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Trees make us feel good:

an artistic exploration of interspecies embodiment between trees and humans

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington New Zealand

Suzy Costello, 2022

Abstract

I have been fortunate to live beside an indigenous Beech-Tawhai Forest for over thirty years, a mere sprinkling of time given it has lived here on the eastern shore of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa New Zealand since the last ice age over 7,000 years ago (Cochran 57). Its presence is always with me, nurturing my family and the communities living alongside. This is an offering of thanks for its sustenance.

What follows is an artistic exploration of interspecies embodiment between trees and humans. Key questions I explore are: If we and the trees are entities, each with distinct and independent existences, then how do we embody each other? Why is our connection to trees and place so important to us? And how do we honour this living being of a Forest that protects, not only its own mauri (life force), but the mauri of all those living nearby?

These questions inform my MFA art practice, resulting in a research-driven and heartfelt creative response. As a conceptual installation artist, my efforts to make space for deeper embodiment between myself and the trees leads to investigations of new materials and processes. Social-engaged art projects with my community expand this sense of embodiment, and artists who focus on embodiment broaden and nourish my artmaking.

To begin, I explore the outer dynamic of East Harbour Regional Park's northern Forest contained by sea, roads, private property, and farmland. Next, I ask others to share their embodiment with the inner dynamic of the Forest; those small intimate spaces people go to, so they may heal and connect with nature. Finally, the Forest's wilderness is recontextualised, contrasting it with the small forest of bonsai growing in our garden as I investigate why my family strives to recreate moments of connection with nature within our home.

I hope this thesis may add to the chorus of voices currently seeking to understand the world from a more-than-human perspective. Today's zeitgeist is driven by a need to reorientate our worldview so we may redress our impact on the planet and its lifeforms. There is much to learn from those who have lived sustainably and in harmony with their environment. Aotearoa's indigenous Māori knowledge-based system, Te Ao Taiao, is explored as a path forward. Exciting scientific research into how trees communicate with each other, and other species, opens new dimensions for multi-species encounter that "situates us within the specific and affirms us as inseparable from the environment" (Adams 150).

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On the eastern shore of Te Whanganui-a-Tara



Fig 1. Costello, *East Harbour Regional Park*, 2022.

An Entanglement

I am
the lived
and living body
intertwining
in this moment of becoming

An assemblage of
fractals
a nesting of nows
whose topology
becomes my topography

Forest tree me us
our inner and outer dynamics
entangling merging
and flowing across
the broken symmetry of time and space

Futures and pasts
are held in this now
impermanence and emergence
buried in Land
that feeds us

Suzy Costello, 2022

Summer 2022

Drawing the Forest canopy

I have walked the tracks of the northern Forest of East Harbour Regional Park for many years, but this art project allows me to revisit the Forest anew.

During the summer of 2022 I begin drawing the outer dynamic of the indigenous Beech-Tawhai Forest which borders the eastern edge of Wellington's harbour and Eastbourne and Wainuiomata settlements. The park covers over 2,000 hectares but the northern Forest is smaller; its Hard Beech and Rātā trees, Mānuka, Kānuka, and other broadleaved shrubs spread from the eastern shore of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, up over mountains, to sweep across into the valley of Wainuiomata and down towards the southern coastline.

Here I feel the entirety of the collective intelligence of the Forest, this singular living being of thousands of individual trees cooperating and intermingling to become one being. It gives me time to pause, waiting to be invited before entering the Forest interior. I read a passage from *Among Trees, Among Kin* explaining Māori etiquette towards Forests: "the ngahere is like a marae, or someone's home. A karakia, asking the forest to welcome us (...) is a matter of respect, an acknowledgement of human limitation, an orientation to the unseen world" (Cripps 64).

The hugeness of the northern Forest is daunting, and I am reminded of Zhang Zeduan's immense and detailed 5.25m silk handscroll painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* which intricately captures people and their surroundings in a northern China city during a 12th century festival (Brennan). Unlike Zeduan, I limit myself to drawing snippets of the Forest canopy viewed from each of the twenty-one bus stops along its western border between Korohiwi and Ngāmatau (Eastbourne bus terminal and Point Howard). Slowly moving around the Forest, drawing what I see and embodying this experience of introducing myself to it and it to me seems respectful; taking time to grapple with the enormity of this living being's complexity and size.

My materials are a 10m scroll of translucent Japanese mulberry paper and Faber-Castell watercolour pencils which I use without water. I like the impermanence and tension of a drawing that could dissolve at any moment with the introduction of water. As I roll and unroll my large scroll of paper at each bus stop, I wrap a small offering of protection around the Forest.

Early attempts to capture my feelings of embodiment with the trees result in drawings of abstracted blocks of colour. When I come to dwellings, I leave the space vacant, an interruption in the Forest's growth. Beginning with one block of colour, I then move to the next paying attention to tone and hue. The Forest colours are markedly different from my mental recall; in the full sun of summer afternoons the undergrowth is easily distinguished as areas of yellow-green, while the large stands of mature Tawhai and flowering Mānuka and Kānuka are tinged with ochres, pinks, and reds within a muted palette of deeper greens (Gabites 65).

In subsequent drawings the Forest is further away from me, and it becomes harder to describe the blocks of colour. Instead, I focus on form, and a representational figurative mode emerges, as if I am drawing a portrait of someone. I lay colours dark to light with a final layer of ochre, lemon-yellow or cadmium-yellow to capture the shimmering quality of light above the Forest canopy. Throughout, my mark-making consists of diagonal pencil strokes.



Fig 2. Costello, *Bus stop 8838*, 2022.



Fig 3. Costello, *Bus stop 8840*, 2022.



Fig 4. Costello, *Bus stop 8841*, 2022.



Fig 5. Costello, *Bus stop 8852*, 2022.



Fig 6. Costello, *Forest drawings reverse side – entrance*, 2022.



Fig 7. Costello, *Forest drawings reverse side*, 2022.



Fig 8. Costello, *Forest drawings right side*, 2022.



Fig 9. Costello, *Forest drawings folded*, 2022.

An entangled embodiment

A series of discrete yet continuous drawings of the Forest emerge. Each drawing expresses a duration of time while simultaneously referencing what came before (retained past) and what follows (anticipated future). Like Vrobel's nested-nows, here nows of different timescales become "an emergence of large-scale synchronized patterns of activity", not unlike the Forest (Laroche 4).

It occurs to me these episodic drawings are a metaphor for how I experience my own inner embodiment within the shifting dynamics of time and space. Subconsciously my brain reassembles isolated moments of corporeal entanglement into a cohesive sense of being. My entanglement is inseparable from the world in which I live, and my inner sense of being, my consciousness, uniquely my own.

I notice too, when concentrating on drawing the Forest, my sense of time slows and expands to make space for a dynamic interaction between the Forest, the trees, and me: a coupling of agent and world. This dynamic perspective is relational: an "intrinsic temporality of experience thereby embodies the dynamics of the environment" (Laroche 3). But how to make sense of this ambiguous state of stillness and flow which feels different from precisely regulated linear time? Inner time consciousness is a self-constituted flow: "it manifests itself to itself, enabling the experience of an enduring quality of its own dynamics"; a consciousness that is perception and action, dynamic and incomplete, always moving forward, coupled to the world around us (Laroche 3).

These descriptions resonate with my growing sense of embodiment with the trees as I marvel at their interaction with sunlight, scattering and sharing it amongst themselves. My hours of containment when drawing in bus stops, immune to the sun and wind cast upon the trees, merely accentuates my captivation; I am filled with a sense of wonder at the Forest's canopy of outspreading crowns, its living cloak, reaching upward to bathe and drink in the sun's light, doing what no human can.

Reflections

Many artists extoll the drawing process as a space where insights emerge. Francis Hallé, a French botanist, travels the world drawing trees in Forests to understand them more deeply. He explains, "Questions come to mind and the answers appear before my eyes. It takes time to become familiar with a tree, and photography is much too rapid a medium. When I draw a tree, when I record the external forms of plants, I feel like I belong, that I'm really doing what I'm supposed to do here on Earth" (Albert 35).

In my first studio presentation I suspend the scroll from the ceiling, creating interior and exterior spaces for the audience to move around. My supervisors, Simon Morris and Sonya Withers, describe a sense of groundedness as they actively engage with drawings occupying their bodily space, and share how the distant view of Wellington's forested hills, visible through the studio window, augments this feeling. Further, the paper's translucency allows them to view each drawing from either side of the paper, and I am intrigued watching them reconcile these shifting perspectives. I find the discontinuous nature of the drawings deconstructs a landform I am so familiar with, disrupting my sense of belonging to a place whose contours are hardwired into my being, a part of my flesh.

My supervisors encourage me to re-examine the notion of embodiment and what it means to embody the Forest from the safety and isolation of bus stops. I compare my art to Ana Mendieta's earth-body sculpture *Tree of Life* (1976), which offers a more visceral elemental interaction with trees. Covering her entire body with mud Mendieta stands merged with the tree, hands raised in prayer and feet grounded "in the universal energy which runs through everything", opening herself to "the vitality of the Orisha; the gods who, according to the Santería, reside in the natural elements" (Fisher 110, 113). This is a long way from my embodiment!

[Ana Mendieta's *Tree of Life*, 1970](#)

Created in the 1970s, Mendieta's art resonates with a vibrancy and vitality of matter and the agency in all things to share their energies through the entanglement of Life processes. These qualities reverberate with today's post-constructionist, interdisciplinary ontology New Materialism which emerged from feminist philosophy, science studies, and cultural theory academics Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett (Sencindiver, 1). Tim Ingold's description of the entanglement of Life processes seems relevant to Mendieta's work: "when we encounter matter, it is matter in movement, in flux (where) every 'thing' leaks, forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them" (Ingold 3). This non-specific entanglement is described by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari as operating at both the perceptible molar level and "below the threshold of perception" at a molecular level, like Mendieta's work that resides in the natural elements (Merriman 1).

I am curious how Laroche navigates the complexity of intersubjective embodiment between the self and others, when he states there is space for us to "co-enact a shared world of significance in which to be together" (Laroche 11).

The other becomes part of my embodied coupling with the world: I do something to him that changes something for me. This way, I pragmatically experience the other, I can enact him (...) we become dynamically contingent of each other... When we interact, we can participate to and mutually incorporate each other's embodied perspective (Laroche 7).

While the issue of agency is complex, in Mendieta's body sculpture the 'doing' between herself and the tree is more obvious than my coupling, which seems focused on 'my' embodiment rather than 'our' mutually incorporated embodiment. I may need to consider alternative drawing methods and reflect on my approach to embodiment.

Cultural landscapes

Mendieta's art practice is situated in "the religious rituals and principles shaped by the indigenous Santería of her Cuban homeland" where she lived as a child before moving to the west coast of America with her family (Fisher 114). I wonder how my European and Pākehā cultural heritage influences my efforts to engage with the Forest.

My ancestral cloak is woven of Irish and English heritage. My mother was born and raised in the west of Ireland, moving later to England where she met my father who had transferred from RNZAF to the British RAF. With three young daughters, they moved to Singapore for two years then Aotearoa to be with my father's family when I was five. I am a sixth generation New Zealander; my father's maternal great-great-grandparents emigrated from England to Aotearoa with their children in the 1840's, following their oldest son who came to Aotearoa as an Imperial soldier with gun in hand to defend the Empire and spade in hand to name and claim the Land. My father's paternal grandparents arrived in Aotearoa separately from the west of Ireland in the 1870's. Tales are told of my great-grandfather travelling alone from Ireland as a 14-year-old and when asked later about his homeland replying, 'Don't look back son, there is nothing to see'. Such is the enduring suffering of the Great Irish Famine.

