Gordon Walters

Lot 19

Tautahi
PVA and acrylic on canvas
signed and dated '71 and inscribed '*Hautana Tuki Waka*' (the inscription possibly in another's hand) verso; inscribed *Cat No. 53* on original 'Gordon Walters' Auckland Art Gallery exhibition label affixed verso
1520 x 1142mm

$400 000 – $600 000

Provenance

From the collection of Tim and Helen Beaglehole, Wellington. Purchased from Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington in 1971 together with Kahukura (1968), which Tim Beaglehole acquired for the Victoria University Collection in his collections role for the University, a role he fulfilled for over thirty years upon taking over from Douglas Lilburn in 1964.

Exhibited

'Gordon Walters', Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 1971.
'Behind Closed Doors', Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, Wellington, 4 June – 18 December, 2011.

Illustrated

Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters* (Auckland Art Gallery, 1983), pl. 53.
Lara Strongman and Neil Pardington, *Behind Closed Doors* (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011), p. 10.

Literature

ibid., p. 16.

Gordon Walters' greatness has snuck up on us, in plain sight, for more than half a century. Most masters of modernism look a tad dated now. Not Walters who is sheerly fresh. Still sailing the walls, Walters' koru paintings impart a conviction of strength in simplicity. 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 kowhaiwhai painters. 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, and to attain this he is drawing upon colours like ochre, derived from tinted clay and one of the earliest pigments used by mankind, and also the predominant colouring agent used by Maori. The title of Tautahi (1971) refers to the legendary settler of Banks Peninsula, Te Potiki Tautahi, who gave his name to Otautahi (Christchurch). Not that Walters' best work needs much help from contextual association. Its strength lies in its combination of perceptual subtlety and sensuous immediacy: a delicacy of vision that is achieved through careful chromatic and structural shifts. All of which has made Walters such an awkward fit in the canon of New Zealand modernism but which now makes him shine as our pre-eminent artist. The exceptionally beautiful stacked korus of Tautahi set in horizontal and vertical combinations presuppose freedom rather than order. At the one end of the spectrum, critics nervous of pure shape and untextured brushwork have tried to square Walters' singular approach with categories of art convenience – he is 'like Mondrian', a 'high formalist', 'hard-edged' – but none of these really suit Walters' case. At the other end, are those who dismiss his insistent two-dimensionality as mere patterning, wallpaper for art gallery walls. While Mondrian's work seems to sit contemplatively within the harmonious austerity of his apartment, Walters' is very much on the marae, celebrating a satisfaction with the surfaces and signs of the material cultural world. In the late sixties and early seventies, Walters intensified the process by which his koru sources in kowhaiwhai patterns were rendered down into elemental forms. Sometimes the tense contrast between two or three strong colours constitutes the drama of the composition, and sometimes it is the optical flip-flop between alternating black and white forms, which have been punched flat like the shapes on a banner or pennant. Whatever the choice — and there are both in Tautahi — what is surprising is the degree to which an apparently elementary juxtaposition of shapes can open up an entire shifting universe of tension, relaxation, conflict and harmony, so that the economy of the painterly means is out of all proportion with the magnitude of the sublime effect. Anyone in doubt should stand in front of Tautahi and sense how the black and white korus rise to meet their ochre cousins. While the left-hand vertical alignment of white bulb shapes drives us upwards we sense how the interrupted black counterparts on the right-hand side seem to be both restraining and yielding to the inexorable ascent. This is no cheap deceit but is pure magic – the kind of wordless revelation that only the most assured abstraction can deliver, and it is light-years away from the design-driven formalism of which Walters has so often been unobservantly accused.

Laurence Simmons

Five Paintings from the Estate of Gordon Walters (1919–1995)

