

Entrenched and Transforming: Passionately Passchendaele
Interview: Stephen Mulqueen Sculptor, Dunedin.

Wreath 303, Stephen Mulqueen, 2004, brass/poppies made from '303' bullet casings, 120 x 60 mm, *Beyond* CS Group Exhibition: 2 - 26 October 2004, Peter Rae Gallery, Dunedin. Collection of the artist.

Called variously an 'alchemist', 'artist/archaeologist', a 'cultural worker', a 'post-modern surveyor of the Dominion of Signs', Stephen Mulqueen is a Southland sculptor hailing from Greenhill's, Bluff Harbour, Southland. He resides between Dunedin and County Leitrim (Ireland). Born in 1953, with an Irish heritage (his grandfather was Irish) he trained as a jeweller in Invercargill before moving to Dunedin where he graduated from Otago Polytechnic School of Art followed by Postgraduate Studies at The Australian National University in Canberra, ACT. He was a founding member of the Fluxus workshop and gallery (1983-2004) and his major solo projects have included: a 1994 DOC commission for the new viewing platform at Bluff Hill - Motupohue; *Papakihau 'Slapped by the wind'* (1993-1996); and - most recently - *Tiwai Project* (Dunedin Public Art gallery, 2004) and *Beyond* Chrysalis Seed group show (Peter Rae Gallery, Dunedin). He has three children aged 22, 20 and 6 spread across the world from Christchurch to Ireland and Australia.

Mulqueen's 2000 work at the Hocken, *Whakamaoritanga/Translations*, is indicative. This is an artist of cross roads, interested in how things translate and cross over. "Leaving the landscape where I grew up (for Australia and Ireland) helped me to focus on where I was from." The Treaty of Waitangi is a principle guiding light in his exploration of biculturalism and the deconstruction of identity politics, which he critiques through his sculpture and installation practice.

In *Tiwai Project* for example, Mulqueen exhibits two wakas of assembled aluminium ingots and billets that juxtaposed historical forms in a discourse about global trade and exchange (*Waka Tiwai ingot canoe with Toki-Adze*, 2004). As an artist he's interested in tensions and contradiction (industrial products set against ancient artefacts for example), mining potent images from our past and amalgamating them with modern reinterpretation.

Alongside *Tiwai Project* his current work in *Beyond* is an installation transforming brass bullet casings into a 'poppies wreath' a memory and commemoration of New Zealand involved in 20th century global conflicts.

"In late 2001 I made a journey down from London into Belgium and visited a number of First World War memorials and museums. I arrived at the Tyne – Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele a very poignant place for antipodean memory; in terms of the lives lost there - it was a slaughter – on a scale never conceived before. I'd been collecting 'trench art' which is a folk art made by soldiers from bullet casings, tins, and other war accoutrements, etc. I had obtained some brass 303 cartridges on my travels and when I got back to my Dunedin workshop in early 2002, I began playing and created a hybrid between the casings and the poppy emblem, a conjunction where 'terror meets beauty'. The work in *Beyond* sprung from that experience."

JS: So was your contribution to *Beyond* [alongside Mary Horn, Claire Beynon, Shelly

Waka Tiwai billet canoe,
Stephen Mulqueen, 2004,
1000 x 120 x 70cm.

Johnson, Maria Kemp in October 04] an exploration of war themes?

"Yes, but more than that - it's about the nature of memory and remembrance really and finding a way to make a poetic meditation. Commemoration should be healing a bonding experience and should help us to focus on contemporary challenges. This is at the heart of my piece for *Beyond* titled: *WREATH 303*. Firstly it's about a specific response to the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino that had its anniversary this year 2004 – but it's also



about '303' as an archetypal killing artefact playing its roll on the many battlefields throughout the 20th century and still - even today".

Why are you interested in commemorating and looking back?

