

JOHN DRAWBRIDGE



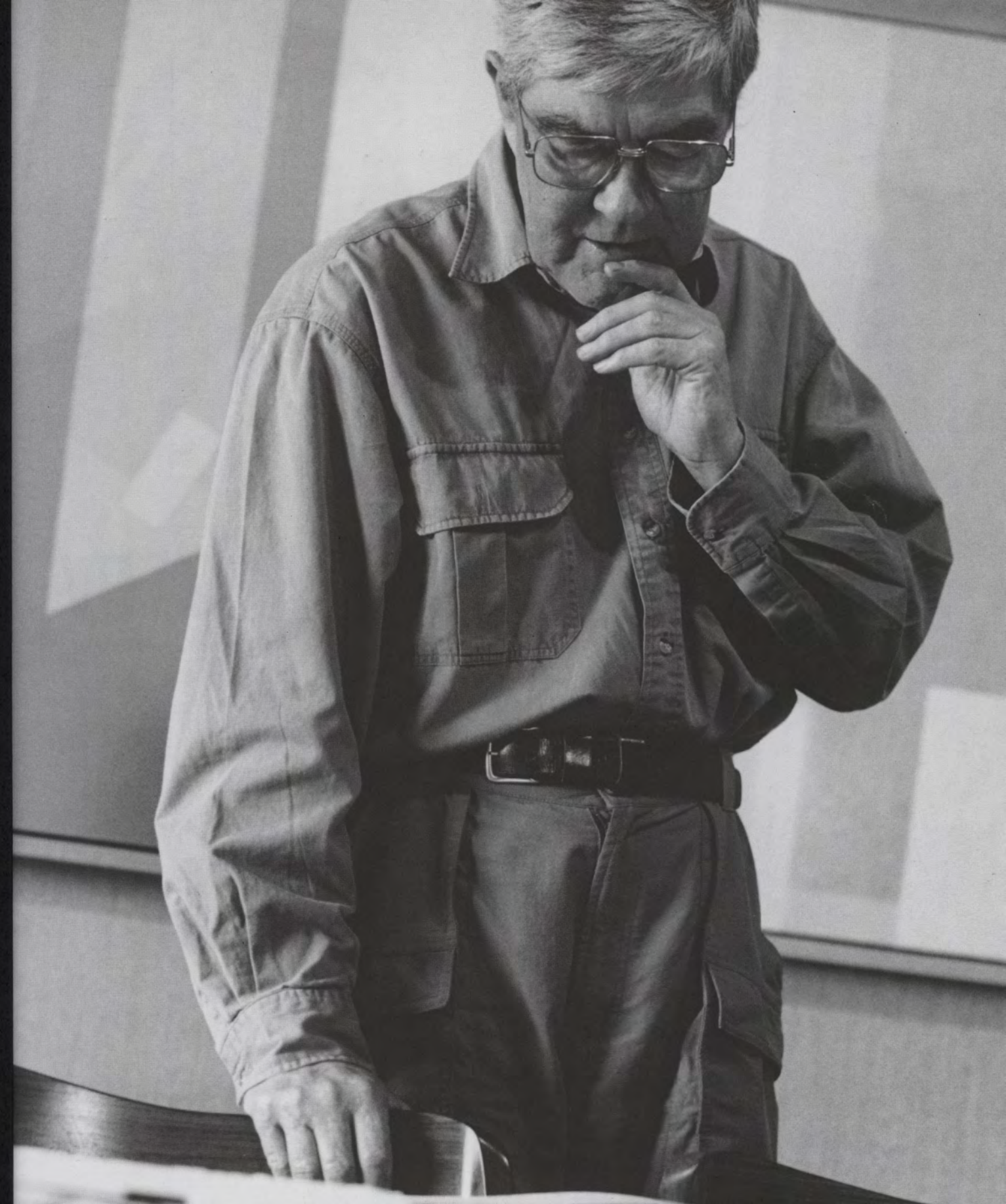
WIDE OPEN INTERIOR

EDITED BY GREGORY O'BRIEN

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON

JOHN DRAWBRIDGE—WIDE OPEN INTERIOR

is the first major study of the leading New Zealand painter and printmaker best known for his murals in New Zealand House, London, The Beehive and the National Library. Born in Wellington in 1930, John Drawbridge was awarded a scholarship to study at London's Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1957. Since his return to New Zealand at the end of 1963, Drawbridge has lived and worked at Island Bay, Wellington, where his studio overlooks Cook Strait. Not only has he been inspired by the colours, forms and rhythms of the coastal environment, he has explored the interior of his beachfront house, its many windows framing figures as well as vistas of the world beyond. This publication features 32 full colour reproductions of these remarkable artworks and over 50 black and white illustrations, with accompanying essays by Gregory O'Brien, Lara Strongman, Gerald Barnett, Robert Macdonald.



JOHN DRAWBRIDGE

WIDE OPEN INTERIOR

Gregory O'Brien

with

Lara Strongman

Gerald Barnett

Robert Macdonald

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Portrait of John Drawbridge on p.1

by Bruce Foster, October 2001

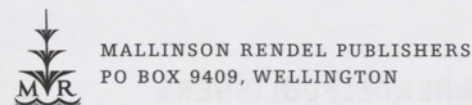
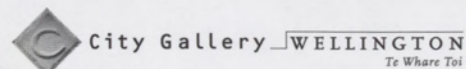
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PREFACE

Paula Savage, Director, City Gallery Wellington

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PREFACE

Paula Savage, Director, City Gallery Wellington

In the past John Drawbridge has often been regarded as either a printmaker or a muralist. 'John Drawbridge—Wide Open Interior' not only acknowledges his significance in the fields of printmaking and public art, it also draws attention to his considerable achievement as a painter, whose career now spans over five decades.

Drawbridge's 1963 solo exhibition at the Redfern Gallery in London was an important moment not only in his career but in the history of New Zealand art and its reception overseas. This major publication—and the exhibition it accompanies—features many of the paintings from the Redfern exhibition as well as the pivotal *New Zealand House Mural*, originally sited in London.

The project brings together a broad array of Drawbridge's work as abstractionist and figurative artist, as painter and printmaker, as a New Zealander but one who is engaged on many levels with the traditions of European art. John is a polymath—he is a Member of the British Empire, a cricket enthusiast, a concert-goer, a teacher, a painter and a consummate technician. He has produced over two hundred mezzotints and these works stand amongst the most significant intaglio prints produced in this country.

As Elva Bett wrote in 1985, 'few artists in New Zealand can boast the achievements of John Drawbridge, yet he remains a modest man. He is a true professional—a multi-media expert, an inspired teacher, a printmaker, a painter and a muralist. . .'

John Drawbridge has lived and worked since 1964 in the Wellington suburb of Island Bay. This project is a timely acknowledgement of Drawbridge's contribution not only to Wellington—as the city's senior artist—but to New Zealand art and culture. We thank John Drawbridge, Tanya Ashken and their family for working with us on this exhibition and publication project. We also acknowledge co-publishers Mallinson Rendel, whose major contribution has made this important and exciting project possible.



WIDEOPENINTERIOR

Gregory O'Brien

I. 'LES ARTS FLORISSANTS'

In the late seventeenth century the French composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier composed an 'idyll in music'—a short opera—entitled 'Les Arts Florissants', literally 'the flowering arts'. It celebrated the inter-relationship between poetry, painting, music, architecture and the other arts. In the opera, singers adopt the persona of an art form (for the original production, Charpentier took the role of 'La Peinture' himself). It would be hard to imagine a more vivid picture of harmonious, creative interplay than this assembled company of prancing, sonorous art forms.

There is a pastoral scene in John Drawbridge's early life which provides a more rustic version of Charpentier's 'flowering arts', set this time in the Southern Alps of New Zealand during the summer of 1949-50. While Charpentier added dramatic tension by introducing a chorus of Furies, in the alpine scene this is provided by a flooded river, a sky full of storm clouds and six weeks of unseasonably bad weather.

Retraining its viewfinders on the peaceable world shortly after the end of the Second World War, the National Film Unit was producing a feature entitled *The Ascent of Mount Aspiring* and had sent a crew into the alps. With a black and white documentary about that landscape—*Prelude to Aspiring*—already in the can, the Unit was shooting the dramatic feature on colour stock. The crew was staying in the recently constructed Aspiring Hut in the Matukituki Valley.

After an apprenticeship as a photographer—a career he would later resume, with spectacular success—Brian Brake was cinematographer for the film project. Also on the expedition was

All the things an artist must be: poet, explorer of nature, philosopher.

PAUL KLEE, 1910

Opposite: Photograph of John Drawbridge, Brian Brake, c.1949



Untitled (from 'Mount Aspiring' folio), 1949, ink and watercolour on paper, 225 x 335mm, collection of the artist

composer Douglas Lilburn, who was to provide a musical score, and James K. Baxter, who had been enlisted to write the screenplay or 'verse commentary'. The youngest member of the group, John Drawbridge, had already produced a series of neo-romantic watercolours storyboarding the proposed film. On account of his incessant poetic production, Baxter had lugged a typewriter halfway up the mountain in his backpack. During the trek up the Matukituki Valley, the young poet lost his footing while crossing the flooded river and his pack was swept downstream—a mishap memorialised in his 'Poem in the Matukituki Valley':

Wading the swollen
Matukituki waist-high in snow water,
And stumbling where the mountains throw their dice
Of boulders. . .¹

The pack was recovered, John Drawbridge recalls, and its contents laid out to dry in the trampers' hut.² However, for days afterwards, as the river level went down, loose manuscript pages from Baxter's backpack were found stuck to rocks downstream. These poems were carefully uplifted by crew members and returned to their source.

Confined by foul weather to the hut, Baxter and Lilburn debated philosophical points and argued endlessly over the existence of God. The quiet member of the group, Drawbridge sat, listened and sketched. Between conversations Baxter would stare out at the mountain above, draft poems and arrive at such memorable lines as: 'For us the land is matrix and destroyer.'³

1 James K. Baxter, *Collected Poems*, Auckland: Oxford University Press 1980, p.86.

2 Quotations from John Drawbridge in this essay, unless otherwise stated, are from conversations between the artist and Gregory O'Brien, May–October 2001.

3 James K. Baxter, *ibid.*, p.86.

What else was discussed in this weather-beaten, godforsaken hut? Modern art, poetry, morality, the puritanical society they have left behind. . . The natural world, certainly, and the overwhelming Southern Alps that would establish themselves as a pervasive motif and metaphor in the work not only of Baxter, but also of Brake, Lilburn and Drawbridge. A year or two earlier, Baxter had written of the 'never-diminishing evocative intensity' of the natural world and the place of 'birds, flowers, air, earth' as the staple of creative production—a view, in different ways, the others shared.⁴

While this Boys' Own version of 'les arts florissants' could conveniently be thought of as a paradigm of nationalistic adventure, the spirit that animated these artists and the issues uppermost in their minds, as Drawbridge recalls, were in fact avowedly internationalist. Their preoccupations were the archetypal modernist ones: the problem of the artist in the contemporary world, art and society, art and politics.

On account of the weather, *The Ascent of Mount Aspiring* was put on hold until the following summer. Tragically, during the ensuing months, the lead actor was killed in a light aeroplane accident and the project was abandoned for good. What, then, remains of that trip? Some poems by Baxter; a few reels of unedited footage in the Film Unit Archive; the folder of Drawbridge's watercolours, embodying both a point of departure and arrival for the young artist. . . While Drawbridge moved away from such naturalistic rendering, his work would retain an engagement with the New Zealand scene and, in a necessarily complex manner, with the Sublime. (In 1963 he exhibited a painting called *Memories of Matukituki Valley, Otago* in London, and in the 1990s he returned to wilderness themes in such large canvases as *Urewera Forest* (1992) and *Mackinnon Pass* (1996).)

Over the fifty years since that outing, the artistic productions of Baxter, Brake, Lilburn and Drawbridge have confirmed Baudelaire's belief that the different arts share a common philosophical basis and are able to lend one another new powers. Drawbridge's friendship with Brake and Lilburn continued until the photographer's death in 1988 and Lilburn's in 2001. (The composer also became an important patron, supporting the practice of both Drawbridge and his wife, sculptor Tanya Ashken.) In subsequent decades, Drawbridge would work with composers—most recently Ross Harris—on opera designs; he would work with architects and technicians on murals and stained glass

4 James K. Baxter, *Cold Spring*, ed. Paul Millar, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.xxi.

windows; he would design and illustrate periodicals and books (including Vincent O'Sullivan's *Brother Jonathan, Brother Kafka*). This predisposition for working with artists in other media, then, is another remnant of the film project. For Drawbridge, that excursion, the landscape and the group of artists have remained important reference points throughout his career.

Far from being the originating point of John Drawbridge's artistic journey, however, the Southern Alps excursion served to crystallise and reinforce an already existent approach to creativity and life. Although hardly nineteen years old when he climbed *Aspiring*, he had exhibited earlier that year at the Helen Hitchings Gallery in Wellington and had established himself in the Capital as a 'boy artist' of prodigious ability and remarkable maturity.

Born in 1930 and brought up in the Wellington suburb of Karori, Drawbridge attended Wellington College and took weekend art classes at the old Technical College. His interest in the visual arts was frustrated by the Second World War, when the usual trickle of arts publications into the country ceased and the National Art Gallery building in Buckle Street was requisitioned as an air force facility. Still, the young artist sought out whatever the city had to offer during the 1940s:

*The National Gallery moved a small part of their collection to the tea-rooms of the D.I.C. Building in Lambton Quay, where they held some memorable small exhibitions. . . Wellington Central Public Library had changing exhibitions and were the first to show a big exhibition of Colin McCahon's paintings. The French Maid coffee shop was a meeting place for conversation and also had small exhibitions. . .*⁵

The influence of the first art book he bought, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* by Alfred H. Barr, is abundantly clear in his drawings, pastels and gouaches from the late 1940s. Picasso became an important role model, as Drawbridge has himself acknowledged:

*I've never actually ever tried to work like Picasso but he seemed to me to stand for a kind of freedom for people to be themselves, as he was being himself. . . Now, as I think about it, the meaning of this freedom becomes even more important. Picasso was a great Renaissance man for he was a painter, sculptor, print-maker, potter, playwright and poet. Regardless of the medium or technique, he was an innovator.*⁶

Drawbridge remembers Wellington Teachers' Training College,



Portrait of Juliet Peter, 1950, mixed media on paper, 340 x 210mm, collection of the artist

⁵ Quoted in catalogue for City Gallery Wellington's opening exhibition, 1980.

⁶ Ibid.

where he enrolled in 1948, as an 'extraordinary, enlightened' place. It was there he began experimenting with screenprinting and lithography, thus beginning a lifelong commitment to printmaking. For Drawbridge, teaching and producing artwork have always been mutually productive. 'Ideas and teaching and my own work have always developed together,' he notes, sourcing this attitude to his teachers at training college, and Gordon Tovey who worked in the Education Department. In a letter to Carol Henderson, he acknowledged Tovey's philosophy of teaching and practising art, stating that 'to Gordon it wasn't one thing or the other. His view was directly concerned with the encouragement of an all-embracing creativity. Therefore I concluded that I could be both an artist and a teacher.'⁷ But Tovey was only one of a lively and progressive group, as Drawbridge recalls:

*Until I went to the teachers' college. . . I had not even heard of the contemporary writing of T. S. Eliot, George Orwell or Frank Sargeson. Walter Scott, Patrick Macaskill and Anton Vogt soon made up for what I had previously missed. Tom Young not only taught me to appreciate the abstract beauty of music, but he also introduced me to the abstract painting of Kandinsky. Arthur Barker, the science lecturer, was not just a scientist; he was a translator of Rimbaud's poetry and also an excellent knitter. . . Louise Henderson was [another] one of this remarkable group.*⁸

Drawbridge was already acquainted with a very committed group of Wellington artists—among them Juliet Peter, Douglas MacDiarmid and Helen Hitchings—with whom he regularly attended life-classes. Through Mario and Hilde Fleischl he met Douglas Lilburn, Theo Schoon and Colin McCahon. For a time, he attended a weekly drawing class in an old house on The Terrace with Schoon, Gordon Walters and Terry Barrow, an ethnologist who was in charge of Māori and Pacific collections at the Dominion Museum. (Drawbridge sources his early interest in Māori art forms to his contact with Walters in particular.) At this time he also became interested in the neo-romantic art of Paul Nash and the emerging strand of landscape-derived abstraction epitomised by the work of Ben Nicholson. Drawbridge's later interest in painted relief sculpture—which reached its zenith with the monumental *Beehive Mural*—can be sourced back to Nicholson, as can the New Zealander's use of a semi-abstract pictorial architecture based on both the still-life genre and coastal landscape. In its public and private purposes, Drawbridge's art has a similar objective to that of Nicholson, who wrote in 1958:



Portrait of Douglas MacDiarmid, 1950, pen and pencil on paper, 340 x 220mm, collection of the artist

⁷ Carol Henderson, *A Blaze of Colour; Gordon Tovey, Artist Educator*, Christchurch: Hazard Press, 1998, p.194.

⁸ John Drawbridge's autobiographical essay, 'I feel at home with my work being here', included in *Godwits Return*, ed. Margaret Clark, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992, pp.42, 43.

*Painting at one end—it seems to me—touches on literature and at the other on architecture, that is to say that the poetry in one touches on the poetry in the other.*⁹

Through the 1950s Drawbridge produced paintings and lithographs, working in a modernist-inflected regionalist style aligned with Russell Clark (1905–1966) and William J. Reed (1908–1996). The latter's presence as Drawbridge's drawing instructor in Dunedin—where he completed his teacher training—was an important factor. Reed's heightened graphic rendering of forms and personalised symbolism was a model for many other students as well, among them John Bevan Ford, Ralph Hotere and Marilyn Webb.

While in Dunedin, Drawbridge met Charles Brasch, who became an important supporter and friend. Brasch reproduced two works in *Landfall* 20 (December 1951) and featured a suite of four Drawbridge photographs of Karori Cemetery in *Landfall* 31. (The young artist's interest in photography continued to manifest itself until the 1960s, with photographs also appearing in School Publications and elsewhere.) While there were many studies of the New Zealand scene among Drawbridge's work from this time, paradoxically it would not be until Drawbridge was living in London that he would begin producing his most emphatic statements about his homeland.

II. WIDE OPEN WORLD

The next important locus for John Drawbridge was the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, where he arrived late in 1957. Drawbridge found the teaching philosophy at the Central School very much in keeping with his earlier 'holistic' experience of both thinking about and making art. The syllabus was closely aligned with Basic Design, the course devised by Johannes Itten at the Bauhaus in 1919, incorporating the ideas of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Oscar Schlemmer. Attitudes rather than techniques were the priority—the course set out to 'educate, but not to train'.¹⁰

As Drawbridge recalls, rather than concentrating on technical matters, his teacher Merlyn Evans would simply talk at length with the students about philosophy, politics and religion, leaving the practical aspects of printmaking to the workshop technicians. It was, however, Evans who introduced the young artist to



Woman, 1951, lithograph,
570 x 417mm, The Hocken Library,
University of Otago, Dunedin

... a bay surrounds you
like a gentle abrasive with
something in it
that slowly sculpts your face—
you notice
each feature as it emerges,
empty as you imagined but
expectant
with a blue, cut-up sense
of what your vocation is going to be,
glimpsed in the light
coming through half-open shutters ...
'Pacific' JOHN FORBES

⁹ Ben Nicholson, ed. Maurice de Sausmarez, London: Studio International, 1969, p.45.

¹⁰ Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century*, Yale University Press, 1999, p.232.

mezzotint—Drawbridge's favoured printmaking technique of recent decades—and he was inspired by watching Evans print his important large-scale series, *Vertical Suite in Black*. Married to a concert pianist, Evans would often talk about visual art in relation to music—an association Drawbridge found particularly relevant. The drawing instructor at the Central School was the novelist/artist Mervyn Peake, with whom the young New Zealander certainly felt an affinity. Drawbridge's early watercolours—particularly those produced for the 'Aspiring' project—shared his teacher's Gothic sensibility and the corridors in Drawbridge's mezzotints from the 1980s and 1990s have something of Peake's *Gormenghast* about them.¹¹

As was the case with the training college in Wellington, the teaching programme at the Central acknowledged the need for both control and freedom, discipline and necessary indiscipline. Drawbridge recalls Alan Davie insisting that his students should 'always paint something badly, to get away from their own psychology, to get somewhere new'.

After three years at the Central School, Drawbridge struck out for Paris, where he studied printmaking briefly with S. W. Hayter and then for a longer period with Johnny Friedlander. If the Central School offered a philosophical 'education', it was during the time in Paris he obtained further necessary 'training', observing Hayter and Friedlander at work and seeing the prints of modern masters being produced at the Lacourières studio.

