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# 'Modern Paints Aotearoa' at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

5 April 2014–15 March 2015

Spread across the two Mace galleries at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 'Modern Paints Aotearoa' takes Colin McCahon's *Northland Panels* (1958) as the starting point for an investigation into the effects of modern paint materials on the work of New Zealand artists in the 1950s and 60s. Curated by Sarah Hillary, Catherine Hammond and Caroline McBride, the exhibition is small—including only 11 works—but, for the most part, provides a comprehensive introduction to these new materials and their influence on the work of New Zealand artists.

The exhibition considers synthetic mediums such as alkyds, PVA emulsions, acrylics and nitrocellulose, which were developed around the time of World War II. These paints offered some significant advantages over traditional oil paints; they dried faster and behaved more predictably on the canvas, and this, combined with their relative cheapness, enabled artists to work faster and produce larger works.<sup>1</sup> This is ably demonstrated in large-scale works by Gretchen Albrecht, Ralph Hotere and, of course, by the centerpiece of the exhibition, McCahon's *Northland Panels*.

These new paints offered the opportunity to remove any trace of brushwork. Hotere's *Black Painting* (1969) and Gretchen Albrecht's *Landscape with Rainbow* (1972) are both large-scale works on a par with McCahon's, but show the quite different effects that were possible with modern paints. Hotere's *Black Painting*, consisting of 6 hardboard panels painted in black nitrocellulose and coloured alkyds, dominates the end wall of the large Mace Gallery. The nitrocellulose paint, applied

with a spray gun and then covered in lacquer, presents both a flat and deeply reflective surface to the viewer.

Working at a similar scale, and providing a balance to the Hotere at the other end of the gallery, Albrecht used acrylics for their saturated colour and pouring qualities in *Landscape with Rainbow* (1972). The contrast between the two works by their location at either end of the gallery is dynamic. Where the Hotere painting revels in opaqueness and reflectivity at one end of the room, at the other Albrecht's work is built up using thin washes of paint to stain unprimed canvas, resulting in a super-saturated surface of delicately interweaving colours.

One of the differences between the new modern paints and traditional oil paints was that the more liquid modern paints did not have the same ability to produce rich impasto effects.<sup>2</sup> Artists therefore experimented with the addition of materials such as sawdust and sand to achieve different surface effects, for example Gopas' work *Nebula* (1969). Experimenting in a different way, Matchitt painted thick layers of smooth PVA paint over each other, which then allowed him to carve intricate patterns into the drying paint; a technique that is evident in his *Untitled* (1964). While PVA emulsion paints are no longer commonly available as artists' paints they were reasonably frequently used by artists experimenting with new paints in the 1960s. PVA paints, and the wide variety of effects they could achieve, are represented in the exhibition in works by McCahon, Rudolph Gopas, Paratene Matchitt, Harry Wong and Gordon Walters.

Interestingly, the one modern paint missing from 'Modern Paints Aotearoa' is oil paint. While artist-quality oil paints had been around since antiquity, modern oils are significantly different to their predecessors. New synthetic pigments are available, and the incorporation of additives such as driers, stabilisers and dispersing agents make these paints in many ways as modern as the synthetic paints.<sup>3</sup> Artists were, of course, continuing to use oils. Philip Trusttun, for example, was producing works 'emphatically concerned with paint, its physical and sensual qualities, and with process'.<sup>4</sup> Working in oils, he was experimenting as much as any of the artists included in 'Modern Paints Aotearoa' and this contrast might have been interesting to explore.

**'Modern Paints Aotearoa'**



**'Modern Paints Aotearoa', 2014, installation view, Auckland Art Gallery  
Toi o Tāmaki. Courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.**



'Modern Paints Aotearoa', 2014, installation view.

While the new synthetic paints had significant advantages they also pose considerable challenges for conservation, and ‘Modern Paints Aotearoa’ devotes some attention to this facet of the new paints as well. In some instances, for all their durability and stability, the use of paints for purposes other than those they had been designed for has caused problems. Most notable in this exhibition is McCahon’s *Northland Panels* where the combination of household paint designed for smooth, rigid surfaces and unstretched canvas has resulted in a steady deterioration of the work as the paint has cracked and flaked. *Northland Panels* have not been displayed for a number of years because of this and its stabilisation and conservation is the subject of both a short video and an essay in the exhibition catalogue.

While the exhibition is the end result of a large-scale research project based on McCahon’s *Northland Panels*, space constraints mean that the three McCahon works are displayed in the smaller Mace gallery. Physically separated from the rest of the works it is not obvious on a first viewing of the exhibition that the McCahon works are part of ‘Modern Paints Aotearoa.’ This separation is likely to have been compounded for frequent visitors to the gallery who will be used to seeing exhibitions devoted to individual New Zealand artists in the smaller Mace gallery.

In the overall scheme of things however this is a minor quibble. For a small exhibition, ‘Modern Paints Aotearoa’ punches well above its weight. The exhibition is a carefully curated and comprehensive analysis of the impact of modern synthetic paints on New Zealand painters and their works. Developed from a conservator’s perspective as opposed to a gallery curator, the exhibition provides a different and thought provoking approach to modernist New Zealand painting.

1. Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), 9.
2. Sarah Hillary, ‘Modern Paints Aotearoa: Setting a Context’ in *Modern Paints Aotearoa* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2014), 13.
3. Tom Learner, ‘Modern Paints: Uncovering the Choices’ in *Modern Paints Uncovered: Proceedings from the Modern Paints Uncovered Symposium*, eds. Thomas J Learner, Patricia Smithen, Jay W Krueger and Michael Schilling (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2007), 8.
4. Michael Dunn, *New Zealand Painting: A Concise History* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), 138.