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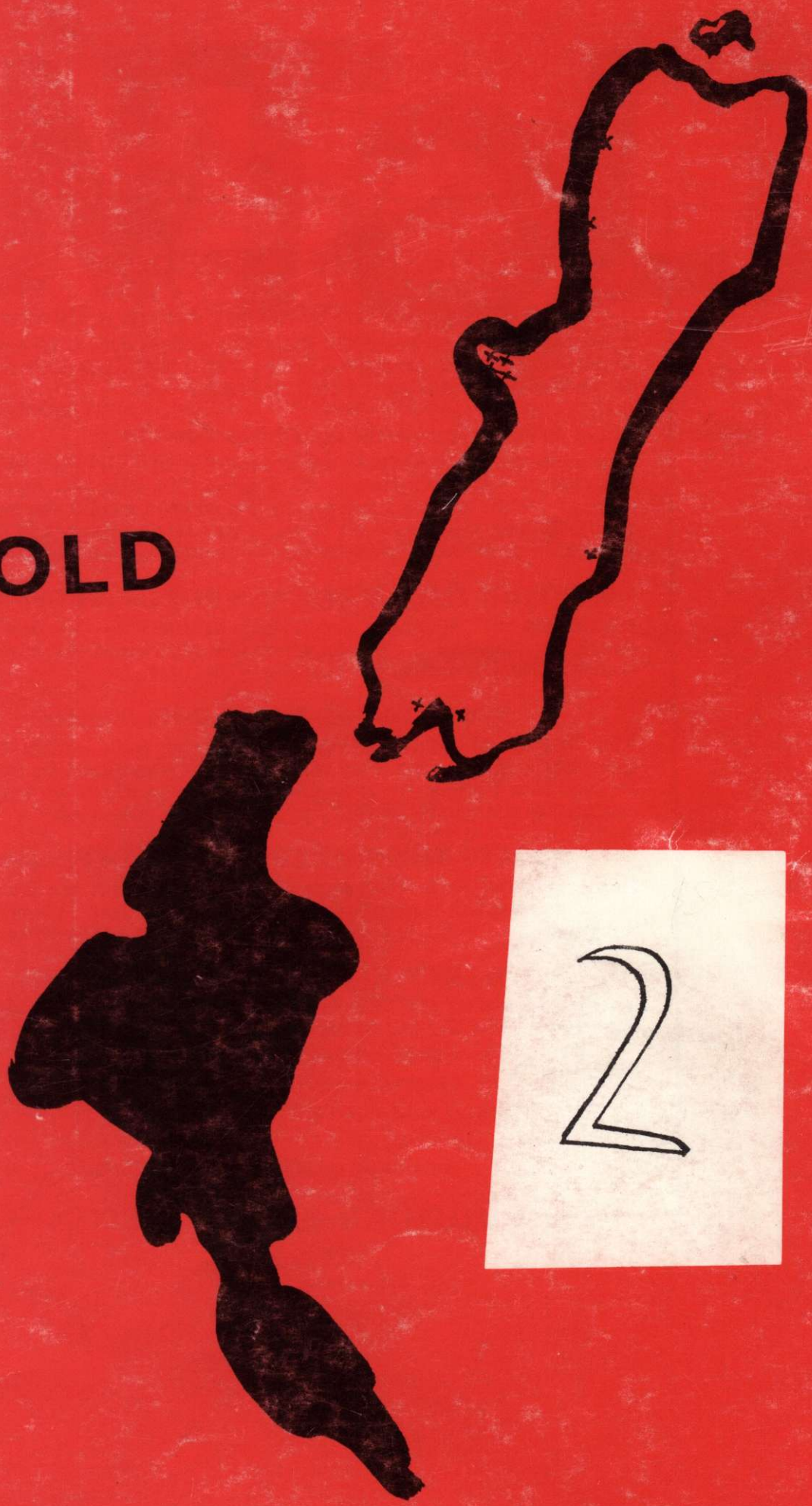

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UNTOLD

Number 2, Spring 1984

Peter Simpson

Habitation of the Whole: The Takaka Rock Paintings of Leo Bensemann

I The Exact Rock

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,

Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

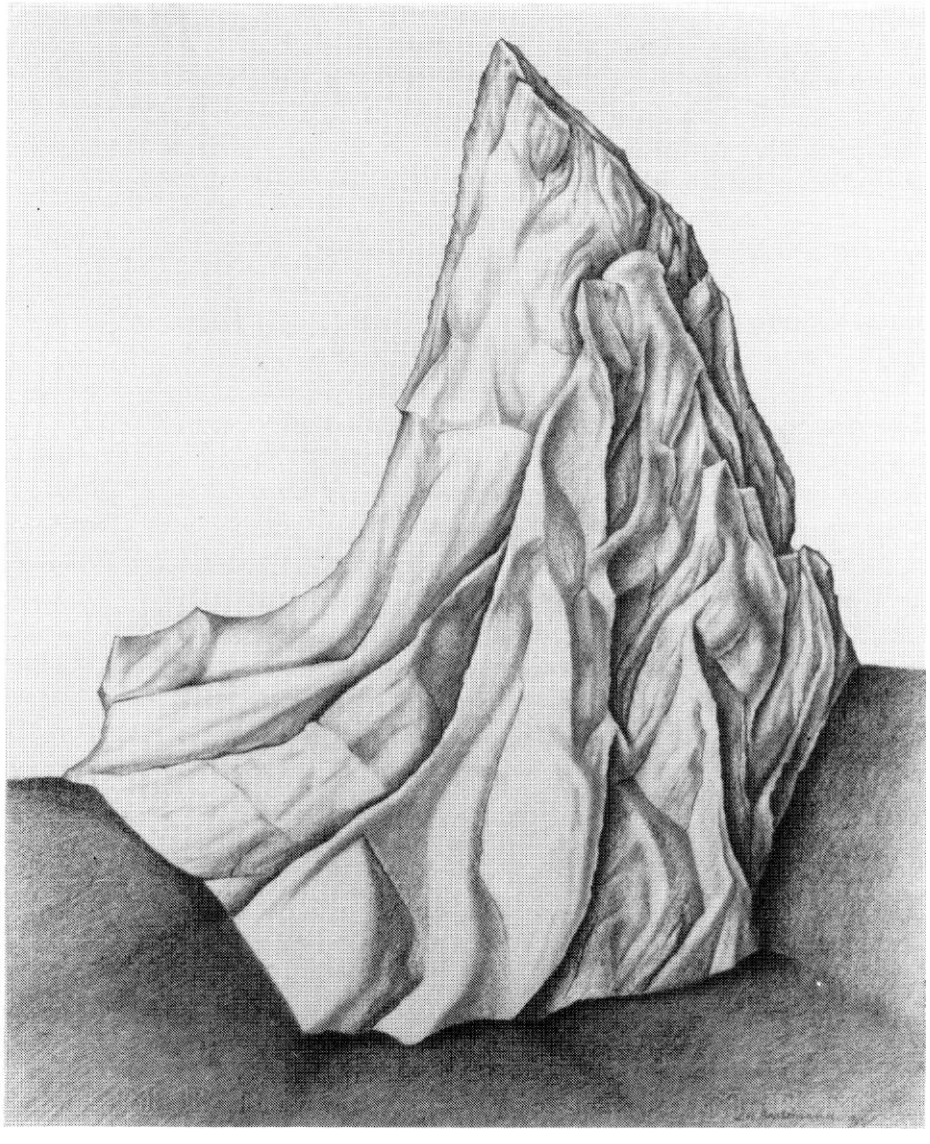
Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

Wallace Stevens
"The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain"

In 1976 Leo Bensemann, then in his mid-sixties, made a drawing, which he called "The Dolomite Madonna", of a piece of rock he had picked up while on holiday in Golden Bay and brought back to his Christchurch home. This drawing proved to be the catalyst for a series of remarkable paintings over the next few years. These rock paintings are the culmination and consummation of an artistic career which has stretched over more than half a century and across a wide variety of media, styles and genres. To borrow some beautifully apposite phrases from the American poet Wallace Stevens (whose poems I will use throughout this article for the vivid light they fortuitously cast on Bensemann's art), the rock paintings provided Bensemann with a" place to go to in his own direction". They are the works in which he is most "complete", .those in which this distinctive and neglected artist found a "unique and solitary home".

The facts of Bensemann's career have recently been set out in a useful article by Avenal McKinnon in *Art New Zealand* 30. A few details which bear on the present topic are worth repeating here.

