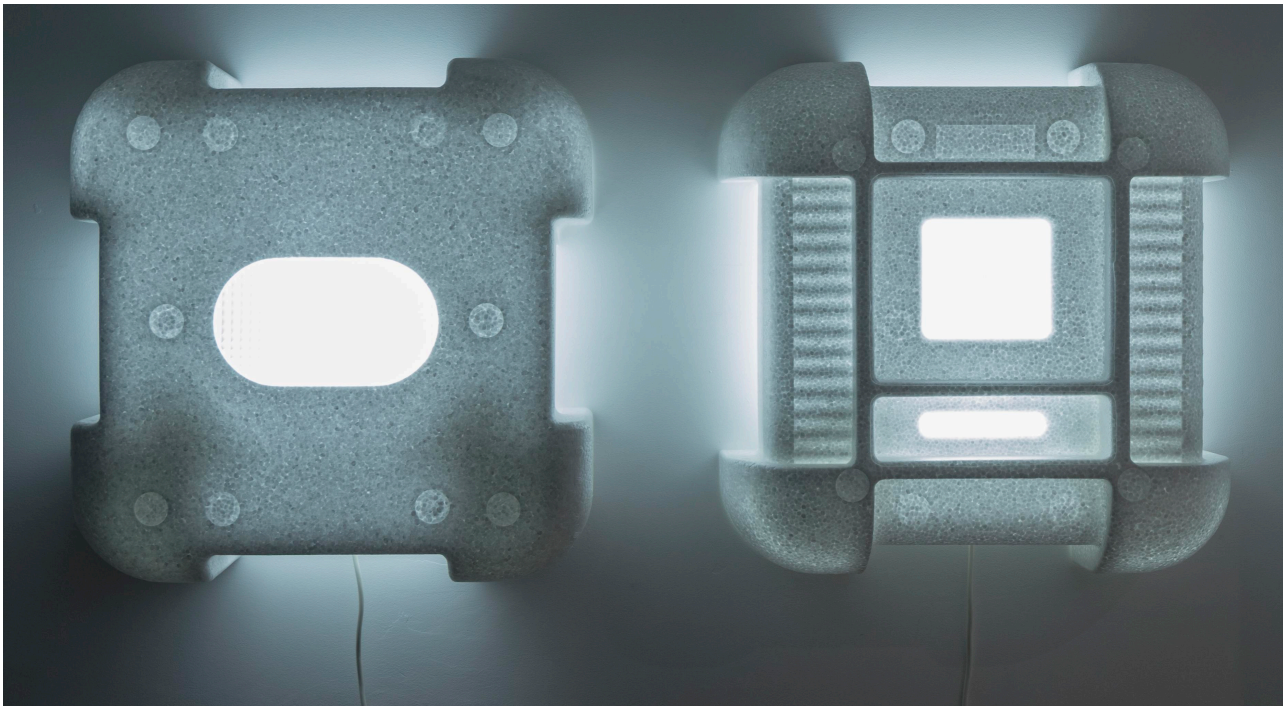
Stella Brennan in conversation with Hanna Scott and Hamish Coney

Trish Clark Gallery, 23 July 2022



Studio Monitor, 2000, polystyrene, acrylic and fluorescent light

TC: I'd just like to welcome everyone here today. I'm very struck, in welcoming Hamish Coney and Hanna Scott to the conversation with Stella, by the Artspace connection. Because here we've got three, either current or past, Artspace trustees. We've got an ex-Interim Director in Hanna, and that's where I first encountered Stella's work, in 1999 in her MFA show at Artspace. And I mean, I've seen a lot of shows around the world for many decades, and I still remember walking into that show, being taken up short and going, "God, she's good." I was stunned to find that it was in fact an MFA show, not someone of much greater years, and I have loved Stella's work ever since then. I think she's one of New Zealand's top artists.

SB: And you've spent a lot of time trying to convince others! Thank you for that.

TC: That is absolutely my pleasure Stella. This is my fourth solo exhibition with Stella since reopening the gallery in 2014. It's terrific that more of Stella's thinking will be pulled out and untangled by Hanna and Hamish, so thank you two for doing this.

HC: Nice to be here.

TC: And I'll leave everything now in the hands and mouths of these three wise people.

HS: E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e aku rangatira, tēnā koutou katoa. Nei ra te mihi kia koutou, kua tai mai ki raro i te kaupapa o Stella Brennan ngā mahi toi. Ko Hanna Scott tenei. Huri noa i te whare. Tēnā koutou katoa.
We had a quick confab about where we should start, and I suggested we should start with a work that is not here! So I'm holding this picture up, this is called *Studio Monitor*, it's an old work that dates from 2000. I have written about it before when I included it in a show I curated at the Govett Brewster Gallery called *In Glorious Dreams*. When Hamish was a trustee of Artspace he organised a fundraising auction for Artspace, and this work was in it, so I was asked to write about it again. All three of us are connected in a way through this work; that was really the starting point. So do you want to tell us a little bit about *Studio Monitor*?

