

From the collection



Bill Culbert (b.1935), *Decanter, London, 1985*.
Black-and-white photograph, 190x190mm
The University of Auckland Art Collection

The unlikely pairing of wine and filament light bulbs has long been a recurring motif in the highly sociable work of Bill Culbert, as has the fluorescent tube, all of which act as metaphor and evidence of the ways we think about light, energy and materials.

Culbert is the subject of a substantial new book *Bill Culbert: Making Light Work*, written by poet, writer and curator, Ian Wedde (recipient of a Distinguished Alumni award from The University of Auckland in 2007) and published by Auckland University Press. This humble use of materials and the convivial way Culbert works is a constant theme in Wedde's book.

Culbert was born in 1935 in Port Chalmers, an environment he would return to in 1978 after a 20-year absence in England and France. This is where he established a friendship with fellow

artist Ralph Hotere with whom he had frequent collaborations, combining their complementary interests in light and dark spaces, often inspired by nearby Aramoana spit.

Culbert studied at Canterbury University School of Art, where he was one of a large group of artists sharing a flat in Armagh Street, including Gil and Pat Hanly, Ted Bullmore and school friend Quentin McFarlane, a lively scene described by Hamish Keith in his autobiography, *Native Wit*. Culbert gained a scholarship in 1957 to study at the Royal College of Art in London, where he found himself in a similarly social environment that included former Armaghians Gil and Pat.

But the most dramatic shift came when Culbert, who until now had been a painter, relocated to southern France in 1961 with his wife, Pip, and spent two years renovating a rundown farmhouse in Croagnes. Raising a family and living frugally in what was then a humble area, he established a strong interest in the materials available in a local refuse centre. By 1968 his work had escaped the limitations of the canvas, venturing into the more dynamic arena of social space with found objects and light.

Culbert employs an economy of means and wit to toy with the interplay of natural and artificial light, and the way this can be contained, conducted, reflected, spilt or captured in documentation. To illustrate these dynamics, Culbert often presents light in juxtaposition with found objects, which brings a social dimension to his work, not only from the simple elegance and humour with which he combines parts but also from the second life he gives used materials. This often includes reference to the convivial situation of drinking.

One of Culbert's best known motifs is a small wine glass filled with red table wine and casting a shadow that resembles a paradoxically dark light bulb. A subtle but sophisticated sculptural gesture, his liquid-light shadow pieces have been captured in photographs, drawings and as installations. The University of Auckland Art Collection owns a 1997 version of *Small Glass Pouring Light*, as well as five other photographic works, including *Decanter, London, 1985*, which features as a promotional image for the exhibition *AC/DC: The Art of Power* at the Gus Fisher Gallery until 3 October.

However, actually in the exhibition is *The Last Incandescent Light Bulb, 2008*, a reworking of the earlier photographic piece, re-titled as a monument to the phasing out of incandescent bulbs in favour of the allegedly more efficient "energy saver" bulbs. This governmental intervention is similar to the inbuilt obsolescence many manufacturers impose on consumer technology, requiring consumers to constantly replace appliances as they break down or become outmoded. This dovetails nicely with the exhibition's themes, which explore the social, corporate and political power structures that inform the ways we think about and use energy.

Also in *AC/DC is Light Vessels, 1996*, a pair of large rectangular chambers which slowly ebb and flow with light in a manner Culbert likens to sunrise and sunset. It employs a similarly liquid analogy to his drinking works, transferring light from one chamber to another like the pouring of liquid. It is lit with two bulbs, one emptying as the other fills, maintaining a constant 1000-watt glow.

Andrew Clifford