

# ***For the feral splendour***

Owen Connors, Laura Duffy, and Aliyah Winter

29 January – 6 March, 2022

## **To eat a flower: or, going to seed**

### **A response by Jane Wallace**

A green-suited and hobgoblin-esque figure clammers out of a sewer and into the grounds of the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, in the totally bizarre 2012 film *Holy Motors*. Known as Merde, they ravage the graveyard, leaping between the tombs and small plaques and swiping bouquets as they go: hefty bunches of yellow and magenta blooms, garish heart-shaped arrangements of condolence. With each, they take an enormous bite, like grass, like a meal, leaving a trail of bitten petals, spit, and thorns behind.<sup>1</sup> This path of green waste, bodily discharge, and desecration shares a visual language with Laura Duffy's work *Fluffy* in the group exhibition *For the feral splendour*. A pervasive sculptural installation, *Fluffy* creeps through the cracks in the gallery floor, green wire seedlings, and larger pieces of acid-coloured wrought metal which support a resinous tablet studded with plants, saliva, and LED lights. In *Holy Motors*, a group of conservative onlookers are stunned by Merde's passage through the cemetery. Both Duffy and Merde revel in the knowledge of being the deviant one. This pleasure is at the core of *For the feral splendour*: realising this deviance and incorporating it into a system of representation for oneself.

The *Holy Motors* scene is like a counterpart to CAConrad's "#88: SECURITY CAMERAS AND FLOWERS DREAMING THE ELEVATION ALLEGIANCE" — or rather, reinforces the ideas that the poem makes clear. CAConrad is already a significant reference point for the exhibition, which takes its title from another of their poems. As a somatic ritual, CAConrad walks the streets of Philadelphia. At the intersections and where the pavement is punctuated by a surveillance camera, they stare directly into it and bury their tongue into the velveteen hymen of a flower.<sup>2</sup> To perform for the camera in this way is an acknowledgement that you already knew you were being watched. When CAConrad eats a pansy in front of a Philly security guard; when Merde stuffs the head of a tulip into their mouth, there is a shift in the balance of

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twcbKbLQUuA>

2 <http://somaticpoetryexercises.blogspot.com/2013/08/88-security-cameras-and-flowers.html>

power and surveillance. I'll give you something to look at! To eat the flower is a double digestion, of flower and camera.

In her book *Staying With The Trouble*, Donna Haraway writes that we are not post-human, we are compost: composite, hybrid, able to absorb and ingest and comeingle. I dream of swallowing the security camera that watches, until it is dissolved into my stomach membrane and I become imaging-surveilling-machine. Together, we perform a scanning of my internal organs, liver and larynx and produce an image where I am mechanical and magical. The alien image is the currency of Aliyah Winter's work, *Invocation*; black polyester satin banners forming a corridor, a zone of transition in the gallery. As I am editing this text, a strange and cosmic thing occurs. A small crack begins at the edge of my computer screen, causing a digital ripple, first separating the open windows into individual bars of colour, and then plummeting into a pool of black. I begin to understand *Invocation* as a liminal space between two different modes of knowledge and narration. Passing through *Invocation*, the parts of religion and truth that are not useful are shedded, and ways of knowing that involve mystery, mythology and embodied experience are prioritised instead. Winter's face is pressed against the surface of the fabric, in yellow and magenta cameos, surrounded by a ruff of starling feathers. I'm still here.

In the New Zealand vernacular, feral is for animals, for pest-creatures and rodents and wild furry things with sharp teeth, to be feared as disease-carriers or unwelcome house-guests. Feral means ERROR ANIMAL, the kind of claw and heartbeat that, if given the option, one would want to delete from the ecosystem. So, fearful of eradication, or of being trapped, the error animal is resourceful and a scavenger, a body to slip into waste-spaces and turn it into home. Their snout in the wrong place, a wheelie bin or garbage bag, a back alley or swamp scrub.

The reclamation of the word feral in contemporary discourse, and particularly in queer vocabulary, reflects a dimension of joy and excess embedded in the word. *For the feral splendour*, then, expounds a kind of recklessness that ignores limitations of binary, normalcy, linearity. I think about error animals, about beings that are always turned away, and how maybe they are the ones that are best at spreading seed. The initiation of new life forms can be a way to register and affirm one's presence and activity in the world — the seeds can remember a path taken through the forest or the parking lot — and also allows past trauma to be rewritten. I listen to a conversation with CAConrad, where they describe returning to a disused patch of land last visited with their boyfriend Earth, before his death. Mayflowers sprawled across the section. They recall a past summer, where together they planted pocketfuls of seed

and then had sex, leaving their own seed too, to fertilise the soil. Back home, the starlings peck at the rotten crops, carrying the material of rowanberry or clover on their wing. Is this the augur? Does the seed also contain a promise or a superstition?

Superstition is a bud that lays dormant and germinates with time, until it is called on again. Sometimes, superstition is the perfect cover for behaving strangely, a good luck charm for a new day. Owen Connors' tempera paintings depict a familial myth of brothers jumping over a swinging axe to prove their manhood. In this version of it, a foot is reborn and baptised as an emblem of success. Here, Connors appropriates the vocabulary and pigments of Western Renaissance iconography for his own narrative. Within a framework that typically denies queerness, the playful erotics embedded in Connors' co-option of Christian events of transformation asserts autonomy over how he can deploy storytelling in a way that allows his own existence within it. We retell the story until we remake it, until we have moved far enough away from its original iteration that we can recognise ourselves there.

The frames that Connors carves recall the woodwork sold in small outposts on the West Coast, a softness to their forms, a sun-bleach, an optimism. Alongside this, the gentle shift from CA Conrad's splendor to *splendour* in the title of the exhibition articulates a sensitivity to place. After all, to grow in the weeds is to feel around the corners and know the cracks most intimately, to follow the contours of a pre-existing terrain and leap through it, ferally, splendidly.

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