

SIGNATURES OF PLACE  
Paintings & Place-names

Francis Pound



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GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY  
New Plymouth New Zealand

15 June - 28 July 1991

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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The Gallery would also like to acknowledge the generous assistance provided by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of NZ through the Visual Arts Projects Programme.

Cover image: Ruth Watson, Names and Places 1990

ISBN: 0 - 908848 - 06 - 4

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GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY  
PO Box 647  
New Plymouth  
New Zealand

Registrar and catalogue editor: Barbara Maré  
Catalogue design: Verne Barrell  
Exhibitions Officer: Terry Urbahn  
Technician and photographer: Bryan James  
Printer: Masterprint New Plymouth

## SIGNATURES OF PLACE

### Paintings & Place-names

#### Francis Pound

*The signature of a region, like that of a witness written  
below the poet's, can attest value in the work.  
(Allen Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*.)*

Here is a quote from 'Labour Has a Plan', an election pamphlet published in 1935. It sounds almost like a programme for landscape painting.

*New Zealand, with its temperate and subtropical zones, its potential waterpower, coal and iron resources, its fisheries and holiday resorts, can be made the centre of a new civilisation. Under the Labour government we shall use our own physical resources and apply the progressive genius that has been dormant in these past decades and erect the new Social State that will once again cause New Zealand to inspire the world... This policy was made in New Zealand by New Zealand citizens who know New Zealand conditions. It is not exotic, but native to our problems.<sup>1</sup>*

As in the larger politic, so in art. New Zealand painting too has a plan to use New Zealand's own physical resources: a policy made in New Zealand, by New Zealand citizens who know New Zealand conditions, a plan not exotic but native to our problems, so we are told. In accord with this policy, in the 1930s and 40s, New Zealand art comes to be judged --

<sup>1</sup> Cited Gordon H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1920-1940: Adaptation and Nationalism*, Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, Wellington, 1975, p. 51.

by painter and critic alike -- for its *New Zealandness*. Critics reviled painters for not painting real New Zealand subjects; they celebrated those who did. Painting, it was said, should be painted *of* New Zealand, by New Zealanders, for New Zealanders.<sup>2</sup>

Frederick Page, for instance, in reviewing a show of the New Zealand Society of Artists in 1933, rebuked painters for not painting the real New Zealand, but 'pretty calendar effects' merely: 'What ninety-nine out of a hundred painters put down on canvas is simply not New Zealand at all'.<sup>3</sup> For John Cam Duncan, similarly: 'New Zealand artists express, for the most part, anything but the country of their birth... the picture depicting the real New Zealand is a rare find'.<sup>4</sup>

Only rarely could painters be praised for representing 'the real New Zealand', as Rata Lovell-Smith was praised in 1933 by James Shelley:

*Here are no subtleties, but a series of vivid and simplified impressions of her native country. Whereas many of the pictures by exhibitors might have been painted in other countries, there can be no doubt about the locality of Mrs Lovell-Smith's landscapes.*<sup>5</sup>

The same was said by Shelley to be so of Rita Angus, and Alfred Cook:

*Mrs Rita Cook [Rita Angus] and Mr Alfred Cook see New Zealand in a way that contrasts with the work of those*

<sup>2</sup> My phrasing here echoes Allen Curnow's, when he calls for a play 'which is of this people, by this people, from this people', in 'A Conversation with Allen Curnow', *Islands*, Winter 1973, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Page, 'New Zealand Society of Artists', *Art in New Zealand*, December 1933, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> John Cam Duncan, 'New Zealand Painters (The Late A.W. Walsh - An Appreciation)', *Art in New Zealand*, March 1929, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> James Shelley, *Christchurch Press*, 15 April, 1933.

*who concern themselves with finding a fragment of a landscape of the popular 'English' type, and who paint it in a manner suited to that type.*<sup>6</sup>

If 'there can be no doubt about the locality of Mrs Lovell-Smith's landscapes', and if Rita Angus and her husband 'see New Zealand in a way that contrasts with the work of those who concern themselves with finding a fragment of a landscape of the popular "English" type', this is not a matter only of 'manner' or style -- though it is partly that.<sup>7</sup> It is a matter, too, of asserting a localism of subject -- of signing a painting with the signature of a locality.

Rita Angus in *Cass*, for instance, paints a specific and specified spot, a place no doubt known to some of her Christchurch viewers -- Cass Railway Station, close to Arthur's pass, 116 miles from Christchurch.<sup>8</sup> *Cass* asserts what the Nationalist poet and critic A.R.D Fairburn had described in the magazine *Art in New Zealand*, just two years before, as 'the natural bleakness of our man-made scenery -- buildings, bridges, railway stations and cuttings, telegraph poles and so on...'<sup>9</sup> With the seedling pines on the hills behind, the more nearly mature pines by the platform, and the heap of pine planks before, there is a certain acerbic pleasure in



Rita Angus, *Cass*, 1936, oil on canvas, 374 x 496mm, courtesy of Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.

<sup>6</sup> James Shelley, *Christchurch Press*, 6 November 1932.

<sup>7</sup> For Shelley, the certainty of locality he praises in Lovell-Smith's and Angus' landscapes is also a result of their assertion, via the hard edge and a high clarity of style, of the 'harsh clarity' of New Zealand light. In a lecture, 'Signatures of Place', given 12 February 1990 at the Auckland City Art Gallery to accompany the exhibition *Two Centuries of New Zealand Landscape Art* I showed how painting's 'style' has, from the 1930s on in New Zealand, been regarded as if it were the signature or idiomatic mark of the country itself -- how a 'harsh clarity of style' was for some forty years inscribed as if it were New Zealand Nature's own 'personal style' or 'signature'. The present essay offers an expurgated, enlarged and improved version of the first third of that lecture.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted for this information to the catalogue entry to Angus' *Cass*, Gordon H. Brown, op. cit., p. 86. The Nationalist painting, one might say, is that which encourages just such catalogue entries.

<sup>9</sup> A.R.D Fairburn, 'Some Aspects of New Zealand Arts and Letters', *Art in New Zealand*, June 1934, p. 215.

presenting not 'pretty calendar effects', but the unadorned economic facts of a place. Here, perhaps, is something like 'the burning honesty' Fairburn felt the 'bleakness of our man-made scenery' required. And isn't there too, however sharp the observation may be, a certain pathos in the very paucity of human effect in a landscape so grand?

The place-name 'Cass' honours Thomas Cass, who was once Chief Surveyor of Canterbury Province.<sup>10</sup> And so a place's past is connoted, to such a local audience as might know its history, while, at the same time, Angus' painting makes *her* now a chief surveyor of Canterbury, and of Nationalist painting's newly discovered -- or newly invented -- New Zealand.

