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Michael Parekowhai / Richard McWhannell / Cilla McQueen & Joanna Paul

Jim Wheeler / Louise Purvis / Richard Lewer / *Tell Tails* at the Turnbull

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Brain on Fire

Richard McWhannell's *Springs and Falls*

PETER SIMPSON

When I walked into the opening of Richard McWhannell's *Springs and Falls* at Auckland's Oreaart in April, I was reminded of a comment Balzac puts into the mouth of the protagonist of *Le Père Goriot*: 'Great God! my brain is on fire. It is as if there were something red-hot in my head'. The impact of McWhannell's 'red-hot' new series—all painted within the last year—is overwhelming, as several people have remarked to me. While not completely without precedent in his long career (his first solo show was held in 1974), *Springs and Falls* is dramatically different from the portraits and landscapes he has mostly exhibited in recent times, and even from the allegorical fictions that have long been part of his practice.

Many of these new works are large in size, and crowded with figures and objects and creatures; they afford a spectacle that is hard to find precedent for in his own work or in New Zealand painting in general, such densely peopled pictures being rare in the land of the landscape with too few lovers. There are seven large-scale paintings, plus half a dozen of mid-size which share their fantastical and multitudinous character. Eleven smaller works, with a generally less populated dramatis personae (such as *Putin in a Gimp Suit* and *The Red Admiral* which both feature riders on horseback) make up the two dozen pieces in the impressive exhibition. Impeccably crafted, they are all oils on canvas on board.

Although the smaller works are always intriguing and painted with great flair and panache—as, for

example, in *The Yellow Admiral*, in which naked figures cavort in the presence of an exquisitely rendered butterfly, or *It's the End of the World as We Know It*, in which a lanky naked figure in hat and sun-glasses, surrounded by a gallery of assorted grotesques, throws his arms wide in a gesture of open-mouthed dismay—it is inevitable that attention is focused on the larger, more ambitious and more novel pieces.

McWhannell has always been a highly literate and well-informed painter. His love for and deep knowledge of art history are evident in many references and allusions to paintings from the past, whether local (Fomison allusions abound, especially in *Captain Pugwash*), or more often to European precedents. In 2013, for instance, he built a whole exhibition (*Crossing the Lake*, Oreaart) around the imagined adventures of the pierrot (clown) figure in Watteau's *Gilles* (1718-19). Sometimes the allusion to past art is in the nature of isolated 'quotations', as for example in the figures of long-skirted women reminiscent of seventeenth-century Dutch or Spanish art which recur throughout the present series in *The Springs*, *The Triumph of Death*, *The Anthropomorphic Quarry* and *The Arab Spring*.

Elsewhere McWhannell's indebtedness to art history is less immediately evident. A general similarity between *Springs and Falls* and those crowded masterpieces of Flemish art, Hieronymus Bosch's triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1500) and Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562), is obvious enough. But beyond the presence of a pullulating mass of creatures, human, natural and imaginary, McWhannell's visions are never copies

(opposite) RICHARD McWHANNELL
It's the End of the World as We Know It 2015
Oil on canvas, 402 x 502 mm.

(right) RICHARD McWHANNELL *The Yellow Admiral* 2015
Oil on canvas on board, 402 x 502 mm.

(below) RICHARD McWHANNELL *The Burning Man* 2015
Oil on canvas on board, 606 x 832 mm.

of individual elements of these masterpieces. One searches in vain for direct quotations. He is perfectly capable of coming up with his own inventions of bizarre, curious and often nightmarish creatures that are both more than and less than human. It is more in the structure and organisation of his pictures, the stage-management, so to speak, of a 'cast of thousands', that he leans on his predecessors.

There is in most of McWhannell's paintings, as in Bruegel's *Fall*, a darkening of colour and tone from top to bottom; the top portions are generally light-coloured, with whites and blues predominating, and the colours darken towards the bottom with browns, ochres and darker blues, as can be seen in *Captain Pugwash*, *The Springs* and *The Burning Man*. Another feature McWhannell borrows from Bruegel is a semi-circle of white at the top centre of the canvas, a feature which signifies heaven in Bruegel's mythological scheme, but which recurs, denuded of its supernatural connotations, in *A Fall of Ventriloquists*, *The Burning Man*, *Acrobats Go Home After Work* and *The Fall of the Pictorialist*. In conversation, McWhannell pointed out to me that the structure of the Bruegel is based on a corner-to-corner diagonal upon which is superimposed a diamond orientated square. He admits to

