



Gerry Nigro in 1937

## Gerry (Angelo) Nigro

1918 - 1994

*His life and times as remembered in excerpts from;*  
**“An Apple for the Teacher” by Jan Nigro (1996)**

***Jan met Gerry when she began studies at Elam Art School, Auckland in 1937. The follow text is taken from the text for Jan’s autobiography ‘An Apple for the Teacher’ published in 1996.***

I was beginning to know Angelo, or Gerry as his friends called him. We would stay behind in the life room to attend night class on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, going down Queen Street to Lyons Tea Rooms for a meal of steak and kidney pie, mashed potatoes and tinned peas costing shilling and threepence. Eating out then was a big treat for me.

In those days Elam was housed in the old Grammar School in Symonds Street, next to St Pauls Church. It consisted of lengthy corridors with lockers on one side, and various passages to rooms for life, antique, common objects on the other. Downstairs there were damp and dingy studios for modelling and casting, plus a small puppet theatre and Arnold Goodwin’s area for design and lettering. Under the stairway was a walk-in locker which was handed down from a group of departing students to like-minded incoming students (male of course) with leaning towards the left – a gesture to the hint of rebellion. This small group, including Gerry, also had a reputation of enticing girls into what we called the ‘passion pit’, with “Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here”, that old chestnut, written over the door.

During the lunch hour, some of the tutors would cross over the road to the Wynard Arms to down a half pint of beer.

Not to be outdone, Gerry and his friends would often front up to their superiors on the opposite side of the bar and order a pint. It so happened that one-day Gerry, after a liquid lunch, sent Lois White sprawling. She had sat on the back of his donkey (a combined easel and seat) to give him a criticism, when he toppled over, taking her with him. She rose, straightened her clothing and stamped her foot, “Angelo Nigro, you are impossible,” and angrily marched off in the direction of Fisher’s study.

Gerry was contemptuous of most of the ‘English School’ of artists – Fisher’s favourite were the likes of Augustus John, Walter Sickert, Stanley Spencer, and all English artists of the 1930s. Gerry was instead, interested in Mexican painting, and was reading Kant, Goethe, Dante and Schopenhauer.

I thought him a dandy, at first, with his expensive clothing and affecting a cane (I didn’t know then he had spent a year away from the Art School recovering from a hunting accident, a gun-shot wound in his leg).



Gerry Nigro recovering from a gunshot wound to his leg



'Chaos of War'  
Gerry Nigro ,1938

I was drawn to and fascinated by his intensity, and knowledge of painting. We would talk and talk for hours. Mr Fisher sent for my mother, asking her to stop the "liaison" with young Nigro. I was lectured by her but took no notice.

Gerry and fellow art student, Hilary Clark shared studio space in a loft adjoining Partington's Mill. I visited them and was most impressed when the old man Partington set the sails creaking round, casting creepy shadows as they raked across the studio windows. In 1938 Gerry had painted 'Activity on the Wharves' as well as 'Road Makers' and 'Chaos of War'. The last two were not painted at Elam. He photographed them and showed the results to the tutors. Johnny Weeks was impressed.

Mr Fisher was not – he had always hung Gerry's work as close to the ceiling as he could get it when holding class exhibitions. This year ended with the usual prize-giving. I won the special award – 'The Student Making the Most Progress During the Year'. Gerry had really fallen out with Fisher, who expelled him at the end of the year for being a disruptive influence on other students, politically and artistically. I tore up my prize certificates and flung them on Fisher's desk telling him I was leaving in support of Gerry Nigro.

During those student days we were largely dependent on the Auckland City Art Gallery to view good quality art. We would enter, always hopeful of seeing something exciting, something with vitality and colour. I quickly by-passed the 'Coming of the Maori', the Goldie heads, the dark gloomy Lindauers; dully inspected the English Victorian sentimentality, always pausing in front of one painting I admired, St Sebastian'. As art students in the late '30s we had to be content with all that heavy drama. I have to admit now the topographical artists have a great deal of charm and sense of adventure about them. Later, I was to become aware of Frances Hodgkins and her contemporaries.

