An exhibition of Colin McCahon works from the 1960s and 1970s, exploring his evolving engagement with Māori themes and subjects, curated by Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard.
an ornament for the faithful
The painter Colin McCahon is New Zealand’s most celebrated artist—his name is synonymous with New Zealand art. He emerged in the late 1940s and was active into the early 1980s. Over this time, his work underwent major formal and conceptual transformations. His diverse oeuvre includes landscapes, figurative paintings, abstractions, word and number paintings, and various combinations of these. McCahon’s work was inventive and inspiring—New Zealand art developed around it. Critics argued over its virtues and implications; other artists produced work in response to it. McCahon cast a long shadow. In 1987, he died.

In the 1990s, McCahon’s position in the culture changed. His work ceased to be part of the cut-and-thrust of the contemporary-art discussion and he became a more canonical, historical figure. In 1997, his works were reproduced on postage stamps. It is now fifteen years since the last McCahon survey show—Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in 2002. Our project is a response to the questions: What aspects of McCahon’s work have not yet been fully explored? What kind of McCahon show might speak to the current moment?  

On Going Out with the Tide addresses McCahon’s works on Māori subjects and themes from the 1960s and 1970s. These works have not been brought together before. The show locates them at the heart of his project. McCahon’s most radical and consequential work—the work on which his international reputation rests—is his later work, from the mid-1960s on. On Going Out with the Tide, then, is an opportunity to consider how things Māori influenced the most important period of New Zealand’s most celebrated artist. Now, in the twenty-first century, we can understand this work in terms of a tectonic shift in New Zealand culture—emerging biculturalism. This show seeks to place the work in its historical context: first, to understand it in terms of the times in which it was made; second, to attend to how it was interpreted and framed subsequently; and, third, to imagine how it might be read in the future, in the wake of Treaty settlements.

McCahon’s work was a product of its time. In the 1960s and 1970s, as Māori continued to migrate to the cities, mainstream awareness of Māori culture grew, a protest movement pressed for the return of Māori lands and the recognition of Māori language, and contemporary Māori artists and writers emerged—an alternative cultural narrative was revealed. This period has been called the ‘Māori Renaissance’. McCahon’s art fed off and contributed to it. In the early 1960s, McCahon began to incorporate Māori imagery and language into his work. In the late 1960s and 1970s, his interest deepened to include elements of Māori history and cosmology. Māori ideas became integral to his project, his world view. McCahon’s interest was fed by new resources on Māori culture, friendships with writers and artists, and the births of his Māori grandsons, first Matiu, then Peter (Tīaui). While his interest in things Māori sustained and consolidated longstanding features of his work, it also changed it.

The 1980s were the beginning of a new chapter for New Zealand. The government began to embrace the Treaty of Waitangi as the nation’s founding document, it grappled with the implications of implementing biculturalism, and it extended the powers of the Waitangi Tribunal. As contemporary Māori art and its advocates became increasingly visible, prominent Pākehā artists who had incorporated Māori elements into their work in previous decades were now criticised as appropriators. In this time, contrary views on McCahon’s use of Māori material emerged. For instance, in 1986, the academic Ngāhua Te Awekotukia criticised McCahon for quoting whakapapa in his 1969 painting The Canoe Tainui, considering it culturally insensitive. However, in 1992, the art historian Rangihoua Panohe would celebrate McCahon’s work for sympathetically engaging Māori content, in contrast to Gordon Walters, whom he criticised for appropriating only the outward forms of Māori art. In the 1990s, a new generation of Māori artists—Michael Parekowhai, Peter Robinson, and Shane Cotton—created works drawing on McCahon and Walters that would complicate and shift the appropriation debate.

