



*Planting*



*Lilac*



# *Planting Lilac*

An Investigation of Flower Gardens and Object-based  
Installation as Metaphors of One Another

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Exegesis in support of practice-based thesis  
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Auckland University of Technology





# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly indicated), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Debbie Harris  
December 04, 2020.



# Abstract

This research explores gardening and object-based installation as ‘likeminded’ systems that could be understood as metaphoric of one another in their consideration of colour, texture, and aesthetic arrangements of things in space. Using conversation as a core methodology, the project explores the relational capacity of the garden by developing a series of *Conversational Events* as an entry point into ways of practising. These interview-like events have been conducted throughout the project with family and friends and gardening enthusiasts. The aim is to investigate how gardens might function as constructed spaces connected to memory, story, and relationship. Conversation is a core method used to cultivate insights, as a means to reflect on the nature of gardening/object-based installation, as comparable modes of making. Haphazard is developed as an active methodology through processes of adaption and trial and error. The research operates with an experimental zone of practice; working with both found and formed materials such as fabric, resin, paint, and glaze, in conjunction with clay to create objects that identify highly-coloured eccentric forms in an attempt to push the threshold of the object’s materiality and associative qualities.





# Pepeha

Ko Tararua Te Maunga

Ko Manawatū Te Awa

Nō Te Papaioea Ahau

Ko Harris Tōku Whānau

Ko Debbie Tōku Ingoa

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*Planting Lilac Exhibition*



## *Settling in*

I'd like to settle you into this project with a story of the site where this research found its roots – my grandmother, Phyllis' garden. Like you, this is a place I've never visited in person; my grandparents relocated from the house it surrounded before I was born. Instead, it exists in my imagination, as a place fabricated through stories told to me throughout my lifetime.

I've been tracing the reoccurrence of flowers and gardens as they appear throughout the history of my art practice. Recently I found an old file filled with photos of things I chose to include in my initial application to AUT. Most of the file consisted of nervous drawings and watercolours of flowers. In the final year of my undergraduate degree, I started making branches and floral-looking things with clay. I was asked in a tutorial why I was making these floral objects, and at that time I didn't have a clear answer.

When my parents moved from the Manawatū to Whangateau a few years ago, I was helping my mum, Joanne, sort out a bunch of old stuff. We were sifting through a box that held some of my grandparents' Ektachrome slides in it. I held one up to the light at the window. Looking through the frame, I could see the details of a tree planted in a circular plot in a garden. I picked out a few more, and for the first time saw through the frames into my grandmother's garden. At the same time in the studio, I had been making round,

half-sphere shapes out of clay, paper pulp, coloured foam, and carpet underlay. These sculptures were made to be reminiscent of the kinds of plots that gardeners carve out for garden beds. I know it was more than a coincidence that I happened upon this photo of my grandmother's circular plot – complete with a blooming tree. It felt like time had folded in on itself, one 'garden' layered over another garden. This was the gentle impetus I needed to keep going. That year, I dedicated my graduating exhibition to my grandmother Phyllis and her flowers.

In order for a flower to grow, it needs a suitable environment and a root system that can spread far enough to take advantage of multiple sources of nutrients and water. The 'roots' of my practice are spread out over several different contexts. Each root pulls in different ideas that together enrich this research and add to its depth. This research is an ongoing practice that will continue to grow, droop, and bloom.





## Opening

The true inception of this research aligns with when I relocated from the Manawatū to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland at the beginning of 2016, and moved in with my aunty in Freemans Bay to begin my study at AUT. My aunty, Helen, has a wild and untamed garden out the front of her home. It's not the usual aesthetic that a more manicured gardener might aim for, but it is uniquely hers. She barely weeds and doesn't seem to mind what are for most people unwanted plants growing amongst the other flowers. Every season she prunes, trims, and plants something new, calling me outside to share in the journey of watching things grow. I've been undertaking this research project over this year with my aunty's garden as company. Over the two COVID-19 lockdown periods, I've been working alongside her garden, spending time with it for quiet moments of respite.

Gazing into this garden is like looking at a feast of texture. It may not appear as 'pretty' as other gardens, but the weeds have made a home there, alongside perennials, a judas tree, some long grasses, roses, and another row of flowers still in pots waiting to be planted. My aunty's garden, like this research, is the sum of many parts. Brought together, these parts interact and converse as a unique composition.

The discussion that follows in this exegesis begins in chapter one with a focus on the intricacies of the flower bed. This project, *Planting Lilac* considers gardening and object-based installation as 'likeminded' systems that could be understood as metaphoric of one another. It thinks through the eccentric aesthetics found within the garden bed and adopts them within creative practice. The garden and installation alike are explored for their considerations of colour, texture, form and aesthetic arrangements of objects in space.

Chapter two explores the notion of 'conversation' adopted in this research as both a conceptual term as well as a social investigatory tool to explore the relational capacity of the garden. The chapter walks through a series of interview-like *Conversational Events* conducted throughout the duration of this project with family and friends. The dialogue transcribed provides a conceptual terrain for the research that resembles a kind of to-and-fro – a dynamic I understand as being *present* between the objects in an installation.

Chapter three explores the material processes of this practice. The influence of experimentation as an open-ended strategy has developed a methodology of fast, on-the-spot trial and error. I outline this methodology, termed *Haphazard* and its role as both method and a material quality in the work. Haphazard drives and generates a working with found and formed materials such as fabric, resin, paint, glaze, and cast materials, in conjunction with clay, to create ceramic objects that could be identified as eccentric forms

in an attempt to push the threshold of an object's materiality and associative qualities.

Finally, chapter four outlines an intuitive and responsive approach to aesthetics, which is described as attraction. Attraction is an intuition which drives my relationship to specific colours, forms, materials and textures. It is a personal relationship that forms a connection to certain colours prevalent in my life and within the aesthetics and formal aspects of my artwork. Here, I also discuss the influence of colour and its role within the environment of my installations.

This document is formatted with the intention that the reader might take a slow and gentle stroll through the writing. That they might take note of the photographs of flowers peppered throughout these pages, each taken at different stages of writing this exegesis. Just like a gardener spends time with a patch of plants and the formation of their garden, this writing and art practice have emerged as each element is nurtured and matures.



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# The Flower Bed

## Chapter One, The Flower Bed

*this is the recipe of life*  
said my mother  
as she held me in her arms as I wept  
*think of those flowers you plant*  
*in the garden each year*  
*they will teach you*  
*that people too*  
*must wilt*  
*fall*  
*root*  
*rise*  
*in order to bloom*

Rupi Kaur<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rupi Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017).

I have an intimate connection with flower gardens.<sup>2</sup>

This relationship to flowers has woven itself through the history of my practice and become a central context within this project. I think of my installations as an imagined garden, where I am the metaphorical gardener and the objects are my flowers. Paired with my imagination, the idea of a flower garden becomes a small world filled with drama and potentiality. As a method, I have embraced this imagined space as a light-hearted yet productive tool that encourages curiosity and evokes multiple ways to explore the garden conceptually. You don't have to squint your eyes to notice the intricacies that reside within the flower bed. Depending on how thorough and inventive the gardener, there can be a lot to admire. Deliberate planting surrounded by imposters in the form of rebellious weeds. There's a comedy in some of these textures. As much as a gardener will try, plants, in the end, will grow how they want. Plants have a life of their own, and each has unique characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> It is important that I explain what I mean when I refer to the garden as a concept. Gardens, as I understand them, are intentionally curated by their gardener with the purpose of maturing certain plants to a desired outcome, e.g. decorative flowers, edible herbs or fruits and vegetables, functional visual barriers, landscaping structures, etc. In the context of this project, my attention is directed toward domestic flower gardens curated and tended to by the everyday amateur gardener who lives in close proximity to their garden, i.e. it is their front or back yard, down the road or contained in a number of pots. These are the gardens I am familiar with and find most attractive.



