

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT? MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI AT THE 2011 VENICE BIENNALE

Rebecca Hamid



Figure: I. Chapman's Homer, 2011, bronze, stainless steel, two pieces: 251 x 271 x 175 and 56 x 87 x 37 cm, Photograph by Judith Cullen.

"But he isn't wearing anything at all!" In a fable by Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," only an innocent child, without guile, can openly declare what it is they are all looking at. More concerned with being judged ignorant or incapable, the Emperor, his ministers and subjects all play along with the tailor's swindle, admiring the suit of clothes which simply does not exist.

We perceive in Anderson's allegory the ubiquity of the tale, the sudden recognition that it brings, certain archetypes of the adult human psyche and behaviour. It exposes the compelling reality of childishness and universal configurations of narrative that are understood subconsciously and collectively. The application here to the world of 'high' art is revealing and pertinent. It provides a valuable reference point when looking and writing about art.

Michael Parekowhai's entry to the 2011 Venice Biennale, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, is an extravaganza the like of which New Zealand has never entertained before. In the context of Venice, touted as the most prestigious of all international art fairs, New Zealand's and the artist's gambit is an ambitious one. With the

announcement, national pride and enthusiasm gained momentum. Parekowhai's credentials confirm him as one of Aotearoa's most accomplished contemporary artists. He is a popular choice. Given its destination, the decision to go for scale and grandeur may have been an astute call. If he pulls it off, this could be a career-defining move for the artist. The stakes are high – "Venice remains a high pressure engagement."¹

But has the artist and his team pulled it off? With the emphasis on 'installation,' does it work as the catalogue and reviews claim it does? Mindful of Parekowhai's past achievements, how does this collection of sculptures compare to previous work? The decision to send Parekowhai has taken ten years. Has this belated decision compromised his installation?²

Walking away with the Golden Lion is to pick up a coveted prize. Nations, artists, their dealers, curators, directors and commissioners, and some heavyweight corporate backers, all line up for a piece of the action. Ideals that art is sacrosanct and not a commodity are dismissed by the capitalist ethos that prevails. As Simon Rees muses in "Pavilions and Palazzi," there is a "current and murkier tendency for the nationalization of production funding and the privatization of profit for sale."³ It is the nation's taxpayers who fund some or most of the entry, but it is the artist and their dealer who benefit from the sales.⁴ The dilemma here is not the rights and wrongs of public funding or support for the arts, but whether or not the profits realised should repay the public purse so as to sustain support for the arts on an ongoing basis. There is also the moral predicament of using public funds to boost the coffers of the private sector:

The scale of this event grows each year: There is nothing scrumpy about Venice. Everything is on a grand scale. It has for centuries been a destination for the wealthy and powerful, appreciative of its elegance, opulence, decadence and cultural diversity. A major power until the eighteenth century, Venice became a byword for decadence. Leading up to the 1800s, vast inherited fortunes were squandered by the aristocracy in gambling and lavish parties. A revival came in the 1870s with the opening of the Suez Canal; Venice became a destination for rich Europeans and wealthy socialites. The Venetians' predilection for liberalism infused the arts and nurtured a setting for the radicalisation of art practice. With the founding of the Biennale in 1895, Venice became a European epicenter of creativity for music, writing and the visual arts.

During the opening days of the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, "ILLUMinations," the febrile clamour of the festivities resonate glamour, glitz and extravagance that at times overshadows the art itself. Referred to as the Cannes Film Festival of world art shows, it exudes excitement and excess. En route to the Giardini, the crowds of art-goers and press representatives pass by the super-sized yacht owned by Roman Abramovich, reputed to require a staff of 45. President Berlusconi arrives for the Argentinian pavilion opening, complete with an entourage of speedboats and bodyguards on jet skis dressed in matching wetsuits. It all seems reminiscent of a James Bond movie.

In shipping containers alongside the cocktail parties, three artists from the impoverished nation of Haiti have



Figure 2. *Kapa Haka* (Officer Taumaha), 2011, bronze, 182 x 60 x 45 cm, Photograph by Judith Cullen.

installed their collages of human forms sculptured from junk. *Death and Fertility* (2011) offers a trajectory on Haiti's ability to regenerate itself after tragedy. From the Atis Collective, Andre Eugene, Jean Herard Claude and Jean Claude Saintilus include fetish effigies constructed from lavishly coloured textile fragments. Juxtaposed with its opulent setting, the Haitian pavilion makes Venice seem all the more extreme and surreal. Apart from its location, this installation makes a powerful political statement about the excesses of both capitalism and art, the distribution of the world's resources and the spirit of human survival against all odds. While other nations, including New Zealand, reference Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades by choice, it is by necessity that these Third World artists use discarded and trashed objects to form the basis of their discourse. Powerful and haunting images of human experience have inspired these sculptures. As with Ernesto Vila's cut-out silhouettes of the missing and persecuted, *Imágenes (des)*, in the 2007 Beinnale Uruguayan pavilion, the conceptual ideas behind these sculptures command much more than a disengaged and intellectual response.

