

Past & Present

# ANNETTE ISBEY

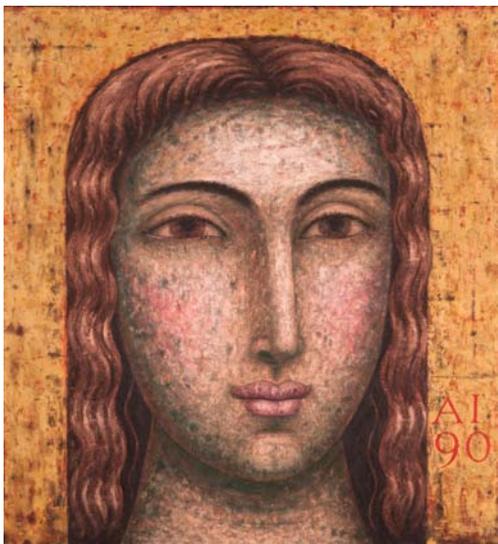
4th - 21st April 2012 | Preview: Tuesday 3rd April 5.30pm - 7.30pm



**WARWICK HENDERSON GALLERY**

32 Bath St, Parnell, Ak, NZ | T/F. +64 9 309 7513 | W. [www.warwickhenderson.co.nz](http://www.warwickhenderson.co.nz) | E. [info@warwickhenderson.co.nz](mailto:info@warwickhenderson.co.nz)

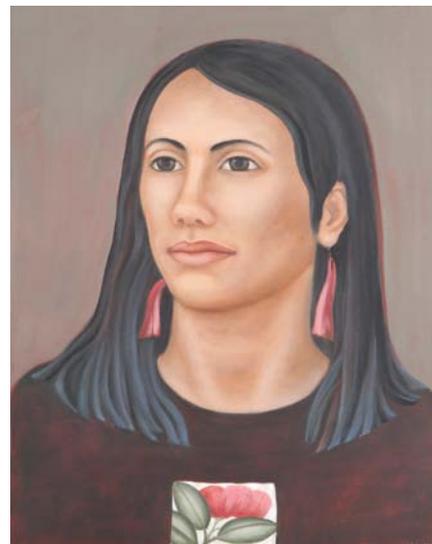
Image: *Girl in a Leather Jacket (Detail)*, Oil on linen, 125 x 181.5cm, 1970s - 2011



Head of a Woman III, Oil on linen, 168.5 x 155cm, 1990

## ANNETTE ISBEY

### *Past & Present*



Portrait of Sandra Tupu, Oil on linen, 102 x 76cm, 2010

#### Time After Time

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, circumstances forced Annette Isbey's family to move to Hokianga, in Northland, where land was cheap and undeveloped. She spent her early years in a predominantly Maori community, attending country schools, before leaving for Wellington to train as a school dental nurse. After graduating she was posted to Auckland, where she attended evening and Saturday morning classes at the Elam School of Art. She had shown artistic abilities at an early age, and began exhibiting her paintings in the mid-1950s. In the half-century or so since, Isbey has explored several themes, covering portraiture, figurative and landscape subjects. All owe much to her formative experiences in the Far North, while another common feature is their strong link to the past in general.

A central feature of Isbey's artistic development has been portraiture, in particular her larger-than-life undertakings that first appeared in 1987. While she acknowledges the influence of the large carved depictions of traditional Maori art and the work of Mexican mural painters, her monumental heads appear to have their immediate origins in the art of ancient world, perhaps in Rome, Greece or Byzantium. Isbey can begin such a portrait with a particular subject in mind, but distinguishing features become evened out and idealised in the creation of an image that may appear more sculpted than painted. The effect is enhanced by the dappled application of stone-like pigment, while the sculptural treatment of such elements as the hair reinforces this link with antiquity. However, *Girl in a Leather Jacket* is clearly a subject drawn from the modern world, while the local connection is obvious in Isbey's interpretations of Maori and Pacific sitters. Like sentinels from some past age, these portraits have a calm serenity, and a stillness that suggests the solitude of the Hokianga Isbey knew in the 1930s. From a technical point of view, the solidity of these impressive portraits may also owe something to the volumetric style encouraged while she was a student at the Elam School of Art.

