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Puketāpapa,
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i. ancient

...it was like seeing somebody in the street you think is a friend, you whistle and wave and run after him, and it is not only not the friend, but not even very like him. A few minutes later the real friend appears in view, and then you can't imagine how you ever mistook that other person for him.

Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*¹

Could you recognise your lover by the *nape* of their neck? It is where you cradle their head when you kiss, where your hands clasp when you dance, what you watch as they walk away. In Taylor's *Nape*, the figure is ambiguous, their brown hair could be cut short or swirled up in a bun. The pink shell of just one ear can be seen almost in its entirety above a plump cheek, for the figure is slightly turned to one side. It is strange to consider the cup of an ear from behind, the jut of a jaw, the symmetry of a neck, but these are enough to recognise someone by. When I worked as an assistant at a public gallery, I would sometimes spot a person I knew but did not want to bump into. Familiar as I was with the building, I was able to evade them by circulating in wide loops, always keeping their back in front of me. As I've grown older, I don't recognise people so readily, not due to any decrepitude, but because life changes us. Sometimes a person I haven't seen in a decade has turned grey, developed a stoop, buffed up, shorn their head. Sometimes the joy that was once written in their bodies has diminished, or else they have stepped out of the anxiety that plagued them. Sometimes these changes are so complete, I can't be sure I ever really knew them at all.

Gaze long enough and *Nape* is barely recognisable as human. Bow-shaped tendons are carved out, over-articulated to the point of appearing almost architectural, buttresses flying to support the base of the skull. Not just

architectural but ancient. I think about a video I saw recently, drone footage of basking sharks—one of the most primitive species still extant today—swimming close to the surface off the coast of Ireland, their gills so long they almost encircle their heads, easily visible from above. Perhaps these are not tendons but gills? Either way, *Nape* and the basking sharks share the curious quality of appearing so ancient they seem almost otherworldly, no longer merely old but alien. *Nape* could be the neck of a loved one, or something stranger, something beyond human. Or perhaps Taylor is showing us a next step in human evolution, one where our tendons have turned taut and rope-like in response to new ways of looking.

ii. perversion

On special days at my childhood church, the altar would be flanked by banners of bright fabric swathed from ceiling to floor. Deep violet for all the forty days of Lent, the monotony heightening the drama when funereal black drapes appeared on Good Friday, followed by the celebration of gold and shining white revealed on Easter Sunday.

Seeing Taylor's bigger-than-a-body paintings in the old East Street Methodist Hall stirs memories in this lapsed Catholic. In these rooms, deconsecrated as they are, colours hold a different weight, are laden with liturgical baggage. Radiant blue is celestial light, a red horse is no mere beast, a black cat is an omen (sacrilege), a plume of white bong smoke must be a sign. Perhaps it is the divinity of light spilling in from the upper windows to meet the halo of synthetic gallery lights, or perhaps the walls still hold some sacred residue, lending their holy aura to the works. But I have visited other exhibitions in this space and not felt this affect. There is an undeniably spiritual quality to these paintings, the way many are suspended off the floor on slim silver poles, seeming to float,

1 — Nancy Mitford,
The Pursuit of Love
(UK: Penguin, 1945) 139.

weightless despite their size. The way forms are blown up, fill up the space of the canvas, are tightly framed or cropped so they appear abstracted, return to being shapes and so can be read like sigils, enigmatic symbols used in occult practices, often to incite communication from the other side. The way dark curved edges are ringed with lighter shades, rippling out so shapes appear to glow and become animated, vibrating with energy. In *Limpets*, chubby pink legs curled side by side, cocooned beneath a navy blue isthmus of blanket, pale rose melting into azureous whorls where knee and thigh flatten one another, blending back into darkness. On the other side of the hall, a tiny white pearl hums between thumb and forefinger, not quite touching. As we are in church, this throbbing pearl might be the Eucharist, although it also recalls the sensitive nub of moon at the end of a ribbed arboreal tunnel, an image seared in my mind from Taylor's 2022 painting, *Wet With Dew*. But this moon, this pearl, has drawn the attention of a body, is being pinched with such gentle intentionality and so my interpretation drifts between two distinct forms of communion. The title *Mother Nature* hints at the more pleasurable option, but then, mother nature can be cruel.

There is an unusual smoothness to *Limpets* and *Mother Nature* that reminds me of the 'licked' look of Renaissance paintings, surfaces shining like someone has literally taken their tongue to the canvas. This is unusual, given Taylor has painted on burlap for so long, but these works are not haunted by the rough spectre of New Zealand Regionalism. In both substrate and subject, they feel smooth and sensual, simultaneously intimate and universal. These latter, seemingly oxymoronic qualities are something Taylor's paintings share with devotional images. In their familiarity, or in the viewer's familiarity with the stories they are telling, they are able to stand in for many different things for many different people. A pearl, a wafer, a moon, a clit. Taylor says this body of work spun from the question of "how to make pervert work without bodies" but there are always bodies, always perverts, even if they're just the ones standing in front of a painting.²

In *Murmurs* a voluptuous brown saddle floats above a pulsing blue bulge. A saddle suggests a rider, but there is no room for her here, the canvas filled to the brim with saddle. Something about the scale—or that suggestive bulge, or the pale fleshy tones moulded above—

reminds me of the machine in Claire Denis' *High Life* (2018), a mechanised saddle equipped with a dildo which Juliette Binoche's doctor character rides like a bucking bull at a saloon bar, the camera lingering on webs of her long black hair sticking to the sweat on her back. Ever since first viewing this film I have noticed a propensity towards the equestrian in high-end sex toys and furniture, not least the brass and leather "tufted boudoir chaise" with reins and stirrups featured in the 2022 Goop Gift Guide.³ *Murmurs* is less overtly sexual and yet this has the perverse quality of making me feel even more deviant—why do I see a painting of a saddle and take it to a place of sci-fi fuck-box? Perhaps the problem is that unlike Taylor, I am not a horse rider, and so riding bears different connotations.

iii. companions

Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises.

