

1988/89

COLIN
McCAHON
Gates and
Journeys

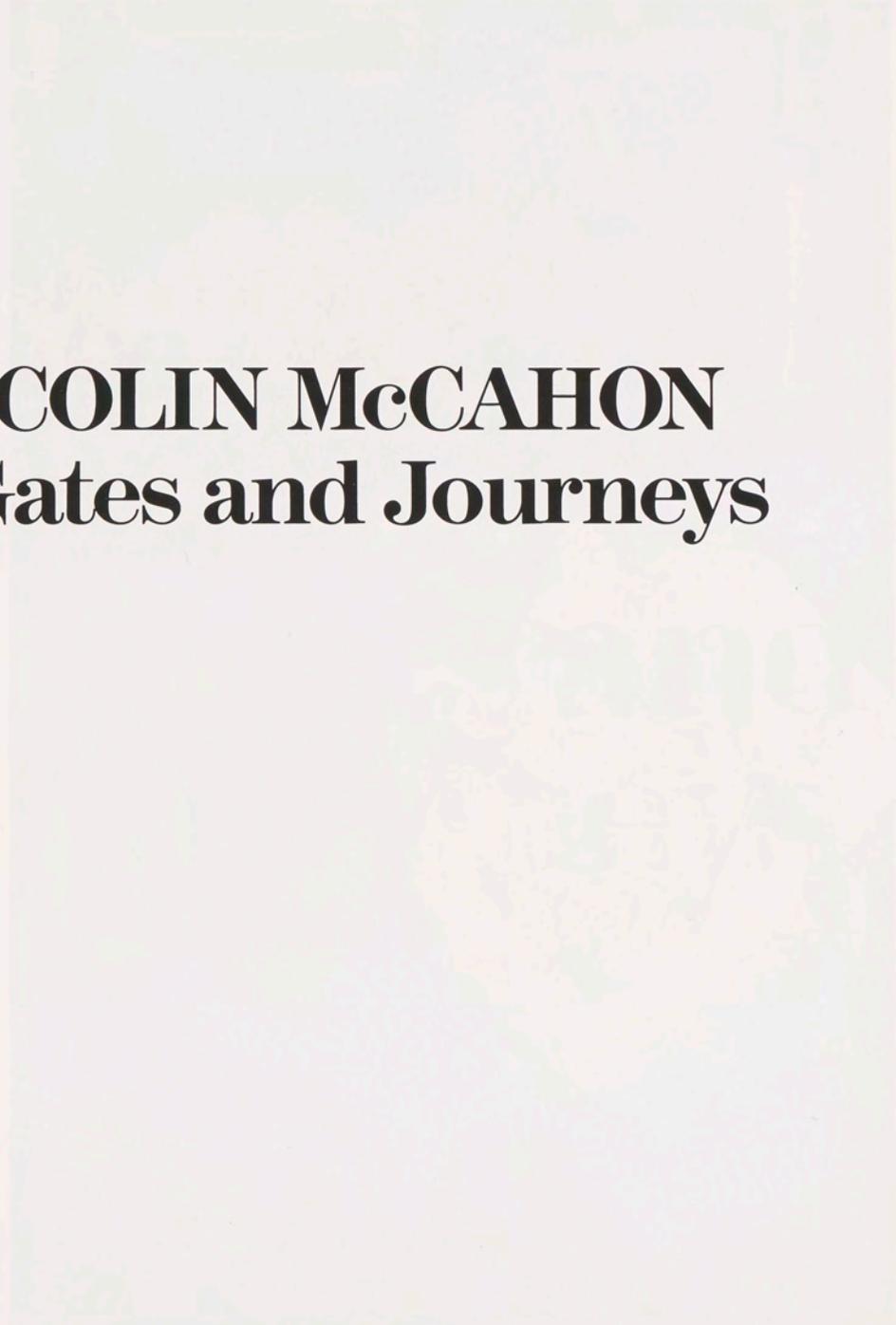
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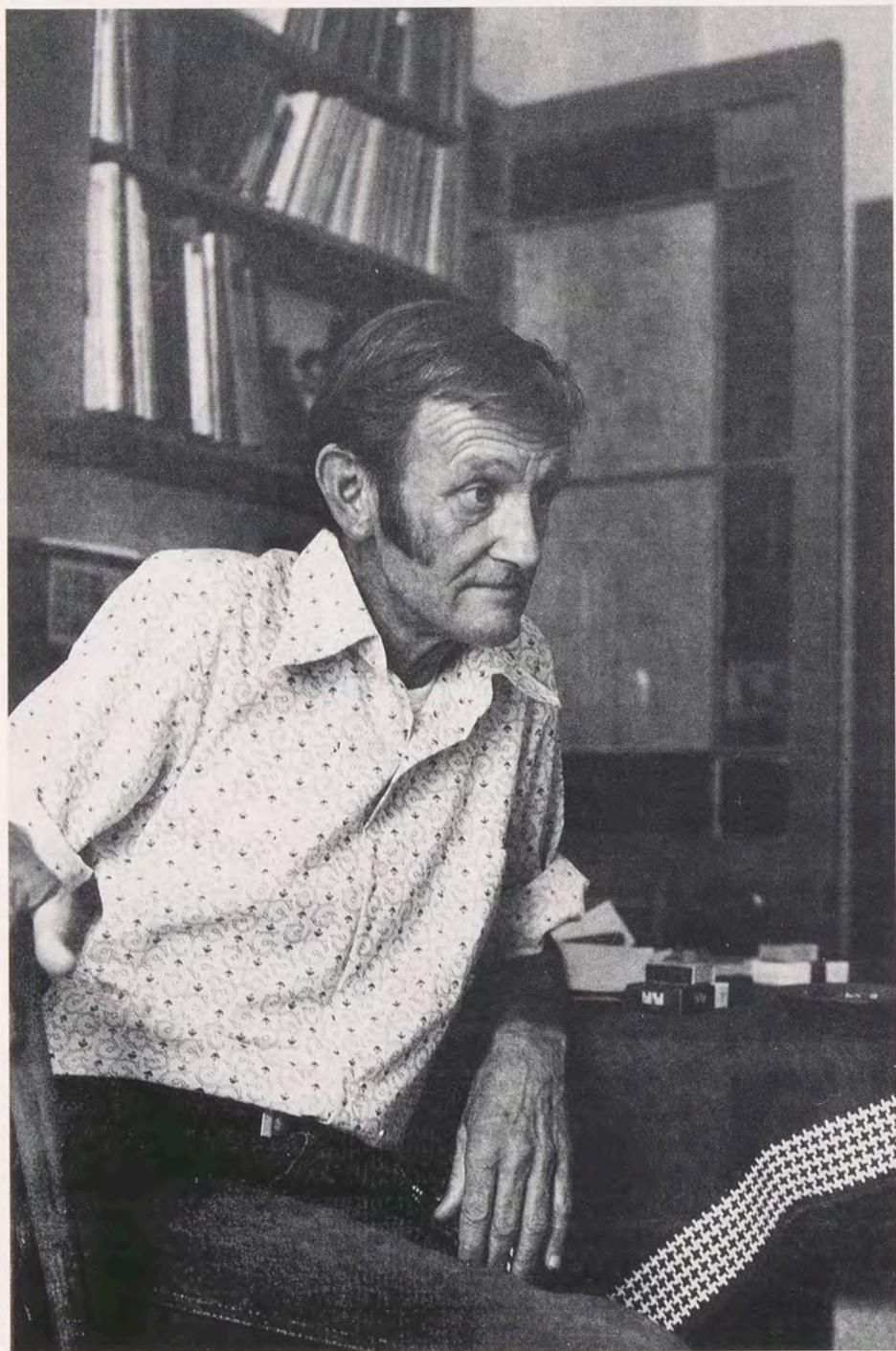
COLIN McCABON
Gates and Journeys

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COLIN McCAHON
Gates and Journeys



Photograph by Patricia Sarr

Colin McCahon (c1978)

**COLIN
McCAHON
Gates and
Journeys**

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

This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition
COLIN McCAGHON : Gates and Journeys.
Auckland City Art Gallery, 11 November 1988 to 26 February 1989;
National Art Gallery, Wellington; Dunedin Public Art Gallery;
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch;
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
Assisted by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand.

This exhibition is dedicated to Anne McCahon.

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New Zealand

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

In 1972 the Auckland City Art Gallery organised the first survey exhibition of Colin McCahon's art. Colin McCahon had a long association with the Gallery. He worked here from 1953 until 1964, much of that time as Keeper and Deputy Director and he was always extremely generous to the Gallery through gifts and loans of his works.

In 1972 Colin McCahon's reputation as New Zealand's greatest artist was unquestionable but he can now be seen as one of the major figures of late-twentieth century art.

McCahon's international reputation has been steadily growing over the last few years, especially since the exhibition *I will need words* which was shown at the Sydney Biennale and the Edinburgh Festival in 1984. In 1989, *The Image of Thinking in Visual Poetry* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, will include one of McCahon's paintings.

So, as the international visual arts community is developing an overview of McCahon, because of his death last year, we in New Zealand begin the process of coming to terms with the greatness and significance of his art. The exhibition *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, and this accompanying book, are part of that process.

In recognition of McCahon's stature it was decided that the exhibition would be the last of the Gallery's programme of centenary exhibitions. Retrospective in scope, to a certain extent, it is not so in structure. Rather, the exhibition assists, appropriately in a new way, our interpretation and understanding of the beautiful, moving, profound and often complex art of a great existentialist artist.

The exhibition has been organised by Alexa Johnston, the Gallery's Senior Curator of Contemporary New Zealand Art, working with a curatorial team of acknowledged experts on Colin McCahon and his art, Gordon Brown, Tony Green and Wystan Curnow, to whom we are greatly indebted.

It is a special honour for the Gallery and the exhibition's curators to be able to dedicate the exhibition and this catalogue to Anne McCahon, the artist's widow. The McCahon family have both lent to the exhibition and given invaluable help to the Gallery

during its preparation. We are most grateful to them.

We also thank the many public and private lenders and acknowledge their assistance; without their generosity the exhibition and tour could not have been achieved. Special acknowledgement must be made to the National Art Gallery, Wellington and the Australian National Gallery, Canberra for their loans.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand.

I thank the Art Gallery Board of Management for its support and encouragement and all those who have contributed to this major project.

Christopher Johnstone

Director

Introduction

Our intention in preparing this exhibition and its catalogue is to present and discuss some recurring themes in the work of Colin McCahon. The exhibition celebrates Colin McCahon's great achievements as a painter, but does not purport to be an exhaustive overview of all his work.

Inevitably, as a result of the thematic structure which we adopted and the constraints of space, we were unable to include a number of important paintings. However the seven sections of the exhibition include many of McCahon's major works and demonstrate the wide range of his concerns. We wished to 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.

A further aim was to reassemble a number of series of works which have not been seen together since they were first exhibited. Our catalogue essays address aspects of Colin McCahon's work of particular interest to us, and complement rather than echo the structure of the exhibition.

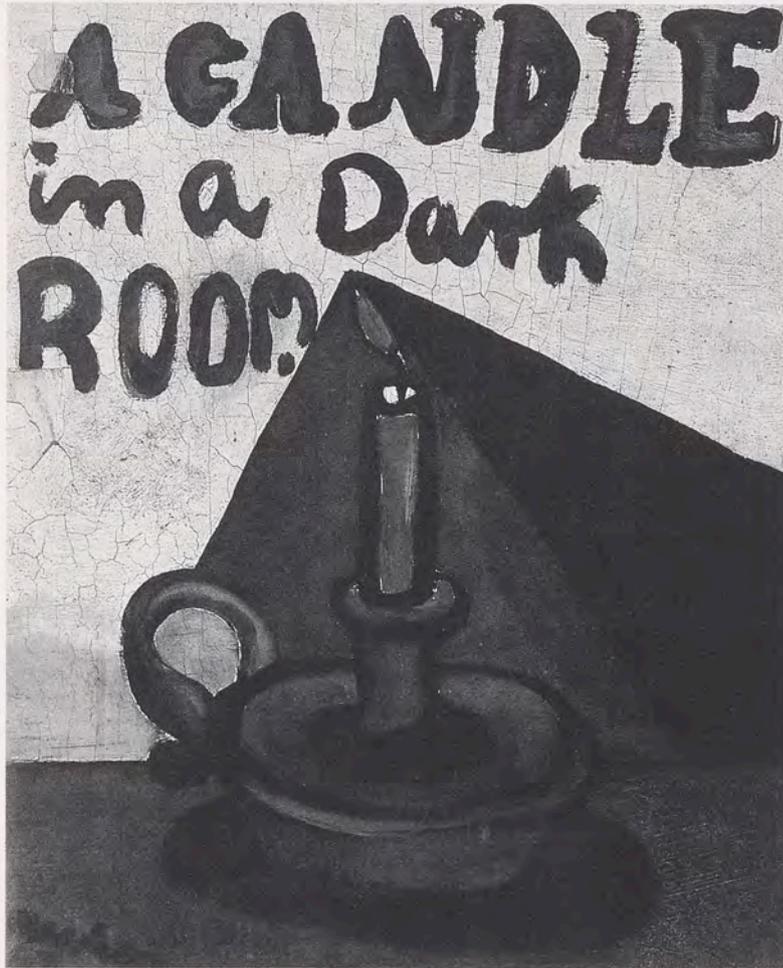
Our work on the exhibition began early in 1986, when the then Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, Dr T.L. Rodney Wilson, suggested that we prepare an exhibition of Colin McCahon's work to coincide both with the Gallery's centennial year in 1988, and the year of Colin McCahon's seventieth birthday, 1989. Sadly, Colin McCahon died in May 1987, and the exhibition is therefore now a memorial and a tribute to him.

This will not of course be the final word on Colin McCahon, but our hope is that the exhibition will provide stimulus for a new generation of McCahon viewers, and further insights for those who know his work well.

Alexa M. Johnston, for the curatorial group

The Autobiographical Factor

McCahon states: 'My painting is almost entirely autobiographical – it tells you where I am at any given point, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in.'¹



Colin McCahon
A Candle in a Dark Room 1943
oil on board 380 x 310mm
Colin McCahon Estate

There is a small oil painting signed and dated 'McCahon 43'. Occasioned by McCahon's first intimate meeting with James K. Baxter, it shows a domestic candleholder in which the candle is lit. Candle and holder are caught in a sombre triangular shadow which has sucked the glow even from the flickering flame. The images are Picassoesque. Occupying most of the brighter, upper third of the picture are the words, carefully lettered, *A CANDLE in a Dark ROOM*.

This work came 'out of the blue', as we say, when rationalisation for the exact existence of something escapes being entirely satisfactory. For in spite of its mundane symbolism, but by the equality of words and imagery, this painting captures an intuitive solution for a desired result. Yet it took time for McCahon to grasp the power words were able to bring to his paintings. The slow emergence of this potential occurred in a staggered, leap-frog manner as words straddled his use of conventional symbols. Finally, words, phrases, quoted texts and numerals shared a place with pictographic landscape symbols to become the dominating features of his art.

While it is possible to see the germ of all this in *A Candle in a Dark Room*, that conclusion arises from hindsight. In this sense the painting was not a prophecy. Instead, in 1943, the picture celebrated a significant event in McCahon's life.

In the Baxters' living room hung a picture I first saw in Christchurch at the 1952 Group Show. This was McCahon's painting *There is only one direction*. How significant this title is! And the semblance to Mary pondering the waywardness of a youthful Jesus – a Jesus whose insight saw that a mother's

feelings must not come between him and the single-minded purpose which now had been laid bare to him . . . Why! this afforded me a metaphor of McCahon's own determination.

McCahon was a quiet, undemonstrative person who, at times, could be generous to a fault. He would open up to those individuals whom he thought showed a genuine appreciation of his work or seemed willing to listen and understand from what he had to say.

As an artist McCahon remained true to a course of his own determining. His sense of purpose and direction was such that it allowed the world of his interests to flow through him. Events or situations which touched him, extended what he saw as valuable to life, allowed an astonishing range of visual stimuli, and the more his processes of thought merged with the manner of his painting, the less he permitted any diversion away from the world of his interests to alter the dedication of his perception. Yet, as is often the price for such determination, his strength of will had an undercurrent of perverseness.

In 1945, when McCahon was painting *Spring, Ruby Bay* [L15], his young son, wanting to help daddy, picked up a paint-loaded brush and across the horizon of sea and sky added his contribution. Anyone familiar with the use of oil paints knows that this 'explosion' of unwanted paint could easily have been rectified at the time. McCahon chose not to do so. Title and date were duly inscribed, but no signature. The painting, McCahon maintained, was unfinished. By implication, this was his son's fault.

In his early religious paintings McCahon aimed for ease of understanding. Their reception by the public, however, was generally hostile. McCahon came to see himself as a man to whom society had no wish to listen. People were unwilling to contemplate the truths his pictures contained; they found them visually unbearable. Most of the criticism was asinine, bigoted, and unworthy of serious consideration. Although this egalitarian sort of response remained a constant irritation throughout McCahon's career, the adverse reaction to his work generated during the 1940s and '50s hurt him far more deeply than at any other time. Doubt grew from McCahon's disappointment, but the doubt was tinged with an inborn, quiet anger.



Colin McCahon

There is only one direction 1952

oil on board 702 x 564mm

Mrs Jacquie and John Baxter, Wellington

If McCahon never publicly concocted fantasies about the 'misunderstood artist', the prejudicial and vindictive battering he took was something from which it was hard to purify himself. Not being immune to human weakness, he inwardly dwelt on the abuse. But the habit of mulling over such abuse was often worse than the abuse itself. The combination of real and imagined grievances also made McCahon a victim of himself. His increasing consumption of cheap, sweet wine provided an illusion of escape, but such temporary oblivion carried no lasting solution; it only brought on the disease of alcoholism. Like many who feel persecuted, McCahon wanted to deny his persecutors their right to individual existence, yet, in an abstruse way, he inwardly transferred this antagonism to family, friends and sympathetic acquaintances so that they unintentionally could become as much victims as confidants. Normally this antagonism lay dormant, but there were unspecified taboos which had to be respected; for example, you never asked McCahon to see his latest paintings, you waited for an invitation to do so. Once such a restriction was violated, the resulting tension could disrupt a friendship or an acquaintance could be silently ended.

McCahon's unaccommodating sense of having been wronged fed a scepticism that in turn held in check his optimism. When it came to scrutinising people he knew intimately, the distancing he preferred in his casual dealings had the effect of projecting onto individuals he knew, the aura of his own pessimism. Such is the case in his *Portrait of Victoria* (his daughter), 1957, and the *Portrait of Gordon H. Brown*, 1968, where the character portrayed enters the shadow of human frailty. This emphasis may speak of his personal concern for the sitter, but it is a product also of his inclination to doubt. Slowly doubt of this sort cut his own family off from any direct involvement in the working of his art. His scepticism questioned their depth of understanding concerning his paintings. The roles of husband, father and of artist came into conflict, but it was predominately a low-keyed, yet hurtful, one-sided clash of emotional loyalties.

McCahon's perverseness, when coupled with his sense of vulnerability, produced an emotional undertow which, while not immediately obvious on the surface, redirected elements present in his work in a way which he hoped would confound his persecutors and afford him some necessary protection. In a

deliberate move, reinforced by the shift in emphasis that took place in his art during the 1950s, he accepted as necessary the need to restrict his audience.

The decade began with *The Marys at the Tomb*; ends with the *Elias* series [E13-19]. Having abandoned the possibility of open communication, McCahon more firmly allied himself with modernism. No longer was he worried about the obtuseness of the modernist aesthetic. Increasingly he employed its grammar, not only for its discipline as art, but also for its alleged difficulties as an idiom. In this way he could refute the blindness of the common audience who so frequently maligned him. But being too good an artist to allow such a perverse grudge to dominate, in that slow sifting of resources that was part of his creative process, and by the balancing of losses and gains, even this apparent weakness added to his toughness as a painter. Significantly the 1950s end with a series of paintings which, though fully utilising the visual resources of modernism, employed a form of Christian iconography most dedicated modernists would have viewed nervously; the religious crux of the *Elias* series seemed an enigma in modernist terms.

This viewpoint could render the *Elias* series symptomatic of either a romantic longing for moral certainty or as a manifestation of eccentricity. Yet both views deny the series its place in the general context of McCahon's work. In this respect, what the *Northland Panels* are to McCahon's landscapes, so is the *Elias* series pivotal to his 'word' paintings.

During the period separating the 1948-1952 religious works from the *Elias* series of 1959, McCahon burrowed deeper into the subjective resources of his art. Although most apparent in those paintings of an obvious religious disposition, such probing was not confined to them. This underground activity was even more far-reaching than the marked compression then occurring in McCahon's use of landscape forms. Both processes accommodate each other, although the gap between them was not bridged entirely till later when the shorthand character of the landscape forms acquired their pictographic nature. The shift in McCahon's



Colin McCahon
The Marys at the Tomb 1950
oil on canvas on board 806 x 1054mm
Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented by the Friends of the Auckland City
Art Gallery, 1960



Colin McCahon
The Crucifixion According to St Mark 1947
 oil on canvas on board 800 x 1095mm
 Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch. Mr R. O'Reilly Bequest, 1982

position, if emphasised through the words used in the *Elias* series, was not wholly manifest in their use as such, for the 'word' paintings of 1954–5, particularly *Let us possess one world* [E10], had already mapped out the direction of this transition.

In the early religious paintings, Biblical events occur as if they were happening now in this land, whereas in the *Elias* paintings the images that relate to the external world are few. Those images which do exist, occupy a space more of the spirit than of the flesh and seem concerned with establishing a mood that can be both sombre and sonorous. Among the more poignant of these finite images are shapes which echo the Cross and the Tomb. The world's uncertainty is turned inward. The *Elias* paintings grapple with a human situation that is fluid: it invites intense personal reflection.

The *Elias* series has as its textual source the closely related passages found in both the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where the events leading to Jesus's death on the Cross are described. At the core of the paintings, McCahon quotes the utterances recorded in Matthew's Gospel. The words arise from a misunderstanding of what Jesus had cried out as he hung on the cross: 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' Some bystanders, misinterpreting the words, think that 'This man calls for Elias.' The reference to Elias is caught and taken up by the assembled mob. They say, 'Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.' For some, the words spoken scoff at Jesus. For some the words carry anticipation and hope. For others the statement conveys a questioning doubt. The puzzle remains: in what way are the words to be read?

When reading the Gospels McCahon came to like the enigmatic nature of many of the debates. Answers were held in suspension. Solutions lay between the lines. He had already employed the ambiguity of the enigmatic statement before the *Elias* series, but with these paintings, the double-edged thrust of such ambiguities cut deeper. In his painting of *The Crucifixion According to St Mark*, 1947, McCahon had shown himself as an impartial observer (on the extreme right of the picture) barely intruding into the scene. With the *Elias* paintings he imagines himself as one of the mob. As he says, 'I became interested in men's doubts' and 'these same doubts assail me too.' Rather than the cries quoted earlier from Mark's Gospel, the shadow of uncertainty that shades Matthew's reporting was more to McCahon's purpose. *Elias: why cannot he save Himself.*

Although McCahon rarely had doubts about his vocation as an artist, he did have occasions when he seriously questioned what he was doing. Take his comment on *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, 1966. 'They are all concerned with Man's fall and his resurrection. They also relate to the *Elias* subject but treat it in a different and new way. The black crows of the Van Gogh cornfield hover over this landscape too, but have failed to destroy it – yet. I am saying what I want to say in these paintings but I am still too abstract.'

In a similar way, as a man who avoided caring for his physical wellbeing and who possessed an inordinate curiosity concerning death, this fascination with the puzzling circumstances surrounding life and death situations assumed an exalted place in his lifelong work. McCahon relates how, in 1969, he 're-discovered 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.' But McCahon is also contemplating his own stand, in a very personal sense, as a human being: 'I believe, but don't believe. *Let be, let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.*'

In 1973, thirty years after McCahon had painted *A Candle in a Dark Room*, he produced another painting which again has the artist reaching out to James K. Baxter. Some understanding of what had become an uneasy relationship provides an insight into the motive for the work. The painting, over twelve metres long, is simply titled *Walk* [J29]. As is frequently encountered in the work of some modernist artists, the compression of what is desired to be conveyed requires a close acquaintance with the artist's past production if the viewer is to pick up on the signals latent in certain recurrent motifs. Such play saturates McCahon's work. Difficulties also arise where at least part of a work's meaning lies outside its apparent context. This occurs when the clue is triggered by the artist in a statement external to the work as a physical entity.

Along the bottom edge of *Walk*, at irregular intervals, appear the numbers I to XIV. The numerical sequence relates to the fourteen Stations of the Cross. McCahon first involved himself with the theme in 1966 as the result of a commission for a convent chapel. Afterwards, as he began to explore the Stations of the Cross, his interpretation, though retaining the narrative connotation of Christ's journey to Calvary, gradually grew into a set of variations on the human journey as it related to his own experience. It is in this manner that the theme reappears in *Walk*.

On 22 October 1972 Baxter died while on a visit to Auckland. From March to May 1973 McCahon designed stage sets for a James K. Baxter Festival of Four Plays staged in Wellington. Among the paintings McCahon worked on till August was a series called *Beach Walk* of which *Walk* (C in the series) is the most substantial. In this painting McCahon imagines he is walking the long length of Muriwai Beach in the company of Baxter. As they walk, the tenor of Baxter's life is reviewed. Events in his life became stages that parallel the Stations of the Cross. Each stage has its affinity in the ebb or flow of the tide, the calm or wildness of the surf, the mood of the weather with its sky either clear, overcast or stormy. Light and shade infiltrated the poet's life. Between stages one and two, Baxter accepts his Cross. At the sixth stage the white-out mist is likened to Veronica's veil. As the twelfth stage is approached, death makes its claim. In the final panel, dotted lines indicate the departing spirit setting off, in Maori fashion, along the west-coast spirit path towards the place of final farewell at Te Reinga.

The painting was first shown at Peter McLeavey's gallery during September. Portion of a letter written by McCahon to McLeavey was printed on the invitation to the exhibition. The extract reads: 'People should know perhaps that I don't regard these canvases as "paintings", they shouldn't be enclosed in frames, they are just bits of a place I love and painted in memory of a friend who now – in spirit – has walked this same beach. The intention is not realist but an abstraction of the final walk up the beach. The Christian "walk" and the Maori "walk" have a lot in common.'

In a personal (if slightly sentimental) sense, *Walk* became the reconciliation of old friends. Some eight years earlier, during a discussion with some dissatisfied students from the Elam School of Art, Baxter had latched on to some adverse comments about McCahon's manner of teaching, but the enthusiasm most students

felt for McCahon was disregarded. Baxter elaborated upon this accusation by lumping McCahon in with a generalised condemnation of the university education system. McCahon was saddened that an old friend should so malign him.² Working on the set designs for the Baxter plays in 1973 had the effect of loosening the wedge that had been driven between them. With *Walk* the wound was ostensibly healed.

With reconciliation, the imagined walk along Muriwai Beach became one in which McCahon accompanied a kindred spirit. In describing this so, recognition needs to be given to a healing agency that had much to do with the processes of art. Had Baxter remained alive, the rift between the two men may not have begun to heal – at least, not to the same extent – as McCahon studied the implications of Baxter's plays. Other than in some early works, McCahon hardly ever exploited the events in his life by way of an immediate response. Such events required a period of gestation before they were allowed to emerge in a way transformed by the alchemy of art. What was important for McCahon was the distillation time brought to recollection and how remembered events were compressed through reflection.

'We went home to the bush of Titirangi,' he wrote, recalling the day he and Anne arrived home from their travels in the United States. 'It was cold and dripping and shut in – and I had seen deserts and tumbleweed in fences and the Salt Lake Flats, and the Faulkner country with magnolias in bloom, cities – taller by far than kauri trees. My lovely kauris became too much for me. I fled north in memory and painted the *Northland Panels*. . . I was just bursting for the wide open spaces.'

By such a criss-crossing of memories, the processes of association become crucial. That process is a vital matrix in the formation of McCahon's art. Anything, on reflection, that was capable of being remoulded, transformed, transmuted or embedded in the tracery of art, if it appealed to McCahon's vision, it was usable. Indeed, McCahon was a scavenger for anything that fell to his single-minded vision. Among this accumulation of visual, literary and verbal images were those of the sort one might expect from numerous artists, except these sources stretched across an exceptionally wide range of interests, from the gold used by Byzantine craftsmen to a road as painted by Richard Diebenkorn



Colin McCahon
The Fourteen Stations of the Cross 1966 (panels 12, 13 & 14)
 acrylic on paper 750 x 555mm (each panel)
 Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented by the artist, 1981

and ideas gleaned from other contemporaries of the avant-garde. But equally important were those images and sources (an approximate word only) gathered from the most mundane of things – objects and happenings encountered in the routine of daily living – road signs, notice-boards, the patterned numbers on a computer or till print-out, a scrap of paper scrawled with several games of noughts and crosses, the speech-balloon image on a Rinso soap-packet, the shorthand graphics of the comic book (significant in the formulation of McCahon's pictographics³), the aural stimulus of popular songs such as 'Now is the Hour', 'I Never Promised You a Rosegarden' and the Beatles' number which became 'Buttercup Fields for Ever', or a young child's fear that approaching thunder clouds carried the danger of 'rocks in the sky'. Yet, in the way McCahon exploits the alchemy of art, such sources are rarely traceable or a reference becomes discernable only if this serves McCahon's purpose.

What has been gathered in and transformed may be used once or, in various guises, repeatedly used. As is common with variations, the original theme provides the key to each new version; the cipher that unlocks the preoccupations of a lifetime. The more paintings McCahon produced, the more one series overlapped others, or an open series was extended. During this process themes and associations became compressed in meaning, acquired simpler forms and, in doing so, gained subtler overtones and deeper significance.

The theme of travelling, or of looking back upon a journey, was repeatedly used by McCahon in one form or another. An autobiographical context will exist, but while clues may be present, hardly ever is this context directly stated. *Walk* provides such an example of the artist using events in his life in this way. External images associated by the artist with these events reflect their driving, inner reality. For the viewer, however, the points of reference are linked with earlier paintings which provide thematic conditioning, though the autobiographical core may be just as difficult to solve in these paintings (and just as indecisive) as it is in *Walk*. The obvious antecedents are *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*, 1950 [J26], the first painting to state the journey theme in its widest sense; the *Northland Panels*, 1958 [J18], *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, 1966, with its traditional 'stations' captions; the three canvases, *The days and nights in the*

wilderness, 1971 [G17-19], the paintings which are precursors of the extended and varied *Necessary Protection* series that includes the *Beach Walk* paintings and the loosely compiled *Jet Out From Muriwai* series. In its turn *Walk* acts as a direction finder for later works such as *The Shining Cuckoo*, 1974 [J21], and the *Teaching Aids* of 1975 [N14]. In each instance the formal arrangement of the painting, its use of multifarious landscape situations, similarities in symbolic content or of mood can be registered as an aid for interpretation. Yet how relevant is the direct autobiographical input?

Early in the 1940s McCahon travelled to and from the Nelson-Motueka region for the fruit-picking or tobacco-harvesting season. On these trips he passed through parts of Canterbury and Nelson. Then he lived at various locations in the Nelson district. Although the movement around the area supplies the autobiographical background to *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*, as in the majority of McCahon's paintings, this fact remains marginal when it comes to reading the painting. Often, as in this case, a painting's title can indicate a way through. When this particular work was painted, McCahon had yet to complete his 'early' religious works. Therefore, the 'six days' of the title carry an implication similar to the six days of the Biblical creation. In a concrete way, the painting sums up for McCahon the genesis of what he had come to regard as the basic landforms for this region of the South Island.

Changes in circumstance and outlook notwithstanding, similar programmes underscore the series, *Towards Auckland*, 1953-4, [J13-16], the *Northland Panels*, 1958 [J18], and other works contributing to this theme. Each time McCahon looked back upon such a journey, the actual physical event tended to recede both in time and importance. With each new series the imagery employed broadened its focus as it dissolved into pictographic minimalism. One must delve behind the broad focus of these simple, yet enriched images, if the particular nature of McCahon's autobiographical input is to be breached. This entails looking beyond an actual event to the situation it represents.

When reading McCahon's statement concerning the autobiographical nature of his art, his own qualifications are important, for the emphasis falls on the phrases 'where I am at' and 'the direction I am pointing in'. As much as the events in McCahon's life may act as a trigger, it is only through the process of reflection that the energy is released.

Implied circumstance is central to McCahon's work. A painting states a situation, indicates a direction or sense of transition, of moving from one place to another. The titles McCahon supplies to many of his works have only to be considered to see how this fact is borne out.

Consider also this: for a man who insisted that his life story was of little consequence to the viewer when faced with his art, to then suggest that his paintings are 'almost entirely autobiographical', as if somehow the biographical factor had special importance, does sound like a contradiction. As with many generalisations, in spite of McCahon's riders concerning location, situation and the direction he is pointing in his paintings, his statement cannot be read entirely at its face value. In common with many of the texts McCahon incorporated into his works, its implications invite a similar enigmatic reading. It is equally true, equally false. If anything, it can confuse issues of motivation and interpretation.

Applied unadorned, McCahon's statement of autobiographical intent does suggest the testing of the viewer's ability to read correctly the implied circumstantial structure of specific paintings as this relates to the general philosophical approach adopted in his work. As individuals who quizzed McCahon on the meaning of a particular painting would discover, he usually threw the questions back at them, forcing them to imagine for themselves the human situation suggested by the painting so that they could work out a meaning that had relevance for themselves. While McCahon drew upon personal experience, the issue was not the personal details of a situation as such, but the projection of that situation into a generalised context applicable to humanity. Any autobiographical input simply established the initial groundwork, the situation and its resulting circumstances, after which a transformation occurred, ruled by the conditions of art.

McCahon's paintings, however, do work at different levels. On rare occasions, as in *Tui Carr celebrates Muriwai Beach* [G13], specific events in McCahon's life are given open access because McCahon allows it. More often such autobiographical events enter obliquely, as in *A Painting for Uncle Frank*, 1980 [N4]. The

motivation from the past is here deliberately masked, even if the circumstances remain open for scrutiny.

Usually McCahon wanted to avoid such levels of biographical scrutiny. He was aware that aspects of his work could be conditioned by subliminal elements of the sort that best remain hidden. Often he expressed the fear that the viewer who too vigorously sought to link autobiographical facts to the meaning of his paintings would end up in so dulling the issues raised in specific works that the crux of what he was saying would be missed.

As 1970 came to a close McCahon's life altered course. He abandoned his job at the School of Fine Arts and accepted the risks of the life of a freelance painter. His sense of release showed in the acrylic watercolours he painted of sky, sea and land around Muriwai and Kaipara Harbour. His eye transformed the atmospheric glow of sunsets into simple Turneresque mysteries. 'All this colour & fun', he explained to Maureen Hitchings,⁴ 'is a direct result of leaving the school.'

While these skylines still blazed, McCahon had begun the first sequences in his *Necessary Protection* series. Soon the elementary symbolism began to accommodate images suggestive of situations born of their own existential predicament; situations that carried on in other series beyond the *Necessary Protection* paintings. Crucial to many of the sub-series was the fundamental situation derived from the 'necessary protection' landscape associated with Motutara Island, Muriwai Beach Domain, but the personal connotation of the *Jump* series also underscored other series like *Scared* and *Teaching Aids*. The barriers of protection which individuals set up to safeguard life's sanctity eventually become barriers that must be overcome in the cause of life, if life is to be fully lived.

Major to McCahon's final works of 1978 to 1982 are paintings which have as their dominant ingredient Biblical texts taken principally from *A Letter to Hebrews* and from *Ecclesiastes*. These paintings concentrate on questions of faith and belief, and implicate doubt and death – questions previously raised in the Lazarus paintings of 1969–70 – as well as the futility of human effort.

It seems reasonable to view the late paintings as advice to the imprudent and unwary. Yet, if their autobiographical compulsion is uncovered, such practical advice surrenders to a less readily observed negativism. Progressively throughout the 1970s, when the time came, for his own survival, to surmount the barriers previously erected for his own necessary protection, he avoided making decisions.

At the same time, that intense faith in his ability to overcome the difficulties facing him as a committed artist began to turn back on itself. The dream of affirmation contained in his early vision of a Promised Land lost its assertiveness. Although appearing distantly in the 1979 triptych, *A Song for Rua, Prophet: Dreaming of Moses*, the vision is associated with a largely defeated cause. Then, in *The Flight from Egypt* [J25], the concluding panel casts doubt on the journey's final destination with the query: 'is this the promised land - '. Likewise, the apt analogies McCahon had been able to extract from his beloved Muriwai became increasingly difficult to bear as its beauty slowly became tinged with shadows suggestive of death.

And what of the cause? If there is an adequate reply, it is similar to, and indeed is an extension of, the circumstances that occurred during the 1950s, as examined earlier in this essay, and which conditioned the *Elias* series.

By 1970 McCahon had begun to attract the sort of recognition that had previously eluded him. More and more New Zealanders found they could respond to his work. McCahon, however, could not cope with this enthusiasm. In earlier days he may have hungered for some measure of notoriety, but to see himself elevated, as though he were akin to a hero, scared him. After years of personifying himself as a martyr to the cause of his art, the only solution he could envisage was one of retreat.

Self-doubt and the insulation that accompanied his personal retreat may have protected him against an old scoffing public – revived with the presentation to Australia of *Victory Over Death 2* [V3] – but eventually it led him to brush aside those people who in the intervening years had come to appreciate those values which allowed access to his work. Because such people had once questioned the worth of his paintings, any later change of heart was seen by McCahon as a cause for suspicion.⁵

The enigmatic structure used by McCahon as his mode of

communication, and the intense self-questioning central to the *Elias* series, which reappears in various guises through the Biblical texts he employed in his late paintings, do carry connotations relevant to a late phase of modernism. The parallel, however, is more clearly represented in the writings of the 'confessional' poets, especially in promoting the proposition of their self-annihilation through the actions of others.

During 1969 McCahon read and endorsed Antonin Artaud's essay, 'Van Gogh: the man suicided by society'.⁶

Gordon H. Brown

Most of this essay was written prior to Colin McCahon's death. Before it took its final form, however, I discussed several aspects of its content with William McCahon. The suggestions he offered allowed me to further clarify what I had originally written about his father.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages by McCahon are from the Auckland City Art Gallery catalogue, *Colin McCahon: a survey exhibition*, 1972.
2. Relations between Baxter and McCahon had earlier been strained when Baxter had asked McCahon for money, but receiving less than expected, he had argued that more could have been given as McCahon was then on a university lecturer's salary.
3. McCahon's reference in the 1972 *Survey* catalogue to his large Lazarus painting being 'a bit like drawing a Mickey Mouse cartoon' (p. 36), has more to it than it might at first seem. Although I saw McCahon studying American comic-books, his son, William, has told me of a 'Scrooge McDuck' comic his father discussed with him in terms of its pictorial and graphic design.
4. Maureen Hitchings managed Dawson's dealer gallery in Dunedin where some of these paintings by McCahon were shown.
5. As part of a September 1972 letter to the writer, McCahon wrote: 'I hate being loved by my previous tormentors, I just can't accept this very new & very dangerous situation.'
6. The essay on van Gogh, which McCahon insisted I read, appeared in *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, edited by Jack Hirschman. (2nd ed. rev.) San Francisco, City Light Books, 1965.

McCahon and the Modern

Just looking at McCahon's painting from the 1940s to the end of the 1970s, the modernism is obvious, though not easy to pin down. It seems familiar. At least three well known modernist styles are there: early on, his religious pictures are close to Georges Rouault's neo-Christian art; in the 1950s the painting encounters first Cubism, then Abstract Expressionism, both of which leave a permanent mark. By the end of the 1960s the work turns even further away from traditional representation towards a painting of signs and symbols. And looking back to the beginning again, it seems that this was what it had always aimed at. Even when it is still figurative and representational in the 1940s, it tends always to reduce figures and landscape to elementary painted signs.

McCahon's modernism is not a search for new forms as such. The insistence on prophetic message, on revelation of a truth, overrides formal invention for its own sake. There is no reaching out for fashionable novelties of style: rather, McCahon aims at a very public kind of statement, one which entails continual efforts to find simple and direct ways of communication.

