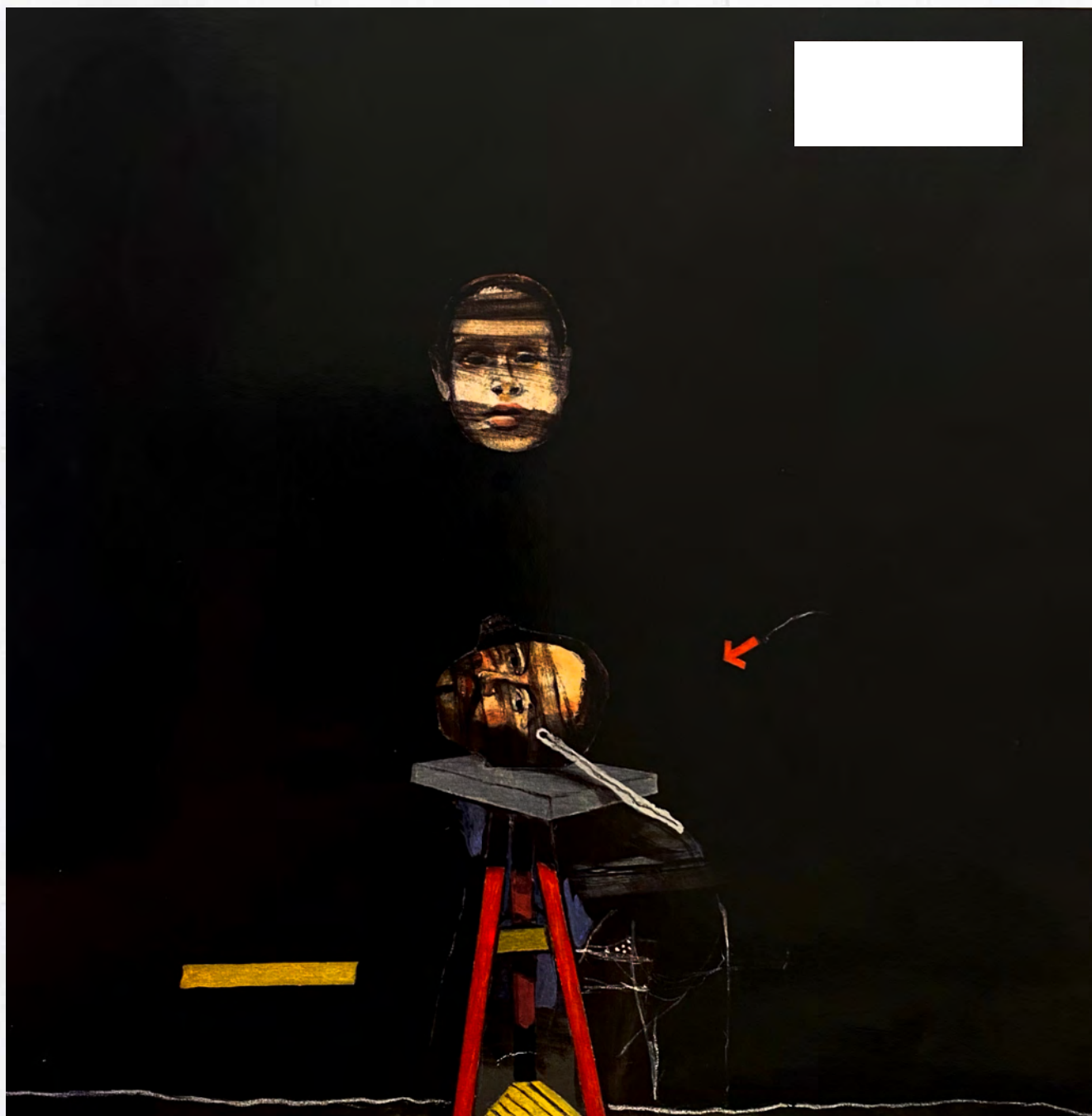


# Ross Ritchie Seeing in the Dark



**whitespace**  
contemporary art

## Ross Ritchie **Seeing in the Dark**

21 May to 9 June 2013

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Catalogue essay by Amy Stewart

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12 Crummer Road, Ponsonby, Auckland  
09 361 3661, [www.whitespace.co.nz](http://www.whitespace.co.nz)

Cover image: *Salome*, 2012/2013, oil on linen on canvas, 1220 x 1220mm.



