



Installation view of the joint McCahon/Woollaston exhibition at Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington, August 1949. The McCahon images are, from left: an unidentified Crucifixion; *Crucifixion* 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 000827); an untraced landscape (possibly the image referred to as *Night and Day* in an unpublished review manuscript by Ron O'Reilly, held in the Helen Hitchings Gallery papers, although this reference may also be to *Takaka: night and day*); *Saint Veronica* 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 000663); and *Takaka: night and day* 1948 (TCMDAIL No. 001361). On the sideboard is an unrecorded image of Christ's face on St Veronica's handkerchief. This may be an early state of *Ecce Homo* 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 001606).

CHRONOLOGY, PART 2: 1950 TO 1959

THE 1950S

In the early 1950s McCahon's focus on landscape imagery increased while his interest in representing religious scenes diminished. Whereas the earlier works of 1946–50 are representational, and the people depicted in the local landscape 'had to have a reason for being there',⁴⁹ from around 1951 the human figure disappeared from all but a handful of McCahon's paintings (these few being specific portraits). The landscape remained important until the end of McCahon's life, either as a subject in itself or as a backdrop for images in which McCahon explored the religious ideas and narratives that expressed his spiritual quest.

Throughout the 1950s he gradually developed the style that typifies his 'middle' period. Basing his compositions on Cubist influences filtered through Picasso, McCahon arrived at a type of Analytical Cubism, but with softer tonal harmonies closer to Braque. Words became overtly important in this decade and he was finally to achieve his own form of abstraction, a development that culminated in the *Gate* series of 1960–61.

1950

Among paintings from this year was *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury* 1950 (page 77). First shown at the following year's Group exhibition in Christchurch, this painting is now considered one of McCahon's most important works. Although heralding a move away from the figurative religious paintings in favour of images more purely landscape-oriented, the painting is in a sense a summary of all McCahon's earlier landscapes, including those in which the tableaux of the 'religious' images had been sited.

‘This painting I never explain but am often asked to. To me it explains itself. It was, I suppose, reconciling gains and losses, stating differences, hills and horizons. Simple. A bit of blood shed in the middle.’⁵⁰

The painting is a reportage of a journey, separated in frames, and allegorically referring to the six days of the Creation. The red in the centre alludes to Christ saving the world with his sacrifice on the Cross – but also to McCahon’s own blood, spilt as the result of a fall he had while cycling on one of his long rides between Dunedin and the Nelson area.

In September McCahon wrote to poet John Caselberg:

‘I seem to have arrived at a place to stop painting. Something has been worked out at last & I can now make a start on a new direction. Still very vague, only a feeling & not yet clothed with a subject but I feel the need of deep space and order, this applied by me & not the earlier order which was so much intuition. I feel I must learn more and make a better foundation for intuition. It may all be so much twaddle. But after recent work I feel the need for something more conscious. (Not I hope, as English painting appears conscious – that is modern English painting – and there is the conscious unconscious painting too – *Horizon* used to reproduce quite a lot of it.)

‘It always gives me such a feeling of pleasure when people away feel the lack of wide views & the emptiness here. Perhaps we are becoming a nation & the encircling seas & dark bush are really a necessary part of us & something we can’t do without now. But who wants painting in our towns or good buildings or music in the streets. In such splendour why are we so small. But again, I don’t know about changing all this, this is my background & it is from this that I paint & from this that new writing & music will come. Our Folk Art is signwriting & early watercolour drawings, & that’s as far back as we go. The extent of our tradition. I don’t feel that much was carried out here from England by the settlers. It leaves a lot of freedom. Those who deny this freedom are usually consciously applying European traditions to us, missing out our own & leaping back to something 50 or 100 years earlier.

‘But I would love to see the real paint on real paintings. To stand in front of a real painting must be excellent, & for a painter most humiliating – not a bad thing. The old masters I’m sure loved paint & from originals you can sense either love or hate of the medium. In exhibitions here I feel very strongly the dislike for paint as paint and I imagine in a large percentage of modern work this is so (painting as a cure for sick minds). Paint that has been loved for itself can teach an awful lot. This is a quality I feel very interested in at the moment.’⁵¹

1951

Throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s McCahon actively participated in a debate that dominated New

Zealand’s art and literary circles at this time: how best to establish an independent New Zealand culture and identity, free of its colonial origins.

From a letter to John Caselberg in early 1951:

‘Our towns our way of life our people, appear anything but inspiring, yes, and our “culture” I agree, but do you think we seek in the wrong places for our “culture”, trying to find parallels with older lands & not recognizing our pattern here as our culture. The awful stuff made by the W.D.F.F. [Women’s Division of Federated Farmers, whose annual calendar included competitions for “arts and crafts”] & the simplicity of the towns & the football and racing & advertising. Is that possibly the culture, & from there we must start[?]. Not from the imports but from the awful stuff around. (Am at the moment full of the ideas for reorganising the W.E.A. [Workers Educational Association] along lines to infiltrate culture at a very low level – not working from the top down but the other way.)

‘I really have no answer. And would love to see other places & ways of life.

‘Meanwhile like as much as I can here. But I do get so fed up with it all & hate the whole thing & long to escape.’⁵²

For six weeks during the winter of 1951 McCahon visited Melbourne, Australia. Charles Brasch anonymously sponsored him on this, his first overseas trip. During the latter half of his stay McCahon became a pupil of Mary Cockburn-Mercer, an elderly Australian Cubist painter who was distinguished by having been present at the famous Paris banquet given by the Cubists to honour Henri Rousseau. Her example of a life dedicated to art was something that was immensely important to McCahon at this time. As a result of their conversations, his interest in the Cubists was revived.

‘In 1951 I visited Australia and became a pupil of Mary Cockburn-Mercer in Melbourne. Mary was old, she had attended the banquet for Rousseau in 1908. She had a broken leg and no money. She charged me three shillings an hour for “tuition” for two hours in the afternoons – painting – and nothing at all for all the mornings of looking – at the National Gallery – and nothing for the extra hours of conversation in the late afternoons. I was taught how to be a painter, and all the implications, the solitary confinement which makes a painter’s life. I remember her with great affection and gratitude.’⁵³

The contrast of the Australian landscape with that he had left had a profound effect on McCahon. In a letter to his wife Anne he wrote:

‘The landscape is so different from N.Z. The greens are quite unbelievable & the soil all light red. Trees everywhere but almost no undergrowth. Hill shapes all very different from ours too & the feeling of distance even in small areas of

landscape enormous. The hills in the distance really blue becoming ink blue further away. A really foreign land this.⁵⁴

'The interesting part [of a visit to Alan McCullough on the south coast] was seeing so much country which is beautiful, just so different from N.Z. So much more human & soft. Little or none of the N.Z. grandeur.'⁵⁵

And to Charles Brasch, written from the train 'somewhere north of Wagga Wagga':

'...it is all so magnificent. The vast tree dotted landscape in such lovely colours. It feels so entirely unlike N.Z., in spite of its size so much more friendly....[I] myself have been doing wonderful sales talk for N.Z. & then destroying the good work by saying how much I would like to move in as a new Australian. I am sure I will do so sometime & when the cost comes down...'⁵⁶

On his return to Christchurch McCahon reassessed his recent work, resolving to place more emphasis on surface structure.

To make a living he went into partnership with Dermot Holland making costume jewellery. However, this venture lasted only a few months, after which McCahon returned to gardening.

1952-53

In June 1952 the Irving Galleries, London, showed several of McCahon's paintings in an exhibition entitled *Fifteen New Zealand Painters*. This had been organised by Helen Hitchings, who had travelled to London after closing her Wellington gallery the previous year. The exhibition, which also included works by Rita Angus, Louise Henderson and Toss Woollaston, was notable as the first significant attempt to promote this new generation of New Zealand painters abroad.

