

GORDON WALTERS
NEW VISION
VISITOR GUIDE
7 JUL—4 NOV 2018

Catalogue

The accompanying publication, *Gordon Walters: New Vision*, is available from our shop on Ground level and online. This groundbreaking book charts new art historical territory to provide the most complete view of Walters' life's work to date.

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***Gordon Walters: New Vision* is the first comprehensive survey of one of New Zealand's most influential modern artists. The exhibition provides an in-depth look into the development of Walters' work, and reveals the different art forms which fuelled his vision and inspired the creation of a singular visual language. Discover Walters' earliest black and white koru works from the 1960s, his first foray into abstraction in the 1940s, and never-before-seen paintings, studies and notebooks.**

Gordon Walters: New Vision is curated by Lucy Hammonds (Dunedin Public Art Gallery), Laurence Simmons (University of Auckland) and Julia Waite (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki).

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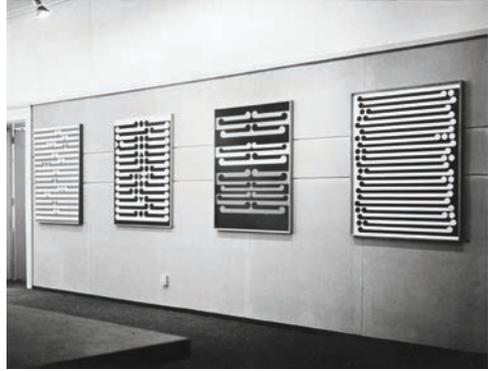


The works Gordon Walters presented at New Vision Gallery in 1966 represented the culmination of a decade of experimentation and development. Reflecting back on this time Walters said:

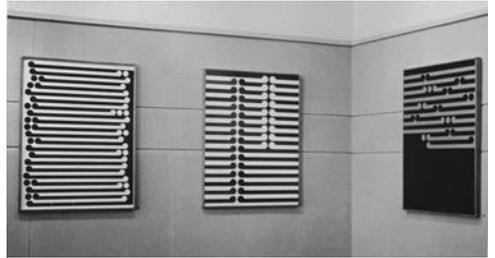
‘I had the habit of looking carefully at whatever I came across and continued playing around with various motifs. In this pursuit I suddenly hit on the positive/negative use of the koru and knew immediately I had something. That was in mid 1956, but it took a long time to realise the potential fully and I tried hard to build on what I had . . . I did not think of making paintings until I felt my source material had been transformed sufficiently to be my own.’

– Gordon Walters to Michael Dunn, 5 October 1983

The selection of Walters’ surviving large-scale koru paintings at the start of this exhibition include several which were first exhibited in the breakthrough show at New Vision Gallery. These starkly rhythmical paintings reveal how, through varying his use of the same basic formal elements, Walters created a wide range of effects. Some convey a sense of contained order, while others feel more expansive.



Gordon Walters: *Paintings 1965, 1966* (installation view: New Vision Gallery).
Photographer unknown.



Gordon Walters: *Paintings 1965, 1966* (installation view: New Vision Gallery).
Photographer unknown.

② From Portrait to Poet

The 1940s was a formative and experimental decade for Walters. As he absorbed the influence of friends, teachers and major figures from international art, Walters' own painting was becoming increasingly abstract.

'In 1941 things took a turn for the better when I met Theo Schoon . . . Schoon had had a thorough academic training at the Rotterdam School of Art, and I learned a great deal from him . . . Schoon's familiarity with contemporary European art movements meant that I could learn about these things from one who had direct experience of them.'

– Gordon Walters, Auckland Art Gallery lecture, 1983

The works in this area show Walters exploring a range of styles from realistic portraiture through to more abstract paintings like *Air Earth*, 1949. These early abstract works define form through curving lines on a field of flat colour. Walters divided these compositions using sections of black and vivid colour – a technique that became an important feature in his later works.



Theo Schoon *Gordon Walters*, 1944. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Gift of the artist.



Gordon Walters at the Botanical Gardens, Sydney, 1946. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

Walters worked prolifically in the 1950s. Many of the forms and ideas laid down in the colourful gouaches of this time would shape his abstraction for decades to come.

'I made gouaches because I could put down ideas quickly while they were still fresh . . . they were not intended to be final works . . . It was a very isolated activity however, and I felt acutely the need of a context for what I was doing.'

– Gordon Walters to Michael Dunn, 28 March 1983

These small-scale paintings reflect years of energy and experimentation as Walters sought to establish a unique visual language. Together, the gouaches show how the artist explored a range of possible methods for relating forms to one another in a composition. He considered the paintings to be working studies and they were not exhibited publicly until 1974.



Gordon Walters [Gordon Walters' Studio, Tinakori Road, Wellington], circa 1965. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

The artworks in this gallery, which include some of Walters' earliest koru paintings in gouache as well as works inspired by Marquesan art, show his evolving interest in Māori and Pacific art.

