

She could lie on her back and sink

3 June – 26 August

Tai Shani (UK) **Ann Shelton** (Pākehā, Italian, Aotearoa New Zealand), **Jayne Parker** (UK) and **Louie Zalk-Neale** (Ngāi Te Rangī, Pākehā, lives in Ōtaki) with **Adam Ben-Dror** (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Tangata Tiriti, lives in Tāmaki Makaurau), **Neke Moa** (Ngāti Kahungunu ki Ahuriri, Kai Tahu, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, lives in Ōtaki) and **Dr Tāwhanga Nopera** (Te Arawa, Tūwharetoa, Tainui, Ngāpuhi, lives in Rotorua)

*'She was underwater now... Just like her grandmother, just like her grandmother's grandmother. She could lie on her back and sink.'*¹

She could lie on her back and sink explores artistic responses to the figure of the witch both in the context of indigenous Aotearoa and European lineages. Through film, photography, installation and performance, the exhibition is framed through an intersectional feminist lens where wise women* and customary knowledge holders are revered because of the way they engage with nature. Water is the unifying force between the artists, from the submergence of women's knowledge in European pre-Christian practices to a vessel of swirling seawater, a hallucinogenic island and an underwater dancer.

The exhibition's title is a quote from a short story by novelist Pip Adam, commissioned by Ann Shelton for her new body of work, *i am an old phenomenon* (2022-ongoing), and refers to the historical practice of "swimming a witch" where hundreds of thousands of women were forcibly tried for witchcraft through drowning. This history informs Shelton's new series and its visual realisation in the exhibition. Shelton's works awaken past and present knowledge systems pertaining to the medicinal, spiritual, and magical applications of plants, animals and fungi.

Turner-prize winning artist Tai Shani presents a feminist mythology of psychedelics in *The Neon Hieroglyph* (2021), which is inspired by her research into the history of ergot – a fungus from which the drug LSD is derived. Comprised of nine hypnotic stories, from dancing plagues to psychedelic communist witches, *The Neon Hieroglyph* elucidates Shani's idea of the psychedelic as a space that can drive new visions of society. Conceived as a hallucination around ergot, the film's CGI dreamlike sequences journey through space and time, from the cellular to the galactic.

In a newly commissioned installation and performance by Louie Zalk-Neale and their collaborators Tāwhanga Nopera, Neke Moa and Adam Ben-Dror, taura (ropes) are arranged to circulate flows of mauri through a self-contained seascape of rock, fibre, plastic and water. The project draws on Zalk-Neale's practice of twisting taura tī kōuka (cabbage tree fibre rope) as an attempt to bind the sacred transgender experience with the transformative powers of taniwha and tipua – powerful beings that can change gender and form.

¹ Adam P. *The Three Fates. i am an old phenomenon* at Denny Gallery New York; 2022.

The exhibition concludes with Jayne Parker's portrayal of a ballerina moving gracefully underwater in the short, choreographed dance spectacle *The Whirlpool* (1997). In red ballet shoes, dancing to music by Schumann, the ballerina imbues the magic of the underwater world unaware of the danger that lies ahead.

She could lie on her back and sink imagines a watery haven where our witchy selves can exist in harmony and new tendrils of knowledge are born.

*"woman" and "women" throughout this text is intended to be inclusive of trans and gender diverse people.

Ann Shelton (Pākehā, Italian, Aotearoa New Zealand)

i am an old phenomenon
2022-ongoing

In *i am an old phenomenon* Ann Shelton considers the figure of the witch as a lynchpin in the history of women's* social positioning. Witches were historically alienated, and a literal erasure was attempted.

The series considers how women's knowledge of plants and fungi was seen as a threat to the newly established economic and religious orders that emerged in the late Middle Ages in Europe. The images displayed here are part of a re-assemblage of old knowledge and invoke the persecution of wise women, witches and wortcunners who kept this knowledge safe.

As Silvia Federici states *"The witch-hunt destroyed a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and stems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women's power... Out of this defeat a new model of femininity emerged: the ideal woman and wife— passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste."*²

In Shelton's work, the witch embodies a critical place in the contemporary landscape that enables a reconnection to the natural world and plant-centred knowledge systems. Linking gender politics and the climate crisis at a critical moment, Shelton considers how past knowledge may propose alternate solutions.

