

*Story—body—stage:  
Ayesha Green's  
disruptive museology*

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Benjamin West *Sir Joseph Banks, 1773, Botanist 1773*, oil on canvas, 2340 × 1600mm. Usher Gallery Collection, Lincoln, United Kingdom.

In 1773, the Anglo-American painter Benjamin West (1738-1820) completed a portrait of the English naturalist and botanist Joseph Banks (1743-1820). West's painting depicts Banks as a self-styled young romantic, a modern man of Enlightenment-era science whose gaze emanates from the canvas with an aura of purpose and control. The scenography of the painting has been carefully arranged. A collection of objects gathered during Banks' recent travels aboard the *HMS Endeavor* frame his body on either side. At his feet, an open book displays a specimen drawing of an indigenous flax species of Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu. With his hands, Banks lifts and gestures towards the garment he is wearing; a kaitaka aronui, or chiefly cloak, woven from muka

(flax) featuring an intricately patterned tāniko border and tassels of threaded awe (dog hair).<sup>1</sup> Banks' gaze and his gesture are the focal points of the painting. The backdrop—a dream-wash of painted clouds, indigenous taonga, and the lush sweep of a heavy curtain looped behind an architectural column—is the setting into which Banks, as protagonist, performs his own scene. From a contemporary vantage, we might read this portrait of Banks as something of a collaboration between the subject and its painter—producing an image meticulously designed to elevate the notion of Banks as a man of action and consequence, poised to play a pivotal role in shaping an expanding epistemological cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

For her recent painting *Self Portrait as Joseph Banks* (2022), Ayesha Green has appropriated the framework of West's original painting without replicating Banks' hand gesture or stance. While retaining the skeleton of West's compositional devices—the column, curtain, and the proportional position of the figure in space—Green has emptied the scene of all but herself (as Banks) and the kaitaka. Although she too gazes directly at the viewer, her posture is infused with a sense of tenderness and quietude; her self-depiction stands with both feet placed evenly and grounded on the floor, naked beneath the kaitaka aronui. If we look to her hands, we can also observe

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of how this kaitaka came to be in the possession of Joseph Banks see Paul Tapsell, "Footprints in the Sand: Banks's Maori collection, Cook's first voyage 1768-71", in M. Hetherington & H. Morphy eds., *Discovering Cook's Collection* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> As Patricia Fara has written; 'Just as Banks policed Enlightenment visions of the lands he had explored and the specimens he had collected, so too he carefully monitored the images of himself that became available for public consumption.' See Patricia Fara, "The Royal Society's Portrait of Joseph Banks", in *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 51, 2 (1997): 199-210.

that she has inverted the posture depicted in the image of Banks. Rather than lifting the kaitaka and pointing to its border, she has folded her hands under its protection, drawing the garment towards herself.

What is Green telling us with her reinterpretation—or rather,



Ayesha Green *Self-Portrait as Joseph Banks* 2022, acrylic on canvas, 2400 × 1600mm.

re-performance—of this historical portrait? We might wonder if she is being a little coy with Banks, placing herself in the role of desirable other. Or we might reflect on the decision to sweep the stage clean of all but the kaitaka, elevating the garment to a lead role in both paintings. This strategic action brings to mind the words of textiles scholar Patricia Te Arapo Wallace where she writes ‘Every piece of traditional Māori weaving is a testament to indigenous science and intellectual ingenuity.’<sup>3</sup> The shift then is in the lens, or worldview, that each painting enacts. By inserting her own body into the continuum of the mythos of Joseph Banks, Green is seeking to disrupt the intellectual authority, and scientific cause, that the original image lays claim to.

The exhibition *Folk Nationalism* at Te Whare Toi City Gallery Wellington (2023) abounds with similar processes of inversion. By employing doubling, repetition, acts of mirroring and re-enactment, Green, with her broad church of reproduced images and artefacts, is asking us to move beneath the surface of Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu’s mythologies of nationhood and explore the possibility of restorative storytelling. For in Green’s oeuvre, cultural artefacts are figures in motion, orbiting the gaze of her figurative subjects. This gaze—the quiet, conscious, presence of Green’s subjects—is inviting us into an empathetic inquiry. Its silent power is pointing to multiple truths and asking that we question the stability and fidelity of the popular imaginary. To achieve this, Green often centres self-portraiture and reproductions of her immediate family and their personal ephemera in her work. This is another strategic decision. By doing so, she is seeking to offer concrete representations of contemporary Māori—free from exoticism, hyperbole and abstraction—and make intimate again that which the mechanisms of the museum have made distant.

