

# GRAHAM FLETCHER

*Paintings 1998–2004*



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Essay by William McAloon





PAINT ISN'T CHEAP – not the good stuff, anyway. It was a problem that Graham Fletcher grappled with as a recent graduate in the late nineties, how to weigh economics against aesthetics. Discarded tins of enamel paint offered the solution, and Fletcher collected hundreds of them from paint shops and the local transfer station. These were the colours that didn't quite match what was on the chart, had exceeded their use-by date, or fallen victim to fashion.

Putting the found paints to work, Fletcher adopted the modernist standby of the grid as his basic format. He used different methods of pouring and pooling – wet on wet – allowing the enamel colours to blend and curdle through various applications. It was a process of mass production as much as trial and error, with numerous paintings worked on simultaneously and at speed – enamel dries quickly – and around two thirds of the results discarded as unsatisfactory. From these laboratory-like conditions, the *Mistint* series (1998) emerged, with their off-key coloured grids dissolving into patterns that hinted at other imagery – frangipani flowers especially.

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The *Mistints* constituted Fletcher's first substantial body of work and in many ways set the terms of his future inquiry as a painter. As much as his inherent interest in their materiality, Fletcher's choice of discarded paints had deeper implications. 'They are tones apart from the colour spectrum,' he wrote at the time. 'I have taken this state of separateness as a larger metaphor for my own placement within society as a person of mixed Samoan and European descent.' The diptych format of the *Mistints* further stressed this duality. In some instances the two halves of a work were clearly conceived together, while in others they were matched up following the process of painting, colour relationships determining the final pairing. The other doubling effect in the series has a similar ambivalence. In some, the frangipani motif is more visible, while in others the grid dominates, as the figure/ground relationship fluctuates. This play of opposites – of the decorative and formal, of high and low, of the Pacific and European, of abstraction and imagery – emerges from the slick enamel surface of the paintings. This is one of the strengths of Fletcher's work, that his thematic concerns are founded in an engagement with the materiality and process of painting.

9 Fletcher's paintings of the following year, the *Stigma* series, are composed of numerous small aluminium discs each of which features a frangipani motif. By using 'a clearly recognised signifier of Oceania', Fletcher sought to draw into question stereotypical images of the Pacific and his own position in relation to those stereotypes. The word 'stigma' carries several discordant meanings – botanical and biological, social and religious. In the *Stigma* series the discs are pinned to the wall in a grid formation, looking like a

collection of captured specimens. As in the *Mistints*, the motif is created in the merging and separation of salvaged enamels, the colour and vibrancy of the paintings belying their origins in the dump. To be coloured is also to be marked, stigmatised. Each flower is unique but becomes subsumed within the overall composition, tied into the grid. These associations are worn lightly, however, offset against an abiding concern for painterly effect and visual delight.

In his next group of works, *Wallflowers* (2000), Fletcher continued to deploy a floral motif, this time derived from Polynesian printed fabrics – Andy Warhol in the Pacific. Rather than the exuberant colours of the previous works, Fletcher dialled his palette back to black and white in another bid to problematise a stereotypical symbol of Pacific Island-ness. The *Wallflowers* also had low-grade origins. The images were created using a home-decorator aesthetic of stencils and spray paint. By deliberately cropping, bleeding and fraying his images, Fletcher breeched those conventions in order to give the works a sense of imperfection and fragility. This, along with his reduced palette, added to a funereal tone. Visually, the paintings shift and flicker between gloss and matt, image and after-image, positive and negative. It's a complex play that emulates Fletcher's own negotiation of the push and pull of cultures.

Later in 2000, the monochrome palette of the *Wallflowers* carried over into the *Quarantine* paintings. The images are derived from representations of the cellular structure of diseases introduced into the Pacific with European exploration and colonisation – tuberculosis, typhoid, conjunctivitis and influenza, amongst

others. Again, the content emerges from the surface of the painting – in this case, Fletcher turned to a traditional Polynesian material, tapa cloth over board. He was ambivalent about its use: ‘In some ways I think I have desecrated tapa cloth by completely covering it in this way, but at another level that can also be read as a metaphor for the desecration of a race of people.’

