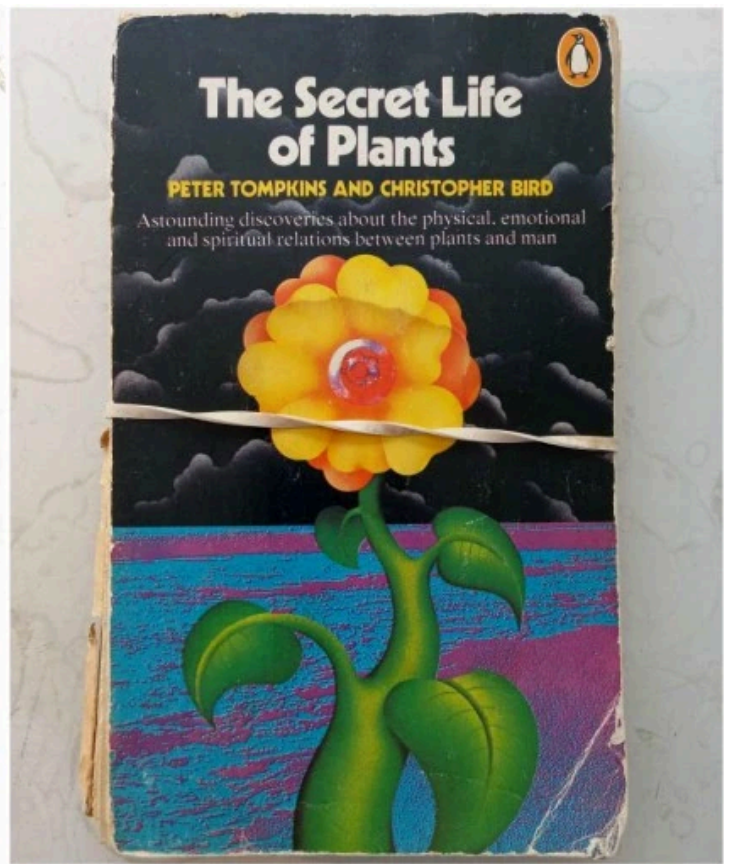
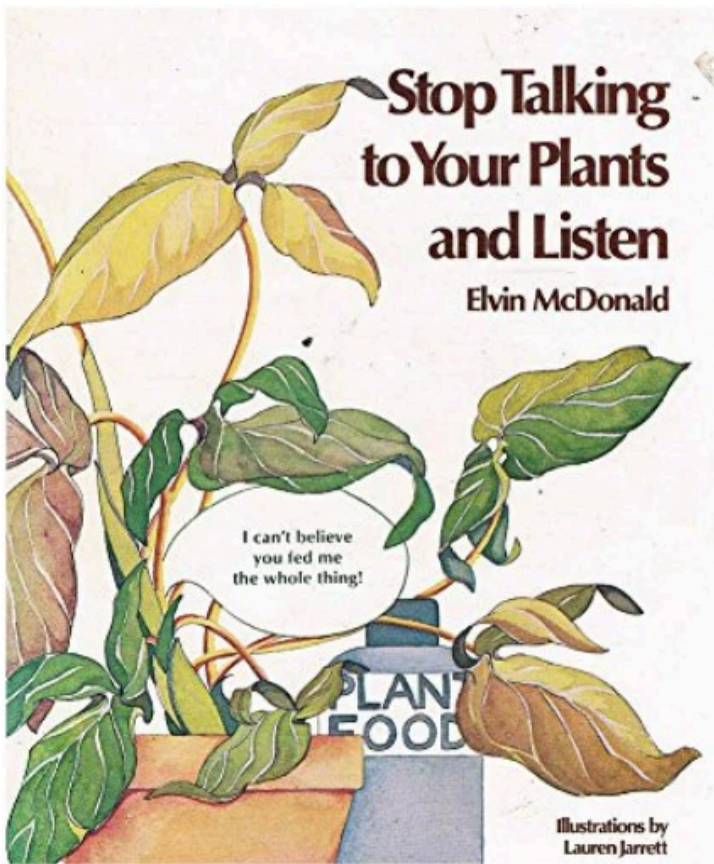