The alternative diet was the Auckland Society of Arts. In 1939 Gerry and I became junior members which enabled us to hang works on the walls of the Auckland City Art Gallery. The Art Gallery didn't show contemporary New Zealand work, but as the Society used spaced there for their exhibitions, artists were given a chance to show their work in a public place.

Gerry's membership was short and fiery. At the 1940 Annual ASA Exhibition his painting of two men, titled 'Unconscious Revelation', was removed from the walls and interned under lock and key. Oblivious to this breaking controversy, Gerry and I walked into the City Art Gallery to view the exhibition. I had also had a painting called 'Woman and Island' accepted. We looked around the walls for Gerry's 26-square-foot 'Unconscious Revelation'. There was no sign of it. We asked Ida Eise, 'Where is it? It was accepted for the showing, what's happened?' She was embarrassed, "I'm afraid it's behind locked doors." Evidently the painting had created much discussion among those who attended the preview on Friday, the Council had met, considered the painting controversial or in dubious taste, having jumped to the conclusion it portrayed homosexuality.



'Unconscious Revelation'  
Gerry Nigro ,1940



Gerry Nigro with his back to us and Jan Nigro on the right at the easel, drawing from life at Elam

The whole affair had a shattering effect on its author, especially when the newspaper boards shouted 'Male Nudity Shocks Art Society'. The headlines of The NZ Observer dated 27 November 1940 read, 'Story Behind Banned Picture' and 'Youthful Auckland Artist A Storm Centre In Controversy'. "I'm disgusted. I consider I've been shabbily treated over the whole thing and I'm sending in my resignation from the ASA right away," read Gerry's words in the opening paragraph of the Observer article. I didn't follow Gerry and resign, but kept on showing the ASA, getting sympathy from Johnny Weeks when I burst into tears on discovering my entry for the spring show had been rejected.

When Gerry invited Tup, Rich and I to meet his family, we didn't know what to expect so played at guessing, imagining the father, head of the house, yelling at a brood of younger brothers and sisters; the mother, a big "momma mia", apron tied around her ample waist, breasts sagging from child bearing; the kitchen with ham strung from the ceiling, an all-pervading odour of garlic; the car sent to pick us up clapping out.

So much for our imaginings! The latest V8Delux pulled in to the curb to pick us up and we were soon turning into Curran Street, Herne Bay, and entering a long driveway to a Tudor-style house designed by Chapman Taylor. We were welcomed at the door by a striking golden-haired woman in evening dress, introduced as Gerry's mother, Lillian. She ushered us into a lovely dark-beamed, white walled lounge, with solid oak furniture, soft lighting, and many treasures of very good taste arranged around the room. We were introduced to a handsome dark man, the father Gennaro Nigro, who offered drinks from a well-stocked sideboard. Gerry showed me his father's rare collection of Italian opera records. He put on Gigli, it was a bit scratchy. As we became more relaxed, in spite of our scruffy looks, Rich stopped pulling his beard, which he always did when uneasy.

Tup and I exchanged looks, remembering our little game. While Gerry and I huddled over the record player, his mother Lillian, with her Irish sixth sense on alert, said to Tup, "He is going to marry that girl."

Gerry and his brother, Tom, had built a studio over the garage. On my first visit he showed me a revolving mirror he had rigged. It was supposed to have a hypnotic effect. His invitation to try it was declined, I was far more interested in some large canvasses stacked against the walls. The painting 'Unconscious Revelation', painted on plaster was so heavy it had a pulley arrangement to lift or lower; other works, including 'Mind and Machine', were painted in monochrome. They were all extremely powerful; Gerry was using Prussian Blue and his subject matter was so advanced for New Zealand at the time. There were to be many comments in the papers when he first began to exhibit. His mother was proud to have an artist son. She even wrote a poem "To the Artist". When he was out of favour with her, however it was a different matter.