The sojourn in France inspired *The Party* (1961) [plate 3], a painting which epitomises Drawbridge's concerns at that time: the balancing of figurative and abstract concerns, and of narrative and formal resolution. While the travelling party—clustered behind a table-like plane which also suggests the hull of a boat—owes something to the work of Balthus, this allegorical scene also has an affinity with the neo-romantic artist Cecil Collins, another of Drawbridge's teachers at the Central School. (A mezzotint version of the image, printed in 1986 [plate 2], makes the affinity with Balthus and Collins even more apparent.) The theme of the voyage or quest was a prevalent metaphor in Collins's art—as it was not only in neo-romantic painting generally but also in the Abstract Expressionist movement. The metaphor of the journey would be explored further in Drawbridge's abstractions of the early 1960s, notably *The Approach* (1963) [plate 7] and *Sea Element* (1963–64) [plate 6].

¹¹ See *Interior with Tanya* (1983) and *Tanya's Witchy Wardrobe* (1998).

Drawbridge's 'party' is a group of travellers cast adrift in an alien territory. He suggests the girl-child in the centre of the composition was based on Tanya Ashken, whom he had recently married, and the other emblematic figures were his fellow New Zealanders (among them, in all probability, Don Peebles and Robert Macdonald) who, like Drawbridge, found themselves cast as outsiders in French society. Like the alpine adventurers of a decade earlier, these figures also appear embroiled in an encounter with modernism and the forging of personal/group identities.

In France Drawbridge painted many figurative oils, including *Barmaid, Rue Lepic* (1960). 'I am susceptible to the surrounds I live in,' he wrote in 1971, 'and I find it very difficult to paint people in New Zealand. . . When I lived in Paris people came into my paintings a lot, as one is very much aware of the human element in France.'¹² Drawbridge's most accomplished early print, *Seated Woman* [plate 5], was also produced during 1960. A pivotal work, it links the artist's earlier depictions of women with the images of Tanya that emerged later in that decade. In fact, depictions of women have been a focus throughout Drawbridge's career, from the 1951 lithograph, *Woman*, until the figure-in-interior compositions of the 1980s and '90s [plates 29 and 30] with their almost exclusively female inhabitants.

The *New Zealand House Mural* commission [plate 8], which Drawbridge embarked upon in 1962, precipitated some months of re-examining his New Zealand past and mining it for visual metaphors—hence the sweeping horizons and unfurling spirals. The forms are at once crisp and hazy, near and far. In this backward glance towards his homeland, fields of hectic pictorial energy are juxtaposed with flattened, empty expanses. As the reviewer in *Studio* magazine observed:

*Though freely abstract in treatment the predominant reds and greens suggest the heat and foliage of the islands of New Zealand with perspectives stepping through the repeated horizontals. Mountain ridges dipping to blue bays, the rotating discs of volcanic rock formations—these motifs are suggested as symbols rather than tight naturalistic renderings. . .*¹³

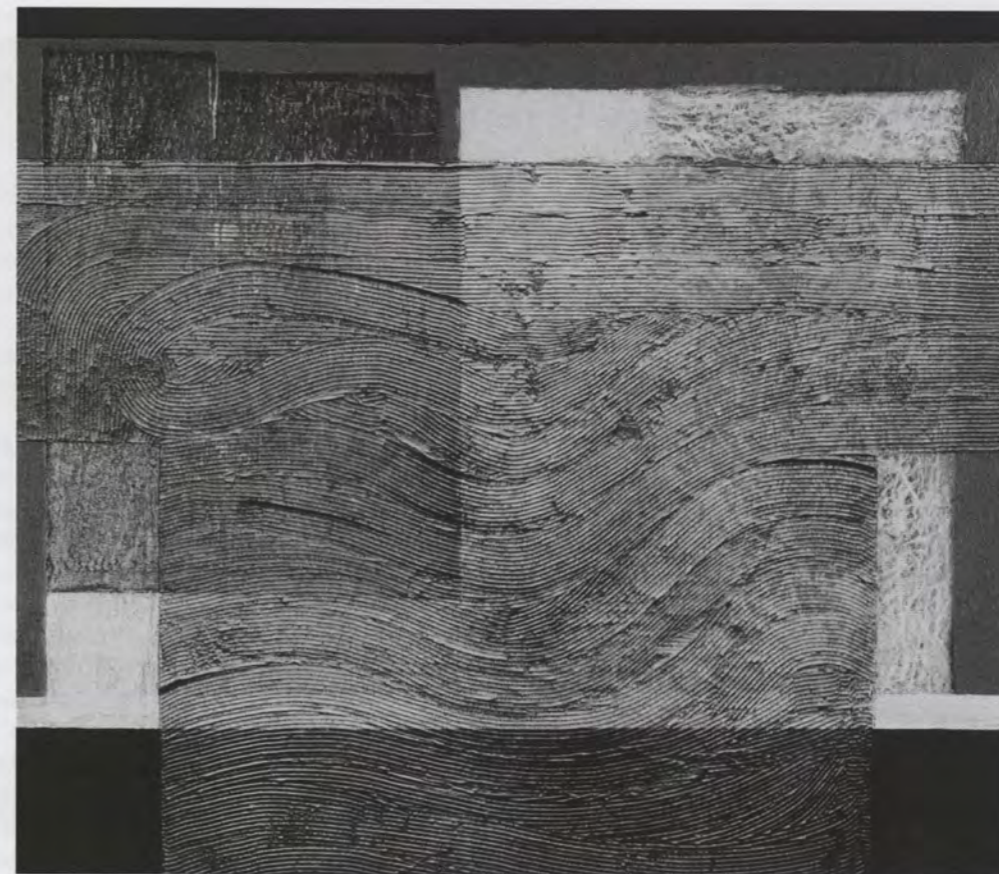
The 'combing' textures in the *New Zealand House Mural* and many paintings of the time have a correlation in the combing technique Drawbridge was using in his printmaking, most successfully in *Approach to St André* (1960) [plate 4]. On close inspection, this



Photograph of Chenonceaux, taken by John Drawbridge c. 1960 and reproduced in *France in the Modern World*, Angus Martin, Wellington: School Publications, 1967

¹² Quoted in *Artis*, vol.1, no.2, New Vision Gallery, Auckland, August 1971, p.18.

¹³ J. W., writing in *Studio International*, vol.166, no.846, October 1963, p.176.



landscape is seen to be largely made up of lines which are almost Futurist in their sweeping, symmetrical formation.¹⁴

Like the *New Zealand House Mural*, works in the 1963 Redfern Gallery exhibition explored the coastal 'Pacific' environment of the artist's birthplace, frequently as seen or experienced through a window or doorway—a visual metaphor for both distance and memory. The paintings also reflect the accommodation Drawbridge was now managing between abstraction and the physical environment. If there is a trace of nostalgia, the paintings are far from sentimental. Theirs is the kind of nostalgia which Andrey Tarkovsky describes as being 'provoked not only by his remoteness from home but also by a global yearning for the wholeness of existence'.¹⁵ That said, the mural did contribute to Drawbridge's decision to return to New Zealand. There was also the realisation that he had been away over six years 'and this

Windflow No. 2, 1968, mixed media on board, 815 x 940mm, collection of Allan Smith, Auckland

¹⁴ Other prints from around this time comprise even more dynamic, mechanistic patterns. Coincidentally, Drawbridge recalls that one of his teachers at the Central School was William Roberts who had been an original member of the British version of Futurism, the Vorticist Group, half a century earlier.

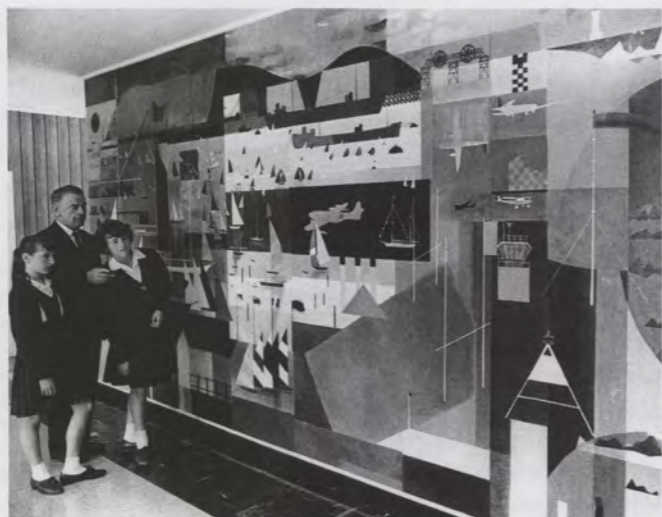
¹⁵ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, London: Faber & Faber, 1990, p.204.

combined with the fact that I could never really become part of another society made me know that New Zealand was my home.¹⁶ After the successes of the Redfern show and the unveiling by the Queen of the *New Zealand House Mural*, late in 1963 Drawbridge and Ashken bundled up the remaining paintings and set sail for Wellington.

Upon his return Drawbridge became immersed in teaching—at the Wellington Polytechnic's School of Design—and in the next few years embarked on important suites of mezzotints, including *Tanya Going and Coming* (1967) and *Interior* (1970). With teaching and printmaking dominating his time, the output of paintings during the 1960s slowed, although he did manage a six-metre-long mural for Evans Bay Intermediate School in 1965, a playful work that peppers a series of Ben Nicholson-esque panels with stylised boats, aeroplanes, football posts and flags.

Through the 1960s, a gulf was visibly widening between John Drawbridge's painting and printmaking, with figure-based subjects increasingly confined to printmaking while the paintings became more and more abstract. A large canvas from 1968, *Big Red* [plate 18] reflects the artist's ongoing interest in Abstract Expressionism and colour-field painting. At a time when much New Zealand art was dominated by a dour black and white palette, this work was a celebration of optical energy, a painterly flare. Similarly high-key, *Flight* (1968) [plate 17] retains a tenuous figurative reference in the Matisse-like forms which suggest sails,

16 John Drawbridge, 'I feel at home. . .', op.cit., p.50.



John Drawbridge's Evans Bay Intermediate School mural upon its unveiling, 1965, photograph courtesy of *Evening Post*, Wellington

clouds and the Island Bay environment. Like the work of Nicholas de Staël, these canvases seek to regain touch with visible reality through abstract means.

If the prints from around this time—of tables, windows, doors, family members—were images of stasis, of time suspended, Drawbridge's oil paintings presented a state of flux, a universe of exploded rather than perspectival space. You could think of these pointillist symphonies as an exploration of both cosmos and microcosmos, a kind of molecular realism or scientific super-realism which was first manifest in his large canvas, *Nucleus*, exhibited at the Redfern Gallery in 1963. They also explore Paul Klee's idea of colour as 'visual music'.

A homage to the sculptor Jean Arp, whose work Drawbridge had been introduced to by Tanya Ashken, *A Wrecked Angle* (1969) is dominated by a wavering golden square. Interestingly, this non-geometric form also appeared in *Tanya Going and Coming* (1967) and *A Rather Transparent Girl No.1* (1967) [plate 15]. The frame within the picture frame has remained a recurrent visual motif in Drawbridge's work. It also made a partial appearance in *Quasar* (1973), floating amidst a constellation of tiny brushmarks. In astronomy, a quasar is a particularly bright star-like celestial object. Although titled after its completion, this work reflects the artist's interest in new technologies and the new reality that space exploration was opening up. Staccato paintwork and the Turner-esque tumult of colour that dominated *Big Red* also featured in *Sea and Sky Mural* (1971) and the *IBM Mural* (1970). Exercises in irrational space, these works at once play with the flatness of the canvas and with a perspectival vortex. Allan Smith has observed that the textile-like quality of *Sea and Sky Mural*, with its strident colouration and optical effects, was in accord with the French chemist Chevreul's conclusion that 'the adjacency of contrasting colour threads enhanced their chromatic intensity'.¹⁷ In the best tradition of the Central School, Drawbridge was keeping a weather eye on theories and technologies well beyond the usual art world pale. In 1971 he set out his interests as an artist engaged with both the tradition of Western 'humanist' art and with the new realities of scientific discovery:

The origins of much of my work lie in the atmospheric elements of the earth and in humanity. A break in the clouds from 20,000 feet, looking down on to snow; the sun beating hard on the sea in the evening; flat country and trees under flood waters; a



A Wrecked Angle, 1969, oil on canvas, 2260 x 1650mm, collection of the artist

17 Allan Smith, *Local Colour: Eight Wellington Artists*, exhibition brochure, City Gallery Wellington, 1995, p.2. That exhibition, alongside the 2000 exhibition *Think Colour* at Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, Porirua, stated a strong case for the little-acknowledged colourist impulse in New Zealand art. Jonathan Mané-Wheoki's essay in the *Think Colour* catalogue is particularly relevant.

barmaid in Paris; these are a few of the impressionable moments. My work is about the mood or feeling of a thing, be it a landscape or an indefinable idea. I do not like to be categorised at all. Freedom to express whatever idea I have is very important, and as my range of thought is wide my work may seem enigmatic to some people.

I love paint and colour and to be actually creating a painting is a most satisfying thing. Of course, the painting should please me when it is finished, but the process is in a way more important. Just very occasionally I have been able to put down an immediate idea, but more often it is a case of working for many weeks on a canvas, sometimes leaving it and returning months later.¹⁸

Drawbridge's interest in new ways of seeing was matched with an increasingly adventurous use of media. Expanding on the textured painting techniques of the *New Zealand House Mural*, the *Beehive Mural* used strips of aluminium at right angles to the surface of the wall. This huge painted aluminium structure, built along a curving wall, was to take up much of his time and energy in the early 1970s.

At the beginning of that decade the artist embarked on a series of 'doorway' paintings which, three decades later, he is still working on. Alongside prints using framing 'panels' at left and right of the image, he produced such epic accounts as *Window* (1972) [plate 19], which harked back to Henri Matisse's *View of Notre Dame* and *Open Window, Collioure*, both of 1914. Like Bonnard, as J. T. Soby noted, Drawbridge is surest of himself as a landscape painter when he begins with 'a sense of enclosure, as when a garden is seen through an open door'.¹⁹ The use of a door or window framing the painted or printed 'view' has persisted in Drawbridge's art—notable examples including the virtuosic mezzotints, *Red Cloud* (1971) and *Woman and Stars* (1971), and the oil painting *Pacific* (1995) [plate 28].

III. THE PERSISTENT PRESENT

Since he was a teenager, John Drawbridge has been drawn to the art of Piero della Francesca, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Matisse and Malevich, not only for its formal and emotional capabilities but for its philosophical inquiry. Drawbridge has used his own painting and printmaking to explore this artistic lineage, his approach reflecting that of the Italian metaphysical



Quasar, 1973, oil on canvas, 2260 x 1651mm, collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

I can conceive nothing more revolutionary, today, than a form of Figuration that would allow the artist to sum up his whole being, what he sees and what he invents; what he remembers and what he dreams; who he is and what he wants to be.

JEAN HÉLION

¹⁸ Quoted in *Artis*, op.cit., p.18.

¹⁹ J.T. Soby, *Bonnard and his environment*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964, p.13.

artists who 'aimed not to subvert or transgress inherited pictorial traditions but to sustain them, although remodelling them according to a singular and unprecedented vision'.²⁰ Particularly in his mezzotints, he has studied and adapted the conceptual and imagistic bases of these artists, exploring ways in which abstraction and representation can co-relate. The capability of an art work to be at once self-referential and also have implications beyond itself is abundantly clear in *Still life with Malevich* (1988) [plate 26] and the many related prints which explore elements of high modernist abstraction while also depicting palpable reality. Not only is it a matter of exploring the relationship between figuration and abstraction, it is a question of exploring the territories of physics, mathematics and philosophy which both figurative and abstract art touch upon.

Drawbridge's 'artistic lineage' of painterly and non-painterly influences suggests yet another variation on Charpentier's 'les arts florissants', only in this case joining the sylvan brigade would be a proliferation of liberal and mechanical arts as well. John Drawbridge's works of the 1980s and 1990s reconcile not only different visual languages but different art historical and philosophical traditions and epochs. They revel in the interplay and the necessary tensions their many sources generate.

Painted in 1986, *Waiting for della Francesca* [plate 22] is a homage to the fifteenth century Italian master of luminous light and space. The painting is a meditation on Piero della Francesca's philosophical system rather than a revision or re-enactment of his compositional approach. Morton Feldman goes some distance to explaining why Piero is such a relevant figure for Drawbridge:

*Piero della Francesca is compounded with mysteries. Like Bach, his construction is his genius. We are looking into a world whose spatial relationships have adopted the newly discovered principles of Perspective. But Perspective was an instrument of measurement. Piero ignores this, and gives us eternity. His paintings indeed seem to recede into eternity. . . The surface seems to be just a door we enter to experience the painting as a whole.*²¹

Perhaps Drawbridge's manner is that which Piero might have adopted if he had been born in this age. With its conscious echo of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the painting begs a few questions: Can a painting 'wait'? How does it exist in time? Does the painting contain some figural or emblematic human presence? Why in the late twentieth century is an artist 'waiting' for a fifteenth-century master?

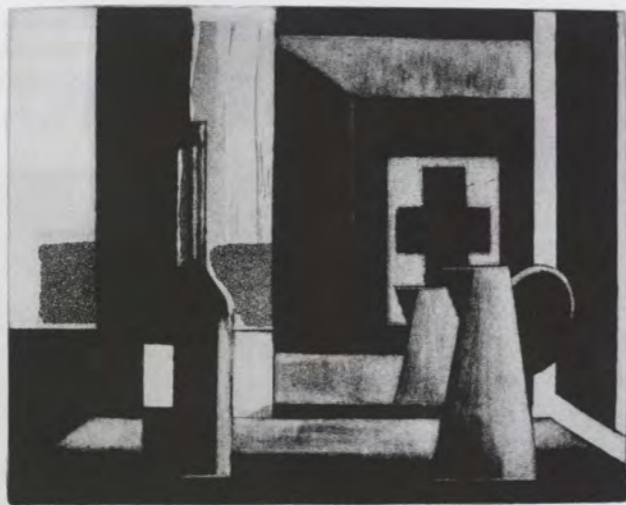
. . . an art about flight, about man's ascent into the ether and into the planetary world of the future . . .
KAZIMIR MALEVICH



Woman and Stars, 1971, mezzotint, 500 x 490mm, collection of the artist

²⁰ Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997, p.87.

²¹ Morton Feldman, *Give my Regards to Eighth Street: The Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Boston: Exact Change, 2000, pp.83-84.



Still Life with Malevich (Black), 1988, mezzotint, 195 x 245mm, private collection, Wellington

From an early age, Drawbridge was intrigued by the studied geometries and theorems of scientist painters including Leonardo, della Francesca (who was a mathematician and expert on Euclidean geometry) and Vermeer. Drawbridge studied della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* (c.1451) at London's National Gallery in the early 1960s and on subsequent visits. The two qualities that have made Piero della Francesca such an important painter from the viewpoint of the modernist era are the same aspects that made him a key influence on Drawbridge. Firstly, the mood of Piero's paintings is of mystical clarity, a rippled stillness. (This detachment and enigmatic quality have made him a relevant figure for artists from de Chirico to Balthus—and for New Zealand artists as diverse as Stephen Bambury and Richard McWhannell.) Secondly, the structural rather than representational geometries of Piero's art made him a key figure for Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich. While Drawbridge's prints explore Piero's perspectival exactitude, in *Waiting for della Francesca* he plays a different game, tilting the master's illusionistic space at right angles to itself so it defines the flat surface of the canvas rather than illusionistic depth. In its juxtaposition of clearly outlined forms and soft atmospherics, this ambiguous composition pays heed to Oscar Schlemmer's exhortation that art must investigate space, both its laws and its mysteries.

Drawbridge's abstraction was certainly shaped, albeit indirectly, by the Platonic idea of the mystic harmony that permeates all creation. (This is a theme that would definitely have pervaded the

conversation in the windswept tramps' hut on Mount Aspiring.) However, while Drawbridge makes use of what Kenneth Clark called 'that arsenal of geometry, of which the golden section was only one important weapon'²², it is important to remember he has always been, fundamentally, an intuitive painter. If there is an idealistic tendency in his work, Drawbridge's artistic project aspires to neither the social utopia of Malevich nor Matisse's utopia of sensory and sensual pleasure, of 'luxe, calme et volupté'. Instead, his idealism or aspiration is concentrated on the practical matter of making a painting or print, the labour inherent in that, and with rendering a formally resolved artefact. At the same time, his paintings and prints are also avowedly impure productions. If they touch upon notions of perfection or infinity, they also stand their ground in the physical world and in the subjective realm of the artist's own experience.

