

**Emma Fitts**  
Mountain Shadows  
and Water Colours



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Study of a Square  
and Sky  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
290 × 200mm

Study of a Square  
and Tussock  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
400 × 200mm

COVER:  
Brushed Mélange  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
1380 × 825mm



## Lichen like light

While Emma and I spoke on the phone about lichen and her new work I washed all my smaller rocks, bullet-sized to biscuit-sized. I've had rocks on the windowsill as far back as I can remember. At some point I stopped bringing them home, but by that time people—mainly my mum—had started to bring me small rocks that they found too, and I'd guiltily add them to the sill. I remember where almost all of the rocks are from, and in recent years I've started furtively returning them, like overdue library books. Meantime I run

them under the tap often, mostly when I'm on the phone, because of the way most rocks' colour deepens in the wet. When you see that wet colour, it's like simultaneously recognising that they were thirsty, and that you are, too.

The new works too have this quality of thirst. In the making process they are saturated with a flashe and acrylic solution; more of this wet pigment is added as they sit on the wall, before they can dry out. The weight of the solution remains in the finished work, a cloudy matte heaviness

<sup>1</sup> Crustose lichens form a crust, usually on rocks or trees, often becoming inseparable from the substrate. There are also 'foliose' lichens which grow in rosette-like layers, and 'fruticose', which are spiny, wiry. Maggy Wassilieff, 'Lichens in New Zealand,' *Te Ara, the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 24 September 2007: <https://teara.govt.nz/en/lichens/page-2>.

LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Study of a Square  
and Lichen  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
215 × 200mm

Study of a Square  
and Gorse  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
205 × 200mm



in the now-dry canvas. There's a word used to describe lichen, 'crustose,'<sup>1</sup> which comes into my mind—it's precisely what it sounds like. I was already thinking about lichen a lot before I saw this work, but the word belongs here too. The paintings wear *crustose* easily, like you might wear a shirt.

There have been many garments in Emma's work over the years, and it's comfortable for me to locate this idea again, to find the seams in this work and connect them with the structure of a woman's oversize shirt, with the utility

and intimacy of work clothes in which one can move. There are even diamond seams in some of the smaller works, making me image search Agnes Martin's quilted painting suit again, drawing my eyes to the crease in my own sleeve. I rest for a minute on the diamond-crossed works, like *Study of a Square and Lichen* (2020), on the satisfying weight of them on the wall, the weight of a sleeve on an arm.

But it's the lichen I want to stay with. The lichen, because of the crater line along the Port Hills, Ngā Kōhatu Whakarekareka

o Tamatea Pōkai Whenua,<sup>2</sup> where Emma was walking as we spoke recently and where the large unstretched canvases sit in some of her photographs: *Being East / Crater Rim* (2020) and *Being West / Crater Rim* (2020). Lichens are what the bone-hard rock shoulders up there wear—or, they wear each other, the microorganism and the terrain, who is to say?<sup>3</sup> It's not a line I have any interest in drawing; surely you too have had a shirt so old and soft that you don't know where your skin ends and the fabric begins? The lichen may be

<sup>2</sup> Ngā Kōhatu Whakarekareka o Tamatea Pōkai Whenua are the smouldering boulders of Tamatea Pōkai Whenua. Listen to Donald Couch's (Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu) recorded narrative here: <https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/ti-kouka-whenua/rapaki-marae/>.

<sup>3</sup> Crustose lichens form a biological layer of the surface they adhere to, sometimes sitting within the tissue itself.



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Being West / Crater Rim  
2020  
digital print on archival  
cotton fiber paper,  
edition of 5  
300 × 375mm

Emma Fitts  
Being East / Crater Rim  
2020  
digital print on archival  
cotton fiber paper,  
edition of 5  
300 × 375mm

wearing the rocks, the rocks wearing the light, which is in turn held close by the photosynthetic lichen. As I picture it now, along the crater the light is sodden with rain, a colour like that of oxidised copper on your wrist. Certainly, the rain is what brings everything into focus.

