From the collection

Richard Orjis (b.1979), Flower Idol, 2006
C-type photograph, 1450 x 1240mm
The University of Auckland Art Collection

After two years in New York, preceded by study at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Richard Orjis returned to New Zealand in 2004 and began a Master of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts. *Flower Idol* featured in his 2006 graduate exhibition but was already familiar, having appeared on the invitation card for that year’s postgraduate information evenings. Purchased for The University of Auckland Art Collection in 2008, *Flower Idol* continues its close association with the University, hanging prominently in the NICAI Student Centre.

Orjis’ striking portraits and distinctive tableau perhaps owe much to his commercial work, photographing advertising and editorial shoots for magazines such as *Interview* or *Pavement*, and designers including Miss Crabb and Natalija Kucija. No surprise considering his teen obsession with glossies like *The Face* and *i-D*, which he acknowledges in a *New Zealand Herald* cover feature about a new generation of photographers emerging from Elam. He also acknowledges that the line between commerce and arts is not always clear with some of his fashion work later appearing in gallery shows.

Other important influences include the sweet-yet-disturbing work of American photographer Anthony Goicolea, whom he worked and lived with in the United States, and the erotically charged surreal images of celebrity photographer David LaChapelle, who took him on as an intern.

From photographing young men in American forests and agricultural environments on earthy interest arose, hinting at strange rituals and ancient rites that underpin working the soil. *Flower Idol* is from the series *My Empire of Dirt*, which also includes drawings on paper literally made from mud. Combined, they seem to capture the iconography and activities of a pagan cult. Characters are smeared in dirt and dressed with flowers, many of which suggest phallic forms. They are dark, organic and beautiful, much like the fecund ripeness of nature, invoking both fertility and decay.

In an artist’s statement, Orjis says: “Nature here is beautiful and dark, a dangerous spectacle of devours and devour; yet still the starting point for religious experience.” He describes the gothic activities of his fictive contemporary cult as trying to “make links with nature in a world that is increasingly destroying the natural [environment] it seeks to control”.

The suggestive forms of orchids continue to feature in his latest work, a solo installation exhibited in the K’ Road window spaces of Starkwhite, a dealer gallery that occupies a building once used as a brothel. Surprisingly deadpan after the lush colours of his earlier work, black-and-white photos of an indoor orchid farm demonstrate the elaborate processes of massed cultivation with flowers all trussed up and hydroponically drip-fed. These are juxtaposed with a white sculptural structure resembling both the formalist angles and shapes of De Stijl paintings and furniture, but also the narcissistic benches, bars and balls of gym equipment. The ever-present candle arrangements drip wax over the otherwise pristine surfaces. Another large circular form hanging on the wall and painted gold invokes the utopian explorations of the alchemists, an old chemistry obsessed with improvement.

Andrew Clifford

Art

Art That Moves: The Work of Len Lye by Roger Horrocks

One of New Zealand’s most original artists, Len Lye had a big idea: movement could be the basis for an entirely new kind of art. In *Art That Moves: The Work of Len Lye*, by Emeritus Professor Roger Horrocks, Lye’s art and ideas move once again, alert and alive. Roger’s superbly illustrated book comes with a DVD of four of Lye’s best films and some outstanding footage of his sculpture in action as well as a new short film about Lye’s early life, which Roger directed.

The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity, 1930-1970 by Francis Pound

From the 1930s onwards, New Zealand artists, writers and critics consciously deployed art, literature and theory in the construction of a national identity and a new New Zealand “high culture”. *The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity, 1930-1970*, by Dr Francis Pound, brings to light both the profusion and cohesion of the Nationalist movement, which lasted for 40 years until a new generation of artists and critics rejected it in the 1970s. Francis, who taught art history at the University for a number of years, has created a monumental study of 20th-century nationalism in this seminal work.

Good Business by Ian Wedde

At the heart of this superb new collection of poems by acclaimed poet and author Ian Wedde is the stunning title sequence, *Good Business*, at once an elegy for the poet’s father and an ode to walking the side streets of Wellington. From the familiar businesses and institutions of the city, Wedde ventures into the flickering screens of dreams and out to the rivers of Bangladesh and to the south of France where “light bruises / the body of the earth”. Wedde is the University’s 2009 Creative New Zealand Michael King Writer in Residence.