



melvin day
continuum

melvin day **continuum**

City Gallery Wellington

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
'Melvin Day—Continuum' at City Gallery
Wellington 12 December 2004–6 March 2005

© City Gallery Wellington and contributors

First published in December 2004 by
City Gallery Wellington

ISBN 0-9582290-6-6

City Gallery Wellington
PO Box 2199, Wellington
Aotearoa New Zealand
www.city-gallery.org.nz

Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of
private study, research, criticism or review
as permitted under the Copyright Act, no
part of this publication may be reproduced
without permission.

All images reproduced with the permission
of Melvin Day.

City Gallery Wellington Director:
Paula Savage

Exhibition Curator:
Gregory O'Brien

Publication Editor:
Gregory O'Brien

Editorial Assistance:
Lizzie Bisley, Sarah Farrar

Publication Manager:
Tracey Monastra

Publication Designer:
Neil Pardington, Base Two

Organisation and Installation:
Emma Budgen, David Chin, Janina Dell,
Kate Fielder, Anita Hogan, Melissa Howard,
Courtney Johnston, Kathryn Love, Phillip
Robertson, Neil Semple, Fiona Sullivan,
Robyn Walker, Nicola Woodhouse

Colour Photography of Artworks:
Michael Roth (except plates three and eight:
photographs courtesy of Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki)

Cover: Melvin Day, *Vertiginous* (detail) 1965
oil on canvas, 1525 x 1370 mm
Private collection
Photograph: Michael Roth

City Gallery Wellington is managed by
the Wellington Museums Trust with major
funding from Wellington City Council.



City Gallery
WELLINGTON
Te Whare Toi

**Absolutely
POSITIVELY
Wellington**

Wellington
MUSEUMS TRUST

contents

4	Foreword	Paula Savage
5	Material and immaterial worlds: the paintings of Melvin Day	Gregory O'Brien
15	Melvin Day—Uccello, Piero and beyond	Mark Hutchins
22	Further reading	
23	Chronology	compiled by Emma Bugden
25	Colour plates	

foreword
paula savage
director, city gallery wellington

It is now twenty years since the Wellington City Art Gallery staged a major exhibition of paintings by one of the city's most respected artists, Melvin—or Pat, as he is known—Day. This new exhibition demonstrates City Gallery Wellington's ongoing commitment to profiling the work of senior as well as younger Wellington artists.

Since the 1984 'Melvin Day—Full Circle' retrospective exhibition, he has continued to paint prolifically in his Seatoun studio, producing still life and landscape compositions of great poise and substance. Exhibition curator Gregory O'Brien describes Melvin Day as a 'scholarly' painter, in the best possible sense, and this description certainly fits him. The paintings engage knowingly, yet also intuitively, with sources as various as the quattrocento masters Piero della Francesca and Paolo Uccello, the American abstractionist Mark Tobey and the Tachiste painters Day saw in London during the 1960s. Yet the work is also shaped by his experience of life in New Zealand. The earliest paintings in the exhibition date from his time in Rotorua during the 1940s and many are a response to that landscape.

In recent years Day has painted the Taupo region, the Kaikoura Ranges and—most impressively of all—views across Wellington harbour. This exhibition and publication also highlight the centrality of still life to Day's practice, charting his work in this genre over half a century.

We are grateful to Melvin and Oroya Day for their support of this project, and for making available not only works from their personal collections, but also materials from their comprehensive archive. The artist's gallerist, Mark Hutchins, has been extraordinarily generous in the time and energy he has brought to the project. We are grateful for his insightful contribution to this publication. Thanks are also due to exhibition curator and catalogue editor Gregory O'Brien, for providing new insights and scholarship into Melvin Day's work.



Melvin Day in his studio, 2003
photo: Kevin Stent

Without a collection of its own, City Gallery Wellington depends on the generosity and collegial spirit of private and public collectors to mount its exhibitions. We are very grateful to the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa for their support of the exhibition and artwork loans. We also thank the many private collectors who have been willing to share their work with a wider audience.

We are pleased to acknowledge the core funding support of City Gallery Wellington by Wellington City Council through the Wellington Museums Trust. We appreciate their support of this catalogue publication.

City Gallery Wellington is pleased to be surveying the work of an artist who, in his eighty-second year, is painting as ardently as ever. The exhibition is a celebration not only of a senior Wellington artist, but also of a significant figure in the art history of this country.

material and immaterial worlds:
the paintings of melvin day
gregory o'brien

'The future is the projection of the past, conditioned by the present.'
Georges Braque

While Melvin Day has spent much of his career painting broad vistas of landscape—notably Wellington harbour and its environs—his art is also an account of a life spent with his head resolutely down, studying art, history and philosophy, and surveying the details and textures of the close-at-hand. If the Romantic image of the artist is that of the upward gazing individual, facing the hills, sky and *great beyond*, in Day's case this heroic type has to coexist with the quiet, undemonstrative scholar.

Since Day began painting in the 1930s, his art has been a balancing act, bringing together elements from different genres, moving between figuration and abstraction, orthodox and innovative painterly approaches, juggling three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. Importantly, he has gone back through modernism to study and assimilate earlier approaches to painting—his ongoing exploration of still life derived from seventeenth century Spanish models being a case in point. Few of the developments within his art have coincided with or conformed to dominant art discourses of recent times. When nationalism and post-colonialism were widespread concerns, Day immersed himself in Shakespeare and Renaissance theory; while the rest of us were discussing the Death of Painting, he embarked upon realist still life compositions. In an era preoccupied with popular culture, Day's art was metaphysical and personal. The dramatic shifts in his approach, and the sheer diversity of his output, have made him a hard artist to place and a high on impossible painter to sum up.

don't look down

'Vibrating patches of colour, strong in texture, harmonious in size and shape, rhythmical in position and direction... utilizing the physiological factors of the advancing and receding movements of colours.'¹ So runs Gyorgy Kepes' evocation of Paul Cézanne's work—a description which also holds for Day's 1965 canvas *Vertiginous* [plate 5]. The theorems and practical example of the French painter had been lodged in the back of Day's mind for three decades before he completed this work. If there is a suggestion of vertigo in the work, it is offset by a sense of euphoria. The painting, with its bold colouration and off-centre composition, embodies a moment of dizzying engagement with the physical world, in this case a Mediterranean headland. It also enacts the various balancing acts intrinsic to Day's work. Painted in the gloom of a London winter, after a brief, liberating spell in Spain, *Vertiginous* harks even further back to memories

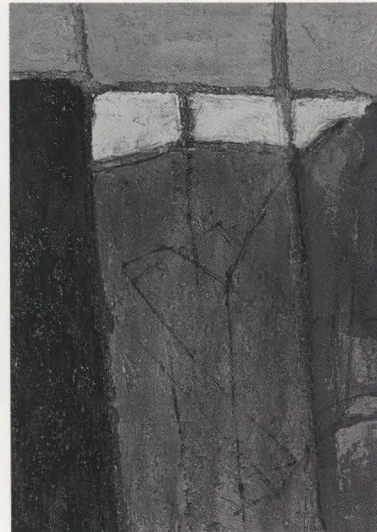
of New Zealand—specifically of Northland, where he had been impressed, as a youth, by the orange-red clay cliffs along the west coast. The work strikes a common note with Day's near-contemporaries, artists Pat Hanly and John Drawbridge who, a few years earlier, were also domiciled in London and were similarly daydreaming of blueness and Wordsworthian immensity.² In the case of all three artists, the clutter of urban life gave rise to works in praise of untrammelled Nature—works which, one way or another, pointed back in the direction of New Zealand.

Gil Docking has aptly described Day's works as 'rooted in the textural encrustations of the New Zealand landscape... As one looks down at the ground, so the objects in Day's paintings are presented in a planar fashion, each looking as though it is dug from the ground, aged by time—scarred, fractured, pitted, scorched and weathered.'³ Such is the artist's approach in *Vertiginous*: ridges of paint divide up the canvas, at times correlating with divisions between colour areas, at other times appearing independent of them. With Cézanne's work as a point of distant departure, the spatial and painterly treatment is reminiscent of Russian artist Nicolas de Staël (1914–1955) and the French Tachiste painters. Accommodating areas of heavy impasto with an overall schema that is airy and vertiginous, Day's painting brings to mind de Staël's oft-quoted description of the painted surface as a wall—a solid, impenetrable plane—in which all the birds of the world fly freely.⁴

For Day, the canvas is a field on which many kinds of activity take place. Here, as in other works of the 1960s and 70s, the canvas is a palimpsest on which ghosts of formal and verbal language are partially revealed: incised and painted lines suggest diagrammatic or mechanical designs; compass-like curves adjoin straight black lines. Is there a sense that the artist is trying to get his bearings on the resistant surface of the painting? Located out on the various edges of figuration, symbolism and abstraction, *Vertiginous* manifests a kind of brinksmanship in painting. Don't look down. Look down. Look out.

peripheral visions and hindsight

If Melvin Day's work manifests both the Romantic upward/outward gaze as well as the studied, downward aspect of the scholar, it is also a by-product of the backward glance. Manifesting the hindsight of the historian, his art is an ongoing consideration of 'inheritance', of what is handed down to the contemporary painter by art history. An apposite work in this regard, *Mountain Torrent* (1951) [plate 1] takes as its subject one of the staples of New Zealand art up until that time. However, Day's burbling river is



Vertiginous (detail) 1965
oil on canvas, 1525 x 1370 mm
Private collection



Landscape—Gisborne 1949
oil on board, 405 x 515 mm
Collection of Government House, Wellington



Maori Meeting c.1949
tempera on card, 420 x 370 mm
Collection of the artist

neither the dark, existential motif of Petrus van der Velden's *Otira Gorge* (1891) nor the ordered, luminous stream of John Kinder and the early watercolourists.

