*Icon*
Maggie Friedman & Ammon Ngakuru
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Coastal Signs
312 Karangahape Road
Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
Aotearoa New Zealand

Wednesday–Friday 11am–5pm
Saturday 11am–3pm
and by appointment

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Devotion

"What do you want, Bridget?"

I knew he would ask again. It has always been his remedy. When I am poor, despairing, wondering, wanting in the wrong way, he questions me towards my desire—as though I am incomplete without knowing it, as if naming it could bring it into being. The last time I failed to satisfy him with any worthy want of my own, I decided to hack my answer. Loveless, I would lead with values.

"I want a life of questioning, of cause, of feeling connected to others through these things··· alertness rather than inertness."

"No. No, what do you really want?"

His question always put distance between me and my own sense of things. I decided this was a fundamental difference between us. Both approaches were flawed: his coherent drive left him unaware, mine was too amorphous to act.

Last summer I had it settled until I met an old colleague, back from Berlin, at a backyard Christmas party. "What do you want?" he asked. Proposed by one much less intimate than usual, the question brought me to the idea that I was an image without cause. I felt it across my face. Something that holds no legitimacy in our world.

I provided the prepared response.

I want to write the next great New Zealand novel. I'm reporting from within—I'm "in," ya know. It's memoir. But intergenerational. A one-woman show. I play all the characters. You know Brecht? It begins in the 1930s. I want to win the Walters. You know, class clowning. *Children of the Poor* meets *Museum Highlights*. Set in a white cube but with a glass front. In the end no one knows if it was by some force or if the characters made their own choices. You know. Mendacity and that. In the end, they all decide to leave but remain motionless and the scene fades to black.

I wonder about a time when devotion was not a matter of preference, but of place. Once born into myth, ritual, and law, art was not a pursuit of self, but a practice of surrender. We created images, stories, and monuments not to project the self outwardly, but to sublimate it. The icon painter did not seek to express themselves, but to efface the self entirely, fasting, praying, and adhering to strict formal conventions so as the image might become a window to the divine, not a mirror of the artist.

The earliest artists went unnamed. Whatever their individual creative impulses, their work was not a signature, it was a structure. It served gods, crowns, and community. It was not meant to say I was here, but It is so. Patronage allowed for the primacy of the artist over their production. With the Renaissance came authorship, and with authorship came ambition. The divine retreated, and the self became the source.

Today, we inherit that shift. In the age of liberalism, art became autobiography. We make meaning not by absorbing the world, but by interpreting it through ourselves. If submission once shaped the artist's relationship to the work, expression replaced it. Art became a way to speak, to self-locate, to be known.

Liberalism gave us choice, not just in what we make, but how we live. We are told we can become anything, so long as we are willing to be seen. In this version of freedom, art does not efface the self, it constructs it. Through medium, we do not simply express identity, we perform it. We externalise what is inward and mark the world with it. This is the liberatory promise of contemporary art.

To act purely on impulse is not freedom, it is to be governed by it. What we often call autonomy may conceal a deeper captivity. And so, paradoxically, it is through limits, through discipline, devotion, and constraint, that a different kind of freedom emerges. Once tethered to the church or the communal, art now finds ritual space in the gallery, the market, the screen. Yet the function remains. We still reach for transcendence. We still seek to devote ourselves. Only now, the objects of our worship have changed.

I made the decision to really consider painting—to really stay with the work—after admitting to a friend's tense and stooping criticism I always "fail to write about the work itself."

Maybe because Ammon is hard to hang a narrative on: polite, present, but withholding. Sleep and its apparatuses—bunk beds, pyjamas, nursery rhymes, his own cast sleeping face—function as motifs, unhooking meaning before it settles.

Maybe because in contrast, Maggie, in L.A. and a stranger to me, labours quite purposefully at the portrayal of her practice. Her debut novel, *Novel*, is a rewrite of Bernadette Corporation's *Reena Spaulings*, inserting herself as protagonist. She calls it fan-fiction but it's also fictional provenance, for both the paintings and artist. An exercise in self-mythologising into the history of the medium, and at the same time, an attempt to dissolve her artistic subjectivity into that same medium: be it contemporary art, or painting.

To consider painting, I'm told, is to consider time. I ask Ammon how he balances the studio with his gardening job. He doesn't work full-time—just four days a week.

"When I get to it," he says, "I actually enjoy being in the studio."

I become envious of painters' content discipline. The tangible intimacy of relentless attention to material—attending to the same surface ev-

eryday, canvas stretched, covered, re-stretched. There's medium. The haunted structure and burden of invention. And then there's commitment to the bit: Ammon's refusal to narrate, Maggie's insistence on it. Both require a sustained performance of belief.

Why become a painter in the first place? Because you believe in it.

