

# The Ecological Self

## A Lens-Based Inquiry

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

Signed

11<sup>th</sup> October 2018

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## **Abstract**

This lens-based research project explores a deep personal connection with a familiar coastal site. I am interested in exploring the ways in which different lens-based media can facilitate a reciprocal exchange between the self and the land, a relationship. The overarching intention is to explore what might constitute an ecological-self emerging out of embodied lived experience. As such, this research project is underpinned by an ecological phenomenology that promotes embodied and affective sensitivity for the rhythms of the more-than-human world. The aim is to recognise the environment as a participatory agent in my practice, liberated from the colonising processes of rigid meaning that I might inadvertently be imposing upon the land.



# 1 INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

This project explores my affective fascination and unfolding relationship with the coastal environs west of Auckland. In this project I use the lens as a device for bringing me into a concentrated and active engagement with the land. The lens establishes the primary focal point for a confluence of influences, impulses, and perspectives that unfold in the processes of thinking and making. These influences manifest internally within me as memory and sensation and emerge out of my relationship with the land. In this project the term 'land' is used holistically to include the elemental forces of sun, sky, and sea. In this project I am seeking to enter into a close dialogue with these forces.

The ideas of interactive landscape (Plumwood, 2006)<sup>1</sup> and enchantment (Bennett, 2001)<sup>2</sup> are key terms which will be addressed within the broader contexts of environmental phenomenology. This exegesis will discuss these territories and how they merge to inform a lens-based practice that seeks to recognise the more-than-human world as a relational constituent of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Plumwood, V. (2006). The concept of a cultural landscape. *Ethics & the Environment*, 11(2), 115–150.

<sup>2</sup> Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

## 2 POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

This chapter outlines my position as a researcher by contextualising my relationship with the coastal environs west of Auckland, and the significant personal and affective drivers that underpin this project. I am interested in the ways in which uplifting moments of encounter with the land can shape consciousness, influencing personal patterns of thought and behaviour. These experiences are informed by culturally conditioned ways of seeing and knowing; however, my concern is with elevating the agency of the land so that it becomes an active participant in the conversation.

### 2.1 MY CONNECTION TO THE LAND

A lifetime spent immersed in the coastal environs west of Auckland has inspired in me an appreciation for the beauty of the region and its diverse ecology. For over thirty years I have been returning to hike, surf, and photograph. My responses to this landscape are overwhelmingly visceral and cathartic. The activities I engage in here facilitate a disengagement from the noise and demands of hurried urban life, and I experience a heightened sensuous immersion in the elemental forces of nature, a connection with the ebb and flow of tides, with the shifting seasons, and with the rhythms of cyclic time. As I approach the coast I take pleasure in the particular character of changing light, of luminous salt-saturated haze drifting above the cliffs, and the reflective shimmering of the ocean over black iron sand.

The wealth of uplifting experiences I have enjoyed here informs my research interest concerning the phenomenology of enchantment. The political theorist Jane Bennett (2001)<sup>3</sup> describes enchantment as a state of wonder that arises when one is struck and shaken by the extraordinary. She explores the possibility that this affective force might inspire and motivate ethical behaviour. Bennett emphasises “how wonder marks the vitality and agency of a world that sometimes bestows the gift of joy to humans, a gift that can be translated into ethical generosity” (p. 175).

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<sup>3</sup> Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

A corresponding sense of gratitude infuses my relationship with the west coast. Over many years I have been privileged to share waves with the now critically endangered Māui dolphins, been thrilled by schools of feeding hammerhead sharks, and I have felt a kinship with the remarkable grace of gliding tākapu, their outstretched wings tracing the crest of unbroken waves, harnessing updrafts that propel them effortlessly along the coast. I have witnessed the infinitesimal growth of kauri ascending the heights of the bush-clad ranges and observed the slow migration of sand. Pushed by the currents of wind and swell, sand gathers in creeping underwater banks that give form to the breaking waves, later congregating ashore in dunes that shape erosion patterns and support coastal habitats.

Over the duration of a lifetime, my continual return to the coast has taken on the character of communion, and yet it exists as a constantly transforming relationship. To navigate the ocean's powerful forces, I have learned to identify its hazards and yields, and to adapt to its ever-changing moods. But also, to appreciate its constancy. The influence of this evolving relationship flows through my life as a sense of enriching connection. I experience myself most fully in this environment as part of a living and interconnected whole, as both a witness and participant in the timeless interaction between land, sky, and sea.

The philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram (1996)<sup>4</sup> argues that the environmental crisis gripping the planet is a crisis of perception, the inability to appreciate anything outside of an exclusively human discourse, and modern life is characterised by an unhealthy disconnect from the living earth. "Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans, and with our own human made technologies. It is a precarious situation given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape" (p. ix). Metaphorically, my project aims to sing in the forgotten register of "the many-voiced landscape", and to imbue my song with the values of kaitiaki or guardianship that are too often silenced by economic imperatives. Although I am Pākehā and a guest on this whenua, I feel I have a role to play in terms of kaitiaki.

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<sup>4</sup> Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

The eco-theologian Father Thomas Berry (2006) laments that Western culture's objectification of the Earth – primarily as raw resource for economic exploitation – is an attitude that drives biosphere collapse. Berry has described the universe as “a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (p. 17)<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Abram (1996)<sup>6</sup> argues of the importance for a renewed sensorial connection with the ‘more-than-human world’. His premise is that “we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human” (p. ix).

For me, the *genius loci* of the west coast manifests as this potent expression of more-than-human wildness, of an abiding and durational sense of deep time, an unfolding drama enacted by powerful elemental forces that have etched their indelible impressions upon the living land. But just as significantly, these forces have played a formative role in shaping the idiosyncrasies of my contemplative character, and my attunement to the rhythms of the region. My familiarity with recurrent ocean patterns has developed out of a necessity to avoid drowning, and in pursuit of catching and surfing waves. I understand the behaviour of ground swell. It travels in sets of individual waves separated by intervals where increases in distance equal speed and power. I can identify rip currents and use them to my advantage, conveying me ‘out the back’ to the relative safety of deep water beyond the impact zone. This intimate knowledge is primarily a bodily and sensorial experience: barefoot dashes across burning summer-baked iron sand; cool afternoon sea breezes drafted off the ocean by rising land-heated thermals; winter southerly winds blowing from the frozen polar regions of the Antarctic, chilling to the core; easterly offshore winds grooming the incoming swell into straight-edged lines, smoothing surface conditions to glass; onshore westerlies generating agitated confusions of white water; northerlies bringing warm tropical air and summer cyclones. I experience these changing weather patterns as associative with the coastal conditions they foster, seen through the accumulated knowledge of a lifetime spent

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<sup>5</sup> Berry, T. (2006). *Evening thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as sacred community* (M. E. Tucker, Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.

<sup>6</sup> Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

communing with the coast. This relationship has instilled in me a humble sense of gratitude for the solace it provides, and has inspired in me an interest in advocating for its protection.

In his *Landmarks* series, the nature writer Robert Macfarlane (2012)<sup>7</sup> contends that the destruction of the natural environment equally impoverishes and degrades our very humanness. He offers a re-connective narrative by exploring the reciprocal shaping of people and place – how landscapes penetrate the psyche of their inhabitants, and how languages and dialects register an enriching relationship with the wild.

I have long been fascinated by how people understand themselves using landscape, by the topographies of self we carry within us and by the maps we make with which to navigate these interior terrains. We think in metaphors drawn from place and sometimes those metaphors do not only adorn our thought, but actively produce it.  
(p. 26)

The sea calls to me, as I perform the duties of a city-bound working life or any other activities unrelated to the life of the coast. Ocean emissaries hasten my return, announcing as the rising flurries of an onshore wind, or as familiar cloud formations harkening trains of building swell. The waves form in my mind before I surf them, sweeping up the west coast from the southern reaches of the Tasman. Their variant angles of approach refract in different patterns around headlands, breaking across reefs or sandbars in familiar yet constantly varying formations.

Elemental indicators form a web of interacting coastal conditions that predict and influence the dynamics of breaking waves. Enchanted, they merge together as a synaesthesia of perceptual phenomena. Surging surf shimmers musically in floating sea-salt haze, painting rippling traces in shoreline creeping dunes, whilst the wind-whistled sun swirls in faceted ocean surface. I appreciate these elementals for the variant possibilities they yield, both for surfboard riding and for photography, but also in the restorative act of spending time, of walking, looking, and noticing. Considered from this perspective, I regard my practice-led

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<sup>7</sup> Macfarlane, R. (2012). *The old ways: A journey on foot*. London, England: Penguin Books.

research as a means for exploring the ways in which I understand and interact within this wider ecology, an inquiry beneath the surface of nature into the lattice of the self.



