

# LIGHTWORKS

recent work by **Bill Culbert**



## LIGHTWORKS

Bill Culbert works with light. Light is both the material and the subject of his works, their medium and metaphor. Over the last three decades, Culbert has explored the remarkable effects of light he observes around him, in an art practice that transforms groupings of prosaic materials into poetic encounters. The surprising beauty of ordinary objects, and the astonishing perceptual tricks with which light rewards the observant, combine in Culbert's work to create resonant images and experiences that flicker in the memory.

Since the late 1960s, Culbert has approached making art simultaneously through two separate, though related disciplines – sculpture and photography. He has made sculptures which exist only as sculptures, their 'real life' effects too experiential to be fully captured in a single image; sculptures which exist as photographs, in which environmental light produces a fleeting effect; and finally photographs of light effects in a real life environment, observed rather than constructed by the artist.

This exhibition, *Lightworks*, brings together recent sculptures and major photographic works, with a montage of earlier photographs to illuminate the directions and concerns of Culbert's practice. The exhibition contrasts the simple elegance of Culbert's light sculptures against the multivalent narratives of his photographs, providing a significant and serious opportunity to view the mature work of one of New Zealand's leading artists. Although Culbert enjoys a considerable international reputation, *Lightworks* is the first major exhibition of his work by a New Zealand public gallery.

### Travelling Light

*One always has a favourite suitcase, and one keeps it for life.  
Living is travelling.*

Bill Culbert is a traveller. He divides his time between a house in the middle of London, and a house in rural Southern France. Once a year on average he returns to New Zealand. He makes and exhibits his work regularly in many countries around the world.

Culbert left New Zealand in 1957, with a scholarship to study painting at the Royal College of Art. Absorbing influences as diverse as historical European painting and the new British sculpture, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of art and life, the next decade was characterised by Culbert's experimentation with both painting and photography. The most profound influence on his work, however, was Culbert's 1961 purchase of a house in the Lubéron region of France. He spent two years rebuilding the house. From this experience, he gained two precepts which were to form the basis of his later sculptural works: a feeling for the poetry of everyday materials, and a fascination with the properties of light.

In 1968, the year of student uprisings against the old European order, Culbert exhibited his first sculptural works. Using artificial light to shine through panels pierced with fine holes, in works such as *Cubic Projections* (1968) Culbert projected a grid of points of light in a darkened room. He produced a total environmental experience for the viewer, like being inside a geometric version of the night sky.

Such perceptual shifts of distance and proximity evoked by the projection of light in space have continued to occupy Culbert's imagination from the late 1960s. Other works, however, have explored notions of distance more literally. Over the last decade, Culbert has frequently incorporated suitcases in his works, arranging them in towering stacks to be photographed in significant locations (*Murdering Beach*, 1990, *Suitcase Column*, 1989); or like *Hotel Voyageur* included in this exhibition, pierced through with his signature fluorescent tube. On one level a metaphor for the artistic process freed from boundaries, incorporating change and displacement as a fact of life, these works often hold a deeper personal significance for Culbert. *Bread Suitcase* (1977) for example, is a sculpture created from a neon tube which intersects a loaf of specially baked bread, placed inside an old suitcase belonging to Culbert's father. "Once this is lit, it is really very strange, it is a forceful sunset, as forceful as a sky," states Culbert.

### Telling Stories

*I remember Raymond Chandler describing Philip Marlowe sitting in his office. He says: 'A wedge of sunlight slipped over the desk and fell noiselessly to the carpet.' I was very touched by this idea ... Chandler has observed a very real phenomenon.*

There is a filmic character to much of Culbert's work. While the elegant chiaroscuro of his light sculptures reveals a certain film noir quality, his photographs frequently resemble stills from European neo-realist movies of the 1950s and 1960s. Their emphasis on the significance of humble objects set against a rural landscape or barren interiors, and lit with dramatic intensity by natural light, suggests that these images are fragments from a concealed narrative. In these photographs, Culbert's remembered fall of light decisively transforms a moment of time into a moment of history.

