

ART COLLECTOR

UNDISCOVERED + UNDERRATED

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#116 APR – JUN 2026
AUD \$24.95 / NZ \$25.50

ISSN 2209 – 7317
Print Post approved PP235387/00100



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BREAKING NEWS

Responding to his daily newsfeed with paint, **Richard Lewer** brings fifty-one new works to the Aotearoa Art Fair — a compendium of political flashpoints, personal memory and social observation distilled into an “over-stylised simplicity”.

WORDS | **EMIL MCAVOY**

Much of **Richard Lewer**'s latest body of work was catalysed by the artist's response to his “morning newsfeed”. In conversation, he describes waking to check the latest news update, a common routine for many of us navigating a rapidly changing world increasingly perceived and conceived through a mediating lens. Yet for Lewer, media events frequently stimulate a new painting within a wider process of “making art to understand”.

These new paintings were rapidly executed within a few days, afforded by a turn towards working at a smaller “more intense” scale. The immediacy and intensity reflect Lewer's responsiveness to developments impacting the public imagination, a personal cultural commentary embedded and materialised in the visual language of painting. Of course, for the artist, news media is only one aspect of collecting information. Lewer's creative responses also “react to conversations that day, radio interviews, films, telephone conversations...”, likening the act of painting to a conduit for processing these diverse experiences.

The constraints of working at this intimate scale prompt Lewer to further distil complex, layered events and concepts into a highly concentrated form. We discuss the challenges inherent in attempts to reduce complicated and often politically loaded imagery to the leanest of visual means. This imagery is rendered in what Lewer calls an “over-stylised simplicity”, while reflecting on “the vulnerability of the painting”. Indeed, the perceived vulnerability of a painting can at times be its greatest strength.

Working at this scale also facilitates the generation of a more extensive body of work, where larger groupings of paintings hung together can form expanded networks and possibilities of meaning. He describes the fifty-one new works presented at the Aotearoa Art Fair as “a compendium” and “a scattering of incidents and events that are relevant now”.

Lewer also frequently reviews old photographs, his reflections and painterly translations entering a visual dialogue with the morning news and other sources. Here the micro and macro, personal and political form complex

OPPOSITE: Richard Lewer, *I Used to be a Barrel of Laughs*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 31cm. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO. COURTESY: SUITE GALLERY.



relationships “interwoven with memory”. Word paintings and eclectic imagery — landscapes, portraits, interpretations of media events, memories and other representations — collectively present a fragmentary picture of “the here and now” grounded in the recent past.

The artist describes these paintings as “anecdotes”, a compelling term given its multiple meanings: a short interesting story about a real incident or person, an account regarded as unreliable or hearsay, and the depiction of a minor narrative incident in a painting. In Lewer’s work, it appears possible for all these dimensions to co-exist.

In one painting, *Neo-Nazis Occupy Steps of Victoria’s Parliament* (2026), based on a televised image, faceless members of an Australian far-right political party dressed in black perform a

public Nazi salute, an event which caused a public outcry and led to legislative changes.

The artist also responded to a story of a Jewish man who recounted to news media that he was having trouble sleeping in the aftermath of the recent antisemitic attack at Bondi Beach killing fifteen people during a Hanukkah celebration. Lewer’s painting portrays a man in a nightcap apparently sleeping soundly underneath a single glowing lightbulb, a visible ringlet of hair alluding to his religious background.

Another painting presents a Muslim woman in a niqab riding a modern bicycle, foregrounding the personal as political, and alluding to the often complicated social and cultural layers present in the navigation of everyday life. I can’t get this painting out of my head. These examples are positioned alongside text-based works

with phrases such as *Keep Your Feelings To Yourself*, *Cancelled*, *What Do Art Dealers Really Do*, and other figurative paintings including depictions of Air Force One, a doomsday clock, a mushroom cloud entitled *If You’re Reading This it’s Too Late* (2026), a number of natural environments, and even paintings of fish which appear as if sourced from scientific, educational or fishing material.