SB: Well, I think *Studio Monitor* is quite obviously formally related to the *iBook Triptych*, hung over there to our right, and to the very viscerally appealing polystyrene design of the Apple corporation – all those nice soft curves. Investigation of technology's always been a cornerstone of my practice and both *Studio Monitor* and this work are about trying to unpack the technological commodity. This was my first or second laptop, a brand new computer, and back

in the day, it was incredibly expensive to buy a laptop. It was very aspirational, it was very exciting, and your heart beat faster as you took it out of the packaging. So both of those works are trying to capture the mystique of the brand new technical object.

iBook Triptych, 2002, composite digital prints

HS: Which one came first, *Studio Monitor* or the *iBook Triptych*? Because the polystyrene in *Studio Monitor* wasn't from your computer, this was when you were doing a residency at Waikato University, and it was just something bought for the department. I'm quite interested in the idea that you just accumulated someone else's trash.

SB: They still had the packaging in the original box, which I appropriated! It's very handy, because of course the artwork packs down beautifully into its original box. *iBook Triptych* was made later for Artspace Sydney.

HS: A year later.

SB: That work is more about thinking about the scale of desire, and also looking at NASA photos, trying to make a large-scale image out of domestic technology. So when we were hanging it, David, my husband was like, "Oh God, I remember all those things that we spent ages sticking together." It was a big job, using just a home scanner and a home printer and there was a lot of maths and there was a lot of swearing. But it's an attempt to try and depict that intimacy that you have with that technology – perhaps it would be more like that with your phone these days – but the intimacy you have with this object, cradling it and poking at it.

HS: I've never seen the *iBook Triptych* in the flesh till now, although I know it really quite well obviously, and I didn't appreciate its scale, so that was a revelation for me; knowing it from the time you made it, but not seeing it properly till now.

SB: If you keep on sticking pieces of A4 together, you'll eventually make something quite big!

HS: And I think the thing that struck me about both of these works is that they are so poignant now, because of how we've come to understand this material as being so deeply, deeply problematic from an environmental perspective, and those were ideas that you were interested in at the time. I think that was quite prescient.

SB: I think it's always been evident, but it's just unavoidable now.

HS: Unavoidable, yeah.

HC: He nui te honore ki ahau ki te noho kei mua i a koutou.
This show is a mini retrospective, so it gives us an opportunity to look back to this time that we've just been talking about, when technology was new and exciting and there was a sense of the future calling, and I think that your work, Stella, always feels like it's freighted with this nostalgia. In 2002, when these works were being prepared, that may not have been so intended, but it frames the way that we look at these works now, we're so sensitised to what packaging communicates. But I feel like as your career progressed, you've been able to understand the sense of nostalgia seeping into your work. There's a work here that I want to talk about in relation to that, *Every Room I've Ever Been In*. That's a very poignant work, because theoretically you will be making it for your entire lifetime, and so I really wanted to get inside *Every Room I've Ever Been In*. I'm presuming that you spend a lot of time at the key-cutters getting duplicate keys. The work has a future nostalgia, because every key comes with a memory that for you is very personal, whereas the packaging works are more emblematic, we can all relate to them. Many people have had a computer or unpacked a computer, and know that magical moment.

SB: The pentane smell.

HC: That smell and the plastic bag it comes in, you open it all up and it's lovely and pristine and then you get biscuit crumbs on it by midday. But I want to talk about this work *Every Room I've Ever Been In*; you started that in 2012. At that point, I presume, if we're going to play this game, there were a few keys there and it's grown over time. Can you tell us about the intent of the work, what's the word I'm looking for… the futurology of it? A lot of these works now have nostalgia baked into them, that work has the future baked into it.

every room I have ever been in, 2012, mixed media

SB: The origin of that work was very personal, because when my parents died, I spent a year going through all of their personal effects and geez; they had a lot of keys! Part of that is economic and part of it is about class. If you have a key to something, then you have some ownership. There's a privilege in having the keys to the kingdom. But also there's an anxiety about a drawer full of keys, when you don't really know what they open, or whose they are, or where they came from and do you need to keep them? So that's a very personal collection of objects that I've inherited.

I was talking to Hanna about the embroidery, which was a test sample for that larger work, the stitch-for-pixel needlepoint of my computer desktop, which will be on show at Gus Fisher next week. I gave that sampler to my mother because she helped me make that work, and then I inherited it back again when she died, so I had given it and then I received it back again. So

there's something quite personal about all of those things, but I think with the keys, we can all relate to them. The key ring that just keeps on weighing your clothes down. You feel like it's an anchor, but maybe it's a dead weight as well.

HC: That's a nice way to understand the work and I want to connect that to this work *The Bones of a Painting* as well, because that is also about family.

