

Art History as Reparation

Several Degrees of Attention at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

CHRISTINA BARTON

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's recent exhibition, *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection* saw four young curators invited to select works from the gallery's collection and to build small shows around their chosen items. These were installed in discrete spaces across the three levels of the original building now integrated with the newer Len Lye Centre in New Plymouth. Visitors arrive to encounter *Thresholds*, Simon Gennard's pairing of Maria Olsen's 'paintings' and Sonya Lacey's multi-media installation; climb the stairs to see Amy Weng's *This Hand that Is Every Stone*, bringing together prints by Kate Coolahan with textile works by Rozana Lee; then encounter the trio of Ralph Hotere, Michael Parekōwhai and Turumeke Harrington in *Tāheke*, Māia Abraham's curatorial response; and finish surveying a panorama of large-scale paintings from the series *Tē Tihi o Kahukura* by W. A. (Bill) Sutton brought together by Elle Loui August.

Brainchild of in-house assistant curator contemporary art and collections, Simon Gennard, *Several Degrees of Attention* was characteristically self-conscious in opening the collection up for creative reappraisal. Following artist Ruth Buchanan's generous hang based on her systematic yet eccentric stocktake in 2019–20, *The scene in which I find myself* or

where does my body belong, this was another thoughtful interrogation of how to contend with the gallery's artistic resources gathered over its 52-year history. Each curator was free to make their own choice as to which artworks they wished to present and how to contextualise them, and each has explained their decisions in essays compiled into an elegant publication that accompanied the show.

Despite this freedom, the resulting exhibition had a surprising consistency. Without exception, each curator chose to juxtapose their collection works with a contemporary counterpoint. In three of the four cases this saw new or recent works by contemporary artists brought into physical relation with the gallery's possessions. In the fourth, Elle Loui August commissioned a text by contemporary Māori writer Chloe Cull that sat alongside the line-up of Sutton's landscapes. As one moved through the spaces there were no jarring shifts in the viewing experience: works were spaciouly installed, sightlines were safeguarded, and discrete works were given their due. This was a quiet, elegant arrangement of well-made, carefully lit, wall-based, suspended and free-standing objects. It was not designed to shock or provoke; indeed the overarching title gently nudged visitors to pay attention, spend time mulling over the nuances and subtleties of each combination of works and their collective effects.

Delving a little more deeply, with the exception of Maia Abraham's dynastic pairing of iconic works by contemporary Māori artists Ralph Hotere (1931–2013) and Michael Parekōwhai (born 1968), these curators' choices were unexpected, either consciously anti-

Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 9 July–7 November
curated by Māia Abraham, Elle Loui August, Simon Gennard & Amy Weng

(opposite) *Tāheke*, curated by Māia Abraham, featuring work by from left, Turumeke Harrington, Ralph Hotere & Michael Parekōwhai, part of *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection*, Govett-Brewster Gallery, July 2022 (Photograph: Bryan James)

(below) W. A. Sutton's *Tē Tihī o Kahukura*, curated by Elle Loui August, part of *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection*, Govett-Brewster Gallery, July 2022 (Photograph: Bryan James)

canonical or untimely. Amy Weng selected six prints from the 1970s by Kate Coolahan (born 1929), an artist long-overlooked, who worked in the once-popular but now neglected medium of etching. Likewise Simon Gennard's interest in the paintings and assemblages of Maria Olsen (1945–2014) might be the first serious institutional attention paid to an artist whose critical success was concentrated in the latter half of the 1980s. And Elle Loui August described her decision to profile Bill Sutton (1917–2000), Canterbury landscape painter par excellence, as 'risky', given the genre's complex association with the colonial imaginary.¹

So what was (or is) going on here? Thinking about the choices and tactics of each curator, all of whom are in their thirties or younger, I would suggest we are witnessing a paradigm shift in curatorial thinking. This exhibition posited a changed relation to art history, or at least the version of that discipline I grew up with. While I would argue that this entails a loss or abandonment of historical consciousness—what would have once required curators to create lineages for artists based on formal synergies, the narrative drives of medium-specificity, the impulses of canon-formation, or the play of antinomies (modern versus post-modern, traditional versus iconoclastic, abstract versus figurative, and so on)—it posits a new relation to the past that I would like to call 'reparative'.

In each case, the curator has taken an item or items from the recent past and found a way to present them in the present to correct or reframe an omission or prejudice or assumption or imbalance of power that we as a society now understand to be problematic. These are posited and remedied by various means in each of the mini-exhibitions. Gennard assembles a group of works by a woman artist who has slipped from art-historical view. He sees in Olsen's visceral surfaces and evocative subject matter a mode of imagining that he understands evades rational thought and taps into something archaic and deep that seems worthy of reconsideration in our current moment. He invites Lacey, a contemporary artist, to respond to Olsen's works not because she too is a painter or shares Olsen's interest in Jungian psychology or matriarchal archetypes, but because in a quite different way she also leans towards the mental state of 'day-dreaming'.²

Weng is drawn to Coolahan's prints because they describe an outsider condition that gives form to the unhomeliness of the immigrant. She pairs Coolahan's etchings with Rozana Lee's hanging wax and hand-dyed textiles for their shared observations of immigrant life, juxtaposing Coolahan's attention to new arrivals in the mid-twentieth century with those of a more recent Asian diaspora. Abraham rethinks history as whakapapa, enabling Turumeke Harrison, a young Māori woman, to construct her respectfully tongue-in-cheek response to the heroic male figures of contemporary Māori art. And August dwells on the fact that Sutton chose for his title the Māori name of the raw, dry peaks he painted as a way to relieve his regionalist realism from charges of monoculturalism.

Although acknowledging that their chosen works were made in the past, all of these decisions are



strangely ahistorical. They speak from and to the present. There is little or no attention paid to the genetic contexts within which earlier works were made. In a sense those older ways of 'doing' art history no longer matter, because right now of key concern are the pressing urgencies of decolonisation and the construction of new, non-hierarchical, culturally specific, non-binary but gendered identities. There is more at stake in caring about the makers—who they are/were, what they stand for—than the specific material qualities and artistic lineages of the works they created.

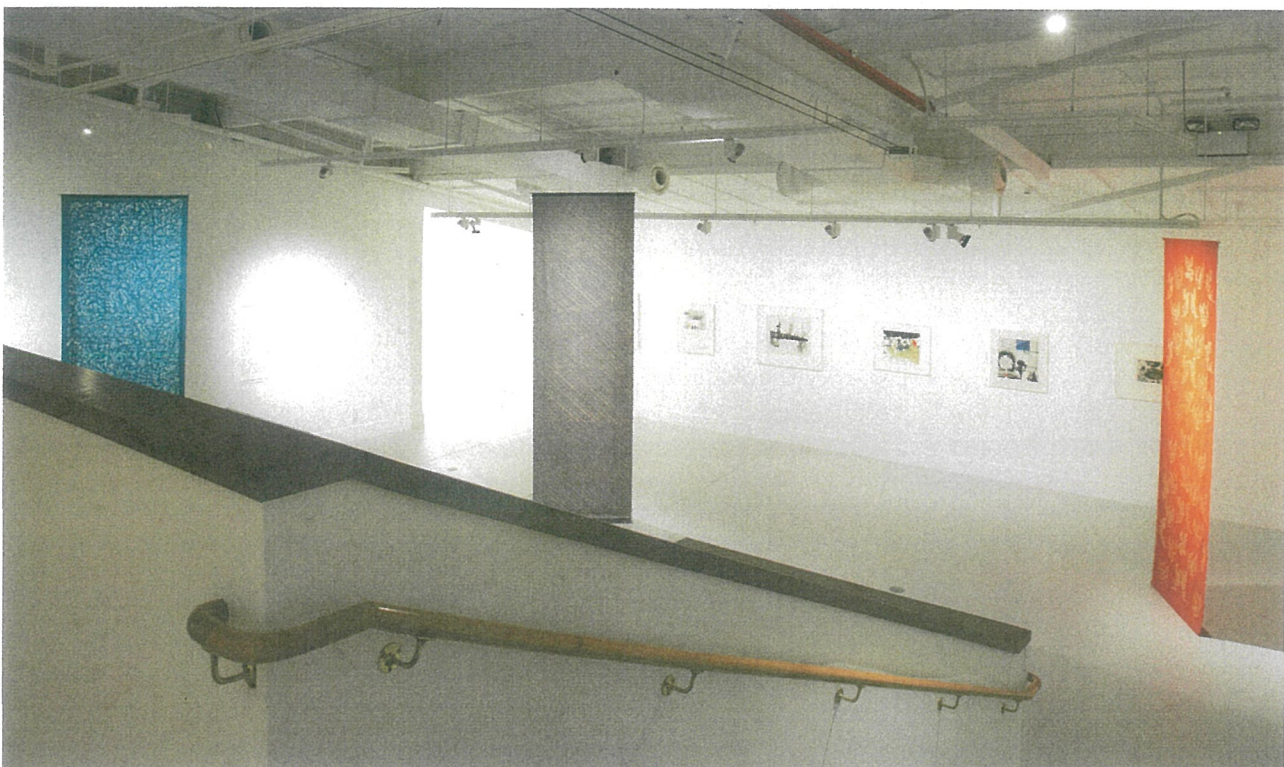
I think this might be worthy and important; a coded refusal of the disciplinary workings of an older art history. Indeed it is entirely in keeping with sentiments expressed by David Velasco in his editorial to the latest issue of *Artforum* (September 2022), which arrived after I had landed on 'reparation' as the framing metaphor for this review. Charged with introducing the magazine's sixtieth-anniversary special, Velasco sets out his 'desire to nourish reparative critique'.³ In elaborating his contention he quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who writes: 'Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.'⁴ And he follows by suggesting that this new approach is significantly a 'minoritarian practice'.⁵

How true this is for *Several Degrees of Attention*. We have four curators who each occupy a minority or non-hegemonic place in the culture: queer, Asian, indigenous, female. Their ambitions are not to construct coherent, linear, positivist narratives, nor even to defend or defeat some artistic orthodoxy. Rather, they place old and new things together, ignoring the expectation to unpack causal relations

between objects and the times and places in which they were made and allowing differences to co-exist. Indeed, they implicitly trust that the contemporary artists they have invited to share the spaces with their chosen works can co-habit with sympathy and affection (no Oedipal tussles here). I compare this to my own efforts as a writer and curator, who has spent the last 30-plus years formulating a critical practice that takes issue with governing discourses and champions alternatives that test, complicate and undermine modernist, nationalist, masculinist, market-led and institutionally conservative formations. Writing, for example, about Christchurch-based sculptor Pauline Rhodes, I used Sutton's conventionally illusionist paintings as the foil against which to set her ephemeral and site-sensitive practice in a way that Elle Loui August completely sidesteps.⁶

As much as I can appreciate the ethics driving this exhibition, I am still coming to terms with what is missing. I cannot help but want more background—not the generalised information about artists drawn from the thin skin of literature that surrounds them but more piercing accounts that understand the conditions within which works were not just made but thought and, yes, fought over. And I wish for closer readings of the works themselves, for this, in my view, is the real task of the curator/writer: to pay attention to the material and experiential qualities of works, to identify their artistic references and debts, to interrogate how they accent the discourse, where they fit within or fight against a larger field of practice. And, then, to articulate what these works tell us about the times and places in which they were made and what we might learn from them in the present.

What does one make, for example, of the fact that Ralph Hotere's *Black Paintings* (1968–69) were made



(opposite) *This hand that is every stone*, curated by Amy Weng, featuring banners by Rozana Lee & prints by Kate Coolahan, part of *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection*, Govett-Brewster Gallery, July 2022
(Photograph: Bryan James)

(right) SONYA LACEY *Stools and Sleep metal pillows* 2021–22
Steel, copper, zinc, magnesium, iron
(Photograph: Stephen Cleland)

(below) *Thresholds*, curated by Simon Gennard, with work by Maria Olsen, part of *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection*, Govett-Brewster Gallery, July 2022
(Photograph: Bryan James)



before Bill Sutton's landscapes (1976–77)? In the normal scheme of art-historical accounting artists move from realistic depiction to abstraction, not the other way around. Does this mean Sutton's are rear-guardist, reactionary? How might we account for Coolahan's choice of medium and montage aesthetic when we learn her prints are contemporaneous with Sutton's paintings? And why does Olsen paint imagined, impossible landscapes a decade later? Or do all these artists simply occupy different points in an equal and infinite spectrum of possibilities?

Perhaps my questions matter less than the opportunity to use these artists' works in and for the present. There is pleasure to be had in drawing new connections, provided here most especially by the contemporary artists (and writer) who have worked with the curators to make sense of their choices now. In the wake of these 'fragments and part-objects' from the Govett-Brewster's collection we are shown (in the order the exhibitions unfold): an entwinement of human and plant life; the survival and adaptation of hybridised non-Western iconographies; female atua and ancestors; and a place-based Pākehā (not European) vision. These are all things we *want* to see in this moment.

1. Elle Loui August used this word in the panel discussion staged on the day after the exhibition opening.
2. This is Gaston Bachelard's term Gennard quotes in his essay 'Thresholds' in *Several Degrees of Attention: Thinking with the Collection*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth 2022, pp. 8–9, 11.
3. David Velasco, 'Love's Work', Editor's Letter, *Artforum*, September 2022, p. 50.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think this Essay Is About You', in *Touching, Feeling, Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham 2003, p. 146, as quoted by Velasco, *ibid.*
5. *Ibid.* Velasco's emphasis.
6. See Christina Barton, 'Moving/On: Time, Place and the Body in the Work of Pauline Rhodes', in *Ground/Work: The Art of Pauline Rhodes*, Adam Art Gallery and Victoria University Press, Wellington 2002, especially pp. 28–38.



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