

**You never know
which side you'll
fall
when you're
sitting on the fence**

Fig. 13. Stephens, Samantha. You Never Know Which Side You'll Fall. 2024.

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Abstract

This research examines the art of protest posters and what it means to engage in a public space as an artist. Primarily through text and printmaking, it explores what could start a dialogue around protest and current events in Aotearoa and globally. Graphic design, traditional, modern printmaking techniques such as urban street art, and both traditional and modern printmaking techniques have shaped this exege-sis and creative body of work.

The artists key to my practice are varied in media and influence; such as musicians Michael Franti, activists and multimedia artists The Guerilla Girls, designers of The Wellington Media Collective and Barbara Kruger.

This research project is concerned with discussion around issues facing Aotearoa and its current government’s policy and decision-making. Protest and protest art is core to how we discuss, react to, and unpack public issues. I am influenced by the process of making, creative practice research, design-art and modern protest material. The crux of this practice is making protest art publicly accessible to anyone.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Who am I in the context of this research project?

My name is Samantha Karin Stephens. I am a multidisciplinary artist, born in Louisville, Colorado who grew up in Raleigh and Asheville, North Carolina, United States until the age of ten. In April of 2007, my immediate family of my mother (born in Kaponga, Taranaki), father (born in Raleigh) and older sister (born in Boulder, Colorado) moved to Whakatū in the top of the South Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand. My childhood instilled a deep love for visual arts and my teenage years produced a passion for civics and community.

My first experiences with protest were at my all-girls' high school where gender conformity, patriarchal and traditional British decency values were historical, apparent and enforced. I rallied against the policing of our bodies, such as instances in which young girls were explicitly slut-shamed by male and female teachers. While I studied there was no option for students to wear pants or taonga (treasures, in this case specifically carved jewellery). Since then, the efforts of a group of persistent students (including myself) has helped to change these rules.

Moving to Pōneke and on to university, I joined the queer club on campus and for the middle two years of my bachelor's degree I was the president of UniQ Massey Wellington. We mostly focused on advocacy and fundraising but also participated in annual Pride Parades, a joyous protest that has a history born out of bravery and suffrage.

These experiences have culminated in my passion for protest art and how it can be used as a tool of agency and a place for public discussion to question or assert ideas. Protest art has a presence within this time in the early 21st century and this place, Aotearoa.

Research questions and concerns

This exegesis is structured chronologically, referring to artist models and theorists where they become relevant.

It asks: What art practices have influenced protest art historically in a way that makes them easy to access and reproduce?

Note to the reader: where relevant, I have used words from Te Reo Māori. These words are used when no translation in English is ideal or a direct one to one. I am aware I write this exegesis in a land belonging to indigenous people (tangata whenua/people of the land) and express all the love and respect I can give.

Protest - Why?

In Gustav Merger's "Manifesto World" (as cited in Lack 32), he argues that art and the artist both act in a political framework whether they want to or not. The central tenet running through his 40 years of practice was the assertion that humans can cause total obliteration. I argue that through socio-economic systems, blindness, ignorance and rhetoric, anyone can be complicit in genocide. Through capitalist regimes, selfishness and means of 'othering' groups of people, we, over a broad spectrum of harm, will hurt others. Protest and protest art aims to speak directly to issues that impact people, either through legislation, proposed changes to law, political decision-making, inciteful events or desperation (Smith et al. 21). The art of protest and protest art ask questions of these systems. Protest art rallies, screams, cries, admonishes, criticises and pleads - for change, focus or help. No one ever protests things going well.

In and around Aotearoa many crimes against humanity have been committed. The Dawn Raids, our low 44% rapist conviction rate (Jury as cited in RNZ), the poverty in Northland (Todd), the slave trade of the Melanesian people (Australian Maritime Museum). Stolen land (Manatū Taonga) and treasures belonging to indigenous peoples, our staggering 500 - 600 person annual suicide rate (Te Whatu Ora); I could go on ad nauseum. We have a nation of pride and constructed

national identity (Mace) whose mould fits only a few. We are extremely wealthy (New Zealand Herald) and yet, our elderly suffer (Walker as cited in Steyl) and our children starve (Pannekoek et al).

The anthology of protest art ranges from sculpture, murals, posters, signage, woodcuts, textiles, clothing, badges, flags, to music and photography. This demonstrates the breadth and depth of communication this art form produces, and is a significant component of effective protest movements. As Gibson et al. state, protest is an act of citizenship and an active tool of democracy (11, 15).

Van Stekelenburg defines protest as a collective political action (15). Wright asserts this collective action as an individual representing a group, aiming to further the stance of and improve the conditions of that group (995). This definition includes small acts of protest, such as trying to purchase environmentally sourced toilet paper, to acts of self-immolation. Before the turn of the 21st century, protest was defined by social scientists as grievances and social efficacy. Political protest begins with grievances: due to policy, issues or current state of affairs (Van Stekelenburg 15).

Protest Art in Aotearoa

Within Aotearoa, protest has spotlighted key issues around land rights, colonisation, racism, nuclear weaponry, feminism, war, economic struggle and environmental issues (Gibson et al., 2019). In Aotearoa, much of this activism has become part of a national identity, especially in cases of the 1981 Springbok tour and nuclear disarmament in the 1960s - mid 1980s (Harris, 2004).

The relevance of this activism today continues through worker's rights, especially healthcare workers and demonstrated by the recent protests in Dunedin in response to the current National government rescinding its campaign promise to build a new hospital. Abortion access in 2020, safety at night in 2021, sex worker rights last year and currently in 2024. The war against Palestine has also been widely protested country-wide over the last year. All of these different protest topics and

ideologies have coalesced in the works I have created, especially the final twenty, which I will explore in more depth later.

The main influence that this history of protest has had to the final project is the deep care that we as citizens have for the world we inhabit. Whether this be protesting New Zealand's involvement in overseas wars, human rights abuse or genocide. This could also be smaller minutiae of policy changes that have a domino effect to a lower standard quality of life, increased starvation and people we love suffering at the hands of a disconnected and careless government.

Chapter 2: Creative Works

Portrait Works - May 2023

When I initially went to undertake this master’s-level study I was enamoured with exploring the idea of what it means to be a public servant after working for a couple of years as a customer service representative in local government. I was intrigued by portraiture and the way symbols are used as suggestions about the subject.

I was interested in portraiture that explores our martyrs, idols, politicians, icons, people of infamy, musicians and artists. I aimed to communicate information using portraiture, especially through reference, pastiche, truth in materials and the context that materials provide. The focus was on those who are public servants and leaders.

I wanted to explore and expound on the research done by Yvonne Todd through portrait photography in representing normal people as valuable, the same way realist painter Millet did and that we all do through digital connections, album covers and the posters we hang on our walls. Her installation “The Wall of Man” (2009) showed how the average person, in this case a majority of Pākeha and tauīwi (foreigner, European, non-Māori, colonist) men from various backgrounds, could be changed solely through context clues. Dressed as CEOs, business representatives, and salesmen the vibe they give “feels uncomfortably, stiflingly bland.” (Hall, 2009).

As I started painting prior to the 2023 national election, I was finding it hard to pick the right things to say through the imagery, pastiche and symbolism. I aimed to celebrate many of the women I painted, such as Tamatha Paul or Jan Logie, especially Logie’s focus on supporting the worker’s rights of sex workers, dancers and strippers. In each portrait, I selected colours that reflected party lines or policy choices, I also



Fig 1. Stephens, Samantha. Christopher Luxon. 2023.

aimed for a style of pop art that seemed accessible to viewers. In the figure above, Christopher Luxon, who was elected as the country’s leader, is shown on a light blue background to signify emptiness and coldness. He is wearing a captain’s cap to signify his prior role as chief executive officer of Air New Zealand, the country’s national airline. Here I was beginning to build a visual and semiotic language to communicate critique of politicians, especially through humour.



