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View of "Kate Newby," 2023. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

## Kate Newby

MICHAEL LETT

Often, the appeal of the everyday in art is that it evokes feelings of familiarity and intimacy. The risk is that it can go unnoticed. Kate Newby's works frequently toe this line, with interventions so subtle they risk disappearing into the architecture. But their delicacy is also their strength when they coax from their viewers a sense of wonder at the world around us, and this was the case with her recent exhibition "Had us running with you."

In a former Methodist Mission Hall next door to the flagship Michael Lett gallery, honey-colored light filtered softly through the upper windows along the northwestern wall. Newby had lovingly replaced each window with panes of stained glass in semiopaque shades of mustard, yolk yellow, orange, and cinnamon brown, their surfaces textured with gentle strokes or riddled with bubble-like holes, allowing fresh air to flow into the old church, breathing new life into a space that still felt reverent. Each of the ninety-nine handmade panes was titled individually, in Newby's distinctive style, with poetic phrases taken from her daily life, such as *The thinnest ice*

*you'll ever walk on, WE THANK YOU, and No one has to be that strong* (all works 2023).

The hall was seemingly empty, with nothing installed on or placed before the large central wall that rises to the mezzanine level, and nothing hanging from the high sloped ceiling. The artist's only intervention in this main cavernous space was to replace a single section of floorboard with a bronze replica, verdigris forming on its textured surface, teasingly titled *I like the way I am*. Entering the space, one noticed a side door open to a narrow bricked alleyway. For *I know the sky is ready*, brownstone tiles were laid over the existing brick wall, their surfaces variously rippled by scrabbling human fingers; slicked with a faintly iridescent lavender glaze; or marked by the dusky comets formed when a whoosh of heat moved swiftly past the circles of wadding each tile rested upon while being fired in an anagama kiln at Frost and Fire Gallery in Nelson, New Zealand. In a nod to Newby's art-school days of guerrilla puddle painting around nearby Karangahape Road, two potholes in the alley had been partially filled with brightly colored concrete—one sky blue (*Make it home*), the other clay orange (*This is how the World will end*).

Back inside, on the dais hidden behind the central wall, Newby had arranged hundreds of hand-molded ceramic husks and shells in a pattern that felt at once organic and highly organized, like a murmuration of starlings or a school of fish. This arrangement was fitting, as the textures, shapes, and colors of the small sculptures that make up this piece, *it is hard to believe that there can be anything more than this*, similarly invite comparison with natural forms: barnacles and oysters, geothermal terraces, bird's nests made with saliva or mud, fossils and stones, any convex place where a pool of water can stagnate or form a tiny ecosphere. But these objects were not the results of naturally occurring phenomena; each husk is a material exploration, comprising found glass spooned into ceramic shells, turned liquid in the kiln, and returned to solid in a new form. Much of the glass used in these works was collected by Newby from fragments on neighboring Galatos Street, the detritus of nightlife given a new lease.

In "Had us running with you," Newby employed certain materials as a strategy to help us notice things we might usually overlook. Windows are invisible until one replaces their panes. Tiles—usually manufactured en masse and uniform—rise to notice when fingers swipe, gouge, and dimple their surfaces. Bronze blends with wood until verdigris blooms. Clinging to the building, sticking to the walls and ground, meshing into hollows and puddles, Newby's works were too close to life to escape attention.

— Lucinda Bennett

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