Rites of passage: public response to
Don Driver’s *Ritual* (1982) and
its institutional history

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**ABSTRACT:** For 30 years Don Driver’s artwork *Ritual* (1982), from Te Papa’s collection, has intrigued, angered and confused audiences. This text analyses documentation of the public response to the work and its institutional history from 1982 to 2012, and considers the impact of this chequered history upon *Ritual*’s iconic status within New Zealand art.

**KEYWORDS:** Don Driver, *Ritual*, sculpture, contemporary art, New Zealand, National Art Gallery, Te Papa, controversy.

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**Introduction**

Don Driver’s *Ritual* in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) presents an opportunity to examine how a work obtains iconic status in New Zealand art and its varied fortunes over time. The story around *Ritual* has all the classic hallmarks of a good art scandal: an artist admired by art experts whose work baffled the general public; an artwork with overt sexual content and a whiff of black magic; and a controversy that played out in the media when the work was exhibited and, especially, when it was proposed for acquisition by a public gallery.

In order to understand why and how a work of art achieves fame, we need to consider the original context in which it was made, its initial and ongoing public and critical reception, and changes to the display and presentation of the work over time. All of these factors play a critical role in how a work of art becomes ‘iconic’, yet rarely is serious attention given to a work’s entire exhibition history and the impact this has on consolidating its status within art history.

Rather than focus on the subject matter of *Ritual*, this text examines its rite of passage to become an iconic work in New Zealand art by addressing its history of public response and its institutional history. It is essential to interrogate the history of the work’s reception in order to consider its legacy.

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**‘Virtually no rules’: a new installation for the National Art Gallery**

Towards the end of 1981, Don Driver was invited to prepare a work for the National Art Gallery in Wellington. (The National Art Gallery was combined with the National Museum by an Act of Parliament in 1992 to become the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, which opened in 1998.)

By 1981, Driver already had a considerable reputation as a leading contemporary New Zealand artist. Under the mandate of National Art Gallery Director Luit Bieringa, 10 of his works were held in the national art collection. In 1978, Driver had been selected as one of the New Zealand artists in the Mildura Sculpture Triennial in Australia, and a substantial survey show of his work organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth toured to numerous public galleries around New Zealand, including the National Art Gallery in 1979.

The invitation from the National Art Gallery was very open in its brief. Louise Upston (now Pether), the exhibitions officer, wrote to Driver in 1981 on behalf of the gallery asking him to be part of a series of sculpture installation
projects: ‘We are attaching virtually no rules or regulations to the invitation’, Upston wrote, ‘(other than budgetary ones) as we wish to bring to the attention of the Wellington public nationally important artists.’ Driver accepted the invitation and the result was his arresting installation Ritual, which was displayed at the gallery from 22 November 1982 to 6 February 1983 (Figs 1 and 2).

Some of the other artists invited to participate included Warren Viscoe, Neil Dawson, Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyar, Pauline Rhodes, Andrew Drummond and Terry Stringer. Driver’s exhibition occurred after Drummond’s in this sequence and the preceding installations had also been of an experimental nature. Observations made by the National Art Gallery’s education officer about Viscoe’s installation are particularly interesting in light of Driver’s future project: ‘Viscoe acknowledges that his type of art may owe something to the South Pacific culture, where the artist works very closely with ordinary materials from daily life, and where objects can possess a power and totemic quality … He recognises that his work is of little “popular” appeal. It is neither pretty nor easy.’ These comments demonstrate the context within which Driver’s installation was likely received by visitors to the National Art Gallery.
From goats’ skulls to pitchforks: Driver’s source materials

