



[Detail of Kawaupaku, Te Henga, 1967, Don Binney, University of Auckland Art Collection]

Korero with Don Binney

A recent honoured guest at our Chrysalis Seed Art and Faith Resource Centre was the renowned New Zealand painter Don Binney. Born in 1940 in Auckland, Binney studied art at Elam School of Fine Arts from 1958-61 and subsequently was a member of the teaching staff at Elam for 24 years before retiring as Head of Painting in 1998. On 8 November 2001 the following phone interview was conducted with Binney; it appears here in an abbreviated form.

Bridget Underhill: What were the early influences on your art?

Don Binney: Growing up in this country as a child with an uncle at the war and a mother in the US undergoing radical surgery was very much a war baby experience with a family sharing in times of domestic and international crisis. Growing up, my babyhood was in Parnell and early childhood also at Browns Bay, which has been the source of some recent work. When I was still a young kid at Browns Bay I would look out at strange islands floating on the horizon above which the sun rose - there was a certain mystique that I still return to as a 60 year old man. Later my parents and I went to live at Kohimarama near to where Selwyn College is now. Then it was largely farmland and I used to be able to walk from my house to watch the milking every night. By the time I went to primary school I was an amateur bird watcher and I would go to St Heliers Bay and Tahuna-Torea, a short bike ride away, and watch birds there. I remember seeing my first shining cuckoo in Purewa Bush near the Purewa Stream, which was first painted by Albin Martin.

My schooling was of Anglican practice with exposure to a wonderful ornithologist at Kings College, R. B. Sibson, who along with being the classics master would take boys on many bird watching excursions. The Kings College former principal, H.B. Lusk, a dedicated botanist, introduced me to the Kauri logging trails behind Lake Wainamu and Te Henga and to local legends and botany. I learnt a lot of things at that time which I have drawn on ever since as part of my schooling - botany, eco-geography and bird life. This is why I draw a lot from bird and specific land form imagery. These are the informing ideas I have lived with since that time. It is what is part of my code,

reference and acquired language. It is the imagery that has informed my growth and development.

Lusk taught me to use binoculars and their use has had an effect on how I have devised my paintings. Through binoculars you see the bird larger and only momentarily. You catch those defining shapes - the visual stigmas that identify a tui or pipiwhareroa. It is enhanced by scale and a certain brevity with detail commensurate with the enlargement - there are only vital seconds when scanning with binoculars. The land, on the other hand, you can dwell on. This was more than just a question of developing a personal guileless visual vocabulary - it was my way of becoming an inhabitant of the habitat.

After Sibson and Lusk had passed on their insights, I got to know Ru Forgie at Te Henga - she was of the small iwi identifying with Anawata. Ru asked me over for coffee and gave me her own handwritten notes of all the Maori place-names along the West Coast of the Waitakeries. This was an entrusting from one who was tangata whenua and she accepted my engagement with these places. I was also party to handwritten memoirs and I started to learn the tapu places which I will not tell anyone. I'm talking about natural spirituality - these are indigenous spiritualities - those places where the birds come to and go to, the old bullock tracks which are becoming overgrown. This was the encoded natural spirituality of a land from boyhood to an adult man which I was fortunate enough to grow into.

That takes me to the age of 25 or so, and after that I started to travel. I went to Mexico and Central America because I wanted to spend time dreaming and assessing animal and bird imagery in pre-Columbian art and to see how a tricultural community like Mexico could communicate to someone like myself - and it did. I was in Mexico and Central America during 1967-8 on a very generous travel grant and I ended up having an exhibition in Mexico City which became part of the cultural programme of the 19th Olympiad. Then back to a period of great mobility within New Zealand - 2 shows in Auckland in 1969 and then off to Wellington and Christchurch in 1970 where I, with Hotere and Smither, were guest exhibitors with

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the Christchurch Group, my second time with the group (first in 1964). In 1970 I spent a lot of time in Christchurch - my McDougall painting, 'Canterbury Garden Bird', I did at that time. Then in 1971 I was guest artist at the Victoria University Students Association and tutor in residence with Victoria's Adult Education Department which was my first taste of university teaching.

