

# **For the feral splendour**

**Owen Connors, Laura Duffy, and  
Aliyah Winter**

**29 January – 6 March 2022**

**THE  
PHYSICS  
ROOM** CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

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Exhibition runs: 29 January – 6 March 2022

'For the feral splendour' suggests the motivation for doing something: making a sacrifice, stating an intention, offering a justification. It's the reply to a strange question, a joke or incantation. In this exhibition works by Owen Connors, Laura Duffy, and Aliyah Winter engage with ideas about that which is natural, unnatural, supernatural, and the transformative potential of queer narratives that connect these things.

The exhibition is underpinned by research into mysticism and celestial identities, utopian gardens and weeds, and stories which are at once fear-inducing and comical. It's also underpinned by friendship. This work is made by three artists who have frequently worked together; it was developed in conversation and in many ways the works overlap in forms and ideas.

Winter's banners form a threshold to the exhibition space. They are two soft columns through which you have to walk to enter: like the title screen of a computer game or an airport body scanner. The falling textile has the weight of classical garments, although it is polyester satin, undercutting any associations of reverence or religious gravitas. With strong wind or another supernatural energy the polyester satin would move as if alive: think of kneeling Gabriel's robe in Renaissance paintings of the annunciation, the ecstatic garments of St Teresa, erotic transfiguration pictures, angelic memes. Quieter, certainly, these banners, with a rose quartz for healing at the centre, but the sense of a charged force field holds.

"In this act of magical transformation, I will recognise myself again" writes Susan Stryker. Acts of self-recognition structure this project. In Winter's work, manipulated photographs of the artist's face and hands, starlings' wings and icons ascend or descend the textile banners. These forms have shed the weight of gravity and appear inwardly lit in CMYK. Latin text on one translates: "Do not speak of god without a light". The statement is a directive, but at the same time, brings forward an image of god in the dark: what would this look like? The work asserts fearlessness in the face of normative violence, and the possibilities of flight, humour, mutation, and queer fantasy.

"Go back to where you grew up. Don't let anyone know you're coming if there's anyone to let know", writes CAConrad (author of the poem from which this exhibition takes its name) in *Restoration Fibre Song*; "Where were you when you first realised it was impossible not to leave a mess behind?" Owen Connors' painting *Die Zerstückelung* returns to an apocryphal story from Connors' childhood, his dad's account of balancing on a felled log and leaping over a swung axe in a feat of bravado. Amplifying and bending this narrative with its elements of rural gothic, the work includes multiple self-portraits of the artist as both protagonist and subject. In the accompanying work, *Autotomy*, a scarred ankle is haloed by refracting sunlight.

Connors' works are painted with egg tempera on birch board. Made from yolk mixed with powdered pigment, and built up slowly layer by layer, the medium offers durability and luminosity. It has been used for centuries, with particular prominence in the Renaissance. In the present egg tempera seems anachronistic, and yet at the same these works glow with a kind of raw newness. The wooden frames are carved by the artist in macrocarpa, the timber of a farm shelterbelt, oxidised. A rising sun, and a shell made from silver beech hardwood, are mounted on the frames. The carvings' style remembers the wood-engravings of queer artist Leo Bensemman, who lived in Christchurch in the 1930s with Rita Angus and Laurence Baigent at 76 Cambridge Terrace, just down the road from The Physics Room's current site.

"I am often disgusted with / life here without you" writes CAConrad in a text on the death of his boyfriend Earth. Forms of disgust, loss, compost and rot, as well as states of bliss and abandon, underpin Duffy's practice, which spans moving image and installation. In this exhibition her sculptures are bodies of metal—steel, resin, wire, strip lighting—that stoop and crouch as if in rapid motion, or, like the slower movements of ageing or transmutation. One holds a translucent resin plate of plant matter including gorse, thyme, dandelion, and gay flower, along with raspberry and dirt and spit. The work's name is *Fluffy*, in reference to a pet's name, a pet-name, or to the kinds of surfaces or ideas which are often considered un-serious. *Fluffy* is a gesture of resistance too, to the self-important language that circulates round contemporary art.

