

OWEN CONNORS: FRAMES ON IDENTITY

EDUCATION RESOURCE

McCAHON
HOUSE

About this resource

The vision for the Parehuia Education Resources is to connect ākonga to local artists, their work and their stories, and to grow students creative and critical thinking skills. In doing so, they will be able to see the value of art and stories made here in Aotearoa, and see themselves as makers of culture.

This resource accompanies [this artist video](#) and is aimed at ākonga in years 12-13 (or curriculum levels 6-8) and is designed as an adaptable toolkit for teachers to use selectively in devising their own units of classroom learning. Key sections are designed to be easily extractable as handouts for direct distribution to students. It is primarily devised for Visual Arts (Painting), but may also be used in other learning areas, such as Art History.

This resource is also relevant for a majority of the levels 6-8 achievement objectives in the New Zealand Curriculum for Visual Arts, especially *Understanding the Visual Arts in Context*, *Developing Ideas*, *Developing practical knowledge* and *Communicating and Interpreting*. It also connects to many of the Big Ideas outlined in the Curriculum, especially *Visual Arts communicates ahurea tuakiri and evokes responses; Whakapapa — Visual Arts descends from, embodies, and creates forms of cultural expression; Curiosity, risk taking, and critical thinking are integral to creativity in Visu-al Arts; and Visual artmaking conventions enable artists to create cohesive and fluent artistic forms.*



Owen Connors
Land of doubts & shadows
Installation view, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
2024
Image courtesy of Toi o Tāmaki

Key themes: storytelling, historical references, identity, landscape painting

Owen Connors

Born 1992, Māwhera Greymouth

lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland

Owen Connors is an artist and writer who explores identity, especially queer and Pākehā identities. Their paintings are mostly figurative (showing people or scenes) and often have a dreamlike, fantastical feel. The artworks also have a story-like quality—as if they are telling a tale or have a hidden meaning.

In recent years, Owen has worked with egg tempera, an ancient and very long-lasting painting medium that has been in use since the first century AD. This is one way they connect their art to history:

"Owen's recent practice is narrative based. These works draw on their own experience as a queer person in the world, in the contemporary context, as well as on a kind of prism of historical references... including regionalist paintings in Aotearoa, the Arts and Crafts aesthetics (which can be seen in the handcarved frame that Owen often uses), as well as a range of Medieval and Renaissance-era paintings and relief sculptures."

– Abby Cunnane, curator

As Abby explains, Owen is not just a painter—they also make their own frames, using different materials and skills. For their 2024 series *Land of Doubts & Shadows*, they created rusted steel frames embedded with *scagliola* stones.

Stones also appear in the paintings, forming a constant background to the action.

"I've been working on a series of landscape paintings, or looking at the land in alternative ways. I've been looking at a lot of the strata (layers of exposed rock and earth) that has been exposed in the last six months, looking at how that can work in relation to histories and our approaches to time, and our approaches to burying lots of ideologies."

– Owen Connors

For these paintings, Owen drew on both their own family history and the history of the land where they grew up.

The works are inspired by:

- Their upbringing on the West Coast—their *scagliola* stones resemble river stones from the area.
- Their Irish heritage—the story in the paintings is loosely based on an Irish myth, *The Tragedy of the Children of Tuireann*.

Queer artists have long used alternative ways of seeing as a creative strategy. By focusing on unexpected elements, they can change how we think about history, identity and the world.

In Aotearoa, landscapes were the first artworks made by Pākehā. These paintings were often used to promote settlement, making landscape painting deeply connected to colonial history. By retelling an Irish myth about the consequences of violence and setting it in a local landscape, Owen sparks new conversations about Pākehā identity.

Glossary:

Scagliola – a technique that makes plaster surfaces look like marble by mixing in pigments.

Strata – distinct layers of rock or sediment formed over time as materials like sand, silt, or minerals settle and accumulate.

Ideology – a set of beliefs or ideas that shape how people see the world and how society should work.



Inquiry questions

- Watch [the video](#) of Owen and Abby. Discuss what you learned about Owen's art practice. What are the main themes of their work?
- How does Owen Connors use both personal and cultural history to shape their artwork?
- In what ways does storytelling through art differ from storytelling through writing? How does Owen's work demonstrate this?
- Why do you think Owen chooses materials like egg tempera and scagliola? How do these materials contribute to the meaning of their work?
- How does the act of making their own frames influence the way we experience Owen's paintings?
- How does placing an Irish myth in a New Zealand setting challenge or expand ideas about Pākehā identity?

Making activity

Part One: Think about the places and cultures your family comes from. What are some symbols, patterns, shapes, or motifs that represent these places or cultures? If you're unsure, do some research. You may want to explore more than one place or culture.

Once you have found some visual signifiers, design a frame using these symbols, patterns, or shapes. For now, just draw the frame—but also think about what materials and colors you might use later. You might even want to learn a new skill, like Owen did when they created their scagliola-encrusted frame. Remember, your frame can be any shape!

Part Two: Think about your whakapapa (family history). Do you know any stories, myths, or pūrākau (traditional narratives) from your culture? If not, research one that interests you.

Once you have chosen a story:

1. Tell it to a partner in the simplest way possible.
2. Together, discuss which moment from the story would make the most interesting still image.
3. Draw this image inside your frame.



Images: (top) *Land of doubts & shadows*, 2024
Installation view, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
egg tempera on birch, oxidised custom steel frames, scagliola, 212 x 93cm
Image courtesy of Toi o Tāmaki

(bottom) *Truth coming out of her well*, 2022
egg tempera on birch ply with cedar backing. Malaysian kauri, walnut, rimu and macrocarpa with Danish oil and pigmented shellac
Image courtesy of Robert Heald Gallery