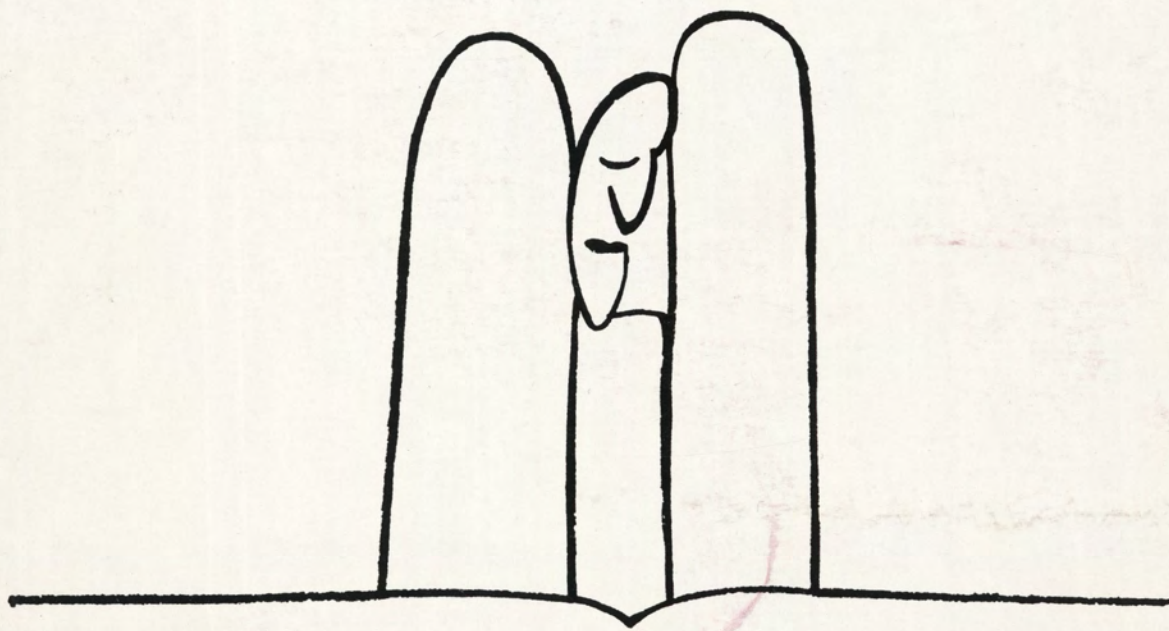


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*c h r i s t i n a*  
**CONRAD**

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# LIST OF WORKS



**1. Howling for Johan Heinrich**

1972 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**5. Vision of Benjamin**

1970 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**9. Something ancient**

1973 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**13. Fallin' light**

1978 Clay icon  
Private Collection Wellington

**2. Vision of Johan Heinrich**

1975 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**6. Eternal sorrow**

1972 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**10. Untitled**

1978 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**14. For Heinrich**

1971/2 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**3. Johan Heinrich**

1972 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**7. The 3 egos of Johan Heinrich**

1973 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**11. From this fig tree has thorns**

1970 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**15. Weeping over Heinrich**

1972 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**4. Three faces of the artist**

1976 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**8. From this fig tree has horns**

1974 Clay icon  
Private Collection Wellington

**12. Tree woman**

1970 Waiheke Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist

**16 Christina thinking about Heinrich**

1976 Clay icon  
Collection of the Artist





**Birth of Paola**  
1970 Oil on board  
Collection of the Artist



**Untitled**  
1970 Oil on board  
Private Collection



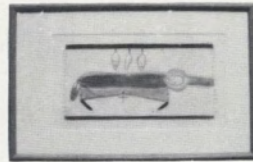
**Untitled**  
1970 Oil on board  
Private Collection



**Christina dreaming of the Babe Krishna**  
1979 Pencil, crayon on stitched paper  
Private Collection Nelson



**Untitled**  
1979 Pencil, crayon on stitched paper  
Private Collection Wellington



**Lying on a bed like a swooning plate**  
1979 Pencil, crayon on stitched paper  
Private Collection Wellington



**Blood rivers**  
1979 Pencil, crayon on stitched paper  
Private Collection Wellington



**Me asking Heinrich for permission to paint**  
1980 Oil on board  
Collection Francis Allison & Syme,  
Wellington



**Johan Heinrich and the yellow jug**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



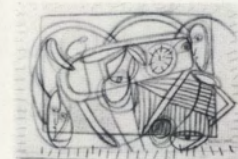
**Portrait of Johan Heinrich**  
1980 Oil on board  
Private Collection Kawhai



**Last winter in Dargaville**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**Many an afternoon we sat together**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Nelson



**Untitled**  
1984 Charcoal on stitched paper  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**Untitled**  
1984 Charcoal on stitched paper  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**Heinrich lamenting his fiendish bride**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**Johan Heinrich contemplating bitterness**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Nelson



**Refugees**  
1983 Oil on board  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The artist and the life of the Cerulian Pot**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Waikanae



**The artist contemplating her finances**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**Krishna's 4th Birthday**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Auckland



**After the birth of Julius**  
1984 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**T'was in Monsegur that I came across a long winding path that lead between these hills**  
1985 Watercolour  
Coutesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The artist pursued by Death and Fortune**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Eastbourne



**The visit**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**The Artist entertaining the dealers**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**Two faces of a dealer**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection



**Act 1. The artist as a savage bride faces the critics**  
1985 Watercolour  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooke-Gifford Gallery



**The stone carver and dealer**  
1985 Watercolour  
Private Collection Auckland



**Woman gazing in some anxiety**  
1984/5 Watercolour  
Private Collection Wellington



**The Artist presenting her life**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**The red jug**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection



**The Artist and son**  
1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington





**The 36th birthday of Simon and the visitation of Christina - 14 Dec.**

1985 Oil on board  
Courtesy of the Artist and Artis Gallery



**Krishna's 5th birthday party**

1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Christchurch



**The artist strolling**

1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**The final innocence**

1985 Oil on board  
Private Collection



**The birthday ride**

1986 Pencil and collage  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



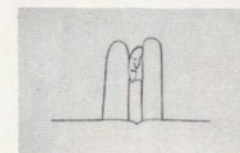
**Krishna's 6th birthday**

1986 Coloured pencils  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



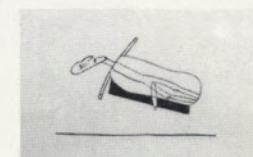
**The painted chariot**

1986 Lithograph Ed. 17  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**Between these hills**

1986 Lithograph Ed. 17  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The search for oblivion**

1986 Lithograph Ed. 17  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery

**The nightmare - The tragedy last year in Morocco**

1986 Triptych Oil on board  
Private Collection Wellington



**The eldest son riding**

1986 Watercolour  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooke-Gifford Gallery



**Life - Death and the Conrad brothers**

1987 Watercolour  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The artist contemplating life or death**

1987 Watercolour  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brook-Gifford Gallery



**The dinner party**

1986 Oil on board  
Courtesy of Artist and Brooker Gallery



**Something sad and ancient**

1987 Oil and titanium oxide on board  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**This summer a huge worm climbed into the hearts of my flowers and devoured them**

1987 Oil and titanium oxide on board  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The eternal stare of the bloody artist**

