With the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods

by Andrew Clifford

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Shannon Te Ao, *With the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods*, 2017, two channel video, colour and sound. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Installation view, Gladstone Court, Edinburgh Art Festival. Photo: Johnny Barrington. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.



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Shannon Te Ao, *Two shoots that stretch far out,* 2013–14 (video still), HD video, single-channel, 13:22min, colour, stereo sound. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington.

The Royal Mile traces a volcanic ridge through the centre of Edinburgh's historic old town, starting with the parade ground in front of Edinburgh Castle and sloping towards the coast to culminate at Holyrood Palace. Flanked by cathedrals, civic buildings, old and new-old pubs, and shops touting souvenirs (shortbread, tartan and whisky), it is the central axis for the region's tourism, particularly at festival time. Surprisingly, few visitors venture off the main street into its many side alleys and closes, so it is through commissioned artworks and interventions that we cultural tourists are led to hidden churches, gardens and stairways.

Not far from the main intersection of the Royal Mile and North Bridge is the Trinity Apse, which, for the duration of the festival, is a resting place for Zoe Walker and Neil Bromwich's large inflatable Dragon of Profit and Private Ownership*, inspired by a 1924 miners' banner. Nearby is the Scotsman Steps, a 2011 festival commission from Martin Creed, now a permanent feature of the city.*

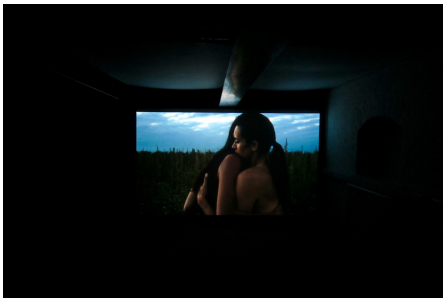
Just off the Canongate, at the lower end of the Mile, is one of Edinburgh's less proclaimed locations: Gladstone Court, once a 19th century Magdalene Asylum 'for fallen women who have deviated from the path of virtue and peace'. This is the venue for Shannon Te Ao's installation, With the sun aglow I have my pensive moods*, another of four key new commissions for the month-long 2017 Edinburgh Art Festival, alongside exhibitions at 20 partner venues, and further events, pop-ups and activities. This all sits within the wider programme of Edinburgh Festivals' 11 festivals, including the Edinburgh International Festival, the Fringe, the Tattoo and book festival, which take place in August.*

Given the large number of Scots who were part of the British colonisation of New Zealand, and the amount New Zealanders (including many Māori) who can claim lineage to Scotland, it is surprising that we haven't had more cultural exchange with Scotland, although there has been a notable increase in performers and artists participating in the Edinburgh Festivals in recent years, following an ongoing trickle of artists studying at the Glasgow School of Art. One notable example took place after Edinburgh gallerist and raconteur Richard DeMarco visited New Zealand, leading to a survey of New Zealand and Australian works for the Edinburgh Festival in 1984. This took place at the Edinburgh University student gallery under the auspices of the ANZART initiative, alongside a showing of the Colin McCahon survey *I Will Need Words* at the Talbot Rice Gallery (now under the directorship of New Zealand curator, Tessa Giblin), both curated by Wystan Curnow.[01]

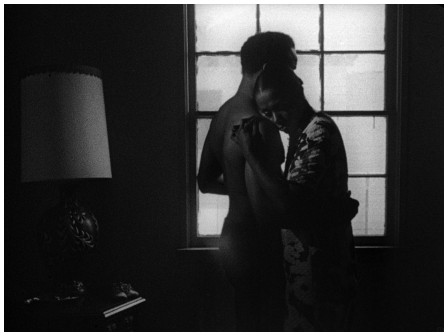
This year the Edinburgh Art Festival takes its theme (*The Making of the Future: Now*) from a manifesto written 100 years prior by Patrick Geddes, a town planner, activist and conservationist who believed in the agency of art, industry, education, health, morals and business all working together. Bobby Nixon's commission is a close fit. His *Palm House* is a glass house type shelter to be used as a studio and workshop venue; a social sculpture set in a wild garden that is in fact a public green space established by Geddes just below the Royal Mile.



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Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (still), 1977, black-and-white film in 35 mm, 83 minutes.

