

## Of Overcoats and Suitcases

### The Painted Narratives of Bob Kerr

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Bob Kerr describes how he 'escaped' from Tokoroa and arrived at Elam School of Fine Arts in 1970: 'it was like a door opening, a new world'. Particularly revelatory was painting lecturer Colin McCahon's standard introductory exercise, a pair of eggs on a white saucer. Kerr admits that at first his subjects appeared as if made of cotton wool or concrete, and his saucer didn't sit convincingly on the table, but the exercise was invaluable and taught him to look and understand 'how stuff physically fills the space'. After completing his DipFA (Hons) the development of his own painting style included regular reference to art books in libraries, and he likens the search for a personal language to 'trying on other people's overcoats to see if they fitted'.

Prior to his first exhibition of paintings, in 1999, Kerr produced illustrations for children's books. The first of these were *Lucy's Big Plan* (1977) and *Lucy Loops the Loop* (1978), followed by his collaboration with writer Stephen Ballantyne for the popular series of Terry Teo stories.<sup>1</sup> Kerr suspects his book

illustration work was a result of having a family; the books followed his own children's interests and 'tended to grow up as they grew up'. At the same time some of these publications (which now total around 20) reflected his interest in New Zealand history, which became the main theme of his painting.

While his illustrations are executed in watercolour, Kerr's preferred medium for his paintings is oil. Working out of what he terms 'this little corner of the paddock' and taking a narrative approach, he has focused on the achievements and contributions to New Zealand society made by a select group of influential individuals. In one series of three exhibitions, between 2000 and 2008, he examined the local landscape through the eyes of scientists Leslie Adkin, Charles Fleming and Harold Wellman.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he began another series, of five linked exhibitions, based on the theme of dissent in this country. Three of these examined the consequences of resistance to conscription, which was introduced in 1916 to maintain the supply of men required for active service overseas: the 1916 invasion by police of Maungapohatu and the arrest of the prophet



(opposite) BOB KERR *Driving up the Paraparas (3)* 2016  
Oil on board, 250 x 600 mm.

(right) Bob Kerr in his Wellington studio, 2016  
(Photograph: Alan Knowles)

(below) BOB KERR *The Red Bulldozer* 2016  
Oil on board, 200 x 1400 mm.

Rua Kenana for sedition, and the punishment and imprisonment of anti-conscription campaigners.<sup>3</sup> The two other exhibitions were concerned with the individuals responsible for the origins of the Social Security legislation adopted by the first Labour Government in 1938, and the 1912 strike by gold miners at Waihi.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to these essays on social issues and disruption during the early decades of the twentieth century, Kerr's most recent exhibition—*Inland*, at Auckland's Whitespace in October last year—was intentionally devoid of what he terms 'left-wing hectoring'. Instead, it consisted of images that had been 'cluttering up' his mind for some time, and needed to be dealt with. But while there may have been no obvious political aspect, certain of these ten paintings—all landscapes—did suggest a strong concern for the environment. With one exception, all were without people, although several had incriminating evidence of human presence. And whereas the earlier exhibitions presented sequences of linked images, the paintings included in *Inland* were more self-contained, although some sense of narrative was retained by the physical format of the canvases. Most were distinguished by their panoramic proportions, their length being upwards of six times their height. Kerr professes an aversion to the square, and employs this narrow approach to reflect the fact that as 'islanders' we are habitually scanning the horizon.

Kerr has an interest in 'what paint does', and his use of oils is spare in the extreme. There is no impasto or discernible thickness, but rather a range of effects extracted from the very thinness of the pigment as applied to board. He lays the paint on quickly with a large brush, and his challenge is to resist the temptation to tidy up and diffuse the impact of those initial spontaneous strokes. The aim is to achieve an immediacy, and hold on to it. Thereafter, the more delicate details are added with a smaller brush, and can be worked into the wet background. A distinctive feature of Kerr's method is the judicious mixing of oil

