

'the artefacts of the past are still here': Ana Iti's 'the past is a foreign country'
Jennifer Katherine Shields

Ana Iti's *'the past is a foreign country'* was, I think, only the second North Projects show I saw. But that exhibition, North's last, has stuck with me and when asked to write for it I jumped at the chance.

It was a simple install, materially - two pieces of Halswell quarry stone in the main room; a small portrait leaning against the wall at the back of the hall, in what once may have been a laundry cupboard; and two delicate pencil drawings of what looks to be detailed masonry paired with poetry printed on office paper stock, in two separate rooms.

But when it comes to finding words to explain the formal delicacy in Ana's work, I find it hard. It was an incredibly experiential exhibition, and I can't find a way to describe how the gentle, almost hard to make out pencil drawings placed opposite from that poetry stuck to a window made me feel—or even how it looked. I don't have enough words to describe how the exact placement of Halswell quarry stone in the main room of North made the viewer—or this viewer, at least—tentatively circle the stone multiple times, how you leaned in close to view the detail but then needed to see not only the whole stone but its place in the room again.

Despite having lived in Ōtautahi for most of a year, I still felt new to the scene when I saw the exhibition. I didn't quite know enough people and lived far out enough that getting to openings was hard. I went along with two friends. I was blown away. The beauty, delicacy, formalism and almost intimacy of all the work struck me—especially in relation to how it carried and conveyed its message—one of politics, society, identity. I spent a long time that night staring at each work in detail and coming back and back again through each room, re-experiencing that feeling of being blown away each time.

Every choice made in *the past is a foreign country* felt very intentional, giving the work its delicacy and intimacy in its formalism. The choice of Halswell quarry stone, which a large proportion of colonial Christchurch buildings were made from, ties the work to both the history and the land referenced in the title. The gorgeous, simple lines carved into the stone do the same.

Across town at CoCA, Ana had a piece, *Karaitiana*, in the exhibition Contemporary Christchurch¹. This work also contained Halswell stone, carved with the name *Karaitiana*, an early transliteration of 'Christchurch'. It was paired with an audio work in which Ana spoke about the "power in naming things", especially in relation to a colonial identity, city, country.

the past is a foreign country contains similar ideas, less so around names and naming but still strongly dealing with identity, history, and colonisation.

The texts included in the North exhibition become contextualising frameworks, in a way; they influence the way both the stone and the pencil drawings, both architectural and

¹ I wrote about the exhibition in a commissioned essay for CoCA, found here:
<http://blog.coca.org.nz/post/152627387190/structures-of-brick-and-quiet-undertones>

material. They provide a reference point both within the space of North Projects from which to read the exhibition but also enable the stone and drawings to point outward, to recognisable buildings within Ōtautahi (*'to look in a museum to reconstruct your language'*)² and abroad to other colonial contexts (*'Tarndanyangga was quarried and consumed, calcareous fossiliferous sandstone built into the first church, the gaol, the government house'*).³

As the texts are often the last piece of the exhibition that is viewed, *the past* shifts as the whole exhibition is experienced. Both the stone and the drawings are beautiful objects, architectural and referencing that solid, theoretically unmoving solid stone. The texts begin to shift their meaning to a more complex one, referencing an often ignored or swept aside past (*'But the artefacts of the past are still here / Getting buried under roads, washing into the harbour / We just forget the origins of things or they blend into the background'*).

The texts also make that important link to identity—this is not a matter of post-quake, predominantly Pākehā heritage issues so much as it is, as explored in other works of Ana's, one of Māori identity. In a country and society that, at almost every stage, discouraged Māori culture and identity but now demands 'authenticity', the line *'A wall must be maintained if a wall is to last centuries'* becomes particularly powerful.

I'm finding a personal connection to *the past is a foreign country*, too. Although incomparable in scale, being a queer and trans person living in 2017 there's that feeling of disconnect from the past. I feel like we're fighting battles we thought our forebears and groups like ACT UP had won; but it feels like no one is acknowledging that past.

But there's a more professional/personal connection, too. Via my limited experience of North Projects, visiting two shows and viewing the rest online—*the past* has become representational to me as to what North was and did. In post-North Ōtautahi, with a dearth of progressive, experimental artist run spaces, and as someone who is currently trying alongside others to fill that void, North and 'the past' has become aspirational, a goal.

² Ōtautahi's Canterbury Museum, constructed in 1870, is one of the many buildings in the city built from Halswell stone. Whilst it contains many Pasifika and Māori taonga, most of these are in the stored collection, the display focussing on outdated dioramas that have existed for decades.

³ Tarndanyangga, a Kaurua word, refers to a red rock outcrop in Elder Park, Adelaide, which was removed, quarried, and used in the construction of Adelaide's Parliament house.