

## Ella Sutherland: Lines that Aren't Straight

*Art, design and politics meld. Melanie Oliver reports.*

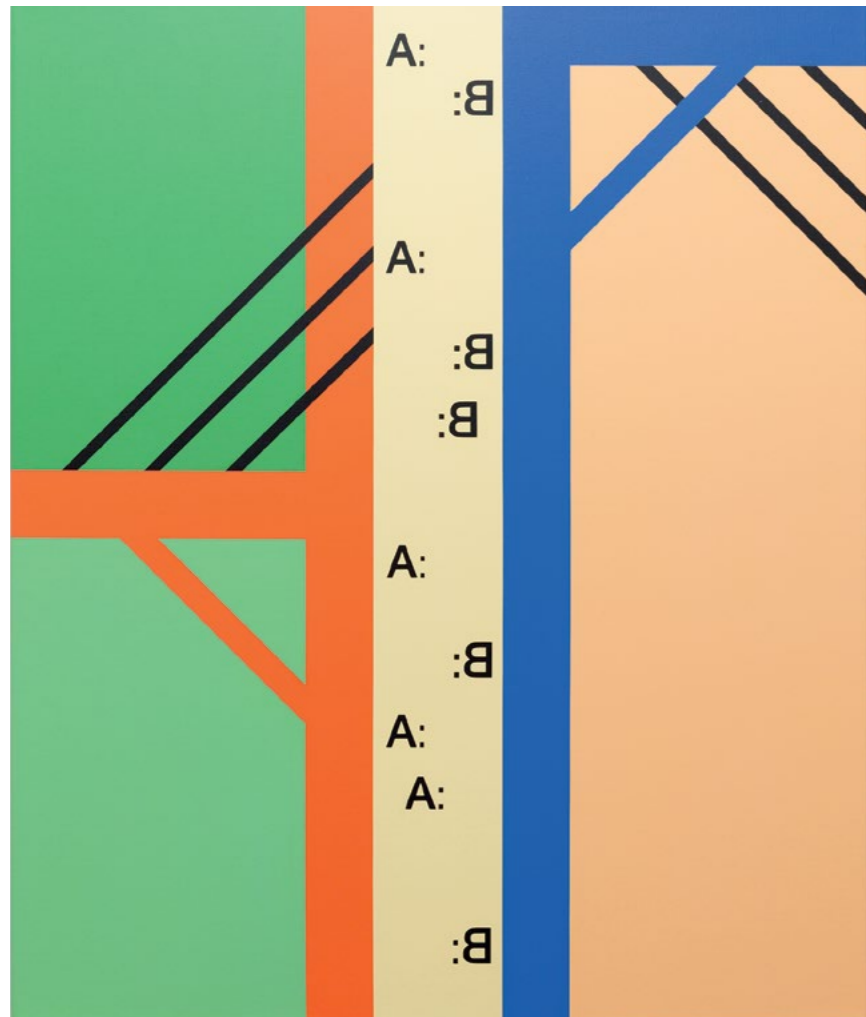
Ella Sutherland has a sharp wit. She playfully forces us to read between the lines by anthropomorphising letters and giving graphics curvaceous forms that express character and potential relationships. Looking at her work, I start to see the sexy big booty of the letter B, how a C might be chatty or churlish, and that Q is really quite codependent on U.

Sutherland works at the nexus of graphic design, publishing, and contemporary art. Originally from Whakatū Nelson and now based in Sydney, her work has been exhibited throughout Australasia over the past decade—and in the 2018 Gwangju Biennale. In her paintings and installations, she explores the poetic potential of letterforms, engages queer texts and social spaces, and addresses architecture's limitations. Each project has specific references, and deploys the multiple meanings of text, colours, and forms to unsettle and reflect on its context. Sutherland reveals the nuances of design as strategic communication tools, stressing how, say, a simple line can divide a page, creating difference and hierarchy. While her works may appear bold, playful, and, at times, funny, they are underpinned by robust research into how visual languages operate, as she challenges the power dynamics enacted through information architecture.

Sutherland graduated with a master's degree in Fine Arts from Ilam School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury in 2013. Studying in the graphic-design department, her early works—which often took the form of printed matter—incorporated keen observation of everyday situations, deadpan humour, and critical takes on design. For *This That* (2012), a collaborative work with Dave Marshall for Dog Park—an Ōtautahi Christchurch artist-run space she founded and ran with Chloe Geoghegan from 2012 to 2014—the artists produced their own versions of those vinyl decals applied to the sides of cars. They invited people to bring in their cars for decoration, in a playful response to the city's boy-racer obsession and the

characteristics of regional signwriting. In 2016, for her solo exhibition *Boring Month Start to Finish, the Whole Month*, at North Projects, another Ōtautahi Christchurch artist-run space, Sutherland stretched and mutated cryptic crossword puzzles into A1 posters, reflecting on her workplace lunchroom culture, where newspaper puzzles offered an escape from mundane office life. In this period, Sutherland celebrated the quirks of architecture and design in a city rebuilding and rethinking its identity post-earthquake, through witty, thoughtful works produced using mechanical processes, such as Risograph printing and cut vinyl.