15 Having depicted the disease, Fletcher’s next group of works offered the cure. *Bad Medicine* (2001) also used diagrammatic representations, this time painted in enamel over tapa on canvas. The titles of some of the paintings are taken from the drugs they depict: *Furazolidone*, for example, is used in the treatment of cholera; *Ampicillin* for meningitis and gonorrhoea; *Zanamivir* for influenza; *Disulfiram* for the physical symptoms of alcohol addiction. In short, they are diseases of poverty, and in New Zealand have had a particular impact on Polynesian communities. Once again, Fletcher’s cultural and political concerns – about poverty, poor housing, and the larger consequences of Polynesian migration to New Zealand – creep in under the surface. Those surfaces are a combination of slick enamel and distressed tapa, where a sense of toxicity is present in the off-key combinations: crimson and cream; pink and ochre; or duck egg blue and bilious green.

17 That fascination with colour – its seductive properties, what it might symbolise as much as it might disguise – has continued to propel Fletcher’s work. In the series *Virgin* (2001), he appropriated Gauguin’s Tahitian nudes and other images of Polynesian dusky maidens, burying their silhouetted forms in jungles of brightly coloured flowers and leaves. The camouflage patterns of the work were noted in the titles by the use of the military acronym DPM –

Disruptive Patterned Material. Using camouflage, Fletcher wrote, ‘enables me to be misleading, evasive and ambivalent while at the same time declaring my full awareness as a Samoan artist that my work is embedded within a cultural context.’ (Camouflage, it’s worth noting, was invented by an artist.)

An altogether stranger body of works followed, the *King of the Wood* (2002). Something of an aberration, these figurative, myth-tinged works were more conventional paintings. Their imagery was drawn from James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, translating the story of a tribal strong man into the field of 20th century New Zealand art history. The dead tree was once a local strong man of painting, in works by Christopher Perkins, Eric Lee Johnson and others, and Fletcher anthropomorphised the stump into a lonely, smoking, drinking figure. 18

In Fletcher’s next series, *Jungle Paintings* (2002), the jungle becomes overgrown, a place of ‘bewildering complexity and confusion.’ Linear figures grow vine-like amidst this confusion, but threaten to be overtaken by the pictorial events surrounding them. Fletcher described these paintings as enacting a struggle for the survival of the fittest, and once again, the rhetoric of a colonial past is not far from the painted surface. 19

The past was further mined for its decorative effects in *The Need-Fire* series (2003). In these works, Fletcher again depicted 20 silhouetted figures, but this time covered them with a welter of European ornament – wallpaper patterns, paisley swirls, fleurs-de-lis – and set them against sumptuously coloured enamel grounds. The paintings seemed to replace camouflage with flagrant display – like watching a passing parade of peacocks.



21 That decorative excess exploded in *The Parrot House* paintings (2004), in which Fletcher recycled fragments of the *Jungle* series. 'I decided to make the field and figure relationship even more complex and entangled,' Fletcher wrote on completing these works, 'by cutting the field away from the lines and laying the skeletal remains one over the other in order to build up a new surface.'

