

T.J. McNamara: Rewarding dig into the past

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Visions of a New Land VI by Alan Gilderdale.

Weekend magazine



Alan Gilderdale, although well known as an illustrator, was a man of many talents

The spacious galleries at Northart are filled with paintings by the late Alan Gilderdale which give a telling insight into the stages of expression of his fine talents.

Paradoxically, his reputation mainly lies in his work as an illustrator, notably in the series of hugely popular children's books written by his wife, Betty Gilderdale, about a little yellow digger and the "bigger digger" that tried to get it out of a ditch. Some of the original drawings for this famous series are on display.

The paintings begin in England where he was training at the Slade until World War II intervened. His early works place him firmly in the English Neo-romantic landscape tradition with Graham Sutherland, John Piper and our own Frances Hodgkins. The show includes an impressive group of paintings of trees and a fine still-life from early in his career.

Later his style became much freer and his knowledge of myth led him into evocations of sagas such as the *Gilgamesh* epic. Embedded in his work were Promethean figures and mythical shapes of horses as symbols of power.

Gilderdale's concern with the legendary past also produced paintings of standing stones where the strong forms were supported by his special palette of evocative colour. A splendid example is *Nativity*, done in 1992

Warwick Brown, who curated the exhibition, has also written an excellent catalogue. When he surveyed the work he was so struck by a series, from 1969, of paintings titled *Vision of a New Land* that he devoted an entire room at the gallery to 20 of them. He sees them as an important expression of the impact of our land and culture on an already mature painter.

These have stylised, rolling forms evocative of our hills, allied to stony shapes. They are deftly painted, with dominating lined shapes that evoke, without copying, the idioms of Maori and Polynesian carving and craft.

The whole show embodies a lifelong voyage of intellectual and artistic discovery that is given worthy, if belated, representation in this remarkable show.

If the work of Alan Gilderdale passed under the radar in his lifetime, the lively art endeavours of the young Korean-born, New Zealand-trained *Seung Yul Oh* have been prominent and public since his student days.

Early on he made a cluster of egg shapes painted with automobile lacquer that have brightened a busy corner in Newmarket.

HaaPoom, a collection of his work, occupies four galleries and a staircase at Te Uru. The work is created in several media. Much of it is blown up, in the sense of being inflated with air. A surprise is an amusing sped-up video where people are filmed blowing up balloons until they burst in rapid fire.

One work rises three storeys in the gallery staircase.



Noonmool (Teardrop) by Seung Yul Oh.

The outstanding feature is *Noonmool* (Teardrop), a striking presence that fills the main gallery and makes perfect use of the architecture. A remarkable feature of the room is a stretched skin in a trumpet shape that funnels light from the ceiling. Seung Yul Oh has matched this with a huge inflated drop. As both a teardrop and a full moon it emerges from the horn, dominates the room, and glows with light. Under this vast and glowing yellow shape is an intricate maze of translucent curves. It is a simple but memorable piece exactly matched to the situation.

Other works include a line that leaps in intricate zigzags across the space of a room; minimalist sculptures glowing with neon; a film made to look as if you are perpetually travelling past a landscape. All excellent and intriguing in their way and evidence of a talent for big effects with a light touch.

In contrast is the fascinating exhibition *Tiny Ruins* by **Susanne Kerr** at FHE Galleries. The basis of the appeal lies in the accumulation of detail conveyed with minute precision and copious imagination.



Susanne Kerr's The Believers.



The detail is in the crowds of women in the large paintings, such as *The Believers*. They act in groups with a single purpose but each one is dressed differently. The patterns of the material of their dresses show wide variety and they are exactly drawn down to the polish on their toenails. All the groups are engaged in some sort of confrontation. Some are aggressive, using crossbows or even a rosary as a slingshot. Others are vulnerable, standing on immensely tall ladders or shoes with tall blocks for soles and heels. The background for these enigmatic confrontations often resembles willow-pattern china.

At other times it recalls Indian painting. These are done in watercolour on paper, the white of the paper often left as great streamers that energise works that are imaginative, tense, and witty.

At the galleries

What:

Alan Gilderdale Retrospective

Where and when:

Northart, Norman King Square, Northcote, to September 15

TJ says:

A splendidly copious exhibition of work by a fine talent over a long career making special use of the change of landscape.

What: HaaPoom (Yawn) by Seung Yul Oh

Where and when: Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, to November 8

TJ says: The artist matches the architecture of the new gallery in Titirangi with aplomb, installing in different forms of life, light, air and wit.

What: Tiny Ruins by Susanne Kerr

Where and when: FHE Galleries, 2 Kitchener St, to September 26

TJ says: Groups of women conflicted by life and love, all painted with minute detail in an imagined, charming china plate world full of energy and tension.

