



Find identity
through mimicry

Self-confessed
copycat
Ayesha Green
wants to 'take
the power
back'. Charlotte
Fielding, looks
at this artist
who continues
to gain
momentum.

Ayesha Green (Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu) has been painting still lifes during her three-month artist's residency at the McCahon House in Titirangi. These are distinctly New Zealand still lifes: Watties cans, bottles of tomato sauce.

"I've been thinking about how the history of still life is documenting the lavish lives of rich people," Ayesha says. "How do we understand that kind of wealth in New Zealand? It relates back to land and agriculture; how we use land to produce food. So while the products or the things that I'm painting aren't necessarily high-end food products, they are high stakes products." Ayesha depicts branded products that have become a part of the New Zealand national identity, and says that "how we relate through food is also a big story of settling colonisation."

Examining the ways in which individual and national identities are developed and performed is a theme through Ayesha's work. She uses copying and mimicry to examine power and cultural narratives. "There's this idea of the performance of identity and that it's sort of mimicked," she says. "As a kid, you grow up copying pictures. You learn how to write by copying. You learn how to speak by copying. And so how we produce ourselves or our identities is through processes of copying."

"There was this idea that Māori had to assimilate to the English, so they were having to copy what Englishness meant. As time went on and fewer generations had directly come from England, more had been born in New Zealand, they became this not-quite-English performance.

"There became a New Zealand identity or a Pākehā identity. And so it's like Māori have contributed to a difference. Over time there's been this reproduction of an identity that changes in each performance. Little things

Photography by
Logan Buchanan

PAGE 40: Ayesha Green in the studio at McCahon House
Photo by Logan Buchanan

RIGHT: Ayesha Green, *Mum* (May 1985), acrylic on canvas, 170 x 140 cm, 2020

get lost or changed. And so it means that that identity or culture is never static. It's always changing and evolving."

This exploration of identity has led Ayesha to copy a range of works by artists such as Gordon Walters, and Marcus King's 1938 oil, *The Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi*.

"I think one of the things that I'm also really interested in is this idea of how Māori can be represented in a world that doesn't just look at customary practice," Ayesha says. "You can be a Māori painter using cartoons or you can be a Māori Kowhaiwhai painter. They're both the same thing.

"It's like Māori culture has to be performed in such a way in order to signify or to uphold a Pākehā image of what Māori-ness is, which







leads to stereotyping and essentialism. So the reason I copy is because I want to find or create those slips,” and thus bring about change in the performance of an idea. “Copying the Marcus King is like taking the power back, to show that it can be reproduced, because there’s this idea that if something is so good and authentic it can never be copied.”

Ayesha’s family members often appear in her portraits, as she does herself, as she delves into the topics that fascinate her. “I have all these ideas about the world,” she says. “Or about, more specifically, New Zealand national identity and biculturalism, and settler colonialism. But in the end, I use myself and my immediate family to stand in for these ideas. Even though all of these things are really big, they are also small because my family lives under the repercussions of these ideas of national identity.”



FAR LEFT: Ayesha Green, *All of my Lovers are Immigrants (Smooth my Pillow)*, diptych (install view), acrylic on canvas, 2700 x 2000mm, 2020

