A New Commonwealth Internationalism

by Aaron Lister, Damian Skinner

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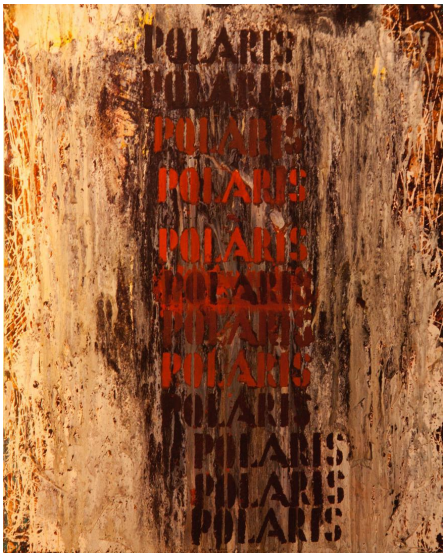
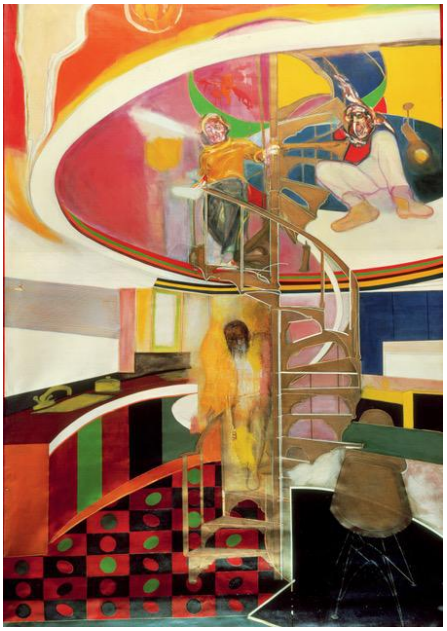
John Drawbridge (in skylight), Don Peebles (with brushes), Robert Macdonald (in frame), Bob Ellio. and son Patrick, London, 1962. Photo: Alex Starkey.



Ralph Hotere, *Polaris*, 1962.



Barry Bates and David Hockney in Cornwall, 1961. Image courtesy of Apple Archive.



Frank Bowling, *Mirror*, 1966. Image courtesy of the artist



El-Salahi (centre) and fellow students at the *Slade*, 1956. Image courtesy of Slade School of Fine.

