

James Ross

b.1948

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In this unusual painting, the carefully shaped components fit perfectly – tucked in together close – just like imagery found in Tantric art. Often in Tantric art, interlocked Buddhist deities make love or geometric forms (mandalas) entwine.

We see three elements: one is a T on its side, brushed with thinly applied yellow paint; another is a small blue ball that could be a moon; the third is a strangely distorted orange skull plummeting diagonally downwards. The latter is related to the famous stretched-out skull in Hans Holbein The Younger's painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), in the National Gallery, London. The skull motif was pivotal in Ross's work at this period. In this painting, he pushes its schematic distortion to the limits of recognition.

This work is an elegant rebus about mortality, with the T standing for Time, and the strange wound-like, vertical mouth – or female organ – a symbol for birth and sexual energy. The moon seems to be an astrological reference for fate and the skull a symbol for death.

The flattening of the skull suggests the immense weight of soil that, over the course of time, accumulates over a buried corpse and causes the head to distort (as was discovered in some of the Iron Age corpses of the ritually sacrificed 'bog people' in Denmark). Such stretching of the head could also symbolise mental stress as opposed to bodily stress.

There are other ways of viewing the warped skull. The elongation could refer to the speed of approaching time, the transience of our lives and the seeming rapidity with which death approaches us. However, the distortion partially disappears when the viewer manoeuvres into a position where perspective is resolved – with the skull's blobby shape condensing to a point of recognisable coherence.

Examining its sideways T-shape, that 'T-ness' is odd. In fact, many of Ross's works in this series have their main compositional elements shaped like a letter. Often it is a narrow H, or a squashed K or A. They can also look like a section of a house's floor-plan with part of a female form spliced into the centre.

Ross is a skilled writer and editor and this might have influenced his imagery. It is as if letter shapes have been absorbed into his painting, and he is about to literally spell out something with a sort of stuttering start. There is also an aural dimension to how we view his images – we can mentally 'hear' the sound of the letters. This leaves open the possibility that if we were to see a group of these 'letter' works together in a gallery, we might perceive words or suggestive fragments, further complicating our reading of the painting.

Though it looks deceptively simple and uncomplicated, this painting lures you into exploring worlds far beyond 'normal' geometry or 'conventional' organic forms. It teases out a range of interpretative possibilities that include remnants of half-uttered and partially unthought language.

John Hurrell

Artist website:

www.jamesjross.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

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Web search:

Hans Holbein The Younger

