

The Visual Artists Against Nuclear Arms Peace Mural, Karangahape Road, Auckland, 1985

## PAINTINGS FOR PEACE

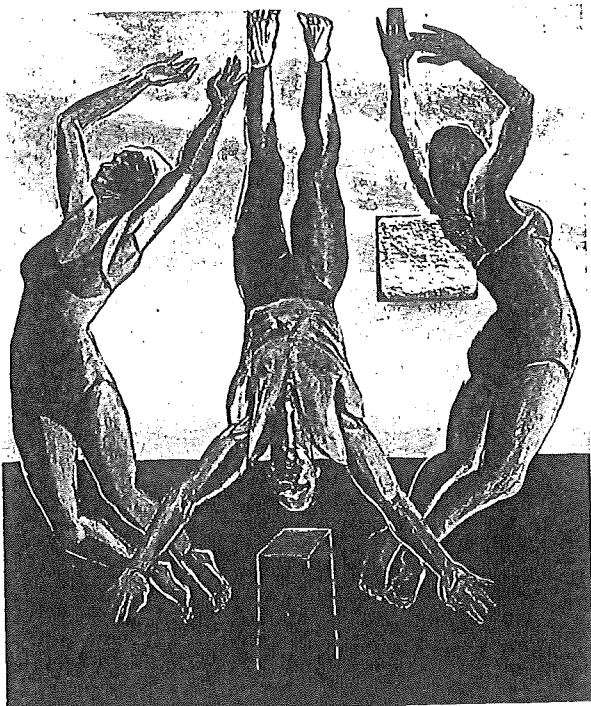
EMKE ENSING

On October 19, 1985, the corner of Karangahape and Ponsonby Roads was transformed by a dramatic 20 metre mural on the theme of Peace. Using *treach* as a studio for three weeks Pat Hanly, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett, Jill Card-Hansen, John Nicol, John Eaden, Rudia Pond Eyley, Nigel Brown and Sylvia Lowry worked together to get their message to Auckland and the larger world.

It is this city's first outside wall mural of its kind to be fixed permanently (and,

ironically, graffiti-proofed) with the express permission of the Auckland Regional Authority, City Council and local bodies although official sanction was not without its problems. After months of initial negotiations (Matt Stafford, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett & Don Solomon) Pat Hanly's original submission, based on his *Figures in Light* theme, was deemed indecent by Keith Hay due to the portrayal of nudity in the silhouette figures. Rather than jeopardize the completion of the mural and the work output of the other painters, Hanly decided not

to fight the issue and offered a new design based on a drawing by his 6 year old daughter, which, ironically, may be the more powerful and telling statement for this particular occasion. Entitled *No Nuclear/Fire for Amber*, the painting is deceptively simple and uncomplicated—a child's vision of herself, smiling, in a green and flower-growing world—but the truncated verbal message on a black, fire-sparking background, the suggestion of flames rising out of the green grass, indicate Hanly's skilful manipulation of ambiguity, innocence and naivety



Mural by John Eaden



Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett working on her mural

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIL HANLY

in the tradition of Klee.

Ambiguity is also implicit in the fifth painting of the mural, the only other one besides Jill Carter-Hansen's not to have an explicitly stated verbal message, although John Eaden's grouping of his three acrobats/dancers could symbolically suggest the CND/Ban the Bomb sign.

While Eaden's figures might represent freedom in the way they fly through space, the fiery, shadowy red/orange and black colours could imply something more sinister: certainly, for me, the response was of a foreboding nature that associated with inverted hangings, the cross, man (or earth) on chopping block/hook ready for slaughter. The burning nature of the background colours seemed too ominous to ignore. In a sense it seemed ironic that the one painting in the mural which was *least* explicit in its message, was also the most disturbing in its colour tones and least optimistic in its point of view.

To an extent, all the other paintings suggest an element of hope, an optimism in the future direction of mankind. This is particularly evident in John Nicol's painting in the centre of the mural. The Living Earth/tree image in its setting of serene and peaceful blue is a powerful evocation of life and reminiscent of an unpublished poem by Helen Shaw entitled *A Tree in a Dream* (1974).

You can stand in the dreaming view  
a ruffling thousand branches  
pointing and opening  
into a severely measured  
area of blue  
the sky of your existing...

But John Nicol is too good an artist to let it rest there. *His* sky goes beyond the personal into the universal and is am-

biguously stencilled over with words—CLOUDS/SHADOWS, and the living, vibrant tree itself is superimposed over its own shadow, which takes the form and shape of a mushroom cloud.

Despite the threat however, the predominant mood is optimistic—a firm commitment to a LIVING EARTH more locally centred in RANGITOTO/WAITEMATA.

The utilization of the buttress as the heart and square centre of the cool green foliage is particularly arresting and shows Nicol's skill in overcoming a physical problem with flair and adaptability even if initially he may have felt somewhat ambivalent about the geometrical composition.<sup>1</sup>

The buttress, or 'hole in the board' was immediately realized for its potential by Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett who had no intention of ignoring or disguising it. She used it with considerable effect as the projected triggering device of the bomb, pointing menacingly and dangerously red in the direction of the sleeping child. Jill Carter-Hansen coped ingeniously by transforming the structure into Pandora's box hung from the birds beak: here there is no verbal statement as complement or integral part of the visual statement but rather the message is carried through connotations and symbols.

