

BILL CULBERT [b.1935 New Zealand]

RALPH HOTERE [1931-2013 Te Aupouri, New Zealand]

P.R.O.P. 1991

corrugated iron, fluorescent tubes

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1991 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

In the early 1990s the headland known as Observation Point, or Oputae, in Port Chalmers was demolished to make way for port development. For the city of Dunedin it remains a historically significant site; the enduring land once home to Hotere's Port Chalmers studio is now where the Hotere Sculpture Garden Oputae is located. The organisation, established to Preserve Observation Point, P.R.O.P., gives this soaring wall of iron its name.

Observation Point has many stories associated with it, including that of an old Ngai Tahu pā or fortified village. Updating the fortifications for a contemporary audience, Culbert and Hotere built a symbolic shield of corrugated iron to protect the face of the headland. Placed at regular intervals across this great black wave are a series of vertical fluorescent tubes. These lights reflect across the iron ripples highlighting the contours and darkness of its surface – much like the moon flickering across the night-time waters of the Otago Harbour. In this space the bars of light are also reflected onto the floor and while it may be unexpected that *P.R.O.P.* could be interactive, the various reflections move with the viewer, ultimately acting as further beacons that both locate and draw the audience in.

The sheer scale of *P.R.O.P.* the stark contrast between light and dark, and the minimalist aesthetic makes it a powerful and confronting work; yet it avoids the aggressive and provocative notions that surround and also define much political art. As with all their environmentally motivated works, it challenges viewers with its sheer scale, blinding incandescence and staunch solemnity. This is amongst the most restrained and elegant protest works in contemporary New Zealand Art – simultaneously highlighting the artists' resistance to destruction and retaining the memory of the land that was lost.

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Whale/Bone 1997

left to right:

High Tide 29 April 1997 8.29am

High Tide 1 May 1997 10.33am

High Tide 1 May 1997 11.00pm

High Tide 29 April 1997 8.56pm

High Tide 30 April 1997 9.31am

High Tide 30 April 1997 9.58pm

paint, wood and fluorescent tubes

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere Foundation Trust

Embedded in six standard 'off the shelf' doors, different arrangements of fluorescents appear like a set of symbols, markings or hidden messages buried in a blackened shroud. A contemporary hieroglyphics, their coding eludes us. Headstones, monoliths, or entryways, the presence of these works is both foreboding and intriguing.

Each of the pieces in this series is inscribed with a date, time and record of 'high tide' as well as a location. Like other work in this exhibition, *Whale/Bone* is tethered to a site of significance for both Bill Culbert and Ralph Hotere: Port Chalmers. The work holds the memory of Culbert and Hotere observing high tide together over a sequence of days in the autumn of 1997 and as such is a portal to both their friendship and collaboration.

Whale/Bone also connects to drawings Culbert made after a trip in 1989 with his son to locations across New Zealand where the arched bones of whales had been assembled as gateways or waharoa, often the access point to marae and pā. The work also references earlier pieces, particularly, *Gateway I* and *II*, part of Culbert's 1990 exhibition at Musée des Beaux-Arts André Malraux in Le Havre and *Three Huts* at Sue Crockford Gallery in Auckland in the same year.

The colour of Culbert's fluorescents here suggests the whiteness of bleached bones and their luminosity the memento mori of a skeleton; the object that remains after life has passed. Similarly, Hotere's black, lacquered surfaces offer both reflection and absorption. Up close, blinded by the light, we are confronted with distorted images of ourselves as we contemplate an entranceway to the unknown.

Doorways, windows, paths and lines appear frequently in Culbert and Hotere's body of work. This interest in transitional spaces suggests the power of potentiality that their practice explores. In *Whale/Bone*, where the act of collaboration itself overshadows our expectation of socio-political content, these mysterious doorways still speak of latent possibilities, of the galvanising forces that echo throughout HOTERE CULBERT.

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Blackwater 1998-99

lacquer on corrugated aluminium, fluorescent tubes, cables, wood
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

A field of fluorescent lights stand, arc and lilt in a pool of shimmering black corrugated iron. Each tube generates a series of flares across the undulating black ground, which move and ripple as you circulate around the work.

Blackwater was commissioned by the famous director/curator René Block, as part of the major New Zealand survey exhibition *Toi Toi Toi* in Kassel, Germany, in 1999. Conceived in Culbert's studio in the south of France in 1998, this work in many respects embodies the fascinating intellectual, geographical and historical dance that these artists were able to consistently produce as collaborators. Block's interest in the art of this part of the world and these two artists was not coincidental and can be traced back to his highly acclaimed 1990 Biennale of Sydney *The readymade boomerang: certain relations in 20th century art*, which included a selection of Culbert's light sculptures. As with the inclusion of *Pathway to the Sea–Aramoana* and *P.R.OP.* a couple of years later in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Sydney, *Blackwater* became a key physical and conceptual fulcrum in *Toi Toi Toi*.

