

# Out of Place

Christina Barton

Flying from Wellington to Auckland recently I had two small epiphanies about this place I live in. The first came as I flicked through the pages of my new *Artforum*. Feeling that flush of anticipation when a new issue arrives, I had a profound sense that I was at home within its pages, even though I was not intimate with all of the magazine's contents. I was comforted by the thought that my insider status allowed me to see beyond the words and images to the semiotics of layout and placement, the power plays of full-colour advertisements and proper names; to read between the lines and grasp the editorial agenda. And yet, I also realised that my citizenship in this art world is predicated on a mirage of belonging that pays scant attention to the real circumstances of where I am. With minor exceptions, *Artforum* largely ignores New Zealand; we are just too small and too far away to warrant consideration; we don't figure. What does it mean to be part of something but not to be seen; how can one belong but fail to exist; what are the practical consequences of this predicament specifically for our local art scene? These were my first thoughts as we flew across the central North Island.

The second epiphany followed almost seamlessly. As we took off I had been mildly amused by Air New Zealand's new in-flight safety video (the latest in a series of arresting mini-fictions that rethink the 'genre') which featured a planeload of characters from Sir Peter Jackson's newly released *Hobbit* movie and toyed with the narrative of two eager Tolkien fans (and their girlfriends) sharing their flight to 'Middle Earth' (aka New Zealand). Somehow this managed to negotiate the fine line between puncturing the illusion and maintaining the credibility of all things Middle Earth by teasing out distinctions between dressed-up flight attendants, 'real' fans, and in-character orcs, elves and hobbits. At the same time it wore its self-referentiality on its sleeve by cleverly nodding to the real-world making of the film (Jackson makes an appearance, as do two of Tolkien's great-grandsons) and to the marketing savvy of the national carrier, whose in-flight videos have for some time now captured our (and the world's) attention.<sup>1</sup> I was struck by the way this storyline messed with illusion and reality, fiction and fact, self-awareness and wish-fulfilment, making me question (again) just what it meant to be where I am. I came to see this collaboration between airline and filmmaker as more than mere marketing; it is a canny exercise in collective self-knowing. It dawned on me that behind Jackson's digital wizardry and Hollywood connections, there lies a local 'real' that comes across in the settings, accents and faces we recognise, and in the self-deprecating humour that gently undoes the illusion. The video confirmed that an inherent incredulity tempers the national psyche; and our smallness in fact makes some things possible.

Perhaps I could only have thought this in flight between two destinations, suspended in mid-air, buried within the pages of a magazine, caught in a flow of images. It sounds like a contemporary condition. But I was also travelling from my home

1. According to one online news report, the *Hobbit*-themed safety video was watched on YouTube by more than six million viewers within four days of its launch in November 2012. See <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/BU1211/S00141/air-new-zealand-safety-video-a-global-hit.htm>.

in Wellington to Auckland, another city I have lived in, across a landscape I have traversed hundreds of times, the lineaments of which are etched in my mind, and somewhere deeper. I was left realising the place I live in is both real and imaginary: an elsewhere, no-place and somewhere all together. This, of course, is no new or singular revelation; indeed, as an art historian and curator who has spent a long time thinking through the conundrum of (re)writing our 'national' art history, I would suggest this sense has long been at work in the culture. If the examples I share unravel as a series of uncanny displacements, then let this prove the power art has to articulate our complex relationship to place and propose recalcitrant but telling ways of being (and being together).

Fig 1

**Portrait of Frances Hodgkins**

c1905 Ref 1/2-010660-F, Alexander  
Turnbull Library, National Library  
of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga  
o Aotearoa, Wellington.



There is a photograph (fig 1) of Frances Hodgkins (1869–1947) – New Zealand's best-known turn-of-the-century expatriate artist – in her Wellington studio in 1905. It was taken on Hodgkins' first return trip to New Zealand from Europe, where she had gone in 1901, as did so many of her generation, to 'find herself' as an artist at the wellsprings of modern culture in London and Paris, during that awkward period of our history when New Zealand was still intimately entwined with the old world as one of the last and most loyal colonial outposts. It shows her at her easel, palette in one hand, the other holding a brush tipped to touch the head of the Māori mother she is painting. She gazes out towards the viewer, her expression poised but plaintive, framed by two other heads – a plaster bust of a cherub, and an unfinished sketch of a young Algerian girl, executed in North Africa on one of her several painting sojourns. This captures a particularly fraught moment in Hodgkins' career, when she was trying to establish herself as a professional artist in the capital city but longed to be back in the thick of things in Europe, rueing the fact that she felt beholden to her family as the unmarried sibling bound by duty of care to her mother, returning to an indigenous

subject that had sustained her in her youth, but now fired to paint with alienating Impressionist gusto. The photograph offers telling proof of the particular binds of her circumstances, class and gender. But more than this, it serves allegorically to picture the dilemma facing the ambitious artist in a far-flung setting like New Zealand at the very beginning of the 20th century. Literally poised between the indigenous and the cosmopolitan, she is torn between the primal pull of her native land and the glittering embrace of modernity. She stands for every artist who has felt the need to leave home; here expatriatism's double bind is attested to as one of 'our' defining subjects.<sup>2</sup>



