

1997 was a particularly difficult year for Zimbabweans. On 9 December the nation demonstrated against government mismanagement of the economy, the streets were in turmoil, the people angry and despairing. That same evening the annual Summer Exhibition 1997-98 opened at Gallery Delta. Gillian Wright finds cause for celebration in the work on show.

In praise of artists



The Summer Exhibition — does the exhibition title suggest to you a summer of soft muzak, sunlit lawns and 'the beautiful people' at leisure? This article, however, celebrates a generally sombre collection of fine, mainly Zimbabwean, work. A General Strike, the annual Christmas buying frenzy and then devastating food riots all took place during this show, whose work tells of resolute and honest commitment to the land, the conditions of its people, the creation of art and response to the ideas it generates.

I take up Keston Beaton's *Jingler's Harp*. From the detritus of consumerism and an earlier age of craftsmanship the artist has made an instrument which sings only in visual and tactile mode. It is silent, an ornament on a wall. It is like a lyre — its horns though, are cow's horns (made of pieces of old bentwood furniture) which suggest the old measure of wealth in pastoral times. It is strung with found cords of varying thicknesses and fibres which bear the dirt of use. One would believe that they had been played many times. An old plastic coffee container (as resonator?), bits of plastic machinery and electronic gadgetry are assembled within the harp. There is pathos in the battered plastic animal shape from a baby's rattle tacked to the frame. It suggests an infant's rudimentary instrument and perhaps how far we are removed from contact with the warmth of real animals in the poverty of urban life. The bentwood bits are refined in their skilled craftsmanship — the one used for the frame is further decorated and made personal with the artist's carved markings. This wood contrasts with the tacky plastic things — but they too are rescued rubbish. The 'third' world seems to be viewed by the 'first' as a vast mine for its resources in the vicinity of which the masses may be jettisoned — there must be no food subsidies, and cut-backs in health, education and social services follow the IMF's economic prescriptions. So may we, as representatives of the throw-away people, redeem ourselves with art from our trash. On the left, below the baby's toy, is a breast image, like a metal cymbal, nailed in. Is he saying that music (art) is our comfort and succour — our mother, in fact? That man does not live by commodities alone? We die for lack of meaning. As Gerry Dixon has it in his poem:

"A mark is made
A line is drawn
Meaning is found"

'People = consumers.' Much of our music is made up of commercial jingles, which children grow up singing. Beaton's harp and cymbal allude to Psalm 150, in which song was an act of worship to the Creator:

"Praise him with the psaltery and harp" and "Praise him upon high sounding cymbals."

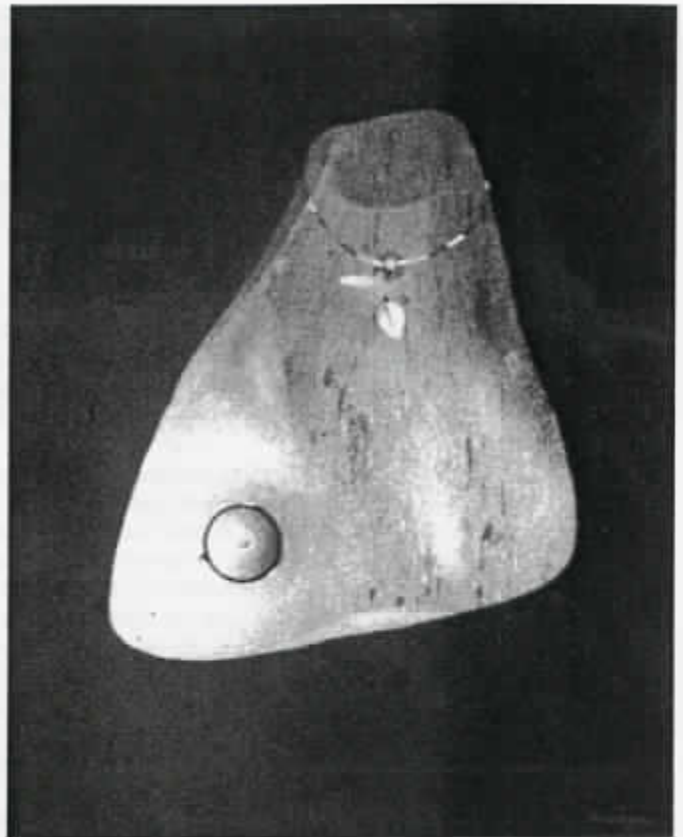
Thakor Patel also uses the breast image in two paintings: the metallic nipple in *Pot* echoes Beaton's cymbal. The other work, *White Ant Egg*, is of a monolithic limbless figure which floats in a turquoise sky. Its terracotta patina of paint suggests a swelling breast, but where it should be is a circular hole which gives onto vibrant sky — space — freedom. The warmth of the blue beyond contradicts the not-thereness of the breast. Can we interpret this as the mystic's faith in emptiness, silence? Where a womb should be is another perfect circular void. Emerging from a shadow inside the left of it is a vibrant orange disk or ball rolling towards the circle of sky. Is it a newly conceived life or idea moving from shadow to light? The artist has seen the womb as space rather than containment/confinement. I think he is celebrating the fertility and nourishment of Inner Space with artful humour, and rejoices over the fecundity of the artist's imagination.

