

G19 *The days and nights in the wilderness...* 1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2378 x 1840mm
Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth



COLIN McCAHON

Gates and Journeys

Colin McCahon is the outstanding figure in New Zealand visual art of the twentieth century. He was a great painter and a profound thinker. He was also a teacher, curator and critic whose contribution to art in New Zealand is immense.

This exhibition celebrates the range and complexity of his work and looks at a variety of themes and subjects which recur through the course of his career. The seven sections of the exhibition acknowledge McCahon's investigation of and response to the landscapes and histories of New Zealand; his reactions to the artistic currents of his time and of the past; his interest in words and numbers both as symbols and as the content of paintings; his exploration of the

idea of a walk past a series of paintings as a metaphor for other journeys; his concept of the Gate as a 'way through' both the surface of the picture and the destructive inclinations of humanity; and his dedication to the task of confronting and discussing issues of religious doubt and religious faith.

Colin McCahon worked for several years as Keeper and Deputy Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery and was most generous in his gifts to the Gallery's collection.

It is fitting therefore that at the close of our centenary year we present this exhibition which honours Colin McCahon and his work.

An Auckland City Art Gallery centenary exhibition, organised with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

Early Religious Works

In the years 1946 to 1952 Colin McCahon painted many familiar Biblical stories, and following a tradition established centuries before, he depicted the main characters in these events as people of his own time and in his own place. McCahon's setting for Biblical events is an empty New Zealand landscape. In *I Paul to you at Ngatimote* 1946 [E7] the landscape is fenced with barbed wire and an aeroplane appears in the sky. *The Valley of Dry Bones* 1947 [E9] demonstrates McCahon's concern for humanity and its need for faith in the aftermath of the second world war, which had so tragically demonstrated the destructive power of nuclear weapons. He includes objects which function as religious symbols in several of the works – a jug of water, a lamp, a candle.

Colin McCahon's consciously 'clumsy' painting style and his use of words in paintings, even speech balloons, surprised and angered many viewers when these works were first exhibited. But McCahon refused to identify religious truths

with the painting style of another time or place. This was New Zealand in the 1940's, a country trying to define its identity, a country for whom the lessons of faith in others and tolerance were still very necessary.

McCahon was disturbed by the criticisms but determined to continue with his work. He made a number of paintings in which words themselves are the subjects, taking the place of Biblical figures. They are visible, three dimensional block-like objects looming large against New Zealand hills. The use of words was to be important throughout his career.

By the late 1950s his text looks more like freehand writing – letters to the viewer. In the great *Elias* series [E13–19] the texts are based on the words of the crowd at the crucifixion, wondering if Elias will come to save Jesus. McCahon seems to echo their doubts and questions. Will Elias come to save him, ever, never?



19 *On Building Bridges* (triptych) 1952
oil on hardboard 1067 x 915mm (each panel)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1958

Landscapes from the South

Colin McCahon grew up in the South Island and lived there until he was thirty-four. Through most of the 1950s he was a painter of landscapes, but they are not picturesque views. McCahon was exploring the conventions of representation. The picture surface in modern painting was no longer regarded as a window opening onto the world, but as a substantial surface, like a wall. McCahon reduced hills to vertical planes and in *North Canterbury Landscape* 1951 [L11] a horizontal plane is tilted and faceted as if it were a hillside.

McCahon also imagined a viewer continually on the move as he had been on his long bicycle journeys from Dunedin to Nelson to work in orchards and tobacco fields.

Of *On Building Bridges* 1952 [L9] McCahon wrote:

"Back in Christchurch and I started work on a painting initially called *Paddocks for Sheep*. This was to be a large work based on some wonderful aerial photographs of North Canterbury where the paddocks with their safety give way to wilder hill country. I gave up, and sheep country became the North Canterbury I had known much earlier when the railway was going through and places like Parnassus, Conway and Clarence were familiar. We lost the sheep and gained a bridge."

Titirangi/Kauri

Colin McCahon came to Auckland with his family in 1953. They lived at French Bay in Titirangi on the Manukau Harbour. The subjects of these landscapes are beach, sea, sky, a strip of land and often little rectangles which must be boats. Blue areas can be sea or sky. Reflected light dances on the water as people wade out into the shallows to spear flounder. The kauri tree of the bush in the Waitakere Ranges is another repeated subject. McCahon later enlarged the small diamond shaped colour

patches which appear in these works into the basic motif for many paintings of the 1960s.