During the 1930s, Day had studied reproductions of modern art—most of them small and monochromatic—in the few books that were available, and had encountered modernist ideas through his teachers John Weeks and A. Lois White at Elam School of Art, University of Auckland, where he studied from 1939–41. In *Mountain Torrent*, Day has gone beyond the interlocked, stationary forms of his earlier works in this genre, for example *Landscape—Gisborne* (1949) [on left]. *Mountain Torrent* is a localised variant of Futurism or Vorticism, and the river has become an angular mechanism, a rhythmical, kinetic construct. Futurist energies would re-emerge in Day's landscapes of the 1970s and later, where the forms of hills billow like sails or are broken up into vectors, as is apparent in *Wellington Harbour (Orongorongo)* (c.1981).

By the late 1940s, Day was living in Rotorua, where he shared a studio with the doctor and amateur painter W. S. Wallis. John Weeks, who was still teaching at Elam, would come down from Auckland and the group would head off into the province to test their Cézannesque hypotheses. The elder painter would offer criticism and intellectual direction. As Mark Hutchins has written, *Landscape—Gisborne* 'clearly illustrates Day's application of Weeks's constructive colour key, the landforms sculpted by faceted planes of inter-relating colour tones'.⁵ Day looks back on his early modernist-inclined experiments with some affection, but acknowledges that his grasp of the tenets of Cubism and modernism was tenuous. It could be argued, however, that such a partial grasp of modernism characterises much of the best art produced away from traditional art centres. 'Provincial' artists are comparatively free to pick up or drop whatever they choose—witness also the work of New Zealand artists M.T. Woollaston, Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere.⁶

The fascination with painterly construction apparent in *Mountain Torrent* is further manifest in *Maori Meeting* (c.1949) [on left] which melds Analytical Cubism with patterning based upon Māori tukutuku panels. Day was interested in Māori patterns and remembers the entrance to the Government Gardens where 'Māori painted patterns on the archway... and we [the artist and Wallis] tried to see if we could adapt those. This was due to some influence from looking at reproductions of Gauguin's work, the way he had made use of various patterns, especially on the native dress...'⁷ While Day believed, at the time, that the exercise did not seem to offer any incisive way forward, *Maori Meeting* is a striking example of cultural bricolage.

From the vantage point of 2004, it seems a prescient work in terms of New Zealand art generally, if not necessarily in relation to Day's specific practice.

Like *Maori Meeting, Boats in Wellington Harbour* (1951) [plate 3] is based on a system of mathematically precise diagonals. The latter work was completed shortly after Day's first visit to Europe in 1949, when he travelled to France, Spain and Italy, taking in exhibitions by Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin. The constructivist tendencies manifest in *Boats* were radical for New Zealand art at this time, and hark directly back to the European modernism of the early twentieth century. I imagine the words of the great Spanish poet Rafael Alberti drifting like a song above Day's angular harbour, for which these lines might easily have been written:

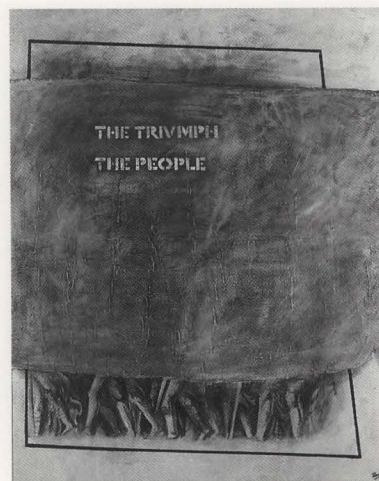
To you, ocean of angulated dreams,
flower of the five regular forms,
blue dodecahedron, sonorous arc.⁸

Of bold, poster-like design, *Boats* directly invokes the spirit of Russian Suprematism, the roofs, hills and cranes together forming a Soviet star-shape—an apposite motif to emerge in a work painted in 1951, the same year as the infamous Waterfront Strike. While Day's work is never overtly political, on occasion it does comment on social or political events: the 'Titus Andronicus' series (1979) engages with notions of authority and the misuse of power while the 'Triumph of the People: Mantegna' works of 1980 were painted not long after the 1975 Māori Land March.

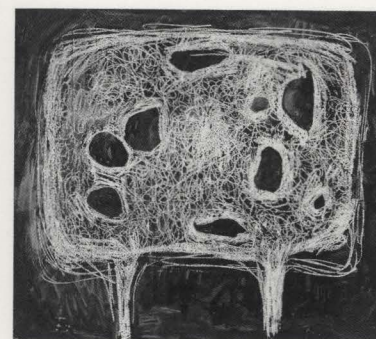
'equivocal' landscapes

In 1958 Melvin Day discovered the nature-derived, heavily textured paintings of Mark Tobey and wrote a letter to the American artist. Much to his surprise, a reply was forthcoming. No doubt the ensuing correspondence gave him the confidence to embark upon the tough abstractions of the 'Microscope' series. At this time Day had begun using a student's microscope to examine slides of organic and mineral specimens, the forms and texture of which he was soon assimilating in his painting. Art critic Patrick Hutchings has described Day's paintings from around this time as 'equivocal—"landscapes" which are both "here" and "not here"'.⁹

Known as one of the 'mystical painters of the Northwest', Tobey had studied Japanese calligraphy and described his approach to painting as 'varied, sometimes being dependent on brush-work, sometimes on lines, dynamic white strokes, geometric



The Triumph of the People 1980
from the series 'Triumphs of Caesar: Mantegna'
oil on canvas, 1515 x 1225 mm
Private collection



Tabula c. 1962
crayon, ink and watercolour on paper, 762 x 866 mm
Collection of the artist

space... For me, the road has been a zig-zag into and out of old civilisations.'¹⁰ Day felt an affinity not only with Tobey's productions, but with his working method and philosophy. Around this time he was also absorbing D. T. Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism and its influence on Japanese culture* (1938) and Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953)—texts which underlined the importance of practise alongside intellectual study.

With its tangle of white lines on a grey-black ground—and resembling a photographic negative—*Tabula* (1962) [on left] hovers somewhere between organic abstraction and still life. Like many of the artist's works from around this time, it has an archaic quality, harking back, indirectly, to Tobey's 'old civilisations'. Day reprised the minimal 'Tabula' series a decade later, completing *Tabula* [plate 7] in 1974. In these works Day approached the flat canvas as though it were a 'tabula'—a writing tablet—while also bearing in mind the notion of the 'tabula rasa' or clean slate. *Tabula* (1974) might also be a landscape, a molecular or microscopic detail, a depleted still life or a diagrammatic reduction of an art historical source. The point is that it sits outside any of these definitions while, to some degree, belonging to each of them.

While living in London, Day encountered Art Brut and the paintings of French artist Jean Dubuffet, whose etched and scratched canvases paralleled the techniques he enlisted for the 'Tabula' works.¹¹ Like Dubuffet, the New Zealander used non-conventional methods of applying paint to achieve a primordial feeling. While the 'Tabula' works were resolutely modern in some respects, they contained nuances of past histories and buried civilisations. In their wide-ranging and imaginative re-engagement with far-flung tradition—a backward glance fuelled by Jungian notions of the 'old brain' much talked about at the time—the paintings were a playing out of critic Hugh Kenner's belief that: 'Tradition is the artist's stock of capital; it can tap impulses "older than the fish"'.¹²

a history of the surface of things

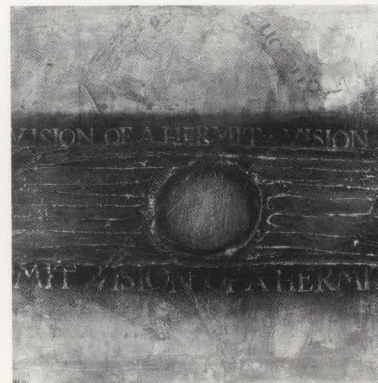
Increasingly in the late 1960s and into the 70s, Melvin Day's paintings stated the case for the history of art as an acceptable subject for primary art production, and as something that might shape an artist's practice, rather than stand to one side or comment upon it in hindsight. Through the 1970s, Day's work explored the ways in which early Renaissance models, and their attendant theories, could reveal possibilities for a contemporary artist. Rather than work in the manner of earlier artists—as he had, to some degree, done in his early Cézanne- and Cubist-inclined compositions—he set out to produce works which dismantled the formal and philosophical language of their source material. The 'Uccello', 'Piero della Francesca', 'Titus Andronicus'

and 'Triumphs of Caesar: Mantegna' series are extended exercises in extraction, an exhumation of underlying principles. And, like most acts of archaeology, the visible yield is a patchwork of signs, enigmatic fragments and figurative elements.

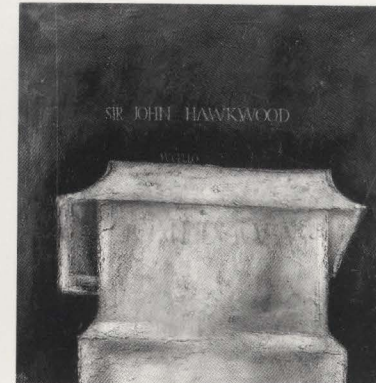
Painted upon Day's return to Wellington in 1968, when he was appointed Director of the National Art Gallery, the 'Uccello' series reflects a fascination with the 'cool logic' of the quattrocento master. In these paintings, Day recast Uccello's spatial concerns on a flat modernist surface. While Gil Docking has linked *Uccello* (1969) [plate 8] with Sydney Parkinson's *A perforated rock in New Zealand (Tolaga Bay)* (1769), it also keeps company with Colin McCahon's 'Gate' paintings, which arose from a similarly intense personal experience of European art, as opposed to a purely analytical deconstruction of it.

The perforation in *Uccello* becomes a blue eyeball or planet hovering in *Vision of a Hermit* (1969) [on right], one of Day's more puzzling compositions. Interestingly, what figuration these works do allow tends to destabilise rather than consolidate any specific meaning. In *Walled City II* (1970) [plate 9], the rounded form of the impasto in the upper half suggests an aerial view or floor-plan—yet, upon closer inspection, the red-orange horizon along the base has geometric lines and rectangles cut into it, rendering it like a cityscape against a dark backdrop. The work references Piero della Francesca—perhaps his *Ideal City, Urbino* (1470)—while glancing across at *View of a City* (date unknown) by another perspectival pioneer and ardent painter of walled cities, Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c. 1290–1348). A passing knowledge of art history, and its theoretical basis, is a useful thing when contemplating Day's art from the 1970s. A dictionary of New Zealand place-names, in English and Māori, becomes increasingly useful when considering works such as *Tihoi* (1973) [plate 14] from the next decade.

