

## THE NORTHERNER

10 artists and the Idea of North

Introduced by Gregory O'Brien

The exhibition 'The Northerner' had its origins in conversations, over many years, with my friend, curator/former Artspace director Emma Bugden. On a regular basis, we would find ourselves bemoaning the absence of any serious acknowledgement of the role Northland has played in the recent imaginative life of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Maybe the reason for this neglect is the art world's preoccupation with cultural nationalism—and, more recently, internationalism? Or is cosmopolitanism to blame? Either way, the far flung province or hinterland doesn't stand a chance.

The Northland exhibition-of-our-dreams would include many artists no one has ever heard of. It would also feature Colin McCahon's Northland Panels, Rain in Northland, the 'Northland' drawings... Mitimiti-born Ralph Hotere would loom large—as would Eric Lee Johnson, Milan Mrkusich (born in Dargaville, 1925) and Peter Peryer (who spent a good part of his childhood in the North). A list of past and present Northlanders would also include ceramicist Yvonne Rust, photographer Laurence Aberhart, carver Cliff Whiting and sculptor Chris Booth. An even broader Northland narrative would encompass artists such as Selwyn Muru and, from Ngapuhi, Shane Cotton, Lisa Reihana, Darryn George and a host of others. Writers as diverse as Hone Tuwhare, Jane Mander and Kendrick Smithyman would be thrown into the mix, as would the Austrian artist, architect, hippy and environmentalist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, who lived part of each year in the Bay of Islands region from 1973 until his death in February 2000, at which point he was buried in an appropriately shallow grave just outside Kawakawa, in 'the garden of the Happy Dead, under a tulip tree'.

That grand, expansive Northland exhibition will have to wait its time. Meanwhile, however, we have 'The Northerner'—an exhibition which doesn't claim to represent Northland on the region's own terms. Instead, 'The Northerner' tracks responses to the province by artists who, with the exception of Gillian Whitehead, probably don't think of themselves as Northlanders. That said, all the artists represented have found themselves—at some point, or points, in their careers—looking purposefully North-wards. They have found some point of imaginative origin and impetus in the region.

For this present gathering of interlopers, fringe-dwellers, blow-ins, northbound travellers, children-of-the-North and occasional residents, Friedensreich Hundertwasser might serve as both precursor and exemplar—an 'outsider' who, with imagination and gusto, managed to find a way in. In much the same spirit, 'The Northerner' brings with it a variety of viewpoints, approaches and backgrounds.



A young Florian Habicht (on the right, with his brother to the left) stands on the deck of the family home near Paihia with Friedensreich Hundertwasser, 1985. The Habicht brothers are wearing teeshirts bearing the artist's much-publicised design for an alternative New Zealand flag. Hundertwasser believed that having the right flag was, for a country, 'a matter of existential harmony, hence of peace'. Photo by Frank Habicht.

Two of the contributors—Florian Habicht and Miriam van Wezel—were born in Europe; another—Andrew McDonald—was born in Northland and now lives in England. Having spent much of her upbringing in Whangarei, Gillian Whitehead (Ngaiterangi/Tuhoe) has spent her working life largely in Britain, Sydney and, before her recent return to Ruakaka, near Dunedin. On the back of numerous childhood forays into the region, the O'Brien brothers both transplanted northwards in their late teens—to Dargaville and Whangarei respectively. Stanley Palmer's artistic identity was shaped, in part, by childhood visits to the family farm in Northland. Elizabeth Thomson worked with Yvonne Rust in her Whangarei studio in the 1980s. Bruce Foster has set up camp at Mangawhai often in recent years, and Sydney-based Noel McKenna has taken in many a Northland vista from the passenger's seat of a speeding car, and in 2008 presented a solo exhibition, 'Northland', in a Dublin gallery.

Introducing his 1967 radio documentary, 'The Idea of North', pianist Glenn Gould made some resonant points in relation to 'The Northerner'. Referring specifically to the Arctic regions north of Canada, his ruminations apply to any hinterland: 'Something really does happen to most people who go into the north,' he noted. 'They become at least aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents and—quite often, I think—come to measure their own work and life against that rather staggering creative possibility: they become, in effect, philosophers.'

