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Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 31

November 2026

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RESEARCHES, PRACTICES, DISCIPLINES, SEMINARS, ARTICLES, REVIEWS, REPORTS, ARTIST PAGES

Edward Hanfling

The Dunedin School of Art (DSA) Lunchtime Seminar series is an annual public programme that runs on Thursdays throughout terms one to three of Otago Polytechnic's academic year. The seminars started in 1998 with the first cohort of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) students and has grown into an outward-facing forum for research. Presenters now include artists, curators, art-writers and others whose contribution to their field is likely to be of interest to DSA students, staff and members of the wider arts community. In 2026, there were 23 seminars on topics ranging from wetland ecology to machine-made painting, from the philosophy of time to how to "get yourself in trouble." There were three seminars by ceramicists and two by contemporary jewellers. One seminar, by a curator at a contemporary art space, addressed artist-run initiatives, one documented an exhibition of archives about a feminist and gender-non-binary collective, another reflected on an artist's survey exhibition and two more on exhibitions and collections within public galleries. Two seminars were based on practice-as-research undertaken as part of a PhD, while seven of the other presenters hold doctoral qualifications.

Seminars are sometimes undervalued in terms of their research contribution. Yet the preparation that goes into them can equal that for writing a scholarly journal article. A DSA lunchtime seminar might test material destined for publication or an opportunity to reflect on a recent project. Importantly (in the context of this editorial), a seminar presented, for example, as part of a DSA residency often turns into a peer-reviewed article in *Scope: Art & Design*.

Having had the pleasure of convening the lunchtime seminar programme for several years, I have an acute appreciation for its role in fostering research in the visual arts. While the primary activity at an art school is the making of artworks, insofar as art can take any form whatsoever, and artists can be interested in any aspect of life beyond art, art practice as research potentially brings into play as many disciplines as have ever been conceived. The scope of *Scope: Art & Design* is likewise boundless, and it is the editor's peculiar privilege and challenge to grasp and shape these often unfamiliar forms of knowledge.

The DSA seminars take all manner of forms and modes of delivery: formal lecture, commentated slideshow, off-the-cuff oratory, panel discussion, participatory dialogue, inspirational exhortation … I remember the Auckland painter Denys Watkins presenting image after image from his decades-long career, each accompanied by a rumination that seemed to be the least obvious thing he could have said about the given work. DSA photography tutor Rachel Allan turned the lecture room lights off and sat at a desk reading quietly, mesmerisingly, from a meticulously composed script. And Jess Nicholson spoke without notes, conversationally, but without hesitation or digression, barely even an 'um', as if she had memorised a text expressly designed

to seem idiomatic. The performance of a spoken seminar, just like the style and materiality of an artwork or the phraseology of a journal article, is intrinsic to its meaning. And the inimitableness of that delivery is liable to leave an imprint on a student or other audience member as much as the content—to be, in short, inspiring, the catalyst for another's creative endeavour.

Delivering a public seminar is never an easy thing, not even for the most experienced and confident amongst us. It takes a considerable effort and can cause extreme anxiety—something an audience is not always cognisant of. Moreover, it is typically unpaid work. The DSA lunchtime seminar speakers are extraordinarily good and generous people. One can only hope that they have an inkling of the extent to which they contribute to the life of the art school, the lives of those who attend and the vitality of the panoply of disciplines to which they (knowingly and unknowingly) contribute.

The lunchtime seminars bring together, in one room, a bunch of terrifically interesting people, which feels increasingly like a galvanising and encouraging force in difficult times. Since the COVID pandemic, the seminars have also expanded their reach by way of an ever-increasing online audience, many of whom live outside of Dunedin. This can only enhance relationships between art institutions and between people who want to make and do things for good in the world. Long may the lunchtime seminar tradition endure and inspire, and continue to be an incubator for curiousness—to represent, in itself, the value of arts-based research and to yield further research for publication in journals such as *Scope*.

* * *

Scope: Art & Design 31 begins with an article by Eva During (Ding) about her MFA project, which culminated in an installation of mounded, creased and sewn black aluminium mesh sculptures evoking, in the white gallery space, the airy mountain landscapes of *shanshui* (Chinese ink painting). During constructs a theoretical framework that describes the relationship between material spaces and cultural memory, including Peirre Nora's concept of 'lieux de mémoires' (sites of memory) and Friedrich Nietzsche's 'horizon,' which constitutes what is remembered, and therefore remains present, and what is forgotten, invisible or latent. The physical dislocation of migration produces a heightened awareness of this horizon, particularly of its instability; it holds both a sense of alienation from an adopted cultural setting and the conditions for change. By translating the floating feeling of two-dimensional ink paintings into three-dimensional forms in space, During's DSA Gallery installation created the potential for viewers to experience the shifting perspectives that shape life and memory. The article makes an important contribution to understanding the relationship between an artist's life and their work, beyond simple notions of self-expression or representation (beyond what one already knows about oneself). It suggests that making is a process of actualising relationships between people, cultures and environments.

Sophie Aitken elaborates a feminist reinterpretation of the story of the 'swan maiden,' an ancient myth that has emerged in multiple cultural contexts and was consolidated in European folklore during the Middle Ages. It is easy to see patriarchal oppression in the tribulations of a swan who turns into a woman, and, through the theft of her magical feathered cloak by a hunter, is forced into the roles of wife and mother. Aitken, however, employs Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine,' in tandem with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, to emphasise that the figure of the swan maiden signifies the extent to which women—or, as the case may be, animals—cannot be confined to passivity, or the extent to which they elude patriarchal

impositions of control and order. The artworks Aitken produced for her DSA BVA Honours project take the form of cushions embroidered with episodes from the swan maiden tale. They chart a transformation not only of swan to woman to domestic housewife, but of the stability of the domestic space and the agency of the swan maiden who ultimately liberates herself and her daughter. In keeping with During's ontological framework, Aitken reveals how her interpretations of the ancient myth, and by implication of immediate social realities, changed through the process of giving them material form.

In "From Verb to Adverb: Contemporary Painting from Within and Beyond the Self," Sam Loe also considers how being in touch with the dynamism and complexity of one's own body can be an empowering act, both for the painter and the feminist. Loe's work takes painterly gesture as a starting point for a series of transformations that include cut-out fragments of mark-making used as stencils for further manifestations of variously intuitive, intentional and chance-based actions. In her article, Loe differentiates her paintings from the gestural mode of mid-twentieth-century (especially male) abstract expressionists. She takes as her point of departure New Zealand artist Judy Millar's call for painting to operate as an 'adverb,' modifying the self-possessed, declamatory 'verbs' of 'action painting.' This can be taken to mean that the artist is attuned to *how* she is making—Loe's examples of adverbs include 'presently' and 'somatically,' and there is an implication, too, that painting can be carried out 'caringly.' Painterly gesture therefore assumes ethical and relational dimensions, and, like Aitken's feminist reinterpretation of a literary representation, enacts a challenge to stultifying oppositions, such as mind/body, control/chance, language/feeling and self/others.

Mackenzie Hayward-Williams similarly extrapolates from self-care a concern for people more generally who are compelled to navigate a society that does not always accommodate, or indeed is often violently hostile to, neurodiversity, chronic illness and gender diversity. *Poor Sick Clown* is a series of sculptural textile works that visualise people who function both as the butt of the joke, as puppets pushed and pulled by social norms, and as knowing satirists, prepared to look silly if it means that they draw attention to arbitrary and oppressive expectations. Hayward-Williams finds support in queer theorist Jack Halberstam's appreciation of 'failure,' as well as Sianne Ngai's 'aesthetic category' of the 'zany' (exemplified by the bumbling but deceptively perceptive female protagonist of the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy*), highlighting the impossibility and futility of what is conventionally, and capitalistically, regarded as 'success.'

In the context of contemporary commercial fishing, nets manufactured from synthetic rope have proved to be devastatingly successful. As Kari Morseth describes in "Culture, Place and Time," the rope is so durable that it lingers in the ocean for years on end in the form of 'ghost nets,' indiscriminately killing marine creatures and generating plastic pollution. Morseth, in her MFA project, returned to the material, technical and ecological knowledge held in ancient European and Māori traditions to weave sculptures out of harakeke, muka, pīkao and kiekie. As a Tangata Tiriti artist, she acknowledges the meanings bound up in these materials—tikanga associated with gathering harakeke, or the story of the celestial captain, Taramainuku, who gathers up the souls of the dead in his net, carries them in his waka and ultimately releases them into the night sky as stars. She also channels her own Norse ancestry, such as the story of the deity Rán who captures and drowns sailors in her fishing net—a reminder of the vanity of human endeavours in the face of the power of the elements. Morseth is exemplary of the contemporary artist whose research into the histories and potential of materials might well prove indispensable to human adaptation in a perilous future.

Morseth's project included participatory rope-making workshops with members of the public at Bathgate Park and community groups at Artsenta (an art studio for people who use mental health or addiction services) and Moana House (a residential community for adult male offenders). Siau-Jiun Lim's article details an ongoing project with residents at two Dunedin rest homes, providing painting materials and tools and encouraging an exploratory approach to mark-making. Lim was initially prompted by the experience of doing volunteer work in rest homes and witnessing the tendency for television to become a default passive activity for people with impaired mobility. The Painting with Residents initiative represents research in the form of an inquiry into the possibilities of painting for activating the mind and body, emotions and memories. Lim is careful to emphasise that her workshops are not therapy in a clinical sense (even if they are therapeutic). Nor, it seems, is she 'teaching,' in the sense of methodically instilling the technical, contextual and conceptual dimensions of contemporary art. Rather, the workshops encourage the residents to embrace the shared realities of artmaking—anxiety, frustration, doubt—and to cultivate openness and curiosity.

Mona Bekhit's article reflects on her exhibition of a body of work that invoked multiple layers of sensory experience while remaining, as it were, at arm's length, or accessed primarily through sight. She made ceramic sculptures in the form of marble runs and needle-like forms that could operate as instruments. The noises of the instruments were turned into a soundscape played in the space where the objects were exhibited. The sculptures themselves, however, while conducive to viewers moving, bending and craning to appreciate their materiality—and perhaps tantalising in their texture and promise of sound—were not for touching or playing. The title of Bekhit's article, "Strike," refers to the 1925 film of that name by the Russian Sergei Eisenstein, and reflects Bekhit's interest in the rapid and repetitive visual montage used by Eisenstein to convey, in a silent film, the raucous activity of an industrial production line. Bekhit also discusses the ideas of another filmmaker, Jan Švankmajer, who suggests that visual forms can activate memories of other senses, such as touch and hearing—he calls it 'tactile memory.'

Scope: Art & Design 31 concludes with a section of reviews, reports and artist pages. Grant Banbury reviews an exhibition of ceramics by Cheryl Lucas, Richard Stratton and Chris Weaver at The National in Christchurch. Ruby Meades promotes the benefits of 'game jams' to test ideas, grow skills and confidence and expand networks. Ryan O'Malley, who was an artist-in-residence and delivered a lunchtime seminar at DSA in 2025, evocatively sketches in the background to his reduction woodcut print, … *shaped by the will of the Universe*, which adorns the wall at the Riego Street entrance to DSA. Finally, Eva During (Ding) brings us full circle with the transcript of a spoken word artwork poignantly eliciting the artist's lived experience, a latent aspect of the installation discussed in the first article of this issue: "Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, cries, loneliness, misunderstood moments, work, work and more work, 9 pm washing dishes, 3 am baking scones, lunchtime exhaustion, after-work soreness, pay days, day offs."

Edward Hanfling is Postgraduate Coordinator at the Dunedin School of Art. He writes regularly as a critic for *Art New Zealand*, has published articles in journals such as the *Burlington Magazine*, the *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Art*, the *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* and *Third Text* and books on New Zealand art, including the co-authored *250 Years of New Zealand Painting* (Bateman, 2021). He is editor of *Scope (Art & Design)* and *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, convenor of the DSA Lunchtime Seminar programme and co-convenor of the Visual Studies Research Network.

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CULTURAL MEMORIES, MIGRANT SPACE, ONTOLOGICAL LONELINESS AND NEGOTIATING HORIZONS

Eva During (Ding)

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my MFA project at Dunedin School of Art, the focus on the juxtaposition of my cultural identities as a first-generation Chinese immigrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand has remained constant.[1] Emerging from sustained experiences of vulnerability shaped by the endurance of alienation and estrangement, I have repeatedly examined my relationship to the society in which I live and its cultural frameworks. Through continual cycles of destabilisation and reconstruction, alongside moments of gradually established connectedness and belonging, a layered identity that combines both Chinese and Aotearoa New Zealand cultural memories has begun to take form, settling into a state of self-acceptance and self-care. While language barriers inevitably produce incomprehension, and cultural gaps distance community groups, it is equally valid that within the same cultural group individuals possess distinct perspectives. This stands in contrast to my lived experience of growing up in the communist environment of China in the 1990s, where individual subjectivity was often shaped by collective norms, converging thoughts and ideas, which have made autonomy more challenging to sustain in everyday social life.

My twelve and a half years living in Aotearoa New Zealand have therefore constituted a prolonged transition from collectivism toward individual autonomy. Yet language acquisition, behavioural adaptation and lifestyle adjustments represent only surface-level shifts. Over time, I have realised that the collective memory of my childhood upbringing—along with my personal memory—is embedded in my identity like blueprints and cannot be erased. It produces a subjectivity that holds overlapping cultural lineages within these rooted memory structures. The continuous evolution of a layered identity is a process of persistent negotiation without resolution. At various junctures, I retain or relinquish specific cultural epistemologies through the form of "selective remembering" and "ideological forgetting."[2] These decisions are not moral or absolute, but contingent and situational.

My art practice mirrors this complex negotiation. Its developmental process is clearly traceable. Initially, I engaged with questions such as whether China might articulate its own feminist discourse within globalisation; the dissonance between patriarchal structures shaped by China's historical feudalism and those of Western societies; and the status of Chinese women's autonomy and self-determination.[3] It is evident that I started reflecting on my identity from a gender perspective within overlapping cultural frameworks. The first significant change came after experiencing a macro-scale cultural environment different from my past—that transition from collectivism toward individual autonomy mentioned before.

As the process of individuality gradually formed, more complex negotiations took shape. Over time, migrant identity, which combines with gender, race and class, disrupts stabilisation. Two years ago, driven by an urgent need to relocate my sense of being, I turned toward the practice of hand-sewing traditional Chinese quilts to imagine a renewed form of strength emerging from the remembered care of my late grandmother. Subsequently, I produced a body of work, *Under The Bridge* (2025), with several hundred *shābāo* (fabric sandbags), and created a 40-minute audiovisual work, *That Was Their One Tree Hill* (2025), which narrates my immigration story using an autoethnographic method. This marked a shift from self-protection to more reflective engagement, grounded in a deepened understanding of migrant spatial conditions.

By articulating personal experience in my art, I began to identify brief, limited points of connection within local communities, especially in the art community in Aotearoa. Over time, I have begun to understand that prolonged loneliness and alienation are less internal emotional states and more a network through which the relationships among memory, space and identity can be examined. In this sense, migrant loneliness in the diaspora becomes an ontological condition.

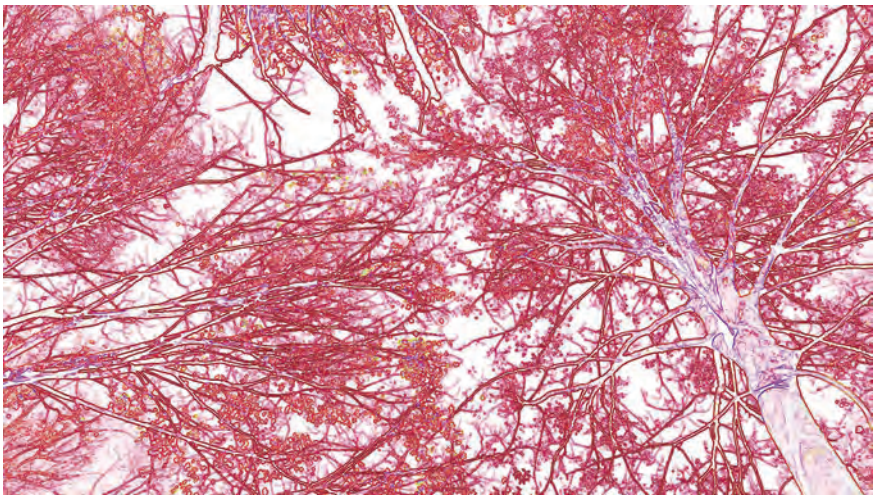


Figure 1. Eva Ding, *That Was Their One Tree Hill*, 2025.
Video Still, from 40 minute moving image with audio narration.
Exhibition at Slant Art Project Space, Dunedin.

My Master of Fine Arts project reflects my current conceptual position after this extended period of transformation. It explores how cultural identity is re-shaped in 'lieu' (a concept drawn from Pierre Nora's "Lieu de Mémoire," discussed in due course),[4] where cultural memory and migrant space continuously co-produce one another. Following Friedrich Nietzsche's term 'horizon,' for a threshold that both enables and limits what can be held in relation, horizons in my work function as negotiated boundaries between my own memory spaces and between myself and others.[5] Traditional Chinese landscape ink painting, *shanshui* (山水/ mountain-water), creates an imaginary space where multiple horizons coexist.[6] It resists single-point perspective, allowing viewers to travel through the landscape. My work extends this context into three-dimensional *shanshui*. Through viewers' 'travelling,' horizons shift in space, negotiating between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

This spatial reconstruction materialises a condition in which cultural memory and lived space do not fully align but remain in continuous negotiation. Viewers' movements enable different cultural frameworks to coexist without resolution, therefore operating as a 'lieu' where ontological loneliness is bodily experienced.

1. MEMORY AND MEMORY-SPACE

Early morning. Before dawn entirely breaks, the noise from the street outside the *hutong* begins to rise from a distance.[7] After washing up, I ask my grandmother for one yuan and walk down the alley toward the street corner. Halfway there, I can already smell the fried buns in the breakfast vendor's wok—the scent of diced beef, spring onion, vermicelli, flour and sesame oil mingling in the air. There is always a queue; everyone in the neighbourhood waits for those buns. Fortunately, the vendor is so practised that within five minutes, another ten portions are ready. Catching the first batch feels like luck; more often, I have to wait through two, standing in the aroma, mouth watering, until finally receiving my share.

Memory itself cannot exist in a vacuum. It requires concrete spatial frameworks to take form: locations, objects, materials, bodily practices, routines, landscapes, architectures … things that anchor and stabilise it.[8] For me, the noise from the distance breaking in the silence of the dawn, the smell of the fried bun diffusing in the air, the route walking to the breakfast shop, the waiting and hoping to get my portion, has been repeated and restored, forming a collective memory shared with neighbours inhabiting the same community. Memory, hence, is produced within social space by constantly reactivating meanings attached to material settings.

Simultaneously, memory reproduces social space because memory relies on spatial and material structures that enable its collective maintenance. Because of their shared fried buns experience, neighbours created a social environment, checking on each other while waiting in the queue, a space where memories could continually evolve from yesterday to today and keep renewing when tomorrow morning comes, in a continual process of production and reproduction.

Representational space (lived space) is bodily and emotional, produced through everyday practice and tied to identity.[9] Meanwhile, remembering inscribes meaning into space through recalling, retelling and remaking, activating space in the present moment.[10] Pierre Nora refers to it as a 'lieu de mémoire' (site of memory), which contains three coexisting senses: material, symbolic and functional. They characterise the physical space as a container for collective memory recalled as 'true memory,' distinct from history; it is collective, social, and encompassing. The 'lieu' functions intimately as a bond between the collective and the individual, and as an endlessly recycling form of meaning through metamorphosis. "[Collective] memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects," and this collective sense is stabilised in symbolically condensed forms.[11]

If memory requires spatial forms to exist, and if space becomes meaningful only through the memories that are recalled, then 'memory-space' refers to the spatial and material forms through which memory is reproduced and reactivated. It is a mutually constitutive relation: space provides the frameworks that stabilise memory, while memory invests space with meaning to reinforce a sense of being. In this continual exchange, memory-space becomes a 'lieu' where personal and collective memories are continuously living.



Figure 2. Eva Ding, *Under The Bridge* (2025).
Hand-sewn shābāo filled with wheat, rice and beans, and a 35-minute audio narration.
Installation view at AV gallery, the Arts House Trust, Pah Homestead. Auckland.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

In visual art, the relationship between objects and memory is often emphasised. We frequently hear the claim that objects 'contain' memory, or artworks 'preserve' the artist's memories and act as mediators through which viewers recall. However, it is challenging to rely on the stability of the meaning of such an object, as it is not universal but specific to a particular person, community, cultural experience or spatial history.

When I was sewing *shābāo* in 2025, I was fully aware that these objects would not function as memory carriers that resonate with local cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand.[12] However, for first-generation immigrants who share a similar collective memory, the throwing of *shābāo* is a kids' game familiar to almost every Chinese child. The object itself does not contain memory in the manner of a hard drive or OneCloud; it operates more like a trigger. When a viewer encounters an art object, it activates memories drawn from the viewer's own life and opens a space in the present moment to reproduce the past. Memory occurs in relation to, not within, the object itself.

Supporting this relational concept of memory, artist Louise Bliss cites archaeologist Andrew Jones' 2007 book *Memory and Material Culture*, where he argues that we tend to imagine memory as a physical entity that "stores the objects of perception," mainly because we associate memory with the architecture of the mind.[13] The attic is an intuitive metaphor: a place where we put things we do not need every day but do not want to lose. For Bliss, discussing French artist

Christian Boltanski's archival practice, the attic is an informal archive composed of sedimented layers of what has been forgotten. This accumulation resembles Andy Warhol's time capsules—a form of semi-disposal. Bliss argues that the attic is a safe holding zone where the significance of objects can be re-evaluated over time. However, it is not a memory container. Rather, the art itself functions as a memory-space that viewers revisit through their own projections during each exhibition experience. We project individual memories onto things and construct individual memory-spaces around objects. Each individual's memory-space differs, as our lived experience varies; each re-entry will not be the same, as our lived experience is in the 'durée' of time.[14] That is to say, memory is not stored in the object and left behind in the attic; it is reproduced through each encounter in the present.

Another key contribution to this theoretical field is Joan Gibbons' 2007 book *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*.[15] Gibbons examines enactment and re-enactment in relation to episodic memory, understood as personal, experiential and situated, in contrast to the more generalised structures of semantic memory. She discusses the *Urban Tapestries* project in central London (2002–2004), a participatory form of subjective mapping based on psychogeography, led by Alice Angus and Giles Lane. Through mobile software that enables participants to map and share "their own sense of place," memory emerges at specific times and locations and unfolds through encounters, weaving a shared social fabric.[16] In this framework, memory is understood as relational, transitional, temporal, personal, episodic, situational, phenomenal, interpersonal, psychogeographical, interactional and participative. A sense of collectivity is redeemed and remapped through intersubjective exchange within the data bank of episodic memories in a reproduced psychogeographical space.[17]

We have established that memory emerges through spatial encounters. Artworks themselves do not contain memory; they generate a memory-space through the encounters and interactions of viewers (participants). Within "their own sense of place," individuals map out a sense of being that is archived in personal memories. Collectively, a new memory-space is reproduced, and the re-created 'lieu' is distinct from the history.

2. MIGRANT SPACE BETWEEN FRIED BUNS AND POPSICLE

What we call cultural memory is a condensed silhouette of social practices, a composite of many overlapping individual memories that form a relatively shared sense of the past. It is collective yet distanced from the everyday; it is generational: transmitted through narratives, media, literature, poetry, oral traditions, customs, art, social activities, behaviour, morals and judgements.[18] It is historical.

Cultural memory reproduces social space, simultaneously generating culture and cultural identity with shared communities. When I describe the taste of the fried buns, the gap between our memories makes it difficult for you (if you did not grow up in China) to truly understand them, even with vivid imagination. Likewise, when you describe the kind of popsicle nearly every child you grew up with enjoyed, I cannot fully imagine its flavour or the happiness it carried, which only you and your childhood friends share. As a first-generation immigrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand for twelve years, I have learned to adapt to the current cultural environment. But the question remains: how can I make you realise that our differences are not limited to skin colour, and that I hold a memory of fried buns rather than a popsicle?

German cultural scholar Jan Assmann used Nietzsche's concept of the 'horizon' to refer to the boundary between what is remembered and what is left behind. It constitutes the limit; without such limits, the past would overwhelm the present and identity would lose coherence. Assmann argues that cultural memory has fixed horizon points through which the crystallised group identity—"concretion of identity"—finds meaning between who belongs and who does not, as cultural memory is objectified in linguistic, pictorial or ritual formations.[19] It is a form of institution; therefore, it is selective, and its boundaries must be constantly maintained.[20]

Here, between the fried buns and the popsicle, draw a horizon line between two different memories—not between two individuals but between two cultures. It is a fixed line to separate two cultural groups in order to maintain the "concretion of identity." When we speak about our autobiographical memories, we are already speaking about the relations between the individual and the collective, and the relations to the space cultural memory produces and reproduces; that is to say, ultimately, we are exploring the spatial relationship between the individual and collective in time.

For migrants, this relationship becomes unstable. When one relocates, the inherited memory-space no longer aligns with the new lived space. The familiar sensory markers, such as language, food, art and historical references, which concretise one's identity, no longer serve as shared frameworks; what remains is an ontological instability that creates loneliness, alienation and displacement. Migrants are forced to make choices to adapt in order to reconstruct a sense of collectivity, inevitably crossing the horizon line between two cultures—between what is to remember in one culture and what is to forget in another. However, one's cultural memory, particularly for first-generation immigrants, is deeply embedded and constitutive of identity; it cannot be erased.