In 1972 - 1973 I was living in London and then travelled slowly back to New Zealand through Africa and Australia visiting Ethiopia where I saw the wonderful Coptic monasteries, then on through Kenya and Tanzania with its birds and wildlife. I binged on flamingos and fish eagles and all species of vulture and I did drawings which were exhibited in 1974 in Auckland. Soon after my return I gave my first tutorial - a relieving tutorial job in the latter part of 1974. From the age of 34 to 58 I was appended to the Elam School of Fine Arts. I gave a lot to teaching and nurturing which did have a slow steady arresting affect on energies that drove my big painting output. For much of my time I was immersed in rich cultural exchange - I learnt a lot from my students and as they (hopefully) did from me - you lose a bit and you gain a bit.

From the age of 23 to 35 I had a seamless ascent into young to mid career of art practice, and did as many do - opt for some sort of teaching role. It was in those years in the transition from spring time of life to middle that I suddenly realised I was teaching students whose parents I had been at school with - a coming of age.

When I was confronted with African spirituality my old beliefs re-emerged. As a cradle Anglican, from an early life of dragging the anchor and with a lifestyle of disregard for formal observances, I made my first full communion after many years in Nairobi Cathedral. I found my way back through strange routes. I found learnt boyhood spiritual insights suddenly started to freshen and renew in foreign spaces and with the contact with other people of the world. Later, towards the end of the same decade of teaching at Elam, I

found my way into the Julian of Norwich group active under the university chaplaincy. From the late '70s to '80s I was involved with very gentle, non-dogmatic but deeply held belief of the general imprimatur of Julian of Norwich - who has been deeply influential ever since.

It was very important for someone like myself, a wanderer and a battler who spins a lot of verbal energy teaching and creating, the type of approach towards shared spirituality: extreme quiet, shared but gentle access to the awakening of the Spirit and shared silence. For some the coming of the Spirit is a highly energising outward and upward kind of thing, but like art, life and other principal acts of creative existence, different people are served by different shared or ritualised procedures. It has engendered the resource of stability - not just drawn like a desperate well of loneliness but the well of commonality.

Bridget: How has this impacted on your art?

Don: It has kept it going. Very quietly augmented. Spiritually we all kind of shake ourselves loose - our energies giving and taking, losing - knowing our own fatigue levels. I have never evangelized - I have never tried to preach my own belief of art or my own specific views of faith, but I have never disguised them either. People may come to it if they see my signals - I don't sell anything - I don't hide my spirituality as it is, nor do I hock it. More often than not people want to be as they are and are served in terms of exchange. Spiritual recognition of person to person is too precious to be compromised by clinging to a dogmatic absolute of any kind. It is a small thing before a greater format of mutual legibility, love and acceptance. It behoves us not to be hustling our inner gifts - offer freely given, never hawked. In 1991 I finally went to Canterbury Cathedral and I had quite a gentle coming to terms there - at the end of that year I felt held by an interesting fuse of connections after my 50th year. The chips of the mosaic were becoming clearer. One finds oneself facing God through the circumstances and the mentors along the way.

Upcoming events

Next Seven Plus event

7.30pm Saturday 24 November. St. Michael's Parish Lounge. 83 Oxford Terrace - corner of Oxford Tce, Lichfield and Durham Streets - park in school grounds. Artists are invited to bring along recent work or work in progress. Guest speaker Don Binney. Bring a plate for supper.

Chrysalis Seed Book Club at CST Art and Faith Resource Centre. Saturday 8 December 12pm. We are working through the book *Art and Soul* and discussing the issues it raises. In our next meeting Kees Bruin will lead a discussion on underlying theological themes in his 'Musterion' painting. All are welcome.

Public Seminar on copyright for artists.

6pm Monday November 26. The Physics Room, 2nd floor, 209 Tuam St. 'Making it in the visual arts: Practical legal advice on contracts and copyright

for visual artists'. Maggie Gresson (Artists Alliance) and Delia Browne are available for interviews before or after the seminars.

Blue Lady offers a venue for collaboration, experimentation and innovation for artists, and an intelligent, stimulating night out for viewers. Centre Court of Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Friday evenings at 8pm, Robert McDougall Art Gallery. Use night entrance on Rolleston Avenue. Duration approximately 1 hour. \$5 door sales only.

Open performance venue - Liquid Lounge. Meets fortnightly Tuesday evenings 7.30pm onwards. Next meeting Tuesday 20 November. 14 Wise Street, Addington. On the left upstairs. Geared to open-minded, liberal people with an avante-garde bent - any kind of spoken or visual performance.