ONE QUESTION QUIZ

Skinny



(Photos: Supplied)

BOOKS November 22, 2020

50 years ago we had some extremely peculiar notions about plants



Chloe Lane
Guest writer

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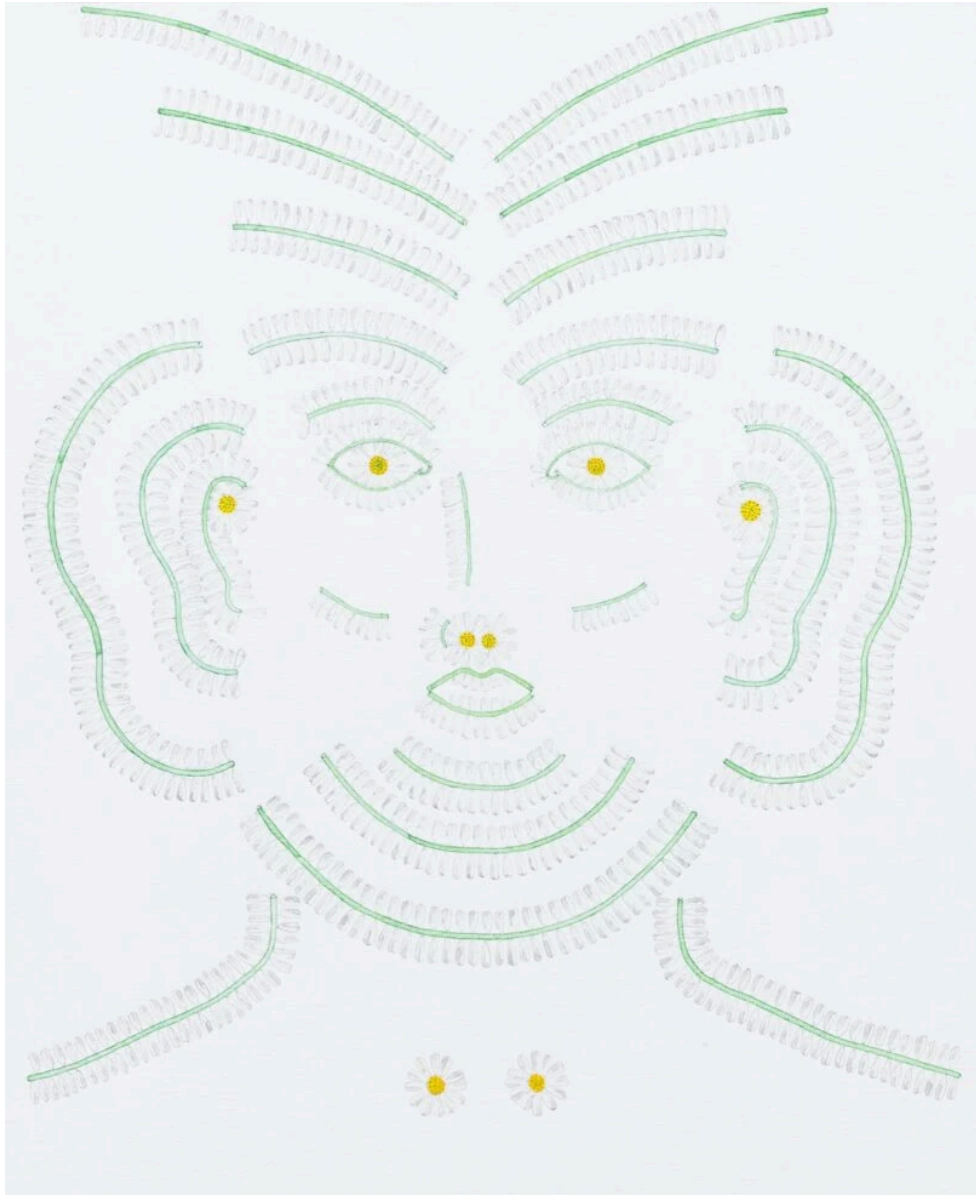
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The Swimmers author Chloe Lane interviews Zina Swanson, whose paintings are inspired by old and outlandish books about botany.

