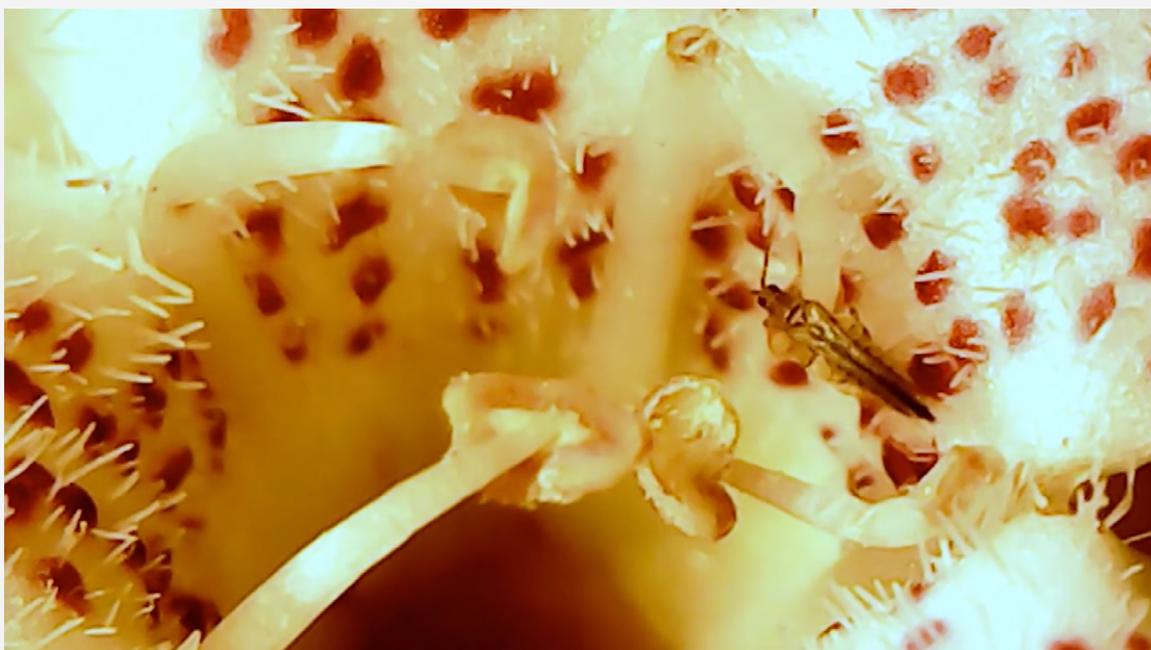


REPARATIVE INTIMACY

On reparative practices and intimacy with nonhuman life in the work of five Aotearoa artists



Xin Cheng and Adam Ben-Dror, 'Making Like a Forest: Manawa Karioi,' 2020, digital video (still).
Courtesy of the artists.

Robyn Maree Pickens
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Recent reparative practices attempt to stem the violence of settler colonialism and turn extractive relationships between human and nonhuman life into reciprocal ones. Such practices may work against 'unravelling,' a word often used to characterise the degradation of the earth, ocean, air, and the disappearance of insects, plants, fish, and mammals. While 'unravelling' is perhaps not as common as terms like 'climate disorder,' 'sixth mass extinction,' and 'neoliberal capitalism,' its usefulness resides in its proximity to 'undoing,' a concept that can be rethought within the decolonial frame in which the five artists who are the subject of this essay operate.

The work of Xin Cheng and Adam Ben-Dror, Ayesha Green (Kai Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu), Raewyn Martyn, and Sarah Smuts-Kennedy demonstrates how affirmative emotional and physical engagements can be reparative. Through painting, expanded and more conventional; ritual-based healing practices; and the moving image, these artists variously address reforestation; decolonial relationships to the land; the healing of kauri trees afflicted with an invasive pathogen; and remediative art practices in the context of settler colonial extractivism. Collectively, these practices are oriented towards healing human and nonhuman beings in the wake of the ecological degradation sustained by settler colonialism.

