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Michael Smither an introduction

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

New Plymouth, New Zealand

An exhibition organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and held there from 1 November – 16 December 1984.

The exhibition was made possible through the funding and material assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand and the New Plymouth City Council, the administrative authority for the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Arrangements for the New Zealand tour 1984 – 1986 were organised by the New Zealand Art Gallery Directors' Council.

Curators: Jim and Mary Barr
Catalogue editor and registration: Joan Comer
Catalogue design: Verne Barrell
Exhibition preparation: Paul Johnson
Photographer: Kris Pfeiffer
Typesetters: Computype Services Ltd. Wellington
Printers: Ekdahl Printers Ltd. Hawera

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Cover: Rock pool, 1968 (cat. no. 22)
Frontispiece: Michael Smither, 1984 (photograph by Dale Copeland)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is simply not possible to research, assemble and to tour such a large exhibition without the help, interest and co-operation of a great many individuals and organisations.

Foremost, special thanks to the artist, Michael Smither.

Thanks also to John and Allison Brebner, Judith Fyfe of the New Zealand Oral History Archive and to Trish Gribben, Peter McLeavey, Bill Milbank, Mary O'Neill, John Perry and Christine Rowe. To the artist's parents, Mr and Mrs R.E. Smither and Elizabeth Smither, our sincere thanks.

For the use of library facilities we would like to thank the following:

Auckland City Art Gallery and Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui; the Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland; the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington; the Hocken Library, Dunedin; and the Canterbury and New Plymouth Public Libraries.

To the owners of Michael Smither art works who have so generously lent their paintings for the two year duration of this exhibition, our sincere appreciation. Special thanks to the Queensland Art Gallery, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Air New Zealand for their co-operation and help.

Jim and Mary Barr
Director and staff of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

FOREWORD

Why call this exhibition 'an introduction' to Michael Smither? Apart from painting, drawing and printmaking, all of which this exhibition touches on, Smither's creative energies span a number of other disciplines and interests, principally, those of composer and environmentalist.

Smither's keen observation and intensely personal vision has led on from his painting into other areas of community involvement. He has been able to put into practice many of the environmental lessons he has learnt and recorded as a visual artist. These include the conservation of North Taranaki beaches and support of the creation of a marine reserve in the vicinity of Port Taranaki.

On a family level, the close relationship which Michael Smither enjoys with his father has resulted in their co-operation in the production of much of the artist's printmaking output. This type of father/son relationship is manifest in other relationships he enjoys: in the master/apprentice relationship with various artists over the years and as mentor to the Taranaki Artists Co-operative.

Both his environmentalist convictions and his empathy with and championing of artists and their problems, has necessarily led him into areas of political confrontation. He has a healthy disregard for conservatism and the slow moving processors of bureaucracy who ignore or frustrate him in his efforts for more understanding, flexibility and change.

In this exhibition the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery salutes an aspect of Michael Smither the visual artist. An artist of considerable talent, conviction and tenacity.

Dick Bett
Director

Michael Smither an introduction

In April 1966 Michael Smither, at the age of 26, travelled to Australia taking with him 64 paintings for exhibition. He arrived at the Argus Gallery in Melbourne to find the timing of the show had been mismanaged and, while waiting for the new opening date (1) he painted for two months in the gallery's storeroom. As he worked Smither studied the paintings he had brought. They were an odd mixture: landscapes painted in car lacquer on hardboard and influenced by the Australians Nolan, Drysdale and Dobell, along with a number of more simply stated paintings of rocks and scenes from his homelife in New Plymouth.

By the time the exhibition could be hung, Smither had made an important decision: he had recognised a content that was visibly his own. The domestic themes and studies of rocks, seen in the Australian context, were clearly specific to him.

'I had just thought that they were natural responses to the environment that I was living in . . . but when I saw them in comparison to a whole bulk of art history and to Australian painting in particular I realised just how unique they were.'
(MDSJB 17 March 1983)

He returned home to New Plymouth, Taranaki on 17 June 1967 with a renewed sense of direction and confidence.

It was a return to isolation far from the events and influences of the arts, in New Zealand as well as in the rest of the world. For Smither the isolation was tolerable, accommodating his distrust of travel and international stimulus.

'New Plymouth's isolation is an advantage for me. Here I am forced to find things out entirely for myself, away from artistic groups or trends. I need a stable environment for my work. I wouldn't want to be away from the sea. And here I'm left alone to get on with painting without too many interruptions.' (NZ Herald, 25 February 1967)

Although there were other committed artists in New Plymouth, in particular Don Driver, the city had no art gallery. Work had to be shown in either art society exhibitions or in temporary premises like the basement of the Opera House. Solo exhibitions, if they were to attract any attention or comment, had to be organised out of town, generally in Auckland. It was Auckland that developments from the



Drawing c.1965
Michael Smither
Showing the strong influence of Dobell
on Smither at this time.

late fifties, when Smither had been there at art school, had firmly established as the country's arts centre. In other centres pockets of enthusiasm kept local art activity alive, but without the concentration of energy evident in the largest city.

Since Smither had left Auckland in 1962 the New Zealand Society of Sculptors had been incorporated (2), Colin McCahon had taken up a position as full-time lecturer at the Elam School of Fine Arts in 1964 and a year later the Barry Lett Galleries had opened. In terms of painting too the years had seen a new confidence with Milan Mrkusich producing his *Element* series; Pat Hanly the much maligned *Pacific Icons*; Colin McCahon *The Second Gate Series, Landscape theme and variations* and the *Waterfalls*; Rita Angus *Fog Hawkes Bay*; and Gordon Walters his koru paintings. Events had moved quickly for back in 1959, when Smither had entered Elam, things had not been so lively.

As a schoolboy Smither had been fired up by images of being an Artist stimulated by the portrayal of Van Gogh in Irving Stone's best-seller *Lust for Life*. This youthful romanticism had been tempered by his father's concern that he get some formal training in art as a stepping stone to the more stable profession of teaching. Bill Smither had enrolled his son at the Elam School of Fine Arts, where among his contemporaries were Don Binney and Stanley Palmer.

Elam was still under the well modelled thumb of A. J. C. Fisher and most of the tutors held to the formal academic principles on which the school had been founded. Although the studio doors occasionally swung open to allow in the fresh aired opinions of John Weeks, Kees Hos, Peter Tomory and Robert Ellis, it was an atmosphere to react against rather than to follow. Binney rebelled against the obsession with modelling and disdain of the linear by eventually producing works that were literally to fly in the face of this training. Smither, however, steeped in Roman Catholic traditions of perseverance and respectfulness, chose to work through the teaching approach and eventually to incorporate it into his own.

Chipping at the edges of the School's conservatism, however, was a revitalised Auckland City Art Gallery under the directorship of Peter Tomory. In 1958 the *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* featured a recent work by a contemporary New Zealand artist on its cover for the first time (3). The same year also saw a thaw in the total ban on overseas exhibitions with the freeing of currency restrictions enabling an increased importation of more contemporary shows from overseas. A dealer gallery system had been established and a number of older painters were returning home to enrich the mixture. If the city provided stimulation for Smither, however, the entrenched attitudes prevailing at the art school deadened its effects and in 1960, during his second year, he left.

Freed from the daily routines of being a student he struggled to live off his art with a number of related jobs. Auckland provided him friends, venues for exhibition, subject matter for his work, the inspiration of old masters at the Auckland City Art Gallery and the facilities for study at the University Library.

By the time Smither decided to return to Taranaki he had the beginnings of a promising career as an artist:

— an exhibition of 'paintings that have verve and energy and which permit a

positive survey of achievement When he is good, he is very good.'(4) at Moller's Gallery.

— four paintings reproduced in *Mate*, 1961 December, 8 pp23-26. Hurky Moon: portrait (collection Hocken Library); Old woman: portrait of Mrs Niven; The fisherman and The evangelist.

— selection by Peter Tomory for Contemporary New Zealand painting 1961 of Schnapper.

But life in Auckland was hard to mouth and in 1962 he returned home to settle in New Plymouth.

' . . . it was time I went back to my stamping ground and had a look around there.'
(NZOHA p 575)

Over the next six years Smither taught himself his craft, financially aided by his parents and a series of full and part-time jobs. He explored a range of subject matter, still finding inspiration in his immediate surroundings, and experimented with different techniques and media. He also exhibited widely and frequently. By the time of his first exhibition in Australia in 1967, Smither had established himself professionally, laid the groundwork of a number of painting styles and concentrated the major themes of his content.

'Art is a way of thinking about reality.' (5)



Still life 1960
Michael Smither



Study for still life at kitchen sink 1966-67
Michael Smither

Smither is an artist who has responded intensely to the world. His home, immediate environment, and people important to him are the starting points for most of his work. Although he has chosen to use different media and styles, it is essentially his own experiences that provide his content. Less evident but still a crucial part of his work is his concern with the spiritual. It is a spirituality that has the same immediate reality for him as a stone or a safety pin or a daisy.

While a record of Smither's travels throughout New Zealand and the details of much of his domestic life can be abstracted from the images of his paintings, to tie the reading of his work solely to such biography would be to do it a disservice. Tracing the footsteps of biography often results in the landscape through which they trek passing by unnoticed.

Smither's concern to 'paint what I know' and his conservative art school training virtually guaranteed an interest in still life. However, he vehemently rejected traditional notions of still life, regarding these conventions as dead and artificial. This desire to record his own, well known domestic environment along with his dislike of artifice resulted in his portraying domestic objects as he found them. The key was honesty of intention. If the objects were to retain their own identity they would only do so if they also retained their physical relationship to one another as determined by the daily use to which they were put. A typical painting of the early sixties contains the following objects: milk bottle, jug, paperbag, bowl and spoon, pound of butter, sugar bowl, half-grapefruit on a plate, slice of toast, newspaper, plate with knife and a jar. Some fifteen years later Smither still returns to paint some of these domestic items individually.

For Smither domestic objects left on a table witnessed that there 'was always something that was happening' and that to arrange them for the purposes of art would be to deny the event that had caused them to be placed in such a way. The objects were a social commentary of domestic incident and routine. They were to remain so even when later they served as props or as background in paintings of his wife and children.

The earliest still lifes, done between 1961 and 1963, are complex in composition and show the influence of his teacher, John Weeks. Although they show little of Smither's typically linear later style, they have already established many of the qualities he would refine in works such as *Still life with brown bowl* 1966 (cat. no. 9). To begin with, and most noticeably, these early works are very tightly framed, the composition organised as a photograph might be cropped. This gives the paintings the illusion of increased size, drawing attention as it does to the continuation of the objects cut off at the frame's edge. Paradoxically, however, it also has the effect of creating an unnatural closeness and claustrophobia in the composition. It is the feeling of walking in a narrow tunnel through a large mountain, the experience intensified by the knowledge of what is all about. It is the combination of these two factors (the prediction of what is just beyond the frame and

the concentration on the objects depicted) that gives much of Smither's work its characteristic tension.

Within this framework the objects themselves are treated non-hierarchically. The structure of the composition provides the dynamic and focus while the elements within it tend to be portrayed in an evenly dense, simplified manner. As a student Smither had been impressed by the way Leger had handled this 'democracy of intention', although he had only seen his work in reproduction.

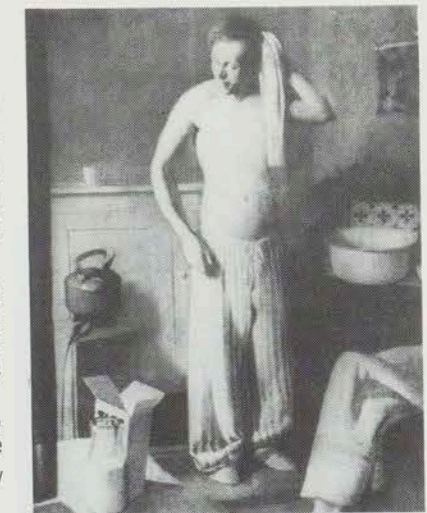
'One then understands that everything is of equal interest, that the human face or the human body is of no weightier plastic interest than a tree, a plant, a piece of rock, or a pile of rope. It is enough to compose a picture with these objects, being careful to choose those that may best create a composition. It is a question of choice on the artist's part.' (Leger: p 111)

Initially this attitude was also reflected in the viewpoint affected by Smither in such compositions. Until 1963 most of his compositions were frontal, the viewpoint generally regarded as neutral. Later Smither was to develop a much more distinctive approach emphasising his role as observer. This is already evident in the painting *Still life with brown bowl* and dominates works such as *Large still life on table* 1968 (cat. no. 11). Later still he was to subvert the supposedly neutral front-on posture by exaggerated scale, turning observation into a confrontation as in the large portraits of the 1970s (see *Self portrait* 1976 (cat. no. 34) and *Portrait of the artist's father* 1975 (cat. no. 33)).

With the births of his children the still life objects moved into the background as Smither began to explore the experiences of his family. Their presence had been implied by the kitchen clutter he had painted; now they were drawn into the foreground. He is unusual among male painters in this interest in the most banal domestic trivia which he has always seen in terms of its association with human activity. A painting that foreshadows the human involvement in the domestic situation is *Bachelor shaving* 1963 (cat. no. 2).

As has already been emphasised, Smither is an artist who paints what he knows. No better subject matter than the self portrait although here he has not met the usual expectations of self portraiture. The figure is turned away from us and as in other paintings (specifically *Study for the Baptism of Christ* 1967 (cat. no. 29)) is strangely amorphous. Bent over the bench, shoulders hunched, anatomy is more implied than stated. Yet the sag of the pyjama seat and the peek of hair above the v-shaped valley of singlet are evocative enough to allow the figure to stand. An expressive piece of observation.

The subject was triggered by a William Dobell painting, *Boy at the basin* 1932 seen in reproduction, but if Dobell was 'making the common place unique' (6), Smither was 'just interested in the realism.' and not 'trying to pretty it up at all.' (7) In the Smither painting the morning wash has been changed from a romance to a daily routine. The difference between basin and sink. This routine is further indicated by the towel draped over the chair, the flannel on the mirror and the



Boy at the basin 1932
William Dobell
Collection: Art Gallery of
New South Wales



Bachelor 1962
Michael Smither
Drawing for Bachelor shaving

specific domestic details in the still life on the benchtop. It is a room the artist knows well. He chose the carpet and painted the bench red. It could be said that the colour orchestration of the work was organised by Smither *before* he chose to paint it. That the quarters are those of a bachelor is emphasised by the beer bottles stacked beneath the sink and the combined clutter of kitchen and shaving gear. The colour is bold and applied with vigour. The paint of the flannel at the top of frame appears to come straight from the tube and owes something to Smither's admiration of the artist Keith Patterson who was painting in Auckland when he was a student. Smither's attempt to portray accurately the specific colours of interiors often causes him problems, as here, which he solves with tone. Tone becomes the link, keeping the colours from collapsing in a landslide of planes.

In early 1964 Michael and Elizabeth Smither moved to the Gables, an historic house that once served as a military hospital, set above Pukekura Park. The building with its beautifully proportioned, sun-filled rooms and distinctive finishing suited the artist. For the next five years Smither used the life of his family in this place as one of his main themes, constantly looking for a clarity of expression that he could mark as his own.

'I would sit on the other side of the table and draw continuously at breakfast time and other times during the day. That table became a very special place for me. The light on it was always just perfect.' (MDS/B 13 December 1983)

In *Still life with brown bowl* the style that was to become recognisably 'Smither' is close to settled. We find he has dispensed with much of the complexity of arrangement across the composition to focus in on the objects. It is the difference between Cézanne and Morandi. The diagonals of the bench and the height of the bottle pull the viewer into the picture but this dynamic is interrupted by the unexpectedly flat simplicity of the landscape outside the window and the bright blue handle of the knife which is the pivot of the painting.

Smither's drive to simplification has not, however, only been satisfied by compositional reduction and focus. His painting of the objects themselves, although still relatively painterly in the brushstrokes and subtlety of colour, has become more linear. Much of Smither's stylistic direction lies in the interaction between these two approaches which can be broadly characterised as painterly and linear. In his search for clarity Smither has, in the mainstream of his work up to 1980, moved from de-emphasising outline to stressing the limits of objects and evolved a painting technique that removed the evidence of painterly gesture from his finished work.

In *Still life with brown bowl* it is the form and shape of objects which are most important, not their substance. They appear strangely like the grey painted items used by Fisher at Elam to teach his students the rigorous disciplines of depicting form and volume. Their materiality as porcelain, tin and wood is subservient to their form. This is also true of the rocks in the paintings he was beginning at the

same time.

'I've always treated oil paint like a modelling clay ... it's not a fluid medium, it's a plastic medium.' (MDS/B 13 December 1983)

Because of this emphasis on form, physical qualities of surface, density and transparency are implied rather than stated, and it is through their distinctive form that we can immediately identify them. Within this simplification and stylisation painting is still important, as can be seen in the subtlety of bruised colour on the bottle at the rear, the blush of pink on the cut-off bowl to the right. As Smither's paintings are the product of continuous drawing and observation, they contain the same everyday objects over and over again; specific bowls and jugs, the bread board and particularly the knife with the blue wooden handle (8). It is this familiarity with his content that gives Smither the freedom to concentrate on the particulars of the painting and composition.

Another example of Smither's reductive technique with still life can be seen in *Large still life on table* 1968 (cat. no. 11). Here there is an added need for the components of the composition to be simplified to allow for the complexity of the viewpoint which is, of course, perceptually impossible. We see at once from above and below the tabletop, the latter view being inspired no doubt by the paintings Smither had been doing of his daughter Sarah since her birth in 1964. There is nothing like a crawling child to make a parent aware of a previously ignored floor and the underside, the 'wrong' side of ordinary furniture. Such a combination of views has been used by many artists and in many different traditions. In New Zealand McCahon has often combined aerial and head on views, such as *Clouds and Oaia* 1975 where a frontally silhouetted island is seen down through the clouds as from an aeroplane. The device is also found in Indian miniatures and medieval illustrations. In *Large still life on table* a particularly ingenious example of the manipulation of perspective is seen in the way the roller coaster of black and white tiles is nailed down on the right by the blank black shape of the hearthplace.

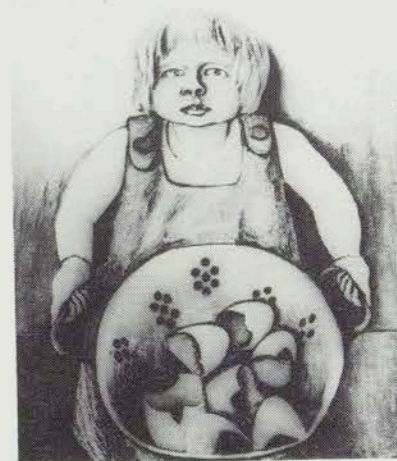
Smither, however, evidently found the artifice of extreme perspective too dominating and in conflict with his search for clarity of subject, for although he used the device a number of times, most noticeably in *Colander* 1966 (cat. no. 10) and its follow-up *Sarah and colander* 1968, it does not appear in such an overt form again.

'It's [Colander] a very disturbing picture, but I wasn't doing that consciously. What I was really after was to show both inside and outside. I was so interested in that I later used it again with Sarah.' (MDS/B 12 June 1984)

'The trick ... [is] to use form to create the illusion of it being one situation and to melt one perspective into another without the viewer being aware of what you are doing. ...' (MDS/B February 1980)



Still life on table 1966
Michael Smither
Drawing for Large still life on table



Sarah and colander 1966
Michael Smither

Although *Large still life on table* can be seen simply as an exercise in colour arrangements, the objects Smither selects to paint can also be projected as symbolic on a number of levels.

'The experiencing of a work of art, then, is not merely a matter of aesthetic taste; it is also a matter of reacting to a proposition about the nature of reality that is implicitly or explicitly shadowed forth in the work.' (McEvilley: p 52)

Given his strong religious commitment at the time and his continuing tussle with Christianity, part of Smither's reality is that of the spirit. In *Large still life on table*, he was almost certainly aware of the suggestion of an altar ready for communion. This evocation of another level of reality by essentially mundane objects — cup, bread, jug — is achieved in part by the stillness of the composition and the formality of the approach. The close association between so much of Christian symbolism and the domestic scene gives many of Smither's paintings this added richness.

'So much of my life as a boy was of a great joy to me that I want now to try and relive it for other people and leave some sort of a record.' (MDS diary note January 1967)

The birth of his daughter gave Smither both new subject matter and an insight into himself. He became aware as he watched her that she was repeating many of the until then forgotten moments of his own childhood. The paintings that resulted from this observation, although quite specifically of the Smither children and titled as such, can be seen on another level as portraits of himself when young.

"At the moment I am interested in painting my own situation. My work is very much tied up with my life, with my childhood which I am rediscovering through the eyes of my daughter, with my environment and the magnificent range of things there are to look at around here." (MDS NZ Herald, 25 February 1967)

Initially it seems to have been enough to capture a moment that clicked in the memory of his own childhood. Smither's notebooks are crammed with drawings of the family at all stages of their daily routine: ducks are fed, babies bathed, meals eaten, hands wiped and nappies changed. The drawings of these incidents, like the paintings, fall into two distinct styles; an initial quickly jotted recognition of the moment and a more detailed drawing based on a number of observations related to that the moment.

In speaking about his wave paintings, Smither has given some idea of the problems of this approach:

"... one of the sources of my frustrations, [is] that I choose to try and freeze the impossible. Try and hold that perfect moment. In my mind I try and understand the subject enough so that perhaps one day I can look at it [and] I'll have enough information tucked away in my brain to be able to recall the situation. It very seldom happens ..." (NZOHA: p 338)

To capture the particular instant Smither started on the board with a brushed 'drawing'. This was then worked on so that the objects became increasingly defined until completion, a process that could take a number of years. This was part of the drive to the linear that has been discussed above. Smither worked hard to clarify the images of his paintings by tightly defining their limits. At the same time he painted what he refers to as oil sketches, freer and usually smaller paintings that go for the spirit of the moment. The sketches can be hit or miss but when they hit they are full of vitality and energy. Smither summarised his two approaches, which he still follows:

'One; a spontaneous reaction to the idea I want to put down. Two, I've got an image in my head ... and I want to get it down as a symbolic image ... which

seems to preclude any spontaneous work ... to me it's the image that is important, the paint becomes secondary.' (MDSJB 13 December 1983)

One thing that these oil sketches do share with the more formal paintings is their source in drawings. Although later in his rock paintings Smither dealt with imagined scenes, the primary source for all his work is the observations made in his sketchbooks and loose drawings. Often paintings may be based on a number of drawings that slowly build up a richness of detail and sense of occasion that may have been missed in the first impression. Generally, however, it is possible to trace a particular drawing to each painting.

The moments of family life that Smither observed in his paintings fell into two broad groups. The moments of individual discovery by particular children and the moments of family interrelationship, both of which triggered off Smither's own recollection of his childhood.

Despite basing his paintings on detailed observation there were a number of problems inherent in using children as subject matter. Children have not been an important theme in Western art and particularly in the twentieth century they have not attracted very much serious attention. In Smither's work, however, they exist as a major and very visible theme. It is yet another aspect of his conviction that he must paint only what he knew and understood if he were to present his view of reality.

The problem was one of effectively managing his content, conscious of the fact that his audience would bring to the paintings its own particular experiences. This was to be particularly true of a subject like childhood on which everyone proved an expert! The two pitfalls of realism are sentimentality and anecdote, and they have to be resolved anew by each artist (9). Both have the power to shift attention away from the painting itself, sentimentality by its reference to banal and second-hand emotions and anecdote through its suggestion that events outside the picture plane give the work more weight and interest than what we see. The classic livingroom painting of the orchid and cigarette butt flung down on the steps gives illustration to the latter. Here the story of how these mismatched objects got to be on the steps becomes more important than the depiction of them. Rambling conjectures overwhelm the moment. The problems of sentimentality are as obvious, for instance, the sickly responses inspired by Goldie's portraits of elderly Maoris. The sitters are not seen as people but as human sunsets bathing our past in an acceptable glow of resignation. Both cases are examples of dishonest generalisation overcoming the specific. It is the balance between these two points of view that determine the success or failure of much of Smither's work in this area.

It is specificity that saves *Sarah eating baked beans* 1967-68 (cat. no. 13) as it hovers on the very edge of sentimentality. It is not surprising that Sarah's grandparents should choose to have the painting in their home. It is a loving portrait of a daughter delighted with her favourite meal, baked beans. Not that the beans that she gets are in any way run of the mill. Dad's a painter so he runs

her up some beans the size of small rocks. Little wonder her eyes scrunch up in delight.

