

The focus of BackStory is our cultural history, so it will be fascinating what future cultural historians make of 2021. The world continues to grapple with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and although Donald Trump failed to win a second presidential term in the United States at the end of 2020, liberal democracy globally has been severely challenged by a wave of ‘populism’. However, this term might infer a far more cohesive political and social movement than, for example, the disparate groups such as evangelical Christians, white supremacists, anti-taxers, anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, disgruntled rust-belt workers and the pro-gun lobby that supported Donald Trump’s presidency. This coalition has been succinctly described as ‘the lunatic fringe seeking to become the lunatic mainstream’.

In the face of divisive politics and a global health crisis what is the role of the artist. African-American artist Charles White was unequivocal: ‘Art must be an integral part of the struggle’. This is a view that Christchurch artist Michael Reed appears to share. Dorothee Pauli writes that his concern for social justice first appeared in his work when he began to support Trade Aid in the late 1970s, and more notably so during the Springbok Rugby Tour of 1981. Reed states that the production of ‘visual sedatives for the established middle-class art print market’ was not the art he was interested in. Pauli argues that the artist’s internationally focused and politically motivated art may well be the reason why his name does not appear more frequently in this country’s mainstream arts publications.

Changing attitudes towards art is the focus of Anya Samaras-inghe’s look at Victorian artworks held by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. She writes that although there is value in exhibiting Victorian painting in its historical context, it must also be recognized that these works are open to multiple interpretations and present opportunities for nationalist cultural narratives to communicate with the margins, academia to negotiate with the public, and for the past to enter a dialogue with the present.

Emerging on to the auction market in 2017 after more than a century in private hands, a Victorian portrait by Louis John Steele features the prominent Auckland settler and businessman John Logan Campbell. Jane Davidson-Ladd says that this portrait, Sir John Logan Campbell at Kilbryde (c.1902), gives us insights into the artist, his subject and their relationship. Furthermore, she argues that Steele had very ambitious aims with his portraiture to do no less than ‘create an artistic vernacular particular to this country and its people’.

In her design and architecturally focused contribution to this issue, Alison Breese looks at an aspect of our cultural history that took the Victorians underground. Nineteenth century residents of Dunedin were concerned about the poor levels of hygiene in their city. They feared that conditions could replicate the urban squalor of the ‘old world’ they had left behind. As Dunedin grew, especially with the expansion caused by the gold rush of the 1860s, local government struggled to provide the essential sanitation infrastructure. By the turn of the twentieth century the Dunedin City Council started to plan for underground public conveniences which although more expensive than their ‘above ground’ counterparts, were favoured because of Victorian sensibilities that all bodily activities should be removed from view. Dunedin’s underground conveniences were designed to be aesthetically pleasing and state of the art.

If the Victorian citizens of Dunedin valued the aesthetically pleasing in urban design they could well concur with the practice of New Zealand designer Peter Haythornthwaite for whom the idea of beauty and what constitutes good design are entwined. In a profile commentary Michael Barrett looks at the ideas which inform the work of ‘one of this country’s original design thinkers’. Barrett says that for this designer beauty through honesty of expression and resolution became something to strive for and a career-long commitment.

One of the aims of good design is to use it to promote the idea of societal advancement. The notion that design is about more than merely fashion or creating product that is more efficient to manufacture but about creating objects of beauty that also contribute to a more equitable and sustainable society. In this issue examples of art and design as positive social contributors might be a welcome antidote to the negative impacts of a pandemic and political divisiveness.