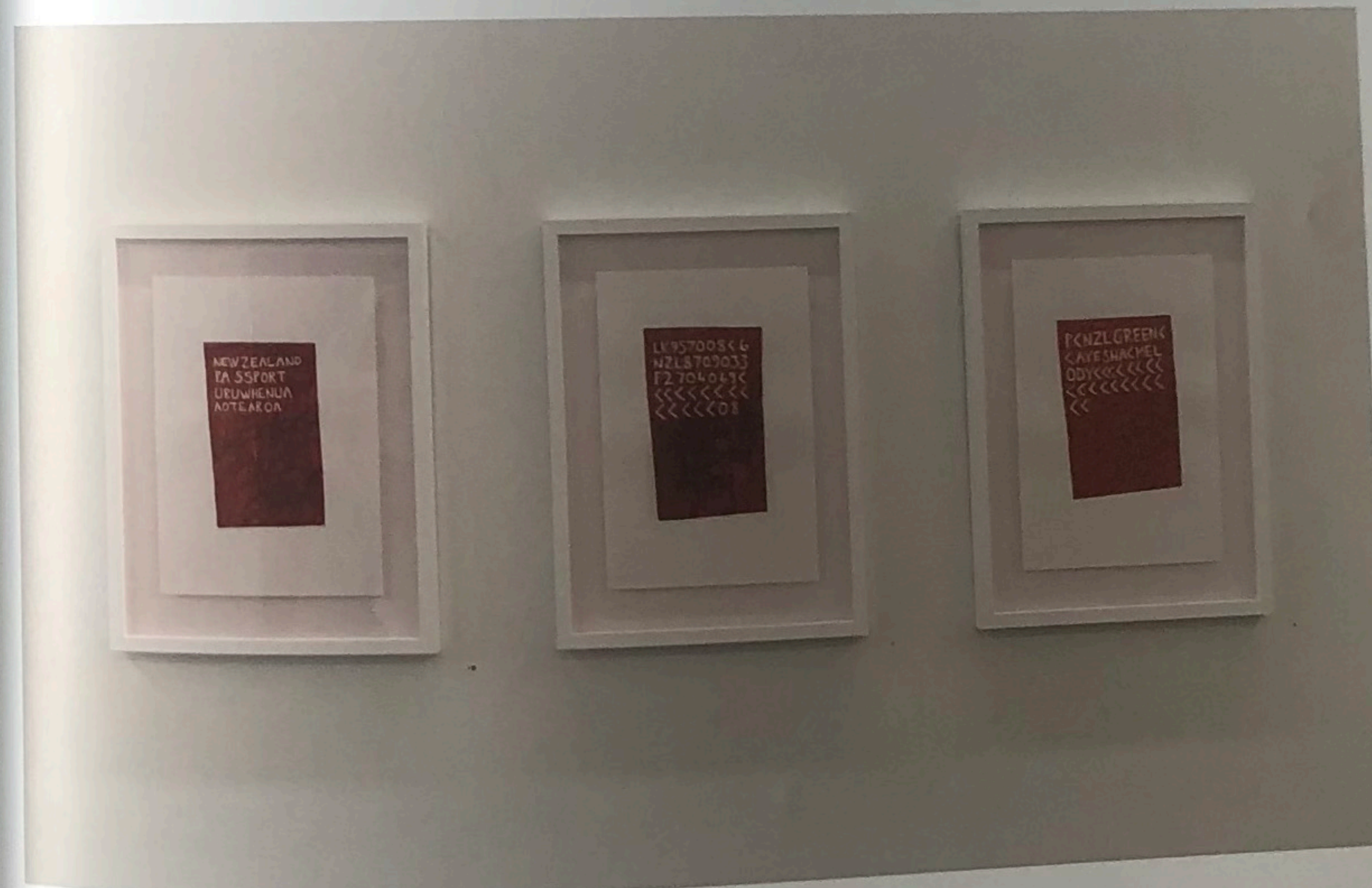
LEFT: Ayesha Green, *Bouquet for Jameela #3*, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 65cm, 2021

BELOW: Ayesha Green, *Good Citizen* (install view), Jhana Millers Gallery, 2021

Ayesha’s art is often about her family, and is also for them. “My service is to them in the long run. I’m thinking about what I can do to contribute to the overall hauora or the overall wellbeing of our iwi. That’s the bigger picture. Everyone in the iwi has a specialty that they can bring to uplift us. And my specialty is hopefully art and so I try to use that as a way to be a part of my family.”

However, Ayesha also seeks a broader audience. Her paintings employ an accessible illustrative style: flat, colourful, and cartoonish, with clean graphic lines. She says her relationship with art came from watching cartoons and reading illustrated books, so it makes sense to her to use that visual language.

“What I’ve realised over the years is that lots of different people can enjoy it,” she says. “A child might really like it. I just hope that lots of different types of people from diverse backgrounds can enjoy it, not just people who are educated or art-adjacent.”



"But hopefully there's things in the work that perhaps someone who has studied Māori art history might understand a bit more clearly. I'm always trying to make sure that there's access points for lots of different types of people in lots of different types of ways."

In recent years Ayesha has been learning to work with traditional Māori earth pigments. Sarah Hudson, one of the co-founders of Kauae Raro, an earth pigment research collective, was sending out traditional pigments to Māori artists who had expressed an interest. Ayesha initially felt intimidated about working with such a profound and sacred material, and says it felt like a big responsibility.

Sarah encouraged Ayesha to just give it a go. "I was always scared and she was really encouraging and from that I've used it," says Ayesha. "Not heaps, but when it feels appropriate, like when I want to talk about land, and whenua, and when I feel like the work is going to be good enough for the materials. It's about treating the material with respect."

