

# FROM THE COLLECTION

## ART COLLECTION



Mixed media artist Alexis Neal is consistently drawn to depicting objects of taonga as she sees them possessing a wairua or spirit beyond their physical presence. The treasures included in the semi-circular mezzotint entitled *Treasured* (1997) include ear pendants, a carved piece of bone and a shell necklace. These are not cheap, throw-away items of jewellery purchased from a ubiquitous mall jewellery store but are objects to be worn, treasured and adored.

As an artist of both Māori and Pākeha descent Alexis's work often explores the duality of artefacts in terms of personal adornment and material culture. This is well represented by the feathers which were traditionally worn as status-symbols by people of high rank. The prized white feathers of the albatross such as those depicted by Alexis were worn only on important occasions. Each treasure in the work has an embellishment function – the shell necklace, the tupa (shark

tooth earrings), the carved pendant – and they are encapsulated in the form of a breastplate or waka huia, kept close to the heart and stored away for safe-keeping in a special wooden chest. Their depiction speaks to both an ethnographic, cultural heritage with the potency of taonga breathing life into objects that have been removed from their cultural context.

Although initially trained in printmaking Alexis currently incorporates a broad range of methodologies into her art practise and the use of mezzotint here provides a dramatic aesthetic. The Italian term “mezzotint” means “half tone” or “half painted” and refers to the method of engraving working from dark to light. Originally used in the 17th century, mezzotints were popular for the reproduction of paintings, favoured for their luxurious quality of tone. Traditionally a copper surface was evenly roughened by a tool with a serrated edge. The

image is then formed by scraping away the roughened surface after which ink is applied to the plate and simultaneously wiped over with rags. The smoother parts of the plate produce solid black sections and the roughened areas produce the image. Alexis exploits this technique to its full potential creating an unbroken velvety black section to form a backdrop to the delicately drawn lines of the treasured items. Their casual clustering recalls Alexis's initial study in collage and her continued interest in layering and pattern. Originally trained at Elam School of Fine Arts, completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1997, Alexis later completed a masters degree in printmaking and mixed media at Slade School of Fine Arts in London. Since her return to New Zealand she has held tutoring positions in academic and community institutions including Paremoremo, Auckland Prison, taught children's printmaking and been the recipient of Māori Print Wānanaga/ residencies in Whanganui. Alexis is currently one of the guest exhibitors in the Central Printmaking Council's exhibition *Printmaking: Beyond the Frame* which is on show at the Gus Fisher Gallery until 30 August.

Alice Tyler, Curatorial Assistant, Gus Fisher Gallery

ARTWORK: Alexis *Neal Treasured*, 4/20, 1997  
Mezzotint, 460 x 810