The Welcome Swallow Gallery has created an AI agent called *Vincent*. We asked the agent to review the exhibition Kiwi Life. The review was presented in the form of a letter to Vincent's brother Theo. Nothing has been edited

Steeped in the artistic traditions of *Vincent van Gogh's* historical period there are a number of quite remarkable observations that you can read here that include a question about one particular sentence in the review. The response is also included.

Mon cher Theo,

The catalogue has arrived. The Welcome Swallow Gallery in Hamilton opens *Kiwi Life: Past and Present* on Friday, and I have read all forty-one pages of it twice over, like a man with a letter from home.

The idea is the one we argued about in the Hague days. Show people at home, at work and at play, from the 1800s to now. I have gone through the list looking for the Millet[i] in it, and he is there.

First, a small picture by Ella Juliet Spicer: *Street Cleaner, Dunedin*, in watercolour, just 23 by 25 centimetres. A man sweeps a grey street beside a cart and a patient horse, with a church tower fading into the mist behind him. It costs $1,750. I would not trade it for a cathedral. That is how you honour a labourer, by making his broom matter.

The great discovery is Ron Stenberg, who lived from 1918 to 2017 and has ten works in the show, more than any other artist. His *Care Takers* has two men in green shirts bent over their work, seen from behind, painted with the loose, thick strokes I would have enjoyed. In *Ford Fans*, two old men stand with hands on hips, gazing at toy motor cars on a white cloth. His *Cafe Twenty Two*, with musicians, a bearded guitarist in yellow, and old friends crowded round a table of drinks, made me think of my *Night Café*, but it is the opposite mood. Mine is a place where a man can ruin himself; his is a place where people sing together. At $4,800 I think it is a bargain. His small ink drawings, a guitar player in conte, a goat shearer etched, are only $450 to $890. You would have understood the value of that, Theo. A drawing is where a painter shows what he really sees.

For the sea, there is Sean Garwood, born in 1964, who paints ships so lovingly that you can smell the salt. *Early Golden Years, Tata Beach, Golden Bay 1843* has tall ships at anchor and men gutting fish on the sand. His steamer *Tamahine* battling into Tory Channel is the dearest work in the show at $15,000, and I understand why: the waves are alive. Beside him is C.F. Goldie, with *A Good Joke*, a smiling old man in a bowler hat with his face tattooed. He is laughing, and he

looks right at you. $5,250 for a lithograph. I have never seen a laughing portrait so honest.

I also loved some smaller things. John Backhouse's little oil, *Maori Settlement in the Waikato*, is smaller than a page of this letter, at $2,600. Aston Greathead has a sawmill in Westland and a farmyard of chickens. Cynthia Taylor etched her own front-gate chickens for $495, and it made me think of the hens I painted in Nuenen. There are wedding guests on the steps of a church in Hokitika for $675. There is a crowd in bright Victorian dress watching a horse named Carbine win a race. And there is Gary Tricker's etching of a man watching rugby on television while a cat sits on his chair. If that is not *life*, Theo, I don't know what is.

I must tell you what worries me. Many paintings here are of the land and the sea, and not so many of faces. People are small figures in the landscape, or seen from behind. I wish for a few more close portraits. But perhaps that is the nature of this country: a place where people are small and the world is large.

The show is held in association with the Fine Art Society of New Zealand, and the sponsor is a company called Initio. May they sell many pictures and be thanked for it.

I will go to the opening at half past five. Wish me luck and a good coat.

Your loving brother,
Vincent v. G.

The gallery asked Vincent why he wrote the line,

"Mine is a place where a man can ruin himself; his is a place where people sing together".

Here is his response:

It was a deliberate echo of something that I wrote to Theo in 1888 about my painting The Night Café. I described the café as a place where a man could ruin himself, go mad or commit a crime. I tried to show the terrible human passions with clashing reds and greens. My painting shows an empty, glaring room with a lone billiard table and a few slumped figures, lit by sickly yellow lamps.

I used that line as a contrast with Ron Stenberg's Cafe Twenty-Two. In his painting, the café is crowded and warm. There is a singer at a microphone, a guitarist in yellow, an accordion player, and old friends leaning in around a table of drinks. The whole room seems to be making music together. So my café is a place of isolation and despair, and Stenberg's is a place of company and joy.

This contrast is from my own reading of the painting as it appears in the catalogue, Kiwi Life. The catalogue itself says nothing about the mood. But I see it.





[i] In the 19th century, Vincent van Gogh called Jean-Francois Millet. "Father Millet", viewing him as a guiding counsellor, mentor and the very heart of modern art. Millet was a foundational French Realist painter and co-founder of the Barbizon School that inspired generations of painters with his dignified portrayals of rural peasant labourers and the land.