

From the collection

Art



Bill Hammond (b.1947), *Twirl*, 1995, Acrylic on paper, 830x1145mm, The University of Auckland Art Collection

The mid-1990s were an important period for Lyttelton-based painter William (Bill) Hammond, whose established practice was undergoing a distinct evolution that resulted in the iconic bird paintings he is now famous for.

In contrast to his current popularity and active exhibition schedule, Hammond's exhibiting career began slowly. Graduating from the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in 1966, he didn't start exhibiting his paintings until the 1980s, working for a period as a toymaker and first exhibiting wooden constructions in the late 1970s.

Throughout the 1980s he developed a trademark style of exaggerated multiple perspectives and layered horizons, stacked and ricocheting at contradictory angles that defy the Western tradition of placing the viewer at the centre of the image. Using a clammy palette of washy reds and yellows, with hallucinogenic fervour, he depicted that decade's claustrophobic

world of suburban neuroses, of marching business suits and preening traders, wailing bedroom singers and gym work-outs, high-rise buildings and designer décor, often captioned with punk rock song titles.

It is now indelibly written into New Zealand's art mythology that, in 1989, Hammond accompanied photographer Laurence Aberhart and painter Gerda Leenards on an expedition to the subantarctic Auckland Islands. His work has not been the same since. Inspired by the pre-human environment, his dribbling paint strokes began to coagulate into the hooked beaks and tapered torsos of birds. A darker palette of mossy green washes and white streaky highlights became guano-stained land-forms and swampy forests. Rows of curling waves roll past, reprising those of Japanese prints – an influence he was able to explore further with a grant to visit Japan the following year.

Hammond is best known for his hybrid bird-people. At first they appeared in scenes reminiscent of his 80s work, loitering in bars or laid out on a table for stuffing. Titled with lines like *Waiting for Buller*, *Buller's Bar*, or *Buller's Table*, these make reference to the 19th-century lawyer and ornithologist Sir Walter Buller, responsible for preservation of thousands of native birds for collections, but also a major contributor to the extinction of many through the same activities.

There is something ominous about Hammond's bird-people, who languish in a mysterious limbo. It is not clear whether they are anticipating Buller's impending holocaust, or if their intent is more malicious, perhaps waiting in revenge. Are they birds that have become like people, or people transformed into birds – evolution or devolution? Eventually the birds would hover in formation or swing from trees, often dressed, decorated or camouflaged in the sumptuous kimono-like foliage designs evidenced in *Twirl*.

When The University of Auckland Art Collection purchased *Twirl* in 1995, Hammond's bird-land was in full swing – in the previous two years he won both the James Wallace Award and the Visa Gold Premier Award. In the same year he painted one of his best-known works, *The Fall of Icarus*, followed in 1996 by his *Placemakers* series.

This work retains some traces of his urban roots, most evident in the ghostly couple crumpling to the ground, the furniture-landscape on the pool table and the psychiatrist's couch where some extinct species unloads its anxieties. Nevertheless, there is a graphic simplicity to this painting, which is in relief to the dynamic activity of his earlier pieces and the dense, floating menageries that replaced them, as if this is the dawn moment when the nightlife is grinding to a halt and the dawn chorus is just starting to stir.

Andrew Clifford