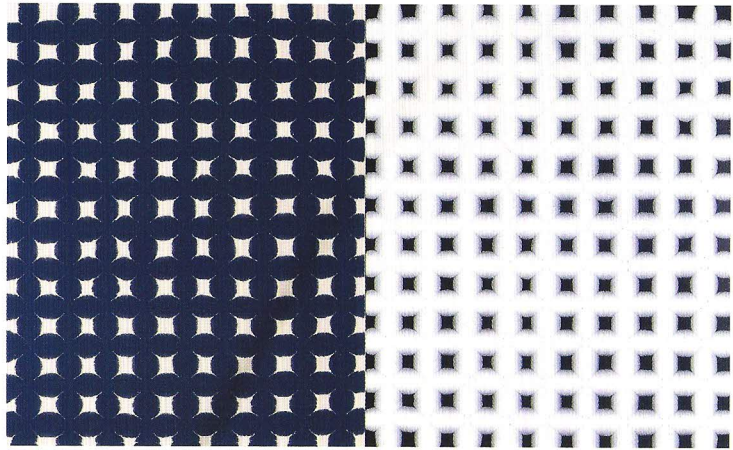
Noisy and colourful, in some senses the works were like *King of the Wood*, a diversion that was necessary for Fletcher to test the boundaries in which he found himself working. It pushed him towards what he describes as 'lounge-room tribalism', where coloured grids knit into totemic forms. In these works, collectively titled *The Rogues Gallery*, Graham Fletcher remains responsive to the clichés of images of the Pacific and mindful of his own place within those representations. After all, one of them is painted on black velvet.

William McAloon



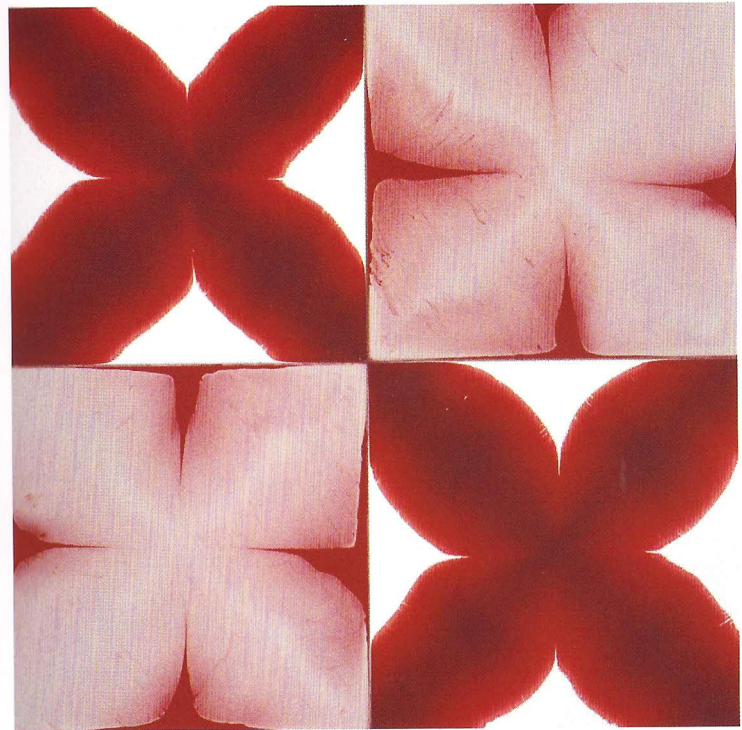
Stigma I (detail), 1999, enamel on aluminium, 1320 x 2580 mm, Collection of Wallace Arts Trust

