

Wesley John Fourie

Ngā Roma Poa



Green-screened

3-24 February 2023

Wave Project Space

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The Greening of Aotearoa: Art and the Death of the Earth

By Hilary Radner

Green-screened, the title of an exhibition of work by Ngā Roma Poa (Te Ahi Haunui-a-Pāpāurangi, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāpuhi) and Wesley John Fourie at Wave Project Space, Dunedin (3-24 February 2023) brings together two artists with very distinctive visions. As Wesley often remarks, they are from two different cultures.¹

In the Night

Wesley is a self-identified immigrant who arrived in New Zealand|Aotearoa as a very young child. Non-binary, using the pronouns they/them/their, they struggle to feel “at home.” The forests and the mountains offer a refuge, especially during the night. Much of their art is inspired by their sustained meanderings “in the night” while suffering from insomnia. Their depictions of “the forest” serve to attest to the emotional fields of these wanderings, infused with their sense of the natural world as “sacred.” Alistair Fox, in an essay written on the occasion of the

exhibition *Wesley Fourie: They Came to Me in the Night* (2022), observes “The forest offered both a kind of sleep, and a sense of order in the world.” In Wesley’s words, “Every time I step outside is a sacred experience.” This forest comprises distinct identities, who assuage the anomie of the artist while speaking to their sense of alienation. Wesley describes falling in love with a particular tree, for example, as Alistair Fox reports: “‘Within the forest, Fourie tells us, there is ‘a spirit tree’—a gigantic kahikatea ‘that stole my heart more than any man ever has.’”²

The Whanganui River

Ngā Roma grew up in the North Island in a culture articulated around a rich heritage of beliefs and traditions alongside the Whanganui River. In 2017, the relationship with the Whanganui Iwi and the river was officially recognized with the iwi serving as kaitiaki (a guardian, an individual or group having “customary authority over a traditional territory”).³ Current New Zealand | Aotearoa law defines “the Whanganui River” as “a ‘living’ entity of a major significance due to its physical and metaphysical role which is ‘indivisible’ from human life and its economic and social development, expressed in the concept of ‘health and well-being of the iwi, hapū, and other communities of the River,’ but also for future generations.”⁴

Ngā Roma continues to live and work with and on the river; however, as an artist she also has strong links to the city, where she eventually moved and where she studied. A young Māori

scholar, Gabriel Baron (Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpāurangi), explains: "...I never forget where I'm from and some of my 'wanaunga' would much rather just stay at home where they know it's safe. But you need to venture out, experience the world."⁵

Gabriel's statement recalls sentiments also expressed by Ngā Roma, who remains tied to where she is "from" while exploring what Gabriel terms "the world." For both, the relationship with the river is fundamental; in Gabriel's words: "I am the river and the river is me."⁶ Indeed, Ngā Roma's Instagram epigraph is "Teina ki te Taiao" (Child of the Earth)". Not coincidentally, her earlier art practice focused on what she calls "foraging," on found, natural materials and pigments, with the river and its banks a rich treasure trove—underlying her identification with Tikanga Māori [sometimes translated as "cultural authenticity]."

A Fluorescent Green Hue

In contrast, the work exhibited in *Green-screened* constitutes a departure from these earlier practices, though Ngā Roma continues to use found objects taken from the natural world. Her installation at Project Wave highlights a series of transformed and almost unrecognizable "hues" (a Māori word for gourds) which, hidden beneath an almost "Warhol-like" exterior covered in fluorescent green, contain their seeds, suggesting heritage, nature, and tradition. By painting the hue green, the artist de-familiarises it such that it is no longer recognizable. People chancing upon a bright fluorescent green hue would ask, "What's that thing?" Ngā

Roma reports, further remarking that “No matter where I place it, it looks like it doesn’t belong.” This transformation of the hue (which came from her aunt’s garden) into a dissonant object constitutes a vehicle (a metaphor) for exploration and expression—of the dissonances and legacies that mark her experience of belonging in an officially bi-cultural nation.

Shared Sensibilities

Paradoxically, then, given the initial disparities of their origins, the visions of these two young artists, Ngā Roma Poa and Wesley John Fourie, are united by their underlying preoccupations: the interrogation of identity and a sharp and persistent concern for the state of the planet. Wesley says: “I want to live,” suggesting their intimate connection to the environment on which their existence depends. While the ideas of these two artists about what it means “to live” may be articulated in different terms, resonating differently, they have in common a sense of deep responsibility for the earth and its future.

Their shared sensitivities to context, the terrain which they inhabit, are demonstrated in the installation of the exhibition itself, conceived as an aesthetically articulated whole. Mindful of the gallery space, in particular its multiple windows and consequent qualities of light, the work of these two artists comes together as an immersive experience in “green,” with “green-screened” as a concept expressing both diversities and

commonalities, a metaphoric key to the exhibition's underlying vision.

Green-screening

Green-screened, the exhibition title, refers to a visual effect process in film and digital movie-making known as “chroma keying.” Chroma keying permits the director (and editor) to shoot or record performers against a blue or green background and to subsequently replace that background with another scene—often, mountains, a beach, Paris, outer space, etc. With the advent of digital technology, further techniques were developed that permitted the masking of given objects in the background of an image in order to change the background “behind” the principal subject without literally “green screening.” The concept remains the same—an object or person is transposed from one location to another in an almost seamless and largely invisible collage.

