



A constant unpacking

Ayesha Green's portraits upend the usual power dynamics between painter and painted, promoting the personal and reclaiming the 'important'. Lucy Jackson speaks to the artist about the conceptual charge behind her recent work.

“There's beauty in the banal!”
Laughter. “That sounds like a title.”

I am Skyping with Ōtepoti-based artist Ayesha Green, who has whakapapa links to Kāi Tahu and Ngāi Kahungunu. We are both wrapped up against the August cold: she in her Dunedin studio, I in my flat in Wellington. Green has just won the National Contemporary Art Award at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato; the day before the announcement, her exhibition *Elizabeth the First* opened at Millers O'Brien. Over the next hour Green and I talk about exhibitions, influences, awards, future plans, copying and the little sentimental moments that make up life.

Green is interested in making *exhibitions*, not just artworks. In *Elizabeth the First*, she tells me, each work intertwines with and is linked by one overall concept. At first glance this can be hard to see. The exhibition is dominated by three large acrylic paintings of Queen Elizabeth I, flat and illustrative, on plywood. But there

are also two taxonomic paintings of native flowers and fossils, two tables of ceramic nails, watercolours on paper, and what look like ceramic leaves engraved with the names of native New Zealand trees. This may seem a little mismatched. After an explanation from Green, however? Clarity of concept.

The portraits of Queen Elizabeth I were the foundation of the exhibition. “With the queens I started to think: What is monarchy? What role does monarchy have in empire and knowledge building?” How knowledge is created and shared through generations is at the heart of Green's exhibition. The creation and dissemination, the artist thinks, stems from relationships that people have with each other.

Queen Elizabeth I invested in boat building and exploration, helping to open up the oceans that would later see James Cook sail to Aotearoa. Childless, the queen began to use language that addressed the nation as her children, and fostered the idea of Britannia (the

All artworks by Ayesha Green

Installation view of *Elizabeth the First*, Millers O'Brien, August 2019, showing (from left) *Wild Flowers (things that grow)*, 2019, acrylic on board, 850 x 1250mm; the three queens *Richmond*, *Buckingham* and *Kensington*, all 2019, acrylic on board, 1600 x 1200mm; and (in foreground) *Natural History (peer review)*, 2019. Courtesy of Millers O'Brien Gallery

Right: *Richmond*, 2019, acrylic on board, 1600 x 1200mm. Courtesy of Millers O'Brien Gallery

personification of Great Britain). "This shift in history and this relationship Elizabeth I had with people and knowledge was why I was drawn to her," Green says. On a more material level, the clothing Elizabeth wore excited Green. "I wanted to paint pattern, I wanted a challenge, and painting the queens gave me that."

"With Elizabeth I, I kept asking: what is it to be the first of something? The first becomes the thing that stands in for all things." Green grappled with semiotic theory while painting her three portraits of the queen, copying historic paintings referred to as the Darnley, Ermine and Ditchley portraits. Green's paintings are titled *Buckingham*, *Richmond* and *Kensington* (all 2019), after royal palaces – symbols of power. Green also references the idea of a woman as a house, looking to Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* series (1946–47). But the titles also speak generally to ancestry. "Like marae, palaces house their own history and hold stories of whakapapa. To walk into a whareni is to walk inside the tūpuna. I think palaces act in the same way; being inside them is to be inside the embodiment of power."

After the three queens came the fossils and flowers. In Western taxonomic science, one thing stands in for all things: the first 'type specimen' collected becomes a record and that record becomes the basis for a species. When Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander began collecting and recording New Zealand botanical specimens, Green says, "their images become the standard image of all those same things". Green paints her flowers and fossils together in frame, not touching, with a scientific name underneath each one. "All these parts make a whole, I guess that's something I have an ongoing interest in."

Green first developed the idea of knowledges collected together but pulled apart in her 2018 exhibition at Blue Oyster Art Project Space, *Māori Girl*, in which she separated out the parts of herself that make her the person she is, while also painting portraits of her family and friends. "Now," she says, "I'm more interested in how the world operates and how it records and shares knowledge."

I return to *Elizabeth the First*. "And what role do the ceramic nails and ceramic leaves have in the exhibition?"

Green laughs. "The 'leaves' are speech bubbles actually!"

Oops.

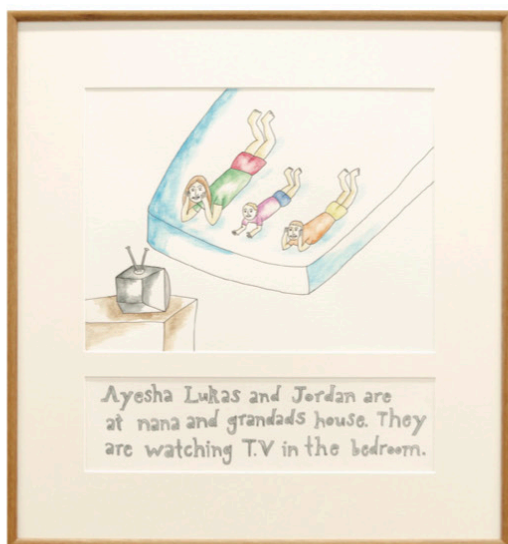


The speech bubbles, she explains, reference the way knowledge is shared and represented by means of the spoken and written word. Within the speech bubbles are names of native New Zealand trees – Tāne's children – and the clay they are made of links to Papatūānuku. By contrast, the nails, *Natural History (peer review)* (2019), refer to trade and its place in knowledge building. "When Cook came to Aotearoa's shores, iron nails were a heavily traded item between European and Māori. Trading created relationships and allowed Cook's team to come ashore and do science. Without this, people might not have come to shore or carried out scientific recording."

"I'm interested in how different materials tell different stories," the artist says. "By using clay, I am also exploring the ecology of te ao Māori and the creation of the first woman." Green entered into ceramics via the story of Hineahuone being made from clay; here, a dichotomy of subject and object becomes blurred.

I'm intrigued by the three watercolour works in Green's exhibition. They each contain a picture of Ayesha and her two brothers, accompanied by a caption. "Lukas, Jordan and Ayesha are building sandcastles at the beach", one runs. "Lukas is eating sand." Viewers may read them as a three-part story, feeling a connection to them – perhaps due to their naivety and simplicity. Inspired by Ans Westra's controversial photo-essay *Washday at the Pa* (1964), Green presents her own storyboard of diverse Māori experience. "It's powerful to think about how Māori were represented, especially in an educational situational context. Who is representing who?"

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Ayesha Green, *Ayesha Lukas and Jordan at Nana and Grandads*, 2019. Courtesy of Millers O'Brien Gallery

Below: Installation detail of *Māori Girl*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, November 2018, showing *Puku*, 2018, acrylic on board. Courtesy of Blue Oyster

Green is drawn to the way portraiture is used to tell national stories with a focus on people of 'importance'. By representing herself and her family in portraiture, she redirects this focus and asserts the power of the personal. The queens, though? "Although Elizabeth I is distant, her actions directly affected the story of my whakapapa. In that way, she is really personal to me."

Ideas of authenticity enter into this quandary as well. Green is interested in what happens to the authenticity of something when it is copied. As well as her three queens, Green has also copied work by Gottfried Lindauer – maybe not stroke for stroke, but with enough of a visual similarity for a viewer to join the dots. Why? "Perhaps copying something is about regaining power. Power of the ownership of image and reclaiming it. I'm constantly unpacking this."

After completing her Master of Fine Arts at Elam, Green did a graduate diploma at the University of Auckland, specialising in Museums and Cultural Heritage. She says she is heavily influenced by museum practice and how museums choose the stories they tell. "I think museum



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practice has to take a lot of responsibility in how we know our world and the power dynamics working inside that." This includes these Western institutions working harder towards decolonisation and reindigenisation.

"In being a Māori artist and self-determining as a Māori artist," Green says, "there are definitely Māori ways of looking and being in the world and expressing this." The artist explains that if you are familiar with mātauranga Māori, you might read the work differently to someone who is unfamiliar with te ao Māori. Green knows that her work speaks to Māori people and of Māori philosophy, but also sits in the Western paradigm of contemporary art. "Can I access both of these groups of people and speak to issues that affect them both? I think there's a way to move in both worlds."

So far, Green's movement in these worlds seems to have been successful: in August she won the 2019 National Contemporary Art Award for her painting *Nana's Birthday (A Big Breath)*, now on display at Waikato Museum. "Competitions don't decide what is good and bad," Green says of the award, "no one can be in a position to decide that. But Waikato is the museum I grew up visiting, and I went to Wintec and the awards were part of our education there. They were something to aspire to."

Nana's Birthday (A Big Breath) is based on a photograph from three years ago when the Green's nana turned 80. Gathered together in the painting, generations huddle and blow out the candles on the cake together. "I like that you have generations of a family here. There was a time in history that Māori were supposedly going to 'die out', but here you have a diverse Māori family, far from dying out." Green says there's a life force, a mauri and wairua, in the image. "To blow out the candles meant everyone had to inhale and exhale at the same time – there's a breath of life in there." The painting also speaks to whakapapa and the idea that there is no past, present, or future. Everything coexists. "That might sound sentimental, but the work is sentimental, that's what makes it lovely."

In November Green will exhibit in the group show *Strands* at the Dowse Art Museum. Exploring whanautanga and reconnection with the whenua, the exhibition will look at how this contributes to and influences art practice.

Green's work is captivating in its ability to coast in multiple spheres, unconfined by trends. At points in our conversation I think her overarching ideas for an exhibition are more significant than the individual works. However, Green's art holds a power in being able to speak to these large, complicated histories, while also enquiring into the emotional nuance of everyday life. Some images are no more complicated than they appear.

"There's just something nice about the banal, and living a life can be precious in itself."

Strands: Arapeta Ashton, Ayesha Green, Chevron Hassett, Ana Iti is at *The Dowse, Lower Hutt, 29 November 2019 to 22 March 2020.*



Outside, 2019, acrylic on board, 1600 x 1200mm, to be exhibited in *Strands* at The Dowse, Lower Hutt. Courtesy of the artist

Below: Ayesha Green with *Nana's Birthday (A Big Breath)*, 2019, acrylic on plywood; winner of the 2019 National Contemporary Art Award at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato. Courtesy of the artist

