

# PETER CLEVERLEY

*NEVER THERE YET*



**RDS Gallery 2021**



**PETER CLEVERLEY**

*NEVER THERE YET*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
Held at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
29 October–20 November 2021

Occasional Essay Series  
Editors  
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *The Sea Walker*, Peter Cleverley (2021), oil on board, 290mm x 290mm.

© images: Peter Cleverley

© text: Heather Bauchop

© text: Alistair Fox

© format and editorial material, RDS Gallery

RDS Gallery Occasional Essays Series editors: Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

*Published October 2021 by RDS Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition "Peter Cleverley, NEVER THERE YET," 29 October–20 November 2021, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin, New Zealand.*

ISBN 978-0-473-59978-2 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-473-59979-9 (PDF)

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. "Getting There"—a visit with Peter Cleverley

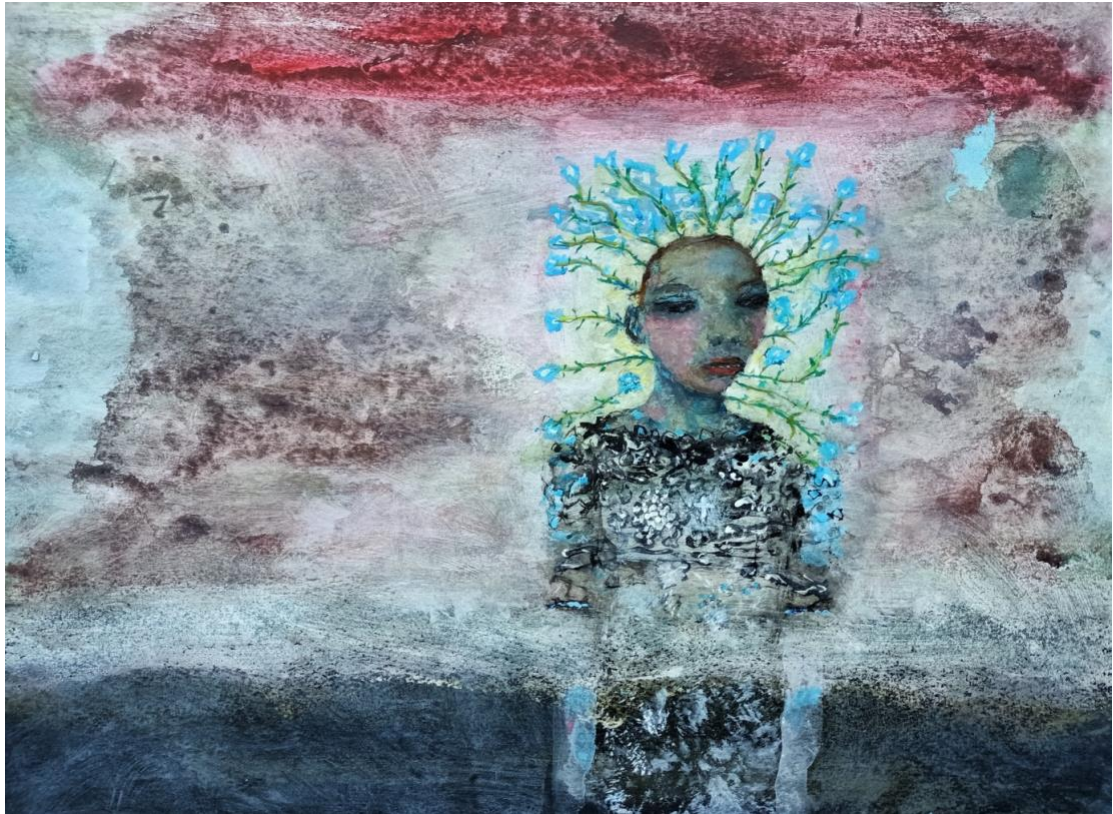
*By Heather Bauchop*

2. Traversing the Space In-Between: Peter  
Cleverley's Art of Translocation

*By Alistair Fox*

Notes on Contributors





*World Girl in the Maniototo*, Peter Cleverley, 2019–21, gouache & water colour  
on d.a.s. 300 gsm paper, 300 x 400 mm.



*Am I Standing in the Right Place*, Peter Cleverley, 2021, gouache & water colour  
on Arches paper, 270 x 400 mm.