Day is an artist with an eye, rather than an ear, for the vernacular. Using both formal and scribbled lettering, *Mutiny in the Mildest Thoughts* (1979) [plate 12], includes the pensive inscription of the work's title, which is ghosted above and below by large illegible scrawls. The painting is a meditation on—amongst other things—Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* (from where the words are sourced), the painterly inheritance of the Renaissance, and the earthy abstractions of Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies. Observing the language within the 'Titus Andronicus' series, art historian Tony Bellette observed: 'Shakespeare's lines seem to move back into the state of unformed thought'.¹³ The half-utterances and muted voicings in these paintings parallel the faint, elusive imagery—itsself at times a kind of semiotic shorthand—which characterised Day's work for nearly two decades from the late 1950s.



Vision of a Hermit 1969
from the series 'Uccello'
oil on canvas, 610 x 610 mm
Private collection



Sir John Hawkwood 1970
from the series 'Uccello'
oil on canvas, 840 x 850 mm
Private collection

Inscriptions denote absences as well as presences. On gravestones or memorials, they chronicle the departed. In the 1970 painting *Sir John Hawkwood* [on left] the inscription has in fact replaced its subject, the figure on the horse in Uccello's original, and is posited precisely within the composition where you would expect the mounted figure to be. Day's later inscribed landscape works also chronicle things that have gone, be they Māori place names or dates past, as is the case in *Wellington Heads Triptych* (1975) which bears the inscription: JUNE 1975. Might Day be proposing here that landscape is itself a 'tabula rasa' upon which Māori and English names are grafted? Posited at the very front of the pictorial space, the words also function as an intermediary between viewer and landscape. Eschewing the use of stencils, Day's words are painted, exactly, by hand—they reference traditions of stonemasonry and inscription rather than industrial process. The question arises in relation to landscape/text compositions such as *Tihoi*: is the artist tagging exhibits in a cultural/historical display, or is he simply commenting on de Staël's 'l'espace pictural' and the language of landscape painting in general?

'the still centre'

While Melvin Day's still life paintings of the 1940s and 50s were sourced in Cubism with elements assimilated from Futurism and other avant garde movements, his works of the 1980s and 90s sift further back through art history to engage with the tradition of seventeenth century Spanish still life.¹⁴ (Perhaps these later still life works state the case for a kind of Past-ism?) Just as *Cubist Still Life with Mandolin* (1951) [plate 2] and *Ox Skull* (1955) [plate 4] are acts of homage to Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, Day's later paintings—including *Still life with Silver Jug, Pomegranates, Peach and Quince* (1989) [plate 16]—are paeans to the Spanish still life painters of the seventeenth century.

After visiting a major exhibition of work by Francisco de Zurbarán and his contemporaries in Boston in the mid 1980s, Day's interest in the still life genre was re-ignited. He recalls being moved by the 'quiet, religious intensity' of the Spanish paintings. If, via Mark Tobey, Day had earlier been impressed by the austerity of Zen Buddhism and its artistic applications, he found a comparable depth in the Spanish tradition, with its spartan arrangements and discipline. A far cry from the luxuriant excesses of the Dutch still life tradition, the sensory deprivations and philosophical orientation of the Spanish paintings appealed to Day, these works in which 'Thought makes the painting bright, / paralyses forms with light... / The brush and palette are all brain, / this is the intellect's domain...' as Rafael Alberti wrote of Zurbarán.¹⁵

Looking at *Still life with Silver Jug, Pomegranates, Peach and Quince*, the formal and philosophical links with artists like Juan Sanchez Cotan and Zurbarán are evident. Day's painting manifests a peculiarly Spanish quality of 'spatial sobriety', as art historian Margit Rowell has described it, which conveys a sense of 'distance and inaccessibility'.¹⁶ In the no-country of Day's still life composition, time and place are dissolved—the tabletop appears almost immaterial compared with the solid darkness behind it.

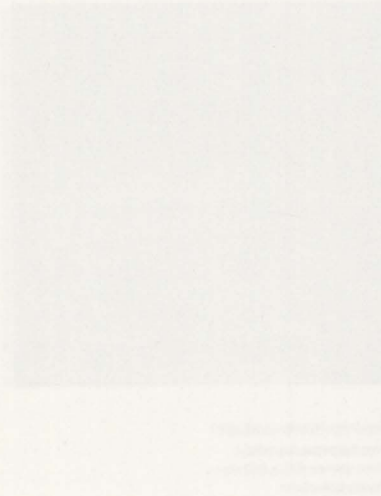
Georges Braque's supposition that 'a still life is no longer a still life when it is no longer within arm's reach' is an interesting one to apply to paintings like these.¹⁷ In Day's painting, the objects hover in an architectural space, just beyond the arm's reach prescribed by Braque. In fact the works might be thought of as 'interiors' rather than still lifes. Day's larger still life compositions often resemble stage sets on which lighting rigs are being adjusted. Lines of white track down the darkened atmosphere. At times the compositions are reminiscent of the enigmatic town-planning of Giorgio de Chirico with their 'strict yet illogical underlying geometries'.¹⁸

In *Still Life with Silver Jug, Pomegranates, Peach and Quince*, two ghost-like door shapes are refracted on the dark surface of the painting, hovering at the front of the pictorial space, much like the words in Day's inscribed landscape paintings. The painting is a meditation not only on the material world, but on the workings of the human mind with its dreams of order, perfection and beauty. The artist's early fascination with the golden section and Renaissance theory are here recast within the night-landscape of the still life.

While still life is often considered a 'minor' genre, there is certainly a case to be made for its centrality and ongoing viability.¹⁹ Critic Guy Davenport has described still life as the 'still centre of civilisation', its purpose being 'to state the architecture of nature's foundations'.²⁰

continuum / discontinuous narrative

Melvin Day's art is predicated on a notion of painting as a process of deep learning, a meditation which runs far deeper than a ticking off of aspects of style. In 1984 Ian Wedde wrote that 'academic' was the wrong word to describe Day's approach because it inferred 'the artist's capitulation to received controls on imagination', the point being that the paintings are not an attempt to impose intellectual order, nor do they give in to existent order. They are an intuitive investigation into different aspects of painting and its history, a balancing and converging of different energies.²¹



Within Day's oeuvre a number of dialectics can be discerned: between theory and practice, past and present, untrammelled nature and human order, organic form and geometry... The ebb and flow of these concerns provide the inner dynamic—a continuum, certainly, although at times, from the outside, it can appear more like a discontinuous narrative. Through the many phases of his art, with its profound and almost violent changes of direction, a sense of progression rather than repudiation emerges.

Melvin Day's art is based on the fact that art history, like nature, is inscrutable. Questions give rise not to answers but to further questions. One canvas necessitates the painting of another. This is what keeps art alive. Day has been prepared to change styles, as his explorations have led him—and it is this aspect of his work which has made him such a difficult artist to place within New Zealand art history. The title of the 1984 survey exhibition, 'Full Circle', suggested that painting was, for Day, a cyclic process of return and renewal. From the viewpoint of 2004, the circle-motif of that title might be adjusted so it now becomes a wheel which is rolling through the world, revisiting and reviving past concerns, taking them some place new. Perhaps the diagrammatic sketches we noted on the surface *Vertiginous* hint at the mechanisms of hand, eye and heart by which this creativity proceeds, taking what it needs from both the contemporary world and the vast store of human history.

Gregory O'Brien is a curator at City Gallery Wellington, where he has worked on 'Hotere—out the Black Window' (1997), 'John Drawbridge—Wide Open Interior' (2001) and 'Rosalie Gascoigne' (2004). His most recent book is *Welcome to the South Seas—Contemporary New Zealand Art for Young People* (Auckland University Press, 2004).

- 1 Gyorgy Kepes, *The New Landscape in Art and Science*, Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co., 1956, p.259.
- 2 In the early 1960s Pat Hanly produced his 'Fire' series, looking back to New Zealand for inspiration, and John Drawbridge painted his New Zealand House Mural as well as numerous Pacific-inspired canvases.
- 3 Gil Docking, *Two hundred years of New Zealand painting*, Wellington: Reed, 1971, p.172.
- 4 'L'espace pictural est un mur mais tous les oiseaux du monde y volent librement.' Quoted in Anne de Staël, *Staël; Du trait à la couleur*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Editions, 2001, p.183.
- 5 Mark Hutchins, *Melvin Day—A Survey: 1940s to 2000*, Wellington: Tinakori Gallery, 2000, p.2.
- 6 The work of these artists was the basis for the splendidly titled 'Mudpool Modernism' exhibition at the Rotorua Museum of Art and History in 2000 (curated by Damien Skinner).
- 7 Melvin Day, interviewed by Damien Skinner, 25 July 2000.
- 8 Rafael Alberti, 'To Divine Proportion', *On Painting*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997, p.155.
- 9 Patrick Hutchings, 'Eight New Zealand Abstract Painters', *Art International* Vol 19 No 1, 20 January 1975, p.23.
- 10 Mark Tobey, quoted in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today*, London: Phaidon, 1978, pp.68–69.
- 11 A surprising technical affinity is also evident here between Day's painting and that of the English-New Zealander Michael Illingworth who, during the early 1960s, produced similar compositions although with an increasingly assertive figurative element.
- 12 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, London: Faber & Faber, 1971, p.232.
- 13 Tony Bellette, *Melvin Day—Full Circle*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1984, p.15.
- 14 Ian Wedde has drawn attention to Day's assimilation of 'the compositional serialism of Cézanne, the low-key cubism of Braque, perhaps the contemplative lighting of Morandi, sometimes the vertical shafting of planes out of Feininger.' (*Evening Post*, 30 July 1984)
- 15 Rafael Alberti, 'Zurbarán', *On Painting*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997, p.93.
- 16 Margit Rowell, *Objects of desire: the Modern Still Life*, New York: Museum of Modern Art/ Abrams, 1997, p.14.
- 17 Georges Braque, *Illustrated Notebooks 1917–1955*, Stanley Appelbaum (trans), New York: Dover, 1971, p.77.
- 18 Rowell, *ibid.*, p.8.
- 19 With notable exceptions such as Giorgio Morandi and Georges Braque, still life tends to be a sideline to the central concerns of the 'major' artist. Michael Dunn's *New Zealand painting: a concise history* (2003) contains over 180 paintings, of which only 7 or 8 works could be described as still lifes (one of these, incidentally, is by Day)—and Dunn is an historian with a strong interest in the genre.
- 20 Guy Davenport, *Objects on a Table, Harmonious Disarray in Art and Literature*, New York: Counterpoint, 1998, p.109.
- 21 Ian Wedde, 'Melvin Day's work shows melancholy air', *Evening Post*, 30 July 1984.

