



Contemporary New Zealand Art 4, 2005
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Contemporary New Zealand Art 4 is the final book in a series that offers readers a comprehensive view of New Zealand artists working at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

ROSS RITCHIE

Ritchie's tenure as a New Zealand Railways billboard painter gave him a superb grounding for his subsequent career as an artist. The discipline and endless repetition honed his skills to a high level of technical competence, yet so bored was he that he 'dreamed into different ways of painting, to escape'.¹ Being selected to further his studies in art was an unexpected turning point.

Recognising that 'all painting comes out of other painting' Ritchie has always used undisguised quotations from renowned artists' works and from general publications as a springboard for his own creative impulses. As his paintings emanate from his fascination for shape, form, line and tone, he extracts these formal elements from borrowed images and interprets them according to his own motivations to create distinctive works with universal application.

The stylistic influences of Francis Bacon and Edvard Munch are apparent in Ritchie's works of the mid-1960s, a time when he also admired Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg.² The American Pop Art movement also had its impact as Ritchie incorporated into his paintings imagery from a variety of popular sources. However, it was studying the work of Léger and Rosenquist³ that proved to be pivotal. For two years Ritchie allowed his painting to be modified by their influences as he explored the conflict between abstract and figurative, reducing compositions to their abstract common denominator. *Reefton Lady*, 1966, is an important work from this period, as it demonstrates the collusion of abstract and figurative that he achieved. Some years of design-based works followed, as Ritchie questioned his direction as a painter and sought to remove any excesses from his style.

The 1970s saw Ritchie turn from the allusive (through his references to Western art history) towards an exploration of reality versus illusion. His two-part works, comprised of constructed objects and painted depictions of them, questioned why the latter was defined as art but the original object was not. A raft of animal and bird portraits followed in the late 1970s, and by the early 1980s he was again incorporating real objects – such as coal, boxes, dead rabbits and buckets – into his artworks, as he moved closer to exploring the potential for ambiguity in reality.

Over the years, Ritchie has returned frequently to the touchstone of still life, a genre he finds deeply satisfying, whether as a stand-alone work or within a larger narrative. The enigmatic paintings of his 1980 'Dummy' series feature a stuffed, headless dummy seated in a



In Order to Make it Safe, 1994-95.

Oil on canvas with stretched canvas attachment, diptych, 1635 x 1265 mm each panel.

Courtesy of the artist.

chair in a variety of postures and costumes, and focus strongly on the technique of painting. They combine portraiture, interior studies and still life; yet, with their depersonalised subject, they offer no explanation. His 1987 *Still Life with Mullet* depicts a dead fish that slips from one picture plane to another, and creates ambiguity and incongruity in an unusual treatment of the still life genre. In 2002, *Index*, too, featured still life, with quotidian objects such as the humble onion, enamel bowls, taps and glass jars placed alongside more 'exotic' elements such as dead birds, fish heads and plant life.

During the 1990s, Ritchie returned to appropriating imagery. *Olympia*, 1992, taken from Manet's painting of the same name and complete with an affixed plank of timber with painted shadow, features many of the themes that have woven through Ritchie's work – the abstract-figurative conflict, the ambiguity linking reality and illusion, art tradition and art history and their links to contemporary art, the process of the deconstruction of painting, and still life itself as an essential vehicle for exploring composition and surface.

Ritchie has also demonstrated a penchant for altered perspective and for creating 'paintings within paintings' to reinforce the illusion-reality dilemma. He revisited these ideas in his 1993 'River and Landscape' series in which still lifes are ambiguously placed in the paintings' foreground. These techniques continued throughout subsequent series. He achieved the enigmatic and covert narratives of 'Blind Narratives' (1995) and 'Fiction' (2002) through combining imagery borrowed from famous artists (such as Puvis de Chavannes and Velázquez)⁴ with images from his own personal history and scenes from his studio.



Blanket Man, 1985.

Oil on canvas, 785 x 795 mm.

Private collection.

Ritchie works from life and from his own sketches, both for ease of accuracy and in order to 'feel the weight of the object' by looking at it from all angles. Although in the past his palette has been subdued, he is trying now to shift the boundaries by lifting his colour away from the 'slightly overbearing sadness' of his earlier grey tones. He enjoys deconstructing paintings to their abstract form, focussing on balancing the formal qualities rather than on the content, but has yet to exhibit the results.

1 All quotations taken from an interview with the artist, February 2004.

2 Francis Bacon, British painter 1909–1992; Edvard Munch, Norwegian painter 1863–1944; Larry Rivers, American painter, graphic designer and sculptor, b. 1923; Robert Rauschenberg, American painter and sculptor, b. 1925.

3 Fernand Léger, French painter, graphic artist and ceramist 1881–1955; James Rosenquist, American painter, graphic designer and sculptor, b. 1933

4 Pierre Cécile Puvis de Chavannes, French painter, 1824–1898; Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velázquez, Spanish painter, 1599–1660.



Thought II, 1964.

Oil on hardboard. 1206 x 1206 mm.
Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

ROSS RITCHIE

White Dwarf, 2002.

Oil on canvas with stretched canvas attachments.
1700 x 1612 mm.
Courtesy of the artist.

