

# Zac Langdon-Pole

**Michael Lett**  
312 Karangahape Road  
Cnr K Rd & East St  
PO Box 68287 Victoria St West  
Auckland 1010  
New Zealand  
P+ 64 9 309 7848  
[contact@michaellett.com](mailto:contact@michaellett.com)  
[www.michaellett.com](http://www.michaellett.com)



Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Breath as Breath*  
2020

(film, 11min 38secs)

Music by Samuel Holloway.  
Installation view, 'Lines of Flight' CIAP Vassivière  
Photo by Aurélien Mole.



Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Punctatum*  
2017  
(Anobium punctatum (woodworm) ridden long-case clock, music shelf, and letter  
desk from Aotearoa New Zealand, restored with 24 carat gold)  
Installation view 'Lines of Flight,' exhibition view, CIAP Vassivière, 2022  
Photo: © Aurélien Mole



Zac Langdon Pole  
*Translatio Studii* (*No such thing as Western Civilisation*)  
2020  
(ceramic fragments, brass staples  
73 x 173 x 186mm)



Zac Langdon Pole  
*Translatio Studii (No such thing as Western Civilisation)*  
2020

(ceramic fragments, brass staples  
73 x 173 x 186mm)

Installation view, 'the body and its outside' Michael Lett, Auckland, 2021





Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Passport (Argonauta) (v)* (front and side view)  
2018  
paper nautilus shell, Sericho meteorite (iron pallasite, landsite: Sericho,  
Kenya) 107 x 33 x 56mm  
ZL5210



Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Ars Viva* 2017/18  
Installation view  
S.M.A.K., Ghent  
February 2018

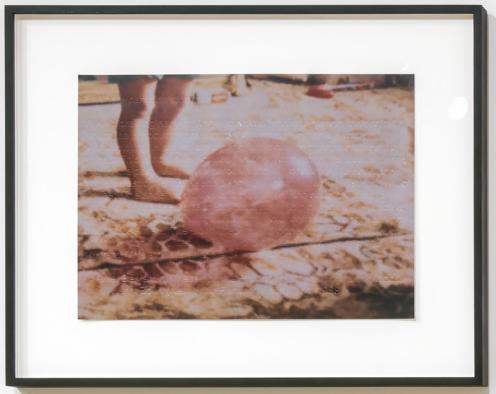


Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Ars Viva* 2017/18  
Installation view  
S.M.A.K., Ghent  
February 2018

Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Oratory Index*  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, Auckland  
December 2016



Zac Langdon-Pole  
*Oratory Index*  
Installation view  
Michael Lett  
December 2016



Zac Langdon-Pole  
Installation view  
La Biennale de Montréal  
October 2016



Zac Langdon-Pole  
*The Torture Garden*  
2016  
framed digital print  
620 x 490mm  
ZL4656

## Zac Langdon-Pole

Born 1988 Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
Lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

### EDUCATION

- 2015  
Meisterschüler, Städelschule, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste. Prof. Willem de Rooij
- 2010  
Bachelor of Fine Arts (First Class Honors), Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, New Zealand

### AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

- 2022  
McCaughon House Artist in Residency, Parehuia, Titirangi
- 2020  
Berlin Masters Schliemann Residency Award, (St Remy de Provence, France 2021)
- 2018  
BMW Art Journey Prize, BMW/Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong  
Fogo Island Artist Residency, New Foundland, Canada
- 2017  
Ars Viva-Prize 2018, Germany
- 2016-18  
Charlotte Prinz Haus Award / Stipendium, Darmstadt, Germany
- 2016  
Artist in Residence, NTU Center for Contemporary Art, Singapore
- 2013  
National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton, NZ (Merit award)  
Judged by Jon Bywater

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2022  
Walls to Live Beside, Rooms to Own: The Chartwell Show, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland NZ (group)  
Lines of Flight / Lignes de Fuite, Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, L'ile de Vassiviere, France (group)  
Splendide Mendax, (with Daniel Boyd) at STATION Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
- 2021  
the body and its outside, Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (group)
- 2020  
Containing Multitudes, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, NZ (solo)  
Interbeing, Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
Group Exhibition, Palmengarten, Frankfurt am Main, Germany (group)
- 2019  
Art Basel Miami, BMW Art Journey Lounge, USA (solo)  
Art Encounters Biennial, curated by Maria Lind and Anca Rujoiu, Timișoara, Romania (group)  
Berlin Masters Prize, Kühlhaus, Berlin, Germany (group)  
Modern Nature, Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (group)  
Ruler, rete, STATION, Berlin, Germany (group)  
Arus Balik – From below the wind to above the wind and back again, curated by Philippe Pirotte, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore (group)  
Same time, same place, twenty years, Berlin, Germany (group)
- 2018  
Ars Viva 2018, S.M.A.K, Ghent, Belgium (group)  
etic etic, Between Bridges, Berlin, Germany (group)  
Art Basel 'Discoveries', Hong Kong [presented by Michael Lett] (solo)  
Sleeping Arrangements, The Dowse, Wellington, New Zealand (group)  
scions, Kunsthalle Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany (solo)  
Loose ends don't tie, PS120, Berlin, Germany
- 2017  
Ars Viva 2018, Kunstverein München, Munich, Germany (group)  
Station, Melbourne, Australia (solo)  
Vanished and Delft, Pah Homestead, Auckland, New Zealand (group)

2016

La Biennale de Montréal, Canada (group)  
 Oratory Index, Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
 FOOD - Ecologies of the Everyday, Triennale Kleinplastik, Fellbach, Germany (group)  
 On the Shoulders of Giants, Kunsthalle Mainz, Germany (group)  
 grammars, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, NZ (group)  
 Fabrik, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia (group)  
 Four Practices, Center for Contemporary Art, Singapore (solo)

2015

Meine Bilder, The Physics Room, Christchurch, NZ (solo)  
 Windows Hung With Shutters, Raeber von Stenglin, Zurich, Switzerland (group)  
 Städelschule Graduate Exhibition, Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, Germany (group)  
 Pestilent Underground; Epidemic Openess , Station Gallery, Melbourne, Australia (group)

