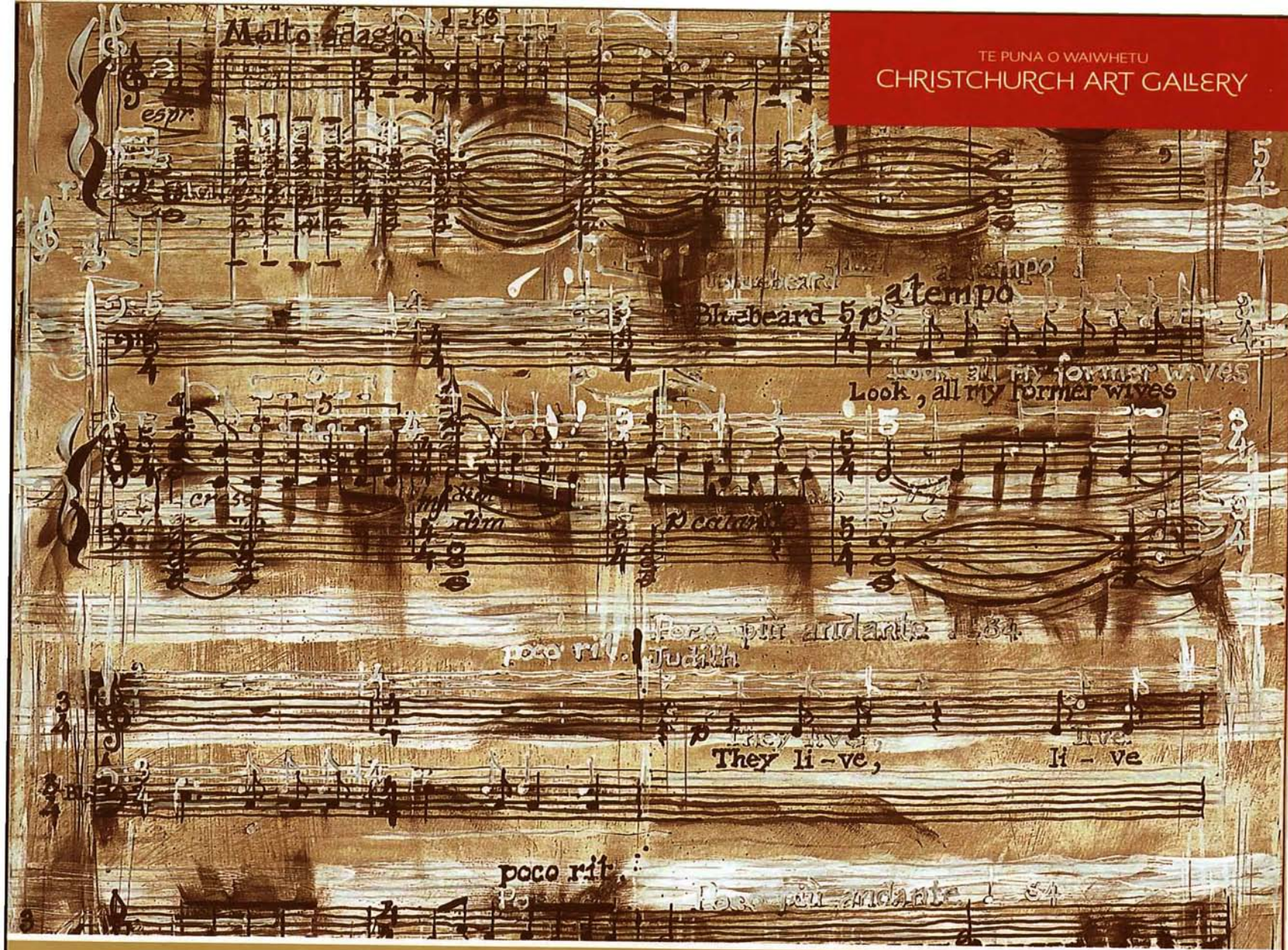


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CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY



BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

PAINTINGS BY NIGEL BUXTON

8 AUGUST – 19 OCTOBER 2003
WILLIAM A. SUTTON GALLERY

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Nigel Buxton's set of paintings (2000–01) was inspired by Bartok's 1918 opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, a musical retelling of the macabre fairy tale by Charles Perrault, published in 1697. In the operatic version, Duke Bluebeard has brought his new wife Judith to his gloomy windowless castle where she sees seven great locked doors. Curious about the prohibited areas, she demands access. Bluebeard reluctantly gives her the keys and, chamber by chamber, his secrets are laid open.

