

“FOUR”¹

Brendan Jon Philip

As part of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's exhibition programme platforming local practitioners, “Four” (2108) presents a cross-section of arts production across various modes of inquiry and activity. Rather than synthesising a narrative connectivity between these artists or prescribing a thematic agenda, curator Lauren Gutsell instead allows each creator to bring a distinct and discrete project to fruition, letting associations between each emerge through spectator engagement. While broad areas of philosophical enquiry are held in common, each artist's distinct aesthetic mode and locus of investigation maintain these linkages as an approach to universals.

The greater text underlying “Four” suggests encounters through time and the malleable interface between temporal and spatial experience. Each artist appears aware of her work in the phenomenological structure of the gallery as an instance of aesthetic encounter and speaks to a different context of time, culture and place in negotiation with that framework. The conversation is a flowing one – like any negotiation, full of statements and refutations, moving from Novak's historiographical document to Brady's timeless liminal non-space, to Parallel's geological weight of fundamental time, and finally to Pieters' crafted and lyrical immediatism.

Kim Pieters' *The Clearing* presents two suites of signature works representing the twin pillars of her practice – painting and drawing, as articulated through seasonal phases of working. Pieters paints through spring and summer, focusing on the slightly more intimate discipline of drawing in the closer seasons of autumn and winter:

Determinedly non-representational, as distinct from abstracted, Pieters is concerned not with what the expressive gesture can suggest, but what that gesture can say in and particularly of itself. Immanence and transcendence are both accurately immaterial in these works, as the unpremeditated gesture emerges through the determinedly structured cyclic phases of working patterns.

The suite of coloured ink drawings shown here, collectively named *The Clearing*, are primarily a negotiation of aesthetic forms. Lines are thick and deliberate, assuming places on the page more than exploring or describing; at most, they are functional, providing visual linkages between clusters of discretely coloured shapes.

The paintings, four of six from the series *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction*, invite an interplay between form and field due to their larger scale. Through the use of pink and yellow, earthy pastels negotiate for space in the picture plane, maintaining a sense of dynamism but not necessarily tension.

Pieters describes her work as “vital formalism,” an expression of the experience of life in a philosophically essential state, built solidly upon the ordered history of Western thought. With her practice notably structured by time, moving through seasonal shifts between media, the days codified into a process of production, Pieters finds a fluid liberty of experience – in much the same way as one of her literary touchstones, Fernando Pessoa, swam in the dizziness of freedom around the anchor of his clerical desk.

The edifice of thinking that underlies this emergent praxis is suggested by her long titles, often borrowed from a deep habit of reading, that provide a counterpoint of conceptual engagement to the visual works. Indeed, the “clearing” that Pieters proposes is in the space between the linguistically dense titles, bound to the heart of culture,



Kim Pieters, *The Clearing*, from *Four*, curated by Lauren Gutsell, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2018.

and the unlanguage, non-symbolic image which is at the boundary of human expression. The work exists to instigate this clearing, activate a moment between moments – a position between actuality and potentiality – and create a pause in the forest of stories that we take as the landscape of the real in order to reveal a truer terrain.

From Pieters' material documents of immediatism, Charlotte Parallel's *Deep Time* offers a line of enquiry that reaches across 36 million years. Concerned with mapping the invisible structures, systems and fields that underlie place and our conception of it, Parallel seeks out data points from field recordings, transduced magnetic fields, sonorised seismology. The presentation of sampled data as audio is the crux of this practice.

Several rows of thin concrete pillars, rising to shoulder height, cradle telephone receivers playing back the data gathered from various points around the Dunedin volcano. Links are made between the pre-quaternary substrate of the region and the use of this geological base, basalt rock, in the fundamental infrastructure of the human-built environment.

The gallery–institution and art–product provide an axis between our immediate human experience, engaged in the sensorial process of looking and listening, and the unimaginable scope of the forces and time that have shaped the landscape where our process take place.

Quarry sites are sourced here, blasting free basalt for use in roading, or “winning the resource” as they say in the trade. Basalt that has also made its way into Parallel's concrete, along with material referencing the site, along with copper sulphate which oxidises, staining the pillars through the course of the exhibition.

Whereas Pieters negotiates both the material and philosophical presence of an elusive moment, Parallel's span of deep time serves the purpose of placing the spectator firmly in the present by contrast to the alienating vastness of years that become place. Geological time is still a process of flux and change, a process that we in our human processes are witness to.

