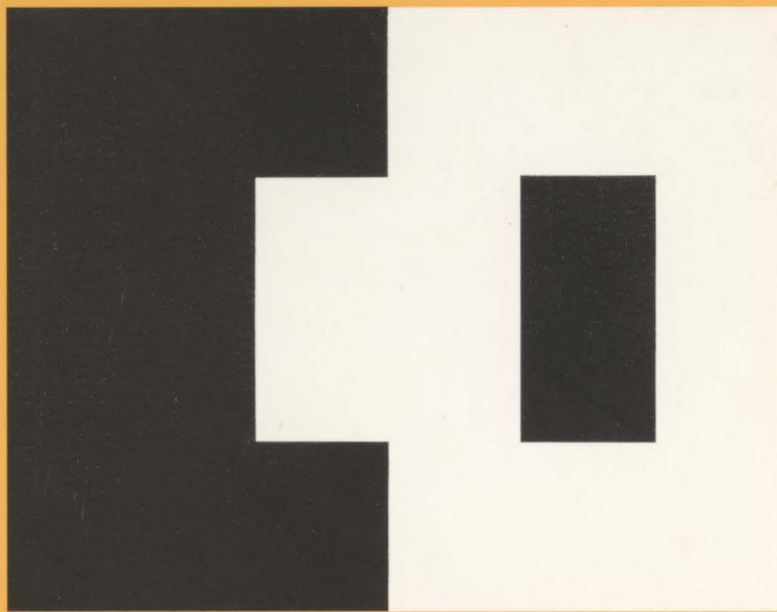


P A R A L L E L L I N E S



G O R D O N W A L T E R S I N C O N T E X T

**Parallel Lines:
Gordon Walters in Context**

Joseph Albers
Jean Arp
Giuseppe Capogrossi
Theo van Doesburg
Auguste Herbin
Robert Hunter
Wassily Kāndinsky
Ellsworth Kelly
Paul Klee
Piet Mondrian
John McLaughlin
Bridget Riley
Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Victor Vasarély

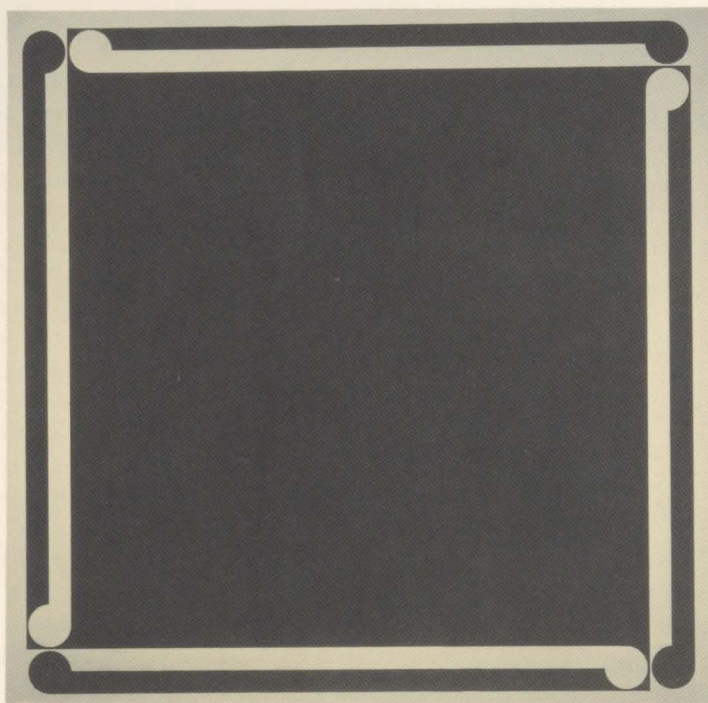
Stephen Bambury
Shane Cotton
Julian Dashper
Richard Killeen
Colin McCahon
Judy Millar
Julia Morison
Simon Morris
Milan Mrkusich
Patrick Pound
Peter Robinson
Sophie Saunders
Theo Schoon
Isobel Thom
Richard Thompson
John Reynolds

P A R A L L E L L I N E S

G O R D O N W A L T E R S I N C O N T E X T

AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

12 August - 2 October 1994



Black Centre 1972

Parallel Lines: the changing contexts of Gordon Walters' art

In the 11 years since the Auckland City Art Gallery mounted the Gordon Walters retrospective exhibition¹, considerable changes have occurred both within the artist's work and the interpretations that have been made of it. The exhibition *Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context* is an attempt to look at Walters' work in the light of some of these changes.

Certainly, *Parallel Lines* takes a retrospective view of Walters' work, and brings viewers firmly up to date with the achievements of his recent painting. More significantly, however, the exhibition presents the artist's works alongside those of the European and American modernists who were formative on his development, and with whom he shares the language of formal abstraction. In turn *Parallel Lines* draws together some of the New Zealand artists whose works have a relationship to Walters' art, examining the various ways in which his influence has permeated through successive generations in this country.

By focusing solely on Gordon Walters, this book in a sense stands apart from the exhibition which it marks. It presents in outline the major developments of Walters' work over the past five decades, reproducing many works for the first time, and others for the first time in colour. The decision to do this has been made in light of the fact that there is currently no such survey of the artist's work available. That said, however, in the decade that has passed since Michael Dunn curated the retrospective exhibition there has appeared a substantial body of writing on Walters' art, which is documented at the end of this book.

The revised edition of Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith's *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1839 – 1980*, published a year before the Walters retrospective, did not revise Walters at all. In it he remained marginalised, one of a number of figures seen to be embracing "a servile formalism"² outside the mainstream of the New

Zealand nationalist landscape. Since that publication appeared, however, Walters' position within New Zealand's art history has been considerably redressed. The record, as Leonard Bell titled his review of the retrospective exhibition, has been put straight.³

The foundations of a fully-fledged modernism in this country have come to be seen as substantially resting upon Walters, from his early explorations of the surrealism of Tanguy and Klee in the 1940s, to his experimental works of the 1950s inspired by the contemporary European abstraction of Capogrossi, Taeuber-Arp, Vasarely and Herbin, to his mature style of the sixties onwards.

Walters' commitment to the project of abstraction, a commitment sustained for many years in a climate of indifference,⁴ has been inspirational to younger artists who have followed related but highly distinct directions in their own work. For the generation of abstract painters who came to prominence in the seventies, including Richard Killeen, Julia Morison, Mervyn Williams and Stephen Bambury, Walters functioned perhaps as a model rather than a direct influence, a model of seriousness and dedication to the art of painting.