Fig 2. Stephens, Samantha. We Won’t Go Quietly. 2023.

I started to explore images of protest through illustration, specifically current events and the Fired Up Stilettos’ petition to parliament to give contracted workers rights, and oppose predatory strip club management towards the dancers that draw clients to their venues. Dancers found that when trying to take grievances to The Crown, they repeatedly did not get results following assault, fines and docked wages (Martusia King).

These illustrations were made working digitally with a limited colour palette inspired by the protest performances on Courtenay Place by Fired Up Stilettos. I took separate images and combined them to explore the depth of the messages being put forward by the group. In all images, I featured placards held by the protestors.

Hand-Made Protest Signs

As I came to the second half of my first year of study, I realised a shift into the concepts around protest were what was important and relevant at that point; what defines a protest artefact and what are the prevalent motifs? At this stage, I did not feel like it was my place to push a certain political ideology.



Fig 3. Stephens, Samantha. I Don't Know, I'm Just Scared. 2023.

In August of 2023 I simulated a protest on the subject of nothing to examine what could motivate some people to speak up in a relatively safe environment, the Tasman Street tennis courts at Pukeahu, The National War Memorial. Location, as with many art practices, is imperative in protest art. This site has a complex history from a history

being used as mara kai (food gardens), a barracks, a prison, a brick works, a preschool, a high school and university (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), and finally to its current iteration as a dedication to those lost in overseas wars; it is extremely charged. I made signs for participants to fill in the meaning themselves, however the site's history could not be forgotten. Being surrounded by chains, rusted poles and having to step over a "NO TRESPASSING" sign evoked a sense of presence from the surroundings immediately.

Other students and lecturers participating in the critique immediately gravitated towards the signs provided and spoke about things that came to them, inspired by the messages provided.

The signs read:
"I AM PROTESTING"
"I'M UPSET"
"I DON'T KNOW I'M JUST SCARED"
"JOIN US"
"NO!", and,
"HISTORY WILL REPEAT ITSELF"

This prompted participants to engage in a variety of ways from lying down to speaking to what the words meant to them. The topics ranged from young people voting, to climate change and human rights.

I was inspired by Gorgio Agamben's posthumanist theories around 'states of exception' and what physical places cause people to be stripped of their rights. I agree with Agamben's (as cited in Ek, 2006) argument that the asylum camp, work camp, or prison has become the place where atrocities are committed in the West.

The theoretical framework at this point was to have the work remain partially ambiguous. Ambiguity within art can cause audiences to linger upon works and feel more stimulated by the work (Farr Tomey and Tomey). The study by Farr Tomey and Tomey found that people who left an artwork were more likely to continue thinking about the

piece(s) if they didn't fully understand them on first viewing. Within my own work, my motivation was to allow the viewer to bring their own preconceived notions to a concept.



Fig 4. Stephens, Samantha. Protest of Nothing. 2023.

Responses

Out of the concepts put forward by the participants during the activation and pushed by the text originally used, I made four works. This marks the solid transition from paintings to printmaking posters. These works implemented traditional printmaking colours to evoke a variety of design principles.

I DON'T KNOW / I'M JUST SCARED / THE WORLD IS ON FIRE:

This work employs broken text to mimic the sense of fear and loss that we experience when confronted with climate change and the heightened natural disasters. At the time this participant was struck by the fires in Maui, Hawai'i and the same sentiment could apply recently to the hurricanes that have affected my hometown of Asheville, North Carolina or Florida. The font was chosen to be bold, round, all caps and solid to evoke screaming and feet planted in the ground.

I AM PROTESTING // // I AM LYING DOWN: Two participants chose to lie on the ground, I chose the layout of this poster to reflect those physical movements. This time, colour was chosen to reflect grass, earth and the original colour of the placard.

I'M UPSET 38.5% OF YOUNG PEOPLE DIDN'T VOTE: Before the election in 2023, amongst my friends and coworkers there was a palpable sense of fear around what impacts a more conservative government could have on New Zealand. In this country many young people (aged 18 - 24) do not exercise their right to vote. There are many reasons why this may be, a lot of young people do not see themselves or their interests being advocated for in national and local government. Some young people do not feel like they see their efforts and work produce anything fruitful in legislation, policy or change. These influences cause lower voter turn-out in young people. One of the participants chose "I'M UPSET" to speak to this point and assert that they were going to encourage a group of young people they were talking to soon to encourage them to enrol and vote. This poster was designed to reflect the font and colour of a newspaper headline.

WE MUST ACT, MOBILISE, ASSEMBLE: This work emerged while I was doing research into The Wellington Media Collective, a group who operated in the late 1900s in a variety of community and protest spaces. I will talk about the WMC further in depth later in this exegesis. For now, I will mention that this font, rhetoric and colour palette was repeated over and over again through the works in We Will Work With You, 2013.

In presenting these works I did not want to end entirely on doom and gloom. I have faith in people to be good and aim to do good things. When people get together to do the hard work, make change, discuss, think and learn, good things can and will happen. 30,000 people gathered in Dunedin last week to demand that our government carry through on the promise to build them a new hospital. This is the largest collection of people campaigning for a single cause in New Zealand in the last decade. I support this collective action.

Fig. 5. Stephens, Samantha. I AM PROTESTING // // I AM LYING DOWN. 2023.



Fig. 6. Stephens, Samantha. I DON'T KNOW / I'M JUST SCARED / THE WORLD IS ON FIRE. 2023.



Fig. 7. Stephens, Samantha. I'M UPSET 38.5% OF YOUNG PEOPLE DIDN'T VOTE. 2023.

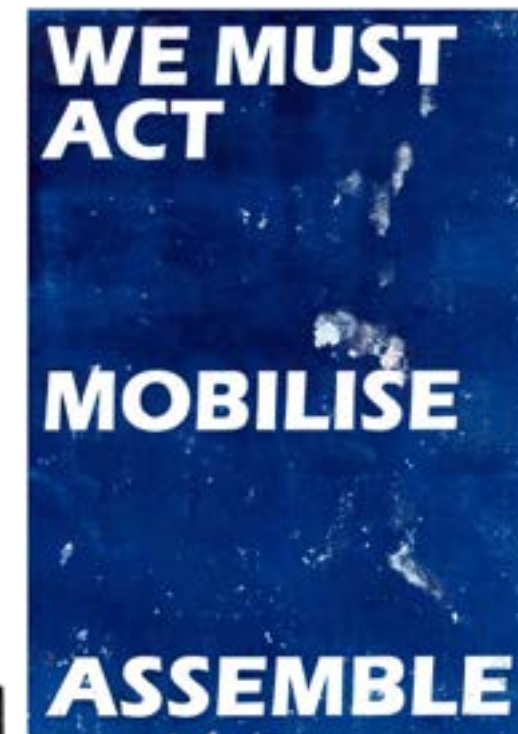


Fig. 8. Stephens, Samantha. WE MUST ACT, MOBILISE, ASSEMBLE. 2023.

Guerilla Girls

By the end of 2023, I felt compelled to almost exclusively make text and colour-based works. This is partially due to the influence of artists and designers such as The Guerilla Girls and Barbara Krueger to get across an idea through words almost exclusively.

The Guerilla Girls are a collective protest group in the art world that take on assumed names and wear masks to hide their identities. The work shown in Fig. 9 is quintessential Guerilla Girls. In 1989 the collective surveyed the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the result of gender analysis among figures versus exhibiting artists, their submission of this artwork was rejected, and instead was displayed as a billboard.