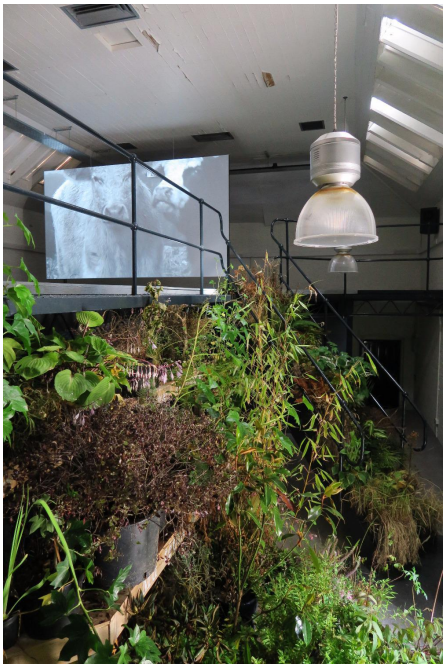


Gladstone Court entrance, Edinburgh Art Festival, 2017. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

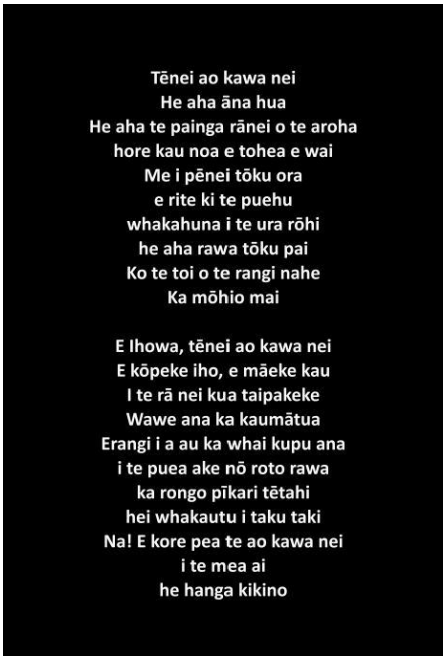
Te Ao's contribution was featured prominently in festival publicity and often used as a 'hero' image – although it wouldn't be unusual for a New Zealander abroad, including this writer, to disproportionately notice anything familiar from home. Nevertheless, distributed throughout central Edinburgh and in associated media was a dramatic still of two figures in an intimate embrace, shot against the backdrop of a dark cloudy rural landscape. This is taken from one of two video projections, which run in parallel on two separate levels of Gladstone Court's main building, combined with a soundtrack and tiers of potted plants that link the exhibition's ground and mezzanine floors. As you adjust to the darkened space and make your way past the plants, the first projection's dimly lit scene slowly becomes clearer. The two protagonists, holding each other tightly, turn slowly on the spot as the fading evening light darkens the surrounding landscape of wild-looking fields. The figures are distant and unspeaking, caught in a moment of grief, solace, respite or anticipation – something unspeakable has just happened, or is about to happen;

one of them has returned, or is about to leave, but for now time stands still as they escape in each other.

This key motif references a distinctive scene from African-American filmmaker Charles Burnett's first feature, *Killer of Sheep*, 1978, stylishly shot in black-and-white. Set in working-class Watts, Los Angeles, its title refers to the day-job held by Stan, the male lead, who works in an abattoir, but it could easily be mistaken for the name of a rural New Zealand story. Stan spends the film being pulled from one situation to another, but here finds time to dance slowly with his (unnamed) wife in their unlit living room, silhouetted against a window while Dinah Washington's rendition of the Clyde Otis song 'This Bitter Earth', 1960 plays in its entirety on a turntable ("this bitter earth can be so cold, today you are young, too soon you are old…"). Uninterrupted by edits, it is a singular performance that concludes when Stan departs and we cut to a view of sheep in pens. This song was previously quoted by Te Ao in his work *Tēnei ao kawa nei, tēnei one kawa, tēnei ao kawa nei*; three archival pigment prints with white text on a black background, each with a different Māori translation of the song, adding a local reading that suggests subjective relationships to the land, and perhaps the mistranslation of the Treaty of Waitangi in relation to ongoing land-claims. The translators of each come from Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland and were solicited by Te Ao as an invited response to a project in which German artist Daniel Maier-Reimer walked from Christchurch to Auckland in 2015.