Isbey recalls an isolated and pioneering lifestyle in Hokianga. She developed a lasting appreciation for the wild beauty of the district, much of which was destroyed during its conversion to farmland. Her landscapes have an elemental quality, harking back to a time before colonisation. She constructs highly ordered and simplified forms, as if her subjects have been encountered for the first time, evoking the spirit of early topographical images, in particular John Buchanan's well-known *Milford Sound, Looking North-west from*



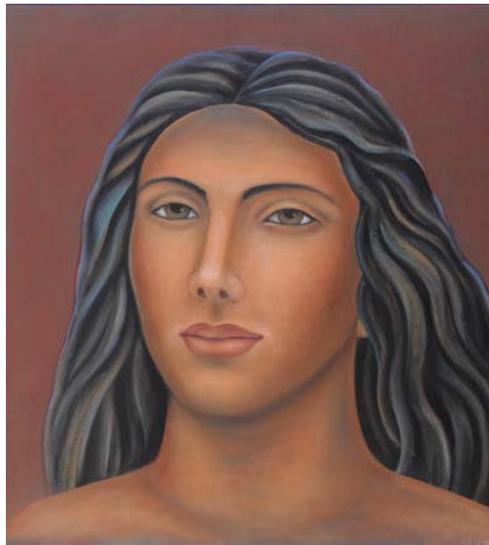
Two Hurdlers, Oil on linen, 120 x 166cm, 1983



Reflections, Oil on linen, 120 x 70cm, c.1970



Small Waterfall 1, 60 x 35cm, 2011



Woman of the Pacific, Oil on linen, 76 x 84cm, 2008



Small Waterfall 2, 60 x 35cm, 2011

*Freshwater Basin* of 1863. Isbey tackles off-shore islands, arranging them symmetrically in receding rows, while their steep sides, worn into furrows by natural forces, suggest the fluted columns of ancient architecture. She takes a bird's-eye viewpoint and sets her scene beneath a wide sky, which she regards as a 'natural roof'. And in another reference to an earlier and simpler time in the Far North, her landscapes may include a horse, symbolising independence and freedom.

A lone human, or two, may also populate these otherwise empty landscapes, where time appears to stand still. In sharp contrast is Isbey's series of paintings of figures, some with outstretched arms, running across a featureless and inhospitable plain. The artist has suggested this state of agitated motion is a comment on the paradox between modern labour-saving technology and the vogue for physical exercise. This predicament also brings to mind an earlier and more static reflection of the nature of life, Gauguin's *D'où Venons Nous / Que Somme Nous / Où Allons Nous (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?)* of 1897. But if Isbey's runners suffer from uncertainty, her two hurdlers seem to know exactly where they are going, with all eyes and limbs firmly focused on the challenge ahead.