In this billboard, bus advertisement, postcard and more, The Guerilla Girls implement a reference to art history, the painting La Grande Odalisque by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres which is famously anatomically incorrect, the spine of the female nude being far too long, a nod to the misogyny of the art world that the radicals were protesting. Stylistically, this work uses colour to bold effect, being the magenta, yellow and key (black) of CMYK. High contrast colours draw the eye to and around the billboard. The classic font Futura Condensed mimics newspapers and magazines of the 80s and 90s (Guerilla Girls 18).



Fig. 9. Guerilla Girls. Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? 1989.

In many of their works, they directly address elected officials or galleries, pointing out obvious racism, exclusion of female artists and the depiction of naked bodies through gender in art. In one poster, the collective directly addresses a conservative US senator, Jesse Helms Jr., letting him know the art world reflects his values through sarcasm. These are techniques that I aim to reflect in works such as “Struggling To Access Your Benefit?”

Mis/Disinformation

The second most recent mass-gathering protest in Aotearoa was the convoy that ended at Parliament in late February of 2022. Inspired by Canadian truckers protesting vaccine mandate laws, the Convoy NZ Facebook group and movement was born (Manhire para 5). Motivated by conspiracy theorist Alex Jones’ Infowars, Counterspin media was Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer’s New Zealand version (para. 7). Through live streams, Facebook and Instagram, flagrant misinformation around the coronavirus being a hoax, along with various other conspiracy theories was what Counterspin peddled. Other figureheads such as Chantelle Baker, Brian Tamaki (explored later), Sue Grey and neo-Nazi organisation Action Zealandia travelled from all around the country in vehicles to occupy Parliament (Manhire).

I visited the protest on a couple of occasions and experienced a first-hand view. The occupants of the Parliament grounds had set up tents, recreational vehicles and barbecues, and held signs at passing motorists and a few brave or foolhardy pedestrians. The rhetoric and phrasing on these placards was vulgar and simple. One read “Clarke might like it up the bum but we don’t.” This combined misogyny, homophobia and a mischaracterisation of vaccine information all in one protest sign. Other verbiage came in the form of chalk on the ground calling for the execution of parliament members: “hang ‘em high” next to a smiley face and “FREEDOM, WAKE UP” (Manhire and Lambert). Memorials around Parliament were graffitied and had human excrement thrown on them. As the protest occupation reached a fever pitch, a wooden playground was set on fire and destroyed (Campbell).

The Disinformation Project (2022), an organisation formed to track the spreading of mis- and disinformation within Aotearoa has dissected what caused people to assemble en masse at this time, to protest usage of the COVID-19 vaccine and the mandates put in place by the traffic light system. The Disinformation Project (TDP) found a huge number of New Zealanders obtaining information via social media, which marked a huge shift from the analogue information streams such as print media, magazines, and set television news cycles, up until the 2000s. TDP noticed a shift from August 2021 to February of 2022 in



Fig. 10. Stephens, Samantha. Convoy 2022. 2023.

memetic imagery, humour, strong emotion and dangerous speech. These tools are used to create an ecology of language, beliefs and perceptions leading to echo chambers of false information. TDP also found that when searching for protest-related content on YouTube, users were repeatedly encouraged to watch videos which were increasingly more conspiracy-based. These videos started to include global movements which were “misogynist, hyper-masculine, anti-authoritarian, Identitarian” (The Disinformation Project, 2022, p. 3) and other anti-mandate content. The mis- and disinformation found in these social media echo chambers both culminated in and were further inflamed by the protest at Parliament.

“Convoy 2022” is a work made out of the words The Disinformation Project found were most popular on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram on the day that the convoy of protestors arrived in Wellington at Parliament. I wanted to evoke the sense of frenzy that these echo chambers can cause. I also wanted to connect the text together to continue the themes of how these words can lead someone from something innocent and not politically motivated, towards conspiracy. I also wanted to use the image of the connected text to represent how someone protesting a vaccine mandate is also potentially inadvertently protesting next to a neo-Nazi, inadvertently aligning themselves with larger groups, ideas and dangerous rhetoric. I used a different font for every phrase to continue the sense of confusion and mixed ideology. I designed this poster with the purpose of mimicking mind maps found on the internet and banners held during protests with cotton-based paper that is similar to touching fabric.

Protest Art Posters

To direct and narrow the lens with which we are viewing my work and this project, we can look at the protest art poster, specifically. When looking at archives of protest media such as Signs For Peace (Baur and Baur) or Strikethrough: Typographic Messages of Protest (Munro) we can see the key role that protest posters have played in the last fifty years globally. Some of the most iconic imagery comes out of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, South African Apartheid in the 1990s and the United States of America invading Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The common themes through these posters are simple colour palettes with high contrast. Many employ text in a way I aim to replicate: light text on coloured or dark backgrounds. This technique allows for traditional printmaking techniques to be employed, using white cotton paper.

Protest art posters can be used in a few ways to great effect: advertisement of a group joining together physically, messaging passively or being used actively within a collective event. Holding a poster in one’s hands at a protest allows one to represent an idea when tears or meaning get caught in your throat. Holding meaningful words provides a sense of agency.

Terminology

The aim of this section is to categorise and define my own work and the set of rules that I am working within.

Printmaking

Within printmaking, I was taught in high school that your prints should have a border or edge around them and that space should be clean. Through my works I have carried that tradition on to situate myself among contemporary printmaking and value the respect I have for this medium.

Materials

Within printmaking, it is typical to use a heavy cotton paper to allow the paper to soak, absorb water and make way for the water-based ink to suck into the paper fibre more easily.

Plate

The plate, within the text-based works I am doing, has revealed itself through trial and error. I made single-text works using a 3mm backing plate and 3mm words glued on top. This did not ink well and often smudged going through the printing press. Acrylic gave an interesting bubbled and plastic effect and was used for the work “You Never Know”, however, a sheet of acrylic is six times the price of MDF and isn’t necessary to get the desired effect. The final prints used 3mm medium density fibreboard in the laser cutter, to use the spaces in between the MDF as text, through the inking stage and into the printing press has provided the cleanest, most reliable results. This reliability is in terms of producing a clean, effective print on the first time. Given time constraints, I aim to make as few prints as possible and only make multiple to experiment with colour or to fix mistakes such as misalignment or smudging.

Colour

The colours I implement usually aim to attach to a political or apolitical framework. Like Wassily Kandinsky or Piet Mondrian, I am to lay out my use of colour to provide a pathway when interpreting these works. I mention modernist painters specifically as my understanding of colour theory started with this base through my teenage years. Some of these interpretations are influenced by Western histories, some by politics within this country and some are attached meaning through personal experience and associations.

Yellow: For me, this colour denotes positivity, brightness and a deep-rooted sense of warmth from childhood until now. Kandinsky (qtd. in Sloane 117) asserts that yellow moves towards the viewer in a

two-dimensional space. Chevreul’s theory of colour (qtd. in Pastoreau 191) could be an influence in the proliferation of yellow through modernist European painting, impressionism and abstraction. For many of these painters, it was used as an easy way to create other colours or as a primary base in itself. It is also currently the main colour used by the ACT Party of New Zealand. “They already owned yellow as their political colour, which we made bolder, and supported it with more contemporary colours – pink and light-blue - and more youthful fonts” (Giannoulis para. 6). This particular interpretation of these colours and lack of mentioning seems to imply that this design company and The ACT Party itself either do not know that they are also the colours of the pansexual pride flag, or, if so, they do not mind that connotation.

Red: This denotes passion, blood, fear, death, excitement, and weight. It is the colour that represents the New Zealand Labour Party.

Black: This is often used as a source of neutrality and seriousness within my work, where I allow the font to do more of the heavy lifting around meaning. Within the New Zealand political landscape it is heavily used by New Zealand First.

Browns and ochres: Represents flesh, the earth and things that are organic. This is heavily influenced by browns and ochres being easily producible dyes by many people. The first and oldest artworks made by humans used ochres from the Pacific Islands to cave paintings in Asia and France (Coles 17).

