

## From the collection



*Pushing it*



*Two Selves*



*Muse Madness*

Living and working in Italy for six months in 1984 immersed Jane Zusters in the Neo-Expressionist works of the Italian artists of the *Transavanguardia* as well as the triptych format of the Renaissance altar painting.

In particular she admired the success that Mimmo Paladino had in establishing the connections between disparate elements in the same painting.

She also had the opportunity to attend the Venice Biennale, where Howard Hodgkins was representing Britain with *Forty Paintings* 1973-84. His work showed her how to make representational pictures of emotional situations, shaped by the rooms they happen in, and the deteriorating memories they survive in. "Howard Hodgkin paints emotional situations just as Cézanne painted apples," she remembers.

Following these leads, Zusters returned to her studio on the fourth floor of the old Greer's clothing factory at 38 Douglas Street in Ponsonby in 1985 and began to paint postmodern pictures. Closely involved with both the peace movement and feminism, she was visited there by Christine Chabon, the first French agent to come to New Zealand before the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior*. After the police found Zusters' name and address on board the yacht *Ouvea*, they too, visited her

studio. This triptych contains traces of that time, with the gun in the third panel (titled "Muse Madness") a reference to the cloak-and-dagger aspect of espionage to which she had been exposed.

Time puts intense emotions in perspective; Zusters tries to take them out again. She does this with a mixture of recognisable and completely abstract shapes, because aspects of the subjects which she paints pictures about would lose their meaning if they were too specifically presented. She therefore finds herself forced into metaphor, while still littering her panels with clues for the viewer to follow.

The first panel in this triptych features the abbreviation for the artist's hometown, Christchurch, at upper left. Being both the place where she was born in 1951 and where she studied for degrees in Fine Arts and English, Christchurch remains her spiritual home, where she now lives again in the suburb of Linwood. This panel is loaded with gestural mark-making and sgraffito, a technique which originated in Italy - of scratching into the wet surface with a stick to reveal the layers beneath. Mostly black and white, this turns out to be a painting about a feeling of diffidence that faltered; an emotional situation lost not because it passed, but because it didn't happen. Like a blast from a CO<sup>2</sup> fire

extinguisher, the hot, lusty reds have been framed - and kept at a distance - by an icy cloud of scratchy white paint, sexlessly frothed on with brush that, like the moment, dried up. As a counterpoint to all this possibility is the neat little collar and tie of conformity, tucked in on the right.

In the central panel, "Two Selves", the outline of the artist's smiling face regards her doppelganger across a complex architectural interior, articulated by brushy passages of white paint.

Again in the third panel, two heads face each other, forming a pattern that can be read as either a vase or two profiles. A sense of hollowness creeps in through the stark section of descending stairs leading to an ossuary of bones at the bottom, and a skull shape looms menacingly through the window on the right. Yet despite this scary scenario, the artist has hope for fresh beginnings. A bright pink and yellow sunrise is on the horizon: seen beyond the crypt, it captures a sense of lively renewal that characterises the idea of new life.

Linda Tyler

*Jane Zusters, Untitled (triptych) 1987, acrylic on canvas, each panel 840 x 1120mm*