

Natalie Tozer Artists Talk
Thursday 26th September 2024
Gow Langsford

Anna Jackson, Director of Gow Langsford

Good morning, we're very excited to welcome you today, to meet Nat and hear about *Erotic Geologies*. Some of you may have already seen the work this morning, but if not we'll start the talk now and you can continue watching with the sound down.

If you've got any questions it's pretty relaxed, but otherwise we'll have questions at the end.

Thanks so much for coming, it's great to have a full house, we're really honoured.

Natalie Tozer

Tēnā koutou
Ko whakapaparangi mai
Engari
Ko Te Awamutu au
Ko Ipipiri te whenua tupu
Ko Ngā Ana Wai te kainga
He kaitiaki au i mothermother
He kaitohu au i LOT23
He kaiako au i Waipapa Taumata Rau
Ko Natalie Tozer au
Tēna tatou, tēnā tatou, tēnā tatou katoa

Thank you all so much for coming, it's an honour to have the opportunity to share the work and speak today. I could talk a bit about how I came to make it... but first, maybe a bit of background about my practice in general.

I have a material practice, a social practice and a digital practice. And I try to access the ground using these various modes. Materially, I access the ground through digging, burying and unearthing canvases and objects. In my social practice, I access the ground metaphorically through facilitating a non-hierarchical, flat-formation, grassroots network for local artists seeking connection. And in my digital practice I access the ground through narrating caves, portals, tunnels and underground experiences.

The ground is a site of great importance in my work. It is the sacred reserve of knowledge, the keeper of the past, and a place of refuge from time immemorial. Also, significantly, as a Tangata Tiriti mother to Tangata Whenua, the ground has also become the blood of my children.

So, I'll talk a little bit how I came to make this work because it was a Covid project, and there was a profound sense of freedom knowing that people would not see the work. In a nutshell, this project started as my Masters of Fine Art project, but due to the lockdowns there was no install or grad show exhibition of the work. When I realised that the work would not be seen, I decided to deviate from my original plan, and take a risk to try something new. In the end I handed in the work unfinished, and continued working on the project after I graduated, adding in an extra scene and pushing the detail and production value much further.

The reason this was possible is that outside of studying I make high production work with my partner for other producers, film makers and artists. We make music videos, documentaries, and a lot of green screen post-production work in a range of contexts. I never would have opted to go high production, but when I knew the work wouldn't be seen I felt like I could push the boat out. It really was a profound realisation. It was an opportunity to take a huge risk and develop into studio animation without having to test workflows on another clients!

Throughout my studies, I'd been researching the Anthropocene and deep geological time, and this kept leading me back to the ground. Ultimately, cyclical modes of thinking provided a sense of hope for the current ecological moment. I became very interested in concepts of indigenous cyclical time, opposed to a western linear sense of time. And I wondered how I could possibly approach that, to really sense it.

The sense of deep time is very interesting to me, as it is incomprehensible to our human time scale. Story telling and mythology was a helpful way in. Characters taking the journey under and into the ground to learn something. There's a lot of mythical stories and creator mythemes where archetypal characters access the ground (mostly heading to hell), having a pivotal experience then returning to the surface.

And I was watching a lot of sci-fi and finding the same thing there, where characters access the ground through tunnels and portals, accessing information and alternative futures... and I'm talking B grade Netflix sci-fi here. Like really accessible. Not high-brow at all! Prometheus, Katla, Dark, Dune, 12 Monkeys, Troll, The Outsider, Counterpart, Stargate, Stranger Things, Annihilation, The Matrix... all of these feature digging, tunnelling and exhumations that alter the future. These Hollywood productions were a really a massive influence for *Erotic Geologies*; the hammy and luxe sci-fi aesthetic, the cinematic soundtrack, and resolution.

In particular, the characters that directly informed my protagonists were Deucalion and Pyrrha. Deucalion's father shaped him out of clay. Hine-nui-te-po's mother shaped her out of clay too, and she was a very inspiring character, especially in respect to how the ground has been perceived across modernity for her. In early descriptions of Hine-nui-to-po, actually, her story is really very tragic, she was raped by her father and she fled to hell in great shame. But modern re-tellings of Hine-nui-te-po have become more compassionate, she has a lot of mana as guardian and safe keeper of souls travelling to the afterlife. This shows a productive revision of the ground for contemporary relevance.

So yes time is critical in this work, and I was trying to use my practice to, you know, to feel the edges of what cyclical time could be in this work. And thinking about time as geology and thinking about guidance from the ground. There're so many contemporary artists who are intuitively turning to the ground and working with stones, earth matter, pigments and digging. But this isn't new, artists in the 60's and 70's in the earth and land art movement were working with the ground just the same, but those artists were thinking about perception in relation to time. Whereas now it's definitely a query about the ecological catastrophe we find ourselves in, and survival.