Three visual approaches anchor the images shown here: the aerial, the earthbound and the submerged. The aerial depicts images of flight associated with witches and wise women, and hint at the vulnerability of the female body. The earthbound alludes to the earth's floor, while the strong horizon line in the images mark a distinction between land, sea and sky. The submerged shows plants suspended in water in various forms of decay and represents the loss of women's knowledge, witches' tinctures and the physical loss of their bodies through drowning.

Shelton's visual approach takes on further resonance at Gus Fisher Gallery. Images hover in sculptural stands in a circular arrangement that resembles a coven gathering around a fire. The vertical ombre creates an underwater setting for the work, materialising a space where the persecution of witches can be considered beyond a dominant misogynistic narrative and in the context of its political and social impact today.

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Warning: Plants are powerful and have fascinating histories but some of them are poisonous and deadly.

² Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004) p. 102-103.

Ann Shelton (Pākehā, Italian, Aotearoa New Zealand)

i am an old phenomenon

2022-ongoing

Pigment prints, handmade cedar stands

All the herbalists and I are root diggers (Roots, Root Diggers, Wortcunners, Root Men, Root Maids)

The roots are often where a plant's healing powers are concentrated. This image focuses on the plant's roots and the earth, drawing attention to things that lie beneath the surface that are powerful forces in our environment.

And as she said thanks and spoke spells (Archillia, Yarrow, Old Man's Pepper, Devil's Nettle, Sanguinary, Milfoil, Soldier's Woundwort, Thousand Seal, Bad Man's Plaything, Carpenter's Weed, Gearwe, Hundred Leaved Grass, Knight's Milfoil, Millefolium, Nosebleed, Herbe Militaris, Stauchweed)

Yarrow has many common names, including "old man's pepper" in reference to the herbs pungent flavour. In Greek mythology, the warrior Achilles gave yarrow to his soldiers to assist with healing their wounds and it was thought that the herb gave Achilles his power of invincibility.

On certain days or nights she anoints a staff and rides (Brugmansia, Angels Trumpet, Snowy Angel's Trumpet, Angel's Tears, Datura [misleading])

Here, the Brugmansia plant resembles the form of a witch's broom, poised and ready to take flight. Records state that as part of rituals, wise women would use flowers containing alkaloids to grease their brooms and then rub the broom on their labia to absorb the hallucinogens. Some ointments were thought to produce a bodily experience of flying, leading to the pervasive belief of the flying witch.

We thank you for the gift to decide the fate of man from birth (Apple)

The apple is steeped in rich symbolism and is strongly associated with love, healing, immortality, knowledge and wisdom. The title of this image refers to the apple and its symbolic reconfiguration by Christianity as a representation of sin and evil. Here, the apple is cut to expose a pentagram at its core.

The loss of the oracle (Cornflower, Bluebottle, Hurtsickle, Bachelor's Buttons, Bluebow, Blue Cap)

The cornflowers in the figure's hair refer to the common idiom of someone with "eyes in the back of their head" who notices everything around them. This image alludes to an oracle that can see into the future. The cornflower is the patron flower of Beltane or Mayday and is included in many ritual celebrations to mark the beginning of summer.

She could lie on her back and sink (Ginger)

Ginger encourages menstruation and has a long history as a women's herb, among other uses. Ginger roots are structurally robust and can be soaked in water for months before they begin to break down. The phrase 'she could lie on her back and sink' is taken from Pip Adam's story *In Three Fates*, which features a witch or wise woman who floats inside the sea rather than on top of it.

They served things ground to soil (Hawthorn, May, Mayblossom, Whitethorn, Quickthorn, Haw, Huath, Gazels. Halves. Hagthorn. Ladies' Meat. Bread and Cheese Tree)

Hawthorn is a plant steeped in ancient pagan traditions and is deeply related to the history of witchcraft. Like Sloe Berry, it is an abundant and constant component of the hedge row. As noted by anthropologist Wolf Storl, the word "Hexe" (also meaning witch) has its origins in hedge row, a symbolic boundary between two worlds accessed through hedge riding.

