

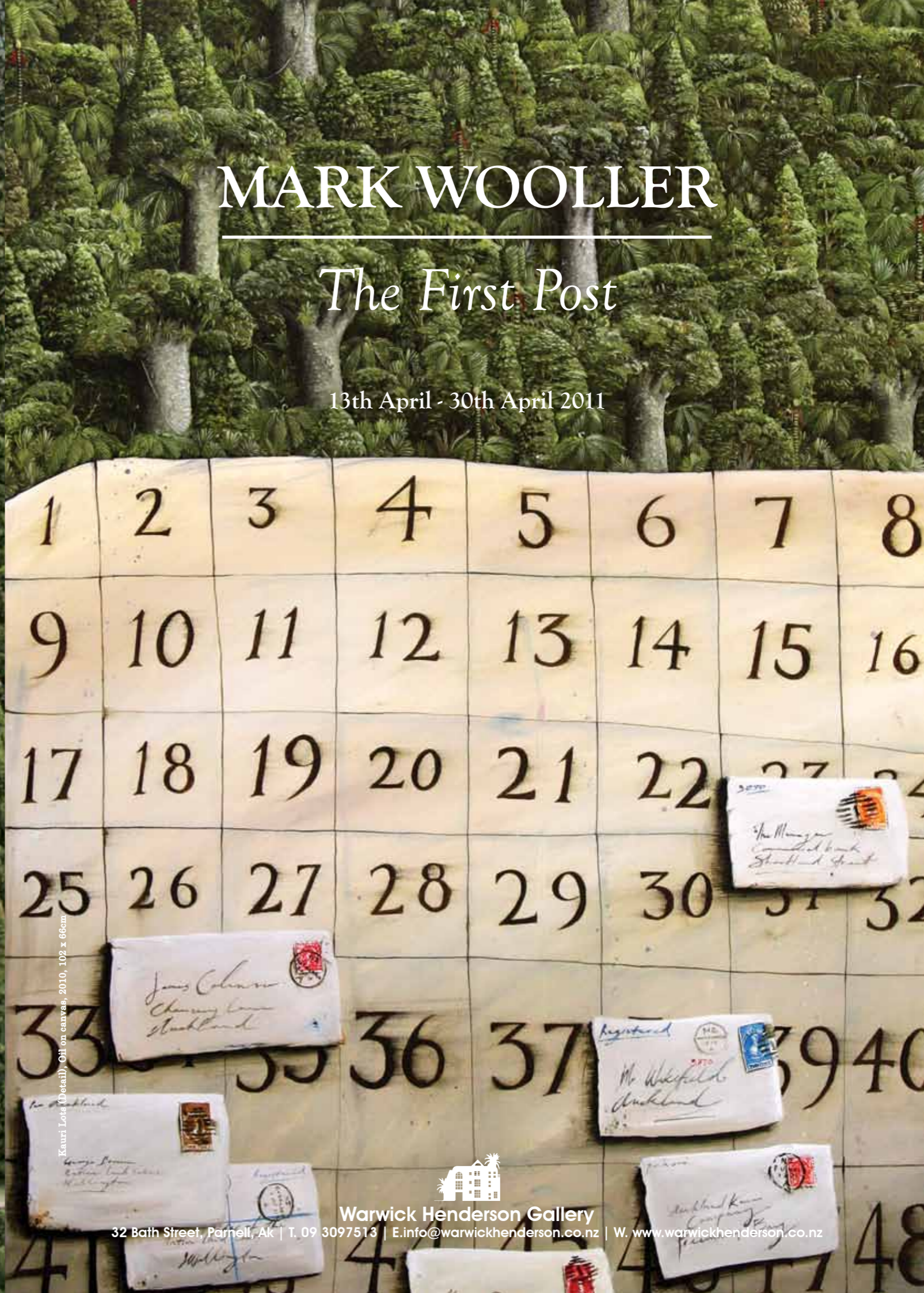


Parihaka Road (Detail), Oil on canvas, 2010, 123 x 106cm



Warwick Henderson Gallery

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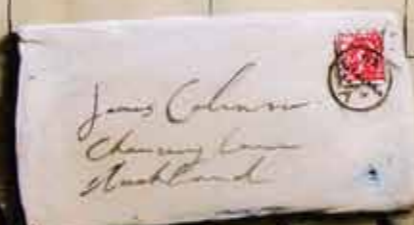


# MARK WOOLLER

## *The First Post*

13th April - 30th April 2011

Kauri Logs (Detail), Oil on canvas, 2010, 102 x 66cm



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Lost Waterfall, Oil on canvas, 2011, 101 x 121cm



Horotiu Stream, Oil on canvas, 2010, 102 x 70cm



Wellesley and Queen (Detail), Oil on canvas, 2010, 101 x 122cm

## Mark Wooller The First Post

Preview Opening: Tuesday 12th April 2011 5.30pm - 7.30pm.

