



The Wandering Land (1974)

BRENT WONG

ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008



Transformation (1990)

BRENT WONG

ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008

by Sophie Keyse

A common thread that is independent of their shared creator links these enigmatic paintings. It may not be evident on first glance but each of these artworks has been abandoned or rejected for not reaching Brent Wong's level of perfection. Whether the deficiency lay in their composition, perspective, colour relationships, content or an attack of the elements, none have been exhibited publicly. It thus begs the question: why is now the time to share them with the world? In 2008, after painting for over forty years, Brent Wong decided to stop: *'You get out of that situation of being a painter. As a painter you can't see yourself.'*^[1] Wong began to feel that painting was not the ideal medium to fulfil his creative aspirations. Rather, the dynamism of music and its immediate effect on the listener was more analogous with his focus of overwhelming one's consciousness. This hiatus from painting gave Wong distance and clarity from what was an emotionally invested practice for the artist and the capacity to proceed confidently with an exhibition of paintings that revealed his method. There is a clear reason why the sketches and cartoons of legendary painters like the Old Masters are still popular: it gives the viewer an insight into the artist's creative process and reveals how a blank piece of board can be transformed into another world. It brings these revered beings back down to earth by exposing their shared need to plan, contemplate, experiment and reconsider, as well as make mistakes and start again. *Abandoned Works 1970 - 2008* divulges the process of one of New Zealand's most eminent painters by exposing the under-painting and preparations of some of Wong's most recognisable compositions and exposes the considered designs of this renowned perfectionist.



Ruin (1972), detail

A self-taught painter, Wong's artistic career began in the field of drawing. After brief experimentations with watercolour and oil, he settled on acrylic as his medium of choice. Its quick drying qualities gave him the flexibility to easily apply successive coats of paint and make drastic changes where necessary.^[2] He has been known to spend more than three years on a painting before he consented to its public display, adding countless layers of acrylic paint to achieve a jewel-like lustre to his surfaces.^[3]

This continuous quest of perfection is an enduring part of Wong's creative pursuits, potentially facilitated by his early tertiary education as a Fine Arts student at the Wellington Polytechnic in 1963. The degree programme's new emphasis on graphic and industrial design refined Wong's technical approach, but did not satisfy Wong's creative imagination. Rather it was the expansive view outside his Vivian Street family home in central Wellington that captured his attention and prompted the frequent architectural presences and geometric patterns in earlier paintings such as *Window* (1967).^[4] The stretch of rooftops and myriad of residential and office buildings seen from his window are dominant shapes and motifs throughout his oeuvre, but these do not reflect a fixation for nostalgia.^[5] The Victorian Gothic eave brackets on the half-demolished shell of the building in *Ruin* (1972) bear a resemblance to similar Wellington buildings in Wong's environs. One could assume its sorry state may be a means of memoriam of a now-demolished house from his street, but is instead an instance of Wong using his memory to inhabit this landscape. His early works were initially composed as line drawings of interiors and three-dimensional formations with exaggerated perspectives, such as *Structure* (1967). Like a stage set, Wong then experimented with proportions and colour.^[6] In retrospect Wong has identified the connection between these compositional puzzles and the interconnecting puzzle-like structures of some of his floating constructions.^[7] Many of these constructions stemmed from doodles created during his nightshifts as a copy holder for the Dominion newspaper and became more formalised and coherent when placed within a composition.^[8] This sketching was a means of relaxation during the artist's serious bouts of depression and anxiety.^[9] *Floating House and Cloud* (1972) features two



