

# Life's celebrant

Colourful and vibrant, Pat Hanly belonged to a small group that redefined New Zealand art in the second half of the 20th century, writes JOHN COLEY.

**T**o the many who were uplifted by Pat Hanly's art and rejoiced in the painter's seemingly boundless vitality, it was as if his death last week turned a dimmer knob on daylight.

Hanly was a phenomenon — a man whose abundant creative gifts came with a great sense of fun and a profoundly optimistic, humanitarian outlook.

He was one of a small group of artists who redefined New Zealand art in the second half of the 20th century. To the spiritual investigations of McCahon, the dark magic of Hotere, the earthy analysis of landscape and light of Woollaston, the koru-cool minimalism of Walters, Hanly added an intensely colourful, vibrant celebration of life and love in a prolific output of prints, drawings and paintings.

James Patrick Hanly was born in Palmerston North in 1932. An amateur artist grandfather quickened the small boy's interest in drawing, and his talent developed rapidly along with an ambition to become an artist.

Hanly's father, noting his son's obsession and anxious to see the lad develop into the standard model of New Zealand manhood, pressed him into the sports of boxing and road cycling. Hanly proved hilariously hapless at both.

At his parents' insistence on his having a real job to fall back on, he undertook a hairdressing apprenticeship before cutting loose to pursue his long-held ambition to live and work as a visual artist.

He found an ally in Allan Leary, a young art teacher newly appointed to the Palmerston North Technical College. With his tutoring and encouragement, Hanly enrolled as a student at the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts. Here he met and formed a close friendship with the artist and lecturer Bill Sutton.

He proved a brilliant student and a catalyst personality around whom a commune of students — among them Trevor Moffitt, Quentin Macfarlane, Bill Culbert, Hamish Keith, Tim Garrity, Ted Bracey, Barry Miller, myself and Gillian Taverner — formed in the small flats at 22 Armagh Street.

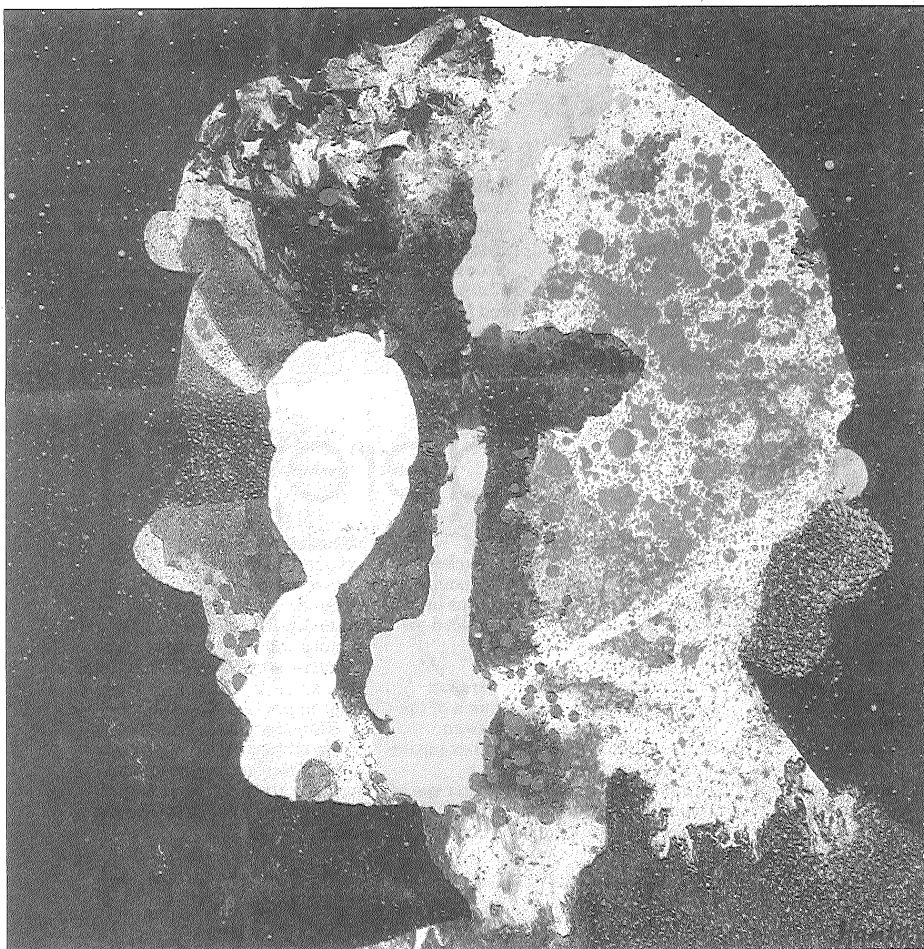
In 1957 he travelled to London where he and Gil Taverner married before gathering experience on the Continent, living hand-to-mouth on a modest scholarship Pat received from the Italian Government.

Gil Hanly, herself a gifted artist, later turned her talents to photography, becoming distinguished in this field for her garden images and her documentation of the social upheavals of the 1970s.

The Hanlys returned to New Zealand in 1962. Pat by this time had absorbed influences of Chagall, Picasso and Matisse, reconstituting them into pure Hanly, first apparent in series of works he titled Pacific Icons, Figures in Light and New Order. These neo-expressionist paintings cut ties with models of English art and proclaimed a uniquely New Zealand character, light and landform. They were a high-energy blast of fresh vision.

There followed 3½ decades of luminous, charged, life affirming works too numerous to catalogue here — all attesting to Hanly's concept of a universal life-force, a pervading metaphysical energy he believed animated all creation.

His Garden series pulsed with vibrant life, the works so explosively vivid that it seemed the paint



itself had burst into its own lush, burgeoning growth.

Hanly's vitality, gestures, manner of speech and mode of dress were inimitable — he was a complete, singular, original package. Whatever he touched seemed to take on some part of the artist's character. It was said that he could not spread Marmite on a piece of toast without creating a Hanly.

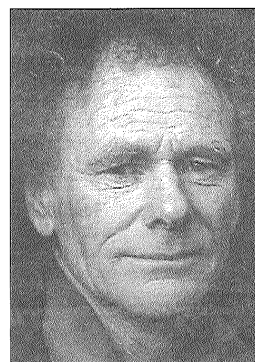
In his small trailer-sailer he was out on the harbour in the flotilla of protest vessels to greet the nuclear submarine Pintado. Hanly's paintings of this pivotal anti-nuclear incident fixed an historic time, place and mood into the consciousness of New Zealanders.

As the progression of images emerged from his small backyard studio in Windmill Road, Pat Hanly became an Auckland identity whose amiable personality brought him widespread popularity. He tutored succeeding intakes of architectural students in freehand drawing.

Hanly in full flight could reduce an audience to fall-about, gasping laughter with tales of the unexpected consequences of his well-intentioned actions. His good humour made him great fun to be with.

Part of his attractiveness was the almost child-like enthusiasm he brought to experiences. He loved to sail, to be on the water, and was fascinated by flight. He made kites he flew from a park near his Mount Eden home and instigated an annual kite-flying day that attracted hundreds of participants. Friends had to plead with him to abandon the construction of an artistic but aerodynamically dubious aircraft. He was convinced would fly.

At his core, though, Hanly was a deeply serious, committed, humanist artist in no doubt about his vocation and mission. He was a virtuoso technician who could make paint and any graphic medium sing. Seeking new, expressive effects he experimented with enamel paints and mastered their unpredictable qualities. From time to time he sought freshness of expression by drawing with his left hand or in the pitch black of the darkroom he constructed in the corner of his garage. He destroyed many of his works he judged unsatisfactory, on occasion buying back works to be altered or burned.



Left: Pat Hanly.

Above: Hanly's Real Self Portrait 1968 (oil on hardboard) from the Penrose High School collection.

Extraordinarily inventive, Hanly could find some piece of everyday flotsam and recycle it into a tool for his art. To a visitor admiring a superb monoprnt and wondering at its unfathomable technique, he explained that it had been made with the aid of a rolled-up sock.

He designed splendid murals for the Christchurch Town Hall, the Aotea Centre, Auckland University and other public and private buildings.

Early in the 1990s Pat Hanly, apparently at the height of his powers, stopped painting. He was diagnosed as having Huntingtons disease. From that time he gradually lost strength, weight and muscular control, although his intellect, sense of humour and courage remained unimpaired. He said he looked forward to death with interested anticipation — some of his best friends were dead.

Some time before dawn on September 20 the life of Pat Hanly came to its conclusion. He was 72.

He had given great pleasure to many New Zealanders and in so doing gave the nation iconic images that celebrated life, the sheer, bracing thrill of existence, admonished us to love one another, to live fully and well and warned of the nuclear fire.

Pat Hanly was a much loved artist whose painted messages will endure for generations.

□ Pat Hanly, born Palmerston North, August 2, 1932; died Auckland, September 20, 2004.