

Bridget Reweti (Aotearoa NZ)
Eleanor Cooper (Aotearoa NZ)
George Watson (Aotearoa NZ)
Xin Cheng (Aotearoa NZ)

They covered the house in stories

They covered the house in stories explores notions of land and place through narrative multiplicity, engaging with the ecological and literary imagination to uncover stories of human and more-than-human displacement. The exhibition examines accumulated histories gathered within geological deposits, across local waterway ecosystems and within the lingering gaze of colonialism. Featuring newly commissioned works by Aotearoa artists Bridget Reweti, Eleanor Cooper, George Watson and Xin Cheng, *They covered the house in stories* considers artists' enduring relationship to place, suggesting poetic and divergent perspectives that challenge accepted histories and their making.

The exhibition's title is taken from a line in Taiwanese author and environmental activist Wu Ming-Yi's 2015 novel *The Stolen Bicycle*. The book is told through the linguistic polyphony of Taiwan's native and hybrid languages, via animal and human registers, and across overlapping temporalities. Indigenous oral storytelling is interwoven with recollections of the Burmese campaign of World War II, told alternately by soldiers and by Lin Wang, the last surviving elephant who served in the Chinese Expeditionary Force. The decimation of Taiwan's endemic butterfly species unfolds in tandem with the waning of bicycle manufacture, so that human machinations become

intertwined with environmental changes, and with the infinite cycle of ecological disappearances.

In writing the novel, Wu was perhaps unwittingly answering to a provocation by the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said. In his collection of essays *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said signals the imagination as an important force in emancipating the land from the effects of colonialism, suggesting that to create from an ecological perspective is to partake in a process of recovery and historical myth-making 'enabled by the land'.¹ Although Said and Wu are from different corners of the world, their writings and ideas find resonance in Aotearoa, a place with its own histories of colonial occupation and displacement.

Surfacing these complex narratives, Xin Cheng and Eleanor Cooper reprise a longstanding investigation into two local bodies of water: Pupuke Moana Lake Pupuke and Te Auaunga Oakley Creek. In a sensorial installation comprised of publications and newly created sound and sculptural forms, Cheng and Cooper ask us to attune our senses to the more-than-human habitants that share our city landscape. Since 2020, the artists have been exploring these two bodies of water, collating a vast tapestry of multi-species resourcefulness.

Two sound works capture audio recording taken at the two sites. At Te Auaunga, Cheng continues her exploration of greywater confluences, uncovering the species that live at the margins of industrial and urban zones. Cheng converses with Wendy John, a founding member of the Friends of Oakley Creek Te Auaunga, discussing John's long-term observations of the stream. This is interspersed with the murmurings of waterflow and branches

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 78.

as Cheng listens out for eels, insects and the dancing of trees using a hydrophone and contact microphone. Alongside this sound work, Cheng presents a set of nine postcards that document instances of interspecies kinship. Taking cues from the resourcefulness and adaptability of these animal and plant dwellers, Cheng repurposes and recycles the everyday material of her explorations into works that reconfigure our ways of thinking and doing.

Focusing on Pupuke Moana, Cooper speaks to a number of scientists and residents of the local area, encountering enigmatic episodes and unlikely residents in the crater lake's history. A pipe containing a sample of lake water shows the heavy sedimentation of the lake, while a whimsical series of windsocks visualises the often forgotten freshwater eels, bullies and rare torrentfish that live at Oakley Creek. In a pair of publications, Cheng and Cooper trade observations, swap rumours and exchange photographs of the organic relationships that animate these waterways. They describe discovering pūriri moths which burrow into introduced Chinese privets, later providing homes to wētā and other organisms. They recount a story of an ancient fossilised mushroom, the existence of which defies logic, but whose alterity sits at home within the vast and often mysterious fabric of the natural world.

Together, the works express an unbounded sense of wonder about the natural environment, one that is entangled in porous coexistence with human intervention. In engaging with multi-species narratives through collective retelling, Cheng and Cooper participate in a new myth-making of the land, revealing the agency of the non-human in reframing our sense of place and time.

Perceiving the land is as much an act of imagining as it is of seeing; thus literary notions of land and place continue to shape our everyday. In a series of

newly commissioned sculptures, George Watson (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Mutunga, Moriori) explores the aesthetic and decorative conventions of early New Zealand settler culture that shape our understanding of place, property and belonging. Drawing on the vernacular of architectural ornamentation and Victorian gentility, using objects and motifs like scrolls, satin ribbon and horse-bits, Watson parodies the underlying ideologies that these objects systematically normalise.

