

From the collection



Established in 1964 by Auckland gallerist Kees Hos and philanthropist Dr Walter Auburn, the New Zealand Print Council flourished for over a decade before slowly going into eclipse.

Guaranteed exhibitions in the nation's major public galleries as members, artists quickly joined. Mervyn Williams, a Whakatane-born artist who had studied painting at Elam part-time in 1957 and 1958, but who never completed his diploma, was one of the first to take up membership. Working as a dinnerware designer for Crown Lynn in West Auckland alongside Frank Carpay, he had met immigrant artist Ted Dutch who taught him how to make serigraphs or silkscreen prints.

In the silkscreen process, the artist blocks out ink using a stencil placed under its screen of fine silk, and on top of the paper. When a rubber

squeegee or scraper is used to push ink evenly over the screen, colour coats only that part of the paper which is not covered by the stencil. A multiple set of prints can be "pulled" using this method, with a new screen for each colour. Although it is quick, easy and relatively cheap to prepare prints to make many copies of an image in this way, it is highly skilled. The screens have to align exactly or else there is a messy edge to the colour blocks, known as "bad registration". The usual edition size is 60 to 100 prints, with the artist including only the best results in the set. Many materials can be screenprinted, not just paper, including plastic, metal, stone and T-shirts.

Over half the prints in the Print Council's shows were silkscreens, with the medium growing in popularity as Pop Art came into fashion. Bold, bright colours and patterns were familiar from advertising in the postwar consumer boom, and had come to be appropriated into works in art galleries during the era, as part of a strategy by British and American Pop artists to have art value of commercial processes reassessed. Screenprinting was highly suitable as a process to print flat and dense colour, and is seen to effect here in the bright contrasting stripes of red, white and blue, cleanly printed.

Six major touring exhibitions were organised by the Print Council between 1967 and 1976, with the first opening at Auckland City Art Gallery. Ambitious in scope, it included 74 works by 16 artists including Mervyn Williams, and helped develop a domestic market for artists' prints which were more affordable than paintings but still original works of art.

By 1973, the Print Council was in trouble financially, and its final exhibition was held in

Masterton in 1976, with the Wairarapa Art Gallery (now Aratoi) accepting all the prints from the Print Council's collection into its art store. Capitalising on the Print Council's promotional efforts, dealer Barry Lett commissioned 12 artists to produce an unsigned, uneditioned and unnumbered set of prints called the Barry Lett Multiples. Costing just \$35 for the full set of 12, prints were made to meet demand, with the aim of making art more accessible to a wider audience.

Abstraction is Mervyn Williams' interest, but here he has combined an image of an object at the centre of his pattern, like the body of a spider surrounded by legs. It is a detailed technical drawing of a compressive mechanical device to symbolise pressure and stress, surrounded by optical patterns. In Greek myth, Dionysus granted King Midas his wish that all he touched would turn to gold, but Midas let his greed blind him to the consequences. Soon (to his regret) Midas's food, drink and even his lovely daughter were irrevocably golden. Williams' title is redemptive: *Midas finds his Soul*, but the artist has written that he thinks of the image as cautionary: "It symbolises certain ill-considered tendencies in our society...[which] endlessly exploit both physical and social environments to render them ultimately unsuitable for human habitation."

Mervyn Williams, Midas finds his Soul, 1968, screenprint

Linda Tyler