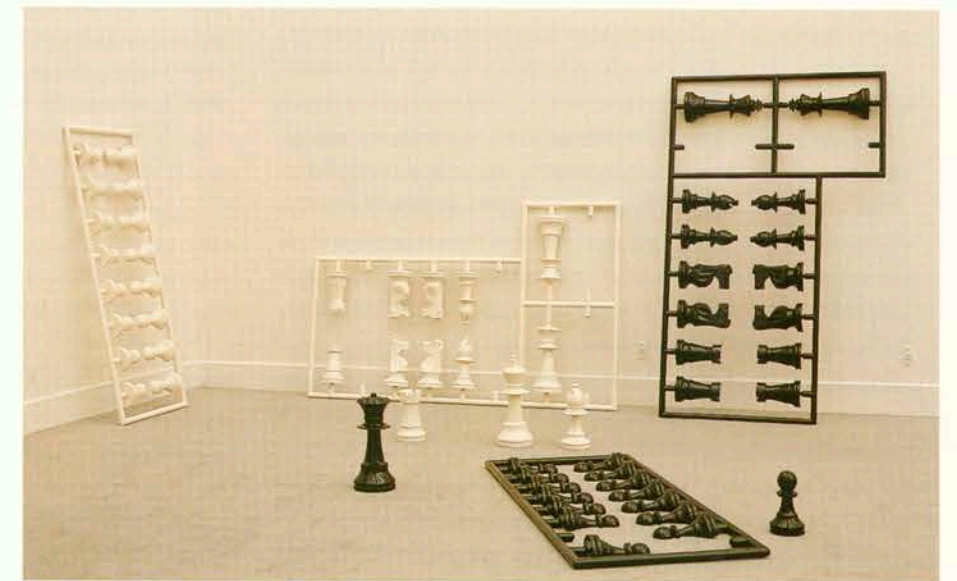
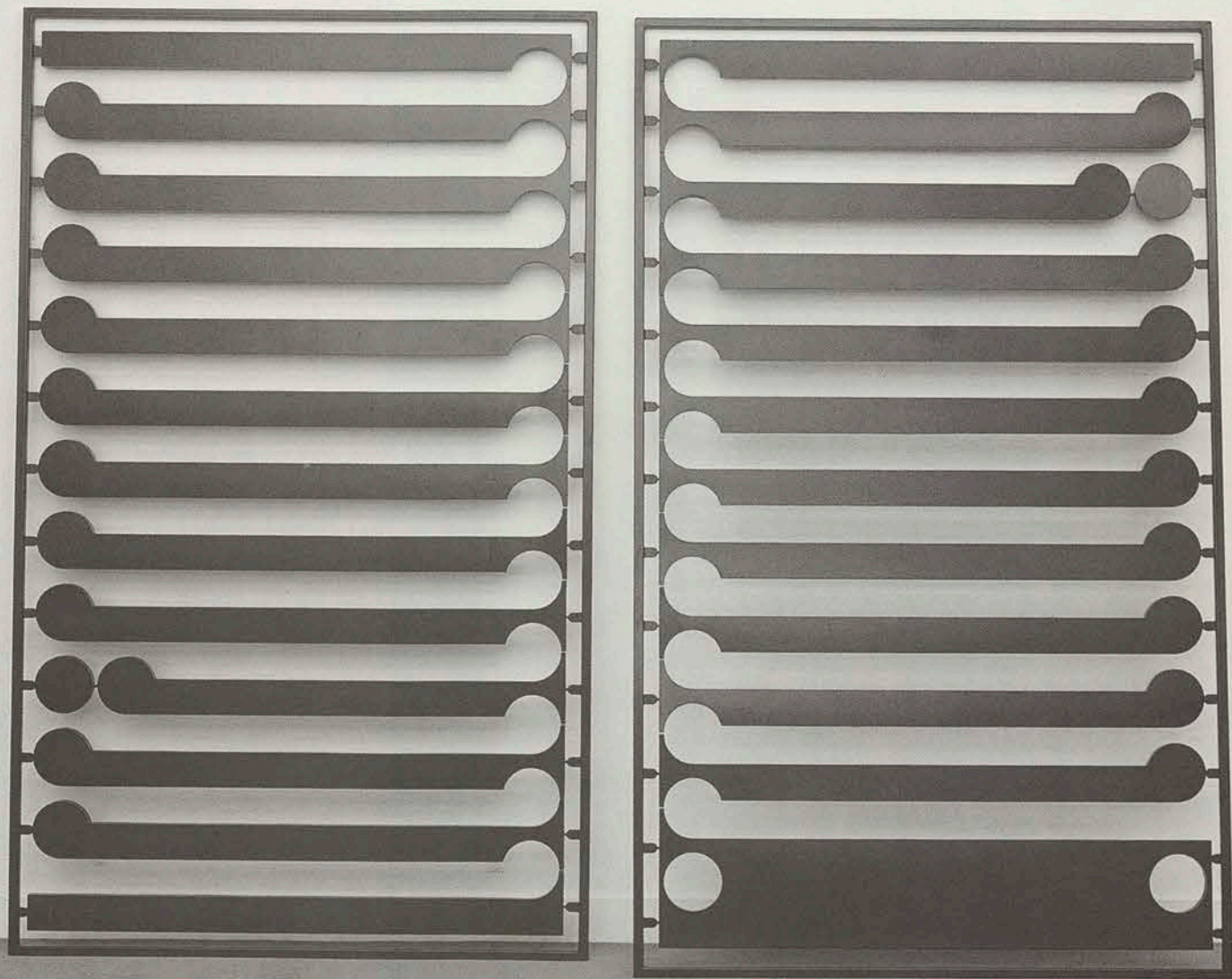


