

An interview with Joel Kirkham
of Tokyo's Goya Curtain Project Space

by Catherine Dale

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Anoushka Akel, *Two Stage Transfer (after T.O.)*, 2020, oil on un-stretched canvas, 600mm x 450mm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Anoushka Akel, *Examiner*, 2019, oil on canvas, 350 x 450 mm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Andrew Barber, *Existing*, 2017, ink on tatami. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Patrick Lundberg, *No title, 32 parts, 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* (detail). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

Joel Kirkham is a New Zealander who has been living in Tokyo for the past ten years where he runs the project space and gallery Goya Curtain. He is a practising artist and teaches art at Temple University, Japan Campus. The gallery, established in 2016 by Kirkham and fellow artist Bjorn Houtman, hosts exhibitions and projects by international and local artists. New Zealand artists Matt Henry, Andrew Barber, Patrick Lundberg, and Stella Corkery have all shown work there. Catherine Dale sat with Kirkham in the gallery to talk about the conception, rationale, and working life of the space, and about the exhibition (RED LEGS) HOT HEAD by Anoushka Akel, presented from September 4th – 27th, 2020.

CATHERINE DALE You've described this space as Goya Curtain 2.0, referring to changes to the gallery since we last spoke in 2017,^[01] just before you moved to the current space in 2018. Can you explain these changes?

JOEL KIRKHAM Yes, the lease of our first space in Naka-Meguro expired and the building was demolished. My good friend and co-founder Bjorn Houtman returned to New Zealand and I decided to continue the programme. Without much effort, I found the new space on the west side of Ikebukuro station, an interesting part of the city known for its young gangsters and slightly gritty atmosphere. Ikebukuro is in North Tokyo and is the second busiest train station in the world, with about 2.7 million people passing through each day.

CD Can you describe the current space?

JK The gallery is in an apartment in a quiet residential area close to a small park. The space is small, roughly 12 metres squared, and is one of four rooms in an old 1960s building. It includes a six-mat tatami room, a wardrobe space, and a tiny kitchen. The wardrobe is used as a display area, it's a bit like a gallery within a gallery. The way this space is laid out is very modular and everything is measured by the tatami mat system: room sizes, building design patterns, and units of land. It is arranged like a bento box, this compartmentalising of things, the rice, pickles, miso soup, each separated with clear boundaries.

The apartment looks out onto the street below, and a gaggle of wires leading to a power pole. The walls are painted white, and the beams are left as they are. I heard from the owner that it used to be his sister's room. In a sense the space has been treated like an interesting found object, its physical attributes have been exposed, and its domestic nature is in plain view. Aside from all that, the space has a lovely atmosphere and great natural light. The tatami mats help people to relax, and visitors often spend up to an hour or more with exhibitions.

CD What made you and Bjorn want to set up a gallery in 2016?

JK I had previously rented an old Ramen shop, used it as a studio, and had a show there. That space was rented on a temporary basis and since that time I'd been hoping to find a new studio. Bjorn and I were always in communication about art, and when a space did become available, I asked him if he'd like to share it. We couldn't afford to spend a lot and Bjorn wasn't sure whether he needed a studio, and then we came up with the idea of setting up a gallery space that would be used as a studio between exhibitions. Our goal was to break even, with a studio and gallery that would pay for itself. Initially, we sold prints that we made, and we also asked exhibiting artists to contribute something (20,000 yen or about 260 NZD). After year two we stopped asking artists to contribute financially, as they already put so much into the making of shows.



Andrew Barber, *The small work is to the painter, as costly as the large, 2017* (installation view). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Axes, group exhibition featuring members of KNULP gallery, Sydney (installation view). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Andrew Barber, *Existing, 2017*, ink on tatami. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



The rock outside Goya Curtain. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

CD Can you say something about the gallery's name and its connection to the city.

JK The name Goya Curtain comes from the time of the massive earthquake here in 2011, which was followed by a tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident. The nuclear plants were shut down and electricity was rationed. It gets very hot and sticky in Tokyo in summer, so instead of air conditioners, people were encouraged to grow curtains of climbing plants such as the goya or melon (gourd), to trail outside their windows. These leaves block the direct sun, and keep the inside temperatures down. Green curtains in summer are not uncommon in Tokyo, but that summer, because of the situation, they stood out more clearly. Bjorn and I started a zine to document that time and called it Goya Curtain, then we kept the name when we opened the gallery in 2016, also liking the connection to Spanish artist Francisco de Goya.

