

Fleischl Collection

A Wellington Story

Hilda Berdach, a medical student and secular Jew in Vienna and her young child escaped to Italy following the Austrian Anschluss 1938. Her long-time partner Mario Fleischl a psychoanalyst who had studied under Anna Freud joined them in Italy two weeks later. The family obtained temporary visas for Switzerland where Hilda was able to finish her medical degree. The two married in London in 1939, and after considerable efforts to escape the Nazi occupation of their Austrian homeland they finally gained visas to New Zealand.

When the Fleischls landed in Wellington as continental refugees in 1943 they found themselves to be part of a burgeoning community of recent European émigré writers, professionals, academics and artists. Juxtaposed against a backdrop of number 8 fence wire anti-intellectual attitudes the Fleischls and their cohort, who included the likes of Karl Popper, Peter Munz, Ernst Plischke, and Theo Schoon, were highly educated, intellectually sophisticated and polymathic. In the world that they came from, visual arts, literature and music were prime areas of intellectual exploration. It was the air that they breathed.

Hilda and Mario embraced their new home in Wellington, they made a conscious decision to live as New Zealanders and stopped speaking German at home. They bought a house on Creswick Terrace in Northland. Hilda set up her medical practice in the Northland Centre, and Mario set up practice rooms for psychoanalysis in Druid house on Woodward Street where he became a foundation member of the New Zealand branch of the British Psychological Society earning the respect of many psychiatrists, physicians, university lecturers and students. Their son Peter recalls that it took some months for their furniture, books, and piano to arrive from Vienna and that among the items was a huge commercial espresso machine, probably the first in New Zealand. Their home became a sanctuary for local artists, academics, and students where the exchange of ideas took place in a climate of intellectual generosity and unwavering hospitality. Along with other educated continental refugees they wrote and lectured, conversed and spread ideas among friends and acquaintances.

Among their many lifelong friends and associates were artists Colin McCahon, Douglas MacDiarmid, Theo Schoon, and the celebrated mid-century historian and critic J.C Beaglehole. As ardent supporters of the arts the Fleischls collected works by up-and-coming artists. Following a small exhibition at the French Maid Coffee House in Wellington in 1945, McCahon gained his first commission from Hilda and Mario, this was the compelling and best-known landscape "Otago Peninsula." From an aerial viewpoint, the sombre-toned peninsula spreads forth, it is tipped up space further enhancing a feeling of estrangement. In this and later landscapes, McCahon revealed his concern for the underlying structure of landforms, and their capability of being interpreted symbolically.

McCahon commented on how influential the Fleischls support had been for the early career artists of the time: "The Fleischls...did a hell of a lot to support us in those early days...we couldn't have done without them." As McCahon struggled to find himself as an artist, he turned to the work of various European artists and the lifeways of those who were committed to these philosophies and aesthetics. In coming to understand his own voice his ideas began to gel in works such as 'Harriet Simeon' (1945), which remained in the Fleischl collection until it was bequeathed to Te Papa by the Fleischl family in July this year.

Douglas MacDiarmid also speaks warmly of his close friendship with the Fleischls, how crucial their knowledge and intensities were to his practice. MacDiarmid found New Zealand mainstream society limiting and repressive "live in New Zealand and suffocate – or chose Europe and hope for a measure of adaptation." MacDiarmid had little time for the conventional, formulaic, Anglo-oriented, parochial and 'polite' arts of the day. MacDiarmid, like McCahon, tapped into the conflicted states of mind and feeling of those neither inside nor outside societal norms.

For MacDiarmid and McCahon, and other artists of the time the Fleischls provided a safe haven where the visceral and dichotomous inward feelings of dislocation were examined and given light. The Fleischls home was an informal space free of moral judgement for the philosophical and artistic voices that were expressing existential concerns. In bringing their inclusiveness, culture, curiosity and acceptance to the lives of artists the Fleischls influenced working practice and in turn the tenor of what was permissible and realisable in art within ordinary culture in New Zealand.

Hilda died in 1968. Mario remarried good friend and close confidant, the concert pianist and highly regarded music lecturer at Victoria University Margaret Nielson. Following the death of Mario in 1971 Margaret has been the custodian of the Fleischl Collection for over 50 years until her death in April this year.

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