

Imogen Taylor

Michael Lett
312 Karangahape Road
Cnr K Rd & East St
PO Box 68287 Victoria St West
Auckland 1010
New Zealand
P+ 64 9 309 7848
contact@michaellett.com
www.michaellett.com



Imogen Taylor
Murmurs
2023
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St



Imogen Taylor
Murmurs
2023
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St



Imogen Taylor
Murmurs
2023
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St



Imogen Taylor
Murmurs
2023
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St



Imogen Taylor
Murmurs
2023
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St



Imogen Taylor
Recent Works
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St
January 2022



Imogen Taylor
Recent Works
Installation view
Michael Lett, 3 East St
January 2022



Imogen Taylor
Limb Report
2022
acrylic on hessian, 1500 x 2000mm



Imogen Taylor
Quiet Motel
Installation view
Whangārei Art Museum
May–August 2022



Imogen Taylor
Quiet Motel
Installation view
Whangārei Art Museum
May–August 2022



Imogen Taylor
Quiet Motel
Installation view
Whangārei Art Museum
May–August 2022



Imogen Taylor
Spaces Between
2021
acrylic on hessian
1000 x 1220mm
IT6416



Imogen Taylor
Spaces Between (detail)
2021
acrylic on hessian
1000 x 1220mm
IT6416



Imogen Taylor
Spaces Between (detail)
2021
acrylic on hessian
1000 x 1220mm
IT6416



Imogen Taylor
Spaces Between (detail)
2021
acrylic on hessian
1000 x 1220mm
IT6416



Imogen Taylor
Food Pyramid
2021
acrylic on hessian
510 x 610mm
IT6205



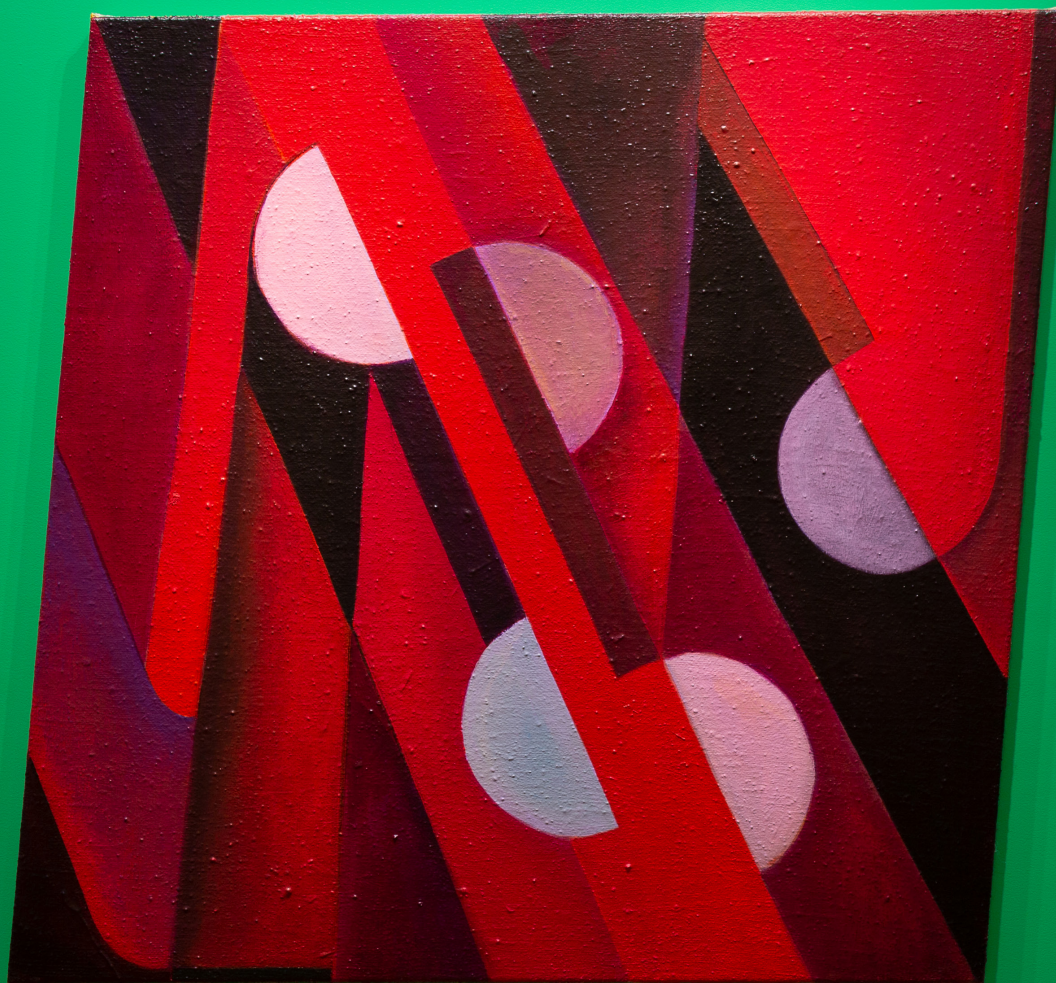
Imogen Taylor
Thirsty Work
Installation view
Michael Lett
January 2021



