

you'd be home by now

Casey Carsel

14 May–25 June 2022

Wormhole Gallery and Studio, Edgecumbe

Exhibition text

Patchwork quilt faces are stitched together from small pieces. With odd scraps, one can piece together something big enough to be wrapped in, something that feels like love, or a home. This exhibition is a patchwork of patchworks (of patchworks) by Casey Carsel, a Jewish artist from New Zealand. Casey has gathered these pieces together in order to rethink the trope of the “Wandering Jew,” and therein the inherited sense of displacement, survival, and homesickness that permeates their personal and cultural paradigms.

A draft for home. An eternal draft held in an ambivalent relationship to any ground.

Casey has been living elsewhere recently—Chicago, USA, and Dnipro, Ukraine—where they have been learning, writing, and sewing. These are places where their parents once lived, and places where ancestors further back were forced to leave. This year, those historical displacements repeated themselves when Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Casey planned this exhibition while staying in Poland and helping friends, while reading every day about the dead and the wounded and the homes destroyed, rebuilt and distant.

The way everyday life is soaked in history. How that history builds a home.

Casey is now on a slow journey back to New Zealand. While this journey progresses, we have spent time together in the intimate and distant digital realm, talking about comfort and protection, and sharing images of quilts with each other in our chats on social media. Casey has been interested in two quilt patterns in particular lately, one of which I first sent to them in the early days of the full invasion. Both of these patterns have been drawn on the walls in chalk.

Depending where your stories come from, the pattern I sent, called “Eight hands round,” is based on folk dances or women sewing together. The other pattern, “Wandering Jew,” depicts the pest plant journeying out across each quilt block, over and over. The drawn quilts are temporary, and not very warm, but they hold some idea of home. Again, it’s a draft.

Wormhole

The tensions of finding physical home in diaspora—the push and pull between living in a book and having to find somewhere to place your feet.

This is the second time the quilt above our heads has been shown. Last year, for the 2021 Auckland Art Fair, I sat with it on Casey's behalf. There, the plant-dyed cloth, embroidered with little pictures of garlic, soup pots, and gentle phrases, spilled from a railing high up on the wall. A cluster of garlic bulbs and smells pooled at its feet. It was based on the song "knobl soup", in which a Jewish family is resentfully sustained on a garlic broth served by the mother over and over again. The smell of garlic marked Jewish families during periods of persecution, but it also was a trace of love and dogged persistence.

At Wormhole, the song becomes a shelter. The patchwork is stretched overhead like a second, more flexible ceiling, under which the weary art visitor may rest. I think of soft-huts, Casey thinks of a huppah (a Jewish wedding canopy made of inherited cloth). Old fabrics become new. We live in them and with them.

The commitment of history, the sacredness of even the most domestic versions of it, the joy and burden and responsibility and beauty of it.

Underneath the canopy, cuttings have been planted in planter boxes and cared for with the hope that they will take root or even grow. The plants are *tradescantia zebrina* and *tradescantia fluminensis*, invasive creepers also known as Wandering Jew. The common name has been called offensive and avoided by some in recent years. But Casey chooses to celebrate the tenacity of this pest plant and the diaspora culture it is named for.

Wandering Jew can sprout roots from each of its nodes. Broken pieces bed down quickly in new environments; it is spread by fragments broken off by grazing cows, by shoes, and clumsiness. When you try to dispose of it, it grows back. The cuttings here were taken from houseplants and in-between sites at the edge of town, and they did sprout readily. We've provided lights to help them grow in the dim gallery space.

It's not quite home, and perhaps it never will be, but, hopefully, one day, we will bloom anyway.

Wormhole

Works list

knobl—soup! (2020–2021). Onionskin-, avocado-, and garlic-dyed cotton fabric, cotton thread, 3150mm x 5280mm. Originally commissioned by Auckland Art Fair for Projects 2021.

Wandering Jew (2022). Chalk and watercolour pencil. 1500mm x 1500mm.

Eight Hands Round (2022). Chalk and watercolour pencil. 1500mm x 1500mm.

Lights and Perfections (2022). Recycled wood, soil, water, tinted glow lights, and *Wandering Jew* cuttings. 470mm x 670mm x 335mm each.

About the artist

Casey Carsel is a Jewish artist, writer, and editor living and working between Chicago, Auckland, and various other places. In their text and textile works, Casey focuses on how communal narratives are constructed and passed down through generations and across the world, and how these stories shape identities and make connections. What is held onto? What is forgotten? What is lost in translation?

Carsel's work is informed by Jewish culture and especially diaspora culture, where stories become homes. They hold and extend this tradition in their own hands, and funnel it through their experiences as a New Zealand-born Jew of American and Ukrainian/Polish shtetl heritage.

www.caseycarsel.com

www.wormhole-edk/youdbehomebynow.com

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