



Matt Hunt, *Dreaming of a New Heaven and Earth*, oil, 2009. Courtesy of Peter McLeavey Gallery

WELLINGTON

Courtenay Place is billed the 'entertainment zone' of Wellington. By day it behaves, more or less; at night the area is not for the faint-hearted. Dozens of bars pump out white noise, while neon, testosterone and draw crowds until street sweepers arrive to erase the evidence the next day.

To stir the mix, eight double-sided light boxes by Marie Shannon are gracing the stretch of Courtenay Place near the St James Theatre until 19 December. The series of photographed notes between her partner, child and self, titled *Love Notes*, 2005, was shown earlier in the year at Hamish McKay Gallery.

It has been a revelation to see how Shannon's photographs behave in their new context outside the gallery. In the midst of Wellington's 'party zone', they can act as mood stabilisers for the fractious faction, distract a bickering couple and provide fodder for conversation. Everyone can relate to a love note.

These paper notes have been through the wars, or at least through the washing machine. They're highly evocative of history, memory and love between family members and there are plenty of narratives behind each message to engage viewers. Among the overload of neon, advertising and temptation, Shannon's poignant pieces send their generosity of spirit out into heightened surrounds. Her lightboxes are seductive beacons of familiarity amidst our rushing world. After the recent death of her partner, artist Julian Dashper, *Love Notes* has become a lasting tribute and memorial to art and family.

I have rarely seen a happier union of artworks with their surroundings than Matt Hunt's show at Peter McLeavey Gallery. Perhaps it was the afternoon light amplifying the orange underpaint; or was it the gallery's dimensions and its particular whiteness in relation to the fibrous floor matting? Hunt's *Dreaming of a New Heaven and Earth* and *the Eternal Nightmare of Hades* transformed the space into a kind of limbo.

His vision of Hell is an agitated molten nightmare where Idi Amin roasts on a spit, alien vessels deliver yet more fallen souls and agony is the order of the day. Paradise beckons in the other room – serene, blameless and glowing. Standing between these extremes, I felt stranded in my own universe somewhere between the two.

Hunt uses symbols judiciously rather than at random. He makes use of humour, comic characters, car culture and text in speech bubbles to moderate the tone of the whole.

He says, "I like fast-tracking by using poetry, spirituality, dreams and intuition, and viewing intuition as potentially as important as logic".

Rather than merely interpreting popular culture, he aims to anticipate it. "Retro is great," he says, "but I want to take it right back to ancient times. What would Moses have thought of today?"

"What I see as my job is to delve so deep... it's like a leather jacket that will last a lifetime. It's not going to be some fancy jacket that everybody loves right now, but which won't have any relevance in 20 years when the tassels go out of favour. I'm not exactly trying to please people now; I'm trying to think of a bigger concept than right now."

Hunt's work deals with extremes, but it embraces humour and has a political edge that people can build on. The McLeavey show represents a high point in this artist's quest.

Across the hall Enjoy Public Art Gallery hosted a thrilling collection of photographs in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut and Massey University School of Fine Arts. *The Urban Workshop: Cuba St Portraits* was a group exhibition combining the work of German photographers, Albrecht Fuchs and Wolfram Hahn, with photographs by 11 other artists.

Quite possibly viewers had passed these subjects on their way to the gallery in Cuba Street. Images of local identities, street people, schoolboys and both Peter and Hillary McLeavey were gathered together with great respect.

A sense of tolerance and affection for difference and individuality made this exhibition ring with pride for one of Wellington's most unique communities.

Now I'm anticipating a visit to Te Manawa, Palmerston North, to visit *The Blue Room: 13 Artists Respond in a Psychic Way*, curated by Pippa Sanderson. Skeptics, believers and the plain curious will be able to engage (or not) with the otherworldly through the work of Louise Clifton, Rebecca Pilcher, Saskia Leek, Andrea du Chatenier, Stuart Shepherd and others.

/Katy Corner