SEVERAL DEGREES OF ATTENTION

Several Degrees of Attention:
Thinking with the Collection

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9 July – 7 November 2022

Kate Coolahan
Turumeke Harrington
Ralph Hotere
Sonya Lacey
Rozana Lee
Maria Olsen
Michael Parekōwhai
W. A. Sutton

curated by
Māia Abraham
Elle Loui August
Simon Gennard
Amy Weng

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Collections are always a product of the interests of collectors and the place and time of their creation. This is especially so with visual art, collections of which are determined by the purpose of the gallery or museum and its curators. And small collections, of which the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's permanent collection of contemporary art is one, are by nature partial, never having had the intention to be fully representative of contemporary art practice in its entirety, nor the means or opportunity to collect in breadth or depth.

Since its inception, the Govett-Brewster collection has had a steadfast focus on acquiring art of the current moment. With resourcing limiting acquisitions to just a small handful of works a year, the collection breaks the logic of collecting as an aspiration to be universal. Instead, the lens on artists and works found in the collection slowly and gradually shifts its focus year by year to highlight select art practices of the day. While a rich repository of work by artists from Aotearoa and beyond, the Govett-Brewster collection is as subjective as any other, equally characterised by gaps as much as signature works.

For *Several degrees of attention* four curators were invited to reflect on what they found of interest in the Govett-Brewster collection, and I thank them for their thoughtful examination that has shed new light on several artists who inhabit the collection and the narratives which their art raises.

Māia Abraham, Elle Loui August, Simon Gennard and Amy Weng have each offered new insights into how art from our recent past, in conjunction with new works by younger artists, can open up space for thought. Their four individual exhibition projects invite understanding through relationships that can be drawn between practices and ideas across time.

Simon neatly summarises the distinctive nature of the four sections that comprise *Several degrees of attention*: "Rather than building toward a containable narrative of the collection as an entity, each exhibition project acts as a chapter, thinking closely with individual artists; the contexts they inhabited, the material and intellectual problems they worked through; and the stakes at play in approaching and navigating their practices now."

Using the rauru spiral as a guiding metaphor, Māia's project *Tāheke* draws connections between three generations of contemporary Māori artists: Ralph Hotere, Michael Parekōwhai and Turumeke Harrington.

Elle Loui reconsiders W. A. Sutton's life-long engagement with the Canterbury landscape through his ambitious series of paintings *Te Tihi o Kahukura* (1976–1977), bringing together most of the series for the first time since its original exhibition in 1978.

In *Thresholds*, Simon explores sculptor and painter Maria Olsen, whose works produced in the 1980s evade literal interpretation, placing her works alongside new sculptural and moving image works by Sonya Lacey in which Lacey extends her research into the chemical and philosophical implications of states of sleep and sleeplessness.

Amy Weng looks into print and paper maker Kate Coolahan who, during the 1970–80s created works reflecting migrant women which Weng understands as offering a counter narrative to dominant artistic and national dialogues at the time. Weng includes large-scale batik fabrics by Rozana Lee alongside Coolahan's work to propose a material affinity and shared interest in questions of encounter and identity between two artists of different generations.

On behalf of the Gallery, I thank Simon Gennard for his careful shepherding of this project, Māia Abraham, Elle Loui August and Amy Weng with Simon for their considered curatorial work, Turumeke Harrington, Sonya Lacey and Rozana Lee for their contributions, Chloe Cull for writing in response to *Te Tihi o Kahukura* and the entire Govett-Brewster Art Gallery|Len Lye Centre team who take seriously their roles as kaitiaki for the collection, exhibition and its dialogues, and sharing these stories with our visitors.

Zara Stanhope — Director

THRESHOLDS

Sonya Lacey, Maria Olsen
curated by Simon Gennard

Thresholds considers two materially and conceptually distinct practices, both of which take us to the margins of what is speakable, knowable or graspable. It includes a small selection of works by Maria Olsen, produced between 1983 and 1988, alongside a newly commissioned installation by Tauranga-based artist Sonya Lacey. Both artists depart from different positions to ask what understandings of ourselves, our bodies and the world might become legible when rational thought or measures of time are suspended, even briefly. What information passes through the body at certain times of day, in certain states of consciousness—distraction, daydreaming, in the haziness of fatigue—and how might we register these states of feeling outside of language?

This exploration begins in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery collection with a work by Maria Olsen, titled *Threshold* (1983). A large wall-based sculpture, over a metre and a half high, the work was produced through a process of layering gesso-soaked muslin into a shape that seems at once organic and foreign. An arch protrudes from the centre of the work, acting as some kind of passageway or architectural boundary. Around the arch, bones are scattered. Flecks of pigment—pinks, yellows—peer out from a dark, but slightly glistening background.

Olsen said little about individual works during her lifetime. Numerous writers have remarked on the privacy the artist maintained in relation to her work.[1] In the few interviews she gave, she was reluctant to distil her thought into literal readings, to constrain works into being containers for the representation of a single idea or a vehicle for an explicit politic.[2] Instead, she preferred to linger on process, or to gesture in the direction of a citation, without ever attempting to neatly illustrate an idea. The inscrutability of Olsen's work—her privacy, her relative silence—may be essential to consider when engaging with her practice. For it may be that through Olsen's work we are invited not into a relation of mastery, or to engage in a task of unlocking secrets, or unpacking a direct representation, but led into a different kind of encounter—more affective, indeterminate and fluid—than what we may be used to.

1. See Cheryll Sotheran, 'Six New Zealand Artists for Australia,' in *Australian Perspecta* '85 [exhibition catalogue] Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1985, 148; and Christina Barton, 'Maria Olsen,' in *NZXI* [exhibition catalogue] Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1988, 70.
2. Lita Barrie, Interview with Maria Olsen, Women's Art Archive Interview Project, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Lita Barrie, 1984.

Maria Olsen in her studio on Shortland Street, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, c.1983. Courtesy of Ruth Parry Williams.

Hotere was a natural teacher and leader. He travelled and worked far and wide and was particularly influenced by his time in Europe, where he studied on a New Zealand Art Societies Fellowship between 1961 and 1965. There, he was thrust into a world of modernist art, with artists such as Henry Moore, Paul Klee, Barbara Hepworth and Kazimir Malevich leaving great impressions on him and his painting style. This international foundation and his ability to merge the principles of modernism with his Aotearoa context and particularly his knowledge of Te Ao Māori set him well ahead of his contemporaries. He thought deeply and his paintings reflect that. The 'Black paintings' series demonstrates a confidence and sophistication in his practice—a will to refine ideas and remain deliberate in artistic decisions.

