

90 Years



Blackburn 19

Blackburn

John Blackburn

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Cover (detail): *8 Cups & 4 Arrow Heads*
Mixed media, PVA over acrylic on canvas, 490 x 715 mm
Blackburn 2019

John Blackburn in ARTIS Gallery

FOREWORD

Blackburn's early works were created in New Zealand from around 1955 until his return to the UK in 1961. Many of these were shown in Auckland's Circle Gallery in Queen Street in 1959. It was around this time that Blackburn met Les Harvey, the Parnell entrepreneur, who may have assisted with the organisation of the exhibition. It was not a commercial success but more importantly it led to Blackburn's enduring friendship with Harvey who would soon become a benefactor and collector as well as a mentor. In November that year Blackburn was included in the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition 'Paintings', one of a dozen local artists including Robert Ellis, Hamish Keith and Tim Garrity.

Blackburn's last paintings during this Auckland sojourn were perhaps a step too extreme for the New Zealand art scene. He alarmed his neighbours when, in his Wairau Road garden, he doused his newly-made large encaustic paintings in petrol, set them alight and then extinguished the flames with wet sacking.

Les Harvey, convinced of Blackburn's talent, advised him to return home to the UK to develop his career. He then purchased the entire contents of Blackburn's Glenfield studio, thus financing the Blackburn family's voyage back to England. Once there Blackburn continued to paint as time allowed, but he rarely exhibited after the late 1970's until his rediscovery several decades later.

Whilst visiting the Grosvenor House Art and Antiques Fair in London in 2007, on Mayfair's Osborne Samuel Gallery stand, by pure serendipity, I came across John Blackburn's connection with New Zealand. With the help of The Harvey Family Trust I was able to re-establish Blackburn's antipodean presence with an annual 'Artist in Residence' at Nancy Harvey's Earthskin studio at Muriwai followed by annual exhibitions in ARTIS Gallery.

In 2018 Dr Ian Massey published the book *John Blackburn: The Human and the Abstract* which included an excellent chapter on Blackburn's New Zealand years written by Christopher Johnstone.

In June 2022 we celebrated the milestone of John's 90th birthday and four months ago he sent us a collection of stunning new paintings for his 2023 exhibition. It was whilst those paintings were at the framers in preparation for this exhibition that we received the sad news of John's passing on October 22nd.

Since 2009 John has been a massive supporter of ARTIS Gallery and a valued mentor to our younger artists. We have formed a strong personal friendship with John and Maude. John's elegant presence at his exhibition openings will be sorely missed. As John said to me in 2017, 'there's no point in simply doing what you already know; the important thing is to search for what you don't know'.

Jonathan Gooderham

Director ARTIS Gallery - January 2023



The Cross

Mixed media on panel, 845 x 1790 mm, Triptych
Signed Blackburn Sep' 22

Painted last year in his studio in Canterbury, *The Cross* is one of John Blackburn's final works. A triptych, it is made with the vigour evident in so much of the artist's painting, indicative of the constancy of ambition that continued until just before his brief final illness. Across the upper section of *The Cross* are three X's, drawn in black pigment over a field of white. The two outer ones are constrained within a grid-like scaffolding, while the larger central X appears untethered and, in contrast to its neighbours, is painted wet in wet, in two long striated trails of the brush.

Looking more closely, one sees that behind this central X lies the ghostly outline of a crucifix, its tilted angle reminiscent of those in depictions of Christ carrying the cross to his own crucifixion. And one concludes that *The Cross* is a Calvary of sorts, albeit with the knowledge that Blackburn was not a religious man *per se*. It is therefore a secular painting, by an artist deeply attuned to the qualities in human nature that shape our individual and collective experience and suffering. To paint or draw a cross – either as an X or in cruciform – was for him

primarily a symbol of memorialisation, to the millions slaughtered on battlefields and in the holocaust. For it is important to recognise that he was indelibly haunted by man's inhumanity to his fellow man, by the enactments of such cruelty that took place during his own lifetime, and that this was an essential factor in what drove him as an artist. It can be traced back to his first truly significant works, a group of experimental canvases made in Auckland in 1961 that formed the groundwork for all that followed. These are the *Encaustic* series, their scarred and

burnt surfaces a metaphor for the existential uncertainties felt by Blackburn and many others of his generation, those who had also reached adulthood in the years after the Second World War. A form of revisitation was to come years later, with the artist's powerful *Fire Paintings* (2018/19), in which the elements – fire, smoke, water – along with various pigments and found materials, became key protagonists in their making.

