

## **Tracing the Land | Finest Fuschias**

### **Kyla Cresswell and Daegan Wells**

### **William Hodges Fellowship exhibition 2023**

The Southland Art Foundation's William Hodges Fellowship offers artists a three-month period of time for concentrated work on new projects, culminating in a closing exhibition. In 2022-23, two selected artists – Daegan Wells and Kyla Cresswell – were asked to consider the city of Waihōpau I Invercargill as site and material, a question that involves an understanding of place as an entanglement of social, political, and environmental concerns and ideas. Both artists adopted an exploratory, research-based approach – a sensually attuned mode of knowledge creation that is fragmentary, allusive, and speculative. Approaching the space of the city through an ethics of care, each artist used their time to pay attention to what is normally overlooked in the functional undertaking of day-to-day life in the city.

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During the Fellowship, Daegan Wells spent time living and working in Yule House on Forth Street. This heritage home was built by Scottish immigrant Robert Duncan Yule in 1866-67, just nine years after surveyor John Turnbull Thomson selected the site beside the Ōtepuni Creek in the boglands that was to become the new town of Invercargill. Daily walks through the adjacent Ōtepuni Gardens led Daegan to a fascination with James Morton – a colourful character who won a competition for the design of Invercargill's first public park in 1872, receiving the princely sum of £20. Many of Morton's original designs of Ōtepuni Gardens remain to this day, including the path layout and a holly hedge.

When Yule was building his house, Morton was on the committee of the Invercargill Horticultural and Floricultural Society and a prolific contributor to the Society's shows, winning numerous prizes including first place in the "Finest Fuschias" category two years running in 1866 and 1867. Morton had wider aspirations beyond floristry and garden design. In the early 1870s, he was advertising his services as a taxidermist and naturalist, offering stuffed birds and fish for export, along with collections of native trees, seeds, and ferns as well as collections of dried ferns "classified in books of all dimensions."<sup>1</sup>

A collection of Morton's taxidermied native bird specimens were included Andrew McKenzie's private museum, a commercial enterprise McKenzie operated alongside

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<sup>1</sup> Advertisement in the *Western Star*, Issue 50, 24 October 1874.

his Scotch Pie shop between 1872 and 1875.<sup>2</sup> By 1876, Morton had filed for bankruptcy and in 1882 he took his own life after he had “been going steadily into a drunkard’s grave,” according to his obituary in the *Southland Times* (5 September 1882). Yet, whilst acknowledging his grim demise, the obituary writer goes on to outline Morton’s achievements and qualities at some length, describing him as “a man not only of talent only, but of genius” with “a sympathetic eye for everything that moved or grew on the face of the earth, that swam in the deep, or flew in the heavens.” This seemingly sensitive soul must have been an exceptional character amongst the rough-and-tumble of Invercargill colonial settler society.

In *Finest Fuschias*, Daegan draws on the elusive figure of James Morton and the traces of his work in the Ōtepuni Gardens as a touchstone and point of departure for the set of works in this exhibition. Honouring Morton’s craft as a florist and gardener, Daegan has created a bouquet of holly, collected from the original hedge planted as part of Morton’s garden design. In addition, a video collage of photographic and historical documentation related to Morton and Ōtepuni Gardens offers a glimpse into the restless, relentless character of the artist’s research – a palimpsest of ever accumulating and interconnecting source material surrounding the figure of Morton and his contributions to public space in Invercargill’s inner city.

Another key point of reference is the Ōtepuni Creek or “Puni,” which is featured on John Turnbull Thomson’s earliest sketches of the proposed settlement of Invercargill. The stream, originally named Ōtārewa, flows in a westerly direction through Invercargill and into the Waihōpai River. Pre-colonisation, the banks of the Ōtārewa were used as a meeting point by Māori prior to inland journeys and there is archaeological evidence of a temporary camp on a site that now houses the band rotunda. Ōtārewa is also the name for the forest that once existed between the Ōreti Estuary and the Mataura River.<sup>3</sup> After British settlement, the banks were cleared of tussock and the creek later straightened and channelized. Flood prevention architecture, including large concrete walls and stop banks, encase Ōtepuni Gardens and it was these features that particularly resonated at the time of Daegan’s Fellowship residency in 2023, which coincided with Cyclone Gabrielle and the devastating flooding in the Hawkes Bay.

This modest stream and the Ōtepuni Gardens through which it flows, then, is emblematic of accumulated and dissonant layers of shifting ecologies and histories of human engagement, intervention, and cultivation of the natural world – a

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<sup>2</sup> McKenzie’s “Museum of New Zealand and Australian curiosities” was purchased by the Invercargill Athanaeum and later transferred to the Southland Technical College where it was opened to the public in 1912. The growing collection later became the basis for the Southland Museum, which opened in 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Kā Huru Manu Ngāi Tahu Atlas. The name Ōtepuni was incorrectly applied to the Ōtārewa creek by the early European settlers, and is actually the name of a small bush located where the stream originates from.

microcosmic imprint of anthropocentric change. A third piece of work in *Finest Futures* memorialises the persevering flow of the stream, in spite of human intervention to change its natural course, in a moving image work where a single shot of the stream is projected onto an aluminium screen, reflecting light back into the space and echoing the persistent reality of ongoing flux in the cultural landscape.

*Finest Fuschias* continues in the vein of Daegan's earlier series of hand-woven textile works called *Local Makers*, which pays homage to the stories of workers in a small-scale clothing factory operating in Riverton between the 1940s and 1980s. Through a combination of archival research, observation, conversation, and "deep listening" to the social context of the local built and natural environment, Daegan's work comprises documentary fragments and reflections that pose questions about the delicate, transient, and elusive nature of histories of place and how these are remembered in the present.

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It is no surprise that James Morton's activities as a practicing naturalist coincided with rapidly dwindling numbers of birds and other native wildlife due to the loss of habitat as native forest clearances and land reclamation of wetlands and estuary areas made way for industry, farms and urban development. Perhaps Morton's urge to preserve and honour dwindling native species and plants was borne of this atmosphere of loss and extinction. Beyond the opportunity for profit, did his naturalist's eye view the degradation of the natural environment with despair as many now look at its afterlife: the latest manifestation of the climate emergency?

Kyla Cresswell's constellation of work, *Tracing the Land*, is also concerned with memory embedded in the local landscape through Waihōpau I Invercargill's links to at least five different ecosystems: mixed podocarp forest, riparian, estuary, wetland, bog. Between 1865 and 1965, a quarter of the original Kōreti/New River Estuary was reclaimed. The Waihōpau Arm, where Chief Surveyor J. T. Thomson chose to establish Invercargill in 1856, has been the most impacted, with approximately 75% of the Arm reclaimed.<sup>4</sup> Soil analysis shows the extent of wetland loss since settlement began – roughly 90 percent of pre-settlement wetlands in Aotearoa have been destroyed by agricultural and urban development, reducing the land's ability to sequester carbon and cope with flooding. Wetland areas also improve water quality and provide unique habitat for threatened birds, fish, and plants. It goes without saying that wetland drainage and vegetation clearance are incredibly harmful to the entire ecological system.

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Kitson, Koreti/New River Estuary Ngāi Tahu ki Murihiku values, environmental changes and impacts: Report for the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, November 2019.

Kyla Cresswell's prints act as a kind of mnemonic for channelling the land's memory banks as well a conduit for uncovering and holding cultural memories before they slip away. The saying "etched in the memory" provides a key to how these images operate through not only what they depict but also the care and attention required to coax them into being. The laborious process of mezzotint, using tools to scuff, smooth and scrape a copper surface as a plate to create a printed image, produced a series of works based on aerial views and maps of old forest remnants in Invercargill city. In two of the images (*Bush Remnant II* and *III*), sections are cut out of the remaining cluster of trees to reference the way the land cleared of native bush has been parcelled up for agriculture or urban development. Another work (*Bush Survey*) shows lines in the void area of the image where native bush no longer remains, referencing the surveying and mapping work that facilitated this loss. There is an 1859 sketch by J. R. Cuthbertson in the Southland Museum and Art Collection of Invercargill three years after the settlement was founded. Behind a straggly group of buildings lining the bank of the Ōtepuni (Ōtarewa) Creek is the once extensive Taurakitewaru, a huge block of podocarp forest. Within 20 years of the earliest map of the site prepared by J. T. Thomson in 1857, much of the forest had been cleared. One surviving island of this is Thomsons Bush, a legacy of the kahikatea-dominated swamp forest once characteristic of central southern Southland.

*City Block* is a series of four relief prints each made from a branch of a native tree and matched up with a city street where such a tree might once have stood: Esk Street – Kahikatea, Gala Street – Matai, Tay Street – Pōkākā, Dee Street – Kōwhai. The presentation of the series includes a small label pinned to the top right-hand side of each work, a subtle allusion to the classificatory impulse of natural history collections. The traditional Western museum is another form of memory space that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in parallel with the disappearance of the native bush. The museological presentation of the *City Block* series is a reminder of the museum's imperative to detach natural specimens and cultural artefacts from the original contexts that once gave them life and meaning, providing audiences with an index of ongoing degradation. Another detail of the work is the use of pigment made from local bricks, which are essentially red ochre, an earth pigment. The brick pigment is used on the labels naming the plants: another reminder of the cycle of extraction and manufacture that characterises human-nature interaction. This brick pigment is also used in *From the Forest* – a series of studies of botanical studies of native plants, including mataī, wīwī, pōkākā, and *Coprosma Pedicellata* (rare).

Further works in *Tracing the Land* depict, in loving detail, rushes growing on the dwindling wetland areas linked to the Kōreti I New River estuary in the lower Ōreti Catchment. Traditionally utilised by Māori for its abundant mahika kai (food)

resources, Kōreti has been significantly affected by land reclamations, urban discharges including sewage and untreated stormwater, landfill leaching, and the run-off from agricultural and industrial activities. The concentrated attention the artist pays to the often-overlooked wetland vegetation recognises the crucial role plants play in supporting and maintaining wetland ecosystems by, for example, improving water retention in times of drought, enhancing water quality, reducing erosion and silting, filtering pollutants, and storing nutrients. A companion pair of works, *Wetland: Kōreti I* and *II* are both silverpoint prints on organically shaped wooden boards. This technique, used by artists in the Renaissance as a means of drawing, prior to graphite, uses a long 99.9% silver drawing scribe on silver plate to prepare the print. Over time, the silver print will soften to a warm brownish colour, echoing the tones of the actual plants.

*Tracing the Land* is a way of naming and remembering what has been or is in the process of being lost. By ascribing value to the plants associated with destroyed or disintegrating environments, the works provide a scaffold for memories as well as an impetus to think anew about preservation and restoration, to act differently towards the local environment that both shapes, and is shaped by, interactions with humans.

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*Tracing the Land* and *Finest Futures* are both projects that dig below the surface of the city, unearthing layers of cultural, social, and environmental memory. This mode of creative research and the aesthetic forms to which it gives rise can be considered an embodiment of what post-humanist theorist Donna Hathaway calls “responsability” – a sensuous and empathic response to the interconnectedness of human and non-human life forms. This relational space is illuminated through the micropolitical here-and-now of art practice in which time expands through re-searching and reanimating ghosts and residues of the past – a past recognised as an ongoing event with real implications for the present and future.

**Essay | Louise Garrett, May 2023**

## Artists' biographies

**Kyla Cresswell** grew up in Southland. She majored in printmaking at the Dunedin School of Art before spending many years travelling, eventually settling in Wellington before moving back south to Athol where she still has a studio. She currently lives in Dunedin. Frequently drawn to a pared down aesthetic and through a variety of printmaking techniques, including mezzotint, drypoint and embossing, Kyla's work explores the micro and macro of the natural world. Her practice relates back to the land: It is grounded in the space where she stands. Her work over the past two decades has often reflected on challenges faced by the natural environment, focusing on nature's tenacity and resilience.

Kyla has exhibited widely in New Zealand and has shown in a variety of locations internationally including Canada, Japan and the UK. Kyla's work is held in private and public collections around the world.

**Daegan Wells** was born in Invercargill and currently lives and works in Colac Bay. He graduated with an MFA from Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, in 2015. In 2017, he was the recipient of the Olivia Spencer Bower residency award in Christchurch. Through his archival, sculptural, textile, film, and object-based practice, Daegan uses narrative to address micro- and macro-political, environmental, social and cultural events from recent history. His research-led practice has involved a range of exploratory investigations, most recently in the context of the Aparima | Riverton area, near where he lives.

Wells co-founded two artist-run spaces in Christchurch Room Four (2012-2014) and Man Friday (2015), a project space operated out of a shed in the garden of artist-run initiative North Projects. He has produced projects and exhibitions for art spaces throughout New Zealand. In 2022, he was commissioned by the Aotearoa Art Fair to produce *Local Makers*, an homage to the stories and activities related to a small clothing factory in Riverton between the 1940s and 1980s.

