

Imagined Communities

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John was disappointed. He'd lost, and though everyone had seen it coming, he was still passing through a very real, very human procession of emotion. Moving through the thrumming anxiety of failure inevitable but not-yet-come, into the purple-black clouds of defeat manifest. While we all suffer loss in its varied dimensions, there must be a distinct aspect, some unique flavour, to its experience in the context of a life defined by so much winning. Maybe the sting is a little sharper for the rarity of its presence, softer skin more sensitive to the bite. John was tired, but he didn't get to wallow, or satisfy the temptation to self-pity. There was work to do, a statement to make, a country to talk to. He stepped in front of the camera, all open-neck shirt and eye bags, and the adverbs tumbled out. 'Obviously, I'm naturally a little bit disappointed.'¹ And then—given the context and given the man—John Key said something interesting: 'You can't shy away from a debate or a discussion about nationhood.'

I think we try to hide the flag referenda, put them somewhere to forget, grind their memory in the mortar of collective embarrassment and stash the powder in the corner of the spice drawer with whole nutmeg and fenugreek seeds. We really shouldn't. The baffling selection process, the rigged order of voting, the Prime Minister who stuck his foot tight on the neck of this vanity project and somehow let it all slip anyway. This beautiful failure said everything you'd ever want to know about New Zealand's national identity, producing some of the most telling images of our visual culture along the way.

Of course, it was never intended as a colonial reckoning, or chance to reflect on the better ideals of the treaty partnership through our national symbology. In the most Jokey-Blokey of ways, the bungled flag change was an exercise in better branding. It's why there were no artists, designers, or vexillologists on the selection committee, why none of the same were

commissioned for proposals. The long list of forty designs was selected from a pool of over ten-thousand entries by a panel of business leaders, professional athletes, and ad executives. It's a symbolic grouping, truly awesome in its inability to express the experiences of living in contemporary Aotearoa, while perfectly summoning the sticky-mouth feel of what it's like to live under brand New Zealand.

Imagined Communities (2022) is one of Ayesha Green's smaller works, but it deserves close attention. Every artist makes works that can act like little keys, ways into really feeling the themes that are drawn across the breadth of a practice. *Imagined Communities* does this for me. In coloured pencil and modest scale, Green takes up and re-presents the long list of flag designs, asking us to remember that graphic of graphics. Hers are a little loose, imperfect representations, but they're all there. When the list was unveiled, it was dragged for being a little same-same. Green's copies count the similarities: twelve silver ferns, eighteen koru, twenty-two southern crosses. Abstract representations of hills, mountains, the ocean. Red, black, white, blue, and green: a total of five colours across all forty flags.

The work, and the memories it evokes, have me feeling a little conflicted. I've always been slightly charmed by this experiment in democratic symbology. If you can set aside the process chicanery and branding bullshit for a minute, it was kind of cool that we made a go of collectively determining our standard in the community of nations. Though I'm pissed, because you can't really put aside the process chicanery and branding bullshit, can you?

But then there's a curiosity, a small wonder at what it is that connects the content and aesthetic of the designs Green has asked us to

¹ Isaac Davison, "Flag referendum: John Key defends \$26m flag vote as critics accuse him of dividing country", *New Zealand Herald*, 25 March 2016. Retrieved at <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/flag-referendum-john-key-defends-26m-flag-vote-as-critics-accuse-him-of-dividing-country/BASZMS7RTQQLJNRESXESDLOS1/>.



Ayesha Green *Forgotten Communities*, 2022, coloured pencil on paper, 760 x 1060mm.

look at once again. Scanning *Imagined Communities*, I feel like I'm watching the end game of New Zealand Modernism, seeing in this image the fruit of a seed planted a century ago, the downstream effects of a visuality constructed in the pursuit of a national identity.² It's the closest thing we'll get to a kind of proof that our canonised artists succeeded in the aims of a movement begun at the start of the twentieth century, triggered by the retreat of empire, to wield the arts in building a visual vocabulary of identity and place for New Zealand—a library of forms, a set of tools, a box of props.