SB: Oh yeah. I went to visit my uncle, who's in his nineties. I'd seen this painting many times before, but somehow on this particular day, the painting caught my eye, because it was a really strange mix of English Romanticism and that picture that you've seen a million times before, a couple of sailboats in front of Rangitoto; so I asked: “Uncle Peter, can you tell me about that picture?” and because he's in his nineties, he just went, "Take it." And so I took it, and he was able to give me a few little clues about the female relative who painted it. When I Googled her name, I got this amazing photograph of the class of 1897 at Elam, a photo of the female painting students. So I learnt that Louise Laurent, my great-great-aunt was a painter, she went to Elam and this was one of the works that she produced. Then she got married and had five children and didn't do a lot of painting after that. I was really struck by this photograph of these women, it was a beautiful staged studio portrait: someone was holding a palette, and someone was holding a mahl stick and there are fake columns in the back with fake ivy on them. Such an arresting image, and also such a strange discovery that this person who I had no knowledge of prior to Googling her name, had actually attended the same art school I did some hundred and something years later.

Background: *The Bones of a Picture*, 2020, photograph and x-ray prints, with thanks to David Perry*;* Foreground: *Underneath*, 2012, polyester, cotton, fabric dye

So, I took the painting, and because my partner is a radiologist, I have all of this lovely access to all kinds of imaging equipment, and I asked him to x-ray the painting. He'd actually brought home some x-rays that had been done of some Frances Hodgkin's paintings to show me, so he inspired

this idea of subjecting the painting to an x-ray, which is a conservation technique. I rang Sarah Hillary, Painting Conservator at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki up and asked, "Sarah, under what conditions, why would it be that you would x-ray a painting?" She explained to me what the processes were and why you might be interested in doing that. Conservators might suspect there might be under-painting because often artists would scrape back unsuccessful canvases and paint over the top of them. I didn't think it was going to be the case with this, but it's quite an interesting image because you can see little compositional changes that have been made, and I think it's also really interesting because of the age of the painting. This was back when they used white lead for paint, which isn't used any more, because of its toxicity. So you can see the image, because all of the pale areas are radio-opaque because they're made of white lead.

Detail: *The Bones of a Picture* (x-ray), 2020

It's quite a small painting and I like making it a bit more grandiose. I was also really surprised to learn that the ivy-covered stone church in the picture was a real church, not a romantic invention. I don't know if you remember the picture of Judith Collins praying before the previous election, but she was praying in the rebuild of this particular church. It was on the foreshore at Kohimarama. It was built by very enthusiastic settlers who used beach sand for the mortar. If you know anything about cement, concrete and salt is not a great combo and so it fell down. It started falling down pretty much as soon as it was built and was a ruin on the foreshore for 50 or 60 years.

HS: So I think you just exposed something really interesting there, the forensic nature of your work a lot of the time. So do you want to tell us a little bit about the research that you do?

SB: Oh the research.

HS: Yeah.

SB: Well, I often have this conversation with Trish in the midst of researching something, it's like, okay, we've got the research. How to now not make a social studies project? Because you can do a lot of research but then you have to transition to making an interesting artwork out of all the research that you've accumulated. You have to murder a lot of darlings to get to that point. I've always felt very privileged to be an artist because when you're an artist you're allowed to be interested in anything and you're allowed to do anything badly, so you can develop an amateur interest in particle physics and you can make bad chromatography devices, and you can be a part-time amateur painting conservator, and you can make photomontages for NASA on the sly, maybe.

HS: And you can make that tax deductible.

SB: Oh true.

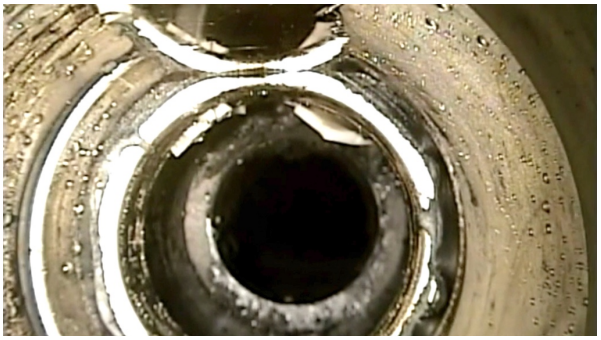
HC: That's one of the good things about being an artist or a writer, everything's deductible: it's all research. This idea of the social studies project, which is where research begins, if you remember at school, I don't know, second form, you're given a random country to research, remember? And you get your book and you do the name of the country and the colours of the flag.

SB: We had to do the New Zealand Fishing Industry. It was so terrible.

