

COLIN McCAHON A QUESTION OF FAITH

an education resource



Six days in Nelson and Canterbury 1950
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

Colin McCahon (Timaru 1919–1987 Auckland) is New Zealand's first painter of international significance. Although his career is rooted in a very specific period of New Zealand's history many of the issues he deals with are still universally relevant today.

McCahon sought a way to give visual representation to issues of the post-World War II environment. Accessing, appropriating and 'modernising' many aspects of the Western Judaeo-Christian artistic tradition, he developed his painting as a vehicle to discuss these concerns and to communicate them to an audience living in a small, isolated country in the mid-20th century.

The core of McCahon's oeuvre – his exploration of spiritual belief and knowledge – may seem unfashionable in our secular age. Nevertheless, 'Faith', the theme of this exhibition, is the critical issue in the artist's life and work: **faith in God, in man, and in himself as human being and artist** – but also what happens when a person loses faith; the way in which this leads to **doubt and despair**.

DISCUSSION

What do **you** understand by 'faith'?

What kind of things would make somebody loose or question their faith?

early religious works 1946 - 1952

At first McCahon painted the New Zealand landscape reducing it to its most basic elements and shapes, revealing a view of the country both startlingly new and yet as old as time – 'a land of calm, orderly granite'. In the mid 1940s, McCahon started to populate his landscapes with figures and events drawn from familiar biblical stories, portrayed in the style and surroundings of mid 20th Century rural New Zealand. He chose a language of well-known stories and symbols – **candles, jugs of pure water** and oppositions of light and dark– to explore and represent **existential** human questions and feelings. Sometimes his compositions are based on reproductions of early Renaissance painting. Rather than relying solely on colour, the paintings are distinguished by an emphasis on modulations of light and dark tones. McCahon also studied the composition and mathematical approach of the 'Golden section' using geometric figures to establish proportion and symbolic content.

His intent was largely misunderstood by the audience he was seeking to reach and this led him, by the end of the 1950s, to replace the figurative image with words.



The Promised Land 1948 Auckland Art Gallery To o Tamaki

Discussion

What are some of the clues that tell you that paintings from this period have a local setting – why do you think he used this setting for biblical stories?

What effect do you think working from small reproductions would have had on McCahon's painting?

text and abstraction

Throughout the 1950s McCahon gradually developed the style based on Cubist influences and his juxtaposition of different colours to create the pictorial illusion of advancing and receding rectangles. In the first paintings with words – in block letters – the image is constructed in a 'architectural' manner, achieving pictorial illusion through limited colour and the placement of the words.

At the same time, McCahon started painting in series or sequences. These took the form of either multi-panelled works, or several single paintings in which the same motif or theme was explored and eventually this resulted in paintings 'to walk past'.

In 1959 McCahon produced his first important body of 'written paintings' – the *Elias* series. The ambiguous comments of observers at the Crucifixion, as reported in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, provided the material for these works. He explored the deeply human concept of doubt: the doubt of the bystanders, of the suffering criminals crucified at the same time as Christ, of McCahon himself, and, not least, the doubts of his audience.



Will he save Him (Elias series) 1959
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

ACTION

Record, by drawing, how planes, letters and words in McCahon's paintings, float, recede or seem to project out from the picture plane.

DISCUSSION

Describe the synthesis of word and image in a work from this period.

the gates

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The rectangular shafts of light and triangular shapes in *He calls for Elias* 1959, subsequently find echoes in the *Gate* paintings of 1960-62. In these series, the subject of which is McCahon's concern that humanity should find a 'way through' the challenge posed by nuclear weapons and the Cold War arms race, the artist also reaches his own form of abstraction. This achievement was the fruit of his early — and recurring — interest in Cubism, as well as his then more recent interest in Mondrian, Malevich and the Russian Suprematists.

The structure of each image rests on the placement of rectangular shapes on the picture plane in such a way as to leave a gap between them into the pictorial space beyond. In the most successful of the paintings, McCahon uses colour, tone and contrast to achieve the optical suggestion that the rectangular shapes advance or recede in relation to one another.