For a number of these artists, whose styles have changed substantially since that time, and for a new generation of abstractionists, including Judy Millar, Simon Morris, Julian Dashper, Richard Thompson, Isobel Thom and John Reynolds, Walters' work remains as a reference point, a paradigm of modernist practice against which their own directions towards a post-modern abstraction might be considered.⁵

At the same time, other revisions have produced differing perspectives on Walters' adaptation of the Maori koru, the motif of his most substantial and most widely known series of works. Walters had maintained an interest and admiration for Maori and Pacific art as far back as

the thirties, one which was nurtured by Theo Schoon in the 1940s, and reached its fullest expression in the koru paintings which first appeared in 1956. In the changed climate of the 1980s, however, Walters' use of Maori art has been vigorously attacked and defended. Rangihiroa Panaho, for example, accused Walters of a "residual colonialism"⁶, while Ngahuia Te Awekotuku found his use of the koru "damned cheeky".⁷

Walters' defenders have responded to such accusations by indicating the seriousness and respect with which he had approached his subject matter – that his art was a homage to one tradition in the language of another. They have noted the distance Walters has taken the motif from its source, and the breadth of other influences affecting his development. And they have pointed to the absence of stable boundaries between cultures, describing Walters' work as a hybrid or interchange of Maori and Pakeha artistic traditions.⁸

Nor has Maori opinion been unanimous in condemning Walters. Cliff Whiting, for example, admitted that "I had to think hard about it and recognise that yes, here is a person who has been fascinated by a particular form of symbol and has explored it. I think that's great".⁹ And Sydney Moko Mead suggested that: "Art can be the best mediator between Maori and Pakeha. It's better than politicians or more talking".¹⁰

The shifting perspectives of such discussions precisely reflect the fundamental qualities of the koru paintings: their ambiguity, as they play out paradoxes between figure and ground, between positive and negative space. As Leonard Bell concluded a discussion of the issues: "That the paintings have been seen in such a variety of ways, that they still generate debate, is perhaps testament to aesthetic richness and cultural value".¹¹

Robert Leonard, a curator of the exhibition *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art* which aroused considerable furor over the appropriation issue, recently suggested that: "Thus far the debate has been bogged down in moralising, as if moralities were not themselves culturally relative and interminably contestable".¹²

Such assertions are borne out in the work of a number of young Maori artists, including Shane Cotton, Peter Robinson and Michael Parekowhai who have in various ways "recolonised" Walters' work, but from a perspective that is by no means black and white.

More significant than all of this perhaps have been the recent changes in Walters' work itself. The past decade has seen a winding down of the koru paintings, not in response to accusations of appropriation, but rather, as he put it in 1991: "I had developed the work to the point where there were no longer any real discoveries for me to make in deploying the image, not surprising after the time I had spent in realising the work".¹³

Thus in the mid-eighties, after some thirty years with the koru, Walters turned his main attention to a geometric minimalism of astonishing simplicity and quietness, a style of painting which had its foundations built throughout his career.

These paintings, which bring both the exhibition *Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context* and this book to their conclusion, show Walters to be what he has always been: a contemporary artist, striving towards new possibilities in his work. An exhibition such as this may historicise his work, locating it in contexts well outside of the present, and the artist may share in something of this process, returning as he does to reassess and develop ideas which have suggested themselves in past works. However, Gordon Walters' interest remains not in the past, but in the future that is his next painting.

