

***Doris Lusk: Practical Visionary***  
**Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū**  
**4 June – 30 October 2016**

A key figure in the development of contemporary New Zealand art, Doris Lusk (1916–1990) combined technical versatility with a perceptive and analytical eye. Dunedin-born, she cut her teeth on Central Otago's vivid landscapes before shifting to Christchurch in 1942, where she soon became a core member of the celebrated Christchurch Group – an alliance of independently-minded artists who rejected the conservative policies of the Canterbury Society of Arts. For years, she fit her painting around the demands of raising a family, turning Sunday walks into sketching opportunities and holidays into painting trips.

Closely associated with many of the better-known names of New Zealand modernism, Lusk pursued a persistently individual path, driven by her attraction to the energy and structure she found in both natural and industrialised landscapes. She relished artistic challenges and chose subject matter that would exercise her evolving technique. In Christchurch, she is remembered not only for her paintings, but for her work as a teacher, both at the University of Canterbury (1966–81) and at Risingholme Community Centre, where she taught pottery classes for two decades.

Presented to honour the centenary of Doris Lusk's birth, these paintings highlight the stylistic changes she embraced across her long, productive career. Ranging from intricately constructed landscapes to imaginative explorations in luminous acrylic and watercolour, they reveal how deftly she balanced observation and invention to create works that resonate with an insistent and authentic sense of place.

*Felicity Milburn, curator*

**Untitled [Gold Dredging, Central] c. 1938**

Oil on canvas on board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

When she painted this work, Lusk was an art student at Dunedin's King Edward Technical College, where her classmates included Anne Hamblett, Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon. She received a comprehensive technical grounding from Charlton Edgar, who encouraged his students to paint outdoors and taught them how to analyse and reproduce the distinctive colours of Central Otago. Her tutor Robert N. Field showed Lusk – who became a gifted potter – how to model clay, and also introduced her to key developments in modern British art, in particular the prioritising of form and internal design over unquestioning representation. During the summers, she undertook seasonal work in Central Otago orchards, where she was struck by the incongruous sight of this huge dredge at the junction of the Kawarau and Clutha rivers, a relic of past gold-sluicing operations.

**Tobacco Fields, Nelson, N.Z. 1941**

Oil on textured board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

In 1941, Lusk travelled to Nelson with her art school 'gang', Colin McCahon, Anne Hamblett and Rodney Kennedy. McCahon often painted alongside Lusk, and Kennedy later recalled him "insisting

that she sit down and work out everything in the landscape in front of her on the spot". As this finely balanced composition reveals, Lusk was well-equipped to meet such a challenge. Drawing on her strong sense of spatial organisation, honed by the ticket writing she undertook to support her art school studies, Lusk unified an intricate vista of tobacco plant rows, drying sheds, road, trees and undulating hills. The incorporation of telling details, such as the crisp shadows outlined by the bright sun overhead, lend the scene a compelling vitality. Its unapologetic complexity, in contrast to the starkly empty, psychologically intense views McCahon produced of the same landscape, suggests that the two friends were already pursuing quite different agendas.

### **Towards Omakau 1942**

Oil on board

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, William A. Sutton Bequest, 2000

Through her tutor, Robert N. Field, Lusk discovered the work of Paul Cézanne, who famously stated his desire to *represent* nature, rather than record it. Lusk readily manipulated reality, describing in a 1987 television interview how her landscapes were "controlled and restricted, composed into pictorial space". Painted in 1942, the year she married and moved to Christchurch, *Towards Omakau* is an exhilaratingly expansive view of a landscape near Alexandra, in Central Otago. It's undeniably modern; a sharp rebuke to those commentators who sought to relegate Lusk to the ranks of pragmatic regionalist.

The composition of this work is designed to accentuate the numerous lines that stretch over its surface, curving around eroded cliff faces, extending in darting tangents as rivers and roads, forming regimented shelterbelt verticals. Sheep trails crisscross gently rounded hills, echoing clouds that swirl overhead. Reflecting on her practice in later years, Lusk stated: "[I] have tried to get to the heart of the matter, involved with the complexity rather than simplicity in describing the nature of our land."