M I C H A E L P A R E K O W H A I
K I S S T H E B A B Y G O O D B Y E

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY NEW PLYMOUTH
1 APRIL - 6 JUNE 1994

WAIKATO MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY TE WHARE TAONGA O WAIKATO HAMILTON
18 JUNE - 4 SEPTEMBER 1994



top to bottom:

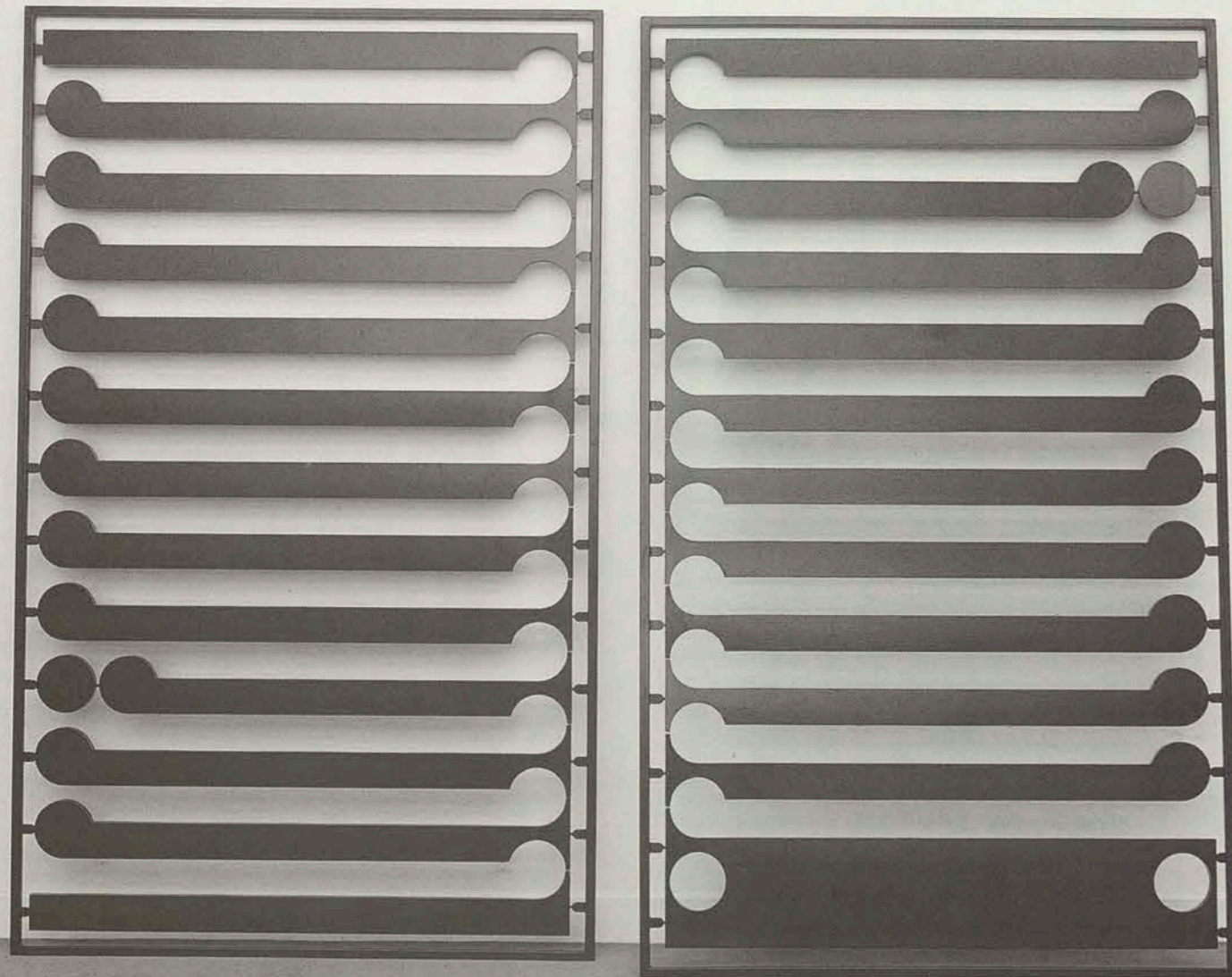
The Epiphany ii 1994
wood, customwood, enamel paint

