

It's all an *illusion*

WORDS Michal McKay
PHOTOS Charlotte Anderson

Kaye McGarva seated inside an installation piece she created called 'Disequilibrium'



The mystery behind the illusion unveiled – Kaye at work on the spray gun as she creates a new piece of art

Kaye McGarva Tollenaar describes her artwork as playing with shadows – or making the invisible visible. Last November, it became very visible indeed when she was invited to exhibit at IIDE – The International Interior Design Exhibition – in Brussels. We look at the journey which took her there.

Go in search of life, don't merely go with the flow" were telling words Kaye heard from a random encounter with a soothsayer on the streets of Los Angeles some years back. A prediction she took seriously.

Like the famous Nietzsche saying, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger", her life has been faced with extraordinary challenges, but each one has become a stepping stone towards fulfilment and enrichment. Her belief is that confronting vulnerability and getting on with the business of life is the only way.

As a child growing up in Hawke's Bay, surrounded by siblings who were sports fanatics, her own direction was towards a far more artistic bent.

However, her desire to become an artist (encouraged by her "fantastic" mother) was momentarily crushed when her application to attend Elam was rejected.

Her confidence quelled, she instead turned to the creative force of food, for which she had discovered at an early age she had a flair as, glued to her mother's side, she helped prepare family meals.

She took off after university to explore kitchens of the experts in Sydney and London, working alongside such notables as Nigel Slater (before he became famous), at Justin de Blank Provisions and L'Escargot, owned by world wine expert Jancis Robinson, before returning home to head the pastry team at Cin Cin (where she met husband Richard) and Metropole with Ray McVinnie. Subsequently, she established the artisan bakery Pandoro with Richard,



"Seeing me in action could be disappointing," laughs Kaye of her approach to painting

using traditional recipes, and by the time they sold ten years later they had a chain of artisan bakeries in both Auckland and Wellington, with 150 staff.

That decade was not without its challenges. Apart from the business, Kaye also had two children (Olivia and Zoe) and a diagnosis of cancer, which resulted in a six-month stint of chemotherapy and recovery. However, it was the tragic death of her younger brother, killed by a drunk driver in a car crash, that precipitated a move not only to be closer to her family but also to allow her to follow her dream, remembering her wise mother's wish that she not put her art aside.

And, even better, for Richard to fulfil his: he with a Diploma in Grapegrowing and Winemaking at EIT in 2013 and she with a Bachelor of Visual Arts and Design a year later.

She was also named Top Research Student, was a finalist in the National Contemporary Art Award, and also gained representation from a Napier Gallery.

Illusion and perception are the two main themes behind her work, aligning her practice with artists like James Turrell, Robert Irwin and Bridget Riley. Working non-figuratively, she acknowledges that process and chance play a big part in influencing the final outcome.

She minimises the 'hand of the artist' through utilising a directional spray technique, which results in an uncanny resemblance to topographic photographs hovering between the abstract and representational. Aimed at generating a physical response, the paintings bring awareness to the role our bodies play in interpreting visual information.

Though her own art is a driving force, Kaye's approach is generously altruistic; she loves to see others succeed. In March 2017 she opened Muse Gallery in Havelock North, with the aim of fostering local and New Zealand talent by making it accessible. It also allowed her to showcase her own work.

Her days were full, focused on running a very successful business in which Richard also plays a significant role, as well as spending time at her studio in Waiohiki Arts Village. What she hadn't foreseen was a change to almost overflowing when another talented local, Catherine Turnbull, a resident now of Amsterdam and in the Bay to visit her mother, walked into Muse, introduced herself and asked to see some of the artists Kaye represents.

Cath is a luminary in her own right. Having trained as an industrial engineer with a strong interest in arts, she moved into the world of luxury consulting where her clients included, amongst others, Armani and Porsche.

Subsequently, she specialised in the architecture and design industry and established Grès et Delibaşı in Amsterdam, a recognised leader in global design, sourcing and bridging creative talent with industry partners who value and depend on exceptional design to differentiate their brand. She specialises in scouting for accomplished emerging talent, supporting the development of their business and aspirations.

Enter Muse. After Kaye had shown several of her artists, Cath asked to see Kaye's own work. Two days later she returned with a proposition. She had become actively involved in working with the renowned interior designer Fleur Rossdale, who was responsible for establishing BIDE (The British Interior Design Exhibition) during the '80s and '90s and which was highly acclaimed for becoming a groundbreaking showcase for the design industry, including design pioneers like John Pawson. Having moved to Brussels, Fleur was encouraged by many in the business to relaunch the exhibition last year, with Cath as one of her ardent supporters and protagonists.

IIDE (The International Interior Design Exhibition) scheduled for November 2018 was, as Cath explained, focusing on ten Belgian and International designers, presenting their interior design vision. Instead of traditional stands, it would utilise a set of diverse,



PHOTO: Andreas von Einsiedel

Kaye's artwork displayed on the wall in the room created by J.Phine for IIDE

individually created, complete rooms. And Cath wanted Kaye to be there. Held in the Hotel de la Poste – an old custom building – she wanted Kaye’s work to adorn the walls of the room designed by new young up-and-coming designers Natasja Molenaar and Nannette van der Vooren.

