

# Imagine the Present

Bjarki Bragason, Amy Howden-Chapman, Steve Kado, Nicholas Mangan, Natalie Robertson, Shannon Te Ao, George Watson

ST PAUL St Galleries One and Two  
5 August – 9 September 2016

*Utopia has been yang. Utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip...Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot....What would a yin utopia be? It would be a dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold.*<sup>1</sup>

Ursula LeGuin imagines a counter utopia—a place where forms, species, ideas other than those that rely on the yang-dominant values of brightness, heat, progress—might exist. While they each have specific context and detail, the works in *Imagine the Present* might collectively be situated within LeGuin's alter-ecology of the speculative, non-linear, otherwise. They don't forecast future utopias. Rather, it's a circular present that these works occupy, within which the deep past is also held, still happening.

Projections of the future prevail in environmental discussions, particularly those around climate change. The image of the future is also a primary point of orientation in many discussions around contemporary art. This exhibition takes a shift in focus to the present, to a number of often invisible, suppressed or fantastical aspects of our current ecological situation.

Shannon Te Ao's video *Untitled (epilogue)* (2015) is shot in darkness. The potted plants which move across its frame don't seem reliant on photosynthesis but are artificially lit, which makes them appear as if they are in deep space, or deep under the sea. The voice, reading a poem by Noeline Arnott, is that of a person dislocated by grief—it could be the end of the world or a bad day. As epilogue, the work is a kind of ending, but its darkness is also a place of possibility. Te Ao refers to Te Kore as both void and potentiality, the nothingness from which everything else emerged; as Moana Nepia has written: "Te Kore may articulate extreme states of emotion, and also the need for space or time to restore balance."<sup>2</sup>

Bjarki Bragason's *Perhaps that in which it* (2013) is a series of photographic images of plaster moulds, formed around a piece of shelf ice used by Reykjavik glaciologists in reconstruction modeling of historical climates. The artist found the ice discarded after a conference on his way home, and later made the moulds as a way of documenting its disappearance. A second work, *Ten Thousand and One Years (one year of emissions at 449,5 meters)*, (2016) looks at the CarbFix project, in which scientists are working with industry

to mineralise CO<sub>2</sub> by pumping it into subterranean Basaltic rock in Iceland, accelerating carbon fossilisation that would otherwise take thousands of years. Documents of the resulting core samples, these photographs could also be read as ambivalent monuments to the nightmarish speculative reach of the 'tech-fix.'

Amy Howden-Chapman's *What you are about to see* (2016) also starts with a monument, a wall dedicated to Los Angeles petroleum industry pioneer Charles S. Jones for 'community beautification'. A narrated video alongside looks at how transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's late nineteenth-century observations of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts are today used by biologist Richard Primark to track the local effects of climate warming. The two-part work contrasts different era's understandings of environmentalism, grounding the often-abstract scientific rhetoric around climate change in simple observation of everyday change, and the voice of a persistent observer.

Nicholas Mangan's *Dowiyogo's Ancient Coral Coffee Table* (2010) is made of coral limestone, from a section of sculpture formerly installed in front of the high-rise Nauru House in Melbourne. Originally this coral came from Nauru Island in the 1970s, at that time wealthy as a result of local phosphate (in the form of guano, fossilised bird droppings) mining by New Zealand, Australian and British companies. By 2003, the phosphate nearly all gone, Nauru President Bernhard Dowiyogo told an American reporter his plan to save the country from bankruptcy by selling ancient coral coffee tables. Completing this likely tongue-in-cheek proposal, the artist makes a lasting marker of the colonial exploitation that saw 80% of the island's topsoil removed, leaving an inhospitable moon-like landscape. The work also de-emphasises human-centric time—capital and industry shrinks to something absurd relative to the geological timespan over which fossils form. The limestone here will outlast today's conversations about the Anthropocene, likely by thousands of years.

Steve Kado's *AGPTL* (2016) video installation moves through a three-chapter observation of living spaces, leisure, travel, 'nature', and the development of symbiotic robotics. The voiceover provides a poetic pseudo-anthropological analysis of a contemporary class of globally mobile, identity-conscious consumers. For every image of pristine alpine landscape there is another of an air-conditioning unit, an iphone, an

electric jug; ubiquitous forms that tell the everyday story of aestheticised resource consumption. The second screen measures time passing as melting ice in a glass, and the pace of the tide; like the Los Angeles sunset billboard draped behind the video, it can be hard to tell which is digital wallpaper or promotional image, where 'real time' experience begins.

In the front window space, George Watson's *The world continues to infect* (2016) is a garden, or a compost of straw and salt, soapflakes and sago. Or a whole closed-system ecology which fuses the organic and inorganic—as her accompanying piece of writing has it: 'it/me'. Originally made for an outdoor installation as part of *Autumn of Spit* at Canapé Canopy, the work here is reconfigured for and by the indoor space, where it becomes an inhuman lifeform incubated under lights, even a whole new microcosmic planet, complete with its own artificial solar system.

Gallery Two holds Natalie Robertson's work *Nought of the portion for Taho. Pohautea 1-4* (1996/2015) are photographs of the Waiapu Ngutu Awa (river mouth) on the East Coast, overlaid with the bones of trees after flooding caused by Cyclone Bola in 1988. This is part of a larger history of colonial deforestation since 1890. Printed for the first time nineteen years after they were taken, the photographs are also witness to that interval, the tons of silt that have washed out to sea, and the widening of the river mouth. The work is accompanied by a 19th century mōteatea (lament) by Hone Rongomaitu, *He Tangi Mo Pahoe*, re-interpreted, sung and recorded for the exhibition by Rhonda Tibble.

Voice is a strong component in this work, as in many of the works in *Imagine the Present*. While looking, we are also hearing spoken or sung words that connect with what is not able to be seen, or is better understood in another form. In an essay relating to her work, Robertson has written:

*There is a gap between what is real and what is imagined. If this gap could be measured, perhaps it would be similar to the distance between what is now, and what will be. If we measure in mass, our unit might be cubic meters or yards of earth stabilised. If we measure in volume, it could be the cubic feet of clear water free of suspended sediment... If we measure this gap in the current era of the Cenozoic geological timescale, it might be the wing-beat of a piwakawaka, a fantail.*<sup>3</sup>

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Climate change puts pressure on conventional forms of representation, asking that we critically engage other senses, or other ways of measuring what is real. Jodi Dean has characterised climate change as

locating us "between the impossible and the inevitable", something we can't see directly because its symptoms are everywhere, and yet not quite here, yet.<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented that the timescale of climate change is such that it's hard to think politically about, that we can only think politically on human timescales.<sup>5</sup> Katherine Yusoff has written of climate change as both absent and present at the same time, and suggested that this often has to do with the absence from political discussion of the voices of those that are 'in' or directly experiencing effects of climate change.<sup>6</sup>

This raises a bigger question: who gets to sit around re-imagining utopia anyway? The answer could be, only those with the privilege of time on their hands. But it could also be argued that re-imagining the present, at a time of ecological crisis, is a political necessity. It is in this sense that the exhibition addresses climate change—as a social, political and psychological issue inseparable from our present, that quick wingbeat of time we are able to imagine.

Abby Cunnane

*Imagine the Present* is a Distance Plan exhibition  
[thedistanceplan.org](http://thedistanceplan.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Further on in the same essay LeGuin writes, "If utopia is a place that does not exist, then surely (...) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way. And in the same vein, the nature of the utopia I am trying to describe is such that if it is to come it must exist already." 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to be' [1982], *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 90, 93.

<sup>2</sup> Moana Nepia, *Te Kore—Exploring the Māori concept of void* (thesis, AUT, 2012), 24. See also Shannon Te Ao, *Part Tree, Part Canoe* (thesis, Massey University of Wellington, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Natalie Robertson, *Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning* (CA: C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California Davis, 2014), 11.