The name of the place -- 'Cass' -- is inscribed in the work as its largest signature. It is a potent legend. A more perfect answer can hardly be imagined to the poet and anthologist Allen Curnow's belief, and the general Nationalist belief, that: 'the signature of a region, like that of a witness written below the poet's, can attest value in the work.'<sup>11</sup> Here, you might say, the painting goes even further than Curnow had required, since the signature of the region is written *above* the signature of the painter, and written much larger, and even gets written *twice* -- it gets top billing. *Cass* proffers, furthermore, in its very acerbity and pathos, and in its resonance of local history, 'a poetry with a regional truth for New Zealand' just such as Curnow praised.<sup>12</sup>

One might compare Angus' *Cass*, with its railway sign marking the name of its station, to the Automobile Association sign marking 'Bruce Creek' in W.A. Sutton's archetypically regionalist work, *Dry*

10 I take this information from the catalogue entry to *Angus' Cass*, Gordon H. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 86. Here I Offer Thanks to Brown.

11 Allen Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 51.

12 Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

*September*,<sup>13</sup> or to the 'Titahi Bay Club' inscription on the hotel of Harry Linley Richardson's *Mrs Thornley, Titahi Bay*. Or, taking an example from the very end of the Nationalist period, one might compare Angus' inscription of place to the inscriptions in Robin White's paintings and prints -- to the 'Fish & Chips to Take Away' and 'Maketu Fisheries', say, of *Fish and chips, Maketu*, 1975, where a sign also informs us that it is 'Closed Mon & Tues', or to the place-name lettered on the foreground truck of White's screenprint, *Mangaweka*.

If we go through all of Nationalist painting, there is hardly a one which does not in some way announce a specificity of place, and thereby justify its plea for a local consumer.<sup>14</sup> Even a regional meteorology, as presented in title and paint, might be thought to vindicate a specifically local attention. What Allen Curnow claims of Basil Dowling's poem *Canterbury Nor'wester* might just as well be claimed of Sutton's *Nor'wester in the cemetery*: it 'will prove his quality better' to one who knows 'in his blood how highly-charged and spectacular a change of weather is the subject of *Canterbury Nor'wester*, and what a potent legend in the skies it is for those who live in that part of the country.'<sup>15</sup> So the painting is



William Sutton, *Nor'wester in the cemetery*, 1950, oil on canvas, 1515 x 1820mm, courtesy Auckland City Art Gallery.

13 The fact that, as the artist himself has remarked, his works in this show are 'studio confections', not faithful transcriptions of a place, the fact that they are 'an assemblage of details observed in the open', and then rearranged according to the needs of composition and meaning, makes all the clearer that the inscription of place-names in paintings is a deliberate meaning-effect, and not merely the result of numbly copying something before the artist's eyes -- that they are not a merely accidental effect of the much-vaunted 'real'. 'None of them', in Sutton's words, is a scene 'taken from nature'. (William Sutton, letter to Barbara Maré, 15 April 1991.)

14 In this matter, even an exception may prove the rule. See for instance, Sutton's *Somewhere up country*, 1944, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, illustrated *Art New Zealand* 55, Winter 1990, p. 81. The vagueness of place in its title -- a most un-regionalist vagueness -- is deliberate, since the trucks on its road are part of a wartime military exercise. Troop movements, of course, are a military secret. If the Nationalist title is generally at pains to announce a specificity of place, and if often the place-name is actually inscribed in the painting itself, in Sutton's *Somewhere up country* such a specificity might have constituted a betrayal of information to the enemy. (LOOSE TONGUES COST LIVES.)

15 Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

not just asserted to be *of* New Zealand -- or of Canterbury, but also to be *for* New Zealanders -- or for Cantabrians, to whom it 'will prove its quality better'.

To entitle a painting with a local place-name, then, is to grant it something more than a distinguishing appellation. It is also to proffer an *entitlement* in another sense of the word: it is to entitle the painting to a local audience. A title like *Nor'wester in the cemetery* acts as a kind of title-deed to Canterbury viewers, the proof of a right, of a just and recognised claim to their attention. It increases the painting's 'value', in both the metaphorical and material senses of that word.<sup>16</sup> The 'local and special' argument is, therefore, a form also of special pleading, a strong stratagem for deserving and achieving a local audience. It is an excellent marketing strategy, and a fine piece of public relations. It is a way of inventing a new New Zealand, a New Zealand School of Art, and a New Zealand market -- all and at once.

The yellow luridity of the dust-filled sky of *Nor'wester in the cemetery*; the bend of the macrocarpa, the rush of the untended grass; the corrugated iron and red oxide, the wood and white lead of a colonial Gothic; the broken marble of a Victorian faith and sentiment; the desolation of rust, ochre and grey: all this is posed as if it had been -- in the words of Allen Curnow's requirements -- 'marked or moulded everywhere by peculiar pressures', those 'pressures arising' at once from the 'physical character' and the 'history' of place.<sup>17</sup>

'Reality must be local and special at the point where we pick up the traces', so Allen Curnow says in a famous passage, 'as manifold as the

<sup>16</sup> That to this day New Zealand art collectors -- unlike their peers in the rest of the world -- collect only art made in their own country, and the fact that most New Zealand dealer galleries show only art made in New Zealand, is perhaps proof of the very effectiveness of the Nationalist 'Made in New Zealand' strategy.

<sup>17</sup> Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

signs we follow, and the routes we take.'<sup>18</sup> (One might think here of the signpost of Peter Peryer's *Bluff*.) The 'local and special' argument, of which Sutton's *Nor'wester* is so successful a syllogism, was to last until regionalism's end. It was to last, that is, until the 1970s, when the Nationalist period begins to be replaced by a new period -- our own.<sup>19</sup>

Even a painter like McCahon, infected with such a modernism as makes it difficult to call him a 'regional realist' like the Sutton or Angus,<sup>20</sup> continues to inscribe his paintings with the name of a place. See, for instance, his abstract-looking *The days and nights in the wilderness...*, 1971, collection of the Govett Brewster Art Gallery, additionally inscribed as it is, 'Ninety Mile Beach With Haumu Hill'.<sup>21</sup> Or see his *A piece of Muriwai canvas*, a painting looking rather like the American abstractionist, Barnett Newman's *Horizon light*, 1949, with *its* horizontal zip of light,<sup>22</sup> but which differs entirely from anything painted by Newman in having the signature of place inscribed on its surface. The 'piece' of the title is -- inextricably -- a piece of painted canvas, and a piece of a place -- a strip of the black sand and white surf of Muriwai Beach. We are offered here, still, what Allen Curnow had emphatically called for, 'the signature of a region, like that of a witness', to 'attest value in the work'.