Meanwhile, in Christchurch, McCahon painted what has become regarded as a classic of this period: *On Building Bridges: triptych* 1952 (page 34). In this triptych McCahon was able to put into practice what he had learned in Australia: the use of alternating dark and light tones, and a 'strictly formal structure'.

'Back in Christchurch I started work on a painting initially called *Paddocks for sheep*. This was to be a large work based on some wonderful aerial photographs of North Canterbury where the plain is slowly devoured by the hills and where the paddocks with their safety give way to wilder hill country. I gave up, and sheep country became the North Canterbury I had known much earlier when the railway was going through and places like Parnassus, Conway and Clarence were familiar. We lost the sheep and gained a bridge. This was in 1952. This was first hung in the 1952 Group exhibition. I finished painting it there.

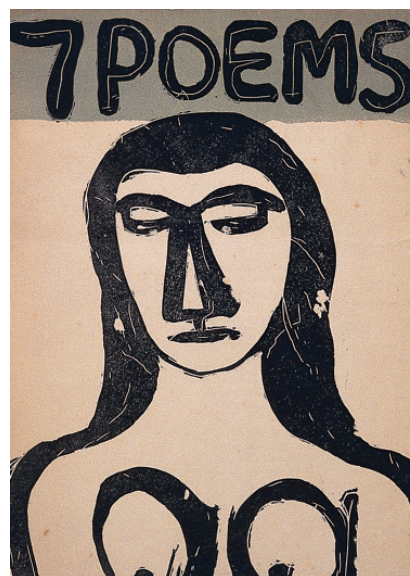
'This painting to me was just something. I had made a very

formal statement; I had put down something of what I had found in Australia. Some very similar paintings and lots of drawings in a like manner had happened before this but the "Bridges", after Australia and Mary, taught me the need for precision and the freedom that only exists in relation to a strictly formal structure.'⁵⁷

Recalling his time with McCahon during this period, John Caselberg later wrote:

'I spent 52-53 in Christchurch....As the months passed, he included me in various activities....[I] accompanied him to meetings of the Philosophical Society, dominated by his friends Arthur Prior and Ron O'Reilly, and to the Theatre Arts Guild, for which he designed and stage managed a production of *Peer Gynt* in 1953; co-operated in publishing a broadsheet, *Issue*, and in trying to stage an arrangement of *Job*; relaxed, over beer, as on the night beside the river when we debated the merits of Beethoven and his favourite, Bach...'⁵⁸

Issue was a venture involving McCahon, John Caselberg and Bill Trussel, a lecturer in music at the Teachers College in Christchurch. Its goal was to publish poetry. McCahon produced a linocut for the cover of the first issue, which

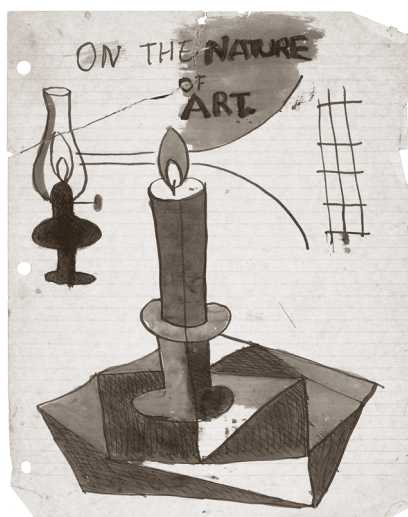


7 Poems, McCahon's linocut illustration for the cover of the first number of *Issue*, 1952. Citing 'indecent' complaints, the publication was removed by police from several distribution outlets.

featured a lyric sequence by Caselberg. In a reflection of the times, the police removed the publication from several distribution points, citing McCahon's cover as 'indecent'. Owing to the departure of Trussel for Europe and McCahon to Auckland, *Issue* ceased publication after two numbers. However, the text of *On the Nature of Art*, an illustrated manifesto that McCahon and Caselberg had produced

together for *Issue 3*, provides an illuminating insight into the nature of their discussions and conclusions at that time.

'*On the Nature of Art* is a unique document in several respects. It is unusual in New Zealand for an artistic manifesto to be attempted, and a joint manifesto is virtually unprecedented. Apart from a few paragraphs which explicitly concern the art of painting, the joint authors' approach is to art in general, rather than to any particular form of art. They deal with such matters as how art relates to life and nature, where art originates, the relationship between subject, message and form, and the question of audience and communication – all in a highly rhetorical and metaphorical manner.'⁵⁹



On the Nature of Art 1953
Ink and wash on paper, 22 x 17.5 cm
Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand.
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)
The title page of McCahon and Caselberg's unpublished
manuscript, originally intended for publication in the
third number of *Issue*.

Many of the ideas that McCahon was to use later in his teaching are already set out in this manuscript.

'To copy is to lie, it is incomplete, it can never be otherwise, to create or recreate is true it is part of the law, the order, the r[h]ythm of nature. Great art never copies, it is concerned with life & death with birth & with age with decay & continuity.'⁶⁰

The authors quoted Cézanne: 'To paint is to contrast.'⁶¹

Eric Westbrook and the Auckland City Art Gallery

In 1952 Eric Westbrook became the first professional Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery (later to change its name to Auckland Art Gallery and again to the title

under which it is known currently, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki). The institution had originally opened in 1888, seventeen years after the founding of the Auckland Society of Artists. Westbrook (and, after 1956, his successor Peter Tomory) initiated several exhibitions of contemporary New Zealand art – for example, the first solo exhibition of Louise Henderson (1902–95) in 1953 – while also taking imported exhibitions, the most controversial of which was a 1956 show of sculptures by Henry Moore. Many exhibitions organised by the institution toured other New Zealand venues, establishing the ACAG's reputation throughout the country. Partially as a consequence of these innovations



International Air Race 1953.
Oil on hardboard.
TCMDAIL No. 001676
The work, seen here behind McCahon (on left) and Auckland City Art Gallery Director Eric Westbrook (on right) was subsequently destroyed by the airline in order to use the wood support to make a packing crate. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

– but also reflecting the city's increasing commercial dominance – Auckland became the cultural centre of New Zealand.

A notable event of 1952 was McCahon's receipt of a commission from TEAL (Tasman Empire Airways Ltd, the forerunner of Air New Zealand) to produce a painting commemorating the 1953 London–Christchurch International Air Race. Despite receiving a lukewarm response from TEAL management – and the company engineers, who complained that the aircraft, as painted, couldn't fly – the painting and five studies for the work were displayed at the 1953 Group Show in Christchurch. Subsequently, TEAL put the painting in storage in Wellington where, at an unknown later point, it was sawn up and the hardboard put to a more 'practical' use.⁶² It was 'later admitted to being destroyed to make a crate.'⁶³

Early in 1953 McCahon produced stage sets for Gregory Kane's production of *Peer Gynt*, performed by the Christchurch Theatre Arts Guild. Using few props, and paying special attention to the effects achievable through lighting, McCahon designed a spare, abstracted set. Anne McCahon and Doris Lusk collaborated on the costumes. McCahon also designed the cover of the programme. Much later, while painting his *Angel and Bed series* (pages 139, 140, 141) in 1976–77, McCahon again refers to *Peer Gynt*, alluding



Colin McCahon in front of his stage set for *Peer Gynt*, Christchurch, 1953. Courtesy of the Selwyn Hamblett Estate.

specifically to the scene in which *Peer Gynt* comforts his dying mother (see page 227).

The move to Auckland

A comment – possibly casual – by the Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, Eric Westbrook, during a visit to Christchurch, led McCahon to believe that a job awaited him at the ACAG, if he chose to take it. Late in May 1953 he moved to Auckland to find that no such position existed. However, Westbrook found him work – initially as cleaner – until he was able to be appointed as temporary attendant on 21 July.

