

From the collection



During 1966 Michael Smither travelled to Melbourne for a solo exhibition of 60 paintings that had been arranged for him at the Argus Gallery by the eminent art historian Bernard Smith, who described him as “the outstanding landscape painter of his generation”.

While in Melbourne, Smither met the Viennese-born Australian artist Anne Graham, and was commissioned to write the piano score for a short film about her life. Returning to New Plymouth, he shared a studio with the inaugural director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, John Maynard, and the sculptor Don Driver.

Striated like a piano keyboard, this pattern of reflections of light and shade through the walls

of the boat shed in Pukekura Park are a study in line and proportion which show the artist navigating away from his signature realism towards abstraction. The ostensible subject was occasioned by the artist’s residence in The Gables, New Plymouth’s historic colonial hospital, situated in Pukekura Park. Dubbed “The Wonder Years” in 2006 by Auckland Art Gallery curator Ron Brownson in his survey of Smither’s work from the New Plymouth period

(1964-1970), the period spent living in the park was characterised by enormous productivity.

Smither’s academic career began in 1959 but was brief. He lasted only eighteen months at Elam School of Fine Arts, where he was taught by John Weeks, Lois White, Robert Ellis, Peter Brown, Kees Hos and Peter Tomory and met contemporaries Stanley Palmer, Don Binney, Suzanne Goldberg and Malcolm Warr. Returning to New Plymouth to work as a trawlerman in 1963, he met Elizabeth Harrington (known then as Harry, and now as the poet Elizabeth Smither) who converted to Catholicism to marry him. Their first child, Sarah, was born the following year at The

Gables. Elizabeth Smither’s first book of poetry *Here Come the Clouds* was published in 1975 and her third, *The Sarah Train* in 1980. The marriage ended in 1983.

In 1966, however, domestic harmony prevailed. Michael Smither composed and painted, his wife wrote. Landscape and domestic subjects dominated in both her poetry and his painting. Smither himself describes his own approach to motifs and imagery for his work at this time as “patching items from the scrapbook of life”, often with symbolic purpose. His work from this period often features children’s antics and the rocks of Taranaki, as well as including the inevitable Christian imagery occasioned by his commission for new Stations of the Cross for the modernised St Joseph’s Church in New Plymouth where the family worshipped.

Referring to a more abstract work from the same year, *Tale of the Fish*, Smither commented that the patterns of fish fins and light patterns on the surface of the lake reminded him of the line breaks and stresses of a poem. “Pukekura Park has a boatshed that makes a quiet place for the lake’s carp to hang out in. Their quietly undulating fins fascinated me. I spent hours drawing them. Their repeated movements were like the lines of a poem.”

Another version of this same subject, entitled *Boats at Pukekura Park*, painted in 1967 and including red and yellow rowboats, is in the collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery.

Linda Tyler

Michael Smither (b.1939)
The Boat Shed, c.1966
oil on hardboard, 910 x 930mm
The University of Auckland Art Collection