December 1990, my family and I stayed with my aunty and uncle in the Christchurch suburb of Mount Pleasant. I remember the summer mostly hazily – picnics, swims, long hot days – though I also have specific memories. Buying a new sleeping bag; Batman-themed gifts including a torch with “bat signal” accessory; the volume of prickly Onehunga weed on my aunty and uncle’s lawn. It was impossible to take a step on that grass without my young, soft feet getting hooked by a fistful of prickles.

Earlier this year when my family relocated to Christchurch, we visited my aunty and uncle who live at the same address but – post-2011 earthquake – in a different house. Entering the new house felt a bit like visiting the old house in a dream – familiar but destabilising. My son immediately wanted to play on the lawn, and before I could retrieve his shoes from the entranceway, he stepped off the deck and onto the grass. As he did, I flinched. Though three decades had passed and the Onehunga weed was long

gone, I had a muscle memory of being repelled by that surface – of the small pain I had experienced the summer I was eight. Unawares, I had created my own little personal history with this patch of grass.



Zina Swanson, Daisy Bust, 2020, watercolour and acrylic on canvas (Photo: Supplied)

Christchurch-based artist Zina Swanson is interested in how we live with plants, and the memories and personal folklore we build around certain plants in order to better understand them. The huge rambling villa Swanson shares with artist partner James Oram and studio-assistant cat Mo has a large, enthusiastic garden that was planted over 40 years ago by the property's owner. Swanson lists the plants she can see from her second-storey studio window: "Cabbage trees, the top of a huge camellia, a feijoa, a beautiful variegated elm that keeps our studios cool in summer. I definitely feel like my most recent body of work is very much about this garden."

The work she refers to is on display at Sumer, Tauranga in a solo exhibition titled *Any Plant Thought of Too Much Will Not Thrive*. The saying is taken from *Animal and Plant Lore* (1899), a collection of oral English language histories that Swanson has had on near-permanent renewal from the University of Canterbury Library, where she works part-time. The book provides the basis for many pieces in the show. Plant lore, which has no scientific founding, has given Swanson a fresh way to consider how we make sense of the world around us. The result is a collection of exquisitely rendered watercolour and acrylic paintings – though pressed flowers and grass also feature – that while uncanny and humorous, also hint at a darker view of humanity's relationship to the natural world.

“Through making the works I establish new memories and stories about the specific plants,” Swanson says. “Most of the time I am killing them – pulling them out, pressing them, trying to keep them in a state that makes them look seemingly alive, presenting them as a sort of relic of a collection process. I made a work decades ago that involved the collection of hundreds of rose thorns. It wasn’t until years later that I found out that rose thorns don’t grow back, but leave the plants more vulnerable to disease and infection.”



Tiger lily with nose border (Smelling tiger lilies causes freckles), 2020, watercolour on canvas / Forget me not, 2019, mixed media

In the painting titled Tiger lily with nose border (Smelling tiger lilies causes freckles) (2020) – another phrase from Animal and Plant Lore – two walls of freckled noses appear to close in on a blooming tiger lily. It’s initially odd, amusing. Swanson often uses repetition to this end. Though take a step back from the work, and the noses collectively could be mistaken for wasp nests – the image turning unsettling. “I’m drawn to these lore for a number of reasons,” Swanson says. “The absurdity, the futility and the beauty of their impossible possibility. In another sense it’s the thought of ‘imagine if’. Imagine if you did get freckles if you smelled a tiger lily?”

