

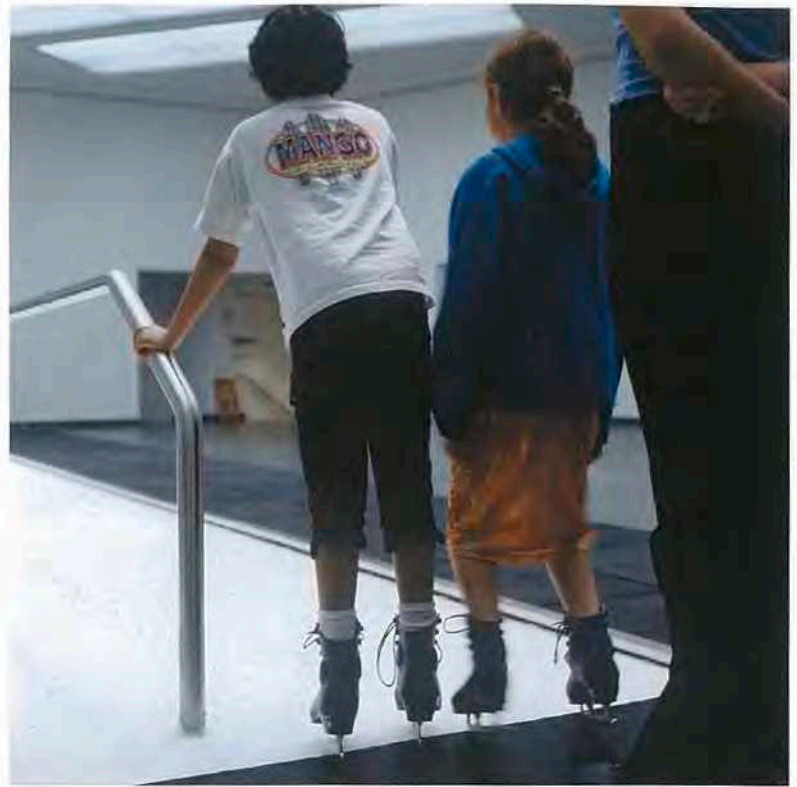
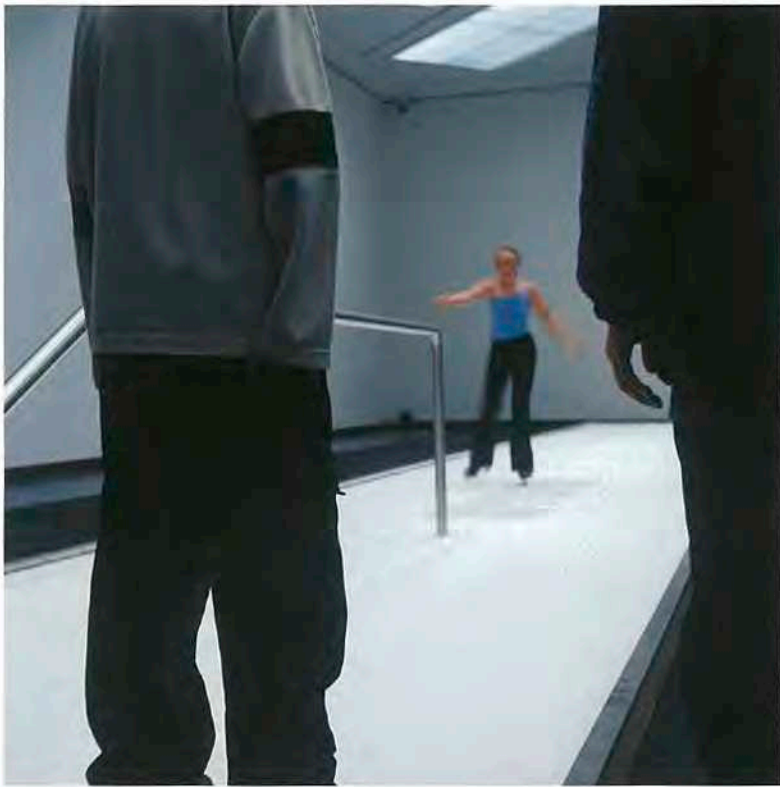
■ Maddie Leach, **THE ICE RINK AND THE LILAC SHIP**, 2002, Mixed media installation and DVD projection. Courtesy of the artist.

