



I Too Am in
Paradise II

Raewyn
Atkinson

I Too Am in Paradise II:
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Melanie Oliver

I Too Am in Paradise II is a glimpse into the secret lives of plants. Over the course of nearly a year, Raewyn Atkinson used a time-lapse camera to document the growth of ngutu kākā mā ‘white kākābeak’ plants that she had potted in a cluster of unfired clay urns. Set in her garden in Te Whanganui-a-tara Wellington, the subsequent video shows aspects of a scene not usually observable in a still image: the slow, subtle processes of development and decay, circadian rhythms, and all manner of weather, from blustery winds and blotchy rain to occasional bursts of sun. The seasonal changes that the video reveals are challenging and nurturing in varying degrees; some plants thrive more than others, while the urns gradually disintegrate. The work quietly conveys these organic processes. Days are marked by light and dark, weeks and months by the blossoming of the ngutu kākā mā and slumping of the urns as they soften, crumble and return to the earth they came from. Time is amplified, palpable and poignant, as the work comes to represent our own life changes, the storms we weather and our ultimate mortality.

The title of Atkinson’s work reinforces this, appropriating a translation into English of the title of the memento mori painting Et in Arcadia ego (1637–38) by classical French Baroque artist Nicolas Poussin. Poussin’s work depicts a pastoral scene with several shepherds in discussion around a tomb. The painting has multiple potential meanings and has come to be seen as both a reflection on death and an allegory for the role of painting. Thematically, then, it is akin to Atkinson’s focus on the life of her plants and the clay urns’ eventual return to the earth. The urns are each adorned with the words ‘Et in Arcadia ego’. However, on the one situated at the front of the group only the word ‘ego’ can be seen, turning it into a statement on the conscious, thinking subject, on self-esteem and on personal identity. At one point in the video, the piece of this urn inscribed with text tumbles off, the moisture from the dirt finally breaking open the vessel. As the video continues, the earth and plant roots hold the urn’s shape, the memory of their recent encasement retained until the ngutu kākā mā can be planted out into a bigger patch of soil.

Poussin painted two works with the title Et in Arcadia ego, around ten years apart. The second version, completed in 1638, contains a depiction of what is traditionally considered the first image in the history of art: one of the shepherds notices his companion tracing the silhouette of his shadow on the tomb, a reference to the birth of painting. Atkinson too has made two works with ngutu kākā, initially installing planted urns in the courtyard of The Dowse Art Museum for an exhibition over summer 2017–18. In the second iteration at Objectspace, I Too Am in Paradise II, she has moved into video form to address the difficulties of exhibiting a living sculpture and to visually communicate the passage of time. As a video, the work incorporates the time-lapse image capture process as an integral part of it, another kind of reflection on the nature of art and image making.

It is the history of ngutu kākā mā that is especially critical for this work, though. There are two species of ngutu kākā that are threatened with extinction in the wild in Aotearoa New Zealand. Atkinson’s project is inspired by a desire to both share this concern with a wider public and assist with the conservation of the white variant ngutu kākā mā in a practical way by propagating the plants from seed. Her initial installation at The Dowse involved gifting the plants at the end of the exhibition to volunteer gardens around the Wellington region to increase the local population. At the conclusion of this second planting in her own garden, Atkinson will send the surviving shrubs to Dame Anne Salmond’s Longbush Ecosanctuary in Gisborne, returning them to the region that the seeds were sourced from and where the need for their preservation is most vital.

The seeds and plants used in this project were entrusted to Atkinson by East Coast hapū Ngāi Kōhatu (Ngāti Hinehika), who are kaitiaki for the species. These kākābeak taonga are known at Te Reinga Marae as ‘ngutu kōrako’, named after the ancestress Hinekōrako, a taniwha who lives beneath Te Reinga falls. The English translation of kōrako is ‘albino’, which describes the white flowers of this type of kākābeak. The plant is woven into local history and narratives through this naming, highlighting its enduring significance. For example, Hine Kōrako is also one of three female atua ‘gods’ featured in the celebrated painting Ko hine te iwaiwa, ko hine korako, ko rona whakamau tai (1993) by Robyn Kahukiwa, who also has whakapapa links to the area. Returning the plants to their original home, Atkinson acknowledges ngutu kākā mā as indigenous taonga and contributes towards their survival.

Thus the ecological, social and cultural importance of conserving ngutu kākā mā is at the heart of I Too Am in Paradise II. In capturing the struggles of developing these vulnerable plants from seed to shrub, the work stresses that preserving the ecodiversity of Aotearoa New Zealand against introduced species, disease and pests is an ongoing challenge. A rich green lichen gathers on the urns over the duration of the video, reinforcing that the clay earth used in their making – taken from the artist’s own garden – is also an important resource, to be treated with respect.