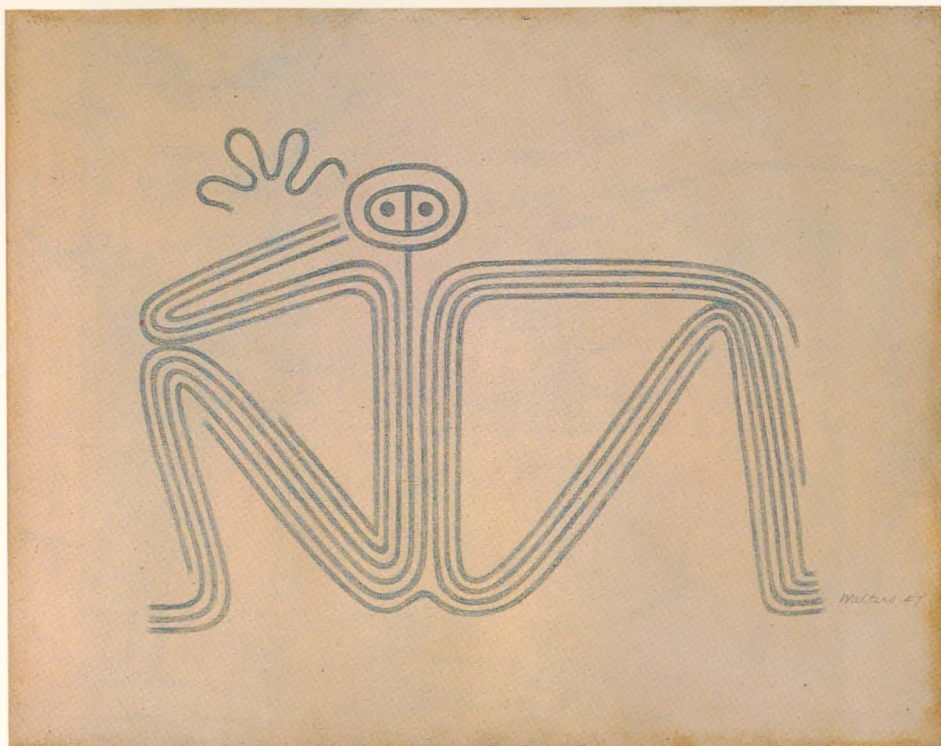
William McAloon



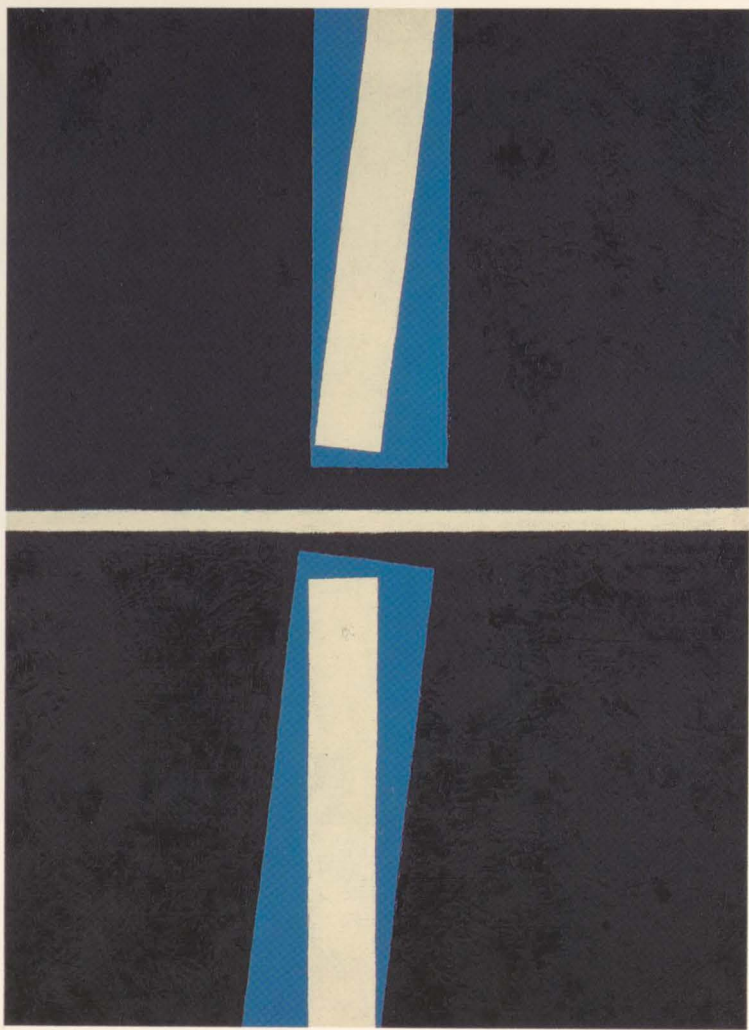
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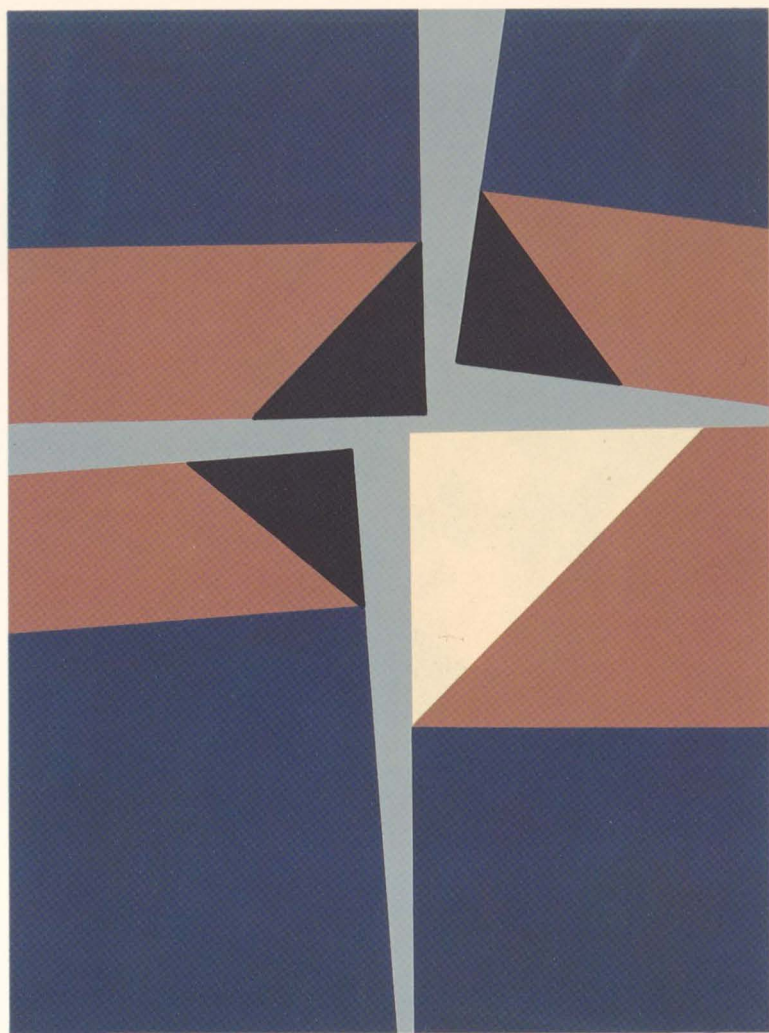
Study for South Canterbury Landscape 1947