Most viewers connect Gordon Walters name with only one type of his painting, the koru motif works — drawn from a number of modes of traditional Maori artistic practice; moko (tattooing), heke (rafter) painting, and hue (gourd) and hoe (paddle) decoration — on which his popular reputation would seem to rest. But, as Francis Pound has pointed out, the geometricised koru paintings represent less than half of Walters' abstract work and, to boot, they constantly destroy themselves in their perpetual dissolution of figure into ground. From this perpetual self-destruction come many other series which Walters worked upon during a long and productive career: *en abyme* (abyss) paintings in which the painting contains a mirror image of itself, or the transparencies in which a solid form is layered with a coloured repetition of itself and so self-dissolves, or the interlocking geometric forms that seem to fight against each other for pictorial dominance. As well as this multiplicity in consistency, something else connects the five paintings in this superb offering: they all share a colour that was to become predominant in Walters' palette: shades of grey — from the lightest tints of dove grey in Untitled (1982) to the dense blue grey of Untitled – Composition with Stripes and Circles. Generally considered the least lively and the most bleak of repertoires, grey is the taint of vagueness and uncertainty. It belongs to an evasive and evanescent world, carrying the tint of smoke, fog, ashes and dust. Fortuitously, for Walters, grey signals the ambiguous space where things blend and blur, it measures the difference between distance