

Bubbling with  
hedonism and delight

Laura  
Williams' work  
pokes fun at  
the serious  
and sacred.  
She discusses  
her lush  
painted world  
with Claire  
O'Loughlin.



Laura Williams

Laura Williams' paintings are having a lot of fun. Vivid and cartoonish, they are dense with patterns and symbolism. They often depict men and women lounging in Eden-like gardens, with lush grass, rivers, and animals, or moping in bedrooms, languishing on lavish bedspreads. Rich in colour and layered with references, they bubble with hedonism and delight, and poke fun at the serious and sacred.

"I can't take anything seriously," says Williams, who describes her work as "optimistically maudlin and maturely puerile."

She started painting 10 years ago, at age 47, and has been going non-stop ever since. Her first exhibition was in 2013 at The Kriesler Gallery in Melbourne, and since then she's had nine solo shows across New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

Her paintings are acrylic on board, and she paints the boards' edges as well, so they seem to pop out from the wall, like 3D objects or artifacts. She likes the texture of acrylic, and it dries quickly, which is necessary for the way she paints, in layers from the background forward. "If I'm doing a room, I'll start with the wallpaper, then the pictures, then the figure. I think of it like a Victorian stage set."

Her two-dimensional style, with both shoulders of the figures visible and broad, brings to my mind adult cartoon shows BoJack Horseman and Tuca & Bertie (both by



PAGE 29: Laura Williams, *A Multiple Dawning I*, acrylic on board, 305mm x 255mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

RIGHT: Laura Williams, *The Dawning III*, acrylic on board, 500mm x 400mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

ABOVE: Laura Williams  
Photo by Rebekah Robinson



illustrator Lisa Hanawalt). Like those shows, Williams' work is sardonic, questioning stereotypes and preconceived notions. But it is also hopeful, freeing, and profoundly feminist, retelling patriarchal stories through a feminine lens.

In *Mary Gets Pregnant*, the Archangel Gabriel stands nude in a bedroom in Gucci loafers, while Mary lies relaxed on the bed. Yonic imagery is everywhere, from the patterns on the rug to the flowery wallpaper. Private and sexy, it feels like a secret window into what really happened, but no one is supposed to see.

"I went to a talk recently where there was a guy saying 'No, Mary didn't have sex. It was an immaculate conception, and she was a virgin.' It was like, yeah, okay. So she got nothing."

Women are certainly getting something in Williams' work, whether it's a contented Mary looking, in Williams' words, "like she's had



FAR LEFT: Laura Williams, *Expulsion from Eden*, acrylic on board, 300mm x 445mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

as there for men to look at. I'm painting naked men in pastoral settings looking like maidens have for years."

Born in 1965 and raised in Ngaio, Wellington, Williams grew up with three older brothers in a male-dominated, Catholic household. She went to a series of Catholic schools, where the role of women was made clear — staying in the home — and Art wasn't offered after fifth form.

Female saints are frequent characters in her work. In an act of retelling and reclaiming, she paints the saints intact, where in the stories they're almost always missing limbs or abused in some awful way. "It's pretty horrifying as a kid. And you're being told them as a story to show you how devoted you should be... it certainly wasn't who I wanted to be."

Fortunately, her childhood was also filled with culture: visits to galleries, shows, and radio programmes. "I loved painting. My mum bought me lots and lots of books,

a good seeing to," or her women audiences enjoying a pastoral scene of nude, lounging men. The male gaze is turned on its head.

In *Beloved Son: Coming to the End of the Phallus Sea*, a swollen river of eels and snakes runs through a garden of phallic shapes. A man lies on the ground with open legs, his penis flopping to one side. In a similar painting, *Cain and Abel Montage: The Honeymoon Period*, several men hang out in a garden next to a stream filled with tadpole/semen-shaped creatures. They're nude or semi-nude, wrestling and playing around together. They remind me of Greek statues or Roman gladiators, or like when you're watching men's rugby and suddenly realise it's a bunch of guys getting up close and personal with each other's thighs. Like rugby, Williams' scenes are not deliberately homoerotic, but she says people read them that way nevertheless.

"Why does it have to be homoerotic? I don't think naked women in classical art have been seen as lesbian porn. They've just been seen



LEFT: Laura Williams, *Bare Bones Fidelity* (detail), acrylic on board, 300mm x 445mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

BELOW: Laura Williams, *Little Emperor*, acrylic on board, 300mm x 445mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb



so I was introduced to quite a lot of artists. I got the first book on women artists that ever came out.”

