

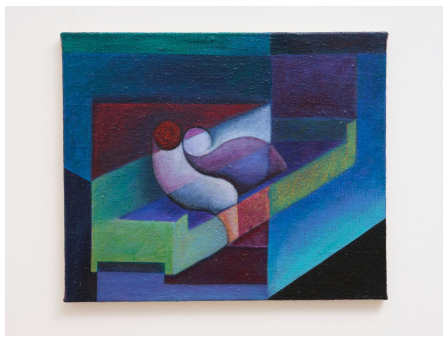


# A Place You Didn't Know That You Didn't Know About

An interview with Imogen Taylor

by Chloe Lane

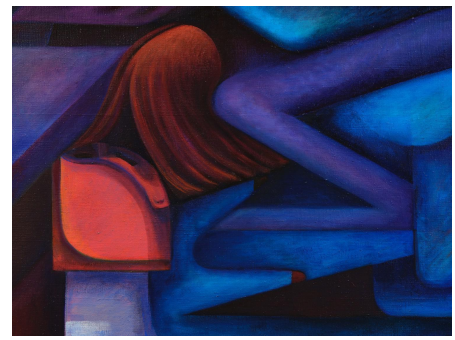
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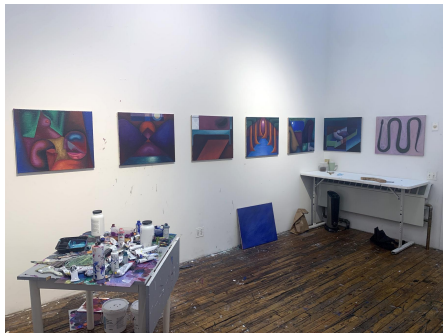
Imogen Taylor, *Smoko*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



NYC Dyke March, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



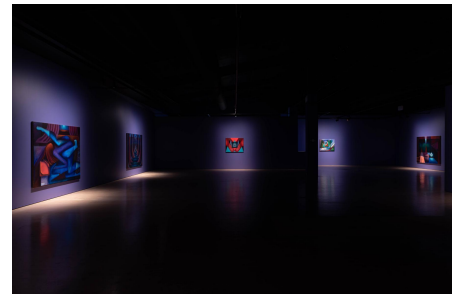
Imogen Taylor, *Moths* (detail), 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 1500 x 2000mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.



ISCP Studio, New York, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



Imogen and Agatha, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



Imogen Taylor, *Quiet Motel*, 2022. Installation view, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Photo: Tessa Paton. Courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland.

*In early 2020, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland-based artist Imogen Taylor was one month into a six-month residency at The International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York City when the pandemic forced them to return to Aotearoa New Zealand. In July this year, they returned to the ISCP studios in Brooklyn for three months to complete the residency, working alongside other international artists and curators. Founded in 1994, the ICSP is New York's most comprehensive international visual arts residency programme. Each artist has their own private studio, a stipend for living expenses, and access to a community of artists from around the world. Taylor, who*

*was awarded this residency as the Wallace Art Awards Paramount Award recipient in 2018, speaks to Chloe Lane about their newest body of work and some of what it means to be a contemporary painter from Aotearoa in New York City.*

CHLOE LANE     The first thought I had on encountering your new works in progress was of the painter Tarsila do Amaral. I think this is partly related to some shared formal qualities between the Brazilian painter's work and yours—the vanishing repetition in *We t with Dew* (2022), for starters, and an overall softness and embrace of the cylindrical. I also think this is connected to my personal experience of do Amaral's work, which was stumbling upon a retrospective exhibition at MoMA on a visit to New York. It's one of the privileges of the city—especially coming from Aotearoa—that there's always more to see, old stuff and new stuff. What are some exhibitions or individual works you've seen during your stay that you think might have a lasting impact on you and your practice?

IMOGEN TAYLOR     While I've never really studied or directly referenced Tarsila do Amaral's work, I'm honoured that you see similarities. She was famously tutored by Fernand Léger in Paris, who potentially influenced painters like Rita Angus, Robin White, Robyn Kahukiwa and Michael Illingworth—all huge influences for me growing up in Aotearoa. I was lucky enough to experience my first Tarsila painting in person, at MoMA, called *A Lua (The Moon)* (1928). I was struck by how much this painting felt like home—that solitary feeling I sometimes have when I gaze upon the moon within a sparse rural setting.

