



Dunedin

Ayesha Green *Maori Girl*

Blue Oyster Art Project Space
27 November–22 December 2018

EDWARD HANFLING

A long padded bench seat is angled across the gallery, upholstered in a fabric that suggests stars in the cosmos. Above hangs a considerable length of gold snake chain, coiled and knotted into a kind of net, and suspended in the lower reaches of the net are seven pieces of pounamu (on loan from Otago Museum). There is a relatively straightforward way in to this work via the title of the overall exhibition: *Maori Girl* is the name of a nineteenth-century whaling boat displayed at Toitu Otago Settlers Museum in Dunedin, and the rocks in the net look a bit like whales. However, you have to cast the net wider if you want to glean more from this initially enigmatic exhibition.

Ayesha Green (Kai Tahu, Ngati Kahungunu) has recently completed a residency at Blue Oyster and taken up permanent residence in Dunedin. She is finding herself, both genealogically

(her great-great-great-grandfather was a whaler down in these parts) and artistically (to her distinctive output of cartoonish figurative paintings, she has added things that communicate less directly). An exhibition that is the result of these combined exploratory processes carries the risk of being impenetrably personal.

Rather than a navel-gazing exercise, *Maori Girl* shows how an individual is tied to people and places. As well as pounamu and gold, both found in South Island riverbeds, Green makes much of clay. A small oil painting, *Cyathea dealbata* (2018), alludes to the earth pigments as well as figurative motifs of North Otago rock art, and clay is physically present in three painted vessels hanging from hooks and three compositions of ceramic fragments on board. The jugs are titled *Tamatea Road*, which is where the marae called Otakou ('red clay') is situated, close to Te Umu Kuri (Wellers Rock), site of a whaling station in the 1830s. Tamatea is also the explorer who captained the *Takitimu* waka from Hawaiki to various parts of Aotearoa, including the east coast of the North

Island (where some of his descendants became Ngati Kahungunu), the west coast of the South Island (where the crew found pounamu) and, according to some accounts, the Otago coastline. Green's mosaic compositions each have fractured images of foliage and flowers and a mirror that reflects, as if in clear water, the more fastidiously rendered native plants in the painting *Kurawaka* (2018) on the opposite wall. And 'Kurawaka' is the fertile pubic region, the blood-red soil, of Papatuanuku from which emerged Hineahuone, the very first 'Maori Girl'.

I patted myself on the back after writing that last paragraph: I am usually rather a duffer when it comes to unravelling conceptual complexities, and just want to look at the stuff. But sure, give the artist some credit too.

Green is getting the hang of allowing materials to do things of their own accord. In the smaller back room at Blue Oyster, we see where she has come from. Painted portraits of whanau and friends are arranged salon style. Although smaller than has been customary for Green, the paintings retain the comically repetitive shorthand vocabulary—buttons and collars, eyes and smiles. This hardly seems like the same artist responsible for the installation in the front gallery—the one who had me googling the whakapapa out of the work. Yet the two parts of the exhibition cohere, especially for those familiar with the wall-to-wall portraits of dour Scottish 'pioneers' in the Smith Gallery at Toitu, just along from the whaling exhibit.



(above left) Ayesha Green's *Maori Girl* at Blue Oyster Art Project Space, November 2018, with from left *Mosaic*, *For Morrie* & *Cyathea dealbata*

(above right)
AYESHA GREEN *Kurawaka* 2018
Acrylic on board & wall, 2400 x 3600 mm.

(left) Ayesha Green's *Maori Girl* at Blue Oyster Art Project Space, November 2018