

N E I L F R A Z E R



S T R E T C H E D T O T H E L I M I T

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NEIL FRAZER

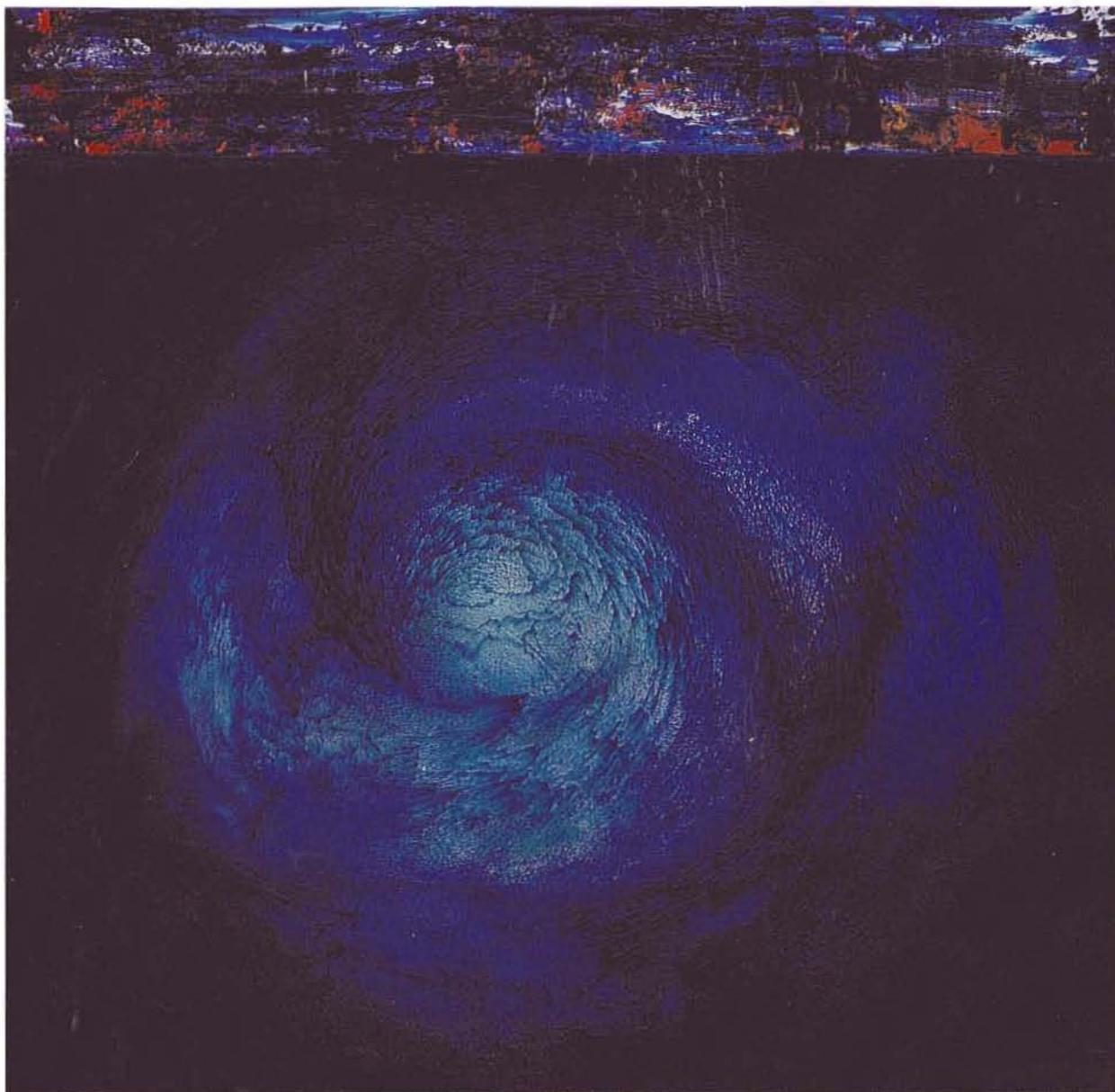
STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT

The scumbled, twisted and splattered surfaces of Neil Frazer's large-scale paintings immediately announce his allegiance to the 'big names' of the American Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950's: artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko who were determined to reduce painting to its least figurative, most spiritual essence. Frazer's distinctive approach marks a fusion between the oppositionary strains of Abstract Expressionism, his vivid yet atmospheric landscapes employing both Pollock's calligraphic splatters and the iconic moodiness of Rothko. Frazer acknowledges the continuing relevance of these sources (his new work, where a painted square is topped by a physically separate band, texturally different but in the same tonal range, is based on a Rothko "zipper" format), but describes himself primarily as a 'third generation' expressionist painter - *"Sort of influenced by people who were influenced by people who were influenced by Pollock"*.¹