melvin day—uccello, piero and beyond
mark hutchins

The first painting by Melvin Day that I saw was an abstract work of moderate size. Although less than a metre high and just over a metre wide it had a commanding presence and totally dominated the room in which it hung. Its image consisted of a vertical 'tabard' or banner of bleached ochre impasto suspended above a deep cobalt ground. The banner form was torn horizontally into three roughly equal portions with the text 'PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA' inscribed in ancient Roman script between the top and middle sections. A crusty, deconstructed quality to its surface, accentuated with stains and partial erasure, imbued the work with the physical appearance of something very old. That momentary illusion was contradicted, however, by the obviously modernist intent of its composition. This impressive modernist work in apparent homage to the Italian Renaissance master was unlike anything I had come across before. I was later told by its owner that the painting formed part of an extensive series of abstractions inspired by quattrocento Italian art undertaken by Day throughout the 1970s.

When I tried to find out more about Melvin 'Pat' Day and see other examples of his work, I soon discovered that, apart from a few paragraphs in Gil Docking's *Two hundred years of New Zealand painting* (1971), little appeared to have been published on this artist. Eight years later, while a postgraduate student at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, with access to more extensive reference resources, I started searching again. I managed to unearth a few magazine articles and some brief exhibition catalogues, but Day's exclusion from nearly every major overview of New Zealand art remained frustrating.

For much of his painting career, Melvin Day has remained outside the mainstream. There were, of course, a number of well-known modernist painters active in New Zealand during this period including Colin McCahon and Milan Mrkusich, whose work now forms the foundations of much contemporary New Zealand art. Other well-known painters such as Ralph Hotere and Don Peebles were friends of Day's, with whom he regularly exchanged ideas. Although he often participated in discussions with his friends on the merits of American artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, Day chose to base his work on formulae proscribed by Alberti five centuries earlier, while also assimilating contemporary influences.¹ These factors, combined with his reluctance to exhibit his work outside of Wellington, resulted in Day having a far lower profile than many of his contemporaries. Art historian Michael Dunn's decision to include Day in his recently revised *New Zealand painting: a concise history* (2003) suggests that recognition previously lacking is now being redressed.

Day became aware of the theoretical foundations of Italian Renaissance art during his studies with A.J.C. Fisher and John Weeks at Elam School of Art in the early 1940s. While Fisher drilled students on perspective in the mode of Leonardo da Vinci, Weeks promoted the importance of structure and composition. Weeks' use of the golden section and his 'profound admiration of the mathematical construction' in the compositions of sixteenth century Venetian painter Tintoretto provided a formative appreciation of structural proportions that would lead Day to examine the work of other Renaissance masters decades later.²

In September 1941 Day's studies at Elam came to a premature end when he was conscripted into the army. After the war, obligations to earn a living prevented him from recommencing full-time study; although in 1955, while teaching in the Hutt Valley, he took advantage of his proximity to Wellington to enrol part-time at Victoria College of the University of New Zealand. After completing a Bachelor of Arts in 1961, he was eager to further his studies in art history. As no courses were being offered in New Zealand at the time, Day applied for admission to the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. The success of his application was largely due to his persistence and determination in the face of reluctance to give any real credit to his New Zealand degree. He was eventually admitted and in 1963 began reading the history of art at the Courtauld—the first New Zealander to do so.

Readers at the Courtauld Institute in the 1960s had the wealth of the English national collections within easy reach. Under the directorship of Anthony Blunt, the Courtauld was in its golden age and had become arguably the leading institution dedicated to art research and scholarship in the world. Day joined a class of about sixteen students who were taught by Alan Bowness (later a director of the Tate), Roy Strong and Lord Kenneth Clark among others. His abiding interest in art of the Italian quattrocento intensified with his studies. Works by the Florentine painter Paolo Uccello, with their 'flat lighting and geometric form', impressed him as being particularly contemporary in feeling.³ Uccello's application of perspective, as described in Alberti's *Della Pittura Trattato* (1435–36), was far more comprehensive than that of most of his contemporaries, with the notable exception of Piero della Francesca.⁴ Some scholars have even accused Uccello of being obsessed by mathematical considerations to the detriment of his art. Art historian Bernard Berenson, for example, claimed:

Uccello had a sense of tactile values and a feeling for colour, but, insofar as he used these gifts at all, it was to illustrate scientific problems. His real passion was with perspective, and



Mazzocchio 1969
oil on canvas, 1530 x 1220 mm
Private collection

painting was to him a mere occasion for solving some problem in that science, and displaying his mastery over its difficulties.⁵

It was this obsessive, and often quite distorting, application of perspective by Uccello that Day found fascinating. His perception of the Cubists, especially Georges Braque and Juan Gris, and of their relationship to Uccello's 'obvious geometric structure', was further clarified by the ideas of John Golding, a lecturer in early twentieth century modernism at the Courtauld and a writer on Cubism.⁶ Uccello simplified elements to their most economic and essential forms, which he then fitted into a structure dictated by precise mathematical formulae. When taken to the extreme, this stylising reduction of form into geometric curves and planes anticipated the early developments of Cubism.

As a reader at the Courtauld, Day was able to visit the National Gallery and make sketches while sitting directly in front of Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* (1445). It was the spatial ambiguity in this painting that initially attracted him; Uccello had created this by limiting his employment of perspective to a narrow frontal strip on which the main scene takes place. The background has no spatial reference to the episode in front. The composition is divided into two quite different forms of representation.

In the mid 1960s, Day began a series of studies exploring different aspects of Uccello's compositional construction. He took rough sketches drawn directly from the original quattrocento painting back to his studio where he reworked them into abstract concepts that provided the foundation for his 'Uccello' series. These early studies led to paintings consisting of irregular blocks of rich colour juxtaposed against patches of heavily worked, encrusted paint.

As the series developed, the works became far more structurally cohesive. A painting completed shortly after his return to New Zealand in 1968, *Mazzocchio* (1969) [on left], gives an indication of their nature. This painting takes its inspiration, and title, from an early form of circular head-gear popular in quattrocento Italy which Uccello adopted as a signature motif. Depictions of mazzocchi can be found in many of Uccello's best known works. Some of the most elaborate representations can be seen in *The Flood* (1444–46), and *The Battle* as 'polyhedrons with alternating facets in black and gold like a chequer board'.⁷ Although Day had noted the headgear worn by the combatants in *The Battle*, it was one of the analytical drawings of mazzocchi in the Uffizi that provided the specific reference for this painting. A portion of Uccello's drawing in the Uffizi has

been superimposed over a light ground washed with transparent stains of yellow ochre and ivory black. Geometric construction lines for the mazzocchio fan out from the top left corner of the painting designating the diagonal compositional thrust from upper left to lower right.

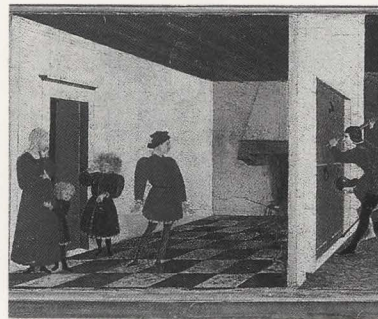
A large reversed black 'L', heavily encrusted with thick impasto, forms a strong visual barrier between the golden section containing the drawing and the light, spatially ambiguous remainder of the canvas. The far right edge is accentuated with a vertical slash of crimson, signalling the outer limit of the composition and completing Day's scheme of red, black and ochre intended to allude to Uccello's original palette. Diverse spatial treatments on each side of the black impasto barrier refer to the contrast between the geometrically constructed space in which the battle takes place and the apparent flat curtain of the landscape behind. The antiquated parchment of Uccello's original mazzocchio drawing is also brought to mind by the delicate staining behind the linear elements in the top left corner.

Another work by Day from this period, *The Attempt to Destroy the Host—Large Version* (1969) [plate 11], was discussed by critic Patrick Hutchings in his article on New Zealand abstraction for *Art International* magazine in 1975.

One of Day's most powerful compositions... seems to derive in the last analysis from a composition diagram of that incredible second panel of *La Profanazione dell'Ostia*, where we see, at once, the company of soldiers battering on the door of the Jew's house, and the interior of a room open at one end, like a stage set. But the formal square-U pattern of Day's picture, executed in sombre tones, works absolutely, as an abstract design of great weight and significance. The lettering which runs across the picture has both a formal role and an ironic one—use the alphabet, and you'll reconstruct any anecdote at all, Uccello's included. Further: the 'divine perspective' of Uccello is recalled by one, intensely pregnant, dotted line.