White Ant Egg recalls Bernard Takawira's sculpture *See More - Talk Less* (see *Gallery* no13 p24). Patel is consciously developing Takawira's mystical idea of contained vision (the eye of the sculpture sees the sky beyond).

Patel's companion painting, *Pot*, suggests another rudimentary female form. Her 'neck' is adorned with an African string of beads, hung with the cowrie shell of fertility and wealth. Another mysterious amulet hangs there; it looks like a coat hanger. The breast, also a single image, is represented by a perfect geometric circle 'incised' into the body. Circle = breast might represent the endless cycle of feeding and nurture of human beings but its reduction to a geometric cypher communicates a different perception of a breast. Instead of a nipple, a bright metal button is seen to be sown onto the stippled paint. The figure is bespattered with drips of paint. This gives her life but reduces her dignity somehow. She is maculate. The purple intensifying to black background is sad and redolent of a majesty belied by the button, the necklace, the splatter down her front. That modern hanger shape — does she exist to display clothes, ornamentation? The dead, dirty white colour of the figure may speak of emotional poverty and corruption of the devalued personalities of women who are regarded as fertility containers and decorative objects only. At the same time Patel may be speaking of the sterility and debasement of art which is expected to be purely decorative, the reduction of the artist (bearer of new life) in the modern economy. Where a nipple should be is a drawing of a pretty button, and skin is made of splatters of paint, female = art is the next step. These themes are transmuted into a creation of beauty and elegance. In this I am reminded of what Berry Bickle does.

The necklace motif reappears as an actual found object, marooned, belonging to no-one anymore and gummed onto the background picture in Berry Bickle's installation, *Font*. Again that elegant exotic Portuguese writing is repeated — used as a texture. The imperialist 'Word' still frames and backgrounds us, in the sense of Fiat and Indoctrination.

A straight wrought iron stand bears a block of plaster or something covered in glued varnished paper, with the waters of the Mozambique sea (waters of redemption, renewal? or ravage?) rendered in gorgeous transparent washes over it. All this paper/surface/information. An inverted basin shape in the block of the font holds a segment only of a beautiful deep blue glazed plate. It can't hold water. The melding of meanings — baptismal font and printer's font — speaks of our birth into a world of imposed information. The baptismal font is broken but still washed with water. The plate image is insistent in Bickle's work. Plate = food security; that issue discussed endlessly in the vast tide of books, pamphlets, e-mails from infinite conferences, lunches and dinners on the subject. More words. There are a crowned plate and a half face in relief with a horrifying dead eye affixed onto the picture like icons or hunter's trophies. The expression 'dish' for 'face' is evoked. (Faces look for food and do eating.) This half face is pasted over with the paper of the written catechism of power. There are other



