



# Contemporary Christchurch

is a celebration of a range of innovative practices being practised in Ōtautahi today.

The selection of the artists has been defined by city and region, to explore how 'connected' the kaupapa of this exhibition points to site, nation, how do we define - via artistic practice - what influence does place have on said practice?

"We were invited by CoCA to select a group of contemporary practice connected to Ngāi Tahu, Canterbury. We looked for artists with a variety of ways with the local situation, and analysis. However, to literalise place in an art complicated and we were conscious of that we didn't want this geographical determinism and hope instead that it becomes an important return throughout this exhibition."

While some projects might be familiar to our audience, we also wanted to provide opportunities to view and make new discoveries about what has happened in this place, over the last three years. Six years after the Canterbury earthquake sequence, as the city rebuilds its post-quake identity, it's a rich and dynamic time. Although we are all curators, in this instance artists in conversation with the curator, Paul, the exhibition," says the panel.

A lively programme of public events to accompany the exhibition will also focus on young people and the city's emerging chance to discover new and existing practices inspiring and innovative in music, dance, the visual arts and beyond.

Since 1980, CoCA has been at the heart of the city's contemporary art scene. This exhibition marks the first of a series of exhibitions showcasing Christchurch artists and their contribution to the international art scene.

Exhibition continues upstairs

CO  
CA  
TOIMOROKI  
CENTRE OF  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART

Structures  
of brick  
and  
quiet undertones:

Considering  
Contemporary  
Christchurch

Jennifer K. Shields  
2016

**C**ontemporary Christchurch is the inaugural iteration of a survey exhibition which aims to capture a moment or feeling of what art practice has been like in Ōtautahi in the past three years; CoCA plans to run this exhibition triennially during Director Paula Orrell's tenure.

Artists in this exhibition were suggested by a curatorial panel of artists and curators from the region, and then Paula Orrell approached the artists to discuss possible works. There is intentionally no unifying theme or aesthetic, and the artists included range in medium, generation, identity, and process. This, along with the fact that many works have been exhibited before, has drawn criticism. But there is a worth in exhibiting works that have been shown before, especially in post-quake Christchurch where exhibition spaces have been dispersed across the city and do not often draw large public crowds. There is also a worth in showing a diverse range of artists that don't seem to sit together at first glance; in placing works

next to each other or in the same space, you create a context; the works speak to, reflect off and relate to one another. Themes, commonalities, concepts and politics emerge. Even in this exhibition, with its wide range of artworks, artists with varying approaches to their practice, with different backgrounds and identities and artistic interests, the context becomes apparent.

The context of this city in 2016 is irremovable from earthquake recovery, but the tone of that context has moved from shock and mourning to exploring the potential of the rebuild as well as frustration with that process. In terms of art, there is plenty of opportunity for public work both temporary and permanent, but gallery and studio space is limited, especially for early-career artists. Leases on central spaces are at a premium, and the kind of cheap temporary lease due to an oncoming demolition - like we've seen at Snake Pit in Auckland, for example - do not exist. Spaces are either already demolished or too dangerous to use.

This has necessarily changed how artists are working in Christchurch - there is a strong culture of collaboration, not only in creating art but in creating spaces to work and exhibit. Artists have had to make space work for them, and there has been a proliferation of art created in vacant spaces in the past few years. However, with both Christchurch Art Gallery and CoCA reopening, there is a sense of a return to the white cube, and the luxury of that context has become apparent. To me, a thriving art scene involves many spaces for students and recent graduates to exhibit, both by themselves and alongside established artists - and this remains difficult in Christchurch. By including younger emerging artists such as Nina Oberg Humphries, Ana Iti, and Daegan Wells in Contemporary Christchurch, Toi Moroki is continuing its historical mandate as the Canterbury Society of Arts of supporting local artists; encouraging and enabling an emerging artist scene to develop and flourish. Placing these emerging artists as peers alongside more established artists such as Pauline Rhodes, Scott Flanagan, and Jacquelyn Greenbank not only gives them validity, but also allows for the works in the exhibition to speak cross-generationally.

The earthquake and rebuild process - 'EQ art', as I've been calling it - remains one of the most significant topics or concepts to work with. I personally was not living in Christchurch in the years immediately post-quake, but from what I have heard, there was understandably a deluge of work about the quakes and the recovery. This is still a running theme within the community, but focus has shifted to the rebuild, the recovery, and frustrations with the process.

