

TE PUNA O WAIWHETU
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MARGARET HUDSON-WARE

Refugees

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let the world see MARGARET HUDSON-WARE'S Refugees

Margaret Hudson-Ware has always been a watcher and a truth-seeker. Regardless of whether her subject is domestic, social or spiritual, she is motivated by a fascination with the human condition. Her unflinching and incisive artistic practice examines the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, probing what she describes as 'the timelessness of human experience and all human interaction, with the forces of good and evil vying for possession and power'.¹

In *Refugees*, Hudson-Ware draws upon the experiences of those forced to abandon their homes and build new lives in an unfamiliar environment to explore ideas of social, psychological and moral alienation. Twelve works, operating cumulatively in a manner that recalls the narrative cycles of medieval art, detail progressive stages of the refugee state: dispossession, confinement, alienation in a new land, the decision whether to live in the past or embrace the future and, eventually, the slow process of reconnection with the world. Genocide, mass persecution, revenge and sacrifice may seem ambitious themes for an artist who describes her life experience as 'essentially ordinary',² but Hudson-Ware's work is characterised by an insistence on the collision between the personal and the political. Our everyday, 'everyman' lives are not exempt from the greed, vengeance, jealousy, exploitation, compassion and resilience that characterise situations of greater global consequence: 'there are always a certain number of martyrs, a couple of helpers and someone who is prepared to make money out of the situation'.³

Throughout Hudson-Ware's lifetime, the numbers of people made homeless through persecution, civil war and natural disasters have never diminished. Her response to these scenes of exodus, informed by the experience of watching her Irish-born father adjust to life in New Zealand, was a determination that the world's conscience

could not allow such events to continue unchallenged. Accordingly, her latest works combine a narrative of displacement with the concept of 'watchers' – the witnesses to suffering and atrocity who record what they have seen for future generations. Like General Eisenhower, who, at the close of the Second World War, demanded that the grim evidence of the atrocities committed within concentration camps be documented to 'let the world see',⁴ Hudson-Ware challenges us to remember what can happen if we stand silently by. By focusing on the act of bearing witness she acknowledges that we too easily attempt to normalise even the most horrific events, falling prey to collective amnesia and apathy. She provokes us to assess our own response to the situations she depicts: will we respond with empathy, pity, condemnation or indifference?

Within a series of large, multi-panelled paintings, often employing the medieval device of continuous narrative, the role of witness is assumed by a selection of artists, some included directly through portraits, others represented through references to particular works. From Max Beckman and Lovis Corinth to Nancy Spero and Colin McCahon, Hudson-Ware gives thanks to those who, throughout history, have 'named the pain'.⁵ She is careful not to present her witnesses as heroes: like the other characters with whom she populates her canvases, they are merely players in a universal human cast.

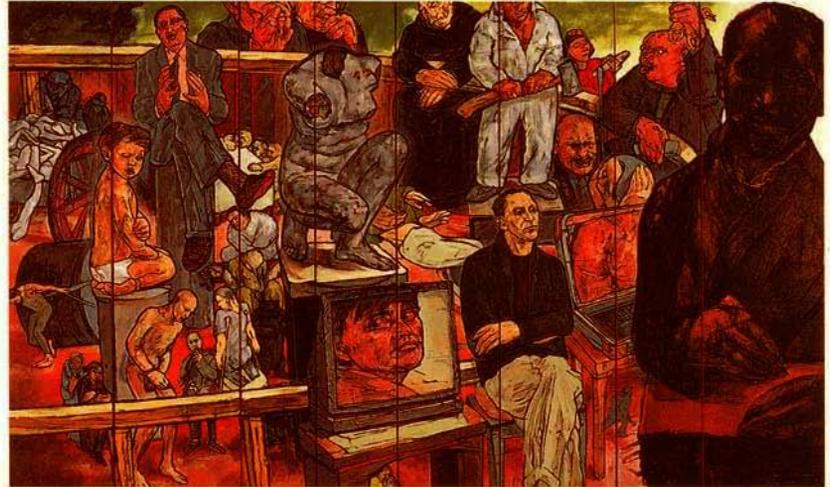
Although her earliest works displayed a predominately abstract style, Hudson-Ware credits the work of the German expressionist artist Max Beckman with validating her powerful interest in character and awakening her desire to show 'the big picture'.⁶ The complex, hierarchical and highly allegorical nature of her paintings also suggests the influence of a variety of other artistic styles, including the narrative cycles of the early Italian Renaissance and the extraordinary visions of Hieronymus Bosch. Metaphors for

