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Puzzles of mystery and emotion

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by TJ McNamara

An enigma is puzzling and strange but, nevertheless, grips the attention. Enigmas abound in the visual art components of the AK05 festival, notably in an exhibition of painting and in a remarkable show of projected DVD recordings.

The exhibition of landscapes by Scott McFarlane at the Milford Galleries until Saturday contains much that is dark and obscure beneath its surface of depiction of places. In these paintings, the hills around Otago heave into great mounds that take on shapes hinting at figures, faces and animals. Some emotion is always lurking that reaches beyond the physical into the realms of psychology and memory.

They are melancholy and ominous. One of the most powerful is of Dunedin, where the artist lives. The city is just points of light spread between crouching hills. It is mysterious and magical but it takes the form of a leopard as it reaches towards the horizon. It makes the city an enigmatic, remote, mysterious creation of spots of light.

In Tunnel Beach, a hill sweeps up and its bare cliff makes it look "most like a whale", filled with a special kind of animal life. A tree in Seacliff is a dark giant with an arm raised. The hills around the drama of gleaming water in Purakaunui seem to have absorbed human misery. Nothing is explained. A great deal is hinted at.

It is the dramatic lighting of these works that evoke a complex and puzzled response rather than the raised texture of the paint, which is often no more than a mannerism.

Otago Peninsula takes a viewpoint that is exactly the same as a well-known McCahon painting of the same landscape. McFarlane's version is more spiky but here, as elsewhere, he manages to give the landscape a special charge in a way that is comparable to McCahon and that is a considerable achievement.

Video has played a part in several exhibitions, notably at the Sue Crockford Gallery, where the German artist Christian Janowski depicted gallery-goers as sheep in a witty but singularly offensive way.

At Starkwhite, Jae Hoon Lee is showing work mostly on small screens, with one projected to make it life-sized. This work, which shows trains arriving and departing from a subway in Seoul, is visual material in the study of humanity. It is nowhere near as humanistic, confrontational, strange or poetic as the striking work by Gina Czarnecki at the Union Fish Company Building in Quay St until Sunday. These gain immensely by being projected on a large screen.

Downstairs is Nascent, a two-channel projection and the most poetic of the four works. Here, dancers flow into a long frieze where individuals are lost in a flow of multiple images and bodies blend light and leave trails of white,

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occasionally touched with colour.

The frieze morphs effortlessly into a spinal column of dancers which becomes embodied in large shapes and then changes into a circling medallion of torso and limbs.

Although the movement is often balletic, this work is far removed from ballet. It is a paean of praise for the flexibility and grace of the body, yet has the strength of bone. Upstairs is something more confrontational but deeply moving in its absolute realism. On a wide screen are a dozen people, alternating men and women, totally naked and fully frontal.

This is the raw reality of a changing-room. The effect is wonder at the strange variety of bodies. Enigmatically, they move and press against an unseen glass wall. The man in the centre of the rank is flanked by two taller women. His penis is the compositional and conceptual centre of the work.

A sudden alarm makes some of the figures turn. Life has abrupt changes. The alarm is part of the dissonant sound-effect music that accompanies each piece.

These sounds, often buzzing, are sometimes irritating. In *Infected* - a circular work on the stairs, not successfully projected - it has the effect of reinforcing the effect of a trapped insect. Yet the steady drum beat, like the throbbing of a heart, is exactly right for the fourth piece, a group of naked people of mixed race. Some at the back remain still, the rest turn and shift gently.

This fascinating, telling exhibition, sponsored by the Moving Image Centre, is a memorable feature of the festival.

Modern technology has caught up with Victor Vasarely, once France's most popular artist. Long before computer-generated images he founded Op Art, where the images on a flat surface appear to move in space by bulging forward or receding - a genuinely new art form.

These images were symmetrically composed, their geometry linked to vibrant colour. The quality of his work can be seen in a lively exhibition of some of his prints at the Studio of Contemporary Art until Friday. The special Vasarely magic still works.

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