PLATE I



Mistint Series 1998  
enamel on board  
690 x 1120 mm  
Private collection

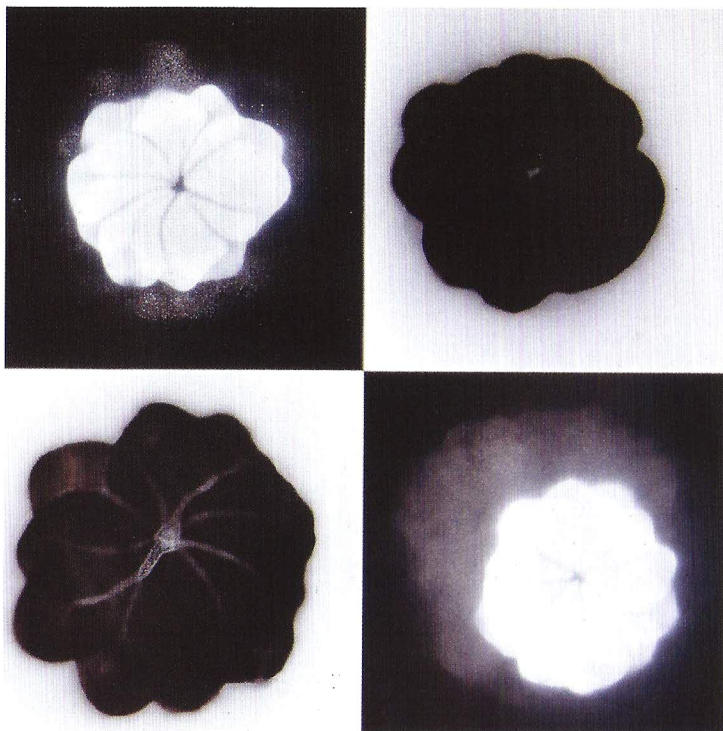
PLATE II



Stigma 1999  
enamel on aluminium  
180 x 180 mm  
Private collection

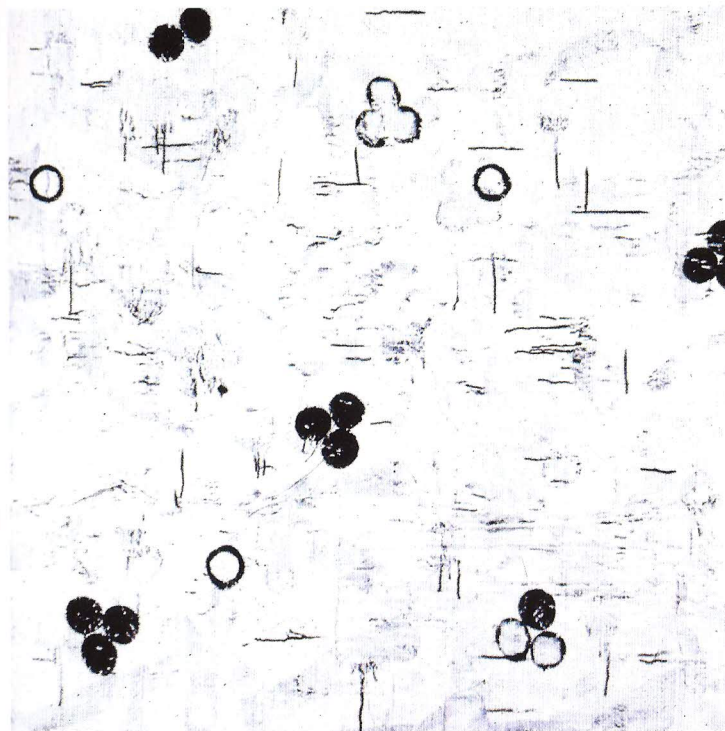


PLATE III



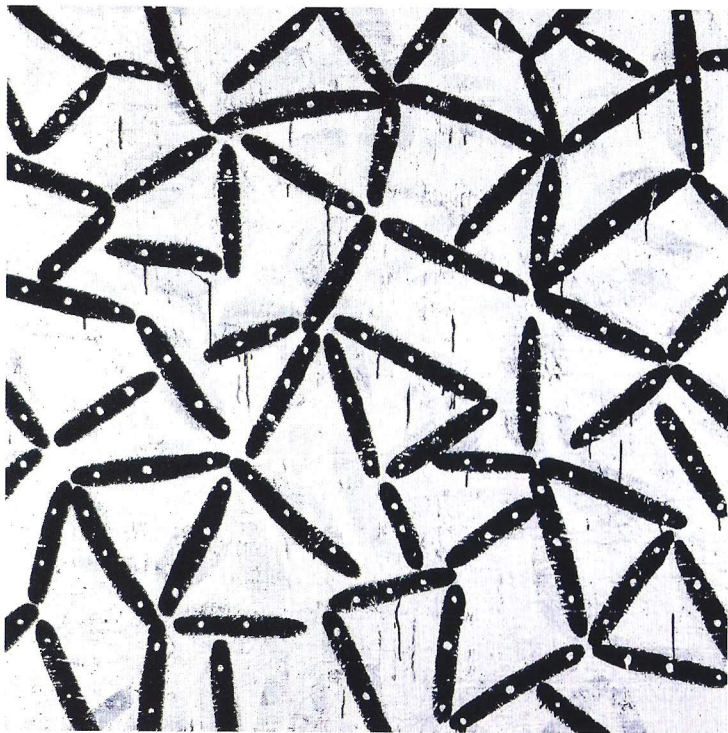
Wallflowers 2000  
enamel on aluminium  
600 x 600 mm  
Private collection

