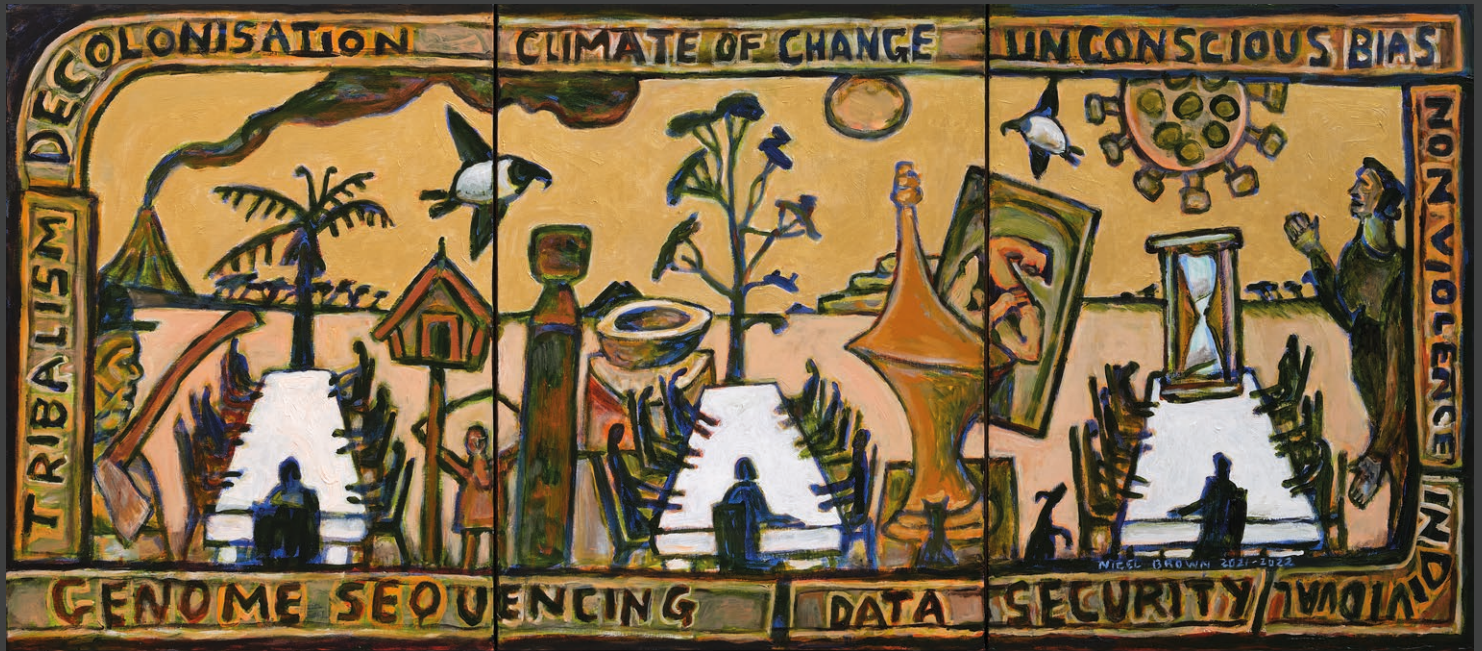




NIGEL BROWN
Cells of Human



Tables Triptych
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 1800 mm

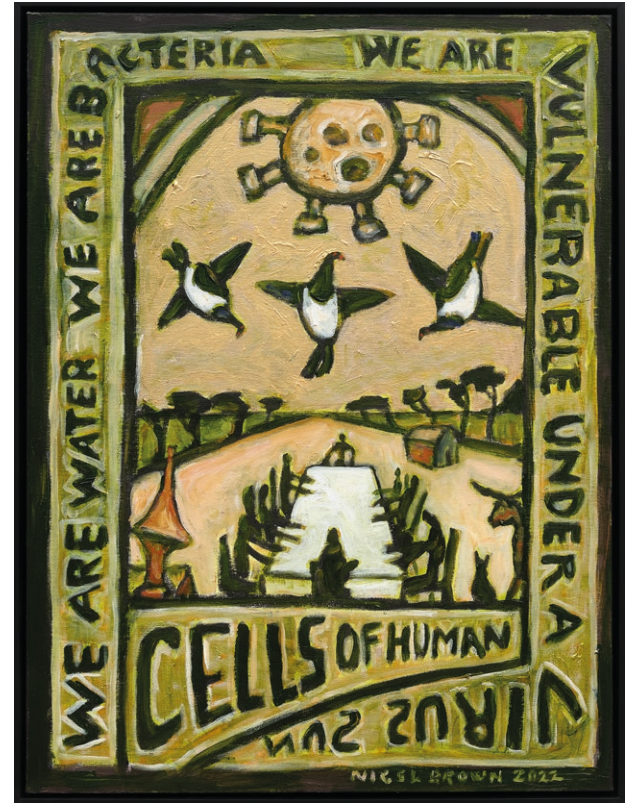
Cover & back (detail): Kerer Rakau
Acrylic on cut out ply, 880 x 1100 mm