Having worked with the internationally acclaimed design studio Studio Piet Boon in Amsterdam, they recently set up shop in Rotterdam. Kaye at first thought this was another dream. It was reality. So she sent two of her works commissioned by J. Phine. Then, having sold seven of her own paintings to fund the trip, she followed. IIDE took place between 17 and 25 November.

“About 500 came to the opening, which was quite spectacular. Ours was the only really contemporary room, and mine was one of the few art works exhibited at IIDE.”

Damien Gard, the owner of Macadam Gallery in Brussels (and another of the exhibitors), took the

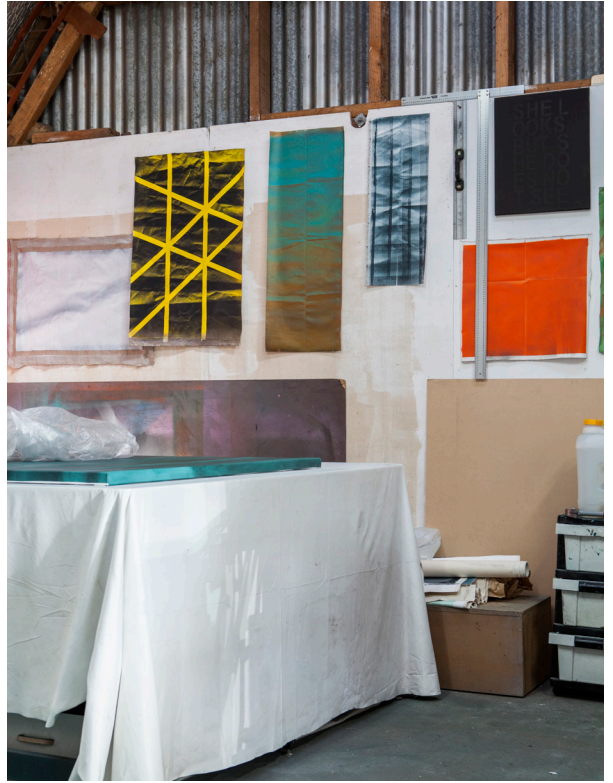
two paintings she had at the exhibition, and since then has shown her work in Luxembourg as well as the gallery in Brussels. “They will probably display more of my work. They’re interested in my coloured ones.” A show in Paris in 2020 is in the offing.

Constantly experimenting with new techniques and paints, Kaye uses acrylic, mixing colours herself and operating with two sizes of spray guns hooked up to a compressor: the large one for the base of the paintings, the smaller for the touching up and fine-tuning. To watch her work is both mesmerising and magical.

Laughingly, she likens the mixing process to harkening back to her cooking days: “particularly with the old yoghurt and butter containers. The mystique of painting is actually all an illusion and it can be quite disappointing to people when they see the reality of its execution.”

It definitely is nothing like the obvious expectancy one has, say, of Van Gogh, out in the meadows with his easel





Kaye at work in her studio at Waiohiki Arts Village

and paintbrush. This is more like an industrial operation – depending on different materials, paint finishes, mixes, methods and, of course, the ultimate placement of light and dark for the definitive response. “It’s how your body reacts to what you see. Some see it as lunar landscapes, others see the sea – a lot depends on the colours. And I love playing with monochromatics – it’s all about light and shade.”

And of course texture, which contributes to the ultimate illusion. “I keep exploring. It’s process driven and not based on an outcome; I just keep working at it. My white works give an illusion of clouds and snow, but if my work doesn’t look like something, then the reaction or physical sensation you get from viewing the paintings can also create the appeal.

“They can appear frozen or moving, it’s how your eyes work trying to identify with something – a sensation or a feeling in the subconscious. When that happens, I know the work is successful.



“And it has to happen rapidly. But I won’t know for months if it is good. My first reaction can be ‘Oh my goodness, I love it,’ and then some time later I will hate it,” she smiles wryly.

At the moment she is experimenting with pearlised paint inspired by the work of Haruki Murakami, who wrote IQ84 about perception and alternate realities. “I am working towards that but I have to get colour out of my system before I deal with the silvers,” she smiles. Pointing to a mass of discarded canvases and other materials, she explains, “There is a big failure rate. A lot depends on the atmospheric impulses in the studio – moisture, heat – all can be going wonderfully and at the last touches I, or they, will muck it up.”

Having recently enlisted Sacha van den Berg, ex-Hastings City Art Gallery, to work alongside her at Muse, Kaye is now able to spend more time in the studio, fulfilling her next dream.

About her art she reflects: “There’s a lot of serendipity in the process.” If her trajectory this past year is any indication, there are a lot more serendipitous moments to come. And a certain reinforcement of Kaye’s most loved quote from German visual artist Gerhard Richter that “Art is the highest form of hope.”

Visit Kaye’s website www.museart.nz

Left: Kaye at IIDE with designer Olivier Lapidus and Cath Turnbull, director of Grès et Delibaşı

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