

# STANLEY PALMER: FOREIGN SHORES

*New Zealand artist Stanley Palmer's art dwells on two very different coastlines.*

By Gregory O'Brien

Stanley Palmer's artistic engagement with Gallipoli began in the late 1980s when he produced a series of works based upon a WWI photograph of his father, James Palmer, in Egypt. A soldier in the Auckland Mounted Rifles Regiment, the elder Palmer had shipped out to North Africa then on to Gallipoli in 1915. In his son's oil painting, 'A Postcard from Gallipoli or A Letter from Eden', the soldier-father has been repatriated to a rustic antipodean environment, replete with snaking driveways and red roofing iron.

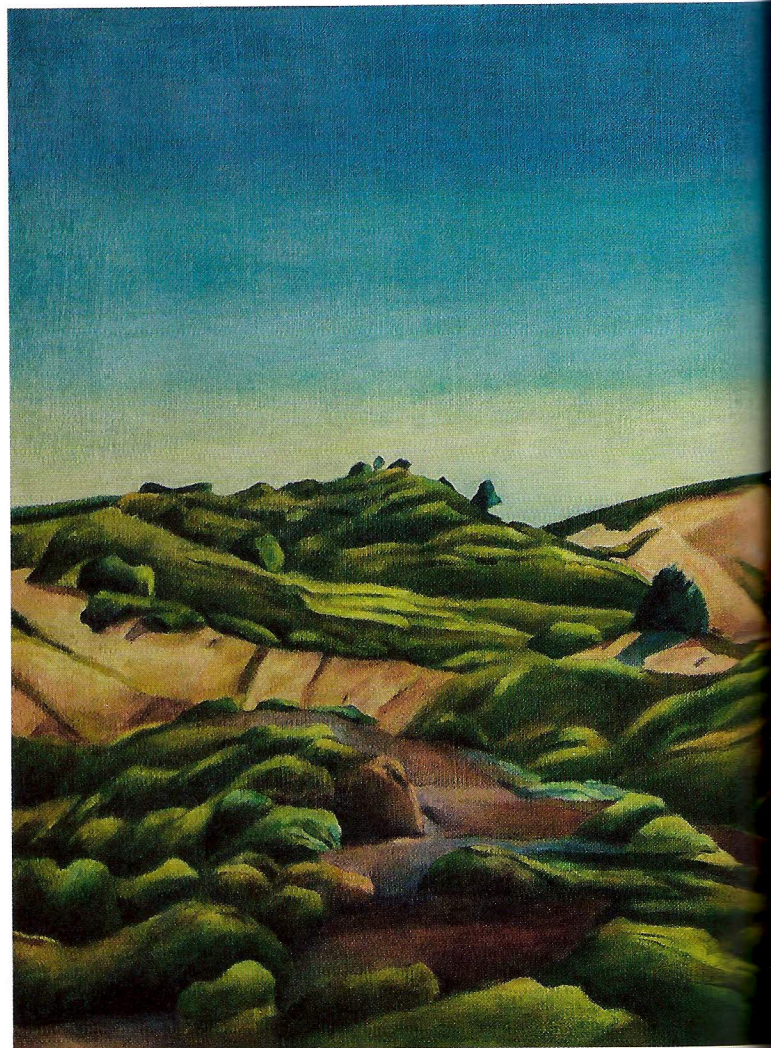
In this painting, Stanley Palmer ponders both the sudden expulsion of his father from the earthly paradise of pre-war New Zealand and, as the poet Riemke Ensing noted in a 1992 essay, the reality which he was fortunate enough to resume after the war. The title also echoes the officially sanctioned Christmas message on the troops' homeward-bound postcards: "Though your lads are far away, they dream of Home."

Palmer's father reappears as the title character in 'From the Nek – Dream Soldier' (2014). In the recent instance, he is looking

seawards towards an island which could as easily be Great Barrier (near Auckland) as any island in the Aegean Sea. Palmer presents the Northern Hemisphere scene as though it is continuous, rather than distinct from, the stretches of New Zealand coast which he has known since childhood. Coastline has been the defining feature of his paintings and printmaking to date – and has also been the theme of his two major books, *West* (Godwit, 2000) and *East* (Craig Potton Publishers, 2009).