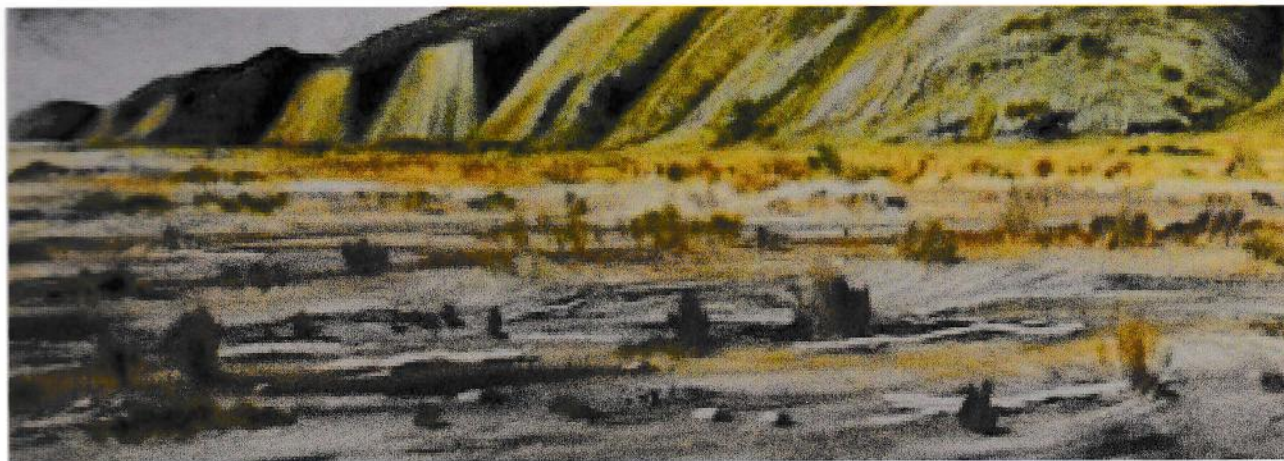


pigment and turpentine, which allows him to produce intricate and organic effects far beyond the capabilities of a conventional paint brush. He describes this fortuitous and reactive mixing as 'a negotiation with accident'; such desirable results cannot be entirely planned and the artist needs to 'trust the paint'. In terms of technique, Kerr acknowledges in particular the influence of Australian painter Fred Williams, whose retrospective he saw across the Tasman in 2011.

The first in the sequence of the *Inland* paintings was *The Red Bulldozer*, driverless and alone on a country road which spans almost the entire canvas before disappearing from view behind a steep bluff. Such tractors have been responsible for carving access roads across rugged farmland throughout New Zealand. In this and the accompanying landscapes the hills have been denuded of their original bush cover, probably by what Kerr refers to as 'matchbox farmers' and in a process 'driven by the economics of paddocks'.

Four paintings dealt with the Paraparas, a region of rugged limestone hills on State Highway 4 south of Raetihi. The road winds between the papa (mudstone) hills and Kerr knows it well, describing it as 'bloody magic' in the late afternoon. He has painted it as he remembers it, before engineers straightened out some of the bends. These images demonstrate his technique at its most exuberant and economic—the road and the flanking clusters of bare conical hills are expressed in long sweeping strokes, while trees, fence posts and roadside signs seem to bend under some mysterious force. The sky has been overtaken by a dramatic meteorological effect radiating from behind the distant hills; there is definitely something magic in the air here.





These paintings of the Paraparas might also be seen as a step on the way to abstraction, in emulation of the work of Fred Williams, and a conscious effort on Kerr's part to resist the temptation of representation and the pictorial approach. They are also in contrast with his more restrained depictions of the Te Humenga dunes, on the south Wairarapa coast between Lake Ferry and the Cape Palliser lighthouse. The subject of two truly panoramic images, each 1800 mm. long, this landscape is also well known to the artist, lying on a 'ferocious coast' and exposed to fierce southerlies. To evoke its 'great presence' Kerr has overlaid his broad-brush background with intricate vegetal detail, masterfully capturing the sense of a unique and delicate ecosystem. He was also drawn to the fact that these dunes were the home of some of this country's earliest arrivals from east Polynesia, and there is surviving evidence of the stone garden walls they built before they moved on.