Day's painting may be read either as a summary of the oppressive story and oppressive feeling of Uccello's *Profanazione*, or as an autonomous, sombre, elegant icon. Either way, it is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', the European themes, with the roots deep in Mediterranean culture, resolved in a New Zealand studio, at the bottom of the Pacific.⁸

While studying in London, Day made frequent visits to the British Museum. Gallery curator David Miller noted that 'the section [of the British Museum] housing the relics of the ancient civilisations especially intrigued [Day], for in many relics—Egyptian funerary



Paolo Uccello
Profanation of the Host (detail) 1467-68
wood panel, height 420 mm
Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino



Melvin Day in London in 1967
Photo: Geoff Adams
Courtesy of The Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena,
University of Otago, Dunedin.

decorations, cuneiform scripts and the like—painting and script are combined. As a result of these visits, Day placed contrived "ancient scripts" based on Phoenician examples on the surface of his work. Later came the Roman script. Sometimes they formed words. Sometimes not.⁹

The artist was interested in the abstracted graphic qualities of these ancient inscriptions, either built up in relief or gouged into a surface, rather than in any attempt to decipher literal meaning. Evocations of tactile striations chiselled into fractured stone also attracted Day to the work of the contemporary Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies who was exhibiting in London at this time.

Instantly impressed by Tàpies' work, Day later wrote of the Spanish artist's 'affinity for the ancient walls of his native Barcelona, with their scars, worn features and generations of graffiti'.¹⁰ As the works of Day's 'Uccello' series progressed, the concerns of surface he shared with Tàpies become more pronounced. Day interpreted the coarse materials used by Tàpies as being '... reminiscent of the substance of the wall: sand, plaster, pebbles and simple natural objects, and these are fused to create the allusion. By this means he identifies with the artisan class, working with simple materials like a manual labourer.'¹¹

An increasing interest in the metaphorical ability of abstract marks, scrapings and patinations also led Day to investigate the corporeal substance behind the crumbling surfaces of the historical works he was studying. Field trips made to Italy as part of his studies at the Courtauld provided the ideal opportunity to intimately examine the physical construction of quattrocento fresco painting. Analysis of the crumbling pigment-laden surfaces provided the basis, years later, for Day's second major commentary on the work of a Renaissance painter: his 'Piero della Francesca' series.

Although begun slightly later than his abstract derivations from Uccello, the 'Piero' series was, for the most part, painted concurrently. Day recalls that from 1966 until the late 1970s he continued to evaluate the work of both della Francesca and Uccello:

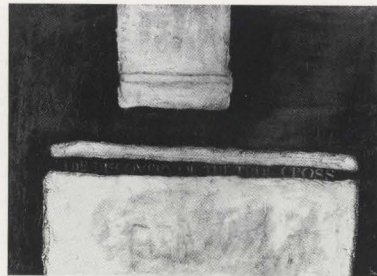
I was greatly drawn to Uccello's linear qualities and the sheer luminosity of his thinking about seeing things. With Piero I was attracted by his colour sense and subtle linear and perspective invention. To my mind both Piero and Uccello are often admired for the wrong reasons. Both are highly cerebral artists and the mathematical underpinning of their respective works is where they emerge as giants.¹²

Albertian formulae continued to provide the compositional framework in the 'Piero' series but the content became simplified into basic blocks of harmonious pinks and ochres floating over grounds of deep cobalt.

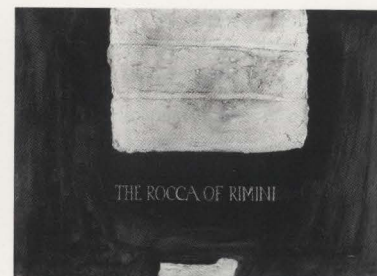
The Discovery of the True Cross (1970) [on right] is an early example of these new developments. Its compositional structure was derived from vertical panels of the architecture, perpendicular to the picture frame, contrasted against the horizontal arms of the cross depicted by della Francesca in *The Proving of the True Cross* (1452–59) from the Arezzo fresco cycle. The title of Day's work is painted in scuffed Roman script underneath the cross as if it were inscribed on the plinth of a monument. Heavy impasto blocks of bleached ochre are softened by delicate washes in warmer, earthy tones that have been built up in semi-transparent layers, scrubbed back and then reworked to create a rich luminous surface closer in appearance to painted plaster than oil on canvas. Day's palette of soft clay pigments juxtaposed against deep celestial cobalt obviously alludes to that of della Francesca, but other references are less clear. Day has totally put aside della Francesca's original narrative intention, choosing to focus instead on manipulating the tactile qualities of the painted surface.

In a concurrent work, *Renaissance Proportion* (1970), Day avoids any direct connection with a specific image source, however tenuous, in favour of a more general acknowledgement of Alberti's definition of the 'new way of seeing' that underpins so much of late quattrocento painting. The addition of a few fine white construction lines ruled across the lower right of the blue ground indicate the fundamental proportions of the golden section, although Day's intention here, as in most cases, is to allude to Albertian formulae rather than to fastidiously apply them. The lighter, more translucent application of paint in *Renaissance Proportion*, especially over the blue areas, sets it apart from most of the other works in this series. Blistered patches of bleached yellow, lapped over by fluid ultramarine glazes, evoke visions of isolated beaches on Pacific atolls as much, if not more than, the quattrocento images that the title of the work alludes to. Perhaps this trans-global parallel reflects the artist's own creative experience of applying classical European methodology in an antipodean context.

Legend of a Monastic Saint (1976) [plate 10] is one of the last works of Day's 'Uccello' series and concludes his explorations of various elements of Uccello's very badly damaged fresco series in St. Miniato al Monte. The compositional forms of *Visions of a Hermit*, an earlier sub-series inspired by the St. Miniato al Monte fragments, were derived from the painted architectural details below the fresco fragments; a faux



The Discovery of the True Cross 1970
from the series 'Piero della Francesca'
oil on canvas, 840 x 1150 mm
Private collection



The Rocca of Rimini 1970
oil on canvas, 840 x 1150 mm
Private collection

marble panel with its highly modelled boss. The 'Hermit' works varied greatly in colour, from deep pinkish reds to opalescent blues and near blacks, but the boldly graphic composition of an ocular form within a rectangle remained consistent.

Legend of a Monastic Saint appears to suggest a conclusion to these explorations through its heavily pared back composition and delicate, almost transient application of pigment. When compared with the quattrocento source indicated in its title, Day's painting appears to make only the vaguest reference to the almost indecipherable remains of Uccello's original fresco. His interpretation of the surviving passages of crumbling plaster seems the antithesis of anything architectural. Flaking fragments of masonry from St. Miniato al Monte have been transformed into billowing heraldic pennants fluttering at some medieval festival. There is an ephemeral, vaporous quality in this work, acknowledging ghosts some might say and metaphorically reminding us of the fragile and fleeting nature of our terrestrial existence.

The primary intent behind Day's 'Uccello' and 'Piero della Francesca' works has been to distil the structural essence encapsulated by these quattrocento artists and reapply it to his own modernist practice: 'What I have done is to reconcile the script art of the ancients and Renaissance proportional devices to form the framework of my painting. In short, it is a synthesis of two extremely old concepts wedded to twentieth century abstraction.'¹³

Gallery Director Anne Philbin describes Day as a 'European painter who is a New Zealander by accident of birth ... [who] through metaphor and reference to art and literature of the past ... illuminates our present.'¹⁴ This European focus should not, however, deny him his true place in New Zealand art. The eyes with which Day scrutinises the Italian Renaissance will always be those of a New Zealander, trained by Fisher and Weeks. Some of his sources were different from those of his contemporaries, but they still had much in common. As a contemporary New Zealand modernist painter, Day powerfully demonstrates the relevance of the traditions of our European past, a perspective that many other artists have subsequently recognised.

Mark Hutchins is a gallery director, art dealer and writer living in Wellington. He first met Melvin Day in 1996 during a research interview for his Masters thesis: *The Italian Inheritance—Contemporary Responses to Early Italian Renaissance Imagery by Four New Zealand Painters submitted to the University of Auckland in 1998*. After graduating with honours, Hutchins moved to Wellington where in May 2004 he opened the Mark Hutchins Gallery.

- 1 Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72): Italian humanist writer, sculptor, painter, architect and art theorist.
- 2 The golden section (or golden mean): The proportion in which a line or rectangle is divided into two unequal parts in such a way that the ratio of the smaller to the larger is equal to the ratio of the larger part to the whole. This idea was discussed by the classical writer Vitruvius and revived in the Renaissance period by Luca Pacioli, a friend of Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca.
Jacopo R. Tintoretto (1518–94): Venetian painter, renowned for his dramatic colour and exaggerated use of perspective.
- 3 Paolo Uccello (1396–1475): Florentine painter who combined International Gothic and Renaissance elements in a distinctive style characterised by an elaborate use of perspective.
David Miller, *Melvin Day—A Retrospective*, Lower Hutt: Dowse Art Gallery, 1971.
- 4 Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura Trattato*, c. 1435–36. A brief summary of Alberti's theory is given by John Pope Hennessey in his *The Complete Works of Paolo Uccello*, London: Phaidon Press, 1950, p.11.
- 5 John Pope-Hennessy quotes Berenson in *The Complete Works of Paolo Uccello*, London: Phaidon Press, 1950, p.30.
- 6 Melvin Day, conversation with author, July 1997.
- 7 S. and F. Borsi, *Paolo Uccello*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994, p.158.
- 8 Patrick Hutchings, 'Eight New Zealand Abstract Painters', *Art International* Vol 19 No 1, 1975, p.21.
- 9 David Miller, *Melvin Day—A Retrospective*, Lower Hutt: Dowse Art Gallery, 1971, p.16.

