

# Baptism of Christ by Kees Bruin

## An interview with Kees Bruin

Kees Bruin has been working and reworking this theme for some years. Initially there was the drawing, in which the figures are more dominant, set at Sumner beach. The artist was unhappy with some aspects of the composition, done about 8 years ago, put it aside and revisited it seriously 18 months ago after being commissioned to do the work as an oil painting. After several months of searching for the setting he was looking for, Kees finally decided on Punakaiki bush on the West Coast (of New Zealand) as the background for this contextualized treatment of *Baptism of Christ*. While not directly influenced by McCahon, it continued the tradition of putting biblical figures in local settings to emphasize the relevance of the story to local viewers, which showed this contemporary artist's connection with grand traditions of western

oil painting. This work has come into being, a brushstroke at a time, in between other tasks and compositions. It is to be part of the forthcoming exhibition *Allusion and Illusion* a major showing of a cross-section of Bruin's work over the last 30 years.

This will be displayed at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, from February 2006.

### When did the idea of this composition first come to you?

'It began with my dissatisfaction with the way that the baptism of Christ has been portrayed in paintings and all the gospel movies that I have ever seen. From the way that I have read the Scripture, it was a mind-boggling concept. The heavens opening. That

the first aspect. The second was the way He burst out of the water after the baptism. The opening in a blue sky. God put the inspiration in my head. I liked the way the heavens were opening and the way the figure burst out of the water.'

He mentions that, after he had put the drawing aside for several years, a certain friend 'provoked me to address the subject again. The original sketch for the painting was changed. It included more foliage and an altered horizon line. Although it looks right, the horizon is impossible.'

'The composition for this painting came to me after I did some research into the way the subject has been treated by Western Judaeo-Christian artists from as far back as 1300-1400 AD, although there wasn't any one painting I was inspired by. I made the decision about the composition as a whole after being at prayer one day.'

He explains that he wanted to 'have some foliage on one side, along with a silhouette of Jesus and John in the landscape, using an authentic biblical site.' After exploring that briefly, the artist decided that this was far too uninspiring and didn't offer enough aesthetic possibilities. 'I wanted to incorporate my immediate surroundings, as well as including contemporary elements. The rough sketch came out in a flash.'

### The parting of the heavens, and the original drawing

'One of the reasons I wasn't happy with the first drawing was that Christ was facing us, and John the Baptist looked so passive. From that angle, he couldn't be looking at the parting of the heavens if he was also looking at us. The scriptures describe that "Immediately He came out of the water and the Spirit came out of the heavens like a dove". A back and a side view would more easily convey this, I thought; this way we would get an impression of His gaze. I always feel uneasy painting Christ's face - that is why I did a back view. The eye can imagine Him walking into the wilderness. John shows dramatic emotion on his face and his eyes are rolled up inside His head in amazement. His hand is reaching out to us, inviting us to participate. The loincloth keeps it historical.'

Referring to the third figure in jeans, Kees mentions 'I was influenced by Poussin's paintings which had people getting undressed for baptisms'. It was also a device to build in depth and the unexpected, as part of making it a modern painting.

### How did Mt Cook get in there?

'I wanted mountains in there right from the beginning, as Jesus was led up to a high place by the devil at the time of his temptation, straight after the baptism. The pebbles on the beach symbolise the stones which Jesus was tempted to turn into bread. I wanted to include primeval, untouched New Zealand bush, as a reference to the purity offered by Jesus. I wasn't really influenced by Colin McCahon. Earlier artists have presented the biblical stories in their contemporary landscape. There was a dead punga fern trunk lying on the bank. I was going to eliminate that, and ended up using it because it had the appearance of a serpent.'

### Past and present

'I am playing with mixing up time by including both a modern figure and also traditional figures.'

On his treatment of the sky, Kees mentions 'I've painted the farthestmost supernova, at the very edge of the Universe. This hole is taking you to the edge and there is a sweep into the present-day setting. I'm trying to show the split second when Jesus emerged from the water.'

### Why the shift from Sumner to the West Coast?

'It didn't have to be the West Coast - I just wanted something with lush New Zealand bush. A backdrop was needed for the figures. I wanted to make it an obvious New Zealand setting.'

### What personal spiritual meaning does this have?

'John the Baptist is reaching out - trying to draw the

Below: *Baptism of Christ*, Kees Bruin, 1999, Lead Pencils on Paper, 370 x 280 mm.

Bottom of page: *The Transfiguration*, Kees Bruin, 1984, Oils on Canvas, 525 x 580 mm.





spectator in, as an appeal to observe, listen and follow the one being baptised.

**Where does it fit into your larger body of work?**

'In the final year at art school, I had tried to do the 'Transfiguration' but it didn't work. I was trying to paint an intricate biblical scene in a local environment.

'Angel with first trumpet has New Zealand in full view. Second coming of Christ has New Zealand in it.'

**Why will it be in *Allusion and Illusion*?**

'It is one of the best I have done. I'm only allowed to choose 20 paintings out of thirty years' work.'

Kees Bruin's work has been relatively unknown until recently. This is despite the fact that he has been working consistently, producing quality contemporary works from Sumner for over 30 years, with works held

in public collections nationally and internationally. This forthcoming exhibition promises to be another step towards the artist being included in our collective memory, and gaining the respect and recognition that he merits. It is my hope that the *Baptism of Christ* painting will be symbolic, for Kees, of his initiation into a new phase of development and artistic exposure as one of New Zealand's finest Super Realist artists.

**Peter and Jessica Crothall**

Above: *Baptism of Christ*, Kees Bruin, 2005, Oils on Canvas, 510 x 510 mm.  
Left: *Cave Rock at Night* (detail), 1985, Oils on Canvas, 900 x 1200 mm.