



PHILIPPA BLAIR

1945 – 2025

CONSTANT
WEAVE

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A celebratory exhibition of paintings, drawings, works on paper, photographs and prints selected from the artist's estate and the collection of Marian Maguire.

4–28 November, 2025

PG gallery192

192 Bealey Avenue
Christchurch
www.pggallery192.co.nz

Cover: *Syncopation*, 2024 (detail)

Right: *Scappare*, 2016 (detail)



CONSTANT WEAVE

It has been hard saying goodbye to Philippa. I first encountered her forty years ago when I was a student at Ilam School of Art. She turned up as a visiting lecturer and was a powerhouse, changing the atmosphere in every room she entered. I was a quiet thing and found this vivacious, energetic woman daunting. When we first started working together on a lithographic project in 1985 I had no idea that we would become enduring friends. While she was drawing on lithographic stones she talked unceasingly, about everything! It took a long time before I realised she liked to be interrupted, the reason for this being that if I didn't interrupt she would never really know who it was she was talking to. It surprised me that when I did open up she listened completely. Our friendship found a solid path. On a professional level, I was at first her printer and later became her dealer. But aside from any of that, we were primarily women, fellow practitioners, trying to find a way through the pitfalls of life and career. Over the forty years of our connection we each went through a lot; heartbreak and hurdles. Philippa taught me that art and life are interrelated. And to survive as a positive creative being there must be a constant weave between the two.

Marian Maguire

SCIENCE & MUSIC

Philippa's father was a scientist, her mother a musician. She had them both in mind while working on her 2022 exhibition *Molecular*. The disquieting effect of the pandemic also fed into this exhibition. She drew on her father's field, micro-biology, remembering times as a child looking down his microscope at small worlds that exploded with life. The gesture, like sweeping sound, came from her mother. Direct reference to her mother can be seen in collages that incorporate the lines of a music score upon which drawn marks come and go. Philippa said her mother was present in much of her work, revealed through the generosity of action. Her father's scientific focus and discipline provided something else.

An elegant woman aptly named Grace, Philippa Blair's mother was American born. Philippa therefore had dual citizenship, which contributed to her open outlook. She did not, at any time, feel constrained by dominant threads in New Zealand art discourse. Her vision extended beyond these shores. Many of her early shows were in Australia where, for a time, she lived. Her painting – with its breadth, colour and bravado – connected more naturally to American artists who were also making abstract or semi-abstract work on a large scale; reflective of continent not island. She visited the United States frequently and made several trips into the desert lands of the South West. Open skies and ancient cultures. She and her husband John Porter lived in Los Angeles from 1995-2015. A happy time. While in California she painted, exhibited and taught.



Grounded, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas, diptych, 1520 x 1015mm

STRUCTURE & FLOW

Artists reveal themselves in the studio – for why hide while in private space? A sincere approach to viewing involves similar disarmament. We look not just through the eye and optic nerve but also through deeper channels of memory and imagination, be they conscious or unconscious. Colours, shapes and textures spark reminiscences. Our mind melds what we see with what we know.

Philippa talked about music, about improvisation. She talked about place. Not just landscapes, buildings or streets but the idea of a place, the vibe that imbued it. Its history, its patterning, the mayhem, the quiet, loneliness, risk, excitement. How it spoke to her. Structure was something she repeatedly stressed. Although she accessed intuitive processes while working she didn't loosely ramble into her pictures. There was always a framework that she heeded, hunted, sought. Without structure the paintings would have no strength, no backbone.

Drawing, collage and decollage were an important part of her process. Through them she built a feel for how to approach painting. They gave her muscle memory for the movement her arm must follow to create a shape, and also helped carve thought tracks, which concentrated subject and direction. Once on canvas, she aimed to paint naturally, in tune with her intention, with the industry of the drawings behind her as a solid base.

She stumbled on a quote (source unknown) that spoke to her objective: *A flow of consciousness producing effortless action.*





Tangler Tracker, 2014, oil on canvas, diptych, 1020 x 2040mm

EYES OPEN

Philippa viewed the world around her with open eyes. Observation stimulated ideas which later found fruit in the studio. Taking photographs was a habit that persisted throughout her career and I always enjoyed any shots she sent me. Early on, she included them with her letters. Later, she emailed them. In recent years she took phone snaps and posted to Instagram.

