

Mark Braunias drives to the Art Fair

By Steve Braunias



Photo: Luke Foley-Martin

The afterlife begins here. Not quite 18 months after he died, my brother Mark Braunias has his first posthumous shows, one at Brett McDowell Gallery in Dunedin, the other concurrently at the Auckland Art Fair—his ghost hovering over either end of the islands, in transit, in purgatory, behind the wheel of whatever celestial version of the kind of wheezing, creaking rust bucket that he drove on Earth.

He lived in Kawhia, closest nearby civilisations (Raglan, Te Awamutu, Ōtorohanga) all one hour away, and I always picture him driving, eating up the miles, punishing the cars and vans he was forever taking into the Kawhia Garage. Emails in his last year itemise the cost of repairs to his fleet. Both his 1996 Toyota Carib runabout and 1994 Daihatsu Delta van were his art stations. He loaded them with his paintings, and set off to whichever city or town was exhibiting his work. "Anyone who invited Mark Braunias to do a show will remember his arriving in a stalwart station wagon loaded with gear," wrote curator Justin Paton after Mark's death. "He was more like a travelling musician than an artist – a player of gigs, not a maker of 'projects'."

Some of these gigs meant one of his specialities, painting directly onto the wall of a gallery. These shows belonged to the exact same concept of a live band. They switched on, played, and then packed down when it was over: the wall was painted back over when the show was finished. The performance was the thing. Mark, always in motion.



Two abstract works by Mark Braunias, part of the body of work returning to public view after the artist's death. Courtesy of the Artist and SPA_CE Gallery. Photo: Hazel Redmond.

Anyone who runs towards something is running away from something. Sometimes I wonder why he was in such a rush and generally I think that it was just the way his mind worked, fast, action-packed, wanting to move onto the next idea, the next surface (paper, plywood, canvas, tapestry), but I think maybe his last year involved a fairly conscious desire to escape death.

He wrote to my sister that year, "I caught up with Steve recently as I have been diagnosed with his similar problem of an irregular heart beat. Have had all the tests and been on blood thinners etc and now have an appointment at some stage for the electrocution process. Steve gave me some good advice so I will

figure out the next stage as it comes around. It doesn't seem any big deal and definitely no significant symptoms. Feel healthier than before so just tag along with it for now. Pretty common situation by all accounts."

Yes, atrial fibrillation is no big deal, except that it killed him. His diary lists dates of "the electrocution process", or cardioversions, where they knock you out and give you an electric shock. It's a total waste of time except they give you a cup of tea and biscuit afterwards. I said to him that I had four or five of these zaps. None of them corrected the heart pattern—too fast, the signals all wrong—for more than a day, sometimes only a couple of minutes. The shocks wore off fast. The biscuits weren't worth it. My advice was to go on the waiting list for an ablation, a surgical procedure where they scorch a circle around the heart to prevent the rogue signals. Okay, he said, I'll do that. He was on the waiting list when he died of a brain bleed brought on by the anticoagulants of blood thinners. He was 69.

He collapsed outside his house near midnight. He had just driven back to Kawhia from watching the cricket at Seddon Park in Hamilton. He lived alone: "Cat died", he wrote in his diary on November 2, 2023. He loved that cat and there still tins of Jellimeat in the cupboards. There wasn't a lot else, and the house needed scrubbing, but it was much less a bachelor pad than a vibrant, busy, ordered, happy and silent artist's studio. "I am up to my eyelids in work of sorts," he wrote to artist Paul Hartigan in his last year. "Trying to make large paintings for a catalogue deadline. Cursing myself for agreeing to do it and thus increasing my anxiety levels. Normally my studio is a contemplative space but at the moment it's a freak out zone."

I always picture him painting. There are bamboo poles propped up against the wall in his studio with a paintbrush taped to the end. That was one of his practises, standing that far back from the surface, a pole's distance; the title of one of Justin Paton's books is meant as advice but also operates as a description of what an artist does: *How to Look at a Painting*. Mark once likened drawing to "carving space...once you make a line you have to own both sides of it". Elsewhere he wrote of a particular art work from a series, "It's a strong work and the only one made with oil stick and charcoal. Something new for me. Virtually all the other works are acrylic and ink." Invited to discuss his work at a gallery, he replied, "I will concentrate on talking about the process behind the work...less about the concepts and more about the making." Actually he thought very deeply about the concepts. His notes are brilliant, scholarly. Much of his abstract works are informed by his adult reading of children's encyclopaedias, and he loved talking about his ideas.



A colourful abstract painting by Mark Braunias, whose work is being shown posthumously at the Aotearoa Art Fair. Courtesy of the Artist and SPA_CE Gallery. Photo: Hazel Redmond.

He loved talking, full-stop. He was a very happy person. He did not do a single slough of despair. As an artist, he did isolation, fragile existences, transitory lifeforms, but comedy and lyricism were always within the frame—there was nothing Pop Art about his work but there was so much that was pop music. He loved crowds, mass hysteria, a good time. He loved the Auckland Art Fair. He was artist in attendance in 2024, exhibiting with the Jonathan Smart Gallery, and later emailed painter Dick Frizzell about opening night, "It was just such an intense and crazy night. Art Fairs are like nothing else I know of. I actually enjoyed the whole experience over those 4 days and this mostly from seeing people engaging with visual art and meeting some of them....I live in a cave the rest of the time so walking into the light made me realise the art world isnt as cracked as I often imagine...or should I say not as cracked. But I still like the cave best."

He exhibited opposite artist Martin Poppelwell at the 2024 Art Fair. They recognised something in each other, some kind of similar zeal, passion, seriousness. He wrote to Martin afterwards, and described a kind of ecstasy when the fair was over and he drove home to his Kawhia cave from Auckland in one of his bombs.

"I cant recall a more relaxed or enjoyable drive for decades. It was almost a full moon and cruising through the dark but lit NZ Landscape was like driving through the history of McCahon paintings. There were moments of sheer beauty as the moon picked up a hill here and valley there. I even turned off the motorway towards Huntly to feel the rapture of the small provincial towns silent in the night-time. Stopping at a supermarket in the heart of maoridom. The night was quite warm and still....I thought to continue driving somewhere, anywhere but ended up outside my own gate around 10pm. As I got out of the car as relaxed as a Persian cat I thought to myself, 'By joves, I could do another Art Fair. When's the next one?'"

His artworks will pull up alongside works by Martin Poppelwell at the 2026 Art Fair at the Viaduct Events Centre from April 30-May 3.