

WELCOME IN TELECOM PROSPECT 2004: NEW ART NEW ZEALAND

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LISTS

A curious thing happened once I accepted the task of developing the next *Prospect* biennial. From the moment my feet touched the Wellington tarmac to begin working on the show, people all around me started offering me lists—their personal selection of who they would like to see included in a New Zealand survey show. People I had barely met offered their particular take. I began to realise that inside everybody such a list is just waiting to emerge into the world: a Top Ten, a Wish List, a Who's Who, a Top of the Pops.

This, then, is my list. Or one of them. 43 artists, spanning a 50 year age gap between oldest and youngest, who work variously across painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, performance, video, film and computer software.

WELCOME

The *Prospect* show as a model was designed by Lara Strongman, curator of *Telecom Prospect 2001: New Art New Zealand*, to be generous and flexible enough to be taken up each time by a different curator and given their individual slant. Strongman's own *Prospect* was elegantly playful in its execution, laying the foundation for each successive exhibition to provide a subsequent snapshot of time, place and personality in New Zealand contemporary art.

Telecom Prospect 2004: New Art New Zealand is an unruly beast, designed to sprawl across the city like an exuberant infection, across galleries, cinema, a hall, the local bus service, your cell phone, your home PC. It has a sociable bent. The exhibition has a celebratory quality, an inclusive nature and would like to welcome you in. Without being driven by one over-arching theme, *Telecom Prospect 2004* is a show located around a series of connections which weave through the artworks. This is a show located in something quite real: it's a show about people, networks, relationships and conversations.

WHERE WE'RE FROM

The artists in *Telecom Prospect 2004* live on Great Barrier Island, in Porirua, Te Aro, Havelock North, Hamilton and Port Chalmers. They also live in London, Melbourne, Bangkok and Auckland.

In 2004 most New Zealand artists are sophisticated gypsies, moving across cities and countries to make and show their work. The sense of geographic isolation and preoccupation with this island landscape which marked out New Zealand art so strongly in the 1980s and early 1990s (as illustrated in exhibitions such as *Distance Looks Our Way*, *Headlands*, *Putting the Land on the Map*), no longer seem so dominant. An electronic squeezing of distance is leading, as promised, to that virtual global village. On one level maybe it still hovers as a utopian dream before us, on another level it is an increasing reality. One consequence of this shrinking sense of space has been increasing numbers of New Zealand artists exhibiting overseas, not just in large-scale institutionally supported touring shows of national art, but

increasingly as individuals in commercial, public and alternative spaces around the world. We may still be uniquely adrift at the very bottom of the world, but we are no longer immune from the ravages of a wider world beyond. Yet, at the same time, we can still assert a desire for locality, a need for the regional and the personal. Not entirely rootless, we are still stuck firmly in our own patch of (shifting) dirt which brings its own conflict and joy. As arts commentator Mark Amery has said: 'Our history young, our geographical position isolated, issues of distance and cultural identity continue to be keenly felt no matter how fast we can dial up our modems. They are issues that still have a strong impact on the kind of art we make!'

Increasing numbers of New Zealand artists are basing themselves elsewhere, sometimes permanently. Therefore, in making shows which examine the stick-in-the-ground benchmark of national identity, as institutions and curators we need to think in the most fluid sense. Included in *Telecom Prospect 2004* are many artists who live away from New Zealand, but still consider themselves New Zealanders; as well as those whose work maintains an active dialogue with this country. While London-based artist Francis Upritchard is established enough in the UK to be included as a finalist in the British contemporary art award *The 2003 Becks Future*, she also exhibits her work here, where it is read within particularly local modes of reference. Under the same rationale, I have also included several artists who are not of New Zealand citizenship, but who base themselves here for some of the time. Waroonwan Thongvanit, an artist based in both Bangkok and Christchurch, makes videos which chart the unease she often feels as an artist whose home stretches across two countries.