CD How is Goya Curtain run, and do you sell work?

JK The focus is rather on making great shows, and if something is sold then that's a bonus. We don't receive funding, and luckily the space is cheap enough that it's affordable. I don't think it's possible to find a cheaper room than this. People associate Goya Curtain with tatami mats, but that's incidental, we exist in this space because the room is cheap. If it were a space for commercial use, the rent would be much more, and this project would change into something else. So the spaces Goya Curtain uses are inherent to the project.

CD Seeing an exhibition is possible by appointment only, tell me about that?

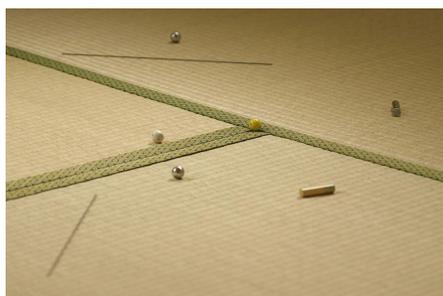
JK This is a residential building, which means I need to be aware of who is entering the building out of respect to our neighbours. For this reason, viewing is by appointment only, and we don't have opening receptions for shows. If someone is visiting for the first time, we set a day and time via email or Instagram, and

I ask them to follow Google maps to Goya Curtain. There are no sign boards outside the building, you'd never know it's here.

The google maps pin for Goya Curtain is actually a small rock set into the ground 10 metres past the actual building. When visitors arrive at the rock they call me and I'll go down to greet them, and show them the way. I explain that it's a private space, and that they need to remove shoes at the entrance, and then I take people up the steep, narrow, wooden stairwell. At the top, you can see a little business card on the door quietly locating Goya Curtain. Once visitors know the location, they still need to make an appointment, but may come directly to the room. At the first space, we used to have openings and sell drinks to help pay the rent, and these often turned into Friday night parties. Now I serve tea, and sit down with visitors for a chat. I like this low key method as the focus is more on the work.



Patrick Lundberg, *No title, 32 parts, 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* (detail). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Patrick Lundberg, *No title, 32 parts, 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* (Installation detail). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Camilla Steinum, *Minting*, aluminium and bronze, 2019. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Olof Nimar and Luca Frei, 2017 (installation view). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

CD

What is your role at Goya Curtain?

JK I see my role as a facilitator. I like to work closely with artists to help them make great exhibitions. Some artists are very independent, and that's fine, while others require more of a curatorial role from me. Either way, the exhibition making, and how the work fits into the space is often quite collaborative. I'm a second pair of eyes for the artist, and I try to make the whole process as stress-free, and enjoyable as possible. Once the exhibition making is done, my role becomes that of host. I greet guests and introduce them to the work. It's a bit like a showroom in that sense.

CD What do you get out of running Goya Curtain?

JK Goya Curtain connects me to the wider world and I get to meet a lot of really interesting people. That's the main thing, and I also continue to receive an education in crafting exhibitions from the processes involved, and from the artists themselves. I sometimes say Goya Curtain is like my PhD project. There have also been opportunities to make exhibitions in other spaces, which is great. We had an exhibition at Caves gallery in Melbourne in 2018, showing photographs by Yusuke Kihara alongside my own work, and in 2019 hosted an exhibition by the Knulp Gallery (Sydney) members, as a type of exchange with an invitation to make an exhibition there in the future.

CD What artists do you show and how does the balance work with local and international artists?

JK We show both international and local artists. To begin with it was mainly friends, and since then our network has extended. We've shown quite a few artists from New Zealand and Australia, and from Europe. Many of the early exhibitions can be traced back to our (Bjorn and I) art school days in Auckland, and in the last couple of years our network has diversified. These days I will reach out to artists whose work I respect, and sometimes they agree to make shows.

The space itself also dictates the artists who show. For international artists I prefer smaller, lighter, easier to transport work. For example, Matt Hinkley showed up from Rotterdam for his exhibition with one small plastic Chinese takeaway box containing all his work and tools. Using tweezers, he installed a tiny pile of cast objects. What the work lacked in scale, it made up for in detail. Visitors were able to use a magnifying glass to see the work. The magnifying glass was more gimmicky than anything, but it added an element of fun to the work. Within the intensity and denseness of Tokyo, I like to think of Goya Curtain as one small part of Hinkley's installation, waiting to be found if you look close enough.



