

## From the collection



Dame Robin White's portrayals of New Zealand and the Pacific are instantly recognisable. Although the word is often overused, these are iconic images, especially because her subject matter is usually anything but. Rather than grand buildings and sweeping landscapes, she prefers quiet unassuming structures like the Maketu Fish'n Chip Shop or the Portobello Pub; simple architecture that is ubiquitous. But they're always specific settings that bring a personal response to a place, usually including a local occupant, such as the painting of Sam Hunt at Bottle Creek that hangs in the General Library, or the more autobiographical *This is me at Kaitangata*. They remind us that these are social places used by people and bring a human scale to the landscape. *Mana Railway Station* continues in this vein and perhaps pays homage to the famous painting of Cass railway station by Rita Angus, an artist whose clarity of depiction was an important influence on White.

White graduated in 1967 from Elam School of Fine Arts, where she found the teaching of Colin

McCahon inspirational. After studying at Teachers' Training College, she took a teaching position at Mana College in Porirua, moving from Auckland with her boyfriend Sam Hunt, who she'd met that year at the University Arts Festival. During her tenure she taught and encouraged Geoffrey Crombie, who went on to enrol at Elam and later became a member of Split Enz under the name Noel Crombie. They lived in adjacent cottages at Bottle Creek on Paremata Harbour and she soon became a full-time artist. She then moved to the Otago Peninsula in 1972, and into Dunedin in 1980.

Having become involved in the Baha'i faith in 1971, in 1982 she moved with her husband and son, both named Michael, to become part of a Baha'i community in Kiribati. Her experience of island life had an immediate impact on her work, which has since incorporated traditional techniques, including the production of a Fijian masi (barkcloth) in collaboration with Lautoka artists Bale Jione and Leba Toki, which was exhibited at the Sixth Asia-Pacific Triennial in

Brisbane in 2009. She returned to New Zealand to live in Masterton in 1999 and was made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2003.

In July, White spoke at the opening of the current Gus Fisher Gallery exhibition *Collateral: Printmaking as social commentary*, curated by Professor of Art History, Elizabeth Rankin to look at the various ways printmaking has been used as a political medium. The four artists featured are American Daniel Heyman, South African Diane Victor, with Christchurch residents Michael Reed and Sandra Thomson. In her speech, White recalled that, while living in Dunedin, she visited Canterbury and encountered Thomson making multi-coloured block prints, a technique she quickly adopted and put to use in her *Beginner's Guide to Gilbertese* (1983) series, which seem monochromatic but uses four different blocks to produce a range of tones from dark to light.

White also noted the way printmaking sits at one remove from the artist's hand so it can convey a message without their ego getting in the way. It is a partnership between the artist and the medium in which the medium dictates the requirements that need to be accommodated by the artist. Unlike handwriting, for example, there is a personal detachment that allows a message to be conveyed relatively unmediated by the presence of the artist.

As part of *Collateral's* weekly event programme, on Saturday 13th August at 1pm, a multi-disciplinary panel of researchers from across the University will respond to issues raised by *Collateral*, including themes of political violence and human rights. More details are available from [www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz)

*Andrew Clifford*

*Robin White (b.1946), Mana Railway Station, 1970  
Screenprint, 301 x 425mm  
The University of Auckland Art Collection*