



Art for New Zealand: Icons from the 1960s and 70s

Kitchener St Gallery

1 - 18 February 2012

Preview: Tuesday 31 January, 5-7pm

Reflecting the rapidly developing culture and society, the 1960 and 70s were an expansive time for New Zealand art. The nation received its first television broadcast which, along with greater ease of travel, offered a wider availability of international media. Public museums and galleries were newly developed or modernised and increasingly began to host international touring exhibitions, while dealer galleries were established, creating a new commercial market for patrons. As wider audiences responded to burgeoning opportunities to engage with art, an appetite for visual arts progressively grew. By the 1970s the art world was blossoming.

In a sense the 1960s and 70s was an era of coming of age for New Zealand art. Where there had been a predominately British influence, a stronger awareness of international art developed. Artists gained confidence and developed styles that while referencing international art abroad, began to wholly embrace and express local concerns. *Art for New Zealand: Icons from the 1960s and 70s* brings together works by noted artists from this period including Michael Illingworth, Pat Hanly, Michael Smither, Bob Ellis and Colin McCahon.

Works

Colin McCahon, 1919 - 1987

Waterfall, 1964

Oil on hardboard, original gold painted frame, 225 x 225 mm

Signed and dated on verso: C56.30 (Ikon Fine Arts code)

Colin McCahon Trust Record number: cm000265

Provenance: Private Collection, Auckland

Exhibited: *Small Landscapes and Waterfalls*, Ikon Fine Arts, Auckland, September 14-25, 1964

For many of these artists the conservation of the natural environment was a focus and a strong part of their visual vocabulary. In this respect, painter Colin McCahon (1919 - 1987) is one of the most recognised in New Zealand art history. Although his output was diverse, McCahon dedicated much of his artistic focus to the bringing together of the spiritual and the landscape.

McCahon's *Waterfalls* series, to which *Waterfall* (1964) belongs, began in 1964 and was originally inspired by the waterfall paintings of English painter William Hodges. Of Hodges McCahon said 'we conversed, through paint (about Naples yellow to start with) - and in 1964 I painted my first waterfall. Hodges is my hero in all these paintings, but the Fairy Falls in the Waitakeres and Japanese and Chinese painting are the real influences later.' (M. Bloem and M. Browne, *Colin McCahon A Question of Faith*, Nelson and Amsterdam, 2002, p.201)

The *Waterfalls* were first exhibited at Ikon Fine Arts in Auckland, September 1964, and as writer Gordon H. Brown noted, again McCahon was able to convert a landscape motif into 'symbolic shorthand.' (ibid. P 201) The simplistic curve of white across a dark background characterised the series and: 'To a mind such as McCahon's, it was but a short step for that graceful arc of water to be transposed to a fall of spiritual light illuminating the darkness of the human condition and, by further refinement, to become a metaphor for the cleaving of evil by good. In these new images McCahon had found a motif that he would explore and adapt over the next ten years

Colin McCahon, 1919-87

Rocks in the Sky 3, series 1, no.3, 1976

synthetic polymer paint on Steinbach paper laid on canvas, 723 x 1095 mm

Provenance: Private Collection, Auckland

Colin McCahon Trust Record number: cm001332

Inscribed vertical edge, lower right in brushpoint: ROCKS IN THE SKY. 3. C. McC. / '76

Exhibited: *Colin McCahon: Paintings—Noughts and crosses, Rocks in the sky, On the road*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1976.

Colin McCahon's 1976 series of paintings, *Rocks in the Sky* were inspired by his grandson's description of storm clouds over Muriwai beach and became for McCahon a powerful metaphor for the challenges of life.

The clouds or 'rocks' within an abstracted landscape are an allegory of the shifting stages of life and its unpredictable events - some of which are "heavy, tumultuous and carrying the threat of dark times, others light and ethereal, dissipating in the sun". (M. Bloem and M. Browne, *Colin McCahon A Question of Faith*, Nelson and Amsterdam, 2002, p.225)

Although McCahon used the cloud form in earlier abstractions the perspective in *Rocks in the Sky* has shifted. Where they previously represented the skyward view from the cliff at Muriwai here the clouds are depicted as part of a panoramic view from the shore, looking out to sea. The black background in *Rocks in the Sky 3, series 1, no.3* (1976) can be understood as the dark sea and overcast sky and the white area in the foreground as the beach itself.

As in the earlier series *Clouds* (1975) and *Teaching Aids* (1975), the inscription of Roman and Arabic numerals implies a reference to the Passion of Christ and by implication liken Christ's struggles to our own.

