

FRANCES HODGKINS 1869–1947 New Zealand
 left: *Mill House, Ponterwyd* c. 1935. Gouache on paper on card
 Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
 Purchased 2005 with funds from the I M Richdale Trust through
 the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

centre: *Green Valley, Carmarthenshire* 1942. Gouache
 Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
 Purchased 1967 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society

right: *Welsh Farm* 1943. Gouache
 Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
 Purchased 1971 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society



THROUGH KIRSTIN CARLIN THE AND FRANCES HODGKINS TREES

LUCY HAMMONDS

The slippage between fantasy and reality has always been the painter's stock-in-trade – a zone where objectivity is transformed into something altogether more mutable. For Kirstin Carlin, an artist interested in the kinds of constructed realities that have been perpetuated throughout art history, this is the borderland in which she has brokered a series of conversations between her own work and that of the painter Frances Hodgkins.

Carlin (b. 1979), who trained first in Auckland and more recently at the Glasgow School of Art, has been drawn to Hodgkins' work for some years. Carlin's practice is predominated by her interest in artistic strategies and their deployment. From genre-painting to the cloying pictorial shorthand of chocolate-box landscapes, she makes paintings about paintings – formal exercises that both celebrate and interrogate the artifice and materiality of the painted image.

Frances Hodgkins (1869–1947), who now sits within the ranks of New Zealand's most renowned artists, was an independently-minded painter who established a significant career in the early 20th century amongst the British avant-garde. Although she was based in Europe from around 1908, Hodgkins retained close connections with her home country. However, the local reception to her work was mixed, as mainstream New Zealand audiences struggled with her increasingly modern and experimental style. This tension between progressive art and conservative taste has become part of the accepted Hodgkin's mythology, with controversies such as the rejection of the gift of *Pleasure Garden* (1932) by the Canterbury Society of Arts in 1948 fuelling ideas about the hostility of mid-century New Zealand to modern art.¹

It was in reference to the *Pleasure Garden* in her 2015 exhibition of the same title, where Carlin most publicly revealed the direct influence of Hodgkins on her own work. Carlin's candy-coloured, impasto paintings paid homage to the twists and flourishes of Hodgkin's brushstrokes, while her reference to the *Pleasure Garden* controversy reflected a layer of interest in Hodgkins' position within New Zealand's art history. Using her own contemporary practice to engage with both the formal and art historical narratives of Hodgkins' work, Carlin leaves the door ajar to a discussion of how both image-making and art history are deliberately constructed frameworks through which cultural information is understood and distributed.

Although Carlin has been overt in her references to Hodgkins, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery exhibition 'Through the trees' will be the first time her work has shared gallery space with Hodgkin's own. This proximity creates a direct point of connection – an opportunity to redirect the conversation away from any prevailing discourse around what painting is and might be in the 21st century, and instead towards examining some of the fundamental concerns presented in the work of these two artists; their works separated by more than seven decades.

In late 2015, Carlin made a research visit to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery where she identified a group of Hodgkins' paintings and drawings that

resonated with her own interests. Largely gouache paintings from the 1930s and 40s, Carlin was drawn particularly to Hodgkins' landscapes – a genre of Hodgkins' works that she was less familiar with and paralleled her own interests in landscape compositions. Hodgkins' paintings such as *Green Valley, Carmarthenshire* (1942) and *The New Rick* (1942) yielded formal leads – darkened corners, angled lines, or trees used as framing devices. In Carlin's hands, these formal elements have been amplified to the extreme; reduced to a kind of painterly shorthand that riffs off the elements of a composition rather than its sum total. Side-by-side, there is a certain harmony to these two bodies of works. Carlin's process of redeploying Hodgkins' details – the 'beautiful squiggles and whimsical marks'² of paintings like *Mill House, Ponterwyd* (1935) and *Welsh Farm* (1943) – creates a sense of familiarity, a feeling that Hodgkins might herself recognise the lineage of these contemporary counterparts.