Duffy's installation is not contained with a single site, rather, elements of the work made from found pieces of acrylic and wire are spread across the gallery floor like an unruly plastic meadow. Or like a viral ecology: *Fluffy* seems to revolt at the idea of self-contained borders. Instead, the work raises questions about human-centred narratives of biological individualism and reproduction. As Daisy Lafarge writes in her essay "Metaphor as Parasite" (*The Drouth*, online, 2001), "Most organisms share up to a third of their genome with other species and kingdoms. Although many viral fragments in human DNA are thought to be 'junk'—strands of now-defunct code—many others produce vital proteins ... without which reproductive biology would struggle. What does it mean that what we usually regard as maternal instinct—the ability to incubate life—is facilitated by the remains of a virus?" Put another way, how does recognition of the virus as a generative and necessary part of life change the way we think about it, and in turn about norms around reproduction, and our understanding of the biological worlds both inside and outside of our bodies?

*For the feral splendour* also suggests a relationship to the messy and organic world beyond the gallery. Since the 2011 earthquake, vacant urban lots overgrown with grasses and wildflowers in summer, have been ubiquitous in the city centre. In a more formal setting, the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, at the end of Worcester Boulevard, were founded in 1863 with the planting of an oak to mark the marriage of Prince Albert and Princess Alexandra of Denmark. Before the Botanic Gardens, that area was wetlands and sand. On leaving The Physics Room, just down the road off Hereford Street, you'll come to Ngā Māra a Te Wera, gardens planted to remember Ngāi Tahu rangatira Te Wera and the abundant gardens at Kaiapoi Pā. The 'garden city' continues to sustain multiple identities: feral and splendid, conservative and manicured, relational or familial. It has been this way a long time. Beneath the city and often-dry region a fertile swamp remains.

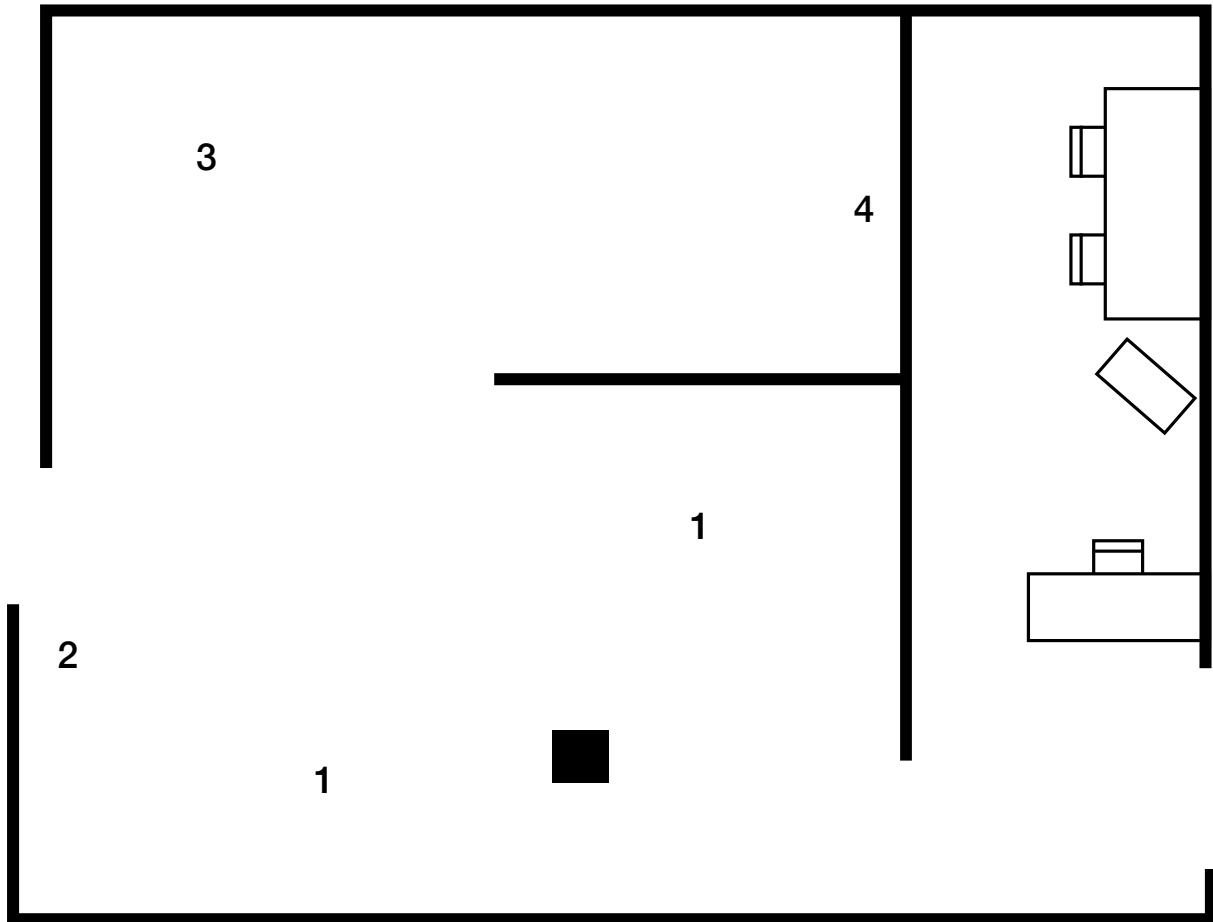
## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