Mark Wooller's new series of bushscapes explore a subject which has featured sometimes controversially in New Zealand's history, both from an economic and ecological standpoint. The economic value of New Zealand's vast forests was not lost on early explorers and entrepreneurs and as early as the 1820's trading posts and sawmills were established in New Zealand. There are records of French explorers taking on spars from "Van Diemens Land" in 1772 and further evidence of this early logging includes reports of ships fitted with Kauri spars at Trafalgar [1805]. The vessel *The City of Edinburgh* is recorded as having visited New Zealand three times alone in 1809 to take on timber bound for Australia and South Africa.<sup>1</sup> In 1827 Augustus Earle reported, "some enterprising merchants at Port Jackson have established a dockyard and a number of sawpits. Several have been laden with timber and spars."<sup>2</sup>

Mark Wooller's paintings entice the viewer with luscious images of native New Zealand forest (some of which remains to this day), but in many paintings the forest becomes a backdrop or foil to other features incorporated into the narrative. Wooller explains "I found old documents relating to the division of land. These old plates and deed documents had appeal with these neatly drawn out numbered squares laid on grids offering settlers a chance to purchase their own piece of paradise.... Streets and views we are so familiar with years ago would have been covered in dense vegetation, to step back and witness the inevitable tide of progress, the laying out of lots and sections the measuring and creation of land ownership out of what was, years before, a land of forest."<sup>3</sup>

This deforestation impacted on the settlers as well. Many early immigrants persuaded by picturesque lithographs sanctioned by the New Zealand Company arrived to find the promise of paradise somewhat misleading. Rather than a picture postcard they found

a rugged landscape often scarred with deforestation, vast areas of tree-stumps, scrubland and primitive tracks submerged in an antipodean wilderness. Despite this, immigration and settlement advanced following official colonization in 1840. By 1855 New Zealand had its first postage stamps, the "full faced Queen Victoria" issue. In the context of this series of paintings this early postal history is very relevant.

While there is an element of the surreal to Wooller's bushscapes the historical background and theme is based on actual documents including period postal stamps. In the work *Parihaka Road*, Mt Taranaki is depicted as a stylised icon after Charles Heaphy or Christopher Perkins, the snow topped cone surrounded by thick forest. The early dirt roads appear carved into the forest, some numbered with their street or lot numbers. The painting *Wellesley and Queen* also displays other ephemera such as postcards, letters, land deeds and an early plan of Albert Park. Wooller states, "the technique I have adopted for this series, the finely detailed bush often frames the plans or in some works the bush itself is the focus of the painting. I looked to the works of the 17th century Northern European painters, who explored the landscape or vegetation as initially a backdrop and then later as a subject itself."<sup>4</sup>

While Wooller has supplanted these early roads into a bushscape which did not exist in the city sites 150 years ago it is most certain it did centuries before. Philip Temple nevertheless in his book *Presenting New Zealand* stated, "It is estimated about one quarter of New Zealand's forests were destroyed (before contact) mainly through deliberate or accidental fires."<sup>5</sup>

The artist has employed stamps (depicting Queen Victoria) as symbols of colonization and the subsequent impact on New

Zealand's native forests. The postal theme is also apparent in the miniatures Wooller has painted, with Rata entwined Kauri trunks and Nikau Palms speckled with red berries, which resemble a postcard, originating from any period. The stamps painted into the miniatures and other bushscapes depicting Queen Victoria (an image which was used by England throughout the colonies on postage stamps) were used as stamp duty on many of the first land transaction documents in the middle of the 19th century. While carefully painting these stamps into the bushscapes Wooller has also created a "painting within a painting". Early New Zealand stamps were in the main designed by artists and the first "Full faced Queens" from 1855 depicted in these paintings originated from a painting by Alfred Chalon, a Swiss born English artist.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between the stamps, the bushscapes and the land change depending on the subject matter. Wooller says "Layered over the street plans I have added items of postal history such as old envelopes, stamps and deed documents. These add a dimension of human transactions, our legal to and fro over property, wrangling and trading between banks, land courts and accountants, these items of history reflecting how some things never change. My use of sepia, browns and earthy greens give an aged appearance to the works, hopefully making them timeless and hard to place in context of our history, but the subject and its offbeat placement of street layout and virgin forest are more of a contemporary way of seeing the land and our impact on her."<sup>7</sup> The miniatures he has completed for example also reference the first New Zealand pictorial stamps printed in 1898. It is perhaps unsurprising in the context of this aspect of New Zealand history, the first pictorial stamps issued in 1898 ignored bush scenes completely. It was not until 1940 when the magnificent Kauri

tree *Tane Mahuta*, situated in the Waipoua forest in Northland surrounded by bush was featured in the centennial series of stamps designed by James Berry. Perhaps in recognition of this some of the paintings feature a *Tane Mahuta* type tree dwarfing surrounding bush.

It is poignant to note the Huia birds in the 1898 pictorials were extinct by 1907. Sadly in the relative blink of an eye between the 19th and 20th century, native forests and their wildlife were largely erased from the landscape. Philip Temple in his illustrated history of New Zealand also claims "over a period of no more than two or three hundred years as many as half a million Moea were killed, until this bird family became extinct."<sup>8</sup>

This new series of work by Wooller is not just a celebration of New Zealand's forests both past and present but a thoughtful narrative highlighting an iconic and often controversial aspect of New Zealand's history. It also serves as a reminder to care for and cherish what remains.

1. "Early New Zealand, Bretts Historical Series", pub Brett NZ 1887 p59, p130.  
 In Bretts description of du Fresnes landing in New Zealand he quotes the West coast of New Zealand as "Van Diemens Land" which became known as Tasmania.  
 2. *ibid*  
 3. Mark Wooller, Artists statement, email to WHG Jan 2011  
 4. *ibid*  
 5. Philip Temple, "Presenting NZ", New Holland 2008 p15  
 6. Richard Wolfe "It's in the Post" C Potton Pub 2010 p16, 17  
 7. Mark Wooller Artists statement, email to WHG Jan 2010.  
 8. Philip Temple "Presenting New Zealand" New Holland 2008 p15  
 Further Reading:  
 "Visions of New Zealand" Gordon Brown David Bateman Pub 1988  
 "New Zealand's Heritage" Paul Hamlyn Pub 1970  
 Warwick Henderson March 2011



Kauri Post 1, Oil on canvas, 2010, 16 x 16cm