

Art in the Floodlights

Venice is the perfect place for Kiwi artwork about a drowned town.



YOU'D THINK ONCE you'd been selected for the world's oldest and largest art event, scraped together the funds and got your giant work and yourself over there, it might be time to relax with a few glasses of Italian red. Not so for sculptor Brett Graham, 41, and digital artist Rachael Rakena, 38, whose multimedia sculptural installation *Aniwaniwa* was the only New Zealand work to show at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

The exhibition space looked perfect: a cavernous, canal-side Renaissance salt factory. But historic-building regulations meant permission to suspend the work from

the ceiling was not initially granted – then an electrician stung the near-broke pair with an \$8000 bill.

The work is big and installation tricky. Five coral-covered, 2.5m-diameter, sculpted vessels (*wakahuia*), with video screens mounted inside, are suspended from the ceiling. Viewers lie on mattresses in a mini marae, listening to a specially commissioned soundtrack (from vocalist Whirimako Black, opera singer Deborah Wai Kapohe and Pitch Black's Paddy Free) watching images which, with music and lighting, evoke memories of a place lost underwater and suspended in time. That's the Waikato village of Horahora, flooded in 1947 to create the Karapiro dam.

Horahora is where Graham's father Fred, also a sculptor, was born and raised, and where his grandfather worked. He grew up in Manurewa, Auckland, but the older men's stories about the town's disappearance loomed large in his childhood. Many sites historic to their *iwi* Ngati Koroki were lost. Not just the story of a small town event,

Aniwaniwa (the name of nearby Waikato River rapids) presents global themes of flooding and immersion as a metaphor for cultural loss, rising sea levels and global warming.

In 2004 Graham and Rakena (Ngai Tahu-Nga Puhū) were teaching together at Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts when they decided to collaborate. "He asked where I want to take my artwork and I said, 'All the way to Venice.' We laughed hysterically and said cheers to that, though it's pie in the sky."

Their first version of *Aniwaniwa* showed in 2006 at Palmerston North's Te Manawa gallery. Graham: "It was still a work in progress but people could see the potential."

One of those people was the show's curator Alice Hutchison, who suggested applying to the biennale. What made the idea so fanciful was although New Zealand participated in the last three biennales, it sat out 2007. Without a Creative New Zealand-supported national pavilion, it'd be hugely difficult to get selection in the fiercely fought collateral events section. Second, that deadline had

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Rachael Rakena and Brett Graham were at the Wellington container terminal to welcome home their work *Aniwaniwa*.

passed. Third and most daunting, they'd have to come up with their own funding.

It didn't stop the duo. From hundreds of proposals, *Aniwaniwa* was selected for the section. It then had to be transformed – it would become five times its original size – in just over a month before the February shipping deadline. Massey University visual arts lecturer Rakena was living in Palmerston North, while Graham was making art fulltime in Auckland – so he worked on the sculptures, Rakena the sound and video.

While their work spent four months at sea, the pair fundraised hard. Grants, donations and print sales raised almost \$200,000.

Rakena took out a large loan she's still paying back.

In Venice in May they unpacked the week-late shipping container. With less than three weeks to wade through red tape and set it up, they made the early-June opening.

The canal-threaded city was an ideal setting for *Aniwaniwa's* themes of submersion representing cultural loss, given that the city itself is slowly sinking.

At the exhibition, Auckland gallery Artspace director Brian Butler paid tribute to Graham and Rakena's determination; Wellington City Gallery director Paula Savage was so impressed with the work

she booked them on the spot. *Aniwaniwa* came direct from the four-month biennale to be the gallery's centrepiece exhibition (February 23-June 15).

Rakena is thrilled that the students who helped her film underwater at a Palmerston North dive pool can see *Aniwaniwa* in Wellington, "as well as everyone else in my family who wondered if I was mad".

It then goes to Waikato Museum (August 30-November 21), an important showing for Graham. "Dad's 78 now and he wants a reunion for those [from Horahora] who are still around. But he keeps complaining they'll have to lie down on a mattress..."