

## From the collection



Interviewed for the May 1966 edition of the Barry Lett newsletter to coincide with his Auckland Festival exhibition, Don Binney responded affirmatively when asked if there was a peculiar sort of light in New Zealand that influenced his way of seeing. The interviewer was summarising Auckland Art Gallery director Peter Tomory's introduction to a catalogue of painting shown at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1965: "in these islands, the Pacific light burns and bleaches, so that in high summer, black and white predominate". Don had only been out of the country a few times to Australia, but he reported "seeing New Zealand for the first time after two weeks away...one had the impression of an iron land, strong and clear in this light." As a fiercely nationalist painter, Don Binney laboured to try and convey the power and simplicity of that vision.

Binney had married Australian-born historian Judith Musgrove in 1963, the year after he completed his training as an art teacher with Peter Smith at Auckland Teachers' College. The Binneys shared an interest in colonial history, and during the mid-1960s while he worked on iconic works such as *Colonial Garden Bird*, she published *The Legacy of Guilt: A Life of Thomas Kendall*. Her researches occasioned a visit to Kawau Island in the summer of 1966. Lying in the Hauraki Gulf, eight kilometres north of Auckland, Kawau had a complicated human and natural history. Governor George Grey had bought the whole island in 1865, introducing wallabies

amongst other exotic species in 1870, and building a mansion house. Mined for manganese copper from 1844-1852, Kawau is the "looted island" of this work's title.

While studying design for a Diploma of Fine Arts at Elam, Don Binney had settled on a subject matter drawn from certain characteristically local motifs: native birds, Victorian wooden architecture, modified landscapes. The pioneer of modern birdwatching in New Zealand, Richard Broadley Sibson (1911-1994) was Don Binney's Classics master at King's College in Otahuhu. "Sibi" had helped found the Ornithological Society in May 1940, and was its president from 1952-54 when Don Binney was a schoolboy. King's College had its own Bird Club, and Don was a junior member of Forest & Bird. He later wrote, "In birdwatching I found the way to enter the landscape and know it as an environment". Using the hard black outline and layers of flattened forms characteristic of Japanese

woodblock prints as interpreted by the Australian bird artist Vaughan Murray Griffin (1903-1992), Don Binney transformed images of airborne native birds such as tui, kereru and kaka into icons of New Zealand identity.

Unique amongst all Don's work, this painting shows a common dolphin, *Delphinus delphis*, saving energy by breaking clear of the water into the less dense air on the leeward (sheltered) side of Kawau. Responding to the opening of Marineland in Napier in 1965, and in the light of Anthony Alpers' study *Dolphins* which had been published in 1963, Don felt compelled to draw attention to the migratory patterns of marine mammals and how unsuited they are to captivity. Don observed that by November 2010 when it closed, Marineland had been responsible for the deaths of over seventy Common and Dusky dolphins taken from the wild off the east coast.

Though they may be sparked by conservationist concerns, ultimately Don's paintings are sophisticated compositions relating tone and form in space. The shapes of living creatures are usually in profile, and parallel to the picture plane so that they chime and rhyme with the rhythms of the land itself, represented in simplified form beyond. As he explained to Barry Lett in May 1966: "I am becoming closely involved with a specific area, a specific time and specific occurrences within this area... a dolphin which I could see as the only wholesome and unscathed thing, smashing through the water at Kawau Island. I spent a very still hot weekend watching all the wallabies dying of cyanide poison and seeing the looted ravaged landscape of Kawau. Any of these, be it death or the appearance of a living form in a landscape can motivate a painting. After that, the painting takes over."

A lecturer in painting for 24 years at the Elam School of Fine Arts from 1974 until 1998, Don Binney died on 15 September 2012.

*Don Binney (1940-2012) In the Lee of a Looted Island 1966, oil on board, 1080 x 960mm.*