Figure 1. Nick Monks. *BlueThoughtForm #1* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm

### 3 LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY

My experience of the coastal environments west of Auckland manifests as a heightened sense of felt connection within a dynamic life world that extends beyond me. However, in my early research rigid pictorial framing has had a narrowing effect of distancing this life world down a telescoping perspective. The historian Simon Schama (1995)<sup>8</sup> makes a strong claim for cultural construction as an implicit characteristic of perception:

Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock ... once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming in fact, part of the scenery. (p. 61)

This chapter queries the role that memory plays in filtering my experience of the present. Here, the ambiguous term *landscape* will be discussed as it refers to a cluster of ideas that describe ideological ways of seeing. This chapter unpacks landscape as a concept in relation to my own latent tendencies for framing the land in terms of antiquated ideological and aesthetic filters. These tendencies predominantly involved photographic tropes of the beautiful, picturesque, and the sublime. These tropes were present in the early stages of this research, at times in a purposive way, at times as unexamined and habitual inclinations. Although my photography practice has evolved beyond the limiting perspective that such framings impose, these inclinations have a habit of reappearing in my current research in different guises, at times beneath awareness. As such, the self-reflexivity of this research project acknowledges and releases my outmoded attitudes towards the land as they emerge from processes of thinking and making. This allows for a more receptive awareness of the environment to arise. Yet, the complete erasure of my historical past and the realisation of an unmediated experience of the land seems an impossible task, and so, during this research I have come to regard an ecological self as a dynamic negotiation of different perspectives that is always ongoing and unfinished.

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<sup>8</sup> Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and memory*. London, England: HarperCollins.

Art provides a means for such critical reflection, for examining and questioning my relationship with the world, for broadening my perspectives, and for opening new horizons and possibilities. Questioning my approaches to photography, and the underlying attitudes that inform them, is to dig down into a compost, part of a deeper psychological schema of attitudes and beliefs that inform my experience of the present and orientate me in the world. My aim here is not a complete uprooting and disavowal of my past methods, but rather to engage in a re-evaluative process that makes allowance for assimilative possibilities.

Simon Schama (1995)<sup>9</sup> states:

Although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are in fact indivisible. Before it can ever be repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind, its scenery is built up as much from strata of the memory as from layers of rock. (p. 6)

In accordance with this view, my research project asks questions regarding the characteristic beliefs – “constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock” – that have been ubiquitous in my past practice and have drawn censures of overt obscurantism. One such convention is the romantic sublime, which has operated as a kind of shadowy antiquarian vestige of its historical predecessor. Photographic throwbacks to this tradition invariable draw criticisms of cultural pastiche, or hopeless romantic cliché. Despite my sympathies with the prescient critical objections levelled against the romantic sublime within contemporary art discourse (later addressed in this chapter), it is a tradition that has remained doggedly with me. As such, certain characteristics of the sublime for which I still hold clandestine sympathies require ongoing critical appraisal as they emerge out of processes of thinking and making. This criticality serves as a valuable means for orientating my practice within a broader historical context of understanding.

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<sup>9</sup> Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and memory*. London, England: HarperCollins.



Although I am attempting in my practice to drop beneath abstractions, and to pay close attention to the felt experience of the land, I recognise the difficulties involved in this process. The subconscious aspects of my psyche are not so easily quieted. Walt Whitman's observation, that nature emerges subjectively out of a changing historical landscape of beliefs, suggests to me some value in maintaining a perspectival viewpoint whereby looking at the world through multiple interpretive lenses might equate more closely as seeing. In this sense, revisiting the possibilities of a repudiated antiquarian tradition serves as a valuable conceit: the romantic sublime as adumbrative window on the shifting psychological nature of place.

### **3.1 THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME**

Nineteenth century romantic artists conceived of the sublime as an elevated experience of boundlessness precipitated by feelings of awe, fear, or terror. Edmund Burke (2008)<sup>10</sup> in his treatise on the sublime described extreme aspects of nature, such as storms, mountains, or the wastes of the sea as the most auspicious environments for stimulating these feelings. For this reason, the sublime became synonymous with natural settings of a grandiose kind.

In my early research I was struggling to articulate my felt connection with the land, and so I adopted the romantic sublime as a substitute discourse which did not accurately reflect my experience. However, certain aspects of this convention resonated with me. My attraction to the dramatic scenery of the west coast elicits at times powerful emotions within me. The adrenaline aspects of surfing, of testing physical limits against the forces of the ocean and the palpable fear that can be experienced in this wild environment, have superficial parallels with the language of romantic sublimity. Nineteenth century metaphysical and idealist rhetoric framed the sublime as a spiritual experience, thought to be triggered when the boundaries of the self and the rational mind – overwhelmed by all that exceeds comprehension – merge with the divine. Furthermore, romanticism was a tradition that celebrated intuition over the intellect, and emotion over reason. These sentiments resonate

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<sup>10</sup> Burke, E. (2008). *A philosophical enquiry into the sublime and beautiful* (J. T. Boulton, Ed.) (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1757)

with my felt experience of the west coast, a location that stimulates an emotional sense of heightened connectivity within an order that exceeds my rational awareness. In common parlance this more-than-human order is commonly termed as nature or cosmos. In my early research the associated heightened feelings that accompanied such felt visceral experiences were translated in lyrical and poetic terms.



Figure 2. Nick Monks. *Romanticism #1* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1500 × 1000 mm



Figure 3. Nick Monks. *Romanticism #2* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1500 × 1000 mm



Figure 4. Nick Monks. *Romanticism #3* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1500 × 1000 mm

### 3.2 THE PROBLEM WITH THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

The artist Simon Morely (2010)<sup>11</sup> offers a short history of the sublime beginning in the seventeenth century with the translation of a fragmentary Greek text attributed to Longinus. Morely traces the evolution of the sublime through various philosophical interpretations and aesthetic iterations in line with changing cultural mores. The philosopher Edmund Burke (2008)<sup>12</sup> designated nature as the best stimulus for catalysing transcendent experience. This gave rise to a romantic tradition steeped in metaphysical sensibilities that sought the sublime in the least reassuring aspects of nature. Conversely, in his analysis of the sublime, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (2003)<sup>13</sup> focused on the subjective reaction of the experiencer unbounded by questions of beauty and aesthetics. The Kantian sublime came to be recognised as an experience that could be elicited by any stimulus, and consequently it evolved in artistic and cultural discourse beyond the limiting tropes of romanticism.

In a contemporary context, Morley (2010) describes the sublime in secular terms: “The dominant assumption behind contemporary thought is that culture and cultural values are socially constructed rather than deriving from some timeless essence. In other words, cultural signs, codes, and representations are understood as producing our life world and making it meaningful” (p. 17). In this sense the sublime defines a transformative psychological experience unrelated to premodern notions of mystical union with the divine. Moreover, philosophical materialism rejects any metaphysical claims of a higher spiritual reality behind the material world. In this context, the romantic endeavour – to communicate edifying mystical and theological motifs through the production of aesthetic and reverential nature icons – is rendered at best as a historical curiosity.

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<sup>11</sup> Morley, S. (2010). *The sublime*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>12</sup> Burke, E. (2008). *A philosophical enquiry into the sublime and beautiful* (J. T. Boulton, Ed.) (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1757)

<sup>13</sup> Kant, I. (2003). *Critique of pure reason* (N. K. Smith, Trans.) (Revised 2nd ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. (Original work published 1787)



Figure 5. Nick Monks. *TouchingBlue #2* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm

## 4 RUPTURE

Departing from the Sublime, I began exploring how I could open my photographic gaze to allow for a more nuanced experience of place, and of the more-than-human agencies active in the land, without being overly prescriptive in my methods. In the initial stages of this project, the confidence I had felt while photographing landscape vistas shifted. I realised that my carefully controlled framing was distancing the environment. With this concern at the forefront of my thoughts, doubt entered my practice and I began to experience an uneasy dissonance when photographing familiar coastal scenes. I realised that to more effectively evoke a sense of relatedness with the environment, I needed a new approach.

Initially, I experimented with a pinhole camera, which involved relinquishing technical control over the aesthetic outcome of my photographs. Owing to the lack of a viewfinder, this method opened my practice to a different kind of attention. Although I was still thinking pictorially, my attention was inversely engaged. While waiting contemplatively during long exposures, unnoticed elements of the environment presented themselves to me. Accordingly, I became less concerned with producing dramatic sublime photographs. Also, this change to pinhole camera shifted my choice of subject matter. The often-frustrated search for breathless romantic vistas relaxed into a more intimate awareness of the here and now. This prompted mindful attention of what was happening within me in relation to the surroundings. I began to regard the camera differently, less as a documentary tool and more as a perceptual filter in which the act of photographing becomes a means for accessing the materiality of my experience.





