

Gordon Crook: the pastel triptychs

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ABSTRACT: Gordon Crook (1921–2011), a British textile artist who arrived in New Zealand in 1972 and settled in Wellington, became well known as a tapestry weaver and designer of decorative banners, as well as a silkscreen printer, before turning to pastel drawing in 1984–85. He created two suites of pastels, each ‘drawing’ consisting of three sheets of fine art paper pasted on watermarked paper on board. These were shown at two exhibitions in Wellington, one at the Janne Land Gallery (1985) and the second at the City Art Gallery (1986). They marked a sharp change of direction in his work, from cheerful and decorative to introspective and complex composite images of memory and feeling states. They are represented in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa collection by arguably the best of these drawings, *Gymnasium*. Crook did not turn to pastels again, but his work on these two suites served as the foundation for his collaged photographic prints of 1989, as well as the tapestries and prints of his *Wolf-Man* project of 1991. This paper is based on Crook’s voluminous correspondence archived in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

KEYWORDS: Gordon Crook, Lesley Nicholls, tapestry, design, textiles, loom, frame, cartoon, weaving, style, imagery.

Introduction

Gordon Crook (1921–2011) showed a suite of 13 pastel drawings at the Janne Land Gallery in Wellington from 26 March to 13 April 1985.¹ The exhibition was titled *In Memoriam*. The pastels were framed in sets of three sheets, making 11 self-contained triptychs, but two further works were ‘combinations’: *Difficulty at the Beginning* (Fig. 1), three frames of three pastels each; and *Gymnasium* (Fig. 2), three frames of two pastels each. It was the first time in New Zealand that Crook had worked with pastels.

This paper uses the words of Gordon Crook to detail the artistic process of composition and construction of these images – the artist’s methods and intentions, and the creative unfolding of the works and their display. Such intimate insights into an artist’s working processes are seldom available, making Crook’s correspondence particularly invaluable.

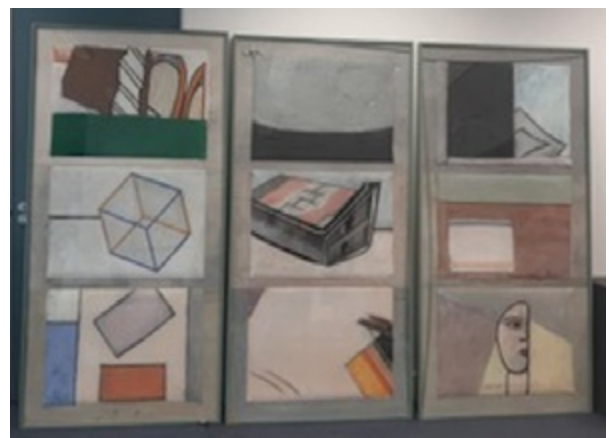


Fig. 1 *Difficulty at the Beginning*, MW, 1985, pastel on fine art paper on paper on board, 3060 × 1420 mm each. Artist Gordon Crook (Hewlett Packard Enterprises, Auckland. Reproduced with permission of M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).



Fig. 2 *Gymnasium*, 1985, pastel on fine art paper on watermarked paper on board, 3060 × 1420 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (Te Papa, 1985/18/1. Reproduced with permission of M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).

Screenprints

Crook had no training as a printmaker but, following his arrival in New Zealand from Britain in 1972, he tried his hand at making silkscreen prints, usually on a ground of his own handmade paper or newspaper. The subject matter of the prints was the symbolic world of the artist's small tapestries – abstract, sometimes seemingly amoebic, animated, but rendered as design rather than symbol. Yet for the Crook mind, psychic powers played a part in even the most random of choices – of colour, tone, form and the juxtaposition of visual fields. Crook chose forms, colours and composition both consciously and by chance, but there were always reasons behind the chance selections: meaning casts a shadow and chuckles in the wings.

In 1980, Crook exhibited a suite of silkscreen prints, completed the year before, that purportedly made reference to the number five. The 'reference' was seldom overt, clear only to Crook during the creative process, 'being hidden', as art critic Neil Rowe felt, 'in a secretive cabbalistic mumbo jumbo that to an artist of less proven calibre might be considered pretentious'.²

Nos 5 and 14 (Figs 3 and 4) illustrate stylistic features of the suite and the type of prints with which Crook was engaged at the time. The composition of these is closely related to the artist's small tapestries – rectangular or square, with motifs made up of abstract coloured rectangles, placed parallel to the straight edges of the work, top, bottom and sides. Other rectangular lines/strips lie at an angle to the edges, often crossing into the space of the ground, appearing to lie on top of the base motif and tying the core image to

the handmade paper on which it lies. The base motif might contain a cross – blue in no. 5, green in no. 14. These refer to Crook's deep regard for the abstract painting of one of the leaders of the Russian avant-garde, Kazimir Malevich

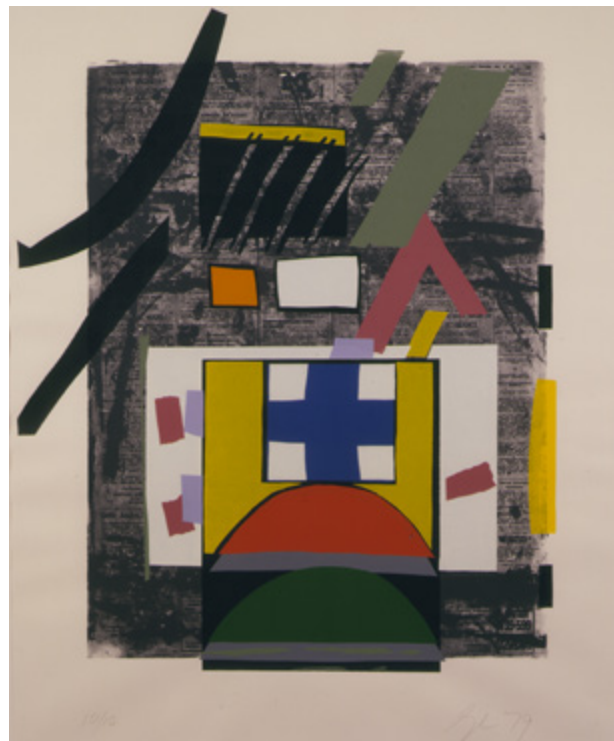


Fig. 3 *Untitled, Based on the numeral five, no. 5* (1979), silkscreen on paper, 788 × 630 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (Te Papa, 1980-0012-1. Reproduced with permission of M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).



Fig. 4 *Untitled, Based on the numeral five, no. 14* (1979), silkscreen on paper, 1038 × 522 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth 80/17. Reproduced with permission of M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).

(1879–1935).³ Crook often printed the images of this suite on a base of newspaper, thus making a complex composite work – ink on newspaper, placed on handmade paper.

Crook was attracted to ideas running counter to the pervading rationalism of the Enlightenment that dominated Western thought. The preoccupation with numerals, for example, comes from his interest – almost a belief, which waxed and waned – in numerology and tarot cards: how our fate, our developing persona, is determined by mystical forces. He was also obsessed with astrology and the history of religions. He read Florence Campbell's *Your days are numbered: a manual of numerology for everybody* (1982) and Cheiro's *book of numbers* (1926), and was drawn to the number five, which for numerologists expresses personal freedom and denotes a curious mind and sensuous personality. Cook also read Trevor James Constable's *The cosmic pulse of life: the revolutionary biological power behind UFOs* (1976), pointing to the existence of UFOs and crop

circles, spirit souls in our midst. He wrote to his old friend Bill Mason: 'I once related to you a mystical experience I had. I don't remember how I described it, but ever since it has stopped me from bothering too much about rational explanations and logic. It has provided a perspective on life I personally find rewarding, and it acts as an authority above all else.'⁴

As in his tapestries, Crook allows the prints to carry their symbolism lightly. The images are bright, fun, playful and striking. His scintillating use of colour allows the lines and hard-edged shapes to sing, and the discipline of the composition to flex order with a sympathetic disorder. As prints, Rowe pointed out, 'they are beautifully controlled and executed compositions. An added bonus for some viewers will doubtless be the fact that with meditation these works may yield the arcane significance the artist invests in the number five.'⁵ At the same time, Crook was ever sceptical: he feared the allure of the esoteric and wondered at the gullibility of people who subscribed uncritically to these fringe ideas. This alternating attraction and rejection paralleled the tension he found in his personal relations, between the need for love and yet fear of the ties that bind relationships, and the deep yearning for friendship yet the visceral alarm of close contact.

Feelings

In 1984, Crook made a deliberate shift to create images that, at long last, it seemed to him, would explore more directly the painful memories of his childhood, the hazards of his ambivalent sexual orientation, his loneliness and his depression. In answer to a photographer who asked Crook 'how he saw himself', he replied, 'I am reminded of H.G. Wells' Invisible Man who had to wrap himself in bandages so other people could see him.'⁶ He would explore his feelings rather than his thoughts: 'And thought is never what we actually are. Feeling is.'⁷

Crook had always held that art is a way of exploring those feelings of the self, images coiling out of his inner world. Part of those feelings were his happy, genial, generous self, who was interested in plants, gardens, music and people. Then there was the obverse – his sense of alienation, loneliness and depression. Art, he felt, must encompass the whole of that composite self:

Art, after all, is basically self-discovery. A sort of light on the truth. Not a veneer beneath which the unpalatable is hidden. It is always, in my view, a re-living of experience so that it may be transcended,

leaving behind the chaff like so many dried skins. Like that camel which learns how to get through the eye of the needle. I think one has to find out what constitutes unnecessary burdens before they can be dropped, else the struggle to be who one is goes on in vain.⁸

Spring-cleaning

In September 1984, Crook talked of clearing the decks, ‘knuckling down to some work’ to prepare for a show at the Janne Land Gallery late in the following year, and that it was ‘in [the] area of self-deception the spring-cleaning needs to be done’.⁹ It was ‘my resolution to get back to the fountain head of my origins again and push all other matters aside ... My plans at present include the cancellation of a June 1985 exhibition at Janne’s, the arrangement [is that] I get something ready for November/December 1985 instead.’¹⁰

By the beginning of October, he was ‘in dramatic tensions about work’.¹¹ A few days later, in a sudden change of mood, he told Helen Whinam:

I have decided against an exhibition and will not be showing anything until very late next year. I have been going through crisis tensions with my work, considering what my future directions ought to be. A back-to-basics and a fresh start is due ... or at least a development which breaks into another (yet to be discovered) (field) to engage my concentration and activity ... There’s no absence of ideas, or challenges, or wishful thinking.¹²

A week later, however, he was back on track: ‘I start on what I hope to be a fresh lot of work ... a more developed stage of work perhaps. The recipe of prints/small tapestries [and] so on, needs to change for my next show. I’m after something different and am giving myself at least until next November to come forth with other ideas.’¹³

Gallerists

During November 1984, Crook became preoccupied with a problem that had been on his mind for some time. He had an arrangement with Janne Land to show exclusively with her gallery. It was an arrangement that seemed to serve them both well. Land’s gallery was assured of one or two good-selling shows a year; Crook was assured of gallery space and had the financial support of a sympathetic gallerist

during his years of struggle to establish himself as an artist in New Zealand. In mid-April 1984, Scott Pothan of Editions, a small gallery specialising in contemporary New Zealand graphic art in Remuera Mews Arcade, Auckland, contacted Crook, offering to show his prints. Crook put him off: ‘I don’t like to have more than one dealer in any one place handling my work, and at the moment in Auckland Beatrice Grossman is looking after me.’¹⁴

In late May, Pothan flew to Wellington and visited Crook in his studio, repeating his enthusiastic desire to show the artist’s work in Auckland. Pothan explained that he could show only small prints or drawings but had space for one larger work on his back wall. Crook was tempted. He was aware that he was largely unknown outside Wellington, and that Auckland was a larger and more well-heeled market. Grossman was a friend, happy to act as a sympathetic and non-aggressive agent, promoting Crook’s work when opportunities arose, but also sensitive to the fact that he did not like to be pushed into ‘commitments’. Perhaps he could use both Pothan and Grossman in Auckland? Crook hesitated: he did not want to upset Grossman or cross Land. Yet he was troubled by his conscience and at the same time by the necessity of making more money, irked by the small amount artists received after paying for materials, framing, gallery commissions and the costs of openings – the general life of the artist when everyone needed to be paid, leaving only dregs for the actual creator. This was how he saw it, how he had seen it for decades, and how he was having to confront it just then with his tapestry works, when the weavers were clamouring for a fair wage. Pothan’s offer seemed a potential way out of his dilemma, while it took him straight into the arena of other conflicts from which he flinched. He tentatively broached the idea with Land, who coldly responded by letter: ‘it is with some chagrin that I see now that you are happier to pass the works to someone else now that things are a little easier’.¹⁵