Evident in this exhibition is the great range, of colour, surface, and technique that Blackburn explored during his many decades of artistic production. Also apparent is his recurrent repertoire of shapes, constantly recast in new formations and inter-relationships. It includes the aforementioned crosses; circles and half-circles; a cup-shaped enclosed U; and an L that appears, for instance, as a dominant black interlocking shape in *Black and Grey '68* (1968), and then much later in the altogether gentler soft pastel L of *Yellow and Pink Forms in Landscape* (2022). Among other examples is that rendered in sooty black, one of two principal shapes – the other a found white acrylic square – in *Fantastic White Plastic* (2017). This is but one of many paintings that integrate found or discarded materials, a strategy inspired by the Catalan Antoni Tàpies, an artist greatly admired by Blackburn. His own use of such materials began early on in his career, partly for pragmatic reasons resulting from financial necessity. But it was a method that also suited his purpose, for he took a sensual interest in things already imbued with a sense of prior usage, with traces of human life. Within this empirical approach, he made substantial groups of paintings in which he incorporated items often rather idiosyncratic in nature. An example is the use of empty blister-packs that began in 2013, their rows of regular units, akin to strips of mosaic, providing a structural base and texture upon which to paint. Among

these works is *Kimono IV, Bombay* (2017), an essay in whites in which the blister-packs are accompanied by a disparate selection of small found objects made from metal, plastic, and textile. Always an inventive artist, Blackburn had the ability to create works of great refinement from such materials, forming compositions of finely judged balance and sophistication. He wedded the formal and the painterly to great effect, as in the large *Black Square - White Square* (2008), the concision



*“For my part, painting is never easy.
Nor should it be. Nothing any good has
ever come out of easy.”*

John Blackburn

of its eponymous shapes countered by passages of gestural energy and runnels of heavily diluted paint. His mark-making encompassed both restrained delicacy and an unmanicured rawness: among many examples in which these two qualities can be found is *Abstract with Triangle Shapes* (2019), a work of equal subtlety

and urgency. And it is the combination of each of these various characteristics that make the artist's painting so distinctively compelling.

During the annual returns Blackburn and his wife Maude made to New Zealand he always engaged in the production of new work. The impact of the environment, its light and colour, often gave rise to paintings of a very different tenor to those made in Kent. Though primarily a painter of allusive abstracts, in his Antipodean work there is often an infiltration of land and seascape, connoted in blues and greens, in the curves of hillsides and trees painted flatly in schematised shapes. The last of the Blackburn's visits coincided with a period of Covid lockdown, when the couple, arriving in Auckland in mid-January 2020 with the intention of staying for three months, found themselves remaining until late July. The artist turned the time to his advantage, painting on most days from a balcony several floors up at Mount Maunganui, forming a body of work that resulted in the show '*Extended Stay*' at Artis Gallery in 2021.

To conclude on a personal note, I first saw Blackburn's paintings during a visit to Kettles Yard in Cambridge in the 1980s, and they remained in my memory. Years later, in 2006 I established contact with the artist and, over the next sixteen years we talked regularly over the telephone, and I made many visits to his home and studio. We became firm friends and, as those of you who also knew him can attest, he was a very special and loveable man. He was

also a truly remarkable painter, whose innate artistry was fundamental to his being.

Ian Massey

Lancashire, January 2023.