Figure 6. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #1* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



Figure 7. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #2* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm





Figure 8. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #3* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm

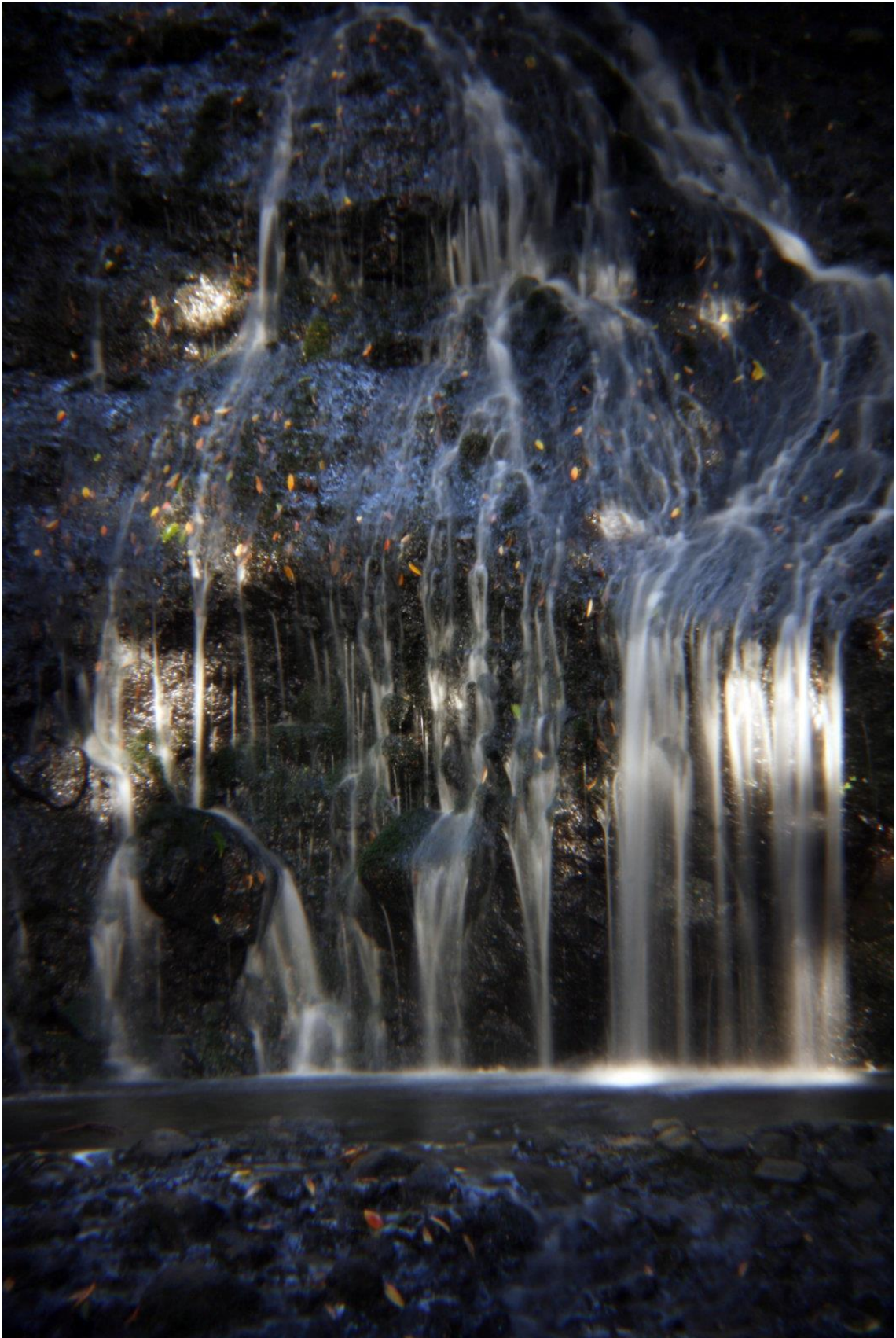


Figure 9. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #4* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



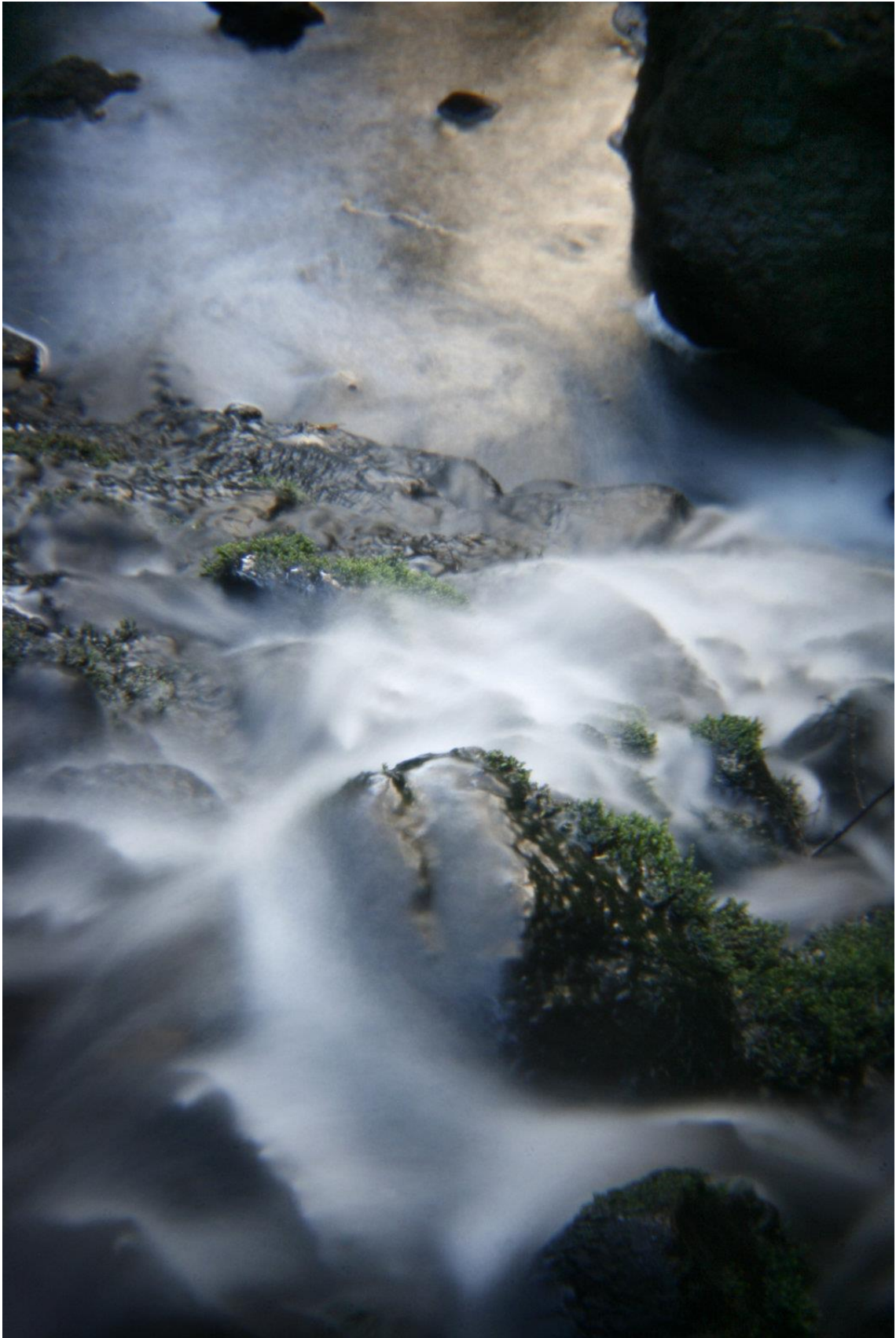


Figure 10. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #5* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



Figure 11. Nick Monks. *Pinhole #6* (2016). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm

This experience marked the beginnings of a transition towards a more relational approach. The romantic sublime morphed from transcendent portal to earthly departure point, registering how shifting attitudes towards the land influence the ways in which it is perceived and interacted with. This shift in thinking raised the question of how an emerging awareness of these filters, documented photographically as markers of significance, could bring into focus hidden influences at work, both in the land and within myself. My interest in felt bodily experiences marked a change towards a phenomenological approach.

#### **4.1 SHIFTING LENSES**

In my practice an emerging sensitivity for the contingencies of experience underpinned my adoption of a multi-perspective approach to the land, one that draws on many frames of reference as a means for approaching an integral state of awareness. During the course of this research I have experimented extensively with different lens-based media, including large format camera, 35mm film, digital SLR, moving image, and GoPro.

Professor of American Literature David M. Robinson (2008)<sup>14</sup> explores the value of embracing epistemological doubt through an analysis of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Robinson discusses the fundamental premise of Emerson's later thought where to act is an ethical imperative of movement through illusion towards an experiential framework of provisional truths: "Illusion is understood to be the provisional acceptance through action, of perceptions that are constantly open to revision" (p. 156). Emerson expresses this in lyrical terms:

Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood. All is riddle, and the key to riddle is another riddle. There are many pillows of illusion as flakes in a snow-storm. We wake from one dream into another dream. (Emerson, as cited in Robinson, 2008, p. 156)

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<sup>14</sup> Robinson, D. (2008). *Emerson and the conduct of life*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Interpreting the land through different media has allowed me to engage in different forms of contemplation. My focus on the changing and ephemeral forces of nature served as a poetic inquiry into the shifting physical and psychological nature of place. I produced a series of contemplative works – atmospheric light, storms, and expansive cloud-swept skies, enfolded within ‘temporal’ layers of multi-media and ‘perceptual’ gradations of tonality, aspired to a metaphoric quality of dream-like perception. This body of work was an attempt at registering the interface between internal thought processes and external environmental influences, in the subjective construction of ‘landscape’. This work endeavoured to blur conceptual boundaries within a multi-dimensional space and allow for the possibility of many different readings – oscillating between romantic ideas of transcendence and a discursive deconstruction of such possibilities.



