



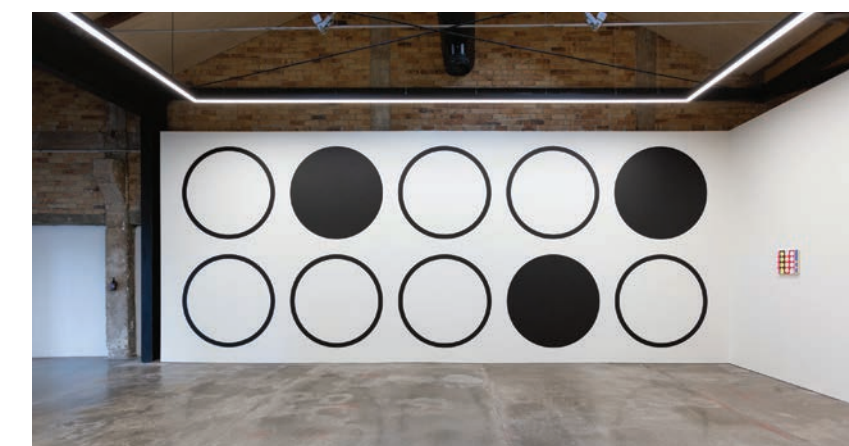
RIGHT: Installation view of Jan van der Ploeg's *Homage to the Circle* at Sumer, 2023.
COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND SUMER, AUCKLAND.

A SERIOUS CONTENDER

Gallerist **Dan du Bern** proposes that what distinguishes one contemporary gallery from others is mainly just what its artists and collectors bring to it. On that basis, his Auckland gallery, Sumer is indeed distinguished. Its diverse list of revered artists share criticality and depth, but not without humour. And the collectors it attracts are not trend seekers or trophy hunters, but rather have in common a desire to genuinely connect with the work of right now.

WORDS | LUCINDA BENNETT

PHOTOGRAPHY | JEROME WARBARTON



Beach Road is not an obvious location for a gallery. A busy thoroughfare connecting downtown Tāmaki Makaurau to the Ports of Auckland, Parnell and scenic Tamaki Drive, it is a place of high-rise apartment blocks and hotels, drab concrete and exhaust fumes. But perhaps this is to Sumer's advantage. Nestled between a

laundromat and a community law centre, the gallery's striking violet and white exterior – a commission from gallery artist **Jan van der Ploeg** – stands out. As I approach the gallery one muggy Friday afternoon, I observe pedestrians doing a double-take, pausing to peer at the slick, glyphic **Ella Sutherland** paintings in the window.



Inside, the gallery is a haven. A bright white box with polished concrete floors, an open archway leading to a sleek back office and a welcoming mezzanine lounge filled with art and books. When Sumer director **Dan du Bern** asks if I'd like a coffee and begins carefully weighing beans, I am reminded of a comment a friend once made; "why would I trust a person's taste in art if they don't care about their coffee?". I look closer at du Bern's bookshelves filled with artist monographs, both international and local: **Giuseppe Penone, Charlotte Posenenske, Olivier Mosset, Sarah Lucas, David Hammons, Mike Kelley, Paul Chan, John Nixon, Milan Mrkusich, Ralph Hotere**, the list goes on. I take a sip of my coffee, unsurprised to find it is perfect.

Sumer wasn't always located on Beach Road. From 2018 until 2022, the gallery was

based in Tauranga, relocating to Tāmaki in 2023 in order to provide greater opportunities to its artists and "have greater visibility in this country's main cultural centre," du Bern tells me. When I ask what makes Sumer distinct from other galleries in Aotearoa and Australia, he answers thoughtfully: "All galleries love to think that they're different," he muses, "but they are only different inasmuch as they reflect the people who run the gallery and the artists who exhibit there, their tastes and values. When I set up the gallery, I wanted it to be shaped for the most part by the artists who exhibited within it, and I wanted to create a gallery that valued integrity and sophistication – both in terms of the work we were showing and also the manner in which we conducted our business." For Sumer, this translates to a programme focused on single

artist exhibitions and a stable of artists with diverse practices, from the political installations and interventions of leading Australian Wiradjuri and Celtic artist **Brook Andrew**, the psychedelic abstractions of Tāmaki-based painter **Georgie Hill**, to the poetic installations and social sculptures of the gallery's newest addition, interdisciplinary artist **Cindy Huang**.

