Star Gossage, *Matariki*, 2014, media, dimensions????. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery

Spirituality, politics and the colour blue

Star Gossage's paintings register psychological and emotional states and embody her deep connection with the land as a potent vessel for memory, imagination and desire.

When I spoke to painter Star Gossage just before Christmas she was working on a series of large scroll-like paintings on unstretched linen that are part of her collaboration with composer Dame Gillian Whitehead and choreographer Carol Brown for the Auckland Arts Festival 2015.

Outside Gossage's new studio her flower garden was ablaze with colour – lavender, gladioli and poppies were all blooming – despite the recent severe north-easterly storm, which had closed the steep road over the Pakiri hill the day before I arrived to interview her. Gossage was excited about her contribution to the collaborative project, simply titled *Pah*, which looks at the history of the Pah Homestead through a combination of dance, music and painting. The homestead is one of Auckland's largest 19th century houses and is now home to the TSB Bank Wallace Trust Arts Centre.

Gossage says she's on a learning curve with the new works. These seven paintings, whose format was inspired by McCahon's *Northand Panels*, are her largest to date. As we looked at them in her studio, the saturated colours of the flowers outside seemed magically reflected in the rudimentary swathes of paint and the barest suggestion of figures starting to emerge on the linen. For the first time Gossage is using tempera (coloured pigment mixed with a water-soluble binder) as well as tar and Pakiri clay, whose softer tones she hopes will quieten down the intense colours of the pigment. "The pigments are too bright and I'm not used to that," she says.

She has painted with local clay for many years and in the earlier stages of her career she incorporated old window frames and other discarded objects into paintings whose surfaces were earthy and weathered. Gossage lives on family land nestled into the pale flank of Parkiri Beach

This page: Star Gossage in the studio with works in progress for the exhibition *Pah*. Photos: Tim Melville

and when she works with clay the land of her ancestors is literally embedded in her paintings. Recently her work has become more formal – painted on sheets of board or canvas rather than on ad hoc materials – and she has shifted out of her draughty garage/studio into a new purpose-built studio beside the house.

As well as making the new paintings for *Pah*, Gossage has curated over 50 works, including some by Colin McCahon and Louise Henderson, from the James Wallace Collection and other sources, which will be displayed throughout the gallery. "It's great to work with Gillian and Carol because they've given me the opportunity to be in a huge space and I can do whatever I want – I don't have to worry about selling work, which is really exciting."

Her paintings are often soaked in a sense of sadness and loss. Many writers have commented that the figures are like ghosts, curiously still and expressionless as if they're waiting for something to happen; they seem to float (sometimes literally) in a timeless era that's hard to pin down. In the painting *Matariki*, 2014, for instance, a group of women dressed in cloaks and blankets sit on the ground in front of the ghostly outline of a meeting house. They look as if they've stepped out of a 19th-century photograph, yet Gossage never works from photographs. Her images come straight from the subconscious and she paints directly onto the canvas – no drawing. Although many of them have figures in them, they're more like portraits of psychological and emotional states rather than of individuals.

Star Gossage, *Birds-in-Garden*, 2014. media and dimensions????? Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery

The paintings in her striking exhibition *Kingfisher Blue/ Kikorangi Kotare*, at Tim Melville Gallery late last year, were dominated by melancholic blue tones that bound them strongly together as a series. "I had this tube of blue paint and I just kept using it the whole time. So all those paintings are that blue colour. And now I don't want to go anywhere near it. I didn't set out to make them all similar, but they were because of that blue paint, which was actually really lovely – it was a really good group of works."

When I ask her about the blue faces Gossage mentions an earlier series she painted in Australia while staying with her sister who was teaching primary school children in a remote outback community six hours' drive from Darwin. While there she painted a series of women and children with blue/black skin. "When I came back from Australia it took me ages to get rid of the Australian colours and for the paintings to come back to greens."

The figures in *Kikorangi Kotare* are mostly women who seem virtually indistinguishable from each other and from the landscape – inky blues and earthy browns bleed through their limbs and faces as if all share the same matter. When you consider these works in the context of a Maori world view, which sees strong connections between women and the land, that interconnectivity makes perfect sense.