- 10 Melvin Day, 'Essay on A. Tàpies' in Colin Naylor (ed.), *Contemporary Masterpieces*, London: St James Press, 1991, p.260.
- 11 Melvin Day, *ibid.*
- 12 Melvin Day, correspondence with author, August 1997.
- 13 Tony Bellette, 'Introduction', *Full Circle—Melvin Day*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1984, p.13.
- 14 Anne Philbin, 'Foreword', *Full Circle—Melvin Day*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1984, p.3.

further reading

- Bellette, Tony, 'Introduction', *Full Circle—Melvin Day*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1984.
- Bett, Elva, *New Zealand Art: A Modern Perspective*, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986.
- Cape, Peter, *New Zealand Painting Since 1960: A Study in Themes and Development*, Auckland: Collins, 1979.
- Docking, Gil, *Two hundred years of New Zealand painting*, Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1971.
- Dunn, Michael, *New Zealand painting: a concise history*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003.
- Hutchings, Patrick, 'Eight New Zealand Abstract Painters', *Art International* Vol 19 No 1, 1975, pp. 18–35.
- Hutchins, Mark, 'Melvin Day, A Modern Legacy', *Melvin Day: A Survey 1940s to 2000*, Wellington: Tinakori Gallery, 2000.
- Mackle, Tony, 'A Sense of Proportion, Melvin Day and the Painterly Tradition', *Art New Zealand* 97, Summer 2000–2001, pp.86–89.
- Millar, David P., 'Introduction', *Melvin Day—Retrospective*, Lower Hutt: Dowse Art Gallery, 1971.
- Skinner, Damian, *Off the Beaten Track: modernism in Rotorua*, Rotorua: Rotorua Museum of Art and History, 2000.
- Thorburn, Ray, 'Full Circle, Paintings by Melvin Day', *Art New Zealand* 32, Spring 1984, pp.42–45.
- Tombs, H. H. (ed.), *Arts in New Zealand Year Book*, Wellington: H. H. Tombs, 1949.
- Wadman, Howard (ed.), *Arts in New Zealand Year Book*, Wellington: H. H. Tombs, 1946.
- Wadman, Howard (ed.), *Arts in New Zealand Year Book*, Wellington: H. H. Tombs, 1947.

melvin day chronology compiled by emma bugden

1923

Melvin Norman Day is born in Hamilton on 30 June, the son of a local school master.

1934

From age eleven, Day begins Saturday morning art classes at the Elam School of Art, University of Auckland.

1935–39

Day attends Howick District High School and Waiuku District High School. From 1937 he is granted permission by the Department of Education to study at the Elam School of Art for one day a week.

1939–40

Studies full-time at Elam and gains a Preliminary Diploma of Fine Arts in 1940.

1941–44

Day serves in the New Zealand Army from September 1941–43. Briefly attends Auckland Teachers' Training College.

1944–45

Day is transferred to the Royal New Zealand Air Force, where he remains until discharged after the war.

1945

Day takes up a teaching post at Ngongotaha, in the Rotorua district, and begins working on a series of Māori portraits. Shares a studio with artist and orthopaedic surgeon Dr Wilfred Stanley Wallis. Day and Wallis make several trips to visit the artist John Weeks (a former teacher of Day's from Elam and friend of Wallis'). Begins painting landscapes and still life works.

1949

Travels to England, France, Spain and Italy and attends many important exhibitions of the time, including a large Cézanne exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, and exhibitions by Gauguin and Matisse.

1950

Returns to New Zealand to live in Ngongotaha. Teaches in the Rotorua district.

1951

Holds his first solo exhibition at Cairn's Bookshop in Rotorua.

1952

Marries Oroya McAuley and starts teaching art at Rotorua Intermediate. His work becomes more inspired by Cubism.

1954

Moves to Wellington and enrolls to study towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at Victoria College. Begins teaching.

1956

Holds a solo exhibition at the Architectural Centre Gallery. His work from this period is characterised by a use of Spanish motifs.

1958

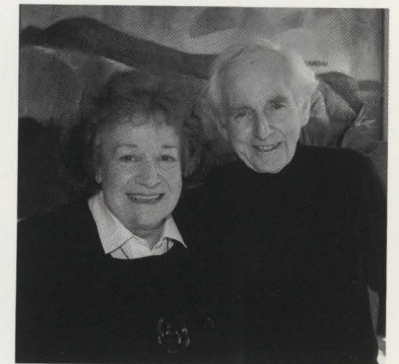
Exhibits with Don Peebles at the Architectural Centre Gallery. Corresponds frequently with American painter Mark Tobey, who encourages the study of Zen philosophy as applied to art. Day's work is moving into pure abstraction, with an increasing interest in texture.

1959

Exhibits for the first time in Auckland in the group exhibition 'Contemporary New Zealand Painting' at the Auckland City Art Gallery, curated by Director Peter Tomory. Day's artwork is also included in an exhibition with Don Peebles and J. P. Snaddon at Gallery 91, Christchurch.

1961

Included in the exhibitions 'Commonwealth Art Today' at the Commonwealth Institute, London, and 'Contemporary New Zealand Painting' at the Auckland Art Gallery. Completes his Bachelor of Arts degree.



Melvin and Oroya Day in Wellington in 2003
Photo: Kevin Stent

1963

Travels to England to attend the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London and read history of European art. Included in the exhibition 'European Art Today' at the New Vision Gallery, London.

1964

Included in the exhibition 'Young Commonwealth Painters' at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Other artists exhibiting include Ralph Hotere and Edward Bullmore. Also included in 'New Zealand Artists' at the Qantas Gallery, London. Lectures in painting and art history for the University of London Extension Summer School. Wins a prize in the Evening Standard Art Competition at the University of London.

1965

Included in the second 'Biennale of Commonwealth Abstract Art' at the Commonwealth Institute Gallery, London. The colours in Day's palette begin to lighten considerably during this period.

1966

Holds solo exhibitions at both the Commonwealth Institute Gallery, London, and the Commonwealth Institute Gallery, Edinburgh. Graduates with a Bachelor of Art (Honours) from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. A shift can be seen in Day's work as he begins to incorporate letters, alphabets and words into his paintings after seeing Assyrian and Phoenician work in the British Museum.

1966–68

Lectures at schools of art in London and at the University of London.

1968

Appointed Director of the National Art Gallery of New Zealand, arrives in Wellington in September to take up the position.

1969

Included in the exhibition 'Five Guest Artists' at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (along with John Drawbridge, Pat Hanly, Ralph Hotere and Don Peebles). Participates in an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington. Solo exhibition at the Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland. Day develops an interest in the perspectival studies of Alberti and Brunelleschi.

1970

Included in the exhibition 'Expo 70' in Japan. A mid-career survey exhibition of Day's work is organised by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

1971

The survey exhibition 'Melvin Day—Retrospective' opens at the Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt. Day also has solo exhibitions at the Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland, and the Winter Gallery, Hastings. He is included in the exhibition 'Wellington 71 Group Show' at the New Vision Gallery,

Auckland, and in a group exhibition at the Bett Duncan Gallery, Wellington. He is appointed the Commissioner for the New Zealand entry in the XI Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

1972

Exhibits at the Bett Duncan Gallery, Wellington.

1973

Solo exhibition at the Bett Duncan Gallery, Wellington.

1976

'Recent Paintings', a solo exhibition of Day's work, is held at the Dowse Art Gallery. Day is also included in the 'Festival Exhibition' at the Canterbury Society of the Arts, in Christchurch, 'New Zealand Drawing 1976' at the Auckland Art Gallery, and 'Four New Zealand Painters' at the Centre Culturel Noumea. Day takes a sabbatical from the National Art Gallery and travels to Europe, the United States and Canada. He graduates with a Masters of Philosophy from the Courtauld Institute.

1977

Travels to Japan on a study grant from the Japanese government.

1978

Leaves the National Art Gallery to take up the position of Government Art Historian.

1979

Exhibits at the Petar James Gallery, Auckland.

1980

Exhibits at the CSA, Christchurch, and the Louise Beale Gallery, Wellington.

1983

Exhibits at the Willeston Gallery, Wellington with John Drawbridge. Retires from his position as Government Art Historian.

1984

Included in the exhibition 'Wellington '84' at the Wellington City Art Gallery and in a group exhibition at the Hamilton Centre Gallery of Contemporary Art. In July a major exhibition of his work, 'Full Circle', is held at the Wellington City Art Gallery.

1986

Included in 'The Word' at the Suter Art Gallery, Nelson. Awarded 'Hors concours' at the Goodman Suter Biennial.

1989

Exhibits at the Louise Beale Gallery, Wellington.

1990

Exhibits at the Charlotte H. Gallery, Auckland.

1991

Exhibits at the Marilyn Savill Gallery, Wellington.

1994

Is included in the exhibition 'We're Still Here' at Milford House Galleries, Dunedin.

1995

Exhibits at the Marilyn Savill Gallery, Wellington.

2000

'Melvin Day A Survey: 1940s to 2000' is held at the Tinakori Gallery, Wellington.

2000–01

Day is included in the exhibition 'Mudpool Modernism' at the Rotorua Museum of Art and History.

2003

Awarded CNZM for services to art and art history.

2004

The major survey exhibition 'Melvin Day—Continuum' is held at City Gallery Wellington.



