

A modest way with a

THE alleyway is so narrow you could easily miss it, between the takeaway bar and the grocer. Barry Lett is waiting on the footpath.

We emerge into a patch of sunlight behind the shops and he points to a brick building. It's one of Auckland's earliest bakeries. His studio is the downstairs part, two high-ceilinged, spartan rooms in which he hasn't yet spent a winter.

The formica table has two chairs. This essentially modest, private man — only one other person has visited his studio in the three months he's been working there — easily articulates his concerns and his life as an artist.

The first of these relates to his public image. People of a certain generation interested in art remember Barry Lett as a place, a specific green building in Victoria St.

The idea has its comic side, but if you're the man, wanting to move on, the wiser ego is something you'd rather shake off.

Nevertheless, the name is inscribed on a part of the city's history. It was not the first, but was one of the more enterprising. St. Auckland's earliest dealer galleries. For 10 years from 1985, the Barry Lett Gallery was a place of pilgrimage for art lovers who enjoyed the novelty of exhibition openings along with the paintings.

Lett comments that most of the painters who were serious at that time came up those stairs.

He had closed an earlier foray into art dealing, the Lip Town Gallery in Upper Queen St, in order to go into the joint venture in Victoria St, with Frank Low and Rodney Kirk Smith. Low now runs a gallery in Sydney, and Kirk Smith stayed in the "green building" which he ran as the RRS Gallery until last year.

Lett's 10-year involvement provided his training in the two brief periods of sitting in more conventional places of learning in Wellington and Auckland. It was, he says, a "terrible learning situation, a real learning apprenticeship," during which he learned by a process of osmosis, looking at artists' work and supporting them.

He sees it also as a time of learning about what he really wanted to do, which was to paint — a slightly strange thing to do, which was also the other public role is that of the sculptor who made the bronze sculpture on the outside wall of the Aotea Centre.



● Barry Lett, plus children, in the Fisher Gallery courtyard.

PICTURE: MICHAEL TUBBERTY

The surroundings are spartan, but the welcome is warm. PAT BASKETT visits Barry Lett's studio.

It's a contradiction Lett lives easily with. "I still consider myself a painter, but sculpture has been my main form of expression."

"Paintings is how he describes his two most recent works. They sit on his studio wall, unadorned by other than our four eyes. A feeling of what Lett calls inadequacy, which one senses has dogged a lot of his life, prevents him from showing them to anyone, yet. "Well," he says, "I suppose they're paintings. They're painted."

These wall pieces — assemblages of flat pieces of wood, like a collage — represent a coming together of the different ways in which he has worked. The most familiar of his styles is that of the Red Dancer and the Clouds

of the Aotea Centre, to give it the feeling of cutting through space like the prow of a waika.

Another semi-public work is a large mural at Nga Tapuwae College, Mangere, and it was while painting this, which he did at the college, that he conceived the idea for his "flat sculptures" of which the Red Dancer is one.

"While I was out there I have been increasingly interested in the wood carving that was going on. My initial work in wood was a response to that activity."

The dancer's open, lattice-work body echoes the delicate trellised shapes of Maori carving.

The story of the red man's growth is another part of local history. He became taller than Lett had anticipated and the only way to get him out of the studio was to take the landlady's condemnation, to remove a part of the roof. A photo shows the red man standing on the tin roof.

There is a certain irony in the event, in that the sculpture was designed to stand away from the wall

what they want to do. My imagery hopefully works on various levels so that people of varying levels in their understanding of art can connect at their own entry point into the work."

Intellectualisation has never been part of his approach to art. "I've always been behind with art theory. I purposely keep my distance from what theory is flavour of the month."

His own explorations into art have been guided by what he describes as a "bodily response." "I find that certain painters chemically affect you. You swoon, or grab the handrail."

Matisse has always moved him in that way, and recent paintings by the American Frank Stella. New Zealanders whose work he feels heads in a similar direction to his own are John Reynolds, Richard Killean, Pat Hanly and, of course, Colin McCahan, from whom he learned "a tremendous amount."

"Each artist is part of a family. Every now and

Lett gathered quartz and limestone from various South Island sites. He was aware of the marauding nature of this activity, and to quell such pang of conscience he would recite a special "karakia" he had learned.

Collecting the stones was, he says, the best part of the job. The initial excitement of starting each work was followed by a long slow labour of love, sticking each stone in place. The return to more painterly works is partly a reaction to that painstaking process.

"I want to get back to something that's easier." That may be true of the execution but the transition period involved working through things that were unresolved and experimental, a period that with hindsight can be seen as part of what every artist goes through if they're extending themselves.

Lett calls it "a healthy frustration."

The outcome bemuses him. One of the wall pieces is a juxtaposition of familiar figures, a central woman with a bird on either side whose wings give the aspect of an angel.

Two circular shapes develop the sense of religious iconography by resembling haloes.

Lett is almost apologetic. "I know," he says. "It's weird. I didn't mean it like that. I put it together over Easter. In a way I saw it happening and I thought, I don't want this, do I?"

"But when you start putting things together, what's necessary seems to come from them and you have to go along with it. So I accepted it."

Lett's working life is circumscribed by his need to share the canvas with his partner. Both believe that children shouldn't be separated from a parent until they're older. They also have a six-year-old.

Full week's work into half that time, spending from 9 until midnight, if necessary in the studio. There is no phone, no interruptions. The shops provide a distraction — the noise of the traffic.

Part of him values the quiet. So he craves Solitude here else tells him that the solitary nature of his work is "crazy."

Think of the way scientists work, he says. They present a paper and then get to the point where they're going to be a far healthier way to about things. But there is a friend who is also a painter, whose studio Lett visits and where work is disrupted. He says, "I've invited him here yet. But I will."