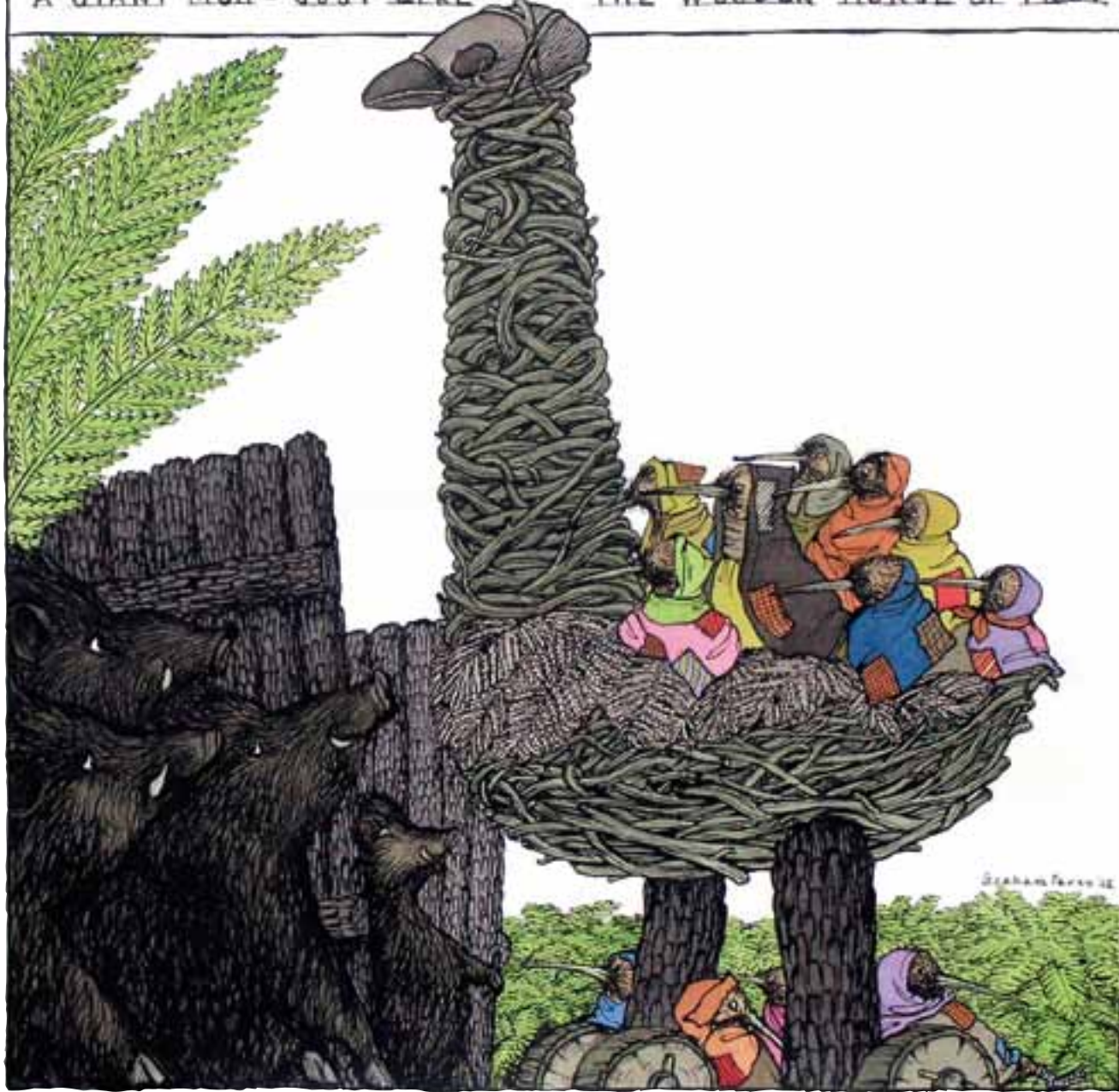


TO GET INTO WHERE THE WILD PIGS LIVE, THE KIWIS HAVE MADE
A GIANT MOA - JUST LIKE THE WOODEN HORSE OF TROY.