Imogen Taylor
Thirsty Work
Installation view
Michael Lett
January 2021



Imogen Taylor
Sapphic Fragments
Installation view
Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena
February 2020



Imogen Taylor
Swallow
2019
acrylic on hessian
1200 x 1400mm
IT5921

Imogen Taylor

Born 1985, Whangarei, New Zealand
Lives and works in Dunedin, New Zealand

EDUCATION

2010
Post-Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

2007
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

RESIDENCIES & AWARDS

2022
International Studio Curatorial Programme (ISCP) Artist Residency, New York

2019
Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, University of Otago
Suffrage 125 Fund, Creative New Zealand (Femisphere)

2018
Wallace Art Awards Paramount Award Winner

2017
McCahon House Artists' Residency

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2023
Murmurs, Michael Lett 3 East St, Auckland (solo)

2022
Recent Works, Michael Lett, 3 East St, Auckland (solo)
Quiet Motel, Whangārei Art Museum, Whangārei (solo)

2021
Thirsty Work, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)

2020
Sapphic Fragments, The Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, Dunedin (solo)

2019
Betwixt & Between, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Spit Roast, Art Basel Hong Kong 'Discoveries', Hong Kong (solo)

2018
Social Studies, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt (solo)
Abject Failures, Hastings City Art Gallery, Havelock North (group)
Imogen Taylor & Diena Georgetti, Stolen Leopard, Michael Lett, Auckland (group)
Pocket Histories, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland (group)

2017
Open Air, Still Life, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin (group)

2016
In & Out, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Painting: A Transitive Space, St Paul Street Gallery, AUT, Auckland (group)
Certainly Very Merry, Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland (group)

2015
BODY LANGUAGE, Artspace, Auckland (solo)
Two in the Pink, North Projects, Christchurch (group)
Spring 1883, The Establishment Hotel, Sydney (group)
Implicated and Immune, Michael Lett, Auckland (group)
Puis-je utiliser votre toilette, Fuzzy Vibes, Auckland (group)

2014
Glory Hole, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Girls Abstraction, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington (group)
Two in the Pink, North Projects, Christchurch (group)
From the Vault, Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland (group)

2013
New Paintings, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Blow Hole, Kalimanrawlins, Melbourne (solo)
Scraps, Artstation Cellblock, Auckland (group)
Porous Moonlight, Papakura Art Gallery, Papakura (curator)
Puahi, The Suter Gallery, Nelson (group)

2012

The New Fair, Michael Lett Stand, Melbourne (group)
Walk of Shame, Ferari Gallery, Auckland (group)
Man Hands, TCB Gallery, Melbourne (group)
Space is the Place, In House Gallery, Auckland (group)
Nap Time, ABC Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand (group)
Balls Deep, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)

2011

Pearl Necklace Patio, Personal Best Gallery, Auckland (solo)
Caraway Downs, Artspace, Auckland, with Richard Frater, Tahi Moore, Patrick Lundberg and Rebecca Boswell, curated by Roman Mitch (group)
Economics, Ostrale '011, Dresden, Germany, curated by Window Gallery, University of Auckland (group)

2010

Surf 'n' Turf, The High Seas Gallery, Auckland (solo)

2009

Beef Taco, 448 Gallery, Auckland (solo)
100 Clams, The High Seas Gallery, Auckland (group)
Now, Plaything Gallery, Auckland (group)

2008

See Saw, Cassette Number Nine, Vulcan Lane, Auckland (solo)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2022

IMOGEN TAYLOR, Auckland: Michael Lett Publishing (monograph)
Bennett, Lucinda, '50 Things: Curator's Radar: Imogen Taylor,' Art Collector, Issue 103 January–March, 2022
Do, Michael, 'IMOGEN TAYLOR: In & Out,' VAULT, Issue 34 May–July, 2022
Wynne-Jones, Victoria 'Split Peaches are pretty obvious!' In Ingram, Simon et al. (eds.) The Dialogics of Contemporary Art: Painting Politics, Bielefeld: Kerber.

2021

Becky Hemus, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House', Index, January 2021

2020

Bridie Lonie, 'On Queer pleasure: Conversations Between Imogen Taylor and

Frances Hodgkins', The Spinoff Arts, March 2020

Joanne Drayton, 'Imogen Taylor's Sapphic Fragments' (catalogue essay), The Hocken Uare Taoka o Hākena, February 2020
Milly Mitchell-Anyon, 'Notes on Queer Regionalism', (catalogue essay), The Hocken Uare Taoka o Hākena, February 2020

2019

Rebecca Fox, 'Coming Full Circle, Changing The Colour Palette', Otago Daily Times, April 2019
Alina Cohen, 'The 10 Best Booths at Art Basel in Hong Kong', Artsy, March 2019

2018

Johanna Thornton, 'Why Painter Imogen Taylor Is An Artist To Watch', Viva Magazine, New Zealand Herald, December 2019
Julia Waite, 'Imogen Taylor: In the Wake of' (exhibition essay), Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, February 2018