Bensemann was born in Takaka in 1912 and spent the first part of his childhood in the Takaka/Golden Bay area before moving to Nelson with his family at the age of eight. After his school days in Nelson he moved to Christchurch around 1930 and has lived there ever since. In the late 1930s



The Dolomite Madonna
1976, pencil and crayon,
520 X 410.

Bensemann joined the Caxton Press where he worked for forty years until his retirement in 1978. At about the time he joined Caxton he also became a member of the Christchurch Group and remained an active member until the Group eventually disbanded in 1977. Bensemann first exhibited with the Group in 1938 and there were only five exhibitions in which he didn't exhibit during the next four decades. From 1940 onwards Bensemann designed and printed all the Group catalogues. The annual Group exhibition was by far the most important outlet for Bensemann's work up to the time it disbanded. Of necessity Bensemann was a part-time artist, at least until his retirement, and his contributions to the annual Group show included most of the work he was able to complete in the interstices of a busy family and professional life. In all he exhibited a not inconsiderable total of 127 works (in all media) at Group shows between 1938 and 1977.

Prior to his retirement in 1978 Bensemann had held only one solo exhibition: a retrospective at the Rue Pompallier Gallery in Akaroa in 1972. Since 1978, however, his output has considerably increased and he has held three further

solo exhibitions; two at the Brooke-Gifford Gallery in Christchurch (1979, 1981) and one at the Galerie Legard in Wellington in 1983.

A further important outlet for Bensemann's work has been the publications of the Caxton Press. Two publications were devoted exclusively to his graphic work, *Fantastica* (1937) and *A Second Book of Leo Bensemann's Work* (1952), and he contributed to innumerable others as illustrator, designer, typographer and printer.

The shape of Bensemann's career somewhat resembles the conventional cartoon sign for a bone: fat at both ends and comparatively lean in the middle. He was more prolific in the 1930s and 1940s and again in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s than in the intervening 1950s. A distinct shift of emphasis is also discernible between the early and later periods. While he has always practised a variety of media and genres, in the early part of his career portraits and graphic work predominated, whereas since the early 1960s (and especially since 1965) landscapes have become predominant.

1965 was the year in which Bensemann began returning regularly to Golden Bay, the region of his childhood, for holidays with his family. Sketches done on these visits were the basis for many paintings completed later in his Christchurch studio. The rock paintings of recent years are part of this process.

Nevertheless, the stimulus to his imagination fortuitously provided by "The Dolomite Madonna" resulted in an intensification of Bensemann's landscape art. In constructing paintings out of images he derived from fragments of rock collected in Golden Bay, a double process was involved. In the first place, there was concentrated study of the rock fragment in meticulously faithful drawings, closely parallel to the portrait studies Bensemann had done throughout his career. In the second place, there was the transference of these images to paintings. This involved both an alteration of scale — the rock fragment underwent imaginative enlargement, sometimes of gigantic proportions — and, in addition, the provision of an imaginary landscape context in which the rock image was placed. This latter process is somewhat analogous to the transition from portrait studies in pencil to portrait paintings in which the figure is provided with an appropriate setting. Bensemann's rock paintings simultaneously engaged his capacity for exact, realistic delineation of forms and his powerfully inventive imagination. The rock paintings seem less tied to the facts of topography than many of his earlier landscapes (often based on sketches done in the field). They are paintings which combine an almost hallucinatory sense of actuality and immediacy with a strong element of imagination and fancy. Elsewhere in Bensemann's art (with some important exceptions) these two tendencies — the mimetic or realistic on the one hand and the imaginative or fantastic on the other — tend to be separated. In the rock paintings these opposing impulses are brought into dialectical conflict with each other. The energy released by this conflict perhaps accounts for the intensity of the works and the rich and complex connotations which their imagery engenders. They represent the consummation of his career in this sense above all others: they bring the contrasted aspects of his vision into vital and fruitful relationship.

In order to support this argument it will first be necessary to investigate earlier stages of Bensemann's career and to examine a number of key earlier works, notably *Fantastica* (1937) and "Portrait of Albion Wright" (1947) in which these opposing tendencies are either manifested separately, or, as in the case of the last mentioned work, involved in a synthesis which anticipates that so notably achieved in the climactic rock paintings.

II The Imagined and the Real

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body...

Wallace Stevens
"Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction":
"It Must Change" IV

Reviewing *A Second Book of Leo Bensemann's Work* (1952) — a miscellany of drawings in pen and pencil, wood engravings, calligraphy and typography — J. C. Beaglehole remarked perceptively in *Landfall* 25 (March 1953):

> *There are two Mr Bensemanns mainly on view... There is first the portentously serious worker in line, immensely detailed, devoted to texture and to formal arrangement... The spirit of Beardsley broods over the scene, but it is a most un-Beardsley scene, this region of Mr Bensemann's fancy — a mingling of medievalism and pseudo-Renaissance extravagance... At the other extreme is the draughtsman of the portraits... Shall we call this the conventional, respectable Bensemann? It is at any rate an extremely competent, sensitive and vigorous hand that is at work here, and one would be glad to see it employed on the portraits of a good many other New Zealanders.* [p. 80]

The two Bensemanns discerned by Beaglehole appear to have existed side by side from the start of his career in the early 1930s. Meticulously drawn likenesses of real people alternated in his work with "weird" and "outlandish" compositions (the terms come from the artist's own titles), usually deriving from literature and art.

Fantastica: thirteen drawings by Leo Bensemann published by the Caxton Press in 1937 is the work in which Bensemann gave perhaps his fullest expression to the "fantastical" side of his artistic temperament.

Not only is *Fantastica* a beautifully made book; it is a book which reveals an imagination steeped in the traditions of both literature and book illustration. As if to foreground *the book* as a medium, the first three drawings in *Fantastica* (illustrations to texts from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus)* all give prominence to books as objects, depicting scenes in which people are shown reading or carrying books in rooms where books are strewn around the floor.

Almost all the drawings in *Fantastica* are related to specific literary sources, notable for their extreme diversity. In addition to Marlowe's *Dr Faustus,* there are texts from the *Arabian Nights,* Dr Thomas Murner's *The Life and Merry Adventures of Till Eulenspiegel,* Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici,* Japanese folk tales and the Brothers Grimm. And while Beaglehole is correct in identifying Beardsley as a dominant influence on Bensemann's style as a graphic artist, there is an eclecticism about Bensemann's technique in *Fantastica* as extreme as the range of his literary sources. Not only is each drawing executed in a manner appropriate to the source of the text in question, but also in some of the drawings a variety of different art historical sources is brought into combination. For example, the first drawing of Dr Faustus combines elements which might have come from sources as disparate as Dürer, Beardsley and Wyndham Lewis.

The eclecticism and heterodoxy of sources and style in *Fantastica* create an initial impression of disunity and even incoherence. On closer inspection, however, various similarities and connections between one drawing and another become apparent, and as these are pursued an elaborate network of repetitions and continuities between the discrete drawings is revealed. Eventually one is led to the conclusion that far from being the random assemblage of unconnected items it seemed initially, *Fantastica* is in fact a single work which, like other books, requires to be read sequentially from beginning to end for its full significance to be grasped. In effect if may even be read as a kind of novel-in-pictures, with recurring characters, a developing "story" and a coherent pattern of imagery and symbolism.

Though primarily pictorial rather than literary in genre, of course, *Fantastica* is somewhat analogous in method to T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land.* Just as Eliot ransacked what he called "the mind of Europe" for his materials, so Bensemann has helped himself to the whole of "art history" for his imagery. In consequence, in both works a single, unified style is eschewed in favour of a polyphonic diversity of surface, incorporating such devices as pastiche, quotation, allusion and imitation. Surface discontinuities are, however, in both instances, subordinated to certain unifying deeper structures. One of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land,* for example, draws attention to the underlying identity of superficially distinct characters. One character "melts into" another, and "is not wholly distinct from" a third, and "all the women are one woman".[1] A precisely analogous process operates in *Fantastica.* While at one level Dr Faustus in the first drawings and "The Mad Prince" in the last drawing are manifestly distinct characters deriving from unconnected sources, they are simultaneously (within the context of the work as a whole) the "same" character, and are similarly identified with other male characters in the drawings. A comparable identify is established between the various female characters in *Fantastica* — the naked, kneeling Salome-like figure in the drawing illustrating the *Arabian Nights* is the "same" as "The Little Witch" illustrating a text from Sir Thomas Browne.

1 *Collected Poems,* Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 82.

