

Inside the Engine Room

A Conversation with Ross Ritchie



Over the last couple of decades, Ross Ritchie has made pictures consistent with those he did early on in his career: appropriations of European art, enigmatic scenarios, loose gestural passages mixed with firm draughtsmanship. In between times, there were phases of pop, abstraction and even conceptualism. When Edward Hanfling visited the artist at his home in Birkenhead on Auckland's North Shore, they had a free-flowing conversation about the process of making pictures, lessons learnt from painting billboards as well as from the works and philosophies of other artists, the more than 20 years Ritchie spent working at the Auckland City Art Gallery, and

(above) ROSS RITCHIE *Engine* 1980–81
Oil on canvas with wooden blocks, chain & metal tacks,
1580 x 1742 x 102 mm.

the way his psychological make-up feeds his art. Yet they both agreed, contrary to popular belief, that the experience of art itself is no conversation.

Edward Hanfling: Let's start with a curly one: If you could sum up in a few words what your art has primarily been about, or the driving force behind it, what would you say?

Ross Ritchie: The driving force is anxiety. I don't know what it's about. I just sign it and walk away. When it's *about* things, you're doing Norman Rockwell: you target something, and if you're good, you get it. But art, to me, is open-ended. It is a live animal.

E.H.: Few of your paintings look finished in the sense of every part of the surface being worked up to a high level of detail. They seem to be always still in process. Is it the process that is important?



R.R.: In part, yes. I find it difficult to finish stuff. I mean, I finish so much that I paint over or destroy them . . . But put it another way: I used to so envy Bob Ellis for the way he could work a thing out and do it right to the end. I could never do that. If I did, it was rubbish.

E.H.: How do you decide when a piece is finished, or when it is good?

R.R.: It tells you. When it starts to work, you can leave it alone for a week and go back in and say, 'yes, that is good!' Drawings particularly—you can work and work—and I work quite fast—and you just put them away and leave them. Sometimes you think it didn't



work and two years later you take it out again and find that it *did* work. The subjective information that was feeding you when you were doing it, clogged it all up. When you forget that and it goes away, the object's still there.

E.H.: So part of the process is leaving things and letting them cook.

R.R.: That and chance. Francis Bacon, whom I've read about extensively, manufactured chance. He knew he needed it. He was a very complex man. He's given me the biggest rush, more than other painters. I saw a couple in the Met a few years ago. They just came across the room at you. This is the sad thing about this pretty interesting show [*The Body Laid Bare*] at the Auckland Art Gallery: they don't have a major Bacon. Because he ticks all the boxes, for the subject, for everything.

E.H.: Your recent exhibition at Whitespace was mainly drawing, but a painterly kind of drawing with rubbed-out passages and a dramatic, smoky feeling. Is that something that you've done for a long time, or is it a recent development?

R.R.: In 2003 I did the first serious drawings I've ever done, because my wife Wendy was doing a drawing show at Northart, the gallery she manages in Northcote. Before that, I could draw for need, for a painting, but I didn't take any pleasure out of it. I just did it to get from there to there. Now I have to lay off it from time to time, because it gets to the point where it's indulgent. Geez, a sheet of paper and I'm at it. I love it, I really do. I wish I'd started a lot earlier.

E.H.: Overall, the Whitespace exhibition had a fairly dark, sombre tone to it—not just in the depth and range of black tones, but the subject matter too, with images of mortality and violence.

R.R.: That's my anxiety. And my engine room. It's got positive aspects, and it's got very negative aspects. I'm not medicated or anything!

E.H.: Right, so it is something integral to your character—a taste, perhaps, for the macabre?

R.R.: Well, it's what drives me to do anything. You coming today—I felt very comfortable about it, but then the anxiety got me and I went and mowed the lawns. One beer, mowed the lawns, and I felt OK.

E.H.: Do you have a sort of sourcebook or stock of imagery that you work from?

