

From the collection

Art

Out on his bicycle selling Rawleights products door-to-door in Greymouth in the sixties, Toss Woollaston could only dream of becoming a fulltime painter.

Complaining of his lot to Dunedin patron Charles Brasch in a letter in the early months of 1965, he was surprised to receive the first of what would become quarterly payments. This beneficence enabled Woollaston to stop hawking household cleaners and develop his artistic career. Coinciding with the opening of Barry Lett Galleries, Brasch's financial support gave Woollaston the opportunity to travel in the North Island collecting landscape subjects for his first solo exhibition in Auckland in November of that year.

Having grown up in Taranaki "under a dreaming blue sky", it was this region he travelled to from the South Island to refresh his landscape style. "The place seems to mean more and more to me" he wrote to his wife Edith in 1966. There were many commentators who felt that there was no mileage left in regionalism and Woollaston made a determined effort to shift away from descriptive topographical painting to try and capture the energy inherent in the geomorphology of the land itself. Art critic (and Distinguished Alumnus of The University of Auckland), Ian Wedde, praised Woollaston's ability to capture the turbulence and vitality of creation, as well as its massive calm. For the benefit of those who made disparaging remarks about his muddy palette, Woollaston explained that he wanted to paint the colour of the earth after it had absorbed the heat of the sun. This sensual and empathetic approach to depicting specific localities distinguishes his work from the realism of his contemporaries.

Woollaston's parents were fundamentalist Christian sharemilking dairy farmers, and he was born in rural Huinga near Toko in Taranaki. In his book *Sage Tea* he reveals the repressiveness of his upbringing – the beverage of the title was



Taranaki Landscape 1965, 609 x 808mm, Oil on hardboard.

administered to him as his mother's cure for adolescent sexual impulses. In 1928 at the age of 18 years he escaped to pick fruit on a Nelson orchard and took art lessons from Hugh Scott. Travelling to Dunedin to benefit from the enlightened modernist approach of Robert Nettleton Field at the art school there, he developed his signature expressionist technique alongside Colin McCahon and Doris Lusk. Marrying fellow artist Edith Alexander, he settled into art and orchard work in the Nelson region until a young family precipitated the move to Greymouth and a more stable income.

His surviving correspondence from 1965 shows how family drew him back to Taranaki in that year:

"My father is 85 and anxious that I should go and see him for what he believes may be the last time," he writes. English-born John Woollaston lived for another decade, but the mid-sixties return to Taranaki enabled his son to establish two important leitmotives – Bayly's Hill and Mt Egmont – which he would make repeated and systematic use of in his painting for the next decade. Selling 325 pounds worth of work in his Barry Lett Gallery exhibition that year, he continued his exploration of the region until he reached a culmination point with the solo exhibition "Woollaston: A Taranaki Excursion" at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth in 1977.

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