Migrants exist in this migrant space, where the horizon line is not fixed but relational, and cultural identity is unstable across different cultural memories. It is a space of in-betweenness, where inherited and present cultural frameworks coexist without fully aligning.

In their 2007 book, *At Home in the Chinese Diaspora*, editors Andrew Davidson and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce argue: "The process of selection is a personalised choice for individuals and a collective choice for the community as a whole, depending on which cultural elements are viewed as key to the survival of their identity."[21] However, whilst cultural memory stabilises the individual and the community, it also carries ideological force, particularly through the façade of stability associated with national identities, within an ingrained understanding of what is deemed "natural." In other words, remembering is selective. Communities actively decide which elements of culture, history or experience should be preserved and transmitted; at the same time, other elements may be forgotten or intentionally excluded.

Migrants may retain or relinquish their cultural memory in order to adapt in a new environment ("Have you tried our popsicle?" "Yes, I have tried your popsicle, and I like it!"). Simultaneously, there can also be uncertainty in the exchange of cultural material, especially for people who have always lived within a certain context where their fixed cultural memory horizons have not yet been interrupted by other cultures ("I haven't tried your fried buns yet, but I think I will like them (or not)!"). In both cases, cultural identity is continuously reshaped through ongoing acts of selection in choice-making and situational judgments.

Migrant space holds unfixed horizon lines relationally between both migrants' and host populations' lived experiences, tried or yet to have, the fried buns and popsicle. Navigating between two cultures is a new experience that disrupts already established fixed horizons; for each side, remembering and forgetting are therefore ongoing processes through which memory continues to renew and eventually settles as a sense of identity.

The differences between us are not limited to skin colour; I remember fried buns rather than a popsicle. However, once again, if migrants cannot be fully accepted by the community because each side (migrants and host population) chooses to remain within a fixed horizon of inherited cultural memories, the distance between cultural spaces widens. Migrant space is a 'lieu' where alienation and belonging coexist, continuously reproducing a sense of loneliness and displacement.

3. GUY NGAN AND THE HISTORY OF CHINESE ART IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Dunedin's history and Chinese culture have been intertwined ever since the first batch of Chinese settlers arrived during the gold rush in the 1860s. However, reading the history of the migration of Chinese people and Chinese art in Aotearoa New Zealand has been emotionally difficult for me, as it appears to be a silhouette of my own migration experience.

Following the impact of the two Opium Wars (1839–1942; 1856–1860), China was left fractured, with people struggling to survive. Driven by the economic incentives of the gold rush, the Otago region accepted its first group of Chinese miners in 1865. Under the logic of colonial interests, they were initially regarded as "qualified by industrious and skilful habits to become valuable servants."[22] By 1871, the number of Chinese miners had grown to approximately 4,000. These individuals were primarily farmers from the Pearl River Delta, fighting for survival. Within the long-standing hierarchical structure of Chinese art history, ordinary peasants had virtually no access to artistic education.

Over the following decades, with successive shifts in immigration policy targeting Chinese migrants, their conditions deteriorated sharply. Defined as "sojourners," they endured overlapping conditions of survival crisis, racial discrimination, spatial segregation, family separation and an enduring inability to integrate into local society. At the same time, New Zealand hosted its first exhibition of Chinese art curated by Capt. George Humphreys-Davies —the *Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art* (1935) at Durham Street Art Gallery, Christchurch—presenting Chinese ceramics from the Han (202 BC – 220 AD) and Tang (618 – 907CE) dynasties to the Song (960 – 1279CE) dynasty. This marked the first moment Chinese art was formally seen within New Zealand. Shortly after, the extensive *Loan Exhibition of Chinese Art: 2500BC to 1800AD* (1937), also curated by Humphreys-Davies, toured Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin, generating widespread attention and reflecting a growing national interest in so-called "Oriental art."[23]

During World War II, shifting geopolitical alliances led to changes in New Zealand's immigration policy. From 1938, Chinese miners' families, particularly women, were permitted entry. This moment enabled Chinese migrants to begin establishing roots and forming family structures in New Zealand.[24] However, the subsequent development of second- and third-generation migrants, limited access to education and language barriers meant that life remained oriented toward labour and survival. At the same time, exclusion from social integration persisted within a racially stratified cultural environment.

It was not until the 1970s, alongside the Māori Renaissance, that some Chinese migrant families began to recognise education as a pathway toward social acceptance. As increasing numbers of third-generation Chinese New Zealanders entered professional fields such as medicine, eventually artists such as Denise Kum (born 1968) and Yuk King Tan emerged in the New Zealand art scene. Chinese art began, for the first time, to take root within the cultural soil of New Zealand.

Parallel to this history, Guy Ngan (Ngan Kwok Guy, 顏国鍇, 1926–2017) was a special case. Yiyan Wang's 2024 article on Ngan offers a broad view of history, documenting the life and work of the first Chinese immigrant artist in Aotearoa New Zealand to receive national and international recognition, even if that recognition arrived belatedly.[25] I believe that although Ngan identified himself as Pacific-Chinese, and although our lived time and space are separated by nearly a century and unfold within vastly different historical and cultural contexts, we have grappled with much the same kinds of questions about being and becoming Chinese migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand. We have experienced similar struggles, harboured similar artistic ideals and aspirations and explored similar cultural boundaries that span nations. It feels as though history has drawn a circle, repeating itself a century later. I want to understand why.

Although there is limited documentation about Ngan, I read the evidence available as a lifelong pattern of negotiation and persistence, an ongoing struggle with stability in cultural identity. As an artist, he completed what was then the most authoritative internationally recognised art education in the United Kingdom on a scholarship at Goldsmiths and the Royal Academy, worked tirelessly to return to Aotearoa New Zealand and continued to create and experiment throughout his life. Yet, he was not fully recognised by the Western—and specifically Aotearoa New Zealand—art world. This, of course, might be said of many accomplished and interesting artists. I cannot help but wonder, though, had he been European or carried a European surname, might he have been written into Western art history half a century earlier?[26] And was Ngan's work difficult to appraise because of a lack of alignment between the recognisably Chinese characteristics in his art and the dominant forms of both European modernism and New Zealand's 'nationalised' version of it?

Ngan's art practice never departed from an intimate dialogue with cultural identity. Whether through carved seals, jade stones, wood, ink, watercolour, acrylic, Chinese mythological symbols or Māori motifs, he consistently sought a space capable of holding all these elements together, a space that could accommodate his hybridity among Chinese, Aotearoa New Zealand and (self-recognised) Pasifika identities.[27]

His visual style was strongly influenced by early twentieth-century modernism, highly rational and formal, at times echoing the graphic sensibilities of the Bauhaus. However, he didn't imitate Bauhaus examples. Instead, he attempted to relocate cultural meanings through lines and forms within the works. He also wrote about his understanding of the relationship between art and the community in his text "Visual Arts and Daily Bread."[28] He wasn't an artist who led or revolutionised art history. Still, he was certainly not one who should be overlooked for nearly a century of dedication in Aotearoa New Zealand's art community; at the very least, he was the first significant artist to hold both Chinese and Aotearoa New Zealand cultural identities, and therefore the first to explore, through art practice, the spatial and cultural interactions between China and Aotearoa.

My art practice reflects my migration experience and my migration experience mirrors the history of Chinese art in New Zealand. As Jung Eun Lee observes in her thesis about Chinese New Zealand artists: "In a multicultural society where diversity is said to be celebrated, but

without truly knowing where the diversity lies, the appreciation of cultural achievement remains superficial."[29] Although the contemporary cultural environment differs significantly from that of 160 years ago—becoming more open and diverse—these challenges have not disappeared.

4. ONTOLOGICAL LONELINESS AND NEGOTIATED HORIZON

I understand my migrant identity requires an ongoing negotiation of the 'horizons' in migrant space that I do not fully reconcile within myself, leaving ontological instability as a lasting condition. In the context of migration, ontology is a relevant term because migration does not just change language or culture at the surface level. It shifts the ground, interrupting the fixed horizon that used to stabilise my identity; my past cannot be erased from my existing cultural memory of my upbringing in China, and the present on the other side of the threshold has been laid with new cultural memories of living in Aotearoa. Negotiating between what is remembered and what is forgotten in everyday practice is inevitable, in order to maintain a sense of identity; this destabilisation produces what I describe as an ontological loneliness condition.

Ontological loneliness here does not describe an emotional state; it is a condition in which one's multiple identities across multiple cultural frameworks remain in unresolved negotiation. Forgotten has yet to be completed; at the same time, new memories have yet to stabilise. Communication is disrupted, halting the reproduction of collective memory and rendering re-entry into the community impossible; as a result, the cultural spaces widen. As a migrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand for twelve years, I contribute to the materialisation of overlapping yet non-coincident fields of memory, where different cultural frameworks remain partially aligned yet not fully integrated, sustaining this condition of ontological loneliness.

Initially, this negotiation takes the form of communication with my environment—a horizon between me carrying original cultural memories and the newly adapted cultural space. It is often deliberate and demanding. This stage resembles a process of learning and accepting local culture, mediated primarily through improving language acquisition. As my English proficiency improved, communication with my surroundings became more effective; however, this did not resolve the question of identity instability.

I then enter a second stage of communication, negotiating a horizon within myself that involves reflection and decisions between what must be remembered and what must be forgotten.[30] This stage is often difficult and requires the courage to confront one's own choices, rather than resorting to uncritical compromise or appeasement of the host culture. Unselective abandonment risks stripping me of my original cultural identity, stretching and distorting it, and intensifying my sense of misplacement.

If this second stage of self-negotiation is successful, I move to a third stage of communication—a horizon between the lived space of Aotearoa New Zealand and me, carrying newly produced memories and identities shaped through subjective selection. Ideally, this process constructs a stabilised identity space—one that does not demand compromise or appeasement from participants of different cultural backgrounds. Instead, it allows diverse perspectives to coexist and collide. However, this negotiation is not always effective. At times, I am unable to enter the second stage, which requires confronting significant psychological work. Remaining in the first phase only exacerbates the instability of my cultural identity. Meanwhile, for those with whom I attempt to communicate, an inability to recognise my transition between these stages

simultaneously impedes negotiation; as I mentioned before, there is a horizon line between fried buns and popsicles.

However, British social scientist Doreen Massey argues that space is relational, mobile and open, constructed through flows of people's memories and movements.[31] Immigration reshapes the meaning of place where multiple cultural frameworks intersect, horizons overlap, landscapes remap and memories reproduce. Horizons shift over time through negotiation, not only within migrants' own culture but also between different cultural groups.

My intention is not to divide communities; rather, it arises from the experiences of divisions and boundaries already present in the community's spatial configurations. The question for my research, therefore, becomes: How can art function as a space where differing memory horizons encounter one another without collapsing into erasure or assimilation?

I consider art my primary medium of communication. Through my MFA studies, I have examined a range of mediums to articulate the ongoing negotiation of my identity, which I will detail in the next chapter. My research also focuses on artists with hybrid cultural identities that resonate closely with my own, particularly at the intersection of race and cultural memory in a relocated migrant space. For artists who have experienced and are continuously experiencing ongoing processes of negotiating identity instability across cultural and spatial boundaries, their various artworks embody this ontological condition and constitute a form of identity-stability and 'becoming.' Accordingly, rather than focusing on any single artwork, I argue that only by attending to multiple works and seeing an artist's transformation more broadly can one fully understand the process of negotiating migrant identities.

Xu Bing's life is closely intertwined with the turbulent history of contemporary Chinese art, particularly during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent period of social transformation. Growing up in China, he was the son of a historian at Peking University and experienced the harsh conditions of the Cultural Revolution. He later trained in printmaking and completed his MFA at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in 1987. Following the political events of 1989, he left China for the United States, bringing with him his then-controversial and widely criticised *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), which later became one of his most recognised works.[32] In later years, he returned to China to serve as president of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, before subsequently returning to the United States to continue his art practice. His work often engages in profound reflections on identity, shaped directly by his long-term living across different cultural environments.

Book from the Sky was created in China during the post-Cultural Revolution period, within the context of the 1985 New Wave avant-garde movement, and was first exhibited as Xu Bing's solo exhibition at the China National Gallery in Beijing in 1989, where it was met with considerable misunderstanding and ridicule.[33] The work comprises over 4,000 invented pseudo-Chinese characters, hand-carved as woodblocks and printed onto paper as scrolls and bound books by using traditional techniques. For Xu, it was an examination of the semantic propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, reproducing a 'meaningless' monument to a period of 'meaningless' Chinese history.

Compared with *Book from the Sky*, Xu's later text-based work, *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–96), appears more dynamic and socially playful.[34] This project came after he crossed national and cultural borders, where adapting to another language became inevitable for communication. In this work, he reconfigured two linguistic systems, Chinese and English, into a square compositional structure that appears, at first glance, to be Chinese calligraphy but becomes legible as English upon closer reading.

I have more than once thought about this similar issue myself through the years of migrant experience: Is there a better way to learn English? Why do we have to communicate only in English? Would they struggle to learn Chinese just as I do to adapt to their language? With all these questions, the moment I saw this body of work, I completely understood Xu's ontological struggles and poetic imagination.

If *Book from the Sky* can be understood as a prelude to the artist's negotiation of destabilised identity during the breakdown of a single cultural framework, then *Square Word Calligraphy* reflects Xu's ongoing negotiation between two cultural frameworks in migrant space, where his identity has become further destabilised. The work invites participants to learn a 'new' language in the installation scene of a traditional Chinese classroom. Viewers (participants) must adapt their reading habits and negotiate between unfamiliar visual forms of the alphabet. Although the artwork functions as a deconstruction of inherited cultural memories that appear as misreadings, it also offers a space to re-enter what is remembered in order to adopt a new way of seeing—not representing cultural differences but enacting the artist's ontological process of becoming in juxtaposition with the complexities of multiple cultural identities. As the horizon shifts while perspective changes, the artwork stimulates negotiation within.

Xu's negotiation doesn't stop with language systems. He continues the conversation in his *Background Story* series (started in 2004). This body of work consists of lightbox installations resembling traditional Chinese landscape ink paintings, featuring a wide range of found objects collaged behind the lightboxes. Through lighting projection, these materials construct the visual illusion of classical ink landscapes on the surface. The term 'background' is itself significant, as it metaphorically points to the deeper layers of Xu's cultural identity. Yet, in the work, the background is placed in the foreground, while simultaneously what has been locally collected in Xu's lived experience becomes the background that constitutes the image.

The experience of living abroad as a migrant is precisely such a process of internal and external transformation. Over time, my ongoing adaptation to and collection of local 'material' is gradually internalised, while the blueprint racial and cultural background becomes a surface. In *Background Story*, I see Xu directly exposing the process of his reconstruction of cultural identity through visual cultural symbols that articulate the complexity of the negotiation between the inherited and the adapted. While the embedded cultural memory of the Chinese landscape cannot be erased, it is no longer produced in its original material conditions.

5. THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHINESE *SHANSHUI*

From Guy Ngan to Xu Bing: I resonate with their migration experiences as I enter my art practice through a unique perspective. My generation's cultural memory has been institutionalised through diversity and inclusion, which differs from previous generations. However, structural asymmetries remain. Ngan's presence confirms that migrant ontology in Aotearoa is historically layered; my practice does not begin anew, but enters an ongoing continuum.

My aluminium mesh landscape body of work emerges from a perspective related to Xu's, affirming that cultural memory does not dissolve in migration; it becomes recontextualised within a new migrant space. Xu's work articulates how identity remains structured even when its ground shifts, which closely aligns with my negotiation of cultural memory horizons.

There is another contemporary artist whose work is relevant to my mesh sculptures. Last year, during a visit to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, upon entering the building and turning a corner on the upper level, I encountered Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *North Wall* (2005).[35] The suspended, neon-green, translucent fabric structure reconstructs a section of the north wall and roofline of Suh's father's house, while suggesting the outline of a traditional Korean house with an elevated scholar's roof. Variations of stilted or elevated roof structures appear across many Asian architectural histories, often signifying hierarchy and cultural authority.

What I saw was one roof placed beneath another, one home contained within another, one identity included inside another. Standing beneath the house and looking upward, I felt an overwhelming emotional response, a powerful sense of displacement. The work stages a collision of the contemporary Western gallery/museum structure with the traditional Eastern house form; a dominant Western exhibition context contrasts with an evocation of East Asian domestic memory. As I approached the work, my memory was instantly drawn back to the past with a sense of familiarity. I, too, grew up in traditional tiled houses with extended eaves—though not of the elite scholar's status that Suh references. The images of such houses at the ends of alleyways, in preserved heritage sites and in historical television dramas are cultural memories from which comes familiarity; deeply ingrained memories that are triggered and recalled upon encountering Suh's *North Wall*.

However, this recognition was immediately fractured by awareness of standing within the Toi o Tāmaki, in the space of Aotearoa New Zealand, in the time of Spring 2025. Familiarity collapsed into dislocation. Is this not displacement? I found myself suspended in a state of being almost at home yet not at home, momentarily wishing that this wall might function as a portal; if I could step inside it, might I return home?

There is also a palpable pressure of cultural interruption, where a non-Western traditional domestic form is inserted into a space coded as 'European' and 'modern.' Despite the apparent delicateness of the structure, this insertion is not gentle; it is confrontational. Positioned at the physical centre of the gallery, the house also occupies the centre of the viewer's memory space, disrupting the expected visual and cultural order of the scene. The original expected memory environment becomes unstable and montage-like, exaggerating this contradiction, hesitation and in-between state.

Do Ho Suh was born in South Korea in 1962. His father was a renowned painter, and he grew up in a family house architecturally designed and well-preserved. After completing a Master's degree in Korean Painting, he trained in sculpture in the United States and is currently living and working in the United Kingdom. Suh's lived experiences shape his sustained investigation into memory, cultural identity and the vulnerability of migrant subjectivity. His work constantly addresses the instability of belonging, the fragility of identity and the experience of living between cultural frameworks connected to a sense of 'home.' As Suh has said, "the concept of home didn't exist; it only started to exist when I left home and went elsewhere."[36]

Materially, *North Wall* embodies fragility and transparency. Unlike the solid architectural references of his other works, such as *Fallen Star* (2012) and *Bridging Home* (2010), Suh constructs this piece from translucent coloured polyester fabric supported by stainless-steel frames, forming part of his 'portable home' series, which began with the first fabric home artwork, *Seoul Home*, in 1999. The material communicates a sense of impermanence and uncertainty; most significantly, it



Figure 3. Hand-stitched aluminium Chinese ink painting landscape,
with a pipe-cleaner-wired tree, installation photograph at Dunedin School of Art. (2025).

Figure 4. Qiu Ying (1482 - 1559),
Fairyland of Peach Blossom.
Ming Dynasty, Ink and colours on silk,
1750x667mm. Tianjin Museum, China.



communicates exposure. A house, which is supposed to be a site of privacy and protection, here becomes transparent; it exposes itself by being porous to the surrounding environment.

This transparency resonates strongly with my experience as a migrant. In moments of social awkwardness—when language fails, when cultural references cannot be accessed, when attention is directed towards me, and I am unable to respond—I feel like a transparent house myself, instinctively seeking retreat, yet finding myself exposed to public scrutiny. In those moments, my memory and Suh's house collapse into a single space—suspended.

Suh's work also creates a sense of spatial and volumetric pressure. The wall is at a one-to-one scale, preserving the architectural volume of his father's Korean home. This physical accuracy sets up a meaningful relationship with the gallery space: the imbalance between an individual migrant's identity and the larger, more powerful cultural environment. Adding to the spectral, immaterial quality, the suspended house appears isolated and unsupported.

In my sculpture *En Route, Finding My One Tree Hill* (2026), I hand-stitched an aluminium-mesh *shanshui* terrain that viewers can physically walk through. The material choice is deliberate. Drawing on the inspiration of Do Ho Suh's portable house, the aluminium mesh I used to make *shanshui* translates landscape into lightness and permeability, forming a skeletal topography that recalls the gestural strokes of ink painting as a suggestion but not replication. Simultaneously, it addresses the sense of belonging and longing, reconfiguring cultural memories into structure.

Traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting does not rely on a technique of perspective that stabilises vision through a single, fixed vanishing point, but unfolds across shifting viewpoints over time. The viewer's eye travels through the scroll—moving from the foreground to the distance, inhabiting multiple horizons rather than standing before a single unified scene.

Horizon in *shanshui* is a relational threshold that continuously changes as the viewer moves. My aluminium landscape translates this logic into three-dimensional space. As viewers walk through the mesh terrain, their bodily movement generates changing sightlines and dissolving contours. There is no single authoritative vantage point. The horizon shifts with each step. This materialisation of a moving perspective reflects both my perception as lived experience and my understanding of migrant ontology: identity is not stabilised through a singular cultural viewpoint; it is continuously negotiated across overlapping spatial frameworks.

The three-dimensional *shanshui* is therefore, I believe, a 'lieu,' where my cultural memory and current living space remain in dialogue. It sustains the relational motion through which negotiation between different cultures also continues. I hope to activate this memory-space where multiple horizons coexist in relation. Through viewers' bodily movements and continuously shifting points of view, the landscape refuses a singular perspective. Although the work is installed on the floor level and there is a certain fixedness suggested by the physical gallery space, within viewers' walking experience the unfixed horizon terrain is reproduced through encounter—shaped by the interaction between my memories and the viewers'. In this shared negotiation, new memories emerge, not belonging solely to the migrant nor to the host population, but arising within the space between.

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1 This article is partially excerpted from my MFA dissertation.

2 Teh Cheong Chang, "Place, Memory and Identity: Imagining 'New Asia.'" *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46, no. 3 (2005), 247–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2005.00286.x.

3 This relates to artworks I have made in the BVA third year and the BVA Honours at Dunedin School of Art.

4 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 7–24.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 57–123.

6 *Shanshui*, 山水, literally "mountain-water", refers to Chinese traditional landscape painting and its broader aesthetic philosophy. *Shanshui* appears first at the fourth century CE, slowly developed into an independent pictorial genre during the Five Dynasties period (907–960) and reached its classical form in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), where shifting viewpoints within the landscape became defining characteristics. *Shanshui* also refers to philosophical understandings of the relationship between human and nature, drawing particularly on Daoism.

7 *Hutong* (胡同): traditional narrow alleyways in northern Chinese cities, typically lined with single-storey courtyard houses, forming interconnected communities and shared living spaces.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (Harper & Row, 1980), 139–140.

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991), 39.

10 Jan Assmann, "Memory Culture," *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15–69.

11 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 9.

12 *Shābāo* (沙包): refers to a small, hand-sewn fabric pouch traditionally filled with rice, beans, corn, wheat or sand, common in Chinese childhood play. *Shābāo*, in the context of my artwork, are used both as throwing objects in games and as tactile, weighted items such as stones and memories.

13 Louise Bliss, "Containers of Remembering: The Creative Practices of Collecting Memory Objects" (PhD dissertation, University of Portsmouth, 2014), 37.

14 See Henri Bergson's theory of 'duration,' which refers to time as a lived whole of our inner experience that differs from absolute time; in duration, memory is continuously becoming as a subjective flow.

15 Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (I.B. Tauris, 2007).

16 Ibid, [page].

17 Ibid.

18 Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, no.65 (1995), 125–33.

19 Ibid, 128.

20 Ibid.

21 Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Andrew P. Davidson, *At Home in the Chinese Diaspora: Memories, Identities and Belongings* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

22 Manying Ip, "Chinese New Zealanders: Old Settlers and New Immigrants," in *Immigration and National Identity in New Zealand*, ed. Stuart Greif (Dunmore Press, 1995), 162.

23 James Beattie and Louise Stevenson, "'[W]hat beauty in oriental art means': Asian Arts, Soft Diplomacy, and New Zealand cultural Nationalism—The Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art, Christchurch, 1935," *Museum Worlds* 7, no. 1, (2019): 58–70.

24 Manying Ip, "Redefining Chinese Female Migration: From Exclusion to Transnationalism," in *Shifting Centres: Women and Migration in New Zealand History*, ed. Lyndon Fraser and Katie Pickles (University of Otago Press, 2002), 149–165.

25 Yiyan Wang, "Guy Ngan: His Art, Life and Pacific-Chinese Aesthetics," *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. NS38 (2024): 195–216.

26 Two articles in 1972 and 1982 make particular mention of Ngan's work; both publications were in design and craft industry journals. He was first recognised in 2006 by Heather Galbraith as "a significant contributor to New Zealand's visual culture." See Wang, "Guy Ngan," 213.

27 From today's perspective, this may be read as problematic, though at the time Ngan used Māori motifs to articulate a Pacific identity rather than treating Māori culture as 'Other.'

28 Guy Ngan, "Visual Art and Daily Bread," unpublished speech as Director, New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, March 1983.

29 Jung Eun Lee, "Tracing the Rise of Chinese New Zealand Artists: Guy Ngan, Denise Kum, Yuk King Tan" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Canterbury, 2005).

30 Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2008), 97–107.

31 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

32 Xu Bing, *Book From the Sky*, 1987–1991, water-based ink on bamboo maobian paper, dyed paper covers, walnut box with leather and ivory clasps; book leaves printed from hand-carved moveable pear-wood type, traditional Chinese thread binding.

33 China National Gallery has been renamed China Art Gallery.

34 Xu Bing, *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 1994-1996, water-based ink on paper, camphorwood box and boards, Hand-printed woodblock and ink rubbing, calligraphy and butterfly binding.

35 Do Ho Suh, *North Wall*, polyester, stainless-steel armature and cable, Auckland Art Gallery, 26 July 2025–23 March 2026.

36 "Janice Kerbel Talks to Do Ho Suh," *Home Sweet Home*, 20 March 2025, https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-65-spring-2025/home-sweet-home.

