

# artnews

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JANET LILO ♦ PETER MADDEN ♦ MICHAEL ILLINGWORTH ♦ PETRA CORTRIGHT  
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TERTIARY ART COURSES SUPPLEMENT 2018



## Solarisation

*Gregory O'Brien considers the fiery, iconographic paintings of our "earthly friend", painter Michael Illingworth, who died in the 1980s but whose work endures.*

Poet James K. Baxter once referred to Michael Illingworth as having a personality which was 'solar' – a description which hints at the energetic, vital and singular position the painter occupies in the evolution of New Zealand art.

Brightness. Radiance. Luminescence. Wonder. Fecundity. All of these qualities were evident in Illingworth's art from early in the 1960s, when he was painting birth-of-the-cosmos, high-energy canvases with titles like *The Poet Explodes* (1961) and *Beyond the Dictatorship of Time and Place* (1961). By mid-decade, the frenetic molecular energy had been channelled into a tighter painterly schema. Yet the vitality and vision of Illingworth's art remained undiminished. During the last two decades of his life, the paintings increasingly resembled religious icons, in both scale and intent – although, throughout his career, he kept a good and very critical distance from all kinds of religious orthodoxy.

In the icon tradition, the painting's subject not only looks out at its viewers, it radiates colour, light and a state of mind and being into the space before it. Such was also the intent of Illingworth's compacted, colour-enriched compositions: to

hold the viewer within their gravitational or magnetic field.

Born in Yorkshire in 1932, Michael Illingworth trained in textile design before moving to New Zealand with his parents, who settled in Tauranga in 1952. During the next two years he made a number of formative and defining connections, meeting the young James K. Baxter, and being befriended by a group of Māori fishermen at Matauri Bay, where he lived for a time. Returning to England and Europe in the late 1950s, he furthered his artistic self-education before heading back to Auckland in 1961 and, from 1962, painting full time. Through the 60s and 70s there were well-received exhibitions in Auckland and Wellington, and a brush with the police in 1965 (when one of the *Adam and Eve* paintings was removed from the walls of Barry Lett Galleries). In 1966 Illingworth was awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, which gave rise to "a marvellous year", as he reminisced in a 1980 *Dominion* interview: "My wife and I got together with Jim Baxter and Janet Frame and we all tore around the Otago peninsula, working furiously."

A few years later, Illingworth's work was featured – alongside that of McCahon, Woollaston, Binney and Smither – in the ground-breaking *Earth/Earth* exhibition at



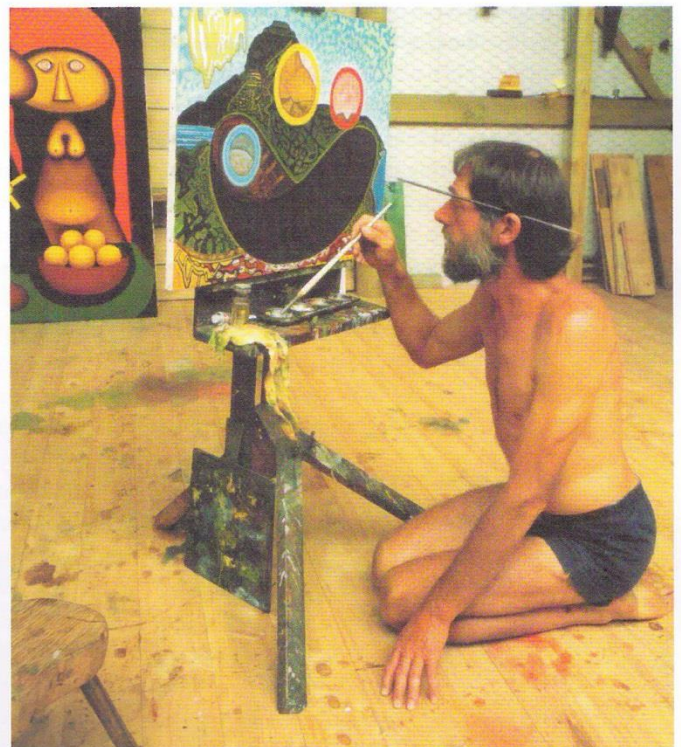
Opposite: Michael Illingworth, *Pylon Flower*, 1968, oil on canvas, 762 x 915mm. All photos by Sam Hartnett unless otherwise stated. Courtesy of Art + Object

Above: Michael Illingworth, *The 245T Farmer*, 1974, oil on board and mixed media assemblage, 488 x 640mm

Barry Lett Galleries. That 1971 exhibition was one of the first public manifestations not only of ecologically driven art-making but also of an emerging Green movement in this country. Before and after that exhibition, Illingworth's conservationist concerns were everywhere to be seen in his work. In *The 245T Farmer* (1974) a cancerous growth invades his beloved Coromandel. Yet even in this chilling, science-fictional scenario, the painterly language is that of an optimist – the brightness of the world and the ripeness of the day will endure; the earth will repair itself.