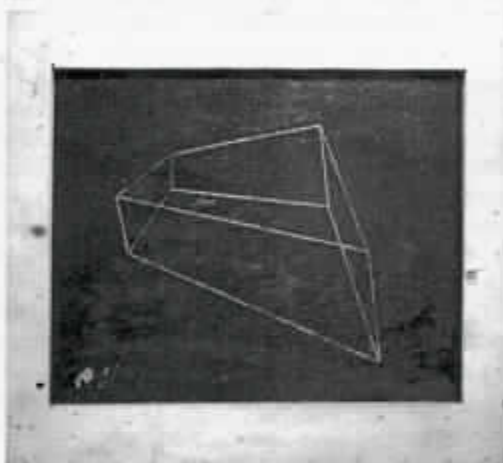
Thakor Patel, *Pot*, 1997, 70 x 56cm, watercolour

Berry Bickle, *Font* (detail), 1997, 250 x 95 x 30cm, mixed media





Justin Gope,
Dancers, 1997,
46 x 38cm,
mixed media



Gareth
Fletcher,
*In Between
No 1*, 1997,
86 x 80 cm,
graphite
on plywood



George Churu, *Rock View*, 1997, 40 x 54cm,
oil on paper



Hilary Kashiri, *Wind Object - Yacht*, 1997, 56 x 75cm,
mixed media

decorations — her beloved sherds the sea washes up. My reaction to this stunning elegance, constructed from fragments of old art, modern junk, lovely objects made by the artist herself and images of imperial rape, is of rage. How dare she? But I am bewitched by its beauty. It's a Catch 22.

I take refuge in Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the first modern English poets. One of his lines is: "Give beauty back." In *To What Serves Mortal Beauty* he says:

*"To man, that needs would worship block or barren stone,
Our law says: Love what are love's worthiest, were all known;
World's loveliest — men's selves. Self flashes off frame and face.
What do then? how meet beauty? Merely meet it; own,
Home at heart, heaven's sweet gift;"*

Men's selves are investigated especially in the work of Luis Meque, Fasoni Sibanda, Cosmos Shiridzinomwa, Justin Gope, Richard Witikani and Shepherd Mahufe, and in Ishmael Wilfred's interior warscapes. The landscapes of this generation of black artists are almost all inhabited. The Romantic individualist buzz over sublime Nature empty of people has not a place here. Justin Gope's dark and intimate painting of *Dancers* impresses. The two embracing figures form one image in paint which has been handled so as to have strong physicality. Their environment is so dark, warmth and light belong only on their bodies — but only enough to define them. This image sears itself on the memory.

Shepherd Mahufe's *Rural Home* is perfect, poetic. The viewer can somehow see this home with the love of the person who lives there, in that hut with the soft rotting thatch. The deep blues and greens of the lush foliage which still surrounds the homestead suggest sorrow and nostalgia. A newer building on the left is represented by a wall facing the hut which is the focus of the picture. This wall is worked in a deep uniform blue much darker than the intense blue shadows of Zimbabwe's rural places. Deep depression in the viewer is evoked by this blue wall. Strung in front of the homestead is a fence. Its grey poles used to be young trees which still dance sinuously. Russet light behind tells of the end of day and suggests to me the end of a way of life.

George Churu's *Rock View* is an uninhabited landscape. It would seem to follow an imposed convention: blue hills beyond a thicket of trees at sunset with a grassy open foreground. There is excitement, a thrill of fear in the chaos of wild colours. The sky is green, yellow, brown and dirty white, and the trees are in colours real trees never have. So why do I recognise this scene, knowing I've been there? This feeling has been felt by Churu and expressed in the landscape. So we are, in a sense, together there in the bush, artist and viewer.

Hilary Kashiri works with the abstraction of landscape forms. His *Wind Object — Yacht* is all movement, but composed of images from the landscape here. The scribbled light lines replicate the shine of sun on dry grass, there are sections of fields of wind-blown pasture, a dam wall perhaps. The sails imitate large industrial structures. Deep transparent blue green shapes repeat the violence of moving bodies of water. You watch land transposing itself into water. The painting gives form to the excitement of shifting perceptions of reality.

The attention is riveted by the brightness of Fasoni Sibanda's *Seke II Scene*. It seems at first to be joyous, artless, naive. The women seem to dance at their work. His treatment of the dustscape they inhabit, in broad strokes of gouache, magically evokes the soft beauty of exhausted soil. The women's vigour is represented in deceptively simple forms, with the negative spaces used to separate them and foreground them. They now seem lonely. Where are the men? The woman disappearing towards the horizon (dust meeting those calligraphic white clouds which bring no rain in a brilliant turquoise sky) moves isolated into nothingness. The lightness of his irony impresses.