It has taken time to see myself as Pākehā, to acknowledge my whanau's part in colonising foreign lands to the detriment of indigenous Māori. Untangling one's own influences and biases to appreciate how they inform our personal worldview and cultural paradigm is a complex process. Sara Ahmed's essay *Collective Feelings, or, the Impressions Left by Others* provides wonderful insight:

Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. However, emotions can also offer

new paths forwards, ... open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others...It takes time to know what we can do with emotion (Ahmed 202).

I suspect my Forest drawings hold an echo of subject-object evidenced in European landscape paintings from the 17th and 18th century whose idealised romantic picturesque scenes reflect a cultural narrative framed by the industrial revolution's ethos to subjugate nature to our will. Nevertheless, I feel my encounter with the more-than-human world aligns to a greater extent with a unified mind-landscape, where the self is embedded and inseparable from the natural environment as described in eastern and indigenous knowledge systems and Laroche's notion of enactive embodiment. My leaning towards eastern philosophy is nurtured by tai chi meditation, inquiries into Gnosticism and Sufism, and living in Singapore during the 1960's as a young child.

When eastern culture was first introduced to European and American landscape artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it heralded a seismic shift in knowledge and embodied perspectives (Munroe 1). Artists, like Vincent Van Gogh, James Whistler, Arthur Wesley Dow, looked to Asian art to reveal the aesthetics of the here and now, of the world seen and unseen, as a dreamlike space of “flow and merging, (...) transparency, weightlessness, dematerialization, silence, and rhythmic movement and harmony” (Munroe 89). After the trauma of the second world war, these qualities and sensibilities offered a new path toward enlightenment and mindfulness that would inspire west coast American conceptual artists of the 1960-70s, like Mendieta, to investigate the metaphysical through an exploration of materiality (Munroe 93).



Fig 10. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Hakone Kosui*, woodblock, 1833–34, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig 11. Hasegawa Tohaku, *Shōrin-zu byōbu-Pine Trees*, ink painting, 16th century, Tokyo National Museum.

During the 1970s, a collection of neo-avant-garde American artists formed the Bay Art Conceptual Art group in California (Munroe 211). Inspired by Eastern mysticism, they investigated "spirit" and "the nature of dematerialized form" (Munroe 212). Bruce Conner is one of these artists whose MANDALA series holds an ephemeral quality of flow and merging: "... tiny, felt-tip marks whose accumulation creates an optical field of quietly pulsating energy. He organized these marks in circular images, which represent a universal form that implies infinity" (Munroe 212).

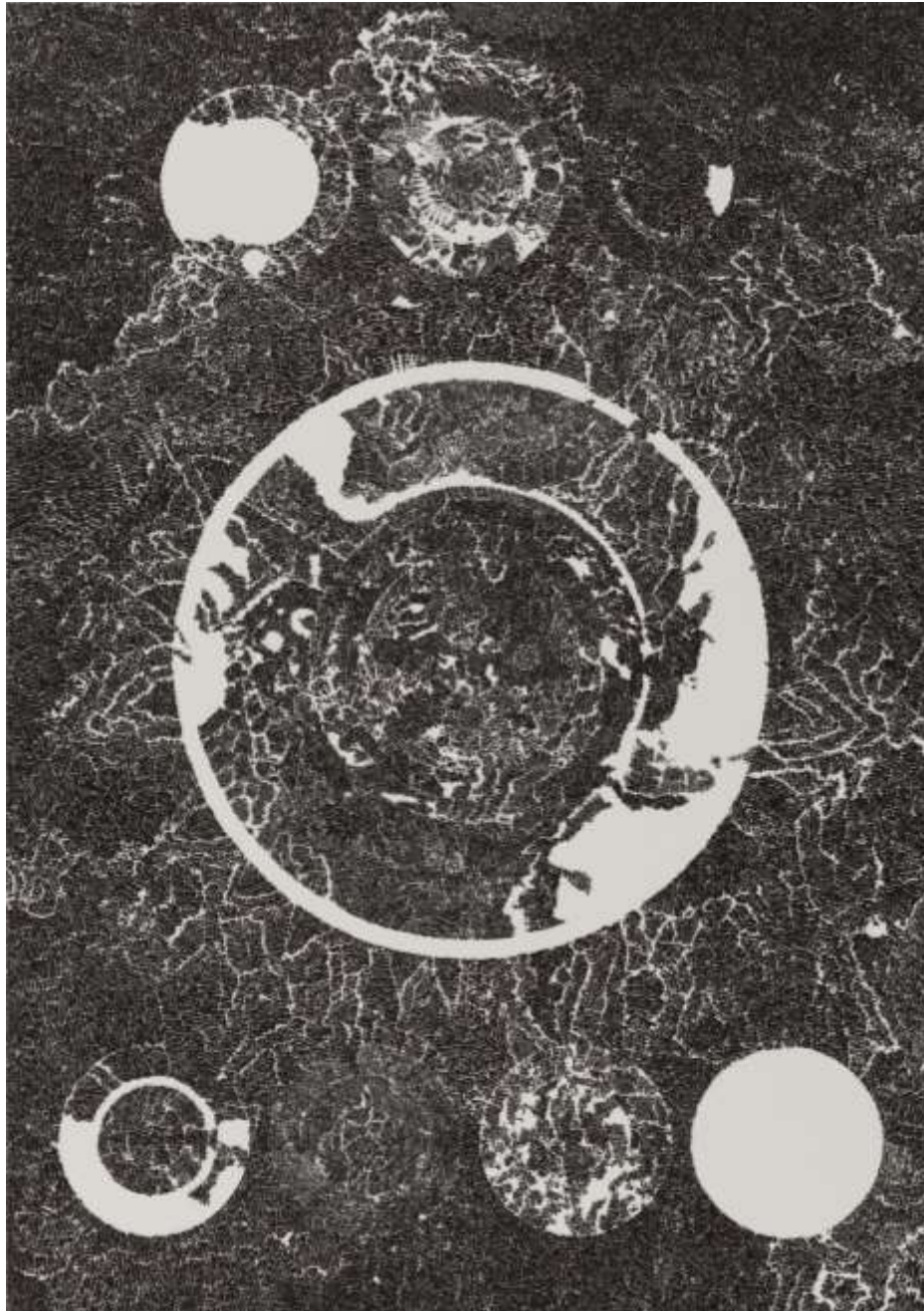


Fig 12. Bruce Conner. MANDALA, offset lithograph on paper 30 x 22-3/16" sheet, 1970, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Gift of the artist, 1998.

Silence, by Aotearoa artist Kelcy Taratoa, also investigates the dematerialisation of light and matter. Using geometry and hard-edged abstraction, Taratoa deconstructs his lived experience of daily walks on Mount Maunganui to witness sunrise. *Silence* reverberates with an energetic liveliness that serves to both anchor and disorientate the viewer in place and space.

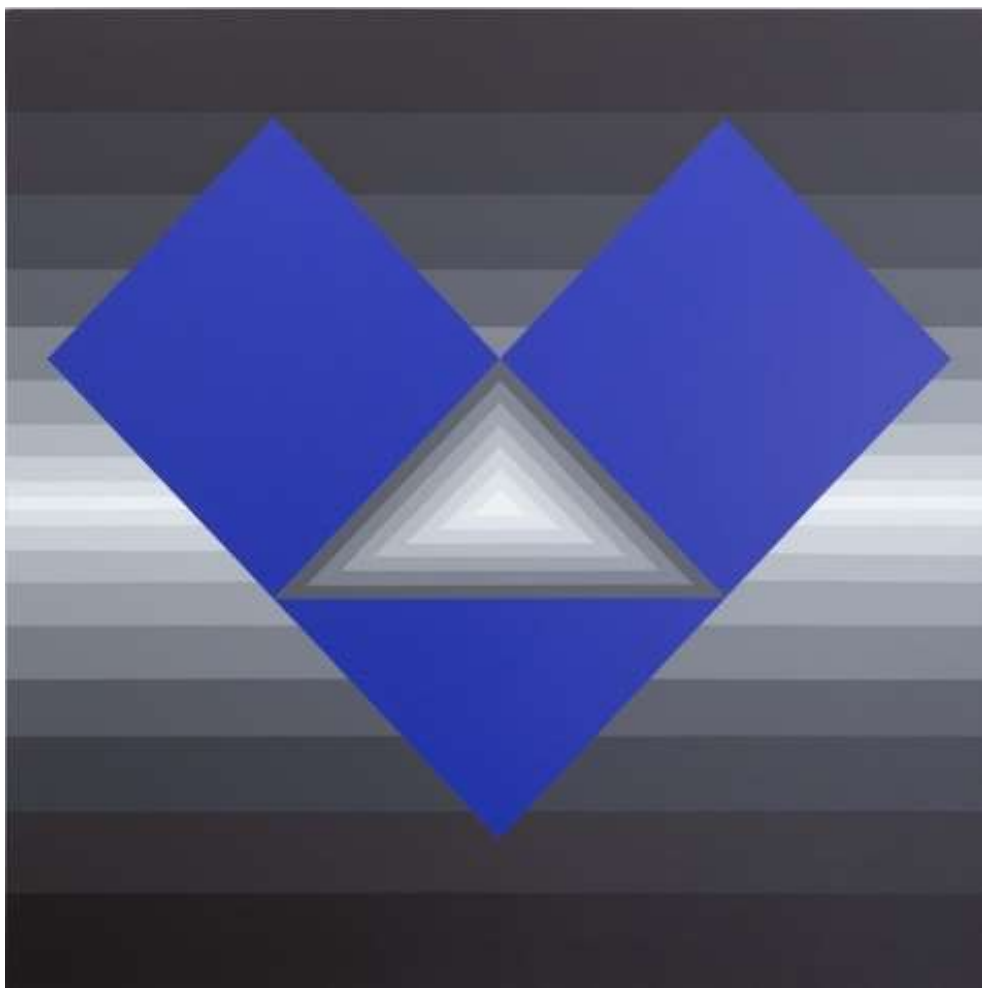


Fig 13. Kelcy Taratoa, *Silence*, acrylic on linen, 2020, Bartley and Company.

Installation 1 - Mountain, Forest, and Sea, 2021

Inspired by Taraoa's *Silence*, in my first MFA year I present *Mountain, Forest, and Sea* to recount my walks along Muritai beach and in East Harbour Regional Park. Rocks and burnt wood are collected from the beach to represent mountain and forest. They are three-dimensional objects containing mass and volume. Sea and sky are described more figuratively by hammering cobalt blue pastels between pieces of paper to produce a drawing.

The deconstructed elements of mountain, forest and sea are placed on the horizontal as free-standing sculptures for viewers to walk around and encounter their materiality and interrelationship. The *Sky* drawing is placed on the vertical as a picture. Despite the works' mass and volume, the space feels empty and silent.



Fig 14. Costello, *Mountain, Forest, and Sea*, 2021.



Fig 15. Costello, *Mountain detail, rocks*, 2021.



Fig 16. Costello, *Forest detail*, burnt wood, 2021.



Fig 17. Costello, *Sea and Sky detail*, pastel and paper, 2021.



Fig 18. Costello, *Sky*, pastel, 2021.



Fig 19. Costello, *Sea*, pastel, 2021.

