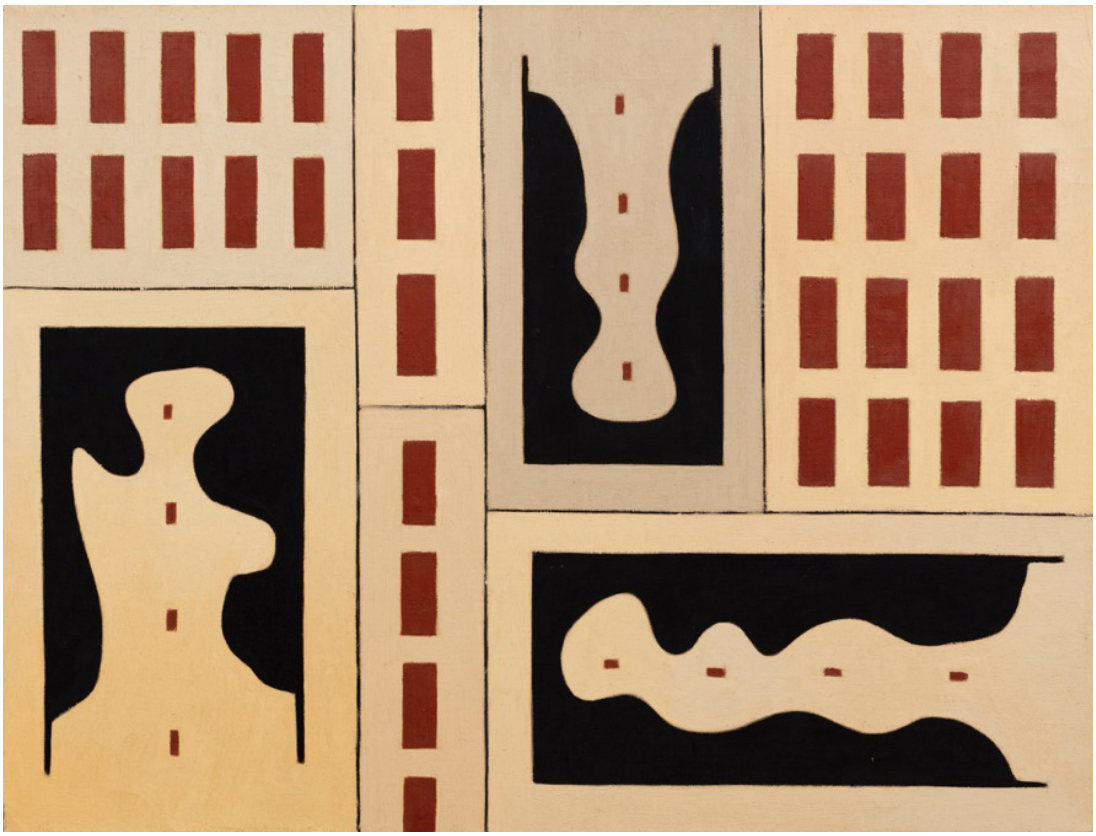
Gordon Walters: Gouaches and a Painting from the 1950s

A Starkwhite exhibition curated by Laurence Simmons and presented in partnership with the Walters Estate from 21 September to 24 October 2015



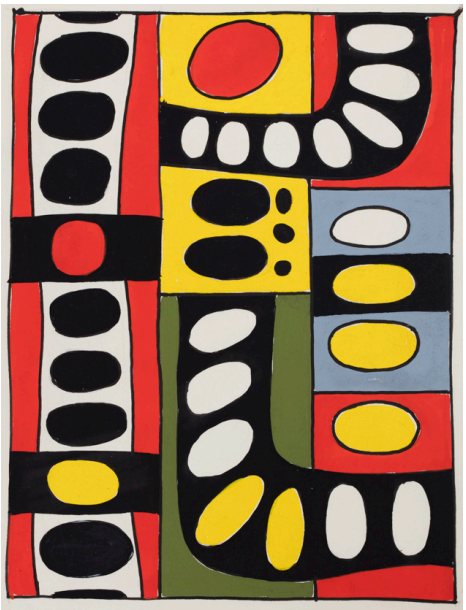
Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1956, acrylic on canvas, 495 x 645 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

