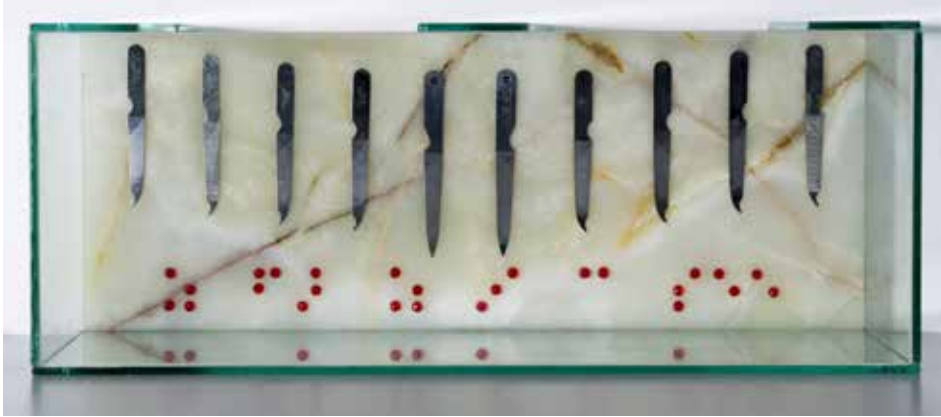


FROM THE COLLECTION

ART COLLECTION



Dealing with the knowledge that she would slowly go blind, poet Professor Michele Leggott published her lament for sight in the book *As Far As I Can See* (Auckland University Press, 1999), concluding: "But eyesight is not vision. The rest waits."

Denis O'Connor's sculpture is a tribute to the poet's courage in facing this fate. Within a glass box, he has lined up steel nail files in a regimented march across the face of a beautiful piece of onyx to refer to how Leggott's regret sharpened her poetic imagery. Inset in the onyx are red glass beads which function both as braille, spelling out the title of the work (and the book) and as re-imaginings of the pupil of the eye affected by *Retinitis pigmentosa*, the inherited degenerative eye disease which is causing the loss of Michele's sight. The redeye effect in flash photography occurs when there is a reflection off the retina, and what is seen is the red colour of blood vessels nourishing the eye appearing like the ruby beads in O'Connor's work. With the bead and files arranged in a pattern, O'Connor conjoins the idea of loss of sight with the function of objects changing just as body parts may change over a lifetime: "transformation's gift

taking place before my eyes," as Leggott puts it. The way in which the beads are disposed below the nail files also mimics the cover image of Michele's book. There the poet's name appears as a spaced text below a photograph of ornamental wrought iron work which arches up to hold an incandescent bulb in a glass lantern above. The black line with its curlicues frames a low-horizoned sunset view of golden clouds scudding across a deep blue sky while yachts in full sail set off purposefully across the Waitemata Harbour.

Related to the ironwork seen on the book's cover are the stainless steel nail files in O'Connor's sculpture which appear like the walking stick or cane referred to in Michele's poem: "she holds a snake a white/stick she gives/ into my hand and I go/ tapping into the world". Functioning like the ten digits of a human pair of hands, O'Connor's nail files allude to the means by which the poet would come to apprehend the world, reading faces and texts through her fingertips. When we view the toothed texture of the hard metal, the nail files come to convey not just their shape and basic function but come coded with associations of touch, fingers,

dexterity. Hastened by the onset of the disease that would later leave her blind, Michele sought to record the vividness of a world that would soon be lost to her. Just as her experiences had to be encapsulated in words, O'Connor's sculptural materials are here enclosed by an aquarium tank suggestive of a terrarium or glasshouse for preserving rare and fragile botanical specimens.

As always in O'Connor's work, the natural materials work with the manufactured and found objects to amplify meaning. In this case, it is the geological structure of the stone that supports the sculptor's ideas both physically and metaphorically. With light allowed to permeate translucently, the cryptocrystalline formation of onyx against which the files are arranged is like the poet's lost field of vision, where all sharp definition is lost and blurred. Inherent in the chaotic intertwinings of the two silica minerals, quartz and moganite, which comprise onyx, is the notion of occlusion, the world rendered opaque.

Appropriately, the Latin name, onyx, is derived from a Greek word meaning "claw" or "fingernail". This particular type of stone is known as Lime Onyx, a translucent Turkish marble, which is believed to have psychic properties that can enable a person to properly realise their vision.

O'Connor's *As Far As The Eye Can See* is on display at the Gus Fisher Gallery until 1 November as part of *Gifted*, an exhibition of works donated to the University of Auckland Art Collection.

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ARTWORK: Felix Kelly (1915-1994) *Three Sisters* 1943, oil on paper, 210 x 255mm