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Glorious Dreams

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery once again has produced a snapshot of current attitudes and gestures from the melting pot of the national visual art scene. The third in a series of summer survey shows of contemporary New Zealand art, *In Glorious Dreams* takes a sideways glance. Instead of growing larger and more inclusive than its predecessors, this exhibition narrows its focus to concentrate on the recent work of just 15 women artists. *In Glorious Dreams* enables audiences to see series of works by the various artists, and allows the Gallery to present works in the context of an artist's overall pattern of production. The exhibition recognises the current creative strength of female artists and mixes some more established names with young talent, taking a plunge into the cool aesthetics of a post-everything culture.

In the past, women's art shows often have had something to prove. By its gender restriction, this exhibition too threatens to raise thorny issues of feminism. Compared with exhibitions of the 1970s and 1980s, which often attempted to be 'definitive' or 'essentialising' in identifying trends and patterns related to gender in women's art, *In Glorious Dreams* is a sampler box of "art by women" - just that. To argue that there is a conceivable difference in the two phrases may be a semantic technicality, but the very idea of 'women's art' implies that there are distinct bodies of work that can be defined in relationship to gender. Today, many artists eschew the glib label of 'woman artist' and its hint of cultural stereotype.

This exhibition recognises and speculates on the shifts in focus in contemporary art practice, with particular reference to women artists working in a diverse range of media and styles. None of the artists explicitly addresses feminist issues here. Collectively, their field of enquiry is vast and includes ideas about the past, the present and the future that are topical within the many dimensions of global culture. Rarely, in this exhibition is a subject approached as definitive. Rather, a general characteristic of *In Glorious Dreams* is the works' speculative and open-ended nature.

Megan Dunn's re-cast music videos, with video footage grafted from commercial sources, delve into the fantasy of childhood Utopia, fairytale and romantic, Gothic excess. The imaginative dream world is one theme that unites the exhibition. Anne Noble's serial documentation of childhood, of which this exhibition presents

only a fraction, reveals a startling development of self-awareness in front of the camera. By comparison, expatriate Kathryn McCool's dressing-table tableaux allude to the contrived stereotypes of 'girly' aesthetics. Her soft-focus prints of deer and horses share imagery with Dunn's clips from the childhood classic *Watership Down*. Their treatment and sense of obsession, however, differs radically.

The sense of a faded, distorted or failed Utopia pervades a number of works in the exhibition. Stella Brennan's self-confessed interest in "crappy utopias" made from the packaging detritus of corporate and consumer culture is a primary example. Like Brennan, Ann Shelton is preoccupied with urban spaces. Her unpopulated photographs capture the tarnished lustre of decadence in urban and vaguely sexualised interiors. Lisa Crowley's monumental images of 'sublime' Nature are in stark contrast to the work of Brennan and Shelton, but again create a shift in perception of tried and trusted Utopian ideals.

An undercurrent of gender considerations emerges in Madame and the Bastard's photographs, where the concealed identities of the artists and the works' protagonists are transposed. The more salient issue here, however, is the nature of identity itself and its relationship to historical models for representing the world. So too with the nebulous figure of L Budd et al whose artistic identity is a shifting ground of associations, feints and deferrals. Here, the quotation from existential or metaphysical philosophy texts elicits a culture of a failed, or doomed, Utopia in a global intellectual field that is portrayed at the point of crisis.

The focus on the interior world of the subject and its relationship to prevailing models of culture is not the exclusive preserve of these artists. Affinities can be seen with the current work of many male artists. The consistency of the theme expressed in *In Glorious Dreams*, however, is of note. The references to dreaming are multiple, from the fairy tale preoccupations of childhood, to the metaphysical questions of existence; from the awe-inspiring landscape of tourism and recreation to the vacant spaces of urban renewal. Collectively, these artists map an uneasy terrain between aspiration and failure.

Gregory Burke and Hanna Scott

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Hannah Beehre

born 1977, Rotorua

Beehre's paintings don't quite establish a relationship to a known language, yet they retain an essence of something that is nevertheless familiar. What she depicts within the frame alludes to fragments of computer code, 'nu' urban aesthetics and the cool rhetoric of commercial branding. It's as if the works capture a mutating language, one that floats as a bunch of free signifiers, allowing the 'play' of text to run rampant.

This fast-paced, post-human language is nevertheless rendered by human hand to be meditated on as painting. Conforming to neither the standards of abstraction, nor the rigour of figuration, Beehre's paintings skim across the surface of recognition, smudging together pastel toned abstraction and referential signs. Sally Ann McIntyre notes, "This is art reflecting back its own image as seen through the eye of a culture fixated on the escapism of fashion. Look too closely beyond the time frames of TV attention span, and the ragged edges of an always-already drab reality intrude on the picture."¹

The aesthetics evoked here trace a trajectory of fashion. While alluding to street identity, Beehre's paintings eschew sensible readings, appearing simultaneously dreamlike and cybernetic.