The opera, written in dark times about dark matters, evokes an eerie contemporary resonance and it is this that Buxton conveys in his paintings, which are as much a collective comment on our own 21st-century disquiet as on the music that inspired them.

The Bluebeard story – a passionate young woman struggling to fully understand her charismatic but sinister older husband – can be interpreted as symbolising a couple's struggles for intimacy. Like Bartok, Buxton portrays this striving in an open-ended, sometimes ambiguous,

sometimes ironic style, inviting the viewer to see what Judith sees through the seven doors. 'That's how it's depicted in the opera, so my interpretation is through her eyes; it's her response that we're responding to.'

Rather than offering a definitive literal interpretation, Buxton presents the viewer with 'veils of emotion, veils of meaning... The colour is stipulated throughout the stage instructions and I stuck closely to those. The distribution and combinations of colours emanate emotions I want to impart to the viewer.'

Opposite – *Torture Chamber* (detail), 2000–2001

Cover – *Chamber of the Former Wives* (detail), 2000–2001

Ours upon the stage of time,
A story introduced in rhyme,
The tale is old, the moral new,
Even the players could be you.

One's watching me, I'm watching you,
But which is which and who is who?
Consider, safely in your heads,
Is the theatre here or in your heads?

In the theatre, you pass a man
Whom you would never meet again,
In wars, outside the blood runs red,
But in the theatre far more deadly.

One's watching me, I'm watching you,
But which is which and who is who?
It starts we cannot tell,
But we do know the ending well.

The curtain starts, the play begins,
But which of us loses, and which one wins?
Is it tears or is it laughter?
Do you live happily ever after?

Prologue

*The tale begins and we must greet it;
One by one we all repeat it...*

Prologue, *Bluebeard's Castle*

'Prologue' is an introductory black painting. The darkness represents the obscurity in the story and the Roman numerals represent the seven doors. According to Buxton, 'Just as the prologue is a preparation for the opera's audience, so is this a preparation for the viewer of these paintings.'

The prologue acts as a voyeuristic teaser to the forbidden secrets of the seven chambers. 'There's something fundamental about it. It's something a child does, peeping through doors into an area where you aren't allowed to go, physically and emotionally.'

Torture Chamber

*The keyholes are like little wounds
where all the blood seeped out.*

Yehuda Amichai, 'I Walked Past a House Where I Lived Once'

This blood-red painting clearly evokes pure pain, yet it proceeds from an artistic conception that is more lateral than literal: 'It's about self-knowledge... It's an aspect of Bluebeard's character, an aspect of his past and present.'

Buxton describes the music at this point as 'quite strident, almost putting one in mind of the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*'.

In picturing this chamber, the artist offers the viewer 'no physical idea of a room, and that's deliberate. There's so much structure in the music, all the lines and bars provide a lot of architecture on which to hang that nebulous notion of 'torture chamber'.'

The richness of the veils of various reds, splatters and drips has a lustrous beauty that narrowly avoids undermining the gruesome subject matter. Buxton explains that even though

the music is 'strident, it is still beautiful'. He aimed to create a tension between beauty of expression and horror of content.

Armoury

*Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood...*

Wilfred Owen, 'Arms and the Boy'

For Buxton, the duke's grim armoury, full of blood-stained weapons, 'shows us Bluebeard's worldly power'. Again the opera's directions provided the artist with this painting's colour: 'The aperture is of a yellowish red colour, sombre and disturbing.'

In order to differentiate the second red doorway from the first, Buxton uses silver lines as a compositional device to counterbalance the vertical lines of sheet music. On close examination, the work reveals red verticals that echo the silver 'cuts', like a chord repeated in a different key. In the same way, Judith learns more about her husband's character the more closely she looks into each chamber.