After a difficult beginning, McCahon's move to Auckland presaged a time of more financial stability. Later that year he acquired a house in French Bay, a bush-clad suburb beside the Manukau Harbour on the then-urban fringes of Auckland. With a permanent home at last, the rest of the family moved north. However, times remained difficult.



Towards Auckland 5 1953
Watercolour and gouache on paper, 54.4 cm x 74.9 cm
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand
TCMDAIL No. 000090

Although sheltered in summer, the house was cold and damp in winter. Since local gossip held McCahon to be a communist, an alcoholic and – in the eyes of some religious conservatives – a blasphemer, and the house in which the family lived was reputed to be barely habitable, the wider community – with a few exceptions – treated the McCahons as outcasts.



Two views of the McCahon house in French Bay, Titirangi. The sundeck, upon which many works from this period were painted, is surrounded by the kauri trees that provided a key motif for McCahon during the 1950s.

'I designed a production of *Peer Gynt* in Christchurch and two days after the closing night we moved to Auckland.

'We came to Auckland in 1953 and lived in Titirangi in a tiny house at French Bay. It rained almost solidly during May,



Manukau 2 1954
Watercolour and gouache on paper, 54.3 x 74 cm
Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand
TCMDAIL No. 000852

June, July and August. For the first month we lived almost entirely on a diet of potatoes, parsley, and bags of rock-cake given by a kind and ancient aunt...

'At this time the bush and the harbour were of prime importance as subjects – so was the whole magnificent spread of Auckland seen from Titirangi Road on the endless journeys into town every morning. The November light for that first year was a miracle. It remains an obsession and still a miracle. After the south, the drenching rain and brilliant sun, the shattered clouds after thunder and the rainbows that looped over the city and harbour through the Auckland light produced a series of watercolours called *Towards Auckland*.'⁶⁴

A key motif developed soon after McCahon's move to Titirangi, and which was to occupy him for the next six years, is that of the kauri – a tall, straight, hardwood tree whose trunks towered above the bush in the subtropical rainforest.

The kauri forest represented a sacred place for the Maori. For McCahon it was a newly discovered – yet typically New Zealand – site. Some of McCahon's kauri, painted

as a single image or in combination with several panels, are realistic – recognisable as trees. Others are stylised, or express McCahon's renewed interest in Cubism – particularly Analytical Cubism, wherein the represented object or scene, and its background, interlock in a web of vertical and horizontal lines, achieving coherence through the relationship of interrelated planes and the use of a limited palette. In this last respect, McCahon's interest in Braque – and particularly in Braque's use of a subdued palette – is visible in paintings from this time. In one of the finest works of the period, *Kauri (December)* 1953 (page 78), an ordered, albeit fragmented, structure is created. The different branches and their surroundings are rhythmically interwoven, while the 'wedge' forms allude to shifting penetration levels of light.

In a further innovation from this time, McCahon commenced painting in series or sequences. These took the form either of multi-panelled works, or several single paintings in which the same motif or theme was explored (although in the works of the 1950s this was generally without a particular narrative thread). Series, with their inherent cross-references and thematic variations, opened

new possibilities for McCahon. Eventually this resulted in his decision to paint images ‘to walk past’. In order to view works such as *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* 1966 (pages 98–99), *Walk. Beach Walk: C1* 1973 (pages 122–123), and others like them, the scale and sequential nature of the images requires the physical involvement of the viewer in a way that is unnecessary in a traditional ‘easel painting’. By introducing this requirement, McCahon succeeded in conveying within his paintings a sense of a continuum across both time and space – a development that was useful as the artist strove to give a visual description of the passage of life, or the journey from the temporal world to that of the world beyond.

1954

In February McCahon became a member of the permanent staff of the Auckland City Art Gallery. Thereafter he organised exhibitions, wrote catalogue essays and was generally involved in the activities of the institution. To a large extent this involved focusing on the core activities of the gallery. Since his appointment in 1952, Eric Westbrook had succeeded in getting the public through the gallery doors. However, the programme he had implemented reflected a populist approach more in keeping with a community arts centre than the art gallery of a major city:

‘There was remarkably little happening...in the way of it being an art gallery. There was everything happening in the way of it being a place where the Rose Society [or the] Carnation Society...would hire one end...of the main gallery, and mix compost – have compost mixing demonstrations. All that sort of thing....[This] was Westbrook and...he managed this extremely well. He had an incredible talent for getting people to know where the Art Gallery was...

‘And this was his main, big move, and he did it with utter expert[ise] – with heedless relentlessness to his staff. He was completely relentless...

‘When Westbrook was there, [children’s and amateur painters’ exhibitions were] all part of his policy – you had lots of them. Then you came to the point where you were getting people who had been to Summer Schools, going around yattering to their friends “I’ve got something hung in the Auckland Art Gallery”. Well, okay, they had it hung, for one day at the end of the School. One gallery would be stripped down and they could all hang their own things, so everybody could see what they’d done, and with that came, it became distinctly too dangerous....there’d be terrific eruptions among the people who hadn’t managed to get to the School [and therefore] hadn’t had work hung in the Auckland City Art Gallery. And relations would come in years later, and say “Oh, my aunt’s got a painting here....”

‘And the exhibition that happened [as Westbrook’s] last, greatest, most glorious thing was his Engineers’ Society exhibition, where we had a train line all laid down properly on scoria, down the whole length of the big City Gallery, and the most astonishing telephone installations, for calling

cops and for doing anything you like – by the P & T – and every conceivable thing. The floor had to be all done after this...

‘Tomory [Westbrook’s successor] came in and asked “Is this an art gallery?” But it got the public in the gallery in their hundreds and they looked. Thank God it was followed very closely by the Henry Moore exhibition.’⁶⁵

As part of his duties McCahon regularly contributed short articles on specific works in the collection to the *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, as well as occasional articles to other magazines.

McCahon’s texts on other artists are often equally revealing about his own work. In an article on the painter Louise Henderson, whose solo exhibition took place in the Gallery at the end of 1953, he wrote:

‘...the depicting of space and objects in space is no longer tied to the brief 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.’⁶⁶

In addition to his gallery duties McCahon also became a tutor in the Gallery’s art education programme and, more importantly, in the courses and summer schools in art and design run as part of the University of Auckland’s Extension Classes and by the Council for Adult Education. Originating in the programmes of the WEA – the Workers’ Educational Association, an organisation whose charter was to encourage general education among workers – these summer schools were community-oriented courses open to anybody, irrespective of previous qualification, experience or ability.

‘McCahon was as idiosyncratic a teacher as he was a painter and a person, subject to extreme mood swings, to polarised behaviour and attitudes. His teaching demanded not only his students’ response and the strong desire to learn from him, but also the ability to comprehend and utilise the content. He demonstrated at times an inspirational brilliance which exhorted his pupils to totally devote their lives to their art. This quality of McCahon’s was a product of his complete dedication to his own painting, to his obsessive work ethic, and his dogged perseverance despite the many years of abuse and denigration of his work.

‘To those students who responded he showed care and concern for the development of their potential....[His] most important lesson for his students was in looking to see, the honest, accurate observing that reveals truth. “Do what the objects are doing”...

‘It was all there to be “read”, the light direction that determined the “light and shade that made shape”his “looking to see” teaching implied that this was a matter of accurate observation....McCahon wasted no time in

persuasion or in tolerance. It was “shape up” or “ship out”.... His response to this teaching situation was typical. No half-measures – no compromise.’⁶⁷

For some of his students, McCahon’s teaching was a life-determining experience. The artist Margot Phillips testified ‘McCahon opened a door for me...without the summer schools I would never have developed as an artist.’⁶⁸

In 1954 McCahon produced his first paintings in which words form the dominant motif – words themselves become the image. Although European Cubist painters had used letters and words as elements in their collages, quite often – although not always – to trigger associations, these motifs seldom constituted the dominant image. Now McCahon was attempting to push this idea of words as images a good deal further than had they.