In what way have the artists in 'The Northerner' become, by Gould's definition, philosophers? The publicity for Florian Habicht's 'Land of the Long White Cloud' summed the film up thus: 'Fish meet Philosophy on 90 Mile Beach.' In his unfurling, poetic evocation of an annual surfcasting competition, we encounter a host of self-styled philosophers, many of whom would have brought tears of joy to Glenn Gould's eyes. The documentary reminds us that Northland is, figuratively as well as literally, a promontory or vantage point, from which its denizens see and interpret the world beyond. (In Maori tradition, the northern coastal stretch takes us to Spirits Bay, the leaping off place for the souls of the departed, as the spellbinding final sequence in Florian's film enacts.)

Florian's existential beachscape is recast in the metaphysical collages of Brendan O'Brien, and in Elizabeth Thomson's enigmatic printmaking. Their works, and Gregory O'Brien's 1988 illustrated novel *Diesel Mystic*, propose magic realism as a mode that is not only viable in the North but also intrinsic to it. Beyond the confines of this exhibition, a key work in the imaginative/mythic reinvention of The North is Florian's 2003 film *Woodenhead*, which can be seen, in its entirety, on-line at <https://vimeo.com/61759640>

Aside from such musings and speculations, how is it that we read and record a place or district? The works in the exhibition suggest various ways a region might enter our consciousness and our being. With forensic precision, Bruce Foster explores the layers of time and matter encapsulated in the Mangawhai coastline. Noel McKenna's paintings suggest the region's true identity is manifest in its most humble manifestations—vernacular signage and roadside ornament. Incongruities and unlikely juxtapositions are central to Brendan O'Brien's part Dadaist, part Neo-Romantic collages—works in which a recurring horizon-line is a backdrop for remembered and dreamt elements. Brendan either gathers his disparate materials into altar-like or monumental arrangements, or he is content to leave them in seeming disarray. In the pig-dog, Andrew McDonald appears to have found a painterly motif of both personal and Northland/regional significance.

Negotiating the territory between meditation and unmediated expression, his paintings hint at incidents and characters from his Northland childhood, presenting them in a darkly ambiguous space, while at the same time celebrating his own re-entry into the life of the province as an annual visitor and owner of a small rural holding.

Taking us back to the most foundational of realities, Miriam Van Wezel's Matakana Quarry comprises three different sandstone pigments as well as charcoal-coloured rock, greywacke, cement and sand. Echoing both colour chart and geological sample, the work blurs the boundary between archaeology and aesthetics. Similarly, Elizabeth Thomson's luminous recastings of small details from the natural environment have both the austerity and the allure of Northland—the same natural environment which Stanley Palmer's wider views bring to life, using a combination of lithography and bamboo-engraving. Stanley's summations of the littoral scene are among the defining images of Northland's art history—a starting place for many subsequent artists.

Yet Cape Reinga isn't as far north as the 'Idea of North' goes. Three of the artists represented were contributors to the Kermadec Art Project and, in May 2011, sailed on the HMNZS Otago to Raoul Island and onwards to Tonga. It was over five days into that voyage that their ship crossed the line, mid-ocean—not far south of Tongan territorial waters—which marked the northernmost extremity of New Zealand territory. For the Kermadec artists, the experience of Raoul, and aquatic regions thereabouts, changed their idea of The North. The North became a vast oceanic expanse linking New Zealand to other places, other realities.

That oceanic reality is at the heart of Gillian Whitehead's 'Puhake ki te rangi' ('spouting of the skies'), the title of which refers to the songs of migratory whales as they travel from northern waters along the New Zealand coast. Whale migration is also implicit in Gregory O'Brien's two paintings, one of which tracks another, more recent migratory species—the many shipping containers set adrift after the Rena struck Astrolabe Reef, near Tauranga, late in 2011.

The works in 'The Northerner' explore The North as a realm of invention, of myth-making and dreaming—as a place (or places) characterised by its geological formation, human history and by many-layered present reality. It remains the creative hinterland which Glenn Gould wrote about—a region where people go for a particular kind of immersion, for an experience that can be galvanising or even transformative. Here, the usual rules don't apply. And the resulting works of art might be a conjuring of abstract space or a kind of self-portrait, a filmic sequence, a chapter in a surrealist novel or a bamboo engraving. Just as the exhibition title 'The Northerner' harks back to the rail transport of New Zealand's past, the exhibition proposes the North as an animating principle, a mode of transportation, rather than as an end-point or a definable location—a process rather than a conclusive point.

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'The Idea of North is an opportunity to examine that condition of solitude which is neither exclusive to the north nor the prerogative of those who go north but which does perhaps appear, with all its ramifications, a bit more clearly to those who have made, if only in their imagination, the journey north.' (Glenn Gould, 'The Idea of North')

