

# Tom Kreisler

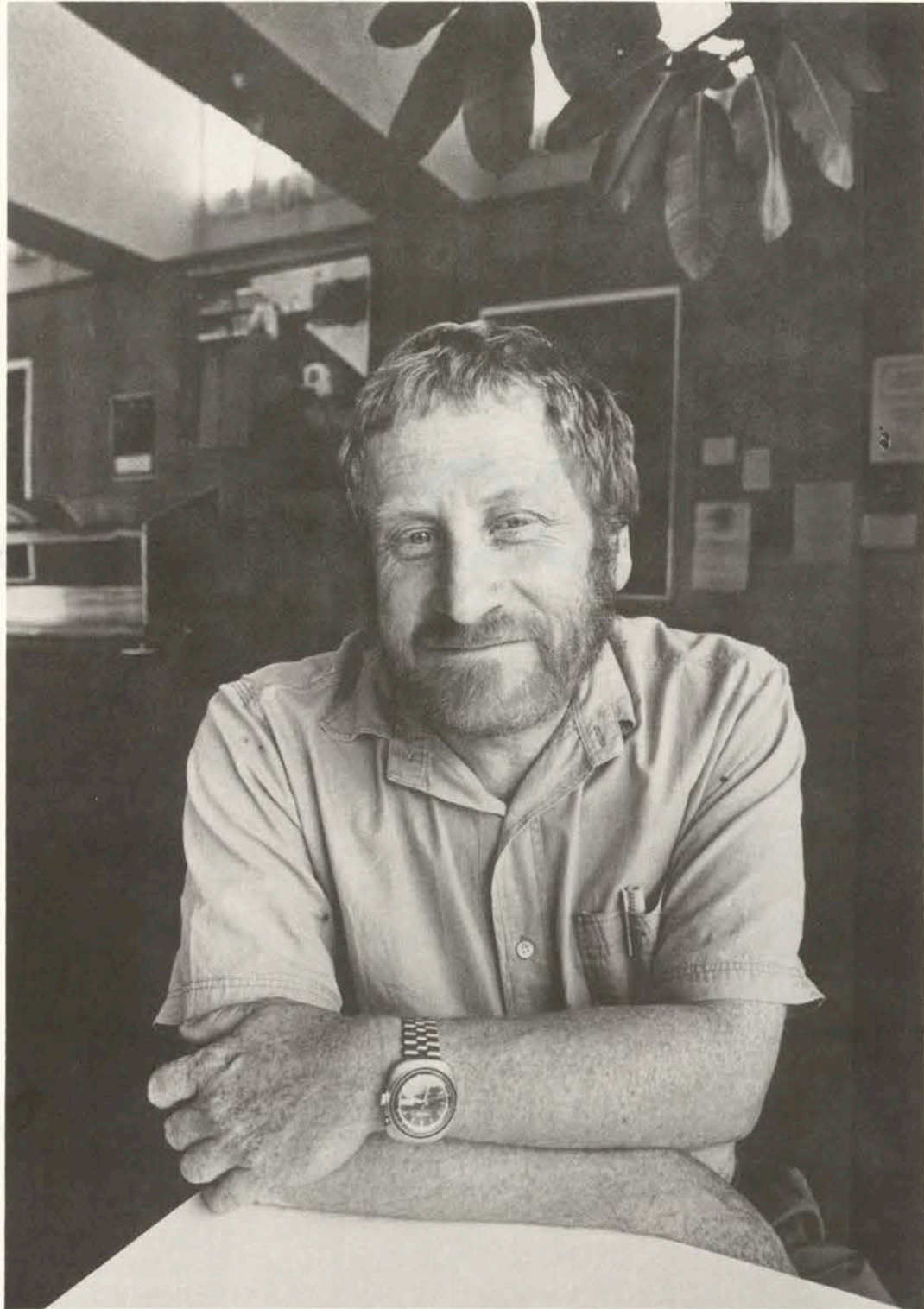
## NOT A DOG SHOW



**Tom Kreisler**  
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GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY NEW PLYMOUTH N.Z.  
31 JANUARY - 23 FEBRUARY 1986





## FOREWORD

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is very happy to stage this exhibition of the recent work of Tom Kreisler. The combination of regional artist with significant contributor to the contemporary tradition is not all that easy to come by. Tom Kreisler fits both bills effectively.

