

# Paul Hartigan

b.1953

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

Of the handful of individuals working with neon in New Zealand, Paul Hartigan is undoubtedly the most experienced. Yet his interests are surprisingly interconnected and feed off each other. He has a passionate interest in Pop culture, especially elements such as comics, advertising and street-front signage.

Hartigan's neon practice grew out of his interest in the registration techniques of printmaking and learning how to make overlaid edges of different colour blocks exactly flush at the edges. The hazy aura that comes off a neon image is a cousin of the seeping, bleeding edge seen in an out-of-register screen print. His interest in neon also grew out of the forms in his painting. Hartigan's doodly oil works of the 1970s eventually led to the humorous wiggling lines of *Pathfinder* (on the frontage of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), and the convulsive pictographs of *Colony* at Auckland University.

In *Revolution XIII (The Robinson)* we see a white and red, hand turned, neon spiral backed by a black perspex disc. The highly reflective circle, which hides a transformer, also provides a background and support for the entwined glass tube, both of which project conspicuously into real space. This sculptural coil of light is a three-dimensional drawing, with all its elements (tube, disc, silicon sleeves, electrode ends, wiring, electrical lead) carefully considered. The revolving line of light has parallel lengths ducking over and diving under to form a wound nest of glowing cord, a tightened spring seemingly about to be released.

Although the *Revolution* series in general was inspired by the Eutron stove element, Hartigan's colour choices came from the tribute palettes he created in response to artists that impressed him. In Robinson's case, he was intrigued. *Boy I Am Scarred, Eh?* was a witty Māori response to McCahon's *I AM Scared*, with its dominating 'moko' coils of red on black. Hartigan picked out warm white and ruby red glass tubing he thought appropriate and used a pale blue gas (argon with a blob of mercury) that would transform dark glass when an electric current was passed through it.

He employed a trained glass technician to weld the two white lengths onto each end of the red section, and then add a further white piece, separated by a black wire. He wanted a gap to appear within the continuous white line. As

the line grew, the technician bent it according to Hartigan's instructions, using a ribbon burner to keep the sections of the glass soft. It took a lot of skill to manipulate the sagging glass and still retain the tight fist-like form in the middle.

The resulting vortexes have a soft, cord-like, undulating line that is apparent in cross section; a wobbly quality that suggests a spilling unravelling motion in the tubes' compressed alignment. The gap on the right-hand side prods the viewer into exploring the work's complicated spatial form; to discover that the object is closer to sculpture than painting, despite its seductively glowing sensual colour.

## John Hurrell

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.govetbrewster.com](http://www.govetbrewster.com)  
[www.pageblackiegallery.co.nz](http://www.pageblackiegallery.co.nz)

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### Books:

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### Web search:

Colin McCahon

