

Q&A with Anna Sisson, on the occasion of *Forgotten Altar* at RM Gallery
22 November – 16 December 2023

1. *Nina.* The title *Forgotten Altar* is very evocative, how did you come to this wording?

Anna. I wanted the title to evoke an ancient time of worshiping the feminine form (i.e., Venus of Willendorf), pre binary gender, while also referencing the destruction and loss of this culture through colonial and misogynistic rhetoric. A lost history—*forgotten*—put into a kind of sculptural object—*altar*—of sacrifice and devotion.

2. *N.* In the portrait of your partner, the letter they hold has a semi-legible script. Did you write this text, or is it a reference to an historic document?

A. This is a text I discovered while searching queer love letters from the past. Evidence of our continued existence and a potential happiness as opposed to the narrative of fear and hardship of the queer community, which is real but it is more nuanced than is sometimes perceived. This one comes from *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, an old love letter written in 1947 in Aotearoa from a woman to a woman on their 33rd anniversary. The letter includes a secret message at the bottom (probably containing the initials of the two women at the start and end). It reads:

For my dearest.

On our 33rd anniversary – in gratitude for everything – for just being you and for all that you do so cheerfully for me. I can't imagine life without you, Ada. I am filled with thanksgiving to God for you. Thank you, my dearest.

Please buy yourself an "airing horse" or anything else you want and take the rest (if any!!) to help with the extra expense you are incurring.

I'm sorry I can't write a letter. Too tired, but please dearest, always know in your heart deep down that I am deeply, deeply grateful to you. My words are few but my word thoughts are deep and filled with love for you.

M. G. H. Y. I. H. R. D. O. A. M.

All my love

M

3. *N.* I like how this text feels allegorical, as though you're creating a sort of parallel with an imagined history, or inserting your reality into history through this reference to the past. How did your research arrive at this text, or, what was the starting point when you decided to look into archives?

A. Researching and art have gone hand in hand with my practice. I use research as a way to inform my personal-historical context and view of existence to then further glimpse an understanding of what I am trying to create. Both are just as important to the process (the creating and the researching).

4. N. The frames are beautiful, how did you achieve the dark tones with the wood?

A. Thank you. The frames are made using a Japanese wood treatment process in which you burn the wood to preserve it.

5. N. Is this an aesthetic decision, or does it relate to the exhibition conceptually also?

A. It is an ode to the burnt witches—and burnt books—the frame acting as a stake holding the women inside of the frame, the horrific histories grounding the fantasies in reality. Bridging the gap between the conjured image on the canvas and the space it sits within.

6. N. With regards to your sculptural figures, I'm curious to learn more about these. The media, within the aesthetic context of the exhibition, brings gargoyles to mind, yet the figures and their poses are softer and more reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Could you elaborate on the titles, *Queer Prayer* and *Discarded Dig Site*?

A. Yes, they are definitely meant to represent gargoyles, as the cement refers to their materiality and the lesbian as a ridiculed or grotesque icon both used and misused, protected and destroyed by the church. *Queer Prayer* is a feeling of desperation, relating to the state of the world, the pain and suffering and a reaction against this. It is a pose of begging as well as praying; as a non religious person begging, falling to your knees, it is the same in a way. *Discarded Dig Site* talks of the misogyny of archaeology and the many overlooked or misinterpreted dig sites and disregarded tombs of important women in history.

7. N. You've mentioned a personal resistance to creating queer art that feels angsty or negative, I wonder if this informed the scale of your triptych of relief sculptures?

A. This is something I struggle with – while I want to express myself, sometimes those feelings come to the surface. I also want to “put things on a pedestal” that I think deserve representation. There is so much exposure to suffering and angst that I try to withhold, keeping the art I make more of the sacred and celebrated objects, full of love. To make what you love is to form the solution instead of focusing on the issue. Although I do like to bring the context of the work back to reality and have it not only escapist, but also a

way of honoring the past. The two will always co-exist, good and evil, issues and solutions. But yes the three smaller works of painting and glass are more of a negative expression, the women in the painting are physically struggling, but still they are not only seen as struggling against the space but also opening and creating the space – pushing against the frame.