Gate 15 (first Gate series) 1961
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

The materials that McCahon chose for all the *Gate* paintings were a hard gloss lacquer and a variety of new commercially prepared household paints – mostly in subdued tones of black, grey, a pale ochre and white, and sometimes with sand mixed in – painted on pre-cut hardboard.

DISCUSSION

Select one of the 'Gate' paintings. Analyse and record how your eye takes in its composition as it travels over and through the work.

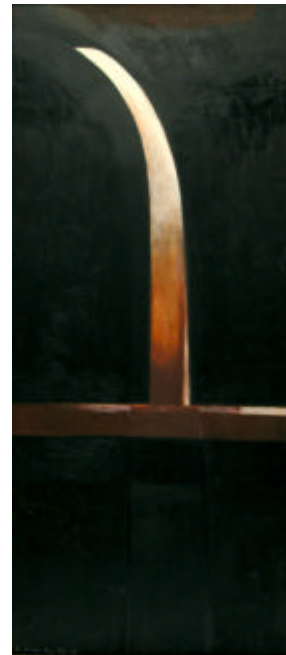
What do you sense about the spatial relationships of forms through edges and shifts in tone – what about the introduction of surface texture?

waterfalls

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'A Landscape is an ever recurring theme in my painting and even when the landscape is not directly stated as such it has been implied both in form and light... Now the place is not stated... Certainly the landscape is New Zealand but in an amalgam of both North and South. Nor is this the tourist's landscape... I am dealing with the essential monotony of this land, with variations on a formal theme... a "landscape with too few lovers"...' (McCahon, 1963).

At the end of 1963 McCahon painted smaller re-statements of a curved hill motif he had developed the preceding year. These works are the genesis of McCahon's next major series, the *Waterfalls*, 1964. 'The waterfalls started flowing in 1964... They grew out of William Hodges' paintings on loan to the Auckland City Art Gallery from the Admiralty, London... Hodges is my hero in all these paintings but the Fairy Falls in the Waitakeres and Japanese and Chinese painting are the real influences later... I look back with joy on taking a brush of white paint and curving through the darkness with a line of white.' (McCahon 1972)



Waterfall 1964 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

numbers and stations

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In early 1965 McCahon returned to an examination of the theme of numbers, a subject he had first explored at the end of the 1950s. He was well aware that many of the teachings of the Christian Church are based on the symbolic meaning of numbers. 'The large *Numerals* series... took months to paint and developed very slowly. They work as a painting and as an environment. They are where we are in one way; and, in another way, if we could walk on from 10 where would we get to. I worked out many new formal problems here and in the paintings following them... Numbers do say a hell of a lot. They mark a time and a place...' (McCahon, 1972)



The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1966 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1966, depicts a series of simplified, generalized landscapes – one for each of the events which took place on Christ's route to Calvary. McCahon's abstracted landscape vision becomes even more sparse simplified to a banded motif of sky, hill and plain, with, in each, a simple line hinting at a cleft, road, fold or waterfall. 'Each one of the series is numbered and inscribed with its traditional caption. This series is closely related in feeling to the *Numerals, 1965*, and some of the *Waterfalls, 1964*, as well as to many other paintings... They are all concerned with Man's fall and his resurrection. They also relate to the *Elias* subject... I am saying what I want to say in these paintings but I am still too abstract.' (McCahon, 1972)

DISCUSSION

Why was McCahon concerned that his paintings were becoming 'too abstract' – what does this tell us about what he was trying to achieve?

In 1965 McCahon's daughter Catherine's gave him a book entitled *The Tail of the Fish: Maori memories of the Far North*. In this book, the author, Matire Kereama, recounts the genealogy, stories and history of her tribe, Te Aupouri, whose traditional lands occupy the very northern tip of the North Island.

In the words of McCahon: 'From August to October I struggled with Mrs Kereama's *Lark's song*. I loved it, I read the poem out loud while I painted and finally the little lark took off up the painting and out of sight. The words must be read for their sound, they are signs for the lark's song...This whole series of paintings gave me great joy. Please don't give yourself the pain of worrying out a translation of the words but try for the sound of the painting. But never forget that these are the words of a poet too. Some people can read them.' (1972)

ACTION

Look carefully at *The Lark's Song* noticing where McCahon has recharged his brush with paint and given emphasis to letters or syllables.

