

Intention to perception — bridging the gap

Explanatory text with art works can sometimes just muddy the waters

Sometimes there is a gap between the artist's intention and the viewer's perception of a work. These days most exhibitions are accompanied by some text and, of course, the titles of works should make clear the artist's intentions. Yet the doubt remains that if we didn't have these guides, would the purely visual experience enable us to appreciate the artist's aims?

The exhibition at Whitespace by **Graham Bennett**, the Christchurch artist who made the fine piece in front of the new gallery, is a case in point. His show, called *Auger Augur*, is accompanied by a commentary full of word play. Discussing the tall piece that gives its name to the show, it typically talks about "Making a hole in order to understand the whole".

The sculpture itself is a beautifully crafted twisting piece in fretted stainless steel hung from the ceiling and ends in a sphere of wood swinging just clear of a pedestal on the floor. It's a fascinating thing in itself but is expected to carry a meaning that includes "speculation" and "risk management". It's lovely, but risk management does not come to mind.

A series of five pieces all owe their origins to scales, weighing and measuring. Precise balances allow the work to be gently moved and pointers to move across a scale. These hold up cupped or conical forms that hold elements made precious by the context. Typical is one called *Weight of Evidence*, *Wait of Evidence* with samples of wood, earth, cow dung, water and milk powder.

A main factor in their undeniable elegance is intricately contrived balance, most convincing in *Gauge* where circular elements make a stand on the floor supporting tall plinths topped by callipers. They are the pivot point for a curved shape with a stone at one end and an arrow at the other. Like other works, it makes reference to trig stations.



T J McNamara

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It's impossible not to admire the inventive design, engineering skill and craftsmanship of these works as well as their intriguing shapes. But for all their appeal, they don't carry the weight of meaning the accompanying commentary suggests.

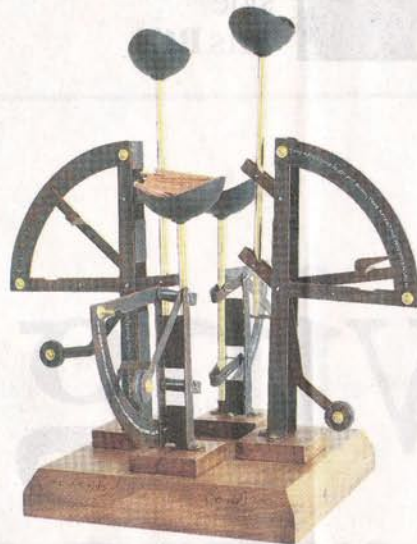
The spectacular exhibition of portrait painting at Orexart by **Stephen Allwood** raises other questions. There's no doubt he is expert at catching a likeness and modelling a face, and the show's principal delight is the rich handling of paint.

Sunlight playing on these more-than-life-size faces creates an energetic drama, sometimes increased by the use of sunglasses. The most striking work is called *Self-portrait* where two images of the artist with camera are reflected in shades worn by a young woman.

Equally intriguing are six portraits of the same woman expressing different emotions, some with open mouth, more with closed lips. The whole impression is joyousness and the joy in the handling of paint as it shapes chins, noses and lips.

The works, which have no background or special setting, convey a strong sense of personality apart from the one of a film star, obviously not an acquaintance of the artist.

One work engages with a problem that's intrigued painters for centuries



Time Weights by Graham Bennett (top); **Self-Portrait** by Stephen Allwood (above right); **How I Want To Live Each Day** by Elliot Collins (above).
Pictures / Sarah Ivey

— how to paint half the face in the shadow of a hat and the lower half in full sunlight, yet retain the continuity of the flesh. Allwood has a fair shot at it in *Veil* with the eyes in shadow.

