



What God Wants, Peter Cleverley, 1998, oil on gesso on board, 326 x 545mm, courtesy of Gregory Flint Gallery.

Interview: Peter Cleverley

The Arts media in New Zealand have questioned for some time whether Peter Cleverley is a sinner or a saint, a 'doubting Thomas' or a 'Son of Thunder': *Finding God in the Landscape* (Sunday Star Times 1992), "Cleverley is not pushing a religious or any other barrow" (The Press, 1998). Perhaps he's too Cleverley by far, filling his paintings with a variety of Christian imagery, symbols and allusions, but distancing himself from any specific McCahon-like faith journey. He grew up in a Christian home, but claims not to be religious. "I use Christianity, Jesus, heaven, to evoke all sorts of things...Aspects of Christianity are reflected in my work."

With works titled: *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*, *Johnny Said to Jesus* (1997), *Jesus in North Otago* (1998), *Kakanui Prayer Songs*, *What God Wants* (1998), *A Jesus of your own* (1997), and exhibitions like, *Lolling around heaven all day*, (1994) it's hard not to notice a deeply spiritual artist at work within a Christian orbit. What is going on with this Otago painter and is there any conscious faith/art crossover within his work?

"I primarily use my life experience in my art. Being in places like Bamiyan (Afghanistan) and sitting on the heads of those idols to Buddha (where you can see to the Russian border) and then those huge objects being bombed down to non existence two years ago by the Taleban, a massive destruction of art, experiences like that and my travels in the 70s and 80s help me identify with other people and other religions."

Cleverley was born in 1954 in Kakanui just south of Oamaru, a third generation. He was in art

school from 1971-74 graduating with a Diploma of Fine and Applied Arts. After the obligatory rite-of-passage at the local abattoir, he departed on an extended O.E. through England, Afghanistan, India, S.E. Asia and Australia, returning to New Zealand in 1980. He was employed at the Forrester Gallery, Waitaki Boys' High School and Otago Polytechnic and held his first solo show in 1982, in Oamaru. He lives in a small cottage by the sea (a deep influence) and teaches adult art students three days a week.

"I used to teach painting and drawing, but more recently I'm concentrated on painting. I do the teaching to give me a consistent income so I don't have to flog my own painting and make it commercial. This way I don't have to show so much or make so much out of it. The teaching is a financial thing primarily, but the interaction with students is really important too. I get a lot back from them."

You seem to have a profound sense of place. You etch the geography of each painting's manufacture into the work, and have said "Good paintings are journeys...that seem to lead back to Kakanui". It's also been said your *Kakanui prayer songs* are a response to locale ...

My grandfather and father lived down here and I've lived most of my life here. Kakanui is a special place and a very sheltered part of Otago. I talk about my environment in my work as a generalisation. I don't 'plein air' paint or draw the landscape, I memorise it and bring it back to my studio. I use the shape, colour, forms and depth I remember, the way the wind moves, I chase the

sea. In some ways the landscape is a backdrop to a comment; sometimes written in text, sometimes it looks like a title or looks a bit biblical or religious but it's not. I'm not prosaic, I'm not saying anything to anyone else. My paintings explore the structure of my own life and what's happened, and hopefully some messages are given out.

Are you exploring God or the Divine in environment and place?

Yes, but I'm not on a quest. I'm not sure there is anything 'after', or one God. I'm fascinated by the human being being captivated by Beginning. The fear of death is the thing. Our own mortality is the umbrella heading in much of my painting. There's a fascination with "what is After?" I positively say, 'look at what we are and what we're doing here' because I don't really think there is another thing. I'm interested in how the human psyche is trying to find another existence, God, something to take them above their own selves, if you like.

I've been in parts of the world where God and the after life is fundamental, even manic. I find it eternally fascinating. People like McCahon were popping the question up there all the time, more than really saying "I've turned". Sometimes I find his paintings quite irreligious, questioning. So I'm putting up the question, and I get a bit of flak back for that.

Do you use religious irony in art?

I try not to use irony, rather reality. I use the things I've been confronted with, witnessed, and my imagination. Not many people are using their imagination. I 'imagine' my paintings, I'm trying to make something not seen before. I'm really really sick of this tardy 'copy the photograph', the overhead projection thing, pure colour, good application of paint, but so what? I'm not chasing a buck with my work, I want to make something new, that comes from the imagination.

Lyttelton artist Bill Hammond once said, "Good art comes from a hard place". Four years ago a young man drowned in the surf metres from Cleverley's home [it emerges during the interview, the young man was the interviewer's cousin Rikki]. The artist tried to save him from the surf, the tragedy having a profound effect.

The drowning was one of those things. I saw this person in the extremes of life and death, and of course I was trying to save him but wasn't able to. The experience was equal to when I was in Calcutta, India. There was a dying 30-year-old female on the footpath and I bent down to help her, there were flies around her eyes. I was abused because as a white person I'm in the top caste and shouldn't be bending down like that. The drowning was like that, when you see those kinds of extremes, it makes a balance for your experience, like Red Cross workers or others at work in wars, despicable things that go on. Human beings are amazing animals, and experiences like that change your life.

What are your immediate plans for the future, current artistic themes and thoughts?

I'm working on a series on the local rivers, generated by the Waitaki Project Aqua controversy: the Maheno, Kakanui and Waianakarua. They are all underground fed from the Waitaki, and I live at the mouth of the Kakanui. I'm doing simplified landscapes, the palette is reduced to a dark and a white (almost black and white), a mossy green, cadmium yellow and that's it. There are simplified mountains, a dark night sky with the moon, stars, and the river courses.

Is there significance to the water pitcher and drinking horn that appear so frequently in your work?

I depict water a lot because it's an essential for growth, for the planet. Water is going to be a huge future battle. We think oil is big, wait till water is rare. Then see what the human being does. So I often place a vessel of water in my painting, or a bowl of water, some reference to water. A bit like McCahon's candle. I wouldn't say I copy the art I really like (Hammond, Hotere and others), I don't paint like them, but the icons I'm using are similar, in fact they're used all over the world, which is interesting.

John Stringer



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