The Poet 1947



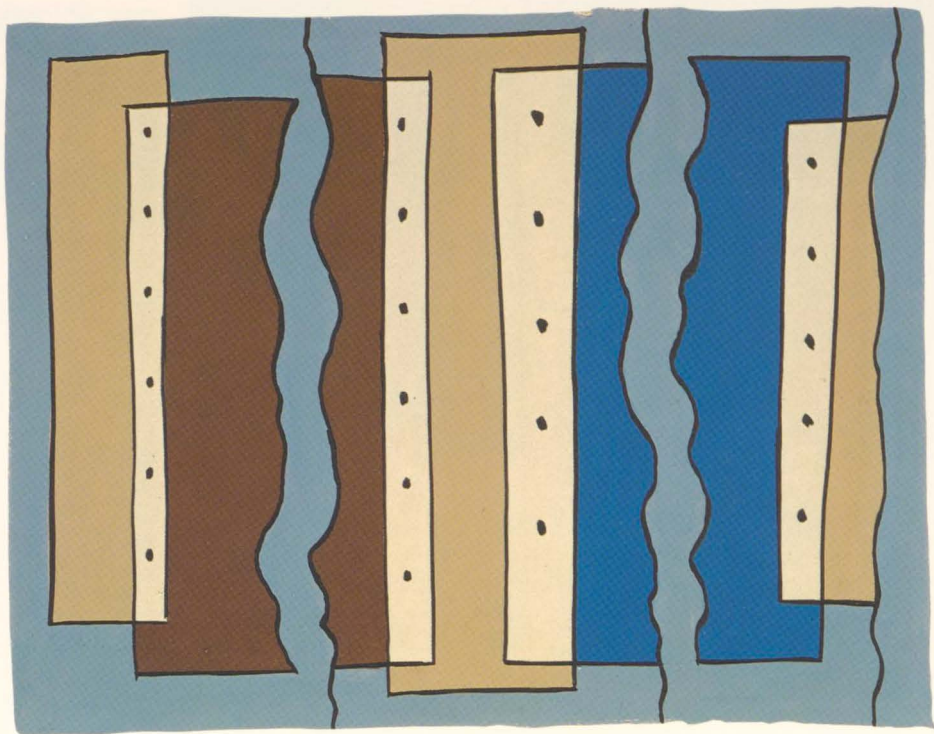
Untitled painting 1952-3



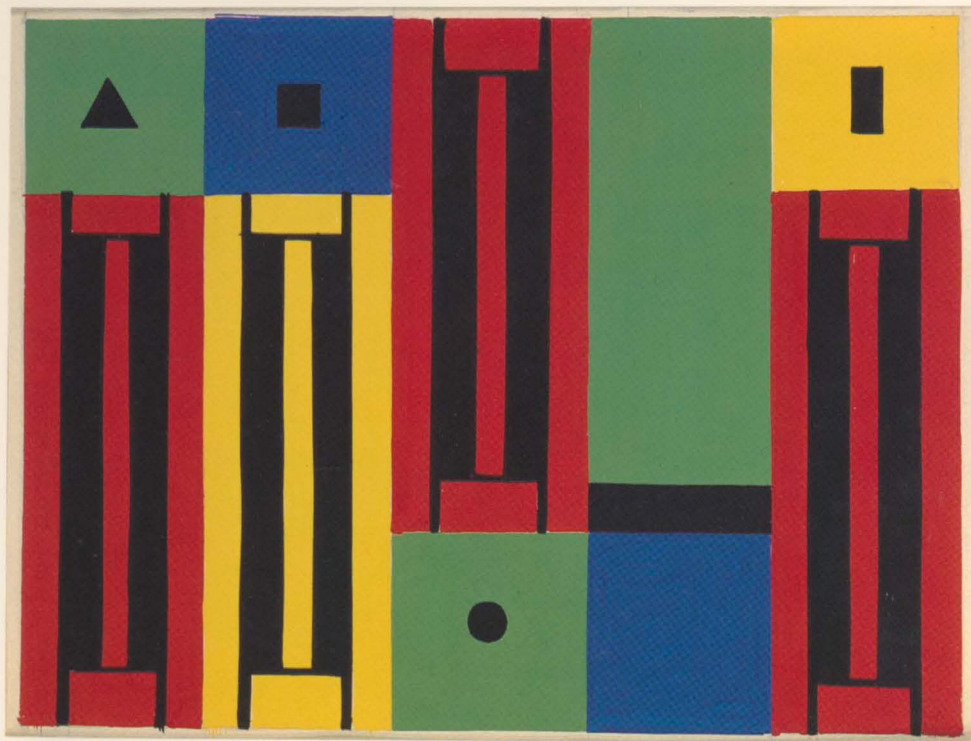
Study 1955, revised 1973



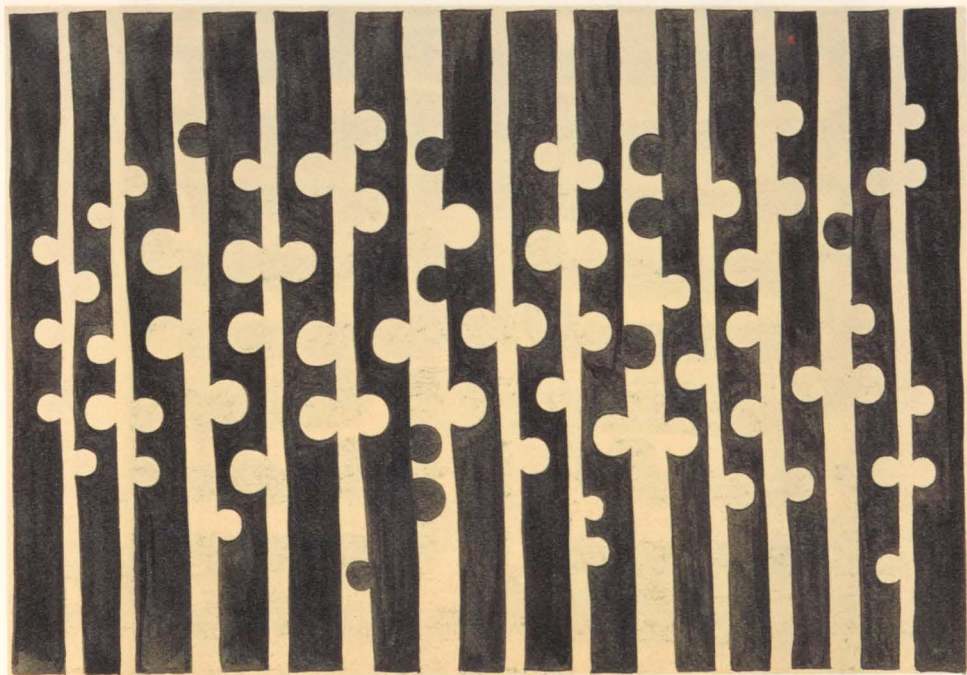
Untitled 1954



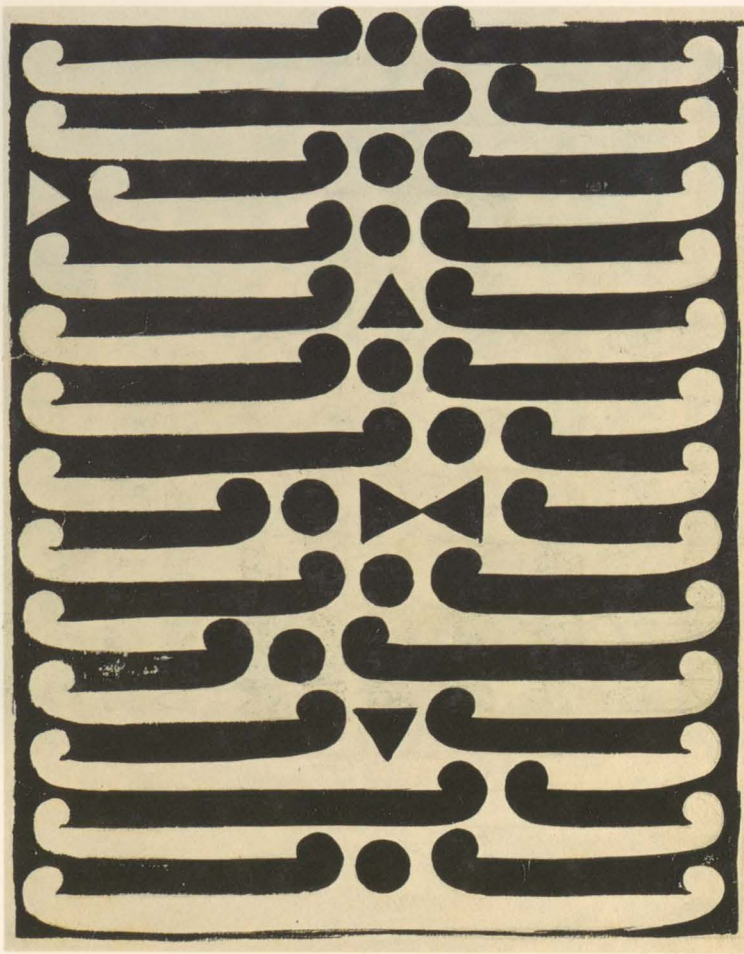
Untitled 1955



Untitled 1955



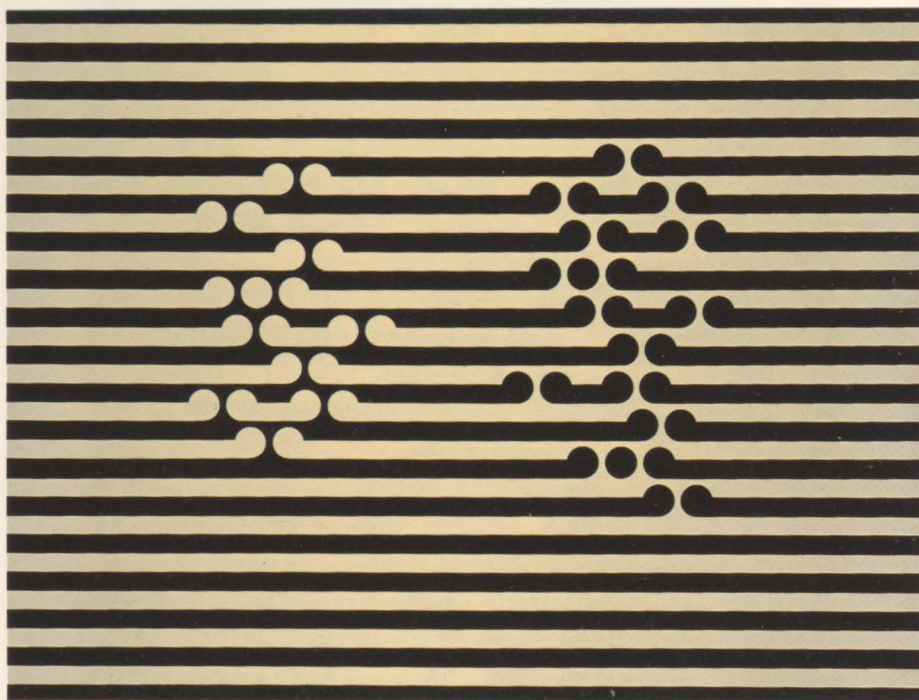
Study for Waitara 1959



Untitled 1956



Untitled June 1957



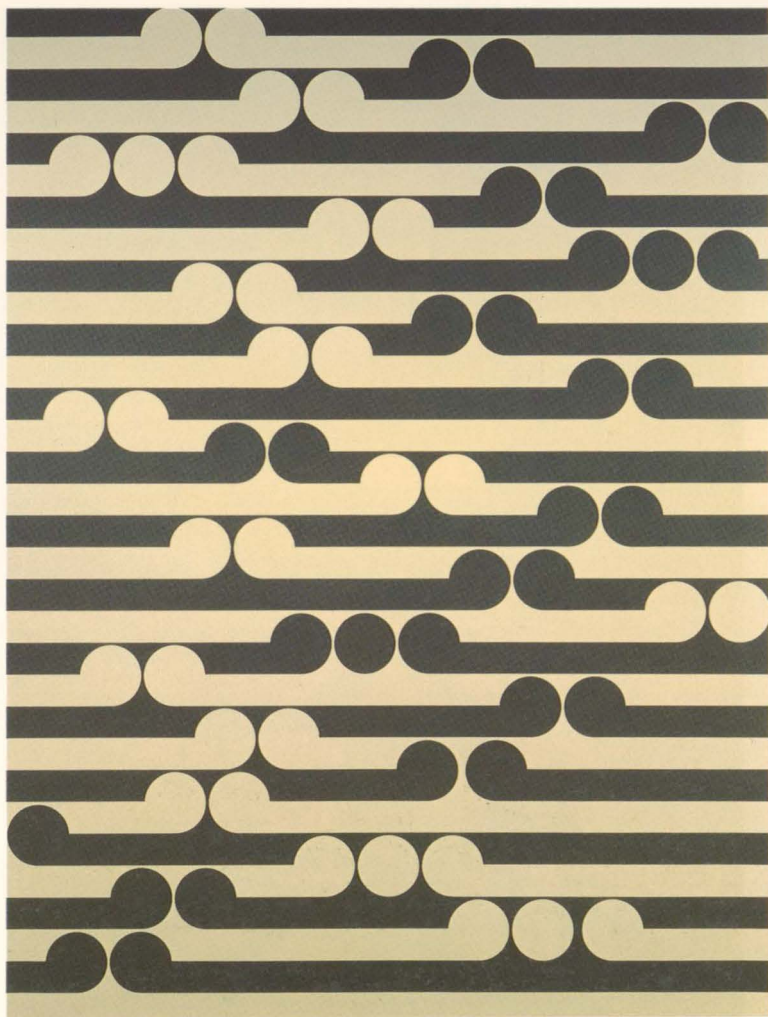
Painting Number One 1965



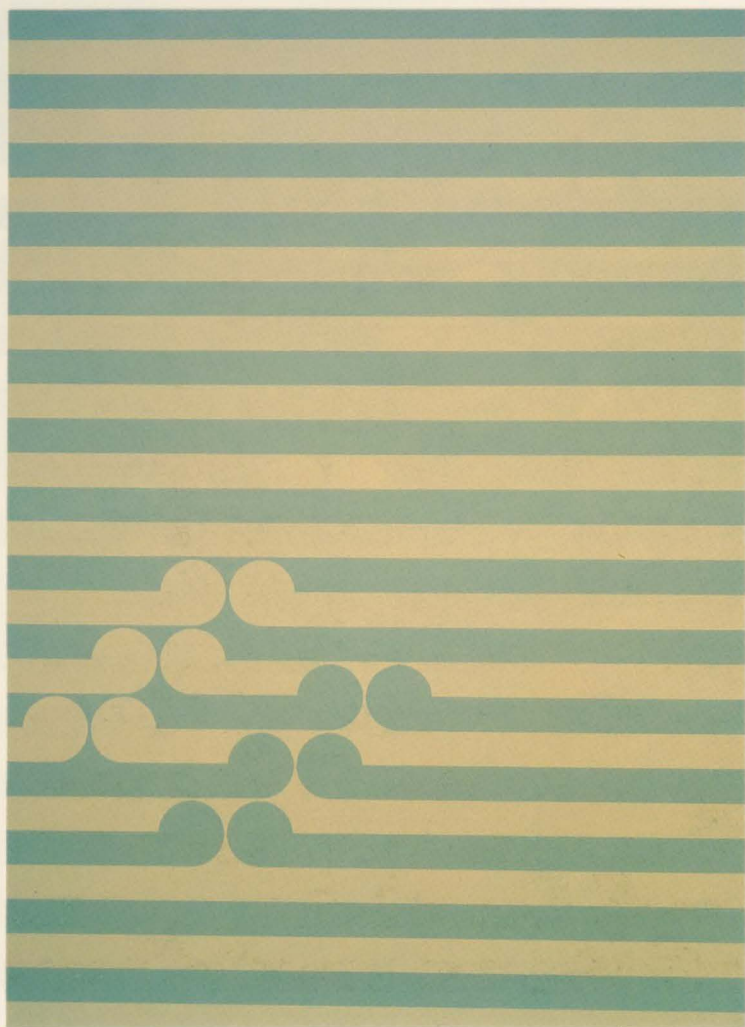
Murital 1967-8



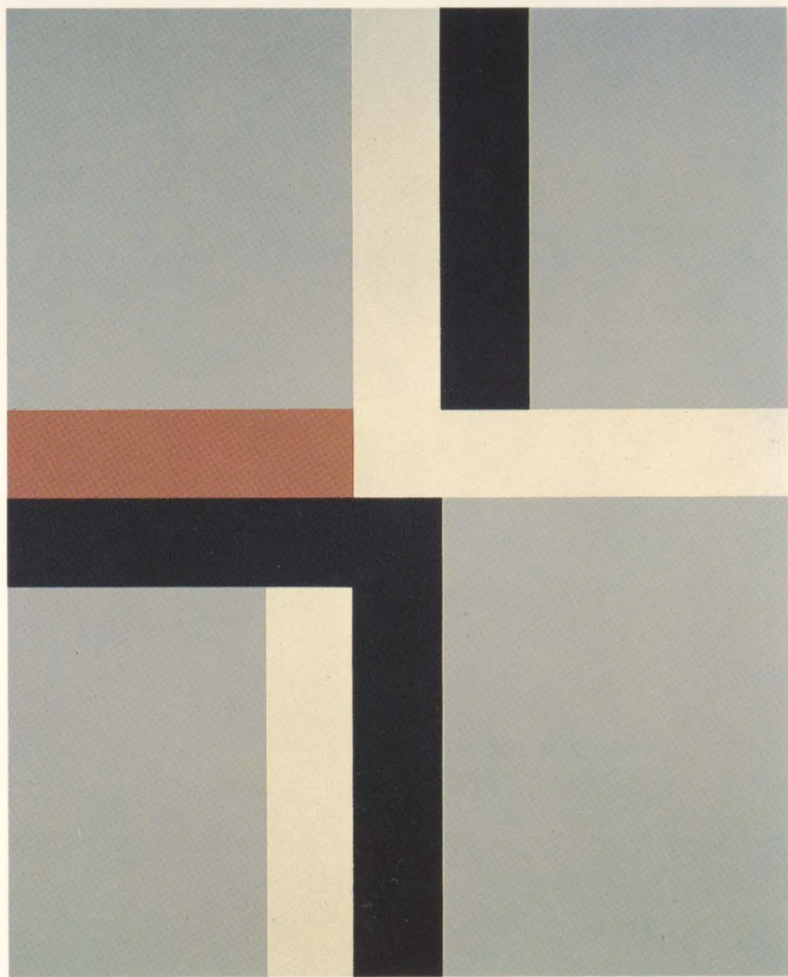
Untitled 1974



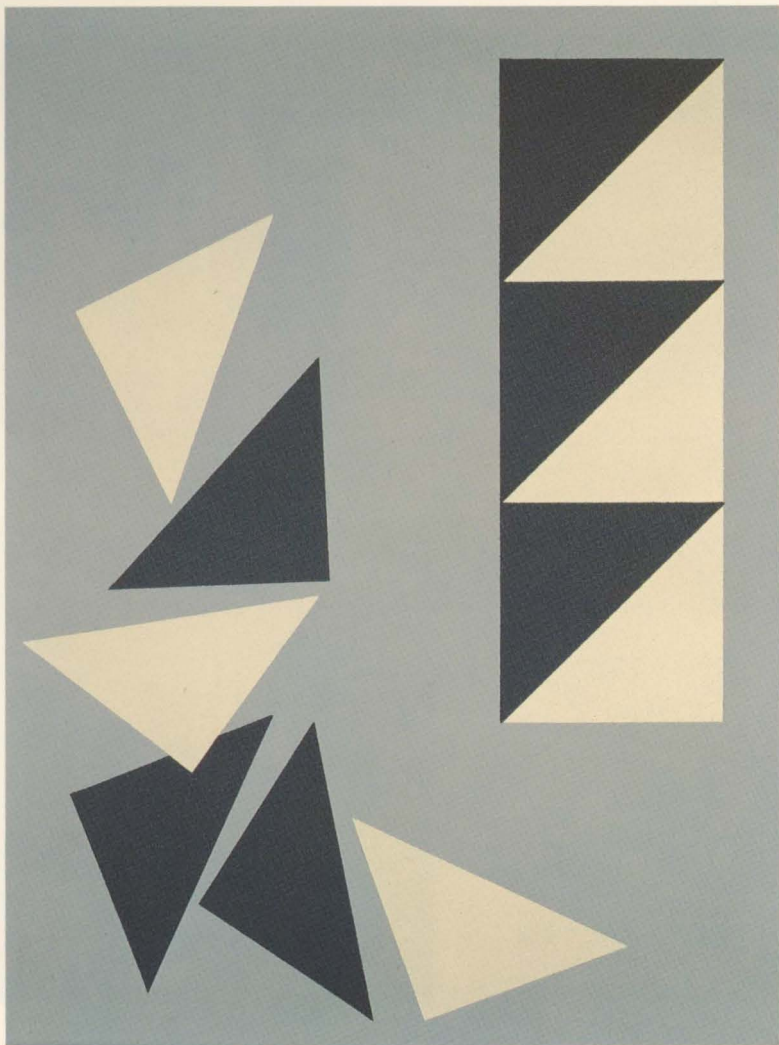
Maheno 1981



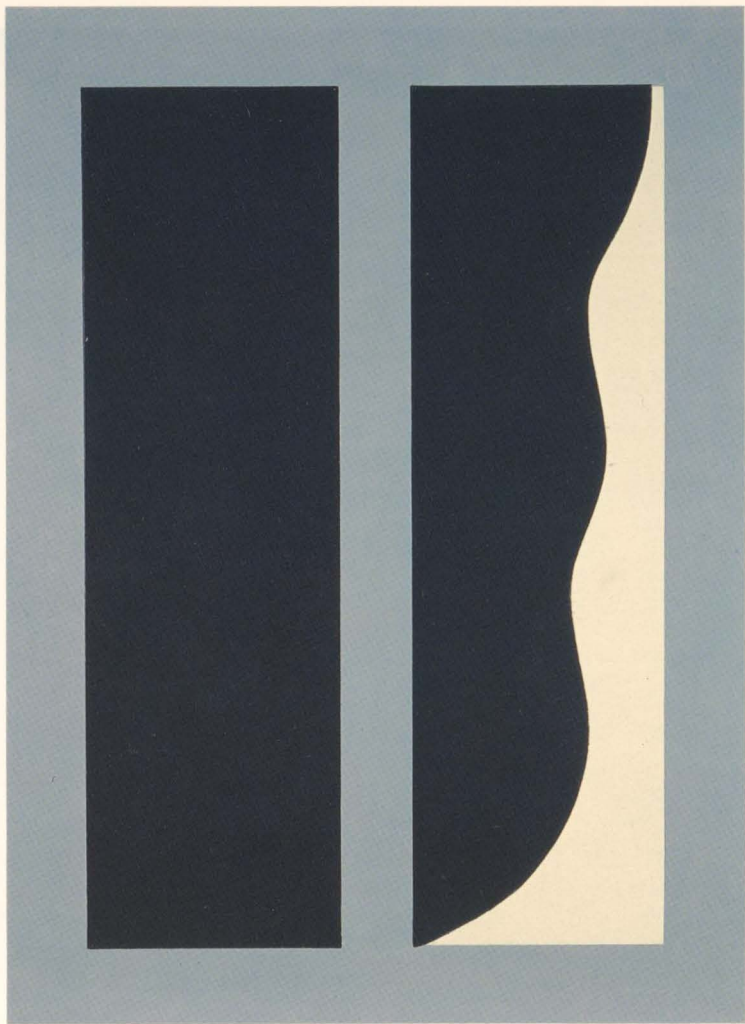
Aranui 1982



Construction with Red Ochre 1985



Untitled 1985



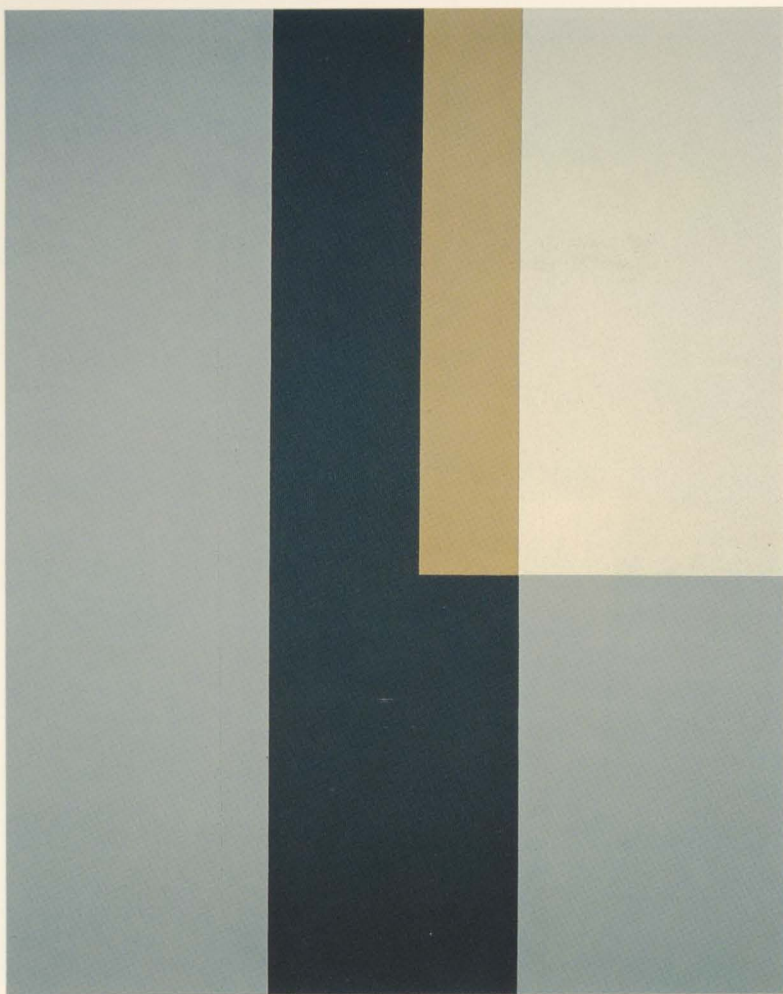
Untitled 1987



Untitled 1989

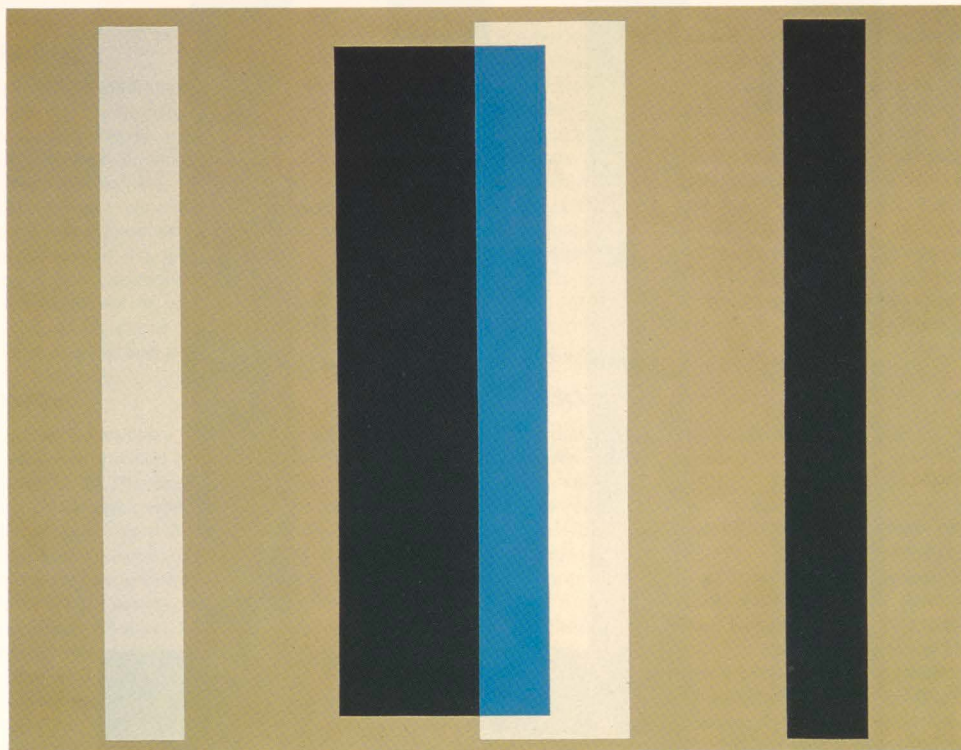


Untitled 1988



Transparency 6 1990

Gordon Watson: a brief biography



Transparency 7 1991



Untitled 1988

Gordon Walters: a brief biography

Gordon Frederick Walters born in Wellington on September 24, 1919, the son of Henry Frederick and Ethel Constance Walters.

1930s

Walters attends Rongotai College, Wellington. Art is not on the curriculum. In 1935 he begins work as a trainee commercial artist while studying part-time at the Wellington Technical College Art Department. His tutors there include F. V. Ellis, Roland Hipkins and T. A. McCormack. He