



## The future is a riot

In the heart of Auckland's commercial district, an exhibition at the refurbished Gus Fisher Gallery borrows a supermarket slogan from the past to look at where technology and 'surveillance capitalism' are taking us.

TEXT — ANTHONY BYRT

**Artificial-intelligence optimists have, for the past couple of years, had to skirt delicately around the giant turd the Chinese government dropped smack in the middle of their collective living room.**

China's social-credit system — a mega-mechanism for social engineering and behavioural coercion — relies on intelligent facial-recognition software to surveil its citizens; if caught doing anything vaguely untoward, they face the

prospect of capricious punishment, blacklisting and public humiliation. Machine learning, its spruikers claim, will free us from pointless labour and create a wealthy, green future. The counterview, exemplified by China's system, is that it'll deliver us up to Big Brother in a heartbeat, to hungry machines far cleverer than any of us, waiting with wet lips to devour us all.

"1984", of course, has a double resonance for New Zealanders — not just for

Orwell's futurist vision of the techno-hell we're (almost) living in, but for our neo-liberal Big Bang: the moment when Roger Douglas and a handful of free-market ideologues in the civil service grabbed New Zealand's ailing Muldoon economy by the scruff and shook it so hard its brain bled. With that economic freedom came a new fear: that of the faceless corporation, driven only by profit. Which is why the small supermarket chain Four Square, in that year, launched a new slogan, staring down the multinational barbarians at the gate with "We're Not Too Big to Care".

For her first exhibition at the helm of the University of Auckland's revamped Gus Fisher Gallery, British curator Lisa Beauchamp has taken the Four Square slogan

**ABOVE**—Cao Fei's *Asia One* was shot in a massive automated warehouse.

both as a provocation and a starting point; a way to group together several New Zealand and international artists dealing with the consequences of late-stage neo-liberalism, while also reflecting on the particularities of the Gus Fisher Gallery's location.

The gallery is in the Grade 1-listed Kenneth Myers Centre near the top of Shortland St: one of the few buildings on Auckland's oldest commercial street that survived the Rogernomics glass-tower reinvention of the CBD. Now, it's surrounded by the country's most powerful law firms, accountancy outfits and PR spinners. It was also the place from where television was first broadcast in New Zealand, its radio

tower a spiky memorial to our (albeit quite late) electronic revolution.

Our electronic future is at the exhibition's conceptual heart, exemplified by the knockout film *Asia One* (2018) by one of the world's most significant artists right now, Cao Fei. Cao's film is shot inside a massive automated logistics warehouse for internet retail giant JD.com, in which all packing, labelling and tracking for the orders is done by machines. There are only two human employees. The warehouse becomes a vast and near-religious space, a temple to the dance between two complementary algorithms: the one that lets us cast our consumer wishes into the ether, and the one that magically fulfils them.

At the other end of the technological spectrum is a classic work of British left-wing malaise: 1984's *Blue Monday*, by the Duvet Brothers. Its soundtrack,

unsurprisingly, is the New Order song of the same name, released the year before. The footage is made up of TV snippets, stitched together as pure Thatcher critique: a fat-cat lighting his cigar with money; cops roughing up strikers; shots of Tory grandees, including Maggie herself, spliced with wrecking balls smashing into buildings.

It's a pitch-perfect inclusion as we all watch the absurd horrors of the Brexit chaos — a reminder of just how much the current situation traces its roots back to Thatcher's time. Our current, collective descent into madness is also captured in Angela Tiatia's *The Fall* (2017), which takes the form of a slow-motion trashing, as young rioters find their orgiastic and carnivalesque release. The work's inspiration was in accounts of the 1942 Fall of Singapore, but here, Beauchamp's curatorial spin gives it a newer, more urgent life.

There's a strong presence of young New Zealand artists,

too; emerging local figures who scrutinise 1984 both as an idea and a date, because they're literally the children of Rogernomics and its late-neo-liberal, apocalyptic correlate — surveillance capitalism, which was born out of the unholy mash-up between Google's search breakthroughs, the response to 9/11 and the connective perversions of Facebook.

