

E . x . q . u . i . s . i . t . e   M . y . s . t . e . r . i . e . s



M . a . l . c . o . l . m   H . a . r . r . i . s . o . n

**EXQUISITE MYSTERIES**, by celebrated Wellington fibre artist Malcolm Harrison, consists of nineteen handmade tapestry works, which combine the delicacy, complexity and rich colour of medieval illuminated manuscripts with a witty examination of the New Zealand psyche.

The title of the exhibition reflects Harrison's incredulity at the structure and operation of New Zealand society, and he uses whimsical and often playfully satiric scenarios to send up and re-evaluate our sense of cultural identity. Attacking the much-publicised myth of a Kiwianically cuddly society, full of blokes and buzzy bees, the artist contends that it is not a depiction which holds true when related to the lives of most New Zealanders. More real perhaps, is the possibility that we may soon be smothered under our own political correctness, a sinister development which Harrison believes "takes the life and guts out of everything", smoothing out what have the potential to be our most revealing and refreshing characteristics.

Dismissing the much-lauded tall poppy syndrome, Harrison believes the greatest threat we face in New Zealand is that of "the long knives" which, hidden and anonymous, reach out to stab in the back anything which is different and unusual. His is work which rewards the second look - it is a combination of many different layers that offer a multitude of possible interpretations, dependent on the experience, background and mindset each viewer brings with them.

Some of the works find their inspiration in the red tape of political and bureaucratic life. *It Looks Like Upside-Down to Me* explores the ways in which different cultures view one another and relates to Harrison's recent experience of making two large works for the new Galleria in Parliament House. Over one thousand people were involved in the project and Harrison received new insights into the varied, and often polemic approaches any group of people can bring to a single work. Several pieces in **Exquisite Mysteries** deal specifically with the

idiosyncracies of other great New Zealand institutions - in *The Killing Shed*, Harrison provides a telling take on the dog-eat-dog world of contemporary art, while *Twenty One Hundred Hours* is an allegoric, albeit cynical, look at marriage New Zealand-style.

The tools of Harrison's conjuring are canvas, cotton and wool, and it is his intention that the works be generously spaced, invoking what he calls "the stillness between". The format of these elegantly slim horizontal works suggests a series of narratives rather than landscapes, and the intimate scale is conducive to such story-telling. Following the movement of the Western eye, these immaculately finished recalcitrants read from left to right, gradually unfolding like the lines of a poem.

Felicity Milburn

**MALCOLM HARRISON** was born in Christchurch. He has completed many commissions for major companies and institutions, including: The University of Auckland; The Regent Hotel, Auckland; The Ford Collection, New York and the BNZ Tower, Auckland. Recently, Harrison made two large scale mixed-media works for the new Galleria in Parliament House. One of those works, *These Are Matters of Pride*, is believed to be the largest commissioned public art work in New Zealand's history. Harrison's work may be found in public collections throughout New Zealand, including those of the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt; the Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton; the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North; the Auckland Institute and Museum. Harrison's solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, include: *Living in Wonderland*, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, 1996; *Echoes and Reflections*, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1990; *The Great New Zealand Box*, Wellington City Art Gallery, 1985; *Gordon Crook, Don Driver, Malcolm Harrison*, Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, 1982. He has also taken part in exhibitions in Poland and the United States of America. Harrison currently lives and works in Wellington.



McDougall Art Annex, The Arts Centre, Christchurch  
ph (03) 374 9800 fax (03) 365 3942

Cover Image: *Layholes for Medlars (Meddlers)*

Photograph by Helen Mitchell