From the collection

Winning a national art award in 2003, the year he completed his MFA at Elam, brought Rohan Wealleans instant notoriety.

The judge described the winning work as a huge bright vagina that he wanted to crawl inside, ensuring that the sponsors, a Waikato electricity supply company, immediately turned it down for acquisition. Since then, Rohan Wealleans has carved out his own special place in the pantheon of male artists with dodgy sexual politics. The consensus, even amongst curators who like his work, is that the artist “flays his surfaces and opens them in a lobal way”. Writers shudder at his “invasive, violent even misogynistic” incisions into acrylic paint as if it was flesh. Blade Healers 2008, recently purchased for The University of Auckland Art Collection, shows Wealleans five years on, still unrepentant in his wielding of the craft knife, apparently now ready to construe the cutting itself as therapeutic.

Weighing over 20 kilos, the laboured surface of the painting reveals the strata of 80 different coats of colour built up laboriously on a commercial canvas support after each layer has dried. The accumulation of surfaces has been carved back so that each figure is covered with indentations revealing the tide-marks left by each colour like the rings of a cut tree trunk. Deploying squatting and languishing female figures as ciphers to visually link the composition to the century-old proto-Cubist work by Spanish painter Pablo Picasso entitled Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, 1907, Wealleans signals his own breakthrough. Just as studying the art of so-called primitive people from the Iberian peninsula inspired Picasso to facet and fracture the forms of the naked prostitutes in his figural grouping, so Wealleans ushers in a new era with his signature layering of acrylic paint and cutting technique in Blade Healers. The painting even bore the original working title Demoiselles before it became Blade Healers in a word association chain which began with the work’s predominant colour, and proceeded via the Australian canine breed, the blue healer, to the final amalgam of knife and balm.

To make his work, Wealleans has cut out the shapes of five female forms, mimicking the structure of Picasso’s Demoiselles, and then re-fixed the excised paint onto the figures as necklaces and other adornments for the figures. This approach to recombining cut and reconfigured paint on a two-dimensional surface is a new development for Wealleans, who has previously only applied his marbled off-cuts of layered acrylic paint to flat surfaces non-figuratively.

Made during the artist’s recent residency in the Mc Cahon house in Titirangi, Blade Healers uses the same method of rail and suspension for an unstretched canvas that the original occupant of that house used for his Northland Panels. Mc Cahon’s eight-panel masterpiece was famously painted outside on the deck at 67 Ottori Road one sunny afternoon in November 1958. Made metres away almost exactly 50 years later, Wealleans’s reprise occupied him for a full four months.

Linda Tyler


Engineering blushes pink

The Engineering building was transformed by hundred of pink balloons on 1 October for the inaugural Engineering Breast Cancer Appeal.

The event wasinitiated by Women in Engineering (WEn) students, and given extra impetus by Robyn Macleod, WEn Equity Adviser, who challenged as many staff and students as possible to be involved.

Pink wigs and bow-ties, shiny pink fairy wings and halos and pale pink t-shirts transformed the ambience of the faculty. A team of 50 students sold pink arm-bands and raspberry icecreams (generously donated by ZEST) to raise over $3,200 for the appeal.

Male students begged and borrowed their girlfriends’ pink t-shirts to show support for the cause. The success of the day has earned the event a firm place in the faculty calendar for 2009.

Forty years of high performance

A commemorative book celebrating 40 years since the first graduates of Engineering Science were capped at The University of Auckland has been released.

Entitled TAM to DES [Theoretical Applied Mathematics to Department of Engineering Science] and Beyond the book was written by Mervyn Rosser, who founded the department in the 1960s with colleague Cecil Segedin (deceased). It was launched at a celebration dinner for alumni on 30 August.

Head of Department Professor Andrew Pullan says Engineering Science, which started as a mathematics arm of engineering, has quietly grown into one of the highest performing research departments in New Zealand.

“Engineering Science is about harnessing the power of mathematics and computers and combining it with human intelligence to solve everyday problems. Our fortieth anniversary is an opportunity to recognise the contribution that Engineering Science has made to high-technology aspects of New Zealand engineering,” he says.

The department’s expertise in operations research is widely applied in industry. Its optimisation models are used for scheduling Air New Zealand crews, optimising electricity generation, and improving ambulance response times. The department’s simulation software has been used in America’s Cup yacht design.

Its graduates include Distinguished Professor Peter Hunter, who pioneered computer modelling of the human heart, and now leads the University’s Bioengineering Institute, and the founders of several important technology companies, including Orion Health and Optima Corporation. Mike Chunn, the bass player in Split Enz, is also an Engineering Science graduate.

“Although much of our growth can be attributed to improvements in computing, the world is experiencing an increasing appetite for clever mathematics applied to engineering problems, and this is driving the need for graduates who have the ability and training to contribute to this growth,” Andrew says.

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