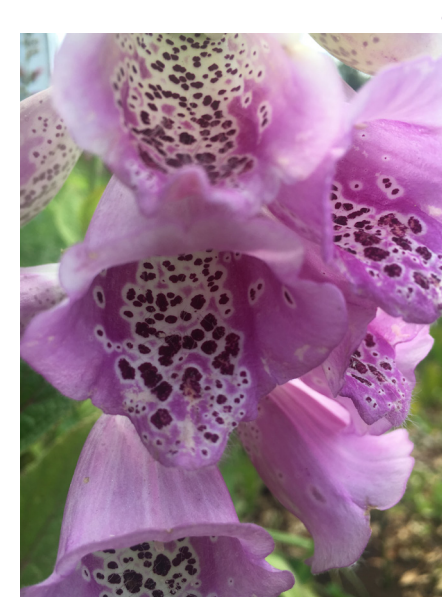
Andrea Büttner is a multidisciplinary artist who uses live moss in some of her sculptures. Büttner employs moss as a material specifically because of her interest in ‘littleness’ – a conceptual understanding of the subtleties of unassuming things. Curator Ray Tangney describes moss in relation to Büttner’s interest in littleness: “Mosses are also called lower plants, as they are small with simple structures. Because of this simplicity, they were considered by early botanists to represent a lower, imperfect level of development, compared to higher, or perfect, flowering plants.”<sup>3</sup> As I read this description, my imagination is immediately drawn to the potential personification of the moss. Although this wasn’t the writer’s intention, the way moss is described here is like a character with personality. Tangney goes on to describe moss’ ability to grow in terrain that most other plants can’t, a ‘simple’ way of living that sets it apart, and a suggestion of moss as a survivor. In contrast to moss, I think flowers have the inverse characteristics – they are flirtatious and showy. Flowers exist to flirt inside their environments, to seduce passers-by. Flowers are a show of bright, bold colours and tall stems. Physically, flowers will reach as far as their stems will allow, ensuring the ideal vantage point to be admired by the outside world. In 2018, Aotearoa artist Lucy Meyle titled her PhD

3 Ray Tangney, “The Cosmic Tree,” accessed October 22, 2020, <https://www.botanicalmind.online/chapter-cosmic-tree>.

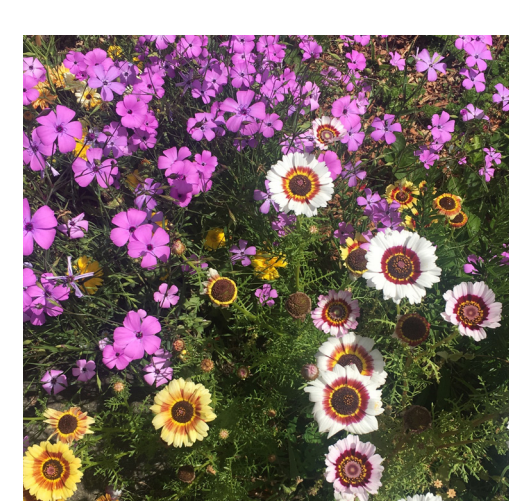
exhibition, *Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring?*<sup>4</sup> The elements within the installation weren’t made in reference to flowers specifically, but the artist’s clever use of words expresses the way I want to position imagination as means of investigating the garden. Meyle refers to the idea that something as seemingly natural as a flower might in fact rehearse for the ‘performance’ that will come in spring. If Büttner’s admiration of moss is for its littleness, then I enjoy the *spectacle* of the flower. As Meyle’s title suggests, a flower in bloom is an audacious performance – and I am the willing audience.



4 Lucy Meyle, “Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring?” (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Auckland University of Technology, School of Art and Design, 2018), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/11716>



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## Metaphor

In her second collection of poetry, writer, artist, and performer Rupī Kaur utilises the metaphor of the flower as a framework that binds her book, *The Sun and Her Flowers* together. Divided into chapters, “Wilting,” “Falling,” “Rooting,” “Rising,” and “Blooming,”<sup>5</sup> the book moves through each chapter as stages of love, trauma, grief, and healing. Kaur employs metaphor to communicate the parallels between one lifecycle and another. The idea of the garden in my practice is similar. The use of the flower garden is an overarching idea that interconnects this research as a set of practices rather than a site or place. I’m not interested in my works translating as literal gardens, nor my objects as literal flowers. Installations are like gardens in that they are shaped through the imagination of the artist. Flowers are planted in space, the way that ceramics are arranged in my installations. The garden and the installation are considered as conceptually like-minded within my practice, and as environments that are linked metaphorically.

As I build these metaphorical gardens, I think about the range of textures found in a flower bed. Particularly, the detail in the eccentric juxtapositions between fungi, moss, grass, mud, bark, flowers, and foliage. A habitat of living things. I encourage my mind

5 Rupī Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017) 7.



to roam with thoughts of what textures *could* live there. I think about the relationships between certain plants and how they exist in one space. Do they enjoy living together? Some plants seem to suffocate, while others sit companionably. In the studio I ponder these things as I work, adding layers and textures to ceramics and objects. To illustrate through terms discussed previously, I use both the littleness of moss and the theatrics of flowers as concepts that allow me to consider scale within my work. In a garden’s horizon line, littleness runs along the ground plane beneath the foliage as small textures or – in Büttner’s words – “simple structures.” Flowers sit a little taller and larger in dramatic effect. Together, the assemblage of plants creates a dynamic horizontal and vertical plane, a silhouette of eccentric shapes and sizes.

## Installation

My installations – like the flower bed – are small worlds<sup>6</sup> made up of multiple species and materials. They are an accumulation of sculptures, textiles, textures and experimental surfaces. Conceptually, littleness settles in the details of my work as the ‘small bits,’ which form an undercurrent of the installational environment. Littleness is in the frayed edges of fabrics, small scattered flowers, ceramic

6 Although my installations are a form of environment derived from my imagination, they are not intended to represent some kind of dystopian or utopian reality.

lumps and bumps, brushstrokes of paint and glaze, plasticine gestures, smudges, the detail of my thumbprints in ceramic flowers, the way light catches glaze, and colours that unintentionally seem to fit together. The theatrics of flowers appear in my works as contrasting, bright, big, tall, absurd, and sometimes silly, touches of extravagance. Gloopy electric pink resin, metallic blue material, glittery surfaces, a form that’s covered entirely in spikes, a flower with legs, and a comedic partnerships between objects. Developing these different qualities within an installation means that I move to-and-fro between the absurdity of these large and bulging forms, while also attending to the small technicalities and subtleties of their character.

From the conception of my first ceramic object, I began to grapple with the question of presentation. My knowledge of ceramic conventions at that stage was of ceramics presented on plinths or on structures that are made to support an object. Immediately I knew this mode of display wasn’t suitable for my objects, as plinths felt too formal a structure: too clean and too geometric in shape. A drive to create my own approach for display is where installation began to develop. I started adding surfaces that had movement, that could droop or slump and could push up against the ceramics to become a part of the space. This shifted my approach from providing a display for objects to populate, to crafting an environment that could be shaped and accumulated.

Australian florist Hattie Molloy styles flowers on her own terms – adding to her bouquets, peach coloured mushrooms, pumpkins, honeycomb, and diverse fruits to create highly contrasting sculptural bundles. Molloy’s arrangements and my installations share a kindred approach to the display of sculptural floral objects. Working against the idea of flowers as singular, Molloy integrates her flowers into ‘installation-like’ total environments. In her concept store in Melbourne, Molloy has previously created rooms of dirt and growing grass, a live bees nest cabinet, and, in her most recent shop, a checked room with brightly tiled islands to house her wonderful floral creations. Although Molloy employs live flowers, her mode of display contextualises the kind of immersive atmospheres I aim to create within my installations. Colour applied en masse is a tactic Molloy often implements in the making of her floral environments. This creates an experience for her viewer that places flowers outside their usual surroundings and into almost a set-like space imagined by Molloy.

Similarly, American installation artist Jessica Stockholder applies colour as an effective device within her installations to cover and consume entire rooms. Stockholder’s site-specific environments read as architectural structures that are compiled of pairings of found and formed materials. Large, surprising combinations are brought together to allude to structures we recognise, but which are not intended as literal representations. In Stockholder’s 2004 exhibition, *Sam Ran Over Sand or Sand Ran Over Sam*, a vivid red



10 Hattie Molloy (@hattiemolloy), *I’m blue, da be dee da bad aa*, 2020, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/hattiemolloy/?hl=en>.



11 Hattie Molloy (@hattiemolloy), *Yes I got this Paloma Wool outfit to match my work bench*, Photo by my darling talented friend @tmhdy, 2020, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/hattiemolloy/?hl=en>.



and yellow textured rug runs along the gallery floor and continues underneath a glass wall at the perimeter of the gallery, out across the foyer. Intersecting the rug, Stockholder builds a world of repurposed and new things: chilly bins and chicken wire, painted polystyrene structures, partially painted walls, a collection of lamps to form a divider, a single bowling ball, and freezers stacked and painted white. She creates a depth of field that is activated by physical movement *through* the space. By using the breadth of the gallery to position things in formations that intersect, the viewer is brought into new compositions with each circuit of her exhibition. In one corner, a painting of sorts can be observed between a purple wall with a pink rectangle patch, and yellow strands of rope hanging from the ceiling. The distance between the two provides a space to look through and *into*. Both elements together provide a composition of a purple and pink rectangle, with vertical yellow stripes.