The works in Contemporary Christchurch that engage with the

quake also deal with other ideas, as well as interacting with the other, non-EQ artworks that surround them. I think this gives them depth and layers, and from what I have gathered speaking to artists and patrons that were in Christchurch for that flood of earthquake art, it seems to make them more interesting and relatable - they are not just about the quake.

Louise Palmer's **90 Canon (a series of empty rooms)** is a good place to start. Her images of her own home, now demolished, with sculptural interventions throughout the architecture, reflects current media coverage of the recovery process - stories about the rebuild and EQC claims and bureaucratic frustrations. The interventions themselves reveal otherwise hidden layers that have become visible throughout the rebuild; pipes beneath the floor, for example. Her artist text that accompanies the works captures the feeling behind the work well:



*Louise Palmer, 90 Canon (a series of empty rooms)  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

For some time in Christchurch conversation would inevitably turn to our houses, structures of

brick, concrete and timber, repositories of memory. Acronyms and codes signalled the extent of damage and whether to rebuild, repair, demo, restore. I carefully recorded every crack, every split, every broken piece of furniture, of crockery and glassware. I wrapped my grandfather's shattered crystal glasses in newspaper and stored them in a box in the garage. Other boxes are now stacked in the garage of another house; the weight of things with which we surround ourselves, and which five years later are partly forgotten.

Daegan Wells' work, **Sutton's Garden** speaks of home and the rebuild process, but also of frustration. He has been collecting artifacts from the Red Zone through his sculptural and archival practice. Through this process he unwittingly came across W.A. Sutton's former home and studio, one of the few buildings left standing in a large expanse of land that has been flattened and turned into an empty, grassed landscape. Like many other buildings in Christchurch, the home studio is trapped in conflict between the Earthquake Commission and Heritage New Zealand. The form of the work is almost in opposition to the frustrations it represents; calming footage and thoughtfully composed black and white silver gelatine prints of Sutton's garden.

Downstairs, in the lower gallery, Rob Hood has a different approach to the frustrations with the rebuild process. His work **Erosion Problems II** (2016) uses humour and play to express the absurdism in what many see as a ridiculously slow, bureaucratic process. The Banks Peninsula volcanic rock left sandwiched between a sack barrow and a cooling fan, a blue jacket or lab coat draped over it all speaks to forgetfulness, a nonsensical job left undone.



Daegan Wells, *Sutton's Garden* (detail)  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

The specific use of volcanic rock speaks to another thread that runs through a number of works in the exhibition - the notion of earth, of land, of space. Louise Palmer's text once again makes this explicit:

*A core was drilled from the ground in front of and then behind the house... Sections of the strata were carefully recorded, numbered and placed into crisp white archive boxes. Topsoil, soft silt, clay, peat, firm silt, dense sand, coarse gravel. Layers of time, of history revealed.*

Land as it relates to time and history relates heavily to the work of Ana Iti, whose piece **First, they chose a name** includes a piece of Halswell quarry stone. Stone from this quarry was integral to the construction of many early colonial buildings in Christchurch, many of which either did not survive the quake or have been demolished since; colonial architecture being one of the focusses of Ana's recent body of work. The stone is engraved with the word 'Karaitiana',



an early name for Christchurch, being a transliteration of the word Christchurch.



*Ana Iti, 'First, they chose a name'  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

Adjacent to this space and these works is one of Steve Carr's two works in this exhibition, **Bubble Cactus** (2015). His works are unique here in that they are in totally separate spaces from one another; appropriate considering that while similar, they deal with slightly different concepts in different tones. **Bubble Cactus** is found footage from a Phantom HD camera, known for its capability for extremely high frame rates. The footage is of a cactus popping a bubble, stretched from 30 seconds out to 10 minutes and 42 seconds. Commentary on media and technology is a common motif in Carr's work; this piece referencing film speed, linking to film and TV; for example nature documentaries speeding up growth of plants or decay of flesh, or sports events replaying and slowing down a moment to reveal the precise sequence of events. Carr 'makes visible the invisible', in this case literally,

exploring how technology is used to reveal 'intimate details of how the world works'.

