

**LOCAL**

# **COLOUR**

**Eight Wellington Artists**



Robert McLeod, *This y/n*, 1995

City Gallery WELLINGTON Te Whare Toi **26 September – 29 November 1995**

## Local Colour

"Nothing is more subjective than the reaction to colour, which depends on the nature of the individual." V. Hulszár

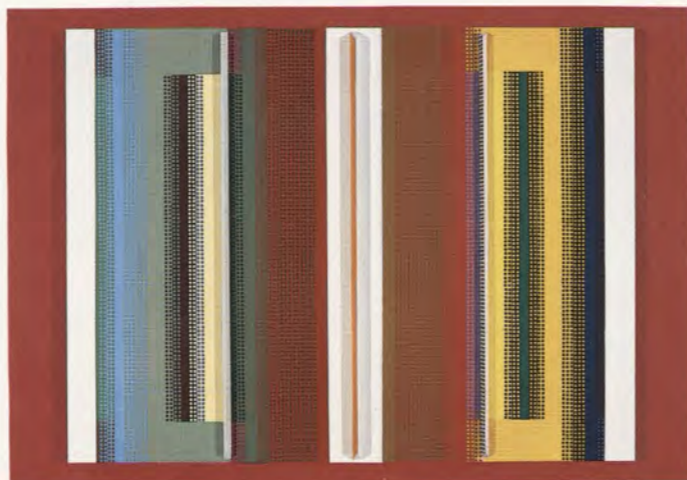
*Local Colour* looks at the different approaches of eight Wellington artists to high impact colour and the materiality of paint. Although this is no attempt to define a Wellington school of colour painters there is a historical dimension to the show; the dates of the works range from 1970 to 1995. For artists such as Catherine Bagnall and John Drawbridge their work in the exhibition represents earlier phases of their careers; for Robert McLeod and Sophie Saunders some of their most recent work is included.

In 1970 Michael Nicholson looked for a sequence of colours to act as visual metaphor for an electronic drum machine and the syncopated lightness of pop music. In so doing Nicholson was continuing a long tradition of artists and philosophers exploring the secret sympathies between colour and music. The sixteenth-century Milanese painter Arcimboldo was known for his "clavichord of colours"; he wanted his colour progressions transposed for the keyboard. Van Gogh took piano lessons to test the subtleties of colour-tones and told his sister he wanted his painting to be received like a concert for violin or piano. Mondrian evoked jazz rhythms in his late New York paintings and Kandinsky spoke of the inwardness and spirituality of a cello's dark blue tones.

The accented vertical bars in Nicholson's *Modular strip-artoon* give plastic forces chromatic value and act as graphic equivalents for the rhythmic spacings in musical form. They point up Nicholson's intention of bringing the time component of music into the static world of painting. The optical flicker and simultaneous contrast of dots and sharp edged stripes also place his painting in the contemporary context of Op Art. When this work was produced Nicholson was certainly aware of and interested in the hypnotic geometries of Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely.



John Drawbridge, *Window*, 1972



Michael Nicholson, *Modular strip-artoon*, 1970

One of the major sources for early modernist investigations of colour by artists and teachers was the writings of poet and thinker J.W. Goethe. Whereas Sir Isaac Newton in his *Opticks* had codified colour and light in terms of objective, physico-mathematical data independent of the observer, Goethe placed emphasis on the variable conditions of colour perception and its psychological interpretation. It is the receptivity and feeling for colour as an elusive, though specific, psychological language that informs Sophie Saunders' paintings. Her works are oblique icons. Their crystalline facets of lime, lilac, black and citron yellow tilt and skew with quiet humour. Saunders' icons are both centred and wilfully eccentric. Acknowledging a heritage of modernist painters granting coloured shapes the capacity to stimulate modes of spiritual awareness, Saunders talks of her desire to "be lucid and exact about something which is impossible to pinpoint."

