

An Exploration Of Consciousness

Robert Piggott's rich abstractions draw us into the unrestricted spirit that reaffirms the distinct realities and potential of the physical and spiritual worlds, the conscious and the unconscious. Piggott's art also evokes the tangle of changing energies through which "we are free to wander and wonder."

By Cassandra Fusco

Robert Piggott, a mid-career contemporary New Zealand abstract painter and printmaker, began painting in 1974. Since 1984, he has taught continuously in art education,¹ something he enjoys. He also considers it a privilege to work with young artists but finding a balance in work and art can be difficult, he has said. Irrespective of such difficulties, Piggott's prolific output displays a refreshing inventiveness, fine technical skill, and an ongoing sense of wonder. Generally in small series of prints and paintings, the work is a musical weave of simplicity and resonant recurring motifs.² In many respects, the persistent imagery of spirals reflects the artist's personal belief in what he describes as the wealth of "an emptiness that is full of potential." Piggott (b.1955, England and moved to New Zealand in 1963), who is also an accomplished musician, says that he makes abstract works to touch people in a free and open manner, leaving space to respond, interpret, and wonder.

For Piggott, the best of music, whether it is academic in structure and orchestration, or music from a single-string African instrument, or a Maori *waiata* (chant song), can touch

people and offer something uplifting and contemplative. He says that this is the potential that abstraction from the subconscious can access. He says that, although he often draws in a mimetic manner, ultimately he works "through abstraction," which "empties the 'concrete' even though traces of the original may still be apparent

in some degree." Piggott's work has been described as 'strong,' 'lyrical,' 'concerned with personal identity and cross-cultural connections' and 'philosophy and spirituality.' But his personal philosophy leans toward that of Jiddu Krishnamurti and Lao Tzu, neither of which dominates but "encourage meditation and contemplation of human relationships."

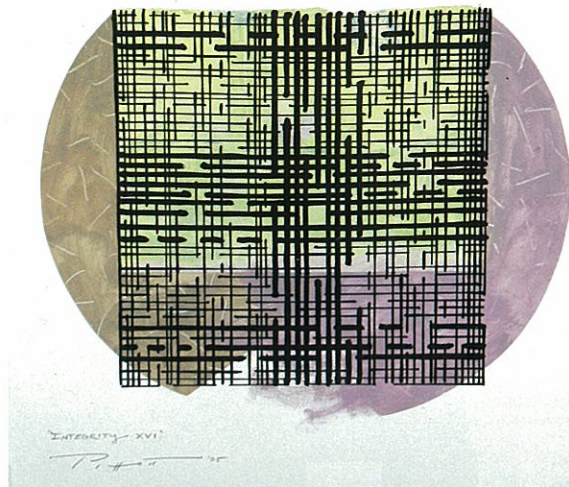
Piggott considers himself to be a 'neutral person.' He believes "in an emptiness that is absolutely full," something that he tries to express in his work. "The ongoing ink drawing series, *Love and Action*, is an example. In these and elsewhere I use the circle and the spiral. These symbols richly embody and communicate the reality that everything is both stillness and movement. It seems in reality love is not something tangible, but it becomes real, certainly something we can truly experience through the loving actions that we both give and receive," says Piggott. "So in that sense love and its actions co-exist. Without love, the actions would not be possible, but without the actions, love would stop and wither. This is similar to the co-existence of both empty and full. My work addresses consciousness and attempts to plumb the depths that inform this."



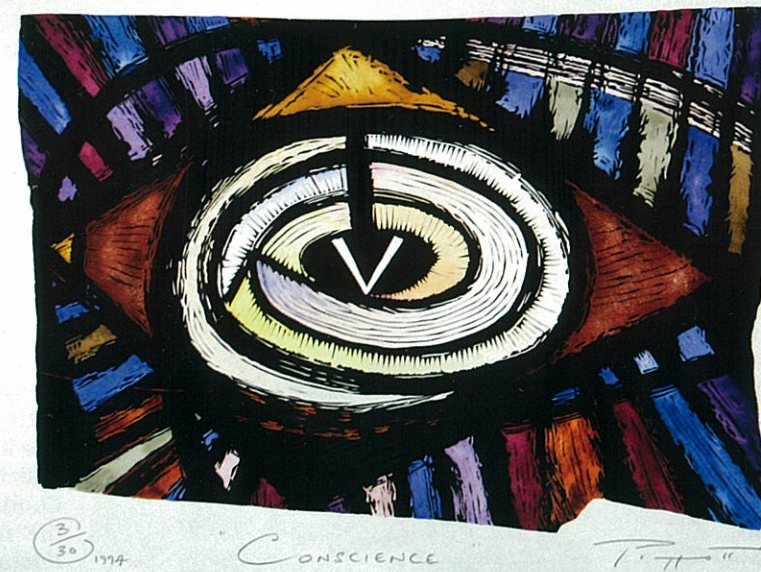
Robert Piggott, *Love and Action VIII*, 2008, Chinese ink and color on xuan paper, 32 x 41 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

From the early ink *Winter* drawings to the lines in *Different Journeys* to the recent *Landmarks* series (1999–2009), it is possible to trace Piggott's pursuit of, as he says, "the emptiness that is full of potential."³ The exhibition entitled *Different Journeys* (2006) contained works from over two decades, and confirmed Piggott's exploration of the conscious and unconscious as both inventive and consistent. *Different Journeys* displayed an impressive variety of abstract formats and yet, irrespective of the variety, they share a certain musical dynamic. In *Matariki: All is Possible/Pumanawa moe and Matariki and From Now on/A muri ake nei* (both 2006), for example, were linear and directional in mark. Within these fairly regular formats, radial crosses shimmer beneath grids of fine lines. The effective combination of fluid mark and media suggest both a surge and a dispersal of energies, reminiscent of Paul Klee.

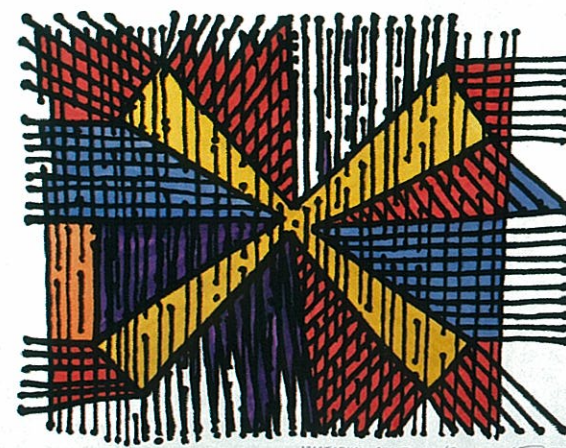
Quite different to the works in *Different Journeys* are two other sequences: the *Loop* (2001–2006) and *Waiata* (2003) series, works of sensually curvilinear and unfixed music. In *Waiata Marama: Floating on the Red Dawn* and *Awatea and Waiata Marama: Song for a true friend/Atiwhai*



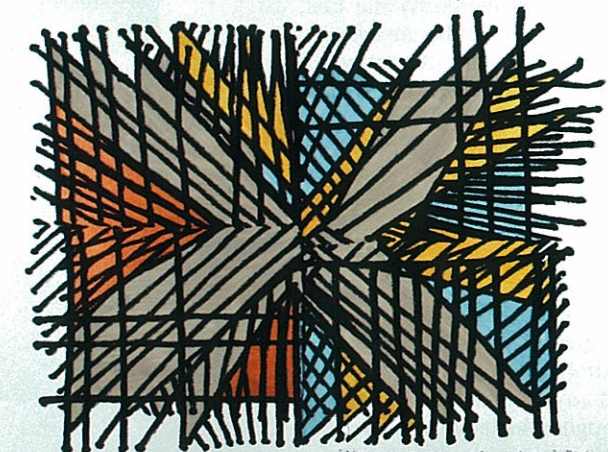
Robert Piggott, *Integrity XVI*, 2005, acrylic on paper, 68 x 80 cm.



