



Artist James Ross with his work *Scan (for Jean Arp)*.

HERALD PICTURE / GLENN JEFFREY

Scanning the brain

James Ross explains to PAT BASKETT his latest exhibition, which he describes as a cross between cave paintings and more sophisticated high modernism.

ARTIST James Ross reaches up and removes an aluminium-framed rectangle of yellow from the wall. You see, he says, without it the work loses something.

He's right. *Scan (for Jean Arp)* is reduced to a rather pretty set of squiggles on the wall; the yellow gives it tension, something for the eye to bounce off.

"It's one of those checks I do — asking myself how essential certain elements are," he explains, replacing it.

Ross is the arch intellectual whose more recent work consists of elliptical hemispheres that appear to emanate from an interior space of vertiginous intensity. Walking into the Fisher Gallery, where his show *Aide-memoire* runs until August 18, one is confronted with a less daunting set of images. Ross has moved on.

The invitation to exhibit at the Fisher allowed him to indulge himself in a way that's less possible in a dealer gallery. He hopes these works, which are painted directly onto the walls, and which he describes as a cross between cave paintings (he's seen some at the famous sites in France), and more sophisticated high modernism, will stimulate viewers to make their own associations and meanings.

It helps to know what the "hooks" are, to have explained the "aides-memoire" that point the way to possible meanings. Ross is affable and articulate and as we talk the arcane becomes translucent.

It's still very cerebral stuff, either

directly so because of some of the delicate tracery on the wall is derived from Ross' study of brain scans, or figuratively, because the images are a loose transcription of the "Rorschach blot" — a tool devised by the Swiss psychoanalyst of earlier this century.

Rorschach used an ink blot as the starting point for his analyses — provoking his patients to project themselves into the shapes and to describe what they saw. Ross sees it as a parallel for the process of communication between artist and viewer. Artists, he says, ask people to empathise with and project themselves into the artist's mind.

It's happening more and more, he feels, this expectation on the part of the artist, that the viewer will use the painting like the Rorschach blot. The content, or subject of a painting now leaves room for some sort of a dialogue between artist and viewer, and this requires a certain amount of responsibility on the part of the (formerly) innocent art-lover.

Nothing, therefore, looks like what it is. Allusion is preferred over statement. Art, Ross offers, is becoming more and more enigmatic, less capable of comprehension.

But here are some more signposts to guide the way through his own images.

One work is called *Genetic Code* and the viewer could be forgiven for taking the crayoned sketches as stemming from images of cells or chromosomes. But the title refers to the metaphorical genetic code of being an artist — the

heritage and the traditions which inform an artist's work. In this case, Ross is paying homage to a personal idol — the French painter Jean Arp who died in 1966 — whose amoeba-like shapes overlay the sketches and also feature in the work called *Somn*.

Then there's the barely decipherable fingerprint — Ross' own — which at times merges with the lines of the brain-scan or the Rorschach blot. It's like a barcode, a mark unique to each.

In one painting the lines of the fingerprint look more like the ripples on a pond and Ross would have the viewer make the connection with Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection, and who is considered to be the first painter. Burred deep in the genetic code is the message that all art comes from within.

The exhibition's first and last works are both called *Memento Mori* which means a reminder of death, the symbol of which is classically a skull. But unless you knew what to look for you wouldn't find it. It's hidden in the slender ellipse that's painted onto perspex and overlays the drawing. (Try bending your head and slanting your gaze up the shape starting at the bottom).

The title could refer to the transitory nature of the works — Ross describes them as "fugitive" — and the exhibition could be seen as a metaphor for existence. After Sunday, the formal elements will be unscrewed and the walls washed clean.

Not that that's necessarily the end. Each work exists as a maquette in the form of a transparency which Ross projected onto the wall in order to do the drawings.

It's a technique he's used to paint other smaller-scale works directly onto the walls of people's homes and there's a cafe in Wellington that will be hard to renovate.