He Landed in a Place of Absolute Magic

Michael Illingworth's London Years

by Hamish Coney, Kevin Ireland

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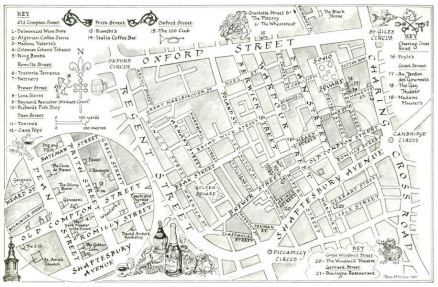


The late artist Michael Illingworth is considered as a central figure of the history of New Zealand modernism. His achievement as an artist also provides insight into a courageous individual whose commitment to the land and his art is both inspirational and unique within New Zealand culture. Though born in Yorkshire, Illingworth immigrated to Aotearoa at age 20 in the early 1950s, before returning to England and Europe for a brief but formative period in 1959. It was an experience which shaped and sustained the rest of his artistic career.

The poet and writer Kevin Ireland OBE is the author of over 20 volumes of poetry, short stories, essays and the novel Blowing my Top. *Ireland was one of Michael Illingworth's oldest New Zealand friends. They first met in 1957 when Illingworth was the photo engraver for illustrations by Theo Schoon and Anthony Stones for the seminal literary journal* Mate. *It was Ireland's introduction to London gallerist Victor Musgrave that set Illingworth on his journey to becoming a full-time artist on his return to New Zealand in 1961. As Ireland explains in the discussion that follows, for Illingworth the London years (1959-61) were a period of high-octane education and inspiration. Art+Object's Hamish Coney conducted this interview with Ireland in 2017 at his home in Devonport, Auckland.*



Michael Illingworth, *Untitled – Head and Shoulders Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1961, 505 x 901mm.



Map of Soho, London in the 1950s with Gallery One location indicated. Courtesy of Daniel Farson, Soho in the Fifties (Michael Joseph: London, 1987).

HAMISH CONEY Kevin, when did you first meet Michael Illingworth and what was the environment?

KEVIN IRELAND 1957 in Auckland. The usual thing in those days of course was six o'clock closing of the pubs so 'Bohemia' did everything from six o'clock on.

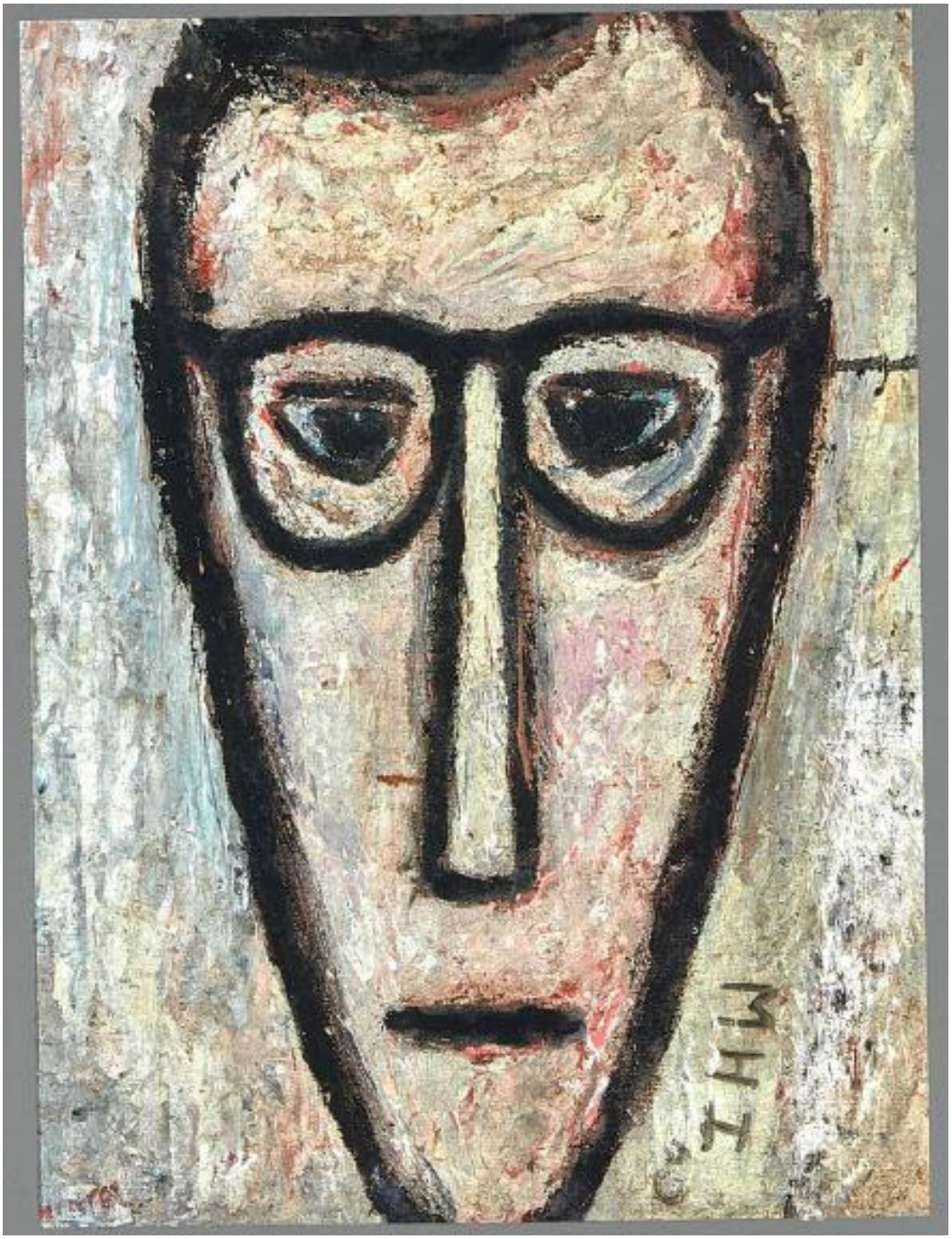
HC When you talk about Bohemia – who were some of the figures knocking around the scene in the late 1950s?