Sometime during the early 1950s, Walters began collecting and juxtaposing images of modern European art and photographs of Indigenous art in a small brown notebook. Viewable on the touchscreen, the scrapbook gives rich insight into Walters' visual research and reveals his interest in different art forms from across cultures. The archival material in the vitrine provides further context to Walters' practice and lifelong interest in the art of Indigenous peoples.

During the same period, the drawings of Rolfe Hattaway, which Theo Schoon had shared with Walters, became an important source of inspiration and led to the creation of some of Walters' least ordered and organic-looking paintings.

5 A Powerful Economy

Walters greatly admired Māori rock art, an interest formed after his first visit to sites in South Canterbury in 1946. These rock art drawings became a fundamental influence, and he often spoke of their importance to his work:

‘I think the origins of my present work can be ultimately traced back these drawings [of rock art]. In fact, I have been astonished to find that the ingredients of my present style are already present in these works.’

– Gordon Walters to Michael Dunn, 30 June 1979

This case study of paintings from the mid-1950s through to the 1990s shows the development of the ‘open figure’ form in Walters’ work. In the early paintings, the central form appears more organic, but as time passed it became increasingly refined and abstract.



Taniwha Gully, Opihi River Valley 1963. Image courtesy of Ngāi Tahu Māori Rock Art Trust.

6 Rhythm and Repetition

Walters found endless potential in a limited vocabulary of basic formal elements. His large-scale, koru-based compositions combine simple forms with principles of variation and repetition to explore differing effects.

‘It might appear that limiting myself to the deployment of a single form would be stultifying but in fact the strictness of the theme provides the maximum of freedom . . .’

– Gordon Walters, Auckland Art Gallery lecture, 1983

The paintings in this part of the exhibition reveal the range of expression which Walters achieved in some of his largest and most visually complex paintings. He created balance in asymmetrical compositions, explored scale, colour and tone, and maintained an element of surprise through unexpected additions and subtractions.



New Paintings and Drawings, 1968 (Installation view: New Vision Gallery). Photographer unknown. E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.



[Gordon Walters], c1990. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

In the later decades of his career, Walters circled back to further develop ideas that he first expressed during the 1950s. These works refined and extended forms that remained important to the artist throughout his life:

‘There is some optical movement in my paintings but it is very slight, and I want them to be thoughtful and quiet. Each work is the expression of a feeling, and I think my painting is in the tradition of much modern art in that I like asymmetry, and work towards a balance of forms in the work.’

– Gordon Walters, Auckland Art Gallery lecture, 1983

This group of works includes paintings from the later phase of Walters’ career, from the early 1970s to the 1990s. In these works we see the artist continuing to explore the ‘dynamic relations’ between forms and using an increasingly limited visual language to create a feeling of stillness and reduction.

What makes Walters’ late practice so remarkable is his enduring commitment to the potential of forms and geometries first realised more than 40 years earlier. Created in the last two decades of Walters’ life, the paintings in this gallery emit formal grace and quietude. They are the works a dedicated modernist with a singular vision – a vision which compelled Walters to pursue a line of enquiry to ultimate refinement.

Glossary

Across five decades, Walters developed a dynamic visual language which consisted of a vocabulary of elegant geometric forms. Art historian Francis Pound put language to Walters' abstraction, describing and naming a number of the forms. Pound listed these in the 2004 publication *Walters En Abyme*: transparencies, stripes, interlocks, ziggurats, notched rectangles, mini-retrospectives (which gathered into one work motifs previously used in others), sprocket-edged forms, spirals, tessellations, tapa-like triangulations, crosses (which Walters called *Constructions*), disintegration and rearrangement of a given form within the one work, quartered rectangles, horizontal or vertical rectangles bisected horizontally, and the composition *en abyme*.

This glossary details some of Walters' most important and enduring forms, all of which can be identified in this exhibition.

Clear Divisions



Gordon Walters *Painting H*, 1975, oil on canvas. Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

By the mid-1970s, Walters had resolved his language to the point of ultimate refinement. *Painting H*, 1975 is an extreme form of abstraction made from a perfect division of the canvas.

En Abyme



Gordon Walters *Untitled*, 1989, acrylic on canvas. Collection of The James Wallace Arts Trust. Gift of the Rutherford Trust. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

Mise en abyme exists in art and writing and has been described as 'a means by which a work turns back on itself, appears to be a kind of reflection'. Walters explored this particular visual relationship throughout the later phase of his career, although the first *en abyme* painting was produced in the early 1950s. The main source of inspiration for

the *en abyme* paintings was Rolfe Hattaway, who produced a sketch on paper in 1949 of a rectangular shape repeated inside itself.

Grids



Gordon Walters *Black/White*, 1969, PVA on canvas. Collection of Alan Gibbs. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

This grid painting draws inspiration from a Polynesian lashing pattern which Walters saw in a diagram in a Bishop Museum publication.

