

DREAMING IN COLOUR

Expressive exploration of colour is central to the works of four artists taking part in this year's Aotearoa Art Fair. We learn more about their diverse approaches and influences.

WORDS BY MEGAN BEDFORD



'Chorus', Crystal Chain Gang, Glass art installation.

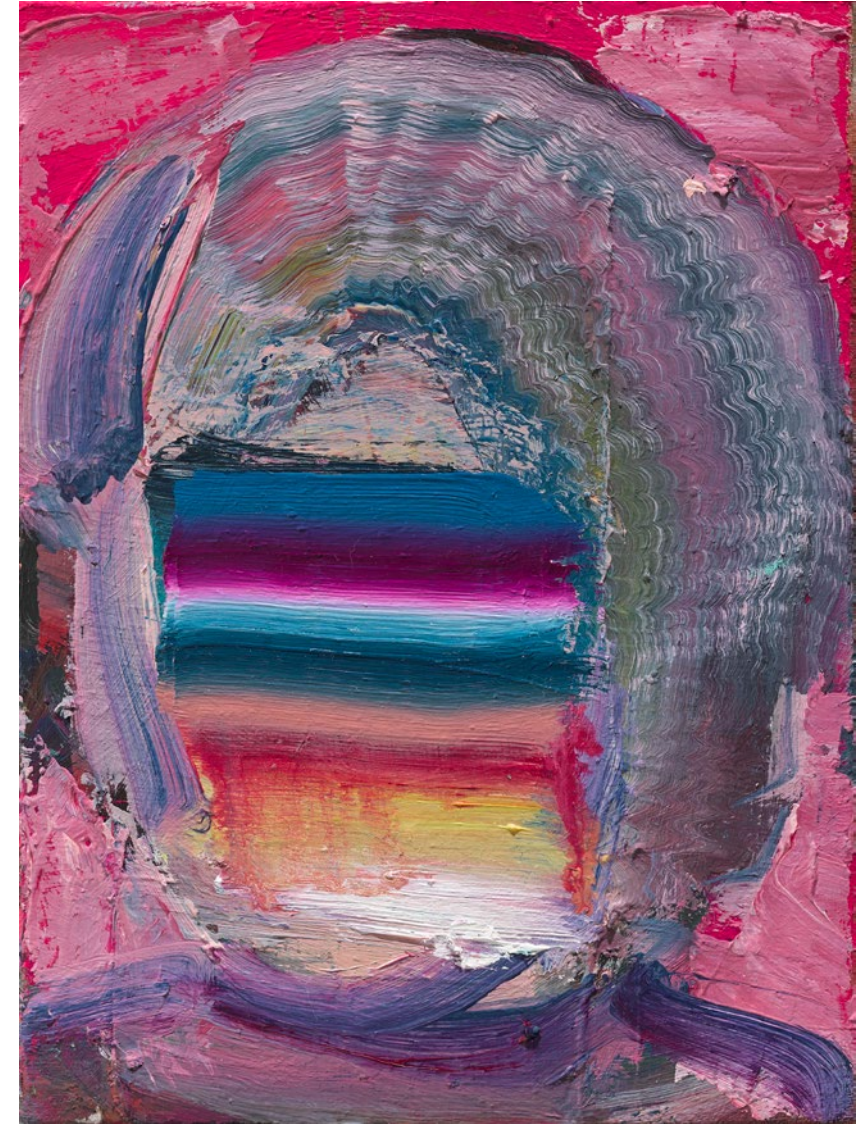
CRYSTAL CHAIN GANG JAMES BLACKIE

Wairarapa Glass artists Leanne Williams and Jim Dennison have been collaborating under the moniker Crystal Chain Gang since 2003. Having worked across sculptural and vessel creation, it is the grand chandelier forms, lit from within, they are best known for. Created in delicate, dreamy layers of colour that transform the spaces they exist in, the evolution of hues and elongated, overlapping lead crystal pieces emulate a bird's plumage. On closer inspection, each of the sometimes hundreds of pieces is revealed to be single feathers, created in hot pressed glass, draped from a frame, topped with a hand-coloured, blown-glass 'head'.

"I really love colour, it's so stimulating for an artist," says Williams, who draws inspiration from elements in the environments around her, like recent travel through Morocco, and those she captures in her own

photography. "It stirs your emotions and your senses – it makes life beautiful and interesting." For the work 'Chorus' (pictured), inspired by native birds, the pair considered bird taxidermy in Whanganui museum. "We looked at different feathers and the layers and glimpses of colour." What resulted are literal translations of those tones on forms that represent kererū, bellbird, kākāpō and morepork but also a poetic use of colour. "There is a tūi there, with black and teal and emerald green, but then with the piwakawaka, I coloured it all dainty, light-pinks, as if it was a flirty little ballerina the way it moves."

