

# LIGHT AS A FEATHER...



... OR, IN THE HANDS OF A PAIR OF ORNITHOLOGICALLY INSPIRED GLASS CASTERS, FEATHER AS A LIGHT. PLUMAGED CHANDELIERS AND OTHER WINGED DELIGHTS ARE EMERGING FROM A WAIRARAPA STUDIO WHERE GLASS ART IS TAKING FLIGHT

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Leanne Williams and Jim Dennison



**THE NAME**  
 There's a little wishful thinking involved in the name of Leanne and Jim's The Crystal Chain Gang company. "Crystal" refers to the lead crystal used and "chain" relates to the number of steps involved in the glass-art process but, when questioned about the word "gang", the pair breaks into laughter. Although there's enough work for a gang, sadly there are just the two of them at present. "We did have an intern from Sweden working with us last year," Leanne says. "That was great."

ABOVE: Feathering one's nest takes on new meaning when one of Leanne and Jim's creative chandeliers is hung in a home. About 150 bird wings and tails are needed for each chandelier. OPPOSITE: At work in their custom-built workshop, Jim and Leanne go through a lengthy lost-wax process to produce each finished piece.

THE COUPLE'S FIRST COLLABORATIVE PIECE HIT THE GLASS-ART WORLD LIKE A ROCK HURLED THROUGH A WINDOW

THROUGH AVIAN EYES, Leanne Williams and Jim Dennison's workshop is a macabre sight. Dozens of budgies are lined up for the oven and dismembered bird bits hang from the ceiling while afternoon sunlight illuminates glassy-eyed fledglings laid out in rows.

Through human eyes, however, it is clear that artists are at work. The birds' tails and wings suspended from the ceiling are moulded from glass. Delicately detailed, the pieces hang in tiers, forming astonishing chandeliers of softly feathered light. The budgies, intricately fashioned from wax, are about to be baked in plaster moulds while the fledglings, radiating subtle colour through their frosted-glass feathers, will soon be winging their way to various galleries round New Zealand.

Yet despite the seemingly fragile subjects and matter with which they are working, there is nothing birdlike about Leanne and Jim. Instead, the words "lion-hearted" come to mind to describe this gumboot-clad couple. It's not just that they've shattered preconceptions of glass art, steering clear of utilitarian objects and catapulting themselves into the international arena with their bold and sometimes brutal pieces – there's also been a tonne of courage involved in their transformation into artists.

In former lives, Jim was a landscape designer while Leanne taught at a primary school. The leap from their respective career ladders came in their 30s. A bout of glandular fever for Leanne was followed by the realization that she wasn't living the life she'd imagined. "I said to Jim, 'This isn't right. I want to go to art school.'" With a degree in ecology, Jim was initially reluctant to follow his partner's suggestion that he also attend art school for three years. However, during an exploratory trip to Wanganui Polytechnic he glimpsed the campus' glass-making facilities and was sold on making the change.

It was an especially brave move in financial terms. "It took us back 10 to 20 years," Leanne says. "For around 10 years our combined yearly income was under \$20,000." Luckily they already owned

a freehold house in Wellington's Island Bay which they managed to sell for significantly more than they'd paid for it, thanks to the property boom. Following graduation from art school and when looking around for a new home, they discovered a section at the back of Martinborough in the Wairarapa large enough to hold the 120-square-metre workshop they had custom-built. There was also room for chickens, a significant vegetable garden, fruit trees and a rugby goalpost for seven-year-old son Willie.

Having trained in the fine arts, Leanne's initial medium of choice to work with was icing, not glass. However, it was not on the cake for the artist, literally or metaphorically; it was painstakingly piped across gallery walls. At the end of her final solo exhibition she announced she'd had enough. "The works would take days to install, balanced up on scaffolding, and then it would all have to be chipped off, so after the last one I said to Jim, 'I wish this was more permanent.'" Surveying the icing roses coming down, Jim had a eureka moment and suggested she switch to glass.