Through her artistic practice, Watson examines the ways in which Victorian villas act to superimpose values onto Māori land. This is explored in *Carlotta* (2021), a large CNC-cut butterfly. *Carlotta* was a pet name used by the writer Katherine Mansfield to address her friend and probable lover Maata Mahupuku. Mansfield was infatuated with Mahupuku, who inspired Mansfield's story 'Summer Idyll'. Mirroring the sublimated desires of 'Summer Idyll', Watson appropriates motifs of butterflies and flowers that are commonplace in domestic interior settings. These motifs are made perverse through Watson's reimagining, in which meat hooks and shackles hint at mechanisms of restraint. Watson's sculptures also suggest the indigenous flora and fauna that give rise to indigenous customary artforms. Woven into her works are elements of *kōwhaiwhai* and the forms of native butterflies and moths, obscured by western paradigms of domesticity. This duality reflects the fraught desires played out in 'Summer Idyll', where colonial interests seek to possess indigenous subjecthood.

The materials used by Watson also encode different *whakapapa*, alluding to the remnants of rural and pastoral landscapes, colonial expansion and the privatisation of land. In a similar manner, notions of land encompass many morphologies: geographically in terms of nation and empire, environmentally in the juxtaposition of the urban and wild expanses, genealogically in terms of

whakapapa, and phenomenologically in the bodily experience of place. For Said, imaginations of place can be evoked to challenge the process of historicisation and the naturalisation of Eurocentric narratives of progress.² That is to say that the stories embedded within the land can provide strategies for contesting histories of occupation because the land is an alternative account of time, echoing the restorative relation between storytelling and place that writer and academic Rarawa Kohere has called a 'tūrangawaewae of thought'.³

In a new body of artworks, Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) subtly draws together poetic and metaphorical images of journeying to create works that stretch across time. Reweti has used argillite and pounamu as photographic plates imprinted with the image of albatross. The titles of Reweti's works borrow from the poem 'Toroa: Albatross' by Hone Tuwhare, the verses of which not only commemorate the albatross' supreme endurance and long migratory flight, but cross lightly between the living and the metaphysical worlds to touch on themes of isolation, homecoming and death. Māori noted the salty 'tears' rolling down the bills of albatross. Through songs and tukutuku patterns, roimata toroa, or albatross tears, express longing for the bird's oceanic home. Tuwhare's albatross, which was 'shot at by ignorant people', also bears a resemblance to the albatross in Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' which was believed to have been inspired by Cook's second voyage to the Pacific. Its line 'the albatross/ about my neck was hung' is often interpreted as a

2 Ibid.

3 Rarawa Kohere, personal communication to Moana Jackson, cited in Jackson, 'Decolonisation and the Stories in the Land', in Bianca Elkington, Moana Jackson, Rebecca Kiddle, Ocean Ripeka Mercier, Mike Ross, Jennie Smeaton and Amanda Thomas, *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), 137.

metaphorical burden for the voyager's sins.

Reweti's photographs of raukura, or albatross feathers, also touch on the symbol of the Parihaka Movement, some of whose proponents were forced to march as prisoners from Taranaki to Ōtepoti, where Reweti is based for the duration of her Frances Hodgkins Fellowship. In embedding animal and human temporalities within the geological continuum, Reweti collapses a linear understanding of time, giving precedence to speculative and lyrical forms of remembrance. In doing so, these works also suggest that fragments of the earth, and the land itself, possess the power to bear immutable witness.

They covered the house in stories foregrounds notions of place and land through the retelling of histories of occupation and displacement from multiple perspectives. In surfacing the ways in which the land and environment acts as an active agent or witness in human experience, the artists acknowledge the limitations of human time and political interest, allowing for positions of collective remaking and alterity.

– Amy Weng

About Amy Weng

Amy Weng is an art writer, editor and independent curator based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. She is the founder of Hainamana, a website dedicated to Asian New Zealand contemporary art and culture, and was the organiser of the inaugural Asian Aotearoa Artists Hui in 2017.

About the artists

Bridget Reweti

Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) is an artist and curator from Tauranga Moana. Her lens-based practice focuses on Māori histories embedded in place. Bridget is the 2020–21 Frances Hodgkins Fellow at Otago University. She has held residencies at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore; the Banff Centre, Canada; The Physics Room, Ōtautahi Christchurch; and the Caselberg Trust, Ōtepoti Dunedin. Bridget has a collaborative practice with Mata Aho Collective, who since exhibiting in documenta14 have taken part in *Oceania* at the Royal Academy in London and the Quai Branly in Paris; the 2019 Honolulu Biennial; the international indigenous exhibition *Ābadakone* at the National Gallery of Canada (2020); and the Dhaka Art Summit (2020). Bridget is co-editor of *ATE Journal of Māori Art*, the first peer-reviewed journal of Māori art, and continues to co-curate the nationally touring exhibition *Māori Moving Image: An Open Archive*. Bridget has a vested interest in making space – from governance to operations to audience – for more Māori to feel safe and brave in the arts.