## Ross Ritchie Seeing in the Dark

It is a particularly articulate mind that is able to scan the vast landscape of the world's images and distil them into a singularly new image. It takes an especially skilled painter to see amongst these images the potential for a new kind of object. This person is a creator, and the objects they create are unique in the existing visual vocabulary of the world. Not every artist works with this ethos in mind; nor should they. The intention is not always necessarily to reinvent the wheel, but rather to take another look at its parts.

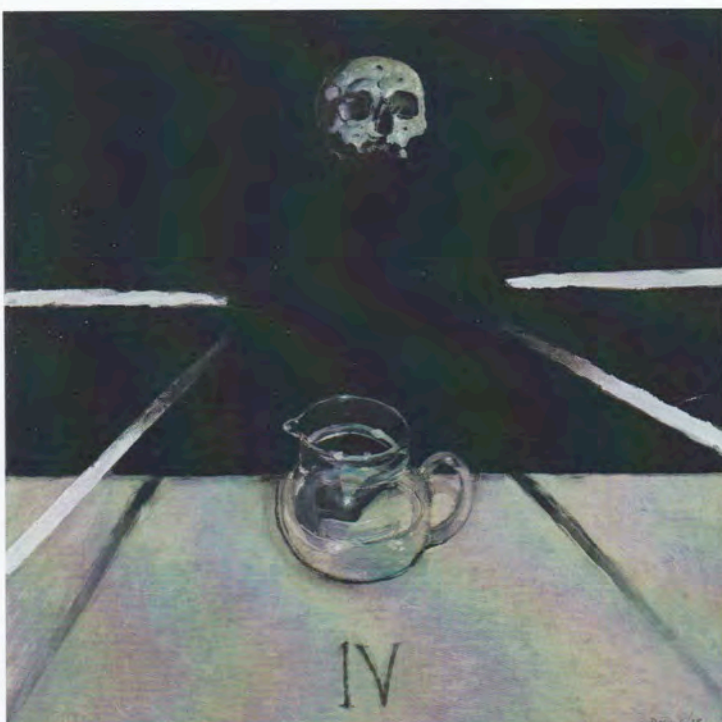
Ross Ritchie paints in many tongues. Each of his series simultaneously creates and defines its own visual universe, often by first finding his footing in the footsteps of some of his giant predecessors. With inspiration as diverse as Leger and Bacon, Rauschenberg and Degas, Ritchie knows what he likes when he sees it. Instead of mimicking, though, Ritchie defies the traits of his heroes (of the abstract expressionist movement, for example) and rejects that his visions must be limited to a particularly narrow style.

Though he is quick to acknowledge his influences, it goes without saying that Ritchie never imitates. The wonderfully heartening feeling of seeing something that he believes works ignites him. He is absolutely and deeply inspired by his heroes, and he internalises the best of all of them – letting their imagery simmer with the lid on

