



On not going down the garden path

Mark Amery considers recent work by Ann Shelton in relation to artists' renewed interest in local food production and the way we view gardens.

A green-lycra-clad performer lies on the gallery floor in a Covid mask, clutching a large spring onion. In the foreground, a landscape of cabbages, radishes, garlic, spinach, carrots, onions and beans. Like a young Mother Earth proud of her produce, her progeny, the performer fondles a cabbage.

A second performer in yellow enters on all fours: wild flowers in their hair, shifting their weight on small buttercup squash as arm supports. Garlands and bracelets are made of natural floral sprays — weeds, to some eyes.

This is *The Green Vein*, a performance at Wellington's Bartley + Company Art devised by Ann Shelton. It accompanied *mother lode*, an exhibition of Shelton's

photographs of Wairarapa Eco Farm, where she gets her fruit and vegetables, and a book work featuring a short story by Pip Adam and digital collages by Shelton and Duncan Munro. In their jazzy abstract formation, the collages share the lead in a dance between culture and nature. Yet, as if nature was trying to tell us who's really in control, these events were postponed due to the Covid pandemic.

The plants in *The Green Vein* aren't indigenous, but they're common. Typically, they're not given the cultural value of being put in a vase. All come from the small farm Shelton has been a part of for 13 years, organised on a model of community-supported agriculture. This, she writes,

All artworks by and courtesy of Ann Shelton

Opposite: *The Green Vein*, from the series *mother lode*, 2020, performed by Louie Zalk-Neale and Deu Brink, choreographed by Alessia Augello, 1 hour duration. Performance documentation: Ann Shelton

Right: *Untitled (green ground, circle, herbal)*, 2020, archival pigment print, 1120 x 760mm



"allows farmers to rely on a predictable income through the advance payment of shares in return for a season's produce". The farm itself is a radical project. Like much contemporary art, it looks nothing like what you might expect it (a farm) to look. It's how it works and what it does as an exemplar that matters.

The Green Vein connects to past performance art, contemporary dance and ancient Western rituals around spring growth and autumn harvest. There's a nod to the pagan Wicker Man effigy, another to the once common iconography of the carved Green Man. These are European traditions, but the plants of European agriculture are now inextricably bound up in our ecosystem.

Tracing and putting down her roots, Shelton connects to myriad art and cultural historical streams. The performance also feels like a solemn ritualistic bandaging of the wounds caused to the earth. It asks questions of Pākehā at a time when, nationally, we are beginning to connect more strongly to the environment through Matariki, with its pre-European traditional connections to ritual around food.

So distant from traditional Western seasonal rites am I — tauīwi, a white European immigrant — that the performance excerpts I watch seem more absurd than any 1970s performance art. But laughter also feels a natural release to the work's complex load. Shelton cites two performance art pieces as influences: *From the Sea* (1985), in which Geoffrey Hendricks, an American artist associated with the Fluxus movement, wrapped tree materials onto himself; and *Grafting* (1975), during which Czech artist Petr Štembera tried to graft a rose into one of his veins.

My mind leaps to the portrait heads comprised of fruits, vegetables and flowers of 16th-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo. In modern times we came to treat the bulbous bounty of fruit and vegetables as comic, like Mr and Mrs Potato Heads.

"Why we have that absurdity reading in relation to vegetables is interesting to think about," says Shelton. "I guess the big overarching question I'm asking is, can we please just look at how we relate to nature? With the performance I'm trying to embody this idea of a contemporary food-centred ritual, which gets you back to a refreshed relationship with food and with nature."

A 20th-century scan suggests vegetables have not been popular fodder for art. But this is changing, in parallel with growing interest in community-led food production. Pushback has begun against the industrialised global food market, with its intensive monocultural use of land. In the last 20 years, issues of climate change, sustainability

and the slow decline of global capitalism have seen more artists shift to an active engagement with the relational space between plants and society.

New Zealand artists have pushed boundaries in this regard: Joyce Campbell's photographic work with wild plants in Los Angeles from the early 2000s; AD Schiering's planting of edible gardens with public galleries; Monique Redmond's work with flowering gorse and her Suburban Floral Association projects with Tanya Eccleston; Jenny Gillam and Dieneke Jansen's 2012 Courtenay Place Lightbox project considering city native plantings. Then there's the photography of Anne Noble, which over 10 years has been concerned with biodiversity, bees and more recently, trees.

