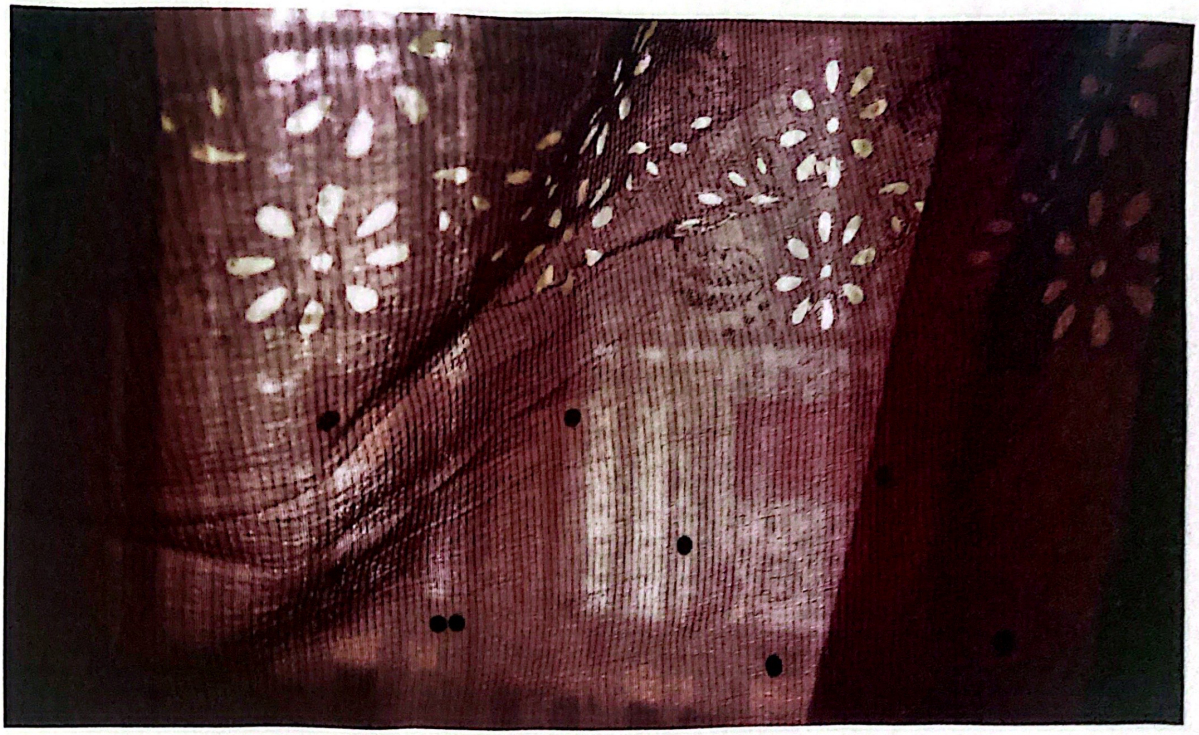


Spring Break

Contemporary Art at Christchurch Art Gallery

JASMINE GALLAGHER

It is a challenging time for our public art institutions, with galleries required to cater to vast audiences, whilst being judged on how many visitors they can get through the door in order to win funding. Add a culture war to the context of needing to appeal to groups of school children alongside arts professionals and it becomes an almost impossible task for curators. However, Melanie Oliver and her curatorial assistant Jane Wallace have managed to capture important aspects of the current zeitgeist, including the role artistic identities play in contemporary art, as well as emotion and new ways of thinking about materiality.