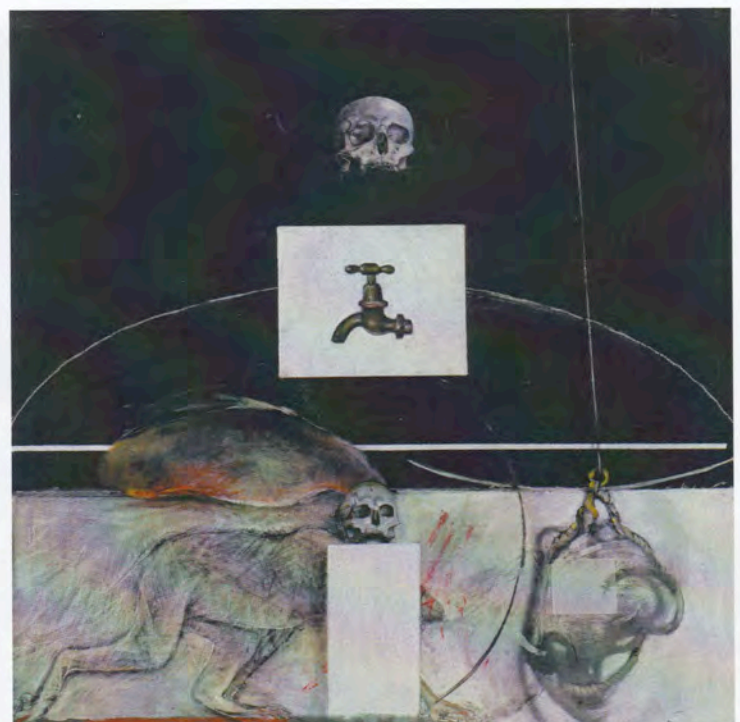
for years until it is well and truly melded into his own juices. Despite the constantly changing style, Ritchie is not out to write his own art history. He is simply doing what he is told, by himself, to do.

Having been inspired largely by the Abstract Expressionists and Francis Bacon (among many others), Ritchie's hand is, like theirs, the hand of a master that creates objects with an aura of the divine. The divinity of Ritchie's paintings is at once multifaceted and indistinct. His draughtsmanship is perhaps the first and most striking of Ritchie's virtues. Every stroke of black paint and every shade of naked cranium is testament to his ability to extract forms from paint that are at once delicate and firm, light and substantial. Each object hovering in his blackness glows with a particular glimmer of meaning, but does not connect to the other objects that hover near it. He is not telling you a story, nor is he showing you a whole picture.

The ethereal substance from which Ritchie pulls his figures is a mysterious but, he insists, familiar one. It is made of the invisible baggage that we all carry around. He hopes that seeing these canvases will give people an idea that they can't fathom: a distinct feeling of indistinctness. The groupings seem chance, yet some sort of internal gravity that calms rather than frustrates mediates each composition. The blackness is not

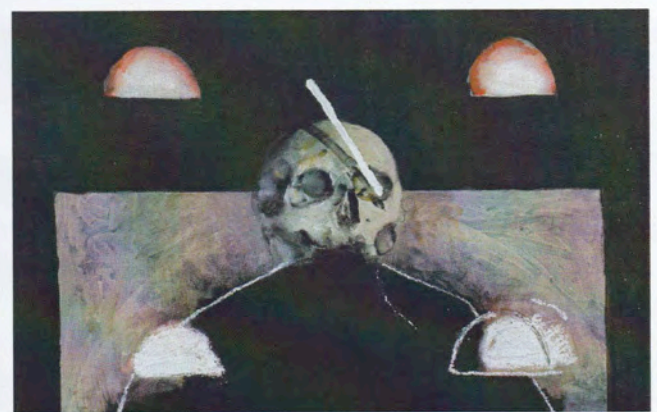
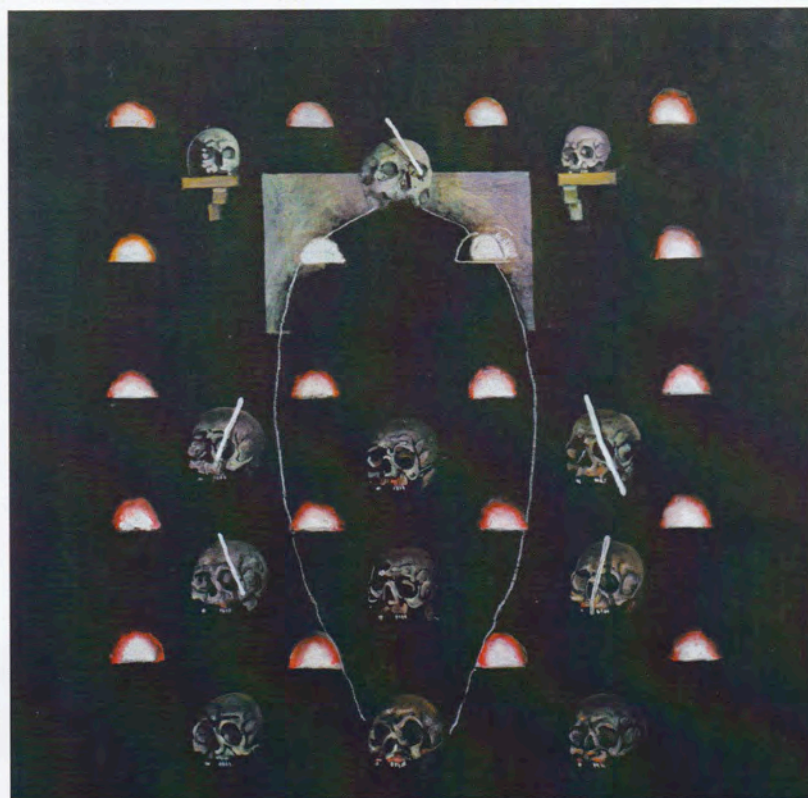


