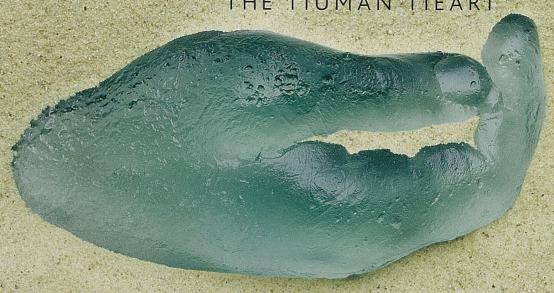
WEIGHT OF THE HUMAN HEART



NANCY DE FREITAS

IN COLLABORATION WITH KAPKA KASSABOVA AND MARK STOREY

2 APRIL - 27 JUNE 2004 BORG HENRY GALLERY

'A long time ago, maybe decades ago, or in my imagination, I read or was told that the weight of the human heart was about the weight of a hand full of earth.'

Nancy de Freitas







For Auckland-based artist Nancy de Freitas, concepts of 'home' and 'belonging' intertwine with ideas of the past, with all its complexities and memories. **Weight of the Human Heart** is an installation that evokes the emotional weight that is a consequence of dislocation, loss and nostalgia.

Weight of the Human Heart is the second in a planned trilogy of installations by Nancy de Freitas, working in collaboration with poet and novelist Kapka Kassabova and musician/composer Mark Storey. The installations focus on themes of land, sea, islands, distance, separation, loss, home, memory, arrival, departure, habitation, shelter, belonging, identity, the layering of time and consciousness. The first installation, Parallel Histories, was shown at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, in 2000. The third in the series, Shining River, is currently little more than a gleam in the artist's eye.

Parallel Histories was a monumental structure consisting of stacks of tinted glass panels abutted end to end, with each sheet tilted vertically in relation to its neighbours so that the surface was not a level plain/plane but, rather, evoked geological strata. This comparison was also invited by the sheer scale of the piece: two metres wide, nearly one metre high, and eleven metres long. Phrases from Kassabova's poems, etched into the glass and broadcast, read by the poet, through a phased sound system devised by Storey, underscored the metaphoric link between landscape and consciousness, the domains of physical and mental travellers. Light playing over the structure in a phased sequence introduced a temporal element, a dimension also evoked through the poetry, since, as T. S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*, 'Words move, music moves/Only in time...'.

Many of the same elements are present in Weight of the Human Heart, but the focus of

the work has become architectural and domestic rather than geological and geographical. Glass is again used as the primary material, but here the sheets are stacked one inside the other (like a nest of side-tables) in the form of an inverted 'V', forming the archetypal shapes (fragile, translucent, precious) of habitation or shelter and evoking the central concept of 'home'. Slumped glass is used for the multiple amputated or disembodied hands, half buried in sand, which express a range of human gestures and feelings.

The private and domestic sphere is further evoked through a video depicting a woman repeatedly brushing her hair, apparently lost in thought or memory, as suggested by the fleeting emotions crossing her features like clouds blown across the sky. Other sequences show the







woman cleaning hair from her brush, while fragments of the shed hair are whisked through a door by the wind.

Kassabova and Storey have again produced multiple recorded texts, audible only at close range from various locations in the gallery space. In one of the recordings, a woman with a slight foreign accent speaks feelingly of her experiences of houses in different times and places. Behind ner narrative lies the pressure of past events, unspecified but suggestive: 'My country was in crisis ... Years after my brother ... disappeared ... They thought he might come back. They said ne must have somewhere to come back to. somewhere that he knows. A home.' These sculptural, auditory and filmed elements combine to produce, in the viewer, a stimulating ange of sensations. Weight of the Human Heart is an ambitious exercise in collaboration petween de Freitas, Kassabova and Storey, who lso worked together on Parallel Histories. The rio have been involved in this project over several

years, with a high level of commitment and interaction. It is a self-conscious kind of activity, too, in that the participating artists are, by implication, conversing about the nature of collaboration. Collaboration as a creative practice is also the focus of de Freitas' academic research, so she has a double involvement, both as participant and observer.

