

VANITAS

ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY STILL LIFE



LUANNE BOND
JOANNA BRAITHWAITE
L BUDD
JUDY DARRAGH
TONY DE LAUTOUR
JASON GREIG
BILL HAMMOND
GRANT LINGARD
VALERIE NIELSEN
FIONA PARDINGTON
JUDE RAE
GRANT TAKLE

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McDOUGALL ART ANNEX

VANITAS

VANITAS is a group exhibition of works on the still life theme by twelve contemporary New Zealand artists. All but four of the artists live in Canterbury – L Budd, Fiona Pardington, and Judy Darragh live in Auckland, while Grant Lingard lives in Sydney, Australia.

The exhibition encompasses a diversity of style, media, and scale. Its works are linked by a common concern for the Vanitas still life subject, which can best be described as meditation on the transience of existence through the contemplation of the everyday. There is also a diversity in the age range and profiles of the artists whose works are included in the exhibition. The works of younger Canterbury artists showing their art in a public gallery for the first time are included in the exhibition with those of more senior artists with established national profiles.

VANITAS – Aspects of the Contemporary Still Life brings together a selection of works which represent various divergent contemporary approaches to the still life genre. While the still life is traditionally the province of painting, Judy Darragh and L Budd assemble objects abstracted from a domestic context to express related concerns. Valerie Nielsen, Joanna Braithwaite, Grant Takle, and Jude Rae present painterly descriptions of objects charged with symbolic qualities, while Grant Lingard renders his objects three-dimensionally; Bill Hammond, Tony de Lautour, and Jason Greig convey the macabre aspect of the Vanitas still life theme, while Luanne Bond and Fiona Pardington use organic material to convey a sense of transience and departure.

STILL LIFE PAINTING AND THE 'VANITAS' THEME

A still life painting is one which closely describes familiar objects. The subjects are often drawn from the domestic environment (flowers, books, drapery, musical instruments, food, crockery, etc.) and can also include objects such as statuary, skulls, bones, and dead animals. The objects depicted in a still life are usually removed from a narrative context. Rather than being part of a story, they take on a symbolic quality in themselves.

Still life painting has appeared throughout the history of Western art. It first emerged as an independent artistic subject in the 16th century, and found its high point in the works of Dutch painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At this time, a number of different kinds of still life painting were developed, including the 'breakfast piece', flower-pieces, still lifes with fish, game, or fruit, and the Vanitas still life.

Objects in still life painting often contain a hidden allegory. Flowers, dead animals and insects, hourglasses, books, and clocks, allude symbolically to the passing of time and the brevity of existence. With the introduction of eucharistic elements such as wine, a jug of water, and a loaf of bread, a more specifically Christian meaning may be evoked.

'Vanitas' is a Latin word which literally translates as 'emptiness'. It is used in conjunction with the traditional genre of still life painting to indicate the emptiness of earthly possessions in the light of the hereafter. Vanitas still lifes function as aids to meditation on the transience of existence, drawing attention to the brief passing of life.

Luanne Bond



Luanne Bond was born in Auckland in 1969, and studied painting at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts from 1988–1991. Her works have been seen in group exhibitions in Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland. Bond's work can be placed within the context of a loosely associated group of emergent Canterbury artists, whose subject matter is organic process, or the biological life forms of the natural world.

Memento Mori is a recent work by Luanne Bond, which reinterprets the concerns of the traditional vanitas still life. 'Memento mori' is a Latin term for an object which functions as a reminder of mortality. Bond presents seven small panels in sequence, laid out like pages from a Victorian nature album, a private collection of personal memories for contemplation. Dried plants are pressed beneath a protective layer of wax, the past represented in tangible form in a work which evokes the biological process of decay, loss, and tentative regrowth.

