



**Fig. 1** *Unmapped*, 2019, oil on linen, two panels each 190 x 260 cm. *Unmapped* accumulated into an energetic writhing swarm of thick paint tissue. An upside-down, sinuous and playful kaitiaki (guardian) figure appeared in the centre at the final stages of the painting. Artwork © Leighton Upson

## Encounters with Indigenous Forest and Intuitive Painting

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## Pepeha

Firstly, I acknowledge the local iwi, Te Ātiawa, as tangata whenua of Ngāmotu (New Plymouth), Aotearoa where I live and paint.

Ko Taranaki te maunga whakamarumarū. *Taranaki is the mountain that shelters me.*

Ko te mahinga toi ka hono i te hinengaro, te tinana me te waahi. *The practice of art connects mind, body and place.*



**Fig. 2** Inside the old growth forest named Rātāpīhipīhi Scenic Reserve on the edge of Ngāmotu/New Plymouth city, Aotearoa New Zealand. This is indigenous semi-coastal forest. Image © Leighton Upson

### Being with the forest: *kotahitanga*

Painting is a great connector of being and place. The process of painting is ideal for thinking with and elaborating an expression of human-plant-life connectivity. Through a painting-based art practice I have become very close to a particular site inside a fragment of an old growth forest named Rātāpīhipīhi Scenic Reserve on the edge of Ngāmotu/New Plymouth city, here, on the west coast of Te Ika-a-Māui, the North Island of

Aotearoa New Zealand (Figure 2). It is in this place that I have spent a number of years painting alongside a group of centuries-old kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*), pukatea (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*) and tawa (*Beilschmiedia tawa*) trees (Lambert) (Figure 3).

Less than 10% of this type of coastal kohekohe pukatea tawa forest remains in Aotearoa.<sup>1</sup> Amongst its dense, dynamic and lush foliage are thousands of different vignettes of existence. It is a place where kererū (New Zealand pigeon) sleep next to me and build their badly made nests. I cross paths with millipedes, centipedes, weevils, spiders, moths, and huhu grubs.

However, with the birds mostly far up in the treetops, it is the leafy plants that dominate my phenomenal field. They are the *greenness* that fills the forest. They are what overwhelm me, and produce the uplifting air I breathe. As the tūi sing



**Fig. 3** Kohekohe saplings. This photograph illustrates both the thick and green nature of the forest undergrowth where I paint. The sun-highlighted leaves of the kohekohe tree draw my eyes and energise my painting hours. Image © Leighton Upson

territorial songs, I am with them, creating my own song of the forest; assembling my own recurring passages in paint on canvas (Figure 4). My own rhythms of presence slip into tune with those of the forest; I am there painting till late into the evening, and the ruru (the morepork or New Zealand owl) family turns their calls from soothing into piercing high-pitched hunting screeches. As the light fades, my brush in hand speeds up to render the last intuitions of that day's impressions. Ruru watch me.

“Why make artworks in the forest?” I am often asked by my broader community. It is sad that few people in their own land in New Zealand experience or even know what a kohekohe tree is, even though it has been the most common coastal tree in Aotearoa for the last 80 million years (Salmon). Rather than playing around in our own individual yet globally homogenised garden plant ‘collections’, we need to show *whakarangitira* towards forest; show our honour and respect of forest. To practise *kotahitanga*: practise togetherness with forest. In the present-day global ecological crisis, this call becomes manifest in the forest. Can I make it a public manifesto, via painting?

In the project presented at *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies*, I discussed my practice in relation to cultural thinkers, Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson. Their philosophical ideas resonate well with the variety and verve of my local old growth forest on the edge of a New Zealand city.

### **Mapping or un-mapping this forest place?**

Consider my painting *Unmapped* (2019) as a resistance to objectifying the forests of Aotearoa (see Figure 1). It tries to resist clichéd forest imagery that I find in mainstream representative realism, and offers an alternative visual narrative that challenges stereotypical, sedate, scenic forest versions. It is an active struggle against the separation of indigenous forest and its people: a dynamic skirmish against viewing forest as controllable, distant and unconnected to everyday life. The work is a challenge to indigenous forest being placed on the periphery in mainstream New Zealand culture.