People experience moving through space engaging with the works, at times kneeling to inspect the materials closely. The discussion of the work is full-bodied and critical. It raises questions about the ethics of bringing natural materials into a gallery setting, how this might interrupt their natural journey, and what happens to the material afterwards. The critique quickly jumps to meaning and context rather than describing the phenomenological encounter with the materiality of the artwork e.g., the weight of the stones and how this affects us and the space. The number of works presented and their relationship to each other seems to confuse and unsettle the audience who describe an incongruous relationship between the works.

In *Relational Reinterpretation* 2009, Mexican conceptual artist Gabriel Orozco juxtaposes the random behaviour of nature with the ambiguity of self-referential individualism (Alves). Using the pleasing aesthetics of sinuous, irregularly formed tree trunks, Orozco pits their natural harmonies against "metaphors on violence, migration, and ecology (...) Orozco's conceptualism in this show 'defines' the creative experience and once again questions the work of art as perfect human representation" (Alves).

Installation 2 - Impressions of Mountain, Forest, and Sea, 2021

The cultural appropriateness of asking tangata whenua permission before removing material from the landscape is discussed at the critique of this installation. Later, I connect with local tangata whenua, Myra Hunter, who suggests not to remove things from their place and helps me understand the deep connection Māori have to the Land as a place to hold the aroha of their people. Attempting to respond to this shifting energy between myself and my surroundings, I am determined to explore this space of perceptions, impressions, and memory traces of materials more thoughtfully.

Tissue paper, typically used to protect precious objects, is placed in an outgoing tide to be shaped by the sea, rocks are covered with paper to hold impressions of metamorphosis, and paper laid over burnt wood is rubbed with a smooth rock from the shore till its charred fractal patterns imprint onto paper.



Fig 20. Costello, *Tissue and sea*, 2011.

I present *Impressions of Mountain, Forest, and Sea*, a second installation of discrete works that are weightless, transparent, ethereal, and empty. This installation describes the dynamic qualities of space, a space where our movements and memories are held in the texture of the land and our enactive embodiment is experienced in a non-linear, relational way (Ingold 155). The relationality between the works is not explicit; this allows the audience to decipher their own meaning of the quality that links them together within the multiplicity of space (Massey 30). Hamish sees the way typography links the works; Shannon, the relational dynamics of space and how space and work are one, and how they recall positionality, territoriality, and topographical maps.

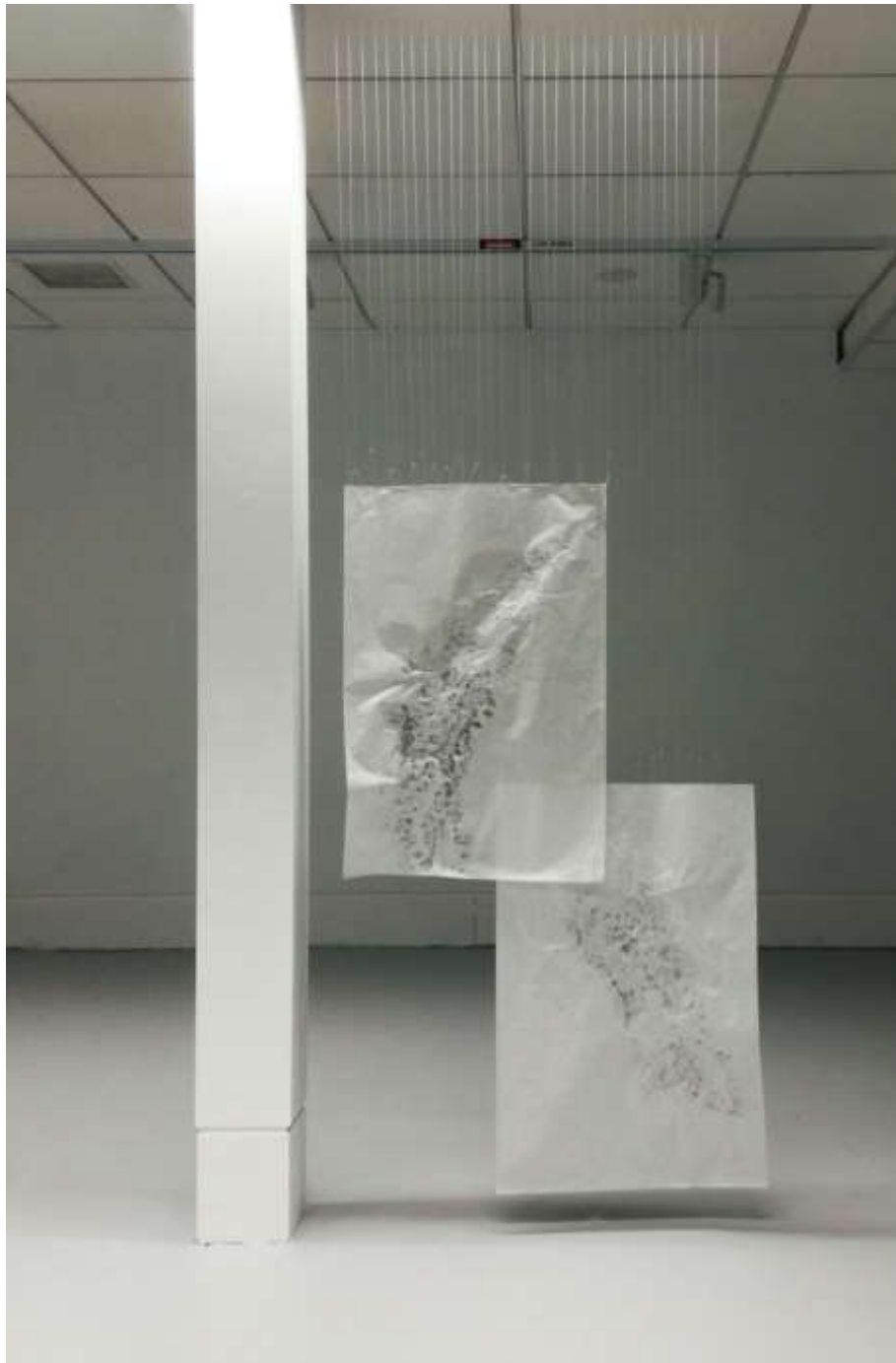


Fig 21. Costello, *Impression of Forest*, paper and charcoal, 2021.

Installation 3 - Form and Formlessness, 2021

I delight in this activation of space and the deconstructed dematerialisation of my lived experience. These processes nudge at the gateway between form (thing-object, figure) and the formless (empty of sense or meaning, ground) (Stupples 152). They describe a place and space of impermanence and emergence which is always under construction (Massey 30). These ideas are explored in the following installations *Space and Space Between*. Here the column operates as a conduit for light to emerge from darkness and 'tree' to take form.



Fig 22. Costello, *Space*, pastel, 2021.



Fig 23. Costello, *Space Between*, pastel and burnt wood, 2021.

Summer is fading
so too the cicada's song
that fills the valley

Suzy Costello, 2020

Autumn 2022

Entering the Forest



Fig 24. Costello, Eastbourne possum trappers, 2022

Summer changes to autumn. In May, I walk Gollans Valley possum line with Mainland Island Restoration members Phil Benge, Colin Dalziel, Alan Benge, and Michael Louden. These legendary possum hunters help to restore the Forest and lake ecosystems in East Harbour Regional Park. For the last 20 years they have operated two trap lines along the Bus Barn track and in Gollans Valley. Their weekly trappings have culled over 1,000 possums from this area, quite some feat given possums eat over 21,000 tons of foliage every night in Aotearoa (Department of Conservation).

We venture off track and it is wonderful to see all the different ecosystems: patches of green kidney ferns light up the Forest floor, trees intermingle and grow close together. It feels vibrant in the Forest away from the tracks but as we reach the edge of Gollans Valley, signs and fences are reminders that we are walking near farmland. A 700-year-old northern Rātā and a pair of 300-year-old Tawhai Raunui-Hard Beech reach into the sky; Ngā Tokotoko-o-Te-Rangi, heavenly posts separating Ranginui and Papaūānuku so light may stream into the seen world (Ihimaera 52). There are a lot more baby trees off-piste; so many seedlings rise from the Forest litter clustering close to their mother tree.



Fig 25. Costello, Collage of Gollans Valley

Kōrero-a-iwi, local stories of place

After this walk, I reconsider my thesis titled *Between the Forest, the Trees, and Me*. Despite beginning as an exploration of my embodiment, it is apparent the exegesis needs to move beyond a singular perspective. Reading Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, which describes Forests as a political model of cohabitation, shifts my perspective (Wohlleben 15). At Sonya's suggestion, I read Indigenous American Scientist Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and am moved by her provocation "to offer our gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision to the renewal of the world in return for the privilege of breathe" (Kimmerer 384).

I decide to invite people from Eastbourne and Wainuiomata to share their experience with the Forest they live beside. Socially engaging with others is an important aspect of contemporary art; it is a form of engaging others in a dialogical interaction that offers a pluriverse view of the world (Maguire 38).

I contact Te Roopu Tiaki board-members Vince Robertson (Taranaki, Te Ati Awa) and Jo Greenman (Wellington City Council Park Ranger). Te Roopu Tiaki provides leadership for co-management of Parangarahu Lakes Area at the southern end of East Harbour Regional Park. They acknowledge my project, requesting nothing be damaged or removed from the Forest. I begin an art project to include voices from the communities, a kōrero-a-iwi, local stories of place.

This recognition of our embeddedness in place explores a biocentric relationality that Matthew Adams, in *Between the Whale and the Kāuri*, describes as critical to "understanding the complexity that exists within the situated and the specific" (Adams 20). He states, "Anthropocene psychology is developed by hearing and telling stories of a landscape and its inhabitants, all active players in shifting assemblages of human and nonhumans: the very stuff of collaborative survival" (Adams 20).

I gather personal stories of others embodiment with the northern Forest, asking participants to consider what the Forest and trees mean to them, what they feel in their favourite place, what the trees might feel, and what they hope for the Forest's future. Covid necessitates dialogue is by phone and social media rather than face to face, so I place posts on Eastbourne and Wainuiomata Facebook pages, and phone Eastbourne locals who have been significant in caring for the northern Forest through their association with MIRO (Mainland Island Restoration). I contact Gary James from Wainuiomata who leads local school programs to educate children about the Forests growing around them. Gary is a member of Wainuiomata Natural Heritage Trust.

Soon people email me their responses. I receive eleven reflective stories from people who love and care for the Forest, and many express a delight in sharing these with their tūrangawaewae. All express a concern for the perpetuity of the Forest. Local scientist George Gibbs suggests legal protection of East Harbour northern Forest is the only way to ensure its future.

When compiling the book, I intersperse stories with images of the northern Forest taken by friend Mandy Holmwood. These allow the Forest's voice to be heard. I spend time on layout and design, binding the book in a Japanese bookbinding style. This publication will be part of my final installation then gifted to Hutt City Library (Appendix A).

Of the responses, ten are from Eastbourne and one from Wainuiomata. While I hoped to gather stories from diverse communities, Eastbourne community's engagement with the project reflects not only their attachment with the Forest but also my relationship with the community I live in. At the heart of social-engaged art projects are relationships based on trust that take time to form, and an openness to allow the project to respond to the collective will of all involved. I am grateful to everyone who offered their story in honour of this Forest we live beside.



Fig 26. Costello, *Book cover*, 2022.



Fig 27. Costello, *Kōrero-a-iwi*, 2022.

The language of trees

While participants describe a profound sense of connection and wellbeing when in the Forest, there is a hesitancy to see the world from the trees' perspective. How does embodiment occur meaningfully between humans and trees when we are such different lifeforms?

