

# KATHERINE GAILER

## The Golden Instant

By Caitlin Eyre

In her luminous female portraits, Victorian artist Katherine Gailer honours the sacred experience of womanhood and explores the mysterious realms of the feminine underworld. Gailer's practice incorporates the multidisciplinary use of oil painting, drawing and illustration to create stunningly realistic, captivating and highly emotive portraits that capture the essence of the female experience. The Colombian-born artist was a finalist in this year's 'Contemporary Art Awards' for her two gold leaf and oil on linen portraits, 'Nesting' and 'The Weaving of One-self'. These works are part of a larger series, 'Treasure of Bachué', which focuses on celebrating women as the driving force of creation, and empowering new, contemporary female identities. Women's connection to nature is essential to Gailer's portrayal of the power of female creativity. Her subjects are usually positioned amidst elements of the natural world that are in the process of undergoing a change or transformation at the hands of the women depicted. Gailer captures the magnificence of this 'golden instant' of creation with tremendous sensitivity and emotive insight towards her subjects, with each portrait revealing the radiant inner strength possessed by the women. It is both fitting and empowering that each of the magnificent figures depicted is based on a real woman. As such, Gailer's portraits serve as both a homage and inspiration to women everywhere.

The portrait, 'Nesting', honours and captures the essence of women's strength, power and determination in building communal spaces for the growth and wellbeing of the people that surround them. The honey-toned African woman pictured in the work is positioned at the centre of a magnificent nest of supple branches that she is weaving around herself. Beautiful, strong and imbued with a quiet dignity, the woman's head is wrapped with a woven textile and her ears adorned with spectacularly large and ornate earrings. A long swipe of golden paint stretches from her forehead to her chin in an echo of the radiant metallic background. The woman's hands work to bend a branch into place, while two precious droplets of sweat, representing the efforts of her labour, are suspended from her chin. The portrait captures a precise instant in time when the

female subject takes a momentary pause from her labour to engage with the viewer. The themes of migration and the centrality of women in building and feathering the family 'nest' are particularly significant in this work, as signified by the twin



birds that accompany the goddess-like figure. Like the birds, women are often tasked with building a new home for the comfort of their families, thereby underscoring the sacred role of women as mothers, caretakers and, ultimately, creators.



In 'The Weaving of One-self', Gailer explores the creative power of women in crafting their own destinies, while also paying homage to the ancestral wisdom and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people of Colombia. The portrait depicts the face of a young South American woman whose features are framed by her long, dark hair and the strands of richly coloured yarn that are draped between her upheld fingers. Holding a ball of yarn, and adorned with a delicate septum piercing, the young woman has an intensely focused

gaze that seems to escape the confines of the canvas to penetrate the soul of the viewer. The tones and texture of the yarn are echoed in the dotted patterns that adorn the woman's chin and are inspired by the textiles crafted by the indigenous weavers of Colombia. The indigenous Colombians believe that they weave their thoughts into their textiles, thereby illustrating the inherent power and significance of weaving and its connection to the spiritual world. The intensity of the woman's gaze is a testament to her strength, empowerment and capability to weave together the threads of her life and to forge her own destiny and identity. This work embodies Gailer's overarching aspiration to utilise her artistic practice to contribute to the 'weaving' or reconstruction of contemporary female identity and to consolidate female experience as a source of power in the world today.

On this page, *Nesting* (2016), genuine gold leaf & oil on linen, 77 x 56cm. *The Weaving of Oneself* (2016), genuine gold leaf & oil on linen, 56 x 102cm.

Images: courtesy of the artist

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