

NEW ZEALAND
ART FROM COOK TO
CONTEMPORARY



CONRAD MARTENS | *Kororareka in the Bay of Islands, 1841*

Kororareka in the Bay of Islands was painted in Sydney, six years after Conrad Martens' brief sojourn in the Bay of Islands, and is based on a pencil drawing in a sketchbook, *Kororareka, Bay of Islands, 1834–36* (State Library of New South Wales). There are only minor differences between the on-the-spot sketch and the painting, chiefly the addition of the group of Māori standing on the left. This view from behind Kororareka looks across the town towards the bay, with the buildings of the pā and a thin line of European houses along the shoreline. One of three known New Zealand oils by Martens, this painting was first recorded as being in a private collection in Sydney in 1919, and was reproduced in 1920 in Lionel Lindsay's book, *Conrad Martens: The man and his art*.

London-born Martens was a pupil of the popular artist Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding. In 1833 he sailed for South America, where he seized the opportunity to join HMS *Beagle* as its artist. On leaving the *Beagle* in Valparaiso late the following

year, he set out for Sydney, sailing via Tahiti, the Cook Islands and the Bay of Islands, where he spent five days in April 1835. After his delightful few weeks in Tahiti, he found Kororareka a disappointment, and wrote in his journal of the 'grey, dull and sombre tone' of the scanty trees and land.⁶ His negative impressions of New Zealand are reflected in the dark cloud effects and muted colours of this painting, and in the absence of bush other than the rotted tree trunk lying in the foreground.

He settled in Sydney, building a strong reputation as an artist, and exhibiting and selling watercolours and oils of Australian, South American and Pacific subjects. Prints of his work were widely published, including etchings of his South American landscapes as illustrations to the account of the voyages of the *Beagle*. On his death in Sydney in 1878, he was described as 'the acknowledged father of colonial art,'⁷ and his reputation, unlike that of many colonial artists, has survived intact to the present. [MM]



JOHN GULLY

| *Milford Sound, 1883* | *In the Southern Alps, 1881*

One of the most popular and successful New Zealand artists of the late nineteenth century, John Gully arrived in Taranaki in 1852. After unsuccessful attempts at farming and shopkeeping in the province, Gully was evacuated to Nelson with other settlers following the outbreak of hostilities with Taranaki iwi in 1860. It was there, first as drawing master at Nelson College and then as a draughtsman in the provincial survey office, that his artistic career took off.

These works come from the latter part of Gully's career when, after retiring from surveying in 1877, he was able to dedicate himself to his art and search out suitable subject matter. It was a period in which areas of New Zealand were opening up to travel, and it coincided with the emergence of an arts infrastructure — Gully had been a foundation member of the Otago Art Society in 1875. Both were vital factors in his success.

Milford Sound had its origins in sketches Gully made on a trip south in 1877. Contrasting a lone ship against looming peaks, the painting captures the feelings expressed by one visitor, who wrote that 'the stupendity and grandeur of our surroundings and own significance and littleness were fully brought home to our minds'.³⁰ Similarly, in *In the Southern Alps* a lone rider makes his way along a ridge into the mountains and an oncoming storm.

While these manifestations of the sublime are late echoes of those found in the works of JMW Turner, Gully's watercolours might not have induced feelings of terror before nature in their viewers. Indeed, colonial audiences were just as likely to feel a swelling of patriotic pride when presented with views of the landscapes over which they could now claim possession.

Gully's approach to landscape was underpinned by a remarkable facility with his chosen medium. He worked by establishing his atmospheric back grounds through the application of broad, wet washes, and then built up detail in the foregrounds. These would become dense with pigment and vigorous brush - work, and even scraping and scouring of the paper. If such an approach passed from artistic fashion in New Zealand soon after his death, Gully's public popularity has endured. [WM]



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JAMES M NAIRN

| *Winter morning, Wellington Harbour, c.1900*

| *Wellington Harbour, 1894*

Scottish-born James McLachlan Nairn was a member of the Glasgow Boys, a group that broke away from the conventional focus on morally uplifting figurative and romantic landscape painting in favour of directly observed, often enigmatic, impressionist paintings in characteristically bright colours. Nairn brought this avant-garde practice to New Zealand when he arrived in 1890. He taught in the art department at Wellington School of Design, later Wellington Technical School, and founded the Wellington Art Club in 1892. This club's rules required members to work 'en plein air' (in the open air) directly from subjects around them. Rebutting criticism of his work, Nairn asserted that in order to capture ephemeral images the artist had to work quickly to ensure that 'the impression is retained ... and he starts to work, leaving the minute details which strike the uncultivated observer to one side'.⁴⁸

