

Eroticism in the artistic work of painters Gabriel Heimler and Anna Proc.

A retrospective of their New Zealand period

by *Daniela Gil Sevilla, Diplomat*

Throughout their artistic collaboration, the contemporary New Zealand painters Gabriel Heimler and Anna Proc have been characterised as explorers, daring adventurers who probe the subtleties of the human condition. Their brushstrokes resemble log entries that portray the starting point, our hidden desires, our primeval instincts, our leitmotifs, whilst their canvases show non-conformist, questioning realities and, at times, glimpses of disparate futures.

Of European descent, Heimler & Proc arrived in Wellington a decade ago and immediately began to render their aesthetic vision in New Zealand. Amongst their first productions, *The Mover* stands out. A 2010 mural located in the Waterfront area, it captures a local moment and has, as a precedent, the mural *The Wall Jumper*. Painted by Heimler on the Berlin Wall just after its fall, *The Wall Jumper* has become a focal point of that city.

The Mover was followed by other murals and series of paintings. In 2011, Heimler and Proc presented the exhibition *Beehive in Cuba Street*. The exhibit marks a new period in their work, influenced by the New Zealand landscape and the history of the country. Here, the urban architecture is the main actor. It is expressed through the juxtaposition of iconic buildings placed in alternative sites, although in a harmonic manner. For the spectator, the effect is one of restlessness and curiosity, urging him/her to question the proposed reality.

One year later, in 2012, the artists held the exhibition *Happy Pacifica*, made up of provocative images that, once again, seek to raise questions in the viewer. Under the critical gaze of Heimler & Proc, society, exploitation and economic fairness are dissected.

The 2013 exhibition, *Foxtrot Around the Piano*, was a significant step in Heimler & Proc's style. Representative of their paintings, the bright colours and defined lines continue, but exciting new elements emerge, such as the nuanced representation of human nature, featuring mountains and vegetation as prominently any other character on the canvas. The symbolism is at once subtle

and unmistakable, expressed this time in a ubiquitous piano that guides our behaviour with its rhythms and most intimate emotions. The viewer is drawn to the various figures, to the eroticism amongst them, to the sensuality of their poses, their unspoken dialogue as they look for each other, forever approaching or moving away in a perpetual dance of encounters and mismatches.

The latter theme remains in the two exhibitions of 2014. The first one, *Dark Lights*, deepens with a chromatic palette emblematic of the lust of the characters, their surrender to desire, captured just on the brink, in their erotic anticipation. In *Shadow in the Bush*, the painters return to the origin of sensuality, or is it its future? In this idyllic utopia of predominantly ochre and emerald tones, humans maintain a symbiotic relationship with their environment, melting into a recurring embrace from which something new and different arises.

In 2015, Heimler & Proc surprised us with *The Inside View*, an exhibition of complex psychological interpretations, based on the ideas of the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Here, the scenes in the canvases separate the subjective aspect, corresponding to the personal, from the objective one, belonging to the mundane. Reality is then divided between the internal and external worlds, which are reflected as in a mirror. In this artifice, allusions to local buildings and urban structures flourish yet again, whilst behind the doors intimacy reigns, along with carnal tension and even voyeurism.

For 2016, Heimler & Proc prepared *Calla Lilies or Alcatrazes. Homage to Diego Rivera*. The series of paintings evoke femininity and is based on the work of this emblematic Mexican painter and muralist. Eroticism is present in the poses and interaction between the models, but also in the sensuality of the flowers, which equally symbolise the mestiza, the indigenous and European women. On this occasion, Heimler & Proc hold an intellectual dissertation with Rivera, highlighting the coincidences between the Aztec and Maori cultures, which are manifested on the canvas with dual motifs.

The New Zealand period of Heimler & Proc was consolidated in 2017 with *All in the Same Waka*. This is an exhibition of intricate compositions with characters of expressive faces and elongated hands that invite us to accompany them in their journey through the Pacific Ocean, in search of that fertile land known as Aotearoa. The production is exceptionally symbolic and referential, where the omnipresent force of nature and an eloquent disposition of the people

are observed. There are also elements that, although they had been included on the canvas before, in 2017 take a preeminent role, like the celebration of the Maori culture. There is expectation in the air, and hope. Meanwhile, the actors sail the waters aboard a Waka, as an analogy of New Zealand, multicultural and unique, in the midst of a global sea.