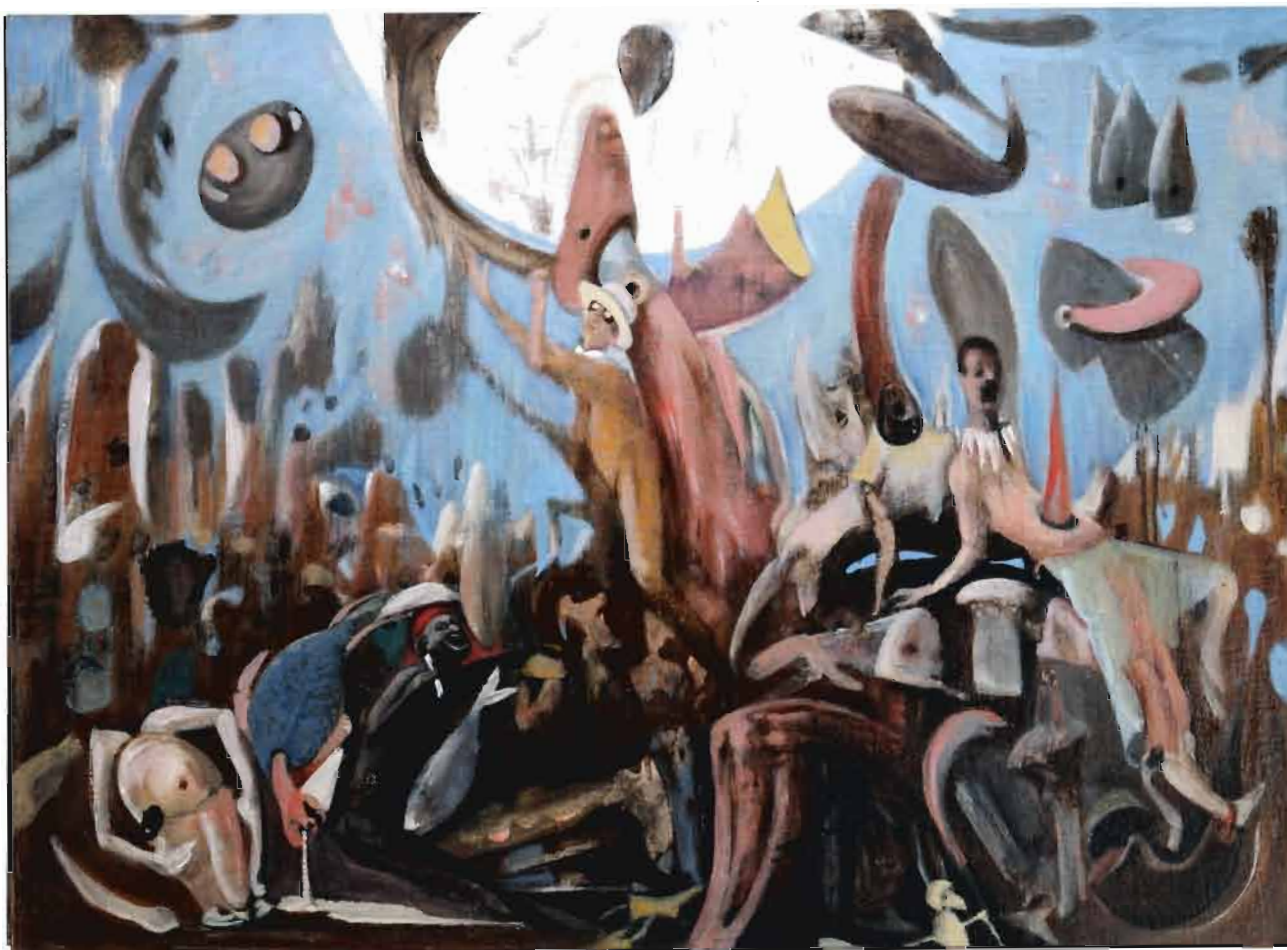


adapting this structural armature, most obviously perhaps in *Captain Pugwash*.

Some light is thrown on McWhannell's use of art history by a comment he once made in response to questions from an 11-year-old student: 'In a way I painted a gallery full of people paintings to make up for the art I'd seen in Europe but that we didn't have here. Sort of my version of art history'.¹

Pinned on the gallery wall is a statement made by McWhannell which is helpful in orientating oneself towards these extraordinary paintings:

There's an argument that goes on in my painting—it's circular and involves degrees. To what extent should one be literal and how far painterly—how much observed and how much imagined? Observation is in a sense easier and more satisfying in its process, at least I've found it so . . .





Yet to work from behind the eye, from the back of the brain—to conjure an image out of feeling seems somehow a more noble aspiration. To pull a character out of thin air is especially sweet. So the battle rages and, along the way, one alights here in the sun and there in the shade. Sometimes the magic is ephemeral as a dream, sometimes as palpable as clay, or so I hope!