I was also very inspired to tell a bicultural story to reflect my collaborative relationship with my husband Sam, who whakapapas to Kati Māmoe in Rakiura. It was important for me to make a work that reflected what the vision of my world is. And so really the work has come to be a bit of a fever dream with lots of snatches of different stories, reflections and hopes to create a new narrative.

So, actually in the structure of this film, there are two halves. There's the Anthropocene half and the Holocene half. In the Holocene, earth has healed itself. The earth is hugely mobile and vital, constantly regenerating and reforming, visible through layers of stratigraphy under our feet. Here the earth simply keeps undulating and breathing. The air on that side is peachy and clean and the sky is open.

On the other side in the Anthropocene, there's a lot of rubble and dust and bricks and tarseal. It's all the rendered stone that we've mined to create our built environment. It's a dust bowl, apocalyptic. In this scene there are selected public artworks that I've included to reference how we identify where we are, and who we are in our built environments. Our protagonists use these sculptures to wayfind through the murk and ultimately find refuge underground.

There's a couple of key works when they first wake up - there's Guy Ngan's bronze sculpture which is located on Karangahape Road on the facade of Tautai and Artspace. Guy was very interested in Pacific navigation and how the wayfinders were guided by stars to travel to Aotearoa. There's Ana Iti's *Basalt Rocks*, Fred Grahams waka carved from jurassic stone work which is on the facade of Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tāmaki. There's Marte Zrimay's Centennial sculpture, located in the capitalist hellscape that is Newmarket. I love this work as homeless people used to be able to crawl into it and sleep in it - a counter strategy, a safety zone, and her design references fossils, bones and shells - the things that we collect when we're walking on the beach or you know, that we find when we're looking down. We're collectors. I love how something about one particular stone will just reach out to you. And then the last work before they go into the cave is an anchor stone by Richard Shortland Cooper, which is located at Māngere East Library, referencing collective knowledge.

So the merchant bankers, our protagonists, crawl into the cave, seeking refuge and the idea is that the cave traps them for a hundred thousand years until they learn something new beyond their own existence. And yeah, they're really in the soup of time in the cave and eventually they hear the cave speak to them. The cave whispers *throw the bones* and this is from the greek mythology of Deucalion and Pyrrha, where the oracle tells them to 'throw the bones of the mother' after Zeus has wiped out humanity for being so dreadful and useless. They understand mother to be Gaia mother earth, and the bones to be stones, and they throw the stones and the stones become people again... I love this idea that we're made from stone. And so my protagonists emerge from the cave and travel to the highest mountain top and complete their solemn task, and the cycle of existence continues.

One other thing I'd just like to say about the script and the two halves is that without that cyclical device the hero's quest is quite problematic. I see the two halves as providing important intersecting fringe zones. These are the productive parts of the story - when their bodies are fossilising on the mountaintop or when their bodies are liquefying in the cave. And it's in these parts they disestablish binary, normative, anthropocentric narratives that aren't helpful... Instead the main character here are derailed and there's another sort of knowledge system accessed.

Audience Question

Who have you shown the work to?

So I upload it via a website for my master's submission in 2021, after which post production continued. Then somewhere along the way the work was invited to be screened at the Sluice Biennial 2022 in Lisbon, which was thrilling because the host residency program in Barreiro, a very working class region across the ferry from Lisbon, was actually situated on the scorched earth of a decommissioned pyrite factory. The land there is absolutely decimated with the leaching out of factory byproducts into the ground.

The artist residency program there invites artists to come and re-contextualise how the land may be used, to transform and heal. It's a familiar story, where artists move into a place because it's cheap and undesirable paving the way for investors who eventually squeeze the artists out. Anyway, it was an absolute joy to show the work for two reasons, to see if people liked it and sat through it. And also to see it at scale to check for post-production errors hard to see on a monitor. And yes we found floating rocks and a lot of moon walking! But Barreiro was amazing. We made a lot of friends on that trip. It's just such a joy to travel as an artist. Then it on-toured to London.

And this is the works premiere screening in Aotearoa. I wanted to thank the cast and crew, and draw a line in the sand and finish it, so I reached out to the wonderful and perceptive Anna Jackson and we had many lovely conversations over many months of planning.

Audience Question

Who would you like to see the work?

Who would I like to see the work? Ah, my children, I make the work for my children. That's really important to me. So that they may know who they are. And their generation, this is their planet now. I think accessible, visually emotive works are engaging for a young audience... well I hope so, or maybe they'll watch it in the future or remember it to be important in retrospect.

But the idea of our children walking backwards into the future is important. Our tamariki have a big job on their hands to change the way that things are done. But their awareness brings so much hope.

Audience Question

First of all, congratulations, I have a question about the music. How did you come up with the music and sound? Because it's quite haunting but at the same time it's very gentle.

