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THE ŌTEPOTI ECO-GOTHIC:
TRENDING TOWARDS AN ENTANGLED AWARENESS

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Sarah McGaughran

I follow the undulating path of a river; each step taking my body further away from my car and its ties to the city, and further into the dense native forest. There is no gentle transition into conservation land – on one side of the asphalt road green paddocks dotted with cows stretch as far as the eye can see, on the other a wire fence which contains the Fiordland National Park. The animals pay no mind to these human distinctions – the groans of deer echo out of the bush, a pair of kea bathe in a farmland stream, and a family of Canadian geese take respite on a pond after a long migration. A triplet of wild goats bounce onto the road in front of my car, and a hawk makes off with a roadkill possum. I observe these interactions between the human-made environment and wild species with a mild curiosity.

In rural Aotearoa, these moments of cross-pollination between worlds happen so frequently that they become ordinary. Recently, I have noticed a rising trend of artists in Ōtepoti and across Aotearoa who are exploring the relationship between themselves and the environment, and interspecies entanglements at large. I have begun to wonder about the origins of this trend. One could start at the beginning of the colonial era, where the sublime infiltrated early painters' landscapes, presenting the damp, wild landscape as tame and idyllic. Fast-forward a century or so, and we continue to see these idealised depictions – in Colin McCahon's paintings, for example, or another 50 years later in Imogen Taylor's queer reimagination of New Zealand regionalist and cubist movements during her time as a Frances Hodgkins Fellow in 2019.¹

In 2015, Jasmine Gallagher published an article in *The Pantograph Punch*, "Christchurch, and the Heart of the Antipodean Gothic." Gallagher writes that "the idea of the Antipodes was, and still is, one of outsiders, as opposed to insiders; of isolation, as opposed to integration; of the antimodern, as opposed to the modern; and especially, one of nature and the organic, as opposed to culture and the reflexively constructed."² The term "eco-gothic," which I have coined for this essay, stems from this notion of the Antipodean Gothic, satirised in Robert Leonard's 2008 essay "Hello Darkness: New Zealand Gothic,"³ which describes the genre's beginnings in the early 1990s (although elements of the genre are notably present much earlier than this).

While it is certainly true that the *idea* of the Antipodes sets nature and the organic in opposition to culture, the reality of Antipodean life is that the organic and the constructed grate uncomfortably against each other. In Ōtepoti we see weeds that sprout defiantly from cracks in resolute nineteenth-century stone architecture; town belts that slice through the suburban sprawl; a Botanic Garden that blossoms next to the streets of Studentville, blanketed with broken glass and the abandoned carcasses of burned couches. The tensions between death and beauty, ebullience and misery are central to the gothic genre. The New Zealand Gothic relays the discomfort of a country with a dark colonial past in a setting of undeniable beauty. Today, our contemporary artists are wrestling with a bloody history amid a climate crisis, ruminating upon how that very history led us to the brink of catastrophe. This is where the ecological aspect enters the equation, forming the eco-gothic – a genre formed within the darkness of gothic sensibilities combined with the horror of impending ecological collapse.

My own practice began, as it does for many young artists, with an exploration of the self. For me, this exploration remained within the bodily horizon until corporeal and psychological experience deemed it necessary to move

outside my own physical boundaries. The smooth, unaltered depictions of my flesh became fragmented, noded, marred and abstracted as my personal world, and the world at large, shifted and fractured. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett presents the eloquent argument that “to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step towards a more ecological sensibility.”¹⁴ I found guidance in the natural world, in the ability of ecosystems to adapt to change, to forest fire, to landslips and to industrial processes. The boundary of the self-dissolved, as I began to view myself as embedded within, rather than governing over, these natural processes. In my work, *Dea matrona*, which was presented in “SITE 2023” at the Dunedin School of Art, this process of personal fracturing, ecological collaboration, decomposition and new growth was explored through a mountain of flesh with weeds sprouting from apertures in the latex skin, which was dumped in the middle of the clean white gallery space.



Figure 1. Sarah McGaughan, *Dea matrona*, 2023, latex, soil, steel, weeds, in “SITE: 2023,” Dunedin School of Art, Ōtepoti Dunedin. Photograph: artist’s own.

