

## From the collection



Challenged by Art Collection curator Michael Dunn to make his best work for the Engineering atrium in 2002, Elam-graduate Paul Hartigan surpassed his earlier, multi-coloured forays into neon. Named the best public sculpture in Auckland in 2006, *Colony* has its origin in the artist's memory of drifting in a long boat beneath the vaulted ceiling of glowworm lights on a childhood visit to Waitomo Caves. Despite the quotidian nature of the commission, Paul's sculpture still impresses with its energy and impact, the hectic squiggles of persimmon-coloured light miraculously produced by bent glass tubes mired in cement.

Sitting well below footpath level, the bald concrete hatbox of the lecture theatre wall was an unpromising canvas. Rather than decorate it with an image, Paul thought he could sculpt with light to offset the monumentalism. Interacting with the architecture, his coloured lines suggest a symbiotic relationship with a host, and appear to be growing on the trunk of the hall like lichen on the bark of a tree.

Like any artist, Paul took into account the different heights and speeds with which the work

would be viewed. From outside the building the neon had to shout out its appeal to pedestrians, motorists and bus riders who sped by, glimpsing it through the greenish glass façade onto Symonds Street. At more intimate distances, it had to murmur quietly to those who milled around it for classes and functions, while also looking down benignly on those assembled for speeches like an altarpiece in a church.

Neon signs have been grabbing attention ever since French engineer Georges Claude lit his first lamp in Paris in 1910. Named after the Greek neos ("new gas"), the noble gas neon is naturally red, but by introducing other elements from the periodic table such as mercury (to produce blue) or helium (gold), it can be tinted to produce up to 150 colours. Shaping a neon requires bending hollow glass tubes with a blow torch and then shaping them into pieces while still hot. Once pressure-filled with neon and attached to a starter, the tubes can be made to fluoresce by an electrical discharge which ionizes the gas in the tube. Fully organic, neon is also a very social and urban material – a neon motel sign hailing motorists in the countryside is anachronistic, and often described as being lonely.

Paul uses neon here to address location. He wanted to create a fluid work befitting a place of transition – people would always be moving through, inside and out – but also use shapes that suggest transgression. Fascinated by the tussle between anonymity and fame that is incumbent in the aerosol and marker pen tags of street graffiti, Paul wanted to invoke the way tagging's abstract lines hover on the periphery of recognition, mute but still communicating.

To develop his language of light, Paul took the architect's elevation and redrew it on his computer. In desperation when he couldn't get started, he shut his eyes, and proceeded to draw blind. From the left hand side, three fifths over and three fifths down, there is an entry point to the work where there is a close cluster. This inspired the title of the work: like-minded members occupying the same territory – a colony, like New Zealand once was. From this start or punctum (it acts like an impact point, a bullet hole through glass) squiggles move out and appear to reposition themselves on the architectural form. Those involved with creative practice will tell you that drawing involves close hand to eye coordination. Shutting his eyes broke with this control, allowing the lines to float away. After coming up with his graphic design, Paul opted to reproduce it in pure neon for its stability and longevity. Glowing persimmon red, *Colony* serves to lively up the grey wall and complements the green glazing of the atrium.

Claude's first neon signs were dubbed "liquid fire" as they caused passersby to stop and stare mesmerically as if watching flames. A century later Hartigan shows how neon can still be used to set a wall alight, and create a head-turning art work.

Linda Tyler

*Paul Hartigan, Colony 2004, neon sculpture*