Aotearoa is host to about 2000 types of lichen (up to 40% endemic<sup>4</sup>). An online inventory allows you to identify and locate these under titles such as

'Arctic frosted rock tripe', 'Mealy pixie cup', 'Fluffy dust', 'Candleflame' and 'Cartilage', 'Porridge lichen'.<sup>5</sup> Lichens are not plants as such, but composites of two or more microorganisms—a fungi and an algae—that co-exist. The fungi and the algae's needs correspond: "The fungi do not pass any nutrients back to the algae, but in return for 'milking' them of carbohydrates they produce, the fungi protect the algal cells from mechanical

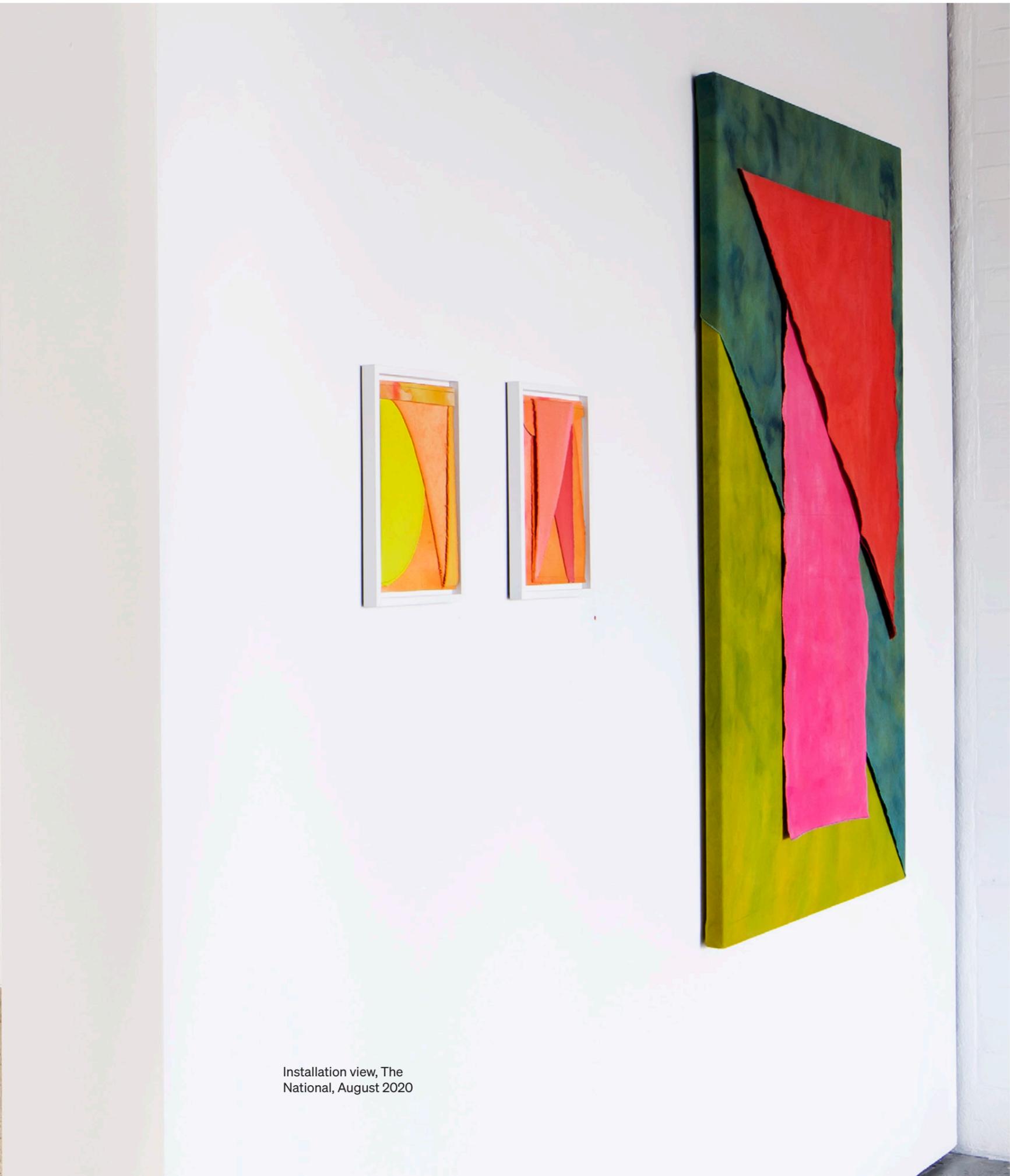
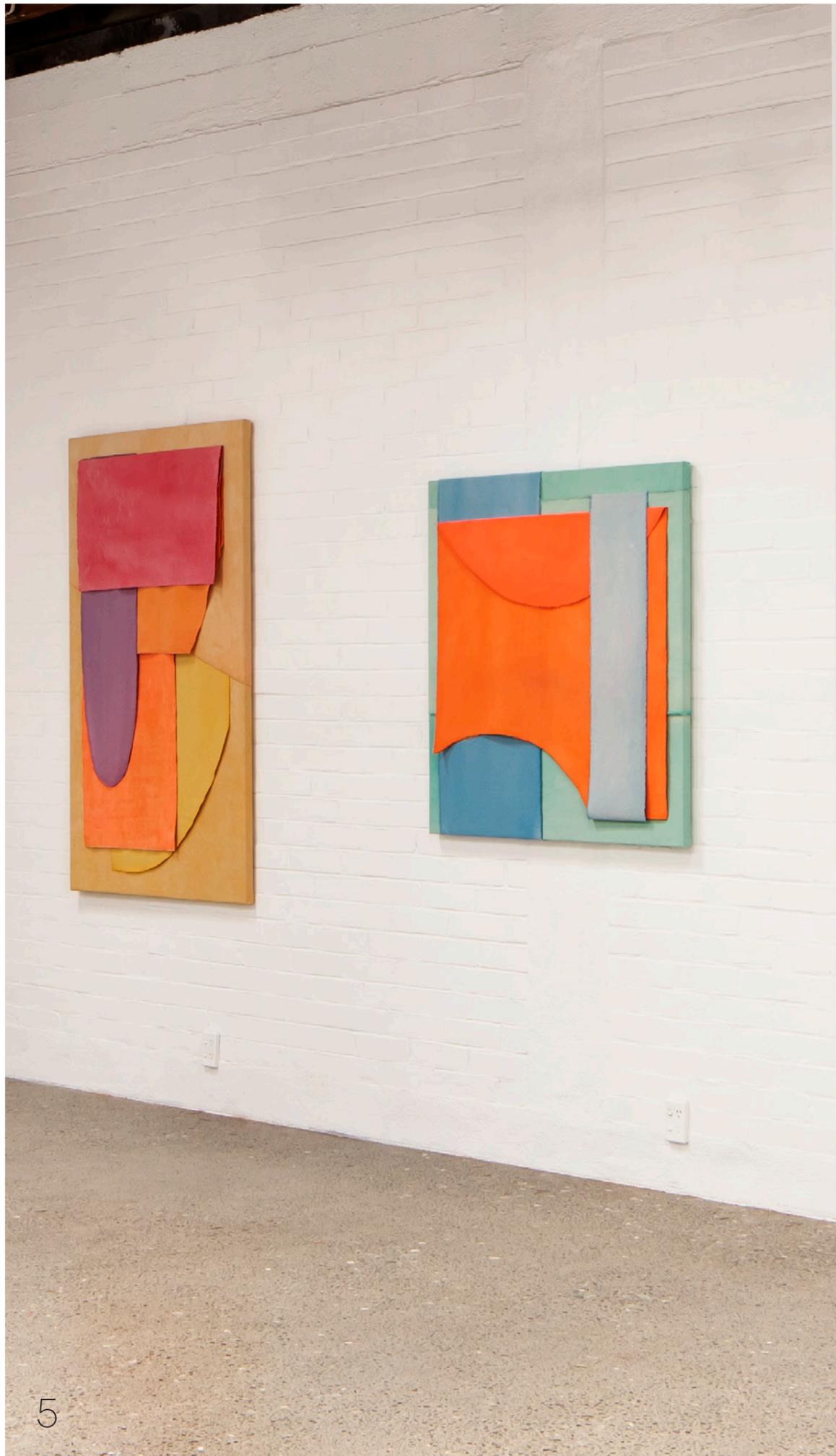
damage and excessive sunlight and keep them moist."<sup>6</sup> *New Zealand Geographic's* Derek Grzelewski notes, "In strong sunlight, the surface of lichens often appears drab, matt and opaque, but that's just the fungi protecting their algal garden from excessive exposure to sunlight. When moistened by rain, dew or fog, the lichens' surfaces become translucent, allowing the sunlight through and turning on photosynthetic processes."<sup>7</sup>