Figure 12. Nick Monks. *Liminal #1* (2016). Photograph, pencil, chalk, charcoal on matt paper. 270 × 400 mm





Figure 13. Nick Monks. *Liminal #2* (2016). Photograph, pencil, chalk, charcoal on matt paper. 270 × 400 mm



Figure 14. Nick Monks. *Liminal #3* (2016). Photograph, pencil, chalk, charcoal on matt paper. 270 × 400 mm

## 5 EMPTYING OUT & OPENING UP

My experience of the west coast is of a heightened sense of connection within a life world that extends beyond me. The intuited value of this experiential state of awareness is of an enriched sense of self through relationship. Identifying how this visceral experience of communion might function as an ethic of care for the natural world has been complicated by divergent trends in contemporary thought regarding landscape perception. The environmental psychologist David W. Kidner (2001)<sup>15</sup> argues that a social constructionist approach to environmentalism, one that views nature as an artefact of language and the realities of the world as primarily discursive ones, has the effect of denying the natural world as a potential source of experience, understanding, or morality.

The sociologist Klaus Eder (1996)<sup>16</sup> summarises a social constructionist view of nature in the following way:

Nature is only signifier. The signified in the description of nature is society itself. Society sets down the rules for perceiving and experiencing the world in the symbolisation of nature. Such symbolisations are used to adjust the elementary schemata for perceiving and experiencing the world. (p. 31)

Thus, constructivism has given rise to sceptical attitudes towards nature – nature understood as a larger order out of which we grow. This philosophical view proposes that there exists no ‘Nature’ out there, and that our true environment is socially constituted. Equally, Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (1993)<sup>17</sup> have argued that “nature, like everything else we talk about, is first and foremost an artefact of language” (p. 5). In this sense, language is understood as constituting nature rather than representing it, so that “any attempt to invoke the name of nature ... must now be either naive or ironic” (p. 5).

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<sup>15</sup> Kidner, D. W. (2001). *Nature and psyche: Radical environmentalism and the politics of subjectivity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

<sup>16</sup> Eder, K. (1996). *The social construction of nature: A sociology of ecological enlightenment*. London, England: Sage.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, J. & Chaloupka, W. (Eds.). (1993). *In the nature of things: Language, politics, and the environment*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.



## 5.1 THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION

In my practice, phenomenology has provided a philosophical ground for reconnecting with nature — for exploring my connection with the more-than-human world. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962)<sup>18</sup> argued for the primary role that sensory perception plays in our understanding of the world. He defined the embodied nature of perception as a reciprocal engagement between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Furthermore, he consistently described the sensible world in active terms as animate and in some sense, alive.

As I contemplate the blue of the sky ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it thinks itself within me, I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (p. 214)

The philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1996)<sup>19</sup> draws on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to elucidate the eco-ethical value of subjective bodily experience. Abram describes the value of such an environmental phenomenology as

a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand. (p. 47)

Abram articulates the foundations of an environmental ethic which calls for the human community to renew its acquaintance with the sensuous otherness of a world in urgent need of our care and attention.

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

<sup>19</sup> Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

## 5.2 WAYFARING

Although I am seeking to prioritise phenomenological forms of perception in this project, I recognise that my experience is tempered by personal proclivities of habit and behaviour that are not so easily relinquished. Earlier in this exegesis I discussed photographic tropes of the beautiful, picturesque, and sublime as limiting filters that tempered a more receptive experience of the land. However, this is not an exhaustive account of the culturally determined ways in which I reflexively think, act, or photograph, nor do I believe that I have a full awareness of my own limiting biases. David Abram, in his introduction to *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment*, describes the difficulties of a phenomenological style of perception: “Such an approach demands great care and lucidity on the part of the would-be practitioner. In careless hands, phenomenology can risk assimilating the wild multiplicity of things into too human a register” (Vakoch & Castrillón, 2014, p. vii).<sup>20</sup>

In my practice I have tempered a phenomenological approach with an awareness that projection is an inevitable function of my psyche. By understanding how different modes of perception unfold in my practice I can recognise a broad spectrum of attitudes as they arise within my experience. In this project I have framed these different understandings of landscape perception as constructivist on the one hand – relating to the projection onto the landscape of culturally determined ideas and attitudes – and phenomenological on the other – perception arising from a sensory and embodied relationship between the subjective self and the land.

## 5.3 THE ECOLOGICAL SUBLIME

To explore these ideas, I departed from my photographic portrayal of landscapes as sublime sweeping vistas, and from my subsequent reflections on the contingent nature of experience. I produced a series of black & white photographs exploring my felt experience of

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<sup>20</sup> Vakoch, D. A., & Castrillón, F. (2014). *Ecopsychology, phenomenology, and the environment: The experience of nature*. New York, NY: Springer.

familiar points of contact along the shoreline. This work focused on the intertidal areas of the west coast with close-up studies pondering intimate details: light illuminating the shadowy recesses of a rock pool; rippling patterns in sand and water; luminous surf spume sliding across the shoreline. These details moved to wider views suggesting the connection of small details to larger patterns within the land. This body of work served to focus my attention on the ordinary, and to consider photographically the idea of relationships within the environment.



Figure 15. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #1* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



Figure 16. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #2* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



Figure 17. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #3* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



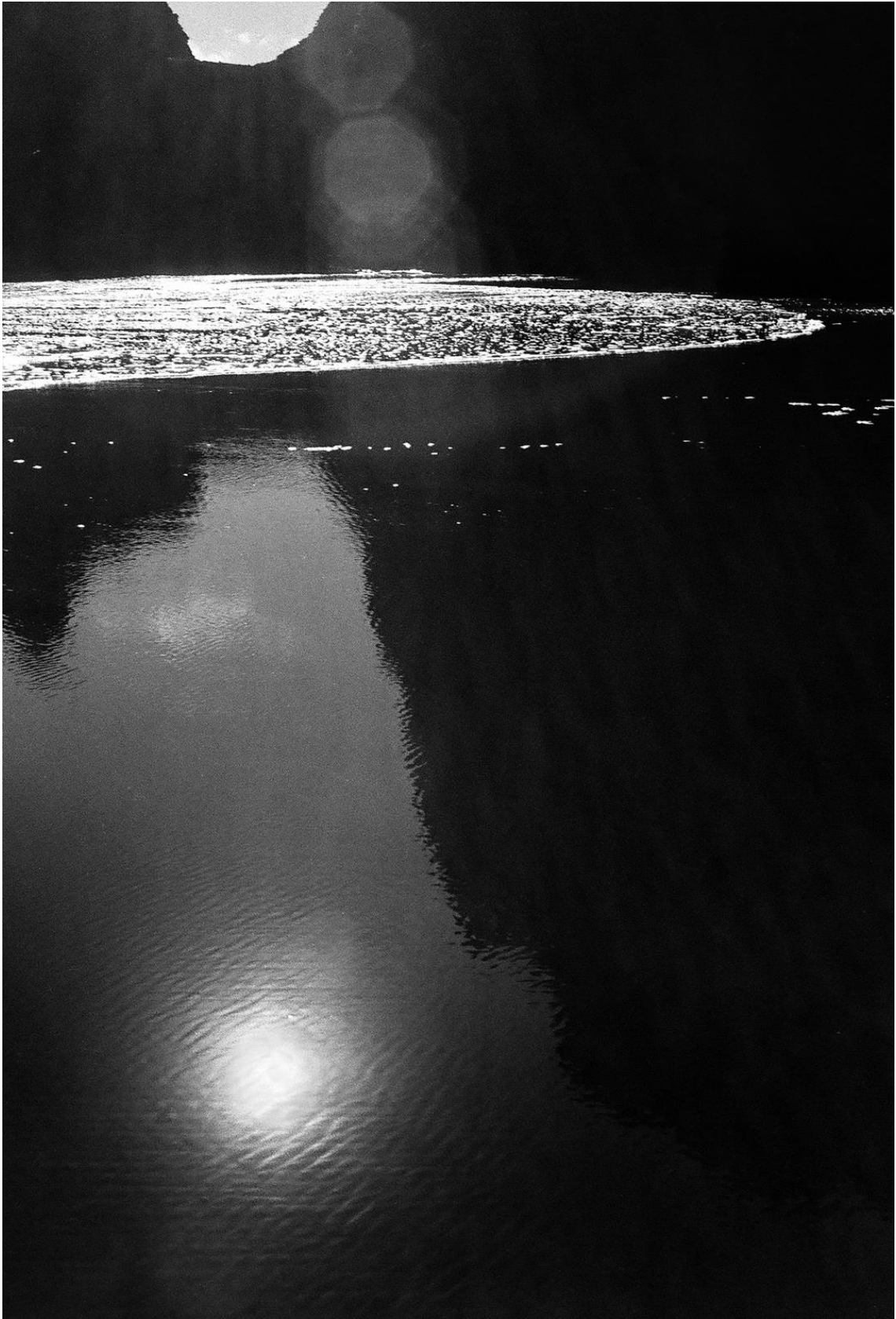


Figure 18. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #4* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



Figure 19. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #5* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm



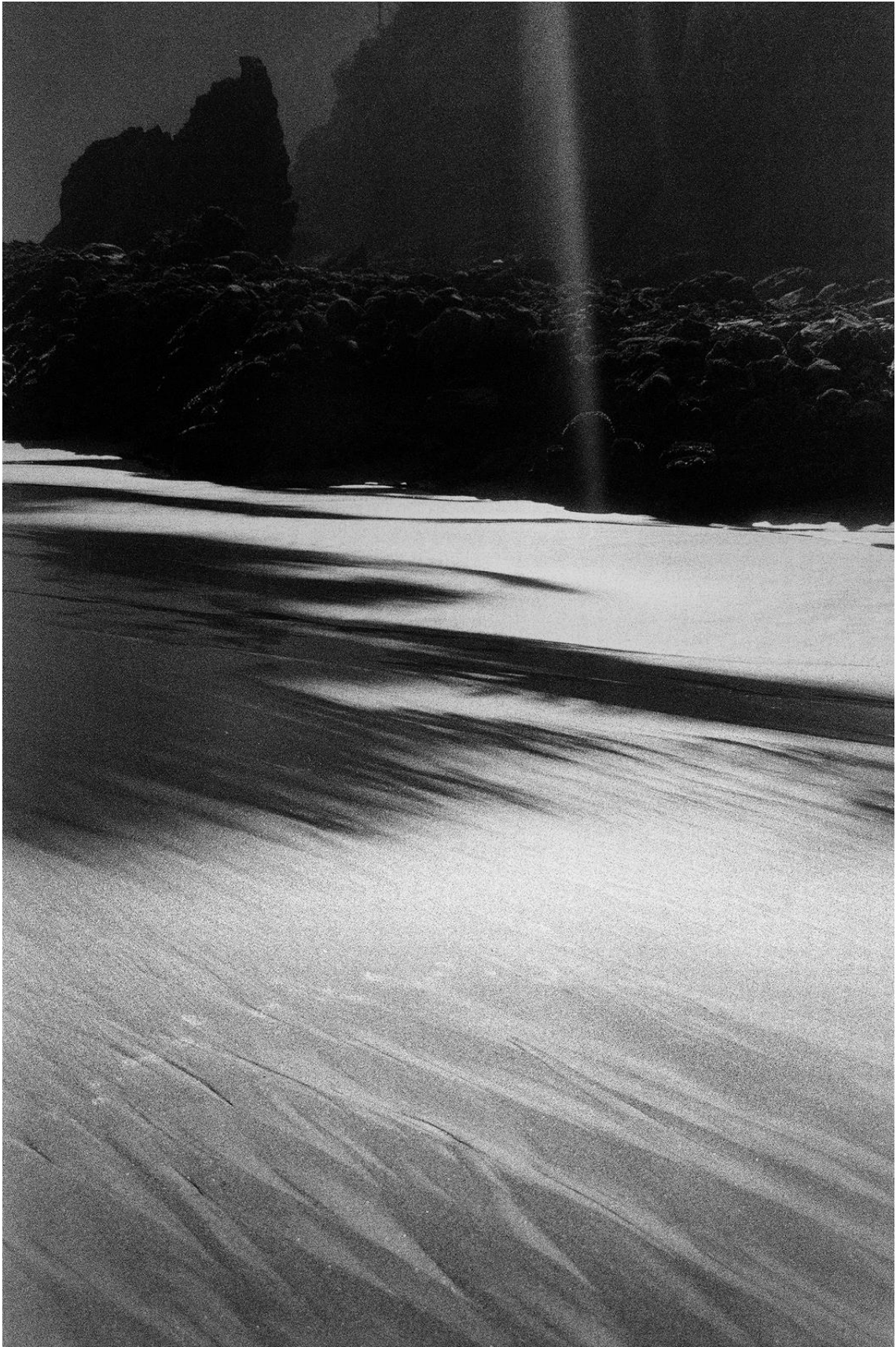


Figure 20. Nick Monks. *Wayfaring #6* (2017). Inkjet print on matt paper. 400 × 270 mm

These photographs were partly inspired by the coastal photography of Charles Pratt as discussed by Finis Dunaway in his article “The Ecological Sublime” (Dunaway, 2005).<sup>21</sup> Dunaway discusses Pratt’s collaboration with the environmentalist and writer Rachel Carson in their book *The Sense of Wonder* (Carson & Pratt, 1965).<sup>22</sup> Featured in the book is an essay by Carson in which she argues for the ethical force of wonder, of re-enchanting the world by looking through a child’s eyes, while her environmental writing places emphasis on the interdependent relationships between human beings and the natural world.

Pratt’s photographs complement the writing by focusing on small and intimate details in the environment and their biotic relationships. Dunaway (2005) observes that throughout his career Pratt offered an alternative to the popular landscape photography of the times that instantiated the ideal of a pristine wilderness.

His images and writings about the medium address fundamental issues concerning perceptions of the landscape, issues that resonate with contemporary debates ... when photographers, art critics, and historians all challenged the wilderness ideal, the notion of pure, pristine nature as a sublime realm separate from civilization.  
(p.78 )

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<sup>21</sup> Dunaway, F. (2005). The ecological sublime. *Raritan*, 25(2), 78–97.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, R. & Pratt, C. (Illustrator). (1965). *The sense of wonder*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.



*This Image has been removed by the author of this Exegesis for copywrite reasons.*

Figure 21. Charles Pratt. *Sense of Wonder* (1967). Gift of Julie Pratt to MoCP, 1995. Gelatin silver print

After his collaboration with Carson, Pratt continued to explore coastal photography, but with a critical regard for the limitations of his own aesthetic perspective. Dunaway describes Pratt's photographic studies of fishermen as a means for exploring the different ways people come to know and perceive the environments they inhabit. "Pratt suggested that what linked humans to the natural world was not an ineffable spiritual bond but the daily experience of work. In doing so, he challenged a key component of the wilderness ideal" (p.88 ). As a body of work, wayfaring led me to reflect critically on my own relationship with the west coast, largely experienced through the leisure pursuits of surfing and interpreted through the aesthetic value judgements of a detached photographic gaze.

## 5.4 EMPTYING OUT

As a participant in the extractive processes of culture and capital consistent with industrial consumer society, I exhibit colonising attitudes towards the land consistent with this world view. I am a member of industrial consumer society and so I appreciate the ironies inherent in any romantic attempts to invoke the name of nature. Nonetheless, I also suspect that my struggle to understand and articulate certain nature-inspired experiences I have had in my life has causative relations with the limiting schemata industrial society sets out in the symbolisation of nature. I am ignorant of the degree to which prevailing societal habits for perceiving and experiencing the world preclude more psychologically integrative ways of knowing and being in the environment. As such, I began to question the shortcomings of my practice and the ways in which my own limiting schemata might be operating to narrow my perceptions.

Surfing has been one of the primary activities that brings me into a close relationship with the coast. However, surfing is an overly pejorative way of relating within a wider ecology that remains indifferent to the fulfilment of my leisure pursuits. To disrupt my own habits of engagement, I began exploring the bodily sensation of being in the ocean through moving image, and with the intention of treading water in the shoreline surf and recording my experience. Untethered from a surfboard, and consequently from my habituated ways of being in the ocean environment, I drifted passively with rips and currents.

I presented the resulting moving image footage on a widescreen TV alongside frame grabs presented as stills. Reflecting critically on this footage, I noticed that during recording, my gaze had been drawn by the activity of the waves from the perspective of a surfer, and that I had chosen to shoot on days that had been favourable for surfing. The still images I selected from the footage for presentation were decidedly pictorial. I was editing in terms of my own tendencies as a surfer to view the ocean through the tropes of surf photography. The body of work didn't reflect my felt bodily experience of rhythmic ocean movements as much as it hinted at a surfing-derived narrative.



Figure 22. Nick Monks. *Surfer's Eye* (2017). Still from video presented on 23-inch LED, 5-minute loop. Available at <https://vimeo.com/album/5474072>



Figure 23. Nick Monks. *Surfer's Eye #1* (2017). Frame grab, inkjet print on matt paper. 250 × 500 mm





Figure 24. Nick Monks. *Surfer's Eye #2* (2017). Frame grab, inkjet print on matt paper. 250 × 500 mm



Figure 25. Nick Monks. *Surfer's Eye #3* (2017). Frame grab, inkjet print on matt paper. 250 × 500 mm

## 5.5 IMMERSION

The photographer Cathy Carter (2013)<sup>23</sup> has explored the experience of bodily immersion in water through moving image and photography. She describes her kinaesthetic curiosity for being suspended in water as “satisfying a desire in the artist to be absorbed in the sensations of being immersed in the natural world” (p. 56). Carter describes the importance of duration for creating a heightened awareness of the environment – both as a method in the field and as an installation strategy to promote a reflective and contemplative state. Reflecting on Carter’s work helped me to define methods within my project that might facilitate a responsive engagement with the rhythms of the sea. And further, how an exploration and testing of the modes of encounter for the spectator/viewer might facilitate this rhythmic bodily sense of the ocean.

Extensive experimentation with moving image ensued. During these field trips I didn’t have a clear intention, but walked the shoreline allowing myself to be drawn into an awareness of the dynamic life of the coast. When my attention was engaged by phenomena, I stopped and shot moving image. These moving image videos were initially short durations of 3 to 5 minutes but extended to longer recordings of approximately an hour. The contents of these recordings varied across seasons, including different weather conditions, times of day, light, colour, movement, and rhythm.