PLATE IV



Influenzavirus 2000  
enamel on barkcloth board  
1200 x 1200 mm  
Collection of the artist





*Tuberculosis 2000*  
enamel on barkcloth board  
1200 x 1200 mm  
Collection of The University of Auckland



*Ampicillin 2001*  
enamel on barkcloth canvas  
1000 x 800 mm  
Private collection

PLATE VII



*Placebo* 2001  
enamel on barkcloth canvas  
1000 x 800 mm  
Courtesy Bartley Nees Gallery

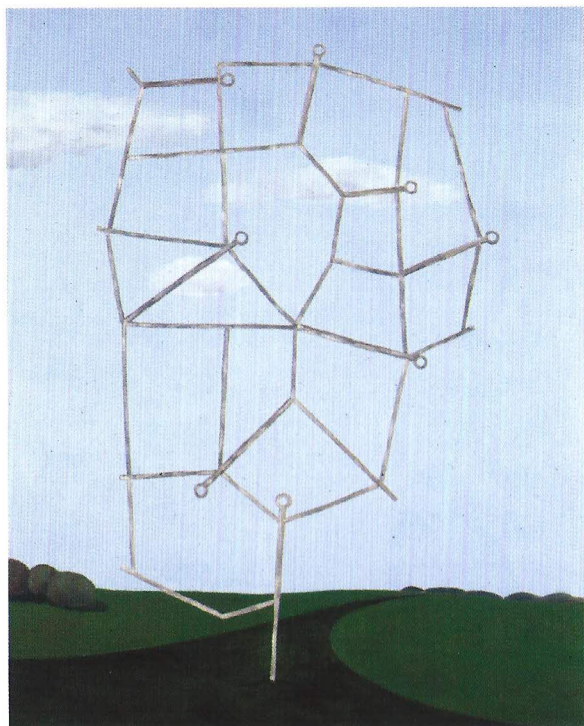
PLATE VIII



*Virgin (DPM2)* 2001  
enamel on barkcloth canvas  
1600 x 2400mm  
Collection of Auckland Art Gallery



PLATE IX



*The New Order* 2002  
oil on canvas  
1620 x 1300 mm  
Collection of the artist

PLATE X



*Jungle Painting #7* 2002  
enamel on canvas  
1000 x 800 mm  
Courtesy Brooke/Gifford Gallery

PLATE XI



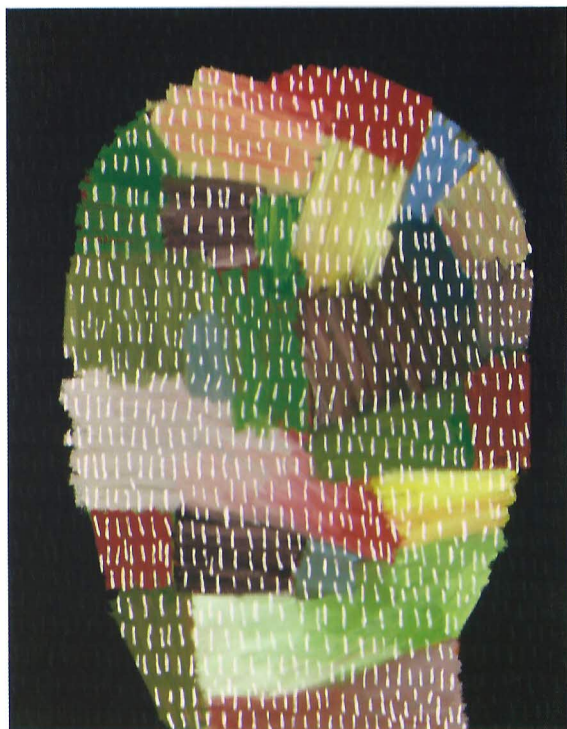
*The Trouble with Greed* 2003  
enamel on canvas  
1500 x 1200 mm  
Collection of the artist

