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An Uncomfortable Sense Of Beauty

From their first major collaborative works, New Zealanders Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams (the Crystal Chain Gang) have fueled excitement about their practice as glass artists. They make intimate domestic objects and immersive gallery installations.

By Warren Feeney

Working from their studio in the small town of Martinborough, northeast of Wellington, for the past 14 years, the Crystal Chain Gang made their international debut in a survey exhibition of New Zealand glass, *Southern Exposure: 25 Glass Artists from New Zealand* at the Ebeltoft Glass Museum in Denmark in 2004. They have sustained the enthusiastic reception this work received by persisting in taking glass to places it never imagined it could go to more than a decade ago, in works like their most recent glass chandelier, *Light at the end of the Tunnel*—an installation branded with the opulence and excess of the best of their work—recently at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt.

The exhibition of *SlaughterhouseME42* in Denmark in 2004, of a reconfiguration of a sheep's carcass skinned and hung for processing, was constructed from almost a thousand glass roses positioned and held to a metal skeleton frame. The work was acquired by the Danish Museum for its collection.

SlaughterhouseME42 spoke to both European audiences and New Zealanders, drawing historical connections between the Northern continent and the Pacific that were confronting and uncomfortable. As a primary source of income for New Zealand, farming and the sheep industry symbolize the excesses and successes of 19th-century colonization and the clearing of native flora and fauna for economic develop and trade with Europe. *SlaughterhouseME42* was a perverse bouquet, with its glass roses representing the return of a native European plant that had been transported around the world to the Pacific nearly 200 hundred years ago.

In the first decade of the 21st century, this uneasy reminder from the Crystal Chain Gang, about the shared histories of cultures on opposite sides of the world, was timely. In 2003, New Zealand's representative at the *Venice Biennale*, Michael Stevenson, had installed *This is the Trekka*, an artwork that featured a 'locally' assembled 1970s' car in the New Zealand pavilion in Venice. In reality, the 'New Zealand' Trekka had been constructed from motor parts imported from Czechoslovakia.



Christal Chain Gang, *Walter Dear Walter*, 2012, glass, brass, steel, 70 x 66 cm diameter. Private collection.

This is the Trekka revealed and confronted the irony of New Zealand's ambitions to compete on the international economic stage and its liaison with a European communist country in the closing decades of the Cold War. Politically, both Stevenson and the Crystal Chain Gang considered the international reach of Western culture, globalization, and capitalism, confronting associations between Europe and the economies of the Pacific in works that were simultaneously humorous and prickly in their messages.

For the Crystal Chain Gang, this open-ended approach to the alleged realities of Western history has been complemented by a democratic attitude as to where their arts are positioned; decorative and applied arts, design, sculpture, and political/conceptual art, all of these traditional categories and definitions of the arts are important to their practice. If there has been a constant in their work over the past decade, it is in their observations about the distant and dysfunctional nature of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Curated and toured by the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui in 2011, the exhibition *Fancy Fool's Flight* revealed something of this curious disconnection in works that looked like a belated heir to Hieronymus Bosch's *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500). Outwardly, the works in *Fancy Fool's Flight* possessed the sumptuousness of 18th-century European decorative arts, but the translucent beauty of their forms and materials, and their meticulously crafted finish, was undermined by the enigmatic nature of these images confronting the gallery visitor.

At the center of this exhibition was an installation of 15 cast-glass vessels, *Fancy Fools* (2011) occupying a pristine-white table. Like mutant whiskey decanters formed in animal and human form these vessels fluctuated somewhere between high art's faith in the beauty of skillfully made objects and a haunting vision of humankind's engagement with nature that can be traced back to popular science-fiction novels such as H. G. Well's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896).

The Crystal Chain Gang acknowledges that there has been a deliberate move away from the more direct narratives in earlier works like *SlaughterhouseME42*. "Over our making history we have produced work that is conceptual and work that is emotive. We see the creation of work that is visceral just as valid as work that speaks to the head. We have not wanted it to become didactic, so by diminishing the narrative we can allow the work to speak in a more



Christal Chain Gang, *SlaughterhouseME42*, 2003, glass, steel, silicone, 124 x 53 x 34 cm. Collection of Glasmuseet Ebeltoft. Photograph: Leigh Mitchell-Anyon.

open-ended fashion and not constrict us to becoming clichéd or contrived.

"There is a more intuitive approach and this has taken experience and confidence to achieve. It is something that we have grown into. We always like to start with the rationale and the theory to give the work layers, and to engage the brain. However, we equally see the importance of a visceral and ethereal engagement.

"Our collaborative practice has also evolved to shape outcomes. We use each other's strengths to determine what direction we are going to pursue. Projects need to be strong on concept and ideas before we commence making. Then once we have sorted the 'head' out, we make and let processes inform and develop the work."

