

# FLOWERS IN A CONTEMPORARY PAINTING PRACTICE



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## ABSTRACT

This project originated from a cornucopia of personal experiences that informed a perspective shaped by a life growing up surrounded by flowers in the context of a large creative family and a domestic-craft background. This confluence of personal experiences and tacit knowledge acquired through years developing a painting technique which had its origins in decorative folk art, formed the foundation for this Masters of Design project.

This document considers the personal and historical significance of the flower in art and in social practices. My research explores the relevance and resonance of flower painting in a contemporary art practice. Historical research into traditional vanitas painters connects with explorations of contemporary materials and painterly applications. This body of work made as a result of this project was intended to rejuvenate the flower for its audiences and to evoke a positive collective response.

Feminist and post feminist art has been referenced, not as political comment, but rather as a celebration of the repetitive and the decorative, qualities that have long been associated with women's craft. An investigation into obsessive and intuitive processes of art making, developed into the realisation of an excessively painted floral studio project.

This series of visual inquiries has generated unique ways of communicating the sustainability of the flower in painting. The industrial surfaces amalgamating with traditional feminine floral motifs highlighted the dichotomy inherent in domestic and industrial contexts and materials.

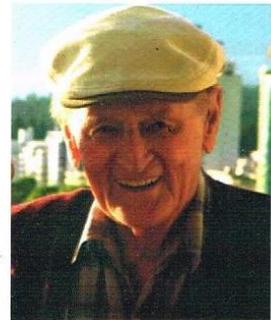
The floral garlands that decoratively frame idealised and imagined landscape's have extended possible conversations and provided a context that intends to refresh readings of the works. Frames within frames and alternative central images were explored - As my personal landscape shifted, so did my work.

The body of work crafted for this project is framed from a personal perspective and the historical developments of flower painting in Western art. This practice delights in the celebration and the rejuvenation of the floral motif within a contemporary painting practice and the shared human pleasure that this can avail.

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**PHILIP LAURENCE CERVIN**

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# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	6
<b>CHAPTER 1: Background</b>	<b>7</b>
1:1 Home is the Beginning of all Stories...	
1:2 Seeds Laid	
1:3 Roots Planted	
<b>CHAPTER 2: Context for Inquiry</b>	<b>16</b>
2:1 Flowers in the History of Art.	
2:2 Tulipomania	
2:3 Investigation into Traditional Painting Techniques	
2:4 Response to Conceptual and Practical Strategies of Vanitas Paintings	
<b>CHAPTER 3: Furthering ‘Other’ Technical Developments</b>	<b>28</b>
3:1 Saying it with Flowers in Paint	
3:2 If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always got.	
3:4 The Fashionable Mop- head Hydrangea	
3:5 Hydrangea Series	

CHAPTER 4: Women Hold up Half the Sky	45
4:1 The Decorated Room	
4:2 Background to Feminist and Post -Feminist Movement	
4:3 Obsession, Decoration and Celebration.	
4:4 The Floral Studio	
CHAPTER 5: The Domestic Petal Meets the Industrial Metal	61
5:1 Slipping the Petal over the Metal	
CHAPTER 6: Floral Garland Paintings	65
6:1 Background to the Garland Paintings	
6:2 Incorporating Landscape into the Garland. Notions of Nostalgia and Sentiment Investigated.	
6:3 A Rosier View	
6:4 From the Garland to the Wreath	
CHAPTER 7: Chance Favours the Prepared Mind	82
7:1 Flower Power	
CONCLUSION	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88
REFERENCES	91
IMAGE REFERENCES	92

## INTRODUCTION

Flowers speak to our senses; they enrich our existence and have been represented in some way in every culture on earth. In our own culture, the flower has always been attributed a deeper meaning, playing a significant role in many ritual contexts from birth to burial. (Herzog 8)

The following text considers the development of the Master of Design Project and aims to analyze my painting practice in the context of the history of flower painting. The journey of the 'flower' in art has been employed as a means of investigating and expressing painterly and social practices. The confluence of personal history and tacit knowledge developed from an artisan background initiated this master's project.

In this body of work I have merged traditional painting conventions with explorations of contemporary materials and painterly applications. The flower as essential subject matter is the vehicle that carries my chosen medium, which is paint. Throughout this project the flower as a motif is designed to conjure and evoke a shared human experience of pleasure and reference a wide range of social practices.

Flora and fauna are central to the project's exploration of 16<sup>th</sup> century vanitas themes of abundance, celebration and transience of life in a 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer society. Notions of the decorative, repetition and obsessive work relating to the post-feminist artists of the 1960's to 1980's were investigated in the floral painted studio project. Following extensive reflection and critiques a new direction was indicated and the work departed from the domestic sphere and onto a series of large scale industrial surfaces.

At this point the decorative floral garland was pivotal as a compositional device in which to frame the landscape and open up fresh conversations and possible readings of the paintings. My interest is in the manner in which the iconic New Zealand landscape has been represented and altered over time by colonisation and the introduction of non native flora and fauna. Idealised concepts of New Zealand as a golden land, a South Pacific Garden of Eden in a semi-tropical paradise, were explored alongside notions of nostalgia and sentiment.

This work frames a personal perspective that celebrates the pleasures of the flower as subject matter and how this impacts on the artwork produced.

## CHAPTER ONE: Background

Personal background and conceptual ideas initially framed around the vanitas painters, the decorative and later the post feminist artists formed the context for this research by project inquiry.

The original title and research question for this project was:

*Still Life in a Contemporary Painting Practice*

How does the often-undervalued genre of still life have an enduring relevance and resonance in a contemporary painting practice?

This research aims to investigate how still life, in particular flower painting, can sustain its poignancy in a contemporary painting practice. I have crafted a series of work that combine traditional painting conventions with current painterly explorations of materiality, of technique and application of paint as a means of expression on shared human experiences.



# 1:1 Home is the Beginning of all Stories ...

This project has its beginnings in personal experiences and a perspective formed and shaped by a domestic-craft background and life growing up in the context of a creative family. Curator, Shiralee Saul,



in her article *Domestic Disturbances*, discusses how our home determines who we are, as our earliest memories and experiences begin there.

“Home is the beginning of all stories and the base of all literature. The home shuts out casual surveillance and allows individuals to drop their social masks to be themselves. And home itself has come to be seen as an expression of the individual.” (Saul 1)

*Whenuapai family home when first purchased in 1971.*

I grew up amongst gardens at my parents’ flower nursery on the banks of the Waitemata Harbour. Both parents were keen gardeners; my father worked as a landscape supervisor at the Auckland zoo for 19 years and was instrumental in its transformation from iron and concrete cages to a botanical amalgamation combining flora and fauna. My mother’s interest in colour manifested itself in a fervent involvement in interior décor, gardening, flower arranging and oil painting. Consequently an interest in the decorated domestic space and floral imagery was an integral part of my early life.



**Figure 1** *Whenuapai Family Home*, 2008  
R. Cervin



**Figure 2** *Whenuapai landscape through the frame*  
2008, R. Cervin

My parents spent years transforming the family property from a rundown bungalow to this ornate, character home surrounded by landscaped gardens.



Plastic house full of calla lilies 2008

## 1:2 Seeds Laid

My first home after I married was a rundown, old villa. Home for many women was a place to express creativity in a traditionally female, domestic environment. I revelled in the opportunity to create an interior décor and sanctuary of my own making.



It was within this domestic environment that an art and craft direction was forged. Lessons in traditional woman's crafts such as cross-stitch, embroidery, folk-art and china painting were embarked upon in order to decorate the home. Most of these handcrafts involved the incorporation of the floral motif. Items such as tin-ware and wooden furniture were also covered in painted flowers inspired by a cottage garden full of old roses, hydrangeas, hollyhocks, lavender and lilies. I had in effect, recreated the flower nursery both inside and out.



I drew on a combination of tole painting (folk art on tin or wood) and china painting traditions, adapting techniques that developed into a painting style that I continue to use as an aspect of my practice today.

Using a one stroke tole painting method, the brush is loaded with several shades of acrylic paint ranging from dark to light. The colours are blended with the brush on the palette before they are applied to the painting surface. In recent years my work has shifted from painting on small objects and canvases to large scale aluminium, and I have upsized the brush.

The paint is kept on a 'stay wet' palette. The sponge beneath the paper keeps the paint moist and can easily be blended on the brush before it is applied to the painting surface



Folk art or tole painting, which falls under the umbrella of decorative painting, translates to 'art of the people' and refers to the type of painting done in various countries for hundreds of years by self-taught 'common folk'. These artisans decorated their furniture and household objects by using a series of simple repetitive brushstrokes often loaded with two colours which was termed the one stroke method. Much of the painting was done using a round brush to make S or coma strokes. The motifs were mainly simply-stroked flowers, leaves, birds and scrolls which were completed fairly quickly.

Almost all countries have some kind of traditional folk art associated with their culture and many are hundreds of years old. Traditional folk art spread from one region of the world to another. The term folk-art is used mainly in America and Britain but it is known in Germany, Austria and Switzerland as bauernmalerie, in France as tole painting, in the Netherlands the term is hindeloopen, in Norway it is as rosemaling, and in Russia zhostova.



**Figure 3** Example of the one stroke tole painting method on an antique tray.

Johan Jensen was a Danish flower painter who has adapted the one stroke painting technique using oil glazes to achieve more realistic flower paintings.



**Figure 4** *Untitled*, Johan Laurentz Jensen, 1846

The glazing method I adapted and experimented with over the one stroke technique was originally learnt from china painting. The glaze is applied to the work after each coat is dry. The addition of a glazing medium to a pigment creates a fluid solution which is applied in multiple thin layers to the work, creating transparency and building up three dimensional depth.

Eventually this proficient painting technique led to the creation of a small business called *Roses & Relics*, where I painted from home for 10 years while I raised my young family. As my children became more independent the opportunity to extend and challenge my painting practice developed.

With support from my parents and my partner, I chose to embark on an undergraduate arts degree in order to investigate how my learnt craft could maintain its relevance in a contemporary art practice.

### 1:3 Roots Planted

During the course of the bachelor degree I investigated the history of the flower in art and developed an interest in the still life vanitas paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As seen in Jan de Heem's painting *A Table of Desert*, these paintings depict sumptuous arrangements of fruit and flowers or lavish banquet tables with fine silver and crystal. Often the luscious food and flowers would be starting to spoil. These were symbolic reminders of the transience of life and the inevitability of death. The popularity of vanitas paintings spread from Holland to Flanders, Spain and France



**Figure 5** *A Table of Desert* Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1640

My theoretical and practical investigations culminated in a series of vanitas paintings completed at the end of the bachelor degree, 2009. The large format, excessively decorative, all over composition and aerial perspective evoke ideas of Bacchanalian extravagance and over-indulgence. The viewer is invited to experience the physicality of the overloaded painted surface.

The *Wedding Table* and *All Year Round* communicate the excess and decadence of a consumer society. While in *The Butterfly has but Moments*, the stages of a butterfly's life and insect ravaged leaves and petals portray the transience of life in the decorative, floral feast.



*The Wedding Table* 2009, acrylic on board, 1800 x 1200mm



*All Year Round*, 2009, oil on board, 1800 x 1200mm



(Detail) *All Year Round*



*The Butterfly has but Moments*, 2009, oil on board, 1800x1200mm



(Detail) *The Butterfly has but Moments*

A conceptual and aesthetic interest in the still life vanitas paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century combined with my decorative, floral background, laid the foundation for this Masters of Design project.