KI There was Tony Stones, the artist who later worked in television and then went over to England and became a very famous sculptor. Bob Dudding, who ended up as the editor of *Landfall* plus a whole group of party goers. I suppose it really was all centred on the Auckland architects. The architectural people were the centre of Bohemia in those days, led by Bill Wilson who was a relative of my wife.

HC Are these the 'Group' architects?

KI Absolutely yes, they were the ones in the early 1950s who discovered Somervilles coffee bar on Queen street and went there in the evening. That was the only place in the whole of central Auckland that made real Kona coffee. Bill Wilson was an all-

round intellectual so anybody who was in town, or coming into town, from Rex Fairburn to Colin McCahon to Theo Schoon always came to Somervilles after six o'clock or if it was before six, the Queen's Ferry or the Commercial, which were side by side. You could go from one pub to the other and if you were broke you could find somebody who would lend you sixpence in one or the other. It cost sixpence for a ten ounce beer in those days.



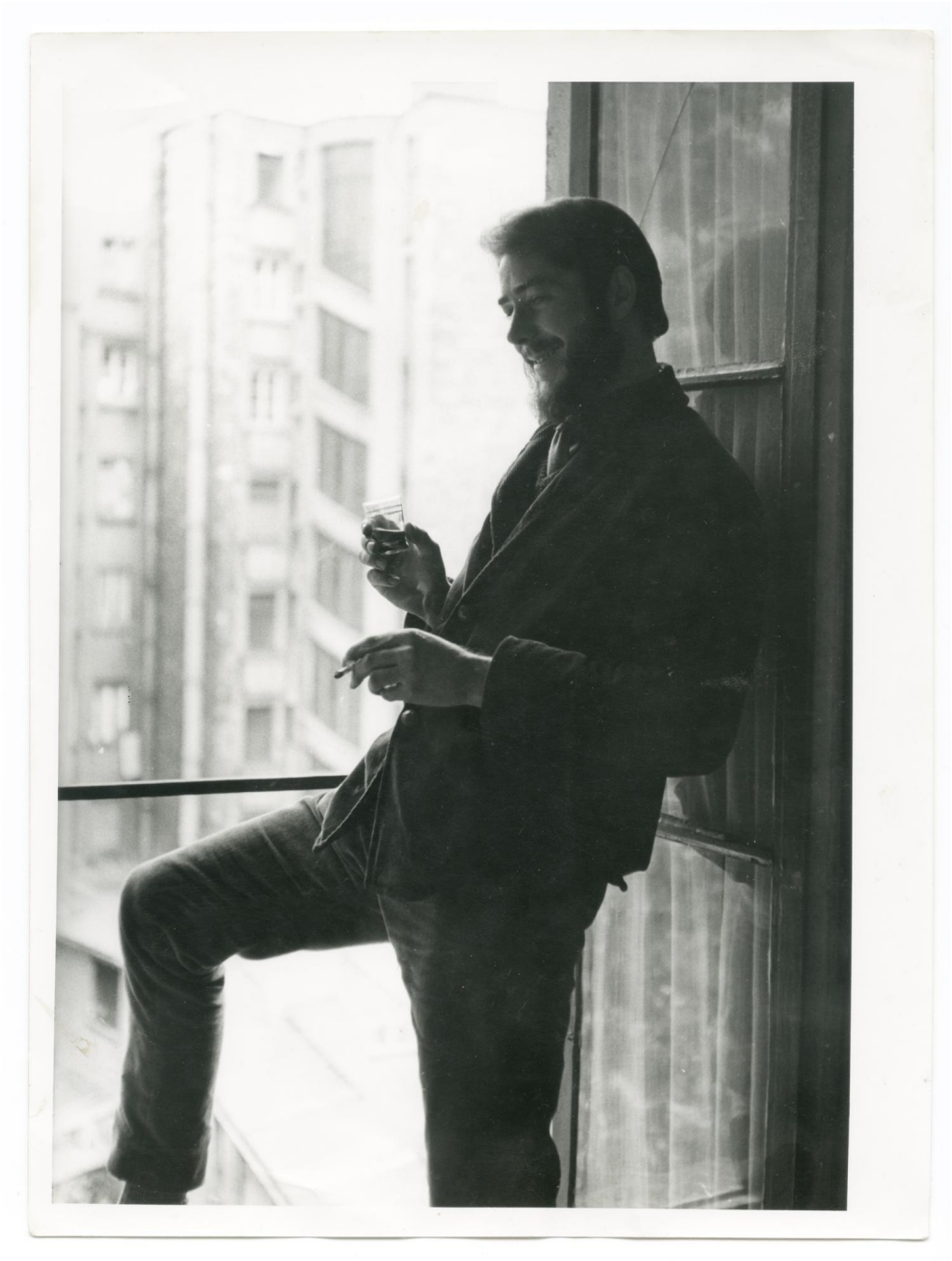
HC So that was the beginning of the art, architecture, literary scene developing in Auckland. But soon after you went to London?

KI In 1959 I went to London and funnily enough Michael popped up three months later. I arrived in May and Mike arrived in August. Like most people in those days he arrived with no money. I arrived myself with ten shillings in my pocket. That is all the cash I had in the world and Mike arrived in no better condition. He was expecting an inheritance I recall - the last of the Illingworth