The catalogue essay takes the form of a conversation with another artist who combines regional and national significance; the photographer Fiona Clark. Their relaxed chat about aspects of living and working in Taranaki and in the wider New Zealand arena gives a useful and interesting background to the works in the exhibition. It's an appropriate introduction: regional artists feel a certain amount of isolation, and the support of friends and colleagues is vital.

Tom Kreisler's work has been made away from the mainstream; affinities, although not necessarily deliberate ones, are clearly with the New Image artists working in the late seventies; ancestral threads can be equally clearly traced to the pop artists of the sixties in Europe and America. But the imagery is personal, an idiosyncratic view, without agony, of situations which veer wildly from the domestic to the global. This artist's imaginative scope is great, and deserves wide exposure. We are glad to be able to give him a little of what he deserves.

Cheryll Sotheran  
Director  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



## INTERVIEW: Fiona Clark talking to Tom Kreisler January 1986

T: I've got a thing here, do you want me to read it to you? It's just a bit of rubbish I wrote one day, and it says: "Have lived with myself as a foreigner, an outsider to most cultures. I know what I like in my work, and try to shape it accordingly.

Hate pretentiousness, cleverness, boringness, being respectable, that is, deserving of respect. Artists who set themselves up as monuments of excellence, social toadiness. I like that art that constantly questions itself, that appears to be aloof, but is passionate, that looks at ordinariness and ordinary things without wishing to colonise them. I don't like art that is so aggressive that it excludes and destroys all that it touches, but I do like an art that understands the totality of its own existence, that is at the same time conscious of its own fallibility. I am more concerned with thoughts and attitudes than appearances". And that's something I scribbled out one day.

F: That's really good; it's very moving. Tell me some of the titles of these works?

T: I haven't given Anna\* any yet.

F: No; she said she's been leaving you alone.

T: She's been very good, because I think it's quite good to keep people off your scent, you know — always!

F: (laugh) Like a dog . . .

T: . . . or put out some sort of false scent as well; I'm very conscious of that.

F: Are they all paintings?

T: Yes. There's quite a few.

F: What period do they cover?

T: They cover from 1983 to now: I'm working on about seven at the moment. They're painted with acrylics and dyes, mostly on canvas, and some of them've got oil paint as well in them. What else can I tell you about them . . . there's a big range in sizes, and there's a certain sort of theme . . .

F: What do you see that as? The theme running through them all?

T: Oh, in some cases, subject-wise, there's the little dog thing, which happens to tie in certain sorts of elements . . . I don't know, the dog starts assisting you, sort of thing. In some cases it's almost cartoon-like. I think my paintings *are* a little bit cartoonish in certain elements, but I think that as soon as you start simplifying things and using a certain element of line, you can easily get into something that can be looked at as life, life-scale sort of cartooning.

But the colour, then, in many cases is quite external, to the use of the line or parallel to the line, but not very necessarily part of it, directly. I'm glad to say my colour is much more open and much more direct in its application.

F: Do you see them, although they have titles that give you some sense of someone's humour, that actually they are very serious. That's how I view them — most people may view them and say: "Haha, big joke, what do they mean?" but actually they're not on that level at all, are they? That's actually a cynical sense, most people's view — but do *you* think titling is really important?

