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# TIME TRAVEL & THE INVISIBLE BODY

Pattern-making, painting & mauri in the Anthropocene

**Benjamin Buchanan**



## Contents

Introduction.....	I
Recent history.....	6
The first works.....	10
Methodology .....	15
Background .....	18
Foreground .....	22
Pattern making .....	24
Where are we now? .....	25
Pure space .....	28
Time travel .....	33
Natural pills/nature(s) .....	37
The invisible body .....	44
Works cited .....	53
Acknowledgements .....	55



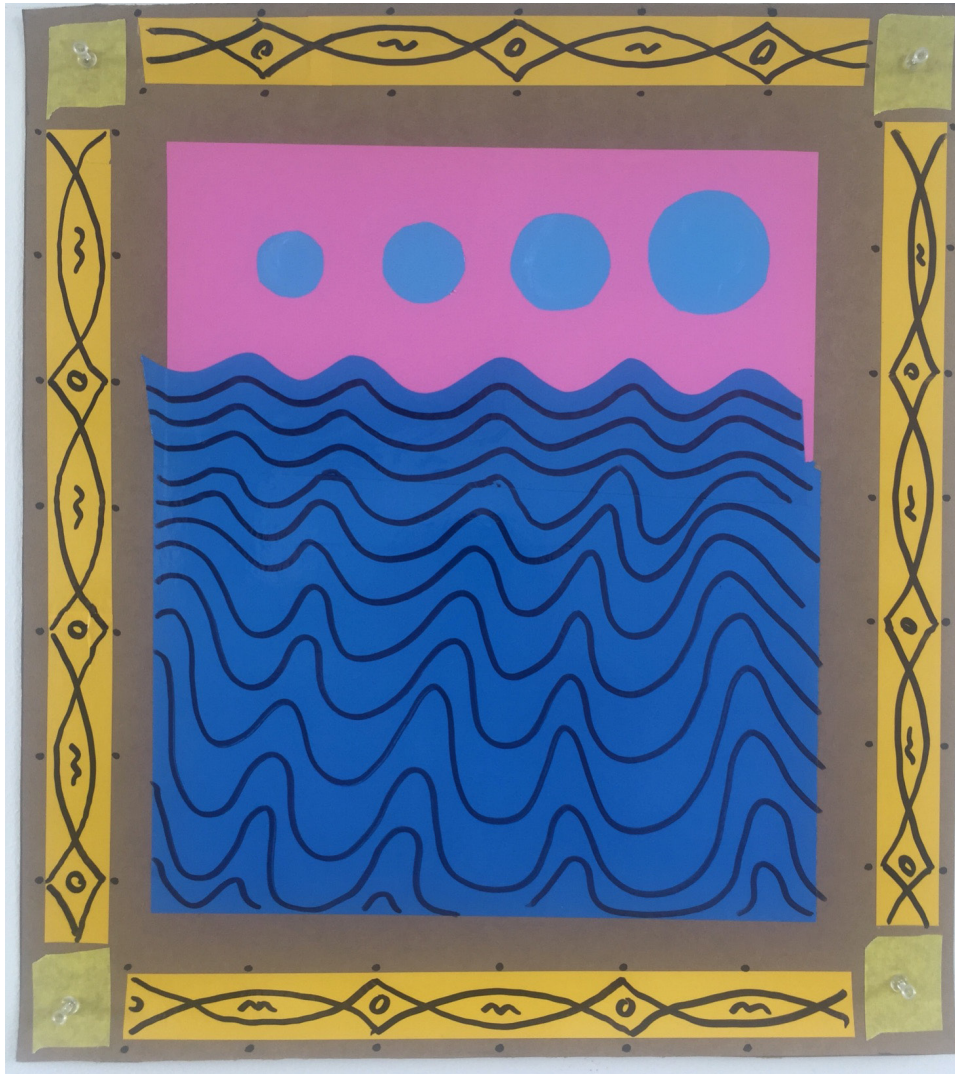
# Introduction

This exegesis parallels and explores my studio practice which primarily includes painted and collaged works on paper and canvases. I have been engaging with ideas around both 'pattern-making' and 'abstraction'. More recently a new element has come into play, potentially best described as illustration. This has opened up new possibilities for incorporating narrative and nuance into the work.

My main impetus for writing is related to 'criticism'. This criticism has been focused on popular culture. I have engaged in critical commentary on a regular basis via social media. While it's good to be able to locate what inspires you, it can also be helpful to recognise what you don't like, even what you might find antagonising. Here I ask myself: what do I find problematic about contemporary culture? And as a person engaging with cultural production, how do I best communicate this? On a more direct and personal level, my recent paintings have functioned simultaneously as a place for critique and for reflecting upon what I love and am inspired by. My paintings materialise the things that I want to see, but that are absent around me. The paintings that I make are my friends, they have personalities and a relationship to one another. I like some better than others, but each has its own currency or relevance. They are objects which I think might look interesting and engaging. They may have a strange magnetic quality. They are a personal response to the world, they contain mauri and might even be beautiful. There is a celebration happening in the making of the work. They also provide a space to negotiate antagonisms, create subtlety and add something new to the world.



*Untitled, 2021*



*Untitled, 2021*

Here I will use the concept of time travel, and consider the past two years' work, contextualising it within some specific aspects of my broader practice. I will also use this concept as a way of making sense of my own view of recent art histories. How does the historical change when viewed through a contemporary lens? I will take a look at Modernist moments, alongside the Postmodern and ask where are we now? Is it the post-internet era, or is it the Anthropocene that is really making changes, and transforming things. Is Postmodernism just another Modernism? Time travel allows us to imagine art history as more than a linear chronology. In my view, it also encompasses Indigenous views of circular time. I look at my iwi affiliations to Te Ati Awa and Taranaki and propose that this presents the possibility of mauri in the work. Pukeahu, where Massey University stands, is a significant site in terms of my Whakapapa. I will look at how working inside my ancestral rohe has influenced my work.

To introduce myself, I will go over some personal recent history. This will outline my broader context as an artist. Following that, I will share ideas around my methodology. How and why is the process relevant? What ideas and attitudes are reflected in the making of the work? Succeeding that I will take a closer look at my identity as a white person with Māori whakapapa. I will argue that this gives me access to something entirely unique to Aotearoa, and that we, as people in New Zealand, have an important and interesting view in global terms. Along the way I will point out affinities with New Zealand artist's Ralph Hotere and Tom Kreisler. I will ask, where are we now? And share ideas around art historical moments. Following that, I will move into my main areas of concern. Which I have titled, Pattern Making, Pure Space, Time Travel, Natural Pills and the Invisible Body. These sections reflect my primary intellectual interests and provide an opportunity for some artistic writing. I take a closer look at responsibilities of the individual, and of the community and relate this to life in the Anthropocene. Before

concluding, I reflect on collaborative potential and practice; and how my work exists beyond a picture frame and that my approach to making can exist anywhere.

Ideas around mauri are important in my practice. It is not mauri because I do not want to suggest it is part of a foreign language, or a foreign concept here in Aotearoa. Mauri is present in all living things, which can be extended to communities and ecosystems. It can also be present in objects, which means it can exist within a painting.

Within a Māori ontological frame, all beings and objects are experienced as having mana, a form of presence and authority, and a vigour, impetus and potentiality called mauri... Terms such as mauri and mana name the interconnectivity of the human and non-human worlds. —Hoskins, Jones, 52

## Recent history

With the commencement of this MFA, I began building from an established art practice spanning twenty years. My re-engagement with art education has opened a space where I can more easily talk and write about my practice. It has also opened a space to contribute to critical discussion amongst my colleagues, and activate collaboration. Conversation has been an important part of this learning experience. As part of the “Flat Earthers” project, I have contributed critical texts to an online publication and performed readings and lectures in and outside of this institution.