In many respects this work seeks to reconnect with the space/place that both artists share in common - the land and sea around Otago Harbour. However it also harks back even further to a small sculpture of the same name, which Culbert made on his first return trip to New Zealand in 1978. That sculpture, constructed from a piece of found corrugated iron pierced by two fluorescent tubes, took its title from a tiny community on the South Island's West Coast (Pongowai), where the local lake is so named for the infinite darkness of its waters.

BILL CULBERT [b.1935 New Zealand]

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Pathway to the Sea–Aramoana

1991

fluorescent lamps, paua shells, rocks

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

At the end of Otago harbour stretches the bleak and beautiful area of coast named Aramoana. Situated near Port Chalmers, where Culbert lived as a child and Hotere made his home for many years, Aramoana is a complex site of many histories. Ralph Hotere painted fierce protests in defence of this landscape in the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties, when its fragile ecology was threatened by a proposed aluminium smelter by a consortium of corporations that would come to be held responsible for serious industrial disasters or involved in controversy over indigenous land rights.

A decade after the smelter proposal was overturned, Culbert and Hotere commemorated the preservation of Aramoana in this work. *Pathway to the Sea–Aramoana* is a sculpture that inherently asks us to engage with it, to walk with it, as it draws us along its impressive stretch. Coursing more than twenty metres across the floor, a track of Culbert's signature fluorescent tubes illuminates a line of cut and polished paua. Interestingly, as a material that long ago became ubiquitous in souvenir shops and flogged off as tourist tat, paua shell remains a powerful symbol of our identity as New Zealanders. These objects - the found, discarded, and left-over - convey the convivial and collaborative relationship which underlies the works in this show. Anchored between two rocks, in this exhibition, *Pathway* welcomes us into the gallery space, marking our entry into and exit from the world of Culbert and Hoteres' collaborations.

Pathway to the Sea–Aramoana evokes the complicated relationship between nature and culture and acts as a lesson in how to pay attention to the smallest details that lie underfoot. Like so many works by Culbert and Hotere, *Pathway* suggests that what is most precious is revealed when it is most threatened.

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Avignon crate c.1978

wood, paint, rope, stickers and labels

Collection of the Hotere Foundation Trust

Avignon crate is the largely unknown first piece, a catalyst or fountain head, for the unique collaborative series of works between Culbert and Hotere, which would blossom and emerge over subsequent decades. Shown very briefly only once before in the late seventies, on Hotere's return to New Zealand after a very productive sojourn in Spain, Italy and the south of France and Culbert's first visit 'home' after more than twenty years away, this work in many ways epitomizes the uncomplicated and direct understanding that these artists shared.

The central element in this work is the former housing for Hotere's unstretched canvases, this included the *Return to Sangro*, *The Pope is Dead*, *Avignon* and *Window in Spain* series. As an object it is full of mysticism – a time capsule that bears all the signs of its transit from the Northern to Southern Hemisphere (freight/customs labels and descriptive information from the artist) and markings of its former life (ropes for its handling and lashing down). For visitors to Hotere's house and studio during this period this contemporary artifact was already the subject of some fascination, as Jim Barr and Mary Barr were to observe in *CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND PAINTERS Volume 1, A-M*: 'In the dining room are the works we have come to see, the banners painted while Hotere was in Europe on an Arts Council fellowship in 1978. On their faces we see the small white pock marks where drawing pins which held the canvas to a board have stopped the flow of paint. These signs of the process left on the finished work are happily integrated into the effect of the paint surface. While he was away, Hotere had wanted to paint on the loose canvas he had used for some years, but was without a studio as he moved from town to town. So he worked on canvases pinned to a large board that could be strapped to the roof of his car and propped up outside, to act as a mobile wall. When it was time to come back to New Zealand, this same board was made into a crate to hold the works that had been produced on its back.'¹

Legend has it that on one of Culbert and Hotere's regular late night gatherings they came up with the idea "to put a tube through it [the painting crate]", and so in an inspirational moment this piece of packaging was transformed into an artwork and their eternal relationship was forged.

1. *CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND PAINTERS Volume 1, A-M*, Jim & Mary Barr, Alistair Taylor, 1980, New Zealand, p. 110.

