

DIE AUSGRABUNG

Karl Fritsch and Gavin Hipkins

Bright fine gold,
Bright fine gold.
One a pecker, Tuapeka,
Bright red gold.

Chorus from the New Zealand folk song, *Bright Fine Gold*

Excavation is a prominent association of the Otago landscape, and in particular, Central Otago. Historically, the land has been shifted, shafted and sluiced – dug out and mined in search of that elusive precious metal. Prospectors fought the brutal weather (and each other) for a few ounces of gold and claims from the 1860s on. Mining towns and communities appeared out of nowhere, and were deserted at the same extraordinary rate, leaving evidence of once-settlements, cottages, terraces, waterways, and dam remains.

The Otago landscape was the starting point for *Die Ausgrabung* – our latest collaborative exhibition of new work made while we were in residence at the Dunedin School of Art. The German term *Die Ausgrabung* translates literally as The Excavation, but this translation feels a little too awkward, and we prefer to think of the title as connoting a broader 'dig'. The plurality of this (cultural) dig is multi-layered.

To start, the photographer was out there in the field making trips to sites as far apart as Middlemarch and Cromwell, gathering material to leave in the cottage studio for the jeweller to dig into and embellish. In this sense, the photographer's role is one akin to visual archaeology, drawing the landscape, rocks, and surface details with a mechanical tool used in this capacity since the nineteenth century. Yet the photographer also ventured into other sites. Specifically, the commodity landscape that is the late-twentieth century phenomenon called the 'Two Dollar Shop'. In this site, objects were gathered not for their function, but for their aesthetic interest, their commodity form, for their contemporary status as signifiers of globalisation and late capitalism: evidence of another passing cultural moment in historic decline. Supplementing these analogue and digital images are photographs taken from the WD Trotter Anatomy Museum at the University of Otago of nineteenth-century wax and porcelain models, as well as twentieth-century plastic models: bones and skeleton parts – what you'd expect to discover from a generic, and imagined, excavation.

On arriving at the studio, the jeweller discovered piles of photographs waiting to be attacked. How to treat these new forms? How to commence this *ausgrabung*? This was the first time colour prints had entered the collaborative project — now in its fourth year. The material included the regular silver gelatin analogue prints (as with the ongoing *Der Tiefenglanz* project), but also included new surfaces: plastic billboard prints, and ultra-flimsy newsprint photos. Recognising the later fragile prints needed a more substantive structure, the jeweller started his own object collecting in junk shops, sourcing all manner of bric-à-brac, forming collections of curios including decorated wooden bowls and serving trays, to kitsch porcelain and plastic figurines. Closer to home, the site of the art school itself also became a place for collecting source material. From the sculpture and jewelry departments, argillite rocks with extracted cores, aluminum moldings, and remnants of student and staff bronze castings, were gathered. Actual rocks



Figure 1. *Die Ausgrabung*, installation.

and shells were found from local Dunedin beaches and became support for prints wrapped around, and glued to, these three dimensional surfaces – gift wrapping gone wrong. A final layer of digging unfolded when the drill, and other workshop tools, met these humble objects – the shrill piercing of glass and jagged slicing of plastic.

From these multiple digs, hybrid artefacts have been created and finally put on display in the faux neutral exhibition space of the art gallery. The gallery site is the last vestige of pretend authority for the altered readymade. The piles of prints, isolated artefacts, and clustered displays are testament to one more pseudo-scientific and idiosyncratic presentation of an imagined civilization.

German born, **Karl Fritsch**, studied at the Goldsmiths' College in Pforzheim and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He was the recipient of the Herbert Hoffman Prize from the International Craftsmen Trade Fair in Munich and the Most Promising Award for Applied Art from the City of Munich. Fritsch's work is included in several important European museums such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Museum of Art and Crafts) in Hamburg. His work is also collected by Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and MOMA New York. Karl currently lives and works in Island Bay, Wellington, New Zealand.

Gavin Hipkins is an Auckland-based artist who works with photography and film. He has exhibited widely in New Zealand and Australia and his works have been included in major curated exhibitions in the USA, UK, Germany, Brazil, and Italy. He represented New Zealand at the 1998 Sydney Biennale and the 2002 Sao Paulo Biennale. In 2010 his 80-part photography work *The Homely* featured in the exhibition *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project* at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. He lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand where he is Senior Lecturer and Associate Head of School at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland.

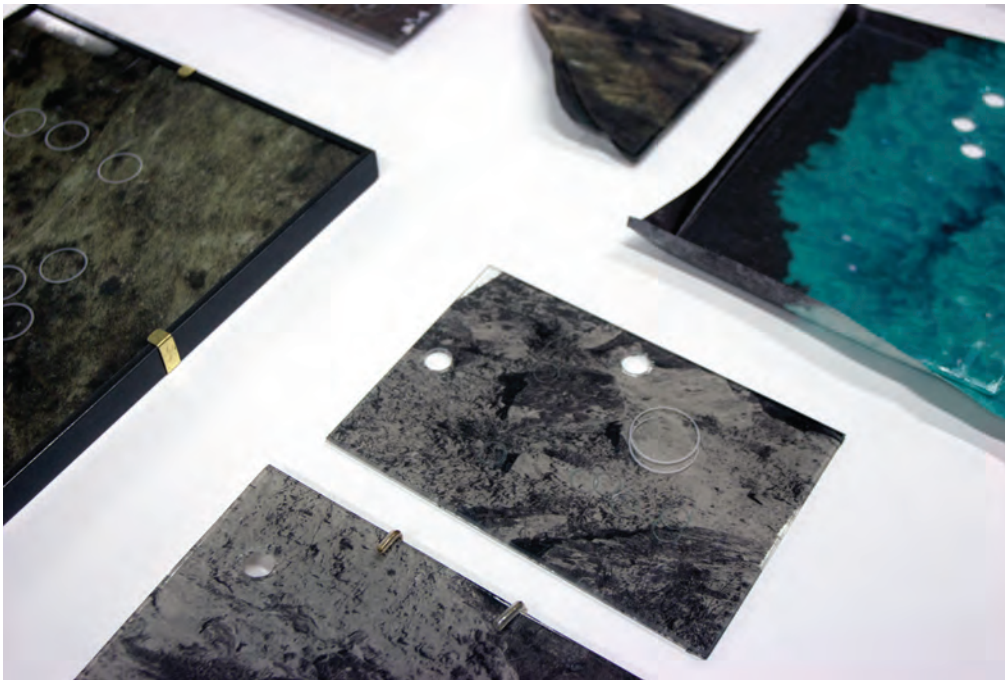


Figure 2 and 3. *Die Ausgrabung*, installation.