## CHAPTER TWO: Context for Inquiry

### 2:1 Flowers in History of Art

Flowers represent life's fragile, transitory nature; their budding freshness embodies spring, full blooms summer, wilting leaves autumn and subsequent mortality and death itself. (Herzog 8)

Myth, legend, literature, art and archaeological evidence reflect the attraction that people have always felt for flowers. Floral motifs can be found on the earliest surviving jewellery, fabrics and murals. However, it was only since the Renaissance that the flower gained the autonomy that allowed it to become worthy of representation on its own in paintings. The Reformation in Europe paved the way for a shift in the art of painting flowers. For the first time in the history of Western art, specific genres in art emerged, such as still life, landscape or domestic interior. The new genre of still life was particularly popular in Holland in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The main themes of Renaissance paintings were religious prior to the Reformation occurring in Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The end result of these changes saw a significant conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. The resulting Dutch Reformed Protestant Church (Calvinist) formed when Holland became a Republic, banned religious art as the new theology considered the paintings to be iconic idols worshiped by the previous doctrine. The new art that developed was intended for the growing prosperous middle class to suit their homes and lifestyles, thus replacing the Church and State as the principal patrons of art. This allowed for the rise of genres, such as still life painting, that had previously been viewed as lowly and unimportant. The Dutch not only liked scenes of everyday life but also greatly valued the objects that they collected in their homes, and still life paintings were a way to showcase their wealth and success.



**Figure 6** Jacques- Samuel Bernadine, 1657,  
*Still Life with violin*

This period is identified today as the Dutch Golden Age, coinciding with the Baroque movement that had its beginning around 1600 and continued into the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Baroque art is characterized by drama, rich, deep colour and dramatic chiaroscuro (light dark shadow effects). Baroque art evoked emotion and passion compared to the calm rationality that had been prized during the Renaissance.

## 2:2 Tulipomania

It was during this Baroque period and the Golden Age of Holland (late 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) that exotic flowers became the object of desire. European trade with foreign countries created the opportunity to import varieties of garden flowers such as hyacinths, ranunculas and tulips. Some of the major Dutch and Flemish painters who specialized in still life subjects were Weillem, Heda, Willem Kalf, Franz Snyder's, Jan van Huysum and Jan Davidz de Heem.

Floral still life became popular with artists to portray moral allegories through their paintings as the affluent merchant class frivolously spent money on lavish lifestyles to flaunt their wealth and power. This period marks the peak of flower painting in the history of art and the emergence of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century vanitas painters.



**Figure 7** *Vase of Flowers*, Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1660

Jan de Heem and other artists in this period painted the tulip and other fashionable flowers of desire for those who could not afford to buy the bulbs. These paintings could incorporate other out of season, expensive flowers all in the one vase. By the time Ambrosius Bosschaert painted *Flowers in a Glass* vase in 1614, tulips were collectors' items. 'tulipomania', as it became known, reached its peak in Holland between 1634 and 1637 where the tulip (imported from Turkey) was the ultimate status symbol of one of the first consumer societies.

An average painting by Bosschaert might cost 300 guilders but during this period an image with tulips fetched up to 3000 guilders. Ultimately, the paintings proved a better investment than the bulbs because in 1637, tulipomania caused a crisis in the capitalist system. The commodity market in the tulip bulbs crashed, causing a major economic depression.

Semper Augustus was one of the most beautiful of the striped tulips which were the most sought after. Its petals flamed and feathered in intricate patterns of white and deep red. At the height of the tulip fever one of these bulbs sold for 5.400 guilders, the equivalent of 15 years wages for the average Amsterdam bricklayer. (Pavord 24)



**Figure 8 (Detail)** *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit*, Jan van Huysum, 1715

17<sup>th</sup> century tulip lovers were unaware that the intricate patterns on the flowers were caused by a virus spread by aphids. Anna Pavord, author of *The Tulip*, describes the virus “as being the joker in the tulip bed.” Early growers had many theories about how to cultivate these ‘magic breaks’ or stripes and gardeners were duped into dubious methods of fertilising (or otherwise) their precious bulbs. Some growers laid the desired colours in powdered paint on their tulips beds, expecting the colours to somehow miraculously transmute to the flowers. Others applied ‘horticultural potions’ to the soil and plants.

The vanitas painters saw the foolishness of this obsession and started to incorporate moral allegories into paintings. Insects, drooping petals and rotting fruit appeared in the still life paintings to convey a sense of life’s transitory nature and the vanity and meaninglessness of earthly life. A book with pages turning, a skull, hourglass, or a candle burning would also serve as a moralizing message on the fleetingness of sensory pleasures.

These paintings were usually embellished with exquisite trappings, precious metal vessels, and delicate glassware. The Dutch call lavish still-life paintings of this type 'pronk stilleven' (pronk meaning sumptuous or ostentatious). The term is traditionally used to categorize decadent displays of banquets and luxury items. De Heem, Willem Kalf, and Abraham van Beyeren were the leading painters of this type of still life. Their patrons came from the upper strata of society and flaunted their expensive tastes.

As seen in the image below of de Heem's *Still Life*, these paintings were skilfully executed. Vanitas artists used dramatic chiaroscuro techniques and in contrast to these dark shadowed areas, a rich, vibrant palette is applied to the overloaded imagery to portray themes of decadence, excessiveness and impending doom.



**Figure 9** *Still Life*, Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1648

## 2:3 Investigations into Traditional Painting Techniques

At the onset of this project the practical focus was on investigating techniques used by old masters. By exploring modern technology and materials such as aerosol cans, airbrush and glazing mediums the intention had been on achieving similar results to that of the old masters but using a more modern and efficient process.



The following techniques that were researched and explored are ones incorporated into my work and are documented accordingly.

The technique termed 'sfumato' was developed and used with great mastery by Leonardo De Vinci. He once wrote that light and shade should blend without lines or borders in the manner of smoke, giving rise to the term sfumato, meaning as 'seen through smoke'. This technique refers to the subtle graduations of tones which was used to obscure sharp edges and create a synergy between lights and shadows in a painting. De Vinci repeatedly applied very thin layers of glaze to produce the hazy effect on faces and landscapes.

**Figure 10** *The Mona Lisa*, Leonardo De Vinci, 1503-06

In De Vinci's painting of *The Mona Lisa* those enigmatic, mysterious aspects of her smile have been achieved by this method and the viewer is left to fill in the detail. To achieve this effect he selected a range of unifying mid-tones which have similar levels of saturation creating a subdued mood to the picture.



**Figure 11** *Still Life with Fruit*  
Michelangelo Caravaggio, 1605



**Figure 12** *Boy with Basket of Fruit*,  
Michelangelo Caravaggio, 1593

In contrast to the paintings of De Vinci and his sfumato effect, Michelangelo Merisida Caravaggio has a heavy-handed approach to light and shadow, as the painting *Still Life with Fruit* is illuminated as if in a spotlight, while the surrounding field is dark and sombre creating dramatic contrasts in the paintings. This contrasting effect of light and shade is termed chiaroscuro. De Vinci brought the technique to its full potential but it is usually associated with 17<sup>th</sup> century artists Caravaggio and Rembrandt who used it with dramatic and outstanding effect.



**Figure 13** *Grand'e Odalisque* Jean Ingres 1814

Grisaille is a term for paintings executed entirely in monochrome, generally in greyscale and was another technique popular with old masters. A grisaille work may be executed for its own sake, or, as under-painting for another work to create the illusion of three dimensional depth prior to colour being applied with multiple layers of glazing.

This grisaille underpainting of *Grand Odalisque* by Ingres, was painted as demonstration for his students.



**Figure 14** *Grande Odalisque*, Jean Ingres, 1814

## 2:4 Response to Conceptual and Practical Strategies of the Vanitas Painters

The first series of paintings produced at the outset of this project reflect the culmination of vanitas concepts and old masters traditional painting techniques using contemporary materials and applications.



*Ode to Leonardo*, 2009, oil and on board, 1200 x 900mm

*Ode to Leonardo* is a collaged work abundant with vanitas symbols; the burning candle, skull, mirror, diseased foliage and insects all present themselves. With the intention of personalising the work, New Zealand and European flora and fauna, were juxtaposed in the painting. An anachronistic strategy was employed by appropriating Leonardo's figure *Virgin on the Rocks*. The practice of quoting from work of other artists and of reproducing elements of historical paintings is a strategy which sits in a postmodern paradigm. Painting the figure was a technical exercise to experiment with the sfumato technique; however, the composition of the painting was not successful. The partly framed figure is centred near the middle of the canvas drawing the eye straight to the face rather than being directed around the painting,



*Cheers to the Good Life*, 2009, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 800mm

Personal imagery was included in the centuries old gravestone which was painted from a photo taken of our Irish Catholic ancestral family plot in Ardglass, Northern Ireland. A smoky sfumato effect was achieved by spray painting mid-tone colours in the background. In the foreground a similar effect was created by the use of an airbrush.



*Cheers to the Good Life 2*, 2009 oil and acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 800mm

There are no drawings done prior to painting as the work develops from an initial idea and is worked out the along the way. As the one stroke blending technique used speeds up the painting process and colour is integral to the reading of the work, painting over previous work has been part of my process.

In *Cheers to the Good Life* the skull is replaced by the figure and the gravestone is pushed back. A brighter, heightened palette on the blousy mop head hydrangeas gives more vibrancy and depth to the painting.

Sometimes these strategies strengthen and sometimes they are just different, but not necessarily better. This is not an economical way of painting as often there has been many hours invested in the previous work but through the act of painting more understanding is gained of what is successful and what is not.



*Memento Mori* 2010, oil on canvas, 600 x 400mm

In *Memento Mori* (Latin, meaning ‘remember you will die’) layers of oil glazing have been applied to create the contrasts of light and dark, (chiaroscuro). Use of an airbrush has produced a light milky glaze on the mirror creating a hazy, smoky (sfumato) effect.



*The Living Room 1*, 2012, acrylic in board, 1200 x 900mm

This is the first attempt at the final painting in this series. The more subtle symbolism of insects, wilting petals and foliage, and a partially hidden snuffed candle are now the only remaining symbols of the vanitas themes. Skulls, mirrors and luxury items have gone.

There were too many elements and ideas in the one painting as the viewer is bombarded with visual information to provide clues, resulting in a confused work.



An interest to investigate other ways of communicating conceptual ideas was developing.



(Detail) *The Living Room*

Texture paste mixed into the paint and then sanded over revealing the outline of the painted edges was experimented in *The Living Room*. Explorations of thick and thin paint produced a depth and interest to the work that was more successful than a sole reliance on illustrating ideas through subject matter.



*The Living Room 2*, oil on board, 2011, 1200 x 900

*The Living Room 2* is virtually completely reworked. Layers of burnt umber oil glaze were applied to the background to achieve the contrast of dark and light and paint over the many different elements incorporated into the previous painting. The flowers in the vase have texture paste mixed into the heightened palette to bring these petals forward while darker areas have had a thinner application of paint in order to push back resulting in a less confused and more cohesive, painting.

## CHAPTER THREE: Furthering ‘Other’ Technical Developments

### 3:1 Saying it with Flowers in Paint

An interest in furthering Western, traditional technical skills were replaced by notions of originality, and experimentation. The rewording of the research question from *Still Life* to *Flower Painting* reflected this shift. The decision to focus on the flower as image wasn’t just an attraction to the subject matter but also a means to push and develop the paintings further. As Renoir has said,

Painting flowers fortifies my brain. I am not subject to the same mental tension as when I face a model. When I paint flowers I lay on the colour shades and try them out with no fear of losing the picture. I would not dare do this with a figure because I would be afraid of spoiling everything. And the experience I gain from these experiments I can then use in my paintings. (*Tojner* 15)

This text resonates with me as spending countless hours striving to achieve technical perfection was restricting the outcome of the work. Painting with less conventional rules and more experimentation with paint was needed. Tutors wise words echoed in my mind “It’s not what you paint, but how you paint.”

This shift led to an investigation into artists who focused on flower painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when art movements evolved in reaction to the artificiality of Romanticism and history painting. One of the most successful flower painters of this period is the French artist Henri Jean Fantin-Latour (1836-1904).



**Figure 15** *Roses de Nice on a table*, Fantin-Latour, 1892

Fantin-Latour’s ‘flower paintings’ were not always ‘still life’s’ since the flowers were often painted without vases in indeterminate space. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the distinction between flower painting and still life became blurred. In spite of Fantin-Latour’s associations with progressive contemporaries, such as Degas, Courbet, Manet, Whistler, Morisot and Millais, Fantin-Latour seems to escape classification. Unlike his contemporaries, Fantin-Latour saw technique as something to be integrated into the subject. As a result his paintings were an eclectic mix of realism, romanticism and impressionism.

Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877) led the realist movement in France in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Courbet and other artists who were part of this movement, notably, Honore Daumier and Jean-Francois Millet, realism dealt not with the perfection of line and form, but entailed spontaneous and rough handling of paint. These artists portrayed the irregularities in nature and depicted the harshness of life which challenged the contemporary academic ideas of art.

The realist movement bridged the gap between the Romantic Movement, characterized by paintings of



Gericault and Delacroix, with that of the Impressionists. After the arrival of Impressionism and later movements the importance of illusionistic brushwork continued its decline.

Dutch vanitas paintings' influence on Gustave Courbet is evident in the abundant display of flowers in one vase that bloom at different times of the year: lilies, roses, gladioli, stock, asters, ipomoeas, poppies, and others. Courbet also followed the Dutch practice of using ephemeral flowers to suggest the transitory nature of life.

Though, unlike the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painters known for their intricately detailed technique, Courbet used broad brushstrokes and often spread his thick paint with a palette knife. This gave a freshness and vitality to the work.

**Figure 16** *Bouquet of Flowers*, Gustave Courbet 1862

With the advent of modernism the genre of realistic flower painting almost completely disappeared. When artists such as Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, and Georgia O'Keefe used the flower as image, it played a secondary role to the exploration of colour and form and developing the artist's individual style.



**Figure 17** *Glycines*, Claude Monet, 1918 -1920

Claude Monet used the flowers in his painting to read as elements of colour, painterliness and decoration. Monet's flowers dissolve into almost abstract atmospheric reflections of light and colour.

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the rise of abstract painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, France became the centre of still life painting. Artists who used the flower as image to further their personal styles over this 250 year period included, Chardin, Eugene Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard.



**Figure 18** *Chrysanthemums*, Claude Monet, 1897

Claude Monet's chrysanthemum series, using a decorative all-over wallpaper pattern, was a pretext for studying and developing his main concern, which was the expression of colour in paint.



**Figure 19** *Chrysanthemums*, Claude Monet, 1897

Stephanie Peek is a contemporary artist whose work resonates with my practice. Peek uses the floral motif in her paintings which reference the vanitas painters. Tulips, roses and other flowers from 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings are floated through an often-dark smoky atmosphere. The dramatic light and rich colours refer to the work of Dutch still life painter Rachel Ruysch.



**Figure 20** *Vase of Flowers*, Rachel Ruysch, 1730

Rachel Ruysch (1665 – 1750) was, in her lifetime, a successful Dutch still life painter. Her painting career began at the age of 15 and continued through to her eighties. Ruysch was best known for her flower paintings in which she achieved a spontaneity and fragility with her virtuoso technique and exuberant colours. The chiaroscuro technique Ruysch applied had a more restrained sense of drama than that of Caravaggio, thereby creating a sense of passion and tenderness in the paintings.



**Figure 21** *Glimmering*, Stephanie Peek, 2009



**Figure 22** *Requiem*, Stephanie Peek, 2009

### 3:2 If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got

Relying on painting techniques mastered over years was holding back experimentation and not allowing the work to move in a more challenging direction. Limiting the subject matter to flora and fauna permitted more time and focus on the investigation of alternative painting applications and strategies to communicate themes of excess, transience, decadence, pleasure and celebration; themes originating from vanitas painters.

To require perfection is to invite paralysis. The pattern is predictable as you see error in what you have done, you steer your work toward what you imagine you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do – away from risk and exploration, and possibly further from the work of your heart. You find reasons to procrastinate, since to not work is to not make mistakes. (Bayles & Orland 30)

Due to the repetitive use of a limited number of flowers, in particular the rose and hydrangea, I was aware the flower had become a motif.

The moment the artists have taken the flower motif beyond the symbolic language of flowers and the art-history ballast that weighs them down, that is the moment when the subject is almost inconsequential. It is the pretext for painting – and as such it fulfils what motif really is fundamentally, as is most evident from the work's relationship with the word motivation. (Tojner 33)



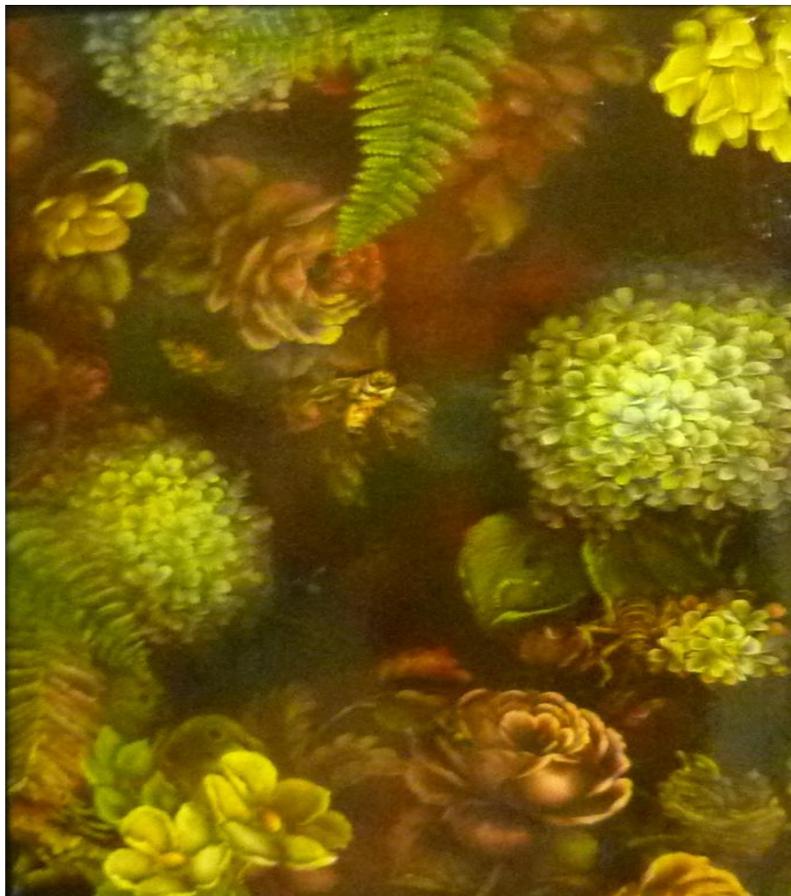
Artists who have used the floral motif to push painterly concerns further were researched. In response to this investigation the following series of paintings were embarked upon to explore fresh painterly concerns of paint and varnish application, composition, scale and colour.

*Till Paradise*, 2010, oil on board 800 x 900mm

Painting finishes explored were high gloss varnish and resin. These shiny, plush finishes communicate vanitas themes of decadence, abundance, excess and vanity (giving a reflection of the viewer in the glossy finish). This rich lustre achieved a deeper level of three-dimensional depth.

Other techniques incorporated in these works are pentimento (the outline of underlying images that have since been painted over are exposed by sanding back) in order to allude to history and the cycle of life.

The blending of dark tone spray-paint in the background, fading out into some flowers in the foreground created a similar result and also sped up the process of the traditional sfumato technique achieved with slow drying oil paint. The dark aerosol colours and airbrush, contrast with the highlighted layers of oil glaze to create a chiaroscuro effect in the work.



*Till Paradise*, 2010, oil on board, 800x900mm

The thick layer of high gloss varnish made the painting appear as though seen through a heavy sheet of murky glass. While the painting appeared luminous, it created practical issues with hanging and photographing the work due to glare reflecting from the surface.



(Detail) *Till Paradise*

The pentimento technique demonstrated in these photos reveal the outline of the previous layers of paint .



A procedural strategy in this painting practice is to use a camera. It helps to distinguish areas in the work that are more successful, which contributes to the next painting. The areas of interest are then protected with a layer of varnish allowing the unsuccessful elements to be reworked and any residue of spray paint over protected varnished areas can be wiped off with turps.

The quote below reinforced the practice of photographing successful areas of paintings and the strategy of reworking previously painted surfaces.

What you need to know about the next piece is contained in the last piece. The place to learn about your execution is in your execution. Put simply, your work is your guide, a complete, comprehensive limitless reference book on your work (Bayles & Orland 35)



*Pleasantville*, 2011, oil and acrylic on board, 1800x1200mm

*Pleasantville* is less successful in that the flat field and true to life scale roses and hydrangeas have not created depth and interest is lost in the all over wallpaper effect. The introduction of colour added to the grisaille painting is not enough to rescue the work from being decorative, rather than referencing the decorative.

The intention for the work is to create the three-dimensional spatial depth achieved by the vanitas painters whilst also acknowledging the decorative. Transparent glazing applications would have created more depth by pushing back and bringing forward areas of the painting.



*Transition*, 2011, oil and acrylic on board, 600x600mm

Using a large scale brush and reversing the grisaille technique makes the larger roses appear to float above the decorative pastel palette, all over floral background. These strategies interrupt the overly decorativeness of the painting.

On reflection pink, green or yellow mixed into the harsh black and white grisaille would have achieved a more appealing grey. My intention is not to impose a visual assault on the viewer, so I endeavour to interrupt rather than disrupt the decorative effect of the work.



*Flowers and Fruit* 2011 acrylic and dye on board 600mm x 600mm

The use of dye over acrylic paint did not achieve the ambition for the work as it flattened the pictorial space and was unable to create the depth, transparency and colour saturation achieved by glazing with oil as the dye slipped over the surface not allowing multiple layers to be absorbed.



*High tea* 2011 oil and acrylic on board 600mm x 600mm

Layering, change of scale and brighter, high key colours were strategies employed to make the top three flowers appear to pop and float on the surface. Experimenting with spraying paint through lace over smaller scaled flowers and fruit created the decorative background pattern.



*Coming to the End of the Day*, 2011, oil and acrylic on board, 400 x 600mm

An unblocking medium was investigated in this work. This medium is used instead of sandpaper. It is applied over the paint and is then rubbed off with a soft cloth. This takes the top layer of paint exposing the layers underneath without any harsh abrasion. Varnish was applied between layers to protect areas of interest. This technique along with the dark background and monochrome palette created a more sombre work. Layers of transparent oil glaze have achieved the three dimensional spatial dynamic that was lacking in the hydrangeas in *Pleasantville*.

Another way of 'interrupting' the painting to be considered was not to strive to complete the paintings. The 'interruption' is in the unfinished areas creating more tension and interest in the work. The challenge lay in resisting the tendency to fill up the space and leave some work unfinished so as to 'suggest' interruption.

As *Coming to the End of the Day* was the most successful in this series a decision was made to confine subject matter to the hydrangea to investigate painterly concerns.

### 3:3 The Fashionable Mop-Head Hydrangea

The hydrangea as image works well as the repetitive pattern of petals forming a circle can effortlessly create illusions of three dimensional depth. The scale, overblown quality and variations of tone make them motivating subject matter.

The sturdy, mop-head hydrangea is the workhorse in my garden. Flowering for long periods of time it keeps giving and giving, expecting little back in return. Few other flowering plants give such a consistent visual display with so little attention.



The flower heads, held on long stems are highly popular in trend setting cities. Their North American popularity in recent years began on Martha Stewart's television show. In 1999 Stewart was asked what she thought the flower of the new millennium would be, she nominated the hydrangea.

Thus the once humble, 'grannies garden' flower became a fashion icon over night in America.

Another reason for the hydrangeas popularity is its ability to change colour. Varieties such as Hamburg start out blue and if grown in the shade later in the season turns an antique red-wine shade.