For the exhibition *Affirmations*, Ammon presented a series of six text-based paintings, each bearing the phrase: "I lied today and I'll lie tomorrow." The works also shared this phrase in title, differing only by attribution of date, implying the day of its making. The series repeated the same visual structure but were distinguished by painterly variations: shifts in colour, translucency of wash, exposed pencil marks, and impressions of the painter's hand. These material inflections interrupted an otherwise rigid reproduction, posing both repetition and rupture in the act of confession.

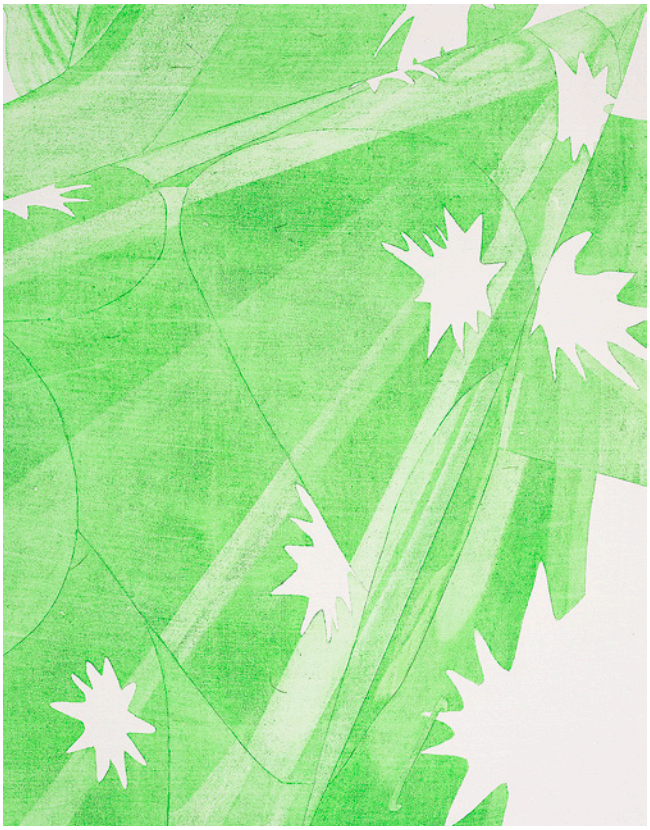
The paintings appeared to follow Ammon's usual approach: abstracting biographical or socially critical content into something "harmless, agreeable, whole."[1] But unlike his earlier works, the artist's feigned admission in these paintings wholly unsettled what I had understood as his sincerity.

The Liar Paradox emerges from reasoning with a self-referential statement, most famously: "This sentence is false." In asserting its own falsity, the statement confuses its own logic, undermining itself and frustrating any attempt to resolve it. Often, we withdraw in response, or dismiss it as meaningless.

If it is false, then it is true. "I lied today and I'll lie tomorrow." Ammon's paradox unsettles not only our encounter with his paintings in the present but our ability to carry their meaning forward. Over time, it shifts from a singular confession to a habitual condition, implicating his audience in the same cycle. "I lied today and I'll lie tomorrow" becomes less a disclosure of deceit than a declaration of performative instability, for both the artist and his work.

The paintings perform belief and doubt simultaneously, undermining both the authority of the artist and the status of painting as the object of his ritualised attention. In this way, the series offers a lucid entry point into the condition of performative belief. It suggests that for belief to have meaning, it must be enacted—through repetition, through context, through the act of doing. The artist tells us his devotion is not rooted in conviction, but in ritual, and the freedom afforded by this attention is not untroubled.

If being a painter is a belief that must be continuously performed, we too, are asked to reckon with what is being performed. I lied today (made a painting I don't believe in), and I'll lie tomorrow (do it again, because it worked). Or: I lied today (tried to believe in painting), and I'll lie tomorrow (because you bought it).



Then there's the artist who says, "I painted this, but it's not mine."

For some time now, Maggie has been painting other people's paintings. She resists traditional gestures of authorship and instead constructs a distributed, performative system around her practice. She's not just a painter, but a writer, a fashion designer, a fan, a fabricator. Her work lives across forms, building meaning through structure rather than statement. Painting, here, is not simply a visual medium or a way to think—it's a way to be seen.

If belief in painting once relied on expressive authorship—the stroke, the genius—then Maggie hollows that out to mere presence, reference, production. Painting becomes a means of remaining in form even when faith in originality, or its necessity, has dissolved. "I am original, and I am only a copy."

Her process follows a self-imposed system: she paints works by better-known artists, paints by projection, swaps brushes for sponges, restricts her palette to Kama fluorescent green. She tries to "paint like a machine." In one sense, this is an act of embodiment, committing to another artist's gesture. In another, it's an absurd repetition.