Throughout her practice Atkinson has consistently aligned conceptual relevance with materials, delivering ideas through the specific history, nature and possibilities of the medium that she selects for each work. This project builds on that approach, broadening out from a sculptural installation caught on film to an ongoing conversation with a community, as Atkinson engaged with Ngāi Kōhatu and those for whom ngutu kōrako are part of their whakapapa. The work contemplates the continuing journey of the ngutu kākā mā plants, and in doing so provides a chance to think about our environment, the ways we respond to changes in climate, and how we adapt to circumstance.

Raewyn Atkinson was born in Napier, New Zealand. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from Victoria University and an involvement with clay that spans over 30 years during which time she has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally. Atkinson was the recipient of the Portage Ceramic Award in both 2003 and 2015. In 2015 she was awarded the Juror’s Prize at the Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale in South Korea.

A three-month Japanese residency in 1998 combined with two visits to Antarctica, first in 2000 on an Antarctica Art Fellowship and another journey in 2003, sparked an interest in working with translucent porcelain. These visits have resulted in several major exhibitions, Terra Nova, (Dowse Art Museum, Wellington 2002, Te Manawa 2003) and Designs on Antarctica, Wellington City Gallery 2005, Objectspace, Auckland 2006. Work by Atkinson is held in a number of national and international collections.

Melanie Oliver is Senior Curator at The Dowse Art Museum in Te Awakairangi Lower Hutt. She was Director of The Physics Room in Christchurch from 2012 to 2016, and has held curatorial roles at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth and Artspace Sydney. Melanie is currently a PhD candidate at Monash University in Melbourne.

Dr Rangihīroa Panoho is an artist and writer passionate about his Māori/Polynesian heritage in the Asia Pacific region. Author of the multiple award winning publication MAORI ART: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory (Batemans, 2015). Panoho’s tribal affiliations are Te Uiroroi and Te Parawhau of the Northland region of Aotearoa. He has curated, published, lectured and collaborated in local and international galleries and universities. His work as curator, educator and art historian (Phd, Art History) feeds into his visual practice. He is currently working on a book that aims at redefining contemporary perceptions of taonga ‘traditional Māori treasures’.

E kōrero ana ngā rākau: ‘the trees are talking’
Rangihīroa Panoho

Raewyn Atkinson’s richly layered visual language involves paradox and citation where metaphor, the natural environment, chance and ceramic processes all play their part. This is particularly evident in the time-delay footage of the changing installation I Too Am In Paradise II (2019), featuring thirty kōwhai ngutu kōrako in unfired ceramic pots documented in the artist’s Brooklyn garden over ten months. The project may sound unexceptional, but the plants chosen are a rare white variant, an albino form, of Clianthus puniceus, one of the two endangered species of kōwhai ngutu kākā. As with Atkinson’s earlier projects involving politically charged content (for example, melting ice in the Antarctic in 2005 and 2006), uncertainty and anxiety around survival resumes. There is good reason. The Department of Conservation claims only 120 kōwhai ngutu kākā survive in the wild in Te Ika-a-Māui. Thus the artist felt a great responsibility in being entrusted with this rare plant by its kaitiaki ‘guardians’ for her installation.

The resurrection of kōwhai ngutu kōrako, last seen growing naturally in the Wairoa region in the 1950s, provides then a miraculous though complex focal point for Atkinson’s work. Propagation of the native was achieved with seed obtained by chance by Scion, the crown research institute specialising in forestry, around 2013 and later gifted back in the form of a hundred plants to the Te Reinga Mārae Trust, Wairoa. In 2015, Minister of Conservation Maggie Barry acknowledged the unusual route of te hokinga mai nei ‘this return’ to ngā kaitiaki, the Wairoa hapū Ngai Kōhatu (Ngāti Hinehika):

the wairua of the plant and the aroha of the iwi [means] that the plant is with us today
— very few species can recover from this – once they are gone, they are gone forever.

Moved, the artist said: ‘I thought it was a wonderful, hopeful story and ... that it would add to the understanding of the installation.’ This wānanga ‘narrative’ is certainly compelling, but each chance layer complicates its meaning and potentially restricts its audience. I Too Am In Paradise II, although situated outside the gallery and grown in the artist’s private garden, is still an artwork read and understood primarily within the New Zealand art paradigm. What interests me is the extent to which the installation references both an indigenous kaupapa ‘native agenda’ and a New Zealand art history whakapapa ‘genealogy’ privileging the West. The crossover seems straightforward. The shrubs conceptually epitomise the threat of indigenous loss, but they also signify the possibility of resurrection. However, the pots containing the native plants paradoxically embody the passage of time and of death, recurring themes in Atkinson’s work. This contradiction continues, while the artist creates a work of haunting beauty, almost regardless.