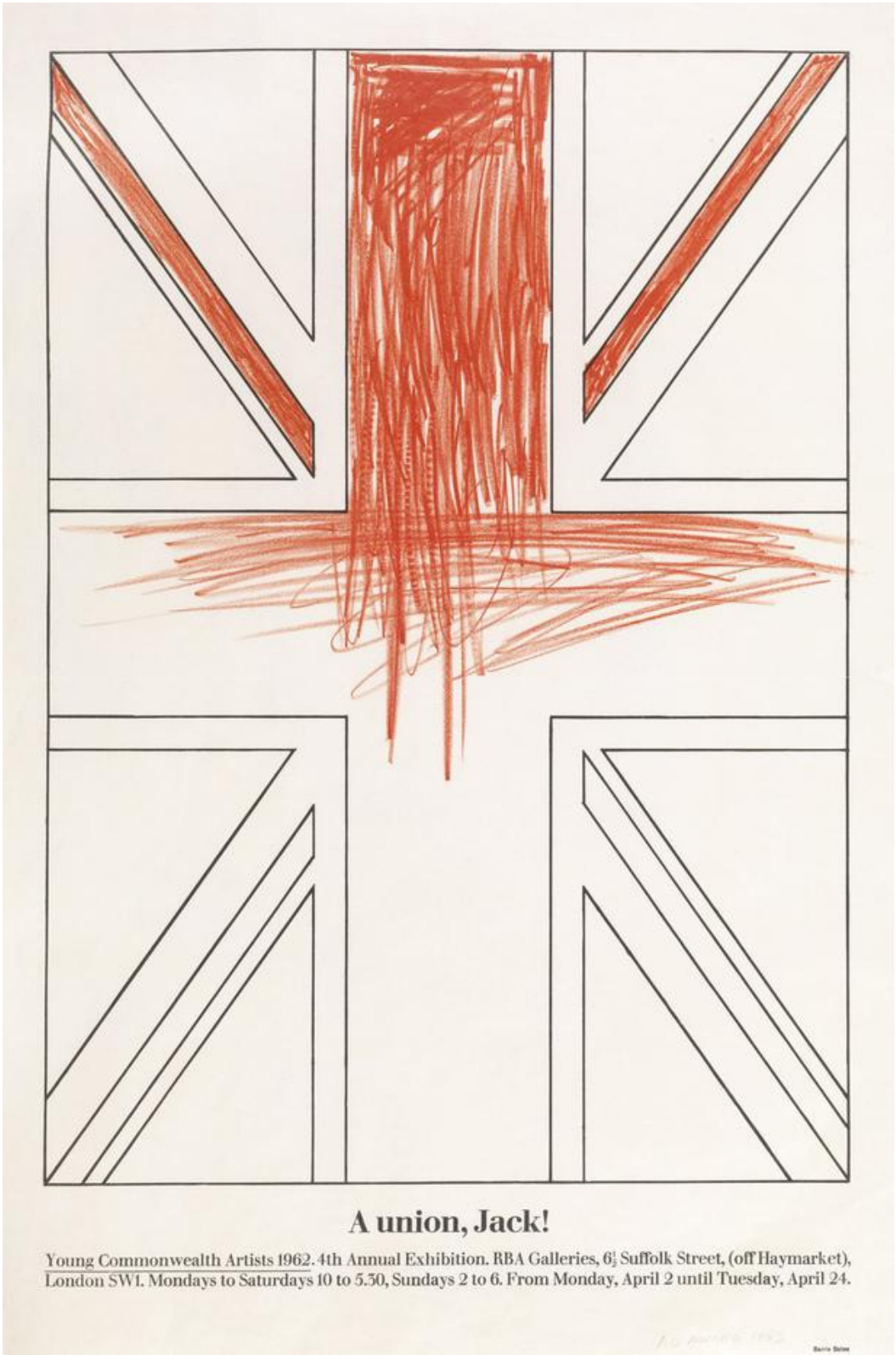


John Drawbridge, *New Zealand House Mural*, 1963.

After World War II, a generation of artists moved from Britain's colonies to London to pursue their artistic practices as modernists. This moment of postcolonial internationalism in the British art scene has been called 'New Commonwealth Internationalism', a form of 'internationalism-from-above' that tried to manage the end of the Empire by modernising Britain's relationship with newly independent countries, rather than breaking ties completely.

Dr Damian Skinner talks to Aaron Lister about the 'New Commonwealth Internationalism' and how it complicates the way both

British and New Zealand art history of this period can be written, and the ways in which artistic modernism was caught up in the decolonisation that transformed international relations in the second half of the twentieth century.



AARON LISTER You describe New Commonwealth Internationalism as an aesthetic imperative. Can you outline what it is, how it emerged and what cultural needs it served?

DAMIAN SKINNER The backstory is the end of the British empire and the emergence of the Commonwealth. At the end of World War II, at the same time that many countries were achieving political independence, a generation of artists moved from the colonies to study and work in London, where they could practice as professional artists and assert themselves as modernists. The British art scene responded warmly to this postcolonial internationalism, because it was a way for London to achieve status as an artistic metropole, a centre that attracted people from all around the world, and thus, in a modest way, assert itself as similar to Paris and New York.

A few different dynamics collide in this moment. This is the time of alternative modernisms, when indigenous and native artists began to adapt modernism into their own work, transforming what had been, until then, the modernist appropriation of indigenous and native art. It is also a period of anti-colonial struggle and national liberation, in which cosmopolitan modernism and national sovereignty had to come to some kind of arrangement in the contemporary art of people from countries that were newly independent. In a sense, New Commonwealth Internationalism was about infusing formalist modernism with specific references to the political and cultural processes of decolonisation.



Architectural model of the Commonwealth Institute in London (opened 1962). Image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



Interior spaces of the Commonwealth Institute in London (opened 1962). Image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

AL The Commonwealth Institute was clearly key in shaping this discourse. What was its role and vision?

DS At first this moment gathered pace in the private gallery sector, with institutions like the New Vision Centre Gallery, which was described as 'fiercely nonfigurative, violently tachiste, remarkably international.'[01] There was also Gallery One, which showed New Commonwealth Internationalism alongside Yves Klein and op and kinetic art. The Commonwealth Institute arose from the ashes of the Imperial Institute, changing its name in 1958, and had a brand new building in South Kensington, including a beautiful art gallery, which opened in 1962. The modernist architecture was a conscious statement of the modernisation of the Commonwealth. And the gallery was a key venue for biennales of Commonwealth art, group shows of Commonwealth countries, and many solo shows. It was an important part of the infrastructure for modernist artists from the Commonwealth who wanted to establish themselves in London.