3. KIWI HOUSE



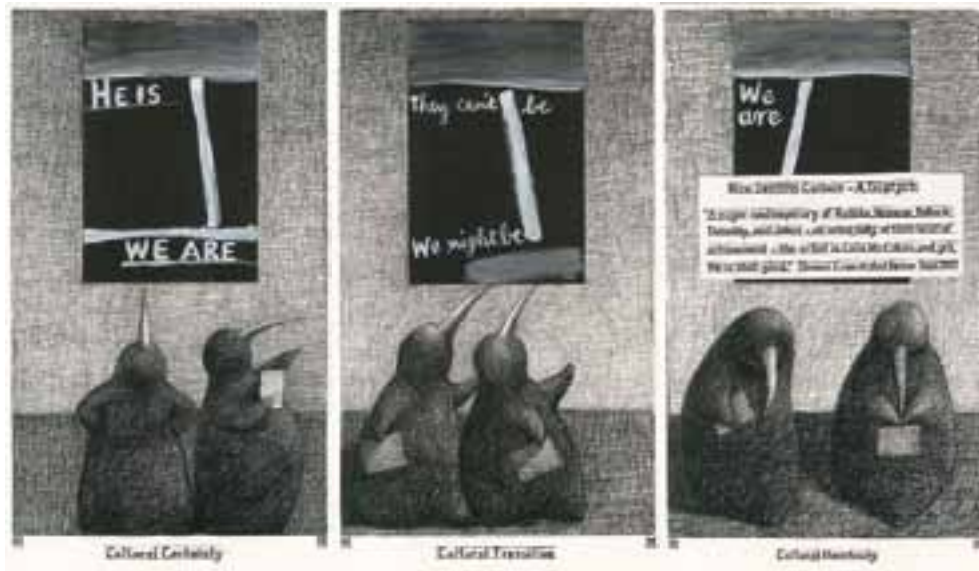
THE [INTER]NATIONAL BIRD

In Graham Percy's 2004 drawing *Kiwi Ophelia*, we find ourselves back in Taranaki. Here Graham sets the national bird adrift on a dark river — the Patea rather than Avon — trailing a garland of flowers. Twig-like, the bird's beak rises above the blackness.

The drawing is a good-natured parody of John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52), which Graham liked to visit at the Tate Gallery. Like Millais's rarefied concoction, the drawing is inspired by the scene in *Hamlet* where Queen Gertrude announces that Ophelia has drowned: 'There is a willow grows aslant the brook, / That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream. / Therewith fantastic garlands did she make / Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples . . .' Graham's version of the tragic incident is not, however, as gloomy as might first appear. This is a theatrical drowning — and the Kiwi Ophelia is play-acting rather than succumbing to the waters. Among the books on Graham's shelves was Neville Peat's *Kiwi: New Zealand's Remarkable Bird* (1999). With his appetite for delectable, offbeat wisdom, Graham was definitely aware of the little-known fact that, while kiwi famously cannot fly, they are fantastic swimmers.

Kiwi Ophelia is one of the first in the kiwi series he drew and painted during the last five years of his life. The same bird appears in *The New Zealand Artist Abroad* (page 2), strapped to the back of a hapless, encumbered pilgrim. This drawing is also a sly retort to Allen Curnow's prescription that we, being good colonial offspring, need to improve our posture. 'Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here,' Curnow wrote in his often quoted 'The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch'.

Graham's emblematic birds travel around the world and through time; they bluff their way through art and cultural history. *Two Kiwis in Paris* and *The variegated Kiwi specially bred for Royalty* (both from 2004) form part of a marvelously inventive, anarchic commentary on the national psyche. The birds infiltrate and inhabit history, as they do the ethnic costumes of Asia and South America. The drawings offer a variety of conducive environments where kiwi can feel comfortable, so long as they're happy to share space with Greek legends,



