

# Jane Zusters

New Zealander, b. 1951

## I'd Rather Be Swimming I

1991, mixed media, 56.5x76.0 cm  
Purchased 1991



### About the work

This is a post-modernist collage that deliberately combines a number of different media and painting styles. It takes on an aerial perspective with the inclusion of photography that is juxtaposed with areas of abstract expressionist colour. The graffiti-like application of paint surrounding the swimming woman suggests she is having a subconscious experience. The work has a dream-like quality of activity, energy and perhaps, as the title suggests, escape from reality.

Zusters has long been interested in water and nautical themes, possibly influenced by her home and studio on Waiheke Island. She has said, "If you are an artist you can't help but respond to the consciousness of the times, and it seemed to me there was a lot of depression and difficulty in the national psyche. My personal theme of floating and swimming rather than drowning, reflects how I would like to see my own times. The swimming works are a metaphor for survival and emotional buoyancy." (Interview in *The Press*, 9 Oct, 1991)

Zusters often includes an autobiographical dimension in her work through the use of personal symbols and references, however she also believes that it is important for the viewer to arrive at his/her own interpretations. "I would say let that image work on your psyche and let you come up with whatever you like about it. I do not provide specific interpretations for my work even though it's full of things like boats, bones, life-savers and fragments of reality". (*A Women's Picture Book*, p. 163-164).

A combination of photography and painting in this work allows Zusters to juxtapose a variety of shapes, colour and references. The collage creates a powerful expressionist-influenced image that glows with colour and texture. Zusters has used a laser print of a photograph rather than the photograph itself. "I like the flatness and grain of laser prints and I was interested in contrasting that with the pigments and paint. The blandness of their surface takes on the tooth of the canvas and they are more archival than colour prints." (*The Press*, 9 Oct, 1991)

*I'd Rather Be Swimming 1* is a mid-career work, painted in 1991 while Zusters was the Queen Elizabeth II Artist In Residence at the Rita Angus Cottage in Wellington.

Collage is a technique invented by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) and later taken up by the Dadaists and Surrealists. The different elements break up the unity of the composition to create spatial disharmonies and unusual perspectives and, in doing so, often represent fragments of everyday life.

For women artists during the 1980s Expressionism (known as Neo-Expressionism) was a difficult style to negotiate. Associated with male artists and their depiction of women in stereotypical roles, Expressionism's predominantly male point of view was challenged by artists such as Zusters.

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## About the artist

Born in Christchurch in 1951, Zusters graduated from the University of Canterbury with a BA in English in 1972 and studied at the School of Fine Arts from 1974 to 1975. 1975 was International Women's Year and Zusters was included in the 'Six Women Artists' exhibition at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. In 1978 Zusters moved to Auckland. She lives on Waiheke Island.

She has twice received grants from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council (1979, 1986) and in 1984 she was awarded First Prize in the Montana Art Award. This allowed her to live and work in Italy for six months. In 1991 Zusters visited Berlin on a Goethe Institute scholarship. She has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions and her work is held in major New Zealand public collections.

During the time Zusters spent in Italy, in 1984, she was influenced by the frescos of Giotto. Her work from this point onwards became more concerned with abstraction combined with figurative elements.

Feminist issues continue to be important to Zusters and are apparent in the way she challenges patriarchal assumptions of male creativity and inspiration. The seeing female 'eye', conveyed through her use of the camera, represents the artist as an active viewer, rather than being passive 'sight' or the muse for the male artist.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

### *Untitled*

1978, hand painted photograph  
Purchased 1978

### *Hearts Landscape in the South Island*

1979, 3/10 drypoint  
Presented by Print Gallery Workshop 1979

### *Better Watch Out Now - Nuclear Waste Is A Coming Down On You*

1985, oil on paper  
William A. Sutton Bequest 2000

### *Post Modern Day Dream*

1986, acrylic on canvas  
Purchased 1986

### *Fruit Salade With Shirt and Cushions*

1988, acrylic and Cibachrome  
Purchased 1988

## Further reading:

'Jane Zusters: Painting it Over', Priscilla Pitts, *Art New Zealand*, No. 52, Spring 1989, pp. 62-65.

*A Women's Picture Book: 25 Artists of Aotearoa (New Zealand)*, Marian Evans et al, G.P. Books, 1988.

