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SMALL WORLD BIG TOWN

CONTEMPORARY ART FROM TE PAPA

CITY
GALLERY
WELLINGTON

10 JULY -
30 OCTOBER
2005



Contemporary art is certainly travelling at speed—but where exactly it is heading depends, these days, on where the viewer is standing. Featuring works selected by curators from both City Gallery Wellington and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa' captures some of the fastest-moving, most exciting New Zealand art of recent years.

Drawn from Te Papa's visual art collections, the paintings, photographs, installations and other works in this exhibition cover a lot of ground, both literally and metaphorically. The exhibition is divided into three sections. The first, 'Highway to Hicksville', explores location and the regional small town while the second, 'Little People', showcases art that is close-up and personal. The third section of the exhibition, 'Outer Limits', takes a broad span—from the world to the universe. While 'Small World, Big Town' might not tell us where we are at this moment, or exactly where we are heading, it provides ample evidence that we are on the move.

Going Local: highway to Hicksville | Emma Bugden

*Well I was born in a small town
And I live in a small town
Prob'ly die in a small town
Oh, those small communities!*

In the 1960s and 70s more than 2000 Trekka cars rolled off the production line in Otahuhu. New Zealand's own indigenous vehicle was ready for the off-road, although perhaps not quite as ready as its deceptive resemblance to a four-wheel drive Land Rover might have suggested. *This is the Trekka* (2003-05), by Michael Stevenson, talks about New Zealand's relationship to the world, imports and exports, and our desire for a freestanding national economy. But it also suggests a love of the provinces, of getting away from it all on journeys into the hinterland, of working on your car in your front yard on a sunny weekend in Inglewood. Like Stevenson's early paintings of Pentecostal churches and small town clubrooms, *This is the Trekka* is as much fiercely



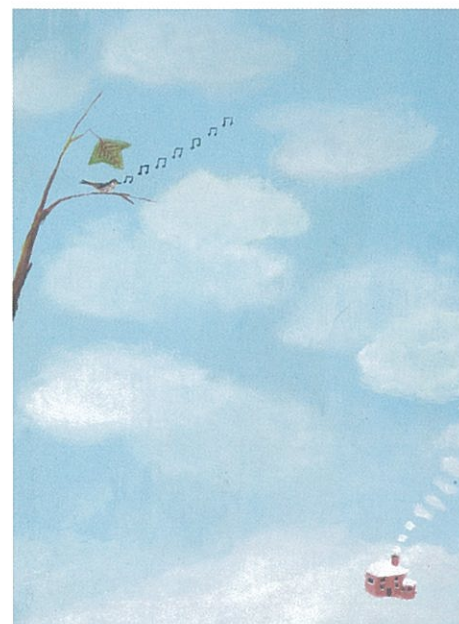
Michael Stevenson b.1964
This is the Trekka as installed at the Venice Biennale 2003
mixed media
Photographer: Jennifer French.
Image courtesy Creative New Zealand.

regional as it is concerned with negotiating a larger world.

I'm writing to you from Hicksville....there isn't even a fax machine in town, so it's snail mail, I'm afraid. God knows how long it will take—this really is the ass-end of universe, remote even by local standards.²

Hicksville is back in vogue. If previous generations were drawn to the city as a cultural and economic hub, the lure of the quieter life is now leading us back to the country. With technology connecting us globally and faster roads to get us there sooner, living in the provinces no longer means isolation from the wider world. Increasingly, urbanites are shifting to 'lifestyle' blocks or moving between a rural base and the city. This shift has brought its own attendant concerns—two sample headlines from the *New Zealand Listener* from the last twelve months: 'Are the wealthy wrecking paradise?' and 'Paradise in peril' give an indication of the new issues facing nowhere-land. Getting away from it all has simultaneously become the new cool, and the new impossible.

But artists have long found the provinces useful for their own purposes, chief among these a good space/money ratio. A warehouse studio



Saskia Leek b. 1970
Untitled. From the portfolio *Underwood* 2001
watercolour, acrylic, polyurethane on board
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Purchased 2001.

in Oamaru is significantly more affordable than its Auckland equivalent. As the world becomes increasingly decentralised, the artistic sway of New York and London as cultural beacons is not so much lessened as changed—artists now base themselves in Port Chalmers and exhibit in New York, or for that matter São Paulo and Lithuania. Going global doesn't have to negate living local.

