



COLIN McCAHON: / AM



‘With any art work, understanding is a difficult word to use, because essentially within the art work, and within Colin’s work, there is a mystery, there is something slightly apart and alone. Like all good art there is something waiting in the shadows.’

Peter McLeavey, Art Dealer

Introduction

The documentary *Colin McCahon: I AM* traces the life of artist Colin McCahon, examining the New Zealand cultural context that influenced and inspired his work and his artistic development. The documentary begins with a bleak narration from the Old Testament, Book of Ecclesiastes, accompanied by an image of what is thought to be McCahon’s final work, *I Considered All the Acts of Oppression*. The documentary returns to this painting and continues its narration from the Book of Ecclesiastes at the end of the film.

I counted the dead happy because they were dead. Happier than the living who were still in life. More fortunate than either, I reckoned man yet unborn, who had not witnessed the wicked deeds done here under the sun.

Some suggest that these words express McCahon’s own loss of faith in God and perhaps even in humanity. Others see it as a continuation of his life-long mission to provoke us to think about our own moral, ethical and spiritual values.

With this narrative construction, it is as if the story of his life remains contained within this painting, and the audience at the end is left no wiser, pondering the universal questions and concerns of humanity that Colin McCahon explored through the medium of painting.

Background to the documentary *Colin McCahon: I AM*

Most of Colin McCahon’s life as a painter was marred by controversy surrounding his work. Similarly, the 2002 retrospective exhibition ‘A Question of Faith’ had audiences either praising his unique vision or struggling to understand his mysterious visual power. The exhibition opened in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and subsequently travelled to Wellington, Auckland, Melbourne and Sydney.

However, many were still intrigued and wanted to learn more about the enigmatic Colin McCahon. The film’s Associate Producer, Rachel Gardner was among those fascinated by McCahon and his work. She and producer Robin Scholes had been looking for a project to work on together. And at the opening of the exhibition ‘A Question of Faith’ at the Auckland Art Gallery, they found it. Scholes had been an art historian prior to her career in film and television and she was awarded an OBE in 1996 for services to the film industry. She and Gardner discussed how they might approach a documentary on McCahon and decided to submit a proposal. They were given the ‘green-light’ by NZOA and TVNZ to make a 44 minute documentary to be shown at film festivals.

Finding a director was no easy task. The Colin McCahon family trust were initially cautious about a format driven



COLIN McCAHON IN MURIWAI

television documentary, and everyone involved wanted a director with some established knowledge of New Zealand art to give the documentary artistic depth and credibility. Director Paul Swadel was an ideal candidate for the project. He had a Masters of Fine Arts degree and a coal-face understanding of painters in general.

After a five-week shoot that went from Sydney to New Zealand, it became apparent that a forty-four minute film could not do justice to the wealth of material shot. Colin McCahon: *I AM* turned into a seventy-minute feature length documentary.

This study guide has been written with close attention to NCEA Levels 1-3 Achievement Standards for English, Media Studies and Art History. As a resource, it is designed with flexibility in mind, recognizing the productive possibilities of cross-disciplinary exchange between English, Media Studies, and Art History. For convenience sake, the Study Guide has been divided into two sections although this guide should be sufficiently flexible for the two sections to be cross-referenced.

1. Art History
2. Genre & Narrative (English/media studies)

It is expected that teachers will be able to modify exercises to suit each level and/or discipline strand. Where relevant,

Level	English (Achievement Standards)
1.5	Show understanding of a Visual Text (2 Credits). External
2.5	View, study, analyse Visual Text (3 Credits). External
3.4	Respond critically to Visual Text (4 Credits). External

Level	Media Studies (Achievement Standards)
2.2	Closely read an unfamiliar text (3 credits). Internal
2.3	Demonstrate understanding of messages, values and representations within media text (3 credits). External
2.4	Undertake a media genre study (3 credits). External
2.5	Explain the use of narrative conventions in media text (3 credits). Internal
3.2	Explore the language of a medium and various readings of texts within a medium (4 credits). Internal

Level	Art History (Achievement Standards)
2.1	Analyse artworks (4 Credits) External
2.2	Examine subjects and themes in art (4 Credits). External
2.4	Examine an art movement (4 Credits). External
2.5	Research an Art History Topic (4 credits). Internal
3.2	Interpret iconography in art (4 credits). External
3.5	Investigate an art history topic (4 credits). Internal



A SOUTHLAND LANDSCAPE

the guide also makes reference to online resources for Media and Visual Language Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum.

