



Artist Michael Smither standing by his mural of the *Baptism of Christ*, one of a pair painted during the 70s for St. Joseph's Catholic church, New Plymouth

I grew up as a Catholic in New Plymouth, and probably the first influences for me were church art – the statues and holy pictures I grew up with. As far as I am concerned a picture is worth a thousand words, and those old pictures are burnt into my memory. I remember a statue of the Virgin Mary with her foot on a snake, standing on the world. The Stations of the Cross were powerful images which impressed me with their drama. I can remember at school being greatly struck by a guardian angel behind the figure of a child about to cross a rickety-looking bridge.

The Catholic symbols impressed me. The whole liturgy is surrounded by such powerful images. But in those days original works of art were practically non-existent. My father was an artist. The things I saw him create were certainly part of my youth. I gobbled up anything

The religious art of

Tui Motu interviews an artist whose



During the 1970s I painted two murals for St Joseph's church, which had just been rebuilt in the centre of New Plymouth. They stand as a pair at the back of the church and are about 20 feet long and 12 feet high. They are painted in acrylics straight onto the wall. *Doubting Thomas* (above) was the first of the two. It wasn't actually a commission – I just went in and painted it on the walls at the back of the church. They were solid concrete walls covered with a horrible speckly paint. I had once seen a couple of Stanley Spencer paintings in the Wellington Art Gallery; they impressed me and set me reading. Spencer was interested more in form and space – not at all like the Impressionists. It gave his work a solidity, and that was what I wanted.

I learned how to create moulded shapes. I enjoyed painting the Taranaki coastal scenery, especially the rock shapes. You



can't paint rocks in an impressionist style, giving them a sense of weight and shape. I added sharp, defined edges, and that became a hallmark of my work.

Like all mural painters I had a sort of 'vision' of it. I sketched it in charcoal first. I first drew the episode of Thomas and Christ. I had always thought it would make a great mural to surround that moment with the reactions of the various Apostles (right). I wanted to show how people might react to an event like that. There are women and children in the scene and even a little dog (left).



visual – including comics. The big event of the year was the arrival of the Columban calendar full of reproductions of Old Masters.

The desire to make things and to paint came to me early. I had quite a bit of training from my father, who had a silk screen printing workshop. Even such commercial enterprises have quite a bit of art content, so I learnt how to paint and do silk screen and make things out of cardboard and various media. I was able to play around in the studio and learn by copying.

At high school I had a good art teacher and he encouraged me. I was given a room to myself out the back of the art classroom. I remember reading the story of Van Gogh – *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone. Once I read that I was doomed! The impressionist paintings we had at school were all rather poor reproductions and I didn't get any feeling for them at

all. They seemed to me a bit namby-pamby, compared with the church tradition with its strong 'blood and guts' imagery! I enjoyed paintings which told stories.

Later I became interested in Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists. At art school my teacher was Lois White, and people have noted her influence in my work. At the time I disliked the way she painted, but something must have rubbed off.

At art school in the early 60s I painted some religious pictures, such as Crucifixions – and that was very much frowned on! It was what I wanted to do because the ideas were so powerful. I remember painting Christ walking on water and the miracle of the loaves and fishes. I also did lino cuts in the style of illustrations you find in the Catholic missals. Some of my earlier works are to be found in the New Plymouth Art Gallery.

Michael Smither

work graces the walls of a local church



The *Baptism of Christ* (above) came six or seven years later. By that time I had dropped out of the church, but the parish priest invited me to paint the other wall because just having the one mural was unbalanced. My ideas had moved on to the notion that Christ could have existed in Taranaki as much as anywhere else. So I set it in a local scene. The rocks are Taranaki rocks. The dove became a tui, and John the Baptist was a Maori friend. Christ was depicted wearing a sort of rubber suit, and some of the other figures were friends and acquaintances of that time.

People were a bit puzzled at first, but the public in New Plymouth have come to know me as their artist. Generally speaking my work is accepted especially after the passage of time. The two murals are both part of my life, and they reflect my personal journey and how my ideas have changed. For that reason I think they strike a chord with people. When an artist is known in an area the people know that the

artist is attempting to speak for them personally. It isn't something which has been foisted on them from overseas.