Joining forces as The Crystal Chain Gang, the couple's first collaborative piece was formed in 2002 and hit the glass-art world like a rock hurled through a window. Titled *Slaughtered*, it consisted of a life-sized metal sheep carcass adorned with hundreds of tiny, jewel-like glass roses. "We really liked the idea of exporting an introduced animal back to Europe," Jim says. Photographed hanging in a slaughterhouse against a backdrop of real carcasses, the startling piece was sculpted specifically for an exhibition in prestigious Danish glass-art museum Glasmuseet Ebeltoft and was instantly secured by it for permanent display.

What followed for Jim and Leanne was an obsession with all things ovine. Their workshop resembled a butcher's as it overflowed with glass shanks, legs of lamb, heads, whole sheep and crown roasts. Gradually, however, budgies were introduced into the meat-works and, despite the success of the sheep, the current fixation with birds took off. ▶



### THE METHOD

The lost-wax glass-casting method used by Leanne and Jim is a lengthy process. They create latex rubber moulds of selected objects before filling the moulds with wax. Once the wax has set and further details have been chiselled in, it's encased in a block of plastic silica and the wax is melted out. Chunks of cold glass are then piled into the silica moulds before they're heated in a kiln to 800°C. After several days, when the glass has cooled, it is removed from its mould and carefully ground into its finished form.



Ann prepares quirky candlesticks being made for an exhibition.



Exhibiting the latest treasure he's planning to work with – a bird's skull found on a beach – Jim confesses “we sort of get obsessive about an idea or form and pull it to bits”. The hand-moulded budgies, formed from lost-wax casting, provide the pair's bread and butter and are, Jim says, the perfect vehicle for them to work on as a couple, combining Leanne's formal training in colour and shape with his technical knowledge of glass.

That said, Leanne adds, “It's not easy working with your partner. I remember the first year in the studio when we were learning how to be in the same space together. There were lots of arguments and adjustments.” While neither is precious about ownership in their work, the couple agrees it's important to feel they're contributing equally during the creative process and it's also imperative they concur on ideas. “That's the hard part,” Leanne says. “I'll get excited about an idea and Jim will go ‘hmmm’ then Jim will have an idea and I'll say ‘no.’”

Whatever differences they may have, a glance around their studio reveals a shared enthusiasm for found objects and kitsch Kiwiana, while their work reflects a mutual sense of humour. Severed budgie heads form a stylized human skull and retro bottles are stoppered with human heads, while the feathered chandeliers are the ultimate trophy imagined for New Zealand ornithologist Walter Buller. “Chandeliers are all about excess,” Jim says, “so we thought, right, let's make them as excessive as we can.” Dripping in frosted plumage, the commissioned chandeliers are in hot demand with the biggest one hanging in the Auckland headquarters of vodka company 42Below. Leanne says the sense of discovery people experience looking at them adds to the fun. “From a distance they look traditional but as you get closer you find this little twist of unexpected beauty.”

While their work is visually arresting and frequently playful, it is underlaid with more serious themes as Leanne and Jim examine the impact of the colonial world on the New Zealand landscape and question stereotypes of Kiwi culture. Their contemporary, highly original approach to glass art has brought overseas invitations as well as attention. They were the recipients of a six-week residency at the US WheatonArts and Cultural Center during 2007 and gave a demonstration lecture at the American Society of Glass conference in 2009.

The Wheaton residency was an immersion into new ways of making glass. Provided with three interns as members of staff, they were given total freedom to experiment with a seemingly endless supply of materials and embarked on a glassy marathon, returning home not only with new and faster ways of making things but also with a packing crate crammed with more than 3000 pieces they'd made.

Despite the accolades they've received, Leanne admits there have been times in the past when she's regretted giving up the financial security they had in order to become artists. Watching her contemporaries select their retirement funds and discuss investments when their own income was reduced to a sickly trickle sometimes made her swallow hard. “Jim never looked back but it took me two or three years to feel really liberated.”

These days, however, there's no doubt in her mind that they did the right thing. While their bank balance isn't as fat as those of others who stuck to the safe path, the feeling of creative richness and autonomy in their lives leaves them feeling very wealthy indeed. And judging by Leanne's smile as she stands at the door to the studio, the icing is now applied thickly all over the metaphorical cake.