Morris money which was the biggest textile manufacturers in Yorkshire at one time. He was a descendant but by his time it had gone through the cycle that Thomas Mann described in his marvellous German sagas. The first of the family builds the firm up, the next generation consolidates it and then the next generation turns to bohemia. They can afford to be interested in the arts and ballet and love affairs and they spend it wildly. By the time Mike got to the Illingworth Morris fortune the firm was owned by shareholders of all descriptions, but I think he did inherit some money.

HC You were working at Gallery One, a leading player in the London art scene. Can you talk about the Soho milieu at that time?

KI (the Scottish painters Robert) Colquhoun and (Robert) Macbryde [01] were in the Caves De France bar every afternoon. They were part of the furniture. They were like twins. Francis Bacon was right in the middle of everything. The artists of the Marlborough Gallery in Old Bond Street were a cut above, they were on retainers. The Victor Passmores and so on. The Marlborough Gallery really changed the big commercial art scene, but the smaller galleries like Gallery One is where the artistic changes were really happening. Victor Musgrave was right at the centre of that. He scratched a living, he just managed to stay solvent, but he had been doing that all his life. He was the most extraordinary eccentric. I describe it in *Backwards to Forwards* [02].

He was an extraordinary man with extraordinary opinions. He would often say that men did not exist; they were only people who dressed differently.



HC What do you think Michael Illingworth was hoping to find in London?