New direction

Crook loathed the Christmas and New Year holidays. His work habits were interrupted. People *would* write him letters, *would* insist on giving him presents and inviting him out. He was obliged to think of others when all he wanted to do was work. There were Christmas letters to send overseas. Closer to hand, he must be a little more sociable. Despite his usual end-of-year Scrooge-like grumbling, Crook had resolved his new direction in his own mind, somewhere between November and December 1984, to start work on a suite of pastel drawings on paper.¹⁶ There

is no evidence where the idea of pastels came from. He resolved to make his own oil pastels, create his own colours and renew a skill he had abandoned in England 20 years earlier, when he had made a series of monstrous, child-like oil pastel portraits of women with large teeth or pregnant and naked – angry, painful, even sadistic images occasioned by some personal experience at the time, such as the 1964 *Untitled* (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 *Untitled*, 1964, oil pastel on paper, 204 × 121 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (The Wallace Art Trust, Auckland. Reproduced with permission of the M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).

Crook pursued his normal method of working himself into a creative space: he cut out sections of colour images from magazines. The subject matter was unimportant; only the colour and forms had any significance – advertisements would do as well as feature articles. He would mix fragments of these images together, select what struck him as having potential, then move them around, adding and subtracting, until something gelled, something that would serve as the basis/prototype/stepping-off point for a drawing. He included a revealing account of this method in relation to the 1984–85 pastels in a letter to Pothan:

This morning I have been looking through my collage pictures, the ones I made from bits and pieces cut from magazines. The ones I made to work from, for the pastels ... Thirty-three all told. I hadn't realised I'd made that many. And in less than a week since finishing them, I found I'd already forgotten what they were like and about ... what I set out to do ... to make some images that would be outside of my understanding yet 'real' insofar they had to be drawn from my own experiences and feelings ...

Well, that must sound like a contradiction. Not the same as making 'sketches' for pastels. Thing was, I needed some specific kind of structure and definition in order to generate thoughts and bring them sharply into focus; merely thinking about pastels wouldn't do. Too vague. Not limiting enough. I had to concoct a method of circumnavigation (don't they call it lateral thinking, these days: to reach solutions by way of surprise). Anyway, from that awful and depressing grey space ... that fog in which something of oneself has to be found before work can begin, thought of an illustrated journal did the trick. Until then I might have just prodded the ocean with a pin in the hope to pull out a whale!¹⁷

Making pastels, Crook soon found, was a dirty, time-consuming and frustrating process. On 16 January 1985, he wrote at length to regular correspondents in England, Anthony Logsdall and his wife Celia, part of a Christmas letter:

I'm now working on large pastels (What a filthy business! Of each stick of colour 75% takes off as dirt clouds which permeate the entire house, the rest drifts across the table, grey mounds of it, about 1% re-surfaces the paper). I am covering sheets of paper about 30×40 inches in size and am composing these drawings in groups of three. The idea is to get three unlike but complementary ... surprise images, together to make the picture ... As you know, as persons we are made up of parts that fit the general framework in a nicely balanced way, nothing (give or take an exceptional feature) which gives the odd impression it ought to belong to something else.

It's that I want to achieve, that each drawing looks as if it does appertain to an independent and different source, but put alongside the others then evokes a memory, a vision, a story which proves it doesn't. It's an intriguing thing to try to do (it has to be to tolerate the

mess of working). It is wonderful when I succeed and am rewarded with some quite un-anticipated surprises.

It's ... It's like this – could be three men or one man and a church and a pair of scissors ... each their own character and vibes, yet somewhere hidden is some special, original excellence, some strange conjunction, constellation, life, they describe. Each acting upon the other like a catalyst, retaining but losing identity at one and the same time. A sort of perceiving the actuality of some relationships. What is it that exists, say, between the pink lupin and the yellow sky reflected on the sea, and a clock ticking? These are the kind of things I want to find out.

The trouble is we tend to refer to externals of well-used and familiar pigeon-holes in the self, we reduce most everything neatly into our established patterns ... the drawings don't work when all I can do is that. How not to do that? ... Another analogy:– day+night=time. What's time? So, I discovered it not what one thinks it is. Or how to see beyond one's conceptions.¹⁸

Crook's intentions and methods here are similar to those driving Malevich's alogical images that immediately preceded his shift to suprematism, such as *Portrait of Ivan Klium* (1913).¹⁹ In these works, Malevich presents a series of seemingly disparate objects that together suggest aspects of the life, character or significance of the subject to the mind of the artist. The scale of these objects bears no relationship to their relative position in a coherent physical space, but only in some scale of values relating to the artist's sentient experience of that subject. It was a demonstration of the creative visual affinity between the Malevich and Crook approaches to visual signs: not representation of place or person, but of psychic associations of experience. Crook was quite unaware of Malevich's writings, which would only have extended that affinity into even more fantastic, surrealist spheres!²⁰

By mid-January 1985, Crook had completed a considerable number of the pastel drawings, which he arranged in groups of three – triptychs – that had alogical but creative associations and affinities for the artist. On 25 January, he wrote to Land asking if she had any old magazine material. He was running out. 'Already feel the urge to make A START ON SOME LARGER WORKS. The "three's" have been good – composition/wise. Now I sense I'm ready to extend the idea.'²¹ He had in mind larger groupings of three, six or nine sheets, as he began work on what would become *Gymnasium* and *Difficulty at the Beginning, MW*.

He was still unwilling to commit to an exhibition date:

I have no doubt at all now I am moving into a different phase, into a fresh interpretation of my interests, I am wise to avoid any time limits ... any anxious feeling [that] I must produce the unknown 'xyz' by a certain date. (There is, after all the chance I may come up with nothing – or feel I'm not, and the uneasiness might force me into work that's merely contrived). In a couple of months, I'll probably have enough in hand for a show; but I don't know that I will, and hence my reluctance to commit myself to any fixed date.²²

The same letter also hinted at a show in Auckland, using another gallerist:

There is also the possibility (not that I've examined much) of advantage by you having reciprocal dealings with whomsoever I want to handle my work. In terms of timing, circulating the work and my convenience, and would surely lend a better consistency for the image I still have to make for myself as a New Zealand artist – not just a Wellington one.²³

Land was right to feel that Crook's loyalties were never to be taken for granted.