2017

Julie Hill, 'You're Equal', Paperboy, February 2017

2016

Anthony Byrt, 'On The Wall', Metro Magazine, January/February 2016

2015

Victoria Wynne-Jones, Body Language (exhibition text), Artspace, November 2015
John Hurrell, 'Imogen Taylor at Artspace', Eye Contact, November 2015
Virginia Were, 'A not so hidden agenda', Art News New Zealand, Summer 2015
Owen Connors, "Give and Take: Imogen Taylor's Glory Hole and Political Camp". Pantograph Punch, June 2015
Erin Forsyth, 'Wahine - Women', The Vernacularist, Depot Artspace, 2015
Sue Gardiner, 'The Return of Gestural Abstraction', Art News, Winter 2015

2014

Anthony Byrt. 'The Best Art of 2014', Metro Magazine, December 2014
Lucinda Bennett, 'Two Sides to the Glory Hole', Express Magazine, October 2014

2013

Edward Hanfling, 'Exhibitions: Auckland', Art News New Zealand, Issue 148, Summer 2013-14

2012

Ashley Crawford, 'Imogen Taylor', Australian Art Collector, Issue 59, 2012

9

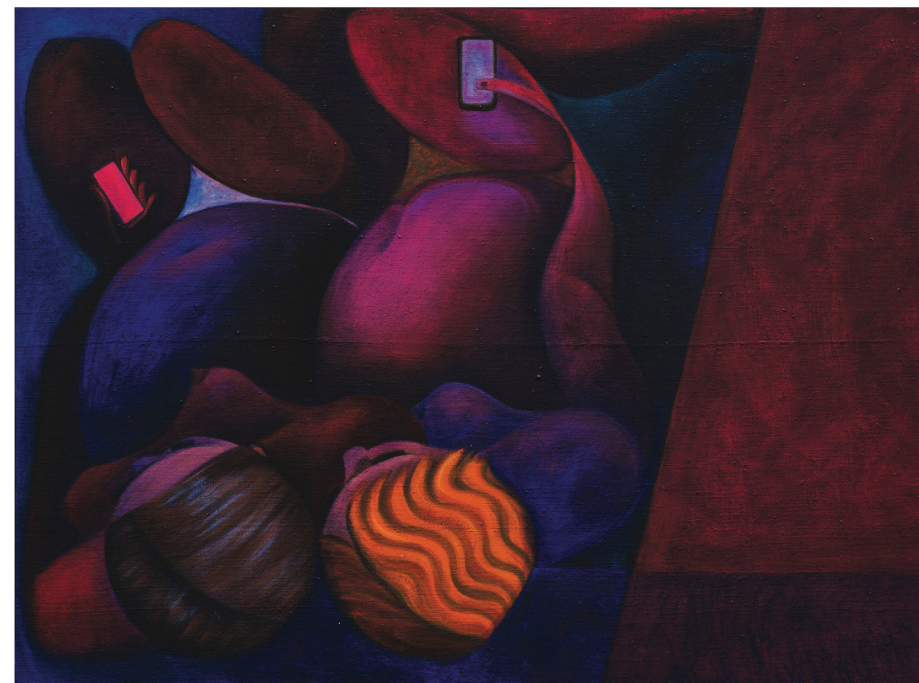
IMOGEN TAYLOR



In 2022, Auckland-based **Imogen Taylor**'s exhibition *Quiet Motel* opened at Whangārei Art Museum. While the show was something of a homecoming for Whangārei-born Taylor, it was also a departure from the formal abstraction familiar to viewers of Taylor's work. In *Quiet Motel*, Taylor embraced figuration: the soft

moonlit curves of a sleeping woman, a tangle of limbs, long hair and pendulous breasts, the alien form of a squid laid on a platter, a wedge of citrus nestled in beside. Taylor explains, "I had initially painted more figurative work, but used abstraction as a vehicle to conceal the more explicit or erotic themes I'd always

been drawn to depicting. In some ways, the art world felt way too homophobic for me, a young artist at the time, to present paintings that uncovered sordid queer desire. Queer art practices were visible for sure, but not so much by queer women or non-binary artists. A lot has changed in ten years."



Queer eroticism is at the fore of *Quiet Motel*, with paintings such as *Wet With Dew*, 2022 – which depicts a tunnel of fleshy trees, a pearl of a moon hanging above, encircled in red, throbbing – leaving little to the imagination. Ironically, *Quiet Motel* is one of Taylor's less explicit exhibition titles, the openly queer sexual content of this show perhaps rendering the subtle queer coding of previous titles – *In & Out*, *Glory Hole* and *Balls Deep* – redundant. In recent years, Taylor has been the recipient of numerous residencies, chief among them being the Frances Hodgkins

Fellowship in 2019, which resulted in the luscious exhibition *Sapphic Fragments* at Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākana, Dunedin in 2020. Two years on and back up north, it seems **Frances Hodgkins** has continued to cast her influence over Taylor. When asked what drew her to the night – for all the paintings in *Quiet Motel* are nocturnes – Taylor is frank. "Let's face it, the lockdowns of the last two years were bleak and at times depressing for many people. I felt motivated to make nocturnes because I'd seen ones by Hodgkins that she'd painted during

wartime. And far out they were so desolate." Despite their bleak origins, Taylor's nocturnes hum and glow, muffled moans of pleasure and vibrant colour shining through layers of dusk. Taylor is represented by Michael Lett, Auckland.