R.R.: Thousands of images. I've got a set of bound *Time* magazines, and when I want to get started I just grab four of them. I felt guilty about it for a long time, but I was talking to Dick Frizzell and he does that too. I always go for certain subjects, of course, although at one point I did some landscapes because I saw a black-and-white photograph in a magazine that I thought was stunning. I used that image again and again, though I'm never tempted to go back to it now.

E.H.: When you were working on the drawings for the show, were you methodical in the way you selected certain kinds of images, or was it just what came to hand?

(opposite above)
ROSS RITCHIE *FB* 2015
Oil on canvas,
305 x 305 mm.

(opposite below)
ROSS RITCHIE
On the Loose 2016
Graphite & oil on paper,
1000 x 700 mm.

(right) Ross Ritchie at
work in the New Zealand
Railways enamel sign
shed, 1958

(below) ROSS RITCHIE
Silent Movies 2016
Mixed media on canvas,
1540 x 2100 mm.

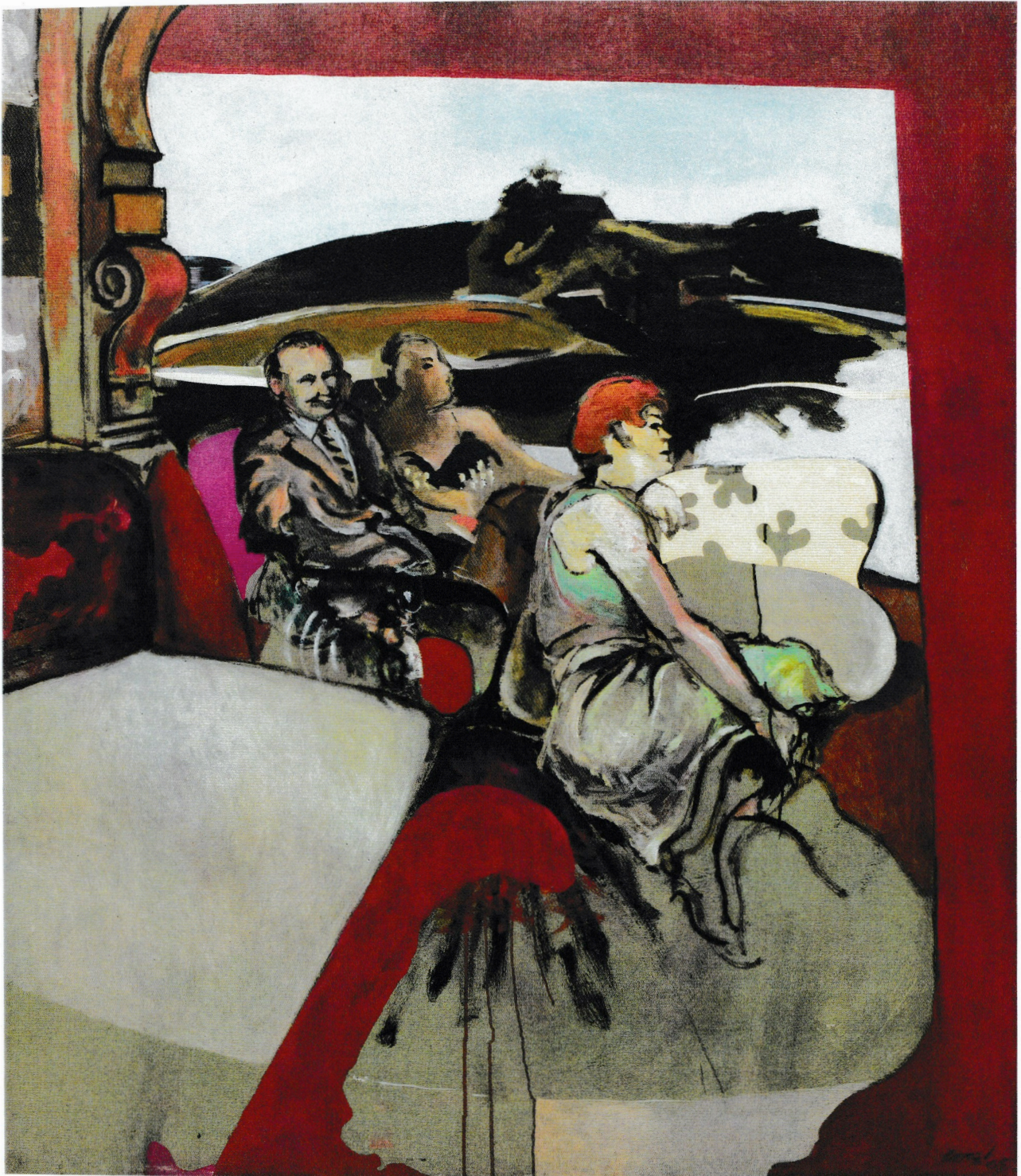


R.R.: That show covers a good deal of time—years, in fact. So, no. I always find myself looking back at what I love doing, but I don't set it up methodically, because if I do, I know it's just going to be like an illustration, dead on arrival. The good thing about drawing is that, with the physical size and the nature of it, you can change it so quickly, within *minutes*,

from a stale, dying image into something interesting that gets you going again. One might have elements from the previous one, or I can pull something out of the drawer that I didn't know where to go with—take a piece of that. It's as fluid as hell. *Has* to be.

E.H.: What was your upbringing like and how did you develop a love of art?





R.R.: My father was a coalminer, and his father was a coalminer, and his father. From Scotland. My mother's dad was a coalminer and her grandad was a nail-maker. They were Scots too. So my parents came out of that working-class ethic. But my father liked to sing, and he liked poetry, in a social sort of way, not as a scholar. I have one brother. We never had a car or anything like that, and from when I was 13 we lived in state houses. Then I split and came to Auckland.

E.H.: So how did you end up painting pictures?

R.R.: I'm dyslexic. Through school and that, it was difficult. They didn't know about it then, of course. I left school at 15 and went into a trade—did

