

# Rich pickings for critics and philosophers

**T**HERE are exhibitions this week that raise the questions about the relationship between form and content that critics and philosophers love to debate.

It is fortunate that they are also fascinating to look at so that those who don't want to involve themselves in the big questions can simply look, enjoy and be moved.

Public galleries can show work that could never really relate to a domestic context. With aesthetic decoration a side issue, in a public gallery the meaning can be all important. It still needs a powerful form but the form that conveys the meaning in a gallery may be impossible to accommodate in a house.

This relates to the work of the three artists at the Fisher Gallery in Pakuranga.

In the large room there is sculpture by **Robert Jahnke** and painting by **Shane Cotton**, both Maori artists with established national and international reputations. Both are interested in the interface between Maori and Pakeha culture.

The gallery is dominated by Jahnke's group of huge rubber stamps with wooden handles. These are laid on an aerial photograph of a town laid out on a precise grid. One of the stamps is on its side; it says "Not Negotiable."

The stance of the artist is clear but the impressive thing is the monumental, pillar-like size of the



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huge, turned handles of the stamps.

In other work by Jahnke groups of pepper pots are imposed on aerial photographs of towns. These have the same wit but less weight.

Much more striking are the wonderful round sculptures on the walls. These are like the business end of an official stamp and they too make a protest, here more specifically connected to the settlement of land claims and the fiscal envelope. What fills the viewer with amazement is not the message so much as the flawless making of these objects. The ones in wood are beautifully precise and the ones in steel let into wood ally an equal precision to a striking heraldic quality.

There is much food for thought in this exhibition but there is also an outstanding sculptural talent underpinning the thought.

The work of **Shane Cotton** uses as a basic

image landforms placed on a raised platform which elevates the land to a sacred state. It should be added parenthetically that the landforms are painted with very considerable knowledge and skill.

The work also shows the influence of the remarkable painted meeting houses such as Rongopai. From their painted decorations Cotton has adapted patterns of leaves which are given eyes as they watch the land. It is significant, though, that many of the plants are in pots — they are not deeply rooted in the land but are exotic imports. The concept of the land as something parcelled and potted is also seen in an untitled extended horizontal work which puts a whole landscape in a pot.

Cotton uses wide horizontal horizons very effectively, ranking them one on top of the other to generate a kind of narrative that suggests various aspects advancing and retreating in importance. Once again strong subject matter is given powerful visual expression but offers little for our comfort.

In the smaller room at the Fisher Gallery an installation by **Peter Gibson Smith**, *Amazon on a Dying Horse*, fills the walls. It has been enlarged by computer and transmitted by fax. The fax paper is heat sensitive and after it has been attached to the walls the artist reworks the computer-generated images with a heated soldering iron.

After the exhibition the work will be removed with a wet sponge and cease to exist.

This raises questions about how permanent a work of art should be.

While it exists the work is a striking account of the imagery associated with horses. On one wall there is the image of an archaeological find of a royal burial, with the skeleton of a prince and the trappings of his chariot and the bones of the horses that drew it.

On another wall is a huge photograph of horses roaming free. On a third wall is an immense enlarging of an etching by Goya of a horse balancing on a tightrope while humans gape. The last wall brings humans and horse inextricably together. It is taken from an antique sculpture of an Amazon on a dying horse, an image that was reworked by Rubens.

The whole impressive piece comments both on art history and the interaction of humans, animals and modern technology.

The work of these three artists makes the Fisher Gallery essential visiting over the next month.

**T**WO installations at the other semi-public gallery, Artspace, are also impermanent, impressive in their own way, and provoke questions.

