

**Black cat, night owl  
Annie Mackenzie**

The first time I biked past, it looked like some kind of meeting was going on behind the banner. It was mid-December and I was trying to remember the last ten New Years' Eves, starting from the previous year and going backwards. I was making a mental poem. The ingredients were the place, food and intoxicants. I was as far back as 2009 - Lake Rotoiti, antihistamines and expired acid - when I saw Sorawit Songsataya's roses.

Mum once told me that if I were to choose a career as a dairy owner I would probably have to also take up smoking pot. I was twelve, sold on the idea of mixed-use trading and the possibility of working in my pyjamas.

Mum was born in the 1940s, a time before supermarkets, brands or migrant workers were invented, as she says. Mum lived through the evolution of The Grocery Store into simply, The Store, and through to The Milk Bar. The Milk Bar came at a time that also signaled the invention of teenagers and an activity called 'going uptown'. How The Milk Bar evolved back into The Dairy she wasn't exactly sure.

Growing up in the 1990s, the local Kandy Korner was a place of wonder for me, full of kiwi nostalgia and joy. The well-worn rimu threshold, the Pixie Caramel, and the large tattooed breasts you could marvel at while you selected your 50 cent mixture.

During my university years, a lot of dairies lost their charm as they became affiliated with lifestyle drinks and lime green paint jobs to match. It was probably around this time that I all but stopped going to dairies. Beyond the lure of the Pak n Save discount, a shot at vegetarianism saw me worshipping at the alter of the organic co-op instead. Visits to the dairy became a case of need and regret, Meadow Fresh and Park Drive.

Like dairies, galleries walk the line between social, residential and commercial space. Someone's always there and the lights are on at odd hours. Artists have long possessed the tools to till what some might say is barren earth.

Recently, Peter McLeavey Gallery 'popped up' at the top of Cuba Street in Wellington in a vacant space. People thought it looked great as a gallery with its polished concrete and floor-to-ceiling windows. There were murmurs that perhaps the McLeavey dynasty would move in for good. However, after a couple of shows of

leaning paintings, they were gone. And in its place a dairy opened.

It's the hottest day of the year when we decide to go to Pah's Dairy in St Albans for a look. Dave buys an ice cream and goes outside. My plan is to engage the woman behind the counter in some conversation to get an insight into the art of Sorawit Songsataya and Signe Rose.

"What is the video?" I ask.

She points at a postcard on the counter. It's from The Physics Room, and she states that some people come especially to Pah's Dairy for the ice creams. I have come.

I see Sorawit's video start up and I step slightly to the side. There's not enough space. It feels awkward, I'm in the way.

"It's starting up," I yell, but Dave's already gone outside.

Words scrawl like ribbons across images of roses being processed on a conveyor belt. It reads *mirage*, *eclipse* or maybe *delica*.

The screen is just right, maybe it's always been there, on a shelf above the counter with a cardboard Cadbury trellis behind. I'm deliberately being attentive, but feeling dorky.

Three other customers have come and gone. I start to feel the impending weight of the expected purchase. I walk under Signe's mobile, towards the drink fridges. I'm out of my depth. I've come for the wrong reasons. What the fuck am I going to buy?

At the counter I point to the screen and ask, "How long has it been here?"

She laughs, "I don't know."

After that there's not really much time left to contemplate Signe's work, the chandelier, dust to touch?

Outside on the bench Dave has nearly finished his ice cream, Sorawit's silk banner between him and the street, a light breeze rising and falling.

"Why didn't you watch the video?" I ask.

"I did. I watched it like you watch a video in a dairy." I feel like I'm trying too hard, like I have missed the point.

"It was great out here... the view from the bench."

An older artist friend of mine recently told me that she was feeling assaulted by art. That it was jumping out of all those places that had previously held the sanctity of being aesthetically devoid. She used to go grocery shopping to get away from it. Now there were no longer safe places to escape from an art project; they could be in your local dairy. She said it was worse than the 60s.

It's after New Year now: 2016, Onekaka, fermented carrots and manuka mead.

I've come back to Christchurch to hang a painting show of Canterbury landscapes. We have got them all lined up: Colin, Bill, Rita and Doris. At this time of year they all

look like prime camping spots.

I bike past the dairy again, this time scooter style, due to being one pedal down. Today the banner isn't flying, just a couple of empty hooks. Inside the TV monitor reflects blankly. It seems the holiday season has taken its toll.

There's laughter coming from behind the plastic fly curtain that separates home from work. Life is spilling over and it smells like pork broth and bitter greens.

I've got time to burn and Signe's mobile is still here, right at home. I notice that it has a two-pin plug coming from the top, but the cord is too short to reach anything nearby. Never mind, it doesn't need to compete with the fluoro tube overhead. The assemblage is a cut up, butterflyed 2.25 litre Coke bottle, there are diamante loops and from these droplets hang like chewed wine gums. Long afternoons; collecting summer's dust, it's got a good feeling for high gloom. I'm surprised a spider hasn't taken up residence yet, I would have.

"You been busy?" I ask Pah.

"So, so."

The laughter behind the curtain swells.

Pah seems pretty keen to get back, to whatever gathering is happening behind that curtain. So I hand over my cash, give a nod to the art and I'm on my way.