Luis Meque's monumental figures this time are larger and even more loosely painted. They dominate the room. The deftness of their execution amazes and speaks of dedicated practice. The respect for people, which is the bedrock of African culture, resonates in these paintings. These are the heroes who populate the poor urban places.

Richard Witikani's *Girl in a Red Bolero* has that intense presence one expects in the figures he paints. She is fully alive, conscious in her body and in her clothes. That foot kicked up onto the pavement belies the seatedness of the girl. Most of her clothes echo the sand and msasas — she belongs where she is, does not suffer alienation. The cheerfulness of youth flares in her white hair ornament, her bright bolero, and the delicious white turning mauve strokes of her blouse. Witikani's fast putting on of paint and use of the paper beneath to create space throughout mocks the massive weight that one thinks one sees. His *Road at Bromley* is a turbulent painting. This red road cut into the land — where is it leading under that stormy red sky? One imagines from the style that he had to get it done fast before the storm broke — it has that immediacy.

James Jali's *Church III* lurches hypnotically on the paper. Leaning dangerously towards it is an electricity pole with its staywire. (The Power?) Cars are parked drunkenly next to the church. The broken surface of the picture, laid in with gouache in sentimental colours, admits a darkness which leaks through the cracks, spaces between the gestures. Is this a comment on the Prosperity Gospel churches which proliferate?

Three Pregnant Women bitterly converse in the clinic queue in Cosmos Shiridzinomwa's painting. This is evident in the vigorous distortion in their drawing. The floor, worked in warring flesh-toned designs speaks of suffering and aggression, and intense life. It tells of the grim aspects of motherhood.

A shift away from people to *In Between No1* by Gareth Fletcher. It hangs next to Danner's elegant graphics. Is it because Fletcher's is sculptural and textural that these appear so thin, sterile? Fletcher revels in the textures of wood, graphite, paint. His personality is evident in the uneven humorous lines that draw a diagram of an impossible 3D geometric figure into the deeply worked graphite rectangle which is formed by and backed by slightly battered lovely smooth plywood. The rough graphite surface invites you into the night — into a depth which obviously isn't there because the graphite is clearly on the surface of the plywood. It is dusty and plainly itself. There are iridescent blobs on the graphite. I see them as rainbows, clouds in the heart of the carbon itself — 'the element contains the whole' idea develops. Do Fletcher and Patel have different takes on the luxuriance of hidden life, and how making art requires craftiness and craftsmanship in dedication to the best fun there is?

Fletcher also exhibits a big rounded metal meat-grinder with a slot in the top and one in the front. It resembles a protruding muzzle now with a dark papier-mâché cigar wedged into the side of the front orifice (now a mouth) and gobs of tar smeared along the edges of the top slot. This piece, *Fat Cat*, sticks out from the front verandah wall. It is a neat cohesive image: a satisfying sculptural single form enfleshing in metal a grim satire.

One is enmeshed again in the human. Craig Wylie's *Urchin* amazes. This very young street child is painted life-sized and almost photographically. The attention to the details of her clothes, her face, fingers and feet is almost worshipful, but distanced by the anonymity of his technique — the artist himself would seem absent. She is dressed in ornate cast-off black tunic adorned with flowers, some of which Wylie has made into holly leaves. It is as if she is a precious gift for no-one. She also wears grubby brown pyjama pants, from which a dainty dancer's foot points with toes tensed. The eyes are lustrous, lovely. A tangle of her fingers presses against her lips. Is she pressing back hunger or stifling a cry? You feel that



