MEMORIES of a NATURALIST

AYESHA GREEN, LUCY MEYLE, KATE MARY OGSTON, NOVA PAUL, GEORGE MALCOLM THOMSON, and KERI WHAITIRI

Curated by **Simon Palenski**, Dunedin Public Art Gallery 2022 Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa Curatorial Intern of Contemporary Art.

ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA

26 NOVEMBER 2022 – 26 MARCH 2023

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Dunedin City Council

Memories of a Naturalist brings together artworks and archival documents containing multiple stories, histories, temporalities, memories, pathways, tracks and traces; both human and non-human.[1] Amongst these accumulating multiples are shared connections and some things that do not add up, things that make trouble or become entangled. Each element of the exhibition shares impressions of our coalescing environment based on close observation of te taiao (the natural world). Collectively they offer a fluid understanding of environmental relations, one that acknowledges the holistic and inextricably complex, though ecologically disturbed, nature of common life.

Nova Paul's film *Rākau* (2022) opens filmic space and time for trees to express some of this connection and complexity, specifically a pūriri tree. Pūriri are indigenous to Aotearoa, growing in the upper regions of Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island). Paul developed *Rākau* using a chloroform she made from its dark green, glossy leaves. Its botanical name, vitex lucens, hints at pūriri leaves' suitability to footage, lucens meaning shining, becoming light. Paul is interested in the shared roots of the words rākau (tree/wood) and pūrakau (story/myth), and the expanse within pūrakau as a concept to inform a Māori-centred methodology or way of working.[2]

Paul recognises that the intertwined roots of rākau and pūrakau reflect how stories come from trees and that every tree contains a story. She has written that "Another [idea] is that all language comes from trees. These stories overlap within us, collected and built together. When we trip we sense a shared becoming, immanence. We are present to the moment and attend to it collectively."[3] Through this overlapping, rākau shape and carry pūrakau and whakapapa, and so collectively hold memories, which in turn also shape and carry pūrakau and whakapapa. These connections might seem intangible, though Paul's material process directly shapes and carries pūrakau and whakapapa within the resulting film. Whereby emanations of rā and pūriri through sunlight tunnel through the camera's lens and impress themselves on the analogue film. The film is then developed through pūriri leaves collected from the tree, which also absorb rā's sunlight, through chlorophyll and photosynthesis. This process has led her to describe *Rākau* as being by trees, rather than about trees.

Paul films the pūriri in *Rākau* by slowly walking the camera around its trunk, directing it up to its crown and closely to its bark. Other plants growing amongst the pūriri are brought into the film, ferns and perching grasses in the crooks of branches and other trees clustered in the background, forming a grove of plantlife. The ecologist and historian Geoff Park titled his study of indigenous lowland forests *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life*. He resisted defining ngā uruora, instead suggesting that if you "go into a lowland kahikatea forest in autumn when its koroī are ripening, lie under the towering trees listening to the cacophony of birds and the constant patter of the inedible bits hitting the leaves around you, and you'll know what 'the groves of life' mean."[4]

Paul's approach to filmmaking is actively decolonial, as filmic space and time is pulled open to the imagining and implementing of tino rangatiratanga (absolute self-determination) based in te taiao (the natural world). Filmmaker Merata Mita has written about the unique ability of photography and film to do this when determined within Māori frameworks, she wrote "it is with greater ease and without embarrassment that the closed audience can find, and themselves express, the spiritual element underscoring our physical world. Receptivity grows more intense as sensory impressions nurtured in the memory and imagination inhabit and haunt us for hours after, sometimes longer."[5]

When George Malcolm Thomson arrived in Ōtepoti (Dunedin) in the early 1870s it was not long before he began studying the natural surroundings, as it was in his garden, and further afield in urban nature reserves such as the Town Belt and amongst the nearby hillsides, estuaries and shorelines he could access on foot. Thomson recognised that rapid environmental changes were taking place, but also how memories of what the environment had been like before were slipping. It is not clear from his writings whether he ever approached mana whenua to talk about the environment, though he did seek out earlier colonial settlers to talk to about their recollections. Over his life, he studied the environment of Ōtepoti, and in his writings he came to rely on his own memories to recognise which animals and plants he had witnessed becoming less common or locally extinct. Some of the disappearing indigenous animals and plants he noted include the formerly common flocks of kākāriki and kererū,[6] and the upland flora and insects that abounded the surrounding hillsides before the scrub was burnt off and resown with pasture.[7] But he also noted the fluctuating populations of newly introduced animals, such as chaffinches and mynas.[8] In one passage, he notes the growing absence of ruru calls heard at night from his home in Ōtepoti compared to his memories of them at his first home in Aotearoa, near Mabel Bush in Murihiku (Southland), and he recalls an unusual visit to his garden by a pair of whēkau, a bird that would soon be extinct.[9]

