

GUY NGAN

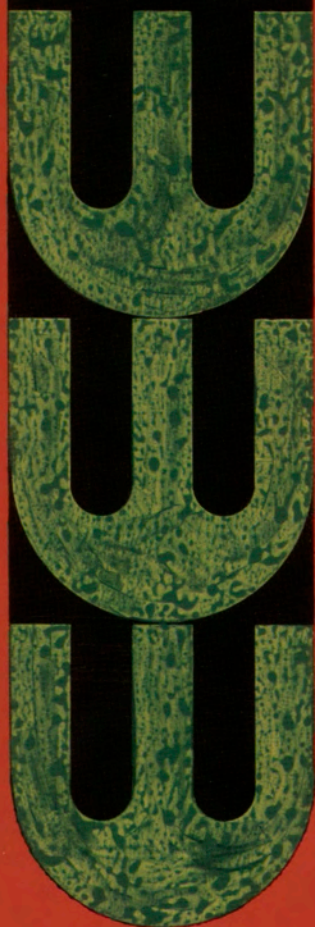
JOURNEY

ALUMINIUM PANEL

TIKI HANDS

& ANCHOR STONES

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON



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Front and back inside covers:
Tiki Hands II (Green Fingers) 1971 – 2005
Private Collection

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Tiki Hands & Anchor Stones* at City Gallery
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Guy Robinson; except for *Newton Post Office Mural*
pp.22-23 image courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki and on p.6. Image of *Maungaroa te
punga tapu o te waka Matahourua* appears courtesy
of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

DIRECTORS FOREWORD

Guy Ngan is a significant contributor to
New Zealand's visual culture, yet he has, so
far, flown under the radar of many people.
Time is right for a resurgence of interest in
Ngan's work and this publication and the
exhibition it accompanies aim to be a catalyst
for further, expanded study of his practice.

As the exhibition title suggests, *Journey:
Aluminium Panel, Tiki Hands and Anchor
Stones* focuses on three bodies of work. When
Ngan was approached to gauge his interest in
mounting a solo exhibition (his first in a public
gallery since 1979), he was adamant that at
eighty years of age he was 'too young for a
retrospective'. Rather, he wanted to develop
a project, where a body of sculpture and a
series of paintings never previously exhibited
alongside one another could be brought
together to explore his long-held fascination
in the early settlement in the Pacific.

Discussions about early settlement of the
Pacific region have absorbed archeologists,
anthropologists, historians, explorers,
scientists and the general public for
centuries. There are incredibly complex
hypothesis of routes and timelines traced
through often conflicting 'evidence'.
Analysis of both 'findings' and method have
always been contentious and heated.

The works in this exhibition represent one
man's exploration through history, image
and form of his place in the Pacific and
in Aotearoa in particular. The 'Tiki Hand'
paintings and 'Anchor Stone' sculptures are

Ngan's homage to early navigators who
around 3500 years ago traversed great
ocean distances from mainland and Island
Southeast Asia through places now known
as Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.
This publication contains a statement from
Guy Ngan which discusses the evolution of
the works featured in this project. City Gallery
Senior Curator Heather Galbraith has written
an essay which gives an overview of Ngan's
career, looking at both public sculpture
works (for which Ngan is best-known) and
his parallel output of domestic-scale works.
The idea of the journey has been extended
with the inclusion of a large public work, the
Newton Post Office Mural (1973) which brings
form to the complex transporting of mail.
Auckland-based artist/writer/curator Stella
Brennan discusses this work in her short essay.

We would like to thank the lenders to the
exhibition, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
and private lenders, many of whom are now
accommodating large voids in the homes
where much-cherished works normally reside.
Ron Sang has lent works to the exhibition,
but also has been a fervent supporter of the
project, for which we give sincere thanks.
We are most grateful to Guy Ngan for opening
his home and archive to us; it has been
a revelation to hear about and digest his
adventures, and his take on the world. City
Gallery Wellington is proud to bring Ngan's
work the public attention it so aptly deserves.

PAULA SAVAGE

Director, City Gallery Wellington

TIKI HANDS & ANCHOR STONES

The inspiration for Tiki Hands and Anchor Stones comes from the discovery of new lands by the Polynesian people. Other seafarers have discovered land by design or by mistake. The Polynesians made the biggest discovery of all because the Pacific Ocean is enormous.

For anything, there must be a beginning. Some time ago, I noticed that the same place names occurred in Japan and New Zealand - Otaki, for example. Also, the Japanese and Maori languages appeared to be similar. In Japanese, a river is called 'kawa'; in Māori, it is 'awa'. I thought there must be a connection.

Say that about 10,000 years ago, at the end of the recent Ice Age, there was a tribe in Japan. Like all human beings, they were looking for something better. So they took to their boats and headed south, searching for more food and a warmer climate. They might have found islands to settle, such as Okinawa and then Taiwan.

Over the years, the people kept moving south, out into the Pacific. Some would get to Indonesia and Fiji, then east to the Marquesas. They would move from there to Tahiti and finally to Hawaii.

How did the people know where to go? They had few instruments and no written language. My theory is this. When you live on an island, you see birds that come and go. When the birds take off and head out to sea, you wonder where they go. They must land somewhere. So,

the tribe would sail out, looking for the land where the birds went.

If you look at some seabirds, their webbed feet look as if they only have three 'fingers'. Like early Māori carvings that only have three fingers, I have used these in the Tiki Hands paintings. It represents the birds the early Polynesian people might have followed when they set sail into the unknown ocean.

When the people found land, they found anchorage. A place to settle down. Perhaps a better place than they had come from. The Anchor Stones represent settling down in a new land.

I have much pleasure in showing some of my works that pay homage to the early Pacific people. Courageously, they discovered so many islands that we unhesitatingly call paradise.

GUY NGAN
March 2006

GUY NGAN—EXPLORER

Hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders—many of us unwittingly—have been exposed to Guy Nagan's work over the last fifty years. These sightings could have included: a snazzy abstract wall relief while in line at the post office or bank (Newton Post Office, 1973; the Eastern and Central Savings Bank, Palmerston North, 1980; Birkenhead Post Office, 1981); a bronze wall sculpture glimpsed atop the entrance to a signature building (Reserve Bank, The Terrace, Wellington); a mosaic frieze atop an office block clocked while staring out the window at the sky line of the CBD (the Bledisloe State Building, Auckland, 1956); a large concrete linear form spotted in the middle of a roundabout (Stokes Valley, Wellington, 1976); or a stack of huge white cubes with protruding chrome verticals (Civic Square, Wellington, 1974) viewed while waiting for friends in squares and gardens. These public works for which the artist is best known are not just in big cities, but are dotted through smaller towns from Invercargill to Auckland.

Guy Nagan, now aged eighty, is one of New Zealand's most prolific artists, working across architectural and freestanding sculpture, design, painting, drawing, interior architecture and printmaking. Curiously, his is not a household name, which demonstrates not only how tricky we find it to classify practitioners working across disciplines, but also how short our individual and civic memories can be. Forever ready to embrace the new, we do ourselves out of a treat in not looking more closely at the 'just-gone'. Fickle to fashion,

one of the motivators to a growing interest in Nagan's work from the 1970s and 80s is it's now appealing 'retro' look. This 'style over substance' oeuvre re-cycling doesn't even begin to nibble at the richness of Nagan's practice and needs to be put to one side, in order to look more attentively at his work and why he has remained, until recently, an unsung hero of the art and design world. Nagan deserves to be recognised not only as a key contributor to our cityscapes, but also as a practitioner whose work—across a dizzying range of materials and scales of production—warrants further examination.

IN THE PUBLIC REALM

Nagan's works act as markers by which we can navigate a particular period of urban growth from the late 1950s to the 1980s, when public and commercial building was particularly active and processes of commissioning and siting public art integrated 'within' architecture were being thrashed out. Now, as 'Urban Design Taskforces' are rapidly convened around the country to ensure quality control and holistic thinking about the marrying of public and private projects (amenity versus investment), there is a renewed interest in the art commissioned in the mid-late twentieth century. A harrowing number of these works have for years languished in a state of neglect and disinterest—poorly maintained, de-installed, lying dormant in storage facilities, or worse, broken up and vanished without trace.

Working on this exhibition, I developed the habit of promptly producing images if no

flicker of recognition registered on people's faces at the mention of Ngan's name—'you know, the one on the brick wall outside Artspace on Karangahape Road, Auckland' and/or 'on The Terrace or The National Archives building (ex. Government Print Building), Wellington...'. At which point, for the most part, a reassured countenance would return, 'oh yeah, sure, there's also the one on the AA Building at Willis and Dixon/ the Beehive Tapestry/ etc'. These works (like so many public works) have ceased to be named—who made them, designed the building they 'adorn', or commissioned them. They are no longer new, or even recent, and are easy to take for granted.

As evidenced in the biography at the rear of this publication, Guy Ngan has been very successful in securing commissions and winning competitions to make sculptures for public sites and buildings. Ngan was trained as a designer and an artist and he was used to commercial/industrial commissioning and pitching processes. In order to make a successful living from his work, he embraced this mode of practice with finesse and dedication. Commissions and pitching for projects were an important way for artists to earn money and to get their work into the public realm—particularly up until the late 1960s when the local contemporary art market began to take-off. Combing through archive material there are occasional observations/grumbles about Ngan's ubiquitousness—the sheer quantity of works that were sited around the country, with an

inferred subtext that a 'jobbing' artist was somehow lower on an art hierarchy than one whose work appears within a museum and gallery context. While there have been significant shifts in infrastructure since these historical reports—namely the strengthening of the primary market (private, corporate and civic collectors) for contemporary art and design, the establishment of a broader range of showing spaces and mechanisms, and changing models of sponsorship and philanthropy—there is still a residual echo of this hierarchy, amplified when the work straddles the camps of art/design/architecture.

The current growth in enthusiasm for a range of creative practices—in particular in the way design and craft are shaping our visual culture and the fabric of our environments—bodes well for shifts in perception as well as infrastructure. Naming what constitutes 'avant-garde' practice, or for that matter 'mainstream', 'commercial' or 'decorative', is an increasingly slippery undertaking. Divisions between disciplines are increasingly semi-permeable; borrowings and mutual influence abound. Eclecticism is commonplace and professional hybridity is the norm rather than the exception.

