

Small but perfectly formed

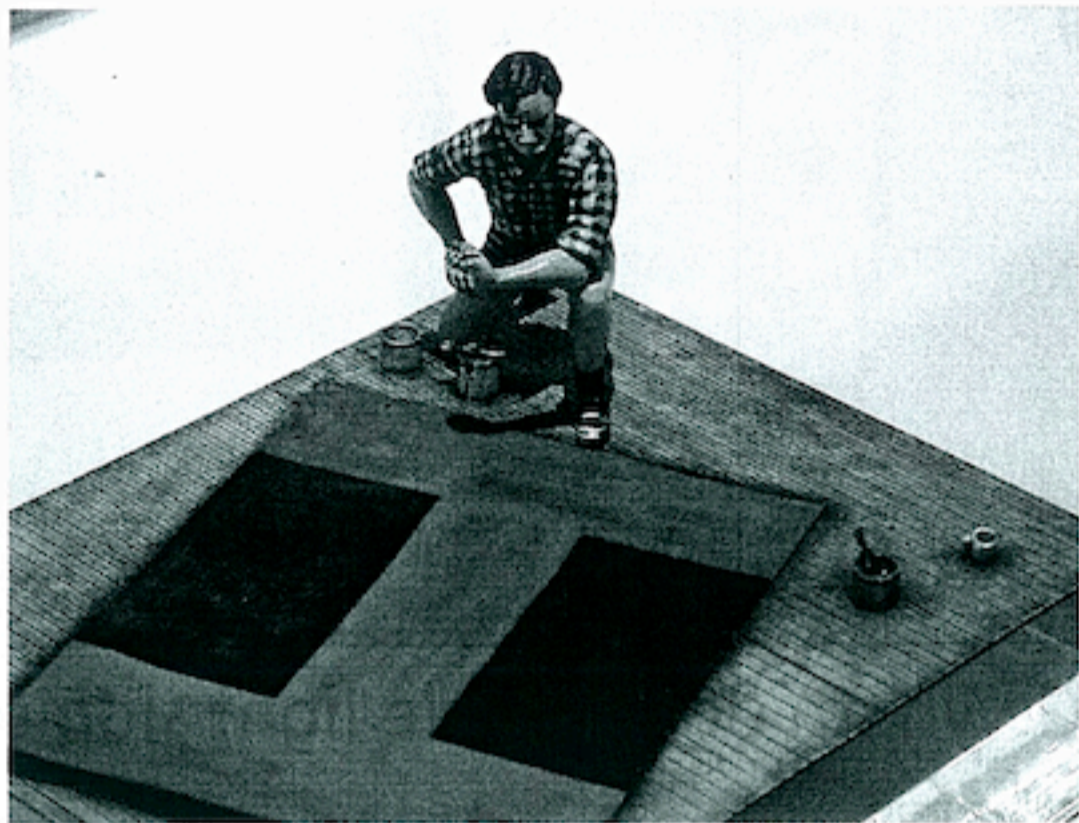
IT'S A SMALL WORLD, Pataka, Porirua (to September 21).

RESPONDING TO WHAT HAS BECOME something of a trend in contemporary New Zealand art, *It's a Small World* brings together nine artists who use models and dioramas as the basis of their works. Although it's a fairly general survey, it's hard not to compare the artists who have been working in this manner for a while with those who seem to have recently clambered on the bandwagon.

In one sense, the initiator of the trend is the now Melbourne-based Ronnie van Hout, who has been making puzzling, funny and engaging little scenes with all the skill and obsession of a model-railway enthusiast for several years. A small selection of his works from the late 90s are included, ranging from scenes of abject rural life – at least one of which has decidedly scatological overtones (something about what a bear does in the woods) – to what is essentially his self-portrait stand-in, a be-suited chimpanzee, slumped over a bar, drink and ashtray nearby. Two "After McCahon" models show the great painter in miniature, early and late in his career. For some reason it's the later McCahon, with his checked shirt and stubbles, that has the greater pathos – he appears as an ordinary bloke, one who might as well be digging the garden as painting sublime landscapes.

Wellington artist Terry Urbahn's work perhaps fits most closely with the exhibition's premise, underscored by actual museum dioramas on show in an adjacent room. Transforming discarded museum displays into often raucous media-scapes, Urbahn's mock-up of the Museum of New Zealand's *Art Now* exhibition is probably the best of these here. The quieter approach of "Designation" (2002), a found model of urban development at Petone overlaid with paranormal sites, shows a new and interesting direction.

Of the newcomers, Brendon Wilkinson's work clearly stands out, picking up on van Hout's skill and wit, and underpinning these with the gravitas of postcolonial and contemporary issues. Although some of his best works aren't here (such the fantastic model of an imagined incident at the Echelon Station at Waihopai), those that are – including a post-Tarawera eruption Maori village – show Wilkinson's ability to use his



Above, "After McCahon", by Ronnie van Hout. Right, "High", by Chris Clements.

technical skill in the service of a deeper conceptual programme.

That balance – between the gee-whizzness of the model-making and more substantial issues – is by no means struck by all in the exhibition. Diane Prince's works compare unfavourably with Wilkinson's in this respect. Although they share some of the same issues, Prince's works seem overwhelmed by their earnestness and lack of economy. Matt Couper's bad-boy renderings of New Zealand art-world figures and events, staged with Manga dolls and clumsy scene painting, fail to deliver any serious point, and alongside van Hout's, look decidedly clumsy. Matt Hunt's fantasies of himself as a comic-book superhero fighting against an impending apocalypse have nowhere near the appeal of his similarly themed but more studiously executed miniature paintings.

The works of the remaining artists – Chris Clements, Stuart Shepherd and Carey Young – all have distinct appeal. Clements's minimal approach is highly effective. In "The Swing" a toy car tyre is suspended from a twig, making for a neat evocation of the memories of childhood, as much in what it represents as how. Shepherd's work is similarly lo-tech, but also more ambitious. A model landscape, assembled from the most unprepossess-



ing objects, is set up before a camera and relayed to a monitor. Representation and reality collide to nice effect. Young's works are different again, lighter and more whimsical than anything else in the exhibition. In the series *Fifty ways to leave your lover*, little white figures on felt-covered matchboxes act out the dramas of relationship breakdowns. As the song that gives the show its title says, it's a world of laughter, it's a world of tears. ■