

- Lucken | Celtic word | anything drawn together | contracted | close-joined | linked

Mister Lucken is a shapeshifter. A figure who grasps multiple narratives in a single form. Someone who understands conjunctions and linkages; who is always attuned to notes in the margin; who can coin new words when required. Think of this alphabet as his illustrated thesaurus.

'Lucken's Alphabet' is the last of a trilogy of exhibitions that began with 'Lucken's Margin', shown at Two Rooms Gallery in July 2023 and 'Lucken's Wing', installed at Sculpture on the Gulf in 2024 (now in the collection of the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua, Whanganui).

The 'Book of Kells' is an illuminated Manuscript from the 8th Century - a calligraphic translation of the gospels in Latin by monastic monks and regarded as one of the worlds oldest books. The book was kept at Kells, northwest of Dublin, in County Meath, Ireland, until the invasion by Vikings in the 10th Century. It is now on permanent display at Trinity College, Dublin. In 1954, the secondary school I attended (1959-1962) was gifted a facsimile copy by a wealthy benefactor. It was displayed under glass, open as a double-page spread, and I regularly scrutinised the ornate, embellished and garnitured capital letter that occupied the entire left-hand page. This experience is where the exhibition of 'Lucken's Alphabet' has its origins. In a Library.

Mister Lucken is a Beckettian invention, whose vision is focused on language in all its manifestations. Placenames, Nicknames, Mispronunciations, Patois, Jargon, Vernacular slang, Coined words, Proper English, Bad English. He has no problem discerning absurdity one minute, then the next, silenced by enchantment. Lucken is also 'spellbound' by the haunting power of an image, and his credo is taken from the poet, Seamus Heaney: 'whatever is given can always be reimagined'. My friend Bill Hammond did something similar in an early series of paintings that imagined what the lines of some of his favourite music might look like as a painting. For many years I had his version of the Elvis Costello song, 'Everyday I Write the Book' on the wall of my lounge.

The convergence of a letter of the alphabet, a word that begins with a capital, and the apparition of an image, has been a recurring sequence over decades of collaborations with poets. A solo exhibition at the City Gallery in Wellington (2001) called 'The Feather-Trade' focused specifically on my reading and, as the poet Bill Manhire described it: 'translations'. But artists as unlikely as Rene Magritte and Ed Ruscha echo in these small slates, and the evocative lines from a poem written on the reverse side of each piece covers broad literary territory, diverse sensibilities, and sometime a songline.

The slates themselves have provenance that traces their working lives to the rooves of a number of heritage buildings in Tāmaki Makaurau. All the green slates once sheltered Saint Patrick's Cathedral, where I was christened and my parents were married in the 1940's. The Historic Places Trust document on the earliest known Remuera farmhouse 'Wharema' (built 1885) includes early drawings of the building sited in the empty landscape, and outlines numerous links to visual art culture, including the childhood home of two significant 20th Century painters, John and Charles Tole. It was built and occupied by Edward Payton, the first principal of the Elam School of Fine Arts. The brown Welsh roof slate pieces are from the original building, and like all slate from early architecture, they have travelled the migratory passage from the Northern Hemisphere and are the material cargo evidence of the diaspora, as well as providing shelter for generations. Recycling and honouring this provenance has been fundamental to my process for decades now. There is also a

significant tradition of folk art by slate workers in Wales, akin to coal-miner's portraiture in large chunks of coal.

Two of my recent book cover commissions from Victoria University Press: the Selected Poems of Andrew Johnston and the late Geoff Cochrane, were precursors to the focus of this themed exhibition. Also included are some previous cover projects of designs rendered on slate in the shiacciato low-relief manner, with added pigmentation and waxing. Many found objects assume a role in this collection and sometimes assumed a place in my working world. 'O' for OPERETTA pictures a 1950's Radiola that I bought at a village brocante in Champagne, while living in France as the Möet & Chandon Art Fellow (1995). It transmitted the sounds of Europe into my studio, and the pink dial pointed to the locations of frequencies and stations available: Tunis|Maroc|Luxembourg. It's indelibly coded onto my minds-eye. 'C' for CULBERT evokes artist Bill Culbert's seating arrangements around his beloved sanctuary in the Luberon village of Croagne. My mother's millinery obsessions surface in the work 'H' for HAT. A large medieval dice, fashioned from an antler-horn that I saw in the National Museum of Ireland, has finally made a guest appearance in 'K' for KNOWN.

The twinship of a singular encountered object with a written word harks back to school-room classes for most of us. But image is not 'defined' by the word, it's linked by something more suggestive or mysterious. The poet's aside, or the songwriter's lyric written on the reverse-side of these slate pieces adds to the force-field of associations and is intended to haunt and provoke - to be at the heart of 'Lucken's Alphabet'.

*Text and image should not explain  
Let alone illustrate each other,  
But enter into a dialogue  
that would each its own  
Space for reverberations.*

From: An essay by Andrea Köhler, 'Penetrating the Dark', featured in *UNRECOUNTED*, a book by WG Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp, 2004.