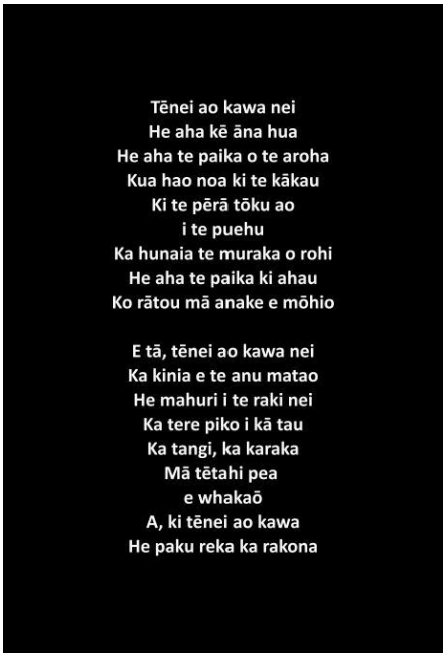
Shannon Te Ao, *With the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods*, 2017, two channel video, colour and sound. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Installation view, Gladstone Court, Edinburgh Art Festival. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Tēnei ao kawa nei commissioned translation of *This Bitter Earth* (Otis,C. 1964). Translated by Evelyn Tobin (Ngati Manu). Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.



Tēnei ao kawa nei commissioned translation of *This Bitter Earth* (Otis,C. 1964). Translated by Paora Tibble (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa, Te Whānau-a-Apanui). Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.



Tēnei ao kawa nei commissioned translation of *This Bitter Earth* (Otis,C. 1964). Translated by Paulette Tamati-Eileffe (Kāi Te Pahi, Kāi Te Ruahikihiki (Ōtākou). Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.

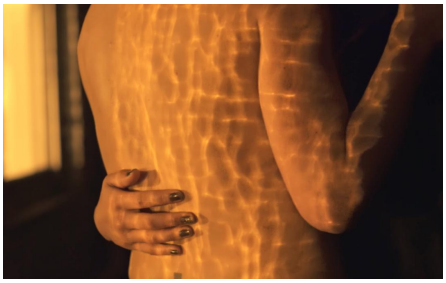
Te Ao has also deployed this scene in *Untitled (Malady)*, 2016, which also recasts Burnett's slow dance with two women, but moving in silence against a burning golden glow of low, dusk light

through a living room window. Burnett grew up during the era of American Civil Rights protests, and especially the Watts riots of 1965, and went on to produce films that rejected Hollywood clichés through which black characters were usually portrayed, if at all. Also dismissing the stereotypes of the era's blaxploitation films, Burnett presented a more positive portrayal of the everyday experiences of working class communities. (Coincidentally, running concurrently with the Edinburgh Festival is Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which surveyed Afro-American artists from a period of political unrest and revolution in the 1960s and 70s. This included Black Panther artist Emory Douglas, who has visited New Zealand on a number of occasions, coming into contact with Te Ao on his first visit in 2009 - Douglas spent time with like-minded groups including the Polynesian Panthers and the communities of Parihaka and Tūhoe.)

By introducing us to Burnett, Te Ao invokes the history of black American cinema (and struggle) and connects this to Aotearoa's own legacy of indigenous politics and filmmaking, the latter pioneered by the likes of Barry Barclay and Merata Mita. One reviewer has described Te Ao's Edinburgh project as a follow-up to Lisa Reihana's Venice Biennale project for the New Zealand pavilion, which launched a few months prior.[02] Although very different in approach, along with fellow Māori artist Nathan Pohio, who was concurrently showing in Documenta 14 in Kassel and Athens, there is a shared interest in the history of indigenous filmmaking, representation and voice. Reihana's *Emissaries* reclaims a narrative of colonial contact, giving it an indigenous voice and a different perspective with a view from the shore rather than from the ship – as Barclay would put it, a cowboys and Indians story that gets a rare retelling from the Indian's point-of-view.[03] Like Reihana's project, Te Ao's also looks at meetings and considers their subsequent impact.



Shannon Te Ao, *Untitled (Malady)*, 2016, single-channel video (still), colour and sound, 13:16 min. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.



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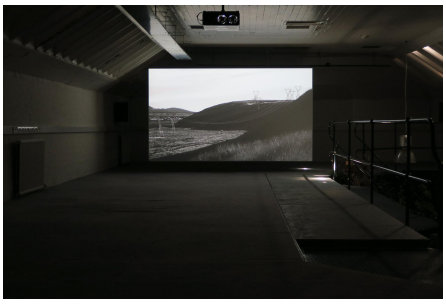


Shannon Te Ao, *Untitled (Malady)*, 2016, single-channel video (still), colour and sound, 13:16 min. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.

