Introduction

EDWARD HANFLING

In 2013 I edited the final issue (as I was dismayed to discover afterwards) of the *Journal of New Zealand Art History* (JONZAH). It is a pleasure, then, to write this introduction for a special issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Studies* (JNZS) devoted to New Zealand art history. The quantity and quality of the articles in this issue go a considerable way to filling the void left by JONZAH in the intervening decade, even if the loss of a dedicated double-blind peer-reviewed journal remains keenly felt.

Other journals have also, of course, picked up some of the slack. *Art New Zealand*, which has been running for almost 50 years, continues to publish shorter articles on historical as well as contemporary New Zealand art. *Reading Room*, published by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, managed over 12 years to put out eight issues of longer-form articles, many of them modishly dense in style. *Back Story*, the ostensible successor to JONZAH published by the Auckland University of Technology, managed 10 issues, surveying a wider field of art, media and design history. And JNZS itself has provided a forum for art history within its multidisciplinary remit.

Our special issue includes textiles, interior design and architecture in its conception of "art," while nonetheless hewing closely and happily to the discipline of art history. That discipline has had some tribulations over the last few decades. From the 1980s, detractors have pointed to art history's traditionally hierarchical focus on "high art" and European methods and frameworks, with correction sought through visual culture and critical theory. Since the 1990s, when university art history courses enjoyed buoyant enrolments and cultivated a rising interest in New Zealand art history in particular, economic imperatives and STEM ideologies have been used to gradually diminish and dismantle art history departments and programmes.

This special issue should, however, put to rest any doubts about the vitality of scholarship amongst those in this country who steadfastly call themselves art historians, while demonstrating too the ongoing, robust and nourishing debates about New Zealand art history that sustain these scholars. With the theme of "Cultures, Controversies and Histories," prospective authors were asked to focus on moments of difficulty and disagreement. Indeed, these contributions offer new evidence or a fresh perspective on a matter of contention, reflect a willingness to grapple with artefacts and histories others have shied away from and take seriously functions or meanings of artworks previously suppressed because they were inconvenient to a prevailing narrative or ideology.

New Zealand art history, in the form of its most substantial and conspicuous publications, has tended to be dominated by compelling narratives. Famously, Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, in their 1969 book, *New Zealand Painting: An Introduction*, mounted the circular argument whereby the distinctiveness of this country's natural environment and atmosphere and the distinctiveness of its painting were mutually confirmed.[1] A moderate but perhaps not attention-grabbing response might have been to acknowledge that New Zealand artists have in some respects responded to specific phenomena of their locale (see, for example, George Hook and Andre Lorrey's article in this volume), to regret the programmatic nature of the "harsh light" theory and to be curious about the interesting work made by artists other than the anointed few for whom the theory was developed. Francis Pound, in his 1983 book on nineteenth-century New Zealand painting, *Frames on the Land*, and in a series of studies of modernist New

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Zealand art that culminated in his 2009 volume *The Invention of New Zealand*, made it his mission to deconstruct the "nationalist" narrative.[2] It is in the nature of deconstruction to pick apart what has previously been erected, and to fiddle with the pieces. Thus, key protagonists—artists and artworks—remain ascendant and the canon is ironically reaffirmed. And what is a narrative without a hero? A previous special issue of this journal, No. NS31 (2020), was devoted entirely to Colin McCahon, albeit not without critical reflection. Leonard Bell's article, "Mythologising McCahon: A Heretical View," sought to counter the "uncritically received opinion in much of the art world" that McCahon is New Zealand's "greatest" artist.[3] "Is there," Bell asks, "another Euro-American country in which a single modernist artist/hero has been so elevated by so much advocacy and promotion?"[4] The answer, of course, is "no."

One wonders if the tendency to turn difficult histories into captivating and (deceptively) coherent narratives with heroic, idealised protagonists could in part have something to do with the fact that many of this country's prominent art writers have emerged from the literary field rather than art history. Persuasive stories can be a curse rather than a blessing when they veil a tenuous grip on the visual and material artefacts under discussion. But it is also inevitable that a book by a single author, or small coterie of like-minded co-authors, will carry a particular perspective and certain biases and blind spots. The strength of a collection of essays by multiple authors, such as this special issue of JNZS, is the range of voices it represents, not just in terms of the contributors but also the subject matter they traverse.

We have divided this volume into three loosely chronological sections. The first, "Revisiting the Colonial Period," includes new interpretations of nineteenth and early twentieth-century art, focusing on the social and cultural functions of the works as well as their value to contemporary understandings of colonial attitudes.