LUCINDA BENNETT

OPPOSITE: Imogen Taylor, *Moths*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian, 150 x 200cm. Installation view of *Quiet Motel*, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. PHOTO: TESSA PATON.
ABOVE: Imogen Taylor, *Limb Report*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian, 150 x 200cm. PHOTO: SAMUEL HARTNETT.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND MICHAEL LETT AUCKLAND.

IMOGEN TAYLOR
Pillow Biter, 2015
acrylic and rope on
collaged hessian
230 x 190 cm
Courtesy the artist
and Michael Lett,
Auckland

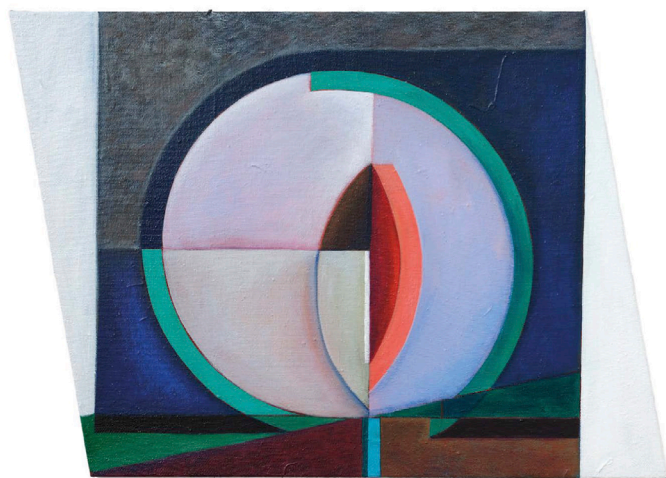
IMOGEN TAYLOR IN & OUT

By refashioning the language of abstraction, artist Imogen Taylor uses painting as a tool of self-understanding, functioning as a form of queer storytelling and solidarity.

FEATURE *by* MICHEAL DO

With the daily deluge of new technologies and material possibilities available to artists, it is almost tempting to relegate the humble painting to the draughty back rooms of art history. Yet despite the routine scepticism of the medium's relevance, and the almost comical click-bait claims that 'painting is dead' or 'painting is over,' the tradition of painting is one of evolution and endurance. Artist Imogen Taylor came to painting in 2008, during a global saturation of process-based abstraction that had prompted a deep existential reckoning of painting's future in the Western art world. American critic Walter Robinson would later name this abstraction apocalypse 'zombie formalism,' a term that encompassed a new generation of artists – including Colombian-born, London-based Oscar Murillo and New York-based Lucien Smith — who revived Modernist traditions and techniques to the delight of collectors who both gilded and damned their careers by flipping their works at auction for astronomic mark ups.





Yet, it was the eventual unfashionability of 'zombie formalism' that attracted Taylor to painting. By peering closer into the mechanics of formalism – the painterly focus of abstract line and form – Taylor saw an opportunity to refashion the aesthetic language of abstraction into a critical tool that could sustain a meaningful career. "Artists aped Modernist art history during this time, but not necessarily in an interesting way," she tells me. "It took me five years to figure it out – to fully unravel my practice and realise abstraction is both art historical and conceptual; it can be identity and biography. My use of fragmented visual perspectives isn't just referencing historical movements, it's also a tool to realise queerness and plurality."

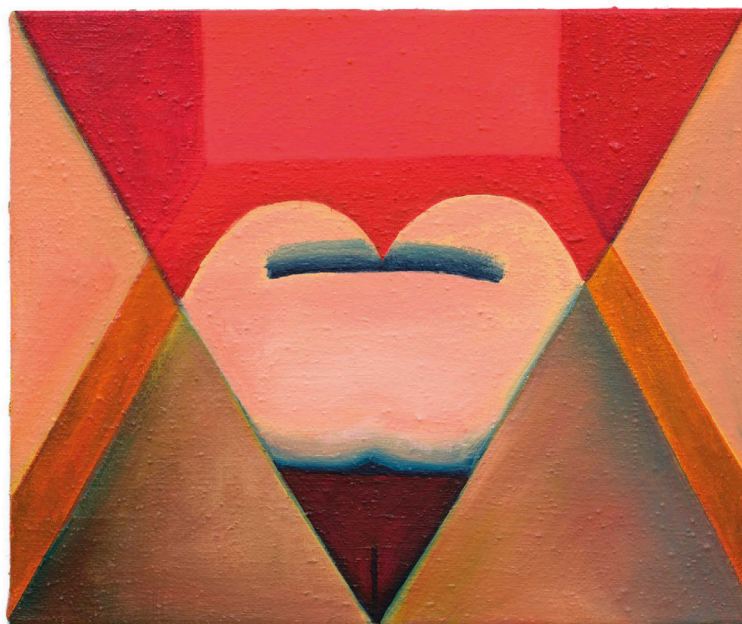
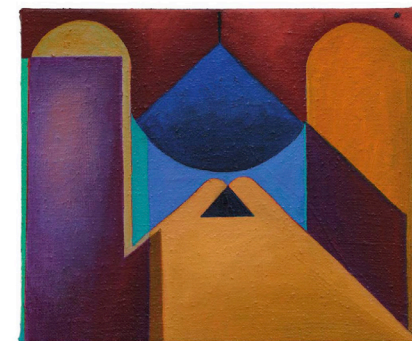
It is this focus on queerness and plurality that is the hallmark of Taylor's painting. Presented at her solo exhibition *BODY LANGUAGE* at Artspace in Auckland, the painting *Pillow Biter* (2015) is seemingly all Cubist – the Modernist movement that Taylor's painting primarily remixes. Formally, the planes of the painting emphasise the two dimensionality of the canvas (tick), there is a severity in her line work (tick) and her painted forms build the illusion of depth and movement within the canvas (tick). Yet rather than directly parroting Cubism 101 to achieve an ornamental result, a criticism levelled at the 'zombie formalists,' *Pillow Biter*, like many of Taylor's works, is smoked with ambiguity and coded with hidden meaning. The colours, shapes and forms work to suggest ideas and situations, rather than dictating a clear-cut narrative.

