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Alphabet of a Southern Alchemist

Sculptor Stephen Mulqueen

DAVID EGGLETON

Stephen Mulqueen's *Whakamaoritanga (Translations)*, a recent installation at Hocken Library Gallery with exhibitions at other galleries to follow, presents the artist as a postmodern surveyor of the Dominion of Signs, of their circuit of endlessly deferred meanings. Surfing the zeitgeist and beaching at Bluff Harbour, Mulqueen surveys this region as a way of finding out about the place where he is now, the place where he grew up, and the place he obsessively returns to, as a locus for the deconstruction of identity politics. He steers by the star of the Treaty of Waitangi, his map is the bicultural equation, his vehicle is sculpture. In an era of fuzzy centres and blurred boundaries he is bravely going by feel, crafting hard bright objects incised with inscriptions over which you can drag your eyes, if not your fingers.

The title of the exhibition—'Translations'—is partly drawn from Brian Friel's play *Translations*, an account of the British Army's ordnance surveys in nineteenth century Ireland—surveys which aimed to replace local Gaelic place-names with Anglicised names, often

distributed at random. In nineteenth-century New Zealand a similar new mapping created a geography of disinheritance for the tangata whenua. Chief surveyor John Turnbull Thomson, whose home thoughts were always of the British Isles, was responsible for renaming much of Otago and Southland. In effect, his place names, along with those of other newly arrived Pakeha, 'wrote over' the existing Maori place-names, creating a palimpsest, or multi-layered text.¹ For Maori, as Sydney Mead writes in *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand*: 'the naming criteria . . . emerges from a long and intimate residency'.²

Stephen Mulqueen, over the past few years, has seen his task as unearthing buried Maori names, associations and mythologies, in order not only to acknowledge them but also to reforge them, those broken links to the past, in his alchemist's crucible of sculptural artifacts. Juggling the colonial and the post-colonial, Mulqueen exhibits a didactic version of an industrial light and magic show. For European explorers the Bluff area was terra incognita, a site which needed to be turned into a place named and

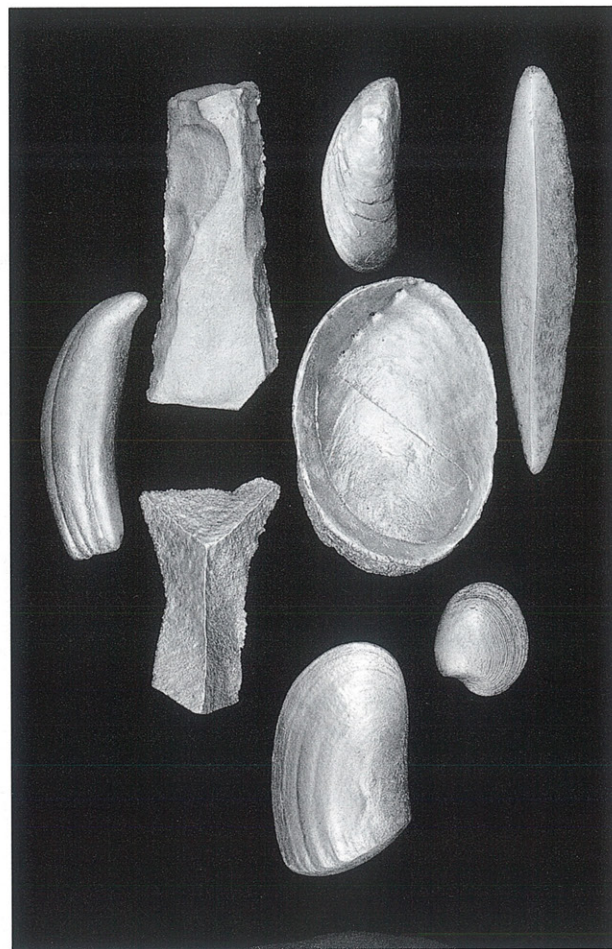
known, a place commodified and made productive.

