

# Unbound

28 Sep-18 Oct 2018

Shannon Novak



# Unbounded

Wendy Richdale  
September 2018

“Unbounded—having no limits, bounds, or borders”. It’s not a word we often use to describe ourselves or the world around us. In fact, part of ‘growing up’ is learning to categorise, to recognise when ‘this’ belongs with ‘that’—to place people, ideas and things within frameworks so we can examine them and understand them better. But categorisations can also feel restrictive, ‘bound’ and only part of the story to be told.

As an artist being ‘known-for-a-thing’ is often a path to success—being consistent and recognisable leads to more commissions and the development of your practice. It’s a desired outcome, right? But it can also lead to a narrowing down, where only certain types of conversations are happening about your work. In this context, this exhibition by Auckland-based artist Shannon Novak titled **Unbounded** looks to open up new ways of viewing and talking about his practice. Working as an artist in New Zealand and internationally, Novak’s pieces are often seen in public spaces and would be recognisable to many. Bright, colour-dense shapes morph across cityscapes and institutional galleries; abstract paintings and architectural interventions boldly speak a new language with their own visual system of meaning embedded in them.

Much has been written and discussed about Novak’s work and artistic practice, especially around his mixing of composition, sound, form, colour and technology to expand the traditional notions of artwork and the spaces that artwork is expected to be seen in. A recent recurring theme in Novak’s practice has been the ‘expanded gallery’ where he continually pushes the physical boundaries of the gallery space; artworks move off the walls into the digital realm and off institutional sites into the city itself.

**Unbounded** at Ramp Gallery is, in a sense, a chance to look at Novak’s work again with an expanded view in mind. In re-telling, the ‘expanded artist’ is explored. By re-staging past work and presenting new pieces, the conversations around his practice have a chance to deepen and move beyond their alluring surfaces and the ‘known’, to explore the ideas and structures that underpin them—to the ‘potential’ and the unknown.

In this exhibition, there are pointers to familiar aspects of Novak’s practice—the use of geometric shapes and visual systems of communication—but there is also a sense of connection to the lived experience of himself as a person and as an artist. With a conscious decision to place his own story within the reading of these works, Novak opens up new possibilities for his practice. Possibilities that seem borderless and without limits.

Novak narrates each of the works presented in **Unbounded**, expanding the conversation around them.



Shannon Novak  
**You showered  
smoke and alcohol  
imbued screams  
over those who  
walked by.  
Drenched in fear,  
they found cold  
comfort in prayer-  
like ground gazing**  
2015

“This work documents a visual score I installed on an abandoned massage parlour in downtown Auckland, a site that was left to slowly decay and disappear into the noise of the city. The site remained emotionally charged and my work attempts to communicate this energy through colour and geometric form—making the invisible, visible, just like an infrared thermal imaging camera visualises heat in a particular location. The title of the work narrates

the geometric forms like a series of lyrics accompanying a piece of written music. They offer a personal and historical view of the site, bringing back into focus that which has now been demolished. This work can be read as a metaphor for how I felt in the 90’s going to gay bars—as though I was going into a ‘forbidden’ space (or space society didn’t approve of). The first couple of gay bars (my first in Hamilton actually—“The Next Door Bar”) were placed away from main streets—the type you had to knock to get in. These spaces were left to decay. But they were still important and formative spaces for me and many others.”