Springtime is Heartbreak has offerings which allow different types of visitors to take different things away from the exhibition. This means that there are myriad threads that can be picked up, depending on viewers and their interests. Twenty-four emerging and mid-career artists working across textiles, sculpture, painting, photography, film and sound explore 'personal and collective histories, communication, distance' and the relationships between humans and their environment. So, rather than making a cohesive statement about the nature of 'contemporary New Zealand art', *Springtime is Heartbreak* speaks to international trends in art theory and how they apply to contemporary art in Aotearoa. This approach was explained by curator Melanie Oliver in her essay for the gallery's *Bulletin* magazine, in which affect theory in particular, as well as notions of posthumanism and New Materialism, are notable. These theories are associated with the speculative turn in Continental philosophy, whereby the role of art is considered with regard to how it might evoke something more than critical awareness alone in its audience, such as an emotional response or an action.[1]

In the current neoliberal climate whereby art is now required to 'do' some sort of cultural good in order to be legitimised in the eyes of the state and its funding apparatus, these theories and the art that speaks to them are the global norm. Accordingly, artistic identities are pertinent, particularly with regard to current issues like social justice and environmentalism, with a diverse range of artists referencing popular aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, but also class. For example, Ilish Thomas addresses financial difficulties in her 2022 *NAMASKAR & Merry Xmas*. In this video work the last letter from Thomas's grandfather before his death scrolls across the screen. This letter is like an informal kind of will, touching on the money worries this migrant family experienced. The South Asian diasporic experience is further elucidated in *Indira's Birthday* (2022) which features the artist's mother putting on a sari on her birthday at home. Such a domestic celebration of identity contrasts with the discomfort some migrants feel wearing such garments in public. Similarly, across the centre of the gallery space under the stairs, one can traverse

Springtime is Heartbreak: Contemporary Art in Aotearoa
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū
25 November–19 May, curated by Melanie Oliver & Jane Wallace

(opposite) ILISH THOMAS *Indira's Birthday* (ᵢᵑᵈᵢᵣᵃˢ ᵇᵢᵣᵗʰᵈᵃʸ) 2022
Still from single-channel video

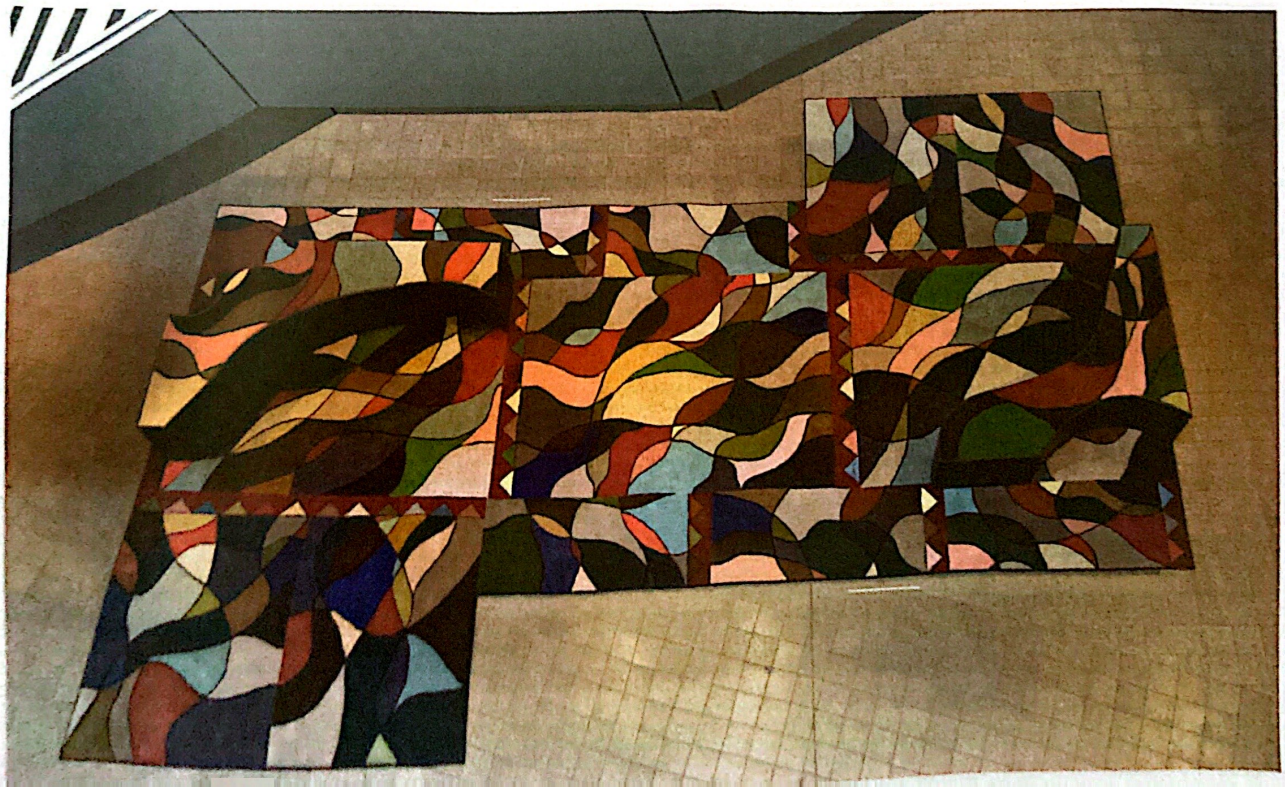
(right) MADISON KELLY *Tohu! Karaka! Braid!* 2023
Glass, fishing mesh & sound

