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GLOKOOL

THE BONUS ISSUE | Zena Elliott



Think global, act local. Think local, act global. *Glokool* is about as cool as it gets – running through the STOP sign at the intersections of contemporary life in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Like her earlier works that articulated a sense of videogame identity, *Glokool* is a veritable mash-up of worlds colliding, not with each other, but through each other.

Imagine if you will, a wharenuī turned inside-out. An eponymous ancestor greets the worlds without, so that the maihi and amo embrace the universalising excesses of pop culture in a Maori worldview. Now turn that wharenuī outside-in, and walk from Te Po to Te Marama. Small wonder that Elliott's famous mural at the Waikato Institute of Technology in Hamilton is called *Te Korekore* – the realm of infinite becoming – for she is no stranger to this walk between worlds.

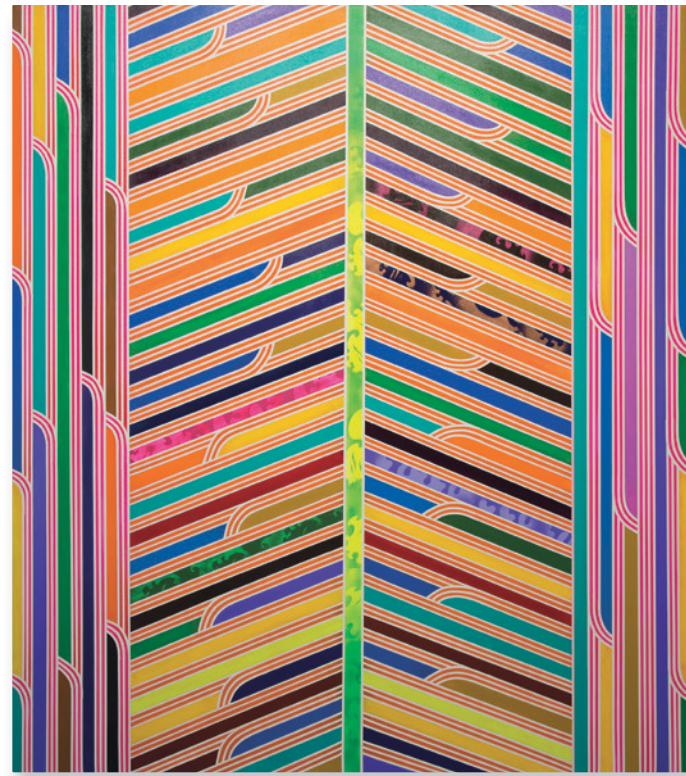
This synthesis of seemingly opposite dimensions has been an ongoing journey: One of her early works was an oversized flying V guitar made out of fluffy faux fur. This straddled hyper-masculinised rock music with one foot, with the other standing firmly in super pink girl land. She knew that whilst TV could give us leather-clad boys in music videos, it didn't mean that all girls who liked rock music had to be how they saw women represented on TV. This work hit the nail right on the head, for she knew another truth – eventually TV would catch up with popular culture as it is practiced – for the local can inform the global too.

Similarly, her large glitter paintings from this period gave a softer edge to her otherwise graphic images of street culture, mixed with the characters of *Dragonball Z*. These works produced both superheroes and demigods willing to fight back on behalf of viewers, themselves attempting to negotiate the stereotypes of gender, ethnicity and role, usually found at these representational intersections. By weaving together street mythology with manga and glitter, she could produce a much wider range and truer set of expressions – a technique that she would later use with her later, typically larger works.

Her more familiar paintings place young Maori and Pakeha into scenes familiar to players of the notorious videogame *Grand theft auto*. By again combining images of the real with the unreal, Elliott not only acknowledges the global as it is practiced at a local level, she validates the expression of New Zealand youth culture through representing youth as characters within this world. We no longer recognise ourselves as American stereotypes, instead we can see ourselves as ourselves, on a global platform. Elliott realises that the global and the local are not mutually exclusive, rather, they can inform each other.