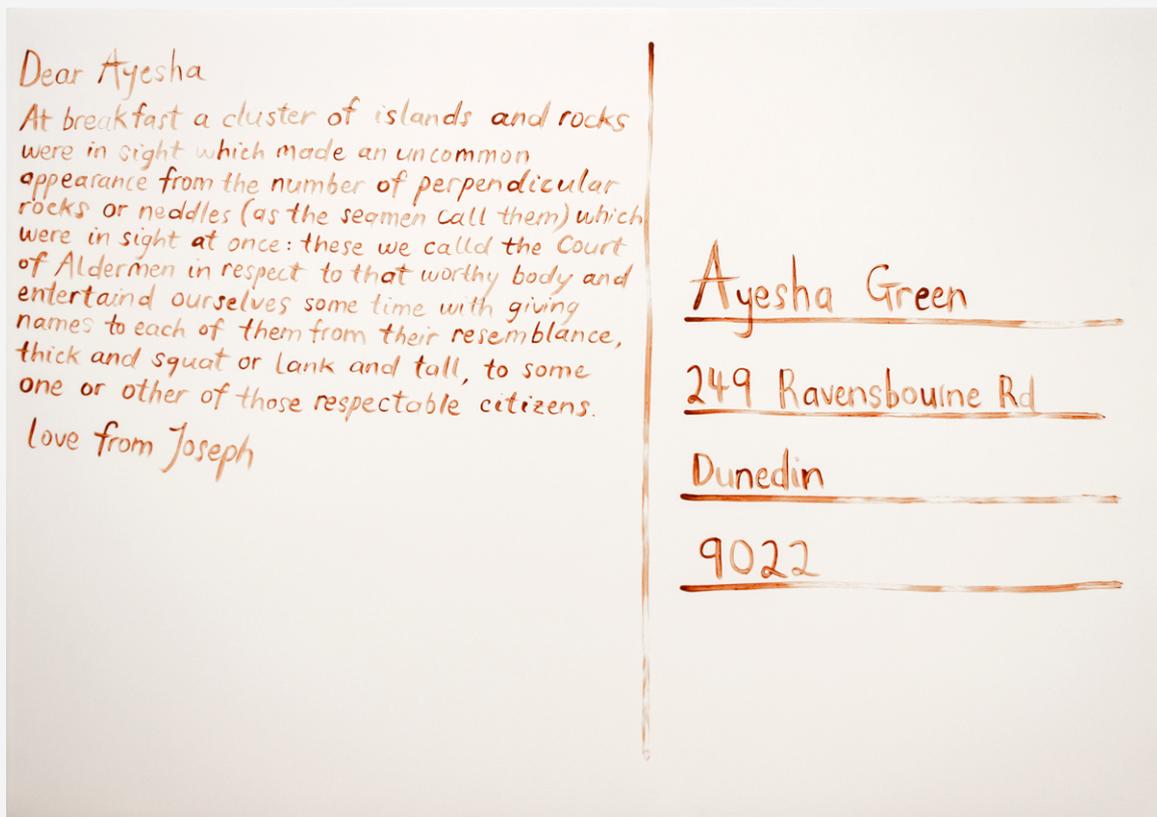


Xin Cheng and Adam Ben-Dror, 'Making Like a Forest: Manawa Karioi,' 2020, digital video (still).
Courtesy of the artists.

XIN CHENG AND ADAM BEN-DROR'S FILM '[Making Like a Forest: Manawa Karioi](#)' (2020) takes as its focus the [Manawa Karioi Ecological Restoration Project](#), which is managed and cared for by Tapu Te Ranga Marae in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. The film emulates the reparative intimacy of this reforestation project through a visual-temporal translation of Manawa Karioi as 'the heart desires to linger.' In its own lingering, 'Making Like a Forest' presents a sequence of long, still shots of the forest, most of them close-ups on plants and insects, accompanied by spare voice-over from Dean Stewart, Ross Gardiner, and Parehinetai 'Pare' Sannyasi. Sounds from birds, humans, water, and the wind in trees act as complementary presences. The calls of tūi and other native birds give voice to the forest's health, indicating its capacity to sustain bird life, including, as we learn, predators such as morepork. An abundance of birds in turn nourishes insects, with the two together supporting the forest through seed dispersal and pollination respectively.