Ana's piece also works with the notion of making visible the invisible, questioning the politics and power of naming. The accompanying audio recording of the artist speaking goes into detail of how Christchurch was 'named' by colonists, beginning with the line "**there is a power in naming things**", a concept that underpins the whole work. Ana aims to make visible the invisible by questioning the idea that a name is natural, apolitical. The power to name things rests within the dominant class - they name what is 'other'; they came to this land and named what was already named.

Ana also emphasises the relationship between name and identity, particularly in the audio recording, speaking about her own family name: "**Our name Iti doesn't belong to us, but none the less we were given it and lived with it... / Our sister was an Iti and she died an Iti**". Her recent work at North Projects<sup>1</sup> as well as *First, they chose a name* explores the difficulty of navigating a Māori identity within Western colonial knowledge systems, made explicit once again in the audio: "**How should you navigate identity when even your name is troubling?**"

Underneath the concept of rebuild frustration in Wells' install is another approach to his work, one of identity. Included in the install is one of Sutton's portraits, **Portrait of Peter Young**. Painted in 1955, it is one of his less significant works, resting on the wall of his home for 45 years before being bequeathed to Christchurch Art Gallery on his death. These are two reasons for its selection in

---

<sup>1</sup> North Projects is an artist-led gallery space that ran from August 2014 until closing at the end of September this year. Ana's recent show there, *Is the past a foreign country?*, came from the same body of research as *First, they chose a name* and contains the same materials (Halswell quarry and spoken and written text).

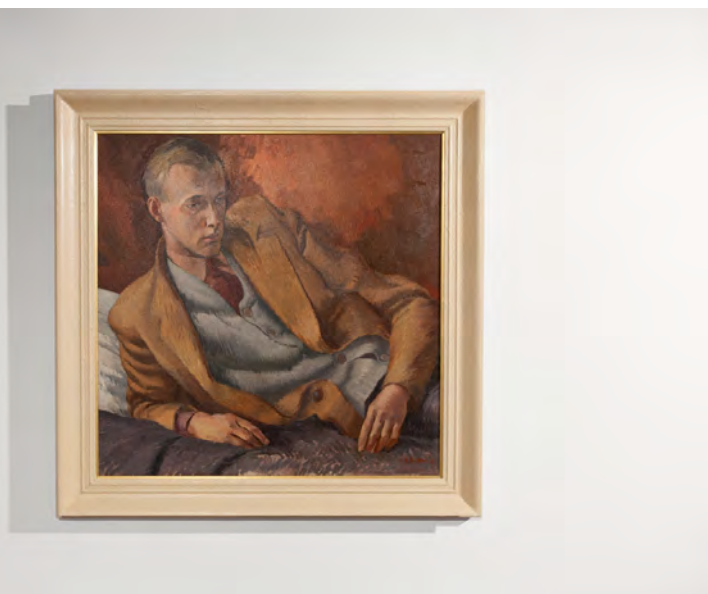
this install - that it was easy to acquire on loan, and that it clearly had some personal significance to Sutton.

of ethics to the work. Like Ana says, there is a power in naming, a power in acknowledging and recognising our queer forebears. But also there is a question of whether it is appropriate to place a label on someone who did not outwardly identify with that label. So, the portrait is included but no mention is made to the possible queer history, and to many - initially myself included - it flies under the radar.<sup>2</sup>

The wall text for Wells' work refers to the red zone land as 'unoccupied', an interesting choice of wording considering the install is right next to Ana's work, so heavily steeped in post-colonial politics. This creates an interesting sense of tension between the two pieces. Ana herself draws a strong connection between this tension and both artists' practices:

*The idea that my practice and work exists in this post-colonial landscape seems fundamental but I'm not sure that that idea is pervasive with other practitioners or even CoCA as an institution. Both our works delve into personal territories where queer histories are often swept under the rug, which is the same 'out of site/sight, out of mind' rhetoric that people have about our colonial history.<sup>3</sup>*

Nina Oberg Humphries, recently studying at Ilam, also explores identity in her contribution, a series of photographic portraits of her family with high gloss, sculptural frames. The choice to show photographs is interesting, considering she majored in sculpture. Being of Cook Island and Pākehā descent, her work combines traditional Polynesian art forms with elements of pop culture. The frames are a good example of this, being a pine



Bill Sutton, *Portrait of Peter Young*  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