AARON LISTER You've identified a tension between New Commonwealth Internationalism and artists from settler-colonial societies like Aotearoa New Zealand. How did that play out?

DAMIAN SKINNER As I started to look more closely at this period in British art, I realised that it wasn't just artists from the ex-colonies of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean that moved to London after World War II. There were also many Australian and New Zealand artists, and some Canadian artists. Indeed, in terms of sheer numbers, Australians were probably the biggest group of Commonwealth artists living in London in the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of New Commonwealth Internationalism, and Australia was definitely having a golden moment in Britain – just like Canada had experienced earlier in the 1920s.

What I found interesting is that these artists are effectively invisible in terms of New Commonwealth Internationalism. The native artists from India or Nigeria or Guyana are never discussed in relation to the settler artists from Australia and Aotearoa. And

as I thought about it further, I realised that one explanation is that bringing them together really complicates the way New Commonwealth Internationalism has been articulated as anti-colonial, a result of modernism and decolonisation infecting each other.

Settler artists in London were also interested in asserting new nationalist identities, just like their colleagues from Africa and Asia and the Caribbean. But unlike artists from newly independent colonies, who were trying to make a kind of modernism that would be international and contemporary and recover lost practices oppressed by colonialism, settler artists were practicing a kind of nationalism that was tied, either directly or indirectly, to the oppression of indigenous peoples. Settlers have a dual identity as colonisers in relation to the natives whose land they have stolen, and colonised in relation to the British metropole. Emphasising the second identity is a way of ignoring the first, and Australian or New Zealand or Canadian artists in London were definitely only decolonising themselves from the problem of British rule, not their culpability in the ongoing colonialism back home.

And so, the problem of introducing settler artists into the moment of New Commonwealth Internationalism is that you get this really unstable situation, in which art practices aligned with anti-colonial struggle appear alongside art practices that are connected to resisting indigenous sovereignty. There are two kinds of decolonisation at work in this moment, and they aren't the same.



El-Salahi (centre) and fellow students at the *Slade*, 1956. Image courtesy of Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.



Ibrahim El Salahi (Sudan), *The Last Sound*, 1964.

AL Are there particular artists, works or moments that best embody or mess up these positions?

DS The most shocking thing I discovered that shows the incompatibility of native and settler artists was a story told by the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi.[02] He studied at the Slade School of Art between 1954 and 1957. After talking about how he was refused a room in a London boarding house because of the colour of his skin, he recalls being called a 'bloody nigger' by another student from New Zealand. It shows so bluntly that New Zealand artists did not have the same experiences, or the same political projects, as artists from other parts of the Commonwealth in this moment of New Commonwealth Internationalism. A racist New Zealand art student can pursue settler decolonisation – i.e. a settler nationalism intended to assert cultural independence from the British coloniser – and at the same time be an instrument of the colonial oppression that El-Salahi's artistic decolonisation has to grapple with and overthrow.

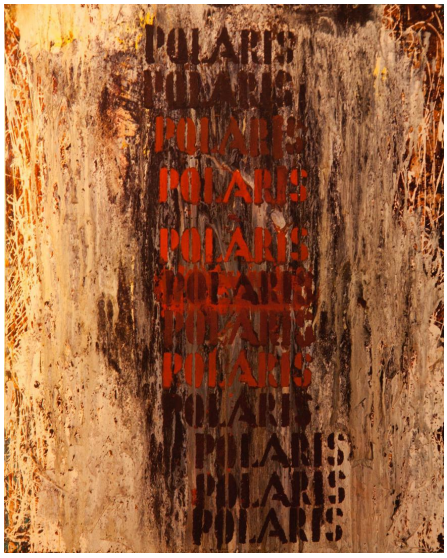
I also found Ralph Hotere's experiences interesting, again because they suggest that his being Māori meant he had a quite different relationship to the anti-colonial struggles that are central to New Commonwealth Internationalism. Hotere made artworks in the 1960s about the anti-nuclear struggle, and about the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, a colony of France, as well as the civil rights movement in the United States. Other New Zealand artists in London at this time, like Pat Hanly or Edward Bullmore, picked up on the anti-nuclear theme, but I haven't been able to find any evidence that a New Zealand settler artist was interested in the political decolonisation of the period. Only Hotere does this, and it might have been connected to the fact that when he was in France he was questioned by the police because he looked Algerian. In other words, it was personal. Hotere was aware of the anti-colonial dynamics in New Commonwealth Internationalism in a way that other New Zealand artists working in London at the time were not.



