

Family

Hannah Ireland

Portraits



Hannah Ireland, *The Bridge to Kitchen Chairs*, 2024. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Have a look through Hannah Ireland's family album. Her parents pose proudly in *I Know a Place*, 2024. In *Tethered to You*, 2024, her sister sightlessly gazes into the distance and *Garden Beds : Woven Threads* 2024, shows the artist herself cradling her niece in a laundry basket. Several generations under one roof to which Ireland returns to document intimate moments of domestic life. There are also the koru motifs, symbols of creation, standing for whakapapa that extends beyond the present day.

In this body of work, Ireland constructs a metaphorical marae, a kāinga, a home. She describes 'a dwelling place carved out due to the severance of knowledge and the localisation of the family in a new urban environment,' and recalls 'jokingly nodding to the idea of us as a family unit creating /being a marae /dwelling'. Removed from her whenua, her building materials are dinner-table conversations and playing with the family cat. She takes the canvas apart and then stitches it back together, letting the lines of her mending dictate the painting's composition. Thus, the pictorial surface becomes the planks and bricks of her walls, and the koru motifs unite the canvases, stating the presence of tūpuna still felt despite the physical and temporal distance.

Ireland tells me she used photographs as source material for this series, but this doesn't make each painting an accurate depiction of reality. Unable to find a recent photo of her parents together, she stitched their portrait from separate photographs, and the references of the children are borrowed from different years, resulting in an impossible scene of mismatched ages. Ireland's paintings are not snapshots but composites, physically cut and pasted together.

After all, Ireland's practice has never been about realism. Her use of supports - most commonly, watercolour on glass, as seen in her 2023 exhibition *Running with Scissors* at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery - isn't the go-to for meticulous brushwork. Speaking about her characteristic slippery masked faces, she notes that they 'aren't necessarily somebody because I'm perceiving, I'm inferring'. The painting becomes 'its own entity' - a mixture of that 'somebody' and, through the acts of seeing and making, the artist herself.¹ And while this new body of work holds more representational detail, the figures are still left purposefully incomplete. Self-evidently, translucent figures with empty eye sockets do not claim to be detailed accounts of her family members. Instead, they are segmented, fuzzy memories of family life, vulnerable insights into Ireland's world that she still veils, keeping the audience at a safe distance. Ireland leaves the figures unfinished in an act of respectful humility, conscious of the many layers of interpretation through which she sees others. RMH

1. The Good Oil by Graeme Douglas, 'Hannah Ireland', 25 June 2023, <https://rss.com/podcasts/thegoodoil/1012262/>, accessed 8 June 2024.