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**NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS:
CAITLIN ROSE DONNELLY AND HER NETWORK OF PRACTICE**

**Four exhibitions at the Forrester Gallery,
Ōamaru, 1 February – 6 April 2025**

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Vicki Lenihan

It's a bright late summer Sunday when we drive up to Makotukutuku along the Tai-o-Āraiteuru coastline, moseying about the cribs and revisiting sites of my childhood summers. There's enough time to lunch before the Forrester Gallery opens for the afternoon. We have come north to see the most ambitious installation my whanauka, Caitlin Rose Donnelly, has coordinated since graduating from Dunedin School of Art with her Master of Fine Arts in 2021.

Since that Master's project, *Māmā*, in which Donnelly's practice shifted in scale from jewellery to textile sculpture and began to incorporate the raw materials of the landscape and literal translations of the actions her work describes, she has continued to develop and reiterate her exploration of being "Kāi Tahu, a mother; a woman in rural Aotearoa, and an adoptee."¹ Donnelly is up for it; fit, busy, young and invigorated by her discovery of her ancestry, she approaches each new stage in her journey with infectious vim, bringing her peers and offspring and forebears, her tuakana and her teina, along with her.

I have worked with and alongside Donnelly several times since her graduation on kaupapa that offer the ringatoi involved space to investigate and express individual identity – through kōrero, wānaka and mahitoi – while upholding a collective expression of self. It was during a hīkoi to Whakatū to participate together in the 2023 Nelson Jewellery Week that I first heard about her intention to fill the Forrester Gallery with stories of family ties, maternity, womanhood and adoption. Her excitement was palpable, and though the manifestation of her vision

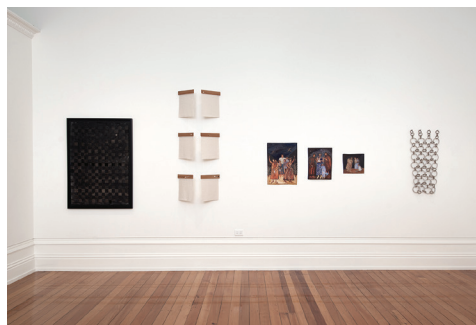


Figure 1. Poipoia te Kākano.

was a long way off, the surety of her commitment was convincing. I have been looking forward to this, keen to see how a colonnaded former bank in the centre of the town's historic precinct copes with being taken over by a posse of articulate and skilled contemporary women artists responding to the myriad cultural conundrums that late capitalism poses.

We enter the Forrester Gallery at opening time and have the place to ourselves. This suits me. I appreciate the opportunity to drift through the spaces at my own pace. My tāne does the same and we weave in and out of the four-part show without interruption, saving our thoughts for later discussion.

Poiipoia te Kākano (nurture the seed) occupies the large main entrance gallery. I am related to each of the ringatoi exhibiting in this grouping and am familiar with their personal canons; most of the works shown are not new to me, but their arrangement is. I am surprised by the absence of an incidental aural accompaniment to the works shown in this space, not least because I have become accustomed to Donnelly's kaupapa of inclusion extending to related musicians and wordsmiths who are often represented through sound works. The quiet affords contemplation time, whereupon lauded local poet whanauka Iona Winter's response to the kaupapa, *Kōkōwai | Pigments* (2025), reached via QR code, is revealed.

Donnelly's life-size simulacrum of a rural clothesline is draped with two braided strips of blanket, in imitation of whaling ship chains and in reference to her contact-era tūpuna and the new materials and technologies they embraced. *Mahana* (2021) was created for *Tauraka Toi*, the Paemanu take-over of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery that year, where it shared kōrerorero with other whaling works, including my own.² Here, it continues to inform and expand our shared stories and anchors the room's investigation of familial links.