Shine even into its darkest winter (Fly Agaric)

These fly agaric mushrooms or toadstools hover like witches around a fire. They are toxic and cause hallucinations and other ailments if consumed in their raw form. Festive colours of red and green symbolise how toadstools were dried on Christmas trees and are thought to be precursors to modern-day Christmas decorations.

Tied together with red thread (Rowan, Moon, Tree, Mountain, Ash), 2023

Rowan wood was once used to make magic wands and trees located near to stone circles were believed to be the most potent. This image references how rowan was worn by pagans as a protective amulet. Tied together with red thread is dedicated to Ann Marie Hope Cross (1968-2023) who assisted the artist in locating rowan plants.

Once upon a time forest floor (Elder, Black Elder, Boor Tree, Elderberry, Elder Bush, Pipe Tree, European Elderberry, Bour Tree, Hylder, Hylantree, Eldrum, Hollunder, Sureau, Hildemoer, Lady Ellhorn, Sweet Elder)

Elder is steeped in pre-Christian folklore and tradition regarding communing with goddesses, witches and those on the "other side". Elder plants have many medicinal uses and are natural antihistamines. This image is intentionally structured as a heap or assemblage using stones, moss, ferns, leaves, and white-elder flowers.

Tai Shani (UK)

The Neon Hieroglyph

2021

4K digital video, 5.1 sound, duration: 57 minutes, 25 seconds

Adam Sinclair VFX Director, 3D Artist, Animator

Maxwell Sterling Score & Sound Design

The Spirit of Molly Moody

Stefano Tsai Additional CG Artist

Lotti V Closs Additional Modelling Support

Mika Lapid Production Assistant

"The sun is a ghost that haunts the night... We had eaten the poisonous bread, milled from contaminated rye. 'Do you feel manic when you swell and are about to burst?'"³

The Neon Hieroglyph is the latest work by Turner-prize winning artist Tai Shani. It is a dreamlike CGI film that blends feminist mythology with fantasy and consists of nine hypnotic stories that draw on Shani's research into ergot – a fungus from which the hallucinogenic drug LSD is derived.

Shani's film is conceived through a psychedelic lens that takes the viewer from the cellular to the galactic, and from the forests to the subterranean. Episodes encompass dancing plagues, communist psychedelic witches and hyper-sexual fungi. The phrase 'Neon Hieroglyph' refers to imagery commonly experienced by people having psychedelic hallucinations while the film's spoken text resembles feelings of free association.

Outbreaks of ergot poisoning were a common occurrence, and Shani has drawn inspiration from the Sicilian Island of Alicudi where impoverished inhabitants ate ergot-infected rye bread for hundreds of years causing them to suffer mass hallucinations. Folklore emerged from people's hallucinations on Alicudi and included stories of the Maiara – flying witches who painted their bodies in ointment and flew to the mainland to steal from the rich. Witches interest Shani as characters who live on the cusp between the realms of the living and the dead.

For Shani, the psychedelic presents an imaginative space of communality and togetherness that has the potential to spark new visions of society. She notes that "we live in a completely unequitable white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system, within which people are born condemned to lives that they have no control over."⁴ She suggests that perhaps by looking to fictional stories, myths and collective fantasies that the structures of power that govern reality can be illuminated and alternative realities explored.

Courtesy of the artist

³ Shani, T. *The Neon Hieroglyph*, 2022. Strange Attractor Press.

⁴ Shani, T. *The Neon Hieroglyph* – Factory International, 2021. <https://factoryinternational.org/whats-on/the-neon-hieroglyph/>

Jayne Parker (UK)

The Whirlpool

1997

Video, duration: 9 minutes

Ballerina, Deborah Figueiredo

Pianist, Katharina Wolpe

Music by Robert Schumann

The Whirlpool is a short choreographed underwater dance spectacle. The video focuses on two settings – a ballerina moving underwater and a pianist playing music by Schumann. The dancer puts on a pair of red ballet shoes and walks en pointe across the pool's floor. Captivated by the magic of this underwater world she begins to dance, unaware of the danger that lies ahead.

Beginning through graceful motions, the dancer holds an arabesque pose – her ease of movement uninhibited by the underwater environment. As the tempo of the music increases, the ballerina starts to struggle and motions towards the water's surface gasping for air. The volatility of the dancer's movements leads to her demise and her motionless body floats on the surface.

