

## Malleable, Elliptical, and Scattered: Nova Paul's Cinematic

### Whakapapa

**Nova Paul, *This Is Not Dying*, 2010, 16mm film as part of *The Earth Looks Upon Us / Ko Papatūānuku te matua o te tangata*, 7.7.18 – 23.9.18**

Nova Paul (Te Uriroroi/Te Parawhau, Ngā Puhī) ushers me to the living room. It's the post-lunch, 5pm slot on Christmas day, or any other occasion upon which everyone manages to assemble—a rarity, nowadays. Equipped, naturally, with mugs of tea, we drift into the lounge for the obligatory yet much-loved screening: Home movies retrieved from a vast archive of videotapes and governed by the world's least-trustworthy labelling system, in which my aunt and uncle's wedding footage is likely to have been taped over in favour of *The Great British Bake Off*, or another re-run of *The Sound of Music*, both apparently of greater sentimental importance to the family oeuvre. For what survives, the seating plan is stratified according to age and frailty—a system fair to all but the youngest. Twenty years on and no new cousin, nor inaugural great-grandchild has ever arrived to take my spot on the lowest-rung. I just hope for the place on the floor at the foot of Grandma's armchair, my head within reach of her unflinching caress. It's a worthy trade-off: thighs scratched by carpet worn like gorse-bush, for hair stroked by hands similarly worn, but somehow still soft as dusk.

Watching these home movies always evokes an odd sensation. I think it's a matter of age. By the time I was old enough to actually recall the moments that it might document, the bulky camera once trained incessantly upon my childhood had been retired, usurped by something defter though seemingly less consequential, less deserving of a slot in the programme of these family ceremonies. The moments it captured otherwise forgotten, its images hold an unchallenged claim to my memory—that is, except for the diasporic, dissonant commentary that fills the room, competing to annotate its scenes, desperate to serve as their authoritative prologue. From my seat on the floor, I am entirely malleable, elliptical, and scattered. And so I abandon myself to image and story.

In the gallery, of course, this commentary is silenced, the memories are not mine, and Grandma's gentle hand upon my head is only an apparition. Our home movies and the memories they keep are still shelved away in my grandparents' house, still at risk of erasure come the next season of *Bake Off*. Nonetheless, Nova Paul's *This Is Not Dying* (2010) welcomes me into a familial space. I leave my shoes at the door, and offer to make the tea.

That it prompts in me such a humble, grounded, and personal experience is the magic of the work, seemingly at odds with its kaleidoscope-aesthetics, and moreover, its specificity to Paul's own marae and whanau. Colours and form, though amplified to psychedelic frequency, melt and merge freely at a satisfied

pace and within a contented cycle as they capture daily life within a community—a warming intoxication, rather than a violent high.

In the opening shots, the camera passes through dense, multiple, and technicolour bush into a clearing where a whare stands. Yet these geographies can only ever be speculative. Was it a passage through? Or was it a journey around, alongside or over? The shrubbery is sufficiently abstracted and unpredictable to confuse any such sense of trajectory. I get the impression that the artist is sceptical of anything too hurried, undeviating or purposeful. She hesitates to treat time as intrinsic, or place as destination, delighting rather, in detour and refraction, in layers and diffusion. This serpentine logic flows and seduces me, despite the several linearities against which it competes. I am aware of the unidirectional reel of film from which it projects, the retreating runway of the gallery space, and the habitual, sober perceptions that I bring to the work as its viewer. But Paul suspends and soothes these contradictions within her magnetic, spectral prism. Their structure is intact but made strange, and I am disorientated, but not distressed.

Exploring the whare's interior, the camera, our surrogate, does not probe, nor penetrate; it moves confidently yet unacknowledged through the community spaces. This apparent lack of materiality within the world of the film further isolates its scenes from the knowable, navigable actuality of the gallery, where, in contrast, the projector announces itself as originating presence, without modesty. Such aural

tensions are only transitional though. Despite its self-importance, the whine of the projector is soon consumed by Ben Tawhiti's cheerful chords and the accompanying waiata of Tui-song and cicada-percussion, the score of every New Zealand summer, here only implied by the imagery, but absolutely in the air.

Like the camera, no person within the film is afforded solidity or permanence. All figures are reduced to a spectre, trace or hallucination, only momentary in their passage through the frame. That said, the marae is far from morbid or haunting—it thrives with activity and life, and merits its technicolour rendering. Paul's whanau eat, feed, play, bathe and restore; unremarkable occupations if considered remote or independent. But Nova Paul never allows for singular considerations of this kind. Interlocking and undulating cyan, fuchsia, and marigold hues layer and weave each vignette with iterations of itself—a vibrant chrono-cinematography which lingers, staggers, anticipates, reminisces. Enriches. Far more than an entrancing aesthetic device —though that it is—the three-colour separation situates generations of whanau and the daily tasks of sustenance as part of the same cyclical, synchronous organism. No distinction is made between the living and the dead, nor between body and spirit—all interact upon a single plane and within a single tense.

Fundamentally, Paul has translated the values of whakapapa into cinematic terms. As one of four Māori female artists on display in the Adam Art Gallery's exhibition, *The Earth Looks Upon Us / Ko Papatūānuku te matua o te tangata*, Paul's practice

firmly inhabits and concerns itself with the specificities of this identity. Immanence therefore—typically coded both female and natural/native—is a vital theme. Her methodology rejects conventional narrative paradigms which separate tenses and generations, or place them on a rigid, beginning-middle-end continuum, or deem said end to be nigh for Aotearoa’s tangata whenua. Here, immanence is a process of devotion, care, respect, and knowledge that looks forward, back, around, and above. It does not connote stagnation or servitude; it does not exist in reluctant symbiosis with transcendence. It is culture and nature, simultaneously.

Because like at my own family gatherings, while I might be tasked with making the tea, and my sister with fetching the chocolate biscuits, doubtless, Grandma will insist on helping and she might tell us how her own grandmother took her tea with cream, six sugars, and a menthol cigarette, or how our mum once gave her six teaspoons of salt instead. Invariably, the task becomes that of nurturing, learning, and sharing. Invariably, it is embedded within a narrative far beyond its own minutiae and transience. Through the everyday, ethereal elsewhere of *This Is Not Dying*, Paul shows us there is no tragedy in sustenance. Nor, when shared among a community, is there burden.

From my spot in the gallery therefore, I am entirely malleable, scattered, and elliptical. And so I abandon myself to Paul’s serpentine logic. Now awestruck, too.