**Owen Connors** is based in Tāmaki Makaurau. Past exhibitions include *Incubations*, Robert Heald Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara, 2021; *For Future Breeders*, Parasite, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2021; *DUIRVIUS* (with Laura Duffy), Blue Oyster Project Space, Ōtepoti, 2020; and *SISSYMANCY!*, play\_station, Te Whanganui-a-Tara, 2019.

**Laura Duffy** is from Turanganui-a-Kiwa and has been living and working in Te Whanganui-a-Tara for the past decade. She works between video, sculpture, and installation. Duffy is interested in exploring queer pleasure or joy derived from failure, error, and disgust. Recent exhibitions include *Spawn*, ACMI, Melbourne, 2021; *Maybe Someone is Starting to Bloom*, PARASITE, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2021; *Candy Coated*, The Dowse Art Museum, Te Whanganui-a-Tara, 2021; *DUIRVIUS* (with Owen Connors), Blue Oyster Project Space, Ōtepoti, 2020; and *Thinking about Thinking about the Future* (with Aliyah Winter), Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2020.

**Aliyah Winter** lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau. Her research based practice extends across photography, video, and performance, and often draws on historical material, with a particular focus on language, voice, and the queer body. Recent exhibitions include *HYPNO.MATRIX*, Parasite, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2020; *Queer Algorithms*, Gus Fisher Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2020; *An affinity of hammers*, HOBIENNALE, Nipaluna Hobart, 2019; *Puawānanga*, with Angela Kilford, WAITHUI Billboard Project; and *Hardening*, Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, both Te Whanganui-a-Tara, 2018. Her work can also be viewed online at CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa.

# WORK LIST



- 1 Aliyah Winter, *Invocation*, 2022.  
Digital sublimation prints on polyester satin, steel, paint, 1400 x 4400mm.  
Hanging mechanism by Laura Duffy.
- 2 Owen Connors, *Autotomy*, 2022.  
Egg tempera on board, pigmented shellacked macrocarpa frame with oxidised silver beech detail, 600 x 700mm.
- 3 Laura Duffy, *Fluffy*, 2022.  
Steel, resin, wire, LED light strip, batteries, spray paint, spit, raspberry, dirt, acrylic, dandelion, gorse flower, thyme, gay flower, weeds, fabric, plaster.  
Approx dimensions: 1250 x 800mm.
- 4 Owen Connors, *Die Zerstückelung*, 2022.  
Egg tempera on board, oxidised macrocarpa frame with pigmented shellacked macrocarpa detail, 1220 x 1830mm.