Well-known on account of its prominent position in a Marti Friedlander photograph, *Untitled* (c. 1980) features, above a bush-clad hillside, three floating discs or petri-dishes – each containing views through either a telescope or a microscope. Upper left, a cloud-form looks like a tissue-sample; in fact, the entire scene resembles a science experiment-in-progress. In recent correspondence, the artist's widow Dene Illingworth likens the enigmatic form that dominates the lower half of the painting to a seedpod. The motif asks questions of the viewer, she surmises. "Where and how will it take root? Will it spoil this land? Can it be incorporated? Take care."

In the *Earth/Earth* catalogue, Illingworth laid his ecopolitics on the line: "We, the Europeans, who have usurped the tribal right, the ancestral lands in a most undignified manner e.g. through the office of shyster lawyers and grafting politicians, are hardly the ones to talk conservation



Marti Friedlander, *Michael Illingworth*, 1980



Left: Michael Illingworth, *Androcles*, 1961, oil on canvas, 1961, 609 x 515mm

Opposite, top: Michael Illingworth, *Untitled – Rangi and Papa series*, 1917, oil on canvas, 805 x 448mm

Opposite, bottom: Michael Illingworth, *Gallery goes*, early 1980s, oil on canvas, 610 x 732mm

for as a breed we stand by and live for the perpetuation of a way of life that means the complete destruction of the natural order in the name of materialism.”

Not surprisingly, Illingworth shunned city living. By 1973, he and his family had transplanted from Puhoi to Coroglen in the Coromandel, where he spent the remaining 14 years of his life juggling the demands of being an organic farmer and an artist. “The Coromandel was a refuge and an escape – a place of beauty – a place to raise a family,” Dene recalls. “Barry Brickell lived nearby and his company was enjoyed. Michael also embraced the challenge of farming – the place was very run down – and he kept up with the latest ideas in breeding and pasture management, etc.

“Considering the fact that we were fairly impoverished and lived in a shack, and that he was pulled in every direction with trying to paint and farm and be a father, and also involve himself in local happenings... it was no mean feat.”

In both his thinking and his art, Illingworth went beyond ‘landscape’ to engage creatively with a notion of ‘environment’ more in keeping with non-Western traditions than it was with the prevailing Western view of the land and its worth – usually judged in either scenic or monetary terms. In 1970 he summed up the parlous state of the New Zealand ecology: “The land is like a dead animal – we’ve humiliated our landscape – the flesh of the hand is rotting away, and the bones are showing through... there are few New Zealanders who are in tune with the soil...”

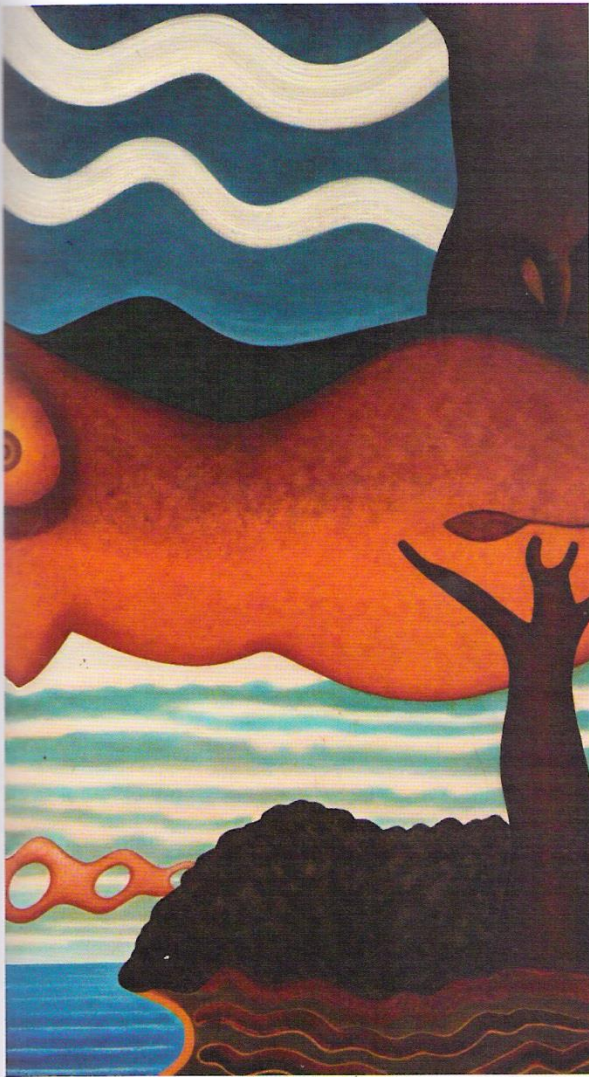
A characteristically holistic offering, *Waiwawa* (1977) is titled after the river that flowed beside Illingworth’s farm at Coroglen. In this small painting, the summer sky is a furnace of overheated orbs and curves, a glowing calligraphy above the verdant hill country. As elsewhere, Illingworth presents nature as, fundamentally, a field of energy. Microcosm and macrocosm are merged

in a dancing pattern of forms that evoke enzymes, particles, molecules... while at the same time suggesting hemispheres, planets and the whirling cosmos.