McCahon's project of the revelation of a truth about New Zealand as a land to live in, involves him in difficult ways of seeing and difficult ways of painting. These he adopts from modernist painting, not by reproducing the inventions of others, but in a series of transformations to a particular and local purpose. That is why his painting looks strange as well as familiar. His project is not like that of the Cubists, who were looking for a new realism: a phenomenological probing that takes into account the continually shifting perception of the world. Neither is it like that of the Abstract Expressionists, seeking to eliminate the literary and the anecdotal from their painting, as in Barnett Newman's words: 'We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, and what have you . . .'.¹ McCahon is intent on trying to revivify traditional religious symbols throughout his work. But, nevertheless, if the landscape was to be truly seen, Cubist analysis could not be avoided, and McCahon involved himself with it thoroughly in the 1950s. Likewise, if the artist's existence in time is a major problem for the Abstract

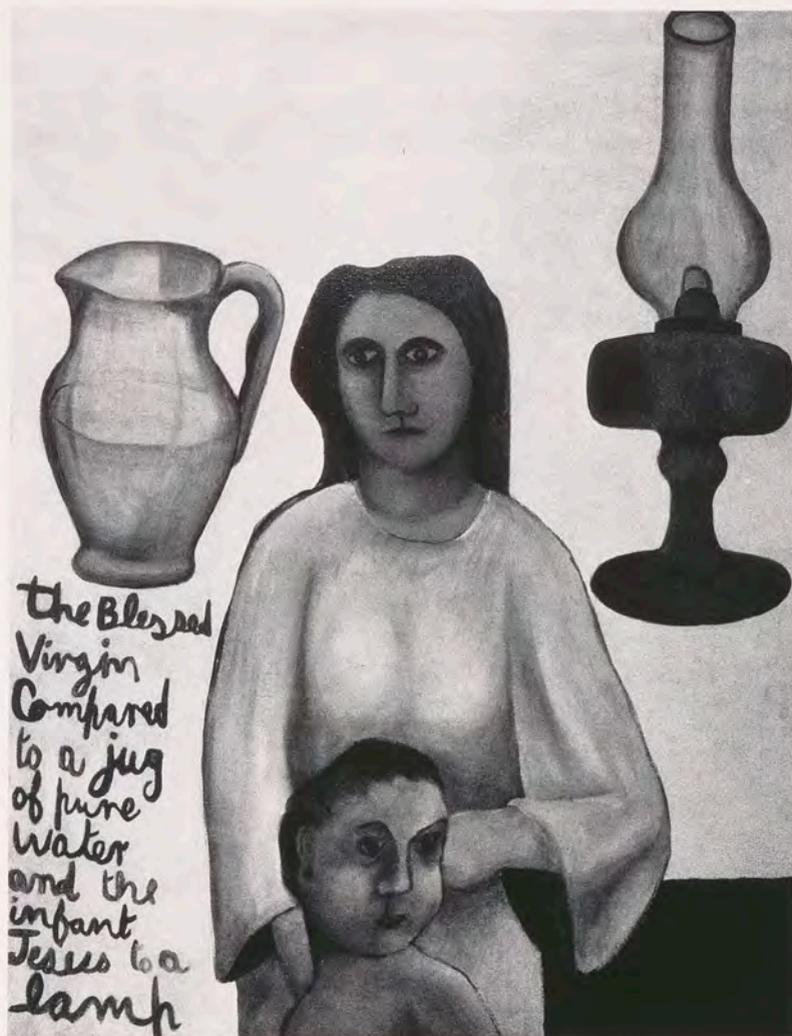
Expressionists, it is also for McCahon. The parallel between his work and theirs is most obvious in the late 1950s and early 1960s, not only in the gestural surface of the painting, but also in the engagement with time – in McCahon's painting an engagement with series and long pictures to be walked past.

McCahon's early religious pictures could almost have come out of post-war Britain. There, as in most of Europe, the mainstream was searching for an optimistic and sustaining 'humanism', based, as often as not, on Christianity, as in the writings of Gill or Maritain or Coomaraswamy. The artist is seen as a humble craftsman, sunk in the workings of tradition. This view restrains the onslaught of modernism, by holding to traditional representation and a conservative classicism of form. It idealises the mediaeval and yearns for the time before the industrial revolution. It forgets the marginal position of art in the twentieth century, cut off from sustaining religious community, and it forgoes a modernism based on technological change.

The Studio, widely read by artists in New Zealand, represents a moderate position. There were illustrated articles on Georges Rouault and Edvard Munch, and on early ikons and mosaics, and frequent illustrations of paintings by Stanley Spencer. It editorialised on the benefits of a revived affiliation between art and the church. Less moderate in this time was the painting of Graham Sutherland, who depicted suffering Christ, and far from moderate were the highly charged paintings of Francis Bacon, but these were beyond the range of *The Studio*. The great old master image for the period was the suffering Christ of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

McCahon is far from tame in his icons. The thick black *cloisonné* line comes from Rouault. Some of the seeming naïvety looks not unlike Spencer's early *John Donne Arriving in Heaven*. But Spencer's sharp, clear draughtsmanship runs counter to McCahon's broad crudity of style which is closer to Munch. McCahon, like Spencer and the early Flemish painters, puts his religious figures, some of them portraits, into local landscape.

McCahon's special interest in an apparent roughness and



Colin McCahon
The Virgin and Child Compared . . . 1948
 oil on canvas on board 1052 x 840mm
 Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch Bequest, 1973

naïvety of style, an uncorrected broad painted outline and simple colourful in-filling, opposed European sophistication and stylishness with a home-grown originality. The models are the wilder and expressionist styles of European art. Michelangelo, Titian and Bellini are models for a kind of sublimity, but this does not influence McCahon's draughtsmanship or colouring. His *Entombment* paintings [E3] are awkward pastiches of Titian's picture in the Prado, not admiring copies.

It cannot have been the subjects that confused gallery-goers in Christchurch and Dunedin in 1948, or the people visiting the libraries in Wellington or Lower Hutt. More than that, it must have been the crudity of the style of painting that McCahon affected in 1947-8, his thick black lines and smeary colours, faceless figures, odd postures, strange pastiches of Titian or Signorelli. The sheer badness of his anti-style would have looked as if he knew no better, though this was far from true. The sources are not far to seek: Rinsio packet speech-bubbles, comic-book characters, scenery and inscriptions. These pictures shake up culture's complacent appropriation of religion, in which religion is identified with the high style of another time and place. McCahon brings it up to the minute, down to the vernacular. The question recurred as late as the 1960s, not so much was this bad art, as was it 'blasphemy'.

The vernacular, even vulgar, style revives ways of presenting imagery that had been ruled out by traditional realism. McCahon can put in all the words he wants, or scenes within scenes, or mix times and places in the same picture, or detach objects from their backgrounds and let them float free as symbols.

Towards 1950, perhaps in response to hostile criticism of the earlier religious paintings, he smoothed out the style. There is more of Fra Angelico, or perhaps Ambrogio Lorenzetti, in the big, thoughtful, meditative heads, especially in the *Annunciation* pictures. In the *The Virgin and Child Compared . . .* [E1], the symbols float free against a light coloured ground, as do the symbols of the Passion in several of Fra Angelico's frescos of the Passion in San Marco. These are altogether a milder and more inoffensive version of neo-Christian painting. McCahon returned to religious painting with force once more only towards the end of the 1950s, with the *Elias* paintings [E13-19].

In the accumulations of the fragments of a scene, a wider view is available, but the complete scene is never possible to describe, because as the mind changes, and takes to itself various means of explanation, so its response to the multiple scene becomes more multiple.²

Robert Bertholf

Through most of the 1950s McCahon was a painter of landscapes. But these landscapes are neither picturesque, nor are they reduced to geological structures, as in the 1940s. They are restructured with a version of Cubist analysis. For a time, McCahon stands aside from public statement. As with the Cubists, what is most at issue is representation and its conventions, the latter founded on assumptions about what seeing might be. McCahon's attempt to see a truth of New Zealand landscape demanded a reworking of the conventions of how appearances should be presented in painting.

There are two typically modern problems in McCahon's painting of landscape. One is the problem of depth; the other is the problem of change, of time. Fundamentally, the picture surface in modern painting came to be regarded not as a window opening onto the world, but as a substantial surface, like a wall. However much painting may allow a reading as objects, as spaces or as narrative, it must still be made clear that these are found by looking at a material painted surface. There is to be no deception, trickery or lies. The politics of knowledge is at stake: painting must produce a certainty of knowledge, not deceive us with half-truths.

The hill landscapes of the 1940s do not present McCahon with a serious problem. Hills can be reduced to flat vertical planes, adhering to the vertical of the picture surface. They may be layered, striated and chequered. But what about the deep sea-coasts of the *D'Urville Island* drawings [L1,2]? The crucial decision comes in 1950: to tilt the horizontal plane of the landscape, and facet it, as if it were a hillside.

Flattening out space in a picture supposes at least two different viewpoints. McCahon goes further, supposing an observer continuously on the move. Accordingly, his search for an essential or a true landscape turns towards series of pictures, rather than a single image. Much of his landscape is landscape seen on the move; it becomes memories of journeys by car or by bus or on foot. He is already on the move in *Six Days in Nelson and*

Canterbury [J26], on his bicycle. The six views represent six days, glimpses of landscape from different times, typifying two kinds of South Island scenery. In this kind of painting of a journey, there could, surely, be a view for every moment. This conception is like that of a personal movie, going on in consciousness. Painting, like Kerouac's writing, becomes a presentation from memory of lost times. McCahon, also on the road, composes his multiple scenes into one pictorial structure in *Six Days*, matching up the views and making shapes that echo one another. The single frame of *Takaka: Night and Day* [J28] likewise contains two times, two lights, in the one continuous scene. But this kind of unification gradually breaks down in McCahon's work.

By 1952, the multiple view becomes a major issue in *On Building Bridges* [L9]. Is this one scene, one time, or several? Though its three separate panels are set side by side in similar frames, the horizon shifts and so does the scale of the diamond facets of the Canterbury plain. This separates the panels, but the black blocks in the foreground, the 'bridge' in the process of being built, appear to continue from one frame through to the next, suggesting that the space and time is really continuous after all. In later paintings the tension increases further as the several scenes in one frame begin to separate out.

Towards Auckland of 1953/4 [J13–16] was originally intended as a series, to be shown together. They depict roughly similar views, but represent different moments in an attempt to reconstruct the view in memory, as McCahon saw it travelling to work on the bus. Though they are called *Towards Auckland*, they are looking back towards Titirangi. The title refers to the direction of the traveller, not the direction of the gaze.

In late 1955 and 1956, the multiple images overlap one another in a single frame in the various paintings of French Bay, Titirangi [T7–13]. In these, time, weather and light are continually shifting. Views across water cannot simply be faceted like the earlier hill landscapes. Rather, McCahon makes prominent vertical and horizontal divisions. The motifs are beach, sea, sky, a strip of land, and, often, little rectangles on the sea which must be boats. The blue areas are sometimes sea, sometimes sky; sometimes, ambiguously, they could be either. The verticals divide the picture into different views at different times, interlocking and overlapping, as in *On Building Bridges*. The divisions between

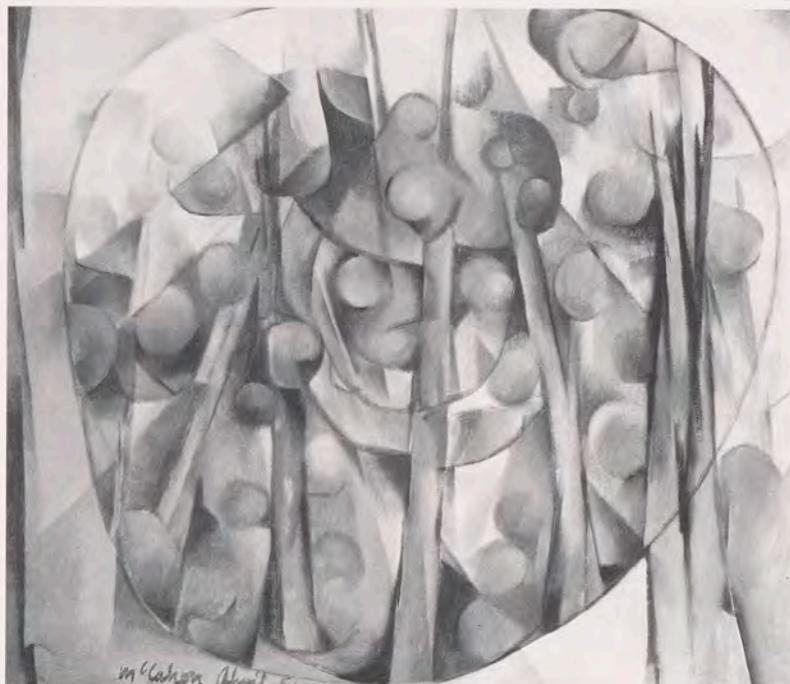
areas change their functions: a juxtaposition of blue and white; a black line, which may be a conventional line or maybe the mast of a boat. The verticals of these landscapes begin the process of dividing up the picture into a series of separate but juxtaposed hanging canvases, as in the *Northland Panels* of 1958 [J18].

After his journey to the United States in 1958, McCahon expanded his landscape painting formidably. The *Northland Panels* is a series presenting glimpses of landscapes, memories of Northland. The different views are abutted with no regard for continuity of horizons or colouring. The whole is as encompassing as a documentary movie, with accompanying words for commentary or as imitations of birdsong. An even more extensive project was the *Northland* drawings of 1959 [J2–12]. There may have been as many as eighty of them, sheets of paper laid out in rows on the floor. McCahon worked along the rows, brushing on ink wash. Later he culled them out, finally exhibiting twenty-eight in 1961. Edge to edge they would make a very long frieze, like black and white snapshots of Northland, all different, making a composite of times and places. These two series are the beginning of the long sequence of multiple travel pictures that become in the later 1960s the various versions of the *Stations of the Cross*.

I came to grips with the kauri and turned him in all his splendour into a symbol.³

Colin McCahon

The *Titirangi* paintings of 1957 abandon the vertical and horizontal scaffolding of the 1956 pictures for juxtapositions of diamonds of colour floating in an atmospheric space. To think of this as a reversion to Impressionism misses the systematics of the painting, and also ignores the effort towards making a truth of seeing of landscape into the basis for symbols. What happened to the kauri image is instructive. McCahon represents it through a structure of straight lines and arcs of a circle. This is a kind of reduction to a language of pictorial elementary forms. All that remains to be done is to find an order for these elements in a systematically constructed design. The process is like that in which the objects of the visible world are turned into elements for incorporation in commercial graphic design – decorative art,



Colin McCahon
Kauri Trees 1954
oil on canvas
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch Bequest, 1973

logos, road signs. The objects remain recognisable, though they are regimented by an imperious system.

At the same time, in Wellington, Gordon Walters was beginning to apply this designer's method to the koru, the curling fern frond motif, that he found in Maori art. Although the motif becomes a geometrical circle and stripe, the fern image remains recognisable, though remote from Maori use of it. The main effort of Walters's painting is in the composition of the elements, the formal choices among the infinite possibilities offered by the one motif. McCahon rarely isolates an object from its surroundings: when he paints his kauris, they are part of the bush surrounding his house, in space and light. They are, importantly, something seen 'out there'.

The *Titirangi* paintings represent an attempt to paint what could be seen, as if without preconceptions. The scene dissolves into arrays of colours, barely identifiable. A few silhouettes of hills, or looking down the cliffs to the beaches, the outlines of sea and land, still remain. They also show just how much McCahon, like Walters, was attempting to be systematic. The paintings are based on the diamond shape as a unit of construction. Still tied to something seen, though, they vary in size and orientation and often shade off into the adjacent spaces. While in paintings like *Flounder Fishing* of 1956 [T12], the rectangular units echo the rectangle of the picture, in these pictures of 1957 the diamonds run counter to the picture's shape. They make up a freely tilted field of their own. Simplified and reduced in hanging canvases of 1959 such as *Fish Rock* [T18], they become the basis for the *Gate* paintings of 1961 and 1962. But the *Gates* mark the decision to free the painting from the dominance of the thing seen; a new phase. The optical intensity of the colours of the *Titirangi* paintings are not based on a scientific theory of colour, but they are concerned with attempts to experience a truth of experience of a place and of seeing. This insistence in the painting keeps it at one remove from abstraction.

For McCahon and many of his New Zealand contemporaries, abstraction signified a reduction of things seen, a formalisation, some kind of departure from traditional perspective and light. The widely used term 'semi-abstraction' covers the practice of many painters of the 1950s and 1960s. Criticism tended to value New Zealand artists for their degree of commitment to revelation of a truth to New Zealand as a new place, remote from Europe. To turn

away from that to abstraction was seen as self-indulgent, a retreat into the private, personal and incommunicable. McCahon's statement of this kind of view appears in an introduction to an exhibition of his friend Alwyn Lasenby's paintings in 1960:

The mystery of the meeting of sea and sky, the fact of our being surrounded by a curving boundary of sea and the quiet wonder of looking at and being involved with the vast Pacific spaces since childhood have all become part of Lasenby's painting subject. That this is expressed within the traditional framework of good painting, where the clarity and order of the real world rule and direct the artist's expression, tends to make these paintings appear more obscure and difficult than those of many contemporary artists whose first aim is self-expression rather than a statement of more universal and basic themes.⁴

When McCahon showed his *Gate* paintings in 1961, they were seen as 'abstracts', but with careful qualification: they were abstractions from nature. The invitation card reads:

Recently, in contradistinction to his earlier almost mystical landscape and figure compositions of the forties, he has developed an even more 'abstract' style in paintings whose forms, with their forceful antithesis of black and white, 'earth' and 'sky', often remain, in some mysterious fashion, landscapes.⁵

Even though they are supposed to have a reminiscence in them of Waioneke or of Kaipara Heads, it is almost impossible to read these paintings as landscapes. Rather, they draw on experiences of representation of space in painting, especially landscape space, as a way of making a symbolising structure. They consist of dark blocks, obstructions, preventing a perception of depth; and spaces, depths of yellow or white, or white on black. They suggest continuity of space beyond their frame and an orientation that is like space travel beyond the earth. The 'gate', the way through, is

the narrow opening between the obstructions, not just straight into space, but between obstructions thought of as plates sliding over one another.

From 1961 onwards, McCahon's way with landscape is to turn it towards symbolic functioning. With the *Waterfalls* of 1964 [G22,23], landscape motif is reduced to a simple arc of light against dark, or a simple vertical streak of light. This kind of painting turns on the way in which a brush loaded with paint leaves a trace, which, at one and the same time, makes light appear and registers the creative hand at work. What you see, therefore, is the trace of light occurring in the midst of darkness. This, for McCahon, is at all levels powerfully symbolic.

Contrary to the notion . . . that these Abstract Expressionist artists started with the minimum, the truth is that they incorporated complex layers of cultural allusion into their art. In a real sense Newman, Rothko and Still were History painters by inclination but Abstract painters by formal inheritance.⁶

Lawrence Alloway

McCahon's inheritance is not abstraction, but representation and meaning, heading towards symbol. Where he meets up with American painting from 1958 on is in the enlarged scale of his work, in the freeing of the painterly stroke and in the involvement with time and process. Like Newman, Still and Rothko, McCahon has environmental concerns. His paintings are often installation pieces for specific gallery situations. But whereas Still, in exhibitions at Buffalo in 1959 and Philadelphia in 1963, was concerned with presenting the continuity of the results of his acts of painting, McCahon's concern is with the continuity of thematic materials. In *Practical Religion* [VI] it was the opposing terms of faith and doubt, for instance. The act itself, the emergence of the new from the depths of the painter's being, is not the prime moving force of McCahon's painting. Nor is he overly concerned with a richness of painted surface as such; rather, he continually moves towards a poverty of means: few colours, especially black; rough surfaces, rough edges and human frailty implied in the

human hand's approximation to straight lines.

McCahon's desire for public statement is the directing force in his painting. The new large scale of his painting, modelled on the new American painting, on Picasso's *Guernica*, and perhaps Orozco's murals, is a necessary means to this end. He was no longer constrained by coffee shop or library or dealer gallery spaces; he could show his new work in the Auckland City Art Gallery or the Canterbury Society of Arts gallery. Later, he treated dealer galleries in the same way, turning The Gallery (later the Ikon Gallery) or Barry Lett Galleries into sites for large-scale installations. *The Wake* [N9] was shown first in the Auckland Gallery; later it filled the walls of The Gallery, where it was backdrop for readings of its text by its author, John Caselberg. In 1963, the *Landscape Theme and Variations* paintings were painted to fit the long walls of the Ikon Gallery. In 1970, *Practical Religion* and *Victory Over Death 2* [V3] were designed to fit the two larger walls of Barry Lett Galleries.

The public intention of the statements of the paintings is unmistakable in the *Gate* series. The first *Gate* paintings are symbolic spaces, obstructions and openings of the space. Some of them have rounded tops, and the reason is that McCahon imagined them as paintings for the walls of the Auckland Town Hall. When he came to paint the *Gate* series in 1961, he had at first intended something even more public. He wrote to John Caselberg:

I am becoming involved with the idea for a large-scale statement on nuclear warfare, this to take the form of . . . a screen rather than a wall painting as it could stand in the entrances to town halls, universities, etc. . . . needing no support and possibly having the effect of a hoarding rather than of a large painting. . . . I will need words. . . .⁷

This scheme never became actual: it was too expensive.

McCahon's paintings have the ambitions of wall-paintings, but without the regular public patronage to carry them out, they

his public commissions is not altogether a happy one. TEAL finally destroyed the air-race painting it had commissioned; Otago University rejected the scheme for a Numerals mural, asking for Waterfalls instead, though he had finished with that a year earlier; the Urewera Parks Board mural has been moved. Only the Upland Road Chapel painted glass windows and the *Stations of the Cross* are more or less as McCahon intended them.

The scale of McCahon's later painting is not unconnected with his activity as a stage designer. From the 1940s in Dunedin, right into the 1960s, he had collaborated in many stage productions. As Rodney Kennedy recalled in recent conversation, he and McCahon introduced movement, lighting and scenery into theatre in Dunedin, which was, at that time, largely dominated by elocution teachers and their pupils. Of the surviving drawings for stage designs those for *Peer Gynt* (1952) are the most remarkable. They show McCahon designing bare stages with few props, but with a special concern for lighting, done in the freest of water-colour washes.

The distance from stage design to large-scale painting arranged in gallery installations is not great. The beholder comes in off the street to find that there is a scene set, so to speak; something that hides the bare space, turning it instead into an imaginary elsewhere.

The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across the terms 'abstract' and 'representational'. . . .⁸

Leo Steinberg

Taking a line through the religious pictures of 1947–8, through the *Elias* paintings of 1959, to the *Practical Religion* paintings of 1970, reveals some major differences. The earliest of these paintings are figural. Then, in the *Elias* paintings, the figures are replaced by writing. This writing is made up of words as objects, floating in a landscape space. In the 1970 paintings, the landscape is reduced to simple silhouettes; the space gives way to flat surface, and on this flat surface the words are painted, not as objects, but like any

writing on a surface. Only scale and medium distinguishes one kind of writing from another in McCahon's later work. There are small written texts on paper that look like the ordinary handwriting of his letters; there are larger written scrolls on paper and large acrylic paintings, written with the brush, but recognisably by the same hand as the smallest pieces.

Alongside the landscapes of the 1950s with their Cubist reductions of space, McCahon established the possibility of written paintings of the *Elias* kind. Around 1959 there is a significant shift in medium, from traditional artists' colours to enamel gloss and other house paints. Because these paints were cheaper, they allowed McCahon to paint a very large number of paintings in a short time. This made possible the often exploratory and improvisational working, moving over and round his complex thematic materials. It affected the written paintings especially: the writing becomes free handwriting. It allowed, in short, McCahon's entry into a kind of painting that was true to the impulses of the moment, rather than work that was entirely planned in advance. This brought him closer to the problematic situation of 'action painting'.

Side by side with his elaboration of dense viscose and glossy painting on boards, McCahon also transformed his other main medium, water-colour. The liquid quality of wash-drawing, with its refusal of hard contours and with its luminous transparency, recurs throughout McCahon's painting. In 1958, with *The Wake* [N9], he began to soak his large loose-hanging canvases with water, floating washes of oil paint onto the surface, allowing it to spread and settle. The result is a canvas that appears to be dyed or stained, self-coloured material, and with exact contours left to chance, a close equivalent to the most liquid water-colour technique. Against this, the denser paint of the writing stays on the surface.

Through the 1960s, gloss paints on board are the dominant medium. Unlike artists' colours, they do not blend easily. They are best as flat areas of colour. McCahon exploits this in the broad flat painting of the *Gates* of 1961. The attempt to clarify the edges with masking tape failed badly, so that he had to repaint most of them by hand. After that, the edges become a significant place of struggle for McCahon. The problem is to get them right by hand, moving viscous or liquid materials with a soft brush along a path.



Colin McCahon
The Kennedy waterfall drawings c1965–66 (no. 8)
acrylic on paper (set of 12)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Presented by Rodney Kennedy, 1968

This varies in difficulty according to the roughness and the absorbency of the support: hardboard, canvas or jute.

Like the improvisational character of his painting, this problem of his painting is significant as an engagement of the painter at the level of action, a problem of control or freedom in relation to the actual application of paint. It would perhaps be appropriate to read his pictures in these terms. Such an engagement with process entails severe difficulties: where or when to begin, how to end, how to arrive at a judgment when it is done. Any absolutes are open to contestation; all certainty of value is open to question. It would be appropriate to read the texts of many of his pictures concerning doubt and faith in the light of his actual practice as a painter.

Gloss paints also showed the way to the elimination of landscape-like space. As early as the late 1950s McCahon had begun to put sand in his paints. In the *Waterfall Triptych* [G23] and other paintings of the mid 1960s, especially the dark, often black landscapes, the light in the picture is no longer that represented by light and dark colours. Instead, the surface of the picture glitters variously, reflecting the light of the room, the real light. Some landscapes are constructed entirely of thickly sanded black paint, with a single path of unsanded matt paint in its midst.

Making light in painting is thematic to the paintings of the 1960s. It appears in the *Waterfalls* in all their variations, with the trace of an arc of light or a straight streak on a dark ground. Or, in *The Kennedy waterfall drawings* [G22], a great streak of variable light, made by working black paint around it. Or, in *Journey into a Dark Landscape* [G24], the arc becomes a faintly seen hill, in a soft dark expanse, barely penetrable by sight.

McCahon's last phase of painting depends on acrylic paint. As the painting turns further from pictorial space and illusion to flatness, so the contents turn from description of landscape and description of words as objects in space, to signs for landscape elements, hills as arcs, and writing as handwriting. This process is near completion with the *Numerals* of 1965 [N12]. These are purely inscription on painted surfaces, white on black, and the perfect, fundamental materials of seriality, numbers. With the large-scale incorporation of symbol into a large flat painting, as in *Practical Religion* [V1], the possibilities open up for the inclusion of any and all kinds of inscription or sign appearing on the surface. This, for McCahon, comes close to the flatbed picture as Steinberg describes it.

McCahon's painting runs parallel to modernist painting that is contemporary to him. It was not developed in isolation. However remote New Zealand might be in terms of travel, or in terms of not being directly in touch with overseas art scenes and networks, McCahon was evidently aware of what was happening elsewhere. The magazines and exhibitions and journeys to Australia and the United States were not lost on him. There is no consistent resemblance to other artists' work, yet there is a continual grappling with problems of representation and illusion and process that marks McCahon as a modernist. He is, though, always an unusual one, with a seriousness and intensity all his own, and always engaged with a struggle in a very particular environment.

Tony Green

1. Barnett Newman. 'The Sublime is Now'. *The Tiger's Eye*, 6, 1948, p. 3.
2. Robert Bertholf. 'The Fictive Voice in the Poem: A First Statement'. *Io*, 19, 1974, pp. 7-15. ed. Lindy Hough, North Atlantic Books, Vermont.
3. Colin McCahon. *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, 1972, p. 24.
4. This text appears on the invitation card to Lasenby's exhibition at The Gallery, unsigned. It is part of a typescript in the files of The Gallery, signed C.McC.
5. Anonymous text of invitation to McCahon's exhibition at The Gallery of the *Gate* paintings.
6. Lawrence Alloway. 'Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism'. *ArtForum*, XII, 3, 1973. Reprinted in *Network: Art and the Complex Present*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1984, p. 63.
7. Colin McCahon to John Caselberg. This letter has been much quoted regarding McCahon's use of words. The text noted here was read out by Ron O'Reilly at the opening of the exhibition of the *Gate* paintings in 1962 at the Canterbury Art Society Gallery. It was subsequently quoted in a review of the exhibition in the *Christchurch Star*, 11 September, 1962.
8. Leo Steinberg. *Other Criteria*. Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 90.

McCahon and Signs

The various modes of relation between words and images, . . . , have been of progressive and determining importance during the modernist period, despite the vaunted definition of visual modernism as somehow independent of other discursive orders, as 'autonomous' in its materials and articulations. For the last twenty years or so the interdependence of word and image . . . has been even more complex, if more explicit in proportion, suggestive of a certain discursive break in the last half of the 1960s . . .

John C. Welchman, in *Individuals, a Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986*.

In the 1940s McCahon commonly painted his titles directly onto his paintings; sometimes they became distinct elements in themselves. In the 1950s he began composing paintings out of words, and numbers, alone. Then, late in the 1960s, when he fashioned his last and most authoritative style, these conventional signs became a standard feature. Over the course of his career, then, McCahon made increasing use of words and numbers and they came to be quite central to his way of painting.

As is clear from the effect of his work on overseas painters like John Walker and Imants Tillers, from his inclusion in the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition *The Image of Thinking in Visual Poetry* (1989) and from the emphasis of his own international touring exhibition, *I Will Need Words* (1984), his reputation outside New Zealand rests largely on this aspect of his work. Ironically, it was also the most common source of puzzlement and scorn among McCahon's earlier doubters and detractors in this country.

What was mistaken for McCahon's most wilful pursuit of modernity was rather an indication of his struggle with it. His career is marked by the late emergence of a mature style, preceded by lengthy and impressive rehearsals for it which are also 'workings-through' of early modernist styles, cubism especially, and by an ambivalence regarding abstraction. If McCahon's

provincialism 'delayed' him, it also gave him time to come up with answers of his own which now seem more interesting than ever.

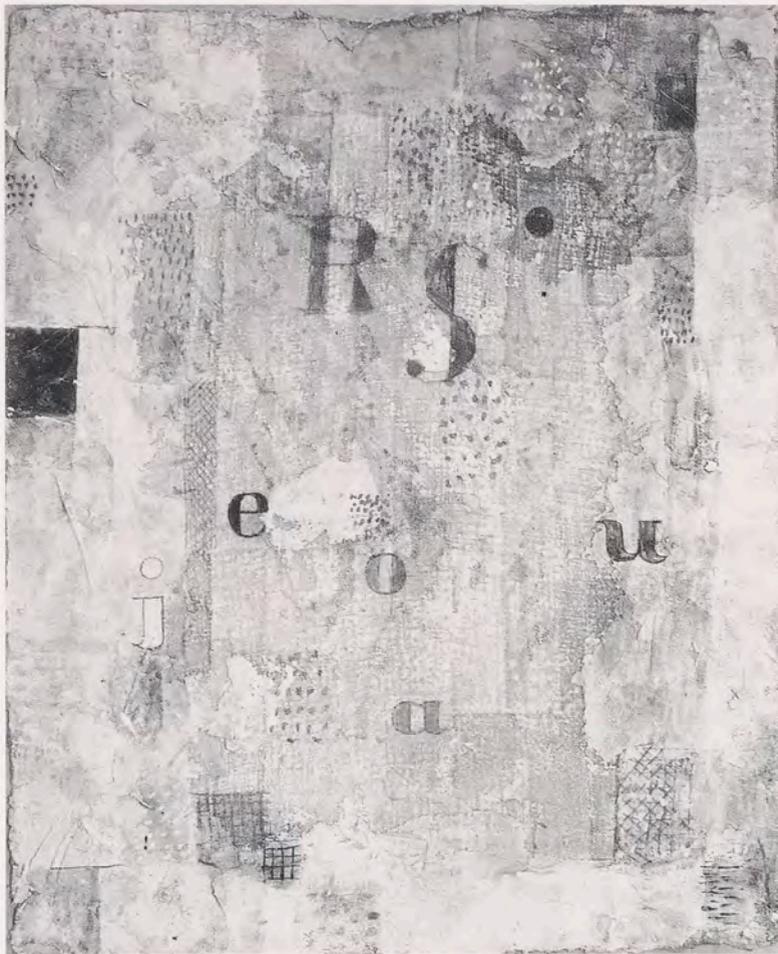
McCahon's paintings composed of words or numbers raised two sorts of objections. First of all they violated the mimetic code which European art observed from the Renaissance to the present century, a code which even now probably determines the most common ideas about art's purposes.

Most people think that a work of art is a picture and that its subject is what it is a picture of. What's in the work is what the work pictures. The dog, or the landscape, or the black square, is the work's referent. It is what the work is *about*. Thus a work in which nothing is pictured cannot be a work that is about something.¹

Paintings of words, no less than abstractions, picture nothing; however, it cannot be said that they are about nothing. Words have referents.

Words belong to poems and novels, they are really none of painting's business. The nineteenth century argument against the literary in painting – stories, characters, and so on – was the basis for other objections. Although it might have been, the twentieth century, 'formalist' version of this argument, associated with Clement Greenberg, was seldom used against McCahon. Greenberg believed that the modernist project had involved an ongoing task of self-criticism which had required 'each art to eliminate . . . any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of every other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure".² McCahon's use of verbal signs is an indication of this rejection of this aspect of modernism.

Today it would be hard to find a significant exhibition of contemporary art anywhere in the world which did not contain work which incorporated words. The new Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art devoted an entire section of its massive inaugural exhibition, *Individuals*, to this aspect of contemporary practice. Recent years have seen exhibitions devoted to it, Flavio Caroli's *Parola-Imagina, Ecritures dans la Peinture*, at the Villa Arson, Nice and *The Image of Thinking in Visual Poetry* at the Guggenheim, among them. A profusion of purposes lies behind the



Paul Klee (1879–1940)
Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber 1922
 gouache and gesso on canvas 514 x 416mm
 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr & Mrs Stanley Resor

Lawrence Weiner, Lothar Baumgarten, Nancy Spero, Ed Ruscha, Jasper Johns, yet all imply a rejection of the argument for 'purism'.

Two principles, I believe, ruled Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The first asserts the separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes it). The two systems can neither merge nor intersect. In one way or another, subordination is required.

This is the principle whose sovereignty Klee abolished, by showing the juxtaposition of shapes and syntax of lines in uncertain, reversible, floating space. . . . Boats, houses, persons are at the same time recognisable figures and elements of writing.

Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 1982

But the whole structure of postmodernism has its proto-history in those investigations of the representational system of absence that we can now recognise as the contemporaneous alternative to modernism. Picasso's collage was an extraordinary example of this proto-history, along with Klee's pedagogical art of the 1920s in which representation is deliberately characterised as absence.

Rosalind Krauss, 'In the Name of Picasso',
 in *The Originality of the Avante-Garde and
 Other Modernist Myths*, 1985

The task of placing McCahon's art in the broad context of modern art has hardly begun; in New Zealand he has ordinarily been considered *sui generis*. A revised modernism of the kind Krauss's and Foucault's comments foreshadow will make it easier. A history of 'impure', discursively-oriented modern practices relevant to McCahon would begin with Cubism and include Klee and Miró, Twombly and Johns.

It would note that the analytical Cubist use of freehand or stencilled letters and words does not quite free the verbal sign from its role as merely a legible portion of a visual scene, but the

invention of collage does. Collage provides the occasion for the intersection of two or more systems of representation and as a condition of that, a model of the picture plane as 'palimpsest' or field of signification. Klee, in the 1920s and then in the late 1930s, provided another. His *17, Astray* (1923), for instance, combines iconic signs (hat, mouth, eyebrows, etc), linguistic (*irr* is the German for lost, mad, astray), and indexical (pointing) signs (arrows). The strangely spermatoid male and female facial features seem distinct, not only from the face they constitute but from one another: each floats free, a separate element in the larger signifying system of seventeen different kinds of sign. Or, there's the work of the year before, *Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber*. Disposed across a loose patchwork grid are the vowels i, e, a, o, u, and the initials R.S. This work is a portrait in which not only the singer's name (Silber = Silver) is rendered in silvery colours but also her voice, the letters functioning as a kind of score.

Miró considered his encounter with Klee's work in 1922 'the most important event of [his] life'; certainly his adoption in the years that followed of Klee's amorphous, non-illusionist space and its activation by a diagrammatic rather than a depictive line, along with letters, words, numbers, punctuation points, arrows and the like, are a measure of his influence. In particular, it was the use of Klee's abstract line which enabled Miró to cross the boundary between verbal and visual signification. The weightless lines that write the words AH! and HOO! in his *Renversement* (1924), for instance, occupy the same realm as those that depict the peasant or his horse.

The devastating charge against the picture theory of language was that a description cannot represent or mirror forth the world as it is. But we have since observed that a picture doesn't do this either. I began by dropping the picture theory of language and ended by adopting the language theory of pictures.

Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, 1972

In addition to a revised modernism, the discussion of McCahon's art could benefit from a 'language theory of pictures', that is, one which approaches all visual representations as conventionalised, coded. According to Goodman, pictures in perspective and even

photographs have to be read, and the ability to read acquired. As W.T.J. Mitchell shows in his recent book *Iconology*, such a theory enables us to argue that 'there is no *essential* difference between poetry and painting, no difference, that is, that is given for all time by the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind.'³

Prophecy – The Valley of Dry Bones

That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we
shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to have
entered it, to have saluted it from afar, is already,
perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it
will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.

Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism
at the Present Time'

Here among shaggy mountains cast away
Man's shape must be recast;

....

Some day thought will startle the bush like scarlet,
The pillar of dust stand in the road a spinning
Stiff legendary fire.

Ships come spanking home and passion make solid
Man's shape again with the end and the beginning.

Allen Curnow, 'The Scene', *Island and Time*, 1941

A Candle in a Dark Room was painted in 1943, preceding and signalling the 'religious' works to come later in the decade. As in many of those works, the title is written on the picture; unusually, it takes up a third of the surface, representing 'a kind of irruption of the name into the very painting itself, so that [it] is no longer the label of the work but its being as a sign.'⁴ Both the linguistic and the visual signs 'say the same thing' and initiate a history of interplay between image and text which lasts the length of McCahon's career. Appropriately, the candle refers both to the spirit of man as the candle of the Lord, and to the creative imagination of the artist. Apparently inspired by his first meeting with the young poet, James K. Baxter, *A Candle in a Dark Room* is a portrait of the artist as prophet.

In Arnold's essay, the promised land is one which can rejoice in the greatness of its art. Curnow was prompted to quote it in the introduction to his anthology, *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, because 'returning so often to the theme of land and people, the particular theme of this land and this people, some poets are making a home for the imagination.'⁵ Elsewhere he said: 'Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn't exist yet. . . . It remains to be created – should I say invented – by writers, musicians, artists. . . – and how many generations does that take?'⁶ Later McCahon wrote of seeing 'something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really yet invented.' How does the imagination take possession? Does it disclose, or impose a meaning, does it discover or create, invent even? The prophetic role offers one answer: what the artist invents is what was 'promised'.

Curnow argued in a 1940 essay, 'Prophets of their Time, Some Modern Poets', that this was the role the age thrust upon its poets, writers as different as Yeats, Auden, and Eliot. McCahon's prophetic treatment of the theme of 'this land and this people' was determined by the war. 'One person,' he had thought, 'with real faith could stop the war. . . .'; his *I, Paul* of 1948 depicts just such a person.

The artist of the 1940s is both iconoclast as well as prophet, which is why Biblical quotations come floating in comic-book speech balloons in several of McCahon's paintings. 'The inspiration – the legend from a Rinso packet and the yellow I suppose from Byzantium' is his comment on *The King of the Jews* (1947), one more remarkable for its nonchalant conjunction of the farflung than for what it tells us about the painting. On the back it is inscribed 'after Signorelli'. These works are certainly about or *after* other art, which is an important clue to their complexity as prophetic statement, but they are as much about low as high art, which is a clue to their iconoclasm. When we look at *The Valley of Dry Bones* [E9], or *The King of the Jews*, it is not Byzantium, Fra Angelico or Signorelli we see first; it's comics. This is what makes them vulgar to the point of blasphemy.

Speech balloons were more widely used in advertising in the 1940s than now, but there are other signs of the comic in these works. Luit Bieringa has noted the 'cartoon-like scene-within-a-

scene division' of *The Promised Land* (1948) [E6] and *Hail Mary* (1948) [E8]. The scrolls in *I Paul to You at Ngatimote* (1946) [E7] and others – indeed most of the inscriptive devices – could be sourced to comics, as well as the frame format of *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* [J26].

In the 1960s some critics liked to claim these works as a local brand of Pop art; before its time, so to speak. But Warhol and Lichtenstein 'put on' the style of the comic artist, whereas McCahon adopts that of the comic reader, consumer of comics. The difference is hard to overstate; in the one, for instance, the comic functions as a sign of cultural 'innocence', and in the other of cultural 'knowing-ness'. Comics, it used to be said, would produce a generation of illiterates, savages, who have escaped the custody of language. Bill Pearson wrote a novel, *Coal Flat*, set in 1947, about the seduction of an eight-year-old boy by lurid American comics and in 1952 Parliament established an investigative committee which succeeded in banning *The Lone Ranger*. On the other hand, such 'innocence' might be a condition for the recognition of adult corruption and social renewal. The grown-ups in McCahon's paintings tend to have something childlike about them. Their blank looks and relaxed expressions suggest a deep inward faith.

*The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the
Canterbury Museum, Christchurch*

Interesting failure to adapt on islands,
Taller but not more fallen than I, who come
*Bone to his bone,** peculiarly New Zealand's.
The eyes of children flicker round this tomb

...

