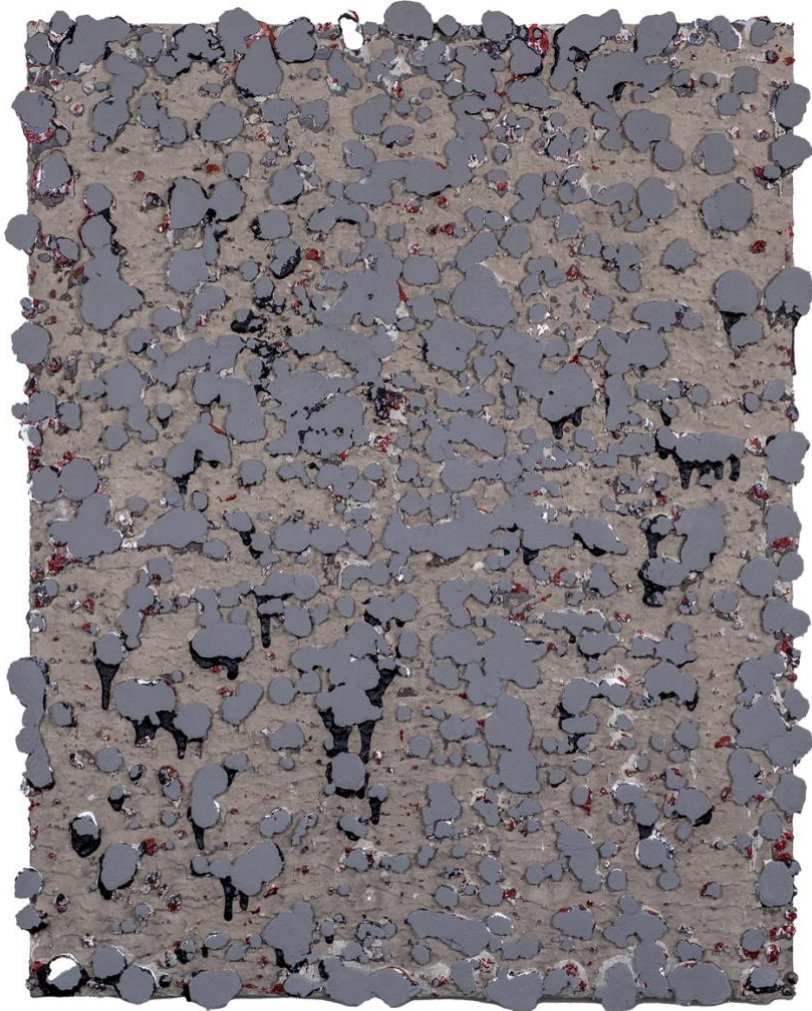


JON COX



Human Errpr

**RDS Gallery
2026**

JON COX

Human Errpr

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition
Jon Cox: Human Errpr, at RDS Gallery,
6 Castle Street, Dunedin,
6 March–11 April 2026

Occasional Essays Series
Editors
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner
RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Gaza*, Jon Cox, 2025, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 710 x 525 mm variable [bas relief]

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[bas relief]



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Jon Cox: Visceral Expression— The Matter of Art

By Alistair Fox

When Jon Cox turned to painting in early 2021, he did so out of a desire to do something different. Previously, he had spent years travelling the globe, encountering landscapes that were variously beautiful and inhospitable, and interacting with the people from different cultures who inhabited them. In his youth, he assisted his father, a builder, which informed his relationships with physical materials. By the time he decided to try his hand at painting, he had a wealth of accumulated experience to explore.¹

Cox was drawn to the materiality of unconventional media that could be used in painting: rust, powdered glass, chalk, clay, chipped ceramics, soot, cotton fibre. He combined these with a mixture of plaster, acrylic paints, and various additives to give a painting structure, texture, and weight. The fact that these materials could be applied with a trowel as well as brushes, evoked memories of helping his father, and the traditions of the tradesmen who built Dunedin. For Cox, the value of matter art was that, though it evoked his past and his family origins, it also gave

¹ Jon Cox (with Hilary Radner), "An Experimental Life," RDS Gallery, <https://rdsgallery.co.nz/jon-cox/>, accessed 22 January 2026.

