

Nigel Brown, 'I Am / We Are', Alexandra, 17/2/17

The most striking thing about Nigel Brown's corpus of work is the range of subject matter across the 60 series of paintings he has exhibited and his willingness to experiment with almost all forms of visual representation. Even as a boy he explored various media, techniques, and subjects. Whether he explored glass back then I don't know, but I first encountered him because of his wonderful windows for the new Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell, which skillfully embodied the Anglican Church's vision of itself in our multi-cultural society and his own quirky take on that vision. But he has also done prints by almost every means known to man, or woman. He has used oils and acrylics to paint on linen, board, canvas ... The sources of his subject matter were equally eclectic: poetry, the Bible, the local environment and its history, his own life and the lives of those around, including *Head of a Red Indian*, carved in wood when he was around 12 years old, for the local Pākeha boys played endlessly at 'Cowboys & Indians'.

The rapid growth of Tauranga in these years provided the young artist with a more significant early theme, however. Indeed Tauranga's new suburbs, seen with fresh young eyes, and the re-working of masculinity and even femininity as suburbia surrounded and devoured farms and orchards and market gardens, became his first major themes. In a series of powerful explorations Brown showed suburbia as the antithesis of nature the lack of vegetation, the sameness of the houses and their TV aerials – and an outwards and visible sign of an inner melancholy. Over the years he would return to the suburban theme many times, most memorably, perhaps, in his *Tauranga Quartet* for the new Tauranga Public Art Gallery (done in 2008-09). Mt Maunganui often figured. Another early theme had the black-singletted Kiwi bloke at work or on the tramp, later often accompanied by his dog.

Growing up in a society where our prophets were often artists – McCahon, Baxter, even Fairburn – it is not surprising that these painterly explorations often assumed an allegorical or even religious significance. The early Brown saw himself in that tradition. Unlike Woolaston and McCahon, however, even his wildest landscapes were always peopled, usually with men who worked with their muscles and sold their labour. Worker and landscape somehow illuminated each other.

So who is this Nigel Brown? The biographical facts are straight-forward. Although born in Invercargill in 1949, a third generation South Islander on both sides, his father bought a small orchard near Tauranga and the family followed. Nigel's father not only tried to make a living from growing citrus but often indulged his passion for writing poetry, hunting in the Ureweras, often with a bow-and-arrow (would you believe), and fishing. Always fishing in that stunning harbour. His mother, confined to a wheel chair and constantly back and forth to hospital because of polio, muscular dystrophy and a car accident, defined another axis to his life.

Nigel learned to balance the demands of a good keen man with the domestic role required of the oldest child in such a home. William Blake, the eighteenth-century painter, poet and print-maker, whose 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' have not lost their capacity to inspire, sparked an early fascination with the way in which words and phrases could work with visual images to create something neither could do alone.

Perhaps art afforded an acceptable refuge from the stress of being eldest in a hard-pressed family. He also had a knack for it and at primary school spent hours drawing, carving, and painting. At Tauranga Boys' High he studied art. His first exhibition, at the Tauranga Public Library in 1963, at the precocious age of 14 years old, comprised nine oil paintings on board. Bold outlines and flattened fields of colour were already visible. A couple of years later he executed a series of small murals for the local hospital, where he inevitably spent a lot of time. The local Health Board destroyed them along with the building in the name, presumably, of progress.

In that annus mirabilis, 1968, having finished high school he proceeded to art school in Auckland where he was taught by Colin McCahon, Pat Hanly and Garth Tapper, among others. For the next twenty years Tauranga and Auckland framed his world, for by now he had a wife and two small children to support. Various laboring jobs which left him free to think about his real work – building labourer, factory hand, navy – sustained a precarious independence. They also quickened his interest in depicting manual workers in his paintings, and the realization that this new country, like Tauranga's raw new suburbs, had been built on hard physical work. He kept painting all the while. Two series – 'Driveways' and 'Lemon Trees' – did so well that he began painting full-time.

By now he was attracting enthusiastic reviews from some of the country's most influential critics. I think there were two reasons for this: his highly unusual but original style, about which more in a minute or two; and his capacity to straddle and synthesize competing artistic traditions. Let's start with the latter. In the world of Nigel's youth four influences or even schools battled for supremacy: the cultural nationalists; the international modernists; the Art Society traditionalists, scorned by the others because they did representational work; and Māori ways of representation and seeing. The cultural wars of that time raged around these issues. By the time Nigel came of age the cultural nationalists exercised increasing influence in the nation's public art galleries and fast-multiplying dealer galleries. To paraphrase an Australian art critic, the great Bernard Smith, previous discussions of New Zealand art emphasized its debt to English traditions, everyone painting in an English manner – unable, poor devils, to paint a pohutakawa let alone a wool shed. This art was bad. Then along came a man called Woolaston who could paint our hills and sky. After Woolaston art was New Zealand, and it was good. McCahon was Woolaston's friend and heir.