The late-evening view from a wharf in *Wellington Harbour* is composed like a snapshot cut off at the edges, but is more impressionistic. Having swiftly painted with licks and flecks of thick paint, Nairn even leaves parts of the orange panel on which the work is painted visible beneath his signature peacock blues and greens. It is ambiguous whether the man on the wharf is watching the fashionably dressed woman.

Nairn frequently painted at first light, and *Winter morning, Wellington Harbour* is another quick impression of the sun illuminating a vivid sea and sky as it rises behind a veil of smoke from the steamers. The sea, skilfully painted as blobs of bright, pure colour for the viewer to mix visually, echoes Monet, whose well-known *Impression, sunrise*, 1873 (Musée Marmottan, Paris), about which the term impressionism was coined, is an obvious antecedent for this painting.

There continues to be controversy among critics and art historians as to whether Nairn's work is best described as merely 'plein air' or as impressionist. Gordon H Brown has argued that the work of the Glasgow Boys 'more accurately equate[s] to a surface layering over Barbizon plein-airism ... rather than to a real appreciation of Impressionism'.⁴⁹

Nairn's work attracted patrons among Wellington's growing and prosperous middle class. Businessman John Newton purchased these two paintings, which his family donated in 1939 to the National Art Gallery. [JV]



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HELEN STEWART

| *Portrait of a woman in red, 1930s*

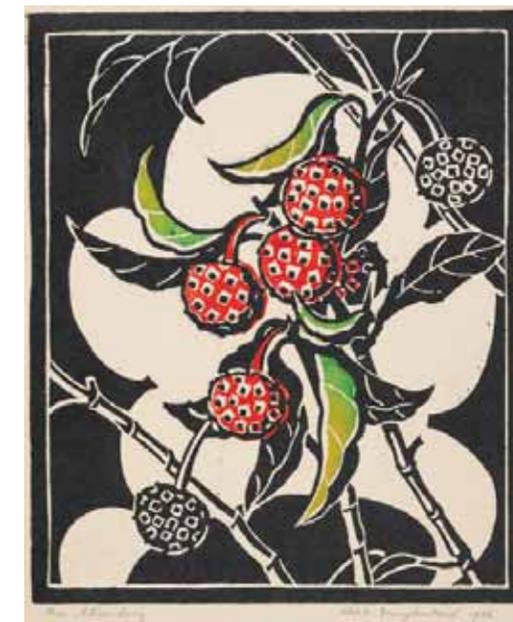
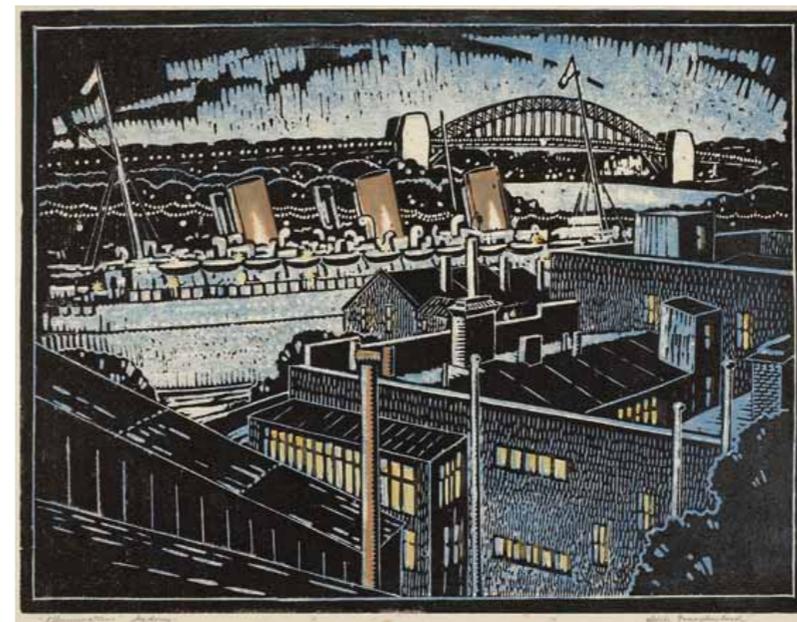
Helen Stewart divided her life between New Zealand and Australia, though travelled to Europe in the 1920s and 1930s in search of new stimulus for her art. She never forgot the excitement of seeing works by Picasso and other modern painters for the first time. ‘Art in Europe to-day is vital,’ she wrote on her return home, ‘and a sincere attempt to forge ahead — to produce an art symbolic of the century ... It is a thrilling prospect.’⁸⁴

