HOTERE

OUT THE BLACK WINDOW

RALPH HOTERE'S WORK WITH NEW ZEALAND POETS

7 June – 14 September 1997
City Gallery, Wellington

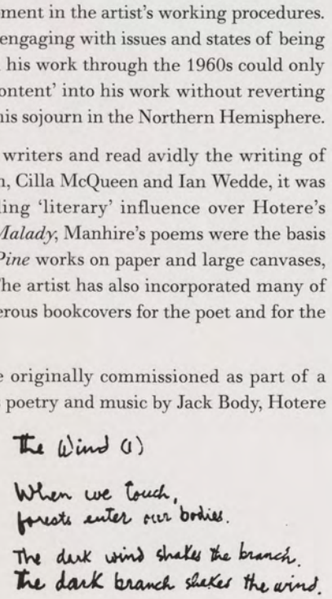
I

Since returning to New Zealand in the mid-1960s after some years in England and Europe, Ralph Hotere has painted consistently challenging and complex artworks, many of them incorporating poems by such highly regarded writers as Bill Manhire, Hone Tuwhare, Cilla McQueen and Ian Wedde. Rather than 'illustrating' the work of these poets, however, Hotere has taken their writing to the very core of his artistic project. Like the multifarious materials his art has been constructed from – the corrugated iron, stainless steel and weather-beaten canvas for which he is well-known – these poems have become an integral part of his style and method. They have influenced the formal development of his art and expanded both its emotional breadth and its sphere of reference.

Although Hotere began incorporating words into his *Sangro* and *Polaris* paintings in the early 1960s, it was after he moved to Dunedin to take up the 1969 Frances Hodgkins Fellowship that language was to take hold of his work. His first major 'collaborative' project using poetry was the 1969-71 *Malady* paintings used a spartan 'concrete poem' by Bill Manhire which comprised only four words: MALADY, MELODY and MY LADY. The Malady paintings, drawings and a 1971 book production of that title signalled a major development in the artist's working procedures. By using Bill Manhire's poetry, Hotere found a way of engaging with issues and states of being that the purist abstract manner which had dominated his work through the 1960s could only be suggestive of. He found a way of re-introducing 'content' into his work without reverting to the more conventional art he had produced prior to his sojourn in the Northern Hemisphere.

While Hotere associated with many Dunedin-based writers and read avidly the writing of O. E. (Ted) Middleton, James K. Baxter, Charles Brasch, Cilla McQueen and Ian Wedde, it was Bill Manhire's poetry that proved to be the presiding 'literary' influence over Hotere's development through the following decade. Besides *Malady*, Manhire's poems were the basis for such major series as the *Song Cycle* banners, the *Pine* works on paper and large canvases, and the *Dawn/Water Poem* paintings of the 1980s. The artist has also incorporated many of Manhire's poems into his artworks and designed numerous bookcovers for the poet and for the Amphedesma Press which Manhire co-founded.

While the important 1975 *Song Cycle* banners were originally commissioned as part of a dance/music/theatre production involving Manhire's poetry and music by Jack Body, Hotere did not complete the works until some months after the performance. (It was a year later that they were exhibited at Dawson's Gallery, Dunedin, many of them hanging away from the walls so the public could walk around them.) Hotere did, however, produce a handwritten programme using Manhire's poetry in time for the *Song Cycle* performances.



II

Hotere – out the black window takes its title from a poem by Cilla McQueen which first appeared in her 1984 collection, *antigravity*. The poem was inspired by Hotere's 'black window' paintings, a series of brooding, contemplative panels mounted in old window frames. The works, many of which have the words 'Towards Aramoana' as part of the title, include traces and remnants of the verbal and visual materials of Hotere's art generally; stencilled letters of the alphabet emerge from the blackness, as do suggestions of land, sea and sky. In the 'black windows' we see the raw materials of Hotere's art, the utterances of the human world – the language – merging with the world of nature – light and shadow, stasis and movement, growth and decay.

out the black window
into reflections, a rosary

it is clear
night is already in the hedge
& under the rainwater tank

the trees rust, the squeaky birds
sing tootle tootle wick wick wick
& power poles are lighting up
with children's voices ...