Good or bad, better or worse, these were the terms of reference and judgment. But one of the distinctive things about Nigel is that he straddled these divides, picking and choosing what to take and what to leave, regardless. With one or two of his contemporaries, he also took off on a new and Expressionist tack. He was not the only young artist to be influenced by a remarkable exhibition of Expressionist lithographs, wood cuts and lino-cuts shown in Auckland in 1975.¹ New Zealand had some print makers skilled in using black and white to heighten expression, but few New Zealanders had heard of Expressionism, a movement roughly contemporary post-impressionism, its roots in Germany and Scandinavia, which explored the uses of an intensified palette to express a new vision. Nigel's close friend and fellow-artist, Philip Clairmont, encouraged this shared interest and urged him to return to woodcuts. When Nigel got a travel grant in 1981 to spend three months visiting Europe and the United States, not surprisingly he went in search of Munch's work in Oslo, Nolde's in remote Seebüll, and Kadinsky's in Munich. He also chanced upon another tradition. In Philadelphia, on the way home, he was blown away by 'John Brown Goes to his Hanging' by the self-taught Afro-American Horace Pippin, who worked in a naïve-folk tradition.

Over the next 36 years Nigel kept returning, both in his own mind and less often in person, as it were, now invariably with Sue, his wife and partner. Of particular importance to his own work were his encounters with Russian constructivism and the visual cultures of our Pacific neighbours. While Russian constructivism prompted such works as 'Sea Rising' and 'Will to Meaning', the encounter with the Pacific saw him seek to achieve a new sense of freshness and depth in his woodcuts. A second visit to Germany in 2009 also renewed his desire to achieve a more intense use of bold blocks of colour.

Nigel's distinctive subject matter and style provides the second reason that the critics began to praise him to the skies in the 1970s and '80s. Let's start with his subject matter. As I remarked at the start, poetry, the Bible, the local environment and its history, his own life and the lives of those around provided much of his early inspiration. After leaving art school he mainly painted every-day things, the ordinary, trying always to locate them in a wider context of social and religious meaning. He added to that palette, as I said earlier, the ordinary bloke, factory hand and navy. Late in the 1970s, with Muldoon now dominating the country and France speeding up its programme of testing its nuclear bombs in the Pacific, he became politically active, especially in the campaign against nuclear weapons. He also began re-considering some of the fundamental truths of his childhood, for the seventies (if not divorce) had problematized such concepts as home and family as well as the conventional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Some of the polemical works were strident and angry, but the times were out of joint.

¹ *Graphic Art of German Expressionism, Australia/New Zealand 1974/75*, with an accompanying essay by Horst Keller.

He began doing fewer large paintings, preferring a more intimate scale. His 'small Icon' series, designed to 'make sacred the ordinary', became a new signature, as it were. 'Brown's icons shuffle matter-of-factly between the archetypal and the autobiographical, the universal and the personal', as Gregory O'Brien observed,.

From the start – encouraged by his first teacher – Brown had used a limited range of bold and earthy colours, simple forms clearly bounded and boldly coloured.

That restricted palate together with those bold and earthy colours brought into sharp relief a certain folksy quality, what one critic once called a 'rugged rural vernacular'. Later he also adopted a pop-art perspective. In style, in short, he has always been, and remains, idiosyncratically himself, different but always eclectic.

From the start he also used words, painting them 'almost sculpturally' around his images. The words become structures, objects complementing other objects. He did the same with his frames, often mimicking the rough-and-ready quality of the fruit trays and boxes he had once spent hundreds of hours knocking up.² In his prints, by contrast, he aimed to achieve the utmost simplicity of form and reduction to essence. Woodcuts, stone lithographs, and linocuts now became an important part of his corpus. Indeed the conventions of this genre also often now shaped his oils, as in the powerful 'Van Gogh Triptych' (1988-89).