Treasure Chamber

*There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest.
For I did dream of money-bags to-night.*

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Golden light was the starting point for this work. 'The stage directions indicate a beam of golden light emanating from the open door. I happened to have some reproductions of Rembrandt landscapes with a strange other-worldly golden, almost stormy light, so I used those as a template for colouration... There's a wisp of carmine or alizarin that creeps in, technically required as a foil to the yellow.'

The blood motif, an idiosyncratic sound that appears throughout the opera, is represented by a line of red dots. Buxton comments: 'It's



purely pictorial as a division. Those visual things happen quite naturally. It balances the golden dots on the top left and helps bind the image to the picture plane.'

The gold dots resemble coins – 'I was getting literal, wasn't I?' Buxton confesses. Nonetheless, he maintains that he was abstracting from the musical notes. 'Music can look like the thing it's depicting. Triangles are playing here, a tinkling metallic sound which is supposed to depict clinking coins... Bartok was clearly attempting through sound to visualise what is in the room, so I reinterpreted these sounds pictorially – the golden dots represent tinkling and falling coins, which is how it sounds in the music.'

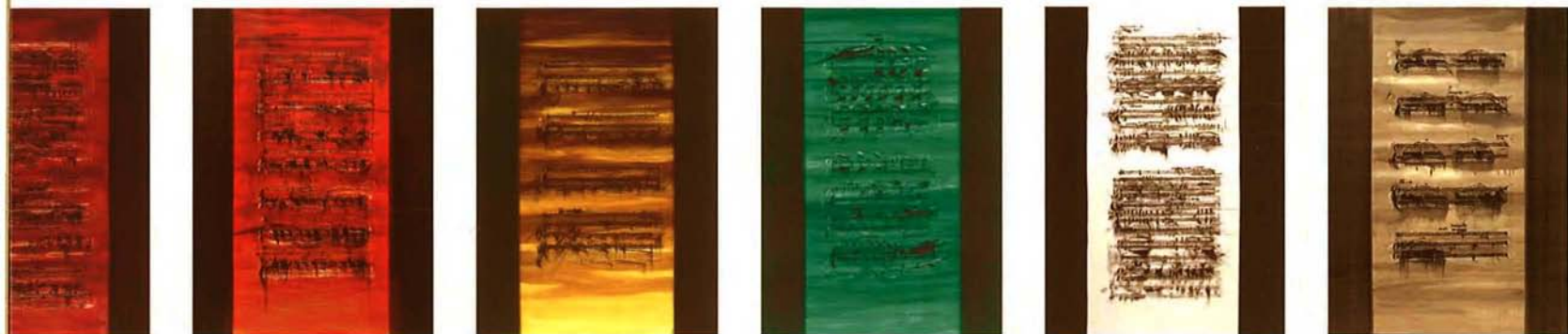
Garden

*There's a certain slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –*

Emily Dickinson, 'There's a certain Slant of light'

When the fourth door opens in the opera, serene music reflecting Judith's relief at the sight of 'lovely flowers' accompanies a blue-green light pouring out. Then, noticing bloodstains on soil and rose petals, Judith sings: 'Who has bled to feed your garden?'

A band of darker blue-green traverses the image. Buxton calls it 'Judith's shadow of



doubt. You get that from her voice as she sings... I used abstract washes of colour and the first few bars of the music when the door opens to depict the idea of a garden.'

Kingdom

*... Only roofs and snow, and but
For roofs and snow – no one at all...*

Boris Pasternak, 'No one will be in the house...'

The light from the fifth door is dazzling when the vast kingdom of Duke Bluebeard is displayed to Judith. As each door opens, a new stream of coloured light illuminates the castle's central hall and now the brilliant lights combine in an explosion of incandescence. But, at the zenith of Judith's initiatory journey, Buxton's painting, 'Kingdom', sabotages the viewer's expectations with an anticlimax at what should be the most highly coloured dramatic moment in the series.

