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MOVIE REVIEW

NEW ZEALAND WOMEN—TWO PORTRAITS

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New Zealand film maker Vincent Ward's "State of Siege" and "In Spring One Plants Alone" (at the Nuart Tuesday only) complement each other as profoundly compassionate and beautiful portraits of solitary women struggling to survive in a harsh, elemental world.

The first, which runs 52 minutes, is based on a short story by distinguished New Zealand writer Janet Frame and was made while Ward was still a college student. The second is a 45-minute documentary about an old Maori woman that took 2½ years to make.

Malfred Signal (Anne Flannery), the heroin of "State of Siege," is an art teacher at a secondary school who at last freed of caring for a dying, possessive mother, quits her job to move to a ramshackle house high on a hill on a remote island. At last she'll be able to paint—to put all the wasted years of her life behind her. But in her isolation she becomes convinced that she's being plagued by a prowler.

In both his films, Ward, who at 24 is the major talent emerging from the burgeoning New Zealand cinema, avoids conventional exposition and narration to trust his images to express the inner lives of these women. In "State of Siege," an occasional brief flashback and a fragmented remark allows us to comprehend all the forces that have conspired to unravel Malfred at last. Flannery, a superb actress, has said that Malfred, whose story is set in the late '50s, represents to her the generation of women who were around 30 and still single or widowed when World War II ended. New Zealand society regarded them at the time as "beyond all marital or sexual possibility."

Ward has a fascination with women's daily rituals and the ways in which they use their hands. Ritual fails to sustain the fictional Malfred but it's what keeps Puhi, the 82-year-old Maori woman of "In Spring One Plants Alone," going.

Puhi lives in a hovel in a verdant valley in New Zealand's central North Island with her ailing, paranoid son, Nicki. We never do get to know exactly what's wrong with Nicki—nor did Ward, who lived with the mother and son for a portion of the filming—but he does nothing but sit around, occasionally playing with a kitten. He may be emotionally disturbed but is not mentally retarded. He is given to terrible rages but we get to see only the wreckage in their wake.

This 260-pound man stands by while his tiny, bent-over mother chops wood for the fire, totes heavy pails of water to a bathtub where she will bathe him. Much of the time Puhi mutters Maori incantations to herself. Like Malfred, she speaks only rarely but when at last she does confess to Ward her sorrow over Nicki, she says, "I dead loss. I very sad inside me, feeling no good, no good. But I have to stay."

Early on in "State of Siege" we glimpse Malfred instructing her pupils on the importance of texture, proportion and shadowing—elements with which Ward himself has taken extraordinary pains in the making of his films. Both are rigorously constructed with one exquisitely composed image following another and incorporating a highly expressive play of light and darkness.

What counts most, of course, is what is reflected in the faces and bodies of these two women. With "State of Siege" and "In Spring One Plants Alone" (Times-rated: Mature), film becomes poetry; yet by implication they also become the most devastating commentary imaginable on the society that is their setting.