From the collection

Named after Séraphine Louis (1864-1962), a French naïve painter born a century earlier whose richly fantasised works were inspired by her religious faith, Séraphine Pick was destined to make art.

Both parents were artists and they became the caretakers of Motuora in the Bay of Islands where brother RuA (also now a painter) was born in 1968. A hearing impairment that was not recognised until she was seven years old led to Séraphine being classified as a disruptive child who got sent to draw at the back of the class by exasperated teachers. Inevitably, all this practice and a conducive family environment led her to study painting at the University of Canterbury where her father Beresford had graduated with his Diploma in Fine Arts the year before she was born.

Finishing her BFA in 1987, she worked as a high school art teacher in Rangiora until a successful application to the Olivia Spencer Bower Foundation led to the art award which allowed her to become a full-time painter in 1994. During the following year in Wellington as the Rito Angus Cottage Artist-in-Residence, she experienced the tipping point of commercial success when outlines of the second-hand iron hospital bed, symbolic of her childhood bronchitis, surfaced in paintings like this one. Fifteen years later, her work is the subject of a major retrospective of 120 paintings mounted by the Christchurch Art Gallery, with a 184-page catalogue featuring essays by Jon Bywater and Allan Smith, two staff members from the Elam School of Fine Arts, where she once taught.

Séraphine Pick describes her art as illustrating the concept of memory. Untitled (the dress) 1995 has a veritable Christmas carol’s worth of imagery – eleven jugs, seven beds, three paper bags (with eyes cut out for wearing over the head), and one large white dress. As in a counting mnemonic, familiar parts can add up to a cryptic whole. There is a hint of McCahon about the vessels, perhaps a reference to his iconic 1948 painting where the blessed virgin is compared to a jug of pure water, and a nod to Pick’s art school contemporary Shane Cotton in the elegant distribution of multiple pots. Like Cotton, who favoured burnt sienna in this period, Séraphine Pick’s bed paintings were kept monochromatic, with white shapes floating, ghost-like, out of the darkness. These graffiti-covered inky backgrounds complemented the bituminous palette used by then-boyfriend Peter Robinson, but the scrawny flock at centre is all her own. Part bridal gown, and part confirmation outfit, with the upper part of its full gored skirt being studded with teats, the dress of this work’s title is both a threat and a promise of motherhood to come.

Eminent scholarly line-up

The line-up of Hood and Seelye Fellows is just as illustrious as usual, giving opportunities for University of Auckland staff and students to engage with top scholars from many parts of the world.

Seelye Charitable Trust Visiting Fellowships
Three Seelye Fellows have been confirmed, one for August this year and two for 2010.

The first to arrive will be Clare Hansen, a professor of twentieth-century literature from the University of Southampton in the UK, who is to be hosted by the Liggins Institute and the Faculty of Arts.

As a leading authority in the UK on the interplay between literature and science/medicine, and on popular science as a literary genre, she works at the interface between science and arts.

In the first two months of 2010 Professor Gretchen Hoffmann from the University of California, Santa Barbara in the United States will be hosted by the Faculty of Science.

An internationally recognised expert on the physiological effects of ocean acidification on marine organisms, Professor Hoffmann works on the cutting edge of research relevant to worldwide changes such as global warming.

To be hosted by the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences in mid-2010 is Naomi Eisenstadt, Director of the Social Exclusion Taskforce in the Cabinet Office of the UK.

She will share her experience, gained in the UK’s Sure Start programme, in integrating children’s services, including health, education and social services. This will be of great benefit to the Kaa Motuora Well Child Consortium, which aims to supply evidence-based child health research and evaluations of programmes to senior policy advisers in government.

Hood Fellowships
Professor Gregory Claeys from the Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, will be hosted by the Faculty of Arts in August/September.

Professor Claeys is a leading scholar specialising in the history of nineteenth and twentieth century political thought, who has published prolifically and is co-editor of The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Political Thought and other standard reference works.

Marc Bekoff, Emeritus Professor of the University of Colorado in the US and one of the world leaders in animal emotion and ethics, will give a public lecture at The University of Auckland on 7 October.

Author (or co-author) of books such as Wild Justice: The Moral Life of Animals (2009), Animals at Play: Rules of the Game (2008) and Animals Matter: A Biologist Explains Why We Should Treat Animals With Compassion and Respect (Shambala, November 2007), as well as the four-volume Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relations, Dr Becker is to be the keynote speaker at the New Zealand Companion Animal Council conference.

John Van Maanen, professor of organisation studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US, will be hosted later this year by the Faculty of Business and Economics.

Professor van Maanen is a world-class authority in the fields of socialisation, occupational conflicts, organisational careers and the various ways occupational identities take shape. He is also one of the discipline’s best-known methodologists, and widely hailed as the “father of organisational theory”.

Christopher Rojek, Professor of Sociology and Culture at Brunel University in the UK, will be hosted later this year by the Faculties of Arts and Science.

Professor Rojek has made outstanding and internationally recognised contributions to the leisure field, the study of celebrity, cultural studies and social theory.