

Clare Reilly, Primitive Neo-Romantic (Gail Ross)

A primitive neo-romantic in a postmodern world, Clare Reilly holds the unfashionable view that cynicism erodes the human spirit while nature has the potential to restore it. Approaching the indigenous landscape and its flora and fauna with humility, she creates paintings imbued with a poetic stillness. Reilly is part of a long tradition of New Zealand romantic and neo-romantic artists, including Alfred Sharpe, Trevor Lloyd, John Lysaght Moore, E. Mervyn Taylor and Stewart MacLennan, whose art reflects the timeless beauty of nature. Like them, her objective is to capture the spirit of place; however where their work was tinged with a fear that they may have been recording the last remnants of the indigenous environment, Reilly celebrates its survival and resilience. Serene and meditative, her paintings are sacred works for a secular age.



(Fig. 1: Clare Reilly, *Wetland Tui, Westland*, 2008, oil on board, 1000 x 800 mm).

Wetland Tui, Westland, 2008, (Fig. 1), for example, focuses on the quiet beauty of the area, even though it was inspired by her concern that vast tracts of wetlands were being drained for use as marginal grazing rather than being recognised as integral parts of the ecosystem. It depicts a lone tui gliding through the evening light in a landscape where the rimu forest and tussock are reduced to decorative pattern, and tranquillity is suggested by the sky and clouds reflected in the wetlands below. Though intended to

proclaim the necessity to protect the wetlands, it is not in any sense didactic. Nor despite its title, is it a topographical representation, instead it resonates with what she refers to as memory of place. Unmistakably a regionalist landscape, it has the meditative air of a medieval fresco.

Reilly is a primitive artist in the sense that she is largely self-taught, her formal art education ended when she left school in 1973 to study law at Victoria University. Rather than abandoning her art, however, she and two fellow students leased a derelict house in Everton Terrace to use as studio space.¹ At this stage, Reilly's landscapes and figure paintings reflected her admiration of Paul Klee, Marc Chagall and Henri Rousseau. In 1975 she made an extended trip to Europe where she was able to study their art at first hand, but it was exposure to medieval and early renaissance art which proved to be the most formative experience of her visit. She recalls being overwhelmed by the luminosity, colouration and naïve landscape of Giotto's frescos at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, and the luminosity of the Rose Window at Chartres Cathedral. Reilly came to understand how artists of this era used harmonious colour, diffused light, simplified form and an accessible iconography, to create works which inspired and invited a devotional response.²

When Reilly resumed painting at the Everton Terrace studio, hard-edged landscapes began to take precedence in her work. She met Max Podstolski at the studio, an artist who shared her primitive approach, and after taking part in the Seven Young Wellington Artists Exhibition at the Antipodes Gallery in 1976, they left to pursue their careers together as artists in the South Island. Reilly planned to study at the Canterbury School of Art but a disastrous entry interview with Bill Sutton caused her to change her mind. Examining examples of her landscapes, he observed "I see you've been greatly influenced by my work".³ Familiar though she was with Colin McCahon, Rita Angus, Robin White, Michael Smither and Don Binney, Reilly had no idea who Sutton was, let alone that he was one of Canterbury's leading regionalists. Deafening silence ensued followed by a tour of the art school where a Wellington painter she admired was at work in one of the studios. Now near the end of his degree, he appeared to be struggling. Sutton's remark that the student had been far too confident when he enrolled, but that "...they had knocked the stuffing out of him", led to Reilly withdrawing her application, determined not to suffer a similar fate.⁴

Since then, she and Podstolski have remained resolutely outside the mainstream. In 2001, they established the Primitive Bird Group “...to symbolise our shared artistic passion, and to enable us to generate synergy through what we have in common: a primitivist affinity and love of and predilection for depicting birds”.⁵ It also enabled them to counteract the isolation they felt as primitive painters in what Podstolski described as a soulless postmodern era. Despite sharing a common vision, the initial stylistic similarities in their art had by now dissipated, with Podstolski’s pictographics continuing to show the influence of Paul Klee, Joan Miro and Wassily Kandinsky;⁶ while Reilly’s hard-edged landscapes demonstrated her admiration of medieval and early renaissance art.



(Fig. 2: Clare Reilly, *Yellow-crowned Parakeets - Matukituki*, 2008, oil on board, 840 x 1000 mm).