¹ High Street Project web-site 2000



Untitled acrylic, board 1200 x 1200 courtesy the artist

Untitled acrylic, board 1200 x 1200 courtesy the artist

Untitled acrylic, board 1200 x 1200 courtesy the artist (illustrated)

Untitled diptych: acrylic, board 2400 x 1200 courtesy the artist

Stella Brennan

born 1974, Auckland

Brennan's works employ the castaway stuff of urban life. The detritus of computer packaging becomes ambient set lighting for bland office interiors. While alluding to minimalism and the doctrine of high modernist abstraction, these works delve into the paralysis caused by a feverish consumption of commodity goods.

Brennan's *Untitled* installation "is part transcendental chilly bin (that moment in the beer ad where they take the lid off the esky and a warm malty glow irradiates the actors); part ER style organ shipping; and part Doctor Who". The whole package is tied together with life support wiring connected to low wattage lights inside.

These white 'nebulae' glance off the Gallery's white walls, not without reverence, but using the deflationary language of commodity packaging to generate an "aesthetics of tasteful absence" and to reveal the "transient glamour of the new".

"I suppose there is something a bit cargo cultist at work in my practice in my attempts to alienate myself from the products of my culture. Like the little kid who gets all the great presents and spends her birthday playing with the cardboard box they came in, it is the periphery of the commodity which fascinates me; its vital remainder."



Studio monitor 2000 fluorescence, polystyrene 600 x 600 x 30
courtesy the artist

Untitled 2000 fluorescence, polystyrene, silicon rubber, electrics,
acrylic dimensions variable courtesy the artist (illustrated, detail)

Mary-Louise Browne

born 1957, Auckland

Browne has a way with words. These austere quotations recall moments from 20th century cinema, from which she has deftly singled out one-liners by female characters. The *femme fatale* and the female victim are mirrored in the quotes writ large and carrying menacing undertones.

The posters swing between overstatement and understatement. Their texts are minimally designed with two tones of the same colour, and are played off against each other. The colours reinforce the restraint that is magnified in the orderly and immaculate grooming of Browne's commissioned carpets *Try I* and *Try II*. The carpets, like the wall posters, contain double-edged statements and can be read in contrasting pairs.

The statements are directive or instructive, and like many of Browne's earlier works, they might be used as moral guides. "Try and get out now" is paired with "Now try and get out". There is a tough doubling at work. The *femme fatale* of movie fictions may suddenly seem indecisive, even contradictory. The works examine the roles of women in film narratives, quoting their lines, playing them against each other and thereby highlighting the constraints of stereotype and cliché.



BE VERY
AFRAID

Be very afraid 2000 acrylic, paper 1430 x 4000
courtesy the artist (illustrated)

Try I 2000 wool 2500 x 4500 courtesy the artist

L. Budd et al

The nebulous figure(s) of L Budd et al whose artistic identity is a shifting ground of associations, feints and deferrals, creates something of a problem for the record books.

There is a strange 'loss' of identity at work, with no single artistic personality identifiably behind the scenes. With the categorical disclaimer, "Oh no, we don't do interviews," the work of L Budd et al must emerge courtesy of the equally anonymous blanche-readymade trust.

Mary and Jim Barr offer a clue to the dense texts that populate L Budd et al installations. "Like memories they are at once illusive, revealing and a challenge to the comforting formulas with which we negotiate our lives".³ The partial sampling of existential and metaphysical philosophy texts elicits a culture of a failed, or doomed Utopia in a global intellectual field that is portrayed at the point of crisis.

The systems of representation and knowledge that underpin Western philosophy are seen in this light as a series of vacant signifiers, or hidden texts that lead nowhere. Instead, the codes of understanding used in L Budd et al installations conform to an ulterior logic of some nameless 'other' order.

³ Burke, Gregory et al (eds) *Toi Toi Toi* 1999, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, p123.

simultaneous invalidations 2000 mixed media dimensions variable
courtesy the blanche-readymade trust (illustrated, detail)

invalidation 2000 VHS tape courtesy the blanche-readymade trust



Lisa Crowley

born 1969, Greymouth

These works continue Crowley's visual archaeology of New Zealand's dramatic tourist sites. Posing for the camera here, are the lakes and crystal formations of 'Roto-Vegas', the sultry pit of natural wonders at the centre of New Zealand's volcanic plateau.

