words, 'Grand Excursion to the Manukau Heads'. This representation comes from a 1998 oil painting by Rosemary Tai. The text reproduced from an advertisement placed in a few nineteenth century Auckland newspapers, *The Southern Cross*.

The Grand Excursion started at the Exchange wharf and its itinerary could 'view the scene of the wreck of the *Ceylon* and the Manukau Bar' before returning on the same day. By the distinctive regular excursions to the north Manukau Heads were made by sea, beginning in Titirangi at what is now called Loydell House. For pleasure seeking visitors, guided by experts, Manukau Heads was a remote and 'exotic' destination. The main attraction was the panorama and the monument.

Such excursions to the Manukau Heads have long since disappeared.

Although there is now a road and for all but the last seven kilometres, reaching the place has reasons, the fast moving currents and unpredictable sea are stark reminders and surfers who congregate further up the coast. The Manukau Heads is a place for fishermen, swimmers and walkers, people drawn to its wild nature.

It was in relative isolation and unpopulated spaces that first attracted me out there in the early seventies. I have returned many times, usually on my own, wandering as will across the open beaches and up and over the surrounding hills. Occasionally I take a camera or developed but often I simply go to absorb the multitude of sensations experienced there. Happy handed I will carry with me the memories of previous visits, the accumulation of stories and memories said. I found myself writing the presence of the past at the Manukau Heads. I came to realise that the experience of going there was also a significant ingredient of my

perception of the place. The journey was far more than moving from one place to another, but an unfolding of memories... a sense of place.

The old road was an extension of the place and was related to the geography like the road.¹

Fifty minutes from Queen Street via Titirangi and Hala on Auckland's West Coast.

Driving along the northwestern, northerly arm of the city, across the suburban landscape of western Auckland, requires little sense of geography, as I head east towards the Manukau Heads. Speed and distance become my primary orientates.

Slowing for the rising terrain of the Titirangi ridge breaks through the suburban order.

Up here you catch the first glimpse of the Manukau Harbour, between shops and karrii coasters before dropping down the West Coast road to the valley below. The road winds up and over rolling hills, past little style houses into the bush covered hills at the back of Laidlaw's and Cornwallis. Out here the road narrows as the land goes. Descending into Hala and the bay beyond, the first expansive view of the Manukau Harbour and the Heads fill my windows.

Down past the beach and across, the small sand of Teahua my memories enter the car and begin after I have turned southwards to follow the rocky shoreline to Little Hala. At the corner of St. Kottell (Jackie Hill) I have to turn away from the coast to begin the road zigging up the steep valley towards Wharapa.

Recent photos say to doublecheck carefully whilst haphazardly the corner of isolation as I leave behind the land of the little dwellings. The smell of volcanic stone and dust increases discontinuously by the time I round the last precipitous corner and leave the valley.

I enter a wilderness. Two rugged bluffs that plunge into deep bush covered valleys, and under the shadow of Mount

Donald McLean the road pivots in very southwards. A glimpse of water far below and then the sign for Distraction Gully, a place where, in the early 1780s, the Kawanui people of the Whānau were captured and massacred at the hand of a Ngāi Whānau war party.² Past the parking area where rubble piles of shattered auto glass give more warning to the unwary traveller of today.

Through that covered gorge and along, the view of a straight valley slowly opens-out, revealed in grass, heather and then the grey band of broken sea to the south.

I start the descent through thickened scrubby into the valley, slow now the path leads before turning into the roughly formed car park near the ramshackle Wharapa Lodge. The oldest part of this cluster of buildings was built in 1805 for the timber mill owner, Rowena Gibbons. His mill, further up the valley, processed most of the available kauri in that area from 1807 to 1915. Today, the ridges and valleys around the lodge reveal the impact of his labour.

This is the end of the road.

The distance between sea piles is measured in memories.³

I head toward the sound of rattling sea, walking a sandy track through coastal carpets of pōhutukawa (interest) and past well filled waterways. At the top of a steady slope the full sweep of the beach lies before me.

High above, a few hundred paces to my left, Wing Head descends in grey steps to the beach where the sea has formed a gap in the headland with Pāremore Island. Spaced out at regular intervals amongst the lower rocks and sand to the gap are a few Maohi and our stained ends of shells, the remains of the railway that carried kauri from the Gibbons mill back up the valley to ships waiting beside Pāremore. I know this from an early photograph I have seen of a three-masted sailing ship tied up alongside the wide shelf of rock that runs just beyond this gap. Here, on the protruded, inner side of the island, the bay is deep, narrow and by rising tides.

Past way up Wing Head a fallen mass of dry and rock steps rise from climbing any further.

Directly west of this spot, over the top and beyond the distinctive leaning shape of Carter rock, the shoreline runs northwards towards Kaitiaki. Used the obvious feature that first used to be right in at Carter rock but changing currents and the prevailing winds westerly winds have combined to transform sea and a half kilometre of broken sea into sand and sea-groans.

