A modest way with art

HE alleyway is so narrow you could tween 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 highceiling, spartan rooms in which he hasn't yet spent a winter

The formica table has two chairs. This essen tially modest, private man has visited his studio in the three months he's been working there easily articulates his concerns and his life as an

The first of these relates to his public image. People of a certain gen eration 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 alter ego is something you'd rather shake off. Nevertheless, the name inscribed on a part of the city's history. It was not the first, but was one of the more enterprising of Auckland's earlies dealer galleries. For 10 years from 1965, the carry Lett Gallery was a lace of pilgrimage for art overs who enjoyed the dvelty of exhibition apenings, 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 Up 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 buildwhich he ran as the RKS Gallery until last year.

Lett's 10-year involvement provided his training as an artist, apart from two brief periods of sitting in more conventional places of learning in Wellington and Auckland.

It was, he says, a "terrific learning situation, a nice winding apprenticeship," during which he learned by a process of osmosis, looking at artists work, and supporting

He sees it also as a time of evasion, of putting off what he really wanted to do, which was to paint - a

slightly strange thing to say for the man whose other public role is that of the sculptor who made the Red Dancer on the outside wall of the Aotea Centre



and Aeroplanes which the Fisher Gallery has on show in its sculpture court

until Sunday. Less well known are Lett's very early paintings. Some are portraits. small framed canvases, and they stand, facing the wall, on the floor of his

THE wall pieces are also the offspring of another little seen painting he did for a mural at the First and Last Cafe and which he lifts out of a pile of debris

pieces of linen and stuck

wall. I guess the works don't want to be pigeon-

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 became increasingly ininitial work in wood was a

tice-work body echoes the

The story of the red part of local history. He became taller than Lett had anticipated and the only way to get him out of the studio was, to the landlady's consternation. to remove a part of the roof. A photo shows the red head slicing out of the

in the event, in that the sculpture was designed to stand away from the wall of the Aotea Centre, to give it the feeling of cutting through space like the prow of a waka

But I ett savs he doesn't mind that it is flat against the wall. "In the end you accept it as one of the compromises you have to make to feed the family. It's nice to have him

Lett is comforted to know that people are seeing the three similar sculptures of aeroplanes and clouds at the Fisher. They were made during a sojourn in Wellington when aeropianes would "pop out of the hills." The

They consist of classic cloud shapes — "like kids' squiggles" — above which aeropiane shapes are balanced. Their simplicity is part of Lett's theory about

art.
"I like the idea that things aren't too obscure to turn people off. But I'm not interested in presenting things that are too simple, so that they

PICTURE: MICHAEL TUBBERTY what they want to do. My imagery hopefully works sculpture, will stop you -

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

you. You swoon, or grab

Matisse has always moved him in that way,

and recent paintings by the American Frank

Stella. New Zealanders whose work he feels

eads in a similar direc-

tion to his own are John Reynolds, Richard Kil-

own explorations

the month.

the handrail."

again one painting, one

your family." In between those flat sculptures and Lett's present "paintings" of wood sculptures solidity and stature appear unrelated to either. They are figures large dogs, women with a fish or a baby in their arms - covered with what Lett describes as

you'll relate to it, and

recognise a member of

into art have been guided "skins of stone. by what he describes as a Spiritually they express his concern for guardian-ship of the land, or of bodily response. "I find that certain painters chemically affect

Their aesthetic enquiry was motivated by an exwas motivated by an ex-ploration of what he calls "materiality" — the nature of certain materials — and at a deeper level, of molecular

and cellular structure. The dogs — daunting guard animals — were constructed of a wooden armature with wire net-ting over it which was plastered with mortar, on which the skin of pebbles was stuck — each one individually beautiful

and limestone from various South Island sites. He was aware of the maraud ing nature of this activity. and to quell such pangs of conscience he would recite a special "karakia"

Collecting the stones s, 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 painterly works is partly a reaction to that pains taking process.

want to get back to something that's quicker. 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 he can see

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 nieces is a invitanceition of familiar figures, a central woman with a bird on either side whose wings give her the aspect of an

Two circular shapes develop the sense of religiiconography by

resembling halo 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?

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

ETT'S working life is circumscribed by the need to share the care of a two-year-old with his partner. Both be-lieve that children shouldn't be separated from a parent until they're older. They also have a six-year-old.

So he crams a full week's work into half that time, spending from 9 until midnight, if necessary, in the studio. There is no phone, no interrup-tions. The shops provide a buffer against the noise of Part of him values the

place and the time. Something else tells him that the solitary nature of his work is "crazy. Think of the way scien-

tists work, he says. They present a paper and then it is talked about. That's got to be a far healthier way to go about things. But there is a friend

who is also a painter, whose studio Lett visits and where work is dis-cussed. "I haven't invited him here yet. But I will."

consider myself a painter, but sculpture has been my

ents him from show-

ing them to anyone, yet. "Well," he says, "I sup-

pose they're paintings. They're painted."

semblages of flat pieces of

represent a coming to-gether of the different

ways in which he has

The most familiar of his styles is that of the Red

Dancer and the Clouds

wood, like a collage

worked.

These wall pieces - as-

main form of expression "Paintings" is how he describes his two most recent works. They sit on his studio wall, unsullied by other than our four eyes. A feeling of what Lett calls inadequacy, which one senses has dogged a lot of his life,

and unrolls on the floor.
Its repeated motifs were painted on separate

"I snent a while stretch. ing myself off the wall into three-dimensional person, and now it's the other way. I'm back to the Another semi-public

terested in the wood carving that was going on. My response to that activity. The dancer's open, lat-

delicate fretted shapes of Maori carving.

There is a certain irony

works were first exhibited

become cliches.
"Each artist decides

leen, Pat Hanly and, of course, Colin McCahon, from whom he learned "a tremendous amount. Each artist is part of a family. Every now and