Thomson was dismayed by the disappearance of indigenous animals and plants from around Ōtepoti. At the same time, he was fascinated by the processes of interaction he observed occurring between indigenous and introduced animals and plants. He envisioned in these interactions the possible emergence of new varieties or species, an idea that followed then-emerging theories around species evolution and natural selection, particularly those of Alfred Russel Wallace, a British naturalist working in parallel with Charles Darwin. Thomson recorded shifts in behaviour and appearance of introduced animals in case they could be harbingers of an emergent, localised species, such as sparrows 'hawking' for moths, pied and white thrushes, starlings eating tī kōuka berries and the growing variety of colouring amongst introduced rabbits.[10] From afar, Wallace himself took an interest in what was happening in Aotearoa, and he was intrigued by kea, a 'curious' indigenous bird that he thought was adapting in unusual ways to the environmental changes taking place.

Wallace wrote that since colonial settlers began occupying kea habitats, "[the kea] has developed a taste for a carnivorous diet, with alarming results. It began by picking the sheepskins hung out to dry or the meat in process of being cured. About 1868 it was first observed to attack living sheep, which had frequently been found with raw and bleeding wounds on their backs."[11] He noted how the climbing feet and hooked beak of kea, developed for feeding on fruit, berries and digging grubs out of tree bark, were well applied to a completely different purpose, and so, he argued, reflected the instability and continual change of fixed habits of life.

Kate Mary Ogston painted *New Zealand Game* (1888) around this time, as kea were capturing public attention in Aotearoa,

and elsewhere too, with stories of their sheep-eating habits on high country stations. The painting depicts a dead kea, one of its wings partially open showing the patch of fiery coloured feathers underneath. Ogston exhibited the painting at the *New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition* of 1889, an occasion that celebrated British sovereignty in Aotearoa and acted as an internationally pitched advertisement for the products and natural resources being harvested and produced for export. In addition to Ogston's painting, kea were present in an aviary outside the exhibition hall, kept with kiwi, tūī, weka, korimako, blackbirds and thrushes. Kea impressed colonial settlers with their appearance and intelligence, to the point that they were sought after as 'tame' pets. Although, they soon became a problem when they threatened the economy of the emergent colony and were ruthlessly hunted down with guns and poison as they stepped outside the human-designated boundaries expected of them.

Lucy Meyle is interested in these human-designated boundaries and the small ways animals can break away from them. In her sculptural installation *Little Enclosure (Temporary Parquet)* (2022) which is laid out over a substrate of gridded newsprint, she plots the traces of animals and the physical and/or imagined boundaries that surround them when they, in the words of multispecies feminist scholar Donna Haraway, 'get on together' with humans. One component of the installation is a printed hand-out with a photograph of a young fur seal snared in a net accompanied by the headline: 'Seal breaks into New Zealand home, traumatises cat and hangs out on couch.'[12] The net is a clear example of a physical 'boundary' that actively contains animals, in this case a fur seal that does not 'belong' in the person's house. Falconry leashes that Meyle has arranged across the installation represent another, quite physical, boundary. When travelling through different cities and towns in Europe she saw how language can enforce these boundaries too. She noticed the various signs communicating where people were not expected to take their pet dogs, including here in Ōtepoti, where bronze plaques laid into the pavement around the Octagon have an image of a sitting dog with a cross through it.

Another example of these human-designated boundaries can be found within legal systems, and Meyle is interested in historical accounts of animals 'breaking' them. In some cases, where animals were accused of doing this by, say, 'trespassing' and eating a farmer's crops in a clearly fenced-off field, they were brought into a courtroom and put on trial. Although this kind of thing was more common in Western Europe from at least the 16th to 18th centuries, there is an echo of it with Acclimatisation societies in 19th century Aotearoa. Beginning in the 1860s, Acclimatisation societies were established by recently arrived colonial settlers throughout Aotearoa with the aim of introducing 'beneficial' plant and animal species, such as timber plants, fodder plants, ornamental flowers and game animals. Colonial settlers often expressed indignation when these animals and plants, once here, acted widely differently from their expectations. The common brushtail possum is an example of this. It was introduced to form a commercial fur industry, yet the population boomed and proceeded to destroy wide areas of indigenous forest through overeating, while hunting, sometimes to extinction, indigenous birds, reptiles and insects. Possums also proved to be unprofitable as a fur industry and, further, they ate into farmers' profits by feeding on crops and spreading diseases to livestock.