Hicksville is in fact a real place—there are at least two in the United States—but here in New Zealand the term is an affectionate put-down of what we used to call 'the backblocks'. We've localised this Americanism in the same way as successive generations of teenagers rename Rotorua 'Roto-Vegas'. In the land of comics, Hicksville is an East Cape settlement created by cartoonist Dylan Horrocks—a mythical sheep-farming town where the entire population loves cartoons. It's a place which is so behind the times you can't even get a decent coffee (only a cup of tea at the Rarebit Fiend Tearooms), but which also has the world's largest collection of rare comic books. Who needs nationalism when you can have the regional, the idiosyncratic, the personal, the eccentric, the folkloric, and the crafty? The artworks in 'Highway to Hicksville' sidestep any attempt to flag-bear for the nation by simply focusing on interesting diversions close at hand.

Both Saskia Leek and Brendon Wilkinson have long known the value of the homemade, bedroom project, while Bill Hammond, Yvonne Todd and Dylan Horrocks have an unerring eye for the wonderful weirdness of small town living. Peter

Little People: point of view | Natasha Conland

Frederic Jameson recently commented that a central artistic response to our times has been the 're-making' of the present as a 'situation'. What he means is that life, *as we know it*, is co-opted in artistic reconstructions, so that the present (represented as a thing, event, happening) is subordinated to create a point of view. In Jameson's terms, the significance of this *point of view* is the alternative it provides to the mainstream.

One might expect that with the increasing globalisation of culture, economies and politics, artists motivated to create an alternative position would engage with big ideas and big themes. Instead, what we frequently see is an engagement with ideas that are personal and subjective.

A number of recent exhibitions have focused on artists who portray the world in miniature, the shrunken scale reinforcing the subjectivity of the view depicted. The selection of work in 'Little People' explores the construction of individuality and counter-perspective prevalent in much contemporary New Zealand art.

Beginning with the depreciated self, Ronnie van Hout's *Nice and stupid* (1995) is a small, pathetic, grizzling sculpture. In this work a knee-high melted head stands next to a swastika. The swastika, that potent twentieth century sign redolent with memory and anxiety, leans against the wall as if it is lying in a gutter. Beside it the

Robinson and Michael Shepherd are off on a boy's own adventure involving danger and machinery, while Andrew McLeod, Derrick Cherrie and Mladen Bizumic's works undertake architectural or geographic mapping.

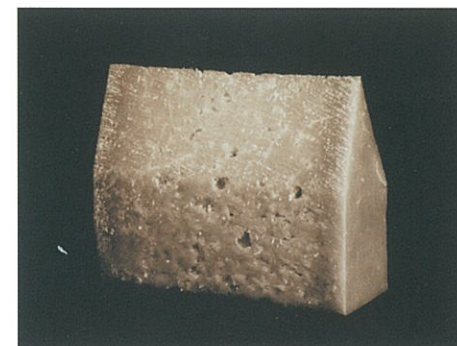
The sometimes claustrophobic nature of the small-scale is apparent in both Fiona Pardington's work *Choker* (1994)—where dark bruises discolour the soft flesh of a woman's neck—and in Ava Seymour's *House at Cannons Creek* (1997), where the mutated family posing in front of their home are clearly no advertisement for the utopian ideals of state housing. Community living may not always be picture perfect (it's a messy business knowing exactly what your neighbours get up to), but the realm of the local provides a palette with its own peculiar flavour.



Ava Seymour b. 1967
House at Cannons Creek 1997
c-type print
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Purchased 2002.

head moans in apathy—unproductive and unable—uttering words filled with doubt: '...don't think I'm up to this...I should go...I'm tired...so tired...'. Well-known for comically positioning himself in opposition to situations of awe, threat or banality, in *Nice and stupid* van Hout depicts a reassuring human incompetency.

Marie Shannon also uses her practice to play with the relationship between an individual and their wider world. She made *The wild side in me* (1989) and *King for a day* (1991) by constructing, and then photographing, model dioramas. By removing all external referents in framing these photographs, Shannon wittily confuses the small

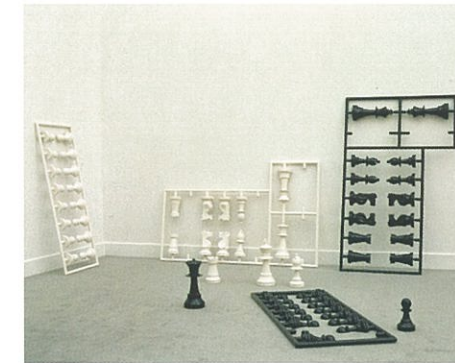


Marie Shannon b. 1960
The house of parmesan 1991
selenium-toned silver gelatin print
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Purchased 2004.

and personal with the larger 'real' world. In *The wild side in me* a miniature paper dog barks at birthday cake candles placed amongst stick trees. The scene is reminiscent of children's illustrative stories such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1964)—horrors for small people. Combined with its imagery, the title of the work *The wild side in me* suggests that Shannon is both demoting and expanding upon her fantasy life, staged here with the domestic equipment of home-making.