Pastel drawings

Making pastel drawings was one thing, but framing them turned out to be quite another: Crook began working with Ron Barber to find the best way.²⁴ Each group was attached to a thick backing sheet of watermarked paper. The backing sheet was then attached to a firm board, before being placed behind glass and framed. At each stage there was the danger of a loss of powdered pastel, and it became clear that the framed works should be handled as seldom as possible. The idea of sending some to an exhibition in Auckland was soon abandoned.

Despite the difficulties in framing, Crook was delighted with the results. He wrote to Michael Whinam: 'Pastels are going wonderfully well. I've just had a trial framing for one. WOW! BEAUTIFUL!'²⁵ In February 1985 he wrote to Michael's mother, Helen, about the 'authenticity' of the realised pastel images – his own sense of 'knowing' when the images were 'right':

Fortunately, I have been working well and the images have authenticity. I always know when this is so or not. Where do they come from? How is it I know they are authentic? It's a matter of going in search of them, recognising them only after they've been found. Which must mean they are already in existence if I'm to know them again.²⁶

In his letters, Crook began to indicate the material that constituted some of the feeling states out of which the images grew. To Linda and Malcom Cocks on 21 February, he wrote, 'I'm working on a pastel drawing, part of what's going to be a very large (sort of ...) triptych, a journey over mountains and plains in search of my (the metaphorical) mother.'²⁷ More extensively, he told Michael Whinam on 4 March that he had

two more days then I hope I have finished the pastels I have been working on for my show this year. I'm feeling very tense and tired as the drawings seem to have become more difficult to do as I have gone on, they are a marathon effort. This last one I'm working on is a portrait of you! Well, sort of. (All portraits tend to be of the artist, I think, influenced by the subjects which interest him). I wonder if you will ever see this one of yourself? It would probably puzzle you as much as it does me!

It's to be the largest in the show – nine separate drawings mounted in three frames. (I've been fascinated with the possibilities of 'three'). Three distinctly different images adding and making, as it were, one. But nine images! And each inclined to wander off from any concept of the whole. I can only keep my fingers crossed I'll make it.

The trouble with portraiture is the great temptation to concentrate on 'likeness' – in the literal sense, an art that is not all that hard to achieve, but it seldom opens doors to what I call 'vision', 'likeness' being always the mask a person wears ... The character, quality, the mystery behind everything involves me much more.

Amongst my drawings is included also a portrait of Janne. Not that I deliberately set out to make one: it just happened, it came as a surprise. Unconsciously I suppose certain people personify (represent) the different aspects of myself (psyche) – we discover ourselves, experience and intensify our feelings and 'being' through others, recognising in them some part reflection of self.²⁸

To Grossman in Auckland on 6 March, Crook wrote that he was

finishing off 'the pastels' but yesterday! The last one a veritable monster to cope with: whether I mastered it or it me I don't suppose I shall ever know ... much to my relief 'the pastels' will be exhibited (off my hands, out of the studio, decks clear again) almost immediately ... Talk about SPEED. Fate. What I call a heavenly smile. Dates for the show 28 March to 13 April. Originally my plans were to produce enough drawings so half could be shown in Wellington and the other sometime in Auckland. However technical problems of transport soon made it apparent my efforts had to be restricted to Wellington. Pity that. Still. And enough. A dreadful medium to have to cope with. The filth of it (off the paper) depressing indeed. A pall of not easily-removed grey-black covering everything lock stock and barrel throughout the house, including me as miner and chimney-sweep ... The last drawings go to the framer this morning.²⁹

The framed pastels were finally delivered to the gallery on 19 March.³⁰ Crook then reported to Michael Whinam:

Pastels delivered to gallery yesterday. A large work – in fact the biggest one in the show (It will be an absolute bugger to hang). It consists of three panels, each one so complete in itself, the triple view becomes difficult to handle at first glance and is more than anyone can be expected to cope with mentally. But that's life. Either we become involved in detail and part to the exclusion of the rest, or we see – and I use the word 'see' guardedly – more of the whole but which becomes increasingly complex. The relationships of part to part are more numerous ... where to look, how to choose what to look at, what does this and that infer when the mind contiguously places them alongside other things? All our personalities are spread into the million-fold, yet the essential self – while I believe it is recognisable, seems to be rooted in the unseen. It's like after a conversation one has sometimes, this feeling a true picture was not conveyed, too much was said that was misleading, too much left unsaid. A true view of anything, any person, must juggle with the contradictory factors of time and timelessness. Time being the visible furniture, timelessness the home.³¹

Money

There were all the usual money problems. Crook was always sensitive to the fact that he would earn little once all expenses for an exhibition had been paid. He railed at Land on 25 February:

Here are a few details regarding the costs to produce and show the pastels. They indicate the sort of figure we should ask for the drawings, at least so that I can recoup expenses.

Paper \$575, pastels 200, fixative 170, framing 2000, P.*'s fee (approx.) 1000, [making] 3945 or say 4000 in total.

Gallery commission. Brings the sum to \$6000

There are 17 frames (as such, though two of the drawings will consist of 3 frames each). Cost per single frame (6000 divided by 17) is \$353.

If I keep my price for each drawing (3 to a frame) at \$100 this adds a sum of \$300 plus your comm. Of \$150, a total of \$450. The full sum then for each framed work being \$803.

As you will see, when your commission is deducted from this figure, I get less than \$100 for each drawing! Sing me the old story, eh? It works out at \$86 per single drawing.

However, what we can establish from this information is that the minimum price for one of the framed pastels can't be less than say \$850.

For the two pastels comprising 3 frames apiece, the one which uses 6 drawings should cost (2 × 803) \$1608 or say \$1800. The other comprising 9 drawings (3 × 803) \$2400 or say \$2500 ... my main concern will be to recoup the \$6000. Only then (the artistic absurdity) will any extras begin to pay for my work.³²

Artist's statement

At the exhibition *In Memoriam* at the Janne Land Gallery in Allen Street, Te Aro, Wellington, which ran from 26 March to 13 April 1985, Crook supplied an 'artist's statement', a summary of his intentions for the works and the 'feeling states' that gave rise to their articulation. He mentions Carl Jung's 'shadow', reflecting his long study of 'erudite Jung', but over the next five years he would turn away from Jung to Sigmund Freud, in particular Freud's *From the history of an infantile neurosis (the wolf-man)* (1918), which would become a source of new energy for his artistic creativity in the late 1980s. Crook wrote:

