



FOUNDATION

# OLIVIA SPENCER BOWER

## 50 YEARS OF PAINTING

FISHER GALLERY  
AUGUST 18 - SEPTEMBER 16 1990

# OLIVIA SPENCER BOWER 1906 - 1982

## Fifty Years of Painting

*Olivia Spencer Bower lived as a child in England. Her New Zealand born mother was a professional artist and contemporary of Margaret Stoddard and Frances Hodgkins.*

*Olivia says: for most of her life, based in Christchurch, with quite extensive periods of art school study in Canterbury later on at Elam in Auckland and at the Slade and Cass Schools of Art in London. A contemporary of Eve Page, Russell Clark, Rhona Hazard, Ngata Marsh and Rita Angus, Olivia's career in many ways paralleled that of Frances Hodgkins. Her work stands firmly in the company of that artist as it does in the company of Margaret Stoddard and Dorothy Kate Richmond. It's contemporarily also finds bonds with Wolfson and McCabon.*

*Her exceptionally vigorous and lucid watercolour with its clarity of line and drawing indicate a mistress assured in her work, at ease with brush, colour, line, wash and paper, intelligently and keenly observant of the land, people and environs she painted. Olivia Spencer Bower left a wonderful contribution to the history of New Zealand painting when she died in 1982.*

There are two or three maxims which could be said to have been used by Olivia Spencer Bower in the way she began, organised and finally assessed her own work.

The first maxim was to do with her contemplation of what was to be painted and how. It could have been the words 'look, load the brush, look again and then paint'. This was a teaching lesson from her first art teacher in England, Miss Coles taught watercolour and insisted on three washes only, all subject matter being resolved in terms of these clearly defined tones. "What it did for me," Olivia once said, "is that with a brush full of paint I had to think before I put it down". The application of this yardstick can be seen in the work currently showing in this 1980 Exhibition curated by the Olivia Spencer Bower Foundation.

When we look at her bald calligraphic and loosely washed paintings of the late 1970's and the early 1980's with their gestural brushwork and liquid clear washes, we see the pre-organised painter's mind at work. The much earlier 1930's works have much more closed and sinuous lines, the works are flatter in treatment, with pattern being the painter's major concern but they nevertheless, (stylistic concerns aside), show the same stoic concern for clear decisive brushwork, well planned and well thought out drawing. Although the earlier works appear to be more concerned with design and pattern than the later works, the broken brushwork treatment of the recent paintings would almost indicate an abandonment of forethought and premeditation. One senses in these more mature works the thorough assimilation of her teacher's adage. Her Italian painting, structurally sound in drawing and abstracted elements, offer a sense of immediacy and ease in calligraphic humour, warmth, colour and musicality. This ease was found in the most unselfconscious and successful of her work and all the formulae she evolved find themselves being intuitively transformed by the sheer productivity of a sensitive artist hard at work. "When you are working hard, you touch a deeper consciousness, when you are not consciously pushing it, shapes and ideas come into the painting from the brush," said Olivia.

Another two yardsticks or maxims closely related to each other and to the first, could very well have been the rule of thumb 'keep it economical and keep it direct'. Whether Olivia was painting from the house-tops of Perugia or the backblocks of 'Steepdown' in Kaikoura her concerns were always with the painterly business of putting marks down in the most abbreviated and economical way and of making brushstrokes that had a joyous clear life of their own. Olivia did not have much time for the fiddly 'spit and polish' studies she found at the Canterbury Art School when she first arrived in New Zealand. It was the new life on a Canterbury backblock farm with a few friends, which probably gave her the intense start in painting her landscapes of New Zealand. "I was trying through my painting to find out how to cope with such a different environment". One can imagine Olivia on her uncle's high country farm painting and realizing many of her first art lessons in very clear and practical terms.

In studying the works of this exhibition one is very aware of the large span of time they are covering. The paintings come mostly from Olivia's own collection and with-in this group of work may be seen important developments, interests and chronologies which trace her stylistic and methodological progress as a painter. It is perhaps worth looking at the maxims which Olivia applied to her work and consider these as we view this exhibition. With her concern for economy and directness, Olivia's Macdonie Country paintings, the Italian paintings and her Flatford Mill paintings all indicate her strong skills of boldly eliminating unnecessary details, thus satisfying the painter's desire for clarity, visual resting places, punctuation and deft, fresh detail in the right places. Accents, highlights and lucid watercolour handling indicate the workings of a patient, hardworking and inspired artist.

Olivia was a prolific artist and like many watercolourists worked quickly, often making many studies, only a few of which she would consider to be complete works. Many of her watercolours were done 'in-situ' outdoors and occasionally finished back in her studio. The difficulty of choosing works for exhibition and sale on behalf of Olivia's Foundation must prove to be very daunting. Knowing which works from her remaining collection she may have selected as a finished work suitable for exhibition is of paramount concern to the curator. The uniqueness of Olivia Spencer Bower's work can be seen in various bright flashes in this exhibition, and what needs to be appreciated about a posthumous sale of the artist's work is that Bill Cumming, the curator, has had to bear in mind these delicate questions of selection and make choices on Olivia's behalf, remembering always the fierce criteria she had herself.

