



Alberto Garcia-Alvarez, 2012-76, 2012, water-based mixed media on canvas, 3000 x 1670mm.
Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery

The everyday existentialist

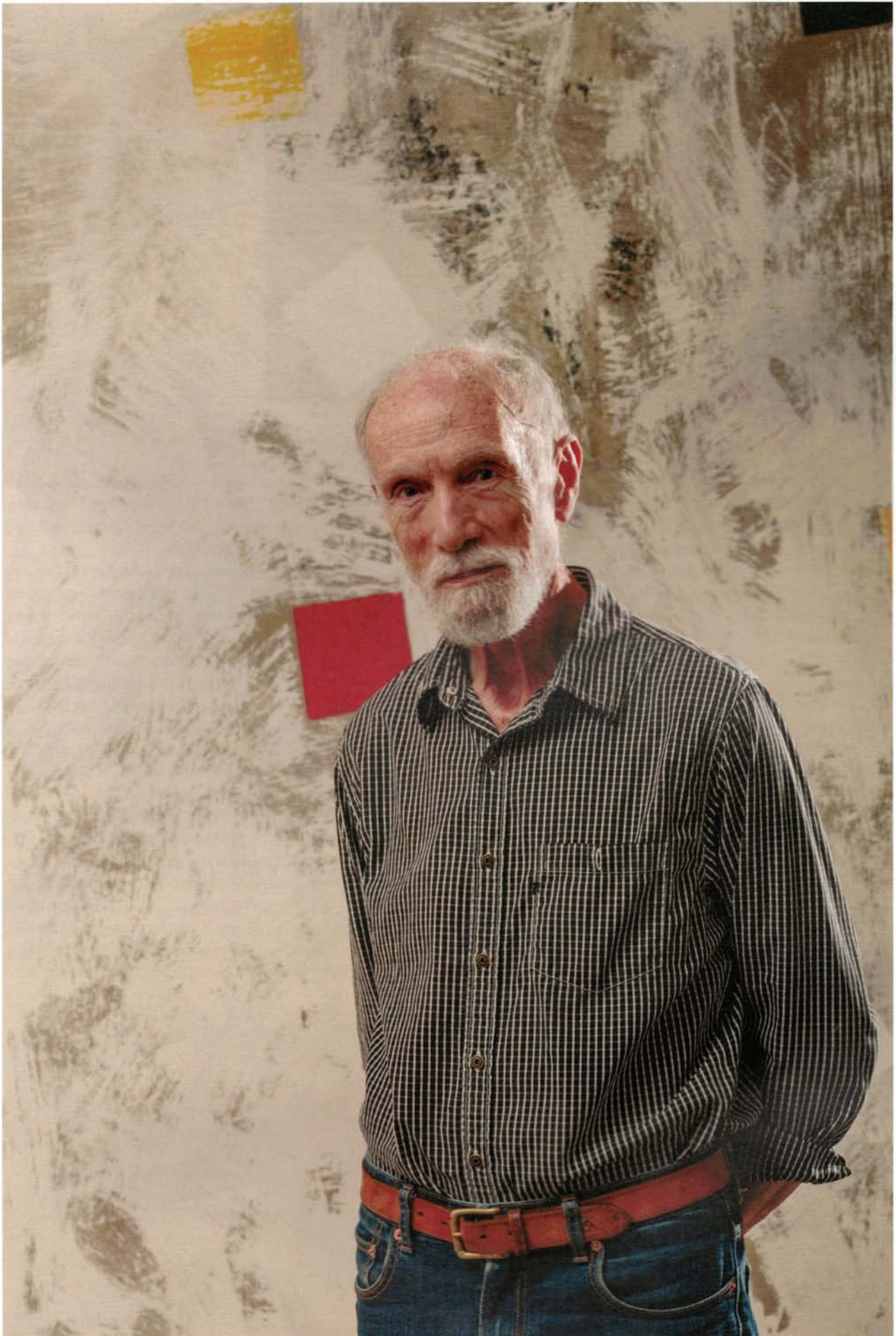
In the first of a new artist mentor series, Linda Tyler talks to Alberto Garcia-Alvarez and the students – among them Judy Millar and Stephen Bambury – who were so profoundly influenced by his intellectual rigour, philosophical curiosity and commitment to living the life of an artist in a culture more steeped in rugby than art.

Remembering his arrival at the Elam School of Fine Arts 40 years ago, the spry 85-year-old Alberto Garcia-Alvarez is still incredulous: “Garth Tapper gave me a tour, and as we went around the studios he would stop and talk to this student or that one, but only ever about rugby, never about art. I could not believe it.” For a Spaniard who’d won travelling scholarships to Paris and Italy after completing his MFA at San Jorge University in Barcelona and had been working for ten years in Californian art schools, it was a shocking introduction to a university art school.