Robert Piggott, *Conscience* (from *Aspects of the Soul* series), 1994, hand-colored linocut, 54 x 62 cm.



Robert Piggott, *Matariki: All is Possible / Pumanawa moe*, 2006, acrylic and oilstik on canvas, 89 x 113 cm.



Robert Piggott, *Matariki: From Now on / A muri ake nei*, 2006, acrylic and oilstik on canvas, 89 x 113 cm.

(both 2003), the unfurling lines dance freely and explore, even break free of their grid format. Begun in the early 1990s and inspired by Maori chants, the *Waiata* are full of echoic notation and free flights. The spiraling lines arabesque around and across the several color-collaged areas and reach beyond—like grace notes in a chant voice. In the *Loop* works, Piggott's lines dance with Klee-like joy.

What is most striking in both series is the legibility of this free-flowing energy conveyed on paper. This same musicality is apparent in the *Songs for World Harmony* (2008). In these, lyrical notations and luminous colors reverberate up and down the composition's stacked grids. They form concertinas of colored curvilinear elements, barely contained within rectangular confines and boldly outlined with black and broken edges. So vital are the shapes and colors of the *Songs* that they appear dynamic and unfixed—reminiscent of the fluidity wrought by changing light in stained-glass windows. Like the effect of such windows, Piggott's abstract *Songs* offer the viewer access to, or the experience of, something harmonic and resonant (beyond the descriptive elements.)

It would be easy

to suggest that the visual music of the *Songs* represents Piggott at his most accomplished. But two other series, *Integrity* (2005) and *Love and Action* (2008), confirm that this is an artist of considerable invention. He declines the notion of a single 'signature.'

By comparison with the *Loop*, *Waita*, and *Songs* series, the *Integrity* series, in particular, may initially be seen as formal and contained. Orbs of muted color linger above abstract collaged shapes are overlaid with tilting or angled black grids (reminiscent of complex electronic circuitry.) Piggott says that the grid (in its various positions) represents the mind. It is both a closed 'system' and an aperture, floating above but capable of connecting to the varied grounds beneath. The interplay between the grounds—a gentle ruffle of collage and circle, overlaid with a grid—prevents a sense of stasis. Set alongside the *Loop*, *Waita*, and *Songs* series, the *Integrity* series works are minimalist. Nevertheless, within them there is an integrative play of forms making the compositions simultaneously calm and questioning.

A different kind of enquiring minimalism informs the *Love and Action*, an almost monotone series. With a minimal palette (black, white, and red), concentric circles ripple and multiply. Are they aids to focus and meditation? Are they protective labyrinths against the 'outside' or reflections of the sacred? Concentric circles have functioned variously within many cultures, especially in the East. Piggott says that in the East it symbolically evokes wholeness, universal love, peace and passivity. It encourages wholeness and a still mind, centered, contained, and connected yet open to the cycles of nature. The spiral was also greatly favored by the Celt, the Babylonian, the Mycenaean, the peoples of the Americas, of the Orient, and the Maori, and remains an enduring universal symbol, open to multiple interpretations. Artists as different as Hundertwasser and Miro, Ralph Hotere, and Ben Nicholson, have turned to the spiral time and again and always remake it 'new.'