Ralph Hotere, like McCahon, has been affected by such a modernism as makes it impossible for him to paint anything as old-fashioned as a 'view' -- and this despite the window frame about his painting *BLACK*

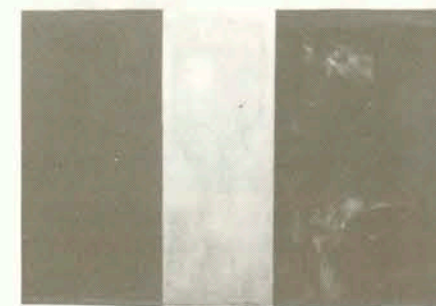
<sup>18</sup> Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> For proofs of this bold assertion, the reader will just have to join the queue awaiting my yet to be published book, *The Invention of New Zealand: a Nationalist Mythology of Landscape: 1930 - 1970*.

<sup>20</sup> 'Regionalist Modernist' might be the appropriate term for McCahon.

<sup>21</sup> *The days and nights in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape*, 1971. Unfortunately, this painting was not available for this show, since it is currently on tour in the United States of America.

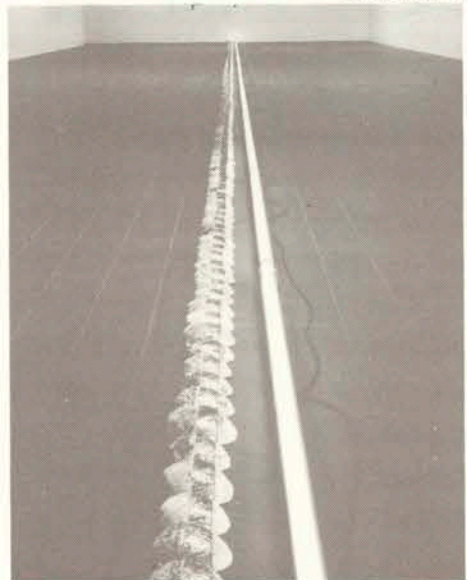
<sup>22</sup> Barnett Newman, *Horizon light*, 1949, oil on canvas, 775 x 1842mm (collection of Mr & Mrs T. Stills, New York); illustrated in *Art New Zealand*, no.8 p.48.



Colin McCahon, *The days and nights in the wilderness...*, 1971, PVA on unstretched canvas, 2360 x 1840mm, collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.



Handwritten sign at Aramoana, NZ  
Courtesy of Bruce Foster/  
NZ Listener



Ralph Hotere and Bill Culbert  
Pathway to the sea: Aramoana, 1991,  
paua shells and fluorescent lights,  
size site specific, courtesy of the artists and  
Auckland City Art Gallery.

**WINDOW - Towards Aramoana**, which must suggest at least the possibility of a view, and which might also recall, for those who know it, the classic Renaissance definition of painting as a view through a window. Yet Hotere, in McCahonian manner, paints a place-name on his dark, high modernist panel: 'Aramoana' -- a name which used to resonate, for the New Zealand viewer, with conservationist protest, and a name now, though this was hardly in the mind of the painter in 1981, darkened by a multiple murder.

In a sculpture Hotere and Bill Culbert made together in 1991, **Pathway to the Sea: Aramoana**, place is in a sense inscribed, though it is not literally lettered on the work's surface. It is inscribed by title ('Pathway to the sea' is a translation of the place-name, Aramoana), and by cutting a line through a row of paua shells which lies next to a line of fluorescent tubes (paua is a New Zealand species of sea-dwelling shellfish, whose shells have a tradition of use by Maori carvers). Significantly, though Culbert is an expatriate New Zealander living in England and France where there is no requirement of art to name place, he continues to produce works titled with New Zealand place-names -- as in his **Murdering Beach**. It seems that this expatriate has been permanently marked by the New Zealand tradition of 'the signature of a region'. In Culbert's works, titles, photographs, and stickers on suitcases have each served to refer us to New Zealand place. And this is particularly curious, perhaps, since those suitcases which are such a characteristic or signature effect in Culbert's oeuvre, reflect also the peripatetic life of successful artists in Europe, a life which requires them endlessly to travel from exhibiting place to exhibiting place.

Gordon Walters, of course, is known for his abstract paintings, and not for landscapes: he was a more resolutely and consistently modernist painter than McCahon, and came to abstraction a decade earlier than he. Yet even Walters painted landscapes in his early days; and these

landscapes too, though without any literal inscription of place-name on their surface, were liable to proffer the 'signature of a region', by means at once of title, a specifically local colouring, and the use of signs derived from Maori rock drawings. The titles alone of two nearly abstract Walters paintings from 1947 may serve here to suggest at least something of this: **South Canterbury landscape**, and **New Zealand landscape**. As I've said elsewhere, 'It is as though Walters' painting, despite its offering an abstraction entirely new to New Zealand, wants in its every register to mark a particularity of locale: in its Maoriness of sign, in its proclaimed geography, in its colouration -- it is traversed by locale throughout. In so deliberately opening itself at once to place and to the Maori, it becomes in a sense housed in a local tradition...'<sup>23</sup>

Later, in Walters' better-known Koru paintings, the 'koru' form, distantly based as it was on that of a Maori *koru* pattern, would again sign the painting with a certain Maoriness -- and so with the signature 'New Zealand'. More specifically, the Maori titles of Walters' Koru paintings were sometimes, in fact, street names -- the names of streets where he had lived. What more precise signature of place could you want!

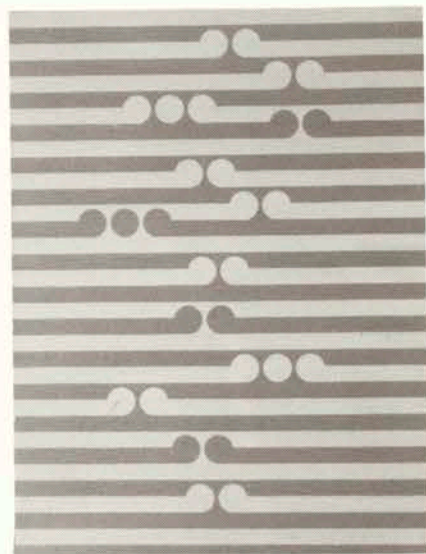
*In the beginning I simply titled works **Painting number 1** 1959 and so on, but I was not entirely happy with this. Then in 1964 I began to use Maori names for titles. This began with my painting entitled **Te Whiti**. The potent figure of Te Whiti had long fascinated me, partly perhaps because the street I had grown up in was named Te Whiti Street, so I decided to title what was then one of my strongest and most successful images in homage to the famous Maori leader. After this I began to use other Maori titles from my environment in Wellington where I had grown up.*

<sup>23</sup> Francis Pound, 'Walters and the Canon', in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, eds. James Ross and Laurence Simmons, Auckland, 1989, esp. pp. 55-56.



Map of Auckland.

Map published by permission of the Department of Survey and Land Information. Crown copyright reserved.



Gordon Walters, *Grafton*, c.1967, acrylic on hardboard, 1220 x 915mm, courtesy Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.