## “Getting There”—a Visit with Peter Cleverley

*By Heather Bauchop*

Travelling south from Oamaru, clouds are scudding ragged grey, the empty road unfurls like a ribbon down the coast. The wind is blowing knives. At Taranui, waves pound the apricot curve of Campbells Bay. The street numbers are unclear. I'm not sure where I am. From Harbour Terrace, I look back to the hill. There are several beige houses. None look promising. Overlooking the bay is a house, deep blue behind a fence of bleached driftwood set low against flax and cabbage trees. I walk across the road and take the not very obvious path. Steppingstones lead to the back door. There's a separate building to my right. Through the window is a chaos of tables piled with discarded paint tubes, stained rags, jars of brushes, paintings on easels—a background, a figure, a sketch. I knock on the door. “Heather,” Peter says. “Welcome.” It seems I have arrived.

He makes tea. The kitchen window overlooks the sea. The fire's on. There are paintings on the walls, leaning against the leg of the table, against the end of the couch. "I'm just making," Peter says. He gets up from the fireside and brings over a small, newly finished work with a delicate figure superimposed horizontally against a mottled blue wash. The painted figure, a woman, cradles the impression of a pink flower. Peter says there are always flowers in his paintings, even in places where flowers shouldn't be. "My mother painted and drew and arranged flowers." Below the painted figure is the filigree of a tree—the thought of tree created with loose strokes. In the top corner, there's an indistinct white area, a moon perhaps, awash and lost in the bright distance of daylight. When Peter brings this painting over to me, he talks to me about it—tracing it with his fingertips. Revisiting meaning, paint, and the act of making. He looks with his eyes and his hands. He likes looking at new works. He keeps them close he tells me, as if to hear what they're saying.

"The paint's bloody important," Peter says. He says there's fear in applying paint to realise an image that has existed only in dreams—making something of an idea and finding a new image. Drawing spontaneously on the void to create something new. "I don't want the work to be seen separately from my life," Peter says. "I'm very interested in the paint, the colour that I use, the surface that I use. Water colour and gouache used together are tricky. You've got to be careful.



Acrylic paint is easy to me. Oil is tricky. It fights back a little. Water colour and gouache do too.”

I am reminded of the piles of discarded paint tubes, twisted and empty. Of the jars of stained brushes, resembling flower stems where the petals have fallen—where the colour has been transferred to canvas, to paper—images from Peter’s mind’s eye, travelling through arm, hand and brush, blossoming into a tremble of magenta, or a shadow of gold bringing a concept to life.

“When I start the works, I’m painting nothing. I don’t want to go straight into the image, drawing the thing I want to end up with. I’m concerned with the picture plane, I concern myself with the edge, the way it’s going to be mounted, how it’s going to be exhibited. I use big brushes, bigger than I should use. I do fine lines with big brushes. Using lots of paint, put it on. I try and be scared.<sup>1</sup> I want to be spontaneous, for the thing to keep mobile and so it’s quite scary. It’s like tattooing a fresh piece of skin, I think. I’m sort of tattooing the face of the abstraction when I put symbols and signs and figurative elements across the abstract background.”

Outside, the flax glints and sways in the southerly. Peter’s young dog, Willamina, in his words “a real backyard bitsa,”

---

<sup>1</sup> Alistair Fox explains that Cleverley “‘prefers to run away from popularity’ in order to keep himself ‘scared’—that is, to remain open to the possibility of being ambushed by the discovery of his own feelings and new ways of expressing them” (Alistair Fox, *Peter Cleverley: Between Transience and Eternity*, forthcoming). [editor’s note].

comes in. She wags a hello and leans against me. She's the same colour as the sand across the road. Peter rubs her head.

Peter says, "I love looking into space...it's a way into somewhere else. I use what's around me. I see the sea out the studio window...yesterday I walked down onto the embankment, and I saw the lacy white waves breaking on the orange sand and the sea's a myriad of bluegreens and reflections and there was no horizon line because it was foggy misty out there, there was just this straight panel of blue with this lovely frothy white breaking on the shore. And when I went back, I was painting a dress on this figure, so I just used that, I just painted the foam of the sea from memory. It also looks like a textile, a little bit of simple cloth that the figure is wearing." When Peter emails me an image of the finished painting, I see the long legs of a traveller, the wavering edge of the dress and recall the sigh of a receding wave, the reflective trail of light on wet sand.

Later, Peter tells me, "When I walk to the studio, I try and get rid of everything, so I'm not burdened by too much information. I remember my technique, conceptually. I think I've been painting the same thing since I was fifteen, under the 'umbrella head' of the 'human condition.' There's a kind of consistency. I use still life, figures, nature, and abstraction on the same picture plane—I don't want to be tied down. I don't want to picture what we already see—I want to make something new, something new for me. It's about the effects

of the colour that stirs the imagination, creates an empathy with the painting and the colour. I have to stay close with what I know and what I want to say.”

Inside the studio, at the edges of the sky outside, in the colour of Peter's house, in background of the paintings, there's always blue. In the paintings, it's not a southern blue, I want to call it azure (the blue of a warm cloudless sky), an azure so unlike the sharp winter sky beyond these distant hills. Not the blue of Taranui with the Southern Ocean tearing at the coast with the snow-topped Kakanui Range to the west. On this August day, it's a blue that feels like a foreign country. Peter tells me he was picking beans in Queensland and surfing at Noosa Heads when he had the chance to buy a piece of land. But he thought, “No, I want to see snow and mountains.” And he came home to the Taranui peninsula of family and childhood, next to the cold waters looking south through the haze to Moeraki. The two 1.5 metre square canvases are empty, but for their backgrounds, like windows. They are warm blues—the kind of blues that draw me closer, that I would like to enter, as if into warm water, warm air, or into undefined depths with no need for a destination. While it may be phthalo blue, French ultramarine, cerulean, with zinc or flake white, the blue I see is a void I could reach into, on which floats a sketchy figure exploring a world of memory, of travels and of home.

Peter's ideas and experiences are nomadic—reflecting his travel through Europe and Southeast Asia, spanning time and place, exploring frontiers, voyaging, the intermingling of peoples, the ties to ancient landscapes, through landscapes created in dreams. But he works with what he knows: “Even if I tried, I can't go too far away from what I know, from what I want to say. My paintings have a message, but I don't care if people misinterpret them. But most people seem to get what I'm saying.”

From home, he reaches out visually to the far away—to the plight of refugees, to the lives of women. I comment that he has come home to see and paint distance and the ideas of elsewhere. In response, Peter talks about the plight of refugees, of displacement. “I've painted people walking out of the sea.” The lone figures in Peter's paintings are displaced, they stand, indeterminate, translucent, above the void. Light clothing, bare legged. But they have survived—they have made it somewhere else, even if they don't yet know where they are.

Always the act of travelling from place to place, from idea to execution, appropriate for a show titled “Never There Yet.” Peter says the title came to him when he was remembering going for a Sunday drive—six siblings in the car with patient parents in the front. “We always used to ask: “are we there yet?” It's a play on that,” Peter tells me. But it also refers to displacement; the idea of always looking for a home, of being

somewhere unfamiliar but still putting your feet down. He draws comfort from a deep time span—the ground below us is ancient, peoples have been in the world a long time, in a world of warm blue, warm brown, ochre, a world festooned with flowers. The paintings ask and offer: “Are we in the right place? I’ve brought some flowers.” An invitation to look to the landscape and to step into a future that cannot be known. An invitation to look out the window. I look up.

Outside, Peter’s wife Pippa walks past the window, home from her workday in Dunedin. Peter gets up and tells her he has started dinner. I stand up to leave. “We’ll talk again, soon,” Peter says and walks me to the door. Outside the studio, there are hints of spring—buds swelling, colour in branch tips, a hint of gold in the chill sun. Peter leans on the gate as I leave. The unfinished canvas on the easel is visible through the studio window, translucent with blue. Ahead of me are waves the colour of the darkening sky and the froth and frill of foam on orange sand. Beyond the beach, the empty road carves its way down the coast.



*never there yet*, Peter Cleverley, 2021, oil on gesso on stretched canvas, 1220 x 1220 mm.



## Traversing the Space In-Between: Peter Cleverley's Art of Translocation

*By Alistair Fox*

Between 2012 and 2019, Peter Cleverley and his wife Pip made a series of journeys overseas that took them to Turkey, the Greek island of Samos, Sicily, and various other countries in Europe. During these visits, they witnessed at first hand the plight of the thousands of refugees and migrants who were trying to get to Europe because of displacement through persecution, warfare, or economic desperation.

Upon returning to New Zealand, Cleverley remained haunted by what he had seen—on one hand, the suffering caused by terrible deprivation, but also, on the other hand, the new reality of societies that were becoming forever changed as a result of ethnic and cultural intermingling. He was fascinated by the mixture of people he saw in the countries he visited—the legacy of several centuries of imperialism and of the increasing mobility of people around the globe. He recognised, too, that such a mixture had become visible in

the makeup of contemporary New Zealand itself: “There are Chinese-European, Japanese-European, African...you know, there are all sorts of peoples here.”<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by his recent experiences, Cleverley has created a series of paintings that capture his sense of what had been taking place in the world in terms of the transnational movement of different peoples. A number of these works use the figure of a youthful female migrant to explore the psychological and existential implications of these relocations. In *The Sea Walker* (2021), the vulnerability of a migrant child in the brave new world to which she has come by crossing the ocean is suggested by her interlaced hands, which are deliberately crudely drawn in a manner reminiscent of painting by Frances Hodgkins that Cleverley admires, and by the incongruous matching of her oversize feet with spindly legs. As vulnerable as she is, however, the biblical echo hinted at in the title, which evokes the idea of Jesus walking on the water to join his disciples in their fishing boat, invests her with a kind of natural divinity despite her impoverished circumstances.

*never there yet* (2021), a large painting in oils, expresses the dislocating feeling of someone who finds herself occupying an intermedial “third space”—one that, in the words of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Cleverley, interview with Peter Cleverley and David McLean, 20 May 2021, quoted in Alistair Fox, “*Peter Cleverley: Between Transience and Eternity* (forthcoming).

cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, exists “in-between”—in this case, both literally (in a geographical sense) and metaphorically (in a cultural sense). Visually, this sensation of being isolated in a metaphysical no-man’s land is reinforced by the emptiness of the rest of the picture—a stark contrast to Cleverley’s paintings of human figures from the 1980s, which are full of background detail. Any negative, pessimistic sense is offset, however, by the beautiful, vibrant blue with its subtle gradations of colour, as well as the presence of two of the artist’s characteristic symbols of hope: flowers, and the cross that forms the “T” in the title written across the bottom of the work.

A comparable feeling of existential anxiety is evoked in another painting, this time in gouache and water colour, with the title *Am I Standing in the Right Place* (2021). In this painting, the inanimate figure standing in the centre of the work, with her hands raised in a supplicating gesture, stares directly at the viewer to ask the question contained in the title. The painting thus simultaneously expresses the uncertainty of the new arrival concerning her cultural identity and her fears for her own safety, while issuing a challenge to the viewer, who is implicitly already occupying the space to which she had come, to welcome and accept this new migrant. Like the subject of *never there yet*, the girl in *Am I Standing in the Right Place* is depicted as being extremely vulnerable, in a way that is designed to elicit humane understanding and compassion.

A second series of paintings explores the phenomenon of the racial and cultural intermingling that has resulted from the migration of different peoples around the world. One of the most striking is *World Girl in the Maniototo* (2019–21), a painting that places an exotic person of colour in the Maniototo basin in Central Otago. Typically, she is beautified by a halo of flowers as if she is a modern Venus reborn in a local landscape. A similar painting on this theme of cultural relocation is *Ginger Baker in the Maniototo* (2020), which shows Peter Edward “Ginger” Baker, an English drummer in the band Cream, against a backdrop of the Maniototo landscape. Ginger Baker’s style melded jazz and African rhythms; the juxtaposition thus exemplifies the international creolisation that had come to fascinate Cleverley.

Viewed in the context of his whole career, Cleverley’s recent preoccupation with refugees and migrants is significant because it reflects how his interests, as he has matured, have grown to extend well beyond the local and parochial. Indeed, there is a paradox in the fact that the very fixedness and security of his relatively isolated location in Kakanui seems to have empowered him in his art to tackle some of the most pressing international concerns that the contemporary world faces.

## Contributors

**Heather Bauchop** Born in San Francisco to Scottish parents who migrated to Palmerston North via Aberdeen in 1972, she is a public historian who has written on iwi history and historic heritage. She now lives in Dunedin. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of journals, including *takahe magazine* (she was the winner of the 2016 short story competition with "Helicopter") *Headland*, *Alluvia* and *Poetry New Zealand*, and in the anthology *Fresh Ink 2017* (Cloud Ink Press). In 2018, she was awarded a mentorship by the New Zealand Society of Authors. *Remembering a Place I've Never Been* (Cold Hub Press, 2018) is her first poetry collection.

**Peter Cleverley** (b. 1954, Oamaru) works from a studio at his home in Kakanui, North Otago, close to where he was born and where he has lived for most of his life. He gained a Diploma in Fine & Applied Arts in 1974 at the DSA. Upon graduation, he roamed the world, after five years returning to and establishing himself in Kakanui, where he has remained. Notably, he taught at the Dunedin School of Art from 1987 to 2017 and has exhibited widely in New Zealand. His works are held in the permanent collections of many New Zealand public art galleries, including Te Papa, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery; Forrester Public Art Gallery, Oamaru; Suter Gallery, Nelson; Aigantighe Gallery, Timaru; Hocken Library, Dunedin; and the Manawatu Public Gallery, Palmerston North.

**Alistair Fox**, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago. Born in Richmond, Nelson, upon finishing his PhD in Canada, Alistair began his career at the University of Otago as a lecturer in 1974, retiring in 2013. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English.