

# Toss Woollaston

1910–1998

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Toss Woollaston’s career as a painter spanned almost 60 years. In the 1970s and 1980s he started working on large, panoramic-scale canvases. The move had an expansive effect on his painting. On these big canvases – the biggest, *Above Wellington* (1986) measured 1760x2740mm – there is so much vitality that it is easy to forget that the artist was in his 70s when he painted them.

To fully appreciate Woollaston’s paintings they should be seen from both near and far. From a distance they are perfectly legible as specific landscapes – Woollaston could account for every brushstroke in topographical terms. A patch of rusty red amidst an expanse of green might be the woolshed on McFedrie’s farm, seen from a distance. But, moving closer to the painted surface we become aware that the image has been constructed from excited flurries of oil paint. Brushstrokes become the focus of our attention or, as Woollaston said, “The naturalism turns into paint itself”.

Woollaston learned a lot about the primacy of “paint itself” from seeing Monet’s vast water lily paintings in Paris in 1962. Having previously only seen Monet reproduced in books, when he saw the paintings themselves he was excited by the ‘fleshy’ texture of the much-worked paint. Other artists whose handling of paint inspired Woollaston include the 19th century artist John Constable and the contemporary German artist Anselm Keifer.

Painters love paint as a substance, and a painter like Woollaston revels in its earthiness. The fact that oil paints are like ‘coloured muds’ (some pigments have literally been dug from the ground and mixed with oil medium) makes sense of what Woollaston said of his painting: “I try to paint the sunlight but only after it has been absorbed by the earth”.

Early in his career he settled on a simple palette – predominantly yellow ochre, light or Indian red and permanent blue (the earthiest colours he could find) – from which he mixed low key harmonies distilled from the sun-baked Nelson countryside. Tawny hills, bracken-patched with raw ochre breaking through where a farm track has been bulldozed. Dark pine ridges seen against the blue-hazy purple of ‘the faraway hills’. Woollaston spent most of his life as an artist in these landscapes. Places like Motueka, Mapua, Riwaka, Upper Moutere. He went on looking at them and painting them all his life. Painting them, he reckoned, was something like building a house for the imagination to live in.

*View From Upper Moutere* is smaller than the vast canvases of Woollaston’s late period, but it thrums with the same dynamism. Airy, ochre brushstrokes laid over dark underpainting advance the contours of foothills. A hurtle of blue paint depicts sky with the kind of brutal brevity that comes at the end of a long career. In his career, Woollaston did not range far across different styles, aesthetic movements or fashions. If his path was decided early by a commitment – albeit on Modernist terms – to the landscape tradition of Poussin, Constable and Cézanne, works like *View From Upper Moutere* show what a painter can do when he has travelled far enough to describe the journey in full.

## Gerald Barnett

### Artist website:

[www.woollaston.co.nz](http://www.woollaston.co.nz)

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.govetbrewster.com](http://www.govetbrewster.com)

[www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)

### Books:

Barnett, G. (1991). *Toss Woollaston: An Illustrated Biography*, Auckland, Random House.

Eggleton, D. (2007). *Towards Aotearoa: A Short History Of Twentieth Century New Zealand Art*, Auckland, Reed.

Hamish, K. (2007). *The Big Picture: A History Of New Zealand Art From 1642*, Auckland, Goodwit.

Woollaston, T. (2001). *Sage Tea*, Wellington, Te Papa Press.

### Web search:

Paul Cézanne

John Constable

Anselm Keifer

Claude Monet

Nicolas Poussin