and proximity, shading into tinges of hues of hesitation, tones of time past and lost. Not that Walters' work needs much help from 'grey areas'. Its strength has always been its winning combination of perceptual subtlety and sensuous immediacy. A philosophical delicacy of vision pumped into raw chromatic heft. Although the progress from his early surrealist-influenced landscapes, through the development of the koru, to his late-career transparency paintings may seem an itinerary of sharp bends and swerves, Walters' career in fact followed remarkably consistent principles. All of his work begins from and repeats what he declared in an interview was "the one picture I am painting all the time". If anything can persuade us as viewers to give Walters the rapt attention his art deserves, and disclose the revelations and pleasures of the play of Walters' thoughtfulness, this small grouping of his paintings will.

Laurence Simmons

Lot 20

Untitled (1975)
acrylic on canvas
signed and dated 1975 (twice) verso
460 x 460mm

$35 000 – $55 000

Lot 21

Untitled – Interlocking Forms (1994)
acrylic on canvas
510 x 409mm

$30 000 – $40 000

Exhibited

'Gordon Walters: Prints + Design', Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, Wellington, 7 August – 10 October 2004.

Illustrated

William McAloon, *Gordon Walters: Prints + Design* (Wellington, 2004), p. 36.

Lot 22

Untitled – Transparency Painting (1990)
acrylic on canvas
signed and dated 1990 (twice) verso
510 x 405mm

$35 000 – $45 000

Lot 23

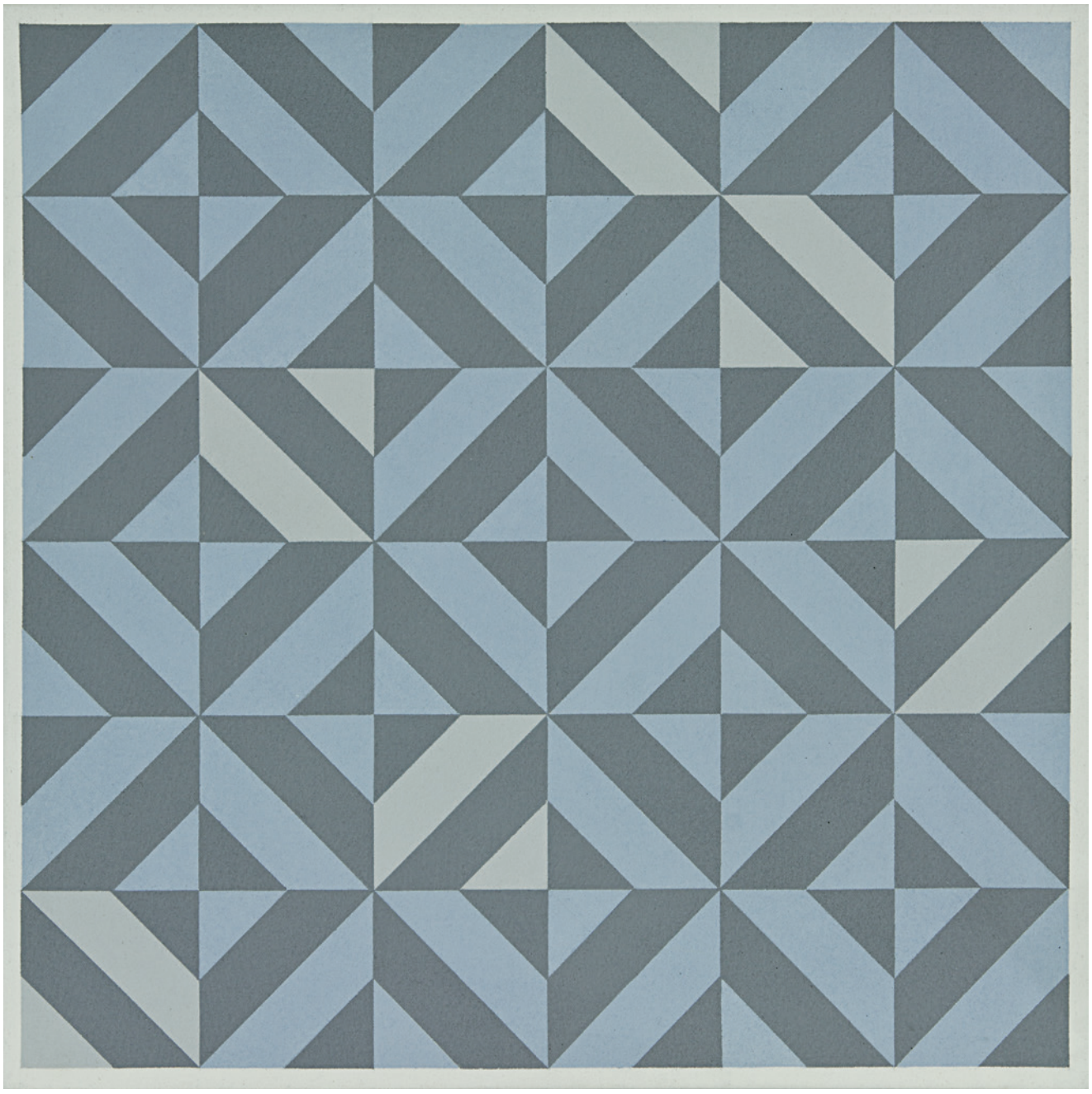
Untitled – Composition with Stripes and Circles
acrylic on canvas
1210 x 900mm

