

DEAN VENROOY

Bar 2003

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Campbell Grant Galleries,
Christchurch

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Plot 2002

Oil on canvas

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In Dean Venrooy's small but potent paintings, Lyttelton Harbour becomes an above-and-below-water theatre where dramas of environmental balance silently play out.

Like Laurence Aberhart in the photograph to the right, Venrooy asks us to consider (without forcing the point) the thought of the waters rising over our own culture at some point in the distant future. In many of his paintings, the sea's surface becomes the dipping and rising canopy of a tent beneath which rest relics of human endeavour – books, urns, vases. Venrooy sometimes brings real relics into the picture, by painting on fragments of glass bottles picked up from the very coastlines that inspire his paintings.

'Plot' is a word to conjure with. It can mean an area of land for sale, the sequence of events that propel a story, or a plan to perpetrate some less-than-virtuous action ('to hatch a plot'). Given his fascination with seabirds as representatives of the natural world and its precarious balances, Dean Venrooy may also have had in mind a lesser-known Scottish meaning of the word. To plot a bird is to dip it in very hot water and prepare it to be plucked.

LAURENCE ABERHART (b. 1949)

**Old bridge structure from
new bridge, Alexandra/Clutha
River** 1980

Gelatin silver print

The Patricia Browne Trust Collection

Laurence Aberhart has made many photographs of monuments and buildings, but the resulting images are not directly 'about' those things. Rather, Aberhart's hidden subject is the way time wears away at human structures, undercutting their claims to permanence.

One of his best-known images, *Old bridge structure from new bridge, Alexandra/Clutha River* derives its poetry and irony from two key contrasts. First there is the contrast between the new bridge (which we only glimpse) and the old one, which now stands free of its span – as if conveying phantom traffic from one bank to another. Secondly, there is the contrast between both bridges and the flow of the Clutha river (its rippling surface rendered uncannily smooth by Aberhart's use of a very long exposure). The river is the most fluid element in the image, yet paradoxically the most permanent. Aberhart invites us to compare the history of the two human structures (and by extension, all works of human art and industry) with the vaster timescale of the river and the geology it has helped to form.

MICHAEL SHEPHERD (b. 1950)

Monuments 1990-1991

Oil on board

Private collection; placed on long-term to the
Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2002

LAURENCE ABERHART (b. 1949)

**Interior: Hall, Naseby,
Central Otago** 1980

Gelatin silver print

The Patricia Browne Trust Collection

SHANE COTTON (b. 1966)

Koroniti 1998

Oil on canvas

Jim Barr and Mary Barr collection

In the New Testament of the Bible, the two books of Corinthians consist of letters written by the apostle Paul to the Christians of the Greek city of Corinth around 50 CE. The word 'Koroniti' is a Maori transliteration of 'Corinth' and is the name of a settlement with wharenui and Anglican church on the Whanganui River in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is one of several settlements along the River whose names recast place-names from the Christian Bible in Maori: others are Hiruharama (Jerusalem) and Atene (Athens). Koroniti's distinctive hillscape, which can be seen in famous photographs of the area by photographers from Alfred Burton to Anne Noble, lies at the bottom of this work by Shane Cotton, but the focus of the painting is not on the physical aspect so much as the spiritual resonance of this landscape. In the sky above Koroniti, Cotton builds a great scaffold of words and phrases that include Karaiti ('Christ') and Te Tahi ('The One'). Cotton's career-long fascination with the way traditions merge and create new forms is dramatised here in his use of Corinthians Chapter 5, verse 17, which reads: 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things pass away; behold all things are become new.'

BRETT GRAHAM (b. 1967)

Kotahitanga 2000

Rimu desk, lacquer

Collection of Sarjeant Gallery / Te Whare o Rehua /
Whanganui

This work was shown in 2000 as part of an exhibition by Brett Graham called *Stain*. The word referred to the colouring that carpenters use to bring up the texture of wood. And it also referred to less straightforward stains – of time, memory and history.

A desk of the kind that colonial school-children used, Graham's sculpture invites us to imagine ourselves sitting and participating in a three-dimensional 'history lesson'. Symbols of European power are carved into the work's surface, making it look like a miniature version of the seats of authority inhabited by judges and lawgivers. Under the lid, however, it is another story. Here one half of the desk's interior is not whitewashed but stained black, and carved with personal signs and symbols that include a star, crescent moon, flame and pillow.

'Kotahitanga' means 'unity', but, as with Michael Shepherd's bitter use of the phrase 'one people' in his work nearby, the split between the inside and outside of Graham's object suggest that the 'unity' is not shared by all.