PLATE XII



*Untitled (The Parrot House)* 2003  
enamel on canvas  
400 x 300 mm  
Private collection





Untitled (*The Rogues Gallery*) 2004  
 oil on canvas  
 1500 x 1200 mm  
 Collection of Wallace Arts Trust

Selected Exhibitions

- 2005 *Wish-Landscapes*, Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington (solo)  
*Altars to the Sun*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)
- 2004 *New Work*, Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington (solo)  
*Flaunt: Art, Fashion, Culture*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland
- 2003 *The Parrot House*, Snowwhite Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
*The Need-Fire*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
*IKI and Thanks for All the IKA*, Contemporary Art Centre, Lithuania
- 2002 *Jungle Paintings*, Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington (solo)  
*King of the Wood*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch (solo)  
*Sea Knowing & Island Looking*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland  
*Red.Black.White.*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland
- 2001 *Virgin*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
*Bad Medicine*, Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington (solo)  
*Botanica*, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington  
*Pacific Wave 2001*, Valhalla Glebe Point Road, Sydney  
*Just Black and White*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
- 2000 *Quarantine*, Campbell Grant Gallery, Christchurch (solo)  
*Wallflowers*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
*Wallflowers*, New Work Studio, Wellington (solo)  
*Toi O Manukau-City Treasures*, Fisher Gallery, Auckland  
*Biennale d'art contemporain de Nouméa*, Tjibaou Cultural Centre,  
 New Caledonia
- 1999 *Stigma Series*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
*Small Sins*, New Work Studio, Wellington  
*Pacific Cool*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
- 1998 *Mistint Series*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland (solo)
- 1997 *A Culmination*, Lopdell House Gallery, Auckland

Grants & Awards

- 2002 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, New York
- 2001 Creative New Zealand Grant (Pacific Island Arts Committee)
- 2000 Merit Award Winner, Art Waikato National Art Award 2000, Hamilton  
 Creative New Zealand Grant (Arts Board)  
 Runner up, Wallace Art Awards, Auckland
- 1999 Special Merit Award Winner, Wallace Art Award in association  
 with Visa Gold Art Award, Auckland  
 Creative New Zealand Grant (Pacific Island Arts Committee)

## Selected Bibliography

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- Caroline Vercoe, 'The Many Faces of Paradise', in *Paradise Now?: Contemporary Art from the Pacific*, Asia Society, New York, 2004, pp.42-44
- Caroline Vercoe, 'Art Niu Sila: Contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand', in *Pacific Art Niu Sila: the Pacific dimension of contemporary New Zealand arts*, edited by Sean Mallon & Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2002, pp.196-197
- 'King of the Wood', *Landfall* 204: *The Wild*, edited by Justin Paton, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, Spring 2002, pp.112-117
- Margaret Duncan, 'Exhibitions: Christchurch', *Art New Zealand* 104, Spring 2002, p.48
- Zara Stanhope, 'A curious collection of flora', in *Botanica*. Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, 2001, p.9
- Sean Mallon, 'Samoan Art Histories', *Art Asia Pacific* 32, 2001, pp.70-77
- Adrienne Rewi, 'Diseased Paintings', *Sunday Star Times*, 5 November 2000, Section F, p.5
- Justin Paton, 'Exhibitions: Auckland', *Art New Zealand* 93, Summer 1999-2000, p.35
- Pat Baskett, 'Flowers from the colour dump', *New Zealand Herald*, 30 October 1999, Section J, p.9

## Public Art Collections

Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru  
Auckland Art Gallery – Toi o Tamaki, Auckland  
Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt  
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington  
The University of Auckland, Auckland

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