T: Sometimes I find that very often the title might precede the work itself, or even the form of it. Years ago my first one-man show was in Auckland at Barry Lett's and it was called *Murf the Surf*, and it was based around the plaster David of Michelangelo's that came to Milne and Choyce about 1967. There was so much made of this great big figure, that spanned the whole height of the building inside from the floor right to the top floor: people could peruse it in detail as they went up the elevator. Because of its temporary nature, the fact that it was plaster and was going to be destroyed afterwards — I felt that it was very much like a pop object; it could have been made of soap or anything like that, and it was very temporary too. I split it up into component pieces, like the ones we had at art school, you know the foot, the head, and the eye and the mouth, and things like that and finally the penis, and I made an exhibition of that. And this figure started off as the way to get him from his stance onto a surf board, and all that happened through the process of him going through the showers. I quite enjoyed doing that. I had to make them very quickly. By the time I started on the show the thing wasn't in existence; it had been dismantled, and I worked from photographs but the whole temporary nature of the thing . . . finally I could only squeeze the exhibition into Barry Lett's for one day, and I called it an opening and closing show, which reflected the nature of the way I worked on it. And the invitations . . . I think it was the last show before Christmas, and the invitations got mucked up with the Christmas mail, and I don't think anybody much saw it — I wasn't there for it — but I thought the whole thing was quite ironical, and I enjoyed it from that point of view. You know, people are always looking in art for something that is wonderful and pure and grand and all that stuff, which to me is the very antithesis of art — which I think should be constantly self regenerating and fresh. I find that in my work more and more I'm treating mistakes as perhaps part of the work as well. What *are* mistakes? I'm very careful with my drawing; I develop my ideas around drawings, but to hang on to the drawing . . . things happen in the process that I don't anticipate, and I'm quite pleased that that's happened. Yes, I think titling was always important. I had a work — a fairly large work — when I was a student and I showed work with a group called *20/20* in Christchurch. It was *very* big, actually, for that time — I think it was about 15 feet, and about 9 feet high on three panels of hard board . . . what do you call that stuff, hard board? And it was just done in black and white and it was called **Darling I Just Adore**

\*Anna Bibby, Exhibitions Officer, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



**Nuit Noir Icecream** . . . it reflected pieces of a person, actually, a woman eating icecream and finally having icecream rubbed all over her and the icecream was black. I don't know why black, I thought that that was quite nice, black icecream.

F: When was that?

T: That was 1963.

F: More than twenty years ago. How long have you lived in New Plymouth for?

T: Ten years . . . more than ten years. Hell, yes, since 1968 — that's quite a long time isn't it?

F: Yes, I think you're doing quite well, to survive that.

T: Well, I'll tell you what I like about being here — that you're out of the way; you don't have pressures from people's expectations in terms of what you should be doing, or how you should be working, and, well, at least you can also keep very consciously out of the way of influences.

F: There are very few artists you probably would be able to relate to? That's quite hard here isn't it? As a photographer I can't just go and have a look at an exhibition, if I want to go and have a look at work. If I go to the Govett-Brewster basement, it's hopeless — no collection\* or anything. You can have books but it's not the same.

T: Yes, but you see, on the other hand whenever I go to Auckland say — yes, especially Auckland — whenever I get up there, for the first few days I find that I'm incredibly disturbed, I get really upset, and then I can't wait to get back to my work. If I'm *not* doing any work, if I'm not working at that particular time, then I get so upset that I feel: Oh my God, my work is so hopeless anyway. Because it's a very materialistic set-up: you feel that you're only being successful if you're having lots of shows, if you're selling, if your work is written about. And I don't know how I'd get on living there at this stage, when I feel I've got a lot of work to do . . . there would be distractions. I find that I can talk to *you* about art, but I can't talk to very many people; I'm really very defensive about it . . ., because I feel your work is very threatened, because people are always ready to take it away from you. There's such a . . . it might sound pretentious, but I don't mean it in that sense . . . but I feel that people are always ready to plagiarise your things. I suppose that's sometimes a reason for my wanting to show it, almost.

F: Yeah, it's also that people are threatened and they don't understand it and therefore will criticise it heavily, especially here (in New Plymouth). It's actually very difficult to work in a vacuum like that. And also you don't know how sincere the response is, here.

