

Nell x Colin McCahon: Through the Wall of Birth and Death

TEACHER RESOURCE



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Nell

Nell is an Australian artist who works across many mediums such as sculpture, wearables, and public art. Her art explores contrasting ideas that push and pull such as ancient and contemporary, individual and community, feminine and masculine, and the sacred and the profane. Her pieces range from small, personal objects to huge, immersive installations.

Colin McCahon

Colin McCahon is often considered one of New Zealand's top painters. Over his 45-year career, he tackled all sorts of themes, subjects, and styles—from landscapes and figures to abstract art and even to incorporating painted text. He made

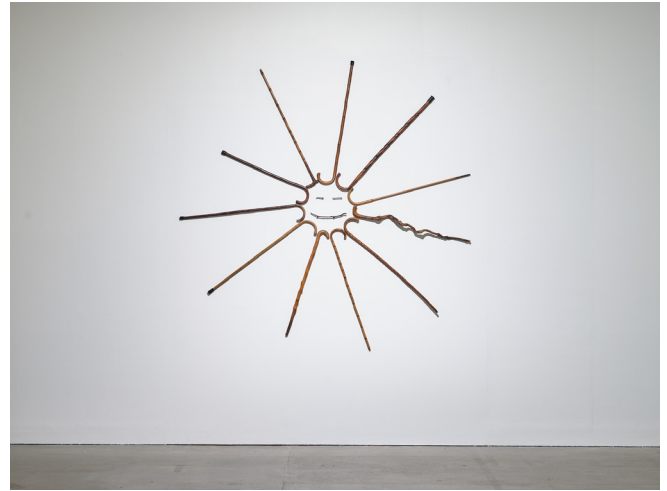
modernist painting his own by adapting it to a local context and brought a unique, spiritual depth to his work, making him a standout figure in 20th-century art.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition showcases the wide-ranging work of Nell, and her own paintings and sculptures are paired with works from Colin McCahon. These pairings are meant to spark conversation, covering 14 years of Nell's work and almost 30 years of McCahon's career.

The title of this exhibition, *Through the Wall of Birth and Death*, comes from a McCahon painting in The Dowse collection. It highlights themes in his work that have resonated with Nell and have helped also inform her own practice. Spread across five gallery spaces,

this exhibition celebrates the beautiful cycle of life and the rich variety of human experiences. We're invited to explore the creative power of opposites—like light and dark, physical and spiritual, moon and sun, birth and death—and many other meaningful connections and to reflect on how they may have influenced our own lives.



"I intentionally use symbols, forms and materials that are familiar and universal: Sun, egg, faces, wood, fabric, shell. I make to communicate. So, whether elemental, natural, domestic, practical or spiritual, these objects already have real world meanings. For me, the simplest works say the most and go the deepest." - Nell

KEY THEMES, INFLUENCES

AND REFERENCES:

- **Buddhist and Christian influences-** Mixing Eastern spiritual ideas with Western religious symbols.
- **Popular music and culture-** Musical references are in many of Nell's artworks: song lyrics, implied sounds, violins, band fonts, and even cut-up band t-shirts showing the transcendent power of Rock 'n' Roll.
- **Art history references-** Drawing from early Renaissance artists like Giotto, Bellini, and Fra Angelico, as well as Japanese and Chinese art, especially scroll paintings.
- **Handmade signs and symbols-** a reverence for the handmade/ analogue.
- **The urge to communicate visually-** A strong drive to express messages through words and symbols.
- **Blurring the line between physical and spiritual-** Fluid transitions between the real world and the spiritual one.
- **Nature and landscape-** A connection to the natural world.
- **Rural backgrounds-** Both artists grew up in small towns: Nell in Maitland (New South Wales), McCahon in Timaru and Dunedin (New Zealand).
- **Respect for handmade work-** A focus on creating things by hand, using traditional methods.
- **The tension between faith and doubt-** Struggling with belief, both spiritually and in their art practice.



ART TERMS

Positive Space- the filled space in artwork.

Negative Space- the empty space around and between the subject in an artwork.

Symbol- something that represents a bigger idea or concept, like a heart symbolizing love

Sculpture- a three-dimensional form of art created by shaping or combining materials (like clay, metal, stone, or wood) into a representation or an abstract form.

Ready Made- is everyday objects presented as art (e.g. Duchamp's "Fountain"). These objects are usually altered or displayed in an artistic context, challenging traditional notions of art.

Grid- a system of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines used to guide composition and maintain proportions.

Analogue- traditional, non-digital methods or materials, anything that doesn't use computer-based technology.

Horizon Line- The imaginary line representing the viewer's eye level in a drawing or painting, where the sky meets the ground, creating depth.

Text Art- incorporates text as a primary element. This can include visual works that use words, letters, or written language in creative ways. It often merges visual and linguistic elements to convey meaning.

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

NELL, CEREMONILA GHOST, 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STATION.

NELL, EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STATION.

NELL, SELF-NATURE IS SUBTLE AND MYSTERIOUS – NUN. SEX. MONK. ROCK, 2010. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA.

NELL, THE WAY OF SAINT SHELL, 2021. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STATION.

COLIN MCCAHERN, WALK (SERIES C), 1973. COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF TE PAPA TONGAREWA. PHOTO: SAM HARTNETT.

NELL, WALKING HOME, 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STATION.

NELL, THE FLEETING WORLD, 2013. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

COLIN MCCAHERN, THROUGH THE WALL OF DEATH: A BANNER, 1972. COLLECTION OF THE DOWSE ART MUSEUM. PHOTO: SAM HARTNETT.

NELL, THREE ON ONE, 2011. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STATION.

COLIN MCCAHERN, KORU 1, 2, 3, 1965. COLLECTION OF TE PAPA TONGAREWA. PHOTO: SAM HARTNETT.

COLIN MCCAHERN, OBJECT AND IMAGE, 1954. COLLECTION OF WAIKATO MUSEUM TE WHARE TAONGA O WAIKATO.

PRE/POST VISIT IDEAS

CREATE Text Art: Find different words around your environment, whether it's from books, signs, or objects, and cut, copy, and paint them to create a text-based artwork.

EXPLORE Black and White Reduction

Drawings: Start by covering your page with black charcoal, then use an eraser like a pencil to carefully rub away parts of the charcoal to reveal the white underneath. Try drawing with the eraser lines, words, and images.

MAKE a Readymade Artwork: - In some of Nell's sculptural pieces she makes us ponder what is art? She uses already existing objects like signs and violins and puts her mark on them to become an artwork. Go to an op shop and choose one object to transform into your own masterpiece.

CHOOSE a Song: Pick a song that resonates with you and take a line from it. Think about how you can express this line visually. Does the tempo affect how you write or present it? Be inspired by Nell's Walking Home. Where the text looks like it is walking! How can you manipulate the text to tell the songs story.

REFLECT on Yourself: Inspired by Nell's

Some of the Things I Am with its ghostly representations of self, think about the words that make you who you are. Brainstorm these words, then draw them like a visual diary!

FURTHER READING

<https://www.instagram.com/nellartist/?hl=en>



STUDENT ARTWORK EXAMPLES, PAPER, WAX CRAYONS AND CHARCOAL. 2024.





**The
Dowse
Art
Museum**

45 Laings Road, Hutt
Central, Lower Hutt 5010
T 04 560 1260
E education@dowse.org.nz