Proud Bluebeard surveys the glittering panorama of his sweeping provinces:

*Silken meadows, velvet forests,
tranquil streams of winding silver.
Lofty mountains blue and hazy!*

Buxton eschews a visual equivalent, instead offering ambiguity: is this truly heaven on earth or does the glory of the domains mask an abyss? Here, the viewer is not invited to look into a chamber, but out at a vista as in 'Garden'. Yet

surprisingly, there are no dissolving distances and no chance for the viewer to associate the play of light over imagery with a Rembrandt landscape. There are no lucent coloured veils like transparent chiffon silks over the body of the music here. The viewer is confronted with naked notation floating still on the surface, the blankness providing an eloquent irony.

Lake of Tears

Take her from me this message full of tears...

Sextus Propertius, 'Good Hope of Accord'

Buxton suggests this dramatic low point in the opera provides a nexus between the audience and the antagonist: 'We view Bluebeard in a different light because of this door, we view him as human, heir to all the usual mishaps and disappointments of being human. He might be powerful and rich, but he's clearly been cruel and he's suffering for that.' Again there is the intimation of moral bankruptcy, the tears a manifestation of Bluebeard's sorrow at the hollowness of his life.

'In the opera, the music is tranquil, almost slightly spooky. In terms of content, suddenly we're shown Bluebeard's bitter self-knowledge and sense of despair. This door hides all the tears he's shed over his past misdeeds... The stage dims, the previous doors swing shut and all at

once the Gothic hall reverts to gloom – coming out of this door is a strange silvery white light.'

The metallic paint Buxton used to visualise the unearthly reflective light is called 'steel'. It's not silver, grey nor pewter – that's deliberate. Nothing's left to chance. The drips are conscious, they're weeping; it's a lake of tears.'

Steel as a colour recalls the 'cuts' of the 'Armoury' painting, whereas silver or grey might evoke more benign imagery of moonlight or clouds. Steel suggests weaponry and inflicted pain, encompassing the notion that the lake contains the tears of others, all those Bluebeard has wounded, as well as his own. The light in the painting is that of an eclipse, dull and chill.

Chamber of the Former Wives

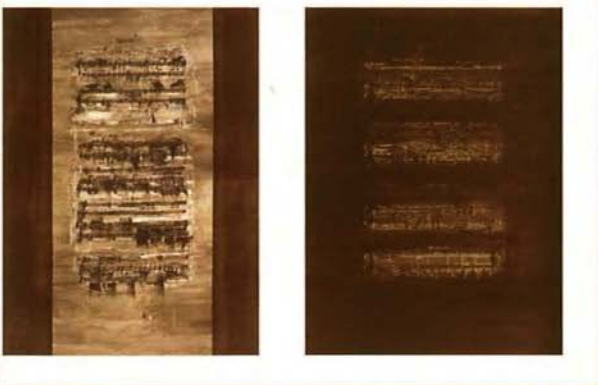
*Ah, ye feminine souls, so loving and so exacting,
Since we cannot escape, must we even submit
to deceive you?*

*Since so cruel is truth, sincerity shocks and
revolts you...*

Arthur Clough, 'Amours de Voyage'

Demanding the truth, Judith unlocks the seventh door. As she does so, the fifth and sixth doors close and the seventh gives out a beam of silvery moonlight.

From this doorway come Bluebeard's former wives. As Buxton explains, 'Rather like



'Treasure Chamber', there are crowns, jewels and ermine robes, in this case decked on the wives, so some of the notes are silver as a reference to the riches.'

In shock and horror, Judith sings, 'They live! They live!' Deaf to her appeals, Bluebeard decks Judith in a diamond crown, cloak and jewels. Weighed down by her adornments, she walks out with the other wives through the seventh door that swings shut behind them.

End

He's sick-dead

he's

*a godforsaken curio
without
any breath in it...*

*Love's beaten. He
beat it...*

William Carlos Williams, 'Death'

The final painting depicts the stage retreating into shadows to the final bars of the opera and Bluebeard's closing words, 'Henceforth all shall be darkness, darkness, darkness'. According to Buxton, 'The music fades, almost pulses. *Perdendosi* is an orchestral instruction for the sound to die away and be lost.'