HC: So how do you move your practice? You've got vast hay bales of research; what do you inoculate it with? Do you inoculate it with the deeply personal? Because in the couple of the works that we have discussed in this room, what I'm hearing is that the activating agent is your personal relationship to what may appear to be a common object. Computer packaging, keys, a family heirloom painting. Something which doesn't turn out to be a junk shop find, it turns out to be something that sits within your own whakapapa that is spookily connected to your life choices. You're doing your social studies, you are finding the emblematic and then winnowing it down to that moment where you can spin a top on it, and that top is your own personal connection to the social studies. When you are in the research phase, how do you know that there's that sweet spot, that moment where there's something genuine and real that you can inoculate into transient packaging that is there to be thrown away. What is that you're looking for in your material?

SB: I think anxiety is a very good prompt for research for me, it's like, oh, I feel really anxious

about all of this material that just gets used and thrown away. Or with this work *Underneath*, I feel really anxious about having a small child that wakes up at four o'clock every morning and throws up all the time. I find anxiety is a question. So if something makes me worry or promotes a question, then trying to find out more doesn't necessarily allay the anxiety, but allows you to unpack its mechanism a little bit. For instance, with *The Pacific Century*, trying to understand radiation, understand in a quite physical sense what that is, how it affects the body, how you can possibly depict it; that was me dealing with my anxiety about our geopolitical moment. Having made the work doesn't necessarily make that anxiety disappear, but it is a gateway into some pretty gnarly stuff.



The Pacific Century (still), 2018, single channel video, duration: 12:59

HC: So this exhibition is like a taxonomy of anxiety over a 20-year period?

SB: Yeah. It's me hiding under that blanket on the floor over there.

HC: Well, I mean that's lovely. It's confessional. So without asking you to give away too many trade secrets, what are potentially some anxieties that are hoving-to on the horizon that you can see will inform your work in the future?

SB: Well, Trish had been asking, "What's the new project, what's the new show?" for a couple of years and I'm replying, "Hmm, give me a bit more time." And then about six weeks ago, she said, "How about we just use existing work?" And my reply was, "Yes, let's do that!" And two and a half weeks later we had a show. We went around and woke up all the works that have been in boxes and sleeping for quite some time. But now that these things are out here, I've been able to start making new work. But the new work comes from finding out about Louise Laurent and her sisters and her mother, really interesting women, who had pretty amazing lives. I was able to locate a second cousin who had for some reason, when Louise died, rescued all of these glass plate negatives that were taken by Louise's husband, father of her five children. And he very kindly shared them with me. And so I've been scanning them. Because they're negatives and they're very old, very damaged negatives, I have no idea what's in the photographs until I actually start processing them. So that has been a nicely un-anxious process because of what I know about these women's lives and their whole process of immigration to Aotearoa. My great-great-grandmother was a pregnant solo mother, stepping onto a boat with her three daughters in Adelaide and coming to New Zealand. It's like, well, if she can do that…
The first time I showed *The Bones of a Painting*, at mothermother gallery, I also had the pages from the 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition that Louise Laurent's sister and mother signed, so there's still quite a lot of social studies in there, but also trying to gain an understanding of history. It does help to have an emotional connection to that spiral of remembrance, to thinking about those people whose lives were different, but also very similar. And there's something very spooky about a long-dead relative's face swimming out of a blurry silvered piece of glass.

HC: These are what? Old five by four glass plates.

SB: They're quarter plates. Yeah, they're three by fours.

HC: I've got another question that is completely different, but I wouldn't mind coming back to the early art school photos of Louise.

SB: My great-great-aunt, but not by blood, on my father's side. My grandmother was adopted, so she's my relative, but she's my adopted relative. So let's go nurture, not nature.

HC: So, I was having a read of this *0–10* book you published in 2005, and there was a comment from Robert Leonard. It says, "Brennan maps modern times from a postmodern vantage point." And 15, 16 years on from that, postmodernism has gone from the new theoretical framework to potentially the dustbin of history; so my question to you is, was that a fair statement then? And if we are looking at your work now, is there another set of ideas that you are thinking about through your work?

SB: I think my interest in unpacking the modernist project has extended further back into history. And again, in terms of genealogical research, to try and understand the grand colonial projects and also the birth of industrialism, the enclosure of the commons, it goes back to the 1500s?

My questions used to go back to the invention of the movie camera and the locomotive, but they go back further now, because the world that we are living in is a world that started being built a very long time ago.
And if we want to build another world, we have to scurry around in the basement and try and work out how we get there.

HS: For me, science fiction has always been something that you and I have come together on, and is something that informs, I think, a lot of your practice. I think that idea of nostalgia for the future is inherently science fiction, a tool.

SB: It comes from Frederick Jameson, who's a Marxist philosopher. He talks about science fiction as a history of the present; a distancing mechanism.