Diverse as his artist list may be, it is clear that du Bern is attracted to practices that honour criticality. "Critical, absolutely, but not without some sense of humour," he explains. "I like all kinds of work, provided the work has depth... I tend to like colour and abstract myself, and I guess this shows somewhat too [in our artists]. I'm not a big one for frou-frou, or the overly theatrical." Another point of difference comes from du Bern's position



as a practicing artist himself, represented by New York gallery ASHES/ASHES. "People often comment that this sets us apart from other galleries," du Bern tells me, "that they see us as being informed by this insight of having been a practicing artist myself." This lived experience may be what inspires du Bern's interest in supporting artists long term, something he says younger artists are often surprised by. "I do think that the gallery is perhaps a bit more active in the way we work with artists to develop shows, more than a lot of galleries here in the South Pacific. Our wanting to muck in, so to speak, has come as a surprise to some artists. It is generally something which artists tend to appreciate, but not every time. But I guess that's a flavour of our way of working."

Perhaps paradoxically for a gallery named after the earliest known civilisation, du Bern

tells me that the collectors who gravitate towards Sumer tend to be "people who are aware that history is written now". Du Bern elaborates, "people who want to collect work that will be remembered as from now, not 20-50 years in the past... I like to think [our collectors] are people that are not just wanting to jump on the latest trend, or to collect trophies but are buying works which they connect with, that they feel will enrich their lives and possibly the lives of others also."

While many of his collectors are focused on the now, du Bern is looking squarely at the future of Sumer, and is clear about his ambitions for the gallery, chief among them the desire to "run an international programme from Tāmaki Makaurau." Looking at Sumer's exhibition history as well as their plans for 2024, it is clear that this has been a goal all

OPPOSITE: Installation view of Zina Swanson's *Watering Shadows* at Sumer, 2023.

ABOVE: Installation view of Ella Sutherland's *Still Life with Argot* at Sumer, 2024.

COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND SUMER, AUCKLAND.

along. Alongside a healthy number of solo presentations from fêted young artists – many of whose careers have since flourished – and venerated senior artists from across Aotearoa, Sumer has also played host to numerous international artists, many of whom have not been put in front of Aotearoa audiences before. "We want to have greater visibility abroad, to attend more international fairs with our artists; and also to do better to develop a collecting audience for artists from elsewhere here in Aotearoa... we want to become a serious contender here in the Oceanic region."



FORTHCOMING PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS



OPPOSITE ABOVE: Brian Fuata, performance documentation during The 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art Opening Weekend at GOMA, 2021. PHOTO: BRAD WAGNER.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Ruth Watson, *Kosmos*, 2016-2024. Mixed media on aluminium globe with wooden base.

LEFT: Gian Manik in his studio with *Garra Rufa*, 2024 (work in progress). PHOTO: SHARON FLYNN.

BELOW: Hikalū Clarke, *Personnel mitigation strategies*, 2023. Retro-reflective glass bead fabric, kevlar, aramid kevlar, flame-retardant cotton, carbon-fibre kevlar, cotton, rubberised cotton, nylon, 105 x 70cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND SUMER, AUCKLAND.

BRIAN FUATA

| AUGUST 2024

A rare opportunity for local audiences to see work from Aotearoa-born, Samoan-Australian artist **Brian Fuata**. Spanning various modes of presentation, Fuata's visual and performance based practice is often described as "improvisational" or even "post-improvisational" for the way he engages with his audiences, sometimes physically within a space, other times through remote forms such as email correspondence and text message exchanges. This will be Fuata's first presentation with Sumer.



RUTH WATSON

| MAY/JUNE 2024

Already well known to local audiences as a senior New Zealand artist and academic at University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts, **Ruth Watson** will show a selection of new and historic works, primarily assemblage sculptures using found objects.

HIKALU CLARKE

| JULY/AUGUST 2024

Following his 2022 Sumer debut exhibition *Dredge* which comprised a series of slick, large-scale textile works fashioned from salvaged fabrics, du Bern tells me that Tāmaki-based artist **Hikalū Clarke**'s second solo presentation with the gallery will be quite different to what we've seen before, likely a large installation incorporating unexpected materials and techniques.



GIAN MANIK

| AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2024

Another first showing for Sumer, Melbourne-based artist **Gian Manik** will be exhibiting a suite of brand new paintings. Du Bern describes them as "lucid and messy, realist painting that skew a Western Orientalist lens, as informed by Manik's dual Sikh and Dutch heritage." Currently in residence as part of the Gertrude Contemporary Studio Residency Program, this will be the first time Manik's layered, energetic paintings have been shown in Aotearoa.