

The simultaneity of things

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Ayesha Green's acts of reproduction are many. There are the pieces of family and personal history carefully maintained; the paintings, plucked out of their prominent positions in art history; the photographs, already the subject of endless copies. These are images that haunt the present, in ways both big and small. What Green does is examine their claim on us, listening for the stories they tell while striving towards the limits of what cannot be heard, read, seen or known—precisely what is unaccounted for in the image. Green's layering of form upon form is a process of entanglement: an unsettling of the tenuous temporal markers that divide past and future, and a muddling of the roles of artist and audience, narrator and character, object and subject.

In his 2015 book *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory*, Rangihīroa Panoho offers a reading of Charles Heaphy's 1840 painting *Cowdie [Kauri] Forest on the Wairoa River*,

Kaipara, interpreting the painting through its qualities of whakatīahotanga, or translucency, and tīaho ana, radiating light. It is a whakapapa approach to art history that locates *Cowdie [Kauri] Forest on the Wairoa River, Kaipara* in a series of local histories that acknowledge the context Heaphy was working in as a surveyor for the New Zealand Company, as well as the physical and spiritual presence of Ngāti Whātua in the light and landscape that Heaphy portrays. These readings are not, Panoho argues, contradictory, because they emerge from the same foundational layer: the environment of the Kaipara, which—whether by Heaphy's intent or otherwise—cannot be extracted from the whakapapa to which it belongs.¹

Panoho's approach, that he describes as a 'palimpsest'—or the layering of one thing over another, with

¹
Rangihīroa Panoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: David Bateman Ltd, 2015) 33.



Charles Heaphy *Cowdie forest on the Wairoa River, Kaipara*
1839-40, watercolour, 287 × 457mm.
Alexander Turnbull Library Collection.



Ayesha Green *Mum (May 1985)* 2020, acrylic on canvas, 1700 × 1400mm.



Christina Green at Ōtākou, May 1985.
Photo: Dennis Green.

traces of the original form left visible—has parallels in Green's practice, which also engages with images as a point of collision: a place where, through various acts of modification and transformation, a series of histories meet.² Panoho and Green are each guided by whakapapa, both in the sense of its common translation, genealogy, and as a verb, where it describes the action of placing down layers. They are concerned with growth—rather than deconstruction—through the practice of seeking connection, a process that is defined not only by its focus on what has been but also by a commitment to what is yet to come. This relational approach to making and interpreting artworks resists the pull of linear time, leaning instead towards the sense of temporality expressed in the whakatauki 'ka mua, ka muri.' As Alice Te Punga Somerville notes, while it

is often translated as 'walking backwards into the future,' the whakatauki does not simply reverse the position of, or human progression towards, past and future, but gives expression to an understanding of genealogy as:

a form of interconnection in which ancestors (and descendants) are located not just before or behind us but inside and beyond us. Futures are therefore in a relationship with the past, but the relationship is not linear; one does not stand on a single plane looking at the past in a way that means a swivel of the head will reveal a view of the future.³

Understood in this way, artworks and images are not interpreted in isolation from the particular histories or contexts to which they relate. Whakapapa circles in, around, and through its subjects—pulling together not only people and objects, but also landscapes, ecologies, histories, memories, the indescribable and the unknowable.

Green's *Mum (May 1985)* (2020) is made after a photograph of her mother, Christina, taken the first time she visited their marae at Ōtākou, on the Otago Peninsula in 1985. The tightly cropped portrait places Christina at the edge of the entrance way to Ōtākou's whareniui, Tamatea, navigating the passageway between the outside world and the space of her tūpuna. Her eyes are focused off to her right, towards the red carved figures that occupy the sides of the doorway. It is their blue eyes that look sharply out of the painting.