Dwelling on the threatened status of the kākā beak with these references is risky, inviting misunderstanding in the acknowledgement – perhaps even the valorisation – of the extinction of ‘the Other’. The ‘dying Māori’ motif is a longstanding and popular paradigm in New Zealand art and literature. Atkinson’s actual citation is the French Baroque artist Nicolas Poussin’s painting Et in Arcadia ego (1637–38) ‘even in Arcadia [paradise] there is death’, a title inscribed on each potted tree. Entertaining Poussin’s proposition regarding temporality while at the same time considering the plight of kōwhai ngutu kōrako makes heavy demands on the viewer.

Atkinson quotes Poussin’s bleak caption on white sepulchre-like urns, each individually elevated on ziggurat-like, six-across-by-five-deep stepped red clay perches. This arrangement resonates the scene in Poussin’s painting where figures stand around a central battered tomb inscribed with the same text. The memento mori also feels uncomfortably close to classic icons of New Zealand art history: the portraits of elderly rangatira by Lindauer and Goldie, for example, or in the 1972 book Moko by historian Michael King. A familiar entropic narrative is thus conjured by Atkinson’s reference to Poussin’s vanitas-like content and her use of the endangered New Zealand native. This latter theme, the idea of threat to the indigenous, is deeply engrained in Pākehā settler history and, some might argue, in the ongoing New Zealand psyche.

For me, following the link to Et in Arcadia ego offers a more fruitful reading of I Too Am In Paradise II. Art historian Anthony Blunt sees Poussin’s paintings as, ‘sensuous manifestations of Stoic ideas’. Not surprisingly this ancient philosophy is also the inspiration for the phrase ‘et in Arcadia ego’. Stoicism helps clarify Atkinson’s installation of the same name, too. The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus once cautioned, ‘Don’t explain your philosophy. Embody it.’ In I Too Am In Paradise II Atkinson gives her audience a tangible understanding of her plant metaphor by using time-delay photography. This embodiment of the kupu whakarite ‘metaphor’ in this medium is both accidental and revelatory:

The film is critical to the audience understanding of the installation. It is the only way they [i.e. the viewer] could see the transformation as it is not in a public space. The installation is not static, but undergoing constant change and the film captures the passage of time as well as the beauty in those changes. I hoped that the plants would flower but did not know that they would, so this added another layer to the installation, with the film ending with the formation of seed pods.

Seventy-four minutes into the film, Atkinson accidentally captures the most compelling resolution of the two seemingly contradictory ideas dominating her installation: growth and extinction. This is the point at which the conditions are right and the plants decide to flower en masse and then to produce seed. It is here the viewer realises (as Minister Barry did similarly) the kōwhai ngutu kōrako are telling their own story about survival and potential loss. Viewing the plants is a little like sensing sadness in Poussin’s work. We witness shrubs undergoing their life processes while enduring and thriving in their environment. The collapsed ten months is a metaphor for a wider environmental struggle. Clouds, fierce winds, blasts of sunshine and rain all hammer the urns as branches pulse and twitch. The moon casts its shadows in the night. The sun circles: entering from the east to swing west, orbiting lower in autumn and winter, then higher later in the film as it heads for spring and summer. With this cinematography the viewer feels the plants’ physical journey, building up their reserves for a high point as gorgeous shadows, legume in silhouette, move fluidly black on white across the convex surfaces of adjoining pots. E toro mai ana ngā rākau ‘the plants are stretching out’.

Along with this tupuranga ‘growth’, chaos is also at play undermining paradise. Whether by day or night and regardless of season, entropic changes are emerging. A green discolouration begins to cover the surfaces of the urns. A third of the way through the film, and then at the halfway point, one pot after another collapses. Weeds push through the greywacke platform beneath, poking through broken vessels and threatening the perimeters of the installation.

In the middle of all this detritus, an hour in, something spectacular occurs. E puāwai ana ngā rākau ‘the plants are flowering’. Beautiful creamy white clusters of crescent-shaped blossoms, unique to the Wairoa variant of kōwhai ngutu kākā, first form and then explode simultaneously across the installation. It is these processes of te tupuranga me te puāwaitanga ‘growth and flowering’ that tangibly demonstrate a once endangered taonga is now living. After nearly a year of the artist’s careful nurturing, the plants offer this final statement. Seeds are formed and so the cycle, plants talking up their survival, returns. Atkinson says she didn’t plan this crescendo. I know:

E kōrero ana ngā rākau ‘the plants are talking’.

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