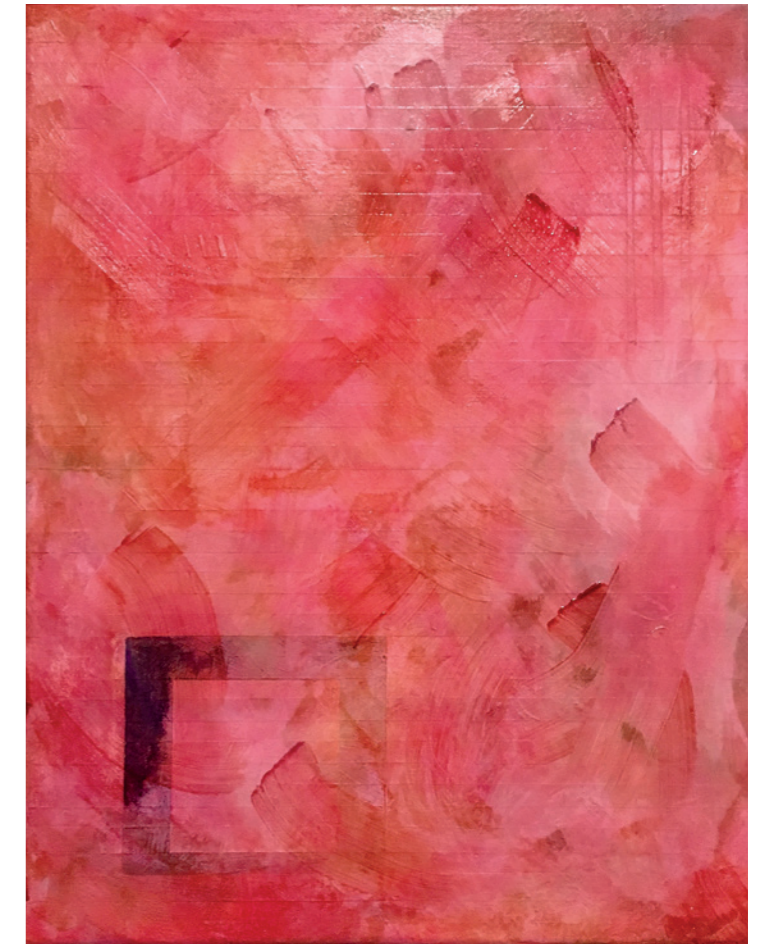


Shannon Novak  
**Paula Novak**  
 2016  
 Shannon Novak  
**Craig Novak**  
 2016

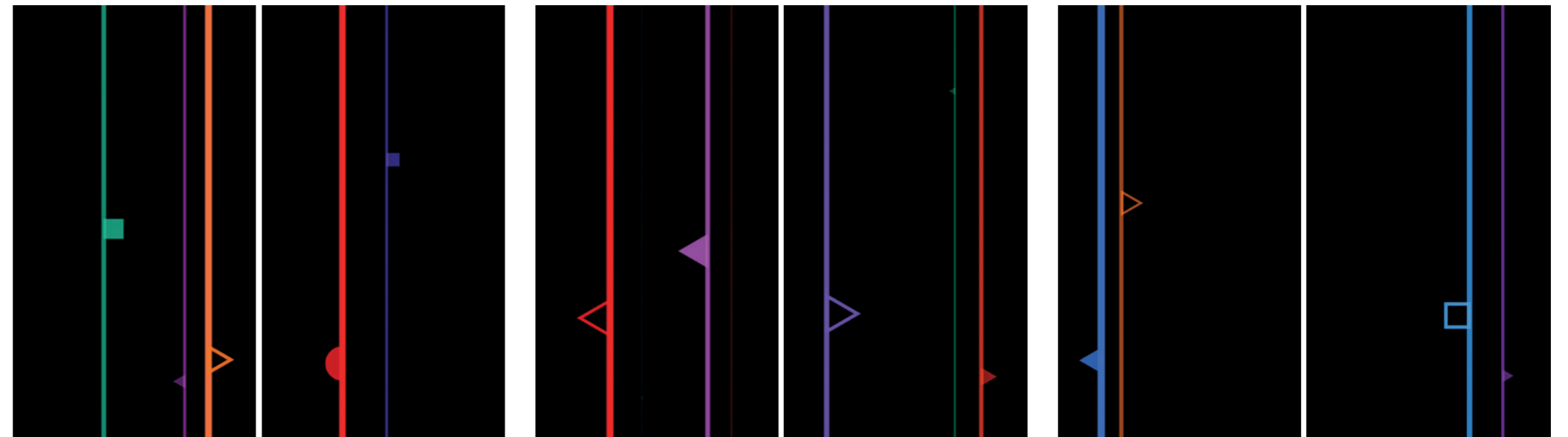


“These are portraits of my mother Paula Novak and father Craig Novak. Both works share a similar colour set, but work in different ways with forms (Paula circular/softer, Craig rectangular/harder). The forms represent the measurable (e.g. DNA) and immeasurable (abstract) that forge together to form my being. The work also examines the idea of homosexuality being part of our DNA. When these were first shown, they were both placed on a hot pink painted background next to each other to reflect the symbiosis of my parents’ relationship. In this show, I decided to re-frame these portraits in light of my sexuality. I wanted them to remain side by side, but decided to use colour to highlight the differences in the ways they feel about the fact I’m gay.”