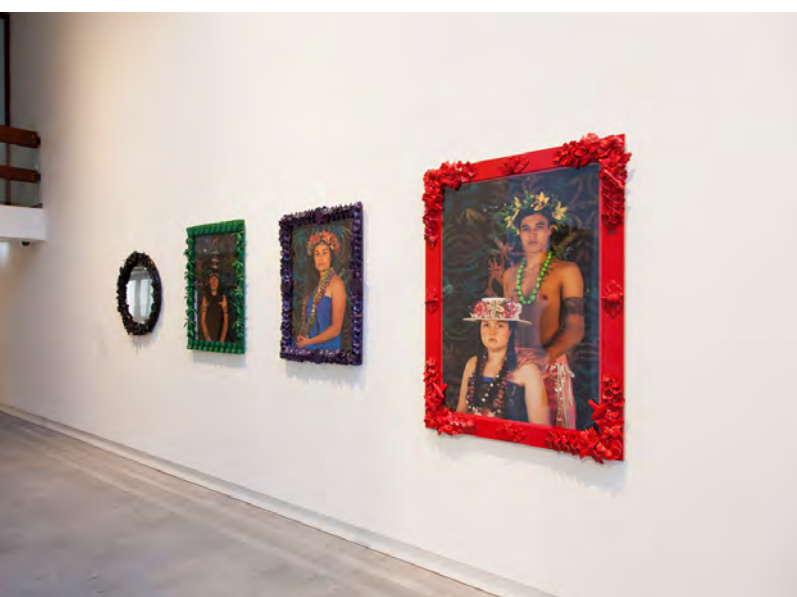
Often referred to as a 'constant bachelor', there is the beginnings of a rumour of Sutton's queerness, 'bachelor' being common code for queer men throughout history. Daegan is almost the sole perpetrator of this rumor, having his practice recently described in the Listener as a 'queering of Sutton's work'. During an exhibition at Blue Oyster about Sutton's home, a friend of the artist suggested very subtly to his queerness; the Christchurch Art Gallery archive of Sutton's work and belongings contains many photos of half naked men.

The queer aspect of the install is intentionally only a quiet undertone, reflecting Sutton's possible closeted identity; considering the historical context and homosexuality being a crime for much of his life, there is a tricky question

**2** The ethics of this came into play in writing this essay, as well - considering it is such an undertone, is it acceptable or even necessary to bring it up in discussion? After talking to Daegan and CoCA curators about it, and thinking not only on Daegan's work but on Ana's assertion that naming has power I decided there was more worth in acknowledging it despite the discomfort some in Aotearoa's art institutions may feel.

**3** From correspondence with the artist, 2016.

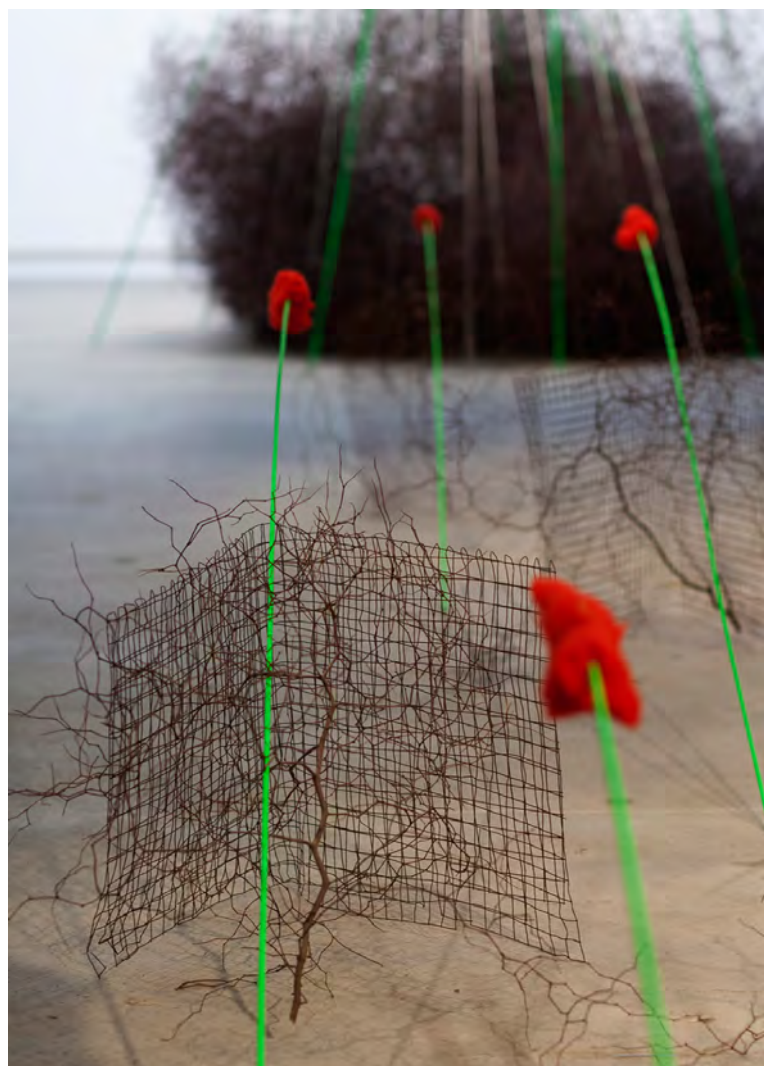
base with traditional adornments that could be read as kitsch: plastic flowers and palm trees covered in resin and automotive paint, giving that poppy, high gloss finish. Alongside this look though, they have all been hand cast by the artist herself - they are unique artworks themselves. This combination of tradition with pop could be read as a commentary on the commercialisation and exploitation of Pacific cultures; the selling of kitschy commercialised versions of traditional materials being a good example.