Reilly has built up an iconography which she uses to suggest narrative and atmosphere. Angular rocks and wind-swept trees denote endurance; verdant bush and berry-laden trees indicate plenitude; serenity is suggested by diffused light, harmonious colour, and reflections in calm water. Broken branches and barren hillsides represent mankind’s destruction of the natural environment, while native birds symbolise nature’s resilience to man’s intrusion.⁷ This is evident in *Yellow-crowned Parakeets – Matukituki*, 2008, (Fig. 2), which celebrates the endurance and beauty of the natural environment. It features a Giotto-like island of schist complete with its own ecosystem,

lying in a pool of pristine water in the bed of the Matukituki River.⁸ Here Reilly uses the bird motif in the traditional sense to signal joy, freedom and the uplifting of the soul. Like many of her paintings, the work is imbued with a quasi-religious atmosphere; however, while Reilly regards herself as a spiritual person she has no attachment to any organised religion. Instead she is able to discern in nature the same spiritual resonance that others may experience only in a formal place of worship.

The motif of a bird in a landscape bears a superficial similarity to Don Binney's work, and the artists do share a common concern for the environment and reverence for spirit of place; but where Binney's emblematic birds are linked with issues of national identity,⁹ Reilly uses the motif mainly for its spiritual symbolism and to express the rapport she feels for native birds.¹⁰ Indeed, the bird motif encapsulates Reilly's approach to artmaking, "There's an utter, utter joy and pleasure in working with paint that fulfils me tremendously. I feel like I'm flying".¹¹ The flight of the birds also relates to her love of modern dance. All of this may suggest she paints with undisciplined enthusiasm, but the opposite is the case, and her work is carefully orchestrated to give an impression of catching a glimpse of nature undisturbed.



(Fig. 3: Clare Reilly, *Coasting*, 2008, oil on board, 830 x 1000 mm).

Each of Reilly's paintings starts with the birds, around which the rest of the landscape is composed. In *Coasting*, (Fig. 3), for example, a pair of kereru swoops over a tidal pool on the edge of a West Coast rimu forest. The contours of the birds are echoed in the curve of the tree-line and coastline, and the arc of their energetic flight leads the viewer's eye through the work. The rimu forest is represented by a linear pattern of trunks with a decoratively intertwined canopy of branches and foliage. The late afternoon sun adds luminosity to the image and evokes a tranquil atmosphere, while reflections of the sky and forest in the tidal pool suggest depth. As Zoe Reeves observed, Reilly's images are "Underpinned with a strong sense of formalised, at times decorative, orderliness, they transcend the unruliness of nature".¹²

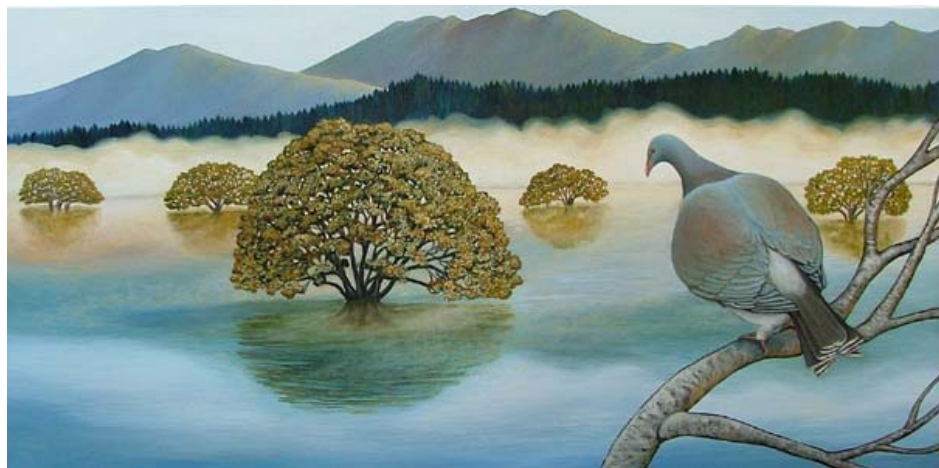


(Fig. 4: Clare Reilly, *Five a.m.*, 2008, oil on board, 800 x 1000 mm).