4 Wassilieff, 2007.

5 See 'Lichens of New Zealand Checklist': <https://inaturalist.nz/lists/336390-Lichens-of-NZs-Check-List>.

6 Derek Grzelewski, 'The Microscopic World of Lichens,' *New Zealand Geographic* 109, May–June 2011 <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-microscopic-world-of-lichens/>.

7 Ibid.



Installation view, The National, August 2020

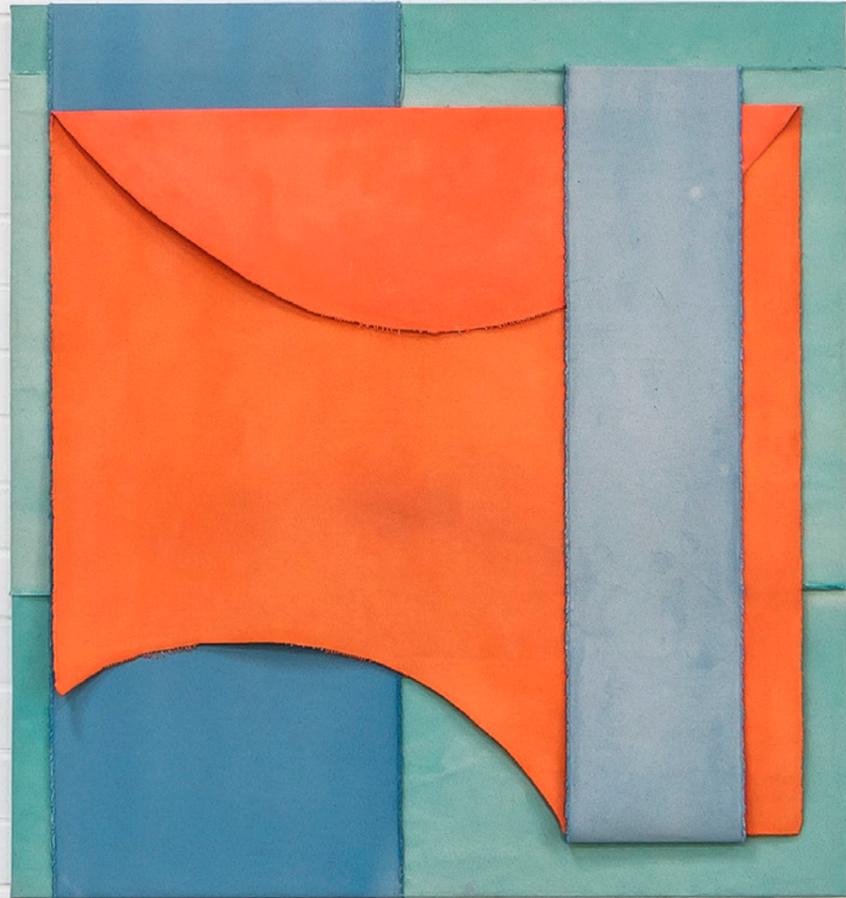
LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Chequered / Scooped  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
1070 × 1005mm

Brushed / Block / Ombre  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
1070 × 1005mm

Some lichens contain fluorescence, visible to human eyes under UV light, as a by-product of their growing processes. Some of Emma's larger works, like *Boxy / Bias* (2020), suggest this property, an acidic luminosity in tone. The paler lichen-like works, less so, but I suspect there is a low-lit day up there on the hill in which they would. I don't know what would happen if these canvases were let to soak in the rain, if the pigment would become soluble again, if they would fold under their own wet-weight, and emit light.