The brightly-coloured bird in flight might well be freedom threatened by the ferociously snarling big cat which, through close proximity, is associated with the missiles which front it. The cat (tiger) may obliquely suggest the beast of the apocalypse, the creature which is predicted to ultimately destroy the world. The bird holds a box or parcel,

the colour of which (predominant blue, as is the rest of the painting, suggests optimism—Hope is said to be the last thing that flew from Pandora's box of gifts and evils which beset the world.

Despite the representation of fear invoking missile heads being made the more powerfully suggestive by the ominous shadows and the suggestion of threat and implication underlying the *actual*, the painting as a whole makes positive statement. The rainbow, the covenant of peace, and the palm from jumping and continuing out above Rangitoto, bode well for nuclear-free New Zealand.

Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett also employs images of hope and symbols of redemption but her optimism is perhaps more noticeably tinged with a sense of dread and foreboding. Although she incorporates the religious iconography of the dove, the olive branch and the rainbow in her work, the blue which she employs is of a muddier nature than that in the adjoining panels and the water in the background, unlike the clear, calm Waitemata of the Jill Carter-Hansen and John Nicol paintings, is decidedly turbulent and troubled—reminiscent in fact, of The Flood. Although the water agitation recedes into light and white and bears above it the dove carrying the olive branch, one cannot dismiss the haunted and terror-stricken face above Rangitoto in the background, looking as if it were at the artist/viewer, beyond an out of the painting and yet *at* the painting, as though the painter were asking 'Have I got it right? Do I get the message across?'

It is a tortured face, full of question and angst—quite separate and different from the female foreground character whose face is partially masked by placard which she holds in her hand and which, by implication, thus becomes an extension of her personality, herself. In that sense the other half of her is NUCLEAR FREE AOTEAROA and the painting, one in a series over the last few years in Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett's developing preoccupation with this theme, an example of the personal statement moving successfully into the universal and political without the painter jeopardizing artistic and individual integrity.

The personal concern being utilized to become the universal statement is very much part of the tradition in which Nigel Brown also works. In a comment on the mural he states: 'Personally I think the nuclear issue is a very critical one for the human race although finally it boils down to us learning to live on this plane with love and trust.'<sup>2</sup> This point of view becomes the predominant statement in his part of the mural which is inscribed



Patrick Hanly, Claudia Pond Eyley, John Eaden and Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett with murals by Nigel Brown, Claudia Pond Eyley and Vanya Lowry.

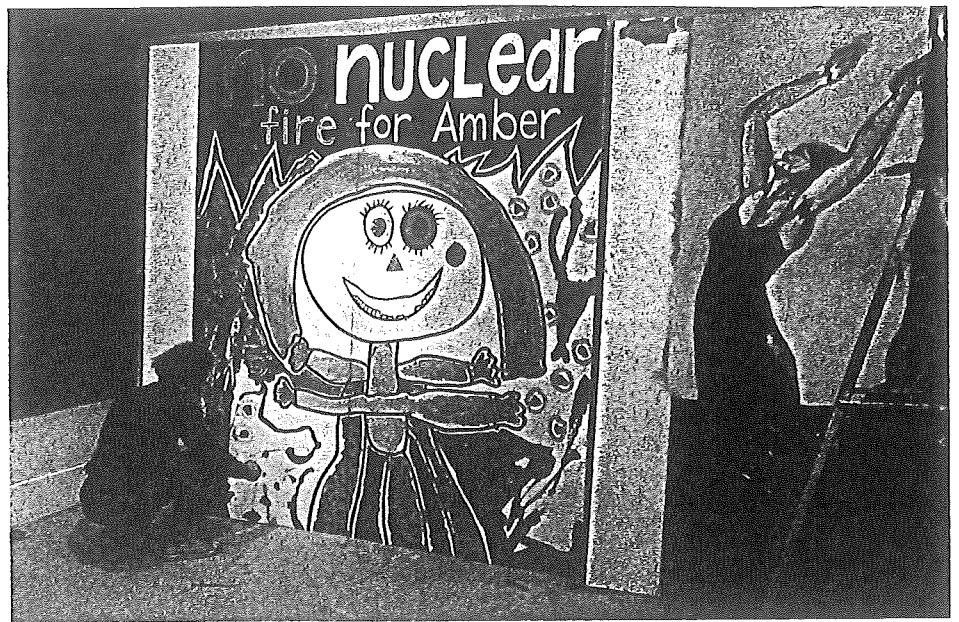
rainbow-like arch with the words A GENTLE EARTH underneath which sits the earth herself, a huge, comfortable woman figure with ample and generous dimensions holding and contemplating a large green heart. A child hugs, but cannot girth her large and wide lap. In the background a man and woman embrace against the most vibrant blue which gives the figures a radiance quite unusual in Nigel Brown's works where characters are almost invariably outlined in heavy, sombre black. The blue in the mural, which is reminiscent of the brilliant blue in *The Book of Hours* of Marshal Jean de Boucicaut, is provocatively attention-seeking and focuses on the other colours and devices in the painting so that one begins (unconsciously) to make associations and feel a kind of *Weltgeist* emanating from the symbols used.