Green: Is an extremely variable colour, can denote something official, lends itself to policy, logic and firmness. Used by the Green Party of New Zealand as their main colour.

Orange: A politically neutral colour within Aotearoa that to me represents community.

Pink: I denote passion, excitement, boldness, attraction and shouting to pink. A colour used to celebrate and persecute women and queer people. In modern contexts, pink has often been denoted to homosex-

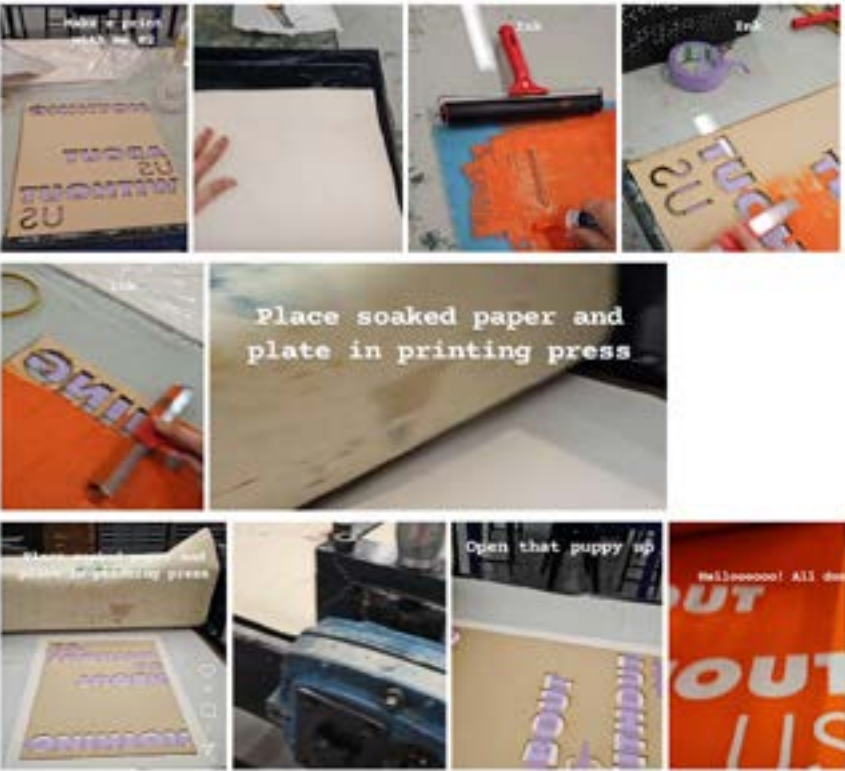


Fig. 11. Stephens, Samantha. Screenshots from a video showing the step-by-step process of making a print. 2024.

The Role of Printmaking In Protest Media

In the 1920s, Käthe Kollwitz used woodblock printmaking to communicate the desperation of the poor German working class to the public. She favoured, as I do, the boldness that working in a monochromatic colour palette allows. She also implemented the reproducibility that prints allow to spread messages through image, flyer and leaflet (Lack 21). The protest artist will accomplish the spreading of a message through the making of many. The screenprint and woodblock print has often been used to allow groups to quickly produce protest materials.



Fig. 12. Stephens, Samantha. 3D printed six-inch wide printing press. 2024.

3D Printer, Maker Space, Summer, Going Mobile

Over the summer of 2023 - 2024 I continued to consider what final shape this project would come to. One idea centred around accessibility: many people have a lot to say about what they feel about what is happening around them but don't have the resources to say these feelings or opinions (Phan). I found an open-source project by printmaker Nick Phan to create a 6-inch wide printing press. This size would allow the press to be taken to workshops or out into the world if needed. I value the use of open-source materials and sharing resources between artists rather than gatekeeping techniques and tools.

March 2024 - Works in The Print Room

Much of the inspiration for my works comes from conversations with people I love. Some of my close relatives identify themselves as centrists for the reason that it seems measured and considered, not leaping to the extremes of liberalism or conservatism. I have always felt that taking no stance at all is not helpful. The famous quote from Desmond Tutu sums it up best: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor". (Tutu as cited in Du Boulay) Avoidance and denial helps no one. This work, inspired by the lyrics by singer songwriter Alex Cameron aims to capture this sentiment. Waiting for tides to take you rather than swimming can suck you under the water.



Fig. 13. Stephens, Samantha. You Never Know Which Side You'll Fall. 2024.

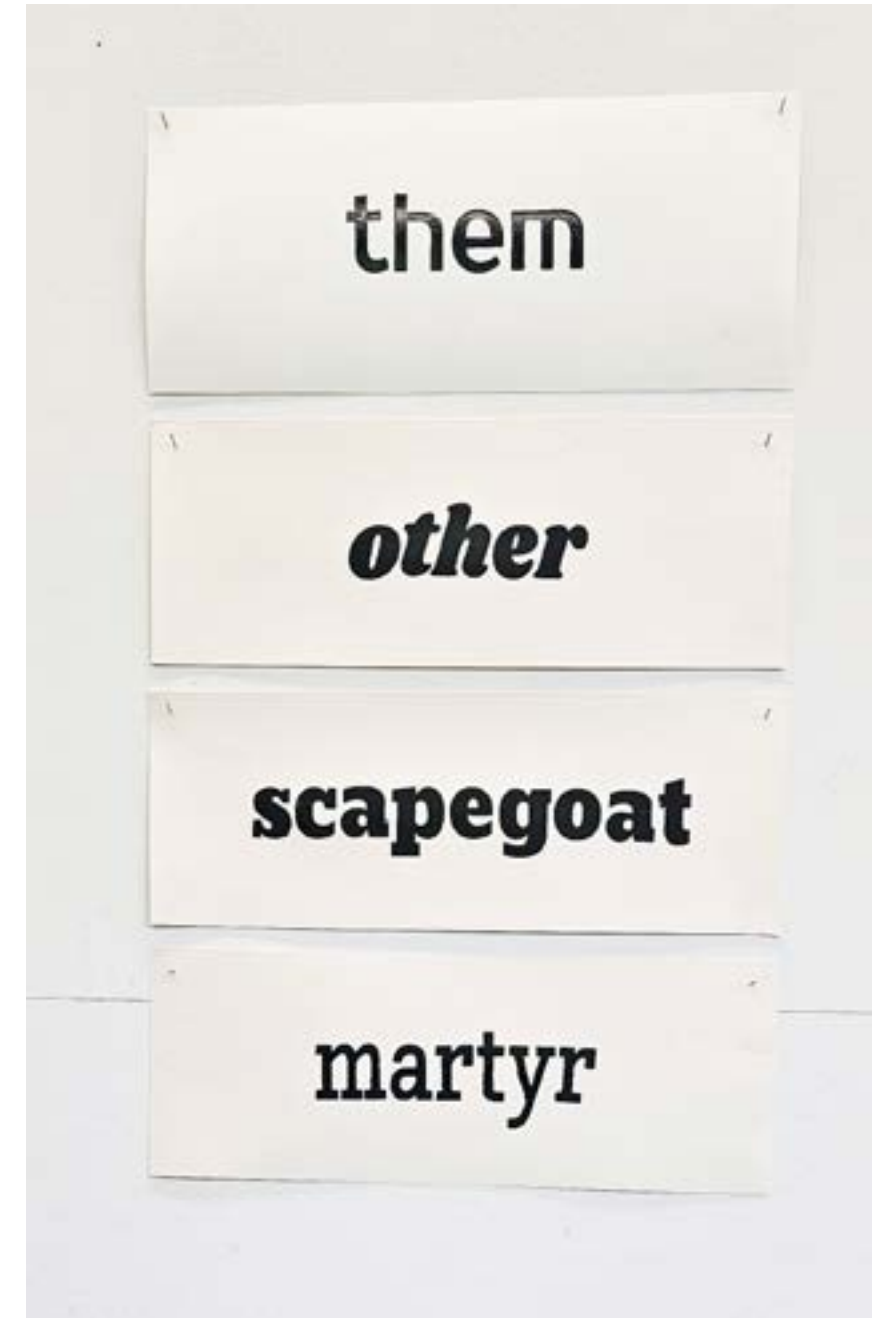


Fig. 14. Stephens, Samantha. Installation view of Them, Other, Scapegoat, Martyr. 2024.