The highlight of Stewart’s formal art training was a stint at André Lhote’s influential academy in Paris. Lhote was one of the original cubists, but his work remained essentially representational, based on landscape, still life and portraiture. As a teacher he focused on the importance of pictorial construction, showing his students how to simplify the forms of their subject into geometric units derived from the ‘golden section’, an ancient architectural principle of harmonious proportions.

Portrait of a woman in red, with its rectangular planes and flattened pictorial space, is based on this principle. In the lower left, in particular, the woman’s dress is reduced to a rectangle that occupies the same space as the ‘background’ planes of colour. Stewart’s debt to Matisse is also evident in her bracing colour and flamboyant patterning, but this fine work with its quirky textures and details has a vitality all of its own. *Portrait of a woman in red* is typical of the pictures Stewart exhibited at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in 1934 — images of ‘modern’ women painted in a modern style. A reviewer praised her striking portraits of ‘girls in berets with swagger spotted scarves, in raspberry pink and grass-green skirts ... ready to greet hail or shine with a grin on their lipsticked mouths’.⁸⁵ Stewart herself described the show as ‘quite a sensation’,⁸⁶ and in the years following she became a well-known figure in the Sydney art world, exhibiting with leading painters such as Grace Cossington-Smith, Margaret Preston and Roland Wakelin.

In 1946 Stewart returned to New Zealand, settling permanently at Eastbourne near Wellington. Although she found the local art world rather conservative after Sydney, she continued to exhibit regularly, pursuing an interest in colour, texture and design in increasingly abstract paintings. [JT]

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ADELE YOUNGHUSBAND | *Tree strawberry, 1936* | *Illuminations, Sydney, c.1938*

The colour linocut movement enjoyed considerable international popularity in the years between the two world wars. Propagated by the English artist Claude Flight and his followers at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art in London, the simplicity and directness of this new printmaking technique were especially well suited to the depiction of modern life.

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While the subject matter of Adele Younghusband’s *Tree strawberry* is somewhat restrained compared with the images of speed and dynamism favoured by Flight and his followers, the print nonetheless shows the global reach of the movement. Using the same subject that provided her contemporary Rata Lovell-Smith with one of her most memorable images, Younghusband lends it the strong linearity, localised colour and overall sense of pattern and rhythmic design typical of the medium.

Illuminations, Sydney dates from Younghusband’s Australian sojourn of 1937–40. Well established as a painter — she had been a regular exhibitor at the Auckland Society of Arts and a founding member of the Waikato Society of Arts — Younghusband moved to Australia at the age of fifty-nine in order to pursue further study and new experiences. After a brief stay in Sydney she settled in Melbourne. There she joined the Contemporary Group of Eveline Shaw and George Bell, both of whom had studied at Grosvenor and shared an interest in the linocut. The Contemporary Group also provided an important outlet for progressively minded artists to exhibit work.

The stimulus of Younghusband’s new environment is apparent in *Illuminations, Sydney*. The print depicts the lights of the city, the harbour, a passenger liner and the recently completed Sydney Harbour Bridge — a potent symbol of modernity in the work of a number of Australian artists — with a scale and confidence that shows the artist making the most of the linocut technique. Celebrating Younghusband’s return to New Zealand, critic Arthur Hipwell stressed the need for artists to have ‘contact with new movements overseas’. Such contact, as Younghusband’s experience showed, could help awaken ‘a new aesthetic consciousness’, and promote ‘a simplified vision’ and ‘consideration of pattern and design’.⁸⁷ [WM]