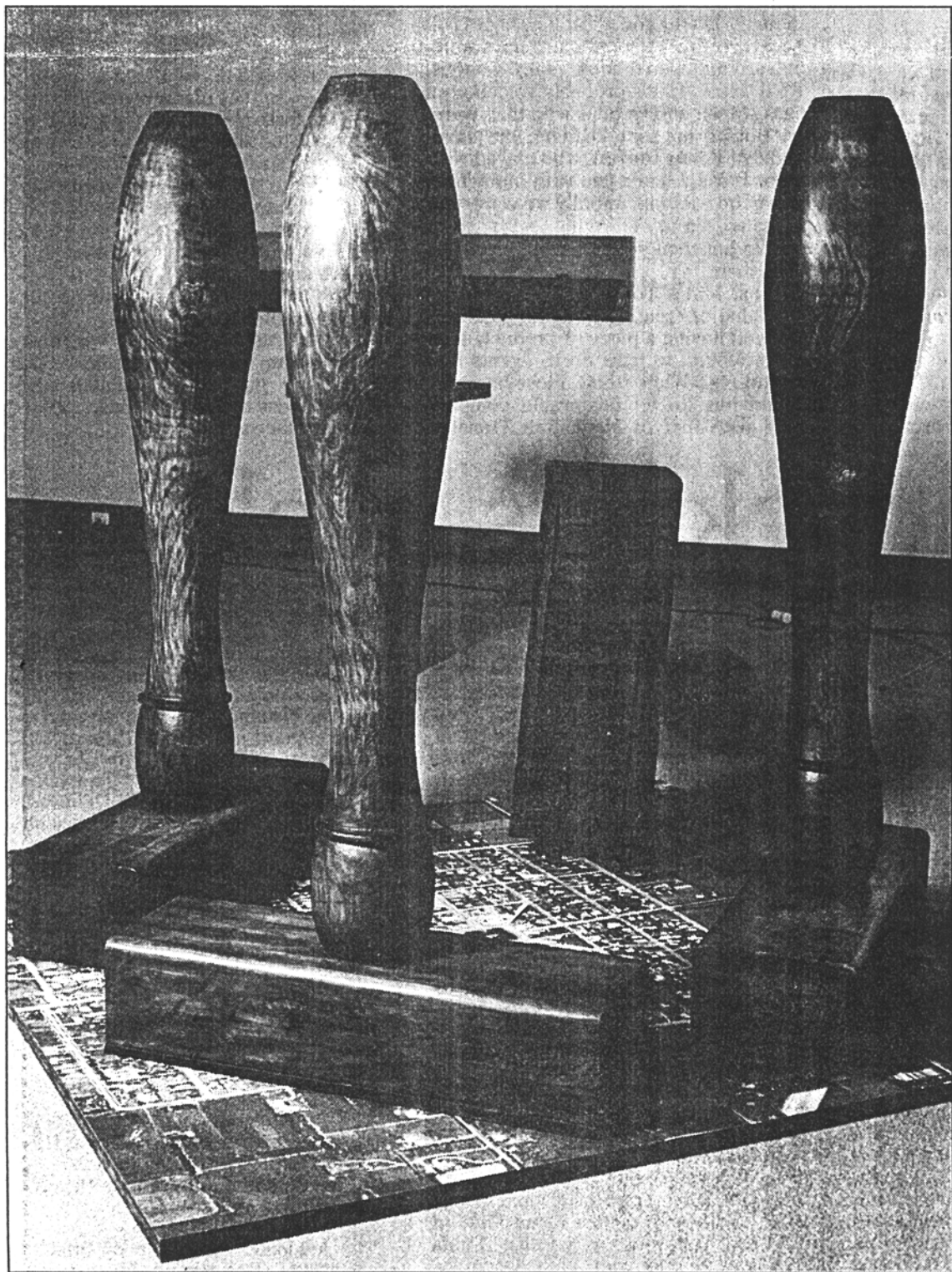
The Australian artist **Joyce Hinterding**, the 1995 Auckland International Artist in Residence, is interested in electricity and has wound 4km of thin, bare, copper wire around the big wooden columns of the main room to make a vast coil that acts as an "energy gatherer."

There is no power in the coil yet it emits a constant hum, making us aware of the invisible forces that surround us.

Lit from above, the copper is striking in colour and texture and its mystery is enhanced by large copper balls attached to the ceiling that emphasise the experimental effect of the generation of an electric charge.

As one drove away the car radio performed the same miracle by scraping music from the air but this familiar miracle did not have quite the magic strangeness of Hinterding's installation.

Also at Artspace is *Maisma* by **Juliet Palmer**. The room has tables, chairs, a sordid ashtray and a vacuum cleaner behind the sofa. The grinding banality of the room is tellingly contrasted with many images of weather conditions on the wall as well as music, dialogue and images that reflect the weather on the television set.



Wooden stamps by Robert Jahnke, at the Fisher Gallery.