A pair of exhibitions at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery are part of the Edinburgh Art Festival's partner programme and so are less connected to the Geddes theme but provide another lens to Te Ao's reimagined scenes and colonial politics. Both Douglas Gordon and Graham Fagen present an alternative view of the much-celebrated poet, Robert Burns. Gordon's *Black Burns* responds to the gallery's heroic white marble sculpture of Burns with a mirrored or shadow doppelganger made from black marble, which is shattered on the floor beneath - a reminder that Burns was a fallible person, troubled and complex who died young and poor. Fagen's exhibition *The Slave's Lament* is a distillation of his 2015 Venice Biennale project for the Scottish pavilion. It takes as its point of departure (and title) a poem Burns wrote from the perspective of an African slave shipped to Virginia, and the surprising fact that Burns nearly took up work on a plantation in Jamaica, presumably not as one of the slaves. Burns' lament is set to music, arranged by English reggae/dub producer Adrian Sherwood, and sung by (London-born Afro-Caribbean) vocalist Ghetto Priest, then set to chamber music. From the perspective of indigenous filmmaking, it is hard to tell who is telling the story and from what viewpoint, but maybe that's the point. It is a compelling but unsettling exchange of voices that echo from history into the present as contexts shift - as the festival theme would have it, the impact or negotiation of history can create new futures.

Te Ao's project draws much from the land it uses as context, and the stories connected to those locations. The dance scene is filmed in New Zealand's lower South Island (a region popular with the many Scottish settlers that arrived in the colonial period; a

southern hemisphere equivalent to Britain's north with cooler, wetter weather, tussocky plains and craggy hills) on a hemp farm, which provides the dried out gold/green plants that surround the dancers, and become silhouetted against the distant horizon as the light fades.



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The second video, shown on the venue's mezzanine, features a similarly barren rural landscape, this time shot in black-and-white and occupied by cattle. This is the North Island's elevated central volcanic plateau below Lake Taupo, near Turangi; the southern perimeter for the customary lands of Ngāti Tūwharetoa, a tribe that Te Ao descends from. A family urupa/cemetery is nearby, encircled by the farm. What is presumably an early morning winter's mist adds a further cinematic quality, giving these silent beasts an almost ghostly quality as they slowly forage through the mud for food. It is a common sight around New Zealand, where a

dominant business-driven agricultural culture has converted any possible plot of land into a place to graze cows. At the time of Burnett's film, this may have been sheep, but cattle are now one of the dominant occupants of New Zealand, especially dairy cattle, to the point that many now question the sustainability of this intensified use of the land, which has resulted in further deforestation and the pollution or drying up of waterways.

A further scene in this sequence provides a wide shot of the nearby Central Plateau, an elevated but flat and largely desolate volcanic area, home to what is commonly known as the Desert Road due to the main north/south highway that passes through, connecting Auckland to Wellington. It looks like an alien environment with only large power pylons to break up the view in an otherwise unpopulated landscape that is largely inaccessible with substantial portions closed off for use as a military training zone. The area is also the setting for two significant maunga/mountains, both part of an active volcanic and geothermal region that generates a brooding, underlying energy, perhaps an analogy for the suppressed desire of Burnett's slow dance. These landscapes could also be a very literal example of what the artist has described as opening up a borderland through combining disparate elements: "the in-between, ambiguous space where nothing is dictated, but everything needs to be negotiated in relation to the things that are around us."[04] Each of these landscapes are captured in a moment of transition and transformation, at dawn or dusk, and, in the case of the hemp, at the point where the female plants are pollinated and the (browner) male plants begin to wither.

Linking the two projections is a slow, mournful, droning soundtrack that reverberates throughout the building, accompanying the Desert Highway scene while the first part of the dance sequence plays below. It could be strings or an electric guitar but is in fact the artist's voice—synthesised through a vocoder as he sings a slowed down waiata, syllable by syllable, holding each note for as long as he can— that extends a two minute song to fill the first portion of the work's 15 minute duration. What began as the waiata 'Tiaho mai rā', written in 2011 by a young girl for her brother, who she describes as a lost star in the night, becomes abstracted through Te Ao's peformance. The effect is like an instrumental that communicates vocally but without words –

much like the physical, non-verbal exchange that plays out between Stan and his wife.