A scintillation of several thousand, tiny parallel strokes of yellow, blue and orange give John Drawbridge's *Sea and Sky Mural* a textile-like quality. I am reminded of Chevreul, the French chemist at the Gobelins dye factory discovering that the adjacency of contrasting colour threads enhanced their chromatic intensity, and of Delacroix's related experiments with complicated overlays of coloured wools to find maximum colour richness. The shattering of colour into a haze of prismatic slivers also relates to Drawbridge's exploration of the materiality of refracted and reflected light taken up in his corrugated mural for The Beehive or in his various experiments with illuminated perspex rods. Another landscape derived semi-abstract, Drawbridge's *Window* uses dense impasto dabs and patches of greens, golds and creams to suggest a shifting exterior world of sky, cloud, water and foliage pressing into a palpable interior space.

Robert McLeod likes the line in Joyce Carey's novel *The Horse's Mouth* which goes "the sun was like an orange in a fried fish shop". Carey's simile conveys a sense of hot physicality and a magical upheaval of scale yet remains fixed in the everyday world. McLeod uses the chroma and the viscosity of paint to make similar jumps. *Stiff Jumble No 2 Merklend* is a stiff buttered slab of Carey's sunlight. *M's Search for Meaning 2* layers fat paint and rich colour in a thick corporeal cuisine. The paint is high in calories and suggests surfeit and excess; its textures resemble rotten cream cakes and the curdlings of marbled cheese. In *Sultan Left* it is the shapes, secretions and altered colouration of the desiring, sexualised body that make their presence strongly felt.

Newton's treatise warned against distraction by unquantifiable colouristic phenomena, "as when by the power of Phantasy we see colours in a dream . . . or when we see Fire by striking the Eye, or see colours like the Eye of a Peacock's Feather, by pressing our Eyes". Jeff Brown's large hazy fields of deep purples, blues and pinks are erratically animated and speckled by just the sort of random effects that worried Newton. Constellations of



Jeff Brown, *Untitled*, 1989/90

broken lines and arbitrary rashes of red or white dots move across the surfaces of Brown's paintings. It is not hard to see in them Newton's dream phantasies or the flash of impeyan plumage through the underbrush. The painted gardens of Monet, Van Gogh and Truettum can be glimpsed through the flurry of brushstrokes.

Both Catherine Bagnall's and Steve Hemmens' work displays the pleasures of painterly construction and the measured optimism of bravura brushwork. Bagnall improvises a jumpy rhythm through close-fitting and overlapping sections of scaly impasto. The listing verticality of her joined sheets of paper is counterpointed by the lumpy, polka-dotted bands which run up and down the work. These bands end in a double halo of red and orange at the top, which heightens the implicit figural appearance of the composition. Hemmens pursues a loose, painterly lyricism which is open to all the surprises of smudge, blur and drip. His process of painting is one of continuous wiping over or scraping down and starting afresh. Keeping the quirky narratives of Donald Baechler and late Philip Guston in mind, Hemmens keeps an eye out for the peculiarities of object, figure and shape in the proximate world of the studio, the table-top and the bedroom.

In *A History of Colours* (1991), Manlio Brusatin describes how Goethe's passion for colours took hold of him in the midst of an "extreme crisis . . . confronting him with the disastrous results of war and endangering his own life." On a Prussian battlefield in 1792, Goethe stared fixated at the effects of light and colour produced by a ceramic shard at the bottom of a pool of water. Goethe's trance-like absorption in the colours in the pool was a form of distraction from the terrors and brutality of battle. A strangely double story also unfolds in Barbara Strathdee's paintings in which the fraying strands of tragic and often violent colonial narrative are embedded in passages of hot, brushy colour. In the centre of *Somewhere in our historical memory - Patapata*, Strathdee has placed an ambiguous and perhaps threatening object that she has stylised from an old drawing of the prow of a Maori war canoe. The disintegrating imagery that

surrounds this object is primarily from line engravings depicting Patapata beach and the story of colonial contact that occurred there. Strathdee's emblematic object floats in a marine world, covered with a capillary network of engraving lines, printed flowers and a coral of stencilled dots. The gestural sections of yellow, blue and pink are anxious signifiers of an attention divided between the beauty and form of the developing imagery and narrative structure on the one hand and the retrospective forebodings of impending betrayal on the other.