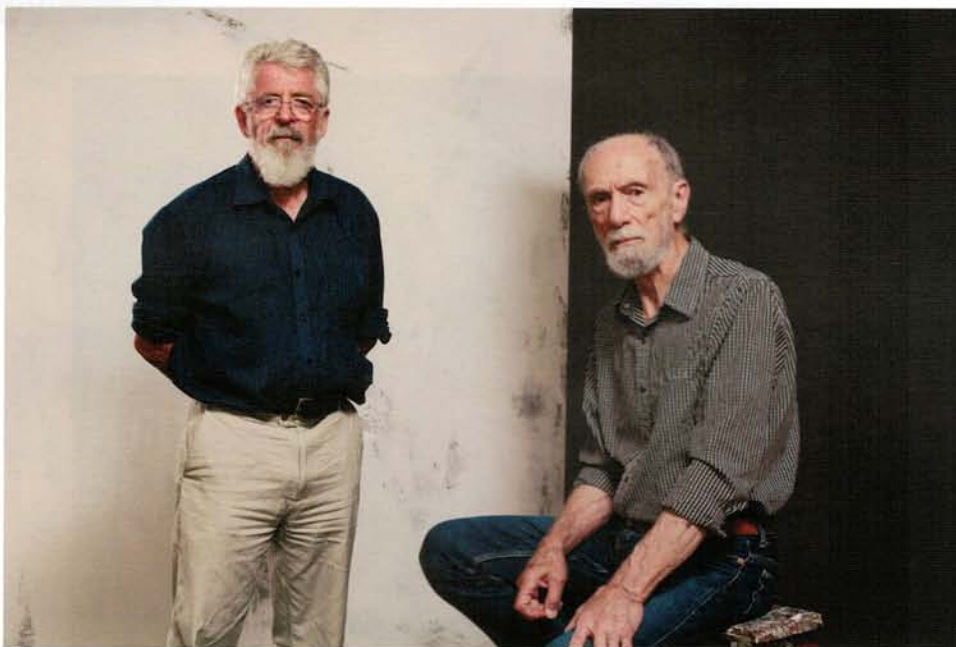
Recruited by Paul Beadle – first as a visiting lecturer, and then to set up a printmaking department and a masters’ programme – Garcia-Alvarez quickly distinguished himself at Elam as an intellectual. Lulled by tutors shuffling through slides of their own work, second-year student John Hoby recalls being invigorated when he finally heard an authentic position being articulated: “Alberto was the only one who had any grasp of a philosophy of art, or who had values, and a system for thinking about art”. Garcia-Alvarez’s quiet determination to ignore trivialities and explore creativity exerted a special gravitational pull. He mentored

a generation of art students who’ve followed him into a life dedicated to teaching and practising art as a way of life: John Hoby, Matt and Katherine McLean, Ian Jervis, Judy Millar, Graeme Cornwell, Cathryn Shine and Stephen Bambury among them.

For Bambury, Alberto Garcia-Alvarez embodied the traditions of Europe translated via America, a cultural inheritance that would destine him always to be an outsider to New Zealand culture while contributing to it. “Alberto stepped right into a raging conflict between provincialism and internationalism,” says Bambury. Battle lines were drawn, and for some, painting was co-opted into a campaign for national identity. Don Binney snorted derisively, believing his own depictions of native birds and hills had put him at the peak of his fame in the national consciousness when “that chap Alberto was still coming through the Customs Hall.” Such macho posturings were anathema to Garcia-Alvarez, who was “always for something, rather than being against something, with no axe to grind” according to Bambury, remembering his former tutor as a relentless advocate rather than adversary. Describing Garcia-Alvarez’s



Alberto García-Alvarez in his studio. Photo: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the University of Auckland



Left: John Hoby and Alberto Garcia-Alvarez in Garcia-Alvarez's studio. Photo: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the University of Auckland

Below: Stephen Bambury, *Insert Cross IC089321*, 2008, iron filings, acrylic polymer on aluminium panel, 795 x 795 x 100mm, signed, dated and titled verso. The University of Auckland Art Collection

work as Art Informel, a European Abstract Expressionism, Bambury says his old tutor's approach to making paintings gave him something to challenge and push up against with his own work while exemplifying the ideal of what it was to be an artist, by the way he lived his life.