Some of those influences include William Sutton, one of Frazer's tutors during his time at the Canterbury Fine Arts School, with whom Frazer shares both a predilection for abstracting the most basic elements of the landscape and a tendency towards exuberantly

sized works; and Rudi Gopas, the Lithuanian-born Christchurch expressionist. Gopas, like Frazer, employed subject as a vehicle for emotion or atmosphere, used colour intensely and theatrically, and carried an interest in outer space over into an exploration of the frontiers within the picture plane. Both artists have used dusty pigment or iron filings, which reflect light out towards the viewer to express cosmic expanses within a basically mono-tonal plane. The view through a telescope is a rich source book for these artists - an essentially abstract vision, it can be given a thousand interpretations or simply admired for its most fundamental visual qualities. Frazer has also suggested a connection with Wellington artist, Robert McLeod, who in all of New Zealand art may come closest to equalling his reverence for materials and process. It has often been recorded that Frazer has spent much of his artistic career in debt due to his all-consuming paint habit and, in a similar obsession with colour and texture, McLeod has used yellow paint designed for road marking and galvanised iron primer in order to attain the tone and feel he wanted: *"It's not that they're cheap,"* he has said *"it's a liking for the quality of the paint"*.²

Frazer sees Australian artist Asher Bilu as a particularly strong influence, both conceptually and technically. An abstract artist specialising in psychedelic explosions of form and colour, Bilu's works, like Frazer's, have



Blue Vortex 1996 Oil on Canvas

been described as "*sculptures made of paint*".³ His interest in building up three-dimensional effects on the picture plane, and his subsequent experimentation with substances like polyvinyl resin are often echoed in Frazer's encrusted surfaces, where the paint is laid on in thick impasto, sometimes until it protrudes several

inches off the canvas. When Bilu declares that it is his intention "*to create visual ecstasies*,"⁴ it is easy to understand Frazer's feeling of artistic solidarity. Both artists associate painting with music, an identification which, for Bilu, verges on synesthesia:

"I hear music when I paint, and see paintings when I hear

music".⁵ The titles of many of Frazer's paintings - *Rhythm Finder*, *Blue Sight Rhythm*, *Rhythm Found* - reflect his own belief that painting and music are closely interlinked, and that the mind can respond as intuitively to the colour in his paintings as it does to the Blues or Rock'n'roll.

Facing Page : **PH Revisited 1990**

Oil on Canvas

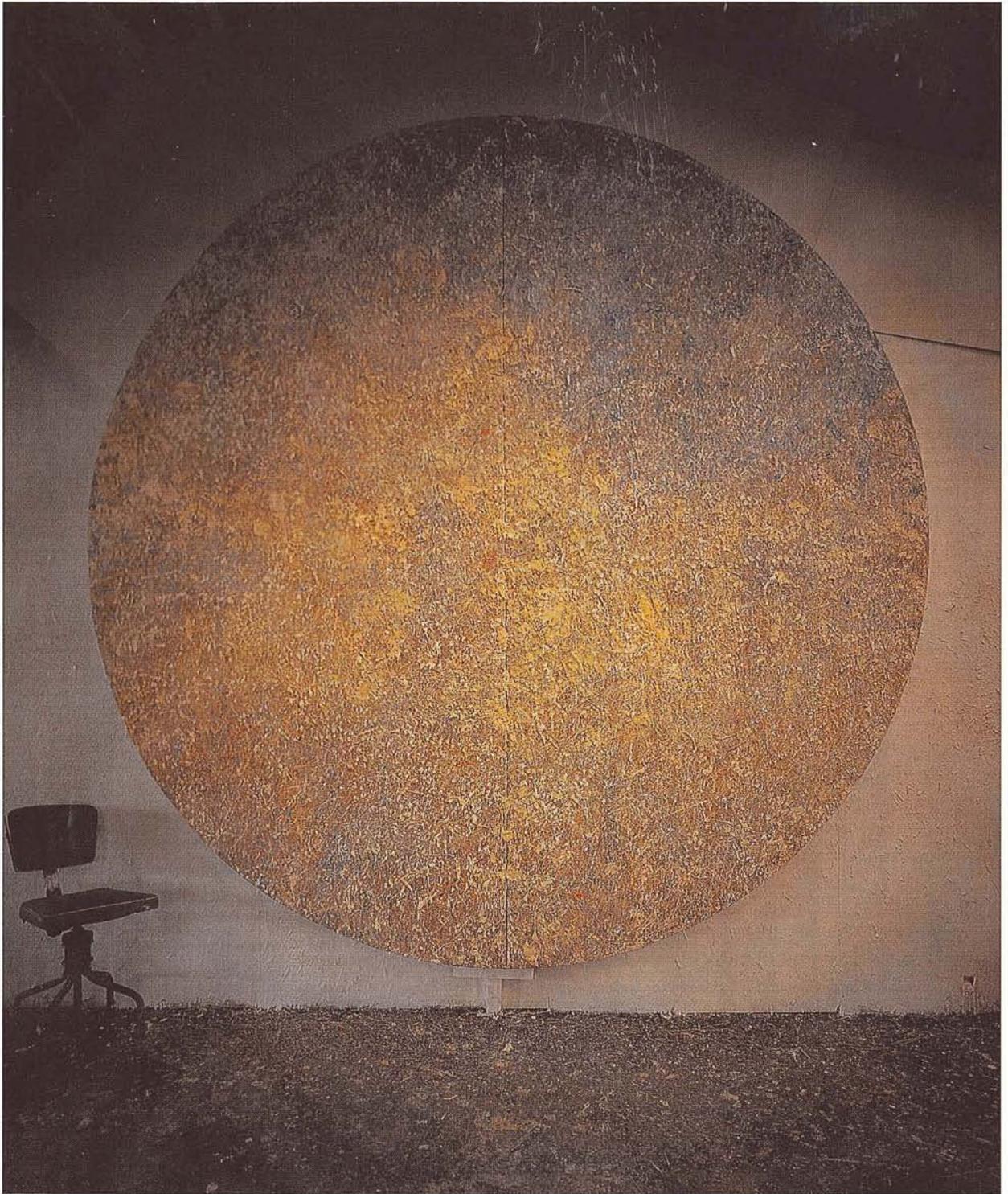
Francis Hodgkins Fellowship
Collection(University of Otago)

Perhaps the single most striking element of Neil Frazer's work is the sheer size of his paintings. *P.H. Revisited* consists of two hemispheres, which, when placed together, form a circle measuring over three metres across the diameter. Although Frazer has worked on a smaller scale, for experimental and financial reasons, he prefers the greater intimacy that the large canvas provides, for both him and the viewer: "*You can walk into a big painting and that's a great thing to do*".⁶ The vast spread of canvas in Frazer's works mean they interact differently with the spectator than smaller, representational works do. Instead of peering at a window of paint, the viewer is encouraged to walk up close, and almost into the curtain of colour and line, to be enveloped peripherally in tactile sensation - the art cognoscente's version of surround sound. Despite the logistical problems of transportation and exhibition (most galleries neither have the space or inclination to show such large works together) there is something apt about such a physical, process-oriented painter as Frazer presenting works on a scale which stretches his body to the limit: it was another abstractionist, American Robert Motherwell, who is said to have exclaimed: "*small paintings are for midgets*".⁷

Abstract Expressionism in its original conception promoted the importance of the pioneering individual, branding the canvas with his or her own distinctive mark. The artist's relationship, physical,

mental and spiritual, to the painting was primary. Because Frazer intentionally works to his own body-scale, forming the scabrous, jewel-like surfaces around himself, the process is even more intimate. Each brushstroke is indexical, not only recording the perceptual, but at the same time registering the artist's proximity to the canvas. The finished work is literally an imprint of his physical presence, which gives it a personal and spontaneous quality not attainable in a small painting of the same style. One reviewer described Frazer's images as "*handmade monuments to the human touch*".⁸

Unlike Pollock, who created his 'action' paintings by laying a canvas on the floor of his studio and dripping and dribbling paint over it until the surface was covered with lines and splashes of colour, Frazer works his canvases on the vertical, attached to the wall, and applies the paint in a variety of ways, including rags, brushes and his own hands. Often, in the later stages, he flicks the paint with his fingers straight from the tube onto the canvas, the twist of his wrist creating regular, bright loops of colour which articulate the surface of the painting, erupting away from the receding nebulous tones of the background. For Frazer, the process of painting is "*a hunt for something different, something extra*";⁹ a process of capturing an effect which is often identified only as the layers go down.



Although the equal treatment given to all areas of the canvas makes it appear completely non-referential, most of Frazer's work has its source in the physical world. He frequently makes studies from nature, using the discipline of drawing as a counter-foil to the exultant freedom of his paintings, and gathering subjects and experiences which return in his large works, often masked and evolved to an almost unrecognisable extent. This is evident in *PH Revisited*, which unmistakably evokes the tussocky hills of Canterbury in its tawny golden tones and spiky wind-swept texture, yet can exist perfectly as a self-contained entity, free from all referentiality, relying confidently on the glorious decadence of its simultaneously glistening and penumbral surfaces to arrest attention. Any sense of visual or aerial perspective is eliminated, leaving only an oblique recession from the radiant centre to the shadowy edges, suggesting at once a distant moonscape and an extreme close-up.

In other works, Frazer overlays dark underpainting with vibrant streaks and swirls in lighter tones. This technique creates paintings which resonate with luminous layers of paint, simultaneously bubbling toward and dissolving away from the surface. In *Ruby Rose Black* (1992), a good example of what Jonathan Smart calls Frazer's

"heroic viscosity"¹⁰, jubilant yellows and capsicum reds dance over the surface, revealing in their movement rich seams of colour beyond.

Frazer's enigmatic spatial constructions continue in his oval 'half and half' works, developed over the last three years and never before seen by Christchurch, in which a horizontal oval is split vertically into two halves, one gorgeously decadent, dripping with gluttonous excesses of jewel-like paint, the other thinly covered with similar tones. The result is a captivating icon of antithesis, a surface which is half empty, half teeming with life, with one side delicately superficial, the other suggesting yawning crevasses and voids. The presentation of the two works as one whole is artfully deliberate, belying the apparent simplicity of non-figurative work. Frazer initially debuted this technique in a split rectangle format, but then employed the oval shape in "*an attempt to bring the two halves back together*".¹¹ His most recent works represent a move away from this divided layout, returning to an unpartitioned plane, but continually conscious of its underlying structure. These paintings also deal with space but the focus has shifted from the cosmic to the earth-bound, exploring internal body-scapes rather than celestial expanses. Frazer's 'half and half' works in

"*Stretched to the Limit*" are motivated by a desire to break the picture down into its essential and frequently oppositionary parts; underpainting and surface colour, individual brushstrokes and united visual effect, physical construction and inherent spirit. In the stark contrast between excess and reduction, the soul of the painting is laid bare.

Felicity Millburn

NOTES

¹ Neil Frazer, Quoted by Brad Smith "Lets Get Physical" *North and South* October 87

² Robert McLeod, interviewed by Susan Foster *Art New Zealand* no. 46 p.64-7

³ Asher Bilu *Asher Bilu: Recent Paintings* (Victoria, The Art Gallery Pty Ltd., 1988) Text unpaginated.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Neil Frazer, Quoted In *The Critic* 14/9/1992 p.19

⁷ Robert Motherwell, Quoted by Frazer in "Neil Frazer Creates After-Images", by Peter Simpson *The Press* 10/9/91 p.25

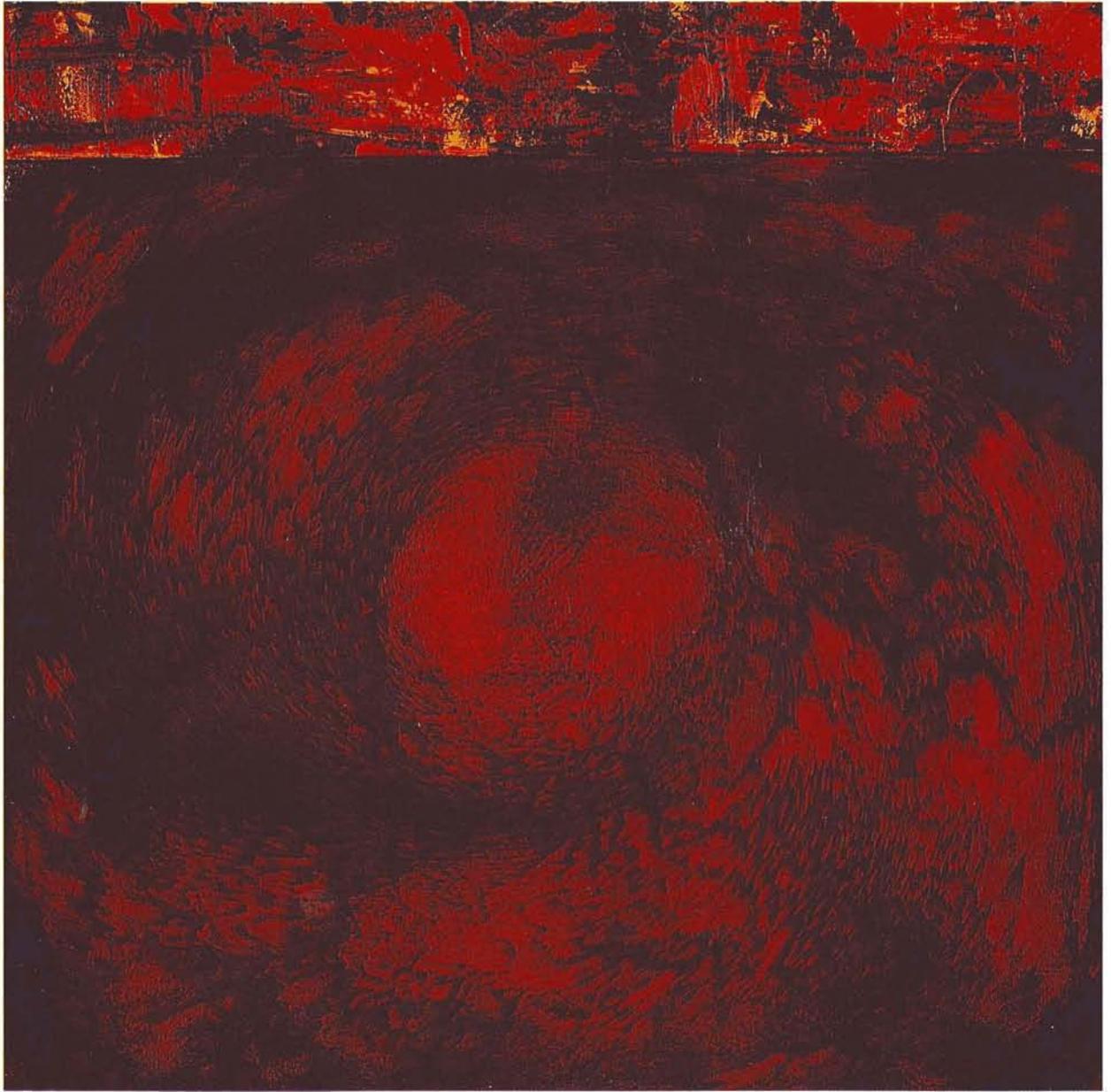
⁸ Rob Taylor "Frazer, Painting Minimalism and Quoting Romanticism" *The Dominion* 20/12/89

⁹ Conversation with the artist 10/4/96

¹⁰ Jonathan Smart *Art New Zealand* no. 45 p.41

¹¹ Conversation with the artist 10/4/96

Facing page: **Red Vortex 1996**
Oil on Canvas



NEIL FRAZER

Born in Canberra, Australia, in 1961, Neil Frazer received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Canterbury in 1985. In 1986, Frazer studied at the New York School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture during a trip to the United States made possible by a QEII Arts Council Grant. His first solo exhibition took place at the C.S.A. Gallery in 1984 and since then he has exhibited regularly in both individual and group shows throughout New Zealand and Australia. His work was seen in "Here and Now: Twelve Young Canterbury Artists"; the inaugural exhibition held at the Robert McDougall Art Annex.

Frazer received the Ethel Rose Overton Scholarship in 1983, and was awarded the Sawtell Turner Painting Prize by the University of Canterbury in the following year. In 1992, he was the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago and was Artist in Residence at the Victoria College of Arts, in Melbourne during 1993. Neil Frazer's Abstract Expressionist paintings can be seen in public and private collections in both New Zealand and Australia. Four of his large works - *Battleground*, *Orion*, *Sight After Sight* and *Ruby Rose Black* - are owned by the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

Selected Exhibitions

- 1985** C.S.A. Gallery, Christchurch, "Big Painting Show"
- 1987** Brooke-Gifford, Christchurch, "Architecture Show"
- 1988** Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, "Thirty Canterbury Artists"
- 1989** Touring New Zealand Public Galleries, "United Modern Masters Collection"
- 1992** Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, "Prospect Canterbury"
- 1993** Luba Bilu Gallery, Melbourne
- 1994** Australian Contemporary Art Fair, Melbourne

Selected Public Collections

- Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch
- Foresight Collection, Auckland
- United Modern Masters Collection, Auckland
- National Bank Collection, Auckland
- Fletcher Challenge, Auckland
- Otago University, Dunedin
- Victoria University, Wellington
- Hocken Library, Dunedin
- Dunmochin Foundation Australia
- Canterbury University, Christchurch

Works courtesy of: the artist, Milford House Dunedin, Brooke Gifford Gallery Christchurch, Brooker Gallery Wellington, Gow-Langford Gallery Auckland



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