In the context of the exhibition, the submerged movements of the dancer echo the watery graves of women forcibly drowned through witch-hunts.

Courtesy of Jayne Parker and LUX, London

Louie Zalk-Neale (Ngāi Te Rangi, Pākehā, lives in Ōtaki) With **Adam Ben-Dror** (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Tangata Tiriti, lives in Tāmaki Makaurau), **Neke Moa** (Ngāti Kahungunu ki Ahuriri, Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, lives in Ōtaki) and **Dr Tāwhanga Nopera** (Te Arawa, Tūwharetoa, Tainui, Ngāpuhi, lives in Rotorua)

Beyond your tadpole stage // Your spinal cord dissolves
2023

Plastic barrel, PETG plastic, seawater, tī kōuka fibre (Cordyline australis, cabbage tree), harakeke (Phormium tenax, New Zealand flax), pungapunga (pumice), pounamu (jade and serpentine), ōnewa (graywacke), kōkawa (andesite), tokauku (shale), takawai (quartz), washing machine pump, refrigerator air compressor, motion sensor, electronics.

“Much like household appliances, human bodies have two sides of imperfect symmetry, which is easily taken for granted when we navigate the world around us. Many ocean dwellers have radial symmetry, like starfish, sand dollars, jellyfish, bottlecaps and kāeo (sea tulips). The sculptural taonga in this room enables several people to direct their focus along the radiating tendrils to a central body. This communal fixation is the basis of how a spectacle or a performance functions, and in this form, the relationship is made tangible. Mauri, a shared energy, can pass through this miniature landscape of rock, fibre, plastic, water.”

-Louie Zalk-Neale

Louie Zalk-Neale is an artist who engages with the transformative power of body adornment. Their work is a revival of discarded plastics and precious detritus from forests, beaches and gutters, which they often use to add meticulously crafted extensions to their body. Recently, their practice of twisting taura tī kōuka (cabbage tree fibre rope) has been an attempt to bind the sacred transgender experience with the transformative powers of taniwha and tipua - spiritual beings from pūrākau Māori that can change gender and form.

Beyond your tadpole stage features tī kōuka which has been woven using a technique for making kawē, a type of carrying strap. Tī kōuka fibre is used for water activity because it lasts a long time before breaking down. Carved pungapunga stones float inside the water barrel, their buoyancy a reference to floats used in customary Māori fishing equipment.

This artwork is a collaborative effort where Louie has worked with three artists who each enmesh their practices into the project:

Adam Ben-Dror looks to the masses of human-generated scraps of overconsumption with opportunistic eyes and reconfigures e-waste and plastic into new forms, imagining new ways of co-existing with the more than human world in troubled times. The barrel is like a single-celled organism passing fluids through its walls, where water circulates in an enclosed but permeable environment.

Neke Moa is an adornment and object artist who reveals whakapapa and connection by bringing together pattern and forms from the atua and their stories. She has contributed a

carved kōhatu—a pounamu mauri stone—that is tied to one of the taura. This taonga has made a long journey to be here and you are encouraged to touch them respectfully.

Dr Tāwhanga Nopera is a kairaranga and kairangahau—a weaver and researcher who explores rāranga as an embodied theoretical framework to decolonise. They spent wānanga time with Louie to collectively envisage what this kaupapa holds. Together, their performance on the exhibition's opening night embeds a collective experience in the gallery space which helps to activate the mauri of the physical forms.

Louie reflects on the figure of the witch in relation to their practice:

“The active erasure of customary Māori practices by Christian colonial forces is akin to how witchcraft accusations have arisen in other parts of the world – which even in Europe, are effectively indigenous practices suppressed and displaced by dominant values.

In a similar sense, gender diversity has been demonised by dominant cultures which subjects transgender people to dehumanisation and violence.

I look to the diversity of the forests and beaches to understand how living as a human within a wider ecological system means fluidity and adaptability are more important for survival than stagnating in the boundaries of a supposedly rigid structure. Feeling the connections of whakapapa we all have to the world around us is comforting and enables movement into wider realms.”

Courtesy of the artists

You are invited to sit on the cushions around the space and hold the rocks connected to the ropes