By John Di Stefano

## MADDIE LEACH AND VJ REX AT PROSPECT 2004: NEW ART NEW ZEALAND

# ICE AND SPACE

PROSPECT 2004: NEW ART NEW ZEALAND HAS BEEN DESCRIBED BY ITS CURATOR EMMA BUGDEN AS A SNAPSHOT OF ART IN NEW ZEALAND. OVER FORTY ESTABLISHED AND EMERGING NEW ZEALAND ARTISTS, BOTH LIVING IN NEW ZEALAND AND ABROAD, ARE REPRESENTED IN THIS TRIENNIAL EVENT. VARIED AND INFORMED BY INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ART DISCOURSES AND DEBATES, MANY ARTISTS IN PROSPECT 2004 ASTUTELY WEAVE A FINE AND COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONCERNS AND PERSPECTIVES.



Maddie Leach's *Gallery Six: The Ice Rink & The Lilac Ship*, an installation comprised of two discreet works, is one of the key works featured in Prospect 2004. Leach is among the country's most talented younger generation of artists. *The Ice Rink* is a functional ice rink, nineteen meters long and two-and-a-half meters wide, where the public is encouraged to don skates and glide, one at a time, down the strip of ice. Adjacent to the ice rink is *The Lilac Ship*, a large, two-screen video projection of a cruise ship slowly making its way across the frame as it enters Wellington's harbor. At first glance, what links these two works is the element of water—one a liquid, the other a sleek, hardened and translucent material. Both ice and water are at once contrasting and similar elements. Skaters gliding along the ice and a cruise ship gliding along the water's surface echo each other in many ways, the most obvious being the notion of movement. This evocative connection is not accidental. Leach harnesses the rich, and somewhat melancholic connotations of departure imbedded in both the figure of a lone skater gliding away in a frictionless gesture across the ice, and of a distant boat sailing away on the horizon. As

Christina Barton has commented: "Leach [draws] connections not by means of metaphor but metonymically, by virtue of the shared properties of natural materials and physical force. And by so directly harnessing matter, she compelled the viewer to respond kinesthetically, engaging all their senses to attend to qualities and contingencies of the moment."<sup>1</sup>

Aesthetically minimal, *Gallery Six: The Ice Rink & The Lilac Ship* astutely comments on the history and identity of New Zealand. Situated in the Great Hall of the original Museum of New Zealand—now part of Massey University's Wellington campus—Leach's work palimpsestically engages with the site's history and resonances of a collective national identity. Physically, the Great Hall is a cavernous three story-high space in the center of the old museum structure that once housed many of the country's heritage treasures. Leach has chilled this space to twelve degrees Celsius, creating a huge mass of cold air that is invisible yet palpable. The artist's eloquent use of material is modulated by temperature, both figuratively and experientially.

As visitors open the doors to enter the Great

Hall, they are immediately enveloped by the frigid air that amplifies the already vast space. What is also important about Leach's installation is that it is in the very place where a *Waka*—a traditional seafaring vessel used by Maori tribes arriving to New Zealand—was once exhibited. Although now in the newly opened national museum in Te Papa—more appropriately located on the city's waterfront—the *Waka*'s memory still inhabits the Great Hall with its profound symbolism, both for Maori and non-Maori New Zealanders alike. New Zealand—or *Aotearoa*, in Maori—is a country of settlers. Maori tribes first landed here, followed by European colonizers and now by waves of immigrants from all over the world. Because of this, the *Waka*, the sea and the shore have deep connotations and resonances here, and these symbols of arrival are fundamental to the nation's own understanding of its origins. Today, most of New Zealand's immigrants arrive to its shores in "wakas" from the sky, but for New Zealanders, the notion of arriving by way of the expansive sea is indeed significant. Although the *Waka* now sits in Te Papa, Leach's work, which pays homage to this great sea faring vessel, is most certainly the reason



■ VJRex (a.k.a. Eugene Hansen), **OUTER NEBULAR DRIFTER**, 2004, Mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

why many people are revisiting the Great Hall.