'It was a deliberate attempt to paint a portrait. The others were paintings of children. This one is of Sarah Smither.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)

The painting is softly focused and the child sweetly dressed and posed. How then has sentimentality been avoided? The first clue is in the child's appraising gaze at the viewer. This is a child who knows she is being cute and her self-knowledge and awareness of our expectations stop sentimental reverie short. Sarah has not been reduced to a cypher for 'sweet little girl'; she has retained a genuine and surprising identity. There are other clues too. The distorted scale, for example, subverts what should be an endearingly cute pose so as to force consideration of the painting itself. Still, it is probably fair to say that had Smither used this approach of slyly contradicting conventional expectations as a model for the rest of his family paintings, it is unlikely that they would have been as forceful.

In his more typical paintings of children Smither has used the abrasiveness of childhood's contact with the adult world to counteract adults' instinctive condescension. This is clearly seen in *Joseph with bear and bottle* 1973 (cat. no. 18). Early morning and Joseph wants breakfast. Food again. The same pointed fingers spreading like starfish, the softly waving hair. But here the similarity ends. The two paintings are at the two extremes of Smither's work, the one a portrait of his daughter Sarah as a child, the other depicting Joseph as Child.

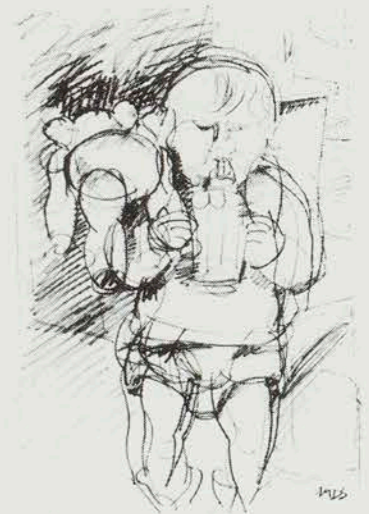
Joseph with bear and bottle, although it comes comparatively late in the domestic paintings, also illustrates the way Smither avoids the other realist trap, anecdote. The painting is the result of an ordinary family event.

'I did [the painting] in Wellington away from the family. I had come back for a weekend home and I was in bed in the morning and this kid came marching in and pointed and I went straight back to Wellington and I did the painting.'

(MDSJB February 1981)

'There was that beautiful quality of light in the room and this kid standing in the doorway and that was it.' (MDSJB 28 April 1983)

It is unlikely that many viewers who were not told of this event would read the painting as an early morning encounter with a hungry child. There is a sense of mystery and threat. Partly this is because the light source is from below to give the child the ghostly appearance of an apparition (close enough to Smither's original theme!). This light is in fact the sun bouncing off the floor of the bedroom, but it has more the ghoulishness of a child holding a torch under its chin playing spooks. The finger too takes on a mythic quality when unattached to the need for food. As the child is pointing to an area that is dark, we assume some menace rather than that the passage light has not been turned on. The scale also makes



Drawing for *Joseph with bear and bottle*
Michael Smither

us uneasy. The child is huge and when confronted also by the equipment of childhood blown up to such proportions, it does not seem like the easily contained and unthreatening domestic world we know. Here Smither again questions easy assumptions and again demonstrates his conviction that the detailed drama of his own experience can act as a powerful source for his painting.

Yet for all the readings which can be made of this painting at a number of levels, it still avoids any reference to what may happen to the child or what has happened to it. It is a painting free of storytelling with the various elements combining to keep us looking at the work as an event, and not as a challenge to our inventiveness at making up a story. Without this narrative aspect diluting the image, it is able to retain its integrity and to operate on terms solely those of the artist. In this respect it is interesting to compare the finished work with the drawing made in preparation. Essentially the concept is the same and yet the changes made are revealing as evidence of Smither's concern to remove sentimentality. The bear has been taken from over Joseph's shoulder to a more neutral position. The pointing finger has been added, either from a remembered detail or further observation and the body's orientation changed to Smither's more usual leftward facing one.

'People thought I was joking. They couldn't believe what I was doing to my family.' (MDSJB 17 March 1983)

As well as showing children as individuals, Smither was concerned with relationships within families and across generations. Rarely appearing himself in any of these paintings he remains emphatically the outsider, the observer. In this and in his portrayals of the relationships between men and women, he shares much in spirit with Stanley Spencer, an English painter who was a considerable influence on his domestic work.

'I saw the way that children were real devils in disguise. They held this incredible wisdom and ability to do the right things and the wrong things with great panache. When they loved, they really loved and when they hated they really hated. And Spencer for some reason had this quality in his paintings . . . He paints his father in his dressing gown out feeding chickens and it's St Francis in the garden. That sort of affected me because of my Catholic upbringing and the deep religious and mystic feelings I had in those days.' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

For the mother in *Sarah with spoon, Elsie in polka dots* 1967 (cat. no. 15) the child is portrayed as a demanding presence that traps and torments her both with its physical presence and with her love for it. While she pulls away from the child's insistent grasp she still attends to the business of preparing food. It is a persuasive intuition into the predicament of motherhood and appears in many of Smither's paintings and prints of this time. In *Grandparents at Tea* 1970 (cat. no. 17) the same conflict is present. What makes these observations unusual is the fact that they come from a male observer. Smither has crystallised that moment of trapped frustration in a gesture which grips the viewer.

'The painting is grotesque, deliberately in this case! It was my first recognition of the tension in the mother-child relationship' (MDSJB 13 June 84)

This tension is emphasised by the conflicting diagonals of the composition, made particularly evident by the arms. Even the top edge of the frame is bearing down on the mother's head making the cropping claustrophobic. Her angled head and neck are those of a Christian martyr. Arms and hands outstretched is a gesture Smither has used often to demonstrate the demanding nature of families, and children in particular. Ambivalent in that it can represent both grasping demand and the desire to protect, it is also a gesture of loving welcome, an interpretation that Smither uses for *St Francis receives the stigmata* 1967 (cat. no. 31)

Smither had already given an indication of his interest in the isolated position of a mother, a woman, in an earlier and more formal painting *Portrait of my wife* 1966 (cat. no. 14). Here he works against his usual approach of recognising his subject matter from observation and drawing. We can assume that the pose was



Study for Grandparents at door
Michael Smither

set for specific reasons, not all of which were purely compositional. Elizabeth Smither is posed formally and traditionally by a window with the light coming from the left, the direction Smither favours for the majority of his work. The hands are clasped on the lap, a position often used in religious art to represent the union of marriage, a suggestion amplified by the work's specific title. As the painting was produced while the sitter was pregnant with the couple's second child the green dress with its connotations of fertility and growth are not inappropriate.

As with other paintings of this time the position taken by Smither as observer is very close. We can visualise him, his chair pulled right up to his wife's, their knees almost touching. This closeness makes the portrait more intimate, with its assumption that the sitter trusts the artist to allow this inspection. Yet she looks away from the painter, her face passively reflecting the light pouring in from the garden. There is an implication that this woman is also trapped in this position, compelled by her responsibilities to remain inside her house and, by implication, inside herself. She gazes not out of the window but into the middle distance, thinking.

Grandparents at door 1970 (cat. no. 16) by contrast with the introspective, personal nature of Smither's painting of his wife, extends his inventiveness with the use of gesture as symbol. The initial drawing is one of Smither's quick records of situation (10). The intention is to capture the basic composition and the key elements that made the incident 'click'. Two children eagerly wait to greet their grandfather their hands outstretched with one of Thomas's clutching at the door knob, faces uplifted. In translating this drawing into a painting Smither has made revealing additions and changes: the inclusion of the grandmother, the greater prominence and character of the grandfather's hand, the turn to complete profile of Sarah's face, the inclusion of the children's feet and added detail such as the toy dog and specific clothing.

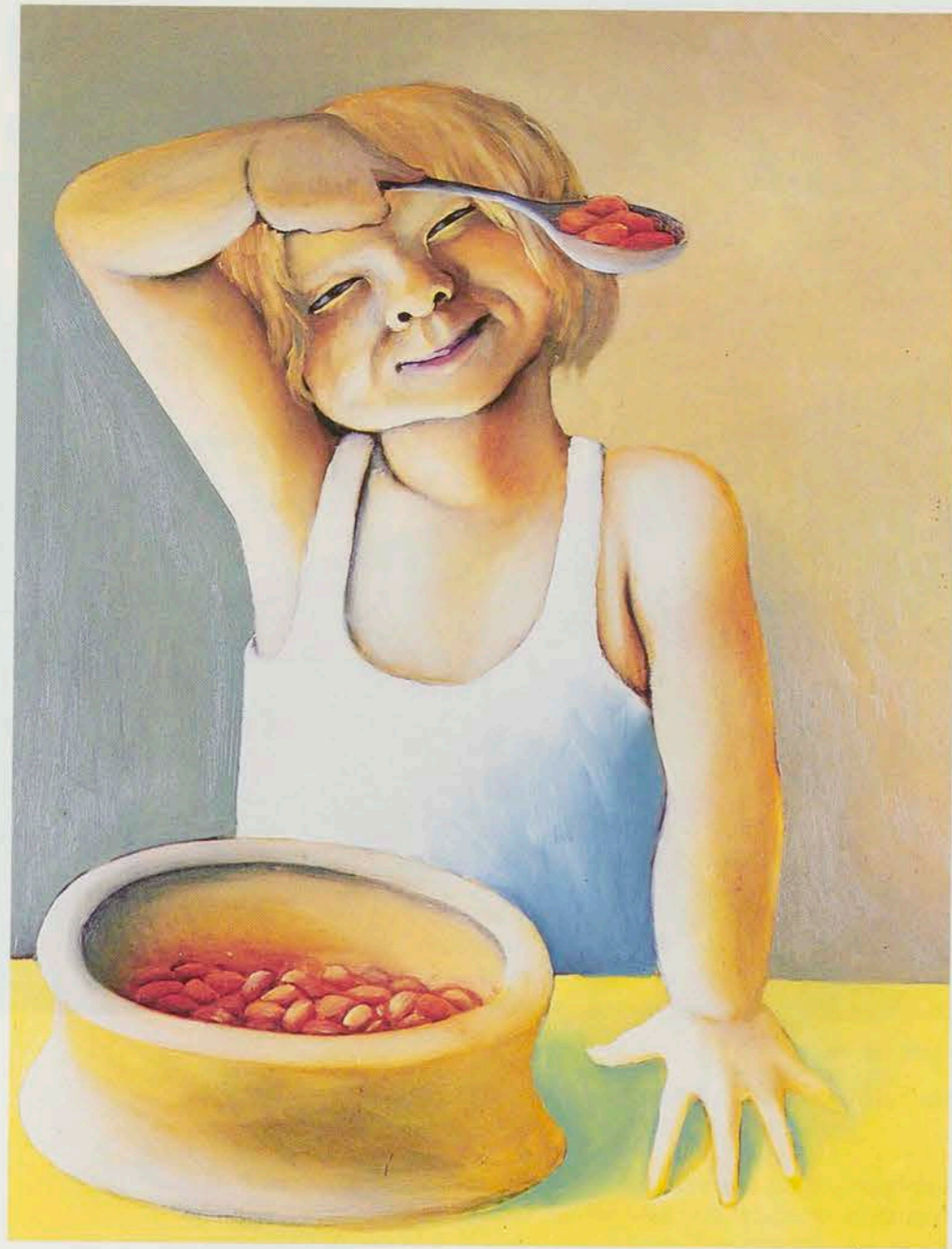
Some of these additions and changes were no doubt made for compositional reasons; the inclusion of the grandmother certainly required the longer view and the toy dog gives a nice personal touch to the figure of Sarah. However, a number of the other changes provide the painting with another layer of meaning. The grandfather's hand is now emphasising the door as a barrier between the children and himself. The lines on his palm are clearly shown. These are often read as a record of the owner's life and portent of the future but Smither has used his own palm as the model. Father and son are combined, the missing link between the generations is present.

'I knew even though he was only opening the door he was saying "Stop, this is a door you can't come through."' (MDS/B 20 June 1984)

This sense of separation is further emphasised by the treatment of the children's grandmother. She is placed far behind her husband in forced perspective as a tiny figure in the rear of the composition. The children are in the bright white light gaily dressed, while the black-clothed old people are separated from them in the



Large still life on table 1968 cat. no. 11



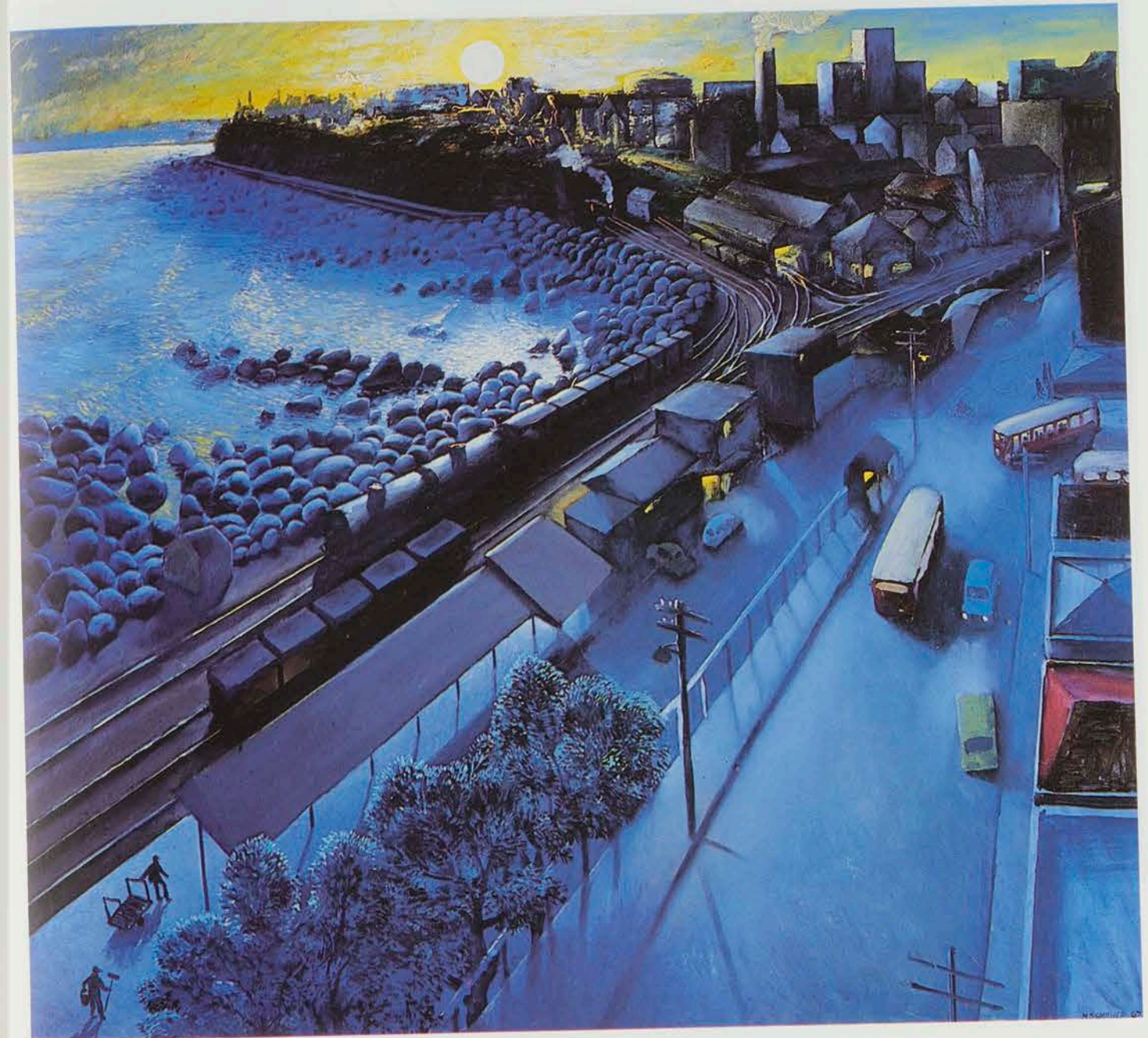
Sarah eating baked beans 1967-68 cat no. 13



Sarah with spoon, Elsie in polka dots 1967-68 cat. no. 15



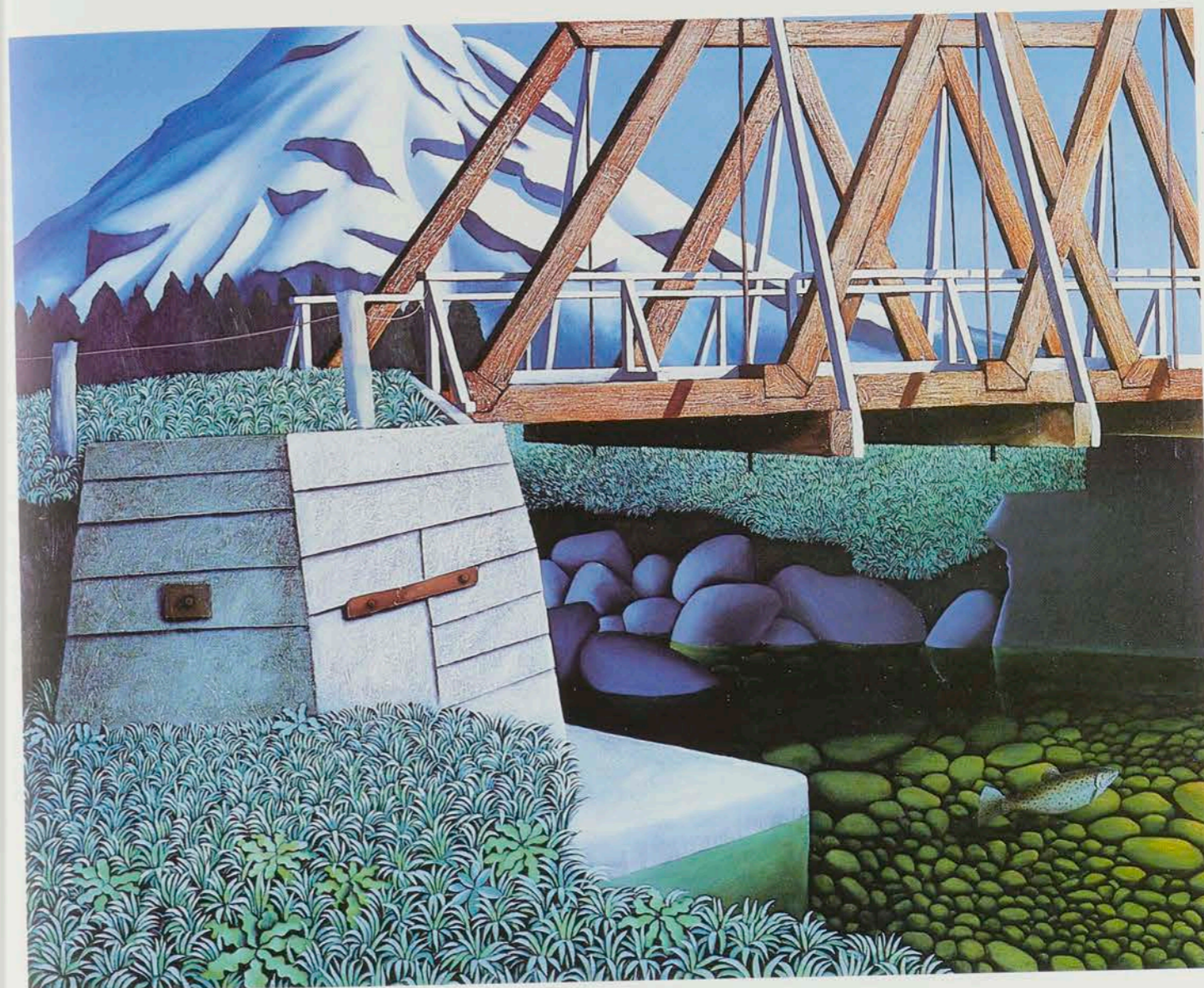
Grandparents at tea 1970 cat. no. 17



Composition — railways 1967 cat. no. 5



Wave breaking on railway wall 1967 oil on board
private collection, New Plymouth



Alfred Road bridge 1968 cat. no. 7



Thomas's first attempt at a stand-up pee 1970 cat. no. 27

darkness, the moment of disjunction frozen. This painting is a good example of the way Smither infused a straightforward observation of an event with personal and then general significances. Smither himself recalls that the painting came at a time when he first became aware of his own parents' mortality.

Not all the family scenes are as overtly symbolic as *Grandparents at door*, however. Some serve more as a record than a portent. *Grandparents at tea* 1970 (cat. no. 17) is such a record of a family meal. Smither once again is an unseen observer looking over the shoulder of his father, a succinct statement of his position. Although the event itself was seen by Smither, he has used it to gather together at lunch, with the members of the family, a number of familiar images. The portrait of Sarah has close affinities with *Sarah eating baked beans*, a painting of the flower arrangement on the table exists independently, the head of the grandfather looks based on the same drawing, albeit reversed, as *Grandparents at door*. All this gives the painting the same sense of familiarity for those who know Smither's work, as the artist has to the family itself. Familiarity is an important element in the domestic scene and in Smither's rendition of it.

In his domestic works Smither attempts to transfer to the viewer his own sense of the miracle of being young. But these are children far from the sentimentality of painters of children such as Millais. They are strongly independent and active individuals. It is ironic that of these paintings, some of his most successful, the chief criticism was to be that he had portrayed his children as monsters. William S. Wilson pinpoints the dilemma when he suggests that as '... a work of art is a proposal about what is real — [this] might help to explain why art that people don't like makes them so angry' (11). Smither's uncomfortably different proposition as to who children are was consequently widely rejected.

'They saw no affection. I have always regarded that as a great failure of my ability to paint that they didn't see the affection that was there ... that has hurt me that they didn't see the love ... at that stage I thought that anybody I loved was blessed.' (MDS/B 17 March 1983)

'Art gives you an emotional map of your environment' (MDS Dominion, 4 December 1971)

If a large number of the domestic works concentrated on the interior of the Gables, Smither at the same time was also giving a great deal of attention to the park close by and the environs of Taranaki. In the mid-sixties he painted a number of oil sketches in Pukekura Park. The immediacy of this technique allowed him to capture quickly the spills of light and changing forms created by shadow as the sun filtered through the dense foliage. These early works of the park are bush studies looking through the undergrowth and trees in an effort to suggest the effect of being surrounded by vegetation (see *Bush study* 1965 (cat. no. 4)). This intimacy with and submersion in his content was achieved again later in the more formal works by very close confrontation with the image and cropping at the frame edge.

'At that stage no one was painting the bush from the inside. I was always inside my subject; it was more intimate, more dramatic.' (MDS/B 20 June 1984)

Smither has been consistently concerned with working from the specifics of his experience. In his landscapes this orientation is constant. *Composition — railways* 1967 (cat. no. 5) is insistently a painting of a particular place: the railway station at New Plymouth, based on drawings made there in both 1964 (12) and 1966 (13). In the later and more detailed drawing, done after his return from Australia, the buildings are clearly labelled, although the view is forward and to the left of that taken in the painting. Other drawings of the time show details of the cutting and other elements from the same viewpoint. The drawings are quite diagrammatic and concentrate on the volumes and shapes of the various buildings and their relation to one another.

In the painting, unlike the drawings, there is a sense of a social, almost documentary approach to the waking city. This is also a feature of the views of Pukekura Park painted around the same time. Buses are pulling out of the terminal, a few cars are casually parked outside the lighted station, a commercial cleaner in the lower left corner might be Smither who held such a job. Smither has always needed to record his experiences and perceptions, both to retain and analyse them for himself and to share them with others. These needs are in large part behind his tireless documentation of his experiences in the eighty odd sketchbooks of drawings and writings. (14)

The mood of a city about to burst into life is neatly summed up by both the warming glow of the rising sun and the bustling detail of the rocks on the foreshore. These rocks are carefully modelled, their form made apparent by the direction of the light. As a motif they were to become strongly associated with Smither over the next six or so years. In *Composition-railways* they have an unnatural, weighty presence which is emphasised by the gleam of water where they hug the foreshore. This presence verging on menace is also evoked in other paintings of the



Study for *Composition-railways* 1966
Michael Smither

period like *Wave breaking on railway wall* 1967. Pushing up against the sea wall like an invading force, these solid waves of rocks appear close to overwhelming the railway lines and by inference to threatening the city itself.

Composition-railways also shows Smither combining his two styles which we have broadly characterised as painterly and linear. The Australian experience confirmed Smither's inclination to develop the linearity and simplicity of his paintings, but in the interaction and tension between the two styles lies much of his interest as a painter. Here he presents an intriguing example of successfully combining the conflicting styles rather than deciding for either one or the other, as he tended to do later and into the eighties, although his choices have changed again. In the background and dancing across the sea the sun glares impressionistically, reducing forms to generalised shapes and blocks of colour. The scene is suggested by the freely applied paint rather than delineated by it; in the foreground, where the business of the day is starting, a more painstaking approach has been taken. We can see easily identifiable cars, buses and, most obviously, the silhouetted guard and station cleaner. This accommodation of conflicting styles was transitory, however, and although he continued to paint in both separately, serious efforts to combine them were abandoned.