On encountering one of my installations, you will be met by a collection of surfaces. Looking up and down, elements sit at different heights and widths. Fabrics are laid flat on the floor, slumped or draped over objects, and strung from the ceiling. Patches of aesthetic resemblance draw the eye from one detail to the next. A series of floral objects run the along the plane of the installation, each in bloom with a ‘flower’ on the end of their stems. The floral tops dance next to one another along the eyeline. Their hand-built forms are created as a kind of mark making when I squish clay into lengths of sausage-like sections. The clay coils are then stacked on top of



12 Jessica Stockholder, *Sam Ran Over Sand or Sand Ran Over Sam*, 2004, Carpet, green waterproof sheet rock, theater lights, yellow and white electrical cords, furniture, lamps, styrofoam, lumber, freezer, digital projector, acrylic paint, coolers, chicken wire, Site-specific installation, Rice University Gallery, Texas, USA, <https://jessicastockholder.info/projects/art/sam-ran-over-sand-or-sand-ran-over-sam-2/>. © Jessica Stockholder / Stuff Matters LLC. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



13 (Detail) Jessica Stockholder, *Sam Ran Over Sand or Sand Ran Over Sam*, 2004. © Jessica Stockholder / Stuff Matters LLC. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

one another and joined together by squeezing the clay downwards with my fingers, creating a rhythmic pattern on their exteriors. Changing the tempo of this action creates different marks on each object. Messy marks in fast scratchy layers are applied with both paint on textiles and glaze on ceramics, leaving frisky brush strokes. I add touches of scribbly patterns with underglaze pencils, and drips of glaze and resin run down the sides of my objects in streams of bright colour. Constellations of small flowers are scattered around the floor space and attached to walls like dandelions in grass. When situated together, these textures and motifs seem to bounce back and forth as a chorus of parts.



14 (Detail) Jessica Stockholder, *Sam Ran Over Sand or Sand Ran Over Sam*, 2004, carpet, rope. © Jessica Stockholder / Stuff Matters LLC. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.







## Woman and Flowers

I want to position myself and the practice within the conversation of woman<sup>7</sup> and flowers.

There is a long art history that ties women and flowers together. This relation is evident in the works of Georgia O’Keeffe, Judy Chicago, and Kirstin Carlin, three artists who have used the image of the flower within their practices, across history and with different intentions. Historically, the central reproductive parts of the flower have been employed as an explicit device to narrate female sexuality, feminist politics, vulnerability, and softness – such as in Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979). In her large-scale monument to women’s history, Chicago set a table with 39 individual ceramic dinner plates, each with their own decorated place setting. The ceramic plates are embellished with floral shapes, fruit, and butterflies, made to depict the vulva. Chicago’s intent was to create a space for those who she felt had been left out of history by providing a “seat at the table,” designed especially for each woman from history. Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings such as, *Light of*

.....  
7 The careful use of woman, singular, vs women, plural, here is deliberate. I am one woman, and my relationship to flowers is intimately personal. Although this relationship to flowers is connected to other women, I position myself as one woman and not within the broader contexts of women and flowers.

*Iris* (1924) frame the flower tightly, illustrating a visceral similarity between the painted forms and female genitalia. O’Keeffe had a dual interest in details from flowers and landscapes – depicting her flowers at a bigger than life scale, so that they had the scope of a landscape. Aotearoa contemporary painter Kirstin Carlin’s flowers inhabit her paintings as “fantastical landscapes, contrived gardens and imagined drawing rooms with floral arrangements or absurd portrait sitters.”<sup>8</sup> Carlin’s thick, romantic paint strokes provide just enough detail to lead the eye through the pastel scenery she creates. The image of the flower connects these three artists together, but each have their own focus and context through which we can read the image.

As a woman who makes flowers, I am part of this art-historical lineage. The history between women and flowers has a life of its own that moves out and beyond the close personal connection that I have with flowers. However, this project centres around a personal love for them – an interest in the particular intricacies of flowers, as well as what I perceive to be their unique character. I incorporate various parts of the flower such as stamen, petals, sepal and stigma – as it is in these details that I see shapes and forms for sculptures.

.....  
8 Auckland Art Fair, “Kirstin Carlin,” Auckland Art Fair, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://artfair.co.nz/artist/kirstin-carlin/>.

My love for flowers and flower gardens is matrilineal. It originates with my grandmother, my mother, and my aunty. All of these women are flower enthusiasts and wonderful gardeners. There is beauty for me in this connection, that flowers are a link that ties my ancestry. I refer to this relationship within my work, but it is not always obvious to the outside eye. This connection exists on a level that isn’t intellectual or analytical, but rather one of feeling.

Flowers have a way of connecting me to important women in my life. This project’s catalyst was a conversation with my mum about my grandmother’s flowers. My grandmother passed away before I was at an age to understand who she was as a woman, and flowers have become a way of getting to know her. I wish I could have been there to see which plants she picked for her gardens and vases, and what she loved the most – did she think about the shape of petals too? Mum tells me stories of how Grandma would search for rare plants; she liked the unique ones best. I wonder if any of my sculptures take a likeness to the plants that she enjoyed.

As previously mentioned, I live with my aunty in the company of her garden. Her fence is half painted, and the weeds are so overgrown that they have formed their own meadow through the cracks in the driveway. Nevertheless, she cares for her wildlings a great deal. Her concern is for the character of her plants rather than how they might grow. Once she plants them, she leaves them to flourish without a need to direct their path. It seems we share

the same methodology. There’s little need for planning or asserting control over the medium; instead the joy exists in the selection process, the making of flowers, and in encouraging them to grow.

I like to think in some way we are gardening together, my mother, grandmother, aunty and I, each at different times, in different ways. An overlapping of gardens through time and space, each of us a ‘woman and flowers’.

This image was removed due to copyright restrictions.

17 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Light of Iris*, 1924, oil on canvas, <https://theartstories.blog/2019/12/30/light-iris/>.



# Conversations

## Chapter Two, Conversations

Conversation within this project is applied as a dual method, exercised in two ways. Firstly, as a conceptual term used to describe a dynamic presence *between* things in an installation. Secondly, as literal discussion applied through a series of interview-like chats, titled *Conversational Events*. In her book, *The Company She Keeps*, artist Céline Condorelli outlines the relationships within creative processes that interweave multiple materials, contexts, or parts.

My practice, like that of many others, often involves putting fragments in relationship with each other, so that the cumulative sum of these things – words, ideas, conversations – somehow proposes something that each part alone could not.<sup>9</sup>

My own practice is accumulative by nature – one of bringing together separate parts that as a group make up an installation. My installations are built bit-by-bit with experimental amalgamations of matter. Each element (ceramic, textile, surface) is made with the other in mind, to sit beside and in relation – they are not designed to exist in isolation. As each part is brought into the equation, a conversation begins to occur between things as small details respond

to one another. As I trial installational arrangements in studio – adding new elements, shifting and re-arranging – I consider this conversation. I question how each of the parts are communicating: are there similarities between objects that might highlight another? Scratchy textures next to scratchy paint marks, resin drips alongside glaze drips – do these elements create a playful to-and-fro? Or are they lost in the surfaces that surround them? I utilise depth of field as a way to create configurations that can be detected from one vantage point and not another. As you circle or move in different directions within the installation, you might see through a sheer drop of fabric, to a cluster of flowers pinned to the wall. From another direction, you may notice a conversation between the ceramic objects’ floral tops as they sit at different heights and ‘chat.’ Condorelli frames this connection between things, material and relational, as a support she likens to friendship.

Perhaps this is a way of working that creates close ties and connections between things, people and myself, and more often than not this feels like a friendship of sorts. I work by spending time with things I have collected, with references that I carry along with the numerous voices – of friends, acquaintances, and peers – that are part of this process of developing work.<sup>10</sup>

9 Céline Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps* (London: Book Works, 2012), 8.

10 Condorelli, 8.



Each facet of my practice, although at times produced separately, is integral to the development of all aspects. Development in this practice sits hand-in-hand with a need to experiment – experimentation comes from the drive to create objects and situate them together in an experimental *mess*.<sup>11</sup> My creative and conceptual ideas are processed and deliberated often with family, friends and colleagues through the mechanism of conversation.