Mencagli and Nieri are Italian agronomists and bio researchers. In *The Secret Life of Trees*, they explain how our long evolution as homo sapiens in the green space of nature has profoundly influenced our genetic inheritance to regulate our behaviour and experiences when in the presence of trees.

When we say that a natural place provides sensations that make us feel good, we are simply drawing on our innate preference for the place where 99.5 percent of our evolutionary time has been spent: natural settings and landscapes (Mencagli and Nieri 49).

Entering green spaces, like forests, savannahs and parks, our bodies and minds spontaneously relax, "reducing stimuli on the amygdala-hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis" (Mencagli and Nieri 86). When we walk in a forest breathing in air cleared of positive ions and charged with negative ions, we experience less "respiratory stress, migraines, fatigue, mood disorders, and other maladies" (Mencagli and Nieri 106). When we inhale volatile essential oils released by trees, our immune defences are stimulated and increase. So deep is our connection to green space that sharing time with plants improves our psychological well-being, "reawakening our feelings of connection with the bioenergetic landscape we inhabit and share with all living things" (Mencagli and Nieri 86). During our evolutionary time spent in green spaces we have adapted to distinguish over a hundred shades of green but a mere dozen shades of other hues (Mencagli and Nieri 12). Just looking at trees makes us feel better. The Japanese activity *Shinrin-yoku*, or Forest-bathing, has proven scientifically that regularly walking in Forests improves our physical and psychological health (Furuyashiki).

This is the language of trees talking to us through our senses: the smell of the Forest, its colours, the feel of the air on our skin. These interactions happen at both the molar and molecular level within our corporeal body, and we feel good. Trees make us feel good. Just as they cooperate and care for each other it would seem the trees want to care for us also. These embodied relational dynamics speak to the concept of thinking systems while allowing space for feeling and empathy to operate between all lifeforms; a shared world which "favours cooperative and pro-social behaviours" (Laroche 15).

Exciting scientific research is emerging of trees communicating with one other, as well as other species, opening new dimensions for multi-species encounter. Peter Wohlleben describes acacia trees releasing pheromones to warn other trees of giraffes approaching so they can release toxins to dissuade the giraffes from browsing on their leaves, but what happens beneath the ground is even more exciting (Wohlleben 17).

Aotearoa's Tawhai Forests seed every four to five years (Dawson 22). During mast years, Tawhai coordinate to release their seeds simultaneously, communicating with each other through a wood-wide web created by mycorrhizal fungi attached to their root tips. This symbiotic relationship allows fungi to feed on sugar the trees make during photosynthesis and in return provide trees with phosphate, nitrogen, and other vital nutrients that are difficult to extract from infertile mountain soil. As fungi form relationships with many trees, an intricate network of fine threads spreads throughout the Forest floor (Morris). Tawhai use this network to share carbon and sugars with other trees; "the stronger trees providing resources to weaker ones for the overall benefit of the Forest" (Morris).

Recently scientists have detected rhythmic electrical sounds emitting from tree roots which may be another form of communication (Wohlleben 98). Understanding and mutually incorporating other species embodied perspectives helps "to situate us within the specific and affirms us as inseparable from the environment" (Adams 150).

My walks through the Forest are now more mindful and alert to the trees talking to me and each other. I decide my next artwork will be an assemblage of layers, an installation for the senses, a celebration of parts that constitute the whole.

Wilderness contained
cupped in the palm of our hands
flowing water stills

Suzy Costello, 2022

Winter 2022

Assemblage of layers

The Matariki constellation rising in the eastern dawn sky heralds the Māori new year. Winter is also a time of mahi, so I set to work creating the sensory layers for my final MFA exhibition: the colours of the Forest, its aroma, textures, tastes and sound, and the mysterious layer hidden beneath the soil.

Colour and light

Thanks to plants and trees, the Earth receives its nourishment from the sun: the planet's mineral flesh is metamorphosed to receive light within. As well as providing us with shade, plants and trees transform light into a consumable and universally available commodity, into a force that animates all of the bodies that exist on Gaia. Thanks to them, food is a secret trade in light that is consumed from body to body. These beings, to whom we pay little heed, are hard at work making the planet a place of permanent metamorphosis. As pioneering species, they are responsible for the transformation of nonliving matter into biomass, from mineral into organic... Through this intertwining, the perception of the world experienced by each living species passes first and foremost, albeit unconsciously and imperceptibly, through our experience of trees (Coccia 29).

Intrigued by Coccia's description of light consumed from body to body, I reflect on this subtle playful dance between light and matter. Reading more on electromagnetic resonance, I learn that excited electrons returning to their ground state release excess energy as discrete particles of light called photons. These photons travel at the speed of light without charge or mass, affecting and being affected by the magnetic field of space they traverse, until they are reabsorbed back into matter (Lucid). And this process repeats itself, matter into light into matter.

I begin another artwork exploring my embodiment with the shimmering light above the Forest canopy. These works describe a balance between order and spontaneity, of Life moving forwards in an ever-changing pattern of impermanence and emergence, just like the photons which light our universe. I use a pattern of prime numbers (a grid of 23 columns and row sequence of 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, and 19) to describe the merging of yellow-light and green-tree. I have used prime numbers in my artmaking previously and find their inherent eccentric patterning intriguing.

In the fourth drawing, I adjust the row sequence of prime numbers to produce an infinite wave that makes space for spontaneity to occur within the orderliness of repeated patterns. This drawing feels like my embodiment with trees and light interacting during photosynthesis. I play with the grid to get the right effect of random scattering and balance of green-yellow, eventually increasing the columns to 31. In version 5, I simplify the colours, using just ochre and phthalo green, and allow the pencil to become blunt before sharpening it which produces subtle tonal variations.



Fig 28. Costello, *Light and trees 1-5*, 2022.

This systematic approach produces an artwork true to my visual experience of the environment. At Simon's suggestion I research systems-based art, a movement emerging in the 1940s where rules dictate the artmaking process, "eliminating metaphor (...) emotive expression and authority of the creator" so viewers may interpret meaning. Utilising the non-hierarchical nature of grids and lines enabled artists like Agnes Martin, Françoise Morellet, Sol LeWitt to dispense with traditional composition (Zelevansky 9).

American artist John Cage adopted a more intuitive engagement with systems-based art. After visiting Kyoto's Ryoanji Zen rock garden in 1983, he creates a series of tonal drawings where the placement of rocks occurs by chance (but repositioned within the frame if outside it) while their silhouette is repeatedly drawn according to mathematical formulae (National Gallery of Art). Cage then uses these sketches to compose musical scores. His willingness to allow intuition to influence the system process acknowledges not only his own agency but the embodiment with another's agency. This reflects my own intuitive use of systems-based processes.

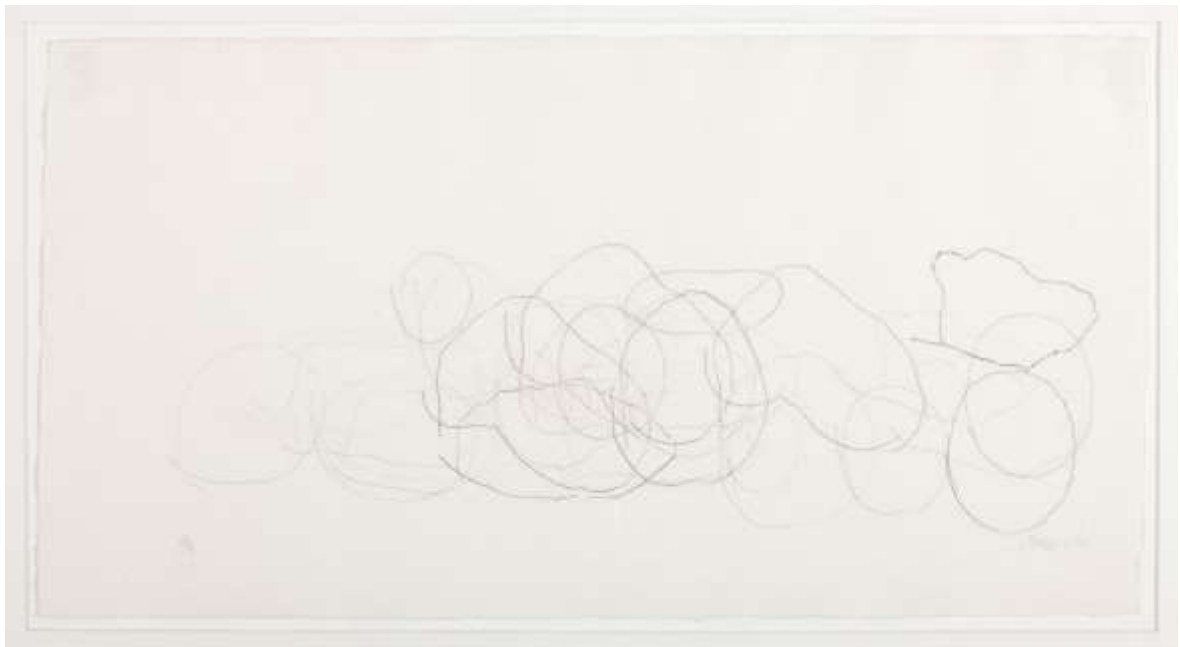


Fig 29. John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji (2R)/9 - 6/87 (1987)*, Pencils on handmade Japanese paper, 16 3/4" H x 26" W, Collection of the John Cage Trust, ©John Cage Trust

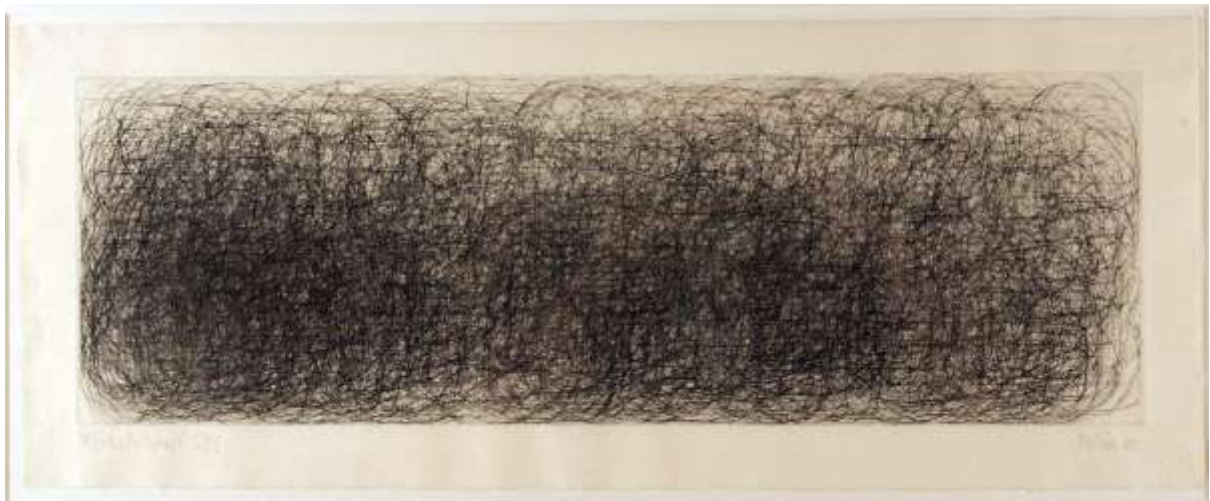


Fig 30. John Cage, *(R3) (Where R=Ryoanji) (1983)*, Drypoint etching on handmade paper, TP, ED 25, 14 ¼" H x 28 ¼" W, Collection of the John Cage Trust, ©John Cage Trust

Forest fragrance



Fig 31. Costello, *Collage of Karaka fruit infusion*, 2022

Smell is one of our most important senses, alerting us to danger, helping source food, evoking memories. As wind pollinators, Tawhai release a delicate scent almost undetectable to humans (Dawson 25). The northern Forest's summer aromas I recall are the sweet warmth of Karaka's ripe orange fruit and the woody floral scent of Kānuka's pink flowers. I collect ripe Karaka fruit beneath a neighbour's tree bordering the Forest and infuse them with iso-propylene for several months to extract their aromatic volatile essential oils. I purchase an aged Kānuka essential oil distilled from the bark of trees growing on Great Barrier Island; its antiseptic odour lessening over 10-years so its floral notes sing. I will trial these volatile essential oils in a vaporiser for use in the final installation so the room will be filled with fragrance reminiscent of the northern Forest.