*Most place-names there were Maori ones and these names had a strong emotional significance for me. By using them to title my works I was able both to pay tribute to the Maori tradition, which has meant a great deal to me, and to re-interpret it in terms of my own art and my immediate environment. (Gordon Walters, 14 October 1982.)<sup>24</sup>*

Not that all Walters' place-name titles were Maori -- see his *Grafton*, for instance, whose title gives homage to an inner city suburb of Auckland where the artist had painted and lived.

Laurence Simmons has recently published a detail of a Wellington CityStreet map on which he has ringed Aranui Street, in order to suggest a (complex) biographical relation of person and place to a Gordon Walters' painting titled *Aranui*, 1982.<sup>25</sup> Seeing Simmons' suggestive figure, or Walters' *Grafton* next to a map of Auckland, it is hard not to think of John Hurrell's paintings made on maps of Christchurch -- the city where the artist lives. There, the map is the literal ground of the picture. But with Hurrell, an artist of the post-Nationalist time, we are getting ahead of our story...

All of Nationalist painting was posed, and posed itself, as a kind of immense signature of place. Painting's signs became, from the 1930s on, a sort of sig-Nature, where New Zealand Nature might seem to sign itself. This is not only a matter of a signature as in *Cass*, or *Dry September*, where we may literally read the name of a place. It is also a matter of signature in the sense of the recognisable 'personal style' of a country or region, 'the set of idiomatic marks that a signer might leave by accident

<sup>24</sup> Gordon Walters, cited Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery 1983, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Laurence Simmons, 'Time and Signature in a Large Painting by Gordon Walters', in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, p. 97.

or intention in his product'.<sup>26</sup> It is signature as the 'style' of a place or of a country; it is signature as the idiom of a local geomorphology and a local meteorology -- as with the much proclaimed 'harsh clarity' of New Zealand light, which is claimed to have signed New Zealand painting as if all by itself. So Nationalist painting offers also signatures of place which endeavour to hide their inscriptive nature, which do not seem to be signs at all, pretending rather to 'stand as natural objects in the open air, in the sun, in the rain, in the wind'.<sup>27</sup>

New Zealand's signature, then, or the signature of a region of New Zealand, is offered as an authenticating and contracting act, 'attesting value', as Curnow would say, like that signing you do on a cheque. It is as if the signature of the country or region allows the country itself to speak, and to say: 'it is indeed I who here paints -- certified, affirmed on my honour'. It is as if New Zealand Nature itself countersigns the painting or poem. Nationalist art might, therefore, be defined as that art which, over a period of some forty years, erects a monumentalised signature of New Zealand, and makes that signature into an institution.

Don't get me wrong. It is not that the signature of place is entirely lacking in post-Nationalist art. It is just that it is no longer regarded as an absolute prerequisite, as the be-all and end-all of painting in New Zealand; it is just that it is far less often asserted today.

And when it is asserted, it is asserted differently.

You might think Billy Apple, for instance, a resolute non-regionalist if ever there was, would never inscribe his work with a place-name. Certainly, there are no landscapes proper in Apple (the closest he comes perhaps, is in using the logo of the One Tree Hill Borough Council in a

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Signponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand, Columbia Press, New York, 1984, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Francis Ponge, cited Jacques Derrida, op. cit, p. 130.



projected work). Yet, in his painting **Our price \$265,000**, in bold sans serif capitals, we see the word **NEWMARKET**. He does mark and attend to place. Here, with impeccable clarity, and in absolute flagrancy, he makes place 'attest value in the work'. He blatantly prices a view. He does not represent a building set in specified place, as Angus does with *Cass Station* -- he paints *about* a building in a place, *on* the building itself -- a new kind of painting *en plein air*.

**Alterations**, another instance of Apple's attention to place, calls upon you to attend to the very space in which you move to follow this show -- the very stair you must climb to have the full story.

Let us look at the exemplary case of the painter Richard Killeen, another of the major artists to have emerged in the post-Nationalist time. Of some two hundred and five cut-outs painted by Killeen, three have titles which spell out the name of a place -- one of which is not in New Zealand: **Murdering Beach, Dunedin** (February 1980), **Rainbow's Reach** (August 1980), and **From the Cairo Museum** (June 1985). Six titles name a country, one of which is not New Zealand: **Born in New Zealand -- for Martin** (September 1985) and **Born in New Zealand -- for Samuel** (October 1985) -- both celebrating the birth of a child -- and **Born alive in New Zealand** in its three versions, two of October and one of December 1985; and **Clay tokens from Iran**, September 1980. Nine titles, then, out of two hundred and five, clearly attend to locale.

If the notion of region is stretched to its limit, Killeen's first cut-out, **Across the Pacific** (August 1978), might also be counted, and two called **Welcome to the South Seas** (October 1979 and March 1980), and another called **Welcome to the South Pacific** (November 1979). Thirteen titles, then, at most, out of some two hundred and five, pronounce a country, region or place. One might compare the paucity of local signature in Killeen's titles with the titles of say Angus or Woollaston,



Richard Killeen, **Born alive in New Zealand no.2**, 1985 acrylic lacquer on aluminium, size site specific, private collection, Auckland.

nearly all of which assert a signature of place.

Despite the relative paucity of regional reference in their titles, Killeen's cut-outs do include many of what might be called locality's signs -- both from New Zealand and from the Nationalists' dreaded 'overseas'. In **Born alive in New Zealand no. 2**, December 1985, for instance, there is a Maori green stone ornamental fish hook; a Maori stone adze; a Polynesian comb pattern; a spiral motif typical of Maori carving, and coloured, as Maori carvings are, with earth red. There is a sheep on an altar in one piece, and a deer in another -- the sacrificial offerings perhaps of New Zealand's pastoral economy; there are fish on an altar in one piece, and a gull in another -- offerings, perhaps, of the geographical fact of New Zealand as an island country.<sup>28</sup> There are volcanoes which actively smoke -- marks, maybe, of a country which is still geologically young.

Even the Nationalists' requisite landscape appears in **Born alive in New Zealand no. 2**, as it does in all six 'Born in New Zealand' cut-outs, in a piece showing, in the words of a Killeen notebook, a 'man with a landscape in his head' -- a nice definition of the Nationalist. There is also a flaming tree stump -- a reference to the stock sign of the tree-stump in 19th century New Zealand painting, a sign of the clearing of the native New Zealand forest; and a reference also to the stock sign of the burnt-out tree in 1930s, 40s, and 50s New Zealand painting.