Ralph Hotere, *This is a Black Union Jack*, 1988.



Ralph Hotere, *Algerie*, 1962.



Ralph Hotere, *Polaris*, 1962.

AL What implications does this project have for art history in Aotearoa?

DS In the case of Hotere, I think connecting him to this moment can help make sense of his art, especially his ongoing political commitment. There is a reason he is interested in anti-colonial struggles around the world, and keeps referring to them in his work. Rather than being an outlier, which is what he appears to be if you just consider his work in terms of New Zealand art, he becomes part of a network of artists who made the postcolonial condition part of late modernism.

I also like the way that linking New Zealand artists to this moment opens up new ways to think about decolonisation in art and culture. That group of Pākehā artists who were in London in the 1950s and 1960s becomes political and complicated in a really interesting way. New Zealand art becomes tangled in an international story, and not just as an addition to it – here are some more artists who should be added to the canon – but in a way that forces a reconsideration of how an entire moment in British art history should be written.

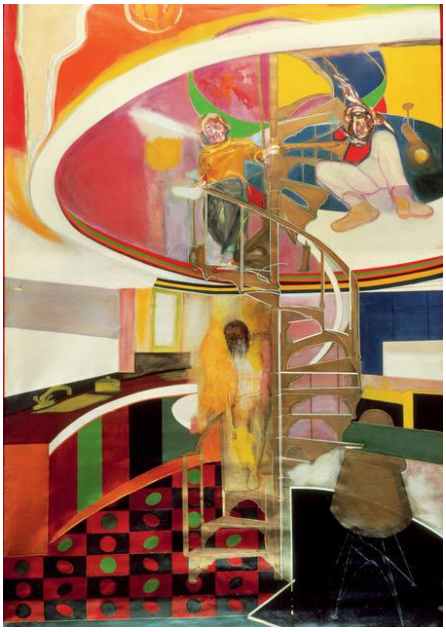
A good example of this is Billy Apple, who left New Zealand and moved to London in 1959 to study graphic design at the Royal

College of Art, and was associated with the generation of artists who went on to define British Pop art. He was also associated in different ways with New Commonwealth Internationalism, showing in groups and institutions that emerged from this moment. As Tina Barton and others have discussed, he has been erased from the history of British Pop, which is another thing he has in common with New Commonwealth Internationalism artists, who were also erased from British art history, because this was written from a nationalist perspective.

You can compare Apple to someone like Frank Bowling, an artist from Guyana, who has a very similar story. He studied at the RCA, in the painting class with David Hockney and others, yet he was excluded from the exhibitions that celebrated his British classmates because of race – he was told Britain wasn't yet ready 'for a gifted artist of colour' – and subject matter – he kept making reference to anti-colonial struggles rather than Marilyn Monroe and other appropriately Pop topics.[03] Both Apple and Bowling have made artworks that engage with the instabilities and problems of this moment – the way their identities are fractured and split in a period when British Pop was grappling with the decline of the empire, and the problem of provincialism. It doesn't precisely change what we understand about Apple, or Bowling, but it expands our sense of the forces at work in this period, the issues that their art is grappling with. Bringing them together, something that New Commonwealth Internationalism makes possible – maybe even necessary – opens up new ways to think about this moment, and the relationship between art and decolonisation, and art and nationalism, in the middle of the twentieth century.



Frank Bowling by Lord Snowdon, bromide print, 21 March 1962.



Frank Bowling, *Mirror*, 1966. Image courtesy of the artist.

AL How do you see this work and your other projects sitting in relation to other New Zealand writers and publications? I'm thinking of recent books like Anthony Byrt's This Model World, or Rangi Panoho's Māori Art, or Tina Barton's work on Billy Apple and other expatriates?