<sup>4</sup> The full quote reads "Climate change tethers us to a perspective that oscillates between the impossible and the inevitable, already and not yet, everywhere but not here, not quite." Jodi Dean, 'The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change', *e-flux* 69:1 (2016), np.

<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Collective consciousness: a roundtable', *Artforum*, Summer 2016, 275.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, 'Responding to the Unknowable and Planning for the Future', lecture, University of California, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VclUk1KrOg0>.

# Pōhewatia te Ināiane

Bjarki Bragason, Amy Howden-Chapman, Steve Kado, Nicholas Mangan, Natalie Robertson, Shannon Te Ao, George Watson

ST PAUL St Taiwhanga Tahī me Rua  
5 Hereturikōkā – 9 Mahuru 2016

*Utopia has been yang. Utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip... Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot... What would a yin utopia be? It would be a dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold.*<sup>1</sup>

Pōhewatia ai e Ursula LeGuin tētahi anō āhuru mōwai —tērā pea e ora ana ētahi atu hanga, ētahi atu momo, ētahi atu whakaaro, atu i ērā e ora ana i te mahana me te whanaketanga o te ao mārama nei. Ahakoa he horopaki, he kōiriiri anō tō tēnā mahi, tō tēnā mahi, e noho tonu ana ngā mahi toi o *Pōhewatia te Ināiane* i roto tonu i te mātauranga taupuhi kaiao rerekē o te auaha rārangi kore o LeGuin. Kāore e matapaetia ana tētahi atu anō āhuru mōwai. Engari, kei tēnei ao tonu ēnei mahi e noho ana, me te aha, e mau ana te āhuetanga o ngā rā o mua e kitea tonutia nei.

Putā mai ai ngā matakite mō ngā rā kei te tū mai i ngā whakawhitiwhitinga kōrero mō te taiao, pēnei i ngā kōrero mō te huringa āhuarangi. Ko te āhua o ngā rā kei te tū mai tētahi anō kaupapa e ārahi ana i ngā kōrero mō tēnei mea, mō te toi hou. I tēnei whakaaturanga e tirohia ana te nāiane, ētahi āhuetanga kāore e kitea ana, e pēhitia ana rānei i te āhua o tō tātou taupuhi kaiao.

I whakaahuatia tā Shannon Te Ao ataata, arā *Untitled (epilogue)* (2015) i te pōuri. Te āhua nei kāore ngā tupu e teretere haere ana i te whakaahua e whakawhirinaki atu ana ki te ao mārama, engari kua whitikia kētia e te mārama horihori, anō nei kei te takiwā, kei raro rānei i te moana e teretere ana. Rere ana i te tangata nōna te reo e pānui ana i te ruri te tūmatatanga, nā Noeline Arnott i tuhi—ko tōna rite ko te mutunga o te ao, o te rangi tino kino rawa atu rānei. I te mutunga iho ko te pōuri anake ka kitea, engari kei roto i te pōuri te māramatanga e whiti ana. Hei tā Te Ao, kei roto i Te Kore te korekore me te pitomata, nā Te Kore ko te ao nui tonu, ā, ko tā Moana Nēpia, “Te Kore may articulate extreme states of emotion, and also the need for space or time to restore balance.”<sup>2</sup>

He kohinga whakaahua o ētahi ahunga uku tā Bjarki Bragason’s mahi, arā *Perhaps that in which it* (2013). He mea hanga i te taha o tētahi papa tio i whakamahia e Reykjavik, e ngā kaimātai awa kōpaka i te waihangatanga o ngā āhuarangi o mua. I kitea te tio e te ringatoi i muri mai o tētahi huihuinga i a ia e hoki ana ki te kāinga, ā, kātahi ia ka hanga i ngā

ahunga kia whakaahuatia tōna rewanga. E titiro ana tana mahi tuarua *Ten Thousand and One Years (one year of emissions at 449,5 meters)*, (2016) ki te kaupapa CarbFix. E mahi ngātahi ana ngā kaipūtaiao i te taha o ngā ahumahi ki te whakaheke i te CO2 mā te tuku atu ki ngā toka karā kei raro i te whenua i Tiorangi, mā te pēnei ka whakaterā te pōhatutanga o te waro ka hia rautau te roa e mahia ana. Nā runga i tēnei, ka rangirua pea ngā whakaaro o ētahi i ēnei whakaahua o ēnei whakamaharatanga e pā ana ki tēnei kaupapa, ki te ‘tech-fix’.