Gerry Nigro in 1938



'Mind and Machine'  
Gerry Nigro , 1939

One day Gerry placed a painting called 'Lago Bello', which roughly translates as "lady of the lake", out in the sun to dry. His mother threw a bucket of water over it saying, "I'll give her lake." She also propped an empty milk bottle under the penis of the front figure of 'Unconscious Revelation'. Gerry used to partner Lillian to the receptions and balls she was fond of attending – she once won a prize as Madam Satan at an Arts Ball. She didn't take kindly to the girlfriends. I was certainly not good enough for her precious son. My mother was also not pleased with the affair.

Gerry's father was Italian and the family were Catholic. I always knew when I stepped off the tram at the top of our street I was going to get a telling off. She was an expert with her tongue when angry. As things became more serious an arrangement was made for the two mothers to meet and discuss the problem. I knew who would emerge triumphant. Lillian, all dressed up and wearing her diamonds along with a haughty expression, met my mother, who looked her usual floral mismatched self, but equipped with her sweet little "do battle" smile and well able to meet the coming onslaught of money and style. They headed for the lily pond in Lillian's garden. Gerry and I kept our distance, out of sight but within hearing. Their voices rose. My mother gave it all she had. Then the meeting was over. I can't remember my mother ever losing any ground.

Lilian Nigro was forced to come to terms with me. She tried playing games, making a fuss over an Italian girl called Pia, invited her over on Saturdays. Pia always wore a hat with a feather. I would see this feather bobbing above the hedge as she approached the house. Gerry was painting her portrait. His father warned, "Don't play around with that girl. She is in a strange country and doesn't understand our ways." Once, Pia wrote a letter apologising for her not being able to pose, explaining she was, "in bed with a bad influence."

I suffered when her portrait was accepted for the ASA's Summer Exhibition and when a review in the local newspaper observed, "Angelo Nigro's 'Pia, Italian Girl' has a fascinating background. His model for the picture was at the gathering on Monday and it was easy to see where the artist's inspiration came from."

An article headed "Art Lovers" named some prominent Auckland citizens who were at the opening, and finished with "also a number of students, among them Betty Aislabie who has lately affected strange Chinese eyebrows". She was with Angelo Nigro. One of our fellow students, name Peter, touched those eyebrows with his fingers. This led to a jealous outburst from Gerry, showing a side of his nature I was going to have to live with in the future.

Gerry's father had become ill during the year and had been discharged from a time in hospital after being diagnosed with inoperable cancer. He was president of the Italian Club, and when he died the Auckland Italians came to pay their respects as he lay in his coffin in the lounge, surrounded by lighted candles. Many tears were shed. He had helped so many to settle, giving advice on the finding of homes and jobs. He had left his village in the south of Italy with his older brother, Vincent, when just a boy of thirteen.

They travelled to Africa, Australia and finally settled in New Zealand. He played and taught the violin before becoming a businessman.



Gerry Nigro in 1940



Gerry and his mother Lillian 1944

He hosted many overseas guests, including Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane, for whom I danced at the Italian Club, dressed in a one-shoulder black dress with gold snake buckle, carved by Gerry. I danced bare-footed to Bolero – it was my party piece (everyone was expected to have one in those days). The Archbishop nodded approval and held out his hand to me. I did not kiss his ring.

Lillian was a convert to the Catholic religion and she became very devout. I once went to mass with her. Mother, after the loss of my brother, John, also looked to religion for spiritual guidance. John had been killed at a very young age of fifteen in a road accident soon after we had moved to Auckland. She tried just about every denomination in Auckland but didn't find one that answered her need. Gerry and I discussed a pantheist approach. We followed the philosophy of Ecclesiastes. I read the Old Testament. We heard Krishna-murti at the town hall. Art became and has been my religion – the spiritual concepts of the old masters have sufficed.

Towards the end of 1942 we decided to head for the registrar and were married in December. I wore a ghastly pink dress, a straw hat with (for God's sake) a rose attached to the front. Victor Impey and Tom, Gerry's brother, were witnesses. My mother insisted on a small reception at the posh department store, Milne & Choyce. Second cousins, Glad and Lou, who owned the Henrietta Cake Shop in Upland Road, made and iced a cake. Tom gave me a set of Pyrex dishes and Gerry, a supply of shirts, socks and underwear, no doubt to keep his younger brother fed and clothed through the hazardous marital journey he was taking on.

