

AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

26 January - 5 March 1980

DON PEEBLES

RECENT WORKS: CANVAS HANGINGS AND DRAWINGS

An exhibition organised by the Elva Bett Gallery, Wellington.

The following article is reproduced by kind permission of the Elva Bett Gallery from their Newsletter No. 11, May 1979.

DON PEEBLES - HIS LATEST WORK

by Michael Thomas

Painting to Don Peebles is a dynamic process. His work is in a continual state of evolution and art to him is not the process of realising preconceived ideas or the carrying out of a plan, but is a venture in which the final form is unknown.

His working method is to make highly considered decisions which make the most of each situation, rather than to act in a spontaneous, haphazard or random way. Each additional line or tone - however small or subtle - is a vital element which must be perfectly balanced with all the other elements within the work. Three months might elapse before a hue or an angle is altered. A piece might be exhibited, and then be later rejected or even become part of a larger work; there is nothing static about his art which is continually being re-processed. Don Peebles admits to having to resist the desire to take his paintings or constructions off gallery walls in order to alter them! A piece is never actually finished, he says, 'it reaches a juncture when I can accept it'.

The prospect of having to decide in advance which paintings to include in an exhibition seems unnatural for such an artist, and Don Peebles will not finally decide which paintings to hang in the exhibition until he sees his works in the gallery space.

His paintings are not consciously concerned with meanings, symbols or emotive feelings; there is no deliberate reference in them to anything outside the work. It is the unity of the 'concrete' tangible elements: forms, texture, line, tone, colour, which is the 'raison d'etre' of his art. Don Peebles' work is not only about aesthetics however, and his rejection of painting when it becomes easy or merely aesthetically pleasing make him a painter as challenging as McCahon.

As with McCahon, Peebles' best works are those where the challenge which he sets himself is the hardest - the most daring; the works in which there is a tension between an almost impossible aim and its resolution in the form of art. Such a work is 'Painting 6' x 24' completed just prior to the canvas reliefs in this exhibition. This very large canvas tackles the near impossible idea of fusing together a progression of shapes (triangles) with a completely blank area in the same painting. The monumental size of the task is increased by the appropriate environmental scale of the

work which covers a whole wall. In spite of the fact that there are two distinct parts to this painting it is seen as a total; a complete entity. A comfortable balance is achieved between activity and rest, and one is struck by the aesthetic 'rightness' of the work as a whole. It is - like the best of Peebles' work - a very unified object in which overall shape, texture, colour and forms are in perfect balance. There is nothing which could be done to improve the painting, every mark, however random it appears, is a considered and necessary part of the whole.

Born in 1922, Don Peebles studied in Florence under a study programme organised by the Royal College of Art before returning to New Zealand and attending Wellington Technical College Fine Art Department in the early fifties. During 1951 he moved to Australia where he studied for three years at the Julian Ashton Art School, Sydney, where he was taught by John Passmore. Inspired by Passmore's understanding of such artists as Matisse and Braque, through cubism towards abstraction, and when he returned to Wellington in 1954 he was an abstract painter.

His first exhibition at the Architectural Centre Gallery was possibly the first show of indigenous abstract art shown in the Capital City, and it provoked much controversy in the press.

During the fifties Peebles continued his search for pure abstraction and in 1960, with the aid of a grant from the Association of New Zealand Art Societies, he went to London where he met and worked with Victor Pasmore. Victor Pasmore's influence can be clearly seen in the constructions which Peebles began making at this time. These were 'pure' abstractions owing nothing to naturalistic representation, and were concerned entirely with the structural dynamics of tone, texture, line and colour; concerns which remain central to Peebles' work today.

Since his 'Cezanne' period Peebles has been interested in the three dimensional element in painting, and his relief constructions allowed him to explore this by making use of projected shapes, actual planes, and cast shadows in a way which has not found its natural extension in the present canvas reliefs.

Two years after his return to New Zealand Don Peebles was appointed Lecturer in Basic Design at the Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1965 - a position which he holds as Senior Lecturer today. Here his teaching of the theory and practice of colour led him towards a type of painting in which the use of colour as the main structural element was explored. In the strong colour paintings of the early seventies fields of bright primary hue are broken into flat triangles of pure colour which either react against or flow into their backgrounds in a kind of dialogue.

Although not so directly concerned with the problem of colour itself, the latest canvas reliefs in this show owe much to this period. The six works are rectangular in shape and consist of 'fins' of canvas which are machine sewn on to a canvas backing at various distances apart creating an effect rather like an open book seen from the front. Paint is applied to the works on the ground with the flaps flat. The canvas is then hung on the wall when wet and the flaps peeled back to avoid sticking when the paint dries. As one looks at the works from the side the many slight modulations of colour, texture and tone across the surfaces become more obvious. The gentle waving frayed edges interplay with the natural shadows creating a flow across the works which has a lyrical ease, and

provokes a continuity of movement which marries perfectly with the natural irregularities of the buckled flaps. Shapes and colour blend into one another, and the movement through the works via passages of similar tones and hues is not unlike the movement across the forms in a late Cezanne.

The earliest parchment coloured work has been overpainted until the paint is quite thick, stiffening the canvas and giving it a 'stage scenery' look. Attractive at first because of the natural earthy colours, the work looks very laboured when compared to the red, green or blue pieces which were painted later. In these the paint is more transparent, has a raw 'hungry' appearance. Rather than pursue the obviously attractive and aesthetically acceptable combination of natural colour and form suggested by the early pieces, Peebles deliberately seems to have chosen colours which are unsuitable to the forms, and in the case of the green painting even appears 'arbitrary'. It would be to underestimate Don Peebles however to suggest that he does not realise an incongruity in this piece between hue and form. In fact the 'acid' green has I suspect been chosen because of its disparity with the form, and the problem of the reconciliation of these two elements thus become the major challenge - the painting is much harder to resolve, but much 'tougher' as a result.

Peebles' rejection of anything when it becomes merely aesthetically pleasing can be both a strength and a weakness. It prompts extremely wild combinations of elements which at times seem to be provocative - but little else. This is the case with the latest work '2 part painting' in which the canvas cross placed on the wall seems totally alien to the large brown canvas relief alongside.

The two separate elements do not relate in any way and the chances of the two parts ever looking unified seems hopeless. It is impossible to say what Don Peebles will make of this idea when the show appears on the gallery walls, but at present the diptych is unresolved.

Peebles' concentration of the 'plastic facts' rather than on emotional feelings or a more overt or literary expression of his New Zealand identity make him much less appreciated at the moment than lesser painters who enjoy popular recognition. His works have qualities which are not immediately apparent but which reveal their secrets as one gets to know them. The qualities which emerge are totally visual and need no other justification than that to be found in the object itself. Perhaps in spirit Don Peebles has more in common with a classical sculptor than a romantic. His art is silent; there is no social message or revolutionary intention behind the work. It is a purely visual statement which is self contained and concerned with the perfect harmony and balance of content and material.

Time is the ultimate judgement of a work of art, and the fact is that a Don Peebles of seven years ago looks better now than it did then. This exhibition of his latest work marks an important stage in the continual evolution of his art, and shows a painter who, now in his mid-fifties, is striving to break new ground and is creating works which pose questions which are increasingly tougher to resolve. As an artist he continues to grow, and there is no doubt in my mind that Don Peebles is one of the few great New Zealand artists of his generation.