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Pop-art pioneer going strong

By LINDA HERRICK

After more than four decades of painting, Auckland artist Ross Ritchie has reached the conclusion that "no matter how clever you are, you only have one or two ideas". He has decided the trick is to squeeze as much as possible out of them. "What I'm doing now and what I've always done is relate back" - back to the early 60s, when it all started for Ritchie. He is being modest, of course - those "one or two" ideas have served him rather well since he began exhibiting. He sold his first painting to a public gallery (Auckland) in 1964 when he was just 23 and his work is now held in many of New Zealand's public institutions and is keenly sought by private collectors.

Ritchie has longevity and critical acclaim on his side, but not quantity. His art doesn't come easy - painting, he says, is "like pulling teeth". "I have bursts then a great hiatus, waiting for something. The pondering starts first, long periods of thinking about work - but I tend not to do quite as much of that any more." Ritchie was considered a pop-art pioneer when he set out. From the start he developed a trademark style of pulling apart things on the canvas, splintering imagery which echoed the work of iconic artists. His narratives are international, so he might incorporate a reference to, say, Velasquez or de Kooning or Matisse, then steer it in a direction entirely his own. While some questioned his allusion to other artists' work, he simply didn't see it as a problem. "I started to appropriate works with openness so you know where it's coming from. There was no theft involved at all."

Ritchie particularly admired American pop artist Larry Rivers for "his audacity, his style. He was there at the beginning of pop painting and it was the most cheeky thing to do." Ritchie's first career must have had some influence. As a lad, he was a signwriting apprentice in the New Zealand Railways advertising and publicity department in Wellington. I was a poster artist. I did big handpainted billboards. It taught me so much - when you make 25 lifesize Humber 80 posters you learn something about how things work." The job also taught him that "repetitive work is a killer". He had already started to paint, taking night classes. Then he studied painting and drawing for two years at Wellington Polytech, returned to the railways, and eventually decided that eight years' service was enough - "I was dying". At the time, few people painted as a career. "There were moments when I thought I could paint full time - mad moments though," he recalls. "It was unheard of then."

Although then based in Wellington, Ritchie had a canny connection in the form of fledgling (later to become legendary) dealer Barry Lett, who had set up the Uptown Gallery in Upper Queen St. "He had a show of works by Elam students and it sold out, so he rang up and said, 'You've got some works together, bring them up'. So we hired a van, brought the show up and then I had to go back to work.

"The Auckland Art Gallery bought one of mine [Thought] and I resigned within a week to come up here to Auckland." Ritchie worked with the Auckland Art gallery from 1965, eventually becoming its exhibition designer, a pioneering position. He created display plans for important shows such as the Constable, Monet and American Art exhibitions. He also went to the United States with Te Maori when it toured there.

Ritchie has been working as an artist full-time only since 1991. "I thought I had a balance between the job and my work as an artist but over the past few years I realised I didn't," he reflects. Because, by his own admission, he has such a "slow careful approach" to his work, that doesn't mean he's not thinking about it most of the time. "I'm not consciously keeping my antennae out for images I can use but the gates are open all the time. I liken it to the nets they catch birds in. Stuff goes through but only some things stay. You have to edit otherwise you'd go crazy.