Historical acts of creation, separation, opposition and belonging are some of the



Prince William meets Buzzy Bee, 25 April 1985. Photo: New Zealand Women’s Weekly.

key ideas that Green is addressing in this series of paintings. How sweet the young Prince William may seem to the onlooker in *The Prince’s New Toy* (2022). Unless of course we understand the innocuous Buzzy Bee as a cipher for sovereignty—the assumed innocence of the image then promptly dissolves. Viewed in relation to the pastoral scene, *Two Māori Boys in an English Field* (2022), invites further questions about the nature of displacement and belonging; to whom, for whom and with

<sup>3</sup> For context, Wallace’s full paragraph reads: ‘Fibre is arguably the foundation of technology; as such, every piece of traditional Māori weaving is a testament to indigenous science and intellectual ingenuity. As weaving arts developed in Aotearoa, the most skillful practitioners achieved their successes not simply through manual dexterity, but rather through their mental capacity. Weaver’s expertise was not only demonstrated in the mathematical applications of the patterns they created, but more essentially in their understanding of the available resources and the complex technologies they devised to maximise them. This was more than mere practice of environmental sustainability. Like other indigenous people living close to nature, Māori developed a rich, holistic understanding of the functioning of ecosystems and the connections between plants, wildlife and their land. Over time, they built up a significant body of scientific knowledge, developed through an approach of observation, hypothesis, experimentation and assessment.’ See Patricia Te Arapo Wallace, ‘Ko te Pūtaiao te Ao o ngā Tūpuna, Ancestral Māori Scientific Practice’, in A. Tamarapa ed., *Whatu Kākahu Māori Cloaks* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011).

whom does one belong, and within which cultural or political framework? What is the nature of the scene and the story that we are telling ourselves?

Scenography and story-telling are recurring themes in Green’s practice. In *Folk Nationalism*, these preoccupations coalesce with meditations on portraiture and statecraft, contrasting inherited power





Ayesha Green *The Prince's New Toy* 2022, acrylic on canvas, 1700 × 2000mm.

with a reclamation of agency that can be enacted in the present. Green sets these ideas in motion within a constellation of reference points that appear to 'take place' in her paintings as if the storyboard of New Zealand history was on the script development table of an amateur theatre workshop ('one more time, Diana, from the top and looking directly at Charles this time ... we want to see your doubt!'). In this way, Green's re-enactments seek to underscore the instability of images, investing in them a sense of questioning and vulnerability that runs beneath their surface like an electrical current. While, on the one hand, Green is gesturing to the role of image-making (in the guise of history painting) and museum display practices as arbiters of meaning-making in the public sphere, on the other, her approach is directed squarely at us, the viewers, as agents of meaning and memory in our own historical present.

Green's subjects gaze out at us, offer each other sideways glances or direct our attention to other features within a painting. Through deceptively simple means, this shifting focus conjures a range of nuanced emotional states, viewpoints or alternative narratives which animate each scene. Like Benjamin West and other artists before her, Green uses the gaze as a focal point to animate deeper layers of context. In her reproductions of existing works this may entail a range of subtle changes in the

translation of particular figures to elevate new meanings—a change in posture, altered eyeline, or facial expression. In the paintings of her family, such as *Mum (May 1985)* (2020) and *Two Māori Boys in an English Field* (2022), she allows familial insight and a deeply felt sensitivity and tenderness to surface.

Yet Green's approach does not forgo complexity. To be able to foreground some of the enduring legacies of colonialism in a few contextual shifts and a handful of glances is part of her effectiveness and charm. Nor is her work without humour. One can't help but be amused by the somewhat wan expressions of the women in the back row of *The Treaty* (2022), or the circumspect suspense of the sentinels watching on. We are not asked to forget that the original, Marcus King's *The Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, February 6th, 1840* (1938) does not truthfully represent events as they unfolded on that day. So what then can King's painting tell us in 2023 about authorship, the desire for a simplified common story, and the dream of nationhood? What questions and viewpoints can we ascertain from Green's remaking of the gaze in her versions? Green's re-performance of King's work refuses misremembering, sentimentality, and colonial amnesia. It asks that we continue to bring these histories and artefacts to bear on our present.