Floating House and Cloud (1972), detail

buildings situated on a parched, empty landscape. This is not simply an exercise in architectural drafting or a memento of a significant event or person, but rather a disturbing illustration of displacement and alienation.^[10] The subconscious presence of these local buildings inadvertently observed on a daily basis manifested during Wong's anti-depressant-fuelled automatic writing experiments and were transformed into a symbol for the artist himself. The way in which one of the buildings floats in the centre of the picture plane anchored by an invisible thread to the fixed building on the slope could be interpreted as Wong almost disconnecting from concrete reality and descending into the dull, neurotic state of mind induced by his medication. It is this technique, and the juxtaposition of bizarre objects like paua shells and eggs (present in *Environs* (1969)^[11]) which brought about Brent Wong's Surrealist label during this period. Devout members of this movement, such as André Breton and Salvador Dalí espoused the virtues of automatism in the pursuit of accessing the 'third eye' and communicating the subconscious in a tangible form.^[12] However, what differentiates Wong from these artists is his inability to completely let go and give over the particulars of an image to his subconscious.^[13] He is always conscious of what he is doing in some way and bearing each painting's ultimate manifestation in mind.^[14]

Initially Wong's landscapes were purely a base upon which content could be added. Unlike American painter Andrew Wyeth or New Zealander Grahame Sydney, Wong's landscapes were not painted from life or photographs and instead were created in his studio from memory. The repetitive geometrical patterns of these outlooks allowed Wong to plan his scenes to the nth degree, laying the groundwork to imbue these carefully considered compositions with content and align them with classical painting.^[15] Consequently these landscapes may be recognisable as 'New Zealand' landscapes but are



Snowstorm (1973), detail

not to be interpreted within the realms of New Zealand Regionalism, which was characterised by a focus on place and local identity. Instead, the landscape is not the centre of attention in Wong's paintings but rather just the stage upon which action was to be enacted.

It is contrary, then, that while Wong's earlier paintings may be concerned with self and its relationship to the universe, there is a noticeable lack of people in these derelict spaces. Except for his 1968 painting *Theatre*,^[16] Wong simply removed the presence of humans from his compositions, leaving only the remains of habitation which is relatable but ultimately disconnected from our reality by their lack of integration with the surrounding landscape. Their isolation from each other imbues the picture plane with a profound sense of dislocation.^[17] This is supplemented by the portrayal of some houses as detached from their foundations and bizarrely suspended in the air, like the aforementioned *Floating House and Cloud*. They are not the only objects Wong hangs in his skies – several works feature more peculiar characters such as jellyfish. *Snowstorm* (1973) even features an oversized snail crawling across the ridge. Paintings like *The Wandering Land* (1974) have an especially extraterrestrial guise in the way the pyramidal-shaped slice of earth tilts towards the terra firma in an almost threatening way. It is the looming, unexplainable element of these suspended objects which generates an eerie atmosphere.^[18] Their incongruous presence and the lack of information about what will happen next can potentially fill the viewer with dread and uneasiness. Wong's disturbed inner state during their execution unconsciously permeates his compositions; the picture surface acting like a mirror reflecting the creator's anxiety. Thus these landscapes are more metaphysical than tangible: a visual autobiography that contains dreams as well as fears.^[19] Moreover, the unfinished nature of these works is apt for their autobiographical edge – they are an



Hill, Layered Clouds (1986), detail

incomplete story which, like life, will only conclude with death.

Not all of Wong's paintings take place outdoors, however, with several compositions set inside like *Window* (1967) or from a window's outlook. *Interior/Exterior* (c. 1972)^[20] initially began as an empty room that closely resembled Wong's Vivian Street flat, the view from which was solely of the building next door.^[21] The artist's relentless perfectionism interrupted this painting's path to completion as he was unhappy with the proportions, so he added a cup and saucer to the mix.^[22] Wong has suggested it was an empty room in his personality and that it required other elements to bring it to life.^[23] Such revelations distinguish Wong from the intense paintings of the Surrealists in his incorporation of whimsical characters and trivial objects. Despite his serious approach to technique and composition he also has a touch of humour, evident in contradictory titles like *Snowstorm* for a barren, golden landscape.

