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Adele Younghusband (1878-1969)

Magnolia

oil on board

signed and dated 'Adele Younghusband/
1954' (lower right)

53 x 35cm

\$8,000 - \$14,000

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist's Granddaughter
Private collection, Wellington

"I never met her, but in my imagination she looms large, for she represents something important. Like Robin Hyde and Eileen Duggan she was greatly gifted. She tried to make a go of it here. She tried so hard. During a fairly short creative life she produced a number of images which, to me, give her immortality. They have a power, strength and vigour which mark them as icons of her time, of our land in the 1930s and 1940s. People will look at them in 200 years time and will know (as when they read Mason and Fairburn) what it was like here, then."

– Peter McLeavey on Adele Younghusband, Wellington, 1983.

Adele Younghusband stands a brave and bold figure in New Zealand art history and, as is the wont of all great artists, the shadow she casts has only grown larger the longer she has been gone. A divorcee with bobbed hair (and the first woman in Northland to single it!) Younghusband was a quiet but determined mover and shaker of modernism in New Zealand in the early to mid 20th century. Her style evolved enormously throughout her career which spanned fifty years and ended with her death, on her 91st birthday, 3rd April 1969. Fearless to try new things, Younghusband built a complex body of work dabbling in styles ranging from realism, to cubism, to symbolist surrealism. Her subject matter also evolved greatly; beginning with landscapes and flower studies then branching out to angels around the earth, Māori wāhine and mythology and surrealist dreamscapes.

Though her aunt, Fanny Osborne, was a well known painter of New Zealand flora and despite her talents being recognised early on, Adele found no familial encouragement to pursue a career in art. Her parents reluctantly afforded her an apprenticeship in photography, putting hers in good stead to be breadwinner for herself and her three children later on in life. While working as a successful portrait photographer in 1921 Younghusband helped to set up the Whangarei Art and Literary Society and subsequently became the secretary. Already a member of the Auckland Society of Arts, Younghusband went on to convene the inaugural meeting of the Waikato Society of Arts, as well as founding the Phoenix Group and the Studio Art Group. It seems that founding societies was a hobby of Younghusband's or perhaps she simply had a yearning to be in communion with people as similarly concerned with the arts as she was.

Although always bringing an artist's perspective to her photography and consistently keeping up a drawing and painting practise on the side, it wasn't until she reached her forties that Younghusband made a commitment to painting. This commitment was strengthened yet again by a move to Australia where she exhibited in Sydney and studied under George Bell in Melbourne. It was in 1937 that Younghusband's interest in abstract art took the reins and galloped her out of the frames of the ordinary and into the extraordinary.

She said of her initial encounter with abstraction: "it took me a good three months to discover what it was faintly about. Then I began to see my way and a whole world was unfolded". Once she had been turned onto it surrealism lit her up and became an ongoing source of fascination to her practise. After returning to New Zealand she was eager to teach it but found New Zealanders 'too sane to accept it'. Though teasing the edges of it she never fully ventured into pure painterly abstraction. Allowing landscapes, portraiture, still lifes and mythological figures to flow through. Her long term associate and artist, Arthur Hipwell wrote in 1941 of her works: "Abstractions revert to objective details assembled in strange sequences and startling juxtapositions. Objects become symbols

telling a story, conveying a mood or expounding a philosophy..." creating a "search for subjective reality as opposed to objective realism."

Nowhere is this subjective reality more apparent than in *The Scientist* (lot 28). A meeting of a goat's skull, a frog, a saw and a man with a white goatee. While the saw, the skull and the man are all translucent in places, the frog sits opaquely in the foreground. Peering up and looking deeply into the man's eyes, the intensity of his stare is enough to make us wonder which, in this topsy turvy world, is the scientist? The longer you look at this scene the less likely it seems to suddenly make an objective kind of sense and yet, the longer you look at it still the more subjective sense gradually trickles from it.

In *Magnolia* (lot 27) and *Abstract with Shells and Coral* (lot 29), Younghusband has found the consistent truth present in the shapes of all living things. The yonic forms of shell and coral interprets an intensely feminine experience of nature. The curve and rise of the abstract forms take on an almost psychedelic sway in their willingness to become something, or someone, else. In *Magnolia* the flowers are clearly represented for what they are. The black vase that holds them stands out like a missing chess piece and shines oddly against the matt background. It floats miraculously tethered to the table. The folds of curtains behind it are shaded with such depth they take on a feeling of aliveness, reminiscent of Magritte's lovers kissing through the cloth.

Adele Younghusband was a spearhead of interwar New Zealand artmaking. Born amid the 'morass of victorianism' (1) she lived her life in bloom. An exhibition of her work in 1941 attracted a record gathering for an artist at that time. Unafraid to try whatever medium or meaning that took her interest, she produced a compelling visual legacy offering a unique insight into New Zealand identity.

Maeve Hughes

1. Roland Hipkins, *Art in New Zealand*, No.22 Dec. 1933 (page 67)