Gallery exhibitions offering olfactory experiences are becoming increasingly popular. In March 2021 during the height of the Covid pandemic, American artist M Dougherty presents *Forest Bath* at Olfactory Art Kellers in New York. Displayed within the gallery are scented sculptures of wax and mycelium (mushroom roots) and forest aromatic essential oils, some distilled by the artist, are pumped within the gallery and onto the sidewalk for all to enjoy (M Dougherty).

More pointedly, in 2020, Aotearoa artist Dane Mitchell creates a fragrance for *Respiratory event (vapor whale)* using both natural ambergris produced by sperm whales and synthetic ambergris. Releasing this fragrance from a rooftop above the city of Bangkok, alongside a replica sperm whale skull, Mitchell's work highlights the natural world collapsing under the toxic pollution of synthetic man-made materials (Mitchell).

Textural frottages



Fig 32. Sue Allman, *Frottaging Rātā*. Photography, 2022.

In spring, a group of friends and I walk the northern Forest's Hawtrey track to a grove of enormous Northern Rātā trees living in a sheltered easterly-facing enclave. Sitting at the foot of a giant mother-tree over 700-years-old, Mandy guides us in meditation. We are still, quietened in this place of rest, aware of wind caressing leaf, birdsong floating, drawn into the being of tree, held safely in this space of timelessness.

Later, we unfurl a Japanese roll of thick Kozo paper and frottage the Rātā's twisted and gnarled trunk of coalesced roots that centuries ago encircled its host tree. Using humus soil from the base of the tree to rub over the paper, we feel the tree's sinuousness as we draw its body's textural contours.

Foraging and Māori Mātauranga



Fig 33. Costello, *Pinched bowls*, clay, 2022.

I have made twelve unfired clay pinched bowls to honour this Land and Forest that nourishes our spirit, our kinship, and our body. Each is inscribed with a line of poetry from the kōrero-a-iwi participants. These bowls symbolise nature's generosity to provide for us and ask how we may contribute to the Forest's natural increase through acts of offering and thoughtful interaction.

Throughout East Harbour Regional Park there are "ancient Pā sites, rock shelters, pits, middens, and garden areas", reminders that indigenous Māori were sustained by the Land and "shaped by generations of connection in place" (Raukura Consultants 3) (Adams 150). While I have never associated a sense of taste with the northern Forest, Aotearoa's earliest settlers would have.

Tawhai produce small inedible fruit so the ocean, rivers, and streams sustained these communities (Raukura Consultants 29). To supplement their diet, Karaka trees were planted so their large fruit could be preserved to remove toxins and eaten during winter. A stand of old Karaka growing at the entrance to Muritai Park always greets me when walking the northern Forest. Close by Tī Kōuka, cabbage trees, were used "as a vegetable, with the growing tips of the branches snapped off, trimmed and steamed" and its leaves woven into fishing nets, baskets, footwear, and cloaks (Simpson 28). Mānuka, growing in dense stands further up the park, treated burns and scalds as a bark infusion, vapour from the boiled leaves treated colds, and "the inner bark was boiled and the liquid used as a mouthwash" (Simpson 33). Kawakawa, growing along the paths of the track, "cured wounds, diseases, and digestive and kidney issues" (Simpson 35).

As an industrialised society our food needs are met with trips to supermarkets. This, combined with conservation efforts to retain what is left of Aotearoa's indigenous forests (following the decimation of lowland conifer and broadleaf forests during colonisation), means as non-foragers we have shifted our awareness and relationship with nature, and our embodiment with other lifeforms. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robyn Kimmerer describes the foraging system as a gift and commodity exchange which creates a feeling-bond between people and their surroundings; "a formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. We tend to respond to nature as a part of ourselves, not a stranger or an alien available for exploitation" (Kimmerer 30).

How can we participate in natural increase without exploiting Earth's self-regulating open system, where "energy flows freely into and out of systems", but with respect to matter the Earth is mostly a closed system (NASA)?

Māori Mātauranga, Te Ao Taiao, envisions a worldview of interconnectedness and inclusiveness. In letters written to Elsdon Best in 1890, Māori scholar Tāmami Ranapiri, explains this symbiotic balance as, "an economy of *mana*, or economy of affection, which exists to maintain the four well-beings of Māori and the Pacific—spiritual, environmental, kinship and economic" (Hēnare 1). Māori academic Mānuka Hēnare describes the spiritual as:

A reverence for the total creation as one whole; a sense of kinship with other beings; a sacred regard for the whole of nature and its resources as being gifts from the spiritual powers; a sense of responsibility for these gifts (taonga) as the appointed stewards and guardians; a distinctive economic ethic of reciprocity; and a sense of commitment to safeguard natural resources for future generations (Hēnare 212).

Scientists Harmsworth and Awatere acknowledge a "clear link between healthy ecosystems (with greater life-supporting capacity) and people's cultural and spiritual well-being", explaining:

Most ecosystems require a diversity of lifeforms to exist and function properly and to sustain the services provided by ecosystems. This holistic thinking, based on traditional Māori values and beliefs, has increasing parallels with late 20th century emergent concepts and practices of interdisciplinary mainstream science, sustainability, ecological economics, and integrated planning and policy (Harmsworth and Awatere 274).

Today the southern end of East Harbour Regional Park, Parangarahu Lakes Area, is managed by advisory group Te Roopu Tiaki, established in 2012 to provide leadership for co-management of the area which was returned to Taranaki Whānui as cultural redress reflecting the Treaty Settlement. Te Roopu Tiaki "provide for the enhancement and protection of Taranaki Whānui's ancient relationship with the Land and ensure that the Land is held and appreciated in accordance with Taranaki Whānui tikanga" (Te Roopu Tiaki 8). The group comprises three members from Port Nicholson Block Settlement Trust, representing the iwi of Taranaki Whānui who hold Kiatikitanga, and three senior staff members of Greater Wellington Regional Council.

Employed throughout Aotearoa, this model enables Māori Mātauranga and science to operate together to ensure natural increase into the future.

Sound of water falling



Fig 34. Costello, *Clay and water*, 2022.

As a ritual offering to the northern Forest, and to acknowledge matter's mostly closed system within our biosphere, each day of the installation I will place an unfired clay bowl under a slow dripping water feature using water collected from a neighbour's stream fed by the northern Forest. Gradually the bowl will dissolve, form returning to the formless. Another bowl will be placed upon it till all the bowls are used, and then water will create a bowl within the unfired clay.

Water is the giver of life, and Dane Mitchell's 2015 exhibition *All Whatness is Wetness* offers viewers a phenomenological encounter with this primordial substance. Water is sourced from the Maeander River in the heart of Ancient Greece, the source of Western rational philosophy. It is distilled using homeopathic methods to heighten the potency of the water's memory and then vapourised for viewers to experience as an unpredictable and ever-changing mist (Mitchell). Mitchell's responsiveness to water's agency encourages me to embrace its unpredictability; I wonder if water will spread throughout the exhibition space or be contained by the unfired clay vessels?

What lies beneath

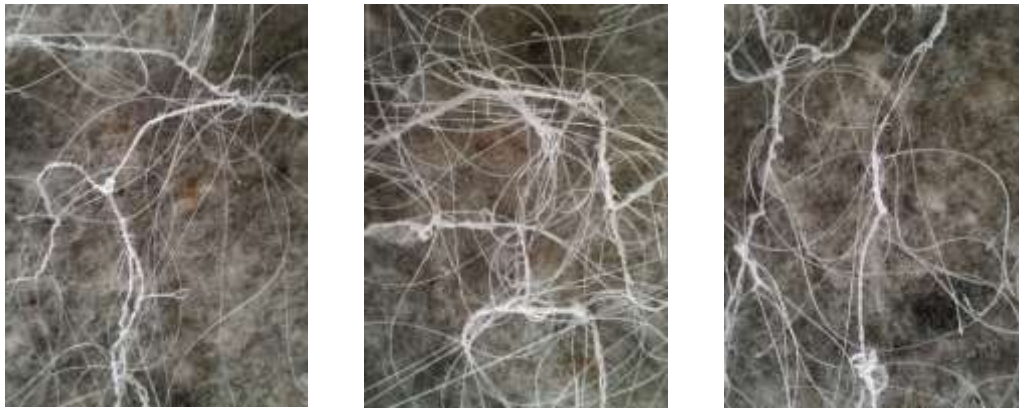


Fig 38. Costello, *Fungi*, thread, 2022.

From knotted thread I make a carpet of fungi to use in the installation which will offer a tactile experience for the audience and speak to Life supported and emerging from the darkness under the soil. These fungal networks provide a sense of hope for the renewal of nature as discussed in Anna Tsing's essay *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Bodenstein 231).

Contained by high walls
a small Forest grows within,
its breathe our heartbeat

Suzy Costello, 2022



Fig 35. Mandy Holmwood, *Gollans Valley*, photography, 2022.

Spring 2022

A bonsai forest

It is time to address the discussion between the northern Forest across the road from where I live and the bonsai forest growing within the walls of our garden. How do they speak to each other? Why have we created a small forest of bonsai, requiring constant attention to survive, when there is a self-sustaining Forest across the road?

Maintaining bonsai requires horticultural knowledge to ensure not only the tree survives but grows to emulate the tenacity and beauty of weathered aged trees (Coussins 57). The Japanese notion of wabi sabi celebrates the beauty of transience and imperfection and is at the heart of the bonsai aesthetic (Coussins 5). The artistry of the bonsai student is to reveal the story within each tree. It requires one, "to listen to the tree, it tells you where it wants to go" (Naka). A well-tended potted tree will naturally over time reduce its canopy in relation to its root space. Some of Aotearoa's Tawhai Rauriki-Mountain Beech survive freezing conditions by becoming bonsai less than half a meter in height (Dawson 22). The art of gentle bonsai uses fingers and string, rather than tools and wire, to mimic wind breaking branches. Unwanted branch tips are removed, encouraging the tree to regenerate and rebalance itself.

Like my first creative encounter with the Forest, I return to drawing my husband's bonsai. As always, I am surprised how much I learn from this process; I notice the strength of the nebari (the foot of the tree, an important element of bonsai), the twists and turns of trunk and branches, the way foliage presents itself, and the energy, strength, and feeling of the tree. The miniature scale of bonsai enables me to embody the tree differently, as a singular entity, an individual like myself; "a microcosm containing within it, unchanged in everything but size, the mystery of the universe" (Lewis).