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New Zealand is a place and a play, and a theatre of national identity calls for a lot of props. These are the images, symbols,

and visual motifs we've bound together as signifiers of an ideological constant, a sign marked *New Zealand* or—with love to Roland Barthes—*New Zealandicity*.³ Call it whatever, this sign is a value-laden core of connoted belonging. And though they often look it, the props that comprise its visual face aren't simple. Their development is a difficult, confused, and often desperate story, pocked with the scars of loss and

² There are, of course, other often connected sources that went into the flag designs, particularly the Tino Rangatiratanga flag and traditional colour schemes found from both Māori and Pākehā sources. Drawing attention to the influence of modernist design doesn't have to imply that it's the only influence that matters.

³ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Breda: Fontana Press, 1977) 32-51.

the fresher wounds of taking. Some are more blatant in their nation-building aspirations than others—they contradict themselves (they are large, they contain multitudes). But despite great



Ayesha Green *The Treaty* 2022, acrylic on canvas, 2800 × 4200mm.

differences, at the end of the night they all get tossed together backstage in the big prop box with *NZ IDENTITY* painted on the lid.

But it's hardly a play without a backdrop, so let's start with an image that hangs behind every debate or discussion about nationhood in New Zealand. *The Treaty* (2022) is Green's interpretation of a pre-eminent image of New Zealand selfhood. In acrylic, over three canvases, she renders Marcus King's 1938 attempt at a history painting of the signing of Te Tiriti in her signature style: flat, bright, sharp. Forms are both simplified and complicated, shapes changed to meet shifts in perspective, reduced to better communicate their essence. Green outlines almost every form she paints, but these aren't the cocksure black edges of an earlier kind of New Zealand painting. The lines are

executed in analogous colours, like liquid skins atop whatever material or surface they touch. This does different things to her figures, depending on their environments. Some people stand out boldly, others blend into their backdrops. Instead of bas-reliefs, they're more like stickers peeled from a book and lovingly laid in sequence atop the canvas. In *The Treaty*, the technique most obviously grants detail and differentiation to the Māori figures in the left half of the image, emboldening their presence in contrast to the somewhat interchangeable figures of King's original.

That original has always been a little misleading. Not just in its small historical inaccuracies, but its broader purpose. The work was painted at a time when Te Tiriti was recognised with little legal authority, but when aspirations for a unique New Zealand identity were growing with urgency



Marcus King *The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, February 6th, 1840* 1938, oil on canvas, 1205 × 1810mm. Alexander Turnbull Library Collection.

in the minds of the settler population. In this context, King's work can be seen as a foundational document in the myth of New Zealand biculturalism, that suggestion that our national identity might be found in a blunt marriage of Pākehā and Māori culture—all the while ignoring questions of cultural, legal, economic, or political equity.

In talking to Green, it's clear that her interest in recreating this image isn't just in highlighting the hypocrisy of its ideals or use, but in investigating its enduring complexity for both Pākehā and Māori. All of Green's works hold something of this dynamic. They share a capacity to investigate how the images and symbols of art and popular culture have been wielded in the furtherance of a sanctioned system of New Zealand identity. Vitally, these concerns extend to how Māori exist within and without of that system, not only how it has exploited tangata whenua, but how they might exist as a part of it too, talk back to it, or even reclaim it. *The Treaty* isn't just condemnation, or ironic appropriation. There's always something more animating Green's simplified figures, some painted agency that shifts the work beyond straightforward representation and into realms of retelling and reimagination.

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If you'll forgive a generalisation, the visual identity of New Zealand can be read as the product of just two connected factors: the retraction of a European identity with its concomitant visual identifiers, and the determined efforts of Pākehā to locate Indigenous replacements for what was lost. Perhaps obvious, but necessary to mention, is that the idea of the nation of New Zealand and its constituent unit, the New Zealander, was built by and for the settler population of Aotearoa—a group that has thought of ourselves progressively as European, white New Zealander, and finally Pākehā.⁴ As Britain made its unhurried exit from the direct governance of Aotearoa,

it took something slippery from the settlers who came here under its name, as its citizens. Hidden among the material and political changes provoked by the vacation of empire was a change in the capacity to directly identify with the greater structure—to understand New Zealand as the empire and not merely one of its subsidiary organs. As signs of Britishness no longer gave meaning, comfort, and understanding to white New Zealand, a bit of a maw opened up beneath us, a feeling of emptiness and separation seen in shifting political and economic circumstances, and expressed in our arts and literature. Or it might just be quicker to say, 'no golden mist in the air, no Merlin in our woods'.⁵