The voice of Sannyasi shares kaitiakitanga practices, acts of guardianship and care, such as standing 'at the mouth' of the forest, and waiting to be invited in. Another voice, that of Stewart, describes the practical regeneration technique of using gorse, an invasive shrub introduced by colonial settlers, as a nursery plant. The project, which began in 1990, imagines that a future visitor will be able to see the growing giants of the forest—tōtara, rimu, kahikatea. It proposes a type of care across generations for human and nonhuman forest life, whereby a proliferation of multispecies exchanges between plants and humans, insects and birds, forest and birds coalesce for the well-being of all. In this context, Pākehā and other non-Māori are invited to work alongside tangata whenua.

In their duration, the sequence of shots in 'Making Like a Forest' incorporates expansive and intimate views of the forest; they linger on the droplets of dew on plants, bark on trees, and lichen-covered rocks inside the forest. In ways recognisably characteristic of Cheng's previous work, in which she focuses on under-appreciated spaces or humble objects like upcycled chairs, 'Making Like a Forest' dwells on scenes that do not induce spectacle, although the long, static shot of a lone thrip wandering around the inside of a tiny ngaio flower is a rare moment of heightened seduction. This dwelling on, and examining of, the interior of a flower exemplifies proximity. But proximity alone does not determine intimacy. Rather, intimacy in the context of this film arises from an ethical commitment to tangata whenua and the forest, which in turn guides the artist's interactions and slow, attentive filmic moments.



Ayesha Green, 'Dear Ayesha, Love From Joseph (November 3rd),' 2020, kōkōwai on stone paper. Courtesy of the artist and Jhana Millers.

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DECOLONIAL RECLAMATION characterises Ayesha Green's 'Dear Ayesha, Love From Joseph' (2020). Here the artist works directly with the body of the land—kōkōwai or red earth on stone paper—to create four postcard paintings, each addressed to her, and all of them reprising extracts from the 1769 journals of colonial botanist Joseph Banks. The narrative involves episodes in which distant mountains and rocky islets appear and disappear amongst fog and cloud. Through the haze Banks observes snow-capped mountains, names the small islets, and visually prospects the land for productivity and minerals.

Here the intimacy of the phrases used in the postcards, a greeting and an affectionate farewell, contend with the colonial violence of Banks's exploits. Green's is an attempt to trouble the histories of colonial conquest by affirming her own ties to the whenua. But there is a sting, a hint of irony, in her re-writing Banks's journals as a series of affectionately addressed postcards, an act that is further complicated by the artist's use of kōkōwai on stone paper to write the text in her own hand. What Banks glimpses and, with Captain Cook's crew, presumes to name, is the substance Green uses in her intimate act of reclamation. The act recalls the words of Sannyasi in Cheng and Ben-Dror's film, affirming the oneness of people with earth and the usage of 'whenua' for both placenta and earth.

'All of my Lovers are Immigrants (Smooth my Pillow)' exhibited together with 'Dear Ayesha, Love From Joseph' as part of Wrapped up in Clouds at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2020, creates an interplay between Green's figurative painting practice and her images of botanical life. Viewing the diptych without knowing the title offers scenes of two pairs of lovers lying in bed under a floral quilt in apparent intimacy. In one painting the lover is a woman and in the other a man. The lovers depicted alongside the artist in both parts of the diptych are immigrants—in the sense that both are Pākehā—while the subtitle '(Smooth my Pillow)' refers to the Pākehā conviction that Māori would not survive the colonial processes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Intimacy in this context is decidedly fraught.

Settler colonialism and acts of violence trouble association between proximity and intimacy, including, potentially, personal relationships with settlers. The complex intimacy of loving Pākehā portrayed in the diptych has perhaps inflected the use of affection in the postcard series. In both works, however, Green's invocation of te taiao, or the natural world, can be interpreted variously as a decolonial act of land reclamation and a form of remediative healing.



Ayesha Green, 'All of my Lovers are Immigrants (Smooth my Pillow)' (diptych), 2020, acrylic on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist and Jhana Millers.

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AMONG ITS MANY ACTS OF VIOLENCE, settler colonialism has wrought extensive deforestation and, as a result, the extinction of species. These phenomena have in turn diminished ecological diversity and the capacity of extant flora and fauna to withstand invasive pathogens. Kauri trees, one of the largest and longest-living trees in the world, are now threatened by one such pathogen: the soil- and waterborne fungus-like organism *Phytophthora agathidicida* (PA), which prevents the flow of water and nutrients inside the tree. In response to this occurrence, various rāhui, or forms of prohibition, have been issued over certain areas to prevent the transmission of PA by way of soil disruption. The question arises: How do we maintain intimate relations of care with nonhuman life when proximity is precluded and, indeed, proximity might be the very thing that threatens long-standing relations with the land?