The artists in the exhibition employ colour in strikingly different ways, yet in all of their work it is clear that colour is sensed, intuited and experienced before it is fully understood.

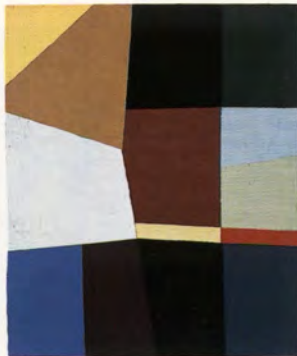
Allan Smith  
Curator



Barbara Strathdee, *Somewhere in our historical memory - Patapata*, 1990



Sophie Saunders, *Malambo*, 1995



Sophie Saunders, *Passacaglia*, 1995



Sophie Saunders, *XOTA*, 1995

## List of Works

Catherine Bagnall  
*Untitled drawing* 1985  
oil on paper 2000 x 470 mm  
Courtesy of Richard King

Jeff Brown  
*Untitled* 1989/90  
oil on canvas on board  
3 parts 2400 x 3600 mm each  
Courtesy of Bronwyn Marwick

Jeff Brown  
*Untitled* 1989/90  
oil on canvas on board  
3 parts 2400 x 3600 mm each  
Courtesy of Jeremy Wilks

John Drawbridge  
*Window* 1972  
oil on canvas 2260 x 1650 mm  
Courtesy of Lyn and Frank Corner

John Drawbridge  
*Sea and sky mural* 1973  
acrylic on canvas on board 3600 x 3600 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Steven Hemmens  
*Two models* 1995  
oil on canvas 1215 x 1520 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Robert McLeod  
*Sultan left* 1993  
oil on plywood 1965 x 1710 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Robert McLeod  
*M's search for meaning 2* 1995  
oil on plywood 2040 x 1715 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Robert McLeod  
*This yin* 1995  
oil on plywood 1920 x 1860 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Robert McLeod  
*Stiff jumble No 2 merkland* 1988  
oil on canvas 1270 x 1270 mm  
Courtesy of Lyn and Frank Corner

Michael Nicholson  
*Modular strip-artoon* 1970  
acrylic on paper on board 1150 x 1641 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Face* 1994  
oil on canvas 380 x 300 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Dona eis requiem I* 1994  
oil on canvas 710 x 320 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*My soul flared up* 1994  
oil on canvas 670 x 450 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Desa* 1995  
oil on canvas 360 x 250 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Passacaglia* 1995  
oil on canvas 410 x 340 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Malambo* 1995  
oil on canvas 380 x 300 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Birdsong, wind, the water's face* 1995  
oil on canvas 380 x 300 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Thy kingdom come* 1995  
oil on canvas 220 x 175 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*You enter suddenly (and I am nowhere again – inside the mystery)* 1995  
oil on canvas 400 x 200 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Secret sky* 1995  
oil on canvas 400 x 300 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*XOTA* 1995  
oil on canvas 300 x 220 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Wachet-auf (Wake up)* 1994  
oil on canvas 250 x 200 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Laudamus te (after Poulenc's Gloria) I* 1993  
oil on canvas 730 x 560 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Saunders  
*Laudamus te (after Poulenc's Gloria) II* 1993  
oil on canvas 730 x 560 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

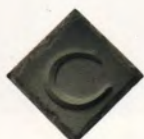
Sophie Saunders  
*Laudamus te (after Poulenc's Gloria) III* 1993  
oil on canvas 730 x 560 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Barbara Strathdee  
*Landing place* 1988  
acrylic on canvas  
3 pieces 1450 x 2000 mm each  
Courtesy of the artist

Barbara Strathdee  
*Somewhere in our historical memory – Patapata* 1990  
acrylic on canvas 1000 x 1250 mm  
Courtesy of the artist

## Acknowledgements

The City Gallery, Wellington, *Te Whare Toi*, would like to thank the artists and lenders for their co-operation in the realisation of this exhibition.



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*Te Whare Toi*

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