Other paintings by Rose Piper, Bernice Bing, Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Murray and Marsden Hartley have really enthralled me on various gallery visits during this trip. Several institutions in NYC have attempted (and some have succeeded) to illuminate these modernist painting legacies that were otherwise forgotten or disregarded.

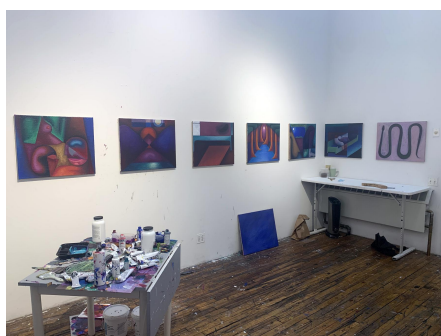
I was lucky enough to catch *Eva Hesse: Expanded Expansion* at the Guggenheim, which was profoundly sad and invigorating at the

same time. The large-scale latex and fibreglass construction had been in storage since the late 1980s and was one of the last works she made before dying at age thirty-four. I didn't think I would ever get to see any of her latex works in the flesh, due to the nature of how they darken and pretty much deteriorate. It raises some interesting questions around conservatorship and whether an artist's intentions for how an artwork ages need to either be respected, or negotiated in order for historical works to be seen by future generations.

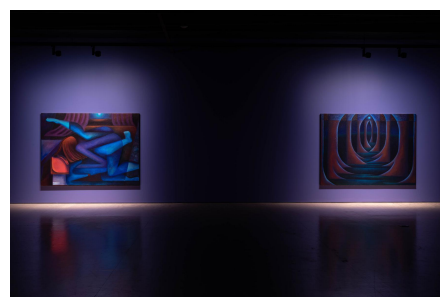
Oh! And Nicole Eisenman at Hauser & Wirth. The most epic, exquisite contemporary paintings I've maybe ever seen. They're easily one of my most favourite living artists.



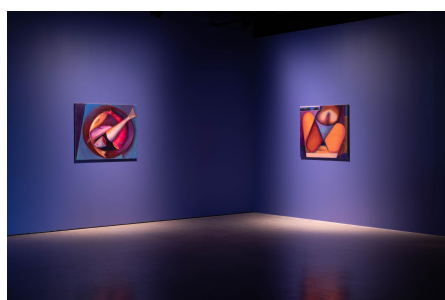
ISCP Studio, New York, 2020. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



ISCP Studio, New York, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



Imogen Taylor, *Quiet Motel* installation view (on left: *Moths*, 2022; on right: *Wet with Dew*, 2022), Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Photo: Tessa Paton. Courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland.



Imogen Taylor, *Quiet Motel* installation view (on left: *Blowout*, 2022; on right: *Smut*, 2022), Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Photo: Tessa Paton. Courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland.

CL In 2017 you were the artist in residence at McCahon House in Aotearoa. You commented in an interview at the time that you could “afford really good paint now” and, more importantly, the gift of the residency was “the most amount of

space or privilege or ease” you’d experienced in your career to date. Since then, you’ve had solo exhibitions at Whangārei Art Museum, Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, Ōtepoti Dunedin, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland and the Dowse Art Museum, Te Awa Kairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt. A lot has happened and changed in our day-to-day lives, too. How is your experience of this residency different from or the same as the McCahon House? Especially because the original timeframe for your stay in New York was for 2020, but was then cut short because of the pandemic.

IT                      Yes, I began the ISCP residency in March 2020, and only lasted three weeks before I had to head home, due to Covid getting pretty serious over here and shutting everything down. Despite missing out on that 2020 residency timeslot, some great things subsequently happened for me back at home, like publishing my first monograph and exhibiting a solo show back in my birthplace, Whangārei.

This time round I got to begin the residency in the New York summer and go through until fall, a swelteringly hot time of year when a lot of people leave the city and go on holiday. I definitely noticed physical changes in the streets since my 2020 visit; shops and eateries had closed up and certain neighbourhoods had become even more commercial. Despite Covid decimating businesses and inflation driving up food prices, the general outlook was optimistic for the summer to have super fun party vibes with more freedom to be in groups of people. I arrived before the residency commenced so that I could catch NYC Pride, the largest Pride festival of its kind in the world. I was primarily there for the Dyke March, which remains a protest, and as the upending of Roe v. Wade happened a day prior, it was even more heated. The American Supreme Court ruling no constitutional right to abortion as well as legislating further LGBTQ+ discrimination, particularly affecting trans people, created a super dark tone for most of my time there, and I worry about what is to come in 2023 and beyond.

