



Barbara Strathdee's 1989 painting 'With the Surveyors', on display in Raetihi. Image: Supplied

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## Pat Baskett

Pat Baskett is an Auckland writer and climate activist.

## COMMENT

# NZ artist's close look at colonialism

**A new exhibition in Raetihi offers a rare opportunity to see early, colonialism-focused works by Wellington artist Barbara Strathdee - many on display for the first time, writes Pat Baskett**

While the closing of the road between Wanganui and Raetihi (SH4) profoundly affects those who live along it, the closure also consigns the little town of Raetihi, 10 minutes' drive from the lively ski resort of Ohakune, to the status of backwater.

Which is a pity, because Raetihi's former BNZ building, with its elegant and spacious interior, opened earlier this year as the Raetihi Arts Trust Gallery, and its current exhibition offers a rare opportunity to see early works by Wellington artist Barbara Strathdee.

Strathdee's 50-year practice includes 30 years in Trieste, Italy, where her husband worked at the International Centre for Theoretical Physics and where she established a career as an artist. She exhibited in galleries in Italy and Slovenia and, with regular return visits, she also maintained a profile in New Zealand.

Colonial history has always absorbed a significant portion of her attention and her work is imbued with intellectual coolness, rather than passion, perhaps as a result of her analytical approach or, equally, from her years of location on the other side of the world. The Raetihi exhibition is titled *People – prints and paintings of people I never knew*.



The BNZ building in Raetihi that is home to the exhibition. Photo: Supplied

The exhibition includes prints and paintings from Trieste in the 1970s. These works show how well-established Strathdee's vision was. Right from the start,

her work cited the political and historical environment in multi-layered images, in a manner deservedly described as post-modern. The etchings, from 1974, were pulled out of storage and are seen here for the first time. Their composition displays the juxtaposition of different elements that has been a consistent mark of her practice.

Three later paintings, from 1998, present figures, or a mere face, seen through or against a background of crosshatching that denotes fabric or woven kete. Other sparse enigmatic objects representing buildings or foliage or weapons create a visual dialogue between dissimilar elements.

Three works appear to be powerful portraits but are, Strathdee explains, a mixture of real and invented. Their black figures looming out of a rich yellow background are imbued with an almost mysterious intensity. *Man with Hands*, she says, is not a depiction of an angry person, but was developed from a photograph of the conductor of an orchestra.

The vertical work titled *Under Control*, painted in 1990, is typical of the way in which Strathdee engaged directly with the representation of encounters between Maori and European. This work, exhibited by the Raetihi Trust for the first time, incorporates two filigree-like images culled from colonial wood engravings which are enlarged to emphasise their formal printed nature. Overlaying them, a strong vertical chevron figure calls to mind the dominant rigidity of colonialism as seen in the angles of buildings.

Strathdee further interrupts the sequence by dividing the work into two panels with the division also dividing one of the engravings. The whole is aesthetically and intellectually satisfying as the viewer grapples with the historical references and their wider implications.

Through this appropriation and re-contextualising of 19th century engravings, alongside Māori weaving patterns, and the layering of opposed cultural elements the painter articulates the boundaries of communication. There is also a further level of mis-communication: that between European colonial artists and engravers whose versions for the press distorted and glorified the original artists' image. Strathdee says:



'Man with Hands', painted in 1973. Image: Supplied

“This distortion is paralleled in the distortions I have made to the original engraving. I was experiencing a change to my original perception of New Zealand history; here was a visual equivalent that I could use in my work.”

It's interesting to consider this painting alongside a major work of 1990, called *Somewhere in our Historical Memory – Combs and Rifle* (held in a private collection). In this typically enigmatic assemblage of abstract and specific objects the rifle is barely recognisable as a long, flimsy-looking pipe – where,

in other works the rifle is represented by the gun's barrel, curved and open at each end, and bullets by an almost soft-looking sphere.

The Māori combs lie at the bottom of the painting, beneath an enlarged strip from the engraved version of Charles Heaphy's painting *The Meeting on the Beach at Patapata*. The reference is to a meeting in 1853 between government and Māori representatives and gold seekers, at the opening of the Coromandel gold fields. Heaphy was colonial surveyor.

Strathdee points out that the gold miners leased land from Māori on whom they were dependent for food. The fragmented nature of the composition evokes the separate, yet at times symbiotic, relationship between the two groups.

The long span of Strathdee's work, which encompasses 50 solo exhibitions, includes a period during the 1980s when she made installations. For some of these she cut out various motifs and abstract shapes which were painted and mounted as an assemblage on a gallery wall. One such work, referencing but pre-dating the Patapata meeting, was created for a large wall of the Wellington City Gallery. It incorporated both figurative and abstract elements and reflected the influence on her work at that time of the Russian supremacist Malevich and the constructivists of the early 20th century.