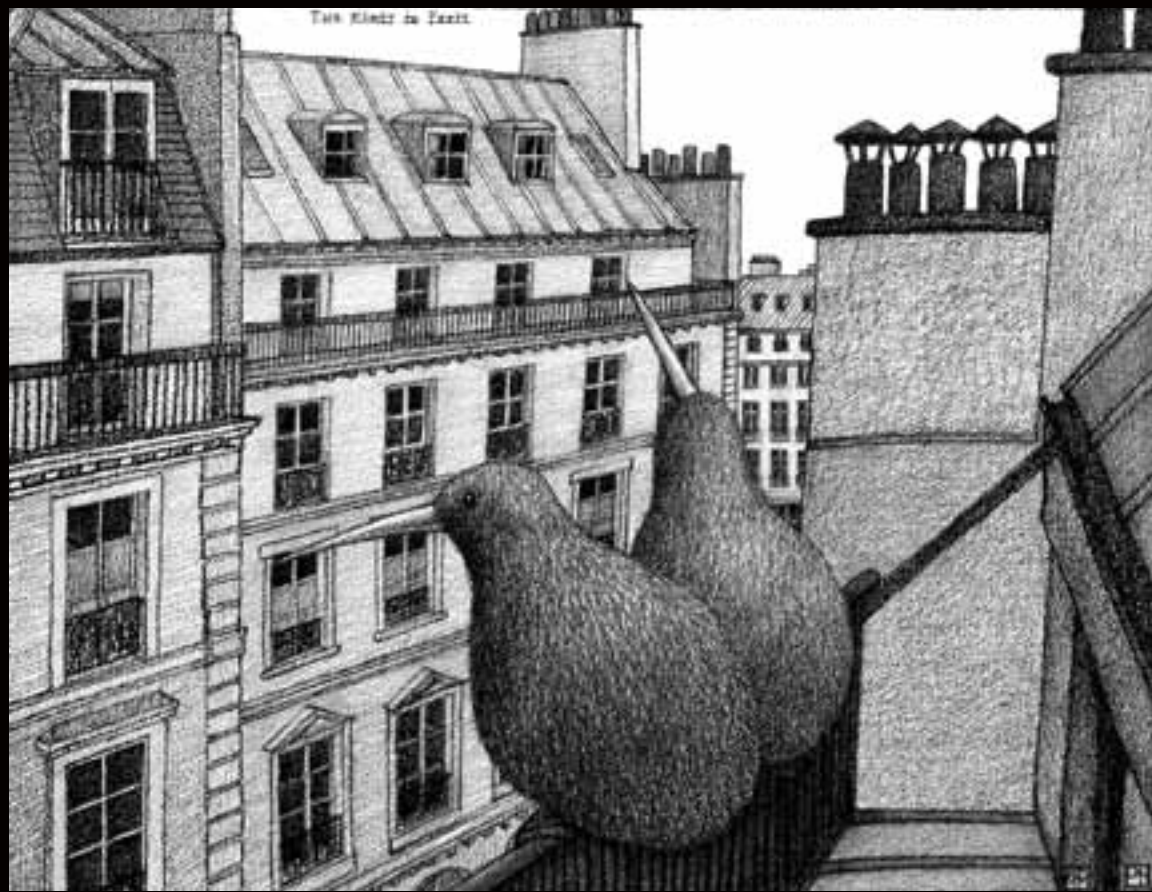
Triptych: *Cultural Certainty, Cultural Transition, Cultural Uncertainty*, 2003, charcoal, ink, collage and crayon, each sheet 392 x 224 mm

steam trains and utopian town developments. And, yet, through it all, they carry traces of their homeland.

In one kiwi work, in three parts, Graham used the birds to ponder New Zealand cultural identity, co-opting Colin McCahon into the conversation. In the 'Cultural Uncertainty' panel, the kiwi — bustling and busy in the other two panels — bow their heads prayerfully beneath a meaningful pronouncement. It appears that Graham stipulated no order in which the panels were to be arranged — hence underlining the irresolvability of matters raised. The relationship between Nationalism and Culture is always tricky. We step forward; we step back. Graham seems to be suggesting that we need intelligent indirection and scepticism — 'cultural uncertainty' — rather than cohesion and narrow purpose.