For Ngā Roma Poa “green-screened” serves as a metaphor for the process she has used to transpose an element from the natural world, in this case, a gourd, a hue, its set of internal seeds intact, into an art gallery as the realm of representation and artifice. She explains that her current installation piece arises from what she perceives as the challenges faced today by kaitiaki, “custodians of the whenua,” when confronted “as bystanders” with “the degradation [of the environment and the land] currently taking place.”⁷

The installation highlights a series of gourds painted a bright fluorescent green (GK3635 Glokote Green from Glo Kote: Fluorescent Marking Paint), a colour, Ngā Roma explains, deployed more generally in “construction sites, roadworks, surveying, and forestry.”⁸ The arbitrary and harsh colour of the transformed gourds underlines the de-contextualisation that takes place when the gourd, or hue, becomes an aesthetic object detached from its organic origins as a product of the land—from its “whenua” and “whakapapa” in Ngā Roma’s words—from the traditions and ritual role the hue plays in Māori indigenous culture. Ngā Roma explains that the name “hue” comes from Hine Pū Te Hue, a kaitiaki (guardian) and the atua (ancestral deity) of the gourd. “She is known to have brought peace amongst battle, [and] in many forms signifies life.”⁹ The artist then asks us: “What happens to a traditional symbol when it has been decontextualised?”¹⁰

Wesley’s mural, or installation, what they call “wall drawings” (produced for a specific exhibition on a gallery wall, in this case Wave Project Space), comprises an array of semi-abstract lines and shapes marked by a spectrum of “greens,” including the fluorescent green adopted by Ngā Roma. Here the transposition of the object (trees, plants, etc.), its “green-screening,” is manifested through the transcription of the artist’s interior experience of the forest, marked by joy, but also unrequited longings, onto the gallery wall. Alistair Fox notes that “Fourie adopts a kind of ‘semantic abstraction,’ to use Harold Osborne’s terminology, that is very clear about referents but avoids depiction.”¹¹

Wesley's wall murals are temporary installations (ephemeral and destined for obliteration).¹² The nature of the wall drawing as transitory, thus, suggests the uncertain future of the forest; it underlines the implicit threat constituted by an economic system wedded to the idea of planned obsolescence and the cult of the new.

An Environmental Crisis

The work of these artists invites us to pay attention to a natural world that is fast disappearing without which humanity may survive, but only with great difficulty, and at great cost, as a new humanity without "humanity." A more likely outcome will be the destruction of the living world and its flora and fauna, including the human animal.

The two artists through their work beg us with a certain urgency to reconsider our priorities, to make every attempt to honour the environment that provides us with air, water, food, and shelter, permitting us to exist. It is too easy to forget that the human animal is defined by its destiny—"ashes to ashes, dust to dust," earth to earth—to forget that it is our ability to recognise the transience of our own existence that makes us human.

We have a unique capacity among animals to think about what came before us and what will come after we "shuffle off this mortal coil." These two artists, like many of their generation, have a message, a plea: that we ask ourselves, in considering our

collective actions during our short time on earth, what we will have left behind; that we mobilise as a society to redress the excesses and damage visited upon our environment in the past in the hope of a different future.

Dunedin, 2023

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise specified, statements attributed to the artists are from a zoom conversation, held 15 January 2023.

² Alistair Fox (2022). “‘They Came to Me in the Night’: A Midnight Sanctuary by the Torchlight of Memory.” In A. Fox & H. Radner (Eds.) in *Wesley John Fourie: “They Came to Me in Night”*. (Np.). Dunedin: RDS Gallery.

³ Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (ND). “Kaitiakitanga – Guardianship and Conservation,” in *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/kaitiakitanga-guardianship-and-conservation/print>. Accessed 27 January 2023.

⁴ Aikaterini Argyrou & Harry Hummels (2019). “Legal Personality and Economic Livelihood of the Whanganui River: a Call for Community Entrepreneurship.” (pp. 751-768). *Water International* 44, 6-7.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02508060.2019.1643525>. Accessed 27 January 2022.

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⁵ Gabriel Baron quoted in D'Angelo Martin (2020), "Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī descendant delights in bringing Whanganui study home," *Te Ao: Māori News*, 30 October.

<https://www.teaomaori.news/te-ati-haunui-paparangi-descendant-delights-bringing-whanganui-study-home>. Accessed 27 January 2023.

⁶ Gabriel Baron, quoted in D'Angelo Martin, "Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī descendant delights in bringing Whanganui study home."

⁷ Ngā Roma Poa (2023), artist's statement, np., email from Wesley John Fourie, document shared 6 January.

⁸ Ngā Roma Poa, artist's statement, np.

⁹ Ngā Roma Poa, artist's statement, np.

¹⁰ Ngā Roma Poa, artist's statement, np.

¹¹ Alistair Fox, "They Came to Me in the Night," np.

¹² See for example, *Running through the Forest with the Ghosts of the Night Time*, 18a Project Space, Nelson, 2021; *I Dream A Rainforest*, Malcolm Smith Gallery, Auckland, 2022.