Today, that debate, itself, seems to be part of history. These days, McCahon is sometimes read, through post-colonialism, as a ‘settler’ artist, linking his work to the nationalism of such poets and commentators as Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow, and M.H. Holcroft. This emphasises McCahon’s earlier work, where he is seen as naming and claiming a silent and empty land, implicitly sidestepping prior Māori occupancy, history, and claims. From this viewpoint, his later works on Māori subjects and themes represent a change of heart, a course correction. This reading distorts McCahon’s and his immediate circle of friends’ relation to the Pākehā mainstream. In his formative years, in the 1940s, McCahon was, in his own words, ‘a real Red’, like his Communist Party friend Ron O’Reilly. With Rodney Kennedy, McCahon briefly joined the Quakers (Kennedy was jailed during the war for his pacifist stance). McCahon’s closest painter friend, Toss Woolaston, successfully registered as a conscientious objector. When they gathered in the Nelson region, during the summer fruit-and-tobacco-picking seasons, they visited Riverside, the Christian Pākehā Society’s commune near Mapua. Established in 1941, it’s still a going concern. McCahon’s broad sympathy with its leftist Christian Pacifist values remains implicit in his work from then on, and, in part, explains his interest in the Māori prophets. Like Riverside, Te Whiti’s Parihaka community was based on pacifist principles. Like Parihaka and Ruia’s Maungapōhatu, Riverside is an experiment in independent community building.

McCahon’s knowledge and understanding of Māori culture was partial and piecemeal. He related to Māori ideas through their spirituality, either seeing Christian and Māori ideas as parallel or looking to the hybrid forms of Māori Christianity. His biculturalism was entangled with his Christianity, which has been seen as limiting it. For Māori, Christianity remains a thorny matter. On the one hand, it was an instrument of colonialism; on the other hand, the Māori prophets hijacked and remade it in their resistance to colonialism. Questions hang over McCahon: To what extent does he engage with Māori cultural difference and to what extent absorb it into his syncretic Christian disposition? How does it change his Christianity? Does it subvert it? Does McCahon’s work represent an opening or an obstacle for the biculturalism that follows and for one yet to come—a gate?

On Going Out with the Tide is a research project. We intend it to be a platform for ongoing discussion, both about McCahon’s work and about the ways the cultural landscape it occupies has shifted. As part of the project, we will be presenting a programme of lectures, talks, and screenings. Our aim is to produce a substantial book later, drawing on what we learn as a result of doing the show and the responses to it.

—Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard
In the early 1960s, McCahon was working as a curator at Auckland City Art Gallery. His milieu was extensive. His emerging interest in things Māori was fed by his professional connections and friendships. He was a good friend of Māori painter Buster Pihama (aka Buster Black)—they went to the movies together. He became acquainted with the emerging generation of Māori modernists, including Arnold Wilson, Ralph Hotere, Selwyn Muru, and Para Matchitt. When he moved into the inner-city suburb of Arch Hill in 1960, he became a neighbour of artist Theo Schoon, and, in 1966, he personally acquired a koru work on paper from Gordon Walters’s breakthrough show at Auckland’s New Vision Gallery.

Writers were also key. In 1961, McCahon designed the set for an Auckland City Art Gallery production of Frank Sargeson’s play *A Time for Sowing*, which was concerned with Thomas Kendall, the early Pākehā missionary who pioneered Māori orthography. The following year, he, Sargeson, and Chris Cathcart set up the New Independent Theatre at the Gallery, and staged a public reading of John Caselberg’s play *Duaterra King*, which was concerned with the early history of New Zealand race relations. An old friend and collaborator, Caselberg had studied Māori language under Bruce Biggs—the first person to teach it at the University of Auckland. In 1964, McCahon left the Gallery to teach at the University’s Elam School of Arts. Writer Bill Pearson, another old friend, was lecturing in the English Department and was a member of the University’s Māori Club. McCahon sought his opinion regarding his use of Māori material in his art.

Māori motifs and language first appeared in McCahon’s work in 1962: motifs in his *Koru* paintings and *Now Is the Hour*, and language in *Heoi Anō* (aka *The Koru Triptych*). The *Koru* paintings and *Now Is the Hour* set koru within abstracted landscape forms. They recall McCahon’s sexualised *Kauri* landscapes from the 1950s. McCahon thought of the koru as phallic. In a letter to Caselberg, on 29 May 1968, he draws a koru and notes: ‘This is just what it looks like. A penis and not a curled fern frond and as all Māori art is based on this one form what a useful symbol on which to build a genealogy.’

*Now Is the Hour* 1962
oil on hardboard
606 x 602mm
Private collection, Auckland

*Now Is the Hour* sets its single, upward-pointing koru into an abstract-biomorphic landscape. The inscription—’Now is the hour we must say goodbye’—quotes lyrics from a hit song that evolved out of ‘Po Atarau’, a song used to farewell Māori soldiers going off to fight in World War I. By combining a koru with these words, McCahon emphasises their connection for Māori, interweaving intimations of sex and loss, life and death.

