

## Media Release

### Plumb Lines: *A Survey of the Visual Landscape through the Surveyor's Lens*

**9 March - 28 June 2009**

*'When I speak of the land, the survey, the ploughman and such matters, the pencils of the reporters fly with the speed of the wind, but when I speak of the words of the spirit they say this is the dream of a madman''*

*The prophet Te Whiti to reporters at Parihaka June 1879*

**Exhibition designed and curated by Scott Pothan**



Hikurangi Swamp 1916 by Thomas Loudon Drummond WAM collection

Every artist, of any generation choosing to portray aspects of our land within their creative ethos, views the landscape through a lens of their own timeframe and attitudes. Even a photograph is a constructed statement of interpretation – a selective process. The next exhibition at the art museum chooses the metaphor of the land surveyor's theodolite, the first draughtsmen from the colonial era to document the New Zealand landscape through their intrepid art making.

Filling the museum gallery spaces for 15 weeks this exhibition will include an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Everest Theodolite c.1840 and a *surveyors camp* installation with

instruments and ephemera from the pioneer period from which students and visitors will literally be able to view the exhibition – upside down! **A special highlight will be the loan of one of the most iconic images of Whangarei – the often reproduced *Entrance to Whangarei Harbour 1871* by John Barr Clark Hoyte. On loan for the exhibition from the Hocken Library collection this famous painting will also be shown for the first time together with a twin watercolour of Whangarei by John Hoyte, *Entrance to the Whangarei River* from an Auckland private collection which has recently been bequeathed to the art museum.**

From the earliest navigator artists of Abel Tasman's voyage in 1642 ( the first New Zealand landscapes) to Sydney Parkinson and William Hodges on James Cook's voyages, New Zealand art has a proud lineage of adventurer/artists which continues to inform our art to this day. These artists have brought a compassionate worldview of wit, wonderment, spiritual affinity and sometimes angry commentary in the many ways they have re-visioned the landscape for us.

From 1840 surveyors arrived to subdivide the territories 'sold' to the New Zealand Company by *maori* under Edward Gibbon Wakefield's grand plan of systemic colonisation. Among the first and most famous of these was Charles Heaphy V.C. He has since been widely acknowledged as the most significant pictorialist of the pioneer period of New Zealand art history. Other intrepid surveyor artists of note were John Gully, John Buchanan and Sir William Fox among others. This early history of surveyor/ artists was to become the touchstone for a uniquely ascetic New Zealand style which was to influence many generations to come from Christopher Perkins to Rita Angus and notably Colin McCahon. The relationship between surveyors and *maori* understandably, was contentious and the Gunter's chain and theodolite and Charles Heaphy's Victoria Cross in the New Zealand Land Wars, became potent symbols of colonisation for *maori*. Charles Stevens was the colony's first registered *maori* surveyor and settled in the Whangarei district in 1880, setting out the port at Marsden and surveying much of Ruakaka and Maungatapere districts. He is one of the many extraordinary stories to unfold in this exhibition.

Drawing together substantial holdings of works from the art museum's Heritage, Modernist and Contemporary collections for the exhibition spanning the period from 1870's to the present, and including the first paintings gifted to the Whangarei borough in 1923 by Capt. Gilbert Mair by Kate Sperrey (Mrs Mair 1862-93). Also including sculpture, photography, paintings and drawings by many well loved artists, including Margaret Stoddart and Adele Younghusband to contemporary works by Don Driver, Gretchen Albrecht, Jacquelyn Fraser and other key national artists such as Jeff Thompson and Tony de Lautour.

Previously, these earliest colonial cartographers, illustrators, surveyors and journeyman painters have had their artistic interpretation demeaned by judging it against the turgid weight of European art history clouding them. More than gifted amateurs, these pioneer artists in fact, brought a clarity, freshness and new field of vision to New Zealand's burgeoning art history which influenced Angus and McCahon.

Northland artists of the twentieth century like McCahon's protégé Freda Simmonds (1912 – 1983) and Ralph Hotere b.1931 began to reconfigure a more cerebral and personal landscape – a more reflective and inclusive terrain. A spiritual connection with the physical landscape has been a significant influence on the creative and ethical interpretation of the natural environment. Among them Eric Lee Johnson,

Milan Mrkusich and Dame Louise Henderson, Bill Sutton, Buck Nin, Doris Lusk and many others drawn from the rich reserves of the art museum collection.

Since the days of early settlement, the landscape has reeled under the pressures of a growing number of inhabitants and their activities. Agricultural as well as industrial development has brought elements foreign to the native condition. Native bush gave way to farmland and the magnificent kauri suffered for both the value of its timber and by the collection of gum. Coastal and river waterways have been changed by the creation of man-made harbours and the draining of swamplands.

As a spiritual landscape, Northland has blessed *tangata whenua* and generations of settlers alike. For *iwi* in New Zealand the land is a living life-force; - *taonga tuku iho*. The people of this region have withstood many hardships and their strong sense of loyalty is in itself a response to the challenge to the land.

Truly resplendent lineages of New Zealand artists have re-visioned the landscape over succeeding generations. Over the past 200 years in New Zealand our documented art history has been predominantly a landscape tradition, recording the life and legacy of our changing landscape, our response to the land and challenges to the manner in which we inhabit it. **Plumb Lines** takes a sweeping scan through the theodolite's lens of this rich visual history.

Scott Pothan

Exhibition includes artwork from the Whangarei Art Museum collections and loans from Whangarei Museum, Waipu Museum, The Hocken Library Art Collection and private collections.  
Images available upon request.