

Romancing science

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5:30 AM Saturday Jun 9, 2012

Peter James Smith's new show proves variety is his spice of life



No. 12 Euclid Alone by Peter James Smith is on display at Orexart gallery in Auckland. Photo / Sarah Ivey

One key word in contemporary art is variety, not only variety across the whole spectrum of art but also within an individual artist's work. *On the Nature of Things*, an exhibition by Peter James Smith at Orexart, contains brilliant Romantic painting, still-life, meditations on poetry, science, mathematics and collections of found objects.

One work, *The Wasteland*, is the result of a trip to Antarctica and shows a vast bay of sea ice and co-ordinates indicating due south. The painting refers to T.S. Eliot's famous poem and the image is shown as on a book with a quotation lettered on it, "Who is the third that always walks beside you?" and the signature of Ernest Shackleton. Eliot's line is quoting a remark by the explorer about how in dangerous places a mysterious figure joined his explorers.

It also refers to the description in the Book of Luke of the two disciples who were walking to Emmaus and did not at first perceive that it was Jesus walking beside them. So a spiritual and mystical element is introduced too.

None of this would work at all if the ice, hills and sky were not so finely painted and if the book format did not suggest a historical aspect.

This layering of meaning is less obvious in *Palimpsest* where a sheet of parchment has had a scientific table erased from it and later equations in black added which have in turn been superseded by modern mathematics in white. The glorious sunset in *On the Nature of Things*, the title of a work by the Roman writer Lucretius, which gives its name to the show, encapsulates the thinking behind the exhibition.

Other works that incorporate found objects are less convincing. A black tomb of boxes surmounted by a cross made of rulers, which is measurement defining the spiritual, does not have the moving power of a nearby painting of the cross that is the Scott Memorial in Antarctica.

Nevertheless, Peter James Smith's combination of high Romanticism with science remains an outstanding personal style and achievement.