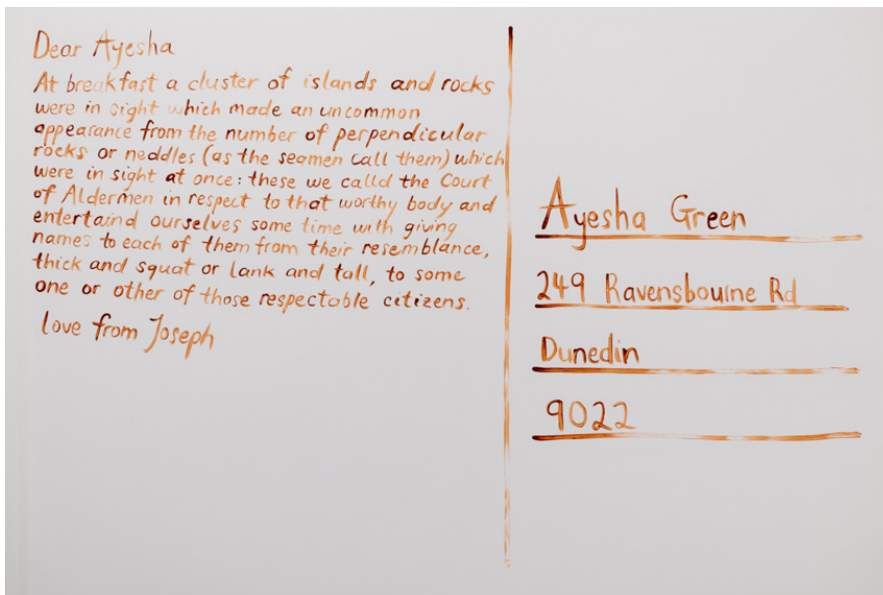
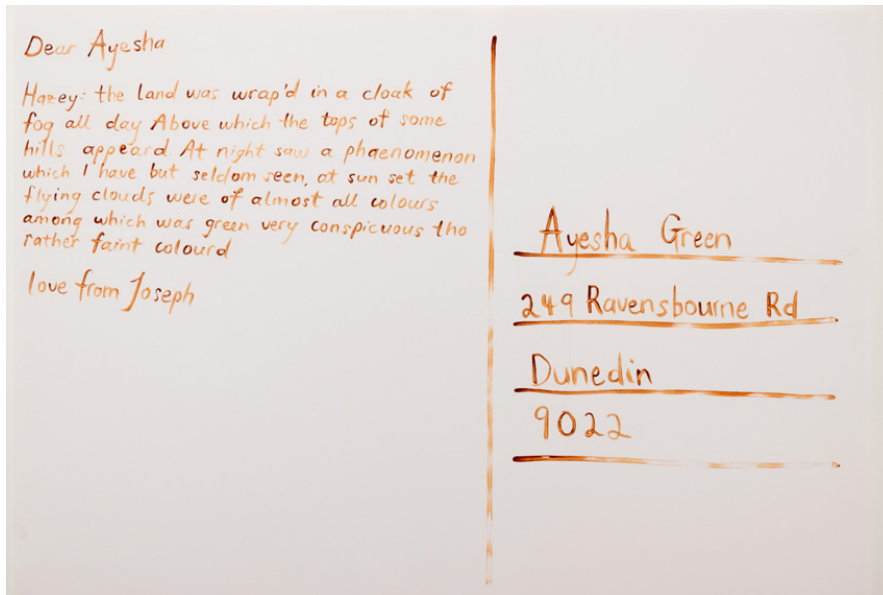
Ōtākou is an important presence in Green's practice, particularly in work made from 2018 on, when she spent a number of years living in nearby Dunedin. Different architectural features and views of the marae are depicted

² Panoho, *Māori Art*, 33.

³ Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Inside Us the Unborn: Genealogies, Futures, Metaphors, and the Opposite of Zombies", in W. Anderson, M. Johnson & B. Brookes eds., *Pacific Futures: Past and Present* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) 74.



Ayesha Green *Ko te Tihono* 2021, aluminium and steel, 4262 x 5000 x 421mm.
The Octagon, Otepoti Dunedin. Photo: Hayden Parsons.



