

Gregory O'Brien

Ode to an abandoned whaling station

14 March - 9 April 2016

1 *Ahipara water sample and whale survey 2014*

acrylic on canvas, 910 x 710 mm

In April 2014, I embarked upon a driving tour of Northland with the Australian painter Noel McKenna. We made it as far as Ahipara, west of Kaitiaki, where we visited the Church of St Clement's, on the hillside overlooking the southern end of Ninety Mile Beach. We thought of McCahon and Ralph Hotere (who had died only a year earlier), of Moby Dick, of St Brendan (the Patron Saint of Whales) and of the bustling, brimming ocean.

2 *Lines on the fiftieth anniversary of Futuna Chapel, 19 March 2011*

23/30, etching, 910 x 710 mm

In recent years, I have been a committee member on the Futuna Trust, looking after John Scott's architectural masterpiece in Karori, Wellington. With Nick Bevin, I have co-edited a book about the chapel, *Futuna—life of a building*, which will be published by Victoria University Press in June.

All proceeds from the sale of this etching will go directly to the Trust. The lines of my poetry incorporated into the etching are from 'Ode to Futuna Chapel', which appeared in *Beauties of the Octagonal Pool* (AUP 21012).

3 *La Cathédrale Engloutie – apparition of Futuna Chapel off Raoul Island during annual whale survey 2014 - 2016*

acrylic on canvas, 1500 x 1200 mm

This painting—an extended meditation on Futuna Chapel—was begun at Waihi Beach in August 2014. In an earlier state, it was included in the 'Kermadec' exhibition at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea, between March and June 2015. It was reworked later that year.

The title is Claude Debussy's—alluding to the legend in which a submerged cathedral surfaces mid-ocean once a year—on the feast day of the Patron Saint of Music, St Cecilia—to the sound of sacred polyphony. Here I imagine John Scott's chapel surfacing in an ocean busy with whales. The stripes on the whale-forms here, and elsewhere in the exhibition, were based on the marble stripes which dominate the interior of the Siena Cathedral. Whales are the cathedrals of Oceania. The (visual) intervals, phrases, echoes and dissonances were inspired by the music of Messiaen, as were the synaesthetic colour/letter/sound arrangements elsewhere in the exhibition.

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4 *Letter from Northland, Ahipara 1 – 7*

acrylic on canvas, 595 x 420 each panel, 595 x 3200 mm overall

Looking northwards along Ninety Mile Beach, I was thinking about the letters and symbols which not only punctuate maps but also lived-in reality—the harbor and beach signage, and the words which, as a poet, I might be moved to add.

One beachfront sign at Ahipara I am still pondering: 'THE BEACH IS A ROAD'.

5 *The beauty of the sounds of their names 2014*

acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 840 mm

This suite of four paintings memorialise four of the outlying islands I have visited in recent years: Whakaari (White Island), Tuhua (Mayor Island), Rangitahua (Raoul Island) and Rekohu (Chatham Island). I was playing around, very unsystematically, with the letters of the alphabet, their attendant sounds, and their connections in musical and colour theory. The title of the suite celebrates the historically and mythologically charged Maori (and, in one case, Moriori) place names.

6 *Windows for a chapel on Raoul Island 1 – 5 2014*

acrylic on canvas, 595 x 420 each panel, 595 x 2200 mm overall

I was imagining a chapel on Raoul Island and how its windows might spell out the five letters of its name. The backward-reading 'Holy Holy Holy' is based on the view from the outside looking in to St Clements at Ahipara. In the end I reached the conclusion that the island had no need for such an addition. The island is its own chapel, its own cathedral.

7 *Ode to the Raoul Island weather balloon 2014*

acrylic on canvas, 595 x 420 mm

The weather balloon is sent skywards at 10.30am each day from the north-facing lawn in front of the meteorological station on Raoul Island.

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8 *Ode to an abandoned whaling station* 2012 – 2015

acrylic on canvas, 910 x 710 mm

With my geographer friend, Robin Kearns and my son Carlo, I visited Waikeri, on the north-eastern corner of Rekohu/Chatham Island in December 2012. We drove around various paddocks and a rocky headland trying to locate the site of what was once a whaling station. A few slabs of concrete, at most, were all that remained. And a lingering sense of a turbulent past. The painting looks towards a future of productive, imaginative co-existence between humanity and its allies.

Collaborations, Gregory O'Brien and John Pule

9 *Maea Tino* 2013

9/25, etching, 910 x 710 mm

The title of this image translates, from Rapanui, as 'Stone Body'. John Pule says it is close to the Niuean, 'Maka Tino'. The birds are based on an early photograph of Denham Bay, Raoul Island.

10 *My stone head / your earthly body / our ocean* 2015

16/20, etching, 910 x 710 mm

The inscription on this etching is a translation (by Simon Pakarati Auila) of a poem of mine from *Whale Years* (AUP 2015). The poem first surfaced—in English and Rapanui—as part of a mural painted by Robin White, Reuben Friend, John Pule and myself in the school hall at Hanga Roa, Easter Island, July 2012. The emblematic landscape represents the Pacific reimagined as a pilgrimage site. Rano Raraku, is the volcanic crater on Easter Island, on the side of which the famous moai/stone heads were carved from rock.

The beauty of the sounds of their names—an afterthought:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Scene 1

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