IV, 2013, oil on canvas, 500 x 500mm.



Zoo, 2013 (in progress), oil on canvas with attachment, 1000 x 1000mm.





Clockwise from top left: *The Dark*, 2012/2013, oil and graphite on linen, 1520 x 1010mm; *Two Women*, 2012/2013, oil on linen, 1520 x 1010mm; *The Apartment*, 2013, oil on canvas with paper attachments, 1000 x 1000mm; *Pacific I* (detail), 2013, oil on canvas, 1220 x 1220mm; *Pacific I*, 2013, oil on canvas, 1220 x 1220mm.



so much an abyss as it is pregnant ether – there is no absence here, rather there is an overwhelming presence. The result is easier to feel than it is to explain. You need to sense it, Ritchie says, like a dog. As a dog senses the deep rumbling of an earthquake before it surfaces, so Ritchie draws on a deep well of blackness within the human psyche – like pulling things from the swirling blackness of Dante's circles of Hell (but without so much evil).

As the viewer stands in front of *Salome*, a pair of floating heads peers out, making them aware of where they stand. Ritchie is adamant, though, that this is not the famed male/female gaze, but a more disembodied gaze that is 'worked until it disappears.' Drawing the eye up and away from these heads is a solid white form, placed just as deliberately as any other element in the painting. 'It's about sense,' Ritchie says, 'and trust.' And trusting senses. Ritchie trusts his. These seemingly random shapes press themselves onto the surface of Ritchie's brain like newsprint on putty, and he presses the images out through his fingers onto the surface of his paintings. They have been filtered through his own dark place, and are at once unintentional and overwhelmingly certain.

Each of Ritchie's objects is rendered as though it has 'something channelled into it'. That 'something' could be a conversation of sensations and abstract meanings rather than one of strict analogies. Though Ritchie's figures can seem otherworldly, their mystery is mediated by the presence of the viewer and the viewer's own memory bank. Ritchie's canvases transport the viewer, pulling them inside. Like pilgrims at Lourdes, the viewer becomes aware of the spot in which they are standing and the murmur of meaning that engulfs that spot. Where you are is in front of this painting, in that hallowed spot of the perceiver. Ritchie does not want narratives, he doesn't want the women huddled close to each other to communicate. He cites Picasso's desire to return to the randomness of a child, but he is not after innocence or purity. What he gives us instead is the randomness of a child who has been not polluted, but populated by life experience.

