

# Made to order

An exploration of topical ideas in the areas of craft and design. In each edition a new term will be dissected in relation to the practice of a New Zealand craftsperson.

## Culture

and the work of Jim Dennison  
and Leanne Williams

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art all december 06 / January 07

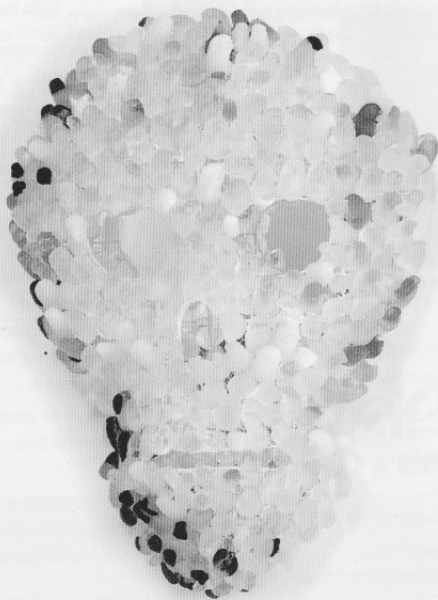
Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams, occasionally known by the pseudonym 'Crystal Chain Gang', have developed a practice, which critiques while also memorialising aspects of what could be described as a New Zealand culture. It is a culture that is often misinterpreted as being solely about race or ethnicity, but in the case of Dennison and Williams is more accurately described as a personal understanding of how we locate ourselves within a societal context and a natural landscape.

Dennison and Williams have developed a repertoire of symbols and signs, which describe their experience of growing up in godzone, doing little to conform to the romantic notions of the exotic antipodean landscape. They have constructed a visual vocabulary which plays on the stereotypical ideas of the iconic kiwi experience of the 70s

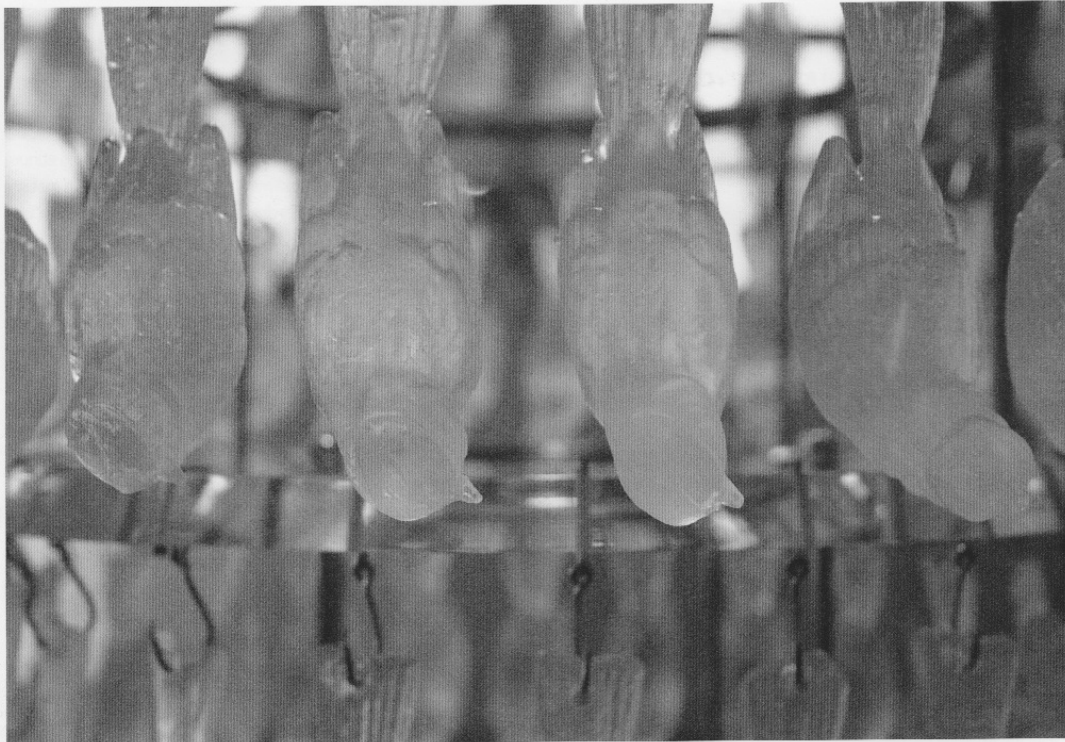
and 80s, with millions of sheep roaming rolling green hills, chocolate box suburban gardens filled with garish shades of the English rose, and the ever present budgerigar caged in the corner of the family living room.

