

*Students Room
please return to desk*

"BILL"

WILLIAM

ALEXANDER

SUTTON

RETROSPECTIVE

1917-1971

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W. A. SUTTON
RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
1917-1971

THE DOWSE ART GALLERY, LOWER HUTT.
28 NOVEMBER 1972 UNTIL 11 FEBRUARY, 1973



W. A. Sutton in front of "Homage to Frances Hodgkins", painted in 1949 as the artist's individual protest over "The Pleasure Garden" controversy. This work, which showed some of the Christchurch champions of the artist and this work, no longer exists.

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I 1917-1948

WILLIAM ALEXANDER SUTTON is a Christchurch painter. He was born there in 1917, and brought up in a wonderful old garden with huge fruit trees planted by his grandfather—peaches, mulberries, pears, apples, cherries, plums, a great wistaria and flowers everywhere. His father was an engineer and mechanic, and a very good one, and the house was full of books and ingenious devices of his father's contrivance. His mother encouraged him to read, and at an early age he was launched into her main enthusiasms, Dickens and Thackeray. Both parents, while without any specific application to the visual arts, nevertheless gave him every support and encouragement to follow his bent—a difficult thing in the depression years. As a child he was introduced to the elements of astronomy by his grandfather, who had a very handsome telescope, and to the delights of minutiae by an uncle who had an equally splendid microscope. Familiarity with the distant sweep, and the close-up scrutiny were well implanted in him before the age of twelve. Both sides of the family, he later remarked "were stiff with school teachers", and it would have surprised no one if he had accepted a teaching post in his later life. He became, after all, Dux of Sydenham School at a time when academic competition was promoted at the primary level, and a former teacher at Christchurch Boys' High School, A. N. B. McAloon, later commented that "Bill was a bright fellow".

At High School, as some other options failed to keep his interest, art by default as well as by choice, became his dominating influence. Thus, for instance, when mathematics increasingly failed to excite him, Euclidean geometry with its demonstration of the shapes of areas and objects, their proportions and relationships to each other, continued to hold his attention.

Aged 13, Bill Sutton started attending Saturday morning classes at the Art School. A steep-gabled gothic building on Rolleston Avenue housed the art school, then a technical institution, although already associated with Canterbury University College for the purpose of awarding the Diploma in Fine Arts. It was not to become the Department of Fine Arts in the University until 1950. Here Ivy Fife taught

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him to handle oil paint in a vigorous and expressive way. Two years later, during 1932 and 1933, he enrolled at evening classes under one of the tutors, Colin S. Lovell-Smith. "A very able and sympathetic man," Bill later remarked. "He taught from the antique, but used it as a method of investigating various philosophies and techniques in drawing. He also taught me the importance of using my mind and asking questions."

Later, with University Entrance and the Fine Arts Preliminary under his belt, young Sutton began his three year study towards his Diploma in Fine Arts in 1935. Like most students, Sutton came to his tertiary education to learn from the acknowledged and long-established masters, rather than to develop new sets of values. At Art School much of the training was in a romanticised version of impressionism. It was the product of an English and European tradition which combined something of Sickert with Whistler's rejection of the anecdotal subject. This approach was combined with a thorough grounding in perspective and anatomy. It was a tough school, with everything continually under expert scrutiny. Cecil F. Kelly taught still-life and landscape. He was a modest, retiring person, tremendously proud of his wife Elizabeth, who was a notable portrait painter. She had been awarded a CBE for her work in this field, as well as a silver medal from the Paris Salon. If Cecil was indisposed, Elizabeth took his classes. Her gentle criticisms and encouragement made her popular with the students. Kelly lived for painting and preached the doctrine that one must "look and see". Only when one had done both could a start be made to paint. This constant demand to note the outward character of natural objects, following the "plein-air" tradition of impressionist France, obliged Kelly's students to paint in all weathers, so that many conditions of light and atmosphere could be studied. "Painting up to our hocks in snow was part of it—the light, as Kelly pointed out, was very beautiful." As the weather varied, so students painted and re-painted their canvases.

