

STANLEY PALMER

Signs of Living

As well as being personal takes on the landscape, Stanley Palmer's recent monoprints and paintings play out various historical dramas in an understated, enigmatic way, hinting at the processes of history and colonisation. They exemplify what Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris calls 'the necessity to read reality in strange and unpredictable ways, re-visionary ways'. The artist's venture into the visual field finds a revealing analogy in Harris' description of going into the Guyanese landscape where 'one can immerse oneself in a world that is much stranger than one thinks and . . . this world has areas in which one is strange to oneself. One becomes aware of an everlasting stranger within oneself, and that stranger is now able to address one, whereas in more settled areas that stranger is unwelcome . . .'¹

'There are dangers in using landscape,' Palmer acknowledges. 'You have to have quite a lot to say about other things or else it just becomes a "material" landscape and a vehicle for restating traditional things. These days painting landscapes is, in some ways, a political statement and may be perceived as reactionary.' The continued viability of landscape painting has been questioned by critics including Francis Pound who, in his 1982 introduction to *Frames on the Land*, consigned such art to the past tense 'since, it seems, at least for the moment, and for first-rate painters, largely to be over . . .'²

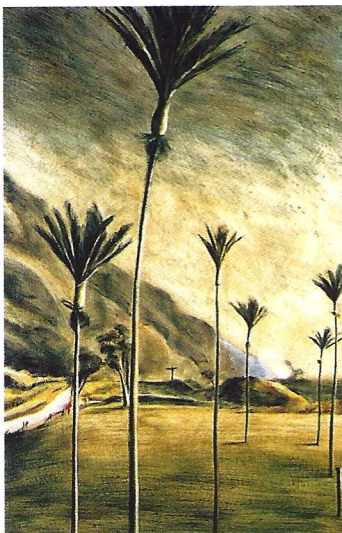
'People would like to categorise me as a landscape painter,' Palmer continues. 'Relationship to place is important to me . . . also the sense that things are fleeting and do not last, which makes me think of those lines by Burns: "Snow falling on the water lasts a moment, is gone forever"'. As well as commenting on the tradition of landscape painting, there is a sense of melancholy in my paintings.'

Palmer asserts the potency of the New Zealand landscape as a metaphor for ourselves, 'reflecting our own experiences and perceptions, as well as the inherent fragility and isolation of living in a country surrounded by a vast ocean'. Refusing to fulfil landscape art's traditional role of the surveyance, appropriation and ownership of the natural world, or to lend themselves to notions of the sublime, the images are inhabited by the past and a sense of implied 'event'. Beneath their predominantly calm surfaces there are unsettling echoes, a buried sense of conflict and struggle.

Beside the Road, Karama, 1992.

Monoprint 1020 x 640.

Collection of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.



LITTORAL

Often focusing on the coastline – the border across which the colonisers and the colonised first tentatively merged – Palmer’s recent work is imbued with a sense of loss, yearning and disappointment. Occasionally, however, the melancholy is offset by a sense that the human inhabitants of the paintings have achieved a tenuous fulfilment — a oneness with the land and the natural processes of time and history. This is all written into the landscape as well as into the figures, structures and objects that inhabit each landscape, that anchor it in time.

Palmer is an avid researcher, unearthing forms and themes from source materials. ‘I’m interested in early photographs and extracting energy from them,’ he states. ‘Old photos are often far more than just images, they’re like footprints. I take elements from photographs and my own drawings and bring all these ideas together. While a writer can take elements from everywhere and it’s legitimate, it seems harder for a painter to do this – there are so many conventions to do with picture-making.

‘You try to make a painting capture a moment, and in so doing you enable that moment to last longer. If you overtly go out and try to paint meaningful or even “spiritual” paintings you won’t do it. It’s by underplaying those things they are brought out. You combine something from the past and the present and hopefully you make something that has a life in the future. I think I’m not painting for *now* but for people in twenty or thirty years time – that’s why paintings have to be made really well, so that they last.

‘I’m drawn to places where people have had an influence or where there is



Departure, Parua, 1991.
Oil on linen 1620 x 2250.
Private collection.

Stanley Palmer

Born 1936 at Turua, near Thames.
1941 Family moves to Mt Albert, Auckland.
1956–58 Attends Auckland Teachers Training College then specialises in art at Dunedin Technical College.
1958 Exhibits paintings and wire sculptures, Auckland Teachers Training College.
1959 Specialist art course at Dunedin Teachers College.
1962 Exhibits prints and paintings at New Vision Craft (Auckland).
1969 Receives Arts Council award for printmaking.
1970 A further grant enables him to become a full-time printmaker.
1974 Travels in England, Ireland, Europe and North Africa.
1975 Establishes print workshop in his Mt Eden home.
1976 Included in Five New Zealand Printmakers exhibition touring Australia.
1981 Designs banners and flags for Auckland Artists Action to protest against the Springbok Tour.
1983 Travels in the USA and Canada; Silk Banners, Dowse Art Museum (Lower Hutt).
1985 Designs 'J' Accuse' poster after the Rainbow Warrior bombing.
1990 Memories of Northland series exhibited at the Auckland City Art Gallery.
1992 Stanley Palmer: Poor Knights, oil paintings, Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga (Auckland). Exhibits regularly at Anna Bibby Gallery (Auckland), Janne Land Gallery (Wellington) and the Canterbury Gallery (Christchurch). Lives and works in Mt Eden, Auckland.

some connection with human society,' he states. 'Even in the *Poor Knights* paintings – many of which are completely without people – there is a visual reference in the natural forms to the Christian monasteries off the Irish coast.' Palmer's understated treatment of metaphysical and historical concerns is paralleled in Peter Siddell's paintings, which juxtapose architecture and nature in surreal urban settings, and the work of Dunedin artist Grahame Sydney.

GOING AND GONE PLACES

'Place was – and still is – important,' Palmer maintains. 'People say it has been played down in contemporary art and if you work in that area they say you're looking backwards. I was very interested in John Berger, who stressed, back in the fifties, the need to reassess *everything*, including the artforms of the past. As Berger said, we have to continually redefine ourselves and what we are doing.

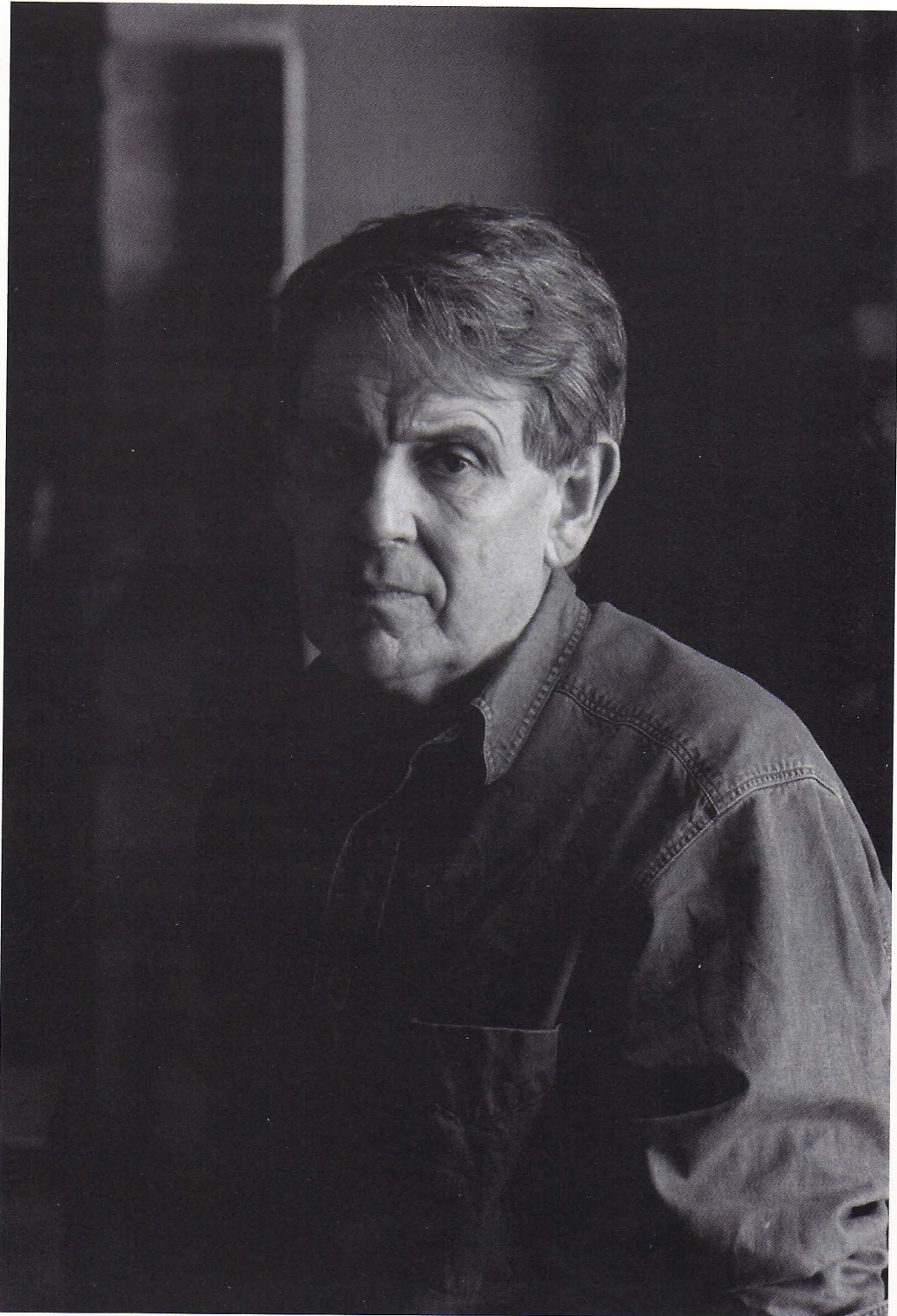
'When I was younger I saw myself as quite reactionary to Colin McCahon. I suppose I was pigheaded enough to think, "Well, I'll do something completely different." I wanted to create work with a more exact reference to experience and place. I didn't relate to McCahon's religious work – we were all lapsed anyway. I never had any religious guilt and I thought who needs it? New Zealand – Auckland in particular – was changing, it was becoming a Polynesian place. People were becoming more open-minded and I wanted my work to be open-minded as well. I still wanted it to be connected to and truthful to New Zealand, but I didn't want to be tied down. The whole idea of New Zealand's isolation has changed. We're a lot closer to Paris now than the Russians were at the turn of the century – it used to take them four days to get there – transport and communications have changed everything.'

PROCESS AND PRINTMAKING

Stanley Palmer spent most of his childhood in the Auckland suburb of Mt Albert, where his education at Mount Albert Grammar was 'scientific rather than artistic'. It was later, while studying at the Auckland Teachers Training College, that his interest in art grew and it was there he held his first exhibition – of paintings and wire sculptures – in 1958. He continued exhibiting his paintings throughout the 1960s, although it was his printmaking of the following decade that first reached a wide audience.

'I used woodcuts, bamboo cuts . . . that was just a process I evolved out of technical necessity, the sort of press I had and so on. Printmaking is a very process-governed medium and that has influenced the way I approach painting, hence I work on my paintings in a manner very like adding to a print. I have always been attracted to artists who were fluent in the printmaking medium – people like Degas, Daumier, Rembrandt, Paul Klee, Gauguin and Mary Cassatt.

'[In the late 1970s] printmaking started moving in a direction I didn't like and that's partly why I moved away from it. Screen printing using bright, flat colours came to the fore, in contrast to my work, which was always very tonal – I tended to use an engraving technique with some lithography. I then became



more interested in doing one-off works such as monoprints (or, as they're called in America, "transferred paintings").'

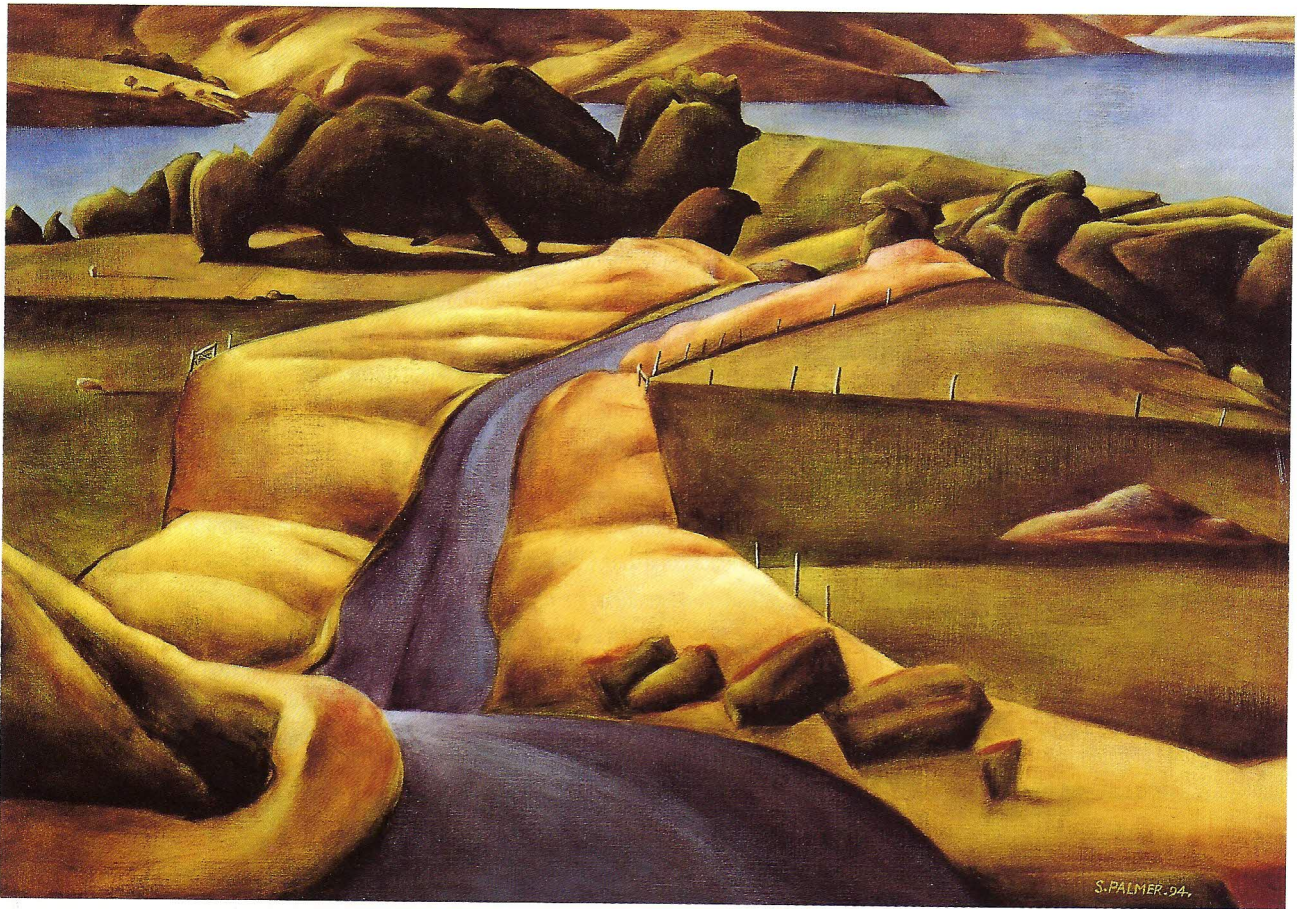
Since the early 1980s, much of Palmer's energy has gone into producing paintings on canvas as well as monoprints. For a time, the paintings incorporated strips of signal flags along the tops and bottoms of the canvases, spelling out words. 'I first made actual flags when I was involved in protests against the Springbok Tour in 1981, then I made a big "Flag for Te Whiti" for an exhibition relating to Parihaka. I became interested in the concept of flags.'

In 1985 Palmer was nearly charged with being in contempt of court after producing a screen-printed flag as a protest after the Rainbow Warrior bombing – the print had a frogman on it and the trial of the French agents had yet to take place. 'Luckily, the whole thing blew over,' he recalls. 'Funnily enough, I recall somebody from the French Embassy – a person who was out here for the trial – pulling up outside the gallery where the posters were being sold and buying about forty of them to take back to France as souvenirs.'