(below) MEGAN BRADY *Entangled and turning, we are river* 2023
Wool & hessian

Megan Brady's 2023 *Entangled and turning, we are river* carpet installation, which is patterned like the braided Rakahuri (Ashley) river, into a second space dominated by an eerie 2023 audio work titled *Ache in time* by Abigail Aroha Jensen, which creates a darker mood as it echoes on this other side of the gallery. Both of these reference different aspects of the artists' Māori heritage, including whakapapa and taoka puoro (musical instruments).

Many of these engagements with identity also reference materiality. For example, in the collaborative work *The Round* (2023), John Harris and Steven Junil Park created a sound and light sculpture consisting of a patchwork curtain of second-hand sheets and two acoustic pickups that follow the tracks carved into a large record-like disc, creating a two-toned aural effect that gradually moves in and out of sync. Not only does the sculptural element draw inspiration from Park's Korean heritage via the traditional practice of jogakbo (a traditional Korean style of patchwork), but the work also brings to mind a chorus of people singing together, or as the title of the work suggests, singing in rounds, as well as forms of knowledge in a hopeful manner.

Many of these engagements with identity and materiality reference the physical environment, including animals and plants. For example, entering the vast ground-floor gallery space, to the left of the main stairs one is first greeted by Madison Kelly's 2023 *Tohu! Karaka! Braid!*, which features the song of the kakī (black stilt), a bird that the wall text notes is at threat of extinction, thus situating the work in a tradition of environmental art. These birds were once prevalent; however, due to habitat destruction and predation, they now only reside in the Mackenzie Basin. The audio track for this work was gifted by the Kakī Recovery Programme which raises and releases the chicks in the wild where they can be heard calling out to their relatives. The ecological kinship referenced in this work also draws on Kelly's Kāi Tahu and Kāti Māmoe heritage that invites interactivity through the inclusion of a glass sculpture that is



available to be played like a musical instrument, so that visitors may make their own aural response to the call of the kakī.

Human–animal relations are also a subject of Lucy Meyle's sculptural installation *Every Green Herb for Meat* (2023), by looking to the tradition of depicting Saint Jerome (342–347AD), best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin. Accordingly, Saint Jerome is the patron saint of translators and librarians, and is often depicted in his study with a lion, in reference to his hagiography that claimed he once tamed a lion in the wilderness by healing its paw. Much of the work rests on newspaper with excerpts of defence testimony from Edmund P. Evans' 1906 *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, which covers the bizarre medieval procedures of convicting and punishing animals that

(above) LUCY MEYLE *Every Green Herb for Meat* 2023
Mixed media

(opposite above) ANOUSHKA AKEL *Click Hiss Rasp Howl* 2023
Oil, acrylic, lithographic ink, clay, pencil, & pastel on canvas, message board

(opposite below) TYNE GORDON *All the Courses of the Suns* 2023
Found objects (washing-machine agitators, beach umbrella prongs, concrete, grout, tiles, pewter) and *Bright Waters* 2023
Oil on aluminium, sand-cast pewter frame

pposedly took the life of human beings. Furniture, :luding a foot rest, bench, book, book rest, lectern, ok house and desk platform, was re-created by eyle to replicate that found in Saint Jerome's study. ıd then smaller objects are placed on and littered around these, many pertaining to animals, including some that were created with the assistance of birds; for example, Meyle scattered sliced bread around her backyard for birds to peck holes in and cast the remnants in pewter.

