

WESLEY JOHN FOURIE



*THEY CAME TO ME
IN THE NIGHT*

**RDS Gallery
2022**

WESLEY JOHN FOURIE

THEY CAME TO ME IN THE NIGHT

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition

Held at RDS Gallery,

6 Castle Street, Dunedin,

26 August – 24 September 2022

Occasional Essays Series

Editors

Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: Wesley John Fourie, *Grotto for Kissing*, 2022, ceramic, 16 cm x 17 cm x 18 cm. [Photo courtesy of the artist.]

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RDS Gallery Occasional Essays Series editors: Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

Published September 2022 on the occasion of the exhibition "Wesley John Fourie: They Came To Me in the Night," 26 August – 24 September 2022, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin, New Zealand.

ISBN: 978-1-99-117300-3 (softcover)

978-1-99-117301-0 (PDF)

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**smell of wet moss
happy sunshine
forever dancing
with you
on the forest floor
i think they used to call it
an afternoon delight
or something**

**wicked memory
happy memory**

**all the birds singing to us
as i melted into you
and we melted into the earth**

**happy memory
loaded memory**

**melting into you
into the earth
dancing**

“Mind-Wandering”: the Art of Wesley John Fourie

By Bridie Lonie

Since 2015, Wesley John Fourie (they, their) have built a fluid practice that moves between painted, drawn, stitched, knotted, and cumulative textile installation to engage with environmental and queer concerns, winning many awards and residencies in national and international exhibitions. Even as the artworks record moments of loss or difficulty, they are easeful and celebratory. Behind the ease lie decisions about the depiction of experience and the use of materials. The artist has worked in residencies in India and Nepal and connects learnings from these residencies with the environment here and with mātāuranga Māori, centering on the expression of perception as encounter. Repeated forms, looping across space, sometimes between genres in the same exhibition, as when the artist draws on walls and glass, and hangs textiles from ceilings, blankets on the floor. Things are placed where they will feel most comfortable. Consistently gentle linearities are designed to generate what psychologists call “mind-wandering”: a productive, relational space of engagement.

In 2020 Fourie cited Martin Creed and Tracy Emin as among their favourite artists.¹ The group characterized in the 1980s as the YBAs, young British artists, responded to Thatcherism's economically divisive politics by distancing themselves from the commodified artwork. They built on conceptual art to initiate the hybrid, domestic, familiar combination of the found and the constructed that is now the vernacular in art schools and public galleries. Martin Creed's work insisted on the value of the encounter in the present. Tracey Emin, whose influence is more materially obvious in Fourie's work, used the apparatus of the bed to record the body's histories. Fourie avoids the shock that Emin seeks, however, transforming Emin's textual interventions on blankets and bedding that interrogate painfully the sexual encounter, into stitched lyrics in rhythmic and calming harmonies that undo the distinction between figure and ground. Colours are saturated, and forms obey the order of the brush or textile rather than the requirements of information. Fourie adopts a kind of "semantic abstraction," to use Harold Osborne's terminology, that is very clear about referents but avoids depiction.² We know we are in the forest, the forest of trees, or the forest of love, and the works offer comfort in the face of the inevitable griefs of love through their materiality and their approach to composition and colour. Other senses, too, are brought into play. Fourie works with natural dyes and may rub plants into material. In

¹ Wesley John Fourie, "Virtual SPAR Live Interview #2: Wesley John Fourie," St. Petersburg Art Residency, 12 May 2020, accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6KX92sKUqM>, 14 August 2020.

² Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 28 (*passim*)).

a dialogue, fellow artist, and collaborator, Hana Pera Aoake agrees. She comments,

I like it when art smells nice or has an aroma, because it is so tied to memory and in some ways offers other ways of seeing and experiencing the world.³

Sometimes literal connections perform the relationship, for instance the use of scale rather than similitude. *Aoraki/Mount Cook* (2019–2020, 3724 meters of finger-knitted found fibers, height variable), exhibited in several locations, measures the height of the maunga/mountain in a finger-knitted textile rope. The translation of intransigent rock into hand-made textile commits data to memory through repetition and brings the distant view into the intimate space. Fourie called this and similar pieces “extensions of [the subjects’] natural bodies”.⁴ One imagines the rope unravelling and piercing the sky. Instead, it is suspended from a ceiling and its length amasses into coils of soft fabric: Fourie describes their delight as children rolled into this mound of yielding fabric.⁵ Such works reward the sometimes hard act of living in the present, and provide access to other experiences, through disarmingly simple connections, on a one-to-one basis. For the viewer, that is. For the maker, they generate those rewards. They function as songs do, as durations of expression.