How are people categorised in extreme ways by language? In this installation I aimed to select singular words that focus around extremism while retaining a sense of ambiguity when left out of context. The word "them" has been used to categorise groups of others, lumping together those who we perceive as different from ourselves. It can be a word that diminishes and dismisses that group. "Other" continues this, but more explicitly; the whole group of words being othering adages. Scapegoat comes from the idea that any group of people can be used as an example of how our society is diseased. Amongst history, as explained in "Degenerate Art" from Neue Gallery in New York, comic, colour and context within art can be used to categorise a group (Peters 86). Specifically Degenerate Art looks at art from the Weimar Republic in Germany in the 1920s. These works were confiscated by the Nazi government that rejected modern art. The motive of the exhibition, as explained by the book, was to scapegoat the avant-garde, featuring references to racism, showing Jewish people as animals or pieces of rock (Peters 95). In modern times, the concept remains. We pin an example of degeneracy on an individual to categorise a group. "Martyr" is the same extreme in another direction.

"My name is Aaron Bushnell. I am an active-duty member of the United States Air Force, and I will no longer be complicit in genocide." - These are the words of Aaron Bushnell, before he committed his body to flame in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C (Malekafzali).

Aaron Bushnell is not the first person to commit their life to make a statement to end genocide and persecution. He thought it was important enough to give his life to make a statement be heard (Malekafzali). That is what protest comes down to, in its essence.

Clearview Gallery Works - “Why Do People Protest?”

At this point in the year I was motivated to return my focus to traditional protest materials, stencil, spray paint and signage. I wanted to explore the concept of what motivates people to protest in the first place.

I found one article in particular that used statistical data to assess why people attended protests (Van Stekelenburg). This led to the poster “THEY WANT TO, THEY CAN, THEY ARE BEING ASKED TO.” Among the emotive catalysts, desperation, anger, fear, guilt, passion, solidarity, belief and love. When designing this particular work, I was inspired by the colour palettes of the Wellington Media Collective and screen prints from the 1990s, which were incredibly garish and off-putting and because of that, they were effective in making the viewer look twice (Derby et al). I selected a stencil font that allowed the spray paint to be its most natural self, as well as curved in on itself. I wanted to force the eye to look at the bottom of the page. Many of the works that come out of protest focus on the negative aspects that cause people to collectivise, I wanted to make sure I captured the positivity that I have felt from rallies at Pride events and women’s marches. Finally, I wanted to experiment with shape to reinforce messaging. This print took many attempts to stop the extremely thin paper from being destroyed by the pressure press, it ended up being successful in the top-down press. Using random lettering found in the print room I was able to get the imagery I aimed for, differences together, repetitively. The shape of a pyramid, a heavy base and smaller top represents the collective organisation that it takes to put together a campaign.

This was a fantastic test space, but confirmed to me that my final work needed to be in a public space, as I got no public feedback from the quick response code I left nearby.



Fig. 15. Stephens, Samantha. Installation at Clearview Gallery, Massey University Wellington. 2024.

Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger’s background was in magazine advertising from the 70s - 90s, which led to a great talent for turning heavy objects into easily digestible messages (Moffitt 136). The work Blind Idealism is Deadly installed from 2016 - 2017 on the side of Mary Boone Gallery on The High Line in New York is huge, six metres high by ten metres wide. The scale of this work shoves the message in the viewer’s face, making it impossible to ignore. Kruger employs text and colour to do most of the heavy lifting in this work. White on black and the all-caps sans serif font mimics a newspaper or tabloid headline, announcing the statement as fact. Kruger edits her own work for the audience to see, using red crosses to ramp from one message to another. Blind idealism is reactionary. Blind idealism is scary. Actually, blind idealism is deadly. It is an adaptation of a quote from Afro-Caribbean revolutionary Frantz Fanon (Moffitt). This message can be applied anywhere, at any time. This work was installed in New York following the election of Donald Trump who was supported by many voters who voted along party lines, and with idealism that may not have even reflected their own personal beliefs (Tiefenthaler). Having this text in a public space also allowed for more eyes on it than if it were inside the gallery.

Wellington Media Collective

Figure 16 is a landscape two colour screen print, designed for the Wellington Unemployed Workers Union. There is no imagery, only text, but font and handwriting are used as a call-and-response to advertising by the Social Welfare Offices. During the Muldoon-era government, the Wellington Media Collective (WMC) made many leftist pieces of political propaganda (Derby et. al., 2013). This particular piece has a connection to activist works by the Guerrilla Girls and imagery by Barbara Kruger through the use of black, white and red as well as text within a box of colour often referred to as a highlight, but in these cases used as a way to embolden the words through darkening the background and forcing contrast. Two-tone prints and bold text, found before the common design aesthetics brought in by computers in the nineties, evoke a simple, direct style.

The WMC, not only designed for clients but helped them to learn how to screen print, and disseminate messages and imagery themselves. The process was one of learning and upskilling while providing a social service (Derby et. al., 2013). Being able to equip anyone with the skills to make protest art is core to my values as an artist.

Many works by the WMC have more of a global context, such as the protest of the Springbok Tour, anti-nuclear sentiment and rallies against the war in Vietnam. Intriguingly, this work speaks to injustice within New Zealand. It is a call to action for people being maligned by the welfare system. There is no context for where this work was placed in the book, but many of the pieces made by WMC were posters that would have been hung publicly on streets or inside domestic settings, endorsing a sense of solidarity. This work speaks because it is simple. It asks the viewer a question, and tells them to do something about it. In my own work, some of the posters directly ask the viewer a question, or implore them to think about current issues.

Other than art, my main love and career focus has been community-focused social work. The Wellington Media Collective had a hugely

varied focus from advertisement, social liberation, political lobbying and, of course, protest. I was lucky enough to see the recent recreation of their works and list of organisations they had worked with at He Pataka Toi and the Refinery Gallery and Artspace in Whakatū Nelson (Cantlon et al). The impact that this collective had for thirty years is astounding (Derby et al 8). The simple nature of screen printing and digital at the time of production leads to specific styles that are recognizable and effective. Simple colours, shapes and images are direct and iconic.

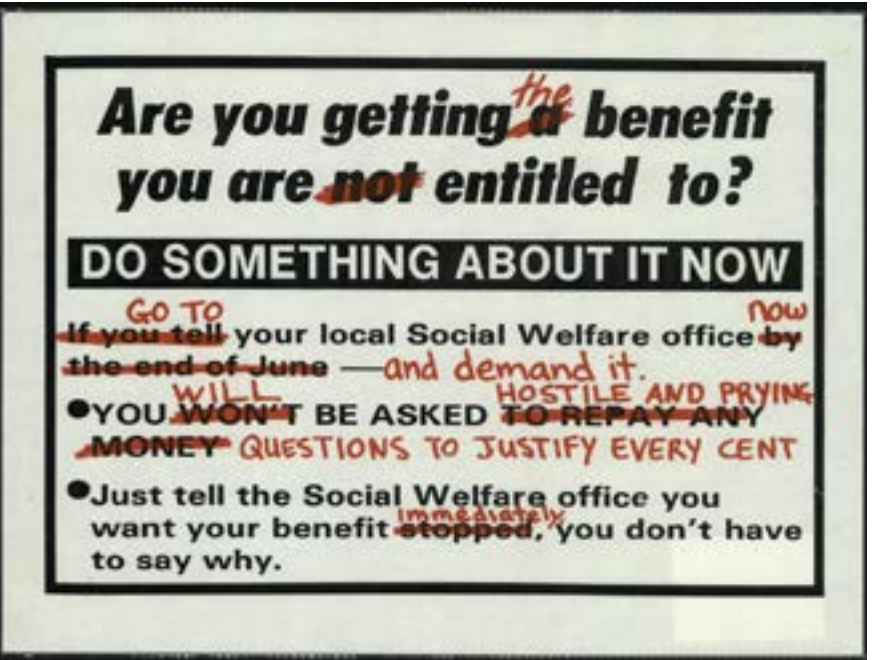


Fig. 16. McBride, Chris. Are you getting the benefit you are entitled to?. 1980.

