Jomison

What shall we tell them?

WELCOME TO FOMISON — *What shall we tell them?*

The City Gallery, Wellington is especially honoured to present this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue devoted to the career of the late Tony Fomison. In view of the artist's death in 1990, we are conscious of the responsibility this endeavour entails.

The exhibition surveys work from every stage of Fomison's development. It not only positions the artist within contemporary New Zealand art but also presents an in-depth perspective on the personal and universal issues addressed in his work.

The Wellington City Council joins us in thanking the many institutions and individuals who have assisted in making this project possible. We especially thank the Fomison family to whom the exhibition is dedicated, and the many lenders. We acknowledge the generous support of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, G P Print, Alan and Jenny Gibbs, and Communication Arts.

Paula Savage
Director

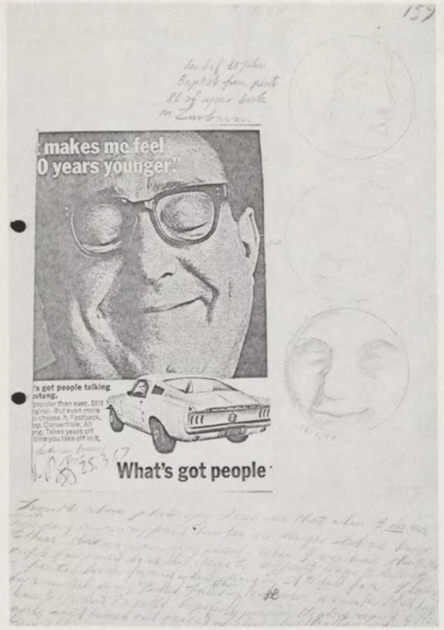
Looking into Tony Fomison's work, I learned that the questions he kept asking in his paintings demand not answers but attitudes. In particular: What is the ancestral lore of your culture? Why does it matter? You may not be able to answer these questions, but you have to have an attitude to them, and you have to care enough to persist with thinking.

Tony Fomison persisted with thinking, and with making art out of his thoughts. He also persisted with pestering people about their attitude. And, if you didn't have one, what was wrong with you?

Tony was a marvellous and infuriating individual, and his work is full of attitude: opinionated, bizarre, profound, irascible and persistent. I visited hundreds of households in which the works were the focus of intense questioning and longing. They were sometimes disputed, and sometimes banished. They were seldom passive. They were very often loved. Many of them are sorely missed during their absence for this exhibition. All were gladly lent.

This exhibition is not about answering the questions in Tony Fomison's work, but about putting them on show again and inviting you to have an attitude.

Ian Wedde
Exhibition curator



Tony Fomison. Painting logbook page for *#159 – Portrait of St Anthony*, nd [1977]. Courtesy of the Trustees, Fomison estate

PICTURING OTHERS

Fomison's library and archive is now housed entire at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Art. Books provided Fomison with much of the source material for his art, and his library shows his startling range of interests. Books on Renaissance artists are shelved with a history of centerfold nudes. A rare edition of Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* sits alongside a book on horror movies. There are books on medical pathology, comics, Edwardian children's books, magazines and books on ethnology.

In Fomison's paintings these and other sources were combined, willfully upsetting traditional ideas about high and low art.

During a trip to Europe in the mid '60s Fomison was able to see the Old Masters at first hand. He described them as Europe's ancestral culture and made numerous copies of Renaissance paintings, translating them into his own style.

Following a short stint in institutions, he also began painting prisoners, and people with disfigurements or diseases, developing the theme of the 'outsider', a person on the edge of society. This was a theme to which Fomison returned throughout his career.

Back in New Zealand in 1967 Fomison renewed his interest in Maori culture, and after moving to Auckland, he became involved with the Pacific Island community. In some works his interest in other cultures merged with themes like 'the outsider'. For example Fomison made several paintings of puhi — high born Maori women who lived a life separate from mainstream society, or fa'aaluma — outsiders of Samoan society.

