

Pineapple Club, Pudding & iPhone Cover, Swizzle Stick, 2014
Mixed media
Erica van Zon
Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

Blackbird and Cycling circa 1870, 2014
Brass, silver, mild steel
Gareth Williams
Courtesy of the artist

Head, 2014
Book covers, Meccano, electric motor
Paul Cullen
Courtesy of the artist

Headcase 201410171628T, 2014
Fired stoneware, oxidised iron filings, wire
Julia Morison
Courtesy of the artist

Dol V, 2014
Mixed media
Suji Park
Courtesy of the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery

The new romantic, 2014
Opportunity shop wooden goblet with carved, painted shells
Glen Hayward
Courtesy of the artist, Starkwhite and PAULNACHE

'Pineapple' style club
From Samoa or the Solomon islands before 1925
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Bread and butter plate
Maker unknown, 1870s
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Carved pumice head
Probably made by Valentine Bevan Horowhenua
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Mouse trap
Homemade in Palmerston North or Hastings
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Paperweight
Made by Polish prisoner-of-war, Italy 1939 – 1946
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Vase
Made from two crayfish carapaces (shells)
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust

COLLECTED FICTIONS

HE KOHINGA MAHARA

Paul Cullen, Julia Morison, Erica van Zon
Suji Park, Glen Hayward, Gareth Williams

The feejee mermaid on display at the North Beach Mini Zoo and Aquarium was in a small glass cabinet near Charlie the crocodile's enclosure. The story I remember, I'm not sure where from, is of the fossilised remains of a half-fish-half-man creature. Found somewhere on the shores of coastal Japan, the grotesque by-product of some kind of post-WW2 nuclear exposure.

The zoo, on a quarter acre section bounded by houses in suburban Christchurch, was sand swept and forlorn, and thrilling to visit as a child growing up in Christchurch in the 1980s. It housed exotic fish, birds, reptiles, monkeys, bobcats, a lion, even at one time a panther, and Charlie, all in small concrete-floor enclosures. The zoo closed in 1996 but I remember both it and the mermaid with the kind of affection that gets stronger and more selective with age. It turns out I'm not the only one. An internet search produces a handful of active webpages and chatroom discussions dedicated to people exchanging childhood memories of visits to the zoo. The posts all share a similar fondness, and regret for not remembering it better.

The *North Beach Mini Zoo and Aquarium Tribute Facebook Page* features a detailed and loving account of the zoo by Alexandra resident Alan Thomas. His research describes the mermaid as the shrunken head of a monkey stitched onto the body of a fish and he ends his article pondering what might have happened to it. Further searching over on *zoochat.com* reveals an almost comprehensive history of the zoo and the lives of the inhabitants after its closure, all pieced together by different contributors to the site. Someone has posted some exhilarating images from the mid 1980s, but unfortunately none of the mermaid. On March 11, 1998, The Press ran a query from a reader on the whereabouts of the 'very ugly man-fish'. Days later the unnamed owner of the mermaid came forward: he had bought it at auction after the zoo's closure, revealing it to be not a fossil, but a ceramic mould of a monkey's head grafted to a reptile's body with a fish's tail, made by Italian ceramicists for American circus man P.T. Barnum.

It's possible there was something included in the mermaid's display revealing the fossil as a hoax but I don't remember, it seemed real to me. And for all my interest in seeing the mermaid again, I don't need to, to know my love of it was in the inexplicable nature of the *thing*. Arcane and monstrous, it was left to its own charms to do the telling. Like nothing of a zoo or museum experience today, where mystery and wonder come off second best to the zillion different ways a *thing* might be explained.

The Mini Zoo's mermaid would find itself in good company in the depths of Te Manawa's natural history collection, surrounded by thousands of objects of every conceivable variety: fabrics, fossils, ceramics, utensils, weapons, tools, toys, etc. On the storage shelves, uncategorised and unexplained this mass of artefacts could just about be the strangest time capsule on earth. *Collected Fictions* begins its life here—in the storage rooms of the museum—an exhibition of six collection objects displayed alongside newly commissioned counterparts, made in response, by six New Zealand artists: Paul Cullen, Julia Morison, Erica van Zon, Suji Park, Glen Hayward and Gareth Williams.

