Gordon Walters
By Francis Pound
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Reviewed by Warren Feeney

Francis Pound's *Gordon Walters* could be considered the final component and critical analysis of the life and times of four pioneering New Zealand artists whose reputations and legacies acquired prominence in the 1960s. Where Toss Woollaston (1910–1998) and Rita Angus (1908–1970) are given due and comprehensive consideration by Jill Trevelyan (2004 and 2020 respectively), and Colin McCahon (1919–1987) in Peter Simpson's two-volume magnum opus (2019–2020), Pound's book on the life and art of Gordon Walters (1919–1995) completes this equation. In making connections between these artists, there is inevitably a sense of the founding of a national art history. Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith's once highly influential publication, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839–1967* (1969), devoted less attention to Walters' abstraction than to the more figurative and referential work of his peers. But now Pound's *Gordon Walters* comprehensively eliminates the remnants of any possible doubt about Walters' central importance in New Zealand art history. To paraphrase the writer's commentary on Walters' own art and legacy, this is an astonishing publication.

Francis Pound died somewhat prematurely in 2017, and *Gordon Walte*rs has been published posthumously, with a foreword and afterword by his friend and sometime colleague in art history at the University of Auckland, Leonard Bell. The latter surely played a tactful and effective role in making this book possible. Pound had already reviewed and rewritten New Zealand's art history over the previous three decades. In many people's minds, he changed the shape and direction of perceptions about this country's art in a series of influential publications culminating with *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930–1970* (2009).[1] In shifting attention to Walters' practice over five decades, the refined minimalist abstract paintings in this book in turn take on a lively and engaging relationship with the reader. How could they not do so? Like Walters, Pound lived an important part of his life making the artist's practice the subject of major interest, tracking a continuing relationship with him, and his observations are accordingly comprehensive and informed.

Pound's own close association with Walters over 23 years had accorded him an extensive, indeed intimate familiarity with the artist's practice. But more than that, the sense of the relationship between art historian and artist compellingly makes us experience the full force of Walters' paintings. Pound's writing enhances our appreciation of their physical presence, and how, through their visual games, they play with our perceptions of space. It is almost as if Pound is sharing with us the experience of seeing Walters not just in the confines of a book but in the spaces of our public art galleries, making our encounter with the works fuller and richer.

Gordon Walters thoroughly unravels and documents his work from the early influences including Thomas A. McCormick (1883–1973) and Chinese landscape painting. Of central interest and significance to Walters' developing practice was the influence of, and relationship with, Dutch-born New Zealand artist, photographer and carver, his slightly older and far better travelled contemporary, Theo Schoon (1915–1985). This association, which was particularly close and

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intense in 1946–7, was brought about by their shared admiration for the fifteenth-century rock drawings by Māori in South Canterbury. Both artists were attracted to the figure and ground relationship of these drawings, but it went deeper than that. For Walters, the drawings posed a powerful challenge to traditional assumptions of New Zealand art as little more than a long-distance extension to the all-powerful European model. The visual possibilities of these drawings suggested that they should play their part in shaping an alternative history of art. Schoon shared such perceptions but was more directly engaged in making copies of them, and his trajectory is of course another story.

Walters went on to look intently and intelligently at a variety of artists across continents, stylistic labels and time. His inspirations—which, always a careful and methodical man, he listed—included Joan Miró, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Jean Arp, Auguste Herbin, Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella and, following this roll-call of modernist heroes, Aboriginal rock engravings and African sculpture. The rock engravings, coupled with their Māori counterparts, certainly distinguish Walters' aesthetic priorities from his contemporaries. Furthermore, Pound observes that the "setting of Walters' encounter is the Museum, rather than the landscape [of the poet James K.] Baxter's childhood and McCahon's original visions" (pp. 22–23). Pound adds that "the non-illusionistic, anti-academic styles" of Miró and Klee, as well as Pollock, Stella and other Americans, provided for Walters, much as cubism had done for Pablo Picasso, a kind of deliverance, which "obliged him consistently to forgo the refuge of virtuosity" (p. 33).

Pound emphasises Walters' long-standing commitment to perpetually refining and reconsidering his practice. In doing so, he devotes several chapters to lesser-known works and series. Among these are Walters' use of *en abyme* (something that contains a reflection of itself within itself) which Pound had earlier explored in an exhibition catalogue text.[2] This, together with the chapter titled "Alternatives and Supplements to the Koru," provide further insight into the artist's practice. Walters' paintings reproduce spectacularly well, consistently making an immediate engagement and direct relationship with the reader/viewer. We can appreciate their spatial ambiguities about advancing, receding and perpetually shifting figure and ground relationships. The sheer number of images in this book (424!) effectively complements Pound's text, reaffirming—as if this were necessary—Walters' magisterial authority and sense of control. Prolific though he was, the distinctive nature of each individual reproduction contains its own singular presence.

From the mid-1950s to the 1980s, the essence of Walters' art is in the figure and ground relationship of each and every painting, a perpetual conversation, demanding our attention to exact geometric shapes, lines and forms. Pound singles out the paradox of the artist's titles bearing no obvious relationship to their formal qualities. Famously, perhaps notoriously, this applied to the koru painting *Te Whiti* (1964; Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki), named for the Taranaki prophet and civil resistance hero as well as a street in Wellington, but perhaps rather more interestingly to his early pencil and conté drawing *Waikanae Landscape* (1944; Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki). Its subject is outwardly a specific location, 60 kilometers north of Wellington, Pound noting that it "might be [a view] standing on a beach lit by flares of a dying sun at the world's end. Nothing could be further from photography" (p. 35). Walters' art is one of a kind and he knew it, realising how it could all too easily be ignored, misunderstood and indeed trivialised. This, together with his exceptionally private personality, must explain why he deliberately held back from exhibiting anything for over 16 years (1949–66). This was the very

time when, in their thirties to mid-forties, any other artist would be in their prime and intent on career promotion.

Pound carefully and convincingly documents groupings of the artist's works, noting how Walters would return to supposedly finished paintings, reworking them anew over many years. Unlike most artists, evidence suggests that they were the better for it. Such groupings are the subject of four chapters that focus on Walters' signature koru series (10, "Origins of the Koru Series: The Ink Studies of 1956"; 11, "Development of the Koru Series"; 12, "Te Whiti"; and, a turning point in his career, 13, "New Vision Gallery Show 1966"). As previously noted, chapters of lesser-known series that distinctly hold their own include 16, "The Transparencies" and 17, "The Sign Collection." Pound is both rigorous and generous in analysing specific works and what makes them significant, and this is one of the key pleasures of reading and reflecting upon *Gordon Walters*. Let us give thanks to Pound—and Walters—with this cogent passage:

> If I seem to have spent an inordinate amount of time with *Koru Study (Blue/Black)* it is because this little study is destined, in an enlarged and finished form, to become one of the twelve paintings exhibited in Walters' first public display of a body of Koru paintings, his 1966 New Vision show; and also because it will find some especially splendid heirs among the *Genealogy Series* (1969–73), a group of Koru paintings that must be included in the very innermost circle of Walters' oeuvre. They are astonishing works (p. 277).

[1] See Natasha Conland, "Remembering Francis Pound (1948–2017)," accessed 7 February 2024, www.aucklandartgallery.com/article/remembering-francis-pound-1948-2017.
[2] Francis Pound, *Walters: En Abyme* (Auckland: Gus Fisher Gallery, 2004).

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