

# Don Driver

b.1930

Taranaki Polytechnic

1966, a year after passing through New York's La Guardia airport, Don Driver makes *La Guardia*. On that visit to New York, Driver glimpsed a rebellious spirit emerging amongst his generation.

There was a move among younger artists to bring life and art closer together, both on the street and in the studio. Artists joined musicians and performers to stage Happenings. Pop culture, theatre and politics infiltrated art. Anti-war demonstrations, race riots and student unrest were just around the corner. Headly times.

In the New York galleries, Driver was particularly drawn to the art of Robert Rauschenberg, who folded consumer society's refuse into his work. Anything from a made-up bed daubed with oil paint, to a stuffed Angora goat, collided in carefully controlled chaos. Rauschenberg called these works Combines.

Driver also encountered Colour Field painting by Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. In contrast to Pop art's levity, and the messiness of Happenings, these artists wielded colour on a breathtaking scale, but within refined aesthetic rules.

Driver's *La Guardia* encapsulates an art historical moment in New York that reverberated in his work for several decades. Today, we can see his attempt to reconcile the very different impulses that he experienced; to combine abstract painting and assemblage in the one work. It looks like a weird coupling, but we can appreciate the artist's wit and audacity – anticipating by 20 years the pastiche abstractions of Neo-Geo artists Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton.

*La Guardia*'s stripes of colour, a common Colour Field pictorial device, are turned out in robust tones with discordant accents – that pink! A collaged metal 'runway' occupies the centre of the painting. PVC plumbing, a nod to Rauschenberg, partially frames the central panel and tweaks the work's overall symmetry.

In the following decades Driver developed both aspects of his art – for a time in parallel – producing elegant, Minimalist-influenced paintings alongside the assemblages. Eventually they merged as colour was fully integrated into his assemblages of such found objects as pitchforks, prams, tarps, doormats, bikes, tyres, umbrellas, rubber gloves, animal hides, baling hooks, scythes, dresses... the list of unremarkable objects goes on.

That Driver is a one-time amateur conjuror, with an abiding affection for the lo-fi tricks of illusionists and escape artists, is worth keeping in mind as you enter his world where everyday objects give our perceptions the slip. Unremarkable objects into remarkable art: Driver's magic.

## Gerald Barnett

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp](http://www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp)  
[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)  
[www.hamishmckaygallery.com](http://www.hamishmckaygallery.com)

### YouTube search:

Allan Kaprow's Happenings

### Web search:

Ashley Bickerton  
 Helen Frankenthaler  
 Peter Halley  
 Morris Louis  
 Kenneth Noland  
 Robert Rauschenberg's Combines