Palmer was aware of the weight of meaning flags carry in any post-colonial society, with their associations of militarism, oppression, empire-building and

Hatters Terrace, 1994.
Oil on linen 1100 x 1600.
The Regent Collection.





economic and geographical invasion. However, without dispelling these associations, Palmer chose to use flags because of their inherent concepts of communication and language.

'I began using flag signals in my work to write names – the place-names of the landscapes depicted. It was an interesting way of "writing". I always liked the idea of communicating with flags – I probably picked that up at school, the Romantic idea of messages being sent from ship to ship, all the way back to England.' Palmer goes on to say that he considers all painting a means of making and sending messages.

RELATING TO THE NATURAL WORLD

'My work is very tonal, which is why people relate it to the natural world and what the eye sees out there,' the artist points out. 'I'm interested in tone more than colour. That's probably my debt to 19th-century painters like Corot, Daumier and Manet. Tonally, I make things work in my pictures so they appear to be natural. I'm also very interested in one area being whiter than everything else – the eye picks up something that's slightly whiter than anything else.'

Above the Harbour, Akaroa, 1994.

Oil on linen, 1300 x 1600.

The Regent Collection.



Gathering Clouds, 1941.

(From 'Memoirs of Northland'),
1988.

Monoprint 640 x 640.

Collection of the Auckland City Art
Gallery.



Summers Pass.

(From 'Memoirs of Northland'),
1988.

Monoprint 640 x 640.

Collection of the Auckland City Art
Gallery.

Palmer points to his monoprint, *On South Terrace, Karamea* (1995), where sharp flickers of light can be made out in details of the foreground trees and in the distant cloud, activating the surface of the image, bringing the whole to life.

'You want the paint to say *what it is*, not the drawing, so I don't use a lot of outlines, except when I'm sketching in a composition and only to imply where a change of tone occurs. I'm also interested in the ways in which monoprint-making is like fresco painting – wet ink being applied to a layer of transparent damp ink, using sketched-in outlines . . .'

Palmer's art is often linked to the conservation movement, although he thinks his position, in this respect, has often been oversimplified. 'The real problem,' he says, concerning the impact of civilisation on the land, 'is how to do new things *well*. If you're going to build a road, you should build it so that it fits in with the landscape. Or if you are going to build a new building, make sure it fits in with the weather, where the sun and rain are coming from. Everyone seems to ignore fundamental relationships to the place, the city and the sea. You could say I would like to see new things done that are really good although, naturally, I do want to see what is valuable preserved.'

The central road in the 1994 oil painting *Road above Akaroa* reflects this sense of the man-made harmonising with nature. The highway flows through the landscape and relates tonally to the harbour beyond. Palmer points out that the painting is also a homage to Rita Angus, who used a similar road motif in her work.

Memory is an important impetus, particularly in works relating to landscapes Palmer experienced as a child. 'I think you feel at ease when you are working with places or events that refer to your past. You look for things that are *real*, I suppose.' While, not surprisingly, it is often assumed that Palmer must live on 'a mad, rundown farm somewhere', he says he has nearly always been a city person who travels into the landscape in search of the visual metaphors his art requires.

AFFINITIES

'Whatever you are doing, it is connected to something that has gone before. I have an affinity with those 19th-century painters who took an idea – an emotional idea – and then formalised it. You just need to think of paintings like Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. I take an emotional idea and then it gets a kind of intellectual life, but the paintings have to be *intelligent* rather than intellectual. Intellectual tends to mean you're preaching to the converted and, unless you have been converted, you won't understand it.

'People see an affinity in my work with the 19th-century colonial New Zealand painters because I am working on the same areas of landscape. While I'm more interested in European art than colonial art, I've always liked John Kinder, especially his photographs. My connection is more with the early 20th-century photographers – the sense of place in the work of people as late as

Henry Winkelmann and the Northwood Brothers. I often look at those images and feel sure I know the people in the photographs.'

Palmer associates the occasional use of figures in his work with the photographic tradition rather than the painterly one. Whereas within colonial landscape painting the figure tended to be a passive onlooker, sharing the viewer's appreciation of *the scene*, Palmer's figures are an active presence within the work. Like the characters in a historical documentary, they are the colonisers, pioneers and the tangata whenua – they are not merely passengers of a visual tradition. He says the foreground figure can also represent the artist and the viewer, enabling them to 'enter' the scene. 'Using the "I" in a painting is like a novelist using the first person.'