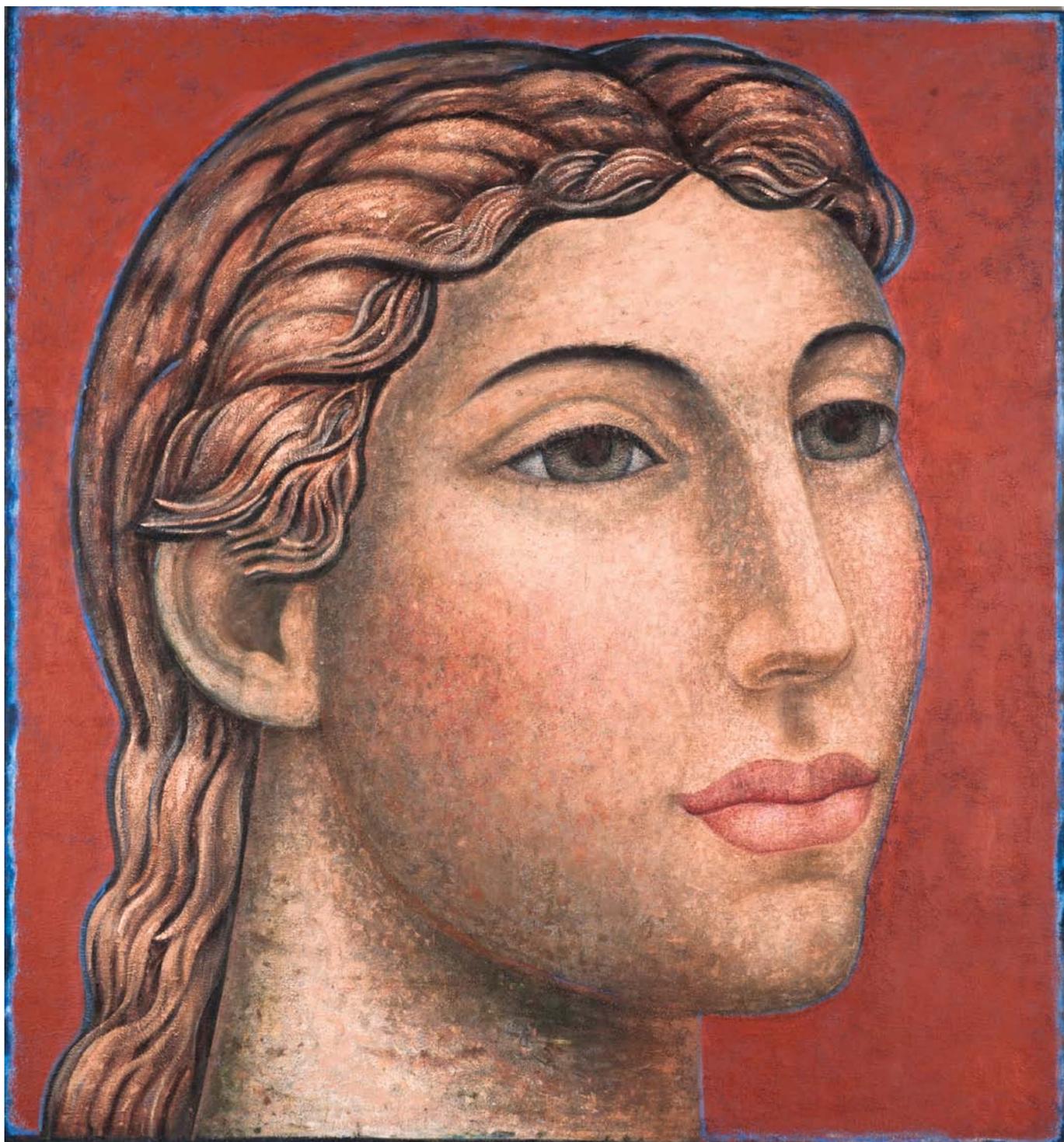
Isbey's numerous waterfalls also mark a return to a primordial time, before the landscape was modified by man. Cascades tumble in regular and rhythmic patterns, their white streams in contrast to the dark backgrounds. On one level these falls are another personal recollection of Hokianga, their Edenic simplicity and purity reflecting a natural environment not yet ravished by settlers, while they also represent the essential source and on-going nourishment of life itself.

It is possible to interpret Isbey's wide-ranging subject matter as a personal mission to impose an order on her world, one that was disrupted at an early age by the deprivations of the Depression. It may have been a backwater but Hokianga made an indelible impression, and continues to be a fertile source of imagery. Annette Isbey looks back to the time of her own childhood, while also evoking other eras - including our own - in her exploration of human nature.

**Text by Richard Wolfe 2012**



Landscape with two Figures, Oil on linen, 35 x 101cm, 2011



*Classical Portrait II*, Oil on linen, 184 x 198.5cm, c.1990s



**WARWICK HENDERSON GALLERY**

32 Bath St, Parnell, Ak, NZ | T/F. +64 9 309 7513 | W. [www.warwickhenderson.co.nz](http://www.warwickhenderson.co.nz) | E. [info@warwickhenderson.co.nz](mailto:info@warwickhenderson.co.nz)