

Raewyn Martyn | GWNZ Fellow

'Talking' about her research journey, May 2020

Tell us a bit about yourself and what you have been doing to Think, Act and Connect during COVID-19 restrictions.

I'm a practice-based PhD student at Toi Rāuwharangi College of Creative arts at Massey University's campus in Te Whanganui-a-Tara where I am researching biopolymer (bioplastics) for use as art materials, within the larger societal transition away from petrochemical materials and oil industry. Some of my research has been in collaboration with Scion, a crown research institute in Rotorua, where I've learned about a whole world of biobased possibilities for Aotearoa's regional economies. I'm working toward a presentation of my PhD work as part of an exhibition at The Dowse Art Museum, because of COVID-19 disruptions this has been rescheduled to 2021. At Toi Rāuwharangi, I'm part of a close-knit PhD cohort who work alongside each other in shared studio spaces. We've used social media and Zoom to stay connected during this time and channelled some of that collective energy into work with the New Zealand Union of Students Associations to advocate for stronger student support during the immediate COVID-19 pandemic and more generally as we move into a period of economic crisis. Isabella Lenihan-Ikin has been doing a stellar job at facilitating conversation between over forty students' associations around the country and amplifying those voices to the government and the voting public. It's a challenging time for students, especially those who were already facing financial hardship due to unaffordable rents and lack of universal student allowances. We also know that the lockdown period has been especially hard for students who are parents and those who are living within large families and might not have access to focused study spaces. We also know that at times like this, extra caregiving for children and older family or community members often disproportionately impacts the research outputs of solo parents, women and gender diverse students and faculty, so we've been trying to raise awareness of that. It's a great time to make sure you're connected to your student and faculty unions and thinking about ways we can all support each other.

I've also been working on funding proposals for two collaborative arts-based projects—a group exhibition and a new online peer-reviewed arts research journal. One of these has recently been successful gaining funding through Creative New Zealand's COVID-19 Continuity Grants and the other is still in development. Both projects aim to create and sustain opportunities for earlier-career and independent researchers, writers and artists. Although the funding system is another competitive one, this kind of collective (unpaid) organisation work feels energising and important right now. I'm very grateful to have the time and energy to be part of these projects and to see other such initiatives in the works.

How did you get started and why do you think you chose this career path?

While I was studying toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts, I was also working for Wellington City Libraries and really enjoyed facilitating school class visits so decided to become a teacher. I taught secondary school art while also working on my own art practice and after a few years, I left to begin an MFA in Virginia, USA. I knew I wanted to contribute to research in painting—how we understand painting as a personal and cultural activity and product, beyond its immediate aesthetic appeal or investment value. The practice-based nature of fine arts means this research is action-based and different from the way art historians might understand painting. Fine arts research can intervene in the material system and conventions of contemporary painting (paint itself, mediums/media, form and commodification, etc), along with the history and future of these material systems and our understanding of them. It was during my MFA that I became interested in how paintings and paint might move more readily between liquid and solid form—imagining

making a paint that could rehydrate, and paintings that could rehydrate and recompose. This led to investigation of biopolymers (plant and bacterial bioplastics) as paint emulsions or binders and this became my current PhD research. I also continue to teach part-time at Massey and want to continue that part of my career too.

What do you feel was the greatest challenge in your journey?

I think new researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand face a high level of uncertainty that is the product of systemic issues, including our university and research funding. These issues have existed for a long time, COVID-19 exacerbates them. There is scarcity and uncertainty within the systems of funding and employment. Knowing this to be the case, it becomes a real challenge to imagine where your research can get to within the PhD project itself and how your research can continue beyond the PhD. Our research and teaching funding systems mean that academics and universities often find themselves in competition with each other, as individuals, teams, and organisations. I understand that there are healthy forms of competition, but what I've seen and experienced over the past decade in the United States and here in Aotearoa doesn't seem healthy. Of course, positive thinking, strong PhD advising and counselling can take you some of the way beyond these challenges of career uncertainty and overly competitive working environments, but the larger systemic issues mean it's only so long until you're again hitting the brick walls of financial reality and lack of institutional openings or stable teaching opportunities.

Another aspect of this challenge is to find a receptive audience or institution for new ideas, when I was younger, I had some real challenges getting people to take me seriously. I'm a strong reflective thinker so I understand that some of that was down to my own communication of ideas but witnessing or reading of other people's experiences has made me realise that some of this was also dismissive sexism. It's a small community here and feeling dismissed or rejected can impact your feeling of belonging and it's also difficult to raise these experiences without feeling like you're being oversensitive. This means we don't talk openly about our experiences.

Where do you find your inspiration? What keeps you going every day?

What has a GWNZ Scholarship meant for you?

I find inspiration in women and gender diverse artists and researchers who have faced similar challenges in progressing their contributions to research. But I don't think that means those struggles and barriers should be seen as some rite of passage, because we know that some people who do push through these barriers—and I include myself here—will readily admit they were enabled by particular race or class privileges. That shouldn't be the case. I would say that the desire to continue this intergenerational work, breaking down those barriers before people reach them and ensuring real systemic equity and equality, is a reason to keep going with the everyday work. The GWNZ scholarship means I can worry a little less about paying market rent in Wellington and, although I still work part-time as a teacher, I have a little more time to spend on community and collective work alongside my PhD work.