



## Crystal Chain Gang: Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams

### *Exotic, Obsessive and Ornamental*

We have been working together for seven years, and as the Crystal Chain Gang since 2004, making cast glass works that comment on subjects to do with origins, habits and identity. Happily locating ourselves within a societal context and the natural landscape, we have developed a repertoire of signs and symbols which we use as signifiers of our cultural history and memory, to describe our experience of growing up and living in New Zealand.

For the past four years we have been inspired to make work using aspects of the humble budgerigar. Initially, we were intrigued with why these Australian native grassland birds came to live in captivity in our homes, in cages – is it a desire to own the exotic and beautiful? Does one become obsessed with the notion of 'to have and to hold, till death do us part'? This desire for collecting the exotic to embellish our homes and bodies intrigued us.

We chose the budgie as our signifier, to drive our imagination to make new objects: objects that refer to the exotic, the obsessive and the ornamental. The wooden museum cabinet, with a selection of taxidermed birds acquired, perhaps, in the context of obsessively collecting the exotic, together with a first edition of Walter Buller's *A History of the Birds of New Zealand*, 1873 (owned by Jim's father, himself an 'obsessive' ornithologist), represents our starting point. We have made birdcages populated by glass birds, a series of bottles and flasks with bird heads as stoppers, and bird trophies, in reference to this theme.

Glass materiality and its relationship to precious gemstones is also a constant source of inspiration. We use glass to make reference to jewels, and cover and clad metal armatures with glass components to create giant works of costume jewellery. One of these is *Lady Luck*, from 2006, which can be read as both *memento mori* neckpiece and trophy, comprising hundreds of cast glass bird wings. We are also slowly forming a crystal topiary garden of jewels and with this our interests turned towards the glass history of the opulent chandelier. Since 2007, we have made a number of these forms. Sometimes they are made up of many complete bird forms; at other times they might be made from wings or tails. *Quill*, from 2009, is a jewel that speaks of excess and beauty. Although being made up of 130 pressed glass bird tails, it also suggests the hunted, the collected, the ornamental, and the passion for collecting.

We are also interested in other birds. Most recently, we've been making an outdoor installation for the Brick Bay Sculpture Park, in North Auckland. *Plunderers* is a bunch of pirate birds – 40 very funny characters – that land in the park on an existing structure. Our process is highly repetitious, hence the 'Crystal Chain Gang'. Each glass piece is individually moulded and cast to create multiples of 'gems' for us to work with. In all these works we revel in the ethereal nature of the glass to evoke an emotional response, all the while wondering how obsessive we ourselves are getting.

**Above:** Leanne Williams and Jim Dennison in their studio, with a flock of budgies. (photo: Emma Smith)

**Opposite page:**

**Top images:** Selection of taxidermed birds: Kakariki (native parrot), Lorieet and Budgerigar; and book, Walter Buller, *A History of the Birds of New Zealand*, first edition, 1873. photos: Sandi Black and Richard Wotton  
Birds: collection, Whanganui Regional Museum.  
Book: collection Tenick Dennison.

**Right:** *Lady Luck*, 2006  
Cast glass, wire, wood, enamel paint.  
800 x 670 x 120 mm  
Collection: Tina Tylee  
(photo: Leanne Williams)

**Left:** *Quill*, 2009  
Pressed hot glass, steel, enamel, electrical fittings.  
480 x 600 mm  
(photo: Leanne Williams)

