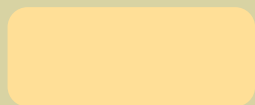




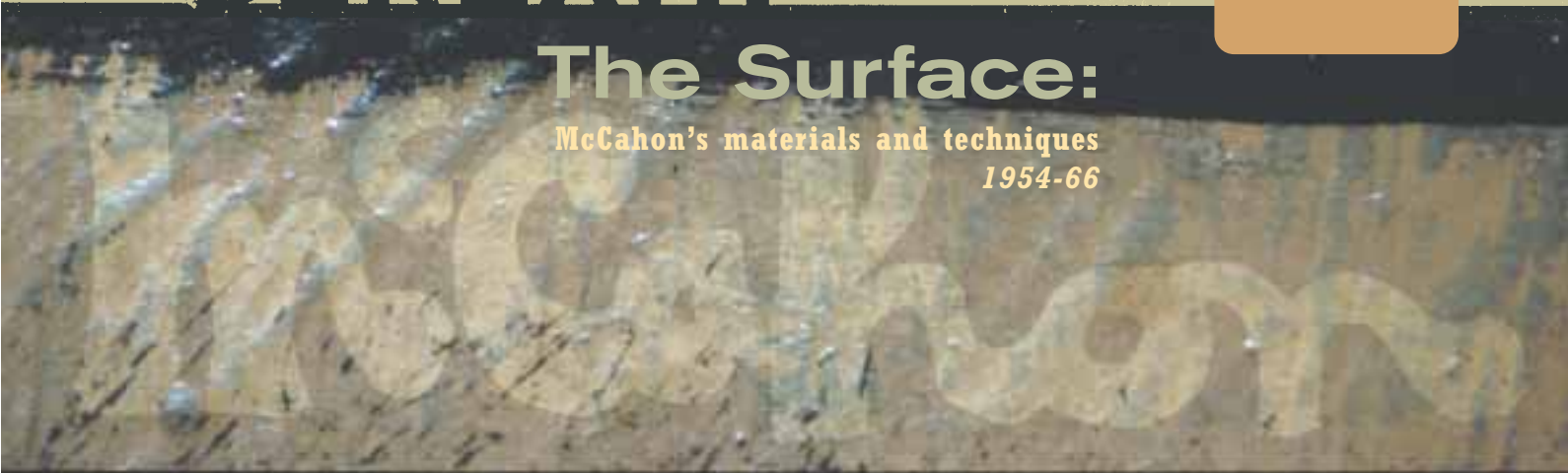
04



# BENEATH

## The Surface:

McCahon's materials and techniques  
*1954-66*





**I and Thou 1954-55**  
oil on hardboard 558 x 538mm



**Colin McCahon**  
N.Z Woman's Weekly Photograph 27.3.1961



**Will he save him? 1959**  
Alkyd and natural resin on hardboard 1227 x 910mm



**Easter Landscape: Triptych 1966**  
PVA on hardboard panels, each panel 1802 x 594 x 20mm

## The Surface: McCahon's materials and techniques 1954-66

There has been much debate about Colin McCahon's art, but an area which remains largely unexplored is the artist's use of non-traditional painting materials. *Beneath the Surface*, an exhibition resulting from four years of research into this subject by Auckland Art Gallery's Principal Conservator, Sarah Hillary, helps to redress the balance. The exhibition presents in-depth analysis of three significant paintings from 1954-66, when the artist often experimented with household paints.

Dulux Enamel, Giant Monocoat, Taubman's Butex and Solpah – the types of commercial paints used by McCahon during the 1950s and 60s read like a handyman's shopping list for a visit to the hardware store. These and other new paints, which came onto the New Zealand home decorator's market in the 1950s, were adapted to fine art purposes by McCahon and other artists who had become accustomed to improvising during World War II. In a period when artist-quality materials were in short supply, artists had been forced to make up their own paints, or use housepaints as a cheap and readily available alternative.

Artists such as McCahon also experimented with commercial paints as a means of exploring the visual results made possible by the distinct properties of these materials. Scientific innovation in paint manufacture had made it conceivable to break with old methodology. In general, the new paints produced glossier, flatter surfaces, more intense colours and dried much faster than conventional oil paint. Because they were less expensive, experimentation on a large scale did not carry the same financial risk as working up a potentially unsuccessful composition in artist-quality oil. McCahon often painted on hardboard for similar reasons, buying large pre-cut pieces, which according to Richard Killeen, he would line up on the floor of the studio and "whack them out, do them all fast". The free-flowing properties of housepaints facilitated this spontaneous approach and enabled McCahon to produce a large number of related compositions in a relatively short timeframe, such as the Elias series of 1959. The combination of commercial paints and hardboard also allowed him to achieve very smooth painted surfaces, which he occasionally enlivened by applying sand and sawdust.