Archibald F. Nicoll was very different, a bluff, good-natured person, with a simple and straightforward approach to painting. He was the life master, and taught Sutton to study tone values. He trained the eye to observe and the hand to record, and trained them thoroughly. One of his comments, if a student's portrait had gone astray, was, "That doesn't add up to a head, does it?" The organisation and relationship of tone values throughout the canvas was paramount, and never departed materially from observed phenomena. Richard Wallwork, Director of the Art School (1928-1945), was a draughtsman and teacher of composition. Trained at the Royal College of Art, his

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knowledge and expertise impressed Sutton. As a result he developed a style of drawing that had all the hallmarks of that college, if understood at the time in a slightly superficial way. However, Wallwork's teaching, which was concerned with the structure, organisation and function of people, things and paintings, added another dimension to the course. Evelyn Page, who was then on the staff, boldly showed that vigour and life could be got by the technique itself. "She did rumbustious stuff all over the place."

Nicoll, Wallwork and Kelly were the masters, and Sutton was an apt pupil. But it was the philosophy of Colin Lovell-Smith and other staff members, which showed Sutton that passing examinations was only one aspect of the business. He found Lovell-Smith a sympathetic teacher—concerned with the "why", rather than the "how" of painting. This was reinforced by the lecturer in sculpture, Francis A. Shurrock, whose perception and discussion was a feature of the school at that time. James A. Johnston, the lecturer in design, himself a painter of note, added his contribution, especially in his spirited drawing and his insistence on a high standard of technical accomplishment. It was this broad liberal approach that laid the subsequent basis for Sutton's later belief that all was not well with the kind of painting he had been taught and was then doing. Or rather, his own application of what he had been taught, was based on a good eye and a skilful hand, rather than an understanding of the subject matter itself.

As a student there were two artistic events in the year which interested him. The **Canterbury Society of Arts** continued as the strongest art society in the country, giving a regular place to the accepted and the acceptable. It was a little Royal Academy—the venue of the successful, with the unchallenged portraits and landscapes of the Kellys, Nicoll and Lovell-Smith, and an occasional heroic piece by Wallwork, all taking pride of place in the serried ranks that often hung three deep in the Durham Street Art Gallery.

From 1927 a number of rebellious artists, dissatisfied with the selection and hanging of the **CSA**, had established themselves as a band of youthful (and not so youthful) protesters, calling itself **The Group**. They objected to what they claimed was a portentous atmosphere within the **CSA**. **The Group** received and gave back a great deal of good-natured contempt from the establishment and the general public. It received support mainly from the intellectuals of Christchurch, but their verbal generosity did not usually extend to their cheque books, and **The Group** was not known for its booming sales. Nevertheless, it introduced a greater liveliness and a sympathy for experimentation into the Canterbury scene, its policy being to

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sniff out and exhibit the most advanced work being produced in New Zealand.

In 1932 the Robert McDougall Gallery was opened, but its then role as a preserver of the past, rather than a patron of the present, was soon to doom it to an artistic backwater—respectable and dull.

There was little else for young Sutton to see in Christchurch besides **The Group** and the **CSA**, although a notable event was the return of Sydney L. Thompson from France. His subsequent one-man show revealed a splendour of colour and a more immediate contact with impressionism than had hitherto been available. There were the rather dreary reproductions in the annual publication of the Royal Academy and of the London **Studio Magazine**. From 1931 Mrs Murray Fuller of Wellington toured a few exhibitions of contemporary British painters, and William Roberts' **The Chess Players** impressed him.

Everyone at Art School had heard of the Impressionists, but a proper understanding of their work was lacking. Cezanne was regarded as important, but few really knew why. Professor James Shelley, among his many activities, lectured in Art History, and he shed some light to Sutton and his contemporaries on some aspects of Post-impressionism that had hitherto been wrapped in mystery.

Sutton left the Art School in 1938, after a post-graduate year in which he indulged in some further interests—calligraphy, silvermaking, and more clay-modelling with Shurrock. He was now painting pictures in a romantically realistic manner that appeared to be a guarantee of success for the future. It justified his receiving the Diploma in Fine Arts and the College Medal in 1937. But whatever queries he might have had about the state of painting in Canterbury were swept aside by the advent of World War Two. After a period on the pick and shovel in the Engineers, Bill was drafted into designing and painting camouflage for military installations in the South Island. Then when Russell Clark was appointed War Artist in the Pacific, Bill took over his place on the staff of Army Education that produced **Korero** and **Current Affairs Bulletin**. Here he met Jim Bowie, Linwood Lipanovic, E. Mervyn Taylor and later Juliet Peter (who had been a fellow-student at Canterbury). These were working as illustrators for the Armed Services' periodicals.

Then came Peace, followed by a brief spell as a lecturer at Art School.

In 1947 Bill set sail for the United Kingdom to see and do as much as possible, and study for a while at the Anglo-French Art Centre, St John's Wood, London. "It was an interesting school, always lots of

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6. St. Giles, Cripplegate. 1947.



9. Dry September. 1949.

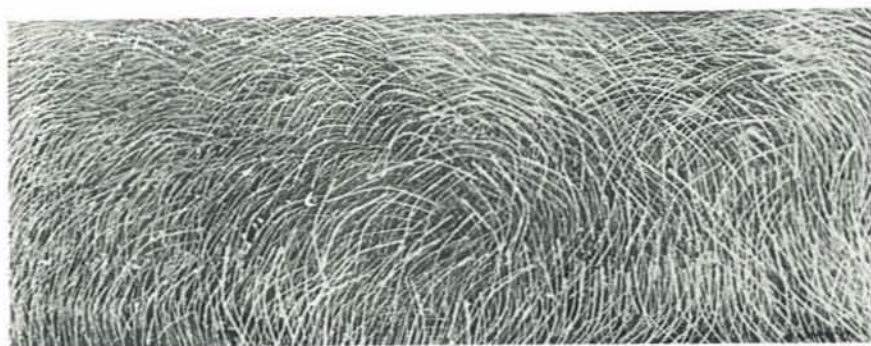


11. Bone and Shadow. 1949.

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16. Country Church. 1955.



27. Grasses No. 5. 1969.



31. Landscape Elements 5. 1970.

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activity; one joined, bought a book of tickets and peeled one off for each attendance. After a while I had had enough of studio work and went back only for special lectures, sometimes delivered in French, with an interpreter at hand. There were always fascinating exhibitions from Paris hung in the Gallery-Cafeteria."

But London was bursting at the seams with exhibitions, and these, together with a visit to the Continent, provided the stimulus he was needing, and led him out of the set pattern he had accepted at Art School. For six months he continued to paint as he had been taught. Then the cast was cracked—almost over-night. First it was Velasquez—"he did the thing I then wanted to do, but so immeasurably better". Then it was Manet's **A Bar at the Folies-Bergere**, on exhibition at the Tate. "Van Gogh showed me the joy of living, of the sun and of the earth with things growing out of it, and the expressive power of paint itself." Turner "hit me with a shovel. It (**Snowstorm at Sea**) was not a painting of a storm. My God, it was the storm itself." "Chagall was poetic, disturbing, and had psychological currents which puzzled me." Paul Nash was "a friendly painter, and made one feel at home, but didn't have the same conviction and intensity some other painters had; for example, after seeing a round dozen of large Picassos at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, I had to sit down. I never had such a buffeting." Finally came Cezanne at the Tate. "Here was really great painting. They were unbelievably lucid, and the apparent simplicity covered an immense re-casting of that painter's philosophy. Every part belonged to every other part, but in a new way."

It was Cezanne who broke Bill Sutton's Art School strait-jacketed training. He now saw that he wanted to break with superficial characteristics and begin to explore the underlying structure of objects. Not that Cezanne was a complete eye-opener. As far back as 1933, Rata Lovell-Smith's **Mt Cook Road** with its rugged simplicity and hinting of underlying structure had raised queries in his own mind as to whether the painting habit he had acquired was really what he wanted to do.

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II 1949-1971

Bill Sutton returned to New Zealand in 1949 to take up a full-time appointment at the Canterbury Art School. He landed at Auckland and travelled South by the Limited, seeing the country with new eyes—the late sun and bright light hitting little houses stuck to hillsides; hills and plains, and “mad little wooden churches which seemed to sum up best the spirit of a rural community of a couple of generations ago”.

On his arrival back in Christchurch, he noted that Rita Angus, especially in *Cass*, Colin McCahon, Doris Lusk and Leo Bensemann, had already begun to explore the basic structure of New Zealand landscape, had turned their backs on the superficial visual reporting of it, and were applying an acute analysis to their subject. In fact a new school of Canterbury painting was being born. He was depressed however by the affair of Frances Hodgkins painting *The Pleasure Garden*. This painting had been rejected, among others, by the Canterbury Society of Arts, and when it was offered to the McDougall Gallery by an anonymous donor, it was again rejected. Sutton, having seen several of Frances Hodgkins' later works in London, at first accepted the judgement of the Gallery's selectors that “it was not a good Fanny Hodgkins”. The picture was exhibited in Fisher's Colombo Street Gallery, and many crowded in to lampoon and snort at this example of modern art. Bill Sutton went in with the crowd and was pleasantly surprised. “It was a beautiful Fanny Hodgkins. I was highly diverted as I stood by the picture for an hour and listened to the comment of the crowd.” Encouraged by the incident, Sutton painted his *Homage to Frances Hodgkins*. Its propaganda overtones were obvious and its reception by critics mixed, and when he felt that it had served its purpose, Sutton destroyed the work.

