

A Public-Private Partnership: The Patrons of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Sarah Farrar



Francis Upritchard, *Blue and Green Scarf* (detail), 2012, modelling material, foil, wire, paint, cloth, human hair, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2013.

From the outset, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki has been the product of public-private partnerships. Its establishment in 1888 was due in large part to two substantial collections donated by private individuals: Scottish businessman James Tannock Mackelvie (1824–1885) gifted artworks, books, coins and antiquities between 1876 and 1885; and Sir George Grey (1812–1898) – former governor of New Zealand (1845–53, 1861–68), and later premier, (1877–79) – gave his collection of paintings, sculpture, taonga Māori, Pacific cultural objects, manuscripts and maps to the city of Auckland in 1887. Both men were motivated by the edifying impact they believed these items would have on Auckland’s citizens, but they were also strategic gifts to help establish a public gallery in the city. These gifts were followed by others, including those of Henry Partridge (1848–1931), Captain George Humphreys-Davies (1880–1948), Lucy Carrington Wertheim (1883–1971), Sir Rex Nan Kivell (1898–1977), Dr Walter Auburn (1906–1979) and the recently arrived gift of Julian and Josie Robertson (1932–2022, 1943–2010).

In 1987, the year before the Gallery celebrated its centenary, a new kind of philanthropic group in New Zealand was established – the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery – to support the Gallery’s ambition to acquire contemporary art. The idea originated in conversations between Lady Philippa Tait and then Gallery Director Dr Rodney Wilson, who shoulder-tapped Dame Jenny Gibbs to lead the new group. Founding Patrons included Dame Jenny and Alan Gibbs, Robert and Maryanne Ferrier, Sir Michael and Harriet Friedlander, Beverly and Malcolm McConnell, Sir Douglas and Barbara Myers, David and Libby Richwhite, Admiral Sir Gordon and Lady Philippa Tait, and David and Angela Wright – all of whom committed to make an annual financial contribution to support the venture. Additional Patrons to join in the first years were Robin and Erika Congreve, Jan and Trevor Farmer, Stephen and Virginia Fisher, Sir Chris and Lady Dayle Mace, Geoff and Fran Ricketts, among others. Brought together through their social and business connections, the group was aligned in their passion for contemporary art and their support of the Gallery.

Founding chair of the Patrons, Dame Jenny Gibbs notes, ‘The group consists of people who donate a certain amount of money annually in order to purchase works of art for our city gallery. There is no obvious financial payback for these donors, yet the rewards are enormous. Over the years, the members have had the chance to know and be involved with not only the Gallery and its curators but also with many of the artists whose works they have purchased. In the same way, many members have also started collecting work by these same artists after developing close relationships. Their knowledge has increased exponentially.’¹

The idea for establishing the Patrons was influenced by Dame Jenny, Lady Tait and others’ participation on the international councils of galleries, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate in London.² Reflecting on the climate of arts philanthropy in 2017, Dame Jenny observed: ‘Support for the arts from private citizens, on any scale, is a relatively recent development in many countries including my own, New Zealand. Previously, there was a general attitude that the state, the local council or the occasional wealthy person would support everything, whether a theatre, orchestra, gallery or museum . . . However, the state alone cannot fund everything.’³

From the beginning the Patrons decided to support the Gallery through the purchase of an artwork or artworks for the collection each year. This tight focus, along with the sense of camaraderie and a warm relationship between the Patrons, directors and curatorial staff, remains a successful formula today.

The first work of art to enter the collection under the auspices of the Patrons was Jeffrey Harris’s *Green and Red*, 1986, gifted in 1987 by Robert and Maryanne Ferrier. The Gallery’s acquisition records from the time do not detail the context for the gift, making it tempting to speculate: perhaps this vivid large-scale painting – depicting a woman in green hovering above a prone man with what appear to be three knives piercing his splayed chest – was not conducive to harmonious domestic relations?