Here, there are no girls with mandolins, nor women of *d'Avignon*, nor any weeping women.

Rather, Taylor's images produce a kind of anonymous cruising in relation to the object and the scene. Meaning is waiting to be discovered, hiding unique references and in-jokes created with her community in mind. Her paintings are both familiar and strange, teasing us, waiting, baiting the viewer to locate meaning. It is this

suggestiveness that opens the possibility of symbolic and abstract content relating to queer culture. It prompts us to ask: is the composition suggesting gay erotica or intimate connections, mutable morphologies and gender multiplicity or successive states of personhood?

Cuban American critic José Esteban Muñoz defines queerness in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) as "about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." As Muñoz explains, queerness apposes heteronormative and homonormative social structures and expectations of gender expression. Queerness is not necessarily related to sexuality – rather, it is a political strategy to challenge the 'normalcy' of Western society and, in Taylor's case, the Western art canon. As such, Taylor queers Cubist conventions in order to critique the legacies of Modernism and abstraction, which have historically centred whiteness, promoted passive femininity and proffered heteronormative sexuality.



Top to bottom
IMOGEN TAYLOR
Food Pyramid, 2021
acrylic on hessian
51 x 61 cm
IMOGEN TAYLOR
Pervert, 2021
acrylic on hessian
51 x 61 cm

Opposite
IMOGEN TAYLOR
Bud, 2020
acrylic on hessian
98 x 141 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Michael Lett, Auckland

Taylor's most recent works have taken a more figurative turn. In the exhibition *Thirsty Work* (2021) at Michael Lett in Auckland, several of Taylor's works contain bodily metaphors.

Pervert (2021) comprises a series of intersecting triangular forms that highlight two bulbous mounds in the centre of the frame. Painted in unctuous pastels and flesh tones, the work suggests charged scenarios. Are we witnessing an intimate act? Is this the perspective of a peeping tom spying on their victim? Or are we viewing a person intentionally played in full commando, celebrating their wares? This work, like many of the images in the exhibition, wantonly demands our gaze, raising the issue of objectification as something we do, but also something that happens to us. By waiting, teasing and testing the audience with these potential readings, the work makes a statement that explores the weight and history of bodies, asking: how do we understand bodies that aren't our own?

In this way, Taylor's queered Cubism conceals in plain sight ideas which otherwise might be unpalatable to broader audiences – a Trojan horse of sorts that delivers new challenges and meanings through successive readings.

This strategy situates Taylor within a global generation of younger trans and queer artists, including South Korean-based Young-jun Tak and England-based Prem Sahbi, who prefer abstraction to other art forms as it offers a less prescribed way for artists and their viewers to represent and imagine themselves. As Taylor tells me: "Cubism and queer theory share multiperspectivity, a trait that can encourage non-binary values systems when viewing my works."

In the same exhibition, the artist presented *Bud* (2020), which comprises a series of silkily coloured concentric circles that frame a crimson ellipse, truncated by a soft white quarter-circle. Viewed in the context of the title of the work, the painting is similarly intentionally ambiguous.



Installation view
IMOGEN TAYLOR
Sapphic Fragments, 2020
Hocken Collections, Dunedin
Courtesy the artist and
Michael Lett, Auckland

“MAKING THIS WORK WITH MY PARTNER, SUE, ACKNOWLEDGES QUEER ARTISTS WHO HAVE WORKED WITH THEIR LOVERS IN THE PAST, AND HOW THESE PROFESSIONAL WORKING RELATIONSHIPS HAVE NEEDED TO BE CLOSETED FOR THE SAKE OF MARKETABILITY.”

Is it nature blossoming? Or the illustration of the anus? (‘Bud’ is a slang term used to describe the anus in queer circles.) Or perhaps the work describes bud-sex – a phenomenon where two consensual straight males have sex for pleasure, yet do not identify as homosexual. This painting, like the broader exhibition, contains an erotically charged potentiality that is adeptly used to explore sexuality without a clearly painted sexual act or erotic body in sight.