1987 Oil and titanium oxide on board  
Private Collection



**Some amount of querulousness**

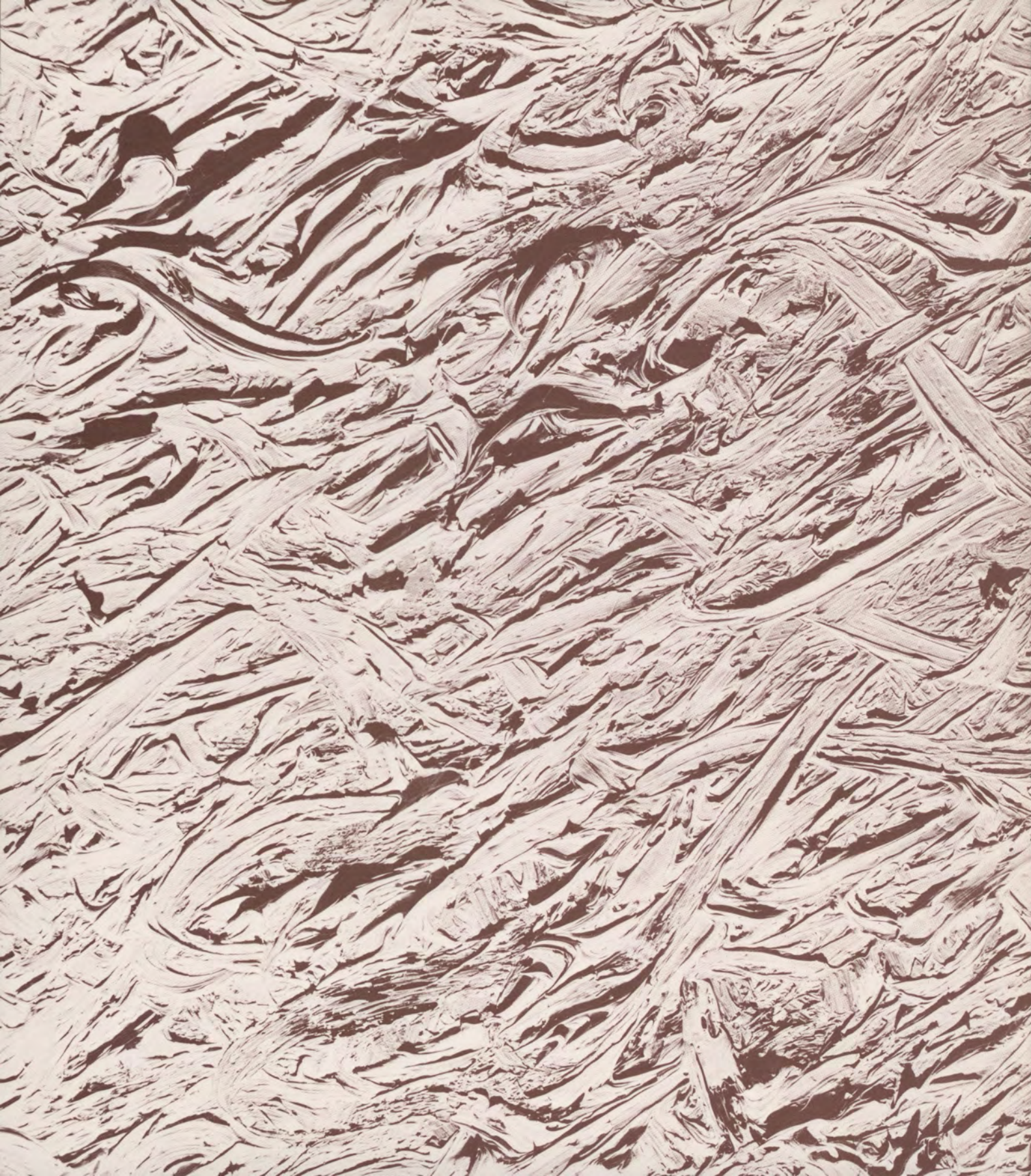
Oil and titanium oxide on board  
Courtesy of the Artist and Brooker Gallery



**The Last Supper**

1987 Oil and titanium oxide on board  
Private Collection Wellington





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*c h r i s t i n a*  
**CONRAD**

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A SURVEY OF WORKS

paintings • drawings • icons

1970 — 1987

JULY 18 — SEPTEMBER 6, 1987

*Wellington City Art Gallery*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Kay Roberts and Deliah Williams for their commitment to the work of Christina Conrad and their time taken in researching the names and locations of works sold. Their enthusiasm and professionalism enabled us to locate and borrow a number of works from collections throughout the country.

Campbell McLean for his time and commitment in the production of video recording time spent with the Artist without the intrusion of dramatic 'effects'. The production is a credit to his patience and integrity.

Anne Kirker and Ian Wedde for their interest and excellent writing for the catalogue.

Wellington City Council as funding body, especially Chairman Ruth Gotlieb for their support and continuing faith in the Gallery programme under my Direction.

The Staff of City Gallery who together make the exhibition a reality. In particular Mark Roach for collection, registration and packaging of works.

Sue Hewitt for administration and Philip Kelly for the flair and exacting standard with which he executes the designwork.

As a Gallery we are indebted to the owners of works whose trust and support in lending work make these exhibitions possible.

J.L.



## FOREWORD

*J o h n            L e u t h a r t*

**T**HE EXHIBITION of work by Christina Conrad is one of two exhibitions curated this year by the Wellington City Art Gallery, surveying the work of regionally based artists. Christina like Tom Kreisler has deliberately chosen to work outside the influences of fashionable contemporary NZ — Art Culture.

Christina Conrads art strongly polarises viewer reaction. The fervour and passion with which some collect her works is as strong a passion for those who dismiss it. The purpose of this exhibition is to introduce the work of Christina to Wellington and national audiences and to provide a platform for critical evaluation and assessment.

Christina began painting seriously at the age of 27. From the works of this period only 3 remain, one of which 'The birth of Paola' from 1970 serves as a starting point for this survey.

The majority of the works from this time, painted when living on Waiheke Island with her first husband Norman Bilbrough, were destroyed by Christina in a 'depressed and hypercritical fit' — 'I chopped them up in the rain, crying as they fell under the axe.'

It was at this point that she discovered clay and for her its healing qualities. 'I was to work intensely for a long time, living almost for nothing else'. Christina has referred to these clay works set in wide Rimu frames as Icons. A collection of clay works retained by her are part of the exhibition.

Also in the early 1970s and following on from and related in style and imagery to the Icons, the artist created a suite of small stitched watercolours. At 32, Christina met Heinrich Conrad, referred to in paintings and writings as the 'Stone Carver'. 'He was a whacking great inspiration for my clay paintings — I courted him arduously in works of art. I made great clay penises. His mystery endlessly inspired me, resulting in many strange works at this time. I was obsessed with the Stone Carver'. I crept about in dark voluptuary, making cakes with honey and seeds, playing houses. After a harvest of sexuality and house playing, I came slowly to the hidden abstract quality of my mind. This was an arduous and painful journey, seemingly fruitless on the outside — a time when many of my ideas changed and my craving to paint grew'.

At 37, time spent in the South of France was to have a marked effect upon Christina's attitudes and work. It marked a return to drawing and subsequent painting and rekindled imagery originally inspired by the birth of her first son Krishna and then by the birth of her second son Julius in 1983. These years were also marked by the first of a number of exhibitions with Kay Roberts of the Brooker Gallery (formerly Galerie Legard) in Kelburn. These first introductions of her works to a wide public included many Icons, drawings and paintings assembled for this exhibition.

