



COLIN McCAHON

Is This the
Promised Land? Vol. 2
1960–1987

Peter Simpson

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AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



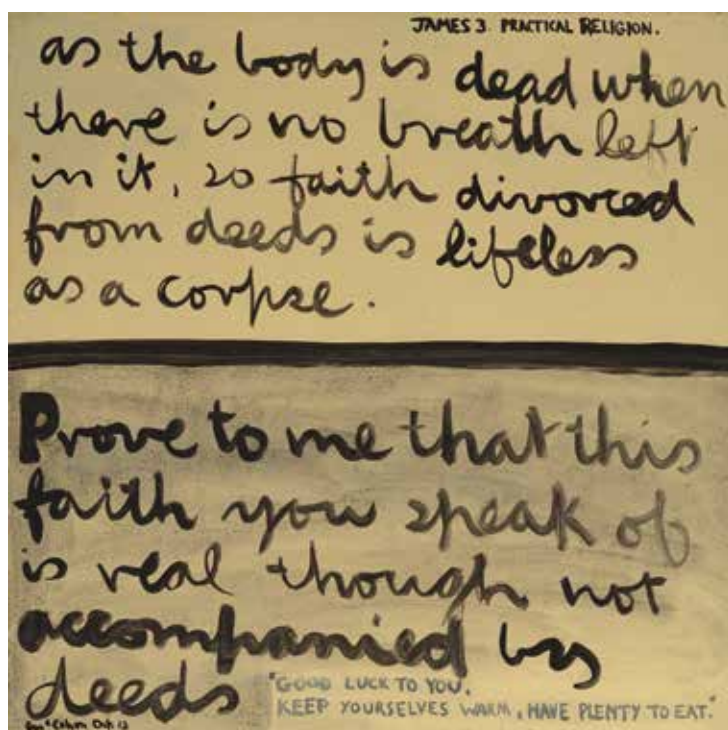
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MURIWAI I, 1970–72

A large new studio built at Muriwai enabled McCahon to paint on an unprecedented scale from 1970, as in *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* (pp. 166–67) and *Victory over death 2* (pp. 168–69). These and other large biblical text paintings from St John's Gospel in *The New English Bible* translation made *Recent Paintings* at Barry Lett's in March 1970 one of his career highlights. *Gate III* (pp. 170–71), an even larger work commissioned for Auckland City Art Gallery's *Ten Big Paintings*, followed soon after. Resignation from his teaching job at Elam in January 1971 and becoming a full-time painter led to a flood of exuberantly coloured watercolours, including *The view from the top of the cliff* (p. 172), *Kaipara Flat*, *Helensville* and others, giving expression to McCahon's new sense of freedom. Directly responding to the cliff, rock pinnacle and offshore island aspect of his Muriwai environment were the series *Cross* (p. 173), *Light falling through a dark landscape* (pp. 176–77), *The days and nights in the wilderness* (pp. 178–79), *Necessary protection* (pp. 180–83) and *Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai Beach* (pp. 184–85) (all 1971–72), which also variously exploited figure/ground ambiguities to create paintings with multi-layered implications. Regular exhibitions took place at dealer galleries in Auckland (Lett's), Wellington (McLeavey's) and Dunedin (Dawson's) in 1970–72. A major touring retrospective, *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, was mounted at Auckland City Art Gallery in 1972; the catalogue included extensive autobiographical notes by McCahon. Regular returns to North Otago for summer teaching at Kurow led to his renewed interest in that landscape. Meanwhile a commission to contribute to an exhibition about Parihaka resulted in *Parihaka triptych* (1972, pp. 192–93) and related works. McCahon responded to the death of his friend the poet James K. Baxter in October 1972 with *Jim passes the northern beaches* (p. 199), which initiated an important series of memorial works in the following year.

Colin McCahon at the opening of *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, photograph taken by Arne Loot.
E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki



James 3: *Practical religion*, 1969,
synthetic polymer paint on hardboard,
600 x 600 mm

Victory over Death or Practical Religion, 1970

Towards the end of 1969 McCahon constructed a large new studio at Muriwai on the property purchased with a legacy of his wife Anne. It was an unlined, prefabricated industrial shed with a double sliding door, roughly 7 x 5.5 metres; its size made much larger paintings possible than had previously been the case. Among the first works produced there were two huge paintings on unstretched canvas: *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* (1969–70), over 8 metres long, and *Victory over death 2* (1970), just under 6 metres. These dimensions reflected the longest walls at Barry Lett Galleries, where they were first exhibited in *Recent Paintings: Victory over Death or Practical Religion* during the Auckland Festival in March 1970. McCahon enthused to O'Reilly:

I had all February out here painting in the new studio. About the best time I've ever had in my life. Endlessly hot & clear & work from 5.30 or 6 in the morning to 9 or 10 at night. The studio is unlined tin & hot, but 22 x 18' and the best yet. The paintings aren't half as good [as] I would have liked but I'm not altogether unhappy & will do better next time. The size even in so large a building was a difficulty. The largest is the Judas [i.e. Lazarus] story – showing Mt Martha, 29 feet long – the smallest about 9 or 10 feet – all about 7 feet high . . .¹

The exhibition also included five other sizeable works painted that summer, all over 2 metres high and between 2.6 and 3.5 metres long, namely: *Are there not twelve hours of daylight* (p. 162), *A question of faith* (p. 163), *This day a man is* (p. 165) and *A grain of wheat* (p. 164), all from 1969–70. There were also three much smaller works all 600 mm square: *Victory over death*, *James 3: Practical religion* and *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep*, all 1969.

Undoubtedly one of the highlights in McCahon's career, this exhibition was unprecedented because of the almost exclusive emphasis on biblical text. All ten were primarily text paintings, one or two of them with landscape elements. All but one of the texts (*This day a man is* from Thomas à Kempis) were from *The New English Bible*, and all but one came from adjacent chapters (11 and 12) in John's Gospel, the exception being *James 3: Practical religion* from A Letter of James (McCahon's text actually comes from James 2 not 3). The phrase 'Practical Religion' is an editorial subheading in *The New English Bible*, which McCahon also appropriated as the eventual title of *Practical religion* (originally called *Victory over death 1*). 'Victory over Death' is another editorial subheading in *The New English Bible*, attached to the chapters of John's Gospel which supplied the texts for seven works in the 1970 exhibition.



Exhibition invitation, *Colin McCahon Recent Paintings*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1970.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon
Artist File

McCahon's tight focus on these two chapters began earlier in the 1969 show at McLeavey's. All five small biblical works in that show – *Mary went to the place where Jesus was*, *If a man walks after nightfall*, *Are there not twelve hours of daylight*, *Take away the stone* and *I know that whatever you ask of God* – came from John's account of the raising of Lazarus in Chapter 11. Two small works in the 1970 show continued this pattern: *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep* and *Victory over death*. All seven were 'starters' for the large paintings of February 1970. The account McCahon wrote of his interest in Lazarus in *A Survey* deserves quotation at some length:

After *Lark's song* I got onto reading the *New English Bible* and re-reading my favourite passages. I re-discovered good old Lazarus. Now this is one of the most beautiful and puzzling stories in the New Testament – like the Elias story this one takes you through several levels of feeling and being. It hit me, BANG! at where I was: questions and answers, faith so simple and beautiful and doubts still pushing to somewhere else. It really got me down with joy and pain. I loved painting it. To be honest it was a bit like drawing a Mickey Mouse cartoon. I grew to love the characters in the story and could see them as very real people; I felt as they felt. This took a monumental time to paint and gallons of expensive paint. It is in one way a dismal failure and in another one of my best paintings yet. At least I had fun. . . . I spent weeks painting my way over this story, more and more involved realising the great need for a new kind of painting to happen.²

Several points in this passage are worthy of emphasising. First is McCahon's interest in stories which possess 'several levels of feeling and being'; he increasingly sought and achieved in his work simplicity of means but multiplicity of implication through different 'levels' and 'layers'. Second, his favourite biblical stories (Elias, Lazarus) focus on the nexus of faith and doubt, not faith alone. Third, his allusion to 'a Mickey Mouse cartoon' indicates a continuing love of comics, and popular culture generally, as sources for his paintings of spiritual exploration – a unique combination of high and low art explored throughout his career. Fourth, the question of artistic failure and success and their interconnection; his conviction that 'success' for him, might well be seen as 'failure' by others; and his never-ending search for 'a new kind of painting'.

Are there not twelve hours of daylight isolates John 11:9–10, a passage which seemingly had for McCahon what T. S. Eliot once called 'personal saturation value' since he used it so often:³ 'Jesus replied: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone can walk in daytime without stumbling, because he sees the light of this world.

But if he walks after nightfall he stumbles, because the light fails him.'" In 1969–70 McCahon employed these verses no fewer than six times: in four small paintings of 1969 and in two large works of 1970: *Are there not twelve hours of daylight* and *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha*.

Imagery of light and darkness permeates Christ's language at both literal and metaphorical levels, just as it does McCahon's painting. In this passage the allusion is primarily to the literal level: 'daylight', 'daytime', 'light of this world' in contrast with 'nightfall'. But the metaphorical level is implied; 'light' is identified with God and Jesus, Father and Son; 'darkness' is life without God. In *Are there not twelve hours of daylight* this meaning is enacted both at the level of semantics – what the words mean – and at the level of image – white words on a dark ground; the square of bright white light at top right; the sliver of last light at right centre between the darkness of sky and earth. In the pulsing rhythm of the text, the bright white of words and letters painted with a loaded brush shines out like a lighthouse beam coming and going, while capitalisation of certain words and letters – **DAYLIGHT**, **Light**, **THIS World**, **Light** – intensifies the effect.

A question of faith, slightly abridged from John 12:21–44, tells the whole story of the raising of Lazarus from start to finish. Virtually every square centimetre of canvas is covered in words, all in black on a variable yellow-ochre ground, ranging from clear yellow around the dominant words **I AM** and **I AM LIFE** and **LAZARUS COME FORTH**, to browned or darkened strips behind certain lines of text. The only exceptions are the final phrase at the bottom where 'Loose him, let him go' is white against a black strip, and the white accenting of 'Jesus', 'Lazarus' and 'God'. In this, the most radically text-centric work by McCahon until his final paintings from Ecclesiastes in 1980, cursive text alternates with capitals, and size ranges from tiny to large, according to the dramatic occasion. The viewer learns to adjust continuously between reading across the canvas and occasionally reading down, the irregular placement of pockets of words sometimes causing momentary misreadings or creative ambiguities.

In contrast to the prolixity of *A question of faith*, *A grain of wheat* is confined to a single verse of only thirty-three words (John 12:24): 'In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.' McCahon leaves the upper third of the large canvas free of words, while the text in the bottom portion is of generous scale, entirely cursive except for the opening phrase **IN TRUTH** and the word **DIES** in the bottom right corner. The lettering varies from dirty yellow to white against a dark background. The upper portion depicts a tumultuous, moody, cloud-filled sky against which words flash like lightning. Biblical commentators generally

interpret the parable as relating to death and resurrection; the grain dies but is reborn into a new and more abundant life. This relates both to Christ's imminent death and resurrection, and to the effects of his ministry: his followers will die to their old lives but be reborn into a fruitful new life as Christians.

In *This day a man is* the words come from an English translation of Chapter 23, Book I of *The Imitation of Christ*, a devotional work written in Latin, c. 1420 by the medieval German mystic Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471). This particular chapter focuses on thoughts about death; the painting presents three separate quotations all painted in a different manner on a background divided between white on black (upper) and black on yellow ochre (lower). The white text consists of a passage in cursive script and a second much brighter passage in block capitals. The black-on-yellow text is written in a tentative, spidery handwriting reminiscent of such earlier works as *Let be, let be* and the *Northland triptych* (both 1959). The translation is in rather old-fashioned English – ‘tomorrow he appeareth not’, ‘full soon’, ‘be everready’, ‘to whom belongeth nothing’ and so on – possibly a Tudor or Elizabethan translation. Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) said this very popular book was one every Christian should own. The burden of the passages chosen by McCahon is the inevitability of death and the certainty of being forgotten – out of sight, out of mind. Christians should therefore always ‘be everready’ to die and not be found ‘unready’. Best not become attached to ‘worldly business’ but to live as a ‘pilgrim’ and a ‘guest upon the earth’. The call to piety and the shunning of materialism is recurrent in McCahon's biblical texts such as *James 3: Practical religion*, which exhorts the viewer to prove faith by good deeds.

The two giant works, *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* and *Victory over death 2*, both have extensive texts from St John which do not overlap at any point. *Practical religion* is confined to the Lazarus story in John 11:21–44, whereas *Victory over death 2* comes wholly from John 12:27–31, 35–36, including the tremendous dialogue between God the Father and God the Son as Jesus faces the imminent prospect of his crucifixion.

In the huge 8-metre canvas of *Practical religion* the pyramidal green shape of Mount Martha (near Lake Hāwea in Central Otago, presumably chosen because of the coincidence of names, Martha being one of Lazarus's sisters) sits at the bottom centre with white-on-black text dominating the left side of the canvas while the right side is largely divided between white sky and black hills, themselves smothered with white text. The textless patches of green mountain and white sky are a welcome rest to the eyes from the crowded text-dense surfaces elsewhere. The interfaces between green, white and black paint are handled with exceptional finesse and beauty. The text is predominantly in block capitals, except for the already familiar

‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight’ (on the left) and ‘The master is here, he is asking for you . . .’ (on the right). The extensive text is managed by being arranged in informal columns and pockets as if the huge canvas was roughly divided into vertical panels; the viewer is directed to read both across and down the canvas then across again, key phrases being picked out in brighter paint and larger script: JESUS WITHDREW AGAIN; LET US GO BACK TO JUDEA; LAZARUS IS DEAD; I AM THE RESURRECTION AND I AM LIFE; LAZARUS COME FORTH.

McCahon retained a strong affection for this mighty work and mentioned it often in letters to McLeavey, who eventually managed its sale to the National Gallery (for \$130,000) in 1985, after considerable competition from other institutions. On one occasion McCahon asked: ‘Is the big Lazarus job still with you? – if it ever was . . . I'd come down to Wellington to see it hung again – it's quite one of my best paintings – but is not popular’;⁴ and on another: ‘it's one of the things I'd like to hand pick a home for. I wouldn't mind giving it away to the right gallery.’⁵ In 1980 he wrote: ‘I like the selection for the Dowse exhibition [*Colin McCahon at the Dowse Art Gallery*, 1980]. I'm so pleased that the “Mount Martha” job will be there. I regard this as one of my best jobs. It's got a lot of truth there.’⁶ When *Victory over death 2* was given to the National Gallery of Australia as a bicentennial gift in 1978, McCahon expressed some regret: ‘The I AM bought for Australia is not the best of its breed. Another on the Lazarus story is much better but more difficult. It's one of the most beautiful stories I know & of strictly honest telling. These stories live on so many levels & layers of truth[;] I just accept them – what else can I do.’⁷ The Lazarus story of death and resurrection so appealed to McCahon (one infers) because it replicates the central mystery of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the miracle held out to all Christians as a possibility for their own lives (and deaths).