Taylor’s interest in bodily experience also takes three-dimensional form. In her exhibition *Sapphic Fragments* (2020) at the Hocken Collections, University of Otago, the artist collaborated with her partner, Sue Hillery, to create the immersive wall mural *Double Portrait, Screw Thread* (2020). Covering the gallery in emerald green, the work is punctuated by an ombre geometric twist of dusty pinks, lilacs and oranges reminiscent of the artist’s signature parallelogram canvases. The presence of this work throughout the exhibition translates Taylor’s queer storytelling into the physical, three-dimensional realm, queering the gallery with allusions to female sexuality and queer desire. “The work relates to Sara Ahmed’s writing, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), which discusses how queer people navigate their lives,” she notes. “The wall work is a metaphoric way of distorting the space and a study into how queer bodies have to perform in order to exist in safe and non-safe spaces.”

And on the subject of collaboration, and bringing her community along for the art journey, Taylor notes how “making this work with my partner, Sue, acknowledges queer artists who have worked with their lovers in the past, and how these professional working relationships have needed to be closeted for the sake of marketability.”

In reflecting upon her motivations as an artist, Taylor reveals that her understanding of herself as a queer lesbian woman often does not match how the world sees or understands her. It is this dissonance between her interior world and exterior world – often marked by repression and challenge for many queer people – that motivates Taylor. Queers, people of difference, women and those who exist at the peripheries of society struggle, both together and against each other, for space to be heard. In this way, painting offers Taylor the opportunity to engage with the world while imagining, as Muñoz writes, the “possibility for another world.” When used correctly (and take heed zombies), painting offers a sanctuary, an entire world safe from intrusion, expectation and manipulation, allowing us, as audience, to cultivate our own interior lives: vibrant, boundless rooms of our own. **V**

Thirsty Work showed at Michael Lett, Auckland from January 28 to February 27, 2021.

Imogen Taylor is represented by Michael Lett, Auckland.
michaelllett.com



Imogen Taylor's Fragments

Treading a Dance Measure to the Strummed Lyre of Sappho

DAVID EGGLETON

Sappho's poems have come down to us from Greek literature as teasing fragments, her verses only preserved for posterity through being quoted in classical texts by other authors, or else unearthed as stray lines and phrases on shards of pottery and pieces of papyrus from archaeological digs. With their glimpses of rapture and yearning, their lyrical imagery, and their assertive themes of relationships and friendships between women, Sappho's recovered writings—the Sapphic fragments—have become canonical in women's studies, feminist politics and queer theory.

Auckland Imogen Taylor—who has established a reputation as a riot grrrl, one able to produce witty comic and to wrangle paint with adroit flair and deadpan comedy—was awarded the 2019 Frances Hodgkins Fellowship at Otago University, and *Sapphic Fragments* marked the end of her Fellowship year.

In this exhibition, painting has been reduced to the essentials of pure form and impure sensation, with the Hocken Gallery space a cave-like grotto painted in summery shades of leaf-green and grape-purple, like some bosky arbour on the Isle of Lesbos. Against this backdrop, Imogen Taylor is artist as psychopomp,

leading us into a cave of knowing. On the walls hangs a scattering of just nine of her paintings, all done in bright acrylics on hessian, stretched over wooden frames; together with, in one recess, a suite of 20 watercolours on paper of abstract figure studies, each framed behind glass and lined up two-deep on the wall like a phalanx of Amazons.

As well, Taylor has dived into the Hocken's archival collections and come up with four paintings by twentieth-century New Zealand modernists which, in a kind of mini-curation, she includes alongside her own: *Friends, Double Portrait* (1922–25) by Frances Hodgkins; *Roses with Rainbow Scarf* (1930) by Dorothy K. Richmond; and *Trio* (c.1930) by Lois White. However, the fourth painting, *The Painter and the Poet* (1966) by Michael Illingworth, actually hangs outside the show proper and is not listed on the hand-out sheet which serves in place of wall labels. The exhibition also contains a large mural running the length of the main back wall, *Double Portrait: Screw Thread*, a collaboration between Taylor and the architect Sue Hillery, which again is not listed in the gallery hand-out but which is noted in the limited-edition catalogue. This mural, based partly on a blown-up diagram of an Archimedean screw's helix or spiral, has a kinetic feel to its motif—like a strip of cinematic celluloid—and it also evokes the idea of a figure in movement, a dancer, a bacchante, or a line of bacchantes leaping up and reaching for the sky. The dynamism of the mural is reminiscent of the paintings

(opposite) Imogen Taylor's *Sapphic Fragments* at the Hocken Gallery, Dunedin, February 2020 with from left *Limp Wristed, No Frills, Swollen* (all 2019) & *Double Portrait: Screw Thread* (2020)

(right) FRANCES HODGKINS *Friends, Double Portrait* 1922–25 Oil on canvas, 610 x 780 mm.

