

MEGAN RULE

INTERSTICES 24

Experiencing water as a spectator: The art practices of innovative mid-century women from southern New Zealand

Water, weather, and inevitably climate are never far from our conscience. Our desires, perspectives, relationships, genealogy, and even survival, hinge upon its presence in just the right amount, and its condition within a relatively narrow band of chemical balance. When these aspects are not quite so, and do not align, either physically or mentally, we intervene or interrupt the state of nature to extrapolate our own experience of this valuable and indeed precious natural and commodified element.

Frances Pound, in *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, points to a painter as a “spectator of nature” and the painting as a metaphoric “window on the world.”¹ He argues the genres of early New Zealand landscapes, including watercolour paintings, are stained windows with shapes and colours, in other words, they are signs with intentional codification to evoke emotion from a spectator.² Our reading of Pound approaches the nature of water in architecture as a technique manifest in an “arc” or “filter” through a framed reiterative reflection, a circular interpretation, like a painting, a drawing, or poetry.

My story begins by exploring the creative practice work of overlooked pioneering mid-century southern-New Zealand women who trained in architecture and became registered architects. This sets a scene by which to examine the watercolour art of Monica (Ford) Barham (1920–1983). Barham grew up and was educated in Invercargill, later completing her architecture training at Auckland University College.³ She became the first female architect in Otago and Southland in 1945, by qualifying for associate membership of the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) and Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and set up her practice Barham and Barham Architects in Invercargill with husband Cecil Barham from 1946.⁴

This paper explores selected Barham watercolour paintings and seeks to establish how the paintings interpret the dynamic of water, weather, and/or climate. In addition to Pound’s “spectator’s” filtering frame or lens, the paper finds a parallel to Barham’s watercolours in the poetry of her near contemporary Ruth Dallas (1919–2008), who also grew up in Southland.

Dallas, a well-loved writer of poetry and children’s books, hailed from Invercargill before moving to Dunedin in 1954. In her writing, she was a discerning observer

and recorder of environmental, social, and weathered conditions. Over many decades and in many narratives about growing up in Southland, Dallas expressly drew on the vigour of the ever-present weather, evoking an impression of the atmosphere, uniquely southern and of its time.⁵

This exploration of the parallel creative lives of two southern women artists responds to provocations expressed in the call for papers for this issue of *Interstices*, to consider “water’s metaphorical force,” and “how architecture might be formed, thought about, created, or occupied by the elemental force of water.”⁶ Together lines of poetry and watercolour paintings are paired to draw forth conditions of water movement relating to the land such as a brisling effervescent edge, the decay of sodden earth, purity in an icy blanket, or nourishment in colourful vegetation.

Barham’s surviving family members talk of her interest in watercolour painting and carving stone even though her general interests changed from time to time as she looked to learn new skills. The majority of Barham’s known paintings are not dated and those that are show either 1963 or 1970, when she became an art teacher, initially at Southland Boys’ High School for a year in 1970 and then from 1971 until 1977 at James Hargest High School, Invercargill, in parallel with architecture practice.

As to why she was mainly interested in watercolours rather than oil paintings is not clear. It could be that this was the most pragmatic, economic, mobile, and user-friendly approach when she divided her time between her two studios located at Otatara and Queenstown. A sample of her watercolour paintings shows a strong interest in the spatial relationship of local landscapes and seasonal variation. Each of the four selections below expresses transitional and extreme states of water, from sparkling summer seas to evaporating autumn winds, chilly winter snowflakes, and hydrated spring flowers.

Omaui Beach

Fig. 1 Monica Barham (ca. 1970s).
Omaui Beach [Watercolour on paper,
Private collection of D. Barham]



Riding the Planet Earth

All day no cloud crosses the deep sky.

The sea is turquoise, with white waves booming

Along the beach like muffled guns.

[...]

Wars like the waves of the sea have erupted and gone.

Somewhere hidden in the long grass, the lark

Must surely have a mate listening to his song.

— Ruth Dallas (1979)⁷

Barham's watercolours typically begin with wateriness as brushes are saturated in bottles or dishes and hues are layered onto crisp paper to construct layers of space starting with the whiteness of the paper background to fill in the whitest atmosphere of puffy clouds, snowflakes, or splashes of water in ocean waves. In this case initially water is created by the absence of watercolours, and by the presence of the watery process of drawing forth the mashed pieces of timber shavings that slide together and congeal to form a papery background.

The watery clouds and ocean meet on the horizon line and consume a majority of the framed view. A rocky shoreline abutting a rich ground vegetation is portrayed like debris washed up in more vigorous weather storms. Dark sculptured cabbage trees speckle the coastline of tussock intermingled with grasses that are layered over with watery shadows. Small threshold structures such as a building, bridge, or gate feature in the vicinity of the perspective vanishing point.

