



The colours of equality: Amanda Gruenwald on her art, feminism and pursuing a passion

Image: Sam Hartnett

Amanda Gruenwald's Auckland garage is a mishmash of different objects. There are various tools and implements on the walls, not to mention a faint dust-meets-unpolished-wood odour mixed with the scent of various household chemicals. On top of a wood bench is a cherry red record player, which looks like it has been teleported in from 1978 – 'funky' is the word that immediately comes to mind.

There are also canvasses. Dozens of them, spread out all over the concrete floor and stacked along the walls and against the large single bay door. Each of them is rectangular, but that's where the similarities end. Canvasses of all sizes – some nearly as large as a wall – and in a riot of colours and designs. Some canvasses have only a small dollop of paint on them, while others are slathered in the stuff. The whole scene looks as if a rainbow – or several rainbows – exploded just minutes before I arrived.

This is the world where Amanda Gruenwald makes her magic – creating art that takes viewers far, far away.

“People like to project meaning [onto my work],” she explains. “But that’s not my intent. It’s about the inter-relationships.”

Using mainly acrylics, oils and alkaloids, there’s a three-dimensional element to Gruenwald’s work. “My work is deductive, based on a process of addition and removal,” she explains. “During each phase of the work's progress, I alter the picture by responding to the marks and changes that came before. This is a gradual process of visual problem-solving that is continually changing. For example, when you resolve one area of the painting, it is quite likely to create other relational problems in the work that will then need solving.”

That idea of “solving” a painting is a key part of Gruenwald’s work – as is the paint that goes onto the canvas itself. “Of equal importance is my investigation of the physical aspects of painting, i.e. the materiality,” she explains. “For example, paint handling, the thinness, thickness, opacity or translucency of areas of paint and how they combine and oppose each other, and colour relationships. It is all these things together in conversation that make my work what it is.”

Gruenwald’s work is currently on display at Auckland’s Trish Clark Gallery – her first solo exhibition at the gallery since she graduated from the University of Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts in 2012.

“A solo show at Trish Clark was an intimidating prospect, because most of the artists at Trish’s gallery are well established mid-career artists with tons of experience behind them,” she says as Peppy, one of her cats, moseys on into the garage, waving her tail about as she sniffs the workbench. “They have set the bar really high, so when you show somewhere like that at my age, you need to bring your ‘A’ game and really prove that you belong there. But nerves aside, it has been such an exciting experience. Seeing my works on the walls, and installed beautifully, is very gratifying, and a far cry from the brown dingy walls of the light-deprived garage they started out in.”

It’s a cool late summer day as Gruenwald deftly maneuvers around the randomly swaying tail of Peppy, and another cat that wanders in, a rather hairy ginger tom named Jeffrey. Gruenwald explains that she mixes all of her own colours for her work. Not all of the canvasses will make it to public display, she explains; if she doesn’t like it, it’ll potentially be repurposed into something else.

Sometime during our conversation the “F” word comes up – does Gruenwald consider herself a feminist? She doesn’t hesitate to say that she does.

“Equal rights for women in New Zealand have come a long way in recent years, but there are still issues that need our attention,” she explains. “One at the forefront of my mind at the moment is the recently publicised 17 per cent wage gap between men and working mothers. This is simply unacceptable. And it’s worth noting that even if one doesn’t have children, women are still trailing behind by an average of five per cent. Obviously there are difficulties with continuity and keeping up with new developments when you need to take maternity leave, and while some issues are legitimate, most are created by a workplace that is inflexible with its attitudes towards working mothers, and still more are only perceived difficulties. This problem could be rectified through legislation if it was taken seriously. And even if working mothers do need a little support when re-entering the workplace, don’t we owe them that support? It’s because of a mother that we are all here, and they should be treated with more respect and empathy.”

She’s also a keen advocate of fighting for equality around the world. “Internationally there are so many problems facing women, issues such as child marriage, FGM (female genital mutilation), sexual assaults, reproductive rights violations, honour killings, sex trafficking and so on,” she says. “The causes of these problems are varied and complex. But generally speaking I think that ultimately, to overcome these problems, a good education is paramount, as it will give people agency over their lives, the ability to provide for themselves and their families, and also the perspective required to respect other people, and their differences.

“The one other thing that I think would bring down barriers for women in many countries is access to reproductive medicine. Being able to choose if and when to have a baby would give women the freedom to shape their own lives and focus on their education and career, and I think this would be really beneficial for the communities they live in. This seems like basic stuff, but a staggering amount of women and girls globally don’t have these things.”

Being woke to the struggles women face around the world doesn’t mean one has to accept the way things are in Aotearoa, Gruenwald explains. But she does believe things could be a lot worse. “I think in New Zealand we have come a long way as a country and we have some of the most genuine gender equality in the world. Most women around the world are not so fortunate, so I think it’s important to appreciate what we have. But we do need to keep being vocal when we see inequalities of all kinds.”

When I leave the rainbow garage and step out into the cacophony of the roaring cicadas, I realise my perspective has somewhat altered. I entered Gruenwald’s world as a journalist, but left it as a fan.