(from 'Out the Black Window' Cilla McQueen)

Like the lyrical poetry of McQueen and Hone Tuwhare, Hotere's art has always been permeated by the textures and elemental forms of nature. The 1972 series of wash drawings he produced for Tuwhare's collection *Sap-wood and Milk* and the *Pine* watercolours of the same year epitomise Hotere's delicate, lyrical approach.

However, there is a harsher, more declamatory tone in many of his larger works relating to the natural world. The *Dawn/Water Poem* paintings of the mid-1980s are a protest against French nuclear testing at Mururoa. Corrugated iron works such as *Aramoana – Pathway to the Sea* were produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a protest against a proposed aluminium smelter at Aramoana, near the mouth of Otago Harbour. Here, found or salvaged materials provide the ground upon which the assertive lettering of Hotere's statement is laid. In these works, the painter is standing up for the rights of a place – Aramoana – to exist on its own terms and on the terms of all its inhabitants, be they bird-life, shellfish or human. The works also invoke Ian Wedde's long poem 'Pathway to the Sea', a similarly 'vernacular' piece of environmental protest art.

the rich claggy rind
of the world where
dinosaurs once
were kings: well they're gone now though
they survived longer
than we have

yet, but then we know, don't we,
citizen, that there's nowhere
to defect to, & that
living in the
universe doesn't
leave you
any place to chuck
stuff off
of.

(from 'Pathway to the Sea' Ian Wedde)

III

Looking into Ralph Hotere's canvases and panels, you enter a world of presences and absences. Out of their tapestry of verbal and visual materials, a deeply suggestive, musical language emerges.

Hotere's art transforms recycled or weather-worn base-materials into objects of reflection and meditation. Like the lyric poetry that permeates the *Song Cycle* series, there is a slowly unfurling order and sense, the formal elements and language combining to create an entity that speaks of Ralph Hotere's particular situation as an individual and also of the human condition in general. Beyond the demands of a rigorously reductive aesthetic, there is a human warmth and generosity of spirit which draws the viewer into the artist's world. These qualities are acknowledged in Hone Tuwhare's poem, 'Hotere'.

While the paintings have many of the traits of formalist abstraction, there is none of the aloofness with which that art is often associated. If anything, the formal demands of Hotere's art have led him to a deeper engagement with the joys, problems and issues of being human. The 1984 painting *No Ordinary Sun*, incorporating Hone Tuwhare's poem of that title, witnesses to this heartfelt engagement with life and the urgent need, in the Nuclear Age, for its preservation. The circle-motif which dominates this work has been a recurrent feature of Hotere's art since the *Malady* paintings. It also figured in the artist's drawings for a 1970 production of James K. Baxter's play *The Temptations of Oedipus* at Dunedin's Globe Theatre. (Interestingly, the curtains that frame the stage in the *Oedipus* drawings anticipate the *Song Cycle* banners.) Hotere's collaborative work with writers, theatre directors and also musicians has often affected his working precedures and priorities in radical ways. For instance, the *Drawings for Ian Wedde's 'Pathway to the Sea'* series of 1975 developed directly out of a commission to produce a wrap-around cover design for a published edition of that poem.

HOTERE

When you offer only three
vertical lines precisely drawn
and set into a dark pool of lacquer
it is a visual kind of starvation:

and even though my eyeballs
roll up and over to peer inside
myself, when I reach the beginning
of your eternity I say instead: hell
let's have another feed of mussels

Like, I have to think about it, man

When you stack horizontal lines
into vertical columns which appear
to advance, recede, shimmer and wave
like exploding packs of cards
I merely grunt and say: well, if it
is not a famine, it's a feast

I have to roll another smoke, man

But when you score a superb orange
circle on a purple thought-base
I shake my head and say: hell, what
is this thing called aroha

Like, I'm euchred, man. I'm eclipsed?

(Hone Tuwhare)

IV

While the *Song Cycle* banners, with their lyrical, if somewhat melancholy, texts embody romantic, youthful love, Hotere is principally a painter of requiems. The 1978 *Return to Sangro* works are reflections on the death of his brother Jack in Italy during the Second World War. Paintings in that series use either McQueen's poem, 'Sangro River Cemetery' or a traditional Maori lament transcribed by the artist's father, Tangirau Hotere, who was a distinguished transcriber and translator of Maori poetry.