*Nina Oberg Humphries, A series of photographic portraits  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

In the same space as these works is a sculptural piece by Pauline Rhodes, **Towards the Light**. Known for two forms of environmental sculptural work; outdoor minimal interventions in the landscape and indoor installations in gallery spaces, her work in this exhibition is the latter. The two forms are linked, however, the indoor works being conceptually related and often referencing the outdoor works. Her works are simple and elegant, the minimal elements responding and referring to places or things, only ever lightly and delicately touching one another. This

simple, elegant form ties in nicely with Ana's adjacent work, also characterised by being simple but striking. The series of rods in **Towards the Light** point towards the north end of the gallery, filled with natural light, in which a large bundle of indigenous vegetation is piled; yet more rods, some wrapped with text and musical notation, are stacked on this pile and point upwards towards the gallery's ceiling window. The use of indigenous vegetation is significant, especially in this space, especially being adjacent to the work of Ana and Nina - it feels referential to this specific land and space, referential to indigenous politics and notions of (de) colonisation.



*Pauline Rhodes, Towards the Light (detail)  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*



Land and nature is also apparent in Rob Hood's other works, **Coupland's Waterfall** (2016) and **Donald's Pew** (2016), moving back to the lower gallery again. The two works deal with parallel binaries - that of nature vs society and object vs art object. **Coupland's Waterfall** is film and audio of the artificially constructed waterfall on the outside of Coupland's Bakery in Hornby, almost an iconic site in Christchurch. The work questions how we delineate between nature and society - is this completely artificial waterfall and fish pond 'natural'? What does it mean to have such an 'object' created by a business? The audio exemplifies this questioned binary well, including both the sound of water falling and the adjacent road and pedestrian crossing. The second work here, **Donald's Pew**, questions the second binary: the opposition of 'art object' and 'object'. Referential to Donald Judd's work around furniture and objects, Hood realised while making both art and objects that he treated them both the same, beginning to question what delineated an art object from an object. The way gallery visitors treat **Donald's Pew** highlights this; despite it being created as an 'art object' and being listed in the wall text as a work, people sit on it in order to watch the video work.

Questions of object run through the exhibition, returning again to Louise Palmer's text:

*The house is small and has no passages, no corridors, there's a fluid movement from room to room. With doors open Ruby runs a circle around the house and I follow her, through each room, and around the furniture. The objects in these rooms define the space. They are markers around which we navigate our daily lives. The spaces of things. The weight of things.*

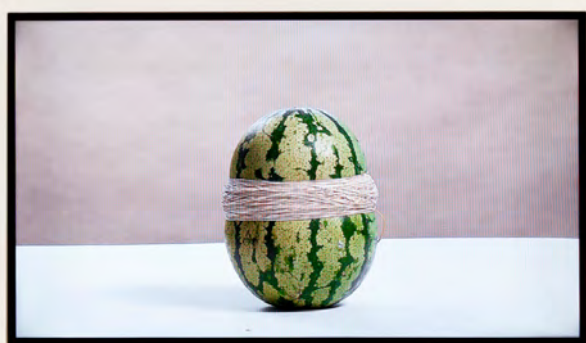
This is an interesting point of reference from which to read Louise's photos: the rooms in the photos are voided of objects, of markers of domesticity and personal identity.

