

Liz Coats curates and writes on Colin McCahon

**Fertile Ground -  
an artist looks at McCahon**

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## Fertile Ground: An artist looks at McCahon

Colin McCahon's view of landscape seemed to me, as a student at Elam School of Art in the mid-'sixties as pervasive and dominant. Yet I could not really understand what it was in his simplified forms and dense, reduced colour system that made these paintings so recognisable.

His conviction seemed both irreverent and philosophically-grounded; technically challenged but reconfirmed through trial and error. It seemed to me his commitment was founded in an experience of 'seeing' in depth and 'knowing' that the paintings he made would respond with attention. Early on his visual ideas were confirmed by a few people - artists and writers - who also had an experience of making things come alive through understanding.

I realise now, that for a young artist without sustained practice and integration of living experience, that signature and style can become a barrier to seeing and understanding.

In 1974 I left for OS. I already knew that protection of familiar social networks stifled the life-affirming potential that 'finding by coincidence' could offer whenever one made leaps into unknown territory.

## Colin McCahon (1919-87)

### *Kaipara Flat 1971*

Water-based crayon and acrylic on paper  
Collection Hocken Library

"From my studio at the south end of Muriwai Beach, the beach and sand bar that fronts the Tasman Sea extends 48 miles to the Kaipara Harbour mouth. .... This is a shockingly beautiful area. .... The light and sunsets here are magnificent."

No longer bothered to explain purpose in painting to students and hunger of those around him for bold statements of identity, in a letter to Maureen Hitchings (18 May 1971) McCahon wrote: "All this colour & fun is a direct result of leaving the school."

In 1966, McCahon had written in a biographical piece for *Landfall*: "...my beginnings were fortunate indeed, surrounded by no dealers, few exhibitions, very few where I was at all welcome, no pressure to 'Be with it' or 'Go Go'. I lived in a certain peace. Actually, no fashions existed at all (and from the Dunedin School of Art at that time, and now, no Diploma of Fine Arts was given). Nothing more came from the School but a love of painting and a tentative technique..." (*Colin McCahon*, in: *Beginnings: New Zealand Writers Tell How They Began Writing*)

I know now that such experiences are also the life-blood in creative work, as much in the minuscule details of observation in the studio as through pressures of necessity in life. I also know that women's upbringing has often inhibited a sense of personal freedom when interpretations of 'service to others' and 'unselfish behaviour' are narrowly defined and strongly imposed. That the greatest danger to vitality in a woman may be a sense of being 'owned' and it becomes impossible to make clear and independent judgements. I understood intuitively to search for solid ground whatever the cost, before anything worthwhile could be said and done.

I still remember Colin, stepping onto a low platform in the student common-room at Elam in the middle of a rowdy party and decrying at his dramatic best across the room: "Art is a matter of life and death!"

Twenty-five years later when I came back to New Zealand for a residency at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 1996, whatever our differences, I could understand the wilful certainty and fresh approach that Colin McCahon had opened up for painting method in this country, providing fertile ground for home-grown artists to flourish and a seeding of on-going possibilities for painting, both unapologetic and raw.

A fresh reading of McCahon's paintings recalled his ruthless painting method; at its best where he cuts through any motions of self-consciousness and opens up a detached field in matter.

***Kaipara Flat 1971***

***Greetings to Mondrian's Chrysanthemum of 1908***

Acrylic on paper

Collection Hocken Library

Mondrian's contribution now is his presentiment of a pulse in depth as well as the familiar horizontal/vertical tensions.

In the *Kaipara Flat* paintings slight nuances in the initial transfer of paint to paper have been tempered with insinuations of breath. The sort of visual cues to growth and longevity in 'wild nature', so loved by traditional Chinese painters.

McCahon's 'chrysanthemum' to me was always Eastern in concept. The flower is spatial, both moving and still - and also quite detached. I see liberation in this work. Here, 'Mondrian's chrysanthemum' is a song of praise.