From the 1980s onwards, Drawbridge used his still life and figure-in-landscape paintings to realign art history, bringing disparate sources together. In *Vermeer with Malevich* (1984) [plate 24], Malevich's *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles* (1915) and *Suprematist Painting* (1921-27) hang on the back wall of a living room lifted from Vermeer. Just as Johannes Itten had his students busily reducing Giotto's *Annunciation of St Anne* to a geometric arrangement, Drawbridge simplifies, schematises and adds to Vermeer's *The Love Letter* to arrive at this composition. Running counter to the Western tradition of the printmaker striving to duplicate the effects of painting, here we have an oil painting adopting the flattened application of paint and discrete areas of colour normally associated with printmaking.

In *Still Life with Malevich (Black)*, the Russian's black cross is incorporated into a Morandi-esque still life. Importantly, Drawbridge references *specific* works; the paintings are homage rather than pastiche. Elsewhere, he uses Malevich's *Black Square*, which was described by its creator as 'the face of the new art. The Square is a living, royal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art.'²³ In Drawbridge's version—or, to be more precise, accommodation—the motif exists as but one part of a composition which might serve as a metaphor for art history in general with its myriad of sources. Drawbridge appropriated the motif—and its bolshevik cousin *Red Square* (1915)—in numerous prints during the 1990s. In a 1994 mezzotint, *Velázquez Infanta* [see p.45], we find Malevich's black obliterating geometry cohabitating with another of the little darlings of Western Art: Velázquez's *Infanta*.



Reproduction of Drawbridge's *The Concert (Vermeer with Matisse)*, 1983, on concert programme

²² Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, London: Penguin 1949, p.125.

²³ Kazimir Malevich quoted in John Golding, *Visions of the Modern*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p.177.

John Drawbridge's explorations and revisions of the Western canon acknowledge New Zealand's position as the rag and bone shop at the end of the world, a locus where all sorts of images and ideas finish up, and where they can be reassembled, integrated, orchestrated. Drawbridge believes that being based in the antipodes allows an artist to 'stand back from the sources'—to keep a critical distance. 'I feel, too, that in living here, I have been able to retain the freedoms, and hopefully avoid the stereotypes, of being an artist.'²⁴ While such an approach could be considered a form of provincialism, it has inarguably given rise to some of this country's most remarkable art, whether you are thinking of McCahon's revisions of Titian and Bellini, or Woollaston's recasting of Cézanne, or Dick Frizzell's mischievous cross-referencing of imported and local icons.

If the scientific space of Piero was fuelled by a thirst for certainty not only in pictorial matters but in spiritual ones as well, then Drawbridge's paintings are more concerned with the balancing of certainty with uncertainty, rationality with irrationality, of that which is known with that which is hidden. You could call this the twentieth century condition. The resulting works are a far cry from the ideal of painting as an 'open window' which, in Herbert Read's words, 'was the complete illusion of a uniform spatial atmosphere, [which] was to be achieved by the tradition which reached its perfection in a painter like Vermeer'.²⁵

John Drawbridge's *Interior with figures* (2000) [plate 29] is a conundrum of non-naturalistic spaces and mirrored zones which, like a kind of fantasy-fiction, 'mobilises several dimensions of space and time without losing its narrative thread, and contrives to deploy a historical sense in tandem with an awareness of physics and biology'.²⁶ The main point of divergence between painting and fiction, however, occurs in the vicinity of the term 'narrative'. The metaphysical and essentially enigmatic cast of not only Drawbridge's recent paintings but all of his mezzotints renders them timeless and, essentially, beyond narrative. Like the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico or Carlo Carrà, they are moments cast adrift, a 'persistent present' that can neither be claimed by the past nor projected into the future.

The presence of mirrors or an implied mirroring of forms is an important metaphor and visual device in Drawbridge's work from the 1980s and '90s. His mezzotints based on Vermeer and other Old Masters are literally mirror-images, the compositions being etched accurately onto the plate then reversed during the printing



Bottles and Table, 1998, mezzotint, 172 x 150mm, private collection, Wellington

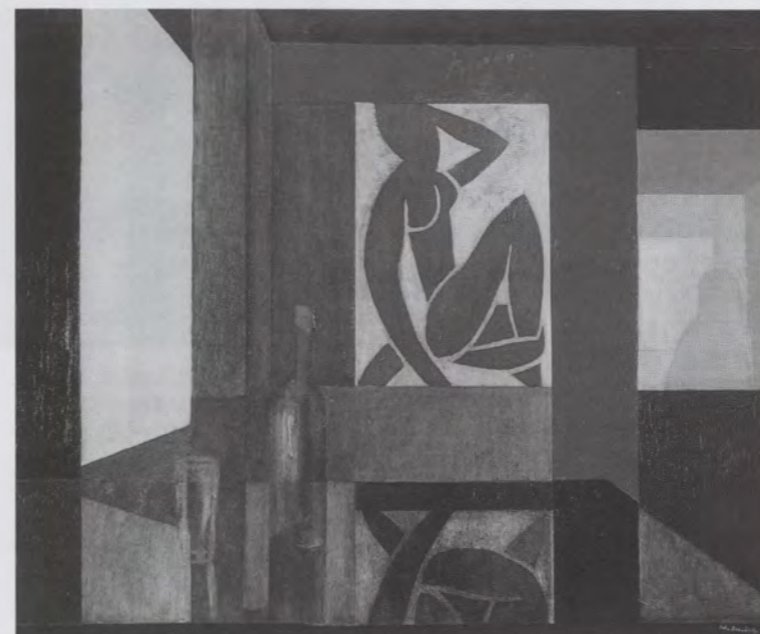
²⁴ John Drawbridge 'I feel at home... ', op.cit., p.53.

²⁵ Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, London: Faber, 1972, p.56.

²⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislators*, New York: Verso, 2000, p.61.

process. In *Interior with Matisse* (1985), the Matisse-inspired 'Blue Nude' is mirrored in the table top below, as are the Morandi-esque glass and bottle. *Interior with Matisse* is a constructivist arrangement of formal elements, and of rhythmical repeats—note the succession of receding doorways on the right. In Drawbridge's many prints incorporating bottles and tabletops, the reflective tabletops suggest infinity.

As well as incorporating windows and doorways—passages through or onwards—the compositions fold in on themselves. By the late 1990s the spatial treatments had become even more elaborate, imparting a sense of optical unease. While soft tonal rendering in Western art is usually a convenient device to suggest recession into the far distance, in *Interior with figures* the hazy, light-inflected human and architectural details are telescoped to the very front of the pictorial space. The viewer is drawn into a folded-screen-like environment where interior and exterior concertina in on one another, and ghostly masses of cloud float among the muted conversations of the living room. These enigmatic environments hark back to the art of Oscar Schlemmer—in particular the palace-like setting of his neo-classical/constructivist *Roman* (1925)—which sets its figures in a similarly compartmentalised space. The mirroring in *Interior with*



Interior with Matisse, 1985, oil on canvas, 1250 x 1500mm, private collection

figures also references two prints by Pierre Bonnard which John Drawbridge has in his collection. The mirrored head of a woman relates to *La vie de Sainte Monique* (1930) and the silhouetted heads (in *Interior with figures* and elsewhere) echo Bonnard's portrait of his wife, Marthe, entitled *Toilette* (1927).

IV. SKY, WINDOW, SEA

John Drawbridge's studio, house and coastal surrounds on the western end of Island Bay are a constant in his work. His watercolours in particular are permeated with a sense of that littoral environment, with its dissolving headlands, inconclusive distances and atmospherics. To walk through the artist's house is to move through the various zones of his art and to sense its origins not only in the physical world outside but in the traditions that continue to nourish it. Books line the shelves—among them, Mervyn Peake, William Blake, Picasso—and works by printmaker-artists line the walls—John Martin, Paul Cézanne, Elisabeth Frink, Edouard Vuillard and André Dunoyer de Segonzac. Tanya Ashken's sculptures not only punctuate the interior of the house but the garden around it. (Not surprisingly, their biomorphic forms have also appeared in many of Drawbridge's mezzotints.) This domestic environment is very much in accord with an oeuvre which moves effortlessly from personal and lyrical to impersonal and metaphysical. The works impart a sense of the changing pattern of human relationships, of family life, the comings and goings, all of them rendered with an understatement typical of the artist.

While Drawbridge's art is immensely responsive to his surroundings and circumstance, at the same time it is, in the best sense of the term, workman-like. It is an act of concentrated labour, bespeaking a tradition of received and passed-on knowledge. John Drawbridge's paintings seek to explore, reconcile and integrate opposites—a tendency Lesleigh Salinger observed when she wrote of him in terms of Herman Hesse's *Narziss und Goldmund*, a novel in which the two main characters symbolise two major facets of the human personality; those of action and of contemplation:

Whilst Goldmund, the voyager, travels through life recording experience at a sensory level, Narziss lives the secluded life of the monk. His voyage is an introspective one; his life dedicated to the enrichment of the intellect. In the great European Humanist

The artist must always be looking to nature. If he does not, his Art begins to plant a hedge around him.

JACK B. YEATS



Oscar Schlemmer, *Roman*, 1925, oil on canvas, 975 x 620mm, collection Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunst Museum

*tradition, Hesse explored how those two streams of human experience could be resolved into a whole. In reviewing the working life of artist John Drawbridge, the strength of that Humanist tradition is revealed. His work has been both an exploration of the rational, and of the emotional, and a search to integrate the two . . . Drawbridge is in Hesse's terms both Narziss and Goldmund.*²⁷

Drawbridge's work as an educationalist has been another crucial facet of his creative life. Through his teaching at the Wellington Polytechnic School of Design, and the countless night-classes and summer schools he has convened, his teaching has introduced many young artists to the freedoms and rigours of art-making. His commitment to teaching marks a continuance of the attitudes and energies he himself was granted by a succession of extraordinary teachers in the 1940s, '50s and early '60s.

There are a succession of 'groups' that figure through John Drawbridge's life; beginning with the Arts themselves, Charpentier's 'les arts florissants'—painting, poetry, and music—and their embodiment in his early life in the persons of Brian Brake, Douglas Lilburn and James K. Baxter—that miraculous party cast adrift in the Southern Alps. There are the teachers and colleagues in Wellington, Dunedin, London and Paris. There is The Group in Christchurch, with which he exhibited from the late 1940s, and the close friendships with other artists, among them Rita Angus, Gordon Crook and Brian Carmody. Then there are the masters of Western art, with whom his art has been in constant dialogue.

I imagine an epic version of Drawbridge's 1961 painting *The Party*, in which all the aforementioned figures appear. Their vessel has just reached the shore at Island Bay, across the road from the Drawbridges' house. One by one, these figures disembark, wade ashore then gather on the narrow strip of sand that slopes down to the blue, black tide as it rushes between water's edge and Tapu Te Ranga. This gathering is at once a party, a ritual, an unruly, albeit well-meaning mob. Yet there is also a marvellous harmony about this disparate crowd—this mortal and immortal company in which John Drawbridge has spent his working life and in which he finds himself as he begins work each day in his studio.



Pierre Bonnard, *Toilette*, 1927, dry-point, 220 x 160mm, collection of John Drawbridge and Tanya Ashken

²⁷ Lesleigh Salinger, Governor General, Art Award catalogue, 1989, unpaginated.

COMING AND GOING

JOHN DRAWBRIDGE, POP ART, AND THE NEW BOHEMIA IN LONDON

Lara Strongman

John Drawbridge is a painter of sea and sky, light and dark, tempest and calm; of elemental forces of nature barely contained by the picture's geometry. In the history of modernist abstraction in New Zealand, Drawbridge is there, with old friends Ralph Hotere and Don Peebles, in the members' stand at the neo-romantic end. How, then, to account for the flamboyant Pop of images such as the two versions of *A Rather Transparent Girl* (1967) [plates 15 and 16] or the mezzotint *Emma* (1967) (inspired by *The Avengers'* Mrs. Peel), which seem, at first glance, figurative anomalies within the Drawbridge canon? And how, strangely enough, does one assimilate what are Drawbridge's best-known works, the industrial Op Art extravaganzas of his murals at the Beehive and the National Library in Wellington, within a painterly oeuvre which appears to lead in a very different direction? The genesis for these works begins, like many great stories, with a sea journey.

John Drawbridge left Wellington in search of adventure and artistic stimulation in 1957. He was twenty six when he set sail for London, returning six years later steeped in both the high culture of the old world and the pop culture of a new society. Commenting that going to London 'was in a sense like being reborn', this expatriate experience was to have a profound and somewhat unexpected effect on the development of Drawbridge's work.¹

Mindful of his teacher Roland Hipkins' exhortation not to allow an artistic career to be subsumed by teaching, Drawbridge resigned his position at the Wellington Teachers' Training College. He had been awarded a National Art Gallery travelling scholarship

Opposite: John Drawbridge with printing press, c.1964, photography by Jule Einhorn

¹ John Drawbridge, 'The New Zealand Artist at Home and Abroad', *Far and Wide*, no.53, Summer, 1960, p.18.



to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and boarded the gangplank of the *Rangitane* on the Auckland waterfront with a sense of 'longing anticipation'.² His first exposure to modern British art came almost before the ship had left the heads of Manukau Harbour. Ben Nicholson's painting *October 1949* had been commissioned for the *Rangitane* by the New Zealand Shipping Company, and hung on a curved wall in the lounge.

The sea voyage to London, via landfall at Pitcairn, Panama, and Curaçao, took more than six weeks. In the company of another New Zealand artist, Brian Carmody, Drawbridge sketched the exotic sights and experienced the strong emotional impact of the journey. 'The size, the space of the great oceans, the places of arrival on the way. . .'³ Once in London, Drawbridge and Carmody became part of a wider expatriate community of New Zealand artists, who had travelled as recipients of scholarships or under their own steam to immerse themselves in the cultural centres of the old world.⁴ Studying by day at the Royal College of Art or the Central School, by night the New Zealanders frequented revivalist jazz clubs, heard skiffle groups in basement coffee houses, watched Neo-Realist films from Europe and returned to damp crowded flats in Victorian terraces.

Until the Second World War, the parallel worlds of high and low culture had been kept rigidly segregated by the British class system. High culture belonged to the aristocracy: popular culture was the domain of the working people. They came together in the lives of the post-war art students, the new classless meritocracy. 'We didn't spend our time analysing everything, we just worked. When we did get together to talk it was about life, films, books, not just our paintings.'⁵

Drawbridge and Carmody spent their early days in the city at the Tate and the National Gallery, viewing works of art which they had previously only seen in reproduction. Like many New Zealand artists of his generation, Drawbridge's experience of international art had been largely drawn from illustrations in the *Penguin Modern Painters* series. He commented that his encounter with the originals was sometimes disappointing, sometimes overwhelming, noting that 'by means of imported books, pictorial reproductions and occasional travelling exhibitions, New Zealanders have gained closer acquaintance with ideas from the outside world than with artists working in other parts of their own country.'⁶ It was the company of other artists in London

2 John Drawbridge, 'I feel at home with my work being here', in *Godwits Return*, ed. Margaret Clark, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992, p.44.

3 *ibid.* p.44.

4 Between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, a roll-call of these New Zealand artists in London included, among others, Bill Culbert (the joint recipient of the National Art Gallery travelling scholarship in 1957 with Drawbridge), Gil Hanly, Barrie Bates (who changed his name to Billy Apple in 1962), Melvin Day, Robert Macdonald, Matt Pine, John Panting, Carl Sydow, Steve Furlonger, Pat Hanly, Don Peebles, Michael Browne, Ralph Hotere, Jeanne Macaskill (née Bensemann), Vic Gray, Douglas MacDiarmid, Rita Angus, and Tony Fomison.

5 Jim and Mary Barr, *New Zealand Artists A-M*, Martinborough: Alister Taylor, 1980, p.50.

6 John Drawbridge, 'The New Zealand Artist at Home and Abroad', *ibid.* p.19.

which Drawbridge found most stimulating, an antidote to the social isolation which he and many others had experienced as artists in New Zealand.

Studying art at the Central School of Arts and Crafts was a revelation for Drawbridge. Founded in 1896, the school's teaching philosophies were directly drawn from William Morris's principles for the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement, which had such a profound influence on the Bauhaus: that the artist or craftsperson should hold fast to a notion of 'truth to materials', and demonstrate a sound working knowledge of the technical process involved in the manufacture of the art object. It was not the function of the lecturers at the Central School, however, to impart knowledge about process—that was left to skilled technicians. The lecturers were practising artists of repute, who, under the guidance of the school's principal William Johnstone, often taught in areas outside their own disciplines: Pop sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, for example, lectured in textile design. Discussions about art and life, philosophy and films, fashion and literature raged daily in the studios among the lecturers and students from all countries of the Commonwealth. Fresh from Wellington and released from what he described as the 'narrow limits' of the artistic life in 1950s New Zealand, an international vista of ideas opened before Drawbridge.

Drawbridge's class at the Central School was the very last to go fully through their training under the post-war National Diploma in Design, a system now remembered as 'the halcyon days of art school life, when Bohemia was a viable career option'.⁷ George Melly commented: 'In the early 1950s and '60s. . . the art schools were the refuge of the bright but unacademic, the talented, the non-conformist, the lazy, the inventive and the indecisive: all those who didn't know what they wanted but knew it wasn't a nine-till-five office job.'⁸ Without a rigid framework for teaching or assessment, students largely worked on their own projects while the lecturers initiated stimulating conversations. The desire to live the artistic life, to close the gap between the routine of the real world and the consolatory fictions of art, was manifest in the lives of both the students and their lecturers in the London art schools. In this new bohemia of fishermen's jerseys and army surplus duffel coats, portable gramophones and government grants, the practice of art was as much—perhaps more—a lifestyle than a living. Robert Macdonald, an expatriate New Zealand journalist and artist who enrolled at the Central School a year after



Alex Starkey, photograph of Don Peebles, John Drawbridge and Robert Macdonald, London 1962

7 The National Diploma in Design was replaced in 1961 by the Diploma in Art and Design. See Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop*, London: Methuen, 1987, p.40.

8 George Melly, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts*, Oxford University Press, 1989 (first publ. 1970), p.146.

Drawbridge 'on the strength of a bundle of old drawings he'd done at home', commented: 'I was quite content simply to be an artist, doing my own thing in late Fifties London.'⁹

The late 1950s marks what is usually apostrophised as the second phase of British Pop Art, as the movement took hold among the leading young visual artists in London. When the term 'Pop' first appeared in print in 1958, it was initially understood to refer to the vast image bank of popular culture—magazine photography, movie stills, advertising and packaging—which had burgeoned amid the post-war affluence of Britain and the United States, and which British intellectuals were beginning to regard as a new art form.¹⁰ It was not until the early 1960s that the contemporary understanding of Pop, as 'high' art in which an image originally derived from mass culture is still visible, came into general usage. The birth of British Pop had taken place between 1952-1955 among a loosely-knit community of artists and intellectuals at the ICA known as the Independent Group, who met for lectures and discussions and organised cutting-edge art exhibitions. As well as critic Lawrence Alloway and leading artists Richard Hamilton and John McHale, the group's members included several lecturers at the Royal College of Art and the Central School of Arts and Crafts who were formative influences on the expatriate New Zealand artists; including Paolozzi, William Turnbull and Victor Pasmore.

The new movement as embodied by the Independent Group was at once aesthetic and anthropological in origin, representing in the first instance less a rejection of the art of the recent past than a critique of middlebrow taste and values. As design critic Reyner Banham noted: 'Pop was meant as a cultural break, signifying the firing squad without mercy or reprieve, for the kind of people that believed in the Loeb classics, holidays in Tuscany, drawings by Augustus John, signed pieces of French furniture, leading articles in the *Daily Telegraph* and very good clothes that lasted forever...'¹¹ For Drawbridge, however, interest in Pop Art did not imply a rejection of other alternatives: he spent long hours studying in the Print Room at the British Museum, and made a trip to Europe in 1958 where he sketched from the Old Masters in the Louvre, the Prado and the Rijksmuseum. He saw the Jackson Pollock retrospective at the Whitechapel in 1958. When the major travelling exhibition of abstract expressionism, *New American Painting*, was shown at the Tate Gallery in 1958, Drawbridge visited many times, particularly affected by the work of Barnett Newman.¹² His later works, such as the haunting suite of

9 Robert Macdonald, 'Central's Line to Calamity', *The Guardian*, 5 January 1985, p.9; quoted in Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop*, London: Methuen, 1987, p.40.

10 Lawrence Alloway, 'The Arts and the Mass Media', *Architectural Design*, February 1958, pp.84-85.

11 Reyner Banham, quoted in Dick Hebdige, 'In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop', in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop*, New York: Institute for Contemporary Art, and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987, p.77.

12 Anne Kirker, *John Drawbridge, New Zealand's Master Printmaker*, Christchurch: Peter Small, 1986, n.p.



Interior with Tanya, 1983, mezzotint, 250 x 160mm, collection of the artist

mezzotints, *Tanya Going and Coming* of 1967, often combine elements of both Pop and Abstract Expressionism.