Luis Meque, *Theatre*, 1997,
111 x 92cm, mixed media



Richard Witikani, *Girl in a
Red Bolero*, 1997, 96 x 80cm,
oil on paper



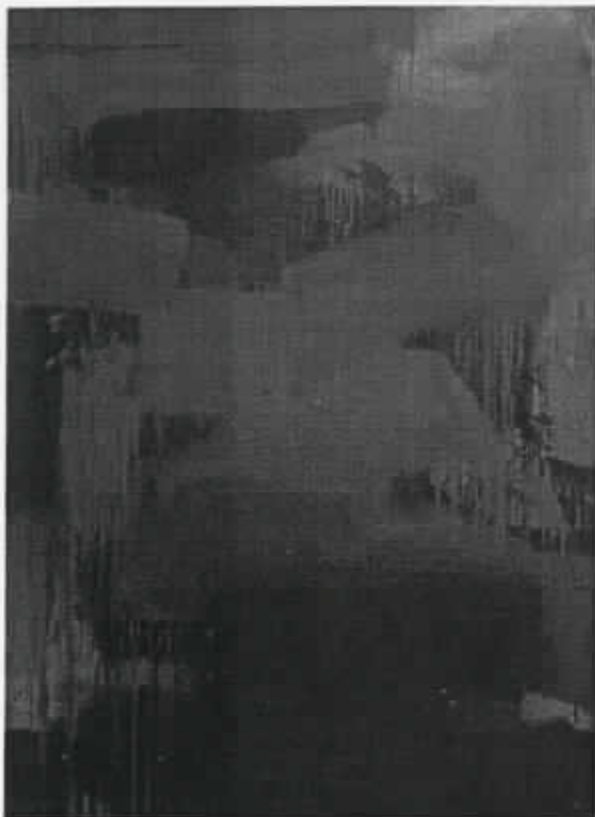
James Jali,
Church III,
1997,
35 x 52cm,
mixed media



Cosmos
Shiridzinomwa,
*Three Pregnant
Women*, 1997,
89 x 70cm,
acrylic on paper



Craig Wylie, *Urchin*,
1997, 90 x 60cm,
oil on canvas



she never cries any more. The diagonal lines of the cement-tiled pavement which form background and foreground contain her like diamond mesh. So this beautiful anxious infant is suspended in a fence which refers us to the barrier between the viewer and the child — she is a painted image. She is not real — the picture is. One feels tricked. *Trompe l'oeil* using this subject — is this acceptable? Rage again. To us, who have learned to pass by the street children on the pavement with hardly a flicker of emotional disturbance, turning our attention to other business, the artist says 'How real is real?'

The attention turns from the ultra-realist to the abstract expressionist Rashid Jogee who also offers an unflinching investigation of personal suffering in *Drought*. This drought is experienced not in statistics for food-for-work programmes. It investigates and sings in sonorous tones of the suffering it causes. It may speak also of emotional drought and loss. The central image, a blackish oblong, reaches forward a darkness which dominates and draws the viewer back through the washes of mauves, purples and golds (for me layers of dust, loss, time and dry golden Bulawayo trees) into the depths of the bereaved heart. That oblong could be read as a grave or as the comfort oblivion offers. I see Rashid Jogee as a mystical, lyric painter. He listens for hours to chants in the mosque, he said. The paintings themselves tell of surrender to, and objectivity towards the interior life to which he gives a physical body in the layers of paint. He respects the paint, letting it have its own life without imposing his personality upon it. The gestures of his medium do not say 'Marvellous me!' but 'Marvellous paint!'



From this intense focus on individual suffering one moves to the epochal Africa and continent-wide vision of Helen Lieros's *Africa Apocalypse 1*. This picture celebrates the physicality of paint with the worked rough background which is her signature. It is like rock and darkness but the uppermost layer of the surface is in a hot dry blue pigment. That blue excites an intense tactile sensation in the viewer, and being so dry refutes the blue = water = renewal/salvation equation. The central collaged motif suggests a typical local rock formation — or perhaps a couple of chunks of flesh — but the dominant image therein, which appears as if by magic from a print of swirled pigment, resembles the embryo of a horse. Will it grow to be a mount for one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to herald the end of the world? Do I see the horse embryo because the picture's title suggested it to me? Horse embryo or no embryo at all, the warm flesh tones of the delicate immediacy in the torn-out collaged print intimates precious pre-conscious life. (The horse in African mythology also symbolises dominion and nobility.) Above the central motif is a heraldic band of three oblongs interrupted by a small earth-white rectangle intersected by a dark line on the side. The middle 'flag' has been invaded by the blue sky/dark rock stuff which composes most of the painting, like the land asserting itself over imposed boundaries. Red, blue, white, black/brown. Red of soil, red of bloodshed? Over the 'flags' a gold line runs across the picture, gold of moths' wings, of ancient art and wealth. Above this is a 'transparent' slit which reveals more sky/earth which appears to be diminishing as a broad guillotine blade of black and reddish blood/soil pigment descends from the top. It occupies the space given to the sky in a child's painting — these conventions stay within us. Blue is often regarded as the colour of spirituality. Here the spiritual seems to reside in the rock below the sky, as rainbow clouds reside within Fletcher's elemental carbon-graphite. The encounter with this landscape/continentscape leaves the viewer with inversions, uncertainty, mystery. There is palpable reality in the pigment and paper and its sure handling, but it seems to say that in spite of tangible signs present in our environment, the millenium's meaning, for us, is inscrutable.