Jane Davidson-Ladd reassesses a well-known painting, Louis John Steele and Charles Frederick Goldie's *Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand* (1899), hitherto seen as problematic, even embarrassing. Commentators have tended to look askance at the desperate and emaciated Māori voyagers, seeing this representation as a reflection of the discredited "accidental" theory of Polynesian migration. Davidson-Ladd's research suggests instead that the state of the travellers can be explained by the artists' familiarity with a Māori arrival story about the Arawa waka's traumatic encounter with a whirlpool named "The Throat of Te Parata"—a story told to Governor of New Zealand George Grey and published by him in te reo in 1854 (and in an English translation in 1855).

Daniel C.P. Smith also finds meaningful cross-cultural exchange in examples of colonial design and architecture by both Māori and Pākehā. Disparaged or ignored by those with a hastily formed and over-zealous notion of cultural appropriateness, these works reveal a considerable range and sophistication within what Smith nonetheless deems to be a distinct category of design, "colonial hybrid." Smith's long acquaintance with the work of J.H. Menzies gives him a viable case study with which to seek a better understanding of the genre and its complexities.

A rudimentary and seemingly incontrovertible premise behind much recent art historical scholarship—certainly since the modernists eschewed mimesis and post-structuralists turned images into texts—is that the "realism" of a painting amounts only to the fact that it exists as a representation, not that it can be measured against whatever it purports to represent. Here again, though, we should be wary of turning a valid insight into an intractable ideology. George Hook and Andrew Lorrey explain how a series of watercolour paintings by John Gully, based on field sketches by Julius von Haast, provided valuable information about the specific features of

glaciers in New Zealand's Southern Alps, accompanying a paper prepared by Haast for the Royal Geographical Society in 1863. Gully's paintings are instructive for contemporary audiences too, including climate scientists and glaciologists, insofar as they indicate the extent of the recession of glaciers since the 1860s and forecast the ongoing impact of global warming.

Victoria Adams' subject is an exhibition of British art at the 1906–7 New Zealand International Exhibition in Christchurch. The bone of contention in this instance is the extent to which the scale and influence of the British Art Section—from which New Zealand institutions purchased works for their collections that constitute an ongoing colonial legacy—helped or hindered the development of the local art scene. Adams scrutinises the existing literature, specifically the views of Linda Tyler (hindered) and Warren Feeney (helped), but steps neatly back from the fray, content with a measured analysis of the archive and with capturing the cultural tensions at work both in the exhibition and in its later assessment.

The second section of the volume, "Reappraising the Modernist Canon," consists of five articles drawing attention to figures whose introduction of novel ideas and forms to New Zealand art, architecture and design is not well accounted for in the existing literature. It is commonplace for art writers to "go into bat" for artists they admire, to bemoan unjustifiable neglect and the hegemony of prevailing values and judgements. And it is also inevitable that the major published histories of art focus on a relative few; any history is necessarily selective, even if the terms for inclusion and exclusion remain debatable or mystifying. Again, however, it is the advantage of this special issue that it can present a history of New Zealand art that is at once broad in scope and highly focused, bringing to light alternative histories, artists who are difficult to fit into the existing narratives and patterns of influence not documented elsewhere.

Joanna Osborne writes about three artists who certainly have never been discussed before in relation to New Zealand modernist art. In fact, it was in the nature of their work that it could not be attributed to their apparent authors. The drawings of Minnie Chapman, Sophia Garland Allan and Berta Sinclair Burns materialised under the influence of spirit guides and, by extension, the wider early twentieth-century spiritualist movement. Recent attention to psychic art, the work of Hilma af Klint in particular, reflects a growing awareness of the (as we know now) destructive privileging of a Western scientific world view at the expense of spiritual beliefs, the latter having inspired much of the "progressive" modernist art of the early twentieth century. Osborne's particular self-inflicted challenge and achievement has been to conduct research on a history of spiritualism otherwise undocumented in New Zealand art writing, pertaining to women who barely registered as "artists" and about whom there is precious little information, let alone extant artworks.

Ian Lochhead interrogates another well-established narrative in the history of New Zealand architecture—one that locates the origins of a distinctively New Zealand and simplified style of architecture in the release of the Group Manifesto in 1947. Lochhead points instead to a less easily simplified but no less innovative array of ideas and achievements that precede the Second World War, pointing specifically to Paul Pascoe's belief that a modern New Zealand architecture might take heed of structures erected by both Māori and early European settlers—their rudimentary forms, local materials and integration with the environment. Lochhead reveals equally the erudition of Pascoe's extensive writings and the architectural realisation of his ideas.