Surveillance capitalism's markers are the absolute demolition of privacy by tech giants in pursuit of our "behavioural surplus", along with a massive rise in inequality — particularly when it comes to wealth distribution. It's here that the show's Four Square-generated title gets some serious grit. Hikalu Clarke's work routinely tackles the ways in which architecture is turned into a mechanism for surveillance and data-profiteering, and here, he uses commercial printing techniques to take over the Gus Fisher's entrance, riffing on the corporate heavy-hitters

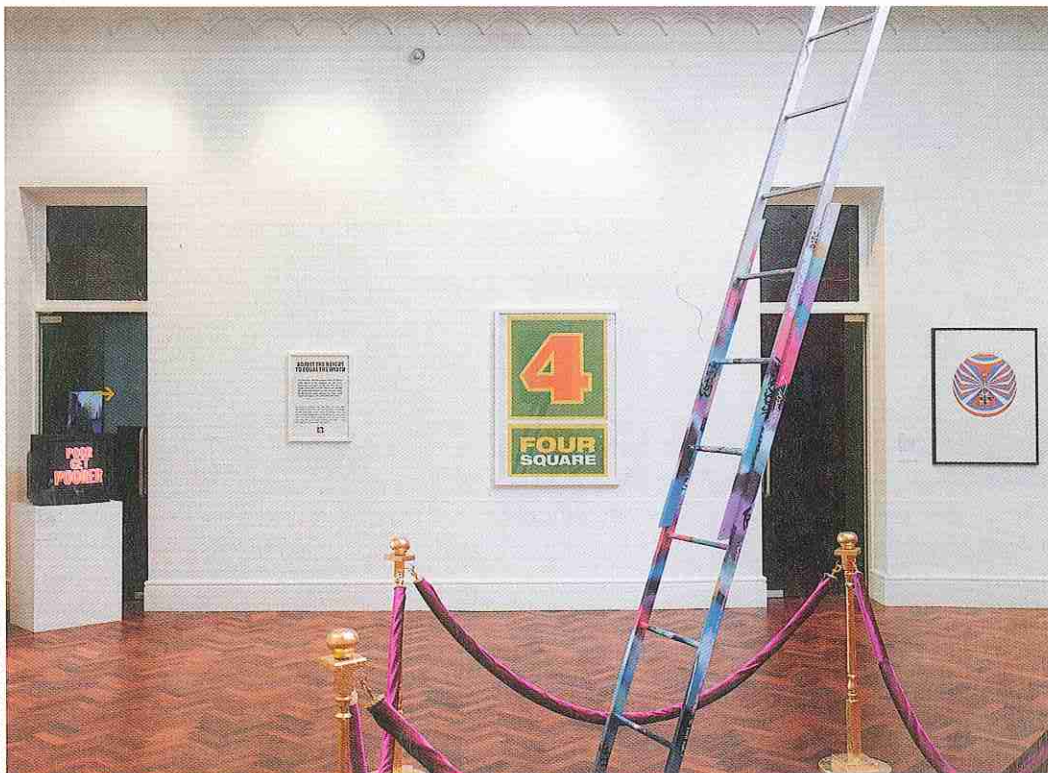
and mysterious "brass plate" companies who make up the gallery's neighbours. And Aroha Novak's work plays with the Gus Fisher's literal "glass ceiling" as a symbol of inequality, creating a ladder up to the gallery's central glass dome.

Visitors can make another climb as part of the show, up one of those nearby glass towers. In the offices of powerhouse law firm MinterEllisonRuddWatts are a series of paintings by Billy Apple: an initial wall-work, which baldly states its transactional details — Apple's \$100,000 credit for legal services — and later top-ups. *Please, Sir* (2014) by Scottish artist Rachel Maclean is also being presented offsite through May, at one of inner-city Auckland's shining examples of recent gentrification: St Kevin's Arcade. Maclean's dual-screen video is a truly nightmarish reimagining of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, drawing on some of the crassest and most exploitative class-based TV spectacles of our era, including *Britain's Got Talent* and *Jeremy Kyle*.

*We're Not Too Big to Care*, both in its ambitions and its smarts, is a welcome return for the Gus Fisher, which has been closed for several months for a much-needed refurbishment. But it's needed a facelift and, frankly, greater support from its parent institution, the University of Auckland, for longer than that. Beauchamp's programme, so far, feels true to the gallery's tertiary setting: critical, intelligent, and engaging with the big questions of our times. It may not instigate a riot, but it's a promising start. <sup>M</sup>

**WE'RE NOT TOO BIG TO CARE,  
GUS FISHER GALLERY,  
UNTIL 15 JUNE.**

**BELOW**—Aroha Novak's work (front) at Gus Fisher Gallery.



EXHIBITION IMAGE COURTESY OF GUS FISHER GALLERY, PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM HARTNETT