Watching John tend his bonsai, I am reminded of the Chinese proverb, "He who plants a garden plants happiness" (source unknown). All living things share an energetic experience together. This energy, its frequency and vibration in the form of electromagnetism, "supports all living processes and allows both humans and plants to relate instantly with the world around us within the biosphere" (Mencagli and Nieri 117). Like others who tend their gardens and beautify their homes with the patterns and colours of nature, we do so because nature restores us. This is epitomised by Arts and Crafts textile designer William Morris's ever popular 1870's wallpaper patterns, inspired by plants growing in his garden.

Song for the biosphere

This is my installation for final studio presentation, *Permanent resonance*



Fig 36. Costello, *Test installation #1*, 2022.

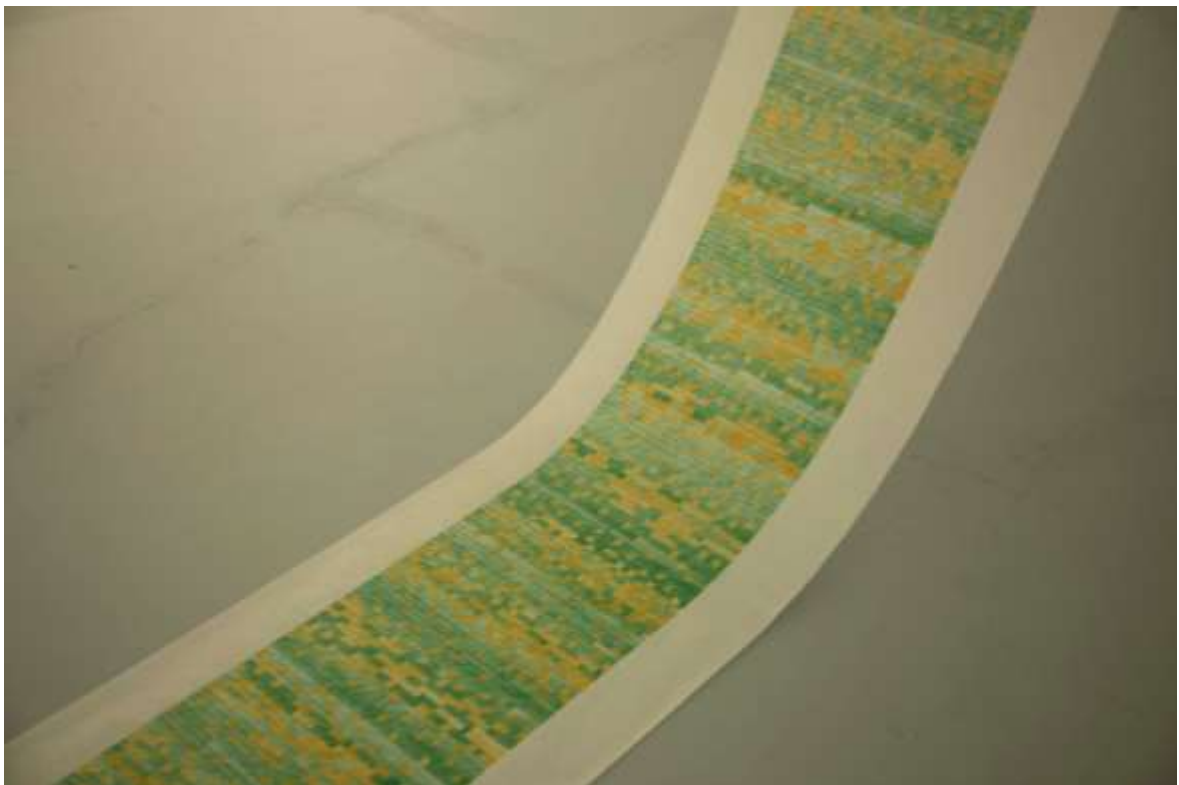


Fig 37. Costello, *Test installation #2*, 2022.



Fig 38. Costello, *Test installation #3*, 2022.



Fig 39. Costello, *Test installation #4*, 2022.



Fig 40. Costello, *Test installation #5*, 2022.



Fig 41. Costello, *Test installation #6*, 2022.

Reflections

Striving to replicate the experience of walking through the Forest or a Japanese garden, I arrange artworks in three groups for the audience to encounter: first the forest canopy, then trees, and finally water. Clay bowls are dispersed throughout the room to democratise the space, merging boundaries between artworks and connecting spaces. Before the audience arrives, Simon and I reposition the bonsai and fungi into the centre and rearrange cushions so the whole space is used. This gives the installation a more expansive feel. We adjust the *Light and tree* drawing slightly so the audience has multiple pathways.

Karaka fragrance greets the audience at the entrance and the exhibition room is filled with the aroma of Kānuka. People's gasps of delight when encountering the drawing and water feature are unexpected and pleasing. Meandering, they inspect the frottage from both sides, pause at the water feature to engage with its fluidity, sit and read the book.

I open the discussion with poetry, outline my thesis and invite others to share their insights. They describe the transformative effect of the Forest aromas, their feeling of being embraced by the frottaged tree trunk, the sense of a deep underlying connection linking the works conceptually and being overwhelmed by the large body of quiet artworks referencing different media, size, and timescales.

When asked what they would change, suggestions include: removing the bonsai as it holds a different timescale from the 'now' of the exhibition, presenting only the water feature accompanied by the Forest aroma, and removing some pots and the book. Others feel the multiplicity of systems-based approaches detracts from the installation's cohesion and suggest works would be better dispersed throughout the Exposure exhibition and the *Light and tree* drawing exhibited later. Like all studio presentations I come away with more questions than answers.

During de-installation I experiment with reducing elements. Removing the bonsai, I feel uncertain about the exhibition's ethereal quality and lack of energetic liveliness. I feel the bonsai anchors the installation and symbolises plants' longevity to exist before and after humanity's time on Earth. When I remove the paper from the water feature the space feels less crowded by repetitive vertical hangings. I remove the frottages till one remains, its organic marks speaking eloquently to the bonsai and fungi placed nearby. Removing the *Light and tree* drawing, book, and cushions means there is no reference to green and growth. This disturbs me. Instead, the frottage and clay bowls radiate a quality of earthiness rather than tree-ness.

I reflect on Martin's comment about the multiplicity of systems I have used and realise I have intuitively responded to Earth's different systems for energy and matter, each eliciting a system appropriate to their vibrancy, vitality and agency. Rather than seeking a singular definitive notion of the Forest, my art deconstructs and celebrates the multiple elements that compose this complex living ecosystem.

Scientists Miguel and Su-Young state -

The emergence of Life is a pure individuation process... a regime of permanent resonance characterizing the biosphere, as open from inside, by the recursive differential relation between the biosphere and all its holobionts [closely associated species that have complex interactions] (Miguel and Su-Young 201).

This is the language of my art: juxtaposing deconstructed elements to expose the recursive differential relation between them so we may appreciate the resonance of Life. This language will inform my installation for Exposure.

Conclusion

Using systems-based art, I deconstructed my lived experience with the northern Forest of East Harbour Regional Park. These sensory artworks resonate with the language of trees and the emergence of Life. They are a conceptual, artistic exploration of interspecies embodiment between trees and humans. Community art projects expanded this sense of embodiment, allowing us to honour the Forest. Its wilderness was recontextualised as I investigated why we recreate moments of connection with nature within our home.

Thank you to all who have contributed.

Poipoia te kākano kia puawai

Nurture the seed and the blossom will come

Māori whakatauki

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Appendix A – Kōrero-a-iwi

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Ray Smith

Eastbourne Forest Ranger since 1975



Fig 42. Ray Smith, *Bus Barn Track*, 2022

We came to Eastbourne 50 years ago on the shortest day of the year. I was born and raised in Christchurch which has no expanse of forest, just gardens, so seeing the forest for the first time was very emotional - an opening up of nature as something you live with. Our home has a track behind the house leading into the bush and straight away I felt I belonged here. I was conscious of another dimension, the natural world. The bush doesn't ask anything of you except to care so it can keep on going.

A few years after arriving in Eastbourne I meet people in the Rangers and joined regular working parties to establish and maintain tracks, build a deer enclosure etc. The physical activity was a release from work commitments and pressure, and I got to know the hills and off-track areas walking backwards and forwards. Once over the ridgeline you'd not hear civilisation.

This photo is one of my favourite places at the top of the Bus Barn ridge looking to the distant hills beyond. I can't walk there anymore but can close my eyes and still be there, I have the memories. The blue haze over the hills is from the oils released by the trees; they make you feel good (it's the cannabinoids), and the oxygen enriched air makes you feel good too.

I think the trees are indifferent to us. The important thing for the trees is to seek light so they can grow and reproduce to make babies. The rate of growth in a forest is very slow, glacial. Maybe our connection with the forest might be different in an indigenous context, where the forest is your food source and medicine chest.

What have I learned from the trees? An appreciation of the meaning of life and one's own place in life - to be blessed in life.

What do I hope for the future of the forest? More respect for the forest and the plant world and its slow process of regeneration. To retain all possible areas of forest and no more deforestation. I am concerned

about the regional council's focus on recreation not conservation. Moving forwards it may be the Māori perspective on nature that will help save the forest.

*Into my heart an air that kills,
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.*

A Shropshire Lad XL by A. E. Housman

Jill Bagnall

Mahina Bay resident



Fig 43. Mandy Holmwood, York Bay, 2022.

My earliest memories of the forest are mostly of the smaller plants on or near the forest floor; especially ferns, which always fascinated me, and the tree roots crossing the narrow track. At that time I was not so aware of the large trees, but more of the gloom – the lack of light – which they created, and the mystery of it all.

By the age of about 9 or 10 years I was much more conscious of the size and variety of trees and the textures of bark, leaf litter, roots, etc. Something which really attracted me were the streams, flowing in every gully with their brown, slippery rocks, little pools and sometimes even kokapu and crawlies.

The forest is very important to me. It is a green mantel. It gives a wonderful sense of division between where one can live and not live, a home for birds and other creatures, and a place for recreation.

Peace and delight are always there. The forest has given me a sense of wonder, somewhere to explore, and a place of quiet thoughtfulness.

I have many favourite spots; I love all the bush. I always feel quietly observant when I am in the forest. The trees are what matters – it is the trees which create the space and the mood. They are all-important.

I don't think that the trees feel my presence, but I do wonder about this.

I hope that the forest will remain into the future and all the plants in it will continue to flourish. Pest control is absolutely essential.

It was a friendly and a private place

Sings Harry

Where a moss-grown track beside the stream

Led to the clearing in the birches. The face

Of the dark hill above was darkling green

Mountain Clearing by Denis Glover

George Gibbs

MIRO and Entomologist



Fig 44. George Gibbs, *East Harbour beech tree in flower*, 2022.

Since birth my 'home' base has been on the margin of the forest that is now known as the 'Gibbs Covenant'. My earliest memories as a small child, and much of my adult life, has been spent here. Both parents lived here because they loved the bush - as members of the Tararua Tramping Club my mum Stella was the first woman to join what was the first tramping club in New Zealand. My parents' courtship took place in Eastbourne, and they raised me in the margins of the beech forest. I guess the best word is 'profound' in terms of my interaction with the forest.

What has the forest given me? The answer to this is my life. I became fascinated by the insect fauna of our land on the hillside. Under the influence of my grandfather George Hudson, one of New Zealand's best-known entomologists whose collection remains in the archives at Te Papa Museum, I also developed a lifelong interest in insects and qualified with a PhD in Ecology from the University of Sydney. The forest gives me peace and a connection to the natural world.

