

From the collection

Winning a national art award in 2003, the year he completed his MFA at Elam, brought Rohan Wealleans instant notoriety.

The judge described the winning work as a huge bright vagina that he wanted to crawl inside, ensuring that the sponsors, a Waikato electricity supply company, immediately turned it down for acquisition. Since then, Rohan Wealleans has carved out his own special place in the pantheon of male artists with dodgy sexual politics. The consensus, even amongst curators who like his work, is that the artist “flays his surfaces and opens them in a labial way”. Writers shudder at his “invasive, violent even misogynistic” incisions into acrylic paint as if it was flesh. *Blade Healers* 2008, recently purchased for The University of Auckland Art Collection, shows Wealleans five years on, still unrepentant in his wielding of the craft knife, apparently now ready to construe the cutting itself as therapeutic.

Weighing over 20 kilos, the laboured surface of the painting reveals the strata of 80 different coats of colour built up laboriously on a commercial canvas support after each layer has dried. The accumulation of surfaces has been carved back so that each figure is covered with indentations revealing the tide-marks left by each colour like the rings of a cut tree trunk. Deploying squatting and languishing female

figures as ciphers to visually link the composition to the century-old proto-Cubist work by Spanish painter Pablo Picasso entitled *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907, Wealleans signals his own breakthrough. Just as studying the art of so-called



primitive people from the Iberian peninsula inspired Picasso to facet and fracture the forms of the naked prostitutes in his figural grouping, so Wealleans ushers in a new era with his signature layering of acrylic paint and cutting technique in *Blade Healers*. The painting even bore the original

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working title *Demoiselles* before it became *Blade Healers* in a word association chain which began with the work's predominant colour, and proceeded via the Australian canine breed, the blue heeler, to the final amalgam of knife and balm.

To make his work, Wealleans has cut out the shapes of five female forms, mimicking the structure of Picasso's *Demoiselles*, and then re-fixed the excised paint onto the figures as necklaces and other adornments for the figures. This approach to recombining cut and reconfigured paint on a two-dimensional surface is a new development for Wealleans, who has previously only applied his marbled off-cuts of layered acrylic paint to flat surfaces non-figuratively.

Made during the artist's recent residency in the McCahon house in Titirangi, *Blade Healers* uses the same method of rail and suspension for an unstretched canvas that the original occupant of that house used for his Northland Panels. McCahon's eight-panel masterpiece was famously painted outside on the deck at 67 Otitori Road one sunny afternoon in November 1958. Made metres away almost exactly 50 years later, Wealleans's reprise occupied him for a full four months.

Linda Tyler

Rohan Wealleans (b.1978) *Blade Healers* 2008
acrylic on canvas, 2000 x 2000mm, The University of
Auckland Art Collection.