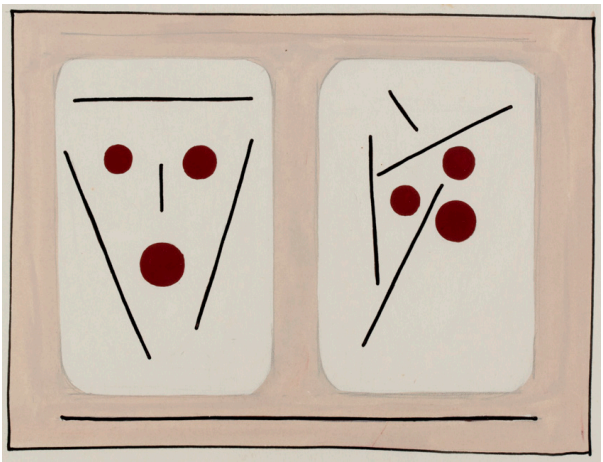
'The greatest freedom comes from the greatest strictness.'
— Paul Valery (inscribed by Gordon Walters in his working notebook)

Gouache

Let us start with the *materia prima*, the primary materials of Walters' method, but also the alchemical reference in the term connotes the transformational aspect of the creative process, which will be the real object of these notes. Despite a relentless will to form, Walters always placed emphasis on the materiality of his art. The use of gouache, also called opaque watercolour, is centuries old. The term is possibly derived from the Italian verb '*guazzare*' which refers to the squelching noise animals and humans make as they walk through mud, and the use of gouache appears to go back to early illuminated manuscripts. European painters used it as an outdoor sketching medium, and it was employed extensively during the golden age of magazine illustration and film animation because of its fast drying characteristics. As well as the fast drying time, there are challenges with gouache. Colours dry to a different value than when they were originally applied (lights dry lighter and darks dry darker). It is also rewettable, and remains active,

apparently for years. Gouache paint is rendered heavy and opaque, yet with greater reflective qualities, than watercolour by the addition of a white pigment in a gum Arabic mixture. This results in a smooth, matte finish that can at times almost be velvety in appearance. Its tonal quality, vibrant hues, and opaque qualities allow for the layering of details but the quick dry time makes the treatment of large areas impractical. Cold pressed paper has bumps and grooves that hold the pigment which has a consistency like cream and absorb it faster so it dries very quickly. Dragged ragged across the surface of rough paper gouache may leave a thick layer that is prone to cracking. Hot pressed paper is smooth and finished, giving you longer to manipulate the surface colour, but if your paper is too thin gouache will cause it to buckle. Gouache was the medium Henri Matisse used to create his collages — *gouaches découpées* — cut from gouached paper.





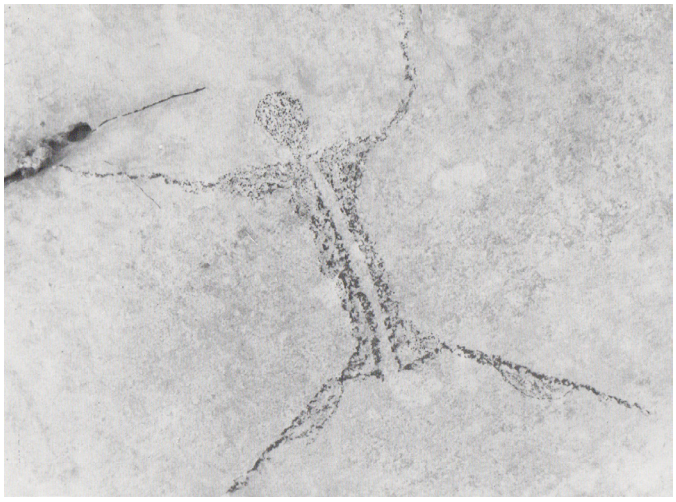
Right: Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1955, gouache, 310 x 245 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