There is a sharp contrast between any perceived 'ubiquity' during the 1960s-80s, and the lack of current visibility and discussion about Ngan's work. Ngan made the difficult choice to largely withdraw from the art world after his ten years as Director of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (1976-1986).

Tired by the political machinations and the constant treadmill of securing additional resources; he just wanted to make work. Which isn't to say that he had ever stopped. He had, throughout this period (and earlier during his full-time working at Ministry of Works Architectural Division 1956-60, and Stephenson & Turner Architects 1960-70) kept making—public works and domestic-scale paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures—as he still does to this day.

Guy Ngan has a loyal fan club. While there are a bevy of long-term supporters (such as architect Ron Sang, who has been both a collector of Ngan's work and a collaborator), there is a strong representation of 'young' folk who are tuning into to his practice. I owe a real debt to artist/writer/educator Stella Brennan who 'introduced' me (and many others) to the work of Guy Ngan through the inclusion of the *Newton Post Office Mural*, (1973) in the exhibition 'Nostalgia For the Future' she curated for Artspace, Auckland in 1999. Artist Julian Dashper paid homage to Ngan's blue and white frieze atop the Bledisloe State Building (1956) with a work *Guy Ngan's Bledisloe State Building Penthouse Suite Mural* (1987). Design writer and historian Douglas Lloyd Jenkins has also been a supporter and commentator. Ngan confesses to 'collecting young collectors', which is too slight an account of the relationships he has built—sometimes since birth or early childhood—with a cluster of folk, many now in their thirties and forties. He returns their interest in his work with genuine curiosity

about what they think and how they and their families are growing.

THE SUN SHINES IN STOKES VALLEY

Meeting Guy Ngan at his house in Stokes Valley where he and his family have lived for over fifty years, you are welcomed into a treasure trove. Every surface is a repository for amazing conglomerations of ceramics, Chinese calligraphy, prints by cohorts/ colleagues including Don Binney, Robin White and Gordon Walters. There are photographs taken during travels, a liberal measure of photographs of Ngan's wife, Jean, their children and grandchildren. Family is hugely important to Ngan. It was on about the forth visit to his house that I saw a photograph of his mother and father in traditional Chinese attire, quite high up on a wall on the way through to the studio, keeping a watch on proceedings within the house. Having enjoyed 'meeting' his grandchildren through snapshots and exquisite line drawings, it felt very balanced to also be introduced to his parents. Paintings, small sculptures and marquetttes are joined by suspended carved bone and pounamu pendants, some of which are hung with natural light penetrating them from behind, revealing their milky seams and passages of translucency. They are all Ngan's handiwork, which also extends to the incredibly robust Burma teak dining table, which he designed and made and reckons is 'bomb-proof'¹. It is the most solid, beautiful, simple table and a focal point of the house. It is where many of the conversations with Ngan have taken place, images spread out,

prawn-laden noodle soups consumed, stories exchanged, furious notes taken, my hand trying to keep up with the speed, range and generosity of the anecdotes and opinions.

FROM HERE TO THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Guy Ngan was born in Wellington in 1926, to Chinese parents Gee Ngan and Gon Lee. His father was a school teacher who came to New Zealand at the end of the 1890s, becoming a British subject and a New Zealand citizen in 1907. Ngan has a strong awareness of his genealogy: from his early ancestry—in the ancient kingdom of Lu, located at today's Qufu in Shandong province of China—to more 'recent' times; he is a member of the thirty-fourth generation descended from an ancestor who migrated south and settled in the north of Guangzhou at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907). Ngan spent his first two years in New Zealand until his father was prompted to return his family to China by the increasingly harsh way in which Chinese were being treated in New Zealand². The Ngan family spent the next ten years in Guangzhou (Canton), China.

In 1938, after Guangzhou was bombed by the Japanese, twelve year old Guy Ngan and his brother Albert returned to New Zealand, where they continued their education. From 1943-46 he attended night classes at Wellington Technical College Art School where he identifies two teachers who made a significant impact upon him: Alec Fraser and William Gee, who taught him techniques

of wood carving and sculpture. Fellow students included Fred Staub, Gordon Walters and Theo Schoon. By 1944 Ngan was receiving commissions for wall reliefs (such as the one for the AMP Building in Wellington) and for painted portraits. He left to study in London in 1951, of his own accord and self-funded, initially at Goldsmiths' College and then at the Royal College of Art (RCA). There he was introduced to the styles and tenets of modernism, across both visual art and design. He studied within the School of Wood, Metals and Plastics designing interiors and designing and making furniture working with wood and metals. He also sustained a drawing practice—charming and quirky line drawings capturing both his immediate environment (the view from his flat window) and fanciful depictions of magical gardens populated by cats and various birds, old fashioned automobiles and abstracted patterns. On completion of his degree at the RCA he was awarded a continuation scholarship and a further opportunity to study at the British School in Rome, where the architectural ruins scattered throughout the city captivated him.