In a 1968 *Craccum* interview, Illingworth asserted that paintings “must come straight from the heart, from the primeval being”. In many regards, his vision was closely aligned with that of potter Barry Brickell, with whom he held a two-person exhibition, *Little Paintings/Big Pots*, at Barry Lett Galleries in 1968. The formal language of both artists merged the science of land, sea and sky with human biology – witness the ceramicist’s bulbous forms, torsomorphs and penis-like extrusions. On the other hand, Illingworth presented all manner of ovoid heads and clouds and – in works such as *Untitled (Pa site)* (1972) and *Untitled (Island)* (1971) – breast-mountains and phallic branches.

Rather than being character actors in a morality play or vehicles for human emotion or personality, Illingworth’s figures are embodiments of being itself. Without mouths or ears, their faces usually lack any identifying, individual characteristics. His denizens of the natural world might best be thought of as kūmara gods or kehua (spirits) from Māori tradition, or as sprites or lesser deities from Shakespeare or elsewhere.

Alongside Adam and Eve unclad – at once innocent and scandalous, in their day – Illingworth drew widely on other mythical sources. *Androcles* (1961) is a retelling of the Greek myth in which the protagonist, after whom the work is named, shelters in a cave occupied by an injured lion. In the nick of time, Androcles manages to remove a thorn from the lion’s paw and, much to his good fortune later in the story, he and the wild beast become lasting friends. As wide-ranging across his mythological sources as Baxter was in his poetry, Illingworth was also inspired by Māori lore – notably the legend of Rangi and Papa, the sky father and earth mother.



While Illingworth's paintings frequently tap into subconscious, archetypal, Jungian depths, they are also intermittently drawn to the bright, assertive surfaces of the contemporary world. In the artist's more satirically inclined offerings – such as *Gallery goers* (early 1980s) or the portrait of a Wellington politician – the figures are comical yet emblematic, pawns in a chess game Illingworth himself was reluctant to play, but felt moved to comment on.

Illingworth's view of suburban reality echoes not only that of Baxter but also that of Janet Frame. In *The Carpathians*, Frame's narrator recalls with a very Illingworth-esque mixture of imagination and clarity, "the brilliance, the mechanical uproar, the clatter, incoherence and madness of a land of bright flowers, bright eyes, European, Celtic, Māori, South Pacific, all New Zealanders, pacifically peculiar people..."

If the world in which Illingworth found himself was vexed and often contradictory, his view remained abidingly positivist. Surveying his oeuvre, we witness – against all odds – the triumph of innocence over experience, of sensuality over repression, of the newly-born over the entrenched. Relatedly, Illingworth's palette owed more to citrus and pip-fruit than to the depths of the forest or, for that matter, the encroaching metropolis.

"He preferred to be positive, which is why he kept trying to make a difference and enjoyed making a difference," Dene recalls, then adds that "shaking things up" was also integral to his personality: "Confrontation was enjoyable (usually)." She remembers her late husband as "a passionate and romantic raver – in all senses of the word, and about all things". Yet the role of the artist was not that of a preacher and, as she notes, "Michael stopped giving titles to his work because he felt each viewer could reach a meaning, and also that meaning could change."

With *Pylon Flower* (1968) as a particularly apt emblem and chosen metaphor, Illingworth's paintings radiate outwards, sun-like, broadcasting their meaning/essence to the world. In this, they are the further yield of the handful of sunflower seeds which the artist gave to Baxter in 1969 and which the poet memorialised in his *Jerusalem Sonnets*: "And they will turn their wild pure golden discs / Outside my bedroom, following Te Ra / Who carries fire for us in His terrible wings..."

Illingworth's vision is intrinsically a bright and clear-eyed one – life-infused, verdant, burgeoning. Yet his warm-spirited offering is not impervious to the absurdities, threats and cataclysm of human history. Both darkness and light are caught up in the process of solarisation which we find at the fiery heart of Michael Illingworth's art: an acknowledgement of cosmic energy not only in the wider universe but also within the seed, the plant, the land and the people who live there.

*The Michael Illingworth Estate Collection will be auctioned at Art + Object on 14 September 2017.*

