

Chorus Arusha Gallery



*Engraving by Hendrik Hondius based on
an original drawing by Pieter Breughel*

Frau Troffea stepped out on to the street and began to dance. Under the full heat of the sun, she moved frenetically to an imaginary beat. As sweat gathered on her brow and blisters grew on her feet, she found that she couldn't stop. Soon, more than 30 people had joined her, dancing day and night. By the time the authorities were alerted, 100 or so people had been infected by this 'dancing plague', a phenomenon that afflicted the townspeople of Strasbourg in the summer of 1518. Many collapsed from exhaustion; some died. In etchings depicting similar occurrences from throughout the medieval era, the group of dancers looks like a solid mass. Arms are interwoven, hands held, torsos twisted into each other like the difference between 'I' and 'you' no longer matters. You *lose yourself to dance*, so the song goes.

The 12 artists in 'Chorus' at Arusha Gallery this spring take their cue from rhythm, harmony, music, or sound – and their art responds to the varied reactions we might have to them. There are depictions of collective euphoria as well as the moment this tips into something more disquieting. We might feel in turn enchanted and invigorated, lulled or shaken by the art on display. While all the artworks were made by contemporary artists, living and working in the 21st century, there is a sense of timelessness that pervades the show. 'Chorus' speaks to an atavistic response to the strains and resolutions, beats and vibrations of sound.

We begin in a jostling nightclub on a Friday night. In Ed Burkes' high key paintings, limbs jut and poses are struck on a harlequin dancefloor, while dissonances and harmonies are played on a keyboard of chromatic colours. There's an implied rhythm of the night in Burkes' work which thrums through each of his canvases, transporting us to that place of collective ecstasy you might feel when lost in the sounds of the dancefloor.

Euphoria, however, is just a short step from delirium. In Fiona Finnegan's oil and acrylic paintings on wood a quiet sense of unease stirs through the scenes, which have been stripped of the details to locate them in a particular time or place. In one work, naked women dance around a bonfire, while sparks are flung high into the night sky: is it a scene of joyful revelry, or are we witnessing an arcane ritual, perhaps inspired by the Celtic mythology that informs Finnegan's art? Likewise, Dereck Harris – who uses stills from YouTube videos of contemporary dance as his source material – creates scenes of baroque spectacle, depicting writhing bodies under the glare of the artificial stage lighting. The effect is like that of an incantation, inviting us to step in, and join the dance.

This theme of enchantment hums through the artworks in 'Chorus'. In one delicate work on paper by Mohammad Barrangi, a procession of masked figures follows behind a piper, as if transfixed by the curious instrument's song; a flute appears too in the foreground of John Stark's contemporary take on a memento mori. The symbol of the flute or pipes is linked in many cultures to the gods, perhaps due to the ethereal quality of its sound – the breath of heaven. Most famously, the goat-god Pan in the Greek myth invents the pan pipes from seven lengths of reed, and the Ancient Egyptians believed the flute was brought to earth by the god Isis. In Hinduism, Krishna plays the flute and transfixes milkmaids with his intoxicating song:

When the first full moon of autumn approaches and the jasmine is in bloom, the shrill, soft sound of the flute penetrates the rooms. It is Krishna calling.

If the flute lulls us with a heavenly melody, then Chantal Powell's *Sistrum* series might wake us from a stupor, fixing us firmly in the here and now. The sistrum, an Ancient Egyptian rattle (that Powell recreates in ceramic form) was historically used in religious ceremonies when coming into the presence of deity. The shrill sound of clanging bronze might have alerted worshippers to come to their senses – a reminder to clear the mind and focus on the ensuing encounter. Plutarch, the Greek philosopher, wrote that the sistrum 'makes it clear that all things in existence need to be shaken, or rattled about, and never to cease from motion.'

Life began with vibrations. Shortly after the big bang, 'the early universe rang with the sound of countless cosmic bells' – the universe was like a thick soup, which rippled like the surface of a 'pond pounded by stones', producing a vast cosmic reverberation. Works in 'Chorus' spiral back and further back into the past, rushing past the medieval, the ancient, and through pre-history. Pippa Gatty's work goes further too, back before there were the words, or pictures, to describe the world around us. Her gestural oil paintings are like a phrase on the tip of your tongue, or an image half-remembered. They possess the rhythms that belong to a primordial brain, sketching out the rough forms of a world just beginning to take shape.

One possible explanation for the 1518 'dancing plague' was a mass outbreak of ergotism, a severe reaction to the psychoactive fungus ergot that commonly grows on grains, such as rye. The ergot got into the flour, which got into the bread, which got onto the plates of ordinary townsfolk all over Strasbourg, so the theory goes. I like the idea that the rhythms of the dance were coded into the fungus already – only to break out once they had found a suitable host.

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