

The painting 'Parkland' by Denys Watkins is a monochromatic work in shades of yellow, orange, and brown. It depicts a central, somewhat abstract figure, possibly a person, surrounded by several fruits. Three red apples are positioned in the upper half of the composition, while three green pears are scattered in the lower half. The overall style is soft and painterly, with a focus on texture and color. The figure's form is suggested by broad, gestural brushstrokes, and the fruits are rendered with more defined outlines and shading.

Denys Watkins  
Parkland

15 November 1990–20 January 1991  
An Auckland City Art Gallery Artist's Project

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Denys Watkins is standing beside the decaying sign for a Balmoral shopping centre called Parkland. Consciously posing as a determined shopper with supermarket trolley, Watkins looks faintly uncomfortable, but committed to his task. And his task is not just shopping, but an investigation of Parkland—the text and the place. This installation presents his findings and responses.

Parkland. The word conjures open, green spaces, calm relaxation, warm sunshine, cool breezes, bird song, dappled light through the leaves of trees, flowing water, the hum of bees, the scents and the colours of flowers and fruit: a pastoral paradise. This is nature's bounty, the subject of innumerable paintings, poems, songs, books and television programmes. As the name of a suburban supermarket it is both wistful and absurd. A voice crying in the wilderness.

Obsessed with efficiency and achievement, urban western cultures operate a vexed and contradictory relationship with nature. In an essay called 'The Green Man', novelist John Fowles writes

We shall never fully understand nature (or ourselves), and certainly never respect it, until we disassociate the wild from the notion of usability — however innocent and harmless the use. For it is the general uselessness of so much of nature that lies at the root of our ancient hostility and indifference to it.<sup>(1)</sup>

Fowles goes on to suggest that ambivalence towards art has a similar root in exasperation with its apparent uselessness. Parks give some evidence of that hostility and ambivalence; not really wilderness they are perhaps closer to art than nature. Like all gardens they offer nature made orderly and useful for human pleasure and recreation.

Shopping, especially shopping for food, is sanctioned as a useful activity. The supermarket is a place where city dwellers have regular contact with nature as producer. Consumer surveys show that many New Zealanders are adopting an American approach to shopping, viewing it as a leisure activity rather than a simple necessity. That is certainly how the supermarket chains would like us to see it. They work hard to stimulate warm associations of community, nurture, fun and recreation in their customers. These food barns may in fact be indoor parklands with spacious aisles, day-bright lights and consumable delicacies arrayed at picking height.

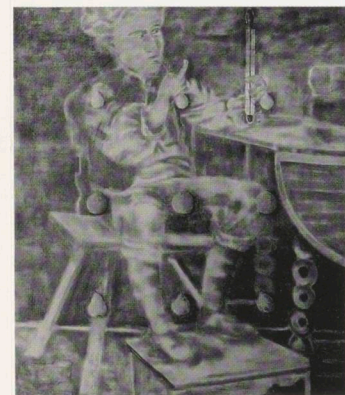


The sifting, isolating and analysing of the artefacts and mannerisms of contemporary urban culture is a constant in Denys Watkins' work, and he views them with irony and some affection. His installation is neither park nor supermarket but somewhere in between — on the grassy verge perhaps. It is furnished with objects reminiscent more of endangered local hardware and grocery stores than Foodtown or Pak'n'Save and contains sharp criticism and warning alongside nostalgia and lyrical fancy.

In his *Parkland* Watkins points to the complicity of representations of nature in art with our need to organise and control it. Throughout the history of art, ownership of the reproduction has indicated control over the original. Watkins makes his own representations of nature and uses those made by others. Trees and birds are here, with fruit and flowers, but all is artifice and imitation: a parade of simulacra, carefully controlled. As every gardener knows there is an irresistible charm in ordering and organising nature. Denys Watkins remembers a childhood fascination with a neighbour's aviary in which budgies were kept colour coded — green in one cage, blue in another, yellow in another.

*Parkland* includes a line of photographs of canaries, red, yellow and green, sitting against coloured backgrounds which match or complement their hue; two perch against swathes of flowers. But these are plastic canaries (the kind that bob on springs which attach with suction cups to car windows) and the flowers are painted. The farthest wall of the gallery is dark forest-green and attached to it are more canaries but still not the 'real thing': these are glazed ceramic casts from the plastic originals. The kingfishers are also ceramic and perch on wall-mounted display brackets rather than in trees or on telegraph lines. Nobody expects, of course, to find live birds, flowers or actual landscapes in an art gallery. Watkins' installation seems to propose that an art gallery's relationship with nature is as tenuous as that of a supermarket, and there is humour in the analogy.