states of being, Hudson-Ware's paintings compress and concentrate the realities of human experience: she intends the figures and scenes she depicts to be interpreted symbolically, rather than literally.

The first of the *Refugees* paintings is *The Dispossessed*, in which the diminishing value of human life is assessed within a macabre auction ring. A young child on a stone pedestal, waits to be sold to the highest bidder, while a statue of Aphrodite is exposed to the scrutiny of potential purchasers. Reduced to a lascivious image on a laptop screen, human life is no longer inherently valuable, but instead becomes a commodity measured in terms of personal gratification and political capital. At the far right of the canvas, the witnessing figure of German artist Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) occupies a mediating position between the viewer and the rest of the composition. He appears dispassionate in his concentration on his drawing, but his work remains as a witness to his life and times.

The fate of the imprisoned is depicted in *The Confined*. To the obvious dismay of the watching housekeeper, a workman exposes the rooms inside, each containing a fresh example of man's inhumanity to man, from concentration camp prisoners to victims of religious persecution. Rearing up from the centre of the earth, a monstrous creature symbolises the evil that has been allowed to breed in the secrecy of this isolated building in a barren coastal landscape. Witness to the seemingly limitless human capacity for cruelty is Edmund Georgen, a prisoner in Mauthausen–Gusen Concentration Camp during the Second World War. By incorporating an image of a man hanging from his bound hands, Hudson-Ware alludes to a drawing Georgen made recording an interrogation by the camp's guards.

Our moral duty to help when others suffer, regardless of our relative distance from the problem, is explored in *Feed My Sheep*, which takes its title from an instruction given by





Jesus to his followers. Arriving in a strange land, a boatload of desperate refugees meets with an ambivalent welcoming party. The anguished faces of the refugees issue a silent challenge to all who ignore those in need, suggesting instead that we uphold the spirit of the philanthropic promises made by previous generations:

Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.⁷

Even before the transition to a new environment, survival is neither simple nor guaranteed, particularly for those who have been traumatised. In *Reconnection*, survivors, at some point, have to choose either to live in the past and be consumed by their desire for revenge or to re-enter the world of the living, by constructing new and different lives. Here, in the midst of a pitiless desert, a primitive structure is crowded with the victims of war, persecution abuse, disease and mental illness. A harsh, fractured sky and the impression of intense heat suggest that this is a site of mental as well as physical torture. The ubiquitous news media, symbolised by an intrusive oversized hand and microphone, monitors the situation in the ante-room of hell, while the figure of Christ is included as a symbol of rescue and redemption. All this is watched over by two immense concrete figures inspired by the totemic sculptures of British artist Lynn Chadwick (b.1914).



In contrast, the scenes depicted in *Rebuilding: Love and Work* are concerned with the return of normalcy and order. Under the watchful gaze of German expressionist painter Max Beckman (1884–1950), who was primarily concerned with the enigma of human existence, the survivors of persecution embrace their new world, rebuilding their homes and personal relationships. Although the overwhelming impression left by the painting is one of relief and

celebration, its vision is tempered by the presence of an accountant, who enters all previous actions, both the hidden and the known, into the book of life as if preparing for an ultimate judgement.