Ngan was lured home to New Zealand by Gordon Wilson, a major architect of the late 1940s and 50s, who, after being a partner at Gummer and Ford of Auckland, became the architect for State housing and finally, Government Architect³. Ngan was reluctant to return to New Zealand but Wilson convinced him and facilitated a three month study tour of the United States on his way back to the Southern Hemisphere. In 1956 Ngan began



Image credits clockwise from left:

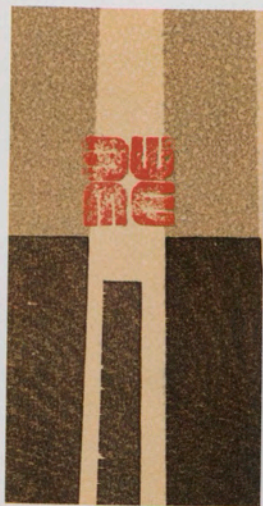
Searching (detail) 1973

Tiki Hand Triumphal Elevation 1985 - 2005

Tiki Hands Encompassing Immense Space 1978 - 2002

Searching 1973

All works Private Collection



Oceania No. 6 1976
Private Collection, Wellington



From left to right:

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993



work in the Architectural Division, of the Ministry of Works (MoW). He was drawn to this opportunity because of Wilson's dynamism and his vision for a new kind of public building. While still studying in England, the sensibilities he shared with Wilson were evident—Ngan speaks in an *Evening Post* article of 1952 of the importance of integrating artworks within the fabric of architecture: 'The visual sense of decoration has been lost in buildings, but it is coming back in modern architecture... Up to now, sculpture and carving have usually been put in buildings as an after-thought, but they should have a unity with the building and be part of the whole artistic structure'⁴. When Wilson died in 1960, the climate in the Architectural Division changed drastically and Ngan resigned from the MoW. The large Australian firm Stephenson and Turner opened an office in Wellington and snapped up Ngan to work for them in a role similar to that at MoW, where the work included not only designing architectural and freestanding sculptures, but also developing processes and protocols for artist's commissions. There still exist exquisite architectural drawings of interior and exterior views of Stephenson and Turner buildings made by Ngan.

'TIKI HANDS' AND 'ANCHOR STONES'

It is perhaps no surprise that a particularly productive period of making followed Ngan's resignation from Stephenson and Turner in 1970 (which followed the death of Sir Arthur Stephenson). The large public works still ticked over, but Ngan's emphasis shifted to smaller-scale paintings, prints and sculptures,

not made for any particular commission. Series from this period include: 'Habitation' (bronze sculptures that Ngan made in response to Roman ruins, over two hundred variations in number); 'Outback' (ochre and burnt sienna biomorphic renderings of Australian desert landscapes); 'Geometric Formation', 'Suspended Animation', 'Blue Formation' (three series where one or two colours were used with white and black to create lolly-bright geometric abstractions).

Ngan's *Untitled - Anchor Form* works are inspired by a particular taonga (treasure) that Ngan came across while Director of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. His office was in the Buckle Street building of the National Art Gallery, Wellington and throughout his decade long tenure he would go out of his way to visit a particular object as often as he could. Known colloquially as 'Kupe's Anchor Stone', the full name of the taonga is *Maungaroa te punga tapu o te waka Matahourua*. Kupe, the legendary early Maori navigator, sailed to these islands from Hawaiiki in his waka (canoe) 'Matahourua'. On his journey he is said to have entered Porirua Harbour and remained there for some time. This large greywacke boulder, complete with a hole and flax tethering rope is believed to be the mooring stone left behind when a new local stone was taken onboard. This object resonated with Ngan, symbolising the significance of making anchor, of putting down roots in a new place. The attraction to the form of the anchor stone did not manifest in a fully-developed passage of



work until the 1990s, when Ngan devoted much of his energy to carving and casting. Of the seven *Untitled – Anchor Form* works in the exhibition, five are carved wood (oak, or kauri) and two are cast in bronze. Ngan plays with the idea of the worn and pierced form. These sculptures demand in-the-round viewing; their ever-changing profile is captivating, their inner hollows and passages creating sumptuous shadow play. While the anchor stone was the catalyst, these sculptures nod to the work of British sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, who Ngan knew and admired from his time in England. The overwhelming sensation these works emit is a fluidity of form and a sensitivity to the potential of their respective materials. Ngan would work and work at a series, trialling and perfecting forms, shifting scale and pushing the materials to their limits. He was compelled by the innate qualities of what he was working, whether it was a kahikatea log, a piece of pounamu (greenstone) or a passage of whale

bone. These seven works are only a small fraction of the sculptures in this series.

OCEAN-DEEP

In preparation for this text, I consulted a broad range of conflicting accounts and viewpoints; from anthropological texts outlining multiple migration hypothesis; angry responses in the news from Māori and other indigenous peoples to calls to take part in Mitochondrial DNA studies (on the basis that it undermined or disrespected migration oral histories), and watched the documentary 'Made in Taiwan: Nathan & Oscar's Excellent Adventure', following Nathan Rarere and Oscar Knightley who sent their DNA to an Oxford laboratory to find out about their shared Polynesian ancestry and then embarked to retrace the route of early Polynesian voyagers from Aotearoa New Zealand back to Samoa, Vanuatu and finally to the indigenous hill tribes of Taiwan. This layering of viewpoints, both contradictory and overlapping, is testimony to the continued relevance of research and discussion about how the peoples and cultures of the Pacific were formed.