In 1965, McCahon returned to Māori material. Since the late 1950s, he had been developing a body of works playing on the ways numbers can be represented graphically—in Roman numerals, in Arabic numerals, in words—exploiting the suggestive qualities and interplay of these representational systems. In 1965, he created several works featuring koru-style Arabic numerals. In *Koru 1, 2, 3*, the numbers represent a progression from singularity, to duality, to multiplicity. Their organic treatment makes us think of numbers as generative—mating and morphing—as genealogical. McCahon was interested in how number begins (0, 1), in the identification of the first-person singular with the number 1 (peculiar to written English), and in how numbers grow (1, 2, 3). He was also interested in the coincidence of one and zero (or ten) with the name of Io, the Māori supreme being, Io Matua Kore.

*Numerals c.1964–6*  
ink on paper
336 x 210mm
Collection Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

In 1965, McCahon made a number of monochromatic black landscapes, creating texture by adding sawdust to his paint. These works may have been influenced by Buster Black, who painted similarly textured views of cities and mountains at night.

*Journey into a Dark Landscape No. 2* 1965
sawdust and acrylic on hardboard
1218 x 914mm
Collection J. Gibbs Trust, Auckland

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*Numerals c.1964–6*  
ink on paper
336 x 210mm
Collection Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington
McCahon made a series of studies for a mural for the foyer of the Caltex Oil building in Auckland's Fanshawe Street, writing the familiar company name in koru letters. Some of the studies recall his cubist-lettering experiments of the 1950s. The indigenising treatment seems strikingly arbitrary, having no apparent connection to the subject, while anticipating the future absorption of Māori motifs into the language of New Zealand corporate branding. The commission didn’t proceed.

Io, the parentless one, was described by the early ethnologists S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best. However, the idea that the polytheistic Māori had such a Christian-style God is questioned. In the painting Io, an I and an O hover in the light over a black gravestone-shaped void. McCahon conjures with something and nothing, self and other, figure and ground, darkness and light. Suggestions of a Māori metaphysics will often lurk in the darkness behind McCahon's word and number paintings. In 1965, McCahon also used koru-form letters to represent Christ, in his Christogram paintings XP and IHS. The final panel of McCahon's 1965 thirteen-panel painting Numerals features alternative numerals for ten: 10 and X. 10 could be Io, X could be a Christogram.
In 1968, McCahon's daughter Victoria and her Tainui husband Ken Carr had a son, Matiu. Around this time, his other daughter, Catherine, gave him a copy of a new book, *The Tail of the Fish: Māori Memories of the Far North*. In it, Matire Kereama, a Te Aupōuri elder, sets down stories of her people, 'their homes, their victories in battles, their defeats, and their lives'—along with whakapapa (genealogies). Together, grandson and book prompted McCahon to return to Māori subjects.

In 1969, McCahon produced a flurry of text works quoting from Kereama. It's fascinating to see how much McCahon drew from this small book, what he took from it, and how he treated it. The works included paintings on sets of hardboard squares. There were two whakapapa paintings, the eight-panel *The Canoe Tainui* and the four-panel *The Canoe Māmari*. He also painted the four-panel *O Let Us Weep* and the three-panel *On Going Out with the Tide*, combining texts in Māori and English for the first time.

All these works were included in McCahon's July 1969 show at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. McCahon explained:

> This is a personal and 'family' exhibition. The paintings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, are all for Matiu Carr, our grandson (No. 5, for his first birthday). His birth and the discovery of Matire Kereama's book by my daughter Catherine … has made these paintings happen and become real to me.

That year, McCahon continued to make works drawing on Kereama, including *The Lark's Song*. McCahon made no mystery of his indebtedness to Kereama, frequently acknowledging her. 1969 proved to be a prolific year, and McCahon suffered for it. He wrote to Ron O'Reilly:

> Have made a new move, this has been happening for the last six months or more & at last have a heap of stuff down (a smallish heap) … [including] a series of eight 2’ x 2’ panels all in words embracing the history of the Tainui Canoe from ‘the chief of the Canoe was Hoturoa’ — through to lovely later names ‘Ngawini McMath whose son was Wiremu McMath whose children were Arthur & Bella’. All this is permeated with a certain horny symbolism. Had a tryout on this last Saturday. Very mixed. One said 'I know Arthur & Bella.’ Others just shocked. Another recognised the chant form in the tone & colour etc.
He didn’t intend any order, as long as you didn’t exercise any tastefulness, that was the way to go about it.