***North Otago Drawing c.1973***

Crayon and pencil on paper. Preparatory drawing for Zonta print edition

Collection Hocken Library

***North Otago No. 1 Ed. 2 Zonta print 1973***

Planographic print on tracing paper

Collection Hocken Library

While sitting with McCahon's *Waterfall mural* (painted on masonite panels with enamel paints) in the old Otago University library, I made the following notes:  
'All the variables of surface modulate fall of light. The paintings are constructed/defined out of being in darkness; a darkness of blindness which feels shapes from the inside and only recognises them completed on the painting surface. A tangible quality of darkness is experienced as an opposition against which the painting is constructed. White water engages with real light; dense earth pigments absorb and distribute light in more subdued, but no less eloquent ways.'

'Rhythmic or counter-rhythmic movements of the brush and other manifest disturbances in paint application cut back minimally to reveal raw and uncontrived divisions of surface beneath. Applications of semi-transparent colour over darker layers, with changes in colour, gloss or texture, aid in the management of lightfall. Choice of difficult surfaces to work on, such as masonite (as with S.Nolan or T. Tuckson in Australia) interrupt the easy flow of paint. Semi-controlled runs of paint in overlay distinguish surface stratigraphy. Working fast, watching and knowing the approximate way paint will react on the surface. Cancellations are woven into the painting logic to effect contrast and structure without self-conscious texture or gouging. Contrasting wet and dry layers are aided and accentuated by a severely limited colour range. Opaque pigments are selected for the widest range of tonal inflections. There is a passionate engagement with

***North Otago Zonta print 1973***

Planographic print on paper  
Collection Hocken Library

***North Otago c.1973***

Graphite rubbing and blind print on paper. Preparatory drawing for Zonta print edition  
Collection Hocken Library

A night landscape. An obliterated fold of hills. One star: by chance perhaps, a smudge of charcoal across a spot of grease.

These small drawings and prints repeat familiar land forms but loosen ties to a particular location. While the artist lays claim to such minimal expressions, they are after all fragments, sketches made for pleasure and repeated use, as well as for sharing.

painting, but this is expressed essentially and ruthlessly through recognition of metaphors of conditional life and place.'

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Perhaps the greatest reward for a painter looking at the work of Colin McCahon lies in being able to consider work from all periods of a long career and to 'think about making' with the artist. To interrogate visual shifts and discoveries and how they become manifest. Talk of consistency in painting has come to mean more often a holding pattern of sufficient longevity for commercial markets and fashion to catch up and expect a consistent rise in monetary value. The artist's living continuity of experimentation is persuaded by public demand and subverted to please

In discussing aspects of Colin McCahon's paintings and his manner of expressing metaphor, I have no intention of linking my own subject matter to his. The gathering of oppositions between shadow and light in his work, leading to grand metaphors of 'life and death' entailed extremes of experience. As a student and a woman seeking assurances for survival in the 1960's, there was a quality of melodrama around McCahon that, while making him an exciting and interesting person to be around, also evidenced a certain devastation. There was need amongst family and friends to defer to him, as if the phenomenon only made sense by being shared in public. Rather than encouraging independence through the example of his dedication, this ensured extreme dependencies and a habit of mythologising which fed off itself and off the support of witnesses. He was generous in

### ***Waterfall 1964***

Oil on composition board  
Collection Hocken Library

Expansive insights, while not easily communicable in conversation and perhaps only shared through common experience, gather recognition at the level of metaphor.

During 1964, while working on the Waterfall series, McCahon wrote: "Waterfalls fell and raged and became as still silent falls of light..... I look back with joy on taking a brush of white paint and curving through the darkness with a line of white."  
(G.H.Brown, Colin McCahon: Artist, Reed, Auckland, 1993)

I once spent a cold winter day exploring the Horyuji Temple complex near Nara in Japan. Following a path behind the main buildings, I found a stone bench beside an altar cut in the rock. Sitting quietly, I was drawn to the sound: a thread of water falling off a ledge onto a rock platform eight feet below. The water hit flat rock as if it were touching a hotplate. This continuous cracking sound was penetrating and induced quietness of body, together with multiple, overlapping thoughts. A thread of water so sharply defined, so finely tuned in its spread, that it could equally be flowing upwards. As I continued to look, this simple device, concentrated out of natural phenomena focussed the mind.

friendship to students, but I was fearful of the public figure.

