



Kiwis in Venice show and not a bray in sight

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LAST time around, it was easier to get a donkey's bray out of a portable toilet than it was to get a word out of New Zealand's Venice Biennale artist.

Four years later, sculptor Francis Upritchard and painter Judy Millar are happy to speak out – but they have not shied away from some fighting art talk.

Creative New Zealand is spending \$650,000 on the pair's entries to the world's oldest and biggest art exhibition, with a further \$400,000 being raised from other sources.

Both artists are based overseas at least half of the time – Upritchard in London and Millar in Berlin.

Asked if their art had anything to say about New Zealand, the pair were clear and unapologetic.

“Not really, and I don't want to, and I don't care,” Upritchard, who makes psychedelic-coloured medieval figures, said. “I think art's way more interesting than that . . . I just want mine to be about people.”

Millar, whose paintings for the biennale are three-dimensional pieces that bulge out at viewers, agreed. “I think there is a problem in New Zealand in that New Zealanders seem to want art to be able to be used for some reason. And for me, art is its own thing.”

New Zealand art did not need to advertise the country, she said. “It makes our society richer and it makes us human.”

The artists sympathised with anonymous art collective et al, which caused huge controversy in 2005 when its artists refused to speak publicly about their Venice exhibition.

The collective's earlier works had included a toilet that brayed like a donkey.

“Sometimes I wish I'd done that from the beginning,” Upritchard said about refusing interviews. “Artists are for making art. They're not for anything else really.”

She was sad that many people found contemporary art difficult and confusing.

Both artists were excited about the Venice opportunity. Upritchard has secured three rooms overlooking the Grand Canal, while Millar will exhibit her work in a restored church.

“You just don't often get funded to this level, and be given the opportunity to develop your work over a long period,” Millar said. “This is what pushes your work to another level, and that's just great.”

Creative New Zealand chief executive Stephen Wainwright said the Venice Biennale was the world's most significant contemporary art event and artists were chosen who could do well there.

“There will of course be, from time to time, work that is deeply representative of a country or an environment, but this is not the primary driver.”



Francis Upritchard: Rooms over Grand Canal.



Judy Millar: Will exhibit in restored church.