Also in the lower gallery is another work that deals with object referencing identity - Jacquelyn Greenbank's **Squatch Poles** (2015). With a history of working with typically 'feminine' craft such as knitting, these totems are comprised of found objects, recycled materials, and craft processes. The found objects are covered with leather from jackets found in op shops, speaking to a specific era, a specific kind of person, even a specific scent. Throughout her practice Greenbank has used craft to create objects, such as her series of crocheted constructions of 1950s household objects, or her 2004 piece *State Carriage*. The work approaches identity and craft processes with humour and a kitsch aesthetic, poking fun not only at the traditionally domestic medium but also at the identities both the medium and object signify. **Squatch Poles** in particular seems to reference the late 20th century Kiwi bogan aesthetic - faded leather jackets and home constructions. This theme of kitsch humour dominates the lower gallery; it is characterised by works that play, works that are humorous and absurd.

Steve Carr's second work, **Watermelon** plays into this notion really well. It is primarily a work of suspense and tension, organised around an absurd act - placing rubber bands around a watermelon until it pops and snaps in half. It has its origins in a commonplace Japanese children's game which Carr restaged in a residency in Sapporo, Japan. The same act was streamed live on BuzzFeed recently to a live audience of 807,000 viewers; the video has since been watched over ten



million times. This formalised, gallery version removes the ability to self-satisfy by skipping to the end, increasing the tension and suspense. Carr's motif of media commentary runs through this work too, speaking to the tension we find in film and TV - we must put the effort into this piece by patiently waiting the full 33 minutes for a split second of satisfaction. Critic Francis McWhannell, in a discussion on the New Perspectives exhibition at Artspace this year, said of video works: "video art has to work very hard to be interesting, because there's this huge amount of often very good material available outside the art world." Audience response to Watermelon signals its success in this aspect: on opening night there was a constant large crowd around the piece that would disperse once the watermelon popped and almost immediately re-form in the minutes after. It is an absurd act surrounded by so much tension that gives so much satisfaction, no matter how short, that people are drawn to it and compelled to stay, lest they miss that split second of satisfaction.



*Steve Carr, Watermelon  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

This could be read as a form of conditioning and a commentary on that conditioning we experience from media and technology - a concept that is explicitly present in James Oram's video installation **Pavlov's Pockets**. Simple in concept, it is a pair of denim pockets - a material consistent through the variety of works he has presented, including the bean bag that Pavlov's Pockets rests on - that vibrate, as if phones are in them, often causing gallery goers to check their own phones, a Pavlovian conditioned reaction to the sound of a mobile notification.



*Scott Flanagan, Wild South - Young Mountains  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

Commentary on technology is a thread common to multiple works in Contemporary Christchurch. Scott Flanagan's *Wild South - Young Mountains* (2016) (above) is another example, a significant work both in scale and in concept, drawing together many inspirations, themes, and theories. It is a large-scale wall of woven VHS tape paired with a sculptural installation, also consisting mostly of woven VHS. It has its origins in a feminist history of technology, focussing on women's involvement in the

development of technology, starting with Ada Lovelace.<sup>4</sup>

It was this history that led Flanagan to weaving - first, small scale paper weavings, then small VHS weavings, and then over the decades variation in scale. They are installed now in a collaborative process - linking back to the history of collaboration in weaving and craft, typically associated with women and femininity.

Weaving also links to technology in the history of the Luddites - a term that now refers to people who are outdated and anachronistic, hating technology for no real good reason, but originally referred to a group who could be described as union activists. They were concerned about the introduction of mechanical looms and the threat they posed to the jobs of workers - a theme that is recurring today with rising automation in factories and other industries.

**Wild South - Young Mountains** also has a political drive behind it, though not immediately obvious. The paper weaving that is part of the sculptural installation is made up of copies of New Zealand's anti-terrorism legislation; laws that Flanagan finds absurd and unnecessary, linking through to Ana's work and the (de)colonial politic behind it. The paper weaving also has an almost hidden connection to quake-related art, having been stuck in a basement gallery after the earthquake stuck. When retrieved a few months later, rats had eaten holes into it. The weaving has intentionally not been repaired.