Contradictions abound between wealth and paucity, parochial and global, virtual and real, grand and simple. There is a deluge of art both serious and lightweight, some inspired but much of it repetitive, or tired, or just trying too hard. From the alluring to the very dull, each year the event grows and this year's Biennale offers a greater breadth of art talent than ever before. Of particular interest this year is that some of the privately funded exhibitions offer more depth than the official events, many of which feel weighed down by conventions of conceptual rigour.⁵



Figure 3. *Untitled*, 2011, wax, pigments, wicks, steel, installation dimensions variable, edition of 2 + 1 AP, Photograph by Rebecca Hamid

The 27-page list of exhibitions in the official press pack includes separate exhibitions housed in the Giardini and the Arsenale. No surprises that previous and current bastions of imperial power dominate the Giardini, the gardens containing the major permanent national pavilions.⁶ The USA occupies the central position, a location it secured in 1986. Britain is at the end of the main avenue, with France and Germany on either side. Pavilions belonging to other countries are in supporting roles, the largest of which is the Palazzo delle Esposizione, a Fascist-style building formerly known as the Italian pavilion.

Since the first Biennale in 1895, the number of national participants has grown rapidly, with a noticeable jump from 77 in 2009 to 89 in 2011. Venice is indisputably the oldest, largest and grandest of international art fairs. In 2011 Andorra, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Bangladesh and Haiti exhibited for the first time, and several countries returned after absences in recent years. Countries committing to permanent pavilions have spilled out from the Giardini to the nearby Arsenale, a series of old armaments warehouses, and across Venice into various palazzi. This year, 37 collateral events supported by international organisations and institutions, spread across various locations around the city,



Figure 4. *Constitution Hill*, (olive saplings), 2011, Polychromed bronze, 110 x 35 x 35 cm approx, Photograph by Michael Hill.

have further swelled the number of exhibitions. Some nationally and privately sponsored shows are on a par with those in the Giardini and Arsenale. There are exhibitions of big-name artists including Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, Andrei Monastyrski and James Turrell. Galleries with permanent collections, including the Gallerie dell'Accademia (Italian medieval and Renaissance), the Peggy Guggenheim (Modern), and the Ca'Pesaro Galleria d'Arte Moderna, are also staging one-off feature exhibitions. The Guggenheim shows a special exhibition by Robert Rauschenberg, "Gluts." In the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, and now the recently opened Palazzo Ca'Corner della Regina on the Grand Canal, rival fashion house magnates Pinault and Prada vie for position with the biggest and best of their contemporary collections.

The theme for the Biennale involved literally shedding light on the institution itself. In announcing it, director Bice Curiger drew attention to "dormant and unrecognized opportunities, as well as to the conventions that need to be challenged." "ILLUMinations" "points to light, a classical theme in art that closely relates to Venice." To make her point, she negotiates the installation of three huge canvases by the radical Venetian Renaissance painter Tintoretto in the front gallery of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. This is a daring and controversial move, which nevertheless proves popular with many visitors.⁷ In effect a dual theme, the

2011 title also accentuates the element "nations," alluding to predetermined notions of nationhood as exemplified in the conservative Venice construct of national pavilions. Curiger intended her initiative to challenge artists "to explore new forms of 'community' and negotiate differences and affinities that might serve as models for the future."⁸

Curiger's premise is to encourage art that "explores notions of the collective, yet also speaks of fragmentary identity, of temporary alliances, and objects inscribed with transience." Her hope is that Venice will host art that demonstrates the vibrancy of life. Citing an age when humans' sense of reality is profoundly challenged by virtual and simulated worlds, she called for art that expresses its potential, is inspired, questions assumptions and strives to be the best.⁹

Looking at what is on show, some of the national events are disappointing. The United States pavilion has a deserved reputation as a must-see venue. In 2005, Edward Ruscha exhibited early urban black-and-white landscapes alongside new, full-colour canvases. These were unsettling yet engaging and beautiful paintings. The 52th Biennale entry showed an installation by the dead Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. This was a controversial choice and questions have been raised about the curatorial logic behind this, as well as previous and current artist selections. Choosing dead, mid-term or high-profile artists has proved to be both frustrating and exhilarating. Gonzalez-Torres's rigorously conceptual artwork, *America* (2007), included replenishable paper stacks, take-away candy spills, light strings, public billboards and photographs. His minimalist refinement of black and white, coupled with social commentary and personal disclosure, ensured that the installation was engaging and fresh. Both his and Ruscha's installations filled the US pavilion as one connected and complete exhibition. In 2009, the multifaceted American

conceptual artist and sculptor Bruce Nauman, a pioneer of post-minimalist video and performance art, won the Golden Lion.