"Ideally I would liquidate the self, but that's not possible," she says. "The absurdity in the labour has to do with how exhausting it is to be an artist today." The project begins in failure: the inability to believe fully, or to fully disappear.[2]

Rather than escape belief, Maggie builds a structure to hold it. Her labour is devotional but unsanctified, repetitive, embodied, without promise

of transcendence. If her paintings open onto anything, it's the systems that shape them: the history of painting, the idea of originality, the economy of visibility. They don't transcend, they endure. Even emptied-out forms still mean something, if only because we keep returning to them.

On the confusion between medium and self, and the spiritual and artistic dislocation of a world structured by self-performance—Sheila Heti writes that the contemporary subject cheats itself: forfeiting interiority in favour of tending to its own image. "In the beginning the gods gave us liberty; in the end, we discovered cheating." Where once we worshipped idols, now the icon is ourselves.

In *How Should a Person be?* Heti outlines three forms the artistic impulse might take: as an object, like a painting; as a gesture; or as a reproduction, like a book. We go wrong, she argues, when we try to fashion ourselves into beautiful, original objects because the human being is more like the latter two: a gesture and a reproduction. We are closer, she writes, to "one unit of a hundred thousand copies of a book being sold" than to any singular, auratic artwork. "Now the gestures we chose are revealed as cheating. Instead of being, one appears to be."[3]

This is the paradox of selfhood under late capitalism: truth must be performed in order to appear true. The subject must be seen to survive, and so belief becomes stylised. Heti's human says: "this original self is copied." Truth collapses in on itself. Yet from that collapse, the artwork, and maybe the artist, the person, emerges.

The artist doesn't resolve belief, they return to it. Through copying, confessing, or repeating, attention becomes its own fidelity. Painting is not certainty, but sustained ambivalence: a refusal to resolve, a commitment to contradiction.

To paint, then, is not to affirm belief, but to perform it—to repeat without guarantee, to remain inside a form even when faith in it has faltered.

Belief becomes return: to the work, to the gesture, to the unresolved. The icon becomes not a symbol of transcendence, but a mirror of our longing to believe—still, despite knowing better. This, too, is devotion.

A few years ago, I noticed people using my name. Not to get my attention, but to hold it. "Bridget." Said like punctuation. Like cupping someone's chin before telling them what's best. I hear it most when I'm meant to concede. Kind of like: sit. But sweeter. But listen, Bridget.

*How to Win Friends and Influence People* insists that hearing your own name is life-affirming—the sweetest sound in any language. It's meant to signal interest, bestow importance. Say someone's name and they will trust you. Follow you.

If I'm a name, am I also a medium?

The book goes on: influence means speaking to others' desires, then offering yourself as the way to get there. "The only way on earth to influence other people is to talk about what they want, and show them how to get it."[4]

So, to get what we want, we must become the setting for others' wants. A blankness. A condition others can project into, or take from. And yet, to get what we want, we also have to name it.

I want to want to know what to know to want.

Maybe I stay in the art world for the commune—that heavy, fragrant intimacy of people who also can't leave. Maybe I didn't choose it at all. I say "I didn't" to keep the story moving. We all get groomed by something—a system, a gallerist, a lover, a myth. Why not by your own biography?

So I try devotion. Just the small, stupid kind of showing up. Of painting. Of staying. Of writing the thing that resists being written.

If I know freedom, it's the moment just before I realise I'm not chasing it. A lucidity I can't hold. When the contradictions start humming. When I can say, without flinching: I am free and I am not free. And both are true. And neither saves me.

This is the terrain of the icon. It says: believe in me and don't be stupid. Like the liar's paradox, I mean something, and I'm only surface. That's the performance. That's the trick.

Freedom isn't what you get when you want it badly enough. It's what flickers when you stop trying to win. A shimmer in the deadlock. A paradox you carry like a relic.

To say, I am free and I am not free, in my devotion—isn't a confession. It's a spell.

Bridget Riggir-Cuddy, 2025

[1] Shiraz Sadikeen on Ammon Ngakuru, *Pumice*, Coastal Signs, 2021 (exhibition text).
[2] Maggie Friedman in interview with Grant Tyler, *Camel* (https://grantedwardtyler.substack.com/p/camel-2-part-2).
[3] Sheila Heti, *How Should a person be?* "What is Cheating," 183–185.
[4] Dale Carnegie, *How to win friends and influence people*, 55.

cover: Installation view, *Icon*, Maggie Friedman & Ammon Ngakuru, Coastal Signs, 2025

p. 3: Maggie Friedman, *Untitled (Jeff Koons, Party Hat, 1995-97, The Broad Museum Los Angeles, 2025)*, 2025, oil on canvas, 1670 × 1670 mm