HS: That's exactly what this is. Yeah. When I first met you, it was also through that same show that Trish spoke about in her introduction. Shortly after I came to Artspace and we were working jointly on the *Dirty Pixels* show. You were going to show that exhibition at Artspace when I was the Director, so we were working on that. And also at that time I inherited some projects from Robert Leonard, I was editing the *Action Replay* catalogue, which I think you were helping with? So I see your work through that Post Object art lens just by way of historical accident, because I met you and your practice when we were working quite intensively together on these two projects. And that starts me thinking about an artistic whakapapa. I'm thinking about John Baldessari and Christopher Williams and Robert Smithson and those kinds of people – all men – and actually the essays in the *0-10* book are written by men. And so I wanted to ask you about a specifically female artistic whakapapa for your practice in that Post Object environment. A really hard question!

SB: Well, I studied sculpture because I found it the most difficult. I have terrible spatial reasoning skills and was always really surprised by physical relationships between objects. Sculpture is a very powerful tool for understanding the world of objects. And the world of objects that we inhabit largely now is the world of mass produced industrial objects. In terms of Post Object practice, Christine Hellyar taught me at art school. And I think it's Jim Allen's hundredth birthday today. Happy birthday Jim Allen! He never taught me directly, but the more I understand about his work and his training, the more I was able to see the reflections of that in the teaching environment that I came through. And also Phil Dadson was teaching me there, though I wasn't in his department specifically. I mean, I didn't know much about those Post Object works till I started actually going through those texts with a fine comb. And I think the work made by women at that time is also still quite unknown.

HS: Yes.

SB: Tina Barton's been doing a lot of work on Vivian Lynn, and I always had a bit of a soft spot for et al. In terms of local examples, I mean, Judy Darragh, she's always been an inspiration. But I think I'm still understanding those historical practices. And I think that's some of the work that we've been doing with mothermother, such as in writing an essay contextualising that collective, which I'm part of, going back to the Women's Gallery. I previously had known nothing about its existence in Wellington from what, the early to the mid 1980s?

HS: It has a fantastic archive.

SB: Yeah. So I've done a bit of looking into that, but I still feel like I don't really know that much and I still feel like I need to uncover that history, because otherwise you just end up repeating yourself. That's what's been really interesting working with Natalie Tozer and mothermother, understanding that there's actually this great history that it's not that easy to access.

HS: I did a lecture at Elam a while ago, a talk about feminist practice to a generation of students who would not identify with the period of feminism that I grew up in. And so they were given this exercise, basically a statistical analysis to go through auction catalogues, look at the number of men, the number of women; someone else had to go and look at the dealer market and look at the number of represented artists, men, women; someone else had to go to museum collections, count men, count women. So they looked at all the sectors of what we know of as the market, and it was deeply sobering. And they came away with fresh food for thought. No wonder.

SB: Well, the Guerilla Girls had that show here. They did a gender breakdown of Auckland Art Gallery's exhibitions. It wasn't very impressive, shall we say.

HS: So, interestingly, dealer galleries run by women tend to have more equal representation.

SB: And to talk about influences, the *Pleasures and Dangers* book that Trish Clark was involved in putting together, and *A Women's Picture Book*, which I didn't realise at the time was produced by the Women's Gallery; both of those were in the art room at my high school.

HS: Right.

SB: But when I was researching the mothermother essay, I went back and found the catalogue for Allie Eagle's *Six Women Artists* show in 1975 at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, which was very influential. Allie passed away a couple of months ago, but it was really interesting to see how she framed that show, the first self-consciously feminist show at that time.

TC: When we did *Pleasures and Dangers*, people wanted to subtitle it 'Eight Women Artists', and I said, "No way. You wouldn't put 'Eight Men Artists' as the subtitle of a book."

SB: Well now we understand more that 'women' is a complex category. So now, how do we negotiate that in a way that also includes everybody?

HC: I grew up, personally, in the space of Broadsheet magazine. My mother was the editor for many, many, many years. So I spent a lot of time personally with Allie Eagle, a young boy in what was fundamentally a female environment. In fact, I was like the mascot. I got magazines and there were always nice biscuits. So I knew artists like Allie Eagle.
There was another artist I was in awe of, both as a personality and as an artist, because she was a mad, fantastic drawer, and I was so keen on drawing as a boy. That was Claudia Pond-Eyley. And the connection I made to her recently was as a decisive character in relationship to Robin White. And there she is, as a friend, as subject matter, as a mentor, as a lifeline, as a collegial peer to Robin White.
And I feel that these archives almost get closed, and it takes the death of an Allie Eagle for suddenly people to go, "Oh my God! Hey, Allie Eagle was an artist of some 40 years-plus standing." I remember doing summer schools with Allie Eagle, so she had very many ways of connecting with all sorts of different people in all sorts of different ways. So there is an archival job with some of those artists from that period, finding a new voice for them.

SB: Allie had a very interesting recent relationship with the gallery Mokopōpaki.

HS: I'm interested in this idea that I think, again, is one of the organising tropes I see reappearing in your work. It's this corruptibility of all things, this idea of entropy, or that play between purity and entropy. It feels like a narrative that lives in a lot of your practice. So where does that come from?

