



Pylons, Awarua Bay. Erwin Brinkmann.

Transcendental Materialism

David Eggleton

Mainly I was led to them, the casinos of aluminium, by the gift of eyebright, whose hollow core contained a vision of the coast ...

(‘Painting Mount Taranaki’, David Eggleton, *An Anthology of New Zealand Verse*, Oxford University Press, 1997).

Numinous as bracelets, they are anonymous industrial entities which seem to await a techno soundtrack. They loom up monumental from the gallery floor, but they consist of nothing more than a few dozen arranged lugs of alloy: the payloads from a casino of aluminium. By shaping these units into waka or canoes, Stephen Mulqueen has turned them into floating signifiers launched out on the currents of historical formalism.

The waka is now central to New Zealand's loaded mantelpiece of nationalist symbols. It's how the nation sees itself. Stephen Mulqueen's installation Tiwai posits that waka symbolism as part of a global nexus of trade and exchange. It signifies materials transformed and moved from Australia and New Zealand, and shifting on to Japan, Korea, China and the USA, before returning to New Zealand and Australia. Extruded and cast aluminium, rolled out from a Southern Hemisphere technological temple of metal, travels to car factories in Japan in the Northern Hemisphere, then comes back as high-tech desirable commodities.

The circularity of the process is itself a kind of enacted libido: transport as an image of desire with its promise of endless mutabilities. These waka are ghost ships, themselves their own exotic cargo. Emblems of the quest to complete a particular circuit, these billets and ingots contain within their

suspended potentialities the apotheosis of the commodity. They could be part of almost any piece of consumerist hardware you can dream up: implicitly energised – gleaming, sleek, protean.

Yet in the first instance it is their literalism you grapple with. The experience of the austere modular forms which evoke the classic sixties' Minimal Art tenet of the object and nothing but the object. Mulqueen coaxes you beyond this minimalism by utilising a material which establishes tensions and contradictions. Because the aluminium is given representational status (the playful boat form) there is an implied critique of impersonal capitalist methods of production and consumption. The ability to subsume individuality within soulless mechanisation is capitalism or monetarism at its most abstract. We become merely 'terms in its logic' to quote Australian poet Les Murray (from 'The Cool Green', *Times Literary Supplement*, July 16, 2004).

In a way Stephen Mulqueen is engaged in a mock-heroic project. It's heroic because the installation is an attempt to invest mechanically reproduced units with the aura of ancient objects. It's mock or ironic because the attempt to reclaim these emblems of industrial alienation within a mythic history of an organic relationship with our environment can only be regarded sceptically at our present moment, with greenhouse meltdown scenarios being shouted from every two-bit satellite television newsdesk. Nevertheless, Tiwai offers a welcome psychological space or context within which we can meditate on such concepts.

Mulqueen is a mid-career artist whose current preoccupations have grown out of his own lifestory. Born and bred in the Deep South, in the Invercargill-Bluff area, Mulqueen began as a craft worker, serving a jewellery apprenticeship in Invercargill before helping set up the Fluxus workshop

for contemporary jewellery-making in Dunedin in 1983. By 1990, New Zealand's sesquicentennial year, Mulqueen's interest in jewellery – the fusion and transformation of precious materials into symbolic designs – was accompanied by a deepening interest in biculturalism: the negotiation of intersecting cultural histories.

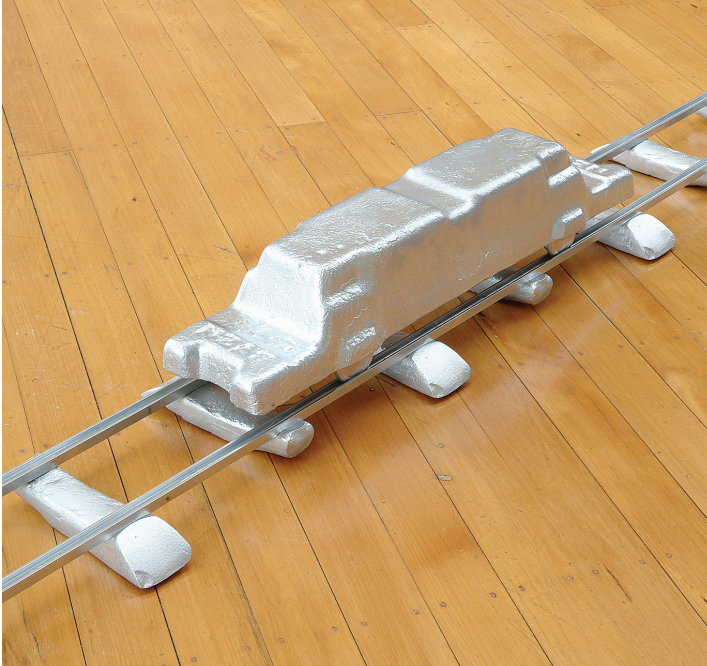
His art practice began exploring the notion of historical authenticity. The speculative combining and recombining of a variety of symbolic materials as expressive of a relationship of exchange found its focus in a sense of the self as an amalgam and a product of influences centred on the place where he grew up – Southland.