1. Genre & Narrative

(English/media studies)

See Chart 01

Narrative Construction

In preparation for the following sections students should have an understanding of how a film is constructed and structured (shots, sequencing, narrative, symbols, themes, motifs, codes, etc) and the visual language, (through editing, semiotics, stylistic codes) used in the construction of a film.

Useful online resources include:

- <http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/units/documentary/home.html>
- <http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/resources/film.html>
- http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/resources/exp_lang/semiotics.html
- http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/resources/exp_lang/genres_and_conventions.html

Although the documentary both begins and ends with a question its narrative structure follows a traditional linear model. The programme begins by examining the life of the young McCahon and seamlessly moves through his influences and development as an artist. While simultaneously exploring the social, political and economic changes that occurred in New Zealand throughout the artists' life.

The documentary focuses upon three main strands in its investigation of McCahon and his work:

- 1 McCahon's personal history: the story of the man, early family influences, education, marriage and children, life experiences.
- 2 New Zealand social and political history: the Depression and the Second World War, post-war New Zealand, the threat of nuclear proliferation and the emergent development of a national identity.
- 3 Art History: how historical and contemporary art movements influenced McCahon's development as an artist?

Throughout the documentary this information is enhanced and developed using both interview and archival footage. These include interviews with McCahon's family, friends and contemporaries; a voice-over (denoted as McCahon's from actual historical interviews or correspondence), archival footage, shots of McCahon's work (sometimes with a commentator explaining the work), and finally a voice-over



RE-ENACTMENT OF McCahon CYCLING TO NELSON

(‘Voice of God’) narration is used to unite these various elements.

Student Discussion

- Create a timeline for the life of Colin McCahon. Starting with his birth in 1919 into a family where he was encouraged to draw, and ending with his death (after deteriorating from alcohol induced dementia) in 1987. The timeline should include such things as geographical locations (i.e. in 1955 McCahon visited the US), historical events and of course McCahon’s work during each period. McCahon’s painting showed his unique vision of the land, which he initially explored through his love of renaissance paintings and spiritual perspectives. Who were some of his artistic influences? If they happen to be a contemporary of McCahon, place them on your timeline.
- McCahon’s experience of a New Zealand affected by economic depression and world war possibly led to his final painting, *I Considered All the Acts of Oppression*. Include in the timeline the social, economic and political contexts that could have influenced the work of McCahon.
- How were McCahon and his contemporaries part of a developing sense of New Zealand national identity? In a young country such as New Zealand, the arts play an important role in binding the nation together and provid-

ing it with a vision of the future. McCahon was among the first artists who did not refer to England as ‘home’.

- McCahon saw himself as a working class man and a prophet (or a prophet of the working class). How does the timbre of the voice-over contribute to the tone of the documentary? What type of kiwi archetype does the narrator, Paul Casserly, remind you of? Why do you think the director chose Sam Neill as the voice of Colin McCahon?
- Jim Hall, a local composer, was asked to write the music for *Colin McCahon: I AM*. He wrote the ‘Ballad of Colin McCahon’ especially for the documentary. The song could be described as having a distinctive ‘Johnny Cash’ feel to it. What other kinds of music or songwriters does the song’s sensibility remind you of? And how does this kind of music relate to McCahon and his work?

Close reading exercise

- Consider the themes of the documentary and then deconstruct the documentary by looking at how each of these themes is presented, (e.g. historical footage, interviews, narration), and from whose point of view? Colin McCahon, friends and family, professional art historians and commentators or the filmmaker? Students should use the storyboard technique in this exercise.
- Does each point of view present facts or opinion, does it present reality or create a version of it, is it objective



INSIDE OF THE UPLAND RD CHAPEL

or subjective?

- Whose point of view does the 'Voice of God' represent? What is the purpose of the 'Voice of God'.
- Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols; what they mean and how they relate to the things or ideas they refer to. Considering this definition of semiotics, students can appreciate McCahon's work from a new perspective. Critically view Kariama's Lark Song and Victory over Death 2 in this light.