Following the birth of Julius and living in Dargaville, there followed another intense period of painting and

prolific output. 'My mental life flowed about me, a rich harvest began and I worked for my domestic life to unite with my creative — for there to be no division — although this has oft resulted in chaos. I've made it, my studio gazes into the kitchen! I'm domestic — I'm a painter, Ye the looney Painter!'

The exhibition reveals over 20 years a choice and use of imagery relatively unchanged, works recording the intensity of passion and frustration of the artist's world. Familiar imagery of birthing, coupling and ritualistic celebration are rendered through a changing intensity of surface treatment.

Her most recent transition was seen during 1986-87 in a series of 'Painted' Icons shown at Artis Gallery, Auckland, and later Brooker Gallery, Wellington — works heavily sculptured, no longer relying on layers of oil for relief but mixing paint with titanium oxide to create works that are both painting and sculpture.

Negotiations for the exhibition began two years ago when little was known of Christina Conrads art outside a committed group of Wellington based collectors and Brooker Gallery patrons. Since then her work has received intense coverage through 'Kaleidoscope', *Art New Zealand*, the *Listener* and the critical columns of newspapers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and her art has come to the attention of a growing number of New Zealand and Australian collectors. It is curious that to date, to my knowledge, no work of Christina Conrads is held in a public collection.

Christina Conrad is an intensely committed and prolific artist. The exhibition surveys the periods and transitions in her art since 1970. While originally planned to tour New Zealand at the close of the Wellington showing, exhibition resources and finances have been used instead to produce a more substantial catalogue and a video documenting the artist's development to date.

Finally, our debt to those collectors committed to the work of this artist and willing to lend for this exhibition is gratefully acknowledged.

Director.

June 1987





Photo: Bruce Connors

Christina Conrad

## IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTINA CONRAD

*A n n e K i r k e r*

The following interview was conducted by Anne Kirker on 6 April, 1987

**A.K.** *I believe you began painting and working with clay in your own words "obsessively" in your late twenties. This would have been around 1970. Could you describe this time in your life and the imagery you produced?*

**C.C.** I was on Waiheke Island with a new baby and I spent a whole year working with clay. I had never used it before and when I picked up a lump of clay and held it in my hand it was like holding the world. It was something amazing. I made great pots in the beginning, covered with women, I didn't have one man on any pot. Round and round the pot raced women, sparks shooting out of their eyes, they were amazed at themselves. They were all red, dark earth red. I really got to know myself, explored myself through the clay. Bit by bit I came upon secrets that had dwelt deep within me and which were now slowly revealed. I hadn't touched paint since I was 19 and when I was 25 a terrible craving came upon me to paint. It was the only thing I wanted to do but I was afraid to paint because I knew that once I started I was going to embark on a huge journey where I would ignore everything else. So I shirked away from it but when my baby died and I was lying prone and howling in a terrible wanton way my husband forced me out of bed and said it's time you started painting. As soon as I touched the brush everything flew to me. I was too scared to paint people because I didn't want it revealed that I couldn't make them move! So I painted furniture but the furniture lept across the board, great baskets of fruit, one crazy little Victorian sideboard. And I had the most exuberant time, like a child. Bit by bit people crept into my paintings and they were these little stiff creatures who lay in baths, white all over without any shadows and curious eyes.

**A.K.** *For many years you kept these paintings and clay works hidden. Why?*

**C.C.** I think I was afraid of myself. I was a very secretive person and I felt safe when they were in cupboards away from sight. I couldn't face them because they were bits of me sprinkled here and there, I couldn't show them to anybody.

**A.K.** *You lived in isolation on Waiheke and then in the Wakamarina between Nelson and Blenheim. Now you're at Avoca Valley outside Dargaville. What advantages and disadvantages do you feel working in such remote areas has had?*

**C.C.** Oh enormous advantages because there is quiet all the time and I'm drawing energy from trees and the sky is like an eternal umbrella to me. I'm hauling down secrets from the sky. I can walk between the trees and get this tremendous energy. I'm sucking up beauty in this terrible greedy way and it's not being interfered with by other people's images.



**A.K.** *But from your childhood you've grown up with books and paintings.*

**C.C.** Yes, I was surrounded by them, I lived in a house overflowing with prints on the walls — Picasso's paintings were 'printed' on me, I couldn't get rid of them. That's why I have found it so good living in isolation away from everybody else's influences; I've been able to cordon my ownself. When I am in the middle of other people and their images I lose my identity and I see their faces not mine, I see their painting and not mine.

**A.K.** *By the same token you come from a family where there is considerable creative talent. Your father for example, is the English artist Patrick Hayman, your husband Heinrich Conrad sculpts and paints and Miro Bilbrough, your eldest daughter has exhibited drawings. Is there a conscious dialogue between you all as artists?*

**C.C.** Well we've all got that sharp eye so we enjoy each other's company. It was quite a painful moment for me to yield my paintings up to the public and I was forced into it.

**A.K.** *What caused that?*

**C.C.** A lot of it had to do with Nigel Brown. I hadn't seen him for years and he came to visit me when I was 40. He was exhibiting often and here I was an artist too and I'd never been seen! My ego rose up like a horrible snake. On the other hand we had run out of money and had no prospects. Heinrich didn't go to work because he was just getting into his sculpture and he also shared the children so I could paint. So I had to make a living.

**A.K.** *In a television interview last year you stated it was important that you were "not hemmed in by rules of a false reality." What do you mean by this?*

**C.C.** I have always loathed rules. When I was a child I didn't appear rebellious because I was very quiet and introverted. But when it came to learning and rules I could never keep to them. I seemed to have a huge curtain across my mind that I didn't want to peer out of. I led a very bored life because I seemed to have nothing to replace it with either, except for this nebulous dream-life.

**A.K.** *So in effect, it was very natural for you as an adult to separate yourself from society at large.*

**C.C.** Yes, because I could never relate. And I had no intention of relating.

**A.K.** *Now you appear to thrive on a frugal existence, on a very harsh lifestyle. To what extent is this self-imposed?*

**C.C.** I thrive on hardship. In hardship I see this incredible beauty; I can't bear luxurious situations because they give me claustrophobia. In one second I'd tear off the wallpaper, tear up the carpet and have it naked except for treasures deposited here and there. Comfort makes me feel uncomfortable. But I love feather quilts and avocado pears — I am a voluptuary in a stark sort of way. I feel primitive . . . it's hard to explain.

**A.K.** *Let's talk about the content of your painting. You always adopt an autobiographical stance, often depicting yourself in the context of those closest to you, Heinrich for example and your sons Krishna and Julius. In 1985*

*especially there was a distinctly narrative quality to your imagery.*

**C.C.** Yes, our life was a turbulent, mad thing and I made paintings of everything that was happening.

**A.K.** *You often place objects like teapots and jugs next to your figures and give them a similar life force. Can you explain your use of animistic symbolism?*

**C.C.** I'm terribly domestic. I love domestic objects and they come alive for me. They've got bodies of their own. I always use them as a sexual image — a jug seems such a sensual thing with that amazing thirsty throat and I also use the teapot in the same way. I love the whole dance of it all. But I don't think of my work usually as being erotic because I go naked in the summer and I put those sexual parts in simply because I'm very aware of them. If I get into a lustful mood then I enjoy expressing it in my painting.