SHANE COTTON (b. 1966)

Ko te rakau a Taiamai 1997

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Purchased 1997 by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Society with funds from the Blair Trust.

‘On the one hand, the pot plant motif can be seen to represent Pakeha notions of land ownership and containment; on the other, it shows a Maori sense of responsibility towards the land and a need to nurture and protect it. The pot plant can also be read as a symbol of whakapapa in Cotton’s paintings, especially where it has been spliced with other forms to represent a hybridised genealogy. At Rongopai [a wharenuī or meeting house near Gisborne embellished with striking figurative paintings], the plant also occurs as a Ringatu image of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden ...’

—William McAloon

WARREN VISCOE (b. 1935)

**Handbook for Night Flyers
(From a Composition by
Stephen Leek) 2005**

Kauri, privet, macrocarpa and paint

Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist and Peter
McLeavey Gallery, Wellington

BILL HAMMOND (b.1948)

Lake Kidney 1996

Acrylic on tabletop

Private collection; placed on long-term loan to the
Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2002

If there is such a thing as a New History Painting in New Zealand art of the 1990s, then Bill Hammond is its initiator and prime exponent. In his now-famous paintings of from that decade, Hammond staged the story of European arrival in New Zealand as a black historical comedy.

In the early 1990s Hammond took a trip to the sub-Antarctic Auckland Islands and saw thousands of birds standing and staring silently out to sea. Soon after, he began to imagine Aotearoa New Zealand as it was before it was named, when the birds ruled. As the title of one of these series put it, the birds were 'waiting for Buller' – that is, Sir Walter Lowry Buller, the pioneer ornithologist and author of *A History of New Zealand Birds* from 1873.

Dangling from trees or poised on headlands, and often clothed in dresses inspired by an old photograph of Hammond's mother and aunt in their best outfits, Hammond's bird-people sometimes emanate aggro and menace, and sometimes an extraordinary calm and pathos. Though they are waiting for humans who have yet to arrive, the birds seem resigned to a fate they have already foreseen.

MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI (b. 1968)

**The Barefoot Potter Boy's
Brigade** 1999

Stuffed rabbits and woven material
Jim Barr and Mary Barr collection

Michael Parekowhai has long been fascinated by the tussle between the indigenous and the imported in New Zealand culture. In this work he puts his razor-sharp wit to work on a well-known imported species, the rabbit.

Dressed up in felt hunting jackets, Parekowhai's feral cuties recall museum displays and morbid Victorian hunting trophies. As the title suggests, Parekowhai also has in mind the animal stories of Beatrix Potter, which filled the imaginations of New Zealand children of his generation with images of a distant, English countryside.

Taxidermy displays send out mixed messages. They celebrate the beauty of native species even as they bear witness to their demise. By putting imports rather than natives on show, Parekowhai seems to be playing out, with a sardonic twist, the great nineteenth-century campaigns to stuff and collect New Zealand's native animal species.

SÉRAPHINE PICK (b. 1964)

**He (Disappeared into
Silence)** 2004

Oil on canvas

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased
2004 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art
Gallery Society.

SASKIA LEEK (b.1970)

Untitled 2000

Oil and mixed media on board

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 2000 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society

Untitled 2000

Oil on board

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 2000 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society

Saskia Leek was one of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's Visiting Artists for 2000. At the centre of her exhibition, *Ghost Painting*, was this painting of dainty nineteenth-century folk picnicking in a sea of native foliage. It is Leek's version of an eccentric masterpiece called *Picnic at Woodhaugh* painted in 1863 by an unknown New Zealand artist.

Like all good ghost stories, Leek's has a beautiful twist. Her first encounter with the original *Picnic* was in a poem about it by Bill Manhire. What makes her version remarkable is that she made it *before* seeing the original. She painted it 'blind', using Manhire's poem as a script or score. The result is an uncanny act of art-historical channelling, in which Leek speaks for the unknown New Zealand artist – or does the unknown artist speak for her?

In revisiting this scene from the colonial past, Leek is also revisiting a scene from her own history – she grew up in Dunedin, attended school near the Woodhaugh gardens, and even picnicked there as a child.

KATHRYN MADILL (b. 1951)

Untitled from the **Burning** series
2002

Oil on canvas

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased
2002 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art
Gallery Society

This small painting is from a larger group that Dunedin painter Kathryn Madill calls the *Burning* series. Along with Madill's prints and paintings of nineteenth-century women in wind-scoured landscapes, the *Burning* paintings recast objects from New Zealand's settler history as fragments from a nocturnal dream sequence. Candles, bibles and axes and houses are among the objects Madill sets on fire in these works, and we are left to guess whether she is responding to an actual historical event or evoking the past's ability to ignite feeling and debate in the present.

