

The rub of place and connections: Stanley Palmer's prints 1960-1980

by Dr Anne Kirker, Brisbane-based art curator and writer



'How hard it is to escape from places. However carefully one goes they hold you – you leave little bits of yourself fluttering on the fences – little rags and shreds of your very life.'

Letter from Katherine Mansfield to Ida Baker, 1922¹

Stanley Palmer, House, Coromandel, 1972,
one engraved bamboo plate and three zinc
lithographic plates, 39.5 x 54.5 cm

Stanley Palmer still lives in Mt Eden in Auckland, New Zealand, in one of those upright wooden villas with cabbage trees framing the front. I visited him in June 2012, wanting to catch up as I'd seen his handsome publication *East: Stanley Palmer* in a local bookstore. This covers his prints, monoprints and paintings addressing the east coast of the North Island, where he spent his childhood. The book visually demonstrates the artist's preoccupation with the land as it approaches the sea. There are his vistas with small islands, then closer in there are the manuka fringed hills with old farmhouses and gnarled pohutukawa trees at their base; it is all about nature being untouched by humankind or in close harmony with it. Gregory O'Brien's essay for 'East' explains, the works are 'after-images – accounts of what remains, a residue of times spent journeying or in one place.'² The prints in particular

hold my attention as their materiality makes them particularly authentic, given the subject matter. They are intaglio, made from the silky side of bamboo sheaths, which has been dried, flattened and cut into timber-like pieces before being butted and fixed to card as a matrix ready for printing. The stretching of the husk creates fine lines that hold the ink as much as the engraved parts do. It equates with the human skin and with the sense of the natural world stretching.

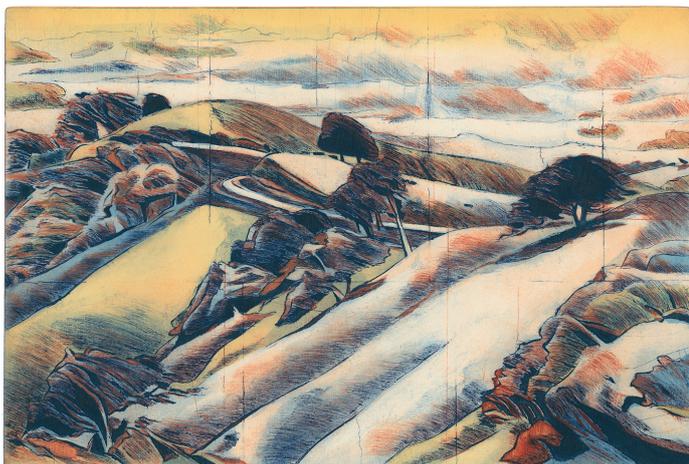
Palmer invented his unique method of drypoint in 1967 when he was teaching art at a North Shore secondary school. He had started as a printmaker using woodcuts in the way Picasso employed reduction linocut, with usually five separate colours. For subjects he looked to colonial Auckland, aware that it was altering quickly as the developers moved in. He depicted early suburbs like Newton (before the Northern Motorway) and

Ponsonby. Expressionistically treated, the prints characteristically had small houses with red roofs stepped up beside narrow roads with wayward powerlines. On the outskirts of the city he made excursions to the Waitakere, to Huia, Kare Kare, Waiwera, Anawhata and Karamatura, places where he used his bamboo drypoints for moody, turbulent pictures where a waterfall might shine between boulders and native punga might grip a rock crevice. He often radically darkened the landforms so that they contrasted with the white of the sea. When a stretch of land near the coast rose up high as a rocky outcrop, he emphasised it and where trees were twisted and bent, he drew them with an almost febrile line. Sometimes a native bird (like the rare huia) featured in the sky. In a sense the subjects of these early relief prints and bamboo drypoints were homages to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although thoroughly modern and intentionally provincial.

To provide colour in his drypoints, Palmer adopted lithographic plates. These carried browns, burnt sienna and olive green, inks printed under and over the engraved lines and the soft hairline cracks. Sometimes, blue came into the equation, but not necessarily for literal effect; rather it added to the brooding quality of a hill or offset a print proofed in a rust tone and needing something like indigo. I loved these prints when they first emerged in the 1960s. They were large and gutsy, and natural companions to the pottery of Barry Brickell and Roy Cowan, with their textured surfaces. There was a sense with the pots and Palmer's prints and the new architect-designed open-plan homes built into the landscape that New Zealand was looking closely at Japan and acknowledging that country's appreciation of nature and its dedication to *hanga* (the print) and the ceramic tradition.