SB: Well, that was the modern dream, wasn't it? Perfectibility. And that's the reason why we have all these persistent materials that are getting into our blood streams. Plastic – it seemed like such a great idea at the time. And I remember when I did the *Nostalgia for the Future* show in 1999, I went to visit Mikala Dwyer in Sydney, to interview her and help her install an exhibition.

HS: She was one of the whakapapa artists I was thinking of.

SB: Yeah. And I interviewed her and I put it in the catalogue. She was talking about her origins, how her dad was an industrial chemist. And she was saying, yes, he invented this polymer that they use for uranium mining.

HS: For the audience, Mikala makes the nail polish paintings, right?

SB: Nail Polish Paintings. Oh yeah, she makes really deliberately crappy modernist sculpture.

HS: Fake fur.

SB: Fake fur and plasticine and pantyhose, she's awesome.

HS: Sorry, I took you off track.

SB: No, just that Mikala was describing that moment when you find a piece of plastic on the beach: is it a beautiful thing or a terrible thing? Mikala spoke about this in 1999 and she saw it as beautiful. I wonder what her answer would be now? And I'd be interested to know what her take on those materials is now because she was very much about redeeming or valuing them. There's a really beautiful Anni Albers quote where she talks about the sign of the hand and she asks – what is it like when you are walking on the beach and you find a button on the shore? I thought about that, and then after thinking about it for quite a while, I realised that when she'd been writing this text – of course, buttons were made out of seashells, buttons weren't plastic! So you walk on the beach and you find this button and it's a seashell that's been formed. Whereas you walk on the beach and you find a button now, and it's like, "Oh, what bird's guts is that out of?" But this is the world we live in. And how do we hold that moment and how do we not be overwhelmed by it? I think I feel an obligation to be more optimistic in my work these days, because doom and gloom is easy.

HS: So, what does this work with the nested zip lock bags do then?

Dark Universe / Light Universe, 2005/2022, Ilford Gallerie smooth pearl

SB: Hmm… I've actually still got a lot of those bags.

HS: Where'd they come from?

SB: I don't even think that shop's around anymore, but I still have all the plastic bags in a little drawer. I realised when I was going through the images of the bags for this show, I had more plastic bags, and more scans of plastic bags. That's only five, but I went up to, I think eight plastic bags nested inside each other. I like them because they all talk about particular objects that they might contain, from cocaine up to sandwiches and your sports shoes. But there is in those ordinary objects that desire, it's this desire to preserve and protect and make immortal in a very ordinary way.

HS: I kept thinking about Robert Smithson, *The descending spiral.*

SB: The Fibonacci Sequence!

TC: Have we got a question from the floor?

SB: Since all you lovely people have said no to the only sunny day in the last million years, thank you for that!

Emily Gardener: I have a question about the poetry in your work?

HS: Poetry scares me, but…

SB: Yeah, me too.

HS: But you're inherently an amazing writer.

SB: I have to put words in everything.

HS: And you're inherently a writer and that's how we, I think became as close as we did, because we were co-editing in parallel. And I have very much admired your ability as a writer and as a curator, as someone who does both as well. I don't do the art though.

SB: That's the funnest bit though!

HS: Hah! So tell us about poetry, why does it scare you?

SB: I think, because it can seem really remote and self-aggrandising. But my video works are always extremely wordy. And the *Israeli Army Blanket* has that idea of embedding a commentary about the object into that object. I always feel quite bad destroying blankets. I've got a large collection of blankets, but I haven't been brave enough or cold-hearted enough to attack any more with lasers yet. But for me, the question is, does the commentary about the object exist separately from it? What happens if you extract those words from the object, which you can very easily? So I'm afraid I don't really have a great answer for poetry.

Israeli Army Blanket, 2020, wool, laser cut text

HS: I find it really interesting going back to that moment at Artspace where you were doing the *Nostalgia for the Future* show and you got a lot of flak for that. I walked into that.

SB: Into the crossfire…

HS: Yeah. Into that environment and went, wow, this is really visceral. It was actually quite ugly.

SB: Yes. I was being pulled between Robert Leonard and Peter Shand.

HC: Is this because of it being your Master's exhibition and being a group show?

SB: I'm still recovering.

HC: So here we are, 20 something years later and we still, all of us, one way or another, have quite a close relationship with Artspace. It's a perpetual love/hate type of a thing, mostly love, but when the hate springs up, a good solid dose of that as well! Artspace is always poking away, that's its job, at those raw emotions and more visceral responses to 'What is art? What is the role of art? What should it be doing? What is it doing that it shouldn't be doing? What should it be doing that it isn't doing right now?' That's what Artspace is for, to have that discourse. So let's go right back there, what was the moment of tension or anxiety around that show? Because that's you in your MFA year presenting a group show. And one of the things I found really interesting about you talking about each of these works, and your personal connection to images and objects, is that it seems at first really intimate, but then the individual, your personality, is pointedly evacuated. But then you have also found ways to get yourself in there. *Nostalgia for the Future* of course had that wonderful Guy Ngan Mural for the Newton Post Office, which was recently reinstalled again at Artspace, at the moment when he finally gets a solo show.