As an individual compelled to paint requiems or elegies, Hotere often uses Maori texts to this end, most commonly the 'Kuaka' text which, as well as appearing in the *Return to Sangro* works, is incorporated into *Godwit/Kuaka* (formerly known as the Auckland International Airport Mural) and his 1982 *Designs for a church window at Mitimiti*. Hotere's use of traditional Maori poems in his art underlines their centrality to his own existence. Through them, he is lamenting the passage of time and of all human life.

The incantatory qualities of Maori place-names are highlighted in Hotere's 1976 *Aramoana Koputai* screen, a work which also includes a biblical text and draws in part on the language and forms of New Zealand's other great painter of words, Colin McCahon. Standing like an open book, the screen asks to be looked at, to be read, to be walked around and reflected upon. A similar work, *Enei Kopu na Tangirau Hotere i homai* was painted in memory of the artist's mother who died in 1972. Stencilled on the wooden frame is a Maori poem, transcribed by Tangirau Hotere, which conveys both a sense of loss and an acceptance of death (the accompanying translation is by Ralph Hotere and Cilla McQueen):

KUA TERE KI
TAWHITI NUI
KUA TERE KI
TAWHITI ROA

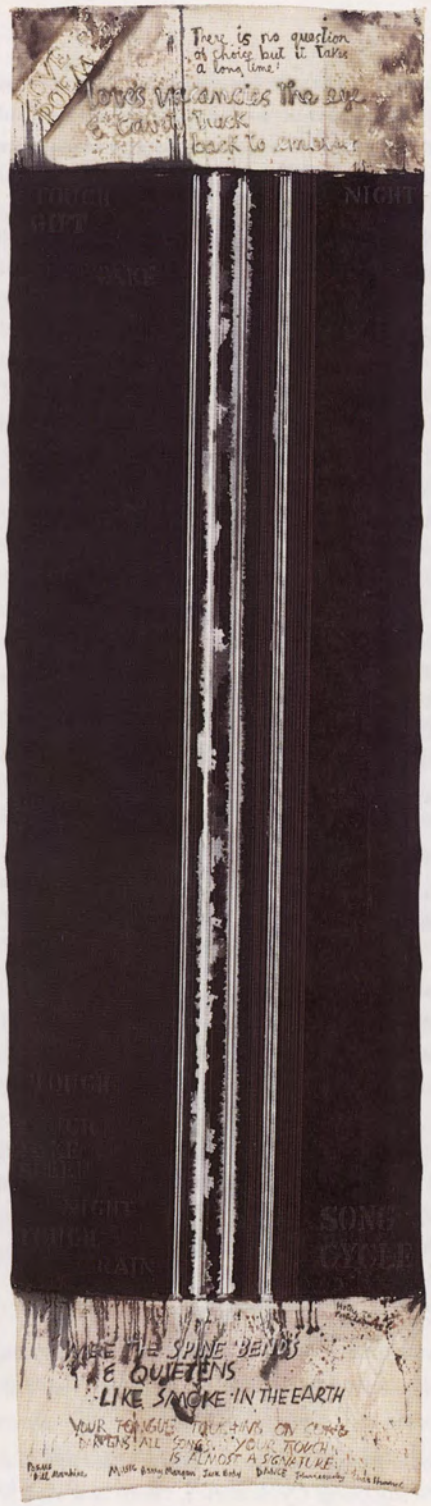
KUA TERE KI
TAWHITI PAMAMAO
KUA TAKAHI ATU I TE
TOKA I PATUKINA

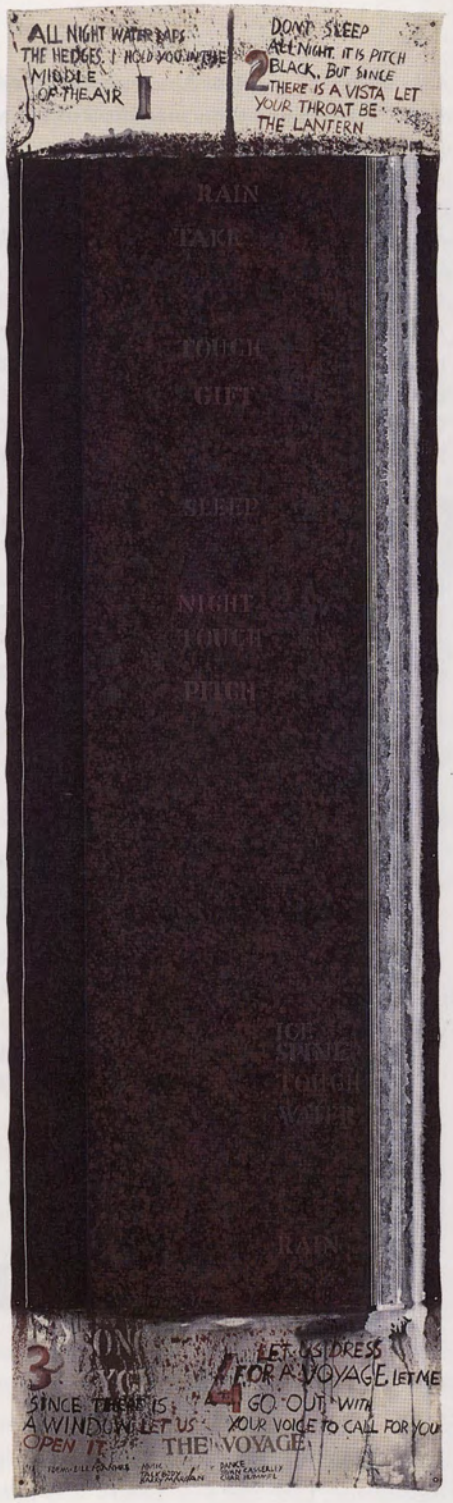
She has drifted to
Tawhiti Nui.
She has drifted to
Tawhiti Roa.

She has sailed away
to Tawhiti Pamamao.
She has stood on the rock
at Patukina.

The above poem encapsulates two of the major themes of Hotere's art: mortality and also the relationship of the individual to the physical world. Like the poetry he has so often been moved to incorporate into his art, Ralph Hotere's paintings are both a celebration and a lament, a hymn to life and an acknowledgement of death.

Gregory O'Brien