**A.K.** *Aside from the sexual component of your imagery, there is also a strong sense of Christian symbolism.*

**C.C.** That's true, but I hate to use the word Christianity because to me it means bombs and murder, nuclear war and so forth. For a long time I have tried to keep that element out of my work because I don't want it to be misunderstood. And that's another reason why I have cocks and vaginas in my paintings because they are our obstacle, our lust. Lust brings war, hate, desire — and yet that is what keeps the world going — our reproducing. Our lust is our life.

**A.K.** *What word would you prefer to substitute for Christianity?*

**C.C.** It is hard, because 'spirituality' sounds so false. You could actually call it 'logic' in a way because if you look at the pattern of things there is a logic to it, that journey through ourselves.

**A.K.** *I've often thought there is a medieval intensity in your work which evokes the terrible and the sinister but at the same time there is a humorous side which makes use of the absurd.*

**C.C.** Yes, I have always got a huge sense of humour. In the middle of some mad drama my humour comes out. When you talk about the medieval I feel that shows also because I often don't live in this life. I seem to journey back into past lives and they are all intermingled.

**A.K.** *It seems to me that the wide range of feelings your work provokes in the viewer either endears them passionately to it or repulses them.*

**C.C.** The paintings show things that are usually hidden and they can upset people terribly.

**A.K.** *Not only are you a visual artist but you write poetry and the way you talk and explain your work is in poetic terms.*

**C.C.** Yes, I love writing, I can't make a straight narrative, everything comes tumbling out. I think this is good because your outside self isn't dominating the invisible part of yourself. The house is full of books — I don't



read all that often but I slowly meditate and suck pieces I like, and live with them. Patrick White is my favourite writer. I enjoy books about people's lives, painters like Francis Bacon. I love Patrick White because visually I see things in a similar way and I also have the same dreadful sense of humour.

**A.K.** *There has been a marked shift in your painting in stylistic terms, from the flat treatment of 1983 through to 1985 and the more sculptural presence that it now has. You currently manipulate paint as if it were clay. How would you describe this development?*

**C.C.** Right back at the beginning, on Waiheke Island, I found I hated the liquid poisonous slippery quality of paint. Whenever I used it I longed to make it like something else. So I was glad to go on to clay, to that dry morose quality. This was when I was 26. When I got a craving for painting later, and it wasn't until I came to the Avoca Valley, I knew that if I touched paint again I would dominate it. I laid it on very thick and I was masterful (though I had a horrible fear lurking in the core of my heart!) I still found I had to turn it into something else. I couldn't stand that flat board with no dimensions. Then I started mixing my paint with a base of titanium oxide and linseed oil. Before that I was using tubes and tubes of paint.

**A.K.** *The colour in your work is now more diffuse and there are no longer binding outlines.*

**C.C.** Those binding outlines were like the limits of my mind and my life. I hated them, they were like the barbed wire fences of a concentration camp. I've managed to break out of them and bring all my secret life, all my gloating voluptuary, everything into those lumps of paint which I twist and mould.

**A.K.** *And your imagery is simpler too. For instance the recent series of paintings that you refer to as 'icons' feature the rudimentary form of a naked figure, often of a woman, merged with a child.*

**C.C.** Motherhood for me at this time in my life, I am nearly 45, has been very wonderful. The baby represents that person that we would be if we weren't dominated by lust. The colours are very ancient and that's the feeling I wanted to capture.

**A.K.** *How unique do you feel your work is within the New Zealand context?*

**C.C.** That's very difficult to answer.

**A.K.** *When Bill Wright, assistant director at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, saw your paintings and icons here last year he singled you out as an unusual talent.*

**C.C.** Yes, I was pleased to hear that. I've sometimes had a longing to plunge into Australia because I am intrigued by the country, it is so old and the colours have been drained out until there is so much grey and yet within the grey you can see everything. I would love to see it and paint it, if I set my foot in Australia I would have a whole new surge of life. I take so much from the environment, from the landscape.

**A.K.** *Since 1984 you have held solo exhibitions in Auckland, Wellington and in Christchurch. 'Kaleidoscope'*

*featured you on one of its programmes, articles have been written in Art New Zealand and elsewhere, and you are now the subject of a survey show with the Wellington City Gallery. Do you see this sudden recognition as a blessing or a threat?*

**C.C.** I've enjoyed it in a lot of ways but also I often feel terribly corrupt. I know that money ruins people but I have to provide for my children.

**A.K.** *What directions do you see your work taking in the future?*

**C.C.** It's terribly hard. I am thinking about it now because I have reached a peak in that I've found the medium that I like working in. I have turned the paint into something else but I never know what my painting is about until I've done it. My whole life has been like a strange murky jigsaw that has exposed itself suddenly to pools of light.

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## CHRISTINA CONRAD — VISIONARY LOGIC

### *I a n       W e d d e*

**I**T WOULD seem that we are condemned for some time yet always to speak **excessively** about reality. This is probably because ideologism and its opposite are types of behaviour which are still magical, terrorised, blinded and fascinated by the split in the social world. And yet, this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge.

Roland Barthes  
from *'Mythologies'*

#### 1

The word “primitive” has become the exhausted slushy of modern art history. Its part in that history has involved many mediations. As Kirk Varnedoe writes in an essay on Gauguin (1), the word “has characteristically been linked to other polarities that clarified its meaning and impact: heathen vs. Christian, natural vs. artificial, irrational vs. rational, etc, each in turn implying hierarchies of high and low, normative and aberrant, good and bad.” Though he does not, Varnedoe could have included gender among these disparative terms.

But it’s important to note, as Varnedoe does, that the terms are not necessarily exclusive, but more usually paired in some way. The “primitive” may be what a civilisation sees as other than itself; it is also what a civilisation must invent as a self-critique.

For example, European court Arcadianism, nobles playing at being shepherds and shepherdesses, was a kind of “primitivism”. It addressed not only the aristocracy’s sense of its class difference from the peasant, but also a sense of loss — a ritualised admission, however sentimental or cynical, of corruption — of the loss of authenticity or innocence to cultivation, manners, consciousness. It was a game in which consciousness was turned around in a gaze upon what it imagined was instinct. The implications of this “primitivism” therefore adhered very closely to the civilised — were *of* the latter, as well as different, other, from it. This retrospective narrative, this drama, has been the subject of much court painting, as for example Watteau’s *The Embarcation From Cythera*, a narrative of nostalgia for lost innocence, whose self-critique adheres firmly, if speciously, to it.

Christina Conrad has usually chosen to move away from the centre, to remote areas and austere circumstances. The bookshelves in these Cytheran houses, however, are full of art books referring to Primitive Painting, African Art, Henri Rousseau, Art Brut.

#### 2

Clearly, Conrad is involved in a version of an age-old drama and quest, the Arcadian one, whose double consciousness has invented the word “primitive” to explain why it should seek to turn back upon itself those

imagined qualities of innocence, primary experience, and instinct, which it knows (or feels) it has forfeited to disenchantment. “Primitive” is the magic word which allows that double consciousness to believe again in what it knows does not exist. The word allows the sceptic to become rapturous. It allows Christina Conrad, in a telling moment, to successively abjure the terms “Christian” and “spiritual”, preferring finally to speak of “logic” (2). In “The Rise of Primitivism” (3), Christopher Middleton uses the phrase “art as visionary fact”: this he sets against “art as a perspectival simulation of nature”; he traces the concept to Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912).

An understanding of this double consciousness, which involves not (self-)deception but a quality of theatricality, is vital to the consideration of an artist like Christina Conrad, who so often and so obviously pushes artfulness and artlessness against each other in her work.