Workshops With the MFA Programme

Through 2024 I engaged the Massey Wellington Master of Fine Arts cohort with a couple of workshops. I hoped to see how these artists would interact with printmaking materials and badge making. I learned a lot from the first one, about providing guidance, instructions and being present as a facilitator and how the environment can influence outcomes. Many participants were excited to just create, speak their mind and get stuck in. Some participants challenged the use of materials and potentially the premise in the first place, to see what reactions this would get. I learned that more than an hour is needed for exercises like this. I provided the printing press made earlier in the year.

The messages brought forward by the cohort ranged from locally to globally and from the abstract to the concrete. Many implemented the use of text rather than imagery because of the time constraints. I provided small blocks of wood and paper so that the works could be produced using only the press provided, if needed to prove proof of concept if I went further with workshops in the public.

During the badge-making workshop many people implemented the use of collage, text and de/recontextualisation. Working with artists makes it easy to get people to interact with materials and the premise.



Fig. 17. Stephens, Samantha. Photos of badge materials. 2024.



Fig. 18. Stephens, Samantha. Photos of print workshop materials. 2024.



6C Gallery Works

Fig. 19. Stephens, Samantha. Install at 6C Gallery, Block 6, Massey University Wellington. From left to right: Love Taught Me, Luxon Word Cloud, I Want You To Worship Me, Lavender I, Deity, Leper, Icon, Pariah, Messiah, Lavender II, Highschool Badge Jacket, 2024.

The act of hammering a message into a wall or pasting a poster up feels satisfying. In late May of 2024, I made five works for the installation at Massey’s 6C Gallery. This installation partially forced the viewer to be beneath the posters, badges and jacket because of the stairs in the gallery space below where the works were hung.

Continuing the messaging around conspiracy theory, cult worship and fanaticism, I thought about the way megachurch leaders such as Brian Tamaki have a stranglehold on their followers. In 2018 Tamaki, the head of Destiny Church founded in 1998, was described as a charismatic conservative leader (Stenhouse). Tamaki’s following has grown exponentially, especially among Māori who live in Auckland. In recent times, Destiny Church has attacked the rainbow community with vitriol, blaming homosexual people and murderers for earthquakes in 2016 (Stenhouse).

More recently in early 2024, Tamaki supported the actions of vandals painting over the rainbow crossing on Karangahape Road in central Auckland (Fallon). Drag performers have undertaken action to press charges against the church who have made baseless claims about the entertainers being paedophiles (Fallon). This work implements space, language and extremism to express Tamaki and other religious cultist leaders’ relationship to their followers.

I really enjoyed the effect of the stairs to lower the viewer even more to this work, as it gave greater feelings of submission and punishment. The text comes from rappers Rico Nasty and Lil Mariko’s “SIMP” which talks about domination, sex, and worship (Lil Mariko et al). Taken out of context, I have used flesh colours to continue the sexual messaging.

Fig. 20. Stephens, Samantha. Love Taught Me. 2024.



Fig. 21. Stephens, Samantha. I Want You To Worship Me. 2024.

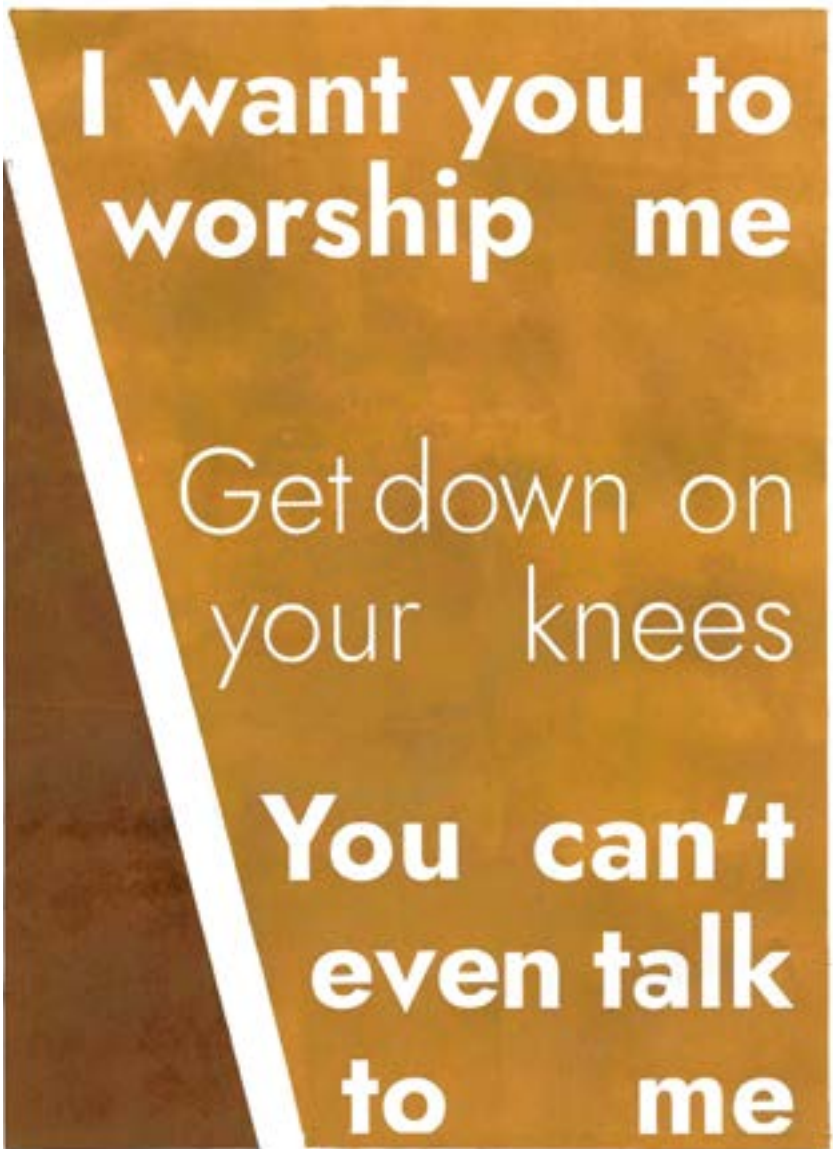


Fig. 22. Stephens, Samantha. Cognitive Dissonance. 2024.



Fig. 23. Stephens, Samantha. Lavender I, Deity, Leper, Icon, Pariah, Messiah, Lavender II, Highschool Badge Jacket. 2024.



Figs. 24 - 30. Stephens, Samantha. Detailed view of badges above. 2024.

Fig. 31. Stephens, Samantha. Nothing About Us, Without Us. 2024.



Fig. 32. Stephens, Samantha. NO. 2024.



Fig. 33. Stephens, Samantha. Don't Tell Me What I Can't Do. 2024.



