

Speaking art is a first language for Tuffery

Michel Tuffery's most famous works were made of recycled corned beef tins but a new retrospective of the Wellington-born artist also looks at his love of history and a sailor he calls 'Cookie'. **Tom Cardy** reports.

WHEN Michel Tuffery was a pupil at college he would travel into Wellington to do remedial reading classes. Tuffery, regarded today as one of New Zealand's best artists, had dyslexia. But he knew the bus and train timetables and they came in handy. "I think I was a bit of an oddball because on the days I wasn't playing rugby I used to sneak into town and go to the art galleries..." Wellington-born Tuffery, of Samoan, Tahitian and Cook Island descent, continued to visit the dealer galleries, including the influential Peter McLeavey. He was already addicted to museums. As a child, he was awestruck when he first glimpsed the museum's giant moa towering over him. Tuffery's giant bulls made of recycled corned beef tins — the works he is best known for — are in part his way of reconnecting with that feeling. For Tuffery, art "has always been my first language". "That was the only way I could tell a story. I still remember at primary school drawing when I was 5 or 6. There was one blank page and there were all these lines on it and I

thought it was a bit odd to have lines on the page. The teacher was writing text and I just wrote down the text and then I started drawing Eskimos." Fortunately, Tuffery's parents were supportive of his love of drawing and art as well as rugby. After school Tuffery and his mates would sit down with ballpoint pens and draw on a big wad of old dot matrix computer paper. "We watched World War 2 or World War 1 black and white films on Sundays and we'd draw these war scenes from one sheet of computer paper to another," he says. Another inspiration from visiting galleries and museums was history — particularly the first contacts between indigenous peoples and Europeans in the Pacific. "I thought history was just World War 1 and 2 and that's pretty much it." Captain James Cook — or "Cookie" as Tuffery affectionately calls him — plays a big part in the exhibition. When he was 9 years old a teacher took him to an exhibition in Wellington about Cook's death in Hawaii. "I saw the paintings and I felt sorry for Captain Cook and I really hated the Hawaiians for doing what they did to him," he says. But as Tuffery got older he discovered there were other non-European sides to the story of Cook, which opened his eyes to who was also around at that time. Works in the show take inspiration from artists such as Sydney Parkinson, who travelled with Cook on the Endeavour and Cook's translator and navigator Tupaia, who learned to paint in watercolour and gave his own depictions of what happened on the voyages. You also quickly learn, listening to Tuffery, that behind much of the inspiration for his projects is detailed research — especially history. He started early. While an art student at Otago Polytechnic in the late 1980s he disappeared for three months to the Pacific islands to research traditional art forms. In part, it was his protest against the polytechnic's regimented and Euro-centric curriculum.

"I questioned that whole idea of 'you learn to paint and you do sculpture'. I got myself into a lot of trouble in my first year. I used to sneak into the sculpture department and use their bandsaw and then I'd go to ceramics and I'd mix the mediums up. The tutors were questioning of that whole idea of playing, but I thought the whole idea of going to art school was to learn the craft and learn the skill, but at the same time to play. To me, it was the ultimate paradise." But this week, as the last touches are put on his new show, Tuffery almost sounds like he's in paradise again. "I'm feeling really excited about this. It's almost like 'Okay, I've done all the hard work. I've done my research'. Now it's opened up more doors to extend some of the stories — especially the history side of things." — Fairfax (Wellington)



Corned beef bulls: Artist Michel Tuffery at his big new retrospective exhibition on at Pataka in Porirua. DOMINION POST



Manscaping: A haircut at sea for Mark Wilson.

Calm before the storm

This is the fourth of an occasional series from **Mark Wilson**, the Southlander sailing the Speight's pub to London.

OUT HERE YOU truly realise how small and diverse New Zealand is. After 15 days of seeing nothing but blue skies and blue ocean for miles, you truly appreciate those times back home when you can drive from the mountains to the beach in less than two hours. And give me a cold Southland night any time to combat the oppressive heat of our cabin. We have been plugging along just north of the equator following favourable ocean currents for 10 days now and are on the downward slide to Panama. We should arrive by August 31 barring any mishaps. However, from what the captain has been saying this may be the calm before the storm as we head through the Caribbean bang-smack in the middle of hurricane season and with the Lida being a coastal shipping vessel, which rocks and rolls on a calm day and really gets going in a storm, we could be in for a bumpy ride. A good bet would be on a few more bouts of sea sickness for some of the boys (Cleavey, you know I'm referring to you here). Action on board the Lida, in the past week, has been very competitive. Presently, we are halfway through our sporting spectacular with the first series tied at one-all between the

Highlanders (Jamie, Marty and me) and North Bridge (James, Lindsay and Tim). We only have volleyball left and Tim is a semi-pro, so the south will have to man-up to have a chance of clinching the series. Being a Southlander you get used to copping a raw deal from the larger provinces and the deck cricket was no exception with the southern team having to contend with some questionable Australian umpiring and dodgy ball interference from the North Bridge team. We have also turned the Ale House into a glorious sporting arena fully equipped with a home-made table tennis table, darts and indoor rugby, under lights. As with any sport, especially ones played in bars, injuries are common and I managed to rip the nail off my big toe during Friday night football. Best thing about being out here is that there is no one to tell you off for playing rugby or cricket inside — how good would that have been growing up. Looking ahead this week is the MV Lida Film Festival, with all the lads having to make a three-minute film about time on board. Hopefully, they will make it to the website and the public can decide who is going to be the next Peter Jackson. Marty and I have also decided to become taggers and have built a stencil shaped like the Speight's stars and we are going to paint a set on the main deck so all the future crews of the Lida can remember us. We are having a slight problem and can't find any orange paint so I've been trying to think back to Otatara Primary School where we learned which paint to mix together to get orange. Until next time.

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