Bensemann establishes these latent identities mainly through the repetition of visual motifs. The male characters all have similar triangular-shaped beards and distinctively shaped eyebrows, or, if they are beardless, as in the case of "The Mad Prince", the *absence* of beard is clearly signified by the depiction of a "five o'clock shadow". Another device is to depict different characters wearing the "same" clothes. Thus Faustus and "The Mad Prince" have identical designs on their shirts. Similarly, Faustus in the first drawing and the prince in the last drawing place one hand on their chests in identical fashion

Faustus

The Little Witch

(though admittedly it is the left hand in one case and the right hand in the other).

One of the most striking instances of meanings being established in this manner is the way of depicting hair. In the fifth drawing (*Arabian Nights)* a man is shown fondling the hair of the naked woman kneeling at his feet. Her hair is depicted with distinctive forked ends as if to suggest flames. The sixth drawing entitled "Mask" depicts a grotesque looking male head with identical forked, flame-like hair. The same distinctive hair also appears on the head of "The Little Witch" in the eighth drawing. The import of this sequence of drawings would seem to be that the male figure has become "bewitched, bothered and bewildered" by the female figure, and indeed that this process of bewitchment explains the transformation of the arrogant and proud-looking Faustus in the first drawings into the foolishly infatuated "Mad Prince" in the last.

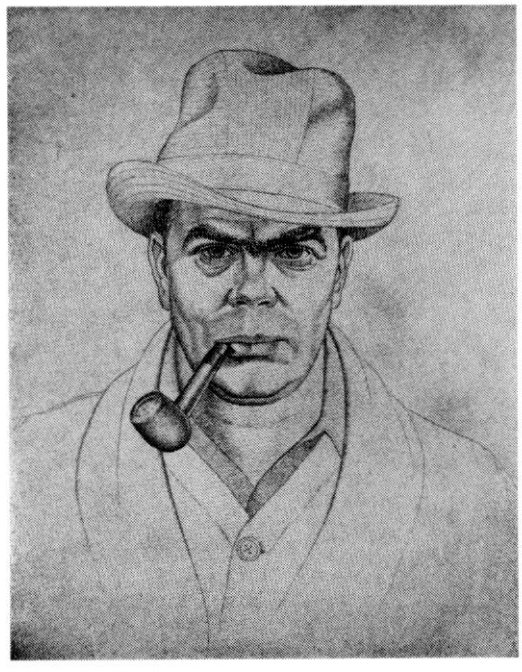
I am sure it would be mistaken to pursue this line of argument too far. As in *The Waste Land* the effect of the work depends upon the maintenance of a tension between surface and depth, manifest and latent content, dissimilarity and identity. But, as in *The Waste Land,* an apparently impersonal and syncretic manner is revealed as the mask for a buried content involving love, possession (in its various senses) and metamorphosis.

A further and final comparison between *The Waste Land* and *Fantastica* seems justified; both works reveal a broadly similar conception of the relationship between what Eliot called "tradition and the individual talent". Behind *The Waste Land* lay Eliot's notion of "the historical sense", that is, the "feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order".[2] Surely a comparable idea lies behind *Fantastica* (though with the emphasis on art history as well as literature). In

2 *Selected frone of T. S. Eliot,* ed. Frank Kermode, Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 38.

Mask

Self-portrait



both Eliot and Bensemann such a view of tradition is essentially post-colonial, a Eurocentric reaction to the cultural emptiness, the absence of history in the new world. Perhaps this is a partial explanation for the privileging of "books" in *Fantastica*; it is only through books that "the mind of Europe" is knowable. Certainly the total eradication of any local or regional referent, the evident completeness of its separation of "art" from "life", of the "imagined" from the "real", is a potent feature of *Fantastica,* a response so extreme as almost by necessity to produce its opposite.

The "opposite" in Bensemann's case was, as I have said already, the "realistic" depiction of real people — self-portraits, and portraits, both drawn and painted, of the artist's family and close friends and associates. It is tempting, though doubtless naive, to see Bensemann's portraits as "artless", in the sense that they attempt to render the appearance of the subject without the interposition of a "style". In fact the art of such portraits is precisely to conceal itself so as better to create the illusion of a "real presence". An art of the "real" is just as much art as an art of the "imagined", and depends as firmly (if less obviously) on conventions, devices and the example of others. Thus, though the subjects of Bensemann's portraits are "real" and "local", their depiction requires just as much artifice as the most outlandish of the artist's fancies. Furthermore, the portraits are just as steeped in the conventions and traditions of portraiture as are his illustrations and drawings in the traditions and conventions of graphic art. The contrast between the two sides of Bensemann's art is perhaps less great than it initially appears to be. The real contrast is between two different kinds of illusion, not between "illusion" and "reality".

An important phase in the evolution of Bensemann's portrait art was the period of his close association with Rita Angus, when (together with Lawrence Baigent) the two artists shared studios in Cambridge Terrace. Their close

proximity enabled each to use the other as subjects and to share other models. Undoubtedly, too, there was the stimulation of each other's work and the sharing of mutual enthusiasms. Both were interested in medieval and renaissance art and in Chinese and Japanese art. Both, too, were alert to contemporary art movements abroad which were relevant to their common concerns, such as the paintings of the American regionalist Grant Wood and the work of the Canadian painters in the touring exhibition organised by the National Gallery of Canada which made an impact in Christchurch in 1938. Both Grant Wood and the Canadian painters may have affected the Christchurch painters' experimentation with landscape backgrounds to their portraits in the late 1930s.

It was largely through the device of combining portrait with landscape that Bensemann began searching out ways of bridging the gap between the "fantastic" and the "real" poles in his art.

Some of the drawings in *Fantastica,* especially the fourth entitled "Dr Faustus", are, in effect, "imaginary portraits" and draw directly on the conventions of Renaissance portraiture. In this drawing Faustus is placed partly against a vertical screen and partly against an arched space opening onto a distant landscape vista, a familiar compositional device in Renaissance art, as for instance in the portraits of Dürer.

Most of Bensemann's "real" (as distinct from "imaginary") portraits at this time (such as those of V. V. Bensemann, Rita Angus and Lawrence Baigent[3]) still employed a neutral background. Possibly the first paintings of Bensemann's to use a landscape background were a pair of small paintings called "St Francis" and "St Olaf' of 1937/38. These, as the titles suggest, are "imaginary" portraits, and both employ obviously stylised or fantastical elements, such as the Modigliani-like elongation of the face in "St Francis" and the blond shock of flame-like hair (closely related to the signifying convention for hair in *Fantastica)* of "St Olaf' (reproduced in *Art New Zealand* 30). The landscape backgrounds, on the other hand, while fairly elementary, convey a definite regional suggestion.

3 Reproduced in *Landfall* 55. September 1960.

A work which operates in a different way in the gap between the two poles of Bensemann's art is the frontispiece illustration for Allen Curnow's poem *Not in Narrow Seas* (Caxton, 1939), a subject which imposed upon Bensemann a regional image rare in his graphic art. The foreground of the illustration is dominated by a John Bullish figure (complete with nose ring) in clerical garb, covering the eyes of a Maori (with moko and cloak) with a small Union Jack. The figures are framed by stylised but identifiable flax-leaves and a tree fern, while the background landscape features lake water, bush-covered hills, and exaggeratedly serrated and pointed snowy peaks. In the sky are some sets of parallel lines which look rather like something out of Gordon Walters or Ralph Hotere; presumably they derive from highly abstracted cloud formations.

The mountains in this drawing closely resemble those in the background to Rita Angus's portrait of Leo Bensemann dated 1938 (included in the recent Angus touring exhibition). This work shows the portrait/landscape convention developed to quite a sophisticated degree. There is a complex interrelationship of figure and ground in terms of both colour and form. The head is so placed as to be completely surrounded by hill forms, making of the shape of the face with its pointed chin a kind of valley or inverted mountain. This relationship is picked up by subtle echoes of hill forms in the shoulders, eyebrows and hair-waves of the subject; these are accented by colour repetitions between foreground and background. The brilliant emerald green of the subject's jacket

becomes in context "part" of the landscape, an interesting anticipation of Bensemann's landscapes of the 1960s in which the use of intense greens became almost a signature of his work, especially in his Takaka paintings.

The earliest I have seen (and only in half-tone reproduction) of Bensemann's "real" portraits to place the figure before a landscape background is that of Allan Simmance, exhibited in 1943. This depicts the head and torso of a boy in profile against a simple but recognisably local coastal scene — a beach, a boat, a couple of seagulls, breaking waves, water, horizon and distant headland. The landscape is less abstracted and formalised than in the Angus portrait of Bensemann, and involves less formal interplay between foreground and background. It indicates that Bensemann had assembled all the compositional elements needed to attempt a portrait as complex and ambitious as that of Albion Wright, a painting which is something of a culmination of the early part of Bensemann's career, in the resolution of "fantastical" and "realist" elements into a satisfying synthesis.

