

MEDIA RELEASE

1 November 2019

Adam Art Gallery celebrates its 20th birthday

Mt Taranaki looms large in a new suite of exhibitions at Victoria University of Wellington, with the first-ever survey of the 1930s New Zealand paintings of British artist Christopher Perkins (1891–1968), responsible for one of the most iconic images of the mountain, and an extensive archive of material relating to the mountain produced or collected by contemporary artist Fiona Clark (b. 1954), who lives and works in its shadow.



Christopher Perkins, *Taranaki*, 1931, oil on canvas, collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (photo courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki).

These are two of five exhibitions that mark the 20th birthday of the University's Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi. Each has been conceived to showcase and celebrate the breadth of programming the Gallery is known for— from rigorous historically focused exhibitions to ambitious presentations of leading figures in contemporary art.

Alongside these two exhibitions the Gallery contributes to the centenary of the birth of painter Colin McCahon (1919–1987) by revisiting his important 1971 painting *Gate III*, a key work in the University's art collection. *Gate III* helped launch the Gallery on 21 September 1999 and this presentation includes archival material that tells the painting's story, including how it found its way to the University and evidence of McCahon's concerns with rising global political tensions and the fear they would lead to nuclear action.

It is displayed 'in conversation' with the University's latest acquisition, *Te Whare Pora* (2012), a similarly large-scale work that was the first by the four-artist Mata Aho Collective. They have subsequently risen to prominence in the art scene, having presented their work at Documenta, a globally significant exhibition staged every five years in Kassel, Germany, among other notable venues across the globe.

Completing the exhibitions will be a specially commissioned print by Billy Apple (b. 1935) as part of his *Decade Series* marking significant birthdays. A blown-up version of the artwork will be displayed in the Adam's window and prints will be available to buy in a limited edition of 20. It is the first in a series of editions by artists who have featured in the Gallery's

programme that will roll out over the coming year, the proceeds of which will help fund the Gallery's future activities.

"These shows exemplify what the Adam has become known for: I would call this 'critical art history'," says Gallery Director Christina Barton. "In all we do, we think about what art is and ask questions of how it has served cultures and communities through history. We are also very artist-focused, giving artists the opportunity to stretch themselves by making new work and taking advantage of our unique spaces. This combination of shows is typical of what we do. And for our 20th birthday we're also highlighting the role we play in caring for the Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection."

The Perkins show will feature 35 of the paintings and drawings he produced during his short but influential stay in New Zealand between 1929 and the end of 1933.

"Perkins had a huge impact here when he arrived," says Barton. "He was controversial because he painted in this new style that was different from the conservative practice of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. He was bohemian and outspoken and rubbed people up the wrong way. But his painting of Mt Taranaki and another called *Brickworks, Silverstream* (1930), which was destroyed back in London during the Blitz, chimed with a new generation of artists who were seeking a new more direct style in line with modernist principles."

Several major works in the exhibition come from the collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, which acquired them in the late 1960s after Hamish Keith, then a curator at the Gallery, tracked down Perkins in Britain two years before he died.

Keith and co-writer Gordon Brown included a chapter on Perkins in their landmark 1969 book *New Zealand Painting: An Introduction*, which picks up and extends the observations E.H. McCormick made in his *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, published in 1940 for the New Zealand centennial celebrations. Perkins' *Taranaki* (1931) is illustrated prominently in both publications.

"Perkins never came to much when he went back to Britain and we know very little about what he did beforehand, but it seems that when he was in New Zealand sparks flew and that was his moment," says Barton.

"Surprisingly there have been very few exhibitions surveying Perkins' New Zealand work. We think it is timely to reflect on his place in our art history. As well as bringing together the iconic works, we are fleshing out the story to show what a good portraitist he was, how deeply interested he was in Māori culture, and the story of his time in New Zealand, most of which was spent in Wellington. We've been fascinated to learn how Victoria University of Wellington figures in his narrative, for it was a small band of academics who defended him, providing their support as an emergent cultural intelligentsia."

The Adam will publish a book on Perkins next year.

Clark has been invited to show her work alongside Perkins specifically because she has long been fascinated by Mt Taranaki, photographing the mountain and the environmental effects on the region around it of the energy and dairy industries. She has also collected paintings, ephemera and other items related to the mountain and for the past 10 years has had a military-grade camera trained on it, livestreaming 24 hours a day to a website she maintains.

Her exhibition will reveal all these aspects of her work, complementing her reputation for in-depth photographic projects documenting transgender, gay and lesbian communities, body-builders, and people with Aids.

Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi at Twenty
Billy Apple, Fiona Clark, Mata Aho Collective, Colin McCahon, Christopher Perkins
Kelburn campus
Victoria University of Wellington
6 November 2019–22 March 2020

For details of each exhibition and accompanying events, visit www.adamartgallery.org.nz.

For further information and media opportunities, contact Curator Stephen Cleland at stephen.cleland@vuw.ac.nz or on 022 264 7996.

Issued by Victoria University of Wellington Communications & Marketing. Guy Somerset, Senior Communications Adviser, can be contacted by emailing guy.somerset@vuw.ac.nz or phoning (04) 463 6589.

Victoria University of Wellington: Capital thinking. Globally minded.