NIGEL BROWN

Cells of Human

“Long recognised as an expert on “we Pākehā” and what makes us tick, Nigel Brown has been described as a “maggie”. And so it is in this exhibition, ‘Cells of Human’. As in so many other of his exhibitions, he not only draws on a wide range of genres and colours, but focuses on the boundaries we create to manage our world. Film, literature, comics, pop art, occasional echoes of Māori design – all are grist to his mill. He also cross-references himself and others, re-investigates, and revisits, conscious always of the complicated relationship between words, the things they purport to describe, and the visual world of planes, colours and dimensions. Sign, signified, and signifier are interrogated together. He has always been interested in change both in our world and in the past, which is how I first became interested in his work. In this exhibition change is at the forefront.

Most of these works were stacked like cards when I first saw them but his studio was littered with works from other exhibitions, brushes and paints, reference works, bric-a-brac, and debris. I got Nigel to unstack those on display that day while I sat munching and looking at them one by one. They were so him. Several impressions vied to be first – the boldness of the colours, somewhat expressionist; the stylised format with words around the edge of the frames, just like rough-hewn apple boxes when such things were made of wood, plus a palette of symbolic-iconic images within that border. Some harked back to previous exhibitions – I couldn’t spot a goldminer, but the man in the black singlet was still there, his shoulders muscly beyond belief; indigenous birds



Cells of Human
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Climate Now Table

Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm

and plants regularly appeared, the Kāhikatea being relatively new although the Kererū and Ngārara were like old friends; and various indigenous motifs were used. I remembered that he was the first - maybe the first, I've not done exhaustive research - to focus on images of indigeneity, distinctively New Zealand images: fern fronds, kiwi, gumboots, often shaped as if they were icons from the Orthodox tradition. Nigel Brown's New Zealand has always been firmly anchored in the Pacific.

Nigel's images are like his words and phrases. You expect words to unfold in sequences which cumulatively say something. Not him. The words and phrases disrupt our expectations, juxtaposing meanings, confronting each other and the viewer, the letters arranged in words, the words in phrases, but the phrases bouncing off each other while evoking a larger theme. In this case it is change. Cells are ever changing. Bodies change. So are landscapes and environments, the changes that come with age, illness, depression, elation, even the climate changing. Sometimes the juxtaposition is captured in a triptych, as with 'Tables Triptych', or the play of word and image, as with the witty 'Menstruation'; or plays of perspective and scale, as when neighbouring paintings are unidimensional and three-dimensional; or the egg-timer is bigger than the table. Everything seems obvious until one sees that visible and invisible, seen and unseen, sit in contrapuntal relationship to each other. Every painting framed in words has a wordless partner. Some are designed to make one wonder whether to laugh, turn away embarrassed, or be shocked. The cell is portrayed as the death star - the arresting symbol of Covid 19. It hovers almost everywhere. Nigel has always been alert to contemporary issues



Kerer Rakau
Acrylic on cut out ply, 880 x 1100 mm

of social justice, including climate change, and now we see him depicting change in a novel context defined by the pandemic. But change occurs at all levels. Cellular change terminates menstruation in menopause, that astonishing human innovation that has ensured that countless generations of new-born humans enjoy the protection of their grandmother and their mother. Plus the men they manage. I can't resist recalling Janet Frame's response to that wall of photographs in Toitu of "the old battleaxes who colonised this country, and their scared husbands" - but change also goes on in the world around.

Trees and birds, once dominant in these islands, are constantly changing; the land itself, whether changed by thermal eruptions or the flow of water, is also changing. We humans change too. Change is natural – birth, puberty, menopause and death. Change can also be unnatural. Cells out of control speak of cancer; other diseases and disabilities change us; and those who look after the victims of such misadventures are changed and change themselves. Optimism and pessimism oscillate. Everything comes up roses; a hard rain hits; maybe it is all too late. The colours almost speak. Blues and greens, intense or muted. Ochres, golds, browns. The rough-hewn texture of the frames and the polished table tops. He often alternates triptychs with whatever a non-triptych is. Perhaps there is no word. At first glance each panel seems the same, or almost so; on closer inspection it is in fact quite different.

I had a sense that this exhibition is the product of a particular moment – a scary and disordered moment, an historic moment.

Erik Olssen

Art collector and emeritus professor of History.

Nature of Change
Acrylic on canvas, 1350 x 800 mm





Give it a Go
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



A Different Way of Caring
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Natural Kerer
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Tree Nurturer
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Menopause
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Planet Balancer
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Sky is Blue
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Hard Rain
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



Happy Days
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



New Baby
Acrylic on canvas, 800 x 600 mm



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