Figure 01



Figure 03

McCahon's use of non-traditional materials and methods could be considered as part and parcel of a renegade nature, bolstering the myth that McCahon was an intentional nonconformist, an anti-academic painter. Yet no artist operates in a vacuum. A counterpart for McCahon's experimentation with housepaints and other commercial products existed across the Tasman in a circle of artists which included Sidney Nolan, Ian Fairweather, George Johnson, Leonard French and others. The Masonite and Dulux brigade, these artists similarly subscribed to the antipodean make-do ethic and even mocked painters who insisted on using proper artists' materials.<sup>iv</sup> They treated technical innovation 'as a challenge worthy of an artist' and believed that 'To break free from conventional painting methods and to invent or adapt one's own, signified an escape from earlier traditions'.<sup>v</sup>



Figure 02

Further afield, artists in America had been experimenting with commercial paints since the 1930s. Having used car paints for his exterior murals to increase their durability, David Alfaro Siqueiros ran workshops to share his discoveries with other artists. Jackson Pollock relied on industrial and household paints, which were thin and easily poured, for his now famous drip technique. In Europe, as far back as 1912, Picasso used trade materials in combination with artists' paints, and his attachment to Ripolin, a shiny, nitro-cellulose house paint, was influential on many artists. The significance of modern paints in the global evolution of creative expression was therefore something that McCahon would have certainly been aware of. A sojourn in Melbourne in 1951 and a four month tour of American galleries in 1958 would have increased this awareness of technical and stylistic developments abroad and reinforced his willingness to experiment. As Tony Green has observed 'Look at America as confirmation for him – an assurance that what he was doing was not a willful error . . . McCahon was no beginner finding his way.'<sup>vi</sup>

Figure 04





The paintings featured in *Beneath the Surface* exemplify McCahon's use of three distinct forms of paint – oil, alkyd, and PVA. Oil is representative of a more traditional approach compared to enamel and PVA, which were examples of new synthetic paints. Not only do these paint types each have different binders, but often different pigments and additives as well. Interestingly, the media of all three works has previously been inadequately described in exhibition catalogues. A lack of understanding about the composition of the paints is partially to blame for this, although McCahon tended to name only the major constituent he had used in any one work.

*I and Thou*, the earliest of these paintings and one of McCahon's first word paintings, was painted in 1954-55, on hardboard. Although the medium is described as oil in the *Colin McCahon / a survey exhibition* catalogue of 1972, analysis of a paint sample also identified some alkyd resin. Alkyd housepaints became available in New Zealand in the 1950s and were commonly known as enamel because of their glossy appearance. The smooth surface in parts of the painting suggests the presence of alkyd, which contrasts sharply with the impasto in the areas of oil (fig 1). Evidence of McCahon's preference for short-hair brushes worn almost to the base can be seen in the shading of forms where there is a dry scratching of colour. This technique is useful when painting with alkyd as the paint dries too rapidly to blend the colours on the surface.

Painted almost five years later, also on hardboard, *Will he save him?* 1959, is one of more than one hundred *Elias* paintings produced in the period immediately following McCahon's American sojourn. These works explore the spiritual fears and doubts of humankind, using as a vehicle the Gospel incident in which Elias is petitioned to save Christ from crucifixion. In each composition, phrases from the biblical text are the predominant motifs, the words painted in a loose calligraphic style. These represent a distinct shift in McCahon's technique directly related to his use of household paints. The free-flowing quality of alkyd or enamel paints enabled him to significantly modify his approach to text images, simply because he could 'write' with the paintbrush more freely. This contrast is well-evidenced by a visual comparison of *Will he save him?* and the earlier *I and Thou*.

The drips of paint, bright colour and glossy surface of *Will he save him?* are characteristic of alkyd paints, the presence of which was confirmed by scientific analysis (fig 2). Although Taubman's Solpah is the medium named on the reverse of the painting, alkyd and oil paint appear to have been added to this oleo-resinous paving paint. This suggests that as with *I and Thou*, McCahon mixed his paint types together to achieve the desired effect. Paint cross-sections have revealed numerous layers of paint, indicating that artist made rapid reworkings and adjustments (fig 3). Light coloured surface layers mute darker colours below and dark forms emerge and submerge. There is a play between upper and lower layers, highlighting and softening. McCahon's frequent use of localised varnishing during this period is typified by this painting. A cross-section seen under ultra-violet light revealed highly fluorescent varnish layers (fig 4).

Figure 05



Figure 08



The latest of the three works, *Easter Landscape: Triptych* 1966, is painted on three hardboard doors, allowing them to be hung without framing. The paint medium has been recorded as acrylic in the 1972 catalogue, but analysis of a paint sample detected PVA, which was manufactured in New Zealand from the late 1950s. It is possible that McCahon did apply some acrylic in the painting, or otherwise employed the term in a generic sense. Because of the flattening characteristics of housepaints, his use of impasto or the texturing of paint was extremely limited. Subtle textures could be produced by the building up of underpaint showing through to the surface (a technique frequently practiced by the artist), yet more dramatic results required the addition of textural materials. McCahon experimented with sand in paintings in the late 1950s, then changed to sawdust in the 60s because it was easier to handle and was available in a variety of coarsenesses. The surface of *Easter Landscape: Triptych* is predominantly opaque and glossy with the characteristic rounded texture associated with latex paints (fig 5). However, the inclusion of sawdust in the black areas works to catch the light at certain points, animating the surface of the image. As the viewer moves past the painting, light flickers across these irregular, glossy black forms, creating the effect, in the words of Buster Pihama, of a landscape that is 'jumping'.<sup>viii</sup> (fig 6).