Now artists are unpacking some of the attendant cultural politics and histories. Cindy Huang's recent exhibition *The Beaglehole's Problem* was a conversation between historical Māori and Chinese historical relationships through market gardening, with a takeback of a Pākehā ethnographic perspective. Matavai Taulangau's video *Ma'u Pe Kai* (2019) documented the Tongan harvesting of kumala (kūmara) in Northland, bringing us closer to human labour and the connection with the earth. At the Dowse Art Museum, *From the Ground Up: Community, Cultivation and Commensality* (until 27 March 2021) features new work by Xin Cheng and Adam Ben-Dror (among many others) concerning another eco-farming initiative in the Wellington region, Common Unity Project Aotearoa. Common Unity are part of an urban regenerative farming network that includes artist and biodynamic gardener Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's *For the Love of Bees* in Auckland.



Shelton reveals sites that, like Wairarapa Eco Farm, provide spaces socio-politically counter to the norms that surround them. From a project on the idiosyncratic library of Fred Butler in New Plymouth (*A Library to Scale*, 2006), to a public walk work (*A House*, 2014), to an exploration of the house built by the first single woman reportedly able to gain a mortgage in Wellington (*house work*, 2014), Shelton has a great radar for charged spaces. She works up against the limits of photography to try and show us things we often can't see.

Shelton's interest in the power dynamics of plants began in 2011 with *A Forest*, for which she photographed the dispersed 'Hitler's Oaks', which grew from 130 seedlings presented to gold medallists at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. *The Missionaries* (2018) considered the relationship between colonisation, nationalism and plants. And for *Jane Says* (2017–19) Shelton learnt the Japanese tradition of ikebana to explore the force that can be exerted by plants themselves. She recalls someone coming up to her after an accompanying performance in Sydney to say that it had transformed their understanding of nature – that they'd never thought of nature as something that could control us.

"I guess you can see the progression of me questioning our distance from nature to reconfiguring our proximity to it," she says. "In the *mother lode* works I'm thinking about access to food and the systems we currently have, like the supermarket... There's an aspect of protest or asserting an alternative view on the systems we have."



To do this Shelton radically rethinks our view of the garden landscape, and the structures photography and architecture have given it. When we think of landscape art we often look back to the 19th-century European painting tradition, its mapping and framing of land as part of the colonial project. In that tradition, technology takes power over the land – takes authorship visually – by applying a set of Western rules.

Contemporary garden magazines have followed, making for easy visual browsing. Light is evened out artificially to pick up all the detail. Colour and texture in the garden beds, and their design – alongside the views chosen by the camera – provide familiar order and structure.

The photography in *mother lode* is at odds with this. Shelton's images may initially seem visually banal, the lighting challenging – it is difficult to find a way in. Here, the garden is beyond our control. Shelton explores what happens when we respect the technology of nature itself – echoing the way Wairarapa Eco Farm sometimes prioritises improving the ecosystem over human needs. Her favourite of her own images "confront you with this wall, this mass... I'm trying to think of these bulbous, random chaotic forms that are in the garden."

Light is uncomfortably spread, often hitting the background, the foreground in shade.

"I edited the images to embody the sense of the sun. To go with the blazing highlights. As you point out, it's a technical no-no – you should have detail in every part of the image..."

"If we start to think of nature as a technology," she continues, "it somehow allows us to think about it in a more complex way."

"Photography really promotes a surface view. If we also think about the history and architecture of gardens, they have become an aesthetic armature. They are pruned and arranged."

Here nature cloaks things. Shelton makes you aware of the visual machinery creating the enclosure, a technology fashioned by 'Mother Nature' herself. A Greco-Roman personification of nature, this maternal figure emphasises the life-giving, nurturing aspects of the natural world. But Shelton's work goes further. It suggests we can no longer afford for the earth mother's work to be subjugated and belittled if we are going to remain in healthy coexistence on this planet.

"There's a whole language of architecture with gardens: promenades, key holes, viewing points and so on. That whole idea of laying a mathematical structure over nature. In the Western tradition there is a really strong relationship to Renaissance perspective as a visual system. With these images I am trying to unclasp something from its traditional form, if you like."

Writer Pip Adam puts it most eloquently in her accompanying story for *motherlode*, 'The Swan': "Everything was awake in the ambit of the farm, she'd seen it as she journeyed there. A golden interior world surrounded by a parched and over-taxed one. An inside in an outside. An enclave."

mother lode was at Bartley + Company Art from 22 July to 15 August. The publication of the same name is available now from annshelton.com

Top left: Installation view of *mother lode*, Bartley + Company Art, July–August 2020. Courtesy of Bartley + Company Art

Below left: *Untitled (Imentet, Ra)*, 2020, archival pigment print, 1120 x 760mm

Right: *The Green Vein*, 2020. Performance documentation: Ann Shelton