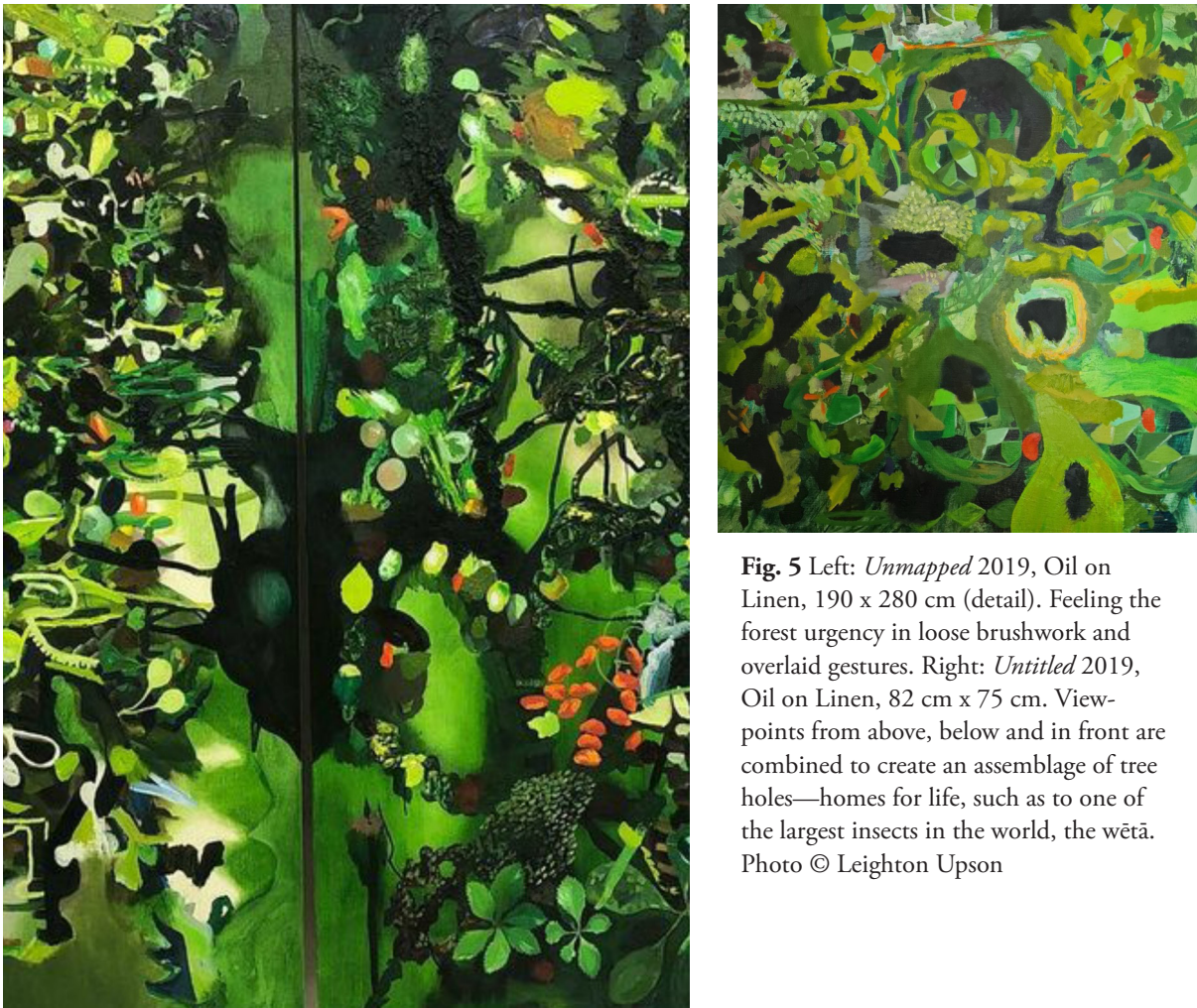


**Fig. 4** Painting in the forest, immersed in its green multiplicity and light. Image © Leighton Upson

The painting calls on a people yet to come who will be more ecologically discerning in their thinking (Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness* 329).

