



STORY – BODY – STAGE: AYESHA GREEN'S DISRUPTIVE MUSEOLOGY

In 1773 the Anglo-American painter Benjamin West (1738-1820) completed a portrait of English naturalist and botanist Joseph Banks (1743-1820). West's painting depicts Banks as a self-styled young romantic, a modern man of Enlightenment-era science whose gaze emanates from the canvas with an aura of purpose and control. The scenography of the painting has been carefully arranged. A collection of objects gathered during Banks' recent travels aboard the HMS Endeavor frame his body on either side. At his feet, an open book displays a specimen drawing of an indigenous flax species of Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu. With his hands Banks lifts and gestures towards the garment he is wearing; a kaitaka aronui, or chiefly cloak, woven from muka (flax) featuring an intricately patterned taniko border and tassels of threaded awe (dog hair). Banks' gaze and his gesture are the focal points of the painting. The backdrop—a dream-wash of painted clouds, indigenous taonga and the lush sweep of a heavy curtain looped behind an architectural column—is the setting into which Banks, as protagonist, performs his own scene. This image has been constructed to champion the notion of Banks as a man of action and consequence, poised to play a pivotal role shaping his epistemological cosmos.

For her recent painting *Self Portrait as Joseph Banks* (2022) Ayesha Green appropriates the framework of West's original painting of Joseph Banks without replicating Banks' gesture or stance. Retaining the

skeleton of West's compositional devices—the column, curtain, and the proportional position of the figure in space—Green has emptied the scene of all but herself (as Banks) and the kaitaka. Though she too gazes directly at the viewer, her posture is infused with a sense of tenderness and quietude; her self-depiction stands with both feet placed evenly on the floor in a resting position, naked beneath the kaitaka aronui. If we look to her hands, we can also observe that she has inverted the posture depicted in the image of Banks. Rather than lifting and pointing, she has folded her hands under its protection, drawing the garment towards herself.

What is Green telling us with her reinterpretation—or rather, re-performance—of this historical portrait? We might wonder if she is being a little coy with Banks – placing herself in the role of desirable other. Or we might reflect on the decision to sweep the stage clean of all but the kaitaka, elevating the garment to a lead role in both paintings. This strategic action brings to mind the words of textiles scholar Patricia Te Arapo Wallace when she writes 'every piece of traditional Māori weaving is a testament to indigenous science and intellectual ingenuity.' The shift then, is in the lens, or worldview, that each painting enacts. By inserting her own body into the continuum of the mythos of Joseph Banks, Green is seeking to disrupt the intellectual authority—and scientific cause—that the original image lays claim to.

The exhibition *Folk Nationalism* at Tauranga Art Gallery Toi Tauranga abounds with similar processes of inversion. Employing doubling, repetition, acts of mirroring and reenactment, Green—with her broadchurch of reproduced images and artefacts—is asking us to move beneath the surface of Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu's mythologies of nationhood and explore the possibility of restorative storytelling. For in Green's oeuvre, cultural artefacts are figures in motion, orbiting the gaze of her figurative subjects. This gaze—the quiet, conscious, presence of Green's subjects—is inviting us in to an empathetic inquiry. Its silent power is pointing to multiple truths and asking that we question the stability—and fidelity—of the popular imaginary. To achieve this Green often centres self-portraiture and reproductions of her immediate family and family documents in her work. This is another strategic decision. By doing so, she is seeking to offer concrete representations of contemporary Māori—free from exoticism, hyperbole and abstraction—and make intimate again that which the mechanisms of the museum have made distant.

Historical acts of creation, separation, opposition and belonging are some of the key ideas that Green is directly addressing in her new series of paintings. How sweet the young Prince William may seem to the onlooker in *The Prince's New Toy* (2022). Unless of course we understand the innocuous Buzzy Bee as a cipher for sovereignty – the assumed innocence of the image then promptly dissolves. Viewed in relation to the pastoral scene, *Two Māori Boys in an English Field* (2022), prompts further questions about the nature of displacement and belonging; to whom, for whom and with whom does one belong, and within

what framework? What is the nature of the scene and the story that we are telling ourselves? Scenography and performance are persistent themes that play out across Green's practice, both of which she addresses directly in her reproduction of Marcus King's, *The Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, February 6th, 1840* (1938). King's painting does not truthfully represent events as they unfolded on that fateful day, so what then does King's painting tell us about desire, authorship and the dream of nationhood? Green's re-performance of King's work refuses colonial amnesia, misremembering and sentimentality. Rather, it asks that we continue to bring these histories and artefacts to bear on our present.

Elle Loui August

¹ For an analysis of how this kaitaka came to be in the possession of Joseph Banks see Paul Tapsell, "Footprints in the Sand: Banks's Maori collection, Cook's first voyage 1768-71" in M. Hetherington & H. Morphy (eds) *Discovering Cook's Collection*, National Museum of Australia, 2009

² As Patricia Fara has written: 'Just as Banks policed Enlightenment visions of the lands he had explored and the specimens he had collected, so too he carefully monitored the images of himself that became available for public consumption.' See Patricia Fara "The Royal Society's Portrait of Joseph Banks." *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 51, no. 2, 1997

³ For context, Wallace's full paragraph reads:
Fibre is arguably the foundation of technology; as such, every piece of traditional Maori weaving is a testament to indigenous science and intellectual ingenuity. As weaving arts developed in Aotearoa, the most skillful practitioners achieved their successes not simply through manual dexterity, but rather through their mental capacity. Weaver's expertise was not only demonstrated in the mathematical applications of the patterns they created, but more essentially in their understanding of the available resources and the complex technologies they devised to maximise them. This was more than mere practice of environmental sustainability. Like other indigenous people living close to nature, Maori developed a rich, holistic understanding of the functioning of ecosystems and the connections between plants, wildlife and their land. Over time, they built up a significant body of scientific knowledge, developed through an approach of observation, hypothesis, experimentation and assessment.
 Patricia Te Arapo Wallace, in "Ko te Pūtaiao te Ao o ngā Tūpuna, Ancestral Māori Scientific Practice", Ed. Awhina Tamarapa, *Whatu Kākahu Māori Cloaks*, Te Papa Press, 2011



Image 1, Benjamin West, *Joseph Banks*, 1773, oil on canvas. Usher Art Gallery Collection, Lincoln

Image 2, Ayesha Green, *Self-Portrait as Joseph Banks*, 2022, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington

Produced to accompany the exhibition
 Ayesha Green: Folk Nationalism
 Tauranga Art Gallery Toi Tauranga
 27 August 2022 – 22 January 2023

The exhibition is generously supported by Seeds Trust



SEEDS TRUST