—Rodney Kirk Smith, 1986

For his October 1969 show, *Written Paintings and Drawings*, at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, McCahon wrote texts on lengths of plain wallpaper. Some ‘scrolls’ include texts from Kereama. In one, he pledges: ‘Whatever money (I seem) to make from the sale of these paintings is to go to the Māori Education Foundation’. The Foundation was established in 1961 to encourage Māori into tertiary education.

**The Lark’s Song 1969**

*PVA on wooden doors*

1630 x 1980mm

Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the artist, 1982

In her book, Kereama explained that the Māori words of ‘The Lark’s Song’ approximate the sound of the bird. The song was part of a children’s game. The aim was to sing it with the fewest breath pauses. In McCahon’s painting, the lyrics are written twice, with variation in the treatment, on two door panels. McCahon recalled:

> 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. The 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.

Beneath the song, McCahon adds a line in English, from New Zealand poet Peter Hooper, ‘Can you hear me St Francis’, referring to the Saint who communicated with birds, transcending language barriers. A dotted line runs vertically through the painting and its text, suggesting the lark’s upward flight. Gordon Brown reported:

> McCahon states that when *The Lark’s Song* was exhibited in Auckland, Matire Kereama visited the gallery. When it was almost cleared of people she chanted the words of the song. It was an experience that deepened McCahon’s understanding of the song, its meaning and the sublety of its poetical sounds and rhythms.
... the first time I saw the place [Muriwai], years ago now, was in a ‘white out’ mist, white mist blowing in & Tora & I on the scooter & seeing a new world.
—Colin McCahon, to John and Anna Caselberg, 23 February 1974

I had all February out here painting in the new studio. Almost the best time I’ve ever had in my life. Endlessly hot & clear I work from 5.30 or 6 in the morning to 9 or 10 at night. The studio is unlined tin & hot but 22’ x 18’ and the best yet …

I have years of painting to do before I catch up with beauty & freedom.
—Colin McCahon, to Ron O’Reilly, 21 March 1970

In May 1969, McCahon erected a studio on a property at Muriwai Beach, forty minutes drive north-west of Auckland. Moving to the beach marked the beginning of his most productive period. Here, he would be able to stretch out, to work on a large scale. In January 1971, he left his job teaching at Elam to paint full time.

The beachscape inspired him. Of all the sites around which our show is organised, Muriwai is the most personal and generative. It’s theatre, stage, studio, and canvas; a home, a geography, and a cosmology. As he enjoyed being a grandfather, McCahon took particular interest in the birds nesting on the cliffs and on Motutara, the rocky stack beyond. There were fairy terns raising their offspring, and, later, gannets. McCahon noticed that the stack offered protection but was also precarious. He abstracted the forms of the cliffs and stack into his signature ‘Necessary Protection’ motif: two dark rectangles confronting one another, leaving a T (Tau cross) or I shape between them, suggesting light descending from the sky into the land or sea. McCahon would explore this motif in a large number of works. Several include fingerpainted furties of birds in flight. McCahon didn’t stop there. He accorded other landscape features narrative, psychological, and moral significance—Oaia Island became Moby Dick.

According to Māori legend, the spirits of the dead, on their journey into the afterlife, travel up the coast to Cape Reinga. There they leap off the headland, then descend to the underworld, to return to their traditional homeland of Hawaiki using Te Ara Wairua (the spirits’ pathway). McCahon saw Muriwai as a landing and taking-off place for souls heading north—via Ahipara, Ninety Mile Beach, and Haumu Hill—to Cape Reinga, the tip of ‘the tail of the fish’. This idea informed McCahon works that made no obvious reference to Māori imagery or language, such as Walk (Series C) (1973), a lengthy beachscape elegy to James K. Baxter, and Series D (Ahipara) (1973). Death would remain on his mind. Into 1974, he would also mourn the recent deaths of his mother and his friends Charles Brasch and R.A.K. Mason.

McCaohon conflated different places, times, and frames of reference. For instance, The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing into a Dark Landscape (1971) is ostensibly a Muriwai landscape, recalling the nineteenth-century Dutch artist’s favourite landscape, Otira Gorge, in the South Island, suggesting these landscapes are somehow linked, interchangeable, entwined. McCahon’s Muriwai works also include more overtly bicultural landscapes, in which Christian and Māori ideas coexist. His Jet Out from Muriwai drawings (1973), for instance, address Māori cosmology via Christian symbolism. McCahon illustrates the idea of the spirit’s flight after death with an airborne cross, suggesting the resurrection and a jet plane taking off.