As an artist I have also been involved in musical projects, where I have collaborated with friends and whānau as a concept creator and vocalist. Both of these avenues led to engagement with artistic communities abroad. Musically this has involved performances in Europe and the United States. These musical projects have looked at ‘genre’ as material and the potential for a person’s context and/or identity to be as much a musical instrument as drums, bass or vocals. Much like my painting practice, musical projects provide an opportunity to challenge and twist genre norms. They create a space for interesting hybridisation. I have also shared my practice with arts focused communities in Beijing and Bangalore. These have been amazing and satisfying experiences. These residencies gave me direct experience with art production outside of the Western paradigm and have been an invaluable influence on my worldview and the way I think about art.

Those experiences, along with being a student, have provided times where I can work as an artist in a full-time capacity. However, the

struggle to maintain an art practice in our late capitalist reality has also informed my artwork. I have found myself in situations where it has become nearly impossible to create artworks. I could perhaps attribute this, in part, to what Mark Fisher describes as 'Capitalist Realism'. I have had to fight, both to maintain an art practice and for my mental health. A life outside the mainstream can be difficult, Capital does not value creativity that has no immediate monetary value. "The most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labour is ours, and the zombies it makes are us." (Fisher, 15) So it is in this reality that I re-engage with my practice. And make a space outside of the dominant discourse where I can enjoy the personal benefits of art making, a space where I can share, communicate and collaborate with my community.

Here is the moment to point out my position as someone who sees equal value on all levels of cultural production. That inspiration and relevance are not confined to things inside the 'high art' paradigm and that, in fact, I find it necessary to engage on multiple levels. For example, the cover art of an eighties metal album has the same cultural currency for me as a reproduction of a Renaissance masterpiece in an art history book. It is here that I find resonance with two contemporary art writers, Mark Fisher and Timothy Morton, both of whom weave references into their writing from outside the art and philosophical realms. I will take a closer look at some of their writing, along with 'post humanist' texts as I position my work in relation to these ideas.



*Plastic bag w Wand, part 1, 2019*

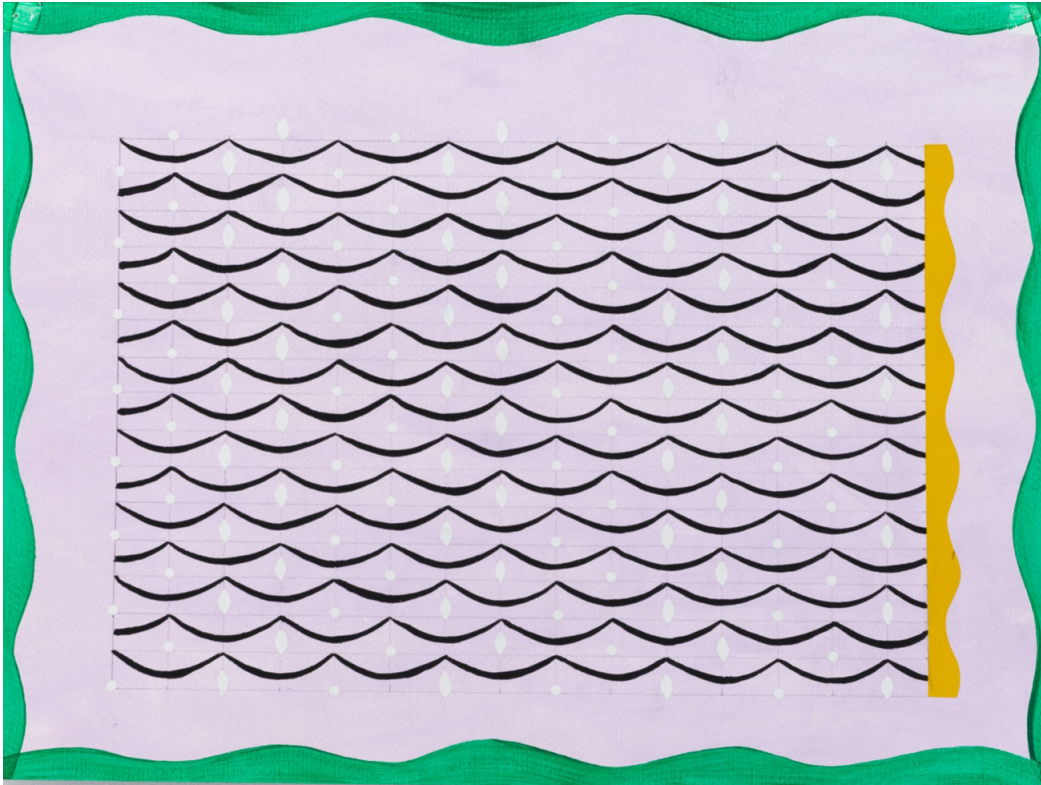


*Plastic bag w Wand, part 2, 2019*

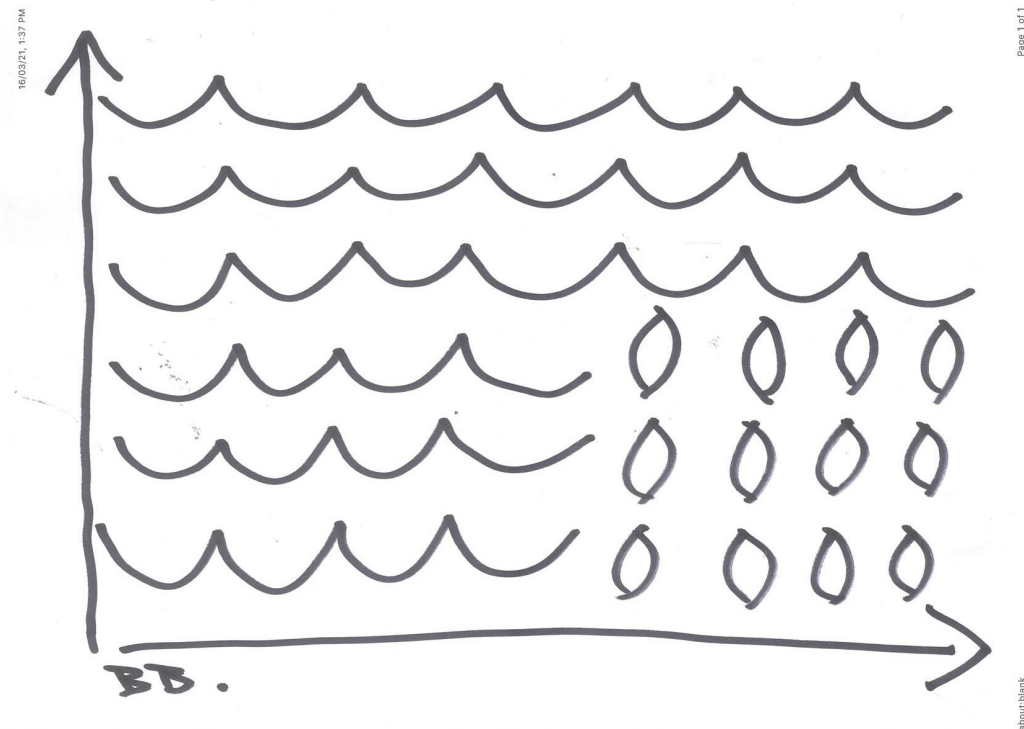
## The first works

To begin making work inside the masters program, I focused on pattern making. That is to say using a familiar system where I find a starting point on the surface and repeat it from there. Repeating the same line, or mark is also an act towards virtuosity in the making of the work. A space where technical proficiency can be improved. This way of making transcends compositional concerns and creates a meditative space for production. These works used a very simple scallop line. This mark can be joined in various ways. Here they make up the wavy line that a child might draw to represent the ocean. Switched around this mark can represent the shape of a typical leaf. I have arranged this drawing into a graph, often the visual formatting of science, the collection of data, used to illustrate many things, including changes in weather temperature. The drawing also evokes the (upside down) pattern of an American flag. The stars and stripes of American imperialism have been replaced with simple representations of the ocean and the trees, the environment. A flag for the non-human world. The stars and stripes are coded with a righteous authoritarianism, one that is inextricably linked to capitalism. “The relationship between capitalism and eco disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental; capital needs a constantly expanding market, its ‘growth fetish’ means that capitalism by its very nature is opposed to any notion of sustainability.” (Fisher, 18)

