

From the collection



Colin McCahon (1919–1987) *Let us possess one world*, 1955.

Enamel and oil on board, 750x550mm.

Gift from the artist to the Auckland University Students' Association. On long-term loan to The University of Auckland Art Collection.

John Weeks Trust, Auckland University Students' Association.

McCahon's left-handed writing wins no prizes for neatness.

In *Let us possess one world*, lower case letters crowd together, shuffled by punctuation into a tripartite scheme so that one world is hoisted proudly on a stem above the mirrored halves below. Whereas the staid pronouncements of his earlier word paintings (*I Am* and *I and Thou*) were freighted with significance by the use of cubist capitals, this looping script dips into the sensuality of the source, John Donne's seventeenth century love poem.

By painting the text in shiny Dulux Super Enamel house paint illuminated with titanium white oils, McCahon lets you look at the words and at yourself simultaneously. "Form, subject and message become order as carbon becomes diamond" as McCahon and Caselberg had written a few years earlier in *On the Nature of Art*.

Described as an aubade, or song to the dawn, Donne's "The Good Morrow" poem uses a dialogue of one to rehearse its manifesto of erotic love. Eclipsing the discovery of new worlds like America is the speaker's earth-shattering realisation that his lover completes him. She is his other half, they are two hemispheres, each has one and is one — world, that is. They find everything in each other, heaven and earth. Donne's is a prescription for image-making and McCahon chimes in with miraculous blending of autumnal Titirangi rainforest colours, putting straight with

Art

curved lines and opening up space in all directions. Beneath a veneer of clumsiness, McCahon's stubby brush points up the delicate modulation between the lyric and dramatic notes in Donne's poem, his manipulated background seismically shifting. In the space behind the words an abstracted nature intrudes like the drapery in a Cézanne still life. Nothing is perfectly still, pulsations and nuanced mood signal all the complexities of a human relationship.

Later, McCahon made whole paintings out of One, then tangled the number one and first person singular, writing on the invitation card for his Necessary Protection exhibition at Barry Lett in 1971, "The I of the sky, falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE. The T of the sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or *Old Testament*, or *Egyptian cross*."

The breakthrough of the word paintings of 1954-55 coincided with the artist's move from the South Island to Titirangi and these achievements will be contextualised by Associate-Professor Peter Simpson (English) at the Writers' and Readers' Festival in the session devoted to his book *s* on Thursday 15 May at 4.30pm.

Linda Tyler