

seen this century

100 Contemporary New Zealand Artists
A COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

Warwick Brown

SEEN THIS CENTURY

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Godwit, \$55, pbk

IF memory serves me well, the first substantial "list" or survey intended as a guide for popular consumption of the work of living New Zealand artists was published by the late Peter Cape in the 1970s. He and Collins produced *Prints and Printmakers in New Zealand* in 1974, and followed this with *New Zealand Painting Since 1960: A Study in Themes and Developments* in 1979. For all their faults, inaccuracies and deficiencies these and others of his books in the genre attempted to show what had been happening in New Zealand art since 1960, and to give novice collectors some idea of where to look and what to look for in the contemporary scene.

Since those days there have been numerous other surveys, disguised as collector guides of one kind or another. Some have been scholarly, some merely lists. All suffer from the same difficulty: the choices are of necessity subjective.

A further factor which can be misleading for novice collectors in some guides is that the motivation has been investment alone, which is to say artworks really identified as commodities to be exchanged for profit once their value has been inflated, not necessarily by any intrinsic worth but too often by hyperbole on the part of dealers and

others, and an art market built on false assumptions. Taking an interest in original art in the hope that there'll be a profit in it is a risky business, and of little ultimate benefit to 99% of the artists.

Warwick Brown's *Seen This Century* seems intended mainly for new and experienced collectors hoping to be both financially and aesthetically rewarded, although if new collectors are confused by the vast range of choices available now they will be equally confused by his list of 100 current practitioners and their works.

It's not Brown's first list, by any means, and perhaps the really serious collector should examine his earlier ones as far back as the 1980s and see who's still around, who's up, who's down. That should provide a longer term understanding of the distorting effects "market forces" have had on contemporary art.

His preface-essay is a reasonable, if brief, assessment of changes in the scene since the 1990s, and his observations about the influence art-school training has had (to which I would add curatorial power, state subsidies, fellowships and prizes) on what a largely innocent and frequently ignorant general public understands is "modern" New Zealand art, are accurate and to the point.

A striking feature of his 100 choices is their diversity. The futility of categorising art as "landscape", "portrait" or "abstract" is well proven. Another is the overwhelming influence of international trends and fashions. A third is the elevation of the banal (perhaps this truly reflects the age in which the artists live) and one wonders why passion has become so subject to the cerebral.

Given this book's small, gallery-visiting format, *Seen This Century* may be counted as a good effort. The colour reproductions are sufficient to arouse interest to explore further though, as usual, visualising the true scale of the works is a problem. There are helpful potted descriptions

of artists and ideas, and Brown has spread his viewfinder across the nation — at least nine of his practitioners are currently resident in this region.

There's enough material here to

stimulate plenty of challenge and debate, and Brown has sufficient experience and knowledge of local art to justify a degree of confidence in his choices.



"High", 2002, by
Chris Clements
... an illustration
in Warwick
Brown's *Seen
this century*
survey of
contemporary
artists.