In the first ‘word paintings’ by McCahon each image is constructed in a manner best described as ‘architectural’. To compose the paintings *I Am* (page 80) and *I and Thou* (page 22), McCahon has rendered each phrase in block letters, achieving pictorial illusion through the restriction of colour and the placement of the words on (or in) an ambiguous background. Dating from February 1954, both images are notable for their strong vertical, linear structure.

The source for each title is clear. ‘I and Thou’ is the title of a book by the theologian Martin Buber. ‘I am’, which McCahon re-employs in several guises in later works, is drawn from Exodus 3:4–6:

‘Then Moses said to God, “if I go to the Israelites and tell them that the God of their forefathers has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, what shall I say?” God answered “I AM that is who I am. Tell them I AM has sent you to them.”’

Of course in McCahon’s painting of this name, an ambiguity is present. For while the ‘I’ in ‘I AM’ is the God of the Old Testament, it is also possible to read it as a statement of affirmation by McCahon, who with these words reasserts himself as an artist.

In respect of the work *I and Thou* 1954, critic Francis Pound has a further suggestion – that the ‘I’ is floating around in Cubist space because everything is still unclear: a New Zealand culture has not yet been formed. The ‘I’ moves around in time and space. It is a ‘self creation’ of a New Zealand ‘I’.⁶⁹

Apart from his innovations in the use of words as images, 1954 also found McCahon casting his eye beyond the immediate bush and kauri forest that surrounded the family’s house, to take in the wider locales of French Bay, Titirangi and the Manukau Harbour’s shores.

In September McCahon was actively involved in curating *Object and Image*, the New Zealand Fellowship of Artists’ exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery. The theme of the



Doris Lusk at The Group exhibition, Christchurch, 1954. Works from McCahon’s *Towards Auckland* and *Manukau* series are visible on the wall behind her. Courtesy of the Doris Lusk Estate.

show was non-representational painting, ‘Purely to open the atmosphere a bit, which it did.’⁷⁰ McCahon participated, exhibiting – among other works – his abstracted *Kauri* paintings (TCMDAIL Nos 001407 and 000843). Other artists represented included Louise Henderson, Kase Jackson and Milan Mrkusich. With the benefit of hindsight, some commentators have proposed the billboard that McCahon painted for the *Object and Image* exhibition (TCMDAIL No. 001406) as an early example of a ‘word painting’.

Late in 1954, paintings by McCahon, along with works by H.V. Miller and M.T. Woollaston, were selected for the *New Zealand Artists 1954* exhibition organised by the Victoria University College: Regional Council for Adult Education, to tour public galleries in the lower half of the North Island.



Object and Image exhibition, Auckland City Art Gallery, September 1954. McCahon paintings displayed included, at left, *Kauri* 1954 (TCMDAIL No. 001407), along with a painted noticeboard for the exhibition (TCMDAIL No. 001406).

Photograph by Barry McKay Photography.

Controversy ensued when the Stratford Arts and Crafts Society refused to hang McCahon's paintings. The initial reason for this refusal rested on the complaint that the paintings of McCahon and Woollaston were 'crude' and/or 'crudely done'.

Mr R.B. Crawford, the Society's President, attempted to defend their decision:

'From various reports and letters to the paper, it would seem that considerable misunderstanding has arisen over certain terms. For instance, the word "crude" appears to have been translated in some people's minds as "rude", suggestive of something immoral – this was certainly never intended or implied. The use of the word crude by the committee



The Rape of Dejanira (after Michelangelo) 1953
Watercolour on gesso ground on cardboard, 51.7 x 65.1 cm
Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand
TCMDAIL No. 000582

implied sheer incompetence in handling technique and most certainly framing.'⁷¹

But as Gordon Brown has commented: 'It was from this "crude" that the other comments emerged...'⁷² The painting *The Rape of Dejanira (after Michelangelo)* 1953, was considered not fit for 'the eyes of young people'. And local taste-makers also thought the nudes coarsely done. 'Nobody would object to a nude painting if well done but those in the collection were examples of "ugly" painting.'⁷³

Although the resemblance to the composition of Michelangelo is apparent, it is more noticeable how McCahon based his work on ideas about space and interrelating forms as explored by Cézanne in the various *Bathers* paintings.

Whatever the real degree of antagonism towards McCahon's paintings, it was just one more obstacle in the search for

public acceptance of his work. It is perhaps hardly surprising that, as Gordon Brown wrote: 'In later years I think [McCahon] saw the whole business in the most negative way possible.'⁷⁴

1955–56

Perhaps inspired by the success of his billboard for the *Object and Image* exhibition, in 1955 McCahon produced two 'word paintings' in which the block letters previously employed in *I Am* and *I and Thou* were replaced by the flowing cursive handwriting with which he had earlier captioned several of his 'religious' works in the 1946–50 period. It was this script which was to remain his 'signature' for the remainder of his life.

The first of the 1955 works – *Let us possess one world* 1955 (page 81) – employs a text from 'The Good-Morrow', a poem by John Donne (1572–1631). McCahon modernised the spelling: 'hath' became 'has'.

The Good-Morrow

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls
Which watch not another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown;
let us possess one world
each hath one, and is one...*⁷⁵

It is most likely that McCahon's familiarity with the poem resulted from its use as an epigraph in John Caselberg's



Sacred to the memory of Death 1955
Oil on canvas, 63 x 76 cm
Private collection on loan to the Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
TCMDAIL No. 001219

volume of poetry, *The Sound of the Morning*, which had been published the year previously. By contrast, the text for

Sacred to the memory of Death 1955 was an inscription on a J.M.W. Turner drawing held in the collection of the Auckland City Art Gallery.

In the mid 1950s McCahon's choice of painting materials turned increasingly from traditional artists' oils towards the new commercially produced paints then being released for the growing home-decorator market. Innovation and experimentation with alternatives to artists' oils was already a well-established tradition for painters such as McCahon. During World War II the importation of fine art materials had been restricted and their distribution controlled by the Art Societies. If an artist was unpopular with these powers, as had been Woollaston and McCahon, he or she was at the end of the line to receive such products. As a result many artists, including McCahon, made their own oil paints. Good recipes for mixing paints were hunted out, and if properly followed, some of them could last a considerable period. The import restrictions lasted for several years after the War had ended.

Faced with this dilemma, another solution for artists had been to use household paints. Thus when such products as Dulux Enamel, Giant Monocoat, and Taubman's Butex and Solpah appeared in hardware stores, they found a ready reception amongst artists. That the new paints possessed particular properties not previously obtainable from traditional oils – and therefore offered new and exciting possibilities – only increased their appeal.

'...the new paints produced glossier, flatter surfaces, more intense colours and dried much faster than conventional oil paints. 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 [his student, artist] Richard Killeen, he would line up on the floor of the studio and "whack them out, do them all fast".'⁷⁶

McCahon's return to a flowing cursive script – mentioned earlier in relation to *Let us possess one world* and *Sacred to the memory of Death* – owed much to these new materials:

'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.'⁷⁷

Although here writing specifically of works from the 1959 *Elias* series, specialist McCahon conservator Sarah Hilary's observations are equally true of those paintings' 1955 forebears.

Yet despite the innovations of this pair of 'word paintings', the vast majority of works from 1955 continued to depict McCahon's surroundings. The development was in the style in which McCahon portrayed the forest and bays of the Titirangi area. Now, the former, more loosely structured, quasi-Cubist style was replaced by paintings in which the

imagery was built up from a plethora of small oblong and diamond-shaped touches of colour, arranged in a sometimes twisted geometric grid.