In 2011, Costa Rican collaborative artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla have created six works, titled *Gloria* (2011), for the US pavilion. Drawing a clear distinction between not representing the US but being "honoured to be included in the history of the US pavilion," Allora and Calzadilla have been strongly critical of American culture.¹⁰ Their multimedia works are about US presumption and military and financial might, as well as nationalism in its various expressions including Olympic sport. In each multimedia work *Gloria* references the theme of grandeur, whether military, religious, Olympic, or economic, using paradoxical and often absurd aesthetic forms to provoke discussion about critical contemporary issues. With a big budget, a permanent fixture and one of the best pavilions in which to work and plan their installation, Allora and Calzadilla had the ideal opportunity to produce some of their best work. But *Gloria* lacks synthesis. The sculptures and the various realisations of athletic performances do not flow as one coherent whole, or from one room to the next. With the not-so-subtle use of juxtaposition and symbolism, the references, narrative and ideas are too obvious to allow the audience to think for themselves. For the rest of the world, the chronicle of US ideology, politics and militarism offered by *Gloria* is 'old hat' and lacks sophistication.

In the eight rooms of the Palazzo Pisani, in a collateral event, Scots artist Karla Black exhibits new work. Described as intimately and painstakingly worked in situ, her pieces are exquisitely detailed. These sculptures float in aesthetic forms of varying materials and colour. They are abstract sculptures, suspended and spilling throughout the rooms and across the floors. Some sculptures were inspired by her interest in scientific theories about quantum particles. Using a vast array of materials including marble dust, sugar paper, cellophane and soap, Black has made sculptures that are at once gestures and serious attempts at creating things of delicate beauty which she describes as having "no image, no metaphor."¹¹ The installation cleverly transitions from one room to the next to form a compelling and complete work.

Christian Boltanski's *Chance* (2011), in the French pavilion, consists of print works sketched in metal scaffolding, resembling a cage or jail, and a press running off a belt of baby photographs, their faces ticked off by digital clocks. As an installation it is complete, integrated and coherent. The noise of the press fills the vast spaces of the scaffolding. Finding it unpleasant, the audience want it to stop; they are encouraged to press a button to do this. However, an alarming new noise takes its place. Boltanski's sculpture is a baby-factory. It is a portrait of the Darwinian drive to extinction and the human predilection to over-populate. It successfully juxtaposes the lightness of the scaffolding structures with the innocence of the newborn and the human predicament, involving a mix of misguided actions and inertia.

Despite its sombre content, the British entry has attracted lengthy queues. Mike Nelson's installation, *I, Impostor* (2011), is made up of a labyrinth of interiors, corridors and squalid corners, workbenches, dusty and derelict appliance and utensils and a make-shift photographic darkroom. Nelson's experiment in 'pavilion-vanishing' has been acclaimed by a few critics including Rachel Withers: "the skylight is gone, and the effect of stepping out from the installation's dim, dusty, intimate spaces into the teetering, sunlit 'courtyard' is breathtaking."¹² Charles Darwent also praises the installation: "its homelessness makes it at home in Venice."¹³ Comparing Nelson's work with Michael Parekowhai's, he implies that both negotiate global exchange and migration such that national identities become blurred. Given that Nelson – inspired by his 2003 Istanbul Biennale entry – intended his installation to replicate an old Ottoman workshop, Darwent's analogy is problematic. Nelson's work misses its mark. It is tediously repetitious and it is very hard to take in anything except dusty rooms and rusty junk in dead-end passages. It contains little which is fresh or provocative or inspiring.

Highlights at the Giardini include Maurizio Cattelan's entry *The Tourists* – 2000 dead pigeons hung from the rafters of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. This entry appeared at the 1997 Biennale, but shows that art which is apparently 'old hat' can, if well executed, remain fresh and vital with repeat showings. We can compare this installation to three huge Tintoretto's, borrowed by Curiger from various Venice museums and installed in the first room of the same pavilion.