According to one Ngai Tahu creation myth, the South Island is Te Waka-a-Aoraki, or the canoe of Aoraki. The Marlborough Sounds represent the shattered prow and Bluff Hill is the stern. Such myths feed into Mulqueen's procedures. Bluff Hill/Motupohue and the surrounding area is a microcosm of cultural hybridity with Maori and Pakeha histories intimately interwoven. In the 1990s Mulqueen created an artwork which successfully encapsulated the area's mosaic-like history of interaction. The Bluff Hill/Motupohe lookout is the centre of a koru-like spiral. At the top, on a panoptic stone diorama, placenames, Maori and Pakeha, are marked. This palimpsest, or overwriting, then led on to the creation, in his 2000 exhibition Whakamaoritanga/Translations, of a whole series of 'entangled objects'. These sculpturalanimistic forms – for example a larger than life-size titi/muttonbird crafted from a colonial iron pickaxe head and aluminium wire – are collages which establish poetic resonances.

Mulqueen has become the artist as archeologist. Another series of works in 1993, Papakihau (or 'slapped by the wind'), presented aluminium casts of ventifacts found around the Bluff harbour area. Ventifacts are lumps of argillite, basalt or granite that have been abraded by wind, sand and sea into sharp-edged stones. The bay is littered with rock shards part-shaped into tools, the remnants of a neolithic Maori tool-making factory which existed for some six hundred years on this site.

Tiwai (or 'dug-out canoe') is the Maori name for the tip of a long windswept strand within Bluff harbour. Before construction of the Tiwai Point smelter began, the building zone was excavated, between 1967 and 1969, by anthropologists from Otago Museum. They established that the Tiwai site had produced some of the most aesthetically satisfying and technically efficient adzes in Polynesia. (In *Comparatively Speaking: Studies in Pacific Material Culture*, published by University of Otago Press in 1972, H. D. Skinner states: 'Murihiku – the southern half of the South Island – contains a greater variety of rocks from which implements can be made than all the other parts ... of Polynesia put together. The Murihiku implement maker could therefore experiment to an extent impossible elsewhere.') The neolithic Maori manufacturing economy around Tiwai was elaborate, and included stone and bone tools, flax containers, skin clothing and wooden canoes. Later-Victorian-era Pakeha industrial activities in that same area included shipbuilding and the making of railways.

The electromagnetic field is almost palpable, a fuzz of force that stiffens chain, aligning iron rods. ('Tiwai Sequence', by Cilla McQueen, *Markings*, University of Otago Press, 2000).



Te Waka on the global highway (75 x 15 x 12 cm). Stephen Mulqueen. Right: Te Waka, John Broughton's Citroën motor car.



permission to make art within a specified area of the smelter. He focused on concepts suggested by the word 'WakaTiwai' ('canoe-boat'). This in turn led to a series of chalk drawings on the floor of a storage area. These evolved into a representation of the six-metre length dimensions of a dug-out canoe held in the collection at Niho O Te Taniwha Southland Museum and Art Gallery. The linear chalk drawings led in turn to the placement of ingots and billets in a quasi-archeological act of reconstruction. The rectangular ingots were stacked, while the cylindrical billets were placed in a vertical position side by side. Three canoe forms were thus created, forming the

installation Tiwai. In the current presentation an adze shape, painted black to represent basalt, is buried within one waka shape.

These vessels remind you, amongst other things, of palisades and kete (woven baskets), but the effect is by no means purely memorial. Tiwai is an installation which undercuts its own coolness, its own smooth sculptural formality, with visual jokiness: an ingot has been turned into a cartoon car with the addition of wheels. And the installation contains another example of present-day waka. There's a photograph of the front of a car – 'Te Waka' – belonging to John Broughton of Ngai Tahu. Selected documentary photographs by Erwin Brinkmann, who has extensively and sensitively documented the Bluff Harbour area, provide another layer of context.

So this is an exhibition which amalgamates identities, which conducts realignments of currency, and which retrieves still potent symbols from the archives of the past. It's an exhibition about assembly and dispersal; about continuities: where we're from, where we're going to – and the crafts that accompany us.

WakaTiwai billet canoe (1000 x 120 x 70 cm). Stephen Mulqueen.