signwriting and poster art for New Zealand Railways for six or seven years. We had to do two nights a week at the Tech with Jim Coe as a tutor. He took different people out and said: 'If I was to say to your boss or supervisor that rather than you coming here to learn how to quote for jobs or whatever, I could do something to expand you . . .' I said that I'd just love that to happen. I also knew Barry Lett. He was painting in Wellington and then came to Auckland and had his little gallery at the top of Queen Street. He asked if Jeff Macklin and I would put together a show and bring it up. We were so broke we couldn't stay in Auckland to see the opening. We drove the van up, took the van back. On the very first night, Auckland

(opposite) ROSS RITCHIE *The 90th Garden* 1965
Oil and collage on board, 1206 x 1029 mm.
(Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki)
(below) Ross Ritchie in his studio, April 2017
(Photograph: Studio Guidon)

City Art Gallery bought a work of mine. 'Well, somebody's telling me something', I thought. The next day, I went and resigned.

E.H.: That was a rapid ascent into the art scene.

R.R.: It was. Very rapid.

E.H.: Was there anything about working as a commercial artist that influenced your subsequent approach to painting?

R.R.: When I was in the trades, I worked on billboards 20 feet long, 10 feet high. You'd do 25 of them and it would take nearly a week to do each. That's a hell of a chunk of your life. To survive, you either just stayed drunk or you devised different ways of looking at it. Towards the end, I got to feel that I understood images and their contradictions. We were doing cars—Humber 80s—and you'd have people from the motor industry come and look before you started on a big run of them. They'd say: 'No, no, no, the heads are too big.' They were from photographs, so they were absolutely right. But you'd reduce it, and they'd come back again: 'No, no, no, they've got to be smaller.' We worked it out that by the time we'd gotten to 'yes, that's it', the heads were the size of a grapefruit. We'd laugh. We'd think it was so funny. But I remember driving down the Ngauranga Gorge, and at the bottom, there were the big Humber 80 panels—and it looked *right!* I thought: 'How does that happen?'

