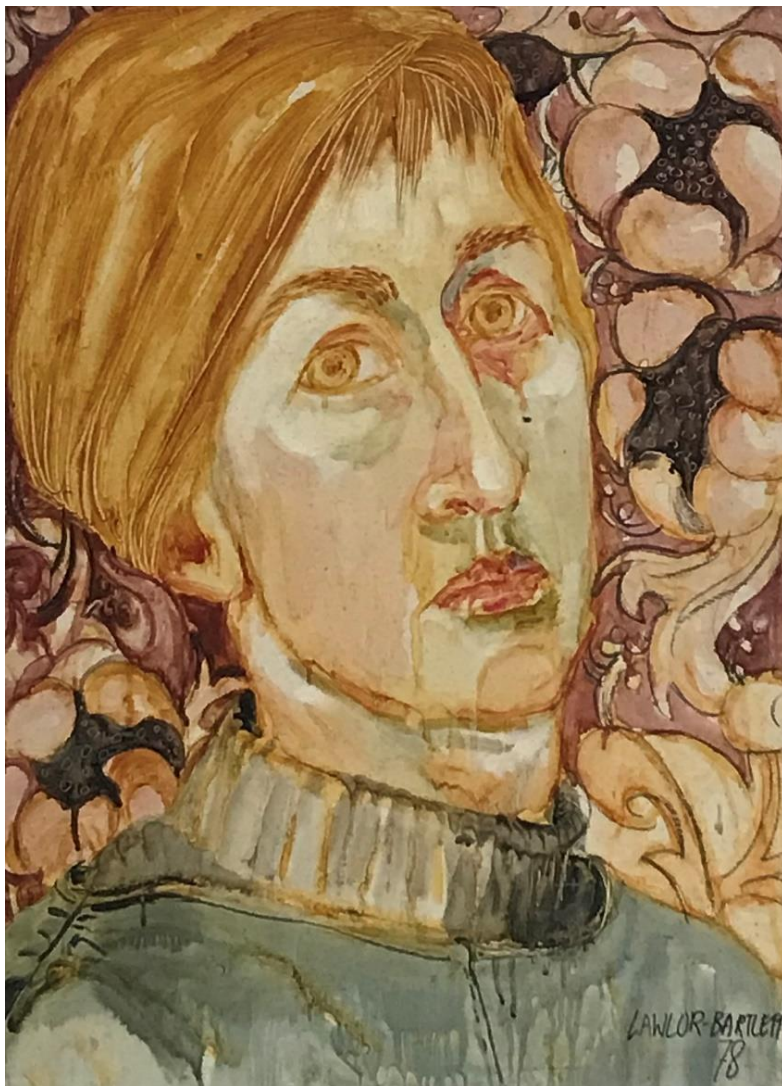


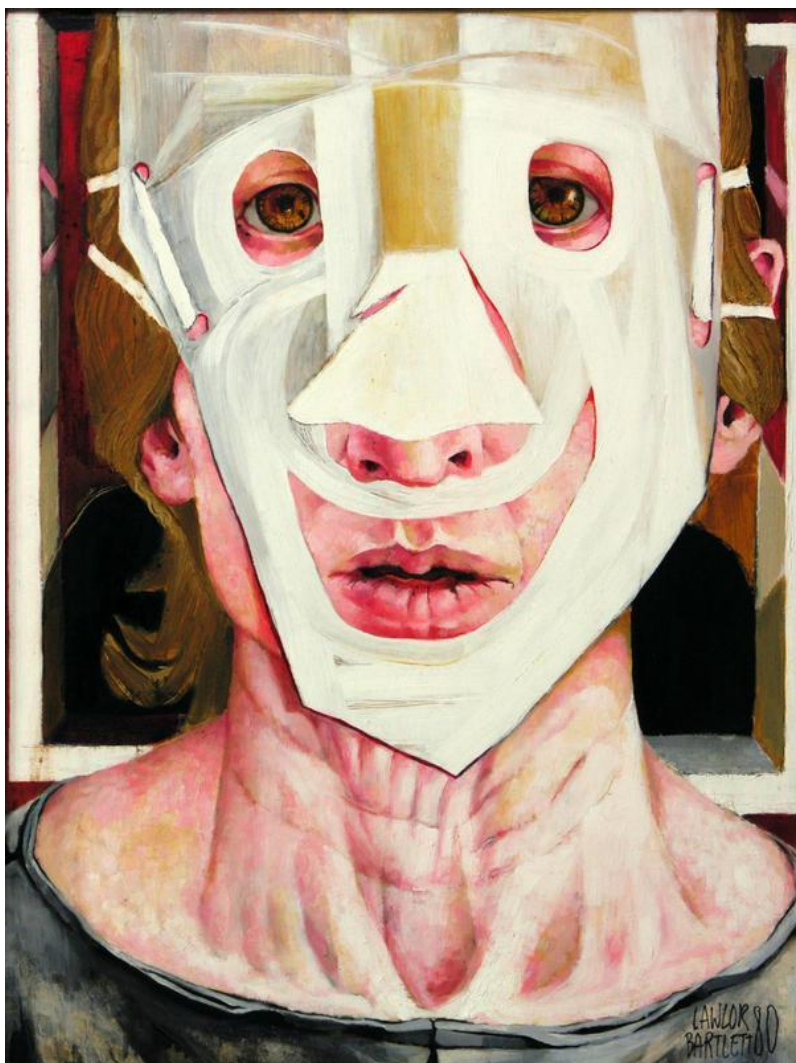
Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett

Waving not drowning

Pah Homestead, 11 August – 2 October 2022, Auckland, New Zealand



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Untitled*, 1978 Oil on board*



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Masked Face*, 1980 Oil on board

Behind the Mask

By Mary Trewby

When ‘two well-dressed ladies with carefully blue-rinsed and permed hair’ walked into the *Images of Man* exhibition at Outreach in Auckland’s Ponsonby in March 1981 and silently removed two works off the wall, placing them face down on the floor in the centre of the gallery, they may have been reacting to the uncompromising nudity of the paintings.¹ The painter, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett, believes they couldn’t bear a penis being so realistic. As Elizabeth Eastmond comments in *Art New Zealand*, ‘much of these images significance lies in precisely what must have shocked some people: their directness. You are *required* to relate to them ... There is an intentionally untraditional treatment of the male body here: one that is not idealised in any way, not posed or transcribed with a more stylised technique – approaches which would distance, weaken the impact.’ Eastmond makes the distinction between these naked-person works and others in the group exhibition that ‘are clearly *nudes*’. ‘Their stressed physicality attracts attention: with their life-size nakedness, their mouths open (screaming?) trapped in the centre of the picture-space/patriarchal religious/social system.’²