The notes are painted in fine ghostly white lines as if the hovering bars are being sucked

backwards into blackness. Whereas the preceding sheet music excerpts – black notes on a lighter ground – advance towards the viewer, here Buxton has created a pictorial vortex around the white musical notes, a black hole into which they are disappearing, the visual obverse of 'Kingdom'.

'There's a going back into darkness where there's seemingly going to be nothing. This is from Bluebeard's point of view; this is the only painting about him. Judith's no longer there in the drama.' The painting portrays 'the death of the possibility of love. The opera was written during World War One and what that meant to Europe was a loss of happiness. That must have informed the way the librettist wrote the opera, the way Bartok interpreted it.'

Buxton purposefully delivers no resolution in this painting, despite its dark beauty. 'It's the beauty element that we live for. In the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the soldier reaches out to touch the butterfly on the barbed wire and at the moment he reveals himself he gets shot. It's that moment of reaching out for beauty and that beauty meaning the end.'

In reaching for Judith's beauty, love and virtue, Bluebeard must reveal himself, his cruel bloody materialistic nature, bringing about his own annihilation. Buxton agrees: 'Yes, and the music used to depict that in the opera is beautiful.'

Images from left to right

Prologue, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

Torture Chamber, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Private Collection, Christchurch

Armoury, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Private Collection, Christchurch

Treasure Chamber, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

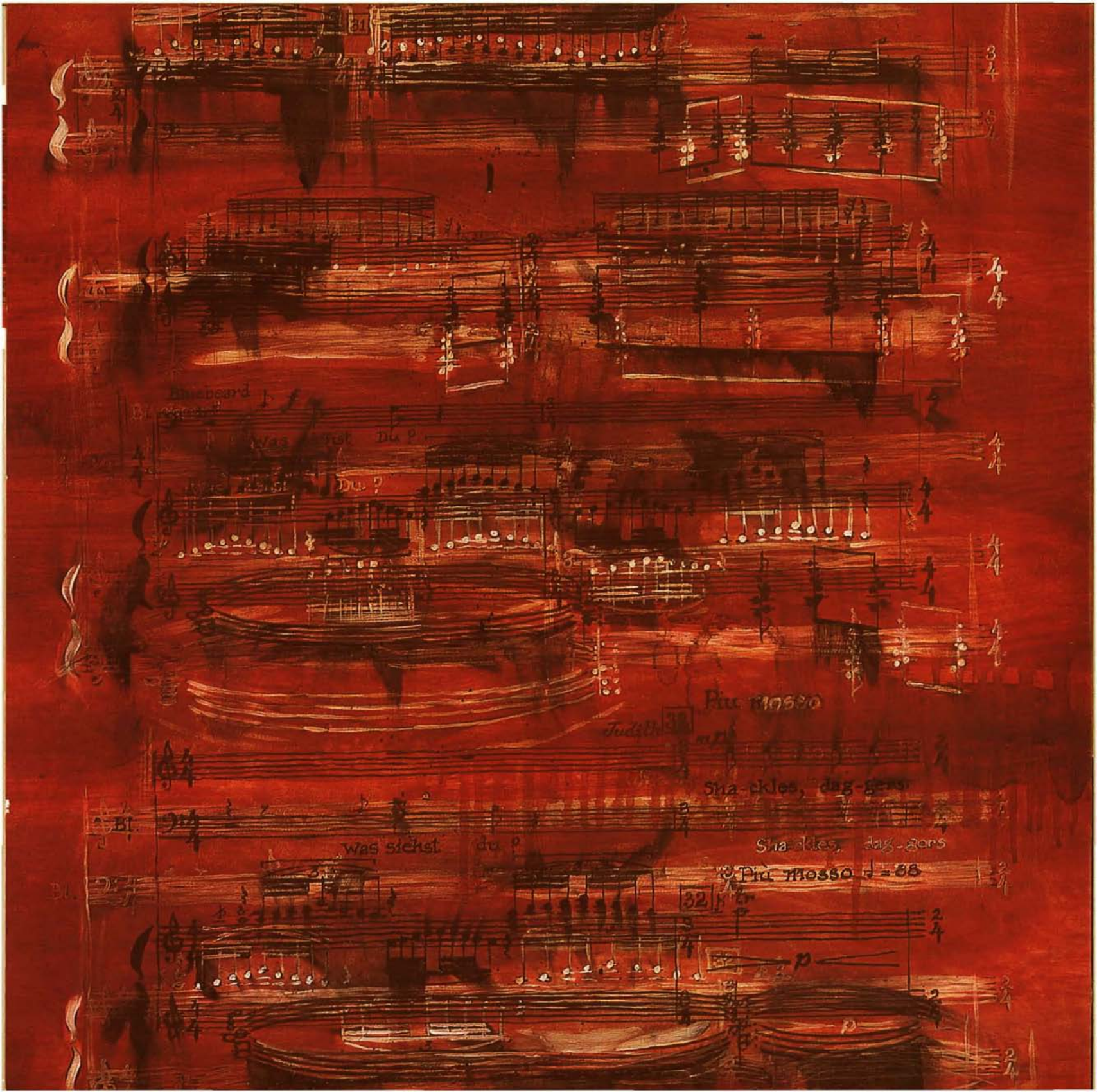
Garden, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