The previous odyssey, which culminates with the arrival of the Waka on New Zealand's shores, is taken up again by Heimler & Proc in 2018 with *On the Road*. Their most poetic exhibition to date is based on the book of the same name by Jack Kerouac, representative of the Beat Generation. With characteristic skill the artists guide us into Kiwi territory on board different vehicles, all the while paying tribute to local painters and writers such as Rita Angus, Michael Smither, Katherine Mansfield, Michael Parekowhai, Ralph Hotere and Sam Hunt. *On the Road* combines the exuberance of the landscape and the creative richness of these artists with the dynamism of automobiles, whilst figures gently interact, in their own time and pace, in an expedition of discovery and individual encounters.

In the New Zealand period of Heimler & Proc, eroticism has been a fundamental part of their artistic proposition. In each of their exhibitions, the painters have demonstrated different facets of sensuality, expressed in such ways as the fluency of urban composition, the relative proximity of travellers in a Waka, the friction of the wind on a journey through Aotearoa, the seductive lines of the calla lilies, the deconstruction of humanity vis-à-vis its habitat, a dance around a totemic piano, the forbidden moments of intimacy.

Certainly, erotic expression in the works of Heimler & Proc reaches a peak in 2019 with the exhibition *Gauguin in Aotearoa*, an invitation for the viewers to travel back in time to 1895, the year Paul Gauguin visits Auckland before heading to Tahiti. Heimler & Proc then return us to the present day, where they extrapolate possible impacts of this trip on the post-impressionist artist, through a rhetorical conversation with him outside an august Te Marae. This suggestive reality is full of restless figures that fidget rhythmically with the wind, whilst others romp placidly amongst native plants and rugged landscapes, surrounded by Maori and Polynesian references and subtexts. In this way, *Gauguin in Aotearoa* becomes an intercultural and Pacifika waltz on a cosmopolitan dance floor known as New Zealand.

The inclusion of cultures continues in *Pacific Memorial*, also of 2019. This

exhibit, a series of six large-format paintings, singular and unique in and of themselves, together tell a story of multidirectional crossings and exchanges. Here, the Pohutukawa trees accompany people of Asian, Oceanic and European descent who mingle with Gauguin and Van Gogh, whilst a carved Maori arch stands proudly in front of Mt Taranaki, welcoming visitors from faraway lands. In this composition of synchronic and silky movements, Heimler & Proc challenge us yet again to consider nuance and subtext: this is an intratextual work that includes symbols and references of past exhibitions, like the calla lilies, the Waka and others that only the keener spectator will recognize.

In ten years of collaboration, Gabriel Heimler and Anna Proc have developed and perfected a distinguished style in this so-called New Zealand period. Their work denotes an academic technique but also a sharp sensibility and acute interest in and appreciation of otherness. During this time, the artists have developed an extended universe that now goes beyond *All in the Same Waka* and *Gauguin in Aotearoa*, incorporating increasingly complex subjects and connotations. Theirs are paintings of sensation with a rich and seductive visual language. What is next in the cosmos of Heimler & Proc only the artists know, but one thing is certain: their upcoming proposal will keep our attention focused and our senses engaged.

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One year later, in 2012, the artists held the exhibition "Happy Pacifica", made up of provocative images that, once again, seek to raise questions in the viewer. Under the critical gaze of Heimler & Proc, society and the current economic system, that seems to propitiate stereotypes of empty foundations, are dissected.

The 2013 exhibition, "Foxtrot Around the Piano," was a significant step in Heimler & Proc's style. Representative of their paintings, the bright colours and defined lines continue, but exciting new elements emerge, such as the nuanced representation of human nature, featuring mountains and vegetation as prominent any other character on the canvas. The symbolism is at once subtle and unmistakable, expressed this time in a ubiquitous piano that guides our behavior with its rhythms and most intimate emotions. The viewer is drawn to the various figures, to the eroticism amongst them, to the sensuality of their poses, their unspoken dialogue as they look for each other, forever approaching or moving away in a perpetual dance of encounters and mismatches.

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