The younger artists in this exhibition were, like myself, raised in a particularly fervent time of New Zealand politics—just children at Springbok marches and CND rallies. Teenage years spent in the tight grip of new-right policies, de-regulation de rigour, an art school education notable both for its post-modern styles of teaching and its ability to generate us many thousands of dollars of debt before we left our early twenties. Like me, these artists are largely urban creatures; clustered around the locust heart of galleries, movie theatres, long blacks and ready access to broadband. At the same time, they are probably equally as at home on marae as they are at a club and as likely to seek corporate sponsorship to enable them to execute their work as they are to apply for arts council funding. In addition to being visual artists, they work variously as designers, stylists, writers, singers, performers, dancers and educators.

As New Zealand continues the awkward process of becoming a truly multi-cultural nation, the changing nature of this wider community has begun to stamp its mark upon the art world. New voices have made their way into the mix; new ideas must be considered. This process of change and shift cannot help but produce a collusion of visual culture which is rich, complicated and diverse. In addition, after six years of additional

governmental investment into the arts, New Zealand artists are, if not lavishly flourishing, certainly operating in an increasingly professionalised environment. De-regulation of tertiary institutions has seen a major explosion of art schools and, even more recently, a corresponding emergence of new commercial and community galleries. An artist graduating in 2004 from an art school has 'Professional Practice' classes under their belt; they are prepped and readied for the 'market', somewhat differently to an artist graduating in the 1980s.

After the passionate engagement of artists with political and environmental concerns in 1970s and early 80s addressing the Springbok tour, the Aramoana Smelter and Nuclear Free New Zealand; the 1990s saw a shift to a far more insular approach to art-making. Slowed perhaps by a less fervent political environment, a desire to make work that was commercially viable and a growing interest in the kinds of post-modern debate which favoured irony over earnestness, artists began to move away from direct political stances in their practice. Recent years, however, have seen a return to the active engagement of the 70s and 80s by some artists, albeit in more subtle and strategic forms. Artists working today are, by necessity, media savvy, operating in a post Ad Busters environment, able to insert themselves into a commercial environment where advertising executives regularly steal the very strategies of subversion and deconstruction deployed by artists.

The complexities and concerns reflected in *Telecom Prospect 2004* mirror those of a wider New Zealand community. Threaded within the exhibition are strands of discussion around the nature of social structures, ownership of the seabed and foreshore, the fragile state of our environment, racial tension, sexual and gender politics, the impact of new technologies, the increasing reliance on drugs in mental healthcare and the growing commercialisation of both our film and television industries. This list could seem like a stern programme for social improvement, were it not for the warmth and lightness of presentation; a series of topical concerns presented in user-friendly packages that are as pleasurable as they are provocative. *Telecom Prospect 2004* offers both personal and social realism with a sassy, sexy gloss. Russell Campbell, writing for the *Telecom Prospect 2004* website about the burgeoning film industry in New Zealand, comments: 'Our lives are worth digging into, documenting, telling tales about. That's authenticity and a refusal of Hollywood alienation.'²

As with the inaugural *Prospect* exhibition, the artists in *Telecom Prospect 2004* are not placed in discrete generational groupings; rather, the senior artists of the show are shown in dialogue with younger artists with whom their work has strong links. Homage is, therefore, paid to the extensive career of Don Driver by placing his art alongside mid-career artists et al. and Ronnie van Hout and emerging artist Dan Arps. The mark of Driver's eclecticism and love of the ready-made registers across generations. In this way, individual practices are seen in light of a wider series of circular connections and relationships.

SOFTLY SOFTLY

And let it also be noted that these are somewhat sweeping generalisations. This is certainly not a watertight manifesto. A template such as *Prospect* must be open enough to accept works which slip outside one's tidy definitions. The temptation is to write about the show in a way which presents it as slightly too ordered, like a bundle tied up with string and labelled 'contemporary'. The intention with *Telecom Prospect 2004* is to respond to the works themselves by placing them in relevant groupings which acknowledge the relationships artists and their work engage in, whilst leaving enough room for each work to breathe, so that, as curator Francesco Bonami puts it, 'different practices can share the same skin but not the same focus'³