E.H.: So you gained an insight into how you could play with reality.

R.R.: Yes, but it *stayed* reality. That's the thing. I couldn't paint abstracts. I have done, but it was always glib, preconceived, controlled and tidied, and that wasn't me. When we were working on the billboards, though, we'd put sheets of paper on the floor where all the paint fell down. There were some beautiful bits—I've still got some. It was totally unconscious, just accident. But accident is a big part of what I enjoy doing.

E.H.: It's interesting that the American pop artist James Rosenquist had a similar background, painting billboards.

R.R.: I would have loved to have talked to him. He was the one who said it takes a lot of work and a hell of a lot of Jack Daniel's to get through it all! He was a hero of mine, that's for sure.

E.H.: Rosenquist also had that experience with distortion when seeing a huge image up close while working up on the scaffolding. And painting just a fragment of an image—part of a wheel or a head—affected his later paintings in terms of chopping things up, the collage effect. Where did you do the work? On the billboards themselves or in a studio?

R.R.: Mostly in a studio. There'd be seven or eight big things going at once. But we worked on the scaffold too, over the Ngauranga Gorge with trucks

coming towards us—'it's going to hit us!'—whoosh, underneath! I didn't do too much of that because I didn't put my name down for it. It was a filthy, awful job, with the trucks, and paint flying everywhere. Other guys liked it.

E.H.: When did you start to become seriously interested in art and to look at particular artists?

R.R.: When would that be? Late 1950s or early '60s. I remember going into the Wellington Library, opening a book on modern American painting, and there was a Barnett Newman. It was the best thing I'd ever seen! The power of it. I couldn't describe or intellectualise it, but I recognised it when I saw it.

E.H.: Not many people would see a Newman in a book and have that response.

R.R.: No. I showed it to people and they thought I was nuts! And there was so little information on him. There was in America, obviously, but it wasn't filtering down.

E.H.: Well, even in the US people were dubious about Barnett Newman in the late 1950s. What about New Zealand artists—what struck you first up?

R.R.: First up was academic sort of landscape stuff. I never practised that, but I gave them their due. And then, quite late in the piece, Colin McCahon. There was a McCahon, Woollaston and Angus show at the Centre Gallery in Wellington, which blew me apart. McCahon did, anyway. I remember ringing my mate and saying: 'I just don't know what I'm looking at.' It even smelled good! I got to him through the likes of Edvard Munch—the landscape but also the figure, the





way he *felt* them through, rather than just illustrating them into some shape. Colin and I got on well. He could be awful, but he was a lovely guy too. He left the Auckland City Art Gallery just as I started working there, but he came back to finish projects. And sometimes he'd ring me up and say: 'Ross, you've got to see this. In Queen's Arcade there's a whole lot of paintings by a ladies' painting group. Four from the left, see how she's signed her name.' And you'd think it was a bit weird, but you'd go down there and find it was signed rather like Frances Hodgkins. Silly little things like that, but very interesting.

E.H.: I guess that shows how much he looked at stuff—at *anything*.

R.R.: That's true. Picasso was the same. I think that's a healthy way to be. I'll look at that shit too. I will. Because every now and again you think 'oh, that's sort of cool', or 'that's a good accident', or 'how the hell did they do that?'

E.H.: How did you get the job at the Gallery?

R.R.: I was making socks out at some bloody factory at night, and sleeping on the gallery floor in the day, in the back rooms . . . How *did* I get the job? Oh yes, Hamish Keith asked if I would come in for an afternoon a couple of days a week, and shift stuff. I did cleaning and all sorts when Peter Tomory was there. Then Gil Docking came and said he was going to make me permanent, and I made frames and later worked on exhibitions with David Armitage.