Unfortunately, there is little correspondence in Te Papa’s archives relating to what Driver intended to display, except for an intriguing reference to a book he had left behind at the gallery: Gert Schiff’s *Images of horror and fantasy* (1979).\(^6\) The book followed an exhibition that Schiff had organised for the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, in 1977, in which a selection of historical and contemporary artworks were grouped around the following themes: ‘Fear / Despair, Religion / Superstition, Persecution / Paranoia, Captivity / Madness, Pain / Torture, Sex / Sadism, Death, War, Dream, Utopia / Arcadia’. Clearly, the book did not offer light reading or viewing. Driver had a considerable personal library of books on the subject of black magic, superstition and ethnic art traditions from around the world, as well as a wide selection of science fiction and fantasy novels.\(^7\) He was also an avid watcher of horror movies, and his wife, Joyce, recalls that ‘a horror movie couldn’t come to New Plymouth without Don going to see it’.\(^8\) Although the subject matter of *Ritual* is not the focus of this paper, unpacking the work in light of its art historical and cultural references – as perhaps indicated by Driver’s possession of Schiff’s book and the fact that he took it with him to the National Art Gallery around the time of early discussions about *Ritual* – warrants further investigation.

In July 1982, Upston wrote another letter to Driver, in which she noted, ‘Other than your wonderful idea I have not heard anything definite back from you in the form of a proposal or budget for your installation here in November.’\(^9\) Their subsequent correspondence appears to have been largely of a financial or practical nature. One letter written by Joyce Driver to Upston later that month includes a list: ‘Chris Garnham’s labour, dray, 2 hayforks, 1 pitchfork, 1 slasher, other tools, stands, dolls, glass, timbacryl, drums,'
Ritual relates to other works that Driver had been making in the late 1970s (Fig. 4). He had begun to incorporate dolls into his sculptures some years earlier, and his two works Fetish (1978) and Girl with skull (1981) can be seen as predecessors to Ritual. About Fetish (Fig. 5), Driver commented, ‘I have always been interested in African sculpture with an emphasis on the fetish type of effigy. This is my own twentieth century New Zealand version’.13

Reflecting on Girl with skull (Fig. 6) in 1985, Driver noted:

I wanted to use the doll, with the head and skull in hand, to produce an awesome feeling. The blue dress against the
green drum and then the heads in the hands, the rough against the smooth – rusty iron chains, corroded head against the smoothed plastic, the shock of seeing a goat’s skull upon a human body. This idea was later developed, and became a component part of a very large work Ritual.14

Ironic juxtaposition: Driver’s Ritual and Rita Angus

The timing of Ritual’s display at the National Art Gallery appears quite ironic. Shortly after the project was launched on 22 November 1982, the gallery opened its substantial survey exhibition of modernist New Zealand artist Rita Angus (1908–70). Many visitors to the gallery would have passed through the room Ritual occupied in order to visit the Angus show (Fig. 7). It is fascinating to speculate on the potential impact that this experience may have had on gallery visitors when they went on to view Angus’s works, such as her double portrait Fay and Jane Birkinshaw of 1938 (Fig. 8). It’s hard to imagine viewing Fay and Jane without a lingering sense of unease after seeing Driver’s fetish dolls aboard a farm dray. Even the girls’ playthings in the painting’s background appear uncannily animated. Likewise, the shock of encountering Driver’s work again after being immersed in the relative comfort and familiarity of Angus’s paintings must have been quite unsettling.
A shock to the system: Ritual’s initial reception

When Ritual was first shown at the National Art Gallery in 1981, Driver was already no stranger to controversy. Writing in 1999, journalist David Hill commented, ‘Hell and its self-appointed opponents have often raged around Driver’s work.’15 The magician (1967) had been withdrawn from an exhibition at the public library in New Plymouth after a large number of complaints were received, and there was further outcry when the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery proposed the purchase of another Driver work, 50kg (1978). The artist’s award-winning entry into the 1972 Benson & Hedges Art Award – Painted relief no. 11 (1972) – was not a popular choice, with the New Zealand Herald’s headline reading ‘Top painting “not for average man’” and some members of the public describing the abstract painting as a ‘confidence trick’.16 In 1980, the National Art Gallery’s purchase of High chair (1968) became the focus of media attention when it contributed to the loss of a $500 annual grant from the Hutt Valley Electric Power and Gas Board.17 Board member Len Little had denounced the purchase and claimed the money had been ‘wasted on these stupid gallery people’.18

Given this context, it is surprising that there is little record of the initial public response to Ritual, other than a couple of anecdotes and thoughtful reviews. Elizabeth Smither’s article in the New Zealand Listener is notable here both for its engagement with the work and for the writer’s...
Fig. 11 *Ritual* in the *Installation Art* exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (photo: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery; reproduced with permission).