It was Killeen who first made signing a painting 'New Zealand', that signing which was an imperative under the Nationalist regime, *itself* the subject of a painting, and it was he who first made Nationalism's interminable litany of place an object of painted critique. He did this in his

<sup>28</sup> That Killeen may regard the gull as a specifically New Zealand emblem is further suggested by the fact that a gull appears too in his much earlier painting with a 'New Zealand' title, *Alive in New Zealand*, 1971. Fish too are an often repeated item in Killeen's iconography.

painting *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* 1971,<sup>29</sup> and in what his notebooks at the time called the 'Goddam damn Home Sweet Hoooooome' works of 1971 -- his *Wish you were here*; his *Postcard from here to the world*; his *Godzone* ('God's own country'); his *Alive in New Zealand*, and *Born in New Zealand*. It seems it was the birth of his son, and the birth of his sister's son, which provoked Killeen, a decade later, to think again about being born in New Zealand, and to revive the titles of his earlier considerations of that geographical fate. It seems that Killeen, like many of his generation, regards being born in New Zealand as a biographical fact rather than as an aesthetic vocation...

In a post-Nationalist art, that signing a painting 'New Zealand' which was law under the Nationalist regime may now *itself* become the subject of painting. Instead of trying to sign a painting 'New Zealand' or 'Ohakune', as the Nationalist painter had, the post-Nationalist painter is more likely to paint a painting *about* signing a painting New Zealand or Ohakune. This was certainly the case with Killeen's early *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, which was not a Nationalist landscape proper, but rather a kind of meta-landscape, a *commentary* on landscape, which questioned the whole national landscape notion. Something of the interrogatory irony of *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* perhaps persists in the cut-outs with 'New Zealand' titles -- Killeen's 'Born in New Zealand' is not a simple signature of place. Rather, it is perhaps, at least on one level, an ironic citation of the Nationalists' requisite of a native nativity and viewpoint.

Certainly, such a citationality exists in a number of other 1980s New Zealand paintings. There is no doubt that in the 1980s a number of artists were concerned to investigate the rhetorics of what they saw as the now defunct, if interesting, Nationalist tradition. Ian Scott's *New Zealand*



Ian Scott *New Zealand Painting (The Promised Land)* 1987  
acrylic and enamel on canvas, 1727 x 2591mm,  
private collection, Wellington

<sup>29</sup> This painting was not available for exhibition, as it is currently on tour in America. It is illustrated *Art New Zealand* 22, Summer 1981-2, p. 27.

*Painting (The Promised Land)*, for instance with its title lettered large over McCahon's *The Promised Land*, 1948, clearly comments on this: the Nationalist attempt to discover or to invent 'the real New Zealand', and the Nationalist assertion of 'New Zealand' as trademark and promotional device -- 'New Zealand Painting' in the sense of 'Made in New Zealand', or 'Buy New Zealand' -- as in support the local product. Here, with Scott's aid, we may literally *see* Nationalist painting posing what I have called 'a kind of immense signature of place'.

Dashper's *Cass 7/10*, similarly, may be taken to refer to the place of that name. But, for any viewer who knows something of New Zealand art, the word 'Cass' is far more likely to summon up a well-known painting by Rita Angus. Such was the success of the Nationalist project that, today, more people know the painting than know the place. Dashper himself made a pilgrimage to the place *because* it was the site signed in that Angus painting. He put a cross into his *Cass* in part because he saw and photographed a red cross on a first aid box at Cass Station -- 'because it was there', a true mark of place, as the Nationalist might stolidly say -- and in part because so much Nationalist painting (McCahon's, most notably, as for instance in his several series of *Stations of the Cross*) had taken place under the sign of the cross. So Dashper's *Cass*, after Angus' station at Cass, is made a Station of the Cross. Hence too, by means of title and triptych, or altarpiece, format, Dashper's *Cass altarpiece*, 1986 (Chartwell collection, Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton), presents place as *Christianised*, as so often it is in Nationalist painting itself.

Ian Scott too has made a pilgrimage to Cass -- or rather, to Cass as a site made famous by Angus, and he too, so he tells me, has photographed that now much fetishised station. In his *Cass railway station*, he has enlarged to billboard size the signature of place which Angus had more discretely marked. The style of Scott's lettering in his *Cass railway station* and *Norwester in the cemetery*, as still more flagrantly in his *Hairdresser*

and tobacconist, recalls the much-quoted origin myth where McCahon speaks of his childhood experience of seeing a signwriter at work:

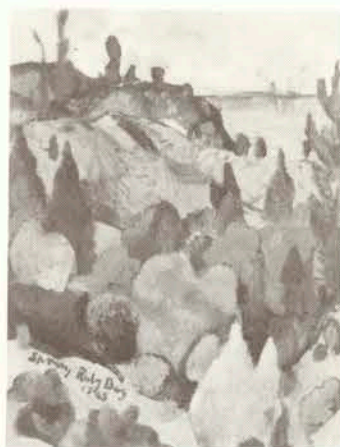
*Once when I was quite young ... I had a few days of splendour. The hairdresser had his window painted with HAIRDRESSER AND TOBACCONIST. Painted in gold and black on a stippled red ground, the lettering large and bold, with shadows, and a feeling of being projected right through the glass and across the pavement. I watched the work being done, and fell in love with signwriting.<sup>30</sup>*

Scott's *Nor'wester in the cemetery*, like his *Cass railway station*, is about a painting, not a place or a wind: or, more exactly, it is about the relation of a painting to a wind and a place -- its subject is Sutton's signing the 'original' *Nor'wester in the cemetery* with the signature of a place and a local weather condition.

Likewise, John Reynolds' *Bouquet for Colin McCahon (Ruby Bay)* is a homage to a specific painting -- McCahon's *Spring, Ruby Bay* -- as much as it is a homage to a place. Reynolds' *Anawhata*, however, is perhaps more directly in the regionalist -- and more specifically in the McCahonian -- tradition, in its signing a picture with place. (Interestingly, the painting usually hangs at Anawhata itself, as though it is in some sense at once *of* place and *in* place.)

It is not, as I say, that artists after the Nationalist time entirely abandon reference to place. Gretchen Albrecht's *Whatipu Diptych*, for instance, like McCahon's *A piece of Muriwai canvas*, is titled with the name of a place -- another black sand, West Coast Auckland beach: though, significantly enough, that title is not inscribed on the surface of the painting itself as place's signature. While Albrecht's paintings are

<sup>30</sup> Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, vol. 20 no. 4, December 1966, p. 361.



Colin McCahon, *Spring, Ruby Bay*, 1945, oil on card, 680 x 459mm, courtesy Auckland City Art Gallery.

often -- as the title of her touring retrospective of 1986 had it -- *After Nature*, their titles tend to be generalised rather than topographical in their landscape reference: *Nature study*, *White cloud*, *Desert edge*, or *Summer harvest*, rather than *Cass* or *Anawhata*. Significantly, of the ninety-nine works reproduced in her retrospective's catalogue,<sup>31</sup> with the exception of some small watercolour studies, only two paintings have place-name titles -- *Karekare 1* and *Whatipu diptych*. And only in watercolour sketches does she actually inscribe place-names: 'Island off Karekare'; 'Low tide, Karekare'; 'Sunset Karekare', 'Titirangi, beach cliff'.