DS Some of these projects share my desire to get away from the idea of New Zealand art, and to understand art practice that happens in Aotearoa to be connected to a much larger network. Indeed, why isn't art that happens outside Aotearoa just as important as that which happens within the borders of the country? We are getting better at thinking about contemporary art in this way, but historical art still seems to be trapped in the vortex of art history's unhealthy relationship with nationalism and the nation state. In terms of thinking about Māori art, I guess the most productive aspect I've identified is the way New Commonwealth Internationalism can link indigenous modernism in Aotearoa to a global movement of artists who are grappling with the challenges of being individual yet collective, completely modern in their dialogue with contemporary art yet representative of local histories and lived practices suppressed by colonialism, and strongly nationalist yet cosmopolitan. There are many Māori artists who pull off this extraordinary balancing act, and they can

be placed alongside their colleagues from other countries who also made extraordinary work out of these tensions.



AL How did you end up researching this topic? How does it relate to your other interests?

DS I started off being very curious as to why the generation of New Zealand artists who went to London in the 1950s and 1960s weren't included in histories of New Zealand art. Then I got interested in the dynamics of settler-colonial societies, and what makes these cultural situations unique and unstable. When I had the chance to work in Britain for two years, funded by a Newton International Fellowship from the British Academy, the two things ended up intersecting. I realised that there were specific

reasons why these artists were missing from both ends, and that this had big implications for how we think about art and decolonisation.

I suppose the fundamental issue I'm keen to pursue is the question of decolonisation – for myself, what that means in terms of Pākehā living in Aotearoa, and then more widely, how decolonisation is a way to rethink art history. My recent book The Māori Meeting House: Introducing the Whare Whakairo (2016) was concerned with the transformations that Pākehā art history needs to undergo; and my work on settler-colonial art history as a methodology, which I am doing with colleagues from Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United States, is about the same issue. Ultimately I hope that answering some methodological and historical questions can have real world consequences, minor as they might end up being.

Footnotes

01. Quoted by Margaret Garlake, *New Vision 56-66*. Jarrow, Tyne and Wear: Bede Gallery, 1984, p.1.

02. Ulli Beier, '*The right to claim the world: Conversation with Ibrahim El Salahi*', Third Text, v.7, n. 23, 1993, p.24.

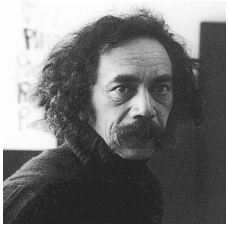
03. Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History from 1950 to the Present.* London: I.B. Taurus, 2014, p.17.

Biographies



Billy Apple is one of New Zealand's most significant artists. In 1964, Billy exhibited with contemporaries including Andy Warhol and Roy Liechtenstein in the ground-breaking show American Supermarket, in which a New York gallery was transformed into a supermarket space, effectively blurring the boundaries of commerce and art. It was the show that many believe marked the birth of the pop art movement. Since that time, Billy's work has continued to explore and interrogate the lines between art and commerce.

Before his passing in September 2021, Billy Apple held numerous solo exhibitions including *Head Height and other self-portraits*, Hamish McKay, Wellington (2021); *Billy Apple® is N=One*, Starkwhite (2019); *Billy Apple: The Artist Has To Live Like Everybody Else*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2015); *Billy Apple: British and American Works 1960–1969*, The Mayor Gallery, London (2010); *Revealed / Concealed*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2009).



Born into a Māori-Catholic family, in 1931, Hone Papita Raukura (Ralph) Hotere spent his childhood in Mitimiti, Te Tai Tokerau/Northland. During the early 1960s, he studied and exhibited in England and Europe. He returned to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1965 with an appreciation of international art movements, and developed a formal reductivism and minimalist approach to his own painting. His works are outspoken against racism, human rights injustices and environmental concerns. Through the 1970s, the words of poets became a characteristic of his work. He undertook a number of creative partnerships with the likes of Hone Tuwhare, Bill Manhire and Bill Culbert.

A leading figure in late 20th-century New Zealand art, Hotere was awarded the Arts Foundation Icon Award in 2003 and the Te Taumata Award from Te Waka Toi in 2007. He became a Member of the Order of New Zealand the year before his death in 2013.



Aaron Lister is Senior Curator at City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, where he curated *Yona Lee: In Transit* (2018-19).



Damian Skinner is an independent art historian and curator, and the 2017 JD Stout Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He was curator of Applied Art and Design at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira from 2012-16, and a Newton International Fellow at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, in 2012-13. His most recent book is *The Māori Meeting House: Introducing the Whare Whakairo*, published by Te Papa Press in 2016. He is currently completing a biography of artist Theo Schoon, and working with a team of international scholars to create a methodology for art history in settler-colonial societies. (www.settler-colonial.strikingly.com)

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