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

Allen Curnow, *Sailing or Drowning*, 1943

7. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, *bone to his bone.**

8. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.
9. Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; *Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.**

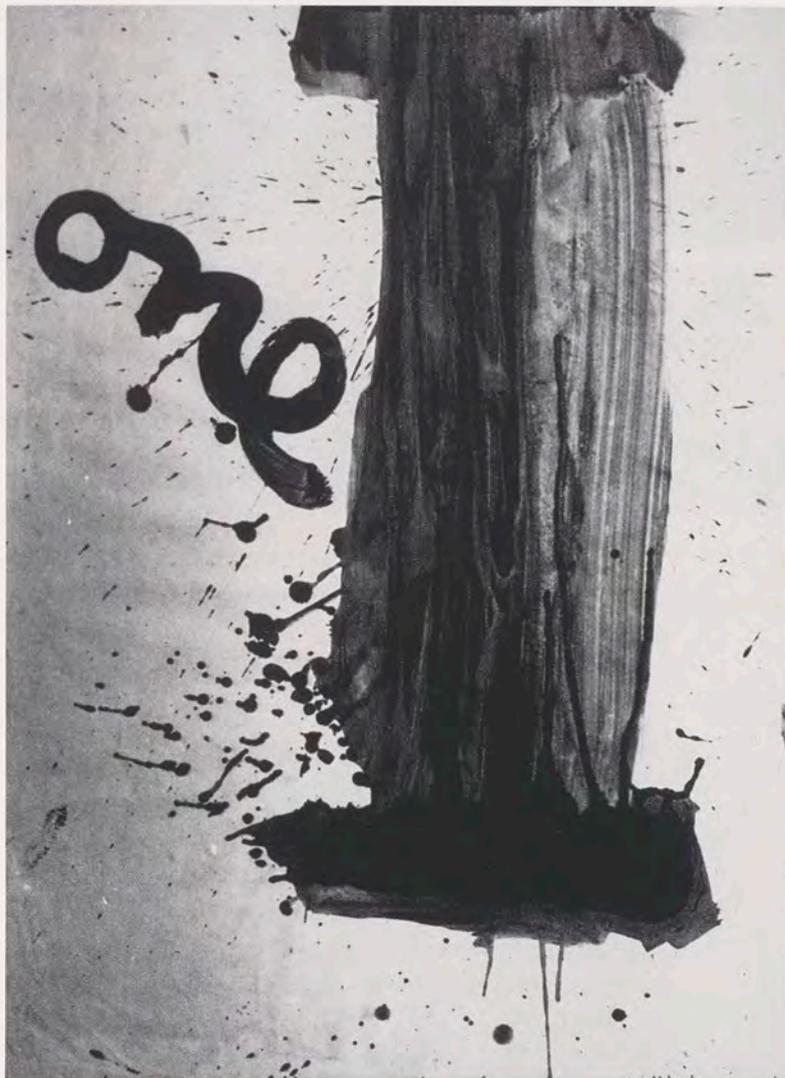
Ezekiel 37, verses 7-9

* author's italics

Perhaps the youth who speaks in *The Valley of Dry Bones* [E9] is that future child in Curnow's poem. Ezekiel's story has it that 'By the resurrection of dry bones, the dead hope of Israel is revived. By the uniting of two sticks is shewed the incorporation of Israel in Judah, the promise of Christ's Kingdom.' Both McCahon and Curnow propose a relation between New Zealand and the Promised Land, between the idea of nation-building and salvation. The valley battlefield, which recalls World War II, and the Museum are both death sites and places for prophesies of renewal. The nihilism and the idealism, the iconoclasm and the prophesying – these need one another.

In 1948 McCahon painted *The Promised Land* [E6], a portrait of the artist as a workingman visionary, watched over by an angel. In 1962, he painted a landscape titled *Was this The Promised Land?* And in 1971, with the scene, the prospect having moved north, from Cape Farewell in the first painting, to Ahipara, there were the three canvases titled *The days and nights in the wilderness* . . . [G17-19]. These are testimony to what became for McCahon a lifelong interrogation of the landscape, which retained its Biblical terms of reference. However, it is important to add that the association of the Promised Land with both the 'truth' of the landscape and the nation's destiny faded or was compromised after the 1940s. Firstly, the long engagement with Cubism in the following decade and with abstraction in the 1960s, meant that 'true vision' was continually deflected by issues of representation.

48 Secondly, in the 1970s McCahon's interest shifted to coastland, to



Colin McCahon
One 1958
wash
Private collection

sea-and-sky-scapes, and to linkages between Christian and Maori ideas which would not be helped by suggestions that Pakeha New Zealanders were the chosen people and Aotearoa their Promised Land.

Passages

Mondrian, it seemed to me, came up in this century as a great barrier – the painting to end all painting. As a painter, how do you get around . . . a Mondrian?

Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition, 1972

'Although he [Mondrian] put up his grid, if you have the right sort of eyes for looking at them, it sort of splits . . . and it passes under this one or over the top of it . . . – there are ways through.' It was this kind of movement that McCahon wanted to capture in his *Gate* paintings.

Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon, Artist, 1984*

McCahon's painting changed a lot over the years; followers of his work had plenty of surprises. But late in 1958 the changes were more radical, thoroughgoing, than at any time before or since. Out of them came what must be one of the most important solo exhibitions in our history, that at Gallery 91, in Christchurch, in October of 1959. McCahon had spent from April to July of the previous year looking at art in the United States, and clearly this gave him the impetus for change.

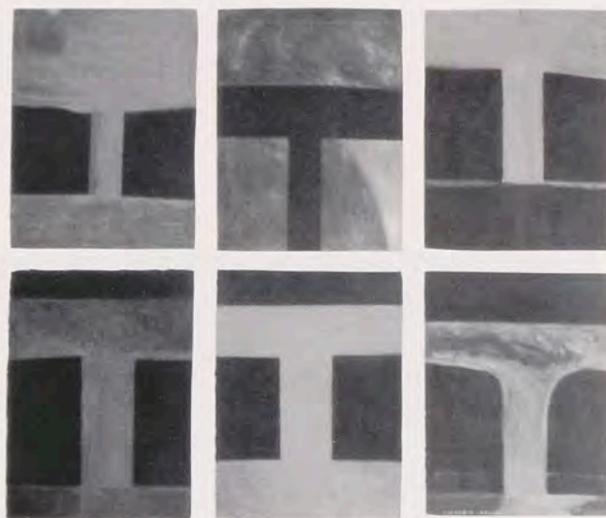
Between November 1958 and January 1959 McCahon painted the *Northland Panels* [J18], the *Northland* drawings [J2–12], the *Northland Triptych*, two series of numerals, the sixteen-panel *The Wake* [N9], and he began the *Elias* [E13–19] series. New media were tried: Chinese inks; mixtures of oil, water and inks; various commercial enamel paints; sand. New handling techniques developed – some more 'oriental', some more 'expressionist' – in the drive for a more gestural process-oriented style. And, suddenly, he began working on a scale quite unknown in New Zealand; the *Northland Panels* ('panel' I imagine from the enormous hanging paper segments of the *Hiroshima Panels* exhibited at the Auckland City Art Gallery that same October–November) were longer, if not

taller, than *Autumn Rhythm*, the large Pollock at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, that had so impressed him a few months earlier, and *The Wake* was twice as long.

Such changes relate readily enough to McCahon's direct experience of contemporary American painting. However, equally consequential changes occurred, which ostensibly had little to do with it. First, serial structures suddenly dominate his production – that is, these paintings are almost all closed sets or sequences (*The Wake*, the *Northland Panels*) or in designated open series (*Elias*) – and from then on more or less continued to do so. Secondly, he makes far more extensive use of words and numbers than before; in the case of the *Elias* series, this is coupled with a return to Christian subjects. As an achievement, the multi-part landscape painting the *Northland Panels* is doubtless the key work; yet, as experiments which open up territory for future use, the word and number works are of more interest, particularly considering the striking fact that no abstract paintings are among this group. The suspicion, rather the hypothesis, is that McCahon preferred words and number to abstraction; and that the emergence of seriality and conventional signs represent a diversion if not a subversion, of the process aesthetic that he had embraced.

Broadly speaking the Abstract Expressionist attitude to time differed from McCahon's. For them, painting hypostatized the moment. Representing nothing but its own eventfulness, the painting's undifferentiated, enveloping field claimed a presence sufficient to shut out the then and the there. Barnett Newman said his 'subject is anti-anecdotal'. He had, so to speak, no time for sequence or seriality. So, for all that McCahon's work gained from American practice in immediacy, the moment he depicted, say in one of the *Northland Panels*, was a relatively narrow event, one constrained by those left and right of it, marshalling it into sequence. Overall, McCahon depicts not a moment but a *passage* of time. Seeing *Guernica* had reminded him of 'the importance of pictures for people *to walk past* [my italics]'. McCahon's larger scale was primarily a matter of *lateral* extension.

Ultimately, the difference between Newman and McCahon on the question of time is ideological. And we see that even when McCahon makes, with the first *Gate* series (1961), his most serious commitment to abstraction, the concept of passage, way through,



Colin McCahon
Necessary Protection 1971
 works on paper
 Installation at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington



Colin McCahon
Jet plane to Reinga and Three Kings 1973
 charcoal 357 x 432mm
 Private collection, Auckland

is at the centre. McCahon's Christian terms of reference ensure that: aren't we still in the wilderness? There are some remarkable paintings here, abstractions which are to be linked more with Mondrian and Malevich than with Newman or Rothko, and which constitute prehistory to the three *Days and nights in the wilderness* paintings, the six related works on paper and other paintings in the *Necessary Protection* series of the early 1970s. Their almost flat black/white figures on black/white grounds, taken together with earlier paintings like *Cross* (1959) [G12] and the later *Numerals* (1965) [N12] and *Waterfall* (1965-66) drawings series [G22], are involved in a three-way conversation with iconic (landscape) signs and linguistic or numerical signs, which concludes magnificently in the works of the early 70s just mentioned. These constitute McCahon's most telling contribution to an aesthetics of 'impure' modernism, combining in a single figure three distinct types of sign.

The I of the sky, falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE. The T of the sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament, or Egyptian cross.

Colin McCahon, *Necessary Protection* invitation card,
 Barry Lett Galleries, 1971

McCahon can yoke (joke) together the first person singular and the number one in the way that he does, only because in English there is a coincidental identity between the graphic sign for the capital T and the roman numeral T. Further, the coincidental identity of the aural sign for 'T' and 'eye', which supports McCahon's association of 'T' with sky (the process of seeing requiring light to pass through the eye, the connecting of I with God by light), is restricted to English. These punning connections do provide us with a 'slowly emerging order' but one built on the arbitrariness of language, the conventions of human communication. As the *Days and nights* works on paper show, these readings depend upon the inter-relatedness, the intertextuality, of McCahon's work, a feature which intensifies steadily through the 1960s and 1970s.

In the drawing series *Jet Out*, 1973, the 'T' exchanges its iconic landscape sign for that of an aircraft sign, while retaining its linguistic sign as the final consonant of both words in the series'

title, and its role as Christian cross. From 1969 on the 'dot' expands its meaning in similar ways. It is a full stop or ellipsis, it is the indexical sign of a passage made or a dividing line (*Jump*, 1974; *Is there anything . . .* 1982 [N7]) and an iconic sign for birds, or beads (*The Song of the Shining Cuckoo*, 1974 [J21]; *Care of Small Birds, Muriwai*, 1975 [G14]), or a star or comet (*Through the Wall of Death*, 1972; *Comet* 1974). In the 1970s, then, as a defining feature of McCahon's consummate style, his *oeuvre* itself increasingly took on the character of a sign system.

Translation — *The Lark's Song*

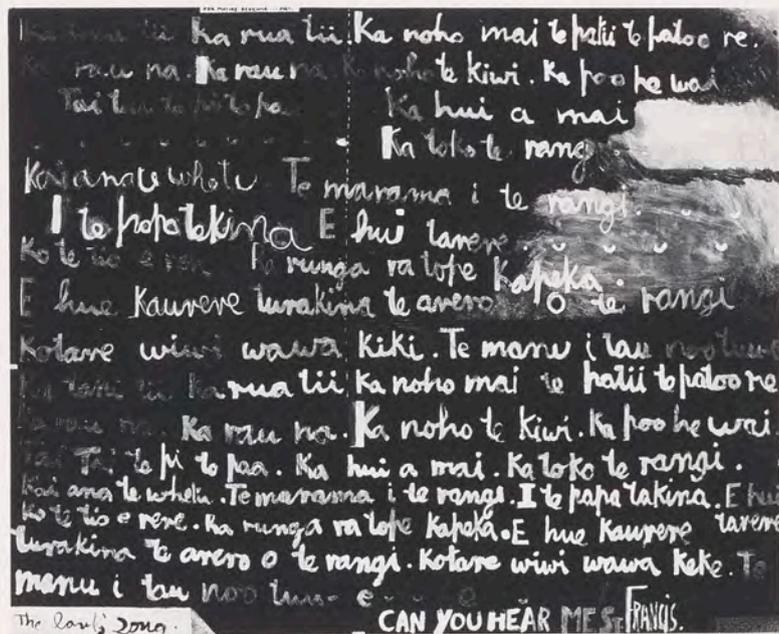
- A. Not understanding is a distinct pleasure. One of the great pleasures of writing and reading.
- B. A positive experience of not understanding occurs in a state characterised by looseness, suppleness, openness, lack of control, inattention, daydreaming, puzzlement. A feeling that certain ineffable thoughts or connections have found expression.
- C. When not understood, words appear in their greatest physicality, dense, concrete, singular. And yet around each is an aura which we invest with feelings, desires, insights, which we yearn toward hoping: may it be here, in this otherness, that these aspects of the self come forth.

Stephen Fredman, 'Not Understanding',
Translations, O.ARS 3, 1983

To translate is:

- * to bear away, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another, to transfer, transport.
- * to turn from one language into another.
- * to interpret, explain, to express one thing in terms of another.
- * to change in form, appearance and substance, to transmute, to transform.

Early in 1969 McCahon resumed the 'written-all-over' type of painting he had tried with *The Wake* [N9] more than ten years previously. In an extraordinarily sustained burst of painting which ran till early in 1970 and produced three exhibitions containing a fair proportion of his greatest works, he concentrated entirely on this type of work. After 1972 there is a pause, then in 1979 a



Colin McCahon
The Lark's Song (a poem by Matire Kereama) 1969
 acrylic on wooden doors 810 x 1980mm (each door)
 Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented by the artist, 1982

resumption; all of his last works on canvas are of this kind. With *The Wake* the ground on which the words appear is an illusionistic, landscape space. In these later works, the largely black ground may be interpreted as a landscape, but essentially it is a kind of palimpsest, a ground for signs of all varieties. McCahon established this kind of ground for the first time in *Numerals* (1965) [N12].

The Lark's Song (1969) [N16] is painted on two doors hinged together. A painter who titles a work on canvas used for blinds, *Blind*, who made the gate a major motif and the title of many paintings, would expect us to make some play of this fact. Doors are a site of translation, a threshold of transference. Oddly these doors open on themselves, and in theory might be closed like a book, with their message, the same more or less on both doors, hidden from view. McCahon's text is from *The Tail of the Fish, Maori Memories of the Far North* (1968) by Matire Kereama, an eighty-year-old elder of the Aupouri tribe, whence it has been transcribed, a handwritten translation of print, reversing the original's black-on-white and acquiring in the process this artist's characteristic prophetic tone. Other kinds of signs appear on this palimpsest: iconic signs of clouds in a night sky, the indexical dotted sign of the lark's flight path up the painting and out the top. Larks don't sing at night; these three sign systems are linked only by a marriage of discursive convenience.

Most of the words on this painting are in a 'foreign' language, Maori: the language of the tangata whenua, the people of the land, and yet unknown to the vast majority of McCahon's viewers. In 1972, he wrote about the work:

From August to October, I struggled with Mrs Kereama's *Lark's Song*. I loved it, I read the poem out loud while I painted and finally the little lark took off up the painting and out of sight. The words must be read for their sound, they are signs for the lark's song.

This whole series of paintings gave me great joy. Please don't give yourself the pain of worrying out a translation of the words but try for the sound of the painting. But never forget that these are the words of a poet too.

Some people can read them.

In not providing us with an English translation, McCahon reminds us that the song is already a translation, from bird song to human song, and that just to utter the Maori, taking the language from text to speech, suffices to give voice to this bird famous in literature, in English, as a messenger of the ineffable.

The bulk of McCahon's texts, whether Maori or Biblical, belong to oral traditions. His paintings of them are transcriptions, and he liked to say them as he wrote them – 'I talk all my paintings to myself.' As they are never original with him, so they're seldom exactly original with their authors either. That kind of anonymity was appealing to McCahon: for him, Kereama is and is not a Maori Shelley, her 'poem' is, as she herself makes clear, the transcription of a child's song popular in her tribal area. It's the sort of rhyme that must be said in as few breaths as possible; Kereama who, in her eighties, could recite it in two, did so at McCahon's request at the opening of the exhibition at which *The Lark's Song* was first shown.

In her book, she writes:

In order to translate these words into English one must imagine the thoughts of children lying lazily on the river bank, looking up into the blue sky where the lark circles and flutters, while they sing the words the lark is saying.

And this is her translation; she provides no other. McCahon relied on it to make his painting. The song belongs to a tradition which predates the arrival of Europeans and their birds, larks included. Composed largely of nonsense words, it was used to prevent frosts which threatened earlier crops. On clear cold nights, following the waving of a firebrand around a urinal, and facing east, the song would be recited in one breath while counting the stars and endeavouring to 'put them out.'⁷ There is no reference to a lark in the text of McCahon's painting, nor, of course, in the song Matire Kereama's children sang. And yet they heard the lark, as we may as well. 'Try,' asks McCahon, 'for the sound of the painting' and, translating the title of a poem by Peter Hooper onto the surface of his painting and the voice of the lark into English, asks also: 'Can you hear me, St. Francis?' McCahon, it seems, wanted us to defer

translation so that we saw the language as opaque, not transparent, so that we were held suspended among voices of children, saints, poets and painters – in language *as such*, where origin and impulse, natural and cultural, Maori and European, are all to be apprehended, but only as being *in translation*.

Wystan Curnow

1. Rosalind Krauss. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. M.I.T. Press, 1985, p. 198.
2. Clement Greenberg. 'Modernist Painting' in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battock, Dutton, rev. ed. 1973, p. 68.
3. W.T.J. Mitchell. *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 49.
4. Stephan Bann. 'The Mythical conception is the name: Titles and Names in Modern and Postmodern Painting'. *Word and Image*, 2, 1985, p. 177. See also his comments on Klee's use of titles, pp. 183-4.
5. Allen Curnow. *Look Back Harder, Critical Writings, 1935-1985*. A.U.P., 1987, p. 44.
6. *ibid.* p. 77.
7. I would like to acknowledge Jeny Curnow's help with the Maori text.

God-talk – McCahon and Theology

Skandalon is the Greek word for a small stone over which one might trip or stumble. It is the source of the English word 'scandal' and it is the word used by the writer of St Matthew's gospel quoting Jesus:

'Happy are they who do not find me a stumbling block'

Matt. 11:6

There seem to have been many stumbling blocks for viewers of Colin McCahon's paintings over the past fifty years – and a few scandals.

In the 1940s, when McCahon painted New Testament events in a New Zealand landscape, he assumed a naïve, direct, clumsy drawing style and acknowledged a variety of high and low art sources. Comic books, signwriting, road signs, Titian, Siennese quattrocento painting – he spoke admiringly of them all. Today his comment that in his 1947 work *The King of the Jews*, the yellow came from Byzantium and the speech bubble from a Rinso packet is endlessly, delightedly quoted. The angry and offended responses to these works are also recorded. McCahon is perceived as an iconoclast – a breaker and challenger of the norms of art accepted in New Zealand society.

There is no doubt that looking back indulgently at art scandals which have lost their power to outrage can create a warm glow of self-satisfaction. How much more sophisticated we are now. How easy we find it to accept and enjoy McCahon's formerly outrageous practices.

Yet it seems to me that there is a *skandalon*, a stumbling block which still lies at the centre of McCahon's work. It is not primarily his sources, or his use of paint, or his numbers and texts – though they continue to puzzle – but his insistent exploring of issues of doubt and faith, of hope and despair, in a consciously Christian framework.



Colin McCahon
The King of the Jews 1947
oil on cardboard 636 x 516mm
National Art Gallery, New Zealand

'Good taste was going to have a hard time with this painter' writes Wystan Curnow in his essay *I Will Need Words*.¹

Colin McCahon's works have in recent years achieved acceptance and acclaim in the New Zealand and Australian art markets. They are high-status commodities. Yet their religious content is seldom discussed, either critically, or I imagine, around the dinner tables of their owners. Religious beliefs, ideas and practices, unless they are those of a distant minority, are not subjects for easy conversation. Art museums do not find the matter easy either. In a letter to the writer, a curator from Washington D.C. commented on American museums' attitudes to religious content in art:

... anything touching on religion (unless produced by a member of an ethnic minority) is regarded with great suspicion. They think it can't be 'real' art. . . . It's a fascinating comment on contemporary society that a gallery that would show the most ribald and pornographic paintings without batting an eyelash gets nervous and cross-gaitered about religion, as if it was the ultimate impropriety.²

There is also a difficulty with the word 'religious'. A problem of definition. What do we understand by the word?

If we look at those early works the answer seems obvious. McCahon was looking at the standard repertoire of subjects for religious painting in the Western Christian tradition. The Crucifixion, the Entombment, the Maries at the Tomb, the Annunciation, the Madonna and Child. This was the area of his work explored in the Manawatu Art Gallery's 1975 exhibition *Colin McCahon: 'Religious' Works 1946-1952*. Yet even here a definite unease with the use of the word 'religious' is indicated by the qualifying inverted commas. In his catalogue foreword, exhibition curator Luit Bieringa wrote of his reservations about the exhibition title:

Doubt . . . at letting loose once again misconceptions regarding the artist's personal convictions.³

A note of anxiety is sounded, of nervousness that McCahon's work might seem less credible if a 'strictly Christian' interpretation were placed upon it. While accepting that religious ideas were vital to McCahon's work, Bieringa wants to make it clear that McCahon is extending 'the bounds of purist theology [and] narrow inflexible creeds.' He asserts that McCahon's religious themes 'combine with more abstract ideas not specifically Christian, as traditionally understood.' There is a problem here. Art is assumed to change, to move, to redefine itself in response to the attitudes and priorities of the times, or in opposition to those attitudes – McCahon's paintings are certainly not narrowly traditional in an art historic sense.

But when religion is mentioned, restrictive adjectives abound. Religious thought is assumed to be purist, narrow, inflexible; needing McCahon to break through its restrictions, to open it out into newer, broader areas of concern. There is a nagging suspicion that McCahon has somehow let us down by being a great twentieth century painter yet insisting on 'bringing religion into it'.

And yet Colin McCahon's thought and work seem to reflect the changes and developments in religious thought which characterise the theology of our times. Narrowness and strictness are not its primary characteristics. It encourages rigorous debate, discussion and a broadening of terms of reference to keep confronting those questions of meaning which are part of being human. Who am I? What is the reason for my existence? How do I relate to the world around me? And a question which many still ask: How may I understand my experience of a relationship with God? This last is McCahon's ongoing question. His attempts to answer it, changing as his painting changes, are most challenging and profound in works which are far from traditionally 'religious' in appearance.

What then do we know of Colin McCahon's personal faith and beliefs? In the catalogue of his 1972 Survey exhibition he writes:

The 1959 *Elias* series were all painted at Titirangi and all come out of the story of the Crucifixion . . . and I became interested in men's doubts. (This theme appears here and appears later – I could never call myself a Christian, therefore these same doubts constantly assail me too).⁴

He also stated in a 1979 lecture in Auckland that he was not a Roman Catholic, and that apart from a short association with the Society of Friends in Dunedin, he had never been a member of any religious organisation. Many writers who see religious ideas as fundamentally intellectually flawed have emphasised these statements as proof of McCahon's detached interest in religion. Their attitude illustrates a widespread Western phenomenon of which contemporary theologians are well aware. The jacket blurb of Ronald Gregor Smith's book *The Doctrine of God* reads:

A lively belief in God has become rare. It is not so much that modern people actually disbelieve. Rather they have grown weary of belief. The God who once delighted the heart of the Psalmist now evokes in them incomprehension and often boredom.⁵

In McCahon's works, that delight, tempered by doubt and occasional despair, seems a constant presence.

In the Survey catalogue again, writing about his 1970 work *Practical Religion: The Resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* [V1], McCahon says:

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.⁶

And about *Victory Over Death 2* [V3]:

the next 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. I believe, but don't believe *Let be, let be let us see whether Elias will come to save him.*⁷

A letter to a friend who was ill in hospital:

The moon is the 'planting' moon of the Maori, of the land – so this is the time for a resurrection and when all creatures flourish – and you too. I am a believer and have great faith: it sags (sic) at times.⁸

Rather than debate what Colin McCahon believed, or his commitment to the life and work of faith, it seems more useful to me – and I hope to those who find his religious content disturbing, puzzling or an embarrassment – to consider briefly his position in relation to ideas and concepts current in Western theological thought.

I am not attempting to 'claim' the artist for Western theology, to reduce his paintings to mere illustrations of particular Christian ideas. But McCahon seems to me to be at home in the questioning tradition of theological thought. Allan Galloway sums up this approach to tradition very neatly. While acknowledging the importance of tradition in shaping our identity, he notes:

Yet we fall short of the level of responsible, historical existence if we merely receive and repeat this tradition. We deal with it responsibly by responding to it in the novelty of our own situation.⁹

This is one of McCahon's great strengths. His responses to tradition, both religious and artistic, always involve an acute awareness of his situation as a painter in twentieth century New Zealand; a complex meshing of landscapes and peoples.

Theology is both the expression of the beliefs of the Christian community, and the criticism of those beliefs in the light of new knowledge and developing experience. It is therefore never static; its task is never finished. There can be no final theology. Theology is rational discourse about God.¹⁰

Yet theologians have long been aware of the obscure and oblique elements in their language. At the heart of religion lies something language cannot express in any adequate way. Yet if religious faith is to maintain its claim to have some cognitive character, it must try to articulate in words what it claims to know. The attempt must be made to stretch language, to show in what way God-talk, in spite of its admitted obscurities, does have a meaning.

The word 'God' is of course surrounded with attempts to illuminate its meaning. The Old Testament writers knew the difficulty:

To whom will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him?

Isaiah 40:18

The twentieth century has seen its own series of arguments continuing the questioning tradition. For example, wanting to avoid discussing God as *a* being, as an object in the world, Paul Tillich described God as Being, or as the Ground of all Being.¹¹ This is not a completely new idea; it relates back to one of the oldest revelations of God. In *Exodus* Moses asks God how he should describe God to the people of Israel. God replies 'I AM; that is who I am'. This seems to be a refusal of Moses' request, requiring him to enter into a relation with an unnamed God and to accept the uncertainties of such a relation. And yet there is also a sense in which God stands alongside us in being, in which God is there with us. Another translation of the Hebrew suggests, 'I am there as I will be there,' or, 'I shall be there as I who will always be there.'

Gregor Smith queries Tillich's philosophical theology:

What are we trying to say when we call God Being, or Being itself, or the ground of Being or Holy Being? Surely we are speaking first and last about the way God 'comes' to us. The key word is 'comes' not 'is'.

We can speak of 'Being' only through our experience of 'beings'. We must not pretend that we can expose the whole mystery of this name. Just as we can never wholly know another person, no matter how close we are to them; we apprehend God in his acts but we do not comprehend him in his being.

We know God by faith in what he does to us. More we do not know.¹²

What then is faith? Faith is often and unfortunately equated with belief. The Church has encouraged this misconception by laying undue emphasis on correctness of belief. Belief is not unimportant, but faith is something more than belief. It is a total attitude to life, and a commitment to a way of life.

Faith is always experienced as a response. It is not something we can create. In the Christian tradition, faith is a response to the historical and continuing way in which Christ extends the vision of what it means to be a human being. He shows the world in a new light and offers new insights into the mystery of God.

Beginning with Paul Tillich's description of faith as 'the state of being grasped by ultimate concern', Allan Galloway discusses the essentially paradoxical nature of faith within any culture:

It is only at the level of existential rather than empirical understanding that the concept of ultimate concern can disclose the distinctive character of faith which sets it in a dialectical tension as well as creative co-operation with culture.¹³

This paradoxical element is essential to authentic faith. Faith can be actual only in the concrete concerns of culture. But it can be authentic only in relation to that which is essentially and unassailably ultimate, and therefore transcends the finite concerns of culture:

When faith loses its positive orientation towards that which is absolutely and unassailably holy, separate and ultimate it has identified the ultimate with some finite, vulnerable form. Therefore it must defend this sacred bastion. The whole orientation of faith turns from the positive to the negative.

Superficially the expression of faith *appears* to have become more definite and positive, but the negative moment of the paradox has been removed.¹⁴

Galloway sees questioning, tension and paradox as essential elements which characterise rather than compromise an authentic faith.

The Bible is one piece of cultic tradition that can easily become a bastion to defend rather than a source of challenges to more rigorous thought. We are presently witnessing in some churches in the West the upsurge of a fundamentalist, Biblicist approach which intends to stifle discussion and argument. McCahon however uses Biblical texts carefully and critically. In his 1959 *Elias* series [E13–19] and in the 1970 work *Practical Religion* . . . [V1] he writes and rewrites the stories, editing them down, searching out their particular relevance for him. In *Practical Religion* he sets the story of Lazarus in a Nelson landscape, reminding us of his earlier uses of Biblical narrative. Martha the thoughtful sister becomes Mount Martha. Particular texts from the story are emphasised by the size and brightness of the white lettering against the darkness. He treats the Bible affectionately, as conversation, as story and as a source of insight and wisdom about God and humanity.

Yet there is also some indication that the man who (as Gordon Brown has noted elsewhere in this catalogue) was infuriated by those critics who came late to an appreciation of his work, enjoyed on occasion thundering out words of admonishment. *A letter of James* in the New English Bible is subtitled *Practical Religion*. It is full of encouragement, example and grim warning. McCahon quotes from it in one work:

Next a word to you who have great possessions. Weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you. Your riches have rotted; your fine clothes are moth-eaten You have piled up wealth in an age that is nearing its close¹⁵

He could not have been immune to the irony of paintings like these entering the art market.

By 1954 Colin McCahon had begun to use texts alone in some paintings to communicate religious meaning and the questions of faith. Speech balloons, landscapes and traditional pictorial narratives were no longer sufficient.

One of the earliest of these all-text works is the small painting *I and Thou* [E11]. Large block-like letters hang against and are enfolded by tilting landscape planes. The 'I', the capital I of God, 'I am that I am', the number one, projects above the 'T' of 'Thou', but the two are inseparably joined. 'AND' slips down towards the 'O' of 'Thou'; a stone rolled in front of an opening in a hillside. God and Christ, God and humanity meet in this small space. The words in the painting have a poetic resonance and McCahon's use of the word 'thou' is daring. It is not commonly heard. He risks here, as he will again, having an unthinking piety rather than a questioning faith ascribed to the work and to himself. Can he expect viewers to take him seriously? What is he talking about here?

It seems probably that McCahon had heard of, and may have read, Martin Buber's celebrated book *I and Thou* published in English in 1937. Buber was a Jewish theologian, and his insights into the religious and social dimensions of the human personality are particularly interesting.

Buber describes human attitudes to the world as twofold. They are characterised by two primary words, 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'.

The I of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different I from that of the primary word *I-It*.

Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations.

When *Thou* is spoken the speaker has no thing for his object . . . he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.

In every sphere, in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out towards the fringe of the eternal *Thou*, in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*, in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*.¹⁶

Buber sees us as experiencing the world to be 'used' and the world to be 'met'; these two responses constantly change and interweave.

So McCahon's painting refers perhaps to this view of God – the eternal *Thou* whom we meet everyday through our meetings with others – through relationships in which we treat others as *Thou* rather than *It*.

Interestingly, Buber also suggests that in a work of art the object or 'it' could be transformed into a *Thou* or presence; a part of the world to be met rather than merely experienced.

Terence Malloony commented on this aspect of Buber's ideas in a recent essay:

His theory also highlights the fact that artworks contradict their own objecthood by lapsing into the *Thou* mode. For anyone to achieve an imaginative rapport with a work of art, he or she has to defer to the work's emergent effects and meanings, (to its quality of *immanence*) and recognise that the sense it precipitates is not finite, has no conclusion, no closure (the quality of incommensurability).¹⁷

This seems to me to be a useful idea for McCahon – that of meeting, of dialogue. Through his use of texts McCahon insistently addresses his viewers; he seems to invite dialogue, to request response. He does not attempt to speak for God, but to God because he speaks to us. He addresses us as *Thou*, and thus, in Buber's phrase, addresses the eternal *Thou*. We are McCahon's 'significant other' in whom God is to be found.

This work is then a meeting place.

By 'Gate' I mean a way through.¹⁸

McCahon often used the symbols of light and light sources to indicate transcendence and the presence of grace. Light is of course an ancient symbol found in many religious traditions. The very word 'Buddhism' implies that the essence of religion is 'enlightenment'. Egypt had Sun-Gods; Zoroastrianism depicts the cosmic struggle between light and darkness; and in Hellenistic times light figured in Gnosticism, neo-Platonism and generally in the religion and philosophy of the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁹ In the Christian tradition it appears throughout the Bible. The Gospels tell how the splendour of the Lord shone around the shepherds, and also of the 'true light' that came into the world.²⁰ The Wise Men were guided by the star to Jesus.²¹ In the Old Testament the prophet says:

Arise Jerusalem, rise clothed in light; your light has come and the glory of the Lord shines over you.²²

In a discussion of the understanding of this symbol, theologian John Macquarrie suggests that it cannot speak so easily to us today, since the source of light is no longer a mystery to us. It has become just another physical phenomenon, something we have at our disposal. Whether or not we agree with this, and there is no doubt that Colin McCahon saw light as a potent symbol, Macquarrie's suggestion of a new approach to the ancient symbol of light is interesting in relation to the artist's use of the idea of a Gate. Macquarrie suggests 'openness' as a word which can help us understand an important dimension of the light symbol.²³ For only where conditions of openness obtain can there be light. In the depth of a forest we call an open place a 'clearing' or a 'glade'; a place that is light. The idea of openness is important to any concept of God in that God takes the risk of being open to humanity. We could not call a self-enclosed Being, 'God'.²⁴

The *Gate* paintings [G1-7] are about creating ways through and beyond the flat painted surface of the canvas, and about humanity's need for a way through the huge obstacles to peace posed by greed for the power of nuclear weapons. McCahon's symbolism is enigmatic, but sure. The Gates can be small spaces between huge dark forms through which we must squeeze; or light spaces surrounded by darkness which presses in on them. Darks can also be fathomless depths of space through which we might fall. The paintings communicate an almost vertiginous sense of swinging, whirling movement, of the push and struggle of opposing forces. Yet these are not simplistic polarities. Dark and light areas can merge with each other, push past each other leaving traces of their presence.

References to landscape forms are here too, and to movement in the landscape. The crash of the sea around a headland eroding and changing its shape, or the measured drift of tectonic plates across the earth's surface.

Movement through the landscape as a metaphor for the journey through life is a recurrent idea in McCahon's work. The metaphor

is an ancient one. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness in the hope of a new country, the promised land. In the final panel of McCahon's *The Flight from Egypt* [J25] they are still unaware of whether they have found it. After the boldly written word 'arrival' there trails away another faint question, 'is this the promised land?' Would we recognise it if we saw it, McCahon asks.

Christ too spent days and nights of uncertainty in the wilderness. McCahon's paintings with that title [G17–19] offer a variety of readings and symbols. These can be dark voids, the night sky, the limitless expanses of space, against which the 'I' of God is an opening of light. Or perhaps dark landscape forms, solid against a clear sea and sky. One never quite cancels out the other. Symbolic and literal, secular and religious responses work in dialectical tension with each other, implying the inescapable paradox of faith.

In a number of the Journey works in this exhibition McCahon uses the Roman Catholic Church's Fourteen Stations of the Cross as his structure. These mark the events of Christ's walk to Calvary, his crucifixion and death – at the last Station he is laid in the tomb. McCahon's own journey takes him through Nelson, Canterbury and Northland, into Auckland from Titirangi, and many times along Muriwai Beach.

Yet there is still no destination beyond death of which any of us can be sure. There is no answer either to the longing for a settled faith – one free from wandering and uncertainty. We remain in the wilderness, but it is a wilderness which for McCahon is occasionally illuminated, opened up by the transcendent grace of God. In *Victory Over Death 2* [V3] the 'I' of God almost cuts the painting in half, splitting open the landscape, cutting through the words of Jesus and the crowd, opening up the space, pushing out against uncertainty and darkness.

Colin McCahon does not intend or wish to separate the secular from the sacred. They work together, inseparably informing and affirming each other. In his *Necessary Protection* works²⁵ he paints about whales, about small birds, about the landscape, and he asserts a view of the world as something graciously given into our care.

One of the most recent paintings in this exhibition is the three-part work *Imprisonment and Reprieve* [J24] from 1978. In each part the dark shapes of buildings and landforms are set against a



Colin McCahon

The Flight from Egypt 1980 (no. 6)

acrylic on paper (6 sheets) 731 x 1104mm

Dr Alan Godfrey, Canterbury



Colin McCahon
Imprisonment and Reprieve (triptych) 1978–79
 acrylic on paper 722 x 1095mm (each panel)
 Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1978

brilliant golden sky. In the lowest of the three are three crosses lined up as on Calvary. Written in the sky are the words 'You too my friend, you too, and you'. McCahon is addressing his viewers directly, involving us in the questions which concern him.

In a 1957 postscript to *I and Thou* Martin Buber wrote:

The existence of mutuality between God and humanity cannot be proved just as God's existence cannot be proved. Yet he who dares speak of it, bears witness and calls to witness those to whom he speaks – whether that witness is now or in the future.²⁶

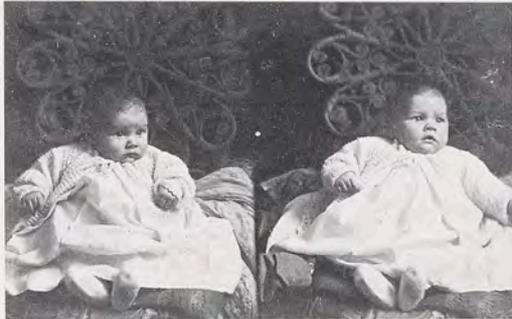
Colin McCahon dared to speak to us of God. These notes are the beginnings of a response, some suggestions for ways in which his paintings exist within the questioning tradition of Christian faith.

Alexa M. Johnston

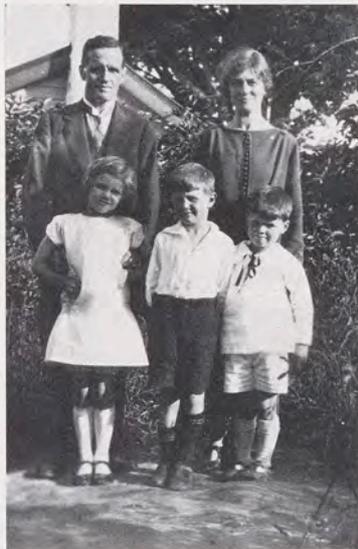
1. Wystan Curnow. *I Will Need Words*. National Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1984.
2. Margy P. Sharpe, National Museum of American Art, Washington D.C.; letter to the writer, 22 February 1988.
3. Luit Bieringa. *McCahon: 'Religious' Works 1946–1952*. Manawatu Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1975.
4. Colin McCahon. *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*. Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1972, p. 27.
5. Ronald Gregor Smith. *The Doctrine of God*. London, 1970.
6. Colin McCahon, *ibid* p. 36.
7. Colin McCahon, *ibid* p. 37.
8. Colin McCahon, letter to Elizabeth Louch, 24 October 1979.
9. Allan D. Galloway. Introduction to R. Gregor Smith *The Doctrine of God*. London, 1970, p. 14.
10. In these notes I am indebted to Malcolm H. Johnston's *Series of Studies in Theology*. Auckland, 1985 (unpublished).
11. Ronald Gregor Smith, *ibid* p. 94.
12. Ronald Gregor Smith, *ibid* p. 108ff.
13. Allan D. Galloway. *Faith in a changing culture*. London, 1967, p. 28.
14. *ibid* p. 28ff.
15. New Testament. *A letter of James*, 5:13.

16. Martin Buber. *I and Thou*. Edinburgh, 1987 edition, pp. 15–19.
17. Terence Malloon. *The Rope, the Clock & the Gift*. Australian Biennale 1988 catalogue, p. 39.
18. Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, quoted by Gordon Brown in 'With my left hand I write', *Ascent* 4, November 1969, p. 25.
19. Edwyn Bevan. *Symbolism and Belief*. London, 1938, p. 125ff.
20. *Luke* 2:9, *John* 1:9.
21. *Matthew* 2:9.
22. *Isaiah* 60:1.
23. John Macquarrie. *God-talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology*. London, 1967, p. 206ff.
24. *ibid* p. 210.
25. McCahon's 'Necessary Protection'. Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1977.
26. Martin Buber. 1957 postscript in *I and Thou*. Edinburgh, 1987 edition, p. 171.

Biography



Colin McCahon at about six months. Photograph taken by his grandfather William Ferrier.



John and Ethel McCahon, with Beatrice, Colin and Jim in Dunedin (c1925)

'Where I am living and the direction I am pointing in'

Colin McCahon held the artist's life story to be unimportant; it was the art produced that counted. This belief was strengthened by his encounters with the news media. As his paintings began to attract notoriety, journalists sought him out for his response to the latest controversy, or to satisfy the appetite of the idly curious. Early in the 1960s, after his photo appeared in a newspaper, he was so badgered by snide remarks about modern art by the owner of the local dairy that he ceased to patronise the shop and transferred his custom to another, nearby store.

As a form of self-protection, whenever possible, he avoided interviews and firmly refused to let himself be photographed. McCahon believed that the artist's personality should remain subordinate to the power of his paintings to convey what it was he desired to communicate. The question was always 'Why aren't the paintings enough?'