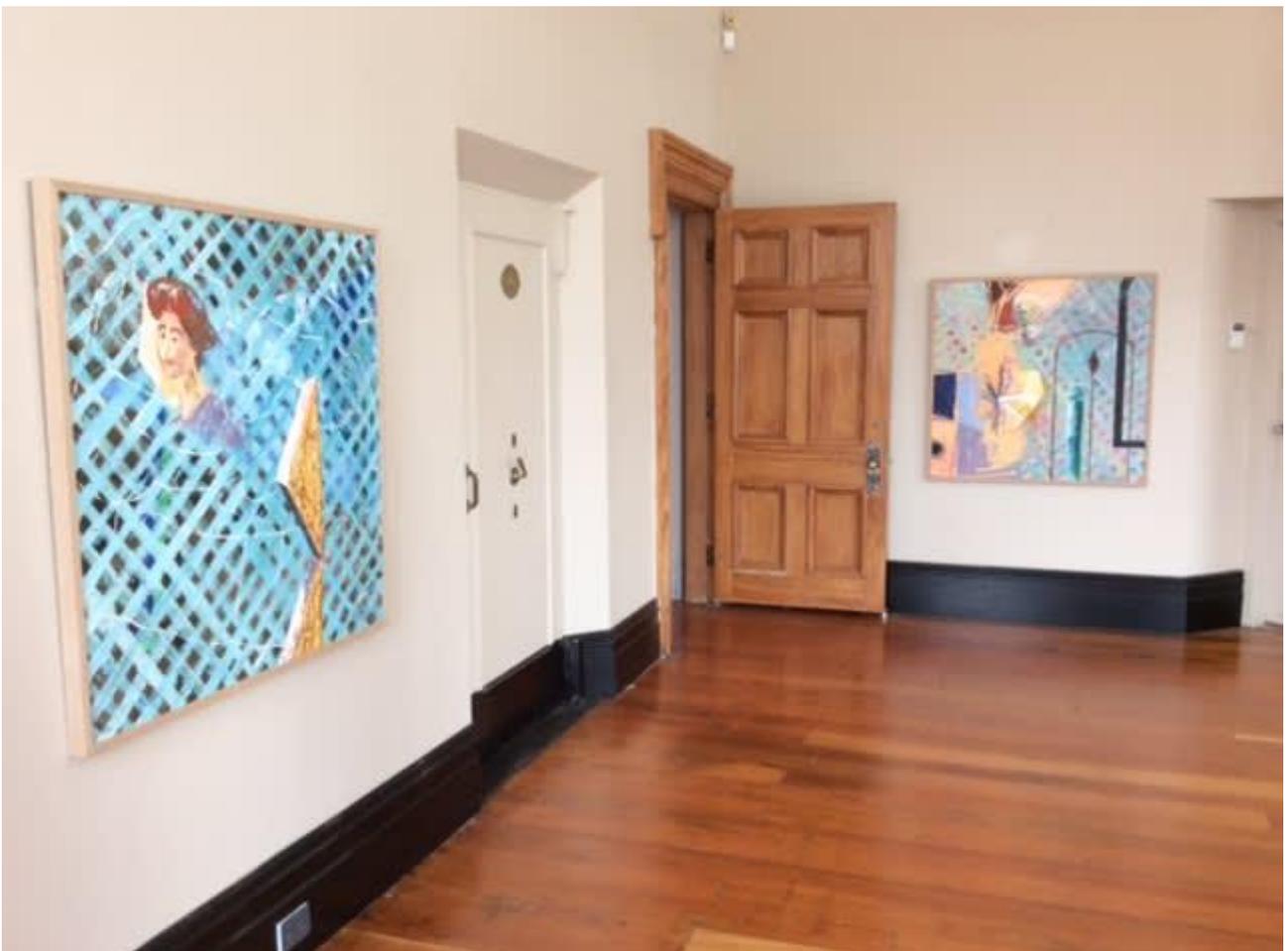


Photo: Supplied

Installations were also a feature of a particular series of her work in Italy where disparate cultures struggled for coexistence amid a history of war and violence. Topolo is a Slovene village on the Italian side of the border with Slovenia, a tiny garrison station where the break-up of former Yugoslavia rekindled complex political divisions within society.

Strathdee's installation there in 1995 consisted of ribbons of aluminium decorated with reversible images from postcards, both real and fabricated, of historical conflicts between Austrians and Italians, and between colonial settlers and Māori. The ribbons were hung on an uninhabited stone house in the largely deserted village.

Remembering that installation, Strathdee recalled how the vivid, multihued images transformed the ominous mood of death and desertion to one of optimism. The strife and warfare provoked by the ethnic incompatibility in that part of Italy also lie behind her novel *Café Wars*, published in 2005.

Plans are for the exhibition to remain open until January 26. It includes photographs by Whanganui photographer John Smart. The building's owners, Anthea Hatfield and Bernice Frost, hope that other projects they had already embarked on, aimed at revitalising what was formerly a service town for the rural community, will continue to attract visitors. The Angel Louise Internet Café offers rewards for those who take the road from Ohakune.