(Untitled) Study of Holbein's 'Dead Christ' (#39), 1973
Oil on canvas, 660 x 3150 Private collection, Auckland Photo: John McIvor

Fomison is sometimes remembered as a painter of grotesques. There is a morbidity in many of the works, especially those of the 1970s, prompted by Fomison's fascination with *fin de siècle* decadence and his involvment with the drug culture.

His work was also often socially commited. He made paintings in protest against the 1981 Springbok rugby tour, and against the proposed Aramoana aluminium smelter.

Curator of the exhibition, Ian Wedde describes Fomison's life and art as being ". . . full of dispute. But these are arguments over problems we need to keep discussing. Arguments about how we can all live here, in Aotearoa. How we can live with all our different histories. How art can be part of these questions."

PAINTING THE PICTURE

As a young man Fomison worked as an archaeologist, tracing ancient Maori cave drawings and making sketches of his 'finds'. With this work he developed a detailed style of drawing which he continued for most of his life.

However with his oil paintings Fomison made no preliminary drawings, preferring to let a painting reveal itself slowly, changing layer by layer, until it seemed right. He gave an example of this metamorphosis in an interview with Jim and Mary Barr in 1980: "The *Omai* painting started out as an attempt to paint Te Kooti and then went on to a Ringatu thing, and then became two jesters, one with a skull. After that it became Polynesian . . . The changes are because of the compositional thing you are handling."

Fomison carefully recorded each change in log books or on the back of paintings. This was another work habit from his early archaeological training. The log books, kept from 1969 to 1979, also note sources for images, technical details, precise start and finish dates for painting, information about the subject matter and sometimes a note about the supports they were painted on.

Many works were made on coarse hessian, giving the paintings a grainy look. Others utilised everyday objects — breadboards, teatowels, cupboard doors, coal sacks or tea trays. A defect might become an asset. Fomison's painting log for #143 *(Mr Bill Ratana, his first dream)* reveals that the breadboard frame for this painting was burnt in a studio fire. It was this scorching that suggested the black cloud from which God spoke to the prophet Ratana in a dream.

Sombre colours characterise Fomison's paintings. In 1971, the time of some of his darkest works, he described his practice in a newspaper interview. "Where before black and earth colours were applied together on a white background, now the black is used first to model forms, and a thin glaze of transparent colour is washed over after the black has dried. Common to both is the retention of a white background for highlights."

Towards the end of his life, Fomison's style became looser and more spontaneous. He made a series of lithograph prints with Muka Studios in Auckland and said of them, " think my work got a new freedom with lithography at Muka."Interestingly the lithographs, drawn on stone with ink crayon, contained something of the early rock drawings, pulling together both ends of the artist's career.

Tony Fomison at the Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, November 1980. The painting is *Portrait of a Clown*, 1980. Photo: Shirley Grace.
Courtesy of the Trustees, Fomison estate

The exhibition *Fomison — What shall we tell them?*, organised by the City Gallery, Wellington, will tour to the following venues:
City Gallery, Wellington *13 February – 22 May 1994*
Robert McDougall Art Gallery *28 July – 11 September 1994*
Waikato Museum of Art and History *18 Nov 1994 – 19 Feb 1995*
Dunedin Public Art Gallery *4 March – 30 April 1995*
Auckland City Art Gallery *June – July 1995*

FOMISON

What shall we tell them?

Edited by Ian Wedde

A limited edition catalogue with over 200 illustrations. Includes an exhibition catalogue, archive listing, essays by leading scholars and interview material from the artist himself, Fomison's Samoan tattoo brother and their tattooist. This ambitious publication allows the reader not only to appreciate the art of Tony Fomison but to gain an insight into areas of his life.

