

# TRACING THE TĀMAKI

AN ECOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE TĀMAKI ESTUARY THROUGH CREATIVE PRACTICE

Exegesis in support of practice-based thesis

Master of Visual Arts

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## Abstract

*Tracing the Tāmaki: An Ecological Investigation of the Tāmaki Estuary through Creative Practice* is a project that explores environmental aesthetics through collaboration with place. The project endeavours to entangle the human and the more-than-human within its site-responsive methodologies. Centred around the idea of tracing, I use direct-photographic processes such as cyanotype printing, lumen printing and pinhole photography; methods of making that involve a direct and deep level of immersion within the estuary. The works created reside closely to the life and ecology of the waters of the Tāmaki estuary, a place that I have developed a strong experiential relationship with, after spending most of my life in its presence. *Tracing the Tāmaki* is situated within a more-than-human paradigm, and invites necessary shifts in perception to engage with the critical ecological concerns.

The artworks within this research project are direct traces of the estuary's ecology. The images are responsive, live and intimate. They are simultaneously made *about* the estuary, *by* the estuary and *for* the estuary. Each one relates back to a moment of ecological interaction – the moment that it was made – in which weather phenomena, tidal flows and human culture cross paths on a page. This collision of entities means that each work is unique, like a temporal fingerprint. They raise questions regarding the agency of our more-than-human environs and entities, and how we might better relate to them; positioning the elements of the site, the artist and the observer in a new set of relations through the creation and exhibition of the artworks. This speaks to the larger issue of a growing separation

between the human and the physical environment, from which their re-tangling will determine our future ecological ethos.

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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 and belief, 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 submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

30 May, 2022

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Thank you to my incredible MVA cohort. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to create alongside so many other inspiring and like-minded artists. It has been such an enriching experience to undertake this journey with you all, and one that I will remember fondly. Special thanks to Becks - you have been there right from day one and your memes, atrological inputs and refreshing new perspectives have been an anchor from the beginning. Our friendship will be forever cherished.

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Finally, the greatest thanks of all go out to the Tāmaki estuary. To work alongside these waters has been a privilege, and an experience that I will take with me through the rest of my artistic career.



Figure 3

Documentation of lumen prints, digital photograph (2022)

## Glossary of Terms

*Nature/natural*: the term 'Nature', when commonly used to describe environments that are largely untouched by humans, is problematic because it establishes invisible boundaries between what is human and what is not. Rather, when I use the term 'Nature' or 'Natural', I am referring to the naturally occurring characteristics or essence of an entity – the nature of something.

*Ecology*: I use the term 'Ecology' in two senses. The first being the broad, overarching notion of Ecology as a whole, and the second in reference to smaller local ecologies – systems and cycles in a specific place.

*Ecological Mesh*: This is a concept coined by ecologist Timothy Morton in his book 'The Ecological Thought'.<sup>1</sup> It is used to address the notion that all living beings are intertwined and connected as a part of a larger web of ecological activity.

*More-than-human*: Terms such as 'nature/culture' or 'human/nonhuman' are dividing. They give implications of boundaries and segregation. 'More-than-human'<sup>2</sup> speaks to an ecological paradigm and converges in some respects with Indigenous ways of thinking in regards to the world being a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Janine Randerson, *Fathomless: Artists converse with the more-than-human, Conversations Beyond Human Timescales*, ASLECANZ conference exhibition, (Victoria University of Wellington, 2021).

# An Introduction

Ecology and the Tāmaki Estuary



## The Ecological Mesh

I have always had a keen interest and sensitivity to the more-than-human environments of the world. Specifically, environments where one may be immersed in the natural ebb and flow of the earth's cycles. As a surfer I find thrill in the breaking swell. As an equine owner I find peace in the saddle on a trail in the Hunua ranges. As a sailor I find balance between the billowing of wind and ocean swell. In his book *The Ecological Thought*, philosopher and ecologist Timothy Morton defines ecology as "a vast sprawling mesh of interconnection without definitive centre or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings sentient or otherwise."<sup>3</sup> From this notion of a wider ecological mesh, that we are all inadvertently a part of, I find one of the foundational drives behind this project. Within these more-than-human environments, Morton's notion of an ecological mesh can be best understood. The notion of meshes pulls the intersections of our world into focus; vibrant sites of ecological exchange within the mesh where differing entities tangle. A shoreline is a site with multitudes of these intersecting moments. It is a place where a body of water collides with land and sky and people, and the resulting overlap of environments creates rich grounds for biodiversity and ecological exchange; wave action against a rock face might create a pock-marked texture perfect for shellfish to cling to, or a tidal current hitting an erosion wall may cause a back eddy that spits a wonderful gallery of shells and sediment onto the shore.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