## Conversational Events

Almost accidentally in the undertaking of this research, I began to engage with the relational capacity of gardens. The more I openly shared the nature of this project, I found on many occasions that friends or family members would describe specific experiences with flowers or plants that had become for them a reference to certain interpersonal relationships. I found this curious as I too experienced a similar connection to my grandmother and her garden. These phenomena brought me to initiate a series of *Conversational Events*, conversations which are prearranged events and conducted over the phone or via video call. These Conversational Events are designed as casual chats with friends or family, utilising conversation as a social investigatory tool to explore the capacity of interpersonal experiences with gardens. There was no fixed agenda or particular set of questions for these events. Instead they were an open invitation

<sup>11</sup> The use of the word *mess* here is expanded upon later in the text.

for my family and friends to engage with this project, and to share personal memories or experiences. Each event was conducted over the duration of an hour and directed through an invitation to share garden stories and anecdotes, leading to relaxed, spontaneous discussion. The first Conversational Event was a pivotal moment of discovery and illustrated a clear link between my practice and methods used in gardening.

The dialogue began with a phone call to my good friend, Jeni Dickson. Since I’ve known Jeni, she has always had a flourishing garden and floral arrangements throughout her house. We spoke on Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2019, over the phone about her garden in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Jeni described gardening as a necessity that allows her a creative output, and which she is compelled by. She compared her gardening and my installations as practices that are a sort of scheming and arranging of textures. Jeni explained that she is never satisfied with her garden until she has the right variety of plants – a mixture of scraggily plants, broad leaf plants, tall plants, bushy plants, and short plants.

Here is an excerpt from our conversation.<sup>12</sup>

*Debbie:* It’s fascinating hearing you talk about how you plan, and how you move plants because they might not be working as well as you wanted, and that is so similar to how I install things.

*Jeni:* Its 100% like that, and you’re looking at the sightlines, and you’re going - when I’m standing here,

<sup>12</sup> An Ethics application (19/283) was approved by AUTC on 16th August 2019, for staging Conversational events with family and friends. Conversational Events are prearranged informal conversations with a family member or friend, to talk specifically about the individuals garden and gardening enthusiasms.

My first conversational event was conducted at the end of my Honours project on, Thursday 26th September 2019 with my good friend Jeni Dickson who lives in Ōtautahi, Christchurch. I’m including this conversation as part of this writing because it marks an important stage and shift in the research. This was the beginning of the Conversational Events, and the gathering of material uncovering the shared experience of gardens as connected to interpersonal relationships.

My second Conversational event was with friend Beka Hope from the comfort of her sunny home in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. We spoke via video call over the COVID-19 lockdown period on Tuesday 14th April 2020.

The last Conversational Event noted here was with friend Annalise Wilkinson via video call from where she was staying in Ponake Wellington after returning home from China recently. We talked on Wednesday 15th April 2020 over the COVID-19 lockdown period.

what’s the composition like - and how does it all balance?

And plants have all sorts of forms, so some of them are rounded shapes, and some of them are really scraggly, so if you have all of the rounded stuff together, and all of the scraggly stuff together - then that doesn’t work. So, you want to have the rounded stuff kind of interspersed with the scraggly stuff, and broad leaves next to thin leaves, and grasses that sway in the wind. So then if the grasses are going to move in the wind, where’s the best place to put them so that they are really shown off to their full potential. It’s 100% visual for me. Even a productive garden, like the vegetable garden.

The other thing about gardening is the swapping plants. When I prune the roses, I take cuttings. And when I prune the lavender, I take cuttings. I can’t help myself. I’m always thinking about how they might be useful.

I remember in Auckland, I had this red dahlia. It was a pom-pom dahlia, and I had got it from my grandma. I temporarily put it in the veggie garden, but then, of course, it stayed there for three years, and it multiplied like crazy. So, I dug it out, and I probably gave a bit of it away to like 10 people.

I still get messages from people with photos of them like, “Your dahlia’s growing, I’m thinking of you.”



Of course, that then makes me think of my grandma, who’s passed away, and so it’s a sense of sharing and kind of almost a memorial. Associating plants with certain people.

I think of my grandma quite a bit in the garden because she was such a big gardener.

She used to have pansies, and my brother when he was little, said to her, “Grandma, why do the flowers have growly faces?”

She used to call them growly faces from then on.

Anytime I see a pansy with a growly face I think of her.

It’s a really nice way to think of people, to remember people.<sup>13</sup>

On Tuesday, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020, during the first COVID-19 lockdown period, I spoke with my friend Beka Hope over video call. Beka shared with me her memories of the large jasmine bush that sat between her childhood house and the garage that her father worked from. She explained that the smell of jasmine is a reminder of the trips she would take from the kitchen to the garage to deliver her father cups of tea throughout the day. Beka also spoke of a recent offering of care in the form of a Kaffir lime tree:

13 Jeni Dickson, telephone conversation with author, September 26, 2019.

This was only a few months ago, I was just in a pretty sad place for various reasons, and two of my best friends who were overseas at the time, sent me a Kaffir lime tree in the mail.<sup>14</sup>

We talked about the surprise of receiving a live plant at her door, all the way from Bangladesh. I expressed I had no idea this was even a possibility, or something I would think to do for a friend. Beka described it as her pride and joy – a plant with a distinct scent and unusually shaped fruit, but that has such a significant memory attached.

The next day, on Wednesday, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020, I spoke with another friend, Annalise Wilkinson, and we conversed about our shared connection to the memory of our grandparents:

When we were growing up, my grandparents were living out in Greytown and they had this huge section and it was like, such a special treat to go out there. There’s four grandkids and we all had a section of this garden that was dedicated to us. My brother had a snowball tree and it [still] flowers on his birthday every year into these big white snowballs. But MY one was definitely the coolest one [*laughing*]. They moved house, so it’s really only my memories and I don’t know if I exaggerate it in my head because I was a kid. But in my head it was this huge mound

14 Beka Hope, video call conversation with author, April 14, 2020.

of dirt and there was a tree on top of the hill - the tree was green all year round, but the hill that the tree was on was called Daffodil Hill, and in the spring time it was covered in daffodils. That was my special hill. If you say Daffodil Hill to anyone in my family, they know what you are talking about. I’m sure my cousins and my brother, they have their own memories of their special place in the garden as well.<sup>15</sup>

My focus on these three events, specifically, is for their ability to portray conversation as a kind of ‘thinking together.’ The dialogue with Jeni, Beka, and Annalise provided an opportunity to engage with my friends in an intentional back-and-forth of exchange through mutual connections to the garden. Condorelli compares this type of dialogue to a labour process,<sup>16</sup> a working together to hash out ideas. Our shared experiences reinforced and expanded my understanding of the way a garden can be capable of facilitating relational connections. These conversations, although not always physically evident in my work, have provided conceptual terrain for the development of this practice. Condorelli explains,

Friendship, then, is perhaps the condition of the work. It might never be the actual subject of the work – but it is a formative, operational condition that works on multiple simultaneous levels.<sup>17</sup>

15 Annalise Wilkinson, video call conversation with author, April 15, 2020.  
16 Condorelli, 7.  
17 Condorelli, 8.

The garden has become the overarching context and setting that connects both my installations and these conversational events. The conversations I have with my family and friends about the garden, mirror the back and forth I see between the objects in installation. Both forms of dialogue are a type of working together. My objects work alongside one another to form a garden, while the conversational events are a working together with friends to share and understand the garden and our connection to it.



19 Jeni Dickson, *Hand and Flower*, iphone camera, 2019.



18 Jeni sent me this photo with a message explaining she had named it after me because it is almost the colour purple I wear. Jeni Dickson, *Hydrangea*, iphone camera, 2019.





## *A list of things I think about when I'm making*



Flowers  
Ponytail Palms  
Ti Kōuka / Cabbage Trees  
Pansies  
Mounds, lumps and bumps in gardens  
Ruamahanga Cres  
Te Manawatū te awa  
How to make a clay Harakeke without the clay cracking  
Branches  
Buds on branches  
The phase before the bud becomes a flower  
Leaves  
Mushrooms  
Moss  
That yellow stuff that grows on trees  
Basket Mushrooms  
Fungi  
Mānuka Pods  
Mānuka Flowers  
How to make those spikey pom-pom things that sit on the ends of  
the branches of those trees  
Kauri Seeds  
How do tall flowers not fall over  
How to make a tall flower that won't fall over  
How to make a tree  
How to make a bush  
How to make the word Bloom  
Dehiscence  
Kaffir Limes  
Babaco Trees



# Haphazard

## Chapter Three, Haphazard

At the beginning of this project, I felt a need to set up a clear experimental zone of practice. Both in thinking and in physicality, I made certain to establish a space in the studio that felt open, light, and ready for trial and error. It related also to my perception of imagined garden spaces and flower beds. With a desire to keep momentum building, I let go of any expectation to create fully realised ideas/artworks and pushed myself to try things out quickly. As a consequence, I began embracing relaxed and intuitive methods of making, developing a methodology of quick, on-the-spot experimentation. The word *Haphazard* is defined as, “with no particular order or plan,”<sup>18</sup> a description that fits this practice well, and so I have adopted this as a term for my methodology. Haphazard, in this context, is a methodology driven by intuition without any need to predetermine an end result.