Stylistic Construction

Colin McCahon: *I AM* possesses an innovative directorial style. The original proposal for the documentary envisioned a presenter-led style with Martin Brown, the curator of the exhibition 'A Question of Faith', providing voice-over intercut with interviews and art work. However, Swadel wanted a stylistically different programme that was a 'work of art' in itself. He designed the documentary to have a number of different points of view that could be intercut to give the film a 'handmade' feel. He used straight cuts and in parts he shot with time-lapsed super eight footage and 16mm film to match existing historical archives. Many of the montage sequences are particularly effective in intercutting live footage, historical footage and stills with shots of actual paintings.

Critically view Colin McCahon: *I AM*, select a segment and

discuss the stylistic elements that have created a particular aesthetic in the segment you chose. It is important to consider the contribution of montage to each of the segments. In simple terms montage means editing but more specifically it refers to Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's idea 'that adjacent shots should relate to each other in such a way that A and B combine to produce another meaning, C, which is not actually recorded on the film.' Students should storyboard at least five frames of a segment in the documentary and give an explanation of what the director is trying to achieve in terms of purpose/effect and techniques. Possible segments to discuss include;

1. The start of McCahon creating his own style and adding a spiritual dimension to his work. (Time code 05.24)
2. McCahon's love of Geomorphology. (Time code 08.39)
3. A record of McCahon's spiritual relationship with the land as represented in Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury. (Time code 11.28)
4. The conflict between New Zealand cultural mores and the emergent contemporary art. (Time code 11.55)

2. Art History

Colin McCahon: *I AM*, is a noteworthy feature length documentary, however there are other documentaries available that offer different perspectives on McCahon. Judy Rhymer's *Victory over Death* (1988) is a fifty-minute overview



McCAHON IN HIS STUDIO

which examines the many phases of McCahon's work. Another is *The Landscape Tradition* that 'draws heavily from Kaleidoscope's 'Landscape' series and moves through several stages of pictorial representation of the New Zealand landscape, including the early sublimes; the departure from one-point perspective; and the gradual move to abstraction. Featuring artists John Kinder, Alfred Sharpe, Sir Toss Woollaston, Colin McCahon, Gretchen Albrecht, Peter McIntyre, Michael Smither, John Oxborough, and Wayne Seyb.'²

These are available from
<http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/education/secondary.html>

The following section should not be read in isolation to the rest of the study guide as many of the discussion points contained within the English and Media Studies sections can enhance and illuminate the specificities of some of the learning modules.

The documentary *Colin McCahon: I AM* can be broken into a number of different learning modules to aid in the discussion of how the work of Colin McCahon can be viewed in the context of the three themes discussed below.

1. The documentary refers to historical and contemporary art movements that influenced McCahon's development as an artist: early renaissance, cubism, modernism and

orientalism. Students should be able to chart these major movements and refer to specific works discussed in the documentary that reflect these.

2. Perhaps one of the most influential contemporary artists was the Dutch abstract modernist artist, Piet Mondrian. What similarities exist between the work of Mondrian and McCahon?

3. *Colin McCahon: I AM* only briefly touches on the technical aspects of McCahon's work. A change in style (around 1955) is evident in the painting *Elias*, which in part was the result of McCahon's shift from oil-based paints to the cheaper and newly accessible enamel gloss and other house paints. McCahon's daughter Victoria Carr also refers to his visit to North America, after which he began to experiment with mixing the new water-based domestic paints with other paints. He also began using masking tape. Looking at his subsequent paintings (particularly those influenced by Mondrian and the *Gate* series) it is possible to see how he used these materials.

It is also possible to view the *Gate* series and observe, then discuss, how McCahon tried to go beyond the flat painted surface of the canvas. He used a hard gloss lacquer and a variety of commercially prepared household paints—mostly in subdued tones of black, grey, pale ochre and white and sometimes with sand mixed in—and applied this to a



DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY (LEON NARBY, LEFT) WITH DIRECTOR PAUL SWADEL

pre-cut hardboard. Waterfall in 1965 is another example of acrylic mixed with sand on hardboard that plays with creating a similar effect.