A few years ago I walked out to that familiar cove of sand and mud wharf, according to older charts, the Oswald bank lay under a shelter, or so of continually breaking seas. It was here that the Oswald, a 385-ton ketch on a voyage from Auckland to Auckland, was wrecked in 1848.

Wind and tide carried her all her covers onto the bank that long since been absorbed by the beach's outward growth. Her course was to line up the rocks that run through Nine Pin, Pāremore and then on to Pōpōma hill giving safe passage through the treacherous Manukau Bar. Maori navigators have used this same orientation for many centuries.⁴

In 1863 the *Opheia*, a Royal Navy warship of 1825 tons, came in south of that line and came to grief on the middle bank. On the day 2 March 1863, Signboard Edward Wing came down from his house high on the ridge, past where I now stand, to climb to his signal station on the highest point on Pāremore

Mount. He had no idea that New Zealand's worst sea disaster was about to unfold. By midnight 180 lives out of a complement of 258 had perished.

In this place where change and chaos reign, more complex phenomena and navigators are denied. Sharp tidal currents have frustrated attempts to anchor channel markers to beacons or placed on prominent points on both sides of the head. From when I stand I can see two beacons. One is on Nine Pin, the craggy rock just 100 metres south of Wing Head which, when aligned with the second beacon on Carter Head, gives the correct bearing for vessels entering the most severely formed South Channel.

Amidst all the changing navigational parameters Nine Pin has remained a constant reference point. I have come to realise how significant this is after learning that in Maori name it is *Tū Tara* - a *Kape* the second rock of *Kape*.⁵ It was at this rock that *Kape* carried out ceremonies to ensure the safety of his journey to the north. At 'Nine Pin', this rock represents a stable reference point in a geomorphical system, but at *Tū Tara* *Kape* it is a constant symbol change and uncertainty, a place where journeys converge.

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Let us we come

we come

Biographical notes

Nancy de Freitas is an Auckland writer who is currently the ASB Artist in Residence at the West Plaza Building in Auckland. She was born in the West Indies and lived there until going to an school in Toronto, Canada. After graduating, she worked and exhibited in Australia before moving to New Zealand where she completed her Master Degree in Fine Art at the University of Auckland. She is currently a senior lecturer at the School of Art and Design, Auckland University of Technology. De Freitas is well known as a painter and more recently as an installation artist whose multidisciplinary interests have resulted in a series of successful collaborative projects.

Defying the Odds, was a work created for the Fisher Gallery that dealt with notions of violence and despair in relation to contemporary ethnic riots. It was a reflection on the transformative power and potential for dignity that is inherent in the human psyche as a response to the experience of violence and despair. In collaboration with Gordon Braid, electronic composer (1994).

Zoo in de Gouda, a dance in three movements, which was created for the Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch, investigated ideas of translation and transformation as a way of understanding the underlying structure of dance choreography. The work was made in collaboration with Mary Jane O'Reilly, director of the Auckland Ballet Company, Ramsey Whelan, dance critic and teacher, Maggie Burke, cinematographer, Lyn Kirk, professional dancer, and Katherine Hill, composer (1995).

Commentaries on de Freitas' work have appeared in several books including *Idea: Bob's New Zealand Art of Modern Perspectives*, Reed Methuen, 1986, and *Warwick Brown's 100 New Zealand Paintings*, Godwin, 1991.

Mark Steery is an Auckland composer and saxophonist. His pieces have been broadcast on Concert FM and played by groups such as the Ensemble Philharmonia, 175 East, Katholika Company, and scheduled for the forthcoming International Chamber Music Festival. He is currently working on a commission for Creative New Zealand and on further projects with poetry readings, including a similar project with Michelle Leggett and one using a text by Russian Symbolist poet, Andrei Bely.

Mark has been the rehearsal conductor for the Auckland Philharmonia since 1994. He has also played regularly with the Katholika Company and on an occasional on-staff basis with the Auckland Sinfonietta, Auckland Chamber Orchestra, Poni Scratch and Ensemble 175 East. Mark also writes and presents occasional programmes on contemporary music for Concert FM and is a member of the Auckland Chamber Choir.

Kapka Kassabova was born in Bulgaria. At the age of 17, she studied in England for a year where she started learning English. Her family then immigrated to New Zealand where she attended university, majoring in French, and went on to become a full-time writer. Her first book of poetry *All Roads Lead to Me* (Auckland University Press) won the 1998 Montana Book Award for best first book of poetry. In 1999 she published a second poetry collection *Elementary* (AUP), from which most of the text in this installation is taken. Her first novel *Amnesia* (Penguin NZ) was shortlisted for the Ondaatje Medal in Fiction in the 1999 Montana Book Awards and more recently was awarded the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the South-East Asia and the South Pacific. Her next novel, written during her residency at the Rangitoto Fellow in Auckland, will be published by Penguin later in the year.

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