Yet even viewers who feel the full, innate power of McCahon's work become curious about the artist who produced it. We are convinced that the puzzling aspects of his painting will be solved by knowing something about his life and the substance of his thoughts.

1919 As was still customary at the time, for the final weeks of her confinement, Mrs McCahon stayed in Timaru at the home of her mother, Mrs Eva Beatrice Ferrier. Colin John McCahon, first son and second child of Ethel and John Kerohan McCahon of Dunedin, was born on 1 August. (Although it is frequently implied, the McCahons were not resident in Timaru.)

1920s and 1930s

The McCahons lived in the Dunedin suburb of Maori Hill. With his family Colin visited the Dunedin Art Gallery and most local exhibitions. For just over a year they lived in Oamaru before returning to Dunedin. McCahon was now convinced he would become an artist. About this time he attended Russell Clark's beginners' art classes on Saturday mornings. He detested Otago Boys' High School and later described it as 'that school for the unseeing'.

During 1936 McCahon was excited by an exhibition of paintings by Toss Woollaston, although he was not introduced to the artist until late in the following year. By that time he had convinced his father to let him study at the Dunedin Art School. This he did on an irregular basis, spending the summer terms in Nelson working in orchards.

From 1939 to 1945 McCahon was a member of the Otago Art Society. In 1940 the Society initially refused to hang his paintings but did so when other young artist members protested in his support.

1935-7 At Otago Boys' High School.

1936 July-August: visits M.T. Woollaston's exhibition, Dunedin.

1937-9 Studies at King Edward Technical College Art School.

1940s

During the early 1940s Cézanne and the early Cubists provided examples for McCahon's guidance both in landscape and figurative painting. Then Woollaston revealed his copy of Flora Scales's notes from lectures she had attended at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, Munich, in 1931. McCahon applied these theoretical ideas to his landscapes.

The middle years of the decade were marked by 'experimental' work in which the influence of Picasso appears, as well as McCahon's questioning of art painted for the artist's sake and of art as a vehicle for communication. In the uncertain post-World War II peace, McCahon saw a need to combat humanity's lack of faith. Here, an important work is his portrait of *Harriet Simeon*, a Maori woman who had saved the McCahons' young son from possible drowning.

McCahon reconsidered the direct approach of his early Otago Peninsula landscapes, but in his two new, large peninsula paintings of 1946, and in his *Nelson Hills* that followed, his study of G.A. Cotton's book *Geomorphology of New Zealand* has the landscape stripped to its geological basis. McCahon ceased to make preliminary drawings of particular landscapes and came to rely on their remembered image.

At the end of 1946 the first of the early religious paintings appeared. These figurative works continued into 1952. Religious subjects alternated with landscapes: the landscapes of the late 1940s are stark and underscored by a symbolic component, as in *Takaka: Night and Day* and *The Green Plain*.

1940-8 Various manual jobs, mainly in Nelson-Motueka region, with short periods in Dunedin and a year in Wellington, 1943-4.

1940 & 1943 Guest exhibitor, Group Shows, Christchurch.

1942 August: married Anne Hamblett, Dunedin.

1947 Becomes member of The Group, Christchurch. Exhibits regularly with The Group until it disbands in 1977.

1948 Settles in Christchurch. February: exhibition in Wellington Public Library, then Lower Hutt Public Library.

1949 August: exhibits with Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington, and in August has a joint exhibition with M.T. Woollaston which is also shown in Auckland.

1950s

These were the years through which McCahon attained mastery over his brand of modernism. The decade begins with *The Marys at the Tomb* and ends with the *Elias* series. In works such as *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*, *Towards Auckland* and the *Northland Panels*, revelation and discovery of a country through an imaginary journey into the landscape became a significant feature in his art. In this he benefitted from his stay in Melbourne in 1951 and his journey through the United States in 1958.

If Cubism provided a departure point for much of McCahon's painting during



Colin McCahon aged about 18 years (c1936-37)



Jackson's Orchard, Mapua, Nelson. Colin McCahon extreme right (c1942)



Colin and Anne McCahon (nee Hamblett). Wedding at St. Matthews Anglican Church in Dunedin, 1942. Anne's father, Archdeacon W.A. Hamblett officiated.



At the beach, Nelson. Colin McCahon with Catherine and William.

this decade, it also guided him into avenues that he made his own. The 'word' paintings of 1954–5 represent one significant road, the multifaceted lozenge shapes of his 'impressionistic' Titirangi landscapes, another. Then, as if at the right time, the trip to the United States provided a whirl of visual stimuli and open horizons. The *Northland Panels* and *The Wake* are the immediate response.

During the 1950s McCahon began his tussle with the notion of a 'way through' the flat, painted surface of a picture to the implied space that extends beyond the confines of the canvas. From this effort came several paintings which prototype the multi-series *Gate* paintings of 1961. Working in series had by then become a habit.

1951 July – August: McCahon visits Melbourne for six weeks. During the latter part of his stay, he becomes pupil of Mary Cockburn-Mercer.

1952 June: several paintings included in *Fifteen New Zealand Painters*, Irving Galleries, London. Commissioned by TEAL to portray 1953 International Air Race.

1953 May: moves to Auckland. Works at Auckland City Art Gallery as cleaner, then attendant. Acquires house in Titirangi and is joined by rest of family.

1954 September: active role in *Object and Image* exhibition, Auckland City Art Gallery.

1955 November: participates in *Unit 2* exhibition, Auckland City Art Gallery.

1956 April: appointed Keeper and Deputy Director, Auckland City Art Gallery.

1957 Holds art classes on Thursday evenings at Auckland City Art Gallery. Exhibits with Peter Webb's Argus House Gallery where, in December, he shows *Titirangi* landscapes.

1958 April: *Kauri*, *French Bay* and *Titirangi* landscapes included in *Recent Paintings by Colin McCahon*, Dunedin Public Library. April – July: Colin and Anne McCahon visit United States of America. November: with Michael Nicholson and Kase Jackson, exhibits works on paper at Kaitaia.

1959 January: works by McCahon included in opening exhibition, Gallery 91, Christchurch. April – May: *The Wake* displayed in Canterbury Public Library, then at Timaru, Dunedin, Greymouth and Nelson. June: *Three Auckland Painters* (Louise Henderson, Kase Jackson, Colin McCahon) at Auckland City Art Gallery – *Northland Panels* shown. October: *Exhibition of Paintings by Colin McCahon*, Gallery 91, includes *Northland Panels*, thirty-five *Northland* drawings and some *Elias* series paintings. October – November: McCahon represented in *Eight New Zealand Painters III*, Auckland City Art Gallery.

1960s

For most of 1960 McCahon was settling into a new home – a lull in the intense period of his painting which carried him from the late 1950s into the *Gate* paintings of 1961. As this series-within-a-series developed, so McCahon's concern at the

international buildup of atomic weapons led him into the anti-nuclear statement of his second *Gate* series and the human need for a 'way through' the dilemma such destructive weapons posed. This work stimulated further word paintings.

McCahon then produced a great many landscapes, including the two big *Landscape Theme and Variations* paintings and a large group based on the Northland region. The verticals and curved forms in these landscapes evolved into the extended *Waterfall* series. These were interrupted in 1965 by his *Numerals*. From then, well into the next year, a medley of themes occupied McCahon, some of which reflected the clerestory windows he was then painting for a chapel. Also related to his work for the chapel was the *Stations of the Cross*, 1966; a theme he later developed further. McCahon again became involved with the *Waterfall* series, then the relaxed *North Otago Landscapes* took over in 1967.

Religion reappeared in the *Still Life with Altar* and *Visible Mysteries* series of 1967–8. At this time, however, McCahon felt depressed by the 'increasing darkness'; a feeling partly brought on by the conflict between his creative urges and his concern as a teacher at the Elam School of Art. By now alcohol was also a problem.

In 1969 McCahon was given Matire Kereama's *The Tail of the Fish* and the *New English Bible*. Although he had used Maori motifs in 1962, this aspect of his work was enriched by his reading of Mrs Kereama's book, which also suggested other possibilities, as *The Lark's Song* demonstrates. Texts from *The Tail of the Fish*, from the *New English Bible* and several other sources were transcribed by McCahon onto about 90 paper scrolls during August and September. At first he was hesitant about exhibiting these, but felt relieved and happy when they were shown. With his doubts overcome, he saw

that such texts could release fresh possibilities.

1960 March: McCahon family shift from Titirangi to central Auckland suburb of Grey Lynn. August: McCahon shares Hays Prize with F.J. Jones and Julian Royds.

1961 May: *Gate*, *Waioneke* included in *Painting from the Pacific*, Auckland City Art Gallery. September: *Gate* paintings and twenty-eight *Northland* drawings, The Gallery, Symonds Street, Auckland.

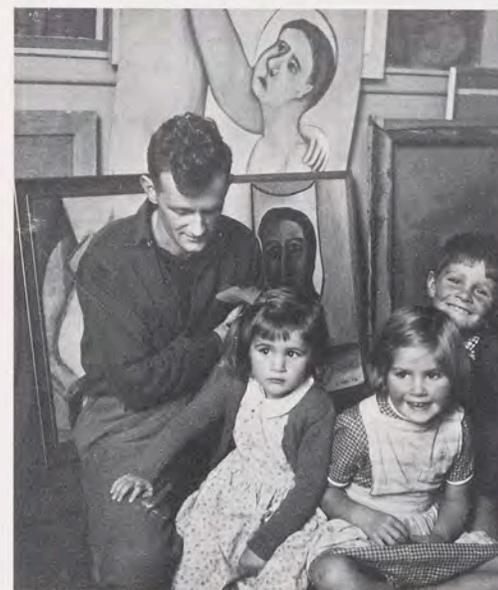
1962 September: *The Gate series and Other Recent Paintings*, Durham Street Gallery, Christchurch. November: McCahon represented in *Commonwealth Art Today*, London. Purchases motorscooter – first visit to Muriwai Beach.

1963 May: *A Retrospective Exhibition: M.T. Woollaston – Colin McCahon* opens at Auckland City Art Gallery, then tours country; *Landscape Theme with Variations* at Ikon Gallery (formerly The Gallery). July: *Northland and other Landscapes*, Otago Museum, Dunedin.

1964 August: McCahon leaves Auckland City Art Gallery and in September joins teaching staff, University of Auckland School of Fine Arts (Elam). Also in September: *Small Landscapes and Waterfalls* at Ikon Fine Arts. McCahon represented in *Contemporary New Zealand Painting and Ceramics* which



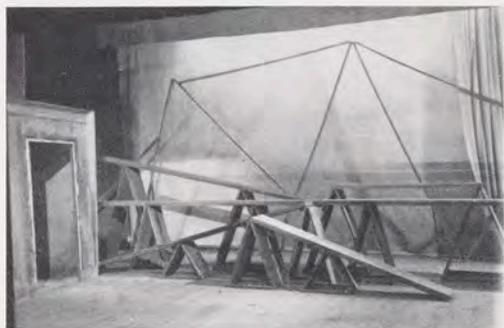
Colin McCahon, December 1948. Photograph by Theo Schoon.



Colin, Catherine, Victoria and William McCahon, Christchurch (c1952)



Victoria, Anne, Matthew, William and Catherine McCahon, Barbour Street, Christchurch (c1950) Photograph by Colin McCahon.



Set for production of Hendrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Set design by Colin McCahon. Production by Gregory Kane.

toured Japan and South East Asia, and eight works selected for *Contemporary Painting in New Zealand*, Commonwealth Institute, London, 1965.

1965 McCahon in *Eight New Zealand Artists* exhibition that tours Australia. August: *Gate: second series*, landscapes, and *Numerals*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland.

1966 February: watercolours and drawings 1937 – 1965, Barry Lett Galleries. February – March: McCahon one of *Five Auckland Painters*, Darlinghurst Galleries, Sydney (August, Barry Lett Galleries, who organised exhibition). May: completed clerestory windows in Chapel, Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, Upland Road, Auckland. August: finishes *Waterfall* mural, Otago University Library, Dunedin.

1967 August: McCahon visits Fiji as tutor, Fiji Arts Club. October: *North Otago Landscapes*, Barry Lett Galleries.

1968 July: selection of 1959 – 68 works at Bonython Art Gallery, Sydney. October: *Visible Mysteries* and thirty small *Helensville* and *South Canterbury* landscapes, Barry Lett Galleries; and *Northland Panels*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. At Muriwai, about 50 km from Auckland, McCahon establishes a studio.

1969 March: *McCahon's McCahons 1943 – 1963*, Moller's Gallery, Auckland. July: *The Canoe Tainui*, *The Canoe Hamari*, some Muriwai Beach landscapes and some 'word' paintings relating to Lazarus story, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

October: seventy-two written paper 'scroll' panels, Barry Lett Galleries.

1970s

The final months of 1969 saw McCahon again exploring the dual forces of death and rejuvenation. Motivation focused on the story of Lazarus. What followed was an intense period of creative activity similar in its significance to that of the late 1950s and early 1960s. From the first flurry of the 1970s came three large paintings, one titled, another subtitled, *Victory Over Death*; and *Gate III*. Then the impetus of the theme was modified and slowly there evolved the large, multi-series of the *Necessary Protection* paintings and drawings. During this transition, however, McCahon indulged in several colourful series of Turner-esque landscapes based on the Kaipara area – joyous in the freedom of having forsaken the demands of teaching.

The changing moods of Muriwai Beach, the sentinel rock of Motutara Island with its gannetry, and the offshore island of Oaia became the basic symbolic imagery for the *Necessary Protection* paintings. Into this landscape the presence of the fourteen Stations of the Cross established circumstance and situation, as in *Walk*. Although McCahon concluded the *Necessary Protection* theme with the *Jump* series, many characteristic features persisted in the new series which followed.

Even when the imagery differs, as with *Clouds* and *Teaching Aids*, fragments of the protection theme remained. This situation is also carried into the Maori dimension of the large *Urewera Mural* and its related paintings, such as the *Scared* series. The *Angels and Bed* series of 1977, with its echo of the death scene in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, also concerns another form of protection as McCahon responded to the illness of three friends.

Various subjects occupied McCahon's attention during 1978 and into 1979, but in the final months of that year and in 1980 his concentration was almost entirely on texts taken from the *Letter to Hebrews* and *Ecclesiastes*. Some of these texts reflect his feeling of resignation.

1970 March: *Victory Over Death or Practical Religion*, Barry Lett Galleries. At end of year McCahon leaves Elam School of Art to become full-time painter.

1971 *Gate III* painted for *Ten Big Paintings* exhibition, Auckland City Art Gallery. April: *View from the top of the cliff* and other watercolours, Peter McLeavey Gallery; and six *Muriwai* 'sunset' watercolours, *Earth/Earth* exhibition, Barry Lett Galleries. August: *The days and nights in the wilderness. . .*, *Kaipara Flat* and early *Necessary Protection* paintings, Dawson's Gallery, Dunedin. November: *Necessary Protection* paintings and drawings, Barry Lett Galleries.

1972 March: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition* opens at Auckland City Art Gallery, then tours country. Also March: *Colin McCahon - Paintings from this Summer '71 - '72: Muriwai & Kurou*, Barry Lett Galleries; and *Necessary Protection* works, Dawson's Gallery. October: the McCahons' new, small house at Muriwai completed, though they still reside in Auckland.

1973 McCahon paints *Te Whiti* and *Parihaka* paintings for Waikato Museum display, *Taranaki Saw It All*. March - June: designs stage sets for James K. Baxter Festival of Four Plays, Wellington. August: *Jet Out From Muriwai*, Barry Lett

Galleries and Peter McLeavey Gallery's show of September includes *Beach Walk* series. September - October: at Dusseldorf International Art Fair, *Victory Over Death 2* shown.

1974 May - June: *Colin McCahon: Jumps and Comets - related events in my life*, Barry Lett Galleries. November: *Recent Paintings*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, includes *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo* and *Blinds*.

1975 March: *McCahon: 'Religious' Works 1946 - 1952* opens at Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, then tours country. August: *Colin McCahon - New Paintings, 1975*, Barry Lett Galleries, includes *Urewera Mural* (before text amended) and *Teaching Aids*.

1976 August: *Scared, The Red Ones, Clouds* and first three *Angels and Bed* paintings, Peter McLeavey Gallery. September: *Noughts and Crosses, Rocks in the Sky* and *On the Road*, Barry Lett Galleries. During November, as a result of motorway construction, the McCahons shift house to another part of Grey Lynn, Auckland.

1977 August: *McCahon: Angels and Bed*, Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland. September: *McCahon's 'Necessary Protection'* opens at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, then tours country.

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



Colin McCahon early in 1961.

1979 October – November: *Truth from the King Country, Five Wounds of Christ and St Matthew – Lightning*, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1980s

After 1980, McCahon produced no new paintings, though he did continue work on several – the last two he approved for exhibition are dated March and May 1982. From then on his illness, with its debilitating affect on his mind, excluded any possibility of painting.

1980 February – March: *New Works*, Peter Webb Galleries, includes *A Song for Rua, The Testimony of Scripture, May His Light Shine* and *The Flight from Egypt*. August: *A Painting for Uncle Frank and The emptiness of all endeavour*, Peter McLeavey Gallery. October: five large paintings 1962 – 1978, in *Colin McCahon at the Dowse Art Gallery*, Lower Hutt.

1983 April: *Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is New?* and *I applied my mind*, Peter McLeavey Gallery.

1984 April: under the title *I will need words*, twenty-two McCahon paintings form 'satellite' exhibition at Fifth Biennale of Sydney. Colin and Anne McCahon briefly visit Sydney. During August *I will need words* shown at Edinburgh Festival, and in October at National Art Gallery, Wellington.

1986 December: *Colin McCahon – A Celebration* at Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt.

1987 On 27 May Colin McCahon dies in Auckland Public Hospital.

Ideas and Reflections – a Colin McCahon Miscellany

Childhood Years

I was very lucky and grew up knowing I would be a painter. I never had any doubts about this. I knew it as a very small boy and I knew it later.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 17)

Once when I was quite young – we were still living on Highgate and hadn't yet shifted to Prestwick Street – I had a few days of splendour. Two new shops had been built next door, one was Mrs McDonald's Fruit Shop and Dairy, the other was taken by a hairdresser and tobacconist. Mrs McDonald had her window full of fruit and other practical items. The hairdresser had his window painted with HAIRDRESSER AND TOBACCONIST. Painted in gold and black on a stippled red ground, the lettering large and bold, with shadows, and a feeling of being projected right through the glass and across the pavement. I watched the work being done, and fell in love with signwriting. The grace of the lettering as it arched across the window in gleaming gold, suspended on its dull red field but leaping free from its own black shadow pointed to a new and magnificent world of painting. I watched from outside as the artist working inside slowly separated himself from me (and light from dark) to make his new creation.

Following this, I did a lot of signwriting.

(1966: 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, p. 361)

When you are young and in love with paint and with painting even inferior paintings become proper food. Later, increasing discrimination robs the experience of its first joy: a critical eye is necessary for the painter but this very eye, seeing that there are blemishes in the beloved, destroys pure joy.

(1966: 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, p. 362)

Driving one day with the family over hills from Brighton or Taieri Mouth to the Taieri Plain, I first became aware of my own particular God, perhaps an Egyptian God, but standing far from the sun of Egypt in the Otago cold. Big hills stood in front of the little hills, which rose up distantly across the plain from the flat land: there was a landscape of splendour, and order and peace. (The Crucifixion hadn't yet come: perhaps this landscape was of the time before Jesus. I saw an angel in this land. Angels can herald beginnings.)

I saw something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really yet invented. My work has largely been to communicate this vision and to invent the way to see it.

(1966: 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, pp. 363-4)

The Function of Art

In this present time it is very difficult to paint for other people – to paint beyond your own ends and point directions as painters once did. Once the painter was making signs and symbols for people to live by: now he makes things to hang on walls at exhibitions.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 26)

Painting What Is There

My paintings . . . are all about the view from the top of the cliff at Ahipara and Muriwai. I am not painting protest pictures, I am painting about what is still there and what I can still see before the sky turns black with soot and the sea becomes a slowly heaving rubbish tip. I am painting what we have got now and will never get again. This, in one shape or form, has been the subject of my painting for a very long time.

(1971: *Earth/Earth*, Barry Lett Galleries)

The Painter's Life

In 1951 I visited Australia and became a pupil of Mary Cockburn-Mercer in Melbourne . . . I was taught how to be a painter, and all the implications, the solitary confinement which makes a painter's life.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 21)

This business of living off painting is tough.

(1971: Letter to Peter McLeavey, 13 July)

For each painter finally there is only one direction and this should become apparent in the painter's work.

(1971: *Manawatu Art Gallery. Centenary Collection*, p. 11)

Memory and Recollection

Takaka: Night and Day is not so much a portrait of a place as such but is a memory of a time and an experience of a particular place.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 19)

I fled north in memory and painted the *Northland Panels*.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 25)

The Known Land

If I got to Australia again I could be torn between there and here as I was in 1951. It does no good. And in the States I was mucked up by the open land round Ox Bow & the nothing, endless land around Salt Lake & out of Colorado. I don't trust myself with new land. But here I know what I'm on about and don't have to wonder where I belong and a problem is solved right away . . . I belong with the wild side of New Zealand. I'm too young yet to leave it.

(1978: letter to Kees Hoss, 15 December)

On Beauty

Painting to me is like lambs born in the spring, rain, wind, sun. Like chopping down trees in the wilderness and living with the slaughtered stumps, of not seeing the beauty I look for, and also seeing the beauty of another world – of words. I talk all my paintings to myself. . . . Tirralirra by the river, sang bold Sir Launcelot . . .

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 17)

Mondrian's Chrysanthemum of 1908, 1971 . . . refers back to my lasting feeling for Mondrian and his work . . .

This is perhaps a chrysanthemum, perhaps a sunset: quite possibly a bomb dropped on Muriwai – all these things can be beautiful, some most deadly.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, pp. 37–8)

Elias and McCahon's Own Doubts

The 1959 *Elias* series . . . come out of the story of the Crucifixion and I became interested in men's doubts. (This theme appears here and appears later – I could never call myself a Christian, therefore these same doubts constantly assail me too.)

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 27)

Techniques and Procedures

The physical art of painting, its mechanics and its labour need not interest the viewer. The work of the artist is done by the time the viewer views. What has been communicated is now of primary importance, indeed, this is the only importance a work of art has.

(1966: Concerning . . . glass panels . . . in the Chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions – Remuera)

Actual dates on paintings are forever misleading. I incline to date a work at the moment the image takes positive shape. It does not mean that the painting is finished. I often rework for months. It implies that the idea is there – has been stated.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 29)

My painting year happens first in late winter and early spring. I paint with the season and paint best during the long hot summers. I prefer to paint at night or more especially in the late summer afternoons when, as the light fades, tonal relationships become terrifyingly clear.

At night I paint under a very large incandescent light bulb. I've been doing this for a long time. I am only now,

and slowly, becoming able to paint in the mornings.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 34)

The King of the Jews . . . The inspiration – the legend from a Rinso packet and the yellow I suppose from Byzantium. The use of legend with space composition could be very telling.

(1947: letter to Rodney Kennedy)

[The *Northland* drawings] comprised about eighty works all painted in the attic at the Art Gallery. The sheets of paper were all spread out on the floor in a row and I simply walked along the line with the brush in my hand using it to create, as it were, a continuous image. I think this method gave me the feeling of spontaneity I was after. In this way they were all closely linked together, almost like one continuous work about forty-five feet long. I then considered them all carefully, for at this stage I had only the main compositional lines down, and got rid of a number that I thought would not come off. Later they were worked over individually. I spent about a month working on them making alterations and corrections . . . The paper was a kind of young cardboard of a somewhat yellowish colour and the combination of that yellowish colour and black and somewhat gritty Chinese 'writing' ink was about as visually splendid as road signs.

(1969: *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 44, pp. 10–11)

[In] paintings from about this period [1962] I used unsized canvas. The canvas was made sopping wet and on this oil paint was used, but only after most of the oil had been soaked out first by putting it on paper. This gives a very matt finish to the final painting, but it has to be done very

quickly. The technique also allows a great deal of freedom.

(1969: *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 44, p. 13)

I'm finished with frames and all that they imply. I want paintings to pin or nail up or tie up with string. I think it gives them more freedom to act.

(1971: *Manawatu Art Gallery. Centenary Collection*, p. 11)

Theoretical Considerations

Space is no longer tied to the Renaissance heresy of lines running back from the picture frame but is freed from these ties to reach out in all directions from the painted surface of the picture. . . . Good contemporary painting lives with us, not separated from us by a picture frame.

(1953: *Home and Building*, January 1954, p. 69)

[In Braque's paintings] there is nothing enclosed, there are ways through; you can trace the design and find your way out of the maze. All of his paintings are open like that; it's a matter of tone touching tone. A dark red will hit a dark yellow, and look at the space where they meet, and they drag, one with the other, and the line doesn't seem to be broken but it is. There is a gap there you can look through into infinity. This gives Braque incredible strength, much more so than Picasso.

(1979: interview, G.H. Brown with C. McCahon)

All the various gates I opened and shut at this time [*Gate* series, 1961] were painted with reference to problems the painter Mondrian had struggled with in his work and I had now to confront too. How to make painting beat like, and with, a

human heart. All his later paintings did this and I had to find out how. Some of mine did work others were probably rejected transplants.

(1974: *Islands* 10, pp. 396-7)

Mondrian, it seemed to me, came up in this century as a great barrier – the painting to END all painting. As a painter, how do you get around either a Michelangelo or a Mondrian? It seems that the only way is not more 'masking-tape' but more involvement in the human situation.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 28)

[*Takaka: Night and Day*] states my interest in landscape as a symbol of place and also of the human condition.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 19)

Landscape theme and variations, 1963. . . . They were painted to be hung about eight inches from floor level. I hoped to throw people into an involvement with the raw land, and also with raw painting. No mounts, no frames, a bit curly at the edges, but with, I hoped, more than the usual New Zealand landscape meaning. . . . I hope you can understand what I was trying to do at the time – like spitting on the clay to open the blind man's eyes.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 30)

As a painter I may often be more worried about you than you are about me and if I wasn't concerned I'd not be doing my work properly as a painter. Painting can be a potent way of talking.

(1972: *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, p. 38)

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Notes

This exhibition is divided into seven thematic sections. Catalogue numbers include an initial letter which indicates the section:

- E Early Religious Works
- L Landscapes from the South
- T Titirangi/Kauri
- J Journeys
- G Gates
- N Numbers and Texts
- V Victory Over Death

There has often been confusion over the titles of Colin McCahon's work. Some titles were changed by the artist for different exhibitions, and in publications over the years a variety of conventions have been followed. The sources listed below and some earlier publications were consulted in arriving at the titles used in this catalogue. Our use of upper and lower case follows principally the form adopted by Gordon Brown in *Colin McCahon: Artist*. All titles used in that book were discussed with and approved by Colin McCahon.

The inscriptions reproduced here are those which refer to the title of the work.

All measurements are in millimetres, height before width.

The following works are included in the touring exhibition.

Catalogue numbers: E6, E7, E9, E11, E13, E15

L9, L10

T2, T5, T6, T7, T10, T12,
T15, T17

J13, J14, J15, J16, J17, J20,
J21, J26

G1, G3, G7, G9, G11, G12,
G13, G15, G17, G18, G19,
G21, G22

N3, N5, N6, N9 (four panels),
N12, N13, N14, N18, N19

V1, V3, V4, V5, V6

Abbreviations

- CMS *Colin McCahon's survey exhibition*
Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972
- GHB Gordon H. Brown *Colin McCahon: Artist*
Auckland, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1984
- IWNW *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word
and Number Paintings*
National Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1984
- NP *McCahon's 'Necessary Protection'*
Govett Brewster Art Gallery,
New Plymouth, 1977
- Q Auckland City Art Gallery *Quarterly*
- RW *McCahon: 'Religious' Works 1946-1952*
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston
North, 1975

EARLY RELIGIOUS WORKS

In the years 1946 to 1952 McCahon peopled his empty New Zealand landscape with Biblical figures. He reworked Gothic and Renaissance images (Titian, Fra Angelico) via a popular vernacular and modernist pictorial structures. Frequently he used frames within the main picture surface for symbols or inset landscapes. The drawing is thick and black and primitive-looking. Gauguin certainly, and perhaps other European artists of the nineteenth century, come to mind. Often the figures are supported by texts inscribed in the picture, an early phase of the text-picture that McCahon made much of later.

- E1. *The Virgin and Child Compared . . .* 1948
oil on canvas on board 1052 x 840
McCahon Nov '48 (l.r.)
The Blessed Virgin Compared to a jug of pure Water and the infant Jesus to a lamp (c.l.-l.l.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch Bequest, 1963
RW cat. no. 33, ill. b/w p. 29
CMS cat. no. 10, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 57, b/w p. 111

This classic McCahon text and image combination is in the later, smoother, religious style. Anna Magnani in *Rome, Open City* inspired the figure of the Virgin. The symbolic lamp and the jug float in undefined space, as if against a gold ground. Similar floating objects as symbols appear in paintings by the fifteenth century Dominican artists in Florence, Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico.

- E2. *The Lamp in my Studio* 1945
oil on board 511 x 646
Colin McCahon Estate
CMS cat. no. 3, ill. b/w

- E3. *Entombment (after Titian)* 1947
oil on board 517 x 646
McCahon Jan May '47 (u.l.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased 1980, from the Molly Morpeth Canaday Fund
RW cat. no. 12, ill. b/w p. 18
CMS cat. no. 5, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 20, b/w p. 37

An earlier oil sketch is even closer to Titian's painting in the Prado. The figures are set in front of hills not unlike those in the *The Caterpillar Landscape* (L6). There are Crucifixions and an Annunciation in 1947 in a similar style.

- E4. *Figure and Cross* 1947
conte on paper 414 x 263
for Rodney, one of the drawings for your painting McCahon (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Presented by Rodney Kennedy, 1948
RW cat. no. 17, ill. b/w p. 17

The figure on the ladder is connected with the origins of Crucifixion imagery for McCahon: men repairing a power line. There is an earlier preliminary drawing in the collection of Gordon H. Brown. The strong black chalk is closely related to the black-line painting style of these years.

- E5. *Crucifixion with Lamp* 1947
oil on board 760 x 912
McCahon July 47 (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch Bequest, 1963
RW cat. no. 14, ill. b/w p. 19
GHB col. ill. no. 6

One of several of this subject, seen by McCahon's friend Charles Brasch as images of 'The Artist' crucified by the public in New Zealand. Whatever other justification there may have been for this view, the traditional imagery here is explicitly that of Christ. The blood flowing from his left side is unusual, as is the introduction of the lamp with the kerosene lamp on a table in the lower left. This *Crucifixion* is one of two by McCahon allied to the post-war European interest in the agonised Christ of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, as for instance in paintings by Graham Sutherland.

- E6. *The Promised Land* 1948
oil on canvas 920 x 1370
McCahon Feb Aug '48 (u.l.)
The Promised Land (u.c.)
Colin McCahon Estate
RW cat. no. 29, ill. b/w p. 26
GHB pl. 102, ill. b/w p. 207

This the most complex of McCahon's multiple scenes of the 1940s. There are separate frames for the figure looking down and for the inset view of Golden Bay, Nelson. The frame of the inset landscape serves as a table for the jug and candle. These, as symbols of purity and light, are regular figures in McCahon's symbolic language. See also *The Virgin and Child Compared . . .* [E1].

- E7. *I Paul to you at Ngatimote* 1946
oil on card 505 x 635
I Paul to you at Ngatimote (l.c.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1982
RW cat. no. 4, ill. b/w p. 15
GHB pl. 17, b/w p. 33

The correct spelling of the place name is *Ngatimoti*. It is a farming locality on the east bank of the Motueka River, Waimea County, Nelson. The name was apparently contrived by Pakeha settlers from the two words *Na Timoti* (belonging to Timothy) found carved on a tree in the area. The title thus recalls Paul's letters to Timothy in the New Testament.

- E8. *Hail Mary* 1948
oil on canvas re-mounted on waxed linen
935 x 890 (irreg.)
McCahon Oil - (illegible) 48 (l.r.)
HAIL MARY. (u.l.)
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Presented by the artist, 1978
RW cat. no. 32, ill. b/w p. 28
GHB pl. 23, b/w p. 41

The figures in several 1948-1950 paintings are half-lengths or heads only. The Annunciation is a favourite subject, here with three lilies in a separate rounded frame in the middle. The angel in several versions is represented as a head speaking to the bowed head of the Virgin. Local references here include the pigsty in the background and McCahon's use of wild arum lilies.

- E9. *The Valley of Dry Bones* 1947
oil on canvas 938 x 901 (irreg.)
The Valley of Dry Bones Painted By
Colin McCahon November 1947 (l.r.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased 1983
RW cat. no. 20, ill. b/w p. 21
IWNW cat. no. 7, col. ill.

Like *Hail Mary* [E8], one of a group of small square canvases of various subjects, taken to England by McCahon's friend Patrick Hayman and returned to New Zealand only in 1975, after twenty-five years. (The others were *Dear Wee June* and *Triple Takaka*.) This is the only religious work at this time which is based entirely on the Old Testament text: *Ezekiel* 37:9. The prophet Ezekiel speaks in front of hills not unlike those in *Takaka: Night and Day* [J28].

After 1952, there are few figure paintings and many landscapes. Text itself now takes the place of Biblical figures. Letters and words are treated as visible objects, elaborately described, often as three dimensions reduced to two in a cubist manner. In several there are hints of landscape behind the words, and in *I and Thou* [E11] an early use of the diamond within the rectangle, a major motif of the 1960s. By 1959, in the *Elias* paintings, the text is more profuse and often more like freehand writing. The result looks much like painted versions of Blake's printed books. *The Wake* [N9] of 1958 is even more like a Blake text, but much enlarged. McCahon called it an 'illumination', the term used for mediaeval figured manuscripts.

- E10. *Let us possess one world* 1955
enamel and oil on board 760 x 560
McCahon MAY-JULY '55 (u.r.)
University of Auckland Students'
Association
CMS cat. no. 21 ill. b/w
GHB col. ill. no. 17

- E11. *I and Thou* 1954-55
oil on board 559 x 533
McCahon NOV '54 JULY '55 (l.l.)
Miss L.D. Gilmour, Auckland
CMS cat. no. 19, ill. b/w

As text, as fundamental as 'I am', the relation of self and other. This is the title of Martin Buber's celebrated book. A reading of the significance of the formal contrasts between the two, 'I' and 'Thou', would seem to be encouraged.

- E12. *I Am* 1954
oil on hessian 373 x 586
McCahon Feb '54. (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch
Bequest, 1973
GHB pl. 32, ill. b/w p. 56

One of the first written paintings. The subject that creates its own being by declaring itself is a recurrent figure of McCahon's painting. The architecture of the letters is as intricate here as in the later *Victory over Death 2* [V3] or *Gate III*.

- E13. *Elias Triptych* 1959
(*Elias* series)
enamel and sand on board
left panel: Seal the Stone 1219 x 838
McCahon Aug. 59 (l.r.)
centre panel: Red, Black and White
landscape 1219 x 914
McCahon 10-2-59 (l.l.)
right panel: Thus it is written 1219 x 838
McCahon Aug. 28. '59 (l.c.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1982
CMS cat. no. 36, centre panel ill. b/w
GHB pl. 61, b/w p. 119
IWNW cat. no. 8, col. ill.

The outer panels were painted later than the central one. The centre belongs to an early phase of the *Elias* series, the others to the short period just before the exhibition of the series in Christchurch. Like *On Building Bridges* (L9) the triptych form was probably not planned from the very first. The other *Elias* paintings are single. The centre panel has no text and an ambiguous image, suggesting several possible readings. The outer panels are more explicit with their text references to the Entombment and the Resurrection. The texts are from *Matthew* 27:63 and *Luke* 24:38, 45:6; also *The Bible as Designed to be Read as Literature*, by Ernest Sutherland Bates.

- E14. *Elias cannot save him* 1959
(*Elias* series)
enamel on board 1470 x 990
McCahon April '59 Aug '59 (l.l.)
Colin McCahon Estate
GHB col. ill. no. 18

- E15. *Will he save him?* 1959
(*Elias* series)
enamel on board 1220 x 900
(verso) COLIN McCAHON WILL HE
SAVE HIM? June-August 1959
Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented
by the artist, 1982
CMS cat. no. 37, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 60, b/w p. 118
IWNW cat. no. 7, cover ill.

- E16. *He calls for Elias* 1959
(*Elias* series)
oil on board 775 x 671
McCahon Aug '59 (l.l.)
Private collection, Australia
CMS cat. no. 35, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 59, b/w p. 117

- E17. *John in Canterbury* 1959
enamel on board 530 x 1770
McCahon, August '59. John in
Canterbury (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Presented by
the artist, 1980
CMS cat. no. 33, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 44, b/w p. 76

This is one of two paintings for friends. The other is *Toss in Greymouth* for Sir Mountford Tosswill Woollaston. McCahon hung the *John in Canterbury* as the cross-bar of a Tau Cross in the 1972 survey show. The upright was *You are witnesses* [E18]. This was an assemblage not thought of when the pictures were painted. The painting alludes to the crows in Van Gogh's late *Cornfield* painting. John Caselberg, the poet, was a friend and frequent collaborator of McCahon's. McCahon is quoting Part III of John Caselberg's poem 'Van Gogh'. He subsequently made lithographs for the poem.

E18. *You are witnesses* 1959

(*Elias* series)

enamel on board 1600 x 419

August '59. McCahon (l.c.)

Colin McCahon Estate

CMS cat. no. 34, ill. b/w

The text sources for this work are *Matthew*
28:6,7 and *Luke* 24:48

E19. *Let be, let be* 1959

(*Elias* series)

enamel and sand on board 1830 x 1220

McCahon. 59. (l.r.)

Colin McCahon Estate

CMS cat. no. 38, col. ill.

GHB pl. 58, b/w p. 116

E20. *Sacred to the memory of Death* 1955

oil on canvas 640 x 760

Colin McCahon Estate

CMS cat. no 20, ill. b/w

LANDSCAPES FROM THE SOUTH

From 1939 onwards, McCahon's landscape painting is full of tension between the traditional European notion of a pictorial depth and the modernist notion of the picture as a material object. Characteristic are the hill profiles parallel to the vertical of the picture-plane. McCahon treats them as simple geometric outline, divided internally into angular slabs. He arrives at this in the later 1940s. In the 1950s it becomes the basis for cubist-influenced landscapes. But the horizontal land or sea plane leading into the distance is also attractive to him, especially in coastal scenes. These are finally tilted up into the vertical plane and structured like the vertical hills from *On Building Bridges* [L9] onwards. The grid-like geometry is nowhere purist. McCahon's sensitivity to colour and the material of paints is clearly visible in all these paintings. This persists even into the most simplifying landscapes of the later 1960s.

- L1. *D'Urville Island from Ruby Bay* (1) 1945
crayon and chalk on paper 220 x 281
McCahon 45 (u.r.) McCahon 45 (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. John and Ethel McCahon Bequest, 1973
- L2. *D'Urville Island from Ruby Bay* (2) 1945
crayon on paper 219 x 281
Colin McCahon 1945 (u.r.)
McCahon (l.r.)
D'Urville Island from Ruby Bay (u.l.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. John and Ethel McCahon Bequest 1973

These two drawings show McCahon formulating a coastal scenery, with open foreground, deep space and a marked horizon. This kind of landscape returns in the 1950s paintings of the Manukau, and later, in the early 1970s, in the landscapes of Kaipara Flat. They also serve as a reminder that McCahon worked extensively in drawing media as well as in paint on board or canvas.

- L3. *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill* 1939
oil on board 760 x 1345
COLIN McCAHON 1939 (l.r.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. John and Ethel McCahon Bequest, 1973
GHB pl. 9, b/w p. 15

The first major statement of the landscape of hills stripped bare, stretching into depth. The gritty low-toned painted surface clings to the picture-plane, even at this early stage of his work (he was only twenty years old). Numerous drawings for this landscape and its later variants are in the Hocken Library; studies for it are the product of McCahon's early and continuing fondness for walking. After seeing this painting, a friend gave Colin and Anne McCahon G.A. Cotton's *Geomorphology in New Zealand* as a wedding present.

- L4. *Nelson Landscape from Queen's Drive* 1947
watercolour 270 x 756
McCahon '47 Nelson Landscape from Queens Drive (l.r.)
Bank of New Zealand, Wellington

This work, like other drawings, was dated from memory some years after its completion. The long horizontal landscape with an even width of hills across the surface is the first version of the long landscape that emerges in the later series. Like many New Zealand artists, McCahon is at home in watercolour painting.

- L5. *Pangatotara* (1) 1943
oil on card 380 x 475
McCahon '43 (l.r.)
Fletcher Challenge Ltd, Wellington

This work and *Pangatotara* (2) [L7] belong to the first phase of McCahon's cubifying of the landscape. At this time he came closest in drawing and painting to M.T. Woollaston's work, and both were still interested in Cézanne.

- L6. *The Caterpillar Landscape* 1947
oil on canvas 737 x 1060 (irreg.)
McCahon September '47 (l.c.-l.r.)
(verso) COLIN McCAHON FROM A MAP OF THE HUTT VALLEY DRAWN BY RON O'REILLY OIL SEPTEMBER 1947
Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt
Presented by the artist, 1980
GHB col. ill. no. 2

A range of hills again, the Hutt Valley, but here treated as a kind of black line drawing, with colour, not unlike a 1940s Picasso. The work is based on a map drawn by Ron O'Reilly to instruct Colin how to find Ron's house. There are drawings related to this landscape.