"The spiral, with its powerfully cosmic overtones, symbolizes time and possibilities," says Piggott. "Like a portal through which we can wander and wonder, it occurs often in my work, as does the grid. If the grid is a symbol of the mind and its logical confines, then the



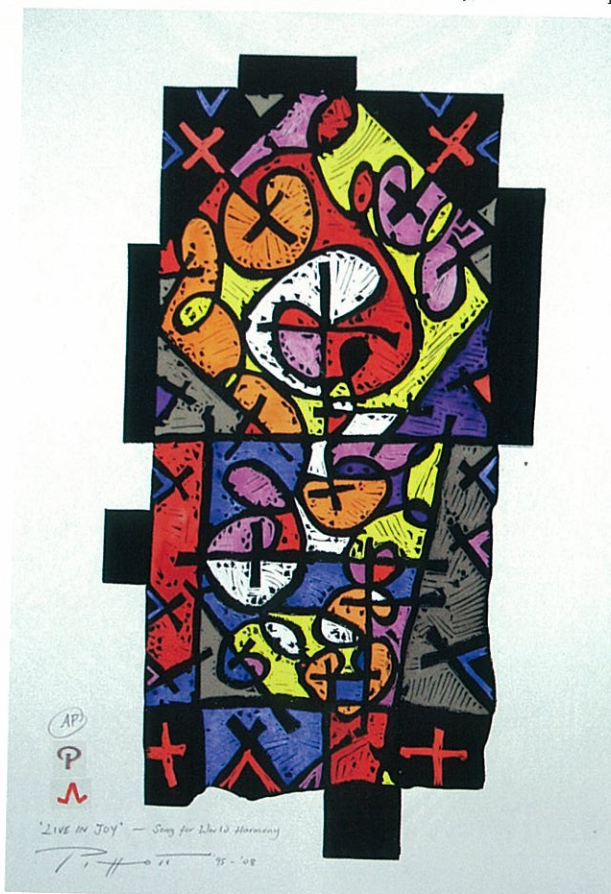
Robert Piggott, *We are One Family* (from *Songs for World Harmony*), 2008, hand-colored linocut, 38 x 57 cm.

spiral is the resonance, the empty-fullness beyond this."

Despite his variety of mark, Piggott's intention is always discernible. Line and color evoke the evolving significance of consciousness and its relationship with the subconscious. Whether characterized by sensuous line or monotone linearity, or soft

explosions of color, the work consistently yet variously explores the expression of the intangible. "The *Integrity* and the *Love and Action* series," he says, "as much as the *Landmarks* series, are informed by the emotional potential of color; emotional, rather than representational or local; an emptiness that is full."

Piggott's search for 'empty/fullness' is legible in the relatively concrete *Landmarks* series. These are landscape studies, and more. Each landmark image functions like an interface of nature itself and our perceptions of this. Consider the blue lancet piercing the vertical elements in *Rangi, through the Forest* (2001). It is like a flicker of tranquil sky glancing between Kauri trunks beneath the forest canopy. The overall composition, entities in cadmium, cobalt, and viridian, is as uplifting as a Chagall stained-glass window. *Rangi* is an abstract homage to life, and of life, and is typical of the whole series—joyous abstractions of the environment. Each landmark work considers aspects of its history and development of place but without any sense of geographic or artist overdrive. Admittedly throughout the series, the land, its elemental forms, and flora are named *Ponga Hill*; *Cliff-face Tupari*, *Pakaurophararoha*; *Petake* (*Hanging Fern*); *Moki* (*Fragrant Fern*); *Tititea*; *Tabeke*; *Hot Blenheim Hill*; *Good as Gold Central Otago*; *Taiari Evening*, and *Ruru's Night*. Yet more than such notation, these works intimate



Robert Piggott, *Live in Joy* (from *Songs for World Harmony*), 2008, hand-colored linocut, 72 x 52 cm.



Robert Piggott, *Waiata Marama : Floating on the Red Dawn / Awatea*, 2003, acrylic on paper and collage, 72 x 76 cm.

close and affectionate observations of the land and something else—a respectful distance. The artist appears to have stepped back in order to abstract his personal sense of these landforms, releasing them as celebratory communications about the land's enduring presence and cyclical changes. These are landmarks of time and tenancy: abstractions without representational over-statement. How is this achieved?