³ Hana Pera Aoake; Wesley John Fourie, “Hana Pera Aoake in Conversation with Wesley John Fourie,” *The Art Paper: Conversations*, 22 August 2021, accessed at <https://www.the-art-paper.com/journal/hana-pera-aoake-in-conversation-with-wesley-john-fourie> on 8 August 2022.

⁴ the grey place, “Wesley John Fourie,” [thegreyplace.nz](https://www.thegreyplace.nz/artists/wesley-john-fourie/), accessed at <https://www.thegreyplace.nz/artists/wesley-john-fourie/> on 8 August 2022.

⁵ Wesley John Fourie, “Virtual SPAR Live Interview #2: Wesley John Fourie.”

In the Forest

Describing the forest, the artist says: “look at it, but don’t stare,” as if staring were confrontational, while a more receptive approach might ensure a proper meeting.⁶ The remnants of the forests of Aotearoa/New Zealand are densely populated with a restricted range of species. The older areas have high canopies, and low new growth. Where an older tree has fallen, young growth quickly inhabits the light-filled gaps, until competition culls the slower trees and the gap fills. To be benighted in this forest is to find oneself in a dense velvet of undifferentiated darkness. Streambeds may have exposed quartz stones that shine faintly; otherwise, the eye must slowly understand the more open spaces of paths, or the lighter areas of diminished growth at the trees’ heights. Even wide paths shrink into obscurity and one’s feet must feel the surface: beech mast, rock or gravel, exposed clay and roots. The body must attune itself to the environment.

Fourie worked on the UNESCO World Heritage site, Milford Track, in South Westland, and, because of insomnia, walked at night in its beech forests.⁷ The forest offered both a kind of sleep, and a sense of order in the world: “Every time I step outside is a sacred experience.”⁸ Painted and drawn leaf and plant forms return to

⁶ Wesley John Fourie, “Virtual SPAR Live Interview #2: Wesley John Fourie.”

⁷ Wesley John Fourie, unrecorded conversations with author, 2022.

⁸ Wesley John Fourie, “Virtual SPAR Live Interview #2: Wesley John Fourie.”

that experience. Sometimes recalling the flat practice of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Fourie's linear forms avoid recession and the possibility of the "simulacral"⁹ by staying at the front of the picture plane. Their patterns resolve into order by activating the mind's engagement with the world through the sense of vision. Trees have bark, branch forms and leaves that we use to differentiate them by species. In Fourie's work, the human form in contrast is yielding. Bodies are barely delineated, absorbent containers rather than forms engaged in sharing order. At times Fourie paints themselves in the forest, naked and almost undifferentiated, not so much modelled as outlined, as if asking to be placed in the right way in that space. The human flesh and the forest as system have different objectives. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, and in the context of the forest, the pinkness of the flesh inevitably indicates the colonizer's ethnicity. The body's pale nakedness in that forest is the stripping back of the civilized self that is both the industrialized world's self-worth and its product. This is no longer the world of the hunter, or the gatherer, attuned in all senses with the environment as sustenance and support. The artworks, made in memory, are the colonizing human's experience of redemption in the face of the forest that remains to us. Titles insist on the privilege of direct experience: *Somewhere only we know; I am a bird now; My body as the rainforest; This must be the place (Naive Melody)*.¹⁰

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "A Note of Photography and the Simulacral," *October* 31 (Winter, 1984): 49–68.

¹⁰ Wesley John Fourie, CV, [wesleyjohnfourie.com](https://www.wesleyjohnfourie.com), accessed at <https://www.wesleyjohnfourie.com/cv1> on 14 August 2022.

Attention and Abstraction

Fourie's interest in the immersive qualities of the deep night of the forests is both ecologically and aesthetically relevant. The quest for order in difference, rest in movement or complexity, lies at the heart of much abstraction. Painting's stillness gives the viewer time and space to follow the artist's logic. Just as we know when a story is complete, we know when we recognize a painting's coherence. But what is it that makes us remain with an artwork, paying attention to it, returning to it?

Attention is a technique of being. In his critical account of the neuroscience of immersive aesthetic activity, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (2021), Gregory Minissale describes how such formal structures as fractal patterns, or found material that has its own logic, require the viewer to work with the material to find this order, in so doing experiencing a sense of immersion that is far from passive.¹¹ He describes how conceptual artists moved from the structured relays between complexity and clarity in the paradigm-shifting works of the abstract expressionists, to the discovery that material itself will generate order, as in the textile fragments thrown down by Robert Morris in *Threadwaste* (1968).¹² The discovery of that order is experienced as the viewer's own possession, gained through their capacity for attention.

¹¹ Gregory Minissale, "2.2 Metastability across Brain, Body and Art: Pollock" in *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 94-113.

¹² Gregory Minissale, 45.

Minissale cites neuroscientist Ichiro Tsuda on “chaotic itineracy.”¹³
In this process the mind switches between:

...relaxed and analytical states of mind and different kinds of vision: looking hard at local, fine-grained details with consecutive vision (gamma) and relaxing focus and differentiating details for coarse—or indefinitely grained configural vision (alpha).¹⁴

Such mental activity generates a “metastability” that Minissale argues should be understood as an aesthetic category.¹⁵ Referring to two significant approaches to the phenomenology of experience and of attentiveness to art, he points out that “[Michael] Fried’s absorption and [Martin] Heidegger’s *Dasein* are both related to the immersive properties of reverie.”¹⁶ Minissale continues to the analytical approach of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, whose six characterizations of what he calls the “flow” experience also entail a relay between analytical activity and non-ego-centred yielding to what Minissale, after several psychologists, calls “mind-wandering.”¹⁷ Csikszentmihalyi includes “clear goals and feedback” as one his six categories.¹⁸ Mind-wandering is not simply a passive, aleatory process, and the work that art produces in its makers and viewers is more central to human flourishing than its characterizations as recreation or commodity suggest.

¹³ Gregory Minissale, 100–103.

¹⁴ Gregory Minissale, 103.

¹⁵ Gregory Minissale, 103.

¹⁶ Gregory Minissale, 109.

¹⁷ Gregory Minissale, 109.

¹⁸ Gregory Minissale, 109.

Fourie's image-making includes multiples and repeat patterns that move asymmetrically across and around surfaces. Flowing plant forms generate connection and immersion through accumulation and repetition. The knitted works in particular move between the fine-grained and indefinitely grained, eliciting ongoing attention. Fourie's practice as a whole is designed to build relationality through aesthetic engagement, through the expression of emotional and personal experience in ecological contexts and in the context of the LGBTQIA+ community, where the fluidity of pronouns indicates that one is never quite alone. As Deleuze and Guattari, whose thinking was instrumental in the disestablishment of singular categories of all kinds, wrote in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaux*: "Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd."¹⁹ Fourie's practice, as is appropriate for this century, recognizes that the crowd includes the non-human.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (trans. Brian Massumi), "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaux, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), 3.



Welsley John Fourie, *Aoraki/Mount Cook*, 2019–2020, 3724 meters of finger-knitted found fibers, height variable. Photo courtesy of artist.

“They Came to Me in the Night”: A Midnight Sanctuary by the Torchlight of Memory

By Alistair Fox

The title of Wesley John Fourie's exhibition, “They Came to Me in the Night,” signals the presence of a multi-layered complexity of signification in his works. To what does “They” in the title refer? At the most superficial, literal level, it attests to the fact that Fourie created the works in this series in his studio during periods of insomnia.²⁰ At a deeper, mnemonic level, the title recalls the artist's experience of walking through the bush when he couldn't sleep at night during the four summer seasons that he spent working on the Milford track. At yet another level, it evokes the painful memory of past lovers who have since moved on, leaving the artist in a state of emotional destitution against which the forest helps him defend himself.

The epigraph Fourie has assigned to the exhibition, widely attributed to American singer Emilie Autumn, quoted in the artist's statement, indicates its thematic preoccupations: “I only sleep with

²⁰ The material in this essay, including direct quotations unless otherwise specified, were imparted to the author by the artist in a conversation held 30 July via Zoom.

people I love, which is why I have insomnia."²¹ Fourie's identification with Emilie Autumn underlines the inextricable link between his insomnia and painful feelings caused by the loss, or absence, of love. It is against these feelings that the forest provides a bulwark. He describes the forests of beech, rata, and a plethora of ferns surrounding the Milford Track as his "midnight sanctuary"—a place where he feels safe, protected by the silence, with the moss of the forest floor serving as his bed while the stars seen through the canopy above serve as his "blanket." Within the forest, Fourie tells us, there is "a spirit tree"—a gigantic kahikatea "that stole my heart more than any man ever has." Symbolically, therefore, the forest, in the artist's imaginative reconstruction, expresses a nexus of intertwined memories, feelings, and associations that eventuates in works marked by tensions and ambiguities.