Lichen has always seemed dry to me—I remember it starchy on the fence posts, the metal gate-locks on the farm—but the more I learn about it, the more I recognise its multiple relationships to water. Climatologists use the pace of lichens' appearance on rocks recently exposed by melting glaciers to measure rates of global warming.<sup>8</sup> They survive equally well in the dry; in 2005 two species of lichen were launched into space, taken out of the capsule and exposed to zero temperature and the spectrum of ultra-violet light for 15 days. On return to Earth

8  
Paul Simons, 'Lichens: hardy organisms warn of pollution and climate change,' *The Guardian*, 18 December 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/dec/18/lichens-hardy-organisms-warn-of-pollution-and-climate-change>.





**LEFT TO RIGHT:**  
**Study for Frances #1**  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
340 × 277mm

**Study for Frances #2**  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
340 × 277mm



there was no discernible change in the lichens.<sup>9</sup> After we talk about Emma's work, I read more, and soon lichen is drinking up pavements, trees, drinking up pages of the internet as I scroll in bed at night with the brightness turned down.

I saw the Port Hills properly for the first time when I was in Ōtautahi for a few hot weeks in February 2017. Emma and Tessa and Mel took me to Rāpaki and we swam the deep wide dark swim out to the buoy. We lay looking back and up towards the hills above Lyttleton Harbour,

Whakaraupō, which from that perspective appear to be propping up the sky. It's so much later that this work happens, I'd almost forgotten that swim. Looking at the work now though, in wet August, and thinking about the slow tides of lichen growing over the rocks, I remember it with physical clarity. I know we would have talked about clothes, about summer things like towels as we dried, salty, back on the beach.

Abby Cunnane

**Pale Orange / Loose Fit**  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
1580 × 930mm

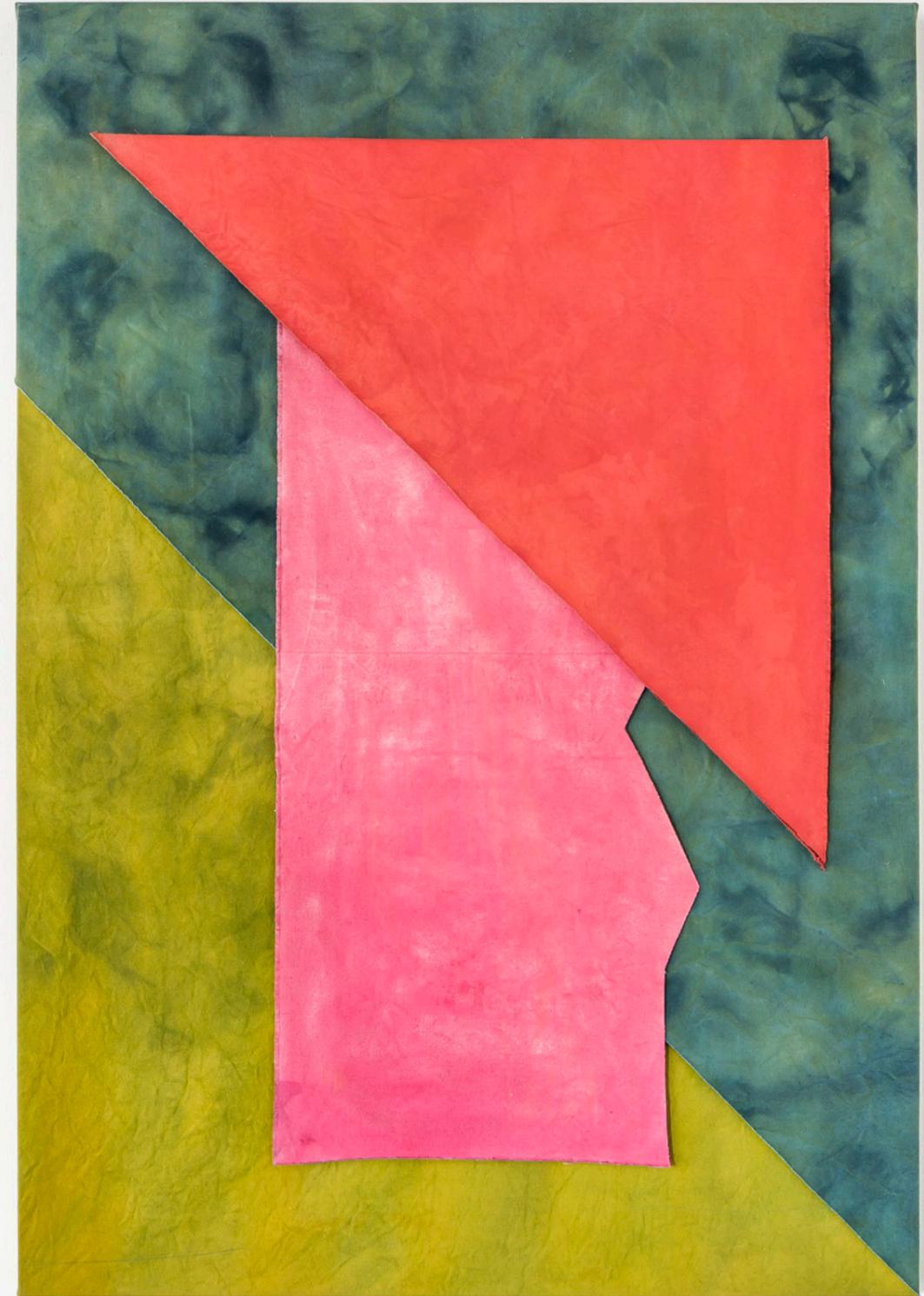
9  
Jean-Pierre de Vera, 'Lichens as survivors in space and on Mars,' *Fungal Ecology* 5:4 (2012), 472-479: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1754504812000098>.