The presence of the object is paramount in Ritchie's work, as he treats each painting as an 'emotional reliquary'. The figures and objects that inhabit these pitch landscapes become almost iconic in their isolated meaningfulness. In *Pacific One*, the 'jury' of skulls, some recently harvested, stand watch over a cocoon-like form. There is

no clear allegory, but the humanity is clearly perceptible. The presence of the painting is only half of the formula. Each object exists on its own in a space not so far away from the viewer in the room; each bustling with its own narratives like so many little galaxies. Nearby, *Pacific Two's* fighter plane tempts the viewer with a wartime narrative, but as with all of the paintings there are many blanks to be filled. The hand of the maker makes Ritchie's anti-landscapes meaningful, but they cannot be activated without the sight, sense, and memory of the viewer. He wants the viewer to find their own dark place: 'I know where that bit lives that's very true'. In the midst of the uncertain there is a deliberateness, and the viewer must trust the mediator.

Ritchie likens his process to teaching someone to drive – a process that is principally the development of a set of instincts. 'The objective is that you pick up the paintings, take them somewhere, and cut them loose.' That being said, there is a deliberateness, and Ritchie, like every other good artist, knows when to stop, and he knows when something isn't right. He is in possession of the rare ability to walk away – a positive spontaneity – particularly difficult when you are not telling a story. 'You can't destroy it', he says, 'you have to learn from it. You can't always figure it out'. Like learning to drive, or seeing in the dark.

Ritchie knows he is communicating with a community of people who are comfortable with the discomfort of the dark place that he is looking to when he creates these works. This community of people would not be afraid to have these works in their homes. So much blackness would be terrifying were it not for the realisation that we are not alone with the terror – Ritchie knows it, too. The thing about those people that are willing to go to that place is – 'you can trust those people'.

Ritchie is exercising the viewer's mind to fill in the blanks. And here's the clincher – the subject doesn't particularly matter to him. The two women huddled in one canvas could just as easily be a pair of cheetahs, or a pair of empty chairs, or a skeleton, depending on where Ritchie's mind had taken him that day. If there are some stories here it's because they have emerged from the narrative swarm of one man's mind, but they could just as easily be anything else.

The experience of looking at one of these works is religious in that it is an act of faith –



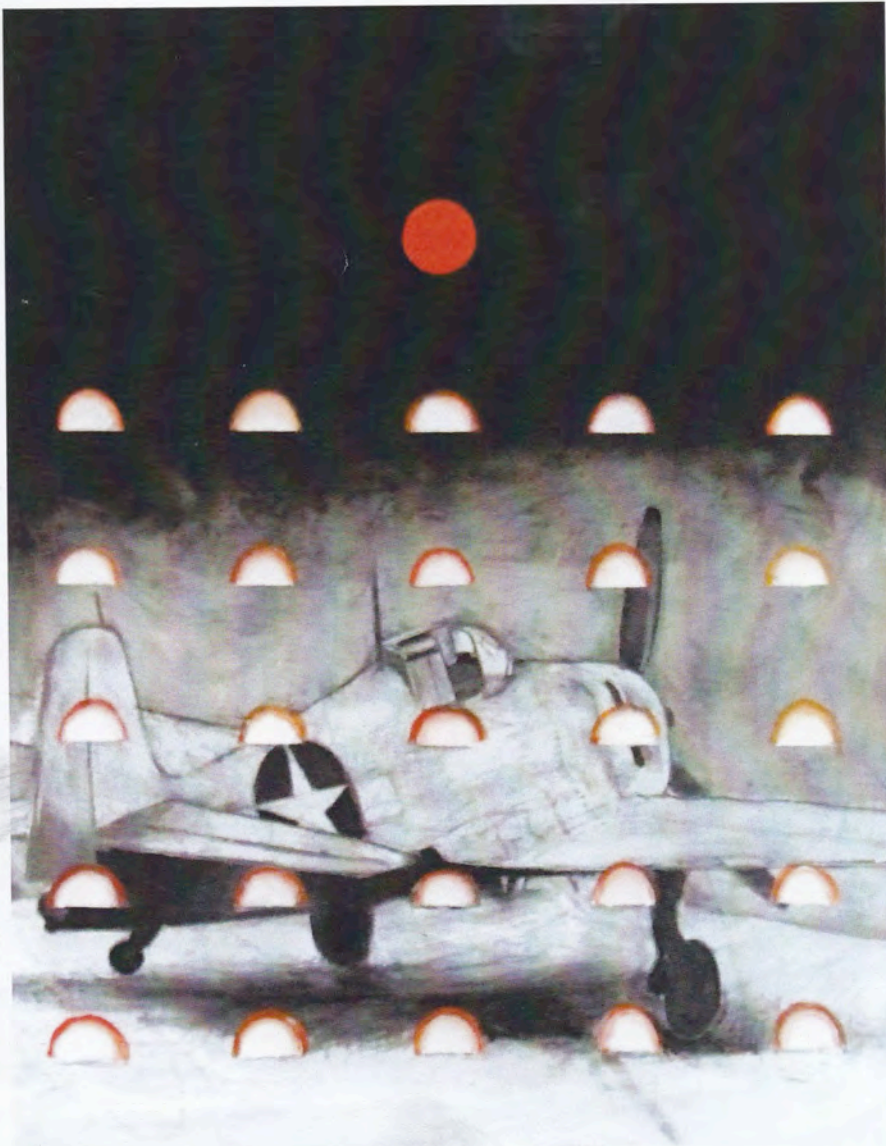
faith in the work of painting and in Ritchie's deft composition. These works require more than just looking: they require that the viewer stop looking, in order to be able to sense the paintings in another way, as a dog senses. Ritchie urges the viewer to ignore the analogy and let something more base creep to the surface. Ignore the surface – he says – as he engineers objects in such a way as to 'vandalise' the surface of the painting.