Yet despite these formal points of connection, there are two very different sets of concerns at play across these two artists' practices. Hodgkin's landscapes of this period have been associated with British Neo-Romanticism; a movement driven by an artistic desire to return to nature and its fundamental truths. With overtones of Surrealism, the Neo-Romantics responded to the symbolic power of the landscape, with features such as architecture and agricultural implements exploited for their metaphorical potential. Hodgkins' landscapes are full – loaded with buildings, anthropomorphised farm machinery, abstracted foliage and environmental features. Although they often recalled locations that Hodgkin had lived in or visited, the readings of these works in their time placed an emphasis on symbolic associations with the Second World War – 'The romantic allusions of disused and rusting man-made objects in the rural scene could be exploited and also adopted as metaphors for the tortured and war-embattled psyche within the sheltering – and now urgently fetishized – English landscape.'³ In this respect, Hodgkins' landscapes might be viewed as offering a dual narrative – a reflection of her responses to specific places and a means of processing the psychological impact of another war.

In contrast, Carlin's landscapes present a complete fiction – a constructed view of the landscape that, despite their extravagant materiality, is grounded in a digital age. Her landscapes are composites, their source material in this case gathered from an 'internet tour' that included locations in Britain and France where Hodgkins resided at different points in time. Yet rather than capturing the reality or essence of any specific site, Carlin instead examines the strategies at play within the contemporary picturesque – the conventions of beauty that continue to mediate many images of the landscape. Harvesting picture-postcard scenery, with its oversaturated colour and calculated views, she unpicks these compositions into a series of elements that form the basis of a formal enquiry. Her editorial process works to avoid a reading of any one particular place, instead creating scenes that are

devoid of representational authenticity, while loaded with a sense of familiarity.

In a similar manner to the associations that have been made between the War and Hodgkins' later landscapes, Carlin's purposeful resistance of the 'real' landscape could be considered as a reflection of her particular time and place – some level of commentary on life in this image-saturated digital era. However, the physical presence of Carlin's work sends another set of signals. Her constrained format (a domestically-scaled 380 x 300mm) and palette offer direct cues – these are not paintings as social observation, but rather an unfolding set of formal exercises through which Carlin negotiates her own relationship to her context. Her practice of working in series reinforces this sense of continuity, with brush work and compositional elements shifting, changing and repeating across multiple images.

It is inevitable that these artists, generations apart, will be separated by the specifics of their time, place and interests. Yet set together in the gallery a clear two-way exchange takes place. The palette of Hodgkins' Mill House echoes across Carlin's series, the combinations of sap green, blue, red and pink as unexpected in 2016 as they might have seemed in 1935. At the same time, the animated wiggles and flourishes of Carlin's brush strokes redirect viewers into the details of Hodgkins' works, pushing and pulling across time. Speaking previously about the external reference points in her work, Carlin has said: 'Rather than influences being straightforward and linear, everything goes in and comes out at altered angles.'⁴ This is a sensibility that resonates with Hodgkins' own, their pairing emphasising both the transformative qualities of painting and all its manifest pleasures.

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1. In 1948 members of the Canterbury Society of Arts proposed a purchase of work by Hodgkins and *Pleasure Garden* was amongst a selection of six presented by the British Council. The Society members then opted not to purchase any of this selection, causing an outcry amongst Hodgkins supporters within the Society. Margaret Frankel then arranged a public subscription for the purchase of *Pleasure Garden*, and funds were quickly raised. The painting was then offered to the Christchurch City Council for the Art Gallery collection. On expert advice, the Council rejected the gift – a decision that was met with derision amongst Hodgkins' supporters and public outcry. Three years later, in 1951, *Pleasure Garden* was again offered to the Christchurch City Council, and this time accepted into the city's collection.

2. Pers com, Kirstin Carlin to Lucy Hammonds, 2 August 2016

3. Ian Buchanan, Elizabeth Eastmond and Michael Dunn, *Frances Hodgkins Paintings and Drawings*, (Auckland, Auckland University Press: 2001), p74.

4. Kirstin Carlin in conversation with Abby Cunneane et al., *Necessary Distraction*, (Auckland, Auckland Art Gallery: 2016) p215.