him absolute creative freedom—there were no rules. This sense of liberty allowed him to follow wherever his impulses led him. This focus on material emerged as a spontaneous reaction to his engagement with art. The artist explains:

[W]hen I first started painting in Port Chalmers, that's just what happened. I just ended up putting layers of thicker things and thicker things on top of canvases and baking them in the sun ... It was very experimental and I just found immediately that's what I just wanted ... So, it was only later that the connection or the similarity [to earlier art movements such as “art informel” or “matérialisme”—often referred to a “matter art” in English] became obvious.²

Cox was motivated to paint by more than simple fascination with the materials he used. Painting provided him with the means of embarking on an internal adventure: a chance to register the emotional states evoked by the memory of past experiences. He quickly learned that creating this form of art gave him a visceral feeling of pleasure and satisfaction, which in turn transmuted into a sensation of joy and accomplishment. More than anything else, he aspired to use artistic creativity as a means of coming to know himself, which is not to say that Cox is solely self-absorbed in his preoccupations. He has a strong social and political conscience, being acutely aware of events in the contemporary world that are causes for dismay, or which arouse indignation. For him, the

² Jon Cox, conversation with the author, 22 January 2026, Dunedin, New Zealand.

affective power of art has the capacity to draw attention to threats in the external world and engender a form of meditation that can serve as an effectual counterweight to the pessimism that these threats inevitably produce.

“Human Errpr”: Figuring the Personal and the Political

The co-existence of personal reflection and sociopolitical preoccupations in Jon Cox's work is strikingly evident in the paintings that comprise his current exhibition. “Human Errpr” [the misspelling is intentional] comprises paintings that are linked by one overriding thematic preoccupation: the capacity of human beings to make errors in the course of conducting their personal and collective lives—whether in the form of missed or wasted opportunities that later cause regret; maladroit conduct that ruins human relationships; perverse decisions on the part of governments that have tragic or destructive consequences, such as those occurring in Gaza—or Iran. He is particularly concerned with AI's increasing presence in the arts, given his strong belief in the irreplaceable value of human mistakes, imperfections, and the roughness of hand-made work as essential to creativity. Paradoxically, in Jon Cox's vision of the world, unintended errors can sometimes lead to unforeseen beneficial consequences. Cox avows that in his view: “It's the mistakes that humans make that make them creative.”³ In this sense, he feels that his wanderings,

³ Jon Cox, conversation with author.

his earlier errant life, brought him to discover art, and, through art, a sense of purpose. As psychologist Stephen A. Diamond famously observed:

Creativity ... can be understood to some degree as the subjective struggle to give form, structure and *constructive* expression to inner and outer chaos and conflict. It can also be one of the most dynamic methods of meeting and redeeming one's devils and demons."⁴

In a world in which our choices are increasingly constrained by technological determinism, Cox asks, "Will we lose our creativity and our ability to make mistakes? ... Are we in danger of losing our creativity ... through our reliance on artificial intelligence in the future, if not now?"⁵

Hilary Radner has described Jon Cox's paintings as "expressive metaphors that emerge out of his state of mind."⁶ In the case of the paintings in this exhibition, the qualities that are symbolically figured forth in the colours and textures of Cox's works address subjects that induce a range of emotions. These last encompass such feelings as confusion, indignation, passion, disintegration, and a sense of fragmentation, as can be seen from the representative examples discussed below. The following

⁴ Stephen A. Diamond, *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic: The Psychological Genesis of Violence, Evil, and Creativity*, Revised Electronic Edition (Booknook.biz, 1996, 2013), 328.

⁵ Jon Cox, conversation with author.

⁶ For an earlier appraisal of Jon Cox's artistic practices, see Jon Cox (with Hilary Radner), "An Experimental Life," and Hilary Radner, "De Profundis: Conversations with Jon Cox, Fall 2024," RDS Gallery, <https://rdsgallery.co.nz/jon-cox/>, accessed 22 January 2026.

paintings drawn from the exhibition illustrate the range of his practice and the concerns that it “figures forth.”