Allie Eagle  
Auckland 1980.

## OLIVIA SPENCER BOWER FOUNDATION

The foundation was established by Olivia Spencer Bower before her death and funded from the sale of some of her property and artworks in her estate. Substantial grants are made most years to enable a painter or sculptor to work full time for a year.

### 50 YEARS OF PAINTING

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>Untitled (Fountain in Assisi)</i> 1931<br>Watercolour 400 x 310 mm. Not signed.                                                          | 15 <i>Untitled (On stage, Othello)</i> 1954<br>Watercolour 508 x 635 mm. Not signed.                     |
| 2 <i>Untitled (Wine Cellars Poggio Gherardo, Florence)</i> 1931<br>Watercolour 390 x 490 mm. Signed lower left.                               | 16 <i>Untitled (Time study, Mother reading)</i> ca 1955<br>Watercolour 493 x 432 mm. Signed lower left.  |
| 3 <i>Untitled (Italian landscape)</i> 1931<br>Watercolour 245 x 345 mm. Not signed.                                                           | 17 <i>Untitled (Perugia, Italy)</i> 1963<br>Watercolour 476 x 645 mm. Not signed.                        |
| 4 <i>Untitled (Canterbury river gorge)</i> ca 1934<br>Watercolour 420 x 330 mm. Not signed.                                                   | 18 <i>Untitled (Study of an old man)</i> ca 1963<br>Watercolour 719 x 537 mm. Not signed.                |
| 5 <i>Untitled (Verandah at Claxby)</i> ca 1935<br>Watercolour 405 x 360 mm. Not signed.                                                       | 19 <i>Untitled (Fields near Flatford Mill)</i> 1964<br>Watercolour 396 x 495 mm. Not signed.             |
| 6 <i>Punahiki</i> 1935<br>Watercolour 520 x 660 mm. Signed lower right.                                                                       | 20 <i>Untitled (Mackenzie Country, Mt Cook)</i> ca 1965<br>Watercolour 430 x 550 mm. Signed lower right. |
| 7 <i>Untitled (Queenstown, Frankton Arm)</i> ca 1936<br>Watercolour 330 x 490 mm. Not signed.                                                 | 21 <i>Untitled (Still life with poppies)</i> ca 1965<br>Watercolour 418 x 350 mm. Signed lower right.    |
| 8 <i>The Untidy Verandah</i> ca 1937<br>Watercolour 375 x 467 mm. Signed lower left.<br>On loan from the Aigungho Gallery Collection, Timaru. | 22 <i>Untitled (Canterbury river terraces)</i> ca 1965<br>Watercolour 388 x 565 mm. Signed lower right.  |
| 9 <i>Untitled (Towards Arthur's Pass, Canterbury)</i> ca 1938<br>Watercolour 455 x 370 mm. Signed lower right.                                | 23 <i>Untitled (Four spinners)</i> ca 1967<br>Watercolour 582 x 913 mm. Not signed.                      |
| 10 <i>Takaka</i> ca 1938<br>Watercolour 475 x 362 mm. Not signed.                                                                             | 24 <i>Untitled (Mackenzie moraine)</i> ca 1969<br>Watercolour 435 x 605 mm. Signed lower right.          |
| 11 <i>Kaikoura Farms</i> 1939<br>Watercolour 480 x 560 mm. Signed lower left.                                                                 | 25 <i>Irises</i> 1973<br>Watercolour 750 x 550 mm. Signed lower left.                                    |
| 12 <i>Untitled (Hokitika, The school launch)</i> 1948<br>Watercolour 320 x 415 mm. Not signed.                                                | 26 <i>Untitled (The Flood, Canterbury river)</i> ca 1975<br>Watercolour 560 x 790 mm. Signed lower left. |
| 13 <i>Untitled (Arthur River)</i> ca 1950<br>Watercolour 380 x 475 mm. Signed lower left.                                                     | 27 <i>Untitled (double portrait)</i> ca 1977<br>Watercolour 510 x 739 mm. Not signed.                    |
| 14 <i>Untitled (Grindstones, Queenstown)</i> ca 1950<br>Watercolour 605 x 495 mm. Not signed.                                                 | 28 <i>Untitled (Olivia's garden, Leinster Road)</i> ca 1980<br>Watercolour 485 x 635 mm. Not signed.     |
|                                                                                                                                               | 29 <i>Untitled (Portrait of a seated man)</i> 1981<br>Watercolour 570 x 770 mm. Signed lower left.       |

Most of the paintings are for sale and prices are available upon request from the Gallery Director.

Authentication certificates will be provided for all unsigned works.

Curated by RBE Consulting.