In *Landmarks*, to a limited extent, Piggott appears to use the same directional lines and non-local color present in several of the *Different Journeys* works. (For example, the directional marks in *Matariki: All is Possible / Pumanawa moe*.) The lines in *Cliff-face Tupari*, *Tititea*, *Sunset on the Mountain*, *Tabeke*, and *Hot Blenheim Hill* appear directional, even descriptive. These could be hilly contours braided with vines; golden crops ruffled by wind; cliffs and coastal profiles, and the dance of light glinting through an unfolding fern frond. Yet more than any such interpretation, the abstract fluidity and musicality of these works keeps them vital and dynamic, rather than representational.

So while the initial landform language of *Landmarks* may appear quite different from the overtly abstract *Songs* or the *Love and Action* series, they do in fact share a similar music. It ripples. It is both a



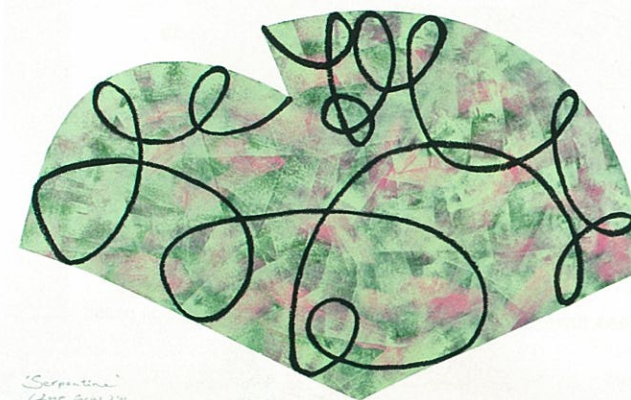
Robert Piggott, *Waiata Marama : Song for a true friend / Atiwhai*, 2003, acrylic on paper and collage, 71 x 86 cm.

dispersal and as a gathering-in of changing energies. Their very formats often reinforce this, particularly *Cliff-face Tupari* and *Good as Gold Central Otago*. We may read these as works concerning coastal erosion, old or new mining, or the use and abuse of water resources. But here, as elsewhere in Piggott's work, the central energy concerns change and it does not necessarily suggest

uncertainty. The work explores and notates the nature of change, as a dynamic of relations, full of potential, actions and consequences. Such is the varied and suggestive power of abstraction.⁴

So what makes Piggott's work worth consideration? On one level it is his consistency of intention and his inventive abstract achievement. But is this a contradiction in terms? Not necessarily. Consider the stacked, hard edged-geometry of *Mindful Action* and the soft, inkblot diffusion of *Moment of Consciousness*. Both works have small bars of light and rich, irregular, calligraphic tails. Is *Mindful Action* a fixed image; an action recalled? Is the diffuse *Moment of Consciousness* a reflection of something ongoing? Or are these works expressions of consciousness as something preliminary to the ebb and flow of something deeper? And if they stimulate enquiry, need there be an answer?

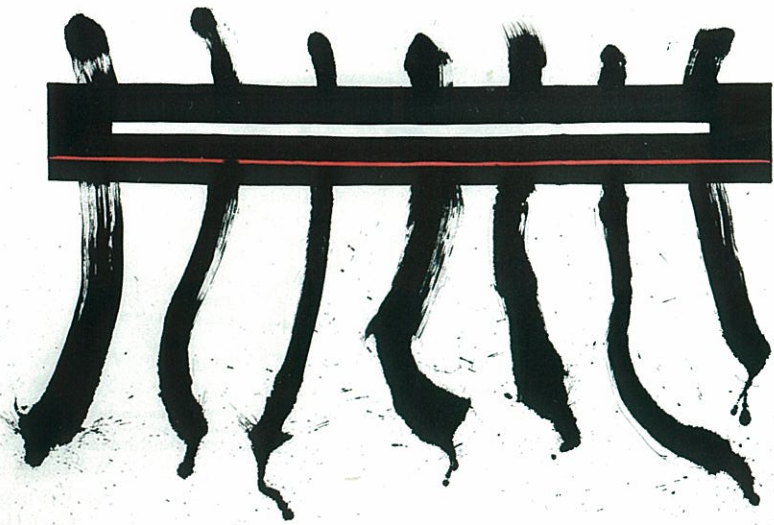
"Anything that stimulates meditation about our lives and actions is worthwhile," says Piggott. "This is where music is so valuable. Not music for entertainment, although clearly that is part of our world, but music that takes us down into meditation; that helps us focus upon the limitations of time and how we use it. When I work, on one level I think about how we relate to one another. On another, I think about how we face the actuality of pain, and how we come to recognize that life is not meaningless; that



