



Photos: ALISTAIR GUTHRIE

Dream world

By PATRICK SMITH

Looking at the paintings of Auckland artist Jenny Dolezel, it comes as no surprise to learn she dreams a lot. Or that many of her dreams are nightmares.

"Sometimes I feel that my dream life is much stronger than my physical experience of being awake," she says with passion.

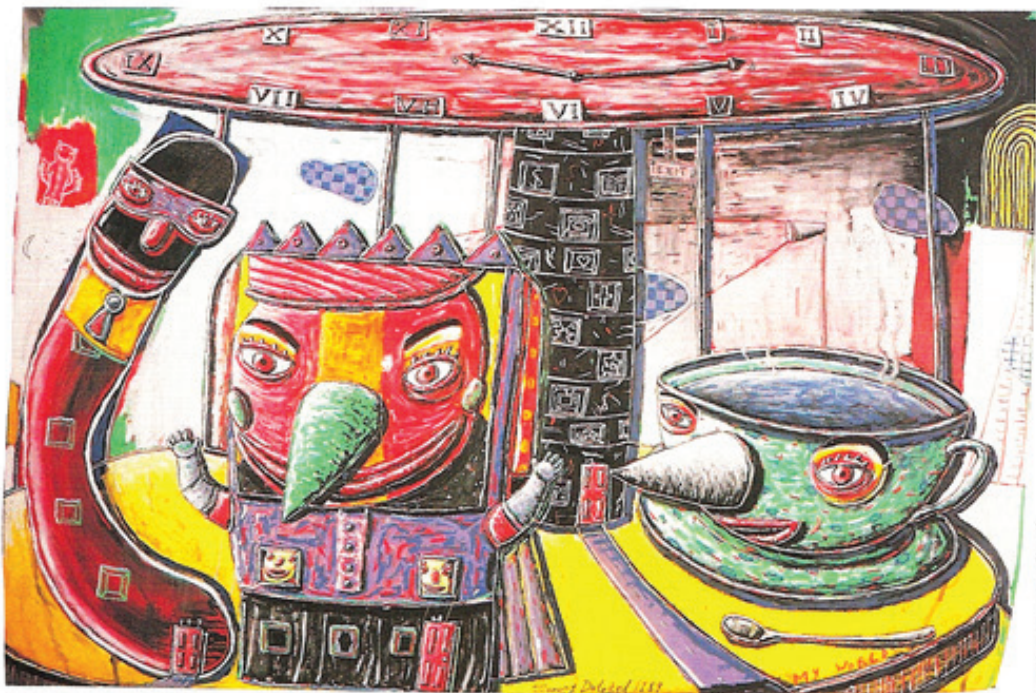
"And the dreams I have! Sometimes I relate them to people and they can't believe them; I don't know where it's all coming from."

The world of Dolezel's art is peopled by strange, grotesque, surreal





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Two Dolezel works ... *My World* (left) and *The Art Of Balancing* (below).

creatures that are both sinister and amusing.

Sometimes, as in her *Circus Of Life* mural at Auckland's Aotea Centre, the creatures are performers in weird theatrical rituals.

"I think some of my dreams do appear in my work," she confesses. "And I guess I get a lot of inspiration from my dreams because they're very surreal and bizarre and yet they're also very related to the human experience."

And yes, they're often nightmares. "But I really enjoy them, even if they're nightmares. And they're always in colour. They're certainly not comforting dreams; they're dreams of unrest."

The waking artist doesn't seem particularly bizarre. A tall woman dressed in a black leather jacket, she's a bit intense, but friendly and unaffected. Her manner suggests she's as sane as most of us — perhaps saner, since she gets to express her

weirder side quite safely in her pictures.

At 28, Dolezel has already amassed a large body of work and established herself on the international art scene. She's the winner of both the BNZ and Shell Art Awards. In 1988 she was the Rita Angus artist-in-residence and the following year went to Berlin as a Goethe Fellow.

She had her first one-woman show at 21 and today her work is in public collections throughout New Zealand.





"This feeling of unrest is a desirable situation to be in for me as an artist."

guise as symbolic of other things".

"Life I see as like a series of performances that are ever-changing; normal life becomes like a circus and we all play various roles," says Dolezel. "As well as taking life seriously, I like challenging one's preconceptions of what life ought to be; looking between the layers of the way things appear and the way they really are."

Dolezel's Bosch-like paintings with their strange, colourful, busy creatures and theatrical settings, are sometimes dismissed as kids' stuff. But art critic Hamish Keith warns against taking her work lightly.

"Her fantastic creatures and elaborate grotesques absorbed in their dogged games can be, and often are, misread for the stuff of children's books and the nursery toy box, given just a slightly sinister edge," Keith writes. "But penetrate beneath that layer and the encounters in her work are all about a relentless psychological control, both the

power of it and the burden of it."

Dolezel agrees that those who see only the "happy circus" side of her work are missing other, perhaps darker, messages.

"Often people look at my work and think that they're happy scenes. But in another sense they can be about things that are quite deep or devastating."

Children, however, seem to respond to her work in a very direct way. "I love watching the process by which a child, like an investigator, sort of devours the work and pulls it to bits and often quite intuitively seems to know what's going on in it."

That child's eye view of the world is something Dolezel thinks is important in her own make-up.

"That innocence of vision is something I always want to retain," she says. "And it's why I often respond to and admire the work of people who do work in a very uncontrived way, like mental patients, schizophrenic people; people whose expression is very direct and spontaneous."

She has exhibited in group shows in Australia, the US, Yugoslavia, Chile and Belgium.


Now she's in California, the first New Zealand artist to be chosen for a six-week residency sponsored by the Norsewear Art Award and the Fresno Art Museum, where she also held her first solo exhibition outside this country. It was a sell-out.

"Often New Zealanders tend to stay very centred in New Zealand," she says. "But I feel it's quite an important experience for artists to get outside input in terms of response to their work, as well as them seeing different ways of creating art. I'm keen to see how a whole body of my work is received over there."

Dolezel seems fast-tracked for success. But then she grew up with certain advantages — among them having an artist for a mother.

Her mother is an abstract painter who also uses the Dolezel name on her pictures. And while her work has not received the kind of public exposure her daughter's has attracted,

"I love watching the process by which a child, like an investigator, sort of devours the work and pulls it to bits."



Jenny says "it's always been really inspiring to me".

"I feel like I had quite a creative childhood. A lot of my experiences were art-related. We were discouraged from watching television and encouraged to express ourselves creatively and to make up our own stories and our own worlds."

As far back as she can remember, Dolezel has always drawn or painted.

"Even as a small child I always loved putting pencil to paper and being able to represent my immediate

environment in that way," she says. "I was always encouraged by my family to create and express myself in a visual sense."

Art became her major subject throughout secondary school at Epsom Girls' Grammar in Auckland. The school's art department was very supportive of her unconventional approach to the subject. At 15 she was working in a "minimal conceptual" direction and for School Certificate she presented her portfolio in the form of an installation and films.

"They didn't know whether to fail me and say, 'Look, this is not acceptable'," she laughs. "Instead they gave me the highest mark in the country."

Not surprisingly, on leaving high school Dolezel applied for a place at Elam, Auckland University's school of fine arts, where she was accepted with top marks. There she began to use photography as a medium and to explore the area of self-portrait.

She also started to play with the idea of "theatrical, dramatic