The final painting was the *Empty Tomb*. I was greatly moved by Piero Della Francesca's *Resurrection*, and I always wanted to paint it. After *Doubting Thomas* I was sure no one had actually seen Christ rising from the dead. All they saw was the empty tomb. It was in the church entrance (below) – about 12 feet high on a solid concrete

wall, facing the people as they came in. You can no longer see it because the wall was later taken away, which is rather sad!

One of the local priests at the time, Fr Carroll, was so deeply moved by the painting that he used to say his breviary there every day. He would walk up and down in front of it.

It was quite a symbolic painting. The rising sun, the new dawn, at the back. The cloth stretched out and weighed down by stones – which was my symbol. Down below at the right, the crown of thorns. For me it was a powerful work, and it's a pity to have lost the picture forever.



It was in 1968 that I was commissioned to carve the *Stations of the Cross* for St Joseph's church in New Plymouth at the time the new church was being built. The stations are cast in cement fondue and I was influenced by the sculptures of Rodin, which I greatly admired. Each of the 14 stations would be about 18 inches high, and they were all the way round the church. Four have now been separated from the body of the church because of the later construction of a day chapel. There is a move at present to open the chapel up again so that the stations won't be interrupted.

Each station is mounted on a concrete mullion with windows between, so they are lit by natural light. The process of cement fondue consists of carving the image in clay, making a plaster cast and then pouring the concrete so that the plaster moulds the concrete. It was difficult technically since I hadn't done it before. The *Stations* took me about three years to complete. It was my biggest job up to that date, and is still in my opinion one of my best works. The reaction of the people was mixed: they were either for or against! I think people now are proud to have them because they are original art works.



The First Station:

Jesus is condemned to die.

I used a photo from the Vietnam War of a prisoner on his knees, hands tied behind his back...

This is an ordinary event; here Jesus placed himself completely within the ordinariness of life.



The Sixth Station:

Simon is forced to help carry the Cross

In many ways I feel like Simon. My life draws me away from what I really want to do. The T-shirt that says: "I'd rather be doing something else" was made for me.



The Twelfth Station:

Jesus is crucified on the Cross

Showing the crucifixion from behind the Cross leaves all detail to the imagination. The effect is to demystify the event... 'Man's inhumanity to man' must surely be enough to satisfy our desire for shame and humiliation.

Stations of the Cross: St Joseph's, New Plymouth, sculpted by Michael Smither

Once did a set of *Stations of the Cross* as a memorial for the celebrated New Zealand painter, Rita Angus. This took the theme away from its religious context and put it into the everyday, in memory of the artist who had recently died. It was a set of 14 crosses with landscapes painted inside them. They are in oils on crosses made of hardboard, each about two feet tall.

They were a statement of mine on the environment. In our culture we tend to impose straight lines on nature. The stations for a Catholic symbolise the trials of life and death. I thought Rita's life had been a tough one, so I symbolised it in that way.

At the present time I'm painting a picture of a man putting a ring on a girl's finger inside a cafe. Outside you can see a Combi van and a parking meter. Across the road is a man with a rubbish cart. It's 'vernacular stuff' – but it could well be my *Marriage Feast at Cana*.

The symbols are those of movement (the van) and time (the parking meter) and the transitory nature of things (the rubbish cart). There's a lonely woman sitting in an alcove across the road. In the foreground are these two intense young people exchanging their love. You stand back from it and make up your own mind. I actually saw this scene – and the painting picks up all the elements.

In my opinion religion is for people, so the artwork in a church should speak to the people. The Christian message is full of powerful symbols. Most of my art continues to be religious in the sense of expressing the depth of human consciousness. Not just surface things, but to go deep into people's hearts. It is the spirituality of people I try to portray.

I'm moved to paint this scene of the couple exchanging the ring. It is my inspiration. It's like a gap opening in the universe and my being able to see things in a way which is not ordinary. ■