

*Don Binney: Flight Path*

By Gregory O'Brien

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Reviewed by Tom Brooking

One of the joys of reviewing is that every so often a book comes along that is elegantly written, persuasively argued and beautifully produced. The result is something special that is both wonderful to look at and a joy to read. Congratulations, then, to editor Sam Elworthy and his team, especially book designer Keely O'Shannessy; I have never reviewed anything quite so visually stunning as *Don Binney: Flight Path*. Gregory O'Brien's balanced and insightful text is illustrated on every few pages by high quality reproductions of this talented artist's paintings. Most readers would expect many images of birds, given Binney's earlier paintings, but he also painted landscapes in New Zealand and other parts of the globe, including Mexico, Africa, Britain and Australia. Binney was skilled too at painting still lifes, creating spectacular montages and occasionally venturing into challenging surreal images of human forms. Despite Binney's somewhat flamboyant personality and occasional carping about trends in the broader New Zealand art scene, O'Brien confirms that he was an effective environmentalist with genuine sympathy for, and understanding of, the Māori view of nature and spirituality.

After a brief introduction, O'Brien moves on to describe the progress of Binney's life in an orthodox biographical manner, documenting his life story in seven ingeniously titled Parts: "Taking Flight 1940–1962"; "Between Bird & Headland 1963–1967"; "Offshore 1968–1973"; "Returning Bird 1974–1985"; "Four or Five Ways of Not Being a Painter"; "Descending Bird 1986–2012"; and "A Flight Path: An Afterword." Binney was born in 1940 to a comfortably-off family. His father, Gordon Heselden Binney, was a wool broker and manager at the large stock and station agency, Wright, Stephenson and Co., and little interested in the arts. Gordon remained a supportive but rather distant father before his relatively early death in 1960. In contrast, his mother Mary and her son were very close across his entire life. The first special place that Binney related to was Te Henga, at Bethells Beach on Auckland's West Coast, where the small family took many holidays. Later it would become a critical site for his development as an artist.

In discussing Binney's education O'Brien tackles the formative educational influences he fell under when he attended King's College in Otahuhu for his secondary schooling, where he showed a real interest in writing and painting. Initially he concentrated on historical figures such as explorers, but once he started attending the Bird Club on Fridays he was influenced by his Kentish-born housemaster, R.B. Sibson, a passionate and eminent ornithologist. Soon after, he also became acquainted with the artist and teacher John Weeks through a contact of his mother. Binney soon eschewed Weeks' approach, but he had learnt a lot about architecture and painting industrial scenes.

Binney studied Design at Elam School of Fine Arts between 1958 and 1961. Luckily for the young artist, he was inspired by the relatively progressive teacher Robert Ellis, who introduced his student to American and Mexican artists, influences that Binney retained the rest of his life. Generally, he avoided the more abstract approaches

favoured by leading New Zealand painters from the older generation. Binney also had his first meeting with his new teacher Colin McCahon in 1961. It was an unhappy encounter, with McCahon suspicious of Binney's privileged background while Binney did not like McCahon's lack of "cultivation." Later the two artists reconciled somewhat, with Binney conceding that he was perhaps a little overconfident, although McCahon's very different style never appealed particularly to him. O'Brien suggests that Binney probably equated this lack of connection with "his vexed relationship with his disapproving father" (p. 42).

Soon after leaving Elam, Binney moved on to Auckland Teachers' Training College. During this time he produced some stunning woodcuts for the *New Zealand School Journal*. He also met the charismatic young historian Judith Musgrove, daughter of a professor of English at the University of Auckland, and later mentor of many of the historians of my generation. They married in 1963. From this time on, Binney started to produce the first of his striking paintings of native birds in flight that grace so many pages in this book. Many of these paintings were also set against vivid landscapes, something repeatedly highlighted in this publication.

In 1967 Don and Judith travelled by ship to Mexico and many local influences appeared in Binney's work. This journey also produced striking paintings of Pacific-based birds and some evocative images of Mexican scenes and birds, while also stimulating Judith's interest in Mexican history. A brief visit to Britain followed on the way home.

