

NIGEL BROWN

WILL TO MEANING



WARWICK HENDERSON GALLERY

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Will to Meaning

Nigel Brown has recently experimented with cubism and abstraction but after reading Viktor E. Frankl's book *"Man's Search for Meaning"*¹ he reconfirmed that his paintings must have meaning, and that meaning he decided, is manifest in symbols and figures. Brown states *"Figurative elements are essential to that meaning... 'Will to Meaning' [one of the major paintings in the exhibition] was given recognisable elements - [figures, Barry Brickell pots, fern trees, water pitchers and farm animals] - ...the general thrust of this show is nature versus humanity with monumental overtures."*²

In *'Will to Meaning'* waves and other symbols are scattered amidst a futuristic asterisk shape, composed of block letters and solid forms. The cross is a Christian reference, while pottery vessels are an extension of the bowl motif from Brown's earlier work; a nod to McCahon; and a reference to Brickell's pots. 'I Am' is another McCahon quotation, and a typical Brown affirmation.³ Rendered in a muted palette, influences include Malevich, Constructivism, Cubism and Futurism.⁴ This is a key work, where figurative elements were added to a painting originally proposed as more abstract. This decision was prompted following Brown's analysis of Frankl's book *"Man's Search for Meaning"*.



Kiln Fired, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm

Brown's paintings often employ images and words from two of New Zealand cultural idols, James K Baxter and Colin McCahon. In this series however he also engages in a narrative with the renowned New Zealand potter Barry Brickell where sculptural arts have been incorporated in his painterly discourse. This collaboration between Brickell and Brown revealed a shared affinity for monumentality and form, providing further impetus for this series. *"In January of 2006 I went and worked with Barry Brickell partly because I had started buying the potters work... I was more focused on form and I see him as a quintessential New Zealand Potter"*⁵ This kindred spirit is evident in many of the paintings, such as the triptych *'Breakers Praise'*, *'Kiln Fired'*, *'A Touch of Clay'*, *'Let Time Be Still'* and *'Salt and Clay'*, where the Brickell pots become a focal point.

Other objects are also cleverly introduced into these paintings such as timber leftovers associated with mining, railways, and tank stands. *"The structure is a monument or anti-monument to ferns, bush and bush carpentry and derives from a small clay model made at Barry Brickell's studio"*⁶. There is a reference to buildings, and structures and the ... *"universal clash of the organic versus the*



Will to Meaning, 2006-07. Acrylic on linen, 1670 x 4140 mm



Breakers Praise, 2006-07. Oil on linen, triptych: panels 1350 x 800 mm ea.

architectural and unnatural ...the sea can be rendered as solid timber and architecture can turn to stone..."⁷ In *'Salt and Clay'* (see front cover illustration) the wave is nature's monument, beautiful and threatening – it shelters the fern cradled within and threatens the clay pot standing unprotected on the shoreline. In *'Kiln Fired'* a row of Brickell pots sit facing a structural kiln arch, *"we are all kiln fired (hardened) by life's experiences and challenges. Bricks are the building blocks of life, Barry says."*⁸ Brown also incorporates stainless steel in many of these paintings for the first time, where the synergy of paint and steel denote a rustic contrast.

In *'Breakers Praise'* a magnificent wave shaped pot, decorated with a fern palm holds centre stage. The large triptych incorporates Baxter's prose, McCahon's 'I Am' text, and features three Brickell pots. As homage, *"each artist is attributed an equal status as treasure."*⁹ Pahia Hill at Cosy Nook spreads behind the pastoral trilogy, Baxter and a rural couple are depicted in the foreground amongst ferns, lit candles, waves and corrugated iron structures. 'I Am' is a humanist sentiment proclaimed in block letters that provide architectural and compositional structure – this is both an image of humility and monumentality.



I/We Landscape, 2006-07. Oil acrylic and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm

The wave motif is also a powerful new icon which Brown has employed and developed with formidable impact in this 2007 exhibition. It first appeared as a powerful image in a large painting completed for the Tsunami victims fundraising art auction in 2005. Waves have interested the artist since high school, and water, as a powerful element and life force, has appeared in many of Browns previous series. As the world now debates and frets over global warming, water and waves have probably never received such attention. This wave motif is a dominant image in the three major works in this exhibition *'Will to Meaning'*, *'Sea Rising'*, and *'Breakers Praise'*. In *'Sea Rising'* while water is disturbingly ascendant it is also a conduit for meaning and change. Rendered in a Futurist, anarchic manner, waves break upon the shore, crashing down upon monumental structures composed of block letters. A couple witnesses the calamity, as relentless waves herald dark warnings of global warming and environmental change. Nevertheless, optimism prevails in the Sun and Keruru (wood pigeon) which signal hope among the chaos.