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THE SWAN MAIDEN

Sophie Aitken



Figure 1. Sophie Aitken, *The Maidens*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

This article reflects on a year-long study of the Swan Maiden myth, central to my BVA Honours project at the Dunedin School of Art. The Swan Maiden is a story of theft and transformation. In traditional Northern and Central European folklore, a swan transforms into a woman using a magical feathered cloak. A hunter becomes captivated by her and steals her cloak, trapping her in the human world against her will. Unable to return to her swan form, she is forced into the roles of wife and mother as they marry and have a daughter together. She remains bound to

these imposed roles until she is able to reclaim her cloak and escape.[1] Historically framed through a patriarchal lens, the maiden is positioned as a passive object of possession. My research and installation of embroidered cushions at the Dunedin School of Art 2025 *SITE* exhibition, *The Swan Maiden*, rework this narrative. This article likewise repositions the Swan Maiden as an active subject whose experience of captivity within patriarchal expectations of womanhood and journey towards reclaiming agency over her identity and body are centred through the slow, labour-intensive process of hand-stitched embroidery.

The *Swan Maiden* myth is part of the "Animal Bride" archetype,[2] found globally in figures such as the Scottish Selkie[3] and Russian Rusalka.[4] These myths work to control what is seen as the "untamed" feminine. By stealing the object of transformation (a skin, a cloak or feathers), the hunter enacts a form of violent domestication, forcing the maiden into the roles of wife and mother. The Swan Maiden's ability to shift between human and animal form symbolises an identity that resists the fixed social roles expected of women. While her human form is often shown as passive, her swan form embodies an untamed freedom. This metamorphosis is a metaphor for the ongoing struggle between the identities women are expected to perform and the identities they live out for themselves. As Marina Warner argues, fairy tales often act as spaces where women's experiences of power and powerlessness are shared.[5] Within this context, the *Swan Maiden* myth can be seen as a narrative that reflects on systems of control over the female body.



Figure 2. Sophie Aitken, *The Swan Maiden*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection describes the abject as that which disturbs identity, system and order, causing both fascination and disgust as it disrupts the boundary between the human and the animal, the self and the other.[6] Drawing on this concept, my work explores the collapse of boundaries through the Swan Maiden's metamorphosis. Building on Kristeva's theory of abjection, Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine' examines how patriarchal culture construes the female body as threatening when it crosses boundaries of control, purity and order. Creed argues that figures associated with bodily transformation, reproduction and bodily excess are made out to be monstrous because they challenge idealised representations of femininity.[7] Drawing on Creed's theory, my work shows the Swan Maiden's transformation as a disruption of the graceful and contained feminine body, replacing the romanticised image of the swan with a visceral and unstable transformation. By placing this transformation within the modern kitchen, traditionally associated with cleanliness and containment, the work shifts the domestic space into something unstable, disrupted by the Swan Maiden's porous, transforming body. Placed within this environment, the Swan Maiden's metamorphic form forces a confrontation between the ordered interior and the disordered self. In doing so, the project brings the Swan Maiden into the present, where women's identities continue to be negotiated within the home.

My methodology is grounded in feminist materiality that reclaims the "subversive stitch," a concept coined by art historian Rozsika Parker to describe how embroidery, while historically used to



Figure 3. Sophie Aitken, *The Robe*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.



Figure 4. Sophie Aitken, *Metamorphosis 1*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

keep women quiet and busy at home, also gave them a secret place for self-expression and defiance.[8] By choosing this medium, my work deliberately inhabits the space it seeks to critique. The slow, repetitive act of hand stitching felt like a reflection of the Swan Maiden's own domestic entrapment and the invisible labour of the household. The use of white satin, a fabric associated with the civilised woman, establishes a surface of idealised and performative purity. This pure material is then turned into a functional object of the domestic space. As a cushion, it references the roles of wife and homemaker forced upon the Swan Maiden. From there, it is subverted through my interpretation of the myth and her 'monstrous' transformation.

This project sits alongside the work of feminist artists who have used domestic craft as a form of political expression. Like Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold, who use embroidery and quilting to elevate 'women's work' into the space of high art and storytelling, I use the cushion as a site to retell and reshape narrative.[9] However, my work is also influenced by the visceral bodily politics of Kiki Smith.[10] By depicting the Swan Maiden's metamorphosis as a grotesque breaking of the skin, I translate Smith's exploration of the unstable female body into a textile critique. Together, these influences position the work between traditional craft and contemporary, abject resistance.

The series opens with an embroidery of the Swan Maiden and her sisters standing on the shore. Although they appear mostly human, their downcast gazes suggest unease within their temporary human forms. Swans bathe nearby, reinforcing their true nature, while a navy outline of the hunter is subtly hidden within the forest. Navy was chosen as a recurring motif, because it evokes authority, positioning the hunter as an intrusive presence and foreshadowing the capture that defines the myth.

The second cushion depicts the maiden gazing away, her expression distant, while a swan is draped around her neck like a massive, living adornment. This image evokes a dual sense of tenderness and entrapment. The swan is not shown as a suffocating force, but as a weight that physically embodies the Swan Maiden's divided identity.

The pivotal moment of violation is then depicted. The Swan Maiden is alone in the water, her sisters having already taken flight. She watches in horror as the hunter's hands enter the frame to seize her feathered cloak, the source of her autonomy. Rather than a human reaction, her neck and face lean forward with an open-mouthed cry, mirroring the territorial aggression of a swan.

This piece shifts to the Swan Maiden in a state of metamorphosis. She kneels on the ground, reaching upward in a gesture that is a plea and a reclamation. Her body appears to be ripping apart as feathers emerge. Set within a modern kitchen and embroidered entirely in the same navy thread used to depict the hunter, the image represents the domestic interior as an extension of his authority, symbolising how patriarchal structures continue to shape the Swan Maiden's identity and framing her struggle as an ongoing negotiation within the modern home.

The series shifts to an embroidery that depicts the silhouette of a ballerina overlaid with a swan, merging human and animal. This references both the Swan Maiden's dual identity and the ballet *Swan Lake*. While the Swan Maiden story is not widely known, *Swan Lake* and Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film, *Black Swan*, provide a familiar cultural reference point through themes of sacrifice and entrapment. The work connects these narratives to the ballerina's performative femininity and tragic beauty.



Figure 5. Sophie Aitken, *The Ballerina*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.



Figure 6. Sophie Aitken, *Metamorphosis 2*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

In a more intimate study of metamorphosis, another embroidery presents the Swan Maiden in a transitional state. She looks downward with a human eye and mouth, yet her 'civilised' face is broken by a large beak emerging from its centre. Her hair is pulled into a tight, disciplined bun, her neck has already begun to curve into the elongated form of a swan, and her shoulders are submerged by feathers, capturing the instability of her identity.

The series concludes with the mother and daughter as swans, flying side by side. While this represents their escape, their bodies are entangled, forms merging and overlapping to suggest the shared struggle that led to their freedom. By including the daughter in this act of escape, the work shifts towards a narrative of generational freedom.

The cushion is traditionally an object of rest and comfort, yet here it is also a canvas for scenes of captivity and resistance. This juxtaposition reinforces the tension between a soft, familiar surface and the myth's unsettling nature, suggesting that the home is not a neutral space but a site where identity is imposed and contested. In many traditional versions of the Swan Maiden myth, her escape is temporary. The maiden is often forced to abandon her daughter and is eventually recaptured by the hunter. However, in this version, the Swan Maiden escapes with her daughter, rejecting both the role of obedient wife and the narrative of her recapture. In doing so, the cycle of captivity is broken, shifting the ending towards a possibility of liberation across generations.



Figure 7. Sophie Aitken, *The Swans*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

Throughout this project, my understanding of transformation evolved from a physical metamorphosis to a way of reimagining inherited folklore through women's experiences. The process of making revealed transformation as an ongoing negotiation rather than a singular moment of change. Initially, my engagement with the Swan Maiden myth focused on captivity and possession. Through the process of making, my practice shifted towards agency and reclamation, treating the myth as a site where inherited narratives can be reconsidered. The project seeks to contributes to contemporary feminist reinterpretations of myth by demonstrating how embroidery and myth can work together as a method for generating new understandings of womanhood and agency.

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FROM VERB TO ADVERB: CONTEMPORARY PAINTING FROM WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SELF

Sam Loe

> If I have thought of painting as a verb, now it needs an adverb. Paintings like emotions are always situated, sited. Potentially new emotions can arise from new situations; meaning arises from conditions. Accidentally, awkwardly, blindly, dramatically, madly, wildly, hungrily.[1]
>
> (Judy Millar, 2024)

Judy Millar articulates the importance not only of action in contemporary painting but of manner, meaning the degree of intentionality and the temporal conditions under which a painting is made. "The adverb is our situation. The verb is the action. Together they can give a new insight, both to ourselves and to others."[2] For Millar, our actions are determined by culturally situated conditions, yet within that exists the possibility for a particular embodied perspective. Millar's sense of being "situated, sited" is not a matter of physical place but of the how rather than the where, the emotional and temporal conditions under which an act of painting occurs. Whilst she embraces embodiment in the making, she also seeks to make herself scarce, exploring the paradox where the painter's particular perspective on the world can be most profound when giving up the notion of 'self.' This seemingly absurd contradiction of being both fully present in the act of painting, while resisting subjectivity or a definitive hand, resonates deeply within my own practice. Her quote is not necessarily intended as an authoritative statement about painting, but I keep returning to it when thinking through questions of self-expression and abstraction, and how painting continues to be relevant, or worth questioning, in the contemporary context. It also offers a way for me to retell some of the history of how women engaged with abstract expressionism and to move on from the patriarchal associations of action painting.

I make large-scale, unstretched paintings, often on found blanket substrates, layering multiple processes that record my felt experience through shape, line, colour and gesture.[3] These distinctive subjective qualities of felt experience are known in philosophy and neuroscience as qualia or the "raw feels of consciousness."[4] They can arguably only be measured through direct or subjective experience. My work moves between structure and spontaneity, deliberate choice and chance, questioning where expression arises from and how painting might accommodate both subjective experience and objective materiality. My resulting paintings appear somewhat biomorphic; they evoke the figural, meaning that they gesture toward imagery that goes beyond the figurative and representation, resisting codification whilst maintaining bodily sensation. I will discuss and expand upon the figural in more depth later in this essay.

My studio and contextual research focuses on how I can set up the conditions for embodied making to allow meaning to emerge for myself and the viewer. I prioritise a pre-reflective space before words and narratives take hold—a bodily awareness on the cusp of recognisability. Such

phenomenological concerns connect to a field of contemporary painting where abstraction and representation merge, embracing what I see as a feminist approach that accepts paradox and emphasises unknowability, rather than pursuing mastery or power. Millar's work and thinking are key to my research as she articulates a contemporary approach to painting that can hold multiple states simultaneously, including embodied action and critical distance.

I ask how I can contribute to the embodied type of large abstraction that has been made by women in recent years, both in New Zealand and internationally, extending and re-thinking the possibility of the figural within abstract painting as a feminist act.

Contemporary American painter Amy Sillman describes painting as a series of decisions where you are editing with the body—spilling, cutting, pulling, covering, scraping and many more verbs that are involved in the act of making a painting. She says, "You don't have a voice when you are making a painting—you have a body."[5] My own works embrace an indexical relationship to my body, meaning that I lie on, wrap, drag and pull the enveloping substrates around the studio floors and walls throughout the process of making. Indexicality, as defined by Isabelle Graw, evokes a sense of the artist's presence or "enhanced physicality,"[6] something I am interested in making explicit within my final works whilst keeping personal narrative at bay. For me the intentionality and conditions of the adverb add to this indexicality, giving subjective meaning that could be experienced as "a highly personalized semiotic activity."[7] I ask which adverbs can welcome a process that maintains my bodily experience whilst making myself scarce. Examples I embrace include, but are not limited to: sleepily, sensorially, somatically, unknowingly, blindly, freely and presently.

Beginning the process, from rested states with eyes closed, I encounter and initially record the qualia of my interoceptive landscape through layers of loose, non-compositional, charcoal drawings that feel somewhat automated, without conscious direction. The drawings are then mediated through masking, cutting and tracing—all ways of isolating certain gestural forms as semiotic icons that become stencils for my paintings. These modes are also a way to deepen my understanding of the free choreography in the drawings by more consciously learning the original automated shapes and moves, allowing for the next iterations of the work to develop new meaning or context. The cut shapes serve to cover the substrate in preparation for a layer of airbrushing and keep me 'working blindly' and lingering in an inchoate space so that I do not plan the end result. Spray-paint allows a soft landing of paint through air and gravity, evoking the movement of breath. As I work with my airbrush, I feel a bodily connection to something quite fundamental and even ancient, knowing that the earliest artists blew pigment through hollowed out bones to make hand silhouettes in caves.[8]

Stencils provide guides that build up the figural and abstracted dimensions of the painting. Sometimes I work on the floor, where I lightly place the stencils down, and sometimes I work on the wall, stapling the stencils onto the substrates. In both cases, the edges of the card stencil can peel away from the blanket in some areas, producing moments of diffuseness which contrast with the sharpness of areas where the cut-out has been firmly placed. These differences of pressure enable a sense of touch to be present in the work without my hand being directly in contact with the substrate; simultaneously present and removed. This also sets up conditions for painting so that I cannot fully know or see what I am doing. Planning or being in control of the outcome is difficult with these methods and conditions, which allows me to invite the unknown in as an operative part of my practice. What I have found is that drawing from an inchoate or rested mind state does not necessarily create peaceful imagery, but rather something dynamic and energetic that is somewhat familiar and somewhat alien.



Figure 1. Judy Millar, *Waking at Dawn*, 2023,
acrylic and oil on canvas, 1400x950mm.

In works on canvas such as *Digesting Anomalies* (fig. 2), there is an illusion between what appears to be on the surface as figure or form and what appears to be ground and depth. The repetitive shapes become gestural motifs that appear to be stuck on as collaged pieces but are in fact the background or first marks that were made on the canvas. The depth and surface only becomes apparent in the final reveal of the painting when all masking tape is removed from the canvas. My methodology continues to prioritise process, material and body over planning or controlling the image, allowing the painting to surprise me so that it becomes a document that is edited with my body. The painting emerges through a rhythm of conceal—reveal—conceal—reveal—conceal—reveal, allowing multi-layered generative processes that explore non-composition through both choice and chance.

My interest in embodiment and somatics comes from many years of teaching and practising Yoga and meditation. Somatics, defined by philosopher Thomas Hanna, studies the body as perceived from within through embodied anatomy and movement modalities, where first person perception challenges the third person view prevalent in the Cartesian thinking of medicine, science and art history.[9] This approach is influenced by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology, which lays down the notion of a "lived body"[10] as our primary organ of perception; a dynamic and unified self, rather than an object. "By this remaking contact with the body, and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, and as it is the subject of perception."[11] Rediscovery here points to finding meaning and a relationship to the self through fully inhabiting the body. This is not to diminish the role of our minds and cognition, but to consider the primary role of the body in the act of perception. This recovery of the body as the primary site of perception also speaks to a feminist reframing of perception itself, one that resists the supposedly neutral, disembodied perceiving subject inherited from Cartesian thought—a subject historically coded as objective, universal and implicitly male. Merleau-Ponty eventually developed a conceptual framework that combined the third-person (objective/external) and the first-person (subjective/reflective) perspectives on the body and human experience in his last, unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible*.[12] This movement beyond the duality of body and brain was highly influenced by Martin Heidegger's notion of 'dasein,'[13] referring to the state of simply existing, as neither subjective nor objective but at the intersection of both and adopting a caring attitude for the world. These Western philosophers of phenomenology share conceptual ground with yoga, meditation and ancient Eastern traditions in which my own direct embodied practices are based. In particular, the non-dualistic tantric texts of Kashmir Shaivism articulate this merging of subject and object through the body itself. In the *Vijnana Bhairava Tantra* (7th to 8th century), the body is described as the gateway:

> Attend to the skin
> As a subtle boundary
> Containing vastness.
> Enter that pulsing immensity.
> Discover that you are not separate
> From anything there.
> There is no inside, There is no outside, There is no other —
> No object to meditate upon that is not you.[14]

My painting process often begins with this type of sensory meditation, lying on blankets and pillows in a practice known as Yoga Nidra. One meaning of the word 'Yoga' is to be awake in a



Figure 2. Sam Loe, *Digesting Anomalies*, 2025,
canvas, compressed charcoal, acrylic spray paint, 3500x2160mm.

spiritual way, and the translation of 'Nidra' is to be asleep. Therefore, Yoga Nidra embraces the juxtaposition of two opposing modes, opening up a liminal state where the body is physically asleep whilst the mind is awake to its own consciousness. Part of the practice is to map and track interoception and felt sensation throughout the body, to stay with feeling rather than thinking. Our brains naturally want to jump to recognition and labelling, pulling us away from the moment. Sensing the body keeps me present to a pre-noetic bearing—an open and spacious place of pure-perception, matter and rhythm from which to make marks. These practices release tension, create more ease in the body, a sense of spaciousness in the mind. Working directly with the somatic markers in the body can offer a new perspective or what is popularly claimed as healing from stress and trauma.[15]

My own stresses and trauma come from many years of mothering a child with rare and complex medical needs involving chronic pain and hundreds of hospital visits, some life-threatening. I have had to find tools that settle my own nervous system and have found these grounding practices vital in order to be with the unknown. From this perspective, these grounding practices are not simply private repair; I see them as part of a wider cultural feminist reframing of self-care as an act of claiming time, space and agency amidst systems that make such claiming difficult. When I am drawing and painting, I am not interested in purely therapeutic or cathartic self-expression, yet I acknowledge and even honour my particular and unique embodied perspective. I come back to my body as it is in the moment, and the way it has marked and scored all my experiences physically and biologically over time. Through resting the body, attending to sensation and inviting meditative mind states, what emerges in the work comes more from the qualities of sensation in my body rather than from narrative or personal story. Despite wanting privacy, I have come to understand that anti-subjectivity is impossible when making anything with my hands and from my body, and yet it offers some distance from personal life challenges. Amy Sillman recognises this paradox when painting, stating that "at the heart of trying to say what something means you need the person's personal story and at the same time you can't rely on it."[16] This acknowledges the inherent indexicality of painting as well as a need to step back from it.

Art historian Gregory Minissale asks a question that resonates with my own research: "how far is it possible to 'lose oneself' in contemporary art?"[17] He discusses the role of matter, sensation and activating particular mind states in relation to creative interpretation both in making and viewing art. His research speaks to my ongoing fascination with the space and relationship that exists via the artwork as a third body of sensation between the maker and the viewer. His research invites us to consider that pure-perception or mind without memory is really part of matter and that it is art that helps us to intuit this. Minissale examines how brain networks, and in particular how the Default Mode Network (DMN), the part of the brain that allows for daydreams and reminiscing, contrasts with the Central Executive Network's analytical and more ordered and decisive thinking, which is useful for checking spontaneous and abstract ideas. Mind wandering is part of the DMN and can be seen as "a state that is non-goal directed behaviour and decoupling from processes of vigilance."[18] It plays a vital role in creative interpretation, where one slips in and out of self-awareness.

In my own embodied practice and yoga research I have come to understand that DMN activation is only the first stage of entering into more relaxed brain wave states. Even though it allows for restful or "dampened attention,"[19] the autobiographical "I, me, mine" references remain prominent.[20] In meditation practices, we seek to go beyond the personal self by activating the Present Centred Default Brain Network, which may open to a spacious, non-dualistic experience

of 'Awareness' or impersonal 'Self,'[21] a state that is perhaps impossible to give words to but absolutely perceptible and known through direct experience of aliveness itself.[22] This openness to rested mind-states and mind wandering means not restricting oneself to rehearsing old ideas and not being limited to situational types or scripts, but rather allowing these moments to build on chance encounters and connections.

Minissale's research indicates that to be truly open to the encounter of art, whether as artist or viewer, one needs to embrace perceptual ambiguity and let go of rigorous cognitive control. Both making and viewing, for him, involve a perceptual and interpretive engagement with matter and sensation, which is why the same research on rested mind states applies to each. This allows access to what he refers to as vibrant materiality, or what I see as receptive encounters with matter and sensation. In particular, Minissale explores Gilles Deleuze's ideas on art, sensation, rhythm and matter in the work of Francis Bacon. He turns to Bacon's portraits, notably the *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), because they break with figuration in a way that invites a relationship to sensation and the act of painting. Deleuze responds to the raw impasto physicality of the paint with its forces of pressure, dilation, contraction and elongation alongside the perception of the face, allowing the interior forces that climb through the flesh to become perceptible.[23]

For Deleuze, the visual organ of perception, the eye, becomes interwoven and distributed across the whole body: "Painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the painting breathes)."[24] Through Bacon's work, Deleuze observes a merging of subject and object that is neither about the artist's inner experience being expressed nor about the viewer's interpretation, but a relational and direct encounter between the painter, the painting and the viewer. "I *become* in the sensation *and* something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other,"[25] the unity of sensing and the sensed. For him, sensation occupies a liminal zone between disorder (raw physical matter) and order (perception). Sensation, therefore, is not about knowing the world as it is represented, but about feeling the passage of sensation as a force of matter and the transformation it causes in the body, specifically in the nervous system. The 'figure' in Bacon's paintings then becomes the 'figural,'[26] which is not about resemblance, reflection or representation of a body, but a body as pure form through sensation and abstraction.[27]

Learning about rested mind states and sensation as matter has led me to question how my choice of materials, process and techniques might enhance and embody these concepts. As mentioned above, I often begin my work through body sensing meditations lying on blankets, which invite a safe and softening state of rest. I wanted to offer this sensation to the viewer and initially began to include blankets in my installations by simply placing a folded blanket on the ground in front of the paintings as a residue that referenced the making of the painting. The presence of the blanket brought with it a somatic awareness for the viewer, which excited me but needed resolving as an element within installation. The blanket becoming a painting substrate was a significant development in my methodology. It occurred in my studio as a result of completing and sending off a series of my canvas works to exhibit in Auckland. What remained on the ground after spray painting were the shapes, stencils and blankets from my rested modes of making. In an 'a-ha' moment, I realised that I was sitting on the perfect substrate for making further paintings that embraced a more haptic or sensorially inviting quality.

Mostly sourced from my restorative Yoga practice, the blankets provide a coloured ground, contributing to a sense of the painting's warmth, and a soft territory for the spray paint to

land upon. As found objects, they carry references to personal and cultural history (sleep, rest, rescue, care), yet what compels me most is how their physical and textural qualities activate both making and viewing. The woollen surface in combination with spray paint shifts me from the direct application of gestural mark-making with charcoal and paint on canvas, toward a more observational, hands-off mode, whilst maintaining a gestural presence. This shift also disrupted my established process and sequence. In the canvas works, the gestural motifs remain materially present on the surface via charcoal marks that are visible beneath the spray paint. In the blanket pieces, however, these marks are incorporated into the outlines of the stencilled shapes themselves. This opened up questions about my process: could I eliminate the canvas stage entirely, cutting stencils directly from pattern-making paper? Or are the canvas pieces an essential investment that makes the blanket paintings work? I continue to consider whether removing this shape-making phase would gain efficiency but lose something vital in the final outcome.

The blanket piece *Woozy Glitches* (2025, fig. 3) is built up through overlays of many shapes, offering random rhythms and pathways through what appears as a somewhat organic and biomorphic picture field. The tongue pink and fleshy maroons reinforce the bodily quality of figural forms, whilst raw parts of the blanket substrate, where stencils have kept the paint away, allow an ongoing return to the haptic. This is also why I allow the creases from the making and transporting of the work to remain visible. The painting invites a somatic response whilst remaining behind the gallery protocol barrier of 'please do not touch,' unlike a photograph or painting on canvas, where the material support typically recedes in service of the illusion it carries.



Fig 3. Sam Loe, *Woozy Glitches*, 2025, woollen blanket and acrylic spray paint, 1940x1540mm.

Millar calls this intrinsic quality of painting—simultaneously an illusionistic image and material object—the "double world."[28] This embodiment of painting is something that, as writer Jarrett Earnest points out, we desperately need in contemporary times to overcome an oversaturation of immaterial images that are unstable and transient: "we now need painting differently than we have before."[29] Unlike the mass-reproducible, screen-based images that dominate contemporary visual culture, a painting remains a singular material body, one that cannot be infinitely copied or dematerialised without ceasing to be itself. It is this insistence on singular, unrepeatable materiality, rather than the object/illusion combination alone, that I want to hold onto and extend in my own work. Rather than resolving tensions between binaries, such as the mental and physical, or our inner and outer worlds, many contemporary painters seek a third way, meditating on and inhabiting these dualities as a key part of their methodologies without trying to resolve them. I am interested in how such approaches have developed over time as a response to gesture and abstract expressionism.

Millar's statement about painting as a verb that now needs an adverb could be seen as both a celebration and a critique of abstract expressionism. As David Joselit notes, after Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionists, the gestural stroke shifted from internal to external expression, marking a shift from focusing on the result, the mark itself, to the conditions of its making by expanding painting's definition to what he describes as "a kind of scoring or recording of physical space and temporality."[30]

After the apparent endpoint of painting in the late 1960s and the conceptual concerns of the 1970s, there was a renewed interest in medium-specific practices. I particularly admire the feminist painters who continued pushing paint around into the 1980s and 90s, finding ways to engage with a gesture that was less bombastic and more nuanced than that of the abstract expressionists: Elizabeth Murray, Joan Snyder and Mary Heilmann in the 1980s, then Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman and Charline von Heyl through the 1990s to the present moment. This is where the shift from the verb to the adverb becomes particularly relevant as painters considered that specific states, conditions and contexts, such as gender, race and culture, matter a lot. The assumption that one person's (usually white male) subjective experience could stand in for a universal human experience moved towards an acknowledgement that there are multiple, different experiences that are all valid and need to be present in painting.