2014

[sic] Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin (solo)  
 Spring 1883, The Windsor (Michael Lett Booth), Melbourne, Australia (group)  
 Spaces, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, NZ (group)

2013

Skeins, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, Australia (solo)  
 Soft Quick Thoughts, Window, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
 Man Made, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, NZ (group)  
 Architecture of the Heart, Hawkes Bay Museum, Napier, NZ (group)  
 National Contemporary Art Award (Merit Award Winner), Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton, NZ (group)  
 Pale Ideas, Micheal Lett, Auckland, NZ (solo)

2012

Nothing by Itself. Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
 Letter from Alice May Williams, Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (group)  
 The New Fair, Michael Lett Stand, Melbourne, Australia (group)

2011

than. Michael Lett, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
 Standing Like Spears. split/fountain, Auckland, NZ (solo)  
 In Any Case. Curated by Window, Ostrale'011, Dresden, Germany (group)

2009

Magazine. Gambia Castle, Auckland, New Zealand (group)

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2022

Robert Leonard, 'Hurry Slowly,' Here magazine, Issue 12, 2022  
 Lachlan Taylor, 'Everything Put Together Falls Apart,' Art News New Zealand, Winter, 2022

2020

Zac Langdon-Pole, Christina Barton, Tendai John Mutambu, Marc Spiegler, Thomas Girst, Constellations (Artist Monograph) (Hatje Canz, Germany, 2020)  
 Robert Leonard, 'Zac Langdon-Pole: Rabbit Hole', Vault Art Magazine, Issue 31, August 2020  
 Francesco Tenaglia, 'Beneath those Stars: Zac Langdon-Pole', Mousse Magazine, February 2020  
 Tulia Thompson, 'My God, It's Full of Stars!', The Spinoff, February 2020  
 Anthony Byrt, Art Forum International, April 2020  
 Lance Pearce, 'A Space In Between', Art New Zealand, Winter 2020  
 Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, 'The Art of Travel', Portfolio Magazine Singapore, February 2020

2019

Tendai John Mutambu 'Zac Langdon-Pole: Lines of Flight', Ocula, November 2019

2018

'The art of celestial mapping', NZ Herald, August 2018

2017

Gregory Kan, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ars Viva 2018 (Exhibition Catalogue) (Sternberg Press, Germany, 2017)

2016

Jane O'Neill, Fabrik: conceptual, minimalist and performative approaches to textile. (Emblem Books, Australia, 2016)  
 Sebastian Schneider, Food. 13th Fellbach Small Sculpture Triennial (Kerber, Germany, 2016)  
 Georgina Langdon-Pole, 'Where Our Bodies Begin and End', The Pantograph Punch, January 2016

2014

Lynley Edmeades, 'What remains, or [sic] and so thus it was written', Blue Oyster Exhibitions Catalogue, 2014

2012

David Lyndon Brown, 'A Common Thread', Art New Zealand, Spring 2012

2011

Alex Davidson, 'Notes on a Hypothetical Room', Accompanying text to exhibition,  
Standing Like Spears at split/fountain, 2010  
Elam Graduate Catalogue, 2010

2010

Directions of a Room (Artist Book), 2009

Artist Zac Langdon-Pole holds infinity in the palm of his hand.

HURRY



A work in progress, 2022.

Issue 12  
Art  
Story by Robert Leonard  
Photographs by Sam Hartnett

In peaceful Titirangi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Zac Langdon-Pole is enjoying his McCahon House residency. In the studio, he's showing me a new sculpture he's working on. A murex shell rests on a clump of quartz crystals. An arrangement of metallic-ore filings – reminding me of the form of a sea

anemone – sprouts from the shell. Magically, the filings are organised and held in place by a hidden magnet. I can't stop staring at this captivating arrangement. Small but sublime, it seems to contain the world.



"It encompasses different materials, different states of being," Langdon-Pole explains. "The quartz crystals are geological growth. The seashell – a spiral of calcite – was made by a living creature. The iron filings come from meteorites – they're star dust. The components exemplify processes, organic and inorganic. It's a very meditative piece."

In the Langdon-Pole literature, there's a lot of exegesis and explanation, a lot of citations and footnotes, but not much about meditation. There should be more. "I'm interested in prompting a certain quality and duration of attention. That's really what I'm working with, more than any particular content or material," the artist confesses, adding, "I like Italo Calvino's motto: hurry slowly. Art needs to arrest your attention quickly, but sustain it indefinitely, slowly unfolding. It's a fine balance."

Langdon-Pole is 33. After Elam, he studied at Frankfurt's legendary Städelschule, a school that fostered two other New Zealand-expat success stories, Simon Denny and Luke Willis Thompson. He belongs to a generation of young artists who left New Zealand to do their postgrad study and were then on the spot to assimilate into the international art scene. Since Frankfurt, he's been based in Berlin.

Winning a major art prize in 2018 – the seventh BMW Art Journey award at Art Basel – put Langdon-Pole on a fast track. He caught the judges' eyes with his Passport (Argonauta) works. Carved meteorite fragments were fitted snugly into fragile octopus shells, perversely marrying animal and mineral, submarine and extraterrestrial. The works were beautifully resolved, yet their implications remained tantalisingly elusive.

The award enabled Langdon-Pole to conduct a grand global research trip, following the path of migratory birds as he explored the history of human celestial navigation and maps. It also enabled him to publish *Constellations* – a book on the trip and on his work to date.

At the end of 2019, after this globe-trotting, Langdon-Pole returned home for a show with his Auckland dealer Michael Lett and a summer vacation with his family. That's when I first met him. At that stage, I didn't know so much about his work – I hadn't yet seen a single piece in the flesh – but his reputation preceded him. I knew his work was erudite and omnivorous, traversing many knowledge systems – scientific, cultural, and historical – and taking diverse forms. Not one to accept press releases at face value, I was naturally sceptical, but also concerned that he might indeed be that smart. When Lett suggested I interview the artist before a live audience for the New Zealand launch of his book, I feared I was out of my depth, but I couldn't say no. I spent the days before cramming.