Victory over death 2, similar in height but at c. 6 metres slightly shorter than *Practical religion*, includes no landscape element; it is entirely a text painting – white words on a black ground. The text comes from John 12, the chapter immediately following the raising of Lazarus. The miracle of Lazarus's return to life greatly increased Jesus' popularity, arousing concern among the authorities. He visited Lazarus's house for a supper in his honour where Mary, Lazarus's sister, anoints his feet and dries them with her hair. He is fully aware of his impending crucifixion. ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ (12:23). At this point the text used on the painting begins:

‘Now my soul is in torment and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.’ A voice sounded from heaven; ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again’. The

crowd standing by said it was thunder, while others said, 'An angel has spoken to him'. Jesus replied, 'This voice spoke for your sake, not mine.'

As with the Elias story, there are elements of torment, doubt, error, confusion, glory. His followers question the possibility of the messiah dying an earthly death, but Jesus answers in his favourite metaphor of light and dark (emphasis added):

The **light** is amongst you, but not for long. Go on your way while you have the **light**, so that **darkness** may not overtake you. He who journeys in the **dark** does not know where he is going. While you have the **light**, trust to the **light**, that you may become men of **light**.

This insistently repeated imagery generates the technique of the painting, its dialogue of white and black, day and night, light and dark. Nor is it a language of simple binaries, but rather one of subtle gradations and intermediate resonances. This is most obvious in the vast lettering that provides the work's architecture. (AM I)/I AM. The letter 'I' blazes out, a pillar of pure whiteness, but the other letters are to some degree shaded or obscured. The initial AM (preceding the 'I') is shrouded in darkness, scarcely (but indisputably) distinguishable from the prevailing blackness which surrounds it. The final 'AM' is variously dirty white and grey. This qualifies the clarity of the painting's overall statement. It is far from being a clear, unambiguous affirmation of faith. On the contrary the prevailing tone of the work is as much conveyed by the expression 'now my soul is in turmoil'. As much as in the *Elias* series, *Victory over death 2* dramatises existential conflict and uncertainty, a connection made by McCahon in *A Survey* in which he explicitly evokes comparison with the *Elias* series: '[*Victory over death 2*] also belongs to the *Practical Religion* series – a simple I AM at first. But not so simple really as doubts do come in here too. I believe, but don't believe. *Let be, let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.*'⁸

Though McCahon confounded many people not familiar with his unusual procedures, he often attracted surprisingly sympathetic reviews even of such challengingly novel work as this 1970 exhibition. Hamish Keith was one such commentator, saying of the exhibition in the *Auckland Star*:

The power of McCahon's images strikes the imagination like a fist. In every sense of the word, this series of paintings is a challenge. It demands answers to questions we might normally avoid, it insists we come to terms with the artist's vision and, for most people the greatest challenge of all,

it questions our whole notion of painting . . . McCahon's ability to carry painting beyond what is normally accepted as its limits, is the real measure of his worth.⁹

Keith also usefully addressed the most flagrantly unconventional aspect of the work – its 'written' character:

The fact that McCahon writes his paintings is possibly the most difficult element to come to terms with in his work. He means what he writes to be read, and while he may be unpopular he is never anti-popular – he is determined even if his message is rejected that it is first understood. [His use of the written word] exists on so many levels, sometimes as a simple message and sometimes as an image that carries its meaning as much in the way it is written as by the words themselves . . .¹⁰

T. J. McNamara greeted the exhibition in the *New Zealand Herald* in a review headed 'Astounding "I Am" revelation', though he dismissed the 'disfiguring banality' of the smaller pictures. In *Victory over death 2*, he wrote, 'the pronoun is a huge pillar of light at once assertive and a dazzling revelation. From this assertion the monumental verb strides fading and echoing into space.'¹¹ He called *Practical religion* 'a great symbolic landscape . . . of . . . extraordinary force': 'Here a green hill leads to a massive ridge whose outline is painted with wonderful subtlety. We feel the great weight of this hill but beyond it an immensity of light breaks as both a revelation and a promise.'¹²

McCahon himself expressed great satisfaction with the *Recent Paintings* exhibition; he told Caselberg:

I must say I do feel pleased about the last paintings . . . they were good . . . Now, I just can't paint. This last summer's series just wore me out. The next lot has to be better & I just don't feel capable of being better yet. I have the awful problem now of being a better person before I can paint better. Tough: and real; understood . . .¹³

For McCahon, painting 'better' was more than an *aesthetic* matter; it was also ethical and spiritual; he had to 'be' better in order to 'paint better'; a high bar to set himself in this day and age.

Gate III, 1970

During 1970 McCahon's work was shown far and wide in both New Zealand and abroad. He was one of twelve contemporary New Zealand artists in a Smithsonian Institution exhibition which toured to several venues in the USA; he was represented by *Two* (1965),



Installation shot, *Ten Big Paintings*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1971. The painting on the right wall is by Robert Ellis.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Colin McCahon, *Gate III*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 3050 x 10675 mm, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, purchased with assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, 1972. Shown at Victoria University, Pipitea Campus, 2014.

Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi

Exhibition catalogue, *Ten Big Paintings*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1971.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Koru (1965) and *The Second Easter Landscape: The Central Plateau* (1968). He also exhibited with Doris Lusk and Toss Woollaston at Victoria University of Wellington, and *Gate II* (1962) was shown at Dawson's Gallery, Dunedin, along with some of the wallpaper scrolls (1969).

Before 1970 was over, McCahon completed one more enormous painting especially commissioned for an exhibition at Auckland City Art Gallery: *Ten Big Paintings*, February 1971. Other artists involved were Don Driver, Michael Eaton, Robert Ellis, Pat Hanly, Milan Mrkusich, Ralph Hotere, Ross Ritchie, Don Peebles and Wong Sing Tai, all younger than McCahon, most by more than a decade. The ten artists were supplied with materials and invited to create a 'big painting' for the reopening of the Edmiston Wing of the gallery in 1971. The commission shows awareness of the vastly increased scale of American paintings in particular since 1945. McCahon's *Gate III*, comprising seven stretched canvases, was at 3.5 x 10.7 metres his largest single work.

McCahon wrote to O'Reilly months before he painted *Gate III*: 'I'm going to give it another go. This for the Art gallery on an even larger scale and so large that if it doesn't go over the edge it will be the biggest flop on the plain above that I've ever done . . . I am possessed with the desire to paint a good painting & till this is lopped off, I most certainly won't do it.'¹⁴ In a letter to a gallery staff member written while working on *Gate III* at Elam, he revealed much about the process of finding 'the true form of the final image':

I hope it's going to work. I don't know yet. I'll see it first in the art gallery. I can't get a long enough wall at the school to see it as a whole thing – or even round a corner . . . To write about a painting when it is being painted is almost impossible . . . I know about what I am painting before I start work: it is in the process of painting the picture that the true form of the final image becomes stuck or unstuck. Tomorrow is the important day, all the 'aesthetic' scaffolding is there. I am not too displeased about it. Now I must think again about the subject & work with intuition and with love, and with the courage to change the form to expose the meaning.¹⁵

He wrote to McLeavey in March: 'Since the end of the school year I've painted a hell of a lot – the big painting [*Gate III*] for the Art Gallery took all my time up to Christmas – about five weeks.'¹⁶

Gate III is a synthesising work. Its title connects it to the preceding *Gate* series of 1961–62, though its main connection with them is thematic rather than aesthetic; whereas both previous *Gate* series were strictly abstract or abstract plus text in their imagery, *Gate III* combines text and landscape like *Practical religion*, and, like

Victory over death 2, is dominated by a huge **I AM**. The stark colours (white, black, brown, blue) and sharp angles of *Gate III*, however, relate directly to the abstract idiom of the first *Gate* series. Another connection with the earlier *Gates* is the concern with nuclear war, not mentioned explicitly but evoked in the words: 'in this dark night of western civilisation', and in the apocalyptic texts at bottom left repeated from panels one, five and eight of *Gate II*.

The landforms in *Gate III* also have antecedents in earlier works. The landscape to the left of the large 'I' resembles the plateau between headlands in *The Second Easter Landscape*, while the hills between the girders of 'I AM' resemble forms in the *Landscape theme and variations* and *North Otago landscape* series. Several of the texts, too, have been used previously (such as those shared with *Gate II*) while some are new: 'teach us to order our days rightly that we may enter the gate of wisdom' comes from Psalm 90:12; the prayer between the legs of the 'A' comes mostly from Psalm 67 in *The New English Bible* plus phrases from other psalms and from Jeremiah; while the words at far right are the now familiar Buddhist koan used in *Waterfall theme & variations* and other paintings.

After the impact of the work as a totality has been assimilated (a lesson learned from McCahon's response to the reception of *Gate II*), *Gate III* invites reading from left to right. It begins in darkness – the night sky, the 'dark night of western civilisation', the 'moon . . . confounded and the sun ashamed'; then comes the blazing, stark-white, vertical pillar of the 'I' – the dramatic intervention of the divine into the human world. Between the 'I' and the 'M' is a gentler landscape, continuous with what preceded it through its horizon line but seemingly sunlit and calm and combined with the soothing prayer for wisdom and order. Next comes the letter 'A', again in pure white, set apart from the preceding area by the blackness between the arms of the 'A', and inscribed with the bright white words of another prayer for blessings and the spreading of God's 'saving power among all the nations'. The blackness implies that time has moved on again to night-time, or has realism been abandoned at this point? Unlike previous works utilising 'I AM' (1954, 1970), the 'M' is black, not white like the other letters, and it sits in front of the 'A', partly obscuring its right arm. Between the shapes of the 'M' is the white of the sky and the brown of the earth, the penetration of the earth by the sharp mid-point of the 'M' being a telling detail. Hardly visible in reproduction but clear in the original is a narrow dark blue edge to the right side of the 'M', the colour of heaven and truth. Finally, the right end of the painting again presents bright sky, brown earth and the mystical message about being 'born into a pure land' – a resolution of peace and hope.

Keith wrote in the *Auckland Star*: '*Gate III* is a stupendous work. Without any doubt it is a major work of New Zealand

painting, and . . . is at once a prophecy of doom in the best Old Testament manner, a prayer for help, and affirmation of individual faith and a revelation.'¹⁷ McNamara in the *Herald* said: 'of all the works on show, his is the most architectural . . . It moves from dark across a landscape to the light of revelation and articulated across it is a monumental assertion of the light and presence of God.'¹⁸

In 1971 Caselberg wrote to McCahon: 'Yesterday we saw the *Gate III* here in Dunedin. I think we both dreamt of it. I have gazed in front of Michelangelo's Moses sculpture in a church in Rome.'¹⁹ Comparison of *Gate III* to Michelangelo's Moses is characteristically hyperbolic though no doubt sincerely meant.

Gate III was sold by McLeavey to Victoria University in 1971 for \$4,000 through historian Tim Beaglehole, curator of the university's collection, who spent a year raising funds from the Arts Council and the university; at the time it was the highest price ever paid for the work of a living New Zealand artist.²⁰

Full-time artist, 1971

Early in 1971 McCahon resigned from the Elam School of Fine Arts and began working as a full-time artist, a decision not without its anxieties. He wrote to McLeavey: 'This business of living off painting is tough. So far – so good – but I've got to keep it up or Anne and I starve.'²¹

Among the first works in which he revelled in his new freedom were a large number of watercolours exploring his new environment at Muriwai and locations nearby – Helensville and Kaipara Flat. This led to *View from the top of the cliff*, an exhibition of twenty-five watercolours held at McLeavey's in April 1971, including such extravagant colour combinations as coral sky over amethyst sea or the rich melange of pinks, blues, whites and yellows of No. 4 (p. 172). Remarkable within his work for the high-keyed brilliance of their colour, the twenty-five watercolours reflected McCahon's exuberance after leaving Elam: 'All this colour & fun is a direct result of leaving the school.'²² The exhibition included ten of the *View* watercolours plus others with titles such as *Muriwai*, *Ahipara* and *Buttercup fields forever* (p. 173), priced at \$60 to \$65. Also included at McLeavey's were six acrylics on paper entitled *Cross*, a first attempt to make paintings of the cliff and rock-pinnacle landscape at Muriwai that was to form the basis of *Necessary protection* – a large open series of over fifty items – and related works, from 1971–72.

Since the landscapes around Muriwai figure so prominently in McCahon's works of the 1970s, it is useful to have a description in his own words of the environment which so appealed to him, and so profoundly shaped his painting through the 1970s. A letter to Caselberg in November 1971 included a diagram and description of key features:



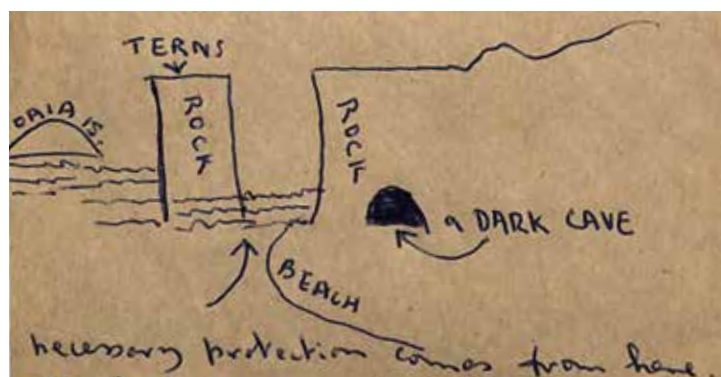
Muriwai. The cliff at left is Ōtakamiro Point; the island in the centre is Motutara; the small island to the right is Ōaia. This landscape is evoked in *Necessary protection* and related series, early 1970s. Photographer unknown.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon Artist File

I hoped to show you the original Muriwai ‘necessary protection’ sometime – the flat cliff top the flat top pinnacle of rock & clay where the fairy terns nest & the flow of light from sea to sky between them. At the place called beach (which is black-purple sand) – we are looking north from Maori bay, one cliff south of Muriwai. This is where the older terns teach the little ones to swim & catch their own food . . . You will notice the cliff overhangs and this provides the necessary protection to raise little birds too as well as on the island rock.

OAIA is off from the coast & because of the birds there is rather like a great white whale with a black belly. From the top of the cliff (right in the drawing) you stand & look for 49 miles up the Muriwai beach, purple-black sand becoming lighter further north – and after the Kaipara harbour mouth going on, right past Dargaville.

Our place is high on the tops above all this – we don’t see the sea but always know it’s there . . .²³



Ink sketch in letter to John Caselberg, 16 November 1971.

Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, 97-185/3, John and Anna Caselberg papers

***Necessary protection* and related series, 1971-72**

The phrase ‘necessary protection’, used in the letter to Caselberg in connection with the young fairy terns and later given wider (and more specifically religious) application, seems to have entered McCahon’s vocabulary around July 1971. Already by then he had begun using the abstracted landscape at Muriwai based on Ōtakamiro Point and Motutara Island in the small series of acrylics called *Cross*.

Cross (p. 173) shows that by February to March 1971, McCahon had worked out the figure/ground ambiguities and layers of symbolism which animate the later *Light falling through a dark landscape* and *Necessary protection* series. If the dark shapes are seen as figure, the paintings read as abstracted depictions of the

island-and-cliff landscape at Muriwai, the lighter colours reading as skies and sunsets. If, on the contrary, the lighter colours are seen as figure and the black shapes as ground, the paintings read either as T (Tau) crosses or, if there is a bottom horizontal (as, for example, in *Cross*), as the letter 'I', thus delivering a semiotic and/or symbolic level of meaning. The title *Cross* foregrounds the latter reading, whereas a related sub-series, *Light falling through a dark landscape*, foregrounds the 'landscape' reading.