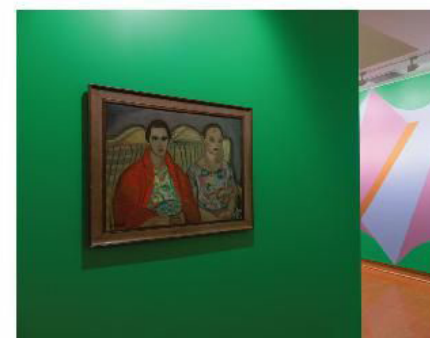
(below) IMOGEN TAYLOR *Different Types of Clown* 2019 Acrylic on hessian, 550 x 600 mm.

of Lois White, her figures, too, always in dramatic movement.

Meantime, the catalogue features reproductions of a further seven paintings not included in the show, yet obviously part of the same set. Instead, these absent works are represented here by lit-up blank wall spaces—and they can also be spotted on the website of the artist's Auckland gallery dealer, Michael Lett.

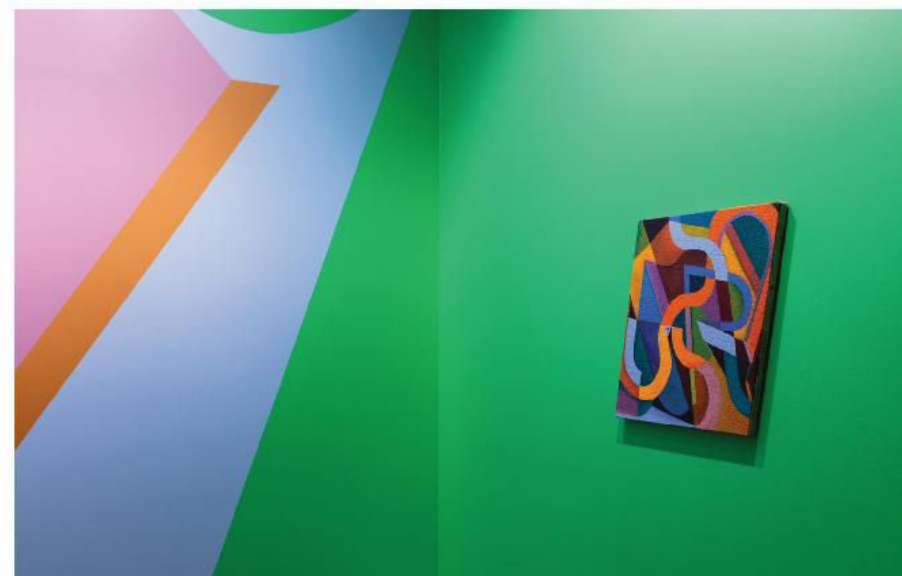
Taylor in her paintings comes across as much a devotee of Euclid and his mathematical rigour as an airy bacchante, treading a dance measure to the strummed lyre of Sappho. There is nothing slip-slop or slap-dash about her articulation of the language of abstraction. Shuffling the pack with practised ease, she replaces the transcendental aspirations of twentieth-century modernism with the libidinous woman and female eroticism, or at least with the empowerments of female agency.

Her Sapphic fragments are sensuous, their impastoed efflorescence beams off the glossy walls, while the titles of the paintings point to intention; which is to evoke and celebrate emotions and the physical, even as she morphs circles and half-circles into serpentine curves and then into intimations of buxom thighs and bulbous breasts, or else into full moons and half-moons and orchard plenitude. A child, very soft, picking flowers; bobbing apples in a



water barrel; a nipple peeping through a hole in fabric; the damp, the drenched, the dewy: her paintings suggest rather than state these things, and in this way she echoes the allusiveness of Sappho. Taylor's modulations are ultimately considerations of what it is like to have a female body, its ambivalences, its ambiguities.

Taylor celebrates the aesthetics of pleasure through reverie and paints shapes into body parts with a sly wink. Here is the comically phallic and the hidden vagina—or else close-ups of rainforests and fern gullies. The paired and somewhat cartoony paintings *Swollen* (2019) and *Swallow* (2019) offer not so much a convulsive mouth and throat in the act of swallowing, but rather, with heightened hues and peristaltic motions, the intimate sensation and feeling of the moment, the throb and pulse of the body. Or are these paintings beachscape and bushscape respectively? The plough of waves; droplets of rain running down fern



Imogen Taylor *Sapphic Fragments*
Hocken Collections Gallery Uare Taoka o Hakena, 1 February–
28 March, curated by Chloe Geoghegan & Robyn Notman



stems? The curtain drawn back on a secret garden, shaped with paradisaical pigments?

A perusal of her painting *Limp Whistled* (2019) brings to mind those still-life staples, a chair, a table, the drape of a dressing gown, a seated figure. And yet at the same time all is nebulous, chimerical, evanescent: the domestic decor gridded out of Fibonacci sequences and a jazz-like polyphony of colour, while the title strikes a camp attitude. *Different Types of Clown* (2019) looks like clown costumes in a tumble-drier, its amped-up addity a bit feverish. The slithery, snaky, bendy forms do not lock together but instead slide and shift, provoking visual unease, even as the eye tries to reconcile them; thus there is a dread, an anxiety, a whiff of paranoia about the image—possibly the spectators', possibly the artist's.

