

## OFF THE GROUND

Charlotte Parallel

The Dunedin Dream Brokerage (DDB) brings life into empty urban and retail environments through brokering a lively programme of art project occupation. We work with property owners, artists, individuals and community groups to broker the use of space – be it public or commercial, empty or under-utilised – for the temporary occupation of creative projects.

*Off The Ground* was directly inspired by the DDB project *Bubbles* that connected the art community and businesses by asking artists to reflect on the ‘upside of lockdown,’ posing questions like, What makes our neighbourhoods vibrant? The positive level of community engagement and collaboration between local business owners prompted the expansion of the idea into another DDB initiative called *Off The Ground*.

*Off The Ground* was funded by a Dunedin City Council Covid-19 Community Response Grant to help artists reinvigorate projects that had been put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These stalled art projects needed to have a collaborative focus on activating the places we live and work in. Following a call-out to the Ōtepoti/ Dunedin community, we were delighted to support four projects, starting with *Tūwhana*, a collaboration between Waiariki Parata-Taiapa (Kāi Tahu), Heramaahina Eketone (Ngāti Maniapoto me Waikato) and Alex Whitaker, held at 23 Princes Street. *The Commons* by Kate Fitzharris was next, at the Dunedin Botanic Garden, followed by *Caffenol Cafe 1. RDC Espresso*, at RDC Cafe by Chris Schmelz, and finally *Basking* with Madison Kelly (Kāi Tahu) at 17 George Street, Te Korowai o Mihiwaka Orokonui Ecosanctuary, and the North East Valley project community rooms.

### WAIARIKI PARATA-TAIAPA, HERAMAAHINA EKETONE AND ALEX WHITAKER – TŪWHANA

While each project was motivated by a different kaupapa, the artists were all working in a performative way where their artistic processes were visible and invited public participation. Working on site enables a shared conversation whereby, as soon as a member of the public enters the space, their interaction becomes part of the artwork. Reciprocity was a direct intention for *Tūwhana*, where, to quote the gallery text, the artists’ “collaborative approach led to the question – what is a tūwhana for our daily lives?”

Tūwhana (noun), river-crossing pole – a pole held breast-high for linking people when crossing a river where the strongest people were positioned at each end of the pole, to prevent the smaller or weaker members of the party from being washed off their feet.



Figure 1. Waiariki Parata-Taiapa, Heramaahina Eketone and Alex Whitaker; *Tūwhana*, 2021. Installation view.

Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figure 2. Waiairiki Parata-Taiapa, Heramaahina Eketone and Alex Whitaker; *Tūwhana*, 2021.

Installation view. Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figure 3. Waiairiki Parata-Taiapa, Heramaahina Eketone and Alex Whitaker; *Tūwhana*, 2021.

Installation view. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

*Tūwhana* started the *Off The Ground* series in a vacant shop in central-city Ōtepoti on Monday 1 March 2021. Waiairiki Parata-Taiapa, Heramaahina Eketone and Alex Whitaker occupied the space for two weeks, where a solid process of making, kōrero, carving and painting took place. The *Tūwhana* kaupapa started with personal research and developed onsite in discussion with visitors to the space.

At the end of the fortnight there was a celebration and silent auction where the artworks were joyfully carried away by participants, whānau and friends; they continue to serve as anchor points in our local communities.

Text from the *Tūwhana* exhibition:

A collaborative approach led to the question – what is a tūwhana for our daily lives?

The porotiti is the central work, the two taura (cords) that make it spin reach up to Ranginui and down to Paptūānuku. All living things exist between the two. Our living art exists in the same way, bounded by Ranginui and Paptūānuku, and supported by our friends and whānau.



Figure 4. Waiairiki Parata-Taiapa, Heramaahina Eketone and Alex Whitaker; *Tūwhana*, 2021. Installation view. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

## KATE FITZHARRIS – *THE COMMONS*

Kate Fitzharris partnered with the Dunedin Botanic Garden to realise her project, *The Commons*, a site-specific raw clay installation made from the earth and windfall of the garden. Working with caretakers at the Dunedin Botanic Garden, in particular Doug Thomson, curator of the Rhododendron Dell, Fitzharris was able to find the right location to make the work and locate a bank from which to gather raw clay and sticks to make the base that her form would sit on. Spending time walking around the Rhododendron Dell, Fitzharris gathered binding materials in the form of natural windfall, such as pine needles and leaves.

Fitzharris then dried and remixed her raw materials to make a “Botanic Garden raw clay” used to construct the form and interventions for *The Commons*.