$90 000 – $140 000

Lot 24

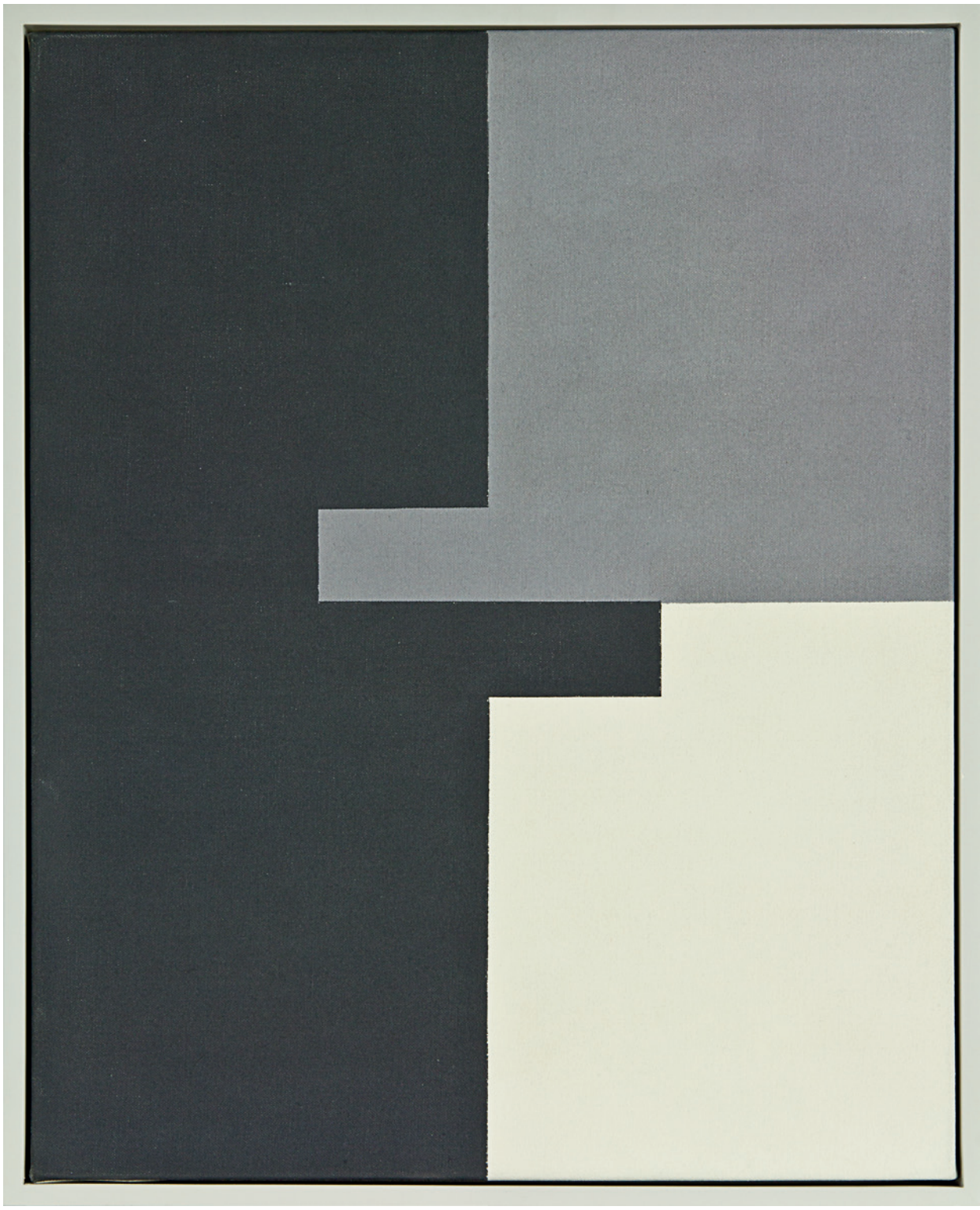
Untitled (1982)
acrylic on canvas
signed and dated '82 verso
915 x 738mm