Opposite: *The variegated Kiwi . . .*, 2004, ink and pencil, 445 x 650 mm; and *Showing the giant variegated Kiwi . . .*, 2005, ink and wash, 570 x 770 mm. Following pages: *A Kiwi in Venice*, 2004, ink and pencil, 280 x 379 mm; *Two Kiwis in Paris*, 2004, ink and pencil, 370 x 470 mm; *Five Kiwis Abroad*, 2005, ink and wash, 1000 x 706 mm; and *The Kiwi — Fourteen Aspects*, 2005, mixed media, 706 x 1000 mm

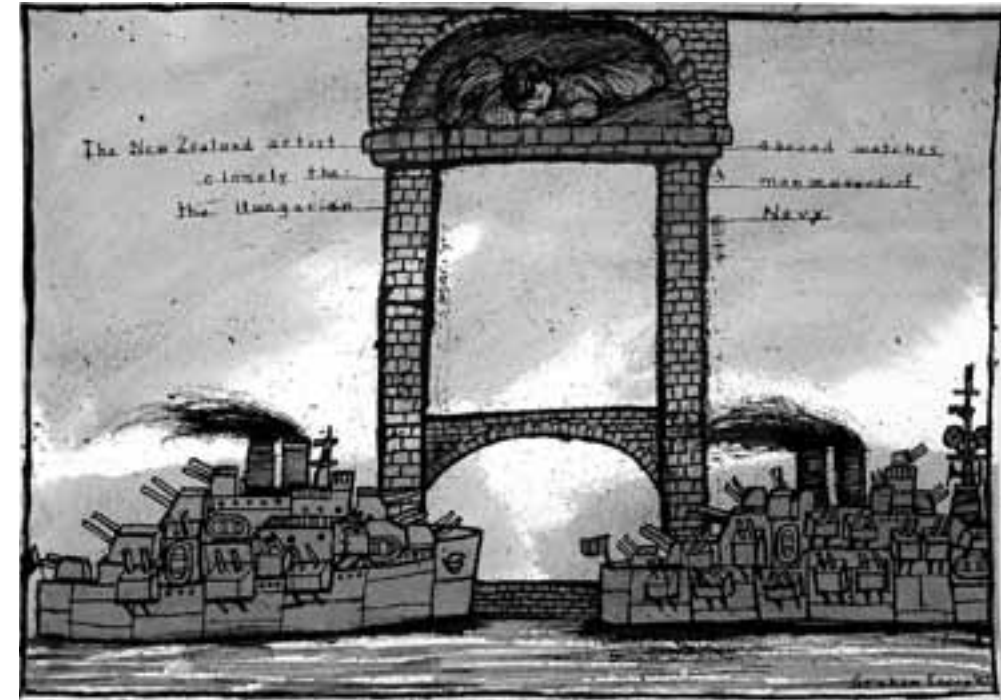
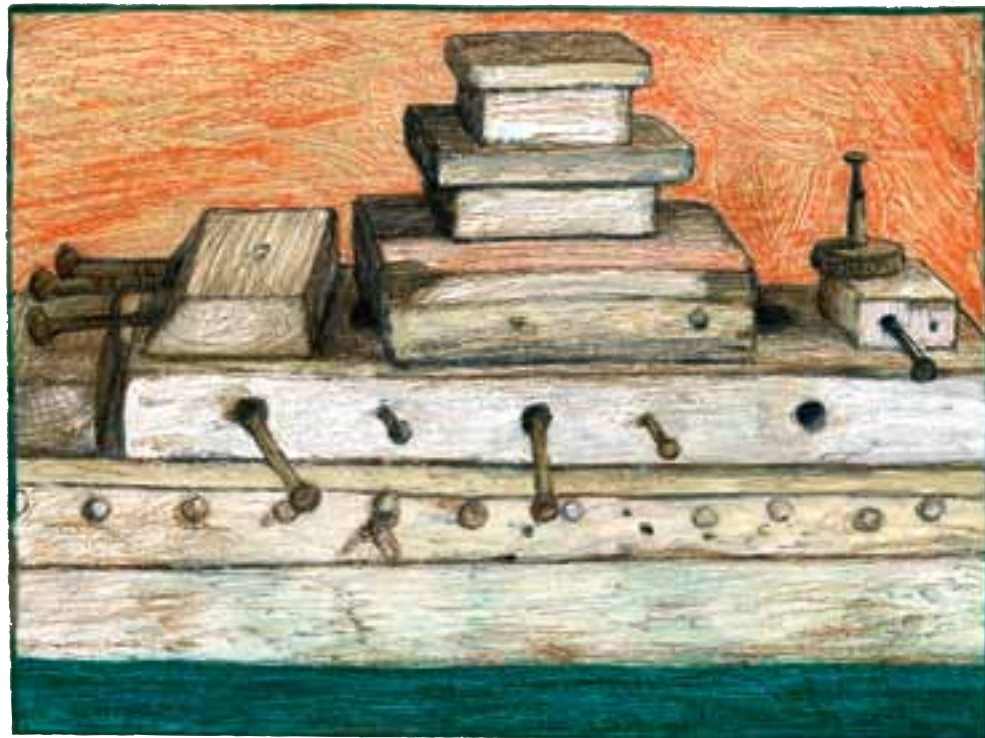




