

# 18 / KUSHANA BUSH

**Kushana Bush's** delicate gouache paintings feel like stumbling into the wrong room in a temple. In *Us Lucky Observers*, naked figures are held aloft like sacrificial lambs. A blindfolded woman raises her hands in prayer, while her fellows around her have already slipped the cloth from their eyes. Others lie on the floor, in supplication perhaps, or the last throes of koolade poisoning. It's a world of strange ritual, though what it's for, and who it might bind together, is not immediately clear.

Curator **Lauren Gutsell** believes Bush's works describe a personal, rather national New Zealand identity. She curated the major solo exhibition *The Burning Hours* for Dunedin Public Art Gallery. It opened there in late 2016 and is now mid-way through its New Zealand tour. Gutsell says Bush's works, which draw on sources from across the Middle East, Europe and Asia, from 13th century manuscripts to 20th century painters, "look outward from her position here in Dunedin and ultimately present a disseminated landscape of what it means to be Kushana Bush in the 21st century".

*Us Lucky Observers* was one of the three largest works in *The Burning Hours*, which included 22 works made from 2014 to 2016, including 11 made expressly for the exhibition. They're the result of several years of intense boundary pushing. In 2012, when Bush exhibited at the Melbourne Art Fair with Brett McDowell Gallery, she was working on a smaller scale, placing groups of figures in the centre of empty space. The recent paintings are larger. They fill the paper. There is no central action. Instead, figures crowd across the picture plane, all locked in their own intersecting dramas. Gutsell had followed Bush's practice for some time, but it was this ambitious shift that convinced her it was time for a cohesive solo exhibition.

Bush plans her images on layers of tracing paper. The new works are intricately patterned worlds. Each tile, each plank of wood, each ribbon of cloud in the sky adds another

layer of reference and complexity. Locating the action takes real work. *Here We Are*, for example, takes place in front of a string of tapestries, each with their own rich patterns. As Gutsell explains: "Every detail, down to the species of bird or tree, has been carefully chosen to locate the work in a particular place at a particular time - juxtaposing elements from diverse cultures and time periods into one composition."

It's intensely disorienting work, and not just because of these hops in time and place. They are works that make the everyday strange again. They draw our attention back to the thousands of little rituals, mores and rules that guide our own days. Bush reminds us of their violence. That we are, perhaps, a little more medieval than we like to think.

In Gutsell's mind, there's no doubt that Bush now holds "a singular position within contemporary New Zealand art". Her profile in Australia is also growing, thanks to appearances at the Melbourne Art Fair and solo exhibitions with Sydney's Darren Knight Gallery, including *Bird, Wind, Box* in 2017.

Jane O'Sullivan

**THE BURNING HOURS IS AT TE URU WAITAKERE CONTEMPORARY GALLERY IN AUCKLAND UNTIL 28 FEBRUARY 2018 BEFORE TOURING TO WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM FROM 3 MARCH TO 27 MAY 2018.**

1. Kushana Bush, *Life*, 2014. Gouache and pencil on paper, 63 x 46cm, Private collection, Wellington. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON.

2. Kushana Bush, *Flogging*, 2014. Gouache and pencil on paper, 56.5 x 38cm. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE MICHAEL BUXTON COLLECTION, MELBOURNE.

3. Kushana Bush, *Babes and Fools*, 2014. Gouache and pencil on paper, 56.5 x 66cm, Private collection, Wellington. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PRIVATE COLLECTION, WELLINGTON.



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