The historical leitmotif of New Zealand is one of departure from one's origins and arrival in this country. Leach has incorporated a hand-rail at one end of the rink that is meant to steady skaters as they prepare to launch themselves down the narrow strip of ice that runs its way along the distance of the Great Hall. In both a symbolic and actual way, the ice rink might perhaps best be thought of as a launch-pad. As the *Waka* has the rich historical and symbolic connotations of being launched into the distance, the skaters on Leach's rink mimic the *Waka*'s symbolic action. Leach's evocation of the launch is a complex commentary on an aspect of New Zealand's national identity that is deeply ingrained in the psyche of its people.

This lone trajectory that Leach has carved out for the skaters is at once a formal device and a poetic metaphor for both an individual and collective departure and arrival. Leach's ice rink is designed for only one person to skate on at a time and, perhaps ironically, the idea of congregating in a public space such as the Great Hall, pits the image of an individual trajectory against a community project. It is the juxtaposition of this melan-

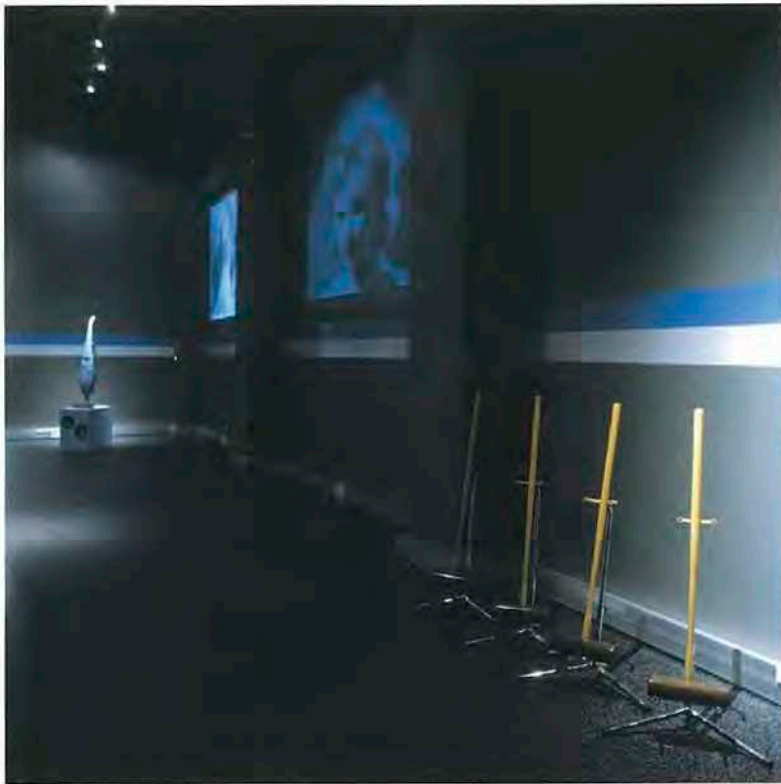
cholic image of solitude and distance that stands in stark contrast to the very public and communal nature of a leisure activity such as skating, and it is precisely the act of skating in this very site that makes Leach's work so poignant and compelling. The occupation of the Great Hall, via Leach's ice rink, modulates the social interactions that occur there. It is here that the social interactions of skating and congregating become meditative engagements which ride the delicate line between a deep-rooted sense of (national) belonging and individualized existence. Indeed, the two seem inevitably intertwined.

