

# *Harmony in Co-existence*



Vivienne Mountfort standing with her work *Manaiā*

VIVIENNE MOUNTFORT



AN EXHIBITION OF SELECTED WORKS

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# Harmony in Co-existence,

a select exhibition of the works of

## VIVIENNE MOUNTFORT

The circle is endless. Universally it signifies intimacy, equality and infinity. Vivienne Mountfort (b 1918) has used the circle in her work since she was eighteen years of age because, as she comments, 'it both conveys and symbolises my vision of the world, the possibilities of growth and fulfilment in the purist, simplest and all-encompassing form. Generations before me and cultures apart have independently used the circle to encourage contemplation and constant re-evaluation of our lives and how we live. As a form, the circle encourages endless reflection. This includes both the forming of relationships and the solitary journeying we must make, both the physical and the spiritual cycles. And perhaps only the circle, like a wondrous crucible of cycles and insights, can intimate to us how inextricably inter-related are the threads of this fragile framework we call existence'.

In 1970 Vivienne Mountfort was seconded to Teachers' College to teach art and weaving *but* without the appropriate paraphernalia. Undaunted by the absence of equipment, she turned to cardboard and plywood to construct handheld circular looms while at the same time drilling holes to secure the materials. Paradoxically, what began as a lack of resources, proved to be heuristically liberating for this weaver and a lasting source of inspiration for her philosophic and creative concerns. Unlike *The Lady of Shallot* so dramatically portrayed in Millais' painting and Tennyson's poem, this weaver was exhilarated by the mobility and potentiality of the circular loom, an experience amplified and recast in wool and flax in successive works.

The selected pieces in this exhibition, covering some thirty years and constructed from natural materials, represent the cycles of an animate world in which natural and human endeavours connect and intertwine. And, indicative of Mountfort's recognition of the flux of existence and the fragility of natural balances, she depicts some connections as positive, others as negative.

One of the earliest examples of such contraries is *Tanglewood* (1972; dia. .62mm) suggesting a sparse inter-weaving of an equal number of thin, young trunks and older, perforated ones. *Tanglewood*, together with the abstracted cross-section, *Coprosma Symmetry No. 1*, (1972; dia. .62mm, with wool spun and dyed by Audrey King) won first and second place in the NZ Wool Board Off Loom Weaving Contest. The conservation here is reviewed in Mountfort's 1990's felt *Skyscraper Series* and her flax *River Works*.

*Life is like a long braided River* No.2 (1990) (2.4m x 1.4m, NZ flax, *phormium tenax*, on handmade flax paper and mineral dye) was inspired by the Waimakariri River flowing from the Main Divide of the Southern Alps and, according to Mountfort, 'the braided flow and flurry of the river suggests the many paths and rhythms our lives might take. This analogy, between a river and a human life, is very ancient and is celebrated in Palaeolithic cave drawings and in the writings of psychologist, Wilhelm Reich'. Visually and thematically the river studies relate to Mountfort's Mandala works, such as *Mandala for Contemplation Beneath the Southern Cross* (1987; 2.42m x 2.42m).

*Harmony and Co-existence* (1996; 2.76m x 1.84m) is a copy of a 1981 work celebrating Farmers Centennial Weaving Award. It features the kahikatea growing in Riccarton Bush, a unique example of swamp forest, and the introduced *pinus pinaster* growing in the Botanic Gardens adjacent to the Gallery. Mountfort comments, 'Separately they symbolise the difference and independence of the indigenous people and those people who subsequently came here. Whereas 160 years ago these trees may well have been planted separately or even competitively, nowadays our forests are an area of genuine inquiry reminding us of our racial, environmental and sociological inter-relationships'.

The historic and cultural overlay of these words is explored in *Tē Whakakotahi o te Maoritanga me te Pakehatanga* (1986; 8m x 2.3m) which translates as 'The unifying or coming together of the Maori culture and the culture of the white settlers'. This work, which won the United Building Society Suter Fibre Craft Award in 1986, was given special praise by Doreen Blumhardt, Brian Carmody, Dr. C.E. Beeby and Cliff Whiting in the exhibition, 'Beeby: The Enlightened Years' (Wellington, 1992) celebrating the minister's contribution to the teaching of arts and crafts in schools throughout New Zealand.