During the course of 1955 McCahon formed a loose association with Michael Nicholson – an English painter who had recently arrived in Auckland – Louise Henderson, who had studied in France, and two other painters. Calling themselves Unit 2, their bond was a shared affinity for non-representational painting. In what was essentially an epilogue to the previous year's *Object and Image* show, Unit 2 exhibited at the Auckland City Art Gallery in November 1955.

Continuing his interest in the theatre, in early 1956 McCahon designed sets for the Auckland Community Arts Service's production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

Of 1956, McCahon later wrote:

'[It] seems to be a blank. It could be the year I painted my boat and we went sailing, landing on distant shores around the Manukau. It may be the year I spent drawing or just working so bloody hard at the gallery by day and teaching.'⁷⁸

The cause of this increased workload was his appointment on 26 April as the Keeper and Deputy Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery. Under the new Director, Peter Tomory, the Gallery pushed forward with an ambitious



Peter Tomory, Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, and Colin McCahon, c. 1957.
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

exhibition schedule as well as an expanded programme of ancillary activities. Controversy struck in September, when an exhibition of sculptures by Henry Moore prompted Auckland's Mayor, J.H. Luxford, to fume: '...I had never seen the art gallery desecrated by such a nauseating sight....These

figures, offending against all known anatomy, to me were repulsive.⁷⁹

The ensuing uproar led to record crowds viewing the exhibition, both in Auckland and on its later tour to the other main cities. Modernism was at last making an impact in New Zealand.

1957

'In 1957 too, a great change in attitude to the Titirangi landscape. I see I was right now in thinking about the previous year as one of little painting and lots of drawing. I came to grips with the kauri and turned him in all his splendour into a symbol.'⁸⁰

'In his last major group of *Titirangi* paintings McCahon attempted to cleanse his vision of some of the conceptual preoccupations that had determined the course of his paintings over the previous few years. These aesthetic preoccupations, with their tenuous Cubist affiliations, were becoming an inhibiting factor. The cue he sought lay in two closely related ideas which, when combined with his technique of small dashes and squares, rectangular and diamond-shaped brushstrokes, provided the indication as to what occurred next. He wanted to simplify the way he looked at the Titirangi bush; to register as directly as possible the visual response received through his eyes. As an aid, he reconsidered what T.H. Scott, a lecturer in psychology at Canterbury University College, had told him several years earlier about the deprivation of sensory stimuli.

'Scott had related the effects on a person's sight when light was restored after a week in total darkness. The first impression was of blinding brightness; then, after some minutes, shapes would be vaguely realized as shades of light and dark. As the eyes slowly adjusted, colours formed but were exaggerated in intensity. As objects regained definition, their spatial relationships were finally established. Taking this account as a starting point, McCahon turned to himself and asked, "What is it like just to see?" To approximate this sense of seeing things afresh, for a short period he adopted the habit of rising from his bed as soon as he had woken at dawn and, dashing outside, tried not to fix his gaze on anything until he was clear of the house and could look at the surrounding bush. Only then would he allow his eyes to concentrate on what he saw. He would then contemplate the bush with all the intensity he could muster so that the forms of the trees would dematerialize while his sense of spatial depth diminished. At its most intense, McCahon likened this illusionary effect to that of the blind man mentioned in Mark's Gospel who, on first receiving his sight, saw "men as trees, walking".⁸¹

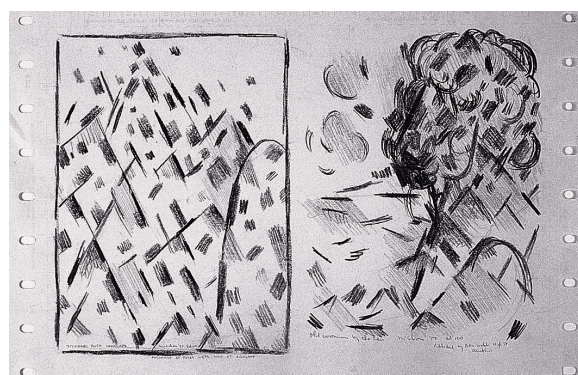
In *Flounder Fishing Night, French Bay* 1957 (page 79) McCahon extended this exploration of the technical aspects of visual perception. Applying the paint in oblong and square brush strokes, he experimented with juxtaposing different colours which, when contrasted with one another, created the pictorial illusion of advancing and receding rectangles. The work recalls evenings spent spearing flounder – a kind of flat-fish – by torchlight in the



Anne and Colin McCahon, *Titirangi*, c. 1957. Behind them are *Kauri Trees, Titirangi* 1955–57 (in an early state) (TCMDAIL No. 000407) and *Kauri* 1957 (TCMDAIL No. 001409). Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

shallow tidal water of French Bay.

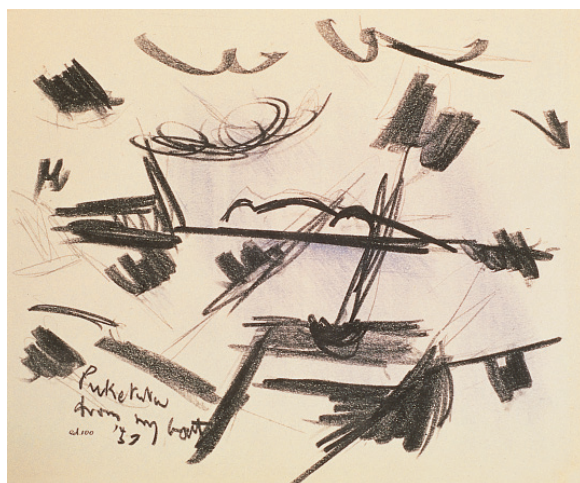
The year 1957 was one in which McCahon pursued his interest in print-making. He had already experimented with the lithographic technique in 1954, printing an image, *Kauri*, that was closely related to drawings of the same subject from earlier that year. Now, in 1957, a series of prints were produced. First was an edition of eight impressions of a French Bay image related to the *Flounder Fishing Night, French Bay* painting. This was followed by four prints



Titirangi Bush Landscape and Old Woman by the Sea 1957
Two crayon drawings on one lithographic paper plate; each inscribed at the base with the title and 'McCahon 57 Ed 100 published by Peter Webb, High St, Auckland', 25.7 x 39.5 cm
Private collection, Kempsey, Australia
TCMDAIL No. 001560

based on John Caselberg's 'Van Gogh' sequence of poems. However, trouble arose when Pegasus Press, the publishers of Caselberg's 1954 book *The Sound of Morning* in which the 'Van Gogh' cycle had originally appeared, refused to release the rights to republication of the Caselberg poems. In the event, the *Van Gogh* prints were not shown publicly until 1971.

In the wake of McCahon's disappointment at the *Van Gogh* embargo, he was approached by Peter Webb with a view to producing another series of images. Webb, who had just opened his Argus House Gallery in July 1957, offered to act as publisher. McCahon agreed and set about his task. The first result was a double image on one plate, planned to be



Puketutu, Manukau: Puketutu from my boat 1957
Lithograph, 19 x 26 cm (image size), 22 x 27 cm (sheet size)
TCMDAIL No. 001346 (one image of four)

produced in an edition of 100 impressions. The titles were *Titirangi Bush Landscape* and *Old Woman by the Sea* – the latter an interpretation of an old pohutukawa tree that



Puketutu, Manukau: View within an Oval 1957
Lithograph, 19 x 26 cm (image size), 22 x 27 cm (sheet size)
TCMDAIL No. 001346 (one image of four)

was overhanging the seashore in French Bay (page 185). However, although McCahon completed the plate, at the last minute he had second thoughts and abandoned the images.