Rites of passage: public response to Don Driver’s *Ritual* (1982) and its institutional history
Driver's Ritual divides council: attempts to acquire Ritual

In 1984, the Govett-Brewster sought the New Plymouth City Council's approval to acquire *Ritual* for its collection. This is when the media storm began (Fig. 12). The gallery’s director at the time, Dick Bett, defended *Ritual* as ‘an extremely important work by Driver’.29 In response to Councillor David Lyall’s wish to disassociate himself from the purchase on the grounds that he wanted to respect those people who found *Ritual* offensive, Bett is recorded as responding that ‘Personally I do not find it offensive – far, far from being offensive.’30 And while the police had never been called in to act on complaints about *Ritual* being obscene,31 some feared that *Ritual* was a comment on the occult and that if the council approved the purchase then it was ‘virtually saying that occult practices were quite acceptable in the community’.32

The council’s deliberations continued through 1985, during which time Cheryll Sotheran replaced Dick Bett as director of the Govett-Brewster. Sotheran reinitiated the acquisition process. When the New Plymouth City Council voted against the acquisition once again, the matter went

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Joyce Driver recalls the response of other artists and the arts community in general as being very positive.30 In a letter to Don dated 23 December 1982, shortly after the opening at the National Art Gallery, Louise Upston wrote that ‘the exhibition is looking really good and have many appreciative comments – one person has written in the visitors book “Bravo to Don Driver” – others have obviously had their say as well.’31 She tells Driver about a mysterious action that occurred each night after the show had opened. A newspaper article recounts the story: ‘On the first few mornings after it was installed, there were indications that *Ritual* had been interfered with. It turned out to be a gallery guard, disturbed by the undeniable maleness or femaleness of the figures, was going around each night tugging down the hemlines of their dresses.’32

Elva Bett reviewed the exhibition for *The Dominion* in 1983, describing Driver’s work as a ‘shock to the system’ and ‘tough fare, thought provoking in its symbolism and shattering in implication’.23 She wrote that *Ritual* harbours those voodoo practices we in the Western world feel reluctant to acknowledge … These half-child, half-goat spectres stand ready to indulge in the pagan rites of their idolatrous society … Don Driver is one of New Zealand’s most innovative artists … He can place innocence upon pedestals and we are left to face the ills and obscenities in our society which we would sooner keep hidden. For Driver is our social conscience. God forbid that we actually need him.34

Not everyone felt the same way. In fact, *Ritual* was seen as objectionable and in ‘bad taste’ by some when it was shown at the Govett-Brewster later in 1983 as part of the gallery’s *Installation Art* exhibition (Figs 10 and 11).33 Letters to the editor of New Plymouth’s *Daily News* decried the work as ‘disgusting’.26 ‘If this “Ritual” was displayed in a shop or street somebody would be locked up for perverted behaviour or indecent exposure, but inside an art gallery it is apparently allowed’, wrote ‘MG’ of Waitara.27 Yet even amidst the protests against the work, some commentators and correspondents advised open-mindedness, including ‘Think Bigger’ of New Plymouth, who said that people ought to ‘give themselves more time to think about what the artist is trying to say. They might be surprised rather than confused and disgusted.’28

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Fig. 12 Selection of newspaper headlines dating from the proposed acquisition of *Ritual* by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1984–85.
into arbitration. It is important to note that council money was not being used to acquire the work – the Monica Brewster Trust provided the gallery’s annual acquisition budget. As a condition of the trust, the directors of four New Zealand public galleries had to be asked for their advice and recommendation in the event that an acquisition did not receive council support. These four galleries were the National Art Gallery in Wellington, the Auckland Art Gallery, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. If the four committee members disagreed, then the director of the National Art Gallery had the deciding vote. Te Papa’s archives include a letter sent by Sotheran to the director of the National Art Gallery, Luit Bieringa, in June 1985 to kickstart this process. The committee went on to support the acquisition but advised the gallery to defer taking action and instead arrange an option on the work owing to limited funds at that time.

When art hits the headlines: Ritual on display

In October 1987, Ritual was exhibited at the Dowse Art Museum, where it again caused uproar. Newspaper headlines include “Ritual” sexual overtones concern’, ‘Driver’s “primitive” art startles’ and ‘Dowse exhibit revolts visitor’. A Lower Hutt city councillor received about a dozen complaints from Dowse visitors. Pauline Clayton noted in an article that Driver’s ability to put together source material which could come from a monastery or a junk heap, has both riled and caused anguish as well as great joy and enlightenment … One wonders if the attitudes of fear and ‘revulsion’ expressed so audibly, are based on similar responses to those of some of the early Christian missionaries who were known to cut penises from Maori carvings rather than be confronted by the commonplace – yet sacred – symbols of fertility and racial survival.

A review of a subsequent 1989 exhibition of Driver’s work at the Dowse noted that when Ritual had been put on display in 1987, the gallery’s attendance figures had nearly doubled.

Following the Dowse exhibition, Ritual was borrowed once again by the National Art Gallery from the artist for its exhibition When Art Hits the Headlines: a survey of controversial art in New Zealand. Curated by Jim and Mary Barr, this exhibition was held at the National Art Gallery’s additional venue Shed 11, the Temporary/Contemporary, from 12 December 1987 to 14 February 1988. The inclusion of Ritual within this exhibition cemented its reputation as a provocative and challenging work.

The exhibition placed Ritual alongside possibly the most notorious artwork in the world, Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain (1917), a ready-made urinal sculpture (Fig. 13). From the outset, Fountain had challenged audiences – including the art world – and it continued to spark strong reactions when it was included in an exhibition of Duchamp’s works from the Mary Sisler collection touring New Zealand in 1967. The work was illustrated in an article in the Evening Post, headlined ‘It’s the rudest and crudest show ever held at the National Art Gallery’. In Christchurch, Fountain and another work had not been put on public display but were available for viewing, upon appointment, in the director’s office.
Preventing a ritual burning: 
Ritual’s acquisition by the National Art Gallery

After the When Art Hits the Headlines exhibition, Ritual was returned to the Dowse in 1988, where it remained in storage until the gallery’s director, Bob Maysmor, informed Driver that the space was needed for other things. At this point, Driver contacted the National Art Gallery to ask whether it would consider taking the work as either a long-term loan or a loan for display, or as a purchase. He had no space for the work back in New Plymouth and wrote: ‘I am seriously considering a Ritual burning unless you have any other ideas?’ By this time, Driver had clearly given up hope on the Govett-Brewster acquiring the work, and the National Art Gallery was quick to act. On 20 July 1989, Robert Leonard, then curator at the National Art Gallery, wrote a short curatorial justification for the acquisition proposal, saying:

Ritual, initially executed as a project for this gallery, has become one of the most controversial and despised works...
of New Zealand art history. It is also one of Driver’s most important and successful works, and probably his best installation work ever. This portrayal of Pakeha rural sexual mythology as primitive fetish is properly regarded as misogynist, but the extent to which the misogyny is Driver’s or merely part of his subject matter (NZ rural sexual mythology) is debatable.44

Luit Bieringa signed his approval of the acquisition on 12 August 1989 and Ritual arrived back at the National Art Gallery on 31 August 1989. It remained in storage for the next decade.

**With Spirit: exhibiting Ritual in the 1990s and 2000s**

If the exhibition When Art Hits the Headlines firmly established Ritual as one of the most notorious examples of contemporary New Zealand art, it was the 1999 exhibition With Spirit: Don Driver a retrospective and its accompanying catalogue that confirmed the work as one of Driver’s most important. Following a stint at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery (Fig. 15), the exhibition travelled to the Manawatu Art Gallery, the Auckland Art Gallery, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and the Waikato Museum of Art and History. Initial plans discussed including a stint at City Gallery Wellington, but this never eventuated.