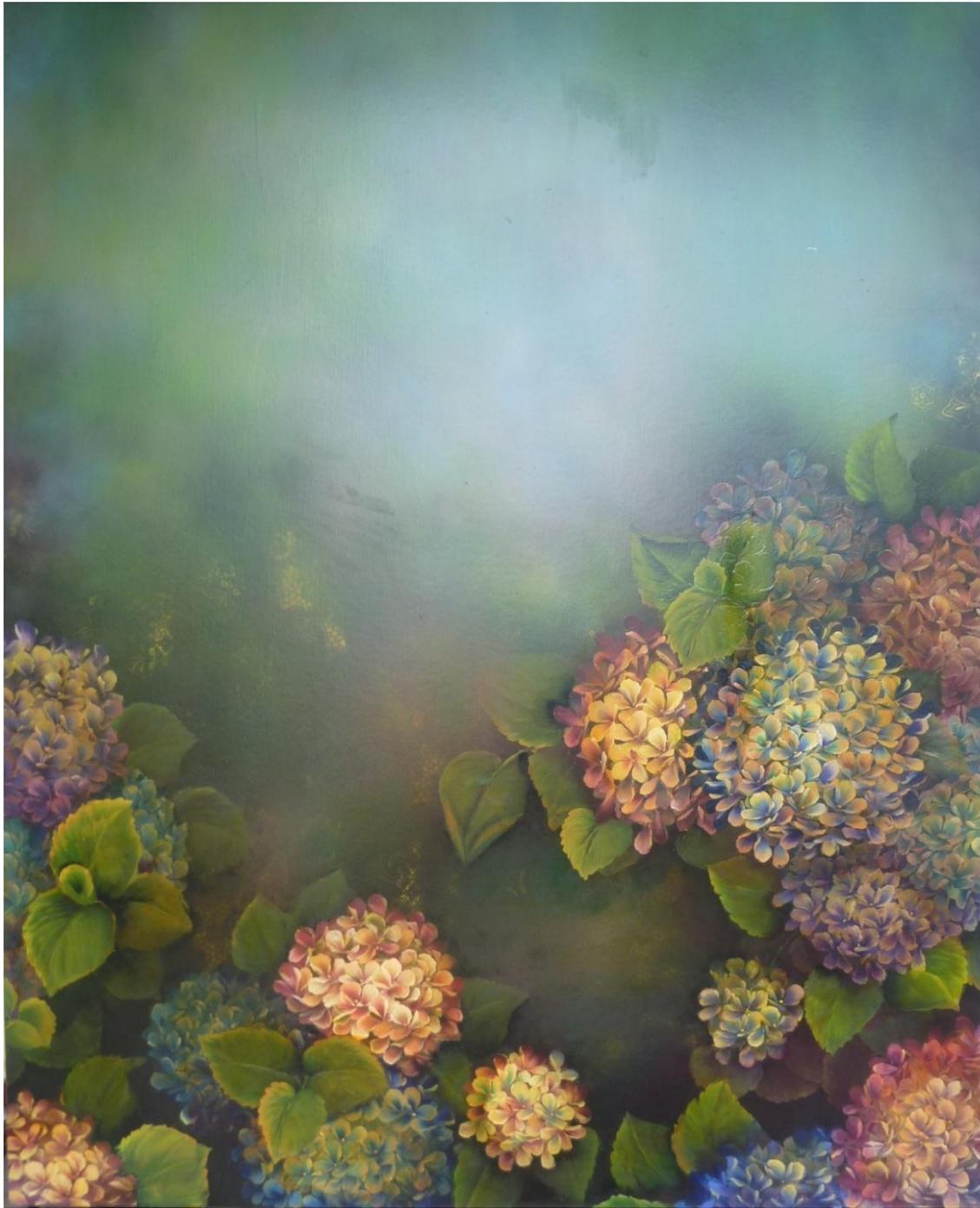
The 'designer tulip' of 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland was desired for its ability to change colour creating 'breaks' or stripes. As mentioned earlier, an industry developed whereby 'potions' were created to add to the soil so these 'magic' stripes could miraculously appear in the flowers. Unlike the tulip, one can however change the colour of hydrangeas by adding chemicals to the soil. Lime and superphosphate will turn shades of blue hydrangea pink and aluminium turns pink hydrangeas shades of blue.

### 3:5 Hydrangea Series



*In memory of Claire*, oil on canvas, 2011, 900 x 900mm

Variation in scale was achieved by using different size brushes, from a ¼" oil painting brush to a larger house brush. A chiaroscuro effect has been achieved with the simultaneously, blended spray-painted background, contrasted with highlights achieved by glazing. Wiping off the coloured glaze on the tips and folds of the petals exposed the light under-painting adding to contrast of dark and light.



*Florabundance*, 2012, mixed media on board, 1200 x 1480mm

*Florabundance* was executed in muted mid tones, creating a harmonious gradation of colour in figure and field and leaving more empty space achieving more spatial depth, giving a quieter, ethereal, atmospheric mood to the work.



*Shades of Blue*, 2012, oil and acrylic on board, 1200 x 1480mm

The abundance of insects detracted from the pleasure of painting and then viewing the work. To portray life's fragility the curling, browning leaves are enough.



*Pretty in Pink*, 2012, oil on board, 900 x 900mm

Due to the consistent, repetitive arrangements of its parts, the intricate detail of the hydrangea is recognized as a pattern. The strength in these two paintings lies in the compulsive repetition of the pattern. When repeated over and over, becoming more complex with the contrasts of darks and light to create depth, the paintings achieved the intention of 'joie de vivre'.

*Pretty in Pink* suggests pleasure in the repetitive act of painting. Such pleasures are often decorative and bound to our desire to escape from the stresses of modern life by creating an environment that satisfies our intrinsic desire to use ornamentation to embellish our surroundings.

The decorative is the sphere of embellishment and ornament, mementos and souvenirs, the domain of the interior. It is a carefully orchestrated mode designed to protect its inhabitants from the trials and tribulations of the exterior world. (Moleworth 5)

Talya Halkin, in her article *On Ornament, Femininity and Modernity*, discusses visual effects of ornamental detail, in sensory and material excess and their association with femininity and desire and the discourses around these concerns during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The article focuses on how ornament and decoration were theoretically considered at the intersection of psychiatry and aesthetics.

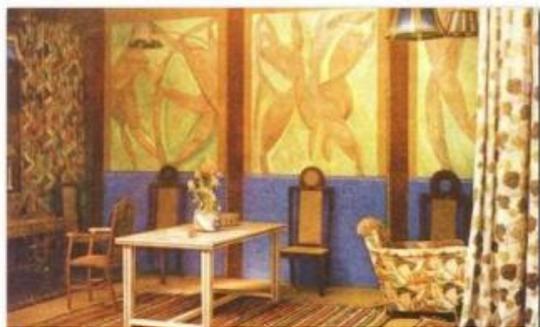
It is at this intersection that we can most explicitly discern how ornament, femininity and female sexuality were associated with illusion and artifice and exalted as a source of pleasure and imaginative fantasy. Often, this discourse focused on ornamental forms borrowed from Rococo and oriental decor, thus conflating feminine Otherness with cultural or historical Otherness. Yet the same qualities that were associated with ornament and femininity in a positive, creative context led to the pathologization of these linked concepts as dangerous, irrational forces that needed to be brought under control in the realm of aesthetics and psychiatry. (Halkin 2)

It is against this troubled historical connection between women and ornament that we can more fully appreciate the struggle artists working within this territory endured. The following research into the Omega Workshops demonstrates this.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Women hold up half the sky

### 4:1: The Decorated Room

The Omega Workshops established in London in 1913 by painter and art theorist Roger Fry (founder of the Bloomsbury group), produced hand-painted, uniquely designed furniture, textiles and interior design ensembles for middle and upper class clientele. The Omega artists dedicated themselves to create art for the domestic space. The workshops were a commercial enterprise for struggling men and women artists. It encouraged experimentation as the artists did not sign their own works but marked them with an Omega symbol allowing them the freedom to explore modernist techniques, styles and ideas.



**Figure 23** Omega workshops interior.



**Figure 24** Drawing room of the Bloomsbury Groups farmhouse in Sussex

The group eventually split and four artists formed another group called the Vorticist, with Wyndham Lewis as the leader. They had opposing views on modernism and the Vorticists despised the term decorative. The 'Ideal Home Rumpus' as the dispute between the groups was labeled, erupted over disagreement for a display at the 1913 *Ideal Home Exhibition*. The original leader of the group, Roger Fry, took charge of the design and installation and Lewis reacted by sending a letter to Omega stockholders denouncing Omega's aesthetic in general. His language contained gendered definitions of the decorative, categorizing their aesthetic as 'prettiness', in contrast to the Vorticists who he described as 'vigorous, rough, masculine' and 'modern' artists. Lewis characterized their machine-inspired aesthetic as modern and masculine, while implying that Omega's aesthetic was old-fashioned and feminine.

Wyndham Lewis's attack on the Omega artists was largely successful as the Vorticists achieved a place in modernism beside the Futurists, while the stigma created by Lewis of Omega artists, who included gay men and professional women artists, labeling them feminine and decorative, did not receive the critical and historical acclaim they deserved.

This was an example of artists who referenced the decorative struggling to have their work acknowledged as 'contemporary art'. Being labeled as 'feminine and decorative' was a certainty for negative criticism and conflict.

## 4:2 Background to Feminist and Post Feminist Movement

Flower painting declined after the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was characterized as pretty and petty, requiring only dedication and dexterity. Flowers were seen as a fitting subject for people who were not meant to take their art seriously, such as Sunday painters.

As Leon Le Grange, a French critic wrote very patronizingly in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1860,

Male genius has nothing to do with female taste. Let men of genius conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculptures, and elevated forms of painting. In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with the kind of art they have always preferred ... the paintings of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness, which alone can compete with grace and freshness of women themselves. (Tojnes 13)

Flower painting had become associated with women by the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as such was relegated and dismissed to the domain of women artists. Modernist art critics and historians had successfully removed flower painting from mainstream art. In the 1960's – 80's the feminist movement reacted to the male dominated art world. Although women have contributed a great deal to the history of art they have usually suffered undeserving neglect of their accomplishments as male domination over social behaviour, taste and value was inhibiting.



**Figure 25** *Heartfelt*, Miriam Shapiro, 1985

With the freeing of women politically through suffrage and the subsequent progress made in formerly male dominated domains, they were finally becoming recognized for the quality of their art along with that of male artists. The early phase of this recognition took the form of appreciating women's domestic arts with exhibits in museums, galleries and private spaces helping to realize the opinion of women's domestic art as 'fine art'. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro were two important leaders of the feminist art movement.

Wanting to draw attention to this long-neglected domestic tradition, Schapiro made abstract and semi-representational collages of women's craft and needlework materials. She called these works *femmes*. These works of art were analogies or symbols for the years of the devalued role of women's art.

Women today have reaped what feminism has sown. The feminist and post-feminist movements resulted in a more inclusive approach to flower painting and women artists, allowing the flower as image to be once again included in mainstream art. Skill, harmony, balance and attention to detail found in nature, (commonly accepted attributes that contribute to beauty) had been revived as an aspect of postmodern art, and the flower is almost always seen as an expression of beauty. Many post modern artists revel in the pleasures of the decorative, such as Rowena Drew and her painted quilts, while acknowledging the solitary feature of such pursuits.

The importance of the resurgence of the decorative and that it is no longer taboo is that it forces the artwork out of its own internal self-appointed and often private reality, into a shared public space. Decoration is intrinsic to human nature of every culture; it is found on buildings, clothing, bodies, cups, knives, forks, cakes and manholes.

Anna Miles writes in an article *How to Decorate* for the exhibition at Objects Space in 2012, about how the recent expansion of Auckland's motorways comes with an ornamental system.

How to decorate our motorway is a contemporary kind of question. Unadorned brutalism, relieved by boxy retaining walls and native plants, is no longer a favoured option. And so Transit New Zealand finds itself in the business of ornamental design. Transit is not on its own in reviving a practice largely dormant for the last century. The contents of our homes, wardrobes' and underwear drawers – are all things of the designed world, excepting Air New Zealand's uniform – witness an appetite for pattern. Now the last bastion of utilitarianism and least likely contender for heritage preservation has been taken: the concrete lining of our commuter corridors. (Miles 10)

## 4:3 Obsession, Decoration and Celebration

The laborious process involved in post feminist artist Liza Lou's *The Kitchen* stands at the heart of her art and the final product testifies to the thousands of hours invested in creating it. Lou engages with decoration, ornamentation, obsessive work and handcraft as her principle practice.