(top) Rashid Jogee, *Drought*, 1997, 124 x 93cm, mixed media on canvas

(below) Helen Lieros, *Africa Apocalypse 1*, 1997, mixed media

Gerry Dixon's work perfects this mastery of material and idea in wood. *Keep Looking* is a sculpture made from a section of young tree trunk. It keeps the organic form the circumference of the trunk dictated. The cracks are filled with a green acrylic medium. Life.

Sap. Does creativity erupt through the breaking points in how we are organised and organise ourselves and others? Is this what we must keep looking for?

Dixon and Andreas Makromallis the potter alike are artist/craftsmen who hone in on three-dimensional form which they make speak in new ways of feelings and ideas. Makromallis's *Aegean Memories : Turquoise Blue Lilac Purple Pot* gives one the quiet full satisfaction that a classical pot would : it has a self-possessed beauty, but also surprising and disturbing details. Its shape recalls the amphora but instead of the tall neck there is a dried spout of overlaid partial leaves like those which curl round the shoot of a plant bulb. A hole into the hollow shape inside replaces the imaginary shoot. From the back this edge of 'dead stem' or 'leaf' reminds me of a soft collar, and brave, sad 'shoulders' slope down into the pot's rotundity. Now it's a man. These edges look as if they would yield or bend if touched. The plasticity of the unfired clay is also present in the large soft dents the potter has made in the back bottom half of the pot. The front is left intact. This work speaks in its shape and colours of a unity of perfection and vulnerability/impairment. The Aegean turquoise predominates in the thick delicious glaze which has permutations of the colours of the title. The blue drips into bright pinky streaks towards and over the edge of the cave of the dark glaze of the base. This pot is three things in one: a potent cultural symbol, a plant bulb with its suggestion of new growth, and a person.

Frowke Viewing's exquisite large creamy *Bowl* was set below Makromallis's collection. One gazed down from the silent carnival into Viewing's shining pale yellow heaven with its galaxy of efflorescences of exploded melted crystals. This looking down not up into heaven was exciting but to see the underneath one had to go down on all fours. It was worth it. In the glaze of the outside seemed to grow myriad blades of golden grass or reeds from dark soil with deep shadows between the leaves, or the striations of rock. The outer form, whose complex glazing recalls the denseness and complexity of vegetative or mineral existence, contains the inner form of liquid light. Thakor Patel's eyes must have gleamed with especial brightness when he visited this pot.