Maelstrom was created in response to Cox's ongoing existential doubt in the face of human nature, taking the form of a meditation on the violence of the Israeli assault on Gaza. The raised elements combined with the underlying base colour are designed to evoke the destruction of buildings and the resulting cost to human life, while the blackness suggests dark clouds hanging over the scene with metaphorical overtones pointing to the human capacity for evil at an existential level. In contrast, *The Emperor's New Clothes* comments on contemporary neo-liberal culture, in which personal wealth is privileged over the preservation of the natural environment—alluding more specifically to the current political situation in the United States of America. In particular, this painting points to the crassness and vulgarity displayed by its president, Donald J. Trump, in his attempt to emulate the opulent palaces of absolute rulers like Louis XIV and Vladimir Putin. The effect of the painting derives from a contrast between the lush greens that form the base and the gold that adorns the elements in relief, suggesting the way that Trump has gilded everything in his effort to transform the White House.

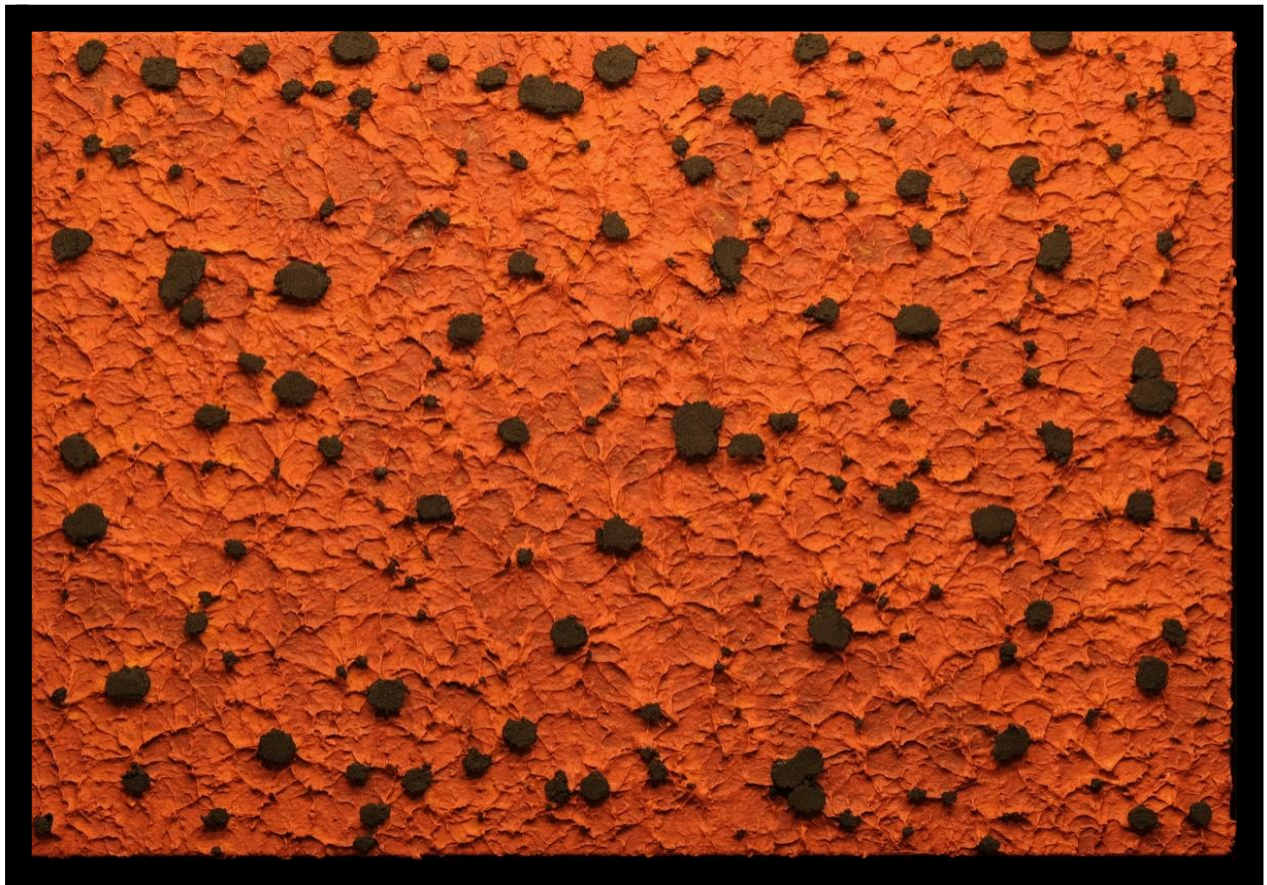
Schönberg [Beautiful Hill], the centrepiece of the exhibition, operates in yet another register, neither existential nor sociological. The painting explores the nostalgic feelings evoked by the memory of a relationship that ended under the pressures of distance and practicality. The colours variously suggest wheat fields under a full moon, a woman's hair—and German beer. Significantly, in contrast with *Maelstrom* and other paintings that

evoke destructive experiences, the surface of this painting ripples like the long auburn tresses of a woman's hair drying in the sun, underlining the tranquillity of the emotions that are being expressed. In contradistinction, *Gaza* is stark in its brutality. As the title suggests, the painting arises directly, unlike *Maelstrom*, out of the artist's unwillingness to accept this humanitarian crisis. The raised elements, which suggest rubble left by the ruthless destruction of this crowded city, are constituted by plaster with acrylic, mixed with Indian ink, soot, and powdered glass. Indian ink also forms the oil that trickles down between the ruins, evoking the loss of innocent lives resulting from relentless Israeli bombing.

Similarly brutal, *Colony* (2025) reveals the motives and effects of colonization as the exploitation of peoples and the environment. Raised dots suggest the presence of human invaders swarming like ants, while patches of red with colour running down the painting provide an image of oozing blood that is reinforced by similar trails of oil composed of Indian ink. Pale blue lingers beneath the raised surface elements composed of powdered glass, while intermittent patches of silver paint hint at the financial considerations that motivate colonization. *Vulcan* differentiates itself from *Colony* by providing a meditation on an ecology in which the human is dwarfed by the planetary. Grounded in Jon Cox's memory of travelling through Iran, the composition, colours, and textures of this painting recall the signs of past volcanic activity that he saw in places such as Hormuz. These landscapes call to mind the power of the planet when compared with the fragility and ephemerality of human existence. The paintings in question all have in common with the further

works included in "Human Errpr" the fact that they operate in terms of tonal and textural registers that induce thought and feelings, rather than seeking to impose a specific ideology.

Viewed as a whole, then, the paintings in this exhibition confirm that Jon Cox occupies a distinctive place among New Zealand artists who focus on material-led abstract art. Given the diversity of his thematic preoccupations, it will be interesting to observe what directions his art will take in the future



Echoes (2026), acrylic and mixed media canvas, 595mm x 650mm



Red Beach (2026), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 595mm x 650mm

2

The Elemental Art of Jon Cox

by Kari Schmidt

I first encountered Jon's work in a group exhibition at Wave Project Space in 2022. It was a shockingly blue painting, gritty and textural, referencing the vibrant colours of Indian landscapes in a celebration of clay and materiality. Since then, Jon has continued to sustain his very own brand of abstract, semi-sculptural painting.

Jon seeks to capture an intensity of feeling in his work. He uses the word "elemental," which is curious given how the works in this show recall the elements—the richness of soil and humus in *Fecund* (2025), the deep red of volcanic ash in *Vulcan* (2025), *Echoes* (2026) and *Maelstrom* (2025), and the coolness of water in *Blue Shallows* (2025). Simultaneously, they depict psychological pressures as in *Maelstrom*, a dark, twisted and torrid painting. Or, conversely, an inner spaciousness as in *Blue Shallows*.

While seeking to capture something fundamental about life and emotion, these works are also a reflection of our times. Paintings such as *Gaza and Colony* (2025) tell of bombed out cities and destruction, death and human darkness. The colour pale blue is littered throughout *Colony*, representing an ill-gotten notion of racial purity. Having briefly lived in Israel, Jon

experienced first-hand the very real division and discrimination which has come to define the settler colony. He has remained resolutely pro-Palestine ever since.

In another example, the greens and blues in *Emperor's New Clothes* (2025) suggest the beauty and generosity of nature's offerings—marred by the glittery, intoxicating hue of an almost Trumpian gold. The title is an immediate cue that we shouldn't take this work at face value. But even with that knowledge, I can't help but be lured in by the gold which suppresses the vibrant blues and greens underneath. The underlayer of *Emperor's New Clothes* speaks to a deep craving for something calmer, slower, gentler and kinder, a drive that exists alongside these more obvious desires and is often overridden by our obsession with pace, show and accumulation.

I am also interested in how these works operate as a palimpsest. During the Middle Ages, paper was a scarce and costly commodity and would be washed or scraped to be reused for writing. In this way, layer upon layer of text would be built up over time, with the original words remaining partially visible (the word originates from the ancient Greek *palímpsēstos*, meaning "scraped again"). In a similar way, Jon patiently and consistently builds layer upon layer of materials in these paintings to create a form of embodied memory. For example, in *Schönberg* [Beautiful Hill] (2026), Jon seeks to capture a particular season in a German rural town where he fell in love with a red-headed woman, drank beer and built a farmhouse with friends. The work is warm, it glows, it speaks of long days, good times, happiness and also, ultimately, tears. Another example is *Red Beach* (2026), a work that evokes

the intensity of red sand at Sahel-e Sorkh on Hormuz Island off the coast of Iran in the Strait of Hormuz, another place Jon has explored during his travels.¹ Having gone through my own diaries recently I am struck by the very human need to capture our experiences, to retain these precious moments in some shape or form and thus resist the ceaseless passage of time.

Jon's practice is also an exercise in play. In the same way that a child is intensely absorbed in the colours and textures of the world around them, Jon has an almost obsessional interest in the qualities of the various materials he uses. His works privilege both the visual and the tactile and are an invitation to presence.



Landscape, Hormuz Island, photographed by Jon Cox, 2018

¹ Editor's note: High concentrations of iron oxide produce the vivid red sand and cliffs associated with Hormuz. With heavy rains, the soil flows down to the beach turning sand and water a deep red. "Rainfall creates crimson spectacle on Iran's Hormuz Island," *Guardian*, 18 December 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/18/rainfall-iran-hormuz-island-red-beach>



Colony (2025), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 760mm x 610mm



Blue Shallows (2025), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 595mm x 650mm

Going Places: The Art of Jon Cox

By Rebecca Stringer

In her only travel memoir, *America Day by Day*, Simone de Beauvoir captures the traveller's unique relation to place. Surrounded by "houses that have existed without me for years," and walking streets travelled by "thousands of people who were not me," the traveller is a stranger, "a ghost," who can slip through the city "without disturbing anything."¹ At the same time, however, the traveller's arrival in a place has ended their estrangement from it, giving rise to a certain belonging. Places travelled mark the traveller intimately and indelibly: "And yet from now on my life will embrace the contour of these streets, these houses; New York will belong to me; I will belong to it."² In travel the sense of being alien is at once heightened *and* put to an end, as places travelled become part of who we are.

I invoke Beauvoir's observation here because it takes us close to the thematic terrain of Jon Cox's art. Cox is a world traveller and his art is made in meditation upon journeys both geographical and emotional, in Beauvoirian embrace of the contours of places travelled. Knowing this helps us understand the process that produces the work, and the experience of viewing it.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (University of California Press, 2000), 8.

² Beauvoir, *America*, 8.

Cox's abstract paintings are *moving*. They transport the viewer to other (geographical and emotional) places, bringing the viewer into the Beauvoirian embrace. Essential here is Cox's affinity with abstract expressionism, the movement that sought freedom from the strictures of representational art in order to give colour, shape and line greater affective connection with the viewer, making paintings potential portals onto spiritual contemplation and the sublime. Pioneered by wartime migrants in New York, abstract expressionism famously broke with the conventions of European oil painting in response to the horrors of the Second World War. Politics and conscience are no less pivotal in Cox's abstract expressionism of the present.

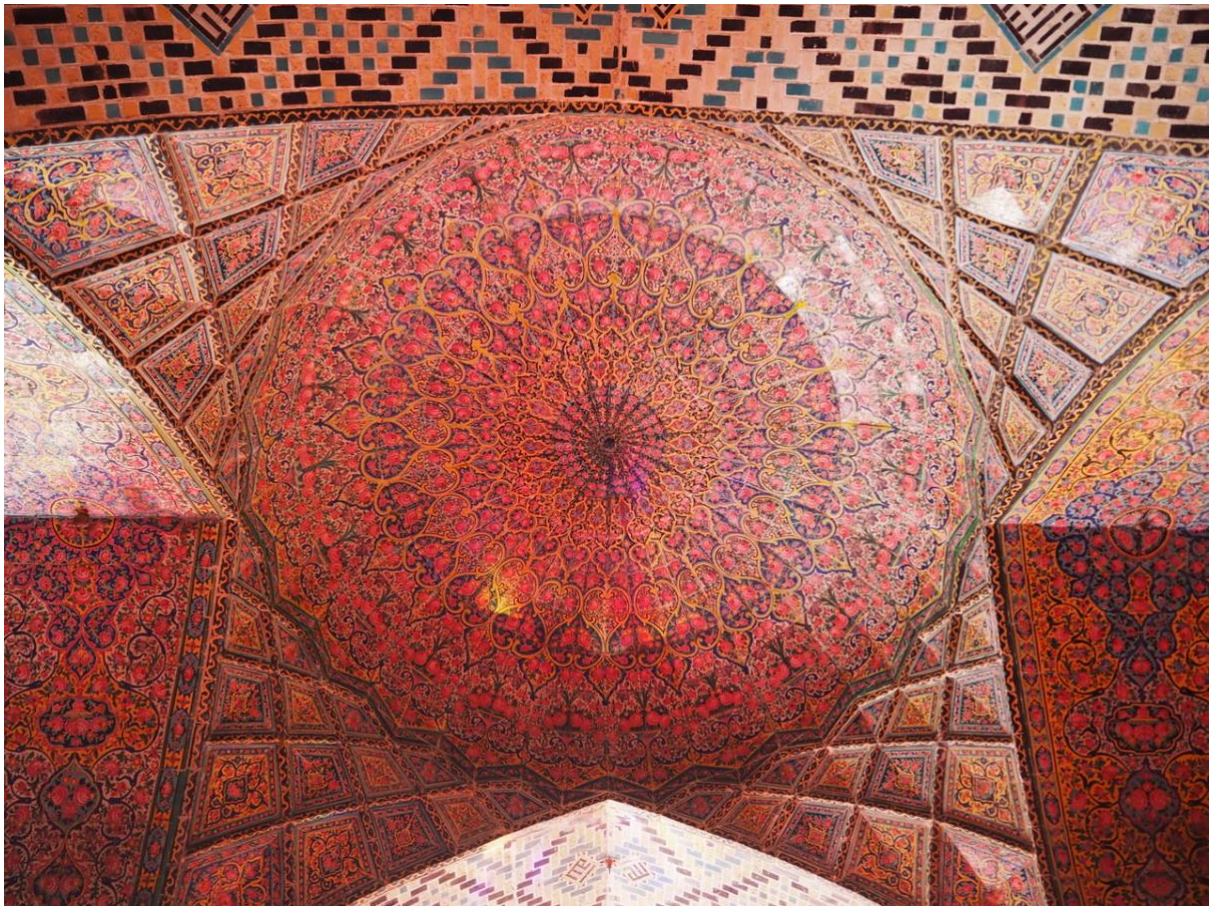
Of the abstract expressionists, Jackson Pollock is a key influence on Cox, whose canvases are smaller but similarly teem with paint arrayed as an immersive environment.³ What Pollock brought about through action painting, Cox achieves by building. Cox's paintings are built—constructed, three-dimensional, tactile, textural—using a multi-media palette at times leaning toward the range of Joseph Beuys. The viewer's sense of being transported by these built paintings starts right away. At first glance they have a science fiction aesthetic, resembling samples of possibly off-world geology that draw one's inquisitive gaze. Longer inspection at close range triggers a journey back to Earth—to its wondrous

³ Editor's note: Jon Cox, at the age of seventeen, painted his bass guitar case in a Jackson Pollock style. He was inspired by John Squire, Stone Roses guitarist, who created an album cover for the group's single "Made of Stone" (1989) that references Pollock's work. The lyrics of a song on the B side of the single, "Going Down," include the lines "There she looks like a painting / Jackson Pollock's number 5." In the same period, he also discovered New Zealand | Aotearoa painters Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, then located at Logan Park. (Jon Cox, conversation with Hilary Radner, 14 February 2026, Dunedin.)

places, to our all-too-human politics—looking directly down from above with no horizon, like a bird, a plane, a map, a microscope, or a drone, in perspectives that pop outside the frame and transition ambiguously between near and far. *Vulcan* salutes the volcanic origins of the Persian Gulf's astonishing “rainbow island,” Hormuz, where iron oxide, copper and brimstone have reigned in multicolour stripe for thousands of years. In *Blue Shallows* (2025) smatterings of Yves Klein blue mark depths of ocean or brook. *Gaza* and *Maelstrom* take us viscerally onto the blood-soaked rubble of the second Nakba. In *Emperor's New Clothes* menacing deposits of Trumpian guilt, more Glomesh than gold, flood the zone like blooming algae. In *Fecund*, fledgling green emerges primordially, or nears its end, in a scene alternately microscopic and vast. Meditating upon the bonds the traveller forms but must leave behind, in *Schönberg* golden hair shimmers and flows like tears in two directions, from north to south, and south to north.

Palpably but with quiet mystery, the works in *Human Errpr* take us places both strange and familiar, through journeys of wonder, beauty, terror and grief. Colour, texture and form subtly telegraph the polycrisis of human wrongs we all know is underway. Blood, fire and brimstone bespeak the planetary scale of our concerns. Saving us from numb despair, Cox takes us to the open subjectivity of the border-crossing traveller, marking the need for reprieve from the border-building xenophobe, and reminding us that there is strength in vulnerability. As Beauvoir documents, “New York began to open up for me only when I had guides to show me

the city."⁴ The traveller depends upon the hospitality of others. Metaphorically speaking, we are all the traveller. Like the fecund Earth, the relation of stranger to host grows human affinity. If we can be as hospitable to one another as the Earth is to us all, we will move in the right direction.



Nasir-Ol Molk Mosque, Shiraz, Iran, photographed by Jon Cox during his travels, (2018).

⁴ Beauvoir, *America*, 96.

Contributors

Jon Cox (b.1973, Balclutha) attended South Otago High School before moving to Dunedin in 1991 to join the music scene, playing in bands such as Isolation Backlash and The Strangeloves. In the late 1990s, he left Dunedin for London, which initiated a long period in which travel and travel photography were his main focus. In 2020, Jon returned to Dunedin during the pandemic, at which point, he began painting. With no previous painting experience, he was taught by the materials with which he worked. In December 2024, he joined RDS Gallery as Exhibitions Coordinator; in February 2025, Moray Gallery hosted his first solo exhibition, where he continues to show his work.

Alistair Fox is Emeritus Professor at the University of Otago. His scholarly publications include ten monographs, the most recent of which is *Peter Cleverley: Between Transience and Eternity* (2025). He is the owner of RDS Gallery and the co-editor of the gallery's Occasional Essays Series.

Kari Schmidt (LLB HONS, Otago, 2015; BA HONS, Art Hist, Well, 2016) is a mother and arts writer based in Ōtepoti | Dunedin. She co-founded Laurel Project Space (2019) and later founded Wave Project Space (2022). She is a trustee on the Blue Oyster Art Project Space Trust and works as in-house counsel at the University of Otago.

Rebecca Stringer is Associate Professor in the Sociology, Gender Studies and Criminology Programme at the University of Otago, Dunedin. Her current research focuses on gender, feminism and the visual culture of victimhood. She has a long-standing interest in contemporary art, having completed her undergraduate studies in Art History and Criticism at Western Sydney University, graduating with a University Medal and a Sydney Mechanics' School of Art Award before interning at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy.