### **Landscape, Overlooking Kaitawa, Waikaremoana 1948**

Oil on board

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased 1955

Daughter of an architect, and married to an engineer, Lusk was keenly attuned to structure. While artists such as Rata Lovell-Smith, Rita Angus and Christopher Perkins juxtaposed natural and constructed elements, such as bridges, telegraph poles and railway stations, Lusk chose more dominating features that resonated with weight, energy and a sense of industry. Artist Anne Hamblett recalled: "Doris always did a different sort of thing. Buildings and water stations. [...] She liked doing big water pipes and machines."

This view of the newly built Kaitawa hydro-electric station and associated settlement was painted when Lusk visited her friends Ian and Adelaide McCubbin in 1948. Ian McCubbin was a construction engineer for the Waikaremoana hydro-electric power scheme, which included power stations at Piripaua and Tuai (also painted by Lusk and part of this exhibition). Here, the massive pipeline in the foreground seems to continually shift in scale, looming hugely over the miniature houses but dwarfed in its turn by the distant mountain ranges.

### **The Lee Valley, Nelson 1954**

Oil on canvas on board

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, William A. Sutton Bequest, 2000

Charles Cotton's *Geomorphology of New Zealand* (published in 1922, with a revised edition released in 1942) transformed the way many New Zealanders thought about the landscape that surrounded them. Geomorphology is the study of the origins of earth's topography and charts how the movements of massive forces beneath the earth's crust have been expressed above ground in features such as mountains, valleys, glaciers and lakes. Colin McCahon received a copy of Cotton's book as a wedding gift and spoke of the influence of its theories – and especially its simple line drawings – on his understanding of the landscape. He first encountered the book on the shelves of the Dunedin Public Library, and it is likely that Lusk, who shared her friend's interest in the structure of the landscape – evident in this robust oil painting of the distinctive 'pleated' hills of Nelson's Lee Valley – at least discussed it with him, or in fact read it herself.

### **Beyond Porters Pass IV 1969**

Watercolour and ink

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, William A. Sutton Bequest, 2000

The dramatic landscapes of the nearby Southern Alps offered Lusk ample opportunities to test her skill. This remarkably fluid work, in which dark ink flick-marks and loose ochre washes define the scarred, crumbling foothills in strong contrast to the crisp white mountains beyond, gives an indication of her exceptional ability in this notoriously challenging medium. Confident and spontaneous, it reveals an artist not confined by representation, but instead pushing her materials to their limit to create an expressive work that vibrates with energy and movement.

### **Onekaka Estuary 1966**

Pencil and watercolour

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Lawrence Baigent/Robert Erwin Bequest, 2003

Built in the 1920s to load pig iron bound for Australia from the nearby ironworks, the Onekaka wharf in Golden Bay had begun decaying long before Lusk first saw it in 1965. By then, it was no longer connected to the sea and she found its dramatic break at the low tide mark irresistible: "It was almost a geometric situation, the way it protruded through the quiet surf."

Years later, Lusk recalled how she had set out determined not to paint it, only to return with a sketchbook full of little else. The interplay between light and shadow, structure and fluidity, strength and decay intrigued her, and she would paint it almost exclusively over the next five years, in watercolours executed on the spot and in a series of brooding oil paintings. This rapidly worked study, observed at a greater distance from the wharf than most of Lusk's Onekaka works, emphasises the estuary's luminous quality and constantly changing tides.

### **Hills from Springfield 1961**

Pencil and watercolour

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, donated from the Canterbury Public Library Collection, 2001

### **Mount Grey from Pines Beach 1961**

Pencil and watercolour

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased 1961

A mother of three, Lusk fitted her art around family life. Her daughter Jancis remembers her as an unstoppable force, "never still, thinking all the time, not a moment to waste", who painted inside the playpen while the children ran riot outside it. She used outings with her children (and later her grandchildren) as opportunities for sketching or painting watercolours directly from the landscape. "I did not paint in a continual professional manner", she revealed of her early years with The Group, "I painted when I could."

