

# From the collection



Alberto Garcia-Alvarez (b.1928), *Collective Mind*, 1979, hand-made bisque fired ceramic pieces, some with white slip and glaze, 3.8 x 11.5m, The University of Auckland Art Collection.

The mural on the Western side of the Science Building on Princes Street may be Alberto Garcia Alvarez's most visible work in New Zealand but, when he completed it in 1980, he was no stranger to working at such scale.

Born in Barcelona, Garcia-Alvarez studied in Spain and Italy before moving to California in 1966. By the time he was invited to Auckland in 1973 as a visiting lecturer at Elam School of Fine Arts, he had worked on major mural commissions in fresco, mosaic, tapestry and stained glass. The following year he decided to stay on in New Zealand, remaining at Elam until 1993 and exhibiting large abstract paintings and prints, including an exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery, as it was known in 1984, focusing on his unusually large lithographs.

As Andrew Bogle noted in a 1985 *Art New Zealand* article, the discipline of working up his religious frescoes in sections of colour was an influential experience, resulting in a keen eye for the formal elements of line and shape that would inform his later abstracts, including irregularly shaped canvases proportioned according to the forms within the work. In the 1970s he produced painted-wood constructions and canvases that were cut to reveal their underlying structure.

His mural for The University of Auckland continues these explorations, deploying a grid of 295 blocks of ceramic, comprising six different sizes, which advance and recede into the wall depending on their relative scale and surface treatment of either glazed white or natural clays, some of which were excavated from the site of the

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nearby Recreation Centre. Around 600 blocks were originally produced for the mural, hand-made by then Elam students Katherine and Matthew McLean, who set up a kiln especially for the project at Outreach Centre in Ponsonby, now known as Artstation where Kate works as a tutor. Matt also continues to work with ceramics, having won the Premier Award in this year's Portage Ceramic Awards.

Titled *Collective Mind*, the mural is designed to emphasise the rectangular and three-dimensional characteristics of the building's facade, which was designed by Ministry of Works architect W.R. Mitchell and built 1963-1970. Garcia-Alvarez says the title "makes reference to the multidisciplinary function of the university and the complexities of mathematics. For its visual structure I thought about the labyrinth. But the viewer may have other ideas about its meaning or may just contemplate it as something that enriches the façade of the building."

The work took more than a year to complete and was finally assembled into eight 800kg panels and lifted into place by crane in close collaboration with a team from University Services. At the unveiling ceremony Chancellor, Dr Lindo Ferguson, said: "I firmly believe our buildings need works of art both inside and outside. The artist's vision stimulates us and makes us think."

The Science Buildings are featured in Julia Gately's recently published book *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*, which has an accompanying exhibition at the Gus Fisher Gallery. As part of the exhibition's public programmes, Professor Errol Haarhoff, Associate Dean (Research) in the National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries, will conduct a walking tour of the iconic modernist buildings around the City Campus including those that feature in *Long Live the Modern*.

Andrew Clifford