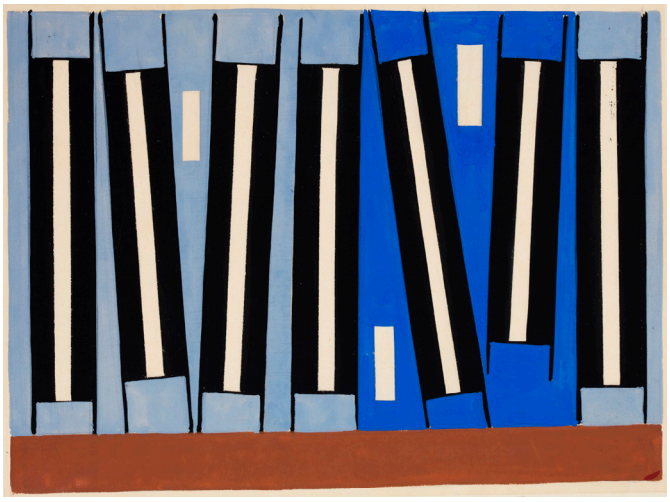
Far right: Gordon Walters, *Variation*, 1954, gouache, 185 x 245 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

Modernism

The other fortuitous act of efficacy here is a direct result of the scale of these gouaches, which were painted at night by Walters while he worked for the Government Printing Office during the day. This involves what Francis Pound has called Walters' 'ethic of modesty'; these are paintings not made to overwhelm the senses but, as we shall see, to offer a 'working out' and a set of equivalences. This ethic of modesty was also, in its way, the mainspring of a restrained but very serious and single-minded ambition. There are three important sources that inform these 1950s gouaches all of which remained un-exhibited until 1974. First of all, Walters had worked his way aboard ship to London in 1950. In 1951, escaping the conservative milieu of London for Europe, he was exposed first-hand to the geometrical abstractions of Auguste Herbin, Alberto Magnelli and Victor Vasarely at the Denise René Gallery in Paris; and then the works of Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leck and Theo van Doesburg in The Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. These gouaches revel in modern colours of an up-to-the-minute 1950s designer's palette: the cell-like structures of *Untitled* (1955) are encased in Herbinesque coloured boxes: oranges, scarlets, lime greens, lemon yellows, sky blues. Walters' early interest in the work of Paul Klee is also frequently alluded to in the critical literature. Before he arrived in Europe Walters knew of Klee's work in reproduction and admired it and, indeed, Walters' early landscapes of the late 1940s appear to draw upon paintings by Klee of the late 1930s such as *Park near Lucerne* (1938). And here amongst the gouaches of the 1950s we have the two Klee-like faces of *Variation* (1954) providing a quirky and symmetrical way of establishing and undoing simple patterns, an exchange bristling with a nervous tingle. Also Klee-like, the two opposing and upside down faces of *Untitled* (1955), make an interest in 'structuring' self-evident and produce an intense drama between two strong shapes.

The notion of deconstruction is not exactly a taking apart of structures as it is that all structures contain within them their contrary, and hence an instability. Walters was to revel many times in the mischief of shapes that can be made to jump out of their skins and perform in unexpected ways. There is also the influential role of Klee's *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*, first published in 1925. The exercises described and illustrated by Klee in *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (published in an English translation in 1944) became a cornerstone of art education across Europe and North America and Walters must have been familiar with Klee's dictum that 'the picture should make visible, not reproduce the visible'. Klee outlined the creative imagination's processes as a series of problem-solving activities, from simple to complex, adding elements to art's *materia prima*, from line and tone to colour, form and content. In fact, the opening instructions of *Pedagogical Sketchbook* could serve as directions for reproducing Walters' graphic meanderings in his gouaches of the 1950s: 'An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal… A walk for a walk's sake… The same line accompanied by complementary forms… Two secondary lines, moving around an imaginary line'.