Folie à deux 1994
wood, fibreglass, enamel paint

Acts II 1994 (detail)
wood, customwood, enamel paint

front cover:

They comfort me too 1994 (detail)
wood, enamel paint



In Michael Parekowhai's exhibition *Kiss the baby goodbye*, toys, games and models loom large as metaphors for art. The nine sculptures resemble gigantic plastic kitset models in various states of completion. Three re-present sculptures based on toys and games from Parekowhai's previous solo show.¹ Four echo classic works by canonical artists: Marcel Duchamp, Henry Moore and Gordon Walters. The remaining two are based on chess pieces and on the gas tanks and trolley from a sculptor's heavy metal welding kit.

Surrounded by these giant models, one might feel like the protagonist in the 1957 sci-fi classic *The incredible shrinking man*. Diminished to micro-size, the film's hero is forced to view himself and the world in a different light. The simplest things become problematic. Massively enlarged and cryptically titled, Parekowhai's pick-up sticks, jack straws, posting blocks and chess pieces similarly take on a new aspect. They become cumbersome, hard to handle. Instead of confirming our mastery, they make us feel physically and mentally challenged. Toys, games and models play a key role in physical, intellectual and cultural education. They develop dexterity; they teach children to recognise shapes and patterns, to follow rules and instructions, to calculate risks, to compete. These teaching aids pave the way to adulthood. Parekowhai increases the degree of difficulty, presenting them on an adult scale as adult problems.

In offering toys and games as art, Parekowhai asks us to consider art as play. The kitset idea is a clear reference to Duchamp, who is attributed with originating the notion that it is the viewer who completes the work of art. For Duchamp, viewers are not passive. By deciphering and valuing an artwork's inner qualifications we actively construct its meaning. Parekowhai draws an analogy between the way we physically assemble a kitset and the way we conceptually make something of art.

Many of the works are reminiscent of museum shop merchandise in which art-images are recycled as toys or puzzles. *Mona Lisa* jigsaws, for instance, permit everyman the opportunity to identify with a great master in his moment of creation. Parekowhai puts such secondary art experiences back into the museum as primary art experiences, as both metaphors for and instances of the art experience proper. And yet perhaps this notion is also treated ironically. Making up his do-it-yourself Henry Moore kit — *The fault dear Brutus*, — would involve no creative decisions, just following the rules. And the activity would permit no insight into Moore's process — a kitset is assembled whereas Moore carved or modelled.

While it touches on different kinds of toys and games, the show also refers to different types of art, particularly sculpture. The welding equipment in *The Sound of Music* relates to sculpture as construction. *The fault dear Brutus*, engages the formalist tradition of carving and modelling. *Mimi* and *von Trapp two Trapps three Trapps four* restage two of Duchamp's readymades.