Jess Nicholson's contributions to this kōrero are familiar to me too.³ The interlinked ceramic loops of *Whakawhanaukataka chain* (2024), at once chainmail and puzzling magic trick, still astound me: the simplicity of the inference, that we are connected by whenua, belies the intense problem-solving and technical skill Nicholson has honed since moving to Ōtepoti to forage along ancestral pathways. Across the way, the sharp protrusions of *Tūmatakuru I* (2024), akin to the obstinate spikes of our fragrant taoka species taramea and matagouri, cradle wee treasures and more links, a possible metaphor for what Nicholson has encountered en route.

Emma Kitson's three versions of the print *Tāniko Argyle* (2024) resonate with my own interest in the overlaps of visual vocabularies that exist in our whakapapa.⁴ Pātaki (flounder) diamonds, reminders that hard work reaps rewards, morph into the tohu of the historically dominant Clan Campbell, which has since broadened into a denotation of wealth and elegance. Both readings celebrate abundance and the rich colours Kitson creates from repurposed make-up, old stationery and pantry staples reinforce this message for me: waste not, want not. I learn through social media the neon ink of these prints changes dramatically under black light. While underscoring the work's investigation of embedded meanings that shift depending upon the direction of light, the intensity of scrutiny or a change of view, this easter egg highlights the joys of embracing new scenes and reminds me of a not-too-distant big city, bright lights past. Further around the room, *He Kōura Whakamā* (2018) (an embarrassment of riches) depicts a fading quintet of kōura, special occasion fare and a further symbol of abundance, suggesting family feasts and other continued customary practices that cement our attachment to each other and to our environment.

Megan Brady's delicate pulled-thread textile work *Aramoana* (2025) tugs at my heartstrings. Much smaller in scale than similar works I have seen,⁵ this iteration re-presents the same interplay of absence and presence and thrown shadows, of movement measuring shifting time or registering faint breeze or sudden breath, intimating the two-forward-one-back steps we take towards understanding ourselves. The linens remind me of whānau afternoon teas and my investigations into ancestral materials and practices and preference for shadow play in my own work. Found and fossicked treasures embedded in the rimu brackets read as everyday gems, reminding us of the importance of honouring our environs.



Figure 2. Broken.

Allison Beck is closer in age to me than most in this group. I assume her textured black painting, *No hea au* (2024) (Where am I from?), is unabashedly goth, which makes her one of my people in another way; black is happy-sad love and longing, loss and belonging, soulful and a blank slate and goes with everything. Refracting and absorbing the ambient light, the embedded gameboard without players or simple raranga pattern is frisky and coy, injecting a mature dose of ironic self-awareness – perhaps signalling that Beck is also an adoptee whose whakapapa discovery has come later in life – into the overarching kōrero.

The titles of two of Kate Steven West's three small oil and gesso canvas works, *Te Pū (Roots Origin)* (2024), *Te Aka (creeper, vine)* (2024) and *Untitled* (2024)), neatly encapsulate the artist's intention – to draw attention to lingering, temporal kinship connections. The thin veil that separates us from our predecessors emerges faintly from the backgrounds between the modern and ancient peoples therein, each generation holding onto the same mahinga kai that keep us sustained and tethered.

The evolving network of practitioners that describes and supports Donnelly's journey of discovery and practice continues in *Broken Narratives* with Victoria McIntosh, who taught Donnelly undergraduate jewellery and offered support for Donnelly's burgeoning investigation into her identity, heavily informed by herself being an adoptee. While the stories and works that each has chosen to illustrate their adoption experience diverge significantly in detail, there are subtle overlaps in the accompanying texts that indicate a shared trauma of being disconnected from their birth parents. I imagine a fair amount of cathartic stabbing went into the exquisitely worked embossments, beading and embroidery showcased in McIntosh's *My Invented History* (2004) and *Ungrateful* (2025), and enjoy that the upcycled and titivated found objects of *When a Secret Tastes Like a Lie* (2025) have been set off-centre with obvious care. I have previously exhibited work alongside Donnelly's *Mauri* (2022), a celebration of her sons and their enthusiastic contributions to her evolving self-description. In this space, the chatter of the mahitōi speaks to the reassurance that one's little limpets are alive and well when they are active and noisy, gathering treasures to bring home for Mum.

