

ART

Searching for Erewhon

Samuel Butler's Darwinian fears are the starting point for the group show *Among the Machines*.

by DAVID EGGLETON

Among the Machines, a group exhibition featuring a motley crew of 14 Australian and New Zealand artists at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, takes its title and theme from an article published in the Christchurch Press in 1863, entitled "Darwin Among the Machines". Penned by Canterbury sheep farmer Samuel Butler, who later expanded on his ideas in the novel *Erewhon*, the article was the first to express Darwinian fears that machines could one day evolve consciousness and take over from human beings.

And so you enter this exhibition space, which is made up of art objects suitably located in odd nooks and crannies, looking for answers to the questions: where and what is Erewhon, and have the machines taken over yet?

A walk-through suggests science fiction scenarios aplenty, but also biblical prophecy, from Genesis to Armageddon, with Douglas Bagnall's *Recur* video work offering neural-network software generating ever-evolving patterns of pixels, and Hayden Fowler's *Goat Odyssey* video work revealing a small flock of goats repeatedly skirting what could be a sacrificial altar.

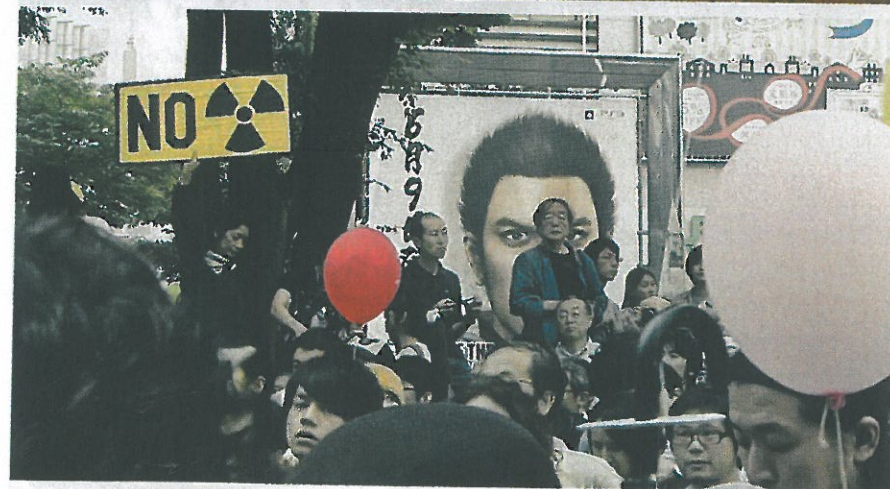
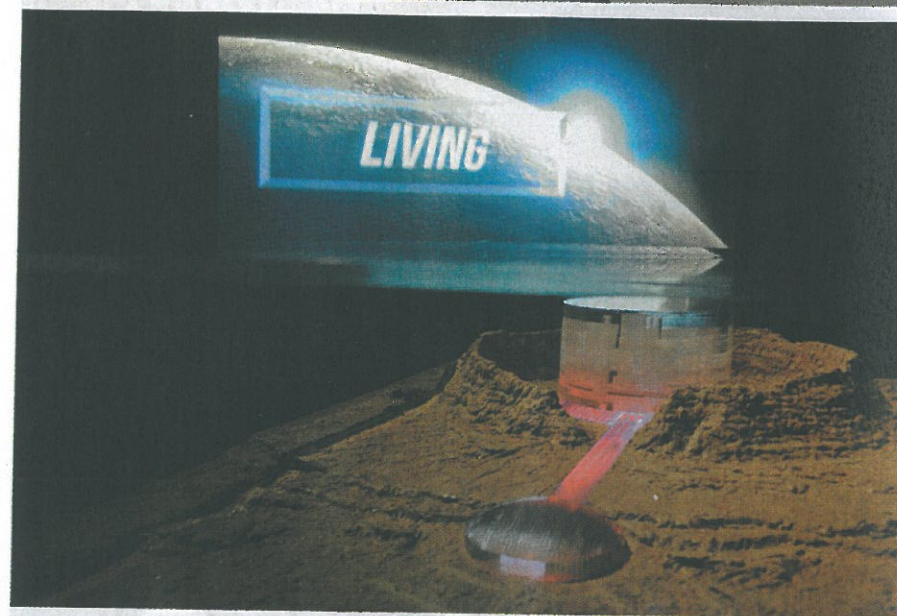
Susan Norrie's two video works convey shock and awe and a sense of impending doom as booster rockets lift payloads from

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a Japanese Aerospace Agency launching pad on Tanegashima Island, as a nearby live volcano pumps out huge plumes of smoke, while on the other big screen crowds, seething like agitated ants, protest about irradiation and nuclear reactors.

Bronwyn Holloway-Smith's upbeat installation *Destination Pioneer City* invokes the

corporate can-do promise of the colonisation of Mars. She confirms Erewhon as Elsewhere, but curiously looking a lot like the Modernism of yesterday – ideal home, ideal consumers – in capsule form. Her pioneer city, with its made-for-TV aura, also cues in Hannah and Aaron Beehre's *Twin Peaks* video homage, *Postcard for Garland*



From top, Daniel Crooks's *A Garden of Parallel Paths*; Bronwyn Holloway-Smith's *Destination Pioneer City*; Susan Norrie's *Transit*.

Briggs, in which fireflies activated by sensors twinkle spookily in a forest glade, an American Erewhon with UFOs in mind.

Ann Shelton's installation transports us to where Erewhon was conceived, the sheep station of Mesopotamia, but here it's ecologically threatened by a tide of red algae (possibly standing in for didymo), which gradually tints her large black-and-white landscape image pink. Fiona Pardington also invokes Erewhon as text, with a sequence of photographs showing the seaweed-wreathed heads of seven women of Maori descent displaying chin moko spelling out that word. Nathan Pohio's *Landfall of a Spectre* video work, a bobbing image of a sailing ship in a bottle, makes a tenuous connection with 19th-century Erewhon; while Jae Hoon Lee sees Antarctica as a kind of Erewhon represented by an endless column of white ice, filmed to suggest an organic growth, a fibrous root, locating place.

For Ruth Buchanan and Stella Brennan, Erewhon is a Nowheresville of small gestures and whispered confidences: misleading recited texts that baffle. Another kind of baffling is demonstrated by Daniel Crooks's labyrinth of Melbourne alleyways, which his video work turns into a panopticon: a generic metropolis subject to machine surveillance, as sliding walls are suddenly occluded by other sliding walls, while pedestrians abruptly disappear as if into portals.

Ronnie van Hout, perennial jokester, gives us his take on New Zealand as a passive-aggressive dystopia, with mock-confessional studies in miserabilism filmed against the backdrop of earthquake-damaged Christchurch standing in for the ruins of Erewhon.

Co-curated by Su Ballard and Aaron Kreisler, the show is sufficiently focused to give little jolts of recognition, moments of hot and cold comfort. Perhaps Douglas Bagnall locates Erewhon and the machines most accurately with his Erewhonian endgame: a cloud atlas operated by self-sourcing programming. There are buttons to push, but they are unnecessary; once set going, you can remove the human from the equation. ■

AMONG THE MACHINES, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, until November 3.