$55 000 – $75 000



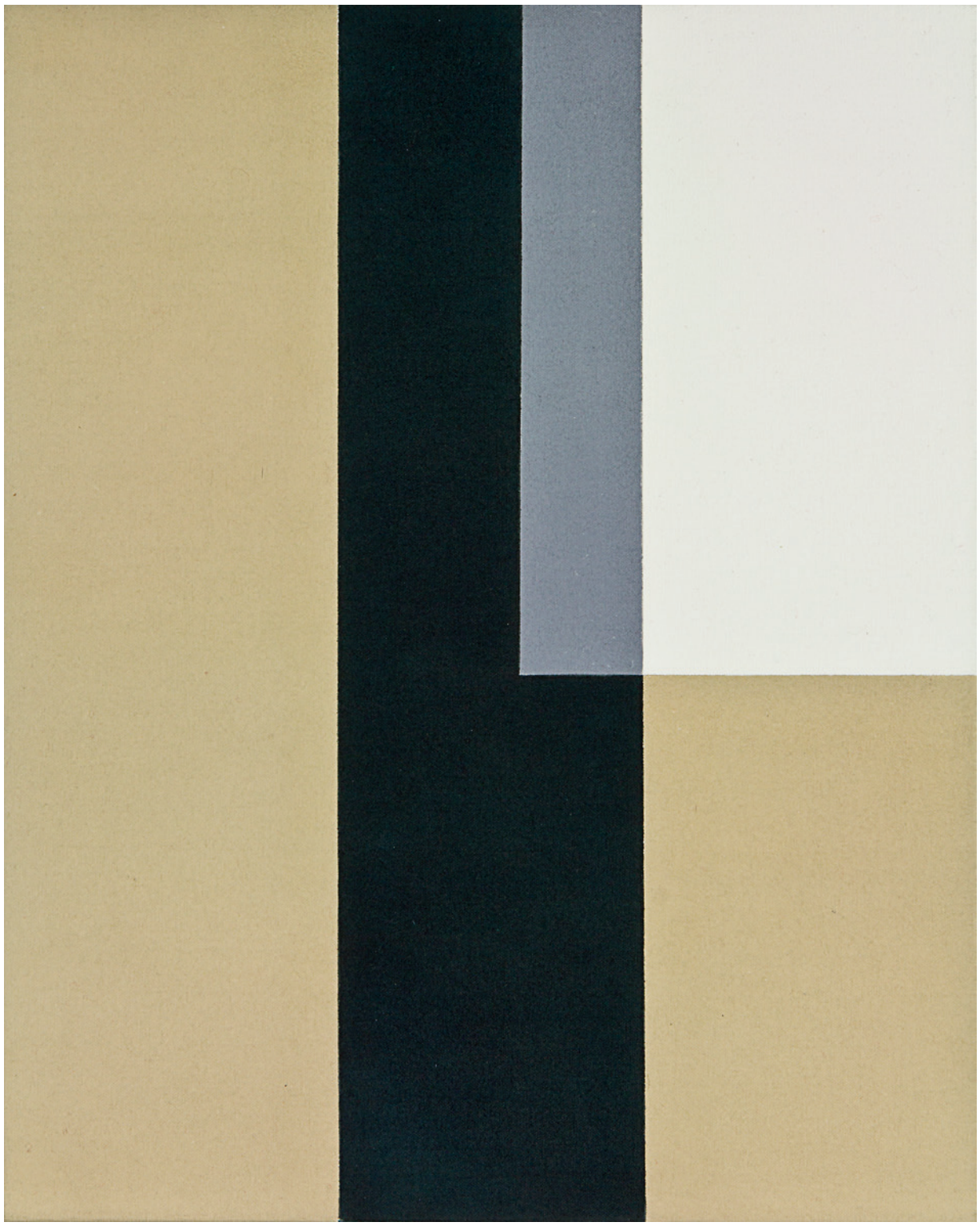
For most viewers Walters' Untitled (1975) works as a slow surprise; at first our eyes race over the painstakingly painted diagonally striped squares of sky blue and delicate greys searching for possible relations, and then at some point, unexpectedly, the image refocuses and we begin to see larger squares, and even diamonds, of combinations of four of the smaller elements. These, in turn, begin to dizzingly shift within their own myriad combinations. There is not a trace of monotony here in the repetitions of Untitled (1975). The small segments are arranged in perfect equipoise with each other, so that, if for a moment they share the unity of a single pattern, they quickly dissolve into elastic animation. We enter an endless game of transformation that through repetition preserves rather than destroys difference. This is not a mere parlour trick, and though Walters is a skilled manipulator of optical values, there is no cheap deceit about his practice. The ingenuity with which his colour stripes are brought together to give the impression of delicate movement – a slide or shift – belongs to his ambition, as he declared, to "control things with [his] feeling". Once we peer closer, in an effort to confirm one of the many polar options our eyes have offered, we enter a world of metaphysical doubt, a world of feints and distractions, demanding a perseverance. It would be easy to read Untitled (1975) according to Rosalind Krauss's well-known argument that the grid is a sign of modernity, which declares art to be a flattened, geometricised, ordered, unreal object that refuses nature. But Walters' adoption of Melanesian grid patterns in this and other works like Taniko (1977), along with Richard Killeen's companion series of grids based on Pacific patterns of the mid-1970s, introduces a social-historical frame that Krauss would ignore. Anchored to questions of local reference, yet contrapuntal, rhythmic, cumulatively spellbinding, Untitled (1975) preserves a relation with its natural origin without simply describing it.

Laurence Simmons



In the 1970s and 80s Walters intensified the process by which his sources were rendered down into elemental forms. Sometimes this became an intense drama between two strong shapes that constituted the excitement of the composition. See, for example, Painting J (1974) in the Te Papa collection, in which a letter 'J' practices karate with itself. And sometimes it is the combative relation between a single colour and the white ground so that a shape can be made to appear to slip off into indeterminate space. Walters reveled in the mischief of shapes that can be made to jump out of their skins and perform in unexpected ways. Untitled-Interlocking Forms bristles with the nervous tingle of this moment. Many of the tensions and motions in a Walters' painting have a directly sensual impact. Indeed, it may seem odd to think of Walters as a sensualist, voluptuous even, but 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. In Untitled-Interlocking Forms the bifurcated erotics of separation, conjoining, mirroring provides a thematics of mutuality. As with tantric diagrams you see exactly what the work is, even as with patient looking, you may undergo a gradual and then sudden soft detonation of beauty.