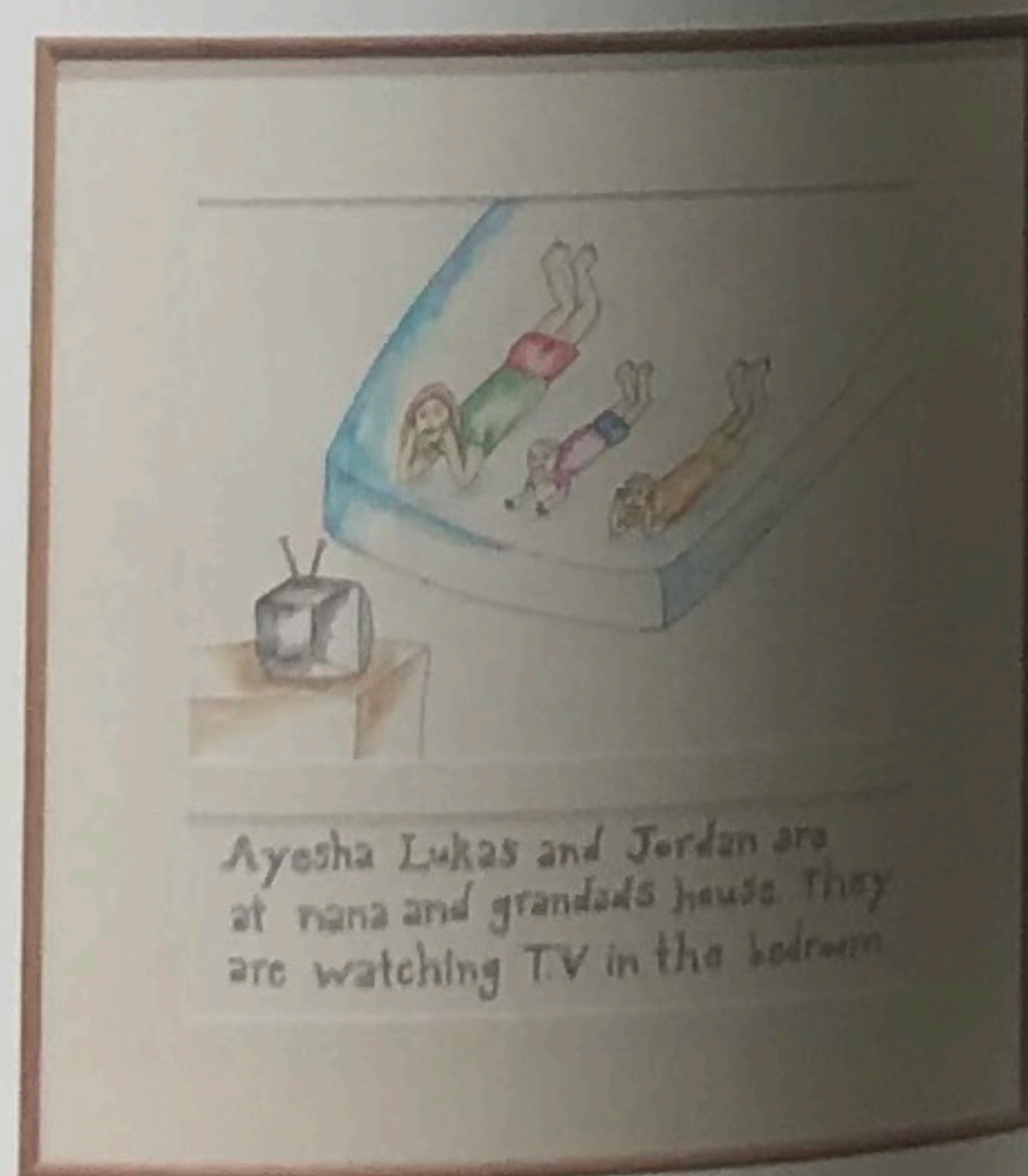
As well as completing still life works for her exhibition at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in December, Ayesha is preparing for a two-month residency in Bahia, Brazil, and a possible move to the United Kingdom.



ABOVE: Ayesha Green, *Kensington*, acrylic on board, 160 x 120cm, 2019

RIGHT: Ayesha in the studio at McCahon House
Photo by Logan Buchanan

BELOW: Ayesha Green, *Ayesha Lukas and Jordan at nana and granddads house*, watercolour pencil and ink pen, 57.5 x 61cm, 2019



For the residency, Ayesha plans to research Joseph Banks and the food that he ate on his journey with Captain Cook on the HMS Endeavour in 1768 to 1771. She intends to create a "botanical taxonomy of the kind of fruits and vegetables he ate as he travelled the globe."

"I've always looked at what he's done in New Zealand," says Ayesha, "but it will be interesting to see how he interacted with other indigenous people. I'll be using his diary to think about all the things he ate that would have been exotic for him."

She's going to be based in Salvador, which has "a really horrific and sad colonial history for indigenous peoples. It was the first settler port in South America." Indigenous peoples were forced to convert to the religion of the settlers, or become slaves. "Salvador was also a huge, huge African slave port and hub. I've never been in a city that has such explicit history, so embedded in the actual architecture. I actually feel a little bit nervous, but it's good to understand, or to see, where New Zealand sits globally; to understand other global histories of colonisation."



ABOVE: Ayesha's latest work in progress
Photo by Logan Buchanan

RIGHT TOP:
Ayesha Green, *The Harvest*, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 270mm, 2020

RIGHT BOTTOM:
Ayesha Green, *Good Citizen*, Jhana Millers Gallery (install view), 2021

Ayesha's art practice involves substantial research and she often investigates an idea for years before she paints. "How do I bring another perspective, or another way of thinking about something?" she asks. "How do I claim that power back? A lot of my research is making sure that I have a robust understanding of the original work and then how that might sit in a contemporary time."

"Understanding its history is also understanding its power. It's about slowly unpacking and pulling away at ideas and thinking about what my role is in copying it."

"It's really about understanding. I deeply believe that art is powerful and it has the capacity to change the way that we think about the world and how we act in the world."