It could be said of these pastels that they show the darker side of my life, what Jung called 'The Shadow'. With aging, I understand my task the more clearly, to master those feelings of loss and betrayal and threat which have always dogged my heels, and which, by running away from, erroneously, I expected to escape. No such luck. I find with age that I must walk backwards, as it were, into these shades, and to know them as projections of myself. To try to throw some light on what's obscure. Until this is done, I am sure 'the Shadow' will remain as a blind spot in the eye of my vision ... I really want to say of this present selection of pastels that I set out to explore a deep feeling of depression and to give face to it. This meant that I had to stick with a particular and isolated feeling, rather as one holds fast to a memory, and resists the flow of change. It was not a way I had worked before – no, that may not be true. I may have done so but not fixed in a 'depression', in the negatives. I have generally preferred to burnish the brighter side of my nature. I have the belief that misery leads on a downward spiral to further misery. I also believe that artists should be very thorough in everything they do, especially in their explorations.³³

Exhibition

The exhibition was a great success.³⁴ Crook wrote enthusiastically to Helen Whinam:

The show? Yes, it went well and looked good. Many complements [*sic*]. Peter McLeavey remarked how he felt for me ... 'nailed on the wall', his expression. This collection of work was especially very personal – 'autobiographical' was another term Peter used. I enjoyed most its serenity. It gave back to me all the magic of a beautiful day ... that which can't be expressed but just 'is' ... though I know that sounds paradoxical ... Finding titles ... is most difficult. I actually devoted a whole week to find mine. What does *In Memoriam* mean? Well, if a title is any good it should, in turn, initiate questions from the observer at the same time it hands over a key, it should help to release many remembered associations. Again, a paradox – to be surprised by something one already knows ... or thought one knew, until ... 'I'd never thought of that, but yes, of course', a matter of bringing the forgotten back into consciousness. In itself, that's an *In Memoriam*, don't you think? That's all titles are.

'In memoriams' take all sorts of forms ... I believe all things in existence emanate life forces of some kind:

the *In Memoriams* particularly so, and so they take on the presence of icons. Become objects which generate power and energy through a sort of ‘thinking’ form and, as I suggest, they are the forms of thoughts.

When I started to work on *In Memoriam*, it was this that interested me, this facility we all have to create from our feelings and experiences, like it’s essential we have to invent a model of some kind in order to ‘recognise’ consciously those things we don’t consciously understand ... In *Memoriam*, appropriately enough, the Easter story, the thirteenth tarot card, death and resurrection ... and so on.³⁵

Sales

By the end of the exhibition, 10 of the 13 triptychs were sold, including the two largest, *Difficulty at the Beginning*, *MW* and *Gymnasium*. Two others were sold by mid-July. Only *Bliss* remained unsold, prompting Crook to remark to Grossman, ‘it seems to strike an uncomfortable feeling with people, or a dreadful misgiving[,] d’you think[,] about relinquishing our pre-natal peace and security?’³⁶ He wrote to Michael Whinam:

I thought I would tell you what happened to *Difficulty at the Beginning – M.W.*, your portrait. It was sold at the opening, three people wishing to purchase it; the following day it changed hands ... and it was then bought by Claire Athfield.³⁷ It is to grace the office building of a firm [Hewlett Packard] whose business is computers. I had hoped the NAG [National Art Gallery] would buy it; of all the pastels it seemed the most obvious choice ... the NAG purchased another [*Gymnasium*] – the most popular, but intellectually less challenging.³⁸

In fact, Anne Kirker, then Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Art Gallery (NAG), Wellington, and a strong supporter of Crook, sent in her recommendation for the purchase of *Gymnasium* on 27 March, the day after the exhibition opened, which was approved by the gallery’s director, Luit Bieringa, on 14 April.³⁹ The price paid was \$2100.⁴⁰ Crook furnished the NAG with details of the work, which included the following remarks:

With much of my work, I tend to ‘translate’ the initial images into another medium, i.e. drawing/collage will be developed into a print or woven tapestry – this process keeps me attentive to the design structure/composition of the work and its parts, it imposes restrictions, and enhances my ability to be expressive in terms of shapes, colours, etc. I mean it makes me concentrate. It allows me to manipulate the compositional devices which, as it were, carry the expression and feeling, irrespective of ‘content’, irrespective of whatever the actual ‘motifs’ happen to be. Periodically – like with these pastels – what I’ve learned doing this all comes out in a direct work. I feel the process has helped strengthen my drawings. I find a lot of drawing/painting uninteresting and weak because it depends too much on the recognisable aspects, the superficial descriptions, and lacks what is most telling, most immediately impressing – the impact of colour and design. Similarly, I want the emotional response we all have about things/people in this world, to give back a richness to the abstraction ... *Gymnasium* is about educating (loving) the spirit and mind and body as a whole.⁴¹

Reception

In a positive review of *In Memoriam*, art critic Ian Wedde wrote: ‘[Crook has a] sensuous simplicity. Where “good taste” means a patient ability to be selective not acquisitive ... something to do with a philosophy or attitude which emerges from the ability to advance design into art’. He was careful not to interpret the visual content, but to draw general art historical connections between the work of Crook and that of Paul Klee, Milan Mrkusich and Colin McCahon.⁴²

Any interpretation of the imagery in these pastels would, of course, be an impertinence, given that Crook’s creative method relied on the subjective selection and manipulation of motifs and their chance affinities. In addition, viewers and writers on art, always overzealous to interpret, should take heed of Vladimir Nabokov’s warning: ‘Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint.’⁴³ The pastels were defiantly private windows into memories of the past that related to aspects of the depression that dogged Crook’s days and nights. If he admitted to references to his mother or to Michael Whinam or Janne Land, it was as triggers to aspects of his self. The images were rooted in his emotional biography – attachment to his mother/estrangement from his mother, attraction to

male figures/disappointment in love. There are gestures towards/memories of Modernism, evoking constructivist minimalism and the chronophotographs of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904).

There is a haunted quality to the groups of pastels, the messages hidden in ambiguity, unsettling, uneasy, dream-like. They were quite unlike anything Crook had made in the past. Whereas the tapestries he completed at roughly the same time have a celebratory, joyful character, the pastels explore darker material. He is sounding the depth of his depression, baring its origins within his self, coming to terms with them, recognising the difficulties in beginnings – childhood, the beginning of the development of ‘self’, the beginnings of each creative project, of imaginative/creative, even philosophical, enquiries at the heart of the Modernist movement.

Kate Derum, Crook’s most perceptive commentator, writing in a monograph published by the Brooker Gallery in 1993, described *Difficulty at the Beginning, MW*: ‘A quiet meditative quality pervades [this pastel triptych]. Big, plain blocks of black are very descriptive of how depression feels. A distorted profile suggests the difficulties of relationships. An empty cube sits in an empty space and the whole is subtly coloured with pinks, apricots, soft beiges and greys, conveying longing.’⁴⁴

From my perspective, the key image in this triple triptych is Crook’s depiction of the figure lower right: she/he is sharply aware, cautious, alarmed by what might lurk in the world around her/him. The gender ambiguity is certainly central to that wariness. Above and behind her/him lie objects in uneasy construction, or tipped over, or slipping out of the picture frame, adding to a sense of unease. Perhaps Michael Whinam came across to Crook as wary, unsure of himself, characteristics the artist felt he shared with his younger friend.

Gymnasium is more clearly autobiographical, certainly if you immerse yourself in Crook’s voluminous correspondence. As a boy, the artist had an aversion to school sports. The figure at top left stands alone, uncomfortable, covering his manhood. The coloured figure top centre is like H.G. Wells’ Invisible Man, wrapped in swaddling bands, his selfhood unavailable to the outside world. The whole triptych is an essay in Crook’s own miserable school years but paradoxically drawn in positive, warmly hued colours. The boy’s misery is taken notice of by the woman at lower right (mother?). Her head makes a half-turn towards the youth but her body is turning firmly away. Yet another woman, a different iteration of ‘mother’ (?), appears at bottom centre, being threatened perhaps, with her head

bowed as a naked gymnast exercises to her right.

Kirker was right to sense that, despite Crook’s own assessment, this was the finest set of drawings in the exhibition: the imagery has the starkness of certainty, the colours are bold, and the faceless gymnasts lack compassion, indifferent to the emotional pain of other actors in the drama.

Second suite

By the end of April 1985, this suite of pastels had been forgotten: ‘off my hands, out of the studio, decks cleared again’.⁴⁵ Crook moved on to making collages in preparation for new prints. After an exhibition he always fed himself on planning new projects. The old was exhibited, sold, and the sensations that gave rise to it absorbed, while new ones, released from the efforts of the past endeavour, arose to fill their place. Yet the effort to find a new ‘authentic’ path was, as so often, fraught. Crook was plunged once more into a state of depression. The collages failed to lead anywhere. He returned to pastels, smaller in size, revisiting the idea of an exhibition in Auckland at Scott Pothan’s gallery, which Crook felt was

too small really for the size of them, still ... I hope to go on with these drawings beyond what’s required for a small show with Scott. When they eventuate, I think I will show them in Auckland also ... Only two pastels achieved as yet ... I am using a different paper from the lovely, sympathetic Broughton and Green English one – a resistant and tough Fabriano which doesn’t permit any effect to come by chance. It’s [like] building the Giza pyramids single-handed. Daunting.⁴⁶

On 3 June, Crook wrote to Pothan:

I will start on the pastels tomorrow. The dimensions have changed somewhat – I have more 2-piece and 1-piece picture ideas than 3-piece ones. More vertical 3-piece ones than the horizontal ones you saw.

Oh, I’m dreading the filth and mess of working the pastels ... O woe is me! Back down the mines. Black in the bath. Dust in clothes. Dirt in my nose. Prospecting. A dark poem.

I thought it may be as practical to have the pastels framed and glazed here and then delivered to you by ‘Paul Pretty’.⁴⁷

On 11 June, he wrote to say that he thought the work would be ready to send around 26–28 August. By early August, he felt this second suite of pastels was complete. He wrote to Ivan Green on 5 August:

Have at last reached finishing post for a new lot of drawings. They have been a great strain to make. Every square inch a struggle. Pastels again. But more serious in content than the previous you saw. Some works succeed in releasing one's tensions; some hold one in thrall. (And I don't think these consequences have anything to do with their successful outcome or otherwise in terms of artistic merit.) ... After framing will go off to Auckland.⁴⁸

On 8 August, Michael Whinam was told:

I have been working very hard at a new collection of pastel drawings to show in Auckland. And what did I choose for a theme? MISERY! I'll never do it again. What a subject ... In terms of art, a contradictory subject, for it's not usual to depict it ... whilst it may be the platform from which one works, a common aim is to transcend it ... However, I am finished at last and the pastels are now with the framer. The effect it had on me though, not as easily disposed of.⁴⁹

The following day, Crook wrote enthusiastically to Bill Mason:

I have made my feelings the theme on which to base my latest work. And that work will be at Scott Pothan's place at the beginning of this September. That's if he can accommodate it. I had to struggle so hard to produce it that I underestimated the amount I actually produced ... However, there's far too much for his small gallery. The contradiction! Scott has acquired an additional space he calls THE ANNEX, and I'm negotiating to use that. I am reluctant to split this collection of ten largish works merely to fit into a restricted exhibition facility... The subject is surely one that I will not work on again. For me, it goes against the grain. Art being as it were a way of transcendence... In the middle of it all (and lord I was despairing...) Scott writes me a never-mind 'Angst is in vogue'. God...when you think about it! Witty maybe. Black humour more like... Meanwhile. Other traumatic happenings connected with work. Too upsetting to talk about now... In my

show will be a picture, titled NOT A WHISPER. You will have to make of it what you can!⁵⁰

Two days later, Crook pulled out of the show with Pothan. The space did not satisfy him. He wrote, like a naughty boy, to Bryon F. : 'well I wonder did you go to Remuera yesterday, and had the news leaked through that I cancelled my show with S.P. [Scott Pothan] I wouldn't think my popularity rates very high in that quarter of town.'⁵¹ Mason offered to cast around Auckland for a more suitable gallery, but none could be found, and in any case Crook was no longer in the mood to venture into Auckland with a project in which he had suddenly lost interest.⁵² He went on to thank Mason for his efforts:

the work I intended to show at Scott's place ... the pastels are being held in reserve until March, and they will be included in a 'Festival' exhibition at Wellington City Gallery ... I wouldn't mind laying a bet that I never intended to show my work with Scott! ... No there's no lack of interest in my work from Auckland dealers – I mean of course, there are several dealers who have expressed a wish to 'handle' it – ... As I said to Scott, I'm not after any accolade or praise 'up there'. In the dizzy international metropolis ... But I do appreciate what you did on my behalf.⁵³

A few days later, Crook complained to Grossman:

I won't talk about 'THE pastels' ... I've just completed. Subject matter: you know ... when expectancy is not fulfilled, that kind of ghost ship which leaves the hurt of 'absence' and vacancy in its wake. The waiting for what doesn't come. The feeling of menace that engenders. Very high-tension stuff. Never again stuff. I'll probably not show them until next year. What with one thing or another the project has put me under much strain. Especially when my negotiations with S.P. collapsed. I really need a long break to recover.⁵⁴

Crook vowed never to work with pastels again, and he kept to that vow. In the end, the second suite was indeed shown at the Wellington City Art Gallery in the exhibition *Gordon Crook: pastel works*, which ran from 7 to 30 March 1986. It was from here that the Robert McDougall Art Gallery (now Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū) purchased through Janne Land *Some Moments Darker than Others* (1985) (Fig. A.1).

Pastels springboards for new work

In many ways, Crook was suffering from success over this period in the mid-1980s. He had begun his long association with the weaver Lesley Nicholls and they sold a large tapestry – perhaps their most significant work, *Red Kowhai* (1985) – to the National Art Gallery on the recommendation of Tony Mackle, Curator Paintings and Sculpture at the time. Crook had also sold the large pastel drawings from his first suite. At the same time, he was being asked to contribute to this show and that show, both in New Zealand and overseas. He was overwhelmed with potential commissions. Yet this restless artist was, as ever, not content until a new project emerged out of his creative explorations in his studio.

Appendix

First suite of pastel drawings

Below is a list of Crook's pastel works from the *In Memoriam* exhibition, held at the Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, from 26 March to 13 April 1985. There were 13 triptychs comprising 48 individual drawings, numbered by Crook in a list around the end of February 1985.⁵⁵ Only three are in public collections; the rest were sold to untraceable private collectors.

1. *Headland*.
2. *Corridor*.
3. *Theme*.
4. *Ten*.
5. *1-22 colour reversal diagram*.
6. *...person*. Kate Derum's description:
The male tie – that which separates heart from head – is a dominant motif. Watchful and menacing the blue of this picture becomes cold and unpleasant. A black screen obscures the vision of the male figure who is either observing or dreaming of the sensuous figure on the right. She is a rounded female drawn with a lovely long slow tilt to the head. We are reminded of Jung's anima and animus and the human struggle with two opposing sides of personality. How do we reconcile softness and strength?⁵⁶
7. *Bliss*.
8. *I can't find the figures in Turner's: Two Women and a Letter*.
9. *Nightwatch, hello*.
10. *Between the icons a landscape*.
11. *Gymnasium*.
12. *In Memoriam*. Kate Derum's description:
A man is looking. He is facing two rather abstract figures which are sculptures in a gallery. The question that arises is, 'Do we become what we are looking at?' In the foreground a flower imprisoned under a dome suggests that tension between man made and natural forms. Lovely visual rhythms and rich reds and yellows give this work subdued glowing intensity.⁵⁷
13. *Difficulty at the Beginning, MW*.

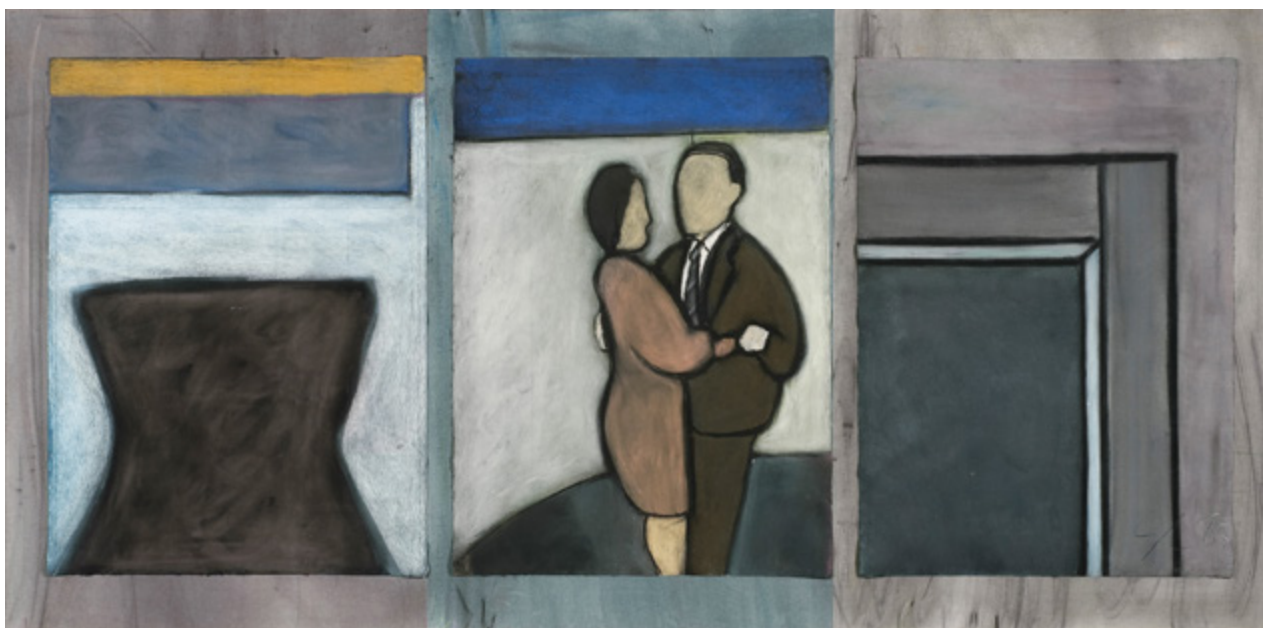


Fig. A.1 *Some Moments Darker than Others*, 1985, pastel on paper, 950 × 1980 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (purchased 1986. Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 86/14. Reproduced with permission of M.B. and V.A. Winter Family Trust).

Second suite of pastel drawings

A list of the pastels is typed on an undated note for the Robert McDougall Art Gallery (now the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū).⁵⁸

1. *Some Moments Darker than Others* (Fig. A.1). Kate Derum includes a photograph of a photocollage related to *Some Moments Darker than Others* (Fig. A.2).⁵⁹
2. *Corridor*. Kate Derum's description:
 'A lone, central figure jogs towards the viewer. This anonymous and ambiguous character, alone on life's journey, could be inside or outside, male or female. The window on the left suggests a church or cathedral while the square field of green on the right suggests, minimally, nature. The journey is possibly the one between this world and the next.'⁶⁰
3. *Curtain*.
4. *Gone Since Yesterday*.
5. *Not a Whisper*.
6. *At the Window*.
7. *Another Morning*.
8. *Of Myrtles in their Hands*.
9. *I*.
10. *Empty Chair/Bare Table (diptych)*.