With this flag drawing and other works, I am thinking about the complexities of responding to life in the Anthropocene. Where do we make a difference? Corporate, extractive capitalism is busy telling us that we need to behave responsibly as individuals to positively affect the planet, or turn



*Untitled, 2019*



*Flag drawing, 2019*

the tide. Likewise, green- focused businesses seem to be selling the same idea; the notion that your purchase of a ‘green’ product is a caring act on your behalf. The producer/consumer dynamic though, remains exactly the same. There is no radical change at all, just new marketing techniques. The reality is that some people are much more responsible for the crisis than others. These flag works look at the political implications, for the individual and for the community. Where does the responsibility really lie? If the world ends, is it because I flicked a cigarette into the gutter? Some people have more power than others, private corporations and governments for example. Interestingly, in the Trump era, the fossil fuel industry has been able to adopt the ideologies of conservative Christianity. This creates a strange dichotomy where active degradation of the global environment can be masked as God’s work. It reaffirms Fisher’s notion that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” (Fisher 1) The powerful entities which benefit need to present their exploits as essential. For example, fracking and mining is vital to the wellbeing of those employed in that industry. And those opposing this are simply the enemy of working people. Elitists with strange agendas. We can see the paranoia surrounding these contemporary developments via the conspiracy theories of the climate change denier.

Early in my MFA studies I created a group of works referencing artists Theo Schoon and Gordon Walters, and their trips to South Island rock carvings. Locations where Schoon infamously inserted his own signature into the sacred sites. My works examine a naivety that is evident when viewing these works today. A lack of cultural understanding becomes very apparent. The enthusiasm for engaging in things outside Western culture does not justify blind cultural imperialism. We can see an illustrative and comedic aspect in this collage. I could imagine Schoon setting off into the wilderness to make a great discovery to share with his fellow (white) man. I could perhaps make a joke about this. Therefore, it is here that I integrate



*Rock art part 1,*  
2019



*Rock art part 2,*  
2019

illustration into the work. Or perhaps even the aspect of a cartoon, which is often associated with joke telling. The addition of drawn/painted black lines is a new element in my work. These objects move into the abstract and patterned space and create more possible readings. This also references my interest in artists such as Jim Woodring and Dennis Worden. Artists whose cartoons I was enjoying at the same time as learning about eighties Postmodernism. During a short stint as a high school student at Hamilton's Fairfield College, I had access to the local independent comic store as well as the Chartwell Collection gallery. A trip into town would often involve visiting both sites, gaining equal inspiration from both places.

# Methodology

Here I will take some time here to talk about the way I make work, and my process. I explore the particular ways that my methodology relates to the ideas in the work and how I find similarities when looking at other artists and different forms of cultural production. While my works involve some very deliberate and careful mark making, they also maintain a casual vibe. However, there is a system of making. I could describe this system as being idiosyncratic. The system has loopholes; I can bend and corrupt it to suit. The systems that are used to make the work follow similarities (repetition, scale and tonal shifts) but are often evolving and looking toward an idea of innovation in terms of how the work is made. I am not looking for a perfect prescription to be endlessly repeated. The method of making can be applied in both intimate and monumental scales. What exists or is created inside the framework of the system can be spontaneous and improvised. I have ways of making, inside a format, that still allow for a surprise. The works have a basic plan but are not planned. A sort of *sprezzatura*. They engage in a formula but reject the idea of perfection in a formulaic sense. This casual approach points to my interest in humour; I like the possibility of introducing jokes within the work. It is more important to me than formal concerns such as composition, or making a meaning within the work. There is no fixed message. Why shut down possibilities? I am not interested in static ideology or aesthetics. I aim for the work to be open, filled with potential and perhaps, to be, funny. Here I am reminded of the work of New Zealand painter Tom Kreisler.



*cigarettes w prism, part 1, 2019*

The humour and lightness of Kreisler's art have to do with it being thus up in the air: as to meaning, it is only loosely, hypothetically secured. It makes fun of all that is systematically weighed down or authoritatively anchored in place, re-presenting it as open to revision and rearrangement.  
— Curnow, 21



*cigarettes w prism, part 2, 2019*

## Background

Being a middle child within a large Catholic family, growing up in various communities around the North Island has unsurprisingly, shaped my views of both art, and the world. Home presented a predominantly Pākehā reality, but with a Māori dad, a hybrid existence. This was reflected in how I perceived life in the places I grew up, mainly Pākehā, but with Māori stuff happening. Like many from my Grandmother's generation there was a separation from core Māori customs. Te Reo and Marae protocol for example. However, a sense of 'maoriness' remained in the whānau. This is evident in our interests and the people we have surrounded ourselves with. My Grandmother, Rawinia Queenie, seemed very focused on positive futures and assimilation with modern 60s Pākehā culture, and affirmed her tūrangawaewae working for the New Zealand Rugby Union on Wellington's Lambton Quay. A modern woman who would travel abroad, become worldly and bring up her only son to be a doctor. This leads me to ask, what happens to a Pākehā culture when it is embraced by Māori? Does it then become part of a Māori culture? My Grandmother was brought up in a space in Johnsonville where Māori who were displaced from Te Aro pā were housed. She spent her life in and around Wellington and the Kapiti coast. She spoke te reo, but did not see the value in passing this on while getting on with the business of the new New Zealand.

We whakapapa to Te Aro pā here in Whanganui-a-Tara, and to Taranaki and Te Āti Awa iwi. Having lived between Taranaki and Wellington, this all feels pretty normal. This is our shared rohe. It's amazing to imagine some of my ancestors were in conversation with Te Whiti o Rongomai

and Tohu Kākahi. Two radical thinkers and humanitarians whose peaceful protest, at Parihaka, completely baffled the invaders; entirely too sophisticated to be considered properly by the Queen's army. It's also realistic to imagine some of my ancestors were among those invaders of Parihaka who imprisoned innocent people and laughed at the protest of children, who under instruction from their elders symbolically built fences around Parihaka with sticks and twigs. I feel a part of both cultures, which also does not strike me as unusual. I would like to acknowledge that my white skin makes me privileged, while also acknowledging that this privilege has not been extended to every member of my whānau. I have siblings of the same parents who have not passed as white. While not being immediately identifiable as Māori, they have lived a reality where they are 'not quite white'. I lack formal understanding of Tikanga Māori, but Whakapapa remains. It is immovable.

Whakapapa means that everything is connected through shared networks and processes of creative becoming. Mauri, or striving to persevere in being, is the animating force of all being and becoming. This vitality continually grows and unfolds as reciprocal relationships become increasingly complex and rich in mana or dignity. — Bignall, Rigney, 162

Via this Whakapapa, which strongly connects my heart to this land I am interested in the potential for the work to hold 'mauri'. Mine is a Māori world view, however fractured or disconnected it may be. But still, like my ancestors who were living here on Pukeahu before me, we are still here, living, working, thinking.



