

# Frozen storms

Painter Georgie Hill conjures up real and imagined visions of cosmic meteorology, her distinctive technique creating patterns of movement and rhythm, tension and release.

BY THEO MACDONALD

**Italian astronomer Giovanni Cassini recorded the first substantiated sighting of the “Great Red Spot” in 1665.** This deathless storm rages atop Jupiter’s surface at a sublime, irregular width, sometimes 40,000 kilometres across. The squall’s colour mutates between cosmic orange, celestial salmon and heavenly white. Cassini’s sighting arrived five decades behind William Shakespeare’s storm-tossed swansong, *The Tempest*, and three centuries before Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chopped and screwed Shakespeare’s play into *Forbidden Planet*, the first film with an entirely electronic score.

This unwieldy astronomical network I am describing motions toward the divergent intellectual curiosities of Auckland painter Georgie Hill: meteorology, astronomy, climate change, disaster, the psychedelic, theosophy, modern literature and colour. Especially colour.

Where does her fascination with apocalypse and disaster come from? In part, through imagining the classical fates of Pompeii and Atlantis. But also, in 2011, Hill’s life was interrupted by the Christchurch earthquake, a traumatic experience that forced her and her partner back to Auckland; their apartment had to be demolished. Perhaps by painting scenes of mass destruction, freezing such catastrophes in sturdy compositions, she can think through the psychological aftershocks of this historic disaster.

Any conversation with Hill is distinguished by the variety of her knowledge and the determination of her convictions, especially when discussing her studio practice. She is an omnivorous reader, citing writers Anna Kavan, Anne Carson, and Doris Lessing, but prefers to discover new titles at second-hand book shops than deliberately seek out specific

authors. She’ll reread books that particularly strike her — such as Kavan’s apocalyptic novel *Ice* — many times over, often appropriating phrases for painting titles. The novels that influence her art practice tend to have sci-fi, fantasy or mythological elements and use heightened language to describe natural environments.

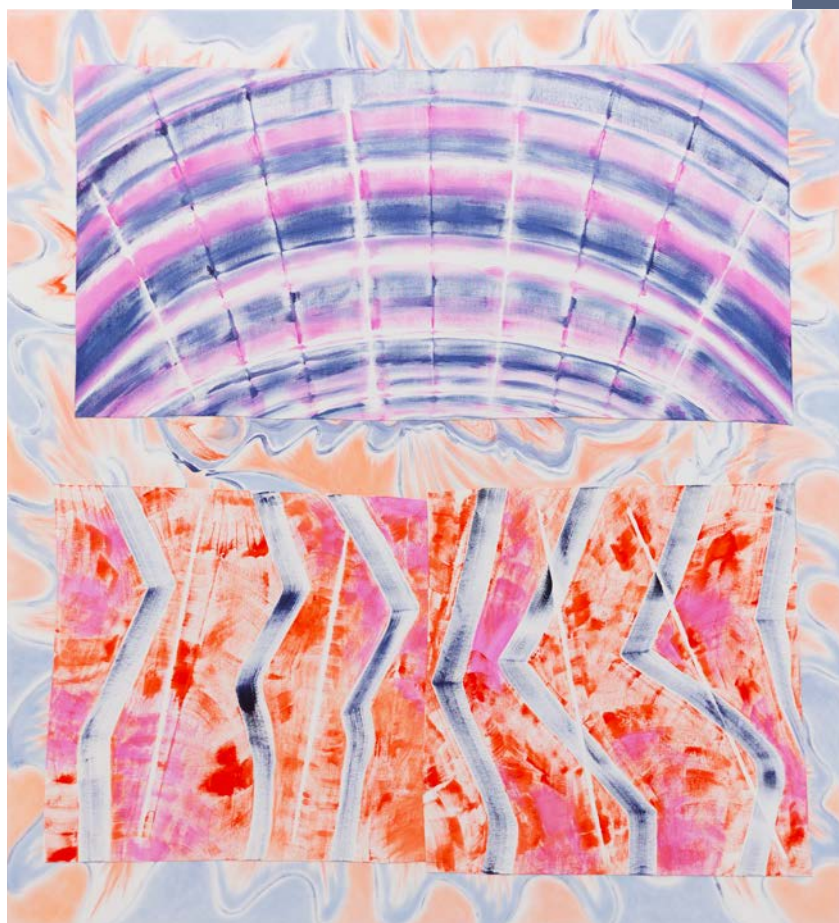
In her watercolour and acrylic paintings, Hill uses gestural mark-making and collage to evoke the ferocity of a cosmic storm, a divine visitation or an erupting volcano. Much as a thunderstorm needs three essential elements to form — moisture, atmospheric instability and a trigger — Hill achieves her abundant colour spectrum with a condensed palette: one shade each of yellow, indigo blue, red and magenta (a recent addition). Layered in calculated intensities, she achieves a wide assortment of effects — a red wash sits under bars of indigo and smears of yellow, yielding a fizzy, TV-static lavender.