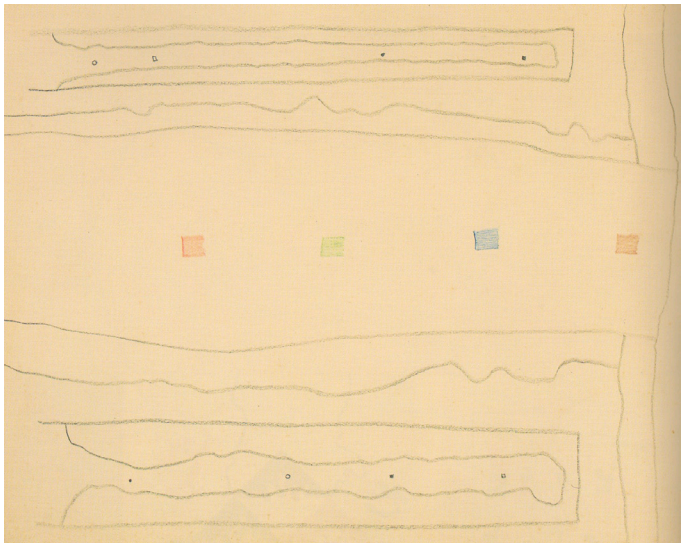
Above left: Black figure with open interior, Craigmore Downs, South Canterbury rock drawing

Above right: Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1955, gouache, 245 x 310 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

Maori Rock Art

Secondly, upon his return to New Zealand into this heady engagement with European modernity Walters was to inject his prior interest in the field of Maori rock art. During the summer of 1946 and 1947 he had worked closely alongside Dutch Indonesian expatriate Theo Schoon recording Ngai Tahu rock drawings in the limestone bluffs and shelters of South Canterbury near the Opihi River. The depiction of human and animal figures with blank centres in rock art (found in both Maori and Australian aboriginal drawings from the Kimberley area) inspired the geometry and interlocking structures of stylized anthropomorphic figures that appear in many of Walters' gouaches. Rock art drawings are spontaneously realized in black charcoal mixed with animal fat on limestone rock. On rough and exposed surfaces there is little opportunity for finesse, the making of the image and the final form are inseparable, and the image must be strong enough to be visualized at a distance. In the empty-centred figures that attracted Walters, the blank centres of untouched limestone allow the limestone ground to enter into the image and become part of it a bonding formed through the interplay of positive and negative. Walters later made it clear that there were significant differences between his and Schoon's 'adoption' of rock art motifs. 'In 1953 when I returned to live in New Zealand after being overseas for several years I was in a condition to be receptive to local material. Schoon's pre-occupation with Maori designs at this time led me to begin my own intensive examination of the subject. I was not satisfied with the ideas of Theo Schoon on how Maori art should be applied and used. Schoon is craft-orientated as his years of work on decorating gourds shows. A considerable exchange of ideas and much discussion of the subject took place between us.' Whereas Schoon was design-oriented Walters was in fact engaging with the deeper aesthetics of rock art. The distinction made by an authority

on prehistoric art, French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan, between the *geometric figurative*, where we can still identify the subject although it tends towards abstraction, and the *synthetic figurative* in which the identifying details are pushed more in the direction of the abstract is useful here. Leroi-Gourhan describes the process of getting from one to the other as 'abbreviation'. The sense of succession from rock art motif to *Untitled* (1955) is exactly that process. What Walters offers is not a finished product but a process of formation, invention, searching, questioning, a work in progress.