KI He had extraordinary luck as I did. I arrived in London with 10 shillings in my pocket as I mentioned and I had to

spend some of that on an *A to Z*. I quickly discovered that, unlike Auckland that had one main street, suddenly I was in the middle of a city where you had no hope of finding your way in any direction unless you had a map. So I spent three and ninepence on that. I knew that (Maurice) Shadbolt was somewhere down in Chelsea, but I didn't know where that was and I also knew that John Kasmin was in Soho because we had written to each other quite a bit and so I thought I'll head for Soho. It was the longest shot. So when I passed Gallery One I thought that it looked like the sort of place that Kasmin might be found in. So I popped in and saw Victor Musgrave and asked, "do you know John Kasmin?" and he said, "why do you want to know?" (laughs). In those days everyone was suspicious of anybody asking after someone. So he said "I'll make a private phone call" and he did and when he came back he said, "I've been told by Mr Kasmin that you are to sit here and I'm not to let you go." Kasmin arrived and announced to Victor that the place was a shambles and Kevin is now working for you.

HC Tell us about the John Kasmin connection?

KI He founded the Kasmin Gallery [03] in New Bond Street.

HC And your connection? Was he a New Zealander?

KI He came out to New Zealand when he was about 16 and left again when he was about 17 or 18. He and I met in the civil service would you believe? I was in the Education Department. I had left school and thought I would do University part time and get my degree paid for by the Civil Service. Kasmin was, in of all places, The Public Trust. He was an outstanding Latin and Greek scholar. Kas had a meteoric journey through New Zealand Bohemia, then went to London and got a job with Gallery One. Victor was married to Ida Karr, a wonderful Armenian photographer and at one stage Kas was one of Ida's many lovers. Ida said to Victor, "employ this man!"



Francis Newton Souza, *Hampstead Terraces*, 1964 from Art+Object's August 2014 Important Paintings & Contemporary Art catalogue.



Victor Musgrave, director of Gallery One in his office at 20 D'Arbley Street with works by Enrico Baj and John Christoforou. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London. A further New Zealand connection to Gallery One took place in 1963 when Billy Apple held his debut London exhibition 'Apple sees red' at the gallery which had relocated to new premises at Grosvenor Square, W1.

HC But soon after you left to go on your travels and Michael Illingworth took over from you at Gallery One?

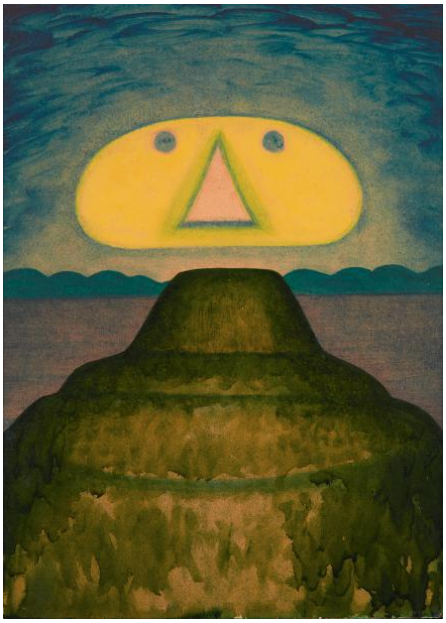
KI I left saying to Victor, "I'm leaving Mike to look after things". Victor needed looking after. He couldn't feed himself or even cut a slice of bread. He was totally hopeless. But I didn't come back for ten months and in that time Mike had a ball. He landed in a place of absolute magic for him. He had all these fantastic people around him. Some people like Christoforou [04], the Greek artist who had been in the RAF, terrifically articulate, didn't influence his art so much, but he gave Mike a real structure of thought to live by. Then there were the other artists like Enrico Baj 5 who really influenced Mike. You can really see Baj [05] coming right through Mike's work of the 1960s. His imagery really hooked Mike. Souza [06] was another Gallery One artist who had a great effect on Michael, with his powerful outlines.

HC Michael was in the middle of Soho, the London art scene…

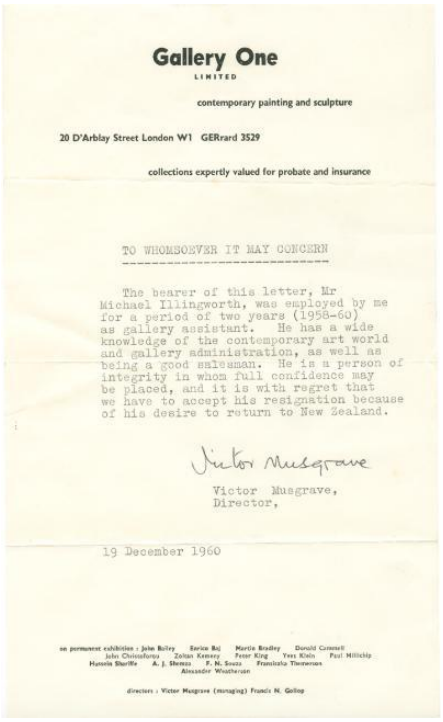
KI That's right Soho, Colquhoun and Macbryde, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon. The Colony Club - the whole thing!