Duchamp's readymades are often considered the first works in the Conceptual Art tradition in which Parekowhai operates. The readymades recontextualised existing objects to make them art. In 1917 Duchamp laid a urinal on its back and called it *Fountain* and screwed a coat rack to the floor to create *Trap*. Parekowhai subjects these two works to further dislocation and retitling. In *von Trapp two Trapps three Trapps four* Parekowhai frames two sets of ten replica *Trapps*. *Trap* satistically repositioned a benign object as an obstacle, something to trip the

unwary. Parekowhai recasts Duchamp's hazard as a toy, suggesting some menace lurking in the heart of childish play. *Mimi* positions one urinal as art, but empty spaces in its frame suggest that two other urinals may already have been put to more practical use. Duchamp took the piss out of a urinal to make it a *Fountain* — Parekowhai puts the piss back in ("mimi" is Maori for urine). Does this work symbolically restore Duchamp's object to its original purpose, further dislocate it into the realm of art, or both?²

Parekowhai is a Maori artist. His work first came to public attention with his inclusion in the 1990 exhibition *Choice!*³ The exhibition's curator, George Hubbard, was concerned that "contemporary Maori art" was being defined prescriptively, with only those Maori artists who clearly capitalised on tradition being promoted as authentically Maori. *Choice!* showcased a group of mostly younger Maori artists working outside the prevailing notion of "contemporary Maori art". Presenting Maori identity as necessarily problematic, multiple and dynamic, *Choice!* asked us all to approach Maori work with an open mind, to be prepared to find Maori identity in what Maori do, not to prejudge the issue by enforcing a single acid test for cultural authenticity. Hubbard's polemic remains a useful entry point into a consideration of the work of Michael Parekowhai. This artist is certainly unusual in addressing issues of Maori identity, history and culture without drawing on traditional Maori imagery, materials or techniques. While it participates in the languages, strategies and plays of international contemporary art, his work also gives voice to concerns that are pointedly local.

Parekowhai's works appropriate existing things and reinvent them as spiritual manuals and history books. In this they recall, among other things, Rua Kenana's use of playing card symbols as religious mnemonics. His works can be read allegorically. Take *Acts II* for instance. The book of *Acts* recounts how the apostles were granted the means to do good, notably to heal. The tools represented by the jack straws could be understood in this light: Parekowhai metaphorically offering the viewer tools with which to do good. On the other hand, the game of jack straws does not encourage generosity. It's a competition. You set out to beat your opponent by acquiring more tools, more resources. The intriguing arsenal afforded by the jack straw set could be seen in the light of New Zealand history. Guns, swords, cannon ramrods and firers, oars, axes and spades were all instruments of colonisation. The crutches and walking sticks, on the other hand, could be understood as shorthand for the raw end of the deal, the trials and tribulations visited upon the locals. Given this, *Acts* might make us ponder the "good" done by the apostles of a colonising Christianity.

Viewers have made other readings. For one, *Acts II* recalled the collections of crutches and walking sticks he had seen in Ratana pa, cast off during healing sessions. Someone else was reminded of the stacks of tools traded for Maori land. Allegories always remain open to further interpretation and elaboration. Often different levels of meaning coexist in tension, even outright contradiction. How we read these works, how we use them, will be conditioned by the values, interests and desires we bring to bear upon them. Whether we understand *Folie a deux*, for instance, as a comment on the colonial struggle of black versus white or as a tribute to chess as Duchamp's favourite alternative pastime will say as much about us as about the artist. Parekowhai offers his works as tools for us to think with.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is also titled *Kiss the baby goodbye*. It is based on Gordon Walters' *Kahukura*, which was painted in 1969 when Parekowhai was but a year old: a baby no less. Parekowhai offers the Walters as a mammoth kitset model.

Kiss the baby goodbye plays into the current debate over the appropriation of Maori imagery by Pakeha artists. This debate has made an example of the work of Gordon Walters. Walters has been bitterly attacked and defended for his appropriation of the koru motif in his classic abstracts of the 1960s and 1970s. Rangihiroa Panoho, for one, has expressed concern at how Walters "progressively simplified the form, divesting it of meaning and imperfection and distancing it from its cultural origins".⁴ Francis Pound has come to Walters' defense. He has argued that, as a "translation", Walters' work actually enhances the prestige of the Maori version. More than that, Walters improves on the original. In Walters the koru "swells with a new strength, it draws itself up to its full height, it takes to itself a maximum power", writes Pound.⁵ Sadly the appropriation debate has got bogged down in moralising, as if moralities were not themselves culturally relative and interminably contestable. Parekowhai's work does not buy into the prosecution-defence duality. It reads neither as a critique of Walters' work nor as a justification for it. Parekowhai prefers to generate interference patterns.

