

Jacqueline Fahey

b.1929

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury

A figure in a large sunhat, recognisable as the artist (although uncharacteristically with back to us), is literally in the middle of the crossing. The milk and coke signs are on the footpath outside the dairy, the bus is at the bus stop, a man stumbles towards us with finger in his mouth, a woman stops in her tracks for a good look. Jacqueline Fahey presents us with business-as-usual on her street, or does she?

Her painting, *At The Crossing* is part of *Bringing It Home*, a series which reconstructs life outside the dairy in richly pictorial, media-soaked ways. Fahey mixes up local trouble that has no place on a postcard (a rape, a car crash, drug dealers cruising the neighbourhood, a boy dying on the ground), with global trouble we experience everyday on television and in the paper (people caught up in war, being shot for their spiritual beliefs or fleeing from machine gun attack).

Fahey is taking her turn at an old art historical trick; setting scenarios in recognisable inner city Auckland, just as Italian painters of the Renaissance set religious stories in the rocky hills they knew best. From another point of view, she is taking a 'personal is political' vision (honed in her 1970s paintings of domestic life) out of the living room and into the street. Her adept handling of a mass of visual information remains consistent. While the subject matter of *Bringing It Home* is in many ways grim, these paintings (like Fahey's 1970s interiors, with their fabulously unrestrained concoctions of people, clothes, furniture, make-up, decoration and gin) come off as the work of an enthusiast, albeit a questioning and critical one. Fahey's eye for her environment is upbeat and her pleasure in handling paint and organising compositions is unmistakable.

Fahey was born in Timaru in 1929 and studied at Canterbury College School of Art (Ilam) between 1946 and 1951. In 2007 her work was included in *Wack!*, an international survey of feminist art of the 1970s held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. In the catalogue to the exhibition, Fahey is described as, 'stand[ing] out among her contemporaries in New Zealand because of her involvement in social and political issues.' She also stands out due to her commitment to oil paint. Her work is informed by a deep appreciation of the persuasive power of painting that dates to her introduction to religious images when she first started school at Teschmakers Convent in Timaru. Fahey's early immersion in traditional painterly values and experience at art school (she was taught by artists including Bill Sutton and Russell Clark and admired the work of Rudi Gopas) has not had predictable results.

Her knowledge of Western painting conventions has fed her attack on the culture of tasteful restraint. In particular she has challenged the limited forms of feminine artistic expression propagated in the unspoken codes of socially acceptable behaviour she grew up with.

Fahey's approach to social commentary is emphatically first person. She relishes painting's role as a politically charged site for the expression of individual views. Time and again she puts herself in the picture. In *Happy Christmas* (1984) she memorably represents herself squirting lurid green Palmolive at the kitchen ceiling. This is social observation as brought to you by a fully implicated insider. That this insider is well versed in the tradition of narrative painting, means her painterly scenarios often contain wider resonance. The presence of Fahey at the centre of *At The Crossing*, for instance, suggests that the connection between this not-so-everyday event and the larger world of symbolic transitions is up for discussion.

Anna Miles

Galleries and museums:

www.annamilesgallery.com

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

www.victoria.ac.nz

Books:

Fahey, J. (2006). *Something For The Birds*, Auckland University Press.

Web search:

Russell Clark

Rudi Gopas

Bill Sutton

