

Parallel Lines: the changing contexts of Gordon Walters' art

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The occasion of any exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art at the Auckland City Art Gallery is always one of considerable pleasure and, as the artist approaches his 75th birthday, *Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context* is particular cause for celebration.

Following on from the Gallery's 1983 survey of this major artist's work, *Parallel Lines* traces Walters' singular pursuit of abstraction over the past five decades. It examines his unique synthesis of Maori and Western art into a personal and highly distinctive style. Most importantly, it brings viewers up to date with the stunning developments in Walters' latest paintings.

The publication *Parallel Lines* is beautifully illustrated with works from all periods of Walters' career and features an accessible introduction by William McAloon, the Gallery's Curator of Contemporary New Zealand Art.

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In the 11 years since the Auckland City Art Gallery mounted the Gordon Walters retrospective exhibition¹, considerable changes have occurred both within the artist's work and the interpretations that have been made of it. The exhibition *Gordon Walters in Context* is an attempt to look at Walters' work in the light of some of these changes.

Certainly, *Parallel Lines* takes a retrospective view of Walters' work, and brings viewers firmly up to date with the achievements of his recent painting. More significantly, however, the exhibition presents the artist's works alongside those of the European and American modernists who were formative on his development, and with whom he shares the language of formal abstraction. In turn *Parallel Lines* draws together some of the New Zealand artists whose works have a relationship to Walters' art, examining the various ways in which his influence has permeated through successive generations in this country.

By focusing solely on Gordon Walters, this book in a sense stands apart from the exhibition which it marks. It presents in outline the major developments of Walters' work over the past five decades, reproducing many works for the first time, and others for the first time in colour. The decision to do this has been made in light of the fact that there is currently no such survey of the artist's work available. That said, however, in the decade that has passed since Michael Dunn curated the retrospective exhibition there has appeared a substantial body of writing on Walters' art, which is documented at the end of this book.

The revised edition of Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith's *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1839-1980*, published a year before the Walters retrospective, did not revise Walters at all. In it he remained marginalised, one of a number of figures seen to be embracing "a servile formalism"² outside the mainstream of the New Zealand nationalist landscape. Since that publication appeared, however, Walters'

position within New Zealand's art history has been considerably redressed. The record, as Leonard Bell titled his review of the retrospective exhibition, has been put straight.³

The foundations of a fully-fledged modernism in this country have come to be seen as substantially resting upon Walters, from his early explorations of the surrealism of Tanguy and Klee in the 1940s, to his experimental works of the 1950s inspired by the contemporary European abstraction of Capogrossi, Taeuber-Arp, Vasarely and Herbin, to his mature style of the sixties onwards.

Walters' commitment to the project of abstraction, a commitment sustained for many years in a climate of indifference⁴, has been inspirational to younger artists who have followed related but highly distinct directions in their own work. For the generation of abstract painters who came to prominence in the seventies, including Richard Killeen, Julia Morison, Mervyn Williams and Stephen Bambury, Walters functioned perhaps as a model rather than a direct influence, a model of seriousness and dedication to the art of painting.

For a number of these artists, whose styles have changed substantially since that time, and for a new generation of abstractionists, including Judy Millar, Simon Morris, Julian Dashper, Richard Thompson, Isobel Thom and John Reynolds, Walters' work remains as a reference point, a paradigm of modernist practice against which their own directions towards a post-modern abstraction might be considered.⁵

At the same time, other revisions have produced differing perspectives on Walters' adaptation of the Maori koru, the motif of his most substantial and most widely known series of works. Walters had maintained an interest and admiration for Maori and Pacific art as far back as the thirties, one which was nurtured by Theo Schoon in the 1940s, and reached its fullest expression in the koru paintings which first appeared in 1956. In the changed climate of the 1980s, however, Walters' use of Maori art has been vigorously attacked and defended. Ranghiroa Panaho, for example, accused Walters of a "residual colonialism"⁶, while Ngahuia Te Awekotuku found his use of the koru "damned cheeky".⁷