Anthony Byrt, in his essay "How to Paint Backwards," draws on Clement Greenberg's role as the great theorist and defender of abstract expressionism to characterise the movement's ethos as one in which gesture is essentially "an expressive act of self."[31] For Millar, this is not the case; instead, her gesture is, as Byrt puts it, "an act of expressive self."[32] This marks a small but significant shift, achieved through the removal of paint on smooth gessoed canvas, leading to a mimicking of the paintbrush gesture in a way that can be seen as a vitally, confirming feminist act. In an interview Millar says:

> When I first started painting, it's a European male tradition, essentially. And I really felt like to find a way in there, I had to dismantle it for myself. So I started to take it apart. And so I started to even copy other artists' work and then wipe it away. I really felt like I had to somehow dismantle it in order to find my own way into it.[33]

Millar and Sillman both evade the use of paintbrushes as their primary tool for applying paint. They use everything but traditional tools and actions to inhabit the verbs of painting and in doing so affect adverbial conditions. Millar, for example, is always finding new kinds of things to use to

move the paint, including rags and tools that she invents, such as a dirty bag full of sand that she pulls using the full length of her limbs, including her fingers and feet, without directly touching or controlling the mark. There is a removal of the self when the artist relinquishes direct control over how the mark forms, and yet the paradox plays out where one's own subjectivity and choice become embedded in the final works. It is this same distance between hand and substrate that has made the airbrush and blanket substrates key tools in my own practice.

Sillman has found similar "anti-heroic"[34] ways to reclaim abstract expressionism's heritage whilst finding new meaning and relevance for the painted gesture. She advocates for "re-doing" rather than "un-doing" abstract expressionism, and describes that style's feminist legacy in her essay "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defence of Abstract Expressionism II":

> It left us with a very nice plot of foreclosed real estate that, several generations later, younger artists could make use of—especially those who were supposedly barred from the place to begin with, as if we were squatters in Peggy Guggenheim's house.[35]

Charlene Von Heyl, one of these 'squatters,' and a contemporary of Sillman, simply says that it is what the painted picture does that she is interested in, not what it is. She employs chance-based techniques and non-composition to be with the unknown, and describes reaching a space of no-knowledge, of absence of text, where a painting says everything and nothing to open space in the mind.[36] For her, painting offers an ineffable language that enables the work to exist without explanation or opinion, and yet she hopes that the beholder activates new meaning when viewing the work to find "their specific non-word ideas in it."[37] Von Heyl spends a lot of time lounging around in her studio in order to inhabit this state; solitude is vital she says.[38] This deeply resonates with my own experiences of finding spaciousness in order to paint.

Millar, Sillman, Von Heyl and many of their contemporaries harness unknowability and de-skilling as an essential part of making, while maintaining profound knowledge and skill of how to make marks on a canvas. Von Heyl allows her process to reach a point where the painting seems to make demands of her rather than the other way round: "I don't want to make the painting, I want the painting to invent itself and surprise me."[39] But the paradox remains: the painting cannot paint itself, it needs the painter's body. This combination of embracing the unknown while navigating the histories and associations of marks allows the painting to develop its own apparent agency and vitality. Graw claims that a painting has its own discourse and subjectivity, or what she terms "vitalist projections,"[40] due to its intrinsic indexicality, pointing to an absent author who remains somewhat physically present in them, creating a distributed rather than singular subjectivity.

Ultimately, I believe that leaning into the unknown and embodied practice supports a feminist approach to abstraction. Curator Helen Molesworth speaks directly to this when she says "For me, feminism is a critique of power and mastery, and most of all, it's a warning about how the combination of mastery and power has, historically, led to violence. One result of this questioning of power is that unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue."[41] In accord with this underlying feminist philosophy, the painters I have discussed here invite the viewer into a moment, outside of art history or the hierarchy of knowledge needed to read a painting, and without even an image to take away—a generous experience that one cannot quite put a finger on yet wants to return to again and again.

Reflecting on my own process and work, I see that consciously invoking rested brain states allows me to open to the unconscious and maintain a pre-noetic bearing, creating an empowering place



Figure 4. Sam Loe, Felt Matter, 2025,
woollen blanket and acrylic spray paint, 1940x1540mm
(installed at Sanderson Contemporary gallery in the *Emerging Artists* exhibition, 2026).

in my practice where unknowability is a feminist virtue. The inchoate becomes generative, leading to new understanding in my work such as the 'a-ha' moment in the use of the blanket. My shift from canvas to blanket substrates allows for a synthesis of the resting processes that feed into the painting. Figural abstraction within the picture frame builds on this, approaching representation but holding it at bay, and acknowledging the dynamic and non-linear process of perception that interweaves body and brain. Through these strategies, I hope to offer what Deleuze points out as the possibility of engaging with and shifting the nervous system. I see this as an act of care, creating a relational proposition, distributing agency between myself, the material, and whoever encounters the work by inviting viewers into their own experience of qualia, the raw feels of sensation that resist language yet are absolutely present.

Through both my studio practice and contextual research, I feel grateful and excited to discover the history, approaches and philosophies that contemporary women painters making large abstract work inhabit. I bring my own history of self-inquiry, somatic and meditative practice as a lens through which to join the conversation on how expression and abstraction can continue to extend and re-think painting as a feminist act.

Millar's proposition that new insight arises when the adverb is present in the action of painting has become a useful way for me to attend to the how—the manner and the conditions of my own making— rather than only the actions themselves. I acknowledge that there is a certain irony in using the semantics of language structure to speak to paintings where I want to keep words and narratives at bay. Yet what the verb and adverb framework opens up is an intuitive, rhythmic, visual vocabulary that is punctuated with repetition and variance, or what Von Heyl might describe as "language without words," resisting linear syntax or narrative structure.[42] As Millar suggests, when paintings arise from adverbial conditions, each encounter unfolds while engaging this central paradox: a place from within and beyond the self. The verb anchors me in painting's actions whilst the adverb shifts how meaning emerges—not through mastery, but through the collapse of boundaries I once thought were distinct.

Sam Loe completed an MFA in painting at Whitecliffe College, Auckland, with first class honours under the supervision of Anoushka Akel and Noel Ivanoff. She was included in the *Emerging Artists* exhibition at Sanderson Contemporary and has a solo show scheduled there in October 2026. Her practice continues to explore the interplay between embodied presence and visual expression, where somatic and meditative practice act as a lens through which to investigate sensation and the figural in contemporary painting.

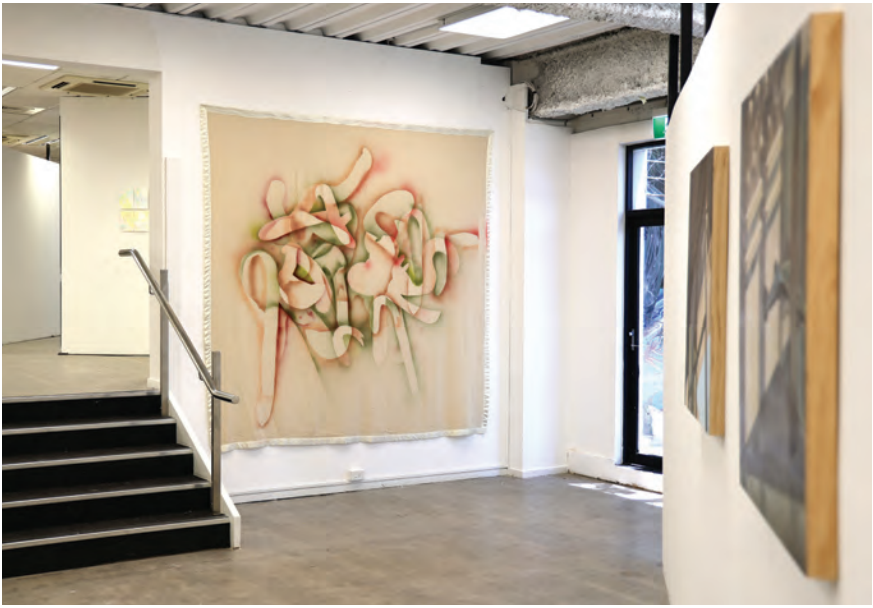


Figure 5. Sam Loe, *Soft Belly*, 2025.
Woollen blanket and acrylic spray paint, 2460x2510mm.
(installed at Whitecliffe final MFA graduation exhibition).



Fig 6. Sam Loe, *It's on the Tip of my Tongue*, 2025.
Woollen blanket with satin edges and acrylic spray paint, 2460x2510mm (plus detail).

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DON'T WORRY, THIS HAPPENS ALL THE TIME

Mackenzie Hayward-Williams

My work has always been about catharsis, informed by trauma, whether I realised it or not. Making has given me ways to describe my feelings with my hands. I spent much of my childhood drawing or cutting up fabric and paper, creating collages, faces, paper dolls and characters, made up or based on movies or books I read—people who lived in worlds far outside of my own. Making is a helpful tool in connecting myself to the world a little better.

While studying at Dunedin School of Art (DSA), I created textile works deeply informed by childhood trauma, from Swanndri-esque plaid textile guns describing my experiences growing up as a queer person in Southland, to a roughly human-sized puppet hung from the ceiling for my undergraduate DSA *Site* exhibition, which worked through sexual trauma I experienced during my teenage years. Despite heavy themes, both my art making and art writing use humour. It is a natural healing process to try and create lightness out of darkness. It is also a good deflection tactic. But if a well-placed joke can hide several emotions, it is not very good at hiding physical sickness.

This article consolidates the ideas and workings behind my BVA Honours project, *Poor Sick Clown*, exhibited at DSA's *Site* 2025. Three 'life-sized' clown sculptures embody feelings of isolation and pain, navigating spaces between naively perceived 'rock bottoms' and intangible distant futures, where I have no vices and I am completely healed. The work centres on a personal narrative of neurodiversity and chronic illness, exploring the creation of self and coping as a young person through layered complexities. I lean into feelings of foolishness and caricature, so I don't feel so ashamed by them—ashamed of being the clown, the butt of the joke.



Figure 1. *Poor Sick Clown*. From left to right: *I'm Getting There, Don't Worry*, *I'm Fine This Happens All The Time* and *Bending Over Backwards*.



Figure 2. *Don't Worry, I'm Fine This Happens All The Time*.

Don't Worry, I'm Fine This Happens All The Time (Fig. 2) is one of the three sculptures specifically influenced by my personal experiences with AUDHD and with Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS).[1] As explained to me, by medical professionals and Google, POTS is a form of dysautonomia which causes increased heart rate when standing, leading to dizziness, fatigue, sudden blindness and fainting due to insufficient blood flow to the brain. Fun! Equally fun to explain to bystanders. Hence, the reuse of the title.

The project explores these experiences with equal parts levity and severity. I am interested particularly in the action of disregarding ourselves and our health in the name of upholding unreciprocated relationships; and in keeping up appearances and keeping in touch with a sense of community, in any sphere, as an unwell person. There is as much humour in the lengths my friends and I go to, in our attempts to assimilate into the world and in spaces that are not built for people with disabilities, as there is pain. Trying to integrate myself fully into these spaces has only made me feel ridiculous, so that is what I am. Ridiculous, that is the feedback loop. But it also makes me laugh at these spaces that exclude so many. What a loss.

Not all my experiences are singular to me; many are shared universally by those failed by systems rooted in colonialism, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, classism and ableism, which are intertwined. Where do you start to participate in what you do not take seriously, and what in return does not take you seriously?

Jack Halberstam argues in his book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, that failure can be a useful and productive critique of capitalism and heteronormativity.

Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the



Figure 3. Original sketch of an angry clown face.

world. There is much to be learned from what is happening at the margins, at the edges, in those places where people who do not conform to the dominant logics of power, discipline, order, and efficiency find themselves living and thriving. Failure, in short, sometimes offers more creative solutions to problems than success, and this is particularly true for those whose success has never been legitimated.[2]

My work encourages the rejection of individualism and the dismantling of traditional ideas of success, wealth accumulation, advancement of career, marriage and having children. These are metrics that leave many people on the sidelines of so-called 'success.' Re-evaluating my needs and motivations, accepting limitations and building routines that allow me to live comfortably have been the hardest lessons of my life thus far. It has cost me opportunities and relationships, but overall, I feel closer to health. Ritalin also helps.[3]

It has been almost like a dance or circus act between keeping oneself alive and feeling as if one is slowly killing oneself, leaving one feeling very foolish, like when the clown is kicked around for laughs. A similar scene is set in examples used by cultural theorist and scholar Sianne Ngai in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, in which she offers theory and context behind some niches we use to process the "hyper-commodified, over-saturated world of late capitalism."[4]

"The Zany Science" is the title of the chapter devoted to a style of comedy in art and literature, which in contrast to irony indulges in light-hearted, silly or goofy behaviour.[5] These works often critique social norms or contain hidden, more nuanced subject matter and themes. A common trope seen within these comedies is the protagonists being pushed to their limits; the humour lies in their struggles to combat and adapt, their ineptness. The author refers to comedian and actor Lucille Ball's character in the 1950s American comedy *I Love Lucy*. The viewer watches housewife Lucy Ricardo's "doggedly persistent, comically strenuous efforts to break into the artistic and cultural production she reverently calls 'showbiz.'"[6] The challenges Lucy faces include quickly picking up new skills, such as "French or ballet, or … taking a temporary job involving some kind of affective service work: selling and unselling salad dressing on television, babysitting and managing child talent, working as a magician's assistant." Each of these temporary occupations requires Lucy to put on a costume and act like someone else. Ngai specifically references the Episode "Ricky Needs an Agent" as a prime example of 'zany.'[7] Lucy, "clad in a power suit and glasses," masquerades as her husband Ricky's agent in order to pressure MGM studios—with which he already has an ambiguous job contract—to let him make a movie.[8] To arouse interest in Ricky, she lies and brags about an offer of a Broadway musical so convincingly that MGM releases Ricky from his ambiguous job so he can pursue it. For the remainder of the episode, she commits herself to playing herself, Ricky's wife, Lucy Ricardo, to convince MGM of the existence of a crazy woman impersonating Ricky's agent to get him rehired.

It is the incompetence of Ball's character that is so funny, exemplified, according to Ngai, in a scene from the ballet episode in which Lucy gets her leg stuck in the bar.[9] Lucy Ricardo is comical because she fails to be versatile, as required by the roles she assumes in the pursuit of paid work—"an unremitting succession that in turn seems to be a formal echo of the multiple roles already demanded by the informal or unpaid job of housewife and mother (cook, teacher, chauffeur, cleaner etc)."[10] Yet it is her incompetence in both spheres—her proposed lack of talent and utter inflexibility—that makes her so entertaining, not her persistence or undeterred can-do spirit.

Throughout history, the role of a clown has been taken by those marginalised in some way, whether through disability, race or class.[11] Court jesters and fools, freaks and rodeo or circus clowns, are permitted to mock hierarchies or the status quo, so long as it is funny. Clowns are performers; their role is to entertain. But this character and role are separate from the self or at least should be. An interesting juxtaposition arises when the clown cannot perform, a scenario evident in the installations of Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. In *Vocabulary of Solitude* (2014–2016),[12] clowns fill a room, more than a dozen sitting or lying motionless.

If There were Anywhere but Desert, Friday (2002), is one of a seven-part series in which Rondinone represents each day of the week with an individual immobile figure, deprived of their freedom and capacity for fulfilling the role of trickster or fool.[13] Rondinone has described the 'failure' of his clowns:

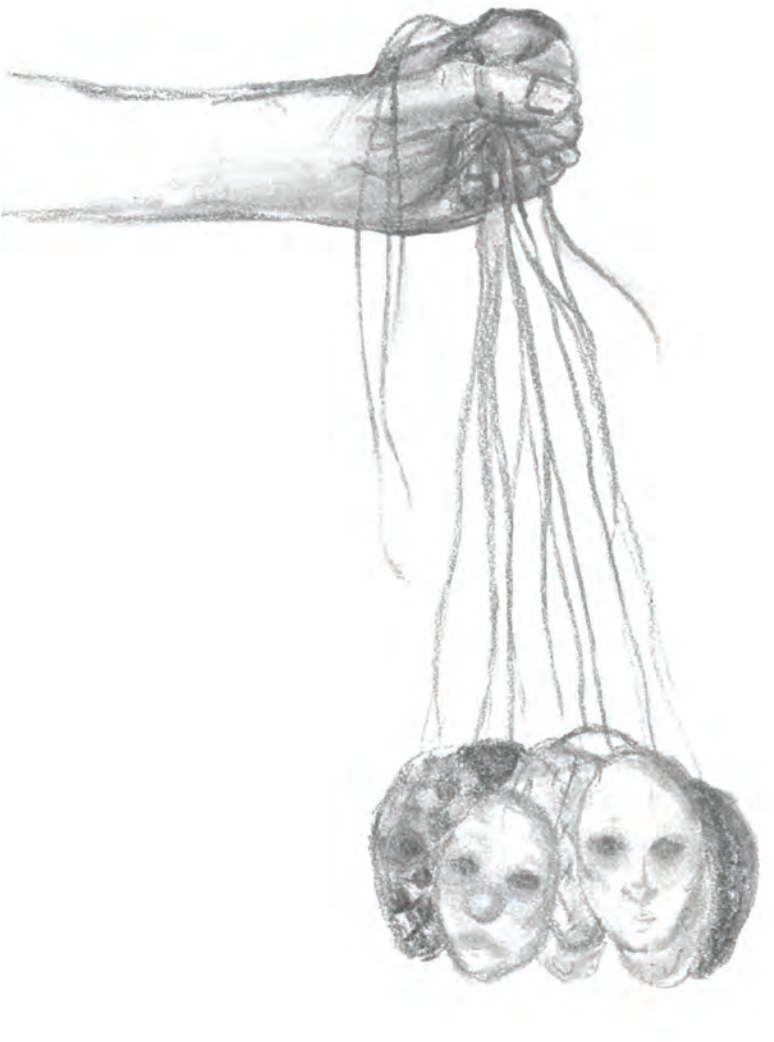


Figure 4. Original sketch of a hand grasping many masks.

The clown is an invention of high nobility to push away boredom and melancholy out of the court. At the same time, it functions as a substitute: it has freedom of speech his masters don't have. On the other hand, my clowns do not move. They only sit or lie down, do not laugh, do not say either good day or good night. By its absence of demonstration and its disinterest in the outside world, the character of the clown is possibly a self-portrait. He leads to a melancholy empty of meaning, which perpetuates itself in the vacuity of a world without irony.[14]

Yet each of Rondinone's clowns is still rich with colour and pattern, with exaggerated tulle collars, performatively dressed in contrast to the stark spaces they inhabit. I enjoy this aspect of his work: while each clown lies dormant, it may at some point rise. Realistically, as much as I jest, there are some things I must take seriously. For example: my health, therapy, the current state of the world. With clown figures or characters, I can live out a fantasy where everything is a joke. Meanwhile, it is hard not to feel like the fool or the comedic relief plagued by misfortunes. So why not lean into it? If I were to take things too seriously, where would I stop? If I am going to struggle to live up to societal measures of success, why not make a performance of it all? These figures can safely stand in this in-between and exist where I cannot.

Clowns connect all my ideas and feelings, particularly with neurodiversity and with mask-making having already being a part of my work. Clowns are adorned with permanent, painted expressions despite tribulations. 'Masking' is a term used to describe the conscious or unconscious strategies used by those who are neurodiverse to hide, camouflage or compensate for their autistic traits in social interactions and settings.[15] This behaviour suppresses both mental and physical feelings, allowing the individual to remain in certain environments despite it feeling unnatural, uncomfortable or painful. Masking can feel to me like creating different versions of myself to assimilate into different spaces. This process leaves me exhausted, and, ironically, it is a process that I do not feel is very convincing.

Creating the masks tapped into the deepest part of my practice throughout my time at DSA: the relationship between the visual language of stitching and patchwork collage, and the real but invisible act of healing or creating new versions of oneself to overcome hardship. Using scrap material to create faces and parts of the body, I felt as if I was stitching myself back together, often haphazardly or messily, but sometimes neatly and with care. Sometimes the stitches pulled too tight, some were too loose and started to unravel, other parts frayed and discoloured. But all parts are valid, part of the art and of the self.

Covering the masks and hands of these figures was important to me for many reasons. The face and head mask true emotions, and the hands make wrong or false actions that are aligned with the mask. I wanted these areas of patchwork to stand out. Any costume too elaborate could very quickly throw off these parts of the sculptures that were already so full of contrasting colours and textures. Each clown was appropriately dressed for the occasion, having their own familiar costume motifs—frilled collars and sleeves, pompoms and unusually large buttons. Amongst the patchwork materials, I chose cotton scraps that had a muted or aged quality to them, and hand-dyed and sewed the cotton clown costumes to match. All the colours are intentionally slightly off, as if they have faded unevenly; materials that once may have been bright and saturated with colour are now well-worn. This is the medium most dear to me. There is something so special that happens when time and care are put into the items we love and cherish to keep them in our lives, repairing something that is torn or broken and being able to see this time in visible mending. Since the inception of my textile practice, I have used repurposed and second-hand fabrics to build faces and images that communicate narratives of my childhood. This way of making has brought me solace and often closure to internal conflicts, either when engaging directly with the subject matter or just ruminating on thoughts while working with the material.

The French American artist Louise Bourgeois has exerted a significant influence on my work, particularly her textile works. With a family history in tapestry repair, she also talks about the connection between sewing and repairing. Her parents ran an antique tapestry gallery in Paris

while also managing a tapestry restoration atelier; while her mother oversaw a team of workers and repairs out of their family home, her father sold the tapestries in the gallery in the city. A key theme in Bourgeois' work is her view of her mother, 'the spider,' a tireless weaver and repairer, as well as complicated feelings of abandonment about her father's infidelity.[16] For Bourgeois, art making was also a tool or strategy that provided understanding and release, working through memories of childhood and family dysfunction.

The 2022 exhibition and accompanying book, *Louise Bourgeois: The Woven Child*, focuses on Bourgeois' textile works from the later years of her career. In the mid-1990s, she began working with textiles, at first from a collection of clothing she had accumulated over her life and that remained intact—her mother's and her own clothing dating back to childhood. Such garments with specific memories attached are part of installations known as 'Cells,' where they "conjure missing bodies or a sense of physical absence and loss."[17] In Bourgeois' work, items that have more or less personal significance attached—clothing, as well as table linens, napkins, handkerchiefs and, later, fragments of tapestry—appear visibly stitched together, having been cut up and altered to create a range of figurative forms.

> Sewing implies repairing. There is a hole … you have to hide the damage. You have to hide the urge to do damage. There is a background of drama here … that something bad you have done must be undone. I sew … I do what I can. This goes back to my mother … she repaired things … she repaired everything. But there is a limit to that. When you mend things, it allows you to have your hands occupied, to look intensely, and never meet the eyes of other people. You can even be moral about it … you can say, 'I am repairing your clothes.'[18]

Works such as *Cell XXVI* (2003), a body suspended and twisted within a cage, were of great inspiration when I was deciding how I might manipulate the bodies of my own sculptures. See also her severed heads—richly textured sculptures, each displaying visceral emotions, some with multiple faces, such as *Cell XIV (Portrait)* (2000).

The practices of sewing, mending, care and healing are often undertaken by women—jobs necessary for survival, yet receiving very little recognition or appreciation, as mass production and globalised labour make these practices 'obsolete.' We have lost (though perhaps many of us are also trying to revive) appreciation for time, care and longevity. In my textile art practice, I aim to reclaim what would be traditionally understood as 'women's work,' and to challenge the hierarchy between fine art and domestic craft by emphasising the visual language of mending. Intentionally visible stitches, puckering, frayed edges—not only do these characteristics of my work communicate pain, repair and undoing, but they also reject idealisation and perfection. My life is messy, my health unpredictable, and so are the stitches holding together each piece of material.

I am fortunate that my way of working allows me to work while mostly sitting down, something crucial for people with POTS. A flare-up can be caused by anything, such as being too hot, too cold, standing or sitting too long or moving too much, because my body cannot regulate itself or circulate blood correctly. I constantly have to be conscious of balance, and it is frustrating when most of the given frameworks for success demand that you be forever moving, accomplishing and accumulating assets, whether tangible or social: "[Capitalism] requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others."[19]

I find I struggle a lot with the power balance between the pressure to be something or someone and simply being a person, or at least a person sufficiently 'fleshed out.' So much goes into the latter. You cannot just *be*; you have to talk, go outside, socialise, network, wash, earn money, eat and water yourself. And to be an artist, at least in my experience, is to see everything, feel it so deeply and struggle to pick different experiences apart; followed closely by finding time to put myself back together again. I do not want my work to romanticise self-destructive tendencies, or indeed ways of coping, but rather to communicate the struggle to find balance. Sometimes this can look and feel like a choice between one form of self-destruction and another. Or maybe I am just choosing one option that seems more aligned with a sense of self that is, in any case, in flux, learning to pick my battles—or learning, at least, what it is I am fighting for.

Engaging with textile art, a slow mode of practice, has helped me greatly with slowing down in other aspects of life. Embroidery is a repetitive and meditative practice, in which fingers connect to a needle, to thread and then to the material and another and myself.[20] At times, I was unwell during the making of the *Poor Sick Clown* project. I also worked on many drawings; some for planning (trying out concepts that could potentially become realised sculptures), others to stay engaged. Each drawing is inspired by young adulthood and what I guess I have missed out on—in part, trying to follow the popular exhortation to 'have fun' in ways I can, while also expressing the pain young adulthood truly is or has been, for me and many others.