I have privileged spaces within our 'Gibbs Covenant' and these places give me a sense of belonging. It was my privilege to be influenced from a young age by the spiritual forces of all the eastern hills of Te Whanganui a Tara. These ranges, and their predominantly beech forests, existed when Polynesians, and later Europeans, arrived in these untouched islands and began their progressive destruction of the indigenous life (huia were common here at that time). I can only be thankful for the surviving natural forest that enables us to see and feel something of its history when we visit it today.

Do the trees feel my presence? I have no way of knowing! My hopes for the future of this forest is that it continues to survive; at best, in its present state, or with possible improvements in pest control techniques, to restore some aspects of it. Protection of East Harbour Forest is the only way to ensure it has a future. The proposal for a very large Wainuiomata Sanctuary area is an exciting idea along these lines.

*Some few yards from the hut the standing beeches
let fall their dead limbs, overgrown
with feathered moss and filigree of bracken.*

*The rotted wood splits clean and hard
close-grained to the driven axe, with sound of water
sibilant falling and high nested birds.*

*In winter blind with snow; but in full summer
the forest blanket sheds its cloudy pollen
and cloaks a range in undevouring fire.*

Excerpt from 'Poem in the Matukituki Valley'
by James. K. Baxter 1913. (one of my favourite forest places immortalised)

About Eco-Sanctuary in Wainuiomata –

'The Greater Wellington Regional Council is considering a proposal that would fence off 3350 hectares of native bush behind the suburb of Wainuiomata to create a "threatened species sanctuary". With its abundance of ancient Rimu, the ngahere (forest) in Puketahā is an ideal habitat for the flightless Kākāpō; which was last seen in the North Island in 1905 near Wainuiomata. And having 40,000 hectares of adjacent forest in the Remutaka Range it's likely that many bird species will eventually migrate from the sanctuary'. (Greater Wellington-Te Pane Matua Taiao)

Michael Louden

Freedom Possum Trapping group

Father and grandfather of ongoing sharers of the area



Fig 45. M.Louden, *Gollans Valley*, 2022.

The forest has been a shared “backyard” environment for our family for over 75 years. My early memories as a boy are short ventures for hunting in the creeks for koura and capturing green geckoes off the, then prolific, manuka at the request of an Eastbourne scientist for his study (along with brown gecko we caught for him on Ward Island). Later came possum trapping and boy scout manning of the kiosk near the Butterfly Creek picnic area.

The trees and forest were just part of the environment then; the first memories being the supplejack vines and the Tarzan play. With a young family, the hills were convenient each December to walk up with the kids and cut off a branch from a wilding pine to use as a Christmas tree. The bush walks were also enjoyed entertaining frequent overseas tourists over weekend breaks. It was not until later, with the pressures of work and family duties, that one started to appreciate the pleasure and peace of the forest as a whole. Once we started possum trapping and had reasons for going “off piste” and excuses to sit for a while over morning tea and lunches, we enjoyed the improvement over time of the flowering of the forest and the increased bird song and sightings.

My preferred areas are quiet places, off the beaten track, without interruption from other human activities. In addition to the attraction of the variety, the trees provide a form of comfortable cocoon surrounding one. This photograph is a typical favoured place; with the older established trees, the young ones growing, the water bubbling by, space to sit and enjoy, and one of mankind’s best companions.

What have I learned from the trees? Patience, respect, and a unity; gratitude for its life, peace and giving of perspective. The trees are part of the whole (the Japanese “Shinrin Yoku” seems apt with its bathing in the forest idea). My self-indulgent enjoyment has been complemented by the benefits of regular physical exercise and time in the outdoor environment rather than less healthy alternative pastimes.

What do I think the trees feel towards me? I am unable, and wouldn’t presume, to answer this; but could consider that they feel and are affected by one’s presence. I would like to think that the trees could become

evolutionarily aware of an inverse relationship between our presence and the possums' presence (with the possums' NZ consumption estimated at ~21,000 tonnes of tree foliage per night).

I hope the forest continues to exist as a living, maturing part of our mutual society. That it remains distinct, not interfered with by councils or individuals, but grows, and is appreciated and enjoyed by future generations.

*Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough'
a flask of wine, a book of verse – and thou,
beside me singing in the wilderness –
and wilderness is paradise enow.'*

Stanza from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Wendy Manson

Muritai resident



Fig 46. Mandy Holmwood, *Muritai Track*, 2022.

I was born and grew up in a small house on the hillside of Muritai Park bush with my brother and Scottish immigrant parents. We explored the backyard of our family home with all the other neighbour kids along Muritai Road, the Bellams, the Martins, and the Hicklings. We had hessian potato sacks to zoom down the pine trees and built forts after school up the bush.

Twenty years later, my three sons, and the family dog got to experience the same childhood. They built bases up the bush. Slept up in the pine trees amongst the ruru and managed to lose all my spades and shovels in the process. Their friends' dads would take them on overnight expeditions to Butterfly Creek and while the dads had beer and told stories the kids would run through the bush.

The kids have grown up and gone now. But every day I still walk the familiar Muritai track with the family dog. It's my spiritual place. I love the quiet, the incredible creation we live in. I love chatting to neighbours,

friends, and new people to the Bay as each one chugs up the hill and realises what an awesome place we live in. And of course ending up at Rimu Street for coffee.

Our bush is so incredible.

Terry Webb

MIRO



Fig 47. Mandy Holmwood, *Gollans Valley*, 2022.

I have two early memories of the forest. One is from when we took our son and his friends to camp at Butterfly Creek for his birthday. While the weather was OK, his friends didn't really know how to go to sleep in a tent, so it was a very sleepless night. We didn't try that again.

The second is running the Korohiwa/McKenzie track route from time to time when I was younger. The grunt up from the Bus Barns on the old track was hard, but it was lovely after that. Running through the forest was so much more interesting and varied than running beside roads.

What has the forest given me? Helping with restoring the forest (through pest animal control) has given me a strong sense of satisfaction through doing something meaningful in retirement. The forest has its 'ups and downs'. I find it sad when I see plants wilting in the late summer droughts, even though this is perfectly natural. However, I do worry about how well our forest will adapt to climate change.

The forest is at its best a short time after a drought-breaking rain. It is amazing how quickly plants freshen up and the forest smells clean again.

I think the west branch of Gollans Stream is my favourite spot in the forest. It feels remote and is very peaceful. So for me it feels safe and comfortable. The trees bring shelter and seclusion. Another nice spot is above the top bridge in Butterfly Creek. This is a good place to spot groups of titipounamu.

Do I think the trees feel my presence? No I don't. If they did, those near tracks might feel annoyed at having their roots walked on!

What do I hope for the future of this forest? Close to full restoration through having no pest animals, resulting in a dense understorey where birds and insects can thrive. Overwhelming birdsong, including kiwi, kokako, tīeke, hihi, toutouwai and, of course, kākā, who we hope will be living here soon.

About MIRO – [Extract from www.miro.org.nz]

Mainland Island Restoration is a volunteer organisation, working in partnership with Greater Wellington Regional Council to restore the forest and lake ecosystems in East Harbour Regional Park. In the Northern Forest, which is the part of the park adjacent to Eastbourne and Wainuiomata, MIRO's work focussed for 20 years on controlling possums, which were damaging our native trees, especially rata. Servicing a network of 470 possum traps, with volunteers visiting their trap lines monthly, has resulted in many thousands of possums being culled. Now, with possums reduced to low levels, the signs of the forest recovering are becoming more obvious e.g. our large iconic Northern Rata now bloom profusely, and the regrowth of smaller broadleaf plants is producing more seeds, providing food for birds such as riflemen, which are now regularly seen on the front faces of the forest above Eastbourne—something which hardly ever used to occur. However, the continued presence of pest animals, such as rats and stoats, makes it very difficult for many of our native birds to flourish, so some species remain classified as 'threatened' and 'at risk'. To get complete 'mountains-to-sea' predator control across Eastbourne and the Bays, local residents are now trapping predators on their own properties and the adjacent foreshore as part of the ERAT Project.

Anne Manchester

Resident of Robinson Bay



Fig 48. Anne Manchester, *Kōwhai Track*, 2022.

When my family moved to Wellington from Auckland in 1961, we soon began exploring the East Harbour Regional Park. My mother had remembered it from when she worked in Wellington during the war. As a young woman, she would often go over to Eastbourne at the weekend, by ferry, for afternoon tea in Days

Bay and a walk in the bush. Eventually her love of the place saw us move here in the 1970s. We would often take visiting family members and friends for a picnic to Butterfly Creek.

The forest is my escape from the normal routines of daily life and a way of enhancing my sense of mental and physical wellbeing. I love the walk from Kōwhai Street to Korohiwa, as it is just one-hour and can be fitted into a busy day quite easily, but I love most areas of the park and know there is still much more for me to explore, even after living here many decades. I think the trees are happy to share their life-giving properties with me. My hope is the forest will be protected forever and will continue to improve and be enriched as predators are removed and wildlife restored. I hope people for generations to come will continue to enjoy this forest, to find rest and restoration beneath and around its trees, in the forest clearings and along its streams. I hope the birdlife will continue to increase so future generations will be able to hear abundant birdsong to enrich their experience.

Anne shares her reflections on walking the Kōwhai track.

Sixty minutes is all it takes from Kōwhai St to Korohiwa, a complete and perfect experience, ending at the bus barns and the buff coloured Wahine memorial mast by the sea. A time to meditate - a time all my own. First, the hamstring stretch to the top of Kōwhai St, from where my sons would race their trolleys, defying the odds and terrifying unwary drivers. At the top of the street, the real climb begins up the dry, north-facing slope, zigzagging rapidly above the orderly streets and well-kept houses. Pausing for breath at Des Lowndes' seat, the affectionately remembered forest ranger, nostrils fill with the heady perfume of flowering gorse and Saturday morning sounds drift into the hills – distant motor mowers, passing cars and the barking of impatient dogs itching for a walk.

Higher up, the vista widens, revealing red-bottomed boats flung along the stony beach, and craggy little Mākaro, an easy kayak distance from the shore. Further on still, Matiu, basking like an ancient tuatara, reflects on its troubled history. Turning south the bush closes in as I cross the ridge through a tunnel of low beech trees and ferns – dark, damp, mysterious, splashes of sunlight dappling the leaf-carpeted path. To the east, the bush-clad valleys roll away towards Wainuiomata and the Ōrongorongo Hills. Tūi squabble in the trees and piwakawaka squeak shyly, while the wail of the 1pm fire siren reminds me the village is not far away.

Meandering westwards, the track suddenly opens out to a broad sweep of the harbour, the sea gleaming like silver along the edge of the bush and towards the Hutt Valley. Another twist in the path and Tapuae-o-Uenuku and the Kaikōura Ranges appear like a Sunday school cut-out pressed onto blue felt. An Interislander ferry glides serenely through the harbour mouth, heading to the safety of the port. A hillside, tumbling to the shoreline, wears a cloak of gorse, its bush cover burnt away some years ago by a carelessly or deliberately thrown cigarette. The sounds change now, bird song smothered in the roar of the surf. A bus revs its engine, readying for the next trip to Wellington, while gulls cry and oyster catchers chatter excitedly as they patrol the foreshore. The sweet smell of the gorse is lost in the sea's sharp tang and ghosts of the once colourful council house community - their sturdy homes cleared to lower debt and usher in the wealthy - still hover in the salt-laden air.

A lively northerly breeze buffets me as I head home along the promenade now, past David's memorial seat at the entrance to Greenwood Park, and my meditation hour reaches its end.

Published in Eastbourne: An Anthology, Mākaro Press, 2014

Debby McColl

Kaumatua Tramping Club member
Point Howard resident



Fig 49. Debby McColl, *Point Howard Bush Track*, 2022.