Matt Hinkley, installation view (detail), 2018. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Soshi Matsunobe, *Dimensional Box*, 2015, acrylic resin, plywood, LED. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Stella Corkery, *I've Seen Sunny Days*, 2018 (installation view), Goya Curtain, Tokyo. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Stella Corkery, *Road Cone*, oil paint on velvet (installation view). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Stella Corkery, *Ruffle Bomb*, 2017, oil on purple velvet. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

CD Do you get many inquiries from artists wanting to show with you?

JK I wouldn't say many, but quite a few, and from well-regarded artists, who are very well organised and professional. Unfortunately, due to the fact that this is basically a one-person

operation, I can only host 2-3 exhibitions a year now. Doing fewer shows means less pressure, more time to craft exhibitions, and a focus on quality over quantity. It's also nice to take a breather between shows, and concentrate on my own practice.

CD What about your own art practice?

JK After coming to Japan in 2006, I didn't seriously make work for quite a number of years, so in a sense I'm playing catch-up now. My friends and colleagues are making work to a very high standard, so I have a lot to aspire to, and intend to keep practicing. I use Goya Curtain as a studio between shows, and this is very important for me as I have a studio-based practice. I'm lucky in that I also have access to studios at my place of work, and a small workspace at my home. So I often make things elsewhere, then bring them here to interrogate what I've made in the neutrality of the space.

CD Tell me about the other artist run spaces you like here in Tokyo, and about other galleries you like.

JK Recently several new artist-run initiatives have been established including Lavender Opener Chair and im labor. They both host great exhibitions and are organised by lovely people. I'm also a fan of 4649, XYZ collective, Asakusa Gallery, Aoyama/Meguro, Misako & Rosen, Hagiwara Projects, and Kayoko Yuki gallery. Then there are the established commercial galleries like Tomio Koyama, Taka Isshi, and Scai the Bathhouse, which are all central to this art world ecosystem.^[02] On top of these are the museums that stage large scale local and international shows, which include the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, The National Museum of Modern Art, and the Mori Art Museum.

CD What is Goya Curtain's role in this gallery scene?

JK That's a good question and I don't really know how to answer. Goya Curtain is small, and due to the nature of the space, it's a discreet project. We can't draw too much attention, so the programme simmers on a low heat. The gallery is connected to Tokyo's other smaller galleries and spaces, but quietly. Starting in this city from scratch hasn't been easy, to build trust and establish some history takes time, and effort. It takes being genuinely willing to support others, to visit exhibitions, and be a proactive part of the community. This effort is ongoing. Like most places it's all really based on friendships, trust, and respect. I do feel support here though.



Anoushka Akel, *Red Legs, Hot Head*, 2020, oil and pastel on un-stretched canvas, 900 x 1200mm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Anoushka Akel, *Examiner*, 2019, oil on canvas, 350 x 450 mm. Image courtesy Goya.



Anoushka Akel, (*Red Legs*) *Hot Head* (installation view), 2020, Goya Curtain, Tokyo. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Anoushka Akel, *Two Stage Transfer (after T.O)*, 2020, oil on un-stretched canvas, 600mm x 450mm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Anoushka Akel, *Examiner (2)*, 2020, oil on canvas, 600 x 450mm (installation view). Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

CD You receive visitors from many places. I never know who I'm going to meet when I come to a show here: someone from Patagonia teaching design at an art school in London, an artist from Australia on a walking tour, or a curator from Mexico who wants to set up a gallery here to promote Mexican artists. Another time, a friend of yours Mr Nojima, who is a professional Kyogen actor, was visiting and gave us an impromptu performance

on Andrew Barber's painted tatami floor. He'd attended a Kyogen conference earlier that day, in costume, and stopped by the gallery on his way home.^[03]

JK Yes, you've met some of these people just from overlapping appointments. One of the best things about running GC is the interesting and lovely people who walk through the door. Generally, visitors are friends, colleagues, and art enthusiasts.

CD Let's talk about the show that's just been on.

JK We hosted an exhibition of very fresh and beautiful paintings by Anoushka Akel. Most of the works included in the show were made in 2020, leading up to and around the lockdown period in New Zealand. The show is titled, (Red Legs) Hot Head. The atmosphere is warm, soft, and energetic.