Kiss the baby goodbye could be read as a celebration of Walters. It maintains his clean lines, his modernist aesthetic. It's a breathtakingly beautiful work, lovingly crafted. Then again, it also looks like an awesome institutional barricade, a corporate castle gate. Perhaps it is belittling to represent a Walters as a kitset, as if it were childish work. Then again Walters did determine his complex koru compositions through the cunning manipulation of paper collage "kitsets". In offering a do-it-yourself Walters, Parekowhai evokes the Duchampian idea that it is the viewer's job to complete the work. But isn't this also an invitation to rip the work apart and fashion something new from it? Is Parekowhai criticising Walters' appropriation? How could he be when his work is itself an instance of appropriation?

Allegory involves the doubling of languages and logics. In this show titles — taken from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from children's games, from the film *The Sound of Music*; titles in French, Maori and English — are laid over the works. Artworks are rewritten as toys; toys, in turn, are reread as art. The works also ask to be read through their sources and through one another. Different aspects of the exhibition constantly gloss one another.

Despite this density, or perhaps because of it, the show seems incomplete, inconclusive. Not only is the artist's selection of the subjects to re-present as kitsets curious, the works themselves seem strangely partial. Where is the chess board, the posting box for the blocks, the rest of the welding kit? Walter Benjamin observed that it is the "common practice" of allegory to "pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal."⁶ Allegorical structures are explicitly open, they can not claim self-sufficiency, autonomy. Parekowhai offers these works, as individuals and as a group, as clearly incomplete. We must bring something to them to finish them off. The onus is on us to make of them what we will.

Parekowhai's works are puzzling, but there are no clear solutions to them. Instead they work as paradoxes, conundrums, machines for

thinking through, talking points, conversation pieces. They engage and embody contradictions, drawing the viewer into a conceptual space where a variety of possible and often inconsistent readings can co-exist. Parekowhai's works both exemplify the difficulty of our situation and offer themselves as tools with which we might clarify it.

Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman

1. *They comfort me too* is a kitset version of *They comfort me* (based on pick-up sticks). *Acts II* is a kitset version of *Acts — 10:34:38 "He went about doing good"* (based on jackstraws). *The Epiphany II* is a kitset version of *Epiphany — Mattu 2:9 "The star in the east went before them"* (based on posting blocks).
2. The other works in this show can also be understood as Duchampian, with Parekowhai re-presenting everyday things in a new context and freshly and obliquely titled.
3. Artspace, Auckland. The text from the accompanying broadsheet was republished in *Antic* 8 December 1990, p28.
4. "Maori: at the centre, on the margins" *Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art* Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1992, p130.
5. "Walters as translator" *Midwest* 3 1993, p35.
6. Quoted in Craig Owens "The allegorical impulse: toward a theory of postmodernism" *October* 12 Spring 1980, p72.

