

Buck Nin

1942–1996

Diploma of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

PhD Fine Arts Administration: Texas Tech University

I live in Glenfield on the North Shore in Auckland. Everybody drives here. Petrol-head heaven. Let's go for a ride and see the sights. Look around. Check out some shapes and the lie of the land, like the cone of Rangitoto, or the steel-arch of the harbour bridge, or the tensile needle of the Sky Tower. That and the snaking lanes of gridlocked traffic going absolutely nowhere every day at rush hour.

These are shapes you'll see above the ground. Not below where layers and layers of history and earth have formed great cavernous compartments like the rounded holes and craters in a block of Swiss cheese. In *Challenge Of The Land* the artist, Buck Nin, is thinking about what's going on underground. He wants us to look beyond the surface through to what he calls "the soul of the land", so that we can see what's hidden just beneath.

There's Papatūānuku – the Earth Mother lying on her back, hair drawn neatly from her forehead, eyes closed, arms at her sides, bone and ivory-coloured thighs heavy, buttocks full and fleshy like one of Titian's recumbent nudes. Papatūānuku – the Earth Mother who, when she exhales, cracks the thinning topsoil of her eroding dermis while thermal vapours rise and subterranean arteries flow, as somewhere a volcano vents and the hot springs steam.

And beneath her, there's the incursion of the city pushing up from behind. The sprawl of suburbia. The march of the motorway and the carbon monoxide pall of commuter smog. The oily fingers of the container wharves stretching into the harbour. The convergence of concrete and steel in a mirror glass canyon of downtown skyscrapers.

Nin's interest is not just in the physical surface or geography and geology of the land. He burrows below, tunnelling down to an investigation of the social and political contours of the land as well. In *Challenge Of The Land* Nin comments on the growth of corporate power in New Zealand and asks questions about the spread of globalisation, consumerism and New Right economics. He is sharply critical of the way in which Pākehā big business, without real consideration of the effects on anyone else, pursues self-serving investment interests where few see the profits from the enormous wealth generated by offshore multi-nationals.

This imposition of stylised buildings and abstracted cityscapes on the smooth organic curve of the land can also be read as Nin's representation of the tensions between rural and urban Māori, traditional and contemporary cultural values, the old ways and the new. In the black pathway to the city, a generation of young urbanised Māori have become separated from the land. Cut off from their iwi and ancestral homes by unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, whānau dysfunction, violence, illiteracy, loss of language and faith. "How", asks the artist, "can these rangatahi reconnect? Where is their future?"

The monochrome cloud forms that gather on the horizon contain more than healing drops of rain. A torrential outburst is imminent, for hidden in each curl of the koru lurks the latent power and unbridled spiritual energy of nature. Despite the intervention of human beings, it seems Earth and Sky are up to it again. Playing their own games. Here the artist encourages all of us to remain staunch. The *Challenge Of The Land* is to listen to what the environment is saying. Learn from the past. Confront the natural cycle of renewal and change with insight and intelligence. Let the blue planet endure. Find a sustainable place in the land where to go forward into the future is to always remember the value of looking back.

Cushla Parekowhai

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