Suffusing her paintings with light to evoke a spiritually-charged luminosity is a recurrent feature of Reilly's art. A particularly powerful example is *Five a.m.*, 2008, (Fig. 4), which epitomises what neo-romanticists mean when they talk about their desire to capture the spirit or essence of place. A solitary tui glides like a sentinel across a West Coast lake in that quiet interlude that precedes the dawn chorus, as he prepares to take up prime-position for his morning repertoire. Intricate patterns of the trunks and branches of the swamp-dwelling kahikatea are traced on the skyline, and reflected on the surface of the water to evoke complete stillness. She enhances this atmosphere by using four layers of glazes applied with very fine brushwork to build up the intensity

and luminosity of the colour. Reilly regards the dawn as a very spiritual time, one which heralds the full potential of the day, but an awakening most of us miss.

Reilly occasionally takes this dream-like atmosphere a stage further to produce a work which borders on the semi-surreal, such as *Observer at Dawn*, 2006, (Fig. 5). A kereru perched on a branch watches as an early morning mist lifts from Lake Tekapo to reveal willows sitting in the bed of the lake. The juxtaposition of trees and the water is strangely unnerving, and it seems as if time itself has stood still. The painting demonstrates Reilly's masterful use of colour, with the hues of the bird's plumage being repeated throughout the composition, a technique she also uses to enhance the harmony and unity of her work.



(Fig. 5: Clare Reilly, *Observer at Dawn*, 2006, oil on board, 460 x 915 mm).

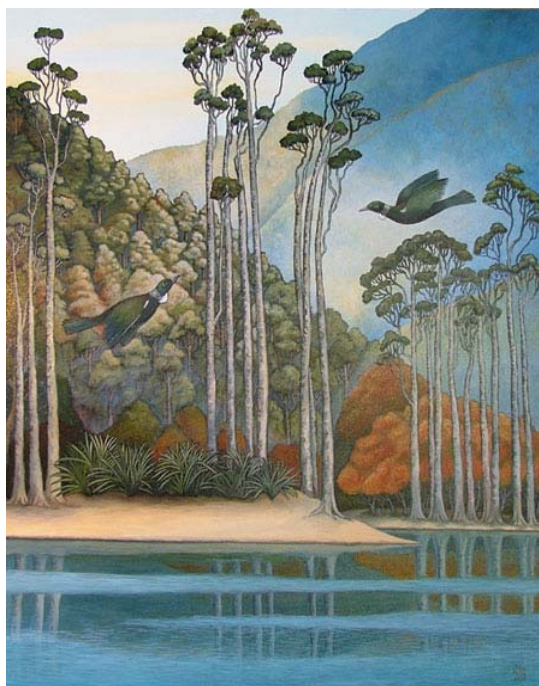
The serenity of Reilly's recent paintings is in stark contrast to the burnt and slashed forests and barren hillsides of her *Austral Series*, 2002, where birds bore silent witness to man's destruction of their habitat. The series originated from Reilly's dismay over the havoc inflicted on the indigenous landscape in the colonial era by settlers, many of whom "...felt morally bound to turn uncultivated nature ('wilderness', 'barren' or 'waste' land) to domesticated, civilised use."¹³ While Reilly remains a committed conservationist, mankind now rarely intrudes, and where he does she treats him as a temporary interloper. For example, *Quest*, 2006, (Fig. 6), depicts a lone kereru flying high above the denuded hillsides of Banks Peninsula. Fresco-like in its simplicity, the work evokes a sense of patience, and suggests that the bird and the land will endure, even if mankind may not.

Though the introduced poplar trees stand tall and proud in a straight line in the autumn light, “...native kanuka is creeping across the gullies and slowly taking back its territory from the pasture that has been imposed upon the land over the last 150 years”.¹⁴ It is a process Reilly has observed in action around the Banks Peninsula region as farming becomes less economically viable and nature reclaims the land into bush, with the fruit-eating kereru playing a pivotal role in the regeneration by disseminating seeds of a variety of native species. It is in her ability to celebrate the landscape here and now, even in this modified state, that differentiates Reilly from her romantic and neo-romantic predecessors, whose art tended to lament back to a paradise lost.



(Fig. 6: Clare Reilly, *Quest*, 2006, oil on board, 800 x 1000 mm)

Despite appearances to the contrary, *Reclaiming the Lake*, 2007, (Fig. 7), is also a landscape intruded upon by mankind. This work originated from a visit to Lake Brunner, where Reilly was horrified by the deafening roar of jet skis and motorboats. Eventually the thrill seekers packed up and left, peace and tranquillity returned, and the tui reclaimed what was rightfully theirs. The rich colouration, decoratively rendered stands of kahikateas and dense forest give the painting a tapestry-like appearance. Its meditative atmosphere stems from Reilly’s capacity to convey the spirit of place, she refers to the forest as “...a cathedral of trees”, and one which for her shares the same spirituality as the interior of a gothic church.¹⁵



(Fig. 7: Clare Reilly, *Reclaiming the Lake*, 2007, oil on board, 800 x 1000 mm).