"1956 seems to be a blank. It could be the year I painted my boat and we all went sailing, landing on distant shores around the Manukau. It may be the year I spent drawing or just working so bloody hard at the gallery by day and teaching at night.

In 1957... I came to grips with the kauri and turned him with all his splendour into a symbol."



TL2. *Flounder Fishing, Night, French Bay* 1956-57
enamel on board 725 x 810mm
Miss A.M. Ryburn, Auckland

Journeys

Colin McCahon was interested in the movement of the viewer in front of a series of paintings. In his work he explored a variety of physical and symbolic journeys; these began from the early groups of connected views within a single frame. The first set of separate views intended as a series is *Towards Auckland* 1953 [J13–16].

"...the whole magnificent spread of Auckland seen from Titirangi Road on the endless journeys into town every morning. The November light for that first year was a miracle. It remains an obsession and still a miracle. After the south, the drenching rain and brilliant sun, the shattered clouds after thunder and the rainbows that looped over the city and harbour through the Auckland light produced a series of watercolours called *Towards Auckland*."

In 1958 after his return from the United

States McCahon painted the *Northland Panels* [J18]. These unstretched canvases are disconnected views, memories of a journey, glimpses of Northland as seen from a car or bicycle. Later he considered the flight of the shining cuckoo north to Cape Reinga; a walk with a friend along a misty, sea sprayed beach; Christ's walk to Calvary and the stations of the cross along the way. These fourteen stations, which culminate in Christ being laid in the tomb, supply the framework for later paintings using numbers as symbols.

Colin McCahon designed the sets for many theatrical productions in Christchurch and Auckland. He planned his exhibitions in a similar way, for specific spaces, making of them a kind of painted scenery within which the viewer walks.

Gates

The Gates began in 1961. Their large scale and simple geometric shapes emerge from the earlier landscape painting of the 1950s, but to the point where landscape forms, even horizons are unrecognisable. They appear to be 'abstract' paintings. But for McCahon they were identified with the notion of great obstructions, especially the fear of the atomic bomb, and the hope for a 'way through'. In 1962 these forms were combined in a series with texts chosen from Biblical prophecy, in protest at nuclear weapons.

In the waterfall paintings McCahon again formulates a simple image which has to function also as a symbol. The waterfalls suggest something like Water from the Rock, or Light penetrating Darkness.

"Waterfalls fell and raged and became as still silent falls of light for a long time. I look back with joy on taking a brush of white paint and curving through the darkness with a line of white."

A bursting of light between massive landforms is evident in the three works called *The days and nights in the wilderness...* 1971 [G17–19] which precede McCahon's *Necessary Protection* series. The landscape is Muriwai Beach Domain, with the geometric shapes of Motutara Island with its gannet colony and Otakamiro Point, in need of protection from quarrying.

"My paintings are all about the view from the top of the cliff at Ahipara and Muriwai."

For McCahon the motif is a landscape with light falling from heaven, pouring, like Grace onto the land below. A symbol of Salvation.

Numbers and Texts

These are perhaps McCahon's main answer to the problem of getting an accessible content into modernist painting. Sometimes they combine with other symbols; often numbers and texts stand alone. The function of the numbers is primarily to indicate serial progression through the work, in the face of the indeterminate way in which painted fields are normally viewed. They also overlap with the 'Journeys' in numbering from one to fourteen; the fourteen stations of the cross.

"The large numerals series... These took months to paint and developed very slowly. They work as a painting and as an environment. They are where we are in one way; and, in another way, if we could walk on from 10 where would we get to."