Black & Grey '68
Mixed media and gouache on board, 501 x 340 mm
Signed Blackburn 1968



Fantastic White Plastic
Acrylic & mixed media on board, 1120 x 920 mm
Signed Blackburn 2017



Black Square - White Square
Mixed media on canvas board, 1200 x 1200 mm
Signed Blackburn Feb '08



Kimono IV, Bombay
Acrylic & mixed media on board,
1680 x 1220 mm
Signed Blackburn 2017



Assemblage of Gentle Cups
Mixed media on board, 705 x 985 mm
Signed Blackburn Jan/ Feb 2022



Three Trees with Two Forms
Mixed media on canvas panel, 605 x 815 mm
Signed March 2022



By Accident, Shades of Giacomo Balla 1871 - 1958
Mixed media on card, 280 x 495 mm
Signed Blackburn May 2022



Abstract with Triangle Shapes
Oil & acrylic on canvas, 425 x 625 mm
Signed Blackburn 2019



Muriwai Morning

Oil & mixed media on canvas mounted on board, 760 x 600 mm
Signed Blackburn Jan/Feb 2009 Muriwai



Fishes at the Mount

Mixed media oil & plastic fish on canvas panel, 355 x 280 mm
Signed Blackburn/The Mount NZ during Covid Lockdown 2020



Yellow & Pink Forms in Landscape
Mixed media on canvas panel, 300 x 420 mm
Signed Blackburn March/April/ May 2022



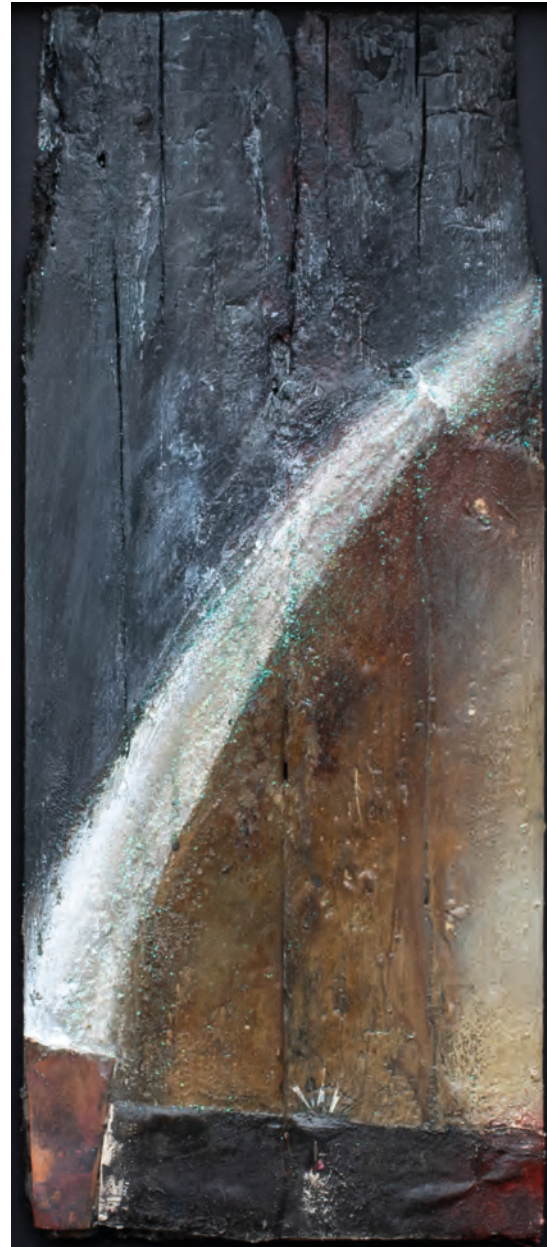
Green Hill with Crosses
Mixed media on canvas panel, 460 x 610 mm
Signed Blackburn March 2022



White Cross over Blue Form
Mixed media on canvas panel, 605 x 815 mm
Signed Blackburn March 2022



Black Form Overtaking
Mixed media on board, 330 x 250 mm
Blackburn Oct 64



Fire Painting
Mixed media on board,
burnt, 250 x 210 mm
Signed Blackburn Nov/Dec
'18: Jan '19



From left to right top; *Black Form Overtaking*, *Viola*, *Fire Painting*, *Cream with Grey Form*, *Fishes at the Mount*, *Key Card*,
 From left to right bottom; *2 Squares - Grey to Left*, *Black & Grey '68*, *From Green to Yellow*

CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND ART

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 Photography by Sam Hartnett



ARTIS Gallery

requests the pleasure of your company
at the private viewing of

JOHN BLACKBURN *90 Years*

14 - 27 February 2023

Opening Tuesday 14 February 5-7pm

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