



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 Olexart 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*, Olexart) 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 . . .

