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Grahame Sydney

Julian Hooper / Sarah Smuts-Kennedy

David Cook / Lara Gilks / Wairau Māori Art Gallery

Neil Dawson's *Chalice* / *Listening Stones* *Jumping Rocks*

Manpower: Myths of Masculinity

Remembering Warwick Broadhead

Darwin's Impact on New Zealand Art

Colin McCahon & Ron O'Reilly





Re-enchanting the World

Projects by Sarah Smuts-Kennedy

STELLA BRENNAN

Through the 1980s and '90s Aucklander Sarah Smuts-Kennedy worked as an actor, as well as running her own applied arts business, SSK Design. It was after moving to Australia in 2000 that she began her visual art practice, initially working in photography. Her 2006 *Painting Rubbish* series consisted of monochromatic renderings of her photographs of trash-strewn, smoky landscapes on the outskirts of New Delhi. Moody vistas of snaky trees and drifts of plastic litter form dark rectangles superimposed over washy sepia grounds. What the artist calls 'shabby realism'¹ intersects with the dusty light and drooping eucalypts of a conventional Australian landscape tradition.

One of these works, *Garden View*, was purchased for the office of the then Shadow Minister for the Environment (and later Australian Prime Minister), Malcolm Turnbull. Smuts-Kennedy recalls:

I remember feeling both excited and deflated by this. I wanted my works to contribute to a transformation, but in that moment I realised they were maybe doing the opposite. They had become baubles; virtue signalling, pearl clutching. I felt like I got trapped in pointing to environmental disaster, like in Walter Benjamin's account of the Angel of History. The Angel is propelled backwards into the future, paralysed by the chaos in their wake.

Whatever it is that you choose to give your attention to is amplified. And I wanted my work to help build something better, rather than just aestheticise the wreckage. I am interested in using art to amplify qualities I want to have in myself, and to contribute to the world I inhabit. So I decided to become really conscious of and responsible for what I

broadcast. This is why I stopped making those content-driven works. To realign my practice, I decided to return to Aotearoa to complete my Master's at Elam and find another way of making.

A series that perhaps signals this period of transition is *Pushing Through* (2012). Here, blobs of plasticine were forced through holes in blown glass forms, extruding into coils and strata. The work is like a scientific diagram of a natural process. It is a reduction with its own internal logic, a slice through something larger. The sculptures could be a demonstration model of a root seeking water, or a wonky terrarium hosting some strange smooth fungus. At an inflection point in Smuts-Kennedy's work, plasticine is a signal material: a cold, heavy amalgam of vaseline and clay, earthy and petrochemical at the same time.

Also beginning in this period are brass hanging works framing empty space and looped circuits of wire. These forms look like elegant minimal sculpture, but were intended to respond to the quality and energy of the spaces they occupied. Smuts-Kennedy describes them as 'tools, not formal arrangements, antennae for material transmissions and tracings of neural pathways. These wires, electroplated in silver, gold and nickel, were inserted into the walls, sometimes with powered crystals or nuggets of brass or copper. I envisioned them as circuits, where the form, relationships and densities of these lines were harnessing subtle energy from the wider field, directing it, and giving it a new expression.'

While at Elam, Smuts-Kennedy began studying permaculture and biodynamics. These disciplines understand the garden as a generative zone of

(opposite) SARAH SMUTS-KENNEDY *Garden View* 2006
Acrylic on linen, 985 x 1980 mm.

(below) SARAH SMUTS-KENNEDY *Push Throughs* 2012
Plasticine, glass, holes & pressure

interaction between humans, insects, plants and micro-organisms. Beauty in these systems is a way to see where life is emerging, a hallmark of complexity and collaboration.

Although I have been influenced by Steiner and Goethe, thermodynamics is my way of understanding deep natural processes and the movement of energy through complex systems. I am pushing working with the other in the widest sense, being open, present, intentional, asking—'what is the most useful thing to do next?' And when I came across the notion of syntropy, the symmetrical thermodynamic process to that of entropy, something clicked. At this point I realised I needed to become an earthworker, with the intention of restoration and remedy, my practice reflecting my understanding of the natural symmetry of energy dissipating and energy coming into being.

