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Spotlight on fanciful juggling acts

5:00AM Wednesday May 16, 2007 By T.J. McNamara

In the show of painting by Peter Wichman at Orexart, among many striking images is one called *Artists*.

On a circular stage, a middle-aged performer in a bowler hat juggles with three figures, accompanied by a clown playing on a pipe. The juggler is squat and ugly, no graceful performer but an aging journeyman carnival entertainer.

The figures being juggled are in cramped positions. One, at the top of the painting, hangs in the air in the position of a tortured victim of some obscure inquisition. The exhibition, on until June 1, is titled *Nostalgia*.

This week in Auckland the arts scene itself juggles with artists and catches them in a variety of positions.

Wichman's position is a literary one. His paragraphs imply a narrative. They are like illustrations to grim short stories incorporating some dark Kafkaesque vision.

At other times the references are to the visual arts. Many of the poses hint at Goya and there is more than a nod in the direction of our own Tony Fomison.

The suited men who inhabit these paintings have dark, saturnine faces while the women's plastered countenances are pasty, but with hectic colour in the cheeks. They seem to interact savagely with each other although they seldom touch.

A typical work is *Trio*, where three men play a game on the floor as boys might play with trucks – but they are playing with lumps of red flesh.

In more crowded compositions, such as *Ballroom Dance*, people dance – under a chandelier – in a chain towards a door that leads to an abyss.

Not all the paintings are melodramatic. Some are just intense distillations of collective misery, as in *Stones*, where figures, all restrained in some way, crouch on a bleak shore abandoned by the world.

This show is a dark vision of the way people react with emotional brutality towards each other in gatherings in many different circumstances.

In the past Wichman's grim paintings have seemed historical, almost fancy-dress. In this show his savage tableaux have been brought up to date.