



Is there a painting method that is purely, distinctly, separately a New Zealand form of art?

In the post war period exciting artists such as **Colin McCahon**, **Rita Angus**, **Pat Hanly** and **Toss Woollaston** were credited with creating a "distinctly New Zealand style". It was given a name, *Nationalist* art. Primarily they felt that they had created a new visual language, particularly in landscape forms that replaced European romanticism with a harsh, clear-light style that represented the New Zealand environment. Even though each of these artists (and others too), used their own insights and practice, by the late 1960s, the existence of a local art form was generally accepted.

In this narrative stream, critics such as Hamish Keith and Gordon Brown in their 1969 book, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, argued that these artists had indeed successfully captured the "essence" of the country. At least implicitly the notion of a national identity form and style was recognized as the official narrative of New Zealand art history and was synonymous with the *Nationalist* form.

Nevertheless, internal resistance and unresolved tensions remained, especially with artists whose craft did not rely on the direct landscape form. For example, abstract expressionism and even impressionism inevitably borrowed from well established existing canonical methods from Europe. Even those artists who had argued for the *Nationalist* school began to develop their work beyond the confines of landscape and light.

By the 1980s, Francis Pound in *The Invention of New Zealand*, argued that the *Nationalist* form was merely a mental fiction created by artists and critics, rather than a literal discovery of a local truth. Consequently, while the artists of the post-war period felt they had found a new art form, later generations viewed it as just one of many possible ways to 'invent' or represent New Zealand.

This debate has been dormant for the best part of two generations. In this gallery, we re-address this question. Over 40 exhibitions of original art have slowly chipped away at this debate. And now we arrive at the current exhibition, *PEAKS*. What do these compositions tell us about national identity? There are many different genres represented here. But is there a common thread? Is there a coherent narrative on display that belongs only to New Zealand?

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