Ritual was a key work displayed at each venue and there is little record of a negative public reaction – in the media at least. One can speculate that within the context of Driver’s other works, Ritual lost some of its shock value. Reviewing With Spirit for Art New Zealand, William McAlloon wrote that Ritual ‘compellingly combines a sense of magical potency – what Driver calls “myths of the past but also the ongoing of myth in the future” – with equal measures of revulsion and eroticism, humour and sensual pleasure. It’s a dangerous combination, and one that retains its potency nearly two decades after the work’s production.’45

Ritual was displayed at Te Papa from November 2003 to October 2004 within Signs and Wonders, an exhibition exploring spiritual aspects of works from the national art collection. Once again, there is little record in either the
Fig. 16 Detail of *Ritual* (photo: Michael Hall, Te Papa).
media or anecdotally about Ritual’s reception. However, there is a note in Te Papa’s object files that in May 2004 one of the hosts noticed that ‘someone had pulled down three of the dresses that were previously folded up’. The next day, the dresses were put back to their original position by one of the art collection managers. Evidently, the overt sexual nature of Ritual continued to cause trouble.

Ritual and The Obstinate Object

In 2012, some 30 years after it was first exhibited, Ritual was presented in the context of a survey of contemporary New Zealand art at City Gallery Wellington. The Obstinate Object’s curator, Aaron Lister, had wanted to bring the work back into the spotlight, to examine its impact and legacy upon subsequent sculptural practice in New Zealand. Despite this intention, visitors who saw Ritual within the exhibition may have left wondering what all the fuss surrounding the work had been about.

Certainly, audiences in contemporary art galleries in 2012 have different expectations than those during the 1980s, 1990s and even the 2000s. The wide proliferation of contemporary art galleries worldwide and the general popularisation of contemporary art – not to mention the growing influence of the international contemporary art market – attest to a growing familiarity with contemporary art and its modus operandi. Many would argue that people have become used to the idea of being shocked when visiting contemporary art galleries. These arguments suggest that Driver’s work would be considered less contentious in 2012 than when it was first shown.

However, there is another angle to consider: to what extent did the presentation of the work within The Obstinate Object actually dilute Ritual’s impact? At City Gallery the work occupied a central position within the exhibition’s first gallery space and was presented alongside work by younger artists, including Eddie Clemens, Peter Trevelyan, Glen Hayward and Bekah Carran. Clemens’ work was made in direct response to Ritual and connected the work with other 1970s, 1980s and 1990s pop culture references such as British horror The Wicker Man (1973), through to more recent film series such as Mad Max (1979–85), Terminator (1984–2009) and Child’s Play (also known as ‘Chucky’, 1988–2004) (Fig. 17). While Ritual packed an undeniable punch within this selection of artists’ works, the group show presentation arguably reduced the intensity of encountering Ritual on its own terms, as the artist had originally devised.

Conclusion

Ritual’s chequered history of display and its relationship to New Zealand art institutions and audiences offers a fascinating insight into the way in which an artwork claims territory within New Zealand art history. Thirty years after it was first exhibited, Ritual’s presentation within a survey of contemporary New Zealand art provided an opportunity to take stock, to consider how it has stood the test of time and to interrogate the myths that surround it. In Jim and Mary Barr’s essay about Driver’s work in the With Spirit catalogue, they describe Ritual as ‘trekking endlessly through the order and mock neutrality of twentieth century, white
cube, art galleries'. With this in mind, the latest exhibition, *The Obstinate Object*, is just another moment along *Ritual's* journey – wherever it goes from here is for the future to determine.

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**Notes**

1 These 10 works include *Horizontal no. 2 (1970–71); Relief VIII* (1976), purchased in 1976; *Billy Apple as a prisoner* (1977); *High chair* (1968); *Lawn cuttings* (1978); *Painted relief no. 14: three blues* (1972), purchased in 1980; *Battery case no. 2 (1972–73); Big relief* (1980); *Blue and green Pacific* (1978); and *Zither* (1968), purchased in 1981.