Structures, architecture and monuments are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with Russian constructivism in other paintings in this series such as *'Do*



Touch of Clay, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm

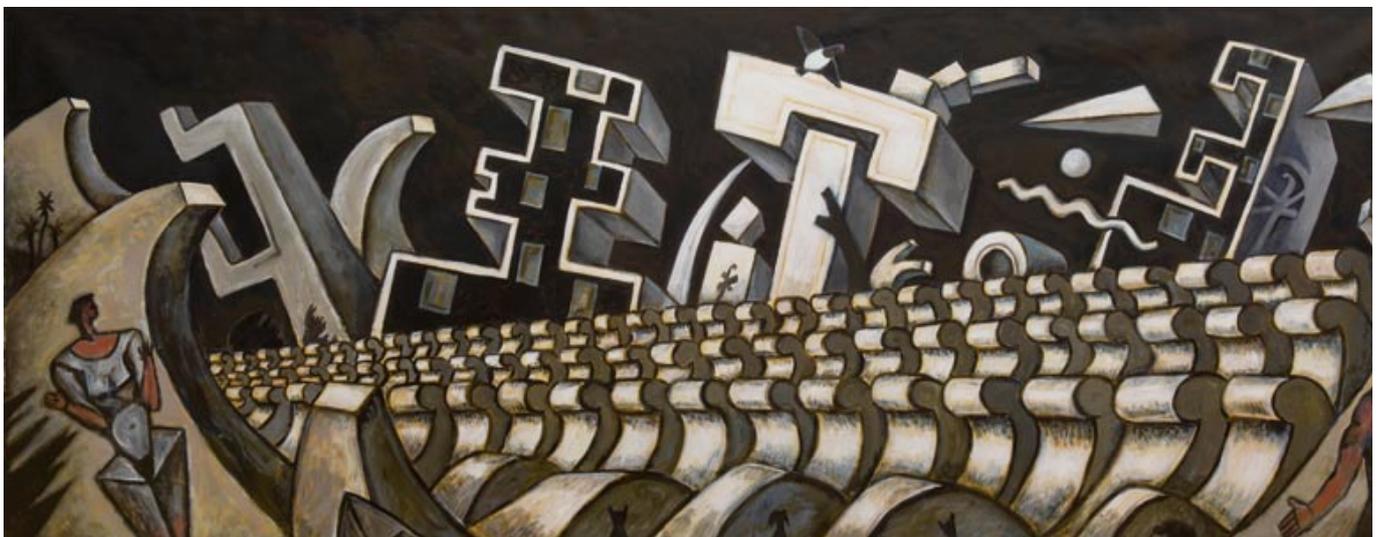
It, *Wooden Monument*, *I/We Landscape*, *Native Timber* and *Tower for Oceans*. In *Do It* the words are placed within a temple structure which appears to sprout and evolve. The tiny figures are dwarfed by an ascending golden staircase. The palette here references the glittery surface of Russian icon and cloisonne paintings. The affirmation and sentiment is literal - to get things done. *Native Timber* incorporates a monumental timber structure which suggests an altar or a place of worship. Once again Brown's environmental concerns lurk beneath the structure - the endless consumption of native timber which is used to build towns and cities. Brown states *"In these works sometimes the polarities merge or change places. The world is at risk as in the sea rising which is a kind of a symphony on global warming - or a matter of comfort in making things such as 'Kiln Fired.'"*¹⁰

This significant exhibition signals and confirms Brown's consistent ability to address international and local environmental issues, utilising intelligent art practice and intuition in a masterful way. With a candid brush he has rendered his painterly collection of monuments, treasures and symbols as expressive entities, giving both purpose and meaning to his art.

Text © Bex Smidt and Warwick Henderson 2007

Bibliography.