Michael Parekowhai also manipulates scale in his work *Folie à deux* (1994), giving his subjects a human relativity. Here, Parekowhai's game of chess is enlarged both literally and metaphorically, so that it engages with the politics of the early 1990s and a newly-emergent bicultural state. The black and white chess pieces are made to imitate kit-set moulds and mass-produced forms, implying that the nature of their relationships—racial, oppositional, political—is equally manufactured.

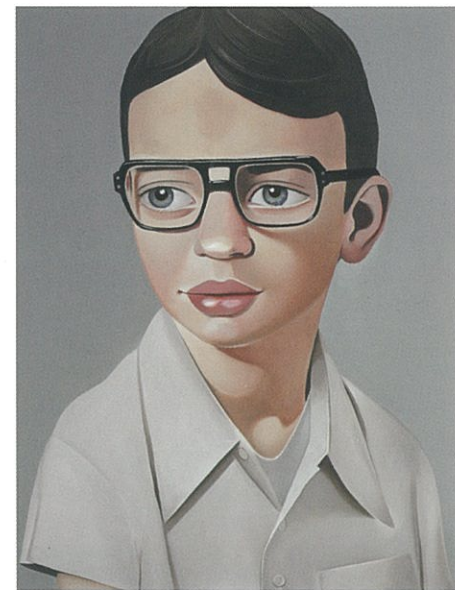
In Peter Stichbury's *Chester Karnofsky* (2004), the head of a young boy is expanded out of proportion, plasticising his features and giving



Michael Parekowhai b. 1968
Folie à deux 1994
wood, fibreglass, enamel paint
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Purchased 1996, with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds.

them a surface lustre. Stichbury has made a beautiful boy; the only problem is that, like Barbie, aspects of his anatomy are unbalanced and exaggerated to cater to the ideal at the expense of the 'real'. Stichbury has appropriated the language of advertising in order to explore the extension of such idealised human subjects.

All of the works in 'Little People' draw attention to the artist's individual and subjective point of view. They often demonstrate a self-consciousness, or frailty, that requires an intimacy of perspective from the viewer. These are works which expand the subject, but don't overawe it... If the world they present is tamed, it is only materially so. Ultimately, and often with some comic relief, their point of view fails to provide a solution. The 'big idea' is undone through the intimacy of scale.



Peter Stichbury b. 1969
Chester Karnofsky 2004
acrylic on linen
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Purchased 2005.

Outer Limits | Gregory O'Brien

In recent decades, the world has grown a whole lot bigger the smaller it has become—so has the universe. 'Outer Limits' takes us beyond the boundaries of the known into far-off regions in time and space. It also drops us into the unfurling cosmos of molecular science and the microscopically close at hand.

We live in an era of blurred boundaries and indistinct borders—between here and there, us and them, the indigenous and the imported. Sometime since the mid-twentieth century—the heyday of the nationalist utopia and the level playing field—the 'outside' moved in. These days, overseas sports stars clamber for places in provincial New Zealand teams. Sydney is sometimes called 'West Auckland' because of all the New Zealanders living there. The nation isn't as easily defined as it once was. Where exactly does the city end and the natural world begin? The coastline presents only one possible shape of the country—and anyone looking for a national 'style' in art, fashion or literature has their work cut out.

One of the many forces that has altered and expanded the size of 'the nation' is that of migration, as is made abundantly clear in the work of Niue-born John Pule. In *Burn my head in heaven* (*Nos 1-5*) (1998), Pule draws upon collective and personal histories, confounding borders and notions of clear-cut nationalism. Adding a layer of mythical narrative, he creates a patchwork of conflicting and complementary scenes which move forwards and backwards in time. Mythology also permeates the work of John Walsh, where coastline is a border between known and unknown, mythical and real worlds. Not only does Walsh draw on his tribal background, but also the fact that he lives close by Wellington's surfing mecca, Lyall Bay. His enigmatic scenes have something about them of panel-van and surf art, as well as the European Gothic tradition.