Absent the tokens of empire, the European settler population of Aotearoa spent the twentieth century clothing themselves in the dribs and drabs of a vestigial identity accented by an uneasy acquisition of new signifiers wrested from the land and its people. This dynamic—the ongoing extent of its reach and the limits of its aspirations—is what forms sociologist Avril Bell's conception of the 'settler imaginary': a fantasised identity that longs for the perceived authenticity conferred by Indigeneity while constantly defending against genuine assimilation of Indigenous ideas and people.⁶ It's cultural double-think of the highest Orwellian order, and the uncomfortable consequence of what happens when an ascendent Pākehā desire to identify with Indigeneity in Aotearoa strikes

⁴ The stories of how Tangata Whenua navigated, were impacted by, and struggled against that conception of citizenship for determination of their own identity are deeply intertwined with this story, but nevertheless separate—histories and art histories that aren't mine to tell, let alone summarise.

⁵ A. R. D. Fairburn, "Some Aspects of New Zealand art and letters", in *Art in New Zealand* 6, 24 (1954).

⁶ Avril Bell, *Relating indigenous and settler identities: Beyond domination* (New York: Springer, 2014) 25–28.

up against our dual inheritances of Commonwealth and whiteness. Bell makes the crucial point that the settler imaginary isn't just found in the disjunctive enclave of theory. This world of image and identity is 'rather

the result of the percolation of theory into the imaginings of ordinary people, expressed in "images, stories, and, legends" rather than theoretical terms.⁷ How can we understand the visual order of this percolation in Aotearoa? One possibility is to follow the path charted by New Zealand Modernism, seeing that movement in broad terms as the aesthetic interface of the settler imaginary. Not to reduce a generation of painters to a single colonial outlook, or to denigrate their individual achievements, but to ask wide questions of a visual vanguard turned mainstream that brought the koru, kauri, silver fern, and hei tiki into communion with the Union Jack and southern man. A movement that, for better or worse, established the terms of reference for what much of our popular culture would look like for decades.

Green simplifies to reveal the essence of things. We used to say that of the artists who populate the landscape of New

Zealand Modernism, that they simplified forms to reveal an essence hidden beneath and in between. That effort was in so many ways a search necessitated by an empty identity—a quest primarily of invention, not discovery. The long road to a new, authentic national identity—a sanctioned, safe and predominantly Pākehā identity—has built an emblem book of empty signs of belonging, their signifiers shuttled and ferried from vestiges of empire and the life and culture of this land into a collection of styles and motifs with tenuous relationships to either. Green has made her mahi the task of reclaiming those signifiers through a painting practice that is always aware of itself within the engine of meaning-making in contemporary art. For Green, a major consequence of the Pākehā quest for (almost) authentic identity is a visual language, a way of speaking in styles and forms that represents in the most general of terms what it means to be of, in, and from Aotearoa New Zealand. Her interest is never just in what the tools of that language are—what they look like—but how they're used, who wields them, and to what ends. Nor is her practice all that historical, in any strict sense. These paintings are an enquiry that begins in the past but looks squarely at the present, on the questions of how those tools of identity are used now and, ultimately, how they might be picked up, played with, turned around, and pointed in new directions.

Scenic Beauty (2020), *Primrose* (2022), and *Passport #1* (2021) are three works that, drawn together, demonstrate something of this thinking. They respectively depict the outline of an outstretched hand, a Gordon Walters koru painting, and a New Zealand passport. All three are painted in kōkōwai on paper, a material process Green

employs that can be seen as both a direct expression of whakapapa and a comment on the kind of estrangement



Ayesha Green *Passport #1* 2021, kōkōwai on paper, 565 × 434mm.

⁷ Bell, *Relating indigenous and settler identities*, 11. Bell is in turn quoting from Charles Taylor's idea of social imaginaries expressed in Charles Taylor, *Modern social imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).