Ka tīmata tā Amy Howden-Chapman mahi, arā *What you are about to see* (2016) ki tētahi whakamaharatanga, he pātū whakamihi i a Charles S. Jones, te kaikōkiri tuatahi i te ahumahi hinumata i Ngā Anahera mō tana kaupapa ‘whakaātaahua i te hapori’. E titiro ana te ataata kei tōna taha ki ngā whakakitenga a Henry David Thoreau mō Walden Pond i Concord, Massachusetts me te whakamahinga o tana whakakitenga e te kaimātai koirora, e Richard Primark ki te whai haere i te pānga mai o te whakamahanatanga o te āhuarangi. Ko tā ēnei mahi e rua he whakataurite i ngā tirohanga o ētahi wā e rua e pā ana ki te taiao. He whakatakoto i tō te taha pūtaiao tirohanga ki te huringa āhuarangi me tō tērā kua roa e mātakitaki ana i ngā huringa o ia rā, o ia rā.

He mea hanga te mahi a Nicholas Mangan, arā *Dowiyogo’s Ancient Coral Coffee Table* (2010) ki te wheo, he wāhanga nō te hanga whakairo i tū i mua i te whare o Nauru i Poipiripi. I ahu mai tēnei wheo i te moutere o Nauru i ngā tau 1970, he whenua i whairawa i taua wā i te mahi kerī pākawa tūtāe-whetū a Aotearoa, a Ahitereiria me ētahi kamupene nō Ingarangi. I te tau 2003, i tata pau te pākawa tūtāe-whetū. I kīia atu tētahi kaikawe kōrero nō Amerika e Bernhard Dowiyogo, tumuaki o Nauru ka tana rautaki kia kore ai te motu e taka ki te raruraru ā-pūtea nei he hoko tēpu kawhe ka hangaia ki te wheo tāukiuki nei. Ko tā te ringatoi he tohu i te whakahāwinitanga a iwi kē i kitea ai te keringa o te whenua, ka toe mai ko tētahi whenua titōhea ko te marama tōna rite. Ko tā tēnei mahi toi he tohu anō i te kōrero e mea ana, whatu ngarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua.

Ka kitea i tā Steve Kado ataata, arā *AGPTL* (2016) ngā wāhanga e toru e titiro ana ki ngā wāhi noho, ki ngā mahi ā-rēhia, ki te hāereere, ki te taiao me te whakawhanaketanga o te karetao taupuhipuhi. Ka kōrero te reo tātaki i tana tātaritanga o hunga hokohoko e mātau ana ki ngā nekeneke hangarau me ō rātou nā tuakiri. Kei te taha o ia whakaahua o te whenua

taurikura tētahi whakaahua o te pūrere whāhauhau, te iWaea me te tikerā hiko; he hanga katoa ēnei e tohu ana i te hokonga o ngā rauemi. Kei te whakaata tuarua, e rere ana te wā i te rewanga o te tio i roto i te karaihe me te rere o te tai, pēnei i te tirohanga maunga i muri iho i te ataata he uaua te kite atu ko tēhea te whakaahua ā-rorohiko, ā, ko tēhea te whenua tūturu tonu.

