

Eleanor Cooper in conversation with Hope Wilson

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Bouquet

Eleanor Cooper

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Hope Wilson:

Kia ora koutou, thank you all for coming along today and thank you, Eleanor, for joining us to discuss your exhibition, *Bouquet*. I realised as we were setting up today that we haven't talked about the exhibition title itself so I wondered if I could start by asking—what is the thinking behind the name 'Bouquet'? Sorry, a very open question!

Eleanor Cooper:

No, no, not at all. I picked the title to acknowledge that it's quite a personal selection of experiences that I've drawn on to make the show. I didn't want the work to make these broad claims in terms of talking about the conservation estate. This is very much me. Having been to certain places, picked certain things, much like bouquets or something and wanting to put them in the show together to contrast and consider them alongside each other.

HW: And each of these objects draw in some way on experiences that you've had in your work as a Department of Conservation field ranger?

EC: Yeah, that's true. Yes. So I work as a ranger for DoC part time and have done for six or so years. And that often involves working in nature, and every so often in quite remote islands, but mostly in and around Auckland in the Hauraki gulf. So you just find yourself in these quite peculiar environments. Or, I find it peculiar. I wouldn't necessarily say that I'd one hundred percent advocate for the conservation strategies we have, but nevertheless we work within them, and yeah, I feel like it's an opportunity to discuss some of those techniques we have.

HW: One of the things we were talking about this morning was the really Western viewpoint that DoC is working from when they're looking after these areas as conservationist estates as well as the different criteria or rules they ascribe to each area when they are conserving them...

EC: Yeah, so you may be already aware there's a Nature Reserves Act and the Wildlife Act and they govern the way we manage our conservation lands and there are all these categories. The nature

reserve, that's the most extreme protection, then there's a scientific reserve and a scenic reserve and a recreation and a historic reserve and they each have certain things that are allowed. So, for example, in a nature reserve there are these rules of 'no take' so, for instance, you would go to visit and once you're there you're not allowed to remove anything like plants, gravel, sand or wildlife.

So it's very much a policy of non interference. Which is pretty problematic from a Māori point of view, as you can imagine. So I guess at the most basic level, under Te Tiriti it was assured that Māori would have customary harvesting of manu/birds and plants, and then as soon as we started getting legislation in the early 1900s and we started to protect nature reserves, those rights were taken away. And then recently there have been re-provisions made, so for example in the islands around Rakiura there were some amendments to allow people to go down and harvest tītī, so we're slowly figuring it out, but our general stance

over the last hundred years has been like “humans live here, let's put aside these little pockets for animals” and it's very distinct and it essentially assumes that humans are going to damage the natural environment by being involved in it, rather than saying, hey there are many ways humans can behave, maybe we can figure out something that works better than just making a walled garden.

HW: Yes, absolutely, and your work is dealing with, in interesting ways, those histories of speaking about land through art. Earlier today you spoke about the picturesque and traditions of landscape painting in Aotearoa and depictions of this landscape in art and we've come a long way since then, I mean, this exhibition is less about the representation and more about the story telling, potentially? Or ways that we could develop new languages for talking about landscape...?

EC: Yeah, I guess I was initially quite surprised to learn there is this link between the way we think about the natural world as being isolated from human life, and the tradition of landscape paintings. The values that landscape painting developed and expressed actually fed into our conservative strategies and policies.

So for example, if you think of the New Zealand landscape art tradition and precursors in Dutch landscape painting, there is a real emphasis on looking at the natural world and being like “yeah that's

picturesque, that's a beautiful hillside” and we might say that we have almost trained ourselves to appreciate the natural world in those ways. So then, although I'm working in the visual arts, I think there are a lot of ways that visual arts can help undo that and reestablish the link between people and their surroundings in non visual ways. So through stories and meaning, and feeling. Like if you can make art from a feeling of interconnectedness or about the connections between living things, whether it's between people and the living world or that living thing and that living thing. For me I like the strategy of trying to work on, or focus on those connections.

HW: Yes, definitely. This body of work has been developed from your Masters submission, how do you think *Bouquet* builds on that presentation?

EC: The Masters project which finished in November last year did contain some of these works in different forms and I kind of approached the examination as a survey of what I'd been researching and produced, so it was quite comprehensive. But I really wanted to have this show at Blue Oyster as a chance to lay out things purely in terms of audience and exhibition, to make what I would ideally like it to be without thinking of an examiner. So some of these works are based on things that I'd made, but shown here in a new version, for example

the whistles were included but in a different format, so they were originally kind of one bunch hung together. And there was quite a selection of different elementary photographic techniques, whereas here there's just one, replicated.

HW: It's been lovely having a slightly longer install period this week and more time than usual to think about how we're going to put the show together and lay things out—one really striking element of the exhibition is the charcoal wash you've applied to the surface of the walls. It's a beautiful gesture which has really softened the space.

EC: I think it's quite important to have a bit of time to plan that, you can't just transplant something into spaces. It's nice to think about the habitat and then work the pieces into it. That's a luxury though.

HW: To focus on a particular work, I know a lot of people enjoyed the work titled *Koekoeā*—the whistles—last night at the opening and we had, ah...some performances, do you want to introduce them a little bit?

EC: They're called *Koekoeā*, which is the Māori name for Long-tailed Cuckoos. So they're our native birds but they also migrate through the South Pacific, so they're not just ours. I was trying to represent a more multisensory experience of things in the natural world, so these are depicting the sound of a creature rather than a visual appearance.

Koekoeā make this awful screech, so this is a replica or as close as I could get in a physical form, trying to embody that.

HW: ...And with the placement of the Cuckoos there is kind of a disruption that happens as well right, through the exhibition. We talked a little about the role the cuckoo plays as an intruder or imposter that goes into the nests of other birds so, in placing them, you were thinking about ways that they might obstruct lines of sight or exist in places where they might not ordinarily be. Visitors might notice there's one hanging at the edge of the office, so they're kind of sneaking through everything.

EC: (laughs) We didn't go and hang them in other people's galleries.

(Audience laughs)

HW: No, that was discussed! (laughs). They're also 3D printed which is quite a fascinating technique in itself, that process of replication. What about the *Bō* staffs? They're beautiful objects that also have a function and relationship to your role at DoC?

EC: Yeah, so they came from working in the Auckland Islands in the Subantarctics last summer and it's just standard practice when you're working with *rāpoka* (sea lion) pups. You're walking into the colony with the adults being defensive, so you get given these broom sticks to defend yourself. One person stands this way and one person stands that

way and you walk back to back. And you have your escape route planned and things like that. And you try not to fall over. But these sticks—and this is probably a really personal connection for me—but I did karate for a long time, Okinawan karate in the south of Japan, and the *bō* is a traditional weapon. You have empty handed techniques, and then you have the *bō* as your first weapon that you train with. So it was quite satisfying to see how people were using sticks around the sea lions, and you could see that they were just using all the same basic moves that you learn in karate. I guess because that's the way a human body works well with a stick. So I first made one because I wanted one for myself to practise karate with, and the only adaptation is that they have bladder kelp as an ornamentation, since that is part of the sea lion habitat down there. So there turned out to be five, to kind of make a forest.

HW: And the photographs, which are installed in the back gallery...

EC: The photographs are about as close to making an image that I'm willing to go. I guess because they're not using any cameras or viewfinders. They're photograms. So that's where you—you may already know—but you use light sensitive paper and you can put the objects directly on it and then you can turn the light on and it exposes it, so it's a contact method of photography. So I'm

comfortable with that method because it's more about the objects themselves and less about a scene or a view.

HW: Did anyone have any questions or thoughts?

Audience member 1: I was wondering about the seeds inside the whistles, do they form part of the cuckoo's diet or are they... just what seemed to work?

EC: Yeah, the diet is insects and berries, so these were more just items from the forest habitat in which you might hear them.

Audience member 1: I noticed one in the other room that was really quite almond shaped and I really wanted to blow it to see how they all sounded different.

EC: Yeah they do all sound different! It was quite tricky with the 3D printer, you had to get the printer to stop half way through and get the seed in and then get it going again to complete the object.

Audience member 2: The shoes, what made you choose the white rice and the basketball? Did you think it might just look good on your feet or... (laughs)

EC: (laughs) Those were made on islands and you would always be in situations of having very limited materials, so I guess it's true to that. And I've followed this Nike trajectory, it's in other shoe brands as well, but they released these shoes in 2012 and they're like "these are the same as

wearing bare feet you'll be totally connected to the ground." And when Nike moved on from their flyknit technique to the flyweave technique, I thought the rice bag was a good example of readymade weaving... I actually made a loom, I wanted to do the weaving technique myself, but that was a readymade woven material I had lying around.

Audience member 2: Everything in the room seems quite athletic... you have the whistles and then the karate sticks and then even the walls themselves hold a gesture, the movement, was that on purpose?

EC: Yeah, well I hadn't thought about athletics I suppose, but definitely, I've been very focused on like the person, how they act and move or behave and probably because it's quite personal to me maybe. Maybe because I'm trying to give some emphasis to active participation, in the way we interact with the natural world, as opposed to looking, so then those things creep in.

Audience member 2: So the idea that we become a part of it as well..

EC: Yeah, maybe the shoes are like a symbol for me. They represent something that mediates your interaction with the world, how you connect, what comes between you and the earth.

Audience member 2: What grounds ya, will release ya...

(Audience laughs)

EC: Yeah, you kinda choose those things for yourself when you go somewhere, even just being in the city, what do you want to have between you and your surrounds? How are you going to filter your experience? There is also an essay which gives some background to this project as well – in the book *In Common* published by Pipi Press.

HW: That might be a good spot to finish. Thank you Eleanor for being here today and speaking to us about *Bouquet* and also thank you to everyone who came along!



Eleanor Cooper, *Bouquet*, Installation View, 2020.