

James Ormsby and Momo Toi at The Pencil Gallery.

It is rare to encounter an artist who has both the patience and the skill to execute the kinds of varied works that are typical of James Ormsby. Finely detailed pencil drawings on a small scale such as his meticulously executed images utilizing a variety of traditional Maori motifs, are admirable for their painstaking flair. But a huge wall hanging, “Whenua” is a striking contrast with its network of delicate linear patterns.

Ormsby chooses to work on paper again with an apparently daring disregard for the time and effort that such an approach demands. The result is magical. A vast cartographic effect is strikingly achieved, mapping both his identity with a specific region – in this case, the Waikato with its river threading through his tracery of thread-like delineations – and his preoccupation with the symbolic resonance of land and sustaining bloodstream.

Manifesting out of the centre of the work is an unfurling form like a bloom opening to the sun. Line over line leads the eye on a kind of hide and seek through Ormsby’s web but the viewer is released rather than ensnared by it.

A surprising diversity is found in his thin wooden panels, beautifully etched with koru shapes that twist sinuously, reflecting the flow of the grain seen beneath them. “Heke” is particularly appealing with its smoky black patterns, swirling as they descend. A fade-out in the lowest register is then arrested by delicate applications of white paint that suggest mist curling around animated forms.

There are three paintings in which a single feather takes on the solid presence of a pounamu taonga which at the same time manage to be islands suspended in oceans of restrained colour.

Perhaps most unusual and innovative of all the works is Ormsby’s “St Lucy Altarpiece” comprising a triptych in warm wood, the curves of which suggest a tabernacle or sanctuary for the saint herself, present in a hand straight from the Italian quattrocento, that adorns the lower area of the dominant central panel. Holding a sprig in which her eyes – the iconography of her martyrdom – materialize like some species of miraculous flower, St Lucy is transported from her natural realm of European Catholicism, to take root in a southern land with Ormsby as her gardener.

The exhibition is a testimony to the artist’s far-reaching and diverse talents.

Norman MacLean

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