



**DON  
BINNEY  
FLIGHT  
PATH**

Gregory O'Brien

A richly illustrated account of the life and work of one of New Zealand's most iconic artists.

Painter, printmaker, teacher, writer and ornithologist, Don Binney (1940–2012) was a mercurial presence on the New Zealand cultural scene from the time of his meteoric rise to fame in the early 1960s. His unmistakable, stylised depictions of birds have come to define an era in the development of the nation's art. *Don Binney: Flight Path* follows the painter from Te Henga / Bethells Beach – his artistic tūrangawaewae – through his years of wandering not only the length of Aotearoa but as far afield as Latin America and Europe.

Drawing extensively on Binney's letters, journals and other writings, award-winning author and curator Gregory O'Brien takes us into the world of this gifted but paradoxical artist. Richly illustrated with Binney's paintings, drawings and prints – alongside photographs and documentary materials – this is the first full-length monograph on one of New Zealand's most important twentieth-century artists.

**Gregory O'Brien** is a writer, painter and art curator. Alongside his poetry and painting, he has written major books on New Zealand art and artists including *Lands and Deeds: Profiles of Contemporary New Zealand Painters* (Godwit Publishing, 1996), *A Micronaut in the Wide World: The Imaginative Life and Times of Graham Percy* (Auckland University Press, 2011) and as co-editor *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* (Victoria University Press, 2005). O'Brien is also author of the multi-award-winning introductions to art for the young and curious: *Welcome to the South Seas* (Auckland University Press, 2004) and *Back and Beyond* (Auckland University Press, 2008), which both won the Non-Fiction Prize at the New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. As a writer, curator and contributing artist, O'Brien was involved in the Kermadec art exhibition, which travelled around New Zealand and the wider Pacific between 2012 and 2016. His book *Always Song in the Water* (Auckland University Press, 2019) is the basis for a major exhibition at the New Zealand Maritime Museum, Auckland. Gregory O'Brien became an Arts Foundation Laureate and won the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in 2012, and in 2017 became a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University of Wellington.



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**Gregory O'Brien**

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**for Philippa and Mary Binney**

Although I have used the forms of birds a great deal in my work I am not, as some will say, specifically or especially a 'bird painter'. I also paint space, earth, sea, light and rivers as well as houses, Ratana churches, volcanoes, schoolgirls, islands and roads. I do not presume to offer any typical or literary symbols of New Zealand . . . What I paint is what I know well, and I am still in the process of learning to know more.

— **Don Binney**

My interest in conservation, ornithology and painting have all grown of a piece. Inevitably the pursuit of the bird takes one into some wild spaces and a great many more open spaces. One comes to appreciate the value of those spaces. In a sense the pursuit of the bird is more than just ticking a bird list or catching something bright in your binoculars . . . There's more to spotting a godwit than spotting a godwit. You become a lover of the environment as well, and when that environment is hearing a knell of doom, you rise with the godwits, so to speak, and take action.