The stretched A GENTLE EARTH banner/PEACE AOTEAROA begins to call to mind ironic visual counterparts like the recent film *The Quiet Earth*, the green (heart, child, man, woman, tree) concentrates the general consciousness on associated parallels and concerns like Greenpeace. Certainly of all the paintings in the mural, Nigel Brown's work is the most readily definable as 'mural' or 'wall' art and in its 'largeness', its uncompromising and unambiguous statement and style, it is very like Rivera's work, which, despite the overt political/social message, loses nothing in feeling and commitment.

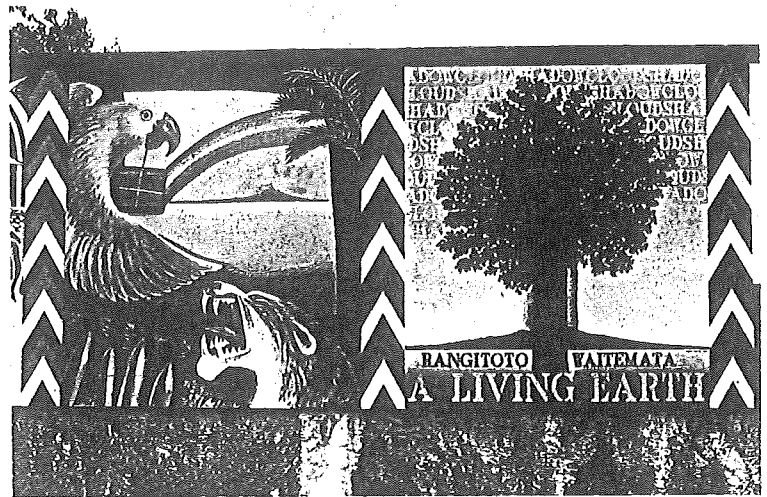
The unambiguous political message is also immediately obvious in Vanya Lowry's particularly effective stylization of two large and serene doves bearing a NO NUKES IS GOOD NUKES sign above the glittering night-lights of Auckland. The painting, the only one of the eight to be executed entirely in flat, two-dimensional, paper-cut-out type, black, white and orange surfaces not unlike those of Matisse, has a close affinity with graffiti art in its immediate accessibility and essential, appealing simplicity.

Simplicity also dominates Claudia Pond Eyley's painting depicting coconut palms against a flat blue sky, yet the simplicity of design is balanced by the philosophical complications of the tree as symbol of life and knowledge (freedom, experience, guilt, fear). The tree is centred in its middle section on the board. We can see neither crown nor roots but the implication of the union between Heaven and Earth is implicit.

Like Nigel Brown's Earth Mother, the tree is regenerative. Both are physical manifestations of shelter, fruitfulness and life. The coconut fruits are blood (life-giving) red, but is there also the suggestion of danger and associated questions raised by that colour? Equally,



Patrick Hanly with his mural *No Nuclear Fire for Amber*



Murals by Jill Carter-Hansen (left) and John Nicol (right)

the tree symbol may be read as depicting the psyche, the process of personal growth and the way the tree opens out to the light might suggest greater consciousness or clarification on the part of the artist for the reason behind the loss of island innocence, the state of paradise.

The complicated iconographic connotations suggested by the use of the fruit-bearing tree is offset by the clear, unambivalent verbal message which frames the painting. Although the visual image is centred in the South Pacific, the message is clearly universal: LET THE WORLD BE/NUCLEAR FREE.

The VAANA mural makes a powerful impact both as street art and as a work in its own right. It has, as is inevitable where such a diversity of styles and approaches is evident, its limitations. The attempt to create unity by the tukutuku panels is somewhat contrived and the strong black, red, white chevron motif tends to divert attention away

from the painting to a point *above* the work, but the individual works are strong enough to withstand this distraction and the wall is a dramatic and exciting statement on Peace.

1. I am indebted to Jill Carter-Hansen for letting me read the diary which she kept as a record of the mural and in which most of the artists recorded some comment.
  2. I would like to thank Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett for making available her personal diary for the three weeks during which the VAANA's mural was created.
  3. I would like to thank Nigel Brown for the special trouble he took to take time out to write up some of his and VAANA's objectives for the purpose of this article and also John Eaden for making available the VAANA file of clippings and reports for my use.
- Although eight artists have their names and images up on the wall, many other people participated in the project and made it possible. Sponsorship was supplied by Carter Holt, PTY Industries and Resene Paints and practical help and co-operation was given by; Don Soloman, Matt Stafford, Peter Lange, Lex Dawson, Gil Hanly, Jim McGraw, Sandi Morrison, John Williams, Marie & Richard Collins and David Blair.