

Te Manawa | ART

ray thorburn
line on line

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Cover image: Ray Thorburn, *Modular 12 Series 2*, 1970, cellulose lacquer on board.
Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust, Palmerston North

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Introduction

“There are two problems in painting. . . One is to find out what painting is, and the other is to find out how to make a painting.” – Frank Stella

Ray Thorburn spent a highly productive period of his life in Palmerston North in the early 1970s – with work from his signature *Modular series* made in the Manawatu now in the major public collections throughout New Zealand. An exhibition devoted to his artistic output highlights a very non-linear practice: the distinct periods and styles of his work from the early biomorphic forms from the mid 1960s, to the switch to a linear idiom in the late 60s, which developed into the modular paintings, then minimal monochromatic panels, to the PhD and *Calendar series*, and finally now to new works produced this year for this retrospective exhibition. Thorburn’s artistic energy converged with the new Manawatu Art Gallery building in the mid 1970s – which provides an integral context for this exhibition, an architectural interplay that could not have been realised elsewhere. The exhibition allows us to gain an insight and an overview of his artistic career which will, we hope, stimulate reappraisals.

Contemporary painting with its roots in Modernism and Conceptual practice has vastly broadened its context since the 1970s. To avoid irrelevance or obsolescence, it has developed new aesthetic idioms for its own survival. Thus, Ray Thorburn’s work in *Line on Line* is being reconsidered in the light of contemporary painting rather than solely within the historical moment of its conception. Thorburn’s work, it will be argued, rather than being essentially formalist, is essentially conceptual.

Ray Thorburn (b. Wellington 1937) majored in design at Wellington Technical College, and later at Elam School of Fine Art, University of Auckland. He maintains that he learned more from stimulating teachers such as A.R.D Fairburn and Peter Tomory, director of the Auckland City Art Gallery and artists Dennis Knight Turner, Eric Lee-Johnson and Theo Schoon than from curricula.¹ Throughout the many phases of his career, as artist, academic, administrator and art advocate, he has always insisted that art education be connected directly to the creative process.

From the mid 1960s his paintings explored organic shapes and biomorphic forms and experimented with variegated surface textures and relief collage elements. *Fantasy Forms* an early example (1965, Collection of Te Manawa Art Society, Inc.) explores form through rich primary colour – red and blue predominate. In 1965 he held his first one-man exhibition at the Argus Gallery, Melbourne, Australia. Returning to New Zealand in 1967, he moved to Palmerston North to lecture at the Palmerston North Teachers College. In 1967 his work was selected for the Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art Exhibition, and toured to major centres in New Zealand. His first solo exhibition in New Zealand held at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, followed later that year. At this time Ray began to reconsider painting in terms of its relevance to the contemporary environment, and design became an essential consideration in his shaped stretchers. Some of these early works – most, now destroyed – were radical for their time, protruding from the wall like a shelf or bending and curling, with one such work suspended in the air, in an S shape. *Line on Line* (1967, acrylic on canvas, Collection of Te Manawa Art Society, Inc.) was one of the first linear works and marks a turning point. The diagonal lines articulate space dynamically accentuated by fluorescent highlights with an idea to using ultraviolet lighting. These early linear experiments were mostly in acrylic on cotton and soon developed into Thorburn’s now signature *Modular Series* from 1968–73 discarding the conventions of containing the image within a frame.

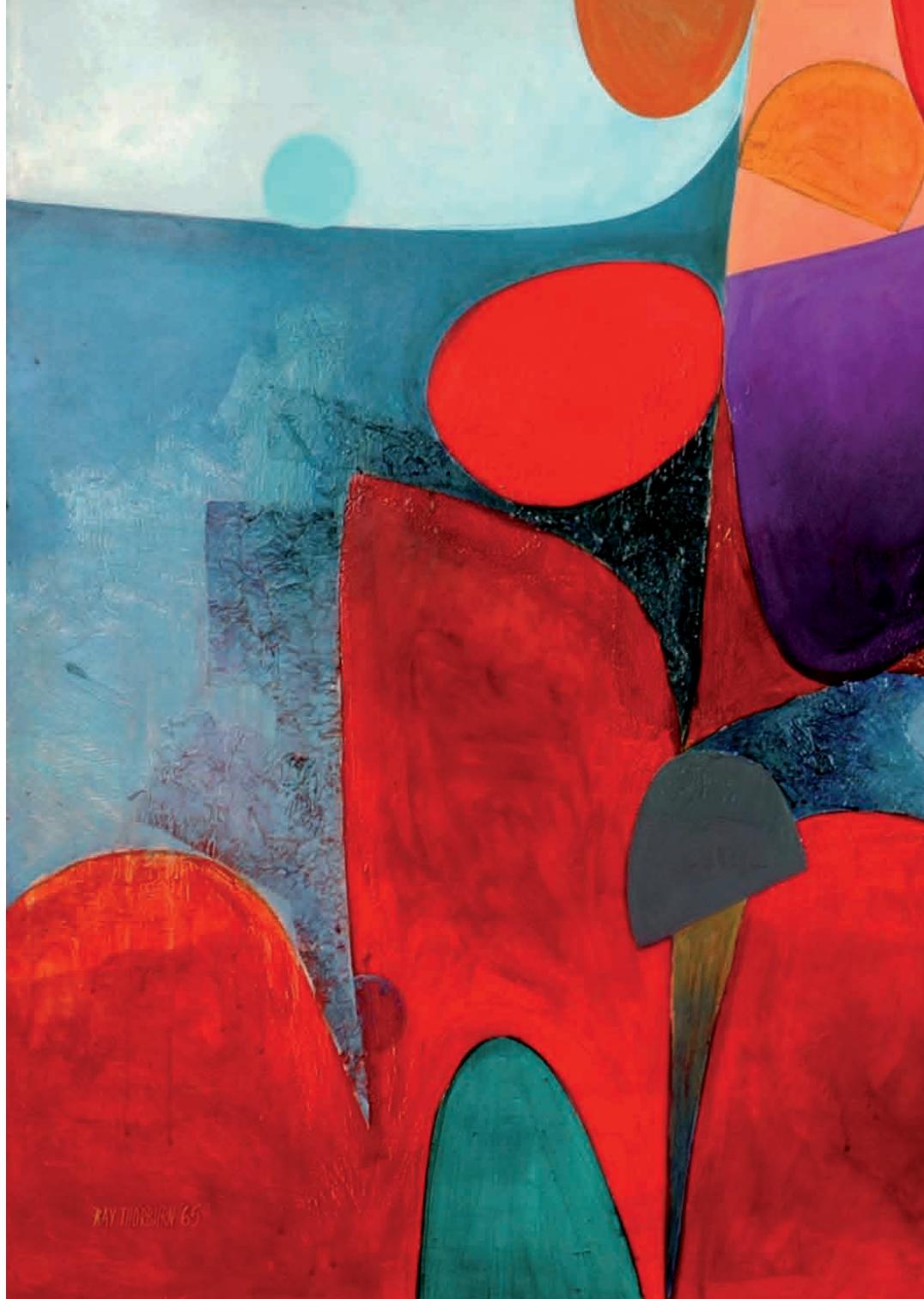
In referencing modular sculpture, he also wanted “to create a total environment so that the spectator is completely encompassed by the work.”² Barry Lett provided a broader context: “Modular painting is an exciting idea. . . Joe Tilson is another who comes to mind immediately, but his works are often wall reliefs with moveable parts.”³ Andrew Bogle recalled one such painting in Thorburn’s 1969 exhibition which ran down the wall and projected out from it to serve as a “coffee table”. Thorburn’s impulse was to produce a painting “that not only could be turned around but which in fact could be taken apart and rearranged according to the space that was available. This meant there was an element of sculpture in it. The painting could project out across the floor. The units could be hung in

2 Letter from Ray Thorburn to Barry Lett, n.d

3 Letter from B. G. Lett to Ray Thorburn, Friday October 27, 1967, Lett Gallery File, Hocken Library Archives Collection, Dunedin

1 The Fletcher Collection Trust website www.fletchercollection.co.nz

Fantasy Forms, 1965, 900 mm x 1510mm,
acrylic on hardboard, Collection of Te Manawa
Art Society Inc.





space, back to back.”⁴ Such intentions drew unsympathetic remarks from one critic: “It is not the function of art to support tea and cakes.”⁵

Ray designed and supervised the making of increasingly complex works using auto lacquer on hardboard. He outsourced the spray work to a commercial car painter Don Heayns of Palmerston North, who was also responsible for the interior lacquered painting of the Manawatu Art Gallery. Instead of labouring to finesse the surfaces himself, Ray became a spectator in the making process. While considered a novel approach to creating work it was a concept shared with Sol LeWitt, who emphasised that it was about realising the idea and not about the maker.

The works evolved into a succession of Modular repetitions in diverse colour combinations around a cross formation. Reverberating optical sensations generated a demanding instability within geometric order, when spaced lines were placed over uniform colour fields. The interchangeable panels could be fitted together edge to edge in any number of configurations. Thorburn was aware of Op-Art pioneer Victor Vasarely’s work with which he had an affinity. (He was later to visit the artist in France and interview him.) The optical effects could be subtle or highly dizzying and disorienting. Op painting used a framework of purely geometric forms as the basis for its effects and also drew on colour theory and the physiology and psychology of perception. Rather than a distant derivative from the South Pacific, Thorburn’s international exposure, even at that time, led to his inclusion in John Lancaster’s publication “Introducing Op Art” (Anchor Press Ltd, U.K. 1973) alongside leading practitioners Vasarely and Bridget Riley.

Thorburn exhibited regularly in the late 60s. In 1968 he exhibited in “New Zealand Painting Today”, Centre Gallery, Wellington, and “Australian Painting in New Zealand”, at the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North. He was first chosen for the Benson and Hedges Art Award exhibition, touring major centres in New Zealand. The following year he won the Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art with his painting *Modular 10 Series 1*, 1969, a work with radiating purples, mauves, and white striations. (The volatile nature of commercial pigments later caused the work to disintegrate).

Thorburn had his sights on the world stage. After his experiments with the *Modular 10* series, a large monochrome black and white work emerged. This was to be included in New Zealand’s representation at the prestigious international contemporary art biennale in São Paulo, Brazil. In a letter of 8 February, 1970 to the selection panel of the Queen Elizabeth Arts Council Thorburn states:

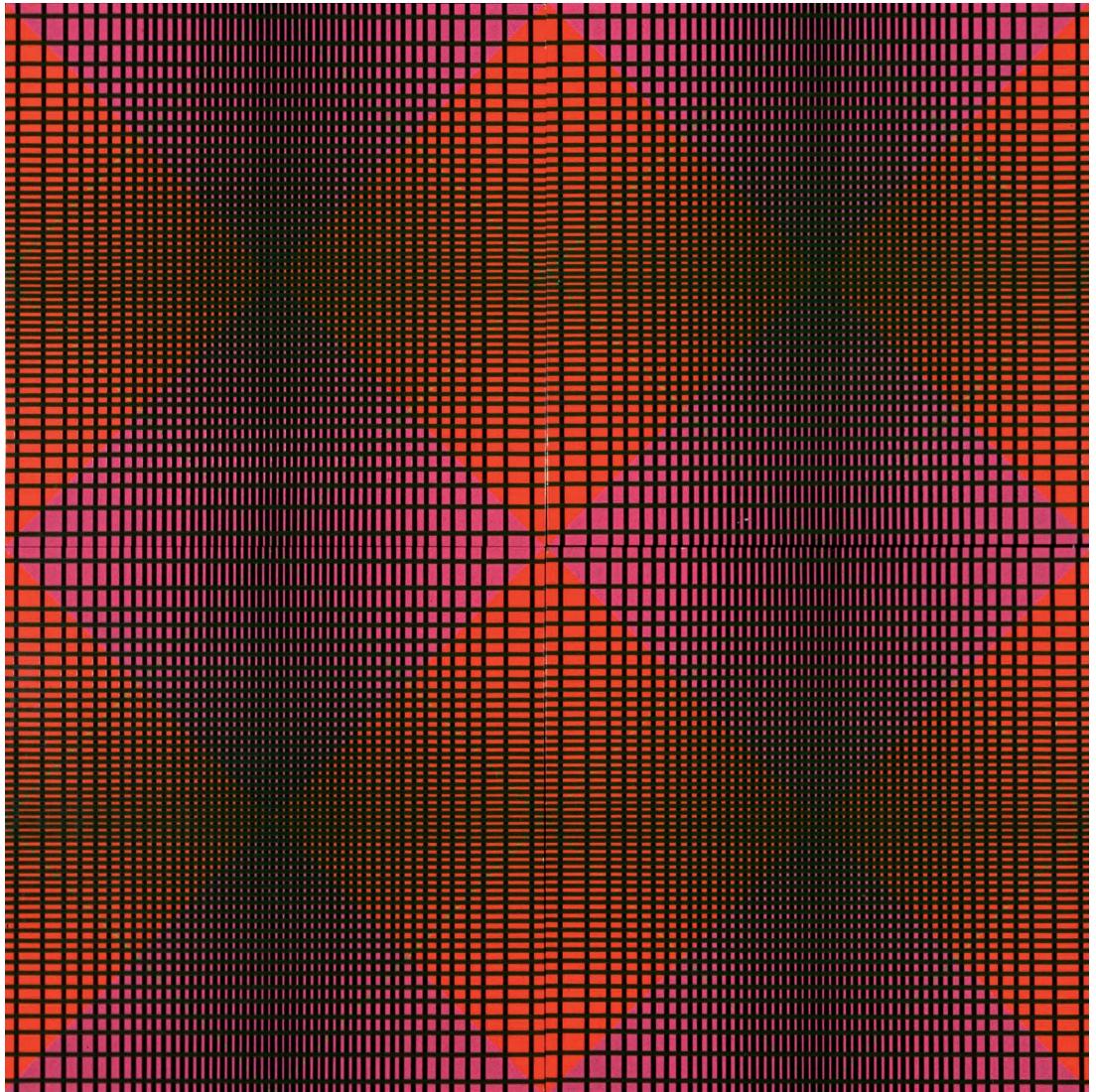
“Since 1967 I have been experimenting with and developing a modular approach to painting. . . I have now reached a point in my development where I feel overseas experience is essential for further progress. [. . .] and can only be gained by personal contact with the work of people painting in the fields of: - hard-edge, colourfield, minimal, op and other technological and objective movements in the major centres in Europe and North America. I am interested not only in recent trends but also in the work of Malevich, Mondrian, Passmore, Nicholson, Albers and Max Bill. . . . I am particularly interested in working with chromium and fluorescent colour because of the reflecting and luminous qualities of the material which I feel would lead to greater involvement between spectator and the painting. The surfaces would be directly affected by any object or light source in the immediate environment, consequently the image would take on the personality of its surroundings. . . .”⁶

In 1970 he held his second solo exhibition, *Modular Series 2*, at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland and at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. The *Modular Series 2* exhibited at Barry Lett included eleven combinations (*Modular 2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15*, and *Modular 16*). Thorburn described the Series in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: “*Modular Series 2* differs from the first series in that there is an obvious relationship between individual paintings. . . . Although there is a strong family relationship in this series, the paintings are more like brothers and sisters of different sizes and personalities and not identical twins. The first painting of this series was exhibited in the 1970 Benson & Hedges Art Award. In some paintings each unit is different i.e. I have used the same colours but in a different order. Others are variations of the horizontal vertical and diagonal format, in some I have reduced the diagonal affect and in others have left it out altogether. Colour relationships have always fascinated me particularly the changing effects colours have on each other if the sequence is altered or another element introduced. In some paintings the difference between each unit is simply one coloured line or a slight tonal variation but in others I have emphasised strong tonal and colour contrasts. I have also been interested in the notion that when a painting is hung in certain combinations the juxtaposition of line and colour will create a sense of movement and yet when the same four units which make up each painting are rearranged the image will appear quite still. At no time do I have a preconceived idea of the end product. I merely start with one colour and the rest is determined as the painting develops. They are what you see; paintings which have no predetermined

4 Conversation, Andrew Bogle interviews Ray Thorburn. *The Grid: Lattice and Network – Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, October 1983, p. 17.

5 McNamara, T.J., “Talented Work close to Op Art” (exhibition review), *New Zealand Herald*, February 1969 quoted in Bogle. Conversation, Andrew Bogle interviews Ray Thorburn. *The Grid: Lattice and Network – Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, October 1983, p. 17.

6 Thorburn, Ray. Unpublished letter to QEII Arts Council Visual Arts Selection Panel, 8 February 1970, Palmerston North, artist’s file, Massey University.



Modular 3, Series 2, 1970, acrylic on board, Collection Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

order but can be rearranged to suit individual preferences.”⁷

Tony Green gave the exhibition a favourable review with explicit descriptions of the works, many of which are no longer in existence or irretrievable:

“... there is one main theme. Sets of straight lines that intersect at right angles. Each set is in a different colour. They are spaced further apart at the edge of the panels, and closer together at the middle. The ground colours behind the lines are differently treated in each group of panels. The panels are made up of groups of four, which can be assembled in several different ways. Out of these simple elements he constructs a series of varied compositions. ... the sets of lines vibrate in a coloured haze against the ground. Interference effects, simultaneous contrasts and after-images abound but Thorburn uses these for colour enrichment, not for op-art illusions of movement.”⁸

Green went on to describe *Modular 2 Series 2*, 1970, now in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki:

“... the richest of all in colour is also the largest, eighteen foot square overall. In this one, a set of magenta stripes and a set of vermilion stripes are played off against a dark blue and dark green ground, divided into large triangles. The tones are close in this picture, and the red lines float in a haze over the ground. In another set with red and magenta lines, set off against a two-toned, yellow ground, the contrast is much stronger, and the lines separate off from the ground.”⁹

Colour is relative: three, four or five elements resonate in the manner of musical notes playing their chromatic scales, and with each a particular feature becomes dominant. The recession and perspective of space through colour and chromatic relationships is subtle and informed. As Gil Docking noted, like his New Zealand contemporaries David Graham and John Coley, Thorburn “too has been fascinated by the possibilities of colour relationships, but has added a modular system to his paintings” furthering their relationship to sculpture and installation. He did not “predetermine the colour relationships. He starts with one colour and allows the application of each succeeding

colour to be modified in hue, intensity and tone as the painting develops.”¹⁰

Thorburn’s application for a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Fellowship was successful. The Award allowed him to study trends in art education and contemporary developments in Europe, Britain and the United States of America. In 1971, he represented New Zealand at the XI International São Paulo Biennale of Contemporary Art, Brazil, alongside Ralph Hotere and Michael Eaton. It was here that he met New York art dealer Leo Castelli. The meeting was to become an essential connection for his next trip to America and his penetration of the New York art world. Later that year, his work featured in two exhibitions: ‘Wellington 1871–1971,’ at the Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt and Centenary Exhibition of Contemporary New Zealand Painting, a touring exhibition presented by the Manawatu Art Gallery.

Reflecting on the late 60s and 70s art scene in New Zealand, Neil Roberts, former Senior Curator at the Christchurch Art Gallery, was struck by three things which had provided artists with direct exposure to international art developments. Firstly, the growth of dealer galleries assisted artists to develop their aesthetic, with Ralph Hotere, Don Driver, Ian Scott and Ray Thorburn in the vanguard. Secondly, informal groups of experimental artists, like *20/20 Vision* which formed in Christchurch in 1964, began to inflect the arts scene with avant-garde practices and politics.¹¹ And thirdly, arts publications began to appear regularly. Although some, like *Arts and Community*,¹² which had started in 1969 folded soon after, such publications provided up to the minute accounts of local contemporary art, art criticism and exhibition reviews.

By 1972 Thorburn’s output was sufficient to sustain a series of exhibitions in New Zealand and overseas. It was a prodigious year. He exhibited a series of modular prints at the major international printmaking biennale, Third Biennale Internationale de l’Estampe, Paris, France; *Modular Series 3* was exhibited at Victoria and Canterbury Universities, and he was chosen for the Benson and Hedges Art Award exhibition. In addition, his work was included in “Contemporary New Zealand Painting” at the Pacific Arts Festival, Fiji, *Drawings in progress*, at Barry Lett Galleries, and the Tenth Anniversary Exhibition NZSSP, at the Osborne Galleries, Auckland.

7 Thorburn, Ray. August, 1970. “Ray Thorburn: Modular Series 2” exhibition catalogue, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland.

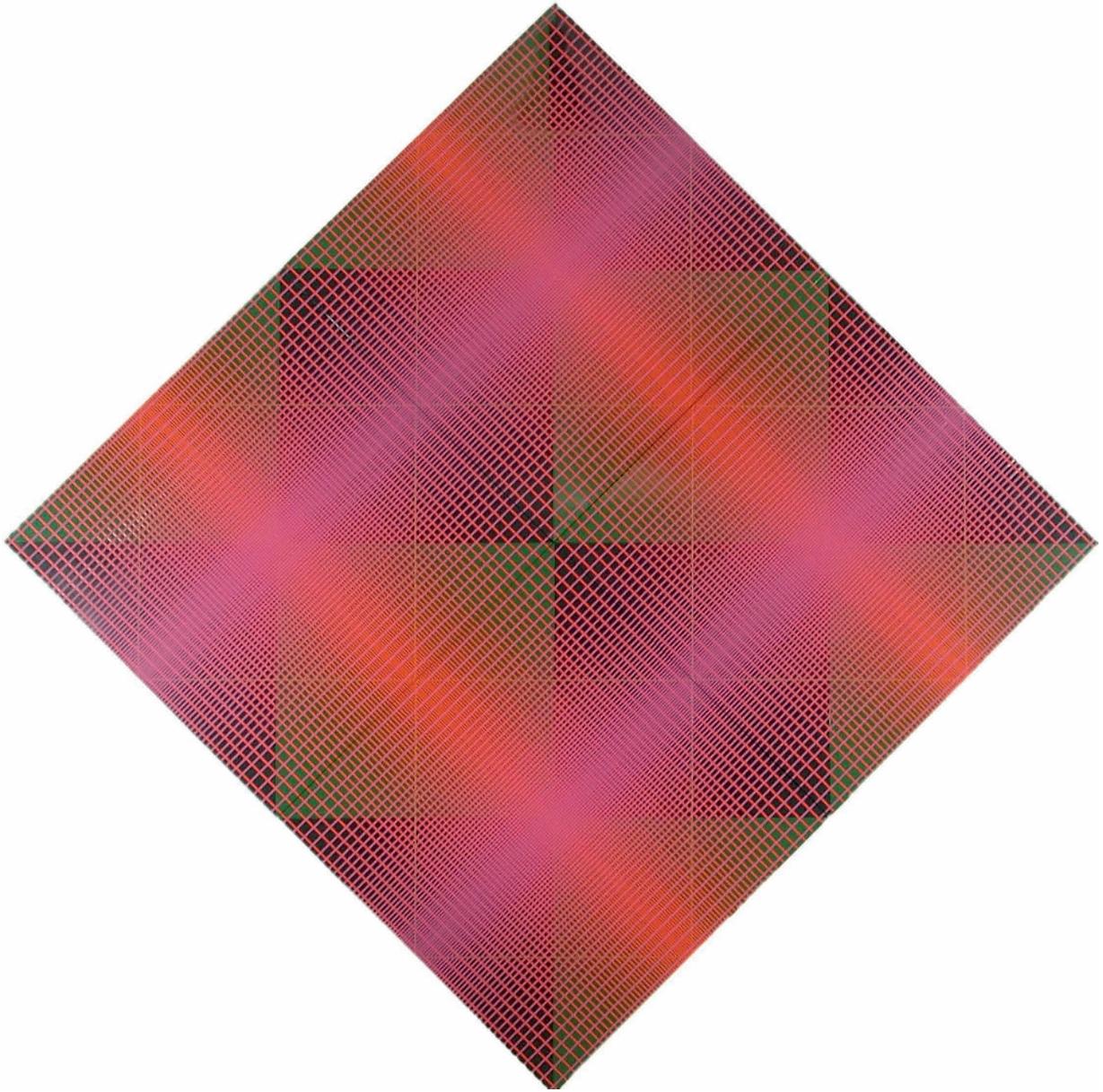
8 Green, Tony. “Ray Thorburn at Barry Lett Galleries,” Arts in Auckland, N.Z.B.C. Aug. 18, 1970 (Hocken Library, Thorburn archives, Dunedin)

9 Green, Tony. “Ray Thorburn at Barry Lett Galleries,” Arts in Auckland, N.Z.B.C. Aug. 18, 1970 (Hocken Library, Thorburn archives, Dunedin)

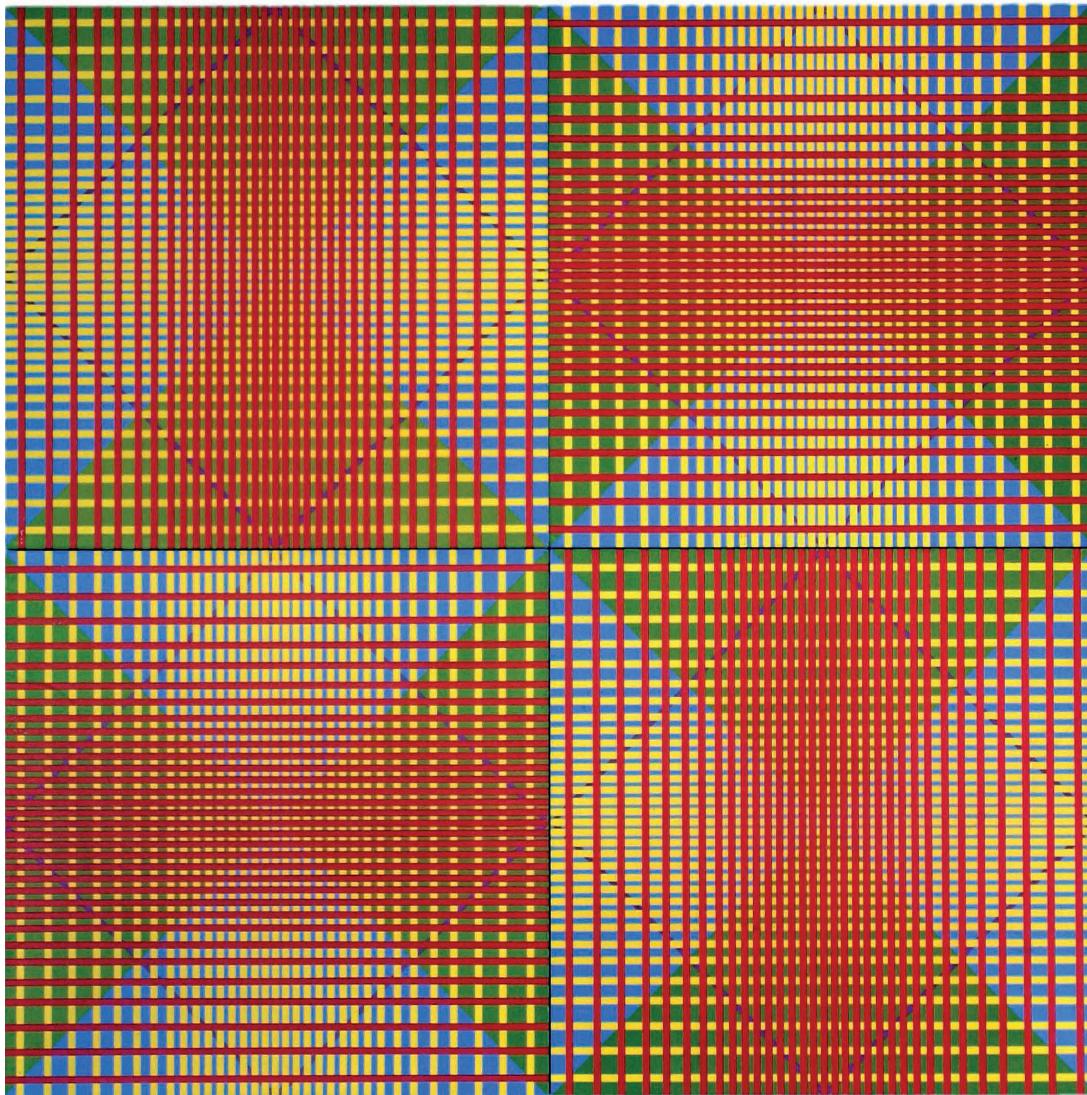
10 John Coley (Christchurch-based, born in Palmerston North in 1935) hit on the idea of using colour grids around 1967–8 after a period of discontent concerning his own work, as Docking says, culminating with the thought of giving up painting in 1967. David Graham was investigating the colour-grid system in Christchurch from 1965–67. Docking, Gil (with additions from Michael Dunn covering 1970 to 1990), *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*, 1st ed. 1971, revised ed. 1990, A David Bateman Book, Auckland, p 178.

11 Milburn, Felicity. 1950–2000. In *A Concise History of Art in Canterbury 1850–2000*. Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 2000, p78–81.

12 Published by Harland Baker Publishing Ltd. Wellington. *Arts & Community* covered a broad spectrum – visual and performing arts, literature, craft and “Cultural Community Living”. Professor Anthony Green was the Auckland Art Editor.



Modular 2 Series 2, 1970 , enamel on board, 1371mm x 1371mm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



After six years as a lecturer at Palmerston North Teachers College, Thorburn was awarded the prestigious Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, at the University of Otago. *Modular Series 4* (1972-3) developed as a result of the Fellowship and was exhibited at Peter McLeavey Gallery.¹³

Pre-empting Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' by a good three decades, Thorburn conceived the following series as an entire installation of mutable components, all white surfaced with coloured edges in his solo exhibition *Modular Air New Zealand Series 4*, at Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney, Australia. 'New Year, New Work,' was exhibited at Barry Lett Galleries in early 1973 in which a new minimalism was pervasive: "When you look at this work straight on, it looks like a large white billboard; but when you walk around it colours appear as the light hits the edges. Because the colour is on the edges you get light reflected or bounced through the white, so it kind of lights up like a neon sign, but quite naturally."¹⁴

For Chris Parr: "Ray Thorburn's intense networks of graduated lines are suggestive of electronic circuits and laser light."¹⁵ Eventually, Thorburn was impelled to reach beyond constraints of picture-making. Future technology and the advent of the digital era were beginning to make an impression in the work. Using what were then very contemporary materials such as automotive spray lacquers and masking tape, to ensure precision effects in his paintings – Thorburn sought to evolve outside of the line-on-line opticality away from being 'the stripe guy' and seek new forms, to create environments. There were few people who 'got it' at the time.

While Thorburn was resident in Dunedin as guest artist of the Otago Art Society, he was one of three artists selected to exhibit in the Manawatu Review.¹⁶ He showed

paintings from between 1970-1973, all cellulose lacquer on board, completed or at least conceived when he was still working in Palmerston North. The works included were *Modular 12, Series 2*, (1970, Manawatu Art Gallery Centenary Collection), *Modular 10, Series 2*, (1970, exhibited in São Paulo); *Modular 14, Series 2*, (1970), *Modular 11, Series 2*, (1970), *Modular 1, Series 3*, (1971, exhibited in São Paulo), and *Modular 3A, Series 4*, 1973. The Manawatu Review was presented at the Manawatu Art Gallery and at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

Stretching the sculptural aspect of his idea even further, Thorburn next adapted his colour variations to concentrate on the reflective qualities of the painted surface and enhanced this by making the surfaces of the modules undulate. This was achieved by constructing a square frame for each unit which had a contoured upper edge. A sheet of hardboard was then forced on to and moulded to the structural form with a furniture press. One convex and one complementary concave module was simultaneously pressed together by machine: so that for every male unit in the works there is a corresponding female one. Each multi-panel work had a predominant surface colour with thin lines toward the edge and middle and contrasting edges – for example, lime green against red. The highly polished monochrome surfaces of these units act like distorting mirrors, reflecting an image which changes with ambient movement, an effect which underscores the variability constructed into the modular composition.¹⁷

At the conclusion of his year as Frances Hodgkins Fellow, Thorburn held a solo exhibition *Modular Series 5* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, which opened on the 10th of November 1973. He wrote in the catalogue to the exhibition:

"During the year I have been experimenting with the effect that light has on colour. *Air New Zealand Series 4* was the result of this investigation.

In this country, generations of art students have been brought up on a diet of light and shade and in particular the peculiar notion of "New Zealand light." I was no exception. Petrus van der Velden was a major exponent who brought the influence of the Dutch "light and dark" school to New Zealand.

If light is as important to New Zealand art as we have been led to believe, then the current *Modular Series 5* is merely an extension of an established tradition. My contribution (if it can be called such) is to use light and colour to reflect reality as opposed to the accepted practice of using light to simulate or capture an aspect of reality."¹⁸

He was reflective about his own change of direction, "... One can never predict the course of one's development, but this year has given me time to think [and] pursue ideas which have resulted in a change of direction. Without the assistance of others I

13 Keith Thomson supported Thorburn's application: "I believe that the timing of Thorburn's current application is particularly appropriate. Last year, as you are undoubtedly aware he represented New Zealand at the São Paulo Biennale ... The impressions gained during that tour were evidently so vivid, the techniques observed so exciting that he should really take time from his demanding duties as a College lecturer to allow them to be absorbed in what will inevitably be a new orientation in his work. It seems to me that he has reached a turning point in his style and every effort should be made to help him develop the new fields his talent will explore". Letter of recommendation to University of Otago, August 14, 1972, Artist's file, Massey University, p1

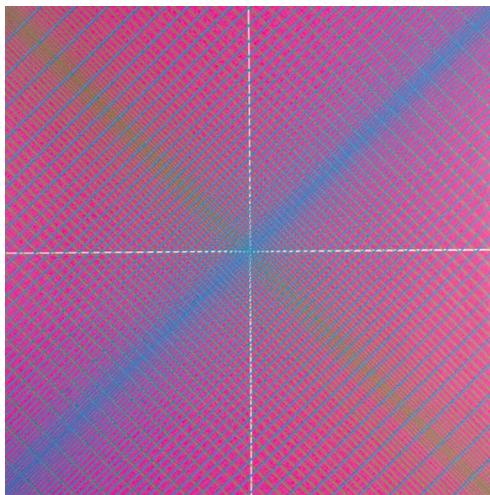
14 Conversation, Andrew Bogle interviews Ray Thorburn. October 1982 *The Grid, Lattice + Network*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 17

15 Parr, Chris. "The Grid: Lattice & Network," *Art New Zealand* 28, 1983, p. 44

16 The Manawatu Review (May 20-June 15, 1973) featured three artists with a strong connection to Palmerston North: Frank Davis, Ray Thorburn, and Natalie Woodhams. The catalogue stated: "... Palmerston North has had the benefit of the residence of several painters who have received national and international recognition. The connection with some like John Coley and Pat Hanly is merely one of birthplace and temporary residence; however, with the three artists included in this exhibition, the connection is a stronger one. All three have resided in the city for a number of years and have participated actively in the cultural activities of the city in general and the Gallery in particular."

17 Thorburn in conversation with Andrew Bogle, *The Grid*, p 17

18 Artists statement, Dunedin Public Art Gallery publication, Dunedin, Otago. November 1973



doubt if the year would have been as worthwhile as I feel it has been . . . thanks to the University's maintenance department for their technical skill and craftsmanship, and also to Dave Fitchett . . . his paintshop has been an extension of my studio and was available to me at all times."¹⁹

While it has been difficult to locate the panels within each of the series, seven groups in all, a number of them subsequently scattering into private homes or offices around the country, we do have a record of what was originally *Modular Series 5*, cellulose lacquer on hardboard (all 1973):

- Modular 1, Series 5 (6 panels)
- Modular 2, Series 5 (4 panels)
- Modular 3, Series 5 (4 panels)
- Modular 4, Series 5 (4 panels)
- Modular 5, Series 5 (4 panels)
- Modular 6, Series 5 (4 panels)
- Modular 7, Series 5 (4 panels)

The catalogue for the exhibition stressed the fluidity of approach: "It is not necessary to purchase a complete set of panels. In keeping with the artist's modular concept, panels can be purchased in combinations of two plus. There is no predetermined order, no preconceived arrangement. It is immaterial how the units are combined. The composition is determined by the individual according to space, environment or personal preference."²⁰

With plays of colour contrast between edges and surfaces, Thorburn was able to explore a variety of visual relationships in this new series. Reflections of viewers and the environment by means of concave and convex carving of the panels created distortions and alternative views. He continued his exploration of colour and line combinations, with their seemingly endless combinations. Professor Keith Thomson²¹ was invited to open the exhibition in Dunedin at the conclusion of the Fellowship. Thomson gives a rich context for Thorburn's practice:

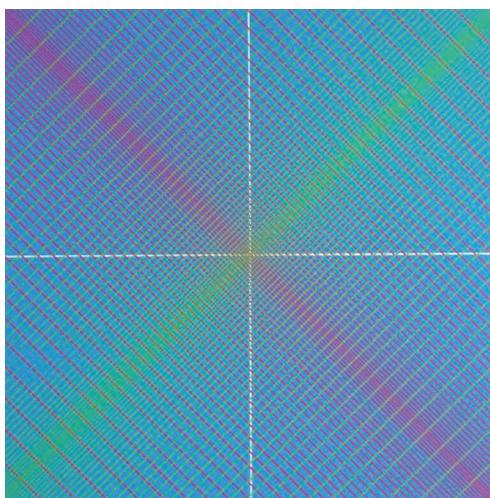
" . . . Soon after his arrival I acquired my first Thorburn, a large painting, with an element of collage which gives a dramatically colourful impression of the coast of Port Phillip. Since then I have been closely involved with Ray Thorburn. From 1967 we have been closely associated in the administration of what has become one of the most enterprising smaller art galleries in the country with a considerable reputation for furthering the cause of contemporary NZ art²² "I watched with a melange of unease, admiration and excitement as he turned away from his earlier approach and plunged into abstraction in his modular series and as the works became

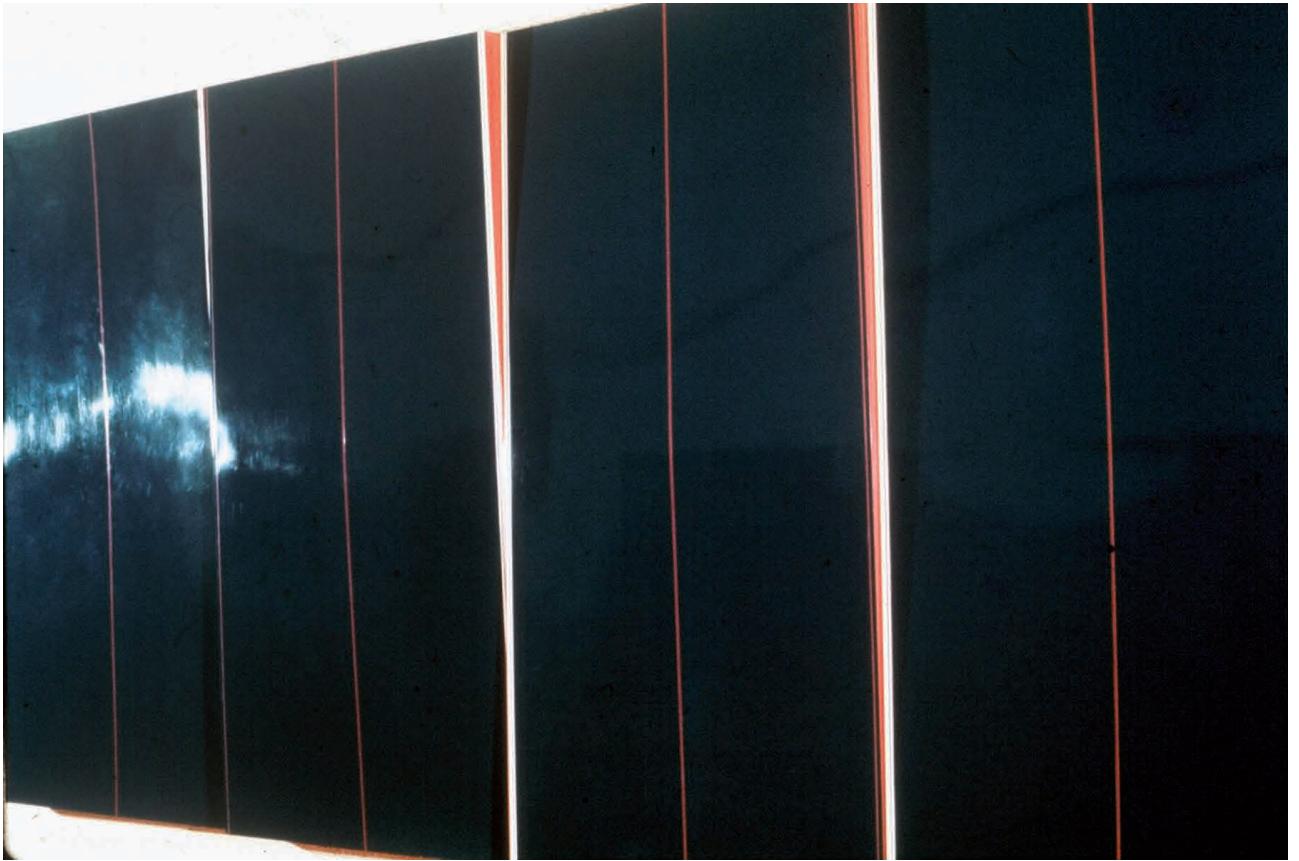
19 Artists' acknowledgements, "Modular Series 5", Dunedin Public Art Gallery publication, 1973

20 "Modular Series 5", Dunedin Public Art Gallery publication, 1973

21 At that time Dean of Social Sciences, Massey University, Palmerston North, and President of the Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand, AGMANZ. Thomson purchased *Modular 2, Series 5* (diptych, 1973) at that time. It was donated to the Massey University Art Collection in 1995.

22 Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North





Installation: *Modular 7 Series 5*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1973

more complex and sophisticated as one series followed another. . . Well has he developed new fields? One answer must be a clear yes, for although the genetic links with earlier modular works are obvious the intensification and simplification of the (richly austere) colour patterns have a much greater impact and sculptural nature of the panels, convex, concave, slanted have gone far beyond the embryo of late 1972 work. 'Where can he possibly go now?' Well he has shown us in this exhibition with works that attract, as with pure colour, fascinate with changing reflections, tantalise with glimpses of contrasting colour on the sides and intrigue with the challenge of the experimental groupings of surprising shapes."²³

Thorburn's interest in perceptual phenomena, applying scientific concepts to visual art had a parallel movement in Southern California with the Light and Space artists from the late 1960s. James Turrell and Robert Irwin in particular, explored elements of visual perception and the properties of light, along with philosophical concerns, an interest in Zen and eastern concepts. A number of their So-Cal contemporaries, artists such as John McCracken specifically, early Judy Chicago, Dewaine Valentine and Larry Bell, also developed an idiom of Finish Fetish, employing the contemporary elements of car and surf culture into their works with fibreglass, smooth spray-painted car lacquers applied over masking tape for a 'hands-off' customized slick finish.

In 1974 Thorburn was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Ohio State University where he majored in Art Education for an MA degree. His American expedition has been largely ignored in New Zealand commentaries about the artist. As he says, "I would not have got to the USA to do post-grad study without being awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 1974. This was important as it enabled me to reconnect with Len Lye. . . a profound affect on the direction of my life as an artist, academic and educator."²⁴ As part of his MA research he conducted numerous interviews with some of the luminaries of the New York art world including Andy Warhol, John Cage, Philip Glass, Sol LeWitt, Merce Cunningham, Keith Sonnier, critic Lawrence Alloway, dealer Leo Castelli and several others. Some of these interviews with Len Lye and Keith Sonnier were published in *Art International*²⁵. The photo sessions and tapes were only rediscovered during research for this exhibition and are now accessible for the first time.

In 1971 Thorburn met Len Lye, New Zealand born kinetic sculptor and film-maker in New York City. This meeting was to have a profound affect on them both. As Ray describes

23 Thomson notes, Artist's file, Massey University

24 Thorburn email to author, January 30th 2007

25 "Ray Thorburn Interviews Len Lye" (at his studio, New York, September 1974), *Art International – The Art Spectrum*, ed. James Fitzsimmons, Vol. XIX / 4, April 20, 1975pp. 64-68

"Ray Thorburn Interviews Keith Sonnier" (at his studio, New York, September 1974), *Art International*, Jan-Feb 1976, pp. 69-74

it they were "artistic cell mates destined to come together"²⁶ Although fresh from the São Paulo Biennale, and the company of internationally recognised artists, Thorburn was "bowled over" from the first moment he met Len Lye in a Mexican restaurant on 13th Street in October 1971. From that moment until Thorburn returned to New Zealand, they saw each other daily. It was the beginning of an exchange that lasted many years. Maybe it was their shared passion for creating new forms that embodied what Lye once described as 'kinetic feelings', maybe it was the mix of two fertile imaginations playing off each other – whatever the magic, it led to Lye's dream of being recognised in his home country. The friendship is described by Lye in a letter to Ray on 28th July 1975. "Dear Ray, Jesus Christ it clicked with, we hope a clack that will be heard throughout Welkin. . . Without you and John [John Matthews] it wouldn't have worked! We all love you!"²⁷ Lye credited Thorburn and Matthews for the impetus behind the establishment of the Len Lye Foundation.

Upon his return to New Zealand in 1975 his painting changed to give emphasis to the "Edge". Stimulated by the graffiti art of the New York subway, an earlier interest in calligraphy resurfaced. Elva Bett described it this way:

"Systematic and reiterated dashes covered the surface but dissipated towards the outside to allow an under grounding colour to define edges. The abutting of another panel with similar definition at the edges produced strong verticals and horizontals. But the addition of a small dot of pure colour in the centre of each panel animated the surface so as to attract the eye away from the edging lines and focus it on the dot which then produced a circular, as opposed to a linear, movement. These "Edge" paintings had a calligraphic effect; they were a morse code language."²⁸

Warwick Brown mentioned Thorburn was unaware at the time of the use of the cross-hatching technique (in looser form) by American artist Jasper Johns from 1972 – whom he was later to meet and interview in New York. For Ray, the calligraphic mark-making of drawing was a means to articulate the surface. The *Edge and Surface* painting (1975-6), a prototype for the edge series reproduced in *Art New Zealand* and Warwick Browns' book has never been exhibited until now.

From 1978 to 1982 Thorburn was back in the United States to focus on PhD studies. A Public Service Award for international study enabled him to continue his interests in "the art practice – theory praxis in education." As Bett candidly put it: "on January 1, 1981 as he began writing up research material for his PhD thesis, the excruciatingly boring exercise made the prospective Dr Ray Thorburn take a long, hard look back at Ray

26 Thorburn email to author, January 30th 2007

27 Thorburn email to author, January 30th 2007

28 Bett, Elva. "The modular mode," *NZ Listener*, July 21, 1984, p. 40

Thorburn, the New Zealand artist *doing* a PhD in the US.²⁹

The result was a series of paintings and drawings using the pages from the doctoral thesis superimposed upon the 1981 calendar, titled PH and D (Piled Higher and Deeper). While laboured, it was a conscious effort to complete the cycle, at least to reconcile, academic study and the art-making process, and therefore an important artistic growth process. It was process art again. But as Warwick Brown says, “this time illustrating the process in time and effort of writing an academic thesis.”³⁰ It was through this process, encouraging unadulterated direct contact with the artistic process within education, which he channelled into art curriculum development in New Zealand. The PhD paintings of 1983–4 (exhibited at RKS, Auckland in 1983) were followed by the related *Calendar Series* 1985–6. Both series were exhibited at CSA Gallery Christchurch and at the Manawatu Art Gallery in 1986–7.

New Zealand’s art education curriculum grew from Thorburn’s research and observations; shaping the philosophy and direction it has taken since. With a prescient interest in design and new technologies, computing and new media, he advocated including computer design programmes into the syllabus over twenty years ago thus envisioning New Zealand’s contribution to the creative industries.

The breaks in painting and redirected creative energy toward academia and education may well have hindered Thorburn’s rightful place within the history of New Zealand art. However, the extensive work invested in cultural policy, curriculum development and advocacy for the visual arts has enriched our creative communities profoundly.

As Ray himself says: “My art is like a crossword, there are infinite combinations and configurations. I anticipate continuing to develop the language and explore the many variables that make up the puzzle, so that one day I might complete the picture.”³¹

Alice Hutchison
Exhibition Curator

Selected Bibliography:

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- Green, Tony, “Ray Thorburn at Barry Lett Galleries,” *Arts in Auckland, N.Z.B.C.*, Aug. 18, 1970 (Thorburn artists’ files, Hocken Library, Dunedin)
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- Thorburn, Ray. “Ray Thorburn Interviews Keith Sonnier” (at his studio, New York, September 1974), *Art International*, Jan–Feb 1976
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- Ray Thorburn artist’s file, Massey University, Palmerston North
- Wilson, Rodney. “Formal Abstraction in Post-War New Zealand Painting,” *Art New Zealand*. <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/abstract.htm>

29 Bett, Elva. “The modular mode,” *NZ Listener*, July 21, 1984, p. 40

30 Warwick Brown, *100 New Zealand Paintings (by 100 New Zealand Artists)*, Godwit Publishing, 1995

31 Artists statement, Ray Thorburn, Manawatu Art Gallery (6 November 1986– 4 January 1987), catalogue



14 Ray Thorburn, Palmerston North, c 1970



Ray Thorburn and Len Lye, New York c 1974

ray thorburn exhibition history

1981 Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Education, The Ohio State University, Ohio, U.S.A.
1974 Master of Arts (MA) in Art Education, The Ohio State University
1960 Diploma of Teaching (Dip Tching), Auckland Teacher's College
1959 Diploma of Fine Arts with Honours (DFA Hons), Design and Painting, University of Auckland

Exhibitions - One Person

1986 Calendar Series, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
1985 Survey Exhibition (1975-1985) including Calendar Series (1985), CSA Gallery, Christchurch
1984 PH & D Series, RKS Gallery, Auckland
PH & D Series, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington
1976 Edge Series, Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
1974 Mini Retrospective, Massey University, Palmerston North
1973 New Works Series 4, Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
Modular Series 4, Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
Modular Series 4, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington
Modular Series 4, Rudy Koman Gallery, Sydney, Australia
1972 Modular Series 3, Victoria and Canterbury Universities
1970 Modular Series 2, Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
Modular Series 2, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington
1969 Modular Series 1, Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
1967 Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
1965 Argus Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

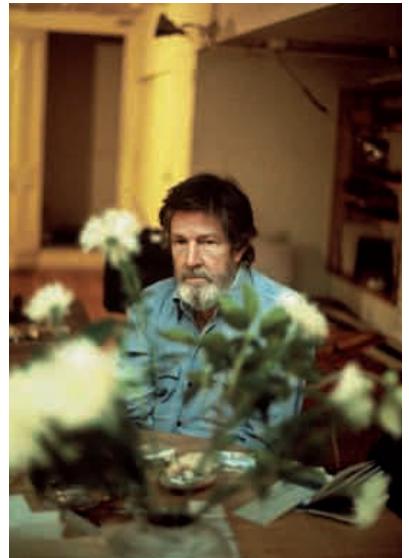
Exhibitions – Group

2006 Toi Te Papa: Art of the Nation. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
2004 Art + Up, Te Manawa Art Gallery, Palmerston North
2001 Parts, Robert McDougall Art Gallery / Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch
1985 The Word, Bishop Suter Art Gallery, Nelson
1983 Aspects of New Zealand Art: The Grid, Auckland City Art Gallery
1978 Recent Acquisitions, National Art Gallery, Wellington
Finalist Benson & Hedges Art Award
1976 New Zealand Drawing, Auckland City Art Gallery
Finalist Benson & Hedges Art Award
Land 76, CAS Gallery, Christchurch
1975 International Young Contemporaries, New York
1974 New Zealand Artists, Commonwealth Games Art Festival Exhibition, Christchurch

1973 Drawings by Invited Artists, Manawatu Art Gallery
Guest Artists, Otago Art Society, Annual Exhibition
New Year, New Works, Barry Lett Gallery, Auckland
Paris Biennale Prints, Manawatu Art Gallery
Manawatu Review, Manawatu & Govett Brewster Art Galleries
1972 NZSSP Anniversary Exhibition, Osborne Gallery, Auckland
Finalist Benson & Hedges Art Award
Third Biennale Internationale de L'estampe, Paris, France
Contemporary New Zealand Painting, Pacific Arts Festival, Fiji
1971 Centenary Exhibition of Contemporary New Zealand Painting, Manawatu Art Gallery
Wellington 1971 Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt.
Represented New Zealand, IX International Sao Paulo Biennale of Contemporary Art, Brazil.
1970 Finalist Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art
Finalist Benson & Hedges Art Award
1969 Winner of Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art
1968 New Zealand Painting Today, Center Gallery, Wellington
Massey University
Finalist Benson & Hedges Art Award
Australian Painting in New Zealand, Manawatu Art Gallery
1967 Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art Exhibition touring major centres

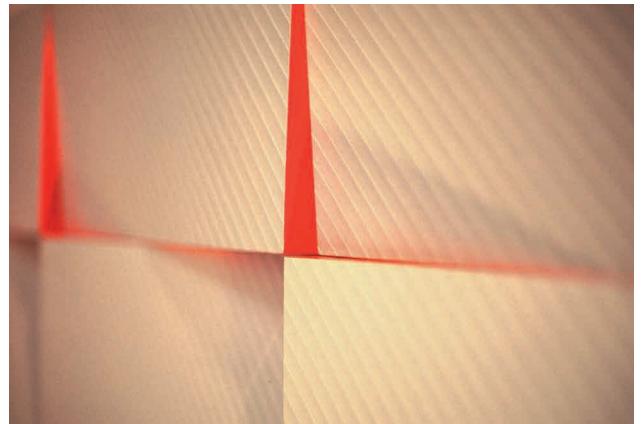
Represented in the Following Public Collections

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
Chartwell Collection
Christchurch Art Gallery – Te Puna o Waiwhetu
Te Manawa Museums Trust (previously Manawatu Art Gallery)
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Fletcher Industries Collection
University of Auckland
Victoria University of Wellington
Massey University, Palmerston North
Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton
New Zealand Industrial Design Council
Palmerston North Centenary Collection of Contemporary Paintings
Sao Paulo, State Collection, Brazil
Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Hocken Collection, University of Otago
Ministry of Foreign Affairs



line on line catalogue

TITLE	DATE	MEDIUM	COLLECTION
Untitled (Red Rock)	1965	Acrylic on hardboard	Private Collection
Rock Form	1965	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of the artist
Untitled	1965	Acrylic on hardboard	Private Collection
Fantasy Forms	1965	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Inc, 90/31
Night Forms	1966	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of Professor & Mrs Roderick Thomas
Diptych Ex No 2	Undated	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of John & Allison Brebner
Line on Line	1967	Acrylic on canvas	Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Inc, 68/28 Gifted by Gillian Rowe
Modular III	1967	Enamel on calico over hardboard frame	Collection of the artist
Modular V	1968	Acrylic on board	Private Collection
Modular 4, Series 1	1968	Cellulose lacquer on board	Collection of Massey University College of Education, Hokowhitu Campus
Experiment for Modular 6	1968	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of John & Allison Brebner
Mini Modular 4 plus 1	1969	Cellulose lacquer on board	Private Collection
Mini Modular 2	Undated	Cellulose lacquer on board	Collection of John & Allison Brebner
Modular 2, Series 2	1970	Enamel on board	Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1970, 1970/25/5.1-4
Modular 3, Series 2	1970	Acrylic on board	Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 70/70
Modular 4, Series 2	1970	Alkyd on hardboard	Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, C2001/1/4
Modular 7, Series 2	1970	Acrylic lacquer on board	Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, VUW.1970.5
Modular 8, Series 2	1970	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Modular 9, Series 2	1970	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Modular 12, Series 2	1970	Cellulose lacquer on board	Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust, 71/12
Modular Series	1970	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Modular 16, Series 2	1970/1	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Modular 3B, Series 4	1973	Cellulose lacquer on board	The Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago, Dunedin, 73/108-114, 73/131
Modular 5, Series 4	1973	Cellulose lacquer on board	The Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago, Dunedin, 73/115-118
Modular 6, Series 4	1973	Cellulose lacquer on board	The Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago, Dunedin, 73/119-124
Modular 7, Series 4	1973	Cellulose lacquer on board	The Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago, Dunedin, 73/125-130
Modular 2, Series 5,	1973	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Massey University Art Collection
Modular 4, Series 5,	1973	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Modular 5, Series 5 (Panel D)	1973	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Modular 5, Series 5 (Panel A)	1973	Cellulose lacquer on hardboard	Private Collection
Edge Series	1976	Acrylic on board	Collection of the artist
Edge and Surface (Edge series)	1975-6	Acrylic on board	Collection of the artist
Nga Tikanga	1991	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of the artist
Raranga Series 1	2007	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of the artist
Raranga Series 2	2007	Acrylic on hardboard	Collection of the artist



Modular Air New Zealand Series 4, Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney, Australia 1973



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