The secret relationship of Culbert to many of his subjects tends to remain elusive, an alternative source for potential illumination of his ideas. His works however are less autobiographical than gathered from the images of his daily life – a glass of wine on a stone table; the view across the valley at sunset; 2CV cars in various states of disrepair; coloured plastic bottles; home-made table-lamps; a wooden table with a leg missing, photographed in the garden; a pile of suitcases; washing hanging on a line. While the ostensible function of these objects is to examine the effects of shadow and reflection, they have an engagingly anecdotal quality, simultaneously down-to-earth and romantic. This is how the artist lives, the images seem to suggest: these are the things and the places he finds significant.

Stories and associations about special places gather around Culbert's works. Sometimes these significant locations appear in his titles – *Murdering Beach* (1990), *Rouille* (1988), *Long White Cloud* (1985) – but more often clues to the geographical significance of Culbert's images surface only in published interviews with the artist. Thus the discovery that Bill Culbert's birthplace is Port Chalmers seems to lend a particular weight to his major collaborations with Ralph Hotere entitled *Aramoana Pathway to the Sea*; while an image of discarded street lamps piled against an old shed wall assumes a historic import following the knowledge that this is the site of the first electricity generated in New Zealand.

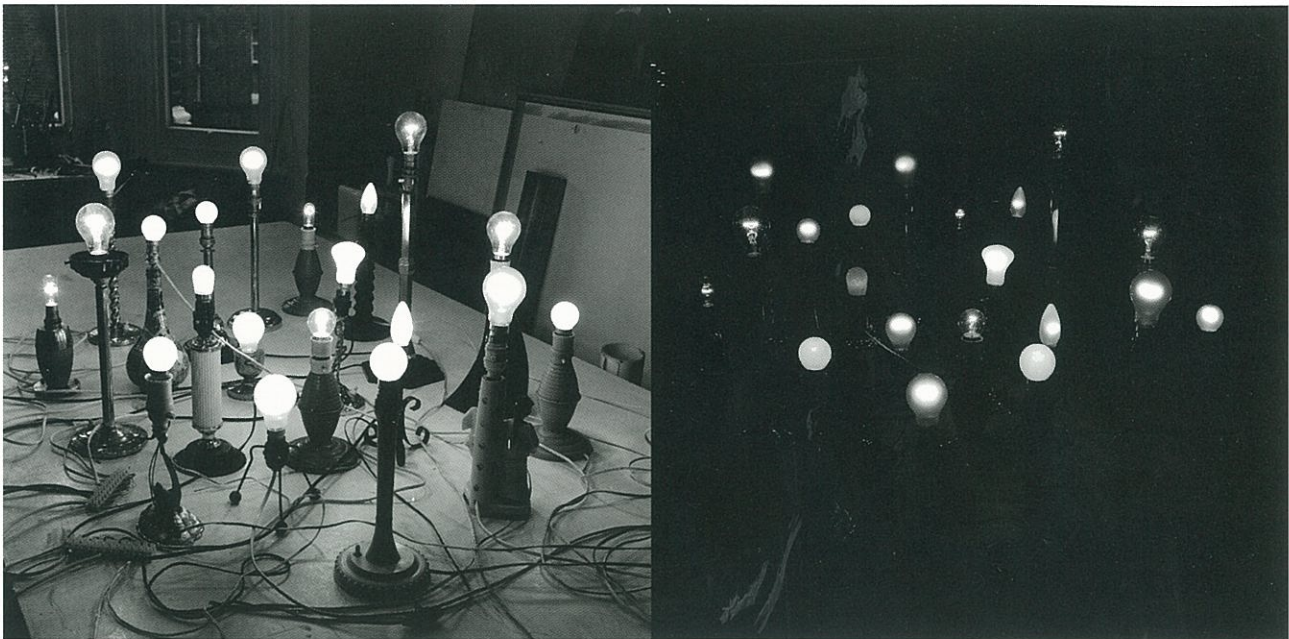


Table lamp day, Table lamp night, 1996

## Making Connections

*I adore it when logic misfires.*

Rather than creating new products, Culbert's self-imposed economy of means leads him to work with what already exists. Discarded objects, released from the obligations of their original function, take on new lives in works such as *Plain of Jars*; while other sculptures included in *Lightworks* are constructed from the commonly available paraphernalia of industrial and domestic lighting systems.