We are generously offered so much through Hotere's abstraction. The fine-lined crosses act as reference points, particularly to his deeply Catholic upbringing in the Far North in the 1940s. This spirituality unites with a Te Ao Māori perspective—the velvety black relating to Māori creation traditions of Te Kore, the nothingness and potential—as well as being connected to Te Aupōuri histories. Hotere tended to be silent about his painting and what he was trying to achieve with them, preferring the works themselves to be the explanation. We can interpret this silence as an invitation to engage and contribute, a gesture that empowers the viewer to reflect their identity back through the work. The meanings held within them are suspended, waiting for the moment of viewership to be released. The exhibition asks, what can we learn from Hotere when he is placed alongside his teina, Michael Parekōwhai?

Michael Parekōwhai, *"Everyone will live quietly" Micah 4.4*, 1990, wood and laminate. Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth.

Born a generation later, in the year Hotere began his 'Black paintings,' Michael Parekōwhai inherits what Hotere laid down. *"Everyone will live quietly" Micah 4.4* (1990) is a sculpture that repeats the name Micah, four times in a row. The letters themselves are made out of wood, and covered with a laminate that resembles pounamu. There is a playfulness and sense of discovery to the sculpture that is characteristic of Parekōwhai's work. It tells many stories with clues and overlaps that lead to multiple ways of knowing.

The book of Micah in the Old Testament of the Bible follows the prophet of the same name and records his teachings to the people of Israel. His message was clear: a call for purity and idealism that allow no room for false gods or mimicry. The title of the work comes from Micah's prophecy for the establishment of Zion. In this new utopia, according to the prophet, everyone will live peacefully and quietly together under fig trees and beautiful vines. In his work, Parekōwhai is drawing the connections between New Zion and New Zealand, gesturing to nationalist myths told by the state of a visionary utopia in the Pacific. The work also resurfaces the feelings and concerns of Māori in the 1990s around questions of identity and reclamation from the colonial regime, and the space to be autonomous in our own country. Quite the opposite of living quietly.

Further, the work cleverly addresses ideas of hybridity. The puns embodied in the work compare and assess multiple ideas, but they also work to unite them as critique. Made to look like a stone carving, the work is a manufactured form. Beyond this, the connection to the Bible brings to the surface reminders of other major Māori religious movements that are deeply tied to this place of Taranaki. Māori prophets like Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi of Parihaka and Te Ua Haumēne of the Pai Mārire and Hauhau movements all drew from Bible stories to build their uniquely Māori religious movements. The name Micah also acts as a partial anagram for Michael, enfolding a personal element to the work, placing the artist right there alongside and within the narrative.

As an artist, Parekōwhai has contributed significantly to the artistic landscape of Aotearoa and beyond. He, like Hotere, has been taking art with a Māori essence to the world for many years now. His manipulation of ideas, drawing on influences far beyond his whakapapa, produces work that is sophisticated in its materiality and conceptualisation. Parekōwhai constructs work that invites you in to think deeply and look beyond what is on the surface, and to ask, What dwells below? When will the water clear so the riverbed can be seen? While the works dwell here, they get to know one another, too, trusting that more will be revealed.

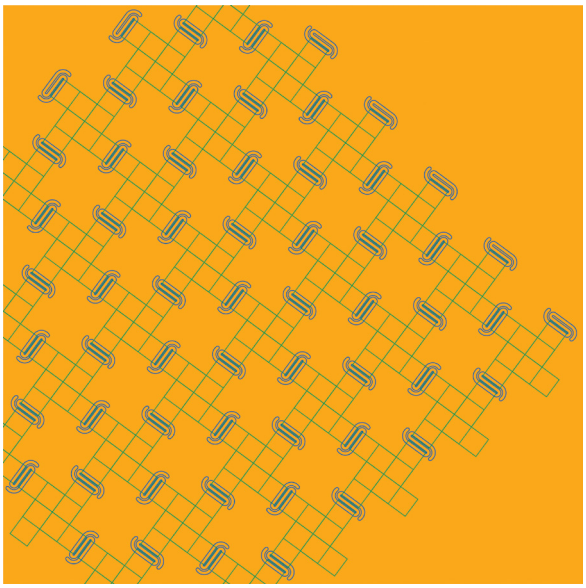
The voices represented in the collection are often strong and established; these works may be familiar to us and each other. As I write this, the collecting of our teina artists is a gap, but this could change over time. Hotere and Parekōwhai have a lot to offer them. Their experience and skill reveal a stream of artistic practice moving from the land and through our artists. Invited artist Turumeke Tui Harrington (Kāi Tahu) is pondering and extending the discussion through her work *For Hineateao, no U-turns* (2022). Harrington is

positioned here as the next wave in the whakapapa of Māori artists, being supported by the work of Hotere and Parekōwhai while simultaneously sharing her voice through her art. The work is a sculpture consisting of a powder-coated steel frame, tracing lines through space as it stands firmly on the floor. Draped over the frame is a U-shaped, net-like structure consisting of individually woven whetū made from polypropylene webbing held together by links that reference the spiral of the rauru pattern.

In many ways, the work is biographical, clearly identifying Harrington as a Kāi Tahu artist. The work is titled in honour of the atua Hineateao, who is the personification of a particular night and keeper of ancestral knowledge. Harrington's name Tui is also referenced throughout the work as a visual manifestation of identity, making reference to Māori artists before her but reasserting in her own way the integral part it plays in Māori practice. Found more intimately in the work are the letters on the whetū that spell out Turumeke, the name of Harrington's ancestor Ema Turumeke and her own as she carries it on. The memory of whakapapa is woven so deeply into the fabric of the work. It is the position from which we see the world and allows connections to be formed and layers to be created. Evident throughout Harrington's practice and particularly in this work is the priority of whānau—and especially so for and through her daughter. The notions of intergenerational learning are embodied quite clearly in the work both materially and conceptually, as it opens itself up to be read from all angles and by all ages. As a collective society, these experiences are shared between young and old, learner and teacher: we're intrinsically connected to one another. The many whetū holding hands to form the net illustrate the importance of gathering and keeping good people around you whether they are whānau or friends.

