

Gordon WaltersPainting No. 7

PVA on hardboard

title inscribed, signed and dated

1965 verso

1210 x 905 mm

Exhibited:

New Vision Gallery, Auckland,

7 March – 12 April, 1966 (as

'Painting 1965' No 2).

Pakuranga Community Art
Centre, Auckland, 5 April – 11
May 1975. Catalogue No 2.'Gordon Walters: Survey
Exhibition', Auckland City Gallery,
March – April 1983. Catalogue
No. 31.'Private View', Dowse Art Gallery,
Lower Hutt, April – May 1977.
referred to in Catalogue on
pages 18 and 37 – colour
reproduction in Catalogue. (4) (5)'Hit Parade: Contemporary Art
from the Paris Family Collection',
Wellington City Art Gallery, 13
December 1992 – 28 March
1993.**Illustrated:**Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*
(Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983),
p. 31.**Reference:***ibid.*, pp. 18, 37.**Illustrated:**Francis Pound, *The Space
Between: Pakeha Use of Maori
Motifs in Modernist New Zealand
Art* (Workshop Press, 1994). p.
142.**Reference:***ibid.*, pp. 133, 169.

\$350 000 – \$450 000



What Gordon Walters invented is an individual consistent style within which similar elements are rearranged to appear as new, yet also the same. In intent and consequence, a 'Walters', at least done by him though not by others, is extremely reproducible. It is easy to argue that Walters paintings taken together are like serialised images in Pop — for example, Andy Warhol's Marilyn or Elizabeth Taylor — easily recognisable, infinitely duplicated, copied, yet none quite the same. Between each 'duplication', there is a shift in colour, arrangements of form, tone, definition, some small detail and each image leading back to the first which is never the original, least of all the first, a beginning. But, while Walters acknowledged his allegiances to Pop/Op (Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely), I want to suggest that Walters is exactly suspicious of this teleology of the reproducible.

For the paradox is that in such an elaborated intellectual practice of painting as his so many of the key effects and decisions are pure inspiration. That doesn't mean that they were not thought out, and in a sense carefully plotted. Scale, colour, and geometry are the forms of an argument in Walters' work. Walters is suspicious of viewing as a kind of objectivity, passivity. He is the most constructivist of painters while also the one at the farthest distance from stating 'the world is a construction'. One of the most wonderful things in Painting No. 7 is the play of its 'fall' of forms: blue to white and then a double reversal in red, down through the

negative koru forms in black. But the korus do not simply turn on the fact that one is positive to the other's negative. This is a complex balancing act. Think of the three falling loose blocks of colour as rhymes with an internal syncopation.

Walters' new way of layering paint is hostile to the linear multiplicity of the original brushstroke. This is a different operation: the paint, already painfully thinned, is coaxed out by the bristles, smoothed and levelled with a crosswise motion that flattens the natural ridges of brushstrokes, all textures are squeezed and assimilated into a single homogeneous flat substance which is then lightly sanded down and the process repeated, only then to be repeated again. In this flatness which reconquers the surface of the painting we have layers upon layers, the unseen ghosts of older surfaces of paint lurk, over-washes press further and further down, so the surface acquires a density, a luminosity of colour and depth. Walters is a painter of accumulations, building-up arrangements touched and edged into life. He is not the painter who understands painting as representing truth as a given. On the contrary, he wants to show us how a truth emerges from the to-and-fro between his forms. This is what Francis Pound called Walters' elaboration of 'the space between' cultures. Walters' interest in painting is *answering* paradox. And this is why his painting, beyond the first impression of methodicalness, turns out to be so changeable, so variable. This is also why Walters is profoundly interested in 'the thinking of painting'.

Laurence Simmons

Gordon WaltersMokoia

PVA and acrylic on canvas
signed and dated '65 – '75 verso
1220 x 980mm

Provenance:

*Purchased from Peter McLeavey
Gallery, Wellington.*

Exhibited:

'Gordon Walters', Peter
McLeavey, Gallery, Wellington,
April 27 – May 14, 1976.
Catalogue No. 9.

'Gordon Walters: Survey
Exhibition', Auckland City Art
Gallery, March – April 1983.
Catalogue No. 60.

'Hit Parade: Contemporary Art
from the Paris Family Collection',
Wellington City Art Gallery, 13
December 1992 – 28 March
1993.

Illustrated:

Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*
(Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983),
pl. 60.

\$350 000 – \$450 000



Les Paris in his Wellington office with works by Rick Killeen and Gordon Walters.

The extreme visual dissonance which takes place between a considered viewing of the two major 'Koru' paintings in the Paris Family Collection, Mokoia and Painting No. 7, in itself goes a long way towards understanding why Gordon Walters may have spent some thirty odd years mining the aesthetic potential of the Maori kowhaiwhai motif. In an oft repeated but seemingly seldom understood comment, Walters famously remarked: "My work is an investigation of positive/ negative relationships within a deliberately limited range of forms; the forms I use have no descriptive value in themselves and are used solely to demonstrate relations. I believe that dynamic relations are most clearly expressed by the repetition of a few simple elements."

Mokoia takes its name from a sacred island on Lake Rotorua and is the site of the famous legend of Hinemoa and Tutanekai. After being forbidden to marry by Hinemoa's father Umukaria, a chief from the shores of the lake, he ordered that she not be allowed to travel by canoe to Tutanekai's tribal village on the island. Hinemoa decided to swim 3.2 kilometres across the lake to the island, guided by the sound of Tutanekai's flute-playing. Walters frequently used Maori titles in his 'Koru' paintings and in doing so directly acknowledged the inspiration he received from the koru and related motifs as well as, more generically, from Maori culture as a whole.

It is in the black and white 'Koru' paintings where Walters' visual interplay of positive and negative forms is at its most formally dynamic and explicit. Like some kind of celestial aesthetic elevator, the forms in Mokoia gently coalesce and collude, stacking repeatedly and extending upwards seemingly endlessly beyond the picture plane. The effect is at once dynamic and calming, rhythmical yet optically frenetic and marks Mokoia as among his most eloquent visual statements. The on-going relevance of Gordon Walters' paintings and his standing in the canon of New Zealand art history is reflected in the decision to name the Auckland Art Gallery's bi-annual award for contemporary art, which is currently on show at the gallery, 'The Walters Prize'.

Ben Plumbly