

NEW ZEALAND

Christchurch

SCAPE 2016

Is it possible to both challenge and enlighten new audiences for the arts through a contemporary public art program? It is a question that has consistently resurfaced for *SCAPE Public Art's Biennial* in Christchurch over the past 18 years as guest curators have commissioned artworks by New Zealand and international artists for numerous sites in the city.

To date, *SCAPE* has been responsible for 200 public artworks, and with the recent announcement that from 2016 it is now an annual event, public art in Christchurch will gain ever-greater visibility.

Curated by Heather Galbraith, the theme for *SCAPE 2016* was 'presence.' It was an opened-ended theme capable

of representing a spectrum of possibilities. Yet, *SCAPE* director Deborah McCormick also maintains that it is an idea that can "draw a thread between works ... a rationale for a group of artists' works that is not too prescriptive." Galbraith further emphasizes that for a city still in a state of earthquake recovery, *SCAPE's* theme has an important role:



David McCracken, *Diminish and Ascend*, 2013, welded aluminum, 1,200 x 145 x 380 cm. Image: courtesy of artist, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

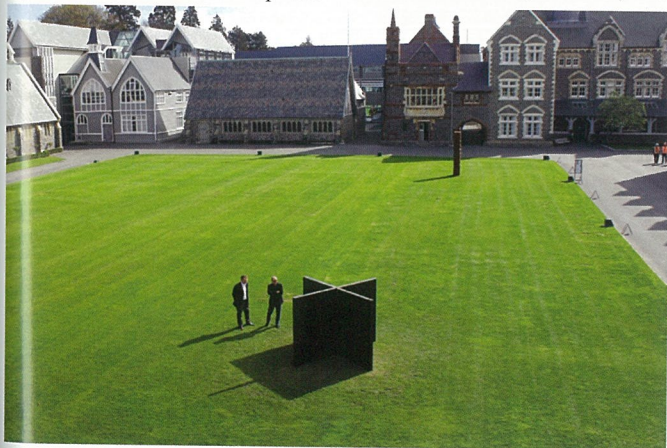
"The people of Christchurch have had more than their fair share of charged and disrupted states. 'Presence' seeks to present works that speak to the spectrum of our current experiences, taking on board stresses and losses of recent times, as well as the moments of generosity and warmth."

Addressing the city's well being? Here was an idea

that was sincere and aspirational, but not necessarily well received by all. *SCAPE 2016* became the subject of a newspaper column by Patrick Whittle, former lecturer in art philosophy at the University of Canterbury. In "Unraveling the true costs and benefits of public art in Christchurch," Whittle described the texts accompanying *SCAPE's* artworks as "beyond parody... epitomizing a (high) culture of frivolous consumption."

Predictably, his comments inflamed numerous online respondents, damming in their opinions about the value of art and public sculpture: "These artworks are not truly worth the price of dynamite to blow them to hell!!"

Yet, those who took the daily guided walk, or tour by tram, would have discovered that, in reality, with Galbraith's selection of works and her spirited call to arms, *SCAPE 2016* rose to the occasion, de-



Gill Gatfield, *The Kiss*, 2015, black granite, 200 (h) x 300 (dia) cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.



Janna van Hasselt, *Buzz carpet*, 2016, paint on asphalt, dimensions variable. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.



Sam Harrison, *Bathing figure*, 2016, cast concrete, dimensions variable, life size. Image: Courtesy of the Artist, Fox Jensen, Auckland and Jensen, Sydney.



Judy Darragh, *Stainless*, 2010-2011, stainless steel kitchenware, dimensions variable. Image: Courtesy of the Artist, Two Rooms Gallery Auckland, and Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch.

liveling sufficient moments of "generosity and warmth."

Of the 12 works in SCAPE's program, David McCracken's *Diminish and Ascend*, an Escher-like stairwell, was located in an expansive pond in Christchurch's Botanical Gardens. Rising out of the water with the width of its stairs narrowing as it ascended, before vanishing into the sky, it seemed genuinely magical: an experience of a bewildering reality.

Sculptor Sam Harrison's *Batbing Figure*, a cast of a young woman, arched and stretching in repose on a rock, similarly delivered a memorable encounter in its presence as mass and volume and the materiality of flesh upon rock in sunlight.

Gill Gatfield's *The Kiss*, an 'X' form cut from black granite, was a sculpture to walk around and watch yourself reflected in the act, while the partitioning into geometric segments on a welcoming, human scale created a reassuring sense of being embraced and immersed in its form.

