

T.J. McNamara: Rare twists of imagination

By [T.J. McNamara](#)

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A more fashionable sculptor would have mounted a coil of sprung steel on top of the pedestal but the artist is Bing Dawe at his most impressive and the vital twisting shape poised is an eel carved in rimu and painted with exact naturalism.

The pedestal brings its energetic presence eye to eye with the viewer and the detail of spread fins and tapering tail have a dynamic life that no moulding or casting could convey.

The Christchurch artist has a profound knowledge of natural creatures and this show at Whitespace is both evidence of that and his skill in conveying the character of animals and birds. Also high on a pedestal is Kaki, a black stilt in carved and blackened oak. It has springy, delicate legs but its particular energy comes from the alert turn of the head. Heads of birds are a feature of the exhibition. There is a series of eight on extended necks mounted on a wall in the manner of deer heads. These are carefully fashioned tributes, not specimens. They project almost aggressively out at the viewer.

The way they thrust forward from the wall brings the viewer face to face with the long deadly beak of the heron or the curious flat beak of the spoonbill, the aggressive head of a bittern and the colourful splendour of the black swan. The skill in the making of these works extends to a curious cabinet-like mounting of a fish, the kokopu. Equally well made are two wind vanes. Both are called *Watching Out for St Francis* (the saint who preached to birds) and combine carved kauri with sheet steel and aluminium. They are too precious to be outdoors and not quite solid enough to be indoors. Yet they and two complex paint and crayon studies of eels and of a stalking black stilt add a special charge to a fascinating and highly individual exhibition.

Another even more gripping expression of an intricate approach is *The Unfolding*, by Susanne Kerr, at FHE Galleries. This fascinating show contains many figures, most of them women, drawn and painted in extraordinary detail. Their faces vary but the most remarkable aspect of the technique is the variations of fabric. Typically, a group of middle-aged women in *Boundary* all wear the same style of hat and dress but the fabric is minutely different in pattern. The same work has a stack of house shapes arranged in a twisted vertical so the viewer can see the interior through what would be the floor. Every tiny house is papered inside with a different pattern.

The works are not small. Most have groups of women confronting each other across a wide space of white paper and *Confluence*, which features activity among tall trees, has the bare trunks defined only by intricate windings of ribbon.

There are ribbons everywhere and they continually express a soft bondage that grips most of the figures and gives the paintings their bite and tension. All the figures are bound, yet are set apart generally in conflict. The sense of entrapment by sex and sexuality is most apparent in *The Tourist*.

The brilliance of the technique, which extends to the virtuoso use of gold leaf to show sunlight on water in *The Cove*, is one part of the completely individual style. Yet the technique is always the servant of witty but insightful inquiries into the ambiguous nature of the human condition.



Confluence by artist
Susanne Kerr. Photo /
Dean Purcell

At the galleries

What: Sculpture and painting by Bing Dawe

Where and when: Whitespace, 12 Crummer Rd, Ponsonby, to Aug 17

TJ says: The sculptor's deep regard for the natural world of birds and fish process some lively, dramatic work.

What: The Unfolding by Susanne Kerr

Where and when: FHE Galleries, 2 Kitchener St, to Aug 31

TJ says: A sold-out show where groups of figures done in watercolour with exceptional skill are given space for ambiguities that emphasise displacement and conformity.

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