And that something adhesive — a magic or mediation — is involved in this primitivist consciousness, must be the starting point for an introduction to the art of Christina Conrad.

#### 3

When she jokingly proposes a painting “The Artist as a Bloody Loony”, the title pivots sharply upon the word “as” — Conrad is turning her theatrical consciousness in some derision upon those who imagine that Cythera really exists and that she has already arrived there — pre-lapsarian, gifted with infantile creativity, without modern consciousness. The title is also a wry self-admission that you have to be mad to get involved in this game. And mad not to.

I’d guess, too, that some attention is solicited by the word “bloody”. Conrad is a wordsmith whose sense of language in her speech, poetry, and titles, is both exact and ornate. The precise words are also embellished — they whirl out from accuracy into metaphor. Thus the “bloody loony” of her title comments not only on one predictable perception of her work and its extravagant gestures; the phrase also backloads suffering. It may even co-opt a male language of religious experience, remotely Christian and possibly mediaeval, to a female zone. It may perform an elision of stigmata with menstruation, a gesture that is at once a transformation of suffering and a defence against its causes. The term even seems to be signalling at a remote mystical history occupied, for example, by the persecuted Albigenes — a sect that sought to advance feminine terms as major, to subvert a language whose Christian masters would respond with persecution, bloody persecution at that.

And further, it’s important to note that Conrad’s art is never secular. It nearly always conveys a deep tone of mystical or spiritual experience — of the fundamental, factual, *logical* nature of such experience. And while this kind of perception is often attributed to “primitive” non-Western cultures and to polytheistic or animistic religions, and while the modelling of Conrad’s figures obviously owes something to Modernist primitivism (Picasso’s Africanism in particular), Conrad’s links are really old European ones. Her art reaches back to a mediaeval, or Gothic, iconography. In a sense, it returns the recent legacy of Modernist primitivism to a remote European history. It enters that visual language in a mediaeval drama in which no aspect of life, however domestic, was merely secular — in which the very objects of domestic life were imbued with malevolent or benign powers, in which the most banal characters could be seen as satanic or saintly, in which sexual and religious forces ran back together toward some suppressed, pagan source.



Conrad's Cythera, then, is not a serene place, a haven, a place of lotus-eaters or born-again innocents, but a site of turbulence, shape-changing, conflict, and ecstasy. In her paintings, those morbid personifications of the secular, the art dealers, become demonic undertakers. Of course, this is also a drama, a costume drama at that, and so the scenes are not without humour — even humouring.

What the dealers signify now, as they pay their call on the “bloody loony” whose visions they will stun into currency, is the fact that Conrad's primitivism is not the innocent sort, but rather a kind of vitalism. What Conrad's art resists are the devitalising claims of the merely secular. At this level, however deliberately theatrical, grotesque, comic, and double-conscious her art may seem, it is profoundly, deadly, serious.

#### 4

The term “primitive” seems to have entered the art lexicon through French. In the mid nineteenth century “*primitif*” was used to denote fourteenth and fifteenth century Italian artists such as Cimaboue and Giotto. Later in the century the term would attach to the Limbourg Brothers. Later still, as the century began to turn towards the kind of primitivist crisis engendered by *Der Blaue Reiter*, the word was used of mediaeval icons, of eighteenth and nineteenth century ex votos and other religious works, especially Rumanian, Bavarian, and Spanish glass paintings.

By the *fin de siècle*, “primitive” was being used of all the above, and of European folk art of the period which extended into the twentieth century, including secular glass paintings, painted Slovenian beehives, rustic painted furniture, and god knows what else. The term was also used indiscriminately of tribal art from Africa and Oceania, of archaic art such as the Iberian sculpture that would later influence Picasso, of Oriental court art, and so on.

This ballooning of the territory of “primitive” reflects a shrinkage and a crisis in the metropolitan zone — reveals a garrison mentality whose sense of its own centrality was megalomaniac and certainly (as events would reveal) proto-fascist; and which was simultaneously aware of the growing scope of the other — of the “primitive”: the savage, the folk, the naive, the archaic, the oriental, the provincial.

Metropolitan taste and scholarship would soon admit the “Italian primitives” to the mainstream of European art history. It would accredit the syncretic sophistication of the Brothers Limbourg. In the first decades of the twentieth century, urged by *Der Blaue Reiter*, the metropolitan would argue for the deprovincialising of such phenomena as Bavarian glass painting.

This had the effect of attacking bourgeois or academic taste, an Oedipal motive also in Picasso's Africanism. As an appropriation, however, it had in addition the effect of enlarging the metropolitan zone. The great Modernist Weltanschauung was launched.

By mid-century the move had been taken further by Dubuffet. The “art brut” of the mentally ill, of children, and of makers working entirely outside the metropolitan art economy, was proposed as an authentic alternative to the products of that economy, which would certainly by now include countless samples of Modernist primitivism.

This move installed Cythera in place of the metropolitan centre. There was no longer any need to be somewhere else. All that was required was the repudiation of an economy. Conrad's art dealers are the phantoms

of this scenario. Much of her writing and art — the signature of its style — might seem of Dubuffet, or of Michel Thévoz (*Art Brut*, 1976; *Le langage de la rupture*, 1978).

#### 5

The successive repudiations and movements in Modernist “progress” have all seemed versions of this primitivist recidivism. The primitivism of such late Modernist phenomena as American sculptural earthworks (Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Robert Morris); the monumentalism of Nancy Holt or Michelle Stuart; the “fetishism” of Eva Hesse or Jackie Windsor or, in New Zealand, of Jacqueline Fraser; the 1970s walks of Richard Long, the shamanism of Beuys; the sympathetic magic invoked by much women's movement art — the primitivism of these is readily identifiable.

But by the seventies, the idea of “the primitive” had been “demagnetised”, as Christopher Middleton puts it (4) by the thought of two and even three generations. A postmodern generation (such as Jacqueline Fraser's) has been less self-conscious about the Late Capitalist economy it occupies. Primitivism raised against the metropolitan economy has seemed, for this generation, to be as effective as a bow and arrow. In the 1980s, the primitivism of Jacqueline Fraser, of Christina Conrad, has a different frame from that available to it in the early 70s. It is a different kind of alternative. And it has been in the 1980s that Christina Conrad, notwithstanding her sardonic asides in the direction of the art dealers, has advanced into the art economy.

#### 6

It is now very hard to make primitivist art that does not install quotation marks around “primitive”. Women artists have featured prominently in this process — the term “other”, like the Derridean pun “différence”, has become a commonplace of this consciousness.

It's a consciousness widely separated from the Modernist primitivism of Gauguin and Picasso, who now, themselves, might almost seem naive. Indeed, the consciousness frequently repudiates their example; or quotes them in knowing contexts. Robin White's Kiribati woodcuts come to mind: their Gauguinesque qualities involve a highly conscious historical sense. And Christina Conrad's Picassoesque modelling needs looking at in this regard also.

#### 7

Paintings titled “The Artist Contemplating Her Finances”, or “The Artist Entertaining the Gentlemen of the Artworld”, or, most blatantly, “The Artist Asking for Time to Paint”, are hardly unselfconsciously primitivist — their claims on the primitivist site have a very large historical context.

What the conscious primitivism of Christina Conrad does have in common with that of its Modernist masters (with whom her relationship is certainly ironic) is a tendency to iconise subjects — to transform narrative into icon, depth into surface, and so on.