Ritchie's objects are 'elements of a private language'. We understand the intonation and the gestures, but we can't make out the discreet words and phrases. We think, then, that we don't know what is going on. But Ritchie speaks the language. He can read it, and he can write it. With these canvases in front of us, Ritchie is speaking over our heads in this secret language to the artists that he has had imaginary conversations with for years. They speak in their own private language, but we can still benefit from their conversation.

The canvases started as blanks, now they are Ritchie's objects. Don't worry what happened in the meantime, says Ritchie. Just sink into it – like an avant-garde art-house film. Ritchie isn't trying to have a conversation with you. Forget your language.

This is the best of what artistic practice can be: feeling your way blind through an idea and finding at the very bottom of the paper bag a form that works – that says what you're wanting to say. Like going for a walk and forgetting the subject of the conversation you were having with yourself, these paintings are full of objects that are agents in themselves, linked together by something so tenuous as composition and meaning. There is a start and an ending, but in between only Ritchie's very carefully engineered chaos.

*Amy Stewart, May 2013*



*Pacific 2*, 2013, oil on canvas, 1230 x 910mm.



*Dog Boy*, 2013, oil on canvas, 620 x 310mm (two panels).



# Ross Ritchie Selected CV

## Solo Exhibitions

2006 *Tromp l'Oeuvre*, Milford Galleries, Auckland 2004 *Voices*, Milford Galleries, Auckland  
2001 *Fiction*, Milford Galleries, Auckland 1999 *Index*, Milford Galleries, Auckland 1998 Milford  
Galleries, Dunedin 1996 *Staged Incidents*, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington 1995 *Blind Narratives*,  
Claybrook Gallery, Auckland 1993 *Ross Ritchie Works 1987-1992* Bishop Suter Gallery, Nelson; Janne  
Land Gallery, Wellington; Claybrook Gallery 1992 Claybrook Gallery; Works on Paper Gallery, Auckland  
1991 Janne Land Gallery 1990 Janne Land Gallery; Charlotte H Galleries, Auckland 1989 Charlotte H  
Galleries 1988 Charlotte H Galleries 1986 Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland 1981 Peter Webb Galleries,  
Auckland 1980 Peter Webb Galleries 1976 Victoria University of Wellington Library, Wellington.

