94-414

Listener 30 July 1994

Exhibition

TALES UNTOLD: Unearthing Christchurch Histories, a series of temporary installations on historic Christchurch sites.

Art that strives earnestly for "relevance" usually has gallery-goers sprinting for the exit, but *Tales Untold* was an exception. Right off, it was a good idea. To coincide with Heritage Week, nine contemporary artists were commissioned by South Island Art Projects to produce an installation for an historic Christchurch site, creating an art-hike round the inner-city. The show was, in short, a valiant attempt to launch art into the wider culture.

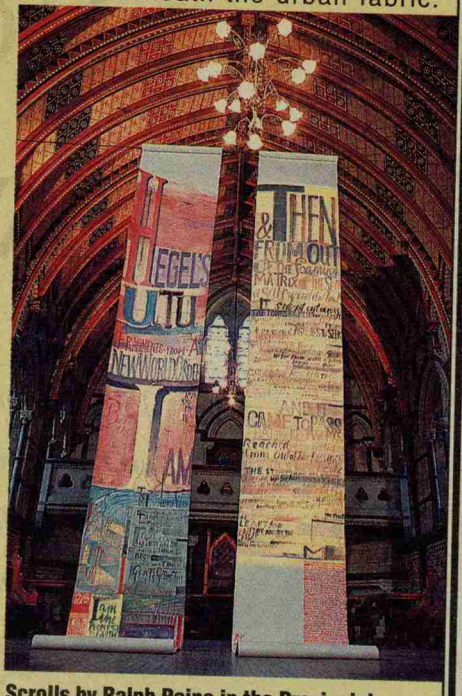
Did it? Not really, although it tried hard. The show was tirelessly promoted and professionally signposted, so you admired the honest idealism of the attempt. But *Tales Untold* was – let's not kid ourselves – an art-world event artificially transplanted to the public domain; like most projects of its kind it looked high-toned and a little condescending.

Which is not to pan the show. Far from it. There are better reasons to like art than that it edifies the masses; the best installations had a resonance that lofted them way beyond the organisers' virtuous intentions.

In a shadowy bunker below the Art Annex, Grant Lingard covered a table and bed with quilts sewn from white Jockey Y-fronts: in yer face, Calvin Klein. This tableau whispered of furtive liaisons and the loss of innocence. Predictably, Lingard was said to be "deconstructing ... male sexuality", but that spongy phrase hardly conveys the honest and bittersweet humour at the heart of his art.

Ralph Paine worked in the spectacular spaces of the Provincial Buildings, unfurling two long scrolls from the Stone Chamber's high roof. A story unfolded down these scrolls, a fugue of voices from Pacific history, German philosophy, religion, myth, and colonial records. These are history paintings for an era when no one historian can call the shots.

Cath Brown unearthed Ngai Tahu histories from beneath Christchurch's Anglophile surface by building a kind of pint-sized pa beneath a lone cabbage tree in Victoria Square. Like Margaret Dawson's riff on the same theme, Brown's gesture was too small, but it reverberated. Not that all the artists were so alert to the stories stifled beneath the urban fabric.



Scrolls by Ralph Paine in the Provincial Government Building, Christchurch.

Denise Kum, for one, placed lots of little photographs on the shelves of the Oriental Warehouse. That was all, and it wasn't enough.

But even with works this thin dragging it down, *Tales Untold* was far from a failure. It was a bit too worthy, but it worked. At its best, the show took its cues from this place and the people who have lived here, providing a human-scaled counterweight to the big bland abstractions of history. It attuned you to the pregnant silences in the urban topography, while reminding you, also, just how hard art must push if it's to break through the crust of public indifference. – *Justin Paton*

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