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<sup>23</sup> Carter, C. (2013). *Immersion and emergence* (Unpublished master’s thesis). Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.



Figure 26. Nick Monks. *Stream* (2018). Still from video presented on 23-inch LED, 40-minute loop. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/album/5474072>

The installation of long duration videos, approximately 40 minutes to an hour in length and looped, has been tested alongside still images as a series of three or more. The moving image works have depicted various natural phenomena: of rippling patterns in streams brushed by the disturbing flurries of gale force wind, swirling eddies scattering sand across the beach in constantly shifting deposits; of clouds sweeping the coastline broken by glancing beams of sunlight and sheets of squalling rain; of rhythmic immersions in shoreline breaking surf, drifting listlessly with rolling ocean currents that submerge into the green ocean depths.





Figure 27. Nick Monks. *Immersive Waves* (2017). Still from video presented on 23-inch LED, 40-minute loop. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/album/5474072>



Figure 28. Nick Monks. *Immersive Waves* (2017). Install with video projection, 40-minute loop

Alternatively, still images have evidenced changing rhythmic patterns of coastal ebb and flow. The presentation of these stills alongside moving image speaks of this dynamic tension between constancy and transformation in the coastal environment. The images exist in a continuum of time and so they alter with it, evolving with processes of exploration to be enfolded back into the ecology of an ongoing project.

## 5.6 INTERACTIVE LANDSCAPE

The environmental philosopher Val Plumwood's (2006)<sup>24</sup> notion of interactive landscape has provided me with a theoretical model for conceptualising how a dynamic relationship between self and land might unfold in my practice. Plumwood argues for the mutually informing nature of mind and matter. She demarcates the boundaries of interactive landscape by indicating what the concept rejects:

- hyperseparation – into a nature/culture binary;
- cultural reductionism – nature scepticism that discounts the agency of the non-human sphere; and
- implosion – nature and culture as indistinguishable categories.

Plumwood argues that hyperseparation, cultural reductionism, and implosion are poor ways to deal with issues of gradation. Plumwood states that “the dialogue on the self/other boundary will hardly be facilitated if it must start by imploding nature/culture discourses and refusing conceptual expression to difference” (p. 146), and also “cultural reduction, which is often associated with certain forms of postmodernism, would abolish conceptual conditions for sensitivity to nature's limits, and to the variations and interweavings of the human and non-human narratives an ecological consciousness aims to foster” (p. 137). Furthermore, Plumwood recognises constructivism as a dualising approach “continuing to represent the Other, nature, as an absence or void, and to demote its agency” (p. 137).

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<sup>24</sup> Plumwood, V. (2006). The concept of a cultural landscape. *Ethics & the Environment*, 11(2), 115–150.

## 5.7 OPENING UP

In my practice I have begun developing an attentive sensitivity to subtle movements passing between self and environment, movements that might constitute a relationship. This opening of awareness is a reconsideration of the environment, and a complementary redefinition of self because it challenges reductionist models that attribute meaning only to language and culture. Through practice I have endeavoured to explore relational possibilities that extend beyond the human and include the vitality of life. However, the goal is not nature mysticism, to become 'one' with 'all that is'.

I have found it exceedingly difficult to integrate these concepts into my practice. To avoid assimilating the land to preconceived categories of thought, I have identified methods that allow for a reciprocity between self and environment to emerge out of my practice in a non-pre-emptive way. One of these methods involves being present in the west coast environment with no fixed goals, open and receptive, and with the intention of spending time. In this enterprise the camera has operated as an appendage, facilitating a deepening of my sensory acuity. This acuity is not limited to the visual, but tacitly engages all my senses. When using this method in the field I focus on my felt bodily sensations in response to elemental forces. Drifting with shoreline ocean rip currents while recording moving image, I surrender myself to the whims of the sea. Periodically submerged beneath breaking waves and buffeted by the elements, I enter into a state of heightened awareness. This attention draws me into a meditative reciprocity with the wider environment and is encouraged by the long duration of the moving image recordings. I have begun to employ this way of knowing in all my photography field trips. My body enters into a dialogue with the elements as I walk the coastline, sit gazing indolently out to sea, drift with ocean currents, or tumble in shoreline breaking surf. I feel the warm sun on my face, or the wet rain on my skin. I respond with my body and through the lens.

Jane Bennett (2001)<sup>25</sup> has described the kind of enchantment I feel in these moments in comparable terms. Enchantment involves an experiential encounter in which one's critical

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<sup>25</sup> Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

faculties are momentarily disrupted, and a sense of fullness and enjoyment ensues. Bennett is careful to differentiate between enchantment and mindlessness by advocating for a critical dimension to this process.

The good humour of enchantment spills over into critical consciousness, and tempers it, thus rendering its judgements more generous and less dogmatic... Such moments can be cultivated and intensified by artful means. Enchantment as I use the term, is an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity. (p. 10)

## 5.8 THE ECOLOGICAL SELF

The combination of artifice and spontaneity, tempered by subsequent critical reflection, provides a provisional framework for approaching how an ecological self might emerge from my artworks. Arne Næss and Val Plumwood have warned against the dangers of an ecological holism that denies individuality. As such, when photographing I do not seek to collapse self into environment, and I am also aware of the dangers of subsuming environment into self. Arne Næss (1989)<sup>26</sup> argues for an ecological ethic that avoids a collapsing of boundaries.

We are part of the ecosphere just as intimately as we are part of our own society. But the expression 'drops in a stream of life' may be misleading if it implies that the individuality of the drops is lost in the stream. Here is a difficult ridge to walk: To the left we have the ocean of organic and mystical views, to the right the abyss of atomic individualism. (p. 165)

In both my artworks and my methods, I am seeking to recognise this interplay between separation and relation, recognising the difference between myself and the land while nurturing a greater sense of respect for the dynamic interaction between a communion of subjects.

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<sup>26</sup> Næss, A. (1989). *Ecology, community, and lifestyle: outline of an ecosophy* (D. Rothenberg, Trans.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Returning to the medium of photography, I employed this relational method by internalising the long duration of the moving image recordings. I began interacting responsively with the rhythmic movements of the shoreline over long periods of time. The intertidal area is both a literal and metaphoric threshold, registering converging movements as they unfold between the wind, the sun, the sea, and the land beneath my feet. The shoreline is in a constant state of transformation swept rhythmically by surging surf that advances and retreats leaving constantly shifting patterns in the sand. As clouds drift through reflective pools of light, I walk the beach advancing and retreating with the sweeping surf. I respond to changing light as it glances off surface and illuminates patterns in the sand and rippling water. I regard this rhythmic movement as a dialectic between self and environment. These works unfold over many hours in which I become immersed in a meditative state of interactive fascination. My attention is absorbed in such a way that I experience myself as participant in an enchanted dance. "Difference and relation ... together make up a sort of dance that is part of the vitality of the natural world" (Kidner, 2001, p. 252).<sup>27</sup> While photographing, I am not engaged in critical or discursive thought but rather relaxing into a concentrated state, responsive to the myriad interacting phenomena in the surroundings.

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<sup>27</sup> Kidner, D. W. (2001). *Nature and psyche: Radical environmentalism and the politics of subjectivity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.



Figure 29. Nick Monks. *Thought Form #1* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm





Figure 30. Nick Monks. *Thought Form #2* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm



Figure 31. Nick Monks. *Thought Form #3* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm



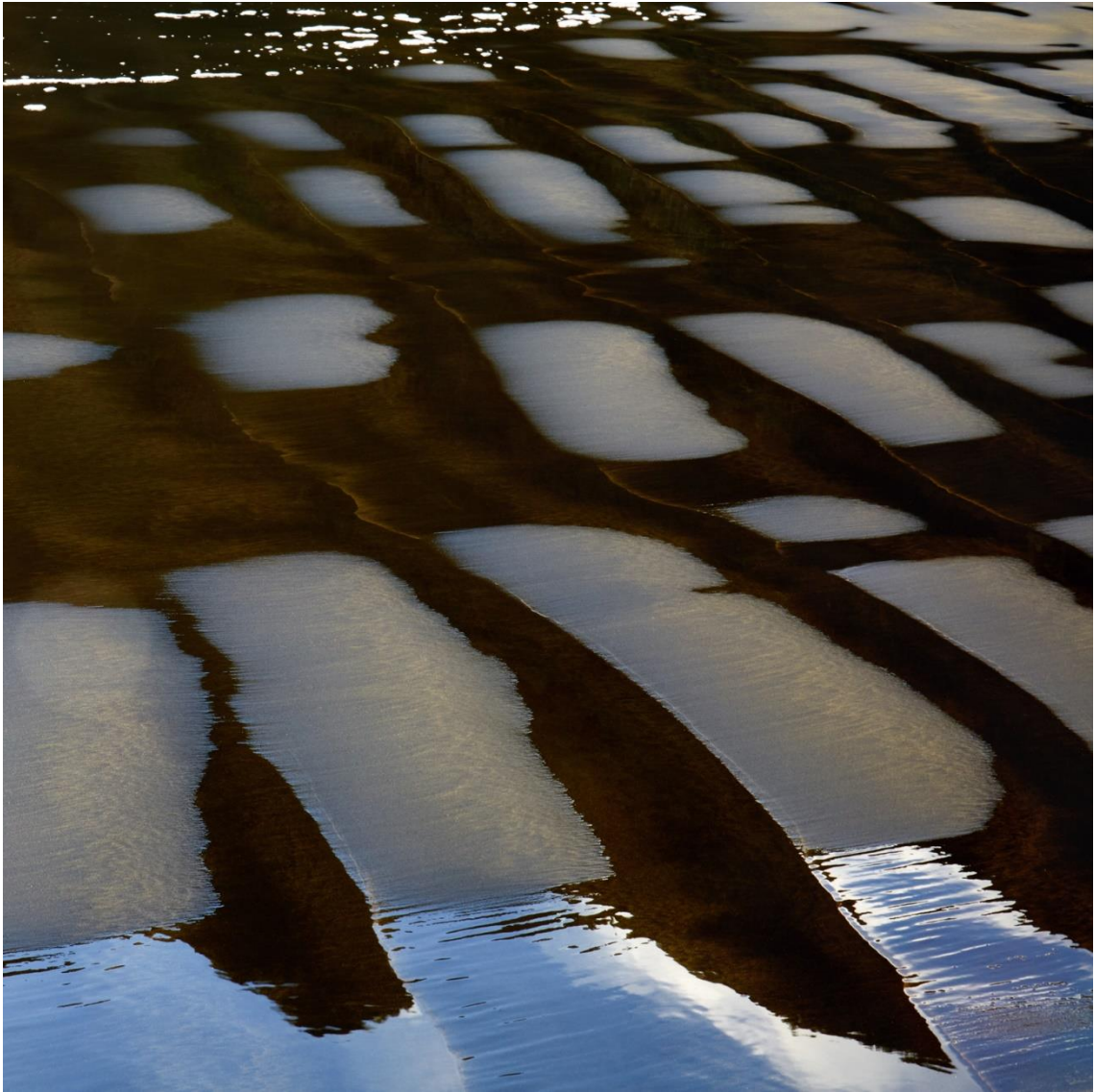


Figure 32. Nick Monks. *Thought Form #4* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 600 × 600 mm

It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that my photography field trips always unfold as enchanted encounters with the more-than-human world. Invariably I am attended by conflicting currents of critical thought ready to punctuate my contemplative methods. Oftentimes thought arises unbidden, pulling me this way and that in streams of conjecture. I stand on the beach surveying the surroundings and I feel oppressed by the dullness of a grey cloudy day, or I resent the lashing assaults of squalling rain showers. I might question the veracity of my methods and ask myself: Where is the photograph here? Why photograph at all? Sometimes this questioning is accompanied by divergences in method, regressions to romantic type, or paralysis.

In such moments I sit in the sand dunes, or alongside streams that empty into the sea. Relaxing into an awareness of the moment, I become a conduit for interacting aspects of mind and matter, I become porous. The rhythmic sweep of the waves draws me into their presence, the eddying gusts of wind converge with the transmuting environments of my heart and mind. This is how an ecological ethic unfolds in my practice. It is an ethic of spending time, of dropping beneath projections and opening to a receptive awareness of the environment.

## 6 CONCLUSION

I began this project feeling separate from the environment external to my perception, with the desire to explore a closer relationship through lens-based media. In the processes of thinking, art-making, spending time and reflecting, the lens has served as an appendage to my self, bringing me into a deeper and closer relationship with what I observe. In the process my point of view has become less separated from the object of attention, so that I find myself intimately involved as an inherent part of the ecology and, in this sense, the ecology that this project set out to explore has opened as a plain of immanent potential. I have found myself close to being 'at one' with the present, and its past.

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## APPENDIX

### EXHIBITION OVERVIEW & DOCUMENTATION

The exhibition installation consists of a large scale-video projection 5m x 3m. This video projection plays as a continuous 16-minute loop. In this work the camera and human body are aligned, prone to the activity of shoreline sea currents, rips, and breaking waves. The visceral power of the video projection operates to stimulate in the viewer an affecting experience of embodied seeing, rhythmically submerging and re-emerging from beneath the surf.

An adjacent wall displays three photographs measuring 1200mm x 1200mm. The photographs are closely spaced to be read together as a group. The subject matter of the photographs registers relationships between land, sky, and sea. And yet, these highly processed static images implicitly reveal the aesthetic value judgements of the artist. Thus, a mediating hand is made visible, implicating the artist as an elemental force within the land.

The bringing together of the large-scale time-based and visceral video projection with the smaller highly processed static images aims to create a dynamic tension between seemingly disparate elements. This tension speaks to core ethical considerations emerging from this research project, specifically the ways in which different modes of perception can be understood as mutually entangled *interactive landscape*. And further, the importance for embracing a holistic approach to the land that jointly considers these mutually informing modes of perception. Thus, the exhibition registers a gradation between processes of separation and relation between self and environment. Consequently, the emergence of an ecological-self from this exhibition is predicated as a dynamic negotiation of these different perspectives that is always ongoing and unfinished.

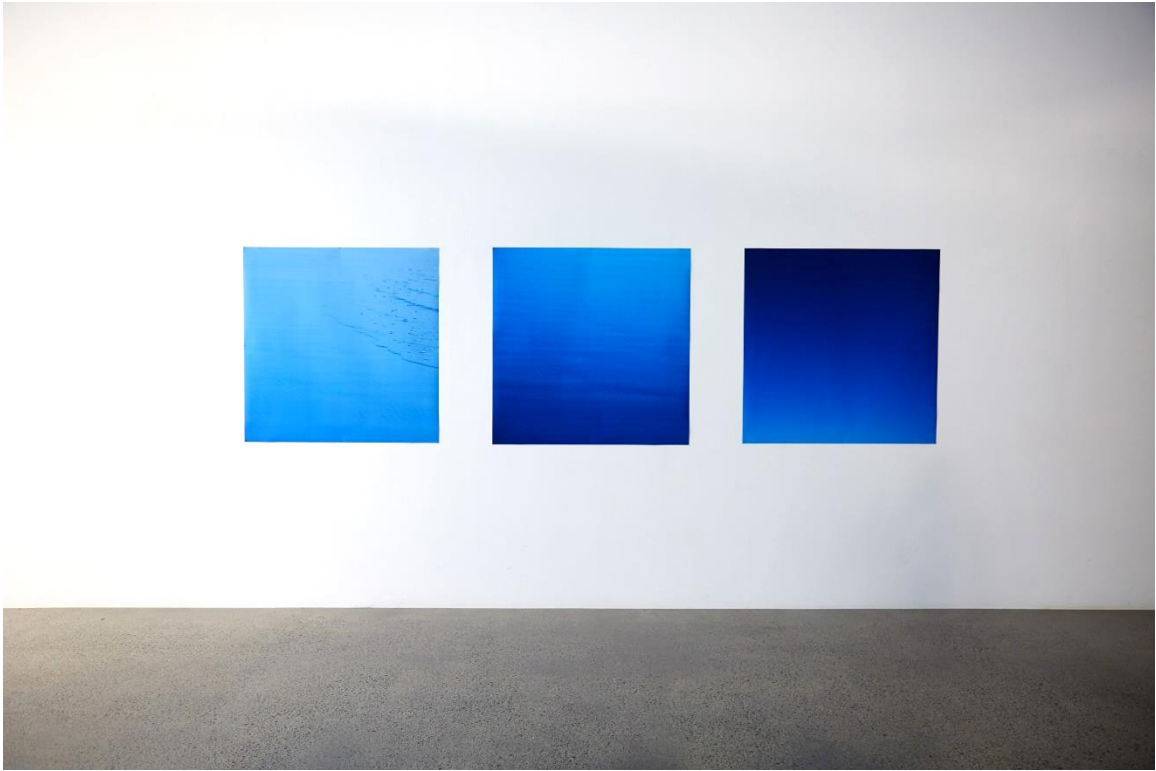


Figure 33. *Exhibition Installation view #1* (2018). ST PAUL St Gallery.