Figure 5. *Untitled*, 2011, charcoal, acrylic and oil on canvas, 157.48 x 279.4 cm, Photo credit: Jeffrey Sturges
Courtesy Haunch of Venison

This was heralded by many critics as a courageous attempt to weave Italian Renaissance art into the twin curatorial themes of light and the nations. Tintoretto's paintings are characterised by dramatic use of light and gestures, bold use of perspective and muscular figures depicting biblical scenes. Curiger intended their placement here as an act of provocation, a challenge to the self-reflective preoccupations of contemporary art. However, this intended juxtaposition has fallen flat. The contrast is too stark and disruptive, causing a disconnect rather than a transition into the adjoining rooms of contemporary art. Curiger's preferred artists, chosen for reasons of contrast rather than homogeneity or 'best fit,' compound this disjunction. In the end, her choices come across as a mishmash of genre, ideas and intentions. One of the starkest of these contrasts is formed by the mismatch of artist Monika Sosnowska's trite and empty wallpapered corridors alongside South African David Goldblatt's haunting and thought-provoking black-and-white photographs.

In the German pavilion – wittily re-emblazoned 'Egomania' from the original 'Germania' – Christoph Schlingensief's installation, *A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within* (2011), described as "a protean and unsettling creativity," is installed by curator Susanne Gaensheimer.¹⁴ Schlingensief died within months of being selected for the 2011 Biennale. Simon Rees judges that, like many other exhibits, "works that delved into elements of insanity impressed."¹⁵ Schlingensief's work clearly impressed the judges, who awarded it the grand prize. Having visited this pavilion three times over five days, I concluded if the concepts, or narrative – or both – do in fact impress, then it is difficult to understand why. The church-style pavilion, with the films, objects and altar that make up the installation, does little other than to accentuate the obsession of the German people (and the artist), with themselves or their past, or both. The artist portrays an unflattering view of the human condition and reveals an obsession with his own imminent death from cancer. Combining film, theatre, sculpture, opera, political events and realpolitik, the piece features numerous chaotic images and ambiguous connections marked by excess of every kind. It is difficult to comprehend whether these portrayals of gross indulgence are to be attributed to others, the artist himself, or the judges who awarded it the Golden Lion.

In contrast, the Czech/Slovak pavilion, which features Roman Ondak's sculpture, is a salutary reminder that much of the art at Venice is vicarious or virtual. This exhibit is made up of a walk-through continuation of the Giardini's gravel paths, with shrub planting on either side. The point of this is to affirm the act of being present, in the Giardini, here and now. It is an expression of the artist's belief that being present and in the moment should be enough. It provides a simple reminder that less can mean more.



Figure 6. Gelatin Pavilion - 'Some like it Hot', 2011, installation.

In the Arsenale, the American artist James Turrell has presented one of his dreamy installations in which changing light creates an alternate universe of space and colour. Turrell's aesthetics and conceptual articulations of light and space can be awe-inspiring. The curatorial theme of "ILLUMinations" would have been sadly lacking without this piece. Like Ondak's work, this installation provokes moments of reflection that Schlingensief's work fails to achieve. Swiss artist Urs Fischer attracts the crowds with monumental functioning wax candles. One is a full-scale replica of Giovanni Bologna's sixteenth-century sculpture *The Rape of the Sabine Women*; the sign on the wall says 'Untitled, dimensions variable.' The other two pieces are in the forms of a computer chair and a well-dressed middle-aged man. The figures will gradually self-destruct during the months of the show as the wax melts and limbs drop off. These sculptures are clever in conception and expertly executed, but beyond this they do not offer much to sustain longer contemplation.

In addition to the five national pavilions of Arab nations at the 54th Biennale, a pan-Arab collateral event, "The Future of Promise," involving 22 different artists, is presented in various buildings in the Dorsoduro district. Across Venice, Arab countries represented include Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon. Much of the art presented is gritty and politically engaging. Israel's long and ruthless oppression of the Palestinian people is eloquently portrayed in *Al Maw'oud* (2011; the title translates as 'The Promised'), by Ayman Baalbaki, who examines the human quest of Palestinian freedom fighters.

In the Giardini, one of the most compelling and inspired presentations is provided by Egypt. The artist, Ahmed Basyony, was killed by sniper fire during the 2011 Egyptian revolution against the Mubarak regime; he became a symbol of hope to millions of Egyptians seeking to oust their repressive government. The installation is a two-fold presentation of work by the artist. Curated by Aida Eltorie and Shady El Noshokaty, it is designed to reflect a random display of incidents. *Thirty Days of Running in the Space* (2011) is a digital and performance-based concept exploring the changes involved in our everyday consumption of energy. This is juxtaposed with another set of screens showing raw footage of the chaotic events on the streets of Cairo during the uprising of early 2011. Basyony and his colleagues filmed events unfolding around them, and Basyony returned home each evening to download all the footage onto his laptop. Exposing the audience to the raw footage that survived Basyony's sudden and violent death, this installation is a homage to the artist behind the project. A reflection on Basyony's life and his commitment to social change, all the events recorded in this exhibition are documented on film, and occupy five screens in the exhibition hall, showing their material randomly side by side.