With the talk, Langdon-Pole went easy on me. He was charming and convivial. A couple of weeks later, when I saw his Lett show, *Interbeing* (2020), everything clicked. The show encompassed massively enlarged photographs of sprinkled sand that suggested the vastness of outer space, hybrids of fossils and human anatomical models, and *Assimilation Study*, a wooden shape-block game where one piece had been replaced by a meteorite fragment tooled to the same shape. The simple but provocative way Langdon-Pole brought things together generated rippling associations and insights; every theory becoming a theory of relativity.

When Covid hit, not only was it hard for Langdon-Pole to return to Berlin, there wasn't much to return for – his shows and residencies had been cancelled. He decided to stick it out in New Zealand. At the time I was chief curator at City Gallery Wellington

and saw an opportunity. If he was going to be stranded here, perhaps he could make a big show for us. It became *Containing Multitudes*, which opened in November 2020.

Living and working in the sleepout at his parents' place in Grey Lynn, Langdon-Pole came up with audacious ideas for new works for the show. He wanted to lay a whole gallery floor with borer-scared native timber, where the borer tracks would be traced in gold leaf, recalling illuminated manuscripts and kintsugi ceramics. He wanted to make a film montaging clips from old New Zealand cel-animation films showing unpeopled natural landscapes. He did both.

But the works that surprised me most were his recombined-jigsaw-puzzle pictures. They emerged out of a simple observation. He recounts: "During lockdown, my nephew was doing a *Where's Wally?* jigsaw puzzle. There was another puzzle there, and I noticed that the pieces from both could be joined together, because of the common nature of the die cuts." Each of Langdon-Pole's jigsaws combined pieces from two different puzzles, usually featuring encyclopaedia-plate and art-history imagery, with the artist suggestively fusing contradictory aesthetics and frames of reference. In one, the biblical Tower of Babel is replaced with a floral still life. In another, a bird in the hand is switched out with the night sky – the universe becoming bird shaped as part of the equation. Langdon-Pole's jigsaws recall William Blake: seeing a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, and holding infinity in the palm of a hand.



[Langdon-Pole in the McCahon House residence.](#)

The jigsaws look like surrealist collages, a bit Ernst, a bit Magritte. Like the surrealists, Langdon-Pole uses collage techniques to jolt us out of habitual ways of thinking and to access the marvellous. But, where surrealism engages the personal unconscious, Langdon-Pole goes further. He wants to lift us out of limited human-centred perspectives, into more-than-human ones, keyed to new ecological imperatives. Langdon-Pole made 12 jigsaws for Containing Multitudes. He made seven more for Splendide Mendax, a dealer-gallery show at the Melbourne gallery Station in late 2021, a two-hander with Indigenous Australian painter Daniel Boyd, where there was an odd synergy between them and Boyd's pixelated "dot" paintings. There's no doubting the Jigsaws' appeal. Langdon-Pole had found a way to make his complex ideas approachable, even quaint.

Reading is an important input. Langdon-Pole is a curious, roaming reader – a magpie. When we made Containing Multitudes, he had me reading Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People*, David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, while googling poet Walt Whitman and maverick biologist Lynn Margulis. Right now, his bedside reading is Cady Noland's *The Clip-On Method*, Peter Zumthor's *Thinking Architecture*, and Linda Rosenkrantz's *Peter Hujar's Day*. But, reading came late to him. "Early on, I was a slow reader and was nearly diagnosed with dyslexia. It wasn't until I went to Frankfurt – which didn't have a curriculum as such, and where research was almost entirely self-directed – that I really started reading. For the first time in my life, I had the time. Reading is all about quality of attention. It's not just what you read, but how you read. My work is about fostering that quality of attention."

While Langdon-Pole's work can seem impossibly broad, it does have some recurrent motifs, including birds and rocks. Birds imply the fleeting timeframe of flight (lightness) while rocks suggest the epic one



of geomorphology (gravitas). Langdon-Pole has made works about the myths surrounding birds of paradise and he favours bird imagery in his jigsaws. "Why birds?" I ask. "For me, the bird thing started in Europe," he says. "But, in New Zealand art, birds are everywhere. They are this postage-stamp idea of New Zealand. But few people are having a critical conversation about that. On the one hand, they are metaphors for human experience. On the other hand, they represent the other. They exist between worlds, between the ground and the air. They have a lot to teach us."

And rocks? His answer is similar: "Geology is one of the most poetic sciences I know. The description of rocks relies entirely on poetry." But then, he comes back at it the other way, adding, "Emerson said, 'Language is fossil poetry.'" So, a rock is a poem, a poem is a rock.

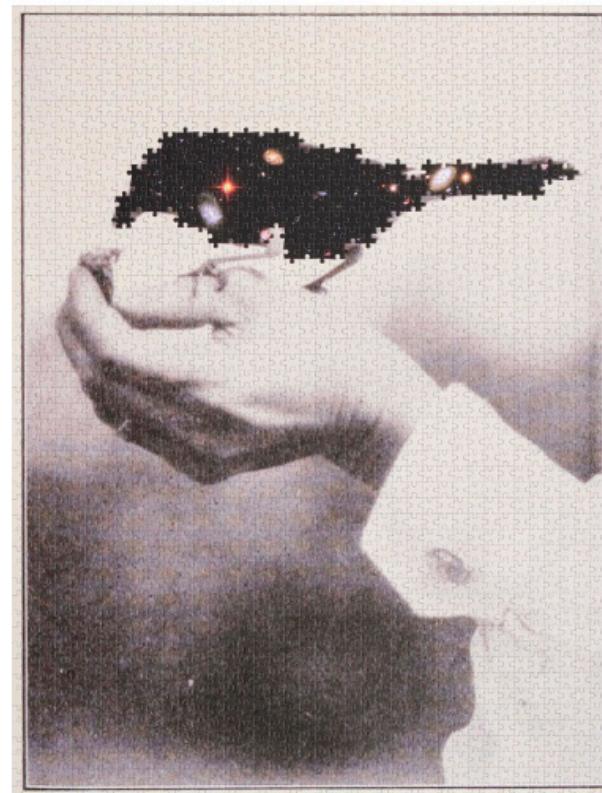
So much of Langdon-Pole's work has been based on travel – passing through time and space. It's been key to its production and reception. Does he miss frequent flying? What's it like to be grounded? "I miss trains," he says. "Living in Berlin, there's a feeling that once a month you can step on a train and visit another city or another country. But, in Auckland, you can drive 10 minutes and be at a beach, so I'm not complaining."