exhibits at the conservative New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. Walters' interest in non-Western art grows through study of the ethnographic collections of the Dominion Museum. His awareness of modern art develops through reading publications such as Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* and Herbert Read's *Art Now*.

1940s

Rejected for military duties, Walters works instead as an illustrator and layout artist for the Ministry of Supply. In 1941 he meets Theo Schoon, an Indonesian born Dutch artist who had come to Wellington as a war refugee. From Schoon he gains considerable insight into European modernism and non-Western art, as well as learning photography. He makes his first abstract works, based on an interest in the surrealism of Klee, Miro and others. Seeking to broaden his artistic horizons, Walters travels to Australia for three months in 1946. He returns to New Zealand and visits Schoon in South Canterbury, where he is documenting Maori rock art. The drawings are a source of considerable inspiration. In 1947 Walters departs for Sydney, where he furthers his knowledge of contemporary art in various libraries, while studying museum collections of non-Western art and visiting Aboriginal rock drawing sites. Walters returns to Wellington in 1949 and exhibits at the Wellington public library. His works are not well received.

1950s

On March 3, 1950, Walters sails for Europe. He spends most of his time in London, but is able to visit France

and Holland. In Paris he sees work by Vasarely, Herbin and other abstractionists at the Denise René Gallery. He sees work by Mondrian and artists of the Bauhaus in Holland, as well as a major exhibition of recent American painting. Walters returns to Australia where he makes his first completely non-figurative works. He returns to New Zealand permanently in 1953, working in Wellington at the Government Printing Office and painting in his free time. He experiments widely, mainly in small works on paper and keeps in touch with art developments abroad through magazines such as *Art d'Aujourd'hui*. Walters maintains contact with Schoon, who is now in Auckland, and with a number of other New Zealand artists including Denis Knight Turner, Ross Crothall and John Zambelis. The first studies using the koru appear in 1955-56. The motif is developed extensively over the next decade.

1960s

Gordon Walters and Margaret Orbell marry in 1963. In 1964 he paints *Te Whiti*, the first major work of the koru series, making use of the new acrylic paints to achieve the necessary flatness of surface and precision of line. Walters exhibits at the New Vision Gallery, Auckland in 1966, his first solo exhibition for seventeen years. He is 46 years old. He begins to paint full time, intensively developing his style and technique. Walters works as a designer and graphic artist for the Maori arts and culture magazine *Te Ao Hou*, edited at the time by Margaret Orbell. In 1968 he visits Australia and sees *The Field* exhibition, an important survey of recent Australian abstraction. His daughter Anna (Alexa) is born in 1969. In that year he has his first exhibition with Peter McLeavey in Wellington.

1970s

In 1971, Walters moves to Auckland, and takes up an appointment as Visiting Lecturer in Painting at the Elam School of Fine Arts the following year. Stephen Bambury is amongst his students. With Milan Mrkusich, Geoff Thornley, Richard Killeen, Ian Scott and others, Walters becomes involved in intense

discussions about abstraction centred around the art dealer Petar Vuletic. In 1974, some of Walters' surviving works from the 1950s are shown for the first time in both Auckland and Wellington. His son David is born in 1976. Later that year, Margaret Orbell is appointed to a lectureship in Maori at the University of Canterbury and the family moves to Christchurch. In 1979 he travels to Australia to view the Bridget Riley retrospective and meets the artist. A visit to New York later that year allows him to study contemporary developments in painting. Through the 1970s, Walters' interest in print making develops and he works on screenprints with Mervyn Williams. A substantial body of work without the koru motif is produced through the decade.