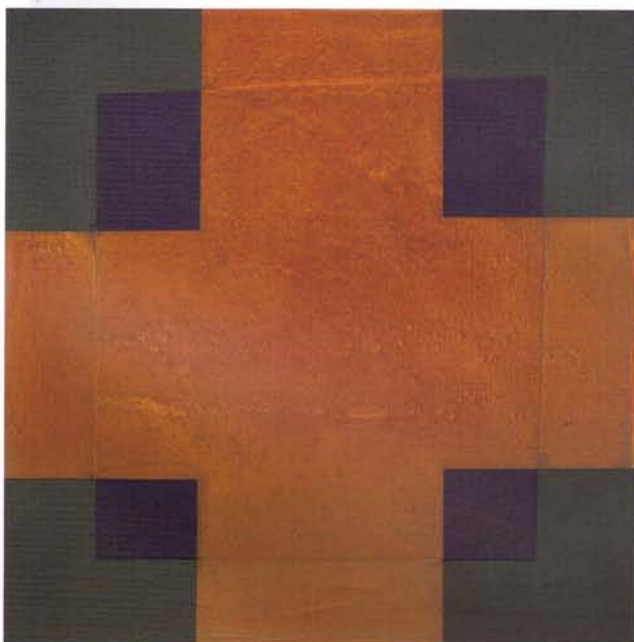
Judy Millar feels similarly beholden. She studied for her MFA in Painting with Garcia-Alvarez as her supervisor, graduating in 1982. "He was the only important person at art school for me," she says. "I wouldn't have stayed at art school if he hadn't been there and yet I almost left because of him. He made me stop painting for two weeks the day he said to me "You want to change the world. Art does not change the world. If you are making art to change the world, you should stop painting." (Garcia-Alvarez remembers that several of the other painting tutors wanted to suspend Millar's thesis presentation for the MFA and give her a low mark in studio presentation, while he consistently gave her the top mark.) Describing the experience of interacting

with Garcia-Alvarez as like having a course in existentialist philosophy, Millar felt that he did what he could to unsettle his students, encouraging self-sufficiency, so they wouldn't look to him for praise.

John Hoby got the feeling that Garcia-Alvarez believed that if you wanted to be a painter, you would be a painter whether you got reinforcement or not, "Alberto managed to convey to us that it would be a terrible thing to try and produce a painting to please someone". Millar remembers that "Alberto would come in to my studio and remark, "That's a good painting" and then the next day he'd look at the same work and say, "That's a bad painting" to demonstrate to me the arbitrary nature of 'good' and 'bad' in art. He taught me the most valuable lesson that painting is about far more than making an object."

Millar saved up three weeks' of her waitressing money to acquire her first ever artwork – a painting by Alberto Garcia-Alvarez from a tutors' exhibition. Ironic when, according to Bambury, "Alberto made a virtue out of never selling anything". New Zealand critics – T.J. McNamara, Peter Leech, Richard Dale – always gave an exhibition of his paintings careful consideration before remarking on the unpopularity of the style. In 1973, the *Auckland Star* subeditor marvelled at Alberto Garcia-Alvarez's uncompromising attitude with the headline "He doesn't mind if he doesn't sell". This indifference to the market was key: you found other ways to sustain yourself, such as teaching, to continue your practice.

Or perhaps you could invent things that were applications of art to everyday life, and they could be marketed. The photographic dark room on the ground floor at Elam was where Graeme Cornwell first encountered the tutor who would become his creative partner in devising games, sparking off each other's ingenuity and sense of humour. Cornwell immediately swapped from painting to printmaking so that he could be supervised by Garcia-Alvarez, who was rare amongst the art school tutors in that "he treated you as a person, and gave you access to his world". Cornwell now regales his students at the Nelson-Marlborough Institute of Technology with a story about



Right: Cathryn Shine and Graeme Cornwell in the printmaking studio at Elam School of Fine Arts

Below: Judy Millar, *Simon-Peter*, 2009, acrylic and oil on canvas, 800 x 2000mm. The University of Auckland Art Collection



the importance of spending time with art: "It was some installation, perhaps a Jim Allen or Bruce Barber exhibition, and I was walking around not getting it at all, and I bumped into Alberto, who asked me what I thought. I said I thought it was superficial, and Alberto looked me in the eye, and said quietly, "It is not the work that is superficial, Graeme". Now it seems to me that Alberto had innately and intuitively absorbed Roland Barthes. Artists put everything into their art, their whole life and soul, he said, and people walk past and dismiss it. Alberto taught me that you should try and enter the artist's world when confronted with an art object that you've never seen before. What you see and what you get out of it is dependent on what effort you put in. I try to teach this to my students now."

Garcia-Alvarez and Cornwell collaborated on the design of ten games called "Drons". Despite designing packaging, explanatory booklets and sending one of the games to World Games, they both got bored with the process of commercialisation, regarding the act of collaboration as more rewarding than pursuing patents and trademarks.

The Drons were the most concrete outcome of a playful relationship where each day's interaction might be premised

on an instruction left by one for the other. Cornwell remembers, "We would leave each other little messages, for example, "Today you will only look at the left eye of people you talk to," and we would create these three-dimensional doodles. We were always trying to surprise each other with humorous gizmos and quirky inventions that were quite useless but mentally stimulating." Judy Millar remembers one of these vividly: "Alberto came into my studio, and beckoned me silently to see a black polythene tent set up in his room. Inside it, I saw only a piece of white chalk suspended on a string – it was an absurd thing."

