

JOHN REYNOLDS

[b. 1956]

The View From the Top of the Cliff 2019

Metallic paint marker on acrylic on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite

Let Be Let Be 2019

Oil paint marker on acrylic on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Starkwhite

Let Be Let Be and *The View From the Top of the Cliff* are recent iterations of John Reynolds' ongoing *Missing Hours* series that revolves around artist Colin McCahon's disappearance in Sydney in 1984. On the opening night of McCahon's exhibition *I will need words*, he became lost in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden and was found the next day five kilometres away in Centennial Park and taken to hospital. Author Martin Edmond later wrote *Dark Night: Walking with McCahon* (2011), as a creative nonfiction elaboration of this event.

In *Let Be Let Be*, Reynolds quotes Edmond directly, constructing the text-based composition from a whole range of phrases in this book, including Sydney locations, names and more obscure references such as the title of a Tom Waits song 'On the Nickel'. *Let Be Let Be* reads like a disintegrated or confused map with lines set out like city blocks, connected in places, isolated in others, or branching out at all angles. Reynolds offers us a diagrammatic transposition of Edmond's account – a visual imagining of McCahon's internal map of the night of his disappearance perhaps.

The View From the Top of the Cliff also contains the semblance of mark making that has defined Reynolds' *Missing Hours* series. In this work, single overlapping map lines are disjointed and angular – like independent lines of thought with no continuity, context or connection. This work also features an exploding chrysanthemum-like form that gathers reference points ranging from Piet Mondrian's (1872-1944) flower drawings from the early 1900s, to McCahon's painting *Mondrian's Chrysanthemum of 1908* (1971) and Gordon Walters' *Chrysanthemum* (1944).

In both *The View From the Top of the Cliff* and *Let Be Let Be*, Reynolds invites his viewers to walk alongside him in this McCahonian odyssey. Their large scale creates a physical experience, offering the space and latitude to trace the lines and make connections across the difference aspects of the compositions – dark and light, text and line, presence and absence, past and present.

GORDON WALTERS

[1919 – 1995]

Untitled photograph of trees and vines

Untitled photograph of trees and vines

Untitled photograph of tree and vines

Untitled photograph of vines

c.1945

Vintage photographic prints

Dunedin Public Art Gallery loan collection

Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate

This series of photographs was made by Gordon Walters in the mid-1940s, primarily as studies for paintings or conté drawings. They are representative of an early phase in Walters' practice influenced by Surrealist trends, and particularly the artist Yves Tanguy (1900-1955), as well as his friendship with fellow artist Theo Schoon (1815-1985).

Walters' conté drawings and paintings contained organic anthropomorphic imagery pieced together from observed natural environments that he often captured through photography: driftwood, dead trees and sand-dunes. Walters would often take multiple images of a single subject, creating many studies on a formal theme. He then transposed his photographic studies into drawn or painted forms, organic, spongy and often intertwined, and placed within expansive landscape scenes. Evidence for this process can be seen in a conté drawing entitled *Composition Waikanae* (1943-1944). In the top section of this work is an area of twisted tree vines that are very similar to the photographic imagery in the series of untitled photographs seen here.

These photographic studies convey Walters' appreciation for the formal elements of contrast, texture and line. They provide insight into Walters' developing understanding of abstract principles, as well as documenting a Modernist trend in photography. Art historian Michael Dunn likens Walters' photographs to the photographic work of British artist Paul Nash (1889-1946), and American photographer Edward Western (1886-1958).

The formal qualities of Walters' photographs draw connections to other works included in this exhibition. The twisted vines echo the ribbon forms in Julia Morison's *Fair and gay goes Lent away* (2007); forms that also might be seen to mark both artists' separate interests in Surrealist art. As photographic studies towards a wider project of non-objective abstract painting, Walters' *Untitled* series sits in stark contrast to the dark brooding portraits of buildings by photographer Peter Peryer.

COLIN McCAHON

[1919 – 1987]

Oaia and clouds 1975

Acrylic on paper

Jim Barr and Mary Barr loan collection,
Dunedin Public Art Gallery

At the time Colin McCahon produced this painting, Oaia Island had become an established feature in his practice as part of the landscape of West Auckland's Muriwai Beach, where the artist was living. This scenic context heavily influenced his practice in the early 1970s, after he moved there from Titirangi and began to paint full time. The cloud forms in this work also reference the *Cloud* series McCahon produced in the mid-1970s, although this work is not specifically part of that series.

The abstract perspective in *Oaia and clouds* depicts a span of inky water that could also be a dark sky, a coastal horizon or a bird's eye view. A work from the Jim Barr and Mary Barr loan collection, these collectors once conveyed McCahon's suggestion that *Oaia and clouds* is a view from the beach at Muriwai, of rockpools reflecting the sky.¹

In this painting, Oaia Island is subtly differentiated from the more nebulous cloud forms. As a fan of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), McCahon dubbed Oaia Island the 'white whale': 'I love whales... I think of them as friends and creatures of great beauty.... Moby Dick sits well out in the sea & birds live there. He is a white whale and wears a halo of seabirds. His name is truly Oaia...'²

1. Jim Barr and Mary Barr, 'Oaia and Clouds', viewed at <https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/jim-barr-and-mary-barr/> (20/03/2020).

2. Colin McCahon, Letter to Patricia France (1911-1995), cited in Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: Is this the Promised Land? Vol. 2 1960-1987* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020), 154-155.

RALPH HOTERE

[1931 – 2013]

Requiem 1973

Lacquer on board

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Given 2002 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade

This work is part of an extensive *Requiem* series of paintings and drawings by Ralph Hotere. As seen here in *Requiem* (1973), Hotere often worked with black lacquer on hardboard. Many of the works in this series are defined by sections of fine lines placed closely together, sometimes with intervals or a particular emphasis of colour. In this work, a thin line of blue emerges from the dark. Other works include lines of text from Verdi's Requiem Mass.

A Requiem Mass is a Mass in the Roman Catholic Church held for those who have died. The Latin *requiem* is a form of the noun requires (rest) and is found in the opening phrasing of the first section of the Requiem Mass: 'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis (Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them)'. In the same year Hotere produced *Requiem* his friend and composer Anthony Watson passed away, following the death of Hotere's mother Ana Maria Hotere in 1972.

Watson was a string player and primarily composed for stringed instruments. Visual connections can be made between the sections of coloured line in Hotere's painting and the stringed instruments. These lines sing like music against the thick reflective blackness of the lacquered ground of the work.

According to art historian Kriselle Baker the lines read like the sound bars of recorded music, extending and contracting with occasional intervals. An analogy between sound, music and colour can be clearly drawn, forming a visual rhythm – the placement of line against black a material expression of the embodiment of sound.¹

This painting invites the viewer into visual contemplation. Standing in front of this work, you see yourself reflected upon its surface. But embedded within the composition is a non-reflective opaque rectangular section. As a kind of visual contemplative counterpoint, this section offers a space of rest for the viewer's eyes. It seems to encourage a more interior viewing experience to the more objective introspection of seeing a dancing reflection within the work.

1. See Kriselle Baker, 'A World of Black and Light: Ralph Hotere 1968-1977' (PhD Diss., University of Auckland, 2009).

PETER PERYER

[1941 – 2018]

Mars Hotel Portfolio I Mars Hotel Portfolio II Mars Hotel Portfolio III Mars Hotel Portfolio IV Mars Hotel Portfolio V Mars Hotel Portfolio VI

1975

Silver gelatin prints

Jim Barr and Mary Barr loan collection, Dunedin Public Art Gallery

The sombre or mysterious quality of Peter Peryer's *Mars Hotel Portfolio* is engendered through a combination of subject matter, framing, and the technical parameters of the camera that Peryer used at the time. He produced these works in the 1970s using a *Diana* camera, bought at a toy shop. With limited controls and a fixed aperture and shutter speed, this camera renders dark images that tend to fade into a soft black border at the edge of the image. The buildings and structures in these photographs catch an atmospheric median light, and the horizon lines often feature a brooding, dramatic sky. The featured buildings seem to take on anthropomorphic characteristics; they are seemingly abandoned or derelict, or reach into the clouds. Photographer Tom Elliott (active 1975) called the Warkworth Satellite Station in *Mars Hotel Portfolio I*, 'a huge monolith ear' cupped to stratocumulus clouds.¹ In the context of *The Brink*, this photograph forges a relationship with the cloud forms in Colin McCahon's *Oaia and clouds*. Incidentally, McCahon was an artist who inspired Peryer, and to whom the *Mars Hotel Portfolio* was gifted.²

The concept of memory also plays a part in this series. In parallel to the way these images contain memories of their pasts, Peryer described his experience of being born during World War II, with an anecdotal recollection of 'an uncle, now dead, flying his fighter low over our house before leaving to crash overseas'.³ In this personal and very lateral reflection on his own work, Peryer conveys a conceptual, poetic quality to his practice that seems to run in parallel to the formal quality of these images.

1. Tom Elliott, 'For your pleasure', *PhotoForum*, Aug/Sept (1976), 33, 17-18.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Peter Peryer, *PhotoForum*, Aug/Sept (1976), 33.

SÉRAPHINE PICK

[b. 1964]

Untitled (White Bags) 1995

Oil, crayon and graphite on canvas
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Purchased 1999 with funds from the Dunedin Public
Art Gallery Society

Untitled (White Bags) forms part of Séraphine Pick's mid-1990s explorations into the concept of memory and its relationship with perception and imagination. Drawing on emblems that recall her own childhood experiences, Pick considered the way that memory works through inscribed and re-inscribed pattern making, as a reflection of 'conscious and unconscious process'.¹

Differing in size and definition, the image of a paper bag with cut-out eyes is repeated and erased many times across the surface of this painting. With one of the white bags over her head, a form floats in the centre, drawing the reader into a kind of spectral narrative. It could be a playful Halloween costume, or a motif that alludes to the idea of anonymity or avoidance of the social gaze.

Not all of the white bags are mask-like, nor are there many bodies, or spectres, attached to them. Three-dimensional cubes merge into indistinctive cloud-like forms or the visual evidence of erased mark-making, creating a layering effect that recedes from or rests upon the surface. As a visual representation of the function of memory, images are retained or impressed beneath surface images. Formal contrasts are present in line and erasure, rich texture and void, and abstraction and figuration.

