

## *Interview: Nicola Farquhar*

Nicola Farquhar makes paintings and drawings that examine what it is to be human in a time of ecological crisis. A convergence of vibrant colours and fluid geometric forms result in a new series of paintings that almost vibrate with organic life, microscopically moving between the inner and outer spaces of abstracted feminine forms.

Posing the question of human survival in a changing climate, Farquhar's abstracted female figures are strengthened by their multiplicity. Rich in ambiguity, they shapeshift between the imagined and the biological; the unshaped present and the reformed future of the human body and the natural world.

*Listening, twitching* sees Farquhar return to Titirangi to present work that was first developed as an artist in residence at McCahon House in French Bay in late 2018.

*The following conversation replaces the floor talk that was scheduled for Saturday 9 May but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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**Chloe Geoghegan (CG):** This exhibition displays two sculptures – one new and one recent – that support the nine new paintings you made for *Listening, twitching* over the course of the year as an outcome of your 2018 McCahon House Artists' Residency. You've described these sculptures as drawings that help you in the process of making your paintings.

**Nicola Farquhar (NF):** Yes, I think that in general everything folds into what you make, and that's one of the things that makes making art seem fulfilling, as it is somewhere to put your experience. I have bits and pieces of sculpture and objects sitting around my studio and they become part of the compositional considerations around the paintings. They help to suggest colours or shapes – it's similar to the process of making collage. For me the sculptures feel like natural companions to the paintings. The paintings are quite three dimensional anyway, and the material-ness of them is a big part of how I judge them to be finished or good enough.

I've also been thinking lately about how writing can have a sculptural chunkiness in its form too. While on the McCahon House Artists' Residency, I read Carman Maria Machado's book Her body and other parties, which has a material feeling that is almost chewable. Olga Tokarczuk's Flights, which I'm reading now, conjures up an image of the turning earth that is hologram-like but also gnarly and thick as fog. While reading, you sense something physical as if the words – not spoken even – have been transposed to eating a meal. Some people told me at my Te Uru show that the work made them feel hungry. This confusion of senses when looking at visual work is interesting and curious too, I think, and suggests that our bodies are densely populated with eyes and ears and feelings.

**CG:** *Group Therapy* (2020) is indeed food for your eyeballs. The smooth, chunky surface oozes over itself like a decadent, monolithic cake, yet the blue pigment tells you it's not food, it's something else. Perhaps this is holographic, because your senses are being invoked in strange new ways through art so you feel like you're seeing or tasting things with your mind. I haven't read *Flights* but I have read about it, and I was intrigued by the way it has been described as a 'constellation novel', because this term invokes the idea that one narrative can be made up of many smaller ones. I think your exhibition *Listening, twitching* holds onto this notion too – especially through the inclusion of sculpture in what is a painting show.

The title of the exhibition is a special reference in itself. The words are borrowed from a 1982 novella by Rachel Ingalls (1940-2019) called Mrs Caliban, about an affair between a housewife and a green-skinned sea monster that has just escaped a nearby research facility.\* Larry, the sea monster, is observed performing a series of actions he saw on television but cannot comprehend: "punching, stalking, listening, fighting, twitching, acting all at once." Thinking about Larry's disjointed attempt to understand the purpose of humans through learning our actions, we begin to think of ourselves as disjointed by nature – wondering what indeed our purpose is on this planet.

**NF:** I think our worry that we are intrinsically flawed has led us to develop many, many characters that are better or worse versions of us, to try and understand what our problems are. I was interested in how Larry tries to become fully human (despite the immutability of his appearance), by imitating a set of choreographed moves. He recognised that the way we move our bodies is a signal to us about our human-ness. Curiously though, because we anthropomorphise so many things around us, we believe we see human movement in many other animals and even non-living objects. We document it all the time – vines reaching, dogs shaking hands, leaves trembling etc. And it can also be misleading as many of these specifics of movement were embodied before our particular bodies came into existence. But I think the idea appealed to me because, when making my paintings, I imagine the body as a thing made of many parts in continual movement. It is something that comes together for a moment through direction by specific forces like gravity and electromagnetics; and it could perhaps be guided by words like these (punching, stalking, listening, fighting, twitching...), that describe action and reaction.



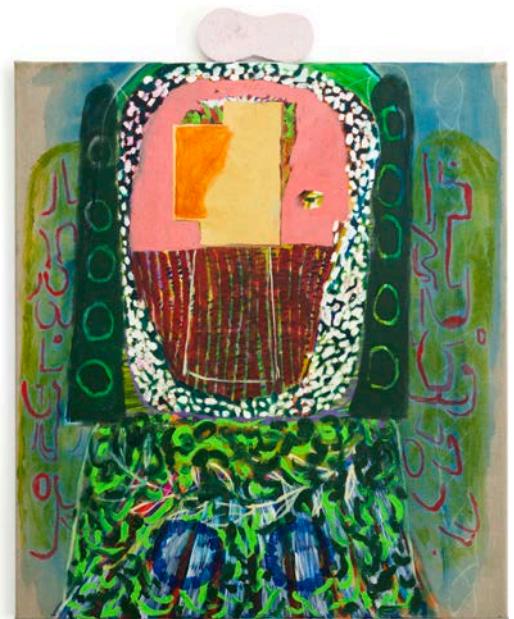
*Group therapy*, 2020  
plaster, pigment and paper mache, 880 x 450 x 430mm

**CG:** I'm so glad you raise the issue of the anthropomorphic aspects of pet ownership. I've long been interested in Hamish Win's research and critique of this through his study of lost pet posters. In a recent article he expands on this by proposing a "slippage of the human," which, through understanding our relationship to the non-human, would allow us to crack open the definition of "the sapience that defines us." Perhaps this is why Larry exists in the fiction of Ingalls – because he essentially hybridises our existence and allows us to look beyond ourselves. Larry is a proposal to be, as Win says, "more collaborative than we have ever thought possible."