TO MAKE A SHOW

Lara Strongman described her exhibition *Telecom Prospect 2001* as a 'Babel tower of voices'.⁴ It's a wonderfully apt description of the cacophony that fills a survey show. At times, the soundtrack involved in actually creating *Telecom Prospect 2004* was as loud as the eventual show itself; an ongoing series of conversations between myself, City Gallery Wellington staff, a curatorial advisory panel, staff from partner venues the Adam Art Gallery and the New Zealand Film Archive and, of course, the artists themselves. *Telecom Prospect 2004* was designed to incorporate and feed off a range of voices. Different spaces accommodate different works, allowing for the presentation of a physically diverse range of practices, as well as bringing additional ideas, opinions and experiences into the mix. The exhibition, as it sprawls across different venues, offers people the opportunity to experience what curator Hans Ulrich Obrist calls 'unexpected encounters' with artworks.⁵ Moving across the city, *Telecom Prospect 2004* offers each section as a complete show in itself, yet, at the same time, each suite also functions as one sentence in a much larger conversation.

MORE PEOPLE PLEASE: CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON'S GALLERY ONE

Consider this as the portrait gallery of *Telecom Prospect 2004*. The works in this gallery span a broad range of ideas about the body, sexuality and sensuality, beauty, fashion and desire. There is a narcissistic flavour to some of these works, a focus on both notions of the self and the wider role of the artist, while other works refer back to historical modes of depicting the human body.

Ian Scott is positioned as the godfather of naughty-but-nice pop, his *Playboy* pin-ups posing provocatively next to famous modernist paintings, as though they were selling us cars in a showroom. A major figure in New Zealand painting since his early days as one of the few local Pop artists in the 1960s and, subsequently, his interest in post-modernism and appropriation, his paintings are stamped with a celebration of the ordinary and the banal, as well as a wilful pleasure in the ridiculous. It's the playfulness of the juxtapositions that Scott makes in his work and his often gleeful humour as he prods the boundaries of acceptable taste, which sees Scott taking centre stage in a line-up which is savvy, slick and assured.

Like Scott, Liz Maw and Scott Eady share an interest in the representation of the body. Drawing on themes from ancient mythology, Maw reworks these to create her own stories in paintings which exude a sleek sensuality. In *Honeymoon on the Pigroot*, Eady's ongoing interest in masculinity and male stereotypes leads him to investigate Dunedin, a southern city caught between its rural heritage and its rising reputation as a fashion centre. Eady's work moves between notions of High Country and High Fashion: his Southern Man wears a Drizabone, but it's made by fashion designer Nicholas Blanchet and the horse he leads is an enormous My Little Pony toy.

Underlying the glossy fun in this gallery, there is a discernible sense of unease. We hear it in the shrillness of Jacqueline Fraser's drawings, the high pitched squeals of the society women whose lifestyles she depicts ('Really, I was a teeny bit late because my make-up man was useless') and their inner emptiness implied by the backhanded jab of titling each of the works after anti-depressant drugs. Similarly, the cuteness of Peter Robinson's googly-eyed creature is a bit like Disney-on-acid, a grotesquely funny reminder of what long-term cigarette use really does to your insides.

A CONVULSIVE BEAUTY: CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON'S GALLERY TWO

In contrast, Gallery 2 offers a more contemplative realm. The works selected for this gallery demonstrate an interest in history, memory, real and imagined places. This is a space intrigued with beauty, dreaming and the surreal. It's a space which asks you to take a breath and contemplate.

In stealing the title of this section from André Breton's famous 1928 quote about Surrealism ('Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all'), I am possibly doing the works a disservice as there is nothing convulsive in these slow-smooth-slippery surfaces. However, the Surrealist preoccupation with both the overcharged fetish and the sublime is relevant to the works in Gallery 2. Their aesthetic of convulsive beauty transgresses all boundaries of rationality or formal logic, bringing instead their own winding logic of myth and seduction.

Lonnie Hutchinson's exquisitely crafted wall-mounted sculpture *Sista7* plays off light and shadow in seven cones constructed from building paper cut into a series of unfurling koru patterns, referring back to the seven peaks of the Port Hills in Lyttleton, where the artist is based. Of these works Hutchinson has said she feels 'passionately fortunate that I make art in such an environment. For me this is a spiritual journey of returning to the landscape of my tipuna'⁶

Peter Madden has also had the scissors out, building an entire miniature city from pictures carefully cut from the pages of *National Geographic*, creating a fantastical world which unfolds like a paper fan. Maryrose Crook's paintings each present a mysterious world filled with personal iconography, rendered with the most intricate detail. Complexly layered, her symbols and imagery tease us with their implied codes and elusive beauty. Shigeyuki Kihara could also be seen as creating new worlds by inserting herself into Samoan history, reinterpreting myths with herself as the central character. The dreamy exteriors of her photographs belie their edgy nature, as Kihara, a Fa'afafine (a Samoan term which translates most closely as transsexual), continues to explore issues of identity.