1. Séraphine Pick, 'A Painting You Can Wear', artist's statement in *Séraphine Pick: Unveiled* (City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 1995), unpaginated. Exhibition catalogue.

PETER ROBINSON

[b. 1966 Ngāi Tahu]

Self-titled 1997

Acrylic on paper on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1997 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

Peter Robinson's work of the 1990s sparked much controversy and debate. This is one such work that epitomises Robinson's confrontational and aggressively ironic commentary on interracial politics and cultural identity. *Self-titled* was first exhibited in a show entitled *NZPR* [New Zealand Public Relations] at the Brooke-Gifford Gallery in Christchurch in 1997. It was made during a period of time in Aotearoa New Zealand when questions pertaining to biculturalism were in proliferation, with the mid-1990s marking significant discussions on land and Treaty issues.

During this time, Robinson was also using his work as part of an exploration of cultural identity, and specifically, the implications of identifying or being identified as an artist of Māori descent. His inclusion in the exhibition *Cultural Safety* (1995), a partnership exhibition between City Gallery Wellington and the Frankfurter Kunstverein in Germany, also informed aspects of his practice. In 1996 he undertook artist's residencies at both the Goethe Institute in Dusseldorf, and in Aachen, both in Germany. Within this context, Robinson began to draw controversial correlations with Nazi aesthetics and traditional Māori colour usage (black, white, red) which led to his use of the Swastika and the more direct play on words as seen here in *Self-titled*.

Seeking a middle way of understanding Robinson's practice, Steven Pritchard writes that 'mimicry undermines colonial authority ... by taking up its forms and categories but reflecting them back in a perverted, distorted, or altered form.'¹ So, in the first instance, this work could be understood as an observation on Robinson's immediate cultural political context through employing a specific textual reference. In this case, it is a form of subversive far-right symbolism for extreme conservatism or racism. But the work reeks of cynicism. The viewer is left baffled by the ironic connection between political intent and delivery. Surely Robinson has gone too far? This work spirals around questions on the use of manipulative shock value in art, and socio-politics become entangled with art-world politics.

1. Stephen Pritchard, 'The artifice of culture: Contemporary Indigenous Art and the Work of Peter Robinson', *Third Text*, 19:1 (2005), 67-80, DOI: 10.1080/09528820412331318578

CHRISTINE WEBSTER

[b. 1958]

Bite Out 1989

Black and white photograph
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Given 1998 by the artist

Bite Out originates from Christine Webster's *Tiananmen Square* (1989-90) series, made in response to the 1989 pro-democracy student-led protests and massacre in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China. The work could be interpreted as a mourning portrait. Enveloped in darkness and wrapped in a white sheet, the figure references the ancient practice of crossing the deceased's arms against their chest, a gesture in empathetic memory of those who have died.

Webster's *Tiananmen Square* series formed one of her first international touring exhibitions, and was shown in Cologne, Hong Kong, Sydney and Auckland. Similar to her *Neue Mythen* (1987-88) and *The Players* (1990) series, Webster included a parallel text with each image. Here 'bite out' could refer to the verb 'to utter', recalling the voices of protest.

In *The Brink*, *Bite Out* forges connections to a range of different works. Central to both Webster's photograph and Séraphine Pick's *Untitled (White Bags)* (1995) is a shrouded human figure. While Pick's work is void of black and white contrast, *Bite Out* exemplifies it. As a gesture of mourning, Webster's work also reads in relation to Ralph Hotere's *Requiem* (1973). Like Hotere, Webster infuses politics into human experience – in this case resulting in a work of high contrast, formally, emotionally and politically.

JULIA MORISON

[b. 1952]

Fair and gay goes Lent away 2005

Mixed media on aluminium laminate

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Purchased 2006 with funds from the Dunedin City Council

This work is a stand-alone piece from Julia Morison's *Gobsmack and Flabbergast* (2005) work in seventeen sections. It was originally exhibited within a continuous and integrated panel of grey and taupe ribbon that wove around the walls of the gallery space. Each image is titled after the name of a game, selected from 216 carnivalesque games listed in an English translation of the 16th-century text *Gargantua* by the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais (circa 1483-1553). *Fair and gay goes Lent away*, which could also be translated as *Fair and softly passeth Lent*, has been surmised to refer to a kind of call and response children's game, perhaps like a very early version of the game 'I Spy' or 'Hide and Seek' that was played during Lent. However, in the context of Morison's work, the lists of games present us with a set of linguistic curiosities, rather than any kind of illustration of the text.

Rabelais is known for his broad and bawdy humour and *Gobsmack and Flabbergast* could easily portray something of this quality. There is a physicality to the work, with pinkish tones and fleshy forms. The viewer is confronted with an expansive twisted length of the beautiful and bizarre, a gross corporeality and perfectly restrained design sensibility. An elegant composition that hinges on these tensions, the symmetry of *Fair and gay goes Lent away* creates a generative energy that originates from the centre and pushes at the border of the frame.