1980s

The Gordon Walters retrospective exhibition opens at the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1983, and includes a number of new works produced especially for the occasion. It is shown in full at the National Art Gallery in Wellington, and tours the country in reduced form. The exhibition is seen by many as long overdue and reveals for the first time Walters' enormous importance to the development of modernism in New Zealand. Walters' interest in screen printing continues until 1984, by which time he has produced a dozen prints. He begins showing at the Sue Crockford Gallery in Auckland. The koru paintings are wound down, and a new body of geometric, highly reductive work begins to develop. At the same time, a new and intensive debate emerges over the use of Maori material by Pakeha artists. The artist celebrates his 70th birthday in 1989, and the occasion is marked with the publication by friends and supporters of a *festschrift* of essays.

1990s

The controversial *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art* opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, and includes several works by Walters. The appropriation debate is played out in the exhibition and its catalogue, where many feel Walters to be unfairly attacked for his use of Maori imagery. The artist continues to develop new directions in his work, and produces several new koru paintings. As his reputation grows abroad, Walters' painting becomes a source of inspiration for a new generation of artists in New Zealand.

Further reading

Mary Barr (ed.), *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1992.

Lita Barrie, *Walters, Gimblett, Bambury*, Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch, 1992.

Andrew Bogle, *The Grid: Lattice and Network*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983.

Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983.

— *The Art of Gordon Walters*, unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Auckland, 1985.

— *A concise history of New Zealand painting*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 1990.

— 'Gordon Walters: Remaking the modern' *Art New Zealand* 63, Winter, 1992.

— 'Headlands: Refiguring New Zealand art' *Art New Zealand* 64, Spring 1992.

Patrick Hutchings, 'Gordon Walters: Absolute abstraction and topicality,' *Landfall* 149, 1984.

Anna Johnson, 'Gordon Walters,' *Interior Architecture* 26, 1991.

Francis Pound, 'Emerging abstraction,' *The 1950s Show: New Zealand Home and Building Souvenir edition*, 1992.

— *The space between: Pakeha use of Maori motifs in modernist New Zealand art*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1994.

Laurence Simmons, 'Exchanging gifts,' *Art New Zealand* 64, Spring, 1992.

Laurence Simmons and James Ross (eds.), *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, Walters Publications, Auckland, 1989.

Gordon Walters, *A Geometric Order*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1993.

— 'A difficult time for artists,' *Landfall*, new series, vol 1, no 1 April, 1993

Ian Wedde, 'Talking to the wounded chief: Augustus Earle and Gordon Walters,' *Now See Hear! Art, Language and translation*, Wellington City Art Gallery, Victoria University Press, 1990.

Essay notes

¹ Curated by Michael Dunn, the exhibition *Gordon Walters* was held at the Auckland City Art Gallery from 23 March – 24 April, 1983. It toured New Zealand galleries in 1983 – 4.

² Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1839 – 1980*, Bateman/Collins, Auckland, 1982, p 214.

³ Leonard Bell, 'Putting the record straight: Gordon Walters,' *Art New Zealand* 27, 1984.

⁴ In a note to his 1974 exhibition at Peter McLeavey Gallery of works from the 1950s, Walters states: "They were not shown at the time I did them because I considered the climate to be unsympathetic, if not downright hostile to abstraction."

⁵ For an analysis of Walters' relationship to subsequent abstraction in New Zealand see Francis Pound 'Walters and the canon' in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, Walters publications, Auckland, 1989.

⁶ Rangihiroa Panaho 'Maori: At the centre, On the margins' in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, MCA, Sydney, 1992, p 133.

⁷ 'Ngahua Te Awekotuku in conversation with Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts' *Antic* 1 1986, p 50.

⁸ See for example Leonard Bell, 'Walters and Maori art: The nature of the relationship?' in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition* and Francis Pound, *The space between: Pakeha use of Maori motifs in modernist New Zealand art*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1994.

⁹ 'Headlands (interview with Cliff Whiting),' *AGMANZ Journal* 1992, p 6.

¹⁰ 'Maori: sharing a taonga' from *Welcome to our world*, New Zealand 1990 Commission, Wellington, 1990, p 146.

¹¹ Leonard Bell, 'Walters and Maori art: The nature of the relationship?' p 20.

¹² Robert Leonard, 'Perverse homages' in *Planet 13* Winter 1994, p 78.

¹³ Gordon Walters, letter to Michael Dunn, 20 October, 1991, p 3.

Illustrations

All dimensions in millimetres

Black Centre 1972

PVA, acrylic on canvas
1524 x 1524
Private collection, Auckland

Chrysanthemum 1944

oil on cardboard, 647 x 522
Private collection, Christchurch

Study for South Canterbury Landscape 1947

oil on strawboard, 352 x 405
Collection of the artist

The Poet 1947

oil, pencil on canvas, 410 x 511
Collection of the Museum of
New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Untitled Painting 1952-3

oil on canvas, 382 x 360
Private collection, Christchurch

Study 1955, revised 1973

acrylic on paper, 277 x 203
Collection of the artist

Untitled 1954

gouache, 190 x 240
Private collection, Christchurch

Untitled 1955

gouache, 223 x 283
Private collection, Christchurch

Untitled 1955

gouache, 215 x 284
Private collection, Christchurch

Study for Waitara 1959

ink, 250 x 356
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Untitled 1956

gouache, 278 x 218
Private collection, Christchurch

Untitled June 1957

gouache, 318 x 242
Collection of the Museum of New
Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Painting Number One 1965

PVA on hardboard, 914 x 1219
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Muritai 1967-8

PVA and acrylic on canvas
1524 x 1442
Collection of Milan Mrkusich

Untitled 1974

acrylic on paper, 303 x 226
Collection of the artist

Maheno 1981

PVA, acrylic on paper, 1545 x 1145
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Aranui 1982

PVA, acrylic on canvas
1829 x 1371
Private collection, Auckland

Construction with Red Ochre 1985

acrylic on canvas, 610 x 490
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Untitled 1985

acrylic on canvas, 485 x 360
Collection of the artist

Untitled 1987

acrylic on paper, 266 x 192
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Untitled 1989

acrylic on canvas, 266 x 192
Collection of Erika and Robin
Congreve

Untitled 1988

acrylic on canvas, 610 x 490
Private collection Auckland

Transparency 6 1990

acrylic on canvas, 915 x 330
Courtesy of the artist and
Sue Crockford Gallery

Transparency 7 1991

acrylic on canvas, 715 x 915
Courtesy of the artist and
Sue Crockford Gallery

Untitled 1988

acrylic on paper, 450 x 300
Courtesy of the artist and
Sue Crockford Gallery

Front cover illustration:

Untitled 1993 (detail)

acrylic on canvas
(three 350 x 450 panels)
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

Back cover illustration:

Untitled 1993

acrylic on canvas
(three 350 x 450 panels)
Auckland City Art Gallery
collection

The occasion of any exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art at the Auckland City Art Gallery is always one of considerable pleasure and, as the artist approaches his 75th birthday, *Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context* is particular cause for celebration.

Following on from the Gallery's 1983 survey of this major artist's work, *Parallel Lines* traces Walters' singular pursuit of abstraction over the past five decades. It examines his unique synthesis of Maori and Western art into a personal and highly distinctive style. Most importantly, it brings viewers up to date with the stunning developments in Walters' latest paintings.

The publication *Parallel Lines* is beautifully illustrated with works from all periods of Walters' career and features an accessible introduction by William McAloon, the Gallery's Curator of Contemporary New Zealand Art.

Christopher Johnstone
DIRECTOR
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

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