Interlocks

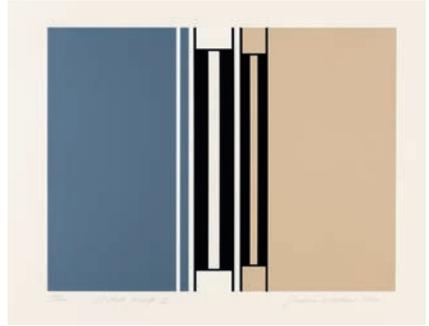


Gordon Walters *Construction with Red Ochre*, 1985, acrylic on canvas. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Gift of friends of the artist on the occasion of his 70th birthday, 1989. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

This kind of composition, built using rectangles and squares, was first explored by Walters in the early 1950s. Here, the narrow forms lock together in a

network that is interrupted by a reddish coloured band which intersects on the horizontal.

Open Figure



Gordon Walters *Then*, 1980, screenprint. Dunedin Public Art Gallery Loan Collection. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

The open figure is based on the figurative drawing found in Māori rock art in Te Waipounamu/the South Island. *1st Study for Then*, 1955 was the earliest articulation of this shape, which would hold Walters' interest across his long career.

Open Peninsula



Gordon Walters *Untitled*, 1954, gouache. Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Purchased 2015. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

The open peninsula shape derives from map-like drawings by Rolfe Hattaway. Although Walters more frequently used black to clearly define his motifs, the open peninsula appears in a range of colours. Like Walters' koru-inspired form, it can be read in the positive and negative.

Rauponga



Gordon Walters *Rauponga*, 1986, acrylic on canvas. On loan from a private collection, Auckland. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

In whakairo (carving), the rauponga consists of a series of pākati (a pattern of fine dog's-tooth notches) sitting within a series of parallel grooved lines or haehae. Walters' abstraction in response to the rauponga pattern first appeared in the 1950s. He would continue to experiment with this form until late in his career, and he frequently used rauponga as a title or descriptor for a specific series of compositions.

Spirals



Gordon Walters *Untitled Black Spirals*, 1970, ink on paper. Dunedin Public Art Gallery Loan Collection. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

Walters' use of spiral forms reflects his interest in Māori art and tā moko (facial tattooing). The strong optical effects in the spiral paintings led audiences to regard Walters as an Op artist and to liken his work to that of British painter Bridget Riley.

Transparencies

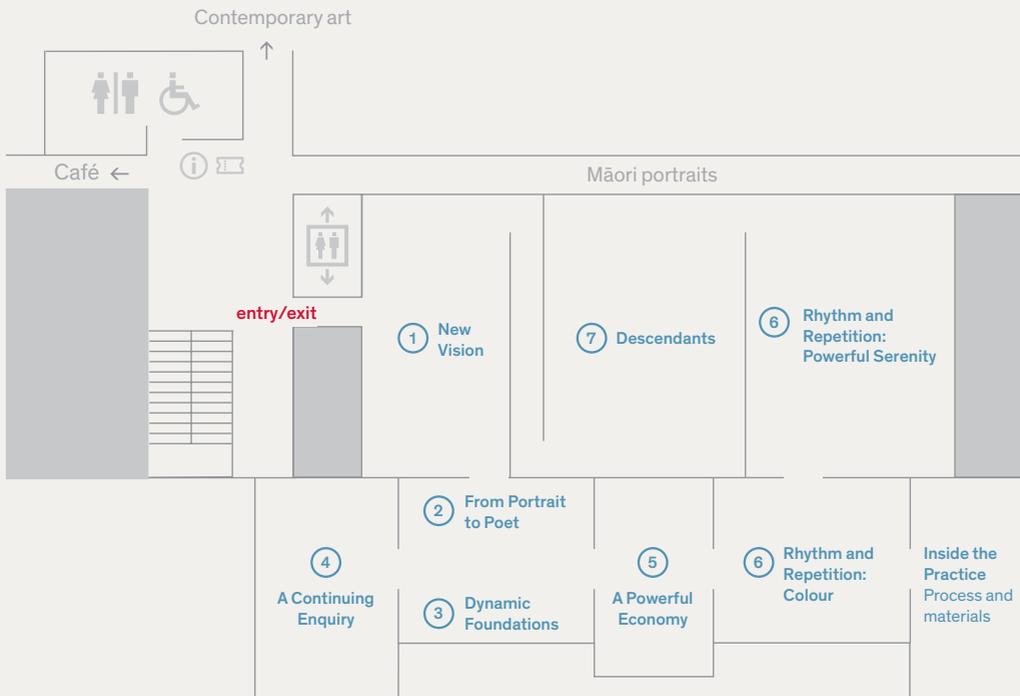


Gordon Walters *Untitled (X)* 1989, acrylic on canvas. Private collection, Auckland. Courtesy of the Gordon Walters Estate.

Walters' interest in overlapping transparent forms dates to the early 1950s and can be seen in a number of gouache paintings based on Rolfe Hattaway's drawings. Walters' *Transparencies* were often worked out as collages, with the artist literally moving around layers of paper to explore the potential held in overlaying forms or planes.



Marti Friedlander (*Gordon Walters in His Studio*) (detail), 1978. E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Courtesy Gerrard and Marti Friedlander Charitable Trust.



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take a close look, but resist the temptation to touch.

enjoy your visit