

# The New Zealand Herald

## TJ McNamara: Getting into the spirit

By TJ McNamara

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**New works by three New Zealand artists have a touch of strange ambition, with two aiming to convey the movement of the spirit**

There is more than a touch of strange ambition about this week's exhibitions.

At Orexart Richard McWhannell is showing a series of self-portraits and related paintings of skulls to reveal the bone beneath the skin.

The works come in two sizes: medium and very large, with more than a touch of the baroque sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt who, in 18th century Austria, made a series of grimacing character heads based on expressions on his own face.

Yet there is much more than studies of expression here. The large works are an ambitious endeavour to keep the spontaneity of a sketch while working on a huge scale. McWhannell also reveals a desire to preserve a carefully worked out system of tones of colour. The even harmonies of tone are worked out in the smaller paintings and developed in the over life-sized self-portraits, building on the pale blue and greens of the background.

These big paintings loom large in the gallery with a striking presence but they are disturbing, with a strong emphasis on the cavities from which the eyes look down because the viewpoint is from below the head. The heads, though strongly modelled, fade into the prevailing background tones and are disembodied since they have no neck or shoulders. The disturbing element comes from the extreme expressions mostly conveyed by the mouth.

In one work called *Head on Blue (Disintegration)* the mouth is twisted into an expression of sarcastic disdain. *Head of a Man* has deep eye sockets; these are reflected in *Tonal Study of a Cranium*, which has a counterpart in the large ghostly *A Cranium* with jets of black in the depths of the sockets.

A feature of the smaller works is the brushwork, which runs in parallel strokes, defining the form and adding to that tonal unity which is the artist's preoccupation.

The whole exhibition is an ambitious display of McWhannell's virtuoso skills in colour and modelling as well as an interest in extremes of expression. Such private ideas delivered on this lavish scale suggest he was driven by a surge of spirit to give outward representation to deep artistic inspirations. The results are fascinating and splendidly painted, extremely curious in effect but not to be missed.



No.5 Head of a Man by Richard McWhannell at Orexart Gallery. Photo / Natalie Slade