

Robert Ellis (b 1929)*Motorway/City*

oil on board

signed and dated 'Robert Ellis 1970' (lower left); inscribed 'Robert Ellis 1970/ 'Motorway/

City' Well. Ex. No. 8 to reverse

90 x 90cm

\$40,000 - \$60,000

PROVENANCE

purchased by the current owner from Peter

McLeavey Gallery, Wellington

Private collection, Hawkes Bay

Motorway/City was produced as part of a series of paintings heralded as one of the most sustained creative efforts in New Zealand art. Robert Ellis first came to New Zealand in 1957 as a Senior Lecturer at Elam, where he was later appointed Head of Painting and awarded a personal chair of Fine Arts. It was Peter Smith, art educationalist, who commented that "in the New Zealand climate of weekend painters" the arrival of a painter with a manifestly professional approach to painting was of enormous value to New Zealand.

Ellis is recognised as one of the few artists to represent New Zealand cities in confronting ways. He painted cityscapes when we had only just begun to think of ourself as an urban country. Ellis has described painting as "largely an intuitive subjective process, based on personally acquired and assimilated experiences, nurtured and shaped by the sensual, emotional and intellectual aspects of one's being." Perhaps it was his particular experience as an English expat, arriving in New Zealand in time to watch it transform, as much as it could muster, into a replica of where he had come from, that gave him the nerve to portray the cities in a daring rather than revering way.

It was after purchasing his first car that Ellis became fascinated with how the roads of New Zealand both blocked and freed movement throughout the land. The Motorways series grew from pen and watercolour studies of Spanish towns surrounded by hills with rivers winding through them. His paintings do not consciously depict a particular city but are a

synthesis of cityscapes focusing on the urban landscape and interpreting it in highly stylised and abstracted way. As Rothko and Hotere did, Ellis grasps at colours for their symbolic power, using black and red to function in terms of emotion and association rather than representation. In this case the cracks in the burnt earth revealing red underneath could be looked at as a representation of a kind of hell or perhaps it is red for warning. We can feel Ellis' concern for preserving what remains untouched and unreachable in the distant hills; space for living, breathing, seeing and being seen.

The sky sits across the top of the painting like a feeling of ease in your forehead. A gap for light to float in the breeze. Beneath the bar of sky there are mountains. They lie in union with the clouds and sky, the peace is theirs alone. We can only see them from across the heart attack of roads. Critics applauded Ellis' technical handling of smearing, layering, cutting and applying oil paint straight from the tube all the while delivering a clarified vision of these roads. As delicate as lines in a frowning face they convey waves of conflicting emotion. Intensity and speed has become stagnant. In a search for shortcuts this city has short circuited itself.

Having spent his compulsory military years training in the RAF aerial survey division it is not surprising to see that his landscapes are viewed as if from above. Mixing accurate observational drawing with his own improvisational flair *Motorway/City* contrasts early European art, which was largely topographical in focus and intent on

measuring and recording land. When not concerned with measuring, English painters traditionally portrayed New Zealand as a quaint wilderness, perfectly picturesque, if not for their unpopulated hills and skies, then for their dozy towns with thin columns of chimney smoke and quiet roads. They had strong overtones of isolation showing remote landscapes which you could vanish in or hamlets which required constant work to remain a viable place of survival. In either case these depictions showed NZ as being far away from the main centres of western civilisation.

Motorway/City instead shows a clump of intensely populated roads and buildings, which when seen from such a distance could almost be empty and derelict. Ellis himself said of his works that they could be open to interpretation "in different ways depending on the 'cultural equipment' of the viewer". His later works acquired words and symbols connected to his wife's, Elizabeth Aroha Ellis, iwi. His continual gravitation towards and connection to Māoritanga in his later works add a deeper richness to the interpretations we can make of the Motorway series. In this painting in particular you can see the beginnings of an undertaking exploring what it means to be a tauiwi or Pākehā New Zealander, standing between land and sky.

Maeve Hughes