There were about eight charcoal or conté drawings called *Light falling through a dark landscape* (others followed later), many specifying October 1971 as the month of their making (p. 176). They are effectively indistinguishable from the *Necessary protection* drawings; one, indeed, is entitled *Light through a landscape: necessary protection*. Compared to *Cross*, these works are more atmospheric, their inscribed titles sometimes alluding to weather conditions. For example, one is called *Muriwai. High Wind & Rain. Light Falls Through a Dark Landscape*.

A significant group show in 1971 to which McCahon contributed was *Earth/Earth: an Exhibition of Landscape paintings* at Barry Lett Galleries, 19 to 30 April. Other artists involved were Don Binney, Michael Illingworth, Michael Smither and Toss Woollaston. McCahon contributed one large oil painting, *Ahipara* (1970, p. 175), and six watercolours all called *Muriwai*. McCahon's catalogue note, one of his most explicit expressions of environmental concern, said:

My paintings in this exhibition are all about the view from the top of the cliff at Ahipara and Muriwai. I am not painting protest pictures. I am painting what is still there and what I can still see before the sky turns black with soot and the sea becomes a slowly heaving rubbish tip. I am painting what we have got now and will never get again. This in one shape or form has been the subject of my painting for a very long time.²⁴

In *Ahipara* the *Necessary protection* landscape of double cliffs appears to have migrated north; the light falling between the 'cliffs of fall' is here the fiery red of sunset. Ahipara at the south end of Ninety Mile Beach was one of McCahon's holy places, especially after he discovered that it was linked to Muriwai by the spirit path of departed Māori souls. *Venus and re-entry: the bleeding heart of Jesus is seen above Ahipara* (1970–71, p. 174), first exhibited at Manawatu Art Gallery – now Te Manawa – is a virtual twin of *Ahipara* (1970) in size and colour, but with the apocalyptic and religious connotations made explicit. McCahon wrote of it: 'This is based on happenings in our own skies and the terrifying present we live in. Moon flights and the calm beauty of Ahipara seem to go together.'²⁵

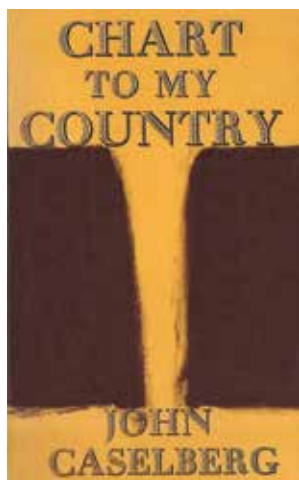
In July 1971 McCahon wrote to his mother: 'At long last I'm free. Home this afternoon[,] sent off an exhibition to Dunedin, all pretty good I think. And weeks & weeks of work have come to an end.'²⁶ *New Paintings* was shown at Dawson's Gallery, also known as Cellar Crafts, run by his friend Maureen Hitchings (he had shown *Gate II* there the previous year); it ran from 30 July to 13 August. The thirty-one paintings in the exhibition were from series named on the hand-painted poster: *Helensville*, *Kaipara Flats*, *The days and nights in the wilderness* and *Necessary protection*. Other titles included in the exhibition (or painted around the same time) were *A poem of Kaipara Flat no. 16* (1971, p. 152), *Kaipara Flat – written* (1971), *Buttercup fields forever* (1971, p. 173), and (closer to the *Necessary protection* and *Days and nights* series in its imagery), *A fall of light illuminating darkness* (1971, p. 176). Apart from three large *Days and nights* acrylics on canvas, they were all watercolours or acrylics on paper, a continuation of what he had shown at McLeavey's in April.

James Mack (1941–2004), who then worked at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, wrote: 'The six paintings *Kaipara Flat – Written* are the most successful of the 28 small paintings on view. . . . McCahon is most successful when he limits his palette.'²⁷ Mack was less persuaded by *Poems of Kaipara Flat* and *Necessary protection*, finding several of the former 'overworked with brush and hand', and the latter 'withheld to the point where they overprotect themselves'. However, he was greatly impressed by the three major canvases, all 2.4 x 1.8 metres, *Days and nights in the wilderness*, especially *The days and nights in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape* (p. 178), which he described as 'one of the most magnificent McCahons of recent times . . . The painting, a storm of muted colour[,] is fully resolved within its tramlines – but it is not confined – it suggests an existence beyond itself into a classical infinity.'²⁸

For McCahon, by analogy with Christ's biblical period of withdrawal and temptation, the individual's experience of a 'wilderness' of darkness and temptation is redeemed by the love of God, as by light falling upon a land of darkness. In these three outstanding works, painted April to June 1971 at Muriwai, the various layers worked out in the small *Cross* series are brought to majestic resolution. In the Govett-Brewster work, *The days and nights in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape* (1971), it is the T/Tau symbol that predominates; in the other two the 'I' symbol is paramount. The first painting is a double landscape; the upper portion carries the inscription 'Ninety mile beach with Haumu Hill', while the lower part references the cliff-and-rock pinnacle location at Muriwai; the two landscapes are linked by the spirit path McCahon learned about in *The Tail of the Fish*. At bottom right, a further inscription reads: 'HOMAGE TO VAN DER VELDEN', a reference to the Dutch painter Petrus van



A poem of Kaipara Flat no. 16, 1971,
watercolour on paper, 1015 x 660 mm



Colin McCahon, cover design,
John Caselberg, *Chart to My Country*,
McIndoe, Dunedin, 1972.

der Velden (1837–1913), whose moody paintings of Ōtira Gorge were likewise sublime studies of light entering a dark landscape with religious overtones.

The other two paintings of the trio, *The days and nights in the wilderness: a constant flow of light falls on the land* (Auckland Art Gallery, p. 179) and *The days and nights in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing through the wall of death* (private collection), are somewhat less complex and reference-rich, but include some superbly painted passages, especially in the turbulent chaos of the dark rectangles. The black and tan colouration, while not immediately seductive, is handsome and gathers conviction with familiarity. Not everyone, though, was impressed by the Dawson's exhibition; Charles Brasch wrote in his journal:

Colin McCahon's water-colours of Kaipara Flat make exciting promises which, now I've seen them more than once, they fail to fulfil. I can't quite believe them. They are Turner-esque visions; but Turner anchors his visions firmly in the real world whereas – to me – McCahon doesn't: his real world is not credible. Nor do his three big Days & Nights & his Necessary Protection series in the same show at Dawson's convince me: blank cheques. A defect in my appreciation? Possibly. But their arbitrariness does not persuade me that the claims they make are sustained.²⁹

This was the last journal entry about McCahon that Brasch made (he died in 1973), after twenty-five years of devoted support; it is rather sad that his blindness to the merits of McCahon's later work continued to the end.

In July 1971 Caselberg asked McCahon if he could provide a cover or illustrations for a book of his stories he was planning with Dunedin publisher John McIndoe. McCahon replied: 'Delighted to hear of the 4 stories publication & would be very pleased to do a book jacket or something – I prefer the idea of a jacket . . . I think I could do that for you. I think that somewhere in the Cellar Gallery exhibition in the Necessary Protection series, the right line might be.'³⁰

The book eventually became *Chart to My Country: Selected Prose* (1972), with prose and criticism replacing two of the stories. In September, McCahon wrote again: 'John – the book jacket fell into my hands – out of the nothing of a beautiful Dunedin.'³¹ Doing the cover design for Caselberg's book seems to have set McCahon off in October on a spate of charcoal and conté drawings on the 'necessary protection' theme. An exhibition, *Colin McCahon 'Necessary Protection'*, opened at Barry Lett Galleries on 1 November 1971. McCahon wrote an important explanatory note for the invitation which, among other things, acknowledged Caselberg's role in its genesis, and offered a helpful key to his symbolism:

This is largely an exhibition of drawings. They all belong to a series made earlier this year under the title 'Necessary Protection'. They have to do with the days and nights in the wilderness and our constant need for protection. The symbols are very simple. The I of the sky, falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE. The T of the sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament, or Egyptian cross . . .

The drawings began with one made for John Caselberg's book 'Chart to my Country'. He and I both chart very similar country both of us having knowledge of the wilderness and both knowing the very real need for protection.

These drawings have been made to thank John Caselberg for his charts and to further my own charting of this often neglected country.³²

This gracious public acknowledgement of his friend and collaborator, Caselberg, was a measure of the closeness of their bond. In 1972 McCahon painted *Chart to my country*, a *Necessary protection* adaptation, in which Caselberg's title is collaged to the surface of the painting.

No catalogue of the 'Necessary Protection' exhibition exists, but from information in the Online Catalogue around twenty works can be identified with that or related titles dated around October 1971: they were (apart from the two large canvases) conté, acrylic, charcoal, and, in a couple of instances, pastel on paper. While most were confined to black and white, a few introduced colour which tempered the severity of the imagery. McCahon described *Necessary protection* to McLeavey rather diffidently as 'about the almighty looking after us . . . All very formal and I think good. But probably hard to take.'³³ Hard to take they proved to be; Keith found the watercolours of Kaipara and Helensville in the exhibition 'joyful', and among McCahon's 'most overtly beautiful paintings', but could scarcely disguise his exasperation at the austerity of the *Necessary protection* series:

By contrast, the [*Necessary protection*] drawings and the two large paintings with them are entirely without joy other than the kind of puritanical joy which goes with revelation and arrives after great suffering . . . There is little words can do to help along the kind of commitment these works demand of the viewer. They exist. We are invited to follow the path they chart or simply leave the gallery, annoyed, puzzled, or angry.³⁴

The two large works on canvas, *Necessary protection* (1971–72, Auckland Art Gallery, p. 188) and *Through the Wall of Death*:

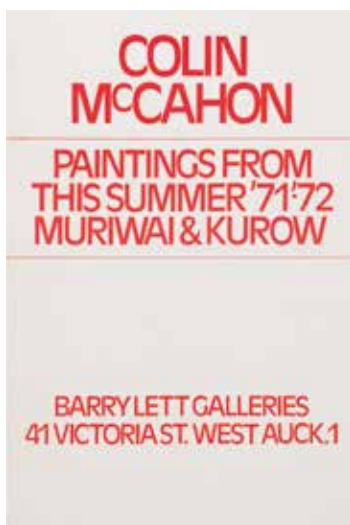


Exhibition invitation, *Colin McCahon 'Necessary Protection'*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1971.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon Artist File



Necessary protection passing through the wall of death, 1971, charcoal on paper, 355 x 270 mm



Exhibition catalogue, *Colin McCahon: Paintings from This Summer*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1971–72.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon
Artist File.

A Banner (1972, The Dowse Art Museum, p. 189), were exhibited again in 1972 and are discussed below. In November and December 1971, immediately following the *Necessary protection* exhibition, McCahon extended the theme, sometimes introducing colour, as in *Necessary protection (blue & brown)* (p. 180), and additional landscape elements such as Oaia Island, as in *Oaia Island and necessary protection* (p. 181), one of several works with similar titles.

Muriwai and Moby Dick, 1972

In the first month of 1972 McCahon returned to the theme of *Light falling through a dark landscape* (p. 177), completing a trio of works on paper which again introduced strong colour to the severe imagery of *Necessary protection*. The presence of atmospheric colour along with the title foregrounds the landscape reading of the works over abstract, semiotic or symbolic readings such as apply elsewhere.

In March 1972 McCahon held simultaneous exhibitions in both Wellington and Auckland. In Wellington he showed again at McLeavey's some of the large biblical text paintings exhibited earlier at Barry Lett's in 1970; later in the year McLeavey also showed *Victory over death 2*. In Auckland, in a repeat of what had happened back in 1963 when he showed new work at Ikon Gallery simultaneously with the Woollaston/McCahon retrospective at Auckland City Art Gallery, McCahon showed *Paintings from this Summer '71-'72 Muriwai & Kurow* at Barry Lett's and simultaneously the large solo retrospective, *Colin McCahon: A Survey* at Auckland City Art Gallery.

In *Paintings from this Summer* there were thirteen Muriwai paintings, six acrylics on hardboard and seven acrylics on canvas, most entitled *Necessary protection*, while a subset of four were called *Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai Beach*. There were also eight Kurow works on paper, some in charcoal and some in acrylics, as in *Kurow Hill*, *Study of Kurow Hill* and *About the Kurow Hotel* (p. 198), recurrent studies of the same unspectacular but (to McCahon) compelling landscape feature. Two very large works on unstretched canvas, *Necessary protection* and *Through the Wall of Death: A Banner*, had also been shown the previous November. In some of these works McCahon plays interesting variations on the 'T' and 'I' formats established in 1971. In two instances he introduced the Christograms IHS and INRI into the cliff-and-pinnacle landscape, thus underlining the spiritual dimension of the 'necessary protection' theme.

An enthusiastic reader of Herman Melville (1819–1891), McCahon quickly dubbed Ōaia Island, offshore from Maori Bay, 'Moby Dick or the white whale', because of its shape and the surrounding presence of thousands of seabirds. To Patricia France (1911–1995), a Dunedin painter with whom he had become friends, he wrote: 'I love whales . . . I think of them as friends and creatures of great beauty. . . . My Moby Dick sits well out in the sea &

birds live there. He is a white whale and wears a halo of seabirds. His name is truly Oaia, I associated him with Melville.³⁵ The Moby Dick identification with Ōaia Island is made explicit in two detailed 1971 drawings which McCahon sent to Caselberg to inform him about the location which dominated his paintings and drawings in the early 1970s. On one he writes OAIA ISLAND: MOBY DICK IS (WAS) A VOLCANO. On the other a note reads: 'Oaia sits and nibbles the sea'.

In the small sub-series *Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai Beach* McCahon shows the bird-enhaloed island/whale in conjunction with the double rock stack which constitutes the 'necessary protection' motif, making the connection explicit in one title: *Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai: a necessary case for protection* (p. 184). The protection mentioned here covers both whales (dead whales were sometimes washed up on Muriwai beach) and the seabirds which nested on Ōaia Island.