- L7. *Pangatotara* (2) 1943
oil on board 503 x 393
McCahon 43 (l.r.)
Private collection, Auckland
CMS cat. no. 2, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 11, b/w p. 18

- L8. *Otago Landscape* 1950
oil on canvas on board 675 x 827
C.McC '50 McCahon (l.l.)
Victoria University of Wellington

The simpler geometric-looking landscape precedes *On Building Bridges* [L9] in a number of variants. This is one of several treatments of hills as overlapping vertical planes.

- L9. *On Building Bridges* (triptych) 1952
oil on hardboard 1067 x 915 (each panel)
left panel: ON BUILDING BRIDGES
McCahon July-Sept '52 (l.l.)
centre panel: McCahon Aug-Sept '52 (l.l.)
right panel: McCahon Aug-Sept '52 (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1958
CMS cat. no. 16, ill. b/w (left panel)
GHB pl. 27, ill. b/w p. 49
Q 44 1969 ill. b/w pp. 6-7 & cover (left panel)

In its original state this work was titled *Paddocks for sheep* and was similar to the *North Canterbury Landscape* [L10]. It is the most thorough integration of hills and plains together. There is the additional element here of the great black blocks, apparently on the picture surface, not in depth – the girders of a bridge under construction. They seem to

continue from one panel to the next, and yet are obviously incomplete and discontinuous. Not only do they have a symbolic importance to do with the notion of bridging gaps, but they also announce the important formal theme of connection and disjunction from one panel to the next. This is crucial to the formulation of major series such as the *Northland Panels* [J18] of 1958 and *Te Tangi o te Pipiwhararua* [J21] of 1974. It signals a growing awareness of the active role of the beholder in painting. The panels, painted at different times, were much overpainted. The work was completed after McCahon's visit to Melbourne and his contact with Mary Cockburn-Mercer, which confirmed for him that he was 'on the right track' regarding his understanding of cubism.

- L10. *North Canterbury Landscape* 1951
oil on canvas 915 x 1080
McCahon May '51. (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented
by the Friends of the Auckland City
Art Gallery, 1960
CMS cat. no. 15, ill. b/w
Q 44 1969 ill b/w p. 7

This landscape shows one of several attempts to work out a way of integrating horizontal plains with the vertical picture plane. The zig-zag grid is common to a group of paintings and drawings of this time. Aerial photographs of Canterbury plains and the hills beyond were an important source for these paintings.

- L11. *French Bay* c.1954
gouache on paper 732 x 872
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1975

- L12. *Manukau 5* 1959
oil on board 562 x 764
MANUKAU 5 McCahon FEB 54 (l.l.)
Margot L. Philips, Hamilton

There were two series of Manukau works, one in oil in January 1954, and the other in watercolour in January 1956. In several of the earlier works there is a similar notion of making the wide sky area into varied and looping curls of light, and extending this into the land areas also. About this time McCahon begins to play off curved motifs against straight in the *Kauri* paintings especially, but these,

with their vertical trees, did not present the difficulty of getting a horizontal plane of sea onto the vertical picture.

- L13. *Whale Beach II* 1954
ink wash on paper 557 x 760
McCahon 'Sep '54 (l.l.) whale beach II (l.r.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1966
Q 44 1969 ill. b/w p. 9

One of two black and white drawings, typical of McCahon's earlier approach to the Manukau Harbour which faced him in his new location in Titirangi.

- L14. *North Otago Landscape 2* 1967
acrylic on hardboard 1833 x 1199
McCahon 67 North Otago (l.r.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand.
Purchased 1969

McCahon's interest in hill landscapes continues into his later painting. The reduction to very simple coloured areas, the simplest of hill and land divisions, are the marks of his mature style. This was a favourite landscape region for McCahon from his childhood days in Oamaru; the landscape becomes something like a sign and capable of becoming a symbol. The interest in the actual painting shifts from the elaboration of many small facets in the 1940s and the 1950s, to the broad enrichment of textural surfaces, however dark or low-toned. Characteristically, this was one of a series, for the walls of Barry Lett Galleries (now RKS Art), Auckland.

- L15. *Spring, Ruby Bay* 1945
oil on card 680 x 459
Spring Ruby Bay 1945 (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1986
CMS cat. no. 4, ill. b/w

One of McCahon's favourite works, looser in painting than the earlier Pangatotara works, and more like some of the 1950s paintings. Characteristically accepting what came along, McCahon did not paint out the 'explosion in the sky' put in by his young son William.

TITIRANGI/KAURI

After *On Building Bridges* [L9] which begins with the Canterbury plains, McCahon's imagery in the mid 1950s is all local to Auckland and especially the western heights of Titirangi and views over the Manukau Harbour. Early on, they show an absorption of a constructive kind of European painting, beginning with Braque and Gris and touching on Mondrian. At this time similar painting appears in McCahon's contemporary, Milan Mrkusich, and in the visiting English painter Michael Nicholson. Probably the later Léger-influenced work of the older painter John Weeks was a model. A landscape-based abstraction, often referred to as 'semi-abstraction' in New Zealand, was the dominant mode in Auckland painting in the 1950s. It appears in several of McCahon's pupils, notably Alwyn Lasenby, Jean Horsley and Freda Simmonds. The earlier paintings show a more determined grid-like treatment of overlapping varied views of the same location, all in one frame – especially the various paintings of French Bay. The later Titirangi paintings, which McCahon at one time called his 'impressionist' style, break the geometry into small diamond-shaped contrastive colour patches. These diamonds are enlarged to become the basic motif of many of the paintings of the early 1960s.

- T1. *House in Trees, Titirangi* 1953
oil on card on board 545 x 616
McCahon '53 (l.l.)
Private collection, Auckland
CMS cat. no. 17 ill. b/w

As with many paintings at this time, this is a small-scale and intimate landscape. The kauri trees around the little house in Titirangi are worked over and over in the next few years.

- T2. *Kauri Landscape* 1954
watercolour and gouache on paper
558 x 763
McCahon June '54 (l.r.)
(verso) *Kauri Landscape* 1954 (l.c.)
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
Purchased 1966

A move away from the most formal and precise arrangement of the kauri motif, to something more like a view again.

- T3. *Kauri* 1954
wash drawing 636 x 509
McCahon June '54 (l.r.)
(verso) June 1954 *Kauri* (l.c.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1966
GHB pl. 30, b/w p. 54
Q 44 1969 ill. b/w p. 8

This drawing shows the fundamental interlocking of curved lines and flattened planes that continues through the cubist *Kauri* paintings and drawings of 1954.

- T4. *Kauri* 1953.
oil on card on board 516 x 646
McCahon Dec '53. (l.l.) (verso) Colin
McCahon Domestic Landscape
Miss L.D. Gilmour, Auckland

The geometry, again within a painted oval, here becomes more incisively linear.

- T5. *Kauri Trees* 1954
oil on canvas 777 x 883
McCahon April 54. (l.l.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch
Bequest, 1973
GHB pl. 31, ill. b/w p. 55

The drawing of trees slips in and out of the drawn oval frame, as do the striations of light coming through the trees. As with *On Building Bridges* [L9] McCahon shows an interest in extending his painting beyond the normal confines.

- T6. *Kauri Forest* 1955
oil on canvas 883 x 778
McCahon '55 (l.l.)
Victoria University of Wellington

This begins to show the small diamonds of the later *Titirangi* paintings. But for the time being there is still some way to go with the simplifying geometrical grid.

- T7. *French Bay* 1956
oil on canvas 1270 x 965
McCahon JUNE JULY SEPT '56 (l.r.)
FRENCH BAY (u.r.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Presented by the Friends of the National
Art Gallery, 1983
GHB col. ill. no. 12

This is the summation of the *French Bay* motif. It elaborates on the *Manukau*-like clouds of 1954, as well as on the effects of radiant light in several of the 1954 paintings. It is constructed from apparently multiple and shifting views of the same stretch of water and sky.

- T8. *French Bay, Titirangi* 1955
watercolour 384 x 560
24.11.55 McCahon (l.l.) *French Bay, Titirangi*
November 1955. Colin McCahon
(l.l. on mount)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased with a New Zealand Lotteries
Board Grant, 1983

- T9. *French Bay, Titirangi* 1955
watercolour 382 x 560
McCahon 55 (l.r.)
French Bay Titirangi. November 1955
Colin McCahon (l.l. on mount)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased with a New Zealand Lotteries
Board Grant, 1983

- T10. *French Bay* 1955
gouache on card 554 x 760
McCahon 16.11.55 *French Bay* (l.l.)
Private collection, Auckland

These works turn away from the close-up vertical trees to the open expanses of the *Manukau*, seen from the beach at French Bay. They seem to be made up of vertical and sometimes overlapping strips, each of which suggests a similar view with a different light, or from a different angle. They are much taken up with continuity and discontinuity across the lines of the vertical and horizontal grid. They suggest the compositional method of the *Northland Panels* [J18] which make real separation between the vertical strips – separate canvases, and the emphatic discontinuity between one scene and another.

T11. *French Bay* 1956

oil on canvas 564 x 461

McCahon Feb. June '56 French Bay. (l.r.)

Private collection, Wellington

This is a transition between the gouaches discussed above, and the National Gallery's large *French Bay* [T7].

T12. *Flounder Fishing, Night, French Bay*

1956-57

enamel on board 725 x 810

Flounder Fishing Night McCahon

FRENCH BAY SEPT 56 57 JUNE (l.r.)

Miss A.M. Ryburn, Auckland

GHB pl. 34, ill. b/w p. 58

The by-now familiar grid-like rectangular motifs are broken here into much smaller particles. The tone, with much dark paint, is not unlike that of many word-paintings of the later 1960s and early 1970s.

T13. *French Bay* 1957

oil on board 585 x 1203

McCahon '57 (l.l.) FRENCH BAY (u.r.)

Chartwell Collection, Hamilton

Here French Bay is not a view across the Manukau, but down from a cliff. This aerial view has the same flattening function as in the Canterbury plains paintings. The landforms, elsewhere reduced to sign-like shapes, are overwhelmed by reflected light from the sea.

T14. *Pohutukawa Tree, Tide Out* 1958

oil on board 609 x 450

C.Mc. '58, Feb. (l.l.) Pohutukawa Tree

Tide out (u.l.)

Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch

Bequest, 1969

GHB pl. 35, ill. b/w p. 61

This is one of several smaller paintings of the Titirangi group. The irregular diamonds are larger here, in an anticipation of the even larger motifs of the *Gate* paintings of 1961.

T15. *Titirangi* 1956

oil on board 653 x 525

McCahon TITIRANGI JAN 23 FEB 13

DEC 8-9 1954 (u.l.)

Mr W.B. Brandford, Taumarunui

The radiant light effects that run through the more grid-like formal paintings from 1954 to 1956 are dominant in the immediately following years. The motif is similar to that in the drawings *Towards Auckland* [J13-16], but now broken into small diamond-shaped particles of light, as if going back through Cézanne to the Impressionists.

T16. *North Shore Landscape* 1954

oil on canvas 563 x 462

McCahon Aug '54 (l.r.)

Paris Family Collection, Wellington

This is the most radiant of the paintings of this year, with a wide variety of the flattened-out, curved and straight forms seen in the *Kauris*. As with nearly all the paintings of this time, it is set in the direction of a synthetic cubist constructed landscape. There are a few known figure drawings and paintings, making use of almost exactly the same formal vocabulary, opposed and interlocking curves and straights.

T17. *Rocks are for building with* 1958

oil on unstretched canvas

1810 x 840 (irreg.)

McCahon '58 (l.r.) Rocks are for building with (l.l.)

Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New

Plymouth. Presented by the New Zealand

Art Gallery Directors' Council, 1979

A loose hanging canvas, akin to the *Northland Panels* [J18] and *The Wake* [N9]. The motifs of the previous years are translated into a new scale. The indirect source for this work was Paul Cézanne's *Mont St Victoire seen from Bibiemus*, which McCahon saw at Baltimore in 1958.

T18. *French Bay with Fish Rock and Headland* 1959

oil on unstretched canvas 1942 x 895

McCahon 15.11.59 (l.l.)

Colin McCahon Estate

This is half way between the diamond patternings of the *Titirangi* paintings and the *Gates*.

JOURNEYS

Though many of the paintings are single, they often belong to a succession of attempts to work the same motif. The finality of any one version is never quite certain. Many of the motifs of earlier works generate later works and are enriched in the process. The method of working over and over motifs is permitted by an earlier recognition (between 1948 and 1950) of the possibility of many versions of a view within one frame.

The first set of separate views intended as a series is *Towards Auckland* [J13-16] of 1953, followed by the multiple images of the mid 1950s (*French Bay*). The major development comes in 1958 with the free-hanging unframed canvases of the *Northland Panels* [J18]. It is vitally important that these be seen not just as one panoramic view made from a series of strips of canvas: the images are discontinuous, various views representing a variety of memories glimpsed as from a travelling car.

The *Northland* drawings comprised the longest of all these series. Such series were often designed for a specific gallery installation, as a kind of painted scenery within which the beholder was expected to walk (not stand still). *Numerals*, and then from 1966 on, the *Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, provide clues to a specific progress.

- J1. *O let us weep* 1969
 acrylic on hardboard (4 panels)
 610 x 609 (each panel)
 panel 1: McCahon April 1969 (l.l.)
 O LET US WEEP. I. (u.l.)
 panel 2: McCahon April 1969. (l.l.)
 O LET US WEEP. II. (u.l.)
 panel 3: McCahon April '69 (l.r.)
 O LET US WEEP. III. (u.l.)
 panel 4: McCahon April 1969 (l.r.)
 O LET US WEEP. IV (u.l.)
 (verso – on each panel)
 O let us weep Colin McCahon The April
 paintings 1969. No (1-4) of a series of four
 Bank of New Zealand, Wellington

- J2. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 603 x 507
 McCahon April '59 Northland. (l.l.)
 (verso) Northland 59 (l.c.)
 Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1966
- J3. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 628 x 508
 Northland McCahon April '59. (l.l.)
 Auckland City Art Gallery
 Anonymous gift, 1985
- J4. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 560 x 503 (irreg.)
 McCahon Northland April '59 (l.l.)
 (verso) Northland. 1959 (l.c.)
 Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
 Purchased 1966
- J5. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 633 x 508
 McCahon April '59 Northland (l.l.)
 Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
 Purchased 1986
- J6. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 650 x 510
 McCahon April '59 Northland (l.l.)
 Miss A.M. Ryburn, Auckland
- J7. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 628 x 505
 McCahon April '59 Northland. (l.r.)
 Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch
 Purchased 1959
 GHB pl. 50, b/w p. 99
- J8. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 629 x 506
 McCahon April '59 Northland (l.r.)
 Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch
 Purchased 1959
 GHB pl. 50, b/w p. 99
- J9. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 632 x 505
 McCahon April '59. Northland (l.r.)
 Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch
 Purchased 1959
 GHB pl. 50, b/w p. 99

- J10. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 633 x 506
 McCahon Northland April '59 (l.l.)
 Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch
 Purchased 1959
 GHB pl. 50, b/w p. 99

- J11. *Northland* 1959
 ink wash 632 x 513 (sight)
 McCahon April '59 Northland (l.l.)
 Private collection, Wellington

- J12. *Northland Landscape* 1960
 ink wash 555 x 455
 McCahon '60 (l.l.)
 Waikato Museum of Art and History,
 Hamilton. Purchased 1966

These were painted between the first and second phase of the painting of the *Elias* paintings, and about the same time as the first sets of watercolour *Numerals*. They represent glimpses of memories of Northland, painted very quickly in Chinese ink on yellowish cardboard. Like the *Towards Auckland* drawings [J13-16] there has been no attempt since they were first shown to reassemble any of them. They have been dispersed in various collections, the exception being the four in the Canterbury Public Library, which were for many years framed in the one frame. In such series, the single painting gives way to the whole as a succession of images.

- J13. *Towards Auckland 3* 1953
 watercolour 558 x 762
 Towards Auckland 3 (l.l.)
 McCahon Dec. '53 (l.r.)
 Waikato Museum of Art and History,
 Hamilton. Purchased 1965

- J14. *Towards Auckland 4* 1953
 watercolour 558 x 760
 TOWARDS AUCKLAND. 4.
 McCahon Dec. '53. (l.l.)
 Waikato Museum of Art and History,
 Hamilton. Purchased 1965.
 GHB col. ill. no. 10

J15. *Towards Auckland 5* 1953
 watercolour 543 x 748 (sight)
 Towards Auckland 5 McCahon Dec. '53. (l.l.)
 Auckland City Art Gallery, Purchased 1965
 CMS cat. no. 18 ill. b/w
 Q 44 1969 ill. b/w p. 8

J16. *Towards Auckland 6* 1954
 watercolour 534 x 747
 Towards Auckland 6 (l.l.)
 McCahon JAN 54 (l.r.)
 Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles Brasch
 Bequest, 1963

A series of six (possibly eight) watercolours intended to be shown together, but subsequently split, some sent as Christmas presents to friends. These are recollections of views of the Titirangi hills seen from the bus as McCahon went to work in the city. He may have been going towards Auckland, but they are views looking back to Titirangi. They are a set of variants of light on more or less the same view, unlike most series which compile many different views.

J17. *Helensville* 1968 (Series A – 4 panels)
 oil on board 606 x 452 (each panel)
 HELENSVILLE '68 (l.l.) McCahon (l.r.)
 (on each panel)
 (verso – on each panel)
 Colin McCahon (1-4) A Helensville July '68
 P.V.A. No. (1-8) of a series of 8 A&B
 Private collection, Dunedin
 One of two short series from a 1968 exhibition
 at Barry Lett Galleries.

J18. *Northland Panels* 1958
 enamel on unstretched canvas
 (8 panels A-H)
 panel A: Black and White 1779 x 817
 panel B: Red Clay Landscape 1778 x 835
 panel C: Manuka and Red Clay Landscape
 1761 x 595
 panel D: Rain 1764 x 554
 rain (c)
 panel E: A landscape with too few lovers
 1778 x 825
 A landscape with too few lovers.
 (u.r.)
 panel F: Tui 1770 x 610
 TUI TUI TUI (c)

panel G: Landscape with white Road
 1779 x 802
 panel H: It can be dark here 1746 x 600
 McCahon NOV. 58. (l.l.)
 Oh yes it can be dark here and
 manuka in bloom may breed
 despair (u.r.)

National Art Gallery, New Zealand
 Purchased with a New Zealand Lotteries
 Board Grant and the Ellen Eames
 Collection, 1978
 CMS cat. no. 28, ill. b/w (panels B, C & G)
 GHB col. ill. 15

These are recollections of parts of Northland seen from the car. They were painted almost immediately after McCahon's return from the United States in 1958. There are also paintings on the reverse, which partly show through, and many alterations, some of them rough, and incompletely cancelling what is beneath. There was much more writing on some of the panels.

They represent a radical departure: the painting is much longer than anything hitherto; the canvases unframed; the scenes are all quite different, with very varied horizons; and the imagery is combined with text which comments on the significance of the landscape, as well as indicating otherwise invisible birdsong and announcing rain. Hung edge to edge they are to be walked past, not confronted head-on.

J19. *A Piece of Muriwai Canvas* 1973
 acrylic on unstretched canvas
 925 x 2060 (sight)
 A PIECE OF MURIWAI CANVAS
 Colin McCahon MAY '73 (l.l.)
 Private collection, Auckland

J20. *Comet [series F8/9/10]* (triptych) 1974
 acrylic on unstretched canvas
 left panel: C. McC. '74 (l.l.) COMET (l.c.)
 [F8] (l.r.) Jump (u.l.) 924 x 511
 centre panel: C. McC. '74 (l.l.) COMET (l.c.)
 [F9] (l.r.) 935 x 494
 right panel: C. McC. '74 (l.l.) COMET (l.c.)
 [F10] (l.r.) 933 x 623
 Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented by
 Mrs J. & Mr A. Gibbs, 1987
 This was one of several sets of paintings,
 showing the comet Kohoutek against the night
 sky, seen from Muriwai. It responds, as do the

Jumps painted the same summer, to something moving in space. (The earlier landscape series are rather the movement of the memory of the artist of different places.) It is at this time that McCahon introduces the conventional graphic signs for movement, dotted lines running across the space. Here there is an indication of a great existential leap across the space of the three panels.

J21. *Te Tangi o te Pipiwhararua* (The song of the shining cuckoo; a poem by Tangirau Hotere) 1974
 oil on unstretched canvas (5 panels)
 panel 1: 1752 x 900
 panel 2: 1770 x 902
 panel 3: 1740 x 905
 TE TANGI O TE PIPIWHARARUA
 TANGIRAU HOTERE (u.c.)
 panel 4: 1755 x 902
 panel 5: 1753 x 905
 C. McC. OCT. '74 (l.r.)
 Hocken Library, Dunedin
 Presented by the artist, 1977
 NP cat. no. 15, ill. b/w
 GHB pl. 90, b/w p. 179
 IWNW cat. no. 20 col. ill.

This work is also known as *The Shining Cuckoo*, the title that McCahon himself used for it. It is at one and the same time Stations of the Cross, a text/song, a bird in flight whose movement is traced from panel to panel, and a numeral painting. It is the most complex and also the most sweetly painted of McCahon's multiple images, on dense and smooth canvas after the rough hessian of the 1973 paintings. McCahon wrote out this translation of the poem in his workbook, reproduced in *Islands* vol. 5 no. 2, July 1977:

<i>Te Tangi o te Pipiwhararua</i>	<i>The Song of (Grief of) the Shining cuckoo</i>
Tuia Tui	Glow Glow & tell us
Tahia Tahia	Te Tui: pierce us and
Kotahi Te Manu I Tau	Join us together
Ki Te Tahuna	Bird: alight on
Tau Mai	the beach
Tau Mai	alight, my friend
Tau Mai	alight, my friend
	alight and rest

J22. *Blind II* 1974

acrylic on unstretched canvas 1750 x 900
C. McC. Oct. '74 (l.l. edge) 11 BLIND (l.r.)
Mr Alan Wells, Wellington

J23. *Blind V* 1974

acrylic on unstretched canvas 1750 x 900
C. McC. Oct '74 (l.r.) BLIND V (l.l.)
Robert McDougall Art Gallery,
Christchurch
Purchased 1975

There were five *Blinds* shown together with the *Shining Cuckoo*. They are seemingly views through windows, a recurrent McCahon motif, and like many of his landscapes are meant to open the beholder's eyes to the beauty of the New Zealand landscape.

J24. *Imprisonment and Reprieve* (triptych) 1978-79

acrylic on paper 727 x 1095 (each panel)
Imprisonment & Reprieve C. McC. '78-Oct '79 (l.l. - top panel)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1978

J25. *The Flight from Egypt* 1980

acrylic on paper (6 sheets) 731 x 1104 (each sheet)
(on each): C. McC. FEB '80 (l.r.) the flight from Egypt (l.l.)
(sequence no. - u.r.)
subtitles: 1. WHEN DO WE START
2. the Desert
3. a big tree offers shade
4. WHEN DO WE GET THERE?
5. I AM TIRED
6. is THIS THE PROMISED LAND. . .

Dr Alan Godfrey, Canterbury
GHB pl. 96, ill. b/w p. 188

Typical flat painted acrylic on paper, the artist's favourite medium in the later 1970s - quick, informal, ready to be simply pinned up in the gallery. The format is a variant of the *Necessary Protection* double rectangle divided by the Tau Cross. Note this is the Flight as in *Exodus*, not the Holy Family's Flight into Egypt.

J26. *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* 1950

oil on canvas on board 885 x 1165
6 DAYS IN NELSON AND CANTERBURY
McCahon Oct. '50. (l.r.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Given by the artist to the Friends of the Auckland City Art Gallery, for presentation to the Auckland City Art Gallery, 1978
CMS cat. no. 14, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 15, ill. b/w p. 26

The views are contained in one frame, as with the 1948 *Triple Takaka*. The landscapes are various places remembered from bicycle journeys across the South Island, characteristic hill profiles or flat horizons, and variable light in the sky.

J27. *The Green Plain* 1948

oil on canvas 374 x 917
McCahon July '48 (l.l.)
Mrs Anne McCahon, Auckland
CMS cat. no. 9, ill. b/w

A favourite of the painter, this is one of the earliest paintings to suggest the long horizontal landscape, yet is rather too small to walk past.

J28. *Takaka: Night and Day* 1948

oil on canvas on board 915 x 2130
McCahon July '48 (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery
Presented by the Rutland Group, 1958
CMS cat. no. 8, ill. b/w
GHB col. ill. no. 8
Q 44 1969 ill. b/w p. 4

A painting with time painted into it. It shows a single view, but under two opposed types of light, one on either side.

J29. *Walk* (Beach Walk series C) 1973

acrylic on unstretched canvas (11 panels)
903 x 12,170 (approx)
(on each panel)
C. McCAHON C (1-11) 1973 (l.l.)
WALK (l.c. - panel C4)
Private collection, Wellington
NP cat. no. 9, ill. b/w (incorrectly titled *Walk with me*)
GHB pl. 88, ill. b/w p. 172 - p. 173

The most impressive set of the 1973 *Stations of the Cross*, done as memorials for McCahon's friend, the poet James K. Baxter. These are

among a number of varied landscapes of tides, lights and weathers, related to McCahon's walking along Muriwai Beach. Originally they were shown hung round the walls of the Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington, and are not meant to be seen as a single panorama from a distance, but rather walked past and close to. The 'A' series were a similar set, shown at Barry Lett Galleries the same year, dispersed around three of the walls. That set was split up.

J30. *On the Road* 1976

acrylic on board (7 panels) 1100 x 740 (each panel)
On the road McC '76. (panel c)
James Baker collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
GHB pl. 72 ill. b/w p. 139 (panels 1, 2 & 3)

GATES

The *Gates* begin in March 1961; the first group was shown in Auckland in October of that year. 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 formal, nearly 'abstract', paintings. For McCahon however 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 their apparently abstract forms were included in a series with texts chosen from Biblical prophecy as a way of making a protest against nuclear weapons. These freehand painted abstracts mark a radical departure from the preceding landscape imagery and from this time on there is a recognisable succession of such works interspersed with more landscapes, and with purely written paintings and number paintings. That succession can be traced into the *Waterfalls* of 1964, and the *Necessary Protection* paintings of 1971. As with the *Gates*, McCahon formulates a notably simple image which has to function also as a symbol: the *Waterfalls* suggest something like Water from the Rock, or Light penetrating Darkness. Later there are *Visible Mysteries* [G25, 26] which share the simplifying form but begin an explicit elaboration of a symbolic imagery, vital to the works of the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

- G1. *Gate, Waioneke* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1798 x 1220
McCahon 3-5, '61 (l.r.) *Gate, Waioneke*. (l.l.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased 1980, from the Molly Morpeth
Canaday Fund
CMS cat. no. 43, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 63, ill. b/w p. 126

- G2. *Waioneke* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1812 x 1195
McCahon May '61 (l.c.) *WAIONEKE*. (l.l.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased 1980
CMS cat. no. 44, ill. b/w
- G3. *Upper corners off, the Second Large Gate*
1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1524 x 1218
McCahon. APRIL '61 (l.c.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased 1980
CMS cat. no. 42, ill. b/w
- G4. *Gate 5* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on board 1220 x 916
C. McC 61. (l.r.)
Colin McCahon Estate
- G5. *Gate: White Diamond* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1218 x 812
Colin McCahon Estate
- G6. *Gate 10* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on board 1215 x 950
McCahon April '61 (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery
Anonymous gift, 1985
- G7. *Gate 15* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1512 x 1220
Colin McCahon Estate
- G8. *The Third Bellini Madonna* 1962
enamel on board 1216 x 764
THE THIRD BELLINI MADONNA C. McC.
61-62 (l.l.)
Private collection, Wellington
GHB col. ill. no. 21

- G9. *Here I give thanks to Mondrian* 1961
enamel on board 1215 x 915
Colin McCahon March '61 (l.r.) *Here I give
thanks to MONDRIAN* (l.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Presented by
the Friends of the Auckland City Art
Gallery, 1964
CMS cat. no. 40, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 45, ill. b/w p. 78
Q 44 1969 ill. b/w p. 12

- G10. *How is the hammer broken* 1961
enamel on board 1218 x 905
C.M. OCT. NOV '61 (l.r.)
HOW IS THE HAMMER OF THE WHOLE
EARTH CUT ASUNDER AND BROKEN
(l.l.-l.c.)
Auckland City Art Gallery
Presented by the artist, 1979
CMS cat. no. 40, ill. b/w

Although eighteen of these paintings were shown at The Gallery, Symonds Street, in 1961, they are a group of works on similar motifs, rather than a sequential series. Like the later *Titirangi* paintings, they are not contained or constrained by the framing shapes, neither by the edges, nor by the rectangular shape of the frames. In fact, several of them are arched at the top, rather than purely rectangular.

McCahon commented in his 1972 Survey catalogue:

The shaped panels come from thinking how good it would be to paint the walls of the Auckland Town Hall.

Such an architectural setting could have made sense of the way the forms are interrupted by the frame; they could have seemed to come and go, as it were, behind the architecture. Subsequently the *Gate* series of 1962 was first of all conceived of as like a hoarding; not an advertisement but a public statement of protest against nuclear weapons. *Here I give thanks to Mondrian* [G9] is one of the best known. The debt to Mondrian is primarily in terms of the extension of the painting beyond the frame, rather than any close resemblance to Mondrian's grid-like structures. The household gloss paint did not combine well with masking

tape for the edges, and these had to be repainted by hand.

Waioneke [G2] is a beach on the South Kaipara Harbour, north of Auckland. *The Third Bellini Madonna* [G8] is a variant of the irregular forms of the *Gate* paintings. (The 'dialogue' with Bellini is taken up from Bellini's painting of marbling on the Madonna's throne, rather than from figures.) There were a number of these McCahon paintings; two of them were bought (as were several of the *Gates*) for the then Mayfair Hotel in London, and have disappeared.

G11. *Painting* 1958
oil on board 1218 x 764
C.M. March '58. (l.l.)
Fletcher Challenge Ltd, Wellington
CMS cat. no. 27 ill. b/w

This work was begun in 1958, possibly worked on again, and was the subject of a newspaper controversy when it was joint winner of the Hay's painting competition in 1960. It anticipates the large dark and light forms of the *Gates*, and also the sense of gaps or spaces, ways through, between the planes of the picture.

G12. *Cross* 1959
enamel on board 1219 x 762
McCahon 8.1.59. (l.r.)
Colin McCahon Estate
CMS cat. no. 40 ill. b/w

The lower part is reminiscent of the centre panel of the *Elias Triptych* [E13]: something between an altar and an image of a waterspout. It is also strikingly like the light-through-darkness imagery that is taken up again in the *Waterfalls* and in *Necessary Protection*.

G13. *Tui Carr Celebrates Muriwai Beach; Moby Dick seen off Muriwai Beach* 1972
(*Necessary Protection* series)
acrylic on canvas 867 x 1752
COLIN McCAHON. 1972 (l.l.) TUI CARR
CELEBRATES MURIWAI BEACH AUGUST
1972 (u.c.)
Moby dick seen off Muriwai beach (u.l.)
Private collection, Melbourne, Australia
NP cat. no. 6, ill. b/w
GHB col. ill. 27

This too is part of the *Necessary Protection*

series. It shows that the formal motif is not essential to the series; rather that the thematics of it can include all kinds of symbol and sign, some of them personal and intimate. Tui Carr is McCahon's grandson. The figure of rejoicing, the 'Y', represents the boy. Moby Dick suggests the shape of Oaia Island, whitened with bird droppings, just off Muriwai. The narrative tendency in this painting falls between the gigantic *Practical Religion* [VI] and the great *Walk* [J29], and functions with almost the same kind of mixture of personal and public symbol and text combined with sign-like figures.

G14. *The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai* 1975
(*Birds, Muriwai* series)
acrylic on unstretched canvas 1725 x 924
C. McC 75 (l.r.) THE CARE OF SMALL
BIRDS: MURIWAI. (l.l.-l.c.)
Chartwell Collection, Hamilton
NP cat. no. 16, ill. b/w
GHB col. ill. 30

G15. *Parihaka Triptych* 1972
acrylic on canvas (3 panels)
left panel: 867 x 1751
centre panel: 1754 x 864
right panel: 864 x 1752
McCahon July '72 (r.h. panel - l.r.)
Presented by the artist to the people of
Parihaka, 1972. Held at the Govett-Brewster
Art Gallery, New Plymouth
NP cat. no. 5, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 84, ill. b/w p. 161
IWNW cat. no. 17, ill. b/w

G16. *Tangi - Necessary Protection* 1972
(*Necessary Protection* series)
acrylic on board 730 x 1098
Colin McCahon Feb-Sept '72-Oct '72 (l.l.)
Rotorua Art Gallery. Gift of Helen
Mountfort, 1977

G17. *The days and nights in the wilderness . . .*
1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2345 x 1840
McCahon. Muriwai, APRIL-JUNE 1971. (l.r.)
THE DAYS AND NIGHTS IN THE
WILDERNESS SHOWING THE CONSTANT
FLOW OF LIGHT PASSING THROUGH THE
WALL OF DEATH (l.l.)
Colin McCahon Estate

IWNW cat. no. 15, col. ill.
The three works with this title were precursors
of the *Necessary Protection* series.

G18. *The days and nights in the wilderness . . .*
1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2378 x 1840
THE DAYS AND NIGHTS IN THE
WILDERNESS: A CONSTANT FLOW OF
LIGHT FALLS ON THE LAND. (l.l.)
COLIN McCAHON APRIL-JUNE 1971.
MURIWAI (l.r.)
Colin McCahon Estate

G19. *The days and nights in the wilderness . . .*
1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2360 x 1840
McCahon APRIL-JUNE '71 (l.c.)
THE DAYS AND NIGHTS IN THE
WILDERNESS SHOWING THE CONSTANT
FLOW OF LIGHT PASSING INTO A DARK
LANDSCAPE (l.l.)
Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New
Plymouth. Purchased with assistance from
the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New
Zealand, and the Monica Brewster Bequest,
1977
CMS cat. no. 71, ill. b/w
NP cat. no. 1, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 85, ill. b/w p. 165

Works from the *Necessary Protection* series are complex meditations on a formal motif of two dark rectangles separated either by a great T or a great Tau Cross. For McCahon the motif is a landscape with light falling from heaven, pouring, like Grace, onto the land below; it is also the two great cliffs at Muriwai with its gannet colonies, in need of protection from quarrying. It is additionally a symbol of Salvation or eternal identity. These varied readings emerge from the considerable body of works around this theme, as well as from statements by the artist. Unlike the roughly painted canvases of the late 1950s - in oils - or the enamel gloss on board of the 1960s, these are among the first of McCahon's great smooth acrylics on canvas of the 1970s. This medium allowed for a grand impersonal look and an integration of paint with the ground, more like stained fabric, coloured through and through.

G20. *Through the Wall of Death, A Banner* 1972
acrylic on unstretched canvas 1834 x 2335
THROUGH THE WALL OF DEATH, A
BANNER. Colin McCahon 1972.
MURIWAI. (l.l.)
Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt
Purchased 1977
GHB pl. 86, ill. b/w p. 167
IWNW cat. no. 16, ill. b/w

This is a marvellous banner-like *Necessary Protection* picture with a great Tau Cross. The prayer is fitted to the format of the Cross, as in the extraordinary marriages of text and image in baroque poetry. The prayer for peace is probably to be seen in relation to the war in Vietnam, in which New Zealand was engaged alongside the United States.

G21. *Angels and Bed no. 4: Hi Fi* 1976-77
acrylic on unstretched canvas 3378 x 5282
Bed and Angels (sic): no. 4 - Nov
'76-March '77. Muriwai. C. McC. (l.l.)
HI FI (l.r.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1977

G22. *The Kennedy waterfall drawings* c. 1965-66
acrylic on paper (set of 12) 780 x 570
(each, approx.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin
Presented by Rodney Kennedy, 1968
GHB pl. 54, b/w (no. 6) p. 105 pl. 55,
b/w (no. 11) p. 107

A final and marvellous series of the much-repeated motif of McCahon's 1964 paintings. They represent the fall of water to the thirsty; made from a streak or stroke that creates light in darkness in the oil paintings and reverses light amidst darkness in these drawings. The reduction of painting to the single strong image and black on white is characteristic of the mature McCahon of the late 1960s onwards. These acrylic drawings were made for McCahon's friend, Rodney Kennedy.

G23. *Waterfall Triptych* 1964
left panel: 1832 x 1220
centre panel: 1832 x 1218
right panel: 1832 x 1219
McCAHON, OCT. 64. (l.l.)
enamel and sand on board
Private collection, Auckland

This is the most impressive of McCahon's versions of the *Waterfall* theme. It is well on the way to resolving the clash between two and three dimensions in his painting. The dense and sanded surfaces reflect light from the environment, rather than represent it within the depths of the pictorial space.

G24. *Journey into a Dark Landscape* 1966
oil on canvas on board 1716 x 918
McCahon 8-2-66 (l.l.)
Private collection, Dunedin

This is the exact opposite of the dense *Waterfall Triptych* surfaces. Delicate staining and a mysterious depth with a faint trace of the glimmer of a hill curve replace the rich, dark, sombre surfaces. This is rather the beginning of the great stained banners of the very late 1960s and early 1970s.

G25. *Visible Mysteries no. 1* 1968
oil on board 908 x 1213
McCahon. Sept. '68. NO. 1. (l.l.)
GRANT THAT WHAT WE HAVE RECEIVED
IN VISIBLE MYSTERIES WE MAY OBTAIN
IN ITS INVISIBLE EFFECT (l.r.)
Auckland City Art Gallery. Purchased 1980
CMS cat. no. 63, ill. b/w

G26. *Visible Mysteries no. 2* 1968
oil on board 911 x 1218
Colin McCahon. September 1968. No. 2 (l.r.)
GRANT THAT WHAT WE HAVE RECEIVED
IN VISIBLE MYSTERIES WE MAY OBTAIN
IN ITS INVISIBLE EFFECT (l.l.)
Private collection, Dunedin

Two from a group of similar paintings, including the Bleeding Heart on an altar, which here takes the form of a Tau Cross, a favourite motif of the *Necessary Protection* paintings. The intimation of a three-dimensional form on the pictorial surface is characteristic of McCahon's practice in the 1950s and 1960s.

G27. *Journey into a Dark Landscape No. 2* 1965
acrylic on hardboard 1215 x 910
Journey into a dark landscape. McCahon.
JULY. 65. (2) (l.l.)
Private collection, Auckland

NUMBERS AND TEXTS

These are perhaps McCahon's main answer to the question of how to get an accessible content into modernist painting. Sometimes they combine with symbols; often numbers and texts stand alone. It must be realised that McCahon's exhibitions of paintings were not simply means for putting easel paintings on the market. They were usually conceived of as installation, a use of the gallery for information, for statement. In this usage of an exhibition any and every means becomes viable for a painter: found materials, sculptural materials, video-images, text. The texts are rarely his own; nearly all are from the culture at large (especially the Bible), often from the writings of contemporary New Zealand poets, and from the Maori texts published by Matire Kereama. As distinct from the 1950s written paintings, most of these make use of a plain brush writing. This can be identical in character with the private and intimate letter-writing style. Some small drawings/texts are on the same paper used for letters. Some of these, notably the *Practical Religion* paintings, are McCahon's greatest efforts towards a style for public statement in painting. 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. In the 1970s they are the basis for the elaboration of series after series of Stations of the Cross, fourteen of them in all. At this point the textual paintings overlap with the 'Journeys'.

- N1. *Walk with me I* 1974
acrylic on unstretched canvas 934 x 1782
C. McC. '74. (l.l.) WALK WITH ME. I. (l.c.)
Mr Ralph Hotere, Port Chalmers
- N2. *Walk with me II* 1974
acrylic on unstretched canvas 930 x 1734
C. McC. '74 (l.l.)
WALK WITH ME II (l.c.)
Mr Peter Ireland, Gisborne

- N3. *Numbers* (sketch for University of Otago Library mural) 1966
enamel on board 595 x 1015
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Presented to the University of Otago by the artist, 1966
GHB pl. 69, ill. b/w p. 136

This was McCahon's idea for the Otago University Library mural. Unhappily the plan was not executed.

- N4. *A Painting for Uncle Frank* 1980
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2330 x 3000
SAINT PAUL-HEBREW. 'A PAINTING FOR UNCLE FRANK.' Colin McCahon 1980 (l.l.)
Private collection, Wanganui
GHB pl. 97, ill. b/w p. 189

- N5. *The Lark's Song (a poem by Matire Kereama)* 1969
acrylic on two wooden doors
810 x 1980 (each door)
Colin McCahon August-October-'69 (l.c.)
The lark's song (l.l.)
FOR MATIRE KEREAMA. . . POET (u.l.)
Auckland City Art Gallery
Presented by the artist, 1982
CMS cat. no. 67, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 83, ill. b/w p. 159

This is one of a group of paintings inspired by the Maori texts published by Matire Kereama. They are often purely textual, written with the brush. The text is intended to be sounded by the reader. The lark ascends on one of the first of McCahon's dotted line movement traces. The multiplicity of cultural tradition here is indicated by the 'Can you hear me, St Francis?', taken from a poem by Peter Hooper.