The form of *Tē Whakakotahi o te Maoritanga me te Pakehatanga* uses the circle and parts thereof to signify aspects of the Maori and European cultures and combines flax (prepared in the *piu piu* technique), handspun fleece, hand- and machine-made lace and ribbon to visually express the meeting and interaction of these cultures, culminating in the ideal of interwoven co-existence. The first circle, on the left, is complete and represents the Maori culture in its pre-European state. The second section, like a *piu piu* skirt, is fractured suggesting the initial impact of European contact. In the third and fourth panels, it is the Victorian handmade, cotton, pillow-lace and ribbon (some of which was inherited from Mountfort's grandmother) that dominates the visual narrative in rigid geometry, so different from the preceding curvilinear rhythms. These tensions are replaced in the fifth and sixth panel with the *piu piu* skirt motif suggesting a gradual resurrection and ascent of the Maori culture albeit in a discernibly changed form. The last panel, which partially echoes the first, again employs the *piu piu* motif using it both to soften and integrate some manufactured synthetic lace and change the previously rigid geometry into more related but not concentric rhythms. The reality that all concerned have been affected is indicated in this abstracted narrative form through its layers of weaving and plaiting, and the gradations of material textures and colours. Here Mountfort uses her knowledge of *taniko* and *tuku tuku* to persuade us to consider New Zealand as it is and how it can be. Jonathon Mane Wheoki comments that this work encapsulates a conviction and a vision 'enriched by the acceptance of difference and the commerce of ideas'.

This is the ethos which informs and shapes *Mandala for Contemplation beneath the Southern Cross* (1987) (2.42m x 2.42m; flax on wood). Mountfort comments that 'the concentric circles so celebrated by the Australian Aborigines, remind us of their exemplary reverence for time and place, and this is reinforced by the double spiral of the Polynesian peoples symbolising their struggles between life and death which in turn are extended by the pointers, urging reappraisal of our paths and place in life'.

In a similar manner, the co-joining wool circles of *Ghost Kauri* (1978; 3.68m x 2.7m) a giant image of growth stimulated by the

Waipoua Kauri Forest on the Auckland Peninsula, north of Dargeville, continue this invocation for balance and planning. These works, and the root bindings in particular, have been influenced by Rumanian fibre artists, Peter and Ritzi Jacobi and Polish weaver, Magdalena Abakanowicz. Mountfort comments that the images and writings of Chagall and Van Gogh are also a constant source of inspiration in her work.

After having been displayed in an international textile exhibition in Germany, *Ghost Kauri* was gifted to the School of Forestry at the University of Canterbury where it hangs like a prophetic guardian spirit. On a smaller scale, *Pohutukawa on Cliff Face* (1979; dia. .89m) expresses the concerns woven into *Ghost Kauri* whereas *Sunlight and Beech Forest* (1986; dia. .92m) illustrates Mountfort's ideal of dense native forests.

Combining wool, silk, felt, leather, lace, flax and wood, Mountfort's works incorporate some of the most ancient and accessible symbols of racial memory such as the circle and the spiral. Referring to *Ghost Kauri*, Don Peebles remarked that 'little needs to be said about the work [since] like any work of art, the full meaning is to be found in its own forms, its own palpable rhythms. Suffice to say that there is that necessary relationship within the work of technical skill and vision'.

