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Author, poet, painter, senior curator (City Gallery Wellington 1997-2008)

Prime Minister's Award for Literature (non-fiction), 2013

Honorary patron, Easter Southland Art Gallery

Honorary patron, Futuna Chapel Trust, Wellington

Arts Foundation Laureate 2013

**Contact:**



In my role as an artist, writer, art curator and as patron of the Eastern Southland Art Gallery, I have noted the pervasive, inspirational force of the Central Otago region on countless creative practitioners who have worked there. The Dunstan Range and Thomson Gorge have become a point of particular focus in recent times—moreso now that they are under threat. The gorge lies near the middle of the Central Otago region—it is a place of many kinds of significance: geological, cultural and—increasingly in the present—artistic.

Anyone who has had the privilege of travelling along the top of the Dunstan Range will know what a powerful presence that landform is—majestic, but also bracing and challenging. Thomson Gorge is the only pass/gorge through the main body of that surreal, existentially-charged, other-worldly range. A corridor of verdant green slopes, the gorge is supported by a healthy river. With its strong sense of the pre-European past (it was once a travel route for early Māori) and its ongoing viability as a site for art-making, the gorge feels very close to the heart of the Dunstan Range. As well as attracting cyclists, campers and environmentalists, the journey across through Thomson Gorge has been made in recent years by numerous photographers, filmmakers, painters, writers and others. In making art about the location, these artists have underlined and enhanced its place in the national psyche and soul.

Any alteration made, or harm done, to Thomson Gorge will affect the entire Dunstan Range and the province beyond. The gorge, while being singularly remarkable, does not exist in isolation. In the minds of artists, as indeed it is in Māori tradition, Central Otago is a place flowing with energy and

interconnection, with dynamic relationships between earth, sky and water.

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Composer Douglas Lilburn (1915—2001) spent many summers in Queensbury, on the far side of the Clutha River, facing Thomson Gorge. Numerous compositions by Lilburn were inspired by the view from Queensberry, the pervasive atmosphere of the region, and his many walks and drives in the surrounding lands. It was Lilburn who commissioned Rita Angus to paint her 1953-56 masterpiece *Central Otago* (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa collection). As I wrote in the 2008 Te Papa publication *Rita Angus; Life and Vision*, that painting embodied ‘a shared awareness of the New Zealand landscape, a mutual point of artistic origin and destiny’.



The view from Queensberry towards the Dunstan Range is an elemental proposition, stretching for many kilometres—golden in summer, a dark brown-grey in winter, often snow-clad. The view from Queensbury is one of the many aspects of the summertime province encapsulated by Rita Angus’s *Central Otago*.

Importantly, Central Otago does not have a central ‘feature’ (ie. there is no Mitre Peak)— it is a multi-dimensional, many faceted region. It is an ‘environment’ with a dazzling array of moods, forms, iconic moments; there are remarkable transitional spaces, rhythms and juxtapositions within its natural forms. Accordingly, our greatest artists (including McCahon, Doris Lusk, Michael Smither, Grahame Sydney and

others) have long been drawn to in the region. Time of day and seasons of the year play upon its surfaces, at times gently, at other times violently.

Rita Angus's painting is a key work in understanding the region: Central Otago is a matrix of mountain ranges, waterways, ridges and other features. The region has an overall pattern, shape and texture which are more important than any singular moment or view (that said, within her wide-reaching, holistic vision, Angus does offer such precise details as the famous tree beside Lake Wanaka; the church at Naseby...) If you dramatically change one part of this landscape, you change the character of the whole, and its collective life-force, its *mauri*. Just as the flora and fauna of the Dunstan region are vulnerable, so too is the overall shape and essence of the region.

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Central Otago is an emblematic and symbolic place. It represents an escape from the stress and noise of the industrial/commercial world. Therein lies its power and great virtue in the broader scheme of things. Like eco-tourism and cycle touring, artistic and cultural activities are well suited to the region. When done well, low-impact activities can have a nurturing, restorative and even enhancing role. Therein lies the region's long-term, sustaining and sustainable future.

When the proposed mine was announced, there was an immediate, unanimously negative response from the country's literary community. Dozens of our leading poets contributed poems in protest, many of which were published on the widely viewed 'Poetry Shelf' website, where they are still accessible:

<https://nzpoetryshelf.com/2025/10/23/poetry-shelf-protest-series-reading-poetry-to-rare-lizards-poetry-in-defence-of-the-environment/>

A poetry reading titled 'Mining is the Pits' was held to a capacity audience at Central Stories, Alexandra, on 22 November 2025. The reading featured Michael Harlow, Bridget Auchmuty, Jillian Sullivan, David Eggleton, Richard Reeve and current Poet Laureate Robert Sullivan.

All of these writers have firsthand experience of Central Otago, many of Thomson Gorge. Similarly, for photographers, cinematographers and others, places like the Dunstan region, whether lived in long-term or visited, are their lifeblood. Creative photography in the province has been there at least as long as the gold industry (with the much celebrated Burton

Brothers making a significant record of both Central Otago landforms and the somewhat messier business of mining in the 1860s). Numerous iconic photographs have been produced in the region by the likes of Tom Field, Laurence Aberhart, Peter Peryer, Bruce Foster, Robin Morrison and others.

Painters including Trevor Moffitt and Nigel Brown have explored the melancholy, often tragic reality of Central Otago's goldmining past. Grahame Sydney's paintings are a life-long, epic account of engaging with the region. His work frequently features the Dunstan Range, beneath which he has lived for decades. The same could be said of Oturehua-based Brian Turner's oeuvre as a poet and memoirist—or the landscape meditations in poetry and prose of Gillian Sullivan. Numerous other writers, from James K. Baxter to the young Annabel Wilson of Wanaka have been profoundly moved by the place.

Major film projects such as Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* and Peter Jackson's 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy have made extensive use of the relatively untouched nature of the Central Otago hill-country, including (in the case of 'Rings') Thomson Gorge. Choreographer Sue Healey (of Tainui descent, but for many years Sydney-based) is now living mainly in Central Otago, at the foot of the Dunstan Range, not far from Thomson Gorge. She devised a short dance which was filmed by Bruce Foster in the gorge in October 2025. A minute-long excerpt can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/1124711335>

Visual artists including Neil Driver (Clyde-based), Martin Hill (Wanaka-based) and Eric Schusser (from Alexandra) have been vocal opponents of the mine, which they see as a threat to the subject of their art and an affront to their values, as artists with a strong environmental focus.

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Others actively involved in opposing the mine include sculptor Elizabeth Thomson, and painters Michael Shepherd, Euan Macleod and Jenna Packer. Later this year Ugly Hill Press is publishing *Tailings; Central Otago* by Bruce Foster and Gregory O'Brien. Some sample pages from that book are attached to this document. A section of that book pertaining to the Thomson Gorge mining proposal was published on 'Newsroom' last November:

<https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/11/12/on-plans-to-create-a-goldmine-near-cromwell/>

The pages attached evoke the Thomson Gorge area and the adjacent deserted settlement of Drybread.

As a final note: The importance of Central Otago as a heritage ‘night sky’ destination is alluded to in a recent collaborative painting by Euan Macleod and Gregory O’Brien. Based on a view from Rise & Shine valley, the work questions humanity’s intrusive, self-aggrandising tendencies. The second collaborative painting below responds to the exploitative and environmentally reckless nature of the mining industry, its inherent risks and the toxic residue it leaves behind.



*Two-part invention with illegal communications tower*, 2026, Euan Macleod and Gregory O’Brien



*The good citizen of Bendigo, 2026, Euan Macleod & Gregory O'Brien*