## Selected Group Exhibitions

2011 *Selected Treats*, Whitespace, Auckland 2011 *Feast*, Northart, North Shore City 2010 *On a Plate*,  
Northart 2009 *Signs*, Northart; *New and Recent Works*, Northart 2008 *Instock*, Northart; *10 Big  
Paintings*, Northart 2006 *First Five*, Northart; *Object*, Milford Galleries, Dunedin 2004 *Transit of Venus*,  
Milford Galleries, Dunedin, Auckland; *The Menagerie. Animals in Art*, Northart; *Land/landscape*, Northart  
2003-11 *Annual drawing exhibitions*, Northart 2003 *Notions of the Figurative*, Milford Galleries, Dunedin  
2002 Various, Milford Galleries, Auckland 2001 *12 North Shore City Artists*, Northart 1998 *Looking  
South...*, Milford Galleries, Dunedin 1997 *The Subject of Object*, Milford Galleries, Dunedin 1995 *Works  
on Paper*, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch 1994 *The Language of the Real*, Claybrook Gallery  
1993 Various, Claybrook Gallery; *Real Vision*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch 1992 *Real/  
Surreal*, CSA Gallery, Christchurch; Various, Claybrook Gallery; Various, Janne Land Gallery; Various,  
Works on Paper Gallery 1991 *The Chair Show*, CSA Gallery 1990 Janne Land Gallery; *Celebration*, Fisher  
Art Gallery, Pakuranga; Hawkes Bay Museum and Art Gallery, Napier, with Terry Stringer 1989 Guest  
exhibitor, *Suter Art Society Autumn exhibition*, Suter Art Gallery 1988 *Goodman Fielder Biennale*, Suter  
Art Gallery 1986 *Goodman Fielder Biennale*, Suter Art Gallery 1982 *XX Two Decades 1962-1982*, RKS  
Art, Auckland 1976 Benson & Hedges Art Award, Finalist Touring Show; *Four Contemporary Artists*,  
Sarjeant Art Gallery, Wanganui 1975 *Figurative Art Now. 9 New Zealand Artists*, Barrington Galleries,  
Auckland; *10th anniversary exhibition*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland 1972 Various group shows,  
Barry Lett Galleries 1971 *Ten Big Paintings*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland (and touring NZ)  
1970 *New Zealand Art of the Sixties*, Auckland Art Gallery; Barry Lett Galleries & Waikato Art Gallery,  
Hamilton, with Pauline Thompson and David Armitage 1969 *Four in One. Multiple Prints*, Barry Lett  
Galleries 1968 Benson and Hedges Art Award Finalist; *Ten Years of New Zealand Painting in Auckland  
1957-1967*, Auckland Art Gallery; *Five New Zealand Artists*, Bonython Gallery, Sydney; *Multiple prints  
by the 20/20 group*, Barry Lett Galleries & 20/20 Vision, Christchurch 1967 *Preview 1967*, Barry Lett  
Galleries 1966 *Preview '66*, Barry Lett Galleries; *Recent New Zealand Painting*, Centre Gallery, Wellington;  
*Five Auckland Painters*, Darlinghurst Galleries, Sydney & Barry Lett Galleries; *Contemporary New Zealand  
Painting*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland 1965 *Contemporary Painting in New Zealand*, Commonwealth  
Institute Galleries, London; Barry Lett Galleries, with John Perry; *Eight New Zealand Artists*, National  
Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (& touring Australia); *Contemporary New Zealand Painting*, Auckland Art  
Gallery 1964 Artides Gallery, Wellington, with Jeff Macklin, Merlene Young and Geoff Murphy; Uptown  
Gallery, Auckland, with Jeff Macklin; *Contemporary New Zealand Painting*, Auckland Art Gallery  
1963 NZ Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington; Hays Ltd Art competition, Christchurch; Willeston Galleries,  
Wellington, with Jeff Macklin 1962 Wellington Art Club, NZ Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington.