



ARTIS

NIGEL BROWN

Last the Distance

10 - 30 June 2025

A survey exhibition with works spanning six decades.



Lovely Nice Self, Oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, 2012

The title of this exhibition – suggestive of being in for the long haul – is taken from that of a 2024 painting of an albatross. The bird has appeared in various guises throughout Nigel Brown’s career and was the subject of his 2015 exhibition ‘*Albatross Neck*’, at Artis Gallery, on the theme of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’. In this recent painting, the magnificent bird surveys the vastness of the Southern Ocean from its rocky perch, and its serenity at rest is in stark contrast to the dark background figure of a running woman.

The earliest work in this survey is a subject Brown has made his own. *One Tree Hill Across the Manukau* (1973) was painted two years after he graduated from the Elam School of Fine Arts, and included in his second one-person exhibition at Moller’s Gallery in Queen Street. The massive obelisk, funded by John Logan Campbell as a memorial to the Māori race, stands sentinel against an ominously hot and copper sky. To its left is the lone Monterey pine, removed in 2000 after being attacked by Māori activist Mike Smith. The obelisk and tree also appear here in *Beyond Laingholm* (1985), a view across the Manukau Harbour from where Brown was living at the time, while a dead stump testifies to the settlers’ brutal assault on the landscape. A similar theme occurs in *Natural Erosion* (1990), from a series prompted by reports of the depletion of the ozone layer, in which the gradual wearing down of a range of mountains is witnessed by a pair of giant and now extinct moa.

Spanning the distance, this collection of 20 works illustrates the highly distinctive range of iconography that Brown has developed

and deployed during the last half century. His essential concern is the human condition, as in the relationships between individuals and with their natural environment. One such issue, which convulsed the nation in 1981, was the Springbok Tour, represented here by *The Goal* (1982), in which a skull-headed rugby player scores what is presumably an own goal beneath the posts. In the same year, and now living in his studio in Karaka Street, Newton, Brown produced *Behind the Easel* (1982), seating himself deep in thought behind an unseen painting. The weather-beaten Karaka Street studio also appears in *Legend of the West* (1986), inspired by the artist’s childhood memories of Western films. A pair of gun-slingers are surrounded, cinematically, by a cavalcade of images reflecting Brown’s concerns, among them the feminist and anti-nuclear movements.

Ah Yes Life (1984) was one of the large number of anti-nuclear works painted during Brown’s involvement with the establishment in Auckland of VAANA – Visual Artists Against Nuclear Arms. At its centre is humanity’s salvation, a symbolic ark, which first appeared in the artist’s *Arama* series in the 1970s, derived from the formal simplicity of the houses in Arama Avenue viewed across the valley from his own home in South Titirangi, while the austerity of the composition was an acknowledgment of the influence of Colin McCahon, one of his teachers at Elam.

Just as Coleridge’s epic poem of 1798 may have been inspired by the exploits of James Cook, Brown has explored the latter’s increasingly precarious place in our own history. The previously unexhibited triptych, *The Ghost of a Chance We Will Discover Anything* (2007-08), presents a bewildered Cook flanked by a man with a spade and a woman with a broom, and his progress illuminated by McCahon’s lamp and assertive ‘I AM’. Over time Brown has treated the navigator as both a positive and negative force, and in *Cook as Integrity Surrounded by Bastards* (2014) he is assailed from all sides, the responses to his legacy even extending to a whakapohone, the baring of buttocks.

A consequence of Cook’s visit to Aotearoa was the onset of settlement from Europe, as alluded to in *White Colonial White Kotuku* (2024). The white heron, selected as the symbol for New Zealand’s Sequicentennial year 1990, appears alongside a carved pou whenua and tidal mudflats, and is contrasted with a white picket fence and a bush hut. The challenges of biculturalism are also referred to in *Marae in the City* (1988), in which the titular subject is elevated on a podium, suggestive of a sanctuary and cultural support, while a black-singlet male nurturing a young child is surrounded by motorways and high-rise buildings – and a distant One Tree Hill.

Brown’s career has been further distinguished by his working in thematic series, which he estimates now number well over a hundred. Among the wide-ranging subjects also represented in this exhibition are Antarctica (which he visited as part of the inaugural Artists in Antarctica programme in 1997-8), while his personal influences include Expressionism and the challenges of working in such media as stained glass and woodcut.