Moby Dick Is (Was) a Volcano c.1971–3
charcoal and pencil on paper
281 x 357mm
Collection Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Oaia Sits and Nibbles the Sea c.1971–3
charcoal and pencil on paper
281 x 357mm
Collection Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

McCahon made map-like drawings for friends, to explain his thinking about the Muriwai landscape. Moby Dick Is (Was) a Volcano and Oaia Sits and Nibbles the Sea were made for Caselberg.

The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing into a Dark Landscape 1971
acrylic on unstretched canvas
2360 x 1840mm
Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Tui Carr Celebrates Muriwai Beach 1972

GALLERY 3
Muriwai 1971–4

McCahon illustrated the idea of the spirit’s flight after death with an airborne cross, suggesting the resurrection and a jet plane taking off.
The Song of the Shining Cuckoo 1974
acrylic on five unstretched canvases
1770 x 4511mm
Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena,
University of Otago, Dunedin

The Song of the Shining Cuckoo was inspired by the words of a waiata given to McCahon by Ralph Hotere, who had learnt it from his father, Tangirau. The shining cuckoo is a migratory bird. Here, McCahon associated it with Māori ideas about the flight of the soul after death.

The work was painted on five drops of unstretched canvas, hung edge to edge. Each drop is subdivided into abstracted landscapes. Horizontal lines suggest frame edges (the edges of a view, spatial and temporal) and/or horizons (within views)—it isn’t clear which are which. Roman numerals superimposed over the views recall the idea of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, the Christian meditative practice whereby the faithful identify with Christ by retracing key moments from the day of his crucifixion. Across this arrangement, McCahon drew a dotted line, suggesting the bird’s—the spirit’s—passage from left to right. In some painted frames, gaps open up hospitably, as if to let the bird pass through, as if it could transcend conventional spatial and temporal limits. Lines from the waiata are inscribed on the painting.

There are two principal ways through the painting—counting the numbers or joining the dots—representing alternative but coexisting paths. The work is bicultural; it suggests distinct and not necessarily compatible ideas concerning death and the afterlife—Christian and Māori.
McCaion’s Parihaka Triptych (1972) is one of two major history paintings in this exhibition—the Urewera Triptych being the other. Both are important McCaion works and rare events in our art history. The fact they are over forty years old and concern serious injustices that go back well over a century—which to this day, still require redress and still make headlines—shows how deep-rooted Pākehā reluctance to right historical wrongs done to Māori has been and continues to be. There’s still work for these paintings to do and neither is fully understood.

The Parihaka Triptych is about historical memory. It asks: How are we to remember the heroes of the Māori resistance to Pākehā colonisation? What is the legacy of the Taranaki Pākehā identified with prophets Te Whiti and Tohu? What is the relation of living memory to the legacies of the Taranaki Pākehā resistance?

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McCallon’s Te Urewera Mural (1975) is not in this exhibition, even though it’s one of his most important works on Māori subjects. Its absence, however, may speak more loudly and more profoundly than its presence. Commissioned in 1974 by the Te Urewera National Park Board for its Āmihiania Visitor Centre, to create the Te Urewera Mural—depending on your politics, New Zealand’s most famous or infamous painting. Smoulderingly beautiful in its own way, Colin McCahon’s pain to land as uruau redefines the state’s attempt to institutionalise beauty, to take the ‘picturesque region’, as [Elsdon] Best called Te Urewera, from Māori homeland to Pākehā wilderness. Echoning with ancestral names McCahon’s dark hills are as profoundly cultured as they are wild. Ironically, the name that Tūhoe required McCahon to delete from the first version of the mural had been found by McCahon in writings only made possible by material gathered by Best in the 1890s.

—Geoff Park, 2000

McCallon’s Te Urewera Mural (1975) is not in this exhibition, even though it’s one of his most important works on Māori subjects. Its absence, however, may speak louder and more clearly of its historical moment. Commissioned in 1974 by the Te Urewera National Park Board for its Ōmihiania Visitor Centre, then under construction, the Mural was first shown in Auckland the following year, just before the Māori Land March began to head South, from Spirits Bay to Parliament House, and prior to the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal.

