

Garth Tapper

1927–1999

Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Garth Tapper's *The Delegates* is like the opening line of a joke: two business men walk into a bar, or in this case a conference. What happens next would depend on what kind of joke you were trying to tell. The connection isn't because Tapper's painting is funny, or not serious, but because *The Delegates* is a picture of ordinary people – the kind who turn up in, and tell, jokes.

Tapper is a narrative painter, which means he tells stories in his work. This is pretty hard to do because paintings don't move. You get one scene in which to present everything to the viewer. This particular scene – two men entering a conference room with a staff member standing at the door – has to include enough detail of the past (where the men have come from), the present (what they are doing), and the future (what happens to them) so that we will be encouraged to make up our own stories. In addition to the title, Tapper gives us clues about the situation through his characters: their expressions, clothes and gestures.

The Delegates is not painted in a particularly realistic way, which might seem surprising given that Tapper is trying to tell us a story, or present us with a situation. His painting is created from very visible brushstrokes, with large parts of the painting given to brushwork that creates an 'atmosphere'. For instance, the black and white rectangles suggest conflict or tension in the room. The lack of pictorial detail also leaves space for the viewer to project their own ideas about what is going on in the painting. It demonstrates Tapper's skill as a painter that he can make his characters believable, even though their faces and bodies are only sketched in, created from a few bold but suggestive brushstrokes.

Tapper said of his own work, "I am not an innovator. I am not a creative painter. I am a recorder... [my work] is a translation... an observation... a realisation of things in the universe..."¹ He was what is called a 'social realist', an artist who is interested in the details of social life, or the way people interact with each other. From 1951, when he graduated from Elam, until 1999

when he died, Tapper made art that documented this world of interactions, creating a rich portrayal of New Zealanders at work and recreation.

In 1978, the year *The Delegates* was painted, Tapper held two exhibitions that show his life-long interest in social realism. One was called *The White Collar*, looking at the different kinds of white collars that people wore – the contexts in which they were worn and the messages about social status and identity that they sent. (*The Delegates* is a good example – compare the men with ties to the more anonymous worker behind them who doesn't wear a tie with his white shirt.) The second exhibition was called *The Suburban Line*, and this show included paintings based on Tapper's observations of people who caught his train into Auckland City. In both cases, Tapper wanted to paint real subjects – the people, events and situations of everyday life.

Damian Skinner

¹ Tapper, W. (1998). *Garth Tapper – New Zealand Painter*, Orewa, New Zealand, Tapper Art.

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.fernergalleries.co.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Tapper, W. (1998). *Garth Tapper – New Zealand Painter*, Orewa, New Zealand, Tapper Art.

