

Connecting Art Exhibitions to Youth

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Increasingly, public art galleries and museums are acknowledging the importance of attracting younger audiences. One reasonable motivation here is fiscal responsibility: growing visitor numbers can safeguard or encourage the possibility of ongoing public funding support. Taking primacy over this, however, and more practically applicable, are the broader philosophical goals of this conference. Among these, the creditable aims of “articulating a hopeful vision of the future for young people in our communities” and exploring the role of museums in “assuring the survival of cultural memory” warrant our focused attention. Aligned to these is “the need to sustain a sense of community identity and reinforce fundamental values of tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural diversity”. In other words, exhibitions might help us understand who we are, have been, and might yet be, while also developing a deeper, more thoughtful appreciation of others. In this present context, such themes are placed alongside acknowledgement of “urbanization, migration, and economic disruption” as widespread aspects of contemporary living. The related call to “creatively engage youth in both global and local environmental awareness” adds another significant layer to our discussions. It soon becomes clear that through committing to this path we accept particular responsibilities and embrace a worthwhile challenge. It also offers the possibility of thinking and working in ways we may not have traditionally considered.

Because New Zealand is still a young nation,¹ the discussion for New Zealanders of diverse backgrounds about museums “assuring the survival of cultural memory” might mean something at least, although our particular ongoing quest is more likely to be aligned with the formation – rather than survival – of a unique cultural memory and identity. It seems reasonable to claim that issues connected to New Zealand cultural identity are still far from clearly defined, perhaps especially for non-Maori. At the same time, it is possible to see increasing globalisation as contributing towards a similar sense of cultural uncertainty for us all. Christchurch, seen as the most English of New Zealand’s cities, has a seven percent indigenous Maori population, and significant, increasing immigrant populations of mainly British, Asian and Pacific Island origin. Christchurch has also traditionally been a magnet to tourists.

Christchurch Art Gallery opened in 2003 (a significantly improved version of its predecessor) and over the past few years has attracted over 450,000 visitors per year, around 45% of these international visitors.² Next to tourists, families have provided the greatest proportion of our visitor numbers. Weekdays have seen school groups regularly hosted, often also utilising our gallery classroom with trained teachers and volunteers. Weekends and holidays have seen the Gallery and children’s exhibitions full of younger visitors. All of this is encouraging, given that we belong to what is seen as a practically motivated and sport-oriented society, where art is often felt to exist on the margins. Art appreciation is not generally one of the strongest noted features of New Zealand life.

One of the Gallery’s teachers relayed some interesting observations, describing a hostility she had often experienced from children (and sometimes parents) in visiting school groups. This was directed towards the whole idea of art – particularly contemporary art. A regularly observed starting point was that they felt at risk of being conned or – worse – made to feel stupid. It might be acknowledged that such a risk can exist within the shadow of the sometimes narrowly focused, academic world of art history, or that ‘Emperor’s New Clothes syndrome’ is readily felt to be lurking within the realms of contemporary art. It is helpful as a curator to recognise the perceived risk, and to allow it to become usefully challenging.

I have curated six exhibitions for younger audiences at Christchurch Art Gallery over the past six years, working as part of a professional team that has achieved strong results with increasing assurance and success. We know that these exhibitions have broken new ground within Australasia and probably beyond, with much positive feedback received from visitors, including artists, overseas museum professionals and other seasoned critics. It is also

encouraging to see that we have touched upon much of the territory covered within the aims of this conference. It is therefore a privilege to have the opportunity to summarise – I hope in a practical sense – some of our experience in bringing these exhibitions together. I also hope it might stimulate the existing energy and creativity of others working in this field.

Our children's exhibitions have been aimed at roughly between the ages of three to 15 years old. Here I must declare an advantage: being a parent with three children (now aged seven to 13) helps keep me on target and younger audiences within my framework of thinking. At planning stages my children have given honest, constructive feedback and also helped to inspire interpretive ideas. I enjoy their enthusiasm. This quality is of course one that a curator strives to maintain and foster.

More generally useful is the fact that our children's exhibitions have been determinedly grounded upon a carefully considered philosophical base, which includes:

- the intention to offer many entry points for younger visitors, as well as strong, positive first experiences with artists' work and the world of the imagination;
- ensuring that lasting entry point experiences might be built upon;
- being democratic, respectful of diversity of gallery audiences, not assuming a degree of familiarity or prior knowledge;
- being broadly educational and art educational;
- aiming to remain fun and lively, avoiding being too heavily serious with educational contents.

These accurately reflect the aims of our children's exhibitions, the first of which, *Ape to Zip*, was an upbeat, collection-based alphabet show utilising one artwork (or group of works) for each letter, A to Z. The proposal presented to management called for acknowledgment of an important, previously overlooked audience. The curatorial rationale also proposed taking a different, new approach for this exhibition through adopting a tone that was "light-hearted, lively and accessible". Intended "to delight and surprise", it would provide "a welcoming introduction for kids to the appreciation and enjoyment of art". A playful tone was to shape the selection of artworks, as well as the writing and design for the show. Short labels would open artworks to children in a tone that was friendly or even humorous, while encouraging them to look closely and inviting "dialogue with the works and between those viewing". To include "modest educational contents – guaranteed to extend literacy, vocabulary and art or general knowledge" was a further specified aim. (A basic premise here is that art is connected to the rest of life.) By accepting this approach, our younger visitors would be thereby offered "a positive early experience of visiting a gallery" as well as a "quality shared experience" with their caregivers.

Along with an eclectic selection of highly attractive artworks, *Ape to Zip* gave an immediately welcoming message through exhibition design, which included comfortable seating (brightly coloured bean bags) and large, silvery alphabet letters alongside each of the artworks. Labels were designed as speech balloons delivered by offbeat cartoonish characters, each of these relating to the individual artworks on display. Intended to run for six months, the exhibition ran successfully for eighteen months.

Our next dedicated children's exhibition was *Art Detectives*, the enticing title immediately placing visitors in an active role. The exhibition also became increasingly experimental through a call from gallery management to include hands-on, interactive elements. The show was based around the idea of groups of artworks from the collection, each of which formed distinct "active zones", these delineated by the use of bold colours and graphics. Adjoining works had visual or thematic links that visitors were invited to discover; each group incorporated at least one interactive element. These included lift-the-flap questions and answers; reasonably complex jigsaw puzzles of artworks on display; a darkened box holding plastic food to be identified through touch while seeking matching items in an energetic, large still-life drawing; a "spot the difference" activity; a raised 3-D version of a displayed historical engraving for making black crayon rubbings; and a magnetic wall with geometric shapes to be arranged and assembled. We used nearly all of our best interactive ideas! Visitors of all ages, including international visitors, spent a lot of time in the exhibition.

Most artworks in the show were by New Zealand artists; the exhibition also highlighted our bicultural history through the inclusion of historical and contemporary Maori art.³ A suite of three colour-themed exhibitions followed, the first of these being *I See Red* (recalling a well-known New Zealand pop song), which highlighted the strong meanings associated with the colour. As with the previous exhibitions, it was an excellent opportunity to bring out overlooked collection works, some of these major, and to enjoy the play of unlikely juxtapositions, placing historical works alongside contemporary. Artworks and accompanying labels also reflected the traditions of different cultures: that red was traditionally sacred for Maori, and within many Asian cultures represented luck and wealth was part of the story conveyed. Associated meanings were highlighted through the lively use of graphic text, positioned above the artworks to which these related. Artists' red pigments were also displayed in perspex boxes (including dried cochineal beetles, as raw material for paint and dye); accompanying potted histories explained their discovery, manufacture or use.

Hands-on interactive elements in the show included a tracing table; and magnetic panels upon which temporary collages were made from assorted found red objects. Free items to take home included cardboard spectacles with red cellophane lenses; and a miniature folding cardboard artwork by Maori artist James Ormsby, whose tiny portable house, *Maorigami*, related to a drawing in the show. Overlaid with traditional, intricate kowhaiwhai designs, the house was carefully made and treasured by thousands. While these items added enormous value, they also became costly through needing to be reprinted several times (a donation box raised just a percentage of the costs involved).

Our next colour-themed exhibition, *White on White*, celebrated the realm of the imagination, likening whiteness to an empty canvas or waiting page.⁴ The exhibition introduced loan works from the Chartwell Collection, a significant private New Zealand collection of contemporary art: significantly its founders, the Chartwell Trust, also began to generously sponsor our children's exhibitions. This support enhanced our ability to maintain high standards, which for this show also involved commissioning several new works from artists whose practice regularly incorporated interactive elements. Taking a different approach to interactive elements within the show was partly in the interests of sustainability, but also in the intention of maintaining for art the starring role. The invited artists presented proposals for which they were paid, with further recompense received on completion of the works, which they retained ownership of. All of the artists embraced their challenge.