For Maori, Bluff/Motupohue already was productive—across the channel at Tiwai (meaning 'dug-out canoe') was an extensive tool-making factory producing stone adzes and other cutting tools. Today, that neolithic factory is where the Comalco aluminium smelter is now located. For Mulqueen this ironic conjunction is an instructive symbol (thus conforming to a standard trope in New Zealand art, that of reductionism). He constructs *Whakamaoritanga* (*Translations*), with its story about Bluff and environs, as an echo chamber of competing discourses, only all are now singing from the same hymn book—one made of aluminium.

Coaxing meaning out of aluminium in a tour de force of metalwork, Mulqueen employs myths of industrialisation to construct a sequence of expressive totemic images. He selects objects which symbolise transformations in the landscape: a lizard made out of a rusty farm scythe and shiny number eight fencing wire; a titi or muttonbird made from an iron pickaxe head and number eight wire; a rabbit constructed from number eight wire and a set of Victorian foot bellows (the rabbit being famously part of the coloniser's baggage, but Mulqueen's image also refers to a special kind of rabbit, a colony of large hares released by early nineteenth century sailors as a potential food source which failed to flourish). The rabbit, conjured up, crouches on a flax-style mat woven from aluminium (twentieth-century aluminium having replaced nineteenth-century flax as an exportable currency).

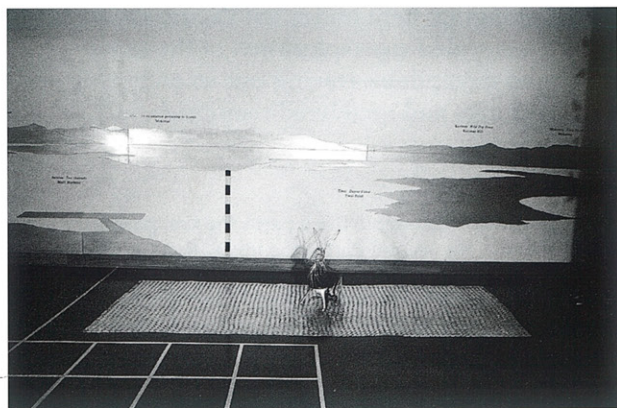
Here we see how Mulqueen has mined his home territory for found objects—resurrected relics—and used them as tokens of place within carefully crafted artifacts which are, wittily, at once monumental and anti-monumental. The narrative of empire has been re-imagined as a crossfire of competing belief systems, generating enough heat to fuse into entangled, ambivalent, but nevertheless powerful forms which present themselves as metonymic readings of yesteryear.

As an explorer of the bicultural equation, Stephen Mulqueen is attuned to the notion of the hybrid. Early colonial examples of hybridity were included in the ambassadorial *Te Maori* (1984) exhibition: a tomahawk (patiti), consisting of an iron blade and a whalebone



handle; and a fighting club (patu), consisting of an iron harpoon hafted onto a carved wooden handle. On the one hand these objects are evidence of a creative collision, of things made alike in new assemblages; on the other it's poignant evidence of a kind of loss—the last talismans of a dying neolithic culture crushed by commodity fetishism: the first inklings of globalisation.

'Te Aka The shell Pig Island' is another metonymic image of cultural commodification. The bush pig, or Captain Cooker, became a valuable trade commodity in the early nineteenth century. Mulqueen's work incorporates a tin metal bath—common in colonial times—and uses number eight wire to complete the handwrought shape of a pig's head. The bath-and-pig contains layers of mussel and cockle shells. (Shells were a neolithic tool: a scraper used to work flax.) The



(opposite) STEPHEN MULQUEEN Central viewing turret of Motupohue/Bluff Hill lookout 1999

Cast concrete, stainless steel and dunite, 6.5 x 1.5 m

(left) STEPHEN MULQUEEN Installation view of *Tihaka*, flax mat (aluminium mat) with *Rabbit Island* (rabbit), survey staff, aluminium map, and grid 2000

Number 8 wire, foot bellows, aluminium fibre and aluminium paint

(above) STEPHEN MULQUEEN Collection of related objects from Tiwai and Bluff Harbour 1993

All cast aluminium, *Toheroa shell* 130 x 70 x 40 mm; *Cockle shell* 60 x 50 x 30 mm; *Paua shell* 150 x 1000 x 50 mm; *Mussel shell* 100 x 50 x 40 mm; *Adze preform* 180 x 70 x 30 mm; *Basalt flake* 100 x 80 x 60 mm; *Whale tooth* 140 x 40 x 60 mm; *Ventifact* 90 x 50 x 40 mm.



