

THREE PUBLIC WORKS 2014

Aroha Novak

FOREWORD

These three projects undertaken over the past year represent a concentrated effort to move art into more public spaces. The differences between each project have been immense – ranging from the people involved, the audience reached, the location and demographics of the area chosen, as well as the approaches taken by the various organisations involved. The common thread that unites them all is the notion of dialectic; all three projects have created an ongoing dialogue within their particular environments, prompting engagement from a wider audience.

PROJECT #1: “THE WILKIE ROAD ART PROJECT;” A COMMUNITY YOUTH PROJECT FACILITATED BY THE MALCAM CHARITABLE TRUST

For a long time, myself and two other artists had been trying to find a shared studio space where we could house a small wood workshop – a moveable gallery space as well as a place to run art workshops. We had an inkling of an idea to create a community-based project where we would pinpoint a particular spot that needed some attention in our local area and get youth involved to create a large-scale mural. This idea had been percolating for a couple of months when, fortuitously, Michaela Carrington, a youth worker with the Malcam Charitable Trust, put a call out for a local artist to help work on a youth project in South Dunedin. I replied with energetic vigour and brought four



Figure 1. Aroha Novak, *Wilkie Road Before* (2014), digital photograph.

other local artists on board: Anna Perry, Guy Howard-Smith, James Bellaney and Anya Sinclair. This project eventually became “The Wilkie Road Art Project”; it turned into a gargantuan effort involving over 70 young people, twelve different youth organisations, a plethora of sponsors and a wall almost two hundred metres long.

The plan was to get local youth invested in their environment and stop unwanted tagging by allowing them to place their future aspirations and dreams on a stretch of wall running along Wilkie Road. We held two art workshops for each of the youth organisations involved prior to painting the wall, and helped them visualise concepts through drawing and planning their finished pieces. Once these sessions were complete, we had the task of helping these young people paint their pieces over ‘Youth Week,’ a week-long celebration of youth in New Zealand. Most participants were aged between 16 and 20 and had fallen through the cracks of the school system, instead going on to training and work courses run by a variety of youth organisations.

This project was extremely stressful, fun, rewarding, time-consuming and skill-building. It was a trial run to see if we really could pull off such an epic task, so that there could be potential for more. As individual artists, it was great to build a camaraderie with our peers and help younger people achieve their vision. There were a few challenges – on one occasion, a group of youths stole some spraypaint from the project and went on a tagging spree through South Dunedin. In addition, the transition from the relatively controlled classroom workshop setting to working outside on a public roadway marked a major shift in behaviour and attitudes – a definite learning experience. The project highlighted the importance of communication and the need to appoint a project manager to coordinate the large network of people involved, as well as the importance of creating boundaries within such a project. It was refreshing working collectively as opposed to individually; there was a real sense of achievement at the end of such a mammoth effort.



Figure 2. Aroha Novak, *Wilkie Road After* (2014), digital photograph.

PROJECT #2: "HUMAN HUBRIS," ART TARDIS, MOVEABLE GALLERY, NORTH EAST VALLEY, DUNEDIN

The Art Tardis is a project under the auspices of the North East Valley arts and performance collective, Northern ARTery. It is a moveable gallery, designed specifically to house sculptural works. A clear perspex cube measuring 60 x 60 x 60cm, with metal framing, sits on top of a heavy-duty stainless steel plinth and platform. Jasmin Lamorie, who has a BFA from the Dunedin School of Art and is the mastermind behind the gallery, asked me to make a sculptural work for the opening of the Tardis.

After much deliberation about trying to make something specific to North East Valley, I felt I was grasping at grains of sand. Being a democratic citizen, I wanted to create a work that could 'move' around the city and appeal to people living in any of Dunedin's suburbs. The notions of public land or commons, ownership and privatisation and free space or 'no-space' have been a recurring train of thought for me in recent times. Not to mention the seascape and questions of what entity controls it – is the sea public space? Can anyone claim a section of current, or do you need to have a multinational in your handbag? This led to the question of what a gas or oil rig might look like in the southern seascape. Would it be visible from shore, or out of sight, out of mind? After scavenging an unusually large feather cache at St Kilda beach, I decided to use these feathers as the material for a three-dimensional model of a gas rig. This model was based on a (two-dimensional) picture of a rig in the Gulf of Mexico, further removing the actual object from reality.



Figure 3. Aroha Novak, *Human Hubris* (2014), feathers, glue, 50 x 50 x 50cm.

Hubris is the Greek word for 'extreme arrogance,' and an object made from feathers suggests that, in this instance, this arrogance is directed towards the environment. The project questions and examines what a structure like a gas rig might look like in our southern seascape, and the benefits and repercussions it could have on our environments, both natural and manmade. The use of seabird feathers gave a voice to the wildlife, the creatures which would likely be most disrupted by such structures being placed in the South Pacific.

PROJECT #3: "SWEET CHILD O MINE," REAR WINDOW GALLERY, DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY

The 1980s power rock ballad, *Sweet Child O' Mine* by Guns N' Roses, describes the desire to protect childhood innocence. In the 1980s, the oldest department store in Dunedin was the DIC building, built in 1884, while the present Rear Window Gallery was an old advertising and display space situated at the back entrance of the shop. After a hundred years of economic growth, the DIC department store was feeling the effects of the economic bubble of the 1980s. This story of the decline of a once highly profitable business has been told many times over. Access to a cheaper labour force overseas has created major holes in Dunedin's economic pockets, Fisher & Paykel and Hillside Railway Workshops being just two examples.

Presented as a faux advertising campaign in hyperactive colours emitting a jewel-like glow, *Sweet Child O Mine* aims to entice the viewer. Upon closer inspection, the images are layered, rendered in different mediums and style of execution, mixing nature and machine, the derelict and functional, childhood and 'grown-up.'

This lightbox work conjures up conflicting images of industry, productivity and progress – through powerlines and flying machines – juxtaposed with the rubble and natural 'lakes' that have formed at the demolished site of the Carisbrook sports stadium, along with cars turned upside down and 'exotic' flowers. All these images were taken in and around Dunedin, creating a library of resources that can be selected and edited to conjure new fictions. The historic site of the DIC building has been a place of economic boom and bust, much like the site of the demolished Carisbrook stadium. Both hold many years of memories, and both have entered new phases of their lives.

The children in this image are looking at both past and present, leaving the audience with the question – where do we go now?

AFTERWORD

Having the freedom – or necessity – to move between many different roles – from facilitator to artist to negotiator to administrator to marketer to accountant to teacher – has been both challenging and rewarding. The challenge faced by any practising artist who seeks to move between fields is that you have to be multi-faceted – and hold down a day job.

This is something that should (hopefully) become easier with practice, so watch this space!



Figure 4. Aroha Novak, *Sweet Child O Mine* (2014), photographic printing, acrylic paint, spray paint, printed vinyl, fluorescent tubes, sound, 3.4 x 3m.



Figure 5. Aroha Novak on Wilkie Road. Photo: Victoria Gillies.

After growing up in Dunedin, **Aroha Novak** graduated from the Dunedin School of Art with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2007, and then completed a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction in 2013. Living and working in Dunedin, Novak uses a variety of media to interrogate issues of escapism as well as the social, political and economic inequality prevalent in contemporary society. Her work encompasses sculpture, installation art, painting, sound, drawing and video.