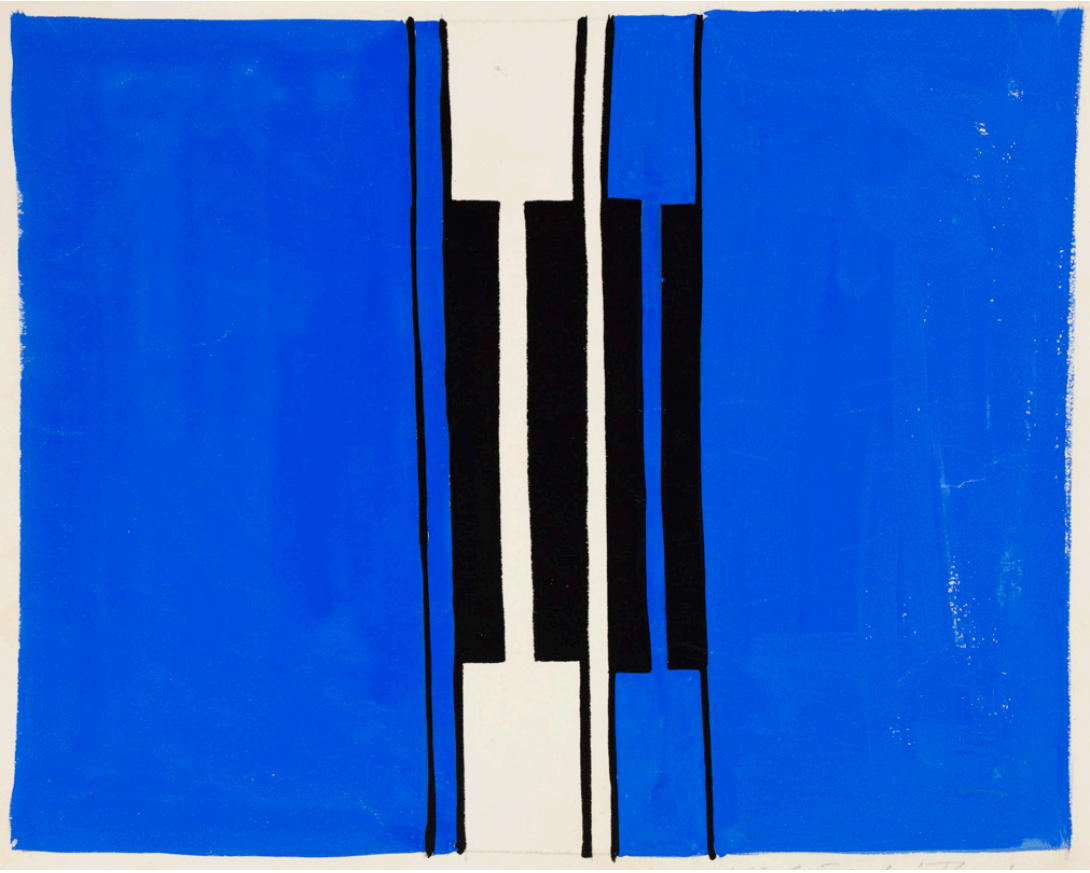
Above left: Rolfe Hattaway, Untitled, 1949, pencil on paper, 240 x 630 mm

Above right: Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1954, gouache, 290 x 360 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

Hattaway

Thirdly, in 1953 Schoon had also introduced Walters to the work of Rolfe Hattaway (1907-1970), a permanently hospitalised psychiatric patient whose drawings made with a lump of clay on the asphalt of an exercise yard had captivated Schoon who was working as an orderly at the Avondale psychiatric hospital in 1949. Schoon provided Hattaway with art materials and later Walters copied Hattaway's loopy tumults of line, in particular the repeated long open rectangle penetrated by a curving snake-like form, a persistently striking motif in Hattaway's drawings. The importance for Walters of this positive form penetrated by a negative emptiness was now confirmed for him from a double source: rock art and outsider art. He commented: 'The idea of the broken rectangle came from drawings by Hathaway [*sic*] but I used this in combination with other things, e.g. the wandering line in certain aboriginal rock drawings. After a while its origins were forgotten and it developed into a very personal device. I liked the play between the free line and the straight lines of the rectangle and used it in varying proportions.' The motif derived from Hattaway's drawings — a rectangle open at one end and entered by a curving line, drawn from the sides of the rectangle — appears forcefully repeated five times in the large gouache *Untitled* (1954) and again as a triple component of the acrylic on canvas of 1956. As Michael Dunn has observed 'the motifs Walters drew have an overt sexual character and relate to basic signs for the sexual organs' and his 'open rectangle form is possibly related to sexual ideas such as penetration'. The organic phallic shape inside the rectangle, composed by a tangling biological line desperately wriggling, is sometimes broken by a meandering that weaves across the surface, sometimes populated by dotted lines or squares. Many of the tensions and motions in a Walters' painting, even in the reduced format of a gouache, have a directly sensual impact. Indeed, it may seem odd to think of Walters as a sensualist, voluptuous even, but a combination of purity and sensuousness undergird his work. Geometry and eroticism hardly seem like perfect companions. But even if there is little talk of sexuality in abstract art — unless it is an explicit form or subject — in terms of process, emotion and expression Walters' pictorial equilibration make his art a form of redemptive seduction. He works hard to solicit sensory investment and the bifurcated erotics of separation, conjoining, and mirroring constantly provides him with a thematics of mutuality.