**Figure 26** Liza Lou, a young American artist, created *The Kitchen* (1991-1995) where she covered a standard, life-size kitchen from top to toe with tiny beads.





Decorative craft is closely linked to the concept of ‘obsession’, because of the demanding focus on details and on compulsive repetition. Obsession is defined in the dictionary as to ‘haunt’ or ‘beset’ and in clinical psychological terms as a form of neuroses whose main characteristic is the attachment to a troublesome thought or image that forces itself on the mind.

Compulsive obsessive actions are meant to reduce anxiety caused by obsession and can express a desperate effort to seemingly control an uncontrollable world. The clinical definition of ‘obsession’ connects obsessive expressions to the work of ‘outsider’ artists – artists in a mental state that activates their creative imagination in an unusual manner. The feminist theoretician Naomi Schor wrote about society’s negative relationship to small details seen as a form of surplus. It was perceived as a decadent and annoying expression, in other words as ‘women’s matters’. An essential part of feminist protest turned against the language that labeled them as illogical, hysterical, obsessive and preoccupied with the insignificant, trivial detail.

Liza Lou and others that work in this territory, demonstrate the long way that feminist art has come since the political activism of the 70s, which motivated women artists to choose obsessive-decorative techniques as a way to liberate them from the hegemony of male art.



In response to this research, and an awareness of an obsessive element in my practice, the intention of the next project was to fully embrace the notion of decorative passion and explore where the obsession may lead. Thus began a project that took a semester to complete.

## 4:4 The Floral Studio

With the intention of pushing obsessive, repetitive, decorative concepts further, three large scale white boards were prepared to pursue an all over composition using only the hydrangea. However, I found the project too daunting to proceed.



“For most artists, making good art depends upon making lots of art and any device that carries the first brushstroke to the next blank canvas has tangible, practical value.” (Bayles & Orland 61)

I began painting hydrangeas over my easel, then my chair....

There was an intention to express passion for painting flowers and decorating, and explore the obsessive, repetitive concepts of the post-feminist artists but in a more relaxed, celebratory manner compared to the angst feminist movement.



The painting spread over the table, radio, hair dryer and other objects, an ashtray with match sticks and butts were painted in and found objects painted over.



The viral painting continued over art theory books, technical 'how to paint books' and house and garden magazines.

The introduction of artificial and live flowers contributed to the overloaded, chaotic studio.



The paint dripping down the filing cabinet creating a thick textured pile on the floor was a deliberate construct intended to draw attention back to the physicality of paint itself in contrast to the more carefully crafted areas of representational flower painting.



A trompe-l'oeil element (meaning a 'trick of the eye,' a phrase originated in the Baroque period), was investigated in the painted window. This technique uses realistic imagery to create the optical illusion of flowers coming from the outside in.

The studio became engulfed as flowers appeared to crawl through the window, over the heater onto the floor and into the environment. Artificial flowers were wound around the pipes and the easel. The studio triggered visions of *The Day of the Triffids*.

Handcraft and decoration were invading the sterile environment of the educational institution. Everything was covered, including; walls, tools and furniture in the floral motif.



One of the more successful surfaces to paint on was the perspex window. It allowed areas of chalky texture, opaqueness and transparency where light could filter through.



A delicate and discrete moment, in stark contrast to the overloaded, excessively decorative space as small flowers quietly look for escape, winding secretly around the pipes in the clinical white walls of the ex-Carrington Hospital room to the freedom and obscurity outside



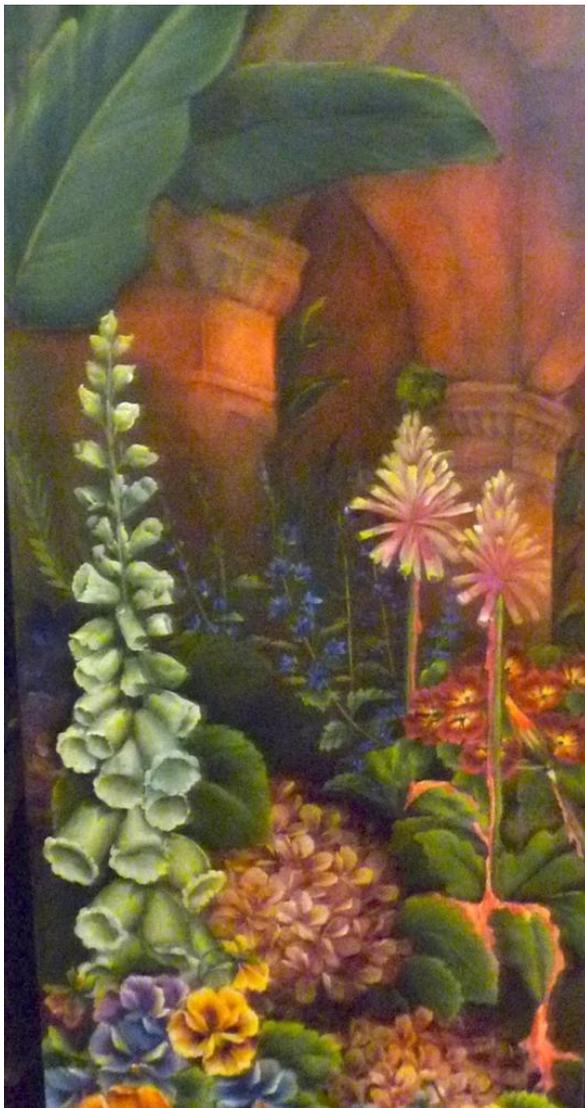
There were a few humorous moments during the making of this project. One afternoon a group of students were peering through my door whilst I was on hands and knees painting over the heater. I overheard one of them whisper, “She’s like a robot!” I did consider if I was operating in a mildly, neurotic, disturbing manner ... but the machine painted on.

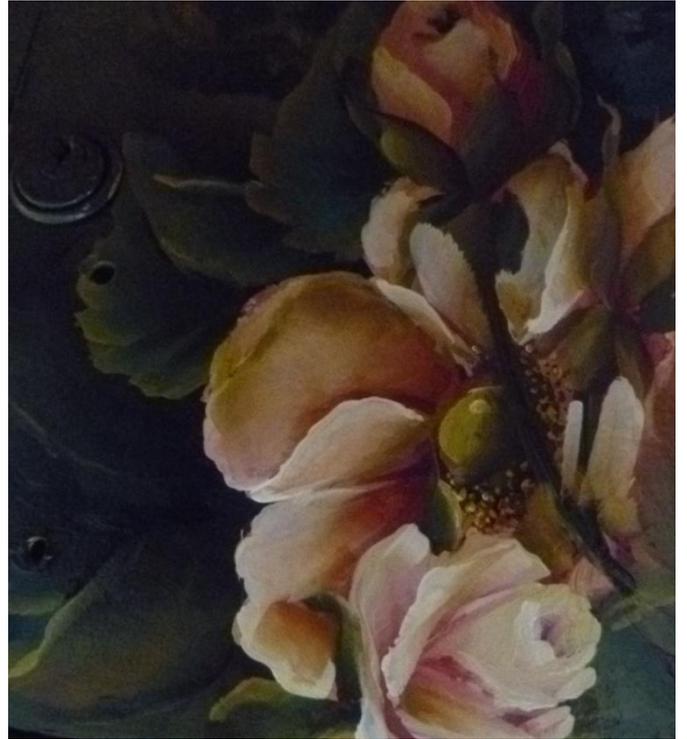
The comment made by Gerhard Richter broaches the idea of the artist as an outcast making do with what he or she has, resonated with me as I fixatedly painted my way around the studio.

Painting is consequently an almost blind, desperate effort, like that of a person abandoned, helpless, in totally incomprehensible surroundings – like that of a person who possesses a given set of tools, materials and abilities and has the urgent desire to build something useful which is not allowed to be a house or a chair or anything else that has a name; who therefore hacks away in the vague hope that by working in a proper, professional way he will ultimately turn out something proper and meaningful. (Batschmann 27)

This practical exploration into obsession, repetition, and celebration was a struggle as at times it appeared fruitless. However, this investigation resulted in a significant epiphany. The experience clarified and reinforced my commitment to core ideas of excess, decorative pleasure and celebration. The driving concept of my work is not something outside of me, but a compulsion that comes from within. Even when I felt happy with the work, I was racked with insecurities: Was my practice too sentimentalized, too decorative or too shallow? On completion of the floral studio I felt less defensive and more secure about my practice. A lot of those things, I had felt were liabilities, had actually become my assets.

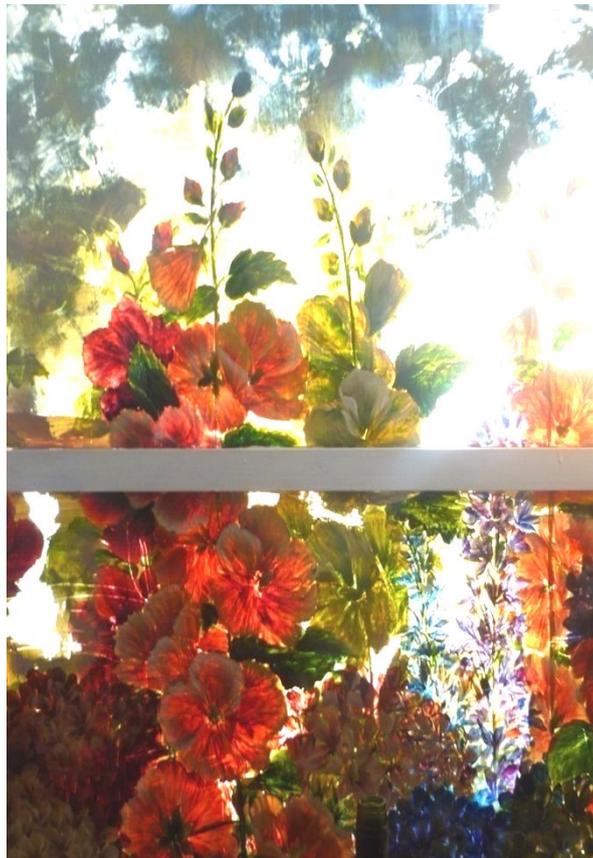
Close-up photographs of the painting in the studio demonstrate painterly concerns explored: colour, transparency, opaqueness, dark and light, thick and thin paint.







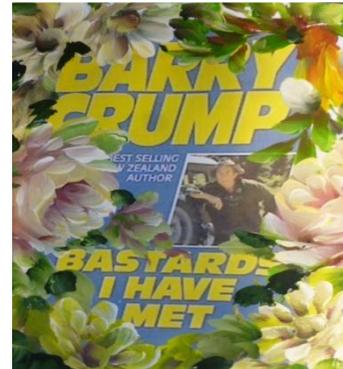
(Detail) painted projector



Also explored were a variety of surfaces including perspex and metal.



In a personal standpoint, having come from a 'woman-centered' (or 'womanist'), craft and domestic background, painting flowers over the studio space was liberating. There had been an ambition to exaggerate and delve into portraying the excessive by being obsessive. The institutional studio space had been transformed into an environment of colourful excess, by the toil of 'women's work', and floral abundance.