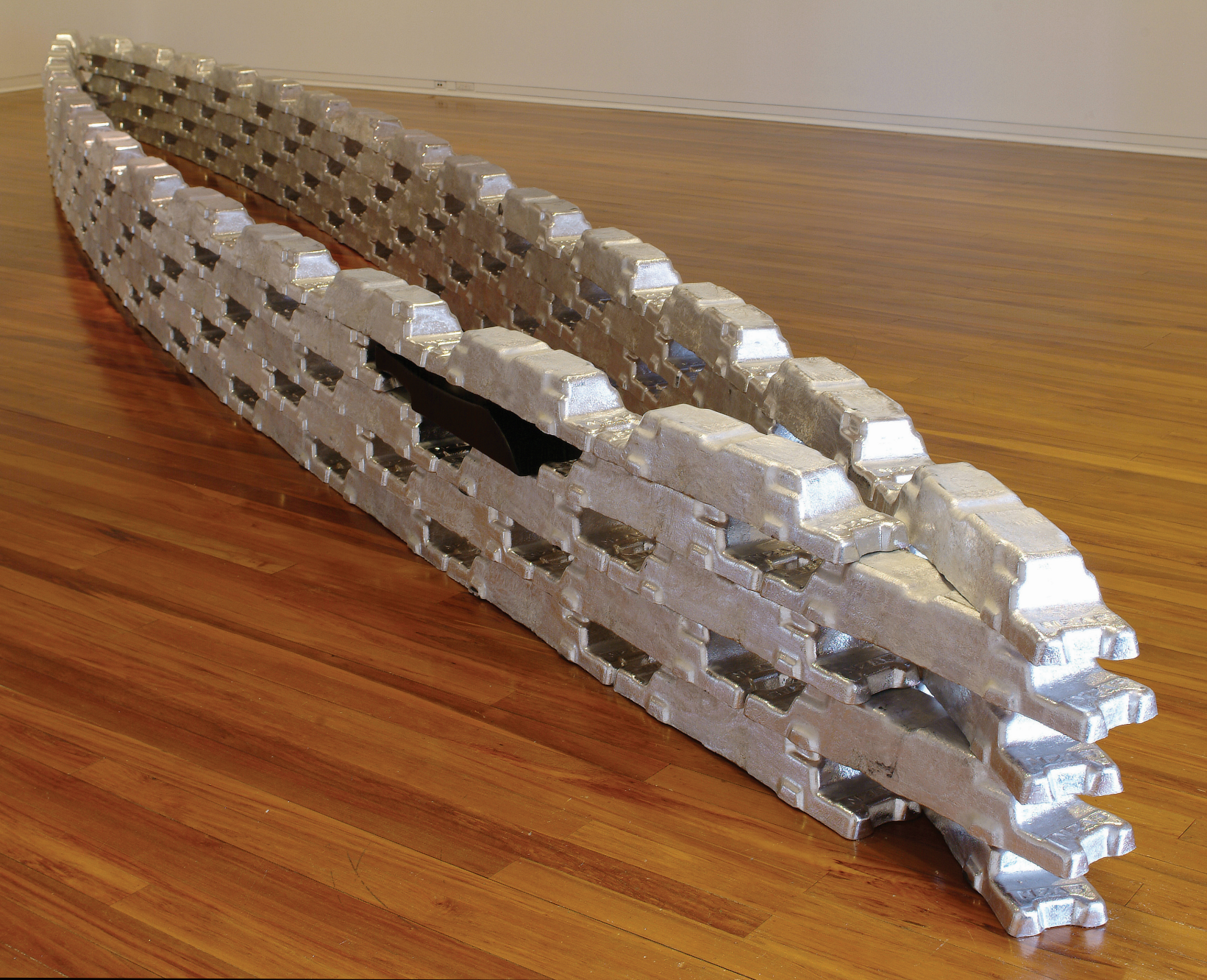
The Tiwai Point smelter began operating in 1971, and was considered by the Government a smart way to export surplus hydro-electricity in the form of aluminium. Now the smelter turns out more than 350,000 tonnes of aluminium a year and uses 15 per cent of the nation's annual power output. (Power comes from the Lake Manapouri hydro scheme.) This metallurgical monster earns for the New Zealand government and the local economy around \$90 million per year. (Comalco, part of the multinational Rio Tinto Group, owns 80 per cent of the smelter; Sumitomo Chemical Company of Japan owns the rest.)

The prime raw material, bauxite, is mined at Weipa on the western side of Cape York peninsula in northern Queensland. Front-end loaders scoop up the reddish-brown bauxite pebbles out of the ground which are then washed and sieved from the soil. This bauxite rubble is next transported by bulk carriers round the Cape to Gladstone in south-western Queensland to be refined down into alumina, a fine white powder.