JOHN PASCOE

| Trainee physical education instructors 1944, printed 1985

| Official VE celebrations at Government

| Buildings, Wellington 1945, printed 1985

When John Pascoe's work as illustrations editor for the 1940 centennial publication *Making New Zealand* came to an end in 1941, his employment with the Department of Internal Affairs was simply rolled over into that of photographer, without any apparent job description, written brief or permanent status. Four years later, Pascoe could proudly report to the Prime Minister's Department that his effort in 'publicity work was yet more considerable than that done by the Tourist Department or by the then Director of Publicity'.¹⁰⁰ He explained that his 'one man service' had supplied photographs to other departments for publications and displays, as well as to overseas magazines such as *Picture Post*, *Pix*, the *Illustrated London News* and *Sport and Country* for the purposes of reminding the world of New Zealand's contribution to the war effort at home.

One example of Pascoe's publicity work for the government was the photograph of physical education instructors for the Physical Welfare and Recreation Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. The branch had been created in 1937 to improve the fitness of New Zealanders, and had taken a strong lead from the health and fitness programmes of the Hitler Youth movement. This fact is echoed in Pascoe's series of low-angle, German- (or, for that matter, Soviet-) style utopian images of these instructors.

Today it is Pascoe's coverage of the war's end that is most often published, particularly this photograph of Victory in Europe celebrations. Many viewers have remarked that it seems a sombre-looking occasion, but news of Germany's surrender had become public knowledge a day and a half earlier, and a degree of spontaneous celebration had already taken place. This event was the official occasion, designed to encourage reflection and commemoration, with speeches from the governor-general and other dignitaries supported by choir and band music. Pascoe dutifully recorded these formalities, but in turning his camera to the crowd he made an image that now seems to best represent the historical moment. It suggests a sober and expectant nation at a turning point, conscious that the war with Japan had no clear end, uncertain about New Zealand's future in a post-war world, and seemingly waiting for instructions. [AM]





ERIC LEE-JOHNSON | *Self-portrait in infrared, 1958*

| *Reconnaissance of Terra, Waimamakau, Northland, 1957*

Eric Lee-Johnson was a secret photographer. Widely known as a painter of neo-romantic images of the New Zealand countryside, in the medium of photography he allowed himself to be experimental, internationalist and abstract. The photographs that resulted from his 'star trails' and infrared experiments, made while living in the remote Waimamakau Valley in Northland, show the early influences of surrealism and Bauhaus design which he had encountered while working as a commercial designer and typographer in London during the 1930s. In these photographs the sky is imbued with a sense of the magical and the elemental. The images represent the potential for the occurrence of mysterious phenomena, while technological and military undertones combined with black and white photography lend them a quasi-scientific truthfulness.

Self-portrait in infrared, one of Lee-Johnson's favourite photographs, shows the artist standing within the confines of a humble backyard. With the corn growing around him and the blue sky rendered black by the infrared process, the mundane business

of living off the land — providing vegetables for the dinner table — contrasts with the vast mysteries of the world beyond the backyard. By tilting his camera up and looking skyward, Lee-Johnson sought to represent himself as not only concerned with the local but also engaged with the larger topic of the universe and the place of humanity within it.

Many of Lee-Johnson's photographs from this period display a fascination with events occurring in the sky, and are concerned with the social and political context of the Cold War era and the development of space research and satellite technology. In October 1957 the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite into space — *Sputnik I*, which Lee-Johnson photographed for news publications. *In Reconnaissance of Terra*, Waimamakau, Northland, a sense of wonder is underpinned by uncertainty about whether the shapes in the sky are natural phenomena or man-made machines. This photograph — a composite of three different images — draws together the natural and the artificial, and portrays them as compelling parts of the same cultural universe. [LM]



