

Patrick Hanly

1932–2004

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Have you ever wondered what scientists and artists have in common? Patrick Hanly's *Hibiscus* is, like physics, keen to show what happens under the surface. We all know that appearances can be deceiving, that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover. What about the world around us? How much can we trust what our eyes see? Science has discovered that what we see as solid forms are in fact made up of energy, tiny particles whizzing and zapping through space. If we could somehow change the way we viewed the world, everything – our eyes, Hanly's painting, the room you are in – would dissolve into movement. Which is what Hanly has done in this painting. The artist shows us what the scientist knows.

Around 1967, the year before *Hibiscus* was painted, Hanly began what he called his 'molecular' paintings. He started to explore the way he could, in paint, represent the molecules and energy that flows through everything in the world. *Hibiscus* shows clearly that Hanly doesn't want to make a traditional still life – flowers in a vase against a nice backdrop, everything looking as real as possible, as though the viewer could reach out and touch it. Instead, the painting is a silhouette filled with different kinds of marks: chains of dots against a dark background to suggest air or space, a dense shimmering field (like stars in the night sky) of white dots to suggest leaf and stem, and brushy areas of colour to suggest the flower's petals. Hanly makes it clear that if everything is made up of molecules and energy, then they are also made up of different kinds of energy, and he calls on all the painterly tricks he knows to show this visually.

To help him achieve his vision, Hanly designed a series of seven rules which he followed in his paintings. First, choose your subject, but make sure you don't fall into any of the traditional rules of picture-making. Second, start painting, but only after, third, you've thought hard about the inner nature of your subject rather than its external qualities (don't get caught up in what it looks like). Fourth, pay attention to the way your subject is energy, constantly changing and evolving cells, gases, heat, etc. Fifth, don't think about making a composition, an artwork, but imagine you are remaking the thing itself through the paint. Sixth, choose your colours not by looking at the subject but by imagining what it does, what it is, and how it exists in the world. And seventh, make paintings that are like statements of what you are thinking. Don't try and make art.

Hibiscus is somewhere in between figurative or naturalistic art and abstract art. We can see what Hanly is painting and we would know this was a flower even without the title. Yet he is also really interested in the painting as an arrangement of colour, line, and brushwork. He doesn't let the appearance of his subject get in the way of what he wants to represent. In this way Hanly belongs to a long line of modern artists whose work is about the 'truth' (as they saw it) of the world, about how things are under the surface. Painting has often been seen as one of the best ways to present such ideas.

Damian Skinner

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Books:

Brown, G.H. and Keith, H. (1969). *An Introduction To New Zealand Painting*, Collins, Auckland.

Haley, R. (1989). *Hanly: A New Zealand Artist*, Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland.