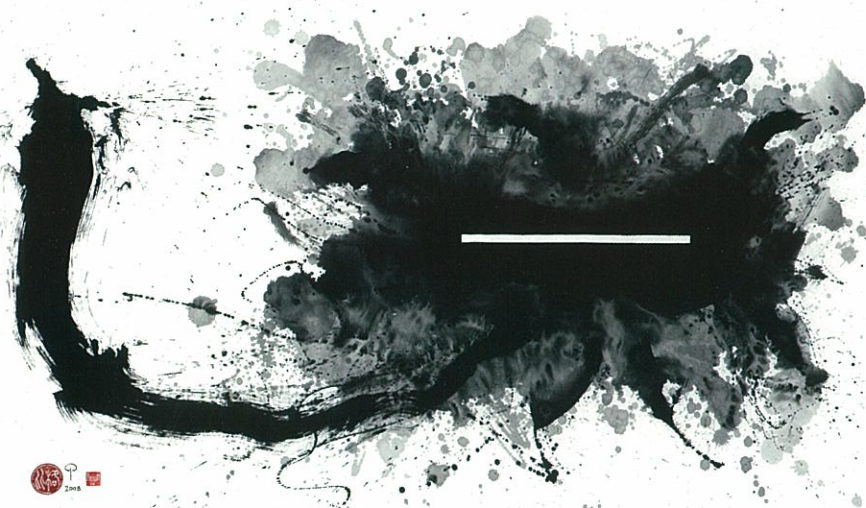
Robert Piggott, *Serpentine* (from *LOOP* series, 2001-), 2001, acrylic and oilstik on paper, 70 x 100 cm.



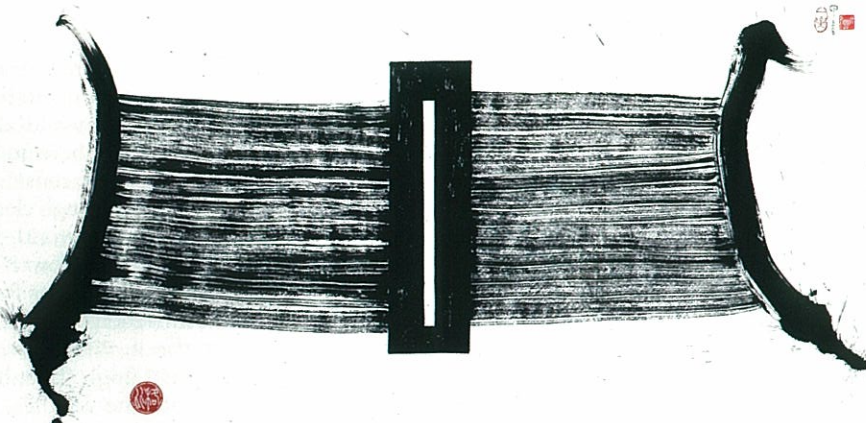
Robert Piggott, *Flax Song* (from *LOOP* series, 2001-), 2006, acrylic and oilstik on paper, 70 x 100 cm.