Plate one
Mountain Torrent 1951
 gouache on paper, 555 x 380 mm
 Private collection
 Courtesy of Mark Hutchins Gallery

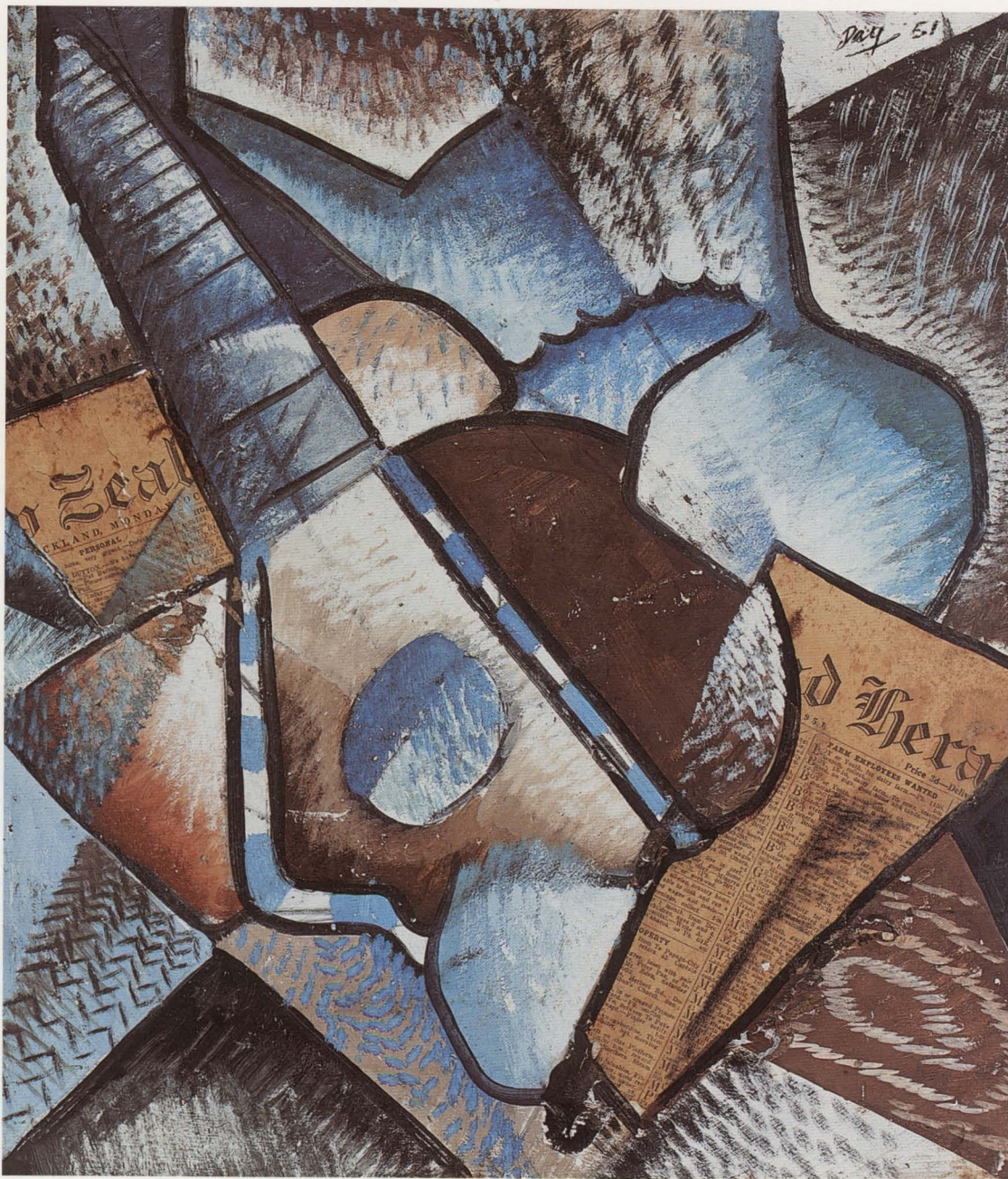


Plate two
Cubist Still Life with Mandolin 1951
 oil and collage on board, 456 x 408 mm
 Private collection



Plate three
Boats in Wellington Harbour 1951
 oil on board, 548 x 462 mm
 Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
 purchased 2001.



Plate four
Ox Skull 1955
 oil on paper, 416 x 533 mm
 Collection of the artist



Plate five
Vertiginous 1965
 oil on canvas, 1525 x 1370 mm
 Private collection

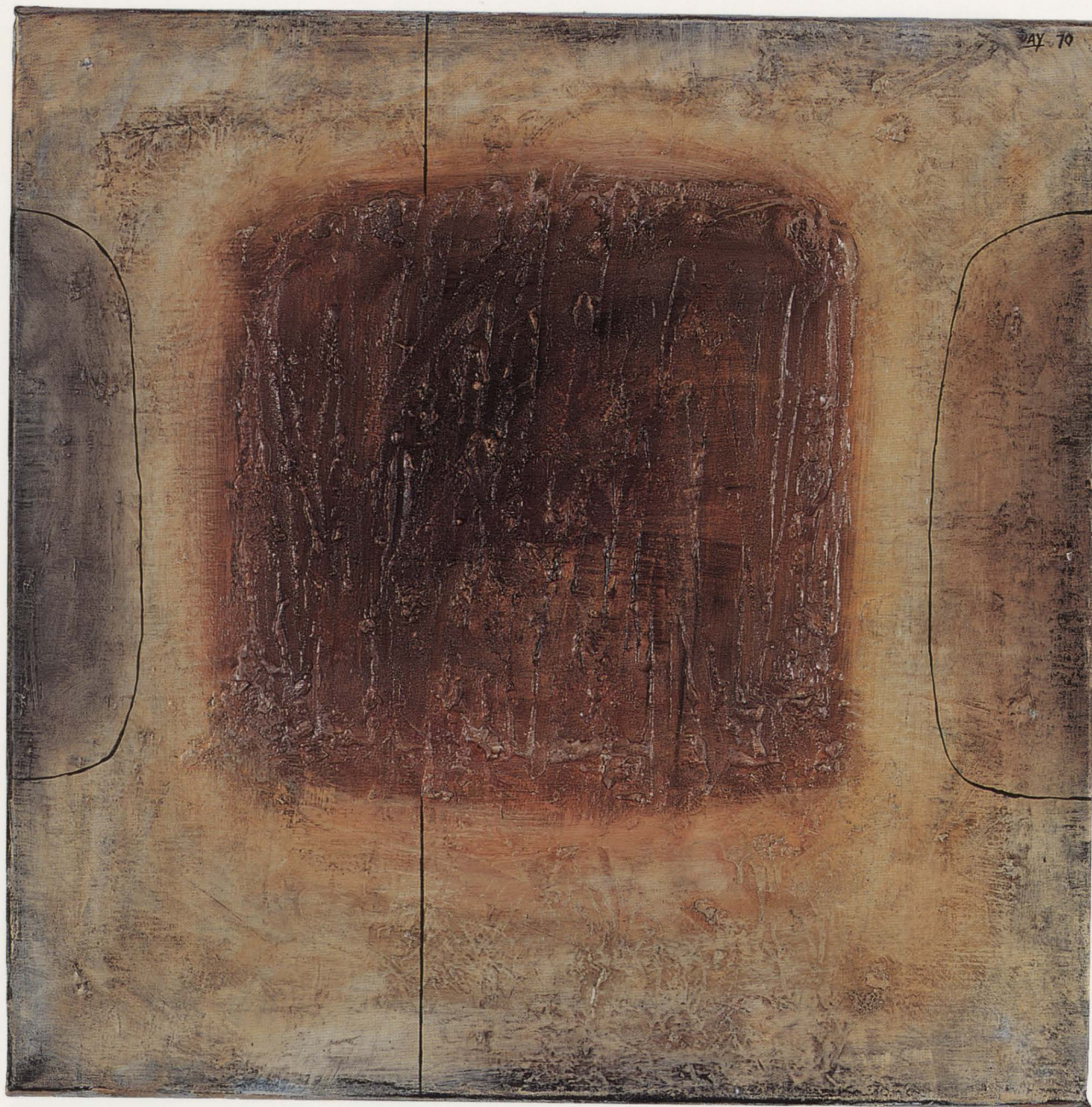


Plate six
Orange Proportion 1970
 oil and gesso on linen, 610 x 610 mm
 Courtesy of Tinakori Gallery, Wellington



Plate seven
Tabula 1974
 oil on board, 530 x 670 mm
 Collection of the artist
 Courtesy of Mark Hutchins Gallery



Plate eight
Uccello 1969
 from the series 'Uccello'
 oil on canvas, 914 x 609 mm
 Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1970.

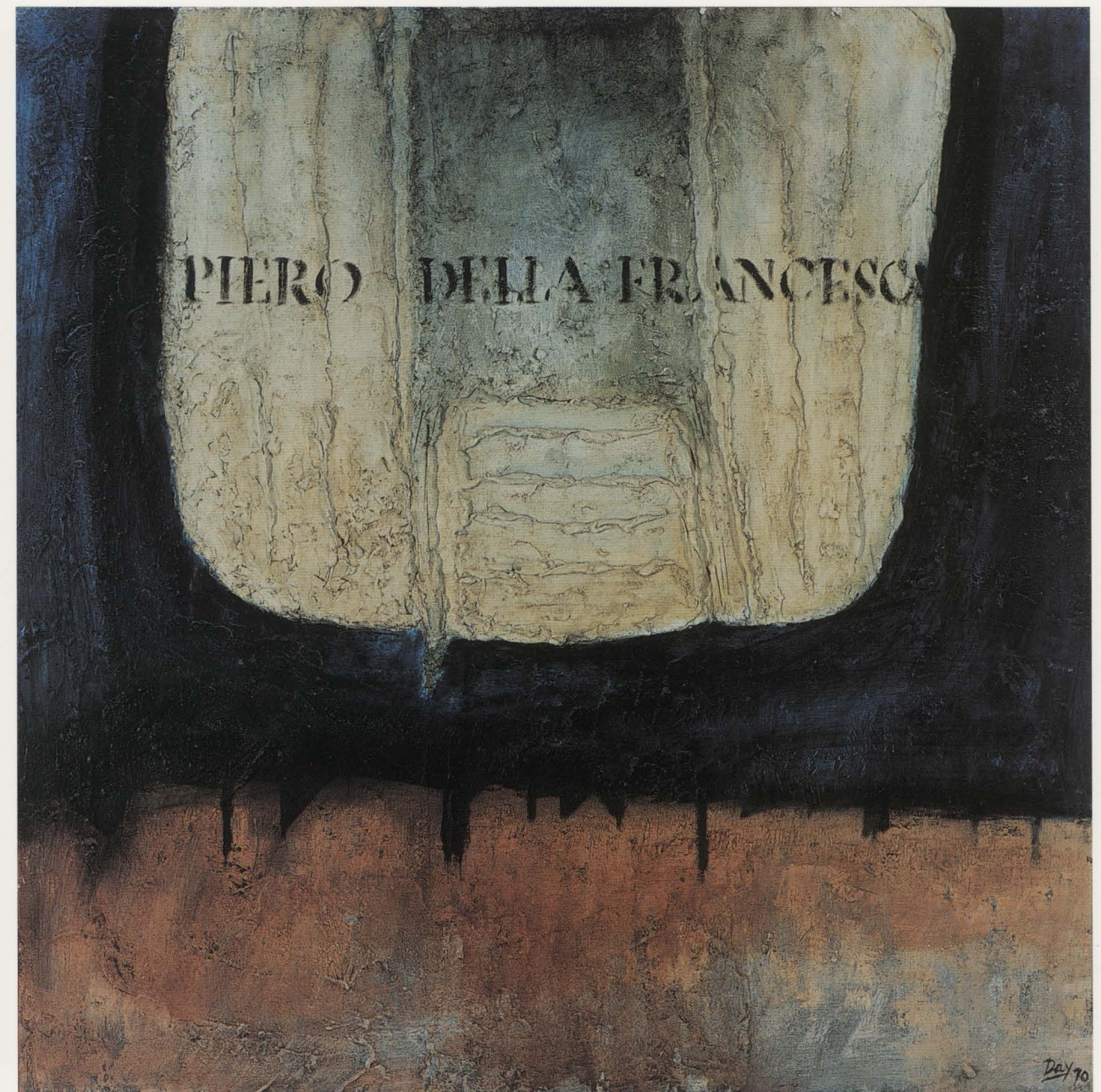


Plate nine
Walled City II 1970
 oil on canvas, 845 x 845 mm
 Private collection, Wellington