III Almost to Man

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

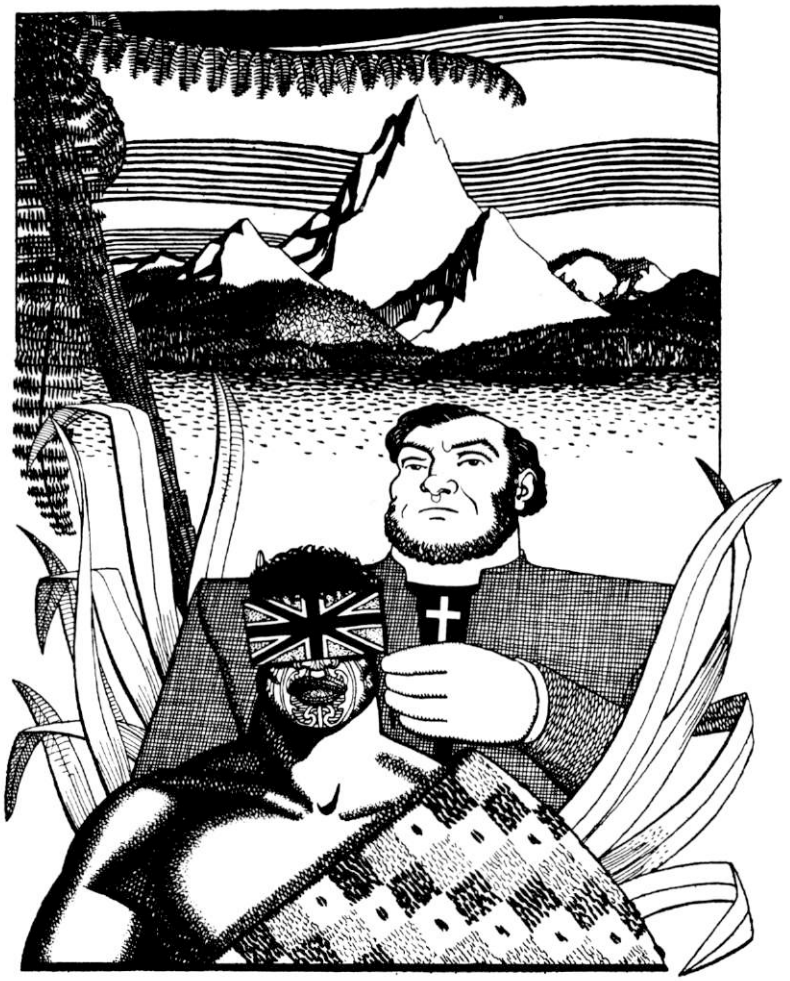
If to serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say that it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

Wallace Stevens
"The Man With the Blue Guitar" II

The subject of "Portrait of Albion Wright" (1947) was a close friend and contemporary of the artist. Born in 1910, Albion Wright was a keen yachtsman and served in the navy in the Pacific during World War II. After the war he returned to his wife and family in Christchurch and later founded the Pegasus Press, sharing with Bensemann and Denis Glover (another close friend) a professional interest in printing, publishing and literature. Albion Wright was, like Bensemann himself, in his mid-thirties when the portrait was painted. Mrs Betty Wright, Albion's widow, told me recently (April 1984) that when they received the completed painting from the artist they were initially shocked by how much older Albion looked in the painting than in "real life". She added, however, that as the years went by her husband "grew into" the painting.

I mention this anecdote as a timely and apposite reminder that "reality" is one thing and "art" (even an art of the "real") is quite another. "Things as they are", says the guitarist in Stevens' poem, "Are changed upon the blue



frontispiece to
Not in Narrow Seas

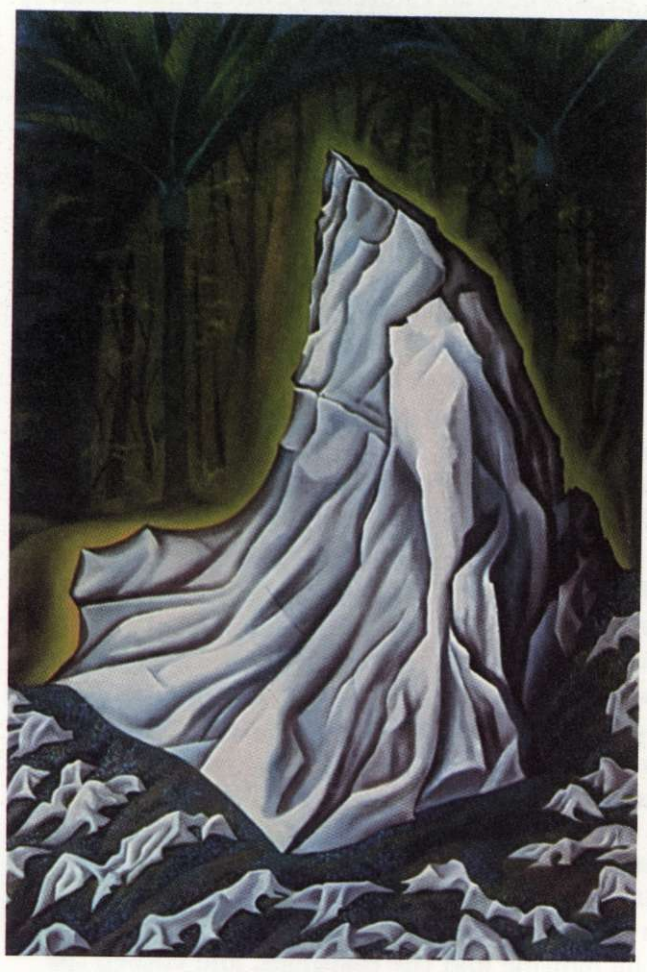
guitar". "Portrait of Albion Wright" is a work of the imagination but one which leaves the viewer with a heightened sense of reality. It is the powerful and subtle dialectic between the "imagined" and the "real", between the "blue guitar" and "things as they are", within the painting which makes it so successful; an equivalent achievement in my judgment to the comparable synthesis realised in the rock paintings of recent years.

I have argued that in Bensemann's previous work two distinctive and contradictory tendencies are evident, the "fantastic" and the "realistic" (to employ a crude but convenient shorthand). While various earlier works have attempted to operate within the gap between these two poles, "Albion Wright" works not by closing the gap but by affirming it. One receives simultaneously a unified yet contradictory impression of a work that is both "fantastic" and "realistic"; it has the force of an explosive visual paradox or oxymoron. To understand fully the visual dynamics of the painting it will be necessary to analyse it in terms of its component parts.

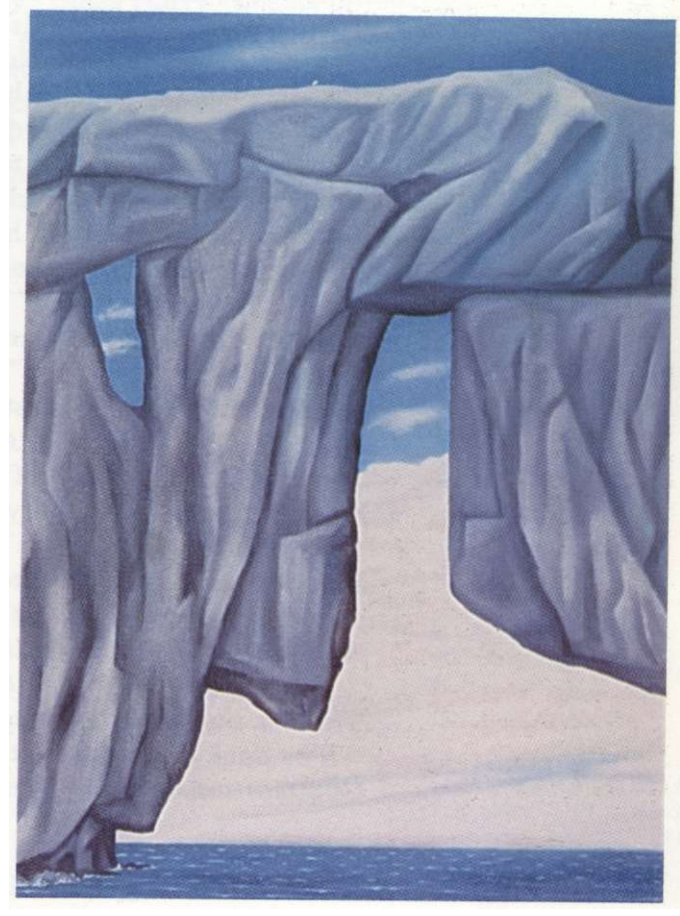
The "fantastical" dimension of the work is carried most obviously by its colour, an effect which is almost lurid on first impression. The brilliance of the red, yellow and green seems almost Fauvist in the intensity of hue and contrasts. It must have looked particularly startling on the walls of the Group show in 1947, given the subdued colouring of most local portraits. It was probably to this sort of effect that Allen Curnow was alluding when he referred

Portrait of Albion Wright, 1947, oil on canvas, 485 X 425.