Some viewers were disconcerted by the comic-book connotations of McCahon's *Moby Dick* paintings. McNamara in the *New Zealand Herald* headed his review 'Display Just Plain Exasperating', and scolded: 'Some of these are so bad that one expects a put-on. If the Moby Dick series is meant to be funny it is mildly amusing; if it is meant [to be] serious, it is ludicrous. In these pictures a great blob of a whale winks on the horizon with some piles in the foreground.'³⁶ But McCahon had a strong sense of humour and always enjoyed the mix of high and low, serious and popular that this series manifests. A variation on the theme appeared later in the year as the exuberantly colourful *Tui Carr celebrates Muriwai Beach* (1972, pp. 186–87). McCahon referred to this work to McLeavey as painted in 'subdued comic strip colours':

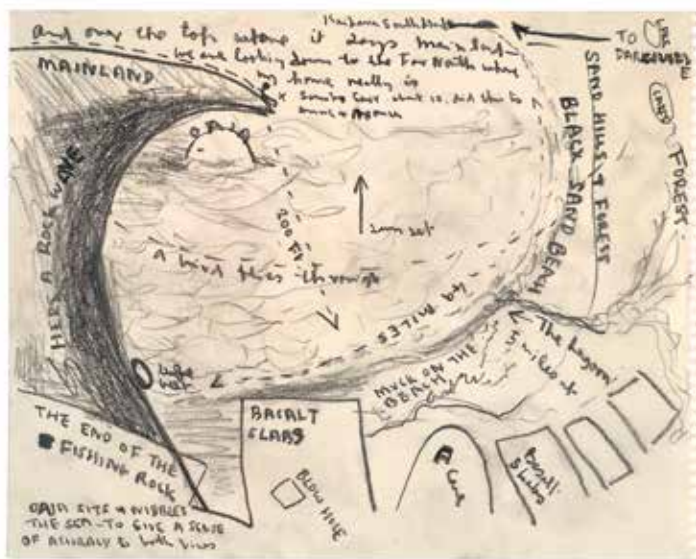
It's a very big fun painting & most deeply serious & is called Tui Carr (who is the youngest grandchild) celebrates Muriwai beach. Tui & I walked on Muriwai at very low tide a few weeks ago – all alone – way down by the water. The place got him, he put his arms up, saw the sky, the sea, black & purple sand, the necessary protection area & Oaia Island (my Moby Dick). Celebrated the occasion. I have painted about him & the place.³⁷

The painting was obviously a favourite of McCahon's as he spoke about it in letters to several friends. To O'Reilly he mentioned 'one of the recent comic book paintings of Tui Carr & Moby Dick'.³⁸ And to Caselberg some years later he described the painting as 'a tiny Y on black & purple, a white sea & a golden sky'.³⁹

The two largest works in the March 1972 exhibition were *Necessary protection* and *Through the Wall of Death: A Banner* (p. 189). *Necessary protection* is a radically simplified and



[Moby dick is (was) a volcano], c. 1971–73, charcoal on paper, 283 x 357 mm



[Oaia sits and nibbles the sea], c. 1971–73, charcoal on paper, 283 x 357 mm



Els Noordhof (1924–2013), Colin McCahon and Doris Lusk at the University of Otago, Kurow summer art school, 1970, unknown photographer.

Private collection, image courtesy of Grant Banbury and the Doris Lusk Estate

geometricised version of the cliff-and-pinnacle motif with noticeably sharp and clean edges to the dark shapes, so that the ‘T’ of the sky stands out with extraordinary clarity. Its great size – c. 1.8 x 3 metres – has enormous impact. As with some later series, such as *Jump* and *Angels and bed*, a very large work was accompanied by dozens of smaller versions of the same motif rendered in different media.

Through the Wall of Death: A Banner (1840 x 2355 mm, 1972) combines the ‘necessary protection’ motif with an extensive text – a Catholic prayer, ‘The Litany of Saints’, which McCahon probably found in the *New Sunday Missal*. The prayer begins: ‘All ye holy Saints of God make intercession for us. / Be merciful. SPARE US, O LORD / Be merciful, graciously hear us O Lord / From all evil deliver us, O LORD.’ The prayer ends with the plea: ‘That Thou would / pardon us, bring us to true penance / grant PEACE and UNITY to all people.’ McCahon wrote interestingly about this work to McLeavey some years later, revealing that his paintings often came out of deep childhood memories:

Through the Wall of Death belongs to the Lazarus job [*Practical religion*]. It follows the big painting in style & thought but is really one of my ramblings after a big job. I love summer shows & the beautiful signs that showmen put up. As the bikes roar round the wooden cylinder of the wall of death the whole construction bulges & shudders & the pictorial & lettered sign flaps & then quiet. A resurrection experience: and [for] those who go to watch a real life & death experience . . .

I can’t write about what I do. This painting & most belong to very deep roots & memories.⁴⁰

Through the Wall of Death was later included as one of three works shown by McCahon at the Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane in 1975 (the other two were sets of *Teaching aids* from 1975). Betty Churcher in *The Australian* said: ‘The calligraphy of the message becomes an active front area surrounding two black voids. This work exemplifies the remark once made [about *Harriet Simeon* in 1945] by Colin McCahon concerning the emotional content of painting. “It should”, he said, “fill a room, it should not exist on the painted surface but in front of it.”’⁴¹ When acquired by the Dowse Art Museum in 1978, *Through the Wall of Death* became the occasion of an egregious, media-fuelled attack on McCahon’s integrity, as discussed later.

Kurow, 1972

The eight Kurow paintings included in the March 1972 exhibition were watercolours or acrylics (or a combination) on paper and grew out of McCahon’s repeated visits to teach at summer art schools in

the small town of Kurow on the banks of the Waitaki River around 60 kilometres from Ōamaru. Other artists involved included Els Noordhof and Doris Lusk. Most of McCahon's *Kurow* works date from the summer of 1972 and feature one particular hill which he drew and painted repeatedly. Sometimes he added a homely sign, 'HOTEL MEALS', to the monumental landscape image.

Later in 1972 McCahon was invited to be guest artist at the North Otago Art Society in Ōamaru. He exhibited eight watercolours all with the same title: *The North Otago Landscape as described by Professor C. A. Cotton and seen by Colin McCahon* (1972). The format was based closely on a screenprint produced as a multiple by Barry Lett Galleries in 1969, one of a series of 12 each by different artists, and also resembles several of the *North Otago landscapes* of 1967, especially number 4 (Auckland Art Gallery). They all shared the division of the picture into three bands: sky, land and plain, the larger land portion featuring a parabola-shaped hill whose contours fall wholly within the band of hillside topped by a plateau. The almost diagrammatic simplicity of the images obviously related to Professor Cotton's drawings which McCahon had been studying since the 1930s. His return visits to Kurow had renewed his sense of the rightness of Cotton's observations. Yet McCahon's paintings were met with incomprehension and dismay by the locals; even the caption to the picture in the *Oamaru Mail* mentioned that the paintings had 'drawn criticism'.

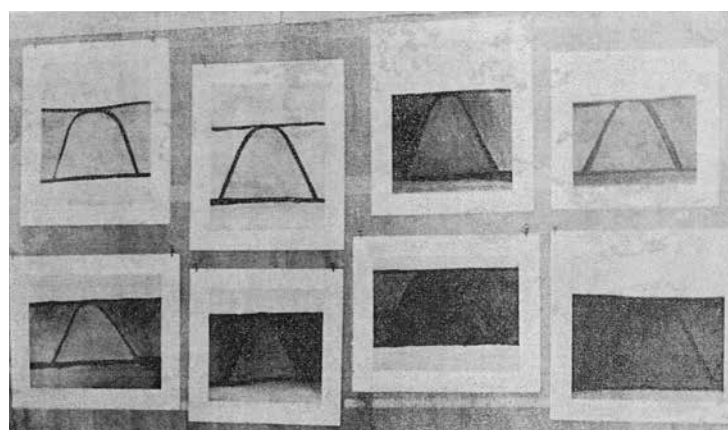
Colin McCahon: A Survey, 1972

McCahon had first mentioned the prospect of the 1972 *Survey* exhibition to Caselberg back in July 1970: 'Will be calling on you and others about May–June, next year to borrow paintings. Am being given an up to three gallery exhibition in the A.C.A.G. – all the series paintings and the others. I'm rather bowled over.'⁴²

After many delays, *Colin McCahon: A Survey* was duly opened in March 1972 and was later shown in Christchurch, Dunedin, Palmerston North and New Plymouth. It was accompanied by a substantial illustrated catalogue with a highly personal introduction by Ron O'Reilly and an invaluable autobiographical commentary by McCahon; the latter has often been quoted in these pages. The exhibition consisted of seventy-two items, but the inclusion of many works in multiple parts effectively doubled its size. These included the *Northland panels*, *Gate II*, *Landscape theme and variations* (A and B), *Numerals* (1965) and *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, plus four triptychs. The earliest work included was *Art school still life* (c. 1936–38), the most recent, *Mondrian's chrysanthemum of 1908* (1971, p. 158), an acrylic on paper from the *Kaipara Flat* series. There were seven works from the Nelson period (1938–47), nine from the Christchurch years (1948–53), twenty-three works from the Titirangi years (1953–59), twenty-eight from the 1960s, and five



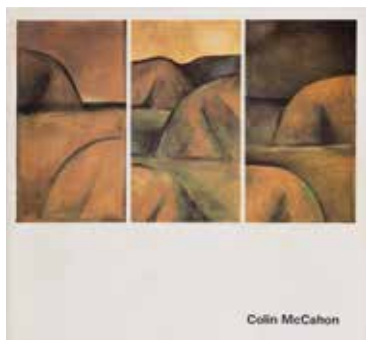
North Otago Landscape, 1969, screenprint on paper, 445 x 555 mm



Undated newspaper clipping from *Oamaru Mail*, 1972. Eight watercolours entitled *The North Otago Landscape as described by Professor C. A. Cotton and seen by Colin McCahon* (1972).
E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon
Artist File



Mondrian's *chrysanthemum* of 1908, 1971, synthetic polymer paint on paper, 1099 x 735 mm



Exhibition catalogue, *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon Artist File

from the 1970s. The most surprising omission was all three major *Otago Peninsula* paintings of 1939, 1946 and 1946–49, though several reviewers also pointed out the paucity of the *French Bay/ Titirangi/Kauri* works from 1953–58.

Not surprisingly, given that this was the first full-scale solo retrospective by a living artist in New Zealand, the exhibition got a lot of coverage in the press. In the *Auckland Star*, Keith saw the exhibition as challenging two ‘assumptions’ about McCahon: first, that he was technically unaccomplished; and second, that his colour was largely confined to black and white. With regard to the first, Keith wrote: ‘even his earliest works are marked by a painterly skill that few other New Zealand painters have ever approached’; the second assumption about restriction of colour was confidently dismissed: ‘In fact, McCahon’s use of colour is staggering in its range and richness . . . He is one of the few painters around completely to understand tone and how images are constructed through contrasts.’⁴³ As the heading, ‘It’s difficult to be great all the time’, suggests, Bute Hewes in the *Sunday Herald* was more grudging, especially of written paintings: ‘Often enough McCahon finds himself lost for visual images . . . and falls back on words, painted words, rambling all over his canvas like the fervent outpourings of a preacher.’⁴⁴

One of the most balanced, extensive and informative accounts of *A Survey* was by Michael Dunn in *Arts & Community*. For instance, he provided very useful comparisons between McCahon’s work and that of certain contemporary American painters; between Jackson Pollock and the *Northland panels*, between Robert Motherwell’s *Je t’aime* series and *Let be, let be* from the *Elias* series, between Barnett Newman’s *Lema Sabachthani* and *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, and between Al Held’s large alphabetic abstractions and *Victory over death 2*.⁴⁵ His praise of *Gate II* (illustrated in full) as an impressive work deserving of greater attention than it had received would no doubt have pleased McCahon, who had always been pained by its poor reception.

However, in his home town of Dunedin, McCahon’s *Survey* was subjected to distressing mockery. Les Lloyd, director of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery where the show was exhibited, invited punters to ‘have a go’ and ‘do their own McCahon’ as a kind of publicity stunt. McCahon’s Dunedin friends were outraged at the insult and some, including Kennedy and France, resigned from the Art Gallery Society in protest. A draft survives of the letter France wrote to the *Otago Daily Times*: ‘I resigned from the Art Gallery Society because I was very distressed at what seemed to me a lack of respect for an exhibition of serious paintings – deep feelings translated into picture form by someone concerned for human beings & able to convey so strong an awareness of the beauty & power of the New Zealand landscape. I feel an Art Gallery must be a place where forms of art are preserved & valued & exercises such as “Have a

Go”, “Try It Yourself” are quite out of place.⁴⁶ Caselberg also wrote to the paper. McCahon wrote to Lloyd with restraint though the event added to his sense of undergoing ‘a lifetime of bash’:⁴⁷ ‘the whole business does not make any difference to me or my painting . . . I do paint for people. Your “happening” can be accepted as an understanding of that fact.’⁴⁸ This crass media stunt was repeated on two later occasions: in Wellington in 1978 and Christchurch in 1982.

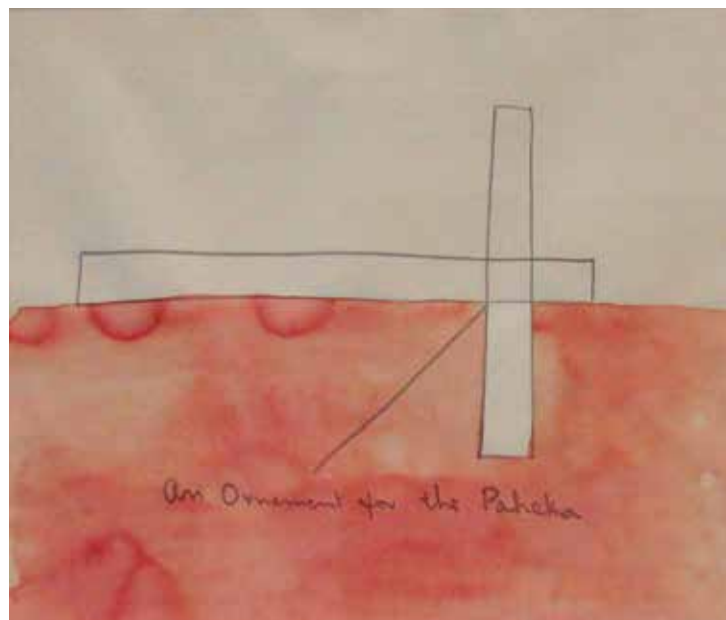
Parihaka, 1972

In June 1972 McCahon sought information from Caselberg about Te Whiti and Parihaka for a commission he had received from James Mack:

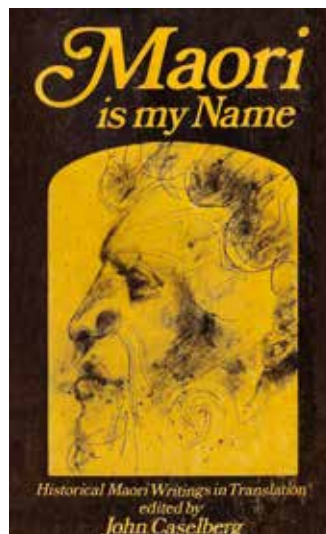
Parihaka, where is there a photograph of the landscape – of Egmont, from there? Am doing a very large painting for Jim Mack & want to glow a white & vast Egmont across about 20 odd feet of canvas. All to be a bit like the Edmonds Baking Powder thing – a very real symbol. Have done about 8 30 X 20 things on Te Ua & Te Whiti. Christianity makes an uncertain link with a light chain linking the 2 Muriwai cliffs of the Necessary Protection things. Some of my best work for years.⁴⁹

James Mack, recently appointed (in 1972) as exhibitions officer of the Waikato Art Museum, undertook as one of his first initiatives, a ground-breaking historical exhibition called *Taranaki Saw it All: The Story of Te Whiti O Rongomai of Parihaka*, shown in 1973. McCahon’s *Parihaka triptych* (1972) and Ralph Hotere’s *Te Whiti* series – a suite of small works on paper – were specifically commissioned for the show. Not included in the exhibition were a number of preliminary works on paper, as mentioned in the above letter, in which McCahon addressed the historical figures of Te Whiti, Tohu and Te Ua.

