



KALEIDOSCOPIC

Thousands of tiny dots cover the surface of Michael McHugh's artworks, along with straight lines, concentric circles, starbursts, metallic accents and tentacles. The paintings buzz with life and give the impression of growing in front of your eyes, or of a microscopic view of plant cells. These images do not come from nature, they come from the artist's imagination.

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In Ginza, Tokyo, geisha are shuffling through the main street in pairs, taking tiny graceful steps in their geta wooden sandals, elegantly shrouded in their colourful silk kimonos. They are beautiful, colourful, transformed, wrapped, obscured and the moment is fleeting.

For artist Michael McHugh, that connection would reveal itself many months later as he prepared works for his upcoming exhibition, *Chroma*, at Martin Browne Contemporary in Sydney.

With 12 paintings in this series, McHugh begins each work with drawings done while travelling from trips overseas and visiting local gardens. While in Tokyo, he sat with his sketchbook and pencil, capturing the mesmerising folds of kimono silk. His initial drawings show geometric forms emerging from a centre point on the page, some mandala-like in their symmetry and pattern. Seeing them in his Surry Hills studio, your inner child wants to grab a pencil and colour them in.

McHugh began to translate the sketches into paintings back home in Sydney, some as large as two metres tall and wide. This is when the artworks take on a life of their own, evolving shape by shape, colour by colour as he applies acrylic to canvas.



Opposite page: 'Metallica', acrylic on canvas.

This page, from top: Michael McHugh in his Surry Hills studio, where each day he begins by drawing nature-based forms and shapes leading to large format paintings; 'Night Queens', acrylic on canvas.



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He says that he is never quite sure how each work will end when he starts a new painting. In the work ‘Theodora’, the largest painting in the show, the kimono begins to fold in on itself until it is unrecognisable. Looking more plant like, almost like a chrysalis dangling from a tree branch, it’s an association also not obvious to most viewers of the artwork. One savvy-eyed art collector at a studio preview told McHugh that the new work reminded her of a kimono. Once you know, you can’t unsee it.

McHugh’s artworks buzz with life; they give the impression of growing in front of your eyes, or of a microscopic view of plant cells wiggling around one another. Look away for a minute and look back, and you could almost swear something has moved or appeared. It’s the minute, patterned details that give the optical illusion. Tiny dots – thousands of them – cover the surface, as do straight lines, concentric circles, starbursts, metallic accents and tentacles.

Looking like plant DNA, these images do not come from nature, they come from the artist’s imagination.

Sitting in his studio and talking to McHugh while surrounded by the massive paintings, it’s easy to forget we’re not talking about a multi-decade art career. To date, he’s been in 25 group exhibitions and had 10 solo shows, this has all happened in the past five years. The studio in many ways has become a place of refuge for McHugh, as he describes painting, especially the repetitive nature of the patterns, as completely absorbing, like entering a flow state, mentally calming yet creatively energising.

“It takes a long time to get into the zone,” McHugh says, “but you do eventually get into that space, and you get so lost in it. Your brain is constantly editing different elements and perspectives, and in that state, things shift and evolve.” McHugh finds not only meditation in painting but also solace. “I lose myself in my art, in many ways the studio has become my refuge. Making something that you love, that you are really invested in. There is a kind of purity to the work, which really is an amazing feeling.”

Chroma, Martin Browne Contemporary
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Opposite page, clockwise from top: ‘Ultramarine’, acrylic on canvas; ‘Rendezvous’, acrylic on canvas; ‘Pondering’, acrylic on canvas. *This page, clockwise from top:* ‘Night Stroll’, acrylic on canvas; A table strewn with paint tubes, another covered with art books in McHugh’s Surry Hills art studio in Sydney; ‘Theodora’, acrylic on canvas; ‘Sunset’, acrylic on canvas.