MICHAEL SMITHER | *Toys' tea party*, 1969 | *Big occity*, 1970

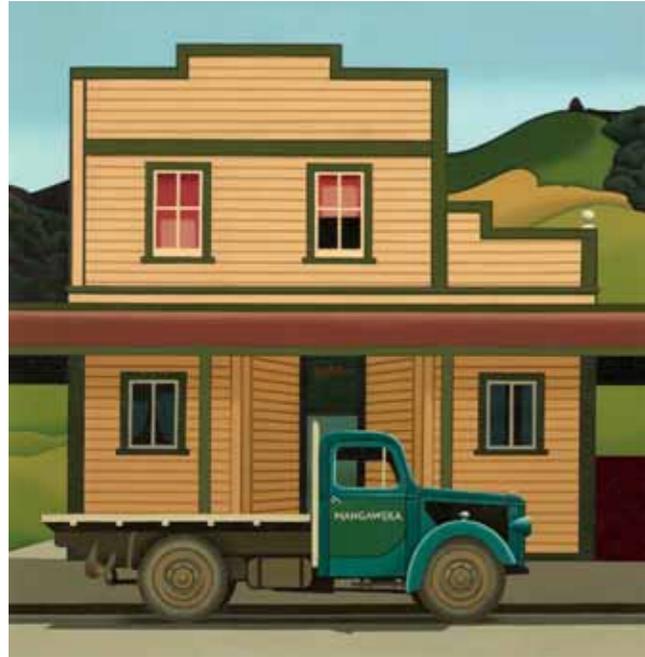
Michael Smither's images of childhood have secured his reputation as one of New Zealand's pre-eminent realist painters. *Toys' tea party* was begun during the autumn of 1969, when the artist, his wife Elizabeth and their children Sarah and Thomas were living in a tiny cottage at Patearoa in Central Otago, prior to Smither taking up the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship at the University of Otago.

Smither's reaction to Otago's landscape was both immediate and intense. It had a worn-down, emptied-out appearance completely different from the lushness of his home environment of Taranaki. He embarked on a series of paintings of the Central Otago landscape while also continuing to sketch and paint scenes of domestic life as he had in New Plymouth. 'The children were an excellent foil to the sparseness of the Central Otago landscape,' Smither has noted. 'I was always pleased to see the inventions and arrangements of the children's toys.'¹⁴⁵ Sarah kept her toys in the small brown leatherette suitcase and brought them out each afternoon. Thomas's toy helicopter seems about to hover off the dining table, and the

artist has included a miniature landscape version of the Dunstan mountains as the view through the tiny window.

Big occity, painted during the same period, is one of Smither's most intriguing early paintings. 'Thomas was fascinated by having power over dark and light,' Smither recalls. 'Big occity was his name for both his power and for the electricity, and he regularly plunged us into the eighteenth century. I caught him at it one night and shouted at him, and was moved by his reaction to make this record of the event.'¹⁴⁶ The painting, typically, developed from a very quick ink drawing; it transforms a furtive gesture and a startled expression into a moment frozen in time.

A compulsive observer, Smither has filled countless sketchbooks with these swift drawings: in 1985 he gifted a collection of a hundred sketchbooks to the National Art Gallery. In contrast, Smither's painting process is slow and painstaking; layers of paint and linseed oil (which give the works their characteristic glow) are carefully built up, and he makes many changes as he works so that the image grows in clarity as it progresses. [RBN]