*Twigging 1, 2020*



*Twigging 1, 2020*

## Foreground

In the front of my mind right now is the opening of Te Rau Karamu Marae on Pukeahu here at Massey University. It opened at dawn on March 27th and I was lucky enough to attend with some whānau. As descendants of Te Aro pā it was a special moment for us, as I am sure it was for all the Te Āti Awa and Taranaki people there, along with others, bringing the space to life with speech and waiata. It felt as though Te Aro pā, which is literally buried under our modern city, had reappeared. Named Te Rau Karamu Marae, it is a contemporary reflection of Te Ao Māori in Wellington. Describing it as ‘next level’ is an appropriate description. Contemporary Māori art adorns the walls, looking forward and backwards in time, while reflecting current moments, or generational influence. This shows me the wide breadth of influence in current Māori art. A Marae at an art school is a very good idea, or is it the other way around? Either way, it’s awesome.

There are sad and traumatic events that occurred here, there are also people of Te Āti Awa and Taranaki living and thriving here. Right now, I am celebrating being able to work here on Pukeahu and have this special connection to the place. Moving through the War Memorial Park I am reminded every day of the way this ancestral land is framed, as a war memorial. There are a bunch of sculptures, some are good, some not so much. They all refer to the War. These memorials, while containing sadness, also present patriotism. There is no mystery to them as art works, the appropriate response is sombre reflection, which can be commonly seen in the visitors to the park. A teary-eyed pride, an acceptable display of empathy and sensitivity. Māori artist Darcy Nicholls’ sculpture is different.

It does not symbolise “the great war” that happened abroad. It represents the prisoners of Parihaka who were kept but ten metres from where the sculpture stands today, in the brick building on the corner. The old cop shop. It is a dark sculpture, a seemingly empty hooded Māori cloak, a ghostly figure, presenting loss and trauma. It is a sad moment amongst the other monuments. And, perhaps a successful artwork in this way. I feel that much Māori art is often understood through trauma. That this stress and upheaval is seen as a necessary component of Māori art. There is an accumulation of microaggressions happening here. What would it feel like if there was an artwork or monument celebrating the revolutionary thinking of Te Whiti and Tohu. Two men who basically invented peaceful protest. Before Gandhi. So I am giving myself a space to recognise that trauma can be genetic, but that joy and celebration are also possible.

## Pattern making

My interest in pattern making exists as something that presses against dominant ideas of abstraction. It challenges the machismo that 20th Century Modernist abstraction became synonymous with, along with the uninformed notion that making patterns is a lesser form of art. Pattern and abstraction, for me, inhabit an environment of equilibrium. The term 'pattern-making' also points to identifying systems of things. What is a familiar pattern in the systems that have contributed to our reality in the Anthropocene? The pattern of capitalism, the pattern of exploitation. Figures are absent in my paintings. My main interests are 'abstraction' and 'pattern-making'. I make an association with 'abstraction' as a western concern, and 'pattern-making' as relating to Indigeneity. The patterns in my work could be seen as similar to tukutuku panels. They are also similar to the manawa line which runs through kōwhaiwhai work. My referencing of these traditions reflects the fluid way in which mauri shifts into new spaces. The pattern of Māori culture, that remains allegiant and resilient. The shapes in these paintings can also be reminiscent of modernist abstraction. In my work these ideas exist side by side, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes not. Pattern making can also be associated with craft, which in a Western sense is often associated with femininity. Strangely and unfortunately, both pattern making and craft have been considered 'lesser' as modes of production in the dominant canon. I would like to suggest a sense of equivalence of these modes within my own practice.

## Where are we now?

Here I would like to consider where we are now, as a culture, inside a broader art historical context. I am interested in both Modernism and Postmodernism, however I don't see Postmodernism as being the radical departure that it has pretended to be. To me, it is another Modernism, still bound by a myopic worldview, the lens of the West. It does not seem able to escape a central authority. It did, however, usher in an era of cynicism. Its most potent traits are cynicism and irony. These became almost essential modes for cultural production, while laughing at the earnest self expression of Modernism. I embrace both of these ideas, I don't think it's embarrassing or a cliché to engage emotionally in the making of an art work. In fact, for me, it is a fantastic possibility. Also, I am more than fine with taking the piss out of something, it can be fun. As a member of generation x it is almost a right of passage.

I felt for a minute that for things to change, irony should go away. But in the Anthropocene it has not gone anywhere, "Irony is the aesthetic exploitation of gaps. Irony means that more than one thing is in the vicinity. Irony is the echo of a mysterious presence. For there to be irony, something must already be there." (Morton, 173) Is the 'echo of a mysterious presence' the echo of Modernist spirituality? The other things in 'the vicinity' I would say are what Morton calls 'hyperobjects', most simply explained as things that we have added to the environment and atmosphere. Plastic straws for example. "So, strangely irony has not gone anywhere, but has increased in potency and poignancy. Irony has lost its 'postmodern' / 'late modern' edge." (Morton, 173) Perhaps it is the

‘Post-Human’ era that is the real radical change. “Hyperobjects have done what two and a half decades of postmodernism failed to do, remove humans from the center of their conceptual world.” (Morton, 181) This change is forced upon us by the enduring presence of ‘hyperobjects’ and the possibility of human extinction. Are we in a time where change is an essential part of our survival? How do we achieve this, when at the very centre of the crisis is the system we have prescribed to. Or the system that has been prescribed to us, by western imperialism.

Science itself becomes the emergency break that brings the adventure of modernism to a shuddering halt. — Morton, 21

Considering my ongoing interest in Modernism and its various impacts in and on New Zealand, it is Ralph Hotere’s work that is currently resonating the most with me. He is often quoted as saying he is ‘not a Māori artist’. Although this quote certainly does not define him entirely, it remains interesting. It meant he could make whatever he wanted, outside of Pākehā definitions. His apparent interest in Western Modernism has drilled into our cultural landscape and changed things. What may have not looked like ‘Māori art’ at the time of its making, has now filtered through our galleries and collections and definitely does look ‘Māori’ even though there is no *kōwhaiwhai*, there is *mauri*. He most definitely was a Māori artist. He was also a person in the world. A person who was interested in making non-figurative work. Someone who was able to evoke a sense of place and time through abstraction. Ralph Hotere’s ‘Māori Modernism’ is not conjuring the same space as a Rothko, or maybe it is? I would say they both present mystical spaces or ways of being, but the context has completely shifted, the potential has changed. His Art, when made, was not necessarily understood or seen as ‘Māori art’. Travel forward in time to 2021 and it’s inescapably

Māori Art, by doing what he wanted he has expanded the scope of what Māori Art can look like. Hotere's black windows and seemingly empty Modernist voids, generously opened a window into Te Ao Māori.

I have shared my background and cultural identity, this makes up part of my worldview and filters through all of the artwork here. I would like to further highlight my main areas of interest in art theory and how I relate these to my own practice. How do I position my work in the contemporary milieu, and what art historical moments are echoing through my work? In considering these reasonably large questions I would like to divide my ideas into four main areas. These areas of interest or categories are not autonomous, like my paintings themselves they have a relationship to one another. They are permeable, they have the potential to weave together, to create hybrids or remixes. They move between absurdity and clarification, making sense and not. Although they can contain symbolic significance, there is no one fixed meaning to be understood on an axiomatic level. The four areas are as follows:- Pure Space, Time Travel, Natural pill, and the Invisible Body.