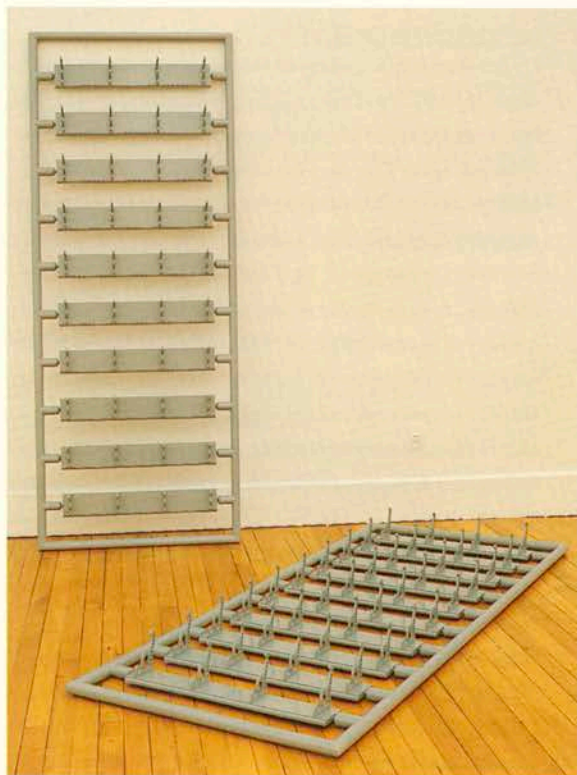
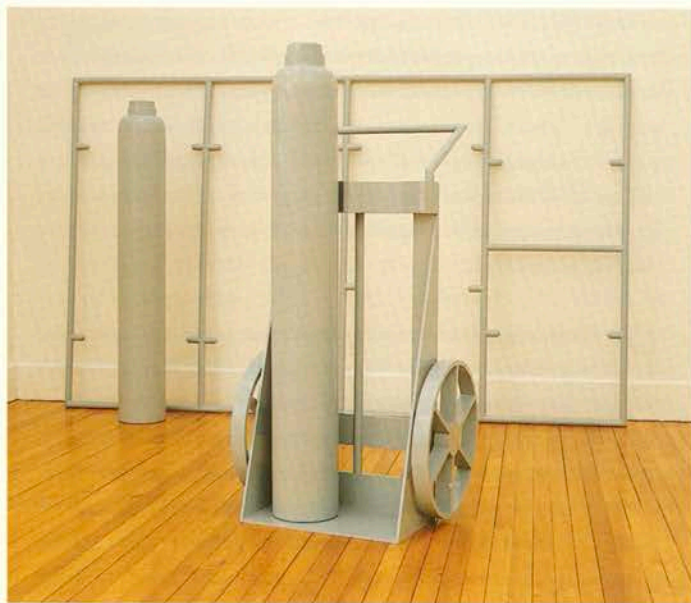
MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI born Petone, 13 May 1968
Nga-Ariki, Te Aitanga-a-Mahaki, Rongowhakaata
BFA, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, 1987-90

Exhibition history (*denotes solo exhibitions)

- 1989 *Drawing out* Artspace, Auckland
- 1990 *Small change* CSA Gallery, Christchurch
- Light'arted* Artspace, Auckland
- Choice!* Artspace, Auckland
- Young Maori artists* Te Koanga Festival, Chase Plaza, Auckland
- Kohia ko taikaka anake* National Art Gallery, Wellington
- 1991 *Six young artists* Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland
- Crunch* Lopdell House, Auckland
- Cross-pollination* Artspace, Auckland
- 1992 *Five young sculptors* Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland
- Festival show* Gow Langsford Gallery, Wellington
- Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art* Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Museum of New Zealand, Wellington
- Hit parade: contemporary art from the Paris Family collection* Wellington City Art Gallery
- Vogue/vague* CSA Gallery, Christchurch
- 1993 *a capella** Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland
- after after McCahon: refashioning the new Cubism*, Wellington
- Midwest* 3 (cover), published by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
- X7: artists' multiples* ASA Gallery, Auckland
- Shared pleasures: the Jim and Mary Barr collection* Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
- 1994 *Changing signs* (billboard project), Artspace, Auckland
- International Festival of the Arts* Wellington
- Under Capricorn* (souvenir pennant), Wellington
- Kiss the baby goodbye** Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
- Ten years on* Fisher Gallery, Auckland

Bibliography

- George Hubbard and Robin Crow "Beyond kia ora: the paraesthetics of Choice!" *Antic* 8 December 1990, p28.
- Stephen Zepke "Difference without binary oppositions: a chance for a Choice!" *Antic* 8 1990, p29.
- Robert Leonard "Against purity: three word sculptures by Michael Parekowhai" *Art New Zealand* 59 Winter 1991, pp52-54.
- Robert Leonard "Mod cons" *Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art* Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1992, pp161-172.
- John Daly Peoples "Exhibitions: Auckland" *Art New Zealand* 67 Winter 1993, p30.



top to bottom:

The Sound of Music 1994
wood, customwood, enamel paint

von Trapp two Trapps three Trapps four 1994
wood, steel, enamel paint

The fault dear Brutus, 1994
wood, fibreglass, enamel paint

Mimi 1994
wood, concrete, enamel paint

inside front cover:

Kiss the baby goodbye 1994
powder-coated steel