Flash forward to 1978 and another photograph (fig 2), this time by the artist Mark Adams (born 1949) of four Samoan men in a house in suburban Auckland, one of whom is being tattooed in the manner and with the tools of indigenous tradition. The photograph was taken at another fraught moment in our history, when the homogeneity of New Zealand society was being undermined by the arrival of new immigrants, especially from the Pacific, to fill low-paying jobs in the burgeoning manufacturing and industrial sectors of our largest cities. Adams' interest in this private ritual was not motivated by ethnographic curiosity. It developed from the relationship Adams forged with Samoan tattooist Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo II (1950–1999), who we see going about his work. This is Adams' response to a time of profound upheaval, when racial and class differences were beginning to cleave New Zealand society and conventional art forms and artistic roles were no longer considered fit for duty, setting artists on different paths to take up new media (photography being one of them) and engage critically with their social, political and cultural realities. The image intrigues exactly because of the heroic scale of the print and the intensity of its detail, which reveals with remarkable precision the strange disjuncture between the tight cluster of men going about their painful labour of cultural inscription, and their setting – a domestic interior, complete with venetian blinds, floral wallpaper and television set, which speaks to the mainstream lifestyle of 1970s' New Zealand. These men are truly out of place, yet this is their home, and as a consequence they have made 'our' (white, suburban, petit-bourgeois) reality unfamiliar. The challenge of this to palagi (European) viewers is made personal

2.  
For a fuller discussion see Christina Barton, '(Re-)Tracing Frances Hodgkins' in *The Expatriates: Frances Hodgkins and Barrie Bates*, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, 2005, pp 4–18.

Fig 2  
Mark Adams  
**7.10.1978. Triangle Rd, Massey, West Auckland. Tattooing Tom. Tufuga tatatau: Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo, Solo: Arona and Leo Maselino 1978/2008**  
Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection  
image courtesy of the artist

3.

For a reading of Mark Adams' photographs see Peter Brunt, 'The Portrait, the Pe'a and the Room' in *Tatau: Samoan Tattooing, New Zealand Art, Global Culture*, Sean Mallon, Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas (eds), Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2010, pp 35–50.

because the artist sets up his camera in such a way that he is caught as a reflection right in the middle on the television's blank screen, as if he too is the photograph's subject.<sup>3</sup> If Hodgkins looks out wishing to escape, these men (photographer included) turn in, to claim and to remake *this* their world, with all its temporal and spatial inconsistencies and cultural tensions.

Onwards to the years leading up to and after 1990 and the installation *Papa Kāinga*, 1987 (fig 3) by Paratene Matchitt (born 1933), which takes the form of four



Fig 3

Paratene Matchitt

**Papa Kāinga** 1991

Collection of Auckland Art Gallery

Toi o Tāmaki

image courtesy of the artist

4.

Inscribed on the work is the following text: 'Kia mau nga whakapapa, nga maatauranga, nga tikanga o te papakainga. Ka mau te wehi, te tapu, te mana, te ihi o te moana, te taiao, te whenua, ka riro totika. Ka mau te ora.' Matchitt translated this as: 'Accept the histories, teachings and lore of the inherited tribal settlements and acknowledge the spirit, the sacredness, authority and powers of the sea, sky and earth in order to determine a covenant for living.'

open-ended A-frame wooden structures arranged at right angles with their bases touching to produce a permeable enclosure. First presented at South Auckland's Fisher Gallery in 1987, the work received national attention in 1988 when it was included in *Taki Toru*, an exhibition showcasing the work of three Māori artists – Paratene Matchitt, Ralph Hotere and Selwyn Muru – at Shed 11, the National Art Gallery's contemporary outpost on Wellington's waterfront. It has since been acquired (in 1997) by Auckland Art Gallery for its permanent collection, as a major example of the work of a leading contemporary Māori artist, one of that first generation to be trained in the Western art system as well as in traditional Māori practices, at that moment when the country was formalising its status as a bicultural nation and therefore celebrating the artistic contribution of tangata whenua (Māori, as indigenous inhabitants). A hulking presence at odds with its conventionally rectilinear institutional container, *Papa Kāinga* is made from rough-sawn planks nailed together. Its forms seem provisional, like temporary huts thrown up to provide basic shelter, but their decorative embellishments (Māori inscriptions and cut and constructed wooden elements) encode deeper cultural meanings. 'Papa kāinga' to Māori is literally 'home', the land on which hapū (family) or whānau (clan) build their communal dwellings. To Matchitt, this installation is not simply an updating or transliteration of customary forms to serve his culturally inflected contemporary art practice, but the manifestation of a worldview, the concrete embodiment of how people might, or should, live together in concert with their environment.<sup>4</sup> But the utopianism of this construction is leavened by a series of uncanny tensions. First, there is the physical bulk of the work which simply refuses to be accommodated within its frame; a looming presence that sets one architectural form against