Drawn to certain landscapes where 'you can see history – a merging of Maori and Pakeha – coming through,' Palmer points to a 1994 monoprint that investigates the connection between the burning of the *Boyd* in 1809 and the bushfires that cleared the New Zealand landscape. While the image is derived from old photos of bushfires, the artist was aware that such source material had to be made over into something more than just historical or illustrative explication. 'If something is not really a part of you then you can only make faint suggestions of it. I can't paint what it was like when the *Boyd* caught fire. But I can do things about smoke, fire and Whangaroa Harbour, which are within my experience.'

HINDSIGHT

Looking back over his career as a painter since the 1960s, Stanley Palmer considers his earlier work to be 'expressionistic', whereas his recent paintings have a more 'classical' feel. Certainly his recent series *Entries for a New Zealand Index*





On South Terrace – NZ Index XVII, 1995.

Oil on linen 970 x 1660.

Collection of the artist.

Photo: Louise Sweet.

witnesses a quieter, more lyrical approach to the landscape than the often fractious bamboo-cuts of the 1970s. He is aware, as a figurative artist, that the 'pictorial' convention can be a trap and says he looks to various forms and ideas related to abstract art to keep the enterprise alive and renewing itself.

'People coming into my studio are sometimes surprised by my paintings being upside down. Upside down they become their own images of themselves. I was always quite an easy abstractionist. My early paintings were abstract, very Paul Klee-ish. Klee was particularly interesting to me. He's been taken up by illustrators but a lot of the important things he played around with – the poetic elements in his work – have never been developed.' Interestingly, New Zealand's foremost abstractionist, Gordon Walters, also cited Klee as an early influence, suggesting the breadth of possibility Klee's merging of figurative and abstract elements embodied.³ In their radically different ways, both Palmer and Walters were seeking something of Klee's 'realism', which he defined as an enriched and heightened reality, dense with meaning.

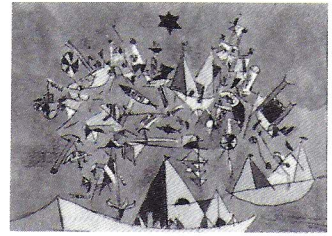
'In the past, Maori artforms have also interested me greatly,' Palmer adds. 'I looked at Maori poetry quite closely at one time – because it is often about the elements, about people's relationship to the weather. It's also very concerned with place, often placing a solitary figure in the landscape, which is what I sometimes do in my painting.'

COMMUNICATING AND WATCHING

'I went through a long period while my children were growing up when I was concentrating on printing and I was seen as a printer. The art dealers thought, "He can do that well, so we should keep him printing." I fell into that. Because I did smaller, domestic work people also came to expect that. I always produced a lot of work so I managed to scratch out a living. I sold a lot to people, including students, because my prices were within range. I wanted to make art for the proletariat, you could say. I heard of one pensioner coming down to Auckland from Kaitaia on the bus to buy a print. . . . But that also made my work unpopular with certain groups of people. The fact that you can *communicate* is often looked down on by critics, curators and collectors.'

While Palmer is aware of a certain territory his work has mapped out for itself in the public mind, that is not something he wants to be limited by. In recent paintings he has incorporated vehicles, machinery and power poles – presences that are disruptive of the roughly-hewn natural environment typical of his prints of the 1970s.

In the future, Palmer plans a series of city-based images, reflecting in part his longstanding interest in the introspective scenes of city life painted by American artist Edward Hopper. 'I have done some works about arrival and departure in Auckland, and I've started on the theme of "Modern Life", depicting people queuing like George Segal figures outside a Lotto shop . . . I want to paint things that couldn't have been there before . . . the aerobics classes . . . people in anonymous spaces like supermarkets. One night I walked past a restaurant in the rain and a waitress was standing, looking out the window, dreaming. The spectator is another idea I'm interested in. People watching . . . '.



Star and Sea, c. 1960.

Watercolour and transferred
printing ink 180 x 225.
Collection of the artist.



Rocks and Sea, 1973.

Bamboo engraving and lithography,
450 diameter.
Collection of the artist.