Detail of flowers painted over book covers of Colin McCahon and Barry Crump in the studio

While researching the history of the flower in art and its connection to the feminist movement it became apparent that a number of New Zealand's women artists from previous generations had married men who went on to become iconic male figures. Anne McCahon had a promising career as an artist, winning a scholarship and the end of the year art prize at King Edward Technical College- where she met and later married Colin McCahon. Linda Tyler writes in her article *I did not want to be Mrs. Colin; Anne & Colin McCahon*;

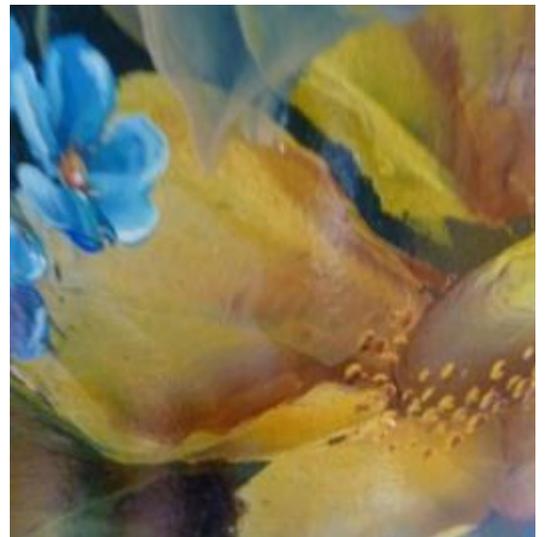
There wasn't enough room in the McCahon's relationship for two painters. Anne, worn down by domestic demands, stepped aside, believing that her art should be sacrificed. (Tyler 45)

Anne McMahan and many others of her generation gave up their dreams and passions to become muses for their artist and writer husbands. And in some cases were abandoned to bring up the family on their own with little financial support while their husbands and partners pursued their dreams.

This investigation allowed me to find a personal status as a woman painter. I am a 'womanist' who acknowledges the work and difficulties some of my predecessors have dealt with and I thank them. Feminism is not my personal vehicle, but I wish to acknowledge the women who have allowed me this status.



The most successful being the overhead projector. The smooth metal surface allowed for fluidity of paint and the fact that it was an item of technology and not a piece of furniture, contributed to the gender dichotomy in my painting practice.



(Detail) Painted projector

## CHAPTER FIVE: The Domestic Petal Meets the Industrial Metal

### 5:1 Slipping the Petal over the Metal

The motivation to shift from board and canvas to a metal surface was not only a practical decision to obtain fluidity of paint over the surface, but a conceptual one. The metal surface combined with the floral contributes to the dichotomy around gender issues concerning the domestic and the industrial space. Slipping the petals over top of the aluminum surface celebrates post-feminist concerns in a gentler, more subtle manner than the previously explored approach of painting flowers over iconic New Zealand male figures on book covers.



*Untitled*, 2012, oil and resin on aluminum, 500 x 300mm



*Flowers on Site*, 2012, oil and resin on aluminium, 1000 x 400mm

An ambition in these works was to leave the aluminium surface exposed in shimmering flecks of swirls and grid patterns representing remnants of wallpaper. These works were relatively small and a decision was made to upscale. Floral still lifes were historically executed on relatively small more intimate formats in comparison to the masculine large scale history paintings. Norman Bryson discusses this in *Looking at the Overlooked* when he explains the meaning of meglography and its opposite rhopography;

... depiction of those things in the world that are great – the legends of the gods, the battle of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from rhopos; trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life and ‘importance’ tramples underfoot. (Bryson 61 )



*The Petal to the Metal*, 2012, acrylic and oil on aluminum, 1500 x 1200mm

The arabesque pattern and rectangular frame exposing metal surface was achieved by painting in the lines with masking fluid before using multiple aerosol colours over the surface. When the rubbery glue like fluid dries it can be peeled off.

Circles play a formal, compositional role by carrying the viewer's eye through the work.

The decision to also create a frame exposing the aluminum using the same process was not successful. It was superfluous and created a static self-conscious element to the work.



*The Petal to the Metal*, 2012, acrylic and oil on aluminum, 1500 x 1200mm

In the reworked painting, the garland becomes more identifiable, as the flowers entwine around the sensuous, circular pattern, reminiscent of a number of visually opulent styles, notably Baroque, Victorian and Art Nouveau.



*Floral Badge*, 2012, diameter oil and resin on aluminum, 700mm

To push the repetitive concept of decorative circular forms further, a decision was made to laser cut the aluminium into a circle format.

Research into decorative, floral borders led to an investigation into the genre of garland paintings that evolved during the Baroque period in response to religious works that had been destroyed after the Reformation in Europe.

## CHAPTER SIX: Floral Garland Paintings

### 6:1 Background to the Garland Paintings

The garland genre, like that of the vanitas painters, belonged to the long Baroque period which lasted from the end of 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The theatrically, exuberant Baroque style focused on movement, colour and sensuality. The garland paintings were extravagantly rich forming a decorative frame around the central image.

Artists who utilized the garland often worked collaboratively. Typically, painters perfected a skill in one subject area – landscape, still life, or the figure and worked with a partner who possessed a complementary skill. The garlands were a compositional garnishing that enhanced the value of the painting as an enjoyable or refined object.



**Figure 27.** Jan Brueghel and Peter Paul Rubens, *Madonna and Child in a Garland of Flowers*, 1616-18

*Madonna and Child in a Garland of Flowers* was a joint collaborative effort by Rubens and Brueghel; the former was excellent at rendering figures, while the latter used his skill in painting flowers. The floral border would have been recognizable with different meanings to viewers at the time, meant to inspire the viewer to delve into the painting as a devotional object because of its religious subject matter. The garland was used as decorative frame to the central image of a painting.

In all collaborative works, the styles used to paint the still life garland and the central images are different simply by virtue of having been done by different hands. The juxtaposition of the two types of painting undermines the kind of illusion commonly developed in 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings.

Collaborative execution drew attention to the images' surfaces; to the way illusion is produced through different kinds of mark making, and to the different visual experiences associated with various painterly styles. In contrast to paintings executed in a single style, where the viewer is transported through the surface of the picture to the fictitious space beyond, garland paintings consistently bring the viewer back to the surface, to the place of the image's making.

Shelley Reed is a contemporary New York based artists who utilizes the garland in classical themes in her large-scale canvases. Reed appropriates and collages images from Dutch Baroque painters, draining them of colour with her strict grisaille palette, suggesting photography while also making the works appear stark and nightmarish. Removing pigments allows her to focus on composition, perspective, light, shadow, texture and rhythm in her work.



**Figure 28** Shelley Reed, *Untitled*, 2006



**Figure 29** Shelley Reed *Untitled*, 2006

There are a number of contemporary artists who have skills in different genres and styles that could work collaboratively together and this is an avenue of interest worthy of further investigation.

## 6:2 Incorporating Landscape into the Garland.

### Notions of Nostalgia and Sentiment Investigated

The addition of the landscape genre as the central image in the garland series was to allow a richer conversation and test fresh spatial propositions. Landscape painting has been historically located as a male terrain. By the inclusion of the landscape in flower paintings, attention is drawn to the ubiquitous binary coupling of women and flowers and men with culture and commerce associated with landscape painting.

Immigrant English landscape artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century presented paintings of the New Zealand landscape to Europe in ways that attempted to encourage emigrants. New Zealand was portrayed as a utopian ideal to a culture in Britain that was disillusioned with life in the Industrial Revolution. Artists working within the landscape genre projected a landscape distorted by the concepts of the ideal and the sublime. The concepts of the sublime are recognized in John Gully's *The Chimney in Milford Sound* and William Hodges, *A View of Cape Stephens with Waterspouts* with the small scale of the ships dwarfed against the superior power and scale of nature.



**Figure 30** William Hodges, *A View of Cape Stephens with Water Spouts*, 1776

Francis Pound, author of *Frames on the Land Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, discusses the imposition of European painting genres such as the topographic, the ideal, the sublime and the picturesque on our landscape and explains that the very idea of landscape is a European construct imported to New Zealand.

If the landscape genre be the ideal, the artist is enabled by it to make you feel 'how beautiful'; if topography, 'that's how it is'; if sublime, 'how overwhelming. (Pound 14)

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century English landscape painters, such as John Gully, Eugene von Guerard, Charles Blomfield and Barr Clark Hoyte, came to New Zealand and painted soft, atmospheric landscapes, which,



rather than depict the local environment and harsher New Zealand light, communicated nostalgic ideas of their romanticized European countryside. These artists depicted a selected vision, aiming to familiarize the unfamiliar. Stylistic concerns of light, atmosphere, chiaroscuro and subordination of detail were used to achieve a unified view, taking preference over pragmatic observation.

**Figure 31** John Gully, *The Chimney Milford Sound*, 1878

In comparison John Buchanan was a topographical painter. Buchanan had been trained as a draughtsman, not an artist, which meant he portrayed a more honest depiction of the landscape and was free from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic conventions of his contemporaries. As a surveyor and topographic artist Buchanan's emphasis was on line and form as his intention was to convey a reasonably accurate sense of place resulting in a more honest response to the landscape.



**Figure 32** John Buchanan *Milford Sound* 1863

In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century settlers viewed the New Zealand landscape as wild and uncivilized. The introduction of flora and fauna from Britain was an attempt to create an emotional bond between New Zealand and the mother country. European settlers were feeling nostalgic for their common garden flowers dahlias, zinnias, roses, hydrangeas and hollyhocks and fruit trees.

The word nostalgia comes from Greek roots, nostos meaning 'return home' and algia 'longing'. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement and a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed. It looks for memorable signs for a home that is both spiritual and physical."

(Boym

The sentimental also parallels the picturesque and the ideal. Sentimentality could be described as sentiment polluted as it simplifies and generalizes the object of our attention. Sentimentality depends upon quick, predictable and familiar reactions to evoke memory and nostalgia. Kitsch is potentially where sentimentality and art come together and maybe conveniently defined as an aesthetic form of lying.



Recent examples of coded messages used to manipulate and evoke a sentimental response can be seen in the gilded frames that have been installed in our parks by Auckland City Council. The large ornate frames are strategically placed so that when the scene is viewed through them we think 'how beautiful' or how 'awesome'.

The council's *National Masterpiece Project* uses the frames to 'brand' the local environment and landscape. While the concept and position of these large ornate decorative frames connects Aotearoa to its European heritage of the picturesque, they also make an effort to connect to the local and the indigenous. National iconic flora and fauna are moulded into the European Renaissance style frames potentially bordering on kitsch. This gives viewers the opportunity to put themselves into the frame creating a nostalgic moment to capture on camera.

## 6:3 A Rosier View



*Untitled*, 2012, mixed media on board, 900 x 700mm

Using found imagery was a helpful strategy employed to begin a new series following a shift in direction.

A black aerosol can was used lightly to achieve the misty, nostalgic atmosphere to John Constable's *The Cornfield*. The central faded image was left untouched as the intention was to juxtapose the two painting styles.

The monochrome garland draws the viewer into a landscape of the romantic English countryside.



John Constable (1776-1837) was known principally for his English romantic landscape paintings of his surrounding district Dedham Lane, later becoming known as Constable Country.

However, evidence was uncovered by historian and writer Dr Cathy Pearson that the painting *The Cornfield*, was an amalgamation of different pastoral scenes and this location on the Essex-Suffolk border never existed.

Constable was a master at painting skies, achieving unique atmospheric effects, which he deemed the 'chief organ of sentiment'.

**Figure 33** John Constable, *The Cornfield*, 1826,



All Seasons 2012, mixed media and resin on board 850 x 600mm

A garland of native and introduced flora and fauna surrounds the landscape of an original painting of snowy mountains recovered from a skip. The painting was recreated with a cottage overlooking a lake with English cottage garden flowers growing wild in the bush.