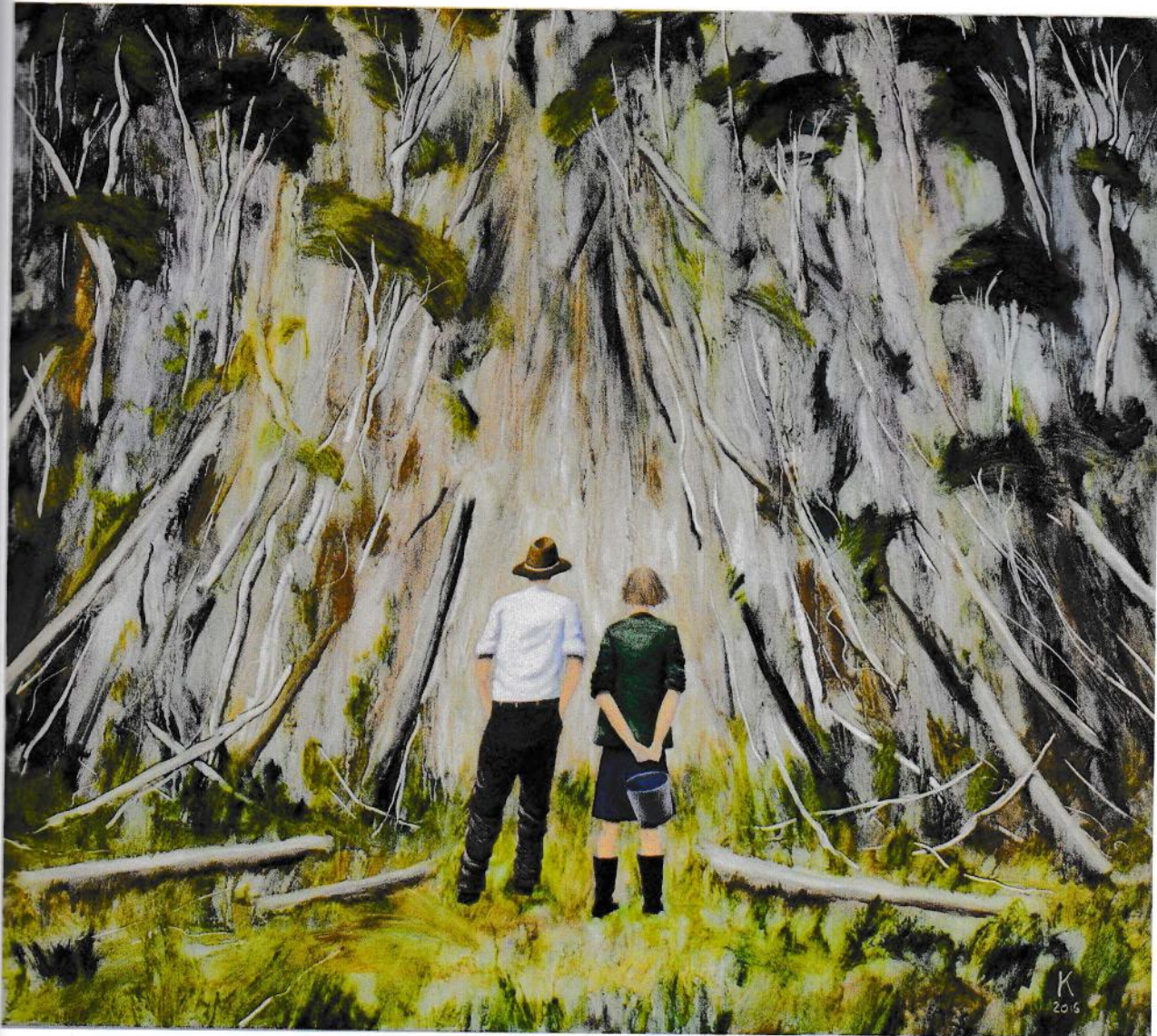
It was just such a landscape that served Kerr well when approached to produce an image for the cover of Michael King's *Penguin History of New Zealand*, published in 2003. In order to suggest human habitation Kerr included rising smoke and signs of a track through the sandhills. The selected image therefore had the benefit of historical

ambiguity; it could be a recent scene of a deserted beach, or alternatively refer to those first people who inhabited the Wairarapa coast some 700 years ago. This composition must qualify as one of the most reproduced paintings in New Zealand, having appeared on the cover of more than 230,000 copies of the biggest-ever selling book on this country's history.<sup>5</sup>

