

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?  
A REVIEW OF MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI'S  
*ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER*  
AT THE 54TH VENICE BIENNALE, PALAZZO LOREDAN  
DELL'AMBASCIATORE, VENICE, 4 JUNE – 26 OCTOBER 2011

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With more than 100 artworks seen in a space of three short days, I left the Venice Biennale with only a handful of key works that stuck in my mind. The work I experienced best was that of New Zealand artist Michael Parekowhai.

The international experience of the Venice Biennale is often short-lived, art-packed and overwhelming for the visual tourist. One lands, one looks, rushing from exhibit to exhibit across the city, and usually one leaves with a sense that one's feet haven't quite touched the ground. It is rare in this environment to have much time to collect one's thoughts during the visit, and often the works that resonate most prominently in the mind are the ones that remain long after you have left the Italian shores.

It was a rare and beautiful experience, then, to be seduced by Michael Parekowhai's exhibition before I even entered the building; to find myself instantly slowing down; and to spend an extraordinary amount of time experiencing his work.

In the heat of the afternoon sun I came across Parekowhai's exhibition sign, pointing down one of Venice's charming alleyways. It had been an exhibition on my list of course but, albeit out of sequence, here we were. As I followed the signs round a corner or two (then over a bridge and round another corner), the first thing that hit me was the gentle sound of piano music emanating from an upper window. Instantly excited about the music – I had hoped it would be played throughout the biennale and not just at the opening events – I entered the Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore on the Grand Canal and wandered into the main chamber and up to the first piece.



Figure 1. "He Kōrero Purākau mo Te Awanui o Te Motu: story of a New Zealand river" Michael Parekowhai (2011) Installation Detail from 'On first Looking into Chapman's Homer' at the 54th Venice Biennale, Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore, Venice (2011), Photograph by Rachel Gillies, 2011.

The room was dim and cool; I sat down, closed my eyes and let the music flow over me. Once rested, I began to look. In front of me, the piano being played was a most intricately carved and red-painted Steinway piano. The craftsmanship was stunning, and one couldn't help but revere the skill and enormity of the work that lay behind it. From my position in the room, I could look left and right and see the other two piano works. In a small ante-room positioned directly on the Grand Canal was the first of two fabricated bronze pianos, with an enormous cast bronze bull atop it. Positioned lying prone on the piano, the bull's head rests almost at eye level with an imagined player seated at the keys. The folds of the bull's bulk echo rolling hills – a landscape associated with both the poem by Keats to which the title of the exhibition refers and the individual title of the work, *A Peak in Darien*.

Keen to see the next bronze piece, I headed back past the carved Steinway and out into the garden area at the back. Stepping back out into the sunlight, I was amazed and pleased to see families and other visitors 'hanging out.' Some were having lunch, others were talking in the shade and surveying the sculptural works. In the middle of this reverie, *Chapman's Homer*, the second bronze-bull-and-piano were holding court. This time the bull is standing, confronting visitors with its sheer size in a direct challenge to anyone who might dare to take the stool. Circling the work, I spied the bronze figure from Parekowhai's *Kapa Haka* series, *Officer Taumaha*, nestled amongst the foliage in the corner, keeping a keen eye on the scene.

What happened next surprised even me; I sat down again. I sat down and I looked and I listened, and I experienced the work. People wandered round, floating almost, in the atmosphere of calm and tranquility surrounding the installation. I viewed each work again, circling each piano, looking at the detail, the fall of the light, the work's position in its space. In a response almost unheard of in this international art supermarket, I spent more time here than at any other (non-time-based) work and Michael Parekowhai made me do it. He made me stop and look. Really look, and really experience *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*.

For further information on the artist, the individual works and New Zealand's history at the Venice Biennale, see the website: <http://www.nzatvenice.com/>.

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