

Image credit:

Brian Brake, *Craft New Zealand - Guy Ngan*, c. 1980.

Digital scan of black-and-white film.

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,
gift of Mr Raymond Wai-Man Lau, 2001.

Seal c. 1970s

wood

Private collection

Untitled 1969

oil on board

Private collection, Wellington

Sunbottle 1976

oil on board

Collection of The Dowse Art Museum, purchased 2019

Equilibrium c. 1970s

acrylic on board

Private collection, Wellington

Geometric Formation No. 2

1976

oil on board

Private collection, Wellington

Sunscape Panels 1-5 1983

acrylic on board

From the BNZ Art Collection

Outback No.5 1973

oil on board

Private collection

Shogun 1980–2004

oil on board

Private collection

Tiki Hands 1988

oil on board

Private collection, Wellington

Series 25 1976

screen print on paper

Private collection

Series 10 1973

screen print on paper

Private collection

Series 11 1973

screen print on paper

Private collection

Series 8 1973

screen print on paper

Private collection

Series 13 1973

screen print on paper

Private collection

The family home

Guy Ngan lived in Koraunui (Stokes Valley) in the greater Wellington Region for over 60 years. His home, which he designed and built in several stages between the 1950s and '80s, was a nucleus of activity for his creative practice. It was brought to life with the principles of modern architecture to suit the needs of its occupiers—his family.

Shelves, seating, desks and beds were built into rooms and every family member had a nook to be creative in. There were also several workshops and studio spaces, and a gallery with skylights that made the bush feel like it was part of the interior décor. Communal spaces were a visual wonder filled with artworks by Ngan and his colleagues, posters and ornaments from the family's travels and a seemingly never ending supply of books.

After the artist passed away in 2017, his daughter Liz Ngan invited photographer Annie Lee to document the family home. Reflecting on her process, Lee says:

"To authenticate the narrative of their home, I suggested using Guy's Minolta XG-M. The project is not only about creating a visual record of the home with a fresh perspective, but also to recognise the hard work Guy and his wife Jean invested to cultivate their family and home over the last 60 years. Ultimately, the photographs acknowledge their home as a work of art that has taken almost a lifetime to complete."

ANNIE LEE

Homage to Guy Ngan (series title)

2017

digital scans of Kodak Tri-X film printed on Hahnemühle paper

Courtesy of the artist

Waoku No. 1

This painting is one of a series of ten called *Waoku*, which in te reo Māori means dense forest. The organic shapes and pathways embedded in rich shades of green draw from the artist's experiences of Mount Taranaki and its surrounding bush, which was a regular destination for family holidays.

This series of paintings are also closely related to the large scale collaborative wall-hanging called *Forest in the Sun* (1976), which Guy Ngan designed with weaver Joan Calvert. Bursting with colour, this woollen wall-hanging was intended to evoke the experience of walking through native bush and looking up through a canopy of trees to be dazzled by the sun—an experience many New Zealanders can relate to. *Forest in the Sun* hung in the Beehive (New Zealand Parliament buildings, Wellington) for twenty-five years before becoming part of the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Waoku No.1

1973

oil on board

Private collection, Wellington

Organic and inorganic

Helene Wong, a relative of Guy Ngan and author who explores contemporary Chinese identity, reflects that “Guy’s works can be like a conversation between the organic and the inorganic. Sometimes the organic inspires the object, and sometimes the object reveals the organic within it. Perhaps this comes from his interest in Buddhism and the connectedness of things, man-made and natural.” She goes on to say “you could see this holistic view too in the organic way he built his home in Stokes Valley—his habitation.”

These qualities crossover fluidly between Ngan’s sculptural and painting practices. As with the habitation sculptures, for instance, the painting *Untitled* (1969) can be linked to his passion for architecture.

Here, Ngan’s fascination with balancing man-made objects with the textures, colours and shapes of nature can also be seen in the pulsating shades of *Sunbottle* (1976), yin-yang composition of *Equilibrium* (1976), twisting pathways of *Geometric formation No 2* (1976) and pixelated landscape of *Sunscape* (1983).

Newton Post Office Mural

In this mural, Ngan brought together European modernist design—such as the Eurostyle font and clean cut lines—with issues related to local politics and infrastructure.

The mural was made for the post office on Karangahape Road, Auckland (now the contemporary art gallery Artspace Aotearoa), a building commissioned by the Ministry of Works and designed by architects Mark-Brown Fairhead and Sang. It was opened shortly after the new motorway was built, which cut through the suburb of Newton and displaced many families. The design reflects the motorway—aptly nicknamed “spaghetti junction”—as if seen from above. While the post office and motorway both stood for economic advancement, Ngan’s design is a subtle reminder that such initiatives should serve the needs of everyday people.

In the 1980s, when the post office was decommissioned, the mural was stored in its basement for over a decade before it was rediscovered, a common story with some of Ngan’s public works. It was exhibited at Artspace Aotearoa, after which it was acquired by Auckland Art Gallery.

This mural featured in the exhibition *Guy Ngan: Either Possible or Necessary* at Artspace Aotearoa, which ran concurrently with *Guy Ngan: Habitation* at The Dowse Art Museum in 2019.

Newton Post Office Mural

1973

aluminium (lost polystyrene aluminium casting)

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of New Zealand Post Properties, 2004

Shared histories

From an early age Ngan's father, Ngan Gee Choy, instilled an interest in him about the roots of civilisation. The painting *Shogun* (1988–2004) is named after early military leaders in Japan and is an example of paintings Ngan made over his career that reference wider histories throughout Asia.