CL                   Where will the finished works from the residency be exhibited? Can you talk a bit about your intentions behind this new body of work? You've made a lot of small acrylic and watercolour works on paper alongside new large-scale paintings—has the residency been about supporting a specific project or have you used this time in a more free-wheelin' and experimental way? Also, will the portrait of the pet snake you've spent some time with in NYC make the exhibition cut?

IT                   I'm not exactly sure where this work will be exhibited, or if it will be at all. I still make a lot of work that doesn't get exhibited, or even seen. I'm always trying to push the work somewhere that's uncomfortable for me, which creates a whole raft of problems, and then I need to try and solve those problems (sometimes they can't be solved, and so probably shouldn't be seen). I'm reluctant to still talk in these painting binaries, but shifts from abstraction to representation (more often it's vice versa, though) usually happen gradually over a few years in a painter's career; the pressure and isolation of the lockdowns of the last two years encouraged me to do it quite quickly. I think it will take more time before I feel confident articulating what the work is doing right now. I guess this is why I've always been drawn to painting, there's still so much I can't pin down about what I do—it feels like the work is leading me.

I've found it difficult to conduct specific projects on residencies, my work usually becomes like fly paper for the research and experiences I'm immersed in. In New York I managed to make a few smaller works on stretched hessian, which have followed on from when I made *Quiet Motel* for Whangārei Art Museum. They're somewhat figurative and possibly the most colourful works I've made in a long time.

And, oh yes, the snake painting. That's of Agatha, a sixteen-year-old ball python that I looked after while I was subletting an apartment in Brooklyn. This is so cheesy (*My Octopus Teacher* much?), but looking after Agatha taught me a lot. There were things I was afraid of doing when I first got to NYC, from working out how to get around to emailing people for studio visits. My fear never went away when I handled Agatha but I think I grew to



respect that about her. I couldn't project emotions onto her and I couldn't dominate her. I came to realise I mostly just liked her for not killing me.



Imogen and Agatha, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



Agatha painting, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



ISCP Field Trip, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



NYC Dyke March, 2022. Courtesy of Imogen Taylor.



Imogen Taylor, *Bud*, 2020. Acrylic on hessian. 980 x 1410mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

CL I was interested in what you said about being “tired of talking in painting binaries,” regarding the shift in your work from abstraction to representation. I recently saw a work of yours at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū in their

exhibition *Perilous: Unheard Stories from the Collection*. The painting, titled *Bud* (2020) is on a parallelogram-shaped canvas. It has the appearance of a stone fruit cross-sectioned and cubified, the elongated stone centre sliced into a palette of pink, red, brown and cream. The last sentence of the wall label says, “‘Bud’ ostensibly refers to stonefruit of the Central Otago region, but also performs as code for something possibly more sexual.” *Possibly!?* I was interested to hear your take on moving outside what is “possible” and into what is more explicit, as is evident in a number of your paintings recently on show at Whangārei Art Museum, for example *Moths* (2022). Is there a new kind of freedom to be found in that space? Did the lockdown and the pressure-cooker effect of your isolation during this period help propel this change?

IT                      I think the more sexual content was always buried within the abstract works, but now I’m like, why hide it? It was suggested that I begin coding my work at art school, as the paintings and drawings I was making then were way more gratuitous and repellent. A memory that I now find quite bizarre is of a tutor saying my work was like “degenerate art”, encouraging me to conceal homoerotic content, as it was “too much”. I think that kind of put me back into some kind of gay art closet, which then lead me to make cubism, which I had no idea was actually ... quite gay.

Maybe I had more of a slow-cooker effect than a pressure-cooker effect in the lockdown period. I tried to find the positives in having opportunities postponed, and used the time to learn new painting techniques. Perhaps the anxiety surrounding the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns made me want the work to speak more directly on certain issues. But that’s a global trend in painting, from what I’ve experienced.





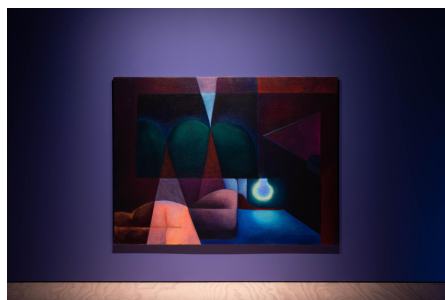
Imogen Taylor, *Moths*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 1500 x 2000mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.