"The Irish historian R. F. Foster states: ' We make history by remembering things'. In New Zealand and Australia the idea of self-validation through received memory has grown apace if the public response to ANZAC outings on the 25th of April each year is anything to go by. As a sculptor;

working in the early 21st century these notions of commemoration are important to me - they ask the question "how does memory operate in our current contemporary context?" Sculpture as a practice, and form of cultural production, has always been linked to manifesting memory and commemoration. All societies tell and retell their pasts. Commemoration is central to national identity; it's the social and cultural glue that reinforces shared beliefs and offers collective reassurance. The recent return, after 90 years, of an unknown kiwi soldier from a First World War battlefield in Northern France to the National War Memorial in Wellington - is a good example of how powerful a tribute - the 'dead' can affect the collective memory of the living as a collective expression of mourning and remembering.

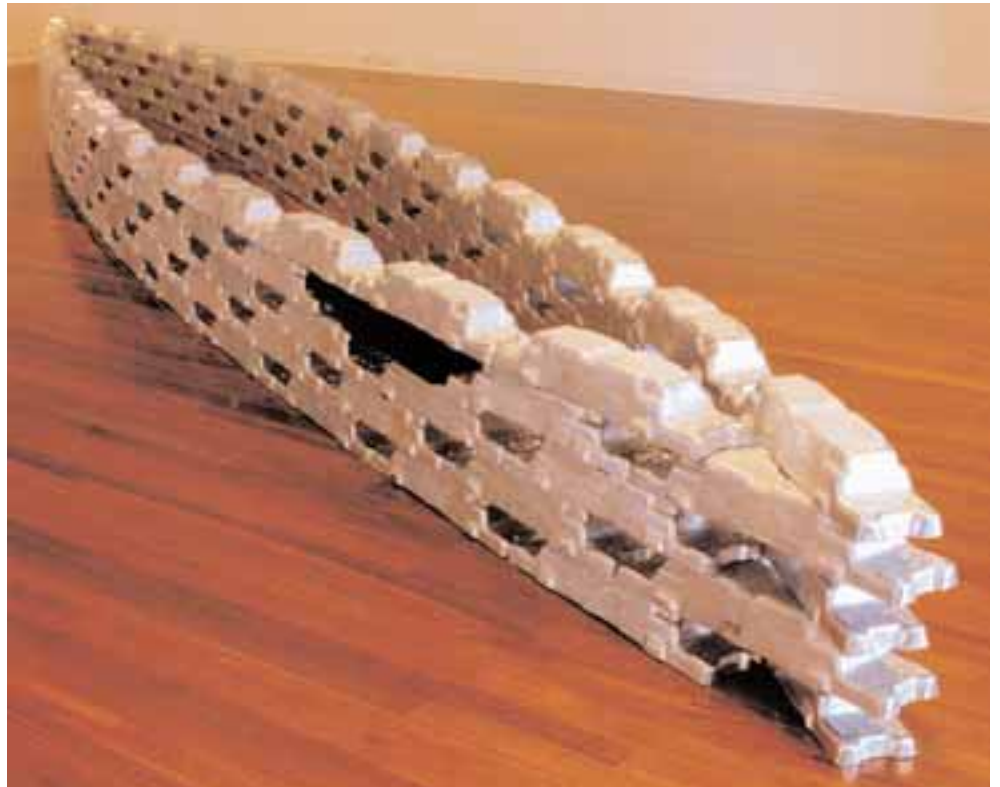
As a writer and cultural practitioner, King forged a way, particularly for Pakeha, to be open to and explore this landscape we're living in."

What are you looking to, artistically, in the near future?

"I'm pretty much staying with the brass – cartridge/poppy theme and looking to explore some more thematic variations around this material. There will be more travel next year to Australia. I want to work with interrelated sites. The Tiwai smelter is part of a complex industrial conduit, connected to places like Weipa in Cape York (Northern Australia) where the bauxite is mined, and the Gladstone Refinery which produces alumina powder for the Tiwai smelter. Aluminium is a geo-cultural product – it's 'Australia refined' really I want to develop these Trans –Tasman and Pacific Rim links in my practice."

John Stringer

Waka Tiwai ingot canoe with Toki-Adze, Stephen Mulqueen, 2004, 1100 x 120 x 60cm.



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