Parihaka in Taranaki was a thriving Māori village in the 1870s – at the time the largest Māori settlement in the country – led by the prophet Te Whiti o Rongomai (c. 1830–1907) and his assistant Tohu Kākahi (1828–1907) and dedicated to peaceful resistance to the settler greed for land. Te Whiti’s philosophy was based on a fusion of traditional Māori and Judaeo-Christian beliefs, partly influenced by Te Ua Haumēne (died 1866), founder of the Hauhau religion. Te Whiti emphasised self-determination for Māori and peaceful resistance to settler intrusion. When Pākehā surveyors planted stakes in preparation for building roads across Parihaka land, Te Whiti’s followers immediately pulled them up again. Because of this direct threat to government sovereignty, a massive military force was assembled to invade Parihaka and restore order. Te Whiti and Tohu



An ornament for the Pakeha, 1972, pencil on paper, 318 x 407 mm



John Caselberg (ed.), *Maori is My Name*, McIndoe, Dunedin, 1975; a source book for McCahon’s Parihaka and Urewera paintings.

and many others were arrested, imprisoned without trial and sent into exile in the South Island. The brutal suppression of Parihaka by the colonial government, led by Minister of Native Affairs John Bryce (1833–1913), is one of the most notorious episodes in the history of European colonisation in New Zealand.

McCahon immediately set about reading up about Parihaka and Te Whiti; one of his sources was material being assembled by John Caselberg for his *Maori is My Name: Historical Maori Writings in Translation* (1975). He may also have read Dick Scott's *The Parihaka Story* (1954), though Scott's fuller and more widely read book *Ask That Mountain: The Story of Parihaka* was not published until 1975, too late for McCahon's use. McCahon quickly recognised that Te Whiti and Tohu were truly remarkable men whose treatment by Pākehā had been disgraceful. The wider importance of this commission was that it started McCahon on the path of learning more about post-settler Māori history, and especially the prophet figures who fused Māori and Judaeo-Christian beliefs, which increasingly occupied him throughout the 1970s.

It is noteworthy that seven preparatory acrylics on paper McCahon made bear so little resemblance to the *Parihaka triptych*, though the drawing *An ornament for the Pakeha* (p. 159), in both its title and image, anticipates the horizontal cross in the left hand panel of the triptych. *Monuments to Te Whiti and to Tohu* (p. 191) and *Parihaka, Taranaki, looking towards the east* depict the mountain in realistic style and bright colours (close to the 'Edmonds Baking Powder thing – a very real symbol' of his original conception). In other preliminary works such as *Te Whiti, Tohu* (p. 190) and *The two prophets Te Ua and Te Whiti* (p. 190), the prophets are signified by shapes which might represent tombstones but which also have a strong resemblance to the landforms associated with the *Necessary protection* series, a relation made explicit in the title of one work, *Te Ua and Te Whiti seen as necessary protection*. Te Ua was the leader of the Hau hau movement of the 1860s and 1870s (also known as Pai Mārire) of which Te Whiti had been a follower in his early years, while Tohu was his right-hand man at Parihaka.

Parihaka triptych despite McCahon's original intention eschews depiction of Mount Taranaki for a three-panel piece which combined abstraction, text and Christian symbolism in a unique T-shaped format. The first and third panels are in landscape format while the central panel is in portrait format, the panels being arranged so as to form a Tau cross. If the black shapes in the outer panels are read as figure, they resemble but modify the 'necessary protection' motif; if they are read as ground, the white shapes become 'I' shapes or lamps/chalices. The central panel is dominated by a white cross below which are the words 'a monument to Te Whiti'. In the left panel is a horizontal cross accompanied by the

words 'an ornament for the Pakeha' (also the title of a preliminary drawing), and, to the right, 'TOHU I stand for Peace'. The right panel features some of Te Whiti's own words: 'war shall cease / and no longer divide / the world. // Adam's race has fallen / over many cliffs, but the / cliffs have disappeared / by numerous landslips / and none shall fall over those / cliffs again. The one cliff / that has not been / levelled is / death.'

When McCahon painted the *Parihaka Triptych* few Pākehā had even heard of Te Whiti and Parihaka. His painting helped to raise awareness about this shameful event. He arranged for the work to be gifted to the Parihaka people and held in trust for them by the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth. Several years later, McCahon visited Parihaka and expressed his anger and sorrow eloquently to O'Reilly who by then was directing the New Plymouth Gallery. He particularly objected to the planting of exotics such as rhododendrons on Mount Taranaki.

What an awful place Parihaka is, where is the spirit now[?] Who wants Rhododendrons up Egmont when bashed spirits stand under the Raj[?] I find it hard to take. I trust my cross for the Pakeha [i.e. the triptych] annoys some people & could restore faith to some others. Boy, I feel little hope there . . . And who could dance now on Parihaka soil and the Raj blooming on the mountain side. I feel personally responsible for visitors gawking. I also feel responsible for past terror. I am not an invader. I saw a lot but I will never again invade such a place. On Sunday – myself to blame, I did, but I saw an awful truth. I know a lot more now. Egmont takes the whole of your soul & all invasion should be stopped – bang – the right name [Taranaki] restored, the daffodils & chalets & muck got rid of . . .⁵⁰

As a postscript to this discussion, it should be mentioned that in 2001 McCahon's Parihaka paintings, including the preliminary acrylics, were included in a major exhibition, *Parihaka, The Art of Passive Resistance* at Wellington's City Gallery. The accompanying book included two fine essays about McCahon's Parihaka paintings: 'Muriwai to Parihaka' by Wystan Curnow and 'An Ornament for the Pākehā: Colin McCahon's Parihaka Triptych' by Jonathan Mané-Wheoki.

Taitimu. Tangi. Muriwai.

In the later months of 1972, McCahon turned his attention to aspects of the Muriwai landscape beyond the cliff-top view, the rock stacks at Motutara, and Ōiaia Island, to the black-sand beach that stretched north towards the entrance of Kaipara Harbour, as in

AAG's *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* with its yellow sky and cut-off upper corner (p. 195) and the colourful *Muriwai* (1972, p. 194), in which wavering white lines on black signify serried ranks of surf. He told McLeavey about 'the new Muriwai jobs':

They are really rather splendid . . . All go under the title of Taitimu. Tangi. Muriwai. Taitimu – low tide, Tangi – a weeping ceremony usually associates with a death but not necessarily so. Muriwai – a meeting place of waters. This beach is part of the long road that Maori spirits travel on their way to Te Reinga Wairua – the hole in the bottom of the sea – to heaven.⁵¹

Paintings belonging to this group were entitled *Seaweed on the beach* (p. 197) or, simply (in one case with a blazing orange sunset over white-on-black surf), *Muriwai*. Several had the words 'Taitimu. Tangi. Muriwai' written cursively along their bottom edge, merging, as it were, with the seaweed of the title. At least some of these were sent to Sydney as part of *Eight Auckland Artists* at the Bonython Gallery, in December 1972. The threatening-looking cloud in one work anticipated the *Rocks in the sky* series of 1976. In *Tangi. Muriwai* (p. 196) a pale moon hangs in the dark night sky above the beach while the merest sliver of sunset is visible on the horizon and touches one of the lines of surf with faint colour. A related work is *Tangi – necessary protection* (Rotorua Museum, see Vol. 1, p. 12), a hybrid, synthesising, work which fuses imagery from *Necessary protection* and the 'beach' paintings and modifies the black rectangles by adding the illusion of a third dimension similar to the *Parihaka triptych*.

Around this time McCahon used the phrase 'Taitimu. Tangi. Muriwai.' as the title of a short poem he sent the text of to friends, including McLeavey and Caselberg. It is one of several poems from this time preserved among his papers:

Taitimu. Tangi. Muriwai.

I too was born here
And this is my home
I too will walk the northern beaches
Look back from Haumu Hill
And weep to leave the land of my loving:
Flowers I have left on the sand
One generation falls, another rises
May us strangers sometime be forgiven
Can we not now be friends.
(for the Nga Tamatoa Council 13 Oct 72)⁵²

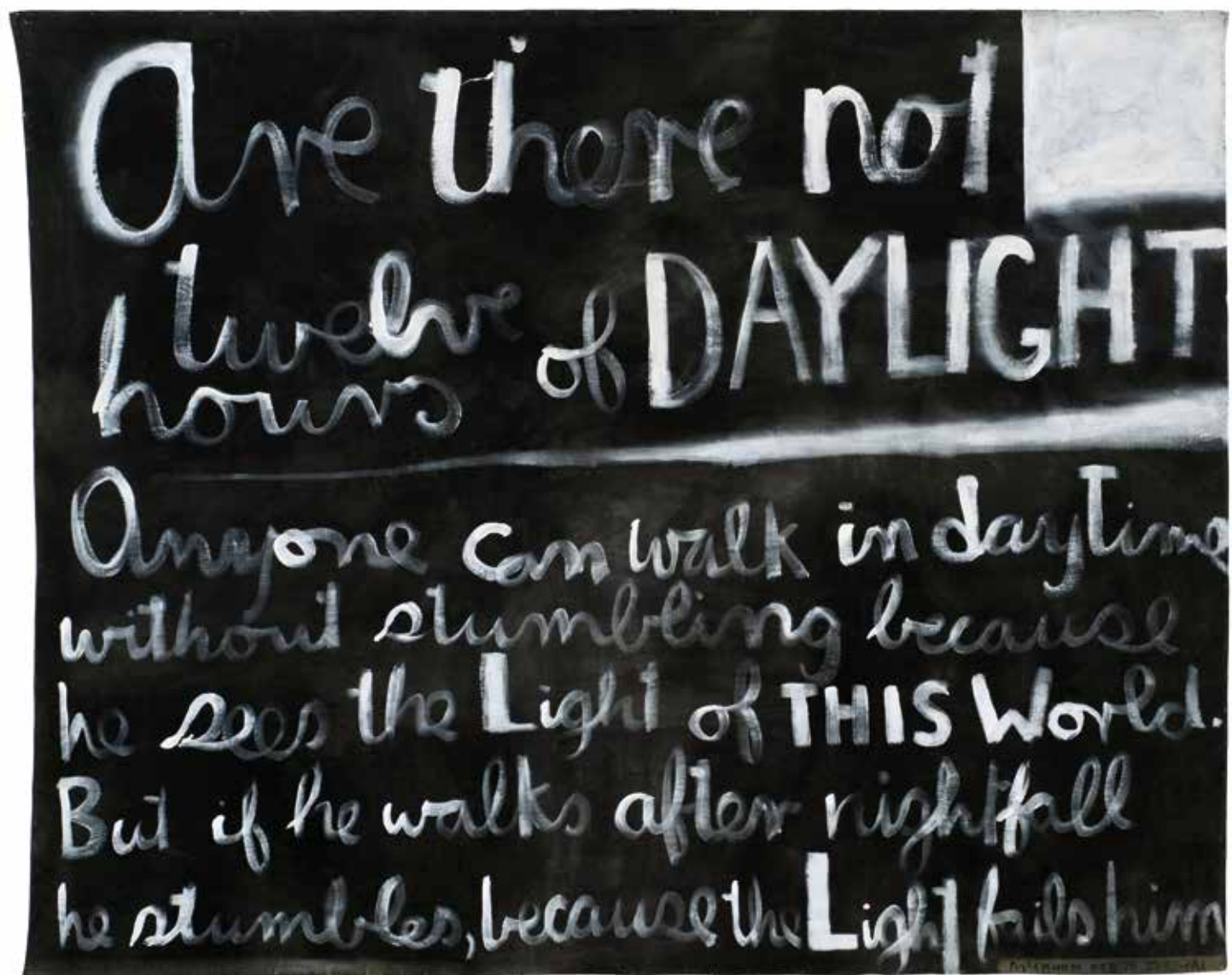
Ngā Tamatoa was a Māori activist group founded at the University of Auckland and focusing especially on land and language issues; it was closely identified with the 'Māori Renaissance' of the decade culminating in the Land March of 1975. McCahon was sympathetic to the movement but always (as here) seeking reconciliation and mutual understanding. Phrases in the poem echo waiata and proverbs he found in Matire Kereama's book *The Tail of the Fish*.

Death of James K. Baxter

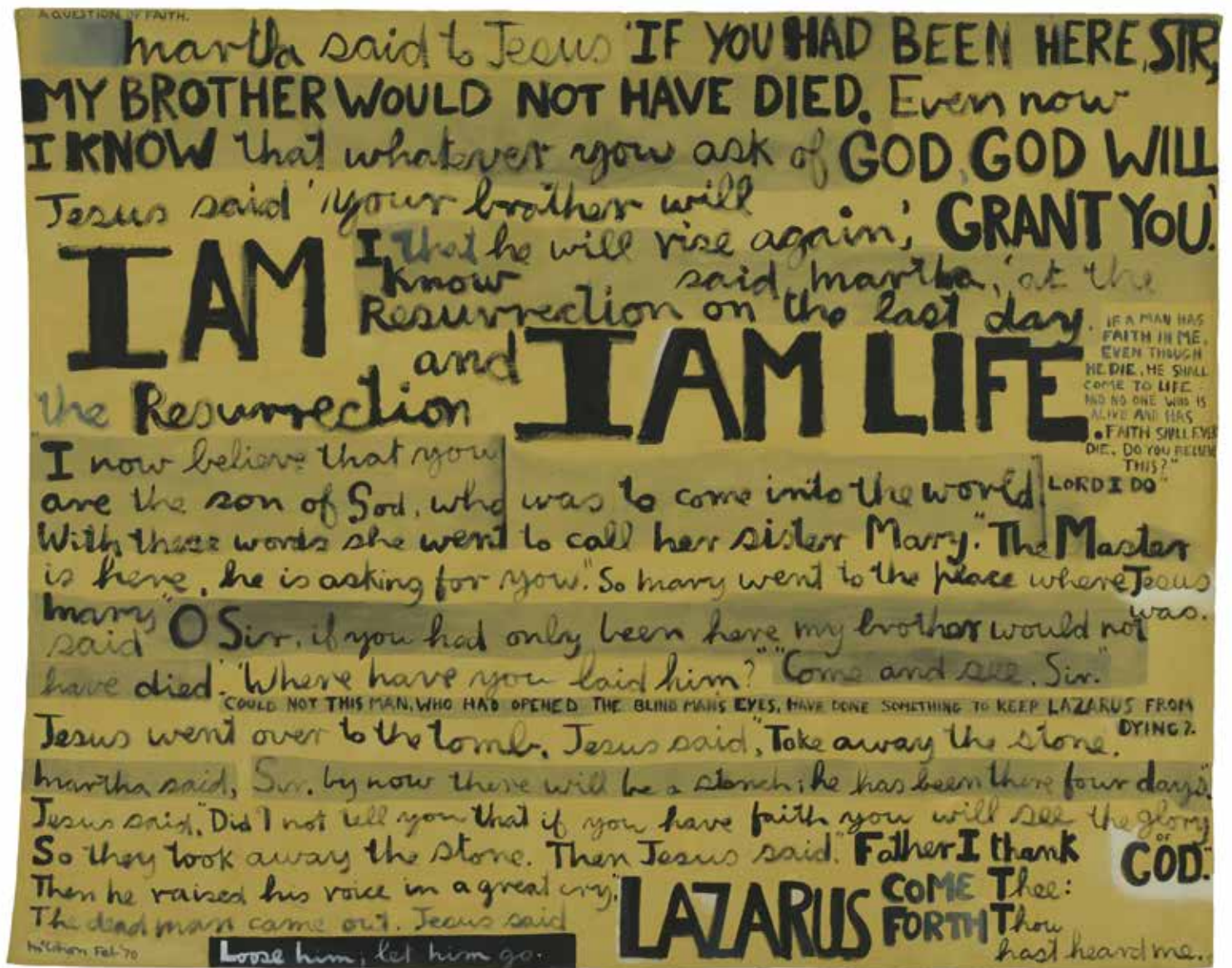
In October 1972 McCahon's close friend, the poet James K. Baxter, died in Auckland at the age of forty-six. Responding to comment about this in a letter from McLeavey, McCahon wrote: 'I've known Baxter since about 1947 or 48 or thereabout. I am his daughter's godfather and have known his wife almost as long as I've known Jim.'⁵³ Despite their close friendship earlier, relations between the two had become strained in recent years partly due to Baxter's unfairly accusing McCahon of having sold out to bourgeois values because he worked at a university. He even wrote a scathing ballad entitled 'To Colin McCahon R.A.', the reference to the Royal Academy being a deliberate insult.⁵⁴ According to one story, McCahon had even thrown Baxter out of his house for objectionable behaviour. Baxter had adopted an extreme anti-materialist and poverty-embracing Franciscan point of view in his last years, spent alternately between the remote Māori/Catholic village of Jerusalem/Hiruhārama on the Whanganui River and the crash-pads for dropouts and ex-prisoners of Auckland's urban bohemia. He began using the name 'Hemi' to signal his identification with Māori/Christian values.