Compared with human experience, the passage of time recorded by geology is an eternity, as immeasurable as the terror sublime of Nature itself - a Nature larger than life. Crowley says her images explore "how the passing of time, embodied in the crystals and in the layers of sulphur craters, can lend a sense of the epic and the unimaginable to the way we try to understand the image".

Her prints crop out any reference to human scale. Seen through the camera lens, the rock faces of crater lakes seem at once micro and macro, infinitely tiny and impossibly giant, using "time and scale as operations which, through their infinity, serve to house contradictions, multiple meanings and that which evades history and representation".

Concentrating on unspoiled tourist sites of reverie and marvel, where human presence is only ever implied, Crowley plays off a human scale beauty and an out-of-scale and threatening sublime. The resultant moments of contemplation and observation are like a dream, a visual reconstruction of Nature made perfect in the imagining.



Two works from *Sinter* 2000 colour photo murals 920 x 1150 and 920 x 1250 courtesy the artist (illustrated, detail)

Judy Darragh

born 1957, Christchurch

Mural sized screen prints in a monotone black, these works are superimposed with plastered sticky labels and dribbles of acrylic paint. Address labels of different sizes and shapes are arranged on a field of flat black in roughly geometric, recurrent patterns. These patterns operate as a kind of signifier of abstraction, rather than as abstraction itself. Darragh defers to the painterly methods of abstract expressionism, but by using mundane materials, the famous 'drip paintings' of Jackson Pollock are referenced and lampooned. The gestural begetting of action painting is conflated with an outpouring of masculine body fluids.

The address labels apply a patch to the canon of abstract expressionism. They resist essential meanings, spiritual gestures or any sense of creative genius that lies 'beneath' a painting's surface. They address the viewer exactly on the surface. The vacant, black space is printed and layered with a patchwork of mass-produced, straight-off-the-roll sticky dots. A true proponent of 'art is for everyone', Darragh uses materials five finger lifted from the flux of everyday life. She refigures heroic abstraction through the homely eye of a *bricoleur*.



Eight works from the series *Onewonders* 2000 acrylic, adhesive paper, paper each 1525 x 1015 courtesy the artist and Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (illustrated, detail)

Megan Dunn

born 1974, Invercargill

Appropriated from the reels of Disney animation classics, Dunn's videos re-cast family favourites such as *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty* to the tunes of soft-core Gothic band, The Cure. The result is a strange tension. The insipid characters and predictable plot lines are fractured and displaced. The grafting and layering of animation and the bleeding from frame to frame signal recalled memories. Saccharine classics merge across the screen as if from an earlier collective childhood memory.

Dunn however, supplies a new, and simultaneous, narrative trajectory for the images, built along the lines of a song. Overtones of angst brewed by The Cure's unique mix of romantic melancholy, re-inscribe these Disney gems with new, more adult meanings that can be both funny and perverse. The deviant nature of Gothic obsession creates a smudgy layer of allegory, for instance, at the beginning of *The walk*, where the lyrics of the song accompany images of Snow White setting out on that fateful day. The hazy, almost halcyon imagery could be a personal biographic narrative mingled with remembered snatches from a shared childhood memory bank. These movies operate in a coveted space between nostalgia, reverie, cynicism and critique.



A forest 2000 from SVHS video 4' courtesy the artist
(illustrated, detail)
The walk 2000 from SVHS video 4' courtesy the artist

Jacqueline Fraser

born 1956, Dunedin

Luxury fabrics have been a hallmark of Fraser's installations for a number of years. Her installations are draped often with organza or silk as a proscenium arch or as framing curtains in conjunction with the characteristic electrical or garden wire.

An exhaustive sense of history emanates from these fabrics. The trail of cultural associations inherent in them brings a host of rich allusions to Fraser's work. In this series of works on paper and fabrics, the figures that usually populate her work as wire figurines are disembodied parts, assembled and regrouped on a paper grid.

Hands, faces and feet are drawn in costume with gloves, hats and dress shoes. These personal cameos accompany architectural landmarks of Europe such as fountains and the classic Eiffel Tower. The poetics of Fraser's travels are recorded with a marker pen, chronicling the romanticism and reverie, for instance, of a sojourn at the Rue Saint Jacques. But there is a dark edge too. These works concern themselves as well with the lost, forgotten and homeless of Paris. Alongside this injustice, the associations of idealism and opulence become a kind of mature fantasy that promotes an elaborate sense of longing.