But home life hasn't been all beach towels and sunblock. In January, Langdon-Pole had a nasty accident. "I rolled over in bed and suffered what they call a 'bucket handle meniscus tear'. My soft-tissue cartilage ripped in half and folded on top of itself and jammed in my knee. It was an ordeal. It was 14 days in hospital unable to move, surgery, copious painkillers, and two months learning to walk again."

This twist interests me, because so much of Langdon-Pole's work is speculative, floating-on-clouds, out-of-body stuff – cultivating that more-than-human perspective. But what

does it mean to be suddenly, rudely, disagreeably plunged back into your body through pain? Is your art thinking put on hold, or could experiencing an injury like this actually contribute to your work? When I asked him, he said, "Lately, I've thought a lot about Julian Dashper's morphine paintings. When Dashper was having cancer treatment, he made these beautiful blank canvases soaked in morphine. The morphine is, of course, invisible, so you have to be told. To me those works acknowledge the incommensurability of pain, yet still offer a sense of intimacy."

Langdon-Pole is now back on his feet, easily traversing the split levels of the McCahon House studio. But he's still doing his physio, riding his stationary bike every day. When I visit, he's been there for six weeks, with six left, and he's loving it. But I'm perplexed. Why do a residency in the city where you're already living? His answer: "It's great. You can be so productive. You maintain access to your familiar support structures to get things done, but you get space, time and money. I've done residencies in the past that have been research opportunities, but I've come to this one already armed with ideas and I'm using it to make work." There is something idyllic about the McCahon House residence, deftly cantilevered into the bush. Langdon-Pole concurs: "It's like a tree house. It's a completely healing and serene place. There's no better place to be."





Zac Langdon-Pole, work in progress, 2022.  
meteorite dust, magnets, Murex shell, quartz,  
Bilbao-style typewriter case. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

# Zac Langdon-Pole: Everything Put Together Falls Apart

*Lachlan Taylor shares a moment with the recent McCahon House resident.*

Zac Langdon-Pole sips his coffee and looks back at me across the void of the internet. ‘The world is already interesting enough; all I can do is offer a certain quality of attention’, he says. Zoom links us, from my flat in Newtown in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington to French Bay in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, where he has been living since February. Behind him, the box of the studio recedes into a staircase and a compact mezzanine. It’s now a familiar backdrop, and one that’s filled the frames of forty-seven recipients of Parehūia, the McCahon House artist residency. Like those before him, Langdon-Pole has occupied this space with his research material and works in progress. We’ve been talking about attention, specifically the attention we pay to the things that surround us. Langdon-Pole’s practice is frequently passed through lenses of geology, ecology, interpolation, history, language, and translation, but it might be the idea of attention that best captures the ethos of his latest projects.

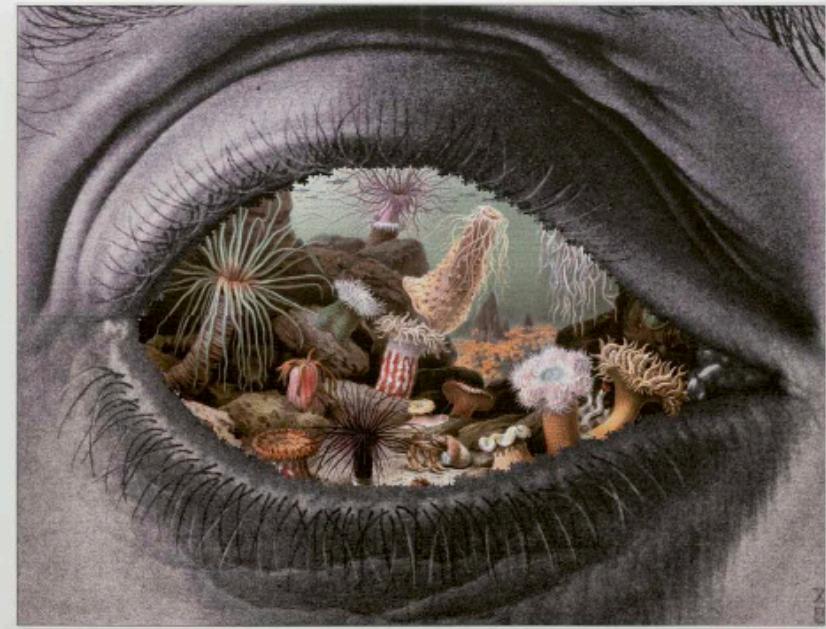
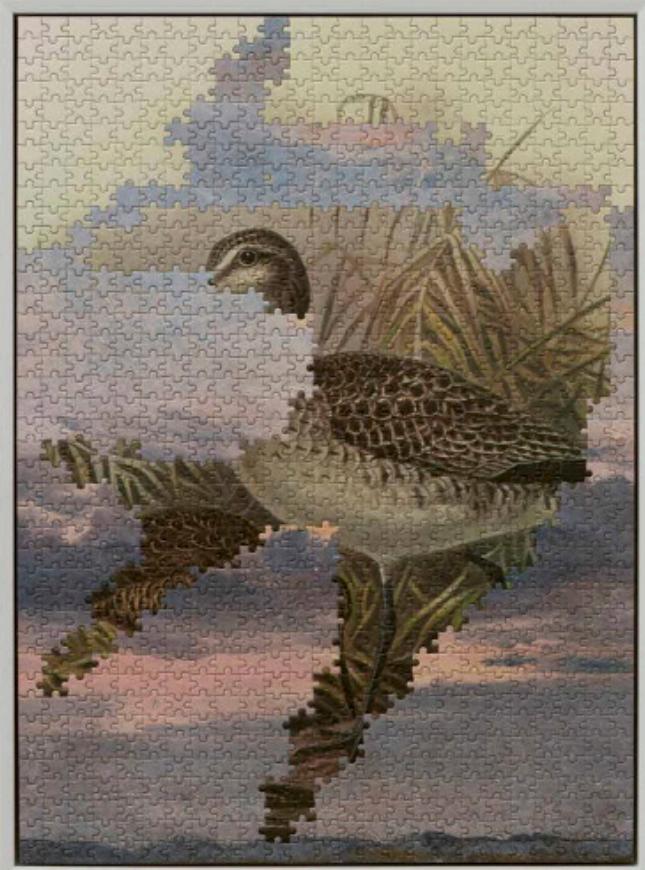
‘I wish we could all be a little more materialist’, he tells me, with a knowing wink towards consumer materialism, but instead using the word to describe a kind of sustained looking, an increased attentiveness to the lives of materials and things—lives that recede into the past through global logistics and supply chains, through fires and formations in industrial manufacture, and, further still, into the geological processes of deep time that turn rock into sand and back into rock again. And it’s an attention aimed at the future, too, once matter has passed beyond our sight and use, moving on to its next chapter. There’s philosophy and heavy thinking for this stuff, if that’s your bag. Schools of new materialism and new realism seek a paradigm shift in the relationship of our human brains to the nonhuman world. But we don’t need to climb all the way up the ivory tower, and Langdon-Pole doesn’t