These techniques find favour in the landscape watercolours of William Matthew Hodgkins (1833–1898), a founding member of the Otago Art Society. Francis Pound

draws our attention to Hodgkins' influential paper, "A History of Landscape Art and its Study in New Zealand" (1880), that demonstrates his interest in the landscape's poetic content as well as investigating atmospheric conditions; gaseous envelopes of clouds, vapour, or mists.⁸ Furthermore his daughter, artist Frances Hodgkins (1869–1947), would later become an important local figure in Barham's art circle. Hodgkins' paintings became widely acclaimed for their bold colour palettes with increasingly modernist reinterpretations of scenery.⁹

Lovells Flat South Otago

Fig. 2 Monica Barham (ca. 1970s). *Lovells Flat South Otago* [Watercolour on paper, Invercargill Public Art Gallery, Cat 715, Collection of J. Friend]



The Ship

*To hear the ship among the trees, in creaking
Boughs that never rested, feel the wide
And cool dark leaves of summer suddenly breaking
Into waves that sang above the wind.*

[...]

*And yet, when through the stories told and told
Again among the swinging shadows, white
And cloud-like, beautiful, the strange ship sailed,
It troubled us like something half remembered.*

—Ruth Dallas (1953)¹⁰

Lovells Flat is situated down the valley from the Taieri Plain where excess hill country headwaters after torrential rains have occasionally flooded the lower nooks and crannies. Close by at Lawrence, Gabriel's Gully experienced a most dramatic expansion and decline within a matter of years due to gold prospecting from 1861. Beyond the flat, the infamous flowing icy blue Clutha River is melted snow fed from the Southern Alps.

The Lovells Flat Sod Cottage (ca. 1862) has survived on a prominent country road highway, capturing a vernacular moment of that time.¹¹ The earth or soil in the immediate vicinity combined with a consistency of water and sand brought this construction into realisation. The watercolour's dark and golden dilapidations hint at and reinforce its derelict status, but give hope. After this painting the sod cottage was restored.¹²

After the Blizzard

Fig. 3 Monica Barham (ca. 1970s). *After the Blizzard* [Watercolour on paper, Invercargill Public Art Gallery, Cat 383]



Snow

On fallen snow we find

As on a chart, patterns

Of man's restlessness.

[...]

The sun glittered for a moment

On the unblemished

Streets of the blind.

—Ruth Dallas (1976)¹³

This watercolour is perhaps Barham's most vivid expression of glistening water with the light and shadow capturing a state of water in the weather. The nature of water is soft, light, and still, with various shades of white, shadows, and light in painterly material layers that construct space.

Several of Barham's paintings give expression to the more extreme environment and weather/climate presence. Notably the deep south of New Zealand experiences long shadows in its latitudinal location. The winter days are relatively short, while summer days stretch on. The greenest in vegetation is also deep and seasonally well fed by water. In contrast, the moisture taken by the Southern Alps leaves the inner valleys with intermittent relief. Is it scorching or is it chilly?

Snow and glass share some translucency and filtering qualities, although it is less clear how they may share a sense of natural connection, and I wonder if the interest in chilly snow harps back to Barham's experimenting with glazing and sandblasting, with its ability to reflect or refract light with a degree of transparency.¹⁴

Telesis

Fig. 4 Monica Barham (ca. 1960). *Telesis* [Watercolour on paper, Collection of J. Friend]



Morning Mountains

*I could not look at the mountains that morning
Because of the avenue of poplars,
The lamp-like willows guiding the stream,
And the tulips in your garden:
Yet all the time I knew they hung like curtains,
Looped and caught by silver ribbons,
To the glittering blue October sky.*

—Ruth Dallas (1946)¹⁵

The painting captures the Barhams' first house, Telesis (1947), showing it with a later addition (ca. 1960s) and the stone terraced gardens fully established. There is a bright whimsical feel to the painted image with pastel colours introduced (aqua blues, sunny yellows). It is as if the painting is producing a more surreal optimism or impression.

