

Roger Hickin 1989-2009

Rangiora Chamber Gallery, 11 April – 6 May 2021

They show their history, these marked, drawn and tessellated works. A steady progression of light and dark, line and ground, inscribed surfaces and worn, gleaming timber, as if passed through hundreds of hands. The materiality of Roger Hickin's work is built from bargeboard, lath, sarking and nail; the iconography – a spare configuration of wood, paint, charring and graphite – imbued with the traditions of art, poetry, religious symbolism and pre-Christian spirituality. He says:

It's that makeshift approach to the metaphysical through the materials of time. I wanted to make things that had a presence, that were a shorthand for meaning, that were symbolic. I wanted to make work that occasions a response from the person viewing it, so they can bring their life or thoughts or feelings to it and have the work.¹

Roger Hickin is a poet, translator, publisher and visual artist. He lives with his wife Glyn in a tall wooden house perched on the hill above Lyttelton harbour, its heels anchored into the pitch of the hill and a narrow garden overlooking the ceaseless activity of a busy port.

Half an hour's drive north, on the other side of the Waimakariri, philanthropist, music lover and art collector Christopher Marshall lives on a large rural property bordered by two streams once used to power the wheat and flax mills that dominated this swampy edge of north Canterbury. On the walls, a collection of art amassed since Marshall first arrived in New Zealand from England in 1984, including these works by Roger Hickin. He says:

I never analyse why I buy anything. It is more an innate response. It is that whole web of human responses to the human condition, where we are asking about eternity or truth or God or the mysteries of life. The way Roger approaches darkness – it has a presence, a purpose. It is part of what could be. It is part of what we live with. I find them so convincingly true and substantial.²

Hickin was born in Invercargill, raised in Dunedin. As a student of Russian literature at the University of Otago, art and writing were subjects but also a way of life. He learned about poetry from the early writings of James K. Baxter and his father's copy of Allan Curnow's 1951 anthology *A Book of New Zealand Verse*. In 1969, the same year Hickin started university, Ralph Hotere arrived in Dunedin on the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship. Warren Dibble and Hone Tuwhare shared the Robert Burns fellowship. Anthony Watson was the inaugural Mozart fellow. For a young student trying to find a path as a poet and scholar, the student cafeteria was fertile ground for friendship and inspiration. On Baxter's advice he travelled north to Jerusalem on the Whanganui River, returning several times over the following years.

¹ This quote, and others by Roger Hickin, from interview with writer, 2 December 2020.

² Interview with writer, 27 November 2020.

"Why? I don't know – I was discovering what I was looking for as I went. But that was the end of my university career."

In 1972 he saw "Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition" at the Auckland City Art Gallery: "It just bowled me over."

By the end of this decade he was in Christchurch, fighting his way out of alcoholism, carving out a new future in art. While house-sitting a friend's farm on Banks Peninsula, he began fashioning weathered timber into rudimentary picture frames. The simple fact of reorganising the two right angle corners of a frame into a T-shape led him further towards the aesthetic potential of found materials.

While making recycled timber picture frames – including many for Ralph Hotere – he continued to experiment with sculptural forms made from farm timber and old metal, expounding on the archetypal composition of a horizontal line bisected by the vertical, then traversed by a diagonal – a sheer, minimal disruption indicative of a gate crossbar or the blood from the wound in Christ's side.

This suggestive iconography – rudimentary and symbolic, playful and profound – found its form in the cross, both the t-shaped Latin cross and the early T or Tau cross, the first letter of the Greek word *Theos*, as seen in *Hiruhamara* (1989) and *Small panel with graphite cross #1* (2003). It is there too in the fork of Hickin's elongated Y-shaped works – a waterfall rushing from a gully, someone throwing up their arms in ecstasy, a body on the cross – and in the etched, scratched or stencilled motifs of spirituality seen in the beaten panel of *Passion, Grace and Fire* (1991).

Writing in the *Press*, Peter Simpson noted this adherence to "an older aesthetic – passion, depth, technical excellence, truth to materials." With McCahon and Hotere, he wrote, Hickin shares "a catalogue of spiritual humanism of outlook, including a Māori element and a commitment to a symbolism drawing on the Christian religious tradition."³

Hickin's first exhibition was at Bosshard Galleries in Dunedin in 1986. That same year he showed at Several Arts Gallery in Christchurch. Seven years later he and Glyn began the process of converting a large timber house into the successful Under the Red Verandah café and gallery, a rich source of kauri door panels, lath, sarking and match lining with its rough horizons of old paint lines. These he refashioned into works of spare austerity and symbolic reverence, including *Sarking Cross* (2004), *Homenaje* (1993), *Elegy for Rosalie Gascoigne* (2000) and the extraordinary elegance of *The Way (Abridgement)* (2000), based on the tradition of the altar screen, or reredos, here shaped from lathwood. As poet and editor David Howard writes, "Hickin's works belong in either a church or a barn ... instead of a gallery that sanitises rather than sanctifies."⁴

Increasingly these constructed works – burned, scoured, etched, "medievalised" wrote Linda Tyler⁵ – became more specific, more painterly. Lines of graphite, letters, words, layered washes of white paint over black became more prevalent. Inspired by the art and writings of Zurbarán, Goya and Antoni Tàpies, Hickin travelled through southern Spain, following a path from Ubeda, where sixteenth-century poet, mystic and Carmelite friar St John of the Cross spent the last years of his life, and Baeza, home to writer and poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939). The stark vocabulary of this landscape is re-imagined in the minimalist marks of

³ *Press*, 7 July 1992.

⁴ *Art New Zealand*, Summer 2002-2003 (105).

⁵ *Otago Daily Times*, 8 March 1993.

graphite on white acrylic-washed board. The line a horizon; the darkened rectangle a door, building, tomb or portal, a marker on the road or a symbol of death.

The prophetic significance of these spare forms holds the promise of affirmation and renunciation while also reflecting the strong, elemental nature of the Spanish landscape. "It is flat and arid," he says, "then suddenly you are plunged down into a river valley that is so lush and green and fertile. In late autumn, you see these bare fields, a single line, then a farm building sitting in the middle."

In later works he used the same unsteady geometry to chart the experience of alcoholism, despair distilled into the bare outline of a bottle, a glass, a table (or counter) top, as evident in *Acedia* (2008) and *Let me sink lower still* (2008).

As seen in this exhibition, Hickin's is an arts practice honed from raw material and emblematic form, gravitating towards the symbolic, the suggestive, the inexorably human. He quotes T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding" to describe his work, based as it is "on an often faltering – perhaps deluded – belief in the capacity of the almost-nothing to embody the almost-everything... An attempt to reach Eliot's 'condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.'"⁶

Sally Blundell

⁶ Artist's statement, 2012.