CHRISTCHURCH ART GALE

A PAINTING INSTALLATION ROSS GRAY

TOURING GALLERY B. 23 IULY - 25 OCTOBER 2004



All images (studio photographs of works in progress) from **Soundings: A Painting Installation** 2004 All panels: acrylic on mdf 300 x 2440 mm Collection of the artist A painting installation on an epic scale, **Soundings** represents the culmination of a long-term creative project by Christchurch-based artist Ross Gray. Grounded in an appreciation of the loca built environment, it reveals Gray's conscious creative shift towards an increasingly abstracted style that emphasises the process of painting rather than thematic concerns.

Over the three decades since his first solo exhibition at the Canterbury Society of Arts (now the Centre of Contemporary Art, CoCA) in 1974, Gray developed a largely expressionist painting approach influenced by the teachings of Rudi Gopas (one of his lecturers at the University of Canterbury), German Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism. Bold and energetic, Gray's works combined figurative elements and gestural markmaking with an uninhibited use of colour and complex pictorial space. Some, particularly those made in 2001, brought together elements in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials, based on a 300 mm square grid.

In 2002, seeking to extend his practice, Gray undertook a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Canterbury, with Julia Morison and Ted Bracey as supervisors. His studies provoked an intense and forthright reassessment of his practice, centred on a desire to

strengthen its conceptual basis and to connect more fully with the installation space. Over twelve months, his approach became increasingly reductive and simplified, emphasising abstraction and experimentation in both paint application and process. Whereas Gray had previously considered each painting primarily as a distinct but related entity, he now more fully realised the potential for a group of works to operate together, in combination with the 'negative' white wall space.

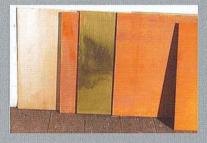
After completing his degree submission, Gray continued to refine an ambitious installation project for the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. His initial concept of a large-scale painting installation, formulated some years before, was progressively developed and refined into more specific plans for one of the gallery spaces. **Soundings** has provided an opportunity to treat the paintings and the exhibition space as an

integrated whole and to explore how, together, they might create a powerful and self-contained art experience. For an artist with a long-standing, recognisable style and an established exhibition history, such a re-evaluation required a considerable leap of faith. The title Gray has chosen for his installation alludes to the experimentation and risk-taking that has characterised this project, leading him, at all stages, to 'sound out' a range of possibilities.

The marks and patterns within this installation reflect Gray's increasingly minimalist approach. Not attempting to represent any particular building, they are summations and distillations that chart the subconscious memories we access and add to when passing through familiar locations. Limiting his materials to a series of panels painted in acrylics, Gray has used layered, rhythmical brushwork and fluid markmaking that show his commitment to









Inspirations, works in progress and working drawings for Soundings: A Painting Installation

painting as a means of exploration and experimentation. The resulting surfaces are ambiguous, eluding definition, but resounding with echoes of the streetscape: the soft, smoky warmth of old brick walls, the interlocking layers of urban façades, the hum of the city, the past in the present.

As a strong advocate for the preservation of Christchurch's architectural heritage, Gray has often used his painting to draw attention to the destruction of the city's landmark buildings. Previous works have referred overtly to the gradual erosion of the cityscape, sometimes incorporating references to particular buildings under threat of demolition. By its very nature, Soundings is much less direct. Open, economical compositions suggest a series of peripheral glimpses,