Sponsored by the Gervasuti Foundation, Iraq has a national pavilion for the first time, featuring six internationally renowned contemporary artists. Thirty years of war and conflict has taught these artists a great deal about artistic isolation. Venice offers these Iraqi artists an international audience to present ideas and cultural themes which extend much wider than the way the West views Iraq. Representing two generations, the artists include Ali Assaf, Azad Nanakeli and Walid Siti, who were all born in the early 1950s and who experienced the cultural richness of the period leading up to the 1970s; and the second generation, Adel Abidin, Ahmed Alsoudani and Halim Al Karim, who have experienced at first hand the Iran-Iraq war, the invasion of Kuwait, UN economic sanctions and then the invasion of the USA and its allies. All are part of the Iraq diaspora who have fled their homeland to study



Figure 7. *The Fisherman's Shoes*, 2011, bronze, two pieces dimensions variable, Photograph by Michael Hill.

and practice art abroad. Having forged ties with contemporary artistic practice outside of Iraq, they have all been able to relate the global situation to their Iraqi experience.

These artists represent an experimental approach that is both sophisticated and credible on an international stage. Water is the thematic choice for all six, and they provide provocative and convincing interpretations of the gravity of the crisis confronting their nation. It is the critical lack of water, not terrorism or civil war, which creates the real sense of urgency for Iraq, and provides a rich source of inspiration for these artists' use of video, documentary, photography and sculptural installations.

Behind the Arsenale, discreetly positioned in a well-kept garden of perennial borders, Gelitin, an Austrian artist collective, present *Gelatin Pavilion – Some like it Hot*, (2011). With a core group of four, other performers from across the globe join them to chop wood to fuel a wood-fired furnace, play music and flirt with each other. A tall naked man plays with his penis while conversing with other participants. A man in crutchless leotard tights mingles with the crowd. A large oven is fed glass taken from broken champagne bottles and glasses previously used by spectators and performers. The hot liquid glass is regularly extracted from the furnace, a reference to Venice and its history of glassblowing. Installation art in action, this 'happening' combines a variety of elements including live music, audience participation and simulated sex.

In the Dorsoduro, close to the Parekowhai exhibition, the Taiwanese *Le Festin De Chun-Te* (2011) by Hseih Chun-te includes elements of photography, theatre, cooking, music, dance and performance – combined to shocking and dramatic effect. Like Gelitin's successful installation art, this piece requires good timing and patience from its audience. Being present for the entirety of the performance is critical in order to comprehend the complexities of meaning it embodies, but given the frequency of performances, this isn't always possible. The four-day cycle of Gelatin's performance, on the other hand, is sustainable. As with so many others, the Taiwanese and New Zealand entries aim to last out the full six months of the Biennale.

With no national pavilion of its own, the site chosen for the New Zealand commission is the imposing Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore on the Grand Canal. Jenny Harper, the commissioner for the entry, announced it as a major sculptural installation that, in the context of other national presentations of the Biennale's "ILLUMinations" theme, will be "timely, compelling and memorable." Prior to the exhibition being installed, anticipation ran high in the New Zealand art world. Michael Parekowhai is a popular and respected artist whose previous sculptures, including *The Indefinite Article* (1990), *Kiss the Baby Goodbye* (1994), *Patriot: Ten Guitars* (1999), and *The Big O E* (2006), have gained him widespread appreciation and recognition. He draws strongly on a Maori-Pakeha cultural narrative that strikes a chord with a wide cross-section of the New Zealand art-loving public. If the narrative is at times complex and intricately woven, the visual impact of his work and its familiar symbolism can resonate with instant impact. It is this familiarity and sense of cultural identity that draws his audience to take a sustained look at his work. The credentials of the artist, the people involved in the project – the commissioner, curators, supporters and patrons – the considerable costs and media hype all created an expectation that Parekowhai's pianos would impress the Venice crowds, woo the punters, position the artist to attract international commissions and, most immediately, gain the judges' attention.

