

# Walk-on success

**T**O GET to Neal Palmer's studio you follow a garden path down the side of his inner-city villa. You clamber up the steps, navigate the native plants and, if you're nosy, you sneak a peek in the windows of his lounge as you pass. It's white, modern and light. As to be expected of an artist's house, there are paintings hanging on the walls, but it's downwards your eye is drawn, to the beautiful floor.

It's been almost four years since the London-born Palmer got down on his hands and knees and painted the tapa cloth design. Inspired by a photograph of a magnificent old tapa in a museum, he used the traditional boxes of tapa design to break up the areas of the open plan space.

When he's not making works of art you can walk on, the 38-year-old father of three paints big, generous super-realistic pictures of flax and pohutukawa.

"There is a photographic element with the unfocused bits. But I really like focusing on the crispy edges and decay. You can get really inventive with how you put the paint on."

He also paints small, intricate landscapes. On November 6, Palmer's fifth solo show opens at the SOCA Gallery in Newton. Called "The Sum of Their



Flaxing lyrical: Neal Palmer paints big, generous super-realistic pictures of flax and pohutukawa.

Photo: Brendon O'Hagan

Parts", several of the works are panels, while others are dissected into complementary fragments. Reminiscent of his kitchen floor, he takes symbolic shapes and places them over the top of his images, repeating the patterns in tapa-like fashion, and gilding them in silver.

"The flowers and landscapes aren't just about them. Because they're icons of New Zealand, and being an immigrant myself, I quite like the idea of introducing another culture. So the lines and shapes which I paint over them are cross-

cultural references.

"Being in New Zealand and enjoying it as a place, but being aware that there are other worlds out there and that there is a world out there that is coming here – I like the fact that it's getting more mixed up. And my work is a positive statement on that."

When he first followed his Kiwi wife from London to Auckland, Palmer says he hated it.

"Well I didn't hate it, but it was a complete and utter culture shock."

It was only after a stint in Sydney, several trips back to the UK and a year

living in Piha that he started to feel at home. He has a degree in fine arts and in the UK worked as a puppet co-ordinator for *Spitting Image*, but it was our native bush that moved him to try to work fulltime as an artist.

"In the UK I got some oak leaves to paint, but I gave up very quickly. They're just not dramatic enough. It's the loops and ribbons of the plants here that excite me."

– Megan Nicol Reed

■ November 6-24 (Opening Monday 6, from 6-8pm)  
SOCA Gallery, 74 France St, Newton. Ph 529-0533.