Reflecting on this, Ngan's friend and fellow artist Kingsley Baird says: "Guy was intensely interested in humanity, including the migrations of peoples across the globe throughout history and, primarily, what links them, culturally and genetically."

These interests extended across Te Moana Nui a Kiwa (the Pacific) and its indigenous peoples. Ngan's *Outback* series, for instance, draws on the colours of the Australian landscape and an encounter he had with Aboriginal artists who painted trails made by insects in the dry earth. His *Tiki Hand* paintings are inspired by whakairo rākau (Māori wood carving) and reference studies connecting Māori and other Polynesian cultures to Asia via migratory routes.

Classical Chinese influence

These brightly coloured screen prints are infused with the gestural brush work of guóhuà (classical Chinese painting), which is closely related to calligraphy. While they are abstract and open to interpretation, they reflect the impact of Guangzhou, China, on Guy Ngan, where he lived between the ages of two to twelve. While there, Ngan received a classical Chinese education, learning Chinese language and calligraphy, history and literature.

Ngan's use of seals also reveals his knowledge of guóhuà, which emphasises the importance of negative or empty spaces just as much as positive or painted areas. Seals played a role in this balance and are placed strategically by artists based on the composition of their paintings. Here, Ngan's seals echo orange-red circles in his compositions, or visually balance the compositions in his prints.

Kahikatea sculptures

Through the creative impulse inherent in man, woodcarving has been a universal vehicle of expression. — Guy Ngan

Throughout his life, Guy Ngan was interested in the qualities of materials and how people responded to them. In particular, he had a fondness for wood, which began early in his career as a furniture maker and developed into his kahikatea sculptures.

The artist enjoyed the grain and density of kahikatea, which enabled him to carve pieces that explored his fascination with the relationship between man-made and natural objects. Ngan also enjoyed the shifting colour of kahikatea from a white pine to a golden hue, which occurs as the wood is exposed to the sun.

1. Kahikatea carving No.3

1976

kahikatea

The Ron Sang Collection

2. Kahikatea carving No.7

1976

kahikatea

Collection of The Dowse Art Museum,
Dame Doreen Blumhardt Collection

Everyday experiences

Guy Ngan was introduced to aluminium casting while studying in London in the 1950s. With time, it came to be an important material for him because its versatility enabled him to create pieces that responded to their surroundings.

Like many of Ngan's domestic scale sculptures, this group could be visualised as large scale public works that sit comfortably in a park or inner city sidewalk.

The sculpture *Aluminium no. 9 1975 series* looks like a miniature monument that is equal parts graphic text, organic plant and stable apartment block. Soon after it was made, it appeared in an article in the Auckland Star with the sub-heading "Wellington artist Guy Ngan firmly believes that art should be an integral part of any community, becoming part of an environment while subtly changing it rather than being a luxurious status symbol."

1. Aluminium sculpture No. 9 1975 series

aluminium

Private collection

2. In Transit No. 1

c. 1970s

aluminium

Private collection

3. Aluminium sculpture No. 5 1975 series

aluminium

Private collection

4. Aluminium sculpture No. 2 1975 series

aluminium

Private collection

5. Congregation

1975

aluminium

Private collection

Habitation sculptures

To many people crafts are an end in themselves, but to me crafts are a means to an end. Art is a language and craft is its grammar. — Guy Ngan

Each of these sculptures is carved from polystyrene with hot wire to create contrasting angles and curves, after which it is cast in aluminium or bronze. Their archways and inner spaces give the impression of buildings. On occasion, Guy Ngan would even photograph them and stick images of tiny people on them, as if they were roaming their small corridors.

Ngan's habitation sculptures draw from Chinese calligraphy, Roman ruins, modern architecture and coastal rock formations in Aotearoa New Zealand like those found in Moeraki. He made over 200 of these, which can be read like a personal language that fuses all his influences and skills together.

1. No. 55

1979

aluminium

The Ron Sang Collection

2. No. 53

1975

bronze

Private collection, Auckland

3. No. 58

1975

bronze

The Ron Sang Collection

4. No. 216

1987

bronze

The Ron Sang Collection

5. Bronze Tower

1972

bronze

Collection of Edith Ryan and
Anne McKinnon

Places called home

***Sculpture should not be isolated,
but take part in life.*** — Guy Ngan

Later in life, Guy Ngan decided to call himself “Pacific Chinese” to show a link to both his heritage in China and his home in Aotearoa New Zealand. These two sculptures represent the artist’s dual sense of belonging.

No 33 (1988) was made after a trip to Guilin in southern China, known for its dramatic limestone karst hills, and is a rare interpretation of the Chinese landscape by the artist. *Anchor Stone* (c. 1990s) was part of an ongoing enquiry by Ngan that began with the taonga (cultural treasure) *Maungaroa te Punga Tapu o te Waka Matahaura* in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa’s collection, said to have been the explorer Kupe’s anchor stone. Like his *Tiki Hands* series, represented by a painting in the section “Shared Histories”, his *Anchor Stone* works represent migratory stories of Polynesian people between Asia and Aotearoa.

1. *Anchor Stone*

c. 1990s

wood, paint

Private collection

2. *No. 33*

1988

bronze

Private collection