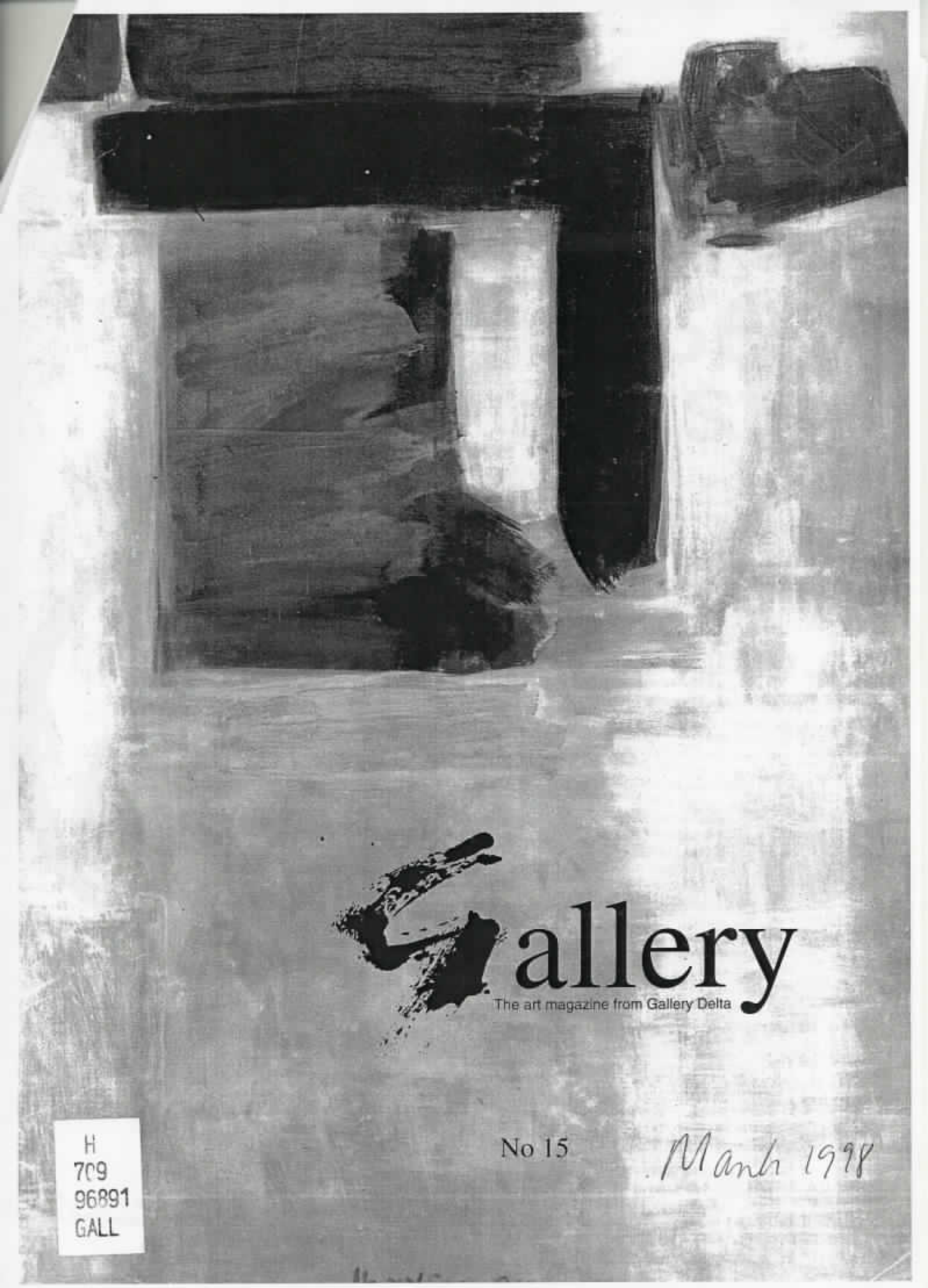
Returning to Gerry Dixon, his *Flame Bird* flies up in a single flickering form from its base. It 'is' — truly flame and truly bird. The front surface is finely polished, hard like stone, and within it are little scars, excoriations, gouge marks. The artist made some and borer beetles others, I think. They bleed with black ink. The back is unpolished but has soft matt colour soaked into the wood. It looks so vulnerable. The mystery here is — how does he do it? Wood into pure spirit? The exultant upward thrust successfully represents the human spirit, triumphant though scarred. I take this to be the sum and symbol of the Summer Exhibition.

It was a feast of works in which the artists demonstrated a commitment to new explorations of the social, spiritual, emotional and physical worlds of our people. Little evidence of stagnation and none of sentimentality were seen. Work of this calibre is an act of faith vital in this cynical, culturally devastated age. It is an act which acquires meaning in the investigative reception given to it by those who will offer the act of truly looking.

(above) Gerry Dixon, *Flame Bird*, 1997, 75 x 23 x 18cm, wood and aluminium

(right) Gerry Dixon, *Keep Looking*, 1997, 17 x 20 x 11cm, wood and acrylic





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