A significant mark of Conrad's consciousness can be read right here — where her narrative or discursive qualities (as inscribed in her titles) encounter her “primitive” iconic ones (as revealed in the static, sculptural, frontal qualities of both paintings and clay works). The one tends to apply pressure to the other; the result is theatrical, often humorous, and certainly involves a deal of calculated display.



This display — this transformation of the discredited optimisms of Modernist primitivism — involves a repudiation of the “old master” history of Modernist anti-bourgeois primitivism. Like Mimmo Paladino’s, for example, Conrad’s primitivism has had to reduce its Modernist masters (for instance Picasso) to an available status — her quotation of such “masters” is not deferential, but equal.

It is even, perhaps, reappropriative — as the Modernist masters in their day appropriated tribal art, transforming it into a memory, so Conrad “remembers” them; less because they might transform the art of her time, as because the transformation they did accomplish now needs to be written back into art as an ordinary ingredient of its vocabulary.

At the same time, then, as Conrad’s art iconises its subjects, it desanctifies its Modernist inheritance. The art’s significance is not hierarchical — is a matter of intensity, not privilege.

It’s from a position like this of Conrad’s that we now look differently at a miscellaneous variety of art which hierarchical Modernism would have provincialised. A list might include the “exoticism” of Freda Kahlo or Adela de Ycaza; the naive qualities of Alfred Wallis or Morris Hirschfield; the utopianism of working-class artists like Camille Bombois, American proletarians such as John Kane or Horace Pippin; Maler Paps (whose “Birthday Flowers” of 1961 has made its way into a “version” by the young Wellington artist Richard Till); the naiveist work in New Zealand of Mei Ropata or Charo Oquet or Sylvia Bowen, and the frank decorativeness of Anne Rush or Pat France or Jane Evans; the vernacularism of Jeff Thompson; Bromwynne Cornish’s garden work; the “decorative arts” motifs of Mary Kay.

## 8

In a sense, Christina Conrad makes the one painting over and over. This painting is an investigation before it is an object. The investigation is overlaid by successive different occasions, experiences, modes. But it has always been the same investigation, the same painting: a mediation between instinct and knowledge, between experience and interpretation. This painting is investigating a way of making a life at the same time as depicting that life. The art is less a product than an intermediary — it is the messenger of Conrad’s double consciousness.

Looking at this painting, we find numerous disparates which the investigation has combined, even at the technical level. For example, recent paintings might seem to have used profligate amounts of oil paint. But this excess or incaution — this *brut* quality — turns out to have a rationale: the heaping effects are obtained by mixing titanium oxide with the oil paint. And as Conrad points out (5), this also has the effect of making the paint resemble clay, a result she has consciously sought and enjoyed. The painting thus presents us with a solution eliding excess with deliberation.

The end of this investigation — of this painting in its many forms — is a reconciliation that folds Cythera, and the consciousness that would deny it, into the same surface. The painting makes that life, and makes it visible. We look at it not as a mirage or nostalgic delusion, but as factual — as the outcome of an intense, visionary logic.

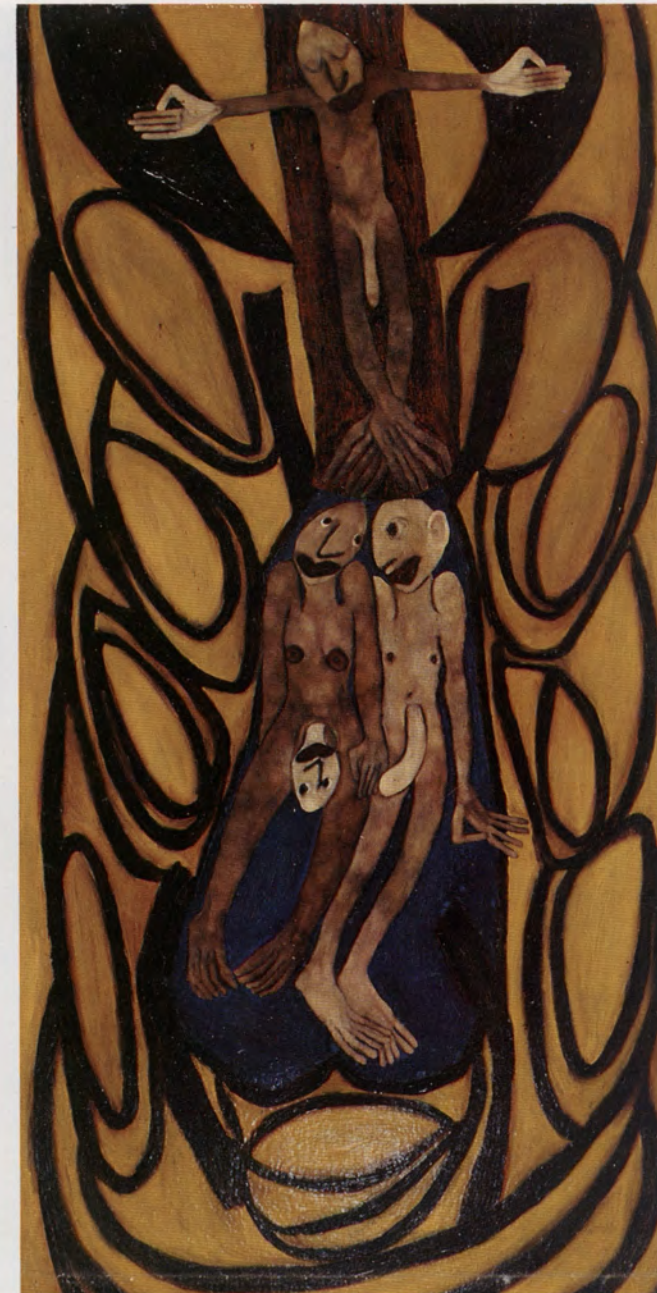
(1) “Gauguin”, Kirk Varnedoe, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984.

(2) Christina Conrad, Interview with Anne Kirker, 1987.

(3) “The Rise of Primitivism”, Christopher Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, Carcanet, Manchester, 1978.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) Interview with Anne Kirker.



Birth of Paola, 1970 oil on board. 660 × 340 mm.





After the Birth of Julius, 1984 Oil on Board 1100 x 685 mm.



The Artist Entertaining the Gentlemen of the Artworld, 1985 Oil on board 1180 x 1180 mm.