Lusk's facility and flair in the watercolour medium are apparent in these two paintings, one depicting the small Canterbury settlement of Springfield with the main divide rising beyond it, and the other taking in the inland view from Pines Beach in Pegasus Bay. Executed in Lusk's customarily decisive and economic style, they convey a variety of textures and spatial relationships within a few, adroitly placed, brushstrokes.

### **Power House, Tuai 1948**

Oil on board

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, donated from the Canterbury Public Library Collection, 2001

Lusk described the power station at Tuai to art historian Lisa Beaven as a "gothic building in the middle of the wild hills". Certainly, this striking oil painting plays up its strange incongruity, combining an abruptly elevated viewpoint with a heightened, stylised approach reminiscent of the unsettling streetscapes of Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978). The tiny human figures moving briskly across the wide driveway accentuate the immense building towering over them, while the angled cars, curved road and power lines marching into the distance suggest a confluence of dynamic forces, barely contained.

### **Study of the Bridge, Clutha River 1985**

Watercolour

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery

### **The Swing Bridge, Kawarau 1985**

Oil on canvas

Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Lusk experimented with a variety of materials and styles throughout her career, "riding the media" to expand her arsenal of painting techniques. Often discoveries in one field were productively translated across into other modes. To make her 1985 watercolour of the bridge over the Clutha River, Lusk first dampened a stretched canvas, to which she applied broad washes of fluid colour. Paint was then flicked over the still-wet canvas, creating a splatter effect that convincingly denoted the scrubby Central Otago terrain.

Painted in the same year, *The Swing Bridge, Kawarau* tackles a similar subject in oils, with Lusk using a dramatically angled view to contrast the forthright utility of the bridge structure with the irregular rocky landscape and surging water beneath.

**Demolition V 1979**

Acrylic on canvas  
Private collection

**College Demolition 1981**

Acrylic and pencil on canvas  
Private collection

**Double Commerce 1982**

Acrylic and coloured pencil on canvas  
Riccarton High School collection

**Finale 1982**

Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased 1982

Driving home one afternoon in 1979, Lusk chanced upon the sight of a half-demolished building. It was a moment of revelation. Looking at what now seem oddly prescient views of demolitions on Tuam Street in central Christchurch, and in the Arts Centre complex just down the road on Worcester Boulevard, it is easy to see why these chaotic, broken structures, with their tangled spatial ambiguities, complex lighting and diverse textures captivated and challenged Lusk. Using her own photographs and those clipped from newspapers, she created an extraordinary series of collages; complex imaginary compositions she later translated into expressive watercolour, acrylic and coloured pencil.

With their collapsed beams, shredded steel and scattered rubble, the works in the *Demolition* series (1979–82) were violent and unsettling; the internal structure of these formerly monumental buildings was undone and exposed. Despite their post-apocalyptic appearance, Lusk firmly resisted any interpretation of the series as an elegiac commentary on the human condition, seeing them as a purely practical extension of her practice:

[I]t would be quite dishonest if I tried to put in psychological meanings. [...] The *Demolition* works were a little misunderstood. [People thought I was] fascinated with the factual destruction of buildings as a sort of sociological thing. But that was not true [...]. It was a visual image to hang my media painting on, that's all.

**Imagined Projects VII, Bush Project 1983**

Acrylic, pencil and coloured pencil on canvas  
Collection of Grant Banbury and Mark Hornby

**Imagined Projects II, Limeworks 1983**

Acrylic, pencil and coloured pencil on canvas  
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased 1984

After retiring from her lecturer's position at the University of Canterbury art school in 1981, Lusk embarked upon what would become her last important body of work. It combined two distinct but related elements: a series of composite oil paintings of remembered and invented views, and seven 'imagined projects' in which apparently functional buildings – in these two examples, inspired by lime works in Ross, on the West Coast, and Takaka, near Nelson, respectively – were inserted into fictional settings. Springing like picture-book pop-ups from shimmering landscapes 'stained' with watered-down acrylic paint, these enigmatic structures are rendered in crisply masked opaque white. Part blueprint, part castles in the air, they suggest both mystery and utility. The sense of solidity and industry that appealed to Lusk in the structures she included in earlier works, disrupted and subverted in the *Demolition* series, seems here to transform into something much less earth-bound, more abstract: buildings for dreaming in.