Before his trip to Australia and on his return in 1966 Smither began a number of what he called 'god's eye' paintings of Pukekura Park — and this was also the viewpoint taken in *Composition — railways*. An earlier work using this same viewpoint, *The spring night of K Wright*, had been exhibited at the Argus exhibition and would have come under the artist's scrutiny there. The later paintings, more confident in approach, show far more than naturalistic perspective would allow and we become 'super-observers'. This has been a viewpoint often adopted by artists over the centuries and probably owes something to Smither having seen the Auckland City Art Gallery's Brueghel *A village fair*. In describing the viewpoint Smither has always been careful to say it is a 'god's eye' view rather than the more usual 'bird's eye' one. The moral implications of such a distinction are clear. Physically it is a point of view often used by regional painters as a way of summing up their environment. In New Zealand for instance the device of has been used by Doris Lusk in *Tahunanui, Nelson* 1947 and May Smith in her 1944 painting *Railway yard* reproduced in *The Arts in New Zealand* number 67.

Unlike the bush studies, the Pukekura Park paintings were made in the studio. A number of them are crowded with the minutiae of a busy public park. Lovers stroll in shaded paths, boats are rowed, wedding guests are photographed and prams are pushed. *Pukekura Park with rotunda* 1967 (cat. no. 6) is different from these works though as it is unpeopled. Living in the park at this time, Smither often saw it when there were no people about so to paint it this way was an obvious option. This emptiness strengthens the work. In some of its companion-pieces social documentary tends to give way to narrative, for instead of seeing recorded a particular place put to particular uses, these very uses distract us from the painting to consider the 'Who's that getting married?' questions. But



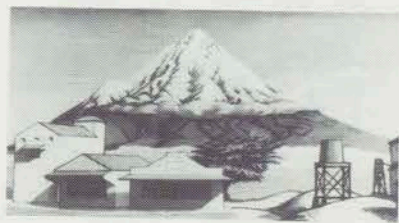
Study for Pukekura Park paintings
Michael Smither

here the lack of people gives the Park an unfamiliar air as though it has been frozen unnaturally in time. The objects made for the enjoyment of people, such as the boathouse, rotunda and small boats look so useless. It's like being in an empty fairground. The curving swans and outside the Park the signs of life from the houses only add to the disquiet.

The Australian experience had confirmed Smither's interest in the techniques of primitive painters and, on his return, he began to use some of them. The simplification of the trees is one example here, although the painterliness of the lake's surface is well outside this tradition. The aspects that most attracted him as a representational painter appear to be patterning, the simplification of forms (which he had been investigating since art school) and blocking colour which can be seen quite clearly in *Alfred Road bridge* 1968 (cat. no. 7). The use of such devices by more sophisticated painters is not unusual. Smither was aware of the American regionalists and in particular was attracted by the dynamic simplifications of Grant Wood so it is interesting to compare the car pulling from the curb in *Composition — railways* (cat. no. 5) with Wood's *Death on the Ridge Road* 1934. Although not as technically proficient as the American, Smither usually kept this attraction to pattern and design in check. He uses patterning and meticulous detail frequently from this time on, very noticeably in the grass in *Boys fighting over pink plastic gun* 1978 (cat. no. 20), the grip on *Yellow rubber gloves* 1977 (cat. no. 35) and the oranges in *Seagrass basket and oranges* 1979 (cat. no. 38).

There is another similar work of *Alfred Road bridge* painted later after Smither's return from the South Island in 1971. In *Alfred Road bridge* 1968 Mount Egmont is cut off by the top of the frame, its completed shape provided by the struts of the now demolished bridge. In cutting off the top of the mountain in such a way Smither was continuing in his efforts to confront his audience with his images. If the painting cannot include the full height of the mountain the implication is that it must be of very great size. This is reinforced by its crisp outlines; it has not retreated in misty grandeur but looms up over the bridge with unnatural clarity. It is the antithesis of the 'grand view' typically used in depicting nature which effortlessly encompasses the elements within the picture frame. There are obvious parallels with the compositional cropping in his still life and domestic pictures.

Smither had tended to avoid Mount Egmont as subject matter because of its long pictorial popularity. Its striking symmetry has made it an appealing image from the times of early colonial settlement. Earlier painters had also seen the mountain in terms of its strong triangular design, most noticeably Charles Heaphy in *Mount Egmont from the Southward* 1839 and Christopher Perkins in *Taranaki* 1931. Apart from these and some other less romantic views, however, it had become a focus for sentimentality, eliciting immediate and easy responses to its remarkable natural appearance. Smither's interest in it at this time — which he went on to develop extensively in many prints — seems to have been part of his wider efforts to subvert clichés as discussed in relation to his painting *Sarah eating baked beans*, to make us see freshly.



Taranaki 1931
Christopher Perkins
Collection: Auckland City Art Gallery

In the later version of *Alfred Road bridge* the mountain shows signs of the increased stylisation Smither had brought back with him from Central Otago landscapes. It is freed from the restraint of the frame and its triangular relationship to the bridge is less stated but this more traditional composition and the inclusion of grazing cattle tends to make the painting a little too picturesque, in the sense of a subject suitable for a picture. It has become too obvious as subject matter. The conception of this second version has also been affected by Smither's renewed acquaintance with the mountain on his return from almost two years in the South Island. It is more an outsider's appraising view.

The trip south to Patearoa in Otago had been initially undertaken to get away from New Plymouth for a break, but toward the end of 1969 Smither was awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship and the visit was extended. Although he had already spent some time in the area painting in 1962, Smither had still to come to terms with the sweeping landscape of Central Otago, so different from the more contained environment of New Plymouth.

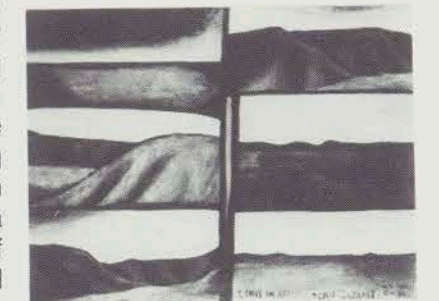
'Prior to Central Otago most of my compositions were seeing from inside things. They were very internal compositions where you were always looking through things, around things, surrounded by things. You were inside looking out. In Central Otago I got exactly the reverse situation . . . The first trip I hadn't noticed it, but . . . this second trip I was more familiar with McCahon and Rita Angus and their approach to that sort of landscape. That "Six days in Nelson" of McCahon's was quite an influence on me. Not willingly as I was still very much anti McCahon in those days.' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

As Smither was aware, Central Otago was an area already powerfully evoked by a number of New Zealand artists including Rita Angus and Colin McCahon. McCahon in particular had concentrated on the elemental aspects of the landscape that appealed also to Smither. Smither's paintings, however, while they can be seen to follow McCahon's interest in the underlying structure of the hills, result in a sensuous landscape strongly suggestive of the female form. If McCahon saw the hills as stark and ancient forms, Smither saw them as supine nudes basking in the hot Otago sun.

Ironically, most of the early works that Smither produced in the south were small, being painted on narrow strips of ivory board. They emphasise the flowing line of the hills by exaggerating the regular dark-shadowed outlines and the smooth denseness of their golden surfaces. Forms are firmly delineated to create a hypnotic repetition. Later, when Smither piled the narrow landscapes on top of one another multiplying horizon lines to give a composite view, as in *Gold landscape-diptych* 1969 (cat. no. 26), there is almost certainly a reference to McCahon's 1950 painting *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury* mentioned above. There are also parallels in these multiple landscapes to Smither's own usual painting process whereby he compiles a number of drawings to create the content of any one painting. Here the focusing process is left more apparent to the viewer,



Alfred Road bridge 1971
Michael Smither
Private collection, Auckland



Six days in Nelson and Canterbury 1950
Colin McCahon
Collection: Auckland City Art Gallery

for although the paintings usually depict quite different geographical areas, the repetition of the forms across them gives a timeless, endless quality to the land. The hills, like waves washing up on a beach, go on forever. It is a theme that Smither returns to many times, using the multiplicity of views to allow for the expression of a journey. In prints like *Motumahanga — green, six views* 1983 (cat. no. 58) the technique, somewhat sophisticated, allows the artist to sweep in on the islands like a gull.

The highly stylised Central Otago paintings also have something of montage about them. It is the same impression the landscape itself gives with the foreground often appearing to lie separately from the unlikely series of hills in the background. This disjunction is most clearly stated in *Thomas's first attempt at a stand up pee* 1970 (cat. no. 27). The two children are imposed on the land although they are unselfconsciously going about their business, as yet unaware that the land is grandly indifferent to their intrusion.

The second year in Central Otago was an important one for Smither as it introduced him to Tony Watson who was Mozart Fellow at the same time Smither was Hodgkins Fellow. Music had been a primary interest of Smither since school days and he had written a significant number of pieces both secular and sacred. Much earlier he had resolved to 'divide my work between painting and music . . . mornings for painting, sculpture etc . . . afternoons choirs, organ and a little composing I hope'(15) although he found this resolve difficult to keep. His knowledge and love of music can also be seen in the rhythmical way Smither painted the Otago hills. Although not overtly visual translations of music — this was a direction he was to explore fully in the eighties — the effects of musical rhythm, variations and structure are apparent. Although Smither had persevered with his music and had at art school even made some tentative attempts to realise musical structure in painting, it was in the company of Watson that he came to realise the importance to him of this aspect of his art.

His year as Fellow also drew him into close contact with Ralph Hotere, the previous Fellow, and Jeffrey Harris, both of whom shared studio space with Smither. It was 1970 also that saw the production of the *Rita Angus Crosses*, painted in memory of Rita Angus, who had died that year, Smither was beginning to express his concern with the destruction of the environment and his precise carving up of the Otago hills into cruciforms was a gesture of this concern. The crosses formed a set of stations which was split up when sold.

For the first year in the south he had done little other than draw and paint the land and the effect on his work had been to simplify even more the forms he chose to paint. He now applied these lessons to Taranaki.

'One of the first things that Elizabeth and I did when we got back to Taranaki was to drop the kids off with Mum and Dad and we spent seven days going right round the mountain. I drew the mountain from every angle I could get at it. It was a sort of a return visit with the knowledge I had achieved with drawings and so on in the South Island Out of those drawings came a number of paintings.

Very, very stylised The paintings I did of Central Otago even though they look like Central Otago are extremely stylised. I began to see some of the same shapes in the mountain. There is that elemental aspect in the Central Otago landscape that only exists in mountains in the North island.' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

The drawings show the mountain as a sinewy elemental presence in the Taranaki landscape. Out of this re-evaluation came three paintings of Mount Egmont of which the largest is *Tribute to Bernard Aris* 1971 (cat. no. 8). Bernard Aris was a Taranaki painter who had portrayed the mountain a prodigious number of times and whom Smither had always admired. His tribute to Aris was in fact a response to a Govett-Brewster Art Gallery exhibition *111 Views of Mount Egmont*, itself a testament to the attraction the mountain has always held for artists. In the Alfred Road bridge paintings the bridge and stream had been used as obvious devices to complicate the view of the mountain, to reduce directness. Now he was ready to confront it.

'Coming back to Taranaki after Dunedin was like coming back to my tomb they are pessimistic paintings . . . after all it is a very uncomfortable, dangerous mountain and has killed 35 people that mountain!' (MDSJB June 13 1984)

This large painting of Egmont stands as both a touchstone of local familiarity and a symbol of menace. The mountain has added scale beyond even the large format Smither has chosen because the sky is cropped very close to the peak. This de-emphasis of the sky is characteristic of Smither's painting but here it is used positively to stress the subject of the work, the mountain itself.

'Really the whole crux of the rock paintings is a compositional and structural thing. They are large masses resting on other masses, touching. To me the Taranaki stones are beautiful round shapes that can only touch at one point against each other. So you get one rock resting on another and its like a giant juggling act . . .' (MDS/B February 1980)

The stylisation evident in the large *Tribute to Bernard Aris* 1971 (cat. no. 8), can also be traced back to his work of the early sixties. *Two waves* c.1964 (cat. no. 21), painted curiously enough on Smither's return from his first trip to Patearoa, shows him already concentrating on the simplification of form that would mark his later work.

Smither has had a long and lasting passion for the sea which has provided him with subject matter throughout his life. His first painting to be selected for a national tour was entitled *Schnapper* (16) while his most recent work is again paintings of the islands and sea off the New Plymouth coast. His sketchbooks from 1962 on are full of drawings of wave patterns, rocks and marine life.

The early studies of waves show the artist freezing the wave action and exploring its form at one instant. This arresting of motion in a characteristically close view gives an almost abstract appearance. The overlapping forms in *Two waves* reenact a frozen section from a continuum and set the treatment of waves as solid and permanent that appears in many later paintings. His consistent interest in form over the substance that comprises that form, its materiality, is again very evident as it was in the Otago hills, the domestic utensils, and the rocks in *Composition — railways*.

At the same time he was making large numbers of drawings of the rocks and rock pools near his flat at Breakwater Bay. He tells us that the cause for these trips to the beach was a succession of toothaches that drove him to concentrate on the drawings so as to forget the pain. These were to provide the basis for the early rock paintings Smither took to Australia in 1966.

The rock paintings, while based on drawings, were generally an amalgam of specific details and general impressions recorded at different times and/or places. For example, *Wave breaking on railway wall* 1967 has as its source a number of drawings, the earliest of which appears in sketchbook c.1965, which are close to the finished work. The drawing shows Smither's intention to play the immutability of the rocks off against the perpetually rolling waves. The completed painting, while it retains this idea, concentrates on the eerie menace of the rocks and the diagonal confusions created by the large concrete slabs. As they have been thrown onto the rocks in a vain effort to stop tidal erosion this juxtaposition of naturally rounded and aggressively geometric shapes has become an apposite comment on the futility of trying to stop the sea by confrontation. In this respect it repeats the menacing presence of the rocks in *Composition — railways* and is in fact placed just out of frame to the left of this painting, geographically.

In *Wave breaking on railway wall* the water is a solid mass, painted in the same way as the rocks themselves. In later works, particularly those of rock pools,



Wave drawing c. 1962
Michael Smither



Study for Wave breaking on railway wall
1961
Michael Smither

the water is clear and transparent — a medium of coloration not substance. We read the changes in the rocks' appearance as indicating the presence of water, rather than seeing the water itself. The corollary of this is to intensify the unease felt in the paintings depicting the water as an opaque invading mass. Water that smothers rather than cleanses.

Two rock pools 1967 (cat. no. 23) is a more tranquil painting than *Wave breaking on railway wall* with no movement, no dynamic. It is the summation of a moment. The main visual contrast is that of the smooth rocks washed down the rivers to the shore and the ancient battered bedrock, the contrasts of smooth and rough, rounded form and lined texture. The inclusion of a piece of driftwood in the foreground show Smither widening the range of subject matter. The painting was selected for the 1968 Benson and Hedges Art Award and, although it did not win, it was constantly reproduced. The suitability of Smither's paintings for newspaper and magazine reproduction is a graphic demonstration of his approach to tonality and ability to select arresting images. It has also had the effect of giving his paintings and indeed his name a familiarity not usually accorded a New Zealand painter.

In paintings that followed *Two rock pools* further natural elements were added including sea weed, as shown in *Rock pool* 1968 (cat. no. 22) and later still *paua shells* and other sea life. Smither was struggling to balance his rational, scientifically based investigation of his environment with his artist's concern for focus. Each object that had to be omitted was regretted but the oppressively close point of view typically taken demanded a limitation on content.

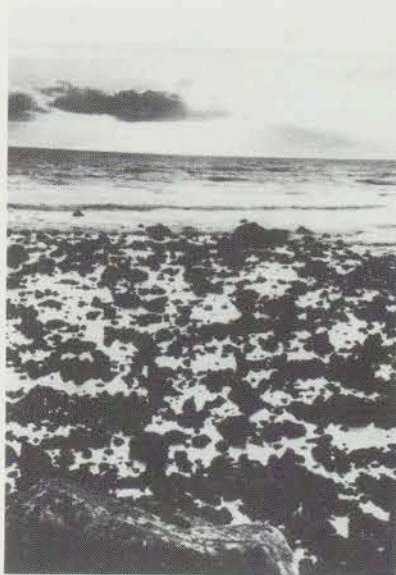
'I was always aware every time I painted the rocks that there were vast numbers of elements that I was leaving out so I tried each time to include some other element.' (MDS/B 28 March 1983)

For Smither the water was a symbol of clarity and purity. His Catholic instruction gave added weight to this symbol as the Virgin Mary is often compared, in portrayals of the Annunciation, to a jar of pure water. The cleansing power of water is more generally symbolic of purity and innocence and Smither was aptly to place his versions of the baptism of Christ in the pure rivers of Taranaki. Rocks, to follow this line further, are often regarded as symbols of the solidity and firmness of the Lord.

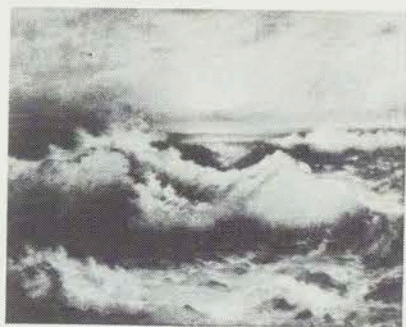
The paintings of pools and particularly rocks were to dominate people's view of Michael Smither throughout the late sixties and into the seventies. Smither suddenly became, as he wryly put it, the 'rock painter from Taranaki'. This recognition was a mixed blessing. On one hand the paintings were arduous to paint but on the other they did provide a welcome income. However their popularity and the monetary emphasis became too much for Smither and he abandoned the series returning to paint the rocks of Taranaki in this form only once more on commission from a friend.(17) He did, however, make one use of his work on rocks on his return from the South Island in the construction of a number of totem



Wave drawing c. 1962
Michael Smither



Photograph by Kirby Wright



Popular wave print of the late 1960s

poles. These sculptures concentrated on the negative spaces between the rocks, an aspect he also used for a number of prints.

Although the paintings of the rocks and pools became more formal as Smither refined his technique, he also treated them graphically when commissioned to produce a cover for *Landfall*.⁽¹⁸⁾ These bold black and white drawings of rocks and pools are some of the strongest of Smither's imagery of the time. His knowledge of the structure of the beaches enabled him to create convincing landscapes from the flat areas of black (cat. no. 46). The images were inspired by black and white photographs taken at Paora by Smither's friend Kirby Wright. Wright had photographed the rock strewn shore with strong back light to throw the rock forms into silhouette. They also provided the basis for *Large blue pool with wave invading* 1969 (cat. no. 24). It was to be essentially calligraphic and the underpainting reflected this emphasis on line. However, as was the case with most of the paintings in this exhibition, the urge to 'finish' the work, to fill in the volumes, overcame the looseness of the drawing and the final painting is probably one of the most stylised of the series.

We cannot see through the water. The tension is heightened by the impending intrusion of the frozen wave forms. It is as though Smither has come full circle in the space of a few years from *Wave breaking on railway wall*. If in the earlier painting the threat was implied, in *Large blue pool with wave invading* it is imminent. The waves hang over the rocks like a spreading fungus, the ripples of their presence already beginning to disturb and distort the calm of the mystical blue pool. No clear water here but the reflection of sky and rocks. At the back of the picture further waves of shapes harking back to *Two waves* await their turn.

His continual examination of the beaches of New Plymouth and especially the Back Beach has enabled Smither to translate the natural features of the area into a variety of forms. From the stylisation of the prints based on the Back Beach (for example, *Back Beach 1* (cat. no. 56)) to the controlled expressiveness of *View of Motumahanga with squall* (cat. no. 42), the shoreline and its relationship to the sea has been a continuing source of inspiration.

Back Beach 1976 (cat. no. 25) is the culmination of Smither's stylisation of composition with waves and rocks. The beach is empty of people, as Smither must have seen it many times in his obsessive walks. It brings to mind the selection of that revealing moment which has been so much a part of his domestic work. The difference from these earlier works though is in the extreme stylisation of the image. The rocks and waves are emblems. There is always a risk in such an approach that design and pattern might overwhelm the image. Smither seems always to have been aware of the dangers of this kind of realism and the painting can be seen as another of his attempts to redescribe clichés; the all too familiar popular print of sunset-glowing waves crashing on the shore. In the context of this studied flirtation with banality the stillness of the wave, the precise placement of the rocks and the sharply delineated pools of water that surround them combine to create a dreamlike reality. In this respect the painting is close to surrealism. Smither has always been interested in the effects of surrealism, if not in the

manifestoes that gave rise to the movement. In the formality of *Back Beach*, however, there are already indications of the problems of form freezing out content that Smither was to encounter later with his highly finished works. As if in recognition of the problem Smither spent much of the time during the painting of *Back Beach* producing a large number of small expressive oil sketches of the *Back Beach* (cat. nos 40 and 41).

'If I hadn't become a painter I would have been a Franciscan.' (MDS *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, 20 October 1969)

The spiritual resonances of elements such as the water in the rock pool paintings become the major theme in a number of overtly religious works produced around the late 1960s. Domestic, landscape and religious paintings were all worked in concert, one serving as relief from another but, not surprisingly, there are strong threads of similarity both of content and intention and style.

Smither was brought up a Roman Catholic and his career in art is dominated by a concern for and knowledge of the Church and its teachings. This involvement is signified by the number of commissions he has undertaken and the music he has written for the Church. (19) Although he is shown primarily as a painter in this exhibition, most of his commissions have been in fact not paintings but sculptures or stained glass windows. This emphasises the point that during the sixties Smither regarded himself as very much a sculptor as well as a painter. His consistent work in sculpture has often been seen as the cause of his interest discussed earlier to 'model' the objects in his paintings, to make them palpable. It should also be remembered though that to the churches commissioning work, painting had very little tradition in New Zealand churches, whereas sculpture and stained glass, even in a 'modern' idiom, were far more acceptable.

As well as dealing with overtly religious themes, Smither's faith has always permeated much of his work. Specific incidents of this have already been discussed in the still lifes and paintings of his children as well as some more general comments about the even density of his paintings — showing his reluctance to diminish any part of objective reality — and the everyday nature of much of his subject matter. However for Smither the most profound expression of his religious conviction is certainly the cement fondue Stations of the Cross in St Joseph's Church in New Plymouth.

'For an artist such as myself (being largely parochial) the chance to react to the world's strife and problems ... are limited. I cannot paint what I do not know or experience directly. But my religious paintings are a different matter and are made up of things I am intensely familiar with, to the point where they have become part of my environment. Born a Catholic with a strict moral upbringing, the lives of the saints and the apostles, have been, if not my daily bread at least my weekly instruction, and in this field I am able to give expression to some of the moral and intensely spiritual emotions that concern me.' (Catalogue introduction, Barry Lett Galleries 1968)

The St Joseph's commission had a troubled beginning. Smither initially undertook to work on a series of paintings but was commissioned in 1968 for the stations to be produced in cement fondue. Despite this change in medium the concept of the work remained consistent; Christ was to be portrayed as a suffering human

being — a man of this earth.

'Our Lord was a strong man and our religion is a strong thing. Good art expresses this strength and sparks up devotional feelings in people's minds.' (*Zealandia*, March 1965)

Smither was well aware of the problems inherent in popularising and simplifying religious ideas. When he was considering the stations as paintings he wrote:

'This is what worries me in the Passion Paintings. I'm trying too hard to reach people with the realism of the various episodes and consequently sacrificing some of the attributes of my art but I'll just have to make it up in another way.' (MDS diary, August 1964)

The series was finally installed in 1969. The medium of cement fondue had been chosen to fit in with the architectural detailing of the church, but it also has appropriately prosaic connotations for telling the story of the Passion and Crucifixion in the no-nonsense way that Smither had in mind. The choice of such an unsympathetic medium added weight to his concentration on the portrayal of the pain of the journey to the cross. Its focus is the actions and reactions of the witnesses, a twist to the more usual view of seeing the Passion through Christ.

'Christ's involvement with humanity is well documented. Humanity's involvement with Christ less so: this work attempts to do this. ... It was then I realised the point of the work must be Veronica's gesture (Station Six), not Christ and his miracle. And so the whole brave, tender and clumsy episode filled me with certainty and the whole work which had taken me so long and exhausted me so completely was finished.' (Unidentified contemporary newspaper clipping)

Christ is depicted as an exhausted, stumbling figure, at times bowed down by his load, at times pinned beneath it. Smither's inexperience with the medium did not allow him to portray Christ's face satisfactorily, and so feet and hands dominate in the images. This is particularly potent when, as in Station Eleven Christ is nailed to the cross the feet twist up in agony to form their own cross. In style the stations have strong similarities to Matisse's bronze relief series *The Back* c.1929.

