

THEGUIDE

The arts -

The Net

One for all, all for one

VISUAL ARTS: Five painters have supported each other for more than a decade since their Elam days. Arts editor Linda Herrick looks at why that's so unusual

When artist Jacqueline Fahey was teaching first-year painting at the Elam School of Fine Arts in the early 90s, it was the norm for most of the painting class to be female. But when she was asked to check out who should go into the class of '91, "they assumed I'd come back with a list of women, especially considering my feminist tendencies," she recalls.

"But a lot of the women who wanted to come in were vacillating. It was like, yeah, they liked printmaking, too, or film, or blah blah blah, and I felt at the time that paint language was being forgotten with all this multimedia thing."

And so, Fahey included on her list the names of four young men — Patrick Malone, Adrian Jackman, Peter Christian and Grant Whibley — "the boys" as she calls them, chosen by her and approved by then-painting department head Bob Ellis because "they were the ones who were the keenest".

So far, so fairly ordinary. The difference between these "boys" and many of their contemporaries is that they all stuck with painting, took their masters degrees, became artistic allies and great mates — and continue to be so to this day. They have carried on working as painters over the past decade and between them have won numerous awards and exhibited steadily. They will all take part in a group exhibition opening next week called *Under the Influence*; the title says as much about their friendship as it does about their work.

"I found it unusual that these boys became allies, yes indeed," says Fahey, who remains their good friend.

"I think it was such a good instinct for survival. They realised they'd have to have a special way of life to survive as artists in our society. For that, you need a group — you can't do it on your own. In the company of others who share their beliefs they don't feel like an alien in an uncomprehending world and they will start to feel there is a future for them."

Don't forget, Fahey adds, that many fine arts graduates don't continue with their work. It is simply too hard to survive and "that becomes so hard on their spirits they give it up".

The boys could have been dubbed the Gang of Four but the later addition of another member, Calvin Collins (brother

>> Exhibition

■ **What:** *Under the Influence*
 ■ **Where & when:** Wallace Trust Gallery, 305 Queen St, Jul 23-Aug 11

of theatre designer Tracey), means they are now more like the Tight Five.

"I didn't meet them until 1993, when I'd done my bachelor of fine arts and been overseas, then came back to do my masters," says Collins, who has been a Wallace Trust Art Awards finalist several times and was artist in residence at the Southland Museum and Art Gallery in 1997.

"When I met them, there was real energy going on in the studio. When I'd been to Elam before, there were people coming in at all times of the day to work, but these guys — they were in at 9am and working long hours till late."

Says Patrick Malone: "We were all enthusiastic and then Kalvin came in when we were in our third year. Bob Ellis encouraged us to go and see him — he said he'd just come back from New York and he'd be full of ideas. You'd go to his studio and there were books, magazines, posters and there was a real professionalism about it. He was full of fresh ideas he'd brought back to New Zealand, so we took on those new ideas."

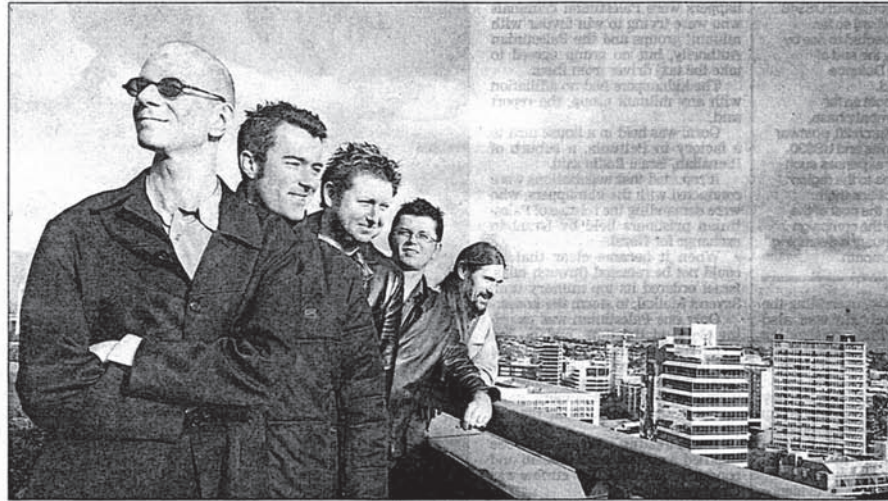
Being such close friends, can they honestly critique each other's work? Complete with each other? "Very much so," is the chorus.

"Rapport is very important," says Grant Whibley, who also has a show at the Milford Galleries until July 21, and received the Wallace Emerging Artist Award last year.

"Without it there's no discussion about the work, to push your ideas forward, so we did need that sort of competitive aspect of the work. We were involved in pushing each other in terms of ideas and in terms of practice."

Patrick Malone, who won the 2001 Goldwater Award and was a finalist in last year's Wallace Trust Awards, says it was significant to their work that they entered Elam at a pivotal time.

"Our first year at Elam was the last



GANG OF FIVE: (From left) Peter Christian, Adrian Jackman, Calvin Collins, Grant Whibley and Patrick Malone — artistic allies and great mates, they depend on each other for support and criticism.

PICTURE / NICOLA TOPPING

year when they had a review and doubled the size of the input in a commercial sense rather than fostering a small group of artists through. There was a period of phasing out the old guard — Bob Ellis, Dick Frizzell, Philippa Blair and of course Don Binney — the leading artists of the time."

"Don Binney was the last to leave," says Adrian Jackman, a six-time Wallace Trust Award finalist and merit winner of last year's Goldwater. "We finished our masters and he finished as well. When he says in his book [*Don Binney: Nga Manu/ Nga Motu-Birds Island*, by Damian Skinner] that he used to go to Elam and hide — we got him out of that a bit I think. We keep in contact with a lot of those old tutors."

Peter Christian (yes, also a Wallace Trust finalist, from 1998) recalls that they

practically lived in the notoriously decrepit wooden Elam studios while they were studying there.

"There were blowflies in the studio because we had possums in the walls and dropping through the roof. And it always amazed me the buildings never went up in smoke. You had to have the heater on 24 hours a day, they were so cold."

Whibley says he's still surprised "we've stuck all the time to our practice of painting".

"The key element is total belief in what we do," adds Malone.

Whibley: "I think Jacquie Fahey saw a long time ago that we had that ability to paint. She looks for that visual intelligence."

"And she actively encouraged us to try anything and everything and do it as

much as possible," adds Jackman.

The work in the upcoming *Under the Influence* is "like a conversation" between them, with works from the past 10 years as well as new paintings. Also contributing will be Anthony Clark, Tracey Collins, Jessica Douglas, Lisa Rushworth and Shruti Yatri.

"It's beginning to happen for them," says Fahey. "The major thing is that past 'groups' of artists would have their manifestos and they were always sticking to theory as if it was a set thing and somebody was a top dog with a theory we all had to adhere to."

"But this is very different. This is much more fluid. I don't doubt the boys are influencing each other but they're doing it in a much more equal way and it's an organic process."