Harrington stands here not just as an inheritor of knowledge from those gone before, but as someone forging her own path. All the artists are from different iwi and lands across the country, stretching from Te Aupōuri and Te Rarawa in the north to Kāi Tahu in the south. Harrington is the only female and mother in this part of the exhibition, which offers a moment to reflect. Her practice is intimately tied with whānau and raising a child, and her work departs from this place. These ideas are drawn from Te Ao Māori and they are considerations that aren't immediately obvious in the works of Hotere and Parekōwhai. They have a lot to learn from each other and many stories to share. The exhibition offers an opportunity for new ideas and connections to be created in the space and time between them, each artist alternating between tuakana and teina.

Rivers start as a trickle high up in the mountains, feeding out into the oceans. Water is drawn down through ancient pathways that cross the lands our ancestors lived on, whispering as it goes. The stream of whakapapa is replicated here also: the passing on of knowledge. We can learn by being observant, listening to the trickle and trusting in the natural qualities of being in a collective. *Tāheke* presents three Māori artists in wānanga, a forum for whanaungatanga that strengthens connections that have existed long before now and reveals those yet to be made.



Turumeke Harrington, research image, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist.

Turumeke Harrington (Kāi Tahu), guided by whakapapa and a practice of whanaukataka, asks how to make and live as a good person. Humour, play and bright colours are frequently used to soften and subvert sometimes tense and difficult subjects resulting in large sculptural installations at the intersection of art and design. Turumeke has recently completed an MFA at Massey University Te Kunenga ki Purehuroa. She holds a BFA from the University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha, and a BDI (Industrial) from the Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka. Turumeke has been the recipient of several major scholarships and awards including the Arts Foundation Tu Tumu Toi Springboard Wai-Toi-Moroki award (2022), a Te Rūnunga o Ngāi Tahu Kā Pūtea Scholarship (2021), the Colin Post Memorial Scholarship in Sculpture (2020), a Ngāi Tahu Research Centre Scholarship (2018), the Winston Churchill/Hawke's Bay Design Trust Fellowship (2017), and a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholarship to undertake a MDes at Emily Carr University, Vancouver (2017). Recent solo exhibitions include *(Tīkaro) Slowly dawning*, Page Galleries, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2022); *Special time (Ehara i te tī)*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti Dunedin (2021), *Help yourself*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2021, co-authored with Grace Ryder), *Gentle ribbing*, Toi Pōneke, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2020), *Te koretētāmaua settle, petal*, Corban Estate Arts Centre, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2020) and *Mahoranuiatea looking out in every direction*, Objectspace, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2020).

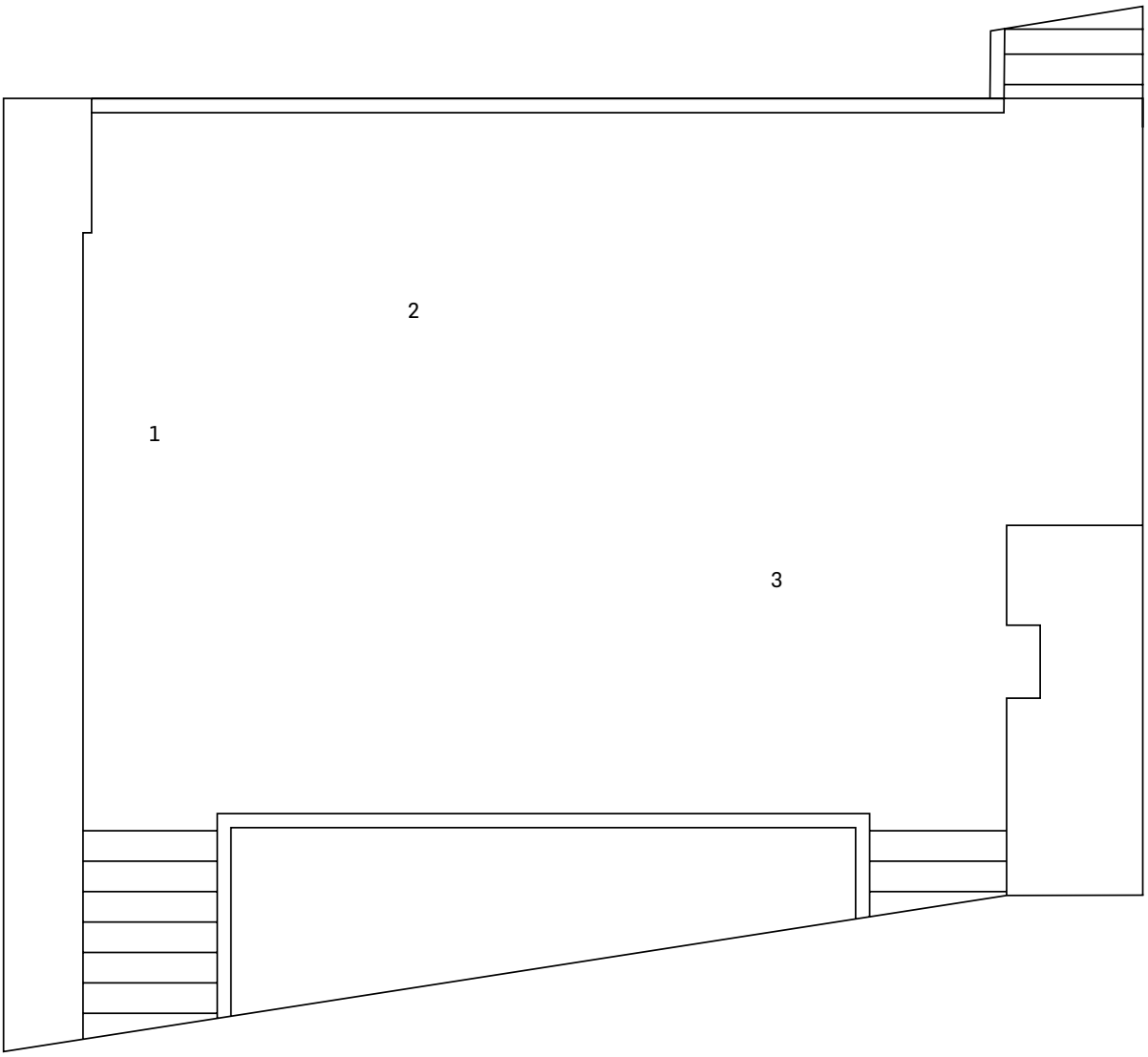
Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri, Te Rarawa) is widely regarded as one of Aotearoa's most important artists. One of eleven children, Hotere was born Hone Papita Raukura to Ana Maria Daniels and her husband Tangirau Kirimete Hotere in Mitimiti, Te Tai Tokerau Northland in August 1931. In the 1950s, Hotere studied at Auckland Teachers' Training College, before relocating to Ōtepoti Dunedin to study at the Dunedin School of Art. In 1953, he worked in the Bay of Islands as a Māori Arts and Crafts Advisor for the Department of Education. During this time, Hotere held his first solo exhibitions, and provided illustrations for the Department of Maori Affairs' journal *Te ao hou*. In 1961, Hotere was awarded a New Zealand Art