HC So why given that he had such a great start in London and had really landed on his feet, do you think he was so keen to return to New Zealand?

KI That's interesting. A differently ambitious person would have stayed. He would have thought, 'I can make my way here in the big pool' and Mike probably could have. But you see he had left England as a teenager and when he got to New Zealand he thought, 'this is the place for me, this is paradise'. He thought, 'I've got all the information I want – in a really compressed year. I've got everything I need to know' and he said, "I want to do something with it and I know I can only do that in New Zealand. I've got to put everything I've learnt into a landscape." He got this from Christoforou who really revved him up. He would say, "you don't belong here boy. You've left here. You might have been born here but you've gone. You've become a New Zealander. Go back. You've got to have a landscape." Christoforou was a massive influence over him, not in his painting, but in his life.



Michael Illingworth, *Tawera over Pah Hill*, varnished watercolour and oil on card, 1962, 380 x 255mm.



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TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

The bearer of this letter, Mr Michael Illingworth, was employed by me for a period of two years (1958-60) as gallery assistant. He has a wide knowledge of the contemporary art world and gallery administration, as well as being a good salesman. He is a person of integrity in whom full confidence may be placed, and it is with regret that we have to accept his resignation because of his desire to return to New Zealand.

Victor Musgrave

Victor Musgrave,
Director,

19 December 1960

on permanent exhibition : John Bolley Enrico Baj Martin Bradley Donald Cammell John Chamberlain Zoltan Kemeny Peter King Yves Klein Paul Millichip Hussein Sharifle A. J. Shemza F. N. Souza Franciszka Themerson Alexander Weatherson

directors : Victor Musgrave (managing) Francis N. Golling

Gallery One reference. From the Illingworth family archive.

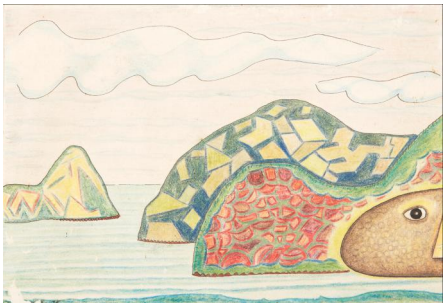
HC Illingworth returned to Auckland in 1961. What was the Auckland of 1961 like?

KI It shocked him. In fact he got out of it. He sent me lots and lots of letters. I got the reports. I was the end of the hippy trail for lots of New Zealanders in those days so I got plenty of updates. Mike would report to me that he was getting out of Auckland and he was going to live in the country and work. He really got down to work. He really developed the language he was going to use. He got all the information needed from that year and half in London and he was off!

HC So Michael was reporting back to you about the New Zealand art scene. The 1960s was a period when some major foundations were being laid in the development of New Zealand art.

KI A lot of this happened in the 1950s but it was not exhibited. I think of Gordon Walters who I knew well – it was

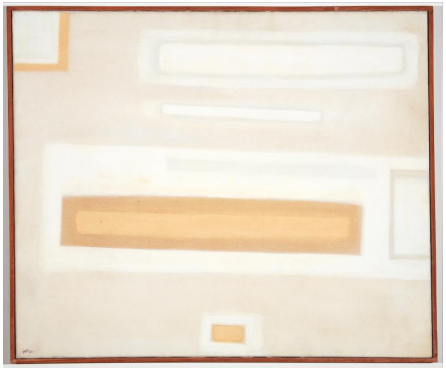
unknown. In the 1960s, art took a new turn. It was no longer the merely Bohemian on the fringes. Bohemia moved in from the edges. People like Mike said, “we are right at the centre of things and we have a vision so sit up and take notice.” Mike was there just to tell the truth, “this is me and this is how I look at things. You can take it or leave it.”



Michael Illingworth, *Study for Tomb of Seahorse*, pastel on paper, 170 x 249mm.



Michael Illingworth, *A City in Exile*, oil on canvas, 1963, 803 x 1088mm.



Michael Illingworth, *Times Beyond the City*, oil on canvas, 1962, 760 x 915mm.