How should we live? *Protection: The Valley of Decision*, the final painting in the *Refugees* cycle, addresses the most fundamental of all questions. Revealing different aspects of spiritual protection, found within history, religion or nature, it illustrates the artist's belief that 'the spirit is not a tent you go in to hide from the outside – it is something that allows you to live from day to day in the real world'.⁸ Those held within the valley symbolise people who have, by a variety of means and disciplines, transcended living by the laws of the jungle. Both realms (inside and outside the valley) acknowledge the essentially primal nature of human interaction, but emphasise the choice that must be made by thinking beings: to be a nurturer, or a destroyer, of life and creativity.

Describing her canvas as 'a plane on which the essences of life are poured and fixed',⁹ Hudson-Ware aims to create images that are accessible at some level to all viewers. With *Refugees*, she powerfully asserts her affiliation with those passionate, if currently unfashionable, artists who propose that the role of art is not merely to inspire us with its beauty or divert us with its humour, but to reveal us to ourselves, as we truly are.

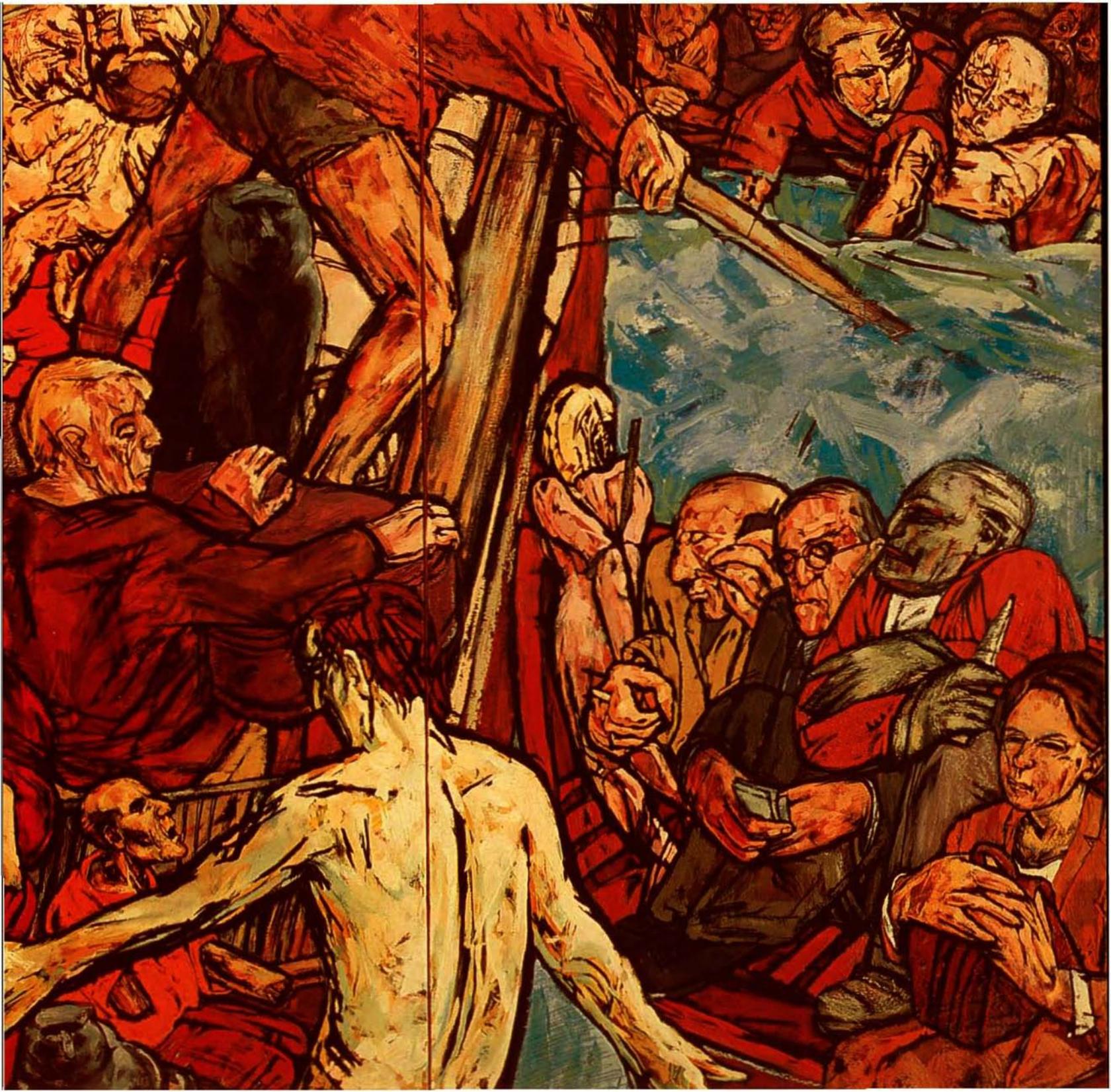
**‘ Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. ’⁷**

