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THE ARTIST: COLLABORATIVE PORTRAITURE

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INTRODUCTION

In July and August 2024, I undertook a residency at Dunedin School of Art (DSA) to extend an ongoing series of performative portraits intended to foreground the invisible labour of creative practitioners. While previous series, *I'm Your Fan* and *Lyttelton Redux*, explore artistic lineage and history of place, *The Artist* emerged from what I felt was a pressing need to highlight the undervalued work of artists – an urgency compounded by recent cuts to Aotearoa New Zealand's arts funding. Through collaboration with DSA students and local artists, I developed eight portraits, one self-portrait and three still life works. These works fuse sculpture, painting and performance to render tangible the often intangible act of artistic labour.

METHODOLOGY: PERFORMANCE PAINTING AS INTIMATE DIALOGUE

The Artist series relies on a process I have developed termed *Performance Painting*, a live, collaborative action where the subject becomes the literal 'living canvas' for their doppelgänger portrait. Unlike traditional portraiture, this method prioritises negotiation for both parties, artist and portrait subject, through active dialogue and trust, from initial conversation through to the finished painting. Before entering the studio, each participant – ranging from students to established artists – engaged in discussions to select an object, tool or material emblematic of their practice. These choices, such as painter Michael Greaves' brushes (Figure 1), writer/director Pennie Hunt's director handbook and reference cards (Figure 2) and photographer Charly Walsh's camera (Figure 3), were then incorporated into the portrait as painted, constructed, sculptural elements made from clay, wood or, in Wesley Fourie's case, fresh daffodils dipped in wax and painted to a facsimile of his own bronze *Narcissist Daffodils* (Figure 4).

Dunedin's arts community embraced this collaborative process with welcome openness. My initial artist's talk at the beginning of the residency, where I outlined the background and my intention for *The Artist* and invited participation, proved pivotal. Staff, students and local artists responded with a generosity that became integral to the work. This collective enthusiasm mirrored the project's core belief – that artistic labour is fundamentally relational.

The studio painting session itself is brief (30–60 minutes), a deliberate compression of time to capture the immediacy of wet paint. The single photograph of the session acts as a record or 'residue' of the performance that has taken place and is usually offered as an edition 1/1, reflecting the live Performance Painting's singularity in the same way a painting on canvas is considered 'singular.' Yet this brevity belies the depth of preparation: the initial conversations, gathering materials, scouting Dunedin's second-hand shops for appropriate clothing, sculpting the hair and other elements in clay and readying the bathroom for the post-performance shower. I aim to be fully prepared before participants arrive at the studio at the allotted time. I literally cannot make the work without their fully engaged presence, so I strive for a calm, respectful and prepared environment to enable an enjoyable experience for all involved. Once the painting starts, there is no going back!



Figure 1. Julia Holden, *The Painter: Michael Greaves*. Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024.



Figure 2. Julia Holden, *The Writer / Director: Penne Hunt*. Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024.



Figure 3. Julia Holden. *The Photographer: Charly Walsh*. Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024.

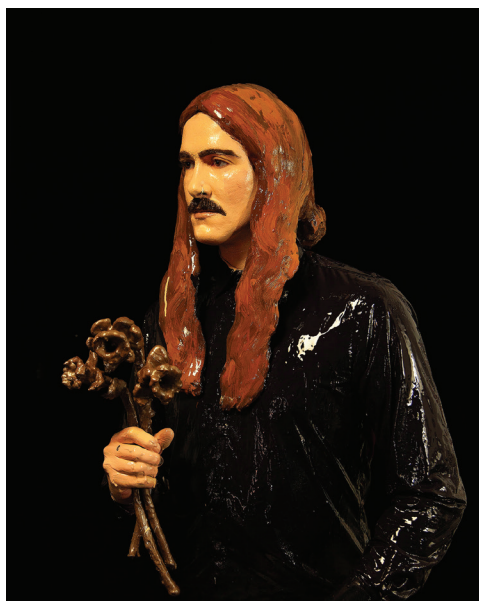


Figure 4. Julia Holden, *The Artist / Curator: Wesley John Fourie*. Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024.

For me, it is a great pleasure to collaborate with fellow artists to make these Performance Paintings as my way of acknowledging their hard work in bringing their specific interests and ideas into visual and material reality. Painting can be a solitary practice, and while I enjoy working in oils and other media, the connection, trust and free-ranging conversations that arise within the bubble of intimacy formed while creating these works together is the true magic for me, and I hope this is reflected in the resulting portraits.