- N6. *I applied my mind . . .* 1982
acrylic on unstretched canvas 1950 x 1805
C. McC. April-May 1982 (l.r. edge)
Private collection, on loan to the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
GHB pl. 98, ill. b/w p. 191

- N7. *Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is new?* 1982
acrylic on unstretched canvas 1955 x 1810
C. McC. MARCH '82 (l.r. edge)
Bank of New Zealand, Wellington
IWNW cat. no. 22 ill. b/w

- N8. *Dark, Dark* 1959
watercolour on paper on card 762 x 560
Colin McCahon 1957 (l.r.)
dark dark (within image)
Professor and Mrs D.I.B. Smith, Auckland

- N9. *The Wake* 1958
ink and enamel on canvas (16 panels)
1785 x assorted widths
panel 1: "The Wake" for Thor Great Dane (c) JOHN CASELBERG. TITIRANGI. 1957. (l.c.)
McCahon 58 (l.l.)
(remaining panels variously inscribed)
Hocken Library, Dunedin
Presented by the artist, 1978
GHB pl. 43, ill. b/w (panels 12-15) p. 75

This is McCahon's largest word-painting. The text is a poem by John Caselberg. It was first shown in an Auckland City Art Gallery show; there was some idea that Caselberg would read the poem in front of it. This did not happen until 1960, when the painting was installed in The Gallery, Symonds Street, for a fortnight. The grand elegy for the great dane, Thor, reaches beyond the immediate circumstance of the dog's death, to a far broader meditation on death. The panels of text are interspersed with kauri tree panels. As illumination of text it is near to the peculiar relation of text to image in Blake's prophetic books. The liquid landscape imagery is close to that in the *Northland Panels* [J18] or the *Northland* drawings [J2-11]. The canvases were literally soaked with water first, the oil paint depleted of binding medium, spread and soaked in. The result is akin to giant watercolour painting. Acrylics, not yet available, would have been the best medium for this work.

- N10. *Clouds 8* 1975
acrylic on paper 1092 x 728
C. McC. DEC '75 CLOUDS (l.c.) 8 (l.r.)
Private collection, Wellington
NP cat. no. 18 ill. b/w

- N11. *Oaia and Clouds* 1975
acrylic on paper 1092 x 728
C. McC. DEC. '75 (l.l.) OAIA & CLOUDS (l.c.)
Private collection, Wellington

These are among the last attempts at the numbers of the Stations of the Cross. The counting goes on against landscape, earlier, and

skyscapes such as these later. Unlike the flatly painted landscapes of the 1960s and earlier 1970s, these are extraordinary gestural creations of clouds from a highly visible brush scumble. The clouds are most casually inscribed areas of light; each act has its number. The paintings are as much a record of process as of progress.

N12. *Numerals* 1965

acrylic on board (13 panels)
panels 2 & 13 1220 x 915
other panels 1220 x 610
(each panel) McCahon April, May '65
(lower edge)
Colin McCahon Estate
CMS cat. no. 55 ill. b/w (panel 11)
GHB pl. 68, ill. b/w (panel 13) p. 134
IWNW cat. no. 11, ill. b/w

There were earlier numerals drawings for the magazine *Landfall* which were not used, and two sets of watercolours of Numerals in 1950. Then in 1965 came this series, after the light-in-dark paintings of the *Waterfalls*. They explore modes of inscription of the Numerals as Arabic figures and also as words and in their Roman form, against a plain ground. The series can be read as the emergence of being(s) out of nothing/darkness. 'One/What/singular upright flourishing/condition . . . /it enters here, it returns here,' says Robert Creeley in not dissimilar vein (*Pieces*, 1969). After 1966 the numerals are almost always 1-14 for the *Station of the Cross*, which provides an unseen text in many paintings.

N13. *Io* 1965

acrylic on board 1220 x 916
McCahon APRIL '65 (l.l.) I (u.l.) O (u.r.)
Colin McCahon Estate

This is closely related to the *Numerals* series. The 'I' and the 'O' are not only one and nothing but together they are the unspoken Maori name for the Supreme Deity. At the bottom right, a light strip appears in the darkness, one of the frequently appearing disruptions of formal 'balance' in McCahon's painting.

N14. *Teaching Aids 2* June 1975

acrylic on paper (10 sheets)
1092 x 728 (each sheet)
C. McC '75 (each sheet) (each sheet
inscribed with title and sheet number)
Colin McCahon Estate
GHB pl. 70, ill. b/w p. 137

There were three sets of these acrylics on paper, all pinned up in Barry Lett Galleries. They are, as the title states, means of instruction, as didactic as anything in McCahon's work. Here, the numbers in Roman or Arabic form, or mixed, run repeatedly from 1 on the way to 14, sometimes not getting there, sometimes cancelled, as on a blackboard.

The Stations of the Cross are:

1. Jesus is condemned to Death
2. Jesus receives His Cross
3. Jesus falls the First Time under His Cross
4. Jesus meets His Afflicted Mother
5. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry His Cross
6. Veronica wipes the Face of Jesus
7. Jesus falls the Second Time
8. Jesus speaks to the Women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falls the Third Time
10. Jesus is stripped of His Garments
11. Jesus is nailed to the Cross
12. Jesus dies on the Cross
13. Jesus is taken down from the Cross
14. Jesus is laid in the Sepulchre

N15. *Kaipara Flat* 1971

watercolour 1017 x 670 (sight)
McCahon '71 Kaipara Flat - written. (l.l.)
Private collection, Auckland

There were numerous watercolours like this in the early 1970s, of Helensville as well as Kaipara. Apart from their unusually rich colour, for a painter so given to the modest black and white of much of his painting, they also show a graphic openness closely akin to writing. McCahon was elated at leaving his teaching commitments and taking up full-time painting.

N16. *The Lark's Song* 1972

watercolour 1086 x 729
The Larks Song McCahon Jan-Feb. 72 (l.r.)
Miss A.M. Ryburn, Auckland

N17. *Noughts and Crosses 1* 1976

acrylic on paper 1085 x 720
C. McC. JAN '76 (l.l.) NOUGHTS &
CROSSES I (l.r.)
Auckland City Art Gallery
Purchased 1984

There are also pin-up acrylics, mostly on paper. Like *Teaching Aids* [N14] they take their format and materials (text) from outside painting altogether, pretending to be something other than art, so to speak. The children's games imitated sign by sign literally, are transformed into opposites of the 'O' to the Cross.

N18. *Hear Me O South Wind . . .* 1977

pencil on paper 165 x 114
C. McC. '77 (l.r.) 1 (l.l.)
Hocken Library, Dunedin.
Presented by Peter McLeavey, 1978

N19. *And What is Faith? . . .* 1976

wash and crayon on paper 442 x 295 (sight)
C. McC. '76 (l.l.)
Private collection, Arrowtown

N20. *Hear Me O South Wind . . .* 1977

pencil on paper 165 x 115
C. McC '77 (l.r.) 13. (l.l.)
Govett Brewster Art Gallery,
New Plymouth
Presented by Peter McLeavey, 1978

N21. *In My Own Village . . .* 1971

charcoal on paper 358 x 271
McCahon '71 (l.c.) Caselberg (l.l.)
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.
Purchased 1983

N22. *Hear Me O South Wind . . .* 1977

pencil on paper 165 x 115
HERE (sic) ME O SOUTH WIND (upper edge)
C McC '77 (l.r.) 2 (l.l.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand.
Anonymous gift, 1978

Here as in other small sheets of writings or drawings, McCahon's normal handwriting with the pen appears in as straightforward a disposition of words as in the painted texts. The informality of his written work is increasingly obvious in the 1970s, whether in these small pieces or in the largest paintings. The graphics are often, as with *The Wake* [N9], conceived of as 'illumination' of a text in the mediaeval sense.

VICTORY OVER DEATH

- V1. *Practical Religion: the Resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* 1969-1970
oil on unstretched canvas 2075 x 7720
COLIN McCAHON DEC '69 FEB '70 (u.r.)
VICTORY OVER DEATH (u.r.)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand
Purchased with assistance from the New Zealand Lotteries Board and the Molly Morpeth Canada Fund, 1985
CMS cat. no. 68, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 77, ill. b/w p. 148
IWNW cat. no. 13, col. ill.

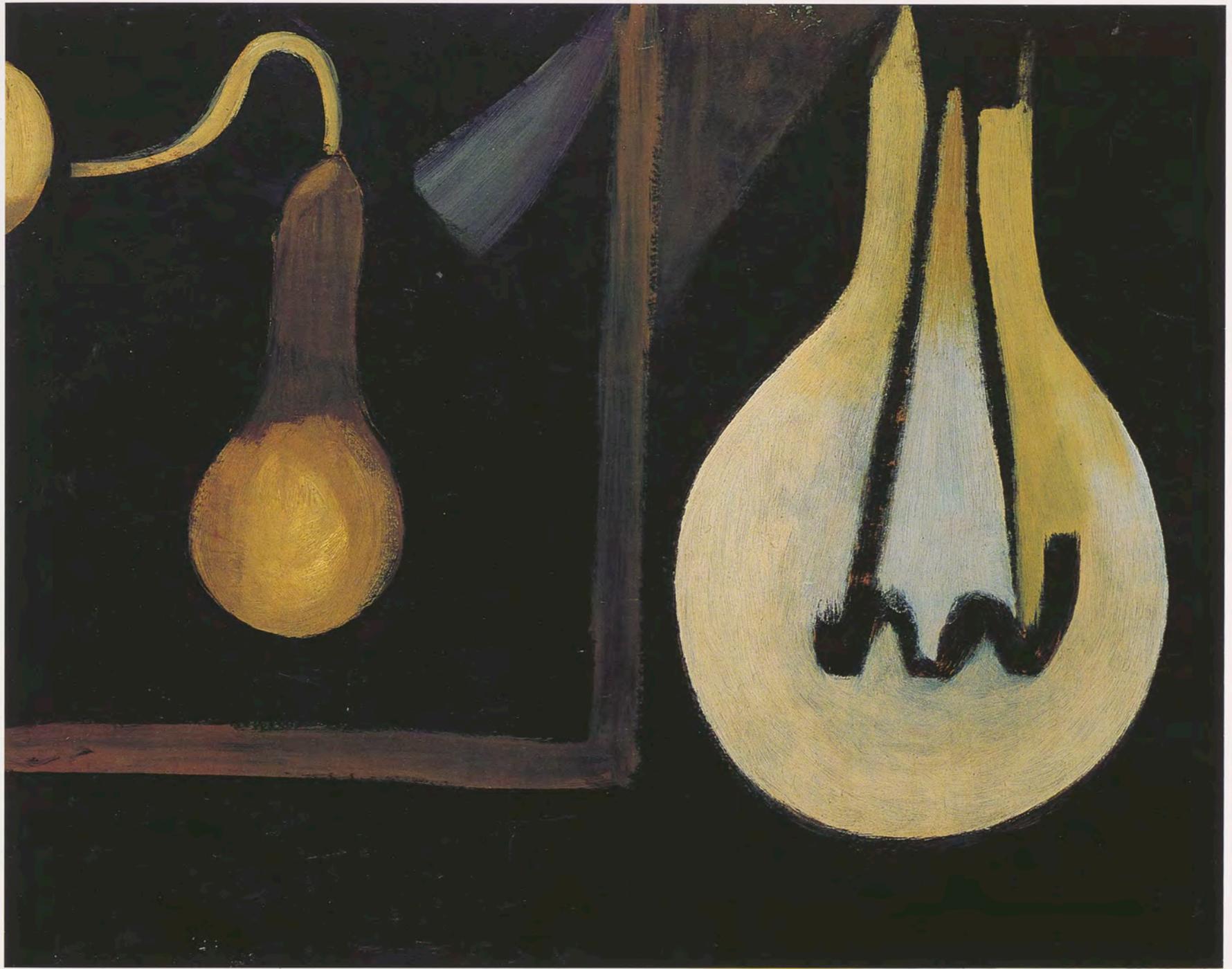
- V2. *Are there not twelve hours of daylight . . .*
1970
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2077 x 2580
McCAHON FEB 70 MURIWAI (l.r.)
Chartwell Collection, Hamilton
IWNW cat. no. 14, ill. b/w

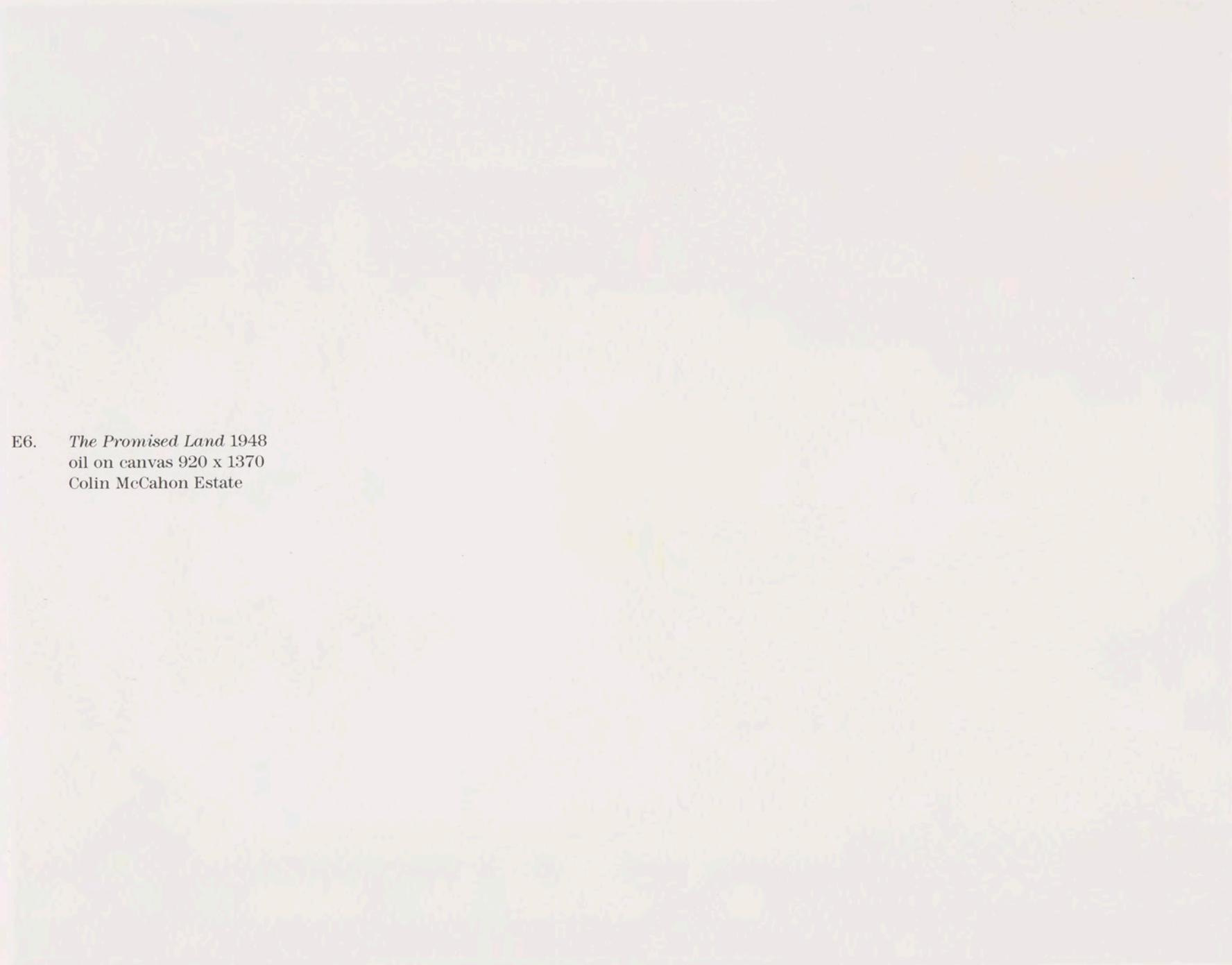
- V3. *Victory Over Death 2* 1970
oil on unstretched canvas 2075 x 5977
MURIWAI. FEB. '70 McCAHON. (l.r.)
VICTORY OVER DEATH. 2. (l.l.)
Australian National Gallery, Canberra
Presented by the New Zealand Government, 1978
CMS cat. no. 69, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 78, ill. b/w p. 150

Practical Religion [V1] was originally titled *Victory Over Death 1*. This work and *Victory Over Death 2* [V3] were first shown together at Barry Lett Galleries in 1970. They occupied the two longer opposing walls of the main gallery space. Other paintings hung like banners in front of the two smaller end walls. *Practical Religion* shows Biblical texts about the resurrection of Lazarus, and sets the hope of the Resurrection against doubt. The text is set against a grand rudimentary landscape of hill-profile (Mount Martha). *Victory Over Death 2* sets the proclamation of Divine Being, likewise, against doubts. Both titles are chapter headings in the *New English Bible*: 'Practical Religion' in *A letter of James 1*, and *Victory Over Death* in *John's Gospel 11*.

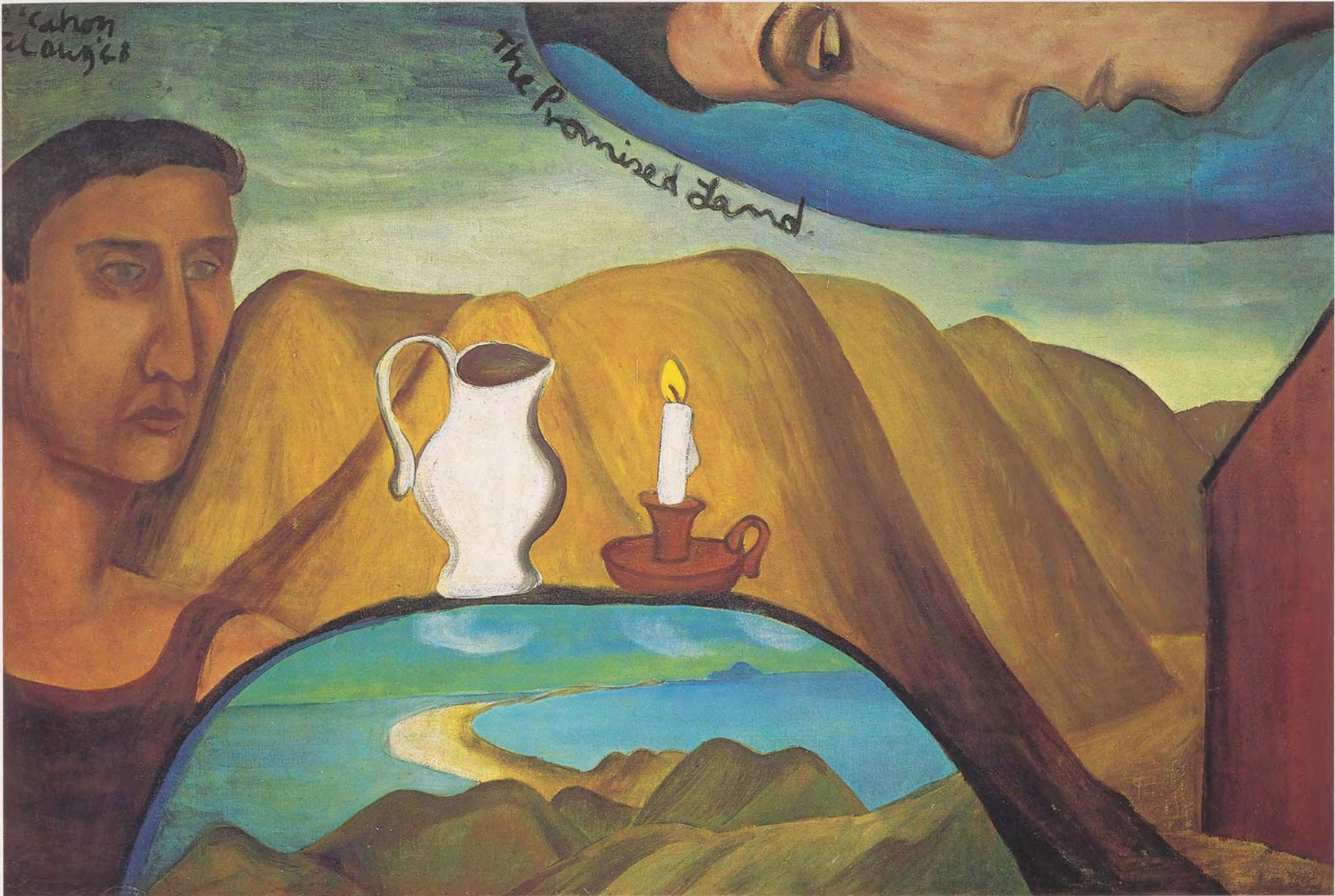
- V4. *I Am Scared* 1976
(*Scared series*)
acrylic on paper 730 x 1104
SCARED C. McC. '76 (l.l.) I am scared
I STAND UP (within image)
Private collection, Wellington
- V5. *Open Door* 1976
(*Scared series*)
acrylic on paper 730 x 1104
OPEN DOOR C. McC. '76 (l.l.) The door is always open the light's on in the hall (within image)
Private collection, Lower Hutt
- V6. *Am I Scared* 1976
(*Scared series*)
acrylic on paper 730 x 1104
SCARED C. McC. '76 (l.l.)
AM I Scared Boy (EH) (within image)
Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Purchased with the assistance of the Monica Brewster Bequest Fund and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, 1977
NP cat. no. 25, ill. b/w
GHB pl. 87, ill. b/w p. 171
- V7. *A Question of Faith* 1970
acrylic on unstretched canvas 2080 x 2615 (irreg.)
McCahon Feb '70 (l.l.)
A QUESTION OF FAITH. (u.l.)
Private collection, Wellington

E2. *The Lamp in my Studio* 1945
oil on board 511 x 646
Colin McCahon Estate



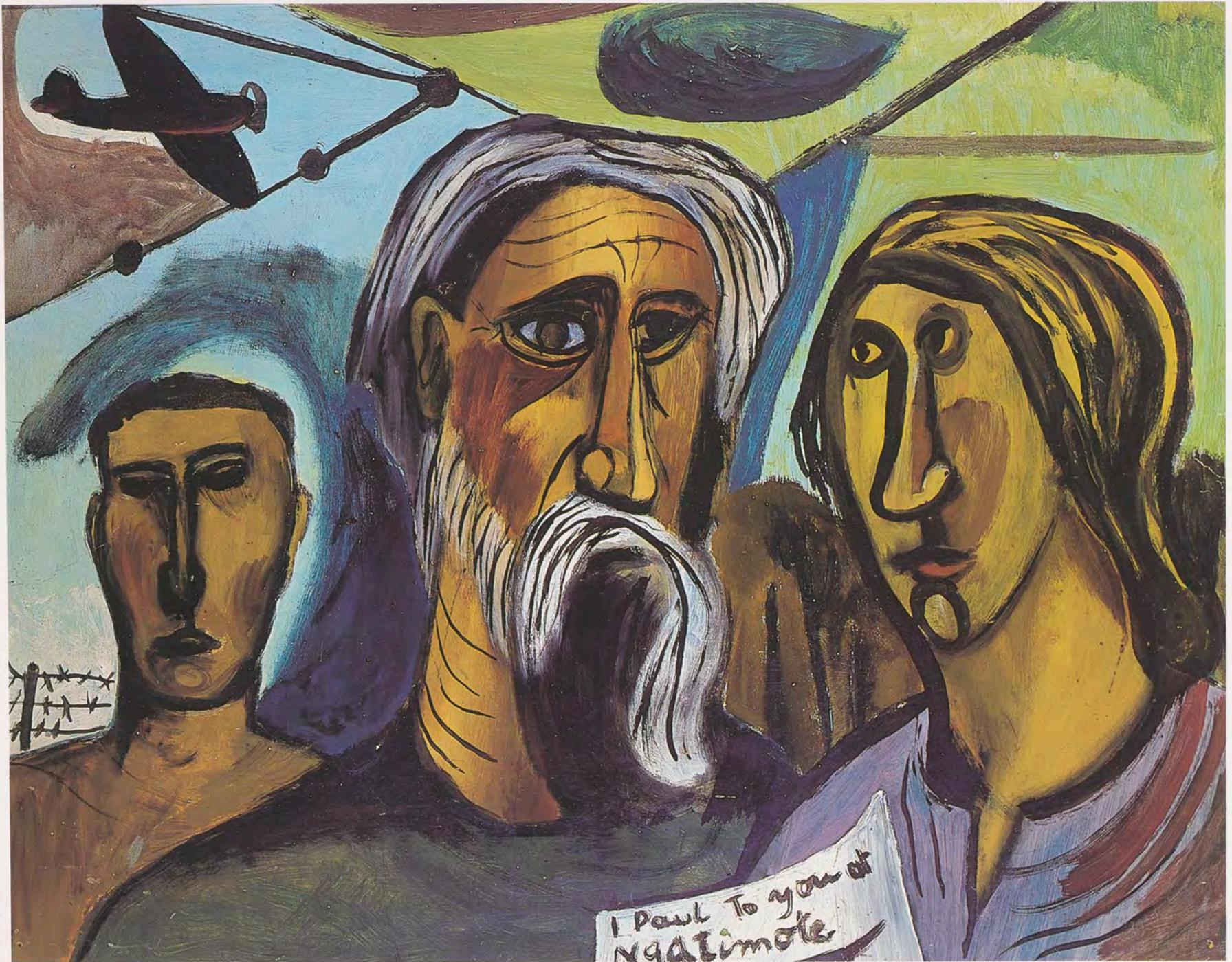


E6. *The Promised Land* 1948
oil on canvas 920 x 1370
Colin McCahon Estate



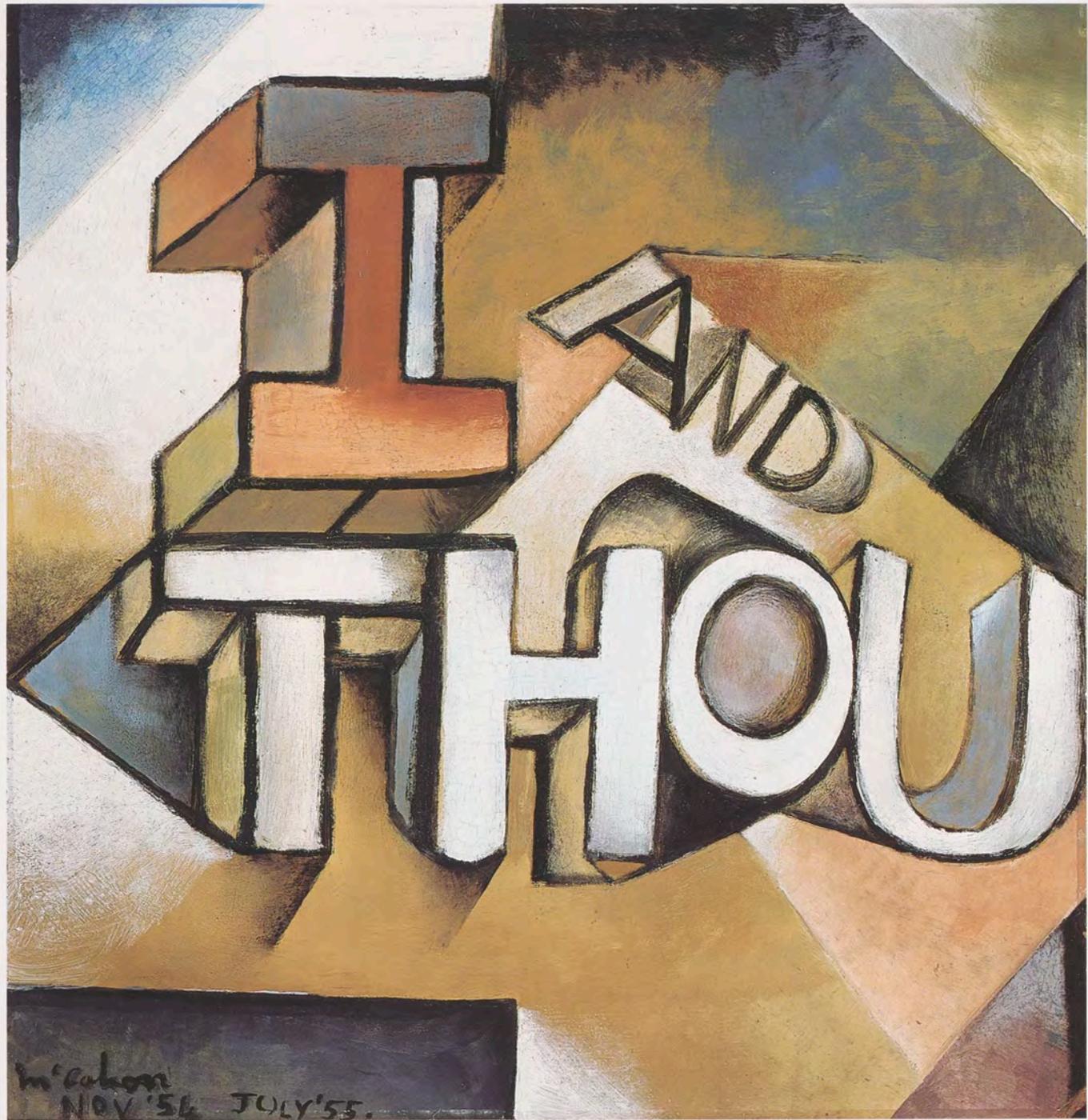


E7. *I Paul to you at Ngatimote* 1946
oil on card 505 x 635
Auckland City Art Gallery.
Purchased 1982



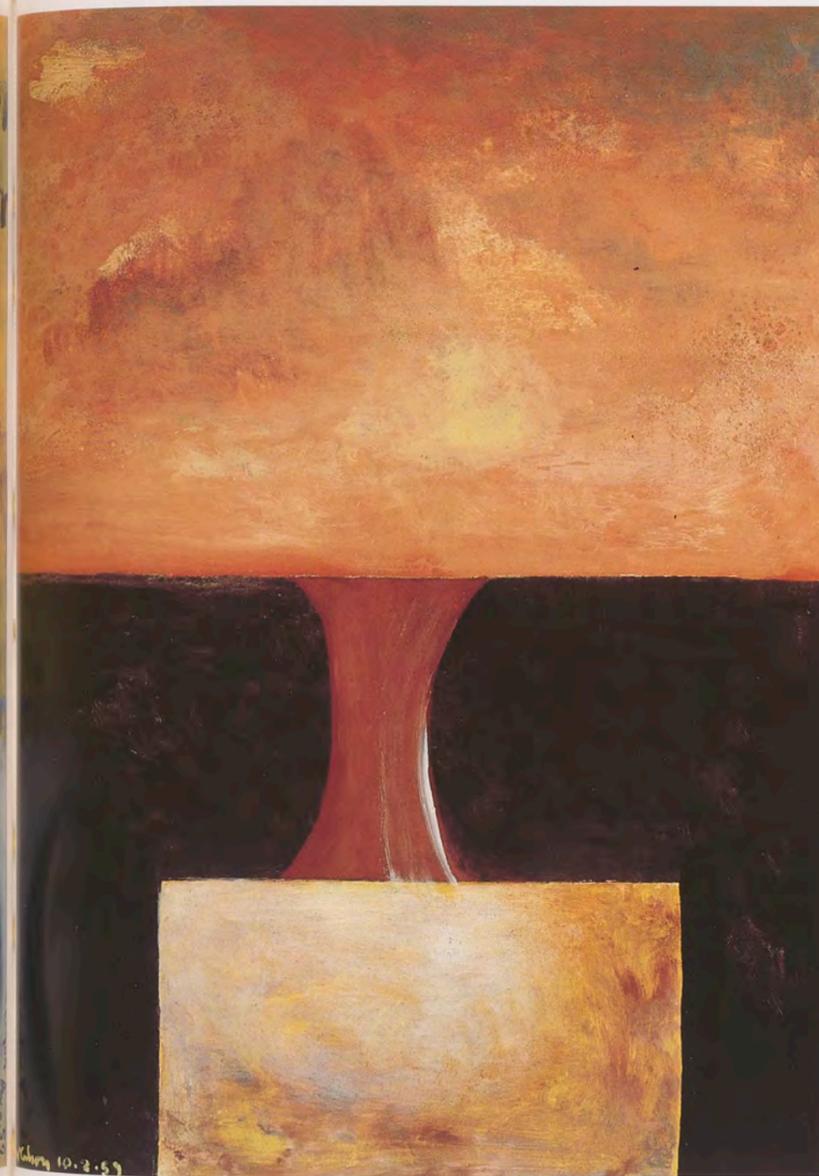


E11. *I and Thou* 1954-1955
oil on board 559 x 533
Miss L.D. Gilmour, Auckland

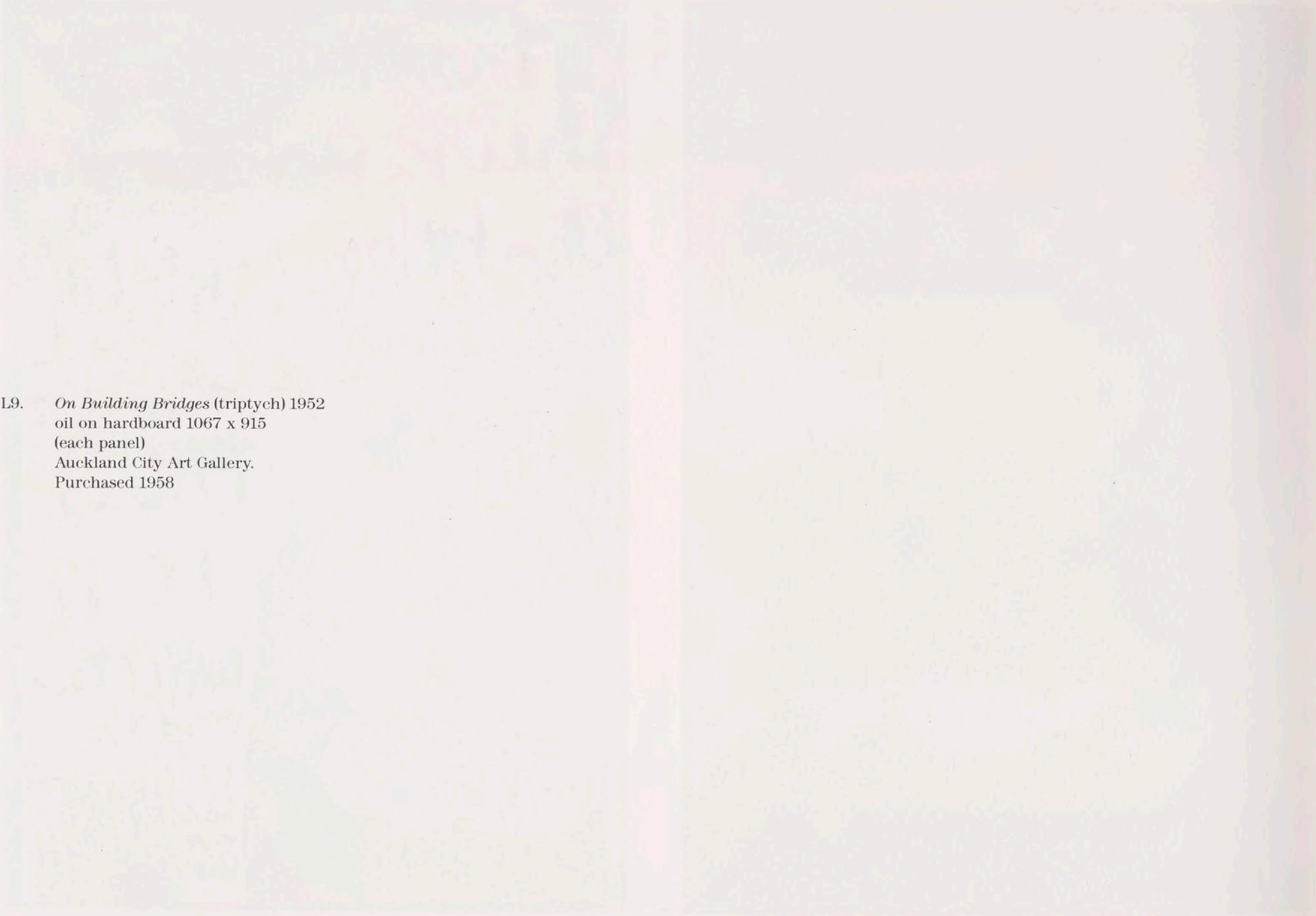


E13. *Elias Triptych* 1959
 (Elias series)
 enamel and sand on board
 Auckland City Art Gallery.
 Purchased 1982

Sir, we remember
 that that deceiver
 said, while he
 was yet alive,
 After 3 days
 I will rise again.
 Seal the stone
 set a watch.