For the upcoming fair, expect to see much deeper hues in play. "At the moment with the full moon, I go out and take photos in the middle of the night. I call them 'moon scapes'. They are really dark but have glimpses of light and colour in them that I respond to."



'Helmet', Diana Copperwhite, Oil on linen.

DIANA COPPERWHITE DAY01.

Diana Copperwhite's abstract fusions of colour form dynamic swathes across canvas, seemingly coming alive in large-scale works and her smaller studies seen at this year's art fair. But actually, the Dublin-based artist says, it is light she finds the most important aspect of expressing colour. "I love light in all its manifestations, from the natural sunlight to the virtual super bright surreal online," she explains, saying her home country is particularly influential for her work.

"I come from somewhere where light is a big factor, it can disappear under a cloud in a second and there is a low, grey light but with that comes rainbows," she says, recalling a childhood memory of being shown a prism and how light refracts. "This never left me and seeing it everywhere in Ireland after rain; it seemed to almost be a

portal into another way of looking at space." She says the online world seemed like an extension of that way of thinking – "where anything is possible". She has been painting since 1994, with an evolution of style but says her work has always had a core that is the same.

"The impetus towards light and structure has always been there, although at first in a more obvious, first-hand way." She says her painting, 'Parallel Universe 2005', was key in beginning to express the influence of technology in those vibrant, almost psychedelic tones.

"That reality is the virtual, ideas around time and space, all areas of a screen active in the digital like a pointillist painting and the colour brighter than bright and realer than real. I think I have absorbed it. I feel collectively we see differently now due to the online world."



'Moorea', Michael McHugh, Acrylic on canvas.

MICHAEL McHUGH
MARTIN BROWNE CONTEMPORARY

Creating a visual language around exotic botanical forms – a fusion of real and imagined species – has relied on embracing a kaleidoscope of hues for Michael McHugh. Extensive research in gardens, museums and libraries worldwide contributes to the artist's pencil studies that begin as his 'road map' that then evolves onto canvas with paint, the layered detail added over many hours of meticulous consideration. The lively colour selection, the placement of a hot yellow, smooth lilac or rich crimson, comes naturally, says the Sydney-based Kiwi.

"Choosing what colour goes where I don't find difficult," he says, pointing out how colour helps draw the eye around the painting. "It's like a storytelling, a narration of that painting. Colour and form will help you do that, because they bounce off each other as your eye

travels around the canvas." Spending time in nature has always been a catalyst to rethink and recharge, says the artist, who grew up surrounded by the flowers of his father's orchid house.

"Reconnecting back into nature, there's a calmness in that. In many ways the paintings I make are imagined worlds, they are my universes, if you like, but there's a retreat into them that I think I'm always searching for."

Eschewing realism in colour selection has been by careful consideration. "The beauty in nature is already there. The perfection of nature, in what it actually looks like. I love that but I want to create my own DNA of that form. Mother Nature started me on this course of relooking at what she has created, I'll take from that, but I'm doing my own thing."



Archipelago Area 51 Series, Andy Leleisi'uao, Acrylic on canvas.

ANDY LELEIS'UAO
BERGMAN GALLERY

Calling on his experiences and those around him, New Zealand artist of Samoan heritage Andy Leleisi'uao uses vibrant colour to bring to life detailed intricate and surreal scenes full of symbolism. Exaggerated figures and unexpected appearances, even futuristic and dystopian elements, explore themes of migration, cultural identity, social justice, and the human condition.

"As a child of Pacific migrants who arrived in the mid-1960s, my experiences constantly feed my vocation," the Auckland artist says. "It gives my work meaning and purpose. Our parents' genius was their ability to adapt and assimilate into a colonised society and through their sacrifices I have been blessed with freedom to be who I want to be as an artist." *Archipelago Area 51* (part of which is pictured above) is a series that considers an "alternative reality that disregards time

and space" beyond the constraints of race, gender, and class structures. Using an unconventional rainbow of colour, he references an "ebullient universe I'm fortunate to tap into every couple of years."

This universe serves as a visual and philosophical exploration of reimagined social formations where bold hues and a collection of fantastical figures illustrate both the possibility and impossibility of this realm. "The colours shape the individuality of figures, creatures and objects. Sometimes I imagine myself wandering and exploring amongst these characters and their imaginary world. I get to travel to a world that colour has made interesting, joyful and safe."

Aotearoa Art Fair, 1-4 May, 2025, Viaduct Events Centre, Auckland.
artfair.co.nz