Eleanor Cooper

Eleanor Cooper is an artist and field ranger for the Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai. Her practice explores ecology, land use and our interactions with the natural world. In 2019 she graduated with a Master of Fine Arts (First-Class Honours) from The University of Auckland, where she previously gained a Bachelor of Fine Arts and

Bachelor of Arts (Philosophy). Recent exhibitions include *The rustling wind reminds me of life on Earth* at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, Ōtautahi Christchurch (2021); *Iteration 11* at Mothermother, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2021); *Flows According to Rocks at Paludal*, Ōtautahi Christchurch (2020); *Greywater* at Mokopōpaki, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2020); *Bouquet* at Blue Oyster, Ōtepoti Dunedin (2020); and *Prelude* at Gow Langsford Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2020). She has contributed to publications including *In Common* (Pipi Press) and *Argos Aotearoa*. Eleanor has lived and worked in a number of nature reserves and is currently based in Tāmaki Makaurau.

George Watson

George Watson is an artist and writer born in Tūranganui, with Ngāti Porou, Moriori and Ngāti Mutunga whakapapa. George graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts in 2016, and a Bachelor of Media Arts majoring in painting and sculpture at Wintec in 2009. George returned to Tāmaki Makaurau in 2019 after completing the Maumaus Independent Study Programme in Lisbon, Portugal. Recent work includes *Eternal Girlhood of the Settler State*, presented by May Fair Art Fair in collaboration with Tyson Campbell (2020), and *Manawa o te kāniwha* in collaboration with Abigail Aroha Jensen at Artspace Aotearoa (2021).

Xin Cheng

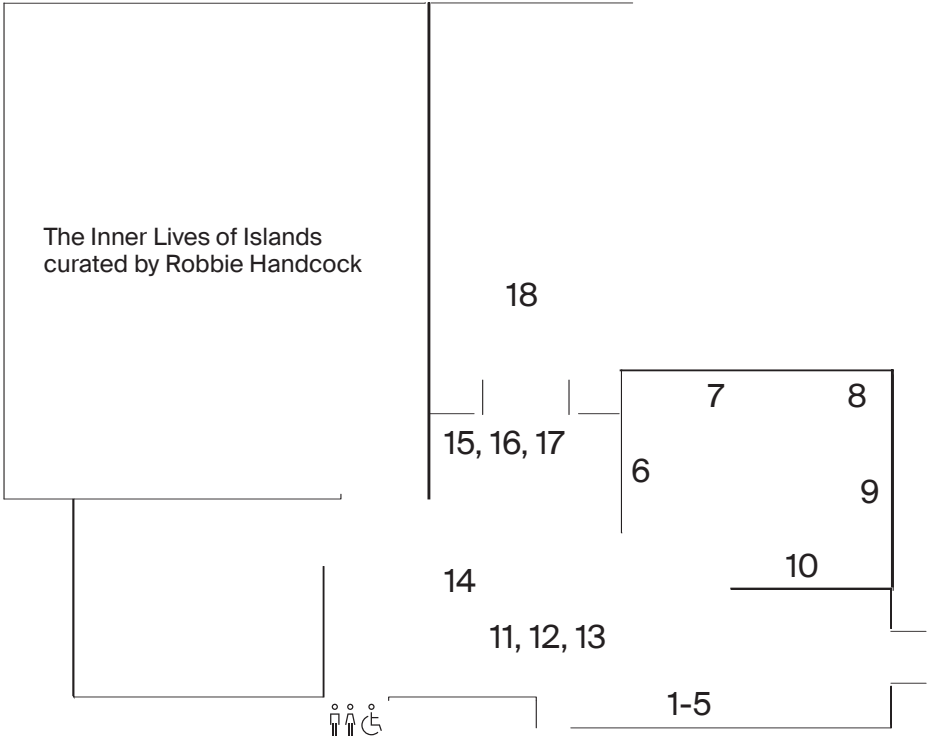
Xin Cheng likes to walk and do stuff around making by hand, ecology, conviviality. While living in Hamburg in 2016–19 she hosted performative talks and workshops on everyday resourcefulness in Berlin, Sheffield and Mexico City; befriended dancers, film-makers, philosophers, junk traders; wrote stories for Hainamana; made books with Materialverlag; and organised a multidisciplinary