I want to take this question as if Swanson were a pre-Enlightenment scientist out to prove these impossibilities as real. Some of how she works mirrors that of fieldwork – she collects, arranges, records, repeats. Many of her works require an almost obsessive attention to detail, as in Forget me not (2019), a silhouette of a head composed of many pressed forget-me-not flowers. “Certain plants keep cropping up again and again in my work,” Swanson says. “Daisies for example. I made a work for The Physics Room in 2009 which was a very, very long pressed daisy chain held up on intermittently placed glass supports. I had a certain spot down by the Avon River that was full of daisies. I would go there every morning to collect them, then take them back to the studio to press. On several occasions I raced to get there before the council worker arrived on a ride-on mower.”

Swanson has an ongoing interest in Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s infamous *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973), which makes pseudoscientific claims about plant sentience. Chapter headings include “Plants can read your mind” and “The mystery of plant and human auras.” After presenting an argument for the book’s validity, the introduction concludes: “There are sceptics who find it hard to believe that plants may at last be the bridesmaids at a marriage of physics and metaphysics ... Evidence now supports the vision of the poet and the philosopher that plants are living, breathing, communicating creatures, endowed with personality and the attributes of soul.”

Unsurprisingly, at the time of its publication there was backlash from the scientific community. Swanson found this and *Stop Talking to Your Plants and Listen* (1977) by Elvin McDonald, a holistic how-to guide of home plant care, at the same book fair. She was initially drawn to the covers of both, but “was completely all in” once she began reading *The Secret Life of Plants*. The chapter that initially hooked Swanson is titled “Plants and extrasensory perception” in which Cleve Backster, a lie-detector specialist for the CIA, attaches his *Dracaena* plant to a polygraph instrument in order to solve a “murder”. In the experiment, a plant “witnessed” one of Backster’s polygraph students “murdering” a second plant. Then when the line-up of students was presented to the plant witness, only when the actual culprit approached did the witness plant’s polygraph meter “go wild”. Swanson also has a copy of Backster’s book, *Primary Perception: Biocommunication with Plants, Living Foods, and Human Cells* (2003), which explores this experiment in more detail.

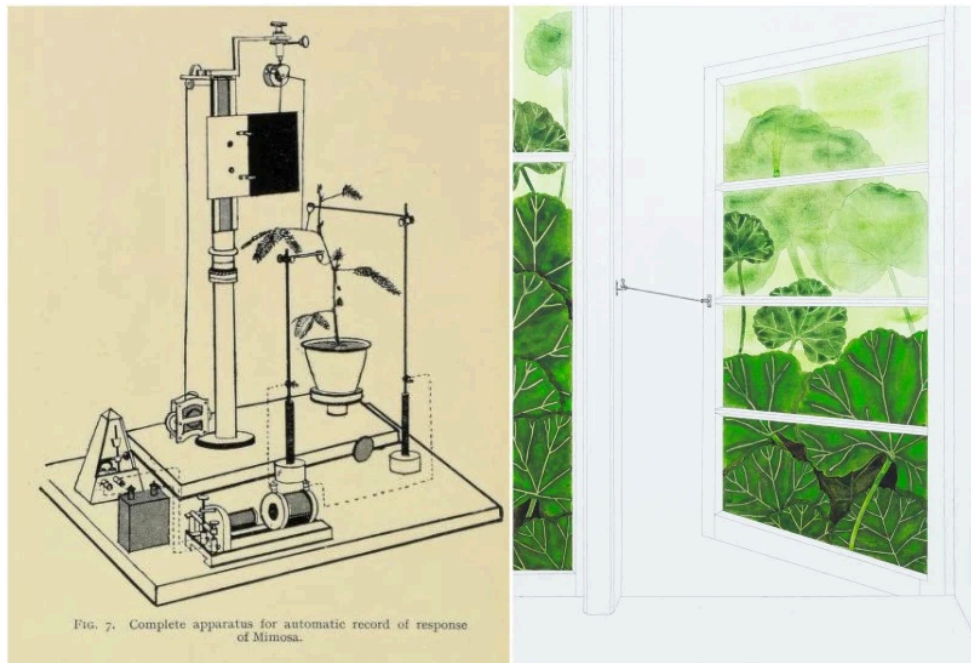


Fig. 7. Complete apparatus for automatic record of response of Mimosa.
A Mimosa experiment from *Plant Autographs and Their Revelations*; Swanson's Idris Window with Geranium (Geraniums growing in an open window will prevent flies from entering the room), 2020, acrylic and gesso on canvas (Photos: Supplied)

