



Big Orange, Berri, SA, 2003, enamel on board, Noel McKenna



Clear Day, 2002, enamel on plywood, Noel McKenna

Noel McKenna likes it here

A work in the *Parihaka* exhibition in 2000, a sellout show after a trip around Southland with Laurence Aberhart, and an upcoming exhibition at City Gallery, Wellington, sound like career highlights most New Zealand artists would strive for. But this is what renowned Australian artist, Noel McKenna, has been doing on this side of the Tasman during the last 10 years – plus illustrating books by poets Jenny Bornholdt and Greg O'Brien, a couple of exhibitions at Bowen Gallery in Wellington, and an iconic work, *The Baggy Green*, in the show *Unaustralian* recently. Not bad for an artist at the peak of his career, who has the Sulman Prize and the Wynne Prize under his belt.

So what draws him to New Zealand on a regular basis?

"I first met Greg O'Brien, and his brother Brendan, when I was working in a restaurant with them in Sydney. We kept in contact after Greg returned to New Zealand and, quite by coincidence, I was holidaying in Wellington when I was offered a ride up to Parihaka with Greg, Lara Strongman and Paula Savage, who were researching the show *Parihaka*.

"The impact of that day was quite moving, and the painting I did afterwards was included in the exhibition

on the recommendation of Ralph Hotere. I hadn't expected it – it really was quite an honour."

Shortly afterwards, McKenna travelled around Southland with photographer Laurence Aberhart and this resulted in a sell-out exhibition at Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney. He is currently compiling an exhibition, *Sheltered Life*, comprising ceramic vases featuring texts by Jenny Bornholdt, metal sculptures incorporating found objects, and paintings, spanning his career from the early 1990s, which opens at City Gallery, Wellington, on 26 June.

Though his work may be unfamiliar to New Zealanders, his style and subject matter will resonate – witty, humble, at times puckish, but always capturing in a spare and endearingly Antipodean way the images of our relatively new frontier. The subject matter is disarmingly eclectic. *Australian racecourse locations, 2002*, shows a map of the country with every course marked, and *The Baggy Green* lists, also on a map of Australia, every cricketer who has worn the talismanic cap, with, unsurprisingly, the name of Don Bradman picked out in gold.

Then there are the series of "big" paintings – pineapple, cow, merino and orange (our Ohakune carrot, Taumarunui gumboot and Gore's brown trout await him) – and the animals. A dog frozen in mid-leap, a cat falling off a branch and the lost animal posters. His keen observations have the power to charm and yet challenge the viewer.

So, how does the New Zealand art scene stack up?

Very well, he claims. "At the last two Melbourne Art Fairs, the New Zealand galleries did very well, making good sales and striking a chord with Australian buyers." He feels the "international blandness" that is permeating the art scene overseas has yet to invade Australasia.

"You see a lot of sameness at biennales – whether they are in Sydney or Istanbul. I like artists whose work says something about where they live. I love McCahon's work – you can't imagine it coming from anywhere else in the world."



Racetrack, Southland, 2000, enamel on plywood, Noel McKenna