In my recent works, I bind ecosystems of soil in permeable sacs of latex and leave them to carry on their closed loops of nutrient cycling. Growth, decay and decomposition take place over months, sprouting oxalis one month, which inevitably dies back and allows a new species to take hold. These works are called *Haggis*, for the form itself, and the action of stuffing a skin-like sac with soil. Each time a plant dies, or drops its leaves, I feed it back into the body of the haggis to recycle the nutrients back into the system. The only input into these systems is the addition of sunlight and water, which escapes through evaporation and uptake by the plants.

Recently, one of the works sprouted a metre long sycamore sapling, which has since begun to decay. I cannot help but see myself in these works, in that hopeful moment of flourishing. Despite my better judgement, I imagined an entire tree growing out of the small body of soil at its base. However, with only so many nutrients available, such wondrous growth was impossible for the sapling. There is both grief and acceptance that comes with each of these cycles of growth, death and decay. Grief at the loss of something both hoped for and expected, and acceptance of this loss as something necessary for the ecosystem. In the ecosystem of the self, these moments of hopeful

flourishing followed by inevitable loss or change are also met with a similar kind of grief and acceptance. The meter of time brings with it an understanding that the loss of something feeds into new growth, allowing space for an entirely different kind of sprouting, if only one has the patience and trust to let these processes play out.

I walk through the Dunedin Botanic Gardens with my dear friend, and local artist, Lucy Hill. Hill's practice is unlike any that I have come across – it's both difficult to describe and to pin down. In her 2023 exhibition with Yana Dombrowsky-M'Baye and Taarn Scott, "Pieces Spaces Species," at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Hill pressed clay into the cracks and unseen spaces of the gallery, both in the interior and in the carpark behind the space.⁵ Bodily gesture is ever-present in Hill's work – the gesture of moving through the world on foot, noticing the unnoticed; the gesture of manipulating clay; the gesture of tossing hand-made seed bombs into forgotten and untended gardens that dot her daily walks. Movement runs as a central thread through everything she does – our conversations take place within this movement, usually walking, sometimes swimming; even while seated we usually occupy our bodies with drawing, so our minds can connect. I tell her of my research into ecological artists in Ōtepoti, and my difficulty in unearthing the foundations that underpin our collective practices. There is a lamenting quality that echoes throughout all these artists' works. A deep, mournful cry of something either already, or about to be, lost. This is the state of any ecologically sensitive individual in the Anthropocene.

Our conversation shifts towards technology, and the unintended side-effects of its use. As we gaze towards the Leith Valley, Hill wonders how anyone could not care about the world we are losing, the beautiful wisdom of ancient forests. We agree that technology aids in the ecological apathy of the masses, pulling focus away from the destruction that is so visible to anyone who chooses to see it.⁶ As we sit on a sun-drenched bench, with tū and kererū swooping between the trees that encircle us, Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux emerge from one of the paths that connects to the clearing where we rest.



Figure 2. Lucy Hill, *210*, 2023, clay-dyed muslin, sticks, cotton, seaweed, Ōpoho Road clay, Black's Road clay, found materials. Exhibited in "Pieces Spaces Species," Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti Dunedin. Photograph: Lindsey de Roos, <https://blueoyster.org.nz/exhibitions/pieces-spaces-species/> (accessed 29 April 2024).

Working as a collaborative duo, Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux present an alternative to my admission of technology as being wholly destructive. Their works often use technology as an interface between natural phenomena and the audience. In their installation, *Stone Moves*, at Tāhuna Queenstown's Te Atamira gallery, the duo used a four-channel audio installation to present soundscapes recorded from the electrical microcurrents of leaves.⁷ I think of this use of technology as a translation device, transcribing the hidden messages of vegetal matter into the aseptic language of sound. Bellamy and Fauteux create a softening of the anthropocentric horizon, allowing audiences to embrace the kinship of their surrounds.