Doris Lusk, reconstructed photograph.



Dolomite Madonna, (Mount Burnett), 1979, oil on board, 860 X 610.



Seascape and Causeway, 1979, oil on board, 580 X 440.

to Bensemann's "colour geometry" as a reaction to the "tonal dithering" of the products of the School of Art, in an article entitled "Painting in Canterbury", published in the *Listener* in 1950[4].

4 "Painting in Canterbury", *Listener,* December 8, 1950, pp. 8-9.

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that, so far as Betty Wright can recall, her husband did not possess a scarlet jacket (though he did have a penchant for wearing red waistcoats); the clothing is the costume of an actor in a pictorial drama, making sense in terms of "art" not "life". Equally startling in its effect is the vivid colour in the background landscape, especially the green and gold of sky and sea. This seems wildly unnaturalistic, until it is realised that the time of day depicted is sunset; it is the brilliance of late afternoon light which partly accounts for the intensity of colour.

At this point certain local conditions bearing upon the scene depicted in the painting are of relevance. To people who know Canterbury, the landscape in the background of this portrait is immediately recognisable as the view from the Scarborough Bluff looking east along the coast of Banks Peninsula. The direction of the sitter's gaze, however, is westward, into the setting sun. This accounts not only for the vividness of colour but also for the strong light on the subject's face, resulting in the sharply modelled features and the prominence accorded lines and shadows. This intense directional light source almost has the effect of theatrical "artificial" light, transforming the "actor's" face into a dramatic mask.

Local knowledge, moreover, enables one to identify this as not just any sunset, but as the sort of sunset experienced in Canterbury after a norwester. On such occasions the sun drops late in the day below its cloud cover into the narrow arc of clear space below the gigantic arch of cloud which stretches across the plains to the north and west. As the sun drops clear it sends a strong horizontal light over the landscape in which, briefly, everything glows with unusual brilliance, and, out to sea, the sky turns, yes, yellow and the sea turns emerald green. In other words the lighting and colour in Bensemann's painting is not a fantastic invention, but based on observation of actual effects. Like a photographer waiting for the "decisive moment", he has posed his sitter in a specific setting, and "taken" his portrait at a specific moment, in order to exploit the dramatic and symbolic possibilities of natural phenomena. One way of reconciling the "fantastic" and "realistic" is to record realistically effects which are "naturally" fantastic (this is a further point of connection between "Albion Wright" and the later rock paintings).

The "theatrical" effects of norwest weather have been well described in Basil Dowling's poem "Canterbury Nor'wester":

The day is lit up like a theatre,
So eyes must get accustomed to the glare
And lungs to breathe an indoor atmosphere.
The drama's in the west: a mighty arch
Gathers the scattered gaze to where, beneath,
The dark tragedian clouds upon a stage
Of mountains wait as if to use their breath . . .[5]

5 *Penguin Hook of New Zealand.* Verse* 1960). p. 191.

Bensemann's portrait is of a man who is not only a spectator of the drama in the west, but also the participant in a drama of which we, the viewers, are the spectators. Bensemann's role is "producer" of the piece. It is he who has painted the scenery, designed the lighting and the costumes, and chosen the actor. There is a sense in which "Albion Wright" (the painting) is no more (or

less) Albion Wright (the man), than the actor chosen to play the part of Hamlet. In Stevens' terms he is a "hero's head" "but not a man". The question to be posed is not (or not just) "What sort of man was Albion Wright?" but "What sort of hero (in what sort of play) is 'Albion Wright'?"

Is it a comic or a tragic mask that the hero wears in Bensemann's "play"? The brilliant colours, the golden glow on the landscape would suggest the former, but the hero's face is mournful and melancholic, his brow is furrowed, the corners of his mouth turn downwards, there is a sad almost tearful look about the eyes. To read the psychology of the hero's expression we have to interpret the implicit symbolism of the lighting and setting. Surely the expression is to be associated both with the brilliance of the light and with its fading. The hero's costume shows him to be in sympathy with the colour and brilliance of the "vision", but his face carries the sombre recognition that the vision will soon fade. The fact that the "hero" is depicted as a handsome man beginning to age (his hair is receding and greying, his face is becoming lined) collaborates with the symbolism of the light. The brilliance of youth and beauty will also fade, is already fading. The sitter's outward gaze is also inward and retrospective. "The glory and the freshness of a dream" (in Wordsworth's phrase) succeeds to, "The things which I have seen I now can see no more". "Albion Wright" belongs to that paradoxical Romantic genre which celebrates the "visionary gleam" by recording its loss.

A striking parallel to both the meaning and method of Bensemann's "Albion Wright" can be found in the exactly contemporary "Sings Harry" poems of Denis Glover. Glover began this sequence in 1941 and completed it after his return from the war, before publishing the complete sequence in 1951.

In the first "Songs" Harry is a youngish man, satirical about those who lose the "vision" of youth and become complacent and "fat as a barrel". The third "Song", however, expresses some disquiet about the future:

When I am old
Sings Harry
Will my thoughts grow cold?
Will I find
Sings Harry
For my sunset mind
Girls on bicycles
Turning into the wind?

Or will my old eyes feast
Upon some private movie of the past?
Sings Harry[6]

6 *Enter Without Knocking*, Pegasus, 1971, p. 56.

In the post-war poems Harry does seem to be a much older man speaking his "sunset mind", feasting upon "some private movie of the past"; the perspective is insistently retrospective:

I remember paddocks opening green...
Once the days were clear...
Once I followed horses
And once I followed whores...
Once my strength was an avalanche
Now it follows the fold of the hill...[7]

7 ibid., pp. 57, 58, 60, 62.

In Glover's poems he dons the mask (Harry) of an older man singing the glories of the faded past. An exactly parallel melancholic nostalgia composes the mask (older than its subject's face, as is the mask of Harry worn by Glover) of "Albion Wright". Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to claim this as the prevailing tone of much New Zealand art in the immediate post-war years; it occurs, for instance, often in the poetry of Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter ("At Dead Low Water", "The Bay").

This prevailing melancholia may have something to do with the pervasiveness of Romantic stereotypes in New Zealand art of this period; it may have something more to do with the onset of middle age and family responsibilities among the artists; it may have something still more to do with the heightened sense of provincial disability which burdened many New Zealand artists of the time. All three factors seem to have contributed to Glover's sour lines entitled "Returning from Overseas":

... When we left it sorrow-kissed
Slumbrous, afloat in western mist,
The land of our remembered past
Stood as the loneliest the last
Lovely remote Hesperides
Nourishing its golden trees.

This sullen and perplexing coast
Makes no assertion, no boast,
No positive utterance; and yet
Somewhere there's concealed a threat,
Somewhere home-coming elation
Feels an old strangulation

8 ibid., p. 69.

I have pursued this theme beyond the frame of Bensemann's painting out of a conviction (as difficult to get rid of as it is to demonstrate) that, like Rita Angus's "Portrait of Betty Curnow", "Albion Wright" is both a portrait of an individual and the portrait of a generation. "Albion Wright" is "New Zealand Man" in much the same way that "Betty Curnow" is "New Zealand Woman". If this is anything more than a private fiction on my part the evidence is to be found in the way that man and landscape, figure and ground, interact with each other.

As in Rita Angus's portrait of Leo Bensemann there is a subtle and intricate relationship in terms of colour and form between the two aspects of the painting. Notice first how the placement of the head in the picture integrates it fully with both land and sea. The sea reaches in behind the subject's head, the land reaches out on both sides of the head, virtually enclosing it in a protective circle. The contours of the face and head subtly echo and merge with features of the enclosing landscape. Thus the skyline of the distant peninsula is continuous with the hairline of the head, the curve of the hair-line echoes that of the curve of the bay, the lines of the brow echo the lines of successive ranges of hills, the angle of the nose exactly duplicates that of the cliff behind the head (an angle which is repeated in the shadow formed where the light strikes the temple bone). This head is in the process of simultaneously growing into and out of the landscape.