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY
NEW PLYMOUTH



Fifteen works from the series *The flagellation of the true voice*
2000 ink, fabric, paper each 517 x 364 courtesy the artist and Peter
McLeavey Gallery, Wellington (illustrated, detail)

Saskia Leek

born 1970, Christchurch

Lately, Leek's works have charmed audiences with their shiny lip-gloss approach to life. The small works on board with a highly reflective sheen have a candy-like coating that adds a rich luminosity to her painting.

Leek is well known for her quasi-autobiographical hero worship and her youthful fantasies projected in paint. Her idiosyncratic curiosity box of cartoon-like imagery might have come from the recesses of an almost nascent imagination. While appearing nostalgic, her dreamscapes explore a contradictory nastiness and innocence in the 'naïve' vision.

She once claimed that she had always imagined that she would be a star when she grew up.² In the same interview she describes the stories behind her works, "Yeah, those things happened to me, I've just embroidered them a bit. Some of the new stories are other people's stories, though others are just things that were quite significant to me, like getting my first stereo. I've got quite a good memory for those things."



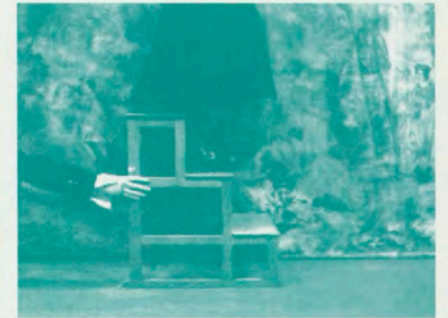
² Robert Leonard et al (eds) *Hangover 1995*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Waikato Museum of Art and History, p33

Wished list 2000 enamel, oils, board dimensions variable
courtesy the artist (illustrated, detail)

Madame and the Bastard

This mural sized photographic cartoon, stretching across 11 metres is a collaboration between two artists who hide behind the identities of the characters they depict. They act in a theatrical exchange as, from left to right, Madame descends the staircase, apparently as part of a larger plot masterminded by the Bastard. The characters however, like many comic strip superheroes, are never clearly identified. Only their hands and feet are shown in each frame. Our recognition of the characters relies on the cultural stereotypes of dress code and gender signals.

As with the artists' identities, the narrative at work is hidden. It is conceived in lush costume but in a Spartan and obviously 'staged' set, where any sense of reality is truly suspended, and the plot of failure - or success - unravels. The master plan of this work is highly ambiguous. Whether or not Madame successfully descends the three-step stair, and whether or not the scheme has been contrived by a deviant and superior, whip-carrying Bastard are undetermined.



Madame descending the staircase 1999 six c-type photographs overall
1150 x 9500 courtesy the artists (illustrated, detail)

Kathryn McCool

born 1965, Palmerston North

Expatriate New Zealander, McCool, wears her heart on her sleeve in these staged photographs of dressing-table tableaux. The images of deer and horses are the clichéd epitome of girlhood fantasy. The ethereal blue and dream-like set could be anywhere, or nowhere. It could shift at any time to be somewhere that seems familiar, but doesn't actually exist. In an *Alice in Wonderland* twist, the figures are filmed on a dressing-table set, however, seen through the camera lens, they appear almost credible in real space.

Location becomes a stage set for the domestic reality of human imagination. As in dreams, the physical details of location are loosely stitched together from basic information. A blade of grass in the foreground, might suggest depth, imagination does the rest.

The imagery of girly aspirations is resurgent, persistent and clichéd almost to abstraction or symbol. The stereotypes of pastoral bliss have some direct reference to a lost innocence, or to uncomplicated desires but their staged nature indicates an impenetrability of these fantasies of childhood naïvety. McCool's reverence is only a mock adulation. The uncomplicated wish-fulfilment of her work resembles a staple diet of trash romance novels - formulaic and reliable because of their safe cultural stereotypes.



Four works from the series *Posters for bedrooms* 2000 c-type photographs two works 880 x 1050, two works 690 x 1240 courtesy the artist and Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (illustrated, detail)

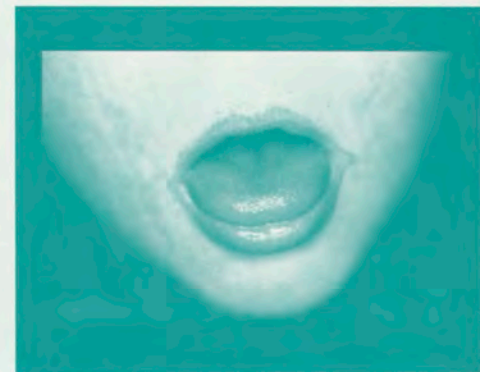
Anne Noble

born 1954, Wanganui

These diary snapshots of Noble's own daughter, taken almost spontaneously throughout her development, illustrate a child's growing awareness and sense of personal identity in front of the camera. These assertive images crop the face, leaving only the mouth as subject. The toxic-like colours suggest the artificial tones of childhood and the synthetic colouring of candy.

