

CONOR CLARKE

The End of Wordsworth Street

8 December 2018 – 17 March 2019 at Sarjeant on the Quay

Photographer Conor Clarke was artist-in-residence at Tylee Cottage from September 2017 to January 2018. Her residency project explored concepts of nature, industrialisation and romanticism, themes throughout her career to date, while investigating the Whanganui River and surrounding areas. Sarjeant Gallery Assistant Curator Jessica Kidd interviewed the artist, now living back in Berlin, about her post-residency exhibition at Sarjeant on the Quay.

JK: Your residency project *Ground Water Mirror* aimed to explore the constructed idea of nature, how it has changed since the era of industrialisation and the (now outdated) romantic model of viewing nature. How has this project evolved since your time at Tylee Cottage in Whanganui?

CC: The project started as a response to urban living in Berlin, itself a watery city with rivers, canals and a really high water table. The title *Ground Water Mirror* is a literal, and slightly wrong translation of *Grundwasserspiegel*, the German word for water table. I wanted to use my mistranslation to talk about the self-reflective qualities of water, this expectation we have of water to provide a solution to the urban anxieties we project onto it, and how this model is problematic and unsustainable. I planned to focus on the waters that flow throughout daily life in Whanganui, using water infrastructure as a means of exploring why we long for that other kind of water, the kind we habitually refer to as Nature. After arriving in Whanganui, I put my plans aside for a bit, while I learned more about local history and got to know the city on foot. Whanganui taught me to be more intuitive, that everything is connected, and one thing always leads to another. The project felt like a riddle that needed to be solved, a puzzle, and the pieces were scattered everywhere.

JK: This project focused on two waterways, the Whanganui River, given its own legal identity in 2017, and the Rhine in Europe. What interested you in the comparison of these two bodies of water, and their sense of place?

CC: It's the comparison of the two rivers that I found really abstract. In the early days of Whanganui paddle-steamer tourism, Alexander Hatrick advertised the Whanganui River as *The Rhine of New Zealand* to attract European visitors. The comparison added value to Whanganui River, loaded it with Romantic potential, but at the same time homogenised it using a generic description that denied its unique characteristics, history and topology. Even today, we continue to look for places where nature begins to look itself, like it does in the internet, where it meets our expectations. Another photograph. Another tick off the bucket list.

The new legal status of the Whanganui River is really exciting! The combination of a Māori world view with Western vocabulary is a sustainable way of looking at the world that breaks the false binary of humanity as separate from nature. It gets rid of the Romantic idea of nature by considering the river as kin, something we're inseparable from.

JK: You've said you 'like limitations', can you elaborate how using the same vertical format for each photograph and a medium format camera throughout impacts on the way you work?

CC: Limitations help me to find focus, they can also give a formal element to an otherwise rather scattered collection of ideas and subjects.

JK: Are you happy for people to make their own connections and comparisons when viewing your work?

CC: It's great when people understand my intentions but it would be selfish to assume that everyone should. I find titles really important though, they give the viewer a clue as to what I'm trying to say.

JK: While you were in Whanganui, you discovered the historic surveyor's chain mark located at Pakaitore, How did this finding inform the project going forward?

CC: Pakaitore is full of strange monuments to colonial achievements, including this long strip of broken concrete in the ground with two brass ends in a wooden frame. There is no sign explaining its origin, other than a barely legible "N.Z SURVEYS CHAIN STANDARD 1880 66 FEET" impressed into the concrete surface. There's something uncomfortable about the presence of this instrument of land alienation on this contested piece of land. The surveyor's chain itself was exactly the length of this concrete strip (20.1168m), consisting of 100 steel links it was widely used across Aotearoa in land surveying based on English practice: an acre is ten by ten chains, a quarter acre is one by two and a half chains. What is beautiful and functional and everything in between has been chained out; measured, packaged and abstracted into residential, common, industrial, commercial, natural and scenic areas. Although the chain has become arbitrary since we switched to the metric system, it established and continues to maintain how space is defined in Aotearoa following its introduction.

JK: You made sound recordings while in Whanganui and also explored the medium of video, are these new areas of interest for you? Have these formats changed the way you approached the exhibition?

CC: They are both really new for me, I guess photographs have certain limitations in terms of what they are able to communicate, but I approach these new mediums as I would with photography. The camera or sound recorder provide a still space for my subject to move through. With the sound recordings, I tried to create a typology of the different waters that flow through Whanganui that are categorised as part of the infrastructure network. These include stormwater drains and outfalls, the town water supply and wastewater treatment plant, decorative water features and gardens, a dam, and the Western Diversion of the Tongariro Power Scheme that diverts some of the Whanganui River's headwaters. The recordings are synced with two moving image works that explicitly reference the surveyor's chain and Romanticism, and their enduring influence on the way we perceive the non-human world.

JK: Any other thoughts on current attitudes towards the concept of nature, considering today's climate?

CC: *The end of Wordsworth Street* is a physical location in Whanganui where residential meets agricultural meets industrial, but the title is also a statement about the need to unlearn what Romanticism taught us about being separate from Nature. I want to find sustainable solutions to urban living that don't rely on the Romantic concept of nature as a sacred, idealised place that is always somewhere else, somewhere I feel I have to travel to. A sustainable ecological future can't rely on this fantasy; it needs to start at home, by acknowledging the nature within us, all around us, *all* the time. Even getting rid of the idea of nature altogether, so as to engage with our cities, our trash and effluent – that is, the real, physical world.