

## *A Truer Picture*

Francis McWhannell

*there is plenty to come  
plenty that awaits us  
plenty of reasons to  
slow down  
be here*

—Chris Tse, from 'Hearts unfold'<sup>1</sup>

The title *Folk Nationalism* is deceptively straightforward. 'Folk' implies crudeness, ordinariness, low rather than high culture. One might think of an anthropologist applying the term 'folklore' to pūrākau Māori. In Aotearoa, 'nationalism' tends to evoke a Pākehā-dominated brand of New Zealand identity perhaps best summed up by the demonym 'Kiwi'. In this context, 'folk' can be understood to highlight the clumsiness of so many attempts to articulate, or appeal to, national sentiment in this place. Such clumsiness does not, of course, equate to impotence. Promoters of 'New Zealand' have long threatened to corrode fundamental elements of te ao Māori—including kōrero tuku iho, toi Māori, and the taiao—by appropriating them, imitating them, inscribing them within a white worldview, or obliterating them outright.

*Folk Nationalism* the exhibition is expansive. In work after work, Ayesha Green (Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Heretaunga) sits with complexity, and invites others—Māori and tauīwi alike—to do the same. She is frank but not pessimistic, drawing attention to dubious constructs, such as the nation state, or national state of mind, the British monarchy, and its hereditary power, but also alluding to alternatives: more meaningful forms

of community and collective identity, sovereignty, and heritage. Green's works emerge as bold and lush, animated by the magical thinking of a child and the wisdom of an elder. They speak in many languages and many registers at once; now contemporary, now timeless, now sorrowful, now joyous, now sober, now whimsical.

In 2021, Green was awarded the Rydal Art Prize in recognition of her contribution to contemporary painting in Aotearoa. The first iteration of *Folk Nationalism*, held at Tauranga Art Gallery Toi Tauranga from August 2022 to January 2023, was the outcome of the prize, and focused on work made in its wake. The second iteration, at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, is different. It is not a restaging but a reworking. A selection of older works has been integrated into the presentation, and a major new installation, *Kowhaea* (2023), expanding on an earlier work titled *Table Manners* (2017), has been developed. Taking place roughly ten years into Green's artistic career, the second version of *Folk Nationalism* acts as a summation and celebration of her work to date.

The decision to revise *Folk Nationalism*, rather

<sup>1</sup> Chris Tse, "Hearts Unfold", *NZ Poetry Shelf*, 1 January 2023. Retrieved at <https://nzpoetryshelf.com/2023/01/01/poetry-shelf-welcomes-2023-with-a-poem-by-our-poet-laureate-chris-tse/>.

than repeat it, chimes with Green's practice as a whole. She is well known for producing new versions of existing images and objects, or classes of the same: botanical artworks, crowns, family photographs, the entrance to a whareniui, painted formal portraits, a passport, so-called 'history' paintings. Her works are not replicas. Instead, they reimagine and reinterpret. They are outwardly simple, marked by a cartoon-like quality that recalls comics or picture books by such figures as Peter Gossage and Robyn Kahukiwa. Colours are made uniform, contours crisp. Most finer details are stripped out, but patterns remain intricate, drawn freehand by Green with painstaking care, as if the omission of a single dot or line might bring the whole painted world crashing down.

In their thematic content, Green's works are always multifaceted. They examine the structures and impacts of colonisation and market capitalism in Aotearoa, and the roles played by art in shaping and dismantling power and identity. They query the notion of 'biculturalism' and reflect pluralism, within selves and communities. They uplift Māori ways of being, knowing, and making. By distilling down her sources, Green acknowledges their intrinsic fullness and makes them more manageable to contend with. Her illustrative style reinforces her great interest in interrogating the persuasive dimension of image-making, its ties to pedagogy and propaganda, while underscoring her enthusiasm for telling stories—to inform and to stimulate imagination. Portals as much as containers, her works accept variations in recounting and reading.

Given the wide-ranging and polyvocal nature of Green's work, it seems especially appropriate that *Folk Nationalism and other stories* features texts by a variety of writers working in a variety of modes. There are repeated rhythms—echoes in ideas and turns of phrase—that serve as reminders of the deep coherence and iterative dimension of Green's practice, but each writer draws

on a different wellspring. Elle Loui August has expanded a text she wrote to accompany the first version of *Folk Nationalism*. She explores Green's use of 're-enactment' to critique the performances given by so many portraits and history paintings, and to challenge the dominance of Pākehā systems of thought. She also concentrates on the restorative function of Green's works, and her interest in answering fanciful melodrama with matter-of-fact sincerity.

Sarah Hudson and Hanahiva Rose concentrate on mātauranga Māori. Hudson locates Green within a community of ringatoi Māori who are making use of kōkōwai, and other materials or processes with whakapapa Māori. She speaks of the importance of extending 'customary materials into contemporary realities' as a means of answering the damages and displacements engendered by colonialism. Rose situates Green's practice within a framework of Māori scholarship, drawing connections with the ideas of Alice Te Punga Somerville, Rangihīroa Panoho, and Carl Mika. She emphasises the role of whakapapa in Green's work, pointing out that her reproductions of images of tipuna both highlight the presence of whakapapa in the source entities, and substantively extend that presence.

With an incisive wittiness consonant with Green's, Lachlan Taylor discusses the search for a Pākehā identity without British imperial bones, and persistent feelings of displacement and shame. He homes in on Green's translations of nationalist cultural products, including Marcus King's *The Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, February 6th, 1840* (1938), which featured in the New Zealand pavilion at the 1939–40 New York World's Fair, the forty designs long-listed during the ill-fated 2015–16 flag referenda, and the modernist 'koru' paintings of Gordon Walters. Taylor contrasts Green's approach with that of Walters, noting that while he pared back the koru to purge it of meaning, she 'simplifies to reveal the essence of things.'

The heartfelt ethics of Green's practice find potent expression in a poem by Matariki Williams, responding to *Two Māori boys in an English Field* (2022), and in texts by Madison Kelly, Moewai Marsh, and Jess Nicholson: three accounts of a visit to Karitane to collect kōkōwai used in the production of *Kowhaea*. Green's desire to include multiple perspectives on the same excursion was suggested by the journals kept by the likes of Joseph Banks and James Cook during the voyage of *Endeavour*. The gesture is part critique, part corrective. Kelly, Marsh, and Nicholson, who are kin through their whakapapa Kāi Tahu, speak with clarity and conviction about their relationship with the whenua, the taiao, and one another.

The writings of all eight contributors to *Folk Nationalism and other stories* get at something not unrelated to the concept of 'folk nationalism'. They evoke a network of relationships, stretching beyond the present, with people and place at its core. They foreground the fundamentals without forsaking nuance. The approach is very much in keeping with Green's practice at large. Her principal gift over the past decade has been to offer those of us who live in Aotearoa a clearer picture of the abundant here we inhabit, the dense fabric into which we are all, differently, interwoven. Dot by dot, line by line, Green plots the patterns of our reality—so that we may better see them, better understand ourselves, and better navigate that which awaits us.