Even the bunkers in 'Turkish Fort, Ikilid Bahr' are echo-chambers of New Zealand locations. They resemble Auckland's coastal fortifications – notably on North Head and Waiheke Island – which a century of wars mercifully never reached. In Palmer's version of Ikilid Bahr, the wounds of history have been cauterised. The trees could easily have been transplanted from Auckland's North Shore. Here and elsewhere, the flags of the opposing armies, as well as the Red Cross, flap brightly rather than in anger or anguish.

Allen Curnow, in his great poem 'Moro Assassinato', wrote of a



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sense of human connectedness that traversed the world's oceans – bodies of water which are, as he reminds us, in fact only one ocean:

*All the seas are one sea,  
the blood one blood  
and the hands one hand ...*

Worked up in his Auckland studio,

using copious sketches and notes from the 2014 visit, Palmer's version of Gallipoli highlights the rhythmical folds of earth and vegetation beneath layerings of sky. The lengthy formats of the paintings accentuate the horizon and impose orderliness and equilibrium. Like the other artists involved in the project, Palmer





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01 Phantom Graves, Anzac Cove,  
2014, oil on linen, 67.5 x 160cm

02 Turkish Fort, Kild Bahr I, 2014,  
oil on linen, 70 x 160cm

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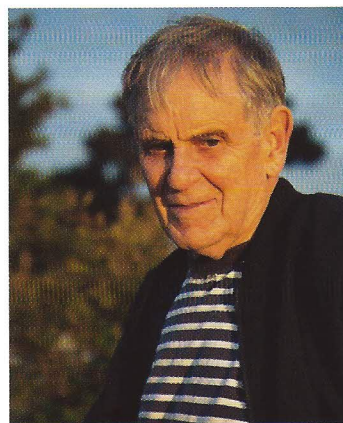
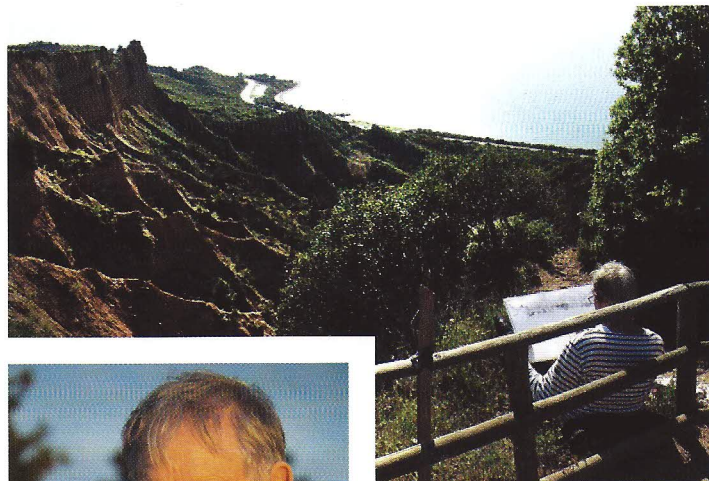
read extensively in military history before and after the painting expedition – not out of a need to illustrate past events but so that such knowledge might, indirectly, be present in his extrapolations of the seemingly benign headlands.

It is when place names are introduced that the landscape becomes manifestly heavier with meaning: Chunuk Bair, Anzac Cove, Shrapnel Gully and the dark irony of Eden Gully (referenced in Stanley Palmer's earlier 1990 painting of his father).

Not only is the lone figure in 'Dream Soldier' a version of the artist's self and father, he is the lone coastal figure who has featured throughout so much Western art. In a 1994 interview Palmer stressed the origin of the figure not only in European literature (in which Ulysses is the archetype), but also in traditional Maori poetry which, he noted, 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." Even in urban settings, Palmer has continued this fascination with "the solitary spectator", with "people watching".

The three white crosses in 'Phantom Graves, Anzac Cove' (2014) imply, quietly, that this place is also a Calvary, a hallowed tract of earth, anointed with human suffering. Yet the place also exists outside of history and mythology – like any headland, it changes with the weather, the season and the time of day. In

Stanley Palmer's Gallipoli, the artist is witness and spectator, looking back in time as well as across space, but the Gallipoli we encounter here is once again a verdant land; a place of regeneration and slow, ongoing rebirth. ●



03 Sketch from the Nek, Dream Soldier, Ari Burnu, 2014, oil on linen, 37 x 58cm

04 Trench, Below Walkers Ridge, 2014, oil on linen, 75 x 160cm

05 Turkish Fort, Killid Bahr II, 2014, oil on linen, 70 x 160cm  
Courtesy the artist



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