Figure 5. Original sketch of acrobatic clowns.



Figure 6. Original sketch for *Don't Worry, I'm Fine It Happens All The Time*.

Each clown that did become a fully realised sculpture embodies a certain feeling I have about wanting to participate and show up versus needing to rest. Introduced earlier, *Don't Worry, I'm Fine It Happens All The Time* (fig. 2) was the first of three that relate most directly to POTS, one of the symptoms being blood pooling in my legs and feet, causing faintness and nausea. I created large concrete clown boots, pulling, weighing down the clown's limp body—yet it still smiles.

I'm Getting There was the second of the three clowns, a life-size functional pop-up cone puppet. This concept had several different sketched-out iterations due to conflicting feelings about it. The idea was that a pop-up clown puppet can be completely pulled into itself, a welcome refuge when burnt out, taking time to rest, but also one that is easy to get stuck and isolated within. On the outside, it can be exciting and fulfilling, but it can also be scary and vulnerable. There is a desperate pushing and pulling, hence the irony of the title. I have drawn this clown in different positions, desperately pulling itself out, lying down serenely, hiding away safely inside, and being sucked up entirely (fig. 7). Each has a different mask and expression, from smiling and frowning to no mouth at all.

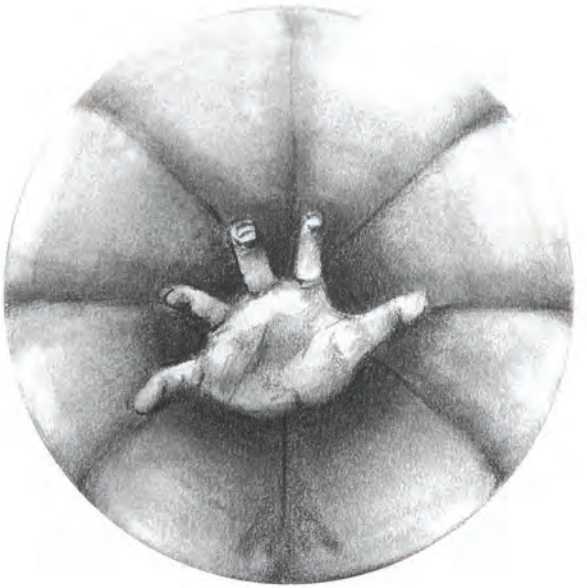


Figure 7. Original sketch of a hand, reaching out from a cone, iteration of *I'm Getting There*.

The third clown, *Bending Over Backwards*, also references puppetry. Raised on a round stand, the clown leans dramatically backwards at an unnatural angle to meet the gaze of the viewer looking down at this poor fool. The figure was inspired by a push-up puppet: once its button is pressed, the character or animal's legs go limp and collapse underneath its body. I associate the work with feelings of bending backwards too much for people and not listening to my body until it is too late.

Puppets have been used for thousands of years to tell stories, both documentary and fiction. They are a useful tool in art making to represent manipulation and abuse of power—the feeling that my life experiences are being pulled, manipulated and positioned by the puppeteer, men and by extension the patriarchy. David Currell, a leading researcher on puppets, has pointed out this helpless status of the puppet: "When an actor makes his entrance, he represents: when a puppet makes an entrance it has no identity outside its performance, and it does not bring any other associations onto the stage."[21] A sense of powerless is I fact a pervasive global condition. Trying to stay engaged in comparatively arbitrary pursuits, during genocides, during climate disaster, creates a paradox for me. All these horrible things are happening all at once, while the vast majority of people are expected to go about their day. My responses range from a 'how does the whole world not stop to help those who are hurting, life is a sick joke' mentality to 'nothing is funny, and how can I complain about my comparably privileged life while this is happening?' This project was never directly about specific global issues. But everything is connected.

My clowns, despite their apparent discomfort, still perform; they move, they stand or push themselves up from the ground. In this way, they embody the complicated space between wanting to participate and recognising when participation—or pushing through, performing and keeping up—comes at the expense of one's own health. Making these figures has allowed me to step outside of myself and look at this contradiction with a little more distance. I can recognise that sometimes the act of stopping, resting or failing to perform is not a failure at all. I can reframe this struggle, questioning the expectation that health and healing should look like constant progress, productivity or success. As stated previously, it is hard not to feel like the fool or the comedic relief plagued by misfortunes, so why not lean into it? If I were to take things too seriously, where would I stop? The struggle to find equilibrium through pain, grief and confusion is often dark, but sometimes a little humorous.



Figure 8. Clown on pedestal leaning backwards, original sketch for the sculpture *Bending Over Backwards*.

The figures in *Poor Sick Clown* are caught between performance and collapse. Through them, I have explored what it means to live with a body and mind that cannot always meet the demands of a society structured around productivity, participation and constant performance. The textile processes of stitching, patching and mending offer an alternative model. Rather than striving for perfection or pretending to be whole, I can acknowledge the damage, adapt and repair. While each figure represents specific feelings and experiences being ill and neurodivergent, they also communicate a hopefulness and willingness to show up despite feeling ridiculous. You can see their pain and discomfort, the visible stitching that brings their bodies together, as their bodies twist and fall in unnatural ways.

But rather than seeing the failure to fit into profit-driven definitions of success as an individual shortcoming, this project questions the systems and expectations that define 'success.' Just as the bodies are stitched together, the understanding of self can be continually repaired and remade. Healing is not perfection; it is learning how to live with the seams visible.

Mackenzie Hayward-Williams is a textile and soft sculpture artist living in Ōtepoti. They completed their Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in sculpture at the Dunedin School of Art in 2025, after completing a BVA in Textiles in 2022. Their practice focuses on patchwork collage covering forms of the face and body, exploring themes of trauma and healing.

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17 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 175.

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Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1031003

CULTURE, PLACE AND TIME: WEAVING THE EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE OF PLANTS INTO AN ARTS PRACTICE

Kari Morseth

As an artist I have always been concerned with sustainability. During the research and development of the body of work for my MFA, I more fully embraced eco-art by assigning as much significance to the materials being engaged with as to the aesthetic and conceptual basis of the final pieces.[1] The works discussed in this article are selected from the MFA exhibition, the installation *Sea Cry: A Lament*, which spoke to a concern about the ecological crisis in our oceans. While each piece can be viewed individually, ultimately they were included in a group of works intended to be seen as a whole. The works used Indigenous plant material speaking to place and culture, situating the work in Aotearoa and encompassing our human history and colonial impact. They embrace the biology of time, growing rates and rhythms that also inform such practices as harvest times and methods. Working with plants is generally labour intensive and requires patience due to the durational elements of waiting to collect enough materials, and at the right time. These elements of place and duration contributed a further expression of ideas, meaning and message.

The key to recognising the embedded knowledge of plants is acknowledging differing world views. Western culture historically positions itself as separate from and therefore looking to control ecosystems, whereas Indigenous perspectives are holistic, integrating cultural, spiritual and ecological knowledge, treating nature and people as inseparable.[2]

This article includes discussion of both the embedded knowledge of plants and their inherent material properties, in relation to a body of work that draws on techniques from traditional European weaving, raranga (Māori weaving) and universal methods of weaving, twining, plaiting, binding and knotting. The plants' material qualities influence and inform artistic practice and process. Central to working with these natural materials is a practice-based research methodology that takes shape as an ongoing creative endeavour, evolving over time through making, observing and documenting. Attention has been paid to cultural and material considerations, including use, harvesting, preparation and weaving techniques. Not only do these inform tensile qualities, tone and form, but, as living organisms, plants hold and embody archives of knowledge: biological, geographic, cultural and historical. The materials are not inert and will change as time passes. Exploring the materiality of plants and methods of working with them constitutes a collaboration; reflecting the depth of meaning they contain is an essential part of the practice-based research, as both method and methodology evolve through making.[3]



Figure 1. Kari Morseth, Detail of *Ghost/Net* showing top whiri blackened by mold.



Figure 2. Kari Morseth, coloured ties used to mark rope as it was created.

HARAKEKE *(PHORMIUM TENAX)*

In Te Ao Māori, harakeke's importance can be demonstrated in its representation of whānau. On an individual fan of harakeke, the centre shoot, the rito, is the baby and the two outer leaves, the awhi rito, are the parents, protecting the new growth. These three rau are never cut, to safeguard the plant's survival. The outer leaves symbolise tūpuna and the wider family unit; while these may be harvested, only what is needed is taken, ensuring a sustainable practice and protection of the plant for future use. The process of gathering and making is underpinned by tikanga that respects and upholds the cultural values embedded within customary Māori weaving. Tikanga carries both practical and spiritual reasons for how things are done.[4]

I was fortunate to learn raranga in a kaupapa Māori environment, which laid the foundation for respect and adherence to tikanga. My research, working with Indigenous weaving materials, grounds, informs and deepens the meaning of my work, such that it carries symbolic weight and speaks to identity and place and draws on history and customary practices that are connected to and sit alongside contemporary environmental concerns. I endeavour to work with plants—primarily but not exclusively harakeke—by way of thoughtful research and care; they are co-creators in my work. In the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, harakeke absorbs interwoven influences pertaining to historical uses, pre and post, colonial impact: weaving a kete, clothing, shelter, transport and medicine, regeneration through durational and environmental protection and knowledge. Contemporary weaving practices draw on techniques that extend beyond the individual maker to generations of shared knowledge of practices, materials and techniques. The plants become a means of cultural transmission; learning how to work with them means passing on principles, values, customs and language.

As a Tangata Tiriti artist, Indigenous plants provide my work with a clear reference to colonisation. Research into local and national histories of the flax milling and rope making industries led to the project *Rope/Walk* (2024 ongoing). Though the research remained an important part of my Master's work, it developed into a standalone participatory art project. A universal two, ply twining technique was used to create a harakeke rope the length of the exterior of the historic rope walk building at Bathgate Park in South Dunedin. This building is thought to be the only surviving rope walk in New Zealand. It was first constructed in 1878 and then replaced in 1920, manufacturing rope, twine and cordage for both the New Zealand and export markets. Historically and architecturally significant, the building is approximately 300 metres on its exterior length but only four metres wide.

Harakeke brings with it the history of colonial trade narratives and commodification of this culturally important plant. At the time of Cook's arrival, a single ship required 30 to 50 kilometres of rope, which needed to be replaced every two years. The recognition of harakeke as a fibre for rope making led to the swift rise of an industry, with little regard to tikanga; it simply became a commercial product. At the height of production in the early twentieth century, 240 flax mills were established across the country. The rise of the flax milling industry in Aotearoa was swift and significant, becoming one of the largest export earners at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.[5]

Rope/Walk involved workshops with community groups and the public, in collaboration with the Dunedin Dream Brokerage. Dunedin Dream Brokerage works with property owners, artists and community groups to facilitate the temporary occupation of vacant space in Dunedin city for creative projects, supporting art and public engagement projects that focus on the urban community.



Figure 3. Kari Morseth, rope and kete for carryng materials as exhibited.



Figure 3A (Detail). Kari Morseth, kete for carryng materials as exhibited.



Figure 4 (Above). Kari Morseth, rope (detail) as exhibited.

Figure 5 (Below). Rope Walk Building Bathgate Park. Photograph: Kim Thomas.





Figure 7. Pīkao plant.

The *Rope/Walk* sessions occurred on site, outside the rope walk building in Bathgate Park, as well as during a five-day occupation of a central city shopfront. Participants were invited to assist in creating the rope, and alongside the making process, stories, questions and discoveries were shared. Making the rope was a slow, deliberate process, which became tied to the meaning of the work; taking time to be with one another, sharing skills and anecdotes and conversations about sustainability and ecology all contributed to the layers of meaning bound up in the final work as a manifestation of time, duration and co-creation.[6] While physical participation gave people an active role in the creative process, the making became a catalyst for histories and memories that formed 'critical dialogues,' connecting participants to the material they were working with.[7] My Master's dissertation adopted an autoethnographic research methodology to capture my recollections of and reflections on the various workshops, recorded either during breaks or shortly after each session. I recorded the place, time and length of rope alongside stories shared: *Bathgate Park—4 hours, 18 metres*. The rope created during the *Rope/Walk* project is itself marked with the time it took to make it. At the end of every session, a white muka tie was secured and the amount of rope was measured. At 30 metres, a coil was created and marked with a red tie. Duration and time become readable in the work.



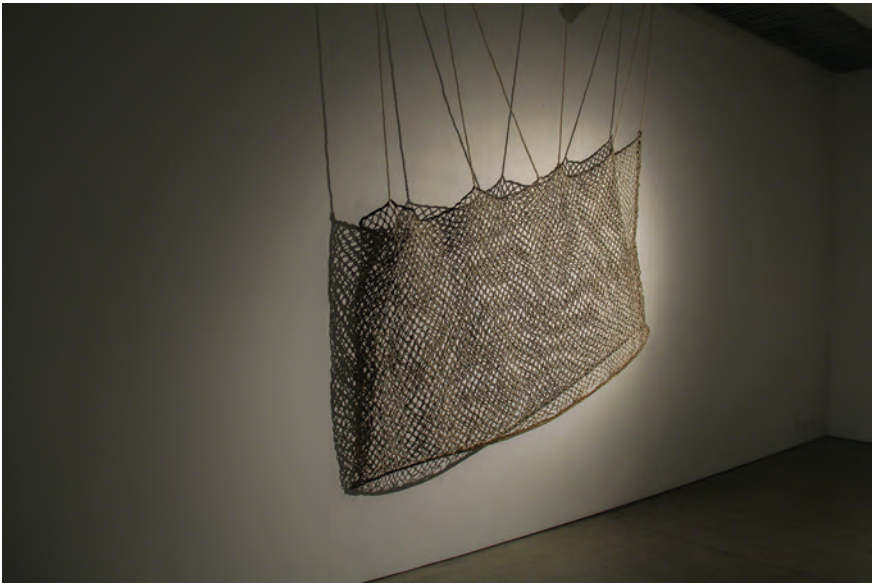


Figure 6. Kari Morseth, *Ghost/Net* as exhibited.

Ghost/Net (2023–2025) draws on cultural narratives from my Norse ancestry and Aotearoa as my place of birth to add a personal resonance to an overt socio-political commentary. The devastation of ghost fishing is a result of the rise in the use of synthetic fishing nets and ropes. Abandoned fishing gear is left to drift in the ocean and results in the ongoing 'capture' of marine life as well as being a major source of plastic pollution.

In Norse traditions, the deity Ràn captures sailors who fall overboard, usually in storms, dragging them to the depths in her net. In Māori astronomy, Taramainuku collects in his net the souls of those who have died that day, carrying them on his waka until the end of the lunar year, at which time souls are transported to the heavens.[8] Through these cultural influences, *Ghost/Net* symbolises both ruin and salvation. The 'ruin' is the rise of ghost fishing and the destruction that is caused by the synthetic fishing gear. The 'salvation' is recognising that Indigenous knowledge paired with contemporary technology might go some way to alleviating and repairing this environmental impact.

Woven with harakeke using kupenga, an open net weave, *Ghost/Net* was hung outside for two years to demonstrate the effects of weathering and the resilience of the fibre; time and the environment were my co-creators in this instance. While small areas of weakness and breakage have appeared, overall the harakeke has maintained its integrity.

The University of Auckland recently announced that harakeke is being tested in the lab as a water filter.[9] It has an extraordinary ability to remove 'forever chemicals,' outperforming other water treatment methods while being cost effective, sustainable and more environmentally friendly. Researcher Shailja Data notes the strength of the plant's fibre.[10] Given that, as discussed previously, historically ships required up to 50 kilometres of rope, while a modern tug boat may replace its synthetic rope at the two to three year mark, though sometimes as little as one to two years, it is worth considering whether a return to natural fibres is necessary, in some if not all instances.

PĪKAO *(FICINIA SPIRALIS)*

Pīkao is a highly valued weaving material that dries to a natural vibrant yellow and is often described as 'Indigenous gold.' Holding significant cultural and ancestral meaning with distinctive cultural narratives associated with it, it is critically endangered.[11] Pīkao grows in the contested space between the sea and the land.[12] Maureen Lander illustrated this with her pīkao crown, *Last Great Land Grab* (2006), in direct response to the then Labour Government's passing of the Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004.

The diptych, *The Sun Compass discards its Shadow*, uses pīkao's embedded knowledge and material properties to layer metaphor and symbolism. In the far north of the northern hemisphere, the North Star, essential for traditional celestial navigation, is not visible for many summer months. It is believed that the Vikings developed the sun compass as a way of defining direction during the 'midnight sun,' allowing for not only north, south but also east, west calculations.[13] As one half of the diptych, *Sun Compass* is a porowhita created with harakeke, pīkao and kiekie (*Freycinetia banksia*)—all traditional and highly valued weaving materials. The work also references a different kind of value associated with the historical narrative of sailors who would wear gold earrings to the value of the cost of returning their body to their home port for burial.[14] Harakeke forms the central circular foundation while the lines of kiekie, valued for its natural whiteness, reference the traditional navigational stick charts of Micronesia.

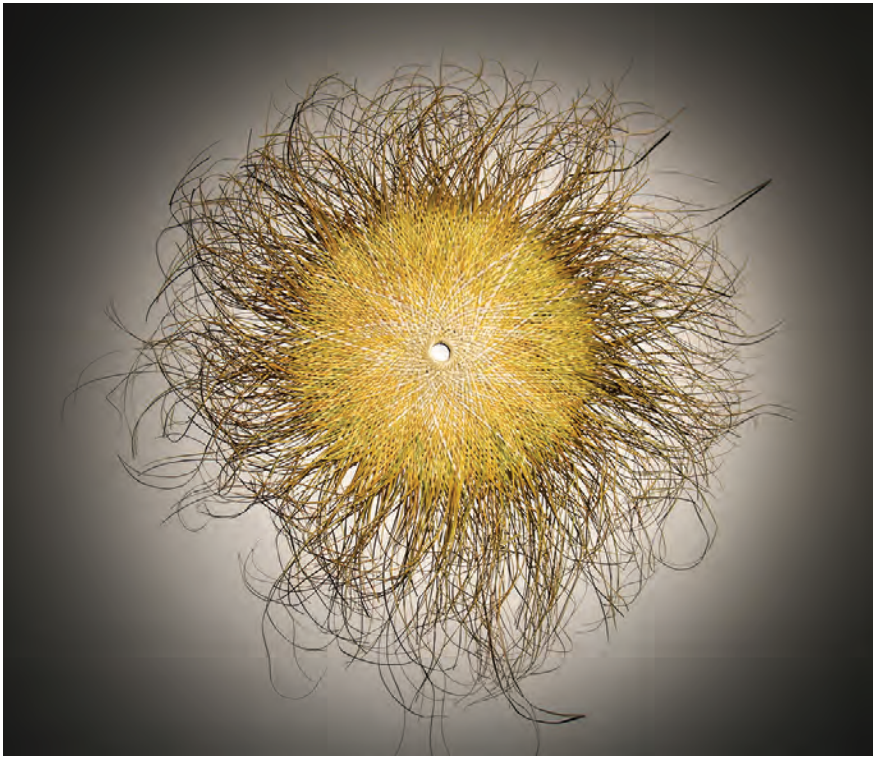


Figure 8. Kari Morseth, *Sun Compass*, as exhibited.

The golden *Sun Compass* represents hope and guidance for discarding a culture of commercial corporate greed, relearning from the past and respecting acquired knowledge. *Shadow* sits in opposition—a dark beauty—constructed with commercially dyed harakeke. The labour, intensive practice is palatable. While weaving *Shadow*, with its ever, increasing circumference, I became interested in answering the question I am often asked, "how long did that take?" Just as biological and historical knowledge is recorded in the rings of a tree, so too did it seem I could record the growth of this round.[15] A notebook sat next to me, arrival and departure times recorded; the start of a round marked and time dutifully added up when completed: *4hours 20min, increase to, 1m 20cm*. Environment, energy and the needs of the weaving changed the time each 'round' might take. Alongside engaging with the growth of this round, the staining of this valued fibre with a modern dye symbolised and become synonymous with commercialisation, capitalism, commodification and colonisation.



Figure 9. Kari Morseth, Beginning *Shadow*, starting cirle of 26 whenu (strips).

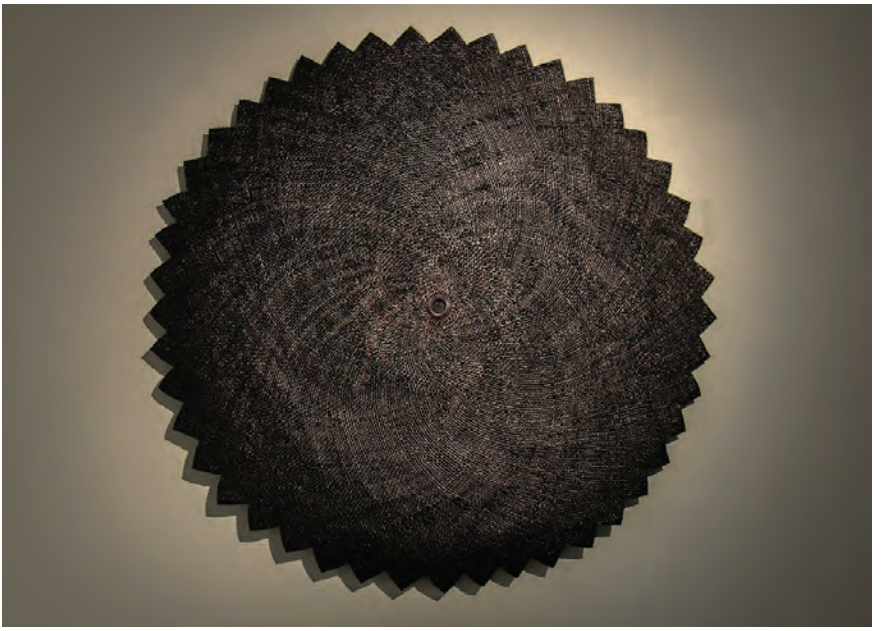


Figure 10. Kari Morseth, *Shadow*, as exhibited with finishing whenu of 1080.

NEINEI *(DRACOPHYLLUM TRAVERSII)*

Working with organic fibres offers a way of entering into a larger ecology of time. The process is slowed and informed by cycles of growing and processing, collection and preparation, which become integral to the meaning of the work. Australian artist and writer Paul Carter defines creative research as a discipline in which "thinking is done through making" and knowledge is generated through the physical manipulation of materials and artistic practice.[16] In my work, method and methodology become intertwined with the inherent qualities and meanings of plant materials. This can be seen in the process I followed while developing a piece for the 2026 Art + Science project, themed 'Time', working in collaboration with geologist Simon Cox. It was through practice-based research that I discovered and incorporated a material I had not previously worked with. My research turned to the Blood Falls, emerging from Taylor Glacier in Antarctica's McMurdo Dry Valleys. This phenomenon is iron rich water, so salty it cannot freeze, containing ancient bacteria which have learned to live without oxygen or light. They produce an iron rich by-product in the form of $Fe3^{+}$, and as this water comes into contact with the air, it rusts; the red, orange water spills into Lake Bonney.[17] Not only is this visually arresting, but the emerging rust, red water is between 1.5 and 2 million years old.

Research into materials and construction began with muka, providing the white of the glacier. Extracting this silky white fibre from harakeke links to a durational practice, a slow craft, which holds a customary history of practice and use. In the process of 'thinking through making,' I initially explored creating cotton linter beads, dyed red, playing on blood and its connection to family lineage. The work started to become an adornment, exploring the tradition of passing treasures down through generations. Through the process of making, and the challenges associated with techniques and construction, I questioned my material



Figure 11. Neinei plant.

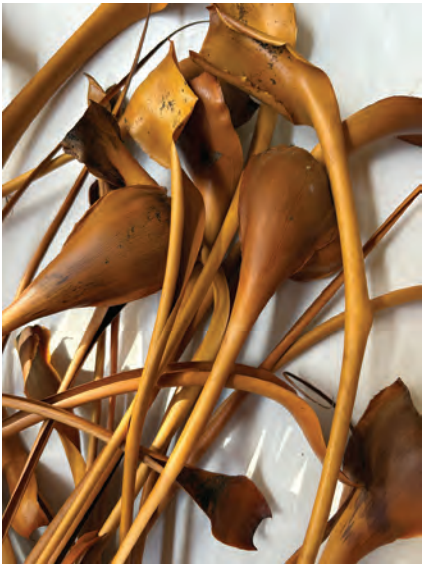


Figure 12. Neinei leaves collected for weaving.

choices and how the work was developing. Research, naturally for me, turned to plants: How this could deepen the metaphor? What plant might provide the colour and what knowledge did it hold? Southern mountain neinei revealed itself to contain a natural red brown colour and embedded knowledge, aligning perfectly with the project. It is the longest living of our Indigenous small trees, with individuals recorded at between 500 and 600 years old. Alongside researching this native plant, I further delved into weaving, harvesting and preparation of the material. In customary weaving, neinei has been primarily included in the creation of heike (rain capes). While my finished work aims to echo a visual response to Blood Falls, it is the making and materials themselves that become the critical metaphor for time.



Figure 13. Muka prepared with braiding and knotting beginning to be explored.

In working with plant materials through a weaving practice, I acknowledge them as active collaborators, gathering and encompassing history—geography of place, biology of time, cultural knowledge and significance. As living materials, they continue to grow and evolve; they are archives of embedded knowledge. In engaging with materials that by their nature lead to a durational and labour, intensive practice, I place value on quality over quantity and sustainability over mass production.[18] This engagement challenges the Western notion of nature as a resource to be exploited, instead embracing an Indigenous view of the interconnectedness of humans as part of the ecosystem. In weaving practices, the past is inseparable from and part of the present, preserving cultural knowledge, connection to the environment and materials and techniques passed on through time.

