

# LIVELY ARTS

## A GLORIOUS EXHIBITION



*Luncheon Under The Ash Tree . . . flagrantly delicious.*

THIS FLAGRANTLY DELICIOUS work, "Luncheon Under The Ash Tree", was painted by Evelyn Page in 1960 and forms part of the exhibition *Evelyn Page: Seven Decades which opens at the Fisher Gallery on August 13.*

Originally organised and shown at Christchurch's Robert McDougall Art Gallery in December 1986, the show has since toured all of New Zealand's major galleries to considerable acclaim and some controversy.

For a brief period it looked as though that parochialism of approach which sometimes afflicts our own artistic leaders would prevent the exhibition coming to Auckland at all; fortunately that has been remedied, although it is sad that the 80-odd pictures shown in Christchurch have been reduced to about half that number for touring purposes.

The last time Evelyn Page's works

were exhibited in Auckland was as far back as 1972 when Colin McCahon opened a show at the John Leech Gallery. Since then, anyone interested in her glowingly vibrant images had to know those lucky enough to own a picture, be a member of the Pages' Wellington circle of friends or persuade the galleries who possessed a work to put it on exhibition.

There was too, a sniffiness about her work which came about partly because the artist herself had been around for so long and her prices had risen steeply, and partly because she and her husband Frederick Page were perceived as members of a dangerous cultural elite.

Part of the problem was that their reputations had been nurtured by friends (see Janet Paul's distinctly hagiographical essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition); the tongue-in-cheek wit displayed in many of Frederick Page's *Listener* Concert columns made many perceive his high standards as critical arrogance, and this only exacerbated the

problem.

Some of the ambiguity towards her work was still there in a piece written by Brett Riley in the *Listener* in May last year. It incensed many of the artist's followers, but didn't unduly upset her. When praised for her painting she invariably exclaimed in her warm, hoaty voice, "But it's so old hat!" When criticised she shrugged, knowing that people were entitled to their opinions and that debate about the arts is something we need more of here.

"By the yardstick which has governed art criticism over the century, Evelyn Page is a lightweight," wrote Riley. "Her modest but consistent output since 1916 has lacked innovation and originality. Rooted in the lush, sunny style of late 19th-century French painting — via England and thence the Canterbury College School of Art — her work has never taken notice of any of the revolutionary movements which have swept over western art. It has lacked anger, angst, chal-

**PETER SHAW**

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lence, adventure, social conscience, apocalyptic vision or, that most cherished critical necessity, power.

"Instead, Page has, after shedding some art school baggage, largely painted open, breezy, warm pictures of the domestic and urban commonplace — pictures which luxuriate in the sensuous brushwork and rich colours washed in white or golden sunlight. To many people they're what painting is meant to be. They're accessible and reassuring, transforming bowls of fruit and bottles of Cinzano, sunny gardens, friends, bustling cities and full-bodied female nudes into positive images of what we're conditioned to recognise as delicious visual delights radiating joy and wellbeing."

Riley questioned the usefulness of such a yardstick, especially in evaluating work such as Evelyn Page's. Ceaseless innovation as an end in itself and the necessity for an aggressive strength are certainly wide of the mark, causing him to ask if we have indeed been hijacked by art professionals whose yardstick "wimply mirrors the masculine, vertical, competitive social and economic order".

So, he comes to the correct conclusion that these paintings must be judged like everything else, on their own terms. They are devoid of angst, not because Evelyn Page was blind to the horrors of the world, but because her concerns as a painter were primarily with paint. As the young Evelyn Polson, she broke away from the muddy colours favoured by Cecil Kelly, her teacher, having first proved that she could use them more expertly than the rest of her contemporaries.

Scandal frequently surrounded the exhibition of her early nudes. One had to be withdrawn from display at the McDougall Gallery after the sitter visited the work she had posed for and found it too revealing. When "Figure Out Of Doors" was shown at the Auckland Society of Arts in 1926, an outraged letter

to the *Star* from "Purity" protested at the "tendency towards an immoral suggestion" in the painting and expressed indignation that it should have passed the scrutiny of the hanging committee.

In fact, as Evelyn Page loved to recall, the letter was written by a bold young journalist who had been appalled at the bigoted response of others at the exhibition and decided to fan the flames. It worked: A.R.D. Fairburn burst into print demanding in mock horror that things should "not stop with Miss Polson's picture; a clean sweep must be made. There is that lewd sculpture the Venus de Milo... there must be hundreds of low pictures such as these in the galleries of Europe."

A steady flow of correspondence ended with the published remark of a member of the ASA council, Mr A.J. Brown, that "to the pure, all things are embarrassing".

Evelyn Page: Seven Decades, even in its truncated state is a glorious exhibition. It reflects the preoccupations of a remarkable woman who died only a few months ago having, by her own account, outlived her allotted time. She was New Zealand-born yet colonial in outlook. Europe, especially the view of it given in the paintings of Bonnard, Matisse, Kokoschka, she adored. Her many pictures of family and friends were made in gardens that could have been situated in the south of France but were in fact at Governors Bay or Waikanae. She had no regard for harsh New Zealand light or the ideology surrounding the landscape tradition here. She will come to be seen as one of our finest and most unique painters.

THE GALLERY SCENE continues to change with the establishment of two new ones in Parnell, making that suburb seem like the art centre of Auckland. Last month, Peter and Adrienne Jarvis opened their new Ferner Fine Arts premises in Old Coachhouse Lane with a special

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exhibition.

Peter Jarvis bought his first painting, a Margaret Stoddart landscape, 20 years ago. At that time he was involved in industry, but it rapidly became clear, as his private collection of paintings grew to huge proportions, that he should move into the art field full time. Ferner Fine Art was established in 1985.

The Jarvis's were formerly situated in Eden Crescent, where they encouraged clients with paintings drawn mainly from New Zealand's historical past up to the early 20th century. Now they have moved into the contemporary field so that the Hoytes and Gullies are cheek by jowl with McCahons and Cairnmonts. Peter Jarvis also hopes to extend Ferner's interests into the field of sculpture. The new gallery is light and spacious and well worth a visit.

Further up the rise, at 32 Bath Street, Warwick Henderson is this month opening his new gallery. Two years ago he sold his customs business to concentrate on selling paintings. In 1986 he organised the Artex art fair and held a number of retrospective exhibitions including one devoted solely to the work of Dorothy Kate Richmond.

The Warwick Henderson Gallery is not a dealer gallery in the usual sense; there will not be changing exhibitions each month but rather a concentration on artists who have either missed out on the recognition that Henderson feels is their due or deserve a good start in a gallery. There will, he says, always be something interesting on show because he has a large stock of pictures ranging from the work of the early New Zealand topographical painters up to the more established contemporary artists such as Woollaston, Ellis and McCahon.

"There are so many neglected painters," he says. "Jack Crippen deserves greater recognition, so do Minnie White, Hubert Tornquist, Denis Knight Turner and, particularly, John Weeks. He really needs a big national retrospective."

Warwick Henderson's gallery has been designed by architects Millar, Houston in an allusive post-modern style. Glass brick columns light up spectacularly beneath an arched entrance; above the ground floor exhibition space are two storeys of private accommodation which can only be described as palatial (in the contemporary sense). One can sneak a little way up the staircase to catch a glimpse, but clients will be encouraged to remain on the ground floor where the pictures for sale will be displayed. Warwick Henderson has been an astute buyer at auctions for some years now; it will be interesting to see what treasures he parts with.



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