Peter Peryer's *Bluff*, on the other hand, with its inscriptions of latitude and longitude, 46 min 54 secs south, 168 min 26 secs east, has a precise marking of place -- enough to satisfy the most ardent Nationalist. Even Allen Curnow, it would seem, could not complain about this work of 'our failure to apprehend, imaginatively, the physical realities of land and latitude'.<sup>32</sup> One might well compare *Bluff*, in its fascination with the known and named place, to the A.A. sign marking 'Bruce Creek' in Sutton's classically regionalist work, *Dry September*, or to the railway sign marking the station of Angus' *Cass*. We might have here, as in those more uncomplicatedly regionalist works, what Allen Curnow had emphatically called for: 'the signature of a region, like that of a witness', to 'attest value in the work'.

But the signpost of Peryer's *Bluff* points at once to Stewart Island, Dog Island, Cape Reinga and Wellington, and to the Equator, Sydney, New York and London, and to a vertiginous and infinite sky. If Peryer's work shows, in many ways, a nostalgia for New Zealand and American regionalism of the 1930s and 40s kind, his *Bluff* perhaps speaks a more complex regionalism: a regionalism aware of the complicity of its 'local'

<sup>31</sup> Linda Gill and Francis Pound, *After Nature: Gretchen Albrecht: A Survey - 23 years*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui 1986.

<sup>32</sup> Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 62.



Artists Travel Grants  
to the United States of America and Australia

'Artists Travel Grants' poster, Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, courtesy QEII Arts Council of NZ.

with its 'foreign' -- of its inseparability from what it has defined as its Other in order to constitute its own place. Where you are, it shows, is defined by where you are not.

You might note, too, that by its 'Panama' and 'Equator', the sign of Peryer's *Bluff* points to the old sea-distances. It is a conservative sign, preserving the referents of that regionalist New Zealand which existed before its surrounding seas suffered the definitive shrinkage caused by the coming of the passenger plane...

Peryer's photograph was 'taken' at Bluff lighthouse, one of New Zealand's southernmost points; and that lighthouse, and the sign next to it, are commonly shown on New Zealand postcards as an emblem of national identity -- as locality's signature. Yet -- and here is the very paradox of such identity -- the Bluff postcard is sometimes labelled 'International Sign'; and Peryer's *Bluff* has been used as a poster advertising grants for New Zealand artists to travel overseas... It is as though where one is, this Bluff, this precise and precisely marked place in New Zealand, is fissured, split through by a series of shafts, pierced by the arrows of elsewhere -- of Sydney, of London and of New York.

Michael Shepherd, in another and equally complex sort of neo-regional realism, attempts to turn paintings about place into a new kind of *history painting*. He proffers a historiated landscape, a landscape which refuses the complaint of Nationalist painters and poets that New Zealand is a 'soil lacking the humus of history',<sup>33</sup> a place where 'the plains are nameless',<sup>34</sup> and 'all human history' has 'lapsed'.<sup>35</sup> Into what

<sup>33</sup> James Courage, *The Call Home*, Jonathan Cape, 1956, cited Paul Day, review, *Landfall*, December 1956, p. 348.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Brasch, 'The Silent Land'.

<sup>35</sup> Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

the Nationalists saw as a Silence, an Emptiness and a Pastlessness,<sup>36</sup> Shepherd inscribes the names of a Maori history of struggle and loss -- see his *Lamenting Mangatawhiri Pa -- Pakeha dreams at Mercer*. His is a revisionist sort of history, akin, though cast in a more melancholy mode, to James Belich's history writing 'proper'.<sup>37</sup>

A number of post-Nationalist artists have investigated rhetorics forbidden to Nationalist high art discourse. The mass-cultural rhetoric of tourism, for instance, which we have seen Peryer touch upon in *Bluff*, is more fully investigated -- and enjoyed -- by Ruth Watson and Merylyn Tweedie. If for McCahon and Woollaston and co. the endeavour was to get behind, or rather, *between* the too showyspectacles of the tourist and the Arts Society, in order to show instead 'the real New Zealand', Watson's and Tweedie's take is quite otherwise. There is no getting behind the cultural, so their art would suggest, there is nothing behind. Nature comes to us already as Culture, as a picture of one kind or another, whether painted by high art or low: the task is to make critical and pleasurable play with this condition.

If high culture in the Nationalist period refused Nature's touristic displays, seeking that rather which the tourist ignores, then here we have another difference between Nationalist art and today's. In today's art, the codes of mass culture, including the codes of touristic viewing, may themselves be the objects of a delighted fascination, and of critique. Hence Tweedie's investigation of 1950s New Zealand tourist guide books in her *Eyes across the Tasman no.1, or Home at last* -- not *views* of Nature, but an investigation of the mass cultural codes *of its viewing*...

<sup>36</sup> For an account of the Nationalist sense of New Zealand's silence and lack of history, see my 'Silence, Solitude, Suffering, and the Invention of New Zealand', *Interstices* 1, February 1991, pp. 61-83.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance, James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Penguin, Auckland, 1988.

'I derive the greatest satisfaction', so Russell Clark said in 1948, 'from painting a subject which is simple and commonplace':

*I cannot enjoy the grand view in the same way. In the one it is necessary to evoke the hidden meaning to give it beauty... The other, being already beautiful, makes no such demands.* <sup>38</sup>

For the Nationalist artist, the 'grand view' was associated with the Arts Society kind of painting -- that of the over-forties hobbyists. It was tarred, too, with the touristic, which toured the country as if with a stranger's eye, seeking grandiose and spectacular spots; while the more subtle, the more vigilant, the true artist's eye, was praised for seeking, with a knowing love, the hidden truths of the non-touristic *spaces between*.

*... as he has written of Mapua, 'The landscape was not an easy one, its attraction wasn't really evident to the casual visitor...' This is not Mount Egmont from the Southward. Woollaston's emphasis is on the hyphenations between the eye-blinding attractions of the scenic tourist pamphlet.* <sup>39</sup>

So McCahon could defend his beloved Otago landscape against a foreigner's charge of 'monotony' by saying: 'Monotonous, yes, but with a cumulative grandeur, like Bach's'. So he could present to the viewer the barest and dullest of plains (**The green plain**); or characteristically offer only a dark hill and white sky, that 'ordinariness' which is just what a tourist's snap will ignore. And so he could proclaim, in a statement written for the first showing of his *Landscape Theme and Variations*, at

<sup>38</sup> Russell Clark, *Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, 1948, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Tomory, 'Imaginary Islands and Floating Reefs', *Ascent*, July 1968, p.16. Tomory also notes there of Woollaston (p. 15), that 'his titles are topographically exact and particular -- Mapua -- Upper Moutere -- Looking towards Hokitika ...' .

the Ikon Gallery, Auckland, in 1963:

*Nor is this the tourist's landscape we so often see painted.  
I am dealing with the essential monotony of this land...  
again, as in the Northland Panels of a few years ago, a  
"landscape with too few lovers".* <sup>40</sup>

Artists like Tweedie and Watson, instead of trying to avoid mass culture, embrace it, delighting in its 'eye-blinding attractions'. They show a landscape with many lovers, the well-trodden and much-eyed and much sold landscape of the tourist, the New Zealand landscape as it appears in the tourist's board game and jig-saw; they chant, with the tourist, a veritable litany of place-names. See again Tweedie's *Eyes across the Tasman no.1...*, and see Watson's *Names and places*.