Furthermore, I think *Mrs Caliban* has become a departure point for another aspect of this exhibition which is to examine what it is to be human in a time of ecological crisis. Your thinking here is introducing us to texts that are about being transported into alternative worlds where moments of crises are woven into a character's very being. This is something that we should recognise in ourselves through the experiences of Larry, for example. The small [exhibition essay](#) that accompanies this exhibition, concludes with a call to action, that we must punch, stalk, listen, fight and twitch our way towards a different kind of existence in this world, sooner rather than later.

**NF:** For me it's about finding hope in the conflicts and loss that come with change. I read [Octavia Butlers science fiction stories](#) when I began painting, and her proposal for a way forward through catastrophe is to adapt, to work with what is at hand; and that human-ness has a fluidity that will persist through change. As an aside it's curious how her aliens (in 1987) had bodies like the octopus, like H.G. Wells also, except hers are sensuous as well as terrifying. To me there is a straight line to [Amia Srinivasan's 2017 article](#) discussing the unique all-over brain of the octopus and how this opens up a discussion on the nature and origins of intelligence.

A much darker narrative in science and speculative fiction is that which suggests the ending of humanity is maybe a good thing – that the resulting flourishing of flora and fauna would make it worthwhile. We see hints of this fantasy in our fascination with real life stories where the sudden absence of humans result in what's called rewilding; for example at Chernobyl, or the de-militarised zone in Korea. Like most people, I'm in conflict and unsure, but I think that we should imagine ourselves, not in the same way as now perhaps, but still present as part of these speculative future worlds. And that musing on the nature of our human-ness is a step toward making a path through trouble.



*Peachthief*, 2019  
oil and acrylic on linen, 1000 x 900mm  
on display in gallery reception



*W.I.* 2019  
oil and acrylic on linen, 500 x 500mm

\*Readers will find Ingall's novella pre-date's Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film "The Shape of Water".



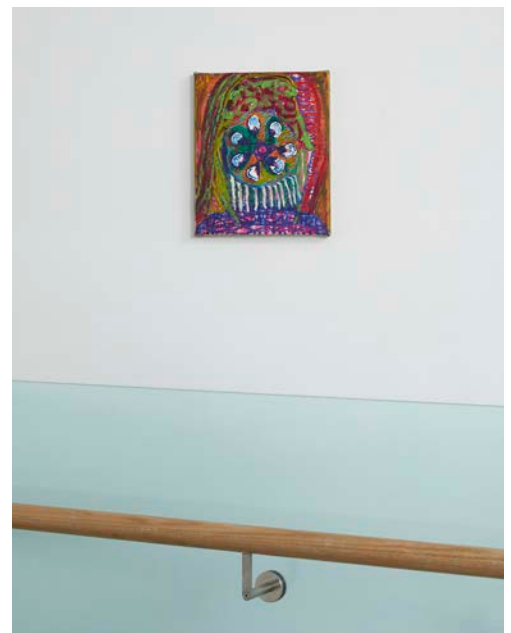
When you mention Hamish Win's pet/human critique, it makes me think of Donna Haraway writing about her dog licking her face, sharing microbes, and the opportunity for hybridisation that this provokes. She is thinking of ways that different species connect – and this simple biological transgression exemplifies this. And another thing is that, in the medieval bestiaries, it was written that bear cubs are born as formless lumps that require their mothers to lick them into shape with their tongue. The medieval scribes would not have known this, but it's interesting how this licking would have ensured that these proto-bears took on a form that also incorporated organisms from their mother's tongue. It's an example of the collaborative process of making that you mention; it's touching also that this now quaint medieval concept of making life can connect to ideas five-hundred or so years ahead.

**CG:** On rewilding, it can also be seen along the river in post-quake Christchurch, it's Aotearoa's own little slice of the post-apocalyptic global narrative where nature covers over what has ruptured, crumbled and broken. In Tim J. Veling's Rewilding series, you can see how absence of humans in this area makes it all the more utopian – it makes those who visit feel that soft vulnerability you mention.

I've been really interested in this concept lately of 'thinking, fast and slow,' which has been explored by psychologist Daniel Kahneman in a book of the same title. In the book, Kahneman says that being human is a dark and veiled thing. The way we are intuitive and emotional, yet at the same time deliberate and logical, is how we've ended up working against the world, constantly breaking it and hoping it'll be fixed. To be human is indeed a dark and confusing experience, and this duality we experience within us is one that we experience together as a mixed up society. I think you've touched on this with your mention of the importance of relationships, but also your interest in science fiction. We are not alone because we have each other, and we have the stories we've been telling each other over the years to lean on and live within as we move through the world.



*I.W.*, 2020  
oil and acrylic on linen, 500 x 500mm



*Hoop*, 2019  
oil on linen, 300 x 250mm

All works courtesy of Mossman, Wellington.

*Nicola Farquhar: Listening, twitching*

Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery

22 February – 5 July 2020

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