

Hey māmā, come play with me

Turumeke Harrington

21 February – 31 March 2019

**THE
PHYSICS
ROOM** CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Artist Biography

Turumeke Harrington (Ngāi Tahu) is an installation and sculpture-focused artist with a background in fine arts and industrial design. She graduated with a BFA (Hons) from Ilam School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury in 2018. Turumeke lives with her young daughter between Ōhinehau / Lyttelton and Pōneke/ Wellington.

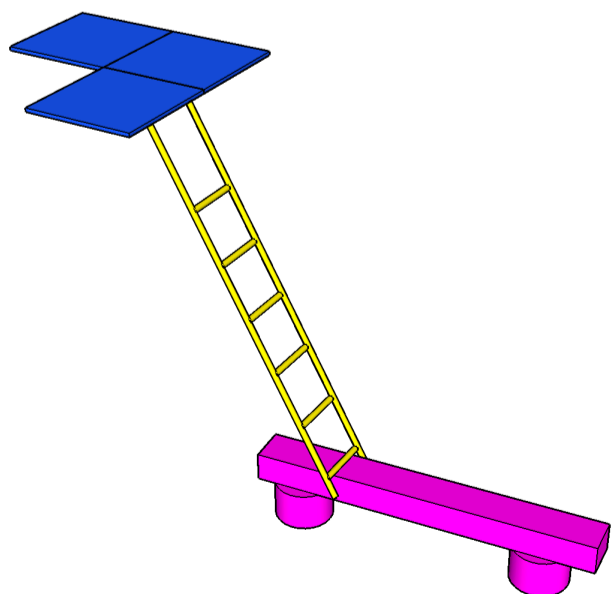


Image: Turumeke Harrington, *Hey māmā, come play with me*, working drawing (installation detail), 2019.

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In *Hey māmā, come play with me* Turumeke Harrington has made an installation-come-playground in order to engage audiences in small moments of respite from daily life. In creating the exhibition, Harrington is also working towards understanding and validating her own art-making process, posing the question ‘What makes something right?’ Drawing on a range of disciplines, knowledge systems, and personal beliefs, where each has its own priorities and values, this question becomes difficult to approach. In this respect, the playground becomes a testing ground for the limits of these various parameters.

Working at the intersection between design and art, and utilising a material vernacular familiar with play and our everyday: rope, steel, and rubber, Harrington explores ideas of craft and whakapapa in contemporary Māori practice. These newly created objects, which, for the purpose of exhibition are placed into conversation with one another, are essentially distinct but modular things. Each was borne out of a specific need—a problem to be solved. However, when existing semi-passively in the gallery they become dysfunctional and could perhaps be described as failed design (and therefore descend into the realm of art).

In this context, the question of ‘rightness’ becomes almost pointless. Rather, Harrington considers the lifespan of an artwork as a measure for success; where do works go to die? Can they have another life? After this exhibition it is highly likely that these pieces of art, these industrial objects, these playthings will be repurposed in the home to gratefully fulfil more pressing needs.

Hey māmā, come play with me

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Exhibition Preview: Wednesday 20 February, 5.30pm

Exhibition Runs: 21 February–31 March 2019

Thursday 21 February, 12pm: Exhibition talk with Turumeke Harrington and Jamie Hanton

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A conversation between Turumeke Harrington and Jamie Hanton

21 February 2019

Jamie Hanton: To start off I wanted to ask about the idea of rightness about what makes something right. Because, during the development of this show you were working through a lot of different contexts: art gallery context, design context, functional context, domestic context and I wondered if you could describe how those different contexts fed into the making of the show...

Turumeke Harrington: It's quite interesting to figure out why some things sit well, and some don't. Last year, working in the university, I was considering how people figure out what makes something right how can you repeat that, and if you repeat it and then it's wrong. Trying to define constraints to develop art. It's like this whole thing of patting yourself on the back, validating your own practice and part of that for me is, as you would do in a design brief, trying to outline all these things and where there's something missing and if it's a bit too free, just arbitrarily defining some constraints which, I guess, is not design at all, and that's the art bit. But just trying to set up a bunch of parameters, starting with budget, and space, and limited time to complete it. Whittling back from that, at the same time thinking I really just want to make a colourful fun thing. So, there's an aesthetic driver. I'm reassessing those all the time.

JH: So, would you consider the arbitrary parameters, those things that are already set in place in the brief, like this space, the budget, the time or are you then imposing other things on yourself?

TH: I'm adding things. You know, there are things that actually constrain you and then there are other considerations like we talked about: where do these things go to die? Mum and Dad have already said that I can't use the garage. So, they either have to be useful in my house which is also very little, and also running out of space or they have to be useful in another future work context. When I was making this show, I was already thinking about the next show, and the next show is pink. So, not trying to make all of the work pink and throw it into the next one and just do that, but being mindful of what's coming up.

JH: That's going to be an interesting constraint on your practice as you go on and are continually making things. Do you see it affecting the way that you make or the objects that you make?

TH: It definitely informs it, but then you have the moments in which you think, is that a good thing to be doing? Feeding myself a bunch of rules. Is that compromising? But I really think that for my work it's not compromising it at all, because it's not about some true emotive expression, it's not necessarily saying something.

