

STANLEY PALMER: FOREIGN SHORES

New Zealand artist Stanley Palmer's art dwells on two very different coastlines.

By Gregory O'Brien

Stanley Palmer's artistic engagement with Gallipoli began in the late 1980s when he produced a series of works based upon a WWI photograph of his father, James Palmer, in Egypt. A soldier in the Auckland Mounted Rifles Regiment, the elder Palmer had shipped out to North Africa then on to Gallipoli in 1915. In his son's oil painting, 'A Postcard from Gallipoli or A Letter from Eden', the soldier-father has been repatriated to a rustic antipodean environment, replete with snaking driveways and red roofing iron.

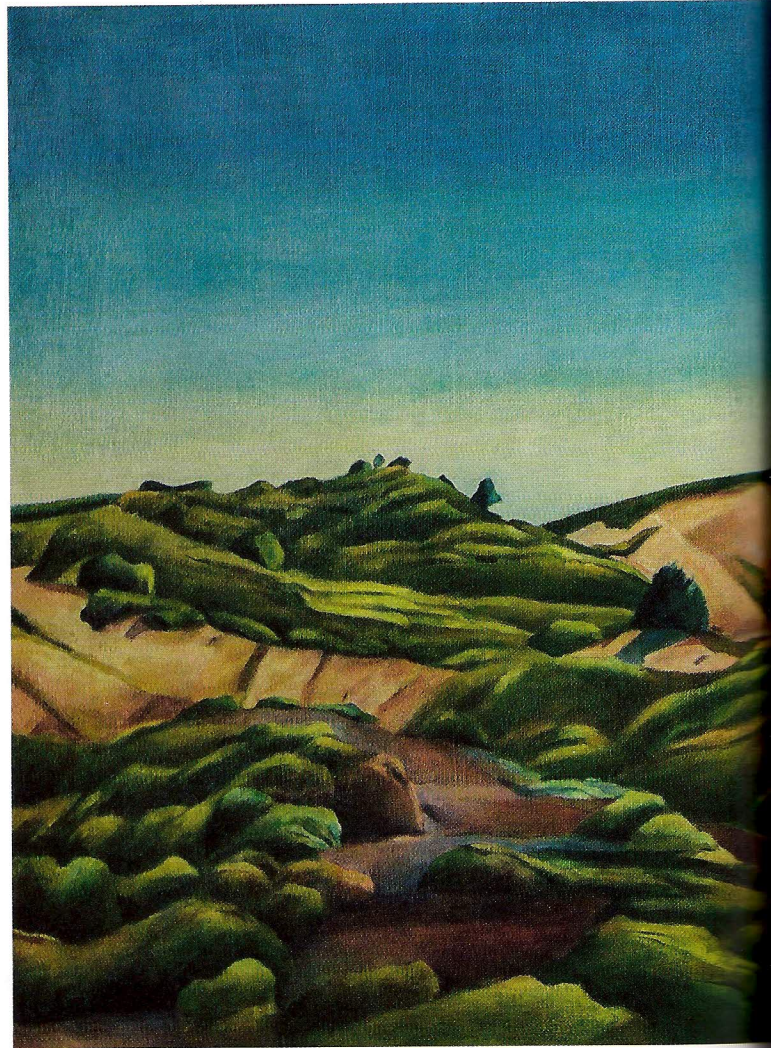
In this painting, Stanley Palmer ponders both the sudden expulsion of his father from the earthly paradise of pre-war New Zealand and, as the poet Riemke Ensing noted in a 1992 essay, the reality which he was fortunate enough to resume after the war. The title also echoes the officially sanctioned Christmas message on the troops' homeward-bound postcards: "Though your lads are far away, they dream of Home."

Palmer's father reappears as the title character in 'From the Nek – Dream Soldier' (2014). In the recent instance, he is looking

seawards towards an island which could as easily be Great Barrier (near Auckland) as any island in the Aegean Sea. Palmer presents the Northern Hemisphere scene as though it is continuous, rather than distinct from, the stretches of New Zealand coast which he has known since childhood. Coastline has been the defining feature of his paintings and printmaking to date – and has also been the theme of his two major books, *West* (Godwit, 2000) and *East* (Craig Potton Publishers, 2009).

Even the bunkers in 'Turkish Fort, Ikilid Bahr' are echo-chambers of New Zealand locations. They resemble Auckland's coastal fortifications – notably on North Head and Waiheke Island – which a century of wars mercifully never reached. In Palmer's version of Ikilid Bahr, the wounds of history have been cauterised. The trees could easily have been transplanted from Auckland's North Shore. Here and elsewhere, the flags of the opposing armies, as well as the Red Cross, flap brightly rather than in anger or anguish.

Allen Curnow, in his great poem 'Moro Assassinato', wrote of a



“Palmer presents the Northern Hemisphere scene as though it is continuous, rather than distinct from ... the New Zealand coast.”

sense of human connectedness that traversed the world's oceans – bodies of water which are, as he reminds us, in fact only one ocean:

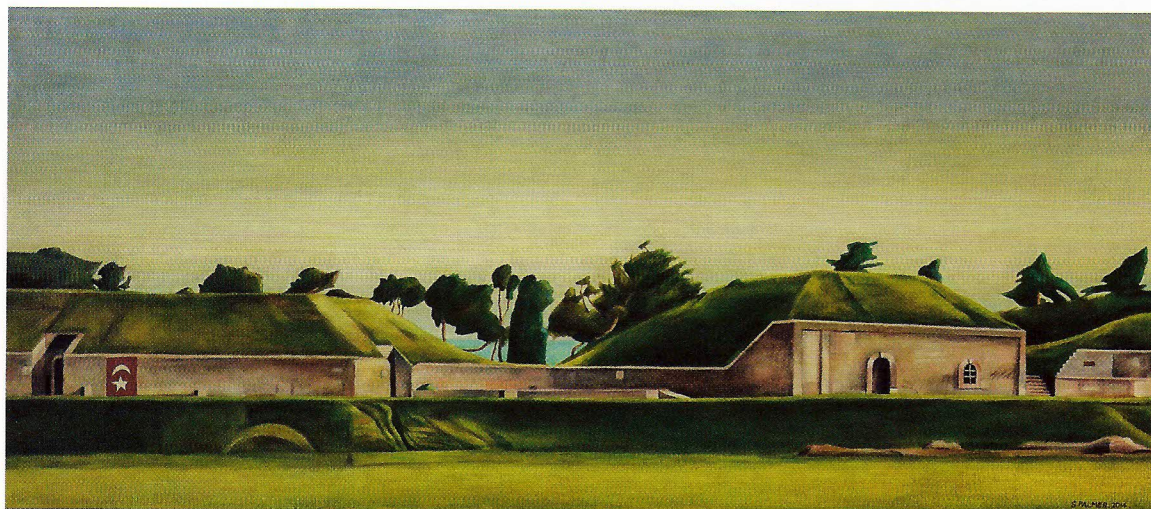
*All the seas are one sea,
the blood one blood
and the hands one hand ...*

Worked up in his Auckland studio,

using copious sketches and notes from the 2014 visit, Palmer's version of Gallipoli highlights the rhythmical folds of earth and vegetation beneath layerings of sky. The lengthy formats of the paintings accentuate the horizon and impose orderliness and equilibrium. Like the other artists involved in the project, Palmer



01



01 Phantom Graves, Anzac Cove,
2014, oil on linen, 67.5 x 160cm

02 Turkish Fort, Kild Bahr I, 2014,
oil on linen, 70 x 160cm

02