Well within the Christian tradition of art, the work is heavily charged with symbolism. When Christ meets his mother in station four the cross comes between the two of them as a barrier and when Christ dies in Station Twelve the cross comes between us and the figure hanging from it. The placing of the stations, however, caused a terrific furore in New Plymouth. The clumsiness of many of the figures and the insistence on Christ as suffering the real pain of this world was too blunt for many parishioners.

While preparing the stations Smither was also working to place the life of Christ into the Taranaki landscape. Like many painters before him, from Giotto to Stanley



Stations of the Cross in situ
St Joseph's Church, New Plymouth
Michael Smither
Station XI

Spencer and Colin McCahon, Smither felt that a local setting would personalise the stories and traditions of the Church and make them more immediate to the faithful.

'The [religious] paintings were concerned with expressing a point of view, of putting into my own personal terms subject matter that had already been done . . . The Baptist paintings were an attempt to take what was then a sacred image, the rock image, and put it into a religious context. To bless the stones of Taranaki by putting Christ into the water.' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

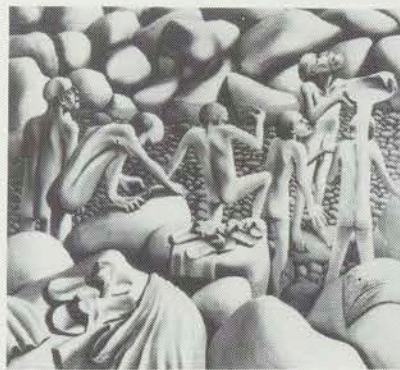
In *Study for the baptism of Christ* 1967 (cat. no. 29) John and Christ have waded into what is clearly a Taranaki stream for the act.

'The Stony River is the spiritual river of Taranaki. I didn't know that until I'd done the painting but I recognised the spiritual quality of it at the time because of the clear water. I've always said that if anything happens to the Stony River that it's time to get out of Taranaki.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)

As well as this specificity of place, Smither has also tried to humanise the ritual. The figure of Christ is braced under the freezing mountain water while John stands on a solid Taranaki stone for elevation. The frail, amorphous bodies of the two men are countered by the strongly modelled, powerful rocks on the bank and the rounded, interlocking patterning of the riverbed. And yet the figures are well integrated tonally with the natural surroundings. Characteristically of Smither's work both men and rocks seem to have been formed from the same substance. They are not realistic portraits but the gesture and setting make it a believable event.

Caricature has often been an element in Smither's work from some depictions of his family to the tiny, busy figures in the Pukekura Park paintings. It is a useful tool which can make a scene or portrait more immediately compelling as the artist has obviously selected what he regards as the most important features by exaggerating them. However, it can be a risky business as it does very easily distance the viewer. The image becomes ludicrous or repels us so that we are unable to empathise with it. Smither came very close to this in a larger version of the baptism done the same year. In this work four apostles are included and in the foreground one mournfully studies a toe stubbed on the rocks. The inclusion of such an everyday detail does add a human quality to the scene but at the cost of detracting from the two lead players who in the smaller version are the sole focus of the drama. Also the number of characters draws attention to the unlikely physiognomy and anatomy which we can more easily accept in the smaller work.

Once again there is pure clear water, and a limpid pool. This stillness sets the specific time: it is the very instant of baptism, the water has not yet run down Christ's back. This disconcerting evocation of a very specific time or place or event by non-specifically expressed elements like faces, bodies, stones makes us



Baptism of Christ 1968
Michael Smither

feel we must be able to grasp the strange image better, until it slips away.

Smither's background, on his mother's side, was intensely Roman Catholic — two of his aunts are nuns — and his knowledge of traditional Church art and iconography is wide. At this time in his painting career he was struggling to express religious experiences and events in the twentieth century without disposing of the rich and varied iconography of the Christian Church.

The paintings of St Francis in the exhibition — there are two more — are a diptych depicting two reactions of the saint to his knowledge of God; in one mediated through nature, in the other through direct divine intervention. St Francis has been a popular subject in religious art and it is typical of Smither that he used a theme that had slid into cliché for his attempt to revitalise Christian imagery. It is fitting in another way for it was the Franciscan Order which has played an important part in directing allegory, metaphor and symbolism towards devotional forms to arouse immediate emotional responses. Giotto was a Franciscan monk and his celebration of God's creation was an inspiration to Smither.

In *St Francis in ecstasy in the presence of nature* 1967 (cat. no. 30) the saint is dipping his feet into the water, his prehensile toes curling in delight. Even with some knowledge of Christian iconography a viewer might not guess the identity of the saint or possibly not even realise he was a saint at all. This information is supplied by the title and by the far more explicitly religious twin of the diptych. But a reading of the iconography of the work demonstrates the seriousness of Smither's intention as a religious artist in a very conventional way. St Francis's extreme state of abandon is symbolised by his loose and ungirdled shift as well as his thrown-back head and outstretched toes and fingers. The girdle, a sign of chastity, is not even seen in the painting. Sandals discarded near the owner's feet indicate that he is standing on holy ground and the sandals themselves symbolise humility.

St Francis has always been Smither's favourite saint.

'St Francis is the patron saint of ecology. He's the one who represents, in the Catholic tradition anyway, the person who cares for the environment and all the creatures that live in it. But I feel rather uncomfortable about the tradition of saints now in the Church because I feel they're elevated to such a level that people think they can't achieve the same levels. And anybody's capable of talking to animals, anybody's capable of fixing other people through healing if they want to, if they happen to be healers.' (NZOHA: p 402)

It was this matter of fact acceptance of the spiritual that gives the St Francis diptych much of its power. The saint is shown as a little figure in an over-scaled environment. Dignity or majesty or temporal power are far distant as this man responds to nature. For all the elements of caricature or distortion or even of horror in the stigmata work, these are pictures to which the artist wishes us to respond with love and affection. The obvious symbol missing in both these pictures is the birds. Although carp can be just discerned among the lily pads, St Francis's

world is almost entirely vegetable. Smither has not felt committed to a complete symbolic portrait and his selectivity has elevated the often over-looked vegetation to the complete context.

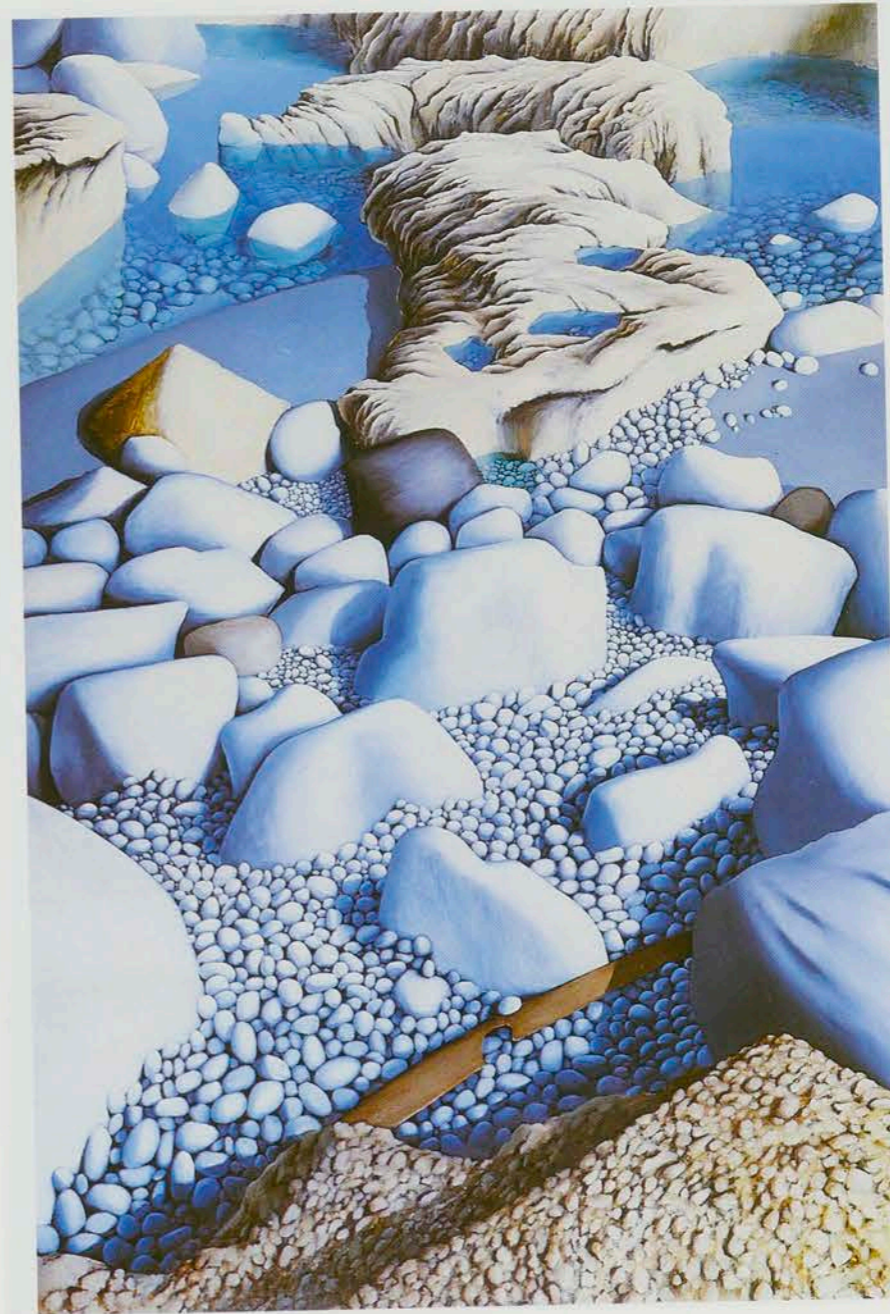
As with most of his paintings of this time there is an emphasis on the hands and feet, the most expressive parts of our bodies, by making them over-sized, unnaturally flexible. Such a distortion has already been noted in Smither's paintings of children and the parallels of the innocent delight of St Francis and childish explorations of the world are revealing. This exaggeration is also found in a number of primitive painters who simply paint the most important object the biggest and, more interestingly, among Mexican muralists like Jose Clemente Orozco whom Smither had so admired when an art student.

The hands and feet are also prominent in *St Francis receives the stigmata* 1967 (cat. no. 31) but here they are even more important to the image and the identification of the saint, with their wounds. This occurred two years before the saint's death yet Smither has chosen to paint the saint receiving the stigmata as younger than the figure moved to ecstasy in nature. Further, the skin of the elevated saint is nut brown, but has faded to a pale greenish marine tinge in the claustrophobic setting of the lakeside.

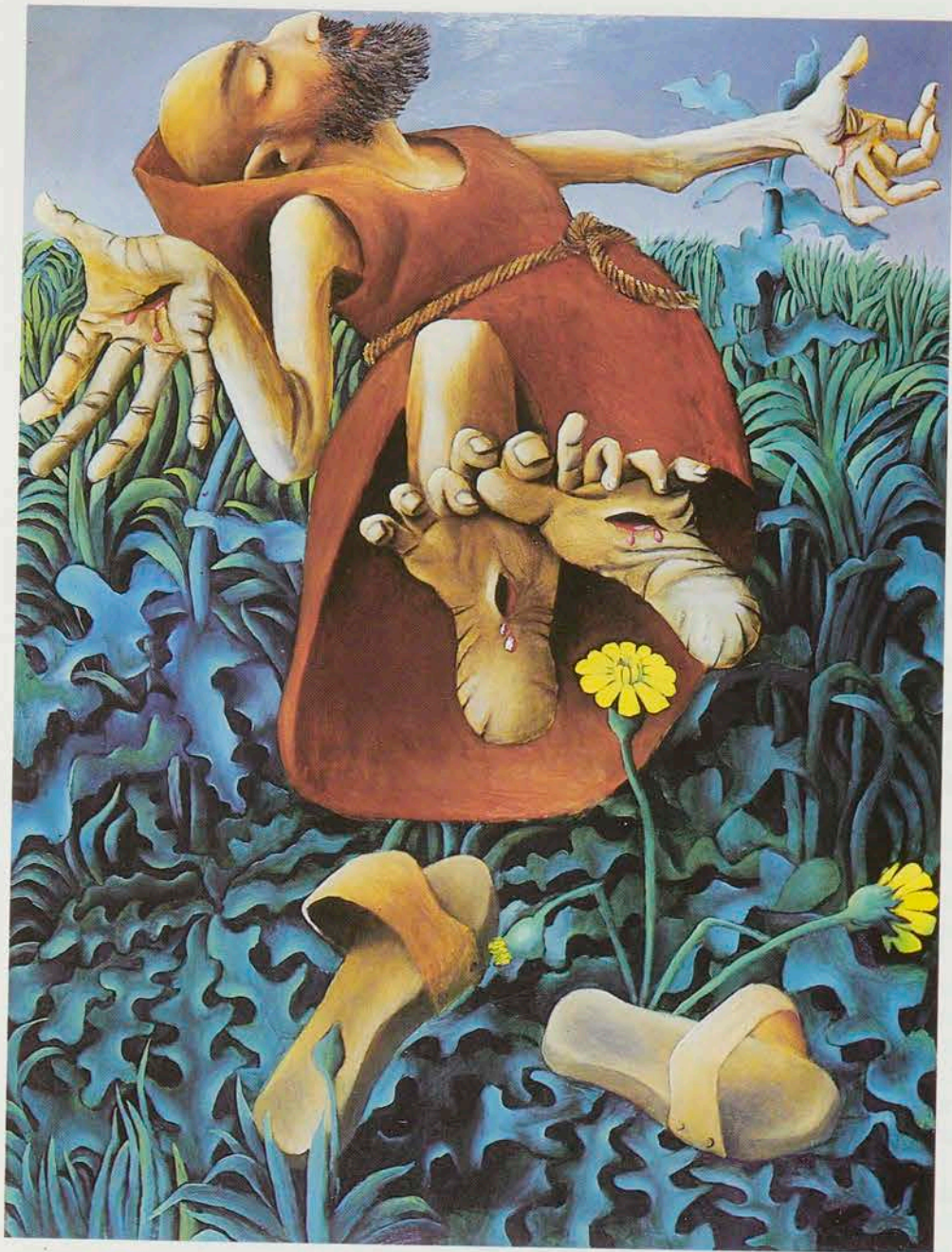
Again the sandals, which in conventional iconography stand for humility and bondage, have been abandoned revealing soiled and worn feet. But the focus of the picture is the gaping eye-shaped wounds trimmed with gouts of glistening blood. This is traditional Roman Catholic imagery at an extreme, rejoicing in the supreme identification with suffering. And yet this gruesome event is offset by the brilliant lush green vegetation forming an intricate backdrop against which the saint is elevated and the flash of chrome yellow flowers at which he almost appears to warm his feet. In his ecstasy St Francis has crushed some of these daisies which usually represent simplicity and innocence in Christian art. They are known as the 'eye of God'.

These paintings of St Francis show very clearly Smither's adaptation of primitive techniques as in the rhythmical patterning of vegetation. It unifies the painting and concentrates the eye on the central figure. The variation possible within such a stylistic choice is also interesting, ranging here from tall, horizontal blades to evocatively sliced lily pads to curvilinear leaves. All are set in and outlined by the very dark earth, the water or the press of more vegetation. The problem with repetition and rhythm is that they can become mannerist with the overall patterning assuming excessive importance. It is a similar issue to that faced by Smither with the hypnotic natural forms in his rock and pool paintings. There he overcame it by effrontery, by direct confrontation forcing us to accept this sort of multiplicity in nature; here he succeeds with a different strategy by making the central image so dynamic that we go for relief to the predictability of nature.

Christ driving the money lenders from the temple 1972 (cat. no. 32) is another painting with mannerist tendencies which Smither tried to resolve in another way. It was begun before he went to Central Otago and not finished until 1972. This extended gestation has resulted in a number of different elements being combined.



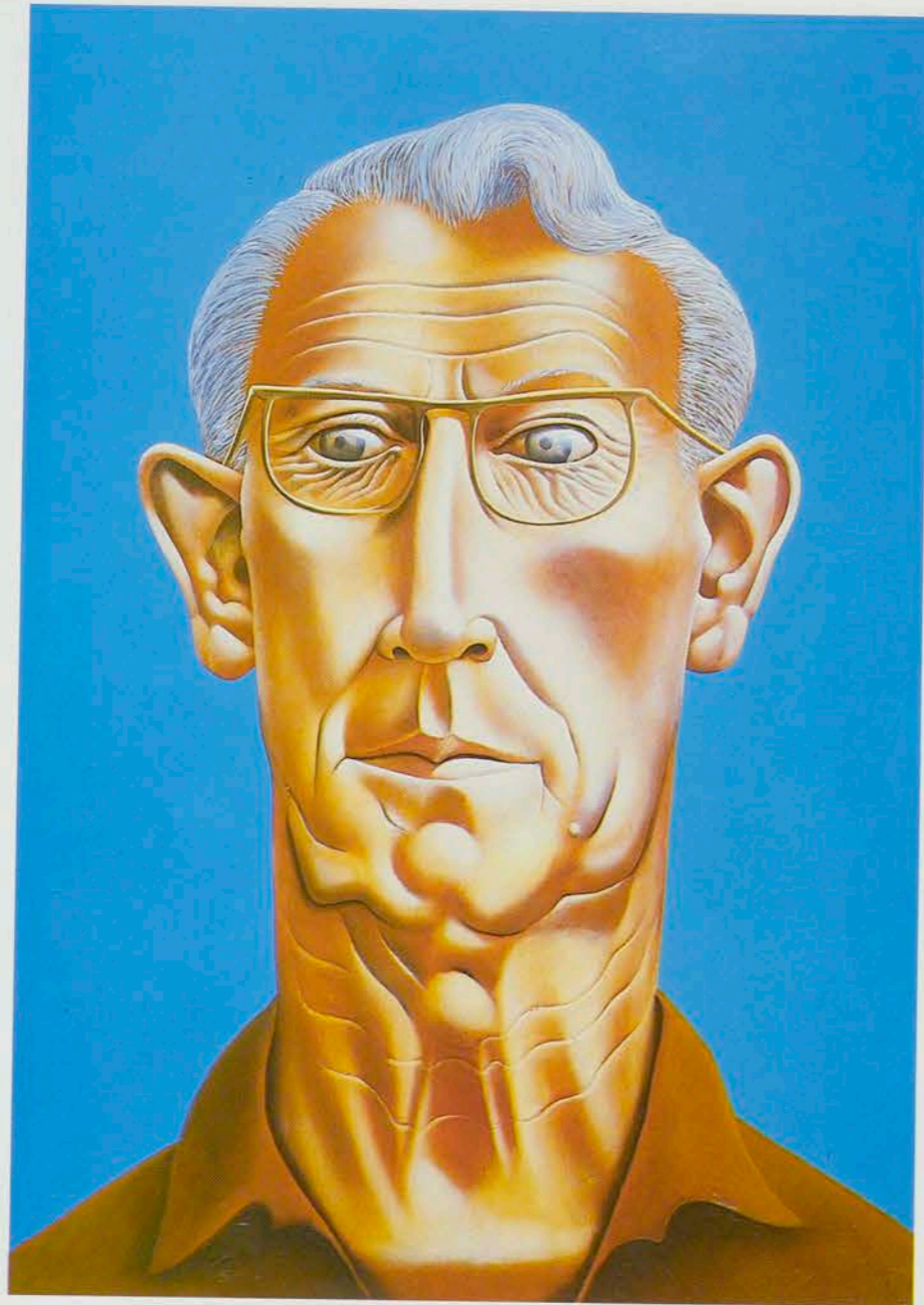
Two rock pools 1967 cat. no. 23



St Francis receives the stigmata 1967 cat. no. 31



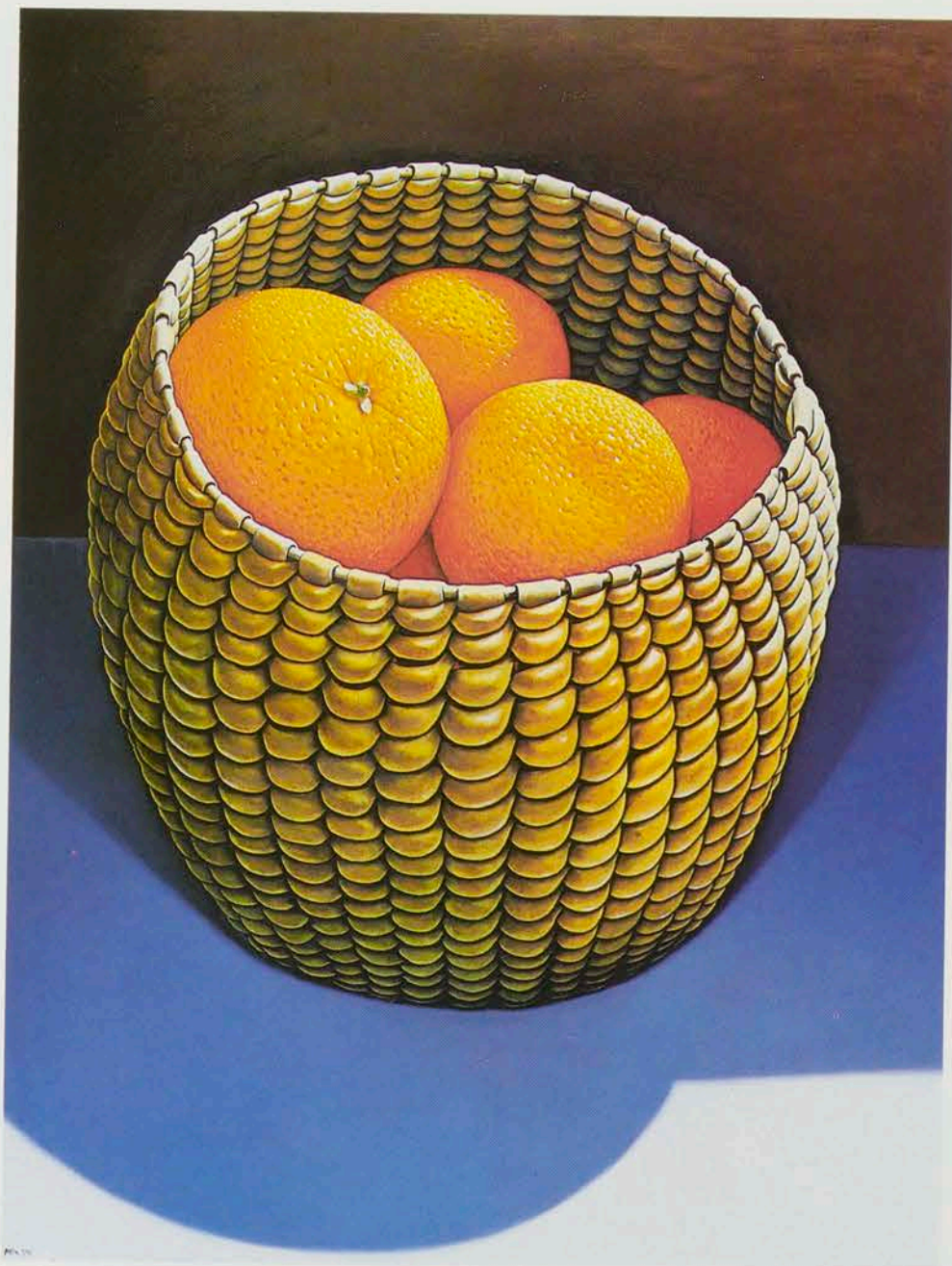
St. Francis in ecstasy in the presence of nature 1967 cat. no. 30



Portrait of the artist's father 1975 cat. no. 33



Yellow rubber gloves 1977 ccat. no. 35



Seagrass basket and oranges 1979 cat. no. 38



Hapuka head on plate 1979 cat. no. 37



Boys fighting over pink plastic gun 1978 cat. no. 20

The effects of his paintings of the Otago landscape can be seen in the stylisation of the pillars which suggest the interior of a Jewish temple, the figures, though, are reminiscent of the St Francis diptych in their emphatically non-spiritual appearance. Christ is seen as a man of action, a man capable of losing his temper. A far cry from the doe-eyed figure of popular Catholic portraiture. The painting is derived from and is in homage to El Greco's *Purification of the temple*. However, El Greco's austere Christ and Smither's vigorous street fighter part company in all but a few obvious borrowings such as the pose of one of the money lenders to the left, and the reference to pillars.

Smither portrays the event like the act of drama it must have been. So the backdrop of pillars can also be read as curtains. This context of theatre places the viewer in the front seats, at any moment to have the moneylender land on her lap as he is violently booted forward and out of the painting. The distortion of the falling figure veers towards caricature and Smither tries to avoid mannerism by sheer energy.

Like Stanley Spencer Smither has tried to refocus and make relevant an important Christian story that with its constant retelling over the centuries has drifted into cliché.