In the official brochure and Creative New Zealand's website page for Michael Parekowhai's Venice commission, it is described as an installation. The work is made up of a number of sculptures as well as performance – there are three



Figure 8. Wood, brass, automative paint, mother of pearl, paua, upholstery. Two Pieces: 103 x 275 x 175 cm and 85.5 x 46 x 41 cm

very large grand pianos, live music and singing. "The works that make up the installation include: *He Korero Purakau mo Te Awanui o Te Motu: Story of a New Zealand River*, 2011 (a carved Steinway grand piano), *A Peak in Darien*, 2011 (a bronze bull resting on a piano), *Chapman's Homer*, 2011 (a standing bull and piano), *Kapa Haka (Officer Taumaha)*, 2011, and *Constitution Hill*, 2011, (olive saplings)."¹⁶ The Steinway piano is wooden and intricately carved with Maori and European symbolism, and is embellished with paua inlay and Parekowhai's siblings symbolised as carved lizards on the lid. First painted shiny black when launched at the New Zealand Patrons' debut in Henderson, it was then painted a brilliant red before being installed in Venice. *He Korero Purakau mo Te Awanui o Te Motu: Story of a New Zealand River* is played throughout the exhibition along with a programme of special performances including one by Aivale Cole, who sang several arias at the exhibition opening.

Music is intended to link the sculptural works and 'fill the space' to complete the installation. According to the artist: "While the objects in *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* are important, the real meaning of the work will come through the music. Just as my work *Ten Guitars* was not about the instruments themselves but about the way they brought people together; performance is central to understanding *On First looking into Chapman's Homer* because music fills a space like no object can."¹⁷ The dilemma with incorporating performance is how to maintain it as a constant element of the installation. While Creative New Zealand has engaged pianists for the first three months of the exhibition, for the remainder of the Biennale, and during the interludes, the audience will not have the benefit of music as a unifying element. Further, the music and performance require the carved piano. The music connects the bronze pianos and the potent bull/piano stool symbolism. When the show is over and the sculptures go their separate ways, the symbolic potency of the unplayed pianos will be lost.

The artist points out that "It's not the size of the object that matters. It's the scale of the idea."¹⁸ Nevertheless, the size, materials and grandeur of the three pianos don't fail to impress. Much has been written about their weight,

cost and the difficulties of transporting them the great distances to Venice. The sculptures have been meticulously executed. The carved piano is beautiful and opulent, and the bronze versions are exquisitely made. Their boldness and daring commands a respect that sits well in Venice and the Palazzo. The accomplishment of their making, getting them to Venice and putting on a first-class performance sends a powerful message to people who know little about New Zealand. The challenge, then, is not to let national pride and parochialism subsume the art. Jackie Wullschlager comments briefly on Parekowhai's entry in reference to her claim that "Nationalism – even parochialism – is the intoxicating paradox of every 21st Century Biennale." The New Zealand pavilion "could not open without first receiving a Maori blessing." Not a word about the art itself.¹⁹

Parekowhai's carved piano has been ten years in the making. The artist put himself forward twice for selection and was overlooked a third time when he rejected the competitive process. During this time, he discussed various installation scenarios for his carved piano including Venice, the Piazza San Marco, a live concert and the possibility of staging a performance with Dame Kiri Te Kanawa. Pianos have featured in many of Parekowhai's previous sculptures. With the exception of *The Fisherman's Shoes* (2011), a bronze pair of Crocs modelled on some belonging to the artist's brother, who died aged 12, and the Spanish bulls on the pianos, all the other sculptures in the installation have been used before in various forms.²⁰ The delicately cast bronze potted olive trees are a new version of *The Moment of Cubism* (2009). The security guard, *Kapa Haka (Officer Taumaha)*, who watches from a corner of the garden is a version of his bronze *Kapa Haka* (2008) and *Kapa Haka* (2003), figures set in white and black painted fibreglass. Pianos have featured in his practice for over ten years, and include *Horn of Africa* (2006) and *My Sister, My Self* (2007). Parekowhai has employed animal figures and performance frequently in the past, interweaving these with his ideas of showmanship and Duchampian wit. In the context of Venice, Parekowhai has all the ingredients for success. But the wit is missing. The sculptures are serious. Unlike his previous combinations of performing seals, ready-mades, animals and pianos, the bulls on the grand pianos do not make us smile at the artist's sense of humour.