The magical potential of lithography similarly enthused both student and tutor, with Cornwell producing his MFA entitled *Ink, the rheology of lithographic ink*, in 1978, and setting up a lithographic printing workshop with partner Cathryn Shine immediately upon leaving art school. Cornwell also worked with Garcia-Alvarez using electron microscopy to develop imagery to produce aluminium lithographic plates. Garcia-Alvarez wrote a ground-breaking book on the outcome of the experiments, which is now in the Elam archive. Leaving New Zealand, Cornwell studied printmaking and painting at Reading University for two





John Hoby, *Blue Shapes*, 2012, acrylic on canvas
1000 x 800mm. Courtesy of the artist

years, and collected lithographic stones discarded from newspaper offices. Returning to Auckland in 1982, Cornwell opened Atelier lithographic workshop in Karaka Street, working as master printer for many New Zealand and Australian artists before pursuing a career in art education.

Cornwell credits Garcia-Alvarez with promoting the idea of a collaborative art practice, as do ceramicists Kate and Matt McLean. They were the two art students who he selected to work with him on the production of the University's ceramic mural, *Collective Mind*, sponsored by the New Zealand branch of the British company ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries). It still occupies a large niche four metres high by 11.5 metres wide on the Princes Street façade of the Maths and Science building at the University of Auckland. Comprising 300 cubes of six different sizes, which are placed side by side at different levels from the wall, the mural was fabricated by Kate and Matt McLean using local clays, some from the site of the university's Recreation Centre on Symonds Street. They formed the blocks in collapsible moulds, which they fired at between 1200 and 1300 degrees in a kiln at Outreach, Ponsonby. Those sections which would stand proud of the building and be most prominent were glazed in white, while the others kept the natural colours of fired clay.

Interviewed by the newspaper when the university's mural was unveiled in 1978, Garcia-Alvarez offered a typically enigmatic explanation of the patterning: "The Auckland mural, white and brown, has no symbolism... the brown reflects the earth, the white the outside world, exciting or dull depending on the day". To a different reporter he explained that he was seeking to maintain the simplicity of the building's façade and its rectangular elements; emphasise the different surface levels; limit the materials used to one, and harmonise the colours with the building. He was also providing an opportunity for his students to make the shift from art school to professional practice. It

was a major learning process, with many of the large blocks of clay warping in the kiln, and having to be remade. Kate and Matt McLean have continued a collaborative practice, producing many more ceramic murals, and are presently co-producing a work for the pedestrian and cycle overbridge at Hobsonville.

Ian Jervis remembers the Art Criticism paper that Garcia-Alvarez offered as an elective as inspirational, and also the way he solicited written responses to art practice as well as encouraging students to read magazines such as *Artforum*. He would also invite international artists – from France, California, Australia – to visit Elam and give workshops and lectures, all the while refreshing his own practice with three-yearly sabbaticals when he would study Islamic art in overseas collections. His phenomenal knowledge of world art history impressed all his students, and he would suggest appropriate artists for research to each member of his classes. Hoby was introduced to the work of the Spanish artists Antoni Tàpies and Joan Miro as well as the catalyst of the American Abstract Expressionist movement, Hans Hofmann. Hoby didn't see any exhibitions of Garcia-Alvarez's work until he left art school: "In his own work, it seemed to me that he used shapes and colours as facts, finding the drama in their interrelationships. Most artists use these elements for their psychological resonances, and Alberto does not, which is what makes him such an unusually good painter. Sometimes I will see the suggestion of an iconic composition in one of his works, a Velásquez or a Goya maybe, which reinforces his role as an outsider, the position of coming from elsewhere, which has its advantages in this culture." It bred in his students a conviction that what they were doing was part of a larger conversation, and Hoby left for New York with Stephen Bambury immediately after art school.

For many of those Garcia-Alvarez mentored, particular pronouncements have stayed with them. Looking at one of Stephen Bambury's student paintings, he once remarked "It's all about where those colours touch each other". "I didn't know what he meant at the time, it seemed the weirdest thing to say, but I paint colour, and when colour shifts that is where the energy is generated. He was right." Bambury remains profoundly grateful to Alberto Garcia-Alvarez for his mentoring, and sums up the sentiment expressed by all his former students in saying that he gains enormous strength from knowing that "on the other side of town in another studio there is somebody engaging in painting. Through his example of the daily practice of painting, he gives me confidence that the questions are indeed big enough and engaging enough to spend a lifetime attending to. There have been a handful of people in my life that I can say have that place. I think it was Robert Creeley who said 'it takes a village to read a poem'. Alberto is an elder for me in that village."