As Wong's career progressed, the details in his landscapes lessened as he pulled himself out of his internal depressive state and opened his compositions up to more ethereal subject matter. He began to meditate daily and practice self hypnosis, creating paintings filled with light emerging from misty vortexes with affirmative titles like *Growth* and *Truth*.^[24] These later meditative works share commonalities with colour field painters such as Mark Rothko, however rather than overwhelming the viewer with colour and depth, Wong was focused more on representing emotional and spiritual states. Light effects or reflections observed by the artist inspired these compositions. His state of mind during these encounters would alter his perspective of the experience, with this modified array of colours forming the painting's focal point. In contrast to his uneasy early works, these paintings are intended to be uplifting. Ideally they should 'make us aware of our human condition on this earth. Should make us wonder why we are here and remind us of our aim

in life and what it's all about, instead of all this complacency and degeneration.'^[25] From Wong's point of view, these works are his most significant and important creations.

This interest in contemplation had signposts in Wong's more figurative works in the form of clouds, which frequently dominate the skies of his landscapes and become the central focus in paintings such as *Hill*, *Layered Clouds* (1986). Influenced by J. M. W. Turner's studies of clouds and smoke, Wong was drawn to the skies on his daily commute to his studio and admired the stunning twilight cloud formations.^[26] It was the multitude of tones within these cloud studies that initiated his more abstracted meditative works which are commonly referred to as his 'light and energy' paintings.

A preoccupation with ideal compositions continued into these nonrepresentational works such as *Growth* (2008) where the artist was attempting to produce something that was 'pure'.^[27] Wong's intention for these paintings was for viewers to get past the paint and transcend the picture surface to experience something meditative – he even prompts the purpose of one's encounter with titles, like *Transformation* (1990). This was one of the reasons Wong ceased painting – the desired effect was not achieved due to inadequate execution and thus the composition 'lost what [it] had'.^[28]

Brent Wong's breadth of subject matter and artistic development is evident in this survey of unfinished works and it is fortunate that they can be displayed together. For his 1978 survey exhibition at Lower Hutt's Dowse Art Gallery, a catalogue was produced that included a conversation between the artist and curator Jim Barr. Wong was particularly forthcoming in this interview, revealing an aversion to selling his potentially significant works into private collections that would remove them from public view.^[29] It is for this reason that so many of Wong's most important works, even if they are incomplete or imperfect in some way, remain in the artist's private collection and can be displayed in this exhibition. It allows viewers to marvel at Wong's innovative compositions and evocative subject matter and be moved by the creations of this superb craftsman.

1. B Wong, interview with the author, July 18 2012
2. J Barr, Brent Wong – A Survey Exhibition (Lower Hutt: Dowse Art Gallery with the Assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, 1978) unpaginated
3. "Gallery shows Wong's work", *Fielding Herald*, 20 April 2000
4. *Window* (Acrylic on board, 558 x 333mm, 1967)
5. N Rowe, "Brent Wong," *Art New Zealand*, Winter, no. 12 (1979)
6. Caughey and J Gow, *Contemporary New Zealand Art 4* (Auckland: David Bateman, 2005) 86
7. B Wong, interview with the author, July 18 2012
8. J Barr, Brent Wong – A Survey, unpaginated
9. G Wong, "Architect of alienation," *Metro*, February (2004) 92
10. N Rowe, "Brent Wong," 1979
11. *Environs* (Acrylic on board, 915 x 686mm, 1969)
12. J H Matthews, *The Surrealist Mind* (Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 1991), 155
13. Ibid.
14. "Brent Wong b. 1945", *Catalogue Ferner Galleries*, Autumn 2007, p. 77
15. B Wong, in conversation with the author, July 18 2012
16. *Theatre* (Acrylic on board, 915 x 137mm, 1968)
17. D Trussell, "Exhibitions," *Art New Zealand*, Winter, no. 6 (1977)
18. S Keyse, "Uneasy lies the head: Feelings on unease in the experience of visual art". (Thesis: University of Auckland, 2009) 21
19. N Rowe, "Brent Wong," 1979
20. *Interior/Exterior* (Acrylic on board, 530 x 710mm, c.1972)
21. B Wong, interview with the author, July 18 2012
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. "Chasing the weather", *Capital Times*, Wellington, 5 March 2003
25. B Wong, quoted in J Barr, Brent Wong – A Survey Exhibition (1978) unpaginated
26. E Caughey and J Gow, *Contemporary New Zealand Art 4*, 86
27. Interview with author
28. B Wong, interview with the author, July 18 2012
29. B Wong, quoted in J Barr, Brent Wong – A Survey Exhibition (1978) unpaginated

ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008

Brent Wong Artwork List

All works courtesy of the Artist's Collection

GALLERY 1

Surrealist beginnings

1971 - 1974



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

1. *The Wandering Land* (1974)

838 x 724mm

Acrylic on board

2. *Worlds* (1973)

686 x 457mm

Acrylic on board

3. *Snowstorm* (1973)

751 x 610mm

Acrylic on board

4. *Floating House and Cloud* (1972)

1219 x 1067mm

Acrylic on board

5. *Requiem* (1971)

1219 x 914mm

Acrylic on board

6. *Volcanic Landscape with Still Life* (1973)

1070 x 992mm

Acrylic on board

7. *Ruin* (1973)

1372 x 965mm

Acrylic on board

8. *Anarchy* (1971)

1219 x 965mm

Acrylic on board

9. *Questionable Objects* (1975)

609 x 559mm

Acrylic on board

Many of these paintings can be viewed
in full scale on:
www.brentwong-painter.com

ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008

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GALLERY 2

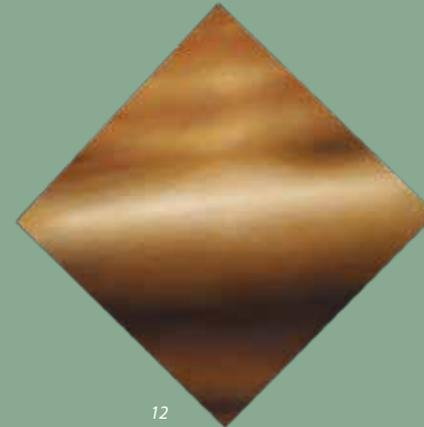
The emergence of the cloud
1974 - 1988



10



11



12



13



14



15



16



17

10. Landscape through a Window (1974)
690 X 608mm
Acrylic on board

11. Building and Sphere (1974)
828 x 727mm
Acrylic on board

12. Jupiter (1988)
1694mm diameter
Acrylic on board

13. Turnstile (1975)
913 x 685mm
Acrylic on board

14. Silence (1987)
1202 x 899mm
Acrylic on board

15. Hill, Layered Clouds (1986)
870 x 660mm
Acrylic on board

16. Conscience (1987)
1067 mm x 995 mm
Acrylic on board

17. Weatherboard Building (1982)
762 x 603mm
Acrylic on board

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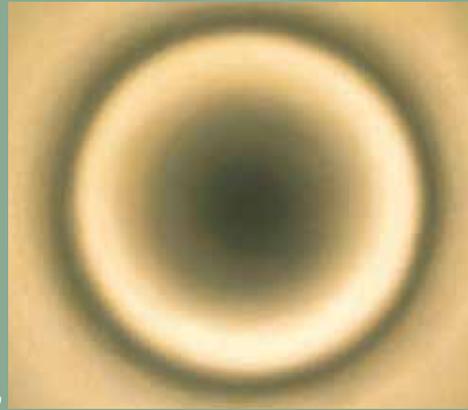
GALLERY 3