Confronting difficult or risky subjects is common in Lewer’s practice. From high-profile disasters to religious themes, from the Waikato Wars in Aotearoa to those impacted by dementia, and paintings visualising anonymous confessions made in a gallery-based confession booth (to name a few), Lewer doesn’t shy away from the increasingly precarious politics of representation.

“If I’m scared to make something, I know I’m moving in the right direction. As an artist it’s your job.”

~ Richard Lewer



Yet this is no rage bait in oil paint. Lewer describes his work as a form of “contemporary social realism”. Further, his open, friendly personality, trust in his own genuine intentions, engagement with diverse stakeholders and communities, and the support of others, go a long way in protecting the passage of exhibitions through public spaces in Australia and Aotearoa. At times he has to ignore risk-averse supporters wary of the next exhibition concept, noting “if I’m scared to make something, I know I’m moving in the right direction. As an artist it’s your job”.

Lewer was born in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, New Zealand, an inspiration for many works. He has been living in Naarm/Melbourne for thirty years, and maintains regular exhibitions in both countries. His return to New Zealand

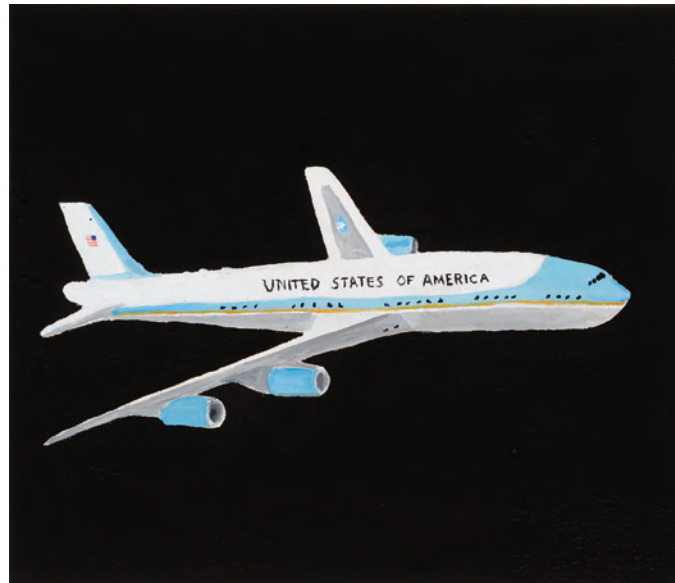
to attend the Aotearoa Art Fair follows a period of significant recognition in Australia, with two major institutional exhibitions at the Geelong Gallery and National Gallery of Australia. The artist is looking forward to the conversations his new work generates, and to reconnecting with people and places.

Richard Lewer’s new paintings can be viewed from 30 April – 3 May at the {Suite} Gallery Booth at the Aotearoa Art Fair, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland.

OPPOSITE: Richard Lewer, *Neo-Nazis Occupy Steps of Victoria’s Parliament*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 36cm. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO. COURTESY: {SUITE}.

ABOVE LEFT: Richard Lewer in the studio. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO. COURTESY: {SUITE}.

ABOVE RIGHT: Richard Lewer, *Doomsday Clock*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 31cm. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO. COURTESY: {SUITE}.



LEFT: Richard Lewer, *Get Well Soon*, 2026. Oil on linen, 41 x 31cm. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO. COURTESY: {SUITE}.

ABOVE: Richard Lewer, *Air Force One*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 36cm.