Finding a suitable pavilion space was not easy. Making the installation work when the artist did not have a predetermined space in which to work was a difficult task. Five months out from the opening, a suitable palazzo was found. Parekowhai and art curator Justin Paton have both reflected on the suitability of the space, agreeing that the Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore was their second choice, a 'best fit' compromise. In the exhibition catalogue, Paton writes that the three pianos are to be placed in the Palazzo, with one of the bronze instruments in the garden at the back; the other in the portico, the entrance off the Grand Canal; and the third, the carved piano, in a room adjoining the other two. The purpose of this arrangement is that visitors will either pass through the garden on the way into the building or enter via the canal, thus achieving what Parekowhai calls a 'moment of reckoning.' In reality, few will enter by way of the portico – most will arrive via a side door and enter the room where the carved piano is positioned. As the garden is surrounded by a high wall, it is in effect not possible to experience *Chapman's Homer* without first entering the room with the carved piano. The positioning of part of the installation in a beautiful garden also questions the relevance of the sculpture itself. So, in the end, are we left sitting in a park listening to music?

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer refers to the poem by the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet, John Keats. Keats describes a Spanish adventurer climbing to the top of a hill in what is now Panama and looking out over the Pacific to survey its potential riches for the first time. Simon Rees questions this referencing of Keats and asks, why not Byron? – given the latter's closer association with Venice.²¹ Rees's comments are not persuasive on this point. Keats's poem provides a compelling reference, as it implies an epiphany – an eye-opening moment and a sense of discovery. The use of the poem for the title works well, both for the installation and *Chapman's Homer* itself. Rees also calls into question the use of an American Steinway instead of a European make, and the performance by a soprano rather than a baritone. He argues that a baritone would have been a more appropriate choice, given that Inia Te Wiata was well known in Europe both as a singer and a master carver.²² Although Rees's own references are a little flimsy here, it is relevant to ask these questions given the heavy reliance on cultural and historical narrative to support the works. The layers of postcolonial references apparent in the work – such as the connection between the craftsman who carved Parekowhai's instrument and the piano in the film *The Piano* – alongside the layers of historical connections, produce an impression of self-indulgence. Likewise, the interwoven

references to migration and re-migration, culture and art are not altogether convincing and burden the works with further layers of narrative.

The titles of the sculptures, as well as the exhibition texts and catalogue essays include references claiming to shed light on the meaning of the works – not to mention the many subsequent critical reviews. None have been less convincing than Mary Kisler's interview on National Radio where she discussed the prominent role of animals in Venice's cultural history, linking the symbolism of crocodiles from Africa with the bronze Crocs in the palazzo garden.²³ Likewise, Sue Gardiner's reference to Molly Macalister's *Little Bull* (1967) in Hamilton, and her linking of New Zealand's rural economy with bronze Spanish bulls in Venice, is a little thin.²⁴

Of necessity, the exhibition catalogue and accompanying publicity material were prepared before the works were installed. These are revealing in what they omit. Given Parekowhai's status as a "one of New Zealand's most dynamic contemporary artists," commissioner Jenny Harper expresses confidence that his exhibition will be a major event. However, commenting on the actual installation, her references are to past work emphasising the deliberate juxtaposing of his sculptures; the topical and polished quality of his work; his use of drama and surprise; his engagement with both Maori and Pakeha culture; his sense of New Zealand identity; and his use of pastiche, wit and the savvy. These comments are made both in reference to past work and in anticipation of what was to come. Paton and Harper had visited the artist in his workshop and had seen the intricately carved piano in the making. They saw the work again, including the two bronze pianos, bronze bouncer, olive trees and 'Crocs,' five months prior to their departure for Venice. Paton is intrigued by the layers of meaning that have come to be synonymous with Parekowhai's art. His bull figures, for example, weave connections between the meaning of bulls in art and myth. He refers to their space-invading 'bullness' and compares them to solid landscapes, with haunches and neck muscles reminiscent of lowlands and rolling hills. We are also reminded that heavily layered narratives are a prerequisite of Parekowhai's art practice. There are symbolic references to centuries of animal sculpture. Paton explains the significance of the two large bulls, both in terms of their physicality and their undeclared meaning – they belong less to official civic statuary, celebrating history or a military victory, and more to the realm of fables and inner-world realities such as conquering a fear or solving a mystery.²⁵

Like the Emperor in the fairy tale, did Michael Parekowhai get distracted by the hype and grandeur that is Venice, seduced by the lure of this international stage? Was he trying too hard to impress? The artist and the nation risk a great deal in pitching for Venice. It's tough when the verdict isn't all praise, but perhaps this is the price of pitching for the world's oldest and most prestigious art event. Parekowhai is aware of this more than anyone. On the occasion of his presentation in Venice in 2007, he noted: "the art world has become such a self-promotional universe."²⁶ Nonetheless, Creative New Zealand Arts Council chairman Alastair Carruthers observes that progress has been made after ten years of New Zealand entries at the Biennale. Now the focus is on the art itself, not whether or not to enter or what the artist should send.²⁷ However, this puts the weight squarely on the shoulders of the artist to come up with the goods. It also means that critics and art writers need to see and write about what they are actually looking at.