Former Prime Minister John Key with the referendum finalist design.
Photo: Otago Daily Times.

that often follows Indigenous artforms. These works let you appreciate Green's presence, the active markings opening up a space for imaginative re-enactment, seeing the paintings in motion. With these works, she reaches out to other hands—not only tūpuna, but her antecedents in the more recent history of New Zealand painting. The rusty brown fingers of *Scenic Beauty* stretch out and grasp those of Theo Schoon, who made a career of lifting forms from caves in Canterbury and North Otago and presenting them within a European visual vocabulary.⁸ In *Primrose*, she reaches for the hand of Walters, and his programme of abstraction that progressively divested the koru of its cultural significance, allowing its generic re-inscription in everything from the New Zealand Film Commission logo, to Air New Zealand, and the borders of every page in our passports.⁹

Both artists took forms out of the specificity of their cultural production and diluted their Indigeneity so that they might

be held as shared markers of belonging. This process, and the licence that white artists gave themselves to undertake it, is what Ngahua Te Awekotuku famously saw as, 'The gall! The sheer gall!' of Walters' practice.¹⁰ A presumption that Indigenous forms were just there for the taking, open for exploration in the identity experiments of the twentieth century, based on a belief that it was all eventually for 'us', for New Zealanders, today's holders of uruwenua Aotearoa. I'm not trying to just denigrate the impulses and effects of New Zealand Modernism, or even to suggest it was one monolithic thing that can be called to account.¹¹ You can't reduce something so complicated to a quick argument. This can only ever be a facet of a much more complex instrument. My interest is in how the more obvious traces of that instrument follow a form: a search for new identity forged by grasping for what remains and accruing authenticity by taking what's around. Green's interest is in making us look, drawing attention to the ways in which that identity was bonded to a specific attitude of representation—focusing our

⁸ A process that, though sometimes written of in complementary language—by Māori art historians as well as Pākehā—appears to follow the established path of taking, generalising, nationalising.

⁹ My language here owes a debt to Rangihira Panoho's essay, "Maori: At the centre, on the margins" in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992).

¹⁰ Ngahua Te Awekotuku in conversation with Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts, *Antic* 1 (1986).

¹¹ In itself this tends to be reductive, a little boring, and ignores the fact that the work of most modernist artists is understood with more nuance, complexity, and generosity, than the simple narrative of 'Modernism bad'. To the extent that this work can be done with rigour and respect. See Francis Pound, *The invention of New Zealand: art and national identity, 1950-1970* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009).

gaze by stripping extraneous ornamentation away to leave just the essentials: the building blocks of identity expressed in our art and visual culture.

The energy, the drive that led to the creation of our national visual culture, that built the signs and signifiers, that told us what belonging to New Zealand looks like, doesn't always come from tourism or branding or the demands

of popular culture. It so often starts with the art and art history of this country. A significant element of our settler imaginary was put together, canvas by canvas, in the galleries and museums of Aotearoa. There's so little daylight between *Cass* and a Kiwiburger, if you know what I mean. And that little light is where Ayesha Green has been working. Simple and understated as they may often be, her works are always prescient and present. They exist within this theatre of identity while giving a little Brechtian side-eye to the mechanics of its operation—refusing to shy away from a debate or discussion about nationhood, as John might say.

Green stands in a lineage, of course. From the Māori artists of the sixties and seventies who challenged the hegemony of Pākehā use of Indigenous forms in contemporary art, to the post-modern ironicists who began the process of talking back to the doyens of New Zealand Modernism, like Peter Robinson subverting the paternalism of McCahon, or Michael Parekōwhai taking aim at Walters' dreams of divorcing meaning from form. Green draws from this lineage, shares in its spirit of refusal and repatriation. She talks to the coloniser in their own language—painterly, iconographic, symbolic—not just in the forms and symbols that she has identified and sought to reorient to new purposes, it's in her very style too. In Green's hand, reduction and simplification look like one more tool used in the quest for New Zealand's national identity that can be repurposed, and reimagined. The simplicity of her paintings isn't a refusal of complexity or nuance, but her own play on the signifying function of abstraction in New Zealand painting. She simplifies to reveal the essence of things.