Ships carry the alumina to a deep water berth in Bluff Harbour. From here the alumina is unloaded onto a conveyor belt and taken directly into the smelter, where it is electrolysed into liquid aluminium, before being siphoned into crucibles, cast into billets and ingots, and water-cooled. Finally it is stockpiled, ready to be shipped out.

Today I surrendered the life of my Honda City to a wrecker in Penrose for \$30 ... That car took me to Uncle pat's tangi in Bluff. We stopped and gazed at Moeraki, the dream sky, on the way. ('Honda Waka', by Robert Sullivan, *Star Waka*, Auckland University Press, 1999.)

In the mid-Nineties, interested in what happens when art practice meets corporate industry on a culturally layered site, Stephen Mulqueen gained



Waka Tiwai ingot canoe with Toki-Adze (detail below) (1100 x 120 x 60 cm), Stephen Mulqueen.



Tiwai Point

K.Gillies

An aluminium smelter now dominates the view of Tiwai Point as seen from the Southland port of Bluff. However, the Tiwai peninsula has been the focus of varied human industry for several hundred years. In the 19th century a whaling station operated there, and in earlier pre-European times a large open-air Maori stone adze workshop turned out hundreds of partially-finished woodworking adzes (known as 'preforms').

In 1969 this important archaeological site was investigated via a rescue excavation in preparation for the construction of the aluminium smelter. Over one ton of stone artefacts was recovered – mostly adze preforms and the 'waste-flakes' of stone discarded from their manufacture. There were very few finished adzes recovered in contrast to the huge number of preforms produced at this site. This immediately suggested a very specialised activity area dedicated to the production of a tool surplus for local and long-distance trade.

A wide range of rock types were brought to and worked on at this site, including pumice, and also a variety of clear quartz; the source of which is still a mystery. The bulk of the stone material was argillite (a metamorphosed mudstone). A small amount of this was actually obtained from the Tiwai Peninsula, but most was quarried from the adjacent Colyers Island and also from a source near Riverton. The Colyers Island quarry is still preserved intact and is largely within the island's tidal zone. Large outcropping boulders of argillite were smashed with heavy hammerstones made of norite (similar to granite) which were imported from Bluff. The broken blocks of argillite were then transported by canoe across to the Tiwai adze 'factory' for further processing. Interestingly, the remains of two tauranga waka (cleared zones for canoe launching) can still be seen on the edge of Colyers Island quarry.

Another significant foreign stone type found at the Tiwai workshop was obsidian, or 'volcanic glass'. From extensive geological and archaeological site surveys, it is now known that this material was only available to the early Maori from North Island geological sources (Mayor Island, for example). The occurrence of obsidian flakes at Tiwai, therefore, had immediate implications of trade and exchange with northern Maori.

Analysis of the site's midden components indicated that shellfish, fish, bush birds, titi ('mutton birds'), seals and flightless moa were eaten at the site. Preserved juvenile titi were probably as popular then as now and may also have been an item for trade and exchange with northern Maori. Mysterious small stone balls were also found at the site; perhaps used for some specialised application, such as stuffing bird carcasses in preparation for cooking.

Tiwai was a specialised industrial site but should be viewed in a greater context as part of a network of pre-European Maori southern sites. Recent radiocarbon dates obtained from titi bones excavated from Tiwai, and published by Professor Atholl Anderson of Australia National University (Canberra), indicate that the site was occupied somewhere over the period of 1100–1300 AD.

Who were the adze-makers of Tiwai Point? In these southern regions we know that they were most certainly hunters and gatherers with a specialised and skilled knowledge of stone sources and stone-working techniques, making the best of available geological resources in a pre-metal era. The 12th century radiocarbon dates imply they were an early East Polynesian people (ancestral Maori), sometimes referred to in academic literature as 'Archaic Period' Maori, and now traditionally known as southern Waitaha – now recognised as part of the ancestral Waitaha/Ngati Mamoe/Ngai Tahu whanui.

Stephen Mulqueen (b. 1953, New Zealand) is a sculptor who resides between Dunedin, Otago and County Leitrim Ireland. A graduate of the Otago Polytechnic School of Art and The Australian National University, Canberra, he is a past winner of the Cleveland Art Award and is also known for his work as a jeweller and founding member of the Fluxus workshop and Gallery, 1983 – 2004. In 1994 he was commissioned by the Department of Conservation Te Papa Tawhai to design the new viewing platform for Bluff Hill. Major solo exhibitions include: Papakihau 'Slapped by the wind' 1993 – 1996, and Whakamaoritanga – Translations held at the Hocken Library Gallery, University of Otago, 2000.

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