THEMES: LABOUR, VISIBILITY, AND THE ARTIST'S ARCHIVE

The Artist connects with my ongoing series, *I'm Your Fan*, 2014–present), which considers the artist-self in relation to an artist's primary influence or artistic hero. The series highlights connections between artists and their mentors past and present, paying homage to the ways in which we, as artists, connect across time, engaged in dynamic and ongoing visual conversations.

The long drive from Waiheke Island to Dunedin gave me time to reflect on the current government's drastic arts funding cuts – a policy that dismisses art's vital role in shaping Aotearoa's cultural and community life, while framing artists as economic under-contributors. This thinking crystallised into action: I began drafting a list of 44 artist occupations (from painters to poets, filmmakers to 'outsider' artists), refocused my original plan and transformed the residency into an active tribute to these often-invisible workers.

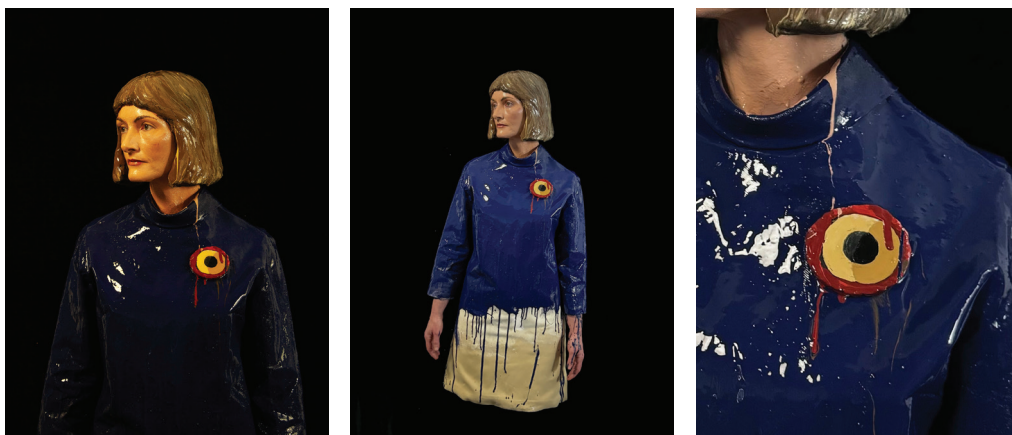


Figure 5a-5c. Julia Holden, *The Jeweller: Octavia Cook*.
Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024 and details.

The new series, *The Artist*, operates as both tribute and critique. The eight new Dunedin works are intended as a first step towards developing the 44 artist occupations into an independent online visual resource about, and for, the often-unseen artists in our midst. By foregrounding the artists and including an element to suggest their activity or occupation, the work confronts the absurdity of defining 'artist' within narrow economic metrics.

In Dunedin, this took on a local resonance. The 1960s dress worn by Octavia Cook, sourced from an op shop, carries the label 'Made by Broadway Boutique, St. Andrews St, Dunedin,' a clothing manufacturer that was based in Dunedin's now long-defunct clothing district. The dress, originally yellow, now partially painted with high-gloss acrylic house paint, is affixed with my painted, handmade cardboard version of Octavia's brooch, *Vul*, based on a vulture's eye from her animal eye jewellery series (Figure 5). These material choices – the repurposed dress, the hand-painted brooch – became metaphors for the often-overlooked physicality of creative labour, transforming Dunedin's industrial ghosts into testaments of artistic persistence.

OUTCOMES: EXHIBITIONS AND AWARDS

Alongside the portraits, I also made three still life works that complicate this dialogue further by extending *The Artist's* interrogation of homage and materiality. These works belong to my ongoing *fanfiction* still life series. Fan fiction is a term used to describe the inventions of an admirer of an existing piece of work (most often a novel, TV show or movie), which feature characters or storylines borrowed from the original. The three-dimensional rendering of early twentieth-century paintings in soft clay and house paint function as portraits in absentia, masquerading as doppelgängers for the original two-dimensional paintings by Édouard Manet and Antoine Vollon.

The three works were accepted into the contemporary art award *Pushing Clay 2024*, with *Mound of Butter (after Antoine Vollon)* (Figure 6) winning the Forsyth Barr Runner-Up Award. This recognition underscored the project's central paradox: even as the work critiques systemic invisibility, it must navigate the very institutions that arbitrate value.

Sarah McGaughran reworked the sculptural latex 'skin' from her work, *Dea Matrona* (2023), to fashion a fleshy shirt for her portrait. I then had the pleasure of exaggerating the garment's pustulent qualities with my house paints. The painted garment or 'residue' of the studio performance portrait was submitted independent of the photograph to the *Molly Morpeth Canaday Award 2025*. Our collaboration, titled *Intertrigo*, won the Akel Award (Runner Up) (Figure 7).