For all their implied sense of order, Walters' new geometric compositions are discovered structures, rather than imposed designs. It is always important to stress they continuously transcend their sources and become visually dynamic accretions made up of ambiguities, ruptures, shifts and unities. Everything in the 1950s gouaches seems both firm and precarious, at ease and ready to shift. Here again, lies the difference between Schoon's and Walters' use of these joint sources. It lies in the illustrative and graphic quality of Schoon's art. Schoon is interested in Hattaway as a connection to creativity, a conduit achieved through a more straightforward design-driven copying, as if in some way there is a connection to be made through Hattaway with some deeper understanding of the unconscious and creativity. Walters takes Hattaway's drawing as interested in form, he plays borrowed form against form, juxtaposes the organic against the geometric, investigates the ways a motif may interact with space, or other motifs so that it eventually becomes, as he declares, 'a very personal device'. By alternately opening up and tightening the arrangements of his shapes, Walters achieves a configuration that is like a compressed spring — something that resonates vividly in the collection of 'spiral bindings' of *Untitled* (1956). What is most stunning about the work is how easy it seems. It wasn't, of course.



Gordon Walters, *First Study for Then*, 1955, gouache, 245 x 310 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

Then

First Study for Then (1955) repeats the rock-art based stylized human figure, headless, with an empty-centred vertical rectangle for a torso, and with a single vertical line for each brief little leg and arm — a simplification of the curvilinear or irregular, more organic, shape of the legs and arms of the Maori source. The 'legs' and the 'arms' of the figures are here tightened and geometricized as the later korus would become. Curiously, the medium of gouache, smooth, flat planes of colour is the very opposite of the effect of rough indentations of charcoal on friable limestone rock. Walters' composition asks to be read vertically, either as four black lines, two short and stubby, two long and thin, riding alongside each other, or two opposing blocks of blue colour, pushed apart by a white gap. However, these alternative visions can never be simultaneously available, they leave the hypnotized gaze to bounce glassily between the one and the other, and in so doing

capture a visual rhythm that begins to pulse. This becomes more obvious in *Untitled* (1955) where the tripartite darker bands need to be read sequentially (like a segment of a giant bar code); they gather speed and head across the frame bouncing against each other. It is this irresolution of structure based on similarities and on differences of form, and on odd, even disturbing juxtapositions (becoming in *Untitled* [1955] almost a dance of replicants whose details are interchangeable and compelling), which provide Walters with a motif that both invades and incorporates a ground's negative space. But here in *First Study for Then* verticality is constantly emerging. The composition does not 'escape' and fall apart for it is held together and 'hinged' by the white block of the (limestone?) ground at its very centreline, so that the painting seems to be opening itself on either side into an imagined space to be looked for. It is through this simultaneous verticality and its horizontal opening out that *First Study for Then* — and the works generated from it — hold their viewer to the point that it becomes hard to turn our gaze away. Eschewed of direct figurative reference yet at the same time retaining the strong connotation of 'locality', the stylized rock art figure conveys the sense of a Maori and non-Western past pressing inescapably against the purity of modern geometric abstraction. Charged with organic energy, tensile as if spring-loaded in *Untitled* (1956), Walters' forms jostle against each other in *Untitled* (1955), as if nature and its limits are locked in a dance. Such a tension between the calm and the tremulous is close to the painter Sean Scully's definition of the power of abstract art: 'the constant exchange and perpetual transformation of a physical state into a visual, emotional, and mental state and back again'.

