



# The Psychogeographer's Dream

## Recent Work by Ayesha Green

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Playing on the values suggested by her own name, Ayesha Green (Ngati Kahungunu, Kai Tahu), in her exhibition *Wrapped up in Clouds* at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, offers a suite of artwork—paintings, ceramics, drawings—that, together, evoke a kind of New Zealand-centred dreamscape. It is one that is made up of fragmentary quotations and visual echoes from canonical works of nationhood, interwoven with a personal narrative. The kaupapa of her show expresses, then, in oblique fashion, a credo: belief in an archipelago situated in Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa that is primal, pristine, folkloric. It is indeed a place wrapped up in clouds, an atmosphere as much as a location. Here, the art-historical landscape of the Romantic Sublime has been tamed and domesticated into wryly romantic scenarios and smartly designed decor.

In these depictions, the artist's persona has itself been transfigured into a mythopoetic identity; she is, variously, the first woman, a creature of biblical fable, and Papatuanuku, oozing fertile mud between her toes, hands daubed with ochre.

Identity is at the heart of the show: individual, communal, national. In the twenty-first century we have become acutely aware of how our identities

are subject to ever-changing societal conditions and competing ideologies, aided and abetted by the internet. The assimilation and universalism promulgated by globalisation has been challenged by counter-narratives promoting ethnic, religious and subcultural identities, all amplified by the rise of online communities and the alienating inequities of neoliberalism and climate change.

*Wrapped up in Clouds* derives its voltage from where these pressures intersect or collide, and is a shamanistic meditation on them, asserting, if not quite the redemptive power of art, then at least its therapeutic potential for witty and ironic commentaries on gender politics and the identikit tokens of New Zealandness, in all their contradictions. There is a gentle cartoonish humour to Green's art-making, even as it goes on copying, quoting and mimicking notions of authenticity and authority. Using her own whakapapa and bicultural heritage, she traces and tweaks the threads of whanaungatanga (kinship, unity and connection) that are part of this country's unique legal framework under the Treaty of Waitangi. Between iconography and iconoclasm, monumentalism and domesticism, museological camouflage and colonialist legacies: that is where Ayesha Green locates herself as an artist.

Some of these works were produced during the first lockdown and the notion of economic migrants and asylum-seekers that she alludes to in her salon-sized diptych *All of my lovers are immigrants (smooth my pillow)* has taken on a special poignancy, now that a

Ayesha Green *Wrapped up in Clouds*  
Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 29 August–29 November  
curated by Lucy Hammonds

(opposite) Ayesha Green's *Wrapped up in Clouds* at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, with *All of my lovers are immigrants (smooth my pillow)*

(right) AYESHA GREEN *Landscape Painting*—detail 2020  
Clay & glaze, 1900 x 2450 mm.

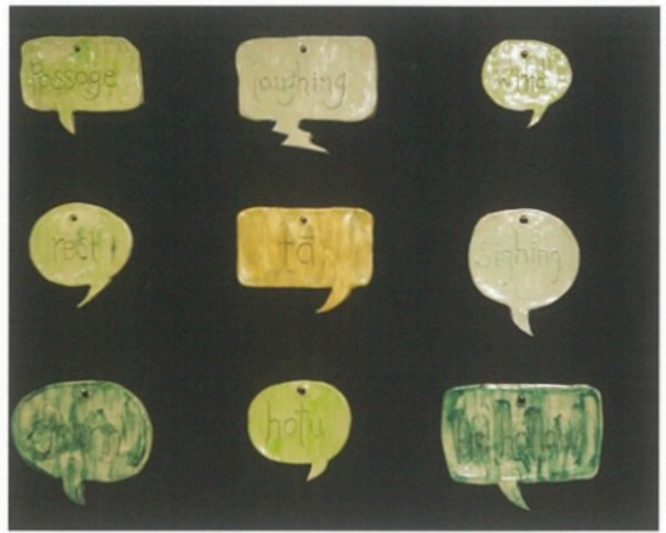
(below) Ayesha Green's *Wrapped up in Clouds* at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, with, from left, *In the extension of my feet*, *Eve Eats (Cook's Scurvy Grass)* and *Eve Eats (New Zealand Spinach)*

*cordon sanitaire* has been placed around our islands to fend off the pandemic.