Lillian promised a hundred pounds and then changed her mind. We had been planning to buy a car with the money, but since Gerry had, at sixteen, rolled the family car, she thought the idea unwise. We moved into Gerry's family home. Lillian and I kept on a fairly even keel. I was adept at avoiding arguments and she knew it, besides she was teaching me to cook. I copied out her recipes in a brand-new exercise book. She was a superb cook, with her Danish-Irish background. Her grandfather was Captain Hansen who brought Samuel Marsden to New Zealand on the brig, 'Active'. Her great aunt was Hannah King Lethbridge, reputedly the first white woman born in New Zealand.

Her mother had married into the Hall family who were missionaries and who had come out with Samuel Marsden. As a child the Maori called Lillian, Muka, as her hair was the colour of golden flax.

By the time the Americans had entered the war. Queen Street was full of them in smart gabardine uniforms dashing from the florists with arms full of flowers, hailing taxis. The very attractive June King (who had been with us at Elam) married one. Gerry, unfit for the forces because of his leg wound, became a replacement art teacher at the Hamilton Tech. Even a glowing reference from Archie Fisher (one I am still very proud of) couldn't get me something similar. Instead, I was manpowered as a draughtsperson to the Karapiro Dam site on the Waikato River along with two office girls, two female schoolteachers and 500 men.

It was 1944, an eventful year for me. I loved the excitement of the dam construction, watching the spillways taking shape, the siren wailing day and night as the workers changed shift, the concrete mixers continually churning, the great overhead lights throwing dramatic shadows.



Karapiro Dam under construction 1944

Gerry too, was manpowered out to the dam site during the school holidays as a temporary concrete grouter. He would appear outside the office window, covered in cement dust, and the girls would pass him a cup of tea. Food was institutional. We jokingly suspected the cook boiled up her husband's boots to give flavour to those mutton stews. The smell of her kitchen didn't whet the appetite, and I began to be attacked by spells of nausea at the very thought of food. I visited the local doctor who confirmed my own suspicions. It wasn't just the food; I was pregnant with my first son, Jon. I left at the end of the year and we rented a farmhouse in TeRapa, near Hamilton, to await the birth.

How I recall those winter frosts and looking out on paddocks full of pregnant cows. Like so many young people who wanted to go overseas the war had curtailed our plans. When the war finally ended the whole world was on the move. Transports was commandeered to bring everyone home and the homeless and destitute Europeans were pouring into new countries for a new hope. There was no way we could get to Europe, the second choice was limited to Australia, South Africa or Canada. We chose Australia and moved to Sydney in 1946.

In Sydney Gerry earned some money painting bulls' heads on butcher shops, ice-cream cones on corner dairies, perched high up on scaffolding painting street signs, and helping Ralph Balsom paint plaster Madonna's for the Catholic churches. Ralph was later to be discovered by writer, critic and painter Daniel Thomas and became one of the early abstract painters working in Australia. Many years later, we shipped Gerry's little red racing Healey over to Sydney so we could travel around the country easier.

We joined the Sydney Contemporary Art Society and exhibited. My contribution was called 'Boy with a Bird' and Gerry's 'Elective Affinities'. The latter was reproduced with others in the Sunday Sun, captioned, "It's called Art".

We had made a decision to move to Melbourne. The housing shortage and our own "rat-hole" were getting us down. There was no space for a child to run and play, the lounge was dank and without windows, the electric light needed to be left on all day and the couple in the flat above quarrelled violently. We had certainly seen the tough side of Sydney. We moved to Melbourne in 1948. Gerry had found us a flat in Union Street, Malvern. The lounge and bedroom overlooked a pleasant lawn. A kitchen was tucked into one end of the back veranda. A long passage led to a shared bathroom. Negotiating this passage often proved hazardous as our landlady, minus half a foot and often drugged, waylaid us. She also penned long complaining notes and shoved them under our bedroom door during the night.

Gerry wanted to buy a business in Melbourne and needed to raise money from his newly inherited property in Rotorua, but nothing came of it. We decided to have a lengthy holiday back in New Zealand so sold our furniture, flew back to Auckland and headed south to the family bach at the lake.

In 1985, when Dr Eric McCormick posed for the drawing group in Auckland, he asked me why Gerry and I had gone to Australia after the War. He thought it was the last place where anybody would want to go. Apparently in earlier days, New Zealand intellectuals were condemning of Australia. Perhaps they clung to the old snobbish attitudes towards the convict backgrounds of our near neighbours.

Pity; they missed out on the Cultural Revolution, when art in Australia searched for its identity. It was exciting to live in Australia in the 1940s with the programme of immigration and rehabilitation of people from a devastated Europe, the immigrants bringing with them new concepts and injecting their culture into Australian mores. Today, I think we look with a bit of envy on our convict cousins judging by the amount of New Zealanders who go over there.



Gerry Nigro  
in Sydney 1947



'Elective Affinities'  
Gerry Nigro, 1947



The house at Kawaha Point Rotorua. Designed by Gerry Nigro in the early 1950s. The house still stands today, although has been extended over the years. It hosted an exhibition of Jan Nigro's work in 2015

When Gerry, Jon and I arrived in Rotorua back in the early '50s it was a relief to have our own home, if only the family bach. Gerry and his brother, Tom, now owned land at Kawaha Point willed from their mother's estate. Jon attended Rotorua Primary School, Gerry bought a car dealership in Tutanekei St. I missed the painting life in Melbourne, always hoping we would be going back soon. The subsequent birth of three more children put paid to that for the time being. I did begin painting again but I needed to meet people in the arts. The Daily Post reported that there was a local art society, newly established by Dr Stanley Wallis, at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

Gerry purchased from him an abstract of yacht shapes on Lake Rotorua called 'Sails', and became very intrigued with his canoe paintings – large black shapes against reds and blues. I gave lessons to his daughter, Ynys and later, briefly, to his grand-daughter, Christine.

We sailed and fished on the lake, went to hunt club breakfasts, to car club rallies and travelled up to Auckland where Gerry raced his Austin Healey at Ardmore. We were there the day Ken Wharton was killed. His little red car spun into the air and crashed. I see it in slow motion, rolling over and over up to the blue sky and the blinding sun.

We would drive to Ohakea, a bunch of us car enthusiasts and race one another home, the Hales' white Jaguar with Molly at the wheel tailing dust, Gerry in our Studebaker and Jim, Gerry's mechanic, and me in the Healey. As Gerry was around cars all day, it was a natural he wanted to try them out. He also drove midget cars, representing Rotorua at Western Springs. He was very proud of his Federation Internationale de l'Automobile License, issued in London. Dr Wallis, however, kept reminding Gerry that he was a family man and it was safer to get back to his painting.

After Dr Wallis died, Ynys asked Gerry to help sort out his paintings. A little later, Johnny Weeks came down from Auckland, staying with Zoe and her husband, Bill, on their farm. He culled the Doctor's work for an exhibition at the Auckland Society of Arts gallery. We threw a party for Johnny at our house at Kawaha Point. He held the members of the Rotorua Art Society in rapt attention when he spoke of Tintoretto. As glasses emptied and were replenished and the music grew in volume his audience dwindled and advice on the Golden Mean fell on one listener far too old to dance. Zoe received a thank-you letter from Johnny, a small watercolour of a cloud, with advice to paint a cloud a day.

Greg was born in 1952, Peter two years later. To enable me to do some painting I hired a series of children's nurses. Gerry was making good money. We had a bar in the lounge where I would prop myself on a stool, spread paper on the bar top and, with a glass paint-water, along with a glass of gin and amuse myself drawing until Gerry came home, sometimes late.



Zoe and Bill Ireland with the Nigros after the Arts Festival 'do' in 1954



Gerry in his red Austin Healy racing at the NZ Grand Prix at Admore 1956

Gina's birth was memorable. She was due in January 1956. Gerry wanted to see the Ardmore Grand Prix in Auckland but Gina refused to appear. While I was waiting for signs of labour, bags packed, and feeling like a beached whale, Zoe called in to see me. She summed up the situation and tactfully told Gerry to stop putting stress on his wife and that she had enough to cope with.

But I realised racing cars released his own feeling and frustrations – I used to hide his student drawings when he was drinking as he wanted to rip them up, and had done so as well as smashing pieces of his mother's china I had kept. The children became upset without arguing. I threatened to leave him and our small and cramped home. We compromised; he could carry on racing if we could build a new house with space enough for everybody. Gerry worked on the contemporary design, building a model to crystallize his ideas and help him site the house on the land to face the wonderful lake and have views from nearly every room. It was such an innovative and "new" house we became trendy and women's magazines were keen to write about it.

Peter Fenwick who had photographed the house for the New Zealand Home Journal, wrote his own impressions: "It is an experimental house too. Jan and Gerry .... have aimed at blending different textures in wood, stone, paint and fabric for the artistic effect, tiles are in coral and smoky black... Mrs Nigro's studio looks out on to the lake. The walls are of red brick and knotted pine. The plaster ceiling is an oyster shade with the merest tinge of palest green and a pale grey budgie happily chirps there in a cage. An easel stands ready with a much-used palette on the side table. Many pictures were stacked against the wall."

Gerry was becoming resentful as his work and life were taking him further from his painting. His larger family was making more and more demands. He tore up his drawings. He was drinking heavily. It was time to get away. We enrolled Greg, Peter and Gina into the Ranui Boarding School, Jon at Auckland Grammar with his cousin, Tony. We put the house on the market and went for a holiday to Japan. When we came home, we made the decision to try Australia again.

With one teenage, and three small children, plus a packing case of paintings, art books a few loved treasures, and a collection of early jazz records, we headed for the Gold Coast to look for a more relaxed, less claustrophobic, lifestyle; to the sun and the sea. In 1961 we settled at Palm Beach, on the Gold Coast, renting a house owned by Miss Cecilia McNally. The house had a primitive kitchen and an outside loo; but never mind, the lounge contained huge Chinese jardinières, coloured glass chandeliers, a worn Persian rug giving it a faded genteel look, quite wrong for the updated, jazzy tropical style the Gold Coast was beginning to develop. The front door opened on to the beach sand.

Gerry became sales manager for Volkswagen, travelling to Southport every day. I joined the Brisbane Contemporary Art Society and after meeting local artist, Laurie Paul, became an inaugural member of the Gold Coast Art Society. I drew from the nude at Laurie's home and sent two paintings, "The Entertainers' and 'Ancient Strata' to the Grafton Jacaranda Arts Festival, another two to the Contemporary Art Award.



Volkswagen dealership Southport, Gold Coast

Gerry was beginning to hate having to go out at night to sell cars. The other three children, too, were feeling restricted, having to keep shoes on all the time, having to think and not turn over logs after they excitedly came in once with a small snake to show me, and by not being allowed on the beach unaccompanied. After the freedom of Rotorua it seemed unfair. I knew I would miss the sounds of the kookaburras at first light in the trees along the river bank of the Nerang, the arrogant black crows who refused to move off the footpaths in the midday heat, the long curve of the glittering Gold Coast at sunset, the hinterland where we drove in search of cool relief on the hottest days, Cecilia and Eve and their stories. We packed, discarding drawing and painting leftovers.

In 1964 Gerry and his brother, Tom, went to Italy after an urgent letter had come from their Italian trustee. In 1946 they had inherited a share of many properties in the hill-top village of Viggiano in Southern Italy. Over the years' members of the Nigro family in New Zealand had visited the village in the hope of selling their share of the properties but there so many complications. Because of the dowry system, bits and pieces of the houses and land were given away as part of marriage settlements: a wine cellar in a house or pieces of land surrounding a vineyard, leaving no access. There is also a law in Italy that, if owners of property did not appear after a certain time to reclaim the property by, literally, putting their foot on it, the land reverted to the tenant.

Gerry returned from Italy, having made a tentative claim on his property although matters were still unresolved. He had made good use of his time while there, seeing masterpieces of Italian art, but it was the New York artists like Rothco, Josef Albers and all the colour-field artists whose work he saw on the way back, which gave him the incentive to begin painting again. He experimented with colour for two years before finding a format for his Island Series. I, too, became caught up with colour, painting bathers into flat areas of pure primaries. Albers was experimenting with his "Joseph's coat of many colours" at Yale University.

I liked his figurative descriptions; "To put colours side by side really excites me. They breathe together. It's like a pulse beat. There is always one colour which dominates. Greens are very jealous of one another. I like to take a very weak colour and make it rich and beautiful by working on its neighbour. What's gloomier than raw sienna. No look what I have done to it. As gentlemen prefer blondes, so everyone has a preference for certain colours and prejudices against others. This applies to colour combinations as well. It seems good to have different tastes. As it is with people in our daily lives, so it is with colour. We change, correct or reverse our opinions and this opinion may shift forth and back."

Gerry began to teach colour relationship and life drawings at the ASA in 1965. Louse Henderson and I held many weekend tutorials on painting and drawing as well as taking 10-day long sessions for those who wanted to immerse themselves.

When we first came to look at Waiheke Island in 1969 it was the boys, Greg and Peter, who decided on Onetangi Beach. They saw surfing possibilities. We were city drop-outs, on the move again. Gerry needed time to paint, to evolve his Island Series. He loved the 180-degree view of the water from our new home, looking out on Coromandel, Little Barrier, watching the light change from dawn to dusk. Many of his paintings are based on the interacting colours and moods of the sea. He liked the simplicity. Waiheke gave his life a more fundamental quality.

The first judge of the Benson & Hedges Art Award in 1968, Robert Haines, from the David Jones Gallery in Sydney, and a former director of the Queensland Art Gallery, sorted the entries into groups and picked the best of each particular style – abstracts, figurative, landscape and pop.



Gerry Nigro with an Island Series painting in 1978

The overall prize went to Wong Sing Tai for his 'Outside the Inside Out'. Gerry's 'Mannequins' and my 'Man on the Beach' were both accepted. Gerry, Gina and I decided on a six-month tour of the United Kingdom and Europe with a ten-day stopover in New York, and also with the intention of visiting Italy and Viggiano. Gina flew up from the South Island to join us.

In a four-hour stopover, in March 1976, I looked out at Honolulu through the closed doors at the airport gateway to a view of Diamond Heads framed by airport palm trees and jets swinging out, angled steeply towards the clouds. There was a glimpse of Tropicana – nicely groomed palms and fountains. The scent of frangipani wafted in. A long line of brown people passed by; "Only the poor immigrate through Honolulu."

Looking for the art galleries in New York, a cab driver explained, "You walk a block on park, you hit the Guggenheim, go right, pass over Fifth, you get to Madison and there they are, a block of them. You walk the whole block, all you want."



Jan and Gerry Nigro at home Waiheke 1994

He was right, it was "all you want". The New York world of art-folk art, eastern art, old art and brand-new art, enclosed in double plate glass doors with price tags in the thousands. We zig-sagged with enthusiasm at the top of the block and became weary at the bottom as prices dropped and names became more obscure. The next day we spent at the Museum of Modern Art, my first contact with the Impressionists on mass. Room after room of Leger, Mondrian, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Beckman.

We travelled around Europe using a Eurail Pass. It gave us great freedom in both the timing and direction of our exploring. We hurtled from here to there, sometimes on a whim. We went back to Naples six times. We pre-booked nothing, trusting to luck that a bed for the night would be found.

In the Nigro's hometown of Viggiano we walked into the plaza of Potenza with all eyes upon the strangers in town. Gerry had been in the hotel with his brother, ten years ago, and was recognised. Word went around, a Nigro had returned. We made an advance visit to Viggiano, the village of Gerry's family to let them know we would return later to continue the on-going argument over property. We arrived unheralded, in the rain. After a surprised, or should I say shocked, greeting, we were ushered inside the house. There was much shuffling and scraping of chairs before we all sat down and confronted one another while Alfredo, the only one who could speak English, was summoned from the bar up the street. We wandered up the hill to see the Norman castle which had been built over an ancient Greek temple.

Gerry showed us the rough stone wall where, on an earlier visit, he had noticed a hint of colour. Removing some stones, he revealed an extraordinary and very ancient Greek mural – a lion, with a female head, taking part in some pagan rite. He photographed it before the colour faded from being exposed to daylight. Earlier Gerry and I had made our trips to Australia by ship, in the Wanganella, the Strathmore, the Tamaroa, and then in TEAL flying boats, circling Lord Howe Island, landing in Rose Bay with connecting flights to Melbourne, or travelling on the Red Line Bus to Queensland, or burning up the Pacific and Hume Highways in our zappy '54 Austin Healey. Later I took a flight to Alice Springs and out to the Rock.



Jan and Gerry Nigro on Onetangi Beach, Waiheke

In 1974 both Gerry and I had one-person exhibitions in separate rooms at Holdsworth Galleries in Sydney. In 1981, leaving Gerry on Waiheke Island, I flew to Brisbane and shared Gina's flat in Abbot Street, New Farm. I sketched in New Farm park – its rose gardens, kiosk, band rotunda, clumps of tropical trees and, across the river, those typical wooden Queensland houses. The following year Gerry travelled around Queensland with me. We stopped in Townsville and saw the large Aboriginal protest mural.

I left Gerry on Waiheke again in 1983. Renting in Esplanade Road, Mt Eden, I went swimming in the Mt Eden pool and met some of the numerous artists who live in the area. Again, I took time out and headed back to Australia, this time to Sydney. Shona and I drove to Canberra to see the Contemporary Masters Exhibition. The National Gallery is impressive. I flipped over Max Beckman's 'The Beginning'. The Australian collection now included its own old masters – Nolan, Bod, Williams, Tucker, Balsam and Whiteley. The American collection had added more new old masters – Johns, Rauchenberg, Warhold, Oldenburg, Rothko and Stella. In the New Zealand section – McCahon only!

Gerry came over for a visit. Shona and I drove out to the airport to meet him but became so absorbed watching the emotional reunions and greetings for the newly arrived plane load of Lebanese that we missed him. We found him at the flat in Dee Why. He had taken the Manly Ferry from the city terminal. Together, we took long bus rides to the city, to art exhibitions, to Centre Point and Paddy's Market, and to Glebe to see how it had changed. We visited the Rocks, the parks, auctions, second-hand shops, and Kings Cross, and saw how it too had changed. Shona, Gerry and I made the pilgrimage out to Hill End, not far from Bathurst. Drysdale and Friend had established themselves there, searching for the truth of their Australia. Many artists including Brett Whiteley visited, stayed and painted.

Waiheke Island from 1969 to 1994 were Gerry's years. There he began and developed his Island Series. There was no way I could get him off the island. He was content with his painting, his endless quest for discovering the essence of colour relationships and applying it to the changing moods of the seas. He no longer felt any urgency to travel nor needed the stimulus of the different. Gerry wrote from home, "You will always tilt at artistic windmills". Pity I can't shove one so very slightly. I don't know why I persist in looking for support in impossible places; Australia for instance. I read what painters have to say about themselves and envy their articulation. I read what critics write and wish someone would write about me and the meaningful direction I am taking, using clever words and lovely 'isms'.

At some points Gerry had attempted to control my life, particularly during the early days in Rotorua, by stopping any contact with my male contemporaries in the arts. He was very possessive of the joy in our intimate and shared interest. It made me fearful to front up to gallery directors, art critics and fellow artists, and I still have difficulty talking to others about my work. It was also almost exclusive of the children and I can see now that perhaps that wasn't so good for them, with both parents always going on about the arts.

*There is no doubt that during the fifty-two years of marriage Jan and Gerry had very full and largely happy lives, as important New Zealand artists who have made a huge contribution to our artistic heritage.*

Island Series paintings in Gerry's Waiheke studio after his death in 1994. Photographed by Jane Zusters