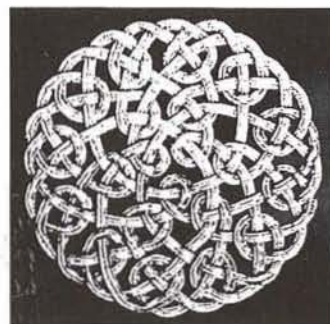
All of these works convey something of Mountfort's skill and vision and her challenge to us is succinctly encapsulated in her statement that she is 'trying to produce a spare, disciplined form provocative of thought and human awareness'. She emphasises the importance for her of ecological and racial balance by beginning and ending this exhibition with two works jointly created by herself and master carver, Riki Manuel. They are *Manaia* (1987; dia. .92mm) which roughly translates as 'monster', and *Tawhiri Matae* (1993; dia. .92mm) 'God of the Winds'. Through their co-existing creative energies, weaver and carver combine wool and wood in forms which invite contemplation beyond simple surface materials.

It is worth noting that in the late Middle Ages, to meet the growth of the textile markets, the Italians, Flemish and French sought widely for sources of wool. Throughout Europe and especially in Spain, grazing lands slowly gained on forests. In *Des arbres et des hommes*, Roland Bechmann states that between the middle of the fourteenth century and the middle of the fifteenth century, the total number of sheep grew from 1.5 million to 2.7 million in 1467. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries deforestation increased as woods were sacrificed for ships seeking gold in the New World. Sheep-rearing in particular contributed to the diminution of forest-lands in the Alps of Haute-Provence, the Massif Central and the Pyrénées, transformed by exaggerated exploitation.

Mountfort maintains that 'here in New Zealand we would do well to remember follies of the past and recognise that forests are an indispensable foundation and resort'. As her work demonstrates, the materials she uses acknowledge the necessity to assess what exactly is 'progress' in relation to these resources and our place in the Pacific.

What these selected works demonstrate, among other issues, is that Vivienne Mountfort lives and works creatively as a 'Greenie' and multi-culturalist long before it was 'fashionable' or politically correct.

Cassandra Fusco,  
February, 1996.



VIVIENNE MOUNTFORT

Vivienne Mountfort is an off-loom fibre artist who has exhibited throughout New Zealand and internationally in Japan, USA, Europe and Australia.

Born in Christchurch in 1918 she was educated at Avonside Girls' High School and Canterbury College School of Art.

Between 1937 and 1939 she attended Christchurch Teachers' Training College where her interest in New Zealand flora was encouraged by one of her lecturers Professor Lance W McCaskill.

Since the early 1970s Mountfort has been prominent as one of New Zealand's most innovative fibre artists exploring various off-loom techniques, methods and materials to give expression to the concepts that interest her.

During recent years she has been experimenting with hand-made paper out of New Zealand flax. The use of flax has involved occasionally adopting the traditional techniques used by Maori women and incorporating these into a contemporary form. This has also frequently involved mixing flax with what is considered more traditional European materials, for example felt.

Often Mountfort has worked in collaboration with other artists and craftspeople. One of the earliest was with the spinner Audrey King on two weavings which won first and second prize in the New Zealand Wool Board off-loom contest of 1972.

Among the most recent collaborations was with carver Riki Manuel and together they have mounted several exhibitions that have included shared works. However, as an individual artist Mountfort has also gained many awards that have included a first prize at the Greymouth Woolcraft Festival 1974, the Northland Harbour Board Purchase Award 1976, the Living Design Award, International Fibre Exhibition Pittsburg USA 1976, several awards for miniatures at Embroidery Guild exhibitions and in 1986, the United Building Society Suter Fibre Award.

A past executive member of the Crafts Council of New Zealand 1976 -1982 Mountfort was made a life member in 1980.

Her works are represented in private, corporate and public collections both within New Zealand and overseas. Among these; New Zealand Embassies in Hong Kong, Chile, Kuala Lumpur, The Polynesian Cultural Centre Hawaii, The School of Forestry University of Canterbury Christchurch, the Vice Chancellors of New Zealand Universities Committee Rooms Wellington, Christchurch College of Education, Fiordland Library, Te Wai Pounamu Maori Anglican Centre Christchurch, Canterbury Area Woolcraft Society, The Arts Centre Christchurch and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

## Selected works:

**Vivienne Mountfort** emphasises the importance of ecological and racial balance by beginning and ending this exhibition with two works jointly created by herself and master carver, Riki Manuel. They are: **1 Manaia** (1987) and **10 Tawhiri Matae** (1993)