Instead he started a new group, using as his subject matter the view from French Bay across the Manukau Harbour towards the small island of Puketutu. The result was three images – *Puketutu from the beach*, *Puketutu from my boat*, and *Puketutu, Manukau: View within an Oval* – as well as a title page. The set of prints was finally released at 12 shillings and 6 pence just prior to Christmas 1957.

Sadly, few found buyers, leaving plans McCahon had for other print editions foundering on the rocks of economic circumstance. Although he made further prints in 1961 ('self impression' monoprints), as well as two *North Otago Landscape* images in 1969 and 1974, after 1957 print-making became at best a side activity for McCahon.

In late 1957 McCahon exhibited Recent oils, a selection of works from the *Titirangi and Kauri series*, at Webb's Argus House Gallery. Reviewing the exhibition, John Caselberg wrote:

'Colin McCahon's work has always been powerful, naked, uncompromising. His ever-restless eye has searched, with increasing penetration, the properties not only of paint and pictures, but of the visible world. His intense creativity has expressed itself in many visual media, in different genres and disciplines: among others, in stage design, jewellery-making, and exhibition display; in landscape, portraiture, and symbolic painting; in drawings, lithographs, watercolours and oils. Essentially, his work is affirmative: of Life; of Faith; of the triumph of Man over his Hell; of Light over Dark....Colin McCahon came to Auckland in 1954. The impact of the light which floods over the city from the sea immediately became apparent in his work....The "Recent Oils" are more than one man's invention. Certainly, there is a long, silent journey necessary to extract all their meaning. But it will emerge. And it is the land itself, a resurgent land clad in young kauris with sap incipient of a thousand year's strength and growth pushing into the sun, whose voice may be heard, in these pictures, speaking.'⁸²

1958

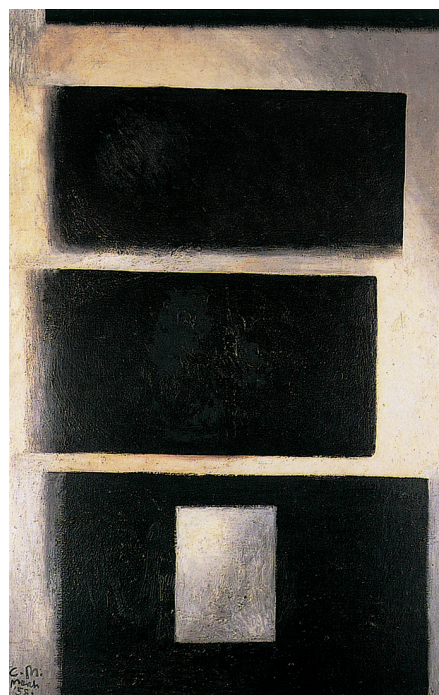
Although 1957 had been a year of continuous painting activity in which McCahon developed and expanded his vision of his Titirangi surroundings, the essence of his output remained a refined version of what had gone before. By contrast, 1958 was to be a year in which new and radical developments would set the stage for much that would occupy him in his subsequent career.

Most notable of the images from early in the year was *Painting* 1958 (page 187). The genesis of this work can be seen in *Flounder Fishing Night, French Bay* 1957 (page 79) in which rectangles of contrasting colour had been organised in a grid-like arrangement. Now, in *Painting*, it was as if a small section of this grid had been magnified, the rectangles

of colour expanding to form solid blocks hovering in an undefined space. Writing retrospectively, McCahon noted that *Painting* really represented 'the opening of the first *Gate* series'.⁸³

But it is not in this capacity that the work's infamy rests. Rather, it was as a result of McCahon's decision two years later to enter *Painting* in the 1960 Hay's Art Competition, a prize established by a Christchurch department store 'to encourage a wider appreciation of the work of contemporary New Zealand artists and to provide facilities for artists to show and sell their paintings'.⁸⁴ A furore ensued when the panel of three judges (two of whom were McCahon's former teacher Russell Clark, and the Director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, Peter Tomory) could not agree on an overall winner, instead awarding the prize jointly to McCahon and two other artists, Francis Jones and Julian Royds. The result was a slew of correspondence to the newspapers and much media commentary, almost all of it negative.

'I submitted this [*Painting* 1958] for the Hay's Art Prize, in Christchurch, and it was a joint prizewinner. There were letters to the papers in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin on "modern art". This was the most publicly disliked painting in New Zealand since my 1947 work was shown in Wellington and until *Tomorrow will be the same* was accepted by the Christchurch City Council in 19[6]2.'⁸⁵



Painting 1958
Oil on hardboard, 121.8 x 76.4 cm
Fletcher Challenge collection, New Zealand
TCMDAIL No. 000934

But this controversy was still two years in the future. Meanwhile, in April 1958, *Recent Paintings by Colin McCahon* was shown in the Dunedin Public Library. The exhibition included *Kauri*, *French Bay* and *Titirangi* paintings. Speaking at the exhibition opening, Charles Brasch observed:

'It is not a very common experience to be confronted with pictures which force us to look at the world around us in a new way....Everyone is familiar with the way in which English painters of the eighteenth and early nineteenth Century taught us to see the English landscape, so that as we look at England today, even in photographs, it really looks like pictures by Gainsborough, Constable, Turner and others. But it didn't look like that before they painted it. This is one of the things Colin McCahon is doing for New Zealand – he is showing us the country in a new way...'⁸⁶

From April 1958 to the end of July, Colin and Anne McCahon visited the United States of America in an official capacity. Upon completion of this programme they extended their stay privately for a further two months. The purpose of this visit, which was made with the aid of a grant from the Carnegie Trust and support from the Auckland City Council, was to look at art museums. In particular, McCahon set out to study the conditions and exhibition practices of major American galleries and museums in order that the best of international practice might be incorporated in the operations of the Auckland City Art Gallery.

Although in that period American painting had not the status it later achieved – Paris was still the centre of the art world and only slowly surrendering that position to New York – the professionalism of the American institutions left most of those in Europe far behind.

'...I would like to point out that this is not merely a pleasure visit, for Mr McCahon will be working alongside art gallery staffs in some of the greatest museums in America and thus his professional knowledge will be substantially increased by this tour. This is the first occasion that I know of [that] any professional member of a New Zealand gallery has visited America. The Auckland Art Gallery already holds a fairly high reputation overseas for its purchases and re-building programme. Mr McCahon will also be giving lectures on New Zealand painting both old and new, and I feel that Auckland can only gain from this visit. In Europe, a tour of this kind would be considered fundamental training for professional art gallery personnel...'⁸⁷

The timing and nature of the trip was symptomatic of wider changes taking place in New Zealand in the 1950s. The country's isolated geographic position, with all the associated problems caused by this 'tyranny of distance', was being overcome by advances in transport and communications. Pan American's commencement of direct air services between Auckland and Los Angeles was but one development among many that provided New Zealanders with hitherto unknown travel opportunities. Meanwhile, improvements in telephone and telex services cut the cost of international communications and increased its reliability. Expanding media coverage of world events, an increase

in migration – drawn both from traditional sources in the British Isles and, increasingly, from Europe (25,000 Dutch migrants arrived in the post-War years) – a desire and preparedness amongst younger New Zealanders to travel abroad, and, not least, the beginning of an expanded period of economic growth, combined to make New Zealanders more aware, and a part of, the rest of the world.