SB: And in whose honour I burnt some more fabric.

HC: Yes. In *Work for Stairwell*. What was the point of contention then around *Nostalgia for the Future*? Can you recall?

HS: I'll rescue you from that one with my own question! What I was going to ask was about the way you are prompted to contextualise your own practice.

SB: Which is my problem.

HS: That's what I felt that MFA show did for you. And I think there was a general absence that meant that had to take place. And I think that's also part of why you are so articulate as a writer and a curator and why that becomes so necessary.

SB: It's also problematic because other people like to have the last word; curators like to have the last word.

HS: Oh, you can only be on one side of the fence. Professional curators can't work in dealer galleries. That's another fence that you're not allowed to cross.

SB: Yeah. The art world is a small world, but it's got lots of boundaries.

HC: It's like a checkerboard.

HS: I've had that experience with you when I've been writing about your work, for example. You are also a fantastic editor and you've fulfilled that role for me on a number of occasions. And I sent you a text in which I described your work and you wrote back to me with some wonderful insights and that was a very exciting process. But I remember thanking you and you said, "Well, I am a bit of an expert in my own work", which could sound conceited, but it's actually not. Well, who else would you expect to be the expert in your own practice? So I think that is a failure of art history in a way, around a specifically female kind of practice. Not the only failure, but it's a kind of failure when you're forced to contextualise your own practice, because there is just a dearth of other options!

SB: Well, it's like vanity publishing. I mean, this book here, *0–10*, is a kind of vanity publishing, but if I didn't, who would? I think there's this great masculine image of the artist who is wild and expressive and inarticulate. But as a mid-career female artist, if you're wild, expressive and inarticulate, people just think you're a crazy old lady.

HS: I'm thinking of Giovanni Intra as someone who was writer, curator and artist, who occupied similar territory but…

SB: But he was much more rock and roll.

HS: Yeah. But he did not get the backlash.

SB: Yes, because you're allowed to be a smartarse young man. It's not really considered nice to be a smartarse young woman…

HC: I like a good smartarse; I don't care where they come from.

SB: Gender neutral smartarses, hmmm.

Emily Gardener: Hamish, you were going to come back to a final question?

HC: It was provoked by an Instagram post by Scott Pothan, that same image of that group of Elam students from 1887. And the bit that really

tweaked my imagination was that the central figure was called Jane Eyre. But also, there would've been seven or eight female students, and there was only one guy.

SB: He was the director of the school. See, I know this image very well. It's held at the Hocken Library.

HC: That's my question. Can you talk about that photo?

SB: That photo? Yeah, I'd love to.

HC: We project onto the distant and the recent past our own frame of reference of what the past is. And frequently, we even think we've got the past under control and that now we are moving in some trajectory to revolution or decolonization or whatever the designation.

SB: Oh, the modern myth of progress.

HC: Exactly. And then the past reveals itself to have a whole lot more nuance to it, a whole lot more interesting things that can be unpacked and discovered. I confess I'm right in that space, and it seems to me that you are moving into that space – it may just be a function of aging! Can you talk a little bit about your practice now moving into the past, what is it that either you are finding or are looking for?

SB: I don't think it pays to be too romantic about the past. If you are African American, there's the historical trauma of slavery. Or if you are a Pākeha female in the 1880s you had no political rights or even legal property rights. But then, this is why I'm heading back, much further back. Where did all this private property stuff, slavery, global capitalism... it must have started at some point. When was that? How did it begin? There's a really awesome book, which I tell everyone that they have to read, called *Caliban and the Witch*.

HS: Yes. That's the best book. Read it.

HC: What's it called? *Caliban*…?

HS: *Caliban and the Witch*.

Judy Darragh: The history of the commons overlaid with the history of burning witches…

HS: All the important stuff that Marx didn't deal with basically.

SB: The author Silvia Federici is an Italian feminist; she started the wages for housework movement back in the 1970s. If you're a bit of a Marxist, it's a must read. So when I read that book, it was like, okay, now I understand everything. It's a very deep history and it's also a very deep trauma. When she talks about what actually occurred in the witch trials and the incredible violence and fear that was instilled in women, it's just like, oh wow, we're still inheritors of that violence, and then it just spread out globally.

HC: So you're going past the 1890s. That's effectively going what, into the medieval period?

SB: Yeah. The enclosure of the commons was really the end of the medieval period. But then going back to Elam in the 1890s, how does my female relative come to be there? When I was doing this family history research, I found this professional historian, who'd been researching my great-great-great-grandmother and one of her other daughters, Louise Laurent's sister, Lottie Diamond. And he has this great theory that the family left France because they were in the Paris Commune and they fled arrest and execution. Louise's father abandoned the family in 1880 to go back to France, the year the Communards were pardoned. So I love his theory that the Paris Commune is what launched these people across the world. The Paris Commune that inspired Karl Marx. I'd love it to be true. It's very unprovable.