The most enigmatic image in the exhibition was *Seven Suitcases on the South Coast*, presenting a set of serious-looking leather cases deliberately arranged in an arc in front of a cliff face. The exquisitely rendered cases were all slightly different, and their pristine condition suggested they had not done a lot of travelling. But if their purpose here was a mystery, so too was the significance of their number; seven enjoying multiple associations, from the days of the week to the colours of the rainbow and the deadly sins. This unlikely juxtaposition of suitcases and coastal landscape could be interpreted as a metaphor for yet another form of baggage, of a human kind, as in responsibility for the erosion which has scarred the cliff in the background.

The final painting in the *Inland* sequence takes its title, *When Tom and Elizabeth took the farm*, from the first line of what is probably Denis Glover's





most famous poem, 'The Magpies'. First published in 1941, each of its six verses repeats the distinctive carolling song of the introduced bird, the memorably onomatopoeic 'quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle'. The poem relates to the misfortune of those New Zealand farmers during the Depression of the 1930s who were saddled with unproductive back-country properties and forced to walk off their land. In a more conventionally rectangular canvas, Kerr presents Tom and Elizabeth with their backs to the viewers, confronting an impenetrable hillside of tangled trunks and vegetation. It proved an impossible economic proposition for the hopeful young couple; any profits went to 'the mortgage-man' and in the end 'Old Tom went light in the head'. As in Kerr's earlier exhibitions on historical themes, this painting refers to the social challenges facing this country in the early twentieth century, while also reiterating a concern for the environment. As Kerr has documented, much of rural

(opposite above) BOB KERR *Te Humenga Dunes 1*—detail 2016  
Oil on board, 200 x 1800 mm.

(opposite below)  
BOB KERR *Seven Suitcases on the South Coast*—detail 2016  
Oil on board, 300 x 1800 mm.

(above) BOB KERR *When Tom and Elizabeth took the farm* 2016  
Oil on board, 830 x 930 mm.

New Zealand was tamed by means of match and tractor, even if it did manage to defeat the efforts of Tom and Elizabeth. The underlying message seems to be that if this assault continues unabated, the implications for all of us may be untenable.

All comments by the artist were made in an interview with the author, 12 October 2016.

1. Words by Stephen Ballantyne, illustrations by Bob Kerr: *Terry and the Gunrunners* (Collins, 1982), *Terry and the Yodelling Bull* (Finlayson Hill, 1986), *Terry and the Last Moa* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), and *Terry Teo and the Gunrunners* (new edition, Earths End Publishing, 2015).

2. *The Field Evidence* (2000, based on the diaries of geologist, archaeologist and ethnologist Leslie Adkin), *Charles Fleming Hears the Kokako Sing* (2007, on ornithologist Charles Fleming), and *The Man who Moved New Zealand* (2008, on Harold Wellman and the Alpine Fault).

3. *The Rua Expedition* (2003–4, on the 1916 invasion of Maungapohatu, led by Police Commissioner John Cullen), *Number One Field Punishment* (2008 and 2014, inspired by Archibald Baxter's book, *We Will Not Cease*), and *It Was The Fun of The World* (2015, based on letters written by anti-conscription campaigner Tim Armstrong to his children from Lyttelton jail). Full details of these exhibitions can be found at <http://bobkerr.co.nz/>.

4. *The Three Wise Men of Kurow* (2011, 2014), and *Gold Strike* (2012–13); see <http://bobkerr.co.nz/>.

5. [http://www.writerscentre.org.nz/michael\\_king.php](http://www.writerscentre.org.nz/michael_king.php).