## Pure Space

We are no longer poised on the edge of the abyss, contemplating its vastness while leaning on a walking stick... Instead like Wile E. Coyote in midair, we have discovered that we are already falling inside the abyss, which is not pure empty space. — Morton, 160

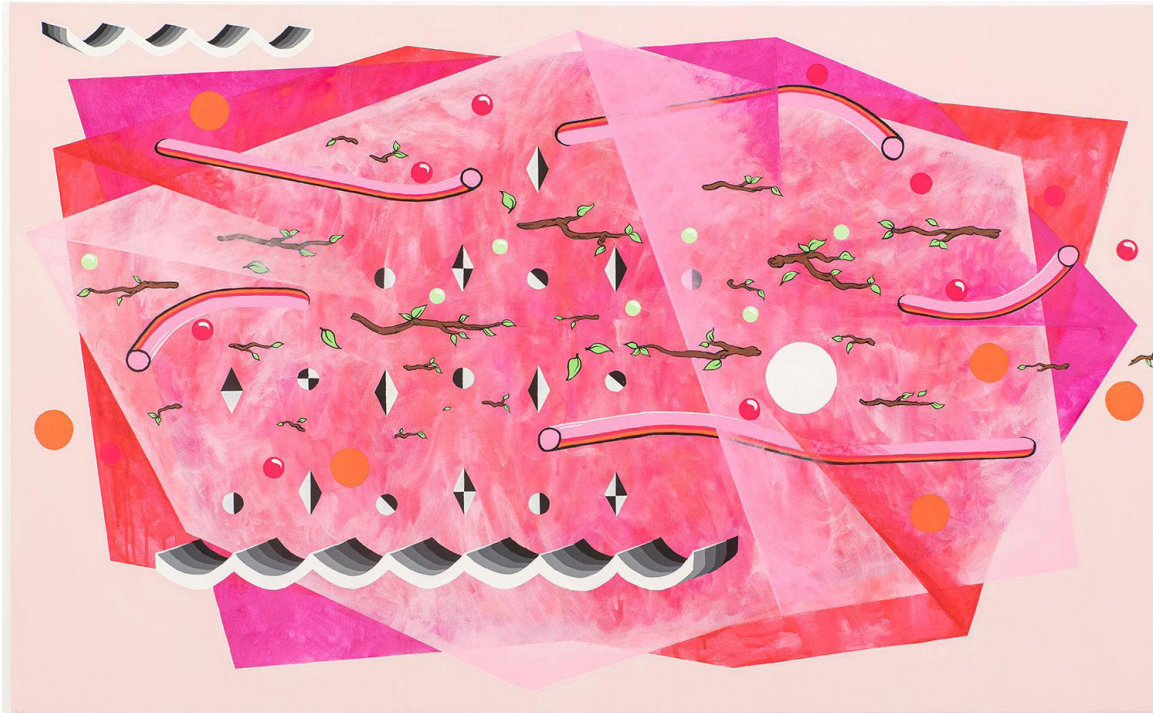
The space where art has existed has often claimed a purity and an emptiness, in that it is untouched by corruption. Art has been a place where humanity can present the best version of itself. A place to locate higher concerns, beyond the everyday and banal matters of human existence. This quality can be seen in figurative art of biblical and political content, and is also very present in abstraction. Malevich explains “The empty space where nothing is perceived but sensation.” (Clark, 274) Modernist abstraction is often associated with the spiritual. There is somehow an indication of the unfathomable, being present in the art, a holy spirit that exists in pure space. This has more to do with the structures around the art world, than any form of magic though. I think of the class and race hierarchies that propped up Modernism, for example. The art world, just like the mainstream, is also a space for graft, deception and the mundane.

Morton adds Wile E. Coyote to this space, a cartoon character, immediately changing the tone. The space is *not* pure and empty. It could be seen as the space that we find ourselves in. A corrupted space. A polluted atmosphere. A contemporary landscape. The Anthropocene. Our environment, like our cultural productions, has become corrupted. The quote suggests a shift from pompous contemplation to something else. We are falling inside

the abyss, we are inside the crisis, but is there outrage? Is there sadness or grief? Yes, of course there is. There is growing anxiety among many, as the patterns of our planet's weather systems abruptly change, to what would seem to be the most extreme possibilities. We are mourning a loss, and praying it's not too late to save the planet. But here in this quote we have a cartoon coyote, a funny character, A loveable villain and trickster. whom, despite his best efforts, always winds up in the same place. Suspended in midair before meeting his end, with just enough time to make eye contact with the viewer and offer a goofy 'I'm doomed!' look.

This attempt at comic relief may not be funny to everyone; it might be offensive, is it ill-timed and in bad taste? For me, this image set amongst contemporary and critical art theory offers some mitigation. Also it introduces something from popular culture into a philosophical realm. It is an affirmation that critique of contemporary culture can transcend good/bad taste binaries and that inspiration and relevance can be found at all levels of cultural production. A cartoon becomes a potent image for our moment in the Anthropocene. The quote also resonates with me because it makes room for critique inside a crisis. A space for contemplation on attitudes towards problems. It suggests that a one note-grief or outraged response may be pointless. It's an affirmation that the way we think affects the world. It points to the possibility, or even the necessity for art to create subtlety and engage individuals and communities with these complexities. Something beyond a citizen's arrest around recycling protocols. And something more than simply appreciating 'nature'.

To accept this focus would be to challenge those who think environmental politics has more to do with appreciating 'nature' than with revising ideas about 'progress', 'prosperity' and human flourishing. — Soper, 367



*the Disney-fication of Audio, part 1, 2020*



*the Disney-fication of Audio, part 2, 2020*

Morton suggests there has been a seismic shift that we did not notice. “The notion that we are living in a ‘world’ - one that we can call ‘nature’ – no longer applies in any meaningful sense, except as nostalgia or in the temporarily useful local language of pleas and petition” The platform we imagined to be viewing the tipping point from has disappeared. there is no longer a view; the tipping point is looking at us, it is all around and yet invisible. We are no longer looking into the eyes of Wile E Coyote, but sharing his moment of horror through his eyes. Where does the responsibility for the crisis lie? Is it the culture of capitalism? Is it the project of Western imperialism? “So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange.” (Fisher 13) We are feeling guilt about this, was it my generation who didn’t care enough? Is it my culture who is mainly responsible? Here, we find a guilt reaction, where we look outside of our corrupted culture, for something pure. Like, how white supremacists find resonance in Viking cultures.

To extend this idea let’s introduce Christian, the boyfriend of Dani. In Ari Aster’s contemporary ‘Horror’ film, ‘Midsommer’ the pair, along with their college friends travel to Scandinavia to celebrate a Pagan festival. Dani is struggling with American college life and looking for a more meaningful place in the community. The community in which the group visits has a close connection with the land and ancient ritual, a welcome relief from their capitalist reality as students in the states. Christian, the supportive boyfriend, eventually witnesses Dani’s initiation as ‘mayfair queen’ during an elaborate and joyful ceremony. However, his view of the event involves being in an unwanted heightened mental state, complete body paralysis and being sewn into the hollowed out carcass of a giant brown bear and eventually burnt alive. The community celebrates deliriously. Now imagine, we are inside the coyote, who is inside Christian, who is inside the bear. We look out in disbelief. We are now falling in a flaming abyss. Who is responsible now?

An ocean of ideologies clouds our vision. We point our fingers in all directions as gravity disappears.

*As your vision fades, the Monopoly man appears, strangely spritely for his old age, he waves a wand and performs a tap dance. Pink dolphins chatter with glee as they are directed through flaming hoops. The water levels rise, the flames intensify. Lime green cuttlefish squirt black goo in Amy eye, the body of Christ disappears into a fuzzy Rothko rectangle, yellow stars, pink hearts and green clovers circle above.*

# Time Travel

As journalist and historian James Gleick points out in his book *Time Travel: A History*, this concept has not always existed and is the outcome of relatively new forms of storytelling; manifesting through novels, comics, theatre, and cinema. Mainstream cinema has introduced ideas of time travel to a very wide audience. This invented concept is very much part of the fabric of our contemporary consciousness and is often presented through the sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres. I find the analysis of these genres to be a useful tool when making critiques of mainstream culture. The idea of time travel is also a helpful way for me to consider art historical moments. The moments or artworks that I am inspired by and vice versa the artworks that I feel antagonised by.