Societies Fellowship allowing him to travel to Europe to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. His contact with Modernist artistic developments, as well as the political context of Europe in the 1960s, would have a lasting impact on his practice. Hotere returned to Aotearoa in 1965. In 1968, he exhibited his first 'Black paintings,' Using translucent lacquers and thin strips of colour, they would go on to become some of his most famous works, and among the first to enter the Govett-Brewster collection prior to the gallery's opening. Following his Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in Ōtepoti Dunedin in 1969, he relocated permanently to the city. Hotere collaborated regularly with poets, fellow artists and composers throughout his career including Hone Tuwhare, Bill Manhire, Cilla McQueen, Bill Culbert and Jack Body. Though notoriously silent about his work, Hotere produced many works protesting racism, human rights abuses and environmental destruction. Recent considerations of Hotere's impact on Aotearoa include the exhibition *Ātete (to resist)* developed by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū (2020), and Vincent O'Sullivan's book *Ralph Hotere: The dark is light enough: a biographical portrait* (2020, Penguin Books). Hotere's work is held in major public collections around Aotearoa and internationally. Hotere was appointed to the Order of New Zealand in 2012. He passed away in Ōtepoti Dunedin in 2013.

Michael Parekōwhai (Ngāti Whakarongo) was born in Porirua in 1968 and lives in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Parekōwhai draws upon an abundant range of both vernacular and collective vocabularies in his work. He re-manufactures these lexicons into complex narrative structures and formal languages, exploring perceptions of space, the ambiguities of identity, the shifting sensitivities of historical memory, and the fluid relationship between art and craft. Ideas of camaraderie, the tools of teaching and childhood learning, as well as references to modern art history and popular culture, also play out in many of Parekōwhai's stories. While his work is often described as emphasising the extraordinariness of the ordinary, each body of work has layers of potential for meaning and significance—they are open to any depth of interpretation and storytelling. Parekōwhai graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Elam School of Fine Arts, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 1990, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in 2000. Parekōwhai was selected to represent New Zealand at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 where he exhibited *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* at the New Zealand pavilion. In 2015 he exhibited *The promised land*, a retrospective survey of his practice at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. In 2018, Te Papa Tongarewa opened its newly expanded contemporary art galleries with *Détour*, a major solo exhibition from Parekōwhai. His work has been included in *Toi tu toi ora: contemporary Māori art*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2020); the *5th Asia Pacific triennial of contemporary art*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2006); the *5th Gwangju biennale* (2004); *The 13th biennale of Sydne*y (2002); and *Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (1992). Michael Parekōwhai was awarded an Arts Foundation Tu Tumu Toi Laureate Award in 2001.

Māia Abraham (Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāi Tuhoe, Ngā Rauru) is a curator and artist currently living in Ōtautahi. In 2017, he completed his BFA in Sculpture at the Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury. He was one of three kaiwhakahaere of Ōtautahi Kōrerotia, a collective producing events and exhibitions for and by local artists based in Ōtautahi. He was the Toi Māori and Creative New Zealand Māori Art Intern at Blue Oyster Art Project Space for 2018, co-curating the exhibition *Wā o mua*. Curatorial projects include *Whitu*, Masterworks Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2019, and *UKU//UTU*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti Dunedin, 2019. Māia was also a participant in the Independent Curators International Curatorial Intensive in Tāmaki Mākaurau at Artspace Aotearoa in 2019.

Turumeke Harrington, Ralph Hotere, Michael Parekōwhai
curated by Māia Abraham



1. Ralph Hotere
'Black paintings' 1968–69
Brolite lacquer on board
Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth
Purchased from the Monica Brewster Bequest, with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand in 1968

2. Michael Parekōwhai
"Everyone will live quietly" Micah 4.4 1990
Wood and laminate
Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth
Purchased from the Monica Brewster Bequest with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand in 1991

3. Turumeke Harrington
For Hineateao, no U-turns
2022
Polypropylene webbing, aluminium, steel
Courtesy of the artist

TE IHI O KAHUKURA

W. A. Sutton
curated by Elle Loui August

Te Tihi o Kahukura

The history of Te Waipounamu is in the footprints our tīpuna left behind; and today the best evidence of these footprints are the names they gave to the places they lived, hunted, and visited as they moved about the land.

So we go back to the land, the whenua, and we put the names in place because that's where the history is. Academia has given us one part of history—we have a responsibility to take that other piece and put it together.[1]

In July 2020, the Minister for Land Information Hon. Eugenie Sage announ-ced the restoration of thirteen te reo Māori place names around Te Pātaka o Rākaihautū Banks Peninsula and Whakaraupō Lyttelton Harbour. Following a proposal by Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, on behalf of Te Hapū o Ngāti Wheke, dual names featuring both te reo Māori and English names for significant sites on the peninsula were made 'official,' and described as such by Toitū Te Whenua Land Information New Zealand on their maps database.