Glokool is both an extension and a departure from her previous pieces. Here she acknowledges cosmological forces greater than any individual, whilst bridging gaps between spaces previously represented as being distinct. Some of these works move into the realms of the symbolic rather than the figurative, and as she shifts gears, changes can be seen in not just her subject matter, but her compositional strategies and colour palettes. Her previously super-flat saturated planes of the videogame now display textures and surfaces that reference deeper modes of understanding. Some paintings are like dream fragments – seamless integrations of the symbols of global entertainment culture with Manaia and Hei Tiki forms. Here she completely discards perspective, but not to recreate a digitally animated flatness. Instead she mixes up the negative and positive spaces of each figure, so that like a MC Escher painting it is hard to tell where one figure starts and the other ends. Unlike Escher however these are not the same images endlessly repeated, but figures melding and arising out of each other. Combined with a complimentary colour scheme, the result is that the foreground and background oscillate depending on where the viewer puts their attention. If darkness is your background then the light figures will jump out at you, but if light is seen as if at the end of a long tunnel, then the opposite will be true.

This perceptual trick fluctuates, which helps our minds to wander. Our imaginations are allowed to re-engage with all those moments when these global icons were or are part of our lives on a personal level. Elliott's sense of play however is double edged – for as some figures recede and others advance in our attention, we begin to understand that these realisations are ephemeral creations. For as new combinations bring new connections, memory and play intermingle. – Suddenly the boundaries between young and old; Pakeha and Maori; global and local, become unfixed.



Clockwise from top left:
Familiar Spaces (dipych), 2012. Acrylic on canvas
Ihi, 2012. Acrylic on canvas
Master Z (green), 2012. Acrylic on vinyl toy
Image on reverse: *Amio*, (detail), 2013. Acrylic on canvas

Other works are more structured. Two paintings are similar to kowhaiwhai – but between the ribs we see glimpses of other worlds of koru-like clouds and oceans; and coloured shafts that shift back and forth. These works are called *Ihi* and *Wehi*, and as befits their namesakes they crackle with an eye-watering intensity. The colour palette seems at first glance to combine hues that should never be thrust together, but the tones all work so that the overall result is similar to the figurative paintings – a constant shifting between what feels like the foreground and the background. In this way Elliott is able to combine colours that we associate with a wide variety places: road-worker's orange rubs shoulders with Popsicle lemon; midnight purple and dairy farm green hang out with urban turquoise and desert tan. None is more or less important, because the relative colour weight of each strip is always balanced by the other colours that surround it. The eye skitters around and cannot find purchase as each colour leaps out and recedes in quick succession. The result is a mesmerising interplay of contemporary recognition: Where and who are we? Where and who are we now?

Her 3D figures are natural creatures of these portal spaces. They seem to be laughing at their own eternal state of creation, as their newness constantly emerges from old ideas. Eyes closed and in that moment before a haka begins, they quiver with the energy of those simultaneously existing between destruction and creation. They have painted on them a wood-grain so that they resemble the whakairo of a wharenuī. Their whakapapa however can trace more than a touch of videogame or graphic novel in their ancestry. It now appears as if the whakairo have jumped off their pou and wandered around our lives, and those of us who always thought that these spaces as being distinct now have to reconsider, for we recognise them and they recognise us. They are not contradictions nor as some would place them, hybridities, they are their own creatures forever in this moment of now.



Far from being fixed, Zena Elliott knows that identity is forever in a state of flux. Her turangawaewae is more than a transporter: She weaves young and old; Maori and Pakeha; global and local, out of our own memories and identities, and navigates the global oceans of pop culture by carrying us all on her waka of wormholes like some maturaunga tardis. Where before, we had thought of ourselves as being distinct and struggling against the currents, we now distinctively find ourselves within those currents, still ourselves, informed by each other. Her turangawaewae therefore is te whariki, constantly weaving, bringing our attention back and forth, back and forth.

Joe Citizen

Zena Elliott (Ngāti Awa, Te Whānau-ā-Apanui) graduated from the Wintec School of Media Arts with a Master of Arts in 2006.

Elliott's work has been exhibited in group shows such as *Got it Sussed* (2008) at Whakatane Museum & Gallery, *Existence: Life According to Art* (2007), *The Inimitable Mr. Hopkins: Barry Hopkins Art Collection* (2008) and *Layer Upon Layer* (2013) all at Waikato

Museum, and *Luminous Beings Are We, Not This Crude Matter* (2013) at ArtsPost Galleries.

Elliott's recent and most significant solo exhibition – *Glokool*, at Whakatane Library & Exhibition Centre – has been reassembled with additional works, for *Glokool: The Bonus Issue* at the Calder and Lawson Gallery.

Steph Chalmers
Art Collection Curator, University of Waikato