

Art New Zealand

NUMBER 183 / SPRING 2022

\$9.75 (incl GST)
ISSN 0110-1102

Virginia Leonard
Robin White / Milan Mrkusich / Emily Karaka
James Robinson / Josephine Cachemaille
Emily Hartley-Skudder / Stavros Kyriakides
Declaration: A Pacific Feminist Agenda / Rhonda Bunyan
Suzanne Goldberg / Patrick Hayman
Luit Bieringa (1942–2022)
Allie Eagle (1949–2022)



9 415006 101933 >



(left) GAVIN CHAI *Interior 46* 2021
Oil on poplar panel, 254 x 305 mm.
(Private collection)

(below left) GAVIN CHAI *Interior 54* 2022
Acrylic & gold leaf on poplar panel, 152 x
203 mm.
(Private collection)

(below right) GAVIN CHAI *Interior 50* 2022
Oil on poplar panel, 305 x 254 mm.
(Private collection)

(opposite above) TORI BEECHE *View to
Vigelandsparken* 2021
Oil on linen, 450 x 550 mm.

(opposite below) *Idyll* at Page Galleries with
from left, brunelle dias's *Transient Village*
(2022), Tori Beeche's *The Crimson Hexagon*
(2021) & dias' *R + V* (2022)

Wellington

Tori Beeche, Gavin Chai & brunelle dias *Idyll*

Page Galleries, 16 June–9 July
MALCOLM BURGESS

In *Idyll*, an exhibition of the works of three Auckland-centric painters of varying ages and cultural backgrounds, we are asked to reconsider the notion of the idyllic as the preserve of a rustic outside-ness, and whether such a state might be possible within an urban framing. Suggesting that a misreading of the predominantly pastoral focus of Theocritus' foundational third-century BC *Idylls* in part led to the conflation of the term with the rural, this curation of three artists' explorations of inner space seeks to reclaim the interior as a subject and setting also possessed of the power and qualities of the idyllic, with its mythic sense of peace and happiness and underlying strains of wish-fulfilment and unattainability.

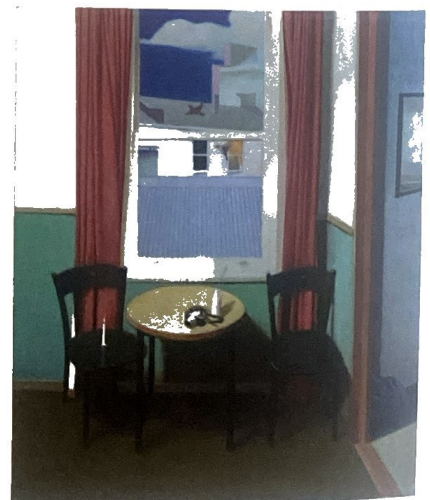
It is a playful concept with a hall-of-mirrors feel, especially when shown in a gallery within a gallery (Page's upstairs gallery on Wellington's Victoria Street). The effort does not disappoint, and the three participating painters each provide a unique perspective on this central thesis, through radically differing approaches and styles.

The small, fine, oil-on-poplar panel works of Malaysian-born painter/carpenter Gavin Chai make up almost half of the show. His ten detailed works stand out as embodiments of the Greek root of the word 'idyll', namely 'eidyllion', or 'little picture'.

And yet their focus is not on the pastoral, but on simple, everyday interior settings, the artist's eye drawn to quasi-spiritual plays of light, or meaningful arrangements of furniture and domestic items. Some works treat emptiness as a subject in itself, seen through an almost magical lens, suggesting an otherworldly presence (as in *Interior 46*, 2021). Interior space is clearly the subject of these works, imbued with a longing, timeless significance whether empty (as in *Interior 44*, 2021) or focused on a few stoically ordinary objects (as with *Interior 50*, 2022). On occasion we are given glimpses of a lush horizon, a cloudscape, or a starry sky, (even a rustic outside idyll makes an appearance in *Interior 54*, 2022), but they are generally far off, outside the immediate focus. The spirit of Peter Siddell is evident in places, through a quiet tone that sits somewhere

between utopian and dystopian, though of course these are not grand, wooden homes in inner-city suburbs, but seemingly make-do, meagre, rented dwellings. Elsewhere Chai has written of these interior works¹ that his main emphasis is 'in the universal psychological or spiritual essence that makes a home', fuelled by a biblical eschatology that taught him 'one day the world shall be reborn, and there we will all have the perfect home'. He has also noted that 'from the struggles I've already seen in this world, I come to establish that it is only in the position of privation that we will learn to appreciate the beauty of little things that makes a home'. Hence the domestic can truly be considered idyllic, from this artist's particular standpoint.

Tori Beeche's larger oil-on-linen works draw on her Scandinavian heritage, hinted at perhaps through their flat brightness, reminiscent of the inescapability of Arctic summer nights. These figureless works are somewhat cartoonish in palette and style, at once familiar and not of this world—dreamscapes with overlapping, ill-fitting essential forms and impossible perspectives. There is humour on show



as the intellect and memory grasps ineffectually at literal meanings and memories, leaving out key details in its pursuit of representing the world at large albeit in a decorative manner. In *View to Vigelandsparken* (2021), the interior framing the outside view is composed of large blocks of colour, with blurred detail, clashing perspectives, and sketchy duotonal window views, suggesting detail is but an unachievable afterthought, the emotional content of primary importance.

There are just two pieces by brunelle dias, however they are sizeable oil-on-canvas works (one unstretched) that dominate the gallery's southern walls. Besides their dimensions, they differ markedly from the other works in this show in that their focus is the inhabitants of their interiors, perhaps less on individuals than on their associated postures, movement, and engagement (via gestures, body language, or pose). These are truly relational pieces that construct the idyllic as a process, a ratio, a relationship, something always in flux. Dias's contribution is unique in its blurred focus on the oblique impact of the domestic on sometimes unconscious social



interactions, conveying a direct and indirect intimacy generally found within shared spaces that encourage communion.

Each artist represented in this intriguing show with much to say about our present moment and universal mores may have been chosen

for their unique take on the prospect of the interior idyll, but it is pleasing to be able to say that each is worth exploring separately outside of these particular walls as painters of rare promise and talent.

1. <http://www.gavinchai.com/about>.

