

From the collection



The art practice of Peter Smith, an expert sailor, often tackled maritime themes, using a sophisticated arsenal of artistic devices.

In this work, there are three representational systems at work which combine to convey the experience of sailing in the Hauraki Gulf, both literally and metaphorically. Dichotomies are traversed: night cleaves to day, and a journey that was forecast through mathematical calculation is rendered as an indelible real experience, complete with wind, weather and surging tide.

Never one to shy away from new materials, Peter Smith was one of the very first New Zealand artists of the twentieth century to wrest aluminium from its lowly associations with cladding as a building material, or as an expedient tool for plate-making in the etching process. His exploitation of its potential for graphic mark-making in painting is indicative of his ingenuity and inventiveness.

Trained as a primary school teacher at

Auckland Teachers' College, he won, through his creativity, a coveted third year in art, and graduated to become an Art Adviser for the Department of Education in the Auckland region from 1946 to 1953. Completing his Bachelor of Arts with majors in Education and Philosophy part-time while he travelled the region showing school teachers how to bring art alive in schools led to his being

seconded back to Teachers' College to develop a course where fine arts graduates could train to become teachers. By 1980 when this work was made, he had become the most highly respected and influential art educator of his generation in New Zealand. His revolutionising of secondary school art teaching practice was recognised by the award of an OBE for services to art education in 1986.

One of Peter Smith's innovations was to provide teachers with skills in printmaking, including etching. He showed them how aluminium coated with asphaltum (which was resistant to acid) was easy to scratch a drawing into. Submerging the aluminium into ferric chloride until the acid ate away at the metal where there were scratches, then inking the plate and pressing moistened paper onto it, would magically reveal an image. What had been a silver line cut into the darkness of the black, printed as a black line on the dazzling white of the paper.

In *Tiritiri Matangi (Transit)*, that miracle of art as transformation of materials is played out through a navigational metaphor. Intersecting white lines that are etched into the black on the left of the composition continue right through the centre of a compass rose, and point to the profile of the island on the horizon. Acting like the pair of dividers that sailors use to measure nautical miles, their pincer movement is the hinge between two systems of representation. One is the planographic map which uses a system of lines to represent contours seen from above (the island is located in the top right of the shaded area) and the other is the side view convention for characteristic coastal profiles from the history of maritime painting. From looking like a tiny flattened platypus in the map, *Tiritiri Matangi* (the name means "tossed by the wind") is transformed in the painting to a place of dark mystery, outlined on the horizon like a surfacing whale.

Smith also combines collage with *trompe l'oeil*, like the Cubists before him. He labours the physical fact of his art work's flatness, melding the making with the meaning, so that the content of the work, the beauty and majesty of the maritime environment, literally bubbles to the surface. The eye is deceived into reading the torn edges of paper as the foaming crests of waves in the foreground, resulting in a celebration not just of sailing but of painting as an art of representation and illusion.

Caption: Peter Farrar Smith (1925-2012), Tiri Tiri Matangi (Transit) c.1980, aluminium and paper on board 600 x 400mm

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