'It's the idea that's important and it's the artist's problem to find the scale for it.' (MDS diary, 8 June 1968)

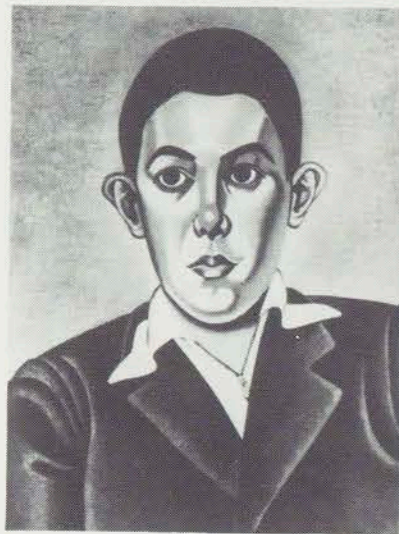
From the mid-seventies Smither changed course. His children were growing up and their discoveries were becoming more personal, individual and unable to be shared. His interest in holding onto those crucial moments of domestic experience diminished as he grappled with more specifically painting problems. His content lost many of its immediately personal meanings and becoming a more obvious expression of ideas, the concepts and implications of the everyday world.

'A painter must be obsessed of course with whatever he is working on but I intend the phrase to convey more than just that. If you take a simple object like a safety pin, or corkscrew, knife, matchfolder etc., and consider it closely a whole new world can be opened up to you. The objects themselves can take on a significance when isolated from their familiar environment and use. For once the image becomes non-functional, in the mundane sense, as it must in art, we set free the phenomena of scale.' (Affairs, November 1974: p 22)

Smither has always used scale expressively and never felt himself tied to transposing it as an absolute quality of an object. Throughout his career he routinely flouted realist expectations by enlarging objects and people, or parts of them, to suit his pictorial requirements. It should be noted, however, that he regards these early scale distortions as unconscious. He simply painted the things that were most important to him larger. An interesting inversion of this can be seen in the late seventies when greatly enlarged scale becomes the major component of a much simplified content.

Portrait of the artist's father 1975 (cat. no. 33) is an imposing work. As the sole content the head pushes almost to the limits of the picture plane. It appears to be the result of a scientific full-frontal stare by the artist with the sitter looking slightly to his right. Smither's father has played an important role in the artist's professional life, initially as encourager and supporter and later as the partner in printing Smither's graphic work. Trained as a commercial artist, Mr Smither has been involved in the arts in New Plymouth for many years and was for a time the President of the local art society. Bearing this in mind the title of the painting is revealing. Like *Portrait of my wife*, (cat. no. 14) this man is defined solely by his relationship to the painter. For this particular painting that is his identity. Yet there is little direct engagement of artist and sitter. Mr Smither remains self-possessed, seemingly oblivious to the scrutiny of his son.

The portrait is highly finished and free of painterly qualities. It is more like a scientifically precise study than a psychologically revealing portrait. The face is moulded in a similar way to some of Rita Angus's portraits, specifically *Head of a boy* 1938-39/57. In the deep folds of the skin can be seen the land forms of Central Otago and below the eyes the eroded ridges of the hills. It is not living flesh but a precise metaphor for the sitter's own life and the changes time has



Head of a boy 1938
Rita Angus
Collection: Auckland City Art Gallery

made to his appearance. The harshness of Smither's quest for a hard-edged clarity is emphasised by the soft wave of the immaculate hair. The artist's intent seems to be to produce a well crafted object as much as a document of the sitter. In this search there is no attempt at naturalism but rather a sustained enquiry into form and finish.

Above all it is the scale of this image that is crucial. This is confrontation, not interaction and the difference is well illustrated by a comparison with the earlier *Portrait of my wife*. In this work the personality of the sitter as expressed by contact with the painter forms a major part of the content and the meaning of the image. *Portrait of the artist's father* is similarly titled, although the addition of the more distant term 'artist' seems significant of the point of view that has been taken. But in the end the exaggerated scale makes this work a totem. It is an abstraction of personality for, although the enlarged scale of the head should make us feel closer to the subject, here it makes us more distant.

Looking through drawings made in preparation for portraits, it is usual to find the sitter recorded from a number of angles but Smither is not particularly interested in achieving exact likeness.

'I have never believed in the eye of the artist having anything to do with the way a camera does things. To me you walk around something when you are going to paint it and see it from all angles. When I'm painting portraits for instance I never ask people to pose. I just ask them to carry on . . . and the painting ends up as a conglomerate of views of them.' (MDS/B February 1980)

Given that Smither's images are not photographically based (20), it is hard to imagine his portraits or his other work relying on tightly cropped compositions being produced before photography taught us to frame the world in such a manner.

Self portrait 1976 (cat. no. 34) shows the same concern with scale and form and a less overt emphasis on content. A forebodingly dark background and very tight cropping make this painting the most piercing and unrelenting of all the portraits done at this time. The high sheen of the painted surface is a barrier to the viewer's involvement. It makes us keep our distance. Smither was approaching his forties when he undertook this self-assessment and it is a much more inward looking face than that of earlier self portraits.

As well as portraits Smither's examination of content can be readily traced back to his domestic still lifes where single objects are painted with such intensity and are so out of scale that they often challenged the balance of the composition. It seems almost inevitable that with his belief in the value of every element of existence that he should begin to focus in more and more closely on single items which are generally disregarded. What might not have been expected, though, is the heroic scale to which he would project these images.

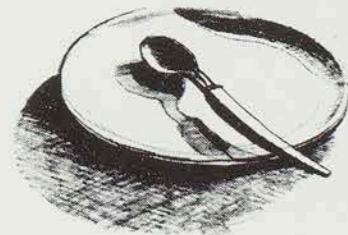
'Visually we accept many things in our lives without mental comment and this allows us to be titillated, horrified, manipulated and conditioned without our knowing it . . . my chief concern in the use of scale is . . . simply to use it as a device to make people 'aware' of these objects.' (Affairs, November 1974: p 22)

Awareness may have been the aim but the results of such manipulation of scale are far more complex. Photography, television, film and advertising have long accustomed us to accept the reality of enlarged objects. We see, even on the 'small' screens of our television sets, biscuits that would cover a dinner plate, sweets that could double as bowling balls. In our image-glutted world the perceptual adjustment necessary to accept such bizarre proportions is second nature. Where once people might have enlarged an object to gain for it fear and respect, nowadays the technique merely engenders familiarity.

In enlarging mundane subjects such as butter, gloves and bowls Smither might have expected similar results but it is not the case. We do not feel any familiarity with this pair of gloves. In being so enlarged they seem to lose any possible connection with an owner and the uses they might have had. This is primarily because there is no context. We know the size of *real* gloves but there is no clue, apart from the actual size of the painting itself, as to what size these gloves are and they are surely not portrayed to size! We reason that these are normal-sized gloves blown up, but can we be sure? Are we very close to the object or is this a telephoto view? Again there are no clues, the focus over the whole object is consistently sharp. The image in this respect is optically impossible in the same way that focus across all the elements in a painting such as *Grandparents at tea* is optically impossible. It is a painting.

One of the problems in projecting objects such as gloves, fish heads and oranges to such a size is to prevent detail overwhelming image. *Yellow rubber gloves* 1977 (cat. no. 35) illustrates the problem and a solution well. The painting is of a mundane object brought to prominence by the artist's selection of it and labour expended on it. The detailing is precise and yet it is the gloves themselves that remain the major focus. They are lying on the bench where they must have been tossed after being peeled off. That they are a small size, as evidenced by the 's' on the cuff, suggests that they were probably used by Smither's wife. It is another domestic painting. An unusual domestic painting though for the gloves look more like some deep sea creature that has been washed up exhausted on the shore than domestic aids. This metaphor is compounded by the similarity to microscopic sea life and sand patterns in the detailing of the grip.

If the detail did not overwhelm *Yellow rubber gloves*, it nevertheless presented problems. The meaning of specificity must be given by its relationship to an encompassing form. Without a clear idea of that form, the detail dissolves the image. In *Seagrass basket and oranges* 1979 (cat. no. 38) the finish is taken to an even more intense level and it was at this point that Smither decided to call a halt.



Study for painting c1975
Michael Smither

Seagrass basket and oranges was a pivotal painting. Driven to strive for a higher and higher degree of finish he was now starting to feel trapped by his technique. It seemed to have overwhelmed the ideas he was wanting to express and the painting itself had become a task rather than part of a process. He had taken specificity to his limit. It was a similar situation to that he had experienced at the height of the rock paintings about a decade before. *Seagrass basket and oranges* had been stimulated by a particular observation of the way light had bathed a basket of oranges on the bench. This recognition of a situation or object is of course reminiscent of the way the domestic paintings were developed, as indeed was *Yellow rubber gloves* or the earlier still lifes. In fact in a print produced in 1963 Smither had given full recognition of his love of sunbathed objects in illustrating (cat. no. 52) one of his wife's poems.

*'The ascending Sun by clarity
Graces each morning thing,
Out of the darkness bestowing
Praises in pools of light'*

As he painted, *Seagrass basket and oranges* however, he became aware of the extraordinary consistency in the way the light fell and formed precise shadows on the weave of the basket.

'While I was painting this I discovered something more important than what I had been doing with light. This was the realisation that natives had used light going around their baskets as a navigational aid. I had suddenly come full circle. The way the light fell on the basket was so specific. Light was only a directional thing as I had been taught at art school.' (MDS/B 13 June 1984)

The appreciation of this fact and its relevance to his music and colour theories, made Smither decide to leave the realist depiction of physical objects and strive at formulating a harmonic code which would encompass them, and much more.

While painting the seagrass basket, however, another series of single object paintings was produced. During a fishing trip with friends Smither hooked and landed a hapuka of which, thanks to the toss of a coin, he received the head. The head placed on a plate resulted in an intensive five day drawing session. The paintings from these drawings show the finish evident in other work of this time and are closely aligned to the portraits, yet they also demonstrate Smither's ability to evoke a range of levels of meaning from a single subject. The differences between the two paintings in this exhibition, which at first glance appear to be little more than the difference between frontal and profile views, are in fact significant and depend in part on their being seen together. It should be noted that it was not Smither's intention to keep the Hapuka paintings together as he had hoped with the Rita Angus Crosses, and yet the comments they make one on the other are revealing.

In *Hapuka head* 1979 (cat. no. 36), the first of the five paintings in the series, the head is centred in the plate which acts as a white collar. Only the curve of the table in the background tells us that the portrait may have been done in a studio or home rather than a laboratory. The eyes are already showing signs of disintegration, the head being divided into two mirror halves. The shadows cast by the frontal light add to this effect. Only the cutting of the top fraction of the head by the framing shows any obvious intrusion of compositional decision. The curves of the gills matching the curve of the plate come to us as a happy circumstance. The frontal presentation also removes any suggestion of expression from the mouth of the fish.

Hapuka head on plate 1979 (cat. no. 37), the last painting of the five, is different in many ways. The head is pushed to the back of the plate so that it has been placed rather than simply presented. The watery pool of blood brings it out of the realm of observation and science and into the human world that caught the fish, gutted it and cut off its head. The intrusion of this one element takes the painting from the objective to the subjective. The gash caused by the hook gapes as a wound in the side of the fish, a white cloud of sheen passes over the dying moon of the eye. The painting was produced when Smither was questioning the central foundations of his Christian belief. The head can be seen as a metaphor for that of John the Baptist, ritualistically placed on a platter.

Both paintings have references to earlier works. The plate of course can be traced back to early domestic studies and later to a very large plate and spoon painted on a similarly brown background. The framing is again tight, bringing this unpalatable subject into unavoidable confrontation with the viewer. We look or we decide to turn away. There are no distractions provided for us in the picture itself. The two paintings are also tightly harmonious in composition, the radiating curves swinging around the dead heads like dervishes. The motion of these devices only draws attention to the stillness of the heads themselves.

'What do they mean by religious art? . . . It is an absurdity. How can you make religious art one day and another kind the next?' (Picasso)

Hapuka head was included in Smither's second exhibition of the *Paintings for the revolution* in 1979. They had been painted over the previous four years and were his attempt to alert viewers to the violent and destructive forces overwhelming the country and world he lived in, an awakening to the 'mental' and 'political situation in this country', a feeling 'that something was imminent' (21). The paintings that resulted were presented explicitly as political propaganda.

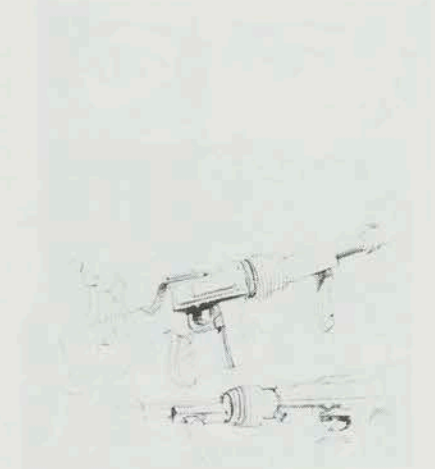
'I had always wanted to make some protest in art about guns and violence and I had painted soldiers and things like that in the past but always ended up destroying them.' (MDS|B 13 June 1984)

'The domestic paintings were real . . . pure emotions and pure situations and when it came to making that statement about the revolution to come I knew that was what I had to draw on. Those were the things I understood.' (MDS|B 13 December 1983)

Boys fighting over pink plastic gun 1978 (cat. no. 20) is the first in the series. It is based on a drawing Smither made of two boys he saw fighting over a gun in an Auckland suburb. As with the domestic paintings, on recognising the power of the image he began adding to it further layers of symbolic meaning. The combatants have been transposed to New Plymouth and placed in front of three condensate storage tanks and the power station chimney. Smither walked past these tanks regularly on his way to the Back Beach; the incident therefore is located very specifically on his home territory. A bank of grass fills the space between the children and these man-made structures. Behind the boys a no-smoking sign is mocked by the black, smoke belching chimney. In an interview (22) at the time of the exhibition Smither identified the young boys as St Peter and St Paul, making an explicit reference to the divisiveness present at the beginnings of the Christian Church. For other works in the series he has also proposed titles with religious connotations (23). However, although this level of meaning was important to him at the time, Smither has subsequently preferred to see them read in a more general way as an allegory of the aggression and corruption of human beings.

The tightly controlled style he had developed in the portraits was combined with themes taken from his religious works, domestic scenes and childhood memories. They are rich in cross references and allusions to earlier work. Smither seemed prepared to invest his life's experience up to that time in a final conscious gesture to stop what he saw as a growing madness.

'The revolution, as I learned when making them, was my own revolution. A change of heart. When you are in conflict with yourself it is much easier to pick up the conflict outside you.' (MDS|B 13 June 1984)



Study of guns (plastic) 1978
Michael Smither



War makers 1937
A. Lois White
Collection: Auckland City Art Gallery

In *Boys fighting over pink plastic gun* the two nappied children are aggressive 'kidults'. Their youthfulness — which is implied more by the nappies and their childish bodies than by their faces — and the obvious fact that the gun is a toy are incidental. The struggle they are engaged in will have taught them well enough when they face the real thing. The tanks looming up in the background are to Smither and many other environmentalists in the area part of the armoury being used in the killing of the New Plymouth environment. The boys are separated from the tanks by nature seen in the snaking tendrils of grass already moving to cover the asphalt on which they fight. This reference to the environment, to nature, is central to the content in the same way as the green band of grass is central to the composition. Smither places the grassy berm like a wall between the environmental menace of the smoke stack and the boys who are already too concerned with their battle to notice the glowering tanks behind them. This is like a horror film: the monster, shockingly obvious to the audience, lies in wait behind its oblivious corrupted victims who will grow up into its polluted world.

This is allegory at an almost literary level. Concepts are represented clearly by humans and their actions. Until this time although many of Smither's paintings could be read at a number of levels, they have been primarily explorations of reality as he has perceived it. Here he still takes the observer's viewpoint but his own attitude to the content is clearly stated. He wants to direct his viewers' reactions more precisely. These are not paintings that they can more or less identify with; they are moral and political lessons.

Gifts 1978 (cat. no. 19) is the last of the revolution series and again concentrates on guns and children. Again the condensate tanks dominate the background but this time the main action is inside the head office of Ivon Watkins Dow, the New Plymouth industrial chemical company — Smither once worked there so this is another specific reference to place. An old man presents a young boy with a brightly wrapped box, his hands enfolding the gift like bony tentacles. On the floor a second boy has unwrapped his box and is taking out a gun, his face closed in calm attention.

Smither had a sore shoulder over this period and was forced to do the revolution paintings with his left hand. Although this seems to have made very little difference to the painting style, he must have been acutely aware of this new orientation. It is certainly revealing to study the left hands of the children in *Gifts*. The child in the background figure tugs at his tee-shirt with his left, leaving only one hand free to take the large boxed gift. The folds of his tee-shirt form an arrow to the hand, pointing up its similarity to the old, gnarled fingers of the man. On the floor, the gun is caressed by the other boy's left hand. The archetypal attributions of left and right reverberate. Through the window a small helicopter flies over the tanks. It is painted like the garish pink gun, like a toy. This throws the identity of the gun into question. If the helicopter can fly, perhaps the gun can kill?

The painting radiates many levels of such symbols and can be seen, with *Boys fighting over pink plastic gun*, within the mainstream of Smither's religious work. It reads as pure allegory: the corruption of youth by the devil here on earth. At

the foot of the chair a walking stick/shepherd's crook has been cast aside reinforcing the evil evident in the skull-like visage of the old man. The shadow of the window pane throws a cross over the floor. It is insubstantial and ignored. A mere shadow. It should be remembered that one of Smither's teachers at art school had been A. Lois White, herself a painter of allegorical works including *War makers* in 1937.

In the other works the imagery is equally powerful. A portrait of his son's new teeth turned from an affectionate observation:

'On this particular occasion he was larking around in the bedroom . . . and I said "O Joseph your teeth are really interesting, smile again." So he sort of grimaced for me for about five minutes and you can see his nose wrinkled up and everything, and I drew the state of his teeth. They were in all directions . . . I mean they were being pushed out by his new teeth coming through, and they were his baby teeth in total confusion . . .' (NZOHA: 410)

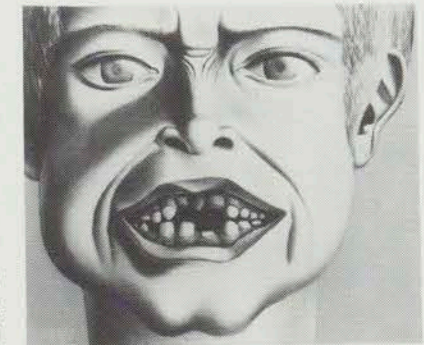
into a painting about the loss of innocence, 'a primal scream' titled *Joseph snarling*. In these paintings for the revolution Smither had hoped to make his audience 'sit up and come to their senses' (24), but the reaction was either cool or stridently critical. It was a bitter blow.

' . . . my attitude now is, well it's too late for that sort of struggle, these people are here, in fact they've been here for some time and had all these ploys and strategies worked out from thirty years ago, and now all you can do is try and raise people's consciousness to make them aware of what is beautiful and worth keeping, rather than sort of hit them over the head all the time.' (NZOHA: 283)

So, although Smither was to complete some representational paintings after the revolution exhibition, including *Seagrass basket and oranges*, the reaction, or rather lack of it, decided him to abandon such literal attempts to use art as a tool for peace and propaganda. Pulled so far away from their moorings of precise observation, these images of fear and hatred lost their directness and became homilies.

'Seriously I think Art at times has done more harm than good in society. In general it has created coteries of elitists and stylists and snobs and propagandists. In this country of plenty, what should have been a delightful stroll through paradise has often been, due to my fault and others', a glimpse of hell.' (Catalogue, John Leech Gallery Taranaki panels, March 1980)

It was to be an important discovery. Like many artists before him Smither had arrived at the inescapable conclusion that the role of art is not to add to the bludgeoning but to produce an aesthetic dimension that can provide what Peter Fuller describes as 'a firework of hope, illuminating the grey bleakness of the winter sky'(25).



Joseph snarling 1977
Michael Smither
Private collection, Wellington

'I'm not a virtuoso sort of person, I like things to be simple. I like things to be easy to understand . . .' (MDS, lecture to Music Department, Victoria University of Wellington, 23 June 1984)

To free himself from his increasing obsession with detail and high finish, Smither returned again in 1979 to abstract work, this time related to his musical theories. Over the years he had created a large body of abstract work, a large proportion of it on paper but also sculpture and murals including his proposal for the Beehive in Wellington. This abstract work rarely strayed far from its natural inspiration, the most successful being interpretations of horizon lines, wave forms and weather phenomena. Earlier he had expressed considerable suspicion of abstraction and had tied his initial rejection of it to his conviction of the value of regional qualities.

'A number of artists are trying to put this country on the map through their abstracts. But they are too much affected by international style. They are outward instead of inward. Abstract art has successfully evolved in other countries, but there they have centuries of tradition behind them to work on.' (Unidentified newspaper clipping, 16 June 1966)

Later Smither became more willing to see abstraction as an option as he modified his regional approach. By the late seventies and into the eighties he was interested in examining the abstract structures on which he was convinced the specifics of reality were based. Many of these paintings had as their basis what he called a harmonic theory: ' . . . that if anything looked "good" it could sound "good"'. (26) This theory, which was to result in a substantial series of works including the large Polyphonic Chords and a number of murals, is not covered in this exhibition but it was to have a major effect on Smither's work and requires some explanation here.

The combination of music and painting was a concern of Smither throughout his early painting career. Even though he had eventually decided to concentrate on the visual arts, an involvement with music continued to run parallel to his painting, sculpture and printmaking. On occasion the two lines crossed, most noticeably in the mural commissioned for Shell House in New Plymouth in 1974. The mural, based on horizons, was also conceived of as being able to be played as a musical score. This concept of painting as music and music notation as a visual art was not unique to Smither. Many artists have shown both an interest in music and a desire to evoke the abstract qualities of music in visual notation. However, Smither found by study and experiment that ' . . . the apparently unrelated systems of visual and colour harmony is in fact a parallel system' which was, as he put it, 'not surprising considering the close proximity of the eyes and ears to the brain'. (27) The system of harmonic relationships that he developed as a result of this notion was eventually formalised on a colour chart and was the basis of colour harmonies he has subsequently used in his representational work.

While struggling with these theories and the harmonic drawings, paintings and

murals that accompanied them, Smither also applied harmonics to other visual observations more closely aligned with his previous work. He recognised a strong link between the harmonic code and his work with dolphins, both while working on a cover for Maurice Shadbolt's book *Summer Dolphin*, and later when he revisited a dolphin tank with a musician friend in 1981. The result was a series of paintings of dolphins which were also playable scores. Smither used the combination of harmonic notation and dolphin images for a mural on a busy New Plymouth road. He believed that this and his other murals created, in the words of Fernand Leger, 'freedom, this new space, [which] can help, along with other social means, to transform individuals and to alter their way of life.' (28) The dolphin motif also returned Smither to calligraphy. His interest in this medium had been extensive, preceding his visit to Japan in 1971 as can be seen by the rock pool drawing of 1970 (cat. no. 46) and *Swimmers and dolphin* (cat. no. 45). At this later time he used its decisiveness and immediacy to loosen up after the constrictions of the formal harmonic chord and dolphin paintings. Again this alternating or concurrent use of precise and expressive line can be seen as an important part of Smither's creative process.

For subject matter he now chose, not surprisingly, the Taranaki rocks which, although abandoned as imagery for paintings in the early seventies, had been used for a number of sculptural installations since, including *Stones, sand and string* in 1976. The new 'rock' paintings were aptly titled *Rocks revisited*. The sweeping gestures of the Chinese brushes (purchased when he had been in Japan in 1971) simplify the forms of the rocks close to abstraction.

'The calligraphy brush can't lie. It either just doesn't say anything or it says the truth.' (MDS, lecture, Victoria University of Wellington, June 1983)

These new rock paintings like *Rocks revisited* 1981 (cat. no. 39) were restricted to line and colour, all conventional delineation of form being removed. The spaces between the rocks that had so intrigued Smither in the late sixties were emphasised. Instead of being a negative element, an absence, these spaces are now presented as on equal terms with the rocks. While the painting retains the stillness of the early rock paintings, its calligraphic urgent insistence on line vitalises the painting's surface. The simplified rock forms are shown as balanced ellipses, their sweeping lines strongly related to the polyphonic shapes of the harmonic paintings.

Rocks revisited only reflected a portion of the harmonic theory, however, and over the last two years Smither has translated the colour harmonies derived from his charts into a large number of paintings. Many of these have returned to the stacking of different viewpoints of the same landscape in a similar way to the Otago paintings of 1970. The very formality of the harmonic structures have freed Smither's painting style in many of his recent works. For example, *View of Motumahanga with squall* 1984 (cat. no. 42) is in the style of the Back Beach oil sketches of 1975-76 (cat. nos 40 and 41). Here though, Smither's pessimism about the future of the New Plymouth coastline is clearly evidenced. This is a true

painting for the revolution, the doom-laden squall lying off the coast, the rocks washed by a leaden sea. It is a chilling mixture of beauty and despair, love and anger. It recalls a quote from Francois Mauriac's *The unknown sea* that Smither had included in a 1970 catalogue of his black and white rock pool studies.