“**The Christian Man** is a painting made this year using acrylic, dye, and red wine on canvas. The painting approach considers the canvas as the body, the geometric forms the character of a human subject, and the layers the issues that ‘drown’ or ‘bury’ this subject. This work explores the issue of gay men in New Zealand who feel pressured into giving up their sexuality to live a heterosexual lifestyle. The body of a gay man is presented (in this case my ex-partner who went through conversation therapy, married a woman, and then had kids) whose being drowns in layers of societal (and in this case religious) expectation. The use of red wine references communion or the last supper on the eve of the death of Jesus, in part linking to the death in confidence and death in belief in being a gay man.”



Shannon Novak  
**The Christian Man**  
 2018



Shannon Novak  
**Flight tracks**  
 2016

“In the summer of 2016 I spent time near the Auckland Airport conducting research for new work. Part of this research involved exploring connections between humans and the atmosphere (and space beyond), in particular, the historical, present, and future uses of aircraft. I focused on the

visible and invisible paths of aircraft traffic across the sky, recording the delicate choreography unfolding over a number of weeks. This was translated into a visual score, two channels selected to represent the incoming and outgoing flights. The change in colour, sound, and form reflects the unique appearance, sounds, and

abstract energy of each individual aircraft and the life it carried at the time. This work also reflected the relationship with my partner; a pilot flying in and out of Auckland. The different colours and shapes represented the different emotional states our relationship was in at each time interval.”





Shannon Novak  
**30 Nights on  
 Queen Street**  
 2017

“In 2017 I spent 30 nights on Queens Street, Auckland, collecting promotional material handed to me during that time. I ended up with various retail product catalogues, religious material, concert and event flyers, and discount vouchers. I also collected a lot of homophobic material—usually religious paraphernalia aimed at saying being gay is wrong. I brought the material together and

put it through a recycling process to create 30 sheets of blank paper. I then created 30 individual compositions or visual scores representing the course of each night and printed these directly onto the paper as C-type prints. The choice of red framing was inspired by artist and mentor Larry Bell (US) who used this approach in a recent body of work exploring a church he has a studio in. The red symbolises his growing relationship with sound and music, something that is also integral to my practice.”



Shannon Novak  
**Open**  
 2018  
 Jeremy Mayall  
 and Shannon Novak  
**Practical Semitones  
 (Unbounded Remix)**  
 2018 (2011)

“**Bound** was a work shown in the Auckland CBD exploring the idea that at times we build up energy we want to express but can’t for various reasons. The energy is contained or held back in some way. The work was an enclosed box-like structure and had no way in. It also referred to being in the closet—and feeling trapped i.e. being too scared to tell people you are gay. **Open** is a new iteration of **Bound**, providing a door that allows people in. It represents a bridging step before coming out completely; a feeling of wanting to be open yet wanting to stay safe at the same time.”

# HEART on a plate

# BLOCK

Shannon Novak  
**Reflector VI**  
2018

“The **Reflector** series stems from work made during my residency in Switzerland this year that explored conversion therapy. This work incorporated text from the bible paired with geometric forms. The series also builds on work created for the Auckland Art Gallery as part of the exhibition *Freedom Farmers: New Zealand Artists Growing Ideas* in 2013. Here I opted not to have an essay in the exhibition publication, instead a single page with text in the middle in the shape of a small square that the audience could interact with using a mobile device,

like a QR code. The **Reflector** series examines contemporary gay issues using an infographic-like approach, similar to the work of Edward Tufte and his practice in data visualisation. This particular work references a scenario using the gay dating app “Grindr” where one might come across as ‘too emotional’ during a conversation, resulting in being blocked by the receiver. It tackles the idea of inward alienation i.e. the gay community itself being something gay men struggle with, a theme I feel needs urgent and critical discussion.”



Tuesday–Friday  
12.30–4pm  
or by appt.

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