A mountain of laundry is stashed in the smallest room beneath the stairs, evoking a washhouse – either a basement, an outhouse or an anteroom nearest the backdoor on the way to the clothesline. This is *Kei te Haere Ahau* (2025) (I am going), Donnelly's solo work, a magnification of earlier similar works that began at *Māmā*. A tapering red elevation constructed from paint-soaked bedsheets cascades from a fixed point high up the facing wall, rising out of an undulation of black bedding that calls to mind foothills or a filthy river. A faint trickling sound emanates from beneath this kinetic jumble. It sounds a little like a subterranean drain or an almost-dry creek and not a bit like the torrent the magnitude of the artwork suggests. The trickle reminds me as much of the state of our stained and strained ancestral rivers as it does the messy and debilitating experience of post-natal menses made arduous by never-ending rounds of housework and maternal obligations. This landscape serves as reminder that the onus of caring for our mauka and awa, our habitat and therefore us, is a collective task, not just the responsibility of those individuals that are looking after home and hearth.

Upstairs, kith join kin in the former bank manager's residence; the extant domestic fixtures provide a comfortable backdrop to *Iti Biti Matapihi* (tiny windows), a playful title that the collected artists coined during development. Blanket forts, repurposed materials, dolls houses, movable figurines and children's scribbles call to mind learning through play, taking things apart and reconfiguring them and their stories; a process many artists actively reconnect with during their research phase. Here, this pedagogy is the star of the show, a reminder that figuring out who we are and where we fit in this world can be fun; grown-ups and kiddos alike are encouraged to be fully in the space and to touch and rearrange some of the works as they wish.

Sunlight streams through *Uenuku? (Where is the joy?)* (2025), Alix Ashworth's kaleidoscopic glass paintings of charismatic dancing characters, reminiscent of a 1970s calisthenics pamphlet or New Age bible, filling the space with their exuberance. *Taki Tahi* (2023) (under, over), a familiar banner fashioned from blankets adorned with sparkling appliqué symbols of kaitiaki by Aroha Novak and Georgina May Young, is draped from a wall across

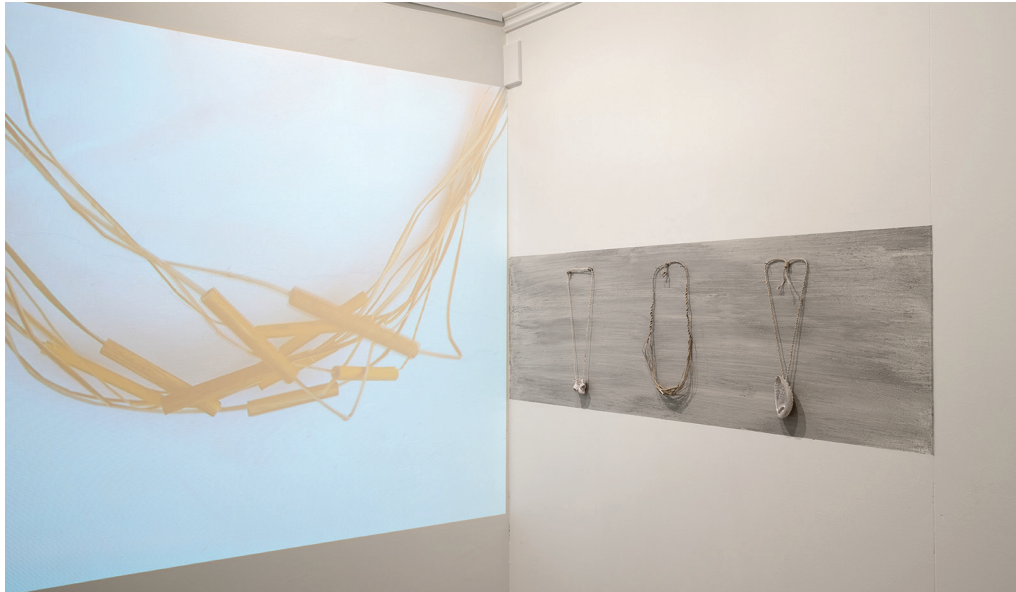


Figure 3. Mahana.