Ngan's interest in early settlement of the Pacific is long standing and was well and truly crystallised through meeting anthropologist Chen Chi-lu in Taipei in 1986. Chen Chi-lu was an eminent academic, a specialist in the material culture of indigenous Taiwanese tribes, who was working as a Cultural Officer for the Ministry of Education's Department of Social Education⁵. He introduced Ngan to new research about early migratory

routes, piling him high with books and articles, generously sharing his knowledge.

In his artist's introduction Ngan writes about his idea that the three-fingered 'Tiki Hand' form shares a similarity with the three front claws of a bird, potentially pointing to the reliance of early navigators on sea birds for wayfaring. The early 'Tiki Hand' works are 'of their time', in that they predate the heated debates of the 1980s-90s about cross-cultural appropriation. They seek to employ a specifically 'local' motif within the language of international modernism, and the motivation for their employment is one of tribute and appreciation. In terms of his cultural affiliation, Ngan speaks of being 'Pacific Chinese'.

The first 'Tiki Hand' image dates from 1971 and contains four red three-fingered shapes—derived from the modelling of tiki hands on whakairo (carving)—on a black ground rotating forty-five degrees from the neighbouring form. The red square cluster form directly references Chinese 'name' stamps used (along with seals) to verify authorship of a document, contract or artwork; to designate individual, familial, governmental/imperial authenticity. Ngan has carved many a stamp design incorporating Chinese characters, abstracted forms and letters from the Modern Latin alphabet which feature on his works on paper. In *Tiki Hands Searching* (1973) the 'Tiki Hand' stamp crowns an upright bisecting the waka form and a personal seal in wax in the bottom right hand corner.

In terms of visually tracing the long passage of peoples across Pacific waters, island hopping in waves (initially c.50,000 years ago from mainland and Island Southeast Asia, and with a secondary push between 3500-500 years ago through to East Polynesia⁶) the chronology of Ngan's images is non-linear, emphasising that while Ngan is captivated by history, these works are visual explorations, they tell a story and jump nimbly from place to place within a narrative—they are not a historical treatise.

Tiki Hands II (Green Fingers) and *Tiki Hands Generations*, both dating from 1971, address descendancy and the importance of valuing and respecting the achievements and stories of those who have come before. In *Animated Colours* (1973-98), a trail of larger 'U' forms and smaller 'Tiki Hand' forms line up across a horizontal. It is tempting to read both the 'U' and the three-fingered 'Tiki Hands' as bodies, entities, on an actual journey. Ngan speaks of *Tiki Hand Triumphal Elevation* (1985 - 2005) as a celebration of settlers making landfall, of asserting presence and enabling the ongoing survival of your people. *Oceania No. 6* (1976) at first reads as a biomorphic meandering. Reminiscent of a Petrie dish of swarming, multiplying forms, you can also telescope to the other end of the scale, where it becomes a bird's eye view of an island archipelago, azure blues lightening as the sea becomes shallower inshore.

The third component of 'Journey: Aluminium Panel, Tiki Hands and Anchor Stones', leads

the charge in the title—the *Newton Post Office Mural* (1973). It too merges abstract and symbolic vocabularies. In her essay, Stella Brennan discusses this work more fully, but its presence in the exhibition is helpful as it links thematically and chronologically with the 'Tiki Hand' works. It utilised a pioneering casting process and was audacious in its scale and detail. The optimism Brennan discusses in her text, in terms of civic expansion with a 'future vision', feels relevant to the particular focus of this exhibition—how this optimism is both enriched and tempered by the process of looking back. In order to get a clearer sense of where we are going, we need to know where we have been. Ngan has travelled extensively throughout his lifetime, but has kept coming back to Aotearoa New Zealand and to Wellington in particular. His warmth for and contribution to this place has been unerring, for which we extend our sincerest gratitude.

HEATHER GALBRAITH

- 1 When studying at the Royal College of Art in the 1950s, Ngan and friends used to comb World War II bombsites, salvaging staircases made of Burma teak, which had regularly survived the impact.
- 2 In 1881 a 'poll tax' initially set at £10, but raised to £100 was introduced to dissuade new Chinese

immigrants. It lasted until 1934. Naturalisation of Chinese was stopped between 1908-1951 and permanent residency was denied from 1926. After 1939 there was partial liberalisation when wives and children of Chinese men in New Zealand were allowed temporary residence as refugees from war-torn China. Further liberalisation—the granting of permanent residency to these 'refugee' wives and children, New Zealand-born children of the wives and Chinese temporary residents and students who had been in New Zealand for over five years—did not take place until 1947.