another. Then, there is the disjunctive scale of the apertures that force the viewer to bend and crouch, as if this is only a model, after all, not a truly liveable habitation. And finally, the installation has not one but two thresholds: one which the viewer sees from the outside as they approach the work, that marks the exact point where gallery setting gives way to sculptural object; and the other we encounter once we have passed through to the centre, where the encompassing wooden structures surround us, a safe haven for a newly formed but seemingly embattled community. Matchitt's work, therefore, offers a framework for how we might live together, drawing on the guiding principles of past tradition and finding new means to ensure cultural endurance. It also conveys the fraught reality of what it means – literally – to be between two worlds: on the outside, looking in; forced together, looking out; confined; hyphenated; one reality at odds with another.



Fig 4  
Luke Willis Thompson  
*inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam* 2012  
photograph by Alex North  
image courtesy of the artist and  
Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland.

Pair this with a work (fig 4) staged in 2012 by Luke Willis Thompson (born 1988), *inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam*, and Matchitt's model is reversed but also subtly balanced. Here the artist had visitors come to his dealer gallery (Hopkinson Cundy in Auckland) to find it completely empty, but to be invited to travel by taxi to a private house in Epsom, a nearby inner-city suburb. There they were free to explore the house, which was lived in but without occupants, before being driven back to the gallery. Although no explanation was given, word got around that this was the artist's family home, the place where he had grown up. Primed to experience art, what but 'life' did viewers encounter? If Matchitt constructed a communal home inside the gallery, exploiting the spatial and experiential tensions created by inserting another cultural template into a monolithic framework, Thompson left gallery and home distinct but linked. Though disinclined to grapple with the complex cultural issues that galvanised contemporary art here from the 1950s to the 1990s, as Matchitt so clearly is committed, Thompson renders these specific to his own upbringing (his father is Fijian; the family is not wealthy) and turns his attention to the deeper constitutive problem of how to be an artist and remain true to one's cultural circumstances, given the powerful neutralising effects of the contemporary art scene that can accommodate difference and any and every gesture of rebellion. Thompson sets out this conundrum as the work's content: here on the one hand is the gallery, that public space in which works are presented and read according to pre-established codes and conventions; there on the other is 'home', a private world where life is lived rather than interpreted. Taken from one to the other (the reverse of the boy-now-artist's journey), we are compelled to examine the terms of this juxtaposition. Though discombobulated by the emptiness of one space and the fullness of the other, we are art-world insiders and recognise both occasions as

exhibitionary in essence, seeing in the empty gallery the lineaments of a concept; looking for the aesthetic amid the personal clutter. It is as if the artist used both venues as tools to anatomise how we make art out of experience. If both home and gallery were put on show, balanced as the worlds which we and the artist track between, then the taxi-ride became a crucial threshold, where public and private, professional and personal, high cultural and humdrum were held in suspension, the means by which two irreconcilable points were joined, a no-place to cogitate in air-conditioned comfort.

Fig 5  
 Julian Dashper  
**What I am reading at  
 the moment** 1993  
 image courtesy of the artist's estate



You will see it as just a chair (fig 5), but I know this is the one Julian Dashper (1960–2009) had in his studio, the one he tracked down which was used in a famous cover shoot when New Zealand's most ambitious abstract painters – our own Antipodean Irascibles – were photographed for *Art New Zealand* back in 1983.<sup>5</sup> Placing this beside a vitrine filled with a stack of *Artforum* magazines, in his installation, *What I am reading at the moment*, 1993, for the National Library Gallery, was a studied gesture designed to foreground our provincial condition at the same time as insert himself within a local canon, as a new kind of conceptual painter for a post-nationalist era. Dashper anticipated my thinking by nearly 20 years; he knew how far New Zealand was from New York, and the powerful hold the centre exerts over all those peripheral to it (even after globalisation, and in the wake of postcolonial and postmodern critiques that have supposedly put paid to the hegemony of the first world over its others). His response was to embrace the vicariousness of his condition, to live the dilemma and to make it real, treating those magazines as we would the internet today, as point of access to the world of art, and the chair as the place where all that information can be filtered, a thinking spot that is itself not fixed. Perhaps that empty chair is a key to what it means to 'live here'. I don't only mean there is a local story to tell about this artist in this place, but that this well-worn receptacle embodies – for anyone, anywhere – a still point where elsewhere and somewhere can come together; it is that no-place where the body can rest and the mind wander.

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5.  
 See *Art New Zealand*, no 28, winter 1983. The cover features seven artists: Gretchen Albrecht, Stephen Bambury, Max Gimblett, Richard Killeen, James Ross, Ian Scott, and Mervyn Williams, who are the subject of the lead essay by Wystan Curnow, 'Seven Painters/The Eighties: The Politics of Abstraction' which reviews their show of the same title that was then touring New Zealand.