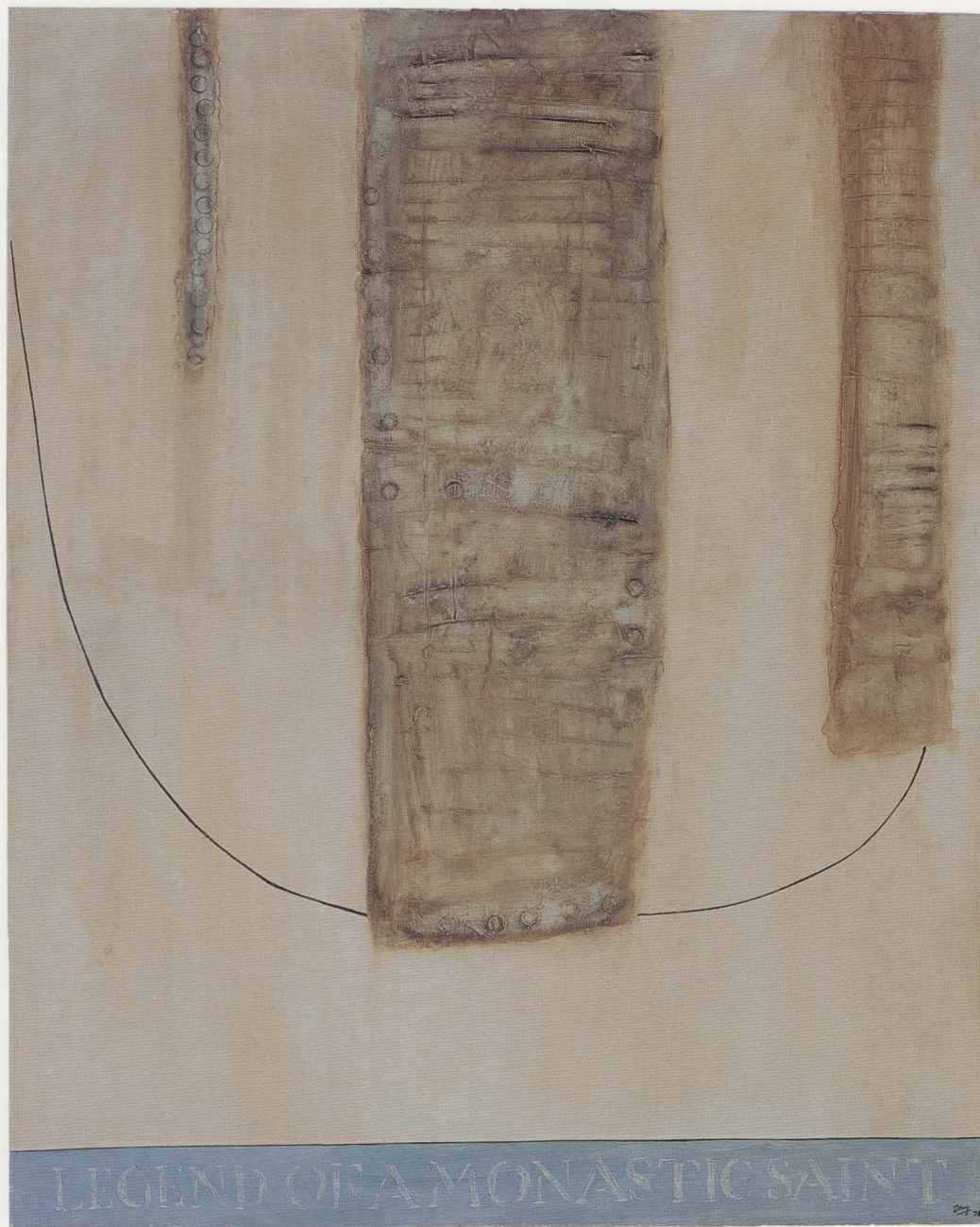


Plate ten
Legend of a Monastic Saint 1976
 from the series 'Uccello'
 oil on canvas, 1530 x 1225 mm
 Private collection

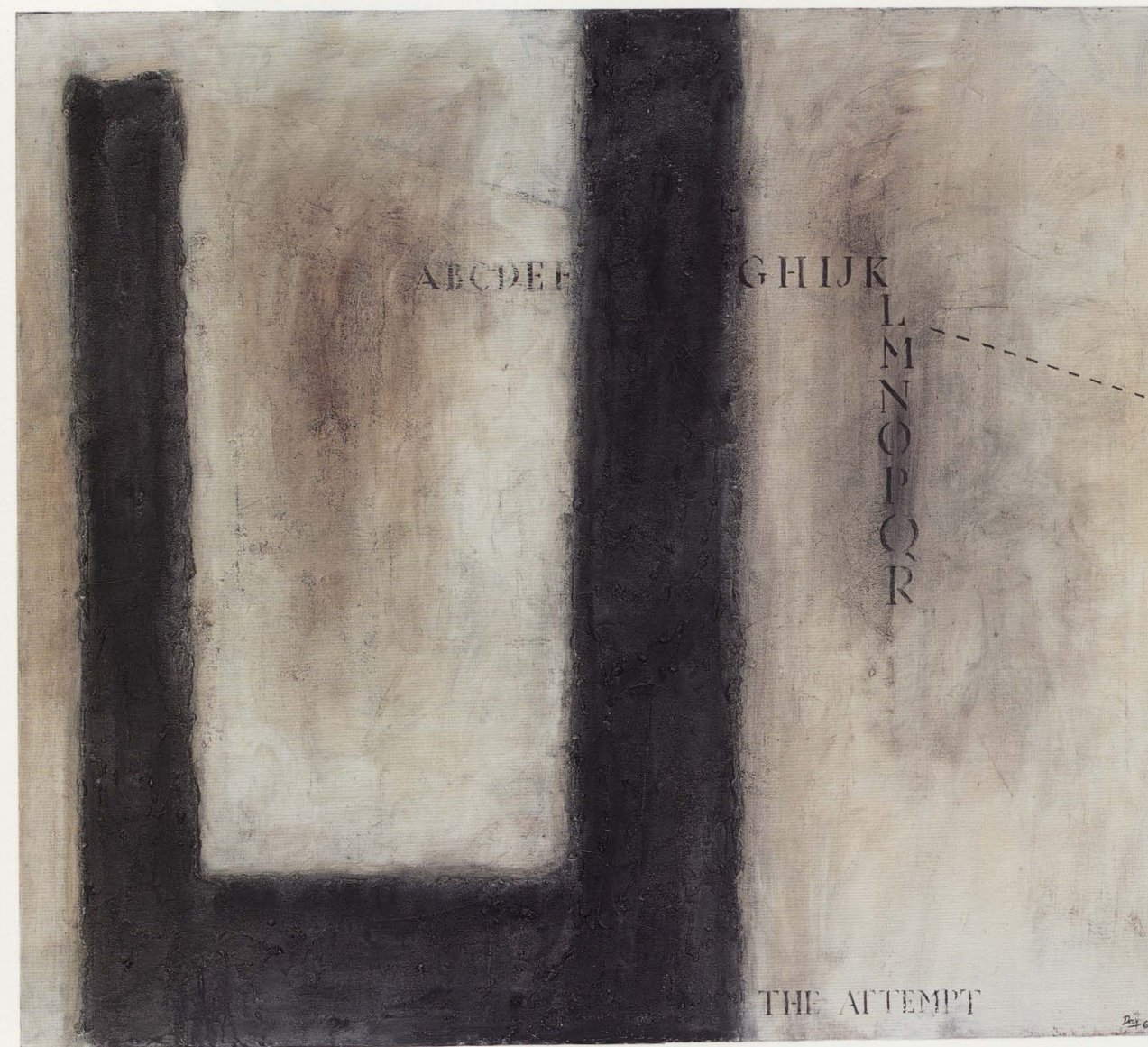


Plate eleven
The Attempt to Destroy the Host (large version) 1969
 from the series 'Uccello'
 oil on canvas, 1370 x 1525 mm
 Private collection



Plate twelve
Mutiny in the Mildest Thoughts 1979
 from the series 'Titus Andronicus'
 oil on canvas, 1520 x 1220 mm
 Private collection



Plate thirteen
Initium Series IV 1981
 oil on canvas, 1520 x 1220 mm
 Private collection



Plate fourteen
Tihoi 1973
 oil on canvas, 840 x 1147 mm
 Private collection, Wellington



Plate fifteen
Kaikoura No. 9 1992
 oil on canvas, 915 x 1525 mm
 Collection of the artist



Plate sixteen
*Still Life with Silver Jug, Pomegranates,
Peach and Quince* 1989
oil on canvas, 895 x 1551 mm
Private collection



City Gallery WELLINGTON

To Whare Poi