— **Don Binney**



# CONTENTS

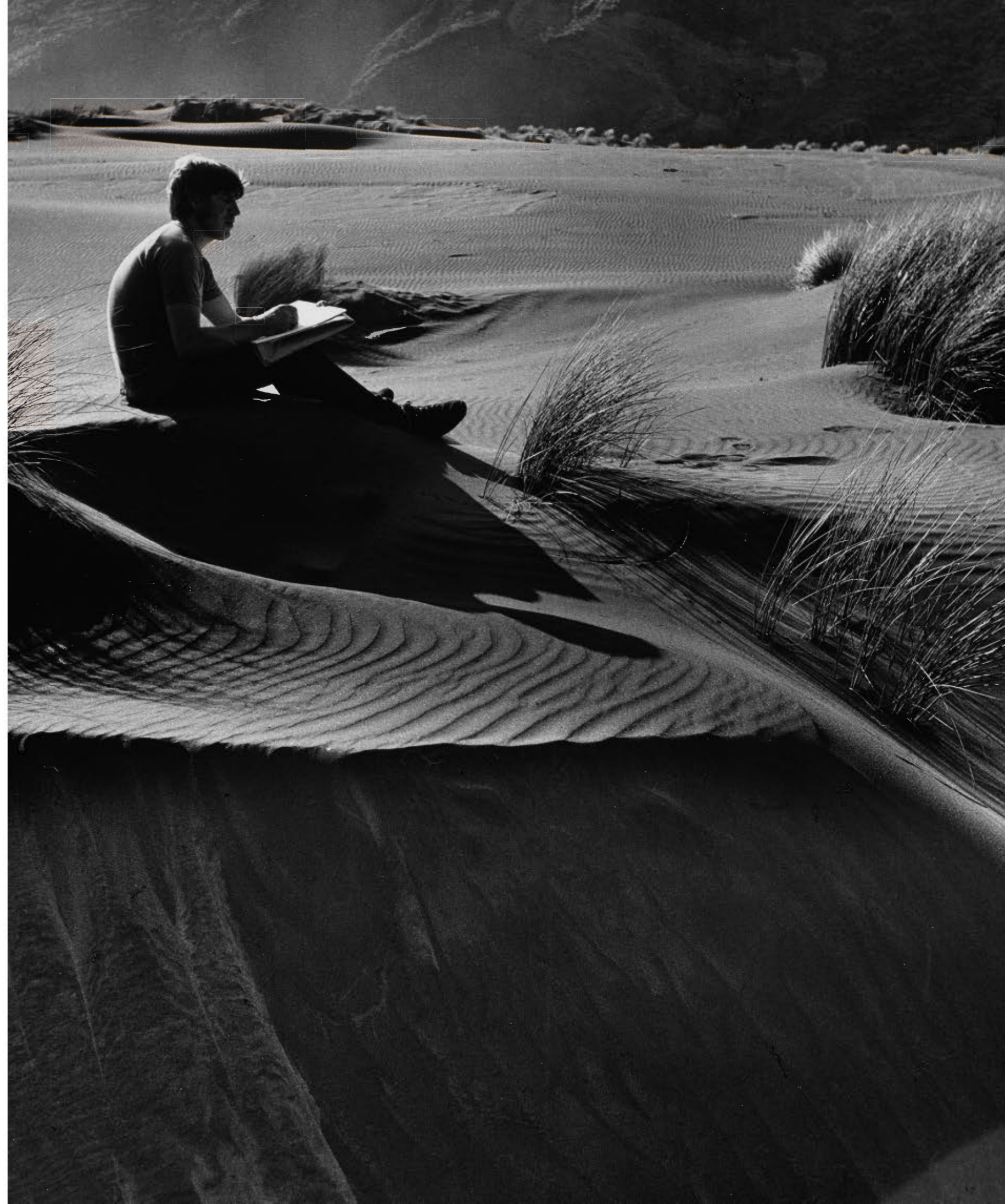
INTRODUCTION	13
PART 1 <b>TAKING FLIGHT</b> 1940–1962	25
PART 2 <b>BETWEEN BIRD &amp; HEADLAND</b> 1963–1967	59
PART 3 <b>OFFSHORE</b> 1968–1973	135
PART 4 <b>RETURNING BIRD</b> 1974–1985	213
PART 5 <b>FOUR OR FIVE WAYS OF NOT BEING A PAINTER</b>	269
PART 6 <b>DESCENDING BIRD</b> 1986–2012	301
<b>A FLIGHT PATH</b> AN AFTERWORD	349
CHRONOLOGY	361
ENDNOTES	389
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	393
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	396
INDEX	397

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way  
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?

— **William Blake**

Geniuses are said to be as 'isolated, colossal, and sometimes also as  
bizarre and enigmatic' as sphinxes in the desert, or Celtic menhirs.

— **James Hall and Carel Vosmaer**





## INTRODUCTION

### I — Portrait of the artist as a young birdwatcher

Birds were flapping and diving deep in Don Binney's conscious and subconscious mind for some years before he struck out, as a teenaged schoolboy, across the Manukau mudflats with his ornithologist-tutor from King's College, R. B. Sibson. The Manukau Harbour story, often told by the artist, presented something of an originating myth, accentuated for effect; he even went so far as to claim he was 'an ornithologist first, a painter second'. Like much that Binney said, this pronouncement should be taken with a grain of salt. Numerous exercise books survive from early childhood, all crammed with flying and striding storks, ostriches, kiwi and weka. These suggest that birds were an entrenched part of his imaginative life from infancy. Strictly speaking, Don Binney was a painter of birds before he became an ornithologist.