Time travel means I can engage in historical moments without being retrogressive or nostalgic. I can instead imagine the moments as still happening. Or, as contemporary Australian painter Elizabeth Newman states, while addressing her interest in the sixties,

One might describe it as a return to the past, and therefore ask why, and why now? But I think it would be incorrect to view history in that way, as only a chronological trajectory. Rather I think of those avant-garde moments as unfinished, as still going on now, continuous with the present. — Newman, 81

I am also suggesting that these concepts have existed, in a way, outside of Western storytelling devices, in Māoridom for a long time. In reality, there



*Metal Straws, part 1, 2020*



*Metal Straws, part 2, 2020*

is no machine to strap into, ignite, and travel through dimensions, but time travel is easy to achieve through our minds. When we imagine the creation of Malevich's painting *Black Square* (1915), we are, in a way, time travelling. I am interested in what happens to art works from the past when viewed through a contemporary lens; this idea also encompasses how perceptions around music and design moments change through time. Rather than taking a retrogressive approach, I aim to illuminate and critique. Here, I also want to challenge the western construct of linear time, or art historical presentations of a chronological end. This introduces concepts of Indigenous time. Te Maire Tau's text "I-nga-ra-o-mua" points out a radical difference in perceptions of time for Māori. The title of the text being "the phrase that Māori use when referring to their past. It means, 'the days that stand to the fore... The past then is seen as existing before oneself—which is a reference more to its place in the present than any idea of the future.'" (Tau, 46) The past is visible in our landscape, the future, then is metaphorically behind us, the direction we cannot see in.

This could be seen as Māori time travel. Within this document I use some creative writing devices perhaps similar to sci-fi or fantasy genres to further illuminate or dramatise a reading of my work. In many of my recent works, I have featured a tube-like shape. On a formal level this functions as a framing and compositional device, but it may also represent part of a 'hyperobject', a plastic straw. It could be a biopsy device, used to take a sample from within a body. It is purposefully nuanced. The work 'metal straws' simultaneously presents an interior and exterior world. Metal straws have been produced as an alternative to disposable plastic ones. But, ironically it presents a new danger; the possibility for the careless diner to become impaled by the device, and lose the ability to breathe. Also I can imagine it as a time tunnel that can be travelled through, bringing the past and future together inside the picture. The white shape, the plastic bag or the prism, are

imagined as transparent and in flux. They are, in part, a response to ideas of time as fabric, or dough. Time that can be folded or kneaded, as Steven Connor writes in “Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shape of Thought”. In the following image, I have intentionally used brushwork reminiscent of the Impressionist era, alongside cartoonish illustration, amongst echoes of Op Art. All of these things have their own contexts and histories. What happens when they intersect in 2021?

## Natural pill

Pills are often prescribed to fill in a gap; they make up for something which is missing; they even out a chemical imbalance. They pretend to be natural, but are not, they are human made. This is the same with nature; sometimes it is pretending to be natural. You will see a recurring motif through my works presented here—that of a leaf, or leaves, or sticks, branches and twigs. This is an obvious reference to ‘nature’. I am looking at this term as a construct, or various constructs. What is ‘nature’ in the Anthropocene and how are we responding to this radical shift in our environment? What is ‘nature’ in colonial terms? What is the relevance here in Aotearoa when we have mimicked a foreign nature? a central part of the colonisation process was to introduce species, flora and fauna from England. Which we know had a devastating effect on our native animal and plant life. Colonisation also accelerated agriculture, and was strangely able to deliver this activity as natural, even as a form of ‘nature’. This agriculture is one of the main contributors to the climate crisis. New Zealand actively promotes itself as clean and green on a world stage.

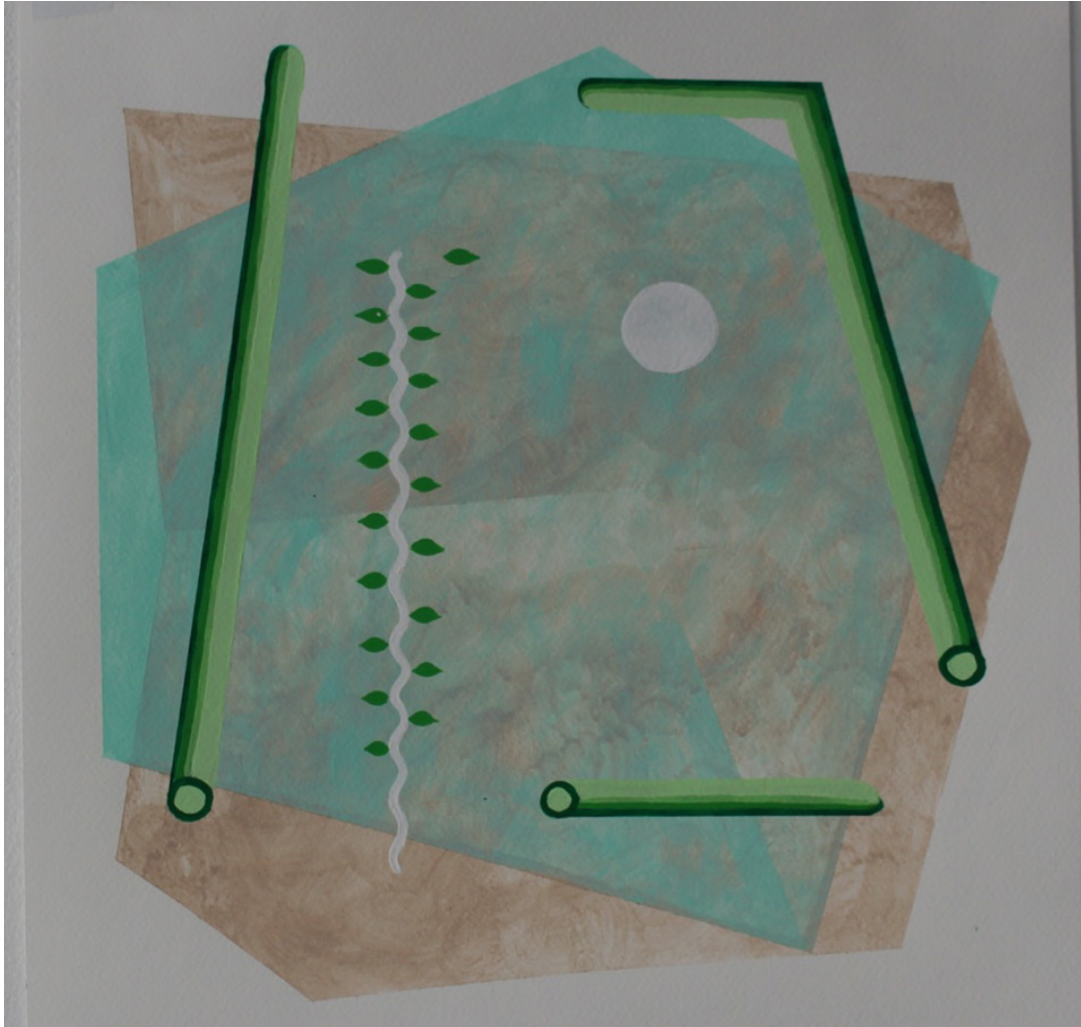
I am not interested in the Western nature/culture binary, but rather setting up visual cues where we might consider these current dynamics and tensions in new or different ways. And also to consider the lost nature that many New Zealanders now mourn. While I myself have imagined what the bird song may have sounded like many years ago, there is also something problematic about the response to this loss by Pākehā. Kate Soper would call this ‘nature endorsing’. “The hands off nature (nature endorsing) approach to conservation encouraged by the endorsing perspective has often proved too

ready to give preference to wilderness preservation for the eco-tourists over the welfare of Indigenous people.” (Soper, 365 ) While we investigate ways to improve our agriculture industry, there are things being forgotten, and are Māori being left out of this conversation. Again, here it is important to think about mauri. This quality is entirely specific to Aotearoa. It can be present in individuals, objects, social groups, and eco systems.