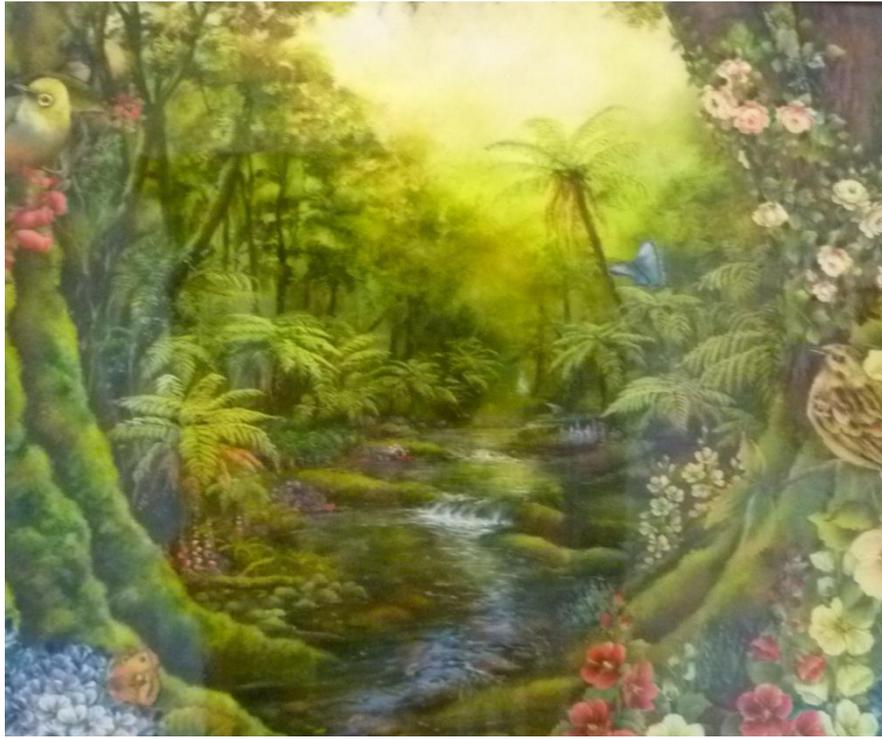
Emotionally coded imagery is used to evoke an emotional response. Spring flowers, bird's eggs, butterflies surround snowy mountains. The result could be described as 'chocolate boxy' and reminiscent of American artist Thomas Kinkaid, known as the 'Painter of Light'. The American artist's English thatched cottages are nestled amongst summer gardens whilst smoke swirls out of the chimney and every window and door exude a soft yellow glow. A high gloss finish was applied to the work as artists that exploit this kind of imagery to reinforce sentimental content also use formal devices such as clarity, harmony symmetry and plush shiny surfaces.



*The Piano*, 2012, acrylic and oil on board, 700 x 500mm

A quote from *Flower as Image* resonated with the ideas being explored in the floral framed landscapes.

The world is an anthology of people and the multiculture of flowers teaches us to respect this. Flowers are anti-racist. The idea of love of flowers as the basis for an understanding of the multicultural is not least interesting in view of the fact that many flowers we cultivate are immigrants. (Tojner 32)



*Oakley Creek in Heaven* , 2012, oil and resin on board, 600 x500 mm

No ideal landscape was ever meant to precisely record a specific and actual place. Each was imagined, and offered the pleasures of formal and poetic arrangement, the composition of nature with the rules. The aim was to present a perfected nature, pruned of fault and accident. (Pound 21)

*Oakley Creek in Heaven* was painted from a collage of photographs to create a semitropical paradise. An idealized landscape is framed with both native and introduced flora and fauna. Resin was applied to the surface, which poses for an interesting debate on how it impacts on the reading of the work. It objectifies the painting as it prohibits the viewer and conceals the handmade mark of the painter. The resin finish while plasticizing and diluting the act of painting evokes notions of nostalgia and kitsch.

The use of a traditional Renaissance style frame to contrast with the contemporary resin finish was unsuccessful, as once framed, resin drips were no longer visible and the painting read as a print under glass. The resin finish created issues with glare and photographing the work. However, the frame within the frame was an interesting concept and one that motivated the following series of work.



*Glancing West* Acrylic and oil on canvas 1480mm x 1100mm 2012

The strategy of reworking over old paintings as a means to experiment with this concept was investigated and a landscape was incorporated into the gilded frame of *Glancing West*. This initiated the next series of work.



*Love Lies Bleeding*, 2012, acrylic and oil on board, 1500 x 1200mm

A more vibrant outer floral border, reflecting the harsher New Zealand light, is juxtaposed with the inner garland framing the landscape; reminiscent of the more subdued palette used by some immigrant 19<sup>th</sup> century English painters.



*Dawn Chorus in Whenuapai*, 2013, acrylic and oil on aluminum, 1500 x 1200mm

*In Dawn Chorus* the misty, atmospheric areas, lie between the frames.



(Detail) *Love Lies Bleeding, Dawn Chorus*

The intention of unifying the two garland frames motivated a change of format. Replacing the outer rectangular garland with a circle format resulted in the following series.



*Hydrangea and Puawhananga*, 2012, acrylic and oil on aluminum, 1200mm diameter

In *Hydrangea and Puawhananga*, the landscape is Brody's Creek, a place where the family would holiday up north. Nostalgic and sentimental ideals around combining culture and gender are playfully explored. The house sparrows, in a slightly superior position to the bush fantail, are eying each other up amongst the introduced hydrangea and native clematis (Puawhananga). In the central image, the English country garden flower hollyhocks, lavender and roses are growing wild in the native New Zealand setting.

The complementary colours of red/orange and blue/green created two unsympathetic solid masses of colour juxtaposed next to each other. The hydrangeas contrasted discordantly with the white clematis. As the intention was to create a unified idealized vision the colours were reworked.



*Hydrangea and Puanbananga 2*, 2013, oil and acrylic on aluminum, 1200 x1200mm

By incorporating more analogous colours into the work the painting is more unified. The decorative floral border of blues and greens and unsaturated reds into pinks and mauve, melded harmoniously into the landscape. The monarch butterfly was painted over, as it was superfluous to the intention of the work.



Detail) *Hydrangea and Puanhananga 2*,



*Whenuapai, (Good Soil)* 2012, oil and acrylic on aluminium, 1300mm diameter

In order to suggest notions of nostalgia and ideas of a lost paradise, in *Whenuapai (Good Soil)*, strategies of pentimento, grisaille, techniques of glazing and airbrushing over the landscape were utilized.

## 6:4 From the Garland to the Wreath



*Blue September*, 2012, mixed media on aluminium, 1800x 1200mm

In *Blue September* the juxtaposition of the decorative floral border with the central image of an industrial cityscape was a shift from the idealized rural scenes previously painted. The landscape in the centre is the view from my parent's apartment. The sky tower was bathed in blue light for the month of September to promote the Prostate Cancer Foundation's awareness campaign called *Blue September*. The reflection of the sky tower in the water is modified to suggest a cross.

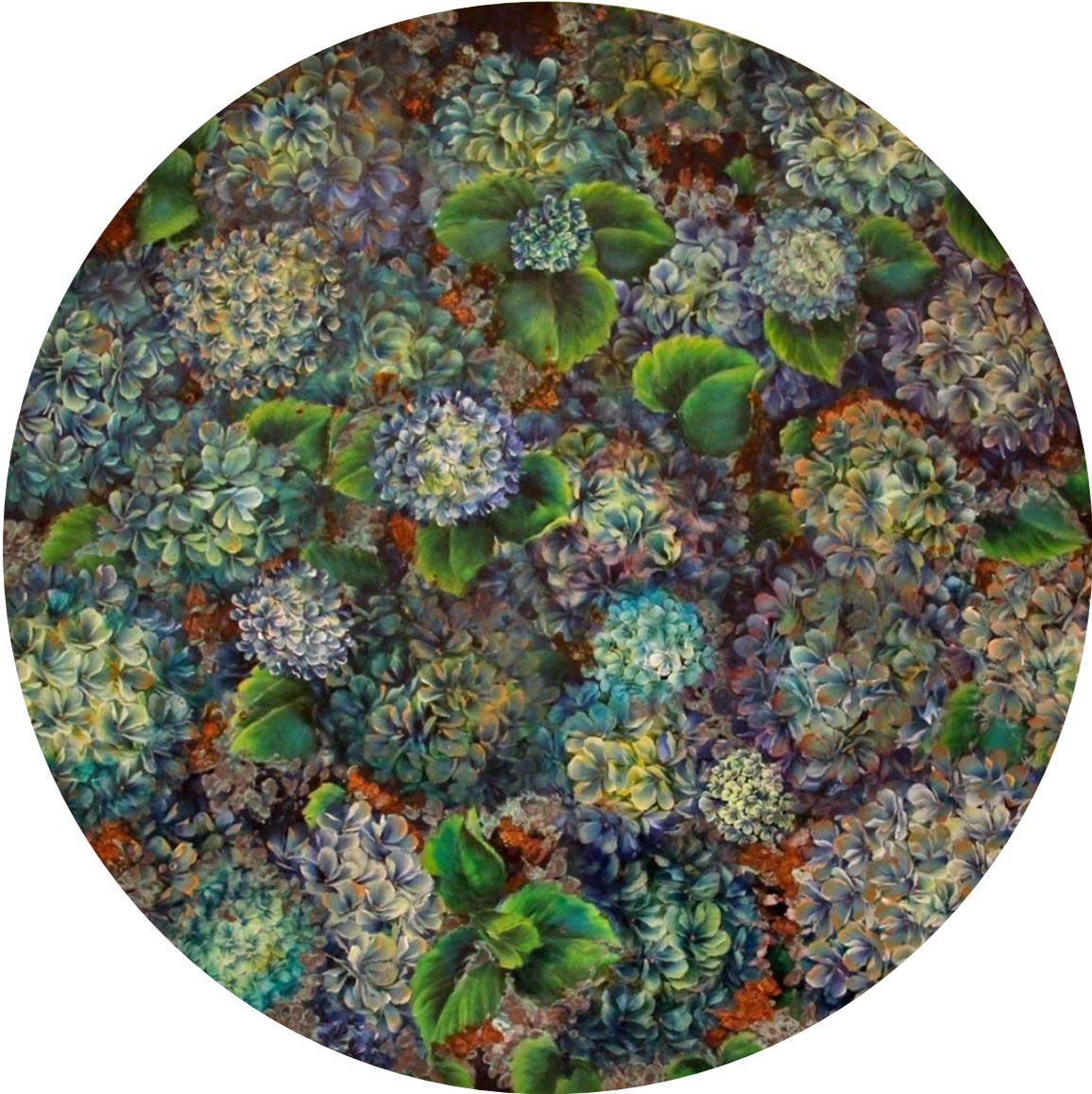
The painting was executed when my father was terminally ill. The garland had become associated with the funeral and memorial wreath.

When life gets challenging, the best opening strategy has been to return to painting habits and practices that were in play the last time I felt fulfilled with the work so a decision was made to return to the therapeutic obsessive, compulsive nature of my painting.

The fear of death marks most flower pictures. Although they rarely explicitly show death, throughout the history of art flowers have often almost automatically – even in their splendid time – been interpreted as symbols of transience or *vanitas*. However magnificent flower pieces may be, they also strike a melancholy note. You cannot see the beauty without at the same time thinking decay. The perennial strength of the language of flowers in visual art is presumably due to this dual symbolic function. (Tojner 24)

## CHAPTER 7: Chance Favours the Prepared Mind

### 7:1 Flower Power



*Rusty Blue*, 2013, mixed media on aluminium, 1000mm diameter



*Copper Red*, 2013, mixed media on aluminium, 900mm diameter

The iron and rust solutions applied in (*Rusty Blue*), and copper and verdigris in (*Copper Red*), originally used as a substrate, are applied in combination with the practised technique of acrylic and oil glazing producing an effect that merged areas of background and foreground, figure and field.

A lot is left to chance with these products as the chemical reaction determines the aesthetic outcome in the variations of colour intensity, texture and pattern that evolve over time.

The areas that I feel work successfully determine where the paint is applied and these sections are protected with a clear medium, where as unsuccessful, patchy areas are painted over.

Having always had control over the application of paint meant this resulted in some interesting outcomes.

Applying heavier layers of the solution on leaves and flowers created a thick uneven textured surface that gave the appearance of something living, growing and spreading.



(Detail) *Copper Red*

The chemical solutions continue to react with each other and as a consequence it can take weeks to attain the desired effect. In order to achieve faster results acrylic enamel paint was investigated as a means to merge figure and field.