Distributed by

GP PUBLICATIONS LTD

$69.95

Available from all good booksellers and the City Gallery, Wellington

ARTIST CHRONOLOGY

12 July 1939
Anthony Leslie Fomison born in Christchurch, New Zealand.

1942 – 46
His father, Leslie Fomison away at war.

1946
Leslie Fomison returns from the war. He brings Tony a box of paints.

1952 – 56
Attends Linwood High School. Art teachers Les Weenick and Roy Entwhistle encourage him to go to art school. Makes his first archaeological 'find' at Gore Bay. Gains the attention of Canterbury Museum's Director Roger Duff.

1957 – 60
Attends Canterbury University School of Fine Art. His teacher Rudolf Gopas encourages him in a loose, gestural style.

1958 – 62
Compiles photo essays on seasonal eeling at Lake Wairewa, Banks Peninsula. Undertakes a survey of Maori pictographs in South Canterbury, for the Canterbury Museum.

1960
First group show, gaining the attention of the artists Bill Sutton, Doris Lusk and Toss Woollaston, and a regional support base in Christchurch.

1962
Curates an exhibition of Theo Schoon's copies of Maori pictographs for Victoria University's School of Continuing Education in Wellington.

1962 – 63
Lives near Kaikoura. Meets the artist Philip Clairmont. Is awarded a travel grant by the Arts Advisory Board.

1964
Travels to England and meets up with New Zealand artists Steve Furlonger, Matt Pine and John Panting.

1964 – 67
Travels to Spain. Joins a Paris street gang and does pavement drawings for tourists. Is imprisoned and deported to England. A drug habit lands him in Banstead Hospital. Makes copies from the Old Masters. Is assisted to return to New Zealand.

1967
Lives in Christchurch, with others including Philip Clairmont. Paints the first of a lifelong series of variations after Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Old man and boy*.

1968
Paints the first 'gurner' faces. Gurners were competitors in face pulling contests.

1969
Works for the CSA as an exhibitions officer and shows his tracings of Maori pictographs there. Paints his first self portrait, and the *Study of head of Christ by Morales*, the peaks of his achievements to date.

1970
Spends 6 weeks in prison for drug offences.

1971
Exhibits a large series of paintings of prison inmates. Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch purchases *No!*, the first institutional acquisition of his work.

1973
Moves to Auckland.

1974 – 79
Meets Colin McCahon. Becomes involved in attempts to revive the moko.

1979
First major survey of his work at the Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt. Is included in the book *Contemporary New Zealand artists* by Jim and Mary Barr and Marti Friedlander. Meets Paulo Sulu'ape II and Fuimaono Tuisasau, and begins to recieve the pe'a (Samoan tattoo).

1980
The pe'a is completed. A Bruce Morrison *Profiles* series documentary on Fomison is made. Meets Samoan artist Fatu Feu'u and is involved in supporting Pacific Island artists.

1981
Becomes involved with anti-Springbok Tour demonstrations.

1983
Travels to Western Samoa.

1984
Begins making lithographs at Muka Studios, Auckland. Death of his close friend Philip Clairmont.

1985
Lives in the Rita Angus Cottage, Wellington as the first Rita Angus Fellow.

1986
Lives at the potter Barry Brickell's studio at Driving Creek, Coromandel and completes ceramic works.

1986 – 87
Organises a film and recording session with Theo Schoon.

1988 – 89
Health begins to fail. Completes a large body of work for his final exhibition at Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

1990
Travels to the Bay of Islands to attend Waitangi Day celebrations. Collapses on the Treaty Grounds on February 5 and dies the following day.

ABSOLUTELY POSITIVELY WELLINGTON
Tumeke Poneke
Wellington City Council

Queen Elizabeth II
Arts Council of New Zealand

GP PRINT

COMMUNICATION ARTS
The Print Management Specialists

City Gallery
CIVIC SQUARE • WELLINGTON
PO BOX 2199, WELLINGTON
TELEPHONE (04) 801 3021
FAX (04) 801 3950