

A Graphic Reminder: Kurt von Meier's Elam 1962-64

“He really blew the place apart”

It's not a name you forget in a hurry, but it's not a name you hear much these days. Kurt von Meier. For a bit of background, google Kurtvonmeier.com and you can link to his personal website, still flying his flag twelve years after his passing in 2011. There he is, the 'rock-star professor'.

That was certainly the impression given by the late John Perry in 2018. As my final act as Managing Director of the auction house Art+Object I worked with the collector, author, museum director and social historian Perry to curate a selection of highlights from his vast accumulation of art, folk art and pop culture - to be auctioned under the moniker 'Collecting Gold, Collecting Dust' in late 2018. Having spent his entire life within Aotearoa, John wanted to do his OE in his seventies, and needed to sell a few treasures to fund the trip of a lifetime.

Amongst the smorgasbord of material that John bought into the gallery on a daily basis was a small group of New Zealand modernist paintings from the 1950s and 60s - works by Denis Knight Turner, Theo Schoon, Nancy Parker, Guy Ngan, Bessie Christie, Peggy Spicer and Robert Ellis. His collection formed an insider's road trip, through the visual and photographic culture of Aotearoa. One of the bigger works in scale and impact was a large oil on board dated 1962 and entitled *Karekare* by Kurt von Meier (now in the collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki). It is a jagged, intense rumination of light and dark, landscape in origin but abstract in conclusion.

“I'm not familiar with this artist”, I said to John. And he was off on one of his much missed flights of fancy, the conclusion being that Kurt von Meier was indeed a rock-star.

Von Meier, then aged twenty-eight arrived in Aotearoa in 1962 to take up Elam School of Fine Arts first position as lecturer in the History and Theory of Fine Arts. His discursive, learned, humorous, non-traditional mode of teaching art theory had a galvanizing effect on a generation of New Zealand artists in the early 1960s. He stepped onto the whenua of Aotearoa just as a wave of nascent self-confidence in the arts was about to crest. Post WWII Aotearoa was awakening to the unique culture of this place and yearning to express its own voice, both Māori and Pākehā. Von Meier was a cheerleader and accelerant of this youthful expression. As a contemporary from these years Hamish Keith recalls, 'he could see what we couldn't.'¹ Keith went on to explain that at this time New Zealand artists needed a bit of a nudge to let go of the final apron strings still tethered to the cultural cringe. Von Meier provided a final snip.

Von Meier landed in Aotearoa as pop culture was being invented Kiwi-style. The arrival of television in 1960 was the catalyst. New ideas, fashions and music were pouring into the hearts and minds of young New Zealanders the length of the country. The Beatles tour of 1964 was when things really heated up. The art scene of Auckland was being invigorated by the return from Europe of a cohort of artists and teachers whose work is represented in the Kurt von Meier collection: Pat Hanly, Michael Illingworth and Robert Ellis being amongst the more notable. These artists along with von Meier brought with them firsthand experience of the British and American scenes... the St.Ives School, Abstract Expressionism, Passmore, Rothko, Pop art. Echoes of all these big art levers of the period can be seen amongst the works on exhibition in *A Graphic Reminder*.

The Auckland art scene was also just getting started in the early 1960s. Exhibition opportunities were limited to the Ikon Gallery or Peter Webb's eponymous gallery. The game changer was Barry Lett Galleries which opened in 1965, staffed by the above mentioned John Perry. Perry had been a student when Kurt von Meier arrived in 1962 and recalled his impact, "At Elam, art history was part of the prescription. Our first lecturer in art history was Peter Tomory. He then went back to his role as Director of Auckland Art Gallery. Then along comes Kurt von Meier and he really blew the place apart, with a whole raft of new ideas and teaching methodologies. He was straight out of Princeton University and he established the Art History department which was non-existent really. We weren't just sitting down and looking at slides of Renaissance paintings. It was much more exciting and vibrant."