Making *The Poet: Isla Huia* with my Ōtautahi Christchurch friend, Isla Huia Martin, was a particularly poignant experience. In the portrait, Isla holds my clay and house-paint replica of her poetry collection, *Talia* – a finalist in the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry in the 2024 Ockham Book Awards, with cover artwork by her close friend, the late artist Natalia Saegusa (1990–2022). Natalia and I had collaborated a decade earlier on her portrait for the original *I'm Your Fan* series, referencing Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Self-Portrait* (1913) (Figure 8). Her absence lent a quiet tenderness and gravity to this new work, a reminder of how artistic collaborations ripple across time. *The Poet: Isla Huia* was a finalist in the *Zonta Ashburton Women's Art Awards 2025*.

Just before packing up the DSA studio at the end of the residency, as an experiment, I attempted a self-portrait in which I did the entire process on myself to see if I could manage all the elements involved. This involved shaping clay into my 'hair,' painting myself in high-gloss house paint and photographing myself without any outside assistance – a very messy, unmanageable process as it turns out. The results are ... interesting. The work will be exhibited publicly for the first time at New Zealand Portrait Gallery's upcoming exhibition, *Me: Artists Paint Themselves*, August 2025.

In September 2024, *The Artist* exhibition at PG Gallery 192 in Christchurch showed all eight DSA portraits. Future iterations of *The Artist* aim to include more of the 'cursory list' of 44 occupations, with Dunedin serving as the first chapter. This archival approach reframes the residency not as a finite project but as a growing, living record.



Figure 6. Julia Holden,
Mound of Butter (after Antoine Vollon).
Sculpted soft clay and house paint.
Archival pigment print, 520x400mm,
edition 1/1, framed.
Forsyth Barr Runner-Up Award, Pushing
Clay Contemporary Clay Awards 2024.



Figure 7. Julia Holden and Sarah McGaughran,
Intertrigo, 2024. Acrylic house paint on latex,
dimensions variable, 2024.
Winner, William Akel Award,
Molly Morpeth Canaday Awards 2025.

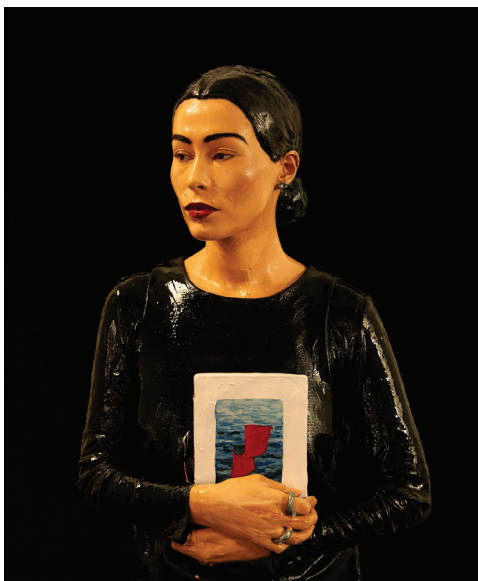


Figure 8. [Above] Julia Holden, *The Poet: Isla Huia*, Archival pigment print, 650x520mm, edition 1/1, framed, 2024. Features replica of *Talia* (2024) by Isla Huia Martin; cover artwork © Natalia Saegusa Estate. Finalist, Zonta Ashburton Female Art Awards 2025.



Figure 9. [Right] Julia Holden, *Self Portrait* (Natalia Saegusa, after Ernst Kirchner), Archival pigment print, 560x680mm, edition 1/3. 2015.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

The Artist series does not naively demand better funding or louder applause. Instead, it models a slower, more intimate form of recognition – one where the act of portrayal becomes a space of mutual acknowledgment. Like American artist Andrea Fraser's institutional critiques, the work exposes contradictions: it navigates award systems that arbitrate value even as it challenges their metrics. In an era of algorithmic creativity and austerity logic, the residency asked: What does it mean to see the artist fully? The answer, perhaps lies in the Dunedin collaborations – in the whakapapa of shared making that echoes Māori *toi* traditions, through the patient work of seeing on another and in the quiet weight of a finished portrait waiting to be witnessed.

Julia Holden is a Waiheke Island-based artist exploring collaborative portraiture through performance, painting, and social practice. Exhibitions include City Gallery Wellington, NZ Portrait Gallery and Sarjeant Gallery (Tylee Cottage alumna). Series: *I'm Your Fan* (2014–), *The Artist* (2024–) Awards: *Pushing Clay*, Molly Morpeth Canaday. MFA (Monash), BFA (Elam).