Intentions become confusing with the drips, splashes and paint strokes completely unrelated to the form of the face. This is another admirable exhibition where some of the artist's

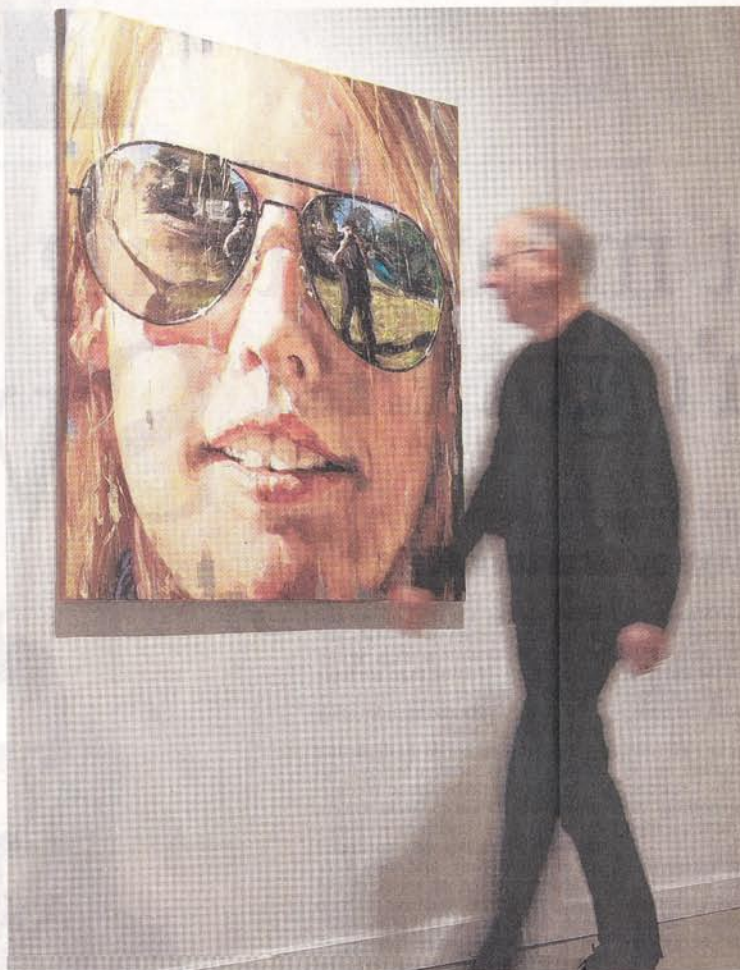
intention may simply be lost on the viewer.

An exhibition at the Tim Melville Gallery by **Elliot Collins** called *The Fall* has enchanting examples of lyric colour. There are some abstractions that are simply bands of bright, varied colour in attractive combinations. Then four bigger works where the brush strokes are

spontaneous but tending downward, the character of each conveyed by the colour. They are works of utmost delight, yet the commentary says they represent a world falling apart, an idea at odds with the short texts across the centre of the paintings.

They could easily be posters but the colour and handling of the paint make them artistically beautiful.

An extreme case of necessary knowledge is *Sea of Trees* by **Shelly Jacobson** at the Satellite Gallery. Each work consists of two photographs. The lower one shows a footpath with snow pushed to the edges and a tangled forest beyond. The upper photograph of each pair shows a scene deeper in the woods with the ground covered with snow.



At the galleries

What: *Auger Augur*, by Graham Bennett
Where and when: Whitespace, 12 Crummer Rd, Ponsonby, to Oct 16
TJ says: Immaculately made, inventive sculpture that references scales and survey markers in the light of concerns for the environment.

What: *Faces* by Stephen Allwood
Where and when: Orexart, Upper Kharitourm Place, to Oct 16
TJ says: Larger-than-life portraits that convey character and emotions in stylish and vigorous paint with just a hint of the slapdash.

What: *The Fall* by Elliot Collins
Where and when: Tim Melville Gallery, 2 Kitchener St, to Oct 12
TJ says: Some lively geometrical abstractions accompanied by expressionist work of great charm and sense of atmosphere.

What: *Sea of Trees* by Shelly Jacobson
Where and when: Satellite Gallery, cnr St Benedicts St and Newton Rd, to Oct 16
TJ says: Sharp photographs of tangles of trees under snow that take on special significance when you know this is the famous Forest of Suicides in Japan.

The images show total technical competence in colour photography. The intricate tangles of the forest near the road are exactly captured, as is the slippery path at the edge.

The whole piece takes on a different dimension when we read the accompanying text, which explains that this sea of trees photographed at 100m intervals is a Japanese suicide landmark. At a high altitude near Mt Fuji, it is a place where many go to kill themselves. We are told its popularity as a suicide destination stems from a novel, a love story in which the heroine disappears into this forest.

This is a case where knowing the background changes how you see the images and gives some insight into the tendency in literature and art to romanticise a tragic aspect of society.