**1 Manaia** (1987; dia. 92) which roughly translates as 'monster'. Collection: The Artist, Christchurch.

**2 Tanglewood** (1972; dia. .62m) suggests a sparse inter-weaving of an equal number of thin, young trunks and older, perforated ones. *Tanglewood*, together with the abstracted cross-section, *Coprosma Symmetry No. 1*, (1972; dia. .62m, with wool spun and dyed by Audrey King) won first and second place in the 1972 NZ Wool Board Off Loom Weaving Contest. Mountfort's recurring conservation concerns represented in these works, were continued in her 1990's felt *Skyscraper Series* and her flax *River Works*. Collection: Christopher Mountfort, Christchurch.

**3 Pohutukawa on Cliff Face** (1979; dia. .89mm) expresses Mountfort's love of and concern for the depletion of native woods. Collection: Mary McAlpine, Christchurch.

**4 Life is like a long braided River** (1990) (2.4m x 1.4m; NZ flax, *phormium tenax*, on handmade flax paper and mineral dye). Mountfort states: 'This work was inspired by the Waimakariri River flowing from the Main Divide of the Southern Alps and the braided flow and flurry of the river suggests the many paths and rhythms our lives might take'. Collection: The Artist, Christchurch.

**5 Harmony and Co-existence** (1996; 2.19 x 1.46) is a copy of a 1981 work celebrating Farmers Centennial Weaving Award. It features the kahikatea growing in Riccarton Bush, a unique example of swamp forest, and the introduced *pinus pinaster* growing in the Botanic Gardens adjacent to the Gallery. 'Separately they symbolise the difference and independence of the indigenous people and those people who subsequently came here'. Collection: The Artist, Christchurch.

**6 Tē Whakakotahi o te Maoritanga me te Pakehatanga** (1986; 8m x 2.3m; flax, handmade cotton and machine-made synthetic lace, ribbon and wool). The title translates as 'The unifying or coming together of the Maori culture and the culture of the white settlers'. The form of *Tē Whakakotahi o te Maoritanga me te Pakehatanga* uses the circle and parts thereof to signify aspects of the Maori and European cultures and combines flax (prepared in the *piu piu* technique), handspun fleece, lace and ribbon to visually express the meeting and interaction of these cultures, and culminating in the ideal of interwoven co-existence. Jonathon Mane Wheeki comments that this work encapsulates a conviction and a vision 'enriched by the acceptance of difference and the commerce of ideas'. This work won the United Building Society Suter Fibre Craft Award in 1986. Collection: New Zealand Vice Chancellors' Board Room, Wellington.

**7 Mandala for Contemplation Beneath the Southern Cross** (1987; 2.42m x 2.42m). The centre of the cross features the ancient concentric circles celebrated by the Australian Aborigines 'reminding us of their reverence for tribal place and location. This is extended by the Polynesian spiral, a multivocal Pacific symbol, evocative of journeying and the struggles between life and death. These natural rhythms contrast with variations of the square and circle symbolising both technological development and its doleful impact upon our necessary exploration of spirituality. At the tip of the cruciform are four triangles pointing outwards and urging us to overcome debilitating constraints and seek a cosmic view of the earth within the universe and each one of us as a vital part of the whole'. Collection: The Artist, Christchurch.

**8 Ghost Kauri** (1978; 3.68m x 2.7m) depicts a giant kauri stimulated by the Waipoua Kauri Forest on the Auckland Peninsula, north of Dargaville, continues Mountfort's invocation for conservation and ecological balance. Collection: The School of Forestry, University of Canterbury, Christchurch.

**9 Sunlight and Beech Forest** (1986; dia. 1019mm) illustrates Mountfort's ideal of dense native forests. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. M. Begg, Charteris Bay.

**10 Tawhiri Matae** (1993; dia. 92) 'God of the Winds' 'God of the Winds'. Collection: Private, Christchurch.



Vivienne Mountfort working on *Harmony and Co-existence II*, 1996.