Uncompromising is a good way to describe Lawlor-Bartlett – and her work. The subject matter, particularly when of people, is often difficult and contentious, her approach is direct and unflinching, and her intention is to confront, not attract. ‘I attempt to draw the face or the body from the inside, or masked, or semi-obscured by something unfamiliar, so that in the shock of the masking and unmasking, I can expose some raw nerve end of truth,’ she says.³



Margaret Lawlor was born on 26 December 1929, the youngest of four children of Pat and Amy Lawlor. The family home at 6 Hawker Street, Wellington, was a literary one. Pat Lawlor was a freelance journalist, and at the time of Margaret's birth the editor of the *New Zealand Artists' Annual*, a local version of a successful Australian publication. He was also a deeply conservative Catholic. As a little girl Margaret remembers that when her parents went out, she would get out the 'hell book' – an illustrated volume of Dante's *Inferno*: 'I was forbidden to open it. I was terrified by it – Dante going down to Hades and all the writhing creatures in Hell. But I was fascinated by the images.'⁴

'Since I could first hold a pencil in my hand I wanted to draw. I loved words but I wanted the visual side of it. ... I just kept on drawing and painting.' By the age of thirteen, 'I knew that was all I wanted to do. I wanted to do beautiful things ... I'd start painting the sea and suddenly I felt here was something beautiful and I wasn't making it beautiful. So I started painting ugly things, or things that were ordinary ... I couldn't make them ugly because they already were. At Taupo, instead of the mountain, I would draw the pipes and rubble of the hotel that had burned down. Even at that stage I was using the negative. Using the things that were supposed to be ugly and trying to see some beauty, some form, something positive, in them. That satisfied me.'⁵