Ayesha Green *Dear Ayesha, Love from Joseph* (21 March) & *Dear Ayesha, Love from Joseph* (5 November) 2020, kōkōwai on stone paper, 660 × 900mm.

in a number of her artworks, including the significant public commission *Ko te Tūhono* (2021), an aluminium replica of the doorway into Tamatea, erected in the Octagon in central Dunedin. Tamatea is an interesting influence on Green for its own status as a reproduction: conceptually, as an architectural embodiment of her Kāi Tahu whakapapa and ancestors, but also practically. Unusually, the carvings in Tamatea are not toi whakairo, or wood carvings. When the wharenui was redeveloped in the 1940s, moulds were made of a whare whakairo held in the collection of Otago Museum. Significantly, the original whare whakairo comes from Pakowhai in the Hawke's Bay, connecting it to Green's Ngāti Kahungunu whakapapa. Pakowhai is only a few kilometers away from her marae, Omāhu. From the Pakowhai casts, the moulds that line Tamatea were made: concrete for the exterior carvings, plaster of paris for the interior. *Ko te Tūhono* is, as Green has noted, 'a copy of a copy', acknowledging the larger history of reproduction to which her practice belongs.⁴

Reproductions hold presence in many marae, in various ways. Images of tūpuna—whether carved; painted or photographed from life; or photographic reproductions of original portraits—are often addressed as though they are the people portrayed. This relationship places Green's practice of reproduction squarely within a larger cultural framework that is guided by the mana of the subject and the mauri of the artwork or taonga, unsettling the centrality of the 'original' or 'authentic' image. To engage with artworks in this way, guided by whakapapa, does not diminish the contested histories to which many 19th and early 20th century portraits of Māori belong, or the colonial impulses that drove their production. Rather, it recognises the important connection between tūpuna and descendants that these artworks embody, and the unique contexts in which these relationships between artwork and viewer (or subject and whānau) are enacted. As

Panoho writes, such an approach allows for 'each *whakapapa* [to] be acknowledged as possessing its own merit but all have the potential to be read at the same time as a whole, complete form with *ko te pū* "the orgin" *e tiaho ana* "shining through."⁵

In Green's work, these ideas of whakapapa are expressed materially, as well as through form. Recent paintings by Green have used kōkōwai earth pigments gathered from Karitane in Puketeraki rohe, north of Ōtākou. Kōkōwai is particularly significant to Kāi Tahu art histories for its use in rock art, which has been recorded in over 700 sites in Te Wai Pounamu. In *Scenic Beauty* (2020), the outline of an outstretched hand leaves a curving red line inside an otherwise blank piece of stone paper. The *Dear Ayesha, Love from Joseph* series (2020) also use kōkōwai on stone paper, this time appropriating text from Joseph Banks' diaries into a set of postcards addressed to Green and signed off with 'love from Joseph'. Intermittently, over a period of months between November 1769 and March 1770, Banks describes *HMS Endeavour's* movements around Aotearoa, struggling to discern the landscape and its features. The sense of distance that Banks' text conveys is heightened by Green's use of materials, which emphasises the space between his unknowing of the environment he strains to outline, and the cultural and ecological mātauranga that is held within kōkōwai.

In a similar way, the straight lines and careful curves of Green's *Primrose* (2022), painted in kōkōwai, places Gordon Walter's well-known modernist kōru paintings in a history that belongs to the landscape—the place from which the material and the form are both originally derived. Here,

reproduction is a way of locating Walter's kōru in a history which he was famously determined that they sat outside of,

⁴ Ayesha Green, *Ko te Tūhono*, Dunedin City Council, 31 October 2022. Retrieved at <https://www.dunedin.govt.nz/services/arts-and-culture/public-artwork/ko-te-tuhono>.

⁵ Panoho, *Māori Art*, 34.

as expressed in his oft-quoted argument: 'My work is an investigation of positive/negative relationships within a deliberately limited range of forms. The forms I use have no descriptive value in themselves and are used solely to demonstrate relations.'⁶ In *Primrose*, this engagement with positive and negative space takes on new meaning. Green reinscribes Walter's koru as a symbol of creation, as a form that recalls the transition from Te Kore to Te Pō and Te Ao Mārama, using a material that belongs to the legacy of Hineahuone, the first woman, formed from kōkōwai.

