

## Pioneer Highway: paintings by Tim Croucher

The stretch from the Square, down Pioneer Highway, past Jackeytown Road, Karere Lagoon and out to Foxton, measured the centre of my early childhood. As I grew, my area expanded to include Shannon, Feilding, the Whirokino Trestle and river bank, the Pohongina Valley, and up to the Desert Road and Taupo. And, of course, to Wellington.

Between the late 1800s and 1940s, flax milling was a big industry in much of the area around Tiakitahuna. A substantial flax mill was located at the Opiki Bridge. We'd often drive across its creaking boards... it's still a fascinating place to visit because of the spectre of its towers and the ragged wires that invite climbing.

Flax growing and milling altered the swampy landscape, enflamed tensions between Māori and colonials, encouraged the formation of trade unions, and polluted the Manawatū River.

Visiting Manawatū and Rangitikei now, I like that it's all shifted and changed to accommodate current needs and amusements. The reminders are still there, but there are carparks, boat ramps, racetracks and 'light no fires' signs.

Zeus Gallery of Tauranga presents this exhibition in a different setting from its original in Palmerston North. Travelling across Waikato, Hauraki, Coromandel and Bay of Plenty, the scenes and imagery unfold in similar ways as they do for me in Manawatu. There's more of the idyllic and affluent, but the same kind of histories and adaptations appear.

Pioneer Highway comprises a suite of paintings that mingle historical, pastoral, and imaginary situations; it is a tender and playful reflection on a set of unglamorous yet peculiar locations and the identities that link to them.