



## Against Malaise

### Pacific Artists Respond to Poetry

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*The long waves of our ocean* is a group show in Wellington's National Library Gallery, in which seven early-career artists have made work responding to various writers, exploring where their practices intersect with the image-making of poetry. Beyond this, each artist manages to tease out a wealth of nuance from their respective writers, a select pool which includes Albert Wendt, Hone Tuwhare, J.C. Sturm, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell and Keri Hulme. In making each writer's work their own, these seven visual artists embrace that public character of an artwork or piece of writing, when a work takes on a life of its own once freed into culture's wide white-rapid stream.

Ana Iti's *A separation between you and me* (2022) speaks plainly to our fractiously cleaved intersubjective field, arguably to incendiary effect since the arrival of the iPhone, bringing with it a new liquid connectivity. It was seemingly a moment of global synchronicity—a realisation of early Silicon Valley woo-woo utopianism—but we have since learned that bestowing individuals with the means of self-propaganda (and surveillance) results in an ideological drift that is impossible to track via the usual political registers, amplifying difference as much as it supplies tools for building communities.

*The long waves of our ocean: New responses to Pacific poems with works by Sione Faletau, Ayesha Green, Turumeke Harrington, Ana Iti, Sione Tuivailala Monū, Ammon Ngakuru and James Tapsell-Kururangi, curated by Hanahiva Rose National Library Gallery, 26 November 2022–27 May 2023*

The screen, the lens, the proverbial window all find simple yet effective plinth-space in Iti's work—a literal window-frame on gallery-white—in an elegant evocation of *neighbourly* space as a modern impenetrability; pointing to neighbourly relations not so much housing as constraining the subject in psychic immunologies. The unassuming modesty of the piece speaks to the presence of violence in the most banal and everyday of milieux, that biased architectures abound in seeming neutrality—beyond this, that screens are not so much thresholds as maddeningly untouchable glimpses: closed windows indeed. As a response to J.C. Sturm's (debatably apocalyptic) visions of thrashing seas, Iti's work might also point to the fragility of our language-defences against the sublime indifference of the elements, like, for example, the cataclysmic feedback loops of climate change set to trample human-scaled-life-worlds as stampeding gargantua.

Sione Tuivailala Monū's video work *Toroa/Toloa* (2022) hews to the contemporary imagination by way of moving image, capturing 'reiteration and pulse' which Carol Vernallis described in her 2013 book *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Media* as the visceral and paradigmatic expectation of new-media audiences, thanks in large part to the bit-consumptions of YouTube and its sibling successor platforms. Monū's visuals play out with oceanic tempi, a soup of blues and beats in rhythmic pulsation, perhaps resisting the absolutism of political registers as they attempt to match the contagion-pace of meaning-making in a deregulated field of media. Seen this way, the piece offers a God's-eye view of

(opposite) James Tapsell-Kururangi's *he tiriti aroha* (2022) at National Library, Wellington, November 2022 (Photograph: Mark Beatty)

