

Arts & Entertainment
IMPRESSIONS

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15

Leaving the tribe

Artist remains Kiwi working in Spain

By Charmian Smith

ALTHOUGH she has lived in Spain for most of the last 12 years, Sarah Shackleton says she remains a New Zealand artist rather than a Spanish artist.

Born in Dunedin, she met Miguel Orduna, her Spanish husband-to-be, on a ski field. In 1986 they went to Europe, shortly after she graduated from Ilam school of fine arts. Now living in Zaragoza, in Aragon, she was back in Dunedin recently visiting her family.

Living in another culture, especially one with a different language makes you more sensitive to your own culture, she said.

"It makes you focus on things from afar so they become much clearer than when you are actually living in your own culture, especially if it is not an Anglo-Saxon culture. You discover how much language reflects a culture — the expressions, the type of words that are used," she said.

"It's important to look after your own identity because you are never going to become a Spanish artist so I try to keep up to date with what is going on in New Zealand art."

Back in New Zealand for a year in 1989, she worked at the City Gallery in Wellington. Just before she returned to Spain, someone in the art world told her she was leaving the tribe and the tribe would never forgive her for it.

"At the time, I was naive and didn't understand what he meant about the tribe. If he said that to me now I would say, in all tribes there have been people



who have gone out and explored and what they brought back from that exploration has been important for the development of the tribe.

"It's always been a big issue. Artists who have done that, like Frances Hodgkins, from Dunedin, are discredited by some people, but just because she lived and worked overseas didn't mean she didn't have something important to give back to New Zealand culture," Ms Shackleton (36) said.

Going to Spain so soon after finishing art school, trying to

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come to grips with the mass of ideas in her head and trying to come to terms with a new culture was overwhelming at the start, although she continued to paint.

"I had not taken into consideration how much language would be a barrier. You can work and paint, and there is lots of stimulus for painting, but to actually move your work and look after the PR side and get involved in the art scene is more

difficult that you think, over time.

"Initially, there's a curiosity and other Spanish artists and dealers and critics are interested, but that wears off and finally you are expected to come up with the goods like any other person living there."

She exhibited in the New Zealand Pavilion at Expo '92, in Seville, was among 40 artists selected for the L'Oreal competition in Madrid in 1994, and has shown twice at Arco, in Madrid, in 1995 and 1997, as well as exhibiting in Zaragoza and other galleries in the northeast of Spain.

Life is harder for artists in Spain than in New Zealand, with no dole payments to fall back on. Most artists, unless they are right at the top, have to work at other jobs, she said.

There have been big changes in Spain as the people grasped the new democracy with enthusiasm, but it had severe repercussions on the arts. In the '80s, almost anything went and young artists' work sold rapidly for high figures. Now, in the '90s there is backlash in the decline of institutional investment in the arts, she said.

"Ironically, even with the isolation we suffer here, as an artist it is not that bad. Dunedin always had a strong history of supporting arts and lots of really important artists came out of Dunedin. I feel there is a strong body of collectors and noticed there is a greater cultural awareness in response to contemporary art. There seems to be more spending among a wider section of population which you don't get in Spain

where only the very rich buy art."

Most Spaniards live in small flats without much wall or floor space to display art work. Because it is a strongly Catholic country, in the past most decorative elements in people's houses were religious icons like crosses and pictures of Jesus with a bleeding heart, she said.

"The younger generation is still influenced by that. Most have grown up in houses which their mothers decorated in that way, a bit like living in a church.

"Also, there's a different sense of aesthetic that comes from that in Spanish art. The Protestant culture gives us a different set of aesthetic values. It comes through more in the abstraction and predominance of symbolic ways of representing our experience of the world."



Sarah Shackleton with photographs of some of her art works exhibited in Spain.

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