Dennison and Williams' interest in these ideas came to the fore in an early work affectionately titled *Gloria*. This piece created specifically for an exhibition in Europe was intended as a comment on the detrimental impact of the colonial process on the New Zealand landscape. A sheep carcass engulfed in delicate glass roses suspended from a standard freezing work style meat-hook references what Dennison and Williams describes as 'imposed notions of beautification and agriculture', which they feel have had seriously negative implications for the New Zealand environment. With *Gloria* the intention was to return these 'imports' back to their symbolic place of origin. This gesture was to mark the beginning of the Crystal Chain Gang's most engaging series of works and also delineated the clear cultural distinction that Dennison and Williams wanted to make between their European heritage and their unquestionable place as New Zealanders.

The use of an eclectic array of found materials and imagery in their works are the result of what the pair suggests is a 'mentality of collecting' that they feel has had a significant impact on the New Zealand psyche. This tradition of collecting has been inherited from the Victorian colonial custom of acquiring artifacts of curiosity from exotic destinations and has manifested in Dennison and Williams' works as a macabre undertone which is hard to ignore. In recent works the seemingly innocuous budgerigar and sparrow feature as prominent reminders of the pair's view of introduced species, but they also become an unintentional reference to the Victorian world view in which anything that was deemed to be chaotic or outside of 'normal' terms of reference was tamed, caged and reconfigured. In *R.I.P.*, flightless glass sparrows are displayed dangling lifeless, tier after tier, from fishhooks in a strangely beautiful environmental statement. Ironically



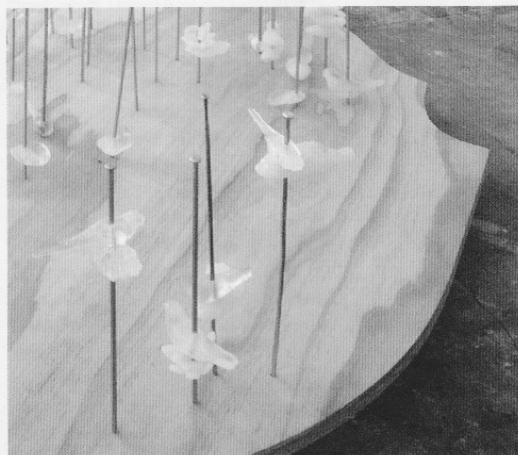
Polly, Cast Glass, Steel Frame, Mirrored Perspex, Silicon glue, 2006.



*R.I.P.*, Cast glass and found objects, 2006.

they have been assembled to form an impressively grand chandelier fit for any luxurious Victorian ballroom.

However, in the tradition of the infamous kiwi do-it-yourself attitude the pair have begun to view their practice as a form of domestic curation, a methodology which endeavors to work against the stereotype of collecting and collectors as the purveyors of a form of unrestrained acquisition. This is also a way in which to bring the everyday back into their practice. The severed budgie heads artfully arranged into the form of a stylised human skull of



*Stitchbird*, Cast glass and found objects, 2006.

*Polly* and the beautiful horseshoe-like wreath constructed of numerous soft-pink glass budgie wings of *Lady Luck* hints at the pair's ability to fuse nostalgic home-craft traditions of shell mirrors and paperflower posies with more serious environmental concerns. This is reiterated in *Stitchbird* a trophy of sorts, won in the ongoing battle of the domestic front which acts as a challenge and a warning of things to come. The budgies skewered on knitting needles discarded on their poorly completed mount are a testament to Dennison and Williams' conviction.

However, this also exposes a rather uncomfortable dichotomy in Dennison and Williams' practice which is reflected in their rose-tinted approach to ideas of the New Zealand experience. Their humorous take is at times shadowed with a deep sense of loss both of a time when things were simpler and of a landscape that has forever been relegated to the legend of history. Is this then a New Zealand culture, one in which we celebrate our everydayness while trying desperately to move forward on a global scale? In light of this it does seem fortunate that we have makers like Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams to remind us of the little things and to keep us focused on their importance in making us who we are. Through their practice they challenge us to consider what it is that makes a culture.

Karl Chitham