RALPH HOTERE was born in the settlement of Mitimiti, just north of the Hokianga Harbour in 1931. A member of the Aupouri tribe, he was a secondary school arts advisor in Northland and Auckland before travelling to England and Europe in 1961. He has been based in and around Dunedin since 1969.

CILLA MCQUEEN (born 1949) has won the New Zealand Book Award for Poetry three times. She was married to Ralph Hotere from 1974 until the mid 1980s. An accomplished performance poet, McQueen now lives in Bluff.

BILL MANHIRE (born 1946) is a poet, short story writer and anthologist currently living in Wellington where he teaches a highly successful creative writing course at Victoria University.

HONE TUWHARE (born 1922) became the first published Maori poet when his 1964 collection, *No Ordinary Sun*, appeared. He now lives at Kaka Point, Otago.

IAN WEDDE (born 1946) was Burns Fellow at Otago University in 1972, at which time he met Ralph Hotere. He is a prolific poet, fiction-writer, anthologist and art critic. He works at the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa.

Four *Song Cycle* banners
Acrylic and dyes on unstretched canvas, 3000 x 900mm
***The Voyage*, Collection of the Hocken Library, Dunedin**
***Love Poem*, Collection of D. and B. Purdue, Christchurch**
***Walf I and II*, Collection of Cilla McQueen**

***Enei Kopu naTangirau Hotere i homai*, 1976**
Acrylic on canvas screen, 1545 x 1260mm
Collection of Jeremy Kirk Smith

***Aramoana – Pathway to the Sea*, 1980**
Oil on corrugated iron and wood, 2430 x 820mm
Private Collection

***Black Window – Towards Aramoana*, 1981**
Acrylic on board and oiled sash window,
1100 x 910mm (incl. frame)
Paris Family Collection

A major book 'Hotere – Out the Black Window' by Gregory O'Brien which accompanies this exhibition, has been produced by Godwit Publishers in association with the City Gallery, Wellington.

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