But times were changing in the Canterbury Art Scene. Rita Angus and Colin McCahon had been exhibiting with *The Group*. In 1951 after a change in the Gallery's administration, *The Pleasure Garden* was accepted. The CSA committee began to fall to younger people who began to champion the work of younger artists. The Art School was beginning to be more venturesome.

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In visiting his old sketching grounds, Sutton now saw a completely new potential in each thing he looked at. The scenery, while still as splendid as ever, was of little interest as subject matter for paintings—in fact it now had nothing to do with painting. The structure of a boulder or the angle of a shingle-slide were now more important than the sparkle of sunshine on distant snow. Back in the studio, chairs, old newspapers, empty bottles, clothes hung on the back of the door developed a new splendour.

Dry September, Bone and Shadow, Feather Stoles for Sale, Cabbage Tree Blossom and Nor'wester in the Cemetery, are among the works produced at this period.

The 1930's and 1940's were marked by a conscious search for a national identity. This was predominantly a literary movement, as writers looked for the specific New Zealand novel, poem, image or idea. Some artists followed in this search for a national identity, and it has been claimed that Eric Lee-Johnson and Mervyn Taylor with their insistence on recognisable elements from within New Zealand landscape were doing for painting what Denis Glover, Allen Curnow and Charles Brasch had done for poetry. Sutton has been described as following in this self-conscious search for a New Zealand art. Yet if critics profess to see this in his work of the fifties, the artist denies that it was deliberate. "I painted the things I liked," he said in 1972, "and had no desire to create or recognise national totems. Literary people suggested that I was a painter of national characteristics. But if they recognised such in my work, then we appear to have met and joined issue in our different means of expression unknowingly."

If his landscape painting on his return from the United Kingdom showed greater boldness and concern for underlying rhythms, his portraiture by its very nature and requirements remained more purely objective in outlook. The freest works are generally those spontaneously painted for friends or from sitters of his own choice. His work is scrupulously drawn, but "I never get rid of an inner tension when I paint a portrait. Sometimes after five hours of concentration at the easel I am whacked." The synthesis of these two outlooks in painting is a problem he freely admits should be resolved if possible. "On rare occasions a total identification of oneself with the sitter occurs and can be maintained for up to fifteen or twenty minutes. The painting then seems to do itself, and satisfactory work usually ensues." He has, during recent years, produced upwards of thirty commissioned portraits.

Landscape moved through several periods on his return. First came the Country Church series, led off by the **Nor'wester in**

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the Cemetery 1950, which was inspired by the mortuary chapel in the Barbadoes Street Cemetery in Christchurch, and came to a close with "Country Church, Governor's Bay, 1962.

The Grass Series began in 1960 with *Cemetery for Sheep*. Visits to friends, Peter and Connie Tennant on Mt Pleasant, and walks with them through waist-high cocksfoot led him, via the work of Mark Tobey, from landscape to texture. First came grass landscapes, sometimes including "Spaniards", lying beneath high horizons. Then the sky was removed and the work took on rhythmic patterns. The series finished in 1970.

The Composition Series begun in 1960, also drew its conception from *Cemetery for Sheep*. From the lichens and boulders which can be clearly seen in this work, emerged a study of texture for texture's sake.

In 1967 he began work on *The Four Seasons* series. Leaving the minutiae of landscape behind, Sutton returned to panoramic views of the Port Hills during the varying changes of the year, and bathed them in a hush that owed much to his admiration for Piero della Francesca.

Parallel with this series came that of the *Landscape Elements* which like *The Four Seasons* is another timeless evocation of the landscape, bathed in prehistoric stillness. Here the hills and plains are "dappled like brindled cows", reflecting the shadows cast by the clouds of the open Canterbury sky, and harking back 20 years to a hint given in *Bone and Shadow*, but only now being developed in its own right. Sutton is at present working on a new series, *Threshold*, an extension of *Landscape Elements*, but based on the river terraces—formations that the great rivers of Canterbury have worn down and moulded for a million years.