The images delve into the imaginative life of children and their peculiar sense of perspective on the world. Life is for the moment, time and the future in particular are attenuated. The persistence of her documentation captures the demonstrative behaviour of children when they are sure that they have an audience. Noble transposes onto film moments such as the lurid display of fake snot or the provocative flaunting of a mouthful of lollies.

The large scale of these works and the absence of eyes create a sense of detachment. The viewer is scaled down while the child's mouth scaled up, becomes monstrous and other-worldly.



Three works from the series *Mouth* 2000 pigment, vinyl each 1250 x 1800 courtesy the artist (illustrated, detail)

Ava Seymour

born 1967, Palmerston North

Spliced and collaged from anonymous sources, these images carry the traits of an anatomy textbook. The white reference markers suggest captions or a key, off to one side, to provide a narrative or descriptive plot. When seen enlarged and when observed in detail devoid of their original context, these scientific diagrams have a totally different quality from that of empirical observation. Reconstituted into a landscape setting, these figures, created out of a mishmash of body parts and rubber suits, become alien.

Mutant human torsos dressed in rubber populate black and white landscapes. Their features are recognisably human in places and they stand in assertive poses. Fused with ill-fitting or disproportionate body parts however, they become misfits or freaks displayed with the air of a scientific specimen for voyeuristic consumption. Continuing Seymour's interest in failed ideologies, these works suggest a diseased futurist vision.



five works from the series *I'm so green* 1998-1999 photo collage each 900 x 900 courtesy the artist and Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (illustrated, detail)

Ann Shelton

born 1967, Timaru

Shelton uses a medium format camera to produce images that saturate the picture plane with a vacant intensity. The detail and rich empiricism of these images employ what Daniel Malone describes as, "God like omniscience", to engage us in the "voyeurism of distanced observation".⁴ Shelton's recent photographs of un-populated interiors are vaguely sexualised, playing into a tension between the observer versus the observed. The massage parlour, the back seat of a limousine, the spa and the cruise ship pool are locations that smack of sexual encounter and a cocktail of avaricious fantasies.

While the images portray a lust for material wealth, their unrelenting detail draws attention to the remoteness of such a lifestyle. The poolside or limousine shots are in perfect symmetry, yet somehow are disconcerting. On close scrutiny, their aura of luxury looks less convincing, somehow too perfect. The restrained, but overpowering observation of these images both courts and distances the viewer's visual senses.



⁴ Malone, Daniel *A bird's eye view* Teststrip monograph 2000, unpaginated

Slimline 2000 c-type photograph 930 x 740 Paris Family Collection (illustrated cover)
Cruise 1999 c-type photograph 930 x 740 collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Golden girl (twin set view #1) 1999 c-type photograph 930 x 740 courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland
0900 #1 1999 c-type photograph 930 x 740 courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland
0900 #2 1999 c-type photograph 930 x 740 courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland (illustrated this page)
Golden girl (twin set view #2) 1999 c-type photograph 930 x 740 courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland

Yvonne Todd

born 1973, Auckland

Todd's studio portraits are a reminder of an almost forgotten idiom. Her formal, calculated images of human, animal and inanimate subjects are an echo of the commemorative family portraits that once adorned the halls and lounges of well-meaning families. The tradition has been almost displaced by the availability of the point and shoot camera, a development perhaps which makes Todd's studied images all the more arresting.

Blisteringly good-looking, these shiny images would be a polished suburban dream come true, were it not for their slightly unsavoury subject matter. Todd's photographs characteristically carry an air of dis-ease about them, often created by an incisive juxtaposition of images. In *Chelsea*, for instance, a radiant and composed adolescent is grouped with a mid-distance photograph of a guinea pig, observed with the same careful scrutiny. While the glamour of Todd's images is alluring, her photographs are often observed with a perturbing attention to detail. This tension creates a push-me-pull-you effect, drawing the viewer into the picture plane, and simultaneously provoking disquiet.

Her work recalls the tradition of 17th century Dutch still life painting that immaculately records the nuances of a bowl of flowers - insects and all. Todd's *vanitas* photographs record the aesthetic of the North Shore with a similar unflinching attention to detail.



Chelsea 2000 LED print 405 x 405 courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland (illustrated, detail)
High School trilogy 2000 triptych: c-type print 2200 x 2880
courtesy the artist and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY
NEW PLYMOUTH

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In Glorious Dreams

new art by women

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Stella Brennan

Mary-Louise Browne

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