ask us to. Instead, it’s just a matter of considering our attention—of thinking about matter as process rather than result, event rather than object.

Langdon-Pole pulls my attention to a new work in the studio. It’s an assemblage built from the sorts of materials that are often drawn into the orbit of his work. A typewriter case from the late nineteenth century provides the foundation for a little Babel of earthly and unearthly materials: a twisting quartz cluster, the vacated shell of a Murex snail, and an urchin-like formation of meteorite dust bound by magnets. The sculpture’s aesthetic appeal is immediate and, like many of his works, there’s a precarity and fragility to its arrangement, seemingly at odds with the structural stability of its constituent parts.

He brings up a line from the American poet Marianne Moore, on our capacity to approach a vast sublime by attending to the particular: ‘So that in looking at some apparently small object, one feels the swirl of great events.’ Here is Langdon-Pole’s materialism again, that quality of attention growing in depth and breadth as we spend time looking at and being with his works. Vitally, it’s an attention that doesn’t only apply to the materials from which the works are physically assembled, but to the structures—cultural, economic, and political—to which they attend. These structures, in their own turns, are assembled from social and physical matter, all with lives that stretch back and forth past us, as momentary as each other.

Langdon-Pole keeps striking at this theme. In *Containing Multitudes*, his 2020 City Gallery Wellington exhibition, he presented a bowl constructed from historical bowl fragments from Ancient Greece and Rome, the Islamic empires of the Middle East, and Georgian England. The pieces were held together by brass staples that tracked across the



Zac Langdon-Pole On Ducks and Rabbits (ii) 2021, recombined jigsaw puzzles (John Gerrard Keulemans Bar-Tailed Godwit and Clathrus Island Slope 1873 and John Constable A Cloud Study, Sunset c.1821), 445 x 330mm, courtesy Station, Melbourne.

Zac Langdon-Pole 451 Million Years 2021, recombined jigsaw puzzles (M.C. Escher Eye 1946 and Alfred Brehm Sea Anemones c.1900), 1520 x 1985mm, courtesy Station, Melbourne.



surface like stitches from a hideous surgery. Two more such bowls were exhibited last year, in a show with Australian artist Daniel Boyd at Station, in Melbourne. These imperfect hybrid objects approximated a form without ever pretending to enable its use. The title they share—*Translatio Studii*—refers to a belief that emerged in the Middle Ages and has been in use ever since: that the nations of Western Europe are inheritors of a pure and distinct cultural tradition running from Greece through Rome to the European city states and nascent nations of the second millennium. As a concept, *translatio studii* has always been as flawed as it is seductive, ignoring the essential role of Islamic societies in preserving knowledge of the antique world, while offering an impossibly linear narrative of cultural inheritance around which to form an identity of ‘the West’. The bowls’ patchwork nature insists on the reality of cultural inheritance as a complex process full of collision and exchange, with paths that twist and fork, even regress. But these brutal ceramic congregations also attend to something vital in an age of rejuvenated nationalisms and violent rationalisations of a Western identity—that such an identity is just one more

transient assemblage. The bowls are fragile constructions, held together by the will of a few brass staples. And it’s these staples that draw my attention most when I look at the works, the way they force an awkward grouping of materials into a shape that looks like something known and important, but will never amount to more than a ceramic folly. Held as they are in the swirl of great events, there’s nothing inevitable or inviolable about each collection of pieces—they’re just together, for now. There’s a phrase that arrives early in Robert Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* that I’ve been hanging on to: ‘Language is always late for its subject.’ Macfarlane’s book is an elegy for the disappearing language of landscape—the words for knowing and being with our natural environments. With that sentence, he succinctly captures the truth that things live lives outside our own, and that naming them not only replaces fluidity with stasis. It inevitably fails at its hopeless task by only capturing a part of what it was. By the time we’ve found a name for something, it’s already in the process of becoming something else.

Langdon-Pole has hung three new works across a wall in the McCahon House studio. Called *Untitled (X)* (2022),

they take the shape of that letter. Each X is formed by the arrangement of four industrial set-squares, their central tips touching at right angles in the centre. All three are imperfect shapes, not just because of the varying lengths of the tools that make up a quarter of each work, but because of minute differences and imperfections in each that disrupt their symmetry. Manufactured by different companies, each tool proclaims to be the perfect representation of a metric constant. But, in both minute and obvious ways, their designations of this constant differ. The lines don’t quite match up, the angles aren’t quite correct, the tips don’t quite touch in the way they should. Four perfect quarters unable to create a perfect whole. He tells me these works play out the simple observation that ‘objective truth is a beautiful yet illusive idea’.