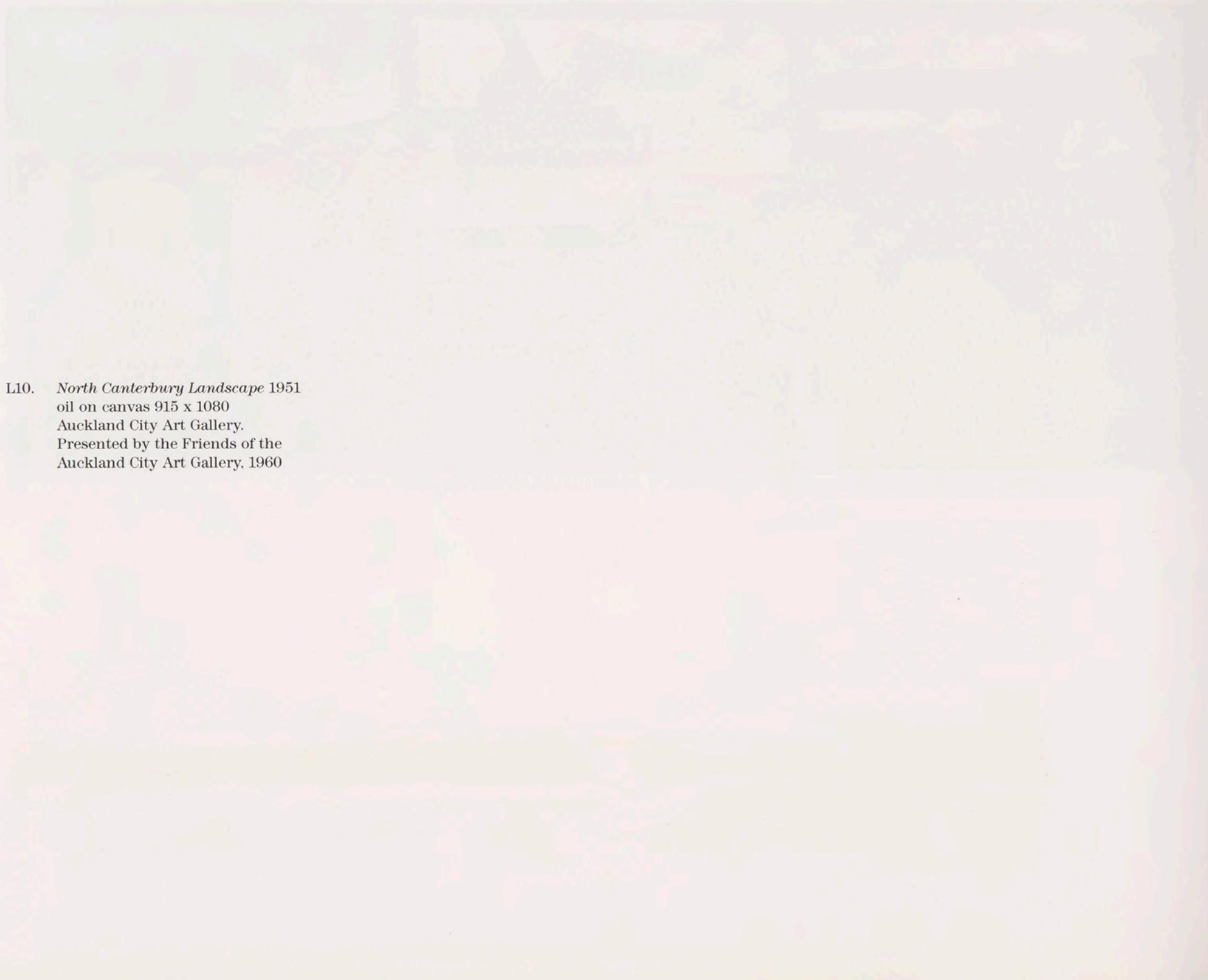


Then he opened
 their understand
 that they might
 understand
 why
 are you
 troubled and
 why do
 thoughts arise
 in your
 hearts.
 THUS
 IT IS
 WRITTEN
 and thus it
 beloved Christ
 to suffer and to
 arise from
 the dead



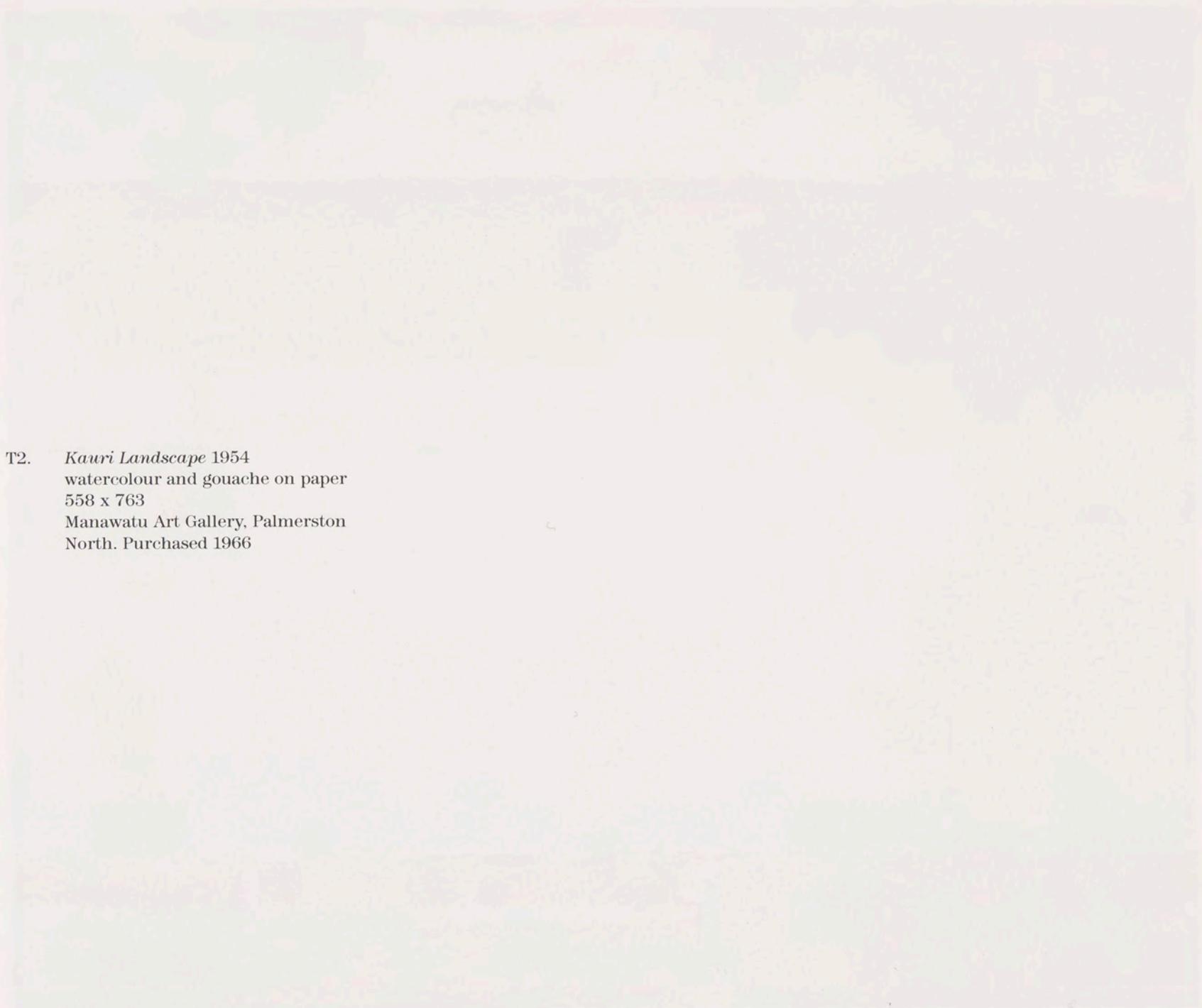
L9. *On Building Bridges* (triptych) 1952
oil on hardboard 1067 x 915
(each panel)
Auckland City Art Gallery.
Purchased 1958





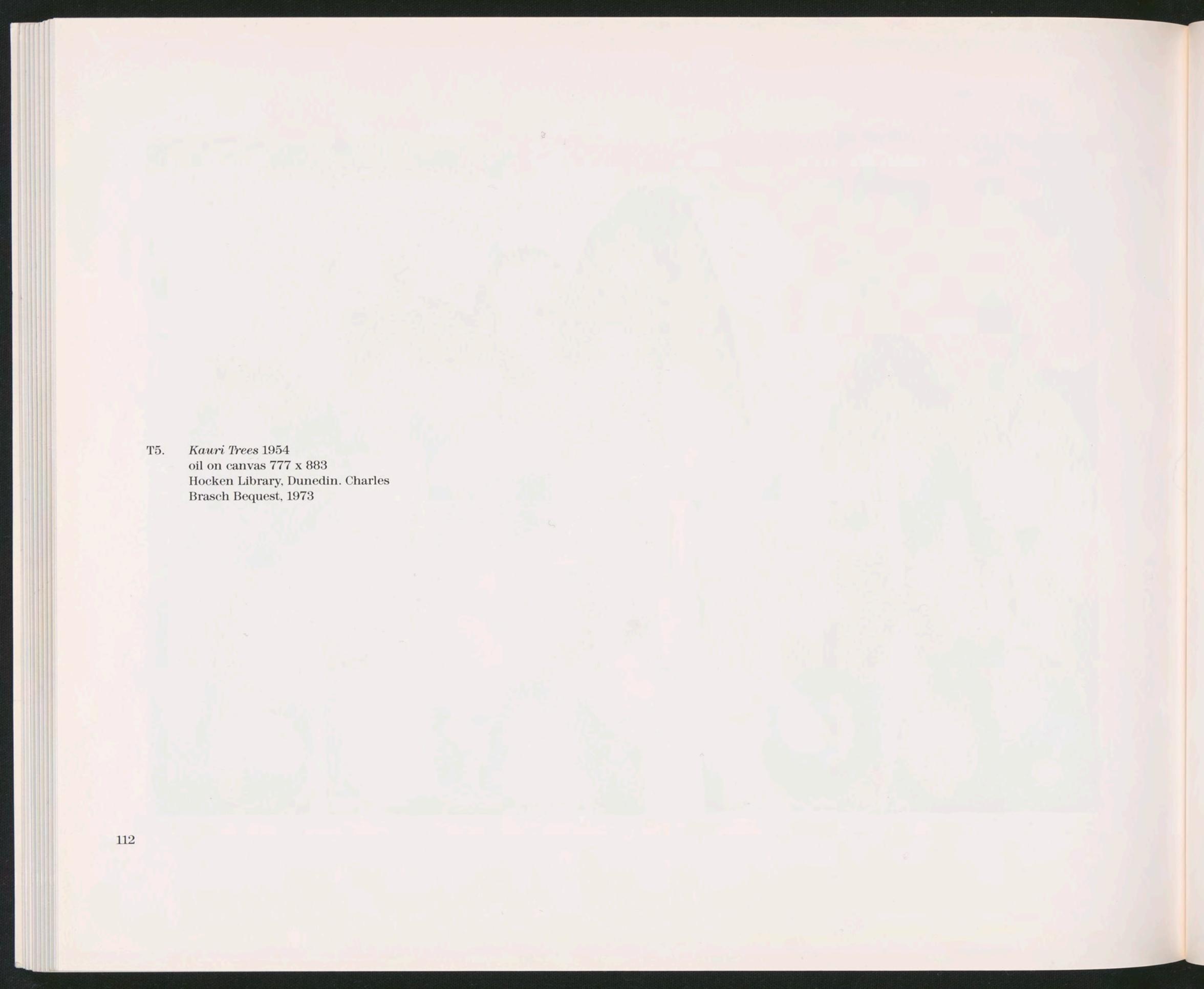
L10. *North Canterbury Landscape* 1951
oil on canvas 915 x 1080
Auckland City Art Gallery.
Presented by the Friends of the
Auckland City Art Gallery, 1960





T2. *Kauri Landscape* 1954
watercolour and gouache on paper
558 x 763
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston
North. Purchased 1966

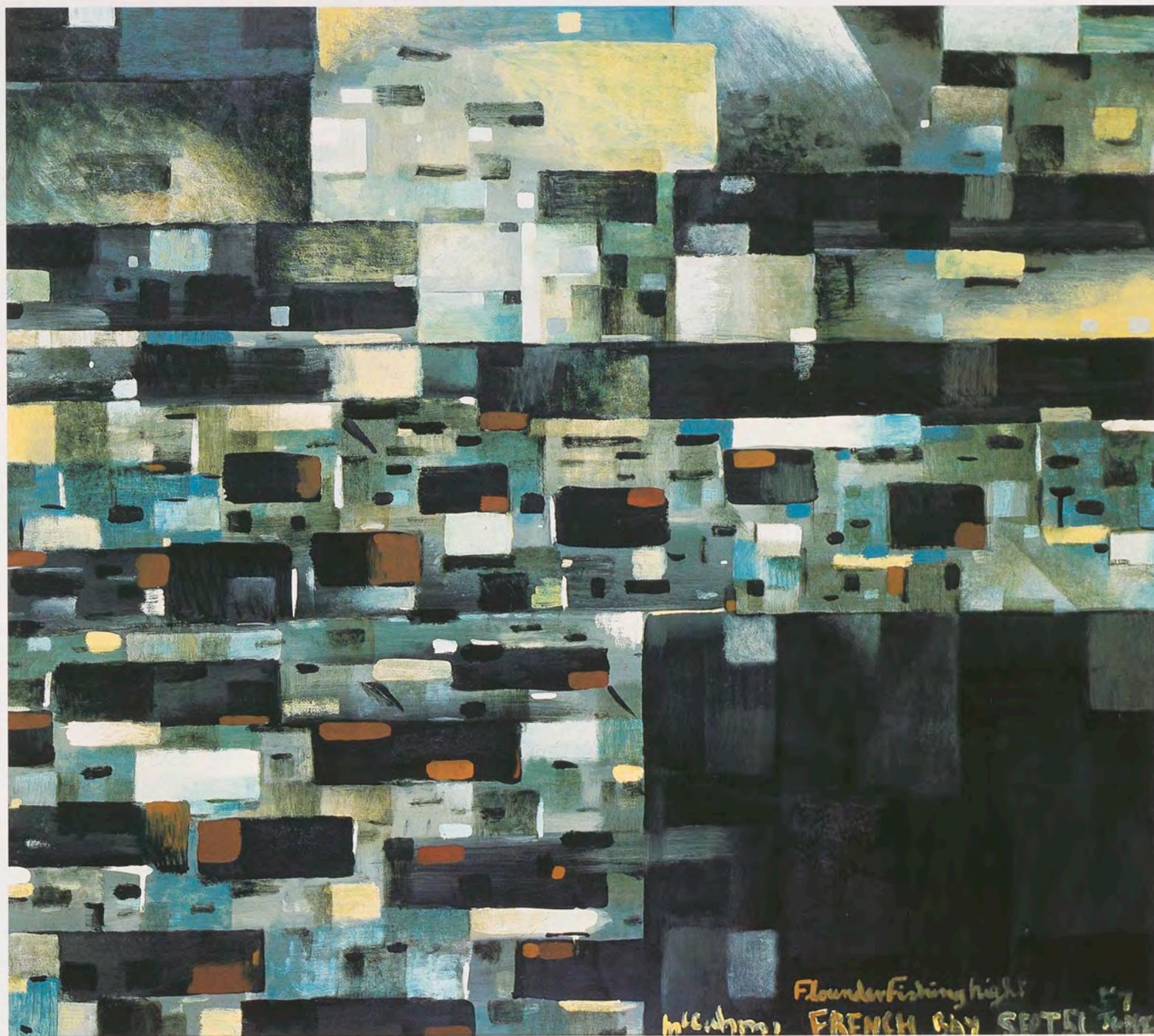


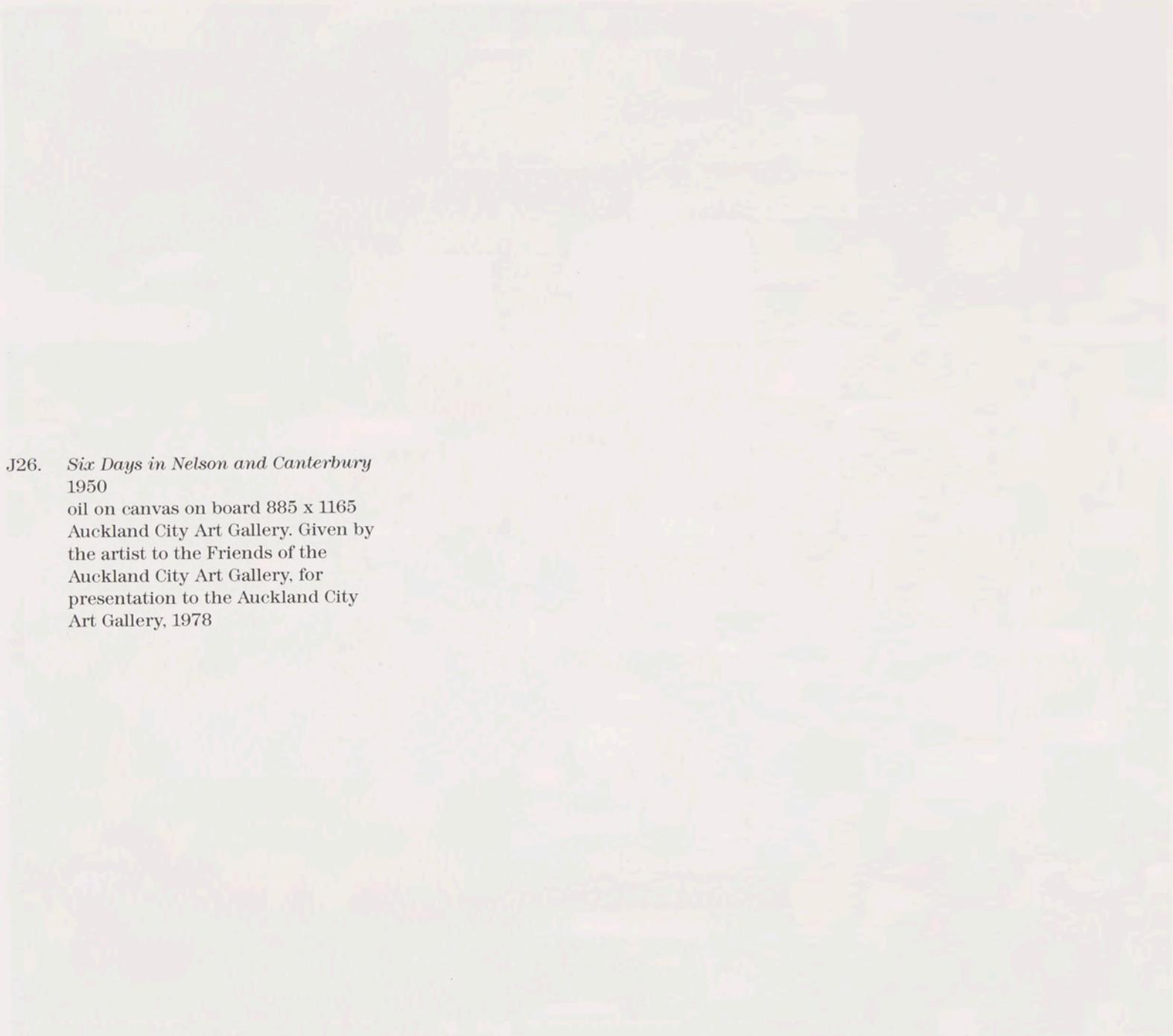


T5. *Kauri Trees* 1954
oil on canvas 777 x 883
Hocken Library, Dunedin. Charles
Brasch Bequest, 1973



T12. *Flounder Fishing, Night, French Bay* 1956-1957
enamel on board 725 x 810
Miss A.M. Ryburn, Auckland





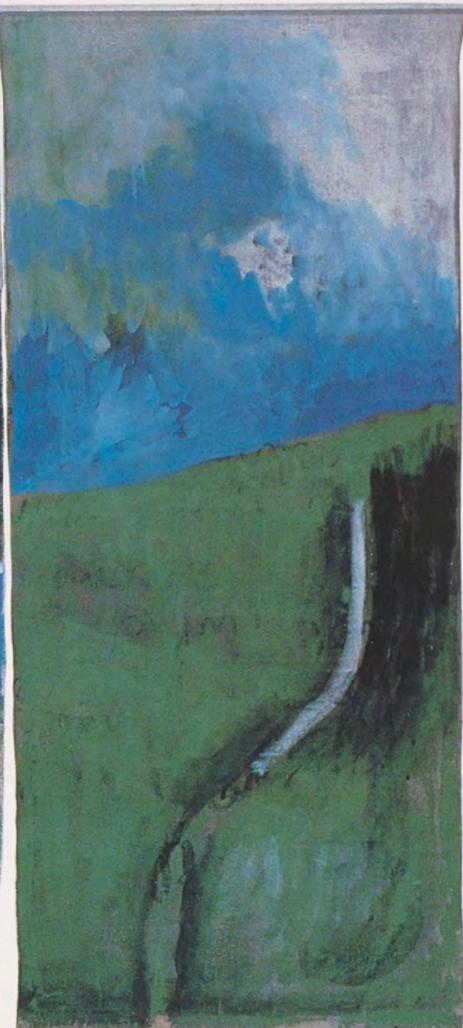
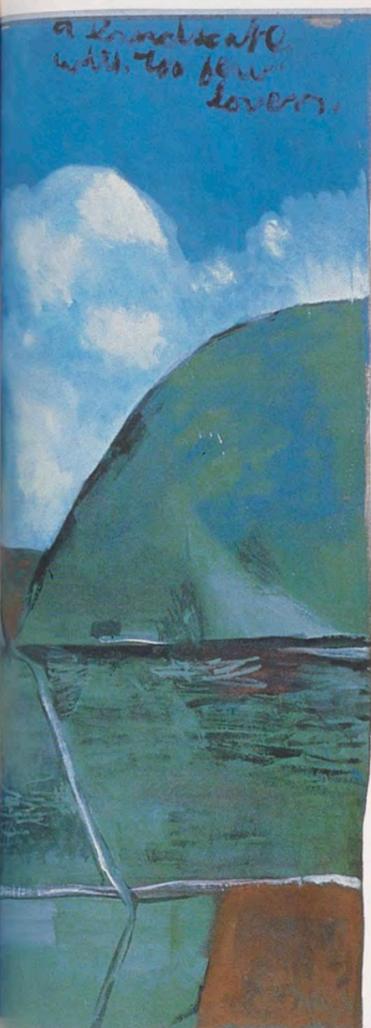
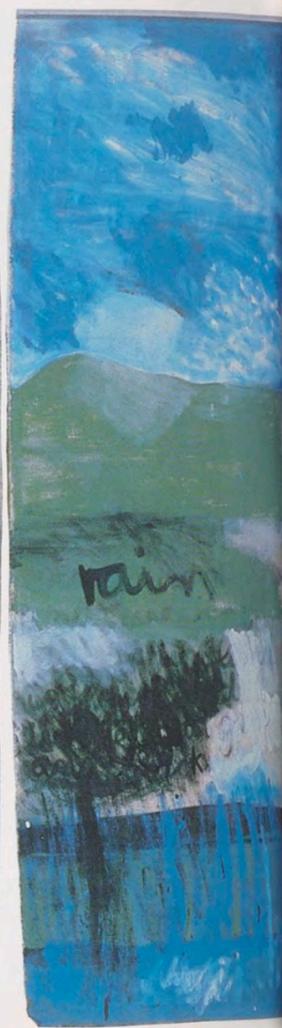
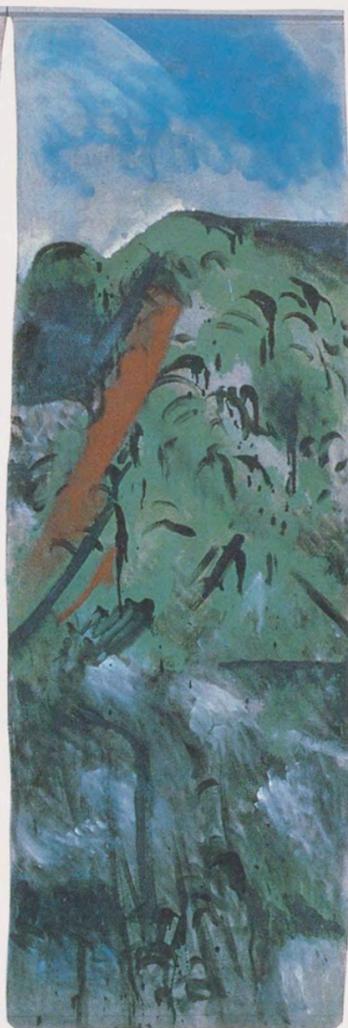
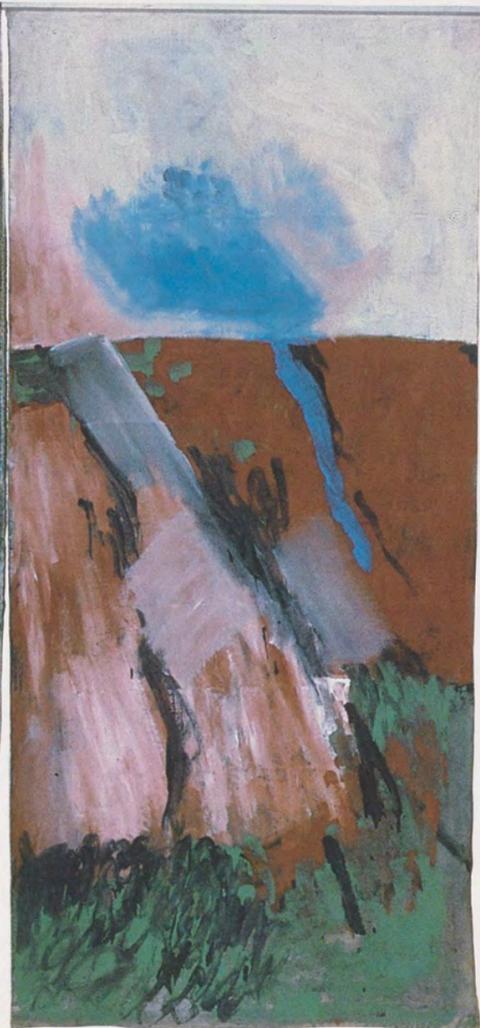
J26. *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*
1950
oil on canvas on board 885 x 1165
Auckland City Art Gallery. Given by
the artist to the Friends of the
Auckland City Art Gallery, for
presentation to the Auckland City
Art Gallery, 1978





J16. *Towards Auckland 6* 1953
watercolour 534 x 747
Hocken Library, Dunedin.
Charles Brasch Bequest, 1963



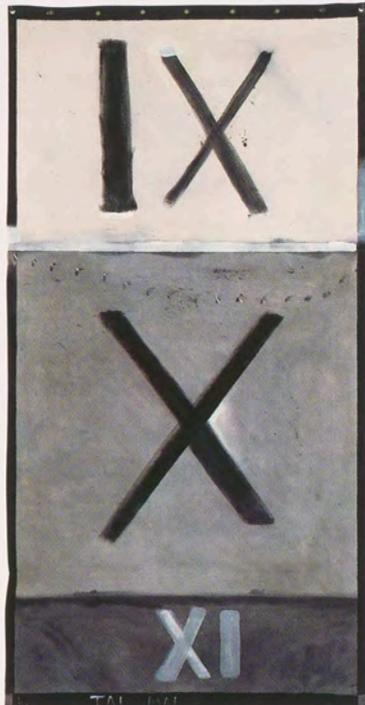
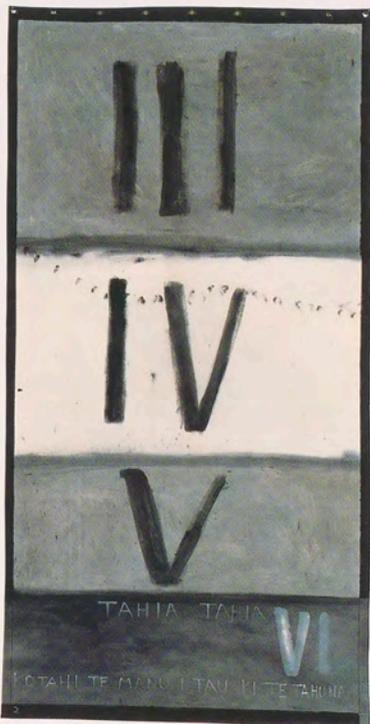


4.11.58 NOV. 58.

Previous page:

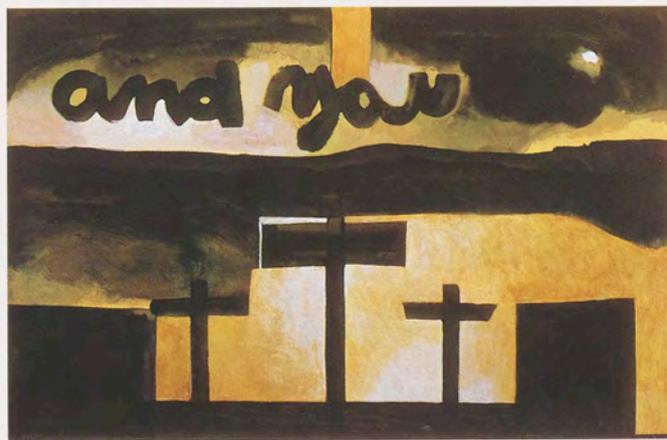
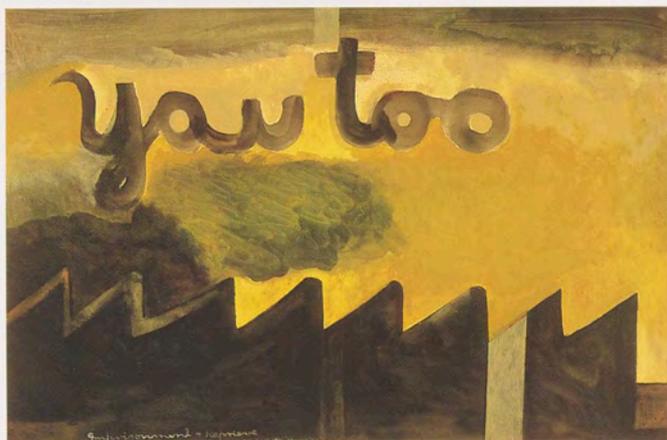
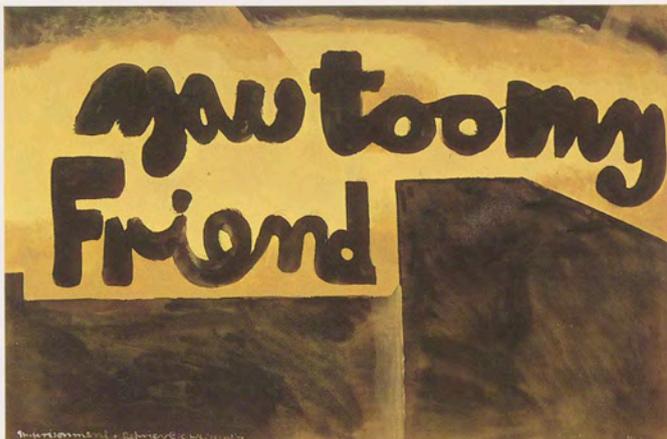
- J18. *Northland Panels* 1958
enamel on unstretched canvas
(8 panels A-H)
National Art Gallery, New Zealand.
Purchased with a New Zealand
Lotteries Board Grant and the Ellen
Eames Collection, 1978

- J21. *Te Tungi o te Pipiwhararua* (The
song of the shining cuckoo; a poem
by Tangirau Hotere) 1974
oil on unstretched canvas (5 panels)
Hocken Library, Dunedin.
Presented by the artist, 1977



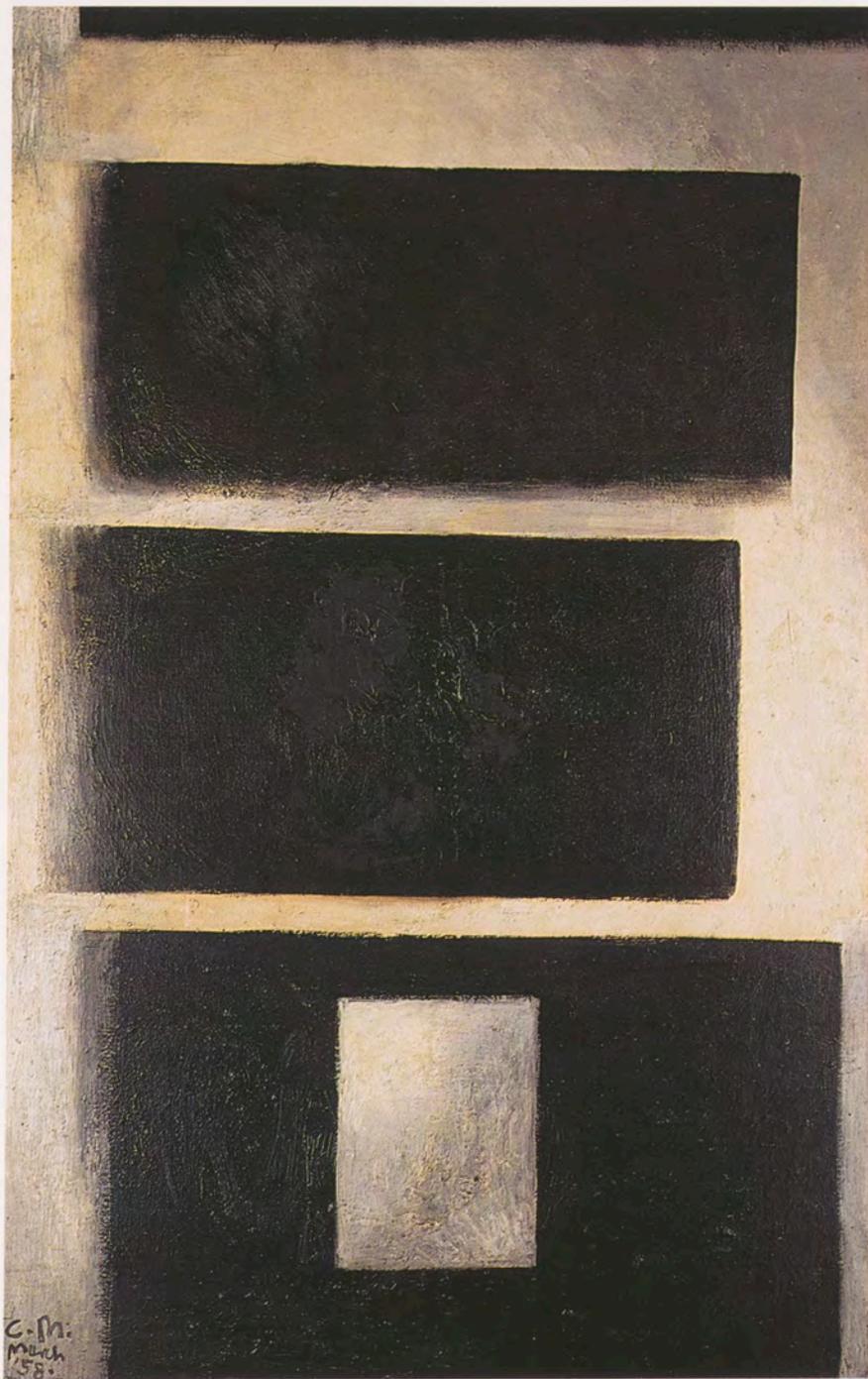


J24. *Imprisonment and Reprieve*
(triptych) 1978–1979
acrylic on paper 727 x 1095
(each panel)
Auckland City Art Gallery.
Purchased 1978





G11. *Painting* 1958
oil on board 1218 x 764
Fletcher Challenge Ltd, Wellington

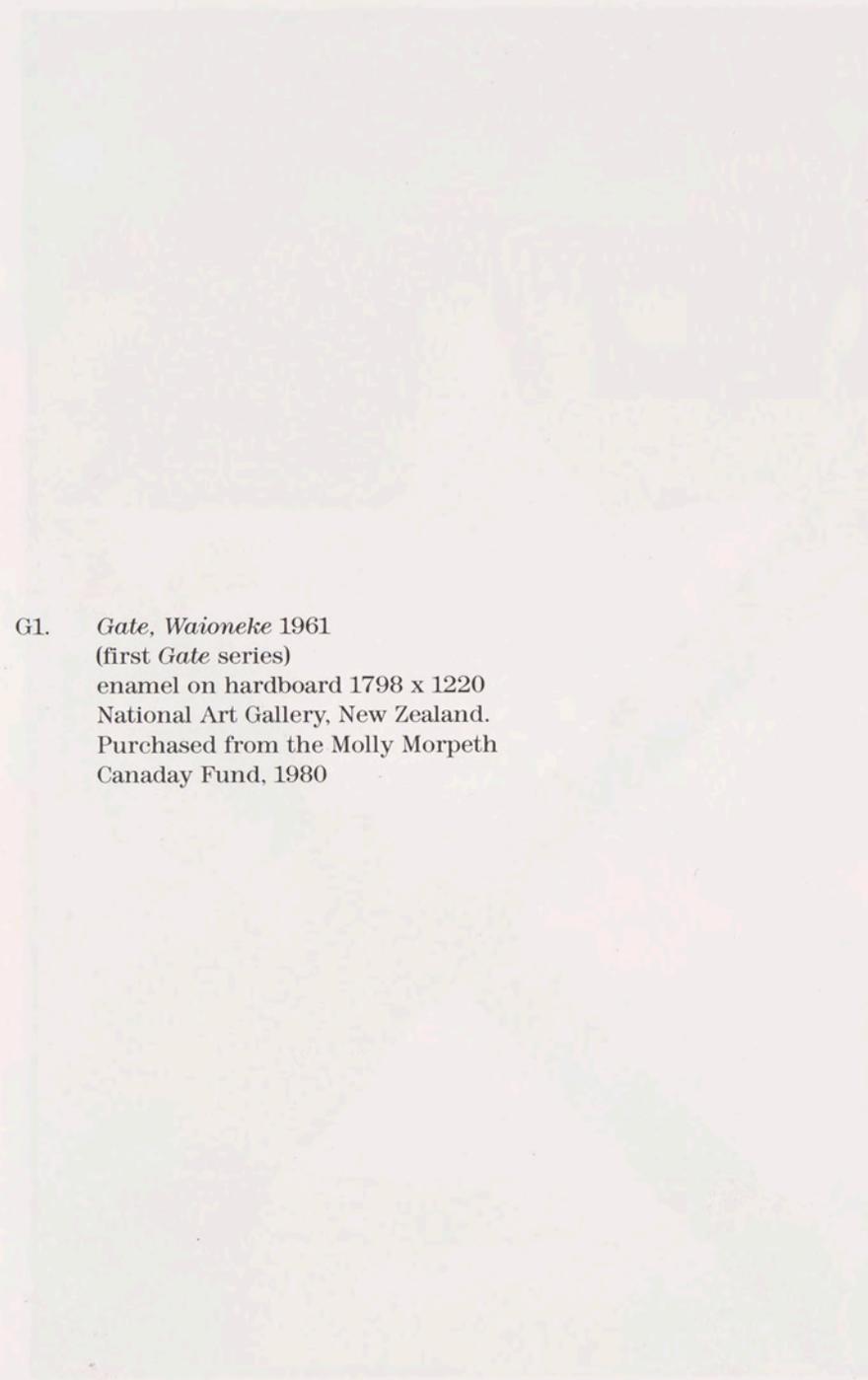


C.M.
mch
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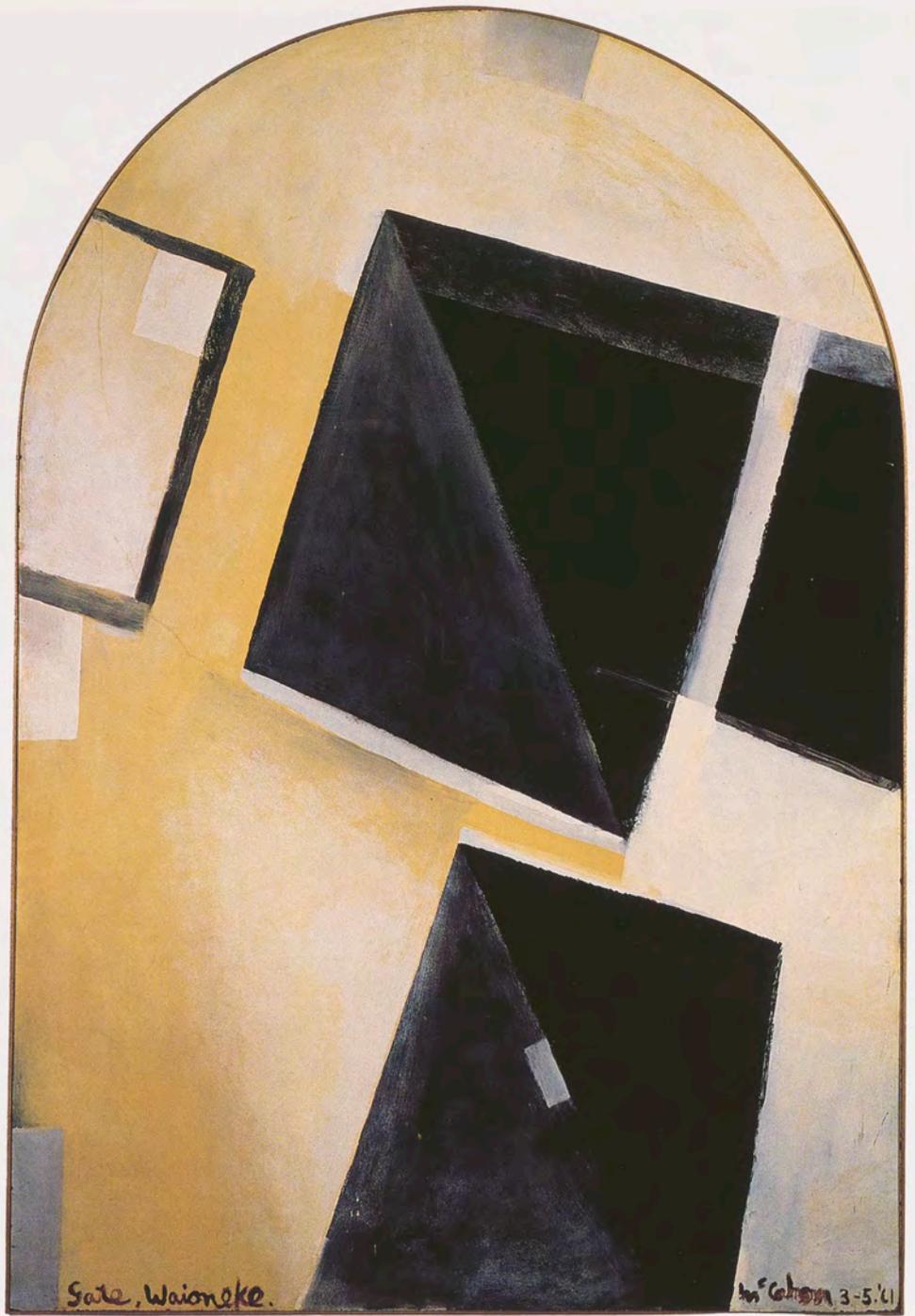
G12. *Cross* 1959
enamel on board 1219 x 762
Colin McCahon Estate



W. C. C. 8.1.59.

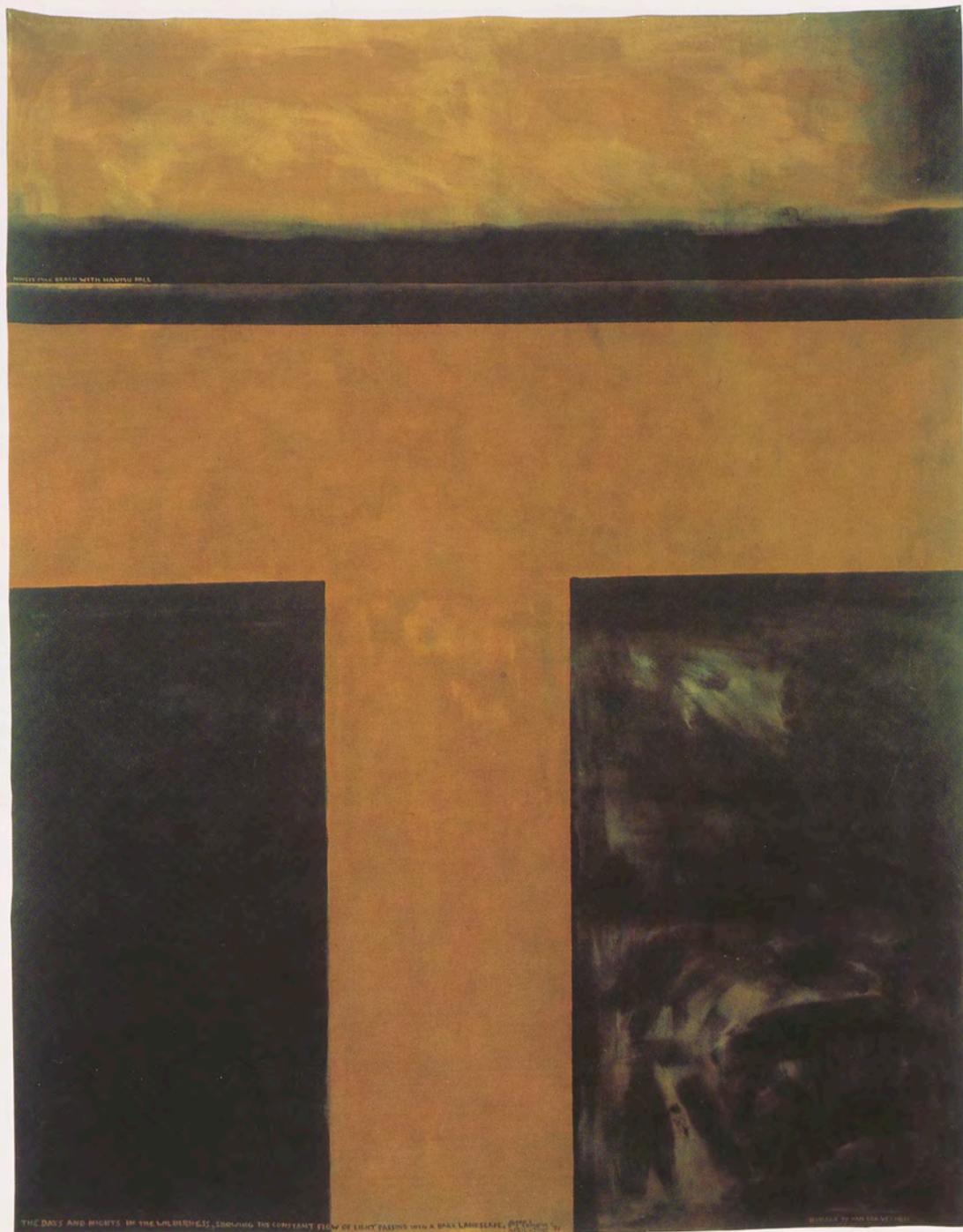


G1. *Gate, Waioneke* 1961
(first *Gate* series)
enamel on hardboard 1798 x 1220
National Art Gallery, New Zealand.
Purchased from the Molly Morpeth
Canada Fund, 1980





