On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer, a sculptural installation by Michael Parekowhai, is situated in the Palazzo Loredan dell’Ambasciatore on the Grand Canal.

The overall title for the project is based on a poem by the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet John Keats. Keats describes a Spanish adventurer climbing to the top of a hill in what is now Panama and looking out over the Pacific and surveying its potential riches for the first time.

The works that make up the installation include: He Kōreora Pārkau mo Te Awanui o Te Motu: story of a New Zealand river (a carved Steinway grand piano), A Peak in Darien (a standing bull and piano), Kapa Haka (Officer Taumaha) and Constitution Hill (olive saplings). The carved piano He Kōreora Pārkau mo Te Awanui o Te Motu: story of a New Zealand river is being played during the exhibition, including special performances. If the sculptures are a source of visual surprise for visitors, it is the music that greets them when they arrive.

Michael Parekowhai sums up: “While the objects in On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer are important, the real meaning of the work comes through the music. Just as my work Ten Guitars was not about the instruments themselves but about the way they brought people together, Chapman’s Homer is central to understanding On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer because music fills a space like no object can.”

Michael Parekowhai
A Peak in Darien 2011
bronze, stainless steel
two pieces: 2200 x 2850 x 1750mm, 520 x 1050 x 320mm
photography: Jennifer French
Michael Parekowhai is of Māori (Ngāti Whakarongo) and Pākehā descent. Born in Porirua, New Zealand in 1968, he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (1990) and Master of Fine Arts (2000) from the University of Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts, where he is now Associate Professor in Fine Arts. In 2001 he was awarded an Arts Foundation of New Zealand Laureate.

His art practice and exhibition history span almost two decades and he is widely viewed as one of New Zealand’s most important contemporary artists. His narratives are often complex as he draws on an abundant range of both vernacular and collective vocabularies which he manufactures into the narrative structures and formal languages of his work. Although key themes of his practice may be described as deliberate ‘takes’ on notions of introduced species and culture, potentially overt political dimensions are downplayed. Ideas of camaraderie, tools of teaching and childhood learning, as well as quotations from the canon of modern art history and from popular culture openly play out in many of his stories.

While Parekowhai’s work is often described as emphasising the extraordinariness of the ordinary, each body of work provides layers of potential meaning and significance – they remain open to any depth of interpretation and storytelling.

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