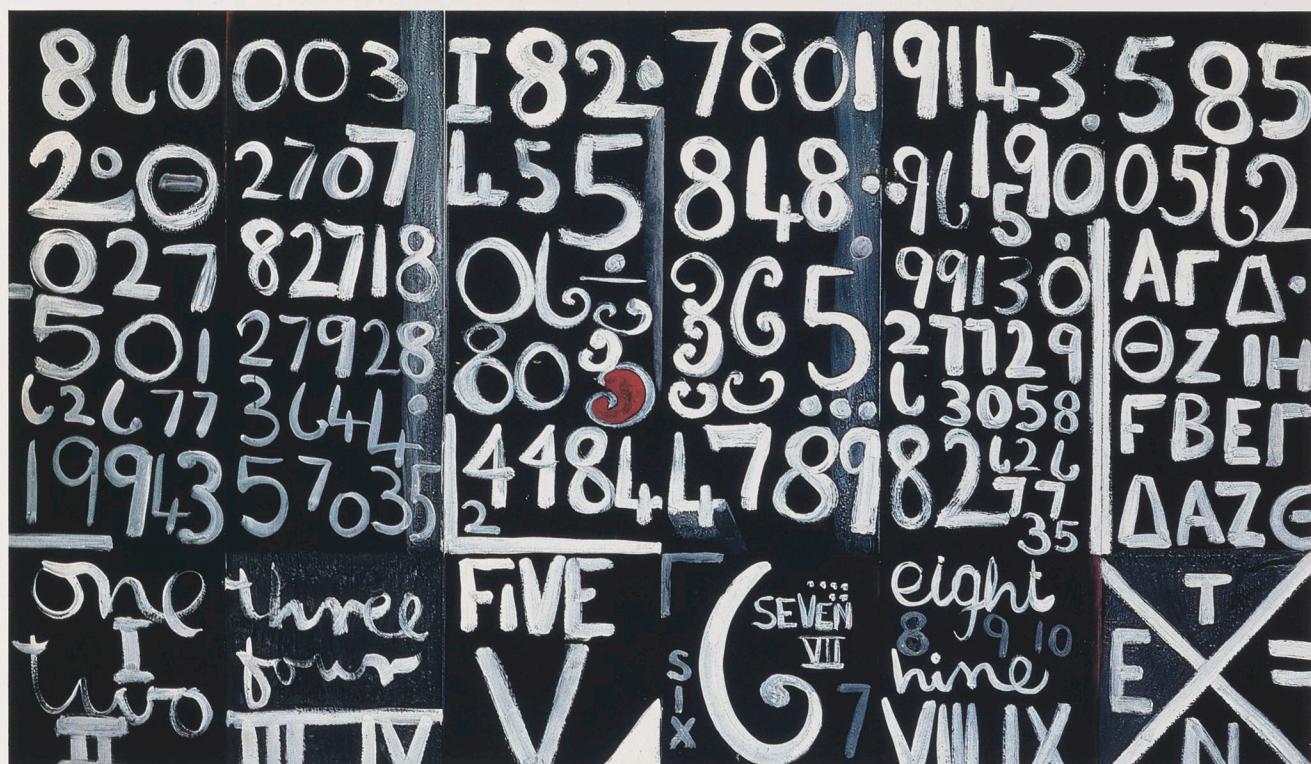
Closely related to the *Numerals* series is the painting *Io* 1965 [N13]. The 'T' and the 'O' are not only one and nothing, but together they are the unspoken Maori name for the Supreme Deity.

McCahon wrote of *The Lark's Song... (a poem by Matire Kereama)* 1969 [N5]:

"The words must be read for their sound. They are signs of the lark's song." He sets poetry to paint, as poetry is set to music, creating a song, a chant, a chorale.

N3 *Numbers* (sketch for University of Otago Library mural)
1966 enamel on board 595 x 1015mm
Hocken Library, Dunedin.

Presented by the artist to the University of Otago, 1966



sounds from
heaven.
**'I HAVE
GLORIFIED
IT, AND I WILL
GLORIFY IT
AGAIN.'**

The light
is among you
still, but not
for long. go
on your way
while you
have the light,
so that darkness
may not over-
take you. He
who journeys
in the dark
does not know
where he is
going.

The crowd standing
by said it was
thunder, while
others said, 'An
angel has spoken
to him.' Jesus
replied, 'This
voice spoke for
your sake,
not mine.'

*the light
is among you*

While you have
the light, trust
to the light,
that you may
become men of
light.'

THE WAY THE TRI
MURIWAI FEB. 70

Victory Over Death

Practical Religion: the Resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha 1969–70 [V1], and *Victory Over Death 2* 1970 [V3] are McCahon's greatest efforts towards a style for public statement in painting.

Practical Religion tells the Biblical story of the resurrection of Lazarus, set against the New Zealand landscape, as in earlier religious works. Mount Martha is near Nelson.