Now, all these years later, the Waitangi Tribunal Report on Tūhoe’s historic claims against the Crown has been released (2009–12) and radical changes to the legal identity and governance of Te Urewera have been enshrined in the Te Urewera Act (2014). The National Park Board has gone, the Visitor Centre has been demolished, and the Mural has passed into the hands of Tūhoe. The forty years, which separate the Mural’s commissioning from the passage of the Act, define the work’s historical moment and set the terms for today’s understanding of it.

When Te Uru Taumatua Board turned down our request to borrow the Mural for this show, they pointed out that it came hard on the heels of the painting’s return to ‘its rightful home after a turbulent period to bring that about’, and added that, as a result, there was ‘no will to let it go again albeit for a short time’. Rightful, because the Act wrote into law the central proclamation of McCahon’s painting: ‘Tūhoe Urewera Their Land’. And rightful, because, as long as the painting remained in the Park’s hands, its proclamation was compromised, in being commissioned by the very state that had taken the land.

On 5 June 1997, Tūhoe activists removed the Mural from the Visitor Centre in the dead-of-night. It was not theft, they said, when they gave it back fifteen months later, but a temporary ‘confiscation’, intended to impress on Pākehā what it is like to be robbed of your taonga. Before the heist, the Mural was the least known, certainly the most neglected, of McCahon’s major works. After, it becomes the most famous (or infamous).

The Te Urewera Triptych—which here stands in for the Mural—is a study for it. It has the same dimensions, basic composition, and conceptual structure. It looks like his first excited response to the commission (the stark simplicity and raw urgency), just as the Mural looks like it might have been subject to second thoughts (its elaborated landscape imagery and overpainting). It’s no great surprise that McCahon wondered whether the Triptych was the better painting.

When the Mural was first presented to the Board for its approval, which it gave, McCahon was asked to change four words because they would cause offence among Tūhoe: ‘Ko Titakanghau te tangata’ (Titakanghau is the man). McCahon agreed, replacing them with the words ‘Ko Tūhoe te iwi’ (Tūhoe the people). However, since then, his ‘mistake’ has been interpreted as cultural ignorance and/or insensitivity. Trouble is, he was quoting directly from the Board’s own handbook, which it had sent to McCahon to guide him. His view was that he’d been misled on the wording. The problem, it seems, inherited in the Board’s own relation to Tūhoe. The offending words remain in the earlier Triptych.

Just prior to the presentation, McCahon worried that he hadn’t risen to the challenge the subject and his clients had set for him. Was it too much? He’d written to Pat France:

It’s a feeling the place has. It sits over it all & must have been there for hundreds & hundreds of years. I feel it now as silence & rain & waterfalls & bush lived in & land so loved I don’t really feel at home there. I’m a part of it all but can’t be of it. I wish I could belong. I just sit outside & look in. It is all so lovely and terrible. We will have to go down & hold this area in great terror. We have been there have done it but to go & put up a painting for the Tūhoe people will be tough—they may not like it why should they. But I am trying to understand them. I hope I can.

After the meeting he wrote to McLeavey: ‘I got scared.’
It's true that McCahon set out to scare his viewers. In this case, it was the tourist types on the Park Board he had in his sights. But, he also sought ways to scare himself and to raise the bar for the sake of his art. In December 1975, Peter McLeavey, who had included McCahon’s A Poster for the Urewera No. 2 in a group show—sent McCahon a photo of two young Māori men hovering with uncertainty in the doorway in his Gallery. The Poster hangs out of their sight, in the next room. In response, McCahon painted Am I Scared (1976), featuring the words ‘Am I Scared Boy (Eh)’. Inscribed in tiny capitals on the lower edge is the plaintive utterance: ‘CRY FOR ME’. This is not as contemporary as the work’s colloquial title sounds. According to Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, the phrase is from ‘a letter written by Wiremu Hiroki to his whanau, on the eve of his execution in New Plymouth in June 1882. Tried and hanged for killing a Pākehā surveyor, the outlaw had been apprehended by the British colonial authorities from his place of refuge at Parihaka.’

The works in this Gallery deal with aspects of the violent and unjust treatment of Māori during the colonisation period. McCahon is not a professional historian, anthropologist, or politician. The works show us more about his thinking as a history painter. He is interested in the Māori prophets because they hybridised Christian and Māori beliefs and practices for political ends, and because he sees a connection between the poetics of prophecy and those of painting.