footnotes

- 1 Margaret Hudson-Ware, *Onstage, Offstage*, Salamander Gallery, Christchurch, 1995.
- 2 Margaret Hudson-Ware, *Signs on the Beach*, Salamander Gallery, Christchurch, 1995, unpaginated.
- 3 Margaret Hudson-Ware, conversation with the author, September 2002.
- 4 General Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*, Barbie Zelizer, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 203.
- 5 Margaret Hudson-Ware, conversation with the author, September 2002.
- 6 Margaret Hudson-Ware, conversation with the author, December 2002.
- 7 Extract from 'The New Colossus', 1883, by American poet and philanthropist Emma Lazarus. The complete poem is engraved on a plaque in the museum beneath the Statue of Liberty, New York.
- 8 Margaret Hudson-Ware, Conversation with the author, December 2002.
- 9 *Ibid.*

images

- Cover, inside front and inside back: *Feed My Sheep*, 2002
- Above left: *The Dispossessed*, 2002
- Below left: *The Confined*, 2002
- Above right: *Feed My Sheep*, 2002
- Below right: *Reconnection*, 2002



Margaret Hudson-Ware Biography

Margaret Hudson-Ware was born in Christchurch in 1938. She received a Diploma in Fine Arts (Honours) in Painting from the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in 1959 and a Diploma in Teaching from Christchurch Teachers' College in 1975. She has exhibited regularly in group exhibitions both in New Zealand and internationally since the 1970s and in 1980 travelled to Australia as the recipient of the Canterbury Society of Arts/Guthrey Travel Award. In 1996 Hudson-Ware was the inaugural winner of the CoCA Annual Art Award.



list of works

- 1 *Return of the Freedom Voyagers*, 1991, oil on canvas, 153 x 117cm, kindly loaned by Sam Heggie-Gracie
- 2 *The Dispossessed*, 2002, oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm, collection of the artist
- 3 *Outriders of the Apocalypse*, 1994, oil on canvas, 114.5 x 80.5cm, kindly loaned by Jan Daley and Michael Gorman
- 4 *Head of Christ*, 2003, oil on canvas, 30 x 30cm, collection of the artist
- 5 *The Confined*, 2002, oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm, collection of the artist
- 6 *And You Too My Friend*, 2003, oil on canvas, 170 x 75cm, collection of the artist
- 7 *Feed My Sheep*, 2002, oil on canvas, 190 x 312.5cm, collection of the artist
- 8 *Laid Waste*, 2003, oil on canvas, 61 x 77cm, collection of the artist
- 9 *Reconnection*, 2002, oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm, collection of the artist
- 10 *Study: Female Head*, 2003, oil on canvas, 30 x 30cm, collection of the artist
- 11 *Rebuilding: Love and Work*, 2003, oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm, collection of the artist
- 12 *Protection: The Valley of Decision*, 2003, oil on canvas, 200 x 200cm, collection of the artist



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