Stylistically, Michael Illingworth's (1932 -1988) figures are instantly recognisable. His "figures" often developed into specific characters that came to frequent his paintings. Most notably are his Mr and Mrs Piss-Quick, a well-dressed bourgeois couple, and their binary opposite Adam and Eve. Where the Piss-Quicks were typically depicted in domestic interiors, Adam and Eve were almost exclusively located outdoors in the New Zealand landscape. Illingworth, who emigrated here from Britain in the 1950s, expresses his disappointment in the utopian view of New Zealand in his paintings. The blatantly satirical Piss-Quicks comment on the aspirations and wants of suburban New Zealand, and are opposed by the openness and freedom of a rural idyll or a Garden of Eden, that his Adam and Eve occupy. The latter works are his most controversial, in part on account of his character's flagrantly sexual and unashamed nudity, which when first shown, roused complaints of obscenity.

Here in *As Eve* a naked Eve stands before the viewer with an ambiguous expression. It is unclear if she is beckoning us forward into her landscape or bidding us farewell. Perhaps surprisingly, the landscape seems as vulnerable as Eve herself. It is a strangely compelling portrait.

A number of artists in this exhibition exhibited with Barry Lett Gallery in the 1960s. Lett's influence as art dealer Barry and his lasting legacy is particularly evident in his 1968 series of editions known as the Barry Lett Multiples. Lett invited twelve artists to participate in the project which was, in part, an attempt to make art more accessible to a greater audience. In retrospect the selection of artists was visionary as many artists involved, although not especially well regarded at the time, have since emerged as significant

figures in New Zealand art history. The set includes a screen-print by Milan Mrkusich, Colin McCahon, Ralph Hotere, Toss Woollaston, Don Binney, Geoff Thornley, Ross Ritchie, Gordon Walters, Michael Illingworth, Robert Ellis, Michael Smither and a line block and stencil print by Pat Hanly. Although widely distributed there are few full sets that remain intact. Don Binney's contribution *Pacific Frigate Bird* is included in *Art for New Zealand: Icons from the 1960s and 70s*. Based on a 1968 painting of the same title now held in the collection of Te Papa, was painted at the height of his critical acclaim. It represents the artist's on-going interest in the mythical associations of the bird and flight and is a classic example of his reduced landscapes and bird works.

Pat Hanly, 1932-2004
New Order 47, Part II
1963
oil on canvas on board
720 x 595 mm

Pat Hanly another noted artist of this generation, is well-known for his colourful paintings that were often motivated by political and social concerns. His *New Order* works were his first since his return from London to New Zealand in the early 1960s and form one of only four abstract series of which a limited number have survived. At a time when regionalism flourished, these works were distinctly 'internationalist'. Still working with the local environment as a subject, Hanly sought to present its unique light, hills, weather and environmental extremes in a non-representational way.

Michael Smither, b. 1939
The Dreamer
1978
oil on board
705 x 1785 mm

During his long and prolific career Michael Smither (b.1939) continues to find inspiration in his immediate environment. Throughout his career he has produced a large body of work that is synonymous with New Zealand's landscape and culture. He paints coastal and mountain landscapes, family and children, domestic objects and religious symbols, all of which have aided him in solidifying his position as one of New Zealand's leading realist painters.

His power of observation is acute and his focus is often on seemingly mundane objects such as rubber gloves on a kitchen bench, cracked eggshells in a colander, rocks on a beach or as in *The Dreamer*, a man dozing on the lawn. Invariably, Smither paints his subjects in a way that imbues value and his unique and quirky way of viewing his subject matter resonates in his works.

Robert Ellis, b. 1926

City in a Dark Landscape

1966

oil on board

1520 x 1220 mm

Signed and dated lower left: Robert Ellis, '66

The cityscape, or more specifically the city lights, streets, motorways and waterways have been an enduring subject in Robert Ellis' oeuvre and dominated his works from the early 1960s to mid-1970s.

This work was completed in 1966 when Ellis has been working on the *City* series for some time. The theme was well developed, yet the style is more progressed than previous works. Unlike many of those before, with their horizon perspectives, *City in a Dark Landscape* is purely an aerial perspective showing a city engulfed and enclosed by the surrounding light. "*Robert Ellis offers us a vision of the city as it may be - were man to leave it entirely to its own devices...The city is built in the image of man. In Ellis' painting this image is endowed with an organic life of its own. Here the city is not what man has fashioned, it is what the city has made itself.*" (Hamish Keith, "Robert Ellis", Barry Lett Galleries catalogue, 1965)