The other objects in the installation — stencilled plywood boxes in tall stacks, fruit trays, paintings, share a softly old-fashioned look, like the labels on 1950s New Zealand produce destined for Great Britain, from her food store in the antipodes. No Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles here. They suggest questions — "Do you remember...?" and then "What do you think about all this?" Most of the 'trademarks' are familiar images: bells, cars, rabbits, ships, angels, fish, buckets, but there is also a scattering of Japanese characters. One translates as forest. If this box represents the sale of our forests to Japanese companies



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perhaps other boxes have similar hidden implications. Other phrases in Japanese appear: Buy me, sell me, love me, help me, save me, need me, thrill me. Nostalgia seems to hover here over a time when shopping was not fraught with contemporary middle-class anxieties about environmentally sound products and politically correct purchases.

In all four of the paintings here, oranges and lemons (and a few pears) seem to float on the surface more 'real' than the images themselves. "Oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clements..." goes the familiar old rhyme, tolling out messages from the bells of London's churches. But the final two lines change the mood and promise a menacing consequence in the manner of many nursery rhymes: "Here comes a candle to light you to bed, and here comes a chopper to chop off your head!"

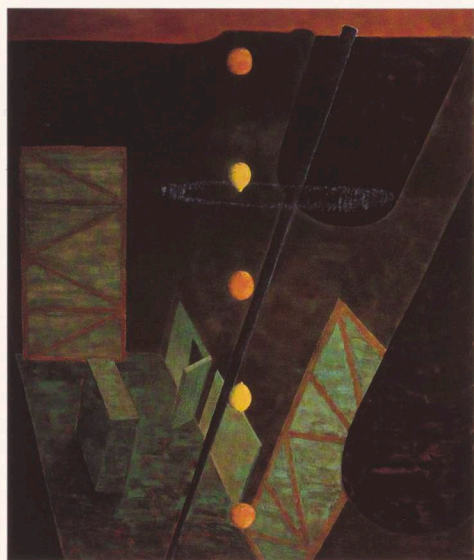
The first part of the rhyme is a recurring motif in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen eighty-four* where it symbolises the longing for an unattainable past. Eventually the chopper falls and as the hero Winston is captured by the Thought Police he hears the last two lines, which he had not known. Once the police have finished with him all his desire to fight against Big Brother has evaporated, he has lost the will or need to question and so, metaphorically, has lost his head.

Is there a chopper concealed in this *Parkland*? The little boy wading in the stream and the old man in his workshop both hold thermometers. The figures are painted in radiantly glowing golden hues and bring to mind the temperature increases caused by pollution of the atmosphere: the greenhouse effect. In another painting birds are silhouetted against the dark branches of a tree, again with the air turning golden. A kingfisher, a robin, a stilt and a blackbird; mere shadows of themselves. The only uninhabited painting is a green interior scene, viewed from a great height, desolate and empty. Between the paintings are ceramic watering cans. Though we need water here they do not provide it; can no more do their job than the canaries can sing. As a final note Denys Watkins includes a large photograph of the ruined sign, tolling out its message of a lost past and a precarious future.

(1) John Fowles 'The Green Man', *Antaeus on Nature*, ed. Daniel Halpern (London 1989).



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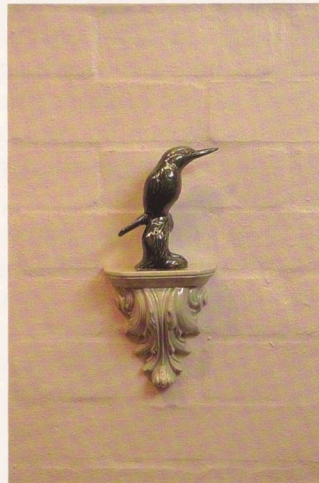


## Brief Biography

Denys Watkins was born in Wellington in 1945. He studied at the Wellington Polytechnic School of Art, and in London at the Central School of Art and Design and at the Royal College of Art. Watkins has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in New Zealand since 1972 and more recently in Australia, Britain and America. He has received many awards including the Transfield Prize in Auckland in 1986 and he was Artist-in-Residence at the Canberra School of Art in 1985. Denys Watkins is represented in all major collections in New Zealand. He works half-time as Senior Lecturer in Printmaking at the Elam School of Fine Art, University of Auckland and lives in Auckland.

## Contents of Parkland installation

Oil paintings  
Cibachrome photographs  
Ceramics  
Stencilled plywood boxes



## The artist wishes to acknowledge the following:

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I dedicate this exhibition to my mother  
JEAN WATKINS 1911-1990

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