Kari Morseth is primarily interested in sculptural installation working with plant materials and using traditional techniques. History, cultural narratives and human impact on the environment are recurrent themes. Kari holds a Certificate in Toi Paematua – Raranga from Te Wānanga O Aotearoa and a Master of Fine Art with Distinction, from the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 14. Kari Morseth, *Blood Falls,* 2026, as exhibited.

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13 Franck Pettersen, "The Viking Sun Compass," *Planetarian* 22, no. 1 (March 1993), https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/a_pettersen1993.

14 This is only one of many narratives attributed to sailors wearing gold earrings. One claim is that it was required by Scottish Law. Peter Benchley and Judith Gradwohl, *Ocean Planet: Writings and Images of the Sea* (Abrams, 1995).

15 Kevin Smith, "An Organismal View of Dendrochronology," *Dendrochronologia* 26, no. 3 (December 2008), 185-193.

16 Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne University Press, 2004).

17 Sarah Everts, "Blood Falls Explained," *Chemical and Engineering News*, 20 April 2009. https://cen.acs.org/articles/87/i16/Blood-Falls-Explained.html#:~:text=Ferric%20Flow&text=New%20research%20reveals%20that%20ancient,might%20support%20life%2C%20Amend%20adds.

18 Charlotte Jansen, "6 Rising Contemporary Artists Using Traditional Craft Techniques," 9 June 2021, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-6-rising-contemporary-artists-traditional-craft-techniques.

Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1031004

PAINTING AT REST HOMES: EMBODIED MOTION AND NARRATIVE IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS—REFLECTIONS FROM A PAINTING PROJECT IN RESIDENTIAL AGED CARE

Siau-Jiun Lim

INTRODUCTION

Painting with Residents began as a simple initiative to provide residents in residential care with a more active and creative alternative to passive activities. Over six years, it evolved into an opportunity to understand painting as an embodied act involving physical movement, mental engagement and interaction with materials.

I began this project as an artist, not as a therapist, health researcher or academic researcher. The workshops were not initially designed as research. However, through ongoing collaboration with rest home management and art facilitators, and with funding support, they gradually became a site for reflection on the act of painting, using a practice-led research approach I have employed for many years.[1]

Throughout this article, I use the term 'embodied motion' to describe how artistic decisions emerge through bodily engagement with materials, and 'embodied narrative' to describe the traces of experience carried through the process of making.[2] Unlike dance, where movement disappears as it occurs, painting preserves physical actions through marks that remain after creation.[3] These marks constitute an embodied narrative through their relationship with the maker and the context of their creation. The painting carries traces of the embodied motion that produced it, with each mark functioning as an index of actions and experiences embedded within the creative process.[4]

Emotions arise in many forms of human activity, but in artmaking they are integral to the process and the outcome. Artistic expression involves a continuous negotiation between expressive intentions and the methods used to externalise them, with the artist monitoring and adjusting their actions throughout the creative process.[5] Therefore, observing residents' emotions and responses while painting provides insight into how embodied intention is both planned and emergent, evolving through bodily engagement with materials. My research question for this inquiry and reflection is: How does the embodied narrative of movement, emotion and material interaction inform the act of painting?

This article draws from six years of sustained observation, workshop adaptations, resident interactions, exhibitions and reflective practice developed throughout the project.[6] The research

was practice-led in the sense that the residents' creative process itself was the basis for gaining new knowledge, rather than serving simply to test a predetermined theory. Here, I will introduce the project, offer observations from the workshops, examine embodied motion in artmaking and discuss its implications.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Painting with Residents project began in 2012 when I volunteered with Enliven Positive Ageing Services, visiting older people in their homes. Initially, I took residents on outings to gardens, beaches and cafés. As their mobility declined, these activities became less accessible, so I began painting with them instead. After two residents I regularly visited passed away, I stopped volunteering. However, one image remained with me: residents sitting in front of a television at a rest home, disengaged from what they were watching. It prompted a simple question: What if they could paint instead?

In 2018, I approached Highview Rest Home and Hospital to establish a weekly painting workshop. With the support of manager Lee, who generously provided art materials, the workshops have continued since then. Over time, the growing collection of residents' paintings have revealed distinctive approaches to mark-making and creative engagement. In July 2025, the project culminated in its first exhibition at the Dunedin Community Gallery, supported by Creative New Zealand, which also funded part of the workshop delivery. The project has since expanded to a second site, Queen Rose Rest Home in South Dunedin, where two additional art facilitators now work alongside me.

The purpose of Painting with Residents is rooted more in process than in outcome: the value lies first in the engagement and social connection it generates and second in the paintings themselves.

NON-CLINICAL ART WORKSHOP

The workshops are not a form of clinical intervention, dementia care support or art therapy. Art therapy is a clinical discipline: a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication, delivered by qualified therapists, structured around therapeutic goals and evaluated against clinical outcomes.[7] Community-based art programmes, by contrast, emphasise expression, participation and social connection in non-clinical settings, without diagnosis or treatment.[8] Painting with Residents belongs in the second category: there is no assessment, no treatment plan, no clinical record-keeping; the goals are artistic and social, and residents take part as painters, not patients.

Many artists, including myself, do not hold clinical qualifications, yet we can offer safe and engaging experiences grounded in human connection and care. Studies have consistently shown that artist-facilitated participatory arts programmes support older adults' physical, emotional and social wellbeing without being framed as therapy.[9] Incorporating clinical goals would also impose regulatory requirements beyond the project's scope. Because residents living with dementia are naturally part of the workshop, the art facilitators meet monthly to share techniques and reflect on ethical challenges, while rest-home staff assist with any care needed during sessions.



Figure 1. Painting display for Queen Rose Home exhibition.

METHODOLOGY

Although the project did not begin as research, ongoing engagement with residents revealed new understandings of how intention, decision-making, emotion, bodily movement and mark-making interact during painting. These observations became a foundation for inquiry into the relationship between embodied experience and creative practice.

The methodology follows a practice-led approach, where knowledge emerges through the processes of making, rather than predetermined theories. The insights presented are practitioner-generated, developed through workshops and conversations, and ultimately refined through critical reflection.[10] They are organised around recurring experiences and responses observed during painting sessions, exploring how intention and meaning emerge through the act of making.

MAKING PROCESS AND WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop consists of weekly one-hour painting sessions, with a small in-house exhibition every five weeks and a public exhibition every two years, for a total of approximately 30 to 40 sessions annually. The workshops adopt an experimental and responsive approach, rather than following a fixed curriculum, encouraging participants to explore mark-making using a range of materials, found objects and unconventional tools.

Activities generally fall into four categories:

- Mark-making using brushes, stencils, found objects and textured materials.
- Storytelling prompts that encourage imaginative responses, such as recalling favourite places or experiences.
- Object observation, using everyday items such as flowers or cups as references.
- Painting from images, which provides clearer visual guidance and step-by-step support.

ETHICAL CONSENT

Consent was obtained from rest home management and from residents who were able to provide informed consent for the use of photographs, artworks and workshop observations. Some residents experienced cognitive decline or have since passed away. In cases where residents or their representatives had agreed to public identification through exhibitions or publications, their names and artworks are retained. This article focuses on observable aspects of the painting process while respecting residents' dignity and privacy.

OBSERVED EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS FROM PAINTING SESSIONS

This section presents my experiences during weekly painting workshops across two rest homes, focusing on particular moments that I noticed and reflected on over time. These observations informed the gradual adjustment of my facilitation approach. Residents' experiences became visible through their interactions with painting materials, responses to emerging marks and ways of engaging with the act of making. These reflections provide insights into the act of painting as an embodied and relational creative practice.

Struggling

Struggles in the creative process often stem from a strong desire to control the outcome of artmaking. This can lead to frustration when our inner visions conflict with our physical or cognitive limitations. As a result, we may feel challenged, uncomfortable and anxious.[11] For example, we may struggle to transfer the image in our minds onto the canvas accurately, or we might try to replicate others' work or a specific picture exactly. It is an inner battle or conflict toward the goal of accomplishment; as artist and teacher Matt Fussell states, "Accomplishments are born from struggle."[12]

Struggle in artmaking occurs when residents cannot find a way in or feel lost, leading to confusion and/or 'wrong' marks, such as an unwanted smear on a painting. It is necessary to guide participants in addressing these issues to prevent discouragement and the belief that they aren't good enough. For some who may struggle to articulate their feelings, the challenge of expressing their inner vision lies at the root of their limited understanding of the painting process, often leading to disappointment and potential withdrawal.

Doubts

Most paintings go through a stage where they appear unresolved before reaching completion. This "messy middle" often brings uncertainty and self-doubt when the outcome does not align with expectations.[13] External encouragement can help sustain confidence, but self-affirmation is equally important. As a painter, I recognise that doubt is not necessarily negative; it creates space for reflection—for questioning and evaluating decisions.

For new painters, encouragement can be essential, not as false reassurance, but as support that allows trust in the process to develop. Over time, this external confidence can become an internal belief, enabling individuals to continue in their practice, learning and allowing the work to evolve.

Intention

Residents' repetitive brushstrokes can serve as calming and regulating processes, in which physical movement develops into rhythmic patterns that support focus and engagement. These gestures, expressed through a limited range of marks or colours, or directional movements, create visual outcomes shaped by personal expression.

Painting involves the interaction of perceptual, motor and cognitive abilities.[14] While ageing does not necessarily diminish creativity, dementia can alter how these abilities interact during making. Residents may return to familiar subjects connected to memory, while others explore varied imagery through unique rhythmic approaches.[15]

These practices demonstrate that creativity remains shaped by personal memories, embodied experiences and sensory engagement. Recognising repetitive marks as intentional embodied actions, rather than meaningless movements, allows painting to support emotional expression and continuity of identity.



Figure 2. Intuitive brushworks from Queen Rose residents.

Play

Play is characterised by curiosity and exploration as well as the development of sensorimotor coordination through experimentation with visual forms and tools.[16] While play is often encouraged in artmaking, it should not be understood as simply imitating children's behaviour. Adult forms of play may appear 'meaningless' to viewers who prioritise technical skill or realism. However, this perception reflects conventional expectations rather than a lack of artistic value. Authentic play involves intuitive exploration that can develop into complex personal expression.[17]

Residents' painting practices demonstrate a similar openness. Their intuitive marks and colour choices, and willingness to experiment, suggest a process guided by immediate



Figure 3: Example of residents holding a brush in different gestures, Queen Rose Home.



Figure 4. The late Laurie Taylor and I at the public exhibition opening, Dunedin Community Gallery, 2025. (Photograph taken with consent from Highview Rest Home and Hospital.)



Figure 5. Social media post for the *Together Through Art* exhibition in 2025.



Figure 6. Social Media post exhibition installation and artists beside their works.

responses rather than analytical decision-making. This engagement with uncertainty allows individual expression to emerge, reflecting qualities that many artists pursue. A 2019 study of dementia noted that the onset of dementia, particularly changes in visuospatial and planning abilities, may cause artistic production to change too, resulting in simplification or repetition. However, these changes can reveal alternative forms of creative engagement rather than a loss of artistic capacity.[18]

Determination

I observed deep determination in Laurie Taylor's painting process. Laurie lived with both physical and mental challenges. He was the youngest among the participants; his mother, Margaret, always brought him to art sessions from his room. Over time, Laurie's work evolved from unrecognisable, fluid patterns into an extraordinary grid system. He approached each painting with a quiet but intense will: "I'm getting this right." Every line demanded his full attention, and completing each stroke brought visible relief before he moved with the same determination to the next. The act of making a line might look small, but his determination was extraordinary.

Laurie brought meaning to me as a human being and an artist by demonstrating determination and confidence in adaptive creative processes. Shortly after the final exhibition, Laurie passed away. His journey through the programme illustrates the vital role of creative practice in affirming agency and a sense of meaning in life, even in the final stages. Here, I would like to thank Laurie for the opportunity to witness the possibilities.

EMBODIED MOTION IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The painting processes observed during the workshops reveal that artistic intention can operate through multiple forms. While artistic practice is often described as a sequence of idea, plan, evaluation and execution, this represents only one form of intentionality.[19] The planned process allows artists to organise form and subject matter toward an anticipated outcome and an accurate evaluation of the process.[20] The concept of intention is generally used when evaluating artistic authenticity: whether an artist has achieved an intended outcome through technical decisions, or whether a work successfully communicates its intended meaning.[21] However, intention is not limited to predetermined plans. It can also emerge through preferences, choices, responses and adjustments during making.

Planned process

Planning → Expression through action → Mark-making → Perceive and respond → Refining intention

In Painting with Residents, many residents experienced difficulty developing a predetermined visual strategy across the entire painting. However, they continued to demonstrate intentional engagement through selecting colours, rejecting materials, returning to preferred marks, repeating familiar gestures and responding to changes within the developing work. These actions suggest that intention can exist without a fully formed visual plan.

The residents' practices demonstrated a stronger form of intention-in-action, where decisions emerged through continuous interaction between perception, movement and materials.

Emergent process

Initial engagement → Expression through action → Mark-making → Perceive and respond → Emerging intention

Within this process, each mark creates a new condition that the resident perceives and responds to. The artwork is not simply the execution of an existing idea, but an environment where intention develops through action. This aligns with embodied cognition, which challenges the idea that thinking occurs only in the mind before being expressed through the body.[22] Instead, cognition develops through ongoing relationships between the body, environment and materials. Bodily actions are therefore not solely physical movements but forms of thinking through the body.

Movements leave traces within the artwork, creating an embodied narrative shaped by experiences, emotions, memories and engagement with materials.[23] The painting does not directly transfer internal states onto the surface; rather, it preserves traces of the physical and cognitive processes through which it emerged. [24]

As cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris explains, a drawn line can be understood simultaneously as an action, an object and a sign—the movement of drawing, the mark left on paper and the trace of the gesture that produced it. Ontologically, these three ways of seeing the line are inseparable. Each one supports, informs, constrains, causes and complements the other.[25] A line is never produced identically by different individuals because each person's body, experience and perception shape the movement. Unlike performative practices such as dance, where movement disappears as it occurs, painting preserves physical action within the artwork. The marks, therefore, function both as a visual outcome and as evidence of the embodied creative process.[26]

Importantly, all artistic processes are forms of embodiment. The distinction lies not in whether embodiment exists, but in the role it plays: in a planned process, embodied interaction often supports an intention that has already been established; in an emergent process, embodied interaction becomes a primary site for the development of intention.[27]

	Planned process Predetermined intention	**Emergent process** Intention-in-action
Timing	A direction exists before a specific action	Direction develops while acting
Function	Guides choices toward an anticipated outcome	Guides responses to the evolving situation
Outcome tendency	Often greater coherence with an initial concept, composition or visual strategy	Often greater immediacy, responsiveness, and traces of the making process
Example	"I want to explore loneliness through a winter landscape"	"This mark creates a feeling; I will follow this direction"

Figure 7. Distinction between planned process and emergent process.

Although residents' paintings may sometimes contain qualities associated with abstraction or expression, such as gestural marks or unusual colour relationships, these visual characteristics should not automatically be understood as abstract art. Abstract art involves an additional layer of artistic inquiry and conceptual engagement with the language of form, colour, space and representation.[28] The significance of residents' paintings lies not in their classification within an art movement, but in how they demonstrate the relationship between intention and material engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that artistic intention should not be understood solely as the ability to create a predetermined plan to execute a desired image. Residents' painting practices demonstrate that intentionality can persist through embodied choices, preferences and responses in the making process. While planning and long-term visual organisation may become more challenging, this does not indicate a loss of artistic engagement. Instead, intention may shift toward immediate and embodied forms of decision-making. This challenges deficit-based perspectives that interpret changes in planning, representation or technical control as reduced artistic ability.[29] The workshops demonstrate that the significance of the work does not depend solely on the final image; the experience of making offers moments of joy, confidence and connection, and participation is in itself an important outcome for residents. The artwork is allowed to exist on its own terms and carries traces of the experience through which it emerged.

This understanding has practical implications for facilitation. Rather than requiring predetermined outcomes, creative environments can support intentions that develop and shift through engagement with materials. Open-ended prompts and accessible materials allow residents to experiment and to participate through their existing capacities. Support should focus on sustaining engagement and confidence.[30]

The project also reshaped my understanding of painting. Observing residents' responsive and material-led approaches challenged my assumptions about where artistic decisions originate, and clarified the distinction between planned and emergent creative processes. Their practices highlighted qualities central to contemporary artmaking, including uncertainty, repetition, responsiveness and dialogue with materials. The workshops expanded my understanding of creativity as an embodied and relational process.

This reflection is limited by its practice-led nature, based on sustained observation rather than clinical measurement or controlled research conditions. The interpretations are situated within my experience as a practitioner and facilitator and do not make claims about creativity among all people living with dementia. Instead, they offer insight into how painting can function as an embodied, relational and meaningful practice.

CONCLUSION

The Painting with Residents project explored how physical and cognitive challenges can be transformed into creative possibilities. Through this project, I understood more vividly that painting is not merely a task or the production of an image, but an embodied process where actions, emotions and experiences are integral to artistic expression.

The residents' brushwork reveals alternative forms of aesthetic agency, where intention—far from being absent or unfulfilled—emerges through ongoing choices and responses during making. The distinction between prior intention and intention-in-action demonstrates how different cognitive and bodily relationships with materials can produce meaningful artistic outcomes.

The emotional experiences observed among residents—struggle, uncertainty, determination and play—reflect experiences shared by many artists. The process of responding to challenges during making is not unique to residents but part of the broader experience of creativity.

Ultimately, the Painting with Residents project contributes to arts-based practice by demonstrating that creative engagement can support well-being and strengthen community connections, while challenging deficit-based assumptions about ageing. Through collaboration between artists, care facilities, community organisations and funders, this approach offers a meaningful model for integrating art into residential aged-care settings.





Figures 8 and 9. Participants and volunteers for the Together Through Art exhibition in 2025 at the Dunedin Community Gallery.

Siau-Jiun Lim is an artist based in Dunedin, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Her paintings explore landscape, atmosphere, movement, and time as shifting conditions rather than fixed images. Drawing from forested environments, life drawing, and everyday observation, she works across mixed media to investigate memory and the relationship between people and their surroundings. Gesture, colour, texture, and unconventional mark-making tools are central to her process, allowing paintings to develop through movement, accumulation, and response. Her practice moves between representation and abstraction, exploring how places and experiences are remembered, felt, and transformed through the act of painting.

She holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) and a Master of Design. Her work is part of the Wallace Arts Trust Collection, and the Moray Gallery in Dunedin represents her. In 2017, she received the David Con Hutton Perpetual Trust Memorial Scholarship.

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Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1031007

STRIKE

Mona Bekhit

In 2025, with the desire to create experimental ceramic noise as a new departure in my work, I built a body of sound making objects out of clay, focusing on the range and qualities of sounds that I could create. I considered the materiality and active agency of unfired and fired clay, tactility, movement and repetition to create visual rhythm and layered sonic form. This practice-based project for the final year of my Bachelor of Visual Arts degree culminated in an installation, *Strike*, exhibited at *Site*, the graduation exhibition at Dunedin School of Art (DSA). I selected pieces to exhibit from a wide range that I created throughout the year, choosing forms that were more divergent instrument structures or that produced sounds that I admired most. The pieces of the installation rested on surfaces or were suspended, accompanied by a recorded soundscape work created from sound samples of the instruments. In this article, I will reflect on the ideas and techniques behind the work, including juxtaposition, montage and relationships between vision, touch, sound and memory, as well as discussing artists working in related fields of practice, including Jan Švankmajer, Maika Garnica, Petr Válek and Sergei Eisenstein.

In developing the project, I decided to move away from traditional forms and uses of ceramic instruments, such as aerophones (whistles, flutes and ocarinas), which have been historically used for rituals, education and communication, instead, following an experimental disposition. I enjoy the delicate nature of working with clay, especially when pushing its limits to create small, balancing forms and large, heavy pieces. Leaning into the tactile nature of clay that transitions from soft to hard when dried and fired, my pieces took shape by drawing inspiration from commuting walks to school through the Botanical Gardens and urban streets, where I inspected pristine, soft, organic forms, such as flora and garden layouts, and collected discarded industrial tools, such as nails, screws and needles. These are contrasting source inspirations; I played with this juxtaposition in my work, with its attributes of hard and soft, large and small, heavy and light. Polarity is also present in the forms through their contrasting colours and mirrored directions of the spirals; I was interested in creating dramatic feelings of unexpected tension. The texture of large-sized marble runs, embracing the soft, malleable, tactile nature of clay, also contrast with miniature needles that have a sharp, manufactured look, reflective of hardware. The sounds that these objects make range from a long and subtle drone to harsher, metallic, quick, percussive noises. My background in dance, film theory and music studies also consistently informs my work, through rhythmic physical processes of making and interests in ideas such as kinetic movement and montage, which help to further relay the dialogue of my work to the audience.

The site that I chose for my work was the mezzanine of the DSA's sculpture building; viewers could hear the work before they saw it when coming up the stairs. The natural cork and wood already present within the space paralleled the unglazed brick and stoneware clay used in my work. The spaciousness and length of the space and layout—the feeling of walking through several different









spaces—reflected the nature of my habitual perambulations, offering viewers an opportunity for curiosity, akin to the experience of walking around and exploring spaces like the Gardens. Two large marble runs stood symmetrically at the entrance to greet viewers, who could choose a passage towards the right, which would lead them to a table of curiosities, or left, towards a bed of enlarged repeated motifs below a canopy of what I call 'defensive garnishes'— hanging clusters of prickly needle forms made out of dark red brick clay.

The ceramic objects were not intended to be handled by the viewer, as I felt this removal of verification would open up for more room for imagination; they could speculate about what the objects are for, what they might sound like, the moving parts, and perhaps pick out sounds from the soundscape and match them to objects. Generally, audiences for my work feel inclined to touch the objects and have found joy in playing with them. In treating my Honours project as a research inquiry driven by and extending my practice, I therefore chose to work, counterintuitively, against the prevailing expectation, presenting the smaller works, for example, on a high, long, clean, wooden table. The effect was of a display case found in museums, in which artifacts of value are presented and protected.

The installation operated on three scales: the small tabletop-sized objects; medium-sized pieces resting on the ground; and large works that were almost a metre tall. This created an immersive feeling, inviting people to explore, walk around, inspect closer—at upper body height, peering over or making an effort to crouch or bend, and looking upwards at pieces like a canopy. I wanted to create a parallel with the range of sizes of forms found in the everyday environment. Moreover, I enjoy the juxtapositions and the challenges of creating works in these sizes with the material of clay, which imposes certain limitations.

I confront the tradition of ceramics by considering the active agency of clay, and resisting how it prefers to move: its aversion to staying delicately slender; piercing the minute mass of the needles; the demanding burdens of balance or clay's capacity to withstand its own weight and gravity until it has been vitrified through a kiln. These kinds of material constraints were also apparent while moulding the gradient of the ramps of the marble runs, keeping the drying times of the clay uniform and preserving thin, delicate parts while building, drying and firing, such that they would not snap or stick together when in a vulnerable state. The large works were, unlike usual day-to-day ceramics, very heavy and required multiple people to lift and move them from the studio space to the kiln, then upstairs for exhibiting. The mixture of mediums in my nontraditional objects, as well as the refusal to make explicit the element of touch, encourage several different senses or modes of experience—hearing and imagining as well as seeing. The resulting installation communicated the sensation of movement without touch. While there is an immersive dimension to the encounter with the work, notably through the addition of sound, it also withholds a fully tangible or corporeal encounter.

My work builds on possibilities for tactility and gesture in clay and filmmaking explored by Jan Švankmajer (b. 1934), a Czech surrealist artist, writer and filmmaker working across many mediums. Švankmajer began making films in the 1960s and subsequently started experimenting with tactile art in the mid-1970s, when he was censored and banned from filmmaking by communist authorities. Švankmajer discusses tactility in his book *Touching and Imagining: An Introduction to Tactile Art*,[1] specifically 'gestural sculpture,' referring to intuitive impressions on clay directly from the fingers, as well as 'tactile memory,' the connection between touch, vision and the mind. These ideas suggest that memories of specific physical feelings or sounds that we have experienced can be evoked through specific sight triggers, and this is an attractive proposition for me because I make quite intuitively, particularly in terms of textural decisions. Given that I did not want the audience to physically interact with the works, it was important that they were able to respond imaginatively, hearing the sounds and creating connections in their own mind. In Švankmajer's films, notably *Alice* (1988), materials and sounds create deep feelings of tactility.[2] Likewise, my soundscape has a cluttered, messy sound, and I wanted to create noises that would evoke incongruous feelings of tinkering and of haptic movement. I achieved these fragmentary sounds through the use of glass and thread, the range of textures and sizes and the steepness of the ramps, while also creating layered, polyphonic sounds.

Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, in his 1925 silent film *Strike*, used techniques of visual collage and repetition to explore themes of revolution and systematic class oppression.[3] Scenes of the working classes, production lines and organised labour take place in front of the general backdrop of industrialisation, which I found engaging in relation to the process of recording the acoustic sounds of my instruments to the sampler machine. In focusing on production processes, collage and repetition as meaningful aspects of the making of my work—repetitive actions and motifs—I contemplated how I could streamline production (there would be no way, apart from a mass of workers or machinery perhaps). The kinetic nature of my work draws parallels with imagery of circuiting factory movements in Eisenstein's film. In the spiral marble runs, the hitting of percussive instruments and the sound collage, I was thinking about the kind of sound formations that could be happening in environments of mass, quick production and action, seen and portrayed in the film through montage.