Yet, this is not to suggest the Crystal Chain Gang's work is no longer political. Exhibited at the Dowse Museum

in 2012, *Walter Dear Walter* was an opulent, trademark glass chandeliers, consisting of numerous glass-molded *huia* feathers (from a native bird species now extinct) that pointedly commented on the 19th-century New Zealand ornithologist Walter Buller (1838–1906). *Walter Dear Walter* was explicit in its message assuming the guise of a luminous chandelier, it revealed the gap between the promise and reality. "Chandeliers are all about excess. Let's make them as excessive as we can. We view chandeliers as objects loaded with history—the history of glass, and just as importantly, social history and, in particular, colonial history and its murky past. We still have a need and urge to continue to explore the chandelier. It is a great vehicle to work with.

"Throughout all our work we have looked at notions of excess and greed.

Humans' obsessive ability to plunder the world in search of exotic beauty never ceases to amaze us. This perplexing trait feeds us conceptually and has done so from early works to the present (*R.I.P.*, *Hung*, *Drawn and Slaughtered*, *Loot*, *Fancy Fools*, and even our humble budgie works). We like to seduce the viewer with grandeur whilst subversively being political. Birds have played a major part in New Zealand historically and we have found ourselves naturally drawn to using them in our work. We view them as New Zealand's crown jewels, our exotic objects of desire, and our royalty. So we use them recurring throughout our practice as signifiers. They are also important in how they speak of our place and how they have been affected historically."

If this notion of excess and grandness is essential to the chandelier as the most magnificent of historical decorative furnishings, it is not just the stories and agendas that it embodies that are source material for the Crystal Chain Gang, but also the experience of this object's transparency and ephemerality of light and color. In *Walter Dear Walter* this encounter with the sumptuous and seductive beauty of the work may initially seem at odds with the politics of the work, but it plays an important role in attracting and sustaining the interest of the unsuspecting gallery visitor.

"We exploit the qualities of all materials we work with. We try to bring ethereal qualities to our work and the use of light is a way we find this works successfully. With glass as a primary medium we like to be considerate in how it interacts with light. We are also purposeful in how we use color; to evoke memory, play with the form, and evoke an emotive response. We use glass to play with light in a way unique to the medium. We treat surfaces to allow glass to penetrate or not depending on how we want the work to be responded to. We don't set out to exploit the medium to seduce the viewer. However, we do like the medium's ability to seduce the viewer with its jewel-like qualities, whilst enabling us to have subversive elements in the work that are hidden beneath the surface."

In recent exhibitions the Crystal Chain Gang has also begun to exploit the possibilities of the dark opacity of glass. At The National in Christchurch in 2015, the exhibition *Clear Cut* included a number of works



Christal Chain Gang, Light at the end of the Tunnel, 2016, glass, steel, wood, LED, 230 x 120 cm diameter. Courtesy: The National and Crystal Chain Gang.

that were anything but clear in the impenetrable blackness of their surfaces and their hybrid forms and storylines. *Pop Rock* took on the life of an evolving crossbreed of recycled glass that had become

king-pin on a mountain of toothpaste-squeezed plaster, proudly intent on delivering its best visual pun.

Light at the end of the Tunnel, an extravagant chandelier installation that opened at the Dowse in the group exhibition, *Solo 2016: Six Wellington Artists*, revealed that their interest in the macabre and Gothic (evident as early as 2003 in *SlaughterhouseME42*) also remained important to their work, but now with a greater emphasis upon formalist concerns that explore and further highlight the qualities of glass. "We have based this current chandelier on cut crystals, so have used both press-molded cut crystal drops and hand-molded crystal forms. We have stripped all avian references out and have looked at the first 'rock crystal' chandeliers as our starting point. The hand-crafted crystal drops and



Christal Chain Gang, Pop Rock, 2015, glass, plaster, 25 x 32 x 21 cm diameter. Courtesy: The National.

oversize diamonds relate obviously to the history of the chandelier but these have all been given a purposeful sense of un-refinement. We have used clear and black throughout the chandelier to evoke a sense of an ominous presence and used a single interior light to project light and shadow to the floor and beyond. The use of a hexagonal-shaped, red carpet reinforced the crystal form and created a palatial sense to the work, allowing the light projection to play against it.

“We are continuing to research for chandeliers and are trying to plan a trip to Europe and India to visit Baccarat chandelier works and immerse ourselves in some significant chandeliers. We are interested in exploring the immediate environments of the chandeliers and would like to explore incorporating interpretations



Christal Chain Gang, installation view of *Fancy Fools Flight*.

of these with the chandelier works, creating environments for the chandeliers that comprise the 'room' and are not solely about the chandelier.

"The aesthetics of beauty is important to us; however, we also have an influence of the Gothic, (carcass work, cut work, and chandelier work). These works are not easily regarded as beautiful but are works that have substance and presence. We use opaque glass to add weight to work and to provide illusion and a sense of surprise and ambiguity. There is an uncomfortable sense of beauty about what we do." Δ

Dr. Warren Feeney is an art historian and writer, Adjunct Fellow in the School of Humanities at the University of Canterbury and a regular contributor to newspapers and magazines and online forums for the arts.



Above from left: *Christal Chain Gang, Mine tick tick tick*, 2015, glass, 37 (h) x 18 cm diameter. *Christal Chain Gang, Heist*, 2015, glass, plaster, 48 (h) x 28 cm diameter. *Christal Chain Gang, Prodigy*, 2015, 48 (h) x 28 cm diameter. Courtesy: The National.