Margaret describes her mother burning Pat Lawlor's autobiography after he died. Margaret tried to stop her, arguing that it was some of the best writing that her father had done 'because he glossed over things – he'd had such a battle with alcohol all his life and that was what he didn't gloss over' in his memoirs. 'He wrote it as it was.' As Margaret points out, the irony was that, as the secretary of the State Literary Fund, Lawlor had fruitlessly attempted to persuade James Joyce's sister, a nun who'd lived in New Zealand since 1909, not to destroy the letters she'd received from her brother. 'Dad thought he could stop Joyce's sister, but he couldn't stop his own wife from doing the same thing. It broke my heart.'⁶

His daughter does not 'gloss over' things, a characteristic that Pat Lawlor recognised. In 1951, when she was home from her second year at Elam, her father recorded in his journal that James K Baxter had visited: 'Jim comes up to my home about 7 pm reasonably sober. ... While we are talking I note that my daughter Margaret is busy sketching Jim. I am anxious, for she is merciless with her crayons.'⁷

After attending Wellington Teachers College, where Gordon Tovey was head of the art department and Louise Henderson taught needlework, she spent a further year in Dunedin at the Teachers' College and School of Art, training to be a specialist art teacher. But she was determined to pursue painting. She wanted to go to Elam, because she liked the thought of being taught by John Weeks.⁸

In the last year at Elam, students had to do a final composition in the style of the 'old masters'. 'Everyone was doing Rubens or Titian, or Tintoretto – huge paintings you did all year taking three figures ... I decided I was going to do the possible nuclear destruction of the world with my Aunt Isabel and Uncle Rupert having a cup of tea in the front ... and in the background everything blowing up in a huge nuclear explosion.' The tutor 'got furious with me, walking up and down behind it. He said, "Margaret, unless you change it to Adam and Eve, I will not pass you." He wanted me to cut it down, simplify it – just put in two people, not even the three that Garth Tapper and the others had done ... and do it à la Tintoretto. ... But that wasn't what I wanted to do. And I wasn't going to be failed.'⁹ She left

Elam without graduating. Nevertheless, she was awarded the Rosemary Grice Memorial Prize for painting that year.



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT,
Pat Lawlor, 1958 Oil on board*



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT,
Untitled, 1958 Oil on board

A few months later she married Peter Bartlett, whom she had met in her first year at Elam, and they sailed off to Europe on the *Rangitiki*. Peter had won a bursary to continue his architecture studies in Paris. ‘I loved Paris, I loved the way the light glowed on the masonry after the dirtiness of London. It was just so beautiful.’¹⁰ Margaret was teaching English at the Lycée Molière in the 16th arrondissement, a job which gave her time to go to classes with Jean Metzinger at the Académie Frochot in Montmartre. Metzinger, one of the major figures of cubism, along with Picasso and Braque, wrote the theoretical text of the movement, *Du ‘Cubisme’*, with Albert Gleizes. By 1953, he was seventy years old. Margaret had a letter of introduction from Louise Henderson who had studied with him in 1950. Metzinger ‘had these bird-like eyes and a tremendous vitality about him,’ she said.¹¹ ‘He was there once a week – he was a modest man, and a very honest and good critic – he’d walk around and peer into all the work we were doing.’¹² ‘It was very upsetting for some people because it was very tough assessments. But ... he appreciated what I was after. I found it very very rewarding.’¹³ When Metzinger retired, she moved to the atelier of

André Lhote, a contemporary of Metzinger and another cubist; John Weeks had studied with Lhote in 1925. ‘Lhote was a famous man but he wasn’t, like Metzinger, a sincere man. You felt that he was just saying nice things to the ones who’d pay the most – I got very little from that.’¹⁴