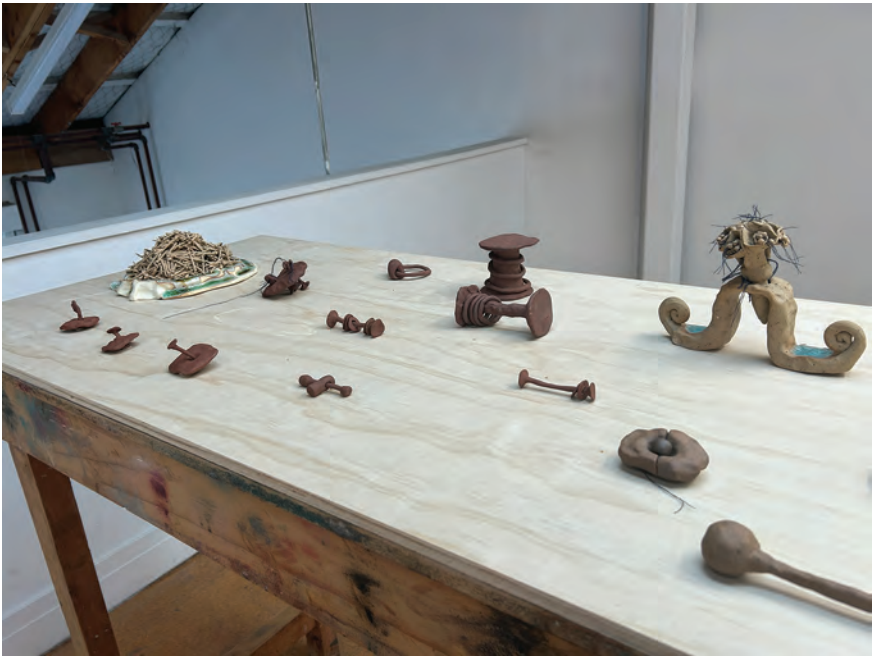
In his book *City Symphonies: Sound and the Composition of Urban Modernity, 1913-1931*, Daniel Schwartz discusses an inherent visual/mind relationship with noise, arguing that silent films, in

their busy, juxtaposing visual rhythm, perceptibly represent fluctuations and the pulsing cadence of unstable urban experience.[4] This abundance of visual information constitutes a display of "inaudible sound—the visual amplification of noise; the treatment of motion as sound; and the analysis and reconciliation of audiovisual rhythms."[5] For example, Eisenstein's *Strike* evokes monotonous, turbulent feelings and sounds of the urban experience through the visual dynamics of montage, rhythm, clashing and conflict. My work is similarly geared towards a rapprochement of the rhythms of sight and inferred sounds, if one could imagine the repetitious rolling of a marble down the eight ramps of my marble runs, or the plinking of the multiples of parts on my percussive apparatus. Although the installation was accompanied by sound, the viewer did not gain the experience of each individual instrument sound, so the essence of this "fluid exchange between the senses" was important.[6]

Contemporary artists Maika Garnica and Petr Válek also approach sound through different forms. Garnica, creates ceramic instruments, taking inspiration from her Belgian and Bolivian heritage and its history, creating wind and stringed instruments and using them in specific atmospheric environments.[7] Petr Válek, from the Czech Republic, creates percussive noises in unconventional ways, choosing not to follow traditional or popular music practices.[8] He builds mechanical, kinetic works using found objects, and also uses body movement to generate noises that may not be seen as musical; sounds that crash and fall. I find that this experimental approach delightfully fosters new modes of listening.

Using a sampler machine, I took samples of every instrument and created a 30-minute-long improvised composition made up of multiple shorter pieces. This was looped in the space during the exhibition. I was enamoured by the multifarious process of collecting samples of each instrument—the importance of sensitivity to qualities of sound and subtlety in variables of manoeuvring them, such as how loud or soft, fast or slow, or shifting patterns. The process of composing a soundtrack for my installation was an intuitive, gestural application of noises, culminating in an opus that sounded scattered, erratic, trailing, straggling, sprawling, meandering, disoriented, deviating, rattling, spinning, clattering, chattering, thrumming, dizzying, monotonous, dissonant, incongruous, luminous, playful, quaint, undulating, oscillating, subdued, sedating, stagnant, toppling, tumbling, fleeting, itching, liminal, smattering, aggressive and stimulating.

This practice-based project created a pathway for me to dive into new approaches to expression with clay. I took inspiration from everyday objects like marble runs and nails, translating them into sounds, working across different and difficult scales and expanding the senses involved in my ceramic work, from touch and sight, to sound. This exploration resulted in insights about the active material agency of clay and its sensitive preference to function in forms I had not built before; in ideas about physical touch and textures, displayed through juxtaposition, repetition and the handling of materials to present feelings of movement through vision; and in observations of how audiences experienced, received and reacted in the space to my work with an inquisitive and speculative nature.











Mona Bekhit, born in Ōtautahi, Christchurch and raised in Ōtepoti, Dunedin, is currently completing a BVA (Honours) at the Dunedin School of Art. She gained a Bachelor in Film and Music studies from University of Otago, received a Diploma in Ceramics in 2024 and a Bachelor of Visual Arts in Sculpture in 2025, which culminated in an installation exhibited in the DSA *Site* exhibition, integrating ceramics and sound. Influenced by her background in film studies, music and dance, Mona's practice explores materiality, tactility, repetition and movement. Her work is held in the collection of The Arts House Trust at Pah Homestead, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

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DOWN TO THE WIRE … AND WHY EXHIBITION FLOOR TALKS ARE IMMEASURABLY VALUABLE

Grant Banbury

Down to the Wire: **Cheryl Lucas / Richard Stratton / Chris Weaver, The National, Ōtautahi Christchurch, 10 March – 4 April 2026.**

"COFFEE WITH CHERYL LUCAS & RICHARD STRATTON," 18 MARCH AT 11AM

The catch-phrase exhibition title – *Down to the Wire* – carries a feeling of urgency, an acknowledgement time is limited, and precious. In reality, such sentiment may not be far from the truth as looming deadlines often add to existing pressures for many exhibiting artists. Chris Weaver, one of the three exhibitors, explains that "The [exhibition] title perfectly encapsulates the way I work and make," and goes on to highlight a fascinating material connection: "I use twisted wires to cut and form the body and attachments of each piece. I've also been using electrical wire to form the handles of my teapots."[1] All Weaver's ceramic works, including cups, dishes, bowls, teapots and pourers, are intentionally functional. But his meticulously constructed teapots in particular – unique, inventive and ever-evolving – have become his signature, justifiably earning him a national reputation.



Advertising image for floor talk Richard Stratton and Cheryl Lucas at the 2017, Portage Ceramic Awards, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery. Photograph: Peter Rough.

Let's begin, though, with a snap, taken almost a decade ago, used to advertise the floor talk "Coffee with Cheryl Lucas & Richard Stratton." With its quirky casualness and cropping, it offers a light-hearted image of the artists and generates an immediate smile, quickly followed by the thought "what's going on here?" Mobile phones have become ubiquitous tools for instant visual communication globally, capturing 'the moment' and sharing it at the touch of a finger. Fun and playful, the image underscores friendship and a shared passion for ceramics, but there is a hint of mischief in their facial expressions, particularly Lucas': has something funny just happened or been verbalised? The photograph was taken at the 2017 Portage Ceramic Awards in Titirangi, Auckland, the year Stratton won the Premier Award and Lucas a Merit.[2]

All three exhibitors, Cheryl Lucas, Richard Stratton and Chris Weaver, are friends, although Stratton is from a younger generation while Lucas and Weaver have known each other for over fifty years.

Cheryl Lucas (b. 1954) graduated from the Dunedin School of Art (DSA) in 1975 with a Diploma in Fine Arts and Applied Arts (Distinction). After gaining a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Printing (Lithography) from Wimbledon School of Art in 1979, she taught drawing at Ara Institute of Canterbury from 1987 to 2005, and since then has been a full-time ceramicist residing in Lyttelton. In 2020, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū presented a major survey, *Cheryl Lucas: Shaped by Schist and Scoria*, curated by Felicity Milburn, the gallery's Lead Curator.

Chris Weaver (b. 1956) graduated from the DSA with a Diploma in Fine and Applied Arts in 1975 and a Certificate in Ceramics the following year. He lives near Hokitika in the South Island and exhibits regularly both nationally and internationally. A survey exhibition, *Teapot Meditations: The Practical Poetry of Chris Weaver*, curated by Richard Fahey, was held at Auckland's Objectspace in 2024; a limited selection toured to Christchurch the same year.

Richard Stratton (b. 1970) gained an Honours degree in Ceramic Arts from the Dunedin School of Art in 1993. He later worked as a production thrower at a commercial pottery in Scotland before moving to Wellington, where he is now based. His works have been exhibited widely in New Zealand and overseas, and are included in private and public collections, notably the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, The Dowse Art Museum and Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

Each of these artists has established a notable ceramics practice in Aotearoa; exhibiting regularly, giving workshops and illustrated talks and attending international workshops. Sustaining a ceramics studio practice also takes commitment. The transformation of a once soft malleable material involves expertise in clay technology, the ongoing challenges of firing and glazes, combined with ideas, concepts and ambition. Trial and error is a constant. The fact that all three are recipients of institution support and awards attests to the strength of their individual voices.

So why are these three artists exhibiting together, and what are we to make of this group show? Although they have a shared connection to the same DSA training ground, The National's director, Caroline Billing, provides further insight into how the exhibition took shape: "it came about from a conversation. Chris and Cheryl were invited to show … and somehow the idea of Richard joining in manifested. I think Cheryl had seen Richard and told him she was showing with Chris, and the idea was sparked."[3]

Lucas' interests in her work link back over three decades to her upbringing in a rural environment, touching on issues around farm and animal practices, exploring the role certain plants play in our ecosystems and addressing the often thorny issue of sustainability. Such conceptual threads give her practice currency in a rapidly changing world threatened by global warming and wars. Her current working environment is a studio high on a hill above Lyttelton Harbour where aspects of the port's lifeblood – cranes and the constant movement of cargo and produce – have manifested in abstract sculptures with titles that indicate rather than define. Exploring the relationship of 'form' to 'surface' is a constant driver too.

In this exhibition, Lucas' works are monochromatic, quieter, more restrained, and more domestic in scale than her expansive 2022 *Subterfuge* series. For me, the title of the current series, *Space*



Figure 1. Floor talk,
Richard Stratton foreground.
Photograph: Caroline Billing,
courtesy of The National.



Figure 2. Floor talk,
Richard Stratton and Cheryl Lucas.
Photograph: Caroline Billing,
courtesy of The National.

Gym, reads as an exercise in containment and release, volume and space, yet allowing for discovery too. Flat plains are formed into open box-like vessels, which gently lean and sway. Architecture is apparent and during the floor talk Lucas mentioned metaphors in relation to her practice. Exterior surfaces are marked by defined areas of black, in striking contrast to the cream-white glaze. Billing observes, through photographing Lucas' pieces, how different each looks from different angles. In the floor talk, Lucas spoke of "finding space, making space," and at a time of reduced energy levels she reiterated the work had to be "simple and achievable."[4] Here is part of a discussion between Lucas and Stratton about the former's techniques:

> Cheryl Lucas: … when I'm working on these [*Space Gym* works] on a turntable, I've got a mirror in front of me, so when I'm working on this side, I'm very aware of what's actually on the other side … [I have used] a really lovely Abbots sculptural clay; it has a fine groggy texture and it's got enough iron in it; where the glaze breaks on the edges it goes really rusty.
>
> Richard Stratton: You have to know about the clay body.
>
> Lucas: [When] I got electric kilns … that changed my whole thinking … I realised it's up to me what I put on the pot … [the kiln] didn't have a flame to do these lovely little scorchings … although it still surprises …



Figure 3. Installation of works by Cheryl Lucas. Photograph: John Collie.





Figures 4 and 5. Installation or works by Chris Weaver, 2026. Photographs: John Collie.

The glistening salt-glazed surfaces of Chris Weaver's pots are a joy to the eye; it is a glaze he has mastered and takes pleasure in returning to again and again. The pots are initially wheel-thrown; he then alters and shapes each form. Each stage of the process – from wheel throwing through various construction methods to the technical understanding of glazing and particularly firing – opens up a heap of possibilities. These possibilities coincide, stand alongside, bounce off or even question the rich history of object-making in clay that stretches back centuries and across cultures.

The wooden handles of Weaver's pots are a striking contrast to the fired vessel. Projecting skyward from teapots and pourers, they offer additional drama to his adherence to functionality. Acknowledging that inspiration can come from something as simple as a household item, Weaver informed us: "I made the handles after seeing a modern desk lamp."[5] The parameters of his practice – functional objects – suggest limitations, but this is far from the reality. It is a hallmark of Weaver's practice that he is always experimenting to find new directions. Richard Fahey, a well-informed and insightful commentator on ceramics in Aotearoa, hit on the word 'poetry', which I feel perfectly summarises Weaver's practice.[6]

At the talk, I sat with other guests, including Nichola Shanley. Shanley is herself an accomplished ceramicist, and I feel I must mention the elegant long steel trestle tables which she loaned for show.[7] Standing on fine beaten legs, around 120 cm tall, they appear to float. From a seated vantage point, the trestle tops were at eye level, and the nearest housed eleven of Weaver's pieces. What struck a chord with me was the way his teapots and pourers could be clearly viewed as silhouette forms, but the clever raised edges at the base of each one achieved a degree of animation and added an overall lightness to the work.

Previously, I have seen only a limited number of Stratton's works, although I remember a solo show in Titirangi, Auckland in 2016.[8] The intricacy and complexity of his pieces intrigues me. In some ways they appear from a former time, and certainly unlike any other contemporary ceramics in this country. Describing his historical interests and processes for pieces in the current show, Stratton states:

> … all this work here is basically based on Japanese, Chinese, English [ceramics] … all the clay bodies are … layered, sandwiches … a lot of it is socially politicised work … I use lead glazes, [a] technique dated right back to Egyptian [times] … so quite amazing still being able to build upon it. Me and my family went to Japan recently ... and I was really inspired by the simplicity of Japanese pottery, and also the woodwork, so I built these smaller works [*Polyphonic bottles*].[9]

In discussing *The Disco of death in an Old Men's War* (2025) with Lucas, Stratton clarifies:

> Richard Stratton: I've used Wedgewood moulds made by John Flaxman, circa 1780 … This is not an original mould … I was lucky enough to buy a whole palette of these … they were imported into New Zealand circa 1930s by Te Rona Pottery in Temuka … This piece is about the colonialisation of Israel, so what we have here is the dance party that Hamas moved into … these are the dancing hours … A lot of my pieces are made against war and stuff.
>
> Cheryl Lucas: You pack a lot into these …
>
> Richard: Yeah, but I only make twelve pieces a year …
>
> Cheryl: I know, I know …
>
> Richard: [They are] made with Winstone McPhersons Stoneware XXX.



Figures 6-8. Wedgewood Cameo moulds
designed John Flaxman ex Te Rona Ceramics Works, Temuka.
Collection Richard Stratton, Courtesy of Richard Stratton and The National.

The floor talk, attended by an enthusiastic group of around twenty, was friendly and stimulating, as such talks should be. Histories were shared, concepts discussed and technical information about processes gave audiences valuable insights. Questions were asked and by the end constant chatter filled the gallery. *Down to the Wire* highlights three distinctly different approaches, but ones in which the vessel, both in a contemporary and historical sense, still carries currency.

As Chris Weaver was not present at the floor talk, I leave the last word to him: "After seeing the show set up, I'm impressed at how our individual works sit well and relate to each other and I'm very proud to be showing in such great company. Thank you, Caroline, for bringing us together as fellow graduates of the Dunedin School of Art."[10]



Figure 9. Installation view, Chris Weaver (foreground) and Richard Stratton.
Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 10. (Top) Cheryl Lucas, *Space Gym I*, 2026, stoneware, 147x156x118mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 11. Cheryl Lucas, *Space Gym Facet*, 2026, stoneware, 132x105x95mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 12. Chris Weaver,
Jug, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
120x145x80mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 13. Chris Weaver,
Teapot with Wooden Handle, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
175x180x110mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 14. Chris Weaver,
Pourer with Wooden Handle, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
195x170x100mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 15. Chris Weaver,
Pourer, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
155x155x80mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 16. Richard Stratton's test pieces.
Photograph Courtesy of Richard Stratton and The National.



Figure 17. Installation of works, Richard Stratton (foreground) and Cheryl Lucas. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 18. Richard Stratton, *Polyphonic Zoo Bottle*, 2025,
glazed ceramic inlaid agate veneers, 175x70mm. Photograph: John Collie.

Grant Banbury is an Ōtautahi Christchurch-based art consultant and art writer. After graduating in painting from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1979, he exhibited throughout the country for twelve years and is represented in several public gallery collections. Following Post Grad studies in Art Curation at Melbourne University in the mid-1990s, he returned to Christchurch and established Campbell Grant Galleries (1997-2008). Passionate about New Zealand studio ceramics, he has published articles in *Ceramics Art & Perception, eyecontact*, and is a regular contributor to *Art New Zealand*.

1 As Chris Weaver was unavailable to take part in the floor talk, Caroline Billing, The National's director, emailed him a series of questions and read out his replies. This quote is from Weaver's email, 21 March 2026.

2 A detail of Lucas' *Milkstock* (2017), visible in the background and comprising 12 individual pieces, was purchased by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, accession 2018/035: a-l.

3 Caroline Billing text to author, 26 May 2026.

4 Cheryl Lucas, audio recording of floor talk, 22 March 2026, collection of The National. All subsequent unidentified quotes are from this source.

5 Chris Weaver, email to Caroline Billing, 21 March 2026.

6 In 2024 Richard Fahey curated *Teapot Meditations: The practical poetry of Chris Weaver*, Objectspace, Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, 15 June - 18 August.

7 Nichola Shanley had these tables made for her solo exhibition, *The Agnes Dei Collection*, Two Rooms, Auckland, 19 July – 17 August 2024.

8 *Richard Stratton: Old Zealand New*, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, 13 November – 14 February 2016.

9 Polyphonic literally means 'many voices or sounds,' and typically refers to a style of music where two or more independent melodic lines are played or sung at the same time, weaving together in harmony. The term is also used more broadly across literature, electronics and phonetics.

10 Weaver, email to Billing, 21 March 2026.

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GET STUCK IN THE JAM

Ruby Meades

It is possible for games to be made in a weekend. If you are new to game development, a student, want to practise or trial an idea or mechanic, have a new team and want to test the dynamics or a pipeline, or want to join a creative community—the answer to all of this is to participate in a game jam. Online or in person, locally or internationally, there are game jams running all the time with themes and due dates to stimulate a plan to get something done. A game jam with low stakes can simply be fun; a weekend is a quick enough turnaround to not distract from any main jobs; it is potentially a good break from a current project; and it can help you to fall back in love with making games. More tertiary institutions across the motu could be organising and encouraging game jam participation for their creative students and staff, reaping the benefits to learning and adding to a body of work.



Figure 1. Collection of game jam advertisements designed by various people.

WHAT IS A GAME JAM?

Game jams involve making games digitally or physically usually under a time restriction and theme. One weekend is a great length of time to dedicate to a jam, though anecdotally there has been a rise of week-long jams to better suit the schedules of people in the industry, and even studios organising their own in-house jams over two or more weeks to fuel creativity and boost morale. Examples of now popular game titles that started out as game jam games include *Hollow Knight*

(Team Cherry, 2017).[1] One of the biggest game jams in the world is the Global Game Jam®, which has been running for nearly two decades.[2] This organisation likens the game jam to the "jam sessions" of multiple musicians, who each "feel and feed off of the others."[3] In 2026 there were 94 countries hosting sites across the world with 9,874 games created.[4]



Figure 2. Ruby Meades and Christopher Popham presenting at NZGDC 2025.

At the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT), there has been at least one facilitated game jam each year since 2019, where teams of students collaborate and make a game over a weekend. Screen Arts tutors Ruby Meades and Christopher Popham have helped organise and have participated in game jams at SIT each year since 2021, and the game jam tips covered in this article reflect those presented by the SIT tutors at the New Zealand Game Developers Conference in 2025 based on their prior years of game jam experiences.[5] Making games each year has helped work out the muscle of game development, test software and inform class content. Nine games can be downloaded and played for free on itch.io with teams varying from two to 14 people.[6]

GETTING THE TEAM TOGETHER

Making a game can be a solo endeavour or involve a studio of departments. Around six to eight core people is a decent team size depending on the roles they are willing to do. A discussion with the team is recommended to outline availability across the event timeline and ascertain which roles team members are interested in. Roles in game development can span a wide range from art to code to animation and audio. Ideally, you should be ready to try new things, put on

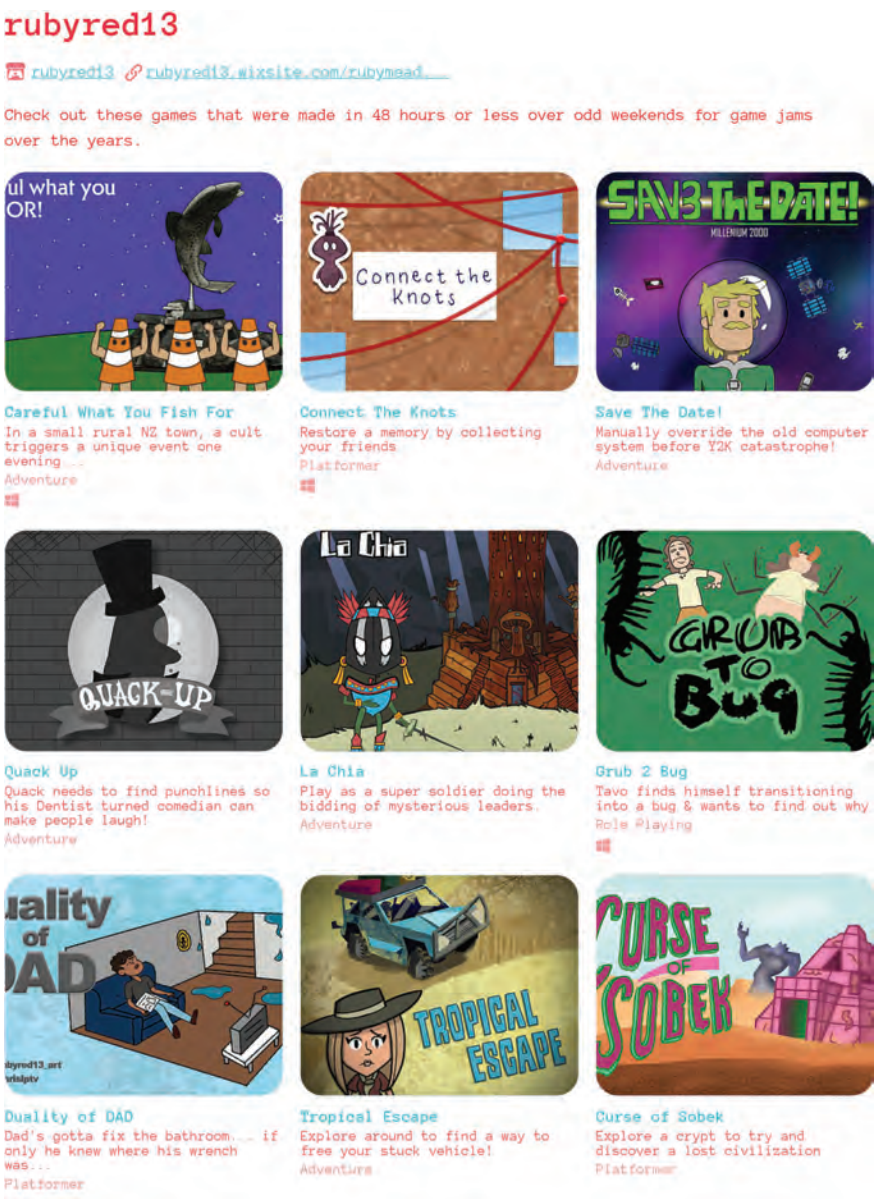


Figure 3. Collection of collaborative game jam games at SIT.

a few different hats and not be afraid to give suggestions and feedback throughout. Joining a jam will expand networks and possible future collaborations. There is usually something to do the entire time, and, to keep on track, it is helpful to have someone be a project manager of sorts to delegate tasks plus motivate the team. Communication is important during the jam to update all who are participating. It is also not silly to survey any relevant legal considerations of ownership and use of the idea and content that will be made. Establish a team goal to establish unity and the motivations behind why everyone is participating; a personal goal adds another incentive. In a game jam with low stakes, any game goal is valid: balancing art and code, or favouring one, or just getting part of a concept that did not exist before. The point is not to produce a game ready for release, but getting something new to function and inform a future project makes it worthwhile to add to a portfolio or library of work.

Technical things to consider for a game jam include hardware, software, internet, power—all are integral and need to be in good working order. Key to smooth production is a file and folder management system that the team knows and a place to post and share. There is no set software to use; it could be an opportunity to learn a new one or be comfortable in the familiar. Game jams are a good way to refresh 21st-Century skills (Contreras-Espinosa and Eguia-Gomez 2022).[7] Do not forget to schedule in time to eat and sleep. Providing accessible snacks and water is important for the team. It can be tempting to go all night with these weekend jams, but a solid nap refreshes everyone, especially if is there is any conflict and tension. If the team is burning like a candle the entire time, there may be nothing left at the end and the mental tax is not as rewarding compared to having a break and compromising on the end product. Recovery time from a weekend game jam is also something to take into consideration. It is fine if commitments change, just keep communication clear with the team and even yourself. Be aware of the surroundings and ask for help if needed; know who to ask and how to best contact them.

