

William (Bill) Hammond

New Zealander, b. 1947

The Fall of Icarus

1995, acrylic on canvas, 200.5x216.5 cm
Purchased 1996



About the work

In *The Fall of Icarus* Bill Hammond explores the threat to New Zealand wildlife by humans. The strange bird-people, painted in uneasy anthropomorphic forms, are silently guarding their primordial world against the unknown. The birds stand in trees which have severely reduced leaf cover. Some hang as lifeless skins, foreshadowing the destruction that is to come. Their wings are reduced, suggesting an inability to fly elsewhere, and their plumage takes the form of modified clothing, again making the distinct association of the bird's plight with that of humanity.

The world is a primitive, almost primordial zone, an eerie and lurid green space where volcanic cones erupt onto a barren land and into a lifeless sea. Black pollution belches from their vents and hangs in the air, perhaps alluding to the pollution caused by human activity on the globe. A strange green 'rain' falls into the scene and dribbles from the image onto the canvas below, bringing it into the viewer's space.

Birds were symbols of the soul in ancient Egypt, but in Hammond's work they seem to represent the beautiful,

apparently fragile, yet eminently adaptable and enduring, force of Nature. Next to these sleek, supreme creatures, which appear to be at one with their environment, the human attempt at flight seems no more than clumsy vanity.

In this work there is also a deliberate reference to the Dutch artist Pieter Brueghel's (c.1529-1569) painting *The Fall of Icarus* (1558) as indicated by the written acknowledgement along the base of the image. As in Brueghel's painting, real life disregards the mythic tragedy. Icarus, the young man in Greek mythology who flew too close to the sun with his feather and wax wings, plunges unobserved into the sea.

Hammond's use of symbolic imagery is distinctive and original, although his 'bird-worlds' relate in some ways to the anthropomorphic images of some Surrealist artists and the unearthly, dreamlike worlds suggested by the Symbolists like Odilon Redon. (1840-1916) This work is an excellent example of Hammond's mature style. Many of his earlier works suggest the influence of popular culture, in the form of rock music, fabric design and comic-book art.

William (Bill) Hammond

New Zealander, b. 1947

Worcester Boulevard, PO Box 2626, Christchurch, New Zealand
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz Phone (03) 941 7300

About the artist

Bill Hammond was born in Christchurch in 1947 and he studied at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts between 1966 and 1968. For a period following his graduation he designed and manufactured wooden toys, but he held his first solo exhibition in 1979. Since then he has exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand.

Hammond received Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Awards in 1984 and 1987 and in 1989 he joined a number of other New Zealand artists on an expedition to Antarctica and the Auckland Islands. The following year, in response to this trip, he completed a series of works that illustrated his reawakened interest in the land, in New Zealand bird life and in the 19th century ornithologist Sir Walter Buller. Buller's lavishly illustrated volumes on New Zealand birds document many species that have not survived into the 20th century and others that may not survive into the next. (Ironically, Sir Walter Buller himself contributed to the decimation of native species as he provided huge numbers of stuffed birds for Victorian display cases.)

Bill Hammond got a further travel grant, this time to Japan, in 1990 and a major Art Fellowship Grant in 1991. In 1993 he received the James Wallace Award and in the following year was the joint winner of the Premier Award in the Visa Gold Art Award. Hammond is represented in private and public collections throughout New Zealand and his work has been included in several important international exhibitions.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 9 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

Talk Talk

1983, pencil
Purchased 1989

Radio On

1985, acrylic on cotton duck
Presented by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council 1990

The look of love plus the sound of music

1986, acrylic on board
Purchased 1986

Specified Departures

1988, lithograph
Purchased 1989

Untitled

2000, lithograph
Purchased 2000

Further reading

Bill Hammond: 23 Big Pictures, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1999.

Skywriters and Earthmovers, (artist text: Felicity Milburn), McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, 1998.

Lands and Deeds: Profiles of Contemporary New Zealand Painters, Godwit Press, Auckland, 1996.