It’s a similar exercise to the bowls—both are reminders that familiarity and consistency can all too often be mistaken for an inevitable, singular truth. I like that the set squares form an X, a symbol of mystery and the unknown. Perhaps one way to address Macfarlane’s idea of the insufficiency of language is to refuse to accede to language’s demands—to let mystery hold the space of

description, if just for a while. X holds other potentials too, such as the X of discovery and revelation. Is there something more to be found in attending to these motley set-squares? It might be that these works offer that quality of attention Zac looks for in his practice: a sustained looking—a moment of reflection—before we move on to something else.

Zac Langdon-Pole *Re Translatio Studii* (ii) 2021, bowl fragments (Ancient Greek/Cypriot, brown red slip ceramic, c.800–600 B.C.E.; Scythian, black clay, c.100–500; Roman, blue-green-purple glass, c.4th–5th century; Samanid, Central Asia, black-painted Kufic calligraphic ceramic, 11th century; Nishapur Islamic, beige-painted glazed ceramic, 11th–12th century; Bamiyan Islamic, green glazed ceramic, 11th–12th century; and Liverpool, England, blue-and-white porcelain, c.1785–95), brass staples, 120 × 190 × 190mm, courtesy Station, Melbourne. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

Zac Langdon-Pole *Untitled (X)* 2022, metric set-square rulers, pine, 900 × 900mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Sam Hartnett.





# ZAC LANGDON- POLE

Science, history, art? Robert Leonard takes the red pill.

FEATURE by ROBERT LEONARD

# RABBIT HOLE



*Artists are curious, they pursue all kinds of obscure knowledge. Some like to do research, and art seems like as good a place as any to show off one's interests. The ideas with staying power are those that intersect with an artist's inclination for form, causing it to deepen and expand, like a paper flower that blooms when you put it in water.*

– David Salle<sup>1</sup>

I  
Two years ago, the Wellington collectors Jim Barr and Mary Barr invited me to their apartment to check out their latest acquisition, a work by Zac Langdon-Pole. Based in Berlin, the young New Zealander had been making waves – he'd just won the 2018 Ars Viva Prize for Visual Arts. I wanted to see what the fuss was about. They poured me a glass of wine and directed me to a framed colour photo showing a river winding through the bush to meet the sea – somewhere in New Zealand, I assumed. It was nicely composed and appealing, a tasteful but generic scenic view. But I was confused. I thought Langdon-Pole was a conceptual artist, not a landscape photographer. “Is that it?” I asked.

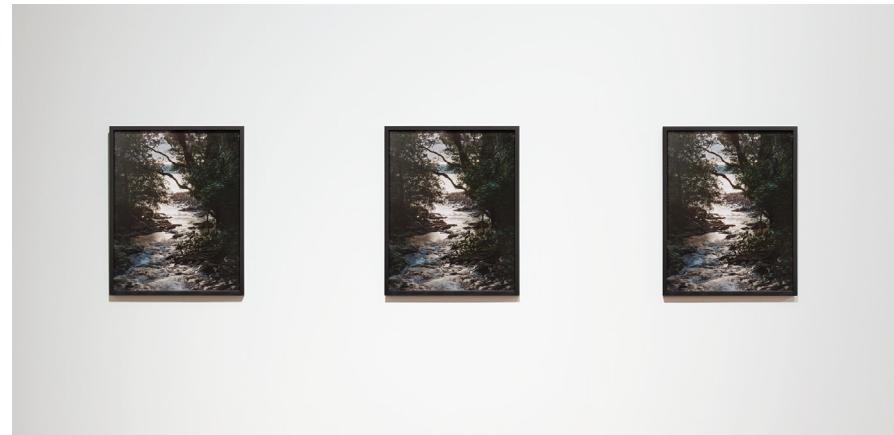
Then – as she knew she would have to – Mary told me the story. Langdon-Pole made the work for his graduating show at Frankfurt’s Städelschule. Perversely, he’d commissioned his professor, Willem de Rooij, to visit the Coromandel to shoot this specific location in his usual style.

De Rooij was to provide one shot only – fait accompli. The site is significant. In 1769, Captain Cook landed there to observe the transit of Mercury and raise the British flag. It became known as Cooks Beach and the wider area as Mercury Bay, bypassing its Māori name Te Whanganui-o-Hei, after Hei, the Māori chief who had arrived there more than 500 years before Cook. This back story made the innocuous postcard view radioactive with politics: the macro-politics of Hei and Cook (who should have their name on this place?) and the Oedipal art-world micro-politics of professor and protégé (who should have their name on this art?).

But that wasn't all, for – as I discovered – there are at least ten variants on this work, each pairing the same photo with an alternative B-side, a hidden key or digression. Back sides include a seashell sculpture made by the artist's mum, an excerpt from Cook's *Journals*, an article about New Zealand's flag debate and treaty settlements, and a photo of poet Gregory Corso's gravestone. As the series is ongoing, Langdon-Pole will continue to make variations on this theme, potentially without end.

So, de Rooij's photo, the ostensible work, was just part of the puzzle.

Here – where one became many, front met back, fresh water mixed with salt, protégé trumped professor and Pākehā encroached upon Māori – frames of reference were scrambled. I felt I might never get to the bottom of this. Or was I there already?