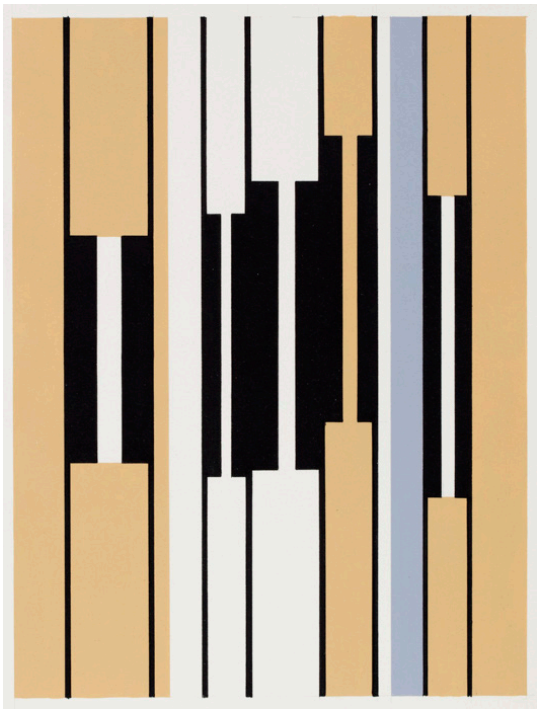
Why *Then*? The title raises the question of what is the history (the 'then') that the 'here' (the present) belongs to, or contrarily what is the present the past belongs to? Walters' title deliberately goes both ways: it is both *descriptive* (dealing with the 'then' of Maori rock art, the prehistory of human marks, and, perhaps, even looking back to that specific autobiographical moment in the past, the summer of 1946-47, when Walters encountered it *in situ* in South Canterbury) and also *prescriptive* (it reflects a local form of the New Zealand linguistic idiom, a laconic, laid–back rhetorical questioning 'What next?'). It is almost as if Walters' sanctions his future use and consequent return to the motif, for example in *Untitled Painting* (1974), the four paintings entitled *Parade* of 1977, the painting *Untitled (vertical bars)* (1978), or the screenprint *Then* (1980). In the 'Statement' accompanying the 1974 exhibition of gouaches at the Peter McLeavey Gallery, some twenty years after *First Study for Then* was made, he noted: 'I frequently take up and rework ideas which were not fully realized at the time.' Walters understands the rock art-based motif in the same way that anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss understood the function of masks: what matters is not so much what it represents as what it transforms. How does the drawn form highlight the neutral or neutralizing elements that can inscribe a working towards abstraction? This is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Walters' approach to abstraction: its relationship with a form of labour (notice how with workman-like medium of gouache we sense the human touch) in order to particularize its forms. In this sense Walters' painting does not refer to a given type of image but is more a working upon, or with, these neutral and derived elements to create something both singular and articulate. This is why these gouaches of the 1950s were so prescient; often the later abstract work on canvas would grow purely out of these working processes, from a transformation in particular, or breaking a received image down by deconstruction, and in doing so allowing the means to take precedence over the reception of the image's original source. Francis Pound — perhaps somewhat extravagantly — has proposed that the influence of the Maori rock art motif applies 'to almost the entire chronological stretch of [Walters'] *oeuvre*, to works reaching through some 48 years, from 1947 to 1995'.

and Now

There is a strong feeling in these works that Walters is finding his way within a new set of rules and that, as he grew adept at the new language, a new body of work would emerge. By alternately opening up and tightening the arrangements of rough shapes Walters achieved a vocabulary of investment in the radically abstract that was to pay off artistic dividends. What makes some of the moments of Walters' later work as intensely rich and