## History of the Tāmaki estuary

The Tāmaki estuary is one such site of ecological interaction that has been significant to both the history of Tāmaki Makaurau and the history of my own personal lived experience. Having lived within close proximity of the estuary's waters for the entirety of my life, I have swum, sailed, played in, and commuted by ferry over it for as long as I can remember. I had developed a strong feeling of experiential attachment to the Tāmaki estuary, and felt a need to seek out the narrative of this ever-present place in my life. After diving into local news articles and histories of Tāmaki Makaurau, I learned that the abundantly fertile shores of the river were first recognised as a place to be settled and cherished in 1300 AD, when the Tainui waka arrived in Aotearoa.<sup>4</sup> Wanting to explore the west coast of the country, Chief Hotu-roa, aboard the Tainui, chose the Tāmaki estuary as his route.<sup>5</sup> The isthmus between the two harbours, known as 'Te kei o te waka' – the stern of the Tainui canoe – provided a portage of easy access between both waters, turning a 1000km sail into a 1km haul over land. The Tāmaki area's ease of transport and flourishing biodiversity attracted large quantities of people. Russel Stone states in his book *From Tāmaki-Makau-Rau to Auckland*: "proliferating hapu origins gave Tāmaki-makau-rau a unique tribal character. It became a melting pot of resident people and incomers alike."<sup>6</sup> Since this first landing, it has continued to be a thriving hub of activity. One particular event of note was the meeting between

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<sup>4</sup> "History: The Old Pakuranga Pre-European Highway" *Howick Times*, September 30, 2020. <https://www.times.co.nz/news/history-the-old-pakuranga-pre-european-highway/>.

<sup>5</sup> Russell Stone, *From Tāmaki-Makau-Rau to Auckland: Tāmaki-Makau-Rau and its peoples*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013), 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

## Current state of the Tāmaki's waters

Hobson and Ngati Rāoa to collect signatures for the Treaty of Waitangi<sup>7</sup>. As an eighth generation settler-descendant, and having a distant relative who witnessed the signing of the Treaty, it became apparent that my own relation to the estuary actually stretches back beyond mere childhood memories. So it is within the embrace of the Tāmaki estuary's shoreline that this project takes place.

In 2018 Auckland Council conducted a marine report at various locations throughout the Tāmaki estuary. They tested for a range of marine health indicators such as water quality, sediment contaminants, and ecology (marine life). The results were distressing at best, with water quality and contaminants in the sediment sitting at a grade D (out of an A – F range) and ecology health at a grade E.<sup>8</sup> The report showed that the main pollutants in the water were traces of copper, lead and zinc, which were particularly bad in the densely urban and industrialised areas like Middlemore, Otāhuhu and Panmure.<sup>9</sup> They stated that it is clear that the issues in the estuary are the result of decades of human impact, largely due to the rural to urban development of the majority of its catchment area. During my time spent at the estuary throughout this research project, I was able to witness first-hand the poor quality of its ecological health. Although I was working near the mouth of the estuary, where continuous flushing from ocean is a great help, there were still days where the water

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret McClure, "Auckland places – Eastern suburbs: Ōrākei to the Tamaki River," *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/auckland-places/page-13>

<sup>8</sup> Auckland Council, *Marine Report Card: Tāmaki estuary reporting area* (Auckland: Auckland Council Research and Evaluation Unit, 2018), 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

appeared murky and thick with visible oil and scum forming on the surface, and hordes of plastic wrappers/ bottle caps/ waste could be seen collecting on the sand and in the shallows. The current state of the waters helped fuel the drive behind my research project; reinforcing the importance of working *with* the local ecology in a way that aids rather than hinders its health.

# Chapter One

Collaboration with Place

## Relation to site

The common term for a project that is undertaken in a specific location is 'site-based'. However, I do not think of this project as site-based. The word 'based' is broad, and has Eurocentric, materialistic connotations; it implies that the site itself is the sole foundation for the project, like a host is to a parasite. It situates this harbour as nothing more than a resource from which the work is harvested. Instead, I prefer to think of my project as 'site-responsive'. Curator and educator Miwon Kwon discusses in her book, *One Place After Another*, how terms such as 'site-responsive' are permutations of the larger 'site-specific' idea. She states that this type of art "whether interruptive or assimilative, gives itself up to its environmental context, being formally determined or directed by it."<sup>10</sup> They reconfigure the space of art, particularly institutional art, as no longer a blank slate, but a real place that can be related to and empathised with. The perception of the site evolves into a relay or network of interrelated spaces, and the resulting art seeks to become a part of the discourse concerning representations of nature and the global environmental crisis.<sup>11</sup>