Thank you, so I knew I wanted a cinematic soundtrack and had thought about asking some collaborators to contribute, but my university covid extension deadline was 21st of January, which is a cruel date because it's a very busy family time. And so we decided that couldn't expect anyone to enter our psychodrama at that time of year, and also the cost, so we decided to write the music ourselves which ended up being my most favourite part of the whole process. We farmed the children out, then lived in the studio day and night for a week. I wrote and performed the score on a piano keyboard and Sam arranged the various parts into strings, wind, gospel movements. Originally I had planned for it to be a retro wave synth soundtrack, but we ended up retaining a lot of the original piano.

Audience Question

How do you manage your protagonists?

How do I manage them? Like write their story, what they do? Well, I wanted them to evolve from extractive merchant bankers into magnificent and ancient prescient earth beings. Right?! Actually when we were on the film shoot, we realised mid-shoot that most of the cast and crew had lived experience of the Christchurch earthquakes, so this wove its way into the protagonists narrative - I'm particular open to collective knowledge. So, yeah during the shoot it became an earthquake that flung our protagonists from their office.

Then the underground experience was important, their pivotal underground experience. I interpret the underground in lots of accessible ways, such as sinkholes, potholes, manholes, etc around town. Like when we had the big sinkhole in Freeman's Bay after the floods, to me that was the underworld lurching up to be engaged with. It can be hard to get underground, so it really has to be found in everyday ways.

And then, yeah, the narrative, I'm fascinated by stories that continually ripple through time, that evolve by the community that tells them. And so this is my contemporary offering to the tradition of underground epics. Sorry I don't know if that really answered your question.

Audience Question

Did you actually shoot underground for the work?

Ah, no, not at all. All the live action was filmed in a studio, and the environment is all animated. Our poor dancers were subjected to the most dangerous dancing conditions imaginable. I had actors come to the audition, but I also invited some dancers that we ended up casting, as I was very worried about their stability, because they had to be on a turntable. And it was hair-raising! But our dancers were brilliant, and if they ever wobbled on the rig, I'd say 'don't worry we'll just add another earthquake tremor in post'!

So there were no camera movements, only actors walking and turning in front of a static camera. And the other thing was we could only have one actor on the treadmill at one time. So they're actually walking separately to each other on their own in the studio and composited together in post. So the work was extremely well planned, down to the second. We knew the duration, we knew how long each take needed to be.

Audience Question

Could you talk to the theme of time and of the actor walking to one side, then out the other?

There are so many sci-fi references in this work. Aurally and visually. And so many concepts of time. I wondered, how do we convey that they're trapped in the cave? And thinking about portals and time loops and space operas where travel is an available technology... and here the cave is a geological time trap.

At the time, there was a lot of talk about off planet survival, Elon Musk and his dumb narrative of abandoning planet earth for a better option. But space is totally inhospitable and so the cave/space scene refers to the fact that everything we need is right here under our feet. That we don't need to go looking anywhere else. That it's actually quite simple to return to the earth, plant a tree, and just keep using each day to try again. So they come back to earth, back home and back to the ground. So I really wanted it to be a geological story where the ground is the main character.

Audience Question

I have a question. I see that the work is on two projectors. Was that difficult to go from having a small screen to big screen and did you find that something changed in that more immersive environment? Did the scale change it for you?

Yeah, it was always planned to be a two or three projector install. So that was in the design right from the beginning. But it was a big risk. It's quite prohibitive for artists to access and afford that technology, and this install is generously funded by CNZ and Gow Langsford.

So it's a two projector edge blended project. It requires scaffolding to prevent the projectors slipping out due to earth movements - and as we know the earth is incredible mobile! It's a huge problem for video artists to afford high resolution multi projector installs. I've seen many budgets where the projector hire company gets paid more than the artist. But I just feel we just have to keep trying, it's so worth it.

Thank you for the questions.

Audience Question

Why do you call it Erotic?

Great question. So the first title for Elam was *An Alternative Archeology*. So awkward. Then when I took it to Lison I tried *Deucalion & Pyrrha* which is really truly impossible to spell. And so thinking about a home audience pushed me to be really clear about how the title should serve the work. But for me Erotic is, I mean it's a sexy story, right? They're dry humping in a cave, that's hot, but also, the ground has a deeply vital mobile agency, and there's a kind of exchange philosophy I was thinking about, with property, erotic matter. It's the idea around gift and reciprocity. So if I give something to you, you would feel like you have to give something back to me. I'm very interested in digging, as well as debt and the collective and I feel like time and various scales are actually playing around with the problem of all of those things. So what we are doing now with mining is incurring a debt to the future. And so there's kind of like this, other consideration about how we're in a vast erotic exchange with each other, but with the earth.

In our timescale we're not really able to see that caves breath or that mountains undulate. I was trying to find a word which would help us see the ground as something that's abundantly active, that we're engaged with, and it's not a new idea, but I was just trying to feel the edges of what I could convey.

And great news we can all spell Erotic Geologies. Ha

Thanks so much for coming everybody.

Anna Jackson

Thanks so much Natalie, we've been here for a little bit longer so, if you've got any more questions, there's some coffee and some biscuits out the front. If you want to hang around and chat for a while, you're very welcome to. Thank you. A really nice group.