The late poet, Leigh Davis, called the Māori prophet Te Kooti’s biblical hybrids ‘creole moments’:

Politics, conflict, translation are part of its moment but they do not give it its art-history importance. The art-history importance comes from grace and complexity of sense. It is where something brown came to stand in a particular relation with something Western. Something unfamiliar to Europeans became bound to something with which we are very familiar and took it over. But it is not hostile per se, this new thing that stepped into the field. We do not experience negation of that with which we are familiar, but are calmed and charmed by a new actor, which takes what is a high culture narrative for us to disrupt it, overlap it with apocrypha, make it encounter a new authority, and, in this time, accord it reverence and take up a position of submission before it. In short, ravish it. The Bible was thus abstracted in a fascinating call and response.

(‘Te Whiti’s remark—‘I am here to be taken! Take me for the sins of the island. Why hesitate?’—was another such creole moment.)

Rua Kēnana claimed to be the successor Te Kooti prophesised, and, after Te Kooti’s death, built a New Jerusalem, at Maungapōhā, beneath Tūhoe’s sacred mountain. Rua’s name shares pride of place with Te Kooti’s on the Mural and the Triptych. He’s also the subject of McCahon’s allegorical triptych, A Song for Rua, Prophet (Dreaming of Moses) (1979). It depicts the progress of God’s cloud cover of the Israelites (Iharaira) as Moses leads them out of captivity in (Pākehā) Egypt to freedom and the Promised Land of Te Urewera.

A Poster for the Urewera No. 1 1975  ←
arylic on paper
1097 x 723mm
Collection Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Urewera Triptych 1975
aka A Painted Drawing for the Mural
acrylic on three unstretched canvases
2520 x 5370mm
Courtesy Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

Am I Scared 1976
acrylic on paper
730 x 1105mm
Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

A Song for Rua, Prophet (Dreaming of Moses) 1979
acrylic on three sheets of paper
each sheet 730 x 1100mm
Fletcher Trust Collection, Auckland

I have 1400 men here and I am not going to let any of them enlist or go to war. You have no king now. The King of England be is no good. He is beat. The Germans will win. Any money I have I will give to the Germans. The English are no good. They have two laws. One for the Māori and one for the Pākehā. When the Germans win I am going to be king here. I will be king of the Māori and of the Pākehā.

attributed to Rua Kēnana, 12 February 1916
This room contains archival materials that offer insight into works in the show. These include facsimiles of McCahon letters in the Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin.

Māori painters’ as Ralph Hotere & Buster deny being—only painters are being themselves, now in time—Arnold Wilson—to a great extentPara Matchitt don’t know yet where they stand—New Zealand painters or ‘Māori’ painters. I would like to see the term Regional painters adopted all over the world—acceptable to art historians in very restricted ways—Florentine, Venetian, Rotorua, Auckland, Dunedin, etc …

Tell me, who is really saying the truth amongst the Māori sculptors & painters—and do they know—and are they courageous enough to try?

Muru makes his raids on the other tribes with great success—he has been Woollaston now Nolan … Woollaston-Nolan substitute or a Māori Painter.

They have a world that I’ve tried to make, (to make—to get with) at their fingertips and I’ve got a world they want at mine—we don’t allow each other, all prohibitions and ‘not telling’. Arnold ‘If you paint Māori Symbols, I’ll paint Christian Symbols’—I don’t mind.

Ralph is just a good painter—
Buster is just a good painter—
Rita Angus is just a good painter—
Woollaston is just a good painter—
Para Matchitt is trying to be a Māori painter—
Selwyn Muru is trying to be a Māori painter—
Arnold Wilson is trying to be a Māori sculptor—
Molly Macalister is a good sculptor. Etc..

It’s all too difficult and the answer is being able to accept. Darkness & enlightenment have nothing to do with the colour of skin—not on intellect but on the grace of God (any colour). Hotere has a recent work (Benson & Hedges) almost right—but so good, pure, lovely. The surviving soul must be black white yellow brown and the common red.