Try reading the painting out loud – following the marks of emphasis as if you were reading from a musical score.



The Lark's Song 1969 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

visible mysteries



At the end of 1966, McCahon began a group of paintings that again sought to imbue recognised images with new symbolic significance. In the *Still Life with Altar* paintings and the subsequent 1968 series entitled *Visible Mysteries*, the key motifs are an altar and a heart, two images traditionally associated with religious iconography.

Both series employ the image of an altar, illuminated along the front and on one side edge. Sometimes a supporting beam gives to the altar the shape of a Tau, or 'T' shaped, Cross. Above or below each altar hovers a white heart. The altar references the Catholic Mass, its re-enactment of the passion and Christ's death in order to save the world, and His presence in the sacrament of Holy Communion as this relates to His importuning of His Disciples at the Last Supper. The heart, meanwhile, symbolises love, both earthly and divine, and by extension, the divine sacrifice of Christ. In some of the *Visible Mysteries* paintings, this analogy is extended and clarified through the transformation of the waterfall motif. Now it becomes a stream of Christ's blood, pouring from the heart into a wine goblet placed upon the altar.

ACTION

Note the names of other works in the exhibition where the Tau cross, or similar compositional devices are used.

Use drawing to record one of these showing how the **T** shape is used to strengthen or stabilise the composition.

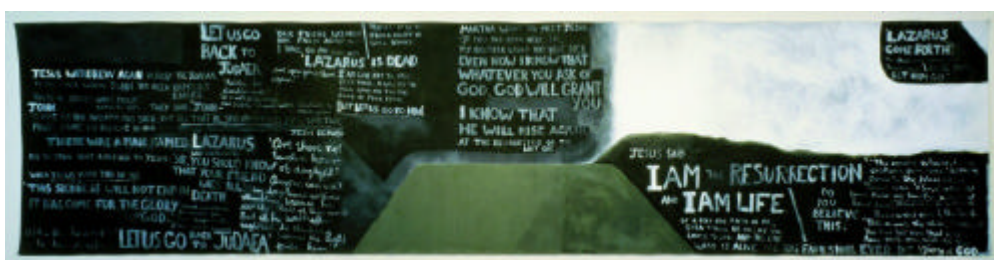
lazarus and practical religion

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The series of paintings based on the Lazarus story with the general title *Practical religion*, included McCahon's two largest works to date, *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha*, 1969–70, and *Victory over Death 2*, 1970. He was able to work on this scale by his moving into a new, larger studio located near Auckland's west coast beach of Muriwai.

In the title *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* McCahon both identifies the story depicted and firmly grounds the story in New Zealand. Although the text dominates, this work remains underpinned by a vast landscape motif.

Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha is perhaps best characterized as a visual litany; a meditation on the resurrection of Lazarus with a particular focus on the faith, obedience and patience of Lazarus's sister Martha. The central themes are doubt, death and resurrection. Reading from the left, the participants in the story, and the events that overtook and occupied them, unfold across the canvas.



Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha 1969-70 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

DISCUSSION

Describe how McCahon animates the various voices reacting to the resurrection of Lazarus.

muriwai: necessary protection

In the first half of the 1970s McCahon succeeded in synthesizing two strands of his work, the landscape and the visualisation of the spiritual, in a series of multi-layered paintings and drawings with the title *Necessary Protection*.

For the central motif McCahon took inspiration from Moturoa Island, a rock column formation a few hundred metres offshore. Its special feature is its nesting colony of gannets. The seabirds' daily drama of birth, nurturing, instruction of the young, and the risk-taking and faith involved in the young gannets' first flights, provided striking analogies for the 'human condition' that McCahon was able to put to use in a wide variety of ways.

The forms of the rocks suggested the letters **I** and **T**. McCahon saw the 'I' as a symbolic representation of the sky, a ray of light and an enlightened or purified land. It was also the number 'one'. The horizontal line in the **T** still provided a metaphor for the sky but this time the fall of light was into a dark or benighted landscape. The **T** shape recalled the Tau Cross, known also as the Old Testament or Egyptian Cross and implied a pre-Christian idea of protection.