'For most men the road of life is a dead end, leading nowhere. But there are some who even in childhood, realise they are moving towards an unknown sea. At the very beginning of their journey they are amazed by the bitter violence of the wind and taste the salt upon their lips. On they go until at length, the last dune has been surmounted, they find themselves in a world of spume and blown sand which seems to speak to them of an infinity of passion. That is the moment when they must choose their path. Either they must take the final plunge, or they must retrace their steps.'

*Jim and Mary Barr
September 1984*

REFERENCES:

- (1) During his first visit to Australia Smither stayed with the academic and author Professor Bernard Smith who had initiated the exhibition.
- (2) 2 August 1962.
- (3) Nor'Wester in the cemetery by W. A. Sutton. *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, 1959 (8).
- (4) 'H.M.' 1961. Unidentified clipping.
- (5) Wilson: p247.
- (6) James Gleeson. *William Dobell*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1964: p20.
- (7) MDS/B 13 June 1984.
- (8) This knife, for example, appears as early as 1964 in Haiku.
- (9) Rosen and Zerner.
- (10) MDS/sketchbook 30, dated by the artist 1967/68.
- (11) Wilson: p251.
- (12) MDS/sketchbook 21, 1964.
- (13) MDS/sketchbook 22a, 1966.
- (14) See notes on the sources.
- (15) MDS/diary, January 1964.
- (16) Exhibited in *Contemporary New Zealand Painting 1961*, one of a series of group shows toured by the Auckland City Art Gallery under the directorship of Peter Tomory. The aim was to '... present a fairly comprehensive show of recent painting throughout the country, including both established and younger painters.'
- (17) The painting showed the subject, a contractor, sitting at a chessboard. Behind him is a 'Smither rock painting' with construction machines at work.
- (18) *Landfall*, December 1968, 22(4), 88 (cover).
- (19) Referring to commissions in the chronology — include mural of Thomas doubting the wounds of Christ which Smither finished working on in 1980.
- (20) Smither has used photographs, for example in *The family in the van* 1971, reproduced in *Anxious images*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1984: p70. A number of rock pool studies were made from photographs taken by Smither's friend Kirby Wright.
- (21) NZOHA: p411.
- (22) Hill, David. 'Seven scenes of revolution.' *NZ Listener*, 10 February 1979: pp30-31.
- (23) *Boys fighting over pink plastic gun* was titled 'St Peter and St Paul as young boys' and *Gifts* as 'Perpetuating the Kingdom'.
- (24) MDS/B 13 June 1984.
- (25) Fuller: p45.

- (26) *M.D. Smither*. Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt, December 1980 (catalogue).
(27) Statement 7 July 1983. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
(28) Leger: p179.

CATALOGUE

Titles used were given after consultation with the artist. Many of the works were painted over a number of years and as a rule they were dated on completion. All inscriptions noted are in the artist's hand. All measurements are given in millimetres, height before width. Where works have been exhibited under different titles from those used here, the variants have been given where possible. A complete exhibition list is available from the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Reproductions have been restricted to major references, so newspapers and ephemera have not been included.

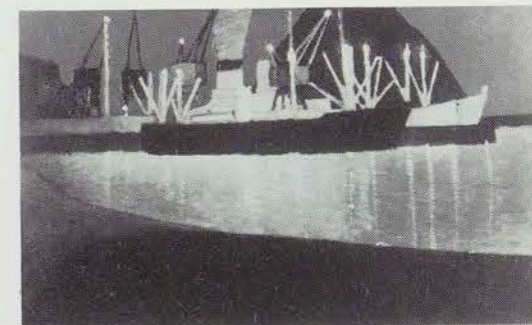
Paintings

1 Taranaki Port 1963

oil on board
545 x 910mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: New Plymouth, Taranaki Museum 1963, cat. no. 30
collection: J. B. Ayckbourn, New Plymouth

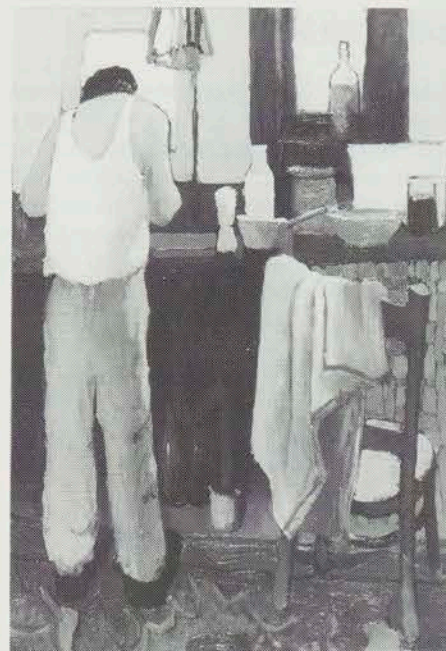
Moturoa Island is behind the ship. The painting is based on drawings made while walking along the beach at night. Initially Smither intended the work to be a study of reflections on wet sand but this proved beyond his technical abilities and he added the sea and shoreline.



2 Bachelor shaving 1963

oil on board
875 x 597mm

inscribed: on reverse 'Batchelor's quarters 1961-62'; not signed
exhibited: Hamilton, Waikato Society of Arts 1968, cat. no. 12 Rotorua City Art Gallery 1978 as 'Bachelor in kitchen'
collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

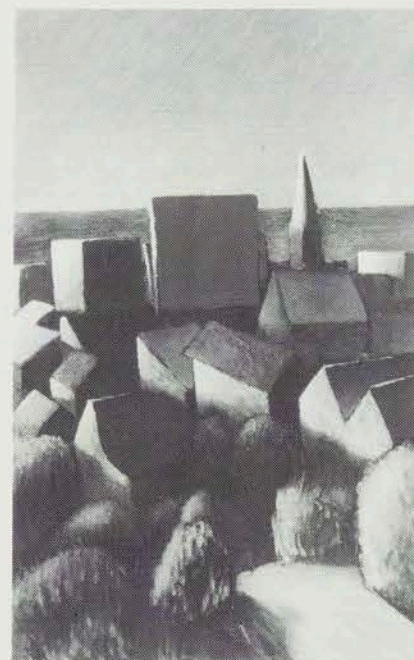


3 View of New Plymouth 1964

oil on board
848 x 520mm

inscribed: lower left 'M.D.SMITHER 64' (late signing)
collection: private collection, Auckland

The view is from Victoria Road near Pukekura Park. The spire is that of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. A drawing for this painting is in sketchbook 21, dated by the artist 1964.



4 Bush study 1965

oil on board
293 x 370mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D.Smither 65'
exhibited: Melbourne, Argus Gallery 1966, cat. no. 40
Hamilton Art Gallery 1966 as 'Bushscape', cat. no. 5
collection: private collection, Auckland

'I finally discovered how to paint pictures to show luminosity, in this case scraping back to the lemon yellow base.'
(MDS/B 20 June 1984)

This and other paintings of its type were influenced by the English painter Ivon Hitchens.



5 Composition — railways 1967

oil on board
1083 x 1205mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D.SMITHER 67'
exhibited: Auckland, John Leech Gallery 1968, cat. no. 21
reproduced: as 'New Plymouth, Morning' *Landfall*, June 1967, 21(2): between pp 176 and 177
collection: private collection, Auckland

'I've changed my attitude from those days when I felt I had to record everything that I saw . . . Barry Lett saw it and said that I was being like a magpie, and that is quite a good description . . . mind you everything that I recorded in those paintings was something that I enjoy.' (MDS/B 13 December 1983)

Drawings for this painting are in sketchbooks 22a and 23, dated by the artist 1966 and in sketchbook 21 dated 1964.

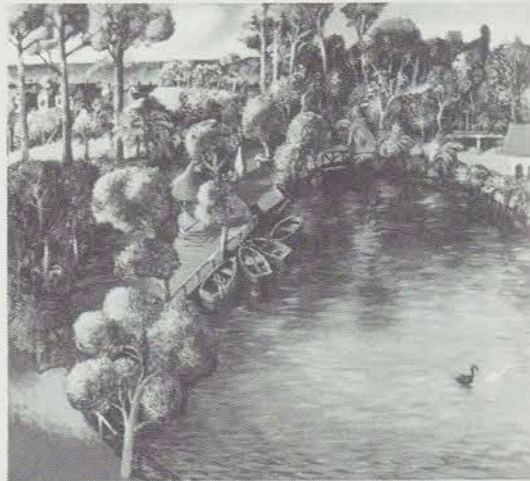


6 Pukekura park with rotunda 1967

oil on board
920 x 1030mm

inscribed: lower left 'M D. Smither 67'; on reverse with title
exhibited: Auckland, John Leech Gallery 1968, cat. no. 30
reproduced: Elizabeth Smither. *First blood*. Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland, 1983: cover (detail)
collection: W. B. Hopkins, Ohaupo

On the reverse is the oil sketch for another painting of Pukekura Park showing a family, possibly the Smithers, rowing in one of the small boats.

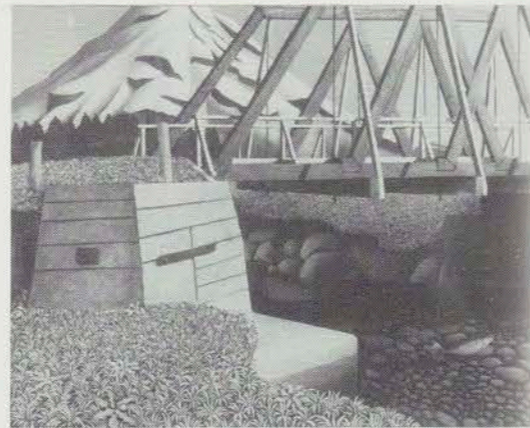


7 Alfred Road bridge 1968

oil on board
1220 x 1525mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: John Leech Gallery, Auckland 1968, cat. no. 27
Waikato Society of Arts, Hamilton 1976
Te Awamutu Festival 1981, cat. no. 20
reproduced: Peter Cape. *New Zealand painting since 1960*. Collins, Auckland, 1979: p134
collection: W. B. Hopkins, Ohaupo

Two versions of this scene were painted, one before and one after the artist's stay in the South Island. In the second version the mountain rises above the bridge structure and is closely aligned to the stylisation of the Otago paintings that immediately preceded it. A drawing for this painting is in sketchbook 26, dated by the artist 1965.



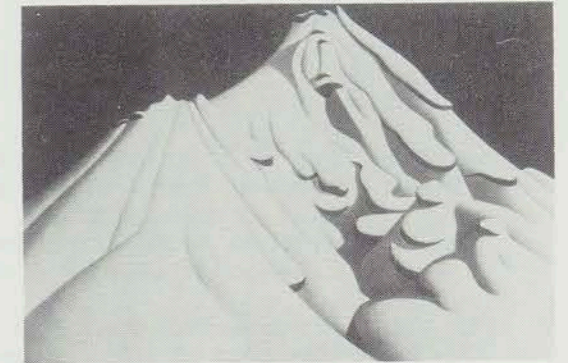
8 Tribute to Bernard Aris 1971

oil on board
1200 x 1800mm

inscribed:
exhibited: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 1971 *111 views of Mount Egmont*, cat. no. 78
Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1971, cat. no. 4
collection: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wellington

'When I heard there was going to be an exhibition including Egmonts on vans in the gallery I painted the biggest Mount Egmont I've ever painted.'
(MDS/B 13 June 1984)

This is the largest of three paintings in the same style. A print commissioned by the Friends of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery was based on it.

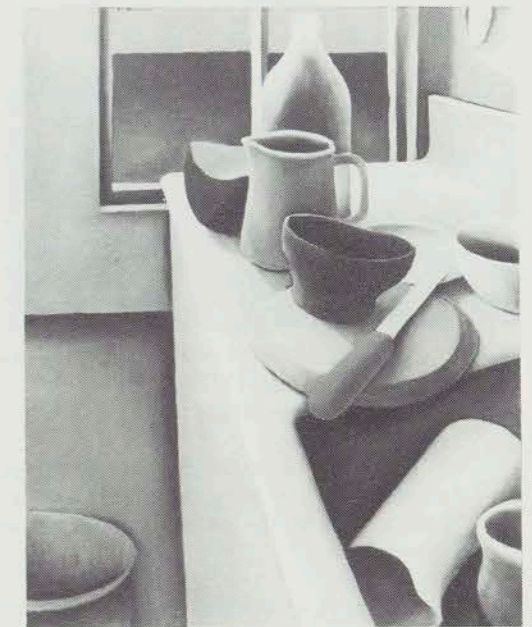


9 Still life with brown bowl 1966

oil on board
939 x 750mm

inscribed: upper left 'M.D.SMITHER 66'
exhibited: Melbourne, Argus Gallery 1968 as 'Still life with wonky brown bowl', cat. no. 25
Hamilton Art Gallery 1968, cat. no. 8
collection: Allison and John Brebner, Feilding

The brown bowl was a pottery container made by Elizabeth Smither. This work is the second in a series of three benchtop paintings.



10 Colander 1966

oil on board
907 x 1025mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D. Smither'; not dated
exhibited: Palmerston North Art Gallery *Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art* 1966, cat. no. 42
Melbourne, Australia, Argus Gallery 1968, cat. no. 18
Queensland Art Gallery *H. C. Richards Memorial Prize* 1968

reproduced: *Art and Australia*, March 1969, 6(4): p314
collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

'... a very disturbing picture. I wasn't doing that consciously. What I was really after was to show the inside and outside. I was so interested in that I later used it again with Sarah.' (MDSJB 12 June 1984)

This second painting is Sarah with colander (see *Landfall*, June 1967, 21(2): between pp176 and 177 as 'Sarah with eggs'). In 1968 the painting won the H.C. Richards Memorial Prize in Queensland judged by Smither's champion, the art historian Professor Bernard Smith.



11 Large still life on table 1968

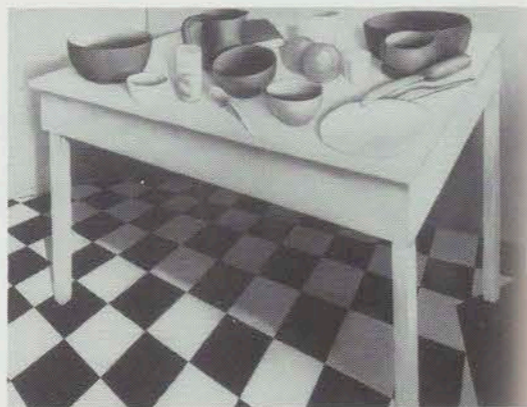
oil on board
917 x 1220mm

inscribed: lower right 'M D SMITHER 68' (oblit); on reverse 'Still life with yellow table 1968'
exhibited: Melbourne, Argus Gallery 1968, cat. no. 8
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Michael Smither paintings prints drawings* 1972
Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Domestic paintings* 1973 as 'Yellow table', cat. no. 9
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Domestic paintings* 1973

collection: the artist

'... if you look at the bowls and things there they are not really bowls at all, they are elliptical lines. The bowls are an excuse for drawing parabolas and things like that which are related to each other.' (MDSJB December 1983)

'The objects in the sink, believe it or not, were based on Morandi. I had been very affected by the movie *La Dolce Vita* and in particular a scene



toward the end where Morandi paintings could be seen in the background when an artist dies. I saw them as mystical still lifes. They were painted in a special way — very cool and mysterious.' 'I was very interested in the idea of what your eye saw was imprisoned to one view while as an artist you were able to express your knowledge of all the views you were familiar with.' (MDSJB 12 July 1984)

12 Oil sketch for Sarah at breakfast 1965

oil on board
562 x 904mm

inscribed: on reverse with title, date, 'M.D. Smither'
exhibited: New Plymouth, North Taranaki Society of Arts 1966
Christchurch, Pan Pacific Arts Festival 1968
collection: the artist

Drawings in preparation for this painting are in sketchbook 26, dated by the artist 1965.



13 Sarah eating baked beans 1967-68

oil on board
702 x 540mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
collection: R.E. Smither, New Plymouth

Sarah appears again in this pose in *Grandparents at tea* 1970 (cat. no. 17).



14 Portrait of my wife 1966

oil on board
945 x 750mm

inscribed: on reverse with title, 'M.D. SMITHER 66'
exhibited: Melbourne, Argus Gallery 1968, cat. no. 16
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 1970 *Acquisitions 1969-1970*, cat. no. 14
collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

A portrait of the artist's wife, the poet Elizabeth Smither, painted in the attic studio at the Gables. The artist recalls the pose and situation were based on a series of works by Keith Patterson shown in the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition *Contemporary New Zealand painting and sculpture* in 1960.



15 Sarah with spoon, Elsie in polka dots 1967

oil on board
804 x 962mm

inscribed: upper right 'MDS 67'
exhibited: Melbourne, Argus Gallery 1968 as 'Harry and Sarah at breakfast table', cat. no. 9
Melbourne, Pinacotheca *The Essentialists* 1968 as 'Harry and Sarah at the breakfast table', cat. no. 29
Sydney, Blaxland Gallery *The Essentialists* 1969, cat. no. 3
Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery, as 'Sarah with spoon (unfinished 1967)' 1973, cat. no. 7
Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1973 as 'Sarah with spoon'
collection: private collection, Wellington

The colour is derived from Smither's interest in Giotto. The polka dots were added later to emphasise the form.



16 Grandparents at door 1969

oil on board
1220 x 837mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 69'
exhibited: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki Review* 1970, cat. no. 41
Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Domestic paintings* 1973 as 'Grandparents at the door', cat. no. 10
Te Awamutu Arts Festival *Michael Smither retrospective* 1981 as 'Grandparents at the door', cat. no. 10
collection: Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton

The first drawing for this work appears in sketchbook 30, dated by the artist 1968. The painting was started in New Plymouth and finished in Patearoa.



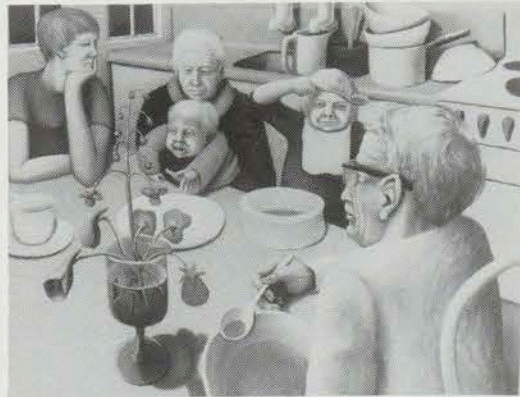
17 Grandparents at tea 1970

oil on board
907 x 1212mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki Review* 1970, cat. no. 40
collection: private collection, Wellington

'It was a carry on from the birthday party idea in the National Art Gallery's painting. I just updated the idea . . . It was about this time that being obsessed with the images I was painting I began to realise that I was actually painting domestic paintings.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)

This painting was started before the Smithers went south and finished on their return. There is also a study which was produced after the painting. Painted in Smithers's oil sketch style the composition is less formal and the reference to the earlier painting of Sarah (cat. no. 13) not so clearly stated.



18 Joseph with bear and bottle 1973

oil on board
1212 x 865mm

inscribed: upper left 'M.D.S 73'
exhibited: Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery 1973, cat. no. 24
Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1973
Lower Hutt, Dowse Art Gallery 1977 *Private View*, cat. no. 89

reproduced: *Art New Zealand* 1977, 4: cover
collection: Paris Family Collection, Wellington

'I did [the painting] in Wellington away from the family. I had come back for a weekend home and I was in bed in the morning and this kid came marching in and pointed and I went straight back to Wellington and I did the painting.' (MDSJB February 1980)



19 Gifts 1978

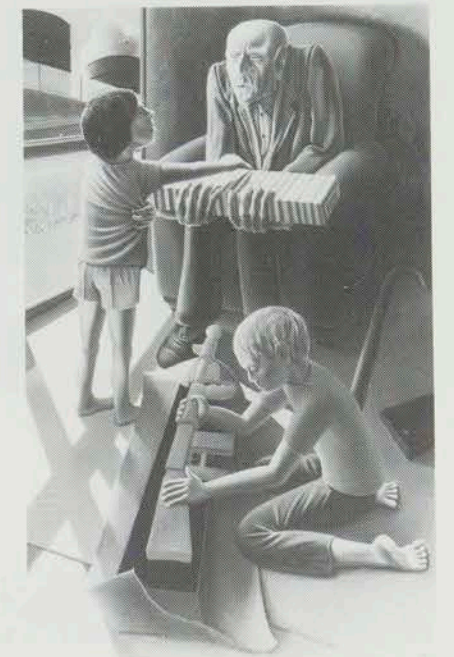
oil on board
1865 x 1180mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 78'
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Seven paintings of 1977 and 1978* 1978, cat. no. 5
Auckland, Denis Cohn Gallery *Paintings for the revolution* 1979, cat. no. 3
Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *Humour and satire in painting* 1980

reproduced: *NZ Listener*, 10 February 1979: p31
The Oxford anthology of NZ writing. O.U.P, Auckland, 1983: cover

collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington

'The revolution, as I learned when making them, was my own revolution. A change of heart. When you are in conflict with yourself it is much easier to pick up the conflict outside you.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)

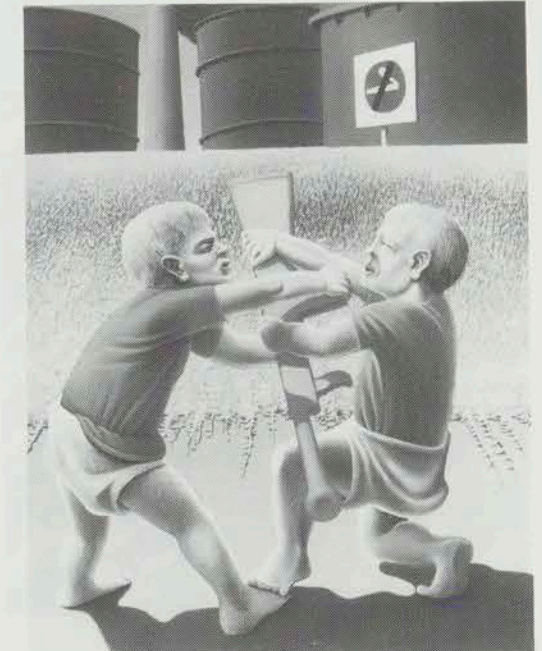


20 Boys fighting over pink plastic gun 1978

oil on board
1545 x 1200mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 78'
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Seven paintings of 1977 and 1978* 1978 as 'Fighting over gun', cat. no. 3
Auckland, Denis Cohn Gallery *Paintings for the revolution* 1979 as 'Boys fighting over gun', cat. no. 1

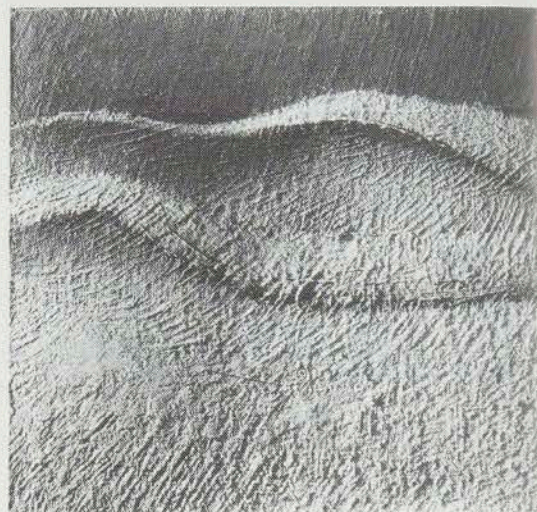
reproduced: *NZ Listener*, 10 February 1979: p30
Landfall, September 1980, 34(3), 135: cover
collection: the artist



21 Two waves c.1964

oil on board
610 x 650mm

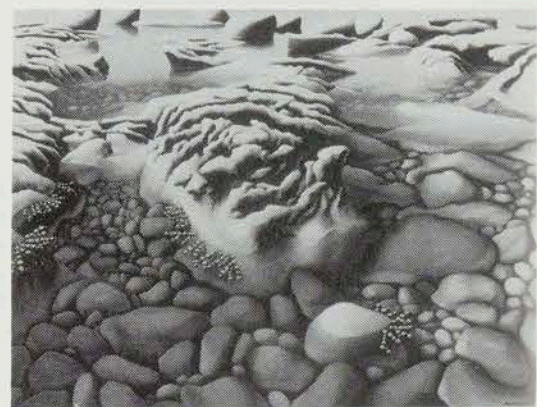
inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Wellington, Artides Gallery 1964, cat. no. 2
collection: Pauline and John Huggins, Christchurch