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McCahon certainly used formulae of perspectival space in his work, but as the practice develops one can see the assertion of more ambiguous surfaces and emerging shapes in support of his established subject matter. Gordon Brown suggests that McCahon really began to understand a way of painting with visual metaphor while working through the *Waterfall* themes.

While an understanding of dimensional space is shared by every person as a conscious experience to some extent, I believe this is more effectively expressed when one is not primarily concerned with conforming to cultural models in describing the appearance of things. By not accepting perspectival formats as an adequate descriptor of spatial reality, for instance, an artist is obliged to question more deeply and exert more effort in encompassing visual experience. Formal communication models are strongly impressed in childhood and often without encouragement to understand the formation of and reason for these constructs. It is easy to lose access to an enlivening interior perception by enquiring no further.

My understanding would suggest that McCahon came increasingly to 'see' dimensionally the images he was developing as he worked with paint in two-dimensional formats, particularly while working across dark paint surfaces. That there was a shift in vision between attention to the materials at hand and entering a deep and large space within

***North Otago landscape c.1969***

Acrylic on paper

Collection Hocken Library

McCahon did not usually intend likeness to a specific place in his North Otago landscapes, but they derive from his "...long association with this most beautiful landscape, both as a child and also later." (G.H.Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, Reed, Auckland 1993)

... landforms where line is gap and gap is line, and spaces full of tone.

***Kauri April 1959***

Black wash on paper

Collection Hocken Library

Centrifugal movement and still body.

***Little Kauri Tree May 1957***

Oil on board

Collection Hocken Library

the surface before him. Experiences of projection that this entails demanded steady nerve and persistence while a quality of depth in 'live' space is sought and rendered in paint. An iconography of simple forms with strong nuances of light and dark is arrived at as a result of a facility in managing the variable absorbency and reflection of the paint surfaces themselves.

Simple forms increase in value when familiar habits give way to exploration and discovery: paint absorbing, brush unloading, surfaces drying. Smudges and surface glint reveal likeness, uncontrived and momentary, calling for extra attention. Shapes can grow life for the artist and increase out of conscious recognition of beginning, till exhaustion is mirrored in repetition.

In this southern environment there is marked reflection off wet and shiny surfaces - lots of white light which is hard to see into. By contrast, shadows are deep and prominent. This all shows in McCahon's management of painting surfaces. Using opaque and earthy colours in high contrast and light and dark tones with undisguised brush movement, he works the surface to incorporate lightfall as an integral component.

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### ***Helensville 3 1971***

Acrylic on paper

Collection: Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Feeling the power of enveloping landscape and light in the Kaipara region, McCahon dispenses with perspective almost entirely. Space is full and air dances across and through the painting plane. Just one edge becomes horizon, acknowledging the body's stance.

### ***15 Drawings December '51 to May '52***

Black wash on brown paper

A devotional book given by the artist to Charles Brasch (Facsimile published by the Hocken Library, 1976)

Collection Hocken Library

The drawings are interspersed with quotations in pencil as follows:

*'This is a cold land'*

*'Light candles against the oncoming dark'*

*'The word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us'*

*'Give us Jesus'*

*'They crucified him (dividing his clothing amongst them)'*

*'He is dead'*

*'and is risen again'*

An understanding of structures of scale and relationship through one's own body experience and through the growth of one's work, evolves differently in its particulars with each person. In my own work with painting I have sought to produce a quality that could be recognised through an equivalent internal experience of expansion. I understand this spatial sense is driven by a desire for connection and communication and a viewer becomes cognisant of this through linking or recognising external with internal pattern forms. Simple observations may be triggers for extended and questioning thinking processes wherein an observable physical aspect is linked to a memory fragment. I understand this to be the nature of metaphor.

