

# 16

## Foreign Assessment

*Synergy*,  
2010, raupo  
stems, and flax thread  
Lake Wanaka

*Burning Issues*,  
2013, snow grass  
fire, Albertburn  
Saddle, Wanaka

Two Wanaka-based artists want to draw attention to environmental degradation in isolated landscapes. **Avenal McKinnon** looks at their work, on show in Beijing, China.

### Temporal landscapes

The breathtaking clarity of Martin Hill and Philippa Jones' Wanaka-sourced *Synergy*, with a seemingly impossibly balanced circle of raupo stems, contrasted strikingly with the grey, industrial setting of Beijing's 798 Art District. Their exhibition "Temporal Landscapes," at the Inter Art Centre Gallery, curated by Na Risong, demonstrated the interest in China in these New Zealand Land artists –

an interest which dates back to the Pingyao Photography Festival of 2014, when as part of the project "To Save a Forest" they received a Chinese award.

A series of impeccable photographs and videos record their transient sculptures "at the most strategic moment for viewing," capturing them before they disintegrate. The materials are entirely natural items – grass, fallen tree branches, leaves, sticks, ice, and snow – belonging in the landscape, and sharing its mutability; prone to decay, withering or melting, but what makes them startling is the uncanny

remoteness of their wilderness settings. Such human intervention in these pristine, isolated areas comes as a shock and reinforces the ethos of all their work – a concern for the planet's threatened environment.

In common with many Land or Earth artists, Hill and Jones move beyond aesthetics to create site-specific works imbued with symbolic meaning. Residencies and sponsorships have enabled them to live on the edge of Mt Aspiring, and to work in Dusky Sound, Wanaka, Yosemite, Iceland, Madagascar and Antarctica. Ideological forces

# 17



dictate their sculptures, which are also a means to access the scene deeply, even theatrically. Circular forms reflect nature's cyclical systems; precarious, cantilevered materials become potent symbols of the physical laws of our universe. The subtle architecture of these ephemeral artworks extends visual perception far beyond gallery walls, to bring the temporality of the universe closer to our consciousness.

*Burning Issues* in which a tussock grass figure is literally set on fire on the Albert Burn Saddle has sped up the natural disintegration process of their structure and carries a performance

element. As an image of immolation it becomes a metaphor of protest.

The towering, enigmatic ice figure in *Antarctic Guardian* is a thought-provoking presence, challenging the right of humans to dominate the environment, while being emblematic of the need to preserve the fragile ecosystems of the earth's polar regions in the light of climate change. The figure turns its back to the dark foreground of melted ice, a stark reminder of the accelerating melting of ice shelves on the perimeter of Antarctica and the consequent rise of global sea levels which we ignore at our peril.

Hill's and Jones' determination to heighten awareness of humankind's landscape interventions is particularly apposite in the context of China, where environmental degradation is occurring on a grand scale. Their work invites the viewer to look beyond the surface of the material world and to question the part we all play in it.

Against their panoramas of nature at its grandest, their sculptures compel a different reading of clichéd beauty, creating disquiet in the most perfect scenic settings. ■