

Proposal to Toi Pōneke Arts Centre

“GOOD ART FROM BAD RUBBISH”

by

THE WOMBLE COLLECTIVE

1. Exhibition concept

We reflect on how the environment is changing and how, as artists, we confront technological syntaxes that are changing geo-social and ecological structures resulting, for example, in pandemics and loss of biodiversity. In developing the project we have used new tools for collectivity in art, which facilitate collaboration, glocal sustainability and new ways of making art.

As a point of departure we use the Wombles: furry anthropomorphic creatures who meet their needs by re-using what humans discard. We need to emulate how they reduce and reuse, while we also need to go beyond their local thinking in order to have a global impact.

Promoting international connection and exchange about how we deal with rubbish, as artists we rethink and constantly research and collect different perspectives from opposite ends of the world to create art.

a. What does your project offer you in terms of development?

We reflect on how the environment, as an Art Collective issue, would be addressed by Wombles. Our collective is fronted by Rosa Baquero and includes themes addressed by her in previous work. Debate within the group has resulted in work which considers the Wombles away from their familiar bucolic setting. Now the Wombles appear not only in the present but also the future and the past, and in societies which include Aotearoa New Zealand and Latin America. Sometimes Wombles are presented as role models and sometimes more critically, moving away from the colonial matrix that unravels other glocal cultural realities.

Rosa is a Colombian artist who has been based in Wellington since 2006 while the other members of the collective are based in Colombia and Spain. Holding this project in Toi Poneke enables us to engage with other artists and the wider population of Wellington. It also increases our recognition at the national and international levels and is a step forward in terms of the spaces in which work is shown.

As artists we have exhibited gallery pieces and made other types of artistic interventions (e.g. performance, curation, research processes - creation in diverse territories), but this will be our first gallery work as a collective.

b. What does your project offer within the Toi Pōneke context and in the Toi Pōneke gallery space?

This project will give more visibility to the diversity of Wellington's artistic community, in particular Latino artists. It will contribute to a sense of belonging to immigrant communities. The use of the Wombles enables us to engage with non-traditional audiences.

The Toi Pōneke space will enable us to further integrate into the Wellington artistic community, is a step forward for us as a group in terms of visibility, and will potentiate our capacity to succeed with further calls for proposals.

We have developed the proposal with Toi Pōneke specifically in mind. For example, the frame dimensions of one of the pieces ("Recycling Extinct Megafauna") were chosen based on the height of Toi Pōneke wall panels.

c. Is your exhibition concept cohesive? What connects its different components or aspects? Is there an underlying theme or rationale that will inform yourself and help others engage?

Aotearoa New Zealand prides itself on being a beautiful green country. The "100% pure New Zealand" tourism campaign focuses on the attractions of the natural environment. However, the reality is different. It is estimated that in New Zealand we generate 17.5 million tonnes of waste per year, of which an estimated 12.6 million tonnes are sent to landfill, and this increased by 47% from 2009/2010 to 2018/2019. Here in Wellington, a 'Waste Minimisation Roadmap' is being developed but we are still producing so much waste that the City Council is currently consulting Wellingtonians on what to do with it all and is seeking consent to extend its Southern landfill.

In this exhibition we imagine how the environment, as a collective issue, would be addressed by Wombles in Wellington and in other places and times. Through this prism we look for better ways to deal with rubbish by everyone, not just those who currently clean up after us.

We conceptualise rubbish and recycling in various senses e.g. "cultural recycling" which for us, includes experimental artistic research. We reflect on what it means to be a Womble. In some of our pieces the Wombles are modes, in others the Womble is presented critically. For example we show them away from their accustomed bucolic surroundings in order to "make strange" the role of the invisible recycler, which in South America is often held by marginalised groups.

We aim to open the eyes of the people around us to ways of daily life that can reduce our environmental impact. We all know that the problems of rubbish and climate change are global and at the same time local. Our group embodies an intercultural dialogue, between artists in New Zealand, Spain, and Colombia, on rubbish, cultural recycling, and the applicability and limits of the Womble mindset.

d. What has informed and motivates your practice, considering artistic, environmental, political or social stimuli, for example?

The motivation of the group is largely environmental but clearly this is intertwined with social issues. In particular those responsible for taking “away” our rubbish are largely marginalised. Some of the works show the background of some group members in performance and film. As gentle fluffy creatures, the Wombles lend themselves to being used contrapuntally to illustrate existential issues, hence we use them to make bathetic the triumphal tropes of colonialist painting.

e. What role does your proposed exhibition play in the context of your own practice e.g., is it the culmination of a project over time, or an extension of, or new direction in your practice?

For Rosa, this exhibition is a development of previous work, while the themes are new to the others. For Rosa and the others, the work uses new methods, including a performance and photographs about a Womble Kiwi interacting with Wellingtonians. As of 2022, The Womble Collective has an online presence, including the launch video:

<https://www.thewomblecollective.net/>

This platform will showcase further activities such as debates and invited speakers. We are developing projects which will be completed outside the current exhibition (in particular, a short film).

f. If you are proposing a group show with other artists, what is the reason for presenting together and how do the different parts of the exhibition relate to each other?

This is a collaborative art proposal by a collective, which shares the following themes:

- recycling as an aesthetic reflection on rubbish
- art collaboration: forming new networks
- Wombles: creating Wombles with planetary consciousness

Each member of the collective had known at least one of the others for at least ten years before the collective was formed. All the pieces in the exhibition have been discussed in weekly online meetings which we have been holding for more than a year. Rather than yoking together existing works by separate artists, all the works derive from the shared concepts and aims described above.

2. Description of the work

The work in the exhibition uses multiple techniques including: found objects, pictorial and video installations, large format oil on canvas, performance documented photographically, drawings in the style of the Artist as Ethnographer. The pieces reflect the different cultural and geographic trajectories of the artists, who are now based in Colombia and Spain as well as New Zealand, with the majority being immigrants in their current countries.

We will use social networks to disseminate additional material to publicise the event and the issues it highlights, as well as the new work that this collective will generate. The exhibit will include interviews and short videos showing what happens to rubbish in Wellington after it is disposed of.

The exhibition will consist of the following pieces, each of which is described in more detail in the annexes.

- 1) Keep Nature Clean
- 2) Campaign “The Womble in Me”
- 3) Womble’s Mandala, Hat & Mat
- 4) Alpha Julangu
- 5) Paramushir Womble
- 6) Recycling Extinct Megafauna
- 7) Wombling Colombia
- 8) The Wombling Standard
- 9) Ekeko: Ecohomes Territories, colonial storytelling # 3

3. Why Toi Pōneke

We want to exhibit in Toi Pōneke as a prestigious gallery in Wellington with a strong profile in the artistic community. However, we seek a wider audience by the choice of protagonist (characters in children’s TV), by the use of found objects from Wellington, and by linking a community campaign which seeks to reduce the need for landfill. Our exhibition increases representation of Latin Americans, who are one of the fastest growing minorities in Aotearoa New Zealand. We have been developing the pieces for more than a year with the Toi Pōneke space in mind, and are including a draft layout.