the sunny room creating a cubby-hole, *He Kapua Mā* (2025) (colours song), which is jam-packed with bespoke cushions and illustrated pukapuka curated by Piupiu Maya Turei. There is, I am happy to see, ample evidence that this wee hideout has indeed been gainfully occupied by little people. Zoe Thompson-Moore's *glimmer* and *glad rags* (both ongoing), chopped up traces of everyday life, challenge my aversion to microplastic mess. The glitter is contained, however, like a centre-pieced ancient relic, and the innocuous fabric remnants that decorate the fireplace relate the artist's vivid yet orderly process. Kitson's no rules colouring-in squab cover and pillowcase, *Rā Okioki (Rest Day)* (2022), have been filled in further with felt pens since I last saw it, wrinkles and bunches in the cloth reminiscent of rainy-day activities at the crib and evidence that interaction and relaxation, as invited, have occurred there.

Nearby, Stevens West's *Make and Make Again Lightbox* (2023) is strewn with shapes of household gadgets and natural things, offering endless catalysts for possible storytelling. I imagine the satisfying schlopp of scissors cutting through ice-cream container plastic, and discover random morsels at the bottom of the shapes' kete, letters left over from previous play. Stevens West's chunky wooden toy, *Tutu chainsaw* (2025), hung above a mantlepiece, appeals to my Girls Can Do Anything upbringing and latter-day sculptural practice; soft yet heavy and sharp-toothed, painted with flora that upon closer inspection turns out to be a taoka species that if prepared correctly is sweet and intoxicating, but deadly if not. Below, in *Whare Takata* (2024) (womb), the venerable importance of motherhood is upheld by Stevens West's redecorated pre-loved treasure trove and modernist dolls house, populated by Ashworth's charming clay figures; the audience is invited to collaborate further with the artists and interact with the work's elements, adding their own stories to this house of humanity.

Interspersed amongst these works are two iterations of *Trace* (2015, 2025), each created by Donnelly with her boys, measures of time passing as her brood grows and learns to communicate through mark-making. These works remind me of when our boys were young and developing their visual and written literacies. We've kept most of those creations, not least because of the accidental genius of children putting ideas to paper – reminders to bring an honest and hopeful approach to all artistic endeavours.

And that, for me, is the overarching theme of the entire Forrester Gallery undertaking: open-heartedness. It is successful because it depends upon forming and maintaining frank, kind and generous communications and space for participants – creators and consumers alike – to think, test, discuss, improve, share, rinse and repeat. Donnelly has learnt much from her wholehearted engagement in all opportunities that have come her way since art school, has digested those experiences, let them percolate with aroha and consideration and extended her insight and eagerness to effectively express who she is through her art practice to now encompass and implement an emerging curatorial practice that offers the same space to others.



Figure 4. This image and the following are from the room; *Iti*.







Acknowledgements: All photographs by Justin Spiers.

Vicki Marie Lenihan is an Ōtepoti-based multimedia artist, writer, curator, educator, arts advisor and event producer whose practice centres on celebrating self-determination, hauora and sustainability. She is the Dunedin School of Art's Kaiāwhina Māori.

- 1 Caitlin Donnelly, "Māmā," *Scope (Art & Design)* 23 (2022): 10-17, <https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1023024>.
- 2 *Paemanu: Tauraka Toi: A Landing Place*, 11 December 2021 – 25 April 2022, <https://dunedin.art.museum/exhibitions/past/paemanu-auraka-toi/>.
- 3 Jess Nicholson, *Whakawhanaukataka*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, 2 November – 20 December 2024, <https://blueoyster.org.nz/exhibitions/whakawhanaukataka/>.
- 4 In my case, in particular, aramoana or 'ki uta, ki tai,' and its formal similarity yet distinctly different denotation to the heraldic chevron.
- 5 See Megan Brady, *Between tide and time*, 2023, accessed 26 May 2025, <https://selwynstories.selwynlibraries.co.nz/nodes/view/6172>.