Painting can be a great connector to a particular forest; it animates the intensity of every exchange. It is an expression of *being with* the conditions. This *forestness*, a concept I name and am exploring now, emerges through material and process. An intense experience of feeling close to and being a part of the dynamic forest energy has been activated by painting itself, using a gestural and free-flow approach in situ. I mainly use thick impasto with a wide range of brushes and sticks for viscerally intuit-

tive painting, precisely because these best matches and enables a material response to fervent emotions that arise from being entangled with—and within—the swarm of abundant growth I meet in the forest. I sense this physical presence and jostling for space around my own body, and respond in paint and brush. Such a direct approach also communicates the sense of urgency I feel for the state of my environment, at multiple scales. When I am painting there is no premeditation or planning. So, the dense and intense work that came to be called *Unmapped*, unfolded like a forest—a cumulative life process. Moreover, it began as, and carries within it, an imagined bird’s-eye immersive map of those familiar places within the Rātāpihihi forest where I go to paint—and which I bind together in the work. Tracks, branches, rich humus underfoot, tree holes, vines and epiphytic protrusions cross over one another. A brush can feel the intensity and layering of our forest; that it too is alive, sensitive, surprising and wanting to make a palpable and playful presence! Like a plant, I select a position within my microcosm through light affects; to be close to the light wells, where the kohekohe saplings absorb and reflect the illumination. In the forest the light shifts fast across the day, encouraging similar responses in paint. During the ex-



**Fig. 5** Left: *Unmapped* 2019, Oil on Linen, 190 x 280 cm (detail). Feeling the forest urgency in loose brushwork and overlaid gestures. Right: *Untitled* 2019, Oil on Linen, 82 cm x 75 cm. View-points from above, below and in front are combined to create an assemblage of tree holes—homes for life, such as to one of the largest insects in the world, the wētā. Photo © Leighton Upson

tended process of laying down *Unmapped*, I found myself going ‘off track’, spending time in speculation rather than attempting to represent what my eyes were relaying. Most of the paint is colour washes, built upon with thick impasto, meandering lines, and bulbous protrusions. The painting process was unsystematic, becoming besotted with overlaid traversals; it took on a life of its own, one that sought to be unmapped or confidently deterritorialized (Deleuze and Guattari).

So much gets overlooked by people in the forest, I sense. While the left side of this painting grew as a (un)map, the right side took on the idea of plant particulars to honour the living and writhing forest. The distinctive orange-seeded kohekohe seed-pod is the emblem of this coastal jungle movement. While painting more, I wanted to make human huts amongst the proliferation of life. Playing games also came to mind; an ambiguous vine and ladders game board emerged; some vines on the right hand panel took on a rib cage—protecting the forest lung. I remembered that both people and plants breathe, and imaginary stomata, the ‘breath cell holes’ in leaves, arrived on the canvas. *Unmapped* accumulated into a swarm of thick paint tissue, and then, towards the end, an upside-down, sinuous and playful *kaitiaki* (guardian) figure appeared and claimed their place in the centre of the work (Figure 5).

Through multiple painting encounters this work deterritorialized itself as a type of physical, visual and psychological intensity—or density—map. Deleuze helpfully notes:

Every map is a redistribution of impasses and breakthroughs, of thresholds and enclosures. [...] There is not only a reversal of directions, but also a difference in nature: the unconscious no longer deals with persons and objects, but with trajectories and becomings; it is no longer an unconscious of commemoration but one of mobilisation (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 63).

When I am painting I am thinking aesthetically or aesthetically discovering, and the painting is alive. It shifts and grows by itself in the same vein that the flourishing forest shifts and grows. It keeps ‘getting added to’, with short durations of activity, new component parts, and traverses over existing lines. A succession of points of view and the movements of a strong sensation are joined across separate time spans, fitting the different tempo or pulses of energy that paint allows. *Unmapped* worked up multiple directions of unequal distribution, and became very thick and abundant in its physical layers. Deleuze’s expression of “through densification or the accumulation of proximities” resonates surprisingly well here (*Two Regimes of Madness* 300). Even when shifting from place to place in the forest, I was able to maintain a moving relationship within this single artwork.



**Fig. 6** *Unmapped* 2019, Oil on Linen, 190 x 280 cm (detail). Parts of *Unmapped* used thick layers of paint, impasto, to allow for a greater visceral effect upon the viewer. Artwork © Leighton Upson

Over time, the painting process has emphasised a method of working with intuition—experiencing the forest I have come to know well. Intuition allows us to “enter into” the things in themselves (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 155). As my hands touch the paint, my eyes touch the plant and its configurations. In being responsive to ‘forestness’ and the paint itself, the painting now carries and elicits a fleshy presence and a viewer might be motivated to not only see but also *touch into* the painting with their eyes.