Nigel never allowed acclaim to stop his restless improvisations. Indeed having begun with his own experience, deeply rooted in the land and seascapes of the Western Bay of Plenty, he increasingly began to explore himself as the product of a much longer history. After a period of painting portraits of his parents, now both dead, he began a succession of painterly historical inquiries, starting with his gold-miner series (for grand-father Brown had been a miner in Central).

Icon, allegory, and archetype now combined to achieve something quite unusual, as Denis Trussell noted in his brief essay to accompany 'Albatross Neck', a series inspired by Samuel Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (first published in 1799 and never since out of print). No doubt Nigel's stint as the first artist in residence in Antarctica prompted this interest in his own deep past, for Coleridge, taught by William Wales, the brilliant astronomer and meteorological observer on Cook's second voyage, vividly invested that great poem with startling metaphors and vivid descriptions culled from first-hand accounts of Cook's epochal journey into the seas surrounding Antarctica.

² As Denis Trussell remarked in his brief essay on 'Albatross Neck', a series responding to Coleridge's 'Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner'.

Not surprisingly before long he turned to the master mariner himself, James Cook, but used him as a lens into the astonishing encounter between Europe and the South Seas, an encounter which in one turn made the term civilization normative while problematizing it, at the same time probing the ambiguities in savage. In these series each painting is presented as an icon and a tableau, connecting with the others in the series. Yet each also stands alone, rendered striking to the eye because each is a visual field in which all things stand equally before the eye – ‘a democracy of light without shadow’. Brown allows gradations of colour, but not of light. It is almost as if he is trying to see as if his eye – the European eye, in short – had not yet mastered the use of light and shadow to intensify the sense of perspective that remains one of the remarkable achievements of the Renaissance and in particular Rembrandt.

Into this world where light is evenly diffused, Brown also introduced an archetypal figure – the ancient mariner, Cook himself, Tupaia (and his crayfish), Coleridge in (imaginary) conversation with Cook, even a post-modern ‘nerd’ confronted by the ghosts of Cook and albatross. The composite figure contains all these: Gulliver (perhaps the greatest traveller), Blake, Cook, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Thoreau, if not Brown himself and his partner since the early 1980s, Sue McLoughlin. Through them Nigel explores the complex legacy of Enlightenment and Romanticism, Industrialism and Environmentalism, Modernism and Post-Modernism. In these historical series he makes it clear that the failures and achievements of those protagonists are not simply past, as many believe; they continue, ongoing in their consequences, painting themselves into both our present and our futures.

I recently visited an exhibition of Nigel’s latest big works, ‘Provocations’, and realized that he now sees himself as the Provoker, prompting the viewer to reflect on the larger landscapes and cultural patterns that have produced us and our society. Many of his own life’s themes were present, as they are here: the introspective anguish of his earliest work, captured in his black-singletted Kiwi bloke, head hung; the struggle against the conservative forces in society and the creative power of spiritual prophecy, here as elsewhere captured in such paintings as ‘Damaged Landscape’ and ‘I Am/We Are’; and his celebration of art and artists as modern society’s moral and spiritual guides; perhaps even the redemptive power of art. The centrality of the word – in the beginning was the word – is assumed, as is the spiritual significance of our landscapes.

Nigel Brown has for long been the artist who has specialized in exploring the lives and dreams of the ordinary bloke within their broader historical context. He has long been a world authority on Pakeha and what makes them tick. Indeed he understands his people as the products of both land and history, except that the land too is now in part the product of history.

Brown has been described as a magpie. He not only draws on a wide range of disciplines and genres, often having chanced upon a serendipitous source, but

hones in on the boundaries we create to manage our world. Literature, film, the works of other artists, pop art, ‘traditional’ Maori art – all are grist to his mill. By the same token he cross references, re-investigates, and revisits. He is ever conscious of the divides and the differences, the detail that disrupts or subverts the category designed to elucidate. Or that’s my take. In my mind’s (recollected) eye I see a Māori Christ; a Polynesian Cook; even Cook defecating (that sparked a storm of sorts). He is also ever conscious of the complicated relationship between words and the things they purport to describe. In his best work sign, signified, and signifier are interrogated. He is also conscious of how change is both abrupt and gradual, in your face and unobtrusive. Politically and socially engaged, he is forever questioning what is going on, what words actually mean, how phrases and snatches of conversation work. He asks what do we value now and that of course brings us back to the historian’s question of how we interpret what is actually happening? And should we care? If you find the questions interesting, let alone compelling, you’ll find Nigel Brown’s works especially revealing and rewarding.

Erik Olssen,

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