CD CD: This show was a little postponed. Akel couldn't access her studio in Auckland because of the New Zealand-wide lockdown. It is not surprising then, that when she was able, eventually, to get to work, she was also thinking about what was happening outside the studio as if the inside and the outside had fixed things into new relationships. In *Bathing (Lamplight or Urine)* (2020), Akel brings the outside into the painting. In her artist statement, she writes about sound, light, and smell entering the studio, and it reminded me of the virus slipping through the borders of our bodies.

The pooling effect of the yellow depicting the urine lit by street lamps and then the street light reflected in the urine creates a sympathetic or resonant reflection that makes the painting internally dynamic.

Bathing (Lamplight or Urine) hangs opposite the entrance. It's the first work you see, this large unstretched canvas nailed to the wall. The work sets the show in motion, with its thick wavy lines, the yellow shimmers, and the canvas threads moving a little from the

breeze through the open window. Tell me about the second unstretched canvas on the floor, *Red Legs, Hot Head* (2020).

JK *Red Legs, Hot Head* is the central work in this exhibition, warming the room, and those that gather around. Like the name suggests, the work is agitated and lively, and for this reason it took some time to find its physical place in the exhibition. The loose threads from the unstretched canvas trail the ground, reminding me of jellyfish tentacles.



Anoushka Akel, *No title (P.P)*, 2019, oil on canvas, 600 x 450mm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Anoushka Akel, *Bathing (Lamplight or Urine)*, 2020, oil on un-stretched canvas, 1000 x 1200mm, installation view, Goya Curtain, Tokyo. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Joel Kirkham, *Updated*, 2020, wood clay, wood, acrylic paint, stone, 30cm x 10cm. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.



Andrew Barber, *Bonsai (lol)*, 2017, gouache and ink on aluminium, wire, swivels. Image courtesy Goya Curtain.

CD Two other paintings lie beneath it, and you peeled the canvas back to show these like we were in the showroom of a carpet shop. It was a very novel way to view the work.

JK I couldn't find space for those two works in the show, so they were sheltered underneath Red Legs, Hot Head. Visitors are always happy and surprised when I reveal the hidden works beneath. The loose ends of the works contrasted beautifully with the tautness of the four stretched paintings.

CD In an article on Akel's work, the writer Lucinda Bennett describes the paintings as condensed, quoting Akel's description of her own work as being about pressure.^[04] I see compression in the deep starless midnight blue of (Karangahape) Sight Formation, 2020.^[05]

JK I was very happy with how that work sat in our space, hanging low to the ground between two windows. It had a lovely connection with the retro, frosted window panes. It took a few goes to get the overall install right, and bringing the works over to Japan was a challenge with the ongoing pandemic, but the exhibition turned out well and the feedback was very positive.

CD Do you get much help with Goya Curtain?

JK Yes, I have wonderful helpers. While I do most of the running of the space, making appointments, greeting people, programming etc., I also rely on friends for help. A good friend based in LA maintains our website, and an editor friend based in Tokyo goes over all the exhibition texts, using his slash and burn technique. And I have two wonderful bilingual translators, one based in New Zealand and one in Japan, who translate the texts into Japanese. Finally, there's an unofficial board of directors, including Bjorn who I often run ideas by, and yourself.

CD So, you plan to keep the gallery going?

JK Yes, and I've just signed a two-year contract on the current space. I'm interested in how to maintain something at a slower pace over a longer duration, without it becoming stagnant. Goya Curtain needs to grow and continually adjust to its and my changing circumstances. In regards to making decisions about Goya Curtain, it's important for me to avoid anxiety and stress. The current space has limitations, but I like to think that these limitations add to, rather than subtract from, the story. I try to go with the flow of things, and work with what is available. I'm also on a constant lookout for other interesting spaces, so you may see Goya Curtain 3.0 sometime in the future.

Footnotes

01. Catherine Dale, "Goya Curtain, Tokyo," *Art & Australia*, 2017. www.artandaustralia.com

02. www.artspace.com/magazine

03. Nobuhito Nojima performed a shortened 狂言 (Kyogen) performance on Andrew Barber's tatami painting titled *Existing*. Kyogen meaning "mad words" or "wild speech" is a form of traditional Japanese comic theatre, closely associated with Noh theatre.