Robert Piggott, **Walking Meditation** (from *The Ending of Zen*), 2008, Chinese ink and color on xuan paper, 70 x 100 cm.



Robert Piggott, **Moment of Consciousness** (from *The Ending of Zen*), 2008, Chinese ink on xuan paper, 71 x 121 cm.



Robert Piggott, **Inner Strength, The light within** (from *The Ending of Zen*), 2008, Chinese ink on xuan paper, 70 x 120 cm.

there is freedom within responsibility. These sorts of thoughts form the starting point to my day and from there the work flows."

Piggott says that he does not find engagement with art or the art world easy. Yet he remains steadfast in his commitment to produce work that will touch and communicate with others. He particularly dislikes flights of intellectual snobbery, and critical pigeonholing. He talks freely about being vigilant and constantly meditating on how to keep his abstractions fresh and meaningful.

"Many other artists [have] experience[d] this struggle. Perhaps more so now than in the past: when artists produced recognized symbols or representations of specific (guiding) beliefs for specific locations. Now, 'certainty' is gone and our viewing and our lives are conditioned by more varied circumstances and complexities," says Piggott. "As an artist I know the past informs the present. My work does not comment on certitudes, or their lack, as 'right' or 'wrong.' My work concerns possibilities: ways of being. I believe that abstraction facilitates this generously, wonderfully."

With their children now happily independent, Piggott and his Malaysia-born Chinese wife live quietly in Dunedin, the Edinburgh of the Antipodes. "We love Otago. The land in this part of New Zealand has qualities that are both universal and yet somehow unique, specific to this area. It has something to do with the rugged beauty of the landscape and the settlements that have grown within it, and how these two entities interact. Otago is rich in natural and material resources, the land and its history, and peoples of many cultures."

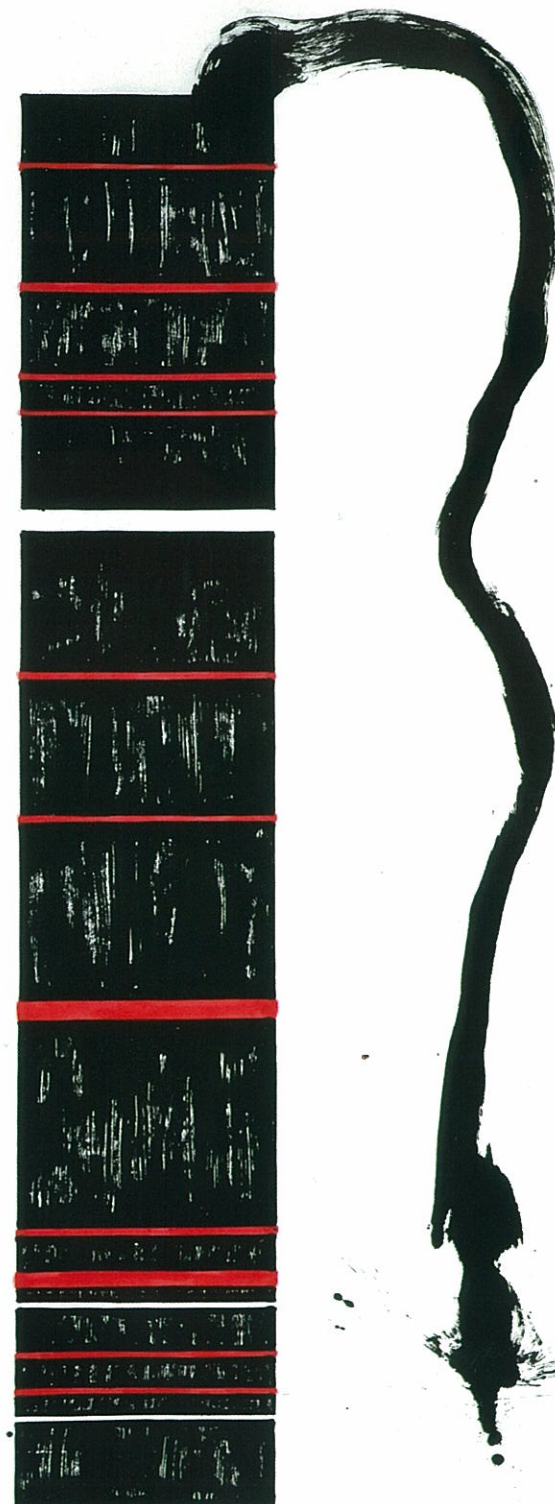
"These early communities founded wonderful institutions such as the university with its Hocken Library, and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, both of which continue to serve and reflect the historical and cultural scope of Otago. It is surprising how many young people frequent these institutions and with good reason. As a youth I found both to be great storehouses of knowledge and culture and contemplation. I still do. For this alone, institutions such as these and education in general help us to appreciate and understand not only ourselves, but also the choices we can and do make.