Included in this exhibition are some of the Instagram shots taken between 2017 to 2020. When out walking, if she saw something that appealed to her visual sensibility she recorded it. The images are fleeting and opportunistic, yet she framed them with a practised eye. Colour, light, shadow, angles, rhythmic patterns – these things stimulated her retina, they grabbed her. Philippa never intended her photographs to be artworks in themselves. But they are revealing as they form part of the visual diary.

PRINTS & PATHWAYS

I think back to the first two lithographs Philippa drew in 1985. They are massed with overlapping lines that swoop and encircle each other. She scratched through to find white. While drawing, she talked about a tree having its heart in its roots and I came to understand that this was about how groundedness is important – no matter how the wind may blow – and how growth persists from depth. In those early works she reinforced structures and strengthened key lines, her hand following previous pathways.





Two Hearts, 1985, lithograph, 485 x 760mm

Philippa's work method went through many changes. She experimented with gusto. As well as making drawings, prints, collages and paintings, she created constructions. Her paintings were not always rigidly rectangular, nor consistently flat. The loose canvas *Heartbooks* and *Cloaks* of the 1980s defied pictorial convention. One thing I noticed as we continued to work together, was that as time went by she let go of repeatedly reinforcing an action and came to trust her first move. Her work became more quietly decisive. One of the last major paintings she sent us was *Afloat* (2024). It is a four-part work, deceptively relaxed but intensely complex. Fluid paint is anchored by the arrangement of the canvasses and the architecture of key lines. Her gestures are loose, clear and effortlessly in the right place. Philippa's commitment to continual development was an impressive weaving of art, life and thought in a constant flow towards something new.



Afloat
2025
oil, acrylic and mixed
media on 4 canvasses
1780 x 1980mm



Philippa drawing on litho stone while working with Marian at Limeworks Print Studio, 1991.

PHILIPPA BLAIR

Born in Christchurch in 1945, Philippa Blair studied, taught and exhibited extensively; art imbued her life. She graduated from the Ilam School of Fine Arts at Canterbury University and by the 1970s was exhibiting widely across New Zealand and Australia, while also welcoming her daughters, Alice (1970) and Taisha (1972). She received Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council grants in 1980 and 1984, and that same year became the first New Zealander to participate in the artist-in-residence programme at the Canberra School of Art. Returning to her hometown of Christchurch in 1985, she

took up a position as a visiting lecturer at the Ilam School of Fine Arts, where she began exploring lithography with Marian Maguire. Her major exhibition *A Tree Has its Heart in its Roots* was shown at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 1986. By the late 1980s she had extended further afield, with solo shows in New York City. In 1987, the Fisher Gallery in Pa-kuranga (now Te Tuhi) presented shelters, cloaks, tents, books, windows and other constructed canvases, marking a pivotal moment in her career. In the following years, she was awarded two Air New Zealand travel funds that enabled her to visit the United States and Italy. Major exhibitions followed, including *Three from New Zealand: Philippa Blair, Christine Hell-yar, Ralph Hotere* at the Long Beach Museum of Art, California (1990), and a Survey Exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Hamilton (1992). Between 1993 and 1994, Blair taught painting at the Elam School of Fine Arts before relocating to Los Angeles in 1995, where she lived and worked with her husband John for nearly two decades, returning to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 2014. Since then, amongst her many exhibitions, were six significant solo shows at PG Gallery: *Crossings* (2015), *Drawn to Paint* (2016), *Dancing off Score* (2018), *Out of the Loop* (2019), *Molecular* (2022), and *Afloat* (2024). In 2020, Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery in Auckland presented *Down Under Cover*, a major survey curated by Chloé Geoghegan.

Philippa Blair's work is held in Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, University of Auckland, The Chartwell Trust Collection, Christchurch Art Gallery, Dunedin Art Gallery, Suter Art Gallery, Nelson; Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; National Art Gallery, Canberra, Australia; Long Beach Museum and Riverside Art Museum, Los Angeles; Citibank Collection, New York; Citicorp Collection, New York; General Electric Co. Collection, New York; British Museum, London, UK; Chan Liu Museum, TaoYuan, Taiwan; David Bowie Collection, Great Britain and Switzerland, and numerous private collections.



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