MEMENTO MORI
1992
mixed media – oil, wax, graphite, dried plants
(Courtesy the Artist and the Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch)

Joanna Braithwaite



Joanna Braithwaite was born in Halifax, England, in 1962. She studied painting at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts from 1981–1984, where she won the Ethel Rose Overton Scholarship and the Sawtell Turner Painting Prize in 1983. She has received two grants from the Arts Council, including a Major Project Grant in 1986, and was given the Olivia Spencer Bower Award in 1990 and the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award in 1991. She has exhibited regularly in group and solo exhibitions throughout New Zealand since 1984, and has work held in several public art collections, including the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

Joanna Braithwaite's **Monument Head** depicts a fragment from a dismembered stone sculpture, a statue of an unknown soldier from the Boer War. Conceived on a monumental scale, Braithwaite's rendition of this lost object takes on a special poignancy, a commemoration of death removed from its context and reworked within the framework of still life. **Monument Head** is related in content to Braithwaite's 1991 series of paintings of the heads of farm animals, and similarly draws attention to the life cycle of animated beings through the portrayal of an inanimate object.

MONUMENT HEAD
1991
oil on canvas
(Courtesy the Artist and the Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch)

L Budd



New Zealand artist L Budd came to the attention of curators and critics in 1991, with exhibitions in Auckland and Christchurch. Her distinctive installations commonly employ text and whitewashed objects described as 'blonded'.

This recent installation by Budd renders three dimensional two traditional elements of the still life, the painted word and the book. The title and contents of Budd's books are obscured by a tacky whiteness: they take on a symbolic role, 'open' and 'closed', fixed forever at this point in time. The text purports to illuminate aspects of Budd's artistic practice: the lamp, unplugged, its componentry seized up, illuminates nothing, pointing dejectedly at the ground. A strip of disintegrating embossed wallpaper, its surface scarred and marked by many hangings, creates an air of uneasy domesticity in the gallery – belonging to another time and place, it draws attention to the limited shelf-life of style and consumable objects.

Journal d'un Voyage Utopique
THE COMPLETE BREAK 1992–1994
1992
(Courtesy the Artist, Auckland, and the Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch)

Judy Darragh



Judy Darragh was born in Christchurch in 1957. She has a Diploma in Visual Communication and Design from Wellington Polytechnic, and is currently Head of the Art department at Auckland's Metropolitan College. Darragh has exhibited regularly since 1988, and her works were included in the exhibition *Constructing Intimacies*, which toured nationally in 1989. A segment of the TV2/Communicado series, *That's Fairly Interesting*, entitled 'Queen of Kitsch', was devoted to her in 1990. In 1991 her work featured in *Pleasures and Dangers*, a book edited by Wytan Curnow and Trish Clark and a film project by Shirley Horrocks. Darragh is known particularly for her use of found objects from the recent past, which draw attention to issues of style and taste, and the socialisation of women.

These three works by Judy Darragh are assemblages of domestic objects, recontextualised as 'art' on the gallery wall. The fruit and vegetables of the traditional still life are displayed here as two-dimensional transfers, busy decoration on crockery which has been removed from its utilitarian function. An embroidered handtowel with an ambiguous message, 'throw this', adds to the sense of domestic disorder. *Hair hand*, with its severed plastic hand clutching three anonymous plaited ponytails, appears as a slightly macabre trophy, a collection of discarded female hair preserved and carefully displayed. Using objects located in the recent past, Darragh directs the viewer's attention to the transient life of style.

CUP AND SAUCER STILL LIFE
1991
ceramic cup, saucer, and plate, board, transfers

HAIR-HAND
1992
board, tea towel, plastic hand, synthetic hair

THROW THIS
1992
cotton towel and embroidery

(All Courtesy the Artist and the Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch)

Tony de Lautour



Tony de Lautour studied sculpture at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1988. However, he is best-known for his paintings and drawings, which are informed by a sculptural feeling for pictorial space and for object placement. He has exhibited in group shows in Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland, and has mounted two solo exhibitions, both at Christchurch's CSA Gallery.

In this recent work, **Collection – Three Skinny Knives**, Tony de Lautour brings together a motley collection of assorted fetishistic objects – knives, chains, crosses, bones – to create a 'still life' painting with an edge of danger, a sinister grouping of the totems of a transient subculture. De Lautour sources his uneasy imagery from the low-rent end of the iconographic scale (the art of horror movies, comic strips, tattooists), combining 'low' art references with the slick passages of oil paint and the heavy varnishing of a traditional 'fine art' painting.

COLLECTION – THREE SKINNY KNIVES

1992

oil, charcoal, polyurethane, photocopy, pencil, comic strips on canvas
(Courtesy the Artist)

Jason Greig



Jason Greig was born in Timaru in 1963. He graduated from the University of Canterbury in 1985 with a Diploma in Fine Arts with Honours in Engraving. He has exhibited regularly since 1985, and is known for his fine draftsmanship and sombre imagery. In 1989 work by Greig was included in the book *Contemporary New Zealand Prints* edited by Jill McIntosh. Works by Greig are held in the collections of the National Art Gallery, the Hocken Library in Dunedin, and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. He lives in Christchurch.

Three small drawings and one print interpret the Vanitas still life theme in Greig's characteristically macabre manner. **Articulo Mortis**, an etching, is a self-portrait of sorts, depicting a sinister figure in the process of bodily disintegration. Described by Greig as a 'portrait of the artist as a still life', this image objectifies the figure it portrays: the artist's body, rather than his personality, becomes the subject of the print. The drawings **Inciser** and **Fiend** carry the traditional motif of the Vanitas still life, the human skull, a potent projection of mortality and the transience of life. **Man's Best Friend** is a pencil drawing which takes on the guise of a faded and blurred snapshot.

ARTICULO MORTIS

1991

hard ground etching

INCISER

1992

charcoal

FIEND

1992

charcoal

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

1992

pencil

(All Courtesy the Artist)

Bill Hammond



Bill Hammond was born in Christchurch in 1947. He studied at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in the late 1960s. Hammond held his first solo exhibition of paintings (he is also known as a printmaker) in Christchurch in 1981, and has exhibited regularly since then throughout New Zealand. His work has been included in group exhibitions organized by public art galleries, including the Robert McDougall Art Gallery's *Fresh Art and Spare Parts* in 1985. In 1989 Hammond took part in an expedition with other artists to the sub-Antarctic Auckland Islands, completing a related series of work the following year. In 1990 he visited Japan. Last year Hammond was awarded one of the four major fellowship grants by the Arts Council. His work has been seen internationally in the *Distance Looks Our Way* exhibition organized for EXPO, Seville, which is currently touring Europe, and at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in the recent major exhibition *Headlands*. Bill Hammond lives in Lyttelton.

The earliest works in the exhibition, a pair of paintings of domestic interiors by Bill Hammond which draw their titles from the lines of popular songs, convey the characteristic sense of unease and emotional discomfort which Hammond imparts to his imagery. The uncomfortably-proportioned settings of the paintings evoke an air of disquiet, which is amplified by the disturbing still-life elements. Flaming bowls and a smouldering computer terminal, spindly plants with skull-like growths, a half-filled glass of wine, a fridge full of food, an unattended telephone, convey a mysterious and ambiguous symbolism, a sense of anxiety in time passing.

I'LL PUT A SPELL ON YOU
1983
oil and collage on board
(Private Collection, Lyttelton)

AND I'M IN THE KITCHEN ...
1983
oil and collage on board

Grant Lingard



Grant Lingard was born in Greymouth in 1961. He graduated with a Diploma in Fine Arts from the University of Canterbury in 1984. He has exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in Christchurch, Auckland, and Sydney, including *Here and Now*, the opening exhibition at the McDougall Art Annex in 1988. Grant Lingard lives and works in Sydney.

Grant Lingard uses the butterfly, the traditional representation of the human soul in still life painting, to embody his concern with the nature of 'beauty' in art and the power of the viewer's gaze. His butterflies, illusions in tin and enamel, are trapped in large collecting jars presented for our inspection. Although the lids of the jars are pierced with airholes, the short life cycle of the butterfly means that these 'living' trophies will shortly die, their beauty fading away from their natural habitat. Above the collecting jars are four coloured panels, painted from the pigments of cosmetics: here again decoration is removed from its usual context, artifice presented as art.

THE COLLECTOR OF BEAUTY, I - IV
1991
Cosmetics on paper, enamel on tin
(Courtesy the Artist and the Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch)

Valerie Nielsen



Valerie Nielsen was born in Hamilton in 1967, and completed a degree in painting at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1990. In 1991 she received a grant from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council. She has exhibited in group exhibitions since 1990, and held her first solo exhibition, *Key*, at the Brooke/Gifford Gallery in Christchurch last year.