O'Brien demonstrates that by the early 1970s Binney's bird paintings began to fall out of favour with some critics and much of the public. He responded by altering his paintings, developing the landscapes through which the birds flew. These included sites beyond Te Henga, such as Mana Island and Little Barrier Island (Hauturu). By reproducing these images in more or less chronological order, O'Brien makes this diversification clear. These stand-alone landscapes are very powerful for anyone familiar with both places. O'Brien demonstrates further significant influences in the evolution of Binney's paintings in the 1970s. Binney produced colourful collages and landscapes from other parts of the world such as Africa, as well as Aotearoa New Zealand. More buildings began to appear along with symbolic images in the skies, coming from both his knowledge of British Royalty and Māori culture. O'Brien confirms that Binney held a genuine sympathy for, and understanding of, the Māori view of nature and religion. His conservation efforts remained constant throughout his life, and he helped save several endangered special landscapes from destruction or development in various parts of the country, an opposition that did not make him popular with developers.

From the 1970s Binney also began to re-engage with his deep Anglican faith. In 1981 he married his second wife, Philippa Moore, whom Binney described as his "kindred spirit," and the book is dedicated to her and their daughter Mary. O'Brien reveals much about the influence of High Church Anglicanism on Binney, deepening throughout his life as the painter coped with the difficulties of changing fashion. Binney's exploration of the mystical side of Anglicanism also prompted his interest in learning more about his Celtic heritage. O'Brien is nicely balanced in showing that, despite his deeper side, the talented Binney could be cantankerous and occasionally inclined to indulge in self-pity, before re-emerging to surprise critics with his new-found inventiveness. That inventiveness included taking up photography (although his painting output still far

outweighed his camera work) and experimenting with writing fiction, in addition to his ongoing reviewing. As Philippa Binney remarked in an interview with O'Brien, Binney was a polymath.

O'Brien directs nuanced focus to Binney's teaching career at Elam from 1977 to 1997. He was a lively but sometimes demanding teacher who, as O'Brien demonstrates in his fair-minded way, could be rather harsh in his treatment of some students. But this time also assisted his diversification, including his movement into exploring natural features other than native birds. Elam also reintroduced him to some other artists from his student days, including Graham Percy and Tim Garrity.

Binney further extended his range of interest when he visited Hawai'i on a self-funded leave in 1990–91, and became entranced with other parts of Polynesia. Images of fresh and very different landscapes began to appear in his work and revitalised his later output. So too did his move into still life paintings. From the late 1990s, a closer focus on his health helped keep him active and innovative in the last phase of his life. He returned to visit the large bird sanctuary on Hauturu, and different birds such as the hihi (stitchbird) appeared in his paintings. O'Brien argues that Binney's painting of both birds and landscape improved in this late phase as he came to pay more attention to different landscape forms and forests and revisited the Auckland West Coast. The images that accompany the final pages of the book support that contention. This final section also shows that Binney expanded his range of techniques as he came to concentrate more on landscape. On the one hand he continued to develop his interest in ornithology, while on the other his outputs became more graphic and he expanded his range of media. From the 1980s onwards he added collage, montage, charcoal and pencil drawings, lithographs and silkscreens as well as oils and acrylics. In relation to Binney's drawings of the Waitakere coast in 2010, O'Brien references ancestral histories and the meditative quality of the artist's work.

This elegant, deeply researched (O'Brien has used Binney's own vast archive most effectively) and timely book proves that Binney was much more than a regional artist. Indeed, O'Brien shows that Binney was a painter of national importance who played a key role in extending and diversifying the mid-to-late twentieth-century New Zealand art scene. This book will, therefore, be of interest to a wide range of readers, including artists, academics, students and anyone interested in how Aotearoa New Zealand has been represented by major shapers of its image and identity. The helpful timeline, comprehensive bibliography and extensive index will also help anyone who wants to learn more about the details of the life of this artist.

O'Brien's scholarly book argues that Binney remained an idiosyncratic painter who followed his own internal drives and motivations from childhood to old age. He veered around modernism, regionalism and abstraction to follow his own flight path. His primary concerns had always been space, the way that birds used that space and the complex eco-system which sustained their flight. O'Brien's depth of research and perceptive commentary, along with Binney's own exhibition notes on the specific qualities of a vast array of paintings, offer the reader fresh insights.

O'Brien concludes that Binney's "works were, in essence meditations on habitat. . . . In tandem with their holistic, animistic energy, there was underlying acknowledgement of the mysterious nature of the physical environment" (p. 356). An environmental

historian cannot dispute that assessment, especially when large, plump kereru can be seen pillaging the yellow flowers of a laburnum tree above the very suburb where Binney painted this bird in 1963. This wonderful book deserves to win suitable national acknowledgement.