Culbert returns again and again to the same simple few materials. Since the early 1970s, he has constructed his works variously from light bulbs, wine glasses, lampshades, window frames, fluorescent tubes, and plastic bottles. Seen as a whole, Culbert's work functions like a continuous experiment in observation, as research into the effects of light on what English writer Simon Cutts has described as Culbert's "world of ordinary objects". Culbert has stated: "The work is a question which I am trying to answer."

Culbert's work recreates his optical discoveries, reconfiguring science as art. There is an amusingly eccentric character to many of his constructions. It is as if principles of the phenomenology of light are being explained using materials closest to hand, perhaps over dinner and drinks. Culbert's work is characterised by his idiosyncratic combination of an engagingly down-to-earth system of invention with an aesthetic based upon startling formal elegance. One of the measures of Culbert's success is his ability to consistently reinvent new imaginative possibilities for ordinary things.

Thus in images such as *Sun, Glass/Wine* (1992), Culbert demonstrates the almost magical property of a wine glass to function as a camera obscura, projecting an image which looks like an illuminated light bulb. *Abat-jour* (1993) and related works reveal the strangely three-dimensional shadows cast by skeletal lampshades

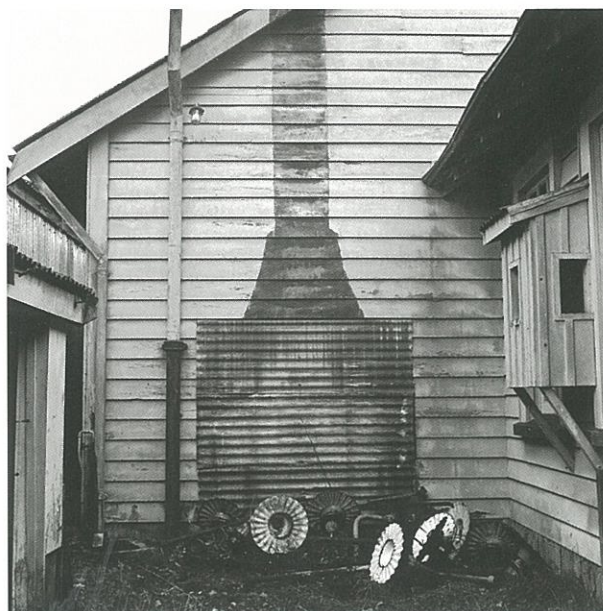
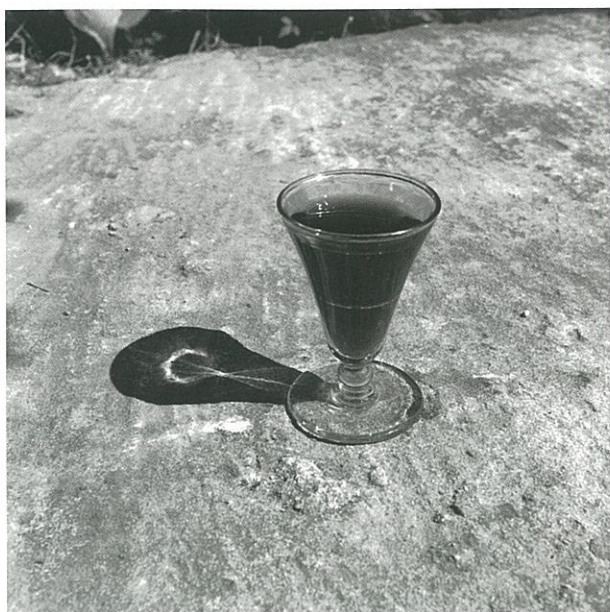
lit from a single light source. The viewer is cast adrift in a dizzy sea of spatial ambiguity with Culbert's positive/negative arrangements of lamps in a darkened room, in sculptural works such as *Light Plain* (1995). In earlier works, Culbert has appeared to pour light from a jug like liquid, and to cut through walls, floors and other solid objects with fluorescent tubes. *Sun Lit Bulb* (1992) captures the unlikely shadows cast by lit bulbs photographed with the sun behind them, a phenomenon Culbert describes as "real contradictions". *Skylight 3*, a tip truck carrying a giant tilted light-box, appears to reflect the blue luminescence of the sky. *Les deux cotes*, a composite photograph, reveals the seemingly impossible shadows cast by what seems to be two external light sources.