In the same room and on a similar scale, Emma Fitts' installation **Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower** also works with craft and

the notion of information as material. It is a work that seems driven by feminist thought around craft and feminine labour, domesticity, and family, linking it to other works in the exhibition - in particular, Greenbank around craft, Palmer around domesticity, and Humphries around family. It is a huge series of pieces, hanging from the ceiling of the main upstairs gallery, the first thing you see as you walk up the stairs or exit the elevator. The fabrics are hung in a way that aligns them with the architectural plan of Bower's own home, referencing not only the specific building but the neo-brutalist architectural style it and many other buildings in Christchurch were constructed in. The house was commissioned to accommodate a female artist living alone, a nice parallel to Daegan's work and Sutton's bachelor home studio.



*Emma Fitts, Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower (detail)  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016*

Grass mats have been hung on the front of these fabric constructions, almost obscuring the front, as Melanie Oliver

---

**4** As the tale goes, Ada spent time around mechanical looms, driven by punchcards to generate incredible patterns - supposedly this influence led her to the realisation that Charles Babbage's Analytical Machine could be used for purposes other than crunching numbers, that the zeroes and ones of the binary system could be translated to or representational of other, more abstracted concepts.

points out in her essay on this work in its first exhibited iteration at Ilam School of Fine Arts. By doing so, along with the way they are hung, Fitts, like Flanagan, Wells, and Iti, makes a comment on history; specifically how 'a version of history sits behind every image'.<sup>5</sup> Fitts disrupts the notion of a simple viewpoint, both materially in that this work must be walked around to be viewed completely and metaphorically in that there are always alternative histories.



*Tjalling de Vries, Copy Card*  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

Right next to this installation is another series that works with size, texture, and layering - Tjalling de Vries' series of cartoonish, gesturely, and experimental paintings **Copy Card**. Coming from a multidisciplinary background, these works are almost defined by studio experimentation. Having painted on canvas and bits of billboard in his recent body of work, these pieces are on stretched translucent linen, intentionally chosen to be able to work with layering.

The figures present in these works are cartoonish, drawing a link to Oram's other pieces in the room downstairs, paintings and sculptural pieces that draw from definite cartoonish origins. De Vries also works with some of his own father's cartoon designs, drawing a thread between this series and other works in the exhibition that deal with family, such as Humphries and, opposite this series, Tim J. Veling.

Veling has exhibited a number of photographs taken from the series **D,P,O** (2014-15). They are intensely personal works, capturing moments spent with his father after a terminal diagnosis. They are a document of the time spent from the diagnosis to his passing, twice a day family visits. Originally presented in a short-run artist book, Veling developed over 100 rolls of film. The processing of the images was also intensely personal, using a magnifying loop to find fine focus on his father's eyes.



*Tim J. Veling, 'D,P,O'*  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

**5** Melanie Oliver, **Silk, linen, leather, denim, grass, cotton, felt.** (2015)

Veling also presented a text, a conversation from him to his deceased father:

*I kissed you on the forehead then  
traced the shape of a crucifix  
with my thumb, just like you'd  
always do to me when saying  
goodbye. I held your hand and  
said it was okay to pass if you  
wanted. With that, you drew  
your last breath.*

Veling's work has strong parallels to Palmer's adjacent series: both are about a personal tragedy, out of control. Palmer's work investigates the intersection of sculptural conventions with the personal underpinnings of an artwork, and as such the medium becomes important. Conventions of both sculpture and photography mean the latter can easier be more personal in its motivations and presentation; photography is often a more personal and intimate medium than sculpture, and these works together signify that very well.

So, despite not having a curatorial intent to create a unifying theme, the works in Contemporary Christchurch reveal similarities in practice, approach, concept, and artistic interest. Perhaps more so than if the panel and curator went out looking for works that would fit together in some unifying manner, the exhibition reveals significant commonalities that shed light on what contemporary art practice is like in Christchurch in 2016. A strong first installment of this triennial exhibition, it will be interesting to see which commonalities remain in three years time and what new ones emerge.

This commissioned text is by **Jennifer Katherine Shields**, an artist, academic, and writer living in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Both her academic and artistic practices examine queer theory, history, sociology, and bodily issues.

Photo credits:  
**Daniela Aebli**

Cover image:  
**Rob Hood**  
Erosion Problems II  
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016