Malcolm Harrison: The Queer Altar Cloth

A talk given by Brent Coutts
at St Matthew-in-the-City
church as part of the series
'The Journey of the Maker'

Sunday 2 May, 2021
St Matthew-in-the-City
Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland.

BRENT COUTTS

It was artist Malcolm Harrison who was commissioned to make an altar cloth for the Rainbow Community Church at St Matthew-in-the-City, in Auckland. To understand the context of this commission, it is important to know about Harrison, his background and the context in which he made the artwork.

Malcolm Harrison was born in Christchurch in 1941 to a West Coast mine-owner's daughter and a carpenter. The politics of the family was left leaning, with his father's buddies coming around on Sunday evenings and recalling stories of their protest activities. The family were Seventh Day Adventists, Harrison attending primary school in Linwood before moving to Christchurch Adventist School at Papanui. It was a long time before Harrison was able to become an artist. From a working-class family in Christchurch with a strict Seventh Day Adventist background, his parents would not allow him to go to art school.[1] He was to get a job and earn a living. He left high school and initially became a window dresser at the DIC department store in Christchurch; a stereotypical form of employment for many young, gay men. Malcolm so convincingly draped fabrics onto the mannequins that customers were requesting the 'garments' to purchase.[2]

Taking night classes at the technical college in pattern design, drafting and cutting, he initially sought an escape through dressmaking. In 1962, at the age of 19 years, he came second in Gown of the Year.[3] Snapped up by Colin Cole (1931–1987), one of New Zealand's leading designers from the late 1950s through to the 1980s, Harrison became a dress designer for Auckland women. By the end of the 1960s he would have his own shop, Jasper Johnson's Jamboree, in Takapuna, on Auckland's North Shore. However, he had never not made art.

Throughout the 1960s he drew, collaged, collected found objects which he transformed into assemblages, and began to make textile-based artworks. He would collect off-cuts of cloth from the shop and use them in his art. He would experiment with different ways of using fabric, including traditional American patchwork quilting, embroidery and appliqué stitching. He would eventually prefer using his sewing machine to create a defined line; to draw with stiches. At the time he did not exhibit this work to the public. That would need to wait.

The times were changing for Harrison. There was overseas travel. A time of personal reflection about what he wanted to do in life.[4] Distancing himself from his Seventh Day Adventist upbringing was a gradual process. It was hard for him to break with the religious ideas that had been instilled in him. In working through this, he started a series of collages on religious themes, assembled between January 1969 and 1974. He later wrote that "the illustrations were not made to imitate an art tradition, but to work through the fear, confusion and dogma instilled in me by an early religious upbringing." As images from the Bible, he acknowledged that "they took me years of overthinking a reality rather than the accepting of others' power in translating these ancient stories."[5]

Sexuality was also something that Harrison continued to reconcile with. On St Leonard's Beach on the North Shore of Auckland, he would socialise with other gay men. He had gay friends in the fashion industry and in the wider gay community. It was accepted that Harrison was gay, though it was termed by Rob Calder, a friend of Harrison's in the 1970s, "a muffled sexuality where nothing was discussed."[6] Discretion was a perfectly normal situation for many gay men at the time. Family relationships could be abruptly ended. Friends could be lost. Even in the art world, doors would close to career advancement when the subject of homosexuality was in the foreground. Exclusion could be the result.

While in their personal lives many men began to embrace visibility and openness as part of the process of 'coming out,' there was still the pressure to conform

1 — Harrison had two sisters, Valerie and Pauline, an elder brother Brian and younger brother Graeme. Harrison died in 2007.

2 — Ann Packer, 'Magicians with Thread,' *Art News New Zealand*, Autumn 2008, 100–102.

3 — The New Zealand Gown of the Year, in the Professional Mannequins Association Golden Shears Awards, was a competition created by Tam Cochrane. It was the first time an event celebrating New Zealand-designed fashion had taken place, touring towns and cities across the nation. The winner was chosen by public vote. Harrison's first entry in 1961 in the Gown of the Year, the first ball gown he had ever made, was titled 'Bronze Goddess.' Inspired by the film *Gone with the Wind*, it was placed fourth, the three winners being fellow emerging male designers Robert Ryan, Kevin Berkahn and Nigel Rodda. The following year Malcolm's entry 'Schéhérezade' gained second place. The gown was inspired by an entry from the previous year, 'Fleur d'Or,' by Pour Vous, and was based on a picture of the set for the ballet *Schéhérezade* which he had seen when he was thirteen years old. It was a soft green satin sheath-style dress with a twin train which could be draped around the shoulders as a stole. The train featured striking and elaborate Jacobean-style embroidery and beading which Malcolm did himself, a prelude to the art practice he moved on to in the following decades.

to dominant social norms. Living in a wider heteronormative society required negotiation that meant, for many LGBTQIA+, their homosexuality was kept quiet whilst in public.[7]

Everyone needed to negotiate the place of their sexuality in both private and public discourse. This necessarily then spilled over into the art world. Artist Jane Zusters discussed this in a 1991 talk at The Dowse Art Museum titled 'The Dilemma Implicit in Silence as a Strategy for Survival of the Renegade Artist.' Just as Harrison appears to have decided, she argued that her images should be self-sufficient in themselves and resisted giving interpretations of her work. Zusters added that one impact of this was that unfortunately her work was often misinterpreted, and that the viewer glossed over any lesbian references. In her opinion, the commercial reality was that the buyers of her art tended to be middle-class heterosexuals, which meant that their perspective needed to be considered if sales were to be made.[8]

For Harrison, the 'open secret' of his homosexuality was deliberately brushed over, and queer references in his work, when they appeared, were ignored or simply not understood by reviewers and art critics of the time. A closer reading of his artworks, though, shows that his sexuality was always there in plain sight.