All the same, McCahon was upset by Baxter's passing and deeply sorry that they had not become reconciled before his death. He quickly made a small painting on unframed canvas, *Jim passes the northern beaches*, which he gave to Baxter's widow, Jacquie, and his goddaughter Hilary Baxter. It turned out to be of considerable importance to McCahon and became the seed for much of the work he produced during the following year.

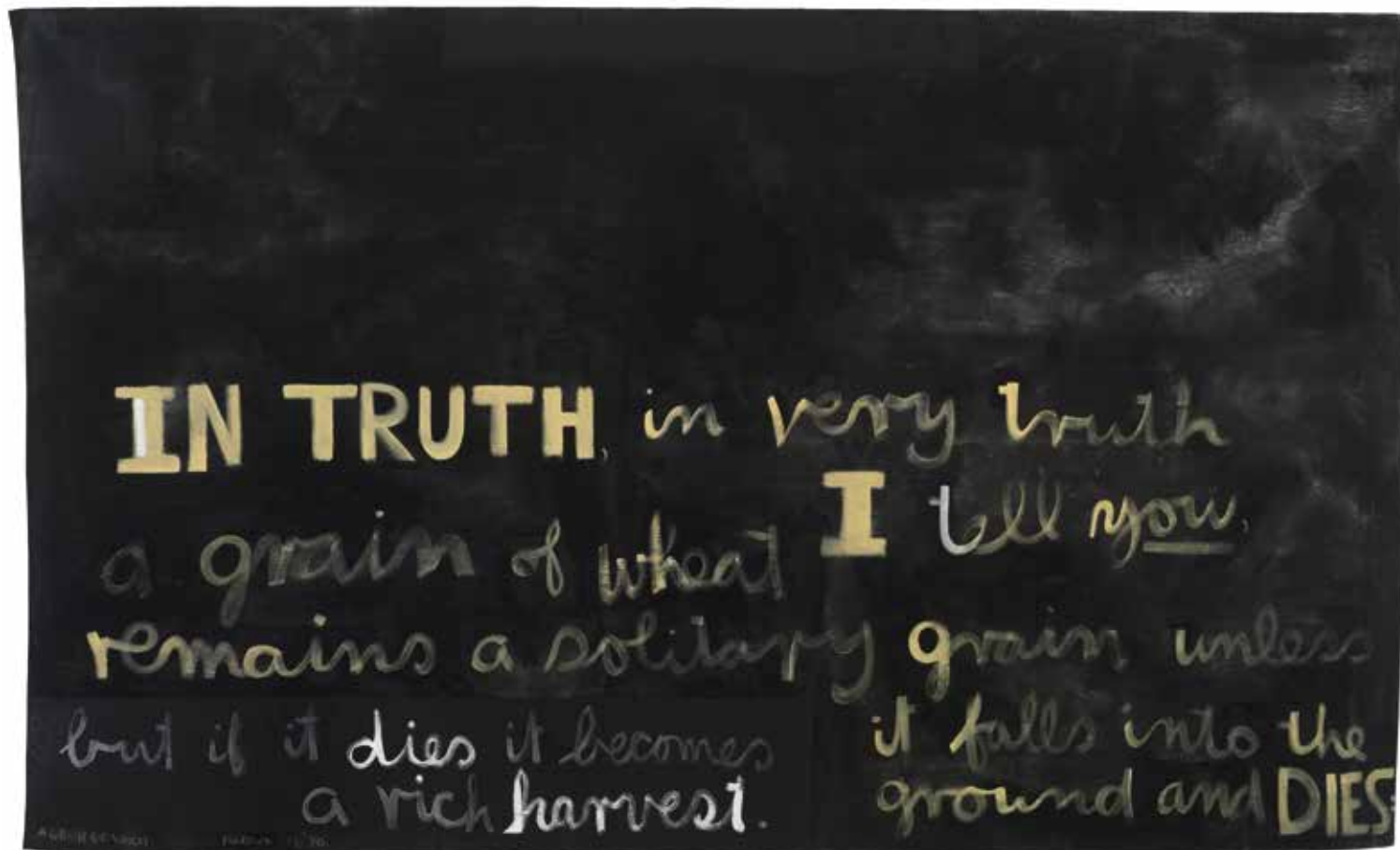
The left side and top edge of the painting comprise a fragment of a Tau cross; the rest of the painting consists of a headland and a beach at sunset with marks representing a scatter of flying birds. As the title, written vertically up the right side of the painting, suggests, these symbolised the passing of Baxter's spirit past the northern beaches in accordance with Māori belief – a fusion of Christian and Māori imagery most appropriate for the occasion. McCahon wrote to McLeavey in March 1973: 'When I painted the small painting for Hilary Baxter I opened up a new way of thinking about painting I'd been working on for a long time.'⁵⁵ The results of this 'new way of thinking about painting' became impressively evident in 1973.



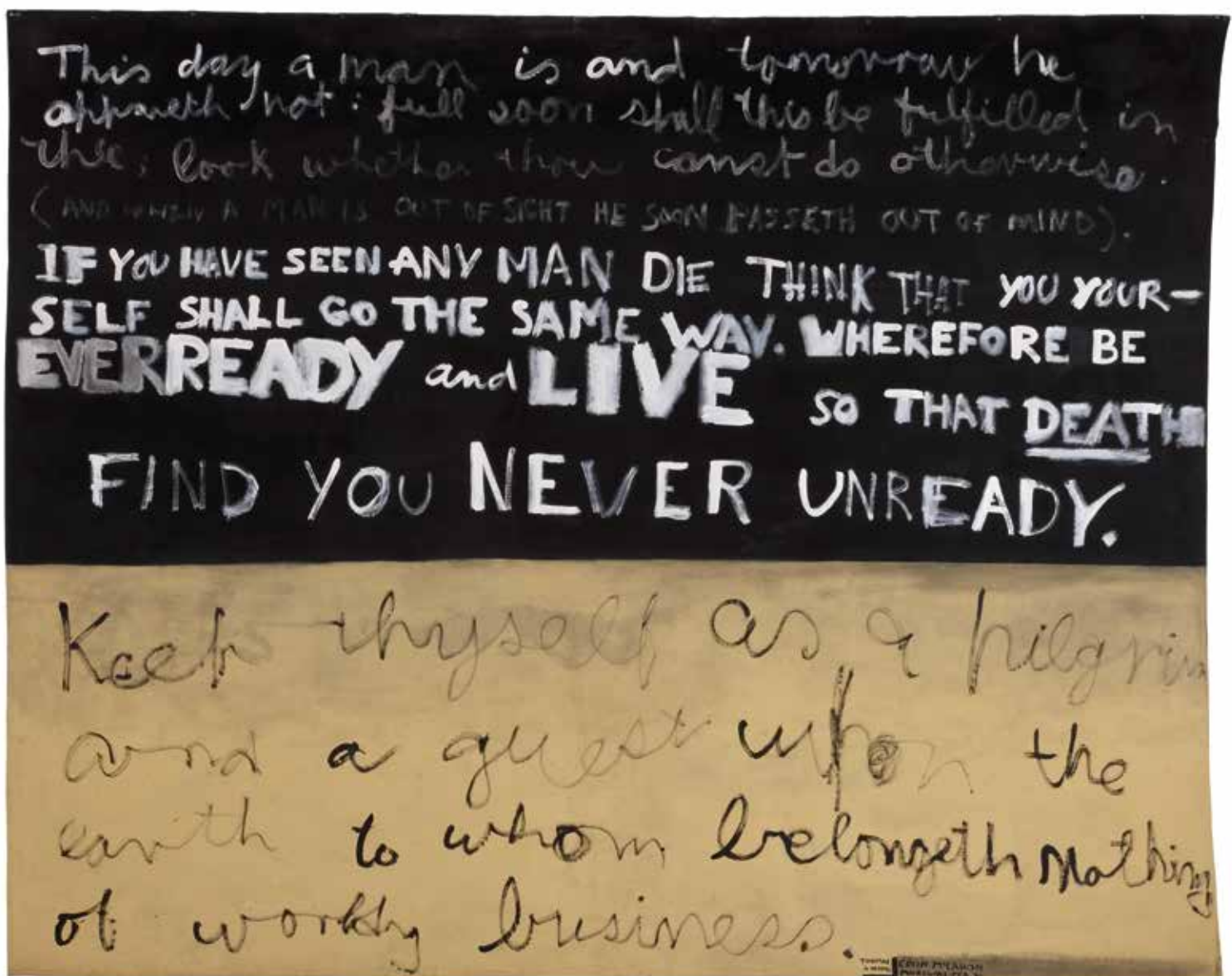
Are there not twelve hours of daylight, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
2077 x 2580 mm



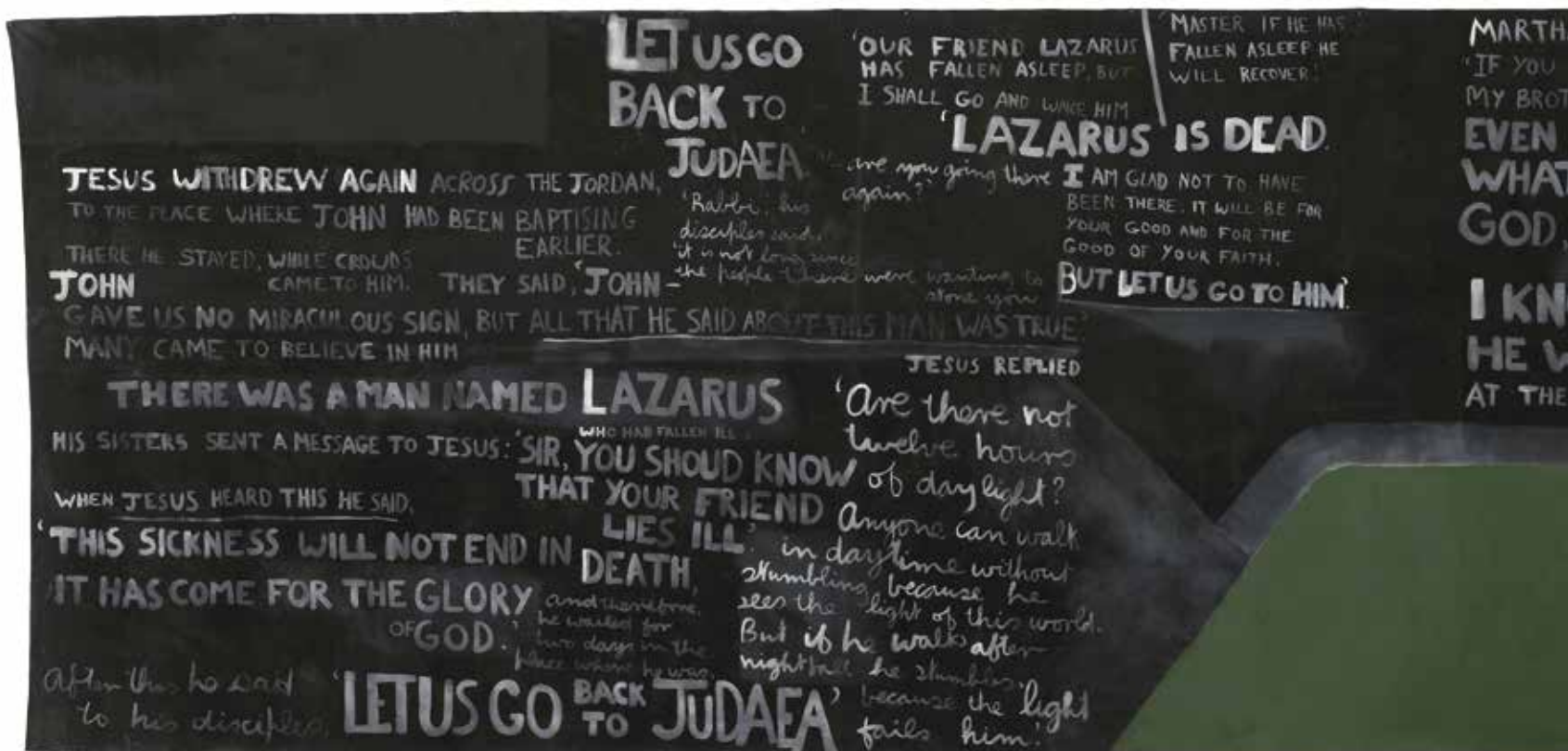
A question of faith, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
2080 x 2615 mm



A grain of wheat, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
2080 x 3435 mm



This day a man is, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
2080 x 2600 mm



Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha, 1969-70, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 2075 x 8070 mm

A WENT TO MEET JESUS.
HAD BEEN HERE, SIR,
THER WOULD NOT HIVE DIED.
NOW I KNOW THAT
TEVER YOU ASK OF
GOD WILL GRANT
YOU
OW THAT
WILL RISE AGAIN,
RESURRECTION ON THE
LAST DAY.

**'LAZARUS
COME FORTH'**
The dead man came out.
Jesus said 'LOOSE HIM.
LET HIM GO.'

JESUS SAID

**I AM THE RESURRECTION
AND I AM LIFE**

IF A MAN HAS FAITH IN ME,
EVEN THOUGH HE DIE, HE SHALL
COME TO LIFE. AND NO ONE
WHO IS ALIVE AND HAS FAITH SHALL EVER DIE.

DO
YOU
BELIEVE
THIS?

'The master is here, he is
asking for you' so many
came to the place where
Jesus was. 'O Sir, if you had
been here my brother would not
have died.'
Jesus went over to the tomb.
'Take away the stone,' Jesus said.
'Did I not tell you that if you
have faith, you will see the
glory of GOD.'