The most recent work in this collection is a plywood cut-out, *Strangers and Journeys* (2023-25), its title referencing the 1972 novel by Maurice Shadbolt, who was a near neighbour of Brown’s in South Titirangi. The subject is another black-singlet New Zealand male, an archetype who first emerged in the artist’s work in the 1970s. A muscular pioneer, his head is bowed as if resigned to the weight of history, or perhaps its expectations. Half a century on, and in regard to this particular painting, Brown admits there is more work to be done, noting: ‘... we are all strangers to each other in varying degrees and we are all on journeys.’

Richard Wolfe, April 2025

Cover: *Marae in the City*, Oil on hardboard, 79 x 117 cm, 1988
Back cover: *The Goal* (detail), Oil on hardboard, 73 x 54 cm, 1982



One Tree Hill Across the Manukau Orange, Acrylic on hardboard, 80 x 120 cm, 1973



Beyond Laingholm, Oil on hardboard, 88 x 120 cm, 1985



Legend of the West, Acrylic on board, 60 x 120 cm, 1986



Natural Erosion, Oil on hardboard, 70 x 110 cm, 1990



Ah Yes Life, Acrylic on board, 83 x 118 cm, 1984



Strangers and Journeys, Acrylic on ply cut out, 98 x 62 cm, 2023-24



Cook as Integrity Surrounded by Bastards, Oil on linen, 80 x 60 cm, 2014



The Ghost of a Chance We Will Discover Anything (Triptych) , Acrylic on board, 60 x 180 cm, 2007-08



Beware of Magpies Tolaga Bay PTG, Oil on board, 60 x 80 cm, 1991



Last the Distance, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, 2024



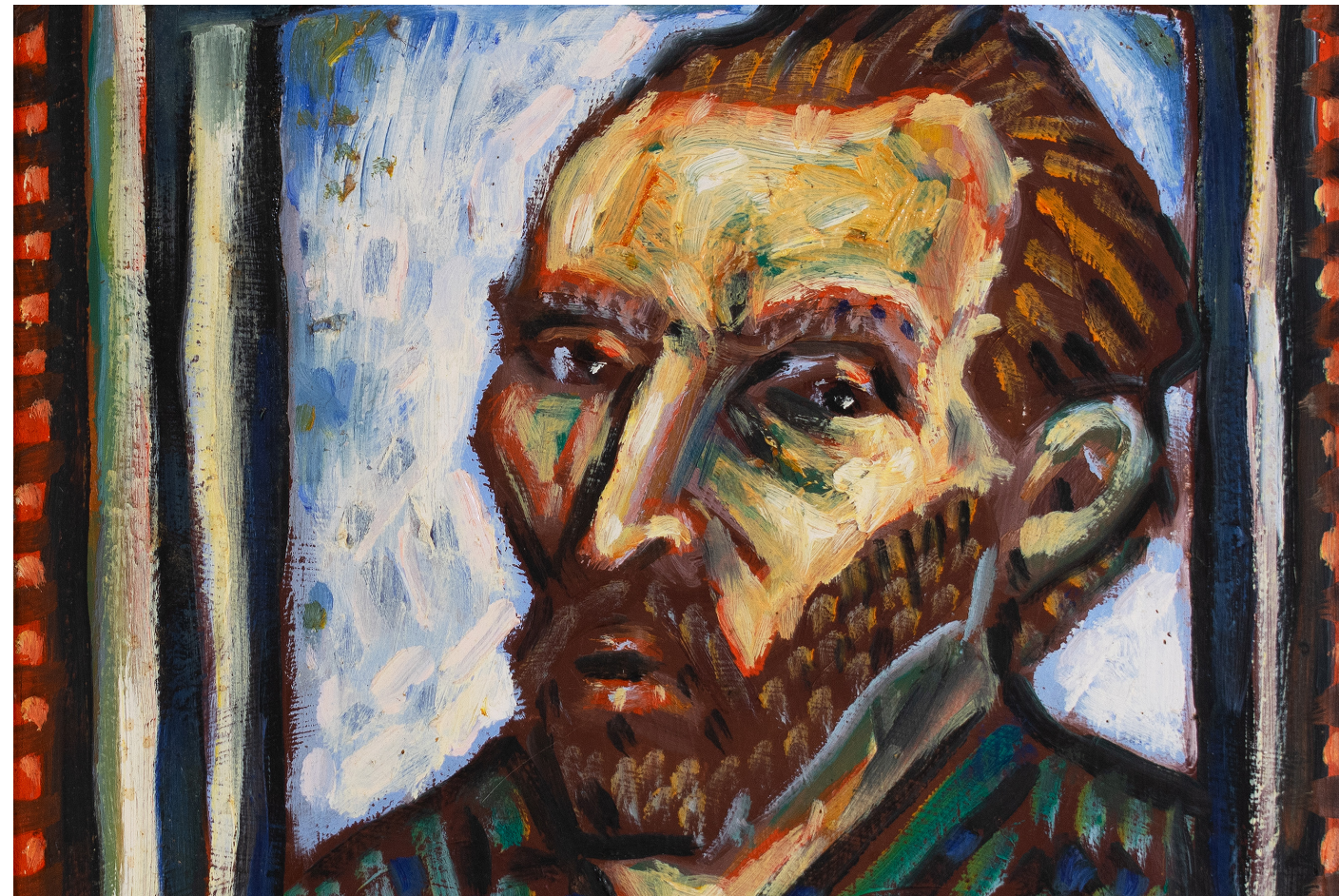
White Colonial White Kōtuku, Acrylic & glitter on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, 2024



Behind the Easel, Oil on board, 51 x 24 cm, 1982



2 Cars, Acrylic on board, 64 x 46 cm, 1980



Van Gogh (detail), Oil on board, 29.5 x 29 cm, 1985



Scott's Hut Cape Evans, Oil on canvas, 75 x 136 cm, 1998-99



Deco Echo, Acrylic on linen, 59 x 89 cm, 2002



The Goal, Oil on hardboard, 73 x 54 cm, 1982

The most powerful image in *Last the Distance* is that of the *Cape Evans Hut in Antarctica* (1998-99). Here the artist captures an unearthly illumination - light within darkness, darkness within light. It has a resonance similar to that in the music of the Vaughan Williams *Sinfonia Antarctica* (1953) and also connects with the painter's lifelong fascination with Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Coleridge's voyager, haunted by the primordial crime of killing the spirit of nature - an albatross - never made it onto the Antarctic continent, but witnessed its vast ice fragments floating by him on his ship that would soon be crewed by the living dead.

Nigel Brown reached the continent and translated into art the eerie beauty that lit the sky, the landscape and the doughty rough-cut hut of *Scott at Cape Evans* (1998-99). That structure reminds us immediately of the ad hoc timber construction of farmhouses and towns that pākehā built. It was an architecture both honest and insecure, in landscapes claimed often without full and fair payment to tangata whenua. Brown hints at some of its ethical and cultural shakiness in his image, "*Legend of the West*" (1986).

Another key image is that of "*White Colonial White Kōtuku*" (2024). In Aotearoa New Zealand we can read the white heron as another talismanic bird symbolising grace and the spirit of nature.

But 'nature' also contains us and the messiness of history. We note the white fence picket used in surrounding our property, as we do the pou whenua, a carved post that speaks of an ancestry here which pre-dates the arrival of industrial capitalism - an ancestry of a first people.

Brown's work navigates its way through these cultural histories, using paintings that are full of juxtapositions. Objects, people, aspects of nature that seem unlike are flung together in time and space. This succeeds. It creates a vital, cranky and meaningful unity. A work by him is a single statement - a synthesis created by the imagination of the artist.

In "*Natural Erosion*" (1990) we see content that includes geological history, mountains, plains, rivers, coastline. And we see two Pākehā, man and woman, Adam and Eve, naked, not in the garden of Paradise, but on plains of austerity, those perhaps of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island, its snow-fed rivers rushing seawards. There are different time scales. Moa are here, centuries after their extinction. So too are starkly black Mamaku or fern trees. They tell not just of our indigenous forest, but of its being stripped out by fire and settlement, particularly on the eastern side of the island. This painting works as a single image, quite formal in its construction.

Brown is not just painting. He takes on the tasks of historian, geographer, poet and an asker of ethical questions. The paintings, their titles and the words inscribed around them, are highly literary. They add a collage of poetry to the collage of the visual imagery; and despite his highly figurative style, he is a strongly contemporary painter, both in the art-historical and social meanings of that word. All forms and figures in the work are a vernacular yet Expressionist idiom of a pragmatic society, that nonetheless struggles with exultation and transcendence but can only aspire awkwardly to achieving them. So "*Marae in the City*" (1988), is a symbol of social coherence in a huge jumble of contemporary industrial building. Distributed through it is an archetypal family, seeking a belonging that it is not yet quite able to achieve.

Dilemma is seen most in one figure, a plywood cut-out. This is the bush-singleted pioneer male of "*Strangers and Journeys*" (2023-24) who has haunted Brown's work for fifty years. Who is he? He expresses a land-breaking masculinity with Christ-like suffering. Not a Mater Dolorosa, but the Pater Doloroso, maker and receiver of violence, grief and contrition in a post-colonial environment that he makes yet scarcely understands.

Denys Trussell, April 2025



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