22 Rock pool 1968

oil on board
915 x 1221mm

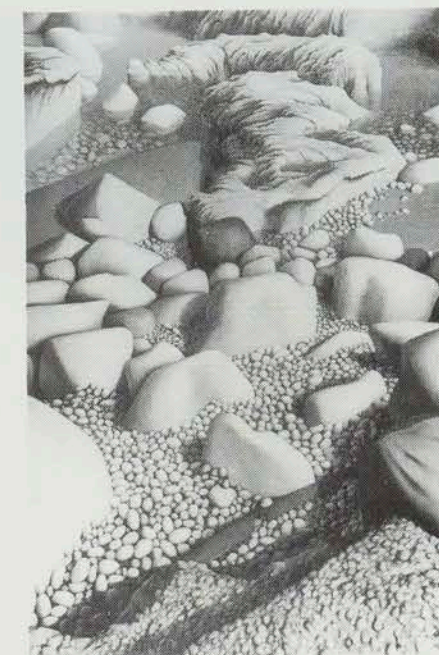
inscribed: lower right 'M.D. SMITHER '68'
reproduced: *Insight*, October/November 1983, 3(6): p32
collection: John and Trish Gribben, Auckland



23 Two rock pools 1967

oil on board
1830 x 1220mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D. SMITHER 68'
exhibited: New Plymouth, Taranaki Society of Arts 35th Annual Exhibition, 1967
Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries, *Benson and Hedges Art Award*, 1968, cat. no. 23
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, *Taranaki Review*, cat. no. 46
collection: R. E. Smither, New Plymouth



24 Large blue pool with wave invading 1969

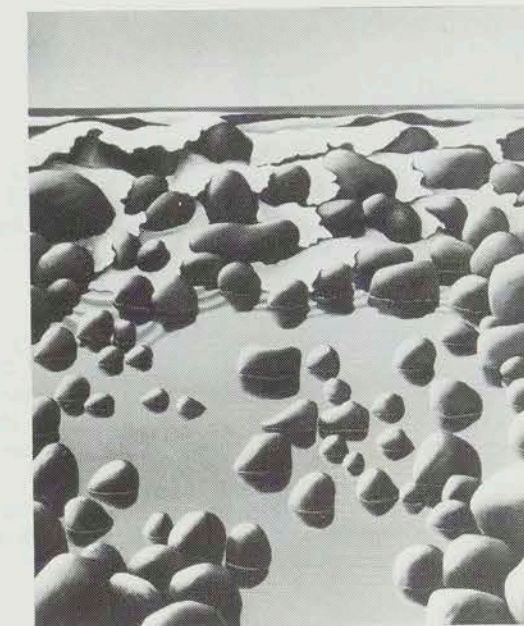
oil on board
1445 x 1206mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *The Paora paintings* 1969
reproduced: *Landfall*, December 1973, 27(4), 108: between pp 344 and 345 as 'Blue pool with waves invading'
collection: Todd Motors, Porirua

'It is quite a sinister painting. It is probably the peak of that period when I felt that the forces invading were very strong and that the distortion that the invasion created was a very strong element.' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

'It relates to my disturbed nature at the time. At that stage I had become involved in environmental issues in Taranaki, was threatened with eviction from the Gables and had lost the battle to save the clock tower.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)

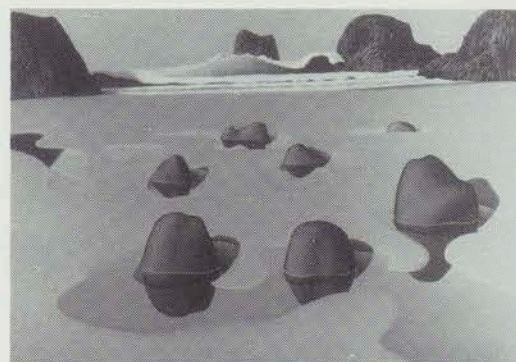
Paora, south of New Plymouth, is also the site of *Rocks with mountain* 1968 (Auckland City Art Gallery).



25 Back Beach 1976

oil on board
1220 x 1741mm

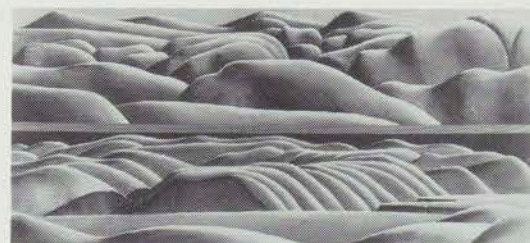
inscribed: lower right 'MDS 76'
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1977
collection: Joy and Keith Aberdein, Wellington



26 Gold landscape — diptych 1969

oil on ivory board
155 x 732mm each panel

inscribed: lower left of bottom panel 'M.D. SMITHER 69'
exhibited: Dunedin, Dawsons Gallery 1969 (as two separate paintings)
Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Michael Smither 1970 Festival exhibition* 1970, cat. no. 5
collection: R.E. Smither, New Plymouth



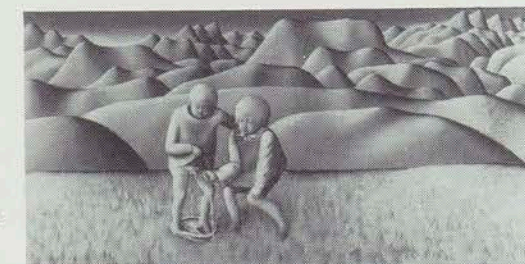
'... These first paintings were influenced by the studio I was working in. It was about 7ft high and 10 foot long so I did small paintings! I had all these off cuts of cardboard ... and as I wasn't well off it occurred to me that long thin paintings would encompass the beautiful line of the hills in an economical sort of way.' (MDS)B 28 March 1983)

The two paintings although related by being Central Otago landscapes are unrelated geographically. The top scene is a view from the Pig Route while the bottom is of St Bathans.

27 Thomas's first attempt at a stand up pee 1970

oil on board
788 x 1650mm

inscribed: on reverse with title and date, 'M.D. SMITHER'
exhibited: Dunedin, University of Otago Library 1970
Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *The Group* 1970 as 'Thomas's first attempt at a stand up pee', cat. no. 81
Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Earth/Earth* 1971 as 'Sarah assisting Thomas in his first stand up pee', cat. no. 25
collection: Peter Fyfe, Wellington

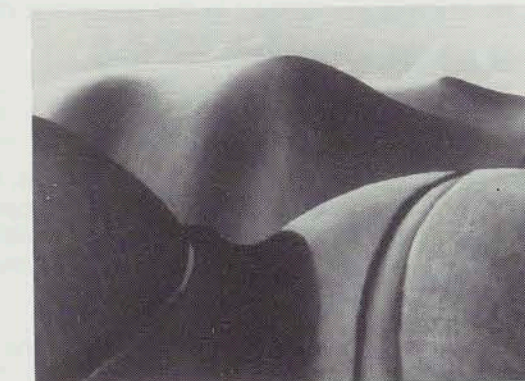


The awkward positioning of Sarah, especially of her legs, appears to owe a great deal to Smither's interest in the Australian painter John Brack. A drawing for this painting is in sketchbook 35a, dated by the artist 1969.

28 Contoured hills 1969

oil on board
487 x 690mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D. SMITHER 69'
collection: private collection, New Plymouth



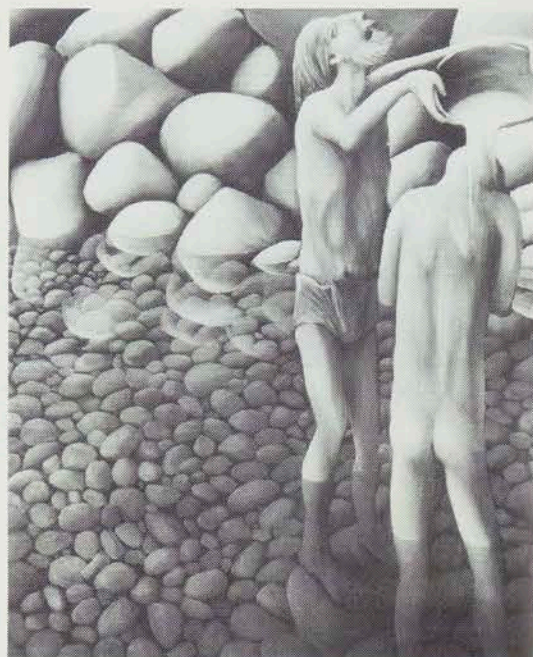
29 Study for the baptism of Christ 1967

oil on board
720 x 660mm

inscribed: on reverse with title and date, 'M.D. Smither'
exhibited: Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries as 'Baptism of Christ (first study 1966)' *Religious paintings and drawings* 1968, cat. no. 7
Palmerston North Art Gallery *Religious paintings by Michael Smither* 1968, cat. no. 7
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review* 1970 as 'The baptism', cat. no. 37
collection: private collection, New Plymouth

The [religious] paintings were concerned with expressing a point of view, of putting into my own personal terms subject matter that had already been done ...' (MDSJB 28 March 1983)

There is also a larger version of this painting with four apostles included. Drawings for this painting are in sketchbook 22a, dated by the artist 1966.



30 St Francis in ecstasy in the presence of nature 1967

oil on board
1220 x 912mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Michael Smither religious paintings and drawings* 1968, cat. no. 9
Palmerston North Art Gallery 1968
reproduced: *Landfall*, June 1968, 22(2), 86: between pp 168 and 169
collection: H. Sampson, Auckland

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182 — 1226) was the most saintly of saints who led his life following the footsteps of Christ. The son of a wealthy wool merchant, he turned from a frivolous life of indulgence to one of contemplation. He renounced his inheritance and devoted himself to the poor and sick. He was able to tame wild animals and preached to birds. The pier on which St Francis sits in this painting is in Brooklands Bowl lake, New Plymouth.



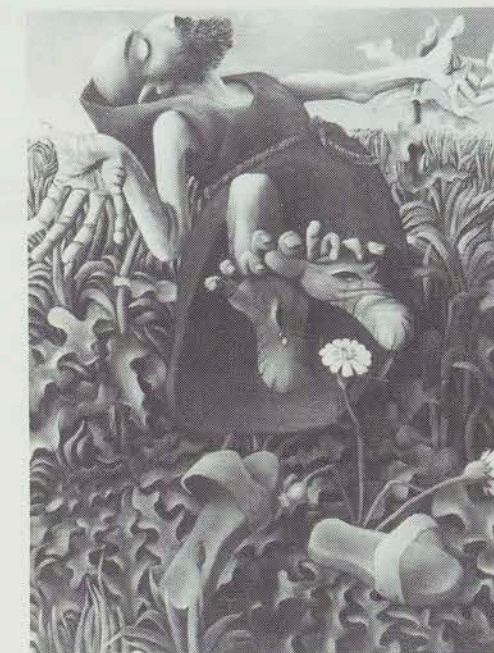
31 St Francis receives the stigmata 1967

oil on board
1220 x 912mm

inscribed: on reverse with title and date, 'M.D. SMITHER'
exhibited: Ashburton Society of Arts, *Arcadia Third Annual Arts Exhibition* 1967
Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Religious paintings and drawings* 1968, cat. no. 8
Palmerston North Art Gallery *Religious paintings by Michael Smither* 1968
collection: H. Sampson, Auckland

While fasting in the mountains towards the end of his life St Francis received the five wounds of Christ, the stigmata, which he bore, continually bleeding and painful, for the rest of his life. 'For an artist such as myself (being largely parochial) the chance to react to the world's strife and problems ... are limited. I cannot paint what I do not know or experience directly. But my religious paintings are a different matter and are made up of things I am intensely familiar with, to the point where they have become part of my environment. Born a Catholic with a strict moral upbringing, the lives of the saints and the apostles, have been, if not my daily bread at least my weekly instruction, and in this field I am able to give expression to some of the moral and intensely spiritual emotions that concern me.' (Catalogue introduction, Barry Lett Galleries 1968)

'St Francis was a clown, that's how he saw himself. He was a poet of sorts — a troubadour, at least — and a joyous saint most of the time. He expressed the foolishness, and the humanity, in all of us.' (Eve, August 1968)



32 Christ driving the money lenders from the temple 1972

oil on board
1210 x 1700mm

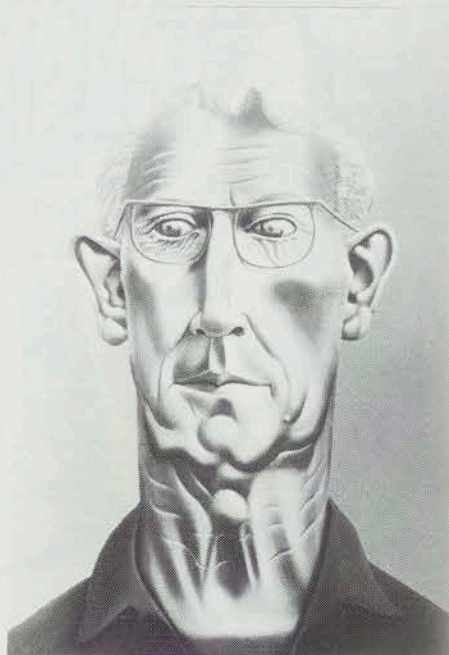
inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Wellington, Victoria University Library 1972, cat. no. 1
collection: Victoria University Staff Club, Wellington



33 Portrait of the artist's father 1975

oil on board
912 x 638mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1975
Auckland, Peter Webb Galleries *Recent paintings* 1976
collection: private collection, Auckland

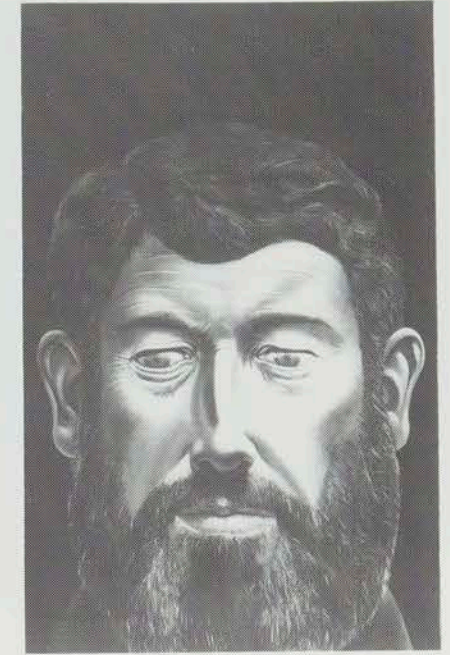


34 Self portrait 1976

oil on board
920 x 585mm

inscribed: upper right 'MDS 76'
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery 1976, cat. no. 9
collection: Paris Family Collection, Wellington

A drawing for this painting is in sketchbook 47a, dated by the artist 1973.

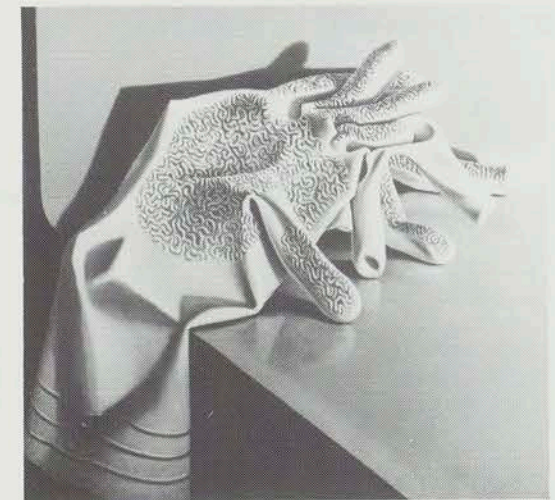


35 Yellow rubber gloves 1977

oil on board
1202 x 1284mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 77'
exhibited: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Eleven paintings* 1977
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster *You, me, us* 1977
Rotorua Art Gallery *Inaugural exhibition* 1978
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *The Govett-Brewster's great show of its purchases over ten turbulent years 1978* as 'Rubber gloves', cat. no. 17
collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

'The painting is a result of narrowing vision and looking at details you don't usually notice. The trivia of life gets a mystical quality to it.'
(MDSJB 13 June 1984)



36 Hapuka head 1979

oil on board
781 x 907mm

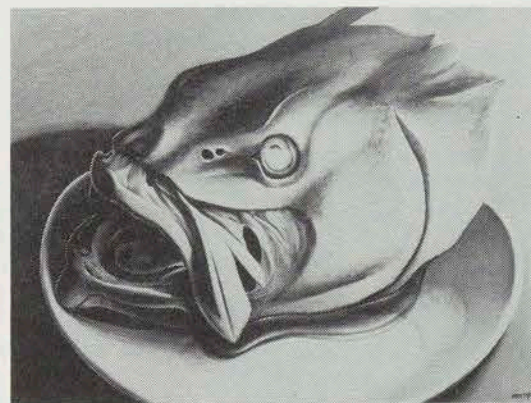
inscribed: lower right 'MDS 79'; on reverse with title
exhibited: Auckland, Denis Cohn Gallery *Paintings for the revolution*
1979 as 'Small Hapuka head', cat. no. 6
collection: Cohn/Vernon, Auckland



37 Hapuka head on plate 1979

oil on board
910 x 1220mm

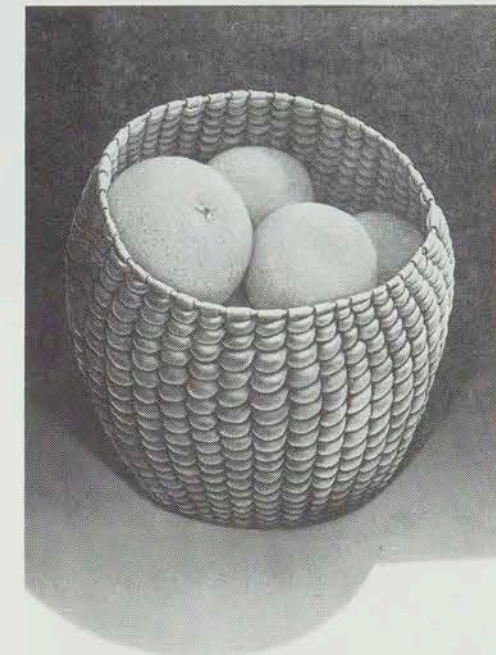
inscribed: lower right 'MDS 79'
exhibited: New Plymouth, Taranaki Society of Arts Centre 1980
collection: the artist



38 Seagrass basket and oranges 1979

oil on board
1600 x 1200mm

inscribed: lower left 'MDS 79'
collection: Terry Boon, New Plymouth

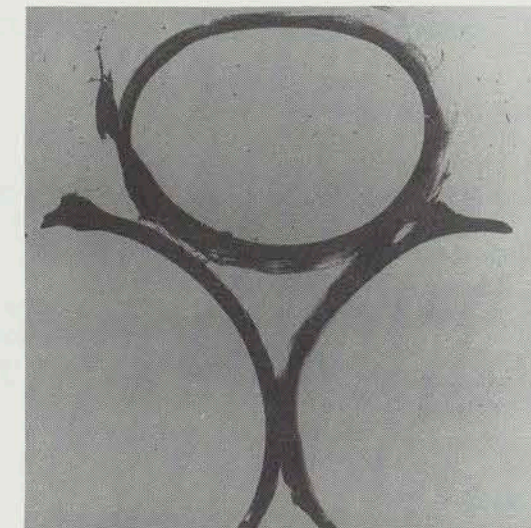


39 Rocks revisited 1981

acrylic on canvas
1520 x 1520mm

inscribed: on reverse with title, '1981 M.D. SMITHER'
exhibited: Auckland, John Leech Gallery *The rocks revisited and political statements* 1981
New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review*
1981, cat. no. 96
collection: the artist

'The series came after my work on the Polyphonic chords. I went for a walk along the beach and for the first time in ten years I felt like doing the rocks again, but this time I could do them a different way.' (MDSJB 13 June 1984)



40 Saddleback and squall 1976

oil on board
226 x 315mm

inscribed: lower left 'MDS 79'
exhibited: Christchurch, Brooke-Gifford Gallery 1976
collection: the artist

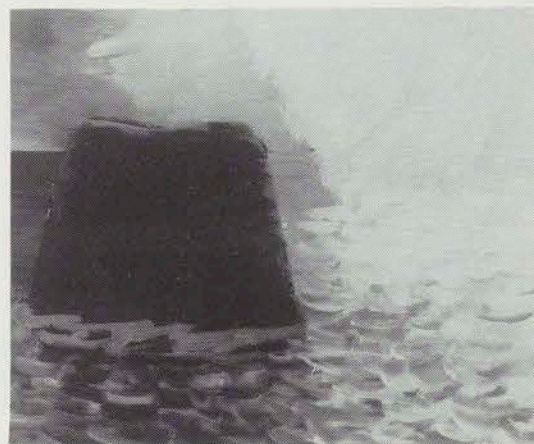


41 Sunlight in squall off Saddleback 1976

oil on board
240 x 305mm

inscribed: not signed or dated
exhibited: Christchurch, Brooke-Gifford Gallery 1976
Rotorua City Art Gallery 1978
collection: private collection, Wellington

'I've always treated the oil sketches in quite a different way to the finished type of paintings. In literary terms I suppose you could say that one's a novel while the other is a poem.' (MDS/B 13 June 1984)



42 View of Motumahanga with squall 1984

oil on board
359 x 628mm

inscribed: lower left 'MDS 84'
collection: the artist



Drawings

43 Sarah eating corn 1967

felt pen on paper
240 x 218mm

inscribed: on reverse with title and date
collection: the artist



44 Sarah playing with blocks, Thomas in bassinette 1968

felt pen on paper
408 x 556mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 68'; on reverse with title
collection: the artist

This drawing has also been produced as a silk screen print.



45 Swimmers and dolphin 1969

PVA on paper
780 x 553mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D. Smither 1969'
exhibited: Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Dolphins and lovers* 1969
Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts 1971
collection: Allison and John Brebner, Feilding

This drawing was used for the righthand panel in the print *Dolphins and lovers* 1969.

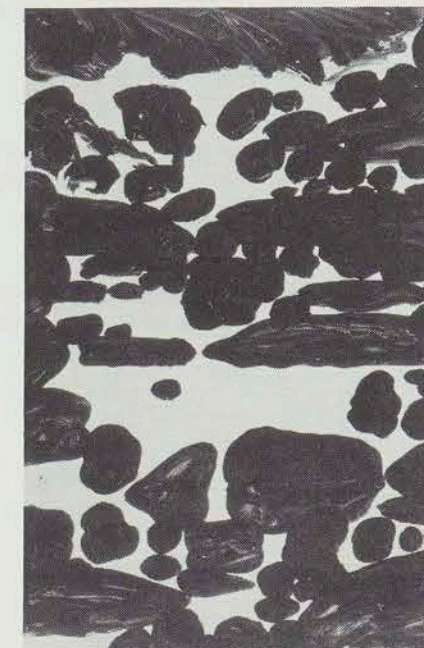


46 Rock pools 1970

PVA on paper
915 x 585mm

inscribed: lower right 'M.D. Smither 1970'
exhibited: Dunedin, Dawsons Limited Exhibition Gallery 1970
collection: private collection, Wellington

Based on photographs taken by Smither's friend Kirby Wright. The drawings were initiated by a commissioned cover for *Landfall* and, although signed later, were most likely done in 1968.



47 2 miles down Pitone Rd cloudy conditions 1971

pencil on paper
430 x 585mm

inscribed: centre 'Mt Egmont 3rd drawing 2 miles down Pitone Rd
cloudy conditions 11/2/71'
collection: the artist

One of a series of drawings completed during a trip around the mountain on Smither's return from Central Otago.