Meditative

1982 - 2008



18



19



20



21



22



23



24



25



26

18. Light Overcoming Darkness (1987)

1200 x 1120mm

Acrylic on board

19. Growth ((2002-2008)

1000 x 830mm

Acrylic on board

20. Lunar Halo (2008) detail

292 x 254mm

Acrylic on board

21. Dusk, Dark Coast (1987/8)

1203 x 1033mm

Acrylic on board

22. Truth 2 (2003)

1095 x 961mm

Acrylic on board

23. Dusk Clouds (1987)

1080 X 1000mm

Acrylic on board

24. Transformation (1990)

1041 x 900mm

Acrylic on board

25. Year of the Comet 2 (1993)

710 x 598mm

Acrylic on board

26. Massing Dusk Clouds (2008)

991x686mm

Oil on board

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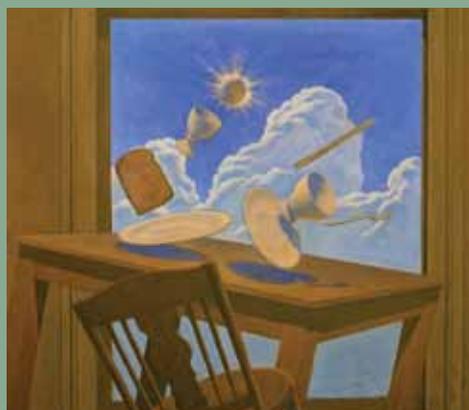
ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008

Brent Wong Artwork List

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NOT ON DISPLAY

1974 - 1994



27



28



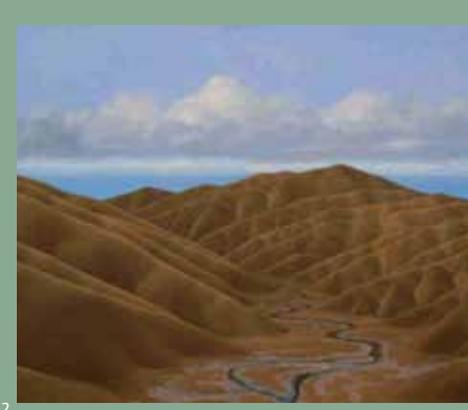
29



30



31



32



33



34

27. Mobile Still Life (1974)

606x 531mm

Acrylic on board

28. Study for: Cross Roads (1977-79)

329mm x 292 mm

Acrylic on cardboard

29. Dark Ages (1982-1983)

813x 898mm

Acrylic on board

30. Cloud, Coast (1983)

660x839mm

Acrylic on board

31. Dark Coast (1984)

35x894mm

Acrylic on board

32. Hills and River (1986)

800x593mm

Acrylic on board

33. Year of the Comet (1987)

451x597mm

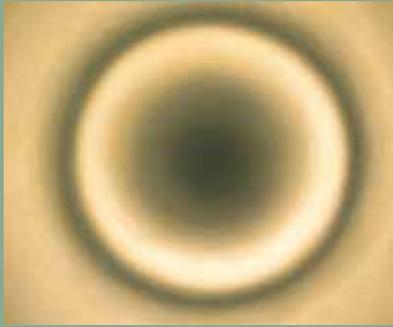
Acrylic on board

34. Creation (1994)

936x979mm

Oil on board

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Growth (2008)

BRENT WONG

ABANDONED WORKS 1970-2008

5 OCTOBER - 11 NOVEMBER 2012

www.brentwong-painter.com

This exhibition serves as a survey of Brent Wong's prolific and prodigious artistic career from the early 1970s into the new millennium in the form of abandoned and incomplete works. These paintings capture the artistic process and reveal the constant editing and exploration exercised by a prominent visual artist. None of the works on display will have been on view to the public before, but will feature several familiar compositions, including the surreal landscapes invaded by floating architectural forms and his cloudscapes. Abandoned Works 1970-2008 encapsulates the artist's exploration of ideas through paint and will uncover the change and evolution Wong experienced throughout his artistic career.

Acknowledgements

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