If the nation is unstable and on its edge, the world as a whole is faring little better. Postcolonialism continues to shake things up, just as colonialism once did. Yuk King Tan's *Island portrait* (2004) uses the present-day

¹Lyrics from 'Small Town', from the album *Scarecrow*, 1985, John Cougar Mellencamp.

²Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*, Canada: Drawn & Quarterly Publications, 2001, unpaginated.

migration of Asian workers to Pacific islands to float ideas about globalism and cultural identity. If, back in the 1960s, the global village appeared a utopian possibility; here we see that village mutate into a free labour-market factory, processing money, goods and people's lives.



Michael Harrison b. 1961
Hawk descending 2001
acrylic on paper
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Purchased 2002.

The internet has led to another form of global movement: the migration of ideas and images. This point is not lost on Gavin Hipkins, whose work *The gulf (redhead)* (2000-01) gathers images from on-line porn sites. Hipkins' practice is in dramatic contrast to Michael Harrison's more mystical musings on sex and life—small works on paper which fuse personal history with elements of Freud and Jung. Harrison is a 'worldly' painter as well as an 'other-worldly' one.

Maybe the only maps that still function in the contemporary world are the most personal ones—those predicated on subjective reality, on the intimate or the imaginary. Ruth Watson's *Mappa mundi* (1986-89) melds a segmented world map with details of the body: a fingerprint and an eye are rendered amidst cartographic details on the skin-like surface of the work.

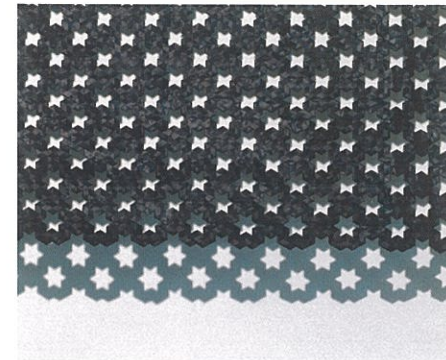
'Space, the Final Frontier' was a catch-cry of 1970s popular culture—but no longer is the cosmos the only frontier. We live in an age of molecular science and quantum physics. Boyd Webb's works take us into these strange new territories—places that exist somewhere between the physical and the imagined world.



Ruth Watson b. 1962
Mappa mundi 1986-89
photocopy, tissue, paint and resin on paper, gauze and canvas
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Purchased 1993.

For New Zealand artists, having a studio in downtown Auckland, Hong Kong or at a surf-beach is no longer a defining characteristic. Traffic is now moving in all directions, using all sorts of vehicles. Yet the Romantic idea of the artist as navigator survives in Ani O'Neill's 1994 *Star by night*—a work which O'Neill says is about 'journeying by star path'. It is also like a DNA ribbon, an endlessly replicating molecular structure.

Perhaps Ani O'Neill's piece is evidence that art, with its inherent mystery, can still function as a kind of global positioning system. The star-shapes in *Star by night* are the empty spaces between the florist ribbon. In the contemporary world, it is plain to see: we navigate by what we don't know as much as by what we do.

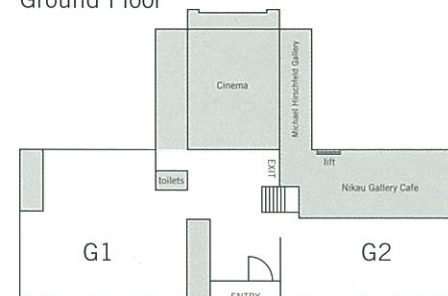


Ani O'Neill b. 1971
Star by night (detail) 1994
florist's ribbon, thread
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Purchased 1997, with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds.

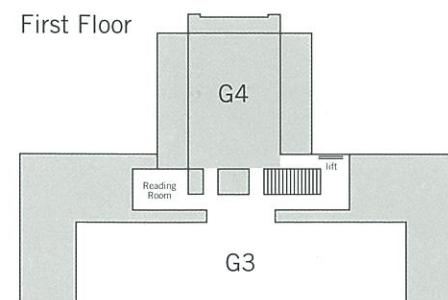
The Light That Never Fails 2005
'Small World, Big Town' brochure cover art by Dylan Horrocks
ink on paper, digital colour
Courtesy of the artist

Gallery Plan

Ground Floor



First Floor



The exhibition 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa' is divided into three parts and runs across galleries 1, 2, and 3.