By 1963, following a period of study at two leading Parisian print-making ateliers, John Drawbridge was a rising star in the London art scene. He had been awarded a Diploma of Distinction from the Central School; he had been elected an associate member of the Royal Society of Painter-etchers and Engravers; his etchings had been accepted for exhibition by the Royal Academy in 1960 and 1962 and had been purchased by both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum; the New Zealand government had extended his grant for a further year. His photograph had appeared in *Tatler* magazine; his work had been well-reviewed in the *Guardian* and in British art magazines. He had been singled out as a promising 'newcomer in abstraction' at the Leicester Gallery in 1960, the gallery at which Merlyn Evans, his influential lecturer in printmaking from the Central School, also exhibited.¹³ He had married Tanya Ashken, a fellow student who was studying

13 Unreferenced clipping from the artist's archive, *Apollo: The Magazine of the Arts*, September 1960.

silver-smithing (and who incidentally was the youngest person in Britain ever to be awarded a personal hallmark), in 1960. The couple lived in a small flat overlooking the pedestrian crossing made famous by the Beatles on the cover of the 1969 LP, *Abbey Road*. Along with Bill Culbert, Drawbridge's work had been included in the first Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art. And in 1963, Drawbridge's first solo exhibition at the prestigious Redfern Gallery was an outstanding success, resulting in critical acclaim and considerable sales to European collectors, including the Rothschild family.¹⁴

More than one critic noticed that a distinctive feature of Drawbridge's painting was a sense of the Pacific. Max Wykes-Joyce described 'a large creation in white and blue, reminiscent of brighter sun and sea than any to which we are accustomed'¹⁵, while Bettina Wadia noted a simultaneous attraction to the 'brilliance of American hard-edged painting' and a 'lyrical evocation of sea and sunlight'.¹⁶ It was, perhaps, to be prophetic: late in 1963 John Drawbridge and Tanya Ashken set sail from Southampton, leaving behind their life in London for a new life together in Wellington's Island Bay.

Drawbridge has frequently been asked by art historians about the decision to leave London. After the success of his 1963 solo exhibition, he had received an invitation to show again the following year at the Redfern Gallery. Its director was Rex Nan Kivell, an expatriate New Zealand art collector who had left his birthplace, Christchurch, at the age of sixteen to fight in the First World War. Nan Kivell dealt in twentieth-century European masters, and took on the occasional 'promising unknown' such as Drawbridge,¹⁷ whose work hung in summer exhibitions alongside paintings by Picasso, Mondrian and Matisse. Drawbridge turned his back on what George Melly describes as 'the cult of instant success or bust' prevalent among the young artists in London in the early 1960s: 'the belief that if you didn't make it straight from art school to a fashionable gallery you might as well give up'.¹⁸ Of his early success, Drawbridge commented many years later: 'I had got to know a lot about the kind of "type-casting" required for British artists to be recognised and promoted by critics and the art fraternity. I was scared that the price of possible fame in that society would limit my freedom to paint as I felt. I knew then that perhaps the best way for me to retain artistic freedom would be to return to New Zealand.'¹⁹

14 Jim and Mary Barr, op.cit., p.50.

15 Max Wykes-Joyce, review in *The Arts Review*, vol.XV, no.6, 6 April 1963.

16 Bettina Wadia, review in *The Arts Review*, vol.XV, no.19, 5 October 1963.

17 T.K. Rowe, 'Rex Nan Kivell Expects to Revisit N.Z. Next Year', *Evening Post*, 10 June 1963.

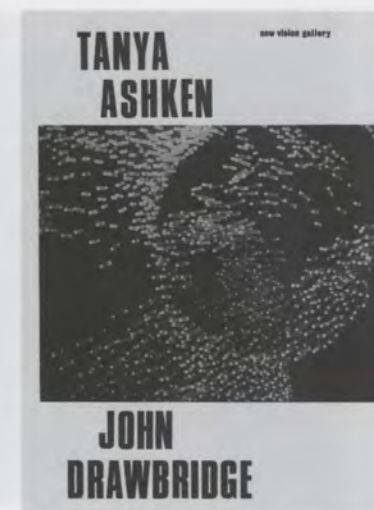
18 George Melly, quoted in Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop*, op. cit., p.106.

19 John Drawbridge, 'I feel at home...' op. cit., p.50.

Back in Wellington, Drawbridge resumed his teaching role, with a position at the newly-established Wellington Polytechnic School of Design. The stimulus of the artistic life around the couple, however, fell sharply away: New Zealand, on the return of the Drawbridges in 1963, 'seemed a strange, empty place to us both'.²⁰ While in London, Drawbridge had painted images redolent of Pacific light and air, back in Wellington the urban iconography and contemporary techniques that he had absorbed in Britain began to creep into his work. It was as if a gestation period had been required, or at least the reflective qualities of distance. Drawbridge printed *A Rather Transparent Girl No. 2*, for example, three years after his return: this image reveals a Pop use of a photographic source and contains simplified areas of solid colour in a solarising effect derived from the silkscreen process. The cheeky, provocative pose of the 'transparent girl' is also a tenet of Pop iconography, whose source is the recycling of stereotypical advertising images.

Female figures frequently appear in Drawbridge's prints after his return to New Zealand, most notably in the images of his wife, *Tanya Going and Coming*. Tanya Ashken is pictured passing through the hallways of their home at a distance, wearing a pair of knee-high boots and a mini-dress. Her long straight hair catches the light falling through doorways behind her. She is the epitome of the new '60s model girl, a Twiggy-like antidote to the voluptuous clothes horses of the 1950s: she appears in Drawbridge's images like Jean Seberg in Godard's *A Bout de Souffle*, or Vanessa Redgrave in Antonioni's *Blow Up*. If the 1950s mannequin 'with her matching bag, gloves and shoes' is epitomised by the *Vogue* fashion spreads of Cecil Beaton, then it was David Bailey who popularised the icon of the swinging 1960s, 'the childlike, sensual and unpredictable model girl'.²¹

While Pop artists were generally fascinated by the images of the immediate present, Drawbridge never lost his interest in the art of the past. Reworkings of images from European art history frequently appear in Drawbridge's prints and paintings, sometimes sharing the composition with his female figures. Matisse's cutouts coexist with a solarised version of Mae West as a show girl, while Tanya appears in a doorway above a Malevich-like black rectangle; Malevich's *Suprematism (Eight Red Rectangles)* is conflated with a Vermeer rendered in simplified blocks of colour. While Drawbridge's instinct for historical relativism in his



Tanya Ashken and John Drawbridge exhibition catalogue cover, New Vision Gallery, 1966

20 ibid. p.50.

21 George Melly, *Revolt into Style*, op.cit. p.161.



Expo '70 Mural, 1970, mixed media, reconstructed in 1987 in the National Library, Wellington

works of the 1960s might mark him as a proto-postmodernist, it is also a trait he shares with American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, who similarly combined images from Old Masters such as Velázquez and Rubens with the detritus of Western mass culture. In such works, both historical and contemporary images are treated as readymade signs, 'pre-coded material [which]. . . is known to the spectator in advance of seeing the use the artist makes of it'.²²

Drawbridge and Ashken worked hard not to 'stagnate complacently in a cultural backwater', as Drawbridge put it, on their return to New Zealand.²³ A distinct advantage of the move to Wellington for Drawbridge was, as a returned expatriate of renown, the opportunity to work on major site-specific commissions. Drawbridge had first felt the call to return to New Zealand almost literally one night when working on his first architectural commission, a fifty-foot mural for the unfinished New Zealand House in London. 'Out of the darkness came Inia Te Wiata, who was working on his carving. He said. . . no, he sang to me, that he saw New Zealand in my work.'²⁴ Back in New Zealand, the mural commissions followed in rapid succession for Drawbridge, installed in many major public and private sites between 1965 and 1987.

While the *New Zealand House Mural* had involved a literal extension of his contemporary painting practice, an abstract work reminiscent of the colours and forms of the New Zealand landscape from dawn to dusk, in later murals Drawbridge

²² Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974, p.7.

²³ John Drawbridge, 'The New Zealand Artist at Home and Abroad', op.cit. p.22.

²⁴ Jim and Mary Barr, op.cit., p.50.

experimented with optical techniques and industrial processes. The *Beehive Mural*, for example, is a double image, a 'concertina' of spines which requires the viewer to experience each image by walking past from left to right and right to left. Over the three years it took to fabricate this work between 1973 and 1976, Drawbridge experimented with producing prints in relief, using a similar folded concertina effect in aquatints such as *Beach Girl*.

In other murals, Drawbridge employed abstracted aluminium forms to catch the light as viewers passed through a building's public concourse: the *National Library Mural* involved the use of fibre optics to create rippling effects of light and shade, a reworking of the mural constructed from perspex rods which had been commissioned for the New Zealand pavilion at Expo '70 in Japan. In the *National Library Mural*, the two halves of Drawbridge's practice might be seen to be brought together: his passion for the oppositional forces of nature reconciled with his predilection for the new industrial technologies advocated by Richard Hamilton and the British Pop artists.

There is the sense, glimpsed through the corridors and doorways of Drawbridge's artistic practice, of a life well-lived: of the fortuitous coming together of metaphors which provide the framework for the telling of a grand narrative. It is the view across water that provides not only the subject matter for many of Drawbridge's works, but a window into his practice. Take, for example, the fate of a suite of prints made in London, a rainstorm over Manukau Heads inspired by his last sight of New Zealand in 1957. Purchased from the Piccadilly Gallery in 1962, they were installed on board the newly-commissioned inter-island ferry *Aramoana*. Five years previously, the student Drawbridge had travelled to London in the company of Ben Nicholson's mural aboard the *Rangitane*: his works came home before him, heralding the return of a significant New Zealand artist.

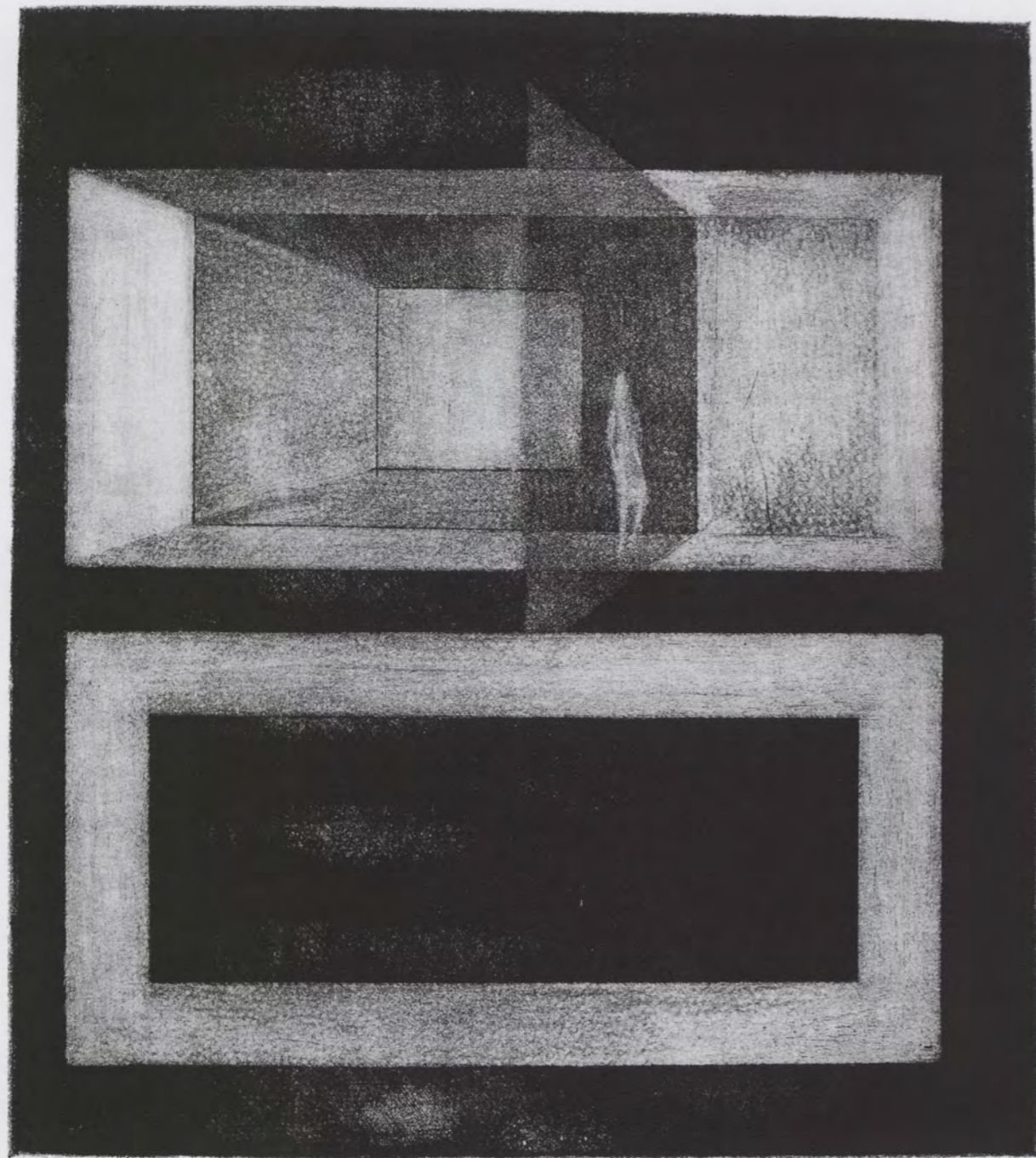
'Stretch a point,' wrote Peter Cape of Drawbridge's work, 'and you have a line.'²⁵ The point here is recognition of Drawbridge's consistently fluid artistic identity, moving like a tide between experimentation and tradition, abstraction and figuration, the old world and the new, his artistic lineage informed as much by Pop Art as by Abstract Expressionism, by urban culture as much as elemental nature. As Drawbridge himself stated: 'I do not try to propound a dogma, for by doing so I would be imprisoned within the predictable limits of the idea.'²⁶ Drawbridge's work has consistently pushed the limits of the idea.



Interior No. II, 1979, mezzotint, 630 x 350mm, collection of the artist

²⁵ Peter Cape, 'John Drawbridge: Techniques and Values', *Landfall*, June 1973, p.144.

²⁶ John Drawbridge, quoted in *ibid.* p.146.



SHADOWLANDS: THE PRINTS OF JOHN DRAWBRIDGE

Gerald Barnett

I. PRINTMAKING AND CONTEMPORARY ART

In the context of today's contemporary art, printmaking is located very much on the margins. But for an artist like John Drawbridge, the margins remain a rewarding place to explore—a place where we encounter the rich ambiguities of discarded knowledge and outmoded technologies in relation to global modernity. Drawbridge's exploration of this territory—of printmaking in particular—has yielded a body of work refreshingly free of rhetoric, but not without a critical dimension, for the work quietly insists on a clear-eyed continuity with the past.

Since modernism's dismantling, the avant-garde has manifested itself as a kind of restless insecurity in contemporary art practice. Every corner of the wider visual culture has been rummaged for practices, technologies and 'looks' that might give art purchase on the *now*: a notion which, despite its inherent slipperiness, has been thoroughly commodified since the '80s. Eclecticism has had positive effects on art, yet the more art has mimicked other cultural practices the less it seems able to differentiate itself. The international fashion for intermedia and installation art can be seen as a case in point.

Yet, not all international contemporary artists have chosen to follow these practices. One thinks of such diverse artists as Luc

Opposite: Tanya going and coming No. III, 1967, mezzotint, 330 x 300mm, collection of the artist

Tuymans, William Kentridge, Mary Heilmann and John Currin for instance, whose work evinces such overt artistic qualities as human scale and intimate labour. As well as these innate consolations, there seems to be a renewed appetite for the kind of beauty that has traditionally relied on the artist's hand. There are no guarantees of course—beauty is never simply a matter of mere technique or imitation—but a backward glance is enough to suggest what might be possible. In recent decades there have been some compelling examples of artists who have rejected Roland Barthes' famously pessimistic remark that, 'to be modern is to know what is no longer possible'.

Gerhard Richter, for example, when asked why he had not changed his methods in accordance with the radical critique of painting explicit in his work, replied: 'In this respect I'm extremely conservative. It seems to me like someone saying a language is no longer useable because it is a bourgeois inheritance. . . I am bourgeois enough to go on eating with a knife and fork, just as I paint in oil on canvas.'¹

II. MEZZOTINT

Throughout his fifty-year career as an artist, Drawbridge has immersed himself in printmaking, experimenting with a range of techniques including etching. Today Drawbridge confines himself to mezzotint and drypoint techniques in the belief that these forms of image-making are capable of a unique lightness and exactitude. He seeks images that have the tonal presence of oil painting and the perceptual triggers of photography, but which remain resolutely hand-made. For Drawbridge, the unsurpassed graphic poetry of Rembrandt, Goya, Martin, Bonnard, Villon, Picasso and Morandi, to name a few exceptional printmakers, is the most compelling argument for persisting with a technology that many would consider an anachronism.

Incidentally, ours is not the only historical period in which printmaking has fallen into neglect. In the 1920s Giorgio Morandi, perhaps the greatest etcher of the twentieth century, had to teach himself the technique from a seventeenth-century textbook. When Drawbridge left New Zealand for Europe in 1957, printmaking as a medium for artistic expression was not taught in any of the art schools. This situation would be remedied shortly afterward, but



The Music Lesson (Vermeer), 1983, mezzotint, 250 x 160mm, collection of the artist

¹ Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt, Cambridge: The MIT Press; London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995, pp.150,152.

Drawbridge was fortunate in encountering a revival of interest which was underway when he arrived as a student at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. There he studied under Merlyn Evans, and later in Paris with Stanley Hayter, who was to be a pivotal figure in English and European printmaking for several decades. Forty-five years later, seeing Drawbridge at work on his plates, handling arcane mezzotint tools, inks and press, one realises the importance of that grounding in the technical aspects of printmaking. It is a knowledge that Drawbridge has willingly imparted to numerous students over the years in his role as a teacher.

Unlike the processes of hard and softground etching, there is no acid involved in mezzotint or drypoint etching, the two processes that Drawbridge favours. Eschewing preparatory guidelines, he draws the image directly on the plate as he cuts into the metal with a range of burring tools. The image is rendered through an interplay of webs of dots, hatched lines and other incisions made in the metal surface, as well as areas left untouched. The burred edges of the incisions are raised on the plate surface and trap the printers' ink—the denser the web and the more ink held, the deeper the printed tone. Where the ink is completely wiped off the untouched, smooth places, tonal highlights occur. A plate can be altered by burnishing back the burr to a smooth state.

The mezzotint process is open to subtle variation from one impression to the next because the inking of the plate involves removal or wiping back of the ink, which relies on an almost painterly touch to produce tonal variations, especially in transitions between burred and smooth areas of the plate. While the printmaker attempts to reproduce identical multiple impressions from a single plate for an edition, the subtle variations that occur in the process are inherent in the medium.

Multiple production of a single image, as well as the intervening technical stages in which the image takes temporary form on a prepared plate before it is printed on paper, is central to printmaking. It may be a formalist truism, but it is worth repeating that these technical aspects of printmaking are part of the meaning of the images. Articulated through the highly specific language of a medium like mezzotint, the meaning of an image 'has to do precisely with how the iconography appears, not just the fact that it is there'.²

² 'Documenta X: Robert Storr talks with Artistic Director Catherine David' in *Artforum*, May 1997, p.129.

III. IMAGE, MEMORY AND MONUMENT

Drawbridge has not simply preserved an artisanal tradition, he has brought what is a pre-industrial technology into contact with contemporary imagery. In Drawbridge's best work the contemporary is shot through with a sense of the depth of time—it invokes memory.

One of the few internationally recognized contemporary artists who is known for her mezzotint prints is the American Vija Celmins. A contemporary of Drawbridge, her work has affinities with his that go beyond the sombre tones of mezzotint. At one end of Celmins' oeuvre are monochromatic depictions of humble domestic objects; at the other—still in monochrome—are glimpses of nature's indifferent grandeur—a starry sky, an ocean or a spider's web. Although Drawbridge's imagery perhaps has a higher emotional temperature, their work shares a quality of hermetic stillness. Indeed, Celmins has remarked that 'art is still and dead', and both artists make images that invoke the still life genre; but the original French term—*nature morte*—somehow seems more appropriate, for these images are as still as a tomb.

