We Work Well Together

by Julia Craig

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Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, installation view, Phillida Reid, London, 20 January—17 February 2024. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, 2022 (film still). 16 mm film transfer to HD, 9'04". Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



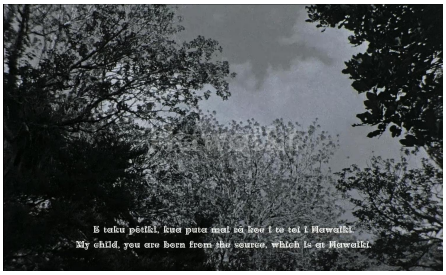
Claudia Kogachi, *Labour of Love*, installation view, Phillida Reid, London, 20 January—17 February 2024. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



Claudia Kogachi, *Planning Stage*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame, 123 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



Claudia Kogachi, *Kiss, Kiss*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame, 34.5 x 29.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



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Phillida Reid in Central London presents Labour of Love*, a series of paintings by Claudia Kogachi, and* Hawaiki*, a film by Nova Paul. Both depict those busy at work on a common project: Kogachi in her meta-staging of the production of her paintings, made in collaboration with her partner Josephine Jelicich, and Paul in her depiction of children constructing a shelter of ancestral significance. Here, the writer Julia Craig draws out the creative labour that goes into building worlds—the necessary, and necessarily collaborative, work of building worlds of love, care, and self-determination.*

This piece is published in partnership with Phillida Reid, London. They have covered the writers fee for this publication, while Contemporary HUM *has retained editorial control.*

On Grape Street, in London's Soho district, in the space of the gallery Phillida Reid (formerly Southard Reid), worlds converge. Against the backdrop of the commercial gallery space, with various textures of brick and plaster, and incongruous but inherited elements such as a disused fireplace and a typical London basement, two Aotearoa New Zealand artists explore themes of community and love through acts of labour and collaboration. Downstairs is Nova Paul's nine-minute film *Hawaiki*, and, back upstairs, Claudia Kogachi's new series of paintings, *Labour of Love*, hang on an old brick wall and newer, white walls. Both of these works carve out emotional spaces and extend outwards, in a southerly direction, to Aotearoa, but also towards collectively built worlds, and back in again.

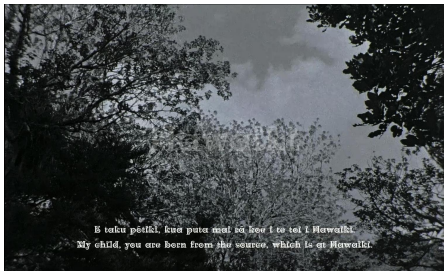
Paul's *Hawaiki* presents a vignette of children at play on their whenua (ancestral land), Aotea Great Barrier Island. It is sunny, the surroundings are lush, and the children are chirpy. The film starts with the group of children emerging from bushes with loot in their hands: the dead flowers from harakeke (species of flax endemic to New Zealand), which they proceed to use to construct a bivouac shelter. They do so leisurely; some of them hang in the tree branches above, watching and teasing the others below ("Ewww you farted!" someone yells from their branch). Another child bemoans a recent admonishment they received from a koro (elderly man or grandfather). The atmosphere is breezy, and the children appear to be their most relaxed selves—no adults are around to bother them now. As the film unfolds, we observe the group of children as they move between building their bivouac and playing in the tree, swinging their legs and chatting happily. The film ends with the children in a quieter state of fixation as they weave the harakeke into various objects: a few children collaborately weave together a small woven square of harakeke into a wharaki (mat), and a lone child weaves herself a harakeke star.



Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, 2022 (film still). 16 mm film transfer to HD, 9'04". Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



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Between bursts of distracted play, the children are in a state of busy-ness. But, they are busy at realising a dream, or a collective self, rather than going about quotidian tasks. The exhibition text, as reflected in the title of Paul's work, tells us that the children named their shelter "Hawaiki." In Māori tradition, Hawaiki is the legendary homeland where Māori come from and where they will return to after death. The whakataukī (proverb) "E taku pōtiki, kua puta mai rā koe i te toi i Hawaiki" (My child, you are born from the source, which is at Hawaiki) is offered to us, the audience, at the beginning of the film, in bold script that curls like koru (a spiral motif typical in Māori artmaking practices).

