

From the Big Apple to Akaroa

His subjects are animals and birds, and he draws parallels between their lives and ours. COLIN SLADE examines Norm Magnusson's work.

It's a long way from Greenwich Village and downtown New York to a picture gallery in uptown Akaroa, New Zealand, but New York artist Norm Magnusson has bridged the gap.

Magnusson came to New Zealand last November with the intention of spending six months in the country and recording his impressions on canvas. Arriving in Akaroa, he travelled, as many a traveller does there, and he reached Lorraine Quinn of the Picturesque Gallery that this man's work was not in the usual "beautiful New Zealand" mould.

For much of his painting career, intrigued by animals and their relationship with humans, Magnusson has drawn parallels between their lives and ours. In his art the animal's predicament is often a metaphor for that of humans. The "Trick Hare" for example, jumping through flaming hoops at someone else's direction, describes the helpless feeling of being caught up in a mad race that any of us experience at times, both in the work and domestic environment.

Other paintings are observations of a world where humans are on top of the food chain: the "Cock of the Walk" struts and crows proudly while being confined within its fence knowingly waiting for the inevitable.

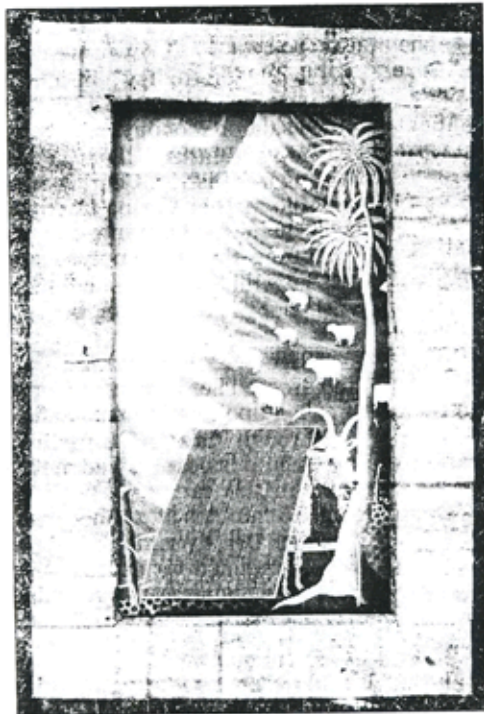
There is a strong environmental thread running through his work, but Magnusson takes no moral stance. "I'm not making a comment so much as making a sharp observation. I don't mind that we hunt and domesticate animals. I'm a meat eater, I wear leather and I'm on. I mean, we in turn nourish others - eventually the worms are going to have us."

Magnusson had no formal art training. Born in Illinois in 1960, he found himself at the age of 23 living in a one-room New York apartment struggling to survive as an advertising copywriter. Painting became an escape at weekends. Gradually he found that with enough patience he could make what was in his head.

By 1986 he was working for Saatchi & Saatchi's Manhattan agency, and this eventually brought him the opportunity to work in their London offices and to see something of England and Europe. The sojourn sharpened his appreciation of aesthetics and his desire to paint. On his return it began to occur to him that he might be able to make a living doing what he had come to love.

By 1991 he had enough freelance advertising work lined up to quit his job and take the plunge. "I just wanted to make pretty pictures," says Magnusson. But what defines a pretty picture? "Colour," he responds immediately - "the balance of colours. It must also have a story, a point of view, but that's secondary. It must first be aesthetically pleasing."

A number of galleries in New York were enthusiastic about his approach and gave him solo exhibitions which were favourably reviewed by publications such as "The Villager" and "The New Yorker." Magnusson enjoys his success and relishes the opportunity it gives him to travel.



Norm Magnusson's "Goat" painting.

He spent most of 1993 painting in Normandy. "La Chasse," one of the fruits of that time, depicts a manic hound and a riderless horse pelting away from their quarry over a ploughed field. Behind them in the woods, a bemused deer looks on, while far in the receding distance, the unseated huntsman stands tiny and helpless. Magnusson's graphics are compelling. His gently distorted use of line and his arresting colour portray a world of humour, madness and irony - a France we don't often see, but it's truthful.

The paintings in the Akaroa exhibition show New Zealand in a similar light. Again his subjects are animals and birds, some of them given his anthropomorphic twist. The Kea is a natural for this treatment, but the Possum takes on a character that only farmers and conservationists would fully appreciate. "I don't see all animals in all places as sacred," he says. Here the background forest is a blazing inferno, while the devilish possum perches on a tree poking a stick into a knot-hole, symbolizing the rape of nature.

A Harrier standing over a freshly slain rabbit on the long asphalt dinner plate shows a more benign example of nature modified by humans. In all the New Zealand works the colours and atmospheric clarity are sharply drawn at the same time as that distorted line entertains. In one painting the long white cloud becomes a long white squiggle, just for fun.

Indeed "fun-ism" is the name Magnusson has coined for his style. "So much art in galleries in New York is held up as important but I don't know why it's important. I mean it's ugly and yet everybody is raving about it. The art establishment feeds on this intellectual elitism. I've developed a theory that collectors have this relationship with the gallery director who explains to them what the painting is about and then they take it home and hang it on the wall. When their friends ask what the picture is about, they have this rap which they reel off to make themselves look smart. Well, that's the cynical part of me. But I want my paintings to be intellectually engaging without being intellectually elitist." It is his dislike for this elitism that made it so refreshing to meet Lorraine Quinn, says Magnusson. "She is so enthusiastic about pretty paintings. She has no time for snobbery in art.

In many of the paintings the frame becomes part of the picture. Complementary graphics appear on some, while others, like the harrier picture, are enclosed at the corners by triangles of old beaten roofing iron - Magnusson's New Zealand travel snaps. You can imagine them mounted in some giant old album back in his New York apartment - unless they are snapped up by the locals first. The exhibition runs from 16th to the 31st of March at "Picturesque Gallery" Akaroa.