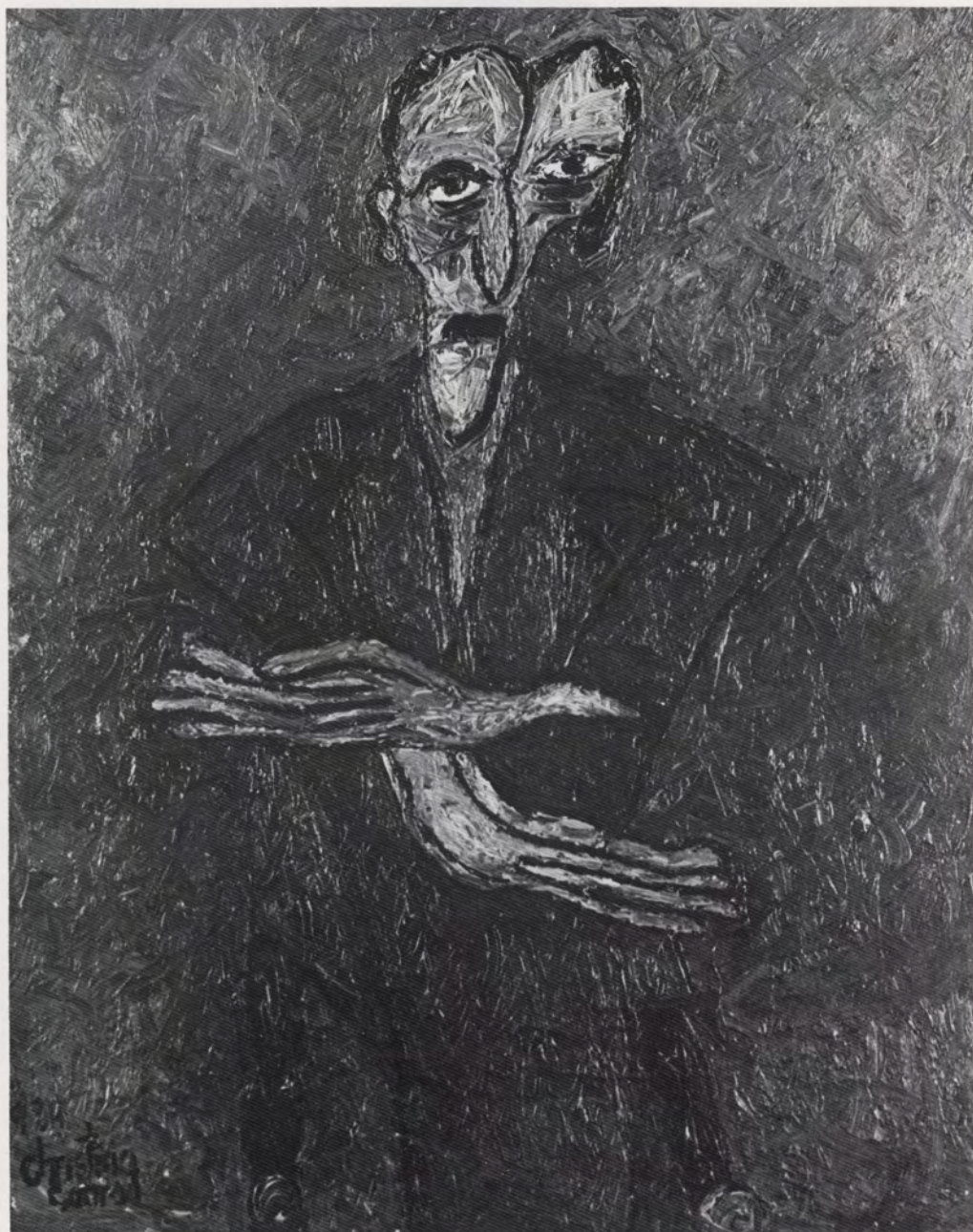


Simon + Christina, 1985 oil on board. 1180 x 880 mm.



Christina thinking about Heinrich, 1976 clay icon 335 x 180 mm.





*The Artist Contemplating her Finances, 1984 oil on board. 470 × 370 mm.*

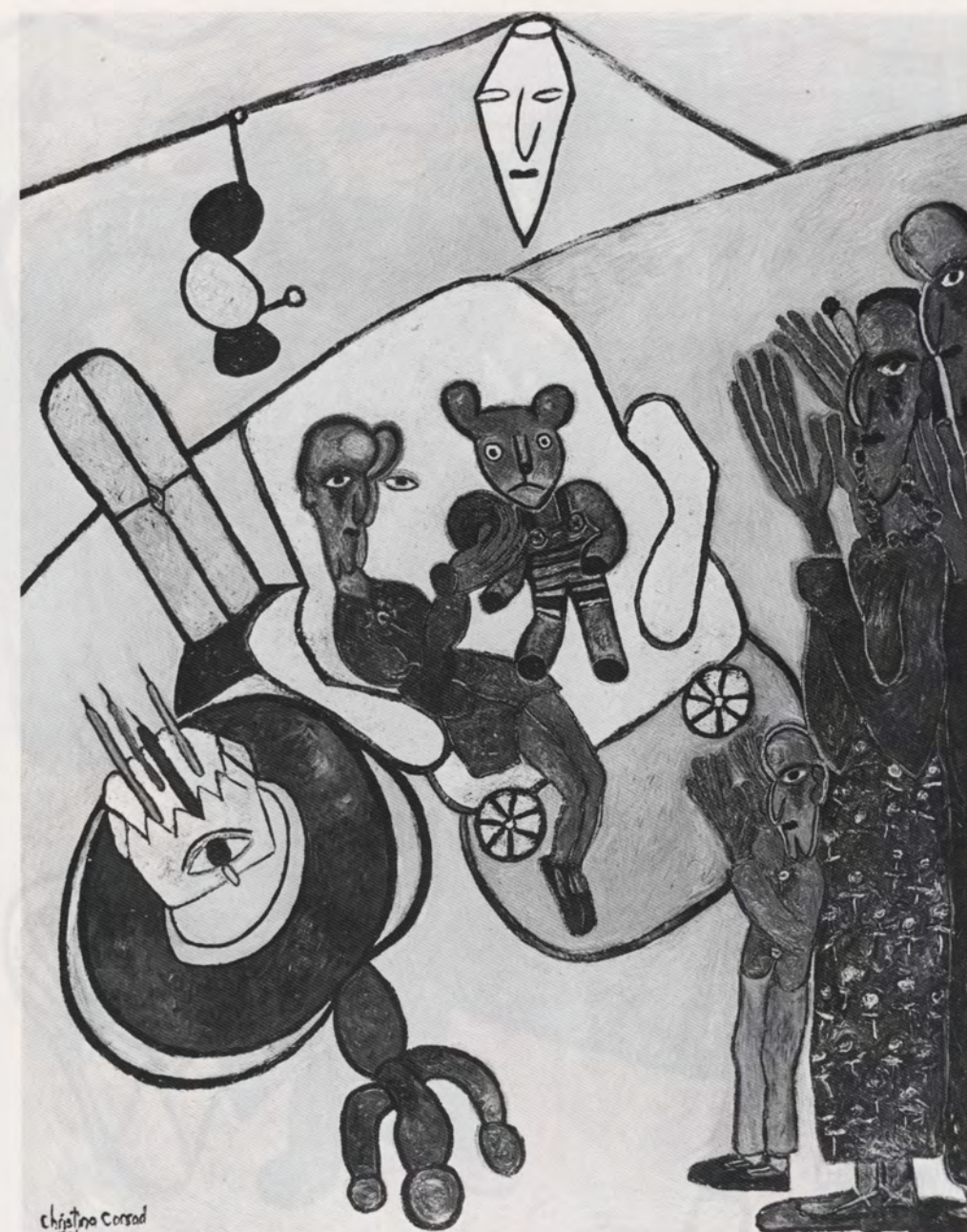


*Many an afternoon we sat together my brother and I united in anguish — the light falling around us in a shadow of dust, 1984 oil on board. 790 × 1035 mm.*





The Artist being pursued by Death and Fortune, 1984 oil on on board. 250 × 330 mm.



Krishnas Birthday, 1984 Oil on board. 1190 × 960 mm.





Woman gazing in some anxiety, 1985 gouche. 470 x 370 mm.



The arrival, 1985 gouche. 600 x 795 mm.