Plant Autographs and Their Revelations (1927), by biologist, physicist, botanist and early writer of science fiction Jagadish Chandra Bose is another text of interest. Here Bose details a series of experiments with *Mimosa pudica*, commonly known as shameplant because when the leaves of the plant are touched they fold into themselves in a kind of embarrassment. “Bose covered glass plates in soot and attached a thread to the plant,” Swanson explains. “When exposed to electric shocks the plant’s movement created what Bose called a ‘response curve’, the thread leaving sort of brush marks in the soot. There were a number of other experiments using this same apparatus but introducing other stimuli such as anaesthetics or ‘the effect of a passing cloud.’”

What Swanson has in common with these “pioneers” of plant research is an inquisitiveness bordering on suspicion in the beauty, complexity, and potential of plants. It is an extraordinary privilege to visit an artist in their studio – to be allowed a peek behind the curtain – yet often I find there is a gap between the finished works and the odd, everyday practice of making. I am reminded of a winter I visited my brother in Virginia, USA where he was working on a PhD in marine biology. While his colleagues were away over the Christmas break my brother was taking care of their ... things. I found myself both mesmerised and bamboozled by the slippage between what they presented in scientific journals versus what they did in their labs, how they organised their personal spaces, their pets, and whatever those things were that were growing in the jars in their bedrooms.

“I recently asked my landlady to please not mow the lawns until I finish pressing enough grass for the grass/glass frieze/skirting board I am making for Sumer,” Swanson says. “Sometimes it’s like I am standing outside myself watching as I collect thousands of daisies, press thousands of forget me nots or crouching down and meticulously cutting grass with scissors and I wonder ‘How did I end up here again?’”



Imagined wood with leaf flames (Burn wood, and the flames will form themselves into the shapes of the leaves of the trees from which the wood came), 2020, watercolour on canvas / Plants from the sale table, 2016, mixed media

Swanson tells a story of buying plants for a work titled *Plants from the sale table* (2016) that originally showed at Christchurch’s Centre of Contemporary Art. As she filled her trolley at The Warehouse with these near-dead specimens marked down to \$1 or 50c, other shoppers started to take notice, to watch her warily, as if she knew something about these sad, rejected plants. Swanson’s paintings leave me equally curious and uneasy: she knows something, is trying to tell me something. But am I getting it?

Animal and Plant Lore doesn’t have any listings for Onehunga weed, so I asked my mum if she could recall any lore related to this plant. “No,” she told me, “but if you transplant a parsley plant it brings bad luck. And some even say the daughter will become pregnant. I remember that one from way back. Also to be ‘in the need of parsley’ is to be on the verge of death.”

“So is it not actually about plants?” Swanson says about her exhibition. “It’s about people and how we seem intent to force our own narratives onto everything, onto plants. To give them histories that are tied up with our own lives and stories.” To this end, her paintings always have a human presence – the outline of a face, noses, a hand – or something that suggests a human has been here: a window, or neatly arranged sticks as in the unnerving watercolour on canvas *Imagined wood with leaf flames* (Burn wood, and the flames will form themselves into the shapes of the leaves of the trees from which the wood came) (2020).

MORE READING

- [In the studio with artist power couple Claudia Kogachi and Josephine Jelicich](#)
- [The Unity Books children’s book review roundup for Autumn](#)
- [‘No singular book is going to be useful for everyone’: Reading tips of a budgeting legend](#)

These works are small – scaled for an interaction with the viewer that is personal, intimate. They could almost be enlarged illustrated plates from the books they reference. And in this way they ask us to carefully and patiently examine our relationship to the natural world, with Swanson as our guide.

Zina Swanson's solo exhibition *Any Plant Thought of Too Much Will Not Thrive* is showing at [Sumer](#), Tauranga until 19 December 2020.