The light in Paul's film feels slightly overexposed, casting a luminosity over her subjects, which include not just the children, but the land, the trees, the harakeke flowers and bushes—broadly, Papatūanuku (in Māori tradition, the land or Earth Mother). It is a quality of light similar to that captured by artist Robin White in her paintings of rural New Zealand shops, factories, and landscapes in the 1970s, a warm, near-blinding gold that drapes itself over everything and casts opposing shadows, which is amplified by Paul's lens in *Hawaiki*. That camera lens is also positioned in ways that amplify the power of nature and the whenua that surround the children. Observing the children through tree branches and strong rays of sun, we see them through the lens of their environs. In one particularly arresting frame, we see a girl quietly bent over her harakeke creation, while the maunga (mountain, also ancestral mountain) behind her frames the tableau—her maunga embraces her and her creation. Paul's lens evokes the centrality of Papatūānuku and mana whenua

(tribal authority over lands) in the self-determination of the children.



Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, installation view, Phillida Reid, London, 20 January—17 February 2024. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



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Back in the upstairs gallery on Grape Street, another collaborative action is forming a collective sense of being. Here, large paintings with sensuous colours of fuschia, lilac, and maroon, paired with halcyon greens and blues, depict a series of scenes in which Kogachi and her partner Josephine Jelicich, a woodworker and furniture maker, carry out the steps to make the frames of the paintings hanging before us, each phase detailed in the titles of the works: *Planning Stage*, *Selecting Wood*, *Lunch Break*, *Drill Press*, and *Kiss, Kiss*. The thickly painted canvases are framed by walnut timber cut into curving or spiky forms. This is typical of Kogachi's style, who often presents works made of haptic textures, like tufted rugs, thick house paint, and oily pastels. Kogachi is renowned for depicting jaunty scenes with tilted perspectives, so that we can see all the playful details between her figures, among which Kogachi almost always depicts herself.

Kogachi's pictorial worlds, for me, always evoke a sense of pleasure. This is evident in a recent framed rug, *Goat Eating Tomatoes* (2023), included in Jhana Millers' booth at the 2023 Aotearoa Art Fair, which portrays a happy goat munching on tomato, or in the titular painting *Blue Moon* (2022), shown the previous year at a solo exhibition at Melanie Rogers Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, in which the artist paints herself as three red-bikini-clad centaurs luxuriating in a pool of water—a heightened fantasy of pleasure. In *Labour of Love* at Phillida Reid, Kogachi's paintings

are just as seductive, but this time perhaps rooted in a less fantastical version of reality, as they explore as simple a pleasure as love.

The paintings in *Labour of Love* have a stark, matter-of-fact quality. The paint is flat, and the colours are unmodulated. Figures' skin is largely unblemished, and there is little distinction between the surfaces and textures of, say, flesh and polyester. The artist has not troubled herself with issues of shadow and three-dimensionality in her objects, so that her paintings have a lightness—unencumbered by the meticulous detail we might expect from the painterly depiction of "real life." Instead, the artist is more interested in the sensory enjoyment she finds in the formal qualities of paint and canvas. This openness to the sensual brings to mind Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic, which she describes as "the open and fearless underlining of [one's] capacity for joy" and the availing of oneself to the body's "deepest rhythms" in such a way that the activation of every sense "also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea."[01]



Claudia Kogachi, *Selecting Wood*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame, 124 x 105 x 6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



Claudia Kogachi, *Drill Press*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame, 124 x 105 x 6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



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In *Labour of Love*, the sensual immediacy of Kogachi's material treatment conjoins with the satisfaction of completing a task. In the first scene, *Planning Stage*, the couple, with fingers interlaced, regard a preparatory sketch of one of the paintings in the series, supposedly planning out the construction of the frames in Jelicich's workshop. In *Selecting Wood*, the two are picking out the timber for the frames. They both grasp the same length of wood and lean in, just about to kiss. Tucked into Kogachi's jeans are

paintbrushes, while a hammer and pencils hang off Jelicich's denim shorts. In *Lunch Break*, the couple takes a break from their work, eating sushi and sharing some with their Miniature Fox Terrier, Fran. Various tools hang in the background of the scene, and the couple wear matching Blundstone steel-cap boots—a sly reference to the stereotype of "U-Haul Lesbians," which describes the apparent tendency of lesbians to commit to (and move in with) each other quickly, and the ensuant "urge to merge,"[02] in which partners begin to assume each other's style of dress.