Throughout *Little Enclosure (Temporary Parquet)* Meyle considers where animals are seen as 'naturally' belonging and where they are not. The worms especially, shiny and wriggling along the gridded newsprint, might seem out of place in a gallery. In urban areas when it is raining, you often see worms on the pavement, avoiding rainwater filtering through the soil and flooding their burrows. When talking about this, Meyle pointed out that while worms seem amiss when this happens, it is really the other way around, with the pavement and concrete being out of place and laid out without much thought for those living underneath. Worms fit well with the thinking of Haraway and what she calls Cthonic ones, in her words "beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute ... replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair."[13] The same could possibly be said of George Malcolm Thomson's drawings of crustacea, with the exhibition including just a small selection of the hundreds he completed in the final years of his life in his attempt to catalogue all of the crustacea species found in Aotearoa. Haraway recognises that in the face of haywire environmental collapse and climate crisis, new ways of thinking and living are needed. This is embodied by her idea of the Cthulucene, a multispecies alternative to the human-centric Anthropocene and profit-centric Capitalocene. She writes that the "unfinished Cthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the extremism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures."[14]

The anthropologist Anna Tsing is another thinker who has written about the possibilities of common life in a climatically and environmentally disturbed world. Tsing argues that it is not enough to linger on stories of devastation, because no matter how environmentally wrecked a landscape appears, humans, plants and animals still have to live there. Furthermore, although humans can, and do, shape and remake landscapes, plants and animals join them in doing this, forming landscapes of collective, unintentional design.[15] Tsing is known for her study of the matsutake, one of the most commercially valuable mushrooms in the world. It is a type of mushroom that only grows in the wild in human-disturbed and ecologically exploited environments, such as deforested landscapes and pine tree plantations. The matsutake is even said to be the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape after Hiroshima was destroyed by an atom bomb. For her, the story of the matsutake is informative for considering common liveability and how 'assemblages' of common life come together amidst the environmental ruins humans have made.

Human-fabricated and disturbed environments are the kinds of places Keri Whaitiri often finds herself observing in her design and art practice, which involves architecture and landscape. The rauemi (resources) that she brings together in *Sticks [and stone]* (2021-2) were sourced by her from different wāhi (localities) across Te Waipounamu, intentionally tracing the journeys she has taken in the landscape. Whaitiri has collected a selection of indigenous plant and earth materials, each with traditions of use for making, modifying, consuming and curing, and non-human ecological uses as fruit, pollen and nectar eaten and dispersed by birds and insects, and soil revitalisation and stability for other natural processes. She also collected materials from introduced plants, ones that have human and non-human value too, but are sometimes considered invasive in the areas that she often works and

travels, such as the Central Lakes region of Otago. She has described how "A weaver's materials are called rauemi; a weaver's movements across the whenua are purposeful, inquisitive, observant, respectful; a weaver's sensibilities are the impulse to locate and gather, to work and observe qualities."[16]

Throughout Whaitiri's recurrent movements across the Central Lakes region, particularly around Whakatipu Waimāori, she has noticed the growing presence of hawthorn, with its distinctive white blossom in late spring and its bright red berries that are highly attractive to birds, ensuring its prolific spread. In much the same way that some plants and animals are seen to belong in one place over another, in the Central Lakes Whaitiri has found that hawthorn can be encouraged and protected as a heritage hedging plant in urban and peri-urban areas, from which it readily spreads out across rural areas and conservation reserves. Other introduced plants, such as willow, redwood, conifer, ash, poplar, oak and sycamore, are planted throughout the region, as they reflect tourism branding that markets the region as an adventure capital and autumnal destination. When indigenous plantings are made in these areas, it is usually only in singular species blocks, and rurally they are often confined to marginal clusters and pockets of high shrub. Tracing Whaitiri's movements and observations, *Sticks [and stone]* comes together as an assemblage of material fragments that speak to the whakapapa and integrity of each element, such as a charred mānuka branch collected from Punatapu, a part of a conservation reserve where she has noticed the proliferation of hawthorn; the charring is a traditional practice for preservation. Hawthorn's high tannin content makes it useful for dyeing, much like the highly valued, but increasingly uncommon mountain toatoa. Whaitiri incorporates both hawthorn and mountain toatoa in her assemblage of rauemi, though the productive benefits of hawthorn are complicated by the ecological imbalances that follow its spread.