GAME JAMMING

Game jams usually have a theme for teams to work towards, chosen by the host and revealed at the start of the jam time. Once the theme is revealed, the first step for any team is a brainstorming session, with each team member contributing ideas and doodling on paper or a digital whiteboard; it can be interesting to see what eventually sticks. There is a knack to feeling when it is time to pause coming up with new ideas and to pick a couple of core directions and expand on them. Focusing on a core idea or mechanic is key; an existing world or character could be brought into the brainstorming time to help narrow down the scope and find the plan sooner. Being conscious of the time is important given the limited time span, with the aim of the game plan being reasonably clear by the end of the first night. It is recommended to go on a break after the brainstorming session and come back with fresh eyes, to check that all agree. A more casual setting away from devices may even spark some different ideas.

There are particular areas of the game development pipeline where there is some wiggle room to make minor changes to the idea, but there must be some negotiation if suggesting any sudden big changes. Clear bullet points are great to keep the team on the same page. A moodboard of existing images then provides a visual path towards a cohesive vision and can help inform the concepting. There is not a lot of time to iterate or try many different variations, so a game jam is about finding confidence in an initial design and avoiding too much second guessing, especially if the team is encouraging. Fostering a positive environment is a big part of a 48-hour time crunch; coming away having had fun is more beneficial than being stuck on trying to make the perfect

product or being too stubborn to collaborate. Game jams help grow soft skills to work in a group and see a project through from beginning to end.[8]

Play-testing games throughout the jam can be tricky to coordinate, but beneficial particularly near the end. Make it part of the schedule to bring in someone fresh; have enough there to play and test but also some time to adjust if needed. No matter the end game result, put the outcome somewhere for people to see, such as on social media or itch.io. It is valid and allows reflection on how to adapt better for next time. Each jam will never be the exact same experience, for better or worse, but that is all part of the learning and a way to prepare for future projects. Gaining the 'experience points' (XP) is what it is all about—trying something new and then seeing how it can inform other things in your life and career.



Figure 4. Collection of game jam concepts by various graduates of SIT.

ORGANISING A GAME JAM

If there is no jam being organised in your local area, then hosting a jam may be the solution and do not be afraid to host and participate. Confirm the venue and facilities as well as security over the intended time period and know the capacity limits. An online jam is an alternative to a physical location, if needed, as proven during 2021.[9] Make sure to provide a contact and establish key health and safety elements. Collectively agree to have a respectful time and be the exemplar to the participants, especially newbies. Occasional monitoring of the other teams is important throughout; providing some sustenance like snacks and water and encouraging breaks goes a long way to boost morale and keep teams engaged. So too does following up with everyone to see how it went and any feedback for improvement. An overall positive experience is the main thing to gain the confidence to do it all again in the future. There are now many resources out there to help and a community across the globe to support more game jam sites.[10] Eventually, they basically run themselves with low effort but high reward.

It has been proven that games can be made in a weekend even at the bottom of the world. Who knows, maybe one day the game you make is featured as a success story from a game jam.[11] Get stuck in the jam and get inspired.

Ruby Meades is a Screen Arts tutor alongside Christopher Popham at Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill. Ruby specialises in 2D animation and games while Christopher teaches graphic novel illustration and 3D animation. Game jams are a key creative output each year to collaborate and keep up to date with technology and skills.

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WE LIVE THROUGH TIME

Ryan O'Malley



I

Pinching a new coin stamped *1988*, I thought I could bargain with time. I whispered into it like a spell—*make July last forever*. And summer replied: if I gave myself to it, I'd always bear the ache of how fleeting it was. But for a Wyoming child of the high plains desert, three months of miracles could cure a restless heart. Maybe slashing hail would flood the dry creekbed at the end of my street, the deep hum of rapids summoning a rift between worlds.

I took summer's offer and jumped straight through, found myself pressed against the earth, carving my name into bald sandstone with bottleglass shattered by someone's old gun. I paced thin dirt-bike trails stitched with antelope tracks. Past the smiling heap of poached coyotes, past scraps of burned pornography in a kicked-over pit. All hidden from the highway among the tall silver sage. Its wet leaves perfuming the meadowlark's song, its clawing underbrush cloaking a coiled threat.

But no strike would follow, just a copy without the bite. There weren't any rattlesnakes up here. That was something to know at nine years old when sticking hands under every rock, climbing the bones of half-built houses, running home at full speed when mom's yell carried a short mile—always a pitch that meant *dinner* and *trouble*.

But that brittle rasp of insect wings stole my attention, *ripping and ripping and ripping* as it leapt to evade, like a yellow paper sun torn repeatedly in two. I matched its rhythm and quickly caught up. Now kicking and spitting tobacco juice in my palm; now dropped in a mason jar in the back of the garage. With a stick. Some plucked up lawn. Holes hammered in the lid with a ten-penny nail.

By morning I imagined myself as the grasshopper. A wonder kept too long, trapped in the simulation, breathing air fermented by the contour of the glass. So, we returned to our dusty gullies and golden frontiers, where the breeze carried a somber urgency—*run now while you can*. Because winter would soon turn the sun inside out, with a wind as cold and certain as Jupiter's eye. But summer stretched wide and boundless, forever changing shape. Always leaping forward, never landing long.



II

I entered college thinking summer would honour our deal, but it led me to South Dakota without mention. It wore another face, unfamiliar to the changing shape of my own. Its breath was damp in my clothes, murmuring promises of awe cloaked in heat.

I crossed where the Missouri River split the mountains from Midwest, an ice-carved line of force and withdrawal. It moved without hurry—stretching, yawning, rolling lazily over. I stomped its

undercut walls until they crumbled into shallows, balanced on half-submerged trees rocking on a snag, swam until I felt the pull of deep hidden currents, and buried my hands in ever shifting sand.

Seasons ran parallel across this snaking divide, but the eastern bank practiced a different magic: *every pressure to the earth would be answered above*. I saw a neon wake behind a rock thrown sidearm from the heavens, saw a hundred different sunsets sinking low and brimming red. I watched silken haze lift off seas of corn in the first light of the morning—to tower, crack and topple on the stillness of evening, wrapping twilight in heavy blankets of rain.

Then fall swung low like a sickle, bleeding trees of gold and vermillion, and threshing starved grasshoppers from parched and twisted stalks. A blizzard could follow without a hint of warning—violet lightning rupturing the blackest pitch of night. It would set winter into grey oblivion, where snow compressed to stone under immovable shadows and days would slowly forget their names. When spring parted lips to call them back, it did so with a bellow—that would set sirens wailing and shake branches from trees and tear farmland into dark spiraling clouds.

I learned to see these moments as form freed from surface, brought into being by taking something away. The matrix as a body etched, held and surrendered. The print not a clean reflection, but a spirit altered and returned.





III

Pressure and time creased two decades of teaching, with printmaking the alchemy of catch and release. Elements extracted from the ground are placed in the jar; transformed then freed back into the field, never to inhabit their original shape. I was allowed to keep summer in exchange for my lessons, now by contract, updated each spring. Signed, numbered and archived for the next twenty years—grasshoppers chewing along the margins.

I saw one skim the chromatic film of a foreign canal; another alight on my silver wedding band. Here crushed in my teeth with lime, smoke and ash; there hitting windshields speeding towards the ends of the map. Most often they cling high on spiced dune grass; bracing the tides on the south Texas shores. Or flushed, maimed and feverish by the blade of my mower, snatched up by grackles well-versed in my back-and-forth path.

I was warned this would all be fleeting, but I took summer's pact and ran—until distance lost all measure, until it was harder to hear that rattle in the brush. Months pile up and patterns repeat—June a gesture, July overlaid, August always misaligned. Repetition can leave an acrid taste; the insect disappeared from my hands.

Attending the loss of that contact and pressure, remnants of touch and release now obscured; in storm and in stillness, I turn to my lover—with ripples of togetherness drawing silt around our heels. We took a year to hold wonder between us and pondered time from the universe to the exhale of a breath. She drew ethereal pictures of expanding moments, while I carved an image from one block, with all the ages compressed.



IV

I imagined myself an all-mighty creator, able to give life to a flat formless world. I gouged plywood like wind cutting high desert prairies, like glaciers dividing alluvial fields. I reduced peaks, bluffs and canyons from buff-coloured badlands; each mark passed a season, each impression an era, every layer an eon delivered without name.

I focused on the power to turn paper to prism; beauty compacted under the pressure of my hand. Pulled from the block, the ink fractured light into pieces—hues cast from the surface of eroding plateaus. Set free of the strata, an image climbed from the horizon: legs kicking beneath patterned tagmata, antennae transmitting beyond knowable scale. I heard a promise echo through tessellated wings—multiplying and vibrating a familiar refrain.

We rose from the heat of the southern gulf border and floated above the great southern plains; glanced over pale ridges of snowy range summits, held aloft by winds of corporeality. We touched cerulean reflections of north coastal tidepools and flooded the creekbed with memory, drifting between transitional spaces; all possibilities embodied and dreamed.

We crossed the Pacific to arrive at Otago, along a pathway from the sea of impossible green. Here my eyes mistook Maungatua for Elk Mountain, who bends a Wyoming highway on an analogous plane. Overhead, an expanse of unfamiliar constellations, an inverted season, another mirrored world. I folded my grasshopper, turned it back to paper and glued it to a wall in a Vitruvian embrace. I left it to fade slowly in the mystery of ages, soon to leave nothing but hints of colour and a trace.



Ryan O'Malley is Professor of Art and Head of Printmaking at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, where he also serves as Graduate Coordinator. He earned a BFA from the University of South Dakota (2002) and an MFA from Louisiana State University (2005). With nearly 30 years as a printmaker and 20 as an educator, his work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, publications, and collections worldwide, including shows across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. He is a frequent visiting artist at national and international institutions and is cited in *Printmaking: A Complete Guide to Materials and Process* (2nd ed.) by Fick and Grabowski.

This essay is based on his reduction woodcut, *…shaped by the will of the Universe*, his contribution to an evolving exhibition of works with his wife Cassie Normandy White entitled, *We live through time*.

He was an artist in residence at the Dunedin School of Art in May of 2025.

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BLUE SKIES, WHITE CLOUDS, STARS, RAINS, SEAS, BOATS, TRAFFICS, FLAT WHITES

Eva During (Ding)

From audio script for a 35-minute audio narration accompanying *Under The Bridge* (2025), presented at The Arts House Trust, Pah Homestead (Tāmaki Makaurau) in November 2025; and for a 40-minute moving image work, *That Was Their One Tree Hill* (2025), exhibited at Slant Art Project Space (Ōtepoti) in December 2025.

*

Shall we begin?
Yeah.

*

Have you ever thought about having the ability to time-travel? I wish I could. I want to go back to the day I was born, to smell my mother's cheek for the first time, the smell of her skin mixed with the sweat that carried the pain to birth me, will forever be my safe space.

She must have been so exhausted. I would have been, too. It was never easy to make it to this world through the last 40 weeks in her womb. Then she looked at the tiny me with tears of joy, picturing my first eye contact, first smile, first hold of her finger, first call of Mama, first crawl, first step …

I want to remember her face when I first locked my eyes with hers, and her laugh when I first recognised her and smiled, then I would call her mama, she answered with her whole heart as if that was the moment she had waited for her entire life. Then I want to go back to the day that I learned to talk, I want to ask her in my mother tongue: "如果有一天，我决定离开你到另一个陌生的国家生活，妈妈，你会同意吗？ (What if I have decided to leave you to live in a strange country one day in the future, will you, Mama, let me go?)"

That little girl in her arms was so little that she would never think we would have to say goodbye to each other one day. She would look at me with blended sorrow and anger and say: "How are you so sure that you will leave me one day to live in a strange country in the future?" I could sketch her face out in my mind.

Oh, I am sure, Mama, that one day, when I grow up, I will have to choose to leave. I hope you can understand that the day you abandoned me to chase your new life was the day you should have foreseen my departure, after I had lived with Grandma for twelve years.

*

I left China for New Zealand when I was 27 years old, an age yearning for a new life different from the past.

It was a rainy night. I walked out of the airport with my suitcase at 11 o'clock and got into a taxi heading to a hostel. The driver kept me entertained with his accented English that I couldn't understand fully, "Look, that's One Tree Hill, a place lots of Chinese love to go to." I nodded, turned around, looked through the window, and it was the darkness beyond the highway, disappointed by not knowing what he was trying to describe, at the same time picturing what it looked like in my head—a hill with one tree on top of it.

There used to be a park in my hometown called Western Lake Park, which I believed was a place that restored my childhood happiness. Indeed, the giant elephant slide, the climbing snail, the bumper kart, the cherry blossoms, the lake, the bridge and the zoo. I would always watch animals for hours until it was time to go home. For quite a while, this was the safe place for me to escape my family's chaos. It was a small town; I could hear the lion roaring every night when the little town was winding down. Somehow, I felt the lion was talking to me, and I could understand him. He must be so lonely, as he was the only lion in the zoo.

With the map I got from i-site, I started my exploration of the city that I had just arrived in. Of course, the first station was the One Tree Hill. Out of my mind, it was not a small hill with a tree on top of it at all; it was a preserved park with cherry blossoms. People were taking photos under the trees that had witnessed generations of Chinese; some were tourists, some were born in this country.

Then I went to the zoo, which was located behind Western Spring Lake Park. Oh, was this a coincidence? I asked myself. I stood in front of the lake, taking in the vast contrast of the landscape, which evoked memories of the hometown lake in my mind, yet also held similarities. I was lost in a moment of geographic and mental overlap, a nostalgia, a connection, a rediscovery of the safe place where I could hide from my childhood memories.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, laughs, belongings, consensus moments, driving licence, visa tickets, work, work and more work, 9 pm washing dishes, 3 am baking scones, lunchtime breathe, afterwork walks, pay days, day offs. Shopping days, grocery days, laundry days, One Tree Hill days, Zoo days.

I fell in love with this country and my new life; it was full of busyness that I had momentarily forgotten the hometown's Western Lake Park. How could one know if it was the right choice to migrate to another country? I wanted to stay.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, cries, loneliness, misunderstood moments, work, work and more work, 9 pm washing dishes, 3 am baking scones, lunchtime exhaustion, after-work soreness, pay days, day offs.

Couldn't remember when I stopped going back to One Tree Hill, or the Zoo. Did I make the right choice to migrate to another country?

*

I want to time-travel again, to the moment I remembered my grandma was singing. That was the only memory I had of her singing, but I couldn't recall or repeat the song.

I burst into tears every time I watch Haka. There's something I feel familiar with. For years, I was curious what this familiarity was. I think it was this cultural practice, passed down generationally, that reinforced collective spirits, as did many other cultures.

Those collective singings, collective dances, collective reading out loud in classrooms, collective vows and salutes under the national flag have completely imprinted my childhood in China, where I always felt I was one of them.

Audio of children reading this poem together in the classroom in Chinese:

游子吟 - (唐)孟郊
慈母手中线 / 游子身上衣 / 临行密密缝 / 意恐迟迟归 / 谁言寸草心 / 报得三春晖

Repeat, slowly fading out…

(*Song of the Wanderer* by Meng Jiao (Tang Dynasty), translation: "Thread in the hand of a compassionate mother/ clothes on a wandering son/ just before his departure, she sewed closely/ in her mind worrying about his late return/ Who would say that the heart of inch-high grass/ could repay the sunshine of deepest spring?")

*

Growing up with my grandma gave me the chance to learn her crafting skills. She had never deliberately taught me how to sew; in my memory, she was always sewing. I asked, "Why don't you buy them from the market?" She said that the commercial clothes were never as fit as the tailored ones.

She was always decently dressed, not for fancy clothes, but always nicely fit and tidy. She didn't like vibrant colours; her clothes were always dark tones with or without subtle patterns. Women's clothes were simple. After the Cultural Revolution, there was only one style left for older women to wear: the Chinese tunic suit style in navy blue, dark green, grey or black.

I grew up wearing cotton-padded clothes she hand-stitched since I was an infant, as my mother loved fashionable clothes; hence, she never really learned how to sew, but was always proud of her daughter wearing the fittest cotton-padded clothes made by her mother-in-law, compared with other kids'.

She tried to learn, my mother. I remembered she was kneeling on top of the unsewn quilt stitching, vigorously, impatiently, even I could tell the difference she did from grandma. Instead, Grandma's stitch was so gentle and neat that she could quietly sit there sewing for a day. Maybe that was her peace, after all she had experienced through wars, famine and the Cultural Revolution.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites. I was pushed into the corner of the kitchen, I was laughed for my accent, I was middle-fingered by turning to the wrong lane, I was mocked of my Ching-eye, I was thrown a plate while serving a meal, I was checked purse while walking out of a store, I was yelled at my colour, I was questioned at my ability, I was refused from opportunities, I was isolated from social topics.

Every story had turned into a stone stored in my heart, cold, hard, heavy.

*

I looked up at the sky and asked the white cloud, why did I make this choice to migrate to another country?

Fear, anger, vulnerable, lonely, I cried while chewing on steamed rice: "奶奶，我好想你啊。(Grandma, I miss you so much.)" Then she would look at me with her loving smile and say: "Shall I make some cotton-padded clothes to wear? Then you won't feel cold anymore."

I want to time travel again, to once again hold her wrinkled hands, and ask her to sew it for me, a cotton-padded clothes, a suit made of love and care, a shelter I could hide in when I felt upset. She had passed away years ago before I came to New Zealand. For a decade, every time I looked up at the sky, the white cloud would remind me of her. Her name in Chinese is 祥云, "propitious cloud" in English.

*****

Years later, I packed everything into the car and drove all the way from Auckland to Dunedin, where I began my art journey. Colder, drier and more beautiful at coastlines with sea lions, penguins, seals and albatross, this city has the dynamic colours of the sky, as well as the colours of the sea. This is a place constructed from preserved historical colonial architecture, as well as the energy and vitality of university students; a place where I met many artist friends, read New Zealand history, developed my sculpture skills and deepened my critical thinking.

I was staying at an Airbnb in St Clair for my first ten days since arriving. The house was sitting on the hill, newly renovated with large windows facing the sea. There was a little island in the middle of nowhere off the shore, they call it *Ponuiahine*, or *White Island* in English.

It's a strange feeling, seeing things from the bird's-eye view from the window; houses were so tiny, seas were patchy, waves became white lines that repeatedly appeared and disappeared on the surface of the blue, as if they were some unsolvable code given by nature. The island was so small. From a distance, it looked like a little mound that was only allowing one person to stand on top of it. I always wondered if anyone had lived there before; whoever it was, that person must have been so lonely.

*

Life was an ongoing, busy mix between work and study. I was putting all my energy into absorbing knowledge and skills, feeling a sense of loss and grieving for the artistic dreams that had been delayed by years of hard work. At the same time, I was excited to find myself in the realm of art, where I could freely express things that I couldn't address well with my limited English.

Perhaps we were never meant to communicate solely through language. The little girl in her mother's arms didn't need to talk; yet, she was understood if she was happy, sad, cold or warm, if she was feeling safe or scared. The little girl didn't need to talk to her grandma either; to feel the care and love, she was holding her grandma's hands, she also memorised her smile and her sewing.

What if there had never been a language developed within human history? Could we understand each other? Could we become more caring? Could we become less hurting? Could we be more patient with each other? More connected with each other?

I went back to St Clair again, sitting in the car parked at the beach, looking out at the Ponuiahine island through the beaded windscreen in the rain. It was so tiny, as if only allowing one person to stand on top of it—it was my One Tree Hill in Dunedin.

The rain was gentle, reminding me of my first night arriving in this country. I stood there, letting the millions of threads drooping down from the clouds reach my skin. What if I kept pulling the thread? Could I pull a piece of cloud into my arms?

That thread was the tie between my identity and my cultural memory. I time-travelled again, sitting next to my grandma, looking at her sewing hands, at the same time sharing my immigration journey to her: "奶奶(grandma), it was so hard!" Then she would stop her stitch, look at me and say: "Of course it's hard, but you are not alone. There are many first-generation immigrants whose stories are just like yours, and there were many first-generation immigrants whose stories were harder than yours."

*

Who were they, the people who first came to New Zealand from China? When did they come? Why did they come? Where did they stay? What did they do? Did they live well? Did they stay? Did they have children? Did they return to China? What did they eat? Did they have rice and dumplings? Did they have green tea and soy milk? Did they have spring onions and coriander? What did they wear? Did they make their own clothes? Did their mother and grandmother make their clothes? Did they have cotton-padded clothes to wear in the middle of winter in the valley of Arrowtown? Did they have a hand-stitched quilt that protected them from the harsh nights? Did they miss their family in China? Did they get rich mining gold? Did they ever think of giving up? Did they make it through? Did they pay off the debts? Did they die? Did they have gravestones? Did their gravestones face their hometown in China? Did their ash send back? Did their ash sink to the ocean? Did they farm? Did they retail? Did they learn English? Did their kids speak English? Did their grandkids speak English? Did they cook shepherd's pie? Did they celebrate Christmas? Did they join the New Zealand Army? Did they read George Orwell and Virginia Woolf? Did they believe in Darwinism? Did they believe the theory of relativity? Did they support the women's suffrage movement? Did they learn Māori? Did they know the Treaty?

Oh, and have they forgotten their mother tongue? Have they lost the ability to write Chinese calligraphy? Have they adapted Marmite on toast? Have they altered the taste of the sweet-sour sauce? Do they buy retail clothes? Do they buy quilts from the shop? Do they fly to China to revisit their ancestors? Do they see themselves as New Zealanders? Do they see themselves as Chinese? Do they see themselves as Chinese-New Zealanders? Do they understand their great-grandparents' choices? Do they work as hard as they used to? Do they become the leaders in their fields? Do they run a business? Do they participate in politics? Do they do research in quantum physics? Do they celebrate the rainbow's rights? Do they paint abstractions with oil paint? Do they make sculptures with sewing skills learned from their grandmas?

*

I drove along the Clutha River to Lawrence and Arrowtown, retracing their immigration journey that began 160 years ago.

At Arrowtown's historical Chinese gold miners' camp, golden sycamore carpet underneath my footsteps, with the combination of beech red and oak brown. I walked back and forth, feeling the roots under the ground breathing out of the soil, echoing their after-work chats in their mother

tongue about how their day was. As I walked into the preserved huts, I could almost picture their enamel basins in the corner of the huts, their ceramic bowls on the shelves, their thin quilts, their worn-out shoes, their paid receipts folded carefully under the pillow, as well as their cheques; rice, beans, wheat and barley restored in the weaving bags under the bed, spades and ropes on the floor.

The hut was so tiny, as if it was only allowing one person to live in, yet it was for at least four people living together—it was their One Tree Hill.

Lawrence's historical Chinese gold miners' camp has preserved two historical buildings. The camp used to be a bustling Chinese village where over a hundred Chinese people lived. Now it is only a giant cabbage tree standing in the middle of the ruin, observing the golden tussac hills in the distance. Visiting the local museum, where it displays archaeological artefacts, has brought me back to their living scenes, and the stories were quietly told through the ceramic shards.

Pan Fah Ancestor Hall is one of the two preserved architectural sites; it used to be a place for commemorative events and worship. People came together to practice cultural activities, tied by their collective cultural memories. For these miners who stayed in Lawrence, it was their One Tree Hill.

*

As I drove back to Dunedin with a car loaded with fallen leaves and branches that I picked up from these two sites, I came to St Clair, once again looking at my One Tree Hill off the shore in the middle of the sea, an idea of responding to their stories echoed 160 years had jumped in.

I remembered I had often played a game called 丢沙包 (Throwing sandbag) in my childhood. It is a kids' game every Chinese child remembers. A small hand-sewn pouch, filled with rice, beans, corn, wheat or even sand—anything to give it weight. Two people stand on either side, tossing it back and forth, while the one in the middle dodges. If you're hit, you're out.

I was often the one hit—not only feeling the physical sting but also the quiet shame of being removed from the game. I remember once, someone's *shā bāo* was filled with kidney beans; it hit my arm and left a deep bruise. I went home crying to my grandmother, angry and hurt. I begged her to make me a stronger *shā bāo*, too—something heavy, something powerful so that I could hurt them back. She listened gently, then said if it hurt so much when they hit me, then why would I want to hurt someone else just by imagining how painful it would be? That moment stayed with me far longer than the bruise.

I want to once again time travel back to meet my grandma, ask her to make another softer *shā bāo* for this time, as it is so soft and so light, that when someone threw a hard stone to me, I would throw this softened one back, because after years I finally understand, love remains a shared, universal force. Then she would look at me with her proud smile and say: "Why don't you make it out yourself? Haven't you learned how to sew from me for these years?"

I have, indeed. I am now holding the thread from the cloud, sewing this story out. Grandma, did you see it?

*

Ponuiahine Island, off the St. Clair shore, is quietly witnessing this city with stories; some are mine, most are others. Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, it was never my One Tree Hill, it is everyone's.

奶奶，妈妈，我决定离开你们到另一个国家生活，我知道，这是我的选择。

(Mama, Grandma, I have decided to leave you to live in a foreign country; and I know, this is my choice.)

Afterword:

When I set out to write an autobiographical narrative recounting my migration experience, I spent two afternoons drafting it in two parts: one set in Auckland and the other unfolding years later, following my move to Dunedin and visits to historical gold-mining sites in Central Otago. After completing the draft, I made no further revisions, choosing to retain my most direct and unfiltered voice rather than refining it into polished English. As a result, you may encounter my habitual but incorrect grammar, as reflected in the title itself—*traffic(s)* and *flat white(s)*.

The imagined, cross-temporal dialogue between myself and my grandmother, and between myself and the first-generation Chinese gold miners, represents a process through which I metabolised and integrated memories of my past with my present experience as a migrant. At the same time, I sense that this story may not belong solely to me; it may resonate with, overlap with and echo the experiences of many first-generation immigrants.

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