Walters defenders have responded to such accusations by indicating the seriousness and respect with which he had approached his subject matter – that his art was a homage to one tradition in the language of another. They have noted the distance Walters has taken the motif from its source, and the breadth of other influences affecting his development. And they have pointed to the absence of stable boundaries between cultures, describing Walters' work as a hybrid or interchange of Maori and Pakeha artistic traditions.⁸

Nor has Maori opinion been unanimous in condemning Walters. Cliff Whiting, for example, admitted that "I have had to think hard about it and recognise that yes, here is a person who has been fascinated by a particular form of symbol and has explored it. I think that's great".⁹ And Sydney [sic] Moko Mead suggested that: "Art can be the best mediator between Maori and Pakeha. It's better than politicians or more talking".¹⁰

The shifting perspectives of such discussions precisely reflect the fundamental qualities of the koru paintings: their ambiguity, as they play out paradoxes between figure and ground, between positive and negative space. As Leonard Bell concluded a discussion of the issue: "That the paintings have been seen in such a variety of ways, that they still generate debate, is perhaps testament to aesthetic richness and cultural value".¹¹

Robert Leonard, a curator of the exhibition *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art*, which aroused considerable furore over the appropriation issue, recently suggested that: "Thus far the debate has been bogged down in moralising, as if moralities were not themselves culturally relative and interminably contestable".¹² Such assertions are borne out in the work of a number of young Maori artists, including Shane Cotton, Peter Robinson and Michael Parekowhai who have in various ways "recolonised" Walters' work, but from a perspective that is by no means black and white.

More significant than all of this perhaps have been the recent changes in Walters' work itself. The past decade has seen a winding down of the koru paintings, not in response to accusations of appropriation, but rather, as he put it in 1991: "I had developed the work to the point where there were no longer any real discoveries for me to make in deploying the image, not surprising after the time I had spent realising the work".¹³

This in the mid-eighties, after some thirty years with the koru, Walters turned his main attention to a geometric minimalism of astonishing simplicity and quietness, a style of painting which had its foundations built throughout his career.

These paintings, which bring both the exhibition *Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context* and this book to their conclusion, show Walters to be what he has always been: a contemporary artist, striving towards new possibilities in his work. An exhibition such as this may historicise his work, locating it in contexts well outside of the present, and the artist may share in something of this process, returning as he does to reassess and develop ideas which have suggested themselves in past works. However, Gordon Walters' interest remains not in the past, but in the future that is his next painting.

William McAloon

¹ Curated by Michael Dunn, the exhibition *Gordon Walters* was held at the Auckland City Art Gallery from 23 March – 24 April 1983. IM toured New Zealand galleries in 1983-4.

² Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1939-1980*, Bateman/Collins, Auckland, 1982, p. 214.

³ Leonard Bell, 'Putting the record straight: Gordon Walters', *Art New Zealand* 27, 1984.

⁴ In a note to his 1974 exhibition at Peter McLeavey Gallery of works from the 1950s, Walters states: "They were not shown at the time I did them because I considered the climate to be unsympathetic, if not downright hostile to abstraction."

⁵ For an analysis of Walters' relationship to subsequent abstraction in New Zealand see Francis Pound 'Walters and the canon' in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, Walters publications, Auckland, 1989.

⁶ Rangihira Panaho, 'Maori: At the centre, On the margins' in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, MCA, Sydney, 1992, p 133.

⁷ 'Ngahua Te Awekotuku in conversation with Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts, *Antic 1* 1986, p 50.

⁸ See for example Leonard Bell, 'Walters and Maori art: The nature of the relationship?' in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition* and Francis Pound, *The space between: Pakeha use of Maori motifs in modernist New Zealand art*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1994.

⁹ 'Headlands (interview with Cliff Whiting)', *AGMANZ Journal* 1992, p 6.

¹⁰ 'Maori: sharing a taonga' from *Welcome to our world*, New Zealand 1990 Commission, Wellington, 1990, p 146.

¹¹ Leonard Bell, 'Walters and Maori art: The nature of the relationship?' p 20.

¹² Robert Leonard, 'Perverse homages' in *Planet 13* Winter 1994, p 78.

¹³ Gordon Walters, letter to Michael Dunn, 20 October 1991, p3.