Top to bottom  
**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Problem Poem I (“The Only Things that Are True Are Exaggerations.”), 2015-6*  
(verso view)  
framed relief print (photograph taken by Willem de Rooij; 2015); verso: digital prints (*Problem Poem I*, anonymous quote, 2016)  
Photo: Alex North

**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Possessor (Argonaut) (V), 2018*  
paper nautilus shell, carved Sericho iron-pallasite meteorite  
10.7 x 3.3 x 5.6 cm  
Photo: Nick Ash

Opposite  
Top to bottom  
Installation view  
**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Opposite / Across the Surf, 2015-6*  
*Spirits / Is Life / It Flows thru / the Death of Me / Endlessly / Like a River / Uneafred / of Becoming / the Sea, 2015-6, and The Torture Garden, 2015-6 in Grammars, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2016*  
Photo: Max Bellamy

**Constellations: Zac Langdon-Pole's Art Journey**  
Published by Hatje Cantz, Berlin, 2020

Previous page  
**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Orbits (Cast Dandelion, Rainbow Obsidian), 2019*  
anatomical orbital human-eye model, resin, dandelion dandelion paperweight, rainbow-obsidian sphere, screws  
17 x 20 x 17.2 cm (each)

In Interbeing, Michael Lett, Auckland, 2020

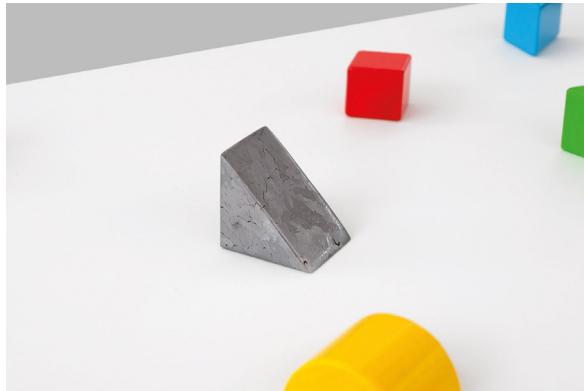
Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland



## II

After that, I didn't give Langdon-Pole much thought. Then, late last year, his Auckland dealer Michael Lett sent me a copy of his new monograph. *Constellations* had been published off the back of Langdon-Pole's winning a prestigious award for his 2018 Art Basel Hong Kong show, where he craftily inserted carved meteorite fragments into paper nautilus shells.<sup>2</sup> The BMW Art Journey award enabled him to undertake a personalised round-the-world research trip. He based his itinerary on white stork and Arctic tern migration routes and on the history of celestial navigation by Pacific peoples and their colonisers. During the five-month odyssey – from London to the Netherlands and France, through the Pacific Islands, before arriving home in New Zealand – Langdon-Pole stopped at significant spots to research celestial mapping practices. The book interspersed documentation of the trip, documentation of six years of works (including works resulting from the trip), plus essays and an interview. The first plate was the de Rooij photo.

*Constellations* was a crash course in Langdon-Pole's work. It was fascinating, but daunting. The works were varied, broaching a bewildering span of topics, with the artist never clearly settling into a signature idiom, medium or manoeuvre. No one could understand the works by just looking at the pictures; each required some explanation, commentary or key – its own reading list. I was constantly flipping between sections of the book, cross-referencing different orders of information to get my head around the project. Perhaps mirroring the artist's wide-ranging erudition, his essayists largely dealt with the work at the level of its content, emphasising *what* it was about rather than *how* it was about it. There was mention of marine biology, astronomy, ornithology, colonial history and personal history, but little on how the work fitted into and changed the landscape of art.



**Top to bottom**  
Installation views  
**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Assimilation Study*, 2020  
painted wooden shape-sorter  
blocks, hand carved Campo  
del Cielo meteorite, display  
case (acrylic, MDF, paint)  
136.5 x 70 x 70 cm  
Courtesy the artist and  
Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland



### III

After reading *Constellations*, my head hurt – like a student cramming a year of required reading the night before the exam. However, when I stepped into Langdon-Pole's *Interbeing* (2020) show at Michael Lett Gallery in the new year, the work opened up – like a paper flower that blooms when you put it in water.

From the book, I knew that Langdon-Pole had been making photographs of sand sampled from stops on his trip. They were labelled with evidential precision: place and date. However, while locations were distinct and specific, the photographs were largely indistinguishable and interchangeable. They didn't offer up significant forensic insight into the sites, which included both Cooks Beach, where Cook had enjoyed a mini break, and Kealakekua Bay, Hawaii, where he was killed. Was place a red herring? Perversely, these depthless, camera-less images recalled the sublimity of deep space, with those tiny grains resting on the print's surface suggesting immense stars. In the show, some photographs were presented at original scale while others were enlarged, one to mural scale. These enlargements were rhetorically impressive, but contained no extra information. I was reminded of the 1966 film  *Blow-Up*, where successive enlargements of photos of a possible murder scene dissolve into film grain. The photographs seemed to riff on Langdon-Pole's research mission: traversing the Earth's surface while pondering how we had looked to the heavens to help us find our way. Did he have his head in the sand?

Langdon-Pole had also been messing about with anatomical models. For *Orbits* (2019), he inserted glassy spheres into pairs of eye-socket models, where the eyeballs would sit. In one pair, the spheres contained a dandelion head and petrified sequoia wood; in another, a dandelion head and rainbow obsidian. There was a disjunction between the time frames suggested by the ephemeral (albeit now fossilised) dandelions and the other materials (although they too were once something else, something



**Top to bottom**  
**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Te Whanganui-A-Hei / Cooks Beach* 12.06.2019, 2019  
photogram made with sand  
from Te Whanganui-A-Hei /  
Cooks Beach, Aotearoa /  
New Zealand; 1000%  
enlarged, archival Hahnemühle  
fine-art print  
301.2 x 394 cm

**ZAC LANGDON-POLE**  
*Cleave Study (II)*, 2019  
plastic anatomical model  
(human-tongue cross-section),  
xenophora shell  
10 x 5.5 x 90 cm

All featured in *Interbeing*,  
Michael Lett, Auckland, 2020  
Photos: Alex North

Courtesy the artist and  
Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland

organic or liquid). In the company of the photograms, the glassy spheres looked like little planets. But what the works had to do with eyes was hard to see. The *Orbits* seemed to be non sequiturs – pointless, puzzling, poetic. In another anatomical-model work, *Cleave Study* (2019), Langdon-Pole grafted a human-tongue model onto an actual xenophora shell, as if the tongue had taken the place of the shell's former inhabitant. The xenophora is a curious thing. As its shell grows, it fuses with things in its vicinity, mostly other shells, assimilating them. But, here, had the shell colonised the human tongue or vice versa? If the *Orbits* made me think about myself looking at them, *Cleave Study* made me think about how it would feel and taste to have my own tongue there.