"After Lark's Song I got onto reading the *New English Bible* and re-reading my favourite passages. I rediscovered good old Lazarus. Now this is one of the most beautiful and puzzling stories in the New Testament – like the Elias story this one takes you through several levels of feeling and being. It hit me BANG! at where I was: questions and answers, faith so simple and beautiful and doubts still pushing to somewhere else. It really got me down with joy and pain. I loved painting it. To be honest it was a bit like drawing a Mickey Mouse cartoon. I grew to love the characters in the story and could see them

as very real people; I felt as they felt. This took a monumental time to paint and gallons of expensive paint. It is in one way a dismal failure and in another one of my best paintings yet. At least I had fun and discovered very much more about both Christ and Lazarus as well as the sisters. I became very involved with the thoughtful sister Martha. Lazarus himself remains a rather distant figure. Mary might be a bit annoying on occasions and Christ perhaps a little too over-certain at times – but right. I spent weeks painting my way over this story, more and more involved realising the great need for a new kind of painting to happen."

"At the same time as this last monster I was working on other related subjects. All of them were painted out at my Muriwai studio on the top of the cliff. The next (*Victory Over Death 2*) also belongs to the *Practical Religion* series – a simple I AM at first. But not so simple really as doubts do come in here too. *Let be, let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.*"

V3 *Victory Over Death 2* 1970 (detail)
oil on unstretched canvas 2130 x 6710mm
Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
Presented by the New Zealand Government, 1978

Biography

Colin John McCahon was born on 1st August 1919 at the home of his grandmother in Timaru. He was the son of Ethel and John McCahon of Dunedin.

He was educated in Dunedin, and attended Otago Boys High School until 1937 when he persuaded his father to allow him to enrol at King Edward Technical College Art School as a part time student. His teacher there was Robert N. Field. He spent winters in Dunedin and summers working in orchards in Nelson.

He began exhibiting paintings in 1939 and in 1940 was guest exhibitor with the Group Show, Christchurch.

In 1942 he married fellow painter Anne Hamblett and they went to live in Pangatotara, near Nelson. From 1944 to 1948 they lived in Mapua, Tahunui, and Nelson. McCahon worked in tobacco fields and orchards and as a builders labourer.

Early in 1948 Colin McCahon moved to Christchurch, and was followed by Anne and their children, William, Catherine and Victoria. Their last child, Matthew was born in 1949. McCahon was exhibiting paintings regularly and working as a gardener.



Colin McCahon in 1977
Photographed by Patricia Sarr

In 1951 McCahon travelled to Melbourne for six weeks and was briefly a pupil of Mary Cockburn-Mercer. McCahon designed sets for a number of stage productions, an interest which continued later in Auckland.

In May 1953 the family moved to Auckland and lived at French Bay in Titirangi. McCahon worked at the Auckland City Art Gallery, firstly as a cleaner, then temporary attendant; by 1956 he was Keeper of the Gallery and Deputy Director. He worked on many exhibitions of both contemporary and historical art.

In 1958 Colin and Anne McCahon visited the United States for four months to look at art museums.

McCahon was painting, exhibiting and teaching art classes at night, as well as designing stage sets for the *New Independent Theatre* productions of plays by New Zealand playwrights.

In August 1964 he left the Gallery to join the staff of the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, as lecturer in painting. He taught there until 1970 when, at the age of fifty-one, he was finally able to paint full-time.

In 1972 the Auckland City Art Gallery organised a large survey exhibition of McCahon's work which toured through New Zealand.

In March 1978 the New Zealand Government presented *Victory Over Death 2* to the Government and people of Australia.

Early in 1983 McCahon was invited to exhibit a selection of works at the Fifth Biennale of Sydney, 1984. This exhibition of his word and number paintings was called *I will need words* and it travelled also to the 1984 Edinburgh Festival.

By 1984 prolonged illness prevented McCahon from painting and in 1987 on the 27th May, Colin McCahon died in Auckland.

Exhibition dates:

Auckland City Art Gallery
National Art Gallery, Wellington
Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

11 November 1988 – 26 February 1989
6 April – 18 June 1989
6 July 1989 – 17 September 1989
2 October 1989 – 10 December 1989
January – February 1990

All quotes are from Colin McCahon in the catalogue of *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972. The exhibition catalogue is available from the Art Gallery Bookshop, Auckland City Art Gallery, P.O. Box 5449, Auckland.



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