In the second law of thermodynamics, first expressed in 1824 by French scientist Sadi Carnot, entropy is described as a system's loss of energy over time, its irreversible tendency towards loss, chaos and disorder. It was during World War II (a time of great loss and chaos) that Nobel prizewinning physicist Erwin Schrödinger identified a symmetrical thermodynamic force to entropy, a force present in living systems. Schrödinger wrote in his 1944 *What is Life?* of, 'an organism's astonishing gift of concentrating a stream of order on itself and thus escaping the decay into atomic chaos—of drinking orderliness from a suitable environment'.² Schrödinger named this energy negative entropy.

In 1941, Italian mathematician Luigi Fantappiè, working on parallel research, wrote: 'The law of life is not the law of hate, the law of force, or the law of mechanical causes; this is the law of non-life, the law of death, the law of entropy. The law which dominates life is the law of cooperation towards goals which are always higher . . . it does not move towards levelling and conforming, but towards higher forms of differentiation.'³ Fantappiè named this law syntropy.

Inspired by Fantappiè's work, Smuts-Kennedy explains how 'simply put, syntropy is the concentration of energy and life coming into being. Since coming to this understanding I have used my practice to research the intersection between energetic and biological systems at vastly different scales, from the garden, to the studio, to city-wide social sculptural interventions.'

In 2014, Smuts-Kennedy and Taarati Taiaroa conceived *The Park*, a year-long installation in Auckland's Victoria Park. Six beehives located in the park were accompanied by six pasture paintings—bee-friendly plantings around the periphery of the CBD. But in spite of becoming something of a spokesperson for apian wellbeing, Smuts-Kennedy acknowledges the choice as a strategic one. 'Bees have a long history of association with humans, and in some way are the easiest insect to connect with. Bees are an indicator species of ecosystem health. Beekeeping forces you into another kind of pace, the natural rhythm of the hive and the plants that feed it. Bees help people see the city in a new way, to gain a new understanding of the commons, of the urban spaces that we share with both the human and the non-human.'





(left) Newmarket & Parnell Primary Schools creating a Pollinator Sanctuary, Highwic House, 2017–19, with the support of Enviroschools

(below) SARAH SMUTS-KENNEDY *Heart Circuit* 2016
Copper, gold, silver & nickel

(opposite above) Time-lapsed drone footage over OMG, Auckland

(opposite below) SARAH SMUTS-KENNEDY
Joy Field—Journey Home Through the Wilderness, Karmic Pattern—April
2nd Sun Studio 2021
Pastel on paper, 1520 x 1070 mm.

It was through the now-disbanded Auckland Design Office that Smuts-Kennedy was offered a new commission, which evolved into the *For the Love of Bees* project.

While I describe myself as the vision-holder for this organisation, I made a rule that I couldn't make anything myself. All I could do was offer my enthusiasm and support to empower other people to become protagonists in creating a city safe for bees.

With Liz Allen, we conceived Griffith Gardens (2017–19) which occupied a vacant city carpark and became our first

Regenerative Learning Hub. Then came an opportunity to occupy another site uptown. This developed into OMG, an organic market garden selling veggie boxes direct to locals. Managed by artists and urban farmers Levi Brinsdon-Hall and Kathryn Tulloch, the project is a social sculpture modelling the capacity of food production to mitigate climate change, promote biodiversity and build community resilience—all while creating livelihoods for growers. A regenerative organic market garden is an everyday example of syntropy, of life coming into being, maturing and being returned to the soil. OMG is an experiment in reimagining commercial horticulture through urban food production. The project has expanded into the Urban Farmers' Alliance, a network of related initiatives throughout Aotearoa, and the Earthworkers Programme, a 50-hour course in repairing ecosystems through commercial food production—we call it 'growing radical hope through food'.