The forest has drawn me to the philosophical concept of multiplicity (Bergson, *Time and Free*) through the processes of painting a plethora of gestural lines bifurcating, diverging and overlapping, throwing out tendrils from anywhere on the canvas. However, it is impossible to make art that is truly expressive of a forest. Painting has to do with the real, with materially realising something in a humanised language, abstracted or not. So much of the forest seems outside of any human language. In ecological thought, there is no independence from your worldly context. Perhaps, care is most important: “attending to something” (Heidegger 56). Care not as a sentiment, but a form of action, responsiveness and involvement. As time passes, I am learning that intuitive painting makes my attentive involvement with the luminous forest an act of care. The spontaneous appearance of the kaitiaki in *Unmapped* reminds me of this now.

*Forestness: painting can express the passion for this felt connection... allows for time with... for intuitive creation...* To become closer to plant lives in the forest, some say that we can ‘enter into’ them through empathy and compassion. How to do this? By making an

effort when we perceive—such as when we perceive green—to sense and embody a variety of shades and colour greens (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*)? But when I feel ‘intimacy’ with the forest, what is this relationship? Am I intimate with my aloneness? Is intimacy a red herring as a concept for artists and forests? Have *feelings* really got anything to do with connection to the forest if I am *already* part of it, and am *with* it?



**Fig. 7** *Unmapped* 2019, Oil on Linen, 190 x 280 cm (detail). The distinctive kohekohe seedpod symbol on the right contains the bright orange seeds gathered on the left. This is to suggest the future planting of these lowland trees to try to join up some remaining forest fragments. Artwork © Leighton Upson

The position from which many people speak in relation to a forest such as Rātāpīhipīhi seems shallow, reductive and involves a romanticised aesthetic. Does the limited language I hear in mainstreamed urban communities limit us all? For instance, I hear that the forest is: ‘calm’ (this is about the person pleasing themselves; i.e. feeling their own calming) and ‘beautiful’ (this is again about the person pleasing themselves—or pleasing their aesthetic sensibility—especially their sense of sight).

My paintings exist as an attempt to get away from a crude view of forest as scenery and towards its performance as a complex assemblage of shifting directions, a multiplicity of overlapping and active flourishings. The forest is active, not a passive ‘thing’, and forestness encompasses this active multiplicity and the energy and connections I tap into through the process of intuitive, gestural painting.



## Painting after/with COVID-19

Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the first nations to go into self-isolation in 2020 on March 25. This first phase of COVID-19 stay at home directives lasted until April 25.

In that month, no longer was I able to visit Rātāpihipihi, and I began visiting a forest place closer to where I live in Ngāmotu. I watched the aftermath of the ecological disaster of the Australian wildfires, and felt a growing urgency to question the very heart of my art practice. I have come to dwell on how the coronavirus pandemic has alerted us to our fragility within the checks and balances of nature. How I/we need to pay attention, take more notice, and connect to nature, especially our local ecologies. The forest is fragile, dynamic, complex and full of life and imaginative possibilities. Painting, performative of the ineffable, taps into this ecology of interactions, vitality and abundance. My immersive approach aims to persuade viewers to spend time

**Fig. 8** Alongside my painting practice and research, I work as a secondary school teacher. The intuition of *forestness* is something to be shared beyond the walls of the academy. Image © Leighton Upson



feeling and thinking about the energy, freshness and connection within the experience of forestness: intuitive painting can do the job of eco-activism by engaging people through affective means (Figure 8). Using the power of images, I can raise awareness of trees such as kohekohe, pukatea and tawa, in particular, and perhaps question where local human cultures sit with understandings of their 'natural ecology' today.

Can I change attitudes via these special kohekohe who have welcomed me to their forest to paint every year so that the planting of indigenous tree species becomes a common intuition? Repaint and remap the neighbourhood as whakarangitira and kotahitanga? Perhaps it is time to introduce a commemorative day for the 1870 to 1920 felling—or slaughter—of our native forest in Aotearoa?

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## NOTES

- 1 Ministry for the Environment Manatū Mō Te Taiao and Statistics New Zealand, 2015.

**Fig. 9 (overleaf)** *Unmapped* 2019, Oil on Linen, 190 x 280 cm (detail of left panel). Artwork © Leighton Upson

