

# Nigel Brown

b.1949

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Nigel Brown is an artist who frequently works in series, producing paintings that explore a particular theme or subject. *Table Series VIII* is from a series that takes an ordinary domestic incident – the family meal – and presents images that suggest more complex social interactions. Brown is less interested in the subject of eating breakfast itself, than in the emotions which might be beneath the surface of an apparently banal moment.

In this painting he focuses on a family. At the end of the table sits the mother whose vacant gaze seems directed elsewhere, while she distractedly fidgets with her cup. Based on Madonnas from 13th and 14th century Christian art, her body language conveys a certain sadness or resignation, which is emphasised by the unnatural paleness of her skin. The children by contrast appear to have a little more spark, the baby (based on a Byzantine Christ-child and the artist's daughter) more so than the teenager who looks bored. At the bottom of the table sits the father. With shoulders slightly hunched, head hung low and black-clad back squarely presented to the viewer, he comes across as a brooding figure.

Each individual appears to be self-absorbed, with little interaction among the group. They don't appear to be looking at each other. Rather than a sense of ease and of enjoyment, there is a feeling of distance and isolation. This feeling of existential remoteness is echoed by the landscape glimpsed through the window, which is one of endless trees and sea, suggesting that this is a family isolated from society and quite alone.

The portrayal of isolation and lack of communication in Brown's painting is part of his wider concern with life and cultural identity in New Zealand. For Brown, the dominant aspect of our identity is a quality of 'down-to-earthness'. He uses a range of signs and symbols to explore this trait, which he suggests is not always positive. In *Table Series VIII*, for instance, it seems that down-to-earthness comes at the cost of expression and communication.

Nevertheless, Brown's own painting style seems to celebrate 'down-to-earthness'. He has chosen to depict everyday life in New Zealand using a direct and accessible figurative style,

which has its roots in German Expressionism and the work of New Zealand artist Colin McCahon. In fact, McCahon was Brown's teacher at art school and it is useful to compare *Table Series VIII* with McCahon's figurative paintings of the 1940s.

In *Table Series VIII* Brown has emphasised a feeling of unease by introducing an additional stylistic element – the unconventional treatment of perspective – which has been borrowed from Cubism. Some objects depicted in the painting have a flat appearance that works against the illusion of depth, which most figurative paintings present to the viewer. The table, for instance, is a perfect rectangle. In a conventional realist painting, the bottom (closer) edge would be wider than the top edge – suggesting to the viewer's eye that the object exists in three-dimensional space rather than the two dimensions of the picture surface. The effect is to make the table 'tip' toward the viewer. So it is no surprise that the breakfast plates (which are also perfectly round) look as if they might slide off the table at any moment; only adding to the tension levels of the image.

## Robyn Pickens

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### Articles:

[www.art-newzealand.com/Issues21to30/brown.htm](http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues21to30/brown.htm)

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Colin McCahon