My first encounter with the couple's work was at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space in 2021, with their work *Radiata*.⁸ Bellamy and Fauteux placed a pine tree into the sterile ecosystem of the gallery space. The tree had been processed as it would be for construction – sliced into straight lengths suitable for building – yet was reconstructed into its whole for its life in the gallery. The straight lines that segment the organic form of the trunk reminds me of the way heteronormative culture segments queer lives. In Sara Ahmed's essay "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," the author argues that queer lives intersect heteronormative culture at an angle, thus only interacting with "straight space" momentarily before continuing into the rest of space.⁹ Over coffee in Bellamy and Fauteux's studio, I ask them about the queerness of nature itself. I argue that the entangled, entwined and multi-layered interactions of nature align with the queer world view. Bellamy makes the astute observation that heteronormativity is an artificial framework that is placed upon the organic, and thus nature itself is not queer; but appears so from the lens of the hegemonic society.¹⁰ I like this frameshift, that I, as a queer person, am not the outlier; that I do not intersect straight society as Ahmed argues, but rather I exist in my organic form and struggle against a heteronormative framework placed upon my life. This is what I see in *Radiata* – an organic body with a grid of heteronormativity placed upon it.



Figure 3. Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux, *Radiata*, 2021, Pinus radiata, 6200x1500mm.
Exhibited in Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti, Dunedin,
<https://www.amandafauteux.com/2021/08/27/radiata/> (accessed 29 April 2024).

The more I search for the foundations of the trend of the eco-gothic artist, the more I become distracted by the history of our collective practices. Amanda Fauteux grew up in one of the most polluted cities in the world, Sudbury, Canada; Miranda Bellamy was raised here in Ōtepoti; Lucy Hill calls the mustardy hills of Diamond Harbour on Banks Peninsula home; and I come from the small town of Waimate in South Canterbury, but call Ōtepoti home. Each of us come from places where the natural world has been altered by the industrial in ways visible within our lifetimes, and thus it makes sense that our works lament these changes or, at the very least, that these changes form a foundation for our work today. The congregation of our lives here in Ōtepoti is mere coincidence, supported by a small, tight-knit community that supports the arts, despite the capitalist pressures that continuously endanger our creative spaces. We are artists who yearn for reconnection with our organic kin. Our works serve as a translatory device between what we can decipher from our environments and relay to our audiences. It really is quite simple – each of us desire lives in which we have the space and permission to convene with nature, to listen, to observe and to pass the knowledge gained from these experiences to our communities.

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Sarah McGaughran is an Ōtepoti-based interdisciplinary artist who works across painting, sculpture, sound and writing. Their practice is concerned with the entanglement of the body with the surrounding environment, seen through the lens of queer experience. They graduated from the University of Otago in 2016 with a Bachelor of Science in biochemistry before completing a Graduate Diploma of Visual Arts in 2022 and a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) with First Class Honours from the Dunedin School of Art in 2023. Sarah McGaughran has been presenting their sound work under the moniker Perry Buoy since 2016, performing with local and international artists in projects including the Dunedin Fringe Festival and Beth Hilton's *Pyhrra* at the Audio Foundation in 2020. McGaughran has recently exhibited their work in "Anhedonia" at New Lands. Gallery and Project Space, alongside local painter Eliza Glyn, and is the founder and director of the artist-run Slant Art Project Space.

- 1 Imogen Taylor, *Sapphic Fragments*, 2020, Hocken Collections, Ōtepoti Dunedin.
- 2 Jasmine Gallagher, "Christchurch, and the Heart of the Antipodean Gothic," *The Pantograph Punch*, 2015, <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/christchurch-antipodean-gothic> (accessed 6 July 2024).
- 3 Robert Leonard, "Hello Darkness: New Zealand Gothic," *Art and Australia* (Spring 2008).
- 4 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).
- 5 Lucy Hill, Taarn Scott and Yana Dombrowsky-M'Baye, "Pieces Spaces Species," 2023, exhibition in Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti Dunedin.
- 6 Lucy Hill in conversation with the author; Ōtepoti Dunedin, April 2024
- 7 Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux, *Stone Moves*, 2023, schist and 4-channel audio installation. Exhibited in Te Atamira, Tāhuna Queenstown.
- 8 Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux, *Radiata*, 2021, Pinus radiata, 6200 x 1500. Exhibited in Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Ōtepoti Dunedin.
- 9 Sarah Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12:2 (2006), 543–74.
- 10 Miranda Bellamy in conversation with the author; Ōtepoti Dunedin, April 2024.