Galleries 1 and 2: 'Highway to Hicksville'.
Gallery 3: 'Little People' and 'Outer Limits'.

Accompanying the exhibition 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa', City Gallery Wellington presents an engaging and stimulating programme of public events. Highlights are detailed below, but for a full list of events and up-to-date information, please ask at the Gallery reception desk, check out the events calendar at www.city-gallery.org.nz or see City Gallery Wellington's ad in the entertainment pages of Saturday's *Dominion Post*.

PUBLIC PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

MONTANA KEYNOTE LECTURE

POPULISM AND UNPOPULARITY: ISSUES AROUND CONTEMPORARY ART AT TE PAPA

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki | Sunday 28 August, 2pm

Join Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Director Art and Visual Culture at Te Papa, as he considers the National Museum's commitment to collecting the kind of art that many, if not most, of Te Papa's 'customers' would find unfathomable or possibly even objectionable. Why, then, do they collect it? Who is it for? What are the consequences of Te Papa's interventions in the contemporary art market?

Bookings essential for the Montana Keynote Lecture. Tel: (04) 801 3017 / Email: citygalleryevents@wcc.govt.nz

TALKS

THE TREKKA—HOW NEW ZEALAND BUILT A PEOPLE'S CAR

Todd Niall | Sunday 14 August, 2pm

Join Todd Niall, broadcaster and author of *The Trekka Dynasty*, as he recounts a colourful tale of a Kiwi entrepreneur, bureaucratic idealism, Cold War paranoia, New Zealand in the 1960s—and the motor vehicle which all of that created.

PLAYING IN THE GARDEN: IMAGINARY WORLDS IN ART, STORIES AND GAMES

Dylan Horrocks | Sunday 16 October, 2pm

Imaginary worlds are everywhere these days. From Hogwarts to The Sims, people are spending more and more time in places that don't exist. Exhibiting artist Dylan Horrocks takes a look at the importance of 'world building' in novels, comics, art and games—including Henry Darger, Dungeons & Dragons, the Brontë sisters and Star Wars—and asks what happens when stories become worlds.

CURATORS SPEAK

Join the curators who collaborated to bring you 'Small World, Big Town' for a series of early evening discussions on New Zealand art, literature and popular culture.

WHERE THE ALPHABET ENDS

Gregory O'Brien, City Gallery Wellington Curator | Thursday 13 October, 5:30pm

Looking in particular at the writing of Janet Frame, Gregory O'Brien shines his torch on the 'outer limits', exploring New Zealand literature that takes us beyond the boundaries.

LITTLE PEOPLE

Natasha Conland, Te Papa Curator of Visual Art and Culture | Thursday 20 October, 5:30pm

Natasha Conland discusses her role as a Curator at Te Papa, considering both the luxury and responsibility of acquiring work for one of the largest collections of contemporary New Zealand art.

HIGHWAY TO HICKSVILLE

Emma Bugden, City Gallery Wellington Curator | Thursday 27 October, 5:30pm

Emma Bugden uses the notion of 'Hicksville'—and her own upbringing in Ngunguru, Northland (pop. 1,290)—as a starting point to delve into popular culture, music and small town idiosyncrasies.

FREE WEEKEND EXHIBITION TOURS

Public tours of 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa' every Saturday and Sunday at 1pm. No bookings required. Meet in the gallery foyer.

VISITOR GROUP AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION TOURS

A great way to get more out of your visit to the Gallery. Bring your social or community group, friends and family (6+ people) to 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa' and enjoy a forty minute tour of the exhibition. Bookings essential. Tel: (04) 801 4241.

FREE ENTRY TO ALL EVENTS AND TOURS

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

City Gallery Wellington offers an exciting and enriching programme of curriculum-linked exhibition tours and workshops in our on-site classroom for primary and secondary students. Book early to ensure your class doesn't miss out on a free education visit to 'Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa'.

Education programme general enquiries and bookings:

Tel: (04) 801 3965
Email: lynn.baird@wcc.govt.nz

Māori education programme enquiries and bookings:

Tel: (04) 801 3081
Email: janina.dell@wcc.govt.nz

Simpson Grierson

Simpson Grierson, proud supporters of City Gallery Wellington.

A partnership exhibition between City Gallery Wellington and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

City Gallery Wellington is managed by the Wellington Museums Trust with major funding support from the Wellington City Council.

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Te Whare Toi



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