T: It *is* hard, but I think the reason that one is isolated . . . well, in my case, I think my isolation is self-determined. I've decided to be like that, so that I could do my work. I think that if

\* i.e. photographic collection

you're in a high pressure situation like you might have up there (Auckland), I think work goes out before it's ready, before it has been actually completed properly. I think people are in too much of a rush to do it. I tend to think I don't have any great need to show my work at TACO or any other local set-up, because I think you've got to give your work a decent platform in the first place, as far as where you're putting it on show. I think that's very important: your respect for your subject is also your own respect, not for your work, but for what you've *really* done, and I think you've got to measure it; it's like framing, it's like the whole process of putting it up, the unveiling of it. I don't want to sound sanctimonious about it, but I think it's very important, who sees it first of all, because if it's going to be looked at by the wrong eyes in the first place, you almost feel that it'd be contaminated from the very start.

I think titling is so important because I feel I very often say what the thing *isn't*. Can I tell you about a painting I did years ago, which was called **Not Clouds**. I did it about 1971, and at that time we had a dog called . . . well, a golden labrador, that used to crap all over the garden, and the clouds were actually his turds, that I used to spend a lot of time drawing, and finally made into some really pretty paintings. I think I painted a nice sort of colour against them, a nice quiet sort of yellow. That was a case of not saying what the thing really was. But what it was was really important of course. There's a special word for that sort of obsession with crap, it became that — not willingly, because it just happened that they were incredibly difficult to draw, and they were bloody awfully smelly.

F: What about the coming of Halley's Comet? I've been thinking, Wow, this is the comet, and for our time it's a huge thing — just to work with a *comet* — Wow! (laugh) You too? It's just in the sense of being aware of what's happening in your own environment, what you're doing in your own work — I really find it's exciting and important.

T: I find there's a very strong Maori thing here, which I don't fully understand. But I feel, what I enjoy with a Maori thing or presence, inner thing . . . that you don't *need* to understand it, and I won't make any claims to. It's a spiritual sort of thing, and I feel that you're almost a guest in it, just by being there, and I really love that. I feel it's very real, and I don't know quite where it's coming from, or where it is, but it's there, and it's a very generous thing, I feel it's very warm and embracing. And how do you feel about that mountain,\* Fiona? I think I've talked to you about it before.

F: Very strongly, actually, I like it.

T: Do you know that I can't see the mountain? If I look at it I don't really see it. I only check it for snow or for its shape, but it doesn't exist.

F: It's just there . . .

T: There without being there . . .



F: Yeah. I photograph it sometimes. I don't photograph it much, but when I do I can understand how I'm photographing it, as a mountain, as a big hunk of earth, and that's how I view it. It's a big hunk of the earth that's symbolic for lots of things. It's so big and powerful for people, that's part of it.

T: I find it quite threatening.

F: I only found it threatening when I was a child in Inglewood, and discovered that everybody else that was a child in Inglewood always dreamed of it blowing up!

T: You know, I think it's quite good that artists write or talk about other artists — unless you have one of those exceptional critics, like Maynard was an exceptional Director\*.

F: And even if it's quite clumsy, I don't actually think that's bad . . . it's this whole protective literary thing in a way . . . I don't know. When did you last show work? You haven't shown a lot like this, quite a big chunk of it?

T: No. The last exhibition I had was in 1981, called **Recent Coat Paintings**.

F: And that was in Auckland?

T: Yeah.

F: What role, how do you see Lesley? As a woman, I see wives and people associated: is Lesley very important in your work?

T: I think she must be because she stabilises me quite well. I think she's very good in the fact that she doesn't let me forget that I mustn't be an egotist, she brings me down to earth and makes me remember that I'm painting, that it shouldn't be that very special activity, that it's work, and I mustn't let it totally take over my ego, and I think that's very important — it's bloody important, actually. And if I've met people that were considered to be good, overseas, as artists, what always struck me was that they were very down to earth, friendly, ordinary people, and they weren't part of this. Mind you, the one exception was Brett Whitely in Australia. I rang him up when I was in Australia because I know his sister very well, and he told me to piss off (laughs), and he was in the phone directory as 'Brett Whitely artist', in the Sydney phone directory. It took me a hell of a lot to actually phone him up, because I didn't want to crawl around him. And, well, that's fair enough, he'd sort of built up a little wall around himself, and maybe that's necessary; yes, I think it would be bloody necessary protection . . . who knows.