There follow three articles that attend to individuals who, in the conviction with which they pursued their own paths, do not fit easily into any of the main themes or stories that have formerly, and artificially, lent shape or coherence to a canon of New Zealand art. Miriam Olds Spence identifies the peculiar contradiction that, while it is generally recognised that few, if any, New Zealand artists could be satisfactorily described as modernists (in the sense of being at the forefront of avant-garde movements or styles), the main histories of New Zealand twentieth century art adhere to a linear model and award pride of place to those perceived as more progressive. There were, Olds Spence maintains, multiple modernisms in play at any given time, sometimes operating together in the work of a single artist. Paul Olds is one notable example. For Peter Stupples, the vibrantly idiosyncratic dyed-fabric banners and wall hangings of Gordon Crook, designed for the interiors of buildings by New Zealand architect Miles Warren in Washington, D.C. and Wellington, fall outside dominant national narratives. Yiyan Yang conducts a long-overdue extended analysis of the work of Guy Ngan across multiple mediums and disciplines, including public murals and sculptures, finding there a "Pacific-Chinese aesthetics," a further instance of cross-cultural innovation hitherto obscured by the marginalisation of Chinese histories and identities in New Zealand.

The third and final section of this special issue, "Activists and Iconoclasts, 1970s to the Present," is about the commitment of artists to political causes. Taken together, the articles uncover connections between the ecological and cultural impacts of colonial expansion—implications for human and non-human alike. The Māori belief in a life force that runs through all things and beings is an underlying thread. The artists under discussion, however, are not overly reverential or inclined to tiptoe around the things that threaten their kin. They are alert to the potential for art too to be lively, a spirited intervention or provocation.

Bridie Lonie argues that a 1978 public participatory work by Barry Thomas, *Vacant Lot of Cabbages*, and the printmaking of Marilynn Webb, especially her 1982 "Taste Before Eating" series, can be interpreted in light of the more recently theorised concept of the Anthropocene. These artists, Lonie states, understood "the irrevocable changes to planetary and ecological systems caused by human activity," and their art came out of and was galvanised by their wider activist involvements. Lonie also emphasises, though, Webb's tactile and expert handling of print mediums, which embody her feeling for the material and spiritual presence of whenua.

"Young Guns Reloaded" looks back to the 1990s and the artists who took on (both in the sense of assuming and of challenging) the tradition of Contemporary Māori Art. While the irreverence of Shane Cotton, Michael Parekowhai, Lisa Reihana and Peter Robinson was recognised by critics at the time, earning them the title "Young Guns," their works fulfilled a then prevalent post-modern desire for intellectual games or conceptual complexity. "Young Guns Reloaded" foregrounds instead the apparent contradiction between the vulgar and prosaic material dimensions of the works and their susceptibility to being absorbed into the spiritual and vitalist basis of Māori belief systems by which contemporary writers and curators have sought to connect generations of Māori artists across time. The article offers the suggestion that the sacred and the profane might be commensurable within te ao Māori, such that the provocations of the Young Guns retain their distinctive vitality.

Given that populist politicians are currently and precipitously reversing years of painstaking progress towards embedding Māori ways of being in the institutions of this country, it seems timely to reflect on the determined work of senior Māori artist Robyn Kahukiwa. Karen A. Blennerhassett writes of the backlash against Kahukiwa's 2020 exhibition *Let's NOT Celebrate Cook*, which was itself a reaction to the commemoration of 250 years since Captain James

Cook's first voyage to New Zealand. Blennerhassett unravels the symbols and narratives of Kahukiwa's pictures, while highlighting their polarising impact.

I thank the *Journal of New Zealand Studies* for their willingness to embrace this ample volume and bring it to fruition. I also thank my fellow editors, Hilary Radner and Mark Stocker, for devoting their considerable experience and attention to detail to this project. I hope I speak for them in saying that the process of helping to form the articles has enhanced our own understanding of New Zealand art history immeasurably and the outcome is what we hoped for—a fresh, free-thinking view of the art and the history. And I thank the authors for their contributions, each assiduously researched, consummately crafted and conscientiously argued. These articles not only draw compelling conclusions but extend implicit invitations; they examine moments of difficulty and disagreement and are themselves sometimes—rewardingly—difficult and open to disagreement.

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[1] Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *New Zealand Painting: An Introduction* (Auckland: Collins, 1969).
[2] Francis Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand* (Auckland: Collins, 1983); *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930–1970* (Auckland: AUP, 2009).
[3] Leonard Bell, "Mythologising McCahon: A Heretical View," *Journal of New Zealand Studies. Colin McCahon: Life and Afterlife*, No. NS31 (2020): 52.
[4] Ibid, 56.