Michael Illingworth, *Beyond the Dictatorship of Time and Place*, oil on canvas, 1961, 575 x 814mm.



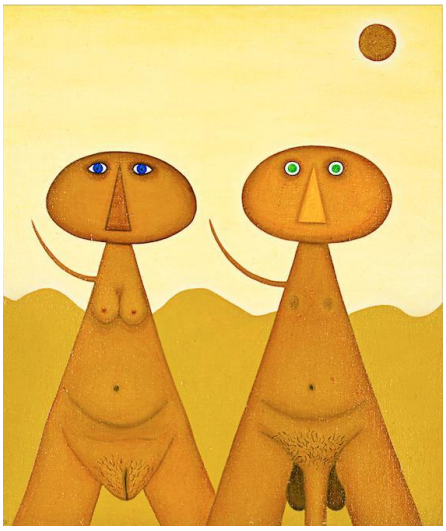
Michael Illingworth, *Untitled – The Jester*, ink and gouache on paper, 1962, 200 x 253mm.

HC Did Michael write to you about that controversial exhibition at the Barry Lett Galleries where the Adam and Eve Painting [07] attracted the attention of the media and the police? He was in the headlines in a way that no other artist had been, up until that point.

KI Oh yes! Lots and lots of letters. He sent me copies of the paper. Mike was excited. He was thrilled. For him he was helping to change the country and change outlooks. He was taking

the artist from the edges as a mere servant of taste into being a creator of taste.

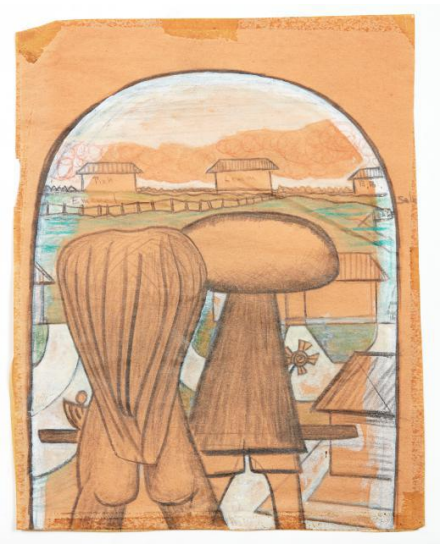
HC Kevin, you knew Michael Illingworth all his adult life and now some thirty years after his death we have a chance to think about his legacy as an artist. Where do you think he sits in the cosmology of New Zealand art?



Michael Illingworth, *As Adam and Eve*, 1965, oil on jute. Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa.



Marti Friedlander, Michael llingworth, Alan Thornton and family with Adam and Eve Figure, Puhoi, 1968. Courtesy the Gerrard and Marti Friedlander Charitable Trust, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Michael Illingworth, *Adam and Eve*, graphite and pastel on paper, 255 x 200mm

KI He is one of the great givers of our culture. He released a whole new set of imagery and ways of looking at things - turning them upside down, satirising the staid view of things which was that it gradually evolved. Mike was radical. He came along and said, “No, you’ve done that. I like the Lindauers and so on. But that is not the way I see it. My view is just as valid.” He really gave the country a unique vision. When I come to a Michael Illingworth painting my first reaction is always to smile. I feel this marvellous sense of life force, energy and vision which is triumphant over all the piss-quicks of the world (laughs). It is so gorgeous, a complete and satisfying vision that glows. Mike’s work makes me happy!

HC One final question. Some key bodies of his work relate to Māori culture, such as the Pah Hill and Rangi and Papa works. These are fertile creation stories, some quite explicit in a way we seldom see in New Zealand art. Can you tell me your thoughts on his view of Māori Culture and how it affected his work?

KI In 1986 just after I had returned to New Zealand. I remember Michael had made one of his trips from Coroglen up to Matauri Bay. He told me there were two places where he came into this connection with Māori culture and thinking about the land, one was Puhoi and the other was Matauri Bay. Of course he had this important access through [his wife] Dene. He came to stay with me in Devonport on the way back driving his little Land Rover. He'd stay with me to break the journey. We'd open a bottle of whiskey and talk through the night. He said, "I've just had the most amazing experience and I had no idea it was going to happen. I met the Kaumātua (esteemed elders in Māori society) I always see up there. I told him all I was doing in my art. He put his arm around my shoulder and we were looking down on Matauri Bay and he said, "Michael I've wanted to say this to you for some time but you are a Kaumātua also". Then he said, "do you know you are the first person I have told this. I have not even told Dene yet as I haven't seen her". He said, "those are the most important words that have ever been said to me in my life. Being an artist is one thing. But I've realised that my whole journey has been towards becoming a Kaumātua. You can't say you are one yourself. But I've been told and I'm going to think on this for the rest of my days. This is the greatest honour I've ever had."