The notion of the tomb is mentioned here not in a morbid sense, but as an idealised space of living people's memories. It is an archaic European notion both spiritual and architectural—the Pantheon, for instance, is a tomb. Let us note, then, that Drawbridge spent formative years as an artist in Europe, living and working in France and travelling further afield. We know from his sketchbooks of the time that he was fascinated by European architecture and traces of architectural form have since recurred in his work.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that there is a quality in the most poignant of his prints (albeit on an intimate scale), similar to that sought by the architect, Aldo Rossi, in his enigmatic monument to the Italian Resistance at Segrate, which itself refers to an ancient coffin. As Rossi observed of the monument in relation to memory: 'The monument is the final sign of a more complex reality; it is the sign upon which one reads something that cannot otherwise be said, for it belongs to the biography of the artist and the history of society.'³

Drawbridge frequently depicts figures in beautifully proportioned chambers. Often these idealised spaces are ambiguous—mirrors reflect images within images—and the figures do not seem



Untitled photograph (Wellington graves), reproduced in *Landfall* 31, 1954

³ Aldo Rossi, *Aldo Rossi: Selected Writings and Projects*, London: Architectural Design, 1983, p.23.



fully corporeal. They are more like ciphers awaiting the animating touch of memory and the play of analogy. Hence their apparent remoteness from the quotidian—entombed in immaculate pictorial space.

As well as being penetrated by light, Drawbridge's images enfold space. Like the elegant and ghostly silhouettes in Seurat's drawings, Drawbridge's figures or objects appear to emerge from gloom, momentarily delineated by the light of a window or a mirror. Their shadowy existence is shrouded with a sense of time past. The more I look at an image like *The Party* (1986), the more I am reminded of a passage in Giorgio Bassani's novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. On an excursion from Rome with a party of friends, the narrator is visiting the famous Etruscan tombs at Cerveteri. 'Let the future overturn the world, if it cared to; but there, whatever happened, in that small space sacred to the family dead; in the heart of those tombs where they had the foresight to take, not only their dead, but everything that made life beautiful and desirable. . . there at least nothing would change. . .'⁴

Héloise and Françoise, undated, mezzotint, 160 x 245mm, collection of the artist

⁴ Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, translated from the Italian by Isabel Quigley, Faber & Faber, London 1965, p.12.

IV. LIGHT AND DARK: CHIAROSCURO TO FILM-NOIR

With even a cursory glance at the history of printmaking, one is struck by the sudden advance in semblance to oil painting that occurred with the development of the mezzotint process in the seventeenth century. *Head of the Executioner (after Jusepe de Ribera)* by Prince Rupert of the Rhine, printed in 1662 in John Evelyn's *Sculptura*, was the first mezzotint published in England. It demonstrates what must have been obvious to contemporary connoisseurs: that soft flesh tones were more effectively rendered through the graduated burrs of mezzotint than through line engraving. A pioneer of the process, Prince Rupert was an amateur etcher and part-time scientist who had been quick to see mezzotint's potential for suggesting painterly brushstrokes and, above all, the effects of chiaroscuro—the deployment of light and dark in oil painting for both spatial and dramatic effects, that would reach its peak in the work of Caravaggio.

It is worth noting that the mezzotint print found particular favour in England. This was partly because line-engraving was not as advanced in England as it was on the Continent. But there was another reason that had more to do with perception than reality. By the early eighteenth century, there was a burgeoning market for prints after the Flemish, Dutch and Italian Old Master paintings. Old Master paintings had been imported by the aristocracy, but they were usually well coated in a century or so of grime and soot by the time they came under English eyes. Even the brightest colours had darkened. Consequently, the English were convinced that fine art was dark art. The characteristic darkness of mezzotint was, of course, ideally suited to reproducing those tonalities.

I mention this history because it seems part of an arc that connects mezzotint printmaking, via the atmospheres of Renaissance chiaroscuro, with the look of twentieth-century photography and cinema. Without wanting to overdetermine the formation of Drawbridge's aesthetic, such an arc nevertheless suggests the kinds of visual data that has been absorbed into his vocabulary as a printmaker.

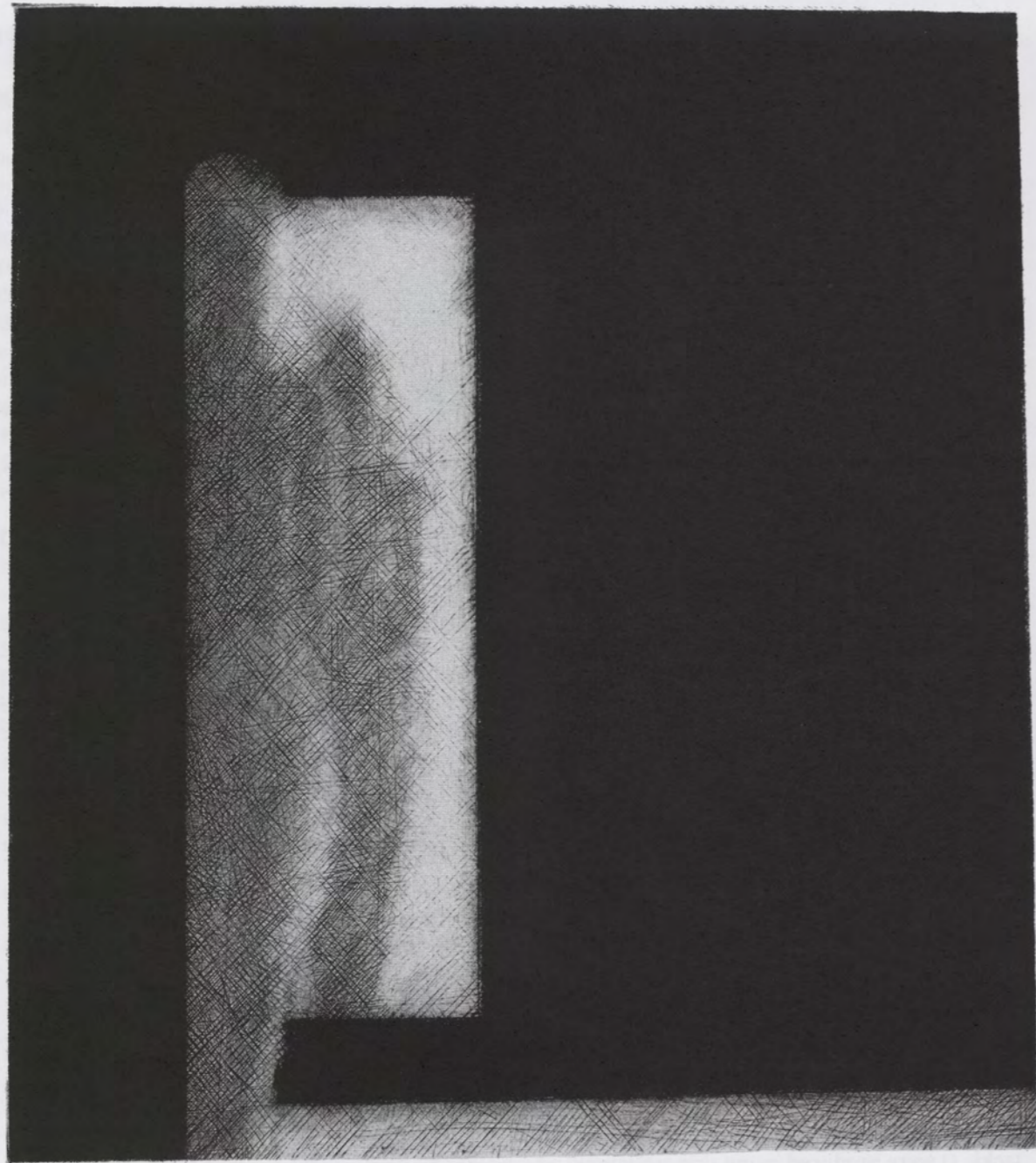
As a student in London in the late '50s, Drawbridge, who had been drawn to photography early, was conscious of the dark grainy atmospheres of Bill Brandt's photographs as well as *noir* films like *The Third Man*. He was also aware of Italian Neo-Realist cinema. Later came Antonioni's *Blow-up*, a freewheeling romp through a



'60s London with sinister undertones. A stylish film that turned the heads of many young bohemians, it seems a likely inspiration for prints such as *A Rather Transparent Girl No.1* (1967).

Velázquez Infanta, 1994, mezzotint, 340 x 530mm, collection of the artist

Mass consumption of images on the one hand and the growth of a visually hungry counterculture on the other, energised the graphic arts in the '60s. Pop and 'counterculture' artists embraced an eclectic range of graphic styles—from comic book to photomontage. Eye-popping colour was pervasive but the nineteenth-century baroque black-and-white aesthetic of Aubrey Beardsley was influential, too. So were the Op Art tactics of painters like Bridget Riley, who favoured the pure choreography of black-and-white. Meanwhile, photographers and graphic designers discovered the side-lit, black-and-white photographic portrait. Deleting midtones or greys, they produced the starkest possible visage, a look that would become pervasive in '60s pop—high and low. Emblematic portraits of everyone from Che Guevara to Jackie O were produced using this technique, which lent itself to low-tech reproduction processes like the screenprint. They appeared on the street as well as gallery walls.



As a student of printmaking, Drawbridge may have been immersed in Old Masters of the medium like Dürer, Piranesi and Rembrandt, but he was also open to recent developments and incorporated them into his work. Occasionally we encounter a contemporary image in which such formative elements come to the surface. A print like *Héloise and Françoise* (undated), for instance, invokes the grainy film-still of European art cinema, as well as the pared down graphics of a '60s album cover—Leonard Cohen's 1969 album, *Songs From a Room*, for instance.

As if conscious of these echoes, Drawbridge has revisited mezzotint's early history in an ambitious series of prints in which he gives us his own versions of great paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt and Velázquez. Reviving the early function of the mezzotint, Drawbridge's images are masterly distillations of complex paintings; translations into the mezzotint language of light and dark. Working on these plates in his Island Bay studio with its views across Wellington harbour's heads, Drawbridge has said that he not only learns a great deal, but that he feels very close to these artists as he works through their images.

To conclude, let us rejoin Giorgio Bassani's narrator in the Etruscan tombs at Cerveteri: nine-year-old Gianna has been told by her father that the Etruscans have been dead for so long that it is almost as if they had always been dead, and that is why we feel no sadness for them: "But now that you've said that," she said gently, "you've made me think the Etruscans did actually live, you know, and I love them as much as everyone else."⁵

Opposite: *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1969, mezzotint, 330 x 300mm, collection of the artist

⁵ Ibid, p.10.



JOHNDRAWBRIDGE

A STUDENT IN LONDON AND PARIS

Robert Macdonald

As I write down my thoughts on John Drawbridge and his art a thunderstorm is rolling around my cottage in the Welsh mountains. I am a long way from Island Bay, Wellington, but close, perhaps, to some of John's earliest influences. The thunder was loud all night and now, at mid-morning, it is still crashing around these hills. Sometimes the noise continues with loud rumbles for minutes on end, and sometimes there is a short period of silence and then an enormous thunderclap. All the lights go out, and my word processor goes down.

Difficult conditions, one might think; but in fact they are quite helpful in conjuring up the subject of my essay. The drama of natural forces seems always to have played a major role in John's painting. I met him first in the late 1950s. The image of some of his early paintings is imprinted in my mind. One canvas in particular which he produced in those early years was of a landlocked harbour painted with intense blues, purples and blacks. It gained its dramatic force from bright shafts of light which burst through from the heavens with all the force of a thunderclap to illuminate the darks of land and sea. It was one of his many works based on Wellington, but it was Wellington harbour portrayed with visionary intensity and an almost religious sense of confrontation between darkness and light.

Obviously there was an early influence in his work of the British Nature Romantics who were such a dominant force in English painting in the war-time and post-war years, and who were attracted so powerfully to this part of Britain where I now sit writing.

Opposite: New Zealand artists in London, 1962. John Drawbridge (in skylight), Don Peebles (with brushes), Robert Macdonald (in frame), Bob Elliott and son Patrick. Photograph by Alex Starkey



Alex Starkey, photograph of John Drawbridge in his studio, London 1962

However, John was experimenting in those years with other forms of modernism. The crowning achievement of this early period was no doubt the *New Zealand House Mural* completed in the 1960s after American Abstract Expressionism had shouldered aside in the public view the gentler schools of art which had grown out of Britain's wartime isolation. This mural has the scale, flatness and grandeur of American abstraction, but it speaks eloquently still of nature and landscape and of light moving across a land-mass—specifically across the seas, mountains, forests and fields of New Zealand. I believe it combines in a quite remarkable way for such an early work (painted before Ralph Hotere had made any real mark on the New Zealand art scene) a sense of Polynesia hidden under the Godzone façade of New Zealand in the 1960s. It is a stunning synthesis of a whole gamut of influences.

I very well recall my first meeting with John Drawbridge. It was in September, 1958, and I had not long arrived in London from New Zealand, and enrolled as a student in the Central School of Arts and Crafts. On my first day there I spent the morning in the life-drawing class where the tutor was Mervyn Peake, author and illustrator of the 'Gormenghast' books (but not the cult figure then that he was to become posthumously).

Sitting on either side of me in life-drawing were two South Africans, one an Afrikaner from the Orange Free State and the

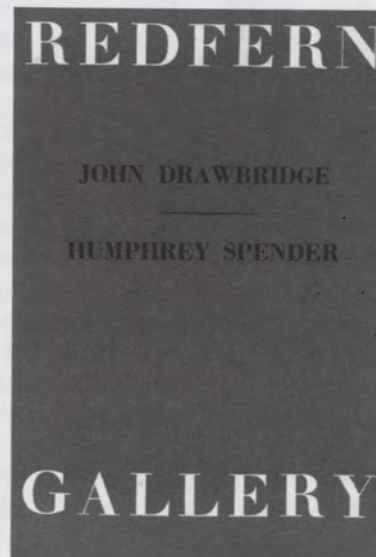
other a Jewish Johannesburger. Almost a third of the Central's students in those days were from overseas (an overseas student was charged only £11 per term in fees) and one of the great attractions of the Central was its extraordinarily varied student body, from all places and all backgrounds.

After lunch I was sent up the Central's grand marble staircase to the etching workshop near the top of the building. I entered this room and found it empty apart from a solitary figure at the far end, who was busily winding the wheel of an etching press. He gingerly lifted the press blankets to examine his print and then looked up at me. 'G'day', he said in a friendly way. 'Where are you from?'

Looking back, it is perhaps typical of John that he was the only student working through the lunch hour in the etching room. He had already been at the Central for a year when I arrived and he was several years older than me. It was natural that I, a stranger in a strange place, should quickly accept him as my mentor and my guide to artistic London. He was a man of great warmth and charm and was by then well-known throughout the art school, especially among the most beautiful girls who vied for his attention (he had not yet met Tanya Ashken who had just arrived at the school to study silver-smithing).

In the 1950s and early '60s there was a sense of vitality and daring in British art schools not to be found in any other area of British life. The country as a whole was still exhausted and recovering from the war. Arriving in London after an Antipodean summer spent sailing up the Northland coastline and later travelling by boat from Australia to Italy, I was overwhelmed by an awful feeling of greyness which hit me as soon as I stepped out of Victoria Station. London had the air of an old lady who had suffered a bad accident. Acres of bomb-damaged desolation still lay undisturbed.

An air of soulless uniformity seemed to pervade much of the metropolis, but it was quite different in the art schools. Students were already wearing the clothes and experimenting with the lifestyles which were later to percolate out into the wider world and create what became known as Swinging London. At the Central School there was a remarkable body of tutors as well as a vivid mixture of students. It was the first London art college to bring in as part-time tutors men and women already established as successful practitioners in their own arts and crafts.



Redfern Gallery catalogue, 1963

When John Drawbridge arrived he would have found Keith Vaughan, one of Britain's most rigorously structural painters, teaching part-time in the studios. Stanley Spencer occasionally took life-drawing, though he stopped just before I arrived; but there was still Mervyn Peake and Cecil Collins. I was taught wood-engraving by Gertrude Hermes and there were many other well-known names from the British art world who took classes of various kinds.

William Lethaby, the Central's first principal, had pioneered this system of bringing in famous artists as part-timers, and it was later adopted by most other British colleges (though sadly part-timers were again phased out for financial reasons in the 1980s, leaving British art schools much the poorer). The Central was also the centre of an impressive craft tradition. Each day in the 1950s the student body was joined by a flood of young apprentices from the streets around Hatton Garden, the centre of London's jewellery and gems trade. They came to study silver-smithing and other crafts. There were important departments of textiles, ceramics, theatre design, stained-glass and book-design.

The craft tradition was strong in the printmaking department where John learnt many of the techniques he continues to practise. Merlyn Evans, in charge of etching, was an interesting artist in his own right whose work combined surrealism with Celtic lyricism. A powerful influence on the whole direction of teaching in the etching workshop was the printmaker Stanley William Hayter, founder of Atelier 17 in Paris.

Hayter had been for many years the main impulse behind experimentation in etching internationally. Surrealism and automatism were major influences on him and he had encouraged a new freedom of expression in etching and engraving. His were the techniques which were encouraged in the Central workshop, though there was no rigid imposition of any style or artistic approach. There was professional instruction in technical know-how and the effect of this can still be seen in the skill with which John Drawbridge creates prints in that most difficult of techniques—mezzotint.

Hayter led the movement in Paris and later in America to restore the print as an art in its own right and to rescue printmaking from the moribund condition into which it had fallen in Britain and America. In the U.S. it is said he taught painters and sculptors how to etch and dealers how to sell. In Britain he must have influenced

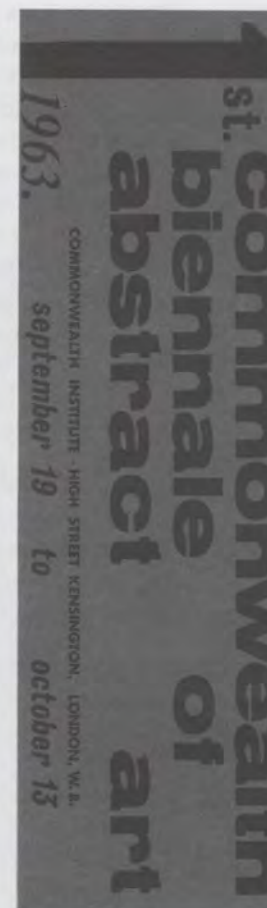
the opening in London in the 1950s of the St. George's Gallery in Cork Street which exhibited artists' prints as original works of art. The gallery was run by the Hon. Robert Erskine, a young man raised in India where his father had held high office in the Raj. He became one of Britain's main champions of printmaking as serious art.

He organised the first major printmaking exhibition in the Whitechapel Gallery in 1958. Soon after I began producing my own etchings John took me on my first expedition to Cork Street, still the centre nowadays of London's commercial gallery world, and introduced me to Robert Erskine, who later included prints by both of us in that exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery.

As student artist-printmakers we were fortunate to be in London at a time when there was a great print revival. But in many other areas great things were happening artistically in the capital. I went with John and other students to see the first Jackson Pollock exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1958. The Whitechapel was the first venue for the great wave of American Abstract Expressionists whose works arrived in Britain and swept from the scene the British Kitchen Sink artists. After a very brief period of great acclaim, the Kitchen Sink painters disappeared with dramatic suddenness, some to re-emerge as totally abstract artists a few years later.

In the art schools we students began flinging paint around with trans-Atlantic abandon, and for the most part turned our backs on gritty social realism. The Americans were not the only new influence. The Whitechapel also brought to London the Australian mythmakers, Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan. And though Paris was soon to be overtaken by both New York and London as a centre of artistic innovation there were intriguing developments across the Channel too.

In 1960, after three years at the Central, John went with his new wife Tanya to study printmaking with Hayter and with Johnny Friedlander in Paris. He gained an extension of his New Zealand scholarship while Tanya was able to study sculpture in France. I suspect this was an important time for him in his own steady move toward abstraction, retaining all the while as he has done a fascination with light and natural form. In the developing schools of French abstraction in those days there was an elegant restraint more to John's taste than the noisy ebullience of American painting. I think this showed in the painting he began producing when he returned to Britain.



Catalogue for Commonwealth exhibition, London, 1963. Four paintings by Drawbridge were included.

I visited John and Tanya in Paris and was taken on an exploration by Tanya who was working in a community of studios in a semi-derelict area of the Left Bank. We strayed into one studio which had a mezzanine floor on which reposed a double bed. As we entered two figures sat up in the bed—the artists Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint-Phalle—and we left hurriedly. In those days I envied John and Tanya their chance to savour the bohemian life of Paris, for I had broken short my time as a student, having run out of money, and returned to my former trade of journalism. When they returned to London John and Tanya came to stay a while in the house off Baker Street where I had rented a flat, before moving on to share a house with Don Peebles and his wife Prue. They then moved to a larger flat in Swiss Cottage which gave John space to work on his *New Zealand House Mural*.