SCAPE 2016 was characterized by such encounters, making the public conscious of their presence in their experience of all works. The city's central shopping precinct, RESTART featured Janna van Hasselt, *Buzz Carpet*, an installation to walk over that unsettled perceptions of form and space in vivid-pink-and-white geometric pattern installed the length of a space between retail outlets.

Judy Darragh's *Stainless* responded to the golden age of the American automobile with her choice of weapon being stainless-steel kitchenware, polished to perfection for a window installation. A heightened sensory experience of glowing, shimmering light and metal, *Stainless* similarly justified its presence in SCAPE's 'Presence,' through the immediate experience of the work itself.

Indeed, it felt as though all the works in SCAPE had rallied in response to Whittle's claims about the assumed pre-tentiousness of contemporary

art. In SCAPE 2016, art and life were irrefutably spending quality time together, pleased to assume the responsibility of challenging and enlightening existing, and new audiences, for the arts in public and community spaces.

Warren Feeney

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THE UNITED STATES

James Emmette Neel at the University of Alabama

For Virgil, as for all Roman poets, war was man's greatest honor and glory. Subsequent centuries, however, have come to see combat differently. Understanding the futility of military grandeur, Napoleon quipped wryly, "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon." Today the recognition of battle's disfigured underbelly, its destruction and suffering, has irrevocably inverted any lingering, romantic notions of its sublimity.

Artists such as James Emmette Neel—whose exhibition *Echoes Along the Syrian Border: Family Archeology and the sound of Distant Warfare* is on view until February 17, 2017—are at least in part responsible for this welcomed reevaluation. It is the appalling aftermath of conflict—particu-

larly on children—that impels Neel to make art. Recently returned from a month in Antakya, Turkey, a few miles from the Syrian border, he has witnessed the horrors of the Middle-Eastern turmoil up close. Neel's sculptures and photographs echoing the excruciating effects of war are scarred, pitted, torn, and shattered, analogous to the shards and fragments unearthed in an archaeological excavation—what future centuries might find.

The title of the first sculptural group, *Aya Sofia Suriya* (2015), focuses on the religious origins of the Syrian war. Aya Sofia is the Islamic name of Hagia Sophia, the great domed 6th-century church built in Constantinople by Byzantine Emperor Justinian. When the city fell in 1453 to Islam, Mehmed the Conqueror leapt onto the altar, claiming it for Allah, transforming the structure into a mosque and translating its name, "Holy Wisdom," into Arabic. Three days of looting followed, after which Mehmed is said to have wept, saying, "What a city we have given over to plunder and destruction": a climactic moment in the centuries-old struggle between the Christian West and the Islamic East. Suriya, the Arabic name for Syria in Neel's title, points to the fact that this ongoing struggle is currently being played out in that nation.

In addition to the title's

historical allusions are the deep ironies—neither holy nor wise—which it reveals. Displayed for maximum impact at eye-level on high wooden stands are the sculpted heads of children, all in the burnt sienna hue of fired terracotta. Embedded in a boy's head is a cast iron AK47. A crucifix is impressed into the bust of a girl. Scars from machete wounds—healed but no less searing—slash the head of another. Pebbles and stones puncture yet another child's skull.

The Arabic word *albadith*, associated with Islamic subjugation of women, is embedded into the neck of a girl, her head upside down, like the position of women in much of the Islamic world. And tamped onto another bust is Mohamed's seal. Violence against children, the artist contends, extends beyond war, however, as evidenced by the outsize carcass of a honeybee on the head of a sad, apprehensive boy. This cocoon-like shell of a living being testifies to the covert but very real threat of pollution to children.

Equally unsettling is *Ghosts in the Field* (2013): realistically depicted child soldiers. Elevated to monumental status on tall metal supports, three like gun barrels and two resembling assault rifles, these enslaved kids are ragged and dirty. Having been deprived of a normal upbringing, they reveal heartless, unfeeling expressions. One girl is armless; two flaunt weapons. They are, the artist says, like "bullets" shot from the guns they stand on. Fashioned from gritty terracotta and hardened iron, materials which Neel likens to "the stuff of Antiquity: the ochre of the Paleolithic Cro-Magnon, the iron of the broadsword and musket," these pitiable children negate the idea so popular in the 19th century that man has "progressed" beyond his aboriginal origins.

Echoing the atrocities reflected in the sculptures are Neel's photographic images. Made to resemble real old photographs, some are manipulated images taken in war zones; others begin with shots



Installation view of James Emmette Neel's exhibition *Echoes Along the Syrian Border: Family Archeology and the sound of Distant Warfare* at the University of Alabama.