The McCahons' tour was intensive, with as much emphasis placed on the study of administrative systems and museum organisation as on looking at paintings: 'In all, I visited about 63 art galleries, 100 dealer galleries and private collections, talked with directors, museum staff and artists...' ⁸⁸

Among the museums McCahon visited were those in Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, Kansas City, St Louis, New York and Buffalo – although not everywhere did he get to see what he had expected (owing to works being in storage; a fire having closed New York's Museum of Modern Art; a rebuilding programme at the Art Institute of Chicago, etc.). Moreover, as McCahon and others, such as the Australian Elwyn Lynn who was in the USA about the same time, have said, it was not easy to find contemporary painting by Americans in art museums. McCahon often failed to find work by those in whom he was interested. Even in the dealer galleries he visited, among them Leo Castelli, Sidney Janis and Betty Parsons, his timing – arriving as the quiet summer season took hold – meant that what was on view were mostly group or stock shows.

Nevertheless, a number of exhibitions provided an opportunity to see at first hand the paintings of artists he had long admired. Among the most notable of these was *The Earlier Years*, an exhibition of Mondrian's paintings and drawings from 1904 until the early 1920s, held at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Other important visits were to the retrospectives of the painters Hans Hofmann and Juan Gris, at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the otherwise-closed Museum of Modern Art, New York, respectively. In addition, there were new surprises, including a show of hanging scroll paintings by the Japanese artist Tomioka Tessai (1836–1924) at San Francisco's M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. As well as the expected European Masters, McCahon also saw works by Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still and others then making their reputations in America. Importantly for McCahon's later development, the murals of Diego Rivera and Thomas Hart Benton affirmed the potential power of large scale painting.

An ongoing topic of debate among commentators on McCahon has been the extent to which – and in what ways – the artist's subsequent paintings were influenced by the American visit. McCahon himself has said that he was influenced more by the vastness of the American landscape, and the American way of life, than by the large scale of the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. He went with an agenda to the States, having a good idea of European art – albeit only through reproductions – and he doubted the influence of specific artists: '...it was in the summer period – they [the galleries] were doing their try-out, if you like, and pretty dull....So altogether it wasn't that successful but the

thing we really came to understand was the landscape and the people.' ⁸⁹

Yet there is clear evidence that McCahon's exposure to artists and paintings he had known only in reproduction, combined with his discovery of others previously unknown, informed his work thereafter in many varied – and often subtle – ways. The impact of Mondrian, whose work McCahon called 'expansive', and the free handling of the brush he saw in Richard Diebenkorn's work – as well as the way that Californian painter was able to give his Abstract Expressionist paintings 'content' – was significant. 'With Diebenkorn...I felt a real affinity with his work, but it's more a question of equivalents rather than a direct influence: an attitude to the way the paint is laid down, colour and the like.' ⁹⁰

Another important discovery was the narrow, scroll-like Modernist paintings of the German painter Hans Richter,



Hans Richter, *Liberation of Paris 1945–46*
Oil on canvas (hanging scroll)
235 x 90 cm
Whereabouts unknown

a small selection of which were seen by McCahon at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. Although, as Gordon Brown records, McCahon was ambivalent when later questioned about the impact of these works – recalling them as ‘useful’ – Brown suggests that they had ‘far greater importance to McCahon in initiating his “canvases without frames” than...the Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings he saw in America, and of which he had seen examples in New Zealand.’⁹¹

Perhaps inevitably, after feasting on so great a variety of art and experiences, the return to the realities of Auckland was to prove challenging:

‘Now this was quite an experience....We saw a lot and learnt a lot and came back to a first-light sight of North Head, and the despoiled landscape of Auckland. We were met by



Colin McCahon, *Titirangi*, c. 1958. Although the painting behind the artist is unrecorded in the McCahon Database, it may be an earlier version of *Untitled* 1959 (TCMDAIL No. 001472). Notable is its incorporation of the text ‘I AM’. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

friends and drank wine all day to forget the aesthetic horror of Karangahape Road.

‘We went home to the bush of Titirangi. 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*’⁹² (pages 42–43).

Painted ‘on the sun deck at Titirangi all on one Sunday afternoon and corrected for weeks afterwards’,⁹³ the *Northland panels* mark a major change in the work of McCahon. No longer content with producing ‘easel paintings’, he searched to find ways to address his new painterly ambitions. ‘I was just bursting for the wide open spaces’,⁹⁴ he later wrote, and he now sought to express himself through the use of large-scale, unstretched and unframed canvases, arranged singly or – as in the *Northland panels* – in sequences.

In both style and subject matter there were also new

directions. Abandoning the small diamond and lozenge shapes that he had used in such previous series as *French Bay* and *Titirangi*, McCahon painted the *Northland panels* in free, loose strokes, moving ever further from naturalistic representation towards a generalised ‘sense’ or ‘impression’ of the landscape. In addition, written text reappeared, now in the loose calligraphy that was to become his signature.

On one of the panels the artist inscribed the now oft-quoted phrase ‘a landscape with too few lovers’. Although suitably ambiguous in its meaning, as McCahon intended, the text nevertheless expressed his very personal concerns about the environment, sentiments that had been reinforced by his time abroad. Years later, in an interview with Gordon Brown, McCahon expanded on these ideas:

Brown: ‘This concern – when did you feel the real concern for the landscape as something that wasn’t taken too much notice of by New Zealanders? I mean the sort of thing that leads to the...statement on the *Northland panels* “a landscape with too few lovers”...’

McCahon: ‘Years back. You see in a place like Dunedin, you’re always being told it looks like Scotland. And this happens all over the country....The first kind of freedom I really found from this kind of looking backwards thing, I got going up into the Far North...Where you can’t say that about it, you just can’t.’

Brown: ‘You mean it’s a unique New Zealand thing.’

McCahon: ‘It’s a completely unique New Zealand thing, and so much of New Zealand is uniquely New Zealand...’

Brown: ‘I find I also take the reading...that it...is also a reaction against the lording of the very obvious things like Mitre Peak...’

McCahon: ‘Oh sure!’

Brown: ‘...I can remember you saying once [that] the landscape you really learn to love is the one out your kitchen window.’

McCahon: ‘Yes, I agree. I just said that on Monday night to those ladies up there (at an “Outreach” [adult education] class) and they went “haw-haw-haw”.’

Brown: ‘This is really what you’re after...the real landscape.... And it really has nothing to do with how imposing it might be....I think this is, presumably...one of the reasons why you like the *Northland* landscape – it’s almost nothingness at times.’

McCahon: ‘Yes.’⁹⁵

Upon his return from the USA, and following the enthusiastic response he had received for the tutoring he had given as part of the Auckland City Art Gallery’s art education programme, as well as the various other courses

and summer schools he had taught since his arrival in Auckland, McCahon started painting classes in the Gallery's attic. Although held on the Gallery premises, these Thursday evening classes were a private initiative by McCahon, thus allowing him more leeway in the nature and approach of his teaching. The effect upon a whole generation of Auckland painters was to be legendary.

Although developing his teaching techniques as he went, his focus remained very much about tonal control – light against dark. Cézanne's 'to paint is to contrast', a central facet of McCahon and Caselberg's unpublished 1953 manifesto *On the Nature of Art*, remained a key to his instruction.

'I don't know if anyone was ever actually taught to paint by McCahon, in the strict sense that is....Since technically McCahon had learnt no formulae, he couldn't teach any. So really one had to have a pretty good idea of one's own direction before entering his class....The Attic class was fairly close-knit which in itself was helpful as it kept the all-important dialogue going between times....He taught mainly from the viewpoint of compositional balance and poise....He emphasized the tonal aspect and would exhort, practically harangue us to make our drawing "do" what the objects were "doing"....Another aspect of McCahon's teaching was that it was Platonic – the tutor's job being to help the student realise what he or she already knew...'⁹⁶

In August 1958 seven works by McCahon were included in the exhibition *Thirty-seven N.Z. Paintings from the Collection of Charles Brasch and Rodney Kennedy* shown at the Auckland City Art Gallery, and in September *Domestic Landscape* was selected for inclusion in an exhibition of New Zealand art that toured the USSR in 1959–60.