Haphazard is visible in my practice in the fast, provisional actions. It is an attitude of adaptability that looks for opportunity in the things that occur without planning. This manner of making enables a confidence when approaching a new task, because there is little

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<sup>18</sup> Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, “Haphazard,” accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/haphazard?q=haphazard>.





cost if the experiment fails. Haphazard approaches any perceived failure as a learning that has the potential to be exploited. This methodology is a consequence of an impatient drive to problem solve ideas quickly. There is a need to materialise ideas to understand them, thus, Haphazard adopts imprecise methods of making by prioritising fast results over outcomes precisely measured or designed. This process has also evolved an aesthetic character alongside it: excessive gloops of brightly coloured resin, clumsy smushed thumb prints in coils of clay, casual smudged applications of paint to surfaces, busy accumulations of found and fabricated textiles. Haphazard emerges in my work as both method and a material quality.



22

In her extensive installations, Australian artist Mikala Dwyer populates space with eclectic sculptural collections. Dwyer brings a playfulness to her interactions with substances, combining unsuspecting components to form sculptures that question the extent of their own materiality. In Dwyer’s 2002 exhibition, *An Australian Artist’s Project*, her inventive sensibility manifests in a marriage of, “fibreglass, polystyrene, silicone glue, plastic, papier-mâché, plaster, glitter, paint, vinyl, fabric, clay, stockings, electric lights, and more.”<sup>19</sup> In a publication describing Dwyer’s assemblages, artist and writer Martin Poppelwell explains, “There are essentially two fundamental possibilities in sculpture: to strip away matter, excavating until nothing remains, or, to accumulate matter, additively, until one arrives at a limit of fullness.”<sup>20</sup> Accumulation is a quality Dwyer and I share, where both of our practices hoard materials to a capacity that expands in scale and distance. There is a playfulness to the way Dwyer uses her body to wield structures, and I try to bring this same attitude to my studio making. I like to play within my space, laying objects down, dragging fabrics into varying positions. I try to move quickly, maintaining my desire not to pre-empt outcomes. As a result of working with an ingredient as fragile as ceramics, I rapidly learnt to adapt in order to ‘repair’



19 Amanda Rowell and Martin Poppelwell, “Mikala Dwyer: An Australian Artist’s Project,” accessed November 5, 2020, <https://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/mikala-dwyer-australian-artist-project/>.  
20 Paula Savage, Amanda Rowell, and Martin Poppelwell, *Mikala Dwyer* (Wellington, New Zealand: City Gallery Wellington, 2002), 26.

sculptures. Ceramics can break, explode, morph, or slump through the firing journey. I don’t let these experiences discourage my progress, but rather I try to embrace these incidental mistakes and use them to spur on new possibilities. This haphazard, responsive method has forced new combinations and agglomerations, which emerge as a mixture of aesthetic qualities that I enjoy because of the way they attract.

## Messy

I like objects to exist as visual juxtapositions of soft, romantic tones with touches of messy, gooey, dark, scratchy, scribbly and bumpy textures. This aesthetic combination is in part a result of my Haphazard methodology, but is balanced out by more intentional aesthetic decisions. These are things that I know will happen as I become cognisant of material potentials of the clay, glaze, textiles and patterns. I can never fully commit to a whole colour palette without the need to mess it up a bit. Somewhere within the mix, I enjoy the tension of adding an element that adds an edge of untidiness or creates a visual clash. I don’t ever feel fully satisfied with the overall effect of my work until that messy ingredient is added. Messy, for me, happens in the stand-back-and-have-a-look moments. It is this phase that solidifies whether or not I feel I have the right mixture of elements aesthetically.



23



There are multiple words I could use to describe Aotearoa painter and sculptor, Virginia Leonard's ceramic vessels. Leonard's vase-like objects are enthusiastically knobbly, drippy, and somehow almost boldly dangerous. Her experimental approach to clay contextualises the kind of saturated messy aesthetics that I want my floral objects to possess. When beginning the process of forming an object, I start with an outline of the kind of shapes I want the object to retain. I then begin by establishing the base of the object, building a foundation for the 'flower' to grow out of. Like Leonard, my forms are each hand-built, leaving behind lumpy curving textures that develop as I squeeze my fingers into the clay, deliberately leaving the evidence of contact. Leonard coats her objects in layers of glistening lustre, slimy resin, and bright glazes. I've been experimenting with new techniques of mixing my own material combinations; layering gloopy, or bubbling glazes with resin, lustre, and underglaze pencils. Glazing is both technically and aesthetically exciting for me, as it contains within its convention an element of surprise (and potentially, satisfaction). This is an aspect of the ceramic process I thoroughly enjoy. The pairing of shiny, glossy glaze; dark, lumpy, bubbly glaze; and bright gloopy dripping resin, is the perfect kind of messy mixture I aim to achieve and exploit.



24 Virginia Leonard, *Pink Legs with Diamantes*, 2020, clay, lustre, resin, 500mm x 520mm x 500mm, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, <https://www.gowlangsforgallery.co.nz/artists/virginia-leonard>



25 Virginia Leonard, *Ripped Legs*, 2020, clay, lustre, resin, 1070mm x 500mm x 500mm, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, <https://www.gowlangsforgallery.co.nz/artists/virginia-leonard>

There is an endless compulsion that drives me to create exaggerated floral objects. Each time I make a new object, I attempt to go a little bit larger than the last. It's both this challenge and drama that I appreciate about large objects. Ceramics at this scale provide an experience that can be missed in smaller objects: glazes are easier to see, the technicalities of the objects are more obvious, and the scale provides a closer interaction with the work physically. Australian artist Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran creates life-sized ceramics by stacking small sections on top of each other to build large sculptural figures. The scale and relentless collage of materials, one on top of the other, is what that I admire about Nithiyendran's works. In pursuit of a specific effect, Nithiyendran recently collaborated with a car painting company to coat a head of one of his forms in a high gloss, metallic electric pink. These sculptures fuse mixtures of contrasting bright coloured glaze with shiny gold, and silver lustres. In his exhibition *False Gods* in 2019, Nithiyendran, constructed oversized ceramic giants with assemblies of strip LED lights, wigs, stuffed textiles, and painted wood – each used to form the hair, arms, legs, head, and shoulders, of the sculptural bodies. The kiln that I have access to in the Auckland University of Technology facilities has a height restriction of around 60cm. With a drive to build large tree-like floral objects, I decided to trial the process of making works in sections: stacked forms that could then be fired in parts. These experiments required me to find ways to stabilise works while also keeping the integrity of their sculptural forms. This is where I began to use resin to glue things in place after firing, and



26 Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, *False Gods*, 2019, Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney, <https://www.ramesh-nithiyendran.com/2019-False-Gods-Sullivan-Strumpf>



it also led to the introduction of new materials that I began adding to the ceramic forms. I experimented with new glazes, under glaze pastels, glaze pencils, plasticine and glitter to create a building-up of aesthetic layers. I favour the messy characteristics of a surface that is built with an excessive amount of texture. Liquid gloops that converge with harder, more solid, ceramic components. I want my work to have a balance of texture: smooth and soft intersecting with rough and abrasive. I do this to disrupt the aesthetic reading of the objects. My intent is to work against the anticipated patterns of materiality associated with the ceramic medium by adding new and unexpected, clashing elements.



27



28





# Attraction

## Chapter Four, *Attraction*

As my practice develops, it is obvious there is an aesthetic tone emerging within my work, both as individual ceramic works and within installation. Underlying my aesthetic sensibility is an intuitive feeling that indicates to me when something feels ‘right’. This intuition I describe as *attraction*. Attraction in the context of my practice is the experience of being seduced by things. It’s like a feeling of being pulled in by something; I have a curious compulsion to see, to feel, or inspect the thing in question. This thing has to have a particular kind of appeal for attraction to occur. The appeal is tacit and exists somewhere within my consciousness. A moment of attraction is active; I find I am incredibly motivated by it. When I’m seduced by a particular texture, structure, system, form, style, pattern or colour, from this moment of connection, I am propelled into a spiral of new ideas that trigger an energetic urgency to get into the studio and make.

