

Michael Smither

b.1939

Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Five young men sunbathing on a beach – the scene presented in this painting by Coromandel based artist, Michael Smither – could be any New Zealand beach, anywhere, any time over the last 40 years. With its simple arrangement of sky, sand and gull it represents the typical Kiwi summer holiday. But look again. The young men fill the centre of the canvas – they barely fit within the edges of their spread-out beach towels. They lie without talking or looking, as if lost in their own private worlds. The perspective is shortened – even the seagull looks large and close. And behind them the horizon arches back as if the sun-baked bodies are stretching across the very curve of the earth in a symbolic celebration of youth.

Painter, printmaker, composer and conservationist, Smither has been described as one of New Zealand's leading Realist painters, yet here, as in much of his work, we see an exaggerated Realism. The clear, intense colours of the boys' swimming togs, the sharply defined shadows on the sand, the strangely truncated form of the seagull, the overstated scale of the bodies – all show the artist's control of line, colour and abstract form, as well as a symbolic conception of the scene before him.

Boys On The Beach was made during an incredibly productive period for this New Plymouth-born artist. It is a typical example of his ongoing interest in the ordinary world (as he says, he likes to pay homage to “the extraordinariness of the ordinary”) and it is this heightened attention to the small details of daily life (and an ability to put that quality of ‘attention’ into paint) that gives his art its almost surreal clarity and presence. As a student at Elam School of Fine Arts, Smither would have come across the work of earlier New Zealand painters such as Christopher Perkins, Bill Sutton and Rita Angus – artists of the 1930s and '40s who developed a strong sense of regional New Zealand-ness in their work, and who depicted small town New Zealand in a straightforward and unsentimental manner. Two decades later, when many artists were moving towards a more urban, conceptual style of art, Smither and other contemporary artists such as Don Binney, Robin White and Peter Siddell returned to this strong regionalist focus with its stark, hard-edged Realism and flat vibrant colours.

Since then Smither has repeatedly returned to the environment where he spent most of his life – the Taranaki coastline and mountain environs. His landscapes, domestic scenes, still

lives and religious images (Smither was brought up a Roman Catholic and painted many religious works during the 1960s and '70s) are often underpinned by the kind of strangeness that is the flipside of ‘ordinary’. Whether painting the famous rocks series, domestic still lifes or figurative scenes of family members, Smither is a kind of ‘visual surgeon’ removing unnecessary matter, focusing instead on essential form and its simplified modelling in strong directional light, to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Sally Blundell

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govettbrewster.com
www.johnleechgallery.co.nz
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

www.listener.co.nz/issue/203/artsbooks/6012/trouble_man.html

Books:

Gibben, T. (2004). *Michael Smither Painter*, Auckland, Ron Sang Publications.

Web search:

Rita Angus
 Don Binney
 Christopher Perkins
 Peter Siddell
 Bill Sutton
 Robin White

