

Maunga and clocks catch visiting artist's eye

Twelve months living in Devonport has led an Australian artist to produce work giving an insightful outsider's view of the area, exploring issues of place and belonging that will resonate with locals.

"This is like a love letter," says Asher Milgate of his show, *Above / Below*, which is on at Satellite2 gallery as part of the Auckland Festival of Photography.

From his lit-up photographic collages to his thematic approach, Milgate's work is a multi-layered reflection. It taps into abstract landscapes, the modifications waves of people have made on them and how history, the maunga and built forms sit uneasily together at times. The works were created in a studio at a home he and his partner rented in Church St. They came to New Zealand in 2023 for her work as a hotel manager, first in Wellington, then Auckland. "Coming to Auckland we didn't know anything about suburbs," he told the Flagstaff. But the opportunity to live in Devonport arose and a past beyond its obvious settler heritage then became apparent and intriguing.

The omnipresent maunga, with villas clustered on their sides, are the visually central juxtaposition. The work also considers an intersection of ideas around land and identity and how future development might change things.

A recurring theme in several of the 15 new works in the show are pillar-like shapes stitched into portions of his photographic prints. They represent potential future higher-rise buildings and also Devonport's three public clocks.

For Milgate, an awareness of the impact of colonialism on indigenous people grew out of his small-town upbringing in central west New South Wales. His parents taught in the small town of Wellington, which has a large Aboriginal population. After establishing himself as an exhibiting artist in Sydney around 15 years ago, he embarked on a five-year documentary project in his home town called *Survivors*.

While in Wellington, New Zealand, his stay coincided with protest action defacing a copy of Te Tiriti Waitangi hanging in Te Papa. "The further I delve into this, the less I realise I know," he says of being an Australian in New Zealand. But his curiosity, conversations and observations inevitably led him to use art to try to make sense of what he perceived. "I don't want to shove anything down anyone's throats, I just want people to see what's here."

He has incorporated road signs into a landscape collage, highlighting familiar names given in settler times, in a work called *The Maunga and Associates*. "I hope people see the other in what is familiar."



An outsider's view... But Asher Milgate doesn't want to "shove anything down anyone's throats".

Above / Below grew out of walks and swims that led him to appreciate the landforms – and friendliness – of Devonport. "I'd been really surprised to walk down to the beach for a swim by the sea scouts hall in the morning and 90 per cent of people say good morning." Wallowing in the water, his eye was drawn to the shapes of Takarunga and Maungauika. Walking up Takarunga became a regular pursuit and he became intrigued by how people branched out on its many informal paths. With camera in hand, he did the same. Driven to click the shutter by feeling rather than logic.

In the darkroom, Milgate plays with processing times for his black and white prints, looking to capture the moment "where you relive the feeling you had when you took the photograph".

He then rips the prints into pieces and reassembles them, with an overlocker. Perforations on the images, allow them to be backlit. The works are framed in orange-red. He says this is a nod to the road cones he sees set up locally. "I've never seen so many."

The story of how Mt Cambria was quarried away piqued his interest, finding its way into his works and the show's title.

Milgate's partner has a new job in Melbourne and after his exhibition opened he rejoined her, but he says the imprint Devonport left means they are keen to return. "I wouldn't make works about a place unless I loved it," he says.

• *Above / Below* is on at the Satellite2 gallery, 61a Victoria Rd, until 15 June.

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