*Attraction occurs for me at the sighting of an intriguing plant during a casual stroll.*

*Attraction is at Geoff’s Emporium while needlessly searching through textiles or ribbons.*

*Attraction is nestled within the pots during a return visit to the Ponsonby flower shop.*

*Attraction is when the clay folds in on itself in a way I didn’t predict.*

In a presentation discussing her theory of ‘the call of things’<sup>21</sup>, the philosopher Jane Bennett speaks about the potential of attraction between human and non-human things. Bennett compares artists with hoarders as individuals with a specific attunement to non-human objects. She explains, “the possibility that the person who hoards and the artist who creates, share a certain something of a perceptual comportment... Artists and hoarders hear more of the aesthetic call of things, to conjoin with them, play with them, respond to them.”<sup>22</sup> Bennett proposes that objects have a potentiality that’s misunderstood, but with an attunement to the *call* of things we might begin to grasp their capacity. Bennett explains that her own experience with a set of objects was the catalyst that provoked her book, *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things*:

My book was not just a response to those other books and to other ideas, it was also quite literally a response to a call from a set of things, some matter that had congealed into a tangible set of things. In particular some items of trash that had collected in the gutter of a street in Baltimore where I live.<sup>23</sup>

21 Jane Bennett, “(4) Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter | The New School - YouTube,” accessed March 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q607Ni23QjA&t=612s>.

22 Bennett.

23 Bennett.



In 2014, as part of an exhibition titled, *Inside Outside Upside Down*, Aotearoa artist Kate Newby presented an installation about her particular attraction to rocks. The installation was made up of a collection of handmade glass and ceramic rocks. Each was provided with a handwritten title that referred to a specific person, place, experience, or feeling. Part of Newby’s work is an underlying, intimate connection to everyday things. Her installations provide space for encounters with the mundane that are like a reintroduction to the things often taken for granted. In an essay, titled “It’s the small often vague things” writer Jennifer Kabat explains the intimacy between Newby and her rocks. She explains, “The rocks become almost a diary of her daily, lived experience, and in that sense the groupings represent a kind of geology of emotion. Constructed from small moments and what you might call slight gestures.”<sup>24</sup> Attraction is therefore my response to the *call* of flowers; my floral objects are an embodiment of this relationship, an expression of the connection between flowers and their intimate place in my life.



30 Kate Newby, *Mr + Mrs Hands*, 2014, ired porcelain, earthenware and stoneware, hand formed glass, table, ink on paper, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, purchased 2015, <https://www.panto-graph-punch.com/posts/review-inside-outside-upside-down>

24 Kate Newby, *Let the Other Thing In* (Fogo Islands: Fogo Islands Arts and Sternberg Press, 2013).

## *Saturated in Colour*

Colours I happily use: hues of purples and pinks, light blues, dark blues, black, grey, red, and specific shades of green. Colours I can’t allow myself to use: yellow; never yellow – I have what I’d call a troublesome relationship with yellow; I don’t like the way it makes me feel. I don’t like the way it yellows up things that are beside it. The only shade of yellow I can allow myself to use is that buttery pastel, that tone which is just faintly yellow. Maybe it’s the way that I specifically use yellow, because I don’t have a problem when other people do. I just don’t trust myself with it. Certain shades of green. Yellow and green together does weird things to me.

Attraction drives my relationship with colour. I’ve noticed the colours that I commonly use connect to my idea of what a ‘floral’ colour is. It’s a silly observation, because when I think of a flower, I know in my mind that there is an entire rainbow of possibility. Flowers often contain a multitude of colours, even within one single petal. But when it comes to choosing my own colours, I repetitively return to soft tones; tones I have a familiar and fond relationship with, and which, therefore, make me feel comfortable.

I share a studio with a group of painters. One of the luxuries of this is observing my work in the periphery of other people’s colour palettes. The painters who surround me cover large surfaces, and the experience of being enveloped by their walls of colour is

visceral. I particularly like to imagine my work in relation to Rhea Maheshwari’s paintings, and that my sculptures (like plants) might live somewhere in amongst her painted worlds. Maheshwari’s works are large scale, often wall-to-wall landscapes, filled with soft purples, blues, pinks, muted greens, oranges, browns, greys and yellow tones. Watching at the beginning of her process of applying paint, I see Maheshwari slowly adding patches of luminous transparent colours. As I walk into the studio each day, I’m sequentially greeted by a wall of purple, the next, a wash of blue, then delicate strokes of brown. I often walk up close, my body the scale of the painting, and stare into the masses of colour. Her paintings have taught me that the experience of being engulfed in an atmosphere of colour intensifies my work. I’ve since been testing how to emulate this experience within my studio. I’ve trialled large sheets of painted fabric, glitter covered tulle, light pink plastic drop sheets, and have roughly painted the studio walls lilac. At this large scale, coloured planes surround and encompass both the objects and my own body. These surfaces of colour alongside the ceramic objects help to magnify a feeling of being *within* the installation as an environment.

Directly beside me in the studio and as an everyday and familiar backdrop for my objects, which sit in temporary studio arrangements, painter Caitlyn Manning fills her space with energetic swerves of saturated colour. I am endlessly surprised by the hues she crowds into her canvases. There are often several paintings on the go at one time, each exploring a unique display and bustle of colours.



Populated with combinations I would never have the courage to try, Manning confidently merges her pigments into agreement. By observing this decision making, I've learnt that what might feel uncomfortable can sometimes be the most effective way to add a touch of charisma to a work. Manning regularly utilises contrast to highlight the technicalities within her paintings. I've since adopted this tactic by attempting to apply the idea of contrast within the open space of my installations. My found and formed surfaces parallel Manning's gridded lines and butt up against one another to create an overlay of contrasted shapes. Manning's paintings have also equipped me with the courage to venture out to access textiles that I would usually not consider, and to test them within installation as way to challenge the dynamics of my work. I observe how some colours clash, while others uplift or create harmony.



31



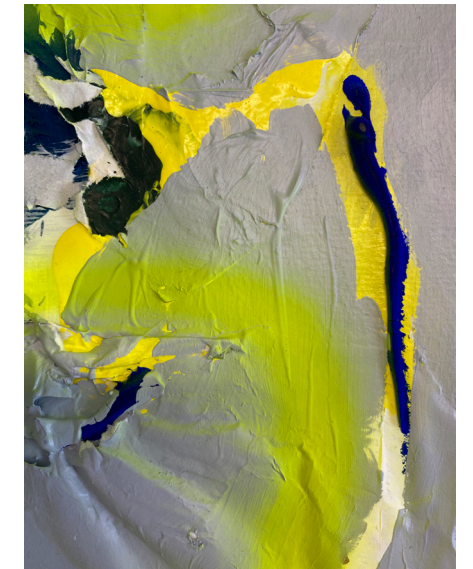
32 Rhea Maheshwari's, *Aerial Architecture*, 2020, paint on paper, Queenstown Contemporary, Queenstown, <https://www.rheamaheshwariartist.com/exhibitions>.



33 Rhea Maheshwari's, *Aerial Architecture*, 2020, paint on paper, Queenstown Contemporary, Queenstown, <https://www.rheamaheshwariartist.com/exhibitions>.



34 Caitlyn Manning, *Detail of Caitlyn's Painting*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, AUT, Auckland.



35 Caitlyn Manning, *Detail of Caitlyn's Painting*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, AUT, Auckland.





37 Caitlyn Manning, *Detail of Caitlyn's Painting*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, AUT, Auckland.

## *Lilac and me*

It seems that my relationship with a specific shade of purple has spilled over and onto the surfaces of my work. I have a very close relationship with the colour lilac. We have been in a relationship for four years now. Attraction is what I think drove our initial encounter. At the beginning of my undergraduate degree, I took a walk from St Paul Street to High Street in the central city of Auckland, on a search for a jumper. After combing through the fabrics in Recycle Boutique, I came across a woollen jumper but I just wasn't sure about its colour. It was a mid-tone purple jumper, a colour I'd never really worn before. On an impulse, I bought it anyway – and then spent most of that winter wearing it every day. A few months later, my friend Rose sewed me a matching cotton gingham outfit in a pastel lilac; it's since become my most worn item of clothing. Several years later, at the end of my undergraduate degree, I made a 1.5-metre-high plaster mound. Its dramatic oval shape (like an egg with its base removed) was a replica of the kinds of mounds that occur over time in the land, grass, and soil in gardens. I painted this mound lilac. When it came to titling my installation that year, I remember thinking words felt too empty. How could I describe all of my feelings, all at once – *Planting Lilac* felt like the best way to encapsulate it all.