This gift was quickly followed by the Patrons’ commitment to purchase a newly commissioned painting by high-profile contemporary German artist Jörg Immendorff as part of the Gallery’s inaugural Foreign Artist Residency. Invited by curator Andrew Bogle and Rodney Wilson, Immendorff spent two months in Auckland from December 1987.



Jeffrey Harris, *Green and Red*, 1986, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Mr and Mrs Robert Ferrier, Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1987.

To everyone’s surprise, Immendorff arrived with a resolved concept for the commissioned work and began working on the painting immediately in the Gallery’s modest studio flat, located across Albert Park on Princes Street. Immendorff did not wish his art to be informed by the local environment – ‘Beaches are boring,’ he quipped in a public talk.⁴ During the residency, the artist completed the commissioned work, *Readymade de l’histoire*, 1987, as well as three other paintings and over 90 drawings, which formed the basis of an exhibition at the Gallery the following year: *Jörg Immendorff in Auckland: A Foreign Artist Project*.

An opinionated and lively character, Immendorff quickly became a local celebrity, earning notoriety during his short stay. Writing about Immendorff’s visit some years later, former Gallery curator Robert Leonard noted, ‘Immendorff drank heavily, but only the finest wines . . . He became the crown prince of the local yuppie “Krug ‘n’ cray” set, just as its disposable income was being decimated by the stockmarket crash.’⁵

The heady combination of Immendorff’s infamous visit, the wider context of the Wall Street crash in October 1987 and its impact on New Zealand’s economy became fertile material for contemporary New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson’s 2001 project, *Call Me Immendorff*.

First shown at Galerie Kapinos in Berlin in 2000, it was nominated for the Walters Prize and subsequently displayed at the Gallery in 2002.⁶

After the hiss and roar of the Immendorff commission, the Patrons switched tack to focus on supporting New Zealand artists, and other parameters were soon established which have been followed to the present day. ‘I became aware of the need for ground rules the first year,’ recalls Dame Jenny. ‘And I said, “We’re going to lay down a rule: we will never buy them anything that isn’t on their wish list, we’re not here to exercise that level of control.”’⁷ Arguably, the next acquisition, Auckland artist Dennis O’Connor’s *My Three Arms*, 1988, was a more conservative choice, but the Patrons’ purchases over the years have demonstrated a healthy appetite for variety and challenge. For example, they have embraced works in new media by artists Phil Dadson, Yuk King Tan, Terry Urbahn and Rachael Rakena; and large-scale installations by Peter Robinson and et al.

The acquisition of et al.’s *Maintenance of Social Solidarity – Instance 5*, 2006–07 in 2008 warrants a special mention as it occurred against the backdrop of the artist collective’s contentious presentation for the New Zealand pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Despite receiving critical acclaim in Venice and winning the 2004 Walters Prize, et al.’s work has not always been well-received by



Jörg Immendorff, *Readymade de l’histoire*, 1987, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased with assistance from Mr and Mrs A M McConnell and the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1988.



Michael Stevenson, *Call Me Immendorf*, (installation detail), 2002, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

New Zealand’s mainstream media. American curator Robert Storr, who awarded et al. the Walters Prize, aptly describes the challenge of their work: ‘It’s a very intelligent orchestration of all the dilemmas that the public actually will feel when considering work they do not know. Particularly the dilemma that I think is true of a lot of art – the art that does not love the art lover back.’⁸

Nominated by Gallery curator Natasha Conland, who was also the curator of et al.’s Venice project, the installation might have been perceived as a ‘tough sell’ to the Patrons compared with some other works under consideration that year. Yet, as Conland recalls from the buying meeting: ‘At the end of all our presentations Dame Jenny stood up and asked Chris Saines, “What does the Gallery need the most for its collection right now?” Chris paused before replying unequivocally, “We need et al.’s work.”’⁹