Imogen Taylor, *Paradise Island*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Imogen Taylor, *Paradise Island* (detail), 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Imogen Taylor, *Cabin Fever*, 2022, acrylic on hessian, 1500 x 2000mm. *Quiet Motel* installation view, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Photo: Tessa Paton. Courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland.

CL                      When you say “I’m always trying to push the work somewhere that’s uncomfortable for me, which creates a whole lot of problems, and then I need to try and solve those problems (but often they can’t be solved)”, as a writer I understand this as two main camps of problems. First the craft-based/technical ones or whatever you want to call them—problems that usually do have solutions, just maybe not desirable ones, or ones that are possible to get to right now. Then there are the bigger “emotional” problems that maybe can never be solved because no straight answers exist—what feels right one day is not right on a different day, and the solutions evolve as you also evolve. Is this something that also tracks with you when you think about this aspect of making—especially because your paintings are so emotionally charged for me—or is it an entirely different thing?

IT                      I was comparing the processes of painting and writing with my brother Rupert the other day, as he is a writer. Despite being quite different, they’re both visual languages, in a

sense. We were talking about how it's essential for both our practices to reach a point where the work goes to a place you didn't know that you didn't know about. Like through a process of building up, erasing, editing and building up again, an image or story is revealed that was not anticipated to begin with. I used to believe that in order for a painting to be considered finished, I had to have lost the initial layers or intent completely, burying them under final layers of paint. I now let each individual painting tell me what it requires: some are sketched up first, others evolve through different layers of paint, or a mixture of both. The paintings tell me what they require when there's enough time for me to just be with them, when looking takes up more time than making. Perhaps these are formal painting problems.

However, the bigger "emotional" problems you speak of, which I would categorise as figuring out tone, content or themes in my work, may take longer to solve. Perhaps across years rather than within singular works. The works are really emotionally charged, for sure, but in saying that there's a lot of distance between myself and them, too. Because I want viewers to have their own personal experiences with them, attach their own sets of values, meanings and memories to them.

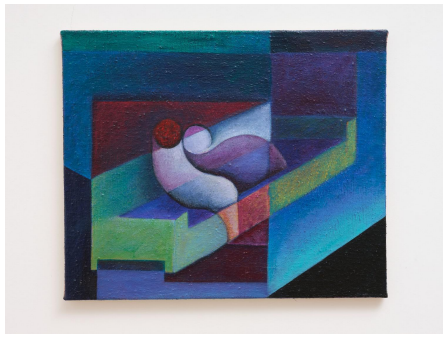
I feel like the formal problems help provide this distance between me and the work, because they challenge my own ability, prior knowledge and experiences that I bring to each painting.

CL                    Agatha the ball python is a beauty. I've read that the most snakes seem capable of in relation to humans is recognising one from another—which human they like more, for example—and in that is a kind of expression of emotion. This idea of learning to respect something you fear and being okay with living with a degree of that fear—I feel this about living in Florida. There's the wildlife component—all the critters that are constantly trying to get inside—though I'm also thinking about how differently people communicate here and how quickly I had to learn to speak louder, for example. Sometimes it feels as if I'm constantly living at the edge of myself, or what I thought of as myself. How much do you think the "discomfort" of not just living with a python, but living in a big city like NYC, and the crazy and

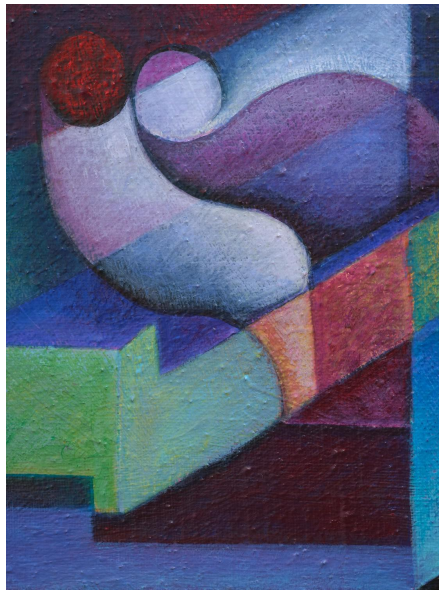
loneliness and intensity that goes with that, boils over into the work? Does it make it easier to embrace a kind of riskiness in the work space as well?