Sticks [and stone], as an assemblage, has an inherent sparseness, as it holds empty space between each of the hanging and floor-based elements, reflecting the patchiness of the kinds of ecosystems Whaitiri observes and works with. The interlacing, environmental relationships that are made and remade between plants, animals and humans often resist human-designated boundaries or what is thought to be 'natural'. This is an idea that interests Ayesha Green as well. In particular, the influence of colonial and hegemonic systems of power in categorising different plants into families, genera, species and varieties, even into 'useful' resources and weeds. Green's painting *In the extension of my feet* (2020) depicts herself with two indigenous flowering plants growing out from her feet, poroporo from one and koromiko from the other. It embodies a direct connection between humans and plants, and between whakapapa, the earth as Papatūānuku and the vegetation of the forest as Tāne Mahuta. Koromiko itself illustrates how categories between species can loosen, as it is part of the hebe genus which contains over a hundred species, many indigenous to Aotearoa. They are known to be bafflingly difficult for botanists to identify as they grow in such a range of shapes and forms and hybridise freely.

Koromiko or, by another name, kōkōmuka, and poroporo are useful to humans as rongoā (medicine), though poroporo is often considered a weed. This is because while it 'naturally' grows in bush margins, it thrives in a range of soil types and can rapidly spread across cleared or disturbed environments. It also has poisonous properties. The indigenous flowers depicted by Kate Mary Ogston in a number of her watercolour paintings also suggest the interconnections between individual plants and their surroundings, in the way that she has painted them within a vegetation-filled background, rather than isolated on a plain background which is often the case in botanical painting. Her painting of kōwhai flowers is also paired with taraire berries. Taraire, like pūriri, grow predominately in the upper regions of Te Ika-a-Māui, and their berries, which are dark purple and plum-like, are distinctive amongst indigenous trees. It is interesting to think about why Ogston has paired the two. Kererū, incidentally, feed on both plants. Taraire are considered by conservationists to be at risk of dying out, due to how the kererū is one of the last animals that can effectively disperse its seed and how the tree's preferred habitat is under the canopy of established kauri forest, an environment that exists only in remnants due to widespread, colonial settler-driven deforestation. Kōkako are also a disperser of taraire seeds, though the North Island kōkako is now rare while the South Island kōkako is presumed to be extinct, along with the other birds that would have, in the past, fed on taraire berries.

Tsing recognises that conventionally histories look only to human remainders, such as archives and diaries, yet the tracks and traces of plants and animals are worth close attention too, as they also contribute to our common landscapes and form their own unpredictable trajectories of worldmaking.[17] The artworks, archival documents, histories, stories and memories that accumulate in *Memories of a Naturalist* offer multiple perspectives on our shared environmental past and how it is imagined and reimagined across human and non-human timescales, as well as possibilities for our shared future.

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1. The title *Memories of a Naturalist* refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's experimental work of philosophy *A Thousand Plateaus*. It comes from a subchapter of the book, where the authors write about the concept of becoming-animal; a system for conceptualising knowledge or a state of being that transcends hierarchical, species-based thinking, see Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Athlone Press, 1992, pp. 233-7

2. Jenny Lee, 'Decolonising Māori Narratives: Pūrakau as a method', *MAI Review*, 2(3), 2009, see: http://www.review.mai.ac.nz/

3. Nova Paul & Gwynneth Porter, *Form Next to Form Next to Form*, Auckland: Clouds, 2012, unpaginated

4. Geoff Park, *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003, p. 15

5. Merata Mita, 'The Soul and the Image', *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Jonathan Dennis & Jan Bieringa (eds), Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996, p. 39

6. George Malcolm Thomson, *A New Zealand Naturalist's Calendar and Notes by the Wayside*, Dunedin: R. J. Stark & Co, 1909, p. 41 & 72

7. Thomson, pp. 48-51

8. Thomson, p. 67 & pp. 152-4

9. Thomson, p. 41 & pp. 151-2

10. Thomson, pp. 37-8 & pp. 165-8

11. Alfred Russel Wallace, *Darwinism: An Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection with Some of its Applications*, London: Macmillan & Co, 1905, p. 75

12. Eva Corlett, 'Seal breaks into New Zealand home, traumatises car and hangs out on couch', *The Guardian*, August 19, 2022, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/19/seal-breaks-into-new-zealand-home-traumatises-cat-and-hangs-out-on-couch

13. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 2

14. Haraway, p. 57

15. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 152

16. Keri Whaitiri, *Paemanu: Tauraka Toi - A Landing Place* exhibition wall text, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021

17. Tsing, p. 168