

## From the collection

Named after Séraphine Louis (1864-1962), a French naive 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 Moturoa 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 Rita 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 scary frock 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.



Séraphine Pick (b.1964)  
*Untitled (the dress)* 1995  
 Oil, pencil and crayon on canvas