Continental posthumanism appears to ignore the prior existence of Indigenous knowledge of this kind. In a solipsistic gesture long typical of western imperialism, posthumanist theory at times risks the elision of Indigenous cultural and intellectual authority by remaining blind to the ancient presence and contemporary force of Indigenous concepts of human being. — Bignall, Rigney, 160

However positive the possible harnessing of Indigenous knowledge is, it is problematic to align Indigeneity as closer to nature than everything else. This has meant that tangata whenua have been excluded from some aspects of capital engagement. For example, at the time that Matiu/Somes island, in the Wellington harbour, was handed back to Te Āti Awa, it was a wildlife sanctuary. It still is. However a cousin casually said, “Well, we can build a casino there if we like”. Which is true. So why does this seem such an impossibility? His statement dramatically highlighted the double standard that exists here in Aotearoa when it comes to the capitalist pursuit of wealth. Who is allowed to pursue it, and how?

I would like to discuss what I see as ‘versions’ of nature. How these versions have permeated our current crisis. To look at what forms of nature have been privileged in the colonial project. And the problems around this. Perhaps what Soper would call ‘nature endorsing’ attitudes.



*Cubism w Plastic straws, 2020*



*Fruit bowl with Seagulls, 2019*



*Time Travel & the Invisible Body, 2020*

Seemingly, in Aotearoa we are currently stuck between two versions, 'old nature' and 'new nature'. There is a definite atmosphere of loss around our ancient forests and wildlife. I am often excited to hear what bird calls will be broadcast on our national radio, a daily event. The most heartbreaking would be that of a kaumātua impersonating from memory, the call of the extinct huia bird. This is a marked shift from colonial attitudes, but this new awareness or appreciation of ancient Aotearoa is embedded with Pākehā ideas of how nature should be used and appreciated.

'Old nature' in colonial terms is something to be feared. Colonial Christianity has linked it to paganism. Native trees that grow way too tall, scarily reaching into the sky, reaching back into the dark past. Tāne-mahuta, still stands in Northland. It is evidence of an ancient world, a world we still inhabit as tangata whenua. It is also evidence of a conquest, an oddity of the old world, left to stand alone. A kind of trophy of colonisation. A marvel of what once was. A moment of reflection, before we get on with the business of re-naturing nature.

It's in the way some things appear 'natural'... as if agriculture was Nature. The 'landscape' look of agriculture is the original 'greenwashing'. Objectors to wind farms are not saying 'Save the environment' but 'Leave our dreams undisturbed' World is an aesthetic construct that depends on things like underground oil and gas pipes. —Morton, 106

The 'new nature' is agriculture. In Aotearoa, this is mixed with what I would call Middle Earth nature'. A place where the very essence of the natural world becomes coded signifiers of colonisation and power structures. A fantasy, bound in a Biblical, xenophobic vision of the world. Christianity creeps through the ancient forest like a wizard, waving a magic wand. There is no cartoon zap or boomf. It is, instead, a slow burn. The hierarchies

of imperialism are reflected back at us through the appearance of the environment. The fields are framed with European trees set in a row. Agriculture becomes the only option. The degradation of the environment that it entails, acts as if it is simply a natural consequence. The hills have eyes, the rivers hide monsters. Crows and eagles pledge allegiance to metaphysical forces.

Indigenous peoples, just as European peoples did before and outside the dominance of science (the Enlightenment) and the church, engaged with an environment that was already formed by powerful and weak forces and objects, where human beings had to negotiate with a capricious, live natural world. —Hoskins, Jones, 52

## The invisible body

I am exploring abstraction, particularly in terms of the absence of the figure—the invisible body. What are the implications here? I am looking at the radical Modernist moment when this happened in Western art. What this departure from the representation of human form might mean, how has this permeated ideologies? And why do I see this moment as still relevant or, as still happening. We are still disappearing from our depictions of us, but can never escape our own hand, or body, or indeed, authorship.

What happens to the body when we time travel. What is this imagined space that we move through? In the painting titled “Time Travel & the Invisible Body” I imagine this space. This space cannot be separated from the idea of ‘pure space’ that I have talked about. Science has pushed us through space and time, but there is an element of mystery here. It’s a space where science meets metaphysics. David Lynch, in his classic film “Lost Highway” imagines it as a place of violence, where the body comes out the other end traumatised and beaten as if surviving a car accident. It is a space of the unknown, where bodies and identities can be swapped, mixed up or even lost altogether.

What happens to the body when it’s not in art? What happens when we make a still life painting? Does the human disappear? No, the person has arranged the scene, the grapes and bananas have been staged. In every still life work there is a human hovering. A puppet master, lord of the fruits.

What happens when we make a landscape painting? Does the human disappear? No, the scene has been selected by the maker. In the landscape we see proof of humanity. It may depict things created by humans or show

impacts on the landscape by humans. Landscape painting offers clues to the viewer as to what was happening in the wider culture at the time of its making.

Here, we see tubes moving through prisms. There is a nineties-style tribal tattoo, but with no host, no body to cling to. It floats through time and space with these Cubist elements. These prisms while representing Art historical moments, also resonate in a more contemporary way (in a deep time context, the eighties could be considered contemporary) They might be reminiscent of the glowing triangle on the cover of Gary Numan's new wave album *The Pleasure Principle*, or they could be the prism that trapped the villains from Christopher Reeve-era Superman films. They are doomed to eternally float through space trapped in a shifting prismatic triangle. Time has changed the possible associations of these shapes. "The compulsive robot that holds open the sliding doors of history just as they appear to be snapping shut, imprisoning us in modernity forever." (Morton, 23)

Within these paintings, I am re-imagining the birth of abstraction, or the disappearance of the body. I imagine Malevich's Black Squares. His solid, singular opaque shapes. In my work these shapes shift from being solid and fixed, here they are translucent and overlapping. Moving back and forth in the picture frame. Again drawing from high and low levels of art production; evoking a democratic effect, a hybrid circumstance.

Within modernism there are contradictions regarding the invisible body. Was it an endeavour to transcend our own egos, or to go beyond 'the self'? In the case of Malevich, the absent body meant that the painting was for everyone. A black square could represent Lenin, or it could represent the collective in which he worked. It could be a representation of an ideology that went beyond the concerns of the individual.

They believed in working together on all forms of visual imagery, putting their individual interests and styles on hold for the moment ... conceived as a kind of way-station on the road to a more comprehensive dissolution of the self. —Clark 226

The inception of 20th Century abstraction is a moment challenging the individual. Malevich is quoted as saying “If we want to attain perfection, the self must be annihilated—just as religious fanatics annihilate themselves in the face of the divine, so must the modern saint annihilate himself in the face of the ‘collective.’” (Clark, 226) It is perhaps this notion of striving for ‘perfection’ that enabled Modernism to become subsumed by capital. No landscape, no figures, just the essence of what, in the past, has made up our artworks. Colour, shape, tone, texture. The body has been obliterated, at least for a moment. Fast forward forty years, and I would argue that the essence of Abstraction has become the individual. We may not see any pictorial representation of humans. But it is not hard to imagine the making of the work, the physicality necessary to produce this void. The brush marks that make the hue; the drips that suggest a tone, the colour selections which add to the atmosphere. In a contemporary circumstance, or a Postmodern one, it is hard to view the work of Jackson Pollock, for example, without imagining him dancing around a room. It is also difficult to take this seriously, and super easy to ridicule. The painter asserts himself as creator of the void. But rather than transcending societal norms, and radically altering human possibility towards something greater than ‘the self’, the painter has become the centre of the void, the centre of the universe, the pure, white universe of Western ideology. In line with more general cultural shifts in relation to Capitalism. The individual is now the centrifugal equation of these

systems. Part of a system that values individualism and the pursuit of capital above all else.