show on rubber trails. Returning to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland before a virus changed the world, she is happy to continue her making-do(ing) with old and new friends. Her works have been shown in public galleries throughout Aotearoa and at the Brno International Biennial of Graphic Design, Czech Republic; Sprint Milano, Italy; and Frappant Galerie, Hamburg. She has completed residencies in Norway, Taiwan, Cambodia, Switzerland, Korea and Japan. She was previously a co-director of the artist-run space RM in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Xin holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts, Germany, and previously studied ecology, psychology and fine art at The University of Auckland.



Xin Cheng, *Eleanor Cooper touching the overflow of Pupuke Moana at Thorne Bay*, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist.

List of works



1. Bridget Reweti
chest-expanding oceans, 2021
silver gelatin emulsion on argillite
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

2. Bridget Reweti
light on water, 2021
silver gelatin emulsion on argillite
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

3. Bridget Reweti
effortless of wing, 2021
silver gelatin emulsion on argillite
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

4. Bridget Reweti
without skin and flesh, 2021
silver gelatin emulsion on pounamu
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

5. Bridget Reweti
You are not alone, Toroa, 2021
silver gelatin emulsion on pounamu
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

With thanks to Chris Charteris, Al Fraser and the Hone
Tuwhare Trust for their generosity in the making of these
works.

6. George Watson
Pākehā Problems, 2021
ribbon, horse bit, rope, CNC-cut plastic
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

7. George Watson
Re-filiation, 2021
Kōkōwai, iron oxide, gel medium
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

8. George Watson
Carlotta, 2021
CNC-cut MDF, meat hooks
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

9. George Watson
Pākehā Problems, 2021
ribbon, horse bit, rope, CNC-cut plastic
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

10. George Watson
Ko wai tō mātua?, 2021
cornice, New Zealand passport
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
11. Eleanor Cooper
Stories of Pupuke Moana Lake Pupuke, 2021
single-channel sound (12 mins and 50 secs)
papier mâché made by Xin Cheng
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
12. Eleanor Cooper
Strands of invasive eelgrass amass in the shallows, 2021
cyanotype photograph of eelgrass from Pupuke Moana, plywood,
gesso, steel, glass
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
13. Eleanor Cooper
The Enigmas of a Suburban Lake & Other Stories, 2020
printed booklet
text by Eleanor Cooper, design by Xin Cheng
with thanks to Peter Crossley, Ebi Hussain, Maddison Jones, Project
Baseline, Nathan Brown-Haysom, Michael Haydon, Tabitha and
family, Peter Buchanan, and many others who generously shared
stories with us
courtesy of the artist
14. Eleanor Cooper
Bloom, 2021
sample of lake water from Pupuke Moana including algal bloom
sediment, vinyl tube, string
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
15. Xin Cheng
Stories from Te Auaunga Oakley Creek, Summer–Autumn 2021, 2021
mixed-media installation with single-channel sound (33 mins 47
secs), including papier mâché with old ecology notes and weeds
from Harbutt Reserve; oak twig; string; volcanic rocks; felt
sound recording includes a conversation with Wendy John,
dancing of the wind and various karamū, whau, kahikatea trees,
singing of the stream under Richardson Road, sound of an eel in
Phyllis Reserve, flowing of Te Wai Unuroa o Wairaka, various birds,
saxophone among oak trees, and cicada chorus
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

16. Xin Cheng
Views of Te Auaunga Oakley Creek, 2021
postcards, edition of 200
koha for Friends of Oakley Creek Te Auaunga
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

Xin Cheng would like to thank Wendy John, Sam Longmore, Adam Ben-Dror, Lee Elliott, Chris Berthelsen, Misong Kim, and her parents for supporting the making of the works in this exhibition.

17. Eleanor Cooper & Xin Cheng
Our Suburban Water Bodies: Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa • Spring & Summer 2020, 2020
printed booklets, unlimited edition

with special thanks to Creative New Zealand and to Peter Crossley, Ebi Hussain, Maddison Jones, Project Baseline, Nathan Brown-Haysom, Michael Haydon, Tabitha and family, Peter Buchanan, and many others who generously shared stories with us

courtesy of the artists

18. Eleanor Cooper
Purple-skinned eels, bullies, and the surprising discovery of a torrentfish, 2021
old sails, acrylic markers, fixings
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

Principal funders

