

John Reynolds

b.1956

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

John Reynolds is not a painter. When he produces two-dimensional work it is by means of drawing or mark-making, using just about anything except a paintbrush. Pencil, crayon, inks, markers, spray-cans, collage; you name it he uses it. He is particularly fond of oil stick because it gives the kind of tentative, almost clunky, line that he likes. But don't be fooled by what might appear to be the artlessness of his marks.

An admirer of great mark-making artists like American Cy Twombly, Reynolds himself is a master of the elegantly off-hand graphic gesture. His line is unerring in its placement, weight and tone. It can turn on a dime, as in these small panels, or it can cover entire walls in mesmerising tracery. Following his line in the wall works is like listening to a great guitar solo – one where the guitarist takes off in directions that even he didn't anticipate.

Reynolds has a lot of intellectual curiosity and his graphic language has absorbed imagery from religion, literature, rock music, botany, architecture, fashion, ethnology and graffiti. Depending on the scale he is tackling, images and symbols from these sources are reduced to a few eloquent marks, or worked up into expansive intricacy. On either scale he brings very different elements into unexpected and intriguing juxtapositions: they can be baffling, but are never dull.

Sometimes it's useful to step back and look at a body of his work. For instance in 1988, the same year that Reynolds produced *The Task Of Our Century*, he also produced *INRI* which included religious and architectural imagery; and *A Deeper Science* which contained references to Mondrian's iconic Modernism. At this time he was exploring Christian symbolism with particular regard to Colin McCahon and Modernism. But Reynolds was not an 'old believer'. His Post-modern take on it was that of a collector of symbols and heroic atmospheres. He was interested in the 'theatrical' possibilities for his art. The series from 1988, including *The Task Of Our Century*, certainly invoke the heroic themes of Christianity and Modernism. The 20th century was the Modernist century: progress was its task. It was also the century of global warfare and totalitarian mass murder.

They are big ideas to grapple with. Of course it helps if you enjoy Reynolds's virtuoso mark-making because that is the immediate pleasure on offer. Meaning can be slower to get and not easily put into words. And even then it remains open to interpretation. In *The Task Of Our Century* there is a structure that could be a crucifixion or an executioner's scaffold. The red marks could refer to Christ's blood or to the executed.

Reynolds likes ambiguity. He wants you to do a lot of looking and thinking: to be curious and open-minded. Travel is perhaps a useful analogy for how to approach this kind of art. When you inhale the atmosphere of an exotic city you may not understand the language spoken around you. But you experience the beauty and energy on the street anyway. Then suddenly one day you realise that just by paying attention you have begun to understand a few words. You begin to see things a little differently.

Gerald Barnett

Links and resources

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govtbbrewster.com
www.suecroxford.com
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issue122/reynolds.htm

Web search:

Colin McCahon
 Piet Mondrian
 Cy Twombly