The young Binney was manifestly captivated by the imaginative potential of flight, in the human as well as in the avian realm. In a formal photographic portrait from the early 1940s, no doubt commissioned by a doting mother, he holds a model aeroplane, possibly handed to him in the hope of eliciting a smile, or to fill the idle minutes while film was changed or lighting adjusted in the photographer's studio. One of Binney's earliest memories was of aeroplanes flying low over the family home in Parnell, Auckland, during the concluding phase of World War II: 'The sky outside was filled with real aircraft which, I was assured, were "ours"'. A mixture of wonder and curiosity – augmented by a little anxiety – about what passed overhead would stay with him through life.

In an unpublished memoir written in the first decade of the twenty-first century (and much quoted in this book), Don Binney recounted how, according to family word-of-mouth, his three-tiered christening cake was 'ornamented with little hard sugar tanks and aeroplanes, attributes of a distant war at its murderous pitch'. Military aircraft probably outnumbered native birds in the sky above Parnell through the years of his early childhood. The amphibious landings of flying boats in Mechanics Bay, a kilometre or two from home, were a convenient precursor to the water birds he would paint later.

When prompted later in life, Binney would acknowledge his prodigious childhood bird drawings, referring to them as if they were made by a different person or were some kind of inheritance. He came to think of them as a gift from an earlier self. It was through revisiting them, he maintained, that his mature style came into being. 'I was painting birds as a child,' he told art historian Richard Wolfe in 2000. 'Interestingly, well before I got to Elam, and well before I got into that state when I was looking at Nicholas de Stael and Larry Rivers and all those people, I thought, heck, I'll look back at my own boyhood birds and they became starts to my development in paint.'<sup>1</sup>

The freewheeling birdlife of his earliest drawings was often in amongst a carnivalesque array of animals, imaginary creatures and strangely humanoid trees. Echoes of those elements would also surface in later work. But it was birds and flight that most held his attention throughout his childhood. Like many of his generation, both victim and beneficiary of a mid-twentieth-century



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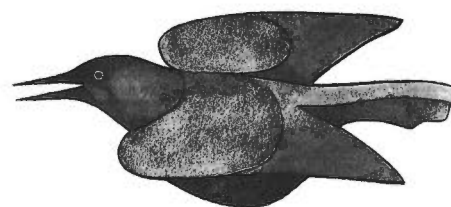
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PAGES 2–3

***Under Moehau III*, 2001**

oil and acrylic on canvas, 600 × 900mm

PAGES 4 & 8

***Pacific Frigate Bird II (details)*, 1968**

acrylic and oil on canvas, 1830 × 1520 mm

PAGE 11

***Don Binney at Te Henga*, c. 1969**

photograph by Marti Friedlander  
courtesy of Gerrard and Marti Friedlander  
Charitable Trust

PAGE 12

***Puketotara, Twice Shy*, 1976**

oil on canvas, 1830 × 1370 mm  
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

PAGE 24

***Dotterel Rising, Te Henga*, 1964**

oil on board, 1030 × 900 mm

PAGE 58

***Tui Over the Anawhata (detail)*, 1966**

oil on board, 910 × 400 mm

PAGE 133

***Don Binney at Te Henga*, c. 1969**

photograph by Marti Friedlander  
courtesy of Gerrard and Marti Friedlander  
Charitable Trust

PAGE 134

***Over Oaxaca (detail)*, 1968**

oil on canvas, 1810 × 1135 mm  
Wellington City Council collection

PAGE 158

***Don Binney and Judith Binney in studio at Te Henga*, c. 1969**

photograph by Marti Friedlander  
courtesy of Gerrard and Marti Friedlander  
Charitable Trust

PAGE 212

***Last Flight of the Kokako (detail)*, 1979**

oil on board, 2130 × 930 mm

PAGE 268

***Untitled*, c. 1970s**

photograph by Don Binney

PAGE 300

***Rakino Northwards*, 2007**

acrylic and oil on canvas, 620 × 515 mm

PAGES 346–47

***Manunui, Queen Charlotte (detail)*, 2005**

oil on canvas, 550 mm × 1100 mm

PAGE 348

***Well I never did (detail)*, 2009**

coloured pencil on paper, 560 × 420 mm

PAGES 358–59

***Don Binney at Te Henga*, 1972**

PAGE 360

***Childhood drawing by the artist*, mid-1940s**

PAGE 388

***Don Binney in the Ikon Gallery amidst works sold from his 'Recent Paintings' exhibition*, October 1964**  
photographer unknown

PAGE 392

***Work table in Don Binney's studio*, Awatea Road**  
photograph by Sam Hartnett, 2021