

Whangārei Art Museum

Alex Chalmers Broken World

6 April – 8 June 2025

Alex Chalmers ● Broken World

In *Broken World*, Alex Chalmers (b. 1991, Whangārei) offers a nuanced meditation on the impermanence of power, using found objects to explore cycles of dominance and decline. The phrase “caput mundi” (meaning “head of the world”) serves as a conceptual anchor for the work, drawn directly from the branding displayed on construction hoardings across Rome, the source of the discarded materials used in this exhibition. Originally a declaration of the city’s historic centrality, this phrase now exists in a liminal state, printed on temporary barriers that both conceal and advertise the city’s transformation. Chalmers highlights the tension between Rome’s imperial legacy and its present-day reality as a site of perpetual reconstruction, gesturing toward the broader human impulse to build, conquer, and endure. His transformation of “caput” into “kaput” (a colloquialism for “broken”) subtly reframes the narrative, not as a simple critique of Rome’s legacy, but as an inquiry into the fragility of all systems of authority, past and present.



This tension, between grandeur and decay, construction and collapse, is neither a lament nor a celebration but an open-ended reflection. Rome, layered with centuries of rebuilding, offers an apt setting for such exploration, yet Chalmers' vision extends beyond any single place or moment in time. His work resists a linear reading of history, instead embracing ruins as sites of ambiguity: objects that speak simultaneously to past ambition and future possibility. By combining materials from his homeland Aotearoa New Zealand with those from contemporary Rome, where he currently resides, Chalmers creates a dialogue between distant geographies, gesturing towards the way power leaves an imprint across landscapes and generations.

The exhibition transforms the Whangārei Art Museum into a simulated construction site, positioning the museum itself as an evolving structure, shaped by shifting ideologies and priorities. Construction barriers and industrial materials reinforce this sense of flux, prompting reflection on whose histories are preserved and who gets to influence or create cultural narratives. In this environment, the museum is not simply a space of display but an active participant in the exhibition's themes: a place where meaning is continually dismantled and rebuilt.

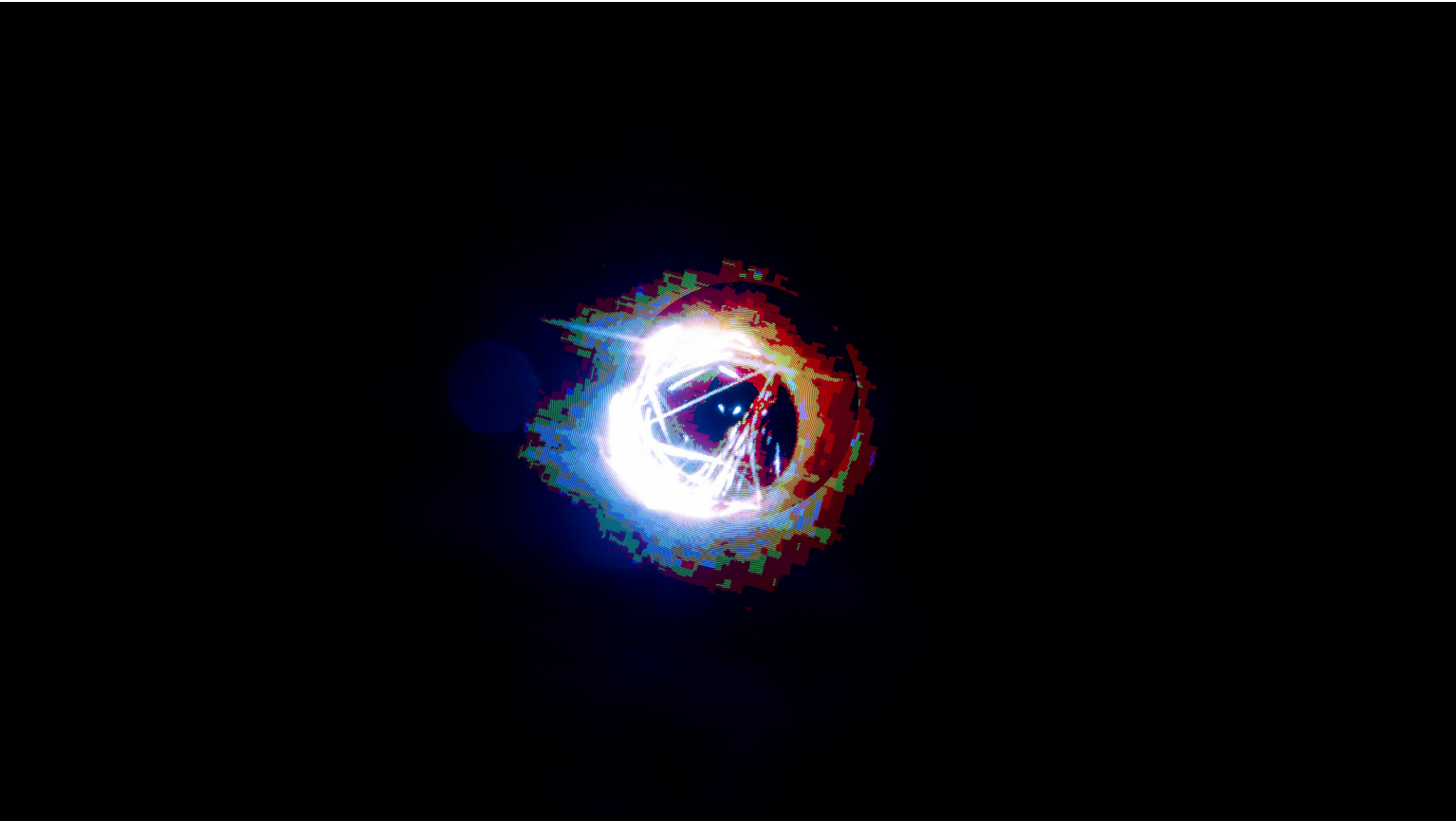
A central part of *Broken World* is a decommissioned elevator, removed from its shaft and suspended in space. Stripped of function, the elevator is no longer a conduit for movement, but an artifact of halted progression. Where elevators typically embody upward mobility and economic ascent, here they exist in limbo, exposing the hidden infrastructure that once enabled their function. This state of suspension mirrors a more holistic sense

of uncertainty in the present moment, as systems once thought to be stable are now revealed to be precarious, subject to forces beyond their control.

The fragility of power, the instability of progress and the cyclical nature of history reverberate throughout Broken World. As global alliances shift and historical patterns resurface, the exhibition's themes feel increasingly urgent. Like the ruins of past civilisations, the tottering edifices of the present moment are marked by competing visions of order and transformation, raising the question: What happens when the systems we rely on falter? In this sense, Broken World is not simply a reflection on the past, but an invitation to consider the unfinished nature of a future suspended between what was, what is, and what might yet emerge.







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