E.H.: I have some photos from the Auckland Art Gallery's Research Library of you at work on the 1971 Morris Louis exhibition that David Armitage instigated.

R.R.: With my pipe?

E.H.: With your pipe, unrolling the canvases and what not.

R.R.: It was a scary-as-buggery job, I can tell you.

(opposite) ROSS RITCHIE *Olympia* 1992
Oil on canvas with attachments, 1640 x 1590 mm.
(Private collection, Wellington)

(right) Ross Ritchie (standing) with Harry Wong working on the Morris Louis exhibition at Auckland City Art Gallery, 1971
(Courtesy of E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki)

(below left) ROSS RITCHIE *Blanket Man* 1985
Oil on canvas, 785 x 795 mm.

(below right) ROSS RITCHIE *Reefton Man* 1963
Oil on canvas, 1830 x 1620 mm.
(Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery)

That was the first true modernist show. There was the Mitchener Collection too—terrific collection, with Franz Kline and that sort of stuff. Then the beautiful show we had from the Museum of Modern Art with all the modernists . . . what was it? Age has caught me here, mate!

E.H.: Oh, *Some Recent American Art*. Mainly minimalist and conceptual work.

R.R.: That's it. Don Judd and co.—the best.

E.H.: What in particular did you get from seeing that show?

R.R.: Courage. What a risk they took. Not only that, the museum took the risk, the dealers took the risk, everybody. We had guards, who had been in the gallery for years, walk out. 'I'm not going to stand here guarding bricks!' That was humorous, but, you know, it got into them, in that sense.

E.H.: Your paintings of that period had a pop flavour. There was the *Reefton Woman* and the *Reefton Man*, which were late 1960s and 1970s. What was the significance of Reefton? Coalmining?

R.R.: It was. Jeff Macklin, a mate of mine, and I decided to walk from Nelson to Dunedin. Reefton was on the way. That was where *his* family had been miners. It was like going back in time. Lovely people. Ladies sitting in the living room mending the cuffs of the priest's trousers—nineteenth-century stuff, you know. So Reefton made a big impression, and it



was a way of naming something. It was like *The 90th Garden* [1965]. That was *Composition in Red* originally, but Barry Lett and some others said it would never sell with that title. I was drunk, I think, and they were saying: 'Well, how many have you done?' I said I'd done 90. And it's a garden, so they said: 'Oh, it's the 90th garden.'

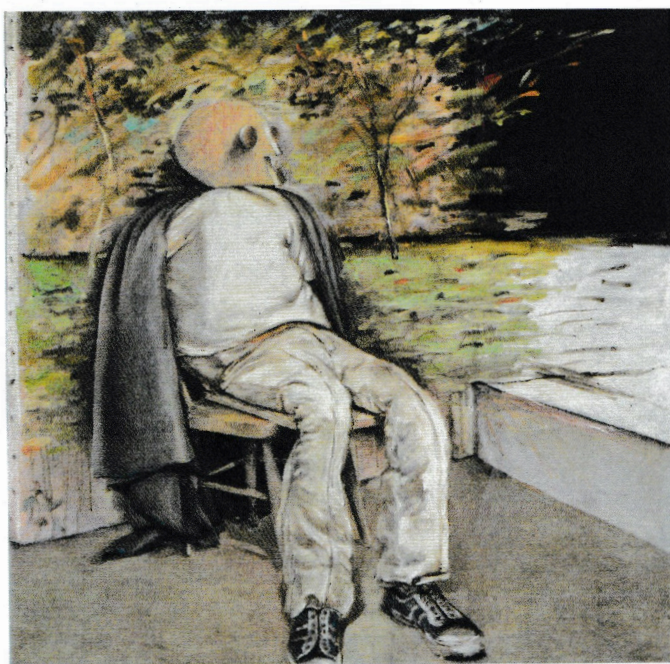
E.H.: Works from the 1980s that stand out for me are the animals, like the donkey and the hippo, and also the mannequins.