Reilly also creates large-scale works of birds depicted at close-range, feeding or resting among the foliage of trees. *The Quivering Kowhai*, 2008, (Fig. 8), for example, shows a pair of kereru feasting among the branches of a kowhai, with the flowers quivering in response to the movement of the birds. Although a tui peers inquisitively at the pair in what he regards as his territory, harmony prevails. The delicate grey and pink hues of the kereru's plumage are echoed in the light falling on the coastal landscape visible through the leaves. The painting's elegant and calligraphic execution is reminiscent of decorated capitals found in illuminated manuscripts and illustrated medieval breviaries.

Reilly's primitive neo-romantic landscapes confirm her status as an outsider. Neo-romanticism flourished in New Zealand during the 1940s and 1950s, but went into decline after American art critic Clement Greenberg attacked its inherent spirituality and mysticism during his campaign to promote abstract expressionism. According to Greenberg, abstract expressionism was "...one of the few manifestations of our time uninflated by illegitimate content – no religion or mysticism or political certainties".¹⁶ There were distinct parallels between Greenberg's stance and the arguments presented by Auckland art historian Francis Pound in the 1970s and 1980s to promote modernist abstraction in this country. First Pound questioned the credibility of landscape painting

based on practices borrowed from European conventions.¹⁷ Then he argued that preoccupation with creating an art of national identity had led to landscape painting being elevated to the exclusion of modernist abstraction.¹⁸ Regionalists like Reilly found themselves marginalised as Pound championed a modernism which “emphasised formalism and subjectivity rather than... narrative and figurative concerns...”¹⁹



(Fig. 8: Clare Reilly, *The Quivering Kowhai*, 2008, oil on board, 1000 x 800 mm).

Reilly’s lyrical, accessible art is also the antithesis of the postmodernism that arose in reaction against the dictates of this modernist formalism. Unlike her postmodernist counterparts, when she quotes from the past it is with reverence rather than irony, and with the objective of offering affirmation not cynical observation. Reilly’s neo-romanticism might appear to be an anachronism, but it is that very idiosyncrasy which is its strength. As John Piper surmised, neo-romanticism “...is the result of a vision that can see in things something significant beyond ordinary significance; something that for a moment seems to contain the whole world”.²⁰

¹ Interview with Clare Reilly, 10 January 2009.

² Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 41.

³ Artist interview, *ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ⁵ Max Podstolski, “The Flight of the Primitive Bird Group”, Christchurch: Salamander Gallery, 2003.
- ⁶ Barbara Garrie, “Necessary Illusion, Max Podstolski & the Primitive Bird Group, *Art New Zealand*, No 118, Autumn 2006, p. 63.
- ⁷ Christopher Moore, “In a Pear Tree”, *The Press*, 22 December 2004, p. C 1.
- ⁸ Email correspondence with Clare Reilly, 17 January 2009.
- ⁹ Damien Skinner, *Don Binney, Nga Manu/Nga Motu – Birds/Islands*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Reilly has corresponded with Binney and long admired his work. Last year he accepted her invitation to attend a group show she was taking part in. Artist interview, *ibid*.
- ¹¹ Zoe Reeves, “West to East: Paintings by Clare Reilly”, catalogue essay, [Christchurch: np], 2003.
- ¹² *Ibid*.
- ¹³ Paul Star & Lynne Lochhead, “Children of the Burnt Bush. New Zealanders and the Indigenous Remnant, 1880-1930”, Eric Pawson & Tom Brooking (eds.), *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 121.
- ¹⁴ Email correspondence with Clare Reilly, 17 January 2009.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Clare Reilly, 21 January 2009.
- ¹⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Our Period Style”, *Partisan Review*, No 11, November 1949, p. 1138.
- ¹⁷ Francis Pound, *Frames On The Landscape, Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, Auckland: Collins, 1983, p. 16.
- ¹⁸ Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions, Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, p. 145.
- ¹⁹ Warren Feeney, “National Identity and Peter McIntyre’s New Zealand”, *The Journal of New Zealand Art History*, Volume 25, 2004, p. 5.
- ²⁰ John Piper quoted in Frances Spalding, *British Art Since 1900*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1986, p. 132.