This room may offer time-out for the viewer, but it's not so much an escape from reality as a hopeful take on what the world could be. In her sculpture *Welcome to Paradise*, Bekah Carran provides a glimpse of nature in the midst of urban sprawl, drawing on time spent working on a community art project for psychiatric outpatients. In Carran's own words, her art provides something 'hopeful and gentle, tinged with idealism, sentimentality and sadness'⁷ To assist the contemplative mood of the piece, she offers a park bench as an invitation to viewers to sit before the work and reflect.

ON THE RUN: CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON'S GALLERY THREE

While Gallery 2 may offer utopia, Gallery 3 delves into more dystopian territory. If there is an idea that binds the chaotic hubbub of works in this gallery, it is that they grapple with reality. Located firmly in the everyday, the works included here take an interest in the wider world—the environment, social groupings and behaviours, science, architecture, medicine and the interesting banalities of real life. Some of these works may seem confrontational, but they also display a sense of wilful humour in their dissection of our lives and environments.

Ronnie van Hout continues his interest in a multiplicity of identities in a major work which offers audiences the chance to assume the very identity of the artist himself, becoming one with the work via text messaging and email. A small shack sits in the gallery, simply built from raw plywood. The door is open. Once inside the shanty, it becomes obvious that we are in a prison cell, but the artist, or prisoner, has escaped his bounds, leaving only a dummy of himself

behind to fool the guard. But the artist keeps mysteriously reappearing to taunt the guard, leaving a virtual trace of his whereabouts as he (and gallery visitors on his behalf) posts regular messages from exotic locales. 'I was attracted to the idea', says van Hout, 'that it would be possible for me to interact with the work when I was away from the gallery. This creates a further depth to the work, increasing the image of the escaped artist, somewhere in the world, on the run.'⁸

GRAND AND MYSTERIOUS: THE ADAM ART GALLERY

An architectural feat built to span the space of a stairwell between buildings, the Adam Art Gallery is not your average white cube, but a series of unique and original rooms which flow into one another. *Telecom Prospect 2004* at the Adam Art Gallery places an emphasis on the emotional and the experiential. Working with the architecture of the space, the works at the Adam Art Gallery play with scale, running the gamut from the large epic through to the intimate and personal.

The organic lyricism of Bill Culbert's and Judy Darragh's sprawling installations engages with the gallery space itself. Culbert's Tupperware containers and fluorescent tubes spill over the floor and metal grating, while Darragh's luridly coloured cobwebs wind their way over gallery windows and right through one of the walls and out the other side. In contrast, Francis Uprichard brings the conversation down a notch, her simple display presenting museology the DIY way, with hand-made papier maché preserved heads, complete with false teeth and real hair. Waroonwan Thongvanit's DVD *True Confessions* is her ongoing video diary, infused with all the confessional ethos of reality TV—the work moves in the ambiguous space between truth and fabrication.

CLICK CLICK BEEP BEEP: THE NEW ZEALAND FILM ARCHIVE

The New Zealand Film Archive turns the very notion of the biennial survey show on its head, offering, in lieu of the static three month display, four solo artists' projects during this time frame. This altered structure, as well as the very nature of the venue—a moving image institution with exhibition gallery, a cinema, screening rooms and a 24 hour public access outdoor screen—means that the works at the Archive have been selected for their focus on the temporal, presenting moving image pieces which are performative and subject to change.