Fig. 34. Stephens, Samantha. We're Killing So Efficiently We Can't Keep Count!. 2024.



Fig. 35. Stephens, Samantha. This Country Has A Difficult Time Looking At Itself Honestly. 2024.

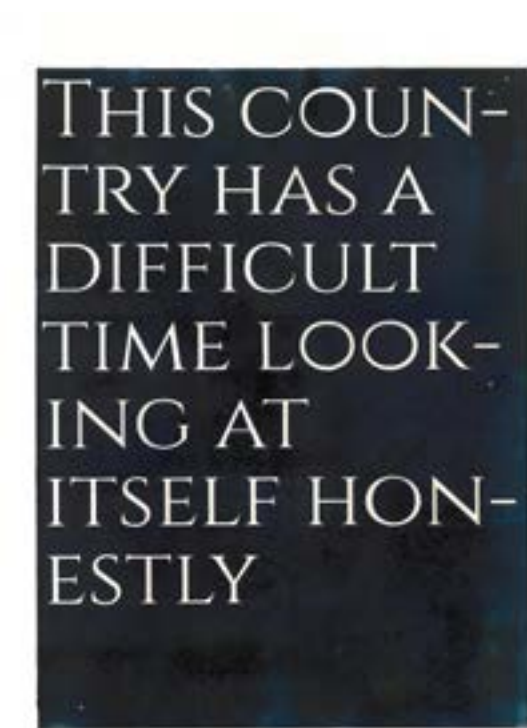




Fig. 36. Stephens, Samantha. JOY IS A FORM OF RESISTANCE. 2024.

Fig. 37. Stephens, Samantha. Struggling To Access Your Benefit?. 2024.

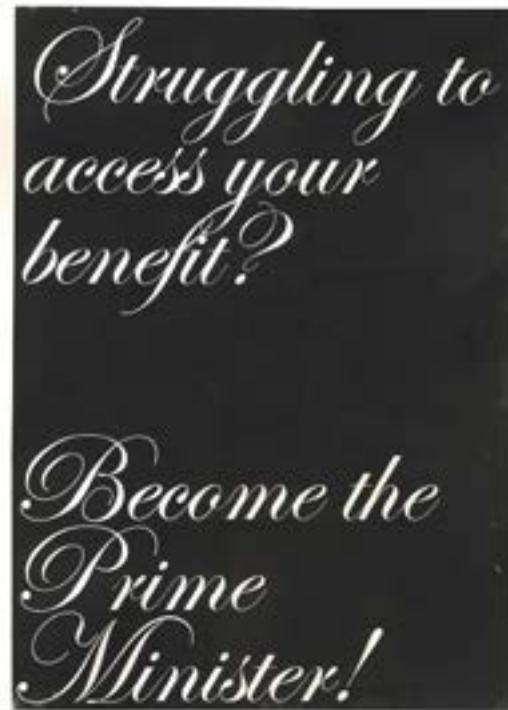


Fig. 38. Stephens, Samantha. Checklist. 2024.



Fig. 39. Stephens, Samantha. Torn poster. 2024.

Fig. 40. Stephens, Samantha. How Recent?. 2024.



Fig. 41. Stephens, Samantha. A Stern Warning Of Things To Come. 2024.

Cuba Street Installation

The final series of works I made was to supplement the previous series, where I felt I hadn't captured the message I was trying to communicate entirely effectively. I commissioned the company Phantom Billstickers to print and paste up my works around Cuba, Vivian and Ghuznee streets on bollards in the Wellington central business district. Phantom Billstickers. I booked sixteen A1 slots.

The response to this work was the most extreme, as I don't know what happened to it. In the last two days of it being hung up it was torn down with no way of ever seeing if anything had been written on it. It is pure speculation, but my guess is something offensive was written on it in response before it was torn down. I hope it was something funny, but it is more likely that it was debasing or rude. If it were me, I would have written "overseas interest".

Fig. 42. Stephens, Samantha. Sponsored By Big Blank. 2024.





Fig. 43. Stephens, Samantha. Nothing Has Changed. 2024.

The current 2024 New Zealand government has made a variety of promises that it either hasn't followed through on, or has, and cannot pay for. The roads in the South Island, the ferries connecting the two islands, removing benefits for disabled children and removing free public school meals to name a few (Kitchin). I aimed for this poster to echo an explosion of dark and light blue, echoing some of National's party colours.

Continuing development from the ideas earlier in the year, I collected language around extremism. The font chosen was Open Sans, a font often used in local and national government organisations. I chose to squeeze the font far left and to mix green into the ink to evoke a sense of discomfort and disgust, as well as give space for graffiti.

Fig. 44. Stephens, Samantha. List Of Extremes. 2024.

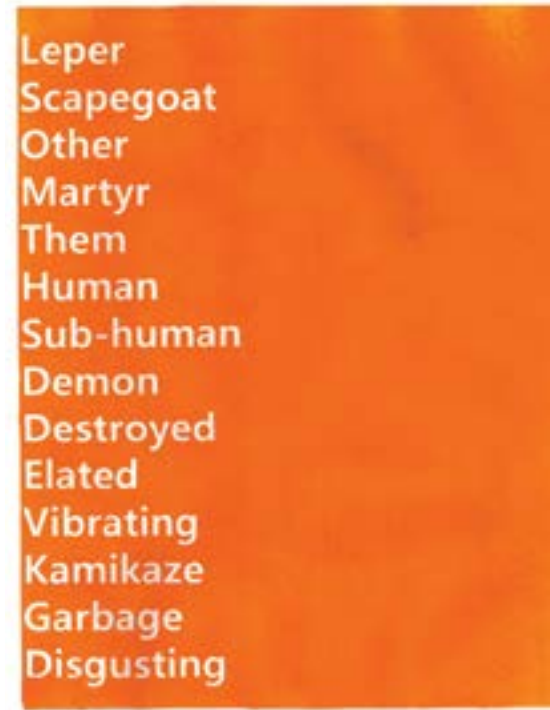


Fig. 45. Stephens, Samantha. Why Should I Vote?. 2024.

Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, this poster speaks to the feeling of apathy, dread and disengagement that one feels when looking at options when it comes to voting. A lack of faith in outcomes and follow-through with campaign promises can cause low voter turn-out.

In 2024, National announced it would be changing how beneficiaries receive support (Work and Income New Zealand). It has introduced a system that has partially come into effect and will fully come into effect in 2025 (Work and Income New Zealand).

If you do not meet deeply prohibitive obligations, instead of receiving payments into a nominated bank account, payments will go onto the infamous teal EFTPOS card. I mimicked the colour of this card for this poster and used Hoefler Text, the font used in advertising for Work and Income New Zealand. If these changes are made, people will not be able to pay rent, the primary expenditure of most New Zealanders being housing costs (Stats NZ).

The Importance of Public Engagement

The final decision to have the final works in the public eye was a straightforward one. During the last year and half, I have documented the ways I have seen the public engage with postering, graffiti, chalk, spray paint. This inspired motivation to have those conversations with visual elements in and on my own work. I aimed to have certain works

Fig. 46. Stephens, Samantha. You Can't Pay Rent With a WINZ Card. 2024.



invite discourse and feedback through boxes or underlines.

It was important for me that anyone who is affected by what my work is talking about be able to see them. A great deal of art is not accessible to the general public, and many people do not see themselves as the kinds of people who go into art galleries, especially private or dealer ones. To have the work out in the public is to give it freely to anyone to muse on, respond to, discuss or ignore. In 2019, local government reported over 10,000 pedestrians walk the central business district every day (Greater Wellington Regional Council). This gives a good indication that by 2024, it may be even higher than that. I hope that over the two week period the works were up, that a good proportion of that number saw the work.



Fig. 47. Stephens, Samantha. Photo of Checklist on Ghuznee Street. 2024.



