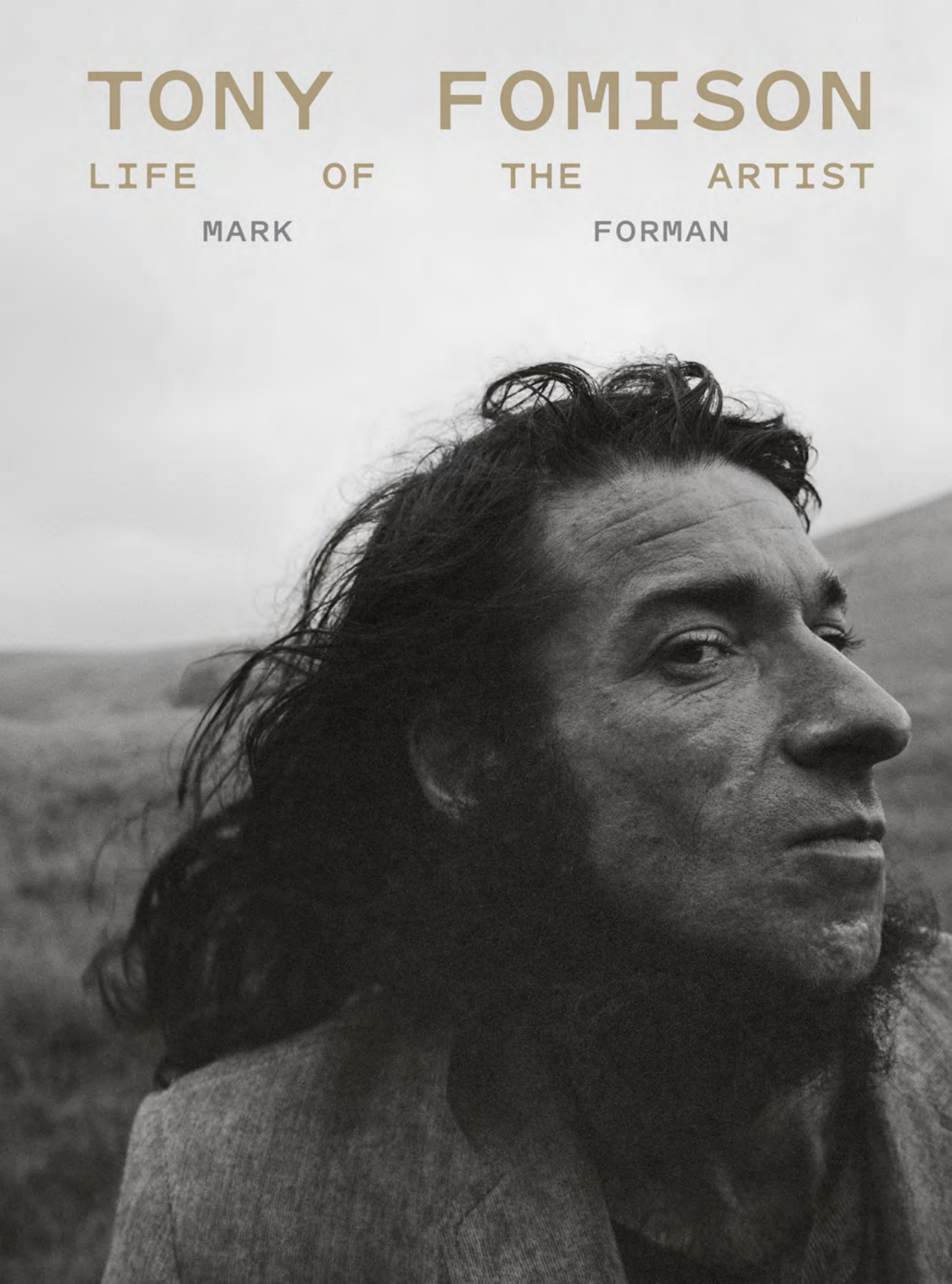
TONY FOMISON

LIFE OF THE ARTIST

MARK FORMAN



TONY FOMISON

LIFE OF THE ARTIST

MARK FORMAN

AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

First published 2025
Auckland University Press
Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
www.aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz

ISBN 978 1 77671 127 7

Publication is kindly assisted by the Gerrard and Marti Friedlander Charitable Trust and by Creative New Zealand.

creative nz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of New Zealand

Design by inhouse.nz
Jacket image: Tony Fomison at Tai Tapu, Canterbury, 1972. Photograph by Mark Adams.