Environmental discourse can be austere and technocratic, leaving little space for pleasure or excess. Smuts-Kennedy recalls environmental philosopher Timothy Morton's notion of climate change or radioactive plutonium as hyper-objects. Hyper-objects are so massively distributed in time and space that their totality is not graspable in any localised sense. 'Perhaps my role is to make happier hyper-objects. I am co-opting the term to describe my desire to create



artefacts that might create balance and harmony. My practice considers the politics of care, drawing on alternative knowledge systems that I attempt to embody as a strategy for repair and regeneration.'

It was during a 2016 residency at McCahon House that Smuts-Kennedy began the *Joy Field* drawings she is still expanding on today. These pastel drawings on paper were initially produced in a single sitting, although now they can evolve over the course of weeks and months. The colours and their order of application were determined using a pendulum.

To make work beyond mind, it helps to have a mechanism to access knowledge beyond self. A pendulum is a limited tool. It can only give you a yes or a no to your own question. So it is as useful as your ability to ask useful questions, combined with your ability to not force the outcome. Art-making is a series of questions and answers between self. The pendulum gives me the ability to expand the range of my answers into my expanded sense of self.

In some ways this work is a continuation of the subtle circuits I was making with the wire works. Perhaps it's more plausible to accept those works as lines of energy, but I have come to think that the drawings are doing a similar thing. Each mark is a manifestation of energy that is channelled by me, expressed through each pigment's own complex chemical and geological history. I began this new body of work by closing my eyes. I noticed that when I opened them again I lost access to the mark-making that was flowing through me. My eyes would kick-start my critical thinking and I would instantly begin assessing the quality of the marks. As artists we have highly attuned visual training. Our eyes are the first tool for analysis, reading and accessing the world we live in and the work we make. But that thinking doesn't evoke what I am trying to give form. Visual perception often gets in the way. These days I have learnt how to observe the drawing emerging without my eyes overriding the flow. However, I often choose to work blind, so I can totally surrender to the process. And so rhythms, colour relationships and patterns emerge that surprise me.

The vibrating fields of marks in the *Joy Field* drawings recall Monet's late, shimmering and immersive water-lily paintings. The gestural marks could also be read as a seismographic record of a moment in time, or as tracings of neural pathways. Smuts-Kennedy describes them as transformational patterns, so you could also think of them as meditative objects, like haywire mandalas. The deliberate suspension of judging mind in their creation recalls both the surrealist practice of automatic drawing and spiritualism's attempts to connect with a zone beyond the living world through spirit writing or coded messages.

Smuts-Kennedy describes the motivation behind her wide-ranging practice—a practice that emanates out while also drawing in:

For me, art-making is a practice that gives us permission to explore new modes of thinking that may result in new ways of living. Imagination gives us access to experiencing life not just from our heads but also from our hearts. It gives us agency to perceive beyond the material world, to access concepts such as wonder, joy, bliss, love, harmony, trust and beauty. And when these qualities are abundant, then life occurs as generous, and fear finds it hard to get attention. Capitalism works against these fundamentally abundant energies, creating space for notions of accumulation, scarcity



and fear. Many of the things emerging in the world at this moment are driven by this. But I am not inspired by what these thoughts give rise to. So I spend a lot of time working with and within nature. Here I find easy access to the syntropic qualities which inspire me. The choice to create is my political act. The blessing is that it is also a spiritual act that gives me access back into the wider field from which I came and to which I will once again return.

1. Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, in conversation with the author, September 2021. All quotes by Smuts-Kennedy are taken from a series of conversations and email exchanges conducted with the author during September and October 2021.
2. Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1944, p. 27, available online at <http://www.whatislife.ie/schrodinger.htm>, accessed 10 October 2021.
3. Quoted in Ulisse de Corpo, *Life Energy, Syntropy, Complementarity and Resonance*, p. 26, available online at http://www.academia.edu/6209698/2013_08_Life_Energy_Syntropy_Complementarity_and_Resonance, accessed 10 October 2021.

Work by Sarah Smuts-Kennedy is included in *Energy Work: Kathy Barry / Sarah Smuts-Kennedy*, curated by Christina Barton, showing at Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Wellington, 9 July–25 September 2022.