G19. *The days and nights in the wilderness . . .* 1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas
2378 x 1840
Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Purchased with the assistance of the Monica Brewster Bequest fund and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, 1977



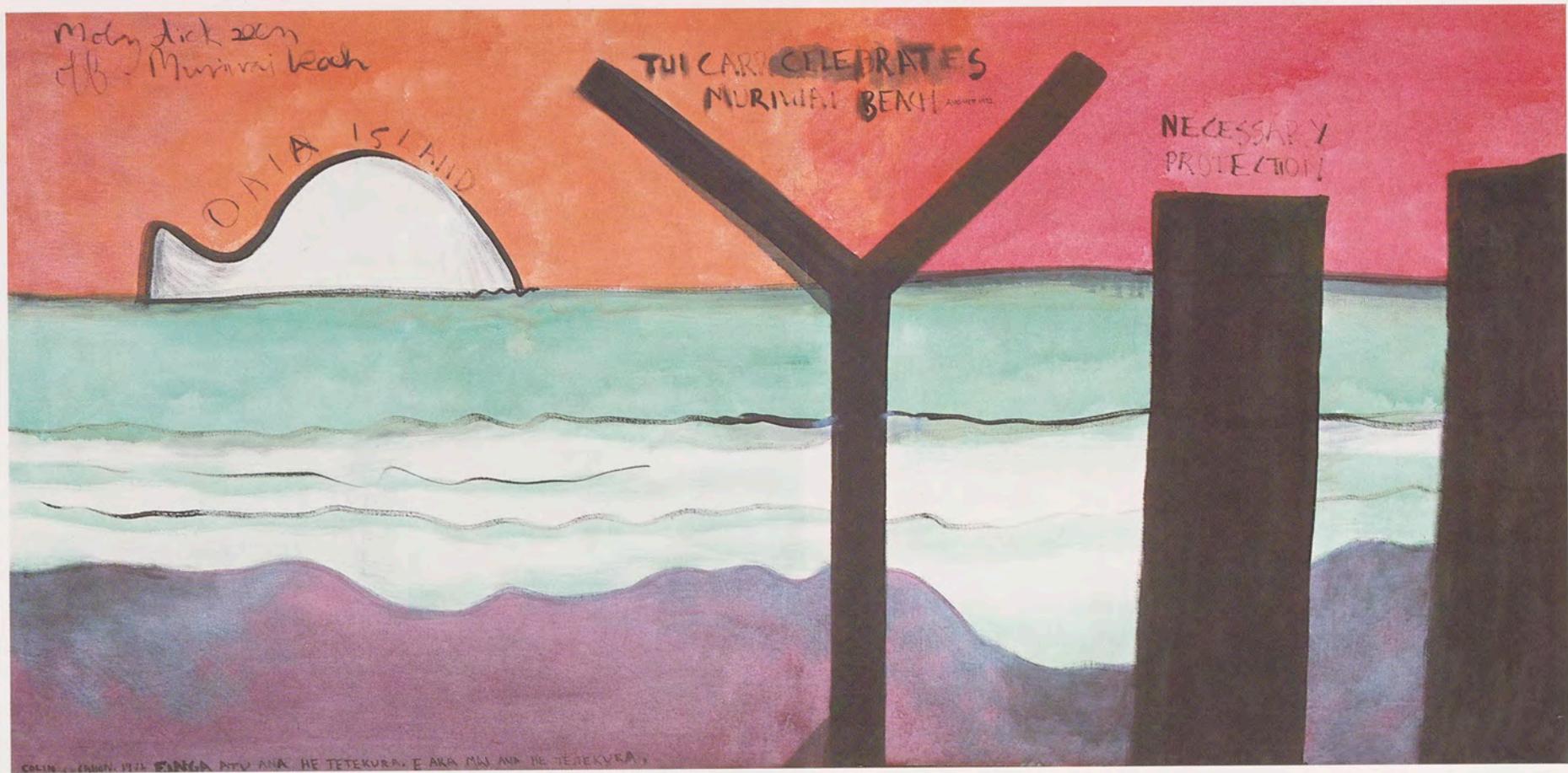
THESE DAYS WITH MATHS HILL

THE DAYS AND NIGHTS OF THE CHILDHOOD, SHOWING THE CONSTANT FLOW OF LIGHT FALLING WITH A SPARK LANGUAGE, BY THE

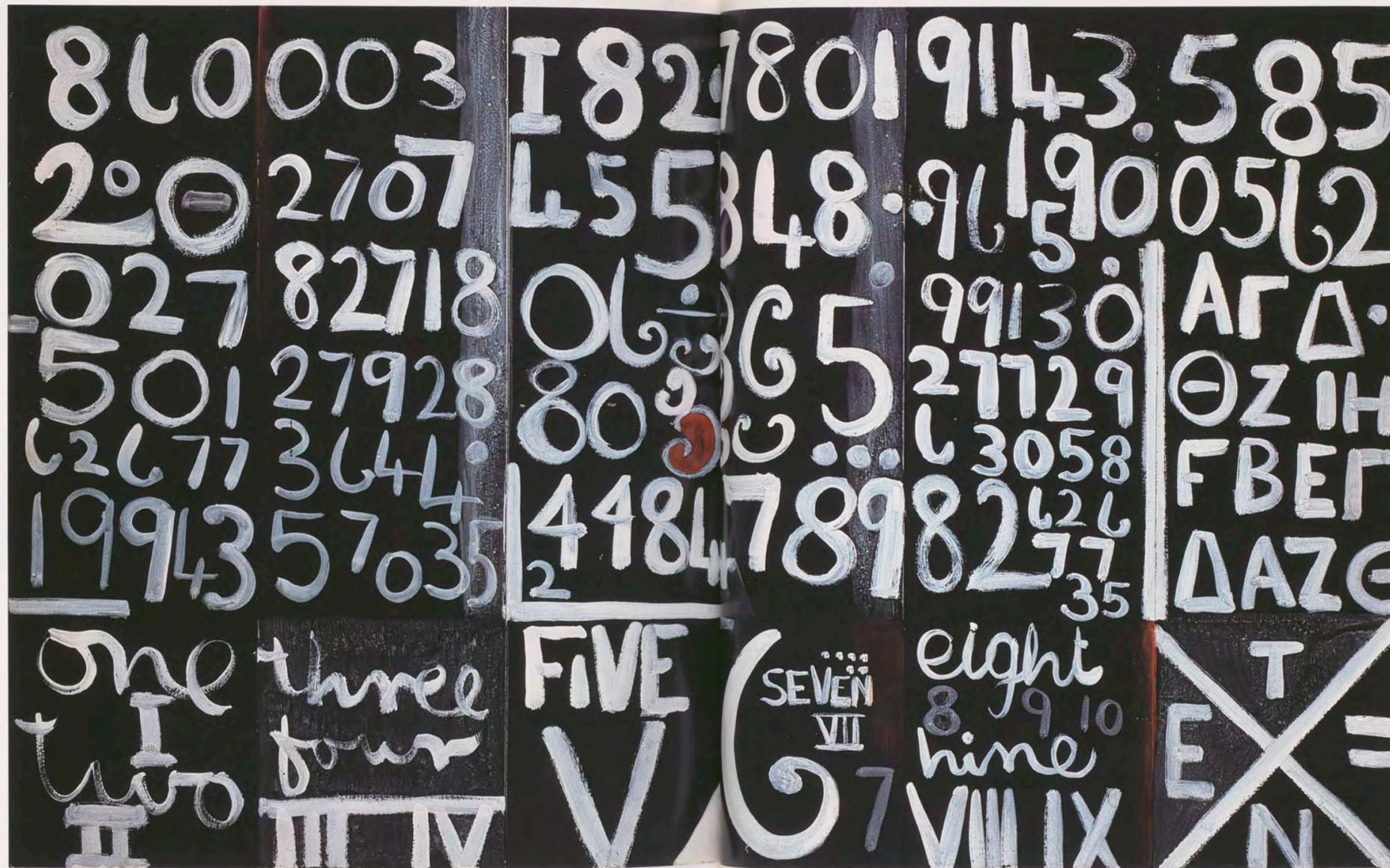
BY THE



G13. *Tui Carr Celebrates Muriwai Beach:
Moby Dick seen off Muriwai Beach*
1972
(*Necessary Protection* series)
acrylic on canvas 867 x 1752
Private collection, Melbourne,
Australia



N3. *Numbers* (sketch for University of Otago Library mural) 1966
 enamel on board 595 x 1015
 Hocken Library, Dunedin.
 Presented to the University of Otago by the artist, 1966



N5. *The Lark's Song (a poem by Matire Kereama)* 1969
acrylic on two wooden doors
810 x 1980 (each door)
Auckland City Art Gallery.
Presented by the artist, 1982

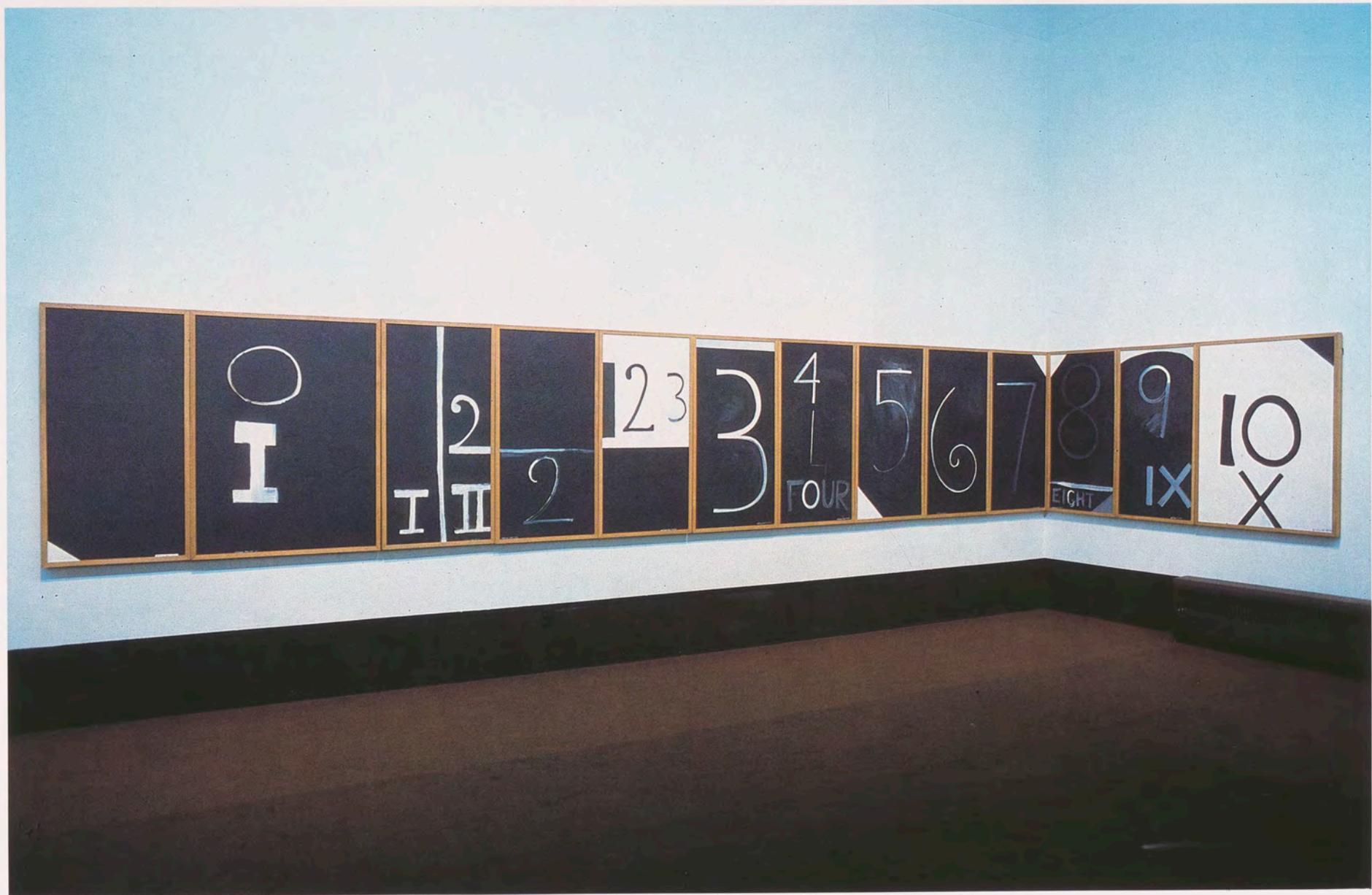
FOR MATIRE KEREKERE ... POST

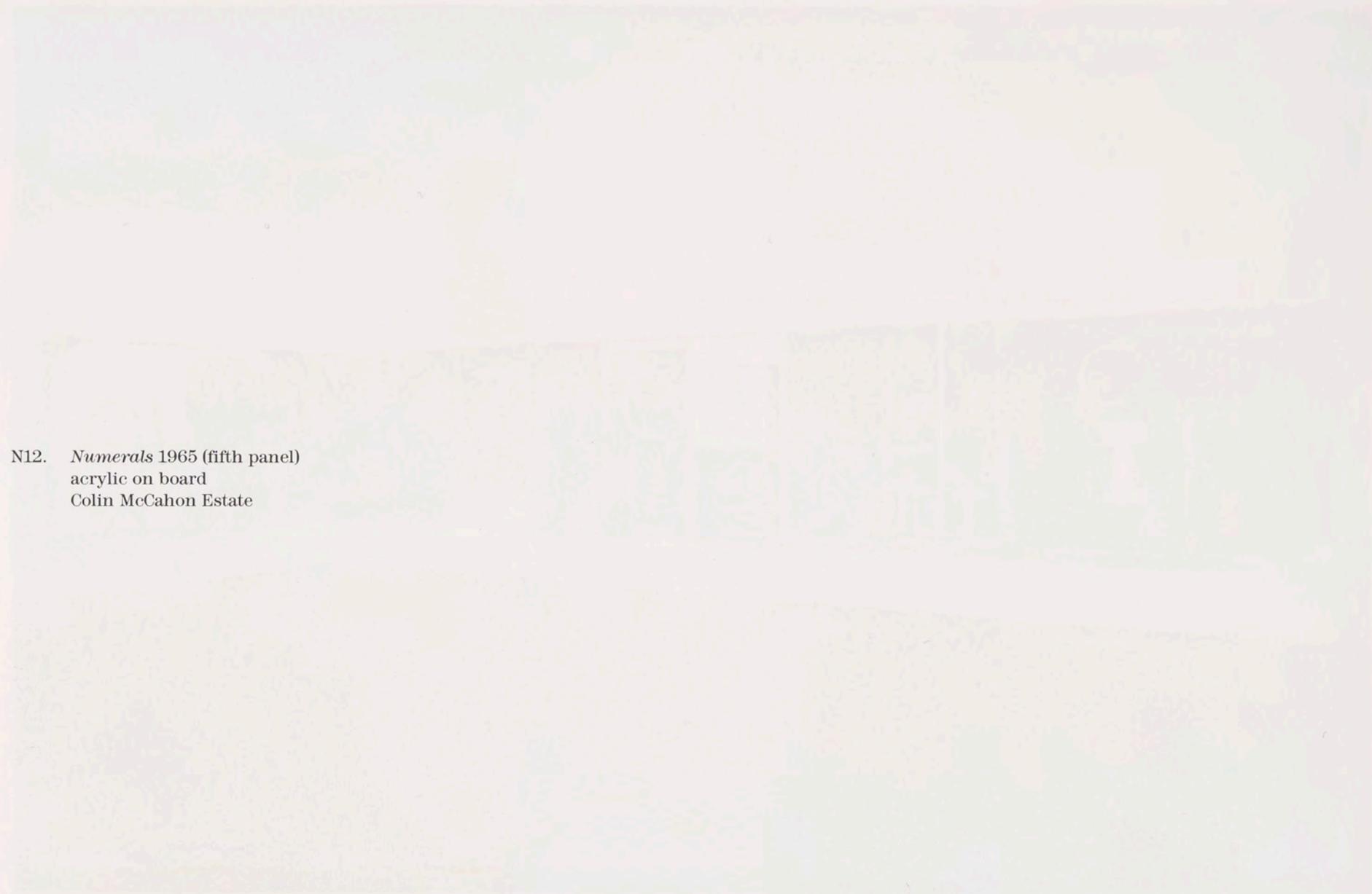
Ka tahi tii ka rua tii. Ka noho mai te hāhi te hāloo re.
 Ka rau na. Ka rau na. Ka noho te kiwi. Ka pōo he wai
 Tai tai te pi to paa. Ka hui a mai.
 Ka toko te rangi.
 Kōi ana te whetu. Te marama i te rangi.
 I te pōpō takina. E hui tarere.
 Kō te tō e rere. Ka runga ra tope Kapēka.
 E hui kaurere turakina te arero. O te rangi
 Kotare wiwi wawa kiki. Te manu i tau noo tuu-e
 Ka tahi tii ka rua tii. Ka noho mai te hāhi te hāloo re.
 Ka rau na. Ka rau na. Ka noho te kiwi. Ka pōo he wai.
 Tai Tai te pi to paa. Ka hui a mai. Ka toko te rangi.
 Kōi ana te whetu. Te marama i te rangi. I te pōpō takina. E hui
 Kō te tō e rere. Ka runga ra tope Kapēka. E hui kaurere tarere
 turakina te arero. O te rangi. Kotare wiwi wawa keke. Te
 manu i tau noo tuu-e.

The Lamb's Song. CAN YOU HEAR ME, ST. FRANCIS.



N12. *Numerals* 1965
acrylic on board (13 panels)
Colin McCahon Estate



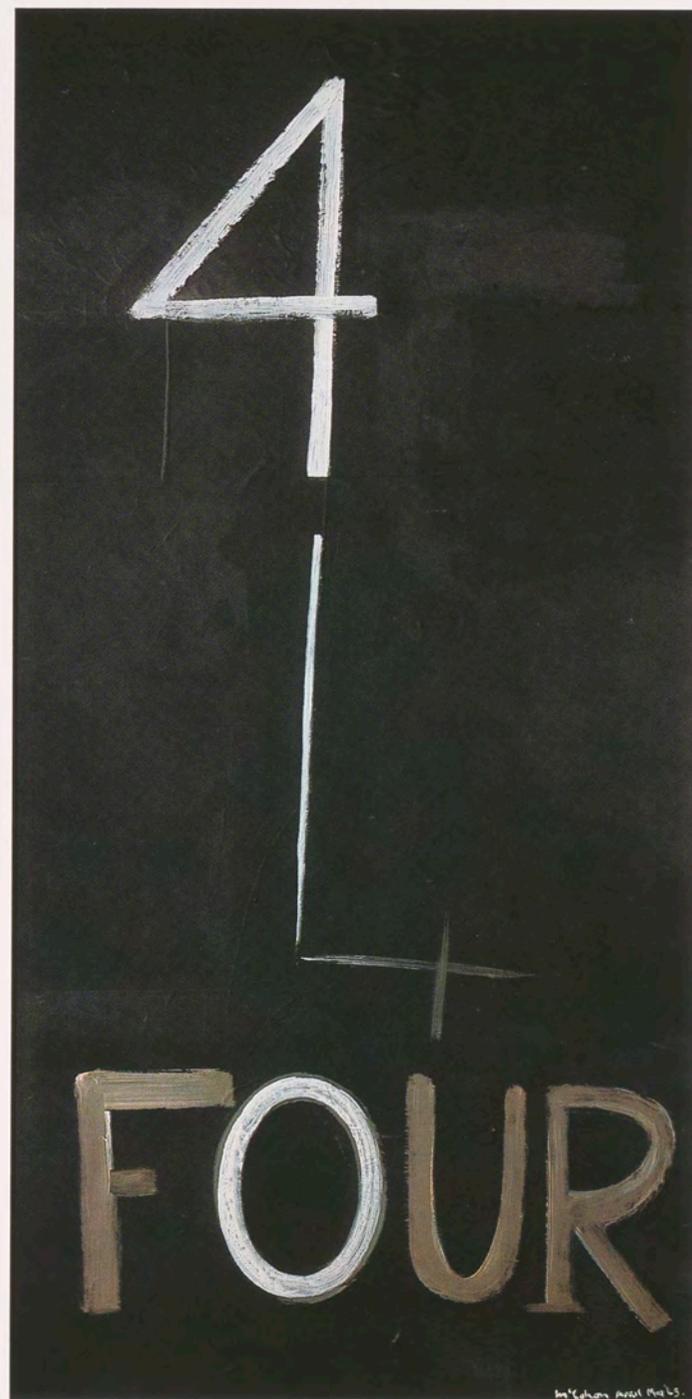


N12. *Numerals* 1965 (fifth panel)
acrylic on board
Colin McCahon Estate

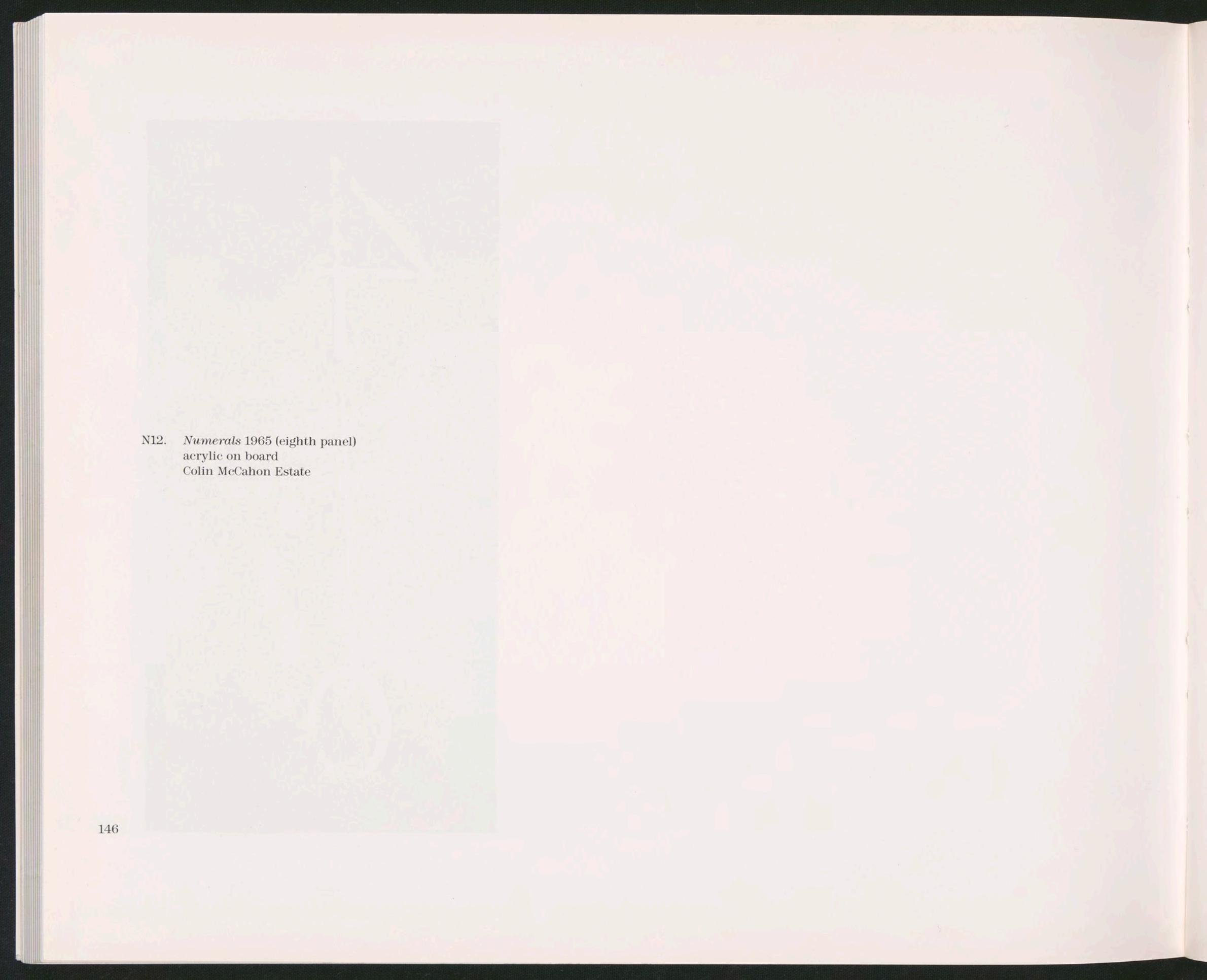




N12. *Numerals* 1965 (seventh panel)
acrylic on board
Colin McCahon Estate

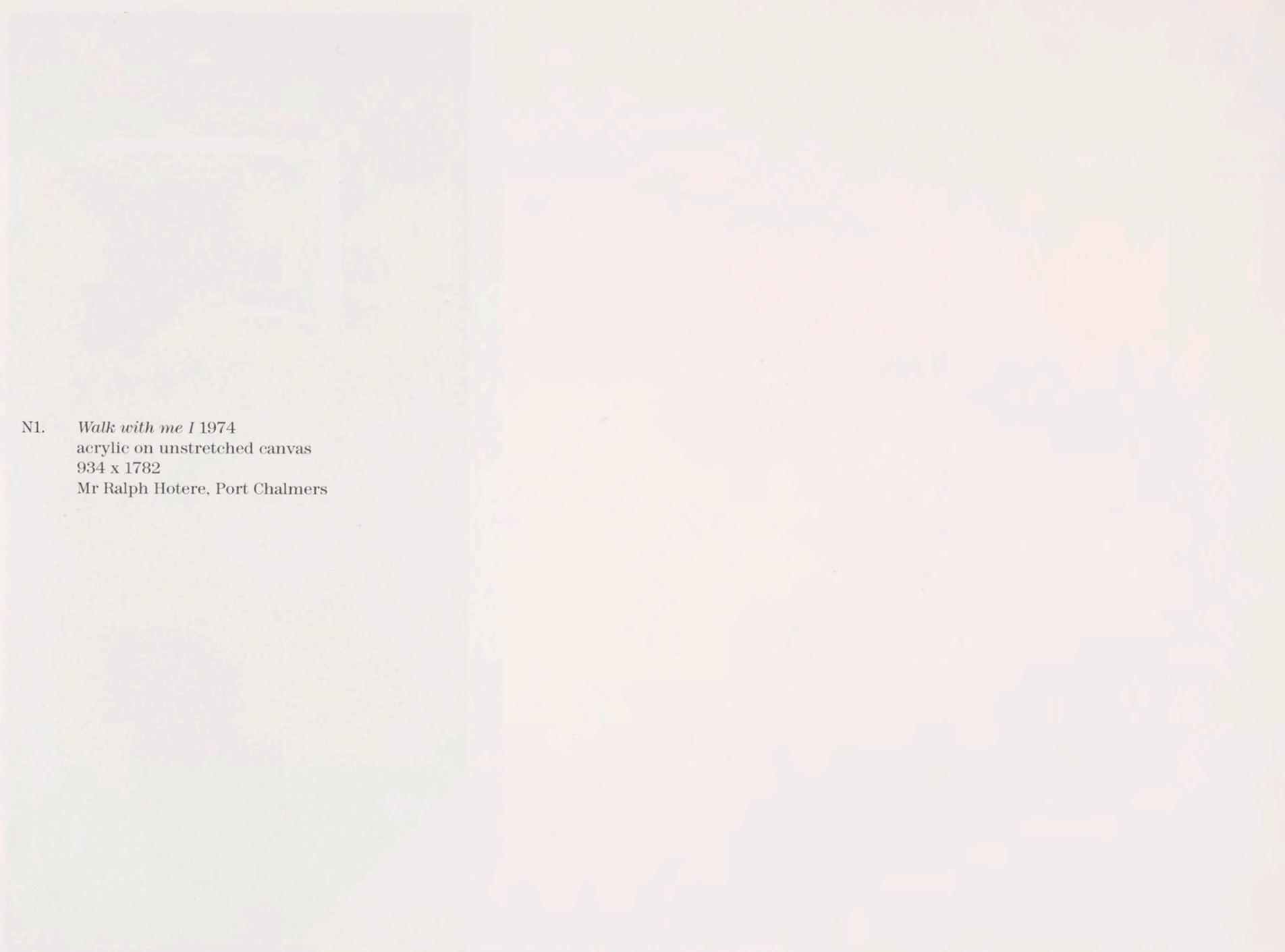


Im'Kohne April 1965

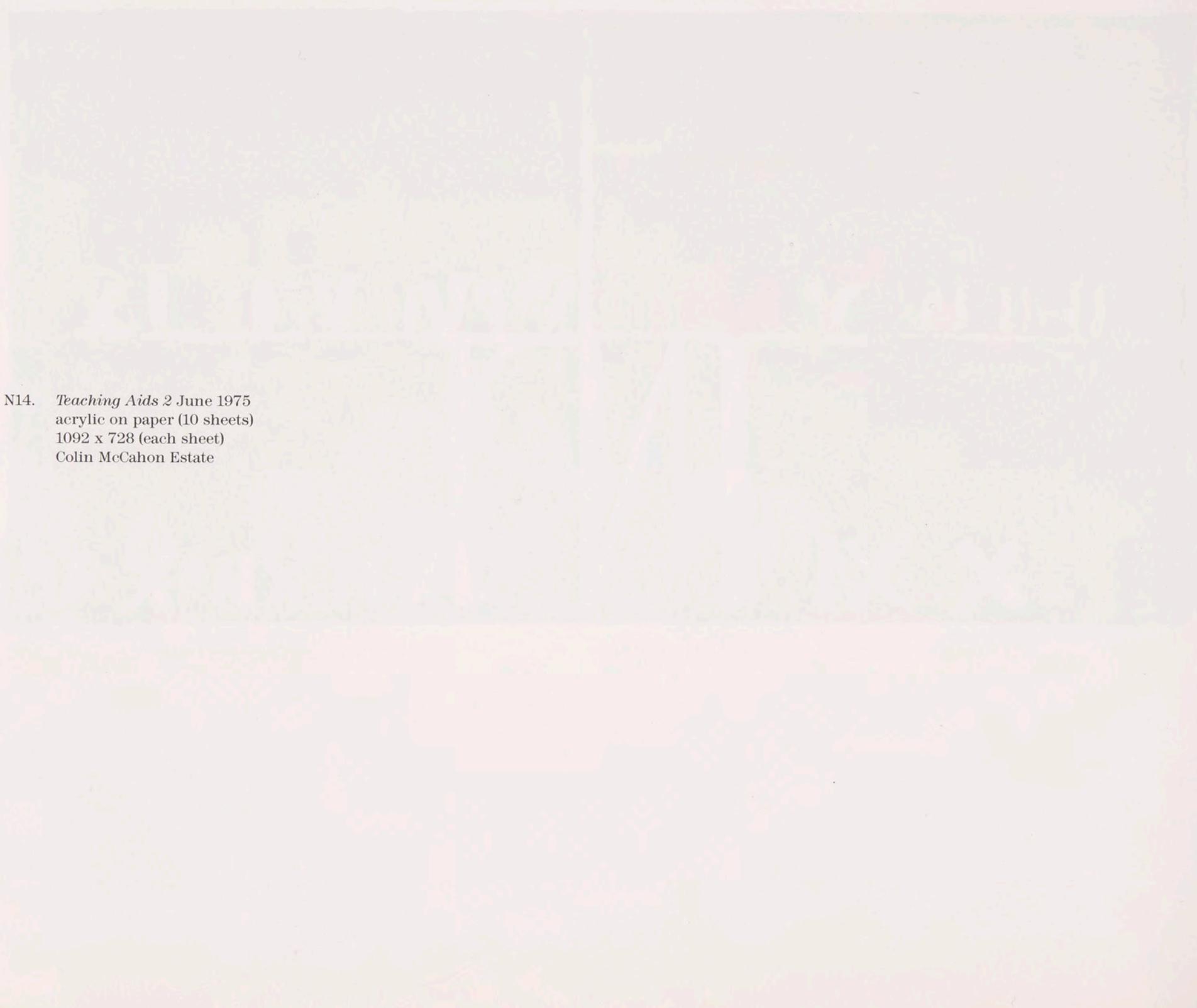


N12. *Numerals* 1965 (eighth panel)
acrylic on board
Colin McCahon Estate





N1. *Walk with me I* 1974
acrylic on unstretched canvas
934 x 1782
Mr Ralph Hotere, Port Chalmers



N14. *Teaching Aids 2* June 1975
acrylic on paper (10 sheets)
1092 x 728 (each sheet)
Colin McCahon Estate

ONE	FOUR
2	4
THREE	FIVE
SIX	7

ONE	1 one
TWO	FOUR
2	4
3	6
THREE	7

1	10	11
2	9	12
3	8	13
4	7	14
5	6	

1	ONE	13	14
2		12	11
3	8	9	10
4	5	6	7

1	14	10
2	4 5	11
3	5 6	12
	7 8 9	13

1	13	12
2		11
3	14	10
4		9
5	7	
6		

ONE	11	10
I		9
TWO	12	8
2		7
THREE	13	6
III		5
4	14	

1	4	7
2	5	8
3	6	9
10	11	12
13	14	

1	14	13
	ONE	12
	TWO	11
	Three	TEN
	Four	NINE
	Five	EIGHT
	SIX	SEVEN

1	14
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
	13
	12
	11
	10

Father, glorify your name. ^{a voice sounded from heaven.}

**I HAVE
GLORIFIED
IT, AND I WILL
GLORIFY IT
AGAIN.**

Now my soul
is in turmoil
and what have
I to say?
Father, save
me from this
hour.

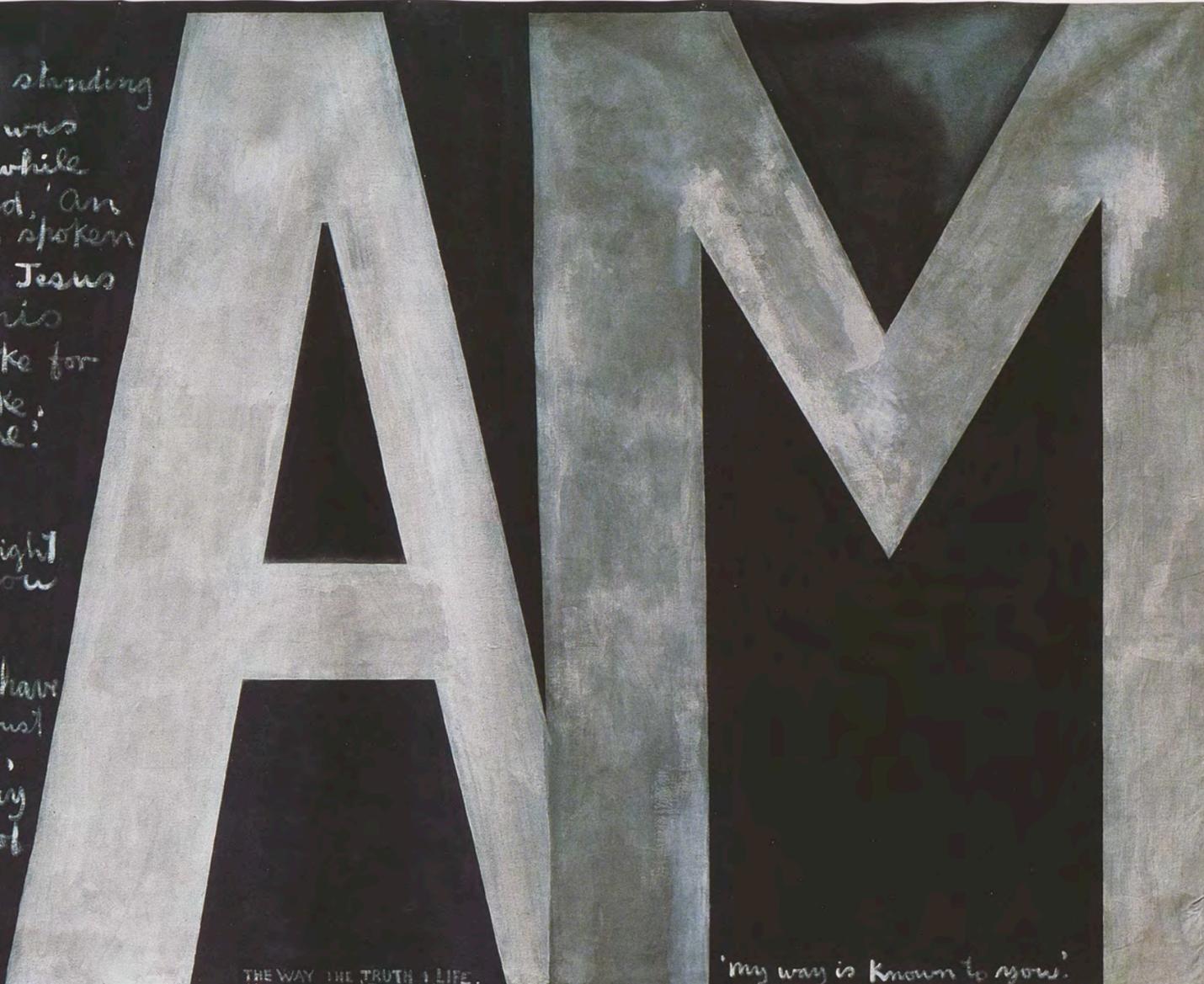
No, it was for this
that I came to
this hour

The light
is among you
still, but not
for long. So
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
in the light,
that you may
become men of
light.



THE WAY, THE TRUTH & LIFE.
MURRAY, FEB. 70. MICHON.

'My way is known to you.'

Previous page:

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

V1. *Practical Religion: the Resurrection
of Lazarus showing Mount Martha*
1969–1970
oil on unstretched canvas
2075 x 7720
National Art Gallery, New Zealand.
Purchased with assistance from the
New Zealand Lotteries Board and
Molly Morpeth Canaday Bequest,
1985

LET US GO BACK TO JUDAEA
 JESUS WITHDREW AGAIN ACROSS THE JORDAN, TO THE PLACE WHERE JOHN HAD BEEN BAPTISING EARLIER.
 THERE HE STAYED, WHILE CROWDS CAME TO HIM. THEY SAID, "JOHN DID NOT DECEIVE US."
 JOHN GAVE US NO MIRACULOUS SIGN, BUT ALL THAT HE SAID ABOUT THIS MAN WAS TRUE. MANY CAME TO BELIEVE IN HIM.

LET US GO BACK TO JUDAEA
 HIS SISTERS SENT A MESSAGE TO JESUS: "SIR, YOUR FRIEND WHO HAD FALLEN ILL, LIES ILL."
 WHEN JESUS HEARD THIS HE SAID, "THIS SICKNESS WILL NOT END IN DEATH. IT HAS COME FOR THE GLORY OF GOD."
 AFTER THIS HE SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, "LET US GO BACK TO JUDAEA."

LAZARUS IS DEAD
 OUR FRIEND LAZARUS HAS FALLEN ASLEEP, BUT I SHALL GO AND WAKE HIM UP AGAIN.
 I AM GOD, NOT TO HAVE BEEN THERE, IT WILL BE FOR YOUR GOOD AND FOR THE GOOD OF YOUR FAITH.

LAZARUS IS DEAD
 MASTER, IF HE HAS FALLEN ASLEEP HE WILL RECOVER.
 BUT LET US GO TO HIM.

LAZARUS IS DEAD
 MARTHA WENT TO MEET JESUS. "IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE, SIR, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED. EVEN NOW I KNOW THAT WHATEVER YOU ASK OF GOD, GOD WILL GRANT YOU."
 I KNOW THAT HE WILL RISE AGAIN, AT THE RESURRECTION ON THE LAST DAY.

LAZARUS COME FORTH
 THE DEAD MUST COME FORTH. JESUS SAID, "LOOSE HIM, LET HIM GO."

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND I AM LIFE
 JESUS SAID, "IF A MAN HAS FAITH IN ME, EVEN THOUGH HE DIE, HE SHALL COME TO LIFE, AND NO ONE WHO IS ALIVE AND HAS FAITH SHALL EVER DIE."
 DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?
 "Thy master is here, he is asking for you." So Mary came to the place where Jesus was. "O Sir, if you had been here my brother would not have died."
 Jesus went over to the tomb. "Take away the stone," Jesus said. "But I don't tell you that if you have faith, you will see the glory of GOD."



V6. *Am I Scared* 1976
(*Scared* series)
acrylic on paper 730 x 1104
Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New
Plymouth. Purchased with the
assistance of the Monica Brewster
Bequest fund and the Queen
Elizabeth II Arts Council of
New Zealand, 1977