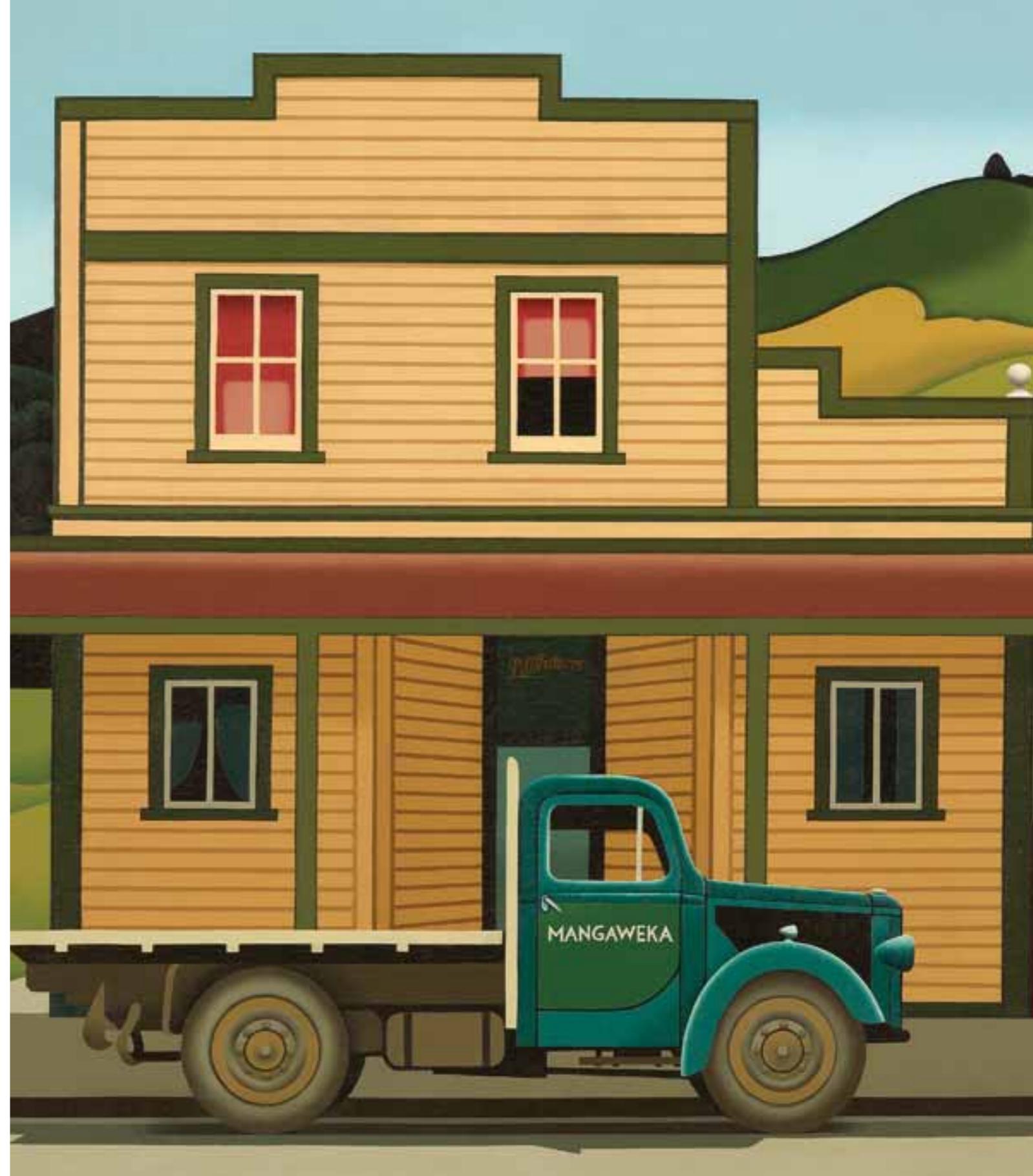
ROBIN WHITE | *Mangaweka*, 1973

Robin White's *Mangaweka* effortlessly captures the scenery and feeling of a rural New Zealand town. White knew the Rangitikei town from childhood, and in 1971 her friend, poet Sam Hunt, wrote 'A Mangaweka road song', capturing the town as she remembered it — 'this one-pub town/approached in low gear down/the gorges through the hills'.¹⁶¹ The artist's characteristic composition of layered planes of crisply edged colour is heightened by the strong horizontal lines, particularly the line of the veranda that divides the painting and the shadow that just appears under the Bedford truck.

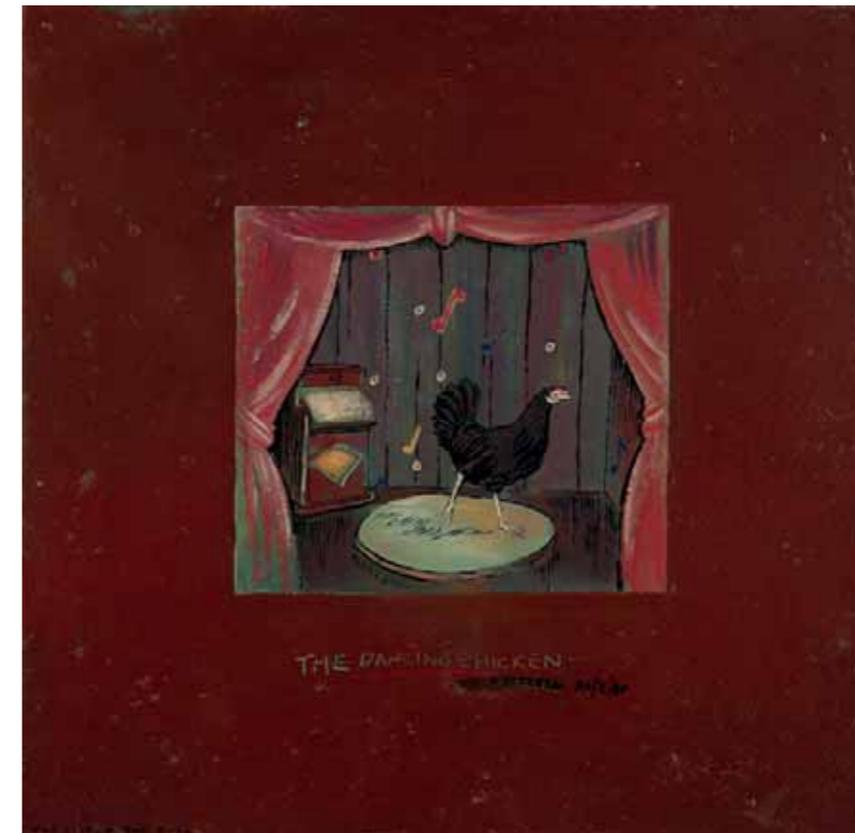
While White paints what she knows and feels affection for, her aim is not simply to produce faithful copies of real landscapes. She is more concerned with representing places that are overlaid with memory and experience. 'I'm not concerned with *just* recording something,' she wrote in 1977. 'I take great liberties with the environment, using it to my own ends. I've always been conscious that painting is fundamentally an abstract thing.'¹⁶²