—Colin McCahon, to Ron O’Reilly, 18 July 1977

What an awful place Parihaka is. Where is the spirit now. Who wants Rhododendrons up Egmont when bashed spirits stand under the Raj. I find it hard to take. I trust my cross for the Pākehā annoys some people & could restore faith to some others. Boy, I feel little hope there, and very little hope for your local painters … And who could dance now on Parihaka soil—and the Raj blooming on the mountain side. I feel personally responsible for the visitors gawking. I also feel responsible for past terror. I am not an invader. I saw a lot but I will never again invade such a place. On Sunday—myself to blame, I did, but I saw an awful truth. I know a lot more now: Egmont takes the whole of your soul and all invasion should be stopped—hung—the right name restored, the daffodils & chalets & muck got rid of …

—Colin McCahon, to John Caselberg, 29 May 1968

Lionel and Ray Skipper with Colin McCahon’s A Poster for the Urewera No. 2 (1975) at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, December 1975.

Photo: Don Roy, Fairfax Media NZ/Dominion Post.
Public Programmes

Deane Lectures

Monday 20 May, 6pm
Wyran Curnow on McCahon’s The Lark’s Song. Saturday 8 April, 11am
Peter Simpson on McCahon’s sources, including Saturday 1 July, 4.30pm

Saturday 1 June, 4.30pm

Saturday 24 June, 4.30pm
Bonaventure (dir. John O’Shea, 1hr 42min, 1964)—‘the intimate, daring drama of a young killer on the run and the women in his life!’ With Kiri Te Kanawa and Selwyn Muru. Introduced by Laurence Simmons.

Saturday 1 July, 4.30pm
The Governor (1977) is an epic TV documentary on the life of George Grey, an early Governor of New Zealand, featuring laudamun, lechery, and land confiscation. Lawrence McDonald introduces the concluding sixth episode, To the Death (1hr 15min).

Saturday 8 July, 4.30pm
To Love a Māori (dir. Ramai and Rudall Hayward, 1hr 43min, 1972) addresses issues facing Māori heading to the cities via an inter racial love story.

Saturday Screenings at Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision

Corner Ghuizne and Taranaki Streets

Film screenings exploring New Zealand race relations in the 1960s and 1970s. A joint project with Ngā Taonga.

Saturday 10 June, 4.30pm
Promenex: movement documentar y double feature: Te Matakitae a Te Aotearoa: The Māori Land March (dir. Geoff Stevens, 1hr, 1975) and Bastion Point: Day 507 (dir. Merata Mita, Leon Narbey, and Gerd Pohlman, 27min, 1980). Introduced by Sharon Hawke, daughter of Joe Hawke, one of the Bastion Point protest leaders.

Saturday 17 June, 4.30pm

Saturday 24 June, 4.30pm
Bonaventure (dir. John O’Shea, 1hr 42min, 1964)—‘the intimate, daring drama of a young killer on the run and the women in his life!’ With Kiri Te Kanawa and Selwyn Muru. Introduced by Laurence Simmons.

Saturday 1 July, 4.30pm
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Saturday 8 July, 4.30pm
To Love a Māori (dir. Ramai and Rudall Hayward, 1hr 43min, 1972) addresses issues facing Māori heading to the cities via an inter racial love story.

Further Reading


Thanks to the lenders and speakers, plus:
Aaron Kreisler and Aaron Beehre at Ilam Press, University of Canterbury
Amanda Morrissey-Brown
Anna Blackman at Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Häkena, University of Otago
Anna-Marie White
Cam McCracken at Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Catherine Hammond at E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki
Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust
Damian Skinner
Department of Conservation
Diane Pivac and Lawrence Wharerau at Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision
Gillian and Roderick Deane Endowment Trust
Gina Matchitt
Hamish Coney and Ben Plumbly at Art+Object
Hilary and Olivia McLeavey at Peter McLeavey Gallery
Ian Macdonald
Jenny Gibbs
Jim and Mary Barr
John Gow, Gary Langsford, and Anna Jackson at Gow Langsford Gallery
John Miller
Laurence Simmons
Lola Proctor and Kathleen Rudolph
Martin Browne at Martin Browne Contemporary
Matthew O'Reilly
Max Oettli
Megan Tāmati-Quennell
National Library of New Zealand
Peter Shaw at Fletcher Trust Collection
Simon Rees at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Te Papa Tongarewa
Toi Māori Aotearoa
Tony Green
Victoria Carr and the McCahon Family
Wellington City Libraries
and the late William McAloon

All McCahon images and quotations reproduced courtesy Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust.

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