Flowers are no longer anchored to a surface and have a freedom to regenerate in pictorial space. The hard edges differentiating figure from field become more seamless and forms begin to hybridize. The pleasure in detail is intensified as it's the icing on the cake.

The shift in direction makes available new experiences, possibilities and challenges.

Future work is intended to retain the essence of detailed rendering of realistic painting techniques merging with the fluid physicality of paint.



*Florafantasy*, 2013, Acrylic and enamel on aluminium, 900x500





*Floraculture*, 2013, mixed media on aluminium, 1800x1200 mm

## CONCLUSION:

This project acknowledges the significance of the flower as being the core subject matter in my art making practice. It documents a particular journey of the flower within a contemporary painting practice. The body of work produced, demonstrates how one's personal stories in combination with an inquiry into the vanitas painters and the broader historical context of the floral motif as subject matter, can shape the contours of a painting practice.

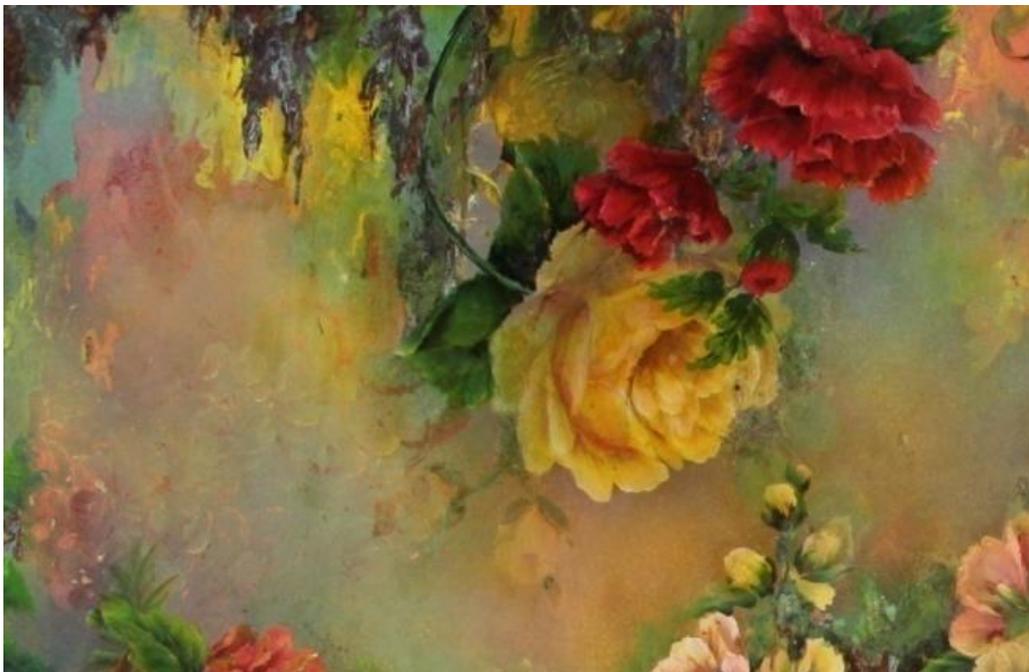
I have drawn upon significant personal narratives inherent in the experience of growing up within a large creative family that revelled in gardening and were actively engaged in a broad variety of craft practices. The handmade, which was highly valued, has driven the crafting of this body of work. My formative years were spent within and amongst the floral themed walls, furniture and floors of an overly decorated Victorian villa. Outside the home through the floral themed leadlight front door lay my parents business; a flower nursery nestled into the edge of the Waitemata harbour. The flower theme merged inside and outside. The confluence of personal history, my fascination and proficiency within the craft of flower painting and my inquiry into the significance of flowers within an historical context has initiated and driven this body of work.

*Flowers in a Contemporary Painting Practice* distinguishes the flower as a distinct theme for aesthetic decoration but flowers also serve other functions aside from the aesthetic enrichment of cultivated societies; they play a significant role in many ceremonial contexts. They are fundamental to courtship as they are to all the rites of passage from baptism to burial. Maintaining an explorative approach through an exacting series of visual inquiries was critical to the realization of this project and has delivered unique ways of communicating the sustainability of the flower and the gratification that it engenders.

Repetitive, decorative craft; often referred to as sitting in the realm of women's domestic space, is the practical foundation for this painting practice. These learnt traditional decorative techniques merged with the learnt technical painting skills used by vanitas painters combined to form the basis of an individual style. Contemporary materials amalgamated with traditional painting strategies to create illusionistic depth to sustain and acknowledge the work done by our predecessors and old masters. Elements of still life, portrait and landscape genres have been incorporated within the floral garland paintings creating more spatial, technical and conceptual exploration. While flowers are examined in the context of a number of genres; the flowers remained the main focus of the paintings.

The quotidian and everyday are elevated and celebrated on large-scale industrial aluminized surfaces. The floral motif is used to develop and investigate painting concerns such as thin, transparent layers and thick opaque application of paint and along with these formal elements such as colour, scale, format and composition are also interrogated.

This project has driven an engagement that is far from over and is eagerly considering new transformations and investigating ways of reconceptualising and rejuvenating notions of flora and fauna, and in particular the flower. Recent paintings are large in scale and less ordered as if communicating a desire to burst out of the frame. I intend to combine the exacting craft techniques of realistic painting with a more relaxed gestural paint application. This shift in direction proposes a different response and is opening up a variety of experimental challenges. The painting surface operates as a social platform whereby interactions are constructed through painterly applications combined with scale and motif. Contrasting painterly effects enhance the social space evoking the enduring beauty of nature and its verisimilitude in painting.



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## Image Reference

- Figure 1** *Whenuapai Family Home*, R. Cervin, 2008, oil on canvas 600x400mm 9
- Figure 2** *Whenuapai Through the Fretwork Frame*, 2008, oil on canvas 600x400mm 9
- Figure 3** *Untitled* Lisa LoPiccolo <http://frenchgardenhouse.com/blog/?p=67/> 11
- Figure 4** *Untitled*, Johan Laurentz Jensen <http://www.palettemuseum.com/?p=221> 11
- Figure 5** *A Table of Desert* Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1640  
<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/table-desserts> 12
- Figure 6** *Still Life with Violin*, Jacques- Samuel Bernard, 1657  
[http://worldvisitguide.com/oeuvre/photo\\_ME0000102149.html](http://worldvisitguide.com/oeuvre/photo_ME0000102149.html) 16
- Figure 7** *Vase of Flowers* Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1660  
[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/heem\\_jan\\_davidsz\\_de.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/heem_jan_davidsz_de.html) 17
- Figure 8** Detail *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit* Jan van Huysum,  
<http://www.headforart.com/2010/03/01/early-bloomers/> 18
- Figure 9** *Still Life* Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1648  
[http://www.allposters.fr/-st/Cornelis-de-Heem-Affiches\\_c64950\\_.htm](http://www.allposters.fr/-st/Cornelis-de-Heem-Affiches_c64950_.htm) 19
- Figure 10** *The Mona Lisa* Leonardo De Vinci, 1503-06 <http://monalisa.org/> 20
- Figure 11** *Still Life with Fruit* Michelangelo Caravaggio, 1605  
<http://artblart.com/tag/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio/> 20
- Figure 12** *Boy with Basket of Fruit* Michelangelo Caravaggio, 1593  
<http://artblart.com/tag/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio/> 20
- Figure 13** *Grande Odalisque* Jean Ingres, 1814  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/38.65> 21
- Figure 14** *Grande Odalisque*, Jean Ingres, [http://www.artble.com/artists/jean\\_auguste\\_dominique\\_ingres/paintings/la\\_grande\\_odalisque](http://www.artble.com/artists/jean_auguste_dominique_ingres/paintings/la_grande_odalisque) 22
- Figure 15** *Roses de Nice on a table* Fantin-Latour,  
<http://venetianred.net/2010/02/24/the-paradox-of-henri-fantin-latour/> 28
- Figure 16** *Bouquet of Flowers*, Gustave Courbet.  
<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/gustave-courbet/bouquet-of-flowers-1862> 29
- Figure 17** *Glycines* Claude Monet.  
<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/7208148@N02/4786202956/> 30
- Figure 18** *Chrysanthemums* Claude Monet. <http://www.loveoilpaintings.com/chrysanthemums-claude-monet-oil-paintings-reproductions-1020> 30

<b>Figure 19</b> <i>Chrysanthemums</i> Claude Monet <a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/search/Christmas%20Roses,%201883%20-%20Claude%20Monet/1">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/search/Christmas%20Roses,%201883%20-%20Claude%20Monet/1</a>	30
<b>Figure 20</b> <i>Vase of Flowers</i> Rachel Ruysch 1730 <a href="http://www.hoogsteder.com/publications/journals/journal-7/ruysch/ruysch-2">http://www.hoogsteder.com/publications/journals/journal-7/ruysch/ruysch-2</a>	31
<b>Figure 21</b> <i>Glimmering</i> Stephanie Peek, 2009, <a href="http://venetianred.net/category/bay-area-art-scene/page/4/">http://venetianred.net/category/bay-area-art-scene/page/4/</a>	31
<b>Figure 22</b> <i>Requiem</i> Stephanie Peek 2009 <a href="http://venetianred.net/2009/09/23/artists-in-conversation-stephanie-peeks-uncertain-riches/">http://venetianred.net/2009/09/23/artists-in-conversation-stephanie-peeks-uncertain-riches/</a>	31
<b>Figure 23</b> Omega Workshop interior. <a href="http://littleaugury.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html">http://littleaugury.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html</a> .	45
<b>Figure 24</b> Drawing Room of the Bloomsbury house <a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/periodproperty/8541562/Charleston-the-Bloomsbury-Groups-favourite-house.html">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/periodproperty/8541562/Charleston-the-Bloomsbury-Groups-favourite-house.html</a>	45
<b>Figure 25</b> <i>Heartfelt</i> Miriam Shapiro 1985 <a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/miriam-schapiro/mode/all-paintings">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/miriam-schapiro/mode/all-paintings</a>	46
<b>Figure 26</b> <i>The Kitchen</i> Liza Lou, (1991-1995) <a href="http://www.artslant.com/ew/events/show/55611-bizarre-perfection">http://www.artslant.com/ew/events/show/55611-bizarre-perfection</a>	48
<b>Figure 27</b> Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, <i>Madonna and Child in a Garland of Flowers</i> , c. 1616-18 <a href="http://www.cavetocanvas.com/post/17716013003/jan-brueghel-the-elder-and-peter-paul-rubens">http://www.cavetocanvas.com/post/17716013003/jan-brueghel-the-elder-and-peter-paul-rubens</a>	65
<b>Figure 28</b> Shelley Reed, <i>Untitled</i> , oil on canvas <a href="http://www.clarkgallery.com/artists/shelley-reed">http://www.clarkgallery.com/artists/shelley-reed</a>	66
<b>Figure 29</b> Shelley Reed <i>Untitled</i> <a href="http://www.clarkgallery.com/artists/shelley-reed">http://www.clarkgallery.com/artists/shelley-reed</a>	66
<b>Figure 30</b> William Hodges <i>A View of Cape Stephens with Water Spouts</i> <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hodges_A_View_of_Cape_Stephens_in_Cook's_Straits_New_Zealand_with_Waterspout_1776..jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hodges_A_View_of_Cape_Stephens_in_Cook's_Straits_New_Zealand_with_Waterspout_1776..jpg</a>	67
<b>Figure 31</b> John Gully <i>The Chimney Milford Sound</i> <a href="http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/the-collection/browse-artwork/261/the-chimney,-milford-sound">http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/the-collection/browse-artwork/261/the-chimney,-milford-sound</a>	68
<b>Figure 32</b> John Buchanan <i>Milford Sound</i> 1863 <a href="http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/McCLett-fig-McCLettP005a.html">http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/McCLett-fig-McCLettP005a.html</a>	68
<b>Figure 33</b> John Constable 1826 <i>The Cornfield</i> <a href="http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/john-constable-the-cornfield">http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/john-constable-the-cornfield</a>	70