DAVID ALSOP

Owner and Director, {Suite}

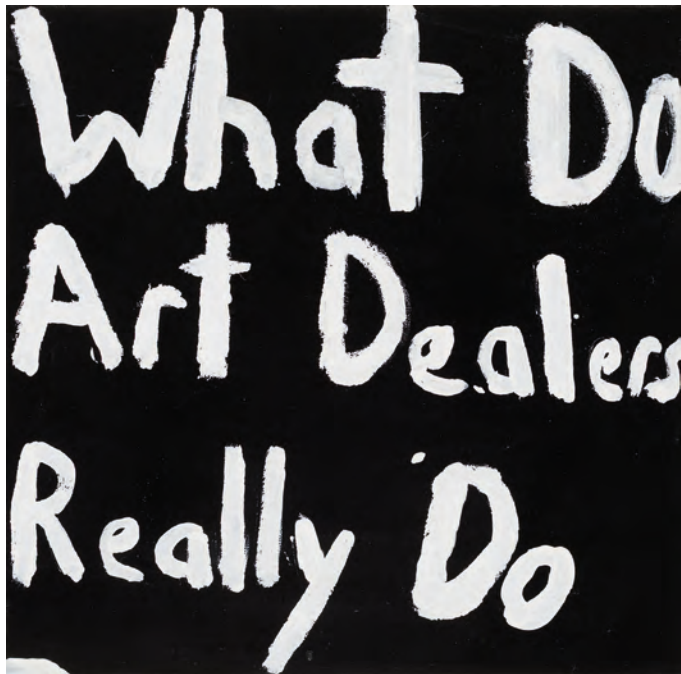
I've been a fan of Richard's work since the early 2000s, and have worked with him since 2016, so ten years this year! I appreciate his courage in making work about tough subjects, sometimes in the face of criticism. There's a discipline, an intent and a drive that is special. His work ethic is incredible, and he can even make me laugh while taking on sometimes painful moments of weakness and failure that he's looking at.

Lewer's return to the Aotearoa Fair follows a period of extraordinary recognition in Australia, with two major institutional exhibitions at the Geelong Gallery and National Gallery of

Australia exploring, respectively, faith and guilt, and a family coming to terms with a dementia diagnosis. He's been a perennial finalist in the Archibald Portrait Award and Sulman Prize and has won the Paul Guest Prize and the Basil Sellers Art Prize, amongst others. Richard's works for the Fair are all smaller paintings, in part to have works available at an accessible price point (\$4,000-\$6,000). In Australia, institutions have been acquiring entire bodies of work, so it will be nice to have a number of works for sale that collectors have an opportunity to engage with.

Richard is among the few trans-Tasman

artists with a significant practice in both Australia and New Zealand so there's always plenty of interest in his work. It's been a while since a body of smaller — accessibly priced — work has been shown, so we anticipate strong interest from collectors in the works we'll be showing. One of the exciting things about art Fairs is that we always meet new people. And of course with the internet, people can be looking at work we have, without us even being aware that they're interested. Richard's work strikes a chord with seasoned collectors, but also with new collectors. There's a familiarity about his visual language that resonates with so many.



TOP LEFT: Richard Lewer, *What Do Art Dealers Really Do*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 31cm. COURTESY: (SUITE).

TOP RIGHT: Richard Lewer, *Sunderland Bay*, 2026. Oil on linen, 36 x 36cm. COURTESY: (SUITE).

ABOVE: Richard Lewer, *Snapper*, 2026. Oil on linen, 31 x 36cm. COURTESY: (SUITE).

LINDA TYLER

Director, *The University of Auckland, Centre for Art Studies*

The suburb of Glenview in the river city of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton is where Richard grew up. I landed my first curatorial job at the Waikato Museum, about the time he was leaving for art school in the big smoke of Tāmāki Makaurau/Auckland so missed meeting him when he was a Hamilton Boys' High school student in grey shorts. In 2010 his survey exhibition *I Must Learn To Like Myself* opened at the museum, memorably featuring large paintings of relentlessly ordinary houses which I recognised as quintessentially Hamilton.

Richard's practice is often funny, deeply personal, self-deprecating and revealing of devastating truths at the same time. The work deals with big stuff such as love, death, sport and Christianity in a small and persistent way. More than cultural relevance, it has universal significance. Everyone can empathise with the pathos and the pain, unless they are a psychopath, in which case they are a prime subject for a Richard Lewer painting.