Kei te matapihi o mua o te whare tā George Watson mahi, arā *The world continues to infect* (2016). He kāri, he pū wairākau rānei e kī ana i te tākakau, i te tote, i te kongakonga hopi me te hēko. He taupuhi kaiao motuhake e noho tahi ai te paraumu me te paraumu kore – ka mea tana tuhinga: 'it/me'. I hangaia tuatahitia ai kia tū ki waho, he wāhanga nō *Autumn of Spit* i tū ki Canapé Canopy. I konei kua whakaritea te mahi nei kia noho ki rō whare, ehara i te hanga māori noa, kua puta kē he ao anō me tōna anō rerenga rā.

Kei te Taiwhanga Rua te mahi toi a Natalie Robertson, *Nought of the portion for Taho. Pohautea 1-4* (1996/2015). He whakaahua ēnei o te ngutu awa o Waiapu kei Te Tai Rāwhiti e pūrangatia ana e te poro rākau nō muri mai i te huripari nui o Bola i te tau 1988. Hei āpiti atu tēnei ki te topenga o ngā ngahere e te Pākehā i ngā tau i muri mai i te 1890. Koia nei te wā tuatahi kua tāngia ēnei whakaahua, tekau mā iwa tau i muri mai i te whakaahuatanga. He whakaatu mai i taua wā, i te mahi a te parahuhu i rere ki te moana me te whakawhānuitanga o te ngutu awa. Kinakihia ana te mahi nei e tētahi mōteatea nā Hone Rongomaitū, arā He Tangi Mō Pāhoe. He mea waiata mō tēnei whakaaturanga e Rhonda Tibble.

He wāhanga nui tonu te reo i tēnei mahi, pēnei i ngā mahi katoa o *Pōhewatia te Ināiane*. I a tātou ka titiro, ka rongo anō te taringa i te kupu e kōrerotia ana, e waiatatia ana rānei, he tūhono i a koe ki te mea ngaro. He kupu ēnei i tangohia i tētahi tuhinga a Robertson mō tana mahi:

*There is a gap between what is real and what is imagined. If this gap could be measured, perhaps it would be similar to the distance between what is now, and what will be. If we measure in mass, our unit might be cubic meters or yards of earth stabilised. If we measure in volume, it could be the cubic feet of clear water free of suspended sediment... If we measure this gap in the current era of the Cenozoic geological timescale, it might be the wing-beat of a piwakawaka, a fantail.*<sup>3</sup>

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Ka pāngia ngā aronga whānui o te tangata e tēnei mea, e te huringa āhuarangi, me whakawhirinaki kē ia ki ētahi atu rongo. Kua whakanohia tātou e Jodi Dean ki waenganui tonu o tēnei tūāhuatanga, ehara i te mea ka āta kitea atu ahakoa ōna pānga mai kei ngā wāhi katoa,

kāore anō kia tae mai ki mua tonu i te ihu. E ai ki a Dipesh Chakrabarty i te nui o te huringa o te āhuarangi tē aro tōna nui i te tangata, engari me whakawhāiti ki a tātou, ki te tangata. Kua tuhi a Katherine Yusoff mō te āhua o te huringa āhuarangi, he wā ka tata mai, he wā anō ka tamō, ā, hei tana e hāngai ana tēnei ki te tamōtanga o tēnei kaupapa i ngā kōrero tōrangapū i waenganui i ērā e pāngia ana e te huringa āhuarangi.