\* Taranaki

\* John Maynard, first Director of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

F: You have contact with other artists, who pass through here, who visit the gallery? That's the only contact I have with people who are artists here, who happen to be here and happen to come round for a cup of tea.

T: I think the gallery (was) why I came here in the first place. I knew there was going to be a gallery here and I knew it was going to be special. And about the second day from arriving, this young clean-shaven executive with an Aussie accent arrived, and that was Maynard, and he was bloody good. His arrival represented the future . . . auguring good will and hope (laughs).

I think I want hope in my work; that's what the laugh is about, although it's also a nervous laugh. That's one of the things I found in Mexican art and South American art — there's always a mixture of the duality of life and death, and laughing and crying, and all that sort of thing. You know when you're laughing, you're never very far away from crying, and when happy things are happening, you know that someone else is dying around the corner, and I think it's very important to keep that in mind. Well I do.

F: You were born in Argentina. In the Falklands! (laughs)

T: Yeah (laughs) . . . the Falklands were never very far away. I was born there and I lived there until I was about twelve and a half . . . no, thirteen, because I did my Bar Mitzvah in Argentina, as a Jew.

F: What's that?

T: It's a kind of entry into . . . it's a kind of religious ceremony; you stand before a temple, and you do a special . . . I had to learn Hebrew, and sing in Hebrew before a congregation — it's like an arrival into manhood — it's very traditional. My father was Hungarian, my mother was Austrian; both had an Austrian and Hungarian — Czech sort of background. And my father was a photographer. My sister was born in Spain, when he was working in Barcelona just after the outbreak of the Civil War; and with the Civil War, they went to Argentina. I think they had left Austria, left Vienna with the arrival of Hitler. My family, my relatives, at that time would've been scattered or killed by the Nazis. And that's how I came to be born in Argentina, and from the age of about 9 or 10 I started bunking school, and my father died . . . sometime after my twelfth birthday. One day I met my mum at the railway station — I should have been at school, and she must have gone to school to find out. I hadn't been at school for *years!*

F: What did you do?

T: It started off with me taking a day off to be naughty with a friend, and then going back to school the next day and finding out that we didn't have to have a note for only being away for one day — so we started being away every second day. Of course my education was incredibly limited. You see, I was quite illiterate . . . no, I *wasn't* illiterate, I used to read. I had a change of clothes in my school bag . . . my school was in a suburb called Belgrano; instead



of getting off at the station where the school was, I would just carry on, and get off somewhere else, maybe go down to where the river was . . . spend the whole day just bumming around. Anyway, when my mother went along to the railway station she found I'd been away all this time. My uncle Teddy had taken over my father's business, and Teddy — who was a bit of a villain — he decided that if I was older he would have sent me to a draper's shop to work, selling fabrics or something like that; he wanted to apprentice me to a tailor. Anyway this letter arrived from New Zealand; my uncle George, in Christchurch, wrote that perhaps seeing my mother was a widow and probably having difficulty making ends meet, either my sister or I could come to New Zealand for a year to further our education. So Monica wasn't very keen — she didn't even give it a second thought at that stage, but I jumped at the chance to get out of Teddy's grasp and make perhaps a bit of a start here. So I came to Christchurch where my uncle and aunt lived, and started at the Boy's High in the third form . . . and what was going to be a year is still going on.

F: What was this ritual you went through when you were thirteen?

T: It's a Jewish ceremony called Bar Mitzvah. It's usually reserved for more orthodox Jews, but my mother wanted me to do it. So I turned thirteen, did my Bar Mitzvah, after having had about six months of trying to learn Hebrew from the rabbi, in the synagogue; I couldn't even learn my own Spanish very well, and here I was, supposed to learn Hebrew, which was quite amazing. And I had to get up before the temple and sing — I think you sing from the Torah which is the Scrolls . . . I know very little about it now, but it was all very mystical (laughs). One of the good things about doing it, too — once you go through that gateway of turning thirteen, you're supposed to be showered with gifts, and so I grabbed my gifts and got on a boat which was leaving very shortly after that, to come to New Zealand. And that's the last time I saw my mother for about ten years, and then I saw her ten years later again.