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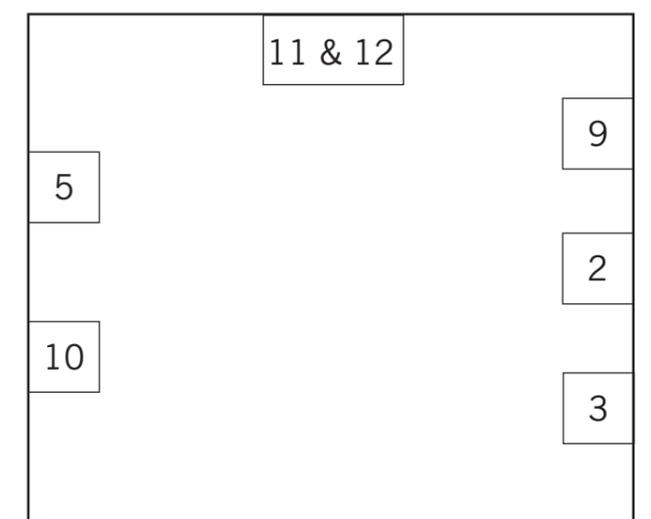
RALPH HOTERE [1931-2013 Te Aupouri, New Zealand]

Post Black 1992

In 1992 a series of works titled *Post Black* was shown at Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland and at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton. The thirteen works in this series, which have been brought together for the first time since their initial display twenty-one years ago, combine Culbert's neon tubes and Hotere's black surfaces with their shared interest in window frames. The frame has been a consistent medium in not only their collaborations but also in their individual practice, such as Culbert's *Window Lamp*, 1982, *Window Mobile*, 1985, *Window, Light Outside*, 1980 and Hotere's *Black Window – Towards Aramoana*, 1981, *Far More Blue*, 1999 and *Night Window, Carey's Bay*, 1995. These examples provide a simple illustration of a display device that both artists have sought to unpack or reconsider over a sustained period.

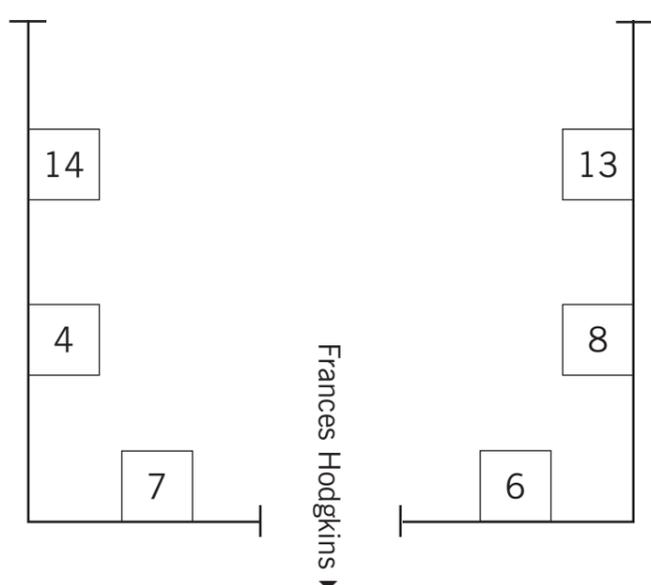
Taking Duchamp's idea of the Readymade, we find both artists giving this routine a uniquely antipodean spin. These colonial frames, many of which were taken from demolition yards, represent buildings that no longer exist, highlighting a specific moment in time through the recovery of items that would otherwise be discarded. This series, with its severe contrasts, has reframed the context of the materials and ultimately inverted notions of inside and outside.

Like a couple of jazz musicians these artists truly encapsulate the notion of riffing on an idea in *Post Black*. Throughout this series of sketches the orientation of the neon tube is adjusted or the quantity altered, glass is framed like a traditional window or replaced with a reflective black panel which tests the expectation of a view through the windowpane. These variations of seeing into and out of darkness mean that each one is uniquely different and yet conceptually linked to the next. The result is a series of black and white frames pierced by, and adorned with, fluorescent tubes that reflect the minimal and elegant nature of their work.



◀ Blackwater

P.R.O.P. ▶



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Post Black no.10 1992

backing panel, paint, fluorescent tubes
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 1992.

Post Black no.5 1992

backing panel, paint, fluorescent tubes
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 1992.

Post Black no.11 and 12 1992

hardboard, paint, glass and fluorescent
tubes
Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.9 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.2 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.3 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.13 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki, 1992.

Post Black no.8 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.6 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Collection Dame Jenny Gibbs Trust

Post Black no.7 1992

window frame, paint, fluorescent tube and
backing panel

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.4 1992

window frame, paint and fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust

Post Black no.14 1992

window frame, paint, glass and
fluorescent tube

Courtesy Bill Culbert and the Hotere
Foundation Trust