Te Tihi-o-Kahukura Castle Rock was one of the names that was restored. A prominent rocky ridge on Te Pātaka o Rākaihautū Banks Peninsula landscape, it juts out above the Heathcote Valley. Tihi means peak or summit. The name Kahukura is shared by several atua, and in many narratives he is manifested physically as a rainbow. Within Ngāi Tahu creation stories, Kahukura worked alongside Tū-te-Raki-Whānoa and Marokura in adorning the land created by the wreck of Aoraki's waka (recognised now as Te Wai Pounamu South Island). Kahukura was responsible for establishing plant life, and populating the landscape with bird song. According to Teone Taare Tikao, Kahukura was also an often invoked guardian for navigators. He protected waka in stormy seas, using the rainbow as a sign to show the way and indicate favourable weather.[2] The significance of Kahukura is recognised within the names of two other sites on or near the peninsula: Te Heru-o-Kahukura Sugar Loaf and Te Iringa-o-Kahukura.[3]

The work by the New Zealand Geographic Board to re-establish traditional names follows decades of work by Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu toward the cultural mapping project, Kā Huru Manu. Through the development of this online atlas, over five thousand traditional place names were researched, mapped and referenced. What becomes clear when using Kā Huru Manu is that within a Māori world view, place names do more than identify a particular location. Rather, they are 'footprints' holding a "cargo of meaning and memory."[4] Embedded within them are cultural values and narratives of people, language and land. Maintaining these names ensures the presence of these histories in living memory.

Chloe Cull

1. Trevor Howse *We are Ngāi Tahu* (Ōtautahi Christchurch: Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahi, 2015), 38.
2. Teone Taare Tikao and Herries Beattie, *Tikao talks: ka yaoka tapu o te ao kohatu: Treasures from the ancient world of the Māori* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990).
3. See Kā Huru Manu, Te Rūnunga o Ngāi Tahu, https://www.kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas
4. Te Aue Davis, Tipene O'Regan and John Wilson, *Ngā tohu pūmahara: the survey pegs of the past* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington: New Zealand Geographic Board Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa, 1990), 5.

William Alexander Sutton was an artist and educator based in Ōtautahi Christchurch and a key figure of twentieth century landscape painting in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu. Throughout his life, Sutton aspired to apprehend the 'nature of things' in the environment around him, and he pursued this understanding via processes of close observation, study and art-making. Whether walking high up in the back country or immersed in self-directed studies in his studio, garden or personal library, Sutton sought an intimate awareness of the patterns and forces intrinsic to his local ecology.

In 1978, then-director of the Govett-Brewster, Ron O'Reilly, purchased Sutton's *Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky V* for the gallery's collection. The purchase was arranged following Sutton's exhibition, *Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky* at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, which comprised ten paintings, each depicting a different view, weather pattern, or mood of a rocky outcrop high on Te Pātaka-o-Rākaihautū The Port Hills, above Ōtautahi Christchurch. At the time, this prominence was known in the parlance of Pākehā as Castle Rock, to Ngāi Tahu as Te Tihi-o-Kahukura.

Since O'Reilly's tenure, the work has seldom been on display, and as a collection object it is something of an anomaly, sitting uncomfortably alongside the vision of contemporary practice that the Govett-Brewster has subsequently pursued. But this discomfort isn't purely stylistic; one might ask what relationship this work has to Ngāmotu New Plymouth, and what stories does it, or can it tell by being here?

At the time of the original exhibition, reviewers saw little more than a return to neo-romanticism, exceptionally realised, occasionally making note of the glimmer of El Greco's influence. Yet by privileging what—to them—seemed obvious about Sutton's visual language, they elided the very thing that could be most unique about this series in Sutton's oeuvre. Of a lifetime spent observing and responding to the whenua of Waitaha Canterbury, in this one instance, Sutton chose to restore the Ngāi Tahu name for the object of his study.

This observation places a different emphasis on this ambitious series of paintings, that includes, but extends beyond Sutton's technical abilities and stylistic choices. It asks that we reevaluate the frameworks through which we see, discuss and exchange ideas around this series of paintings. Most critically, we must ask if Ngāi Tahu understandings of place are evident in the work. And if they are not evident, how might these meanings be restored through the way in which we handle these paintings and frame discourse around them? We might also turn toward the artist's own story to ask: how did he arrive here? Which questions had he posed to which these paintings were the answer?

W. A. Sutton: A Lover's Discourse

A favourite area for me to paint was up at the Bealey, this side of Arthur's Pass and the Upper Waimakariri. I'd stay at the pub there and walk across the river and up-stream several miles to Turkey Flat and lie on the long grass and tussock there, the Nor'wester sweeping over it. That wind governed the whole of nature. The slope of the trees on the far side across the river, they were all moulded by the Nor'wester blowing; the ripple of the grass and tussock, the wind pattern it made was echoed in the shapes of the clouds in the sky, all caused by the same wind. Even the layer of shingle and boulders in the river offering its line of least resistance to the force of water that the Nor'wester released upcountry, up in the tops. That one thing governed it and by seeing the results of a force like that you infer the force itself, you paint the wind itself.[1]

— W. A. Sutton in conversation with Damian Skinner, April 1999.

Of the many themes that animate the story of W. A. Sutton, one of the most consequential was his unlearning of 'appearances.'[2] In 1949, Sutton sailed home to Ōtautahi Christchurch, following two years of postgraduate study at St John's Wood Art School in London. When he arrived he found his sense of place had been sharply refreshed, and the language of his training was no longer adequate for the environment of Te Waipounamu. Soon followed his era of 'country church' paintings, in which the seemingly provisional nature of built structures he found scattered throughout rural Waitaha Canterbury and the suburbs of Ōtautahi are contrasted against the weighty permanence of mountains, riverbeds and restless grassy plains; each element cut with clarity and cast on the canvas as if suspended in the vicissitudes of the climate that had shaped them. This transformational period of Sutton's oeuvre includes two of the paintings for which he is most widely known, *Dry September* (1949) and *Nor'wester in the cemetery* (1950).[3]

Sutton had been a keen observer of the natural world since childhood, so to a degree, his turn to more analytical methods of observation was in keeping with his preferred habits of mind. What was fresh to his intellectual and imaginative wingspan, however, were a wealth of powerful encounters he had experienced in the galleries of London and Paris. J. M. W. Turner's *Snow storm: steam-boat off a harbour's mouth* (1842), and a selection of paintings by Paul Cézanne at the Courtauld made a particularly powerful impression, both of which he continued to speak of with deep feeling and critical acuity until the end of his life; Turner for his grasp of the thing in itself (the storm), Cézanne for his command of colour and compositional relationships, his restating of mass in space.

