

FROM THE COLLECTION

ART COLLECTION



Not many New Zealand artists can lay claim to having infiltrated hundreds of private homes and public gallery collections with their work.

Although Barry Cleavin didn't invent printmaking in New Zealand, he might as well have, so synonymous is his name with the medium. He was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2001 and, now aged 75 years, he has recently moved from Christchurch back to Dunedin where he was born and belongs. Now the subject of a 300-page Canterbury University

Press book which reproduces a mere ten percent of his output, and still producing new prints every week, Cleavin continues to reign as the undisputed sirdar of the stipple and boss of the burin.

Confirming that the artist is a magpie when it comes to the sources for his imagery, this early etching has its roots in Europe, where there is a long tradition of printmaking being used to criticise, with biting irony, the dishonesty of social rituals. The obsequious male figure on the right is derived from the bowing and scraping nude men in German-Swiss modernist artist Paul Klee's 1903 print *Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to Be of Higher Rank*. Contemporary German viewers would have recognised Klee's caricatures of the Austrian ruler Franz Joseph I and Wilhelm II from Prussia from their hairstyles. They are

shown outdoing each other in deference because they are confounded by the lack of social clues that might be provided by clothing. Rather than depicting specific individuals like Klee, Cleavin chooses here to show a generic male and female, the man displaying outmoded courtesy to the woman by taking her hand to kiss it, although it hurts his ageing spine to bend over. The Medusa-like woman seems unimpressed by his attentions, but deigns to pause and preen while he makes his ministrations. It might be a comment on

the coronation of the Māori queen that year, or merely a statement on shifting ground in the battle of the sexes as women moved to greater equality in the workforce and society in the later 1960s in New Zealand.

Hungarian-born master etcher Gabor Peterdi (1915-2001) became an enduring influence on Cleavin's themes after the publication of Peterdi's book, *Printmaking: Methods old and new*, which accompanied the Brooklyn Museum's 1959 retrospective. Cleavin encountered this book while he was still at Canterbury College School of Art studying painting, and he credits Peterdi's images for enlightening him with the possibilities of print as a "malleable, literate art". Peterdi's 1947 zinc plate etching of Adam and Eve offering each other fruit while the serpent entwines their legs is the starting point for Cleavin's interpretation of the Garden of Eden, made during his Honours year at art school. Rather than being kiwi bush, the leafy background of Cleavin's *The Garden* is a composite of two different versions of *The Flight into Egypt*, a heliogravure by Martin Schongauer from 1470-74 which is in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery and the woodcut by Albrecht Dürer from 1504. In this way, Cleavin acknowledges his debt to the technical expertise of the graphic masters of the Northern Renaissance, as he learned to use printmaking "to look and resolve, translating from the verbal to the visual in the same manner that one translates from one language to another".

■ Linda Tyler

ARTWORK: Barry Cleavin, *The Garden*, 1966, relief etching, aquatint, 328 x 240mm.