



# *Richard Tomkins*



Robert McDougall Art Gallery  
Christchurch Botanical Gardens  
Christchurch

June - July 1987

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## Foreword

Riduan Tomkins, a distinguished artist with a record of major exhibitions in England, Europe, Canada and the United States, has been living in Christchurch for over a year, teaching at the University of Canterbury School of Fine arts and painting. This exhibition of his recent images introduces Tomkins' work to the public and the community of artists in Christchurch. It is one of the responsibilities of the public art gallery to present exhibitions which bring fresh impulses to the region and it is in this spirit that the gallery is mounting this presentation.

John Coley



### Riduan Tomkins

Riduan Tomkins was born in Dorset, England in 1941. He was educated at the Poole School of Art, Dorset; the West of England College of Art; the Wimbledon School of Art (National Diploma in Design); and the Royal College of Art, London (M.A.). He has taught painting in England, the United States and Canada, and from 1983 to 1985 was an instructor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He is currently teaching painting at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

Tomkins' work is included in numerous public and private collections in North America and Europe, including the collections of Paul Mellon; J. Walter Thompson, London; the Chase Manhattan Bank, New York; the Estate of Betty Parsons; Margret Walker; Angela Flowers; and the Edward Albee Foundation.

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1972 The Greenwich Theatre Gallery, London
- 1974 Whitechapel Gallery, London
- 1977 Sable Castelli Gallery, Toronto
- Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin
- Angela Flowers Gallery, London
- Betty Parsons Gallery, New York
- 1979 Whitechapel Gallery, London
- 1980 Dart Gallery, Chicago
- 1983 Theo Waddington Inc., Montreal
- 1985 Sable Castelli Gallery, Toronto
- Ruth Siegal Gallery, New York
- 1987 Arts Gallery, Auckland

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1979 Europa, Stuttgart, Germany
- 1980 Nuova Imagine, Milan, Italy
- 1982 The Discernible Image, Burlington, Ontario
- 1983 Critic's Choice, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
- 1984 Face to Face: The Figure and Figuration, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto
- Four Painters, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax
- An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, New York

### Paintings by Riduan Tomkins

1	Running pointers	52 x 52 inches
2	Red blue, blue red	48 x 48 inches
3	Yellow red, red yellow	48 x 48 inches
4	Red green, green red	48 x 48 inches
5	Rural ritual	52 x 52 inches
6	Trapeze	52 x 52 inches
7	Different sides	48 x 48 inches
8	Trapeze artist	48 x 48 inches
9	Trapeze artist with figures	48 x 48 inches
10	Running down	52 x 52 inches

## Riduans Tomkins

On first encounter, Riduan Tomkins' paintings present themselves as accessible, immediate and sensual objects which seem to stand squarely in the familiar territory of the Modernist tradition and in sharp contrast to the strident and confrontational stuff of which so much recent work is made. Indeed, given the current trends in artistic production we may even feel something akin to relief at the prospect of dealing with work which is familiar and which, for once, offers the promise of giving pleasure to our senses. But, as one critic of Tomkins' work has noted, it has a "slippery feel;" there is more to it than is evident on first sight and much more to seeing it than meets the unprepared eye.

To regard Tomkins' paintings as part of the Modernist tradition is, first, to see them not simply as things in themselves but as elements in a sequence of pictorial events which itself takes on meaning as part of the peculiarly Modernist search for what has been called "pictorial essence" — a search characterised by a persistent reduction of painting to its "essential" features. There must be some doubt about the existence of essences, pictorial or otherwise, nonetheless, Tomkins' paintings can be explained as elements in his personal search for some such thing and there is no question but that they are all founded upon some "essential" pictorial device which holds them together and, more importantly, in place with other works in what amounts to a regenerative continuum of pictorial propositions. To sense the "essentiality" and continuity of Tomkins' work is to feel comfortable with it and, as is the case with all Modernist work, to have access, at least at a rudimentary level, to its meaning.

The immediacy and sensuality of Tomkins' paintings arises from the most sophisticated of Modernist practice which is revealed in its most impressive form when the underlying structure of a work (its grammar) becomes so much part of its superstructure (its image) that the two appear to have come together all-at-once. The result is a dazzling work of startling freshness, which is entirely without artifice or any sense of fabrication. At this level, and seen in purely Modernist terms, Tomkins' work is as seductive and persuasive as anything we have yet seen in New Zealand. But we sense that it goes deeper than that, and, having said that we might be tempted to look into his use of figuration as a possible locus of some deeper layer of meaning, an idea which, on the face of it, seems to have merit.

Figuration itself is not inconsistent with the Modernist tradition since, even the most abstract of Modernist work makes references to things outside itself, yet, of all the features in Tomkins' work, the distinctive way in which he uses figuration seems to set it apart from the rest.

Giacometti-like (although informed by Picasso and Matisse) troupes of figures edge around the paintings always playing some formal role but never solely in virtue of their form, scale, colour or location. Typically they point, both literally and figuratively, to formal elements in the works, including, curiously enough, each other — but they also fly on trapezes, hold safety nets, dance and strike poses. None of the figures, however, are merely incidental to formal issues and although interdependent with them they have, as well, a life of their own. This invites interpretation, at least to the extent that we find ourselves reflecting on how and why the figures appear to us as they do — like mute vandevillians whose master, Tomkins, having rendered them onto some flattened tragicomic tableau, orchestrates their participation in a frozen theatrical tragi-comic tableau. However, we cannot know the purpose of such entertainments beyond their capacity to intrigue and amuse us. Moreover if we press the point and try searching for deeper meaning here we risk, at best, stepping into the impenetrable jungle of psychoanalytic interpretation and, almost certainly, we will miss the point altogether.

It may be, of course, that to see Tomkins' work as Modernist is a mistake and if that is so we would have to look for its meaning in some other tradition or, as has been suggested by a sympathetic critic, in the non-tradition of Post Modernism. If one is looking for a way out of a Modernist interpretation of his work, Tomkins clearly offers in his figures a promising starting point. But however such an interpretation might end up, it will have to deal with the fact that his work stands among the most eloquent testimonies to the spirit of Modernism we could reasonably expect to find. Equally clearly it is not enough simply to say of the work that it stands in the Modernist tradition. its point can be revealed more clearly than that, especially if we were to ask where that point is located rather than what it is.

It has already been said that Modernist paintings take on meaning as elements in a sequence of pictorial events which characterises the search for "essence". It is not important to know what this essence consists in since, even if we could be sure of its existence it is doubtful that any artist would want to uncover it, once and for all. The truth is that the point of all Modernist work is the search itself — the odyssey — and in that search it is not individual works which carry meanings. Rather, they function as points of discovery along the path of the search and it is the path, mapped by the relationships between works, in which meaning is embedded.

It follows from this that a small exhibition of this kind can tell us little about the path Tomkins has taken and, thus, it can offer little insight into the point of his work. It also raises the question of where, in the Modernist enterprise, can we find what we might reasonably call "the work of art". Such a question must, however, be left for future investigation because we are still faced with the problem of how to get at the meaning of Tomkins' work when the stuff of which that meaning is made is not there for us to see. The answer, of course, is that we must wait until it is; until we have seen enough of his work to thread our knowledge of its path into our experience of it. In the meantime we must be content with seeing only what meets the eye — the compensations of which, for the moment at least, are fair reward.

Ted Bracey  
University of Canterbury, April 1987