

Don Peebles

b.1922

Wellington Technical College (Art)

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Honorary Doctorate in Literature: University of Canterbury

Don Peebles's 60 year art career is characterised by constant experimentation and revision. He has never settled on a singular style or aesthetic, and continues to challenge expectations of what a painting is and how it should appear. *Untitled* is a work that shows the artist moving from one phase to the next, developing his thought processes in physical form.

Having received an academic training in art, Peebles's early paintings followed a traditional figurative basis.¹ A Fellowship Award in Europe in the early 1960s, and the example of the innovative art he saw there, encouraged him to develop and extend his own painting. Peebles sought to eradicate anything unnecessary from his paintings, which for him meant removing any references to the external world and creating pure abstract art.

On his return to New Zealand, Peebles created wooden assemblages that challenged the conventional notion of painting. While hung on the wall and viewed in the same way as a painting, these works occupy the third dimension, and incorporate light and shade into the composition. By the late 1970s, Peebles believed his wooden constructions had become overly refined and 'too mathematical' and he had an urge to return to paint on canvas. Keen to loosen up his approach, he began to use canvas as a structural element, rather than a support for paint.

Untitled is a maquette or work-in-progress, and shows the artist testing and resolving ideas early in his development of these canvas paintings. Strips of canvas are painted in many layers and adhered to a backing board. Further layers of paint are added as he observes the relationship between different sections and the effect of light on the composition. Peebles resists conventional attractiveness or 'prettiness' in his work and the unfinished appearance is deliberate. He enjoys the tension between the vigourously-worked canvas section and the brush marks that overspill onto the otherwise bare wooden support. While *Untitled* is the equivalent of a sketch where the artist trials dimensions, shapes and colour relationships, it is an artwork in its own right. Looking at this work three decades on, Peebles insists he would do nothing further to "finish" it.

He is adamant that his paintings have no meaning other than their physical form. Peebles does not seek to make statements through his art and refuses to assign anything other than generic titles. But his work still engages and challenges the viewer. He strives for unity in his compositions, and plays with the eye's natural tendency to seek visual order and balance. This "harmony of opposites" as he calls it, plays with the relationship of components within his work and seeks to extract order from chaos. Peebles's canvas works involve the viewer directly by projecting into their space – playing with the perceived potential for movement, which is checked by the stiffness of the heavily painted canvas.

Christine Whybrew

¹ Early influences include:
Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) – sustained and important influence for his understanding of form and colour relationships.

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998) – Peebles' mentor; introduced him to Constructivist painting and Geometric Abstraction.

Galleries and museums:

www.artisgallery.co.nz

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

Simpson, P. (1997). 'Don Peebles At 75: Alive & Working Among Us'. *Art New Zealand*, 83, Winter, pp. 67–71.

Books:

Paton, J. (1996). *Don Peebles: The Harmony Of Opposites*. Christchurch: Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Hazard Press.