Printed in China by
Everbest Investment Ltd

For Beck

INTRODUCTION

IN FEBRUARY 1990, TONY FOMISON travelled from Auckland to Russell with his friend Fiona McLeod. They went in Tony's car – a 1978 mustard-green Toyota Corona – but even by age fifty he had never learned to drive, so Fiona took the wheel and the two of them listened to tapes of reggae, soul and Jimi Hendrix while Tony sipped from a hip flask of whisky wrapped in a paper bag. He had been asked to speak at the opening of Merry Isaac's art exhibition – another friend he'd known since the early 1970s – and he also wanted to be at Waitangi for the official commemoration of 150 years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.[1]

In a photo taken the night of the exhibition opening, Tony looks tired to his bones, far older than his fifty years, his face like an aged walnut. He has a smoke in his hands, jandals on his feet, and a low-slung tie-dyed T-shirt. His eyes are closed, most likely because he's finished the short speech which opened the exhibition; he's ready to go home now, he seems to be saying, and it's time to sleep. While being helped to the car in the dark, he slipped and cracked his head on the concrete path. Already physically frail, the fall was probably the final blow for Tony, and over the next few days his condition worsened. On Sunday he gulped vodka straight from the bottle, and picked at some cheese on toast. Monday was Waitangi Day, exceedingly hot, and while he waited to glimpse Queen Elizabeth being driven through the crowd, he curled up in a foetal position under a tree. It wasn't long before a friend decided he needed to be taken to hospital and so Tony exited the Treaty Grounds in an ambulance. By late Tuesday night he had died in Whangārei Hospital, alone.

Fomison's death was widely reported throughout the country on radio and television and in the main newspapers. As the weeks and months unfolded, art historians and critics began to weigh up his work, to figure out what it had all meant: 'one of the most important painters of his generation, without any doubt' was how Hamish Keith put it;[2] Lara Strongman went further and declared Fomison 'unarguably one

of the greatest painters living or dead, which New Zealand has ever produced'.[3] Four years later, in further recognition of his significance, the City Gallery in Wellington held a major retrospective exhibition of his work, as big as any New Zealand painter had ever had.[4] Posters advertising the exhibition were pasted all over Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin: they featured a striking image of a jester with an enigmatic smile, holding a small figure in his hand. Fomison's most potent paintings induce a kind of giddy disorientation for the viewer, and this image was up there with the best of them. According to some reviews of the show, it achieved something rare for a local artist: not only did it draw large crowds, but people were animated, speaking about it with the kind of gusto usually reserved for a blockbuster film.

In conjunction with the retrospective, Ian Wedde compiled *Fomison: What Shall We Tell Them?* – a collection of four essays by contributors, along with a detailed chronology of Fomison's life and work.[5] There were reproductions of Fomison's most important paintings, drawings and sculptures, as well as dozens of black-and-white thumbnails of lesser-known works. The catalogue of images was described as 'one of the largest and most scrupulous yet devoted to a New Zealand artist', and the project was acknowledged for its impeccable production and research.[6]

But there were hesitations. Throughout his life, Tony Fomison had poked fun at anything he thought was too pretentious, a little bit snobby, and he liked to think of himself as a working-class man. It's unlikely he would have warmed to the writing in the book, which was noticeably high-toned and academic, with references to French philosophers and the theory of poststructuralism. The essays were a product of the academic world in which they were written, circa 1990, when terms such as 'ethnologist' and 'anthropologist' came under intense scrutiny because of the ways these disciplines had been used (often unconsciously) to perpetuate the myth of the inferiority of certain ethnic groups and the superiority of white, mostly male perspectives. There was merit in this, because Fomison's deep engagement with Māori and Pacific cultures raised questions about whether it was ever possible to avoid another version of colonialism. The problem was, it all felt a bit jarring; as Justin Paton put it, 'post-structuralist theory feels about as right for Fomison as a pair of brand-new Reeboks'.[7]

It wasn't just the tone of the essays that was puzzling; it was also the absence of the gritty details of his life. The big moments had been included, such as the traditional Samoan tattoo he had received

in the late 1970s – a pe`a from the bottom of his knees to his mid torso. A sparrow of a man, he had subjected himself to months of gruelling pain. The book also canvassed his archaeological research and his documentation of centuries-old Māori rock drawings, a fascination that had begun in his teens and had continued as long as he was physically able to negotiate the sites. These were the high points, but there was little of the messy details of his life. As one reviewer put it: 'Here is the work, but where is the *life*?'; where was the 'jagged character' and the 'stroppy dissenter' who had made the art?[8]