Laurence Simmons



As always, in his Transparency works Walters celebrates, like no other New Zealand painter, the limited virtues of acrylic paint: opacity and fluidity. Walters learned how a block of colour that is laid under or over a ground of another colour may take on qualities of being a discrete shape while registering direction and velocity across the compositional surface. That is, in Untitled-Transparency Painting (1990) you don't read Walters' line between white rectangle and black stripe as a graphic contour but as an actor in a pictorial field. It anticipates all the eye's ways of seeing. Edge and shape, figure and ground, matter and atmosphere are reversible, bringing about, for me, a sense of oscillation in the optic nerve. What we have here is not a perceptual flicker as in Op art, but a conceptual jam of sheer undecidability. Of course, applying paint is itself is a form of layering, particularly the way in which Walters came to use PVC acrylic: brushstroking it onto gessoed canvas, then painstakingly sanding it back to apply yet another layer, and thus build up an opacity through material density. Transparency thus becomes a self-reflexive metaphor for the very act of painting and is inflected by the fabric of the material canvas support. Accordingly, Walters' Transparency paintings knowingly play with the Greenbergian insistence on the flatness of modernist painting. They understand it can never be an absolute flatness. For the application of paint to canvas destroys any literal and utter flatness. It perforce opens up an illusory space that is optical.

Laurence Simmons

It seems that at the very moment that Walters achieved the basic form of his Koru paintings (1959), he fell into a state of uncertainty about them. Apparently, he had come to wonder if it might be possible to continue with the Koru painting format, keeping in play all he had invented over the years of his work towards it, but *without any reference to the koru.* Could this be done without aesthetic loss? Without intensity bleeding away?

In 1959, just when his geometrised koru was first achieved, in the form of finalised paintings in ink on gesso on board, Walters began a series of black and white positive/negative studies in which the motif is a horizontal bar *without any koru bulb* and *without any circles*. These studies, made in quite considerable numbers between 1959 and 1962. Let me call these works the 'Koru Alternatives'.

Circle and bar — these are same forms we have seen put under such pressure in the Koru Series. But here, as if their author had become impatient with an order so slowly and painfully achieved, the tightly locked forms of the Koru works are permitted to break free, to scatter and disperse. High order is sacrificed to exuberance. And though here, too, as in the Koru Series, there is a counter-charging of positive and negative, it tends to be looser, more intermittent, more partial than in the Koru works.

This is what Roland Barthes calls 'the dispersion of the tableau, the pulling to pieces of the "composition," the setting in movement of [its] partial organs . . .' Walters' circles now seem to go where they will; and his bars sometimes rotate from the horizontal to the vertical or diagonal. The diagonalising of some of the bars, the spilling of the circles from the confines of koru and bar, their pouring across the surface at large: after the immense tensions of the Koru paintings, all this represents a kind of *letting go*.

We might relate this 'letting go,' this 'pulling to pieces,' to the use of collage as a preparatory stage for the Koru paintings. As John Richardson remarks of the effect of Picasso's collage on his works as a whole: 'when art becomes a matter of cutting, positioning, and pinning independent elements . . . the potential is always for fixed relationships to become undone.' It is of the very essence of collage to promote free play in the disposition and disbursement of forms. And that, I think, is what has happened here: the compositional order of the Koru works, so patiently, so agonizingly achieved, is now undone, and collage is, as it were, responsible

The grey rectangles in Untitled – Composition with Stripes and Circles have remarkably scissored-looking edges, as if frankly to acknowledge the truth of their paper collage origin. Walters seems to imitate with his brush the effect of a free-hand scissors cut of a straight line. Indeed the painting shows a paper collage aesthetic throughout. Nothing could more readily lend themselves to paper collage than its simple, flattened planes.

The Bar and Ball works may pose an interplay between figure and ground in parts of their surfaces, but they always come back in the end to admitting the presence of an underlying and continuous ground. This, of course, makes the Bar and Ball work very differently from a Koru work, since in the latter we cannot distinguish between figure and ground, since the two exist only in a state of constant interchange.

Francis Pound

Untitled (1982), which looks spectacular when seen from the appropriate distance, asks to be read vertically, either as three black lines riding alongside each other, or two opposing blocks of colour, green and light grey. 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 pulses. As well, the tripartite bands of black need to be read sequentially (like a segment of a giant bar code); they gather speed and head out of the top and bottom of the frame. Walters used the vertical format elsewhere, for example in Untitled (vertical bars) (1978) or the screenprint Then (1980). But here his painting's verticality is based on a principle of internal levitation that is constantly emerging. Nevertheless, the composition of Untitled (1982) does not 'escape' and fall apart for it is held together and 'hinged' by the white slither of the 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 that Untitled 1982 also holds its viewer to the point that it is hard to turn our gaze away.

Laurence Simmons