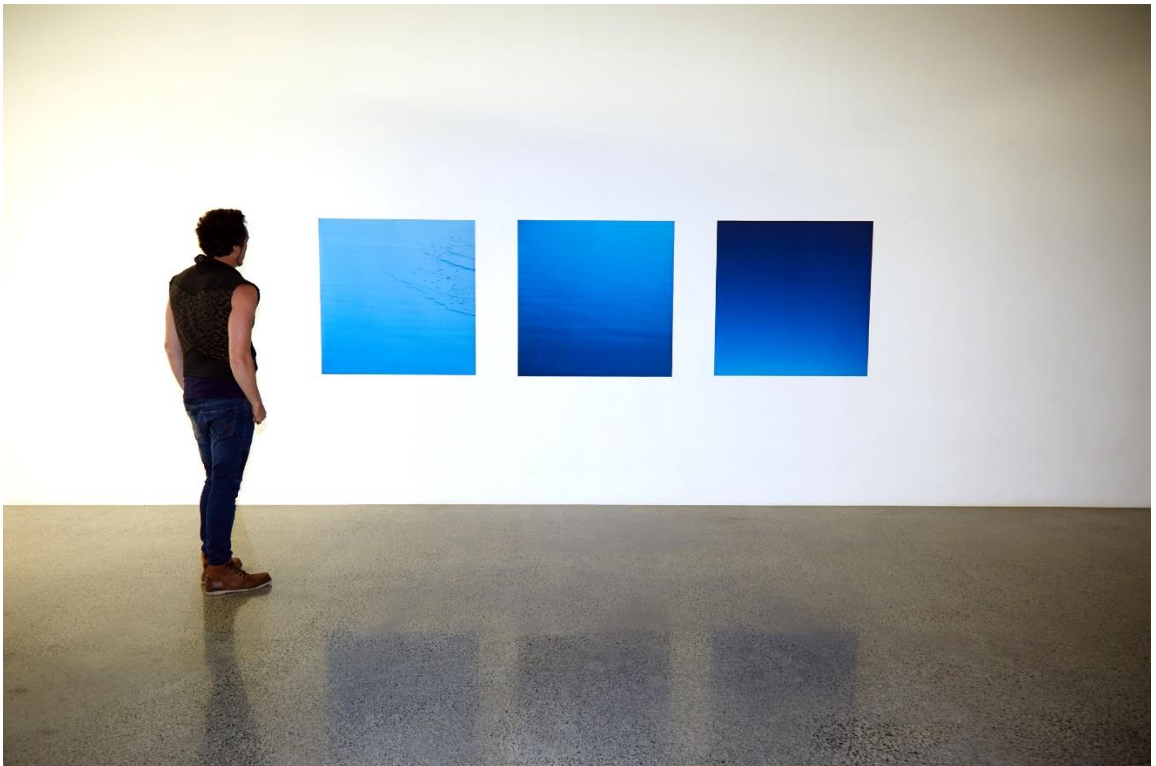


Figure 34. *Exhibition Installation view #2* (2018). ST PAULS St Gallery.





Figure 35. *Exhibition Installation view #3* (2018). Install with video projection, 16-minute loop. ST PAULS St Gallery.  
Available at: <https://vimeo.com/304283211>

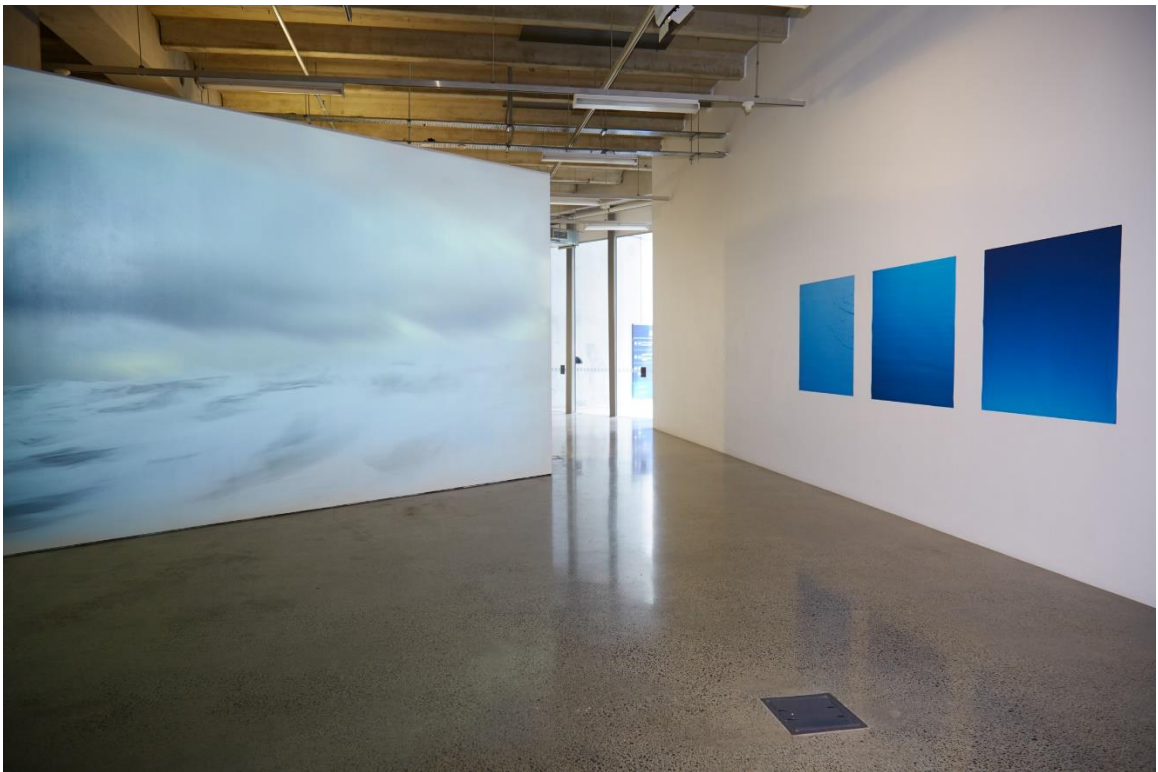


Figure 36. *Exhibition Installation view #4* (2018). Install with video projection & photographs. ST PAULS St Gallery.



Figure 37. Nick Monks. *Untitled* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1200 × 1200 mm





Figure 38. Nick Monks. *Untitled* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1200 × 1200 mm

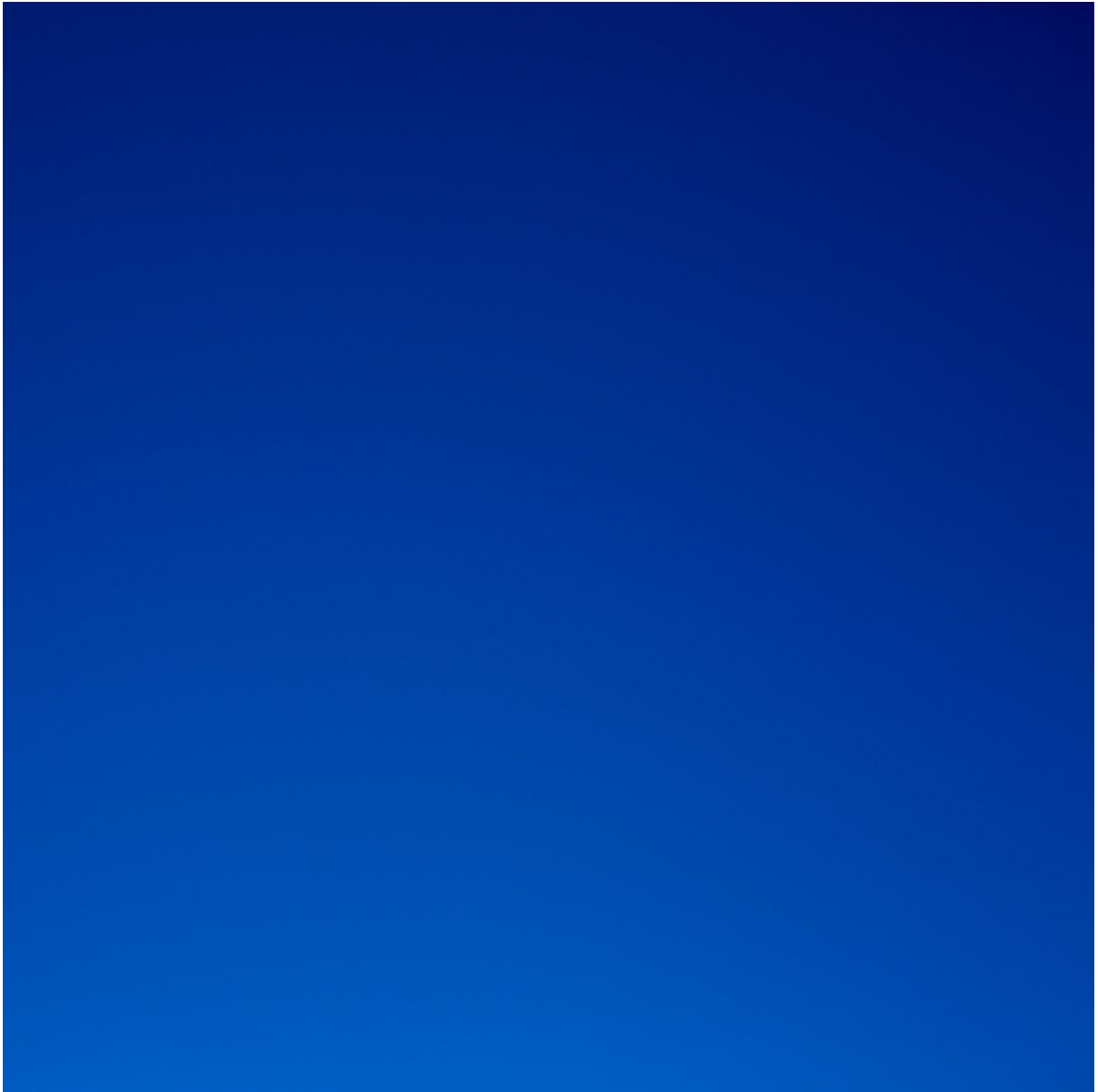


Figure 39. Nick Monks. *Untitled* (2018). Inkjet print on matt paper. 1200 × 1200 mm

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