

ENTERTAINMENT

T.J. McNamara: Small, pale and interesting

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Untitled work by Saskia Leek on show at the Gus Fisher Gallery. Photo / Dean Purcell

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Collection shows artist's journey from strident beginnings to subtle restraint

Saskia Leek, with her small, pale, paintings of commonplace objects, has achieved widespread recognition. She was a finalist for the 2010 Walters Prize, and the Dowse Gallery



Untitled work by Saskia Leek on show at the Gus Fisher Gallery. Photo / Dean Purcell

in Lower Hutt staged a retrospective of her career to date, complete with a catalogue of learned essays. The touring exhibition is now at the University of Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery.

The show has nearly 60 paintings, mostly done in her quiet, musical style in which everything is harmonised to a pastel dream by unifying the colours with copious additions of white. Some of them, where the colour becomes more intense or the subject achieves a dream-like quality, stand out.

What is startling about the exhibition, which has been selected from work in public galleries and private collections, is the size and rawness of the artist's early style. It denies all painterly graces and is deliberately naive and crude.

This is a reminder that she belongs to the same 1990s generation that produced the hacking rawness and anti-art of such painters as Tony de la Tour and Peter Robinson.

An early trip to the United States set up paintings of roller-coasters and lurid young women with raucous speech balloons spouting their opinions. *Coney Island Baby*, a big painting in the foyer, is the most startling of these works and *The Gum Fights*, with its rubric "Gum is Dumb" and huge pink blobs of bubblegum, is the most childlike.

There was a change in mood in a group that showed girls playing nurses in fields of flowers. These were done on polished wooden panels and the acid tone was more diluted.

Typical of these is *Best Wishes*, lent by the James Wallace Arts Trust, in which a girl/nurse with her Red Cross bag of tricks is extending her hand to a notably tame and gentle deer.

What this and other works like it have is deliberate pathos in a vein of mockery or satire. There is a fine thread of this in the artist's established style and it adds just a hint of tension and parody that gives the work individual quality.

A simple, but tightly constructed small, untitled painting, mostly in pale blue and pink that shows a lake, a bridge, the moon and a reflection, has fine traces of dark underpainting that suggests all is not well under the conventional beauty.

Some works - a blue horse on a white road, a strange flower between theatrical curtains - are memorable because the softness is allied to a hint of surreal discord. Seldom has a prominent artist arrived at such subtle, restrained expression after such strident beginnings.

In contrast is the frenetic activity in the remarkable work of Gregory Bennett at Two Rooms. His visionary works, called the *Dromospheres*, are all computer-generated.



Florotopia by artist Gregory Bennett on show at the Two Rooms Gallery in Newton. Photo / Dean Purcell

In the main gallery we see stills taken from the videos but the room is dominated by the hectic movement of three videos in his unique style, dominated by the endless energy of masses of naked figures.

The crowds of stylised figures move constantly with great vigour and an apparent sense of purpose through complex structures.

Recent developments have seen the environments these people inhabit, formerly geometric and bare, now include waving grass, deep red pools and abundant foliage.

The biggest of them, *Florotopia I*, shows a cloudy spiral with the figures moving up it like pilgrims through leafy vegetation as well as haunting a vast tree.

There is no real narrative implied, just a situation as the figures go up in waves.

They express energy but no real purpose. There is no narrative implied. The most fascinating is when the figures form a ring and open and close like a throbbing sea anemone.

In *Dromosphere I* the figures are working within a structure. Planks are often used in the structure, then dissolve again.

The show is an impressive display of video technique and the work communicates a unique vision, at times oddly beautiful, but with overtones of hysteria and consistent uniformity of human action that make it uneasy.

Amy Melchior at the Warwick Henderson Gallery uses melted wax in an encaustic technique that is thousands of years old, and was used by the ancient Egyptians.

Her paintings are mostly round and layered with flowers given rich colour by the manner of their making.

What the technique contributes is thickness and density.

Its complexity is intensified by the way the artist has used the thickness of the wax as a basis for cutting lines and patterns into the surface and working dark paint into them between the largest splashes of colour to add extra detail and hold the work together.

At the galleries

What: *Desk Collection* by Saskia Leek

Where and when: Gus Fisher Gallery, 74 Shortland St, to December 14

TJ says: Desk Collection because most of the paintings are in Saskia Leek's small, softly coloured style and are small enough to have been done on a desk, along with startling revelations of the rawness of her early work.

What: *Dromospheres* by Gregory Bennett

Where and when: Two Rooms, 16 Putiki St, Newton, to November 2

TJ says: Gregory Bennett's computer-generated videos grow more complex with every exhibition. Here colour, vegetation and clouds add to the structures in which his masses of figures endlessly rush about.

What: *Morph* by Amy Melchior

Where and when: Warwick Henderson Gallery, 32 Bath St, Parnell, to November 2

TJ says: The ancient technique of encaustic, painting with colour in wax, produces bursts of floral colour in round works made subtle by surface etching.