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Colin McCahon (1919-87)

Singing woman on pink ground

oil on canvas

Signed and dated, 'McCahon July 55'

(upper right)

59.9 x 49.5cm in original frame

\$500,000 - \$600,000

PROVENANCE

purchased by the current vendor from

Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1966

Private collection, Canterbury

EXHIBITED

1955, *The Group*, Christchurch

1963, *A Retrospective Exhibition: M T Woollaston, Colin McCahon*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 20 May 1963 - 4 June 1963

1972, *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 7 March 1972 - 23 April 1972

2016, *Leo Bensemann & Friends:*

Portraiture and The Group, New Zealand

Portrait Gallery, Wellington 24 November

2016 - 26 March 2017

LITERATURE

Colin McCahon; A Survey Exhibition

Catalogue 1972 cat. no. 22. (b/w illustration)

Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist New Edition* (Reed Auckland 1993) pl. 26., p. 48.

(b/w illustration), p. 82.

New Zealand Portrait Gallery, *Leo*

Bensemann & Friends: Portraiture and the

Group (Wellington 2016) p.22-3 p.37

(colour illustration)

Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon There is Only*

One Direction Vol. 1 1919-1959 (Auckland

University Press 2019) p. 215, 242. (colour

illustration)

The Press, Your Weekend, 12 October 2019

(cover illustration)

Colin McCahon Online Catalogue record no.

cm0009736



Compared to such contemporaries as Toss Woollaston, Rita Angus, Doris Lusk, Olivia Spencer Bower, Leo Bensemann, William Sutton and Evelyn Page, Colin McCahon was only an occasional portraitist, though there are at least thirty portraits by him (if drawings are included) scattered through his output between 1938 (*Elespie Forsyth*) and 1968 (*Portrait of Gordon H. Brown*). His portraits fall into two groups; one is of subjects who are known people, as named in the title (usually family members or close friends); a second is of unnamed subjects, some of whom are identifiable, while others are anonymous. Examples of the first group are *Harriet Simeon* (1945), and *Portrait of Victoria* (1957), while the second group includes *Portrait [Peter Webb]* (1955), [*Portrait, Anne McCahon*] (1957), among the identifiable, and *Singing Women* (1945-46) among the anonymous. *Singing Woman on Pink Ground* (1955) belongs to the last category and is one of a number of strong portraits painted in Auckland in the mid-1950s. The subject is anonymous; in *A Survey* (1972) McCahon wrote of the painting: 'it is a direct relation to the *Singing women* of 1945-46...' (p. 23). And in 1969 (as reported by Gordon Brown) he described the subject as: 'a splendid Australian head here for a couple of years and now in Sydney' (*Colin McCahon: Artist*, 1983, p. 82).

According to poet and collector Charles Brasch, who saw the work when he visited Auckland in November 1955, *Singing Woman on Pink Ground* was originally intended to hang in Unit Two, a group show to which McCahon contributed along with other Auckland Modernists – Louise Henderson, Gabrielle Hope, Michael Nicholson and Kase Jackson. In his journal for 13 November, 1955, after discussing McCahon's contributions to the exhibition, including *On Building Bridges* (1952) and several *Kauri* studies, Brasch wrote admiringly: 'Better than any of these is a big head against a glowing geranium background which was not hung because the members of the Unit thought it too strong & dwarfing – & it would have been the most striking picture in the show. (Later. Colin told me it was he alone who decided not to include it; it must have been someone else who gave me the above version.)'¹.

In *A Survey* (1972) the catalogue states (p. 23): 'First exhibited, the Group, Christchurch, 1955', though it does not appear in the Group catalogue for that year; perhaps it was a late entry, after being withdrawn from Unit 2. It was included in both retrospectives held in McCahon's lifetime: 1963 and 1972.

Apart from touches of colour round the eyes and mouth the figure is largely in shades of grey (*grisaille*), from very light (for the naked neck and shoulders) to very dark (for the hair neatly encircling the face and the vivid eyes). The mouth is open, displaying a row of teeth as if to signify singing, while the nose, Picasso-style, is seen in profile while the rest of the head is full frontal. This slight Cubist-like distortion is central to the effect. The singer's expression is focussed, concentrated, alert, as if depicted in mid-performance. The intensity of expression is enhanced by and to some extent communicated by the extraordinary solid pink background, a colour found seldom if ever elsewhere in McCahon and creating an all-over effect likewise unique among his oil portraits. Perhaps by using this unusual 'glowing geranium' (Brasch's term), McCahon was trying to replicate in colour (in a synaesthetic way) the sound of the singer's voice – painting by its very nature being a silent mode of expression. Whatever his intention the impact of this great painting is remarkable and unforgettable. It is one-of-a-kind.

PETER SIMPSON

1. *Charles Brasch Journals, 1945-1957*, ed. Peter Simpson (Dunedin, OUP, 2017), p. 468