Footnotes

01. Robert Colquhoun (1914 – 1962) and Robert Macbryde (1913 – 1966) were legendary Scottish artists noted for their entwined lives and working relationship. The 'Two Roberts' were most closely aligned with the British post WWII 'Neo-Romantic' artists such Graham Sutherland, John Piper, John Minton and John Craxton.

02. Kevin Ireland, *Backwards to Forwards*, a Memoir by Kevin Ireland, Random House, Auckland, 2002.

03. The Kasmin Gallery in Central London was David Hockney's first dealer gallery and many leading American and British and abstract and colour field artists including Barnett Newman, Morris Louis, Frank Stella, Helen Frankenthaler, Howard Hodgkin and Gillian Ayres. Kasmin's entry career in the artworld began as Victor Musgrave's gallery assistant before joining the

Marlborough Gallery and founding his own gallery in the early 1960s. His contribution to the British art scene was recently celebrated in the 2016 exhibition 'Speaking of the Kasmin Gallery' at Tate Britain.

04. John Christoforou (1921 – 2014), a British painter of Greek heritage who exhibited at Gallery One and the Gallery Rive Gauche in Paris. His work is held in the collections of the Tate, Museum of 20th Century Art Vienna and the Kunst Museum Randers in Denmark.

05. Enrico Baj (1924 – 2003), the Italian artist born in Milan was closely associated with the European avant garde including the COBRA movement. Baj is most well-known for his elaborate paintings and collages. In 2013 a suite of his work was included as part of the curated exhibition at the Venice Biennale entitled The Encyclopedic Palace.

06. Francis Newton Souza (1924 – 2002), the Indian artist was a founding member of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group in 1947. In London in the early 1950s he came to prominence, exhibiting at Gallery One. His first solo show in 1955 was a sell out and he went on to enjoy a notable career in London, New York and latterly in India.

07. *As Adam and Eve* (1965) later became a key work in the collection of Les and Milly Paris Collection, offered at ART+OBJECT in September 2012 and acquired by Te Papa Tongarewa. 2017

Biographies



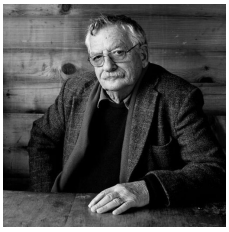
Michael Illingworth (1932 - 1988) is often described as an outsider in New Zealand art. Born in Britain he arrived in New Zealand in the early 1950s. He returned to London in 1959 where he engaged with the contemporary art scene there whilst working at Gallery One. Upon his return to New Zealand he developed a distinctive body of landscape and figure paintings in New Zealand that appeared naive and surreal, yet were also derived from the local environment and influenced by the art of Klee and Miro.

Illingworth's simple, triangular naked figures stare out of the canvas, detached from the land they occupy, seemingly devoid of culture, spirituality and identity. However, rather than detached from humanity, the bleakness of Illingworth's imagery is often counterbalanced by a wry humour and pathos. Illingworth's work is represented in the collections of the Auckland Art Gallery and the Museum of New Zealand - Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.



Hamish Coney is Managing Director of the auction house Art+Object in Auckland, New Zealand. Coney is an art historian and Qantas Media Awards winning columnist who is regular contributor to Newsroom.co.nz and has written on art and architecture for magazines such as URBIS, Architecture NZ, NZ Herald and Idealog. He is also a collector of contemporary New Zealand and Australian art.

This interview was previously featured in the 2017 catalogue The Estate of Michael Illingworth published by Art+Object.



Kevin Ireland is a well known New Zealand poet, essayist and writer. He was also one of Michael Illingworth's oldest and closest friends, their association dating to the mid 1950s. Their paths merged at Gallery One in London in 1959. Ireland's 2002 memoir Backwards to Forwards traverses this period in some detail. Ireland and Illingworth maintained an active correspondence and friendship for over thirty years until the artist's death in 1988. In 1992 Ireland was awarded the OBE for his services to literature and in 2004 he was further recognised with the Prime Minister's award for Literary Achievement.

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