The contrast between the historical *Waka* that was once housed on this site and the video projection of the contemporary cruise ship that now "sails" continuously in and out of the site become equated in an odd, and even uncomfortable, relationship. Wellington, and New Zealand as a whole, is increasingly becoming a destination for international tourists. Leach's work is a powerful statement on contemporary New Zealand's uneasy, yet fluid relationship to place and identity, as borders, comings-and-goings, take on different and challenging meanings in a new era of mass tourism

encouraged, in part, by the country's landscape prominently featured in the highly successful *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In essence, Leach presents us with an updated commentary on being and belonging to a landscape, which could also be thought of as a space where global and local currents collide. The landscape and space that Leach offer us are politically jagged despite their fluid appearance—like shards of ice floating in an expanse of water.

*"What constitutes landscape? A reflection on the thinly veiled colonial practices embedded in popular culture? And why, when nothing else seems to exist as a cohesive or coherent whole, would our sense of place remain singular? As the dis-placed we attempt to colonise the coloniser, to take insidious pop and read the map of our dreamscape / we attempt to / and re-map our dreamscape / the Dis-Placed take insidious pop."<sup>2</sup>*

VJ Rex's work, *Outer Nebular Drifter*—a work also in Prospect 2004, exhibited at the New Zealand Film Archive's new Mediaplex—is an ambitious installation and live-performance event



which is an extension of a series of immersive multimedia installations that the artist has been producing over the last five years. Picking up obliquely on some of the themes of space and identity in Maddie Leach's work, *Outer Nebular Drifter* engages the embedded narratives of colonialization found in domestic objects and the pop culture, including Sci-Fi, Westerns and other contemporary tele-visual forms. VJ Rex (a.k.a. Eugene Hansen) is a young Maori artist whose own personal history is punctuated by these narratives of ownership in their myriad manifestations and concerns.

*Outer Nebular Drifter* is a painted physical environment with audio and evolving video feeds. Also in the space are selected digital prints culled from the video feeds as well as domestic-oriented objects appropriated from mass consumer culture. It is within these appropriated elements, which the artist has been using consistently in his recent projects, that fragments of a larger narrative of ownership, control and colonization permeate the everyday. A seemingly innocent leaf-blower, for instance, might be seen as a weapon in the battle to manicure, and thus command, a suburban environment. By appropri-

ating the signs and codes of these ever-surfacing colonizing narratives from popular culture, VJ Rex's work comments—on the micro-level—on New Zealand's traditional ideals of the domestic quotidian space punctuated, as it is, with technology, and—on the macro-level—on the shifting space of the country's landscape and identity.

Many Maori artists of Hansen's generation view technology as a tool and have appropriated it into a Maori conceptual framework. This process of turning new tools to perform customary roles is also evident in VJ Rex's live video and sound performance that parallel his multimedia installation where he "plays" with images, sound and their origins for critical commentary. In addition to appropriating objects of domesticity, VJ Rex also appropriates images from old Westerns and Sci-Fi films which were broadcast on television. The artist is at once fascinated with these images and also compelled to re-order them as a means of critically uncovering their apparently innocent seductiveness. Westerns and Sci-Fi imagery resonate particularly well being, as they are, pre-occupied with exploration and occupation of so-called uncharted territories. In these depic-

tions of the frontier VJ Rex cuts and mixes the original ordered narrative sequences of these films as a means of uncovering and dismantling their underlying colonizing politics. The landscapes inherent in both Westerns and Sci-Fi films can be understood as stand-ins for the specific and real landscapes where actual contests over identities and colonizing forces exist. For a Maori artist, this certainly has a strong significance. Although immersed and generationally a product of a "techno-culture," Hansen manages to maintain and comment on his specific place in the here and now, and attempts to stake out a claim to a contemporary Maori identity in a world fraught with these homogenizing narratives of colonization inherent in discourses around technology.

END

1. Christina Barton, "Out of the Deep", *Gallery Six: The Ice Rink & The Lilac Ship*, Hamilton: Waikato Museum of Art and History, 2002.

2. Eugene Hansen, artist statement, "Techno Maori: Maori Art in the Digital Age", Wellington: City Gallery and Pataka Porirua Museum, 2001.

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