From the age of five, I grew up in the northern forest of East Harbour Regional Park. We lived up on the hill in Eastbourne, and much of my childhood was spent playing in the forest. We had a gorgeous old Kānuka tree which we used as a sailing ship, and in the pine trees bordering on the park we built forts, sped down the pine needles on sleds, and collected pinecones.

Possums were regular visitors to our garden, and my dad invented great stories about them. We also encountered pigs on our road – my sister and I have never run so fast! The smell of karaka berries instantly throws me back to those wonderful days of free roaming. The forest was our playground, and I have lived almost all my life close to it.

The forest has given me a sense of freedom and peace. A sense of wonder. And on a stormy day up on the ridge, a kind of fear – will a tree be blown down on me? It has taught me to respect our flora and fauna.

My favourite places are up on the ridge track and down in Gollans stream. I am always amazed at the beauty on our doorstep, and at how close we are to a major city and yet I feel a million miles from the crazy world. I always have a sense of adventure, but at the same time, I have a sense of happiness and peace. I hope the trees know I mean them no harm. I do talk to some of them, and often touch them, so yes, I think they know I am there.

I hope the forest continues to recover from the ravages of the past. I have seen fires in the forest, that really broke my heart. All the damage we have allowed- farming, deer, pigs, possum and other pests - I really hope we can stop all that. But I would also love to see the ridge track extended all the way to the coast – it would make for a stunning tramp through spectacular forest with amazing views.

*Not mistletoe and holly
to ward off melancholy*

*carols in the chapel
plum pudding and crabapple
but to camp for a week
by a mountain creek
with fresh taken trout
and tinned pears to eat
with tea boiled in a billy
and the morepork in the gully.*

A Christmas Wish by James. K. Baxter

Rob McColl

Kaumatua Tramping Club member
Formerly worked at Department of Conservation
Point Howard resident



Fig 50. Mandy Holmwood, *Gollans Valley*, 2022.

As a Point Howard resident, the Eastbourne Ridge and Gollans East Ridge are on my back door. I first became aware of Gollans Valley when I married into an Eastbourne family whose land backed onto the Eastbourne Ridge above the village. Visits there took place well before a track was beaten along the ridge. The sense of wilderness was much greater then, and Gollans Valley was a mysterious and remote location – and unbelievably close to NZ's capital city. People could and did get lost there, as the *Search and Rescue* history of our tramping club shows. There was little obvious evidence that people went there then. The closest to human intervention I saw then was a few sheets of corrugated iron near the *S Bend*.

Now things are very different – there are many pest management tracks and there is excellent access along most of the Eastbourne Ridge. The East Gollans Ridge is still relatively unused and feels more remote. It's easier to get lost up there, and there's a corresponding sense of danger. But there's a conundrum – what we gain by the wonderful access, we lose by the loss of remoteness and the joy of risk and challenge. I have camped there and have enjoyed the night experience – the day birds quieten down and the moreporks take

over. The birds of the forest are wonderful in the daytime and there is a possibility of seeing or hearing the falcons.

The forest presents many tramping challenges - the going can be hard and it's easy to notch up a nine-hour day if you choose a difficult route. The beauty of the forest, especially along the stream, is wonderful and joyous, and the stream itself, descending through small gorges, is a delight. And, of course, the part of any trip that stands out is the camaraderie – helping someone through the tricky bits or relying on others to help you, and the combined knowledge of the trip members to navigate and remember features or landmarks.

Here's a poem I wrote during Covid to capture this:

COVID -19 BLUES

I'm grumpy as, and trapped inside

My weekly tramp has been denied

Jacinda's told us loud and clear

That I'm not getting out of here

My muscles slowly lose their ton

I'm sitting reading books at home

I'm feeling like a useless oldie

My tramping boots are going mouldy

Outside it's quiet, the birds are bolder

My world's gone dead, I feel much older

I crave the tracks, the forest trees

But lockdown means there's none of these

Mass media drives me round the bend

I'd swap it all for just one friend

To sit and chat with over a brew

Or have a laugh and a drink or two

Life has stopped for a pesky virus

When what we need is a tramp to tire us

Some company to cheer us up

And to rest by the track with a steaming cup.

Rob McColl, May 2020

[Published in the May 2020 KTC Newsletter and the KTC 60th Anniversary Publication].

Navigation is the skill that gives humans the ability to know where they are in a hostile environment. Pathways and maps help, but without these there are significant dangers. Recorded routes allow us to revisit special places and give us a sense of security. My favourite place is on East Ridge above Butterfly Creek picnic area. The views from here are stunning, but at the same time you are on private land. You know from the map that the track – if you were allowed on it - would take you down to Baring Head. What a trip that would be! It maddens me that private ownership is so brutally repressive in NZ. I was born in UK in a countryside criss-crossed with footpaths – I get angry at what we are denied here in NZ by weak government and hostile landowners.

I have talked above of my feelings about nature. I will add that I try to care for nature, but I worry about the dichotomy between natives and pests. This is a very tricky question - perhaps one that will only be solved in the end by evolution towards a more balanced natural environment – a long journey. We have to think in centuries to understand nature.

Do the trees feel my presence? We know that trees feel the presence of other trees and we are starting to understand how. It's difficult, though, to see how trees could sense us. Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose spent much time on this question and showed electrical impulses were involved in plant protection mechanisms. We know that some plants will respond to human touch by closing their leaves. Other plants eat insects. We also know that when a caterpillar eats a plant, *elicitors* send chemical signals that enable the production of bitter compounds. I feel we need to keep an open mind on this. At the very least, by altering the climate we are affecting trees and they may well "sense" this – especially if they become unhealthy. I wonder as we tramp, whether they feel us treading on their roots – simple ethics suggest we should think about this and care for trees and living things.

Here's another of my poems that is perhaps relevant:

SCIENCE

*Come let us dance on pinheads
And ply our subtle art
And use our cold hard logic
To take the world apart.*

*How cleverly we lay it bare
And clear away the fog
To revel in the beauty
Of each component cog.*

*But here's a little problem
That's troubling my soul,
I want it all put back again,
I rather like it whole.*

Rob McColl, August 2001

I hope we will care for Nature in perpetuity, and we keep our footprint on it as light as possible. We must fight for forest growth and extension as regeneration expands its margins. Much regeneration is taking place on lands to the south of Eastbourne. We must hope that we will not see that halted by farmers attempting to reconvert it by burning. At the same time, we need to sort out public access to such regenerating forests. As so often happens, good government lags behind and our institutions fail us. The enemy is our lack of foresight and wisdom and the leadership needed to change things.

Jane-Pyar Mautner

MIRO trapping and Baring Head volunteer



Fig 51. Jane Pyar, *Gollans Stream*, 2022.

East Harbour Regional Park is my lungs; it is vital. Enveloped in bush-clad hillsides and valleys, it stirs my heartbeat, broadens my vision, and soothes my being.

First memories go back to playing in the bush in the 1950s growing up at Point Howard. We'd find connection with ancestry as we swung in supplejack, built forts, ran up and down steep banks and lurched into forgiving undergrowth. A friendly and timeless space. Then I'd accompany my father walking the tracks behind Eastbourne passing regenerating native bush and gorse. On these occasions, his role was to empty the rubbish bins, a voluntary task shared amongst the local community. I remember his long rubber gloves up to his armpits; I remember them disappearing into the deep bins in Butterfly Creek picnic area. I remember his eager naming of the native plants as we stopped to admire. He insisted on naming them in Latin, Te Reo and plain English. Although grateful now a lot has rubbed off, this verbosity of knowledge was, for me at the time, a disturbance to my experience of euphoric wonder at the dancing sunlight, the sounds of insects (mostly cicadas) and endless textures and tones of green.

The bush gives me joy, energy, and peace. It is where things make sense, where I feel connected and there is natural balance. Walking gives a good workout over stumps and up and down hillsides. I go off-track for solitude and adventure, using a tracing app so as not to have-to stay out unprepared overnight. I unashamedly hug a tree where no-one can see. I love to feel my body connect to it and on a windy day feel how it gives to the airflow and moves with its rhythm while remaining deeply rooted in the earth. They feel noble beings, connected to each other through their labyrinths of roots, sharing their environment, as well as competing for space and sunlight. Not one is better than the other, each unique and beautiful. A giant rata does not say: "I am better than you!" to a kawa kawa, just because it reaches higher into the canopy!

I have many favourite places in the park. Gollans valley in the summer is special. It feels ancient; as if a Stegosaurus will appear and join me for lunch amongst the nikau palms and lush ferns, and soft green mosses beside the meandering stream under a towering, protective canopy. Then, old Muritai track is always good to wander, either to meet and chat with fellow appreciative folk or when no-one else is around. It offers natural foot holds and requires attention while the established native bush attracts plenty of birdlife. Halfway

up, I have enjoyed a long eye-contact session with a young ruru in the middle of the day. His focus was admirable with the distraction of piwakawaka flitting by and grey warblers' calls.

Walking over Hawtrey is another favourite. The track is natural and the birdlife plentiful there too. In summer, young kāeaea hoon overhead with their threatening squawks like typical teenagers. Also, in summer, Middle Ridge, and all the ridges and spurs, offer intoxicating fragrance from masses of abundant *Earina autumnalis*. They seem to flower slightly earlier here than in the Tararua Ranges. The rata stand out when they set the hillside ablaze with their burnt orange-red flower in the right season, and rangiora make their presence felt when their tiny white blooms emit sweet fragrance in the summer air. The bush is full of much abundance.

I think trees' feelings are not feelings as we humans experience. I understand they have a nervous system that senses conditions that effect their well-being and survival. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that trees tremble when they hear a chainsaw felling another tree nearby. I understand also they share water and sustenance so that a tree at the bottom of a slope where the water is abundant will share through its roots with the trees at the top of a slope. It would be nice if my presence and anyone else's who appreciates the bush, helps enhance the well-being of trees.

I hope there will never be a fire. I hope there will never be mass residential development, tunnelling or roading. I hope kiwi will soon be introduced and will flourish. I hope native birds will continue to increase and predators be controlled. Dogs be kept to specific areas on a lead so that kiwi and other walkers may relax in the park without the possibility of an unwelcome canine encounter. If these outcomes require a predator-free fence to achieve them, then I'd support such a project whole-heartedly.

AUTUMN

*Speckled autumn sunlight
Dances through the bush,
A gentle southerly wind
Whispers its presence
Creating ripples on an
Otherwise glassy harbour*

*The air is crisp where
The sun's rays
Have not yet penetrated,
Rays that still hold
A taste of summer's
Warmth*

*Drops of dew glisten
A reminder of night's cool,
Birds sing with joyful abandon
Each voice uttering
Sounds unto itself
Connecting in symphony*

by Jane-Pyar Mautner 29.03.21

Gary James

Wainuiomata Natural Heritage Trust



Fig 52. Mandy Holmwood, *Koromako Track Ferry Road*, 2022

I enjoy recreational walks through the northern forest of East Harbour Regional Park. I have found that it provides exercise with significant views, and it is a relaxing place with great scenic value.

The mature trees have a power of their own, bringing a life force that envelops one and drains away the stresses of life.

I suppose my favourite place in the forest is the high areas with great views that provide a feeling of isolation but you are close to civilisation and you feel that with the view you are part of the world.

I think the forest has a life force as all trees communicate with each other on a cellular level, and fungi as well. I think the trees provide us with a sense of well being.

I hope that we can protect the forest by eliminating all the animals and weed plant species that threaten it.

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