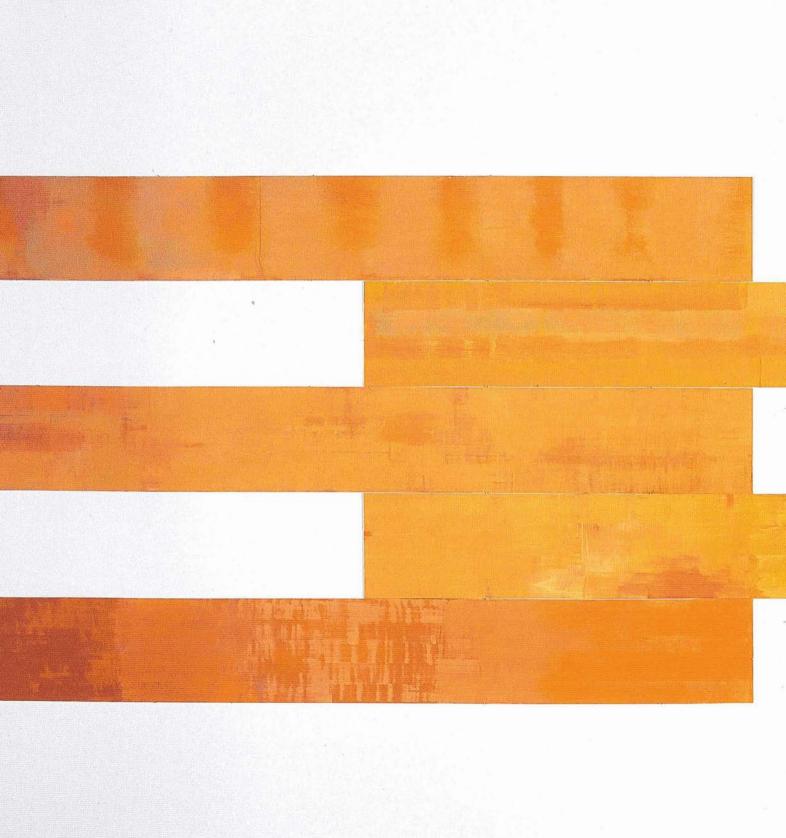
built up from long familiarity with the city, projecting a more general statement about the need to respect our urban fabric. Rather than spelling out his concerns, Gray would prefer to position the viewer as an activator of real and implied architectural spaces: 'I'm working towards a balance between my current approach to abstract painting and the subject matter of these old city buildings'

The faded brick wall of an early commercial building dominates the view from a window in Gray's rented inner city studio, a constant reminder of the rich palimpsest in which new structures rise up between and around old ones and buildings are transformed with each new sign and coat of paint. It is this richness that Gray thinks is so important to retain: 'As a citizen of

Christchurch, I'm interested in the resonance and reverberation of our architectural heritage: it evokes the past so strongly and enriches the present. As an artist I would like to be able to explore that through form and colour and, in this case, through the configuration of panels in the Gallery space.'

Soundings has been conceived as a cumulative, encompassing experience. Here are paintings to walk past and be enveloped by — a pulsing, fragmented frieze that evokes a sense of time past and passing, the vital but fragile presence of historic buildings in the life of a city. With lyrical chromatic shifts and subtly layered surfaces that seem to project and recede, reflecting the volumes and voids of the city beyond, Gray gives these silent structures voice.





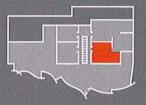
Ross Gray was born in Wanganui in 1945. He graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts in 1967 and a Master of Fine Arts (Distinction) in 2003, both from the University of Canterbury, and completed a Diploma of Teaching from the Christchurch College of Education in 1968. Gray has had a long career as a visual arts educator, teaching art and art history fulltime in secondary schools from 1969-95, including a period from 1981 as Head of Art at Cashmere High School. He currently tutors part-time in drawing at the School of Art and Design. Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology.

Gray has exhibited regularly in solo and group exhibitions since 1967. Recent solo shows include: Shift, University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts Gallery, 2003; On the Wall, CoCA, Christchurch, and Bowen Galleries, Wellington, 2002; Building, CoCA Mair Gallery, 2001; Past: Presence, CoCA Mair Gallery, 2000; Keeping Time, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, 1998; and Circuit (survey exhibition, 1971-97), Sarjeant Gallery / Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui, 1997. Recent group exhibitions include: Look this Way (Christchurch College of Education Anniversary Art Show), CoCA, 2002; Canterbury Painting in the 1990s, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 2000; and Gopas and his Students, CoCA, and Wallace Art Awards Exhibition of Finalists, Auckland, 1998.

In 1997, Gray travelled to Germany on a Goethe-Institut German Language Artist's Scholarship, and in 1999 he was awarded the CoCA Guthrey Travel Award to Australia. Gray lives in Christchurch, and his work is represented in private collections throughout New Zealand and overseas, as well as in numerous national public collections including: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; Sarjeant Gallery / Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui; The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, Nelson; and Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

TE PUNA O WAIWHETU CHRISTCHURCH ART GALL

Getting Around





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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

10am until 5pm. Wednesday until 9pm. Free guided tours available.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The essay for this publication was written by Felicity Milburn, Curator (Contemporary Art) at

> Curator: Felicity Milburn Publication Coordinator: Sarah Pepperle Editor: Anna Rogers Photographer: Brendan Lee Designer: Emma Vial

> > ISBN 1-877375-02-0