Likewise, *Another Word for Abyss* (2019) teases with architectural suggestions of Ottoman Empire domes and arches and, in its fleshy colours, the seraglios of the French painter Ingres. Its patterned undulations are at once cosmic and ravenous in implication, all yawning maws and expectant mouths, or entryways to Lacanian labyrinths, the abyss itself possessing a cavernous receptivity.

Peeping Tomboy (2020) blushes and glows, and has an oomph to its surge of painted orbs that evokes bellies and boobs, as well as melons and fembuds. And in what might be a fenceboard there is a single signature dot, like a watching eye, or a nail-hole, a flaw in the smooth surface of things. *Late Harvest*

(2019), too, swells into ripeness, buttocky or bosomy with attendant fruit bowl and a sort of watermelon mouth to convey bliss. The biomorphic *Late Harvest* might be the celebration of a love affair, in shades of peach, apricot and plum, while also managing to be, like Taylor's other works here, an encyclopaedic grab-bag of influences, stamping the artist as a bricoleur or pasticheur, adapting and recycling art-historical whakapapa to collide, mingle and ultimately coalesce. If this is zombie formalism, to borrow a judgemental phrase, then it has been recharged with electrifying purpose into a manifesto, into passionate declaration.

Taylor's pantheon is vast: the Big Bang of the early cubists, by way of the antipodean regionalists John Weeks, Louise Henderson, Charles and John Tole and Rita Angus, with their devotion to local landscape features. Then there are the glancing acknowledgements to Patrick Hanly's *Figures in Light* series, to the hill contours of Don Birney, to the weatherboard and stucco buildings of Robin White, to Gretchen Albrecht's soaked canvas skies, to Ian Scott's lattices, to the puffball clouds and kauri cones of Colin McCahon, to Michael Illingworth's geometric figures in biomorphic landscapes painted on hessian.

Hessian is a foundation material in the legacy of New Zealand regionalist painting. An industrial weave used to cover wool bales and for wool carpet backing, as well as a wall cavity lining for colonial houses and buildings, hessian has an authenticity taken from shearing shed and factory that, for some

(opposite) Imogen Taylor's *Sapphic Fragments* at the Hocken Gallery, Dunedin, February 2020 with from left *Late Harvest* & *Another Word for Abyss* (both 2019)

(below) Twenty watercolour works at Imogen Taylor's *Sapphic Fragments* at the Hocken Gallery, Dunedin, February 2020

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: IAIN FRINGLEY

artists in the mid to late twentieth century, gave it working-class credibility. Those attracted to its coarseness, its rough wick, its hairy authenticity, included Tony Fomison and Philip Claimont.

In *Sapphic Fragments*, Taylor in a way has appropriated the masculine tropes associated with rustic hessian and made them over in paintings which evoke a tight-packed physicality all the way down to the substrate. Hijacking the big macho truck of 1970s Kiwi neo-expressionism and driving it deep into the twenty-first century, she is not so much a bower bird or magpie out to appropriate a discarded art-historical material in order to line her own nest, but a subversive rejecting the smooth finish of latter-day salon art for a paint-coated surface made from an abject material, the tactile potential of which might just evoke the pockmarks and creases of real skin, the frisson of real contact.

And her paintings, free of frames in the approved neo-expressionist manner pioneered by McCahon, and as a New Zealander might kick off the cramping shoes of high fashion, are suspended on the wall as sculptural slabs, not in conventional rectangles and squares, but angular, crooked, bent, queered.

Taylor, then, pays her art-historical homages by being a condenser; her jagged and compressed picture planes have been made skew-whiff, as if subject to subterranean or concealed pressures, social or

otherwise. Representing a view of the world using abstraction, she conveys a marginalised perspective, where subjects are effaced and erased, as well as squeezed or pinched.

Her 20 watercolour figure studies, selections from a number painted serially over 2019, are tightly corseted mannequins. Biomechanical, robotic, they might swivel and pivot, collapse and expand, each in its glass-fronted box as in an isolation booth. Taylor's X-ray vision allows her to celebrate the transience of the body as a passing parade, the carnival of flesh scooped back to spine and sinew.

The German Bauhaus, the Russian constructivists, the Italian futurists are the obvious starting points for the engineering of such creatures; they are products of a fantastical liminal zone, part utopia, part dystopia. *Open, Out, Spleen, Nape, Stripped, Whip, Slit*: the titles have a certain savagery, as of high dudgeon in a low dungeon. In these watercolours, the human form has been reduced to constricting contraptions, to gussets and brackets, to translucent panels, to knobbed columns that could be head and neck, to planes that could be arms, legs and torso, able to be folded in like collapsible furniture.

And in making each of these 'studies' a matrix of shape-shifting possibilities, Taylor asserts her own tensile, springy, portable vision. These might be portraits of the adored one; they might be self-portraits seen in a trick mirror. Riffing on the human figure, Taylor conjures it as stackable, modular, or else as razory, thinly sliced, or possibly crystalline, prismatic. Reductive, essentialist, these watercolours are all angles, pointing in all directions, like the compass of her paintings.