The book seemed to be following what was a well trodden path in written accounts of New Zealand artists, which was that the life should be kept separate from the art. And yet, as art historian and critic Anthony Byrt pointed out, this approach created a dilemma. In a 2018 review of a book on artist Gordon Walters, Byrt proposed – somewhat provocatively – that 'New Zealand art history has a biography problem, a prudish formalism that bulldozes over the mess of ordinary lives then presents itself as a sophisticated truth.' Byrt insisted that 'we're more shaped by who we love and fuck and who we lose and hate and how our hearts are broken than by paintings we might have seen in a gallery in Europe or an art magazine'. The risk in focusing solely on the 'quiet refinement of an art work' is that we inadvertently 'throw a blanket over the fires that produced it'.[9]

That's what led to this biography: I wanted to look at the paintings and drawings, but I also wanted to know the man who made them. The art world with its officials and administrators can be intimidating if you're not an accepted part of it, and during some of my initial forays I sometimes felt as if the only way I could get close to the art was by first bowing before the high priests. It was never made as explicit as this – more common was the advice that a book on Fomison would have to be solely about his art; that his life was of little interest, and that who he was as a person would shed no light on his paintings. In part, I agreed. I had no interest in trying to propose some kind of a one-to-one correspondence between events in Fomison's life and the images he created. And I knew there were myths about Fomison that had circulated during his life and after his death, and that these may have distracted in some way from what he had created.

And yet the further I delved into his life and art, the more obvious it became that the two could not be separated. This was made strikingly clear when I talked to people who had known him well. It was like this with Jacqueline Fahey, who is now in her nineties and still painting.

One of her mentors, Rita Angus, had taught her that being a painter was a way of life, and slowly, over the years, Jacqueline had realised its truth – 'Fly solo, fly solo Jacquie!' was how another of her guides had put it. Jacqueline had become a close friend of Tony and, in the last year of his life, when he was frail and unwell, she'd dropped off videos for him to watch at his home on Williamson Ave. Before I finished talking to her, drinking wine at her dining-room table in a purple house also on Williamson Ave, she wanted to make sure I understood that Tony's life and art *must* be considered together: 'You can't, as some people imagine, separate your work from your lifestyle. And that's why you can't be too acceptable as a person. You have to protect your integrity.'[10]

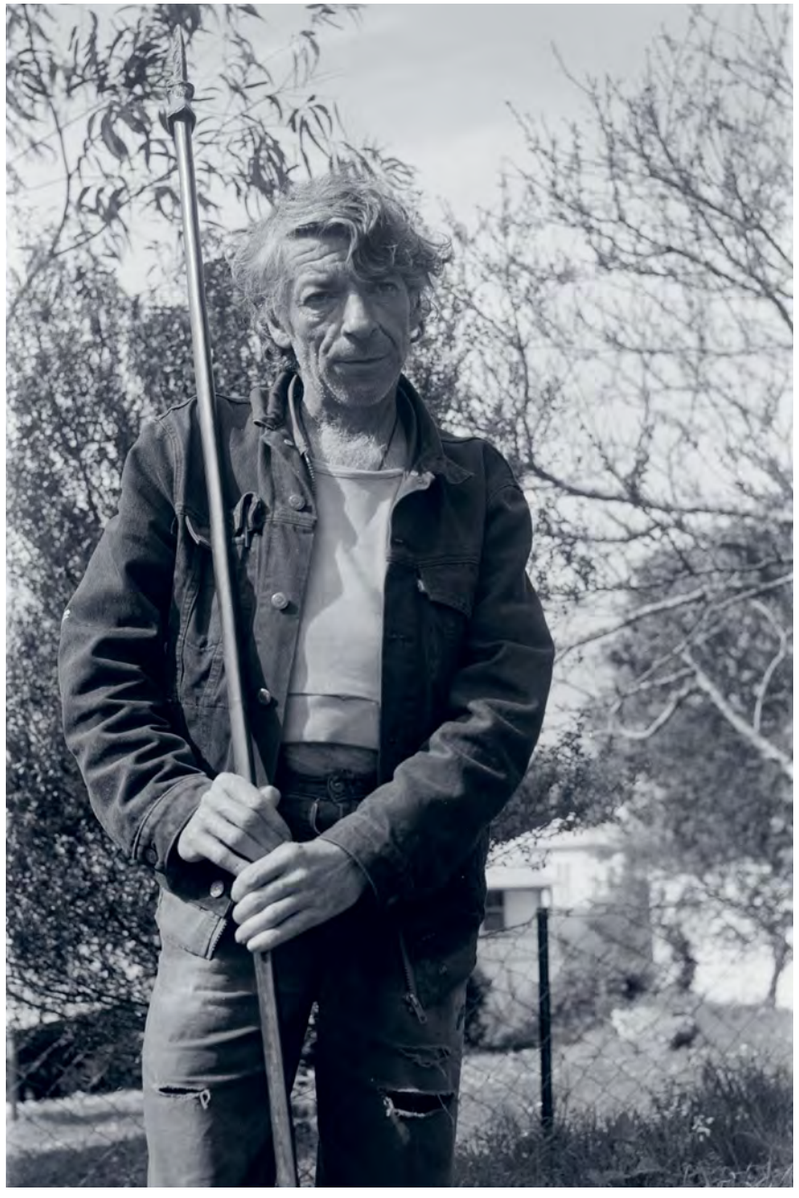
People who were part of Tony's 'inner circle' were equally convinced of the inseparability of his life and art. Paul Rossiter was one.[11] During our first telephone call he was encouraging of what I was doing and wanted to hear more. But there were traces of caution. 'Did you know Tony, did you?' he asked. I said that I didn't. I am sure he already knew this, but we were establishing credentials. 'Tony and I were very close,' he told me. Paul was making sure I knew my role, which was to be ushered into the 'inner circle', to listen and record and then get it all down on paper, word for word – the story of the life and the art.