IT                      If anything, the discomfort or fear of living with a python or in a new city taught me to lean into my communities even more. The friends I made in New York will be my friends for life and I miss them a lot already.

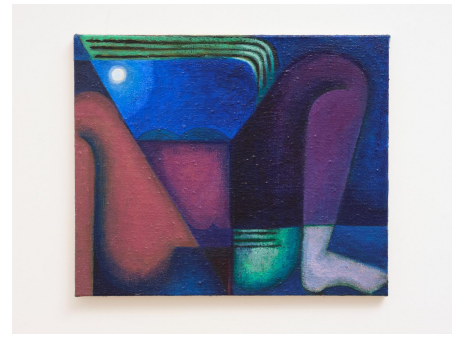
When I think of embracing riskiness in a practice or a work space, it gives me the impression of a hyper individualist-careerist art practice, rather than what I'm more interested in: being part of communities who value care and nourishment, and encourage safe exchange of critique and ideas. But if it feels like the work has taken more risks since the residency, I wonder if that's due to there simply being more visibility for LGBTQ+ artists in NYC, so it felt safer to make even thirstier work.



Imogen Taylor, *Smoko*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Imogen Taylor, *Smoko* (detail), 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Imogen Taylor, *Antipodean*, 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Imogen Taylor, *Antipodean* (detail), 2022. Acrylic on hessian. 500 x 600mm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

CL                    What is it like to be a painter in one of the great painting cities? As someone growing up in Aotearoa, did NYC and its ‘art scene’ have any kind of intoxicating, mystical pull for you? I’m curious about the idea of a place versus the reality of it, too, particularly as this relates to America—a lot of what we hear about it in Aotearoa is the big news, mostly a lot of bad stuff, and then the romantic stuff like the dreams we grow up on. What is it actually like, the place and the people? When you say you hope this residency is the beginning of an ongoing relationship, what does that mean?

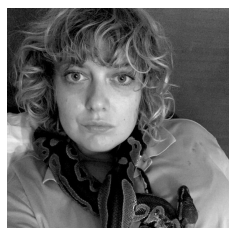
IT                    I think the intersection between painting and gay liberation legacies was what made New York the most alluring for

me, along with punk music I'd listened to since I was a teenager. From then I started imagining a life as an artist there—when I first read the Keith Haring diaries, around about the same time I was listening to Patti Smith, Blondie, the Velvet Underground and the Ramones. So perhaps I brought a lot of nostalgia with me to the States, despite having toured there a bunch as a musician a decade prior to the residency. Living as an artist there has felt different from being transient as a musician or tourist in the past. You find your own rhythm amongst the chaos of the city, and the work–life balance certainly becomes more peaceful than it initially feels.

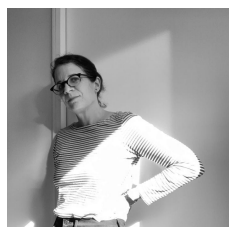
I'm still processing how the residency or the city may have changed or evolved my practice, but, so far, I think it has made me loosen up a little, particularly in regards to how I perceive my own work. I arrived at the residency worried that my painting was too connected to New Zealand art history, and that those references and the materiality of my work would be lost on a more international audience. But during the residency I actually became increasingly drawn to the variety of painting languages and dialects that painters from abroad had brought with them.

I'm looking forward to returning to my lush West Auckland studio to work on some large paintings over summer. I feel like a lot of the processing of the work I've seen and research I've done will happen then, as I really need a large space where I can spread out and work on quite a few paintings at one time.

### *Biographies*



Imogen Taylor is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau, and is represented by Michael Lett gallery. They have exhibited extensively throughout Aotearoa, with highlights including solo exhibitions at the Whangārei Art Museum; The Dowse Art Museum, Te Awa Kairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt; Artspace Aotearoa and Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, both in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Taylor was the recipient of a McCahon House Artist's Residency in 2017, the Wallace Arts Trust Paramount Award in 2018 and the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 2019.



Chloe Lane is the 2022 recipient of the Todd New Writer's Bursary and a 2021 Grimshaw Sargeson Fellow. Her second novel, *Arms & Legs*, is out now in Aotearoa (Te Herenga Waka University Press), and will be released in North America (House of Anansi Press) and the UK and Europe (Gallic Books) in 2023. She lives in Gainesville, Florida.