As a psychogeographer of place, Green offers ambiguous parables that invite decipherment. With their clean, strong graphic lines, her paintings have stylistic and polemic similarities to the art of Robyn Kahukiwa, Robin White, Gavin Hurley and Kushana Bush. Her art is accessible, virtuous, orderly, tightly-edited, scrupulously neat. She offers what might be simplified or reductive landscapes that bring to mind the land of plenty, the Promised Land, the Garden of Eden, Paradise Lost. Hers is a transposed Arcadia, but one charged with forbidding meanings, as if positioned behind electrified fences.

There is an implicit pageantry to Green's depictions of native plants, for example, that generates questions about power: this pomp and ceremony, what does it signify? Who is it for? One possible answer is that her iconography derives from the nationalist art of tourist posters of the mid-twentieth century, and is therefore about the scenic as an economic asset. Or is it about what naturalist and writer Geoff Park termed 'theatre country', and another naturalist and writer, David Bellamy, termed 'moa's ark': that is, an increasing environmental awareness amongst this country's contemporary inhabitants, and a contested understanding of '100% pure', thus subsuming into the secular world of branding and marketing aspects of the pagan, the cultish, the spiritual?

Curator Lucy Hammonds' brief wall essay informs us that the botanical specimen imagery Green



employs derives from the illustrations of Audrey Eagle, which were produced during the latter half of the twentieth century and collected in award-winning books, published by Te Papa.

Manipulating this found imagery in her large acrylic painting, *I thought I heard you crying in the forest* (2020), Green arranges plant examples, accompanied by their carefully handprinted Maori, Latin and common names, into a kind of latticework across the surface of the canvas. The background is pitch-black, like a midnight nocturne, and the specimens are so painted as to suggest a mazy display, glowing luminously in the dark as if moonlit for our attention and observance. The effect is eerily beautiful; a salute, yes, to the richness and diversity of the New Zealand bush but also made into a haunting allegory by its poetic, fairy tale-like title.

The diptych *All of my lovers are immigrants* also features massed inflorescence, unfurling in a manner emblematic of a midsummer night's dream: at once overpowering, hypnotic, sensual. Each panel shows a barge-sized bed, islanded by blackness, and each





15. *Pimelea longifolia*  
Taranga

16. *Coriaria arborea*  
Tutu

4. *Clematis paniculata*  
Puawhananga

5. *Ascaris huta*

28. *Sophora prostrata*

30. *Motostichum Carmichaeliae*  
Pink broom

17. *Coriaria angustissima*

18. *Tetrapathea tetrandra*  
New Zealand Passion flower

19. *Metrosideros fulgens*  
Rata

20. *Metrosideros perforata*  
Aka

42. *Pomaderris ericifolia*  
Tahinu

29. *Corallospartium crassicaule*  
Coral broom

45. *Pseudopanax anomalous*

31. *Carmichaelia odorata*

32. *Carmichaelia williamsii*

47. *Pseudopanax laetus*

34. *Bidens*

33. *Urtica ferox*  
Tree nettle

61. *Cyathodes juniperina*  
Perina Mingimangi

43. *Phebalium nudum*  
Mairehau

44. *Melicope simplex*  
Poataniwha

46. *Pseudopanax colensoi* Mount-ain five finger

48. *Pseudopanax lineare*

62. *Archeria racemosa*

75. *Coprosma rotundifolia*

63. *Archeria traverssi*

77. *Coprosma rhamnoides*

64. *Epacris pauciflora* Tumingi

65. *Dracophyllum subulatum* Monoao

66. *Dracophyllum strictum* Te

*Coprosma colensoi*

76. *Coprosma tenuicaulis* Hukihuki

78. *Coprosma spatulata*

79. *Coprosma australis* Kanono

80. *Coprosma robusta* Karamu

90. *Traversia baccharoides*

91. *Solanum aviculare* Popoporo

92. *Calystegia tuguriorum* Powhiwhi

93. *Hebe stricta* Koromiko

94. *Hebe decumbens*

95. *Hebe cupressoides*

(opposite)

AYESHA GREEN *I thought I heard you crying in the forest*—detail 2020  
Acrylic on canvas, 1730 x 2700 mm.

(below)

AYESHA GREEN *Dear Ayesha, love from Joseph (November 3rd)* 2020  
Kokowai on stone paper, 640 x 900 mm.

contains two sleepers, male and female, hands and arms forming an interlocked pattern. They are cocooned dreamers beneath wraparound, neatly tucked-in coverlets, which are embroidered or woven with an elaborate design of spring and summer flowers. It is as if each of these great barges moored in dark waters is spread with a fitted comfort blanket of swampland plants.