**Boxy / Bias**  
2020  
acrylic and flashe  
on canvas  
1600 × 1105mm

Emma Fitts creates sculptural textile works that draw on research into alternate histories, storytelling, textiles and architecture. Most recently her work has been informed by the histories of women who were over looked or under-represented in the traditional archive. As well as the idea of biography, the histories of architecture, textiles and a broader social context are also integral to her work. With a focus on the tactile and the domestic and through engaging in a conversational research processes Emma offers an alternative approach to that of a traditional historian and one that stresses affect, emotion and feeling.

Emma Fitts completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury in 2002 and a Master of Fine Art from the Glasgow School of Art in 2010. Her individual practice and collaborative work as Fitts & Holderness and Victor & Hester, has seen her participate in exhibitions and residencies both nationally and internationally. Fitts returned to Christchurch in 2014 as the Olivia Spencer Bower awardee, was a McCahon House resident for winter 2018 and most recently completed a Fulbright/Wallace residency at The Headlands Center of Art, California, USA.

Fitts has exhibited both nationally and internationally. Recent projects include: *Paint etc.* curated by Madeleine Gifford, (Corban Arts Center, Auckland, 2020); *IFF: An Ideal Museum*, (Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland, 2019); *In the Rough: Parts 1, 2 & 3*, (Te Uru Waitakere Gallery, Auckland, 2019); *Softly Spoken*, (Hastings Art Gallery, 2019); *Towards Another Figure*, (Ashburton Art Gallery, Ashburton, 2019); *In the Rough: Parts 1 & 2*, (Parlour Projects, Hastings, 2019); *Bright Cave*, curated by Robyn Maree Pickens (at Blue Oyster, Dunedin 2018); *I Digress*, with Victor & Hester, curated by Sophie Davis (at Enjoy, Wellington 2018); *Homeshow*, curated by Louise Palmer, (Christchurch, 2017); *Section, Elevation, Perspective*, (Parlour Projects, Hastings, 2017); *From Pressure to Vibration: The Event of a Thread*, curated by Melanie Oliver (The Dowse, Wellington 2017); *Embodying the Archive* (The Physics Room, 2016) and with her frequent collaborator Kirstin Carlin; *Necessary Distraction: A Painting Show*, (Auckland Art Gallery, 2016); *VH-16- 22-7-12-3-22-5* (Victor & Hester, Glasgow, 2015), *Dreams of Machines*, (Transmission, Glasgow, 2015), *Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower* (Ilam Gallery, Christchurch, 2015) 74 Heaton St, Christchurch, with Kirstin Carlin (2014), *Bomber Jacket for Marilyn Waring*, (St Paul St, Auckland, 2014) and *Sports Jacket for Marlow Moss*, (Physics Room, Christchurch, 2014).



Installation view, The National, August 2020