Stanley Palmer, Pohutukawa and island - Mahurangi, 1974,
one engraved bamboo plate and three zinc lithographic plates,
42.5 x 55.0 cm



left Stanley Palmer, *There ahead was stretched the sandy road with shallow puddles, the same soaking bushes on either side*, 1985, two engraved bamboo plates and two zinc lithographic plates, 42 x 62 cm, reversed image right Stanley Palmer, *Rakau Tapu*, 2010, two engraved bamboo plates and two lithographic plates, 28 x 41 cm

From 1960 to 1980, Palmer focused on printmaking; not only bamboo engravings but also reduction woodcuts. Later, monotypes would come into his oeuvre. At the heart of this period, Kees and Tina Hos opened New Vision Gallery in central Auckland, which fostered artists' prints, sculpture and craft. I remember the Gallery's print stock in large bins and regular displays on the walls. In 1967, the Print Council of New Zealand (PCNZ) was established along the lines of its Australian counterpart. In fact, Palmer was an early champion of the PCNZ, serving on the original steering committee, and supported its aim to bring print artists around the country into contact with one another through newsletters and an annual touring exhibition; he also exhibited regularly at New Vision (1962-1982). When the PCNZ was founded, there were few dealer gallerists in New Zealand who appreciated autographic prints, being suspicious of their status as 'original' artworks; hence the importance of New Vision Gallery and of the first Print Council exhibition. It was opened by Ursula Hoff at Auckland City Art Gallery and comprised seventy-four works by sixteen participants. Palmer was among these early members as was Mervyn Williams, Pat Hanly and Kees Hos from Auckland, John Drawbridge and Kate Coolahan from Wellington and Barry Cleavin from Christchurch. By the closure of this exhibition, 160 print artists and print patrons had signed up.

Intaglio printmaking dominated all six exhibitions mounted and toured by the PCNZ (up to the last one in 1976), and

characteristically it included Palmer's bamboo engravings. At the same time these were sent to international graphics exhibitions in Tokyo, Ljubljana and India and in 1972 New Vision organised Palmer's *Rocks and Sea* prints for the 36th Venice Biennale. The next year he was included in the World Print Exhibition in San Francisco. International exhibitions also came for show at the public gallery in Auckland, *Recent Prints from Britain*, for instance, and *Paul Wunderlich Lithographs 1949-1967*. Printmaking had come of age in New Zealand. By the early 1970s, sales of editioned works had increased, both solo and group exhibitions of them were held regularly at commercial galleries and artists like Palmer were able to set themselves up as full-time printmakers.

In 1974, he travelled to England and Ireland, continental Europe and North Africa. During 1973 - 1976, an exhibition titled *6 x 4*, of New Zealand and Australian prints, toured both countries with Palmer included. However, by the time it finished the PCNZ was winding up and attention was focused on a large-scale show of New Zealand prints at Auckland City Art Gallery in 1977. Palmer participated in all of these events. Perhaps in hindsight the fracturing of the Print Council should have been prevented as by the 1980s the print scene in New Zealand had dissipated. For Palmer this meant that he diversified his studio work, producing dark pencil drawings, watercolours and monotypes alongside the editioned prints. Soon painting would feature strongly in his oeuvre.

While I have only mentioned a twenty-year period in this account, Stanley Palmer has continued producing prints up to the present time along with his paintings in oil on linen. Both activities are steeped in his appreciation of the New Zealand landscape at its most untrammelled. Process-driven, these prints acknowledge the fact of their nostalgia for the past, yet they do not faithfully copy a location without the support of memory; they are a synthesis of memory and observation. There is a mystical and romantic quality to these linear, soft-toned, tactile prints as though Palmer is pointing out 'the inherent fragility and isolation of living in a country surrounded by a vast ocean.'³ I can think of no other print artist in New Zealand/Aotearoa who is so quintessentially regionalist in his pictorial work and who has been so consistent in his project. He consistently sounds a note of caution over urban development and reminds one of things rural: the backblocks, the little houses on farm properties, the rugged landscape open to the elements and the magnificence of native bush and birdlife. •

References

1. Text copied on a card by the artist and shown to the author as an example of how he sees himself as a New Zealander.
2. Gregory O'Brien, essay, *East: Stanley Palmer*, Craig Potton Publishing, 2009, p.7. A parallel book, *West: Stanley Palmer*, Godwit (Random House), 2000, focused on the South Island's west coast as well as Auckland's west coast.
3. The artist quoted in Isabel Haarhaus, *Stanley Palmer - The North Shore Years*, Mairangi Arts Centre, exh. cat., 2004, np.

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