Though the notion of transformation is central to Culbert's work, his magic is grounded in an appreciation of the real world. His works do not rely on illusion, but on real life mysteries. He comments: "When the wires and cables are visible in a work, you know where it comes from, where it stands." Thus the viewer remains aware of the close connection between the utilitarian and the imaginative, between the mundane and the magical.

Light is the shortest distance between two points, and works to connect the viewer with an object. Likewise, Culbert's constructions directly connect the viewer with the idea being expressed, through the most economical means at his disposal. Nothing is superfluous, nothing wasted. In Culbert's art, light works to transfigure simple objects, providing an unforgettably resonant moment of illumination.

Lara Strongman, 1997

*All italicised quotes are Bill Culbert's.*



## Public Programmes

**Sunday 25 May, 3pm**

*Illuminating Bill Culbert*

Tina Barton, lecturer in Art History at Victoria University and contributor to the exhibition publication, will give a gallery talk on Bill Culbert's sculptural works.

**Thursday 19 June, 6pm**

*Fault - A Reading*

Bill Manhire will read from *Fault*, his literary response to the work by Bill Culbert and Ralph Hotere which makes its mark across the facade of the City Gallery.

**Sunday 29 June, 3pm**

*The Mechanical Eye*

Photographic historian Bill Main will talk on Culbert's photographic installation in the North Gallery.

## Acknowledgements

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The project is generously supported by:  
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*A fully-illustrated catalogue is available from the Gallery.*

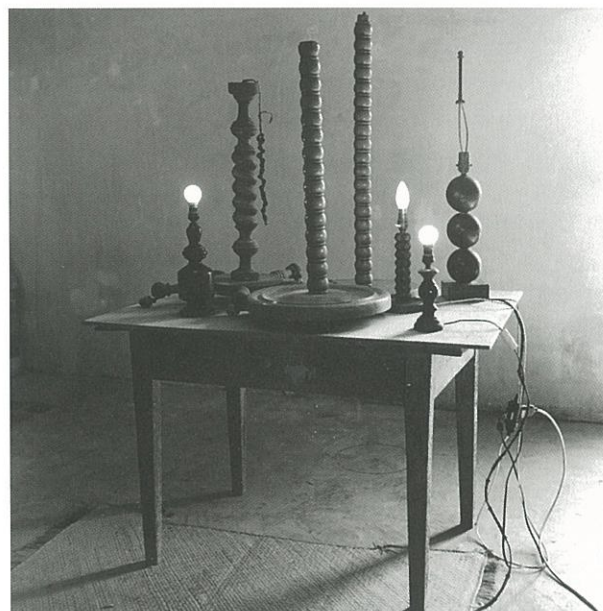
Top left: *Wineglass*, 1979; Top right: *Reefton*, 1978; Centre right: *Table lamp 5*, 1996; Lower right: *2CV table*, 1989; Front cover: *Trousers*, Contadour, 1977.

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10 May – 13 July 1997

City Gallery, Wellington



New Zealand and Britain – modern and evolving relationships



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Te Whare Toi