I have often wondered why painters in this southern land so strongly favour dense, opaque colour - lots of black, brown, grey and blue. Surfaces for sensing and touching as much as seeing - more matter than space. You can't physically see through these surfaces. In seeking engagement you are thrown into an internal, reflective mode.

I understood something further about the influence of environment while walking to the Polytechnic one morning in 1996. There was a prussian solidity about the surrounding hills, brightened with patches of snow and gorse flowers. A light snowfall was melting in the morning sun and the sky, sharp and bright, with dazzle from puddles in the road. I became aware of gazing into patches of shadow; the beautiful deep, dark shadows of broad daylight, containing every

***Easter landscape with 3 falls and an epilogue 1968***

Pencil on paper

Collection Hocken Library

Bringing the body's capacity to bear with light experience is a self-managed and private affair, where conscious intelligence is at stake. Stability provided by metaphors of Christian progress, as in 'The Fourteen Stages' offers a readily communicable stage for releasing personal experience into common ground. McCahon identifies states of 'fall' and 'rise' in number sequences with tone and spatial rhythm.



nuance of black. Encouraging a slow down into depth - truly dimensional. . .

While reflective, ricocheting light hardens surfaces here, the eyes need rest in shadow.

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Some of the unspoken knowledge about survival in the body that I carry as a New Zealand-born person, I found explicit in Japanese and more powerfully in Chinese culture where signs and artifacts continue to speak to the eyes.

In 1998 I spent four months working at the Beijing Art Academy on a scholarship offered by the Australian Asialink organisation. The painter, Yang Gang chose to be my mentor.

Traditional Chinese landscape paintings carry complex references to literary sources within the landscape imagery itself. Contemporary ink on paper painting however, frequently shows obedience to traditional methods, with inclusion of historical references at the expense of lively and direct mark-making that would locate these metaphors in the contemporary world.

I saw Yang Gang challenging this issue directly through a 'fast energy' approach, attempting to cut through descriptive, linear representations for qualities of 'likeness' rather than illustration. He told me he was trying to achieve an 'archaic but new' quality in his work.

### ***Clouds 6: Muriwai 1975***

Acrylic on paper,

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery (long term loan from Jim & Mary Barr)

The clouds launch into contact with paint surface in continuous motions of such ambiguity, he punctuates them with return to the old counting systems, as if there is consciousness within.

Simple observations seized in a moment are worked as extended language into skeins of vapour. The artist exploits a severely reduced colour system to call attention to subtle nuance, or perhaps to add value to simplicity. Like pre-language sounds or blinded touch, these signages call for close examination - or quick dismissal. Strings of numbers call forth sounds and those sounds make rhythm. Sound itself, with tonal contrasts and breath, has a colour response.

In the studio, I watched closely the way Yang Gang brought combinations of brushmarks into shape. The touch of brush to paper regulated ink flow, so his movements could be slow and considered or darting and forceful. Placements were aimed at weight, leverage and energy rather than linear description and contained an element of coincidence that was extended by the liquidity, absorbency and drying time of the medium. Working with the psychological impact of this very direct method, I watched him coax a unity between the connective underpinnings of experienced figuration and immediacy and chance that is a characteristic of ink and water painting on paper.

Making paintings and drawings of people in everyday life with subtle attention to character, necessitates a technical facility without loss of empathy in self-conscious embellishment. The 'archaic' quality showed in Yang Gang's observations in real time and image construction which did not preclude the rough edges and gaps that are often a result of immediate responses. His recent ink on paper paintings have impulsive and chaotic qualities that make it seem as if the fluid nature of the medium is the driving force. Perhaps observing images that change form is not worth emphasising in words, or the experience spoils. But with painters like Yang Gang this is a persistent quality, where a shift of focus might turn inanimate into animate, or image into metaphor.

