

From the collection

Developing the new Conference Centre for the University in 1982, architects Kingston Reynolds Thom and Allardice worked with architectural drawing lecturer Pat Hanly to brighten the place up.

Hanly himself worked with Claudia Pond Eyley to make a large mural for the exterior, while Don Driver and Barry Lett were commissioned to make wall hangings. As sculptors, Greer Twiss and Peter Nicholl positioned lengths of timber and steel outside. Dick Frizzell had been on the staff at Elam as a part-timer since 1980, and was entranced with post-abstract in the United States. Francis Pound had announced the arrival of New Image painting in Auckland with a winter exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1982, and with Paul Hartigan, Denys Watkins and Gavin Chilcott, Dick Frizzell was a leading light.

Escaping from designing the packaging for slug pellets, Frizzell had fled advertising for the higher realms of cultural production in the 1970s; his painting reaching its apotheosis with the *Dancing Chicken* of 1980. Heading straight for the New York art world for confirmation of his direction, Frizzell collared American artists for advice, and was crestfallen to be returned to sender. Neil Jenney directed him to examine his own backyard and “represent”, assuring him that success would follow: “So that is what I did - one item at a time, iconicised in the middle of a generous colour field. It was the worst-selling show I have ever had.”

In *Workers on a Construction Site*, the central figure is clad in his carpenter’s apron and steel cap boots, wearing only a terry toweling hat as protection against the searing sun of an Auckland summer. A



dinky hammer on his belt, he shovels gravel into the cement mixer, a bucket of water nearby. Nothing is to scale: his massive legs and muscly chest and arms dwarf a nearby handsaw and sawhorse. Just as his form as a worker is exaggerated, his tools are shrunk, abbreviated to become toy-like signs of the hand-built nature of the job ahead. Celebrating the worker as hero, Frizzell also reveals his ironic affection for the particularities of the fast-growing kiwi suburb of the seventies. Fashionable Spanish-style haciendas parade along the top of the painting, with concrete driveways leading to the road. Frizzell contrives to peel the image back at the corner, pretending to show the four-by-two framing of the wall itself. His

aim is to reveal the artifice of painting itself, which is no longer striving to be naturalistic, or a window onto the world, but instead foregrounds the conventions of art making itself with disjunctions of scale and placement, and a flattening of form and colour.

Like a split-screen movie, Frizzell provides scenes within the scene to give more information about the activity. Inset at the bottom is a red-shirted figure in profile, his hammer lifted above his head as he aims at an upright which is cropped out of sight. Above him against a brilliant violet background, a wheelbarrow is being pushed up a makeshift ramp by the central figure, as if time has elapsed, and we are viewing the next frame in a comic strip. The imagery is recognizably kiwi, but the content is as much a display of painting skill as it is an unpacking of the construction industry’s skills. Glossy layers of enamel paint are built up and scraped back with bold shifts of colour and a heavy use of line. Even the attendant piebald dog functions to activate space, directing attention above.

After 16 years on staff, Dick Frizzell left Elam to become a full time painter in 1996. His contribution to the University will be celebrated with an exhibition at Old Government House from 10 June to 19 July. The artist will speak at the opening at 6pm on Monday 10 June, and all are welcome to attend.

Dick Frizzell, *Workers on Construction Site*, 1982, enamel on Ruffit board, 3040 x 3400mm