www.teara.govt.nz/NewZealanders/NewZealandPeoples/Chinese

- 3 During Wilson's time at Gummer & Ford including a period as an Associate Partner of the firm, he was involved in generating many landmark buildings including: the Remuera Library, the Wellington Public Library (now City Gallery Wellington), the Auckland Railway Station, the National War Memorial Carillon, the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery. Examples of buildings realised by Wilson's office at MoW include: Government Buildings, Auckland; the School of Engineering, Christchurch and the Departmental Buildings, Wellington.
- 4 Keith McCook, 'Young Chinese Sculptor Has A Bright Future', *Evening Post*, 19 November, 1952.
- 5 Chen Chi-lu is author of *Material Culture of the Formosan Aborigines*, Taipei, The Taiwan Museum, 1968. At the time of Guy's visit he was a Cultural Officer. In 1982 with the formation of the Council for Cultural Affairs, he was appointed the inaugural Minister of Culture, Taiwan.
- 6 A useful account is Geoffrey Irwin, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

MURAL FOR THE NEWTON POST OFFICE 1973

In the 1960s and 70s Guy Ngan was a public art insider, an artist working with architectural practices and the Ministry of Works. A Wellingtonian, he designed many pieces for buildings in the capital, including a large tapestry in the Beehive. In a period of expansionist 'think big' government spending, his public work was caught up in a bureaucratisation of modernist precepts and forms.

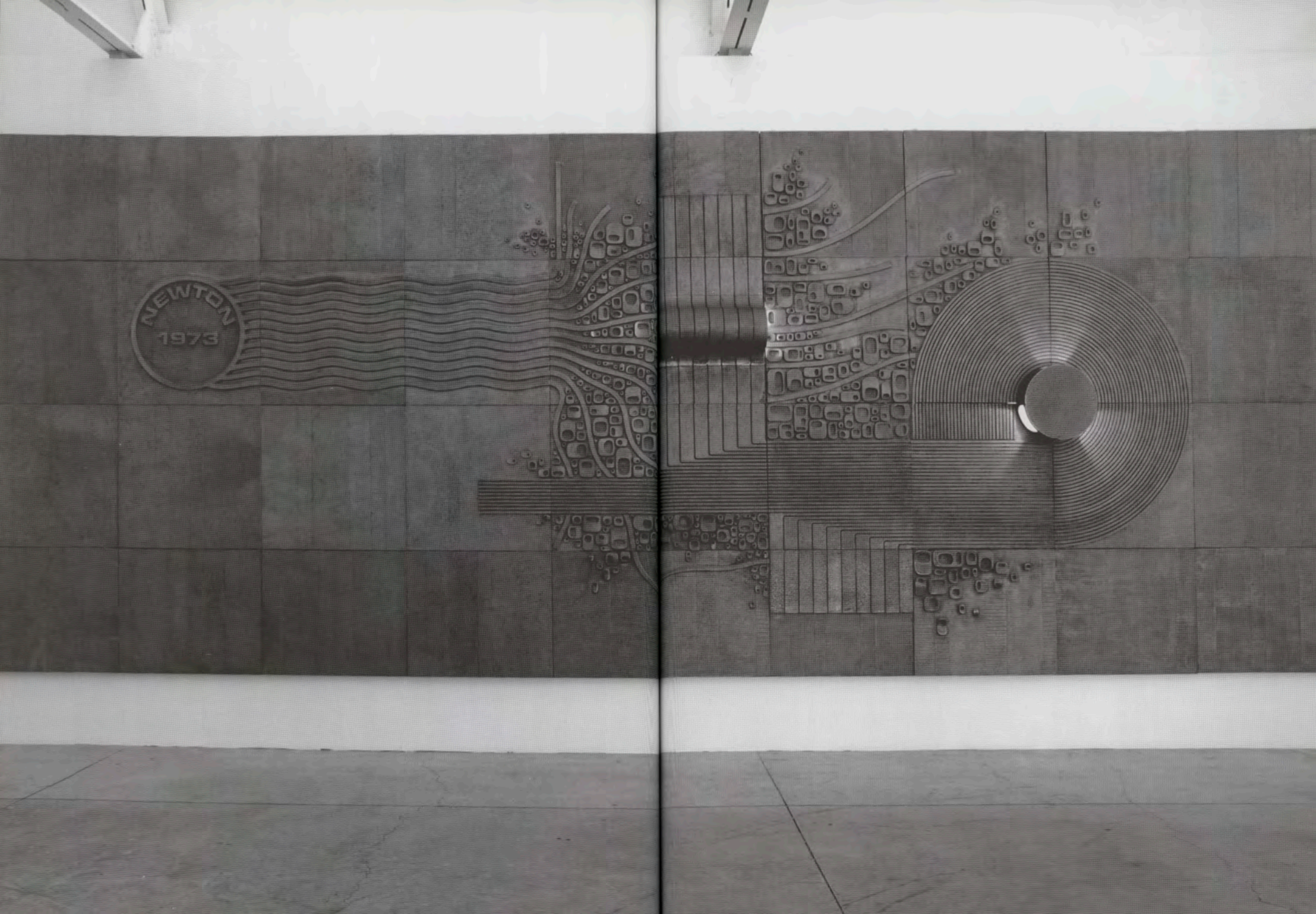
Ngan's mural was made for Auckland's Karangahape Road Post Office, commissioned by the Ministry of Works and designed by architects Mark-Brown Fairhead and Sang. Three metres tall and seven metres wide, it is made of interlocking cast aluminium panels arranged in a four by ten grid. The work was constructed using a novel 'lost polystyrene' process. The panels were initially carved from expanded polystyrene—the ubiquitous lightweight packing material. Aluminum was then poured into moulds encasing the carvings, vapourising them in a noxious puff. The fine porous texture of the sawn and sanded polystyrene remains visible on the mural's soft grey surface. In a fascinating doubling of materials, the light, fragile and disposable polystyrene is replaced by silvery aluminium. Aluminium itself is a paradigmatic modern metal; displayed in ingots next to the Crown Jewels in the Paris Exhibition of 1855 and not producible in commercial quantities until 1886. Its lightness and strength made it a post-war stalwart of the aerospace industry. Ngan's first use of aluminium was in a mural commissioned by