Fig. 48. Stephens, Samantha. Photo of You Can't Pay Rent With A WINZ Card on Cuba Street. 2024.



Fig. 49. Stephens, Samantha. Photo of JOY IS A FORM OF RESISTANCE on Ghuznee Street. 2024.

Chapter 3: Reflections

I learned a huge amount about printmaking, public engagement, planning and how to get as much as I can from my love of design and fine arts in combination. In the future, when displaying works focused on the current and the political in public I would like them to have a longer life span. Potentially, if using similar tools - text, layout and colour - this could be achieved through mural work, stencil and graffiti. While paying a company to deploy the posters guaranteed a home for them, it came with a variety of uncertainties, such as where the works would be located after a certain guideline was given, a non-guaranteed timeline of hanging and was a fair cost for a limited life span. I also found it surprising how small A1 sizing felt out and about in the world. I would aim to have A0 works if done in the same format in the future.

In offering this research to others, I would encourage all artists to step outside of gallery spaces and to talk to the everyday person as much as possible. People feel restricted when accessing art; owning and producing art can be prohibitively expensive. Working with found or inexpensive materials not only serves to open doors to creating but also gives what may be discarded a second life as something beautiful or thoughtful. Putting your work into the public domain not only to help people seeing the work consider other perspectives, but encouraging a response is invaluable to artistic political discourse.

I am inspired by how much words have affected me through this project. I have always loved music, lyrics, comedy and line delivery in film, theatre and television. Exploring this and pushing this further into a compatible but wildly different medium would be continuing to make text-based prints and adapt them into digital media such as short

film or lyric video. I have been approached by another artist at this point who is interested in carrying out this vision. Protest has propelled me up to this point, but I am intrigued by the other ways text speaks. Engaging with the absurd, the bizarre and the lack of context when approaching an artwork is where I would like to explore further.



Fig. 50. Stephens, Samantha. Photo of We're Killing So Efficiently We Can't Keep Count! on Ghuznee Street. 2024.

Map of Poster Locations

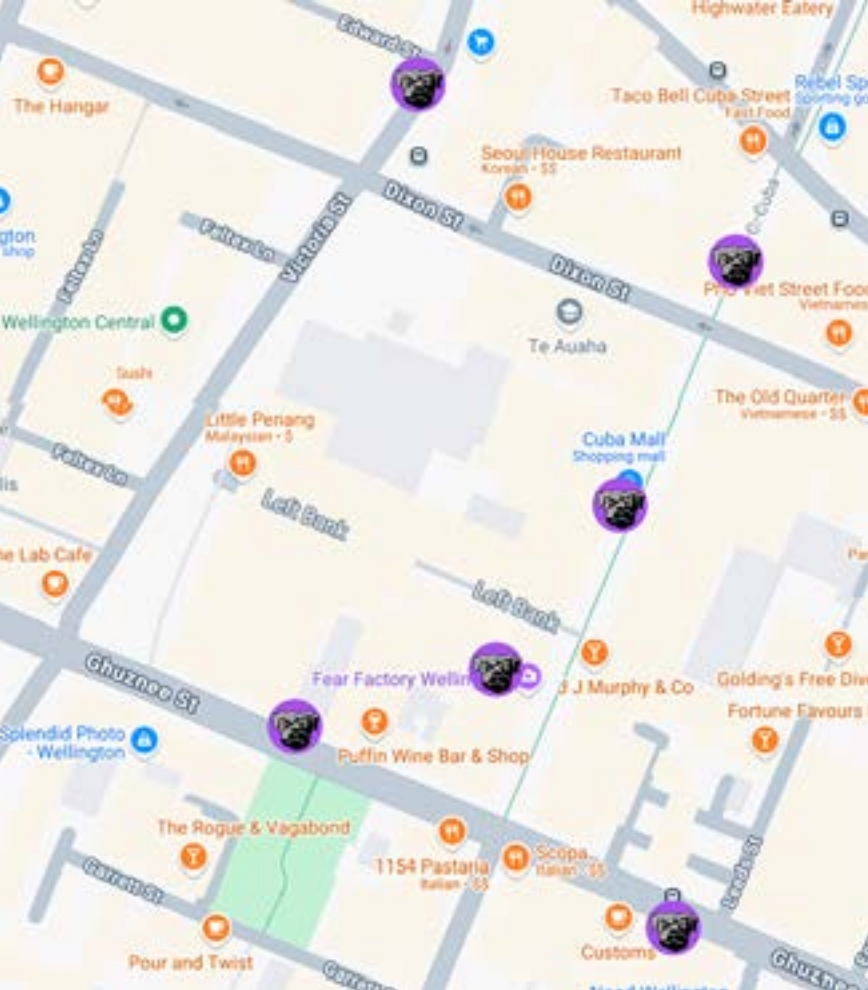


Fig 51. Phantom Billstickers Campaign Map North. 29 Sept. 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/cubapostermmap>.

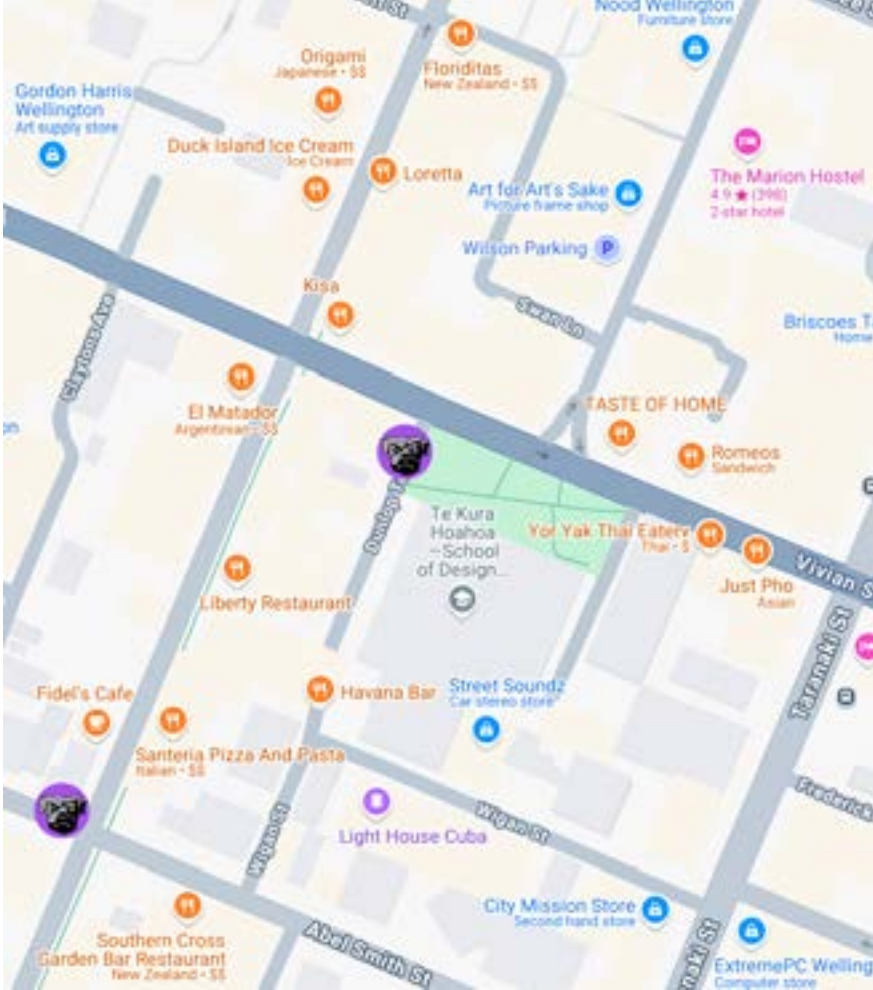


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