The luminous, empty landscape *Rahuikiri Road* (in the 2013 exhibition *Marae*) has clear ancestral links to the paintings of Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon – and to Gossage's family. In this work a terrifically battered and windblown tree leans into the centre and a pale gravel road disappears behind a grassy hillside, lending a delicious sense of mystery. It's an exquisitely textural and raw painting that brings back the magical sense of anticipation you feel when driving along a winding, slightly treacherous road at dusk on your way to an isolated beach where you plan to stay the night. The transition from light to dark within this transcendent painting evokes the passage of time and the potency of the landscape as a vessel for memory, desire and imagination. This is what Gossage sees from her window every day – the bend in the road, the old pohutukawa tree and the shoulder of the sand dunes; it's also the name of the road that takes you to her house and is named after her great great grandmother Rahui Te Kiri. Gossage says the painting is about her uncle who used to walk his horse along the road and recently passed away.

Providing an historical backdrop for Gossage's paintings, artist Lisa Reihana wrote ("Maps and Memories", *Art New Zealand*, 118, Autumn 2006): "In 1894 the Government forced Ngati Wai people off their land. Rahui Te Kiri jumped ship and swam straight back to Hauturu. When Hauturu was finally 'cleared' and acquired, it was declared Crown owned land and turned into a nature reserve. In return 400 pounds was offered as compensation but tellingly this money has never been redeemed. Rahui Te Kiri and her husband Tenetahi did not accept this financial overture and so it still sits as a quiet protest in the Crown coffers, defiantly ensuring the act of attrition is understood as confiscation. This local history of enforced displacement helps explain the terrain as well as the melancholic tone of Gossage's work."

Driving up the east coast from Auckland to Pakiri you can't miss the rapid changes overtaking this prime stretch of coastal land – the Johnstone Hill Tunnels and major motorway expansion have opened the area to tourism

Star Gossage, *Rahui-Kiri Rd*, 2013. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery

Star Gossage, *Piki te Ora*, 2014. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery

media and dimensions?????

(and traffic jams), and new subdivisions are sprouting up along the coast. Though Gossage says her work is subtle and she avoids "hard-core politics", it's obvious she's thinking about past and present alienation from whenua – and relating the broader issues to her own and her family's experiences. Art historian Damian Skinner has described Gossage's paintings as naïve realism and traced her engagement with spirituality and politics back to the work of Selwyn Muru – in particular his *Parihaka Series* painted in the 1970s.

Named after the star symbol of the Ratana Pah, Gossage is of Ngati Manuhiri/Wai, Ngati Ruanui, French, English and Portuguese descent. Art runs deeply in her veins – both her Maori and Pakeha grandparents were artists and two of her five sisters are also painters. Since graduating from Otago Polytechnic with a Diploma in Fine Arts in 1995, Gossage's star has been rising steadily. She had her first solo show, *Ora*, with Jeffrey Harris at Oedipus Rex Gallery in 2001 and many more followed. Last year her work was featured in Auckland Art Gallery's exhibition *Five Maori Painters,* curated by Ngahiraka Mason, and after that she received a $25,000 New Generation Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand.

Commenting on the interiority of Gossage's work in the catalogue essay "Star Gossage: Tona Whatumanawa Maori" Ngahiraka Mason wrote: "The artist struggled with depression before the birth of her daughter in 2004, and it could be said that in some ways painting became her medicine".

In recent years there's been an obvious shift in Gossage's work, perhaps signalling a new sense of optimism and joy in the artist's life. "When I started off the colours in the paintings were really dark and then when Grace was born, heaps of colour came in and they got lighter," she says.

In *Birds in the Garden,* 2014, for instance, a bright orange wedge smolders in the top left corner of the painting – a fragment of sky set alight by the setting sun. The exuberant flight of birds flocking at dusk and the dark diagonal lines of foliage create a sense of energy and movement – a marked contrast with the static figures in earlier paintings. *Piki Ti Ora* is another work energised by movement, and was inspired by her 11-year-old daughter Grace's school Kapa haka concert. In this we see a young girl dressed in traditional costume raising her arms and fluttering her hands.

Gossage says she wants to capture this energy and joy in the new paintings for *Pah* – despite the fact that the history of the house contains some "dark" episodes. She has been looking at Henri Matisse's famous "dance" paintings in which a group of pale figures are linked together, forming a dynamic pattern of movement, and set against a simplified blue and green background. She wants the new paintings to be similarly boisterous.

Also rising on her horizon is inclusion in the prestigious annual exhibition *Blue Chip* at Melbourne's Niagra Galleries (scheduled for April/May 2015) where she will be shown alongside artists Ian Fairweather, John Brack, Rick Amor and others. Tim Melville will also show her work at the Sydney Contemporary art fair in September. Star Gossage's work is about to reach a much larger audience – a change she is eagerly anticipating.

Pah *is at the TSB Bank Wallace Trust Arts Centre from 11 March to 19 April 2015.*