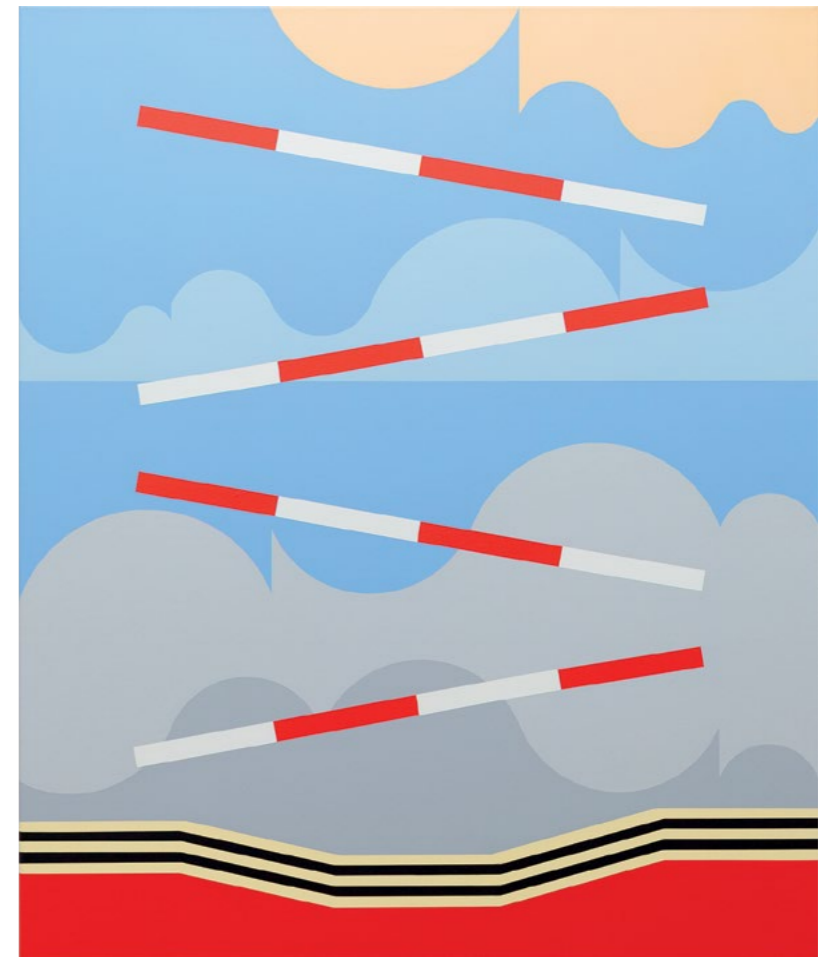
In 2018, for the exhibition *Margins and Satellites* at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Sutherland took a more focused approach to queer social histories and print archives. As Enjoy's Summer Resident, she researched a range of periodicals published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, held in the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand Te Pūranga Takatāpui o Aotearoa, in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. From an analysis of their language, typography, materiality, and design, Sutherland made a series of silkscreen posters. She interspersed these with small sketches of the eyes of politicians from those times, laser etched into the substrate used for institutional nameplates. The eyes uncannily followed visitors around the room. Alongside, she presented a range of printed works made in collaboration with local artists that people could select and assemble into their own personalised publications. This comparative approach to past and current narratives and identities within local LGBTQI+ communities showed the continuous development of visual language and how design is utilised to identify and connect people within social space. Looking back to queer histories of creativity and cleverly navigating the concealment and evasion inherent in them became an ongoing concern, which surfaced in subsequent projects.



Previous: Ella Sutherland *Character Study* 2020, pigment ink on cotton rag paper, 1155 × 840mm.