The woman in each painting is a self-portrait of the artist, a self-possessed dreamer, smilingly content, while each of the males, encompassed in a womb-like bed, lies passive, immobile; bed-bound and possibly spellbound. Privileging the female perspective, each painting presents a perfect schema, bringing to mind the calculated look of an Instagrammed image. Each seems to draw on the filtered shapes of the digital landscape, smoothed-off, flattened, tightly enclosed. It is the look of immediate nostalgia, a snapshot memory, implying the shareable selfie. Yet the beds, unmistakably anchored in New Zealand, the bed-sheets white, planed flat and as clasping as bandages, also summon up a disquieting impression of ceremonial funeral caskets: buried alive in a bed of flowers.

*Scenic Beauty* (2020), the brushed-on outline of a hand in red ochre or kokowai, is a drawing displayed at the exhibition's entrance that points emphatically to its own symbolism. It is both cartoonish and elegant, mock-primitive and resolutely modernist, a knowing squiggle. Here is the artist's hand grasping at or otherwise expressing art's potency and mana. The 'hand-made' has been placed in quote marks, at a remove, behind a pane of glass. Pictographic, it is also an emblem of possession or perhaps possessiveness, an acknowledgement of the haptic, of touch: the touch of earth, the matrix, the whenua.

Earth in the form of hand-worked fired and glazed clay is both subject and object in the wall-hung ceramic work *Landscape* (2020). This is an assemblage of plaques resembling speech balloons, each plaque incised with a word descriptive of landscape as a state of being: 'dancing', 'yearn', 'heihei', 'hukiki', 'laughing'. The language in *Landscape* implies toponymic descriptive place-names, with their instant poetry. The land is a living entity, Papatuanuku, and these clay tiles speak for her, invoking religious shrines, relics, offerings and the redress of ancient wrongs.

The sense of gestures made towards creation myths becomes more emphatic with the handful of artworks at the other end of Green's exhibition. The name Ayesha is a Muslim transliteration or approximation of Eve, meaning womanly life-force. In the twinned paintings *Eve Eats (Cook's Scurvy Grass)* and *Eve Eats (New Zealand Spinach)* (both 2020), Green links extracts from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the words painted

on canvas so as to suggest text in a rare book held in the British Museum, although in fact obviously copied from the internet. The chosen extracts have been interpreted by feminist literary critics to suggest the idea that Eve is a kind of proto-ecofeminist. Thus, Christian allegory is allied with Maori myth via the judicious use of herbs and plants.

Acting out her own psychodrama as Everywoman or Eve in the painting *In the extension of my feet* (2020), the artist, or the artist's projected persona, stands, looking slightly comical, in her underwear holding leafy flowering vegetation that seems to be growing from her feet, thus linking landscape and bodyscape as female-centred. We might read this latter group of works as parables of growth, fecundity and conservation, both feet planted firmly on the ground, and the ground itself there to be worshipped as much as it is to be walked on. And yet, read this way, these works offer pedagogy that seems dry to the point of desiccation. Better perhaps to view this self-portrait of the artist as Eve as a fantasy, expressive of a buoyancy, a lightness of being, and the landscape itself as a place of reverie and musing.

In the set of four wall-hung postcards titled *Dear Ayesha, love from Joseph*, Green makes colonial history light and breezy, a kind of frothy daydream, head in the clouds. Each large postcard has a brief quotation, written in red ochre, from the *Endeavour* journal of Sir Joseph Banks, and all are addressed to an Ayesha Green living in Ravensbourne Road. Fun is had with the word 'green'. 'At night I saw a phaenomenon which I have seldom seen, at sun set the flying clouds were almost all colours amongst which was green very conspicuous tho rather faint coloured.'

Botanist, collector and explorer, Banks writing to Green might be an authority figure, father figure, ancestor figure. Confronting the overbearing weight of colonial history, its gravitas, Green takes refuge in making Banks an imaginary friend, and thus seeks to destabilise or dislocate old shibboleths, allegiances, assertions: old ways of looking at things. These might be tourist postcards sent to the future allowing the past to seem fresh and strange all over again. To defamiliarise the touristic landscape is a psychogeographer's dream. These postcards are what she is dreaming, wrapped up in clouds.