Simultaneously with the *Northland panels*, McCahon set about a second large-scale, multi-panel painting on unstretched canvas: *The Wake*. Unlike the *Northland panels*, however, this work was dominated by text – specifically a cycle of poems by John Caselberg, written as a lament upon the passing of his Great Dane dog, Thor. *The Wake* consists of sixteen sequential canvases – a title panel and nine canvases containing poems, interspersed with six smaller panels. Of these, five depict abstracted kauri trunks and one a dark landscape.

Quite apart from its innovative balancing of landscape and

text, *The Wake* saw McCahon employing new techniques in an effort to achieve the look and feel he sought. Rather than applying paint with the broad, loose brushstrokes he had used in the *Northland panels*, McCahon now moistened each panel with water before spreading and soaking the inks and oil paints – their binding medium diluted – into the canvas. The result was a stained effect not dissimilar to watercolour, over which McCahon painted the text in oil paints. First shown in April–May the following year in the Canterbury Public Library, *The Wake* then toured to Timaru, Dunedin, Greymouth and Nelson before finally being shown at the Ikon Gallery, Auckland, in October 1960, where the 'environment' it created was the scene for a poetry reading by Caselberg.

There were other new directions in 1958:

'Ideas came up...[including] the first of what became a truly vast series [of] paintings of numerals. The very first were intended as end-pieces made for *Landfall* and were worked out so that any page could end at any page number with a combination of these symbols, both to fill the gap and to state the page...'⁹⁷

Although the ideas were never used, their exploration prompted McCahon to reflect on numbers and their possible use as signs, symbols and imagery. 'These were the beginning of something and the end of something else.'⁹⁸

1959

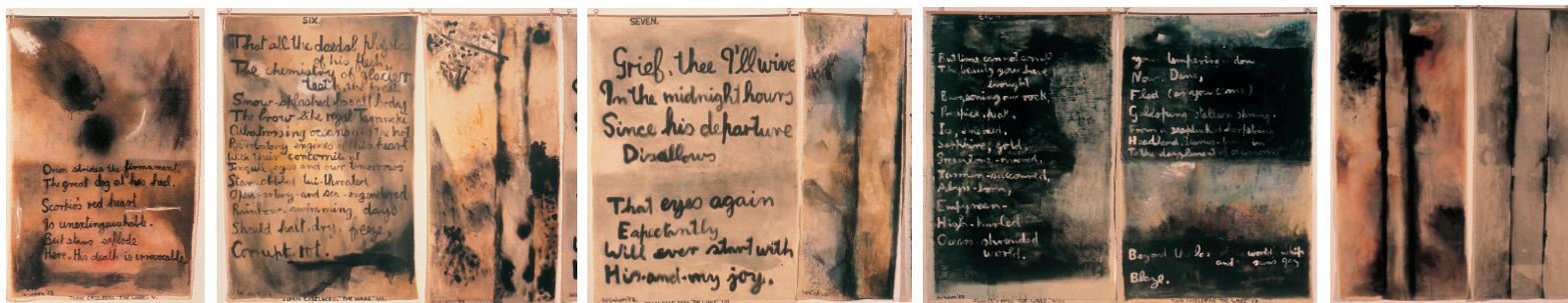
In this year it was words rather than numbers that dominated McCahon's painting. Specifically, it was the ambiguous comments of observers at the Crucifixion, as reported in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, that provided the material on which McCahon drew to produce his first great body of 'written paintings' – the *Elias* series (pages 83–89). The impetus to this change in direction was McCahon's fear that his painting had become too dominated by landscape concerns – preoccupied with solving technical and stylistic challenges that, while personally interesting, eschewed any real attempt to communicate his core concerns to an audience. Now, in the *Elias* works, McCahon explored the deeply human concept of doubt: the doubt of the bystanders, of the suffering criminals crucified at the



‘Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.

Stylistically, the *Elias* series are characterised by the placement of text within a (frequently colourful) Cubist

Ink and Monocoat on canvas, 16 panels, 178.5 cm high x varying widths, overall width 1673 cm
Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
Gift of the artist, 1978
TCMDAIL No. 001610



space. In several of the works, elements derived from the landscape or the iconography of the Cross are present. Yet it is the words that dominate. For whereas words had served as descriptive explanation in McCahon's religious paintings of the 1940s, and in the early 1950s there are a few works in which texts are the visual subject, now a whole dialogue became part of each painting. Certain letters were emphasised, while words or phrases were underlined or varied in size – formal innovations designed to influence the reading, and open up different levels of understanding, of each image. Although nowadays, especially since the development of Conceptual art practices, we have become used to language being used as material for visual art, at the end of the 1950s McCahon's concept was exciting and new. At last he had found, in the written word, a visual language with which he could address his need to communicate.

Although words were the key to the *Elias* paintings, colour was also an important and carefully considered element. It is used throughout the series to establish different moods in each of the paintings. In *He calls for Elias* (page 85), for example, the dark tonality of the work and its acid-like palette suggest the doubt that Elias will come – though there are indications of hope in the flashes of white light that enter the painting on either side of the name Elias.

Yet despite the universality of the *Elias* theme, the paintings remained grounded in the everyday life of the artist. The artist's son, William McCahon, writing of the *Elias* painting *Let be, let be* (page 89), recalled:

'The painting *Let be, let be* was first shown to the family by Colin McCahon while we were still living in Titirangi. The product of many late nights after work, we children recognised its skies and moods. *Let be, let be* and its companions in the *Elias* series, seemed to be about our concerns, our lives, and very modern; a triumph and an instant favourite. We felt that this was an equal to those wonderful new works we saw in overseas magazines and books. At the time of this showing the central area was unlettered. It was felt by a family consensus more writing was needed. We children did not respond to its written messages of doubt and hope; we enjoyed its size, the mood of its skylines, the balances and harmonies of its construction. Some time later, after much agonising, Colin, well fortified, lettered the central panel during the small hours of the morning, a time during which he knew he would not be disturbed. At first disappointed and depressed by my mother Anne's criticism of the method by which he had achieved this script, he began to rework the words. Every brush stroke was much talked about. Putting any reservations aside, he called the work finished, Anne agreeing. However, this spidery scrawl is possibly his most expressive writing in paint until perhaps the *Scared* series, being the most direct from his hand and heart. Colin himself was afraid of this directness, an issue of its own in modern art, while knowing when to stop is one of the hardest things for the artist himself to decide, and so an already complete work was brought into an even greater realisation of an original idea.'¹⁰²

In October 1959, the *Elias* paintings, along with the *Northland panels* and thirty-five *Northland drawings*, were included in a major exhibition of McCahon's paintings at the new Gallery 91 in Christchurch. Reviewing the exhibition, Toss Woollaston wrote:

'...The written word, too, most often quoted from the Bible, is...without apology used as a subject for painting. No one seeing this exhibition can dismiss those pictures in which the lettering is painted without missing the unity and power of the artist's whole work. This matter...is...the one people most want to lay down rules about. But how do we lay down rules for this sort of painting? Part of a painter's work is to discover rules and...test them as he goes along, to see if they will work for him and for us. When a whole sky cries "*Elias*"...who shall say lettering shall not be big in a picture? Or who objects to it when a glimmering of the mystery of time is given in the darkness under a passing river?'¹⁰³

Apart from the Gallery 91 exhibition in October, exhibition-wise 1959 was a busy year for McCahon. The *Wake* had toured South Island cities and towns early in the year while the first public display of the *Northland panels* had been in *Three Auckland Painters*, held with Kase Jackson and Louise Henderson, at the Auckland City Art Gallery in June. Finally, a group of works dating as far back as an *Otago Peninsula* painting of 1946–49 had been included in the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition, *Eight New Zealand Painters III*, held in October–November.