In a recent conversation with Hamish Keith he describes the art scene at the time as "bubbling under" noting that the official view of art was determined by the Kelliher Prize which prioritised landscape painting, followed by more landscape painting. But in and around Elam, a vital new scene was brewing. Keith gave me a summary of how this selection of youthful works by some of our most esteemed artists, those mentioned above as well as Gretchen Albrecht, Geoff Thornley, Pauline Thompson and Keith himself come to be, via California, on exhibition at the Waiheke Community Art Gallery in 2023, some sixty odd years after their creation.

The works have been donated on the proviso that they remain together as a collection, by friends and widow of Kurt von Meier, in memory of both his affection for Aotearoa and the foundational impact he had on a group of lively art students and fellow travelers in the early 1960s, many of whom have gone on to become significant contributors to our visual arts culture over the following seven decades.

I have been looking at, thinking and writing about these artists my whole life. The pinnacle of my time in the art auction world was managing the sale of the Michael Illingworth Estate collection for his family in 2017.

Earlier this year I was contacted by Fiona Blanchard, director of the Waiheke gallery to enquire if I would curate an exhibition from the over 200 works for this March 2023 exhibition.

The ultimate selection of just over thirty works is designed to communicate the soul of the wider collection and I hope that of the time as well. The chosen works reveal a theme of lively graphic extemporization of ideas. These are early 'demos' of motifs, some of which would soon, particularly in the case of Pat Hanly and Michael Illingworth, become part of the visual Lingua Franca of this country. Others such as the art student works of Gretchen Albrecht and Geoff Thornley are more embryonic, but no less fascinating.

What unites the works selected in *A Graphic Reminder* is the primacy of drawing. These are bold, confident explorations, not designed as full-fledged works to exhibit but advanced working drawings of the ideas buzzing around the Elam milieu during Kurt von Meier's tenure. He obviously was taken with them – and his guardianship means we can be transported to this energetic period once again.

This commitment to drawing in graphite, ink, crayon, even rudimentary collage is a consequence of the legacy of the elephant in the room, one Colin McCahon who was an art lecturer at Elam from 1964 to 1970. McCahon was a stickler for drawing. Keith confirmed this in our recent conversation, repeating McCahon's mantra "if you can't draw, you can't paint."³

McCahon was a mentor and colleague to the artists in this collection. His insistence on drawing practice as a bedrock discipline was recently eloquently recalled by his former student Dame Robin White, whose career retrospective *Something is Happening Here* has recently opened at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery after stints at Te Papa and the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Just like von Meier's own *Karekare* work from John Perry's collection and some of the works on paper here that are surely from his hand, many of the works in *A Graphic Reminder* are flirting with abstraction, but as McCahon was so want to do, they have a bet each way.

Two works by Hamish Keith himself are included and these represent a rare sighting as artist for the self-confessed 'odd job man' of the New Zealand art scene. Hamish Keith was the author and presenter of the television series *The Big Picture* in 2008. He was also appointed a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to the arts in 2013. This exhibition is a way of thanking Keith for guiding this collection back to Aotearoa.

In the 1960s when he was part of the circle of Kurt von Meier he was thinking about his own future and concluded his preferred role would be to build the superstructure of the wider cultural environment of Aotearoa – he describes that period, “there were a lot of people on stage and not in the audience.”⁴

I was a kid when all this was taking place, born in 1963. I've been part of the audience my whole life. But I've always been fascinated about this period before the gallery scene was a reality, before New Zealand art publishing swung into action, before landmark exhibitions such as *Te Maori* or wider public gallery curatorial programs powered up.

A Graphic Reminder transports us to this ambitious time, when these artists and figures such as Perry, Keith, McCahon - and for a short period Kurt von Meier were thinking big for Aotearoa.

1 Hamish Keith in conversation with Hamish Coney, March 2023

2 John Perry in conversation with Hamish Coney, October 2018

3 Hamish Keith in conversation with Hamish Coney, March 2023

4 *ibid*