

LAST SEEN:

Protest Banner Portraits of the Escapee Menagerie

It all started with a leopard.

While researching a female leopard who escaped Auckland Zoo in 1925, I came across a NZ Herald article describing the fugitive. While her male companion who stayed safely behind bars was described as “extremely tame”, the escapee was criticised for having “a very nasty temper”. I assumed this was a historical one off, but the more I researched the more I discovered an archive of consistently gendered escape language over more than a century of reportage. Male animal escapees were framed as ‘curious’, ‘intelligent’, ‘benevolent’ and ‘happy as Larry’, while female escapees were ‘feisty’, ‘nasty’ and ‘a handful’. I was surprised by the sheer volume of escapes I uncovered around Aotearoa, so I decided to explore this further and bring these animals back into visibility.

THE PORTRAITS

Every portrait in LAST SEEN is drawn directly from photographs of the animals themselves, most often the last known image before they escaped. And almost all of them are life sized because this forces us to reckon with their actual presence in the world, rather than simply a figure to dismiss, describe as difficult or fear as dangerous. All portraits are rendered in black, white and grey calling to mind CCTV footage or wanted posters. These animals are treated by the media as fugitives to be surveilled and catalogued. The grey scale palette honours that framing and subverts it, turning wanted posters into memorials and instant surveillance images into slow portraits made with care.

Every portrait is hand stitched from reclaimed synthetic fast fashion garments and textiles, sourced from op shops and remnant stores. Fast fashion is widely derided, produced at enormous volume, often worn one or not at all, then discarded. Yet at the same time they are products of nature, derived from fossil fuels that have taken millenia to form, extracted from deep in the earth to be spun into fabric and worn briefly. They are also made by human hands, predominantly the hands of women working in precarious conditions within global systems that render their labour largely invisible. Bringing these fabrics onto a gallery wall is an act of honouring and witnessing. Every synthetic scrap carries within it a history of resource extraction, of skilled labour, of someone’s working life.

Each portrait is laid on a bed of hessian, returning these animals, at least in material terms, to something closer to nature. Hessian is fragile, it frays and the use of it in these works speaks to the ecosystems that these animals were taken from, habitats that are themselves fraying under the pressures of extraction, pollution and perpetual growth.

THE MAKING

I am entangled within new materialist/ animist/ wairuatanga frameworks, ways of understanding the world in which all matter is active and alive with its own tendencies and resistances. I felt this profoundly in the studio while I was ‘making with’ these materials. Certain fabrics refused to participate in certain portraits and others couldn’t wait to become an octopus, or a bear or a bird. I would move from garment to garment until I found the material that wanted to be there. It’s a way of working that takes materials seriously as participants, rather than merely tools to be used. These fabrics already carry within them histories of extraction, labour and women’s exploited hands across global systems of production. They arrived in my studio having already journeyed vast distances. The making became a collaboration between those histories and my own hands and I tried to remain open to what the materials were asking of me, rather than simply imposing my will on them.

THE REPORTAGE

Each banner carries language drawn directly from media reportage and are the actual highly gendered words used to describe these animals by reporters, zoo staff and rescuers alike. At first I was enraged by these, but the longer I worked alongside them, their meanings began to shift and what started as insults became badges of honour. Who wouldn't want to be 'a handful' or have 'a nasty temper' when you'd been taken away from home then caged, crated and controlled over thousands of miles of ocean?

THE BANNER FORM

The protest banner is a form that carries a lineage. Roziska Parker's foundational text *The Subversive Stitch*, traced how textile arts were systematically dismissed and feminised, characterised as mindless and decorative precisely to keep women's hands busy and their voices quiet. And then women turned that same craft into the most visible and collective form of political resistance available to them.

As Mary Lowndes, founder of the Artists' Suffrage League, wrote of banners in 1909;
"They are things to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to half show and half conceal, a device you long to unravel. You do not want to read a banner, you want to worship it."

This quality of revelation and concealment is central to *LAST SEEN*. The velvet backings, the fringing, the overwhelming synthetic trims are almost suffocating in their fecundity, deliberately evoking the crowded and overwhelmingly stimulated environment we all currently inhabit, wash in synthetic and energetic excesses. The fringing in particular subverts the traditional banner vernacular. Where fringing would conventionally sit at the edges, here it often invades the image plane, creeping across the work like the patriarchal systems it references, concealing and revealing in equal measure.

I grew fond of each animal under my care during this process, spending long hours with their photographs, stitching their likenesses from discarded cloth and learning their stories. Jamuna the elephant who broke free and sent the entire night shift staff scrambling on top of the boilers to safety, Inky the octopus who slipped 50m through a drainpipe out to the freedom of the ocean, Tommy the spider monkey who disappeared into a Taranaki storm and was never seen again.

These animals escaped and the language used to describe them held them captive again. *LAST SEEN* asks what it means to be captive, who gets to decide and whether the systems that confine animals in artificial habitats are really so different from the systems that confine natural resources within systems of extraction and profit, or confine women within global industries of exploitative production.

Where suffrage banners once demanded political freedom, these banners ask what freedom looks like now, within the polycrisis, enduring patriarchal structures and a world awash with excess.

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