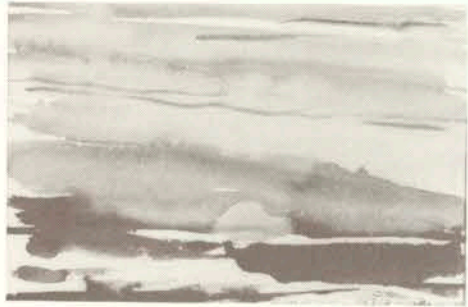
For a post-Nationalist art, New Zealand is no longer as it had been for the Nationalists, an unknown landscape, 'a landscape with too few lovers', a landscape awaiting the paint which might serve to make it sufficiently known and loved. It is a landscape already much-ravished and loved: that which has long been prepared, posed, and anointed by painters and writers, powdered with pigments and words, mascara'd with ink, and lubricated with oils, made into a painted surface (Mallarmé -- 'this art made of ointments and paints'). For a post-Nationalist art, place is that which has already been covered over with paint and signed.

<sup>40</sup> 'A landscape with too few lovers' is an inscription on one of McCahon's *Northland Panels*, 1958, National Gallery, Wellington.

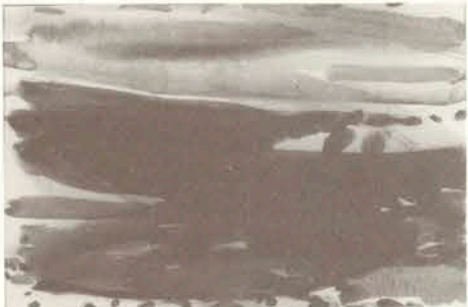
CATALOGUE



Gretchen ALBRECHT  
**Sunset Karekare (3) 1975**  
watercolour on paper  
260 x 380mm  
Collection of the artist



Gretchen ALBRECHT  
**Sunset at Karekare (4) 1975**  
watercolour on paper  
260 x 380mm  
Collection of the artist



Gretchen ALBRECHT  
**Tide out (2) 1975**  
watercolour on paper  
260 x 380mm  
Collection of the artist



Gretchen ALBRECHT  
**7pm-sunset at Karekare (2) 1975**  
watercolour on paper  
260 x 380mm  
Collection of the artist

Gretchen ALBRECHT  
**Whatipu diptych 1975**  
acrylic on unprimed canvas  
1800 x 2300mm  
Collection Colenso Communications Ltd, Wellington



Rita ANGUS  
**Cass 1936**  
oil on canvas  
374 x 496mm  
Reproduced courtesy of Robert McDougall Art  
Gallery, Christchurch  
(Painting unavailable: colour photograph exhibited)

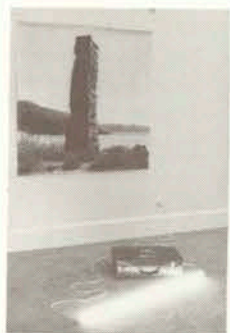


Billy APPLE  
**Our price \$265,000 1983**  
colour photograph; ballpoint and felt pen on  
lined paper  
505 x 377mm  
Private collection, Auckland



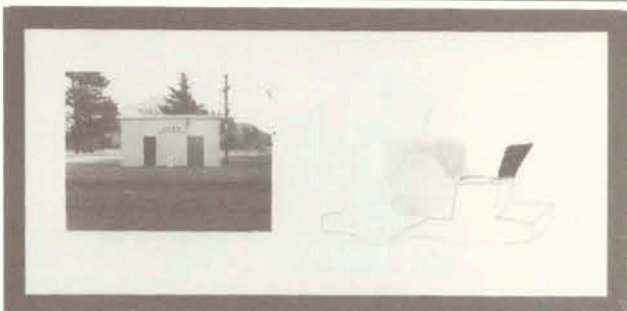
Billy APPLE  
**Alterations 1980**  
widening of existing stairway between B & C decks and  
construction of solid balustrades  
Documentation: Two photo-lithographic posters  
Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.





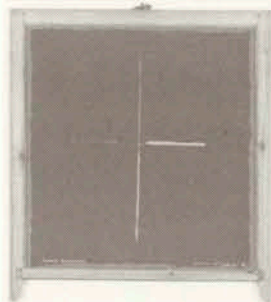
Bill CULBERT  
**Murdering Beach** 1990

fluorescent tube, photograph and suitcases  
3000 x 2000 x 2000mm approx.  
(photograph 1225 x 1225mm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford Gallery,  
Auckland



Julian DASHPER  
**Cass 7/10** 1986

black & white photograph and pastel on paper  
690 x 1400mm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington



Ralph HOTERE  
**BLACK WINDOW - Towards Aramoana** 1981

1090 x 970 x 40mm  
acrylic on board  
Private collection, Auckland



John HURRELL  
**Allagar** 1989

2400 x 6750mm  
acrylic pen, conte crayon and marker pen on paper maps  
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Jensen Gallery,  
Christchurch

Richard KILLEEN  
**Murdering Beach, Dunedin** 1980

acrylic lacquer on aluminium  
size site specific  
Collection of the artist



Richard KILLEEN  
**Born alive in New Zealand no.2** 1985

acrylic lacquer on aluminium  
size site specific  
Private collection, Auckland



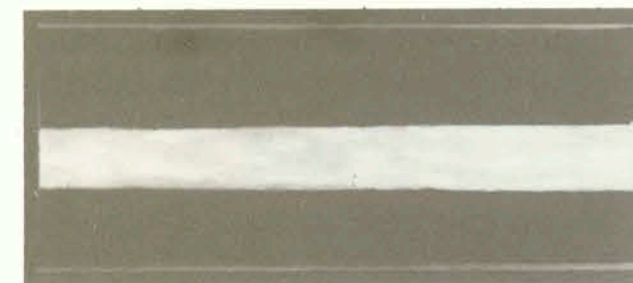
Richard KILLEEN  
**Rainbow's Reach** 1980

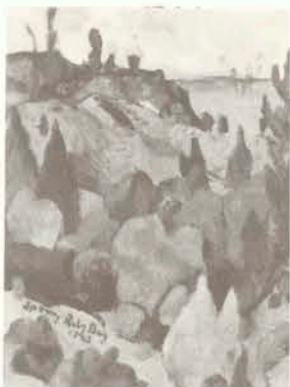
acrylic lacquer on aluminium  
size site specific  
Private collection, Wellington