He worked intensively for several months on the mural (Tanya kept all visitors at bay), drawing on his experience as a printmaker as well as a painter (in some of the panels he has 'combed' the paint in ridged swirls rather as an engraver raises a ridge of metal and gives extra body to his plate).

It was through John that I met a number of New Zealand artists working in London in the 1960s, including Don Peebles, Melvyn Day and Ralph Hotere. They all returned to New Zealand to make names for themselves. For John himself the decision to return cannot have been easy, for he began to have considerable success exhibiting in London. There were gallery owners keen to promote him, urging him to stay. And when he did return the intellectual climate was not necessarily sympathetic towards him even in his home town, Wellington. On one of my own trips back in the early 1970s John showed me a mocking article in a Wellington newspaper. He had exhibited a semi-abstract painting entitled *Coastline, Island Bay*, and the newspaper ran a photo of it, asking readers whether they thought it bore any resemblance to the bay itself.

Being a Wellington artist in an Auckland-dominated art world was also difficult. At times he seems to have been comprehensively excluded by elements of this world. He has been dismissed at times by writers on New Zealand art as a mere printmaker. I think in many respects he is a remarkable artist with rare skills. With him painting and printmaking are interwoven and gain strength from each other. He has experimented with materials in an adventurous way and shown great artistic courage throughout his career. I know why he returned to New Zealand, for both as an



artist and as a person he is essentially a New Zealander—a Wellingtonian—and his work draws its strength from the New Zealand landscape and atmosphere, particularly in recent years from the lights and darks of the New Zealand coastline and, of course, Island Bay. New Zealand is lucky to have him.

John Drawbridge at Island Bay, 1995, with Tanya Ashken and sons Tony and Cameron. Photograph by Simon Woolf.

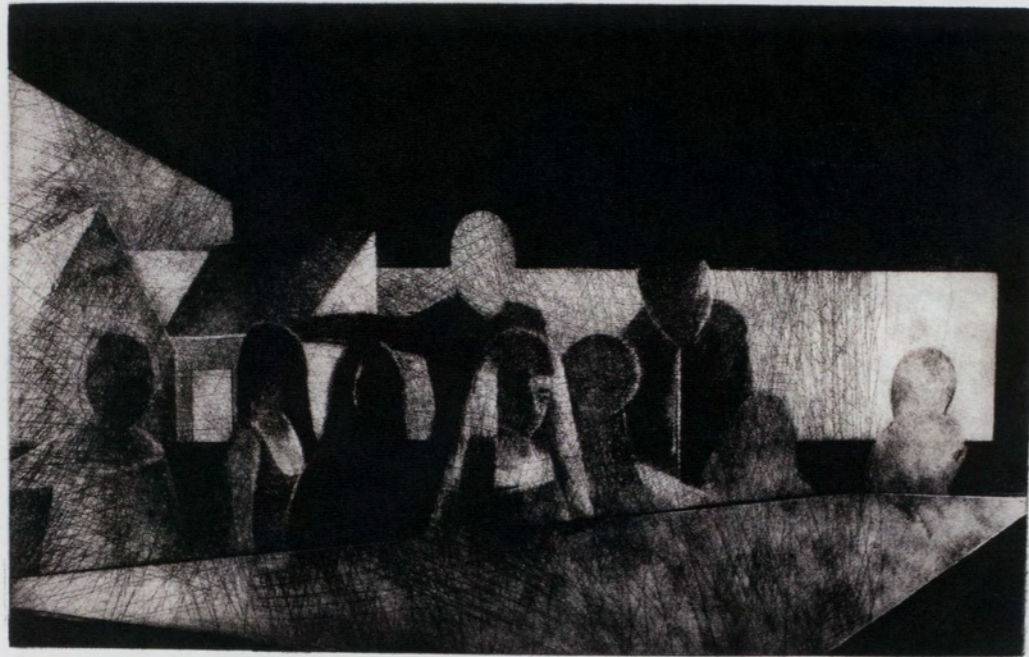
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1: *Untitled (from 'Mt Aspiring' folio)*, 1949, WATERCOLOUR AND INK ON PAPER, 225 X 333MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

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2: *The Party* 186, MEZZOTINT AND DRYPOINT, 350X550MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



3: *The Party* 1961, OIL ON CANVAS, 810 X 1160MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



4: *Approach to St André* 1960, ETCHING AND MEZZOTINT, 600 X 497MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



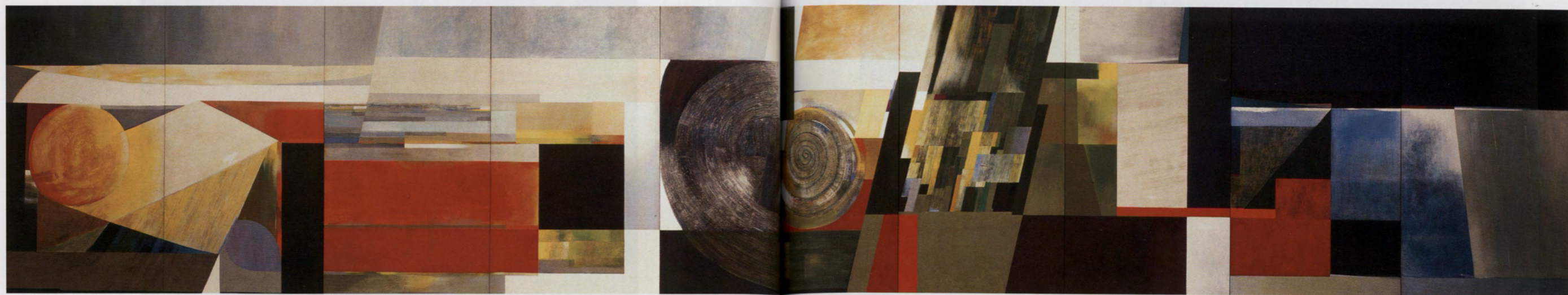
5: *Seated Woman* 1960, ETCHING, 486X395MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



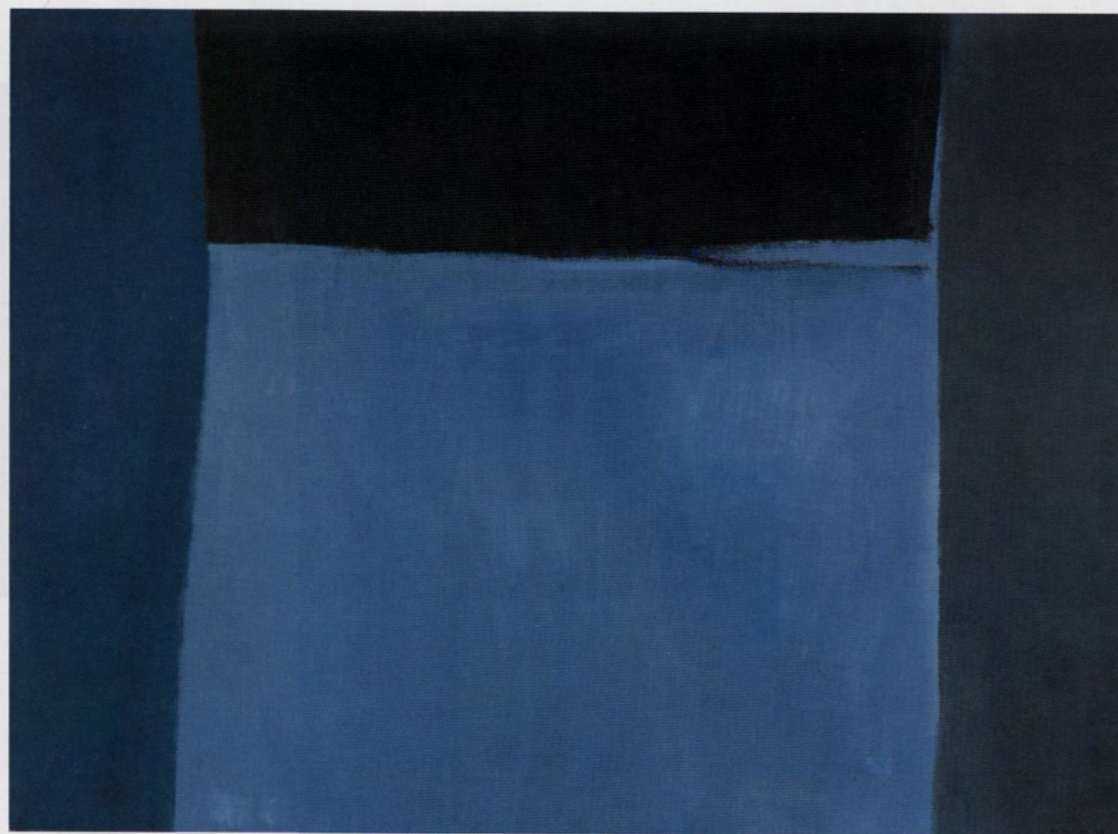
6: *Sea Element* 1963–64, OIL ON CANVAS, 1535 X 1020MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



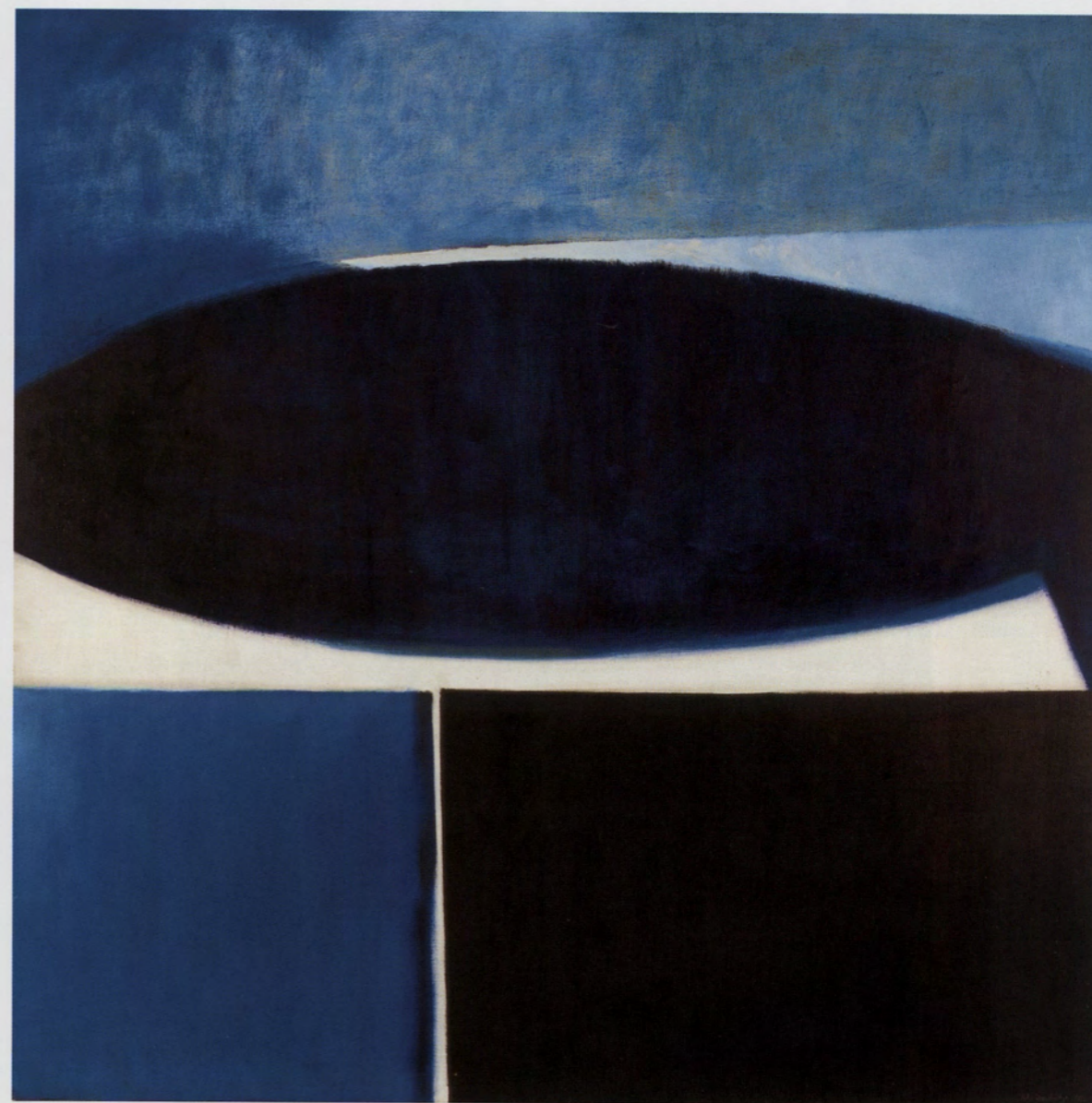
7: *The Approach* 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 1520 X 1010MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



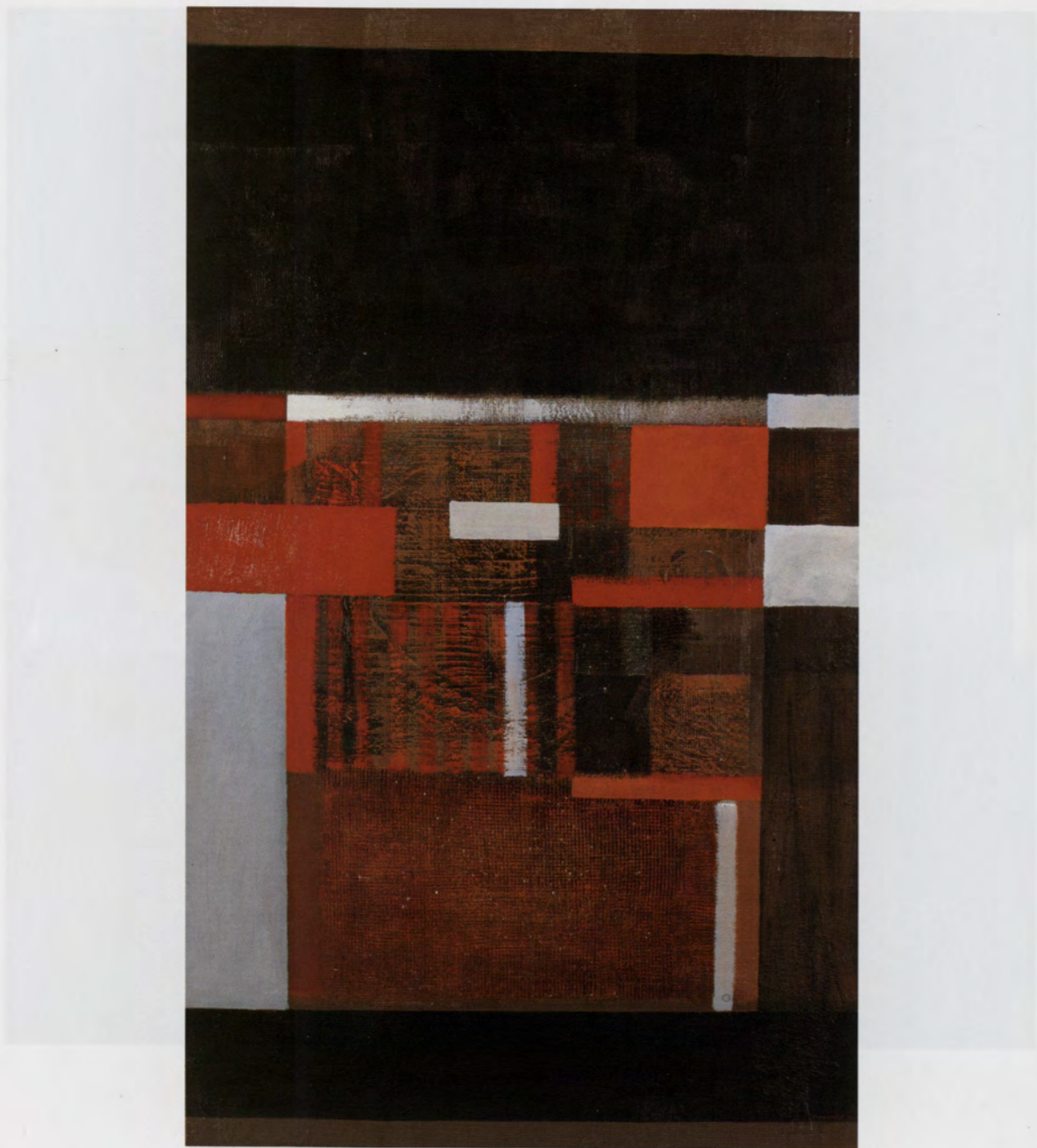
8: *New Zealand House Mural* 1963, OIL ON TEN CANVAS PANELS, 3000 X 15000MM (INSTALLED), NATIONAL ARCHIVES, WELLINGTON



9: *Bluescape* 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 1270 X 1651MM, COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA



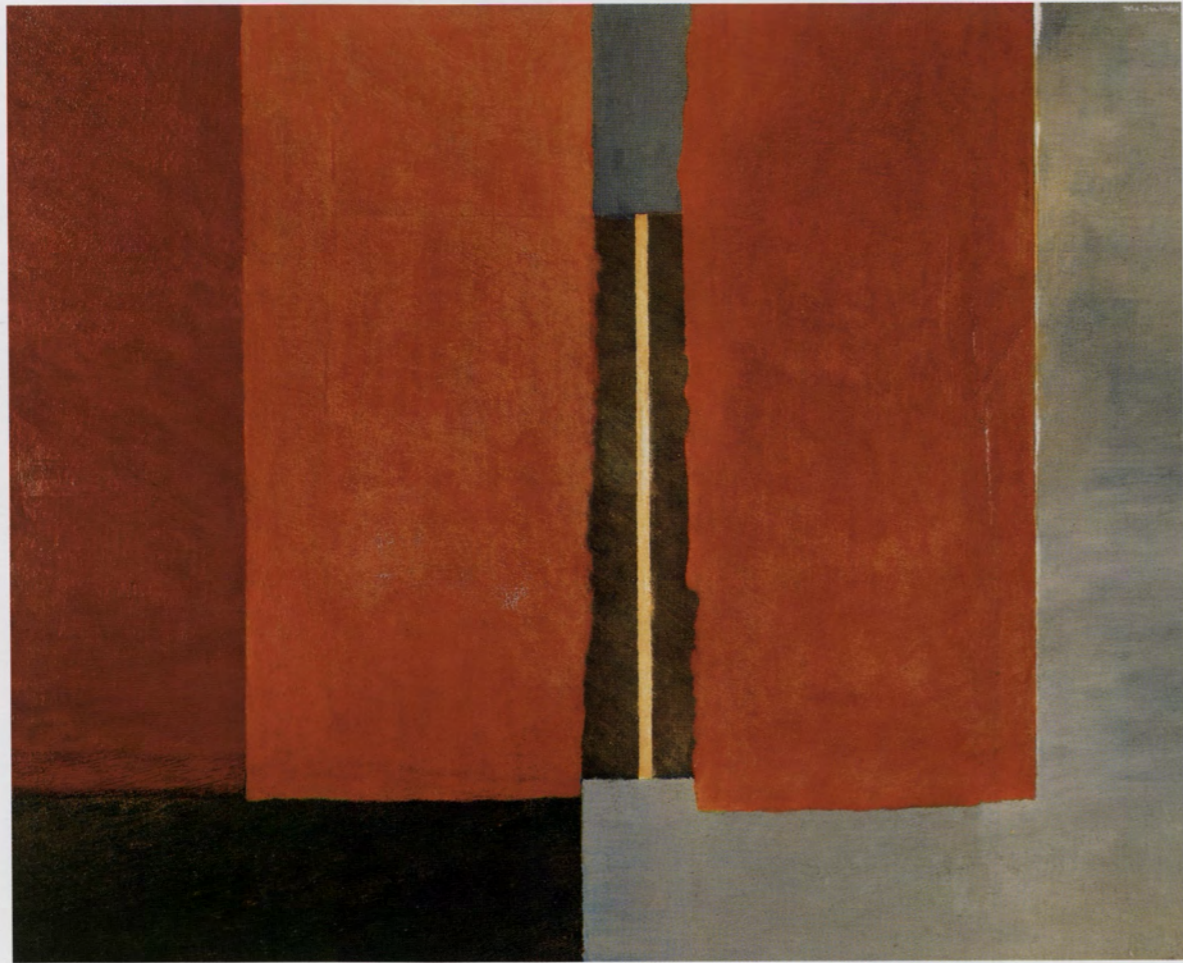
10: *Pacific Lagoon* 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 1650 X 1650MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



11: *Space Planes* 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 1275 X 765MM, HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN



12: *Promontory* 1963-64, OIL ON CANVAS, 1162 X 740MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



13: *Red Echo* 1969, OIL ON CANVAS, 1250 X 1557MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION



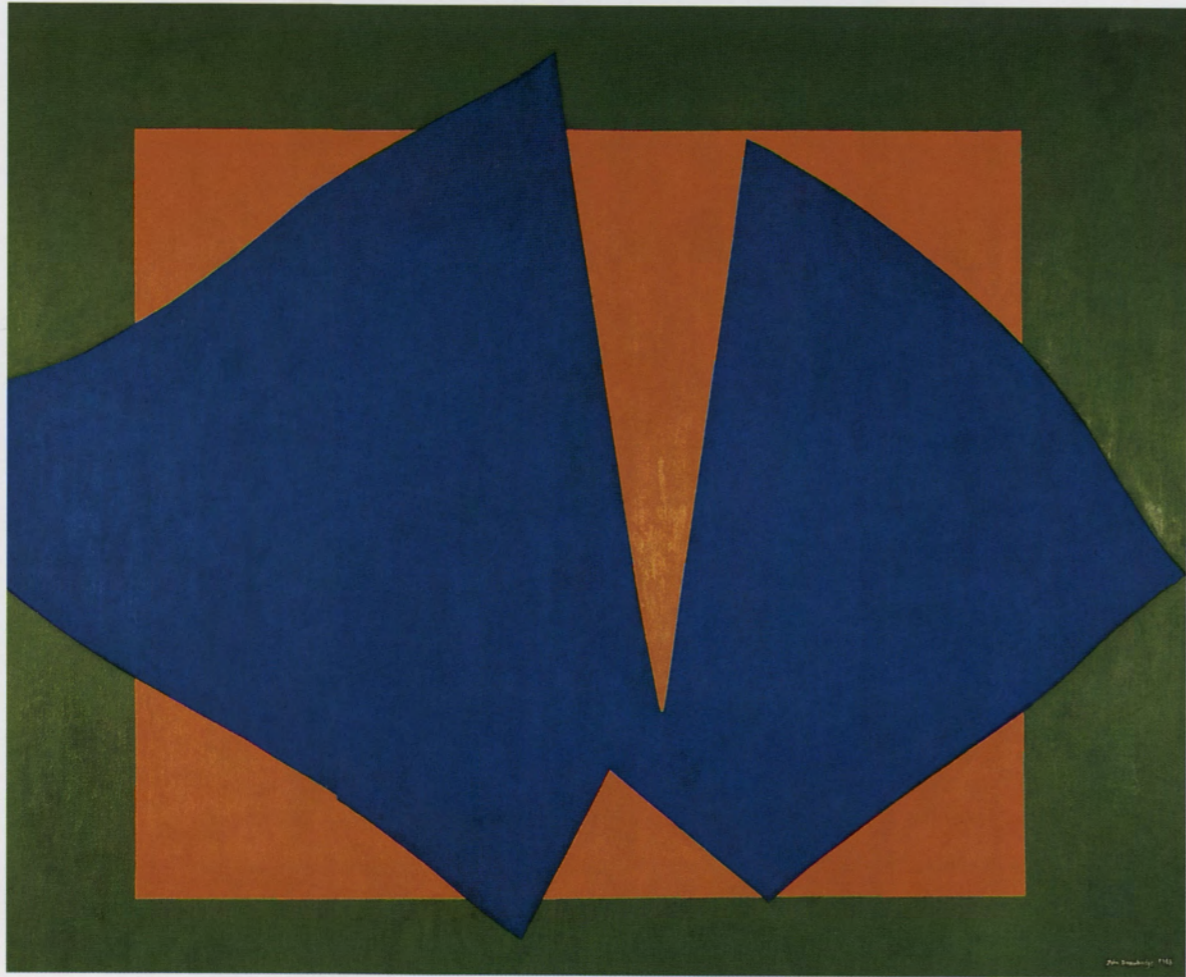
14: *Earth Element* 1964, OIL ON CANVAS, 1520 X 1010MM, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



15: *A Rather Transparent Girl No. 1* 1967, ETCHING AND MEZZOTINT, 497 X 373MM,
THE HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN



16: *A Rather Transparent Girl No. 2* 1967, MEZZOTINT AND DEEP ETCH, 555 X 275MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



17: *Flight* 1968, OIL ON CANVAS, 1425 X 1710MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



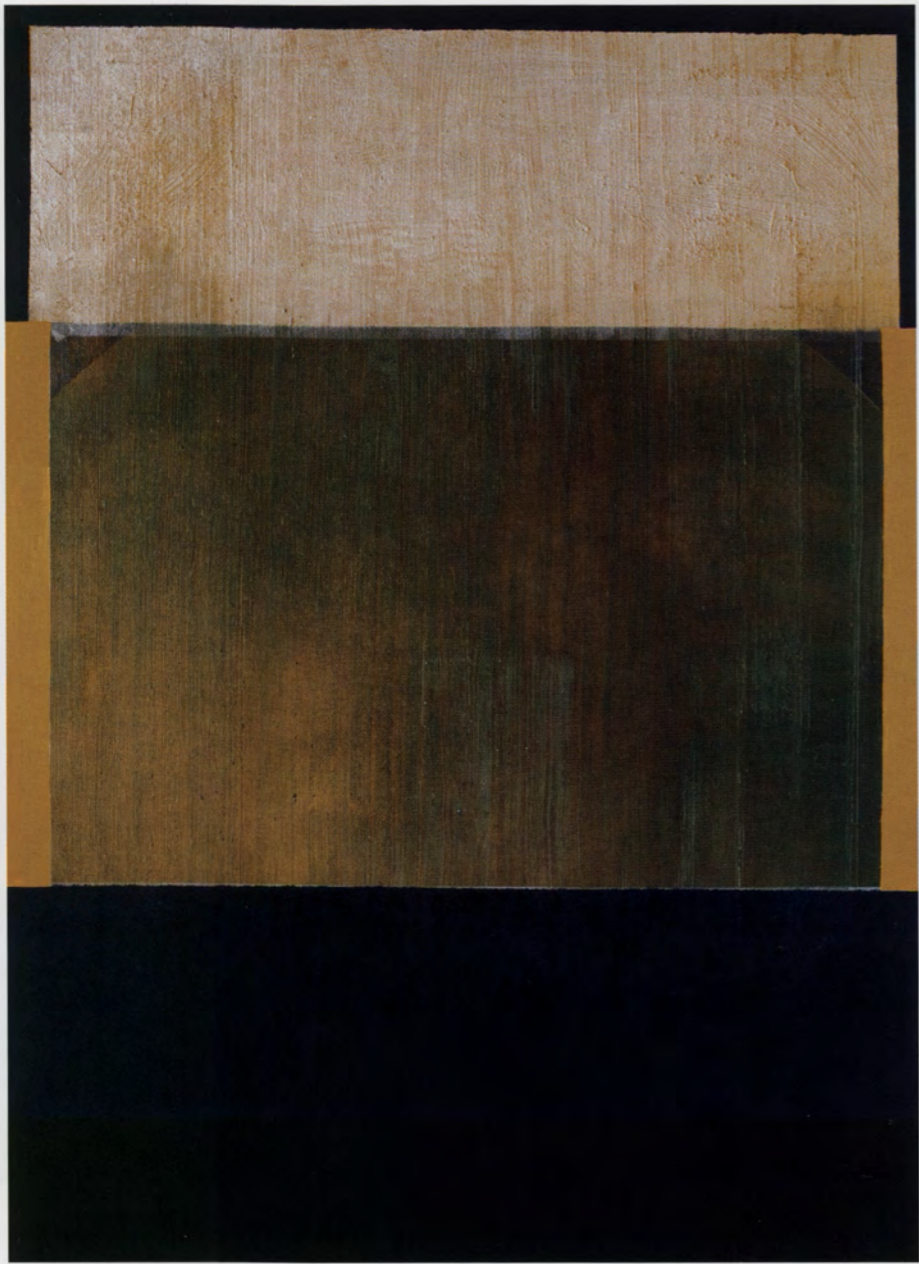
18: *Big Red* 1968, OIL ON CANVAS, 1730 X 1410MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



19: *Window 192*, OIL ON CANVAS, 2260 X 1650MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



20: *Sea Window No. 2* 1984, OIL ON CANVAS, 1770 X 1770MM, BANK OF NEW ZEALAND ART COLLECTION



21: *Space Move No.2* 1972, OIL ON CANVAS, 1680 X 1225MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION



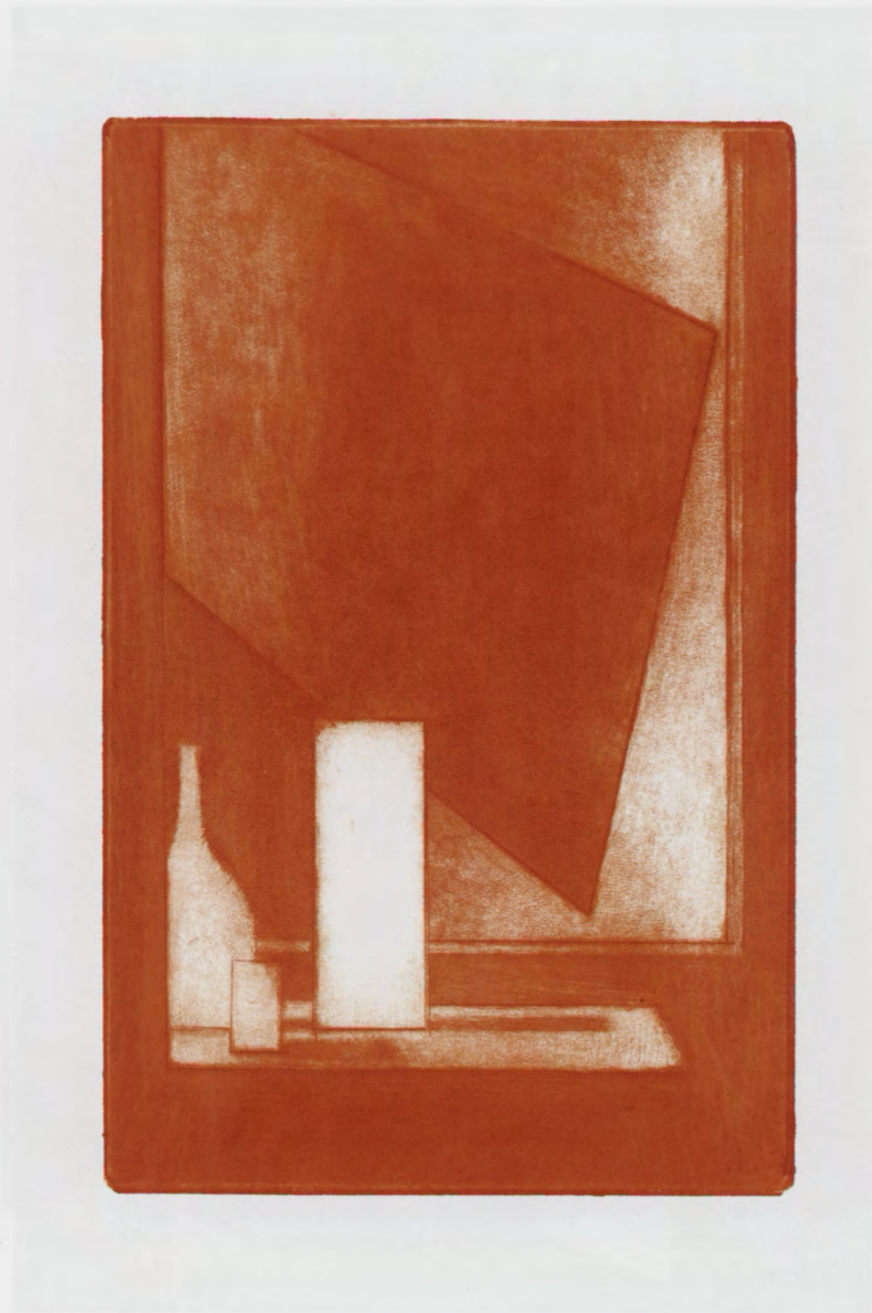
22: *Waiting for della Francesca* 1986, OIL ON CANVAS, 1730 X 1270MM, COLLECTION OF WILLIAM TOOMATH, WELLINGTON



23: *Vermeer, Rembrandt, Malevich* 1984, MIXED MEDIA, 750 X 580MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



24: *Vermeer with Malevich* 1984, OIL ON CANVAS, 1835 X 1225MM, MASSEY UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION



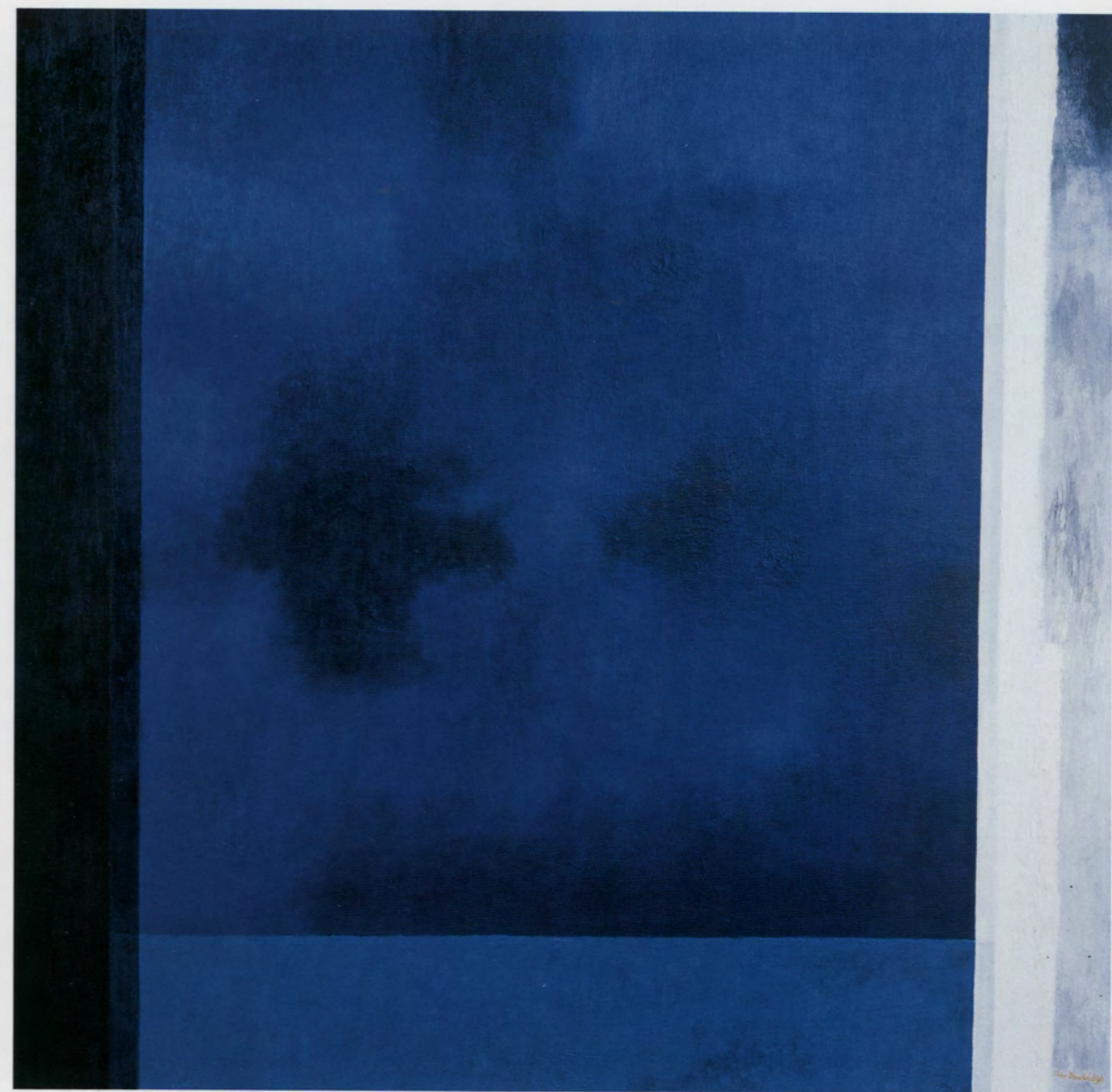
25: *Still life with Malevich (Red)* 1988, MEZZOTINT AND DRYPOINT, 245 X 152MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



26: *Still life with Malevich* 1988, OIL ON CANVAS, 1395 X 1099MM, RUTHERFORD TRUST COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



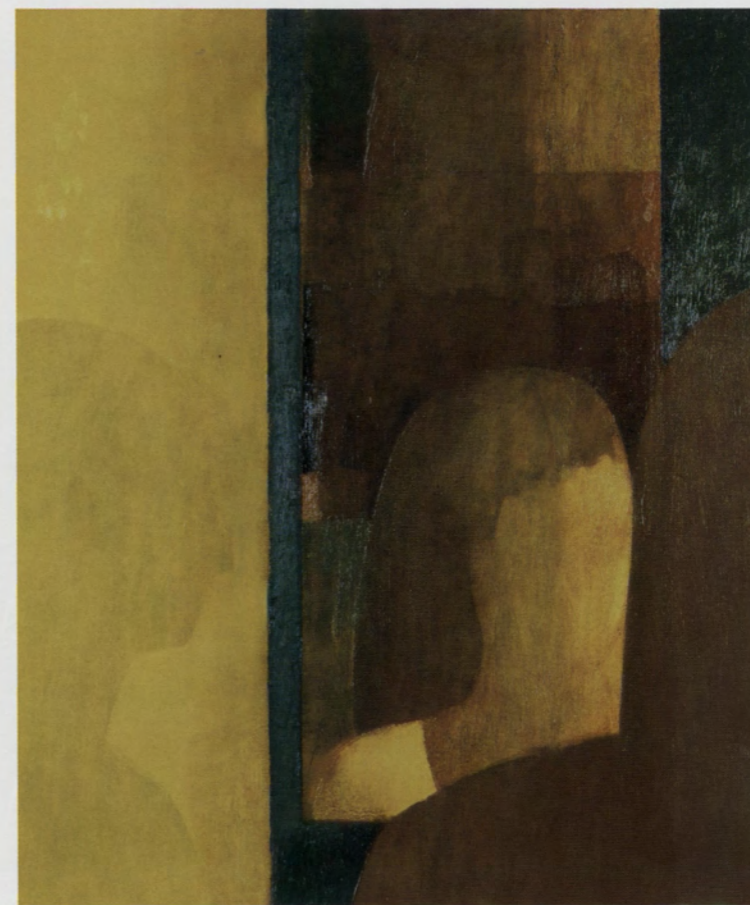
27: *Bluescape 2000*, WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER, 760 X 560MM, PRIVATE COLLECTION



28: *Pacific 1995*, OIL ON CANVAS, 1755X1760MM, COLLECTION OF SUE AND GRANT ALEXANDER, AUCKLAND



29: *Interior with figures* 2000, OIL ON CANVAS, 1650 X 1660MM, COLLECTION OF IAN FRASER AND SUZANNE SNIVELY, WELLINGTON



30: *Double Portrait* 2001, OIL ON CANVAS, 760 X 630MM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



31: Photograph by Marti Friedlander, John Drawbridge with *Beehive Mural*, Wellington, c.1979

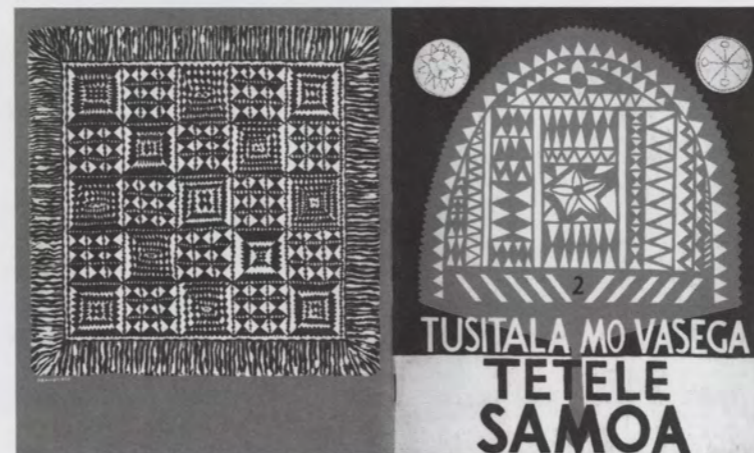
JOHNDRAWBRIDGECHRONOLOGY

1930 Born in Wellington. **1943–47** Educated at Wellington College. **1947** Studies at Wellington Technical College Art School, where Fred Ellis is head of school. **1948–49** Studies at Wellington Teachers' Training College. **1949** Exhibits at Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington. A drawing is featured on the cover of the Wellington literary journal, *Hilltop* (vol.1, no. 2), June 1949. **Summer 1949–50** Produces a series of watercolours for the National Film Unit production, *The Ascent of Mount Aspiring*. Spends six weeks in the Southern Alps, accompanied by cinematographer Brian Brake, composer Douglas Lilburn and James K. Baxter, who was to compose a verse commentary for the film. **1950** Completes his third year of training at Dunedin Teachers' Training College, where his teachers include Fred Shewell and William Reed. **1950s** Produces artwork for *School Journal* and other publications. **1951–53** Employed as Art Adviser to Education Board, Wellington.