Sean Kerr's sensor-activated work jiggled, blinked, or sang badly in response to viewers' movements. Simon Shepherd's minimalist work in fake fur provided a performance element as visitors created temporary artworks with a clothes brush. Rachel Brunton's digital screen work incorporated a computer mouse to be dragged or clicked to alter the course of a self-generating drawing of fading patterns and lines. With permission from Steve Carr, a digital game consul was produced that enabled visitors to imitate his photographs in the show: deceptively simple, large photographs of hand animals with googly eyes applied (visitors could email their own results home). *White on White* was visually striking, much visited, and praised by a fairly tough Wellington art critic as one of the best shows around.

The colleague who had experienced occasional hostility from younger visitors also told of something very different she had seen in *Blue Planet*, our most recent children's exhibition. Many had a physical response when entering the space; children would stop, breathe in and then slowly begin to lift their arms. The space was immediately exciting and inspiring; young visitors were also repeatedly rewarded by the art on display. Entry wall text reflected the exhibition's mood and selection of works: "Blue is a feeling, a place to dream and the colour of our amazing planet as seen from space." The art in the show connected visitors to vast themes, with interactivity belonging innately to the attractions of the artworks themselves. One of the most extraordinary was a video work by leading international contemporary artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. After persuading him to allow us to borrow and show the work, the logistics were made relatively straightforward through further valued support from his New York dealer (the DVD arrived by post). Nguyen-Hatsushiba's large, projected video of underwater rickshaw drivers moving across a coral reef created a moving,

living presence (and soundscape) that energised the whole space, and connected imaginatively also to weighty global and environmental themes.

Supplemented by other significant public and private loans, the exhibition also included two commissioned works. Peter Madden's *Small World View* was a large, sculptural collage installation in which (as the label described):

Eyeballs and globes join melting ice, painted flies, bones, umbrella mushrooms and assorted oddities to become a giant blue riddle. Peter Madden's *Small World View* is like a lesson from the future, or an alien museum display in a distant galaxy – a teaching kit to explain life on the beautiful, broken, blue planet earth to these curious, far away visitors.

I worked hard on this label and was delighted when the artist declared it perfect. I loved the generosity of Madden's response to the theme of this show and that his strange and beautiful work contained deeply felt but also intelligently coded environmental ideas and concerns. I enjoyed seeing school groups around the work discussing its contents, and also small children standing before it completely mesmerised.

Blue Planet included artworks by artists from four continents: an interactive wall included outlines of countries in which they lived; children were invited to find these on an illuminated globe. Alongside was a circle filled with words for the colour blue in many different languages; and scientific and art-historical information together with blue mineral specimens from which artists' paints were traditionally made. Beneath was a set of artist-designed "I Spy" drawers that made many references to the artworks on display. Take home items in *Blue Planet* were Peter Madden's printed, folded card snowflake globe; and a printed activity trail leading children through the exhibition and beyond into the rest of the Gallery in pursuit of blue. For this a coin donation was respectfully invited, with the explanation that proceeds would help protect the endangered takahe, one of New Zealand's rarest flightless birds. An exquisite small painting of this deep blue plumaged bird, by British-born Eileen Mayo, was one of the artworks in the show. *Blue Planet* lasted for fifteen months. I never grew tired of looking at it.

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Two days after *Blue Planet* ended, Christchurch Art Gallery itself was closed due to the devastating 22 February 2011 Christchurch earthquake. The Gallery is expected to reopen on 1 July, and to play an increasingly valued role towards rebuilding the morale and cultural life of our devastated city. An opening date for our next children's exhibition, *Bad Hair Day*, is not yet confirmed.

Notes

¹ New Zealand became a Dominion in 1907, but did not fully embrace independence from Britain until 1947. "New Zealand's Governor-General – An Historical Perspective", <http://www.gg.govt.nz/the-governor-general/historical>, accessed 4 May 2011.

² This picture will obviously change as a result of the 22 February 2011 Christchurch earthquake. The Gallery was mostly unscathed, but closed to the public to become the centre for civil defence emergency relief and temporary centre of operations for Christchurch City Council.

³ The crayon rubbing activity utilised an enlarged detail from an historical engraving that depicted an elaborate piece of Maori carving. The original object, now in the British Museum, had also inspired John Bevan Ford (1930–2005), a Maori artist whose related drawing was shown beside the engraving.

⁴ This title was also the name of a famous series of paintings by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich.