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## Denys Watkins, *Dynamo Hum*

For nearly fifty years Auckland-based Denys Watkins has been making the most wonderful art in a practice that refuses to sit still in any one medium.

A deadly serious artist with a playful edge, Watkins studied at Wellington Polytechnic School of Design in the early 1960s before heading off, like so many New Zealand artists of the time, to London. There he studied at the Central School of Art in 1967, and thence to the Royal College of Art until 1970. From 1980 to 2011 he was a senior lecturer at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland.

It would be a fool's errand to try and make Watkins fit in a box. *Dynamo Hum* at CoCA brought together a selection of his abstract paintings and each was an absolute delight; ebullient riots of joy and exuberance. The palette ranges from lush to lurid, almost always saturated and Milton Avery-sharp, but consummately judged and balanced with the composition and each other. What at first glance appears flat and hard-edged, on closer inspection turns out to be painterly and playful. The background plane will suddenly transition to a slightly different shade in a subtle joke on your retinas with a nod to Matisse and Rothko, or a geometrical shape softening to a blur, tipping the hat to Isamu Noguchi.

The action in the paintings ranges from geometrically constructivist to biomorphic and subtly alluding to nature. The shapes gravitate to the middle of the painting, often vertical, and abutted together or piled up like a piece of architecture. One could be forgiven for thinking of summer cocktails and avant-garde ikebana. Each composition has a distinct personality and sense of presence, almost like a portrait. A comparison might be made to Mark Braunias'

blobby characters and Len Lye's cartoonish primitivism, but the first thing that occurred to me were Roger Hargreaves' *Mr Men* and *Little Miss* children's books (and I mean that as a sincere complement) for their visual economy, whimsy, take no prisoners colour and formalism, and personable accessibility. It's impossible to share space with it and not smile.

*Dynamo Hum* is one of those incredibly rare things, an exhibition that will appeal to kids without insulting the intelligence of adult connoisseurs. It's full of fun.

Denys Watkins, *Dynamo Hum*, CoCA Toi Moroki, 66 Gloucester Street, 3 August – 16 September



Denys Watkins, (from left), *Fire Starter*, acrylic on linen, 2014, and *The Right Place*, acrylic on linen, 2014.

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