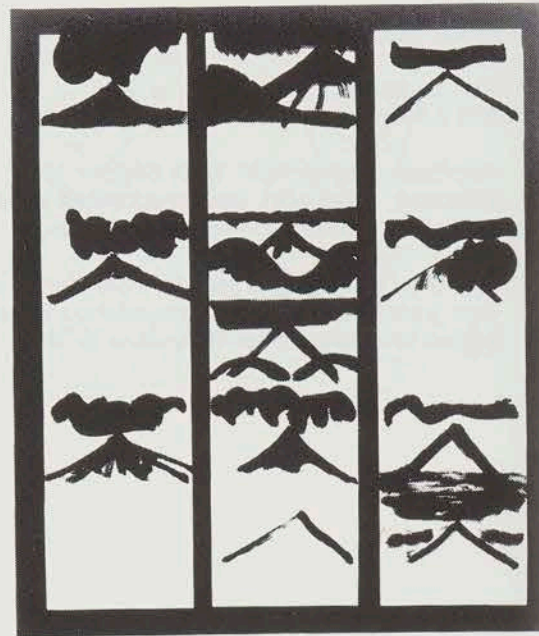


48 Taranaki panels 1979

ink on paper
583 x 148mm each

inscribed: left hand sheet, lower centre '7/8/79 1'; centre sheet, lower centre '7/8/79 2'; right hand sheet, lower centre '7/8/79 3';
not signed
collection: the artist

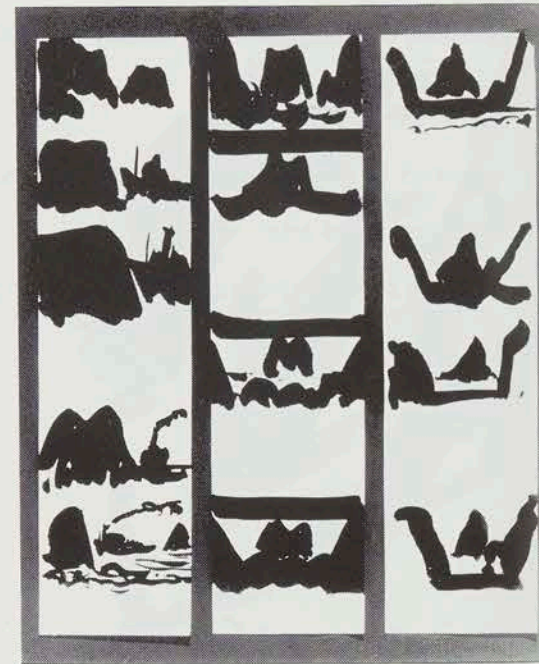
The drawings are based on photographs Smither commissioned from Phil Bendle. They were taken from a boat off the coast of New Plymouth.



49 Taranaki panels 1979

ink on paper
583 x 148mm each

inscribed: left hand sheet, lower centre '4 MDS 7/8/79'; centre sheet, lower centre '5 7/8/79 MDS'; right hand sheet, lower centre '6 MDS 7/8/79'
collection: the artist



50 Carol 1981

pencil on paper
265 x 219mm

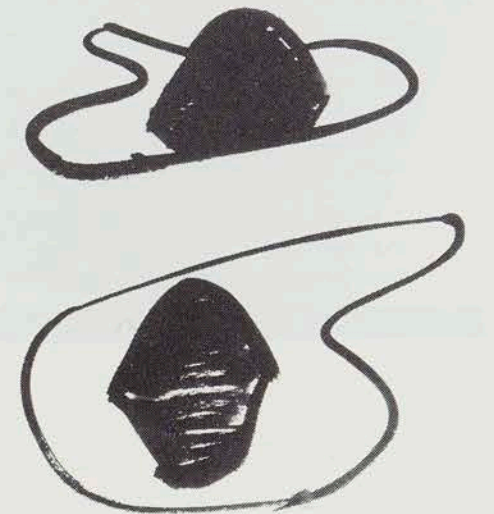
inscribed: lower right 'MDS 81'
collection: the artist



51 Sand pools around boulders 1981

ink on paper
220 x 193mm

inscribed: on reverse 'April 81'; not signed
collection: the artist



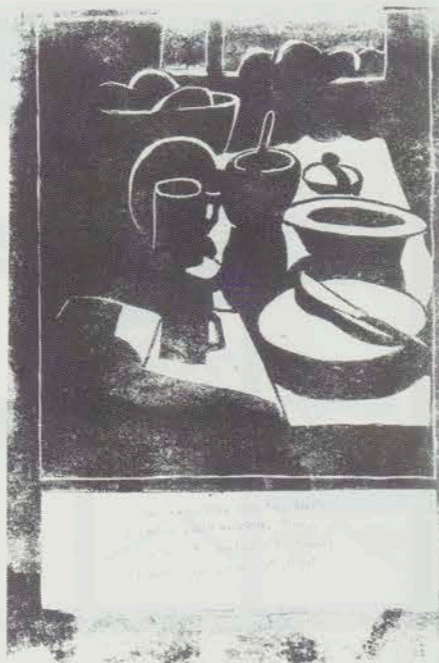
Prints

52 Still life with poem by artist's wife c.1963

lino cut on paper
515 x 344mm

inscribed: below image 'The ascending Sun by clarity/ Graces each morning thing,/ Out of the darkness bestowing/ Praises in pools of light'; not signed or dated

collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth



53 Line fishing (first stage) c.1964

lino cut on paper
242 x 217mm

inscribed: lower right 'MDS 63'

collection: Allison and John Brebner, Feilding

This image was intended as an illustration for a children's book *Duncan the cat*, written by Smither for his daughter Sarah. The illustrations are based on his experiences on fishing trawlers.



54 Wave c.1967

silk screen print on paper
519 x 515mm

inscribed: not signed or dated

collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

This print was produced with a large number of drawings in preparation for designing the cover for *Landfall*, December 1968, 22(4), 88.

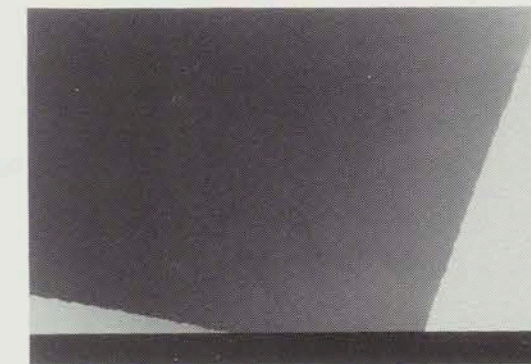


55 Squall 1 1973

silk screen print on paper
529 x 768mm

inscribed: lower left below image '1/33/73', centre with title and lower right 'MDS'

collection: the artist

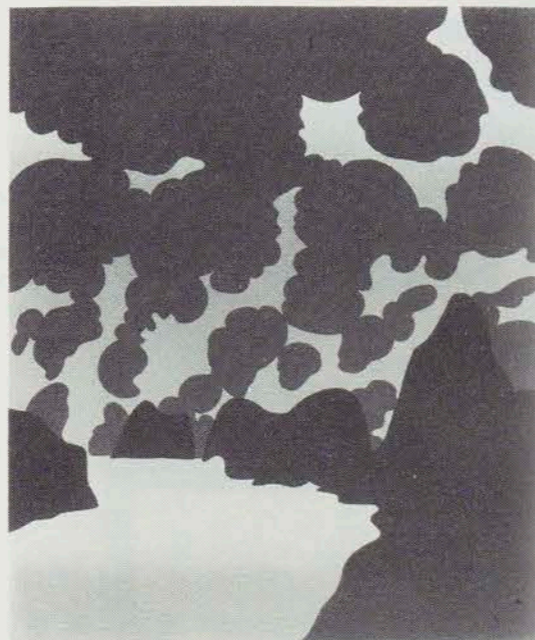


56 Back Beach 1 1974

silk screen print on paper
725 x 605mm

inscribed: lower left '2/30/74', centre with title and lower right 'MDS'
collection: the artist

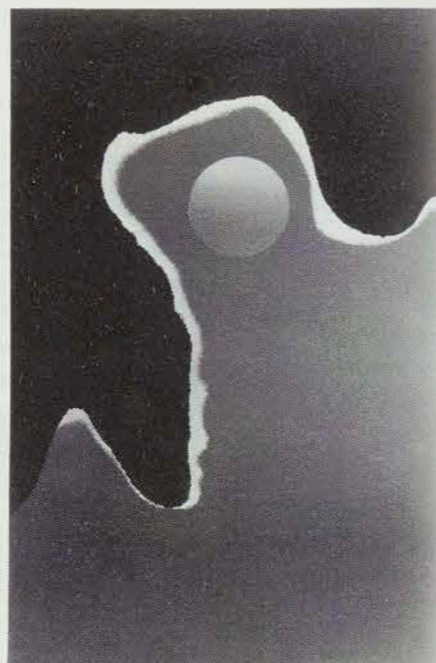
An image done at the same time as this print was used for the cover of Maurice Shadbolt's *Danger Zone*. Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland, 1975.



57 Moon behind cloud 1975

silk screen print on paper
568 x 381mm

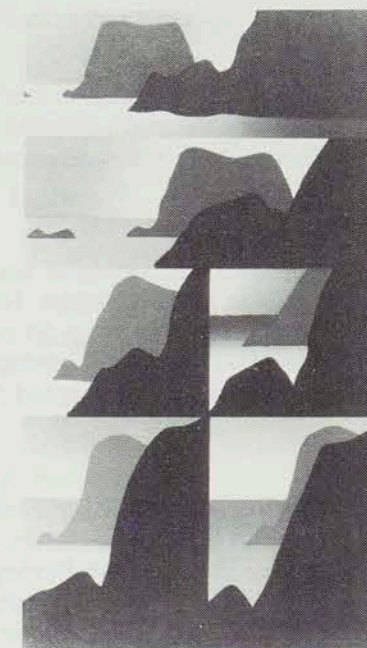
inscribed: lower left '1/20/75-137', lower right 'MDS'
collection: the artist



58 Motumahanga — green, six views 1983

silk screen print on paper
648 x 375mm

inscribed: lower left '24/60 MDS 83'
collection: the artist



CHRONOLOGY

Michael Duncan Smither is born in New Plymouth on 29 October 1939 to Mary Ellen (nee Duncan) and Reginald Edward (Bill) Smither. Educated at St John Bosco School, Fitzroy, New Plymouth and New Plymouth Boys' High School.

1958

Leaves school and works at Ivon Watkin's New Plymouth factory which later appears in his **Paintings for the revolution**. His main interests are art and underwater diving. Many of his paintings of this time have an underwater theme. Lives with his parents at 48 Doralto Road. His father takes samples of his work to A. J. C. Fisher at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland. Smither is accepted for the next year's enrolment.

1959

Attends the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, where he is taught by A. Lois White, Robert Ellis, Peter Brown, John Weeks, Kees Hos and Peter Tomory. His contemporaries are: Stanley Palmer, Don Binney, Suzanne Goldberg and Malcolm Warr. Spends holidays in New Plymouth where he has, among others, a job in a car spray shop which introduces him to the lacquers he will later use in his paintings.

1960

Leaves the Elam School of Fine Arts in July but remains in Auckland supporting himself by designing posters and painting portraits of National Orchestra members. Although he is keen to get an illustration job in newspapers he is unsuccessful. At the Auckland City Art Gallery sees *Contemporary Australian Painting* which includes works by Nolan, Drysdale, Dobell, and also *Contemporary Japanese Woodcuts*.

1961

Exhibits in first 'Group 60' show in New Plymouth but spends most of this year painting in Auckland. Part-time jobs include painting backdrops for plays, portraits on commission and coffee bar mural. Sees *Painting from the Pacific* at the Auckland City Art Gallery in May and is particularly impressed by the Japanese work. Brueghel's **A village fair** is purchased by the Auckland City Art Gallery. First solo exhibition held at Moller's Gallery results in a number of sales. **Schnapper** is selected by Peter Tomory for the Auckland City Art Gallery's *Contemporary New Zealand Painting* in November. Later the show tours the country. Four works from the Moller's exhibition are published in the December issue of the literary magazine *Mate* 8. Returns to New Plymouth for Christmas.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Auckland, Moller's Gallery.

group: Auckland City Art Gallery *Contemporary New Zealand painting*. New Plymouth Public Library *Group 60*.

1962

Spends most of the year in Patearoa, Central Otago, painting and doing part-time jobs. Exhibits paintings including a series based on a hoarfrost in Dunedin. Returns to New Plymouth and begins his first rock drawings.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Auckland, Moller's Gallery.
group: Auckland City Art Gallery *Contemporary New Zealand painting and sculpture*.

1963

Lives at 37 Breakwater Road and works as trawlerman at a commercial fishery. Paints **Bachelor shaving**. Marries Elsie Harrington (Elizabeth) 31 August.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Auckland, John Leech Gallery. New Plymouth, Taranaki Museum.

1964

Starts first rock pool paintings from a drawing in January. Moves to 48 Mill Road. Paints a number of still lifes on 'the utensil' theme, including **Still life with red cake tin**. His sculpture **Victoria reigns** is shown at the New Plymouth Public Library and causes great public controversy. Moves to the Gables. Paints Antarctic series based on a book of photographs by Herbert George Ponting. Visits Eric Lee Johnson at Waihi in September. Paints a large number of rock pool watercolours. Sarah Smither is born 16 November.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Wellington, Artides Art Gallery. New Plymouth, Bernard Woods Art Centre. New Plymouth, Taranaki Museum. New Plymouth Public Library *Victoria reigns*.

1965

In March begins designs for Stations of the Cross to be placed in a modernised St Joseph's Church. **Madonna and child** is selected for the Auckland City Art Gallery's *New Zealand painting*. Australian art historian, Professor Bernard Smith, arrives in New Plymouth in August to advise on foundation of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. He meets Smither and sees his work. Undertakes to organise an exhibition in Melbourne the following year. Advises on plans for Govett-Brewster Art Gallery with John Matthews while constructing cut metal sculpture for St Pauls, New Plymouth.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: New Plymouth, Taranaki Museum. Auckland, John Leech Gallery. Auckland, Giotto Art Gallery *Collection of sketches and lino-cuts by Michael D Smither.*
- group: Christchurch, Pan Pacific Arts Festival exhibition. Auckland City Art Gallery *New Zealand painting.* New Plymouth Opera House basement *Group 60.*

1966

Sculpture of St Paul is installed at St Paul's Roman Catholic Church at Spotswood, New Plymouth in February followed by intense public controversy. Travels to Melbourne, Australia in April and stays with Professor Bernard Smith and his wife. Writes piano score for short film on Australian artist Anne Graham. Returns from Australia in June. Paints **Portrait of my wife.** Shares studio space with John Maynard who is in New Plymouth to set up the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, and Don Driver who is working on a large mural for the New Plymouth airport.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Melbourne, Argus Gallery *Michael Smither paintings.* Hamilton Art Gallery.
- group: Auckland City Art Gallery *New Zealand painting 1966.* Auckland, John Leech Gallery, Palmerston North Art Gallery *Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art.*

1967

Thomas Smither is born 11 May. Paints **Study for baptism of Christ.** Commissioned to produce a stained glass window depicting the Transfiguration for Ramsay House, Victoria University, Wellington. He uses resins to paint directly onto glass and perspex.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Whangarei, Reyburn House *Northland Society of Arts.*
- group: Ashburton Society of Arts *Third annual arts exhibition in the Arcadia.* Christchurch, Durham Street Art Gallery *The Group.* Palmerston North Art Gallery *Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art.*

1968

Two rock pools is accepted for the Benson and Hedges Art Award in February. Returns to Melbourne for his second exhibition at the Argus Gallery in March. **Rocks, concrete and iron** is purchased by the Auckland City Art Gallery. Awarded \$1000 as the H.C.Richards Memorial Prize, by Professor Bernard Smith at the Brisbane Art Gallery, Queensland for **The colander** in November. Formally commissioned to produce the 14 Stations of the Cross for St Joseph's, New Plymouth. Works on a series of black and white rock pool studies for *Landfall.* Commissioned to produce a cover for Maurice Shadbolt's *This Summer's dolphin.*

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Hamilton Art Gallery, Waikato Society of Arts. Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Religious paintings and drawings.* Palmerston North Art Gallery *Religious paintings by Michael Smither.* Auckland, John Leech Gallery. Melbourne, Argus Gallery.
- group: Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Benson and Hedges Art Award.* Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *This land.* Christchurch, Pan Pacific Arts Festival *100 New Zealand painters.* Melbourne, Pinacotheca Gallery *The Essentialists* (Tours to Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney). Christchurch, Gloucester Street Gallery *The Group.*

1969

In January draws the dolphins at Mt Maunganui Marineland. After a prolonged battle the New Plymouth clock tower is demolished. **Large blue pool with wave invading** exhibited at Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington. Leaves the 'Gables' in March and travels with his family to Patearoa, Otago. *Dolphins and Lovers* series exhibited at Barry Lett Galleries in June. Maurice Shadbolt's *This Summer's Dolphin* is launched at the opening. Selected to provide work for the New Zealand Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. Exhibits with the Essentialists at Blaxland Galleries, Sydney. Travels to New Plymouth in August to install Stations of the Cross at St Joseph's. They are officially blessed in September. Awarded the 1970 Frances Hodgkins Fellowship.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery. Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Dolphins and lovers.* Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts Gallery *Exhibition of paintings and drawings.* Dunedin, Dawsons Gallery.
- group: Washington, Smithsonian Institution *Exhibition of New Zealand modern art.* Dunedin, Otago Arts Society *93rd annual exhibition.* Sydney, Blaxland Gallery *The Essentialists.*

1970

Takes up Frances Hodgkins Fellowship at the University of Otago, Dunedin. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth opens in April. Shares studio space with Ralph Hotere and Jeffrey Harris. Meets Tony Watson, Mozart Fellow and sees Istvan Nadas in concert. Paints crosses in memory of Rita Angus. Opens Jeffrey Harris exhibition. Joseph Smither is born 17 November.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Dunedin, Dawsons Limited Exhibition Gallery. Dunedin, University of Otago Library. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *An exhibition of paintings by Michael Smither.* Dunedin, Otago Museum Foyer *M. D. Smither Frances Hodgkins Fellow 1970, University of Otago.*
- group: Auckland, John Leech Gallery *1970 Festival exhibition.* Osaka, Japan *Expo 70*

exhibition. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Acquisitions 1969-1970*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review*. Palmerston North Art Gallery *Manawatu Centennial Prize for Contemporary Art*. Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *The Group*. Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand *New Zealand art of the sixties*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery. Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *Otago Art Society*.

1971

Returns to New Plymouth in February and is awarded A.S.P.A.C Fellowship to Japan. Returns in June to live at 19a Mt View Place. Exhibits with *Figuratives now* Hawthorn City Art Gallery, Melbourne. The book *Figuratives Now* featuring the Essentialists is launched at opening.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Timaru, Aigantighe Art Gallery. Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts. Auckland, John Leech Gallery. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery. Dunedin, Dawsons Exhibition Gallery.
- group: Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Centenary collection*. Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Earth/Earth*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review 2*. Melbourne, Hawthorn City Art Gallery *Figuratives now*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *111 views of Mount Egmont*. Taumarunui Art Society, annual exhibition. Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Print/Pac, Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art, Printmaking 1971*.

1972

Visiting lecturer at Victoria University Extension, Wellington. Paints *Joseph with bear and bottle* and finishes *Christ driving the money lenders from the temple*.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Michael Smither paintings prints drawings*. Wellington, Victoria University Library. Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt *One man show of work by Michael Smither*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *An exhibition of watercolours*.
- group: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review 3*. Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art 1972*.

1973

Spends much of his time producing prints with his father and starts building a new studio onto the house. Tony Watson dies. Asked to submit designs for Beehive mural. Commissioned to design dust jacket for Dick Scott's *Ask that mountain*.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Domestic paintings*. Auckland, John Leech Gallery. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Domestic paintings 1966-1973*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Domestic paintings*.
- group: Wellington, New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts *Manawatu Art Council permanent collection at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts*. Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Landscape — a survey exhibition*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Watercolours, drawings and prints*. Palmerston North, Manawatu Art Gallery *Drawing invitational*.

1974

Foyer mural commissioned for new Shell BP and Todd Oil Services offices in New Plymouth. Works on mural for Robert Jones House mural in Wellington.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *Watercolours*. Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Back Beach series*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Works on paper by Michael Smither (1959 — 1974)*.
- group: Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *Art N.Z. '74*. Auckland, Barry Lett Galleries *New year/new works*. Auckland, New Vision Gallery *Gallery choice*. Auckland, New Vision Gallery *Portraits by contemporary New Zealand painters*. Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Group 74*. India *Sixth International graphic art exhibition*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *New Zealand on paper*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Watercolours, drawings and prints*.

1975

Begins *Paintings for the revolution*.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery. Hamilton, Waikato Art Museum. Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Michael Smither new paintings*.
- group: Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Group 75*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Exhibition of Taranaki Art Societies and independent artists*. Nelson, Suter Art Gallery.

1976

Commissioned by Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council to draw in the Rotorua area for the Pan Pacific Arts Festival.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Hamilton, Waikato Society of Arts Studio Gallery *Exhibition of retrospective work by Michael Smither — on loan from private collections in the Waikato*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery. Auckland, Peter Webb Galleries *Recent paintings*. Christchurch, Brooke Gifford Gallery. Rotorua Museum, Commission by Arts Council for Pan Pacific Festival.
- group: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review 1976*. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth *Painting in Taranaki*. Auckland City Art Gallery *New Zealand drawing*.

1977

Starts rebuilding track down to Paritutu Beach and planting the cliffs. *You, me, us* exhibition at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in July with emphasis on public participation in art. Illustrations to *Ten for St Francis* by Elizabeth Smither published in *Islands* 18. Begins Gribben family mural in Auckland.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Thames, Pofflatt Gallery. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *You, me, us*. Rotorua Art Gallery *Inaugural exhibition*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Eleven paintings*.
- group: Auckland City Art Gallery *New Zealand prints*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *Works on paper and prints*.

1978

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Rotorua City Art Gallery. Thames, Pofflatt Gallery *Retrospective exhibition of drawing*. Hamilton, Aquarius Fine Arts Ltd *Retrospective drawings exhibition 1964-1977*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.
- group: Auckland, Peter Webb Galleries *Rangitoto special*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review 1978*. Whangarei, Reyburn House, Northland Society of Arts. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *The Govett-Brewster's great show of its purchases over ten turbulent years*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1979

Completes harmonic mural for New Plymouth War Memorial Hall. Draws and paints the hapuka head series. Active in the fight for a sewage treatment plant for New Plymouth.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Rotorua, Display Art Gallery *Exhibition of drawings in retrospect*. Auckland, John

Leech Gallery. Auckland, Denis Cohn Gallery *Paintings for the revolution*.

- group: Rotorua City Art Gallery *Air New Zealand Rotorua Civic Art Award*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Major works from private collections*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1980

Starts experiments with driftwood on the Back Beach and shows New Plymouth City Council officers the results as a way to prevent the erosion of local sand dunes. The twelve *Polyphonic chords* are exhibited at the Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt. Paints pavement mural in Liardet Street, New Plymouth.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Taranaki panels*. Hamilton, Studio Gallery *Michael Smither — retrospective drawing*. New Plymouth, Taranaki Arts Centre. Lower Hutt, Dowse Art Gallery *Polyphonic chords*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.
- group: Christchurch, Canterbury Society of Arts *Humour and satire in painting*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Carnival of the animals*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1981

Accompanies *Polyphonic chords* tour of New Zealand working with the public. Fitzroy Beach reclamation project starts with Smither as supervisor. Travels extensively to protest against Springbok tour of New Zealand.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Auckland, John Leech Gallery *The rocks revisited and political statements*. Te Awamutu Arts Festival *Michael Smither retrospective*.
- group: New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Stations of the Cross*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Taranaki review*. Hawkes Bay Art Gallery, Hastings. New Plymouth, St Joseph's Hall *Renonsense*. Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1982

Prepares slides and music for performance of *Back Beach time* with Jamie Bull. Continues work on the Fitzroy Beach project. Paints Dolphin mural in New Plymouth and supervises workshop for Govett-Brewster Art Gallery mural project. *Back Beach time* performed at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in October. Begins scratching harmonic shapes on 35mm slides and photographically printing the results.

Selected exhibitions

- solo: Auckland, John Leech Gallery. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Back Beach time*.

group: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1983

First exhibition of the Harmonic chart derived from experiments conducted during the polyphonic chords exhibition. Production begins on an independent film showing the process of beach restoration. Installation at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery showing harmonic arrangement of stones for the adaptation of sea walls. Lectures at Victoria University of Wellington's Music Department and displays a large harmonic painting which is performed at the lecture. *21 piano pieces* published by Wai-te-ata Press.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Wellington, Peter McLeavey Gallery *An exhibition of works on paper covering the period 1976 through 1982*. Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Motumahanga*.

group: Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North *The New Zealand landscape from the Manawatu Art Gallery collection*. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth T.A.C.O. *the politics of exhibition*. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery *Four years of collecting 1979 — 1983*. Wellington, Janne Land Gallery *Michael Smither and friends*. New Plymouth, St Joseph's Community Centre, TACO Christmas party.

1984

Presents *End of time's chimes*, a light, sound and dance performance with Jamie Bull at the Christchurch Arts Festival.

Selected exhibitions

solo: Christchurch Festival *End of time's chimes*. Auckland, Editions *Suite of figure drawings*. Wellington, Janne Land Gallery *Taranakigraphs*. Auckland, John Leech Gallery *Views from Back Beach*.

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Notes on the sources

Our primary source material was conversations with the artist, most of which were taped. These are referred to in the text as MDS/B and the date. In 1983 the New Zealand Oral History Archive (NZOHA) recorded MDS's commentary while examining the 80 odd sketchbooks he has used since 1959. Many of these sketchbooks were dated at this stage. The NZOHA also taped a biographical record which has been drawn on in the essay. All NZOHA material is referred by the page number of the transcripts which are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library. The sketchbooks are held in the National Art Gallery.

A substantial number of clippings was made available to us by the artist, his parents and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Some of the early ones were not dated or sourced and this has been noted where necessary.