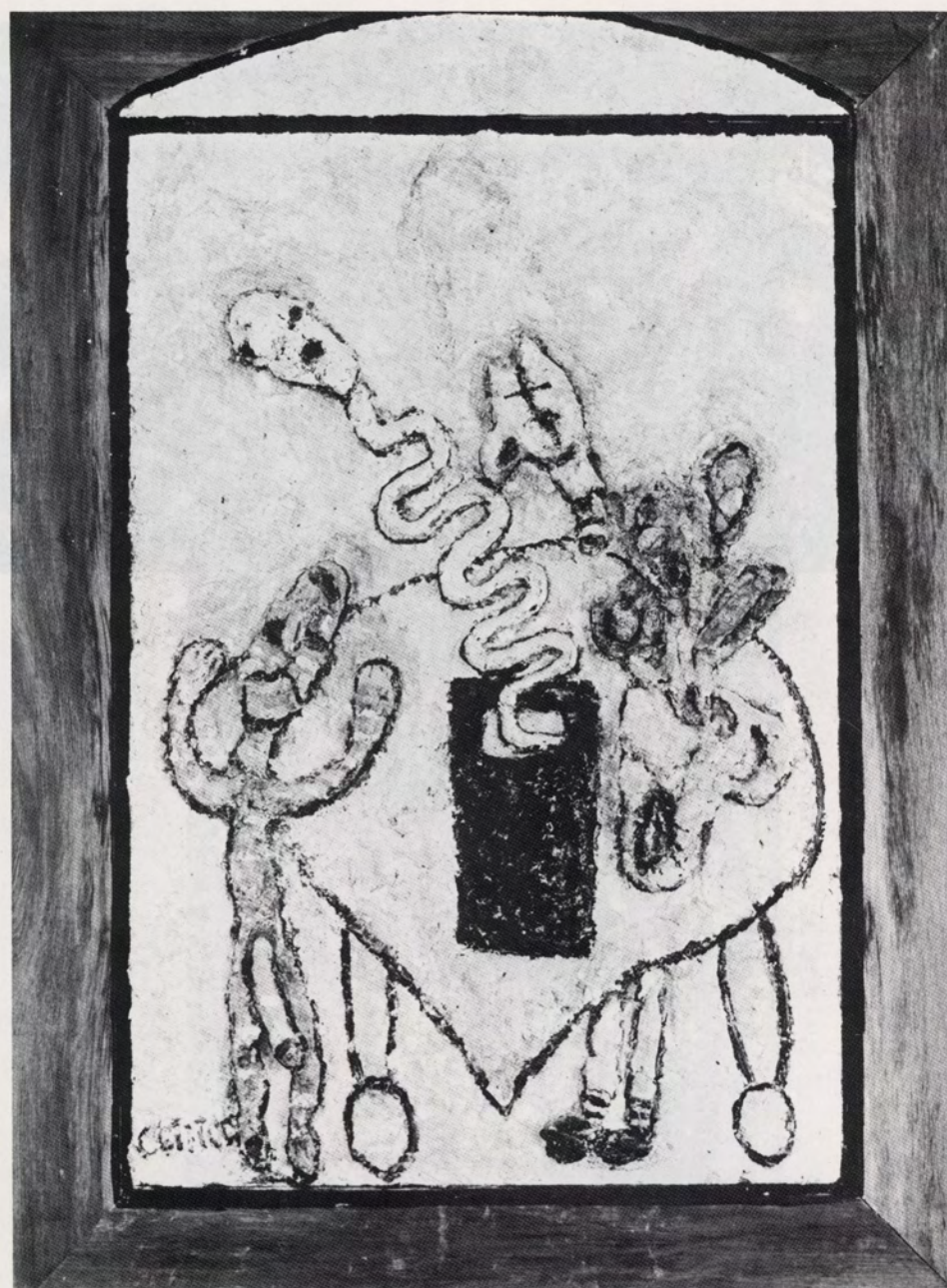


*The Eternal Stare of the Bloody Artist, 1987 titanium oxide, white china clay, linseed oil base with oil on board. 1150 × 525 mm.*



*The Last Supper, 1987 titanium oxide, white china clay, linseed oil base with oil on board. 650 × 1175 mm.*





Son of the Jack, 1987 titanium oxide, white china clay, linseed oil base with oil on board. 1070 × 800 mm.

## WAIHEKE — ROCKY BAY

1 9 7 2

i came heavy with child in the fierce sun  
 the house was a dull yellow  
 lying  
 below the road  
 the front door was shaking  
 in the heavy house  
 the gale was wire  
 the fallen stars were hidden  
 by dry mud  
 lying in heaps  
 on the bank grew endless daisies the colour of the house  
 near the clothes line  
 where clothes hung  
 dry and empty  
 was a swaying wooden cross  
 the chimney rose up  
 in the painted sky

all summer the cicadas screamed  
 glued to concrete walls  
 their bodies heavy and painted  
 i did not know the way outside  
 rats with shining eyes  
 skimmed up trees  
 the heavy pods of the nikaus  
 crashed  
 in the heat  
 my baby clung to me  
 his eyes seeing beyond  
 later  
 when he died  
 i walked through the wire gate  
 down a long dusty road  
 at the end  
 was a sheep  
 a telephone box  
 + a little crushed beach  
 where the sea ran  
 in + out

CONRAD



## THE TEARS OF THE WORLD

1 9 8 4

Twass not until i was 27 that i started painting obsessively — twass fear of myself that i abstained  
 for so long — i was afraid of my shadow  
 twass in the silence of my 27th summer that vision came to me  
 the huge pods of the nikaus crashed in the heat  
 tables lept across the room — great bursting teapots howled  
 my knees spun like mandalas  
 everything seemed to be created out of little particles of light  
 i forgot the self that haunted everything I did  
 the paint sang on my brush — gradually it began to sicken me  
 my ego flailed like a snake  
 each day heavy with child i crept to my studio  
 room of wind & darkness  
 the trees walked up from the black creek  
 & walked about me like pale tombstones  
 windows of blood red  
 i gave birth amidst twisted oil paints  
 not long after this i discovered clay — taking it in my hands the masks of many  
 lives came to me — that dark hill in the valley of thebes  
 great pots like beached ships lept out of the clay with red women racing round  
 & round amazed at themselves their eyes shooting sparks — their vaginas dark caves  
 for 1 year i made only these red pots  
 later i made a great penis shooting sparks in the centre of the pot  
 weeping eyes  
 (most of these doomed objects were blown up in an oil-fired kiln like a brick coffin one night  
 on waiheke island)  
 i discovered i could use clay like one would use oil paint  
 i could sculpt — paint — write in the clay  
 lo! when i held the clay in my hands —  
 strange secrets were revealed in an endless dream  
 time passed — i could not hold it in my hands  
 my paintings seemed like secret objects — i kept them in cupboards instead of food  
 i would go to them secretly feeling them in the darkness  
 many years passed  
 in my 42nd year i shew them to you  
 shall we journey together.  
 ah! how the sky falls about our ears in a great starry hat that we are all under  
 ah! this little wooded room — tis like a dwelling in the heart of an ancient kauri tree  
 slowly i paint now  
 carrying my obsession like a dark stone for i have 2 young sons  
 our son krishna's descent from the womb twass like the flight of a summer bird to its nest

the babe julius 2 years later  
 ah! how i fight for time — a woman of 41 in one falling greenstone earring  
 a dress like a dying leaf  
 marooned on an island waving a blue dishcloth  
 ah! the tears of the world

CHRISTINA CONRAD



Photo: Bruce Connors

(L. to R.) Julius, Heinrich, Christina and Krishna Conrad.





PHOTOS: ANNE KIRKER.







*Wellington City Art Gallery*

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