Salman Rushdie once remarked, 'We're all exiles now', and he is right. Migration, diaspora, globalisation and international travel affect millions of people around the world. Evocations of the fragility of house and home will stir sympathetic responses in many of us; it is not necessary to be a migrant in any literal sense to be able to empathise with such feelings. Some would argue that human beings are, almost by definition, exiled by birth from the psychological and physical plentitude of life in the womb — we forever lament that loss of wholeness and belonging, represented in ideas of Paradise, Heaven, Arcadia, the Garden of Eden or 'the

green green grass of home'. Adding the passage from country to country to the normal burdens of consciousness is merely a further twist of the knife.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky wrote:

You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and useful for life in after years than some good memory, especially a memory connected with childhood, with home ... If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if we have only one good memory left in our hearts, even that may sometime be the means of saving us.

This quote, which I found among some background papers that de Freitas lent me, points towards the emotional core of this project.

Weight of the Human Heart is concerned with (among other things) the preservation of the child within us, through memory and imagination

ge brother

 a theme as old as Wordsworth and as pertinent today as it was 200 years ago.

Collaboration is an especially evocative means through which to approach loss, nostalgia or rupture because, through its 'working together' aspect, it denies and transcends isolation and selfhood. This gives the installation a beguiling optimism. All the elements — objects and structures made and found, sounds, words, moving images, light and darkness — are filtered through the varying sensibilities of the collaborating artists to produce a subtle harmony, like a piece of haunting son et lumière chamber music.

Peter Simpson

Peter Simpson is Associate Professor of English at the University of Auckland and a widely published commentator on literature, the visual arts and cultural history.

All images (details, DVD stills and installation photograph) from Weight of the Human Heart 2004. Reproduced courtesy of Nancy de Freitas.



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Auckland University of Technology (research grant); Pilkington New Zealand Ltd (sponsor of the sculptural component); AMP Capital Investors (patrons, New Loft Artist in Residence Project); Steven and Sam Tozer of Brownstreet Productions, Auckland; Relda McDowall of E-scape Glass, Invercargill (glass hands); University of Auckland Music School; Anna Rainey (actor); Paul Barrett, Anne-Marie Davis, Inigo Echevarria, Karen Hunter, Robert Leek and Elena Stejko (speaking voices).

Nancy de Freitas

Nancy de Freitas' work is grounded in an awareness of immigrant sensitivities and a notion of exile. Recent work has explored the human condition in which cultural material such as tradition, memory and identity are preserved, reconstructed, questioned and sometimes discarded as markers of individuality. Her work reveals a desire to understand what our home and our memories of it mean to us.

Nancy was born in the West Indies and lived in many countries before settling in New Zealand. She is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design and the University of Auckland where she completed a Masters degree in Fine Art. Since then she has been active as both a professional artist and an academic.

Kapka Kassabova

Kapka Kassabova is an award-winning poet, novelist and travel writer. She was born and raised in Bulgaria, moving to New Zealand in 1992. Her debut novel *Reconnaissance* won the 2000 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first novel in South-East Asia and the

Pacific, and her first book of poetry won the 1999 Montana Best First Book of Poetry. She was the 2002 NZ Cathay Pacific Travel Writer of the Year, and in 2003, she held the Creative New Zealand Berlin Writer's Residency. Kapka currently teaches at the University, of Auckland.

Mark Storey

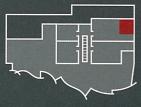
Mark Storey is an award-winning composer, musician and sound recordist. He has had works performed by the Ensemble Philharmonia, 175 East and the Karlheinz Company. Mark has worked on various multi-media projects, including a sound installation at Auckland's Artspace and the sound component for

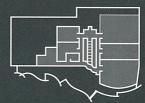
an installation by Maureen Lander at Te Papa. Mark is also a film and TV sound recordist, and has made documentary programmes for Concert FM, been a guest lecturer at the University of Auckland School of Music and a parttime lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology.



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