During the course of his exhibition, VJ Rex will perform a public gig in the cinema with his collaborators, devising new sound and visuals which will form the content for the rest of the exhibition. Much of the footage has been culled from Western and sci-fi movies—both preoccupied with the exploration and occupation of so-called uncharted territories, these two strands of popular culture form an ongoing fascination for the artist. The sound and visuals generated at these events then form the content for his ongoing exhibition. Collaborating with other artists complicates the notion of exclusivity implied by a survey exhibition. By drawing in other artists to work with him on this project VJ Rex, in effect, bends the rules and opens the doors to allow more artists into the inner sanctum. As he has said, 'making work collaboratively on one level is a political act and on other levels it operates to open up the possibilities of what I can achieve—and most importantly it's fun to work with other people'⁹

Hye Rim Lee's cyborg entity Toki is technology at its most seductive, a feminine creature who flirts with us within the boundaries of her electronic construction. In contrast to this whimsy, Douglas Bagnall's robot has evolved to such a useful extent that it can actually work as a film-maker; as Bagnall says 'it makes sense to make a robot that performs the role of the artist, freeing the artist to dwell on something else'¹⁰

GLIDE TIME: MASSEY UNIVERSITY'S GREAT HALL

The day after being offered the chance to curate *Telecom Prospect 2004*, I was on a plane headed for San Francisco for two months work. During my time away, I received an enthusiastic email about a new work by Maddie Leach. An actual working ice rink, read the email, 18 metres long and able to be skated on ... Far away from the ice chill of a New Zealand winter, without seeing a photograph, without knowing more, I immediately began to locate this work as a centrepiece for *Telecom Prospect 2004*. A major piece in physical scale and conceptual scope, *The Ice Rink* functions both as an aesthetically beautiful artwork, and, at the same time, as a community project—in a sense a gift from artist to gallery visitors.

Activated when audience members don skating boots and glide (or more often stumble) up and down the ice, the gallery is transformed into an inclusive zone for recreation. Placed in Massey University's Great Hall, a vast space loaded with the memory of its former existence as the central core of the original Museum of New Zealand, the grandiosity of the building is softened by playful occupation. Bringing into the art gallery the rules and procedures for an entirely different realm of social interaction, Leach's project, in the words of arts writer Christina Barton, 'explores the nature of contemporary experience as it is played out in the arenas of public life'.¹¹

WELCOME IN

This brings me back to the phrase 'Welcome In', with all its implications of invitation and participation. This is the crux of the *Prospect* series, its very impetus: to open up a discussion around contemporary art to wider audiences. Over time, the ongoing *Prospect* series will become a kind of barometer—of taste, ideas, perspectives, what people were doing and thinking and wondering. Quirky, eclectic and opinionated, *Telecom Prospect 2004* provides a platform for a generous range of voices to be heard, celebrating the sometimes messy hybridity of these times.

ENDNOTES

1. Mark Amery, 'Tauīwi [1]', *Techno Maori: Maori Art in the Digital Age*, (CDRom exhibition catalogue), Wellington: City Gallery Wellington and Pataka Porirua Museum of Arts and Cultures, 2001, p.3.
2. Russell Campbell, 'Viewpoints', *Telecom Prospect 2004: New Art New Zealand* website: <http://www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz/cgi-bin/viewpoint.pl>
3. Francesco Bonami, cited in 'Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition', *Artforum* XLII, no.3, November 2003, p.157.
4. Lara Strongman, 'Curatorial Statement', *Telecom Prospect 2001: New Art New Zealand* website: <http://www.prospect2001.org.nz/cgi-bin/index.pl>
5. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, cited in Tony Bond, 'Biennales Strategies. The Theme or the Curatorial Strategy?', available online at <http://home.iprimus.com.au/painless/street/tony.htm>
6. Quoted in Felicity Milburn, 'Lonnie Hutchinson', in *Tē Puawai o Ngāi Tāhu*, Christchurch: Christchurch Art Gallery, 2003, p.56.
7. Bekah Carran, personal communication to the author, 2004.
8. Ronnie van Hout, personal communication to the author, 2003.
9. Emma Bugden and Eugene Hansen, *Port Replicator*, Wellington: Michael Hirschfeld Gallery, 2003, available online at: <http://www.city-gallery.org.nz/mainsite/InterviewwithEugeneHansen.html>
10. Douglas Bagnall, personal communication to the author, 2003.
11. Christina Barton, 'Out of the Deep', *Gallery Six: The Ice Rink and The Lilac Ship*, Hamilton: Waikato Museum of Art & History, 2003.