R.R.: Yeah, the mannequins had something. Then I exhausted myself with it. It was a hard time. I separated from my first wife. Then I met Wendy [Harsant]. She made some mannequins for me for a while.

E.H.: How do you make mannequins?

R.R.: You get rags and stuff them with clothes and cardboard boxes and sticks and shit like that, and put them on a seat, and that's it.

E.H.: They relate to the macabre side of your work.





(left) ROSS RITCHIE *White Dwarf* 2001
Oil on canvas with canvas board attachments, 1700 x 1620 mm.

(below) ROSS RITCHIE *Oyster* 1998
Oil on canvas board, 200 x 755 mm.

Oyster (1998), flanked by two blank white panels. Do you find pleasure simply in the handling of the paint?

R.R.: I don't over-indulge in it, but I do. And I like the subtlety in shifting parts and edges. I remember McCahon saying 'look after the edges'. He took a lot of time over where a plane comes across, and how it all fits. You have to do it without losing the feeling of the whole picture to the technical fiddling around. A lot of Cubists murdered themselves doing that, whereas Braque didn't, Picasso didn't. Toulouse-Lautrec is another one that's affected the way I work, and I've got his brothel keeper in *White Dwarf* (2001).

E.H.: In an essay for one of your shows at Whitespace, Amy Stewart wrote that 'Ritchie is not trying to have a conversation with you'. It's a good line. I get a bit annoyed myself when people say 'art is a conversation'.

R.R.: Oh, yeah. No, it's not! I take it more seriously than that. I think *your* job must be tough.

E.H.: Well, I do find it tough!

R.R.: I can see that. Not in that way . . . that came out wrong! I took this Jean Cocteau quote out of the *Listener* the other day: 'An artist cannot talk about his art any more than a plant can discuss horticulture.' That's so good. And yet it's got to happen, and I always get a lot out of it. Like today: you've asked me things that, now you've asked, I'm starting to think about again, and that's good.

E.H.: That's a bit like the Barnett Newman one about aesthetics being for artists like ornithology is for birds. The thing is, when you look at art, it's just there. It's not telling you anything, which is what you said at the beginning when I asked 'what's it about?' But there is something distinctive about the way your work offers snippets of visual information and doesn't fill you in. Of course, an artist might put a whole lot of imagery together and say 'oh, it doesn't have a particular meaning—it's whatever you want to make of it', and it's superficial. How do you make something that is arbitrary not seem arbitrary?

R.R.: It is in the making, the putting together. That is the hard part: to make it *convincing* and *real*. If it falls short of that, it's decoration. Simple.

R.R.: Which is really just anxiety. I'm the most anxious bastard on earth, I really am. I tell you what happened: I was in a hardware shop, rummaging through stuff, and I thought there was somebody in front of me. It was a cardboard cut-out of a policeman, life size. I thought: 'I wonder if I can do *that*.' I tried, but I couldn't quite get that feeling of someone in the room. At that time, the Irish troubles were happening, and *Blanket Man* refers to the IRA prisoners—Bobby Sands and those guys. They wanted to make the prison the most horrible place for the guards to work in, so they were wiping their faeces all over the wall. And one of them said: 'After a while, it becomes a landscape.'

E.H.: A lot of your paintings are based on appropriations from other artists. Why?

R.R.: There's nothing even vaguely intellectual about it, I can tell you. It's just things that attract you, that you think you understand a bit—or don't. No, there's no depth, it's just subject. It's everybody's property. And originality? It's not true.

E.H.: You've done paintings of Manet's *Olympia*, which Émile Zola described as being a picture about white. I have been thinking about the particular feeling you get from whites and blacks, and how it relates to both Manet and Velázquez. There is a connection too in your painterly 'touch'—the fleshiness of the oyster in the central black panel of