The line of argument I am pursuing here is neatly confirmed by knowledge

of the local landscape. The curve of the subject's brow closely resembles the profile of Scarborough Bluff itself, clearly visible as one approaches the point of vantage from which this landscape is viewed. Furthermore, the cliff of Godley Head which is perhaps the most salient landscape feature visible from this point of vantage is omitted from Bensemann's landscape because it is obscured by the placement of the head. It has, nevertheless, been "included" in the picture by being displaced and metamorphosed into the subject's nose (the scale and angle is exactly right).

The cumulative effect of these details is to establish an identity between man and the landscape; it is part of him as he is part of it. One might compare the import of this painting with that of Glover's lines about another peninsula sailor, "*In Memoriam,* H. C. Stimson, *Port Levy":*

You were these hills and the sea,
In calm, or the winter wave and snow.
Lie then peaceful among them,
The hills iron, the quiet tides below.[9]

9 ibid., p. 64.

Something more is involved here than the celebration of the association between a man and the landscape he knows and loves; the artist "reaches through" his subject to grasp a larger theme, that of a people becoming one with the landscape they inhabit.

It is possible to detect in this remarkable painting a never fully resolved tension between a "tragic" reading (emphasising separation and loss) and a "comic" reading (emphasising harmony and integration). This tension is of a piece with the paradoxical artistic impulses ("fantastic"/"realist") which it engages. I will leave the final word to the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott who found in the weird light of a St. Lucian sunset (an effect very similar to that captured by Bensemann here) a symbol for what he was aiming for as an artist, and which I think Bensemann in this painting actually achieved:

in every surface I sought
the paradoxical flash of an instant
in which every facet was caught
in a crystal of ambiguities.[10]

10 *Another Life,* Jonathon Cape, 1973, p. 58.

IV A Mythology Reflects Its Region

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible — But if we had —
That raises the question of the image's truth.
The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region,
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains.

Wallace Stevens
"A Mythology Reflects Its Region"

Recalling the impact of the 1943 Group show, Bensemann remarked that "something was beginning to happen in a New Zealand way . . . the native scene was definitely emerging with a force and impact of its own".[11] But in the first three decades of his career Bensemann's own work stood almost completely apart from the regional aesthetic implied in this statement. Apart from landscape backgrounds in some of his portraits and very occasional landscape paintings (he exhibited 5 landscapes out of a total of 77 works at Group shows between 1938 and 1960), there was little to identify Bensemann's art with New Zealand. In *A Second Book of Leo Bensemann's Work* (1952), a miscellany of graphic work, only one image (a wood engraving entitled "Maori") has an explicit connection with New Zealand. Except for portrait studies, the figures depicted either derive from myth, folk-lore and fantasy (satyrs, dwarfs, a basilisk, a merman, a "strange outlandish fowl") or from literary sources — Shakespeare, Chaucer, Boccaccio, the Brothers Grimm, *The Ancient Mariner*. The landscapes in which these characters exist are wholly imaginary and conventional.

11 *The Group 1927-77* (1977), **p.** 9.

It is tempting to identify Bensemann up to this point in his career with "The Disinherited", as described in a poem of that name by his friend and contemporary Charles Spear, himself a "wild outlandish fowl" among the poets of his generation in his avoidance of the regional referent:

They reared the shell of vision and of words unsaid
To be their haunting and their earthly home.'[2]

12 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse,* p. 195.

The epigraph Spear chose for his book of poems *Twopence Coloured* (also published by Caxton in 1952) came from *Finnegans Wake* and would equally have suited Bensemann's book: "This the way to the museyroom. Mind your hats goan in".

Bensemann's rare excursions from the "museyroom" to check out the topography of his "earthly home" revealed his strong potential as a landscape painter. "Canterbury Landscape", exhibited in 1945 and reproduced in *Arts Yearbook* 1 (1945), encapsulates the local scene with a lucid and economical regional iconography: road, fence, hills, telephone poles, shed, pine trees, magpies. Even so, it is as a formal statement that the painting makes its strongest impact. Curves and verticals are cunningly played off against each other; a diamond-shaped road sign showing a curving arrow prominent in the right foreground does its bit for regional imagery and at the same time cunningly "foregrounds" the curvilinear principle embodied in the composition as a whole. The influence of the American painter Grant Wood is evident in the combination of formalism and regional imagery. Such paintings, together with the backgrounds to "Albion Wright" and other portraits, showed that it was certainly not incapacity which kept Bensemann from depicting the "native scene".

Suddenly in 1961 a change of direction occurred. In that year he exhibited four landscapes of Canterbury ("Autumn", "Winter", "Spring", "Summer" — a "Four Seasons" suite, anticipating by some years Bill Sutton's well-known set), five more landscapes were shown the next year, and thereafter landscapes came to dominate his output. Of 50 works by Bensemann exhibited at Group shows between 1961 and 1977 no fewer than 39 were landscapes. In 1965 the first landscapes of Takaka and Golden Bay were shown and thereafter the majority of his landscapes derived from that part of the country, with Canterbury an important secondary source.

A simple practical explanation for Bensemann's turning to landscape painting was the opportunity provided by summer vacations with his family to get away from Christchurch. After 1965 most of these holidays were spent in Golden Bay.

"Golden Bay Landscape" (1965), in the collection of the University of Canterbury Staff Club, is typical of Bensemann's landscapes of this period. A small painting, nicely composed, it depicts a tiny V-shaped patch of golden sand, visible through a notch in emerald green hills opening onto the sapphire waters of Golden Bay. The colours have a jewel-like vividness. It perfectly illustrates Bill Sutton's reference, in the catalogue of the Group retrospective, to "Leo's vibrant green landscapes so curiously resolved and complete".[13]

13 *The Group 1927-77,* p. 9.

The clarity and brilliance of such paintings, it is tempting to speculate, owes something to the double charge of the recovery of the landscape of childhood and a renewal of creative energy. In the words of Stevens' poem "Seventy Years Ago" (Part I of "The Rock"), his vision is:

like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied
In a birth of sight.

The pendulum has swung, it appears, so far as the source of Bensemann's pictorial imagery is concerned, from "there" to "here", from "culture" to "nature", from the "museyroom" of art and books to the hills and beaches of Golden Bay. The argument is seductive, it may contain elements of truth, but it needs to be treated with caution, if one is not to fall into a naive romantic fiction.

It is instructive to compare Bensemann's paintings of Golden Bay with those of his friend and associate Doris Lusk who also often holidayed in Golden Bay and derived paintings from the locality during the same period. Many of Lusk's paintings relate to the beach at Onekaka, and especially to the decrepit remains of a wharf there, a subject she has painted many times in different media. Bensemann painted a watercolour of this wharf himself on one occasion — it was the only watercolour included in his 1972 retrospective ("Onekaka", 1965) — but it was an exceptional exercise in a fellow artist's imagery and medium (Lusk often paints in watercolours). Bensemann's Takaka paintings seldom include evidence of human occupation (beyond that implied in bush fires and dead trees). In this respect (as in many others) his landscape paintings are in striking contrast to his graphic art which is intensely human-centred. Lusk, on the other hand, is typically drawn to the signs of the human in the landscape, whether it is a hydro-electric power station or a decaying wharf. The point I am making is that Bensemann's Golden Bay is quite different from Lusk's Golden Bay; the artist's eye finds what it is looking for, in other words. What is the essence of regional imagery for one person may be quite peripheral to another. Stevens has got the matter straight. A mythology reflects its region, yes. But the image must be of the nature of its creator. Bensemann's imagery is one thing; Lusk's is another. "Responsibility", the American poet Robert Duncan once wrote (the lines are quoted by Ian Wedde as an epigraph to *Earthly),* "is the ability to respond". Place may provide the stimulus, but in terms of art it is the response which matters, the poem (or painting) which takes the place of a mountain.

The relation between painting and place is well described (in terms that can be appropriated without strain to Bensemann's practice) in Colin McCahon's

remarks about *his* 1948 Takaka painting, "Takaka Night and Day", painted in Christchurch (like most of Bensemann's Takaka paintings):

Once more it states my interest in landscape as a symbol of place and also of the human condition. It is not so much a portrait of a place as such but is a memory of a time and an experience of a particular place.[14]

14 *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition* (1972), p. 19.