Varnish is present on the surface of *Easter Landscape: Triptych* and ultra-violet examination of a cross-section revealed a varnish layer between the black layers of paint which is not visible under normal light (figs 7&8). McCahon's intention in applying varnish at this point is unclear, although he may have been trying to saturate the colours to reconsider the image during the painting process. William McCahon remembers that his father was well aware of how the colour of the varnish could be used to suit his purposes.<sup>ix</sup> Unlike the layered effect of *Will he save him?*, it is not possible to see underlying colours coming to the surface in *Easter Landscape: Triptych* - PVA paint is much thicker than the alkyd and often quite opaque, therefore the emphasis is on relationships between forms and the movement of light on the surface of the composition.

ly, an examination of the structure beneath the surface of McCahon's paintings encourages us focus on the surface. The use of underpaint, sawdust or sand, diverse brushwork and localised all contribute to the delicate surface effects that are vital to the artistic concept behind all three s. McCahon's choice of painting support - whether textured, flat, rigid, or 'a bit curly at the edges'<sup>x</sup> - contributes significantly to the character of the surface.

As each painting ages there will be inevitable changes in its appearance and relationships will slightly shift. In order to respect the authenticity of the artwork many of these changes must be accepted as part of the natural ageing process. While contrary to popular belief, McCahon's paintings have remained in good condition in the majority of instances, regrettably, inappropriate handling, conservation treatments and framing have caused permanent damage to some of them. It is hoped however, that with a greater understanding of McCahon's materials and techniques, this type of unnecessary damage can be avoided in the future.

i Quoted in Agnes Wood, *Colin McCahon: the man and the teacher*, David Ling Publishing Ltd., Auckland, 1997, p.106

ii *The Christchurch Star*, 18 December, 1962

iii *The Press*, 22 September, 1962

iv Jenny Zimmer, 'Memories of 'Masonite' and 'Dulux': A Study of Experimental Painting Techniques used by Australian Modernists of the 1950s and 1960s', *The Articulate Surface*, The Humanities Research Centre Monograph Series No. 10, The Australian National University and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1996, p.144.

v *ibid.*, p.147

vi *ibid.*, p.148

vii Anthony Green, 'McCahon's Visit to the United States', *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, Vol. 3, 1975, p.25.

viii Sarah Hillary conversation with Buster Pihama, ex-pupil and friend of the artist, 30 April, 1998

ix Sarah Hillary interview with William McCahon, 26 February, 1998

x *Colin McCahon / a survey exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, March/April, 1972, p.48

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## GLOSSARY

### Acrylic paints

Acrylics are polymers of acrylic acids and their esters. Polymers are large molecules made up of many relatively simple repeated units. Acrylics and PVA paints used by McCahon were polymer emulsion systems, which are dispersions of solid or semi-solid polymeric particles in a continuous aqueous phase.

### Alkyd paints

Paints made from oil modified resins. The resultant mixture is very viscous and requires a solvent to be brushable. As a consequence it dries very quickly compared to oil paint. Most of the alkyd paints were high gloss, although alkyd flats such as Giant Monocoat were available. Monocoat had significantly less oil and a large component of flattening pigment to produce a matt finish.

### Cross-sections

Tiny sections of paint, smaller than a pinhead, taken from existing damage around the edges of a painting. These are embedded in resin and magnified 100-400x to provide information about the paints used and method of application.

### Household paints

Paints designed for decorating houses, therefore their components differ to those of artist-quality materials. Although household paints need to be hard wearing and durable, ultimately they will be removed and repainted. Artist-quality materials aim for permanence.

### Hardboard

High-density fibreboard made from wood fibres.

### Masonite

Brand name for the original hardboard and the variety sold in Australia.

Paints primarily composed of pigments and a drying oil, most commonly linseed oil, which dry to a solid film if exposed to air.

Paints made from oil and hard varnish that were commonly used for interior gloss paints prior to the 1950s.

Polyvinyl acetate polymer. Like acrylics, the PVA paints used by McCahon were polymer emulsion or latex systems.

A method used by conservators that can detect varnish layers in a painting. A clear varnish layer in a cross-section will fluoresce brightly under ultra-violet illumination (UV). When the surface of a painting is examined under UV, a natural resin varnish will appear as a green haze and can mask other layers below.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### I and Thou 1954-55

oil on hardboard 558 x 538mm

### Will he save him? 1959

Alkyd and natural resin on hardboard 1227 x 910mm

### Easter Landscape: Triptych 1966

PVA on hardboard panels, each panel 1802 x 594 x 20mm

## RECOMMENDED READING:

Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints*, Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2000

### Oil paints

### Oleo-resinous paints

### PVA

### Ultra-violet illumination



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