The more familiar aspects of McWhannell's career, such as the portraits exhibited in *Women Painted* (Orexart, 2014) or his memorable renditions of the coastal landscape at Pararaha, clearly belong to the 'observational' end of the pendulum; though even here 'imagination' comes into play, as when he dresses contemporary sitters in the clothing styles of Titian or Goya, or when he depicts Pararaha not by the clear light of day but in the beguiling and estranging shades of moonlight or early dawn. At the same time,



while these new works are manifestly products of imagination—paintings from the 'back of the brain'—they also involve a great deal of acute observation of sense experience—a moonlit mountain landscape in *Captain Pugwash*, a tiny bunch of blue flowers in the corner of *The Arab Spring*, a seagull alighting in *The Springs*, plus hundreds of other sharply observed details.

Some further clues to McWhannell's intentions in this series come from attending to his titles. The name of the exhibition, *Springs and Falls*, is a multiple pun. In the first instance it refers to the seasonal pattern of change and recurrence which also has metaphorical relevance to the patterns in individual lives—youth and age, life and death, beginnings and endings—and in societies and civilisations, with their rise and fall, phases of order and chaos. 'Spring' and 'Fall' also allude to human movement: ascent, descent, springing up, falling down. That all of these implications are relevant is apparent from individual titles from *The Arab Spring* to *It's the End of the World as We Know it*. Connections between paintings multiply; patterns emerge. A final implication of 'springs', which McWhannell mentioned to me, is an allusion to Western Springs, that watery area of Auckland near the zoo where he frequently walks, and which helps to

(above) RICHARD McWHANNELL *Captain Pugwash* 2015
Oil on canvas on board, 1200 x 1600 mm.

(left) RICHARD McWHANNELL *The Triumph of Death* 2015
Oil on canvas on board, 605 x 757 mm.

(opposite) RICHARD McWHANNELL *The Arab Spring* 2015
Oil on canvas, 1200 x 1500 mm.



explain his recurrent imagery of fish, birds, butterflies, flowers, trees, rushes, vessels, waterfalls, and other evocations of life in and near water.

McWhannell is not a didactic painter; he offers some signposts towards meaning through his titles and recurrent strands of imagery, but mostly he leaves the viewer to make his or her own way among the bewildering welter of visual signs. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, however, that collectively these paintings offer us a frenetic and fairly disenchanting vision of the world. As compared to the strictly coherent and hierarchical vision of a Bosch or Bruegel where heaven and hell are clearly delineated and differentiated, McWhannell's world is disturbingly anarchic and chaotic. It is a place where violence and enigma intersect, and with few positives to cling to apart from rare instances of calm and beauty (the butterflies, the flowers, the be-skirted women) plus of course a dominant impression of dynamic vitality with which a turbulent world, without certainties or coherence, is apprehended and articulated.

* * *

McWhannell's posthumous tribute, 'Allen Maddox Painter: 1948-2000',² reveals an unexpected affinity between Maddox's abstract expressionism and his own very different-seeming work. Some light is thrown on this affinity, however, by the spontaneous mark-making apparent in these paintings. Far from the precision and minute articulation with which artists like Bosch and Bruegel presented their images, McWhannell often gives the impression of making things up as he goes along, following wherever

the pigment happens to lead him, particularly in his constant exploitation of anthropomorphic or metaphoric possibilities in a swatch of paint, a practice perhaps hinted at in the title *The Anthropomorphic Quarry*.

Way back in 1987 McWhannell told Rhondda Bosworth: 'One sets out with a certain knowledge, ability and a notion of the image to come. One does not rigidly adhere to a scheme, but follows the dictates of the paint, where one can edit and amplify to good effect. Although the arrived at image will be different from its starting point, it will very likely carry a strong connotation of it expressively.'³ Could these words not also be applied to the methodology of Maddox? The subject matter could not be more different but the mark-making is directly comparable.

Another quote from this essay also remains relevant to McWhannell's current practice, as so vividly manifested in these remarkable paintings: 'I want to provide the viewer with an enduring image that is recognised as having some truth. Everything goes into it to rattle the accumulated experience of the viewer, so that the depicted experience is believable and understood, despite its being set on a stage of unreality, despite its bizarreness'.⁴

1. The whole exchange, well worth reading, is reproduced on McWhannell's website: www.bakedbean.co.nz/mcwhannell.htm.

2. *Art New Zealand* 97 (Summer 2000-01), pp. 44-45.

3. Rhondda Bosworth, 'Richard McWhannell Explains Himself', *Art New Zealand* 43 (Winter 1987), p. 62.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 63. Some details in this article derive from a conversation with the artist in May, 2015.