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The New Zealand Herald

T.J. McNamara: Variety, richness on show

By [T.J. McNamara](#)



Tomorrow will be Beautiful, by Richard McWhannell.

Richard McWhannell, who has a retrospective exhibition at the Pah Homestead, has been for many years one of the country's outstanding painters.

He lives to paint, although he has also done some fine sculpture. He also paints to live, untrammelled by teaching or any other such activity, and his skill in portraiture has brought many commissions.

The keys to his achievement, clearly apparent in this exhibition, are his awareness of the great tradition of Western painting, the variety of his subject matter and the way his work is always immediately recognisable no matter which area of painting he is foraging into.

The individuality of his sombre colour also makes his works instantly recognisable.

The best way to begin a tour of the show is in the room by the front desk. There are several early portraits, small, deft and immediate characterisations here. Also tucked away behind the door is a work that involves an extravagant self-portrait nearly nude except for a hat and boots.

There is an intended element of shock because this is a reversal of the usual portrayal of women nude.

The title, *Cathy Dressing (after Balthus)*, makes it clear that the composition is taken from a painting by Balthus, the 20th century French painter who obsessively painted very young women.

McWhannell turns the subject of the painting entirely on its head. The painting is challenging and such confrontation is part of the spirit of much of the artist's work.

Also there is a round self-portrait that is a vigorous example of a subject he pursues as frequently as Rembrandt.

The next, larger room is notable for exceptionally fine paintings including a series of rich, shadowy nocturnes of the hills of Pararaha on the coast of the Waitakeres, an area that specially appealed to the artist.

The third room around the fireplace might well be called The Fomison Room. For a time McWhannell was much influenced by the dark

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force of his late fellow artist, Tony Fomison.

The Poet Famous for His Looks has the intensity and irony of Fomison allied to an unusual technique suitable to the ugly, aggressive face.

The large end-gallery is the venue for some of the biggest paintings in the show. The room is dominated by a "cover version" portrait of the artist's son Francis done in the manner of Titian's noble Young Man with a Glove in the Louvre.

McWhannell does not quite have Titian's touch with a linen shirt and his subject is in rosier health than the great master's Hamlet-like aristocrat.

Yet the demonstration of the power of the tradition is strong and the painting succeeds in all of its several aims.

Also on the walls is an exceptionally large self-portrait that is another challenge, not in depiction but in making the paint stay lively on a large scale and to investigate the curlicues of the ear.

A large sofa features in a number of the artist's character studies and there is a pair of such works, both showing two people. All four portraits are exact but the interaction is complex.

Recently McWhannell has ventured on a complete change of subject inspired by Flemish painters such as Pieter Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch. These paintings are shown in the entry hall. One image, from the artist's past, shows a dunce driven by a demon toward a canvas with only one haunting mark, a moon, on it.

Two more recent paintings bring the demons together.

One, Fall of the Powder Puff, brings together animal spirits and scientists with the foreground dominated by a huge powder puff. It is full of flowing movement.

The other painting is smaller but more powerful. It has a wide gloomy landscape where death enters on a pale horse and fragments of the work of artists in the past, notably Velasquez, live on in a nightmare landscape. It is called *The Triumph of Death*.

The sombre atmosphere of these works is broken by the painting over the desk called *Captain Pugwash*, which has a crazy humour.

There is a feeling that the selection of the works in the exhibition was made quickly from both his studio and paintings readily available, leaving some significant gaps.

Nevertheless, it is a rich and stimulating show by a hugely accomplished and witty artist devoted to both reality and the workings of the imagination.

Upstairs at the Pah Homestead there are two high-definition digital videos by Pacific artists.

Pati Solomona Tyrell's solo work *Fa'aafa* fuses elements of Samoan culture. He performs a remarkable dance allied to the music, costume and language of his country. His eloquent and sometimes fierce gestures are enhanced by spot and strobe lighting.

Tanu Gago looks at the element of self-preservation in contemporary Pacific experience. He overlays documentary of Pasifika peoples in employment in repetitious work in New Zealand with modern display slogans ironically advocating leisure.

A trio of singers harmonising make a fine coda to an inventive work.

At the gallery

What: In My Own Time by Richard McWhannell, Fa'aafa by Pati Solomona Tyrell, The Sound of the Ocean by Tanu Gago.

Where and When: Pah Homestead, 72 Hillsborough Ave to February 28.

TJ says: A rich survey of the varied work of one of New Zealand's most accomplished painters and two HD digital videos by Pacific artists imaginatively presented.