- ¹ Frankl's Book *"Man's Search For Meaning"* was published in 1946 and chronicles his ordeal as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Frankl describes his psychotherapeutic method of finding meaning in all forms of existence, and thus a reason to continue living.
- ² Artist statement to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email April 07
- ³ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07
- ⁴ Brown traveled to Russia in 2005 as an Artist in Residence. The influence of this experience has left a lasting impression on the subject, style and symbolism of his paintings.
- ⁵ Artist statement to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email April 07
- ⁶ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07
- ⁷ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07
- ⁸ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07
- ⁹ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07
- ¹⁰ Nigel Brown to Warwick Henderson Gallery - email 12.5.07



Sea Rising, 2006-07. Acrylic on linen, 1670 x 4140 mm



Native Timber, 2006. Oil on acrylic on canvas, 1750 x 800 mm

Notes from Barry Brickell

"Nigel and Sue arrived 16 January 2006. Nigel departed 29 January. Nigel worked at Driving Creek Potteries making works using our local terracotta clay during this period. He also made works on light cardboard using acrylics.

Nigel had written to ask if he could try his hand and ideas at clay work. He had seen some of my pots at an exhibition in Invercargill. During the 13 days he was here in January 2006, he made several quite intricate pieces using our coarsely textured clay. It was fortunate that a younger potter Masoud Zadeh happened to be working here at the time who kindly helped Nigel with his clay work. Nigel's clay works carried much of the imagery seen in his paintings. He also decorated some bowls that I had made using earthy coloured slips.

Soon after he arrived, I suggested that he provide me with a drawing for a large sculptural piece that I could make in terracotta clay, to his designs. He left before I could finish the piece but armed with his drawings and two coloured slips, I managed as best I could to complete it. We jointly coined the work "waveomorph" to title it. This almost koru-like form crops up in many of his paintings in an architectural context together with a palmate cross and solid block letters. This latter feature of his story-rich works does not appear on his works in clay. . .

. . . The paintings seen in this exhibition represent a coalition or perhaps a collision between both artists. (Sorry, I'm not supposed to call myself an artist - someone else's job). In a recent letter I quote Nigel: "at worst your art (pots) become props but at best they are celebrated". Of the various forms I have made repeatedly over the years, the slant-bellied somewhat anthropomorphic ones seem to have become the most oft used props. Another of them is used sparingly. Nigel's limited colour range is made up for by the architecture within the paintings which is perhaps the reason for our mutual compatibility.

Icons within the realm of contemporary art are treasures. They can and should be picked up and re-used, re-interpreted, modified, bashed and loved. Such a testing is offered in these works of Nigel Brown. I feel deeply honoured to have been able to supply him with one or two images."

Barry Brickell, June 2007 Coromandel, New Zealand



Dish Me Up Some Harsh Reality, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm



Do It, 2006-07. Oil acrylic and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm



Let Time Be Still, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 1200 x 790 mm

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4 - 29 September 2007

Preview: 5.30pm TUESDAY 4th September 2007



Nigel Brown in his studio, 2007

THE CATALOGUE

1. WILL TO MEANING, 2006-07. Acrylic on linen, 1670 x 4140 mm
2. SEA RISING, 2006-07. Acrylic on linen, 1670 x 4140 mm
3. BREAKERS PRAISE, 2006-07. Oil on linen, triptych: panels 1350 x 800 mm ea.
4. DISH ME UP SOME HARSH REALITY, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm
5. SALT AND CLAY, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm
6. WAVE AND CUBIC STILL LIFE, 2006. Oil on acrylic on linen, 900 x 600 mm
7. LET TIME BE STILL, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 1200 x 790 mm
8. TOUCH OF CLAY, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm
9. WOODEN MONUMENT, 2006. Oil on linen, 1350 x 800 mm
10. DO IT, 2006. Oil acrylic and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm
11. I/WE LANDSCAPE, 2006-07. Oil acrylic and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm
12. NATIVE TIMBER, 2006. Oil on acrylic on canvas, 1750 x 800 mm
13. TOWER FOR OCEANS, 2006. Oil on canvas, 1750 x 800mm
14. BACK INTO ALL THIS, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm
15. WAVE, 2007. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm
16. KILN FIRED, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on board, 1200 x 790 mm

Paintings included in this catalogue are available for immediate sale and may be sold prior to opening of the exhibition.

Cover image: Nigel Brown, *Salt and Clay*, 2006. Oil and stainless steel on linen, 900 x 600 mm
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