F: Is she still alive?

T: No, she died . . . God, isn't it strange . . . about ten years after that. That's when I went to Mexico. Yeah, she was ill at that stage, and she died just before I arrived.

F: Was she in Mexico?

T: Yes, she went to Mexico after my sister left for Mexico from Argentina, about 1956, and my mother joined her there.

F: And that prompted you to go? You went to Mexico to teach, didn't you?

T: Yeah. I went to see my mother, and of course she was dead, but I stayed in Mexico and got a job there, and we were in Mexico for the next couple of years. And at that stage, when we were in Mexico, there was a great interest from New Zealand, in Mexico. What had whetted *my*

appetite for Mexico was meeting Helen Escabedo; she just happened to be in the Gallery here, and was just so lovely, and she said: you've got to come to Mexico. And we got to know her there. And while we were in Mexico, Dick Frizzell and his wife Judy and their kids came, and they made an epic trip across from San Francisco down to Los Angeles and then to Mexico City, and finally to New York, and then back across the continent to California again, in one car — just an unbelievable journey! Peter Nichols was doing the same thing. I couldn't believe New Zealanders tended to treat the whole world as if it was so small and were covering these incredible, unbelievable distances by car, like it was a Sunday drive from New Plymouth to Oakura, with their picnic baskets and everything . . . they'd arrive, spend a few days and be on their way again, which was just unbelievable! Gosh, what have I told you . . . all this incriminating evidence!



# CATALOGUE

- 1 Old and new 1983**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1270 x 1572 mm  
Collection: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
- 2 Circa 1971 1983**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1000 x 1180 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 3 Lightness of hand fleetness of foot 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1140 x 1350 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 4 Two esoteric low pressure systems 1983**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1275 x 1575 mm  
Collection: Paul Hartigan, Auckland
- 5 Night weather 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1270 x 1050 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 6 Footnotes 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
890 x 1170 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 7 Casual and navy**  
acrylic, dyes and oil on canvas  
1190 x 1000 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 8 Flying from Hong Kong to Ireland 1983**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1000 x 1180 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 9 Mexican coat hangers 1985**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1270 x 940 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 10 Chameleonitis 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1310 x 1275 mm  
Collection: private collection, New Plymouth
- 11 Dancing dogs 1 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1374 x 1374 mm  
Collection: Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
- 12 Dancing dogs 2 1985**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1370 x 1300 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 13 Tired dogs 1985**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1370 x 1420 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 14 4 pairs of dancers pulling against the fabric of life 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1345 x 1680 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 15 No laughin' matter 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1150 x 1480 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 16 Boston 2 step 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1070 x 1480 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 17 Side effects of dancing 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1380 x 1380 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 18 Maori interior 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1020 x 1220 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 19 Vroom vroom 1986**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
760 x 990 mm  
Collection: the artist
- 20 Ancestral figures 1984**  
acrylic and dyes on canvas  
1185 x 1005 mm  
Collection: A. G. and M. E. Kerr, New Plymouth

## Tom Kreisler

Born in Argentina 1938  
Arrived in New Zealand 1952  
Attended University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts specialising in painting  
Awarded Senior Scholarship University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts 1965  
New Zealand Selector for Paris Biennale 1966  
First one-person exhibition Barry Lett Galleries 1967  
Graduated Diploma of Fine Arts with Honours in painting 1968  
Art teacher New Plymouth Boys High School 1968-1977  
Art teacher in Mexico 1977-1979  
Art teacher Taranaki Polytechnic 1979

## Collections

Auckland City Art Gallery  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
Rotorua Art Gallery  
Sarjeant Art Gallery Wanganui