In the early 1950s, Sutton acquired a motorbike, a BSA Golden Flash, and began tearing about 'up country' and around Te Pātaka-o-Rākaihautū Banks Peninsula. He had a preference for painting en plein air, having become ensconced with the practice while a student at Canterbury College School of Art (now the School of Fine Arts at the

1. W. A. Sutton interviewed by Damian Skinner, 15 April 1999. Visual Culture in Aotearoa Oral Archive compiled by Damian Skinner. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Archives.
2. A term Sutton used to refer to the transient atmospheres and surface effects of Impressionism.
3. As we know, Sutton wasn't alone in his ambition to find a new visual language. Even before his two years in England and galvanising return, he looked to the work of his friends and contemporaries Rita Angus, Doris Lusk, Rata Lovell-Smith, Leo Bensemann and Colin McCahon, whom he admired for a clarity of vision that was not yet his own. Mere months before Sutton boarded his ship home, *Landfall* published a short book review penned by Rodney Kennedy in which the author appears to raise a challenge to local artists to rebel against the imported niceties of English picture-making and instead return to the lucid simplicity of the earlier geologists, surveyors and botanists (Buchanan, Fox, Heaphy et al.), whose "vision was less befogged than ours with aesthetic preoccupations." (Rodney Kennedy 'A Century of Art in Otago, ' *Landfall*, Vol. 2, No.2, 1948.) The La Trobe Scheme, too, had brought a wave of fresh ideas, informed by imported art teachers from Europe with a mind to the modern—including Christopher Perkins and Robert Nettleton Field, whose influence lay

beneath what would become a rich and fascinating period of art history in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu. Of this time, much has been written. For present brevity we might look back on this moment as being much like the braided rivers of the Waitaha Plains; a series of individual artists and ideas flowing in parallel, oftentimes following the lines of thinking of their European predecessors, sometimes in fellowship, other times in fray, but ultimately pooling together in moments for a party, backcountry painting trip or the yearly exhibition of The Group.
4. Sutton and Skinner, Te Papa Archives (1999).

Bill Sutton on his BSA Golden Flash c.1950's, photographer unknown. W.A Sutton Archive, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

University of Canterbury). Painting in this way has the capacity to form a focused (and one could even go so far as to say quasi-magical) relationship between the body, image and place, fusing the senses and the canvas with a visual present-moment-in-the-world, achieved through the design of the intellect and deployment of technique. Or at least this was the way that Sutton came to approach it, fortifying his feeling for place with what he knew—the intellectual and structural ideas gleaned from his love of art history, geometry and wider learning more generally.

For Sutton, painting was conscious organisation, a careful balancing of relationships. What he gathered out in the open air he took home to his studio, where he would prepare a more schematic approach to his larger works on canvas. From a preliminary, foundational skeleton of lines and geometric forms, he then worked through a process of subtle additions and readjustments until he felt each element of his image belonged to every other 'irrevocably.' Rather than composition, he preferred the term 'picture structure' to describe this process, as it emphasised the kinds of intrinsic relationships that he aspired to.[4] Ever fond of a musical metaphor (and a lifelong devotee of the concert programme and live classical music) he likened this aspect of his working method to striking a chord, the allusion being to musical notes as equivalent to the mathematical principles that lay beneath a finished painting. Much like the composers he so admired, Sutton valued pattern

and structure, at times with a kind of raw muscularity that can lend his paintings the sense one is witnessing the geomorphology of Te Waipounamu as it heaves and stretches. For a time, that was the story of place that he wanted to tell—its structure and climate—and by doing so, move toward the deepest knowledge in the land that he could access, and articulate that new awareness with sensitivity and precision.

Of the published writing on Sutton that consider his inner landscape during this period, one of the most insightful and carefully considered pieces was written for the Sutton retrospective catalogue by his friend and fellow artist, John Coley. Warmly titled 'Sutton and his Friends,' Coley's text introduces the reader to the upbringing, social life and philosophical outlook that shaped Sutton's personal life and attitude toward teaching. He also cautiously broaches the topic of Sutton's sexuality, of which discussion was allegedly beginning to circulate around the time that the exhibition *W. A. Sutton/A retrospective* opened at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna Waiwehtū in 2003. Coley structures his sentences in such a way that if you are familiar enough with Sutton's biography, you are able to follow the intimations he makes as he moves delicately around the lacunae that define this aspect of Sutton's story.[5]

In the centre of what remains of Sutton's world, on the second story landing of his former home and studio, a large timber-framed window looks out to a sprawling field of grass and

Members of The Group photographed in front of *Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky V*, during their final exhibition *The 1977 Group Show and The Last* (1977). W. A. Sutton Archive, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

5. It remains crucial to be mindful of the historical conditions of Sutton's lifetime—same-sex relations were deemed illegal in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu until the Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1986. And Sutton was an exceptionally private person, despite the open, gregarious side of his personality so sensitively framed by Coley. Quentin McFarlane writes of him being a "rather shy, scholarly and quiet person, who didn't stand out in terms of his personality but was exceptional in terms of his expertise" as cited in Pat Unger, *W. A. Sutton: Painter*, (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 1994). Nevertheless, during his life, Sutton took on the role of something of a public figure and spokesperson for the arts, and as such, he enjoyed collegial relationships with a wide range of other leading figures. These facts make it worth mentioning that one doesn't have to look far from Ōtautahi to uncover the instance of James Mack's effective dismissal from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 1971 on account of the then Director Charlton Edgar's outrage at his homosexuality. Nor to note that Sutton was a frequent dinner guest of the Edgar's whenever he visited Ōtepoti Dunedin. For further brief reading around attitudes to sexuality in mid-century Ōtautahi see Joanne Drayton '*LGBTQI 1960s marriage was the white noise of normality*,' in *Okay Boomer* ed. Ian Chapman (Auckland: Bateman, 2020).

parkland that is now characteristic of the area known as the 'red zone.'[6] The Ōtākaro Avon river meanders close by, its presence felt in the autumnal dampness that settles in the air of the empty house. Further in the distance, through the haze of morning light and above the turning leaves of the urban canopy is Te Tihi-o-Kahukura Castle Rock, a prominent landmark of Te Pātaka-o-Rākaihautū which rises above the city on the Ōtautahi skyline. Sutton's series of paintings *Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky* (1976–77) came into being in this house during a second transformational period in his life.[7] Though one could easily position this series as being the summation of several lines of artistic thought and a lifetime of training, we can also think of these paintings more directly as beginning here, on the second-storey landing, with Sutton and the rocky prominence which carries the name Kahukura facing one another through the picture window.[8]