The documentary only refers in one other instance to McCahon's use of different techniques. Again the study tour of North America influenced McCahon's attitudes. Apart from viewing North American paintings he also (although the documentary doesn't mention this) saw Chinese and Japanese scrolls where writing and painting are one. The documentary refers to the influence of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Hans Richter and Barnett Newman. How was McCahon's work influenced by these contemporary modern artists?

This North American study tour also gave McCahon the confidence to change aspects of his style. Which paintings reflect this?

4. McCahon's work can be associated with the use of iconography—the study of images, symbols, signs, icons, motifs and emblems to convey meaning in art.

In his early work he used iconography familiar to a public raised on biblical stories and images. He needed to find a visual vocabulary that would enable him to explore in his painting the issues that concerned him and to allow him to provide a visual depiction of the spiritual.

This does not necessarily mean he was an unquestioning believer—rather, he chose a known language in order to explore the existential human questions that concerned him.

A deconstruction of *The Promised Land* shows how McCahon combined landscape, portraiture and spiritual imagery. He added symbols to his landscapes, such as jugs of water, lamps and candles—iconography familiar to the church-going society of 1940s New Zealand. Furthermore, the title of the painting clearly recalls the biblical story of Moses leading his chosen people to the Promised Land. However the title also alludes to the experience of the Europeans who arrived to colonise New Zealand—a country that to many was indeed like a 'promised land'.

The Promised Land can be discussed within the context of parallels to fourteenth century Italian painting and artists such as Giotto and Simone Martini. Furthermore, there could be some discussion about what inspired McCahon's use of speech bubbles. Was this inspired by Martini's painting, *The Annunciation*, where words are coming from the Archangel's mouth, or from cartoons and commercial art (as in pop art twenty years later)?

Although not featured in the documentary, another painting to discuss within the context of McCahon's love of renaissance painting is *Cruxifixion: The Apple Branch*. With its multilayered iconography and the hidden meanings of the



JIM McCAHON, COLIN McCAHON'S BROTHER

different elements, it foreshadows McCahon's development to a more abstracted style.

Six days in Nelson and Canterbury heralds a move away from the figurative religious paintings in favour of purely landscape oriented images. However these paintings are still rich in symbolism. What do the six frames represent and what does the red in the centre allude to?

McCahon began combining experimentation with letters with a renewed interest in cubism after working with Mary Cockburn-Mercer. In New Zealand cubism was mainly used in the representation of the local landscape, and also in the case of McCahon to render an undefined space open to ambiguousness and interpretation. The '*I AM*' referred to in Kauri can either refer to the Book of Exodus when Moses asked God how to describe himself or to Colin McCahon asserting himself as a painter and creator. Discuss how the use of cubist techniques in this painting opens the possibility of further ambiguous interpretation in terms of McCahon's sensitivity to the land and environment. Are there any other interpretations that are possible?

The text of *I AM* discussed above is crucial to the Elias series as these series are among the first of McCahon's early word paintings. Elias was a ninth century BC Hebrew Prophet who according to tradition never actually died, instead departing from this world surrounded by a whirl-

wind, in a chariot of fire. In Hebrew lore he was seen as a role model for spiritual experience. McCahon does not concentrate on Elias himself but on the speculations his name made possible. The texts, in their ambiguousness, allow consideration of the possibility of life after death. After viewing Colin McCahon: *I AM* what are some of the other interpretations possible?

The Gate paintings are about humanity's need for a way through and beyond the huge obstacle to peace posed by nuclear weapons. The Gates can be small spaces between huge dark forms through which we must squeeze, or light spaces surrounded by darkness which presses in on them. As the documentary says, finding a way through could be applied as much to the struggles of daily life as to the threat of nuclear war. Students could discuss what reference to landscape forms there are and to movement in the landscape.

Discuss the various ways text is used in *Victory over Death 2* to impede a direct reading of the painting (scale of letters, different calligraphies, an emphasis on certain parts of the text over others). It's as if different voices are putting forward alternative ideas. Whose voices are these and what does it say about the 'meaning' of the painting?

Another recurring theme or motif in McCahon's work is that of the fourteen stations of the cross. McCahon had used



TIM GARRITY

Christ's journey towards death as the inspiration for many of his works prior to his commission in 1966 to depict the stations of the cross for the Convent of the Our Lady of the Missions in Remuera. Over next decade this theme is almost always present where the fourteen stations are incorporated into other contexts. Watching the documentary students can identify and discuss some of McCahon's works that clearly demonstrate this.