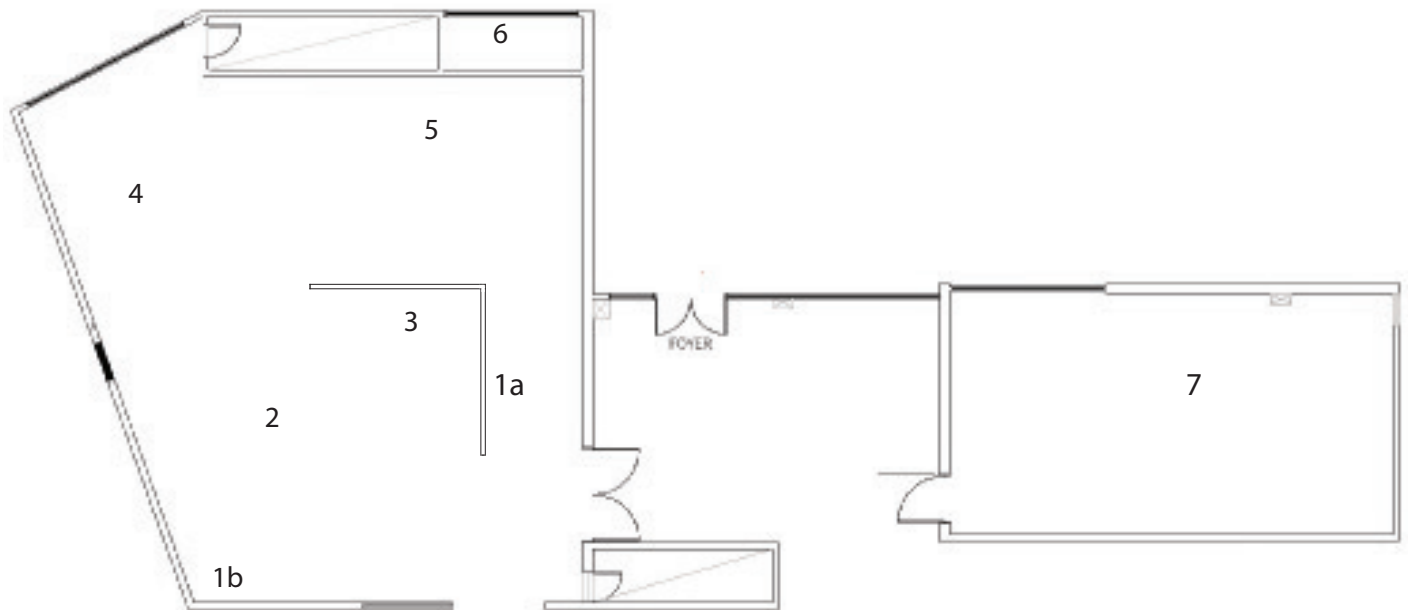
Ka toko ake te pātai: ko wai te tangata ka noho noa ki te pōhewa ake mō tēnei āhuru mōwai? Ko te whakautu pea, ko te hunga kāore e herea ana e te wā. Ka tohe tonu pea ētahi me pōhewa tonu tātou ki te nāiane i tēnei wā o te raruraru ā-taupuhi kaiao. Nā, koia rā te take o tēnei whakaaturanga, he take tēnei tē taea te whakataha noa, nō reira ka huri te tangata ki te pōhewa.

**Te Reo translation by Hēmi Kelly**

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# Floorplan



## LIST OF WORKS

1. Bjarki Bragason  
(a) *Perhaps that in which it*, 2013  
photographic prints  
(b) *Ten Thousand and One Years (one year of emissions at 449,5 meters)*, 2016  
photographic prints, pinewood, graphite
2. Nicholas Mangan  
*Dowiyogo's Ancient Coral Coffee Table*, 2009  
coral limestone  
Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand
3. Steve Kado  
*AGPTL*, 2016  
video installation (two-part); billboard skin  
12:14 minutes
4. Shannon Te Ao  
*Untitled (epilogue)*, 2015  
video  
4:48 minutes
5. Amy Howden-Chapman  
*What you are about to see*, 2016  
photographic print, steel; video projection  
20:00 minutes
6. George Watson  
*The world continues to infect*, 2016  
peastraw, sago, soap flakes, Epsom salts, black oxide, found wood
7. Natalie Robertson  
*Nought of the portion for Taho*, 2016  
(a) *Pohautea 1-4*, 1996/2015  
four photographic prints  
(b) *Ngā Mōteatea: The Songs* by Sir Apirana Turupa Ngata, 2016  
[first published 1959; this edition 2004]  
mounted photographic image  
(c) *He Tangi Mo Pahoe*, 2016  
mōteatea by Hone Rongomaitu; recording by Rhonda Tibble  
With thanks to Hohepa Spooner.