Hill characterises her studio process as “an economy of means”, meaning she works frugally, recycling materials and ideas to push them to the absolute limit. Technical studio experiments are held onto and often find new life as collage components, evoking the original science-fiction novel — Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

One of Hill’s most distinct methods is her use of a scalpel to slice delicate incisions into her thick watercolour-paper sheets. From afar, the crisp contour lines floating above each painted surface appear to be the product of delicate masking. Step closer, and you’ll see these lines are split open, the paper interior flayed and uncovered like a frog in biology class, a split frankfurter or a pipeline trench.



Top down:  
*Venus Marina*  
*The Roses*  
*Came Roaring*  
*(2)*, Georgie  
Hill; Detail,  
*Prismatic*  
*Tectonics* (5).



Left to right: Venus Marina /  
*The Roses Came Roaring* (9);  
Georgie Hill.

Hill, a 17-year watercolour devotee, says this technique came from a desire to be less precious with her materials. The Western commercial art market has traditionally perceived paper as a lesser, more vulnerable alternative to the oil painter's canvas. Hill seeks to subvert this vulnerability and emphasise the strength of this two-millennia-old technology by slicing into the paper, revealing a creamy, Punakaiki-esque cotton interior. Remembering Hill's apocalyptic subject matter, the method has an added layer of meaning, as the Greek "apokalypsis" translates as 'reveal' or 'uncover'.

In 2015, when visiting Japan for six weeks, Hill saw a photograph of anime artist Takayuki Goto slicing straight, angled lines into an animation cell to create the impression of moving rain. She'd already begun making precise cuts into paper but began to think more substantially about what it might mean to transform her surfaces this way. She was also interested in Rakusui washi, a technique of sprinkling paper pulp with water before laying it to dry. The water droplets break and puncture the paper's surface, creating an irregular mottled texture. What would it mean to make Rakusui washi using the rain as the puncturing liquid?

A few years later, Hill applied for a funded residency in Japan, focused on researching Japanese artists' approaches to depicting "tempestuous, uncontrollable weather events". Unfortunately, the residency would be put on hold by an altogether different form of apocalypse than Anna Kavan's frozen climate — the kind of apocalypse that rides a white horse. In April 2024, Hill will embark on her four-week research trip, funded by the Asia New Zealand Foundation, four years later than anticipated.

This rain cloud may have a silver lining. Hill's practice has evolved in exciting new directions in the intervening years. She has started working in acrylic paint on canvas after years of exclusively using watercolour and paper. She has delved deeper into art history, drawing on her interest in spiritualist artists, early abstraction and the House of Venus fresco at Pompeii. Wherever Georgie Hill's intellectual curiosity guides her, she'll transform, deconstruct, and adhere these ideas back together by the time we see them on the gallery wall. ■

*Georgie Hill is represented by Auckland's Sumer gallery. Find her at [sumer.nz](http://sumer.nz) and [georgiehill.com](http://georgiehill.com).*