White's depiction of her local inhabited landscape has affinities with the New Zealand regionalist painting tradition. She acknowledges a particular connection with Rita Angus, citing her appreciation of both Angus's work and her dedication as a woman artist. Along with her contemporaries Richard Killeen and Ian Scott, White was taught by Colin McCahon at Elam School of Fine Arts, and she credits McCahon as another important influence on her development and commitment to her art.

Motivated by the wish to make her imagery more affordable and accessible, White taught herself to screenprint after moving to Bottle Creek, north of Wellington, in 1969. She frequently made screenprints after paintings, including *Mangaweka*, and has noted, 'If I get a *good image*, then I like to reproduce it. To confine it to one painting, one oil, is to block it off from other people'.¹⁶³ In 1982 White and her family moved to the Republic of Kiribati where she continued to make art, working almost exclusively with woodcut prints as the materials were more readily available. White returned to New Zealand in 1999, and she continues to make artworks in a variety of media. [CH]



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DICK FRIZZELL | *The dancing chicken*, 1980

In Werner Herzog's enigmatic 1977 film *Stroszek*, the recently deinstitutionalised Bruno S, his prostitute girlfriend and eccentric elderly neighbour flee West Berlin in search of a better life in the United States. Their American dream slowly unravels and the film concludes with Bruno's suicide in a fairground. Pursued by the police following a dismal attempt at armed robbery, Bruno rigs his truck, feeds a stack of coins into an arcade machine and mounts a ski-lift with his shotgun. The policeman radios in the film's final line: 'We've got a truck on fire, can't find the switch to turn the ski-lift off, and can't stop the dancing chicken. Send an electrician.' Herzog apparently thought the chicken was a great metaphor, though he was unsure for what.

Travelling through the United States with his family in a station wagon in 1978, Dick Frizzell took the scenic route up from Florida to New York. As a result he happened upon the town of Cherokee in the Smoky Mountain National Park in North Carolina. It seemed familiar — he had seen *Stroszek* at the Auckland Film Festival the year before — and indeed it was: the dancing chicken was still there, still dancing.

The trip provided Frizzell with a wealth of imagery. The paintings in his 1980 exhibition *Illustrations of America* featured the stuff of tourist snapshots — the Grand Canyon, food at a diner, a ride on the subway, a visit to an Indian reservation, and of course the dancing chicken. With their glossy enamel surfaces and thick coloured borders, the paintings look like photographic slides. It was more than just imagery, though, that Frizzell gained from his American odyssey. Meeting artists such as Neil Jenney and Robert Moskowitz, and seeing their work in the landmark exhibition *New image* painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, validated his own direction. It was a time when a new brand of figuration was being welcomed into painting; earnestness was giving way to irony, and the lines between abstraction and representation were blurring. Jenney's advice to Frizzell was not delivered in such theoretical terms, however. 'Your country and culture need you, so haul your ass back home and get busy doing what artists are meant to do.'¹⁹² [WM]