Green's approach might be seen as interpretive: it involves the pulling apart of the layers of a particular image, an analysis of its component parts, and their placing back together in a newly found, but recognisable, shape. But while it is easy to view her reproductions as one step in a series of progressions—located precisely in response to what has come before and in anticipation of what will come next—their relationship to temporality is more complicated than that. Green's engagement with whakapapa as the foundation of her reproductions follows Carl Mika's argument that:

in Māori thought, a concept and a real thing are equally material, with genealogy showing the link between

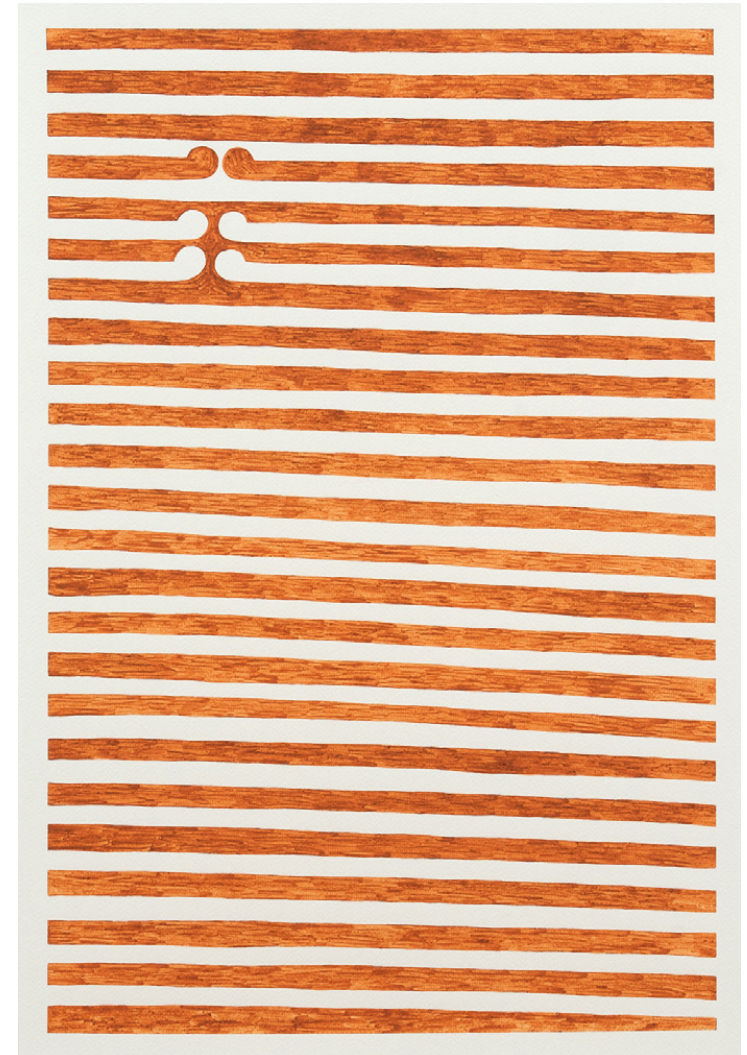
the two. Indeed, form and thought are the same, to the extent that they have forever been enmeshed. It should further be remembered here that the linearity of genealogy does not do justice to the simultaneity of things, and there exist deep problems with the straightforward notion that whakaaro (concept) eventually begets āhua (form).⁷

The idea of the 'simultaneity of things' might seem counter to the process of reproduction, but the action that Green's paintings perform is an affirmation of whakapapa that may not have been seen, understood, or knowable in their source image. Her reproductions challenge the understanding that all that can be 'read' in an image is all that it contains (or that we can all, always, read everything if we look close enough). Instead, they insist on

the constant, if at times irretrievable, presence of whakapapa as a connection to the wider world and all it comprises—known and unknown, seen and unseen, material and metaphysical.

⁶ Statement from the invitation to Walters's 1966 *New Vision* show, quoted in Robert Leonard, "Gordon Walters: Form Becomes Sign", in *Art and Australia* 44, 2 (2016). Retrieved at <https://robertleonard.org/gordon-walters-form-becomes-sign/>.

⁷ Carl Te Hira Mika, "Worlded Object and its Presentation: A Māori Philosophy of Language", in *AlterNative* 12, 2 (2016): 167.



Ayesha Green *Primrose* 2022, kōkōwai on paper, 820 × 610mm.