JH: For me this show is a really slippery one, in an interesting way, because it occupies all of those contexts we talked about, but none of them fully. We were having a conversation this morning while we were cleaning after the opening, and talking about health and safety; the physical act of people wanting to sit on the bench and we were talking about the material choices you made and how that would dictate how someone would move towards the object. And how you have sourced materials from play areas, and industrial sites ... these stanchion holders are really interesting...

TH: Yeah, the stanchion holders are drawn from tools used in Christchurch Art Gallery to mark off fancy paintings. I was working in there and I was like, these are really cool and would hold things to the wall, can I please copy them? I was working with eyelets last year, but if you spend all this time putting this thing together but then you're limited by store bought fastenings and if there's scope to make them ... I was just trying to blur the lines between store-bought and made, and trying to make the things that are getting made, look like things you could buy but then they're not. I guess if I can produce enough of a blur, I can throw in a few readymade pieces and I can throw in a few of my own and then it would be good if people didn't know, necessarily, where they all fell.

JH: I love how they're meant to stop people from touching things, but in this show they're ... they're absolutely functional ... well they're not, they have a function ...

TH: I feel like that is probably where you get, if you want to start textbook defining art and design and craft and all that, that's where you start.

JH: I just wanted to talk about and I think it's still in this area of distinctions between craft and art and design the fact that in the work list only two works have titles. Which is totally fine but I wanted to ask about the titling of the works...

TH: The big rocking punching bag it's not a punching bag the big green object is *Pride of the Nation*, which is a joke, but I don't quite know what the joke is that I'm making, but it's definitely a big green sports thing. That already had a name and was made for a show in Auckland a couple of years ago. So, it made sense to keep its name. And if we were talking about naming the other works ... the yellow ladder is the yellow ladder. It's a ladder... although, I nearly named everything after S Club 7 lyrics.

JH: Whoa!

TH: And then I was like ... I'll just do that privately. I don't want to do that out loud.

JH: Can you talk about the *Pride of the Nation* as the joke that you still don't know that you're making, or not?

TH: I made that between moving back from Melbourne and going to art school. So, it was before I sat down and thought about anything, properly, for like five years, and I was just working through some ideas that were quite literal and that's the last vestige of the works that I still quite like. I thought it would be; just a kind of sport-thing. But riffing on the pou holding things. And when it was shown, there was, next door to the gallery, a bunch of kids who had been kicked out of school. And they were working on photography projects through Nga Rangatahi Toa. And so, there was this bunch of rowdy boys and they thrashed it so hard and it was so good! Because everyone was so uncomfortable, and they were just having a real good time beating this thing up. And I was like, fine. This is perfect. I wish I had filmed that because that was the best part of the work, watching those kids kick it. So good.

JH: I think it holds that space really well in terms of discomfort and uncomfortable conversations: I don't think it's literal at all.

TH: That's why it survived all the literal ones got cut up and returned, trimmed into different parts, sold as chairs. And the soft bench doesn't need a name: it's a chair for looking at the art, that you can't sit on. Or you can, but you have to brace your core and hold yourself up properly. And so it works as part of the installation and it's definitely a "work". It's just not "art work". Does that make sense?

JH: Totally. And what about *Shoot for the stars!* (*Here's 1500 for when you miss*)?

TH: I really was going to name it after that S Club 7 song...

JH: Ah, that is "shoot for the stars"!?

TH: It's "reach for the stars"! I nearly did it. I was thinking about contemporary Māori practice, and not being a weaver and not having raranga skills and not even knowing where to go sit with someone for a while and do it, and working by myself, and trying to use non-specific weaving techniques. That, as it happens, is very similar to the whetū, the four-plait star. I was trying to ... I guess I've just said it out loud ... but generally speaking, leaving bits there for people who are looking ... macrons over the "a" in mā mā. Putting enough there so that, if you are so inclined you can read it in that way. And if you are not, then you don't have to, and that's okay too. I don't want to exclude people because they don't have a perceived cultural competency. If they want to see it as a sweet pink thing then that's fine. And also, everything is doomed and it's funny to think about like here you go, Pia here's this monumental thing for you, and you're also going to fail at everything and enjoy your life. I've been feeling a little bit bleak about a bunch of things lately.

JH: Pia's your daughter.

TH: Yeah, Pia's my daughter. She's three and a half. And I'm sure she'll be fine. But this has been another thing we were talking about with Pia; how it's so hard to control children in art galleries. You just get so sick of having to constrict or moderate their behaviour. And she got so bummed out going to see the Wayne Youle show, which I liked, but she was just angry because she couldn't touch it all, and it was good colours and she was like, "I just want touching shows!" And I was like, "fair call." And so, there's another route: validate your art-making practice by making it so your three-year-old likes it. If nothing else, she liked it. She likes the trampoline, she had a good bounce on that. So, there's another consideration or parameter during the making: if she's occupying most of my time and space then it has to, in a way, suit her.

JH: It also works for me as a sculpture show: there are some really great formal decisions that have been made around the objects. I'm really interested to spend some time in the space with people as they come in to see how they apprehend the whole thing...

TH: A lot of people will ask "how much can I touch this?" and without being aloof, it's like ... I have load-tested everything: I have sat, and climbed, and pulled on everything. It's fine! Because if you're not going to put a sign that says "don't touch", people do silly things and they will pull or something. So it either has to fall, or collapse, or be soft. Everything is, practically speaking, to be engaged with. But I quite like watching people trying to figure it out.