



chrysalis seed trust



Peter Rae Galleries, Dunedin

The waning power of galleries

Faithless, a contemporary UK DJ band sing, "God is DJ/This is my church/This is where I heal my hurt/It's in the world I become/Content in the hum/Between voice and drum/It's in change/The poetic justice of cause and effect/Respect, love and compassion/This is my church." While *Faithless* are creating a new music mix in a postmodern world, it serves to reveal that 'the more things change, the more they stay the same;' that people everywhere still express spirituality through creativity and, while all the big social picture stuff dilutes away, core human needs remain unchanged.

Our age is change. Previewing *Japonism* in December, I sat discussing with two older women the changes between the old Robert McDougall and our new cathedral of art Te Puna o Waivhetu. Their conclusion, as seasoned Christchurch connoisseurs of art, that Te Puna is an altogether different experience, more austere and removed, and perhaps not as much fun. In the same way that the traditional experience of church has morphed for many (I recently attended an informal Auckland church service in the middle of a Sunday afternoon, the notices were a well-constructed rap set) so too has the gallery experience for practising artists.

While we effused about what Te Papa was or wasn't, the nature of galleries around us was changing. Gone are the days when a gallery could make or break an art career. The kind of awesome power wielded by someone like art dealer Ambroise Vollard at the turn of the nineteenth century is long gone. Artists need to empower their own careers with a combination of exhibiting, media coverage, publicity, well-targeted promotion, prolific output, and other tricks. I know of two well-known Canterbury artists who no longer exhibit. "In many respects it can be counterproductive," one told me. "I might work a

month on several works for a gallery exhibition. If nothing sells it is a minor disaster to my year's income. Galleries simply don't do enough today to make the risk of that kind of investment in time and materials worth the possible payoff." A prominent gallery director told me, "It's simply not enough to rely on people walking in the door. We now travel the South Island attempting to make sales, building connections, following up possibilities."

Emerging artists still obviously need to exhibit, but it appears mid-career artists may be looking for other ways to be. The recent, "Sculpture in the Garden" is an example, selling a high number of works for artists and drawing a fresh audience to art. Long gone are the days when a few key galleries were the agoras of art. Now, a veritable wave of quality work is spread across a broad beach of galleries, cafés exhibiting art, and 'art shops,' diluting the power of galleries as the arbiters of the New Zealand art scene. More artists can 'be seen' but in many ways they are more anonymous, diluted amid a cacophony of presentation.

At last count there were 62 galleries or pseudo galleries operating publicly in Christchurch and near-surround. There is 'more' - but it is perhaps 'less.' The power of galleries in the 1970s has waned, and they remain, at best, merely one shaft in a quiver artists draw upon. Emergent artists and students are still motivated to exhibit, but the payoffs are less, and a number of artists I've spoken to in both Australia and New Zealand, have walked away disillusioned, with sizeable post-exhibition debts. They are 'Faithless,' "Content in the hum/Between voice and drum," but have found their 'church' "in change."

John Stringer

1. With acknowledgment to Steve Taylor, BCNZ colleague, senior minister Opawa Baptist church, and the website "emerging thinking in a postmodern future" at www.graceway.org.nz

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