

# Don Binney

b.1940

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Don Binney's drawings reveal a personal and intimate understanding of the landscape. By the early 1970s his approach of wandering the landscape armed with a sketchbook seemed quaint and romantic, a product of an earlier time. But Binney stuck stubbornly to his task. More than 30 years later, this drawing of Bland Bay in Northland makes a strong case for the continuing relevance and importance of the artist who works in and for nature.

Landscapes like *Bland Bay, Northland* are a familiar presence in Binney's well-known paintings of birds, where tui, kererū and kawaupaku all majestically soar overhead. In this drawing the landscape receives Binney's undivided and focused attention. He dissects the landscape with reverence, charting the ways its sweeping, abstracted landforms respond to changing weather and light patterns. The wax crayon on heavy, grainy paper elegantly conveys the effects of light, shadow, and the rustling of foliage. This use of textural qualities to capture nature's energies and patterns also characterises Binney's paintings. On occasion he has even combed the paint surface.

The drawing captures the moods, character and mysteries of the landscape. Yet it is only one of a series of drawings of this place. Each drawing offers a subtle variation or shift, which combine to produce a fully developed 'portrait'. These drawings, in turn, represent only one strand of Binney's career-long engagement with landscape, wildlife and flora: one of the most sustained investigations of a subject in New Zealand's art history.

The drawing embodies a creative process that begins with observation and engagement with the landscape. Eye and hand convey those experiences through art. But for Binney this is about more than making a beautiful image. Coming to terms with the landscape opens up deeper issues. He pays close attention to the Māori presence and stories inscribed on this land, and to his responsibilities as a Pākehā artist seeking his own relationship with the land. Environmental concerns are also at play. Signs of industrial development and human presence creep into these drawings only rarely. Binney offers a pure and pristine landscape as both reverent response to the power of nature, and as reminder of what may potentially be lost. It is worth noting that Binney made conservation posters that address these issues in very different ways.

For Binney, drawing takes on symbolic importance in relation to these environmental and political issues, but also in the face of art historical shifts of the period. Younger 'New Image' painters like Richard Killeen and Ian Scott celebrated the city and the suburbs, claiming that the landscape tradition headed by Binney was outdated. New art forms and media also threatened the values of Binney's generation. These factors and issues may all have played a part in Binney taking to the sandhills with his sketchbook. He summed up his reaction and these drawings in an artist's statement made in 1976 when he wrote, "I see nothing inappropriate in offering a prayer for pure air, clean water and growing life in this and the coming century; hence the act of drawing".<sup>1</sup>

## Aaron Lister

<sup>1</sup> Don Binney, cited in *New Zealand Drawing* (1976), Auckland City Art Gallery.

### Galleries and museums:

[www.artisgallery.co.nz](http://www.artisgallery.co.nz)

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)

[www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)

### Articles:

[www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/envirofdb.htm](http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/envirofdb.htm)

### Books:

Skinner, D. (2003). *Don Binney Ngā Manu/Ngā Motu — Birds/Islands*. Auckland University Press.

### Web search:

Richard Killeen

Ian Scott