An unfinished watercolour painting from a similar era by New Zealand artist Rita Angus (1908–1970) shows a modern setting of *The Artist's Cottage, Clifton* (1945), in which she resided for a year. The landscape vegetation is awash in rich green hues while the minimal rectilinear lines of building remain brief and inconclusive in pencil form.¹⁶ Angus was part of the Canterbury artists' collective known as the Group. She is well known for her oil paintings of landscape and especially *Cass* that captured the heart of the Southern Alps further north.¹⁷

Fig. 5 Rita Angus (ca. 1945). *The Artist's Cottage, Clifton* [Watercolour and pencil on paper, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, courtesy of the Estate of Rita Angus]



The publication of Frances Pound's *Frames on the Land* coincided with the end of Monica Barham's lifetime and career in Invercargill. Pound suggests that the early New Zealand landscape impressions do give some sense of what the context may have been like, in some cases before it was further disrupted by the industrialisation of European settlers. Pound laments a colonial British construct or perspective though, since Māori did not record their landscapes, however he accepts that further perspectives would follow his.¹⁸ In his later book, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity: 1930–1970* of 2009, Pound ditches many of his earlier themes framing New Zealand landscapes and argues for a newer "complex critical analysis" of paintings. In his search for a New Zealand difference in art he admits to further change being warranted by the book's gestating closure.¹⁹

Barham's later creative period related to the timing of a design for a family holiday cabin (1969) at the holiday park in Queenstown and regular family excursions up the road inland to Central Otago from coastal Southland. The contrast in weather between the two family abodes could not be more different – Southland with its higher than average wind speeds combined with their water or wetness carried from the mainly cooler southern coast, and the inland alpine area with its dryer sunnier extremes of hot or cold temperatures. These climate characteristics are deftly captured in Barham's impressions.

Having seen a photograph in the family archives that inspired one of the paintings, I am led to believe that Barham tended to paint from photographed images of scenes visited and experienced. As an art teacher she would over time become increasingly aware of the techniques that illuminate the spatial and climatic atmospheres in her paintings.

Barham's art speaks to the nature of water, whether in context, materiality, by arrangement or methodology, or whether present, suggestive, or absent. The "spectator's window" of art critic Frances Pound, local writer Ruth Dallas, and artist Monica Barham suggests that Southlanders are acutely attuned to their climate, weather, and water conditions, perhaps more so than those from elsewhere in New Zealand, due to the occurrence of greater extremes in seasonal variation.

NOTES

1. Frances Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand* (Collins, 1983), 12.
2. Pound, *Frames on the Land*, 12.
3. Megan Rule, *Monica Barham: So You're Building: You and the Architect* (SPA Press, 2024), 19, 52; Megan Rule, "Crit/Itinerary 75: Monica F. Barham in Southland," *Architecture New Zealand* (May/June 2024): 84–87; "Debutant Ball," *Evening Star*, 7 June 1938.
4. Megan Rule, "Not Afraid to try Anything: Monica Barham," *Making Space: A History of New Zealand Women in Architecture*, ed. Elizabeth Cox (Massey University Press, 2022), 144.
5. Ruth Dallas, *Curved Horizon: An Autobiography*, Te Whenua Series No. 5: Pacific People, Land and Literature (University of Otago Press, 1991).
6. "Call for Abstracts Issue 24: On Water: The Aqueous in Architecture," 22 June 2024, <https://interstices.ac.nz/index.php/Interstices/announcement/view/19>.
7. Ruth Dallas, *Steps of the Sun: Poems by Ruth Dallas* (The Caxton Press, 1979), 28.
8. Pound, *Frames on the Land*, 64, 66.
9. Catherine Hammond and Mary Kisler, *Frances Hodgkins: European Journeys* (Auckland University Press, 2019).
10. Ruth Dallas, *Country Road and Other Poems: 1947–52* (The Caxton Press, 1953), 22.
11. "Old Sod," *Otago Daily Times*, 29 November 2023, <https://www.odt.co.nz/rural-life/rural-life-other/old-sod>.
12. Clutha District Council Heritage: Lovells Flat, accessed 24 November 2024, <https://heritage.cluthadc.govt.nz/nodes/view/66>.
13. Ruth Dallas, *Walking on Snow: Poems by Ruth Dallas* (The Caxton Press, 1976), 35.
14. *Evening Standard*, 22 August 1942; M. F. & C. V. Barham, "Remodelled Brown Owl Milk Bar," *Home & Building* 11, no. 3 (Dec 1948–Jan 1949): 38–41; Rule, "Not Afraid to try Anything," 144, 147; Molly Macalister and Monica Ford, "Talented Young Sculptor at Work on Museum Exhibits," *Evening Star*, 22 August 1942.
15. Dallas, *Curved Horizon*, 84, 85. Published in *Southland Daily Times*, 22 June 1946.
16. Lizzie Bisley, ed., *Rita Angus: New Zealand Modernist: He Ringatoi Hou o Aotearoa* (Te Papa Press, 2021), 10, 25, 27, 111.
17. Bisley, *Rita Angus*.
18. Pound, *Frames on the Land*, 12, 13.
19. Frances Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity: 1930–1970* (Auckland University Press, 2009), xxi, xxii.