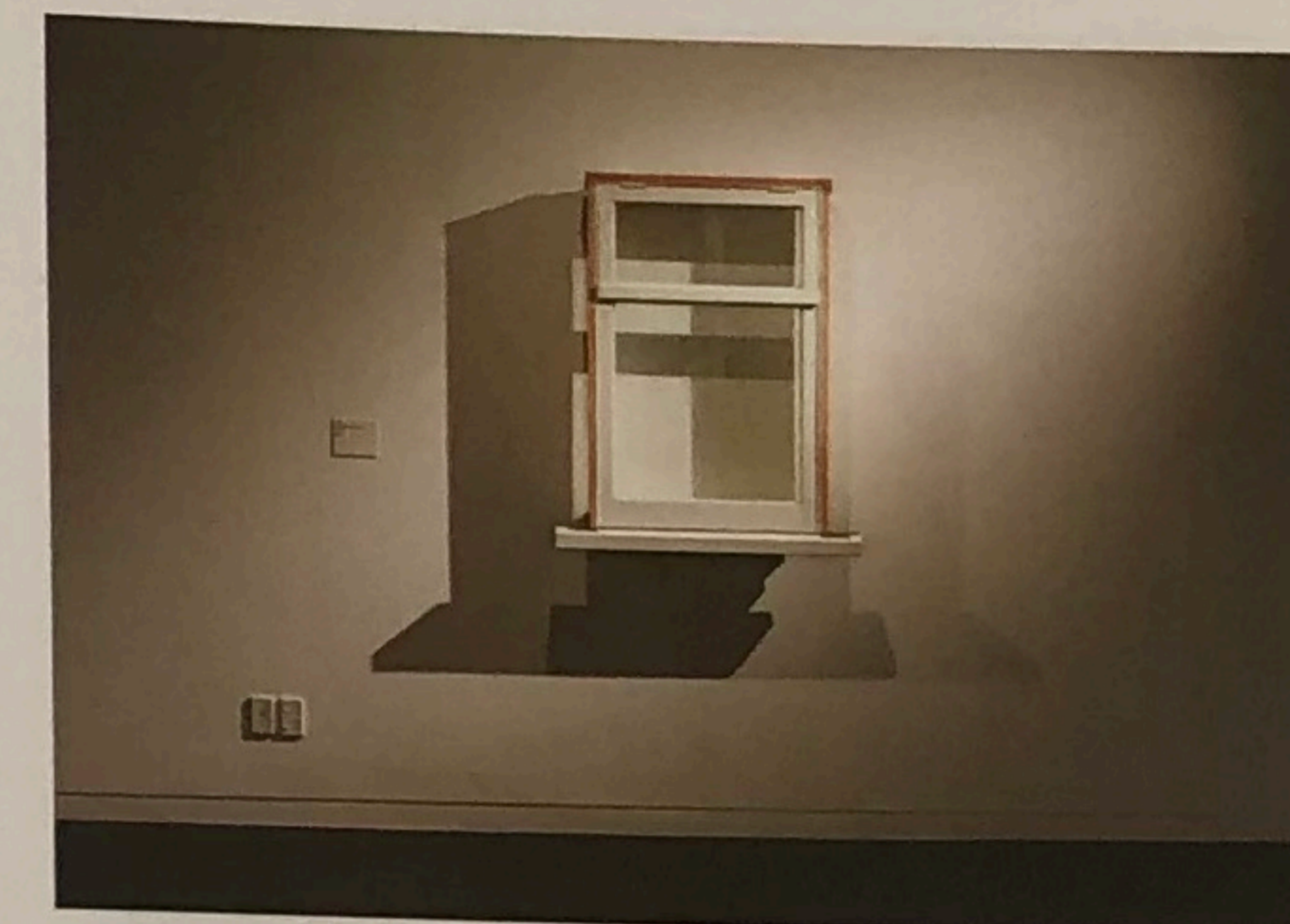
(right) Ana Iti's *A separation between you and me* (2022) at National Library, Wellington, November 2022 (Photograph: Mark Beatty)

(below) AYESHA GREEN *Welcome home, traveller* 2022 Acrylic on canvas. 2400 x 2300 mm. (Photograph: Mark Beatty)

the internet's increasingly frenzied swarm-logics, watching retention and expansion from above like the comings and goings of an ionised tide. Furthermore, the piece bookends the show's ambient oecumene, holding every object and image in the sea's baptismal rhythms of ebb and flow. *Toroa* are albatrosses and *toloa* are ducks—responding to Hone Tuwhare's poem 'Toroa: Albatross'—which provokes yet more readings: that perhaps Monū is signposting strategies for negotiating oceanic-informatics without drowning; that one could either skate the surface like an albatross (riding storm winds with ease) or surf each rise and fall with the unbothered resilience of a duck (not quite a swan, and yet the effect of furious submerged paddling and above-water grace holds).