Colin McCAHON  
**A piece of Muriwai canvas** 1973

acrylic on hessian  
930mm x 2270mm  
Private collection, Auckland





Colin McCAHON  
**Spring, Ruby Bay** 1945

oil on card  
680 x 459mm

Reproduced courtesy of Auckland City Art Gallery  
(Painting unavailable: colour photograph exhibited)



Colin McCAHON

**North Otago I** 1967

polyvinyl acetate on hardboard  
1220 x 1832mm

Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
New Plymouth

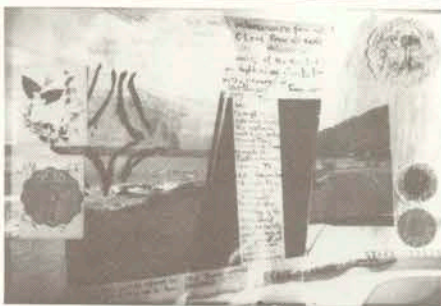


Peter PERYER

**Bluff** 1985

gelatin silver photograph  
358 x 354mm

Collection of the artist



John REYNOLDS

**Bouquet for Colin McCahon (Ruby Bay)** 1987-89

laser print with collage  
1000 x 1550mm

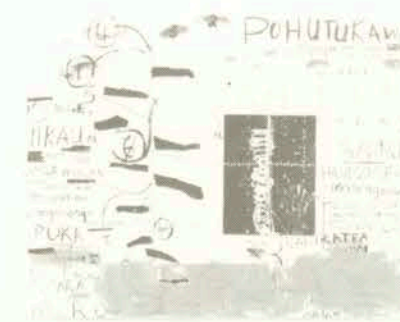
Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford Gallery,  
Auckland

John REYNOLDS

**Anawhata** 1983-91

oil, acrylic and paper collage on canvas  
1650 x 2100mm

Collection ML and IB Reynolds



Harry Linley RICHARDSON

**Mrs Thornley, Titahi Bay** c.1931-32

oil on canvas  
495 x 598mm

Collection Victoria University, Wellington

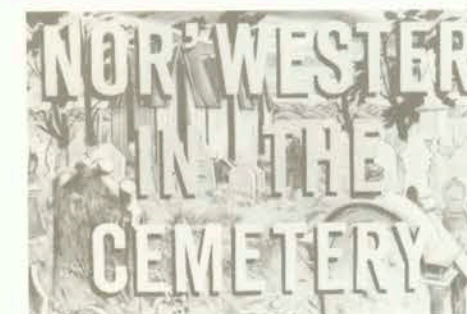


Ian SCOTT

**Nor'wester in the cemetery** 1987

acrylic on canvas  
1730 x 2590mm

Courtesy of the artist and Peter McLeavey Gallery,  
Wellington



Ian SCOTT

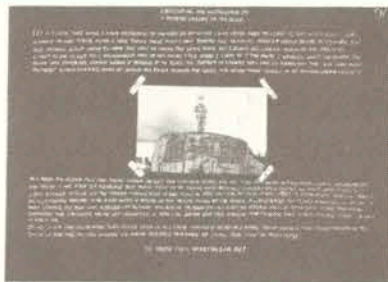
**Cass railway station** 1987

acrylic and enamel on canvas  
1500 x 2000mm

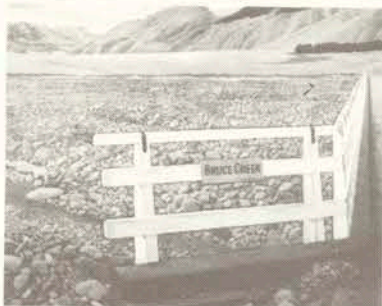
Courtesy of the artist and Peter McLeavey Gallery,  
Wellington







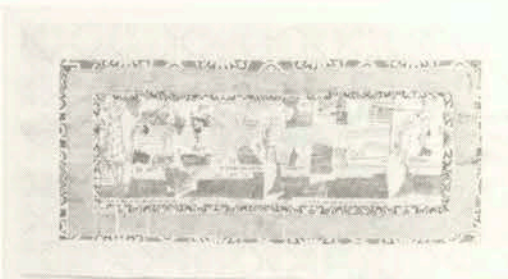
Michael SHEPHERD  
**Lamenting Mangatawhiri Pa:**  
**Pakeha dreams at Mercer** 1989-90 (detail)  
 oil on board (6 panels)  
 each panel: 450 x 600mm  
 Private collection, Auckland



William SUTTON  
**Dry September** 1949  
 oil on canvas  
 620 x 752mm  
 Collection Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



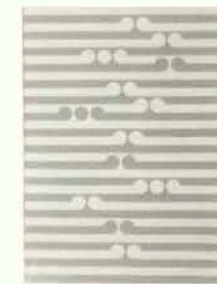
William SUTTON  
**Nor'wester in the cemetery** 1950  
 oil on canvas  
 1515 x 1820mm  
 Reproduced courtesy of Auckland City Art Gallery  
 (Painting unavailable: colour photograph exhibited)



Merylyn TWEEDIE  
**Eyes across the Tasman no.1,**  
**or Home at last** 1989 (detail)  
 photocopies, epoxy resin, fibreglass cloth on wallpaper and  
 linoleum (6 panels)  
 each panel: 720 x 1370mm  
 Courtesy of C J (Arthur) Craig & Sons and Jonathan  
 Jensen Gallery, Christchurch

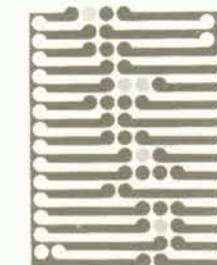
Gordon WALTERS

**Grafton** c. 1967  
 acrylic on hardboard  
 1220 x 915mm  
 Collection Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North



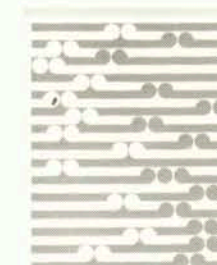
Gordon WALTERS

**Tawa** 1969  
 screenprint on paper  
 530 x 413mm  
 The Bath-House, Rotorua's Art & History Museum,  
 Fine Arts Collection



Gordon WALTERS

**Karaka** 1979  
 screenprint on paper  
 703 x 560mm  
 The Bath House, Rotorua's Art & History Museum,  
 Fine Arts Collection



Ruth WATSON

**Names and places** 1990  
 cibachrome print  
 500 x 610mm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford Gallery,  
 Auckland





Robin WHITE

**Mangaweka** 1974

screenprint on paper  
800 x 595mm

Collection Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1975

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Robin WHITE

**Fish and chips, Maketu** 1975

oil on canvas  
640 x 946mm

Collection Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1975

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