Other tributaries flow behind the scenes. In 1972, Sutton travelled back to Europe, spending most of a sabbatical in Italy. His experiences during this year provide a backdrop for the *Kahukura* paintings, most notably his full-body immersion in the paintings of the Quattrocento and High Renaissance periods.[9] The work of Piero Della Francesca and Michelangelo made an especially deep impression on him, and a remark he made during an interview with Deborah Shepard is revealing:

> Everything in his [Piero Della Francesca's] work is completely inevitable, as if it has been there for all time, is part of nature. Piero must have been very much in tune with whatever it is that formed nature in the first place to be able to invent these shapes that fit in so perfectly with it.[10]

It seems to me that this short reflection tells us a lot about what comes next. Although it is difficult to know precisely when Sutton's contemplation of Te Tihi-o-Kahukura began, a trail of preparatory drawings begins not long after he arrived home. What was he moving toward with his ambitions for this series? Was it solely to capture a sense of the residual volcanic energy of Te Pātaka-o-Rākaihautū? The sheer ambition of the project alone is astounding. And then, there is the title. In a career spanning over five decades, and dedicated primarily to the Waitaha landscape, it appears to be the only instance in which Sutton has introduced a Ngāi Tahu name, and its meaning, into dialogue with his work. These questions do call for some thought. As Justin Paton has written, "nothing made it into a W. A. Sutton painting by accident."[11] And there is evidence to suggest that Sutton was not naive, that he had a rudimentary grasp of the concept of mana motuhake.[12] While it's unclear at which point, or where, Sutton came across the name or decided it was a suitable title, or exactly how much he understood about Kahukura from a Ngāi Tahu perspective, it was Roger Duff, then the Director of the Canterbury Museum, who provided him with a translation and a much longer title, *Te Tihi o Kahukura (The Citadel of the Rainbow God) and a sky full of boiling clouds roaring around all over the place*.

6. A 600-hectare area which has been largely designated unsafe for permanent habitation in the wake of the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010–11, and where almost all existing structures prior to the earthquakes have been demolished. Due to exceptional circumstances—largely the foresight and advocacy of individuals—Sutton Heritage House and Garden has been saved from this fate.
7. *Dry September* (1949) and the *Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky series* (1976–77) could be seen as bookends for Sutton's thirty-year teaching career, both being preceded by a period of international travel. Sutton retired from the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in 1979, and as a parting gift, bequeathed the University of Canterbury's Library an incredibly generous sum, enabling the purchase of an edition of Banks' Florilegium.
8. As Chloe Cull has written in her introduction, "The name Kahukura is shared by several atua, and in many narratives he is manifested physically as a rainbow. Within Ngāi Tahu creation stories, Kahukura worked alongside Tū-te-Raki-Whānoa and Marokura in adorning the land created by the wreck of Aoraki's waka (recognised now as Te Wai Pounamu/South Island)."
9. I note, while in Rome, Sutton visited the Sistine chapel a total of fifteen times.
10. W. A. Sutton interviewed by Deborah Shephard, 1982. W. A. Sutton Archive, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, Tape 3.
11. Justin Paton, 'Sutton high-fives McCahon,' Behind the Scenes, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 2 September 2011. https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/blog/behind-the-scenes/2011/09/sutton-high-fives-mccahon

W A Sutton, *Te Tihi o Kahukura V*, 1977, oil on canvas. Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth.

Across each of the ten paintings, Sutton sustains a vision of a silent, primaeval earth suspended between illumination and intimacy. His 'boiling clouds' not only roar but take on the array of moods and layered textures that the skies of Waitaha are so well known for. Built brushstroke by brushstroke into a series of complex atmospheric fields, the anatomy of each sky rewards close viewing. But are Sutton's skies a cipher for the divine? And if so, whose image of the divine precisely? On this, Sutton's biographer Pat Unger writes:

In Bill's paintings the rock became an empty fortress-like place, to be seen by humans but not for humans. Perhaps these were his religious works—New Zealand geomorphology and meteorology elevated to a higher level of thought.[13]

Language is a precise instrument, and while I sympathise somewhat with Unger's reading, 'elevated' is not a word I would settle on. There is an overwhelmingly earthy, almost bodily quality to these paintings that gives one the sense that land and sky are bound together by immense, eternal forces, that are born of the world and its consciousness of itself. The term, or rather, the sensibility I keep returning to is dialogue. In particular, the soft, receptive position of one who listens. Te Tihi-o-Kahukura, it seems, appeared in Sutton's consciousness as a question, attaching itself to his imagination with the same tenacity that grass seed purportedly stuck in his socks—very tough to get out. In turn he responded with a lover's attention, establishing a flow of intelligence between his sense of the whenua that arose in his present, and his scholarly perspective of a thousand years of art history and the myriad ways that artists and storytellers before him have listened to and framed the world.

I come to these paintings, not as a Sutton aficionado, or a specialist in mid-20th century landscape painting, but as someone who has been thinking alongside art-making in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu for a number of years. As a researcher, this series of paintings bring issues to the surface that are tender and complicated, and not so easy to untangle or resolve. In response, rather than turning away from what is difficult and complex, I have turned to them with questions, many of which originate in the early colonial era and the thorny relationships that were then established between representations of whenua in the Colonial Museum in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Those early works of the 19th century, as beautiful as some of them may be on the surface, played a role in the transfer of power, knowledge and land from Māori, and we should not shy away from addressing the violence of that fact.

The earliest Pākehā artists in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu were largely self-taught geologists, botanists and surveyors, and, almost exclusively, self-appointed men of science. Therefore the link between artworks, knowledge, museum collections and place is neither new, nor superficial, but foundational. While artists working within those early scientific frameworks belong to an era before Sutton's time, and bear little direct relationship with his mode of working or concerns, they remain the context for landscape painting in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu.

Presently, there is a metamorphosis unfolding in our galleries and museums. In Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu these processes of transformation are grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and seek to redress and transform the values, practices and governance structures—that determine how knowledge is exchanged, how we engage with artworks and objects, how storytelling takes place, and from whose perspective—in a manner that seeks to honour and uplift the values of that document. In this moment, the question remains open as to whether there may be a role for the many representations of whenua that populate our museum collections. Can they too take on a transformative role as part of these processes? Can they find a way out of the storeroom to tell new stories, or restore those that may have been silenced?[14]

Art history, like history itself, is full of nuance and contradiction, pleasures and sorrows. Now, when I think of Sutton and his fine-grain listening to the world about him, manifesting his feeling of accountability to the places he loved in a form of visual storytelling that has outlived him, I feel a deep sense of fondness for his commitment to his own principles. The passage of his practice also shows by example that we can disentangle ourselves from ways of seeing and thinking we have outgrown, slough off our outmoded attachments, and return to the matters at hand, refreshed. It is also of undoubted significance that he has left us with a resplendent homage to Kahukura, beacon and guide, who adorned the whenua in birdsong and plant life in the wake of the wreck of Aoraki's waka. This too is a story to lean toward in our moment.