BEN CAUCHI (b. 1975)

Flames and Candlestick 2006

Ambrotype

Guardian (After Sassoferrato)

2006

Ambrotype

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased
2006 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art
Gallery Society

Many contemporary photographers work in front of a computer, resizing and Photoshopping their images. Ben Cauchi, however, creates one-off images according to recipes first devised in the mid-nineteenth century.

To make ambrotypes like these, he prepares a collodion mixture from cotton, acid, ether and alcohol, pours it on to his large glass plates, then readies the surface to take in light by bathing it in a further coat of silver nitrate. Once exposed, the glass plate is floated in front of a backdrop of black.

Not only does Cauchi revive technology more than a century-and-a-half old, he also re-enacts the dramas of truth and falsehood that animated photography in its earliest decades. He's especially attracted to the tricks played by the 'spirit photographers' of the nineteenth century, who used dummies, sheets and double exposures to conjure the presence of lost loved ones for recently bereaved customers.

BEN CAUCHI (b. 1975)

The Fool 2005

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased
2006 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art
Gallery Society

The most potent image in this group of three derives its power from an echo not of historical but contemporary photographic imagery. *The Fool* (2005) is a disguised self-portrait, in which the artist sits shrouded by a cloth hood. Guided by the title, our first response might be to see the work as absurdist: the artist as a dunce whose cap has slipped down over his face. But the image soon yields more sinister associations: think of execution masks, or the pointed hoods worn by Ku Klux Klan members or, above all, the hoods forced on political prisoners in the infamous photographs of torture in Abu Ghraib prison.

JASON GREIG (b. 1963)

Sarge 2005

Monoprint

Courtesy of the artist and Marshall Seifert Gallery,
Dunedin

The Resurrectionist 2004

Monoprint

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Purchased 2004 with funds from the Dunedin Public
Art Gallery Society.

Preacher 2004

Monoprint

Courtesy of the artist and Marshall Seifert Gallery,
Dunedin

‘It’s not dirt – it’s memories’. That’s Jason Greig talking about the layers of ink with which he builds his monoprint portraits. *Sarge*, *Preacher* and *The Resurrectionist* are three of the most sinister characters in the album of ancestors that Lyttelton artist Greig has compiled over the past few years.

The word ‘resurrectionist’ suggests a minister or spiritual agent. In fact, ‘resurrectionists’ were grave-robbers who supplied corpses to London surgeons in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Greig uses layerings of tone to perform an anatomy lesson of his own and evoke the skull beneath the Resurrectionist’s skin, all sockets and crumbling cavities.

At times Greig has portrayed real figures such as the Reverend Samuel Marsden, named ‘the Flogging Parson’ for the punishing cruelty of his sentences as a magistrate in New South Wales. ‘The Resurrectionist’ is more shadowy, in every sense. His collar has been starched until it’s white, but the darkness Greig imbeds in his face doesn’t look like it’s ever coming out.

WARREN VISCOE (b. 1935)

**I am a Man of Widespread
Fame** 2005

Kauri, privet, macrocarpa and paint

Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist and Peter
McLeavey Gallery, Wellington

Warren Viscoe is New Zealand art's resident cultural carpenter. A master woodworker, Viscoe not only works in the medium of wood but also dwells constantly on what he calls 'the culture of wood' – its status as a measure of time, its place in forests and the ecologies they sustain, and its role in building and culture generally.

Not surprisingly, birds are especially cherished in the world of Viscoe's art, and many of his recent sculptures have taken the form of memorials or elegies to dwindling bird populations. This work is an ambivalent portrait of Walter Lowry Buller, the pioneer nineteenth-century ornithologist famous for his study of New Zealand birds. Buller's contradictions – a recorder of birds who killed and stuffed many – have made him a figure of fascination for painter Bill Hammond (seen across the room), sculptor Michael Parekowhai (who has reversed Buller's obsession with exotic birds by stuffing dozens of sparrows), and recently inspired a play by Nick Drake.

Carved in the style of a nineteenth-century folk monument, Viscoe's Buller strides towards the future with Victorian rectitude and purpose. He has a feather in his bowler hat and two birds held, like missiles attached to the wings of a fighter plane, in each arm. Part of the pleasure of Viscoe's work is that, even when he is homing in on a subject that angers him, he is never moralising. Anger exists alongside affection and a cultivated sense of the absurd.