(left) STEPHEN MULQUEEN *Te Aka The shell Pig Island* 1999
Number 8 wire, tin bath, mussel/cockle shells and aluminium paint, 1800 x 550 x 750 mm.

(opposite) STEPHEN MULQUEEN *Close-up of Rabbit Island (rabbit) with Tihaka, flax mat (aluminium mat)*
Number 8 wire, foot bellows and aluminium fibre, 500 x 650 x 280 mm.

entire tank-like object has been coated with aluminium paint, impressively unifying its comical bulk.

'Motupiu *A swinging island Dog Island*' commemorates the region's many references to the kuri, or Polynesian dog. Maori used the kuri for hunting, but after Pakeha settlement, the dog was seen as a threat to livestock and hunted down, becoming extinct in the middle of the nineteenth century. Mulqueen has fused the image of the dog with the image of an iron spike nail. These big spike nails were traded items during early contact. They were used by Maori as fish hooks, chisels and small adzes, superseding the implements of their stone culture. A spike nail was known as a 'dog'. One of its main uses was to fasten railway irons to wooden sleepers. This information becomes part of the artwork: a block-shaped dog made from railway sleepers and with the silky black sheen of a charred carbonised surface (charcoal drawings of the kuri survive in Maori rock art, and one of the Bluff place names Mulqueen has disinterred is *Te Umu Kuri*: 'the dog oven'). This lifesize dog shape rides on bogie wheels running along railway irons.

From such cat's cradles of references Mulqueen has built up a mode of almost theatrical enquiry. His installation is an elaboration of themes in his Department of Conservation-commissioned sculptural project *Bluff Hill Lookout* (1997-2000).³ The Lookout, on top of the region's outstanding topographical feature, is a paced-out ascension to a sublime view, a panorama mapped and inscribed on a stone diorama making reference to more than ninety landmarks. Those landmarks are revisited and commented upon in the installation, which includes glass case displays of stone artifacts, stone preforms and aluminium ingots as well as explorers' drawings, survey maps and photographs. Digging deep, the artist has uncovered a lot of curious information. The past, he reveals, is not an extinguished culture, but

simply one positioned out of sight, awaiting recovery and re-presentation.

Born in Bluff, a second generation Pakeha of Irish and Scandinavian descent, Mulqueen began a jeweller's apprenticeship in Invercargill in 1969, aged 16. Later, he worked in Nelson with Hans Jensen—where he was introduced to modern Scandinavian design—and then helped establish the Dunedin contemporary jewellery gallery, Fluxus, with Swiss-born Kobi Bosshard. In the early Eighties, Mulqueen spent eighteen months working with jeweller Charlie Gore. Gore was the last of a generation who had been trained by English artisan-jewellers attracted to Dunedin by the Otago gold rush in the 1860s. These jewellers reflected the ideas of the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement which aimed at an integration between art and industry.

Starting out as a formally-trained conventional jeweller, Mulqueen has gradually become more interested in design philosophies and art theory. He's a jeweller who has rejected bland, mass-market gemware, along with commercial notions about luxury wealth and status, in order to revamp the whole idea of jewellery: what is it for?

He's come up with miniature objects which function as iconoclastic statements. His is jewellery as articles of faith, replacing modernist alienation with a sense of belonging, here under the Pacific sky. His sculpture is a scaled-up exploration of the same energies and disciplines, tracing out an archeology of buried meanings and recovered memories.

1. Where the works' titles are in three parts, the first part is the old Maori place-name; the second part is the translation into English; the third part is the present-day name

2. Sidney M. Mead (ed), *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*, Harry N. Abrams Inc & The American Federation of Arts, New York 1984, p. 20.

3. See also: David Eggleton, 'High on a Hill', *New Zealand Listener*, 7 November 1998, pp. 38-39.