His landscape painting owes nothing to romantic works of early Canterbury painters like Van der Velden or the two Gibbs. He avoids their love for "noblest crags and the mildest torrents in the worst weather". Instead he moves on to the plains and foothills, into wide open spaces, where acres of pasture, wheat and tussock reflect the passing mood of the open sky, and there is silence, total silence.

Motivating a great deal of his painting has been his desire to set the ochre of the plains and tussock hills against the grey of the shingle and the piercing blue of the sky. For Sutton this has been a great driving force, for his love of the "Canterbury Ochre" has fascinated him and led him to remark that "it is a great ochre and evokes in its prevalence and intensity the great Vermilion of the Pompeiian murals".* Rata Lovell-Smith introduced Sutton and many others to it, in her

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42. Professor J. G. Beaglehole, O.M. 1971.

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paintings of shingle-slide and tussock. It was an introduction that has developed into a long relationship.

"Every time a Venetian painter raised his brush," said Sutton in 1972, "that brush celebrated Venice, and I hope that I'm not being over-presumptuous in saying that something of the same sort has happened and is happening here in Canterbury. Here, if anywhere in New Zealand, a district has seized hold of the imagination of generations of painters. And this immense canvas has been presented to us with a few, but very bold marks upon it."*

It was this fascination for a region, and Sutton's subsequent handling of it through his brush, that led Peter Cape to comment in 1972 when reviewing Sutton's exhibition at the Victoria University of Wellington on 2YC to say:

"It is possible for a regional painter to develop—and develop dynamically—without losing any of the defined regional perceptions which have made him what he is. Which means that—at least for a painter of Sutton's calibre—nothing is at all lost if he stays in and paints out of one tract of land for the whole of his life."

D. P. MILLAR,
Director,
November, 1972.

The writing of this catalogue was made possible, owing to the absence of any primary research material, by several interviews with W. A. Sutton, followed by three re-writings of the text. His hospitality made this pleasant task even more enjoyable. Quotations taken from his opening speech at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery's exhibition, "Canterbury Painting, 1860-1940", are marked with an asterisk.

D.P.M.

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CATALOGUE

(Height before width)

1	Cart with Trees Watercolour <i>Mr J. S. Guthrie, Christchurch</i>	$23\frac{3}{4} \times 15\frac{1}{2}$	1943
2	Nor'wester—Trees and Barn Watercolour <i>Mrs Sylvia Pearson, Christchurch</i>	$14\frac{3}{4} \times 28\frac{3}{4}$	1944
3	Hills behind Wanganui Oil <i>Dr and Mrs Clark Hanan, Dunedin</i>	$29 \times 33\frac{1}{2}$	1944
4	Passing Shadows near Wakatipu Oil <i>Canterbury Society of Arts</i>	$23\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2}$	1945
5	Spring Afternoon, Bealey Watercolour <i>Mr W. B. Beaven, Christchurch</i>	$17\frac{3}{4} \times 20\frac{3}{4}$	1946
6	St. Giles, Cripplegate Oil <i>The Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt</i>	$17\frac{1}{8} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$	1947
7	Towards Whitechapel Oil <i>Mrs E. Kennedy, Christchurch</i>	$15 \times 18\frac{3}{4}$	1947
8	Cabbage Tree Blossom Oil <i>Mr and Mrs A. N. Dale, Christchurch</i>	$23\frac{1}{2} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$	1949
9	Dry September Oil <i>Mr R. Hiseman, Christchurch</i>	$24\frac{1}{2} \times 29$	1949
10	Jim O'Phee's Paddock Oil <i>Mr and Mrs G. E. Roth, Christchurch</i>	$20 \times 29\frac{1}{2}$	1949
11	Bone and Shadow Oil <i>Mr A. W. Dickson, Christchurch</i>	$19\frac{3}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$	1949
12	Feather Stoles for Sale Oil <i>Riccarton High School, Christchurch</i>	$27\frac{1}{4} \times 35\frac{1}{4}$	1950-51
13	Nor'wester in the Cemetery Oil <i>City of Auckland Art Gallery</i>	$59\frac{3}{4} \times 71\frac{3}{4}$	1950