During the first weekend of the making process, Kate invited the public along to share in the site-specific construction. Hand-building is a considered process, and the ongoing conversations fed into the clay, coil by coil, as *The Commons* came to be. The rightfully slow process triggers references to geological time as the material informs construction and, in turn, the responsiveness to activity.



Figure 5. Kate Fitzharris, *The Commons*, 2021. Work in progress.  
Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figure 6. Kate Fitzharris, *The Commons*, 2021. Work in progress.  
Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figure 7. Kate Fitzharris, *The Commons*, 2021. Work in progress.  
Photograph: Justin Spiers.

Figure 8. Kate Fitzharris, *The Commons*, 2012. Detail of tree.  
Photograph: Justin Spiers.



*The Commons* artist text:

*The Commons* explores the blurred lines between what we often think of as distinct spaces or perspectives: private/public, individual/collective, domestic/wild, human/nature, object/viewer. It reminds us that wild public places can be as intimate and homely as our domestic spaces, and that we have wild roots to our domestic lives. *The Commons* refers to places and resources not owned privately, but held in common and managed for the collective good. It also alludes to seeking out what we hold in common with each other and what we find around us, so we may have a more empathetic, connected world view.



Figure 9. Kate Fitzharris, *The Commons*, 2021. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

### CHRIS SCHMELZ – CAFFENOL CAFE I. RDC ESPRESSO

Down the alley at RDC Cafe is where Chris Schmelz welcomed RDC regulars and curious people wanting to take part in his project *Caffenol Cafe I. RDC Espresso* – an analogue photography project using coffee as an ingredient to develop film within a café environment.

For a week, starting on Monday 12 April, Chris Schmelz invited people to have their portrait taken in and around RDC Cafe – which they could also take home at the end of the project. Once each 35mm film was finished, Schmelz removed the roll and placed it inside a developing tank. Chris merged into the café environment as he worked away on a small coffee table in the corner of RDC.



Figure 10. Chris Schmelz, *Caffenol Cafe I. RDC Espresso*, 2021. Work in progress. Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figures 11 and 12. Chris Schmelz, *Caffenol Cafe I. RDC Espresso*, 2021. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

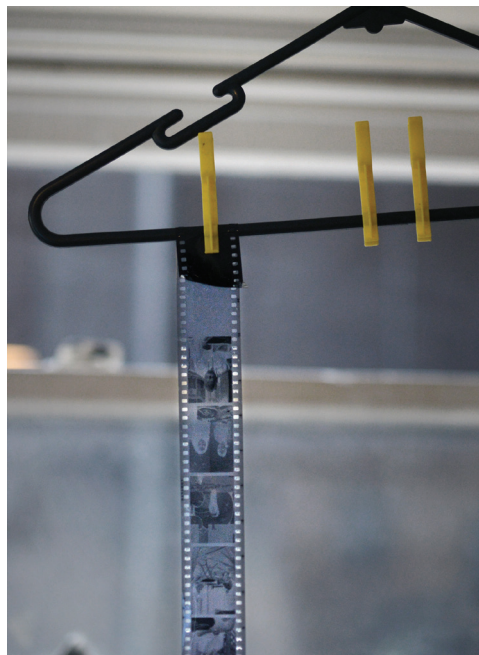


Figure 13. Chris Schmelz, *Caffenol Cafe I. RDC Espresso*, 2021. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

He strained the espresso coffee, unique to RDC, and measured up the rest of the ingredients required for his special Caffenol formula. Having filled the tank containing the 35mm film, Chris proceeded to turn it in timings that he had worked out from previous experiments and that he knew would produce the density of tone necessary for a quality black-and-white print.

The negatives were hung to dry in the café window, celebrating that moment of magic in analogue photography. From there, the negatives were digitally scanned, printed and installed. The black-and-white portraits adorned the café walls, accumulating as they were printed throughout the week and revealing the social architecture of RDC.



Figure 14. Madison Kelly, *Basking*, 2021. Photograph: Justin Spiers.



Figure 15. Madison Kelly, *Basking*, 2021. Photograph: Justin Spiers.



## MADISON KELLY – BASKING

*Basking* opened as an arts hub in a vacant space on 17 George Street that welcomed our communities to learn about local mokomoko (lizards). The hub was a place to talk, read, draw, watch, listen, observe and consider lizards in Ōtepoti through a contemporary art lens. In the street-facing window, a stack of terracotta tiles offered refuge to a clay skink. Other tiles, on the floor, held records of mokomoko movement and pebbles. The sounds of pencil against tile and the multi-species noise of Orokonui Ecosanctuary filled the space. Three groups of tiles grounded three monitors, where observational drawings referenced field studies collected at Te Korowai o Mihiwaka Orokonui Ecosanctuary.