Bensemann's landscape paintings, like McCahon's, begin in immediate experience and direct observation of specific localities but they do not end there. By means of the transformational process, the world is remade in terms of the artist's mind, and mind is remade in terms of the world. Bensemann's landscapes are also mindscapes; symbols of place and of the human condition, incorporating memory, experience and imagination into a mythology (regional in its imagery) of self and world.

V Forms of the Rock

The rock is the gray particular of man's life,
The stone from which he rises, up — and — ho,
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents...

The rock is the stern particular of the air,
The mirror of the planets, one by one,
But through man's eye, their silent rhapsodist,

Turquoise the rock, at odious evening bright
With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
The difficult rightness of half-risen day.

The rock is the habitation of the whole,
Its strength and measure, that which is near, point A
In a perspective that begins again

At B: the origin of the mango's rind.
It is the rock where tranquil must adduce
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,
That in which space itself is contained, the gate
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep.

Wallace Stevens
"The Rock" III "Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn"

To isolate Bensemann's rock paintings as I do in this section is in one sense an arbitrary division, a critical fiction. In medium and genre they are no different from his other landscape paintings. Nevertheless I believe that the rock

paintings do hang together as a distinct and distinctive group, and this is best explained by describing the process by which they evolved.

The pencil drawing called "The Dolomite Madonna" (1976) encapsulates within its title several of the key elements in the whole series: the local/literal; the allusive/historical; the symbolic/iconic. Dolomite is a kind of marble, a calcium magnesium carbonite rock, occurring in quantities on Mount Burnett near Collingwood in Golden Bay where Bensemann probably picked up the specimen which provided the subject for the drawing. The literal connection of the rock with its locality, its being an actual part of the place, was obviously important to Bensemann.

In calling the drawing "The Dolomite *Madonna*", Bensemann had, I think, in mind both the associations that the rock/drawing engendered and the significances he attached to it. The name "Madonna" calls to mind the traditions of religious art, two in particular of which are relevant here — icons and sculpture. Icons are representations of sacred personages which are themselves regarded as sacred. In this instance it is the rock itself which is the icon, in that it both represents the "sacred" landscape and is itself sacred in being part of the landscape. The act of making the drawing is therefore a kind of secular devotional exercise. Furthermore, the title "Madonna" may suggest to the viewer the resemblance of the rock depicted to a sculptural figure, more particularly, I suggest, the late pi^täs of Michelangelo. The drawing is full of figurative suggestions, as if the artist were a sculptor contemplating a block of marble to discover the potential figures locked within the stone. In the transition from rock to drawing a change of scale has occurred; it is (literally) a small drawing of a small rock, which has metamorphosed into (imaginatively) a small drawing of a large rock, monumental in scale. Visible in the drawing are hints of elbows, shoulders, torsos, backs, and in the middle of the image there is the suggestion of two hooded figures uncannily reminiscent of the placement and shape of the figures of Mary and the crucified Jesus in Michelangelo's Florentine Pi£tä.

It is scarcely possible to separate the allusions (whether conscious or unconscious) to the art of the past from the more general symbolic connotations of the drawing. It is clear, though, that what may have originated as a technical exercise — a study in still life — became in the process something else, involving a considerable amount of "dreamwork" or unconsciously motivated imaginative play. The mimetic realist insensibly merged into the creative fantasist, a metamorphosis that is recognised and validated by the attribution of a symbolic title. This drawing, then, to appropriate again the words of Wallace Stevens (from "The Poem as Icon", Part II of "The Rock"), led to the recognition of the possibility of making

meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things.

It was in 1979 that the possibilities inhering in "The Dolomite Madonna" were first realised in paintings. Two completely different versions of the same rock image were painted: "Rain in the Paradise Garden, Takaka" and "The Dolomite Madonna (Mount Burnett)". The relationship between drawing and paintings in this instance is somewhat similar to the translation from Bensemann's pencil studies for portraits to the painted versions of the same subject. The "figure" of the rock is introduced into a landscape setting appropriate to the treatment of the central image. Bensemann has, however,

eliminated the figurative associations so evident in the original drawing by subtle alteration of the internal configuration of the rock image (the outline remains much the same). The symbolic connotations of the paintings are governed by the way in which the central image is treated and by the interplay (as in portraits of the "Albion Wright" type) between "figure" and background. The titles also play a part in directing how the image is read. "Rain in the Paradise Garden, Takaka" is lyrical and ecstatic in feeling, a kind of secular "hymn", whereas "The Dolomite Madonna (Mount Burnett)" is a more sombre and dramatic work, suggesting suffering and aspiration.

"Rain in the Paradise Garden, Takaka" is a small and exquisite painting, the central rock being set within a magical landscape of plunging cloud-filled valleys and soaring mountainsides of bare rock. The lines of the central rock are not contorted or interrupted as in the drawing or the other painted version, but are long and unbroken, sweeping and easy, sweetly echoed by those in the surrounding landscape. The bare rock gleams with a pearly opalescence. The effect is of a dream world, a paradisal Xanadu, embodying the lineaments of gratified desire.

"The Dolomite Madonna (Mount Burnett)" is, in contrast, a tougher, less immediately engaging work, though equally suggestive in its setting. The central rock is placed within a bushland setting and flanked symmetrically on either side by tall nikau palms. The perpendicular trunks and arching fronds of these trees create a kind of Gothic frame for the "Madonna" which is surrounded by a luminescent "halo" or "aura". The rock rears high above a scatter of smaller rocks in the foreground. These low, earthbound shapes are curiously reptilian in connotation and emphasize, by contrast, the tall, up-reaching grandeur of the "Madonna". The figurative associations of the earlier drawing give way here to architectural suggestions — buttresses, arches and spires — as of a natural cathedral. Even without the specific religious connotations of the title, the spiritual implications of the composition are unmistakable and are reinforced by various art historical comparisons which the painting calls to mind.

The "Gothic" atmosphere of the picture is created especially by the emphasis on perpendicularity in the forms of both the rock and the flanking trees, and by the symmetry of the composition. Various antecedents in the German tradition of landscape painting, a tradition known intimately to Bensemann, are perhaps especially pertinent. The 1532 "Landscape" of Altdorfer uses tall foreground trees to frame the distant landscape, and in the nineteenth century Caspar David Friedrich often organised trees and churches (or other religious symbols) into strikingly symmetrical compositions.

Into the lineaments of the rock itself it is possible to read the symbolism of a mental and emotional drama. The eye is made to reconnoitre the rock like a mental climber, negotiating narrow crevasses, sharp horizontal fractures, vertical precipices, until the final ridge is reached and a series of clearly defined stations leads to the summit apex. Whether the symbolism of the painting is interpreted in religious or secular terms (supernaturalism or "natural supernaturalism"?) it is evident that Bensemann is (to adapt to his own practice the words which he once applied to McCahon's "14 Stations of the Cross") "evoking symbols of human suffering from the landscape around him".[15]

15 *Ascent,* Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1967), p. 66.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to claim that in these artistic explorations of a single rock fragment Bensemann had succeeded in inventing a pictorial language sufficiently flexible and capacious to contain and resolve all the

complexities and contradictions of his vision.

In the first place, rock was a convincing and appropriate icon of his chosen locality — literally, "the substance of his region". Much that is unique to Takaka/Golden Bay is attributable to the region's rock. Some of the most ancient rocks in New Zealand are found in this area. It was part of a block which was split apart and separated by hundreds of kilometres during the mountain-building regime of the Kaikoura orogeny (the other half finished up in Fiordland). The deep, steep-walled trough of the Takaka Valley resulted from a fault-angle depression which lifted high the Pikikiruna range, the "marble mountain" which cuts off the valley and Golden Bay from the world beyond. The only access by road is up and over the steep and winding Takaka hill, from which the weird marble outcrops which strew the rough terrain are clearly visible (as in Doris Lusk's photograph). Such rocks stand at the entrance to Bensemann's world and it is not surprising that they took possession of his imagination and came to represent for him the essence of the place.

Secondly, in the hands of man, rock (and more especially marble) has been a medium for some of the most enduring and remarkable creations of human culture — Stonehenge, Chartres, the sculptures of Michelangelo and Henry Moore. Bensemann brought to his response to the remarkable natural landscape of his region a consciousness steeped in the history of art and culture, so that his perceptions were continuously mediated by sculpture, architecture, painting, literature. In "Takaka Stonehenge" (1983), for example, the primitive grandeur of the ancient landscape arouses in him a pagan sense of awe which finds a natural analogue in the megalithic monuments of ancient Britain (this work is reproduced in *Art New Zealand* 30). The rocks are therefore for Bensemann a way of reconciling and integrating his European consciousness with its Pacific habitation, "there" with "here".

