Two Rooms

Shaun Waugh
Encounter

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Gallery Hours
Tue–Fri 11am–5pm
Sat 11am–3pm

Shaun Waugh's exhibition *Encounter* frames the experience of encounter within the realm of contemporary photography and its relationship to what we might call the 'real'. Waugh's practice highlights the fraught relationship between images and the world they profess to represent – a relationship the artist describes as defined by deception, reduction and seduction.

In 2021, our encounters are perhaps as much with images as they are with other beings, objects and phenomena. Images not only stand in for things, but have taken on increasingly complicated and multifaceted lives of their own. Despite their complexity and their often contradictory operations – both online and offline – we are forced to interpret and use them in order to navigate our way through everyday life.

Waugh's photographs critically interrogate the frontiers presented by emergent technologies and their profound impact on the medium. His images confront us with representations which are not as certain as they may first appear, prompting us to reconsider and redefine what constitutes contemporary photography and its shifting implications and effects.

Waugh has recently had a son which has also influenced his work. Here we might find a parallel in Waugh watching the two year old's first experiences with the world around him, and the artist's photographs which present us with subjects at one strange and familiar. In its focus on domestic situations – his son's immediate world – there is an accessible, everyday feel to *Encounter*. Yet on further inspection, apparently straightforward photographs of backyard lemon and kawakawa trees and a child's brightly coloured toy blocks are revealed as highly constructed and complex.

Waugh employs the technique of focus stacking, a recent software script in Adobe Photoshop which creates composites of multiple images captured at different focal lengths into a single image. Focus stacking allows Photoshop to computationally interpret and combine an array of images (with the same framing and differing focal points) into a unique convincing hybrid with a depth of field which a single frame could never achieve. The artist, however, works against the illusionistic imperative of the software, pushing it to produce digital artefacts and aberrations. In short, Waugh forces the software to reveal itself while creating new forms of imaging in the process.

Waugh's largest work in the exhibition, *Ruse (v)*, is a panoramic image of what appears to be an abundant lemon tree printed on adhesive vinyl and wrapped across two gallery walls. One framed photographic print – a kind of detail – is hung on top of the vinyl wall image. At this scale, the lemons are larger than life, taking on a slightly surreal quality. Further scrutiny reveals that a verdant kawakawa has been blended with the lemon tree – a digital hybrid and a ruse indeed.

The software doesn't see leaves or lemons, it sees pixel information. The artist drives the software to attempt a task it can never fully accomplish – a synthesis of irreconcilable images of two different species. Forms blend, layers multiply, edges blur and fracture – the image coming together just as it is falling apart. The organic surface markings and discolouration of the foliage and fruit further echo the digital artefacts. The holes in the kawakawa leaves read as apertures, revealing layers beneath while complicating the appearance of other forms when computationally blended together. The depth of the composite photograph appears strangely shallow – a kind of overgrown, energetic visual field – immersive and perhaps more intoxicating the longer one looks.

The kawakawa (*Piper excelsum*) is a native species, while the lemon (*Citrus limon*) was introduced by European settlers to Aotearoa. The lemon tree is a common fixture in many New Zealand back yards. Kawakawa is also commonly grown as an ornamental plant in local gardens. Both species are used as food, medicine, and a wide variety of other applications. Kawakawa has particular significance for Māori given its use in traditional medicine and ritual. Tangata whenua wave leaves of kawakawa as part of ceremonies to welcome guests on to the marae. Both hosts and guests at a tangi may wear wreaths of kawakawa on their head as a sign of mourning.[1] Kawakawa may be involved in the launch of canoes and the opening of houses.[2] It was also used in the dedication of children to particular gods at a sacred stream in the tohi ceremony.[3] Both kawakawa and lemon are infused as teas to enhance wellbeing, while their ethnobotanical histories are steeped in colonial encounters. A lemon tree in Rangihoua Heritage Park in the Bay of Islands is thought to be New Zealand's first imported tree, planted in an important site for early contact between Māori and the first Pākehā missionaries and settlers.[4]

ICONS, a complementary series of photographs in the exhibition, feature depictions of his son's painted wooden toy blocks. In their apparent simplicity these works are all the more deceptive. Each photograph was created using two unique compositions in which the component toy blocks were rotated, re-stacked and re-shot. In this case, the software has successfully blended the two, creating hyperreal illusions of situations which can only exist as images.

As an enlarged composition, the blocks also take on an architectural quality reminiscent of Brutalism, albeit more colourful. Their woodgrain is also prominent under bright studio lights, as are signs of use. These blocks are learning tools for children: encounters with geometry, form, volume, weight, texture and colour. They are also modular construction materials from which other structures can be made.

The narrow colour range of the blocks may evoke the appearance of sample paint charts, while their shades of green, yellow and blue echo the palette of the botanical images. Here, Waugh also extends his use of custom-painted wooden frames, whose hue is generated by colour-sampling from the blocks that are photographed to create a uniquely mixed paint. The frame becomes an extension of the image, while the image further asserts itself as an object.

In this exhibition, Waugh's back yard and his living room floor are employed as sites for encounters with new forms of imaging, equal parts representation and abstraction. Blocks of visual information, both digital and physical, are reworked in successive deconstructions and reconstructions, reconsidering contemporary photography in the everyday.

Emil McAvoy
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[1] Rawinia Higgins, "Tangihanga – Death Customs –The Tangihanga Process," Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/tangihanga-death-customs/page-4
[2] Ibid.
[3] Basil Keane, "Traditional Māori Religion – ngā karakia a te Māori – Rituals and Ceremonies," Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/traditional-maori-religion-nga-karakia-a-te-maori/page-5
[4] "Aotearoa's Oldest Lemon Tree," Tohu Whenua: Landmarks That Tell Our Stories, text adapted from 'The Hansen Lemon Tree Project 'by Eric Hansen, https://tohuwhenua.nz/stories/aotearoa-s-oldest-lemon-tree