HS: Another grand theory.

SB: But here was the thing about art school back then. Elam wasn't an elite finishing school. It was a practical training for, largely, women, who would go out to be employed. And Louise was recorded on the census after she left Elam as a photo retoucher.

HS: Yeah. It was a trade school.

HC: Do we have any questions from the floor?

HS: You've got your homework. Go buy *Caliban and the Witch*, read it. There will be a test later. When we were talking before the audience arrived, I was thinking about how the three of us came to be here. I was thinking, isn't that a coincidence, all three of us are, to be polite, bookish – I was trying to avoid using the word 'nerdy'.

SB: I like the term 'bibliophiles'.

HS: That's the one. Yes. I don't think it's an accident.

SB: Yeah. Well, books are patient. Just the beautiful happenstance of all the stuff that

resurfaces in the books that you buy at the local op shop, and then you come to read them some time after and – this is the perfect book.

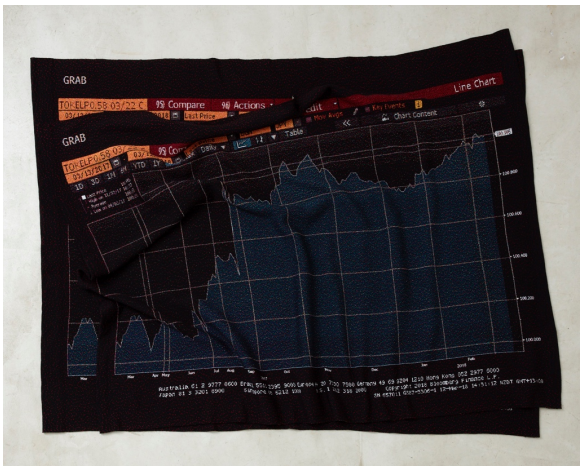
HS: Divine intervention.

SB: When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

TC: Absolutely.

TC: Okay, is there one last question?

Lois Perry: Can I ask about the doubling up of the *Tepco Blanket* works on the floor over there?



Tepco Bond Blankets (Security Description), 2018, merino wool and cotton, two blankets

SB: Well, we had to make two to get it right. So the one underneath is a bit less perfect than the one on top. But if you think of, back in the day before the invention of the duvet, you'd have a couple of blankets, layer them up: sheet, two blankets. Formally, it gives them a bit more substance but it's also how we practically use them. But also, I've made two of these bloody things that are very expensive and difficult to make. So I'm going to show you both of them. It's also a suggestion of the mass object, that's something I'm always interested in. They are a one-off individual, never-to-be-repeated thing; but in theory we could have knitted 200. I didn't though because they were really expensive and difficult! But back to when I was talking about the objects that we find ourselves in constant contact with in the contemporary world… if you think about the things that you are wearing, the things you've got in your pockets: very few of those things would have been crafted by a single individual from start to finish, and very few of them would be unique or completely different from every other object.

Lois Perry: Sorry. I'm not sure the doubling says that. It seems as if the doubling should be embedded in what's going on in the image itself.

HS: Are you talking about layers or the fact that it's two of them?

Lois Perry: The fact that there are two, that they're doubled.

SB: Well, I think it's bloody mindedness, that I've made these things at great trouble and expense. But just from a practical sense, if you just had a single one on the floor, it wouldn't feel as full or as dense. So it's a practical aesthetic solution, which I'm then retrofitting justifications onto! It is definitely that this is a mass object, but also an individual thing capturing a moment that can never be reproduced.

Lois Perry: That's good. That fits.

SB: Okay. Thanks. I hate to disappoint you.

TC: If there are no more questions, I'd like to thank you three for joining us.

HC: Thank you.

TC: And thanks too to everybody else. Can we all put our hands together for Stella, Hanna and Hamish?

Speaker Profiles

Stella Brennan

Stella Brennan has exhibited in New Zealand and internationally and been awarded Residencies including at Apex Arts, New York and Artspace, Sydney. She is a Trustee of Artspace Aotearoa. Brennan co-founded Aotearoa Digital Arts and co-edited the Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader, the first comprehensive text on digital arts practice in New Zealand.

Hamish Coney

Hamish Coney is an art advisor, award-winning writer, and Trustee of Artspace Aotearoa. He was the Founding Managing Director of the auction house Art+Object. Coney has provided valuations and consultancy to many of New Zealand's public galleries including Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Museum, Auckland Council, The Auckland Art Gallery and more.

Hanna Scott

Hanna Scott is a contemporary art curator and writer, who ran Artspace Aotearoa as interim Director in 2002, and for eight years was Senior Programme Leader, Arts and Culture, at Auckland Council. Scott is currently Public Programmes Manager at MOTAT.