

The promised land

Living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, even in the cities, the land is never far away. The Southern Alps dominate the horizon in Christchurch, the bush, gulf, and island define Auckland, and the harbour and hills surround Dunedin and Wellington. Traditionally much of our art has been a response to the physical environment. The physical design and concept of our national museum *Te Papa* reflects both Maori and Pakeha traditions (Murray Rae discusses this in *CS Arts Issue 23—January 2006*, pp 10-11). The early Pakeha artists described and responded to the land directly. Maori traditions explored the underlying powers. Maori spirituality and therefore art is closer to a biblical worldview than a modern secular perspective.

The book of beginnings describes the Creator God making the entire cosmos. As each part of the world was spoken into being, the writer says, 'it was good'. The New Testament affirms that Jesus is the Lord of all the earth. He holds all things together. A worldview that includes these articles of faith gives the Christian artist a mandate to engage with the whole world. This means that any topic or style can be explored. There is no limit to the materials or concepts that can be used. Every level of reality is interrelated. Therefore the Christian artist should reflect that in how he/she develops her professional practice.

Claire Beynon, Sue Cooke and Jessica Crothall all engage with the physical environment in their art. This pursuit is about seeing the land as a springboard for fresh ideas and innovative aesthetics, rather than producing a descriptive record. The landscape becomes a framework for exploring the artistic medium. Implicitly the non-physical world is alluded to. The simplified tones and shapes of Fiordland are a doorway to the spiritual in Claire Beynon's canvases.

In Genesis 1, man and woman are presented as the caretakers of the world. Both development and conservation are implied in these verses. Both Sue Cooke and Claire Beynon developed recent works out

of personal visits to areas of special environmental interest and fragility: the Antarctic and Fiordland. The silent bush and the melting ice in their art allude to this caretaking in the context of global warming. Claire mentioned how surprised she was to find the silence and lack of native birds in the heavily bushed areas of Fiordland. She was on a special visit to the Sounds on board the *Breaksea Girl*, alluded to in some of her paintings.

Jessica Crothall's use of simplified compositions, vibrant colour and varied texture reflect and allude to the presence of the creator and the reality of the unseen supernatural world. Her dynamic markmaking can be seen as a textural metaphor for the act of creation: both human and divine.

These works responding to the land are neither 'religious' nor 'biblical' in content. All these artists celebrate the wonder of the physical environment in which we live. They remind us of the need to take better care of these landscapes. Christian art is not confined to a narrow religious iconography. The faith of these artists connects with their artmaking at a deeper level. It reflects a worldview that affirms Jesus is Lord of all the earth and all that is within.

Peter Crothall



The promised land,
1948, Colin McCahon, oil on canvas, 920 x 1370mm,
Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki,
Presented by the McCahon Family, 1988.
Courtesy Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust.