

SAY
SOMETHING!

JACQUELINE
FAHEY





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Felicity Milburn

with Allie Eagle, Julia Holden, Bronwyn Labrum, Lana Lopesi, Zoe Roland and Julia Waite



Felicity Milburn

Jacqueline Fahey, by her own description, is “naturally disruptive”.¹ Certainly, she made her disdain for authority clear from an early age, when she was kicked out of her Timaru kindergarten. After joining her sister Cecil in throwing the other children’s shoes and socks into the swimming pool, she then refused to tuck her singlet into her underpants:

I said my mother never wore her singlet inside her pants, but ‘No’, said this ridiculous teacher, ‘you have to put your singlet inside your pants.’ Then she got the headmistress and I asked her ‘Where do you put your singlet?’ She said inside my pants and I asked ‘Can I see please?’ ‘No you can’t see’, she said, and in the end she decided I should be removed.²

Something in that story sums up what I like most about Fahey’s paintings – an instinctive rebellion against arbitrary rules, a compulsion to question what she feels is wrong, and a killer eye for the crucial detail. These elements also underpin her most well-known body of works – the psychologically charged interiors she made from the 1970s until the early 1980s. Bristling with all the intensity of domestic life, and charting the love, loss, frustration, conflict and despair that surrounded her easel as her three daughters grew up around it, these works have enduring relevance within contemporary discussions about female visibility, the importance of artistic ‘ancestors’ and the relevance of politicised practice. Viewing them now is revealing; so much has changed, but many aspects still ring true, sometimes uncomfortably so.

In an era when women were often silenced and side-lined, their opinions and energies steered toward more ‘suitable’ pursuits, Fahey’s voice was distinctive and unapologetic. Painting figures when landscape was de rigueur, she insisted on the relevance of narrative as her peers, one by one, converted to the school of international abstraction. “They said to me, you’ll have to change, old girl, or you’re out. So I said, sadly I’m out. I tried to see something in abstract art, but what I was looking for wasn’t there.”³ In asserting her own identity as an artist, Fahey opened up space for those who followed. Over seven decades her paintings

Previous images,
in order:
Georgie Pies for Lunch (detail) 1977,
Drinking Couple: Fraser Analysing My Words (detail) 1978, *My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room!* (detail) 1979

have addressed a range of subjects, but one constant is her commitment to justice: speaking up is important, but saying something worthwhile matters too.

Fahey attended art school at the Canterbury University College from 1949 to 1951, where she was taught by Russell Clark, Bill Sutton and Colin Lovell-Smith. Off campus, she found solidarity with a group of now-legendary female artists that included Doris Lusk, Rita Angus and Juliet Peter.

They picked me up. They were from the 1930s so they were that much older than me – they remained great friends of mine and that was so good for me. They were very socialist – like Russell Clark – and I began to relate my politics to socialism in relation to Māori issues and feminism. It was their influence that drew me to feminism so early.⁴

The example of these artists (and also Rata Lovell-Smith, who taught at the art school while raising two children) was attitudinal rather than stylistic: “It wasn’t so much that they influenced the way I painted. What they did was allow me to be professional, to think of it as my life.”

During those years, it was still considered valid to question the seriousness of any woman artist. Fahey confronted this prejudice head on by inserting herself as a ‘warrior artist’, brush in hand, into self-portraits that doubled as non-negotiable statements of her intent. As she said of one such work: “The palette is my shield and the brush is my weapon, and I’m rigidly trying to show a savage dedication to painting.”⁵ Occupying the works in this way forced the art world to acknowledge her identity as an artist, and also reaffirmed it for herself. Fahey has since deployed a multitude of self-portraits and alter egos – reflected in mirrors, glimpsed in photographs, even trapped in a magnifying glass under the diminishing scrutiny of her husband’s gaze – as a means to represent the various and shifting roles women play, both in the eyes of society and within their own lives. Tellingly, she avoids straightforward depictions; her selves are doubled by reflection, obscured with hats, masks and sunglasses, distorted and pulled apart by the magnitude of their emotions. Whatever the ‘truth’ of being a woman is, Fahey seems to suggest, there isn’t anything simple or static about it.



Woman at the Sink 1959

Fahey moved to Wellington in 1951 and five years later married Fraser McDonald, who went on to become a prominent psychiatrist. When, a few months after their wedding, McDonald contracted tuberculosis, Fahey nursed him for several years, supporting them both by working part-time in Harry Seresin's coffee bar. There she came into contact with Wellington's art scene, spending time with Bruce Mason, Alistair Campbell, Jacquie Sturm and James K. Baxter among others. By 1959, McDonald had recovered and the couple settled in Porirua, near the hospital where he worked as a medical officer.

In response to her first taste of suburban life, Fahey painted a ground-breaking series she titled *Suburban Neurosis*, which charted the isolation and stifling sameness experienced by the housebound wives and mothers she met in Porirua.

The touching vulnerability of these cloistered women. There are no bars on the windows, but there might as well be. In their isolation they have fallen back on magic. Hand-reading, interpreting tea-leaves and the signs and portents – the omen at the window.⁶

With its numb, mournful figure and claustrophobic composition, *Woman at the Sink* (1959), one of the few surviving works from this series, revealed Fahey's growing awareness of how internalised attitudes about femininity could stifle women's potential and narrow their horizons. Informed by her reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *American Day by Day* and *The Second Sex*, she recognised how these attitudes had indoctrinated the women of her generation through religious teachings, the education system and popular media, including post-war films that glamorised the role of the housewife, encouraging women back into the home. Newly pregnant, and in the early years of her marriage, Fahey was alert to the pitfalls that lay ahead. In making visible experiences that were almost entirely absent from New Zealand's political narrative, the *Suburban Neurosis* paintings can lay claim to being some of the first truly feminist works made in this country, but they began as a riposte to the suggestions Fahey received from politicised male artists.

They said if I was a socialist I should be painting men digging holes in the road, working class men. And I said, so women slaving in the house aren't workers? Is that it? They don't work? Just the men are working?

As McDonald took up positions at a number of New Zealand institutions, including Kingseat and Carrington, Fahey accompanied him, bringing up their three children in houses within hospital grounds. Characteristically, she converted a situation that might have choked her artmaking into a strategic advantage. By wheeling around a large trolley, she painted wherever there was space to do so, placing herself in the box seat for the real-life drama of family interaction.

I decided that rather than getting away from it all, I would embrace domesticity, transform it, interpret it. Who better than someone immersed in it? I did not want to escape from my family, I loved them. I began to understand that what happened in my kitchen was as momentous to me as what had happened in Queen Elizabeth's banquet hall. [...] Everything that made up my life automatically became part of my work.⁷

The interiors painted during these years combine turmoil and frustration with romance, companionship and wistful yearning. In some, household objects and glimpses of gardens convey a sense of comfort and familiarity; in others, they rise up maniacally with sinister and oppressive force. Fahey's works from this period vibrate with colour and life. These homes are not prisons, but rather the nexus for the conflicts and complexities of domestic life; waiting rooms between youth and adulthood where identities are tested, assumed and reconstructed.

Fahey's unforgettable 1979 painting *My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room!* found its catalyst in an unexpected letter from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council. Her travel grant to the United States had been approved, but she was required to complete three new paintings over the Christmas break for an exhibition of works by that year's grant recipients.

My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room! 1979



Well, this was the school holidays for goodness' sake. How thoughtful! So I was standing in the kitchen trying to think. I started painting the kitchen and then Alex came in, screaming across the table at Augusta 'My skirt's in your fucking room!' – and then the two of them were at each other. And I thought, ah that's it! [...] The letter from the QEII council is on the table. Buller's book of birds had just been republished and it's there, with a book on women's painting.⁸ This painting, more than any other, is an example of me not resisting the circumstances of my domestic life but incorporating it into my work. I could have treated the fight as a huge distraction; instead I used it to contribute to my painting. This philosophy has stood me in good stead.

Back when Fahey was eight, her family home burnt down after a bonfire and she was sent to Teschemakers, a Dominican boarding school near Oamaru. It was strictly governed by nuns, who were determined to make their charges into “really lovely Catholic girls”. The rebellious Fahey soon became the “most thrashed” student there. She survived by reading novels during Mass (selecting those that would fit inside her missal cover) and later chose her reading list diligently from the index of books banned to the faithful by the Vatican. The experience confirmed both her taste for freedom and her agnosticism, but she left with a good education and faith of a sort – an unshakeable belief in the power of images. Fahey recalls a typical summer's dinner-time in her childhood home:

The old black trolley would come trundling up the long, dark hall. Bunsen burners alight under the chafing dishes. Silver and sparkly, the chafing dishes. The whole effect of the big black trolley was of some religious shrine. The masses of rich, steaming food. The antique shapes of the containers. The plates of gold-rimmed plates and cups and saucers.⁹

The Birthday Party
(detail) 1974



Illustrating Fahey's powers as both a writer and an observer, the details are as precise as they are evocative. This sense of reverence carries over into her painted interiors, in which objects and figures are rendered with equal attention, illuminating them with an almost-mythical significance. Elaborate set pieces, often borrowing a sense of gravitas from the great works of art history, they prime our expectations and then confound them. *The Birthday Party* (1974) contains all the expected accoutrements of such an occasion – cake, candles and balloons – but Fahey suspends us in the moment after. As the children drift out the door, we are left behind, languishing amidst lolly wrappers and pinned by the harrowing, dazed expression of the abandoned grandmother. With forensic attention paid to every surface and texture, whether chequerboard linoleum, paisley fabric or the grain on a wooden table, Fahey's compositions are wonderfully intricate, and her skilful, opulent application of paint adds another level of intensity. But while they are seductive, they are also imperfect: there's no room for sugar-coating or whitewashing in Fahey's universe. Along with the flowers and the patterned vases,

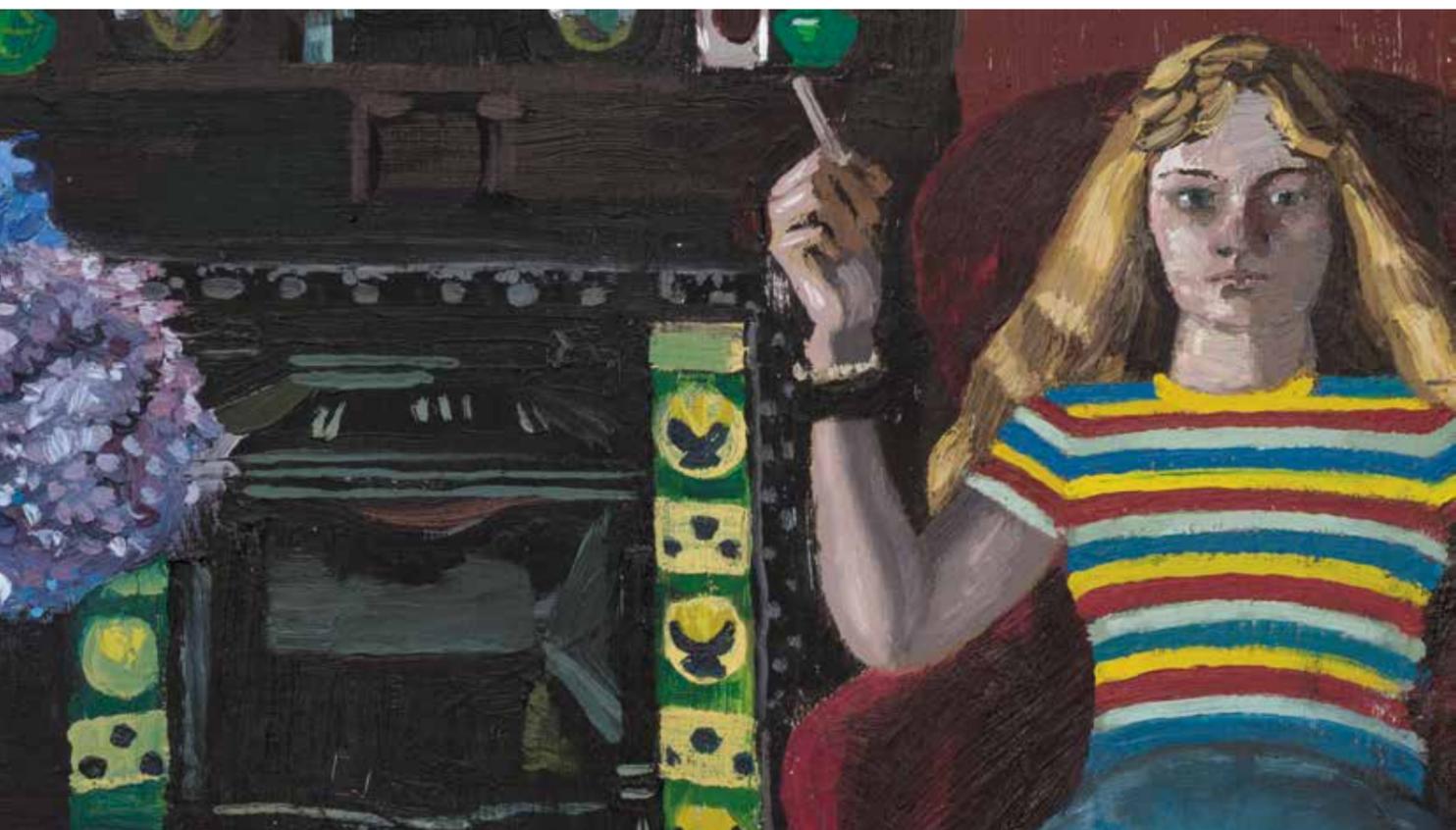
she shows everything else – the gin bottles, dirty washing, takeaways, unmade beds – summoning with unnerving authenticity the real lives that are typically swept under the carpet.

Such a stance is less than outrageous from our contemporary vantage point. After all, the most famous unmade bed in recent art memory was British artist Tracey Emin's, and that included condoms and blood-stained underwear. At the time, however, Fahey's disclosure was undeniably confronting to her audience.

Funnily enough, it was always the middle-class women who would say: 'I don't know how you could do that, I never could. I'm too private a person. I would find it humiliating, showing unmade beds or things like that.' And I would say, 'Well, don't try then. Give it a miss.' Or they 'couldn't get back to painting if there was dust under the bed' and I thought, Christ, that's endless, kid! There's always going to be more dust under the bed, you can bet on it.

Evening Smoke
(detail) 1975

Overleaf:
The Birthday Party
1974



In Fahey's later works, painting realistically isn't enough for her – she wants not only to suggest drinking, but drinking gin, and not just gin, but Tanqueray Special Dry, and she wants to be so specific with this bottle of gin that instead of painting it, she takes off the label and sticks it directly onto the painting. Painted amalgamations of life become literal collages – pieces of truth, pieced together: shrewd fabrications that attempt to get at something real.

This desire for physical exactitude goes hand in hand with truth-telling of another kind. As Fahey is always reminding us, the moments that cut to the heart of being human often aren't the ones that make the headlines. They unfold privately, behind closed doors; endured in lonely isolation or uncomfortable silences; battled out in full-throated fury between sisters, mothers and daughters, wives and husbands. Fahey's 1970s interiors are unresolved, untidy and unerringly authentic: fully-dimensioned lives inserted persistently and problematically into the 'official' record.

Of course, Fahey didn't holster her brush after making these paintings – far from it. In the decades since, she has turned her attention to a range of other subjects – from post-coup Fiji, to the inequalities of Auckland's K road, and the skaters in her local Grey Lynn park – always drawn to what was real, raw and discomfiting. Painting has always been her primary means of interpreting her life, and she shows no sign of stopping: "I have to have my hand in all the time", she told Kim Hill in a swashbuckling radio interview earlier this year. "I dare not leave it [...] because if inspiration strikes, I will have the weapon at hand."¹⁰

Felicity Milburn is a curator at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. She works collaboratively with all kinds of artists, aiming to bring them and their audiences closer together while getting in the way as little as possible.

1 All quotes unless otherwise indicated are from Felicity Milburn's interview with Jacqueline Fahey, 24 June 2016.
2 Fahey, quoted in Deborah Shepard, *Her Life's Work*, Auckland University Press, 2009, p. 21.
3 Fahey, quoted in Gregory O'Brien, *Lands and Deeds: Profiles of Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, Godwit Publishing, Auckland, 1996, p. 129.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
5 Fahey, quoted in Jillian Lloyd, *The Paintings of Jacqueline Fahey* (MA thesis), University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1988, p. 8.
6 Fahey, *Broadsheet*, June 1983, p. 19.
7 Fahey, *Before I Forget*, Auckland University Press, 2012, p. 37.
8 The book is *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, which

accompanied an influential exhibition profiling and re-evaluating the work of women artists.
9 Fahey, 'Painting Christchurch red', *Beyond Expectations: Fourteen New Zealand Women Write About Their Lives*, Allen & Unwin / Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1986, p. 72.
10 Fahey, interviewed by Kim Hill, Radio New Zealand National, 27 May 2017.



FAHEY

“It’s no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then”, said Lewis Carroll’s Alice. *Augusta and Voss* illustrates something essential and enduring about Fahey’s paintings: an ability to evoke the intensity of her subjects’ emotions while also retaining a strong sense of their psychological distance. Lost in thought, Augusta inhabits her own, unknowable world, where a beloved toy looms as large and as real as anyone else. ^{FM}

Augusta and Voss
1962



Speedy's Return
1971



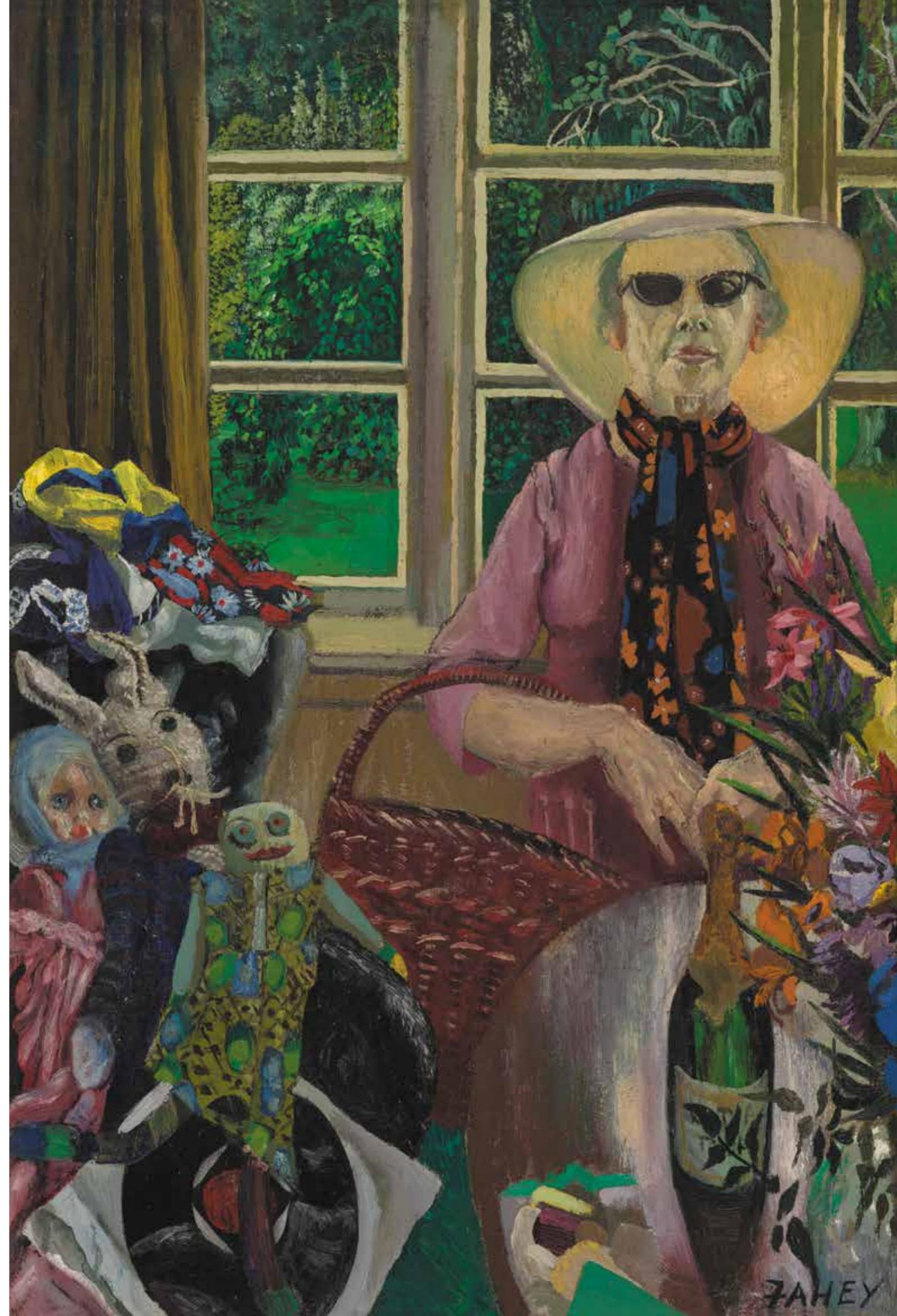
The garden itself was in a celebratory mood, all flickering lights and shadows, and my mood lifted. In response, the children ran wild in the garden all day and Mr Quickly, the gardener, who had come with us to Kingseat, bossed two helpers about.¹ JF

After Dad died, my mother came to stay with us at Kingseat. Her grief was awful. She would sob all night, half asleep. I don't think she was aware that she was crying. When she woke in the morning and I would ask her how she had slept, she would say quite well. [...] Out in the garden there were wonderful grapefruit, sweet and strong, so we had gin and grapefruit. That is what we are holding in the painting.² JF

In Memoriam
1969



Mum, Christmas Day
[also known as *Grandma,*
Christmas Day] 1971



When Mum first told me not to outstrip my sisters, I felt incensed by her lack of understanding, especially when she was so creative herself. She later decreed that I must devote myself to my children and to Fraser; I could no longer put myself first. And so it continued, a futile struggle. Deeply disturbing, and very common between mothers and daughters throughout history. Mothers, out of fear, are determined to confine their daughters; daughters determined to find meaning in life. Genetic matter is repeated again and again, as suggested by the Persian carpet, which rises up to compete with the genetic matter pulsing out of our heads. In the mirror my more compassionate alter ego watches, appalled at my lack of control.³ JF

*Mother and Daughter
Quarrelling 1977*



Drinking Couple:
Fraser Analysing
My Words 1978



Julia Waite

Clouds of euphoria drift above Fraser and Jacqueline as he plucks at her words, which transform themselves into winged jewels. *Drinking Couple: Fraser Analysing My Words*, painted in 1977, is radical in New Zealand art for its anti-gentility. A Hogarthian commentary on married life, it lifts the curtain to reveal the charged undercurrents of coupledness. But from a female perspective.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.” At the Canterbury School of Art in the early 1950s, artist Russell Clark encouraged Fahey to paint what she knew – her truth. As her consciousness was awakened to feminist issues, the experiences of her immediate life became pregnant with meaning.

In her vivid paint language, Fahey renders objects in intense detail and sets them on the move. Flames lick at the bottom of the composition. A dragonfly rests on a glass, symbolising the dangers of alcohol. The acrobat balancing on one hand alludes to the precariousness of her husband Fraser McDonald’s position as medical superintendent of Carrington Psychiatric Hospital. Her interior is undone, and through the heat and haze she watches on from above with a knowing look.

The subversiveness of *Drinking Couple* lies in Fahey’s unflinching self-scrutiny and ability to dig beneath pretence. Her singular voice challenges traditional notions of ‘the feminine’ and politicises the seeming banality of the everyday. As Fahey points out, “I was called a domestic painter – but domestic painters in the past had tidied up their house first or, I assumed, their wives had.”

Julia Waite is an assistant curator at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Her work is motivated by a desire to research and curate exhibitions of under-recognised artists to bring a greater diversity of voices to bear on art history. This kind of work is less about confirming status than interrogating it.

Last Summer
1971



The Portobello Settee
1974

I think a lot of painters of my era have a hangover from art school days. If you could pull a painting off without a pause – no having to backtrack, no laborious re-worked areas, no long delays to work out the next move – all of it effortless, then you inspired the admiration of the other students. I think it was a sort of sympathetic magic: if the artist enjoyed painting it so much then people must enjoy looking at it as much. The genius myth comes into it too: “You know – she just sat down and played like Eileen Joyce! Music is in her.” Or: “He dashed it off in a couple of hours – no trouble. He’s a natural.” Augustus John was our hero.

This painting belongs with that kind of response – it just went like a bird. I felt certain of my vision, certain I could endow my humble objects with mana because for a while they were totally beautiful to me. My need to record was intense, innocent and certain. No intellectual calculations crept in to cloud my vision. It was pleasure all the way through.

I know this is a form of art snobbery. I know I have done other paintings equally good which arrived agonizingly slowly, calculated every inch of the way and very like a game of chess in the thinking out of each move. However, *The Portobello Settee* is my choice, I suppose because we don’t escape our old values easily.⁴ JF



Lana Lopesi

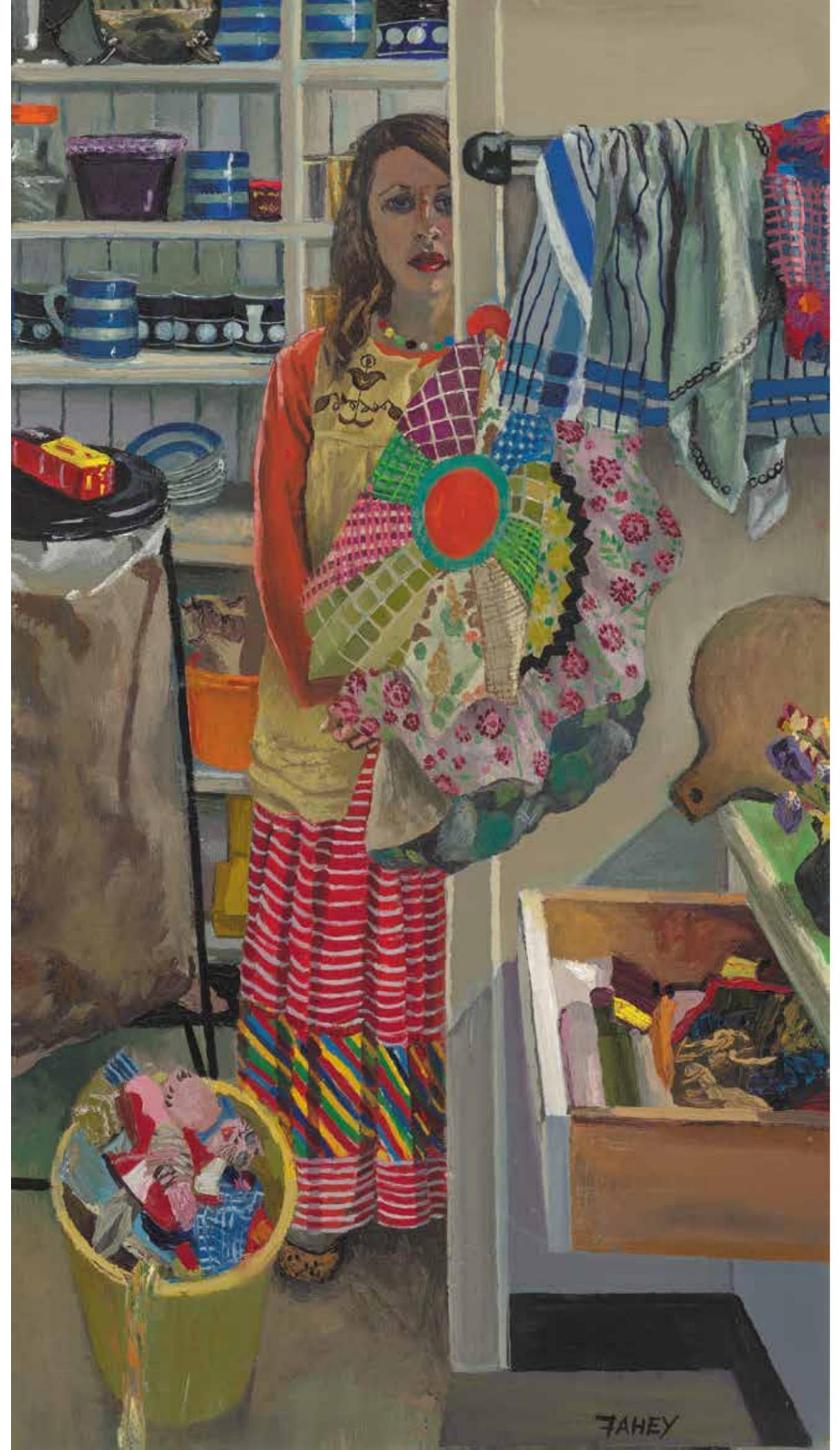
My world sits somewhere between my laptop and my children. Work and family are in constant negotiation; one is always compromising the other. On those busy weeks when I leave before the children wake up and get home after they have gone to bed, I psychologically prepare myself with the mantra, “You are the Dad.”

The need for women to just “say something” doesn’t seem to be the same problem now as it was in the 1970s when Jacqueline Fahey’s interiors were creating visibility for the New Zealand housebound woman. We’re in the fourth wave and have seen women gather en masse with their pink pussy hats, yet I wonder how much the female reality has changed. While of course I acknowledge that the landscape has shifted, I ask this question as a young mother in my twenties because I resonate with almost all of Fahey’s depiction of lived female experience. And what does that tell you?

Women really aren’t supposed to talk about this stuff though, are they? And our experiences within the home surely aren’t valid subjects for artmaking—if anything, those are the moments we sweep under the rug and slam the front door. We still definitely do not rate the labour of labour.

Lana Lopesi is a mother to six-month-old Laki and three-year-old Arpi, and in other moments of the day she is a writer and critic of art and culture, predominately as editor-in-chief of The Pantograph Punch.

Christine in the
Pantry 1973





Early Spring
1974

Stillness isn't a quality I associate with Fahey's paintings – it's those insult-slinging siblings and skirmishing spouses that loom largest – but a surprising number of her works from the 1970s share the stationary, not quite tranquil, state she explores in this painting. Her subject is often one or more of her daughters, gazing out of a window, languishing uneasily in an armchair or waiting, with a peculiarly restless poise, for something to happen. Here, Augusta pauses before leaving, her formal dress and the work's title suggesting an occasion that is significant not only for her, but for her watching parents. Fahey lays out the scene before us with obsessive attention to detail, tilting up the table to better show us every inch. Yet what we might most want to see – what this girl, caught at the beginning of the evening and on the cusp of adulthood, is thinking – remains persistently out of reach. FM



Bronwyn Labrum

Objects can reveal experiences that are often side-lined in conventional histories, which focus on key moments, turning points, high politics or mass movements and which often rely on conventional archival sources of texts and images. If ordinary people's experiences aren't written down or collected in photographic archives, how might we tell the story of everyday life in the past?

Oral histories continue to be one important answer to this question, but as Jacqueline Fahey's paintings show, there is another equally important answer: the stuff that people have all around them. She includes the very ordinary material culture of domestic life in her painting from the 1970s in order to show us how she and her friends and family actually lived and to assert the importance of home and family life to women at this time.

These are not typical images of empty rooms with tidy still-life arrangements. Her rooms are full of the material detritus of eating, drinking, washing, lounging, playing, talking and shouting, smoking, imagining and dreaming. These activities are seen from the perspective of a woman and feature women and children, and the occasional figure of her husband. The daily swirl is anchored in the specifically Kiwi elements of everyday material culture from this decade: Georgie Pie burger wrappers, Shrewsbury biscuits and bottles of Fanta, or on special occasions it is bubbly, gin and wine. Televisions and washing machines are there, as well as couches, easy chairs and coffee tables, heaters, crockery, dolls and toys. Smoking frequently occurs, as it did in real life, and the distinctive Beehive matches are painted in alongside swirling curls of exhaled smoke. Fahey's detailing of the different clothing worn by older and younger women shows a much more formalised generation gap than we see today, ranging from 'straighter' 60s attire to flower power to the early days of punk, as well as long hair for younger women especially and the last gasp of hats (large and floppy).

This was her and other women's daily reality: being saturated in New Zealand's consumer culture, stratified by age, gender, class and location.

Dr Bronwyn Labrum is Head of New Zealand and Pacific Cultures at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Over her career, she has shifted between the university and the museum, focusing on how differently we might create historical accounts when we put women and gender at the centre of our thinking and how we can find the extraordinary and revealing in everyday domestic lives in the past.

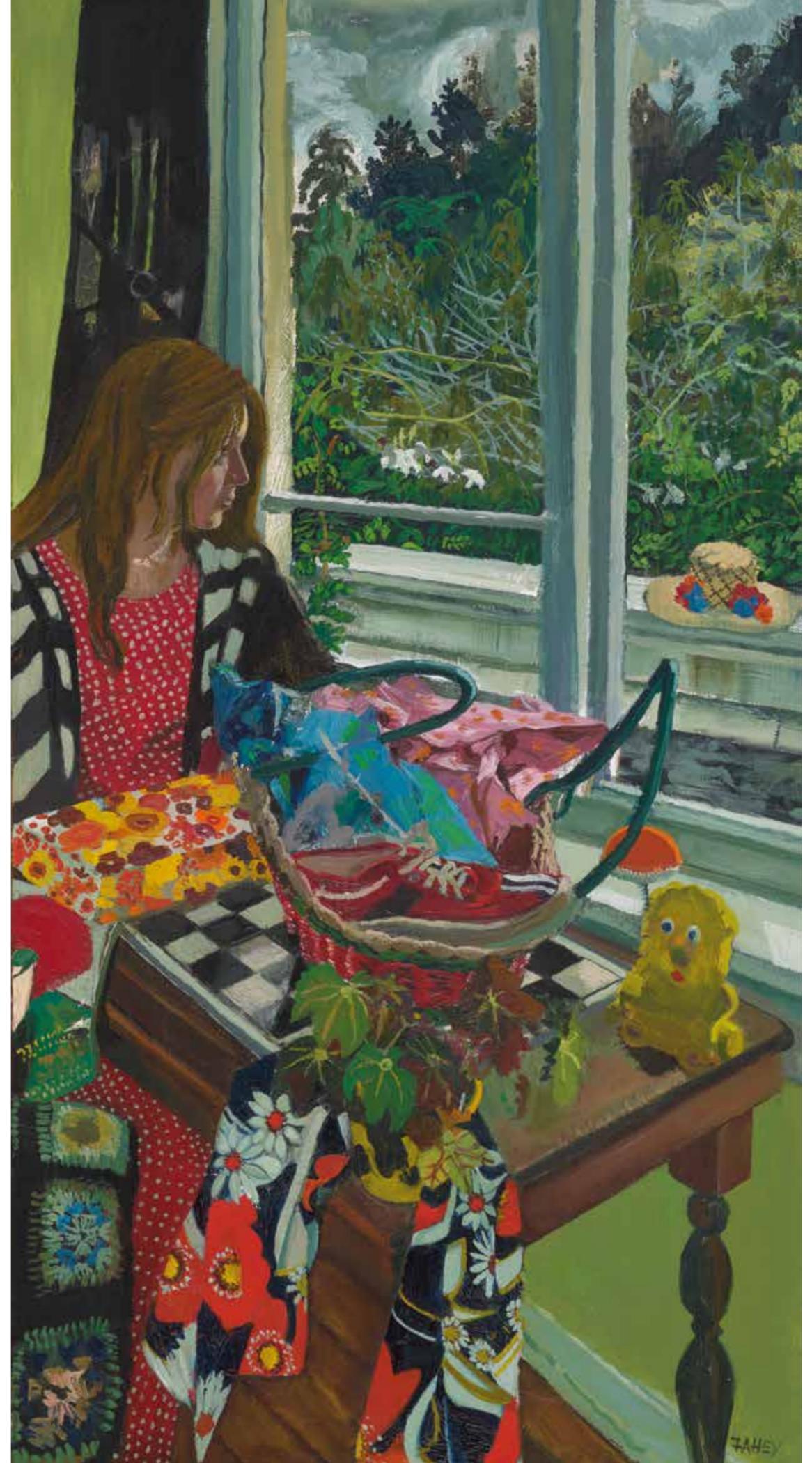
Georgie Pies for Lunch 1977



When I use the term 'feminist artist' I mean (a) I am a woman (and that helps) but by marrying, having children and being confined by that experience I am leading the life most women lead. I would even after that not call myself a feminist artist if I did not use that experience and physical world as the material to comment politically on that special way of spending one's life.⁵ JF

Below:
*Small Girl's Table and
Dead Starling* 1978

Right:
Girl at a Window
c. 1973



Some feel that one's painting should speak for itself. I do not believe that one can separate so easily the artist from the work. I know that my painting is myself. [...] I want to find some hint of what it is all about and the only case history I have to hand is my own. Do not confuse this urge with vanity. Vanity has nothing to do with it. I am like the woman closely examining herself in the looking glass; not to admire herself, but to try and see herself.⁶_{JF}

Allie Eagle

My correspondence with Jacquie in the mid-seventies gives an insight into the early days when her work started to be taken seriously (at least by other women artists). I was about twenty-five at the time, and reading back over it I can see how earnest and sincerely concerned I was that the memories of women would not fade from the public sphere, nor their imagery!

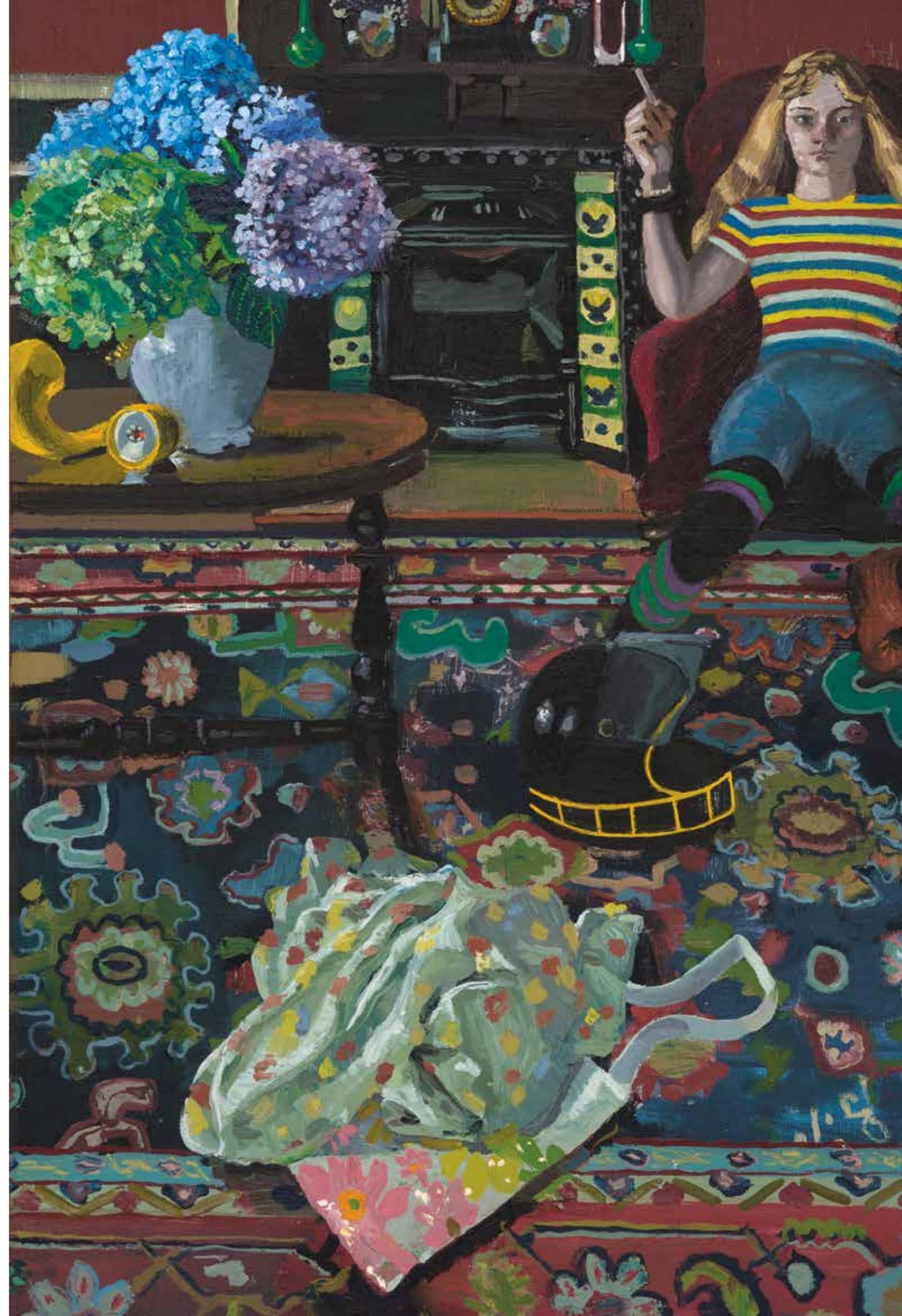
Our letters talk about a proposal for a big exhibition at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, intended as a follow-up to *Women's Art: An Exhibition of Six Women Artists*, which I'd curated in 1975 in response to an all-male touring Auckland Art Gallery exhibition. I was trying to get a feel for what women artists were saying about themselves and their own work, and create opportunities for networking. We didn't end up doing the big McDougall show, but *The Women's Art Environment*, a pivotal exhibition I helped curate at the CSA for the 1977 United Women's Convention, took some of its thrust from that research and correspondence with Jacquie. At that time, Joanna Margaret Paul and I were searching for other art school-trained women artists so we could start having conversations with them. This grew naturally into the Women's Art Movement, and we realised that it was a little elitist to only include professionally trained women artists in our search.

From my position as exhibitions officer at the McDougall, I was able to purchase the very first publicly owned Gretchen Albrecht painting for the collection. Director Brian Muir was very supportive of this venture and finding where New Zealand contemporary women artists were. (There were honestly so few women included in contemporary exhibitions then!)

What was exciting about Jacquie's work was the domestic interior, subverted away from the male-view pleasantries of 'woman happily domiciled' into painted rage and honest truth about suburban women's reality (well... some women's reality). Her paintings worked powerfully and satisfyingly into the idea of women speaking for and about themselves.

Allie Eagle is a studio-based artist living in Te Henga on the west coast of Auckland. Her current project is a series of portraits and installations that interrogate the male gaze. As a teacher and cultural activist, Allie Eagle works both inside and outside art institutions and uses collaborative processes from the Women's Art Movement and second-wave feminism as a means of creating intentional communities. Allie Eagle is a supporter of Mokopōpaki, the new Māori art space in Auckland, where her interest in land and spirituality encourages a much longer conversation about the nature of identity and being Pākehā.

Evening Smoke
1975



Sunday Evening
1978



I used to feel awful about my ambivalence, but as I get older I have come to terms with it. I'm reminded of the ancient Irish god with the head that looks three ways at once. I am sure that's what it means: ambivalence. What you see depends on where you are looking from, and all of the viewpoints are true and none of them are true.⁷ JF

[Cecil and Barbara, Fahey's sisters] are at that stage in life, in time, in history, where they're beginning to see that it's not a simple issue, that it's not just a simple matter of getting married and having children, that it's going to be much more fraught than that.⁸ JF

Sisters Communing
1974



Sixteen years after Fahey painted the dazed suburban ennui of her sisters Cecil and Barbara, she witnessed another, no less charged, communion between two of her daughters, Emily and Augusta. As Emily, having just broken up with her boyfriend, was counselled and consoled by Augusta, the space they occupied seemed hermetically sealed, leaving even their mother on the outside, looking in. As Virginia Woolf observed in her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, women have traditionally been depicted predominately in relation to men, rather than to each other: "and how small a part of a woman's life is that". By foregrounding the personal, Fahey makes explicit aspects of female experience often side-lined by more conventional histories. ^{FM}

I have imagined this scene as a flashback to ancient Crete, where older sisters comfort younger sisters, attempting to give their siblings some idea of how to protect themselves from the slings and arrows of scary fate. This, I don't doubt, happened as often in ancient Crete as it does now in Auckland, New Zealand.⁹ ^{JF}

Sisters Communing II
1990





1931-32 FAHEY

Julia Holden

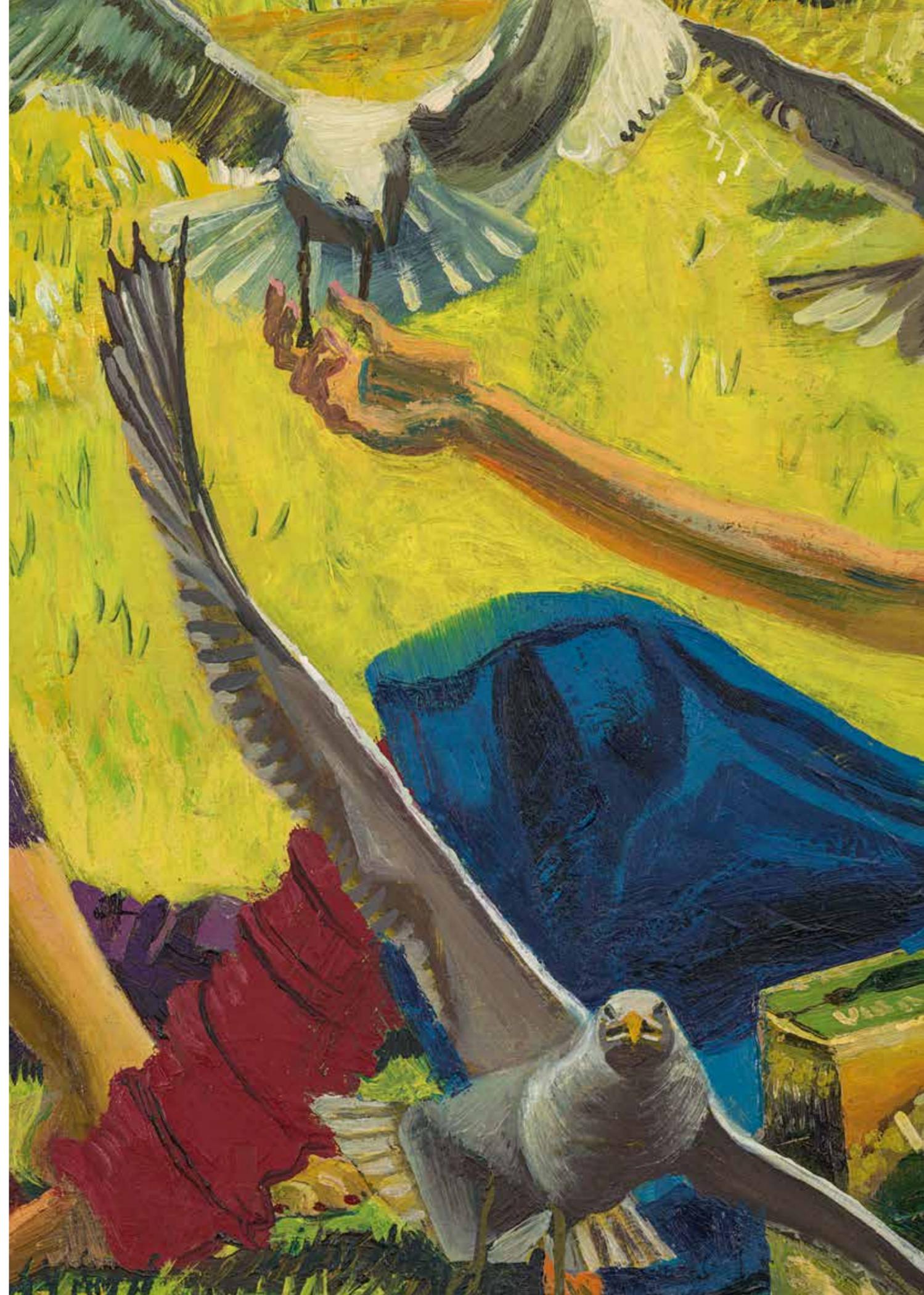
Jacqueline Fahey's *Luncheon on the Grass* gives us her take on Edouard Manet's radical and famously strange painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863). Hers is a humorous and personal work, equally radical at the time of its making.

Fahey relocates Manet's tableau to a park-like Kiwi setting. Lit by intense summer sunlight, male and female roles are reversed, immediately acknowledging a feminist reading of the original. The implied power relationship between the four figures is subtly altered. The male nude nearest us, taking the place of the female nude central to Manet's painting, has none of the ethereal glow and striking presence of the woman in the original work. For Fahey, it's the two women, her own stylishly insouciant daughter and her friend, who are the focus of the painting – not the men, naked or otherwise.

For me, Fahey's close relationship to, and the connection between, the two young women reveals itself: the sunlight is strongest upon them, they are painted more vividly, she calls attention to and links them through the blue dress and the hat's bow, they are more defined and I have a sense of them as individuals rather than mere props in the scene. The girls are composed and relaxed – despite the squabbling seagulls overhead. It's like Fahey is letting us and them know that they are in charge, they have agency and the world is their oyster – Fahey's women are more than silent, beautiful objects whose sole purpose is to enhance male status.

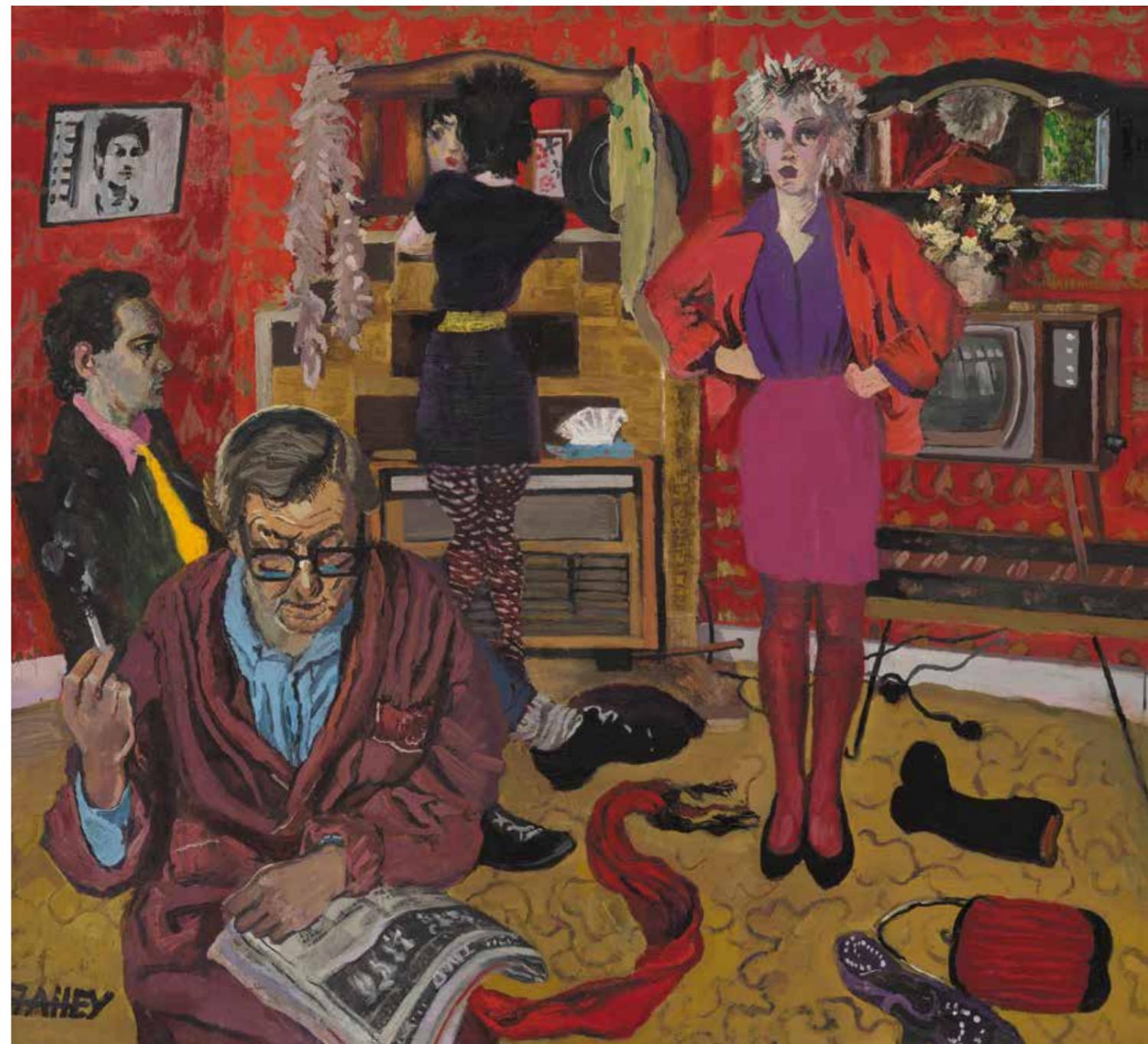
Julia Holden is a graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts and Monash University, Melbourne, currently based in Christchurch. Working continuously within the portraiture genre, Holden centres her production upon outcomes that emphasise community connections and a wider social engagement.

This and previous pages:
Luncheon on the Grass
1981–2



Alex and her friend Susie are off to hear a band, maybe Hello Sailor. Spinner, their friend in the black jacket, is pissed off; he feels used as a taxi driver, not appreciated as an attractive young man. Fraser has the 'flu and will be going to bed as soon as their noisy presence has dissipated.¹⁰ JF

*Friday Night and
Fraser has the Flu*
1978



Spinner Waiting
for the Girls 1978



Zoe Roland

One morning during the weeks leading up to Christmas, my children and I witness a curious ritual. Lifted, writhing, from its temporary home, an overcrowded paddling pool, the traditional central European Christmas carp is weighed and wrapped in newspaper. Then, carried gasping for air through the snow and hauled up multiple flights of stairs in communist-era apartments, it's kept in a bathtub for up to a week before being killed and eaten in the name of 'tradition'. Carp au naturel with bones big enough to pierce a lung, cold fried carp and finally a muddy carp soup concocted from the giant carcass. Unsurprisingly, some locals claim to detest the taste of carp. Celebrating Christmas in this part of the world requires stoic loyalty to rules and rituals defined mainly by superstition and old-world tradition.

As dystopic and chaotic as Fahey's hyperreal scene initially appears, it expresses a freedom and familial warmth that to me speaks of a nation unhampered by old-world European custom and tradition. *Happy Christmas* captures a new-world domestic order on the precipice of a New Zealand Christmas – a New Zealand Christmas riotous with colour, movement and unpredictable possibilities. Chic in red lipstick amidst frenetic household energy, her arms outstretched magically multi-tasking, Fahey's New Zealand heroine is unfazed by the poltergeist in the fridge, the hungry child, the rogue tomatoes, the ying-yang squabbling cats, or by the fish, which is unlikely to be carp, suspended in mid-air free from the shackles of old-world traditions.

Zoe Roland has recently returned to New Zealand to undertake the role of Senior Advisor Public Programmes at the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa. While living on the Czech-Polish border for three years, Zoe completed her thesis on the role of personal narratives in cultural institutions, looked after her two children and travelled enough to say with unflinching conviction, "There's no place like home!"

Happy Christmas
1986



About the artist

By the time ‘the personal is political’ became a rallying cry for feminism in the 1960s, Jacqueline Fahey was already portraying the private realities of New Zealand women. Challenging conventions about legitimate subjects for artmaking, her works made new kinds of female experience visible, and they occupy a distinct and significant place in the history of New Zealand art. Resisting the shift towards abstraction embraced by many of her peers, Fahey maintained and developed her characteristically expressive realist style, wielding it to respond to a variety of political and social issues.

Born in Timaru in 1929, Fahey attended the Canterbury College School of Art, receiving her Diploma of Fine Arts in 1951. She was taught by artists Russell Clark and Bill Sutton and was part of what would become a renowned group of Canterbury women artists, including Rita Angus, Juliet Peter, Doris Lusk and Evelyn Page. Fahey moved to Wellington in 1951 where she married psychiatrist Fraser McDonald and began to raise their three daughters. They spent a year in Melbourne in 1960 then shifted to Auckland in 1965, where she has lived and painted since.

In 1964, with Rita Angus, Fahey organised New Zealand’s first deliberately gender-balanced exhibition at the Centre Gallery in Wellington. Significant solo exhibitions have included *Portrait in the Looking Glass: The World of Jacqueline Fahey – A Survey on Paintings 1957–1995* at Fisher Gallery, Auckland in 1996 and *Bringing it Home* at Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland in 2004. Fahey’s works have been included in many significant group exhibitions, such as *Mothers*, a Women’s Gallery touring exhibition in 1981, *Anxious Images* at Auckland Art Gallery in 1984 and *Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 1985. In 2007, two of her paintings were included in the major exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Fahey became an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) for services to the arts in 1997 and in 2013 was announced as a New Zealand Arts Foundation Icon, an honour limited to a circle of twenty living New Zealand artists. Fahey is also an accomplished writer, publishing the novel *Cutting Loose* (1998) about the 1987 coup in Fiji, and two memoirs, the best-selling *Something for the Birds* (2006) and *Before I Forget* (2012).

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Woman at the Sink 1959
Oil on board, 752 x 590 mm
Private collection, Sydney

Artist quotes

- [page 19] *Before I Forget*, Auckland University Press, 2012, p. 42.
- [page 20] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- [page 24] *Ibid.*, unpaginated.
- [page 30] ‘19 painters & their favourite works’, *Islands*, 10, 1974, p. 394.
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- [page 48] *University of Otago Magazine*, Issue 9, October 2004, p. 40.
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Last Summer (detail)
1971

Overleaf:
The Portobello Settee (detail) 1974



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Back cover: Jacqueline Fahey, 2016.
Photo: Wayne Williams

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FAHEY



In an era when women were often silenced and side-lined, Jacqueline Fahey's voice was distinctive and unapologetic. Speaking up is important, but saying something worthwhile matters too.

Jacqueline Fahey was one of the first New Zealand artists to paint from a feminist perspective. Here, her psychologically charged domestic scenes of the 1970s, in which she unflinchingly surveyed her own private reality, are revisited by contemporary feminist authors. At once familiar and unsettling, these paintings overflow with love, loss, conflict and quiet despair, and bristle with all the intensity of domestic life.

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