Yang Gang's sensitivity to flexible ways of seeing was a great encouragement to me. In the four months that I worked at the Academy in Beijing, I found connective meaning has deep

***Calendar No. 1 1975***

Acrylic on paper

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery (long term loan from Jim & Mary Barr)

***Noughts and Crosses 5 1976***

black acrylic on white paper

Collection Hocken Library

McCahon believed that paintings should secure for the viewer some inner guidance. He used number sequences to carry a range of connotations while retaining links to the Stations of the Cross.

***Oaia and Clouds 1975***

Acrylic on paper

Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery (long term loan from Jim & Mary Barr)

Fast brushwork forming puffs of cloud, both fractal and composite.

Simple registration of white on black draws attention quickly to tonal shift and surface modulation, inviting other associations. Clouds bob and drift like the mirage of *Oaia*, island in the sea off Muriwai, or perhaps the whale of *Necessary Protection* - or even *Rocks in the Sky*.

significance in daily life and recognition of similar values in painting practice can dissolve cultural boundaries and transcend national differences.

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For a New Zealander, an understanding of environmental and social conditions matter in interpreting a developed painting aesthetic from another part of the world. While McCahon had always been receptive to visual and literary sources in reproduction, he was now able to see those original art works on his trip to the US in 1958 and returned to Auckland with an increased understanding of how to proceed through self-directed assimilation of local and international influences.

Whereas the association with Mondrian is important, showing a way forward out of cubism and a release from figuration generally, without loss of deep philosophical undercurrents, I like to think the constructive and social issues imbedded in Chinese painting and poetry had an increasing impact. This Chinese influence is not style-based, but draws attention to a like-minded, painterly and structural relationship between abstract marks and purposeful figuration.

In the art museums of the mid-west in North America one comes upon quiet rooms of Chinese paintings and calligraphy. Looking again at the great names of mid-century American modernist painting it becomes apparent that while these artists were assimilating influences of architectural formalism and humanism from Northern Europe, that Chinese philosophy and structural canons of brushwork played a part.

## ***2 cartoons for stained glass windows, Te Puke Church***

Pencil with white gouache corrections on white card.

Collection Hocken Library

The drawings are the same size as the completed windows. The drawing on the left is the upper panel of a vertical sequence.

Dated: August 20-21, 1970

Tiered bands of hill and sky forms are drawn with lettering in silhouette. They offer insights into McCahon's visualisation of colour and shape. For instance, where a sharp, vertical slash through hill forms is needed, he requests: "...the merest touch" (of sandblasting over dark ruby glass) "...and filled with black (enamel) to produce really a black-red combination".

Here McCahon translates the precise medium of stained glass into New Zealand landforms as sacred space, refreshing the dreary solemnity of much 19th century church glass design. He notes: "In both these windows please be accurate but not pedantic. An irregularity of line is hoped for - life rather than the more usual death."

The following is quoted from Pierre Ryckman's translation and commentary from Chinese of Shitao's: *Remarks on Painting by the Monk Bitter Pumpkin* (1630?-1720?), Herman, Paris, 1984.

"Painting is not a transfer, a plagiarism of the world, but a reality parallel to the world. The various concrete characters presenting respectively mountain and water are the implementation of abstract principles with which they have been endowed by Heaven (or Nature). The painter cannot be content with reproducing their concrete manifestations; he must journey within himself to their source, in other words, to those various principles themselves, with which, by the grace of Heaven, he too is infused. Thus it is not from the mountain or from water that he will take those various principles, since Heaven has granted them to him directly.... This gift assumed by the painter has been conferred upon him by Heaven, and Heaven has endowed the mountain and water in the same way; the autonomous development of painting, far from being carried out in a vacuum, is thus achieved and takes its place in symmetry alongside other natural outward forms of creation, inspired by a single ordering principle."

Liz Coats, Dunedin, March 2001

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