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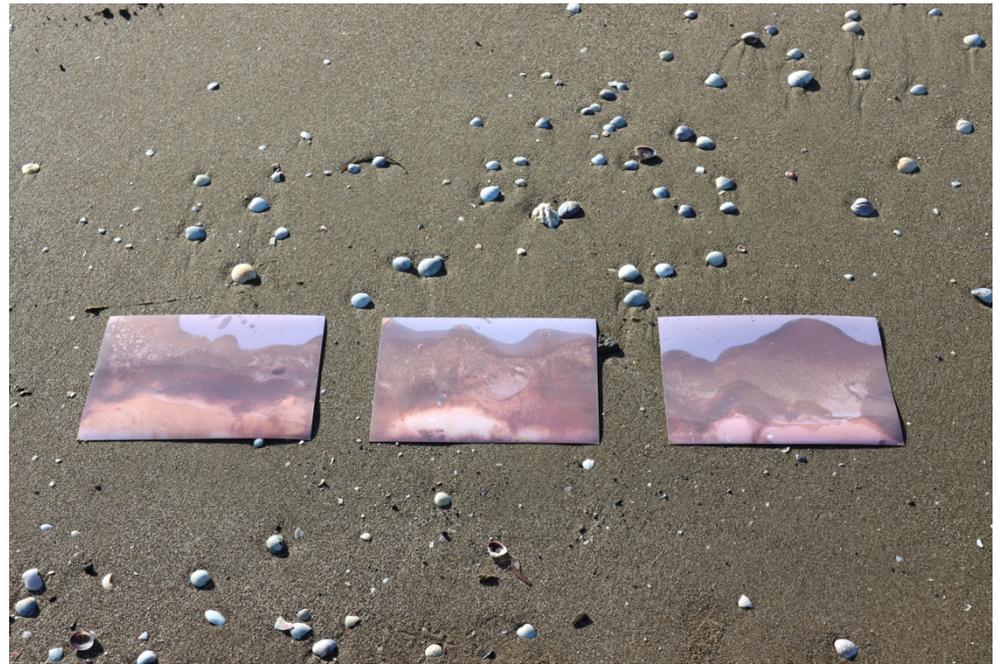
<sup>10</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

My direct-photographic pinhole, cyanotype and lumen works employ similar notions of environmental direction and interrelation. They engage with and respond to the estuary through the process of their making, so that what we see on the wall is merely a consequence of the ecological processes that occurred while sharing a space with the estuary. They are traces, resonances, echoes and evidence. By aligning the methods of my making with the natural systems and cycles of its ecology, the Tāmaki estuary became a living, thriving *who*, and its presence within my work became one of collaboration rather than existing as a simple resource. In the *100 Atmospheres* collective project, the chapter 'Encounter' discusses the experience of affect; "places have affective resonance, a sensual atmosphere that permeates them and those who linger or dwell within."<sup>12</sup> By simply sharing space with the estuary, the work that I create in its presence is inevitably permeated by it, becoming a site of vibrant exchange. It is extended beyond existing as the physical arena in which I create, to an area of temporality and transience that imprints itself upon my practice. The phenomenological events of the Tāmaki estuary combined with human culture is integral to this project, and the entanglement between the two is where the art resides.

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Ballard et al., *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2019), 21.



Video documentation of lumen print creation:

<https://vimeo.com/715838486>

Figure 5 (left): Documentation of lumen print creation (2022).

Figure 6 (top): Documentation of lumen prints at the Tāmaki estuary once fixed (2022).

I have been raised to have a certain degree of respect for the people and places that I may encounter in my life. Always offer to help. Say please and thank you. Never leave your rubbish behind. Treat others how you would like to be treated. I extend that same respect to the Tāmaki estuary. If its presence in my practice is that of a *who*, then I must treat it with the same level of respect as I would to whoever else. In her essay *Indigenizing the Anthropocene*, Indigenous author Zoe Todd of the Métis people discusses the importance of decolonizing the persistently Eurocentric spaces in which art and literature are made and perceived. She states “it is an ethical imperative to see that, despite our varied place-based cultures and knowledge systems, we must live in the world with others and must constantly think and act with reference to these relationships.”<sup>13</sup> Todd holds the belief that in order for an act of decolonization to occur, we need to change who is spoken about, how they are spoken about, and *who is present* for the speaking.<sup>14</sup> Aotearoa based artist Natalie Robertson, of the Ngāti Porou iwi and Clann Dhonnchaidh, does so by engaging her practice with indigenous relationships to land and place, environmental issues, and cultural landscapes. In 2017 Robertson created a series of sunprints for the *Heat: Solar Revolutions* exhibition at Te Uru Gallery.<sup>15</sup> Made with pieces of driftwood from the mouth of the Waiapu River laid over cyanotype cotton squares, her work presents solar ‘powered’ art and highlights climate friendly shifts. Robertson also has an ancestral connection to