

Ralph Hotere

New Zealander, b. 1931

Dawn/Water Poem

1986, acrylic on canvas, 178x107 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council 1986
Reproduced courtesy of Ralph Hotere



About the work

During the 1980s French nuclear testing at Mururoa atoll was a major cause of political and environmental protest by the people of the Pacific. Hotere made the testing programme the theme of a series of works that includes *Dawn/Water Poem*. 'Dawn' represents the atomic age, while 'Water' represents the Pacific Ocean surrounding Mururoa, and the 'Poem' becomes a flag of protest – the X in the middle suggests a warning to French military to keep away, or a 'crossing out' of their actions.

Hotere has taken the poem by New Zealand poet Bill Manhire and transformed it into a visual experience. That interaction between painted and written expression is a technique that Hotere has used since the 1960s.

The work also follows the style of the American Abstract Expressionism and the Minimalism of Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). Their purpose was to explore how an abstract composition could become a meditative field that reflected the dynamics and dilemmas of human existence.

Dawn/Water Poem is an Abstract Expressionist work that uses the drama of bright red, evoking blood, sacrifice and anger against a black background that suggests death, loss or repression.

Hotere and Manhire started to collaborate in 1970. The compositional format recalls that of Colin McCahon (1919–1987) who also incorporated words and numbers in his works of art. Another important aspect of Hotere's technique is the layering of the paint applications, creating a surface which is both beautiful and visually active.

Rising through the centre of *Dawn/Water Poem* is a repetition of the word 'Sunrise', from Manhire's poem. The column of stencilled words has been extended in the artist's handwriting with the word 'Mururoa', adding a specific political reference to this work. Although Hotere does not view himself as a political painter, he frequently voices concerns about the human condition and the environment. "I have provided for the spectator a starting point which, upon contemplation, may become a nucleus revealing scores of possibilities." (*Bulletin* No.4, Waikato Art Gallery)

He is adamant that his works speak for themselves. "There are very few things I can say about my work that are better than saying nothing." (Publicity material for documentary film on Hotere by Mereta Meta.)

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About the artist

Hotere has never sought to incorporate traditional Māori motifs or designs in his work, instead using colour, texture, expressive brushwork, words and abstraction of image in the international style, and embracing a universal rather than specifically Māori position. He has said that although he is Māori by birth and upbringing, as far as his work is concerned this is coincidental.

Hotere was born in Mitimiti, north of the Hokianga, in 1931. He first studied art in 1952 at the King Edward Technical College in Dunedin and his first solo exhibition was held that year at the Dunedin Public Library. He travelled to Europe after receiving a New Zealand Art Societies' Fellowship in 1961 and studied painting and graphic design at the Central School of Art, London. In 1962 he was given a Residential Award for a year to paint at the Michael Karolyi Memorial Foundation at Vence in France.

After returning to New Zealand in 1965, Hotere worked as an art advisor for the Education Department. He received a Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 1969 and a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council award in 1970. Since the 1970s he has lived and worked in Port Chalmers, Dunedin.

Political and social issues prevalent in New Zealand and internationally in the 1980s, such as the proposed Aramoana smelter on the Otago Peninsula, the Springbok Rugby Tour of New Zealand in 1981, race relations, nuclear testing in the South Pacific by the French, the sabotage and sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in 1981 and the assassination of South African leader Steven Biko, are all issues that Hotere has responded to in his paintings.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 39 works by Hotere in the Collection, including:

Aramoana Drawing - For a Black Window

1981, mixed media
Purchased 1981

Black Painting

c. 1969, acrylic on canvas
Purchased 1969

Black Painting

1969, oil on canvas
W. A. Sutton Bequest 2000

Black Union Jack

1984, etching
Purchased 1985

Malady Panels

1971, acrylic on canvas
Purchased 1979

Polaris No 9

1984, paper, stainless steel
Purchased 1984

Kyrie Eleison 3 (Requiem series)

1974, oil on canvas
Presented by Mrs C. S. Hamilton 1982

Sangro Litany

1979, acrylic on loose canvas
Purchased 1981

Untitled (Stainless Steel series)

1983, stainless steel
Purchased 1983

Window in Spain

1989, work on paper
W. A. Sutton Bequest 2000

Further reading

Ralph Hotere: Black Light, Te Papa Press, 2000.

Out the Black Window: Ralph Hotere's work with New Zealand poets, City Gallery, Wellington, Gregory O'Brien, 1997.

Ralph Hotere: A Survey 1969-1973, Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1974.