She is represented by [Sumer](#), Tauranga and [Jonathan Smart Gallery](#), Christchurch.

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KEEP GOING!



Claudia Kogachi and Josephine Jelich in the studio, and *Selecting Wood*, Claudia Kogachi, 2024.

SOCIETY April 28, 2024

In the studio with artist power couple Claudia Kogachi and Josephine Jelich



Gabi Lardies
Staff writer

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The pair opened their first fully collaborative exhibition, *Nina for Flowers*, last Saturday. Gabi Lardies visited their studio to find out who Nina is and what working together was like.

It didn't start out like, 'This is a show about Nina,'" says Josephine Jelich, gripping a thermos of peppermint tea. Next to her on a little vintage chair, Claudia Kogachi agrees. The idea that sparked the exhibition was "creating a domesticated space in real life, in the gallery", they say.

We're at The Warren on Auckland's Cross Street, a workshop Jelich shares with a handful of other woodworkers. It's long and narrow, packed with workbenches, electric saws, drills and pieces of wood poking out everywhere. In the weeks leading up to the Nina for Flowers opening, the pair say they took over almost the entire space, their work spilling out of Jelich's designated area.

Now, the work is on the walls and floor of Laree Payne Gallery in Kirikiriroa Hamilton until May 11. The pieces are rugs set into cabinets, portraits of horses with hand-carved wooden combs, detailed wooden stools and a glass-topped, heart-shaped table. They're a perfect marriage of the two artists' practices. Kogachi began making pictorial rugs in 2020, two years after graduating from University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts. She switches between her tufting gun and paintbrushes, but always produces stylised images full of detail, colour and energy.

Kogachi's not yet 30, and one of just a small number of artists in New Zealand making a living from their practice.

Jelich studied fine arts at Massey University in Wellington, then spent a year at Nelson's Centre for Fine Woodworking before returning to Auckland in 2019. Her considered furniture sits both in the art and woodworking worlds, as she works on commissioned projects and exhibits in contemporary art galleries.

Claudia Kogachi (left) and Josephine Jelich (right) working on Nina for Flowers (Photos: Supplied)

In the combination of furniture, imagery and materials, Nina for Flowers forms a romanticised living room. The tufted rugs are soft and many feature flowers. The stools, though beautiful, are to be sat on, and it isn't hard to imagine placing a honey-sweetened tea on the heart table. Then there's the namesake of the show, a tufted Nina, with grey hair, holding a bunch of flowers, with her horses at her sides, smiling. It's a portrait of Jelich's mum, who is a florist.

The pair came to Nina for her flowers. When thinking about the domesticated space they wanted to create, they knew they wanted Kogachi to paint (or tuft) still lifes. "We were like, 'Oh, we should do flowers, that would be so cute,'" says Jelich. "And then, 'Oh! Let's use mums.'"

Nina began sending Kogachi photos of flowers. “Mum takes photos of random flowers in the bucket on the floor – you know, not just pretty Instagram photos,” says Jelichich. They looked back through years of photos of flowers, as Jelichich would also “take photos of weird flower arrangements that were in the corner” when visiting. The flowers Kogachi and Jelichich were interested in weren’t the perfect bouquets, but instead ones with a more casual, homely and accidental beauty.

Claudia Kogachi's *Nina Arranging Flowers with Olympia and Duchess*, 2023. Wool with cotton backing, framed by Josephine Jelichich in cherry, ebonised carved cherry comb (Photo: Laree Payne Gallery)

For Kogachi, family is never far from her mind. Early paintings depict her in sports competitions or domestic settings with her mum, their skin coloured a bright blue. Kogachi was born in Japan, but her grandparents live in Hawai'i, having moved there to work in pineapple plantations. Her obachan (grandmother) has featured in her work, most notably in a series of rugs picturing her at home. While they aren't pictured in *Nina for Flowers*, they weren't far. “My obachan flew over from Hawai'i to be here for the show,” says Kogachi. “She’s a huge part of my life, but she’s not overly fond of the gay paintings.”