04. Lucinda Bennett, "The Felt and the Told: On Anoushka Akel," *Art New Zealand*, 169, Autumn 2019, 54-57.

05. (*after T.O*) 2020, which was one of the works lying underneath *Red legs, Hot Head*, uses a similar blue and a two-stage transfer technique.

Biographies



Andrew Barber was born in 1978 in Auckland, where he is now based. Recent exhibitions include: *Painting*, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington (2016); *Necessary Distraction*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki (2015); *A world undone: Works from the Chartwell Collection*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki (2014); *From under the house*, Peter McLeavey, Wellington (2014); *When I paint my masterpiece*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland (2014); *New Revised Edition*, City Gallery, Wellington (2013); *Flags*, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington (2013); and *Hedge*, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington (2012).



Anoushka Akel is an artist who lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau. She received her MFA from the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2010. Akel works across the mediums of painting and printmaking. Consistent ideas within her practice include: embodied knowledge, cognitive psychology, and philosophies of care as well as pressure and plasticity in relation to the body, behaviour, and the art object.

Selected exhibitions include: *(Red Legs) Hot Head*, 2020, Goya Curtain, Tokyo; *Learners*, 2019, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington; *Biographies of Transition: Too Busy to Think*, 2017, Artspace, Auckland, NZ; *Chain of Mountains*, 2016, TCB, Melbourne; *Back, Front, Brain*, 2016, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington; *Painting: A Transitive Space*, 2016, St. Paul Street Gallery 3, Auckland; *Necessary Distraction: A Painting Show*, 2015, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland; *Hop Scotch*, 2012, Artspace, Auckland. Akel was the recipient of the C Art Trust Award in 2018 and was artist in residence at Künstlerhäuser Worpswede, Bremen, Germany in 2013.

Joel Kirkham is an artist, who teaches studio art courses at Temple University, Japan Campus.

Matt Henry (b. 1973) appropriates formal aspects of art, design and architecture to explore histories and contradictions imbedded in the minimalist idiom. Central to his practice is an interest in the mechanisms of commodification and consumption and the attendant shift of particular signifiers which move between art and design contexts. Known for his minimalist paintings and installations, Henry's works summon these contextual shifts through altered scale, media and materials. Playful and often incongruous, his paradoxically mimetic form of non-objective art invites new readings and interactions between art and the everyday.

Henry lives and works in Wellington, New Zealand. He received his MFA from Melbourne's RMIT University in 2008 and his work is held in public and private collections including the Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; Wallace Arts Trust; New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade; Elevation Capital Art Collection and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.



Patrick Lundberg, b.1984, Stockholm, Sweden. Graduated from The Elam School of Fine Arts with a BFA in 2005 and later attended Kungl. Konsthögskolan, Stockholm as a guest student from 2011-12. Exhibitions include: *The science of light* (solo), Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington (2019), *Painting Amongst Other Things* (group), ANCA Gallery, Canberra, *Petrified at the instant of a change of wind* (solo), Ivan Anthony, Auckland, *New Seams* (solo), Station Gallery, Melbourne (2017), *No title, 32 parts, 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* (solo), Goya Curtain, Tokyo (2017), *Necessary Distraction: A Painting Show* (group), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2015. Awards include: The Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, University of Otago (2014), Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum, Hamilton (2008).



Stella Corkery's (b. 1960, Tuatapere, NZ) painting practice is driven by interpretations of the past and ideas surrounding new feminisms. Corkery tends to bypass preparatory devices such as drawing in order to create work with some immediacy, directly on to the canvas, improvising and problem-solving in situ. References within her work can stretch across art history, contemporary art, popular culture and musical influences such as post-punk and free jazz. The result is bodies of work that often appear to belong to disparate systems, yet still operate within a conceptually unified programme. Corkery also works outside of visual mediums playing experimental music as a solo project and as part of the duo *White Saucer*.

Corkery graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland with a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours in 2012, and a Master of Fine Arts in 2013. In 2015 her work was included in a major exhibition of contemporary New Zealand painting, *Necessary Distraction: A painting show* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Solo exhibitions include *Year of the Head*, Olga, Dunedin (2020); *Paradises*, Michael Lett, Auckland (2020); *I've Seen Sunny Days*, Goya Curtain, Tokyo (2018) and *Keep Smiling the Boss Loves Idiots*, Poppy's Gallery, New York City (2016).



Catherine Dale teaches literary studies and feminist philosophy at Chuo University in Tokyo, Japan.