THE HUNGARIAN NAVY SAILS THROUGH THE CITIES OF EUROPE

A small flotilla of wooden ships steams along an upstairs windowsill. Recovered from a pile of roadside refuse in Budapest, the vessels were designated, by Graham, the 'Hungarian Navy' — an appropriately imaginative definition for a fleet that hails from a nation with no coastline. Mari considers Hungary a country strangely similar to Graham Percy's New Zealand. Just as New Zealand is isolated, surrounded by immense oceans, she describes Hungary as a linguistic island. It is surrounded by a world where virtually no one speaks Hungarian.

Untitled drawing, 2004, ink, wash, acrylic and pencil on cardboard, 160 x 200 mm



The New Zealand artist abroad watches closely the manoeuvres of the Hungarian Navy, 2005, ink and wash, 250 x 350 mm

In *The New Zealand artist abroad watches closely the manoeuvres of the Hungarian Navy*, Graham has installed a boy-artist high on a brick structure, looking down on the steaming vessels. Here, the child-artist is an impresario of dreams. As this drawing and others suggest, Graham loved make-believe and toys, particularly home-made ones.

According to Graham's brother Colin, their boyhood toys included a Meccano set, a Hornby train set, a wooden construction toy called a 'jiffy joiner', tin-plate cars and jigsaws of Edinburgh Castle: 'The train set held special memories. We would spend wet winter afternoons setting out rail systems and creating buildings and landscapes — all to be packed up off the floor in time for tea. Graham later regarded the train set not only as something special in his boyhood but also as an example of an era of well-made British toys.' Much later, Colin sent the Hornby train to London, where Graham, towards the end of his life, made many drawings of it.



THE BOOK OF NOSTALGIA AND NOT FORGETTING

‘Contrary to our intuition, nostalgia came from medicine, not from poetry or politics.’ So Svetlana Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia*. ‘Among the first victims of the newly diagnosed disease were various displaced people of the seventeenth century.’ She goes on to describe nostalgia as ‘a hypochondria of the heart’, the word itself being derived from *nostros* — return home — and *algia* — longing. With this definition in mind, I wonder if Graham and Mari shared a fascination with nostalgia rather than a suffering from it.

Fantasy plays a significant role in nostalgia, Boym also suggests — and certainly a fantastical element is a key ingredient in Graham’s most sustained exploration of nostalgia, his series of drawings of kiwi. These ‘drawings for grown-up children’, as he described them, are infused with a spirit of magic realism that Mari is particularly fond of — on account of her South American birthplace, she likes to say, smiling. A working relationship with the fantastic was something Graham learnt through years of illustrating children’s literature — magic realism having long been a crucial element in children’s literature, in such books as Tove Jansson’s *Moomintroll* series, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and so on.

Graham’s drawings — be they of kiwi or well-rounded persons — are full of gains and a sense of discovery. His exile was voluntary, and — on a scale of things — well adjusted. His kiwi aren’t seriously homesick, no matter how far they wander into art history or the heartlands of European culture. They embody a warm-hearted coming to terms with displacement.

Svetlana Boym also points out that, for some emigrants, inert objects may stand in for geography that has been left behind. A formative view or outlook can be replaced by ornaments, works of art or furnishings. These talismans are imbued with the power of particular landscapes; they provide a set of co-ordinates by which the exile may orient him- or herself. Such is the case in the Wimbledon town-house — although the objects there suggest a dizzying expanse of co-ordinates: a 12-centimetre Statue of Liberty, Indonesian wood carvings, Chinese dolls, tiny giraffes, toreadors, toy houses and a model aeroplane made from a single, twisted piece of wire. A micronautical version of the wide world, no less.