Comalco for Invercargill's 1971 Centenary. Comalco commenced operation of New Zealand's only aluminium smelter, at Tiwai Point in Southland, that same year.

Depicting postal and telegraphic communication, the Post Office Mural's semi-abstractation typifies modernist-inspired public art of the period. From the left, wavy lines emanating from a postmark bearing the words 'Newton 1973' in Eurostyle font (a favourite of late modernist architects everywhere) diverge into what could read as roads or telephone lines. The lines snake through a cluster of lozenge forms—houses, stylised letters or perhaps packets of information—before shooting out beyond the abstracted conurbation.

Near the centre of the mural, a broad strip of parallel lines moving from the top swoops down over an inbuilt light, before merging with a narrower horizontal band and another broad strip from the bottom of the mural. The converging sweep of lines then encircle a domed light, forming a motif that is part stylised koru, part motorway interchange.

The sinuous lines cutting between the clustered hollow lozenge forms recall a feature of the Newton landscape under construction at the same time as the Post Office building—the sweeping camber of 'spaghetti junction', Auckland's most vexed piece of roading. Contemporary aerial views show the new motorway interchange cutting through the old central suburbs just as the



NEWTON
1973

sweeping lines zoom through the mural's clustered forms, before trailing off into the aluminium countryside. To extend the reading of the mural in terms of this very new and dominant feature of the local landscape, the vertical band which loops over the first inbuilt light could be seen as referencing the Karangahape motorway overbridge. Just a block down the road from the Post Office, the bridge was constructed as part of the same major roading development (and also under the auspices of the Ministry of Works).

The mural evokes a sense of movement, while its abstraction allows a multiple reading of its sweeping lines: as roads, as phone cables and as lines of flow. In its evocation of two modes of communication—post and telegraphy—the mural works at the cusp of the twentieth century's major communicational shift—from object transfer to information transfer, from physical to electronic information.

Ngan received \$6,000 for the design, fabrication and installation of the Post Office Mural. The Newton Post Office commission (which also included a bronze still in place on the street frontage of the building), was one of a number of collaborations with architect Ron Sang. Sang describes the process of writing artworks into the building design at the contract stage, smoothing the way with clients by describing sculptures, murals and tapestries as 'architectural features'. Other commissions included the Mt Albert and Brkenhead Post Offices in Auckland and offices for ANZ and IBM. Most

recently, Sang was instrumental in the realisation of Ngan's Millennium Tree project, which was finally installed in the Auckland Domain in 2005.

Ngan's mural was positioned in the building's street level public area, filling an entire curtain wall. It was lit from above by spotlights in orange plastic dome fittings and skirted at its base by heavy-duty black plastic; the two lights built into the surface added focal illumination. The mural was decommissioned when the building was remodeled following the Post Office's Rogernomic restructuring and the subsequent subleasing of parts of the building in the late 1980s. It remained in basement storage for a decade, only resurfacing in 1999 when I included it in my Artspace show, *Nostalgia for the Future*. Artspace is situated on the first floor of the Post Office building, so it seemed a highly appropriate context for a work designed in conjunction with the building's construction.

In addition to the Post Office Mural's impressive scale and visual appeal, it is its emphasis on surface and its incorporation of the style of the time that makes the work so engaging for the contemporary viewer. In the early 1970s, criticism of the Post Office Mural condemned it as depthless décor—feminised, frivolous, ...'one is impressed rather more by its design and decorative qualities than one is by its ability to evoke a response at any depth...'. Postmodern smudging of the boundaries between art and design has transformed Ngan's

background in the realm of architectural and industrial design from a critical handicap into a pedigree. Today Ngan's futuristic artwork seems stylish and dynamic, a social artefact representing a free-spending, infrastructure-happy governmental culture.

