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.

To 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 dinner 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 Woodall, the kōr-nou minimalist 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 lifelong ambition to live and work as a visual artist. He found an ally in Allen Learoyd, a young art teacher newly appointed to the Palmerston North Technical College. With his tutorage and encouragement, Hanly enrolled as a student at the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts. He met and formed a close friendship with the artist and lecturer Bill Culbert.

Hanly proved a brilliant student and a catalyst personality around whom a commune of students—among them Trevor Moffitt, Quentin Macpharlane, Bill Culbert, Hamish Keith, Tim Garrity, Ted Brucey, Barry Miller, myself and Gillian Tavener—formed in the small flat at 22 Armagh Street.

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

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

The Hanlys moved to New Zealand in 1962. By this time had absorbed influences of Chagall, Picasso and Mattisse, reconstituting them into pure Hanly, first under Ken Blackburn, who then proclaimed a unique New Zealand characteristic, light and landscape. They were a high-energy burst of fresh vision.

The 1960s saw a decade 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 modes of dress were inexhaustible—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 fullness of protest vessels to greet the nuclear submarine Pindaro. 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 generations of architectural students in freehand drawing.

Hanly in full flight could reduce an audience to fall about, gasp and placing 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 childlike enthusiasm he brought to experiences. He loved to sail, to be on the water, and was fascinated by flying. 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.

Hanly’s 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, humanitarian artist in no doubt about his vocation and mission. He was a virtuous technician who could make paint and any graphic medium sing. Seeking new, explosive effects he experimented with enameled prints 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.

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 monoprint 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.

In the 1990s Pat Hanly, apparently at the height of his powers, stopped painting. He was diagnosed as having Huntington’s 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 interest and explained that 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 another, to live fully and fully and warn of the nuclear fire.

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