

## From the collection



With her husband the eminent psychiatrist Fraser McDonald, Jacqueline Fahey lived her married life in hospital houses until 1984.

Moving to French Bay in Titirangi after a decade living at Carrington, where Fraser was Medical Superintendent, Fahey continued to use her domestic life as the subject matter for her work. Often, fraught family relationships directed her pictorial narratives, with the artist invoking classical mythology to give her imagery resonance.

In this instance, the three figures depicted are her elder sister, Barbara, who wears the hat in the foreground and gestures through a patch of sunshine yellow; the artist's youngest daughter, Emily, sitting back on the couch with her feet up on the Victorian deal table, and the matriarch Margaret Fahey, seen in profile at right, seated in a roll arm chair. In the recently-published second volume of Jacqueline Fahey's autobiography, *Before I Forget*, there is an explanation of the greater significance of this grouping: "Mum had stayed with us at Carrington after a fall once, and I'd done a lot of drawings of her. Back in Carrington then I'd had a lot to do looking after her and I didn't want to stress myself out, so I had stopped painting. But I could not control my looking and seeing and

took to drawing again, often random and on-the-hoof stuff. Now in Titirangi, seeing more of Mum, those drawings came back to me."

This explains the sketchy, seemingly unfinished aspect of this work, where black outlines predominate and the colouring has been abandoned. A shallow interior space gives on to two large picture windows at the back, with fluffy clouds in a blue sky and a flash of green bush visible, the serenity of nature beyond the living room contrasting with the chaos within it. With its profusion of diagonals and tangle of lines, the scene spills toward the viewer like a tilting stage set.

Aspects of the tableau are recognisable as symbols of the traditional realm of the unrelenting tasks of housewifery: the basket of unfolded washing in its wicker basket and the skeins of wool on the floor. Flitting birds, found elsewhere in Fahey's work where female characters are shown speaking, animate the air in concordance with the gesturing of Barbara's left hand. Central to the composition is the three-legged Victorian gypsy fortune-telling table, topped by letters, with its silken fringe fiercely bristling, recognisable from a photographic portrait of Jacqueline Fahey made in 1987. Beneath one of the bobbin-turned legs,

capitalised letters spell out the work's title. Rather than suggesting that Barbara is a modern-day soothsayer, the tripod table's role is to point to the nature of threes, showing how these women can be seen as a kind of Holy Trinity.

"MUM" is writ large, but indistinctly, and similarly, the mother figure is almost indecipherable, hidden beneath foliage and scribbled lines. Only her stoic profile seems resolutely described. In a recent radio interview, Fahey explained that although she frequently saw her mother (who lived well into her ninth decade), they were estranged until almost the end of Margaret Fahey's life. Here the artist is the dispassionate observer, using her image-making skills to configure the emotionally charged mother-daughter relationship as universally significant. *Before I Forget* offers insight into the intent of this imagery of mother, daughter, grand-daughter: "Out of that messy collection [of drawings] came something consistent: a sort of Greek tragedy-cum-King Lear rendering of my mother's decline. Her handmaidens in her travails were my daughter Emily and my sister Barbara. They were placating, soothing, and distressed in themselves. A grieving Greek chorus. Now in Titirangi I was able to resolve the compositions and carry those ideas to fruition...The maiden, the mature woman and the hag. A female holy trinity, an eternal cycle. Her shrines had been established at waterfalls in Ireland. Later the new priests of Christianity replaced her with the Virgin Mary." Typically, Fahey loops back from her own relationships through Catholicism to invoke her Irish ancestry, giving a political and religious twist to her narrative of connection, while noisily dispelling the ideal of intergenerational familial harmony.

*Jacqueline Fahey, Barbara Speaks to Mum, 1986, 510 x 1040mm, mixed media on paper*