

(un) Common Relations

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Reuben Paterson has earned acclaim as an artist whose work continues to question, surprise and reveal the most intimate parts of us. *Cream* is a world emerging from abundance that explores the tension between humans and their bodies, while engaging with the histories of queer identity, pop culture, and desire. It's a lush web that connects a system of relations and whakapapa.

Through intriguing pairings of kōwhaiwhai and wild cat images, Paterson alters the nature of our gaze into sexually and culturally loaded relations that celebrate hybrid and fluid identities and unstable and contradictory meanings. I believe the boundaries of our consensual relationships frame the focus and the notions of self. Here they are wrapped up in the wow! factor of queer worldmaking.

The works are read as couples in their proximities. They are bound together in dreams and fantasy, depicted as opposing forces and urges driving our desires. One-half of these enchanting companions derive inspiration from kōwhaiwhai, as the genealogical markers in a wharenuī, and they are paired with an image of subversive appropriation - an exoticised wild cat. To engage us in the ongoing investigation of the everyday power dynamics, Paterson interrogates conventional relationship roles, while creating references for empowering queer lives. He frames the intersection of what it means to be in a relational space between Māori identity and sexuality. These pairings are disorienting, and our interpretations of their cultural significance are too. Something is unsettling in their associations. Neither can be tamed, but both are the subject of colonial exoticism.

While the kings of the jungle have become synonymous with power and beauty, they are also a reflection of our possessive nature and the human legacy of caging and taming wildlife. We are being challenged to disrupt the existing power dynamics enacted over generations. The work is asking us to orient ourselves and ask questions. What is the purpose of the hierarchical nature of the established binaries like dominant over submissive, competitor versus collaborator, or predator versus prey? What is up with our visual obsession with animals? We farm them, shape them, organise, and classify them, breed them, give them to each other as gifts (perhaps a velvet bedspread?), and include them in our families and social activities. We are fascinated by their life, and it is no great surprise that animals are abundantly represented in visual arts. They are embedded in the ongoing impact of our exoticised history, and we are forever tied together within the hierarchies of power relations and domination. When was the first leash invented, and why do we fetishize some animals more than others? Why are we happy to partake in the flesh of some, but recoil at the idea of consuming another?

Looking at the work, I am experiencing a sense of familiarity. A close affinity that is accompanied by the importance of knowing and yet a dissonance that comes with deep discomfort and understanding that I don't fully grasp all its logic. Far from just the ability to admire it, I am searching for meaning, and there is a great sense of discovery as I attempt to tune into it furthermore. These encounters are more than just peculiar. They are so specifically paired that I keep returning to them. It's like a good, thought-provoking first post-coital conversation. Persistent and encouraging yet recognising our participation's discomfort and its effect on us uncanny. I find the forms and shapes familiar and completely foreign. They reflect the entanglement of our human condition,

and at the heart of it all is the audacious nature of pleasure-seeking.

This work is an act of looking 'with' those we objectify while looking 'within' ourselves to discover our biases and prejudices. The pairings bring into focus the contested or established power relations. The subject and the object – the entitlement associated with one over the other – and the recalibration of human relationships. If we examine the role of spectatorship and how some people are denied the right to look, we can reveal the counterbalance between the fixed and disembodied gaze – between the subject and the object.

Most importantly, the works encapsulate the joy of being seen and the pain of being perceived.

There is a sense of acuteness when we look at the roaring kōwhaiwhai patterns from the ocean paired next to the exoticised wild cat from the land. They are so intimately placed together, bringing about that overwhelming but familiar feeling of self-awareness and self-consciousness. None of this art is closed or elitist, but our gaze has often been superficial and intimidating—an attempt at penetration enhancement.

These images are more than captivating. They are inviting and fantastical, situated between sight and touch. The paintings are glowing and supercharged. Paterson amplifies our desires for plenitude through sensually bending light. We are being welcomed into a space of exchange and curiosity, where multiple realities exist in tension and where viewers can create meaning together from a place of shared respect and responsibility. The works call into question past and present histories and remind us of spaces that welcome certain bodies and exclude others. Together, these relational hybrids are a portal to exploring the themes of identity, vulnerability, sex and spirituality. It's a discovery of something that can be harmful and nurturing, startling and beautiful, inclusive and exclusionary. By questioning our nature and our drivers for desire, we can be open, and courageously break away from the normative ideas of classification and traditions.

It reveals that trust in relationships is paramount, where the power of love, intimacy, and queer potentiality can become indispensable tools for our survival. If we want to experience the world beyond fixed attributions, we must allow ourselves to imagine the difference.

Inside the infinite architecture of Paterson's kōwhaiwhai patterns are the constructs of an intimate labyrinth. The works emerge into the conversation and context of his iwi and artistic predecessors. The overwhelming saturation of colour used to depict the wild and enticing cats makes us think of the iconic pop of the Warhol prints. Everything is lavish and magnified by refractory light. The greens turn into jade, and blues turn into ocean hues. We are completely enveloped by the vibrancy of the blue tiger, so utterly convincing, that we imagine it roaming the jungle in our mind's eye.

Initially, these scenes' idyllic nature lures us into believing that we can tame and reinterpret their true nature. Upon more significant pause, we notice the tension, the hidden mystery, and the moment of climax in the titles. *Cream* is profoundly human. We are being shown the sexuality of the tiger, but it is the whiskers that are the heroes and the cream catchers. Paterson's distinctive approach to leaving his mark ensures his visual language is always dominating. These portraits and motifs are beyond the classical. They encompass similar cues and characteristics but in a remix of their own, to ensure all the

stereotypes have been undone in the process. They are autonomously questioning the ideas of belonging and identity construction. It is a subject that is ever-changing and far from static.

Our fantasies allow us the space to speculate about different futures and reveal our need to conquer and control others. If fantasy is a rehearsal to dominate, the question is how to reshape it by incorporating it into our present for an equal future. We know that visibility is fundamental to perceptions and our judgment. Although we can express the limitless longing to be recognized and embraced, it is inconceivable ever to have all our desires fulfilled. Here the wild cat and kōwhaiwhai can be exotic and equally caged in their interpretation. We are the viewers, the narrators, the interpreters, and the protagonists.

By pinpointing our desires between hypnotism and engagement, we find ourselves mesmerised equally by the eyes of the tiger as we are by the koru spiral motifs of the kōwhaiwhai. We naturally place the tiger as the predator, while we see kōwhaiwhai as prey. Although they both act as locators of desire, their pairing is an obvious distraction. It is easy to seek self-reflection and lose any sense of self in the act of looking.

Perhaps it is about the animal within.

Perhaps it is about the whakapapa within.

The show teaches us to think in different corridors of desire. It's in your face, and here to tell you what you think. Oozing with confidence and power, Paterson has, once again, lured us into a safe space to face our demons. Using personal experiences as the source material for his art, he successfully blurs the lines between the intimate and the public. It's a strategic rebel mirror showing us the bias in art and life.

If we accept our nature and the beauty we risk ourselves for, this is the perfect way to address these contradictions. It's our first lesson of looking into, instead of at.

Kia hora te marino
Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana
Hei huarahi mā tatou I te rangi nei
Aroha atu, aroha mai
Tātou i a tātou katoa.

May peace be widespread
May the sea be like a greenstone; a
pathway for all of us this day.
Let us show respect for each other; for
one another.
Bind us all together.