Within a year, Margaret was pregnant. ‘My first baby, Nicky, had Down Syndrome – that was not easy.’¹⁵ Peter’s bursary lasted for one year, and after that he worked on short-term contracts with architects like Maurice Cammas. So they lived on the edge, sometimes not having enough to eat. They had an old scooter and would go to as many exhibitions as they could in the weekends. ‘We lived in a poor part of Paris surrounded by factories, so I painted them. And I started drawing and painting the babies – by that time I had another one. I just tried to snatch as much time as I could to work. Most of it was figure painting – I would go to ateliers just to use the model.’¹⁶



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *87 Rue de L'Amiral, M. Nicolas Paris*, 1954 Oil on board

Returning to Auckland in 1957, they soon had another child. After four years in Paris enjoying its vibrant arts environment and intellectual sophistication, settling back into a life of mundane conservatism in dull

remote New Zealand must have been a shock. By 1961 Margaret was finding coping with the children and trying to paint very difficult – ‘it just wasn’t working and I was very depressed. I had a breakdown when I just couldn’t paint.’¹⁷ She spent some time in a clinic and ‘this terrible psychiatrist gave me shock treatment’.¹⁸

Over the next seven years, she had three more children. It was a large family. Margaret also had a husband pursuing his career – Peter had set up his own architectural practice and, after years of combining that with part-time teaching, was appointed dean of design at the School of Architecture in 1977. That same year her parents, by now old and frail, moved into a flat in Margaret and Peter’s house in Shelly Beach Road, Herne Bay.



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Brendon Mask Adolescent II*, Acrylic on board

It was difficult to find time to devote to her work, although this was when she became more involved in the political aspects of art. In 1979 she was one of the founding members of the Association of Women Artists. ‘It was very hard for a professional woman painter to paint with integrity in the patriarchal art world ... I was told by several art dealers to change the subject of my work to still life flower arrangements or landscape before they would consider showing my work’, a not-uncommon experience.¹⁹ Like many women artists, she was concerned primarily with painting what

was around her. ‘My children were my life so I wanted to paint them. I was pretty ruthless, I used them. I used everyone. I would leave them in the high chair for hours until they fell asleep – I did feel ashamed of myself sometimes. I just painted as much as I could ... anything that went wrong, I painted it.’²⁰



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Father Christmas IV "Who Does Not Wear A Mask?"*, 1976 Oil on board*

Her *Father Christmas* series of the 1970s, exhibited at Barry Lett Galleries in 1977, was quietly subversive, an exploration of loneliness and perversion, with grim children, hovering mothers and watchful businessmen with an eye on the profits. ‘I did a whole series of drawings of children on Father Christmas’ knees. [T]he Farmers ... used to have a throne room with an often rather whiskeyed Father Christmas in it and the mothers would tell their screaming children to sit on his lap. The whole concept of it was just so wrong.’²¹

She took sketchbooks with her everywhere. ‘For Lawlor-Bartlett, drawing is a necessity of life. She draws on the bus, in the TV room, at a bedside’,²²

and has even been known to take her sketchbook to dinner parties: ‘you can concentrate everything you see into one drawing, which you can’t do with a camera,’ she says.²³ Her archive of drawings is massive – she has held a number of exhibitions of these works but most are unseen. Rodney Kirk Smith, for many years her Auckland dealer, admired the series she produced of her father dying, although he felt they were ‘too much’ to exhibit.²⁴

Margaret once noted that, ‘According to RKS, I am a figurative mixed media artist whose works have strong social content.’ Not satisfied, she tried out several alternatives: ‘I am a social figurative painter – post modernist? trans-avant garde, expressionist/symbolist, figurative neo-expressionist.’²⁵



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Mother Child Bomb VI*, 1985 Monoprint and collage*

In the late 1970s, she had introduced masks, x-rays, ribcages and helmets into her works: ‘I cut out ... masks and wore them in a series of self-portraits I did in 1979, the year my father died,’ she wrote in 1993, preparing a new exhibition of masked self-portraits.²⁶ The helmet is a potent element in the collages and paintings about the 1981 Springbok Tour. Margaret could be seen at the protests, a tiny figure standing face to face with helmeted gimlet-eyed Red Squad members, recording them in her sketchbook: ‘My lines are shaky because I found their refusal to make eye contact with a fellow New Zealander filled me with fear and fury,’ she said.²⁷

‘My work has always been concerned with the human condition, but now my images are also becoming increasingly political,’ Margaret wrote, introducing *Face Up*, her 1984 exhibition at RKS.²⁸ ‘These faces and bodies, masked, hooded, full-face and profile, dissolving into skulls with bodies whose entrails are twisted by foothills – the pointed shapes of which duplicate bombs – are created by combinations of collage, monoprint, xerox, drawing and old painting,’ TJ McNamara wrote in the *New Zealand Herald*, singling out *Identikit Woman, Full-face and Profile*, which he described as ‘an extraordinary anatomisation of a modern woman complete with x-ray.’²⁹ ‘The show was a great success,’ she wrote to her Wellington dealer, Elva Bett, ‘with 12 sold out of 20, so I am pleased, for it was tough stuff which I did not expect to sell.’³⁰



GIL HANLY, artist's refurbishment of VAANA PEACE MURAL, Aug 1993, Karangahape Rd, Auckland

The ‘poverty-stricken’ children Margaret had gone to school with during the Depression had made an indelible impression (‘we had little money, but at least we were fed’).³¹ And so did living in Europe in the 1950s at the start of the Cold War, when it was impossible to ignore the very real fear of atomic warfare. The continued threat of nuclear destruction was heightened by the persistent and bloody-minded French weapon testing in the Pacific – they conducted 183 tests, mostly at Mururoa in French Polynesia – and intensified her desire to use art as a political weapon. In 1984 Margaret established the Visual Artists Against Nuclear Arms (VAANA)

organisation with Marté Szimay and Nigel Brown, organising a group of artists to paint a mural on the corner of Karangahape and Ponsonby roads. 'I put an ad in the Artist Newsletter because I thought we should work as a group or team, anonymously, like artists did in the Middle Ages ... Around 100 artists came to that first meeting which was held at Elam. I think it was the first time in NZ that 100 artists were motivated by one cause, and we decided to put a mural along the Ponsonby [Reservoir] wall.'³²

The family moved to Devonport in 1986. The next few years were challenging, with Margaret coping with her mother's last years suffering from Alzheimer's: 'I kept drawing her ... I'd been drawing her all my life – she'd get quiet, she felt she was being useful.'³³ The move did have compensations: 'I swim all the time in the sea out front. ... I just leap in and swim all through winter, free style, no goggles. I like the salt on my eyes. In the summer I often just lie in the water and look at the volcanoes. It is marvellous in Devonport to have all those elements. ... I always come out from a swim and I see the world in a different way!'³⁴

A holiday home at Tarawera provided another regular swimming spot with an equally magnificent backdrop. Margaret has stated that, 'When I paint landscapes I usually express my joy, but when I paint humanity it is always the agony that I must paint – to try to find some dignity or to resolve the sadness of the human condition.'³⁵ In her *Tarawera Volcano Unmasked* series, exhibited at Rotorua Museum of Art and History in 1998, the landscape is not always benign. 'When a student – for joy & peace I painted the Tarawera bush, but it became blacker & blacker. I knew I was not painting bush – I was painting inside me', Margaret wrote in 1980.³⁶ She captured the contained violence and beauty of the silent volcano Tarawera on the canvas and on paper, transforming the horrors of the nuclear bomb into the relentless constancy of nature's destructive powers, and the repressed anxiety, the sense of unease, that New Zealanders live with every day.



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Peace and War, The Measure of Man's Thirst, The Victims Are Always Beautiful*, Acrylic on canvas

The following year she held an equally notable exhibition in Auckland, *Volcanoes My Witness: Tamaki – Tarawera*. ‘I explore the bodies of my family and my body ... I then explore the relationship between the body, its outer surface as well as its inner organs and skeleton, and the forms of the mountain, lake, sea and land. I used Nairn’s geological maps, the researches of Scott and other scientists at the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, the findings of Keam and the insights of June and Anaru Rangihueua and decided to use elements of measurement as I tried to express the entity of the mountain.’³⁷

In 2003 Margaret initiated another peace art project, *Maungauika North Head Artists Project: Seven Artists*. When walking on Maungauika, ‘I saw the eastern windows of the old barracks boarded up with marine plywood and asked DoC to please give them to me if they took them down. A year later I got them ... I dragged the poet Riemke Ensing up the mountain and asked her to write a poem for 14 Stations of the Cross.’³⁸ Each of the seven artists took two stanzas and painted two panels based on Ensing’s poem ‘Towards 14 Ways of Looking at Pohutukawa’.

The volcanoes of Tarawera and Tāmaki Makaurau reappear in the large paintings of *What Will We Leave Them?*, her first solo exhibition in sixteen years, shown at the Parnell Gallery in 2016. The ruru, mother owl, multi-

breasted and silent, sometime jester, protects humanity, which struggles against restless volcanoes and rising waters. She has replaced unknowing Aunt Isabel and Uncle Rupert (whom she admits she didn't like much) with watchful faces, her own and her mother's, and figures of her tupuni, and exchanged atomic devastation with another global catastrophe, climate change. The New Zealand Herald art critic TJ McNamara wrote the following in review of this exhibition: 'It is easy for paintings with a direct political or protest purpose ... to slip into becoming no more than posters. These potent images avoid that intellectual simplicity ... These paintings show the artist as visionary. They are complex compositions of telling detail and bold attack in the manner of painting. They have a clarity that makes the problems she addresses catch the heart of the viewer with immediate reality and concern.'³⁹



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *They Must Harvest the Sun* 2014, Acrylic on canvas

For all the nuclear explosions, flooding seas and exposed ribcages, at heart Margaret's work is optimistic. 'The flaws – the negatives I have been exploring ... – become part of the whole, the catalysts to make me join the birds, share the jokes and use the negative to live life to the full.'⁴⁰

-
- ¹ 'Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett', in Erin Forsyth (ed), *Wahine = Women*, Depot Artspace, Auckland, 2015, p 102.
- ² 'Images of Men', *Art New Zealand*, 20, Winter 1981, p 26; emphasis in original. Elizabeth Eastmond has referred to Margaret as 'Mary Lawlor Bartlett' throughout, although the reproduction of *Naked New Zealand Person I* is correctly attributed to Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett.
- ³ Artist's statement for exhibition *Face Up*, RKS Art, July 1984.
- ⁴ Conversation with the author, 27 May 2021.
- ⁵ Interview recorded with Riemke Ensing, Cultural Icons, no 15, Depot Artspace, Devonport, 20??, available at <https://culturalicons.co.nz/15-margaret-lawlor-bartlett/>.
- ⁶ Conversation with the author, 27 May 2021.
- ⁷ Pat Lawlor, *The Two Baxters: Diary Notes by Pat Lawlor*, Millwood Press, Wellington, 1979, p 13.
- ⁸ Interview with Ensing.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Conversation with author, 8 August 2021.
- ¹¹ Conversation with author, 21 July 2021.
- ¹² Interview with Ensing.
- ¹³ Conversation with author, 21 July 2021.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Ensing.
- ¹⁵ Conversation with author, 8 July 2021.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Conversation with author, 26 July 2021.
- ¹⁹ 'Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett', in Forsyth, *Wahine = Women*, p 100.
- ²⁰ Interview with Ensing.
- ²¹ 'Artistic approach to activism', *The Devonport Flagstaff*, 8 June 2012.
- ²² Warwick Brown, 'Lawlor-Bartlett – the eyes have it', *New Zealand Times*, 2 September 1984.
- ²³ Interview with Ensing.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Unpublished notes on *Naked Faces & Paper Hats*, 1977, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett Archive.
- ²⁶ Unpublished notes, dated Christmas 1993, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett Archive.
- ²⁷ Artist's statement, *Face Up*.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ TJ McNamara, 'Short Stroll Offers Contrasts', *New Zealand Herald*, 9 July 1984.
- ³⁰ Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett to Elva Bett, 18 June 1984, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett Archive.
- ³¹ Conversation with author, 27 May 2021.
- ³² 'Artistic approach to activism.'
- ³³ Interview with Ensing.
- ³⁴ 'Artistic approach to activism'.
- ³⁵ Artist's statement for exhibition *Naked Faces & Paper Hats*, Barry Lett Galleries, 21 March–1 April 1977.
- ³⁶ Artist's notes about the works in *Face Up*, 1980, Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett Archive.
- ³⁷ Artist's statement, *Volcanoes My Witness: Tamaki – Tarawera*, Peters Muir Petford Gallery, April 1999.
- ³⁸ 'Artistic approach to activism'.
- ³⁹ TJ McNamara, 'Mass appeal of individual artists', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 July 2016.
- ⁴⁰ Artist's statement, *Volcanoes My Witness: Tamaki – Tarawera*.
-

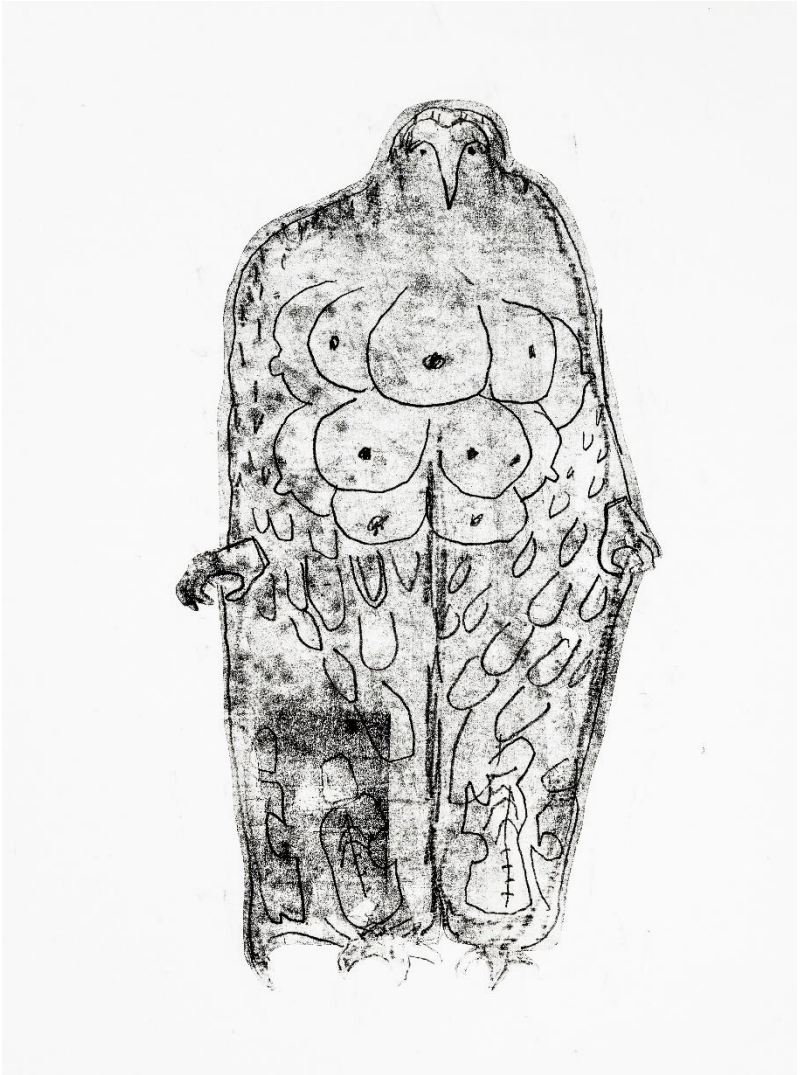
Created for the exhibition: **Waving not drowning**

Pah Homestead, 11 August – 2 October 2022, Auckland, New Zealand

*Artworks feature in exhibition

The artist and family wish to extend special thanks to The Wallace Arts Trust, Nicholas Butler, Mary Trewby, Penny Devereux, Julia Cahill, Amy Norrish, Riemke Ensing, the Cumberland family and all those who contributed to this exhibition and project.

Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett Collection Curator, Julian Harrison



MARGARET LAWLOR-BARTLETT, *Just Enjoy the Lull IX - Earth Mother*, 1998 monprint/woodcut with handwork, on paper