A series of artworks referencing the writer Yukio Mishima allows a queer reading of the artwork. Queer literature was difficult to access in New Zealand in the 1970s and early 1980s for gay men, but it remained important for them when they found it, as it opened up ways of living and being. Bookshops only sold a few titles and libraries did not have many gay novels on their shelves. Mishima's novels were available, and Harrison was particularly impacted by the Japanese writer and incorporated a number of references to him in his work at this time.[9]

A gaining of territory, false starts, circling. It was a long time before Harrison was able to become an artist. At the age of 38, he would finally get a public show at the Denis Cohn Gallery in Auckland, a joint exhibition with Penny Read in 1979. He exhibited textile artworks, initially quilts; however, within a few years he was developing this artform further than it had been taken in New Zealand.

In that first exhibition, Harrison hand-sewed *Hommage à Rousseau* in the tradition of American quilt techniques, although for a large period of his art practice he preferred machine quilting, which, while more difficult, was quicker and gave a harder edge.[10] Later, he turned to stitching at his kitchen table, drawing in thread; "needlepoint and spare, simple stitchery on cloth."[11] The work, skillfully crafted, also gained complexity, coded in a layered methodology. *Richard Pearse* (1978) included figurative images of the aviator who flew and landed a powered, heavier-than-air machine on 31 March 1903, nine months before the Wright brothers, along with an airplane and symbolic patterns of clouds. *Eketahuna Fandance* (1978) was "an all-over repeat unit of the sun and rays cut from the printed cottons, surrounded by a border of birds, Edwardian cyclists, bouquets, all carefully designed."[12] *L'après-midi d'un faune (Afternoon of a Faun)* (1979), a commission made for Tim McWhannell and Terry Stringer, illustrated his experimentation and the humour within his artwork; for example, toast with spilt honey left on the mattress.

From 1984 to 1986 his work moved away from traditional quilt designs and took on a more personal significance. Subject matter began to stem from personal experiences that would remain private; rather than being illustrated, they were presented as assembled fragments.[13] The semi-circular cape, a form he explored from 1987, became a feature of his work. With these he often played with colour, using royal blue, yellow ochre and sea green, turquoise and bright red. Colour made them light and fresh, helping in the presentation of very strong imagery.[14] He also began stitching his poetry into his work; however, he insisted that although the words might mean something, he was using them more as a visual device rather than making statements.

Works exploring Pacific references and influences were created. *Oceania* (1985), ten metres long and four metres high, was made for Auckland's BNZ Tower. He created a hand-stitched book based on Rapa Nui Easter Island hieroglyphics using tapa cloth and linen scrolls, in 1988. This connection to the Pacific would lead to his inclusion, as a pālagi artist, in *Te Moemoea No Iotefa (The Dream of Joseph)* at the Sarjeant Gallery in 1991.[15]

It was in this context that Harrison was commissioned to create the altar cloth for the Rainbow Community Church within St Matthew-in-the-City. The altar cloth was blessed on 6 December 1992, St Nicholas Day, the second Sunday of Advent.

4 – Malcolm Harrison, *Drawings and Poems* (1969), 91 pages in ballpoint pen, 180 x 113 mm. Throughout his life Harrison kept sketchbooks and diaries. Many include figure studies with the male nude predominating. Others reference music. Often his own poetry appears in his sketchbooks. The sketchbooks acted as a way to improve his art practice. They were also a medium for working through personal thoughts.

5 – Malcolm Harrison, *Illustrations for the Bible* (1969–74: inscribed and signed in 1998), over 100 pages of papier collé collaged illustrations.

6 – Rob Calder, interview with the author, Freemans Bay, Auckland, 14 January 2021. An artwork by Terry Stringer, *Malcolm Harrison on St Leonards Bay beach, Auckland* (1978), watercolour on paper, 370 x 555 mm, records the importance of this beach as a 'gay social space' for gay men.

7 – James Belich, *Paradise Reforged* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2001), 511–519. Jenny Carlyon and Diana Morrow, *Changing Times: New Zealand Since 1945* (Auckland University Press, 2013), 241–246. Brent Coutts and Nicholas Fitness, *Protest in New Zealand* (Auckland: Cengage, 2013), 192–196.

8 – Jane Zusters, 'The Dilemma Implicit in Silence as a Strategy for Survival of the Renegade Artist,' in *Lesbians Discuss Heterosexual Visibility in the Visual Arts* (panel discussion, The Dowse Art Museum, 1991). Brent Coutts, 'Inclusion/Exclusion,' in Steve Lovett (ed.), *Re-Reading the Rainbow* (Auckland: INKubator, 2017), 74–76.

Malcolm Harrison
Altar Cloth, 1992
in situ, St Matthew-in-the-City, 2023

The clergy that evening were John Marcon (Celebrant) and Glyn Cardy, who presided at the blessing of the cloth. The homily was given by John Bishop (subsequently Professor of Philosophy at Auckland University). Frank Checketts welcomed everyone. Mark Hangartner was the thurifer and also spoke about the making of the cloth and its design. The reader at the service that night was Peter Roband. Tim McWhannell played the organ. Malcolm Harrison was invited, and had said he would attend; however, he did not turn up for the event. As an artwork, Harrison's altar cloth retains some of the elements associated with his art practice at the time. The use of a thread colour similar to that of the background fabric renders the image difficult to see. You have to look closely. You have to look carefully.

Harrison places the chalice in the centre of the image. This goblet is the symbol of the Christian Church and the most sacred vessel in liturgical worship; the cup from which Jesus Christ drank with his disciples during the Last Supper. It reminds us of Christ's power to redeem humankind. The two circles below the chalice are the paten, the saucer-like plate that holds the goblet. The paten is held at an angle, elevated above the ground, marking the moment of the consecration of the bread and wine in communion.

An inverted triangle, a symbol for homosexuality, has been placed above the chalice. In the decades after the Second World War, this symbol from the Holocaust, which had been used to stigmatise homosexual prisoners, had become the symbol for the gay liberation movement. Yet in a Christian sense, the reference is also to the Holy Trinity, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Harrison purposefully provides two meanings in this symbol.

The rainbow that arches above the chalice is to be read as a symbol of God's faithfulness and his promise to never again destroy the earth. The clouds at each end of the rainbow symbolise the storms that surround LGBTQIA+ in today's society. In the story of Noah and the Flood, God placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant. The rainbow shows the all-embracing expanse of God's Grace: Genesis 9:16, "And the rainbow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." We are reminded by this that God's Grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, is not only for a select few to enjoy. It is for all, including the gay community. For members of the LGBTQIA+ community, when looking at the rainbow, the reference is also a connection to the Rainbow Flag, a newly adopted symbol for LGBTQIA+ at the time of the altar cloth's creation. The flag had been designed in 1978 by American artist and activist Gilbert Baker, as an alternative to the pink triangle. The original, eight-stripe Rainbow Flag designed by Baker had a meaning for each colour: hot pink symbolises sex, red is life, orange is healing, while yellow is sunlight, green is nature, turquoise is magic or art, indigo is serenity and violet represents spirit. Baker would later state that "the Rainbow Flag was a conscious choice, linked to history as a symbol of hope."[16] The lambda symbol also referenced the energy of the gay rights movement and had been used during activism for law reform in the 1980s in New Zealand, but by the early 1990s, when Harrison made the altar cloth, the Rainbow Flag had taken prominence.

A dove, the sign of the Holy Spirit, flies in front of the inverted triangle. In Matthew 3:16, during the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and comes to rest on Jesus. Here it also represents the Christian soul, where the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit resides. Harrison has placed the dove in front of the inverted triangle, flying into the chalice. The effect is to announce that the Holy Spirit and Christ reside in all, including those who are gay.

Two palm trees, perhaps the native nikau, flank the central image as a symbol of victory. Psalm 93:12–15 says, "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree ... they will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.'" The triumph over death through the resurrection; not only victory already gained, but victory in anticipation. An encouragement is given to those viewing the altar cloth by placing before them the reward that awaits the victor.

Art requires inspiration. Oral historian and writer Ann Parker, in remembering Malcolm Harrison, reflects, "When people stitch, as Malcolm pointed out, they are stitching their own feeling into the work." Harrison described his art as "allegories: echoes and reflections of experience in my life." Yet any further explanation from the artist was limited. He declared, "The happenings remain obscure for I leave their interpretation in the hands of the viewer."[17]

9 — *Forbidden Colours – the life and times of Yukio Mishima* (1984), quilted box in black quilted wrap, machine-quilted and hand-stitched cloth, 115 x 255 x 180 mm. *Forbidden Colours* (1951) was a novel by Mishima which includes descriptions of the gay world in Tokyo after the war, revealing the writer's own homosexuality and, perhaps more controversially, his sadomasochistic desires. In the novel *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), Mishima describes seeing the painting of St Sebastian by Guido Reni, which led to his first sexual awakening when he masturbated to the image, experiencing his first ejaculation. Mishima was photographed by Kishin Shiroyama, showing the writer's bulked up bodybuilder's physique as St Sebastian in a loincloth, impaled by arrows. The image was used repeatedly by Harrison. His 1984 *Forbidden Colours* opens to reveal screen-printed and quilted books inside; Shiroyama's Mishima image is repeated a number of times in different books and on the lid of the box. An ongoing series of assemblages, constructed as boxed artworks, the first made as early as 1969–70, brought together found objects which Harrison placed together to create narratives. These assemblages also included other work referencing Mishima, including *Mishima No. 5* (1978), mixed-media assemblage artwork in box, 205 x 120 x 65 mm, signed on the base. Harrison would show some of these works in an exhibition *Artists' Boxes*, held at the Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, 16 February – 26 February 1982.

10 — 'Celebrating a Life in Stitches,' *Weekend Herald*, 7 October, 2017, 8.

11 — 'The Stitch Doctors,' *The Dominion Post*, 7 October 2006, 4. Anne Parker, 'Magical with Thread,' *Art News New Zealand*, Autumn 2008, 100–102.

12 — Dugald Page, 'Exhibits Show Skill and Flair,' *New Zealand Herald*, 25 September 1979, 12.

13 — Rob Taylor, 'Dowse Spreads Full Feast of Harrison's Talents,' *The Dominion*, 1 May 1991 30. By 1986 Harrison had been exhibiting his art for seven years and held eighteen exhibitions.

Malcolm Harrison
Altar Cloth, 1992
in situ, St Matthew-in-the-City, 2023

The exhibition *Echoes and Reflections* was first shown at the Manawatū Art Gallery in Palmerston North in 1990, before touring to Wellington, Auckland and Napier. *Echoes and Reflections* is the body of work contemporary to Harrison's altar cloth. This was the largest show at that point for the artist and a turning point in his career. Sexuality and personal experience were very much key themes in this major exhibition. It was a significant public coming-out for the artist.

In this exhibition, *Between Nocturnal Pools of Rigid Light* (1990) is an example of his monotone stitching, creating secrets that the viewer has to work on in order to find meaning. Hidden, naked, male figures in a block of black background have been drawn in machine stitching. They lounge about seated, relaxed and looking out at the viewer. From different points they can be seen, but then as you move, they disappear into the black cloth once again so that they become unseen. The invisibility of gay men; they are there but not noticed by all. We might call this 'the closet,' but for many, there are always situations in which their identity, as gay men, is unseen and unknown by others.

In *Russian Caviar* (1991), Harrison recalls a trip he made to Greece. The profiled head and bull are a reference to Europa and the bull god who seduced her. In the top right-hand corner, a tablecloth waves in the wind like washing hung outside of an apartment building, as is common in Greek towns and cities. Two men look across at each other, a male figure changing out of red Speedo swimming togs appears in the space between. The gay male gaze is referenced. It's sexy. Is this naked man the 'caviar' that the title refers to? There is tension. Is this recording an encounter Harrison had? A love affair?

Three Nights in Stockholm (White Levi's) (1990–91) is peopled with figures in profile emerging as positives and negatives. There is an invisibility to the figures within the image, a hiding in plain sight. It is a complex work that illustrates how he was attempting to 'paint an image' in textiles. In remembering a visit of his own to Sweden, Harrison placed male figures in an abstracted composition. Two men, in the lower right corner, perhaps the artist and his friend, are watching the scene. In the centre of *Three Nights in Stockholm (White Levi's)* two men embrace, while a male figure is showering to their left. We are asked to join in watching him in this intimate act. The indication of what could be men in a sauna or at the baths. A male figure lounges on a deckchair. Two male heads profiled in red and green blocks of colour in the lower right corner, intimately lie against each other, their heads on a shared pillow. A man swimming can be seen. A profile of a head, perhaps a punk rocker with spiked hair, creates a silhouette. The outline of a similar profiled face in blue. Men watching men. The symbols tease the viewers. It's homoerotic and alluring. And the reference to white Levi's – they were a very popular fashion for gay men at the time. Both *Russian Caviar* and *Three Nights in Stockholm (White Levi's)* illustrate a technique he had developed when he began cutting straight into the fabric to keep the spontaneity going, rather than drawing out his ideas first.

A Quiet Meal at the Chez (1989) records a time when Harrison was artist-in-residence in Nelson. In a room framed by curtains, two men in the centre of the image sit at a table, separated by a vase of flowers. One holds a flower in his hand, dropped against the tabletop. A wistfulness is created with crossed hearts. The failure of a love affair. Is it a failed romantic assignation? Is it unrequited love that is recorded in the image? A burning building further emphasises the end of a relationship. Other similar artworks, all created in 1990, continue the series: *First Night* and *Happy New Year*, and *Rainbow Babble*, a work now held in the collection of Te Papa. *I Don't Regret Anything* perhaps signals the end of a relationship. Unrequited love or the end of a love affair may also be inferred in *Night Swimmer* (1991) with the cliché phrase "If you love somebody, set them free," embroidered onto it above a field of hearts and crosses. The images are coded. They are full of symbols and inferences. There is that hiding in plain sight.

Harrison's lack of specific public discussion about his sexuality can be viewed as working in distinction (but not in opposition) to the demands to be visible. The long history of structural homophobia and the 'politics of visibility' that characterised gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer social movements privileged recognisability. To make oneself visible and 'come out' among one's peers was expected, but not in the commercial realms of the art world. There was a clear distinction between private and public 'coming out.' Harrison did not remain divorced from this trend nor from other queer artists, or queer imagery in his work, although he chose not to discuss his work in depth.

14 — Helen Schamroth, 'Harrison Draws on Fresh Concepts,' *New Zealand Herald*, 4 August 1988, 2. In 1989 Harrison exhibited *Pacific Capes* made jointly with Chris Mahoney Jukes. These used dyed fabric, tapa cloth, canvas and shells, combined by appliqué, stitching and binding. Chris Mahoney Jukes, 'Fibre Arts – One Story Two Exhibitions,' in *New Zealand Crafts*, no. 25, Spring 1988, 8–10.

15 — Judy Webby, 'Exhibition the Most Exciting of the Year,' *Wanganui Chronicle*, 19 January, 1991.

16 — Gilbert Baker, *Rainbow Warrior: My Life in Color* (Chicago Review Press, 2019).

17 — Malcolm Harrison, artist's statement for *Echoes and Reflections*, Manawatū Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1990. Helen Schamroth, 'Landmarks in Fibre Art,' *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 1991, section 2, p. 5. Val Cuthbert, a writer for *Pacific Quilts* magazine, commented at the time that "He sees his quilts as constructions, likening their making to the building industry that his father was involved with. He never knows just what the final work will be like, he no longer makes a sketch to begin with." Fisher Gallery, press release, *Malcolm Harrison: Echoes and Reflections,* 1991.

Malcolm Harrison
Between Nocturnal Pools of Light, 1992
machine-quilted and appliqué cloth,
2070 x 3400 mm

What made the exhibition *Echoes and Reflections* significant were the direct references to HIV/AIDS. Harrison was not the first, nor the last, queer artist in New Zealand to make reference to these themes. The gay liberation movement had made it possible to be more open about homosexuality in the 1970s. Artists responded to their culture and the world they were living in. The arrival of HIV/AIDS in New Zealand society further emboldened gay artists, more prepared to 'come out' and voice their anger and sorrow at its impact.

HIV/AIDS arrived in New Zealand in the early 1980s, having first been noticed in mid-1981 in the USA; the nation's first AIDS death taking place in New Plymouth in 1983. The AIDS Support Network was established in 1984, becoming the New Zealand AIDS Foundation in 1985. The need to educate the public about safe-sex practices and treat those with the disease made HIV/AIDS a significant short-term factor in the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Act in 1986, which legalised consensual homosexual acts. By 1992, 348 New Zealanders had been diagnosed with HIV, 245 of whom had died.[18]

The series *Mortal Angels* (1989–90) consisted of seventeen narrow, vertical, predominantly black panels. Colour was applied in five of the panels, the rest remaining black. Although shown as one work, they were sold individually. Each strip is studded with hearts, triangles and crosses on squares richly textured with stitching, which refers to the loss of so many gay men due to AIDS. Some of the hearts are broken, fractured, and split apart. Others have a cross on top of them, cancelling them out. The work has a strong graphic quality and immediate visual impact to the viewer.[19]

Harrison records on the artwork *The Letter* (1990), "Yes, I'm Alive!", stitched onto one of the horizontal bands. It is a reference to a letter written to Harrison from Kim Brice, when Brice was recovering from surgery.[20] It is a personal reference to friendship, yet it also takes on a greater meaning for gay men at the time living during the AIDS pandemic. As many gay men around Harrison fell ill with AIDS, he dared to proclaim that there was still a place to celebrate life. It's an important message. Harrison is proclaiming that there is still a life to live.

Three key separate works by Harrison that illustrate this were hung in the exhibition side by side, as a triptych. Although they are individual works, compositionally there are similarities; they are three square quilts, each split into two halves of contrasting coloured cloth. *Creator / Destroyer* (1990) is blue and red. *Kissing Death* (1990) is black and yellow. *Lies* (1990) is purple and blue.[21] At the point where the two halves meet, two naked male figures stand facing each other, meeting at the lips to kiss in the first two works, while one turns away from the other in *Lies*. Love won and love lost.

An inverted pink triangle, the reclaimed symbol for homosexuality, covers their lips. In *Kissing Death*, the attraction between the two men is further emphasised by the figure on the left side, who has an erection. As an image, it is not particularly coded at all. In the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis the title is self-explanatory. The use of thread the same colour as the background to stitch the figures makes the men seem as if they are hiding in plain sight. And many gay men were. You have to look closely to see them. You have to look carefully. They are members of the community living among you, yet you may not have noticed them. They are your neighbours, your co-workers, your brothers, your sons.

AIDS Quilt Dedicated to Simon Morley was made in 1991, while *Echoes and Reflections* was touring. The work commemorates the life of Simon Morley, who died on 7 October 1986, aged 36. Morley's funeral took place in St Matthew-in-the-City two days later, on Thursday 9 October. This artwork is another connection for Harrison to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Harrison was not a friend of Morley's; however, the artwork is an extension of the work responding to HIV/AIDS that he exhibited in *Echoes and Reflections*. The artwork was commissioned in 1991 by Rob Calder, a close friend of Morley's.

Simon Morley, born 14 December 1950, was a spontaneous and fun individual who easily became friends with many. Morley had initially studied law but dropped out of the course. He developed a confident personality, and was considered by friends to be "ostentatiously gay." At one point Morley lived in Australia and found work in a Sydney musical. For a while he was living in Holland with a Dutch architect as his boyfriend. In the late 1970s he owned a craft shop in Christchurch called Lekker ('yummy' in the Dutch language).[22] Moving to Auckland, he was a co-director of New Vision Gallery with Jim Peters.[23]

18 — AIDS Epidemiology Group, University of Otago, *AIDS New Zealand Newsletter*, 15 November 1992, 1–2.

19 — *Mortal Angels* (1989–90), 17 panels, machine-quilted and appliqué cloth, each panel 3000 x 450 mm. When originally displayed, it spanned 7650mm. Each panel was sold separately.

20 — Simon Gennard, *Sleeping Arrangements* (catalogue essay), The Dowse Art Museum, 2018, 4. *The Letter* (1990), machine-quilted cloth, 1510 x 1090 mm.

21 — *Creator / Destroyer* (1990), *Kissing Death* (1990), *Lies* (1990), machine-quilted cloth, each 1720 x 1750 mm.

Morley quickly made close friends with gay men and artists in Auckland. *Portrait of Simon Morley* (1984), by Terry Stringer, shows a confident figure, a gay man who held a presence. A bronze sculpture by Stringer soon followed.[24] Artist Steve Lovett returned to live in New Zealand at the end of 1982 with his partner Moe Meyer, and they quickly became good friends with Morley, meeting through gay artist Alan Brown.[25] Lovett found Morley extraordinarily handsome with a great sense of fun. They shared much in common, in interests and temperament. Lovett especially valued Morley's generosity.

Morley started a relationship with Michael Creelman, an air force mechanic with a handsome statuesque figure admired by many, after Creelman and Alan Brown had split up. The two men travelled to San Francisco to live in 1984, but Morley found that Creelman soon moved on to other men. Morley was devasted when this happened, describing to friends that he broke down in uncontrollable tears at the San Francisco opera when he realised the relationship was over. Morley returned to Auckland by himself. Creelman would stay on in San Francisco for another four years, working at the Body Centre Gym, and only returned home when he became ill. He died of AIDS on 12 February 1988.[26]

It was on a trip to see his former lover in Amsterdam, and while on a side-trip to Tangiers in Morocco, that Morley had experienced flu-like symptoms, such as fever and body aches, that were signs he had seroconverted. For Morley, AZT arrested the progress of HIV for a while, but it could not stop its advance. He had bought a small house in Mt Eden and for a while his mother came to Auckland to look after him.[27] Calder and Lovett, along with other gay men, helped look after Morley as his health declined. Steve Lovett's artwork *Wish You Were Here*, painted in 1989, three years after Morley's death, expressed the artist's intense personal grief felt with the loss of Simon Morley as his friend.

In commemorating Simon Morley, Harrison chose to place the image of two naked men facing each other. Their presence dominates the work. Stylistically, it is similar to the three artworks in the 1990 *Echoes and Reflections* exhibition. They are in an embrace, with a glowing pink triangle between their mouths. At their feet, their toes are touching. The figures, outlined in red stitching, burn brightly on a background of blues and purples. In the top corner a circular badge reads "1950 S. Morley 1986" to identify the subject. In the lower right-hand corner is a cross, draped with a pink cloth labelled "h.i.v." signifying the cause of his death. The phrase "Simon bids you farewell xx" is a copy of a note in Morley's handwriting left on Rob Calder's doorstep before Morley's last trip to Europe. A portrait of Morley is placed sideways on the lower left side of the artwork, based on a drawing by Terry Stringer.

The work's initial purpose was for inclusion in *The New Zealand AIDS Memorial Quilt*, a local version of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, established in the USA in 1985. Individuals in New Zealand adopted the idea to create community artwork to commemorate the lives of those who died. Unbeknown to Harrison, the size of the work he initially made for the quilt was too large. The *AIDS Quilt* joins together rectangular panels 6 feet x 3 feet (183 x 91 cm), which are then joined together in groups of eight. Harrison had to remake the quilt. In the second version, the figures, still with a pink triangle between their mouths, are almost invisible when stitched against the backdrop of the same colour. "Simon bids you farewell xx" is again included. At the top, the dates 1950 and 1986 are placed on either side of the figures.

In 1992, a landmark exhibition for LGBTQIA+ was *Implicated and Immune: Artists' Responses to AIDS*, held at the Fisher Gallery (now Te Tuhi) in Pakuranga, Auckland. The importance of the exhibition was due to its public institutional statement of solidarity with the gay community struggling to come to terms with the AIDS crisis. The decision was made to include heterosexual artists sympathetic to the issue alongside queer artists. The exhibition was, however, a key event in gay liberation activism, at a time when promoting further visibility was important. Politically, the gay liberation movement in 1992 was promoting the idea of the extension of legal protection for LGBTQIA+ from discrimination under the Human Rights Act. This would be achieved with the Human Rights Amendment Act of 1993.

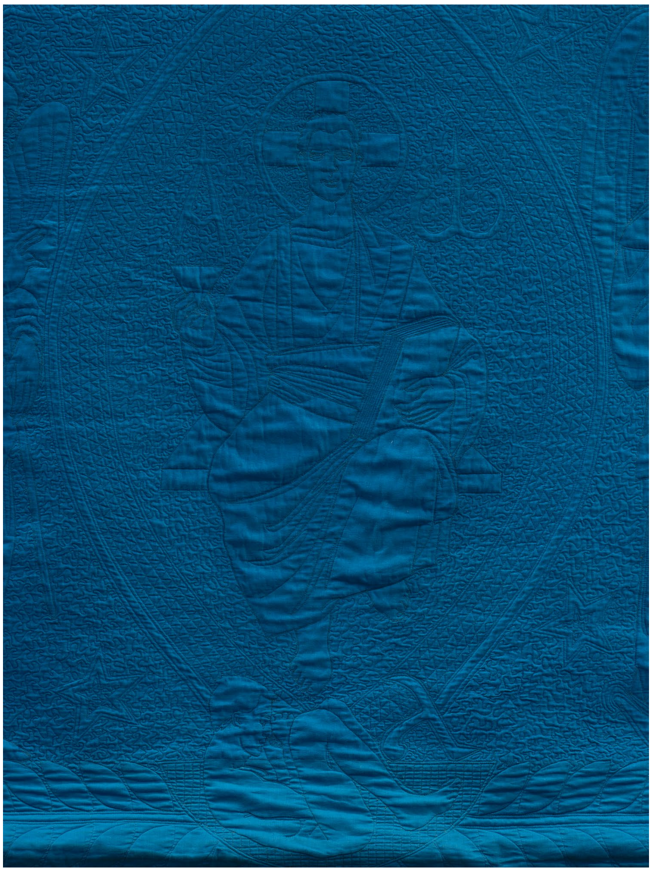
Malcolm Harrison joined Jane Zusters, Paul Rayner, Fear Brampton, Jack Body and Steve Lovett, exhibiting as a 'gay artist.' This very act was a political statement, and risky for those artists who ran the risk of institutional and dealer censure because of their inclusion. Steve Lovett, in *Re-Reading the Rainbow,* argues that at the time a damaging silence was drawn over LGBTQIA+ artists and

22 — Interview with Rob Calder by Brent Coutts, Freemans Bay, Auckland, 14 January 2021. Lekker Gallery, in Christchurch, was registered as a company in December 1978 and operated until 1981.

23 — New Vision Gallery was originally set up in Auckland by Kees (Cornelis) Hos (1916–2015) and his wife Tine (Albertine, 1918–1976). It opened in 1959 in Takapuna, before moving to the now-demolished Edwardian His Majesty's Arcade, off downtown Queen Street in 1961. In 1981 it was taken over by James (Jim) Peters, until it closed in 1986. Simon Morley was a partner in the gallery with Peters. See Joanna Trezise, 'The Artists of the New Vision Gallery 1965–1981,' master's thesis, University of Auckland, 2007.

24 — Terry Stringer, *Portrait of Simon Morley*, 1984, coloured pencil on paper, 370 x 550 mm. And Terry Stringer, *Portrait of Simon Morley*, 1984, bronze on marble base, 340 mm height, edition of 3.

25 — Moe Meyer (David Morris [Moe] Meyer, 1951–2014) was a gay American artist, author and professor. In 2007 he set himself up as the publisher of Macater Press. He had grown up in Bay View, Milwaukee, in Michigan, and was a member of Milwaukee's art scene in the 1970s. He was the editor of the influential *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), for which he produced two chapters, 'Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp' and 'Under the sign of Wilde: An Archaeology of Posing.' His book *An Archaeology of Posing* (2010) compiled two decades of his writing on gay culture. He was Mellon Fellow in Contemporary Arts Criticism at the California Institute of Arts. He lived in Auckland with Steve Lovett in 1982–83. Later, he was a lecturer in performance studies at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, before returning to the USA to live in Madison, Wisconsin. Alan Brown (1958–2007). Refer to Brent Coutts, 'Inclusion / Exclusion,' in Stephen Lovett (ed.), *Re-Reading the Rainbow* (Auckland: INKubator, 2017), 82–84.



Malcolm Harrison
Altar Cloth, reverse, 1992
in situ, St Matthew-in-the-City, 2023

their work if they acknowledged a personal narrative. They were often ignored and excluded. Fear Brampton has also argued that being identified as LGBTQIA+ at the time had negative implications, as it risked an artist being "'categorised,' identified and so 'positioned' in the art world" on the margins.[28] Yet the power of acknowledging this identity connected each artist's practice with a beneficial and more holistic sense of self. For them, it was a necessary thing to do at this point in time.

Harrison's contribution to the exhibition was an 84-piece diptych artwork, gouache and collage on paper, titled *Hygienically Sealed / Letting the Spirit Go* (1992).[29] The two parts, hung side by side as if split into two halves, create a similar split form to the artworks *Creator / Destroyer*, *Kissing Death* and *Lies* (1990), from *Echoes and Reflections*, and the Simon Morley *Aids Quilts* (1991), as well as also directly referencing HIV/AIDS. On the left side, twenty-four sheets were in red, as if blood had been scrubbed across tightly patterned forms. In this work the gay man's body is not absent, but the viewer must look closely to make out a collaged naked limb or torso. Harrison wrote that this work was about "how quick value judgements can be made, compartmentalised, and sealed away." He was concerned about the rise in people keen to allot blame rather than to give compassion.[30]

On the other side, *Letting the Spirit Go* is painted in eerie blues and purples to indicate an acceptance of the death of the body. The artist's brief statement argued that although "AIDS is not about dying, but of life, of living," the emphasis was that "[t]his work is about dying; about letting the spirit go." Gallery director Louis Johnston (now Louis Le Vaillant) commented that the work questioned "how assumptions are justified at the same time as contrasting the practical limitations and fragility of the body" and challenged "the uncertainty of death" yet also "strengthened its transcendence by implying a surety of faith in the face of the unknown."[31]

St Matthew-in-the-City, who have encouraged an inclusiveness and a surety of faith for LGBTQIA+ with the Rainbow Community Church services each Sunday, have a treasure in the Harrison altar cloth. It is a significant cultural object to be the guardian of. Importantly, it is a significant queer object. Yet there is one more thing about the object. It can be turned around to reveal a second image. Harrison chose a vivid blue – a Giotto blue. The use of the blue thread makes it, once again, almost invisible to our eyes.

Christ appears in the middle of the image, his gaze fixed directly on the viewer. We see Christ in Majesty, seated on a throne as ruler of the world and flanked by two angels. He holds a book on his left thigh, the Bible. God's plan. In most images of Christ in Majesty, Christ blesses the viewer with the thumb of the right hand touching the fourth finger. Held in his hands is a small, inverted triangle. Once again, the Holy Trinity is shown. In the context of a Rainbow Church congregation, the inverted triangle, as a symbol of the gay liberation movement, symbolises the acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ within the Christian faith. Yet is it just an inverted triangle that he holds? Is it a chalice? Christ present through the Eucharist? Christ known to us through bread and wine? Harrison leaves it open to interpretation.

On one side of the figure of Christ is the symbol in the Greek alphabet for Alpha, on the other the symbol for Omega. The reference is to the Bible, in Revelation 22:13, where Jesus says, "I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." By putting the two together, Harrison reminds those looking at the altar cloth of the eternity of Christ as the Son of God. The Alpha and Omega symbols are repeated at the bottom corners of the panel.

The two angels flanking Christ are perhaps a reference to the two at the tomb of Christ, where one was at his head and the other at his feet, who saw him raised to Heaven. The angel on the left is playing a harp. Traditionally, the harp is played after death. This is the music of Heaven, where Christ has risen to. The five stars on the image also signify Heaven. The angel on the right, carrying a staff, stands on a boat, which is a symbol representing the church.

Below the feet of Christ, a naked man has been placed, lying in a pool of water. Christ's feet stretch down to touch and give life; giving the possibility of resurrection to all. The naked man represents humanity. He represents the congregation. He represents each one of us. In the context of 1992, the figure at Christ's feet may also represent those lost to HIV/AIDS. He lies in a foetal position, the position of man going back to the womb. A rebirth. Look closer and there is a tear in his eye. Is he grieving death, yet about to be reborn in the presence of

26 — Michael Creelman Obituary, *Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco, 10 March 1988. Interview with Steve Lovett by Brent Coutts, Grey Lynn, Auckland, 16 January 2021.

27 — Interview with Rob Calder by Brent Coutts, Freemans Bay, Auckland, 14 January 2021.

28 — Fear Brampton, 'What Do You Mean, We? A Response,' in Bruce E. Phillips and Rebecca Lal (eds.), *What Do You Mean, We?* (Auckland: Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, 2012) as referenced in Stephen Lovett, 'Re-Reading the Rainbow,' in Lovett (ed.), *Re-Reading the Rainbow*, 38–39.

29 — *Hygienically Sealed / Letting the Spirit Go* (1992), gouache and collage on paper, 84 pieces, each 240 x 297 mm.

30 — Don Bassett (ed.), *Implicated and Immune: Artists' Responses to AIDS* (Pakuranga: Fisher Gallery, 1992), 29.

31 — Louis Johnstone, 'Introduction,' in Bassett (ed.) *Implicated and Immune: Artists' Responses to AIDS*, 4. Don Bassett, 'Implicated and Immune: Artists Focus on AIDS,' *Man to Man*, no. 36, 15 October 1992.

Malcolm Harrison
Altar Cloth, reverse, 1992
in situ, St Matthew-in-the-City, 2023

You have to look closely and carefully at Harrison's altar cloth to make out what it is illustrating. It's a slow viewing, which Harrison requires with much of his work. In today's world, it often seems that there is not enough time to look slowly. Our lives are too busy. Yet to look slowly, to pause and contemplate, and then to look again, will bring clarity. Time spent looking and time spent in prayer and meditation leads to understanding and clarity. Perhaps it is time for us also to look once again. To look a little closer at the altar cloth. Harrison might like that we are doing this.

Brent Coutts is a writer and historian from Auckland, New Zealand, who has an interest in New Zealand LGBTQIA+ histories and queer art narratives. His publications include ***Crossing the Lines: The Story of Three Homosexual New Zealand Soldiers in World War II*** **(Otago University Press, 2020). Coutts is particularly interested in biography that redresses LGBTQIA+ who have been overlooked or marginalised in historical narratives.**

First published 2023
by Michael Lett Publishing

Edited by Michael Lett
Proofread by Marie Shannon

With thanks to: St Matthew-in-the-City, Mark Hangard, Peter Lineham, the Auckland Rainbow Church and Simon Gennard

Designed by Inhouse

Typeset in Helvetica Now Text

978-1-99-117272-3

michaellett.com