(right) PRISCILLA ROSE HOWE *Festering in me* 2023
Flashe, acrylic, oil & pastel on canvas, 1820 x 1520 mm.

Nearby, a series of ten paintings by Anoushka Akel, titled *Click Hiss Rasp Howl* (2023), is granted a large space. Akel has a sensibility which is particularly attuned to that of affect and materiality, and the relationships between humans and non-humans. Affect and human–animal relations are a concern, but in a subtle way because the bodily elements in these works lurk in watery translucence: one can see hands, faces, eyes, hair, noses, beaks, claws and genitalia alongside the waves, boats and ships. Akel's oceanic themes are reminiscent of a recent show at Michael Lett, *Wet Contact*, in which the artist was in dialogue with poet Lisa Samuels. Samuels is an Auckland-based experimental poet and academic with a relatively low profile in New Zealand, despite (or perhaps because of) her extensive, elite and internationally published output over the years. Akel's connection with her is proof of her skills as a thinker and reader; accordingly the philosophical depth in her work offers a challenge to those who share her commitment to the world of literature and ideas. Much of the canvas is unstretched, hanging loosely, crinkled, and layered with elements from her studio that was once a church classroom, including message boards, morality posters and student vandalism. The inclusion of these local elements is enhanced by the cobalt blue of the crayfish in one large work, which speaks to the unique hue of the blue kōura (a rare freshwater species of crayfish native to Aotearoa). For this body of work Akel took a drawing by Renaissance artist Sofonisba Anguissola titled *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crawfish* (1554) which shows a crying child being held and comforted by a woman after being bitten. This work in turn inspired Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (1596), which depicts one of the first of his expressions of physical pain that engenders an emotion of grief. That the title of this series refers to the vocabulary of noises used by lobster and crayfish to communicate further extends the metaphor of how we transmit emotion from the physical body of ourselves to that of others.

A focus on emotion can be noted in many other works too, especially with regard to how it is felt in the body, including mixed emotions and ambivalence, from horror to joy. On the darker end of the spectrum, Tyne Gordon's work, partially inspired by body horror films, featured a painting, *Bright Waters* (2023), and sculpture, *All the Courses of the Suns* (2023), created partially from found materials. The depth in the painterly surface of *Bright Waters* draws you in, but this contrasts with the sculptural work that, with its sharp protruding spikes, makes you want to stand back. Further around are Priscilla Rose Howe's lurid paintings, also partially inspired by horror films, as well as those of John Waters, which are described as depicting queer futures and expressing the sensation of experiencing multiple emotions at once. Humour is also present, particularly in the work of Campbell Patterson, which includes a video titled *Nowhere* (2022), in which he writes notes in pencil on masking tape such as a reminder to take vitamins and paracetamol, or eat vegetables. Concepts such as routine and the fragility of the body are also seen in his paintings, which took years to complete because he was intent on slowing the process down as much as possible.

The title of the show, *Springtime is Heartbreak*, highlights a key aspect of this moment in contemporary art: namely a feeling of ambivalence. This quote from poet Ursula Bethell contrasts the season of spring, usually associated with new beginnings and fresh growth, with a broken heart due to the death of her companion Effie Pollen, thus an ending at odds with the season with which it is paired. Here a romantic melancholy ensues, pairing grief with joy in a way mirrored by some of the individual artworks in the show, as well as its overall atmosphere, because much of the art is considering serious issues we face as a society, whilst also trying to remain hopeful and inspiring. Luckily, much of the work in this show does not follow this now well-worn path of lofty moralising. And some of it might also benefit from a reading that is not so steeped in any sort of justification or wall-text explanation at all. Because if art has any chance of saving us, it is only if it is freed from the instrumental and neoliberal requirement to do any such saving at all.

1. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek & Graham Harman (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, re:press, Melbourne 2011.