In Titirangi at McCahon House, a residency studio in west Tāmaki, there are pockets of land where research and interaction with kauri is permitted. Over the course of her three-month residency from September to November 2016, artist and biodynamic gardener Sarah Smuts-Kennedy developed and practiced ritual-based actions predicated on Agnihotra rituals and the application of tree paste to kauri—the latter of which comprises the main subject of her film ‘Violet Light’ (2017). The twice-daily practice of Agnihotra, a Vedic healing ritual, generated ash from the burning of cow dung. When mixed with organic ghee and clay, the ash produced a paste which the artist subsequently applied by hand or paintbrush to eight kauri trees. (1)

‘Violet Light’ uses a series of static shots that slow down time and take the viewer deep into the forest, amongst the interplay of light and shade, and in front of kauri trees filmed both as distinct entities and as part of a community. These long takes allude to the (threatened) longevity of kauri trees, and on a smaller scale, to the length of time required to generate the ash through ritual (two weeks for each tree). ‘Violet Light’ exists in the space between documentary and eco-aesthetic film, operating at the intersection of ecological and aesthetic practices. The film intentionally omits contextual or explicatory narration and instead becomes a meditation on reparative intimacy between plants and humans.



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, ‘Violet Light,’ 2017, digital video (still).
Courtesy of the artist and McCahon House.

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RAEWYN MARTYN'S BIOPOLYMER PAINTINGS, 'Greywacke love poems: returns' (2019), exhibited at Ōwhiro Bay quarry in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, demonstrate reparative intimacy by their dissolution to source, which, in the context of coastal mining and extraction, can be interpreted as a form of ecosocial redistribution. Formed by interactions with plant and marine bacteria, Martyn's paintings resemble rivers, pools, or peeling skins—depending on the presence of 'heat, light, moisture, and microbial activity.' (2) For the Ōwhiro Bay project, Martyn ground greywacke stone from the quarry to make pigment, mixed it with biopolymer, and draped the resulting pastel-coloured, living skins over washed-up trees and rock surfaces as a gesture of healing. In response to the extraction of greywacke stone by settler colonists to construct the streets and buildings of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Martyn returned the reconstituted terrestrial, marine, and mineral traces to the degraded coast.

However, if the paintings are not dissolved, Martyn frequently reconstitutes and recycles the biopolymer forms from project to project, and with this reconstitution a type of intimacy evolves from working iteratively with a living material. The affinity between affective and physical intimacy, and reparative aesthetic practices is made evident in the description of 'Greywacke love poems: returns' as a 'gesture of remediation and love.' (3) These works are intended as an act of returning their constituent material to its origin, reintegrating what has been extracted and made foreign from the natural world by forming a second skin that dissolves back to shore and sea. In this context, Martyn's collaborations with bacteria and the elements, as 'empathetic materialism,' (4) are readily apparent.



Raewyn Martyn, 'Greywacke love poems: returns,' 2019, cellulose with mineral pigments.
Courtesy of the artist.

The practices of Xin Cheng and Adam Ben-Dror, Ayesha Green, Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, and Raewyn Martyn are guided by affective and physical intimacy with human and nonhuman beings in various states of wellness. However, reparative intimacy is not a given. It is practiced in these artists' projects as durational and processual. Only when intimacy is guided by contextual conversation and sustained by reparative intent, can it contribute to healing.

Footnotes

- (1) The application of healing pastes to trees is a practice that exists in Te Ao Māori, and in biodynamic gardening. See Tui Shortland, "Rongoā (Traditional Medicine Practices) Improving the Health of Kauri Forests" Kauri Protection (2020): 7. <https://www.kauriprotection.co.nz/media/2020/rongoa-report.pdf>; and Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, "Making Your Own Tree Paste," Harvest Magazine 69.1 (2017): 11.
- (2) Raewyn Martyn, Greywacke love poems: returns (2019): 3.
- (3) Raewyn Martyn, "Adventure: Biopolymer Aesthetics and Empathetic Materialism—Another World is Possible," Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research 2.1 (2021): 126.
- (4) Ibid., 16.

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