Artist Elizabeth Sweetheart is infamous in Brooklyn, New York, for her title as the 'lime green lady'. Her hair is green, glasses, eyeshadow, shoes, carpet, furniture, clothes, house – all green. Sweetheart's life is quite literally lime green. In an interview she explains it was on a trip to Florida with her father as a child – a day she describes as a lucky day<sup>25</sup> – which sparked the beginnings of her relationship to green. As a painter, Sweetheart began to incorporate shades of green into her works and then into her life. Sweetheart exemplifies an extreme commitment to the pursuit of one specific colour; so much so, it has become her life-long companion.

In a recent panel discussion with multidisciplinary artist, Claudia Kogachi at Artspace, Tāmaki Makaurau, a question was asked that inquired about the artist's application of their own cultural identities, and how that appears within their practices<sup>26</sup>. Kogachi answered with the brief description of how the colour blue became the skin of the figures in her work, explaining that when she began painting people, she was struggling with her own experience of cultural diaspora. As a consequence, she wasn't sure what colour to

25 Elizabeth Sweetheart, *Green With Happiness: Meet the Green Lady of Brooklyn*, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE5h2kk0NTI>.

26 Panel Discussion: 'Hidden Agenda' with Vanessa Mei Crofskey and guests (Artweek), interview by Vanessa Mei Crofskey, October 15, 2020, <https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/events/panel-discussion-hidden-agenda-with-vanessa-mei-crofskey-and-guests>.



paint skin tones. At this same time, some conflict with her mum had left her feeling ‘a little blue’ and therefore, the blue figures became a depiction of her feelings. The colour seemed to stick and is now a common signifier within her paintings. Kogachi now identifies blue as a favourite colour, and one with which she feels a connection.

Both Elizabeth Sweetheart and Claudia Kogachi in one moment chose a colour that would unknowingly become a companion, a comfort, or type of muse. I don’t know if I chose lilac or it chose me. Either way, I have welcomed lilac into my life. Lilac has become more than a colour to me. It is as if it has its own essence. Lilac is a metaphorical record of cherished memories and sits within my practice as a quiet memento to people, feelings, and connections; it is an aesthetic celebration of the lilac presences that fill my life.

This image was removed due to copyright restrictions.

38 Photograph of Elizabeth Sweetheart, Yuka Azuma, *Green Lady of New York*, 2019, Trend and Chaos, New York, <https://trendandchaos.com/green-lady-of-new-york-city/>.



39 Claudia Kogachi, *Obachan and Mom Helping me Tie the Obi to My Kimono*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 1600mm x 1200mm, Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland, <https://www.sanderson.co.nz/Artist/346/Claudia-Kogachi/PageIndex/0/ProductId/12981.aspx#Artwork>





## Closing

In closing, I return once more to the origins of this project – the Ektachrome slides of my grandmother Phyllis’ garden. Early in this project, I made a quiet promise with myself not to have these slides digitised until the completion of the writing. This hasn’t been an easy exercise in patience, but I have maintained my desire to keep the photographs as a surprise for the end. I wanted them to be a kind of encouragement or reward for getting here.

In a way, in this moment we are sharing the experience of the emergence of these images and my grandmother’s garden together. As you have reached the end of this writing, you too are presented with the details of this garden you weren’t privy to at the beginning. While these images themselves are a little blurry, it’s clear my grandmother had a very particular style of gardening. We can see her shrubs are pruned into round balls of colour, interspersed amongst rocks, small pebbles, trees and bushy foliage. The scale of the plants sits at a similar low height, with only slight variations in elevation. Her garden is contained in circular-shaped plots, outlined with curving edges, and carved out into tidy lines. She has considered how the garden might be encountered, creating pathways with pebbles, that (no doubt) my grandfather would have helped her rake into tidy aisles. This description I consider no different from the way I describe my own installational gardens. Floral texture,



41 Photograph of Grandma Phyllis’ Garden, Ektachrome slide, Gore.

arrangements, shape, form, scale, plane, depth of field, and composition are all deliberated here, in Grandma’s garden, as they are in my installations. These photographs appropriately illustrate the like-minded relationship between the garden and the object-based installations discussed throughout this writing.

Furthermore, these images themselves express the relational capacity of the garden explored in this project, not only through a series of *Conversational Events* with my friends Jeni, Beka, and Annalise – but also within the connection I share with my grandmother, mother, aunty and their gardens. Each of these relationships demonstrate the unique ability of gardens to be spaces capable of facilitating interpersonal memories and connections.

Unfortunately, there are no detailed photos of Grandma’s chosen flowers up close. I’ve made the assumption from spending time with these photographs that she was attracted to the flowers that could grow as clusters and be shaped into plump round bushes. In contrast, my installations are a little less orderly. Nevertheless, my haphazard, open-ended and experimental approach has proved immensely productive. As a methodology, it has allowed me the creative freedom to make mistakes, exploit those mistakes and apply them as part of the learning process and as discoveries. I’ve grown to enjoy these ‘mistakes’ the most. They have a characteristic that is uniquely eccentric and unexpected in terms of ceramic conventions. These messy qualities, alongside other elements that I am attracted

to, are what give a defined aesthetic quality to the artwork.

Although our approaches are separate, my grandmother’s garden and my art installations are drawn together across time into conversation. I like to think that my sculptural forms merge into the likeness of some of the flowers she has planted and grown in these images. As I spend quiet moments with my hands in clay, I consider how she might have done the same, hands covered in the soil of the plants she cared for. My invitation as you encounter my installations is to enjoy the experience of being *within* the environment, that your thoughts might wander as you do through the space. My hope is that this practice will continue to unfold; as the seasons’ transition and ready the flowers that await their moment to blossom.



42 Photograph of Grandma Phyllis’ Garden, Ektachrome slide, Gore.







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Appendix

# *Planting Lilac* *Exhibition*

*Raumati Postgraduate Show*

*ST PAUL Street Gallery Three*

*Thursday 11th Feb - Saturday 13th Feb 2021*





Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, textile, paint, plaster of paris, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, plasticine, textile, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, plasticine, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, plasticine, textile, paint, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