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14	Country Church		
	Oil	19½ x 23½	1953
		<i>Mr and Mrs G. E. Roth, Christchurch</i>	
15	Private Lodgings		
	Oil	24½ x 30¼	1954
		<i>Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch</i>	
16	Country Church		
	Oil	21¾ x 29¼	1955
		<i>Mr K. A. Gough, Christchurch</i>	
17	Triptych		
	Oil	23¼ x 47¾	1955
		<i>Mr and Mrs A. N. Dale, Christchurch</i>	
18	Country Church		
	Oil	40½ x 45½	1956
		<i>The Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt</i>	
19	Three Chairs		
	Oil	22 x 32¾	1958
		<i>Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch</i>	
20	Pastoral		
	Oil	54 x 54	1959
		<i>City of Auckland Art Gallery</i>	
21	Spaniards No. 1		
	Oil	32¾ x 47¼	1960
		<i>The Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt</i>	
22	Country Church, Governor's Bay, Diptych		
	Oil	35½ x 48½	1962
	Oil	35½ x 33½	1962
		<i>The Artist</i>	
23	Cemetery for Sheep		
	Oil	32¼ x 47¼	1960
		<i>Mr T. J. Taylor, Christchurch</i>	
24	Grasses No. 7 (First Series)		
	Oil	23¼ x 35½	1963
		<i>Canterbury Public Library</i>	
25	The Four Seasons. Autumn		
	Oil	36 x 96	1968
		<i>National Art Gallery, Wellington</i>	
26	The Four Seasons. Winter		
	Oil	35½ x 96	1968
		<i>Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch</i>	
27	Grasses No. 5		
	Oil	23½ x 59¾	1969
		<i>Mr R. J. Lucas, Nuie Island</i>	

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28	The Four Seasons. Summer			
	Oil	36 x 96		1970
	<i>University of Canterbury</i>			
29	The Four Seasons. Spring			
	Oil	36 x 96		1970
	<i>The Artist</i>			
30	Grasses No. 14			
	Oil	23½ x 53½		1970
	<i>Mr and Mrs T. H. Beeston, Christchurch</i>			
31	Landscape Elements 5			
	Oil	27½ x 47¾		1970
	<i>Mrs J. Poulton, Christchurch</i>			
32	Landscape Elements 6			
	Oil	27½ x 47¾		1970
	<i>Mr and Mrs K. M. Ironside, Ashburton</i>			
33	Landscape Elements 10			
	Oil	67 x 84		1970
	<i>The Artist</i>			
34	Tom Taylor			
	Oil	27¼ x 19¼		1951
	<i>Mr T. J. Taylor, Christchurch</i>			
35	Pat Hanly			
	Oil	19½ x 14½		1953
	<i>Mr P. Hanly, Auckland</i>			
36	Bill Main			
	Oil	19¾ x 17¾		1954
	<i>Mr W. Main, Wellington</i>			
37	Bill Culbert			
	Oil	41¼ x 19¾		1955
	<i>The Artist</i>			
38	Allan Franks			
	Oil	17½ x 17½		1968
	<i>The Artist</i>			
39	Peter Liley			
	Oil	14¼ x 11		1969
	<i>Mr P. Liley, Hastings</i>			
40	Professor Petersen			
	Oil	21 x 28½		1970
	<i>Professor G. M. Petersen, Christchurch</i>			
41	J. M. Nuttall			
	Oil	23¼ x 17¼		1971
	<i>Mr J. M. Nuttall, Christchurch</i>			
42	Professor J. C. Beaglehole O.M.			
	Oil	35¼ x 29¼		1971
	<i>Victoria University of Wellington</i>			

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Exhibited regularly with The Group and Canterbury Society of Arts. Work included in Contemporary New Zealand Painting, organised by the City of Auckland Art Gallery, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1966, and also in New Zealand Contemporary Painting and Ceramics, touring Japan and South East Asia, 1964.

One Man Shows:

- 1947 Early Settlers Museum, Dunedin.
- 1960 Centre Gallery, Wellington.
- 1966 Suter Gallery, Nelson.
- 1970 Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum, Napier.
Canterbury Society of Arts.
Otago Museum.
Manawatu Art Gallery.
- 1972 Victoria University of Wellington.

Senior Lecturer and Tutor in Painting at the School of Fine Arts,
University of Canterbury.

Member of the Visual Arts Advisory Panel, Queen Elizabeth II Arts
Council of New Zealand.

Member of **The Group**.

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