

Leonard Bell. *Strangers Arrive: Emigrés and the Arts in New Zealand, 1930-1980*. Auckland University Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Rex Butler, Monash University

For many years, Leonard Bell has been trying to think an alternative New Zealand art history. As far back as 1992, he wrote *Colonial Constructs: European Images of the Maori, 1840-1914*, his Bernard Smith-inspired account of how the European invaders depicted the original inhabitants of the land. In 2007 he published *Transit: Questions of Home and Belonging in New Zealand Art*, his analysis of the creation of a New Zealand national art and the role European immigrants played in it. Now, some 10 years later, he has produced *Strangers Arrive: Emigrés and the Arts in New Zealand, 1930-1980*, a much expanded and more specific treatment of European immigrants and the role they played, not so much in revising New Zealand art history as in creating another art history altogether. The book, coming as it does at the end of a long career teaching Art History at the University of Auckland, has something of a valedictory quality about it. It is not only a summary of Bell's life – as he says, the inspiration behind his interest in immigrants lies in the fact that his wife's parents came from Czechoslovakia – but also the culmination of a life's work. It marks – at least to my knowledge – the first book-length treatment of the role “émigré” artists played in New Zealand art throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, as an Australian art historian, I would want to assert that it is the first monographic study not of any particular immigrant artist but of the phenomenon of immigrant artists in shaping the art of the region altogether.

The book – in the coming style, I suggest, of all art histories of the twenty-first century – takes up its artistic material in a wide-ranging and non-exclusive manner. It foregoes the two dominant ways of understanding the influence of art coming from somewhere else: as either demonstrating the “provincialism” of the local or producing a “resistance” through ironic hybrids of the local and international. Although Bell lapses into this attitude occasionally – at one point he speaks of modernism as unknown in New Zealand before the arrival of the immigrants – the real argument of the book is that the continued presence of these artists and their work contests the very notion of the “local.” As he says of the English arrival Patrick Hayman, he was “unsettled” and “cosmopolitan.” Or of the Hungarian refugee Marte Szirnay's sculpture, it is “ambiguous” and “displaced.” Indeed, altogether in the detailed readings of specific works he provides, Bell emphasises the “divided” nature of the work, the way it speaks of or models belonging in two places at once. And, perhaps reciprocally, the effect of this émigré sensibility is to show that New Zealand art itself is not so settled or resolved as it thinks. For example, Bell quotes the Czech-born critic Imric Porsolt, who claims that the great “national”

artist Colin McCahon is as much “medieval” as New Zealand in inspiration.

Bell divides his account into four sections, each focusing on a particular artform. In “Taking Pictures,” he studies the photographers who began to arrive in the 1930s with the rise of Nazism, most notably the German-born Irmgard Koppel, Austrian-born Richard Schacherl and Czech-born František Hofmann. In the following chapter “New Visions,” devoted to drawing, painting and printmaking, Bell takes up the English-born Patrick Hayman, German-born Margot Philips and Dutch-born Kees Hos. In the third chapter, “Words,” he speaks not simply of all writers who came to New Zealand – that, of course, is already the subject of parallel literary histories of the country – but those who were either writers on art or lectured on art at universities. Here we have the German-born art historian Gerda Eichbaum, Czech-born architectural historian Porsolt and German-born doctor and art patron Walter Auerbach. And in the final chapter devoted to an artistic medium, “Architectural Episodes,” Bell again does not merely recount the architectural immigrants who came to New Zealand but more idiosyncratically the story of “a staircase and its surrounds in a state-owned building, a couple of private houses for continental immigrants, a city apartment for lower-income tenants and an outdoor pool by the sea.” Here he looks at Porsolt’s design for the 1ZB Radio Studios, Czech-born Heinrich Kulka’s house for the photographer Marti Friedlander and the Serbian-born Tibor Donner’s design for Parnell Baths, all to be found in Auckland. These principal chapters are followed by an Epilogue, which continues the story beyond the predominantly European account Bell provides to include immigrants from other places, principally Asia, up to the 1980s. In order to make his argument about the continuity between these two moments, Bell reproduces a photo by Friedlander, who earlier in the book had made portraits of the post-war European immigrants, of Vietnamese refugees arriving in the 1970s; he also reproduces a work by the Korean-born video artist Jae Hoon Lee, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (2015-16), which looks uncannily like a McCahon landscape of the 1940s. As I have suggested, this history of immigration would be not so much a revision of existing New Zealand art history as the beginning of a new history that would extend beyond New Zealand art. This is the thrust of the one chapter I have not yet mentioned, “Virtual Strangers,” which traces a number of New Zealand artists who having made contact with those new arrivals decided themselves to go overseas and not always to Anglophone Britain and Australia (Douglas McDiarmuid, Charles Brasch). In this chapter, Bell remarks that these artists and writers, who never saw themselves as not New Zealanders, have largely been written out of the existing accounts of New Zealand art. In doing so, he contests Hamish Keith’s nationalist assertion that New Zealand art is “that which came out of the experience of living here.” More positively, he points towards a new “New Zealand” art history that would explore the “dialectic” between immigration and emigration. This new non-nationalist narrative has been hinted at in Antipodean art history for over a decade now. In 2018, for example, a

large retrospective of the Australian artistic expatriate John Russell and a detailed monographic study of the Indonesian-born New Zealand painter, photographer and writer Theo Schoon were produced. But Bell's book is the most fully realised version of this history yet written. It is foundational, and in writing it Bell perhaps comes close to the book he says inspired him to become an art historian, Bernard Smith's *European Vision*. In this case, however, Smith's message arrives in reverse form: not as the internationalising of Europe by its colonies but as the internationalising of its colonies by Europe.