Muriwai. A Necessary Protection Landscape 1972 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

muriwai: walks and jumps



Between 1971 and 1973 and after the deaths of several people important and close to McCahon, the artist turned again to Muriwai for inspiration. He found it in the beach's association with the traditional Maori spirit path to 'Te Rerenga Wairua', the 'jumping off' point for departing souls on their journey to the spirit world. This exploration culminated in the three *Walk. Beach Walk* paintings of mid 1973 and *The Shining Cuckoo*, 1974.

Returning to a landscape analogy of the Via Dolorosa by numbering each of the panels with the numbers of the Stations of the Cross, McCahon overlaid the image of Christ's last journey with the Maori tradition of the spirit's path, while grounding a 'painting to walk past' in the tides, mists, weather patterns and moods of a landscape he loved: 'The intention is not realistic but an abstraction of the final walk up the beach. The Christian "walk" and the Maori "walk" have a lot in common' (McCahon, 1973).

In late 1973, the return of the gannets to the nesting colony at Moturoa Island precipitated a new series and in *Jump*, 1974, McCahon explores the need for all creatures to make choices, taking risks in order to grow. In the first hesitant attempts at flight from the rocky cliffs there was no room for a loss of confidence, nor for error or failure.

DISCUSSION/ACTION

McCahon often makes series of paintings that are arranged in a sequence, so that they might be taken in by walking past them rather than being apprehended by looking from a fixed spot.

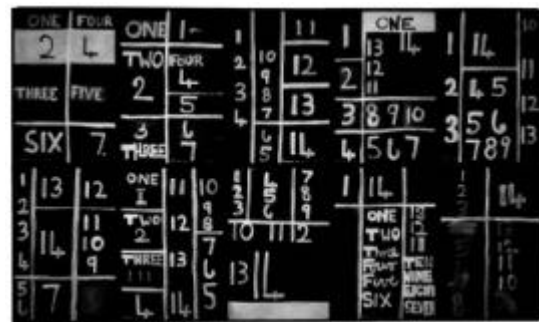
Try this out – how does it change your perception of [the] painting?

teaching aids and noughts and crosses

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Teachings Aids 1975, explore a new concern for McCahon. Observing the learning processes of his young grandson, he was prompted to consider the way in which society passes knowledge from one generation to another through the use of language, numbers, systems and charts.

His response was to develop images that, while still playing on the numerical sequence derived from the Stations of the Cross. While at the same time presenting diagrams of different ways to reach the final point or number.



Teaching Aids 2 (June) 1975
on loan to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

In so doing, each panel reflects the choices and options every person is faced with in their life.

Likewise, the children's game of *Noughts and Crosses*, 1976, suggested an analogy for the choices everyone is required to make. Some lead to positive benefits –and perhaps even the possibility of resurrection– while others offer the horror of the bottomless abyss.

DISCUSSION

Where else do you see the same kind of white script on a black background with rubbings out, as seen in McCahon's paintings?

Is there perhaps a reason for this similarity?

the late works



Two Biblical texts dominate the final period of McCahon's painting: the New Testament's A Letter to Hebrews and Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament. In his employment of these texts in his paintings, most do not exactly follow the passages as laid out in the New English Bible. Instead, McCahon adjusted them to suit his needs, emphasising certain aspects and possible meanings.

In his last four paintings, all of which draw upon texts from Ecclesiastes, the collapse of McCahon's faith is written in episodic progression. Over the course of time McCahon's beliefs had evolved from a positive outlook, through a period of doubt to, finally, utter despair. Whatever the specific conditions that led McCahon to these eventual conclusions – and they can surely be found in the combination of his burdens of age, illness, alcohol, the widespread misunderstanding of his work, and indeed the times generally– his artistic authority shines more clearly than ever through these final works.

DISCUSSION

Try to sum up your feelings about McCahon and his paintings dealing with faith and doubt.

Do you think that the explorations of ideas in these works are still relevant today?