Ayesha Green's expansive tableau *Welcome home, traveller* (2022) also courts the same Hone Tuwhare poem and cleaves it into a painterly dyad. As in most of Green's work the visual field is flat, gesturing towards the associative innocence of illustration, of childhood, and of objects denuded of the real by way of fantasy—not just whimsical but also political fantasy. The fact that her prior works have been couched in the murk of colonial histories—arguably in efforts to soften divisive and racially charged rhetorics (thereby making them critically approachable)—imbues the work's deceptive simplicity with its own paratextual awareness, that here the prodigal flight of seabirds carries the weight of pre-colonial migratory passages in the Pacific, and a cosy ambience of home. It is typically polished, seamlessly inhabiting the distinct visual register we have come to expect from Green, and yet advances the artist's existing accomplishments into a freer and more lyrical space.

In conceptualising the sea, James Tapsell-Kururangi's *he tiriti aroha* (2022) considers the limitless heavens, and that initial separation of Ranginui sky-father and Papatūānuku earth-mother which makes all life possible—without which the expanses of creation as we know them would not exist. In this vein the first two photographs in his blown-up triptych offer out-of-focus faces, the artist's mother and father as mythic stand-ins. Abutting these warmly intimate captures is a starker shot of a house, in crisp black and white—possibly the artist's childhood home. Here the distance between sky and land is a knowing schematic of the child leaving the bosom of home for rites of expansion, a combination of fear and longing which is never without those umbilical tugs of losing one's centre. That said, poetic and almost gothic beguilement resides here, an intrigue even—that the surfaces of home, and home as a proposition of nurturing, are never what they seem. The miasmas



of childhood and its various containments can be experienced as both nurture and imprisonment, something that nourishes and rankles in equal measure, and the wounds of which emerge in time with surprising stealth. In this vein, Kururangi's headshots of his parents might even be a knowing defacement—the artist taking a personal inventory and making corrections.

Ammon Ngakuru's painting, much like that by Ayesha Green, operates in flatness; but with softer lines, with a feathering delicacy in which subject matter is approached through a prism of dream—or even, true dialogue; a modality of provisional speech, a lateral gentleness. In *Night* (2022), this soft approach gives darkness a navy texture offset with the sharp edges of cut-out stars, the brushstrokes having so light a touch they show wording beneath, a base of printed material. These texts remain mysteries, haunting the clearer nodes of the stars—a murk between their navigable certainty, their shining endurance (showing up text, maybe language itself, as ephemera). In a similar enclosing of text, Ngakuru's *alphabet painting (bone in the throat)* (2022) features a free-floating alphabet in gossamer-soft watercolour, in the midst of which levitates a figure-less item of clothing. Both works configure words with maddening opacity, but *alphabet painting* in particular gestures at the ghosts within language, at the demiurges which language





(left) TURUMEKE HARRINGTON *rooting rooted* 2022  
Kōkōwai (red ochre), 194 x 164 mm.  
(Photograph: Mark Beatty)

(below) AMMON NGAKURU *Night* 2022  
Oil paint on newsprint, 4000 x 2300 mm.  
(Photograph: Mark Beatty)

(opposite above) Sione Faletau's *Toroa/Toloa* (2022), at National Library Gallery, Wellington, November 2022  
(Photograph: Mark Beatty)

(opposite below) SIONE TUÍVAILALA MONŪ *Bones and all* 2022  
Plastic flowers, beads, foam board, fabric, dimensions variable  
(Photograph: Mark Beatty)

acts as a mere transistor for—making every word a séance, making every utterance a potential conjuring of intelligences trapped in etymological ossification and neglect. It is the idea that trapped inside words are pre-linguistic pre-modern forces, maybe djinns, which any offhand incantation might accidentally unleash. In this vein of language and its only partial grasp on numinous reality, *bone in the throat* alludes not only to Keri Hulme but to that Zizekian reality-tenet, whereby the Real is the indigestible thing,

the thing so difficult to conceive of that it cannot be properly said; and that attempts to do so are blocked by a bone in the throat.