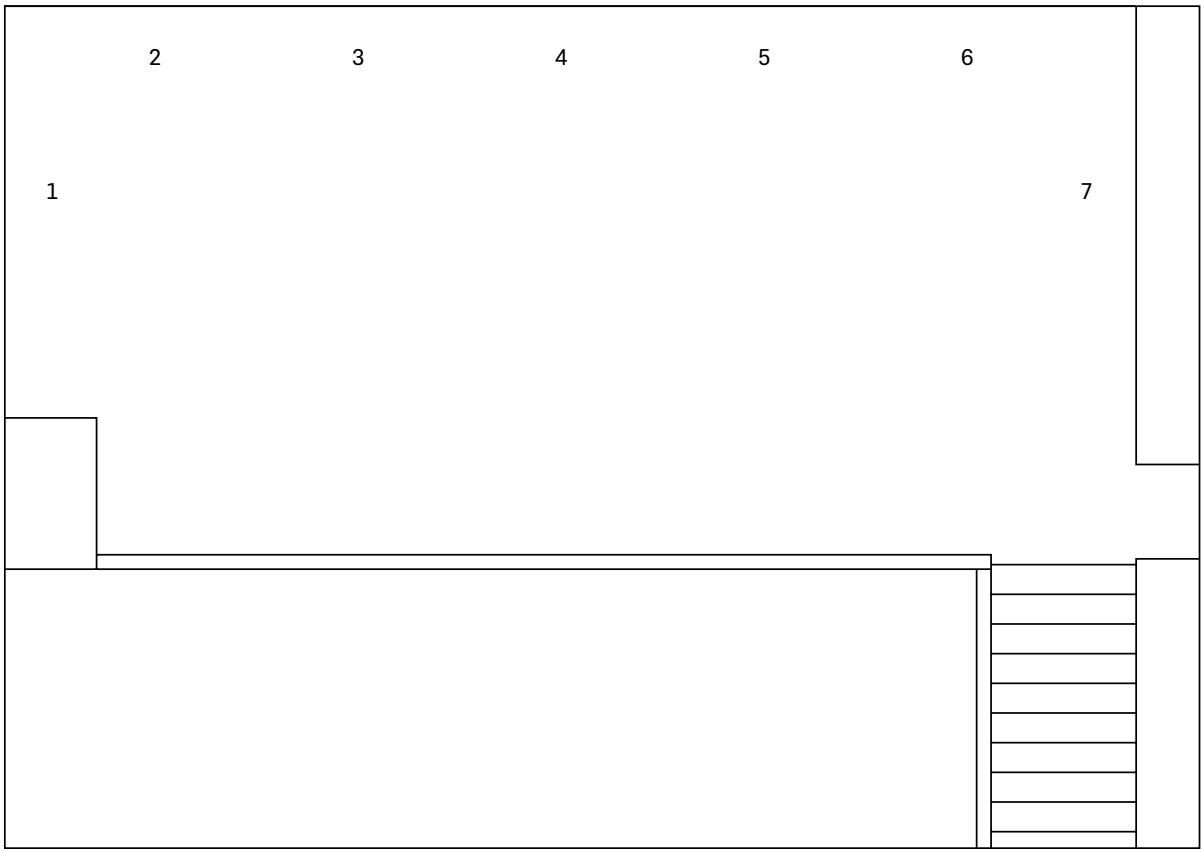
12. See 'Comment on National Museum,' Appendix 2, Pat Unger, *Bill's Story* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2008), 213–215.
13. Ibid., 131.
14. My notion of restoration here leans heavily on that of the late Moana Jackson and the pathway he outlines with the six values for a wider ethic of restoration: the value of place, the value of tikanga, the value of community, the value of belonging, the value of balance, the value of conciliation. Moana Jackson, 'Where to Next: Decolonisation and the stories in the land,' in *Imagining Decolonisation*, ed. Rebecca Kiddle, (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), 152.

William Alexander Sutton (1917–2000) was a key figure of twentieth century landscape painting in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu. Sutton, along with fellow artists based in Waitaha Canterbury such as Rita Angus, Rata Lovell-Smith, Doris Lusk and Leo Bensemann, developed a distinctive interpretation of the region's landscape, and are often referred to as the Canterbury School. A graduate of Canterbury College School of Art (now the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts), Sutton was also a skilled portraitist, fine calligrapher and influential teacher at the Ilam School from 1949–79. During his lifetime, Sutton volunteered time to a number of arts organisations: he was an active member of The Group (1946–1977), council member of the Canterbury Society of Arts (1949–67), a member of the Visual Arts Committee of the Arts Advisory Council and QEII Arts Council, and a trustee of the National Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Sutton was awarded a CBE for services to art in 1980 and the Governor General's Award 1984.

Chloe Cull (Waitaha, Ngāi Tahu, Ngāi te Ruahikihiki) is a writer and curator living in Ōtautahi Christchurch. She is the Arts Programme Coordinator for the Community Services and Facilities team at the Selwyn District Council. Chloe has held curatorial positions at The Dowse Art Museum and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, and is the Chairperson of The Physics Room Board of Trustees, and a trustee of the SCAPE Public Art Trust. Chloe also works part time as a primary school teacher and tutor of Te Reo Māori.

Elle Loui August is an independent writer, researcher and exhibition-maker based in Ōtepoti, Te Waipounamu.

W. A. Sutton
curated by Elle Loui August



1. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky, I 1976
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, purchased 1980

2. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky II 1977
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Wallace Arts Trust

3. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky III 1976
Oil on canvas
The Alex Baird Collection, College House, Ōtautahi Christchurch

4. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky IV 1977
Oil on canvas
Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery

5. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky V 1977
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth
Purchased from the Monica Brewster Bequest in 1978

6. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky VIII 1977
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, purchased 1980

7. W. A. Sutton
Te Tihi o Kahukura and sky X 1977
Oil on canvas
Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery

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