On the opposite wall, we see the finished product of the preliminary sketch featured in *Planning Stage*. In this painting, *Drill Press*, Jelicich begins to create the curving shapes of the walnut frame using a forstner bit, as Kogachi embraces her lovingly from behind. The final painting of the series, *Kiss, Kiss*, is much smaller than the others, and the workshop backdrop is now out of view. Within the small frame, we finally get to the crescendo of their intimacy with a tender and intimate kiss shared between the two. The series is playfully meta, as the paintings depict the process of their own making, but this comically self-referential aspect serves a purpose: it brings the focus onto Jelicich's handiwork, and celebrates her artistic brilliance alongside the artist's.

There is also another kind of meta-referencing at play in *Labour of Love*. The couple wear matching Blundstone boots, their stitching and lacing meticulously painted by Kogachi. These boots bring to mind another work of art where sexuality is both coded and self-consciously performed: Alex Monteith and Catherine Opie's film *Sp lit* (2011), which was part of *The Bill*, an exhibition held at Artspace Aotearoa (then Artspace NZ) in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 2016. In this film, we see Monteith and Opie clad in the same blue denim, with similarly matching boots, chopping wood together. Their coded accoutrements allude to a queer intimacy, much like Félix González-Torres' photographs and participatory sculptures, which encode mundane objects with references to himself and his partner, Ross, such as two clocks side by side and a slowly diminishing pile of candy, both alluding to Ross' HIV diagnosis. The content buried under this coding is often reserved for those who "get" the reference—a hidden language for communities of shared experience.



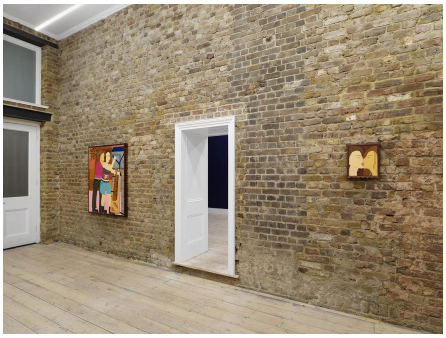
Claudia Kogachi, *Labour of Love*, installation view, Phillida Reid, London, 20 January—17 February 2024. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



Claudia Kogachi, *Lunch Break*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame, 123 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Phillida Reid, London.



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Adorning the necks and shoelaces of both Kogachi and Jelicich are curious pieces of jewellery: large silver chain necklaces (with an additional purple gem set in a spiky casing for Kogachi) and butterfly-shaped pendants nestled in the laces of their matching Blundstone steel-caps. To those “in the know”—those familiar with the creative scene in central Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland—the references are obvious: the purple-gemmed necklace worn by Kogachi is by her contemporary, jeweller Hannah Davis-Gray, who

runs the brand Dangerous Goods, and the shoe jewels identifiably by another New Zealand jeweller, Shannen Young. Kogachi and Jelicich's labour of love is not restricted to themselves, in their workroom, but also the connections they have with other artists outside the workshop. At first glance, the painted matching necklaces and shoe accessories could signal a proclivity to fine things, to artistic objects, like the ones they are fashioning together (and the ones before us in the gallery). More so, however, these objects locate us in a time and place, as specific as Karangahape Road in Central Auckland, where artists and practitioners such as Kogachi and Jelicich, Davis-Gray, and Young might work, exhibit, and hang out. This locality is even more pronounced when it is taken out of context and placed in the streets of Soho in London. The inclusion of these objects could also act as coded language typical of "queer art," where being "in the know" is a cheeky subversion of the historically heteronormative institution of the art gallery, but they also act as coded references to place, alluding to the creative community Kogachi and Jelicich operate within.