Turumeke Harrington's *wormhole, damn, log, jam, blood and boned, dusty boned, rooting rooted tussock, royally boned* (2022) finds in Keri Hulme's words an organic flow of birth and decay (and rebirth), locating within the soupy transfigurations of the cosmic dance those things which remain the same—holding the cloak of air and sea, skeletal structures and their binding gravities. Roots, bones, all phallic emblems—these totems repeat in coppery beiges across four panels, each a variation on a single theme, deliberately earth-hued and pared back. As if to say, these are the generative blueprints for existence. This is the master code. In each frame we have the russets and ochres of earth, of mineral clay. Like the divine geometries of Pythagoras, Harrington's shapes vibrate on some mythic ground of physical being, the fibrous stuff of life itself emitting key notes of strength and survival. Their modesty conceals brut and belligerent earthiness, the kind that outlives civilisations, and

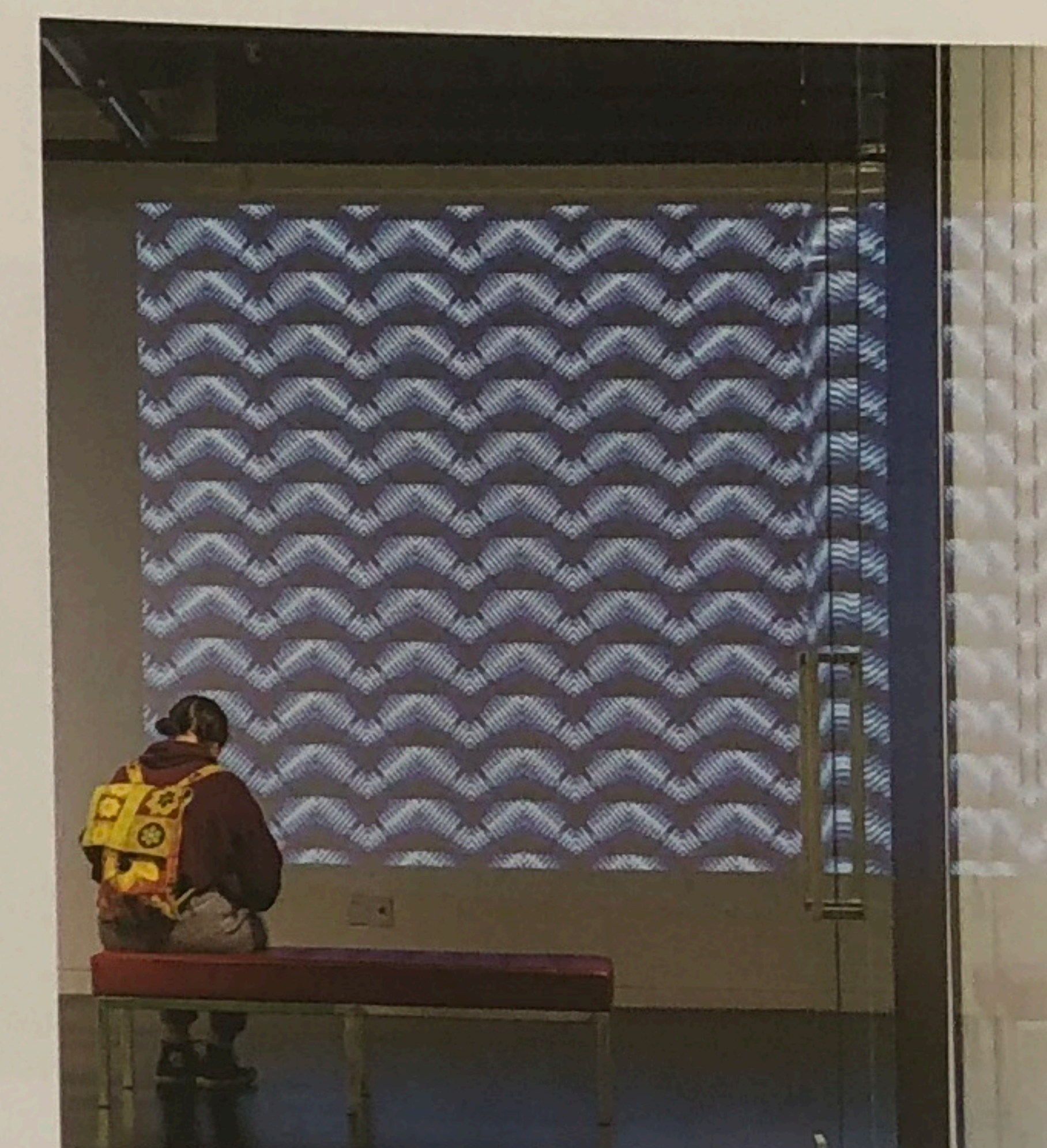


which serenely watches the rise and fall of various Babylons like disinterested referees. Perhaps the thoughts of mountains, which Harrington alludes to being binary, have little interest in the suicidal machinations of humanity.

Then there is Sione Tuivailala Monū's front-facing installation *Bones and all* (2022). In the gallery window a vibrant figure hangs in synthetic allusion to the necro-brilliantines of Mexican Death Days, garlanded from plastic bouquets—to date, something of a signature for the artist. In the show's broad theme *Bones and all* rises up from the sea like a resplendent Venus, proffering a revision in that deity's skin-deep wiles. Here Venus has dual being, a bejewelled skeleton and a 'spirit'—a white dress haunting-from-behind. Maybe inadvertently—relaying with the consummate kitchen-sink-ism of the work's title—there is allusion to the off set positioning of man and woman in the symbolic order (in the West anyway) as presence and absence. Here the woman is non-existent (see Lacan; 'woman does not exist'), but only in as much as maleness has been historically afforded master status. And like any master, maleness needs a subordinate by which to affirm itself. In her alleged *absence* self-adornment becomes the feminine strategy