

ART

Inside out

Two of the most well-regarded New Zealand-based artists you've probably never heard of.

by MARK AMERY

Two exhibitions side by side in their own quiet cells at the back of Wellington's City Gallery. At first glance, they're the proverbial odd couple. Susan Te Kahurangi King: a 64-year-old self-taught outsider, coloured pencil and felt tip scribbled intensely within laps of line on scrap paper; Shannon Te Ao: the youngish university-aligned insider, making oblique poetic performances for video. Brought together under one title, it's curatorial game show time: *Make Sense of This!*

From the One I Call My Own proves clever, sensitive curation. The first commonality: these are two of the most well-regarded New Zealand-based artists you've probably never heard of. With his

Unable to speak since age five, King has been written up in *Frieze*, the *New York Times* and *Art in America*.

work *Two Shoots That Stretch Far Out*, Te Ao was the sole New Zealand artist at last year's Sydney Biennale. This is the work's New Zealand premiere. King, meanwhile, has recently featured at New York and Paris's Outsider Art Fairs, and been written up in *Frieze*, the *New York Times* and *Art in America*. Both artists gently yet powerfully explore a tension we all feel – how to communicate to others the weave of emotions and thoughts in our heads.

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King was instead encouraged to draw. Since the 1960s she has taken to it with extraordinary abstract, muscular verve. Exhibition and the subsequent recognition has come only recently.

This exhibition is disappointing for not showing a wider public more of the works that have gained King an international reputation; an exhibition at Wellington's Robert Heald Gallery earlier this year did this beautifully. Those works were made largely in the 1970s; landscapes compact and warp dislocated body parts and props from Disney comics into rippling patterns, giving a new kind of knotted bodily language to internal urges, grotesque and witty.

King's more recent work has been excluded from previous exhibitions but that has been remedied here with an excellent series of pieces incorporating clothing cut-outs from paper-doll sets given to the artist by musician Alastair Galbraith. In one set reminiscent of

African fabric or ancient friezes, faceless figures shuffle or dance across a space filled with crinkly coils of penned line. Lumpy legs and misshaped alien heads with bulbous ears are given to the Victoriana dolls.

In another series, figure outlines are buffered against the squiggly noise of the world by a colourful, carnivalesque patchwork of marshmallowy blocks. It's a Harlequin-like armour, providing a kind of camouflage and insulation.

One of several slender but resonant connections is made across to Te Ao: King's Pakeha father taught te reo and provided her with scrap paper, sometimes complete with Maori designs. There are drawings here showing King riffing off tiki forms, and designs emerging from a koru-like spiral.

Te Ao also plays with form in new ways. Born in Sydney, he grew up in Australia but is of Ngati Tuwharetoa descent, which may influence his distinctive perspective. In *Two Shoots*, he reads

aloud in a barn what sounds like a Victorian English translation of a Ngati Porou lament. He does so five times, in the company of a procession of animals: geese and chickens; a donkey; a wallaby; some rabbits; and a swan, an elegantly curled up, sleeping bundle. Te Ao is the outsider trying to get close, the animal-actors strangely at ease in their own performance space on the floorboards.

It's utterly absurd but enormously touching. Shiftless yet elegant and beautiful, Te Ao's meditative pieces evade easy definition but poetically strike poignancy.

The lament is a love poem about feeling adrift after the departure of a loved one, trying to connect over distance. Te Ao experiments with trying to find a point of stillness when feeling ungrounded. "My mind tossed about like the clouds and I am the drifting reeds of the river," he reads. "My thoughts are vainly thrusting outwards."

Melancholy, the words are reminiscent of a piece of English Romantic poetry, and the animals are similarly pastoral imports. Barefoot Te Ao, feeling with his toes, evokes dislocation from the land. The strongest segment sees the camera slowly pan to reveal him reading in the presence of an adorable donkey nuzzling his shoulder. It's as if Te Ao is making confession, the donkey the priest.

Some segments added little for me (donkey and fowl were enough), but I enjoyed how Te Ao, moving in and out of the frame, softly explores new forms of being on camera. Working with text and symbols, he creates a resonant intimate space, as close to drawing and painting as narrative film-making.

What we deserve are fuller surveys of these artists' work. In the meantime, this is quiet joy: as Te Ao's whakatauki goes, two shoots reaching out to each other over a distance. ■

From the One I Call My Own is on display at City Gallery Wellington until November 8.



A scene from Shannon Te Ao's *Two Shoots That Stretch Far Out*. Left, untitled pieces by Susan Te Kahurangi King.



DVDs

by Mark Broatch

FORCE MAJEURE

A Swedish family is on a skiing holiday in the French Alps when a controlled avalanche goes awry. The father, a distracted workaholic, runs from the alpine cafe, leaving his wife and two children to the snow; no one's hurt, but Tomas (Johannes Kuhnke) can't admit to Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli) that he was a heartless coward. This is no drama, but a terrific dark comedy about male ego, modern marriages, and the passive-aggressive brushing of teeth that holds its nerve to the final frame.

★★★★



STILL ALICE

Minor memory lapses can no longer be shrugged off after 50-year-old linguistics professor Alice (Julianne Moore) completely loses her train of thought during a lecture. Her neurologist eventually diagnoses early-onset Alzheimer's. Alice attempts to combat the disease methodically, but the dread is palpable: her brilliant mind and articulateness are pillars of her personality. And forgetfulness has a terrible stigma: "I wish I had cancer," she says to husband Alec Baldwin. It's largely seen from Alice's point of view, so everyone other than Moore is relegated to worrying/arguing/patronising roles, and the film flirts with her options rather than engaging with them. But that misty-eyed stare truly haunts. ★★★★★