Those tensions and ambiguities are very evident in Fourie's paintings. In the series of small acrylic sketches, he depicts the forest floor of his reveries with an extremely fluid, light touch. What is notable about them is how removed the depiction of the vegetation is from literal representation—so much so, that it verges on abstraction. Instead of ferns as one knows them, there are a few generalized plants surrounded by a pattern of squiggles that merely suggest the presence of foliage and moss. Then, one notices that the colors are not at all naturalistic: the green is of a tone that differs from the olive-greens of the actual New Zealand forest; interspersed among the darker and lighter blue-greens are various

²¹ Wesley explains: "My friend Tiltan told me the quote during a conversation in India and it stuck with me." Wesley John Fourie, email to editor, 8 August 2022.

yellows and a striking pale pink, which, again, are not found in nature—at least, not on the Milford Track.



Wesley John Fourie, *Pastel Garden III*, 2022, oil on primed canvas fragment, 33 cm h x 43 cm w.

The colors and tones of this palette show Fourie constructing an emotional landscape in which the colors register and express the feelings that motivated the creation of the image in the first place—all of which relate back to the idea of a love that is simultaneously longed for, but feared to be lost, combined with a color palette that Fourie associates with the pleasure he took as a child in lollipops.

Two larger paintings, this time showing a solitary, human figure amidst the foliage of the forest carry over the same colors and tones. This time, the signifying relevance of the pink, which was only latent in the smaller forest sketches, is made explicit. The first of the



John Wesley Fourie, *The Anticipation (To Be Yours)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 76 cm h x 76 cm w;
 Wesley John Fourie, *Stephan (After Loving)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 76 cm h x 76 cm w.

two human figures—in a painting titled *The Anticipation (To Be Yours)*, 2022—is highly eroticized, suggesting a force of libidinous energy and desire, which is echoed in the vigor of the burgeoning plants that are shown thrusting upwards around the supine body. The second figure—in a painting called *Stephan (After Loving)*, 2022—is bent over, detumescent, implying post-coital deflation. Once again, Fourie has drawn attention to the Janus-like existence of two sides to the experience of love, both associated in his imaginary with the forest: the anticipatory joy of expectation, and afterwards, the sense of loss and deprivation. The feeling evoked by a juxtaposition of these two paintings is not dissimilar to William Shakespeare's description of visceral desire and its aftermath in his *Sonnets*:

A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;

Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.²²

Significantly, Shakespeare's sonnets were written at a time in which no clear distinctions were made between the erotic and the pornographic. This same ambiguity marks Fourie's work, often challenging the boundaries and definitions of both in a manner that arguably characterizes the international art world as well as popular culture in the twenty-first century. While Fourie's landscapes recall a tradition arising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Jacques Rancière reminds us, in which nature offers the supreme aesthetic experience, the artist's forest nevertheless also recalls the furtive lovers' rendezvous in locations

²² "Sonnet 129," originally published in what is often referred to as *The Quarto of 1609*. William Shakespeare, *Shake-speares Sonnets, Never Before Imprinted* (London: Thomas Thorpe, 1609).

like the Bois de Boulogne, famous throughout the twentieth century as a haven for transgressive sexual acts. Indeed, Wesley recently commented in an interview with Taarn Scott undertaken in July 2022, “At present, I’m working on a suite of paintings taken from old gay porn magazines I had as a teenager.”²³

The forest is not, however, univalent. As suggested above, it also evokes a place of Edenic refuge and redemption. This Eden, however, for a twenty-first century artist such as Fourie, exists in the shadow of a past marked by violent appropriation in the colonial era as well as a future threatened by climate change and deforestation. Taken as a whole, Fourie’s relations with the forest, depicted across a number of media, reverberates with a kind of postmodern romanticism expressed by twentieth century writers like Roland Barthes, in which the object of desire is always already lost.