Part of the imagined audience of the exhibition was that 91-year-old grandma. “Some flowers and horses and your mom and the domestic scenes: those were things my grandmother was gonna really love,” Kogachi says. It hasn't stopped the “gay paintings” of course, but they were sent to London, “where she would never go”, says Kogachi, as both artists laugh.

That series of paintings, titled *Labour of Love*, picture Kogachi and Jelichich working together in a kind of meta-narrative. They look over plans, pick out wood and Kogachi “helps” Jelichich by hugging her from behind. Finally, they kiss. “The method of working together so closely within the relationship doesn't come new,” says Kogachi. Previously, Kogachi hired Jelichich to make custom frames for her paintings and rugs. The frames are artworks in their own right, hand carved and unlike any other frames I'd ever seen before. “I guess your name wouldn't technically have been on the works – but we always do write Jo's name on the back.” What's different about the works in *Nina for Flowers* is the artists worked together from the conception of the exhibition.

Selecting Wood, Claudia Kogachi, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, carved walnut frame by Josephine Jelichich

I've caught the couple a few days after the show opened, and they're relaxed and open. You get the feeling they're taking a moment after being under the pump. They say two weeks ago they were frazzled, different people, under the influence of too much caffeine. Both wear hoodies and loose pants with plenty of pockets. Jelichich hasn't yet tidied up her workspace: it's covered in hand tools, small offcuts of wood and scrawled notes. Kogachi has come from her studio in Epson, where she's returned after spending a few weeks working here at The Warren. There's still a to-do list with her name on it taped to the wall.

"It was quite special to work on a show within a partnership. I don't think it really happens much," says Kogachi. "You can see how much love goes into the work as well. And there's a lot of affection in the work without it being, necessarily, directly about that." They're themes that fold nicely into Nina for Flowers. "There's so much care that's gone into every tiny little drawer, every little handle that Josephine's carved," says Kogachi. "If I worked with anyone else, they just wouldn't care as much."

Claudia Kogachi, Water Lilies, 2024 (Photo: Laree Payne Gallery). Right: reference photo from Nina.

Something else happens when you invest so much care into your art. "It's hard to say goodbye to the works," says Jelichich, "which I think is a good sign ... It's kind of like when you get a present for someone – I find if I don't want to give it away that means it's a good present."

"I just love the heart table so much," Kogachi adds. "I'm secretly hoping it won't sell."

With the works gone from their studios, both artists are looking towards the rest of their year. “I have my commission work to get back to now, which is nice,” says Jelichich. She feels like she’s only just starting her career. “Being a woodworker is a really long-term commitment. The best woodworkers I know are like 70, and they’ve been doing it since they were 30.” By comparison, Jelichich is “just a baby”.

Left: heart table in progress (Photo: Josephine Jelichich). Right: Claudia Kogachi and Josephine Jelichich, Heart Table with Poppy Anemone Rug, 2024 (Photo: Laree Payne Gallery)

Jelichich has an exhibition with about 25 other fine woodworkers at the end of the year, put together by the Nelson woodworking school. “I think I’m gonna make a cabinet that’s just got, like, heaps of drawers in it and it’s just something really beautiful and timeless,” she says. Making more of her own designs is something she’d like to work towards.

For Kogachi, the next few months will be spent working towards a group show at Season Gallery and a solo show at Jhana Millers Gallery in November. For her solo show, she’s setting aside time to read and research deeper into her family history, especially on the migration journey of her ojiichan (great-grandfather). He was from Okinawa Island, a place she wants to visit soon.

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“It’s a funny experience being an artist,” Kogachi muses. “I think what’s most important to me when I’m making is having fun.” Sometimes, when she’s alone in her studio, in a big, dark, old building that leaks, she thinks about how weird and silly it is that she spends her days painting while other people are in offices. “I have to be having fun,” she adds, “because this is such a strange, lucky and privileged position to be in.”

[Nina for Flowers](#), an exhibition by Claudia Kogachi and Josephine Jelichich, is running until May 11 at Laree Payne Gallery in Kirikiriroa Hamilton.

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