

mommy practices



mary mcintyre





*The Birth of Adonis, or Portrait of three prominent men,
or The Kiwi cup of tea 1982*

Untitled 1993



In reviews of Mary McIntyre's many exhibitions over the past twelve years, a number of words occur frequently: ironic, satirical, savage, perverse, alarming, uneasy and, most often, surreal. McIntyre's eye for the absurd and the pretentious in the everyday world does parallel the interests of some of the original surrealists, as does the political bite at the heart of much of her work. And although McIntyre does not share their pitiless dismissal of the Catholic church she makes regular glancing references to some of the traditions of Catholicism and the more mawkish manifestations of popular religion.

The original surrealist group shared ways of thinking rather than a common visual style, and so surrealism has proved the most adaptable of twentieth-century art movements. In Mary McIntyre's work its legacy is put to feminist use and her subject matter is relentlessly anchored in the here and now. No wistful backward glances, instead a clear-eyed and often amused analysis of the present; the social and political issues of today.

McIntyre ascribes her wry view of human behaviour to her experiences as the mother of six children. Her husband was a farmer in the Waikato and she carried out her own education through a voracious appetite for books, many of them borrowed from the Country Library Service which was based at her house for several years. In this way she was able to borrow art books from libraries throughout New Zealand. Some of her earliest paintings, made in the early 1970s when she was attending a weekly night-class in painting at Matamata, show the letterbox at the end of her driveway and suggest a longing for the world beyond the farm gate.

She exhibited paintings regularly from 1972 and moved to Auckland in 1978. A ten-day intensive painting course taught by Colin McCahon in 1970 had convinced her that she wanted to paint full-time. In 1983 she won the newly-established Team McMillan Ford Art Award with *Crown of Flags* in which a patriotic body-builder, set against a back-

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ground of canned peaches (Watties and strong men both being icons of New Zealandness), has the head of a sentimental blond European Christ. The work provoked strong reactions and established her as an artist who was able smoothly to create disjunctions of imagery which confronted and sometimes discomfited the viewer.

In this exhibition *The Birth of Adonis, or Portrait of three prominent men...* dates from the same period. Here McIntyre piles up contradictory symbols of maleness in New Zealand. Floating on the pink clouds of paradise a musclemans, the ultimately absurd conclusion of a fetish for strong men, emerges proudly from a cup which is embellished with the motto of Superman. The male 'graces' beside him are poets Sam Hunt and Gary McCormick who at that time epitomised another stereotype of kiwi masculinity: hard-drinking bohemian poets. Between them is a wary politician, Robert Muldoon. This is a large painting in which heightened colour and extreme subject matter set up an intense and uncomfortable engagement with the viewer.

McIntyre has worked in most of the traditional subject areas of painting producing portraits and landscapes as well as allegorical works, but her distinctively biting humour is seldom absent. In *Apparition over Ohinewai* she reverses the standard roles of jovial Santa and solemn Virgin Mary. Santa is serious about the business of bringing presents and 'good cheer' while Mary and Jesus laugh happily, having a carefree Christmas as they float above a small stucco house. And this is also a family portrait – the Virgin Mary is Mary herself and Jesus on her lap is one of her grandchildren. She seems to delight in the many contrasting textures in this work – pine needles and gum leaves, pink cloud and white beard, golden halo and soft velvet suit.

Mary McIntyre has spoken of an artist's work as involving a protest against mortality. She records her own appearance in regular self-portraits, some of them ruth-

lessly clear-eyed and others indulging in ironic fantasies of eternal youth. The puzzle of aging which so many people comment on, of feeling the same but being perceived differently by others, is implied in her 1987 painting *I'm the boy you made me*. The title is taken from a song by Boy George which was popular at the time, but the two characters standing in front of the majestically empty landscape are Mary and her youngest son. The painting is a response to his teasing her about growing old, so she retaliates by depicting him wearing a rubber 'hag' mask. But the title also lands some of the responsibility on her – he's the boy she made him.

McIntyre has depicted herself as a nun on occasion, but the subject of *Untitled* is Peter McLeavey, owner of a leading New Zealand dealer gallery. She has him holding an apple which represents his high standing in the art world. McLeavey's costume is not an invention of McIntyre's – she saw him at a fancy dress party wearing a nun's habit. Like the earlier surrealists McIntyre often finds rather than creates key images, although the telling conjunctions are her own.

Mary McIntyre is not exempt from the conflicts, mistakes and self-delusions which we are all prey to; she includes herself as a participant in many of her painted tableaux. Her satire has become more ambiguous over the years; she leaves interpretations to the viewer and never resorts to stock positions of political correctness. Her sharp analysis of society seems to emerge from an acute awareness of the paradoxes and painful choices which have been part of her own decision to live as a painter.

In this year celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, the Auckland City Art Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of Mary McIntyre's work and to salute her achievements as a feminist artist.

Alexa M. Johnston

Principal Curator



Mary McIntyre 1993 (Photograph by Alistair Guthrie)

biography

Mary McIntyre was born in Auckland and grew up in the Waikato. She married young and lived for many years on farms with her husband. She has six children and five grandchildren. Her formal art training comprised a year of night classes and a ten day intensive painting course at the Elam School of Fine Art, Auckland in 1970. Her teacher there was Colin McCahon who communicated his view of the painter's life as one of determination and hard work. She realised that she had the potential to be a serious painter and that she needed independence to achieve it. Her husband was unable to accept this change in her and so in 1978 she decided to come to Auckland. The decision to leave was a source of great distress for her.

She is now an established artist who exhibits regularly throughout New Zealand. Her ascerbic comments on New Zealand politics and society demonstrate a fascination with the conflicts and puzzles of human experience.

catalogue

*The Birth of Adonis,
or Portrait of three prominent men,
or The Kiwi cup of tea* 1981
acrylic on board 1510 x 1185mm
Auckland City Art Gallery collection,
purchased 1983

Apparition over Ohinewai 1983
oil on board 1180 x 1190mm
Collection of the artist
(illustrated on front cover)

I'm the boy you made me 1987
oil on board 1220 x 2440mm
Courtesy of the artist and Brooker Gallery

Untitled 1987
oil on board 1160 x 1175mm
Courtesy of the artist and Brooker Gallery

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