Shortly after the Gallery re-opened following its major redevelopment in 2011, the exhibition *Partner Dance: Gifts from the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery* was presented. Curated by Ron Brownson, Natasha Conland and Ngahiraka Mason, the exhibition celebrated 25 years of Patrons’

acquisitions, featuring 48 of the 153 works that the Patrons had acquired since 1987. On the occasion of the exhibition, chair of the Patrons, Dayle, Lady Mace noted, ‘The Patrons are committed advocates of contemporary art. We are proud that our gifts to the Gallery acknowledge and recognise New Zealand’s artists. We want to celebrate their achievements and see their artworks represented in the collection.’¹⁰

An influential tastemaker at the Patrons’ buying meetings over many years was the late Ron Brownson (1952–2023), senior curator, New Zealand art. When I started working at the Gallery in late 2018, I quickly appreciated the key role Ron played in the annual Patrons’ acquisitions. The presence of works by photographers such as Laurence Aberhart and Mark Adams, for example, and Pacific artists including Ani O’Neill, Andy Leleisi’uao, John Pule and Rosanna Raymond between 2007 and 2020 are among Ron’s lasting contributions to the Gallery’s collection.

Each year the Patrons’ buying meeting is a lively, competitive, and high-stakes event. Current chair of the Patrons Chanelle Farmer wryly compares the process to the popular television series *Dragon’s*



Partner Dance: Gifts from the Patrons of Auckland Art Gallery (installation views), 2012, featuring works by Michael Parekōwhai, Lisa Reihana, Andy Leleisi’uao, Gavin Hipkins, Ani O’Neill, Julian Hooper, Julian Dashper and Peter Robinson.



Chairs of the Patrons of Auckland Art Gallery Dayle, Lady Mace (chair 2002–17), Chanelle Farmer (chair 2017–ongoing) and Dame Jenny Gibbs (chair 1987–2002) with Gallery Director Kirsten Lacy, June 2023.

Den, in which budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to a panel of potential investors. Where possible, the artworks themselves are physically displayed and the curators give a short presentation about each work. This is followed by robust discussion and then the voting commences, coordinated by the chair of the Patrons and the Gallery director. Talking about this process with broadcaster Kim Hill, the Gallery’s Curator, Emerita Mary Kisler observed: ‘The Patrons never want us to go to them with just one work. They want to have the opportunity to choose for themselves . . . It’s quite a challenge because you prepare, you do a presentation about each work, and they decide what they want in light of the collection that they have acquired so far. It draws out very interesting conversations between the Patrons group themselves. So, it’s vibrant, but you’ve really got to know your stuff.’¹¹ The role of the chair of the Patrons is an equally challenging one: a combination of gracious host, liaison between the Gallery and the Patrons, and guide of discussions among opinionated curators and enthusiastic Patrons. Dame Jenny humorously compares the exercise to ‘herding cats’.¹² According to Dayle, Lady Mace, the chair must be ‘forthright, no shrinking violet’.¹³

One of the defining aspects of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery is their steadfast support of contemporary art and artists. All acquisitions have been of work by living artists who have directly benefited from the sale of their work, with only one exception: a work by Billy Apple acquired within a year of his death in 2021.

In most cases the works acquired by the Patrons are completed artworks but there is one exception. In 2014 they acquired a work-in-progress by Lisa Reihana (Ngāpuhi), nominated by director of the time, Rhana Devenport. This timely support enabled Reihana to realise the work for display the following year at the Gallery.¹⁴ A mammoth production, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–17 had been in production for several years by that stage. An immersive panoramic film, Reihana’s work cleverly reimagines historical 19th-century wallpaper depicting Captain James Cook’s voyages in the South Pacific and his encounters with Indigenous peoples of the region. It was an immediate sensation with critics and audiences – close to 50,000 people attended the exhibition during its three-month display in Auckland. Unsurprisingly, given the attention it received, the project was subsequently nominated



Acquired in 2012 to mark the Patrons’ 25th anniversary, Ngāpuhi artist Shane Cotton’s *Eden to Ohaeawai*, 1998–2000 explores the intertwined legacies of whakapapa, 19th-century Māori prophetic movements, Christianity, and conflict between Māori and the Crown in the northern parts of Aotearoa. Shane Cotton, *Eden to Ohaeawai*, 1998–2000, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2012.