Kingdom, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

Lake of Tears, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

Chamber of the Former Wives, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist

End, 2000-2001
Oil on gesso
Collection of the artist



Barbeard

Was siehst du?

Was siehst du?

Piu mosso

Judith

Siehst du, das Gese

Was siehst du?

Siehst du, das Gese

Piu mosso - 88

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NIGEL BUXTON

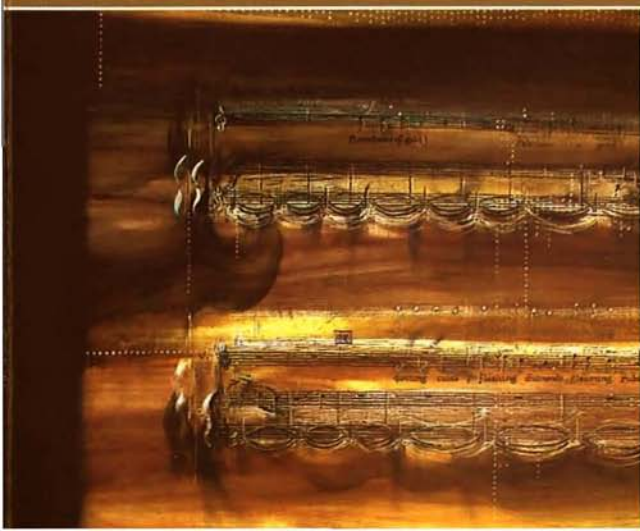
Nigel Buxton has worked in a variety of jobs – from driving taxis in Sydney to auctioneer's assistant at Sotheby's and appraising and

valuing Old Master drawings at Christie's in London. During 1989 and 1990 he taught painting and drawing at the Ilam School of Art, University of Canterbury, and from 1993 to 1997 was Director of the CSA Gallery, overseeing its transformation into the Centre of Contemporary Art. In 1995 he was awarded first prize in the Cranleigh Barton Drawing Award and in the same year was a finalist in the Wallace Art Award.

Since graduating from art school in 1980, Buxton has exhibited regularly, developing a style of picturing that fuses painting and drawing to create a subtle evocation of space. The bulk of his work until 1997 dealt with still life and explored the way objects activate the space around them. These works expressed a perception of a contained actual environment. From 1997 Buxton's interest in music has presided as his main subject, and he has used the musical scores of operas as the starting point for imaginative works that deal with the dramas and emotive themes the composers present. Not being concrete or fixed in time, the musical space explored is ephemeral and conceptual.

Nigel Buxton lives and works in Christchurch.

Treasure Chamber (detail), 2000-2001



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CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY TE PUNA O WAIWHETU

Worcester Boulevard, PO Box 2626,
Christchurch, New Zealand
Telephone: 64 3 941 7300
Facsimile: 64 3 941 7301

Email: info@christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

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