Figures 16 and 17. Madison Kelly, *Basking* workshops. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

On Saturday 17 and Saturday 24 April 2021 Madison Kelly (Kāi Tahu, Pākehā) lead four one-hour workshops with up to 15 participants each at Te Korowai o Mihiwaka Orokonui Ecosanctuary. Madison posed questions and shared knowledge that invited participants to consider mokomoko in their multiplicities, both culturally and ecologically. What makes a lizard-friendly habitat? Where can they seek refuge? What plants do they rely on, and cohabitate with? How does mokomoko whakapapa in Te Ao Māori guide us through the dark, towards a multi-species future? Observations were realised on black and white paper, and donated terracotta tiles. Attendees who drew on the tiles were invited to take them home, for installation as “productive grounds” that could serve both functional and poetic roles in suburban conservation culture.

What can we learn from our native lizards, across science, culture and community? This question formed the final event – a mokomoko hui held at the Fred Hollows Room, a community space initiated by the Valley Project, based in Dunedin's North East Valley. This pātai was addressed by four speakers: Orokonui educator Taylor Davies-Colley, artist Madison Kelly, herpetologist Ellen Richardson, and Clare Cross from the Open Valley Urban Ecosanctuary.

Thanks to the artists and host businesses which supported *Off The Ground*, our communities had the chance to come together and look a little deeper into our relationships with each other and the whenua, and to be an active part of the ecosystems that make up the places we live in.



Figure 18. Maddison Kelly, *Skink* at Orokonui Sanctuary. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

## Acknowledgements

Text by Charlotte Parallel, broker for *OffThe Ground*, in consultation with the participating artists.

Image credits: Justin Spiers.

**Heramaahina Eketone**, of Ngāti Tamainupō, Ngāti Maniapoto and Waikato descent, is a traditionally trained indigenous artist in raranga (weaving), whakairo (wood carving) and tā moko (tattooing). Heramaahina takes her knowledge of the meanings inherent in tohu māori (design) and applies them to both her traditional and contemporary work. She is currently an apprentice under Stu McDonald of Moana Moko.

**Alex Whitaker** is a carver at Te Whare Wānanga o Te Whanau Arohanui. He started learning carving from Allan Nopera in the mid-1990s. He has a Bachelor in Māori Traditional Art and a PG Dip in Māori Visual Art.

Ko **Waiariki Parata-Taiapa** tōhoku ikoa.

“Toitū te whenua, whatukarokaro te takata”

I am a descendant of the four winds. My roots are deep within our Araituru coastline. My community and people have shaped me and I maintain connection to our place and people.

“Tamaiti akona ki te kainga, tū ana ki te marae, tau ana”

I love everything about what encompasses life on the marae. The marae replenishes my wairua; my place of being. Tihei Mauri Ora!

**Christopher Schmelz** is an interdisciplinary artist from Koputai/Port Chalmers, Ōtepoti/Dunedin, predominantly working with analogue film and sound. Chris has performed nationally and internationally as part of the long-running experimental film/expanded cinema group, Rubbish Film Unit, and in collaboration with a number of other artists and musicians.

**Kate Fitzharris** completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Dunedin School of Art, with a major in ceramics, in 1994. Her interests include the wild and domestic histories of clay and ceramics, and how the objects we live with partake in our daily lives. Kate has held a number of residencies, including: Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (Japan), 2019; Tylee Cottage (Sarjeant Gallery, Whanganui), 2018; and Doris Lusk Residency (Risingholme Community Centre, Christchurch), 2017.

**Madison Kelly** (Kāi Tahu, Pākehā, b.1994) graduated from the Dunedin School of Art in 2017 with a BVA(Hons), majoring in drawing. Her Ōtepoti-based practice is concerned with contemporary 'nature-cultures' in an unstable era. Grounded in drawing and field-recording processes, she aims to reckon with the shared time-spaces of humans and nonhumans alike.

**Charlotte Parallel** completed her MFA at Dunedin School of Art in 2016. Based in Koputai/Port Chalmers, she works in the fields of sculpture, sound, performance and collaboration.

**Justin Spiers** is a New Zealand photographer who has a long-standing interest in documenting and exploring the relations between humans and their environment, especially, but not exclusively, with regards to the animals that share their planet.