"I don't expect my work to change the world radically. But I do

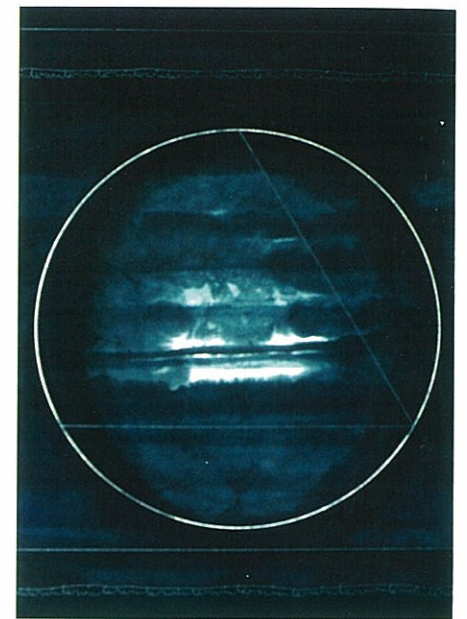
want my art to add to people's lives and hope there is something in my work that can positively connect with others and hopefully withstand the test of time."

One of Lao Tzu's most resonant quotations comes to mind: "At the center of your being you have the answer; you

know who you are and you know what you want." Robert Piggott's work quietly and consistently draws us into considerations of this center. But what enlarges and invigorates this engagement is Piggott's ability to make works that are both centered yet 'unfixed.' One consequence of



Robert Piggott, **Mindful Action** (from *The Ending of Zen*), 2008, Chinese ink and colour on xuan paper, 137 x 69 cm.



Robert Piggott, **Winter Drawing**, 1976, dye on rice paper with silver ink and graphite, 36 x 26 cm.

this confluence of the calm center and the unrestricted spirit, is a progress of richly varied and free-flowing abstractions. Robert Piggott has described himself as 'neutral.' It is perhaps his personal quality of unobtrusive centeredness that enables him to produce works that evoke both the dispersal and the gathering-in of changing energies and through which we are free to wander and wonder. Δ

Notes:

1. Piggott is also an accomplished musician and, since completing a Master of Fine Arts Degree at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2000, he has taught art and music at Kaikorai Valley College in Dunedin.
2. This and all subsequent quotations are taken from interviews and correspondence between the artist and author between 2008 and August 2010.
3. Piggott says that this series is a hybrid combination of the pure abstract concepts developed during his Masters Degree (1998–1999) at RMIT in Melbourne, and his previous monotype-drawing medium and style.
4. Piggott says that the *Landmarks* series may reference Maori and Primitive art and the linear work of artists Hotere, Klee, and Miro.
5. Gold was discovered in Central Otago's Tuapeka field in 1861 and was worked by people from a variety of cultures including: Chinese, Jewish, and German.

Dr. Cassandra Fusco is the New Zealand contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News. She lives in Christchurch.