Thirdly, rock, the thick craggy rind of the world, proved to be for Bensemann as for Wallace Stevens, a personal symbol of inexhaustible efficacy, "the stone from which he rises, up — and — ho,/The step to the bleaker depths of his descents"; "The starting point of the human and the end"; truly "the habitation of the whole".

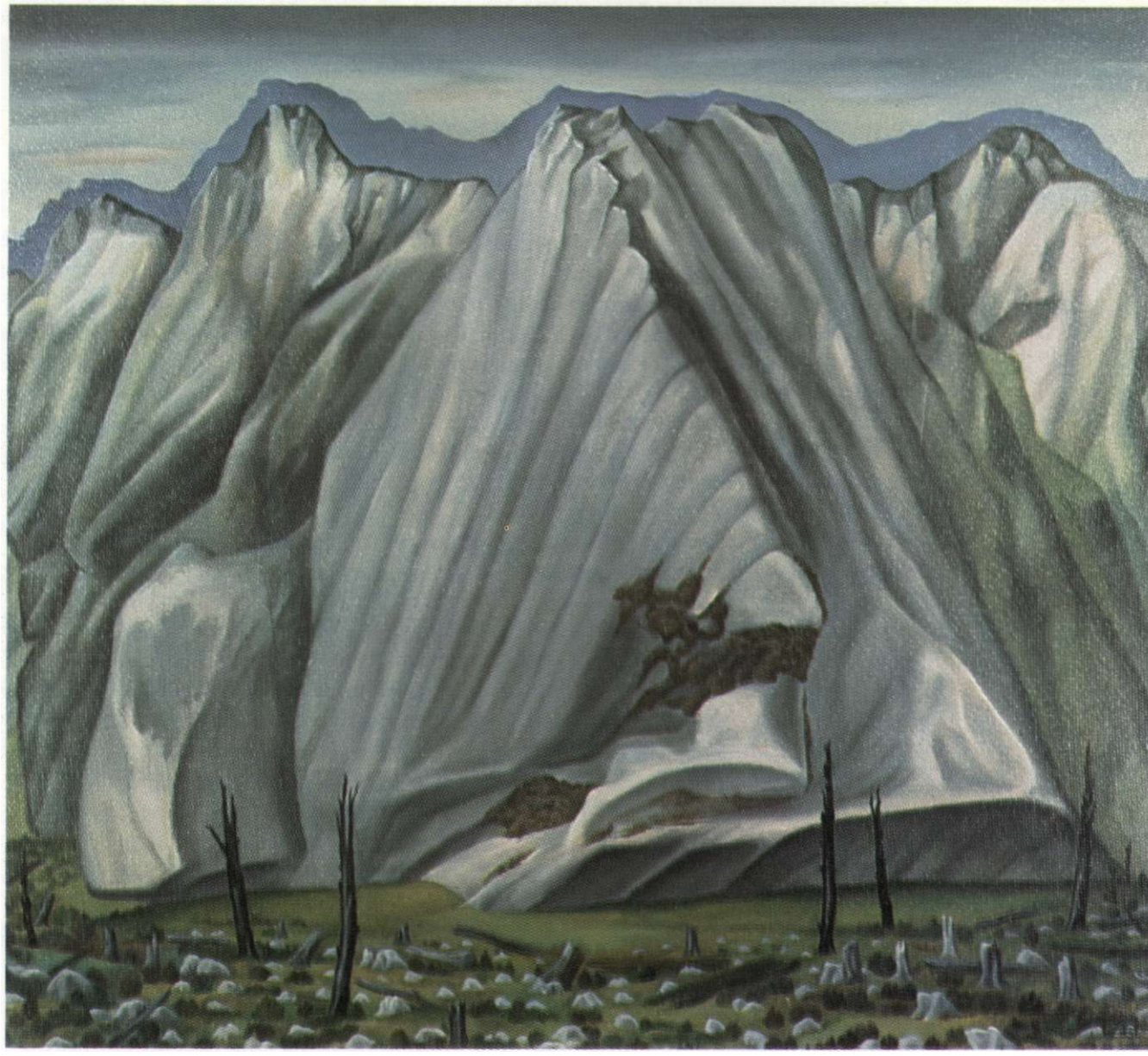
Streams from all these sources fed into the magisterial rock paintings of the last five years, including the three reproduced here, "Seascape and Causeway" (1979), "Takaka Landscape" (1980/81), and "Golden Bay Landscape" (1982), some brief notes on which will end my survey.

"Seascape and Causeway" creates an effect of gigantic scale by means of the low horizon and by slicing the image with the picture frame. If some of the rock paintings carry suggestions of human figures, and others of architecture, the dominant suggestion in this work is of a marvellous feat of (natural) engineering. Space is spanned with the effortless poise and balance of a stone bridge — a way over which is also a kind of gate, a way through, into the blue and white immensity of space and distance. Horizontals and verticals divide up the surface with a feeling of Tightness and inevitability; there is an effect of tranquillity and composure about the way the forms lock into each other.

By way of contrast, "Takaka Landscape" is an agitated and disturbing work in its angularity and the writhing muscularity of its forms. Trevor Moffitt (in *Landfall* 138) has remarked upon the contrast between the rocky slopes and the "burnt-out landscape in the foreground in which widely spaced, blackened stumps march in thinly spaced ranks across the dark, tussock covered land... a silent noting of the ravages of man upon this young environment"[16]. This

16 *Landfall* 138. June 1981, p. 148.

Golden Ray Landscape, 1982, oil on board, 585 X 710.



Takaka Landscape, 1980/81, oil on board, 625 X 710.

connects the painting with a long tradition in New Zealand art and literature, in which the dead tree is a symbol of the battle between man and nature. Pursuing this line of argument one could see the mountains as stripped, flayed like the carcass of a flensed whale, a reading supported by certain animalistic connotations (mouth, nose, spine) in the landforms.

There are other implications in the images, however. Knowledge of the local landscape allows the vegetation to be read not as "tussock" but as regenerating totara trees. If the landscape is redolent of death, it also contains hints of rebirth, suggestions which are enhanced by the touches of pink and green animating the stern battleship grey surface of the hills.

A further ambiguity in the symbolism of this painting derives from the line of the horizon. One possibility is that the horizon line relates to a range of hills beyond those visible to the eye and separated by an invisible valley. However, the fact that the line of the horizon follows so closely the ridge of the visible hills, suggests that we are seeing, as if with X-ray vision, through the outer surface to what lies underneath, the skeleton of the land. "Takaka Landscape" is a powerful, complex and multiple image capable of sustaining a variety of different readings.

"Golden Bay Landscape" contains some of the same elements as "Takaka Landscape" — dead trees set against the background of ambiguously scaled rock and mountain forms — but the similarities serve only to underline the completely different feeling of the painting. "Golden Bay Landscape" is a warm and sunny image, alive with light and space and colour. Even the dead trees seem decorative and attractive in appearance, free of the pathos attached to them in the other work. Possibly because of the golden arch at the top of the painting (also signifying Golden Bay) it is reminiscent of certain Italian Renaissance landscapes; in terms of its European antecedents it is "full of the warm south" in contrast to the chill "northern" connotations (Friedrich again?) of "Takaka Landscape".

In fact the two paintings are like complementary halves of a single vision. The stern, brooding angularity of "Takaka Landscape" is the other side of the coin from the benign curvilinear ebullience of "Golden Bay Landscape". Where one painting seems nightmarish, anxious, demonic, the other seems a wishful dream, a benign vision of heaven perhaps. "Takaka Landscape" is a valley painting, the precipitous mountains lean close, formidable, compelling, even sinister. "Golden Bay Landscape" is a coastal painting, the playful landforms open out into space gleaming with brilliant light.

"The rock is the habitation of the whole", wrote Stevens, and so, in relation to these two equally powerful but utterly different paintings, it is. If one is "the stone from which he rises up", then the other is "The step to the bleaker depths of his descents". If one is a vision of "day, the things illumined by day", the other is a vision of "night and that which night illumines". Both seem like images seen in a "vivid sleep". Taken together, and in combination with the others — all different, all related — which preceded and followed, they represent the culmination of Bensemann's long and complex journey towards the achievement of an art that answered all the demands of his vision:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view towards which they had edged,
Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.