As such, these objects facilitate a reaching outwards to other artists to bring them into Kogachi and Jelicich's labour of love, in a de-valuing of the self that foregrounds the collectivity of artists and artmaking. In addition to exploring the erotic as a site of sensual delight and fantasy, *Labour of Love* can be understood in terms of Lorde's notion of the erotic as the sense of the satisfaction and creative power activated through work. The couple's evident mutual satisfaction in their artmaking, as depicted in Kogachi's paintings, evokes a palpable sense of joy, and that joy is roundly committed back into their work. In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde describes how the market economy that defines "good" in terms of profit rather than human need ultimately crushes the erotic value one can find in their work, reducing any labour to a necessity rather than a pleasure. She likens this to "blinding a painter then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting."[03] Kogachi's *Labour of Love* enacts what Lorde suggests can overcome this oppressive force of capitalism: "sharing deeply any pursuit with another person."[04] Kogachi's depiction of work, therefore, is one of liberation and connection. The sharing of joy, which they find in the satisfaction from

producing art together, “forms a bridge between the sharers,” whose power is located in their shared creative pursuit.

At large, both Paul’s and Kogachi’s works at Phillida Reid enact an "unselfing."[05] Paul’s film channels the mauri (life force) of nature to evoke its connectedness to the children, and how the children’s sense of selfhood, and agency, is deeply connected to and activated through each other and the whenua. Their world is built before us; we witness the formation of a Hawaiki through gestures of play and weaving enmeshed within nature. Similarly, Kogachi’s own inner world is constructed through her enmeshment with her partner, her work, and her wider community of practice. Within these worlds the artists have built, work has been liberated from tedium and exploitation. Instead, labour is a conduit for joy and community-building, and our interconnectedness with each other and the natural world is made precious. The individual notion of the self, including the oppressive artistic ego that has dominated art history for so long, blissfully evaporates and dissolves into the crowd.

Footnotes

01. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde* (Norton & Company, 2020), 56.

02. Conversation with the artist.

03. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

04. Lorde, 56.

05. The concept of “unselfing” is attributed to the Irish novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch.

Biographies



Claudia Kogachi works with painting, textiles and installation. Her work leans into the personal and the imaginary; often depicting herself and those close to her carrying out everyday activities, exploring collective moments, or inserting herself and loved ones into fantastical or comical situations. Kogachi also presents story-book-like scenarios, populated by creatures and animated elements from nature, films, or folklore, using composition to delve into interpersonal dynamics and/or emotional states. Oscillating between painting and textile, and a variety of installation techniques with a playful ease, Kogachi embraces the awkward, the charming, the romantic and the magical, through a distinctive visual language of bold block colour and textural touch, producing works of simultaneously friendly and provocative presence.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Exit 8*, Aupuni Space, Hawai'i, USA (2023); *There's No I in Team*, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, Aotearoa New Zealand (2021-2); *Heaven Must Be Missing An Angel*, Jhana Millers, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand (2022); *Obaachan During The Lockdown*, Wahiawa, Hawai'i, Te Tuhi, Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand (2020).



Nova Paul (Te Urironoi, Te Parawhau, and Te Māhurehure ki Whatitiri, Ngāpuhi) is an artist, film-maker, and Indigenous rights researcher currently residing in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Her film-making practice draws from te ao Māori knowledge as well as early cinema, experimental film histories and fourth wave film discourse to consider the poetics and politics of place and tino rangatiratanga.

Paul has shown at galleries including Whitechapel Gallery, London (UK); Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Wellington City Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū (Aotearoa NZ); Australia Melbourne Museum, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Artspace Sydney (Australia). She has presented films at Sundance Film Festival, New Zealand Film Festival, Short Film Festival Oberhaussen, London Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Rencontres Internationale, George Pompidou Centre, and Artists' Films International at the Venice Biennale. *Hawaiki* (2022) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2023.



Julia Craig is a writer and public servant based in London and hailing from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. She holds a Master of Public Policy and Master of Arts from the University of Auckland. She has previously held positions at Gus Fisher Gallery, Te Tuhi, and Window Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau, and has written for *The Art Paper*, *Art News New Zealand*, and *The Spinoff*.

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