

Raw Material

In his landmark essay, *Neo-materialism*, Joshua Simon argues that every work of art is first and foremost a commodity.¹ In Tim Wagg's collectively titled series, *Working towards meaning*, McCahon's thirteen chapel windows are depicted as such, as they are conserved, framed and installed for an exhibition.

A commodity in essence is raw material, a product created in service of a larger system. In this context, the exhibition is the system that these windows serve, as the windows play their part in the narrative of *A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*.² For Simon, an exhibition is a framework — a form of seeing that allows an encounter with the art object as commodity.³

Beginning with *Working towards meaning (519_0280.MXF)*, the tenth window is lifted from its case and evidence of this material transformation can be seen. In this image, the value and symbolic power of the window is temporarily muted as it is carefully lifted out of its case by Wagg and a colleague. The iconography of the grapes and wheat depicted on this window by McCahon are unable to be made out as the window is unpacked and prepared for its frame, which can be seen in *Working towards meaning (519_0236.MXF)*.

Through this process of material commodification, each window is returned to its former glory. In *Working towards meaning (977_0024.MXF)*, they are seen having made the journey to the wall, which in turn permits the windows an additional layer of symbolic power through the very framework of an exhibition.

Throughout *Working towards meaning*, ideas of subjecthood are challenged. Take, for example, *Working towards meaning (519_0212.MXF)*. In this image, Wagg is present as a ghost-like reflection on the second window, which features a candle and visible text: *Lumen de Lumine*, or 'light from light'. At no point is your eye absorbed in the work of McCahon, which takes up the entire foreground of the image. The subject of this image is very clearly Wagg, highlighted by a pair of blue nitrile disposable gloves.

Establishing the subject of *Working towards meaning* creates a better understanding of the object of the work too, which is not necessarily the chapel windows. The raw file prints, Tyvek as canvas, MDF floor coverings, and the omnipresent blue glove in almost every image point to the object of each work being work itself. The labour that surrounds the history of art in the form of production is the most significant object in *Working towards meaning*. The largest work in the series, *Working towards meaning (A7300142.arw)*, emphasises this by breaking form on the wall. Almost like a punctuation mark, it encourages you to move your eye beyond the standard 1.5m line of sight and consider the entire exhibition space as the object of Wagg's interest.

Presented in Te Uru's most transient gallery, *Working towards meaning* is an exhibition that explores the liminal space between art and display, playing with ideas of commodification, subject and object. Being Wagg's McCahon House post-residency exhibition adds an additional layer of scrutiny, as Wagg occupied McCahon's space — his 1950s Titirangi home — for three months in 2019 before working on the chapel windows at Auckland Art Gallery.

Chloe Geoghegan
Curator | Kaitiaki Wakaaturanga

1. Joshua Simon, "Neo-materialism," Part I: The Commodity and the Exhibition" in *e-flux Journal* 20 (November 2010), <http://e-flux.com/journal/20/67643/neo-materialism-part-i-the-commodity-and-the-exhibition/>
2. *A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 10 August 2019 – 27 March 2020.
3. Simon, "Neo-materialism".

TIM WAGG: WORKING TOWARDS MEANING

11 July – 13 September 2020

LEFT TO RIGHT

Working towards meaning (519_0280.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (519_0236.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (519_0214.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (519_0187.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (519_0212.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (A7300142.arw), 2020

612x412mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Working towards meaning (977_0024.MXF), 2020

421x228mm, digital print on Tyvek, aluminium frame

Wagg acknowledges the generosity of Chris Dudman and Bridget Hackshaw, who provided the raw digital files from their documentation of the chapel window installation at Auckland Art Gallery in 2019.

The title *Working towards meaning* is taken from McCahon's 1972 written reflection of his time working on architect James Hackshaw's Upland Road Convent Chapel of the Sister of Our Lady of the Missions in Remuera over the summer of 1965 and 1966. More information about the chapel windows can be found in the publication *Working towards Meaning: The Restoration of Colin McCahon's Chapel Windows* (2019), available to download for free on the Auckland Art Gallery's website.