Object 352: Pineapple club, (Samoa or Solomon Islands, pre 1925)

Artist: Erica van Zon

A short mace-like club with pointy regular and repeating studs on its head, which, hence the name, look quite a bit like a pineapple. It could be a weapon or a tool. van Zon in response gives us a medley of pineapple inspired objects: *Pineapple Club Tapestry*, *iPhone Cover*, *Pudding and Swizzle Stick*. It's an assemblage of associations, forming a sort of brief personal history of the fruit spanning the decades of the artist's own life: breezy fashion prints, joke shop accessories, fruity cocktails and optimistic recipes for crushed pineapple in a can all feature.

Object 81/93/3: Bread and butter plate (1870s)

Artist: Gareth Williams

A small blue and white china plate, no bigger than a contemporary side-plate, featuring a seemingly innocuous image of a woman on a tricycle driven by two 'negro' boys. *Blackbird and Cycling circa 1870* by Gareth Williams extracts the tricycle from the plate rendering it 3D in brass and silver, and introduces a silhouette of a single blackbird. The blackbird is Williams' reference to the lesser-known practice of slavery (blackbirding) in the Pacific around the period of the plate's provenance. Indigenous people of islands throughout the Pacific (Niue, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, New Hebrides) were coerced through deception and kidnapping into labour in mines and on plantations in Peru, Australia and Fiji.

Object 91/83/497: Carved pumice head

Artist: Paul Cullen

The bust of a Maori woman from the collection of the late Valentine Bevan of Ngati Raukawa ki Kapiti descent, Bevan was a carver and may have carved the head himself. The bust, much like a portrait, is an art form designed to communicate a likeness to its subject, but here the subject is strange and otherworldly (there is evidence of pumice being used historically in Maori culture for carving human figures representative of gods and as monuments to the memory of killed tribal members). While we'll never know who the subject of Bevan's carving was, we do know it spoke keenly to his interests: he was known in his community as a collector, particularly of items of Maoritanga, he displayed objects, including the head, in the front room of an old street-front shop

in Manakau. Paul Cullen's *Head* is a bust made in reply. Constructed from secondhand book covers and Meccano, *Head* combines Cullen's set of interests: Naum Gabo; Picasso; Braque; Tatlin's Monument to the Third International; and a kind of 'backyard scientist' approach to making, where matter (buckets, books, toys, tables, chairs etc.) is reconfigured into systems and schematics, communicating newfound reflections of the natural and material world.

Object 240: Paperweight (Italy, 1939 – 1946)

Artist: Suji Park

Made by a Polish prisoner of war sometime during the period of WW2, the metal paperweight features a splayed eagle standing on a pentagon shaped ball. Park takes the original form of the paperweight and grows it into a numinous and disorderly mass, the thing shifts and mutates: fine and recognisable details (wings, stairs, vessel) deteriorate into a mountainous terrain. *Dof V* exists in the order of dreamscapes and fantasy, Park subverts landscape and logic and renders it all in a chalky rainbow hue.

Object 74/197/1: Mouse trap (Palmerston North or Hastings)

Artist: Julia Morison

A homemade mouse trap, likely to be from the early to mid 1900s, donated by the Compton family (Palmerston North and Hastings). The trap, made from timber, steel, mesh and wire, is extraordinary for its craftsmanship and ingenuity. For *Headcase 201410171628T*, Morison simulates the structure and appearance of the trap, distorting the barrel into the form of a human head. The result is aberrant, theatrical and seriously frightening. The work is part of a larger series, *Headcase*, a suite of heads made of stoneware and porcelain and Morison's treatment makes no exceptions: orifices are bound in rope; distended and deformed appendages feature; teeth, lips and limbs are not where they should be. It's surreal and unholy, horror story stuff.

Object 91/83/782: Vase

Artist: Glen Hayward

Also exhibited from the collection of Valentine Bevan, a vase made of two conjoined crayfish shells with decorative shell detailing. The vase is now visibly dated with a beachy, homemade, tourist-shop charm. Hayward replies in kind, *The new romantic* shares the vase's brazen disregard for high fashion. A goblet purchased from the Gonville Hospice shop in Whanganui is inlaid with carved shells, modeled from shells collected by the artist at Castlecliff beach. The exact nature of the ornament isn't clear – it's part vessel, part totem and part mantelpiece talking-point.

What *The new romantic* proposes above all else is that we're not to know, or care, what's yet to date or to fall in and out of favour, and any lasting connection we make with an object or a *thing* (be it stylish or style-less) is oblivious to time by any measure. Our museums and art galleries (and to a lesser extent mini zoos) are in the long game of safekeeping a mindboggling array of matter: as the custodians of the strange, the outlandish, the lost and the adored, they do the remembering for us. *Collected Fictions* charts just six of these, and gladly adds six more.

Kim Paton
Curator