du jour, towards camouflaging this symbolic abyss, this voidish lack with which she has been characterised. Reversing this gendered allotment, Monū's figure—as masculine *presence*—bears all that typically feminine accoutrement, oscillating (and queering) the symbolic beyond its two parts. Classically hermaphroditic sea-goddess? Avenging Amphibian Angel? She is as open as the sea itself.

From work to work there is more on offer in *The long waves of our ocean* than a simplistic story-boarding of their corresponding literatures. Instead, each artist uses their chosen text as a launching pad for unwieldy explorations, jettisoning the provocation from what might have been mere eco-minded platitudes into something more, wading with bristling restraint through notions of endlessness, communal experience, wonder big and small—and most of all, endurance. That a show circuitously about the inevitably rising seas should pivot (with the lightest touch) around the concept of longevity makes for a hopeful experience. Perhaps, reaching for the beautiful amidst volatile global decay can only ever be a symptom of hope, albeit a less obvious hope shrouded in existential dread and species-remorse. Aesthetics is presented as the opposite of resignation, as the lure drawing the jaded back into those necessary sympathies which make political life—and participatory efficacy therein—possible.

*The long waves of our ocean*, then, is arguably a show about art itself, and the veritable ocean of visual culture alongside which art finds itself attempting relevance. Ultimately it asks the question: What function does art's somewhat deliberately paced image-making have in an otherwise prolific and accelerated image-field? When that field is literally an ocean, surging with turbid consummation of omni-fumes—a marbled swarm of longing and



vitriol—where does art and its instituted gravities sit? Furthermore, where does incentive to make art speak louder than resignation, not just in the face of ecological collapse, but cutting through the omnidirectional effluvia of image as we currently consume it. It is a question adjacent to investing in futures at all, the proverbial *why bother?* Against such malaise, this collection of artists dig deep enough that their own incentives make for exemplary beacons.