John Berger, *Why look at animals?*⁴

Perversion aside, these are paintings that feel as though they have always existed. Certain forms hold resonances that can be felt in our bellies, bones, deep down into the earth. Among these forms, animals hold primacy. For it was animals that were the subjects of the first paintings (likely painted in their blood). Animals that were used to symbolise and summon different desires through hunting magic and shamanic rituals, animals that were called upon to ferry messages between corporeal and spiritual realms. It was onto these painted animals that we projected our hopes and dreams: they were the first symbols.⁵

With depictions dating back up to 30,000 years, horses, cats and snakes are among the oldest in the history of painting. Like the rock paintings at Lascaux, Bhimbetka, Altamira, Chauvet, Taylor's paintings employ these animals symbolically, but their signifying function, already murky for the way it shifts across time and culture, is further clouded by the ways in which they are cropped, stylised and simplified. A horse might signify something, but what of their legs and flank, depicted all on their own? Of all the paintings in *Murmurs*, it is *Night Eyes (Chestnuts)* that most puzzles me, until I search the title online and learn that 'chestnuts' are a type of callus sometimes found on the leg of a

2 — Imogen Taylor in conversation with Victoria Wynne-Jones, 30 September 2023, Michael Lett 3 East Street, Auckland.

3 — The 2022 Goop Gift Guide is no longer available online, however the "ridiculous but awesome" selection from 2023 can be viewed here. Kiki de Montparnasse's tufted boudoir chaise can still be purchased online for a cool \$47,577.42 NZD (exclusive of tax, duties and shipping).

4 — John Berger, "Why look at animals?" in *About Looking* (UK: Vintage, 1992) 4.

5 — *Ibid.*, 9.

horse, usually about the same size and colour as a chestnut. I keep reading and discover 'night eyes' is an alternative name for the calluses, stemming from an ancient belief that they allowed horses to see at night. In Taylor's painting, the lower half of a horse is painted in scarlet red, as warm-blooded animals appear in night-vision, amidst a green swirling, vertical pattern recalling the common form of so-called 'night eyes'.

I may not be a horse girl, but I do live with a small calico cat. Rather than my pet, I like to think of Julia as my companion, perhaps even my closest companion, so intimately do I know her soft, capable body and its routines. In his essay *Why look at animals?*, John Berger reminds us that for all the symbolic meaning we have placed upon the animals we look at, they look at us too.⁶ Julia watches me often, sometimes staring into my eyes without blinking at all, other times with slow, deliberate blinks that I will mirror, as though we are engaged in a kind of close-range semaphore, as though we might be the first human-animal pair to bridge that which divides us: our lack of common language. What does she see when she looks at me? Does she understand that I love her, does she understand love, does she love me?

Taylor's cat is a shiny puddle of black with two thick whiskers on either side of its face, head bent over a white bowl. It is not a real cat (Taylor has a dog), but viewers have responded strongly nonetheless, are obsessed with the cat, have asked whether *Alone Time* is a nod to the storied history of female artists and their beloved cats. I can't help but wonder, why not paint a dog, if your closest animal companion is one? But then, perhaps to paint a dog is too intimate, when you share your life with a dog who is real and not a symbol. The cat in *Alone Time* is sleek and stylised, a whiskered geometric form amidst other shapes. *Night Eyes (Chestnuts)*, too, is cropped and abstracted while *Nook*, Taylor's painting of a snake, is simplified to the point where it is more like an emblem, a hypnotic spiral barely recognisable as a snake but for the subtle spade-shaped head and a gentle tapering off towards a fine tip (does a snake have a tail?).

Taylor has described snakes as "living linear forms" reflecting on the strangeness of cohabiting for a time with a 16-year-old ball python named Agatha.⁷ Snakes are symbolically

slippery, having represented all manner of things across different cultures, mythologies and contexts, immortality, healing, fertility and wisdom. But for me who was raised with the Bible, snakes did not represent these things. Snakes were always hubris and Satan, reminders of the original sin, responsible as they were for Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, but they were also God's creatures, just like us.

Everybody who looks at a snake sees something different, feels something different. But what does a snake see when they look at us? What do they feel? Berger argues that animals look at humans just as they would look at any other species. The difference comes from us humans, who when held by their look, become aware of ourselves returning the look. In sensing an exchange, we begin to ascribe all kinds of human qualities to animals, come to believe they have secrets which, Berger writes, "unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to [us]" when we share their look.⁸

In *Murmurs*, animals are represented abstractly, their forms not quite present or complete, more suggestion than demand, murmur than chatter. They do not look back at us, for they have no eyes. These are not animals but symbols, and as such require a less explicit form of recognition from us, one that allows us to look with no possibility of our gaze being returned. And yet even as we look and come to identify these symbols, we suspect they hold secrets. We look closer and every one of us sees something different.

6 – Ibid, 4.

7 – Taylor and Wynne-Jones

8 – Berger, 4-5.

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