condensed and filled with energy as they are has to do with the journey that is begun here and taken forward to arrive at the end point. These gouaches teach us that Walters should no longer be thought of as an ascetic painter, dogmatic in conception, and formulaic in execution. There is something mysteriously archaic and supremely modern about Walters' work with its ambivalent play of the figure-ground distinction, and his emulation of the flattened work of the painters of Maori rock art. The effect, I want to suggest, is anthropological rather than psychological: Walters is reaching for (not appropriating) forms, akin to those revered in Maori culture, that are simultaneously spiritual and earthy. The story of his painting is not one of captivation to a process but liberation from it; he was not led by a geometer's rule and a hard-edged line but by restless experiment. These rapid study gouaches of the 1950s called for a certain amount of tenacity of purpose, sustained analysis and prolonged concentration. They involve an ethic, as we have said, of modesty. The gouaches taken together yielded a surprising narrative of astonishing range, providing images and compositions that would carry Walters through the decades to follow. Years later he was still using motifs he had stored in his visual memory from the 1950s. For the paradox is that in such an elaborated intellectual practice of painting, which Walters' was, so many of the key effects and decisions are derived from moments of pure coincidence and inspiration. Walters' translation of natural form into purely abstract language, his achievement in creating an infinitely variable universe of values from the most economical set of ingredients, has drastically altered the course of modern New Zealand painting. Walters' best works of this period are permanently embroiled in the present tense of their making; they would be just as fresh as if created today or tomorrow.

Laurence Simmons



Right: Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1956, gouache, 310 x 245 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

Far right: Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1955, repainted 1975 (original damaged), gouache, 390 x 290 mm, courtesy Walters Estate

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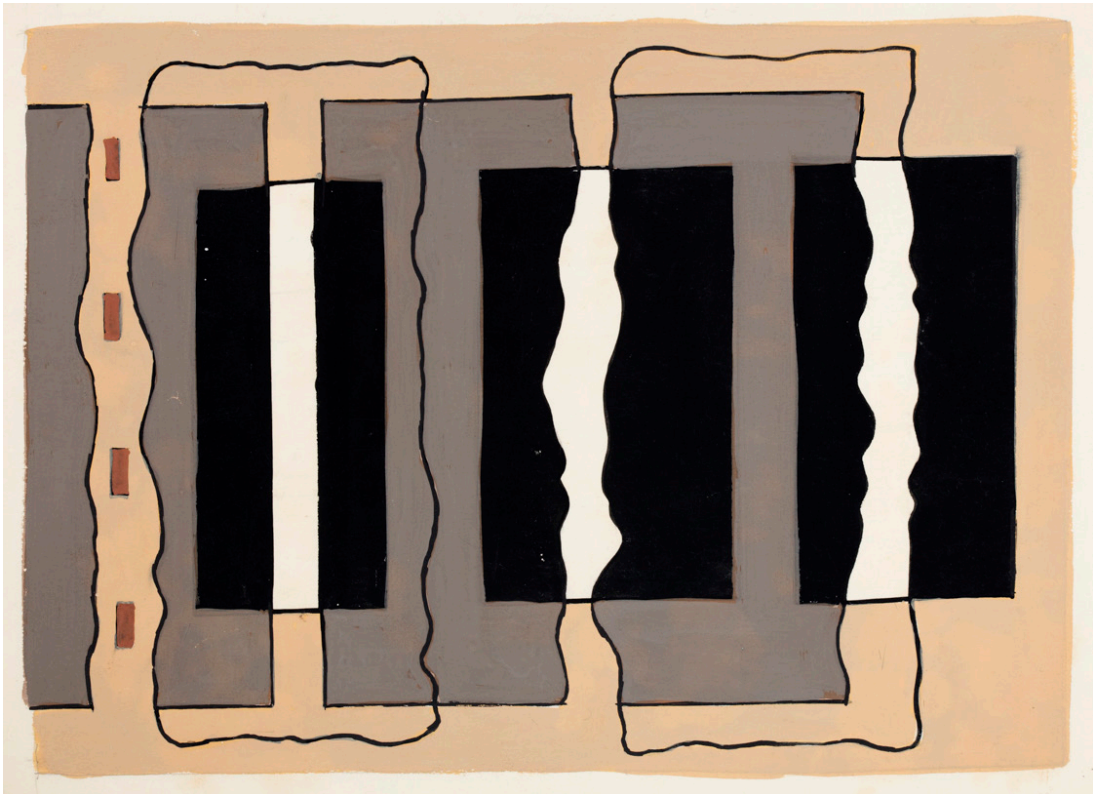

Gordon Walters, Untitled, 1954, gouache, 245 x 310 mm, courtesy Walters Estate