Victory over death 2, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
2075 x 5977 mm

The crowd standing
by, said it was
thunder, while
others said, 'An
angel has spoken
to him.' Jesus
replied, 'This
voice spoke for
your sake,
not mine.'

the light
is among you

While you have
the light, trust
to the light,
that you may
become men of
light.

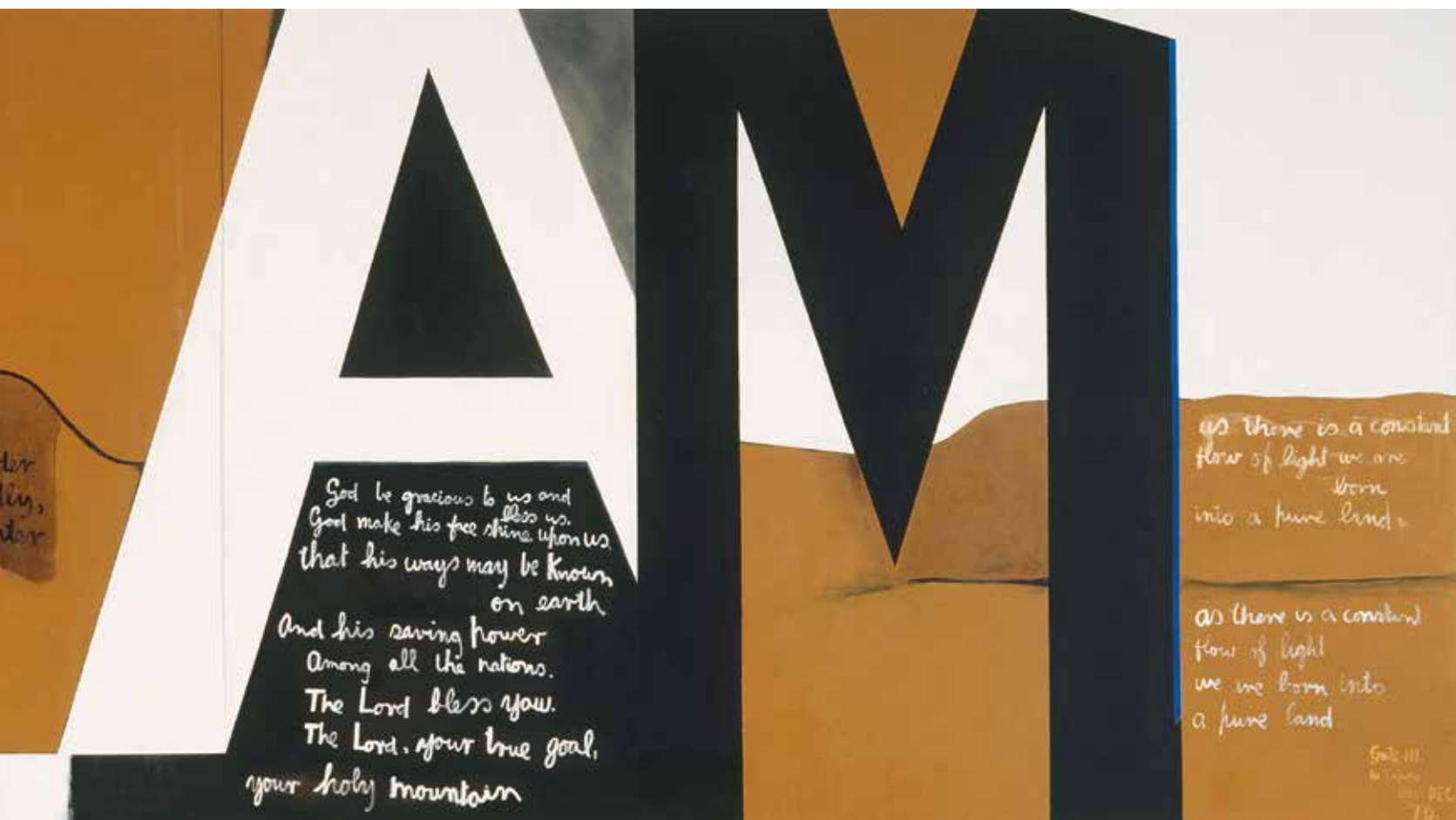
AM

THE WAY, THE TRUTH & LIFE.
PUBLISHED FEB. 70. M19600.

'my way is known to you.'



Gate III, 1970,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas,
3050 x 10670 mm



God be gracious to us and
God make his face shine upon us,
that his ways may be known
on earth
And his saving power
Among all the nations.
The Lord bless you.
The Lord, your true goal,
your holy mountain

as there is a constant
flow of light we are
born
into a pure land

as there is a constant
flow of light
we are born into
a pure land

Gate III.
10/1/2000
DEC
70



View from the top of the cliff no. 4, 1971,
watercolour on paper, 1084 x 720 mm



The view from the top of the cliff, 1971,
watercolour on paper, 794 x 589 mm



Buttercup fields forever, 1971,
watercolour on paper, 1015 x 675 mm (est.)



Cross, 1971,
synthetic polymer paint on paper, 787 x 585 mm



*Venus and re-entry: the bleeding heart of
Jesus is seen above Ahipara*, 1970–71,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
1480 x 1840 mm



Ahipara, 1970,
oil on unstretched canvas, 1475 x 1842 mm



Light falling through a dark landscape, 1971,
charcoal on paper, 460 x 605 mm

A fall of light illuminating darkness, 1971,
watercolour on paper, 582 x 775 mm



Light falling through a dark landscape, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper, 1080 x 710 mm



The days and nights in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape, 1971, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 2360 x 1840 mm



The days and nights in the wilderness: a constant flow of light falls on the land, 1971, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 2378 x 1840 mm



Necessary protection (blue and brown), 1971,
synthetic polymer paint on paper, 1090 x 727 mm



Oaia Island and necessary protection, 1971,
synthetic polymer paint on paper, 730 x 1100 mm



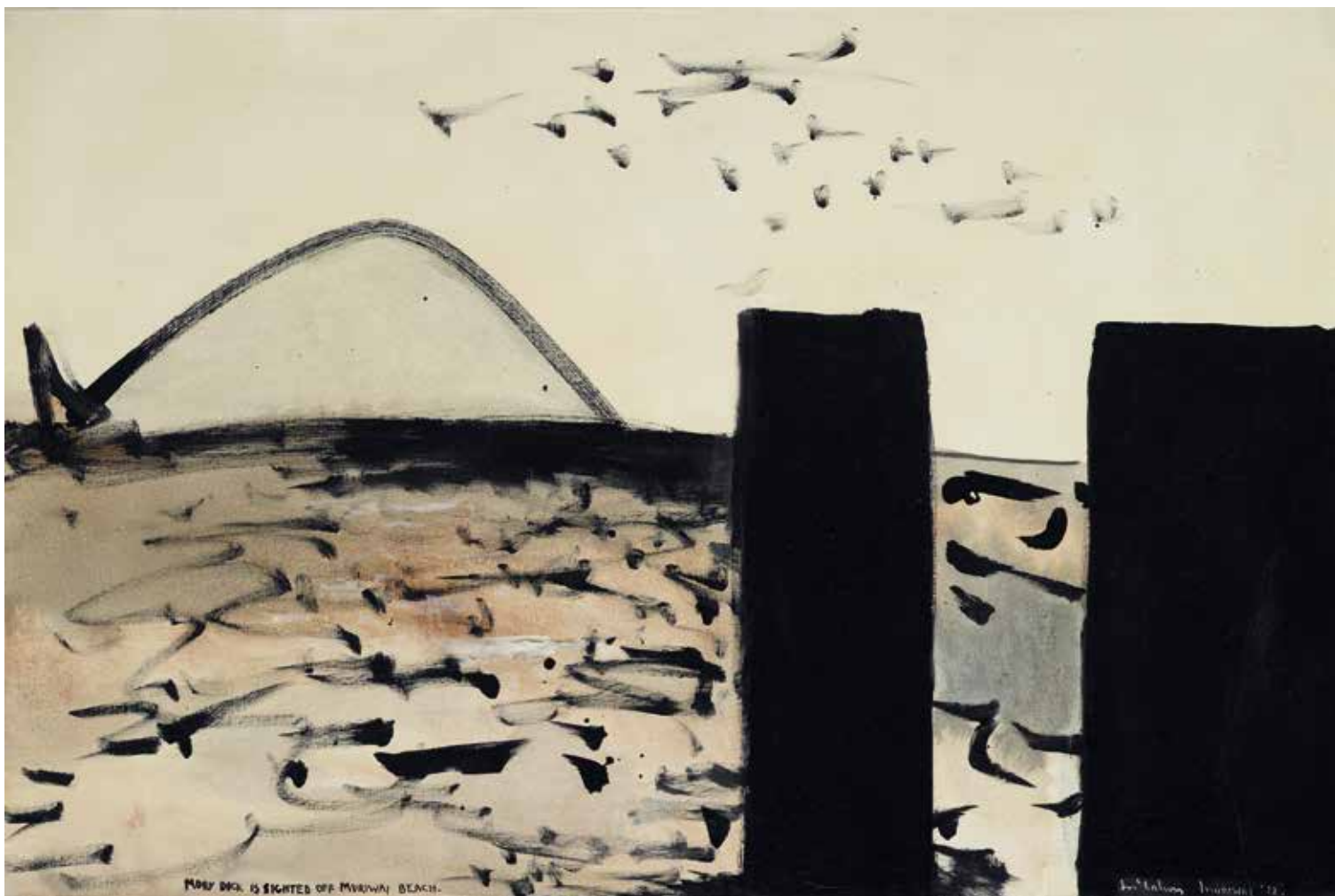
Necessary protection, 1971,
charcoal on paper, 1040 x 685 mm



Necessary protection, 1971,
pastel on paper, 420 x 595 mm

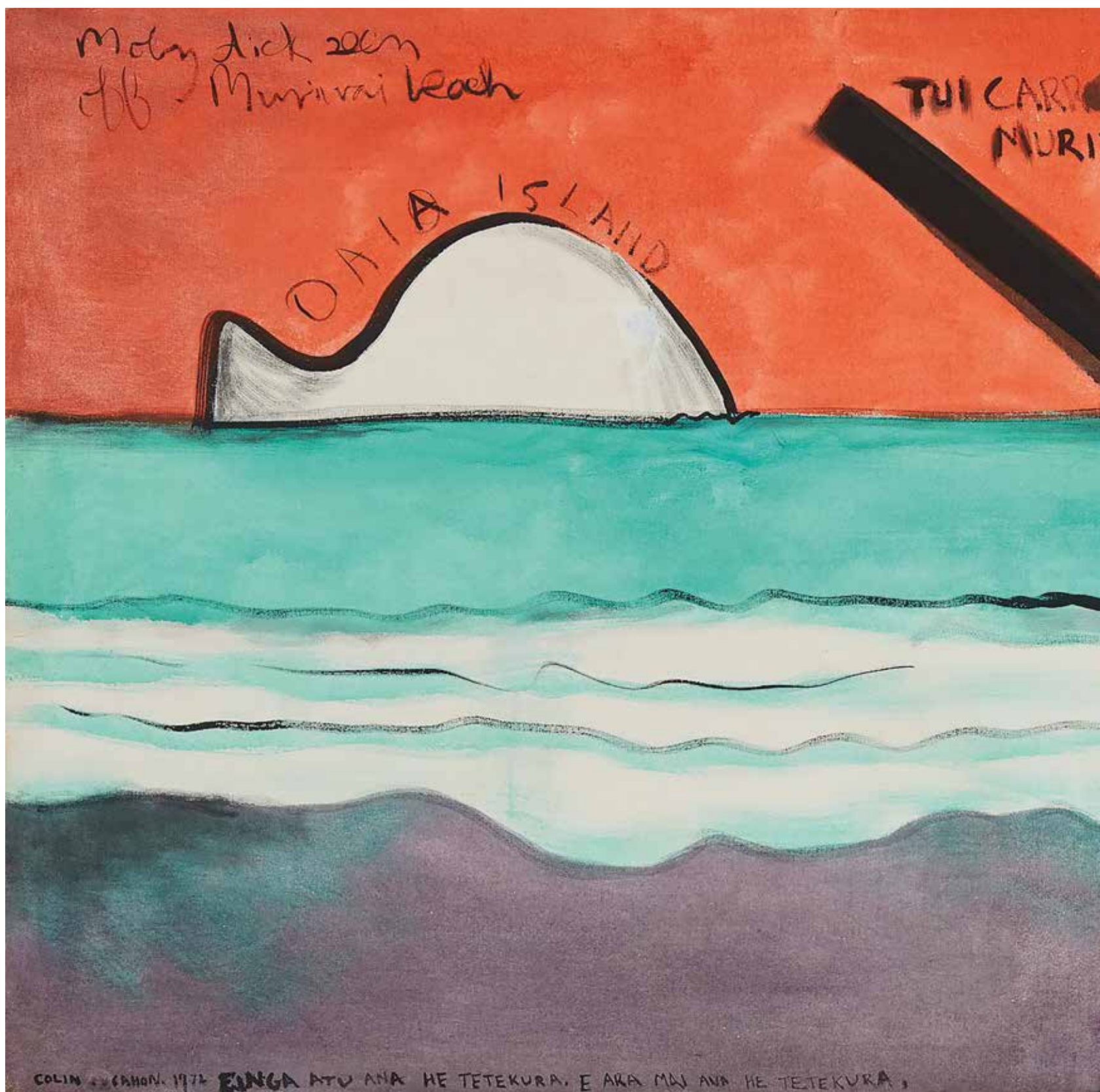


Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai: a necessary case for protection, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 549 x 1270 mm