Abstraction suddenly presented another series of possibilities within art making. It imagines a world beyond the one we can see. Abstraction presents a new possibility here, can we imagine something else? Something surprising or unimaginable, something beyond human comprehension? This may have been a truly radical moment. But time continues, it creates sequels and new versions. The radical absence of the body becomes a stylistic signifier of a time period.



*Rat Bridge, 2021*

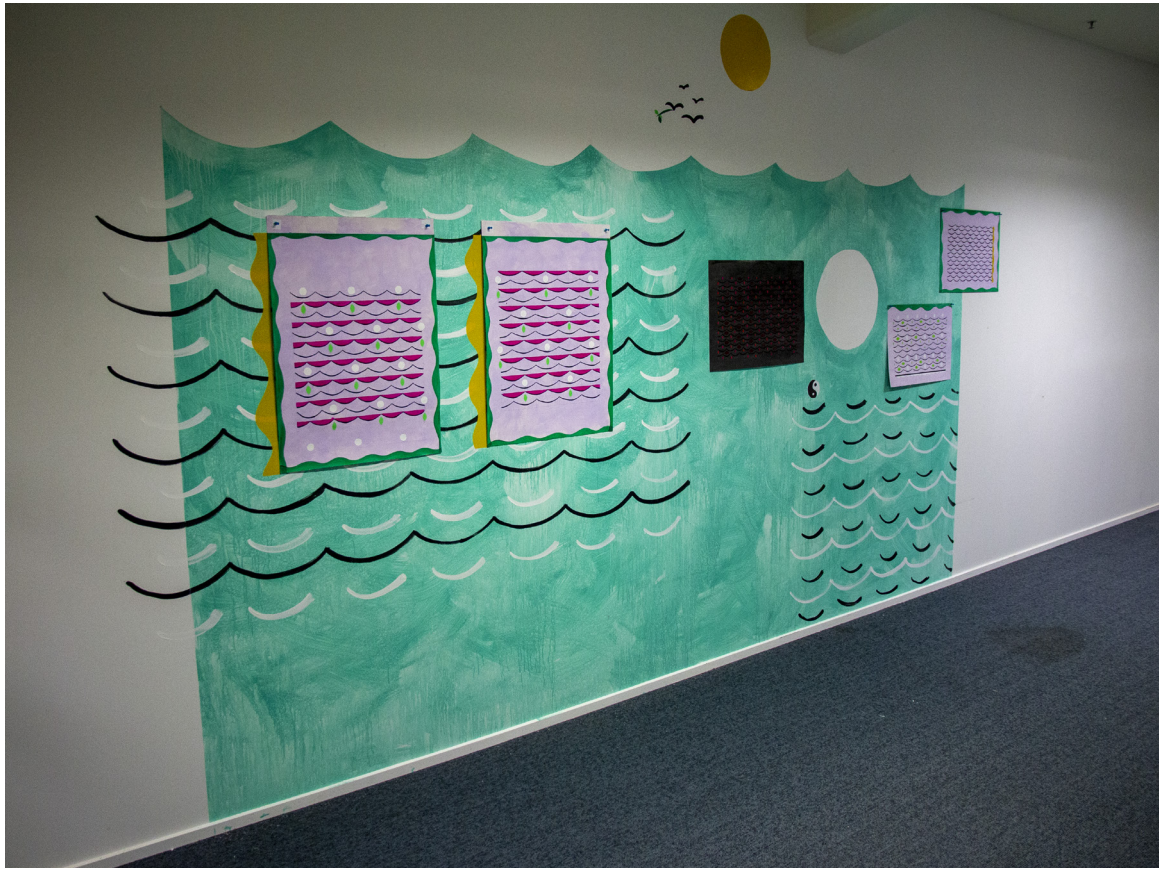
Here I look at the potential for collaboration within my work. This can be a simultaneously generous and strengthening action. A resistance to dominant western ideals of creative production. A recent public artwork of mine was part of a celebration around Wellington's Chinese community, and of the Chinese New Year. Twelve invited artists were asked to represent one of the animals of the Chinese zodiac. I got 'rat'. I worked on this with my brother and we imagined a future where the sky is pink and the water level has risen to the height of this bridge, located near the Wellington waterfront. Plastic tubes inhabit the seascape and house surviving rats. The rats have adapted and survive with the help of some remnants of humanity. It is both a cynical and hopeful look at a possible future. The work is deceptive in its simplicity. However, on another level, the work involved hanging out with my brother



*Rat Bridge, 2021*

on a bridge and making something. Spending time together in this public space, sharing ideas with each other and passers by, and a dedicated cast of characters who enabled us to do this. *Rat Bridge* became an opportunity to share art and ideas, while placing myself and whānau in the wider community.

I have previously stated that my way of making can exist anywhere. That is to say, that I am not bound by a picture frame. The work extends beyond that, with installation and public art. The shape of the gallery—or the given architectural forms—becomes like a canvas, which for me, means there is limitless potential. The context that the work is presented in shifts, the context becomes another material. The essence of the work adapts to new spaces.



*untitled, 2019*

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My practice has entered a new phase. Poised on the edge of returning to life outside of the institution, I am asking myself how I can maintain this practice. What possibilities has this institutional engagement opened up? It has meant I have gained more confidence talking and writing about my work. It has also firmed my resolve that some of the most interesting aspects of my practice exist solely within the visual language of the work. This is not to say that kōrero and written words are not valuable aspects. They are in fact inextricably linked together as part of a living and changing creative dynamic. However, there are things that exist within the work without conversation. I hope this has been apparent while viewing the work in this document. That there are ideas here that don't explain themselves. Qualities that are unique and entirely specific to my practice.

I am also thinking about posthumanism as a real change? Can this moment transcend the modern eras of utopian pursuits? Or will it simply fold in on itself as fashion? I am wanting to offer some response here regarding my generation's inability to imagine, or see something new outside of our own experience. 'The future is cancelled' proclaimed Mark Fisher. Or have you missed the nuance? Surely, this is every generation's mistake. Optimistically I am operating in a reality where Modernism, Postmodernism and the Posthuman are existing together. That the best parts of these movements can be mobilised in discussion with each other and filter into our cultural production. I am hopeful but skeptical that we have not reached another endgame, only to be toppled, again, by 'progress'. So, I finish with an optimistic assumption that potential magic within art, and art making can transcend its own structures and become beneficial to the world.



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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Friends and Whānau, especially Mathew and Ruth Buchanan as artistic collaborators.

Thanks to Caroline Johnston, Martin Paviour-Smith, Liz Allan, Claire Harris, Stef Animal, Shannon Te Ao, Catherine Bagnall, John Lake, Raewyn Martyn & Julieanna Preston for specific, thoughtful and generous feedback relating to this document or otherwise.

Special thanks to Martin Patrick and Simon Morris.

Thanks to Kirsty Lillico & Gina Matchitt for your work in the 'underground burger scene'.

Thanks to Greg Simpson for publication design.

Thanks to my colleagues & everyone who has engaged in conversation around this work.