Paul introduced me to the 'circle' via a 'session' at his house. Richard McWhannell was there – another artist who had experienced the ups and downs of Tony's friendship. We drank bottles of wine that first night, and as the evening went on Paul lurched between sentimentalism and something verging on anger. 'So what's your *session* with Tony?' His words were slurred but forceful: 'Why do you want to write about him?' I said that I liked Tony's art, and that I was surprised so little had been written about his life. Paul seemed satisfied.

As the months – and then the years – progressed, I felt I was drawing a little closer to Tony. But progress was slow, and I think this was deliberate on Paul's part. Typically, he would share a detail he'd not mentioned before, and I sensed that he was about to divulge some new and important insight, and then he'd pull back and go quiet, and check my reaction. He insisted that whatever I did must be *thorough*. He said this to me a number of times, reiterating that it was what Tony would have wanted. And then he said something which has stayed with me, and which I have returned to often as I tried to piece together and make sense of the network of friends and alliances that Tony was a part of. Paul paused, and then said, 'I tell you, if you come into our circle, *good luck*.' I was caught off-guard, because although it was the sort of thing two people might say to each other over a drink, he had not meant it in a frivolous way. I laughed, uncertain of what to say next. And then, as if to make sure I had got the point, he said, 'Seriously. *Seriously*. Okay?'

Tony could be a difficult man to get close to – that seemed to be part of what Paul was hinting at. But it was also an oblique reference to how powerful – unsettling even – the art could become. Only if you looked close enough, though, if you really spent time with the paintings, and if you knew about the life that had made them. During one of our final meetings Paul told me that he thought Tony was the greatest painter we had ever produced: 'Bar none. Okay? Bar none. He makes room at the back of your head.'

'The back of the head' was a Jungian term, and the man who came up with it – Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung – had a profound influence on Tony's thought and art. It gave him a new way to think about the world, about history, about dreams and about art. Now, he would gather fragments from his past. As a boy, Tony had drawn maps and diagrams and medieval battle scenes. He'd read fairy tales, and been enchanted by local sites of Māori history. As a young man he was a vagrant on the streets of Paris, was twice imprisoned, spent time in a mental hospital, battled destructive addictions, and experienced unrequited love and loneliness. All of this would become the underworld of his art, the subterranean realm where he could dwell so as to create work that expressed something of the human condition. But it was always far wider than just his own story. Endlessly curious about Pacific and Māori history and art, and enchanted by European Renaissance art, he wanted to find a new visual language for what it meant to live in the Pacific; he wanted to make room at the back of our heads.



Tony at Williamson Avenue, November 1989. Photograph by Shirley Grace.

Tony at Williamson Avenue, November 1989. Photograph by Shirley Grace.