Clearing as site of encounter is explicit in the title of Megan Brady's *A quiet corner where we can talk*. A subtle yet profound environmental intervention, the work simultaneously invokes and negates the nullity of institutional space; or perhaps it could be considered that negating nullity is itself the process of invocation.



Charlotte Parallel, *Deep Time*, from *Four*, curated by Lauren Gutsell, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2018.



Megan Brady, *A quiet corner where we can talk*, from *Four*, curated by Lauren Gutsell, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2018.

Brady has covered the 94-square-metre floor of the irregularly shaped exhibition space with a hand-crafted carpet comprising a rhythmic pattern of squares and a repeated geometric motif which is the outline of the floorspace. Accompanying this installation is a composed ambient soundtrack that emulates the bland aural background of Muzak that haunts waiting rooms, transit lounges, foyers and hallways – what Brady refers to as “transitory public spaces.”

Addressing the human experience of these liminal spaces in official places, *A quiet corner where we can talk* mutes the blank-slate austerity of the arts institution, softening the sound of footsteps and easing the viewer's tread. At the exhibition opening attendees gathered in this particular space, removed their shoes and sat and lay about on the floor; the project's title taken as instruction.

In the rigidly codified public spaces of the kind that Brady has observed in relation to this work, there is an alienation from the experience of the space, a push to keep you in transit to where you're supposed to be. Brady marks this transient space as a communal space as our communal engagement with public spaces is diminished through forces of privatisation, surveillance and other dynamics of power:

There is something solid and comforting in the weight of the labour expended in the many hours spent hefting a pneumatic tufting gun and several hundred kilogrammes of donated wool. This immediate aura of labour and the sense of the creator's hand is evident in the materiality of the installed carpet. A sense of the human is present in this labour; and this provides an access point for the human expression of enjoying the product of that labour:

The emergence of such a spontaneous community activity, as on the evening of the opening, speaks to the success of Brady's reordering this particular transitory space.

An equally evocative and engaging environment is proposed in Aroha Novak's *Cascade*, a response to a very specific historical document: William Hodges' 1775 painting [*Cascade Cove*], *Dusky Bay*. Novak abstracts the painting's romanticised landscape into a sculptural installation recreating Hodges' waterfall, with water run through pipes along the ceiling and dropping down into a black plastic-lined pool ringed with potted plants. The walls are painted a pastel blue that infuses the strong natural light from the wall of windows that overlook the Octagon and its immigrant London plane trees.

Created under appointment to the British Admiralty during James Cook's second voyage to the Southern Ocean, Hodges' painting is an idealised colonial vision of an exotic South Pacific. Rather than resting on an easy critique of this propagandist lens, Novak embraces her fascination with the romance of the image, which evokes Hodges' sense of colour in the gentle mist of her falling water:

Moving through an indeterminate space between propaganda and actuality results in the layering of loops of semiotics that fold back on each other, creating a space that is as reflective as it is reflexive. Curved in the shape of the prow of a boat extending into the gallery room, the pool is a vessel in several senses – both as a container and also in alluding to the journey of transition in the cleansing and catharsis that water can symbolise.

While the living plants surrounding the pool are tended and sung to by gallery staff, they had to be fumigated as part of the labyrinthine health and safety discussions involved in bringing such a project into public space. The natural world that Hodges documented and glamorised continues to be quantified and controlled by the same bureaucratic impulses that dispatched the English painter across the world towards his encounter with the sublime. An echo of this sense of the sublime survives in Novak's emulation, and again we find a clearing, a quiet corner and a space to contemplate our place in time.



Aroha Novak, *Cascade*, from *Four*; curated by Lauren Gutsell, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2018.

Brendan Jon Philip is an artist, writer and musician based in Dunedin. Drawing these distinct practices into a syncretic whole, he has exhibited, published and performed throughout New Zealand. He studied at Whitecliffe College of Art and Design and Elam School of Fine Arts, as well as receiving distinction in film and media studies at the University of Otago.

- I The exhibition "Four" brought together works by four artists: *The Clearing* by Kim Pieters, *Deep Time* by Charlotte Parallel, *A quiet corner where we can talk* by Megan Brady and *Cascade* by Aroha Novak. "Four" was curated by Lauren Gutsell and was shown in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 25 August – 18 November, 2018.