When I was 13 years old, at Wellington College, an inspector looked over my shoulder at what I was doing and he said, 'Your work is like Picasso's.' I had no idea who he was talking about. Some years later, remembering that inspector, I knew that he had no idea who he was talking about either.

Since I was no good at maths, or rugby, or anything else, it was important for me at that age that someone should realise that I might be good at something. Later the terrible reality came to me that perhaps the inspector was saying that I was really no good at art either! I'm sure that he didn't think too highly of Picasso. But at least then for me, in Wellington, in 1943, it was reassuring to think that there was someone, somewhere in the world to look towards. At 13 years old, I took seriously what the inspector had no doubt said as a joke.

DRAWBRIDGE quoted in catalogue for Opening Exhibition, City Gallery Wellington, 1980



John Drawbridge's cover design (front and back) for *Tusitala mo vasega tetele Samoa*, School Publications, 1955



Left: Tanya Ashken and John Drawbridge with *New Zealand House Mural*, London, 1962
Below: *Your New House*, a special issue of *Design Review*, cover by John Drawbridge, 1953



I am a painter—born in New Zealand, where I lived and worked for twenty-six years. But for the past three years I have lived in England. Coming here was in a sense like being reborn among people who use the same language as we do in New Zealand; but who live in widely different cultural circumstances...

Our greatest, yet scarcely recognised inheritance is the Maori culture. But collections of Maori arts and crafts are housed chiefly in museums, and consequently tend to be regarded more as anthropological curiosities than as works of art. The Maoris used objects and weapons made from wood, flax and stone, and, without metals, produced designs and patterns of great beauty.

JOHN DRAWBRIDGE in *Far and Wide* London, Summer 1960

1953–57 Assistant lecturer in art at Wellington Teachers' Training College with Doreen Blumhardt. **1954** Series of four black and white photographs in *Landfall* 31. **1955** Exhibits at Architectural Centre Gallery, Wellington. **1957** Is one of two artists (the other being Bill Culbert) awarded a National Art Gallery Travelling Scholarship to study in London (Drawbridge's three year scholarship is extended for another year in 1960). **1957–60** Studies at Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, UK. Spends much time in the Print Room at the British Museum. He is awarded a Diploma of Distinction. **1958–59** Spends three months each year travelling and sketching in Europe. Visits the Louvre, the Prado, Uffizi, Rijksmuseum and other galleries. **1960** Marries sculptor Tanya Ashken. Exhibits at Royal Academy, London. Elected Associate Member of the Royal Society of Painter-etchers and Engravers, London (A.R.E.). Writes essay, 'The New Zealand Artist at Home and Abroad', published in *Far and Wide*, London, Summer 1960. **1959–60** Work exhibited at Zwemmer Gallery and Piccadilly Gallery, London.

1960–61 Studies with S. W. Hayter and Johnny Friedlander in Paris. Visits Lacourière's print studio, where Picasso, Braque and Chagall prints are produced. Exhibits with London Group. Commissioned to paint a mural for New Zealand House, London. Leicestershire Education Committee, U.K., purchases a mural. **1962–63** Teaches drawing and painting at Isleworth Polytechnic, London. **1963** Solo exhibition, Redfern Gallery, London. Four large paintings included in 'First Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art', London, 19 September – 13 October. Completes work on *New Zealand House Mural*. Returns to New Zealand late in 1963. **1964** Begins teaching at the Wellington Polytechnic School of Design. Solo exhibition at Uptown Gallery, Auckland. Cover artwork for *Landfall* 69, March 1964 (design repeated using different colours for three subsequent issues of journal).



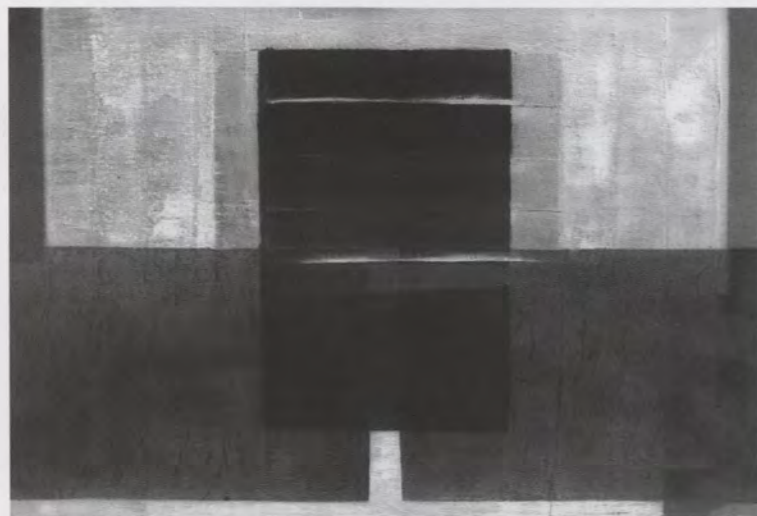
[Drawbridge] seems to me a particularly powerful and convincing artist and I think this is because one is made continually aware of the natural forms from which his paintings are derived, vibrating just below the surface of the abstract image.
GUY BRETT, *The Guardian*, London, 21 September 1963

John Drawbridge has been attracted by the brilliance of American hard-edged painting but, in spite of this, his Pacific Lagoon, with its violet blue, white and pale blue, is a lyrical evocation of sea and sunlight.
BETTINA WADIA, *The Arts Review*, vol.XV, no.19, London, 5–19 October 1963

New Zealand House. With typical London indifference, practically nobody has appreciated its many visual attractions. Not the least of them is the mural painting fifty feet long and almost nine feet high by John Drawbridge in the reception hall, ground floor... John Drawbridge is one of the most original of young New Zealand painters to have come here for many years...
J.W., *Studio International*, October 1963

Top: Exhibition invitation, Leicester Galleries 1963
Left: *Landfall* cover designs by John Drawbridge

1965 Completes mural for Evans Bay Intermediate School. Work included in 'New Zealand Painting 1965', curated by Hamish Keith, at the Auckland Art Gallery, and in 'Contemporary Painting in New Zealand' at the Commonwealth Institute, London. (*Promontory* and *Bluescape* were among the four works by Drawbridge featured.) **1966** Work included in Unesco-Brandeis University International Exhibition, Washington, USA. **1967** To mark Canada's centennial, the New Zealand Government gifts a painting by John Drawbridge to the Canadian people. The abstract canvas, entitled *Coastline, Island Bay*, sparks a controversy, with many letters to the Wellington press decrying such a misrepresentation not only of New Zealand Art but also of the Wellington coast. (The painting's reception on the other side of the Pacific proved far more receptive and the work still hangs in the Canadian Parliament, Ottawa.) Exhibits prints and paintings in the Otago Museum Foyer to accompany the sculptures of Tanya Ashken, who was 1967 Frances Hodgkins Fellow at Otago University.



That Painting! They Didn't Believe Us. *The painting in yesterday's 'Post', Coastline, Island Bay, has aroused, to put it gently, considerable controversy.*

It was not a wrong picture in spite of appearances. It is a contemporary work, by John Drawbridge, part of New Zealand's gift to Canada for its centenary. 'The Post' yesterday transmitted the photograph by wire to 'The Taranaki Herald' and 'The Christchurch Star'. After an hour's puzzling the New Plymouth paper rang for a verbal description. They had the title and the picture—and some strong doubts about the behaviour of the receiving machine. Next on the phone was 'The Christchurch Star' with the same problem... they took some convincing. How about you?

Front page lead story, *Evening Post*, Wellington, 20 July 1967

Objection

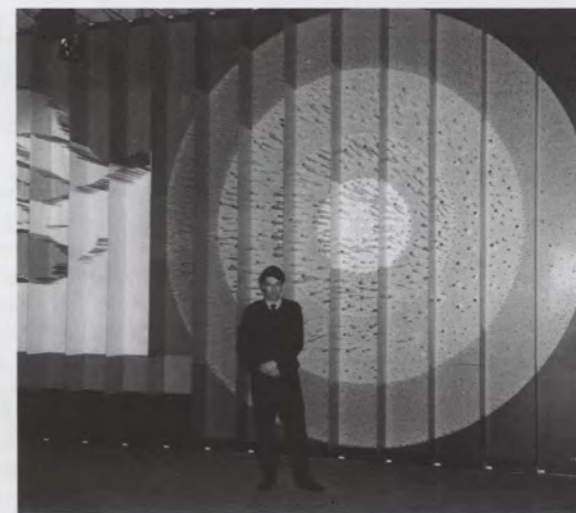
Sir,—What hope is there for a serious artist in this God-forsaken country when an artist of John Drawbridge's standing is allowed to be ridiculed publicly? It is no wonder New Zealand artists who have acquired international reputations have had to leave this country in order to avoid abuse and childish criticisms...

SELWYN MURU, Letter to the editor, *Evening Post*, 22 July 1967

Here, instead of a balanced assessment of a work of art we are subject to schoolboy humour at the artist's expense... The result of all this is that the public mind is filled with misconceptions... Coastline, Island Bay, is in fact very conventional when compared with what is happening on the international art scene.

PETER McLEAVEY, *Dominion*, 29 July 1967

Left: *Coastline, Island Bay* (1967) by John Drawbridge, oil on canvas, photograph courtesy of *Evening Post*



Left: Drawbridge in front of the Expo '70 mural, now in the National Library, Wellington

Below: Catalogue cover, New Vision Gallery, Auckland, 1970

1968 Major Prize, 10th International Exhibition Bianco e Nero, Lugano, Switzerland—previous winners include David Hockney, Pablo Picasso and Jacques Villon. Drawbridge's solo exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery is reviewed in *Ascent*, vol.1, no.2, by J. G. Blackman. **1968–81** A series of solo exhibitions at New Vision Gallery, Auckland. **1969** Included in 'Five Guest Artists' exhibition at New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (alongside Melvin Day, Pat Hanly, Ralph Hotere and Don Peebles). Featured, alongside Helen Stewart, Paul Olds and Tanya Ashken, in the opening exhibition of the Bett-Duncan Gallery at 147 Cuba Street, Wellington. **1969–79** Exhibits at Elva Bett Gallery, Wellington. **1970** Completes mural for New Zealand Pavilion, Expo '70, Osaka, Japan. Exhibits twelve large canvases (including *A Wrecked Angle*) at Auckland's New Vision Gallery. **1971** Awarded Q.E.II Arts Council of New Zealand Fellowship. Mural commissioned for Shaw Savill Co. Mural commissioned for IBM Centre, A.M.P. Building (work presently installed in foyer, Radio New Zealand House, Wellington).

My paintings are about 'states of being', usually attempting to describe some sort of limited space or depth. I'd like these works to exist particularly in their own right, without words.

JOHN DRAWBRIDGE, 1967



1972 Son, Tony, born. **1973** Artworks featured in *Landfall* 106, accompanied by an essay by Peter Cape. Featured, alongside Gordon Crook and Jeanne Stocker, in 'Three Artists' exhibition at the New Zealand Academy of Arts, 25 July–6 August. **1973–76** Produces *Beehive Mural*, Parliament Buildings, Wellington. **1974** Drawbridge is featured in *Prints and Printmakers in New Zealand* by Peter Cape. **1975** Son, Cameron, born. Drawbridge's art featured in 'Eight New Zealand Abstract Painters' by Patrick Hutchings, *Art International*, vol. XIX/1 January 1975. Designs cover of *New Zealand Atlas*. **1978** Is made a Member of the British Empire (M.B.E.). **1979** Produces series of prints for Vincent O'Sullivan's poetry collection, *Brother Jonathan, Brother Kafka*, Auckland: Oxford University Press. **1980** Exhibits at Curwen Gallery, London. Featured in *Contemporary New Zealand Painters A-M*, photographs by Marti Friedlander, text by Jim and Mary Barr, published by Alister Taylor. **1983** Completes mural for Auckland University School of Architecture Library. **1985** Produces mural for C.M.L., Wellington.



Drawbridge, a constructionist, a printmaker and, essentially, a precisionist, contrives to extend, inevitably, the exigencies of the medium in such a way that they become part of the meaning of the image. His solutions are always elegant: and his elegance reflects, in a refined way, the clean handsome country which he celebrates. Drawbridge's abstractions are, in the end, rooted in mimesis...

PATRICK HUTCHINGS

Drawbridge sees himself as teacher, printmaker and painter, although he ranks these roles in no particular order. He doesn't like neat dismissive categories being used for artists or people. He is one of those rare artists who has managed not only to combine his work with teaching, but has found the involvement an asset.

'Painting is a very isolated occupation,' he says. 'One is always dealing with one's own ideas. Teaching provides an important two-way process, an interplay of ideas.'

JIM AND MARY BARR

John Drawbridge with *New Zealand House Mural*, exhibited Shed 11, Wellington, 1991.

1986–mid 1990s Exhibits at Brooker Gallery, Wellington. **1987** Mural installed in foyer of National Library, Wellington. Wins Governor General Art Award at New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. **1991** Stained glass window commission for Home of Compassion, Island Bay, Wellington. As a result of reconstruction of the interior of New Zealand House, London, Drawbridge's mural is sent to Wellington, where it is exhibited at Shed 11 before being installed permanently in the National Archives building. **1991 onwards** Collaborates with Dilana Rugs, Christchurch, to produce rugs. **1992** Contributes chapter to *Godwits Return*, ed. Margaret Clark, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books. **1994** *Blue Night* (1973) included in 'Town and Gown; Victoria University Art Collection' at City Gallery Wellington. In March, Drawbridge's mural for the CML building in Wellington is discovered to have been destroyed. **1995** Exhibits with Tanya Ashken and their two sons, Tony and Cameron, at Turnbull House, Wellington. **1996** Work featured in 'Local Colour: Eight Wellington Artists' at City Gallery Wellington. **1998** Painting, *Sea Window No.2* (1984) included in 'From the BNZ Art Collection' at City Gallery Wellington. **2001** Solo exhibition, 'The Wide-Open Interior', at Tinakori Gallery, Wellington, in May. Exhibits new mezzotints, Portfolio Gallery, Auckland, July–August. Exhibits new paintings at the Lane Gallery, Auckland, in August. 'John Drawbridge—Wide Open Interior', a retrospective exhibition, opens at City Gallery Wellington in December. A survey of the artist's prints, 'Shadowlands', is held concurrently at Mahara Gallery, Waikanae.

Drawbridge's mezzotints are austere and commanding. Shorn of unnecessary detail, form is transmuted into concise statements in shades graduating from white to velvet black. He broaches a range of subjects: Interior with Bottles is a well-balanced treatment of transparency and reflection; Woman Reading is a superbly minimal rendering of form; Interior with Tanya is a more complex problem to which Drawbridge has nevertheless proposed an elegant solution.

STEPHEN CAIN, reviewing an exhibition of prints at Marilyn Savill Gallery, Wellington, in *Evening Post*, 18 September 1991

Mural's demise stuns artist
An aluminium mural by internationally recognised Wellington artist John Drawbridge in the CML building in the Capital has been destroyed. The large mural, which dominated the entrance foyer by the lifts, was demolished last year when that part of the building was refurbished.

Mr Drawbridge learned later of the destruction of the mural, an abstract design in gold and silver anodised aluminium. He said Colonial Mutual management had not consulted him...

'It raises the issue whether people who own works of art have the right to destroy them.'

Front page story, *Evening Post*, 21 March 1994

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON DIRECTOR: Paula Savage

EXHIBITION CURATOR AND PUBLICATION EDITOR: Gregory O'Brien

ORGANISATION AND INSTALLATION: Mark Amery, Megan Bull, Tania Connelly, Greg Donson, Mary-Jane Duffy, Tommy Honey, Anne Irving, Heather McCaskey, Amy MacKinnon, Justine McLisky, Marion Parker, Phillip Robertson, Neil Semple, Lara Strongman, Amber Wilkie, Rebecca Wilson

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Denis & Verna Adam; Sue & Grant Alexander; Neil & Barbara Anderson; Tanya Ashken; Auckland Art Gallery; Bank of New Zealand; Dr. Doreen Blumhardt; Jenny Bornholdt; Murray & Joan Calvert; Ian Campbell; Brian & Dorothy Carmody; Central School of Arts & Crafts, London; Linda Chalmers; Diana Coop; Frank & Lyn Corner; Dr. Roderick & Gillian Deane; Theo & Marjorie de Lange; Dunedin Public Art Gallery; David Farquhar; Ian Fraser & Suzanne Snively; Bryce Harland & Anne Blackburn; Lindsay & Maggie Haas; Hocken Library, University of Otago; Andrea Johnston; Lane Gallery, Auckland; Massey University; Bob & Pat McCay; Paul Millar; Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade; Victoria Moore-Jones; National Archives; Paula Newton; Dr. & Mrs Ian Prior; Mark Roach; Rutherford Trust; Dr. Eddie & Mrs Sang; Alick Shaw; Allan Smith; Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; Tinakori Gallery; Bill Toomath; Linda Tyler; Genevieve Webb; Alexander Yule



GREGORY O'BRIEN curated the exhibition 'John Drawbridge—Wide Open Interior', which opened at City Gallery Wellington in December 2001. Born in Matamata in 1961, he has worked at the City Gallery since 1997, during which time he curated 'Hotere—out the black window'. He has written numerous collections of poetry and co-edited three anthologies of New Zealand verse. **LARA STRONGMAN** was born in Exeter in 1968. She has published widely on New Zealand art and, since 1997, has been Programme Manager at the City Gallery Wellington. With Te Miringa Hohaia and Gregory O'Brien, she co-edited *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* which was co-winner of the History and Biography Section, Montana Book Awards 2001. **GERALD BARNETT** is currently director of the Mahara Gallery in Waikanae. He also works as a freelance curator and writer. He curated the important *Toss Woollaston Retrospective* in 1990 and authored the book that accompanied that exhibition. For some years he was researcher and project manager of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust. **ROBERT MACDONALD** was born in England in 1934 but grew up largely in New Zealand. He studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (London) before working as a Fleet Street journalist. His book about New Zealand, *The Fifth Wind*, was published by Bloomsbury (UK) in 1989. A prolific art writer, he currently lives in Wales.

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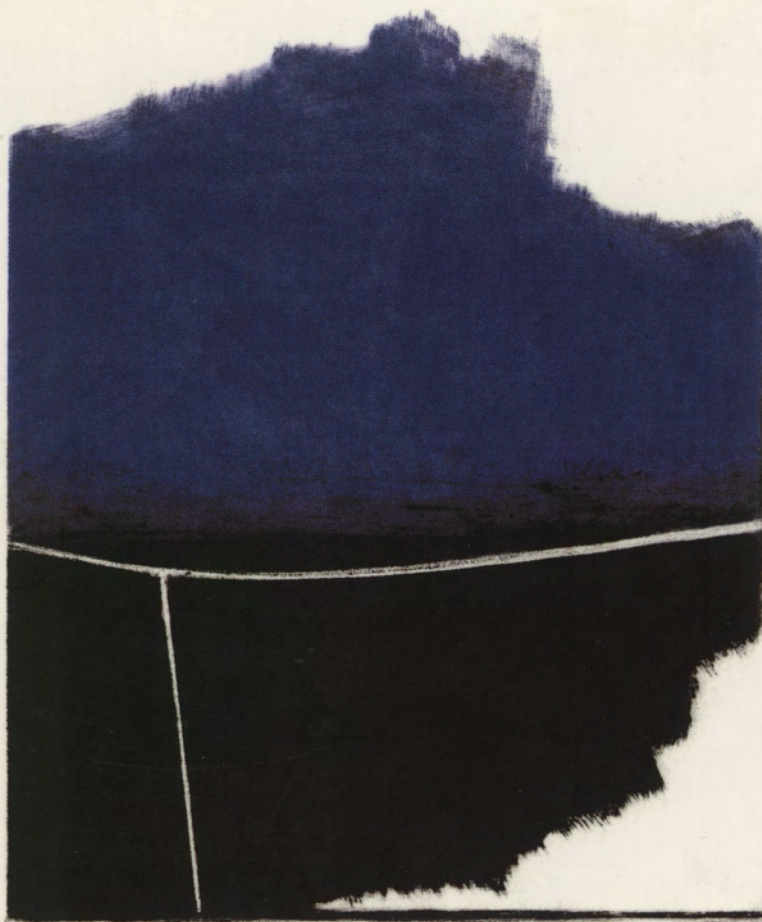
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