

Patrick Hanly

1932–2004

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On the back of this painting, Pat Hanly has attached two documents. One of them is titled *Exhibition Notes* and says, “ALTERATIONS, BROKEN PAINTINGS. *Works have been made up from broken paintings of mine and are used in a reaction to the ‘cleanism’ of post-modernism. Away from the precious, the tough is broken, veneer threatened, materials exposed and explored...*”

As can happen in a career that spans several decades, Hanly’s work fell out of fashion. This occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s when many younger artists, art curators and academics were influenced by the ideas of French thinkers (such as Derrida, Barthes and Baudrillard) about language and representation. These ideas were loosely grouped under what became known as Post-modernism. In the field of the visual arts, Post-modernism became a new avant-garde that rejected expressive and decorative painting, like Hanly’s, equating it with conservative cultural and gender politics. They wanted to replace painting with conceptual modes, language-based art, and reproductive media.

Although the dimming of Hanly’s star did not last much longer than a decade, it coincided with serious health problems and he ceased working in the mid-1990s. When his reputation recovered, it was largely due to a renewed and widespread interest in the art of the 1960s. Hanly had been a key figure in New Zealand art of that period. He spent five years in Europe from 1957 to 1962, exhibiting in London. But it was the series of paintings produced on his return from Europe, notably *Pacific Ikon* and *Figures In Light*, that became central to the account of New Zealand painting by Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith in *An Introduction To New Zealand Painting* that shaped local art history for the following two decades.

This is the background to Hanly’s exhibition notes and his “reaction to the *cleanism* of Post-modernism”. Sour grapes? Perhaps, but there was more to it than that. Hanly’s whole life in art had been based on engagement with materials – especially paint – and the vitality of forms. For centuries these elements had been at the heart of the visual arts, and he felt that they were under attack from people who wanted to privilege language and concept over the hand and eye.

Back to Hanly’s picture. Its rough plywood edges, exposed nail heads and rickety framelessness are a wonderful foil to some lush passages of paint. Those turquoise brush strokes on her blue dress! We can only guess at what is going on in this odd little scene, but I would suggest that a young girl is freaking out at her piano lesson. In the same year that Hanly produced his *Alterations*, he also produced a number of works with children in the imagery, such as *Screaming Child*, *Confused Mother* and *Twins In Light*. He obviously considered *Knot Blocks Learning* to be related to these works because he has attached a second ‘statement’ to the back of the painting explaining that the *Child Works* deal with the way adults can unwittingly pass on their fears to children, spoiling their innocence and their creativity. Knot (of fear?) blocks learning.

Gerald Barnett

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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.