Two recent paintings, *Untitled (Spoon)*, and *Untitled (Hourglass)*, reveal Valerie Nielsen's concern for the painterly depiction of the object isolated in space. The landscape references of her earlier work have here been excised in favour of psychologically suggestive backgrounds which focus attention on the central object. Nielsen's compositions are charged frequently with the dynamic of binary opposites, twin poles of attraction linked by a continuous tidal flow of communication. In these works, water falls from one basket to another, and sand flows between the chambers of an hourglass – the passing of time is measured and recorded.

UNTITLED (SPOON)
1992
oil and tin plate on canvas

UNTITLED (HOURGLASS)
1992
oil, aluminium sheet, and vinyl film on canvas

(Courtesy the Artist and the Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch)

Fiona Pardington



Fiona Pardington was born in Auckland in 1961. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1984 from the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland. She has exhibited regularly since 1987, and has featured in many group shows organized by public galleries. Her work has appeared in several national touring exhibitions, including the important *Imposing Narratives* exhibition of contemporary photography organized by the Wellington City Art Gallery, which toured to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery last year. In 1991 Pardington was awarded the prestigious Moët et Chandon Fellowship, and spent a year working in France. Fiona Pardington is one of New Zealand's leading contemporary photographers.

In Fiona Pardington's *Autumn Still Life*, a collection of discarded objects (a dress, shoes, dried flowers and leaves) are charged with a wistful symbolism. There is a melancholy feel to this image, as if the objects gathered together for the photograph evoke memories of a happier occasion, now consigned to memory alone. The chill of autumn has displaced summer's warmth: the flowers fade and die, and the immediacy of the moment is replaced by the endurance of memory.

AUTUMN STILL LIFE
1990
black and white photograph

(Courtesy the Artist and the Sue Grockford Gallery, Auckland)

Jude Rae



Born in 1956 in Sydney, Jude Rae received her formal training as a painter in Australia. She has exhibited her work in Australia since 1985. She moved to Christchurch in 1990 and has exhibited in New Zealand since then. Rae is known particularly for her elegant and evocative depictions of still life related objects which she frequently combines with the painted word. Rae is concerned with exploring the ways in which women are represented in our society through language and visual forms.

Drapery has appeared as a recurrent motif in Jude Rae's recent work. Folds, swags, and twists of cloth are promoted from the secondary function of a backdrop or the covering for a body to become the primary content of an image. The drapery suggests the presence of a body but does not describe its forms: a body is intimated, concealed rather than revealed, and sensual memories are evoked. This quality of loss and absence is repeated in Rae's use of fragmentary text in the process of dissolution: words which have lost letters, letters which have lost form, waver on the brink of legibility, and are given personal form and meaning by the viewer.

THREE FRAGMENTS

1992
oil on canvas, acrylic on upholstery fabric
(Courtesy the Artist and the Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch)

SMALL TWIST

1992
oil on canvas

Grant Takle



Grant Takle was born in Christchurch in 1962, and completed a Diploma in Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury in 1984. He has exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand since the mid-1980s, and has held four solo shows of his work. He has received two grants from the Arts Council in 1988 and 1989, and his work is held in public collections in Christchurch and New Plymouth. Takle is particularly known for his eclectic and innovative use of a variety of media and techniques. His works frequently blur distinctions between craft and fine art, and often use 'non-art' processes such as china painting, knitting, and weaving.

Domestic Back-Ground and **Incognito in the Garden** were both completed in 1991. The formal gridded arrangements of china tiles are subverted by the loose handling of the paintwork, fired on to the tiles. Takle has frequently employed the motif of the human spine in his work as a compositional device to suggest underlying structures, paring the figure down to its supportive backbone. While the spine lends support and mobility to a body, it is also a delicate mechanism, susceptible to nervous damage. Here Takle combines the spine motif with a profusion of delicately painted flowers. The symbolic combination of the two elements, bones and flowers, often found in historical still life painting, evokes a concern for the fragility and endurance of human life.

DOMESTIC BACK-GROUND

1991
china paint on glazed tile
(Courtesy the Artist and the Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch)

INCOGNITO IN THE GARDEN

1991
china paint on glazed tile



ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH CITY COUNCIL, 1992