Fig. A.2 *Some Moments Darker than Others*, 1985, photomontage, 770 × 1020 mm. Artist Gordon Crook (unknown private collection, illustrated in Mack *et al.* [1993], p. 29).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank particularly Audrey Waugh and the staff of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, for their patience in guiding me through the Crook archive and fetching me material with a smile. I also have received only the best of assistance in finding material through Jennifer Twist at Te Papa Archives, Victoria Boyack at Te Aka Matua Research Library, Lizzie Bisley, Curator Modern Art and Andrea Hearfield, Collection Manager Humanities, all at Te Papa. Ron Barber has been a source of information over many coffees. Val and Mark Winter are always deeply interested and supportive. Cassandra Lawless and Clare Loxley of Hewlett Packard Enterprise were generous and helpful with invaluable information. As always, research is a team effort.

Notes

1. For a full list of the works shown at this exhibition, see the Appendix. This list was constructed from an undated list typed by Gordon Crook. Janne Land usually printed a list of works for sale for each exhibition on a single A4 sheet, but no list for this show can be found in her archives in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa or the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL).
2. Neil Rowe, 'Crook's "Five" a virtuoso display', *Evening Post* (Wellington), 3 April 1980, p. 3.
3. For further details of Crook's relationship to the work of Kasimir Malevich, see Peter Stupples, 'Gordon Crook: tapestries', *Tuhinga* 32, 2020, pp. 70–90.
4. Crook to Bill Mason, 2 August 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016. Bill Mason was a textile and wallpaper designer who Crook had known since the Second World War in London and with whom he worked, briefly, in Wellington in 1972.
5. Rowe, 'Crook's "Five"'.
6. Crook to Paul and Trish Heully, 18 June 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016. Heully was a printmaker living in the United States.
7. Crook to James Mack, 4 May 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016.
8. Crook to Ken and Jean Crook, 8 September 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016. Ken Crook was Gordon's brother.
9. Crook to Bill Mason, 28 September 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016.
10. Crook to Beatrice Grossman, 24 September 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
11. Crook to Walter Hoyle, 9 October 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016. Hoyle was a British printmaker and former colleague of Crook at the Central School of Art and Design, London.
12. Crook to Helen Whinam, 13 October 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016.
13. Crook to Paul Heully, 20 October 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016.
14. Crook to Scott Pothan, 25 April 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018. (Note that Pothan is sometimes mistakenly spelled Potham.)
15. Janne Land to Crook, 6 November 1984, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
16. Crook mentions in a letter to Beatrice Grossman of June 1985 that he used a 'lovely, sympathetic Broughton and Green English' paper for the *In Memoriam* pastels. However, I can find no reference to this particular paper.
17. Crook to Scott Pothan, 3 June 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
18. Crook to Anthony and Celia Logsdall, 18 January 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-016.
19. *Portrait of Ivan Kliun*, 1913, oil on canvas, 1120 × 700 mm. Artist Kazimir Malevich (State Russian Museum, St Petersburg).
20. See also, for example, Malevich's *Cow and Violin* (1913; State Russian Museum, St Petersburg) and *An Englishman in Moscow* (1914; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).
21. Crook to Janne Land, 18 January 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Barber was Crook's long-term framer. His studio is in the Aro Valley, near where Crook lived in Brooklyn and even closer when the artist shifted into the Aro Valley itself.
25. Crook to Michael Whinam, 28 January 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
26. Crook to Helen Whinam, 17 February 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
27. Crook to Malcom and Linda Cocks, 21 February 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017. Malcolm Cocks was a student of Crook and later a lecturer in textile design at the Central Saint Martins School in London.
28. Crook to Michael Whinam, 4 March 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.

29. Crook to Beatrice Grossman, 6 March 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
30. Crook to Bill Mason, 19 March 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
31. Crook to Michael Whinam, 20 March 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
32. Crook to Janne Land, 25 February 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
33. Crook's artist's statement, as reproduced in Kate Derum, 'Gordon Crook', in: Mack J., Derum, K. and Crook, G., *Gordon Crook*, Wellington: Brooker Gallery, 1993, p. 40. Kate Derum was an Australian tapestry weaver and a close friend of Crook.
34. As confirmed by a number of letters, such as Crook's communication with his English relative David Barnes on 26 August 1985, ATL MS-Papers-11213-01.
35. Crook to Helen Whinam, Easter Saturday 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
36. Crook to Beatrice Grossman, 13 July 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
37. Claire Athfield was a Wellington interior designer, married to the prominent architect Ian Athfield, who, in turn, designed the Hewlett Packard Tower on Grey Street in the Wellington CBD.
38. Crook to Michael Whinam, 17 April 1985. This story is repeated by Crook in a letter to Helen H. (surname unknown) in Carterton on 18 April 1985, ATL MS-Papers-11213-017.
39. Acquisition and Approval Form, National Gallery of Art, accession number 1985/18/1, A-C to 1985/18/1, C-C.
40. Accession records, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
41. Ibid.
42. Ian Wedde, 'Crook display shows inimitable ambience', *Evening Post* (Wellington), 30 March 1985.
43. Alfred Appel, Jr., 'An interview with Vladimir Nabokov', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 8(2), 1967, pp. 127–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207097>
44. See Derum, 'Gordon Crook', p. 40.
45. Crook had foreseen this in his letter to Beatrice Grossman on 6 March 1985 (see note 29).
46. Crook to Beatrice Grossman, 16 June 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017. I can find no reference to a 'Broughton and Green Fine Art Paper'.
47. Crook to Scott Pothan, 3 June 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
48. Crook to Ivan Green, 5 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-14.
49. Crook to Michael Whinam, 8 August 1985, ATL, MS-Documents-11213-017
50. Crook to Bill Mason, 9 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
51. Crook to Bryon F. (surname unknown), 12 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
52. Crook to Bill Mason, 17 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
53. Crook to Bill Mason, 13 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
54. Crook to Beatrice Grossman, 23 August 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-017.
55. Crook, numbered list, c. February 1985, ATL, MS-papers-11213-018.
56. Derum, 'Gordon Crook', p. 41.
57. Ibid., p. 40.
58. Crook to Janne Land, 27 October 1985, ATL, MS-Papers-11213-018.
59. Derum, 'Gordon Crook', p. 29.
60. Ibid., pp. 40–41.

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