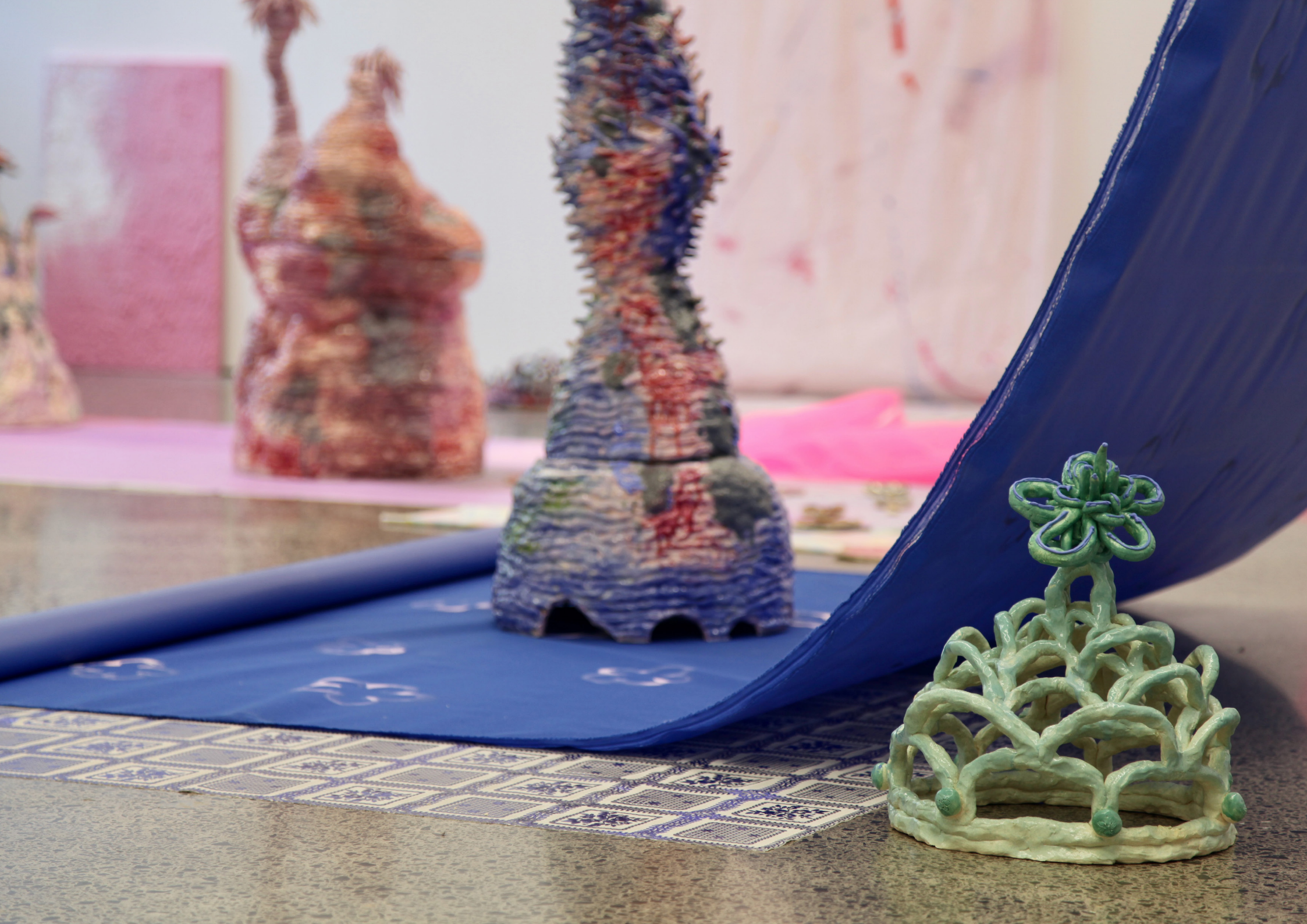


Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, on painted textile, ST Paul Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, on textile and paint, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



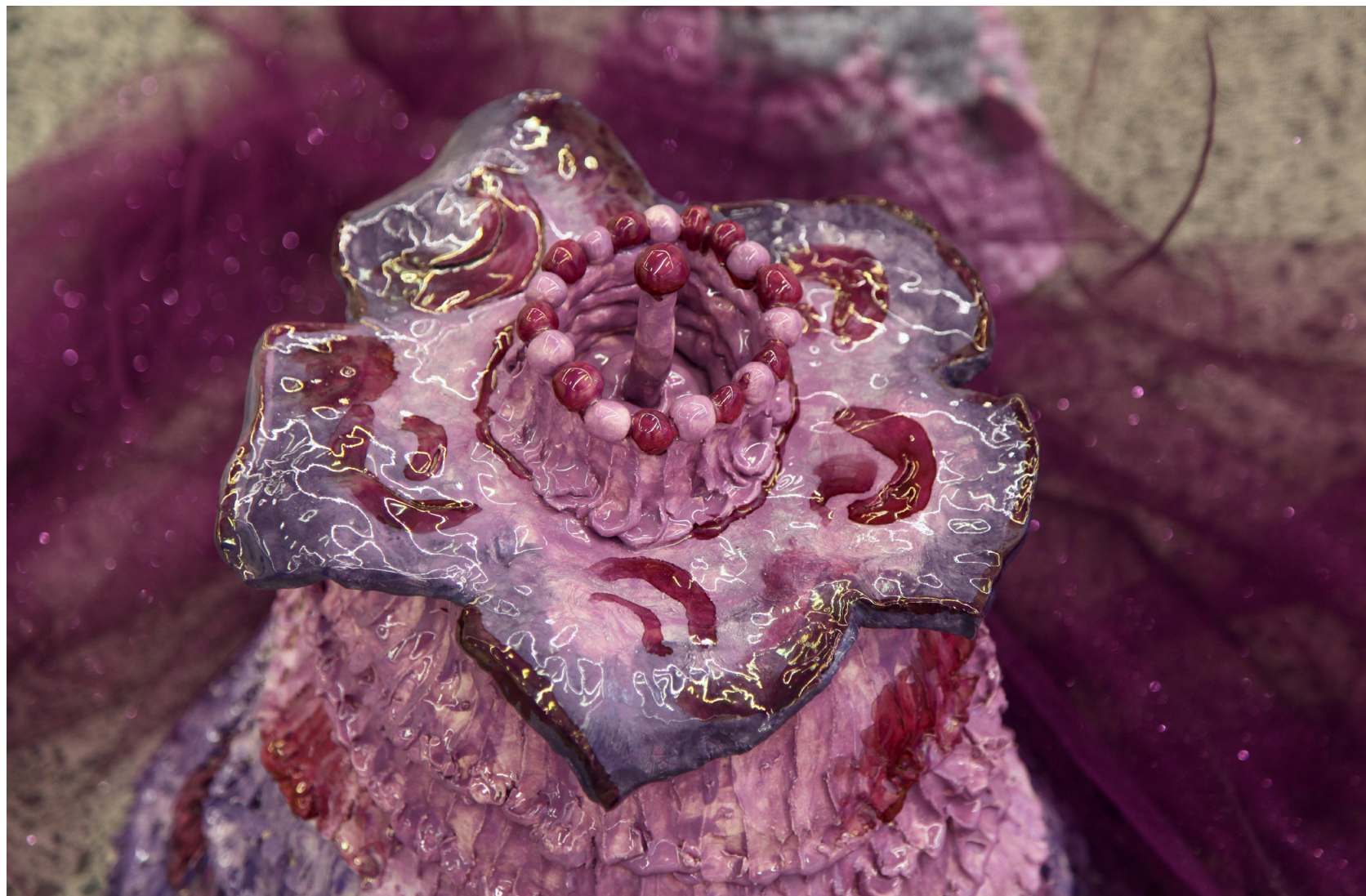


Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, resin, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, slip, resin, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





Detail, *Planting Lilace*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, on textile, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, resin, on textile, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, resin, on textile, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, resin, textile, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.





*Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, resin, textile, paint, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.



Detail, *Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, plasticine, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.

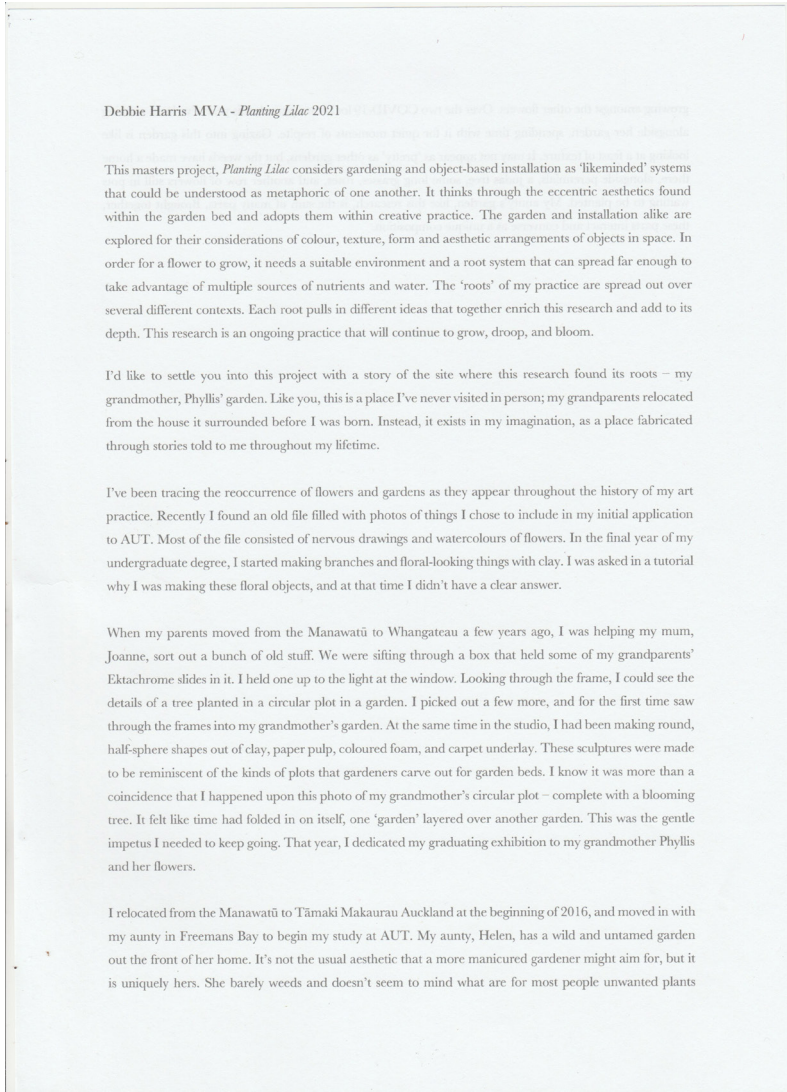




*Planting Lilac*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, lustre, resin, textile, paint, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.







*Planting Lilac Room Sheet, 2021, text on paper, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland.*