5. McCahon's work reflected his life long spiritual struggle between faith and doubt in God. Colin McCahon: *I AM*, follows this spiritual journey in terms of his life and work. Students can discuss his work in terms of this journey. Is there a painting or a series of paintings that represent his growing doubt in God before his eventual despair?

6. Colin McCahon said, 'My paintings are almost autobiographical ... they tell you where I am at any given time, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in.' His works can be chronologically ordered to reflect the various stages of his life. View the documentary and make a list of McCahon's work that reflect the varying influences in his development as an artist. Although McCahon's interest in spirituality is a constant theme in his work there are other themes that also recur such as:

- Early interest in the landscape
- Love of renaissance painting and interest in religious

imagery.

- Influence of the depression and the Second World War
- Belief in himself as a prophet of New Zealand's working class
- Trip to Melbourne working with Mary Cockburn-Mercer
- Journey to the United States, which influenced aspects of McCahon's technique
- Living in Northland
- The beginning of the themes of doubt in God, doubting oneself and the death of faith
- Interest in words
- Influence of Mondrian
- Growing concerns about nuclear proliferation
- Response to audience misunderstanding over abstract concepts
- Interest in numerals
- Living at Muriwai
- Struggle between faith and doubt
- Public ridicule, alienation and increasing mental darkness

7. Many of McCahon's paintings that students have listed in response to the above question explore similar subjects, themes and influences. There are recurrent themes that occur throughout the body of his work while other themes only influence a few works. Try designing a chart that groups paintings in terms of themes and influences.



PETER McLEAVEY

This will show the interconnectedness of the life of McCahon and contemporary social, political and art movements. Considering these themes design a star chart or diagram to show how the themes inter-relate for ease of representing the information.

8. Although this has been mentioned in the English/media studies section of this study guide, after viewing the film it would be useful to consider what contemporary New Zealand artists were emerging at the time.

Conclusion

The documentary finishes with an interview with McCahon. His voice is laid over his final painting, 'I consider all acts of oppression', and covers an aspect of his creative approach to creating a painting.

'The long time it takes often to produce a painting, even the ones that look like they have been dashed off, a lot of time is spent looking at them. And this going over and going over is absolutely essential - it must be stopped at the right point - you must know exactly when to stop, otherwise you might squeeze out all the feelings that you may have had originally.'

McCahon's thoughts about knowing when to finish a work of art highlight the difference between producers and consumers of art. This study guide for English, media

studies and art history reflects only the beginning of wide ranging and possibly neverending discussions about the life and work of Colin McCahon. The nature of cultural studies (which art history, media studies and English encompass) is such that the 'construction of reality' by the artist is open to boundless interpretations by consumers. Indeed one of the skills of an artist is to create a space for a myriad of interpretations of their work by audiences.

This study guide has offered some interpretative tools of McCahon's work such as:

- * semiotics
- * discourse analysis
- * medium used
- * critical analysis
- * socio/political/economic context
- * the artist's personal/emotional and spiritual journey

As a final exercise, can students think of other discussion points to appreciate the work of Colin McCahon and the documentary, 'I Am'?

Additional Resources

Visual resources material is included in the study guide.

Reading resources:

Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith, Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, Craig Potton Publishing, Nelson, 2002.



CONNIE SUMMERS

100 New Zealand Paintings by 100 New Zealand Artists, Warwick Brown, Godwit, Auckland, 1995.

An Introduction to New Zealand Painting, Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, Collins, Auckland, 1982.

Colin McCahon: Artist, Gordon H. Brown, Reed, Auckland, 1993.

I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Numbers Paintings, Colin McCahon and Wystan Curnow, National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1984.

Answering Hark: McCahon/Caselberg, Painter/Poet, Peter Simpson, Craig Potton Publishing, Nelson, 2000.

Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting, Gil Docking and Michael Dunn, David Bateman Ltd, Auckland, 1990.

New Zealand Painting: A Concise History, Michael Dunn, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003.

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Endnotes

- 1 James Monaco, *How to Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media*, (Revised Edition), Oxford University Press, New York, 1981. p.442.
- 2 <http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/education/secondary.html>

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All production stills courtesy of Juanita Dobson.