When you make a piece of art, is it really 'lucky' when it works? A happy surprise? A pleasant mistake? All artists think carefully about making it look too easy. "Tennis looks easy, so grab a racquet and knock yourself out."²⁸ In the past, Parekowhai has made it look easy. He has the ability to see what we can all see, but can't express. Unlike anyone else, he wraps it up in smart, chic, intelligent and heart-warming art. Pieces like *Cosmio* (2006) make us smile. The idea of music 'sculpting' a space and the openness of the performance to public interaction was a hallmark of his Venice entry. The downside was a certain awkwardness about the objects themselves that didn't allow them to work well as sculptures, and failed to draw a smile. If this is art as narrative for the sake of narrative, why wrap it up in sculpture? With this one, the artist wasn't so lucky. Neither are we.

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- 1 Tom Cardy, *Dominion Post*, 26 May 2011, Arts Section, 5.
- 2 Venice has hosted official representatives from New Zealand on four previous occasions. Peter Robinson and Jacqueline Fraser were the first in 2001, followed by Michael Stevenson in 2003. Following a government review sparked by a public controversy over the entry of *et al* in 2005, there was no official entry in 2007. Despite this, Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena installed *Aniwaniwa*, their installation of sculpture, music and video, in a salt warehouse in the Dorsoduro, as an unofficial entry. Judy Miller and Frances Upritchard comprised New Zealand's dual entry in 2009.
- 3 Simon Rees, "Pavilions and Palazzi," *Art New Zealand*, 139 (Spring 2011), 52.
- 4 In 2011, Creative New Zealand (funded by taxes) contributed \$700,000 as well as the additional costs for staff time and expenses to support the event; the patrons' group contributed \$315,000. Each of the three pianos is reputed to have a price tag (or have sold) for \$1.3 million or more. The private dealer gallery representing the artist usually claims a commission on art sales of 40-45%, the balance going to the artist.
- 5 This was a claim made in reference to New Zealand's 2005 entry made by the collective *et al*.
- 6 Michael Archer, "Not Seeing but Drowning: My Visit to the Venice Biennale," *Guardian*, 10 June 2009.
- 7 Jackie Wullschlager, "Arts & Books," *Financial Times*, 4 June 2011.
- 8 Bice Curiger, "Introduction: Art," 2011, www.labiennale.org.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Elaine A King, "Art as a Monster: A Conversation with Allora & Calzadilla," *Sculpture*, 30:5 (June 2011), 20.
- 11 Charlotte Higgins, "Karla Black at the Venice Biennale: 'Don't Call my Art Feminine'," *Guardian*, 1 June 2011.
- 12 Rachel Withers, "Mike Nelson at the Venice Biennale," *Guardian*, 3 June 2011.
- 13 Charles Darwent, "The Venice Biennale, Various Venues, Venice," *Independent*, 12 June 2011.
- 14 Stephance Malfettes, "Christoph Schlingensief," *Art Press*, Supplement (June 2011) (trans. L-S Torgoff).
- 15 Rees, "Pavilions and Palazzi," 54.
- 16 Michael Parekowhai, brochure in Creative NZ press pack, June 2011.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Kim Knight, "Parekowhai to show at Venice Biennale," *Sunday StarTimes*, 22 May 2011.
- 19 Jackie Wullschlager, Arts & Books Section, *Financial Times*, 4 June 2011.
- 20 'Croc's' is a trademarked name for synthetic sandals or shoes.
- 21 Rees, "Pavilions and Palazzi," 54.
- 22 Inia Te Wiata died in 1971. This weakens Rees's argument somewhat; after 40 years it is questionable how well Te Wiata is remembered in Europe.
- 23 Kim Hill, "Art with Mary Kisler: Power Animals," *Saturday Morning*, National Radio, 2 June 2011. ("Senior Curator; Mackelvie Collection, International Art, at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki discusses Michael Parekowhai, Venice, and symbols of animals.")
- 24 Sue Gardiner, "Musical Epiphany," *Art News* (Winter 2011), 87.
- 25 Justin Paton, "Weighing In, Lifting Off: Michael Parekowhai in Venice," in *Michael Parekowhai: On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer: New Zealand at the 54th Biennale di Venezia 2011*, ed. Mary Barr (Auckland: Michael Lett and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 2011), 22.
- 26 Gregory Burke, "The Virtuoso Effect," in *Michael Parekowhai: On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*, 38.
- 27 Charles Anderson, "Bullish in Venice," *NZ Herald*, 4 June 2011.
- 28 Ibid.