Fourie’s sensitivity to the multidimensional aspects of the experience of love and desire has enabled him to develop his forest imagery into a highly personal expressive language that is repeated and elaborated across a variety of media. For example, the same color palette can be seen in the embroidery titled *A Portrait of the Midnight Ghost Forest*, 2022, composed of thousands of laborious stitches that create an equivalent to the pattern of marks and colors seen in the paintings.

²³ Wesley John Fourie, included in an email from the artist to the author, 30 July 2022.



John Wesley Fourie, *A Portrait of the Midnight Ghost Forest*, 2021, embroidery, "found" fibers, 17 cm in diameter.

The two ceramic pieces included in the exhibition pick up the same motifs as in the paintings. The first, a stoneware vase, is inscribed with similarly stylized plants on the forest floor and includes a tree with its canopy, while filling the spaces between with marks that create the effect of a tapestry, just as the paintings do. The difference is that the fired clay imparts a permanence to the representation that the paintings, being more fragile and subject to damage over time, lack.



Wesley John Fourie, *Vessel for Holding Water*, 2022, ceramic, 22 cm x 12.5 cm.

The second ceramic piece, *Grotto for Kissing*, 2022, recreates the textured greens, yellows, and browns familiar from Fourie's paintings, but this time, there is no pink. One also notices that the green is no longer in the subdued blue/grey tone of the paintings, but is of a vibrant, bright hue. Whereas the paintings expressed the melancholy reminiscence of an absent lover—evoked by the presence of the flesh-pink color—the brilliant, energetic green of

Grotto for Kissing correlates to the anticipatory excitement of an erotic encounter that is yet to come.

Finally, the ambivalent paradoxicality that informs Fourie's work is fully on display in the soft sculpture he has included in the exhibition, *Snare (Mount Cargill in Loved Up Colors)* 2021, which is a scale model evoking the mount that stands guard over Dunedin, the city that the artist considers his artistic home, where he feels "safest." As with the forest-related works, there are two aspects to this feature of the natural environment. On one hand, like *Grotto for Kissing*, the work is invested with very vibrant colors that express Fourie's love for this city; like the forest, this is a place in which he feels safe. As the word "snare" in the title suggests, however, it is also a trap; the very security it imparts simultaneously implies the risk of complacency, removal from the dangers and stresses that fuel creativity.

Altogether, then, the works in this show provide ample testimony to an artist who has developed a distinctive personal vision of the inseparable interconnectedness between the affective lives of human beings and the natural environment in which they find themselves living.



Wesley John Fourie, *Share (Mount Cargill in Loved Up Colors)* 2021, mixed media (found fibers), height variable [can be adjusted], 680 m of knitting. Photograph courtesy of Marc at Broker Galleries

Contributors

Wesley John Fourie (they, their) identifies as a queer artist whose multi-faceted art practice explores themes of nature, spirituality, and sexuality, predominantly through the use of textiles. The years that they spent in Ōtepoti|Dunedin had a formative influence on their practice and they regularly collaborate with Ōtepoti-based artists Taarn Scott and Hana Pera Aoake, including the recent exhibitions "The Future of Dirt," RM Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau | Auckland, June 2022 and "Invasive Weeds," the Physics Room, Ōtautahi | Christchurch, July 2022; "Endless Sky of Honey," Meanwhile Gallery, Ponake | Wellington, July 2022.

They were awarded the 2021 Molly Morpeth Canaday Youth Award and have been a finalist in the National Painting and Printmaking Award (2021), and the Wallace Art Awards (2020). Recent exhibitions include: "The Dance," Window Gallery, University of Auckland, 2022; "i followed you Into the sea," Whakatane Library & Exhibition Centre, Whakatane, 2022; "i dream a rain forest" at Malcolm Smith Gallery, Uxbridge Art Centre, 2022 and "From Across Bodies of Water and Other Transient Objects," with Rozana Lee, at Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts, University of Waikato, 2022.

They are interested in creating a conversation around the preservation of our natural environment within the context of contemporary art. When not in their studio, they can usually be found somewhere in the bush.

Alistair Fox is Professor Emeritus at the University of Otago, New Zealand, and has written extensively on topics in literature, cinema, and, more recently, on New Zealand art. His most recent book is *Melodrama and Masculinity in International Art Cinema* (in press, 2022).

Bridie Lonie has worked in art education throughout her life and is an Emeritus Member of Otago Polytechnic. She was a founding member of the Women's Gallery, Wellington in 1980, and has published on feminist artists, and art on climate change and the Anthropocene.