I lingered longest with *Assimilation Study* (2020). Painted wooden blocks were scattered in a Perspex-topped display case. They came from that common educational shape-sorter toy that teaches tots to put square pegs into square holes. Shape-sorter blocks are a selective attention exercise, asking us to focus on a specific dimension of difference (shape) at the expense of all others. That may be why it took a moment to notice that Langdon-Pole had switched out one piece. A wooden wedge had been replaced with a metal one – a piece of Campo del Cielo meteorite – toolled to the same dimensions. Over four billion years ago, that nickel iron had been in the core of a small planet that broke apart. It fell to Earth some 4,000 years ago, landing in what is now Argentina. In Langdon-Pole's work, it's as if this alien artefact had infiltrated the children's game and was hiding in plain sight. As two blocks were star shaped and as the work was surrounded by photograms that looked like night skies, this meteorite might have already felt at home.

*Assimilation Study* set me thinking. I was reminded of the 19<sup>th</sup> century inventor of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, and

his 'gifts' for children, which included geometric blocks. A crystallographer, he wrote: "my rocks and crystals served me as a mirror wherein I might descry mankind, and man's development and history."<sup>3</sup> I thought of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where geometric minimalist monoliths of ancient origin – some passing through the cosmos – prompt giant leaps in human education. And I remembered a 1993 Michael Parekowhai installation of enlarged shape-sorter blocks, *Epiphany: Matiu 2:9 "The Star in the East Went before Them"*, that asks us to rethink the Christian story within te ao Māori. In retrospect, none of these connections was irrelevant. Or, rather, the work begged the question: what is relevant? That meteorite had been flying through space for aeons – aeons before Langdon-Pole, before Parekowhai, before Kubrick, before shape-sorter blocks, before Froebel, before Christ, before humans – but already on a collision course with us anyway, addressed to us before we were a twinkle. Here, retooled, it comes to rest in Langdon-Pole's work at an Auckland gallery in 2020. Has it been domesticated by the artist, drawn into his game, or does it exceed his presumption to frame it? Langdon-Pole relativises frameworks – even his own.

Zac Langdon-Pole is represented by Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland and STATION, Melbourne.  
michaellett.com  
stationgallery.com.au

1. *Introduction: How to See: Looking, Talking, and Thinking about Art* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2016), 3–4.

2. *Constellations: Zac Langdon-Pole's Art Journey* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

3. *Autobiography of Friedrich Froebel*, trans. Emilie Michaelas (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Company, 1892), 97.





Zac Langdon-Pole, *Cleave Study (ii)*, 2019, plastic anatomical human tongue cross section, Xenophora shell, 4 x 2 1/8 x 3 1/2".

## Zac Langdon-Pole

MICHAEL LETT

In 2018, the Berlin-based New Zealander Zac Langdon-Pole won the BMW Art Journey prize at Art Basel Hong Kong, an award he used to fund a trip from Europe to his homeland, via several stops in the Pacific, including Hawaii, the Marshall Islands, and Samoa. His recent exhibition "Interbeing" was (along with a new book about his practice) a culmination of his journey across the world. The trip's course was determined by two overarching navigational frameworks: first, the history of celestial navigation by Pacific peoples and later colonizers; and second, the migratory patterns of two birds, the white stork and the Arctic tern, that travel extraordinary distances every year. The latter species travels from the Arctic Circle all the way to Antarctica. Langdon-Pole's interest in these specific birds, he explained in the new book, was "not only because of their analogical potential in understanding migration on a 'global north to south' axis, but also as a way of de-centering human perspective and opening it up to the flows and interdependencies of the natural world, of which we are an inextricable part."

Colonialism was, in the Pacific, a technological big bang, the first step in a migratory-scientific-extractive project that not only has recently caused rising sea levels and

uncontrollable wildfires, but also found deadly expressions in the use of atomic bombs in Japan and in the radioactive devastation of "unpopulated" atolls. In a series of photograms, Langdon-Pole explored this imperialist arc, using sand from evocative sites to create images that resemble night skies pocked with stars. These locales include Cooks Beach on New Zealand's Coromandel Peninsula, near where James Cook and his men observed the transit of Mercury; Majuro, capital of the US-controlled Marshall Islands, a group of atolls where the superpower tested nuclear weapons, notably at Bikini and Rongelap; and Kealakekua Bay in Hawaii, where Cook's decade-long Pacific adventures were brought to a bloody end. Connecting the sites and providing the impetus for Langdon-Pole's decision to turn their granular realities into astronomical metaphors was the idea of "foreign" or "alien" invasions: that the material world we occupy and exploit is made from collisions between the meteoric—the compressed celestial matter that we've transformed into mineral commodities—and the modern, in the form of European Pacific exploration.

These principles of fusion and compression were also essential to Langdon-Pole's sculptures. *Cleave Study (ii)*, 2019, combined an anatomical model of a human tongue with the shell of a Xenophora snail, a creature that moves across the sea floor collecting other shells and debris to adorn its own—an adaptive underwater tourist. And in two pairs of sculptures, *Orbits (Cast Dandelion, Rainbow Obsidian)* and *Orbits (Cast Dandelion, Petrified Sequoia Wood)*, both 2019, Langdon-Pole replaced the eyeballs in models of human eye sockets with "invading" spheres. Each pair of spheres included a ready-made paperweight with a fragile dandelion head suspended inside it juxtaposed with a rock-hard expression of geological time: volcanic glass in one instance; in the other, petrified wood. In *Assimilation Study*, 2020, Langdon-Pole hid yet another of our ancient mineral ancestors in plain sight, placing a meteorite fragment hand-carved into a triangle among a child's set of wooden shapes. Langdon-Pole's strategy of combining materials to traverse vast distances of time and space had, at its heart, a deep ethical drive: an attempt to map the consequences of two centuries of Pacific exploitation. But the plan also pointed to the show's central ambivalence: whether the artist's own Xenophora-like journey of collection, imaging, and adornment really was pointing the way to a decolonized future, or whether it was still rooted in the art world's touristic, extractive past.

—*Anthony Byrt*