Shannon Te Ao, *Two shoots that stretch far out*, 2013–14 (video still)
HD video, single-channel, 13:22min, colour, stereo sound. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington.



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Shannon Te Ao, *Two shoots that stretch far out*, 2013–14, HD video, single-channel, 13:22min, colour, stereo sound. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Photo: Shaun Waugh. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington.

Accompanying the cattle scene and the remainder of the dance scene, the last third of the soundtrack has Te Ao reading from an 1846 song/waiata, 'He waiata mo te mate ngerengere (Song for a leprous malady)', written by Te Rohu, who is also of Ngāti Tūwharetoa descent. Te Rohu has contracted leprosy (introduced by European settlers) from a suitor, but also laments a landslide that wiped out a village including her father, Mananui Te Heuheu Tukino II, and the wider trauma that colonisation has brought to the country. This recalls Te Ao's use of historic Māori waiata in *two shoots that stretch far out*, 2013-14, in which he reads a lament to a variety of animals. As well as linking the past to the present, the text also functions as a performative tool or task through which the artist tests his ability to communicate with each creature and documents what is otherwise a non-verbal interaction. In this new

work, the text isn't performed live in situ but, through cinematic juxtaposition, is overlaid into the three scenes, weaving or entangling the disparate elements into new scenarios and fresh connections. Again, there are non-responsive animals, ambivalent to the narration of sorrowed experience, but implicated nevertheless, their continued foraging seeming almost defiant.

The two dancers continue to circle each other, also oblivious or unaffected by the spoken waiata yet seemingly sympathetic to its tone. They are held in an intimate embrace despite the wide open setting of their physical environment, but also turn within the metaphysical space of the text. While one character represents Stan's wife, the other woman represents Te Rohu; one fictional and unnamed, the other an ancestor summoned from song, and brought together across time and geography to occupy an ambiguous borderland that links Watts and Turangi through a South Island hemp farm (that produces skin products), and transported to a home for 'fallen women' in Edinburgh. In bringing these and other elements together to perform in the same space, Te Ao doesn't blend them but instead uses them to destabilise the setting through the friction of layered traumas coexisting in the landscape, a poetically charged combination of potential connections in which imagined dialogues can be explored.

With the sun aglow I have my pensive moods *was commissioned by the Edinburgh Art Festival and Te Tuhi, exhibited 27 July - 27 August 2017. It will be at Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand from 18 November 2017 - 22 April 2018.*

Andrew Clifford attended the Edinburgh Art Festival through the festival's Momentum international delegate programme, supported by British Council Scotland, Creative Scotland and Creative New Zealand.

Footnotes

01. see www.art-newzealand.com/Issues31to40/anzart.htm

02. www.theartnewspaper.com/news/edinburgh-art-festival-artists-look-to-maori-traditions-19th-century-botany-and-jellyfish

03. Barclay makes this analogy in the documentary, The Camera on the Shore, 2009 (www.nzonscreen.com/title/the-camera-on-the-shore-2009). His essay 'Celebrating Fourth Cinema' has become a defining manifesto for indigenous filmmakers internationally - published in Illusions, number 35, Winter 2003 (www.maoricinema.com/celebrating-fourth-cinema-2003/).

04. www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/bulletin/187/a-torch-and-a-light

Biographies



Working predominantly with performance and film, the elegiac installations of Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Ngāti Te Rangiita, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui, b. 1978, Sydney) explore fraught dynamics of indigeneity, language and loss. Te Ao draws on a range of existing literary material, including Māori lyrical sources such as whakataukī and waiata, as well as poetic and lyrical texts from popular culture. Richly layered, Te Ao's works enact a compression wherein past and present co-exist, and daily life is inextricably linked to multifarious social, cultural and philosophical histories.



Andrew Clifford is the inaugural Director of Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in Titirangi, Auckland - a contemporary art space that was relaunched in 2014 after a major redevelopment, which included the restoration of Lopdell House where the gallery began in 1986. He was previously Curator at the University of Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery. He has contributed articles and essays to publications throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including recent essays about John Parker, Yuki Kihara, Bepen Bhana, Lisa Reihana, Phil Dadson, Billy Apple, and a New Zealand history of invented instruments. He is also a trustee for the Len Lye Foundation, Audio Foundation and CIRCUIT.

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