2 The exhibition *Don Driver, 1965–1978* was organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery with the support of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand. The exhibition travelled around New Zealand from late June 1979 through to mid-July 1980. The full list of venues included the Govett-Brewster; the Sarjeant, Wanganui; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North; National Art Gallery, Wellington; Bishop Suter Art Gallery, Nelson; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; Wairarapa Arts Foundation, Masterton; Hastings Cultural Centre, Hastings; Gisborne Museum and Art Centre, Gisborne; Rotorua City Art Gallery, Rotorua; Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland; and Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton.

3 Louise Upston to Don Driver, draft letter, 1981, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.

4 Following is a chronological list of these solo artist ‘installation’ exhibitions at the National Art Gallery, Wellington, from early 1981 to mid-1983. The series was at times referred to as ‘Installations’, but more often the exhibitions appear to have been presented as individual artists’ projects with individual titles or with the word ‘installation’ used in a descriptive sense. Each artist was invited to develop a new work for a single gallery space of their choice within the National Art Gallery. ‘Warren Viscoe: A midden site’, 14 March–10 May 1981; ‘Neil Dawson: Reflections’, 5 September–1 November 1981; ‘3 Sculptors: Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyer, Pauline Rhodes’, 5 November 1981–14 January 1982; ‘Andrew Drummond: Cycles/stages’, 13 March–16 May 1982; ‘Don Driver: Ritual’, 22 November 1982–6 February 1983; ‘Terry Stringer: Wrap around sculpture’, 29 July–19 September 1983.


6 Joyce and Don Driver to Louise Upston, letter, 22 January 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.

7 Joyce Driver, conversation with the author, 29 January 2013.

8 Ibid.

9 Louise Upston to Don Driver, letter, 21 July 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.


11 Don Driver to Chris Cane, letter, undated, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.


18 Ibid.


20 Joyce Driver, conversation with the author, 29 January 2013.
21 Louise Upston to Don and Joyce Driver, letter, 23 December 1982, MU000052/001/0011, Te Papa Archives, Wellington.
22 Hill, ‘Ritual shows power’.
24 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Dick Bett quoted in ‘Driver work in bad taste’.
30 Ibid.
33 The directors were Rodney Wilson, Auckland City Art Gallery; Luit Bieringa, National Art Gallery, Wellington; John Coley, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; and Frank Dickinson, Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
34 Cheryll Sotheran to Luit Bieringa, letter, 26 June 1985, located in Don Driver Ritual object file 1989/34/1-11, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
38 Clayton, ‘Driver’s primitive art stirs’.
40 ‘It’s the rudest and crudest show ever held at the National Gallery’, Evening Post, 15 June 1967, p. 28.
41 Louise Pether to Don Driver, letter, 6 July 1987, located in Don and Joyce Driver’s personal ‘Ritual’ correspondence file.
42 Joyce Driver, conversation with the author, 29 January 2013.
43 Don Driver to the National Art Gallery, letter, undated [c. 1989], located in Don Driver Ritual 1989-34-1 object file, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
46 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Notification of change or damage form, 13 May 2004, located in Don Driver unnumbered artist’s file, Te Aka Matua Research Library, Te Papa, Wellington.
47 Ritual was not the only work by the artist to attract negative reaction at Te Papa. In 1998, a letter was written by a member of the public to Te Papa’s director, Cheryll Sotheran, raising concerns about Driver’s Girl with skull, then on display in the Parade exhibition on level 4. Don Driver Girl with skull 1987-0003-1 object file, Art Department, Te Papa, Wellington.
48 In conjunction with the exhibition, City Gallery Wellington and Te Papa jointly organised a symposium to examine Don Driver’s work and legacy. An earlier version of this article was originally presented by the author as a lecture at this symposium.

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It’s the rudest and crudest show ever held at the National Gallery (1967). *Evening Post*, 15 June, p. 28.


Top painting ‘not for average man’ (1972). *New Zealand Herald*, 9 June, p. 3.

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