STELLA BRENNAN

1 Peter Cape, *Listener*, 23 February 1974, p.29

b. 1926 Wellington, of Chinese parents

EDUCATION

1946-46 Wellington Technical College Art School, NZ
 1951 Goldsmiths School of Art, London University, UK
 1951-54 Royal College of Art, London, UK
 1954-55 British School in Rome, Italy

ART AWARDS

1954 Royal College of Art Continuation Scholar, UK
 1954-55 British School at Rome Scholar, UK
 1955 Murphy Radio Research Scholar, UK
 1968, 1969, 1971 National Bank Mural Awards, NZ
 1970 Reserve Bank Sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1971 Invercargill Centenary Sculpture, NZ
 1972 Asian Development Bank Sculpture, Manila, Philippines
 1972 International Sculpture, Stanthorpe, Queensland, Australia
 1973 Hansells Environment Sculpture, NZ
 1973 Parliament Building (Beehive) Tapestry Design
 1980 IBM Art Award

PUBLIC ART WORKS

1956 Beldisloe State Building, Penthouse frieze, Auckland, NZ
 1957 Bowen State Building, Linkblock mural, Wellington, NZ
 1957 Engineering School Lecture Hall frieze, Christchurch, NZ
 1957 Dental School Lecture Hall mural, Dunedin, NZ
 1957 Government Print Building, exterior wall (now National Archives), Wellington, NZ
 1960 ANZ Bank Q&V mural, Auckland, NZ
 1968 Reserve Bank sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1968 National Bank Head Office, wall sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1969 National Bank Cook Bicentenary mural, Gisbourne, NZ
 1969 National Bank mural, Thames, NZ
 1970 Air New Zealand murals, Tahiti
 1970 Captain Cook plaque, Parliament Grounds, Wellington, NZ

1971 Automobile Association House, wall sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1971 Centenary wall sculpture, Invercargill, NZ
 1972 Teachers' Training College sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1973 Asian Development Bank, wall sculpture, Manila, Philippines
 1973 Newton Post Office, mural and wall sculpture, Auckland, NZ
 1973 BNZ sculpture and mural, Queen Street, Auckland, NZ
 1974 Windemere Apartment, wall sculpture, Auckland, NZ
 1974 Civic Centre sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1976 Community sculpture, Stokes Valley, Wellington, NZ
 1976 DFC sculpture, Auckland, NZ
 1978 BNZ frieze, Onehunga, Auckland, NZ
 1980 NZ Wire wall sculpture, Auckland, NZ
 1980 Rose Garden sculpture, Porirua, Wellington, NZ
 1980 Eastern & Central Savings Bank sculpture, Palmerston North, NZ
 1981 Birkenhead Post Office sculpture, Auckland, NZ
 1982 NZ Wool Board, wall sculpture, Wellington, NZ
 1982 HMNZS Takapu, wall plaque, NZ
 1983 National Bank Mural, Hamilton, NZ
 1984 Data General mural, Wellington, NZ
 1996 Sang residence, wall sculpture, Auckland
 1997 Bodhinyanarama Monastery, roof woodcarving, Stokes Valley, NZ
 2005 *Millennium Tree*, sculpture, Auckland Domain (originally commissioned for Parnell Rose Gardens) presented to the city by Auckland's Chinese community)

CONSULTANCY

1956-60 Architectural Division, Ministry of Works (full-time)
 1960-70 Stephenson & Turner Architects (full-time)
 New Zealand Wool Board
 ANZ Bank & National Bank

OFFICES HELD

Vice President, NZ Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington
 Council Member, NZ Industrial Design Council
 Council Member, National Art Gallery
 Director, NZ Academy of Fine Arts 1976-86

LIST OF WORKS

All measurements are in mm

Newton Post Office Mural 1973

aluminium (lost polystyrene
aluminum casting), inbuilt light fittings
2900 x 7250

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
gift of New Zealand Post Properties, 2004

Oceania No. 6 1976

acrylic on board, 1218 x 2514
Private collection, Wellington

Searching 1973

oil and woodcut on board with wax, 595 x 1210
Private collection

Tiki Hands Generations 1971 - 2005

acrylic on board, 795 x 595
Private collection

Tiki Hands II (Green Fingers) 1971 - 2005

oil on board, 810 x 1215
Private collection

Tiki Hands Animated Colours 1973 - 1998

oil on board, 758 x 1215
Private collection

Tiki Hands Encompassing

Immens Space
1978 - 2002

acrylic on canvas, 1680 x 1675
Private collection

Tiki Hand Triumphal Elevation 1985 - 2005

acrylic on board, 1210 x 805
Private collection

Tiki Hands Trinity 1999

acrylic on board, 1560 x 575
Private collection

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

carved wood, stone plinth, 310 x 270 x 270
Collection of Ron Sang, Auckland

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993

cast bronze, stone plinth, 210 x 145 x 135
Collection of Ron Sang, Auckland

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

cast bronze, stone plinth, 630 x 390 x 370
Private collection

Untitled - Anchor Form 1992

carved wood (oak), stone plinth,
170 x 163 x 160
Private collection

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993

carved wood (kauri), stone plinth,
375 x 300 x 290
Private collection, Wellington

Untitled - Anchor Form 1993

carved wood, stone plinth, 250 x 140 x 140
Collection of Ron Sang, Auckland

Untitled - Anchor Form 2000

cast bronze, stone plinth, 265 x 195 x 195
Collection of Ron Sang, Auckland