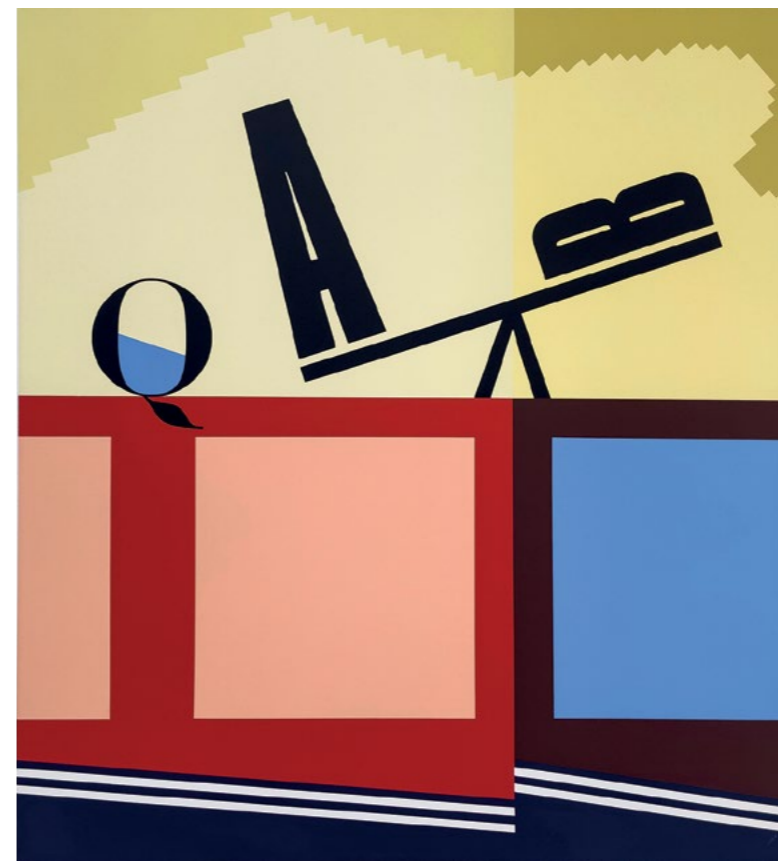
Ella Sutherland *Medium* 2022, acrylic on linen, 914 × 762mm.

Ella Sutherland *What Is a Letter?* 2020, acrylic on linen, 1675 × 2440mm.



Ella Sutherland *Spectre* 2022, acrylic on linen, 914 × 762mm.

Ella Sutherland *Saturday* 2022, acrylic on linen, 1066 × 965mm.





Over the next five years, Sutherland's work became less ephemeral and developed into a vibrant painting practice that remains informed by design and its histories. This shift was prompted by a desire to have greater independence in the production of her work and the conceptual and formal possibilities offered by the medium. The foundations of design are evident in her aesthetic and ideas. Her crisp lines and strong compositions recall mechanical processes. The use of layers and iterations, and the relevance of critical discourse around publishing and of European modernism from architecture and design, also continue to contribute to her thinking.

Sutherland's first painting exhibition, *Letters*, for the Tauranga gallery Sumer in 2020, was inspired by illuminated medieval manuscripts and by the personal correspondence between three female literary figures and their confidantes: Emily Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, and Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Sutherland enlarged and abstracted the shapes of individual letterforms to make paintings that were both architectural and figurative. Sharp lines open out as though windows and doors, and are intercepted by curved forms suggesting bodies sitting close together, interconnecting and overlaid. There is a play between what is hidden and what is communicated, public and private languages, in a homage to this lineage of queer writers and the spaces they occupy.

Looking more directly at built architecture, *Composition for Two Planes* (2021) used the base-isolation system of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū as a framework to think about the fluidity of ideas. Installed under the Gallery after the 2010 and 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, the isolators allow seismic forces to pass through them, decoupling the building from the ground. A common way to depict planned movement is through the choreographic or musical score—a set of instructions for performers to follow. Adopting this visual language,

Sutherland speculated on the seismic future of the Gallery—how it might move with any turbulence—while suggesting this movement could be conceptual as well as physical. This sense of fluid, flexible meanings and identities features across her work.

In her most recent exhibition, *Speaker of the House* (2022), at Melbourne's Futures Gallery, Sutherland considered the structures of political representation. In diagrammatic form, she showed Parliament's curved seating arrangement and how it is divided into sections for each political party, and other data systems through which decisions are recorded, collated, and archived. These forms are disrupted with 'bad' data, compositional devices that hint towards a rogue element—dissension or discord. With obvious sides and seats, and the notion of the 'speaker' and the 'voter' as key participants, the works ask whose voices are heard and who can have agency in this space. 'Either/Or', 'A' being more heavily weighted than 'B', and an imagined dialogue back and forth between A and B parties are some of the exchanges pictured in the works. Sutherland questions what constitutes a democracy and who makes decisions—a serious topic as we head into an election year, though treated in a playful and abstract way.

Back in 2020, Sutherland was awarded the Creative New Zealand Visual Arts Residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, and, after Covid delays, she finally began the year-long residency this November. During her time in Europe, she intends to further her investigation of censorship, the representation of voices, individual agency, and how architecture impacts on who gets heard. Given the complex histories and built environment of the city, she will be introduced to challenging new reference points. Bringing her characteristic humour and critical insight to the archives, queer spaces, political structures, and visual languages encountered through this experience will doubtless lead to radical and perceptive future projects.

Ella Sutherland *Sirens* 2021, acrylic on marine ply, twelve parts each 600 × 800mm, in *Every Artist*, City Gallery Wellington, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, 2021.

Ella Sutherland *Composition for Two Planes* 2021, silkscreen, three parts each 1065 × 765mm.

*Ella Sutherland: Speaker of the House*, Futures, Melbourne, 2022.