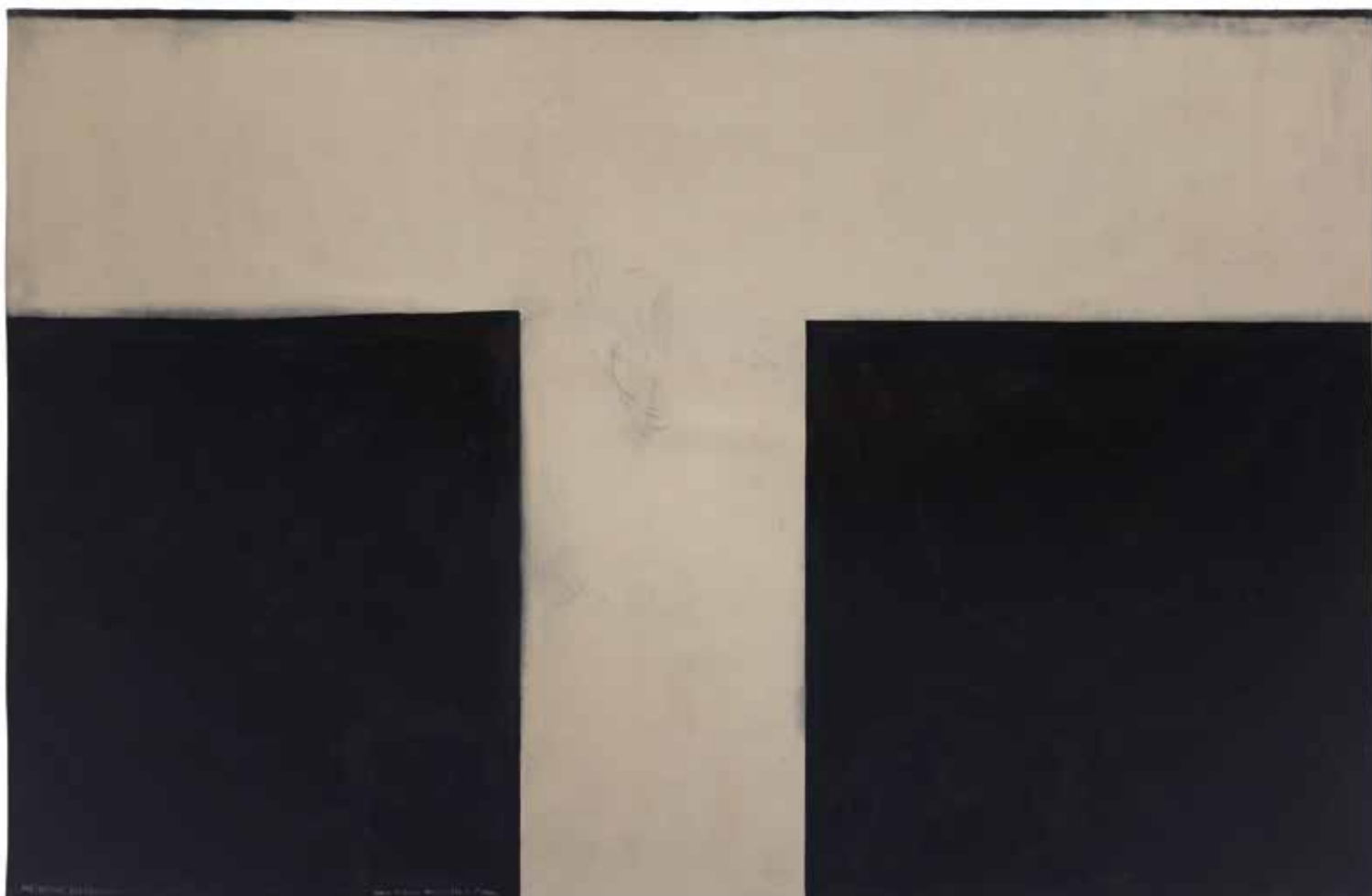


*Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai Beach, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 760 x 1140 mm*

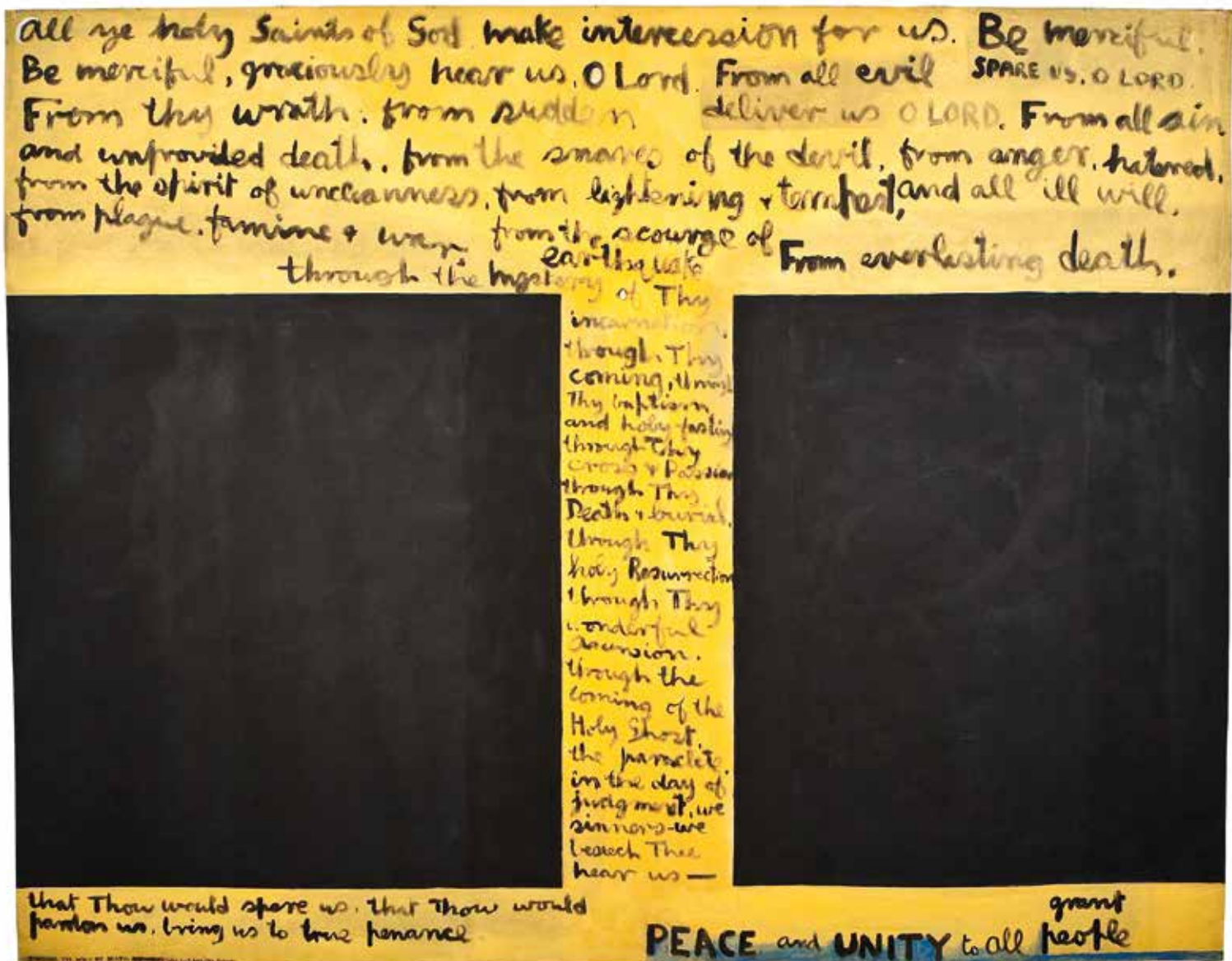
*Overleaf: Tui Carr celebrates Muriwai Beach, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 858 x 1742 mm*







Necessary protection, 1971–72,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
1840 x 2973 mm



*Through the Wall of Death: A Banner, 1972,
 synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas,
 1840 x 2355 mm*

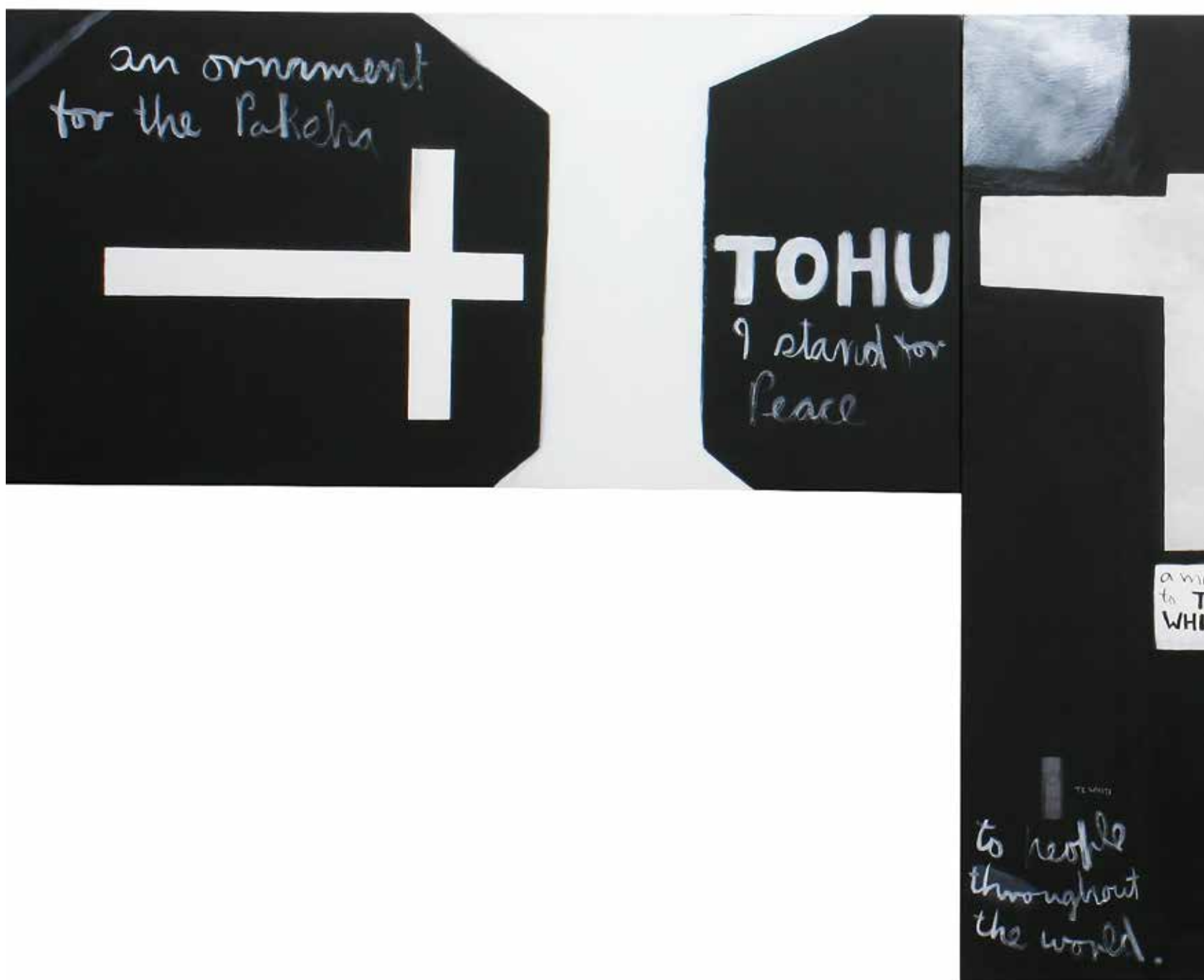


Te Whiti, Tohu, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper
on hardboard, 735 x 1100 mm

The two prophets Te Ua and Te Whiti, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper,
730 x 1095 mm



*Monuments to Te Whiti and to Tohu, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper,
726 x 1085 mm*



Parihaka triptych, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on three canvas panels,
1: 865 x 1752 mm, 2: 1753 x 867 mm, 3: 865 x 1752 mm

war shall cease
and no longer divide
the world.

Adam's race has fallen
over many cliffs, but the
cliffs have disappeared
by numerous landings
and none shall fall over those
cliffs again. The one cliff
left which has not been
levelled, is
death.

TE KUMU TO THE PEOPLE

onwint
E
TI

and to
the people
of
Parikhatu





Muriwai, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper mounted on hardboard,
710 x 1090 mm



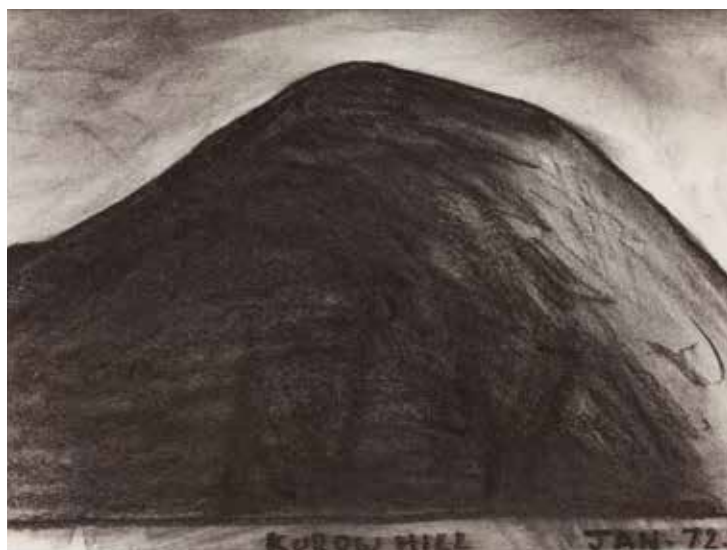
Muriwai: Necessary Protection, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper on hardboard,
710 x 1090 mm



Tangi. Muriwai, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on board,
720 x 1110 mm

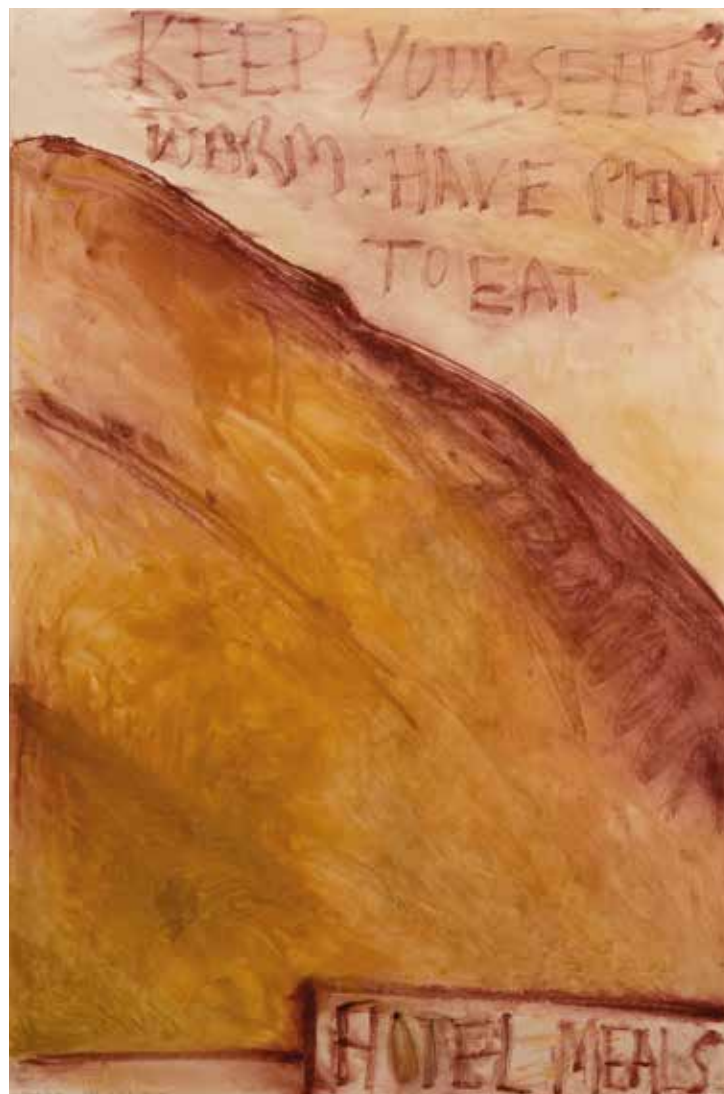


Seaweed on the beach, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper mounted on board,
730 x 1112 mm



Study of Kurow Hill, North Otago, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper,
710 x 1077 mm

Kurow Hill, 1972,
charcoal on paper, 210 x 280 mm



About the Kurow Hotel, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on paper,
1092 x 718 mm



Jim passes the northern beaches, 1972,
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched
jute canvas, 445 x 435 mm

An abstract painting featuring a prominent, curved, light-colored brushstroke that sweeps from the bottom left towards the top right. The background is composed of large, dark, textured areas in shades of brown and black, with some lighter, reddish-brown patches. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

WATERFALL WITH OVERHANGING RED ROCK
McCAHON AUGUST. 1964