Those early influences still affect her work today. In her interior paintings, seen recently in her solo exhibition *Thinly Veiled* at Page Galleries in Wellington, famous art is featured on walls of the bedrooms, or referenced heavily in the work. She often pays homage to artists, including Francis Bacon, Suzanne Valadon, Roger Brown, Aubrey Beardsley, Henri Rousseau, David Hockney, among many others.

After high school she worked in minimum-wage jobs for nearly 20 years, before completing an MA in Sociology, specifically focussing on emotions in the workplace and the verbal abuse of service workers. For the past 17 years she’s worked for the Public Service Association. Sociology influences her work, which is often about relationships, identity, and power dynamics.

Henry Darger is another big influence: “He’s sort of creepy and innocent at the same time.” Unknown in his lifetime, and uneducated and supposedly uninfluenced, Darger was a true “outsider artist”, a position Williams identifies with to an extent, as someone who has come to art later in life and hasn’t been to art school. But it’s a classification into which, as an established artist, she herself doesn’t fit. ‘Naïve’ is a more appropriate term for her work, one which she uses herself.

“My work is defensively and wilfully naïve, self-reflective, and figurative. My style of painting is not a deliberate style, it just is.”

The highlight of her career has been her experiences in the USA. In 2018, she was awarded the ChaNorth residency in Hudson Valley, New York. “They were very nurturing. Brigitta Varadi and Peter Fulop, who ran the residency, were like, ‘You need to do this, you can do this.’ I hadn’t had anyone say that to me ever. They said, ‘Shut up about not going to art school, we don’t care about that! We just like your art.’”



ABOVE LEFT: Laura Williams, *A Small Amuse Bouche I*, acrylic on board, 305mm x 255mm, 2022

Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb



ABOVE RIGHT: Laura Williams, *A Small Amuse Bouche II*, acrylic on board, 305mm x 255mm, 2022

Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

LEFT: Laura Williams, *Green with Ivy*, acrylic on board, 305mm x 255mm, 2022

Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

In 2019, she returned to New York for several group shows, and in 2020 was supposed to do a month-long residency at the Golden Foundation Artist Residency in New York, but covid postponed it. It’s taking place later this year instead.

With time on her hands in 2020, she focused her attention on a new project, spending the lockdowns converting an old doll’s house into her dream convent. It’s a luscious, Gothic masterpiece, titled *Paradise Mound*. Like her paintings, the project reimagined a life of strict piety into something more fun. It’s also a homage to the nuns who taught her, “independent, educated women who instilled





ABOVE: Laura Williams, *Cain and Abel Montage: The Honeymoon Period*, acrylic on board, 400mm x 500mm, 2022  
Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries  
Photo by Michael Mahne Lamb

in me a strong sense of social justice and the idea that you didn't need to be married or have children to have a useful life."

Although she thinks it will inevitably affect her work in some way, Williams wants to move on from biblical references, and plans to explore something new next year. "I have a fondness and a respect for my upbringing, and it did shape me, but on the other hand, it left an imprint that I'm still trying to get rid of."

"I poke fun at it because I can. I'm in charge of the universe, I'm my god in my universe when I paint."

"I got kicked out of a McDonald's by the police for doing this when I was a teenager, now it's art."

One social media user was less than impressed with the \$10,000 artwork of a single slice of pickle from a McDonald's cheeseburger flung on to the ceiling at Michael Lett Gallery. The work, *Pickle*, is by Australian artist Matthew Griffin and described by a representative as a "deliberately provocative gesture."  
*The Guardian*, 27 July

"This moa pushes the boundaries of what is and isn't art. However, Maribeth felt compelled to take a photo of it, so here we are."

In 1996 Maribeth Coleman began documenting Wellington's public art before it disappeared, including a large model of a Moa on Featherston Street. Her work, comprising over 360 photos and descriptions, was donated to the Wellington Central Library and is available for the first time online at [wellington.recollect.co.nz](http://wellington.recollect.co.nz).  
Wellington City Council, 25 August

"I wouldn't have given my permission if asked.... they are cynical rip-off artists and I have nothing but contempt for their... tinfoil hat bullshit."

Carterton artist AJ Hunter's comments on his work being stolen by conspiracy theorist platform *Counterspin*. His artwork *Permanent Recess*, depicting a decrepit Beehive in the year 2200, was used to promote an online video pushing conspiracy theories. Hunter is looking to take legal action.  
*Wairarapa Times-Age*, 25 August

"People are much more compelled by stories of common people like themselves, rather than gazing upon the riches of kings and queens."

Claire Regnault, senior curator at Te Papa Tongarewa, comments on the institution assembling objects to chart Aotearoa's coronavirus journey. Items in the collection include a canvas bag with an image of prime minister Jacinda Ardern as Wonder Woman.  
*The Guardian*, 5 August