



Far left: Installation view of *Nine Māori Painters*, Tim Melville Gallery, 2021. Courtesy of the artists, Tim Melville Gallery and selected gallerists. Photo: Kallan MacLeod

Left: Mark Schroder, *Fortune Teller*, 2021 (installation detail), in *happiness is only real when shared*, Gus Fisher Gallery, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Gus Fisher Gallery. Photo: Sam Hartnett

AUCKLAND

It feels like a good time for the visual arts in Aotearoa. This can be seen in the number of strong and engaging exhibitions on offer, and despite the ongoing challenges presented by Covid-19. The uncertain state of affairs is perhaps most keenly felt in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, which has faced more outbreaks and subsequent lockdowns than the rest of the country. But art-world folks are a resourceful and resilient bunch – we have to be – and it appears we’re doing OK. Though it was forced to close a day early (panic stations!), the Auckland Art Fair in February felt the happiest and most positive to date. Describing an art event as ‘happy’ may seem odd, as happiness often seems like a lower priority to the art world than success – and at a time when our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing are being thoroughly tested. But as we keep hearing in the media, our wellbeing is now more important than ever.

This brings me to consider the Gus Fisher Gallery’s latest group exhibition in the context of Covid-19 and issues of wellbeing. *happiness is only real when shared* (until 29 May) combines an installation by Auckland-based artist Mark Schroder and animated video projections by Wong Ping (Hong Kong) and Pinar Yoldas (Turkey/USA). The exhibition is complemented by *Now You See Me*, a concurrent presentation by Vanessa Crofskey and Kimmi Rindel, a.k.a. Wellbeing Analysis Techniques Limited.

happiness is only real when shared was conceived as a response to the gallery’s reopening exhibition in 2019, *We’re Not Too Big to Care*, and features a more pared-back curatorial approach, placing several key works in confident counterpoint. That said, the exhibition is still packed with ‘stuff’ (Schroder’s) and generously overflowing with ideas and content. The often bizarre black comedy evident in Ping’s *Fables* and Yoldas’ *Kitty AI* will no doubt find broad appeal, but for me the highlight was Schroder’s sprawling new installation *Fortune Teller*. The work features a number of awkward bank-teller-like windows, empty meeting rooms and clunky, abandoned office spaces, as if their corporate workers had received an emergency ‘work-from-home’ memo and were yet to return – if ever. Autumn leaves blow through the offices while screens glitch, possessed perhaps by an unchecked virus running rampant across the company server.

Visitors attempt to forensically piece together the ostensible purpose of this dubious organisation through a series of material clues, both readymades and objects fabricated by the artist. Followers of Schroder’s work will find rewards in tracing

recurring themes and motifs across his earlier projects *New Gold Mountain* (2018), *GOLDKORP* (2019), *SILVERCITY* and *[Holding Co]* (both 2020). Here, Schroder’s fake corporation is the Bureau of Happiness, an imagined consultancy firm providing ‘values’ propositions and ‘universal wellbeing programmes’ like those currently proliferating across public organisations and the corporate sector. One of the mantras is “happy staff, happy customers”. In typical Schroder style, however, there is a growing realisation it’s all an absurd scam – yet one tellingly close to home. Photographic images don’t do this sophisticated installation justice – you need to experience it.

Across town, *Nine Māori Painters* at Tim Melville in February–March featured artists from Melville’s own gallery stable alongside other invited artists and those represented by other gallerists: Hiria Anderson, Nigel Borell, Heidi Brickell, Shane Cotton, Star Gossage, Charlotte Graham, Ayesha Green, Ngataiharuru Taepa and Kura Te Waru Rewiri. The exhibition capitalises on the major Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki exhibition *Toi Tū Toi Ora*, curated by Nigel Borell, and gestures to the 2014 AAG exhibition *Five Māori Painters*, curated by Ngahiraka Mason. Personal highlights of *Nine Māori Painters* include the work of Heidi Brickell, Ayesha Green, Ngataiharuru Taepa and Hiria Anderson – the latter is also showing in Mason’s *A Very Different World* at Te Tuhi (until 9 May), an exhibition which foregrounds the changes and challenges of Covid-19 through works that focus on hope and wellbeing.

In some incisive reflections on *Nine Māori Painters*, Francis McWhannell noted that the show ought to act as a challenge and spur to both individuals and organisations to further support and promote Māori art across the board in Aotearoa (and, by implication, redress the ongoing dominance of Pākehā art and the negative impacts of that dominance on the wellbeing of all). Perhaps most important in the exhibition is its currency, commercial impact (money in Māori artists’ pockets) and the number of artists participating (through the goodwill of gallerists working together). *Nine Māori Painters* is a great sign of things to come – if others are willing to follow its lead. Given the extraordinary wealth of contemporary Māori art, and an art world eager to capitalise on underexposed segments of the market, it appears to be a no-brainer. But beyond the money, the necessary reckoning in this area is about the wellbeing of our culture.

/ Emil McAvoy