

# The surprising art of grass

Gill Gatfield doesn't let the grass grow under her feet, she takes it into the art gallery. CHRISTOPHER MOORE reports.

While flora blooms at the Ellerslie Flower Show, there's also a sense of fecundity at the Centre of Contemporary Art as Gill Gatfield's art grows, literally and figuratively, on gallery visitors.

Watching grass grow might not seem the most stimulating of cultural pursuits but Gatfield's exhibition at COCA raises the family poaceae, aka grass, to a fine art form. Since 2002, her conceptually based work has explored and expanded an eclectic catalogue of materials (glass, disposable nappies, electric fencing, pins) into complex and intriguing artworks. Four years after she created her first lawn painting, she continues to be fascinated and challenged by its possibilities.

The title of her latest show gives some clues to its contents. *En Plein Air* can be loosely translated as "in the open air", a term applied to painting outdoors and in natural light.

Gatfield says it's a technique which altered the essence of landscape

painting, allowing a direct connection between reality and its representation.

In her lawn paintings, a slice of turf complete with resident worms, from a golf course, is stitched onto a canvas backing, exposed to sunlight and watered daily. Gatfield can't anticipate what will result – this is unpredictable art where the creator proposes and nature disposes.

These are works which bring the outside world inside. They must also be the only art which requires a regular watering and a grass carer if the owner is away from home.

Hanging alongside the lawn works is a series of magnetic paintings where up to 2000 small pins are attached to a magnetic backing. The finely tuned balance of gravity and weight – and the inventiveness of the artist, curator or collector – creates shifting patterns and textures.

Born in Kawarau, Gill Gatfield's childhood in the Bay of Plenty saw her creating bridges or making mud pies, "as we always seemed to be making things."

During a student exchange in the United States she spent most of the time in the high school art room. But law rather than art would become a central part of her life for a decade as she became involved with questions of law reform.

"But I never stopped creating things while I was in law – painting mostly, but also small objects. The turning point came when I had a dedicated work space. I was running my own legal business and attending art classes. I then held a couple of exhibitions. Talking with people who knew more about the practice of art turned a light on. I didn't have to operate in two worlds. I could apply my mind and hands to art."

She was accepted into Elam School's masters degree programme where her art evolved. "What spurred me on was the ability to self-critique and a maturing of my work. This art is not a static thing – I never expect to stay in one space. I am driven to investigate various materials and really get into them."

The inspiration for Gatfield's art blossomed in her mind suddenly – as many of her ideas do usually in the early hours of the morning.

"When I get an idea I'll pursue it, unless I find that someone is doing something similar or better at which point I'll drop the idea. I need challenge. The more I look for the answers through the materials and creation, the deeper I get. I research the project. I'll go down small avenues to throw up more thoughts, solutions," she says.

"I agree that logic is against some of these things. To begin with it's trial and error. It's exciting when you don't have an expectation of how things will turn out."

To illustrate the point, she recalls



watering one of her early grass paintings.

"It looked quite beautiful in its dormant state but I took it outside and put the hose on it. I was obviously feeling somewhat robust that day. When I returned later it had grown 10 very long, very green

shoots. It looks beautiful back hanging on the wall.

"In art there's a tendency to love the dramatic, the shock. But these works involve slow changes; slow revelations and perhaps a long playing time."

The first grass painting she exhibited was selected for the inaugural national contemporary art award in 2005. The work, *Lawn (Green)*, caused some initial concern for the gallery's curators but a solution was found after a watering

regime was established.

"Initially they had reservations about hanging the piece. When you do something for the first time, there's always a risk that people will think that it's a joke. But it wasn't a folly in any sense and hopefully the body of work which followed has

A growing awareness:  
Gill Gatfield's *Black Cloud*  
2008, left. Below: *The Pleasure Garden*.



proved this. The fact that they persevered, and even found someone to water the piece though the course of the exhibition was a turning point for me. People apart from me, believed that these works were worth pursuing," she says.

Today gallery goers continue to watch the grass grow.

"It's cliché like that that have some veracity – rather like the sound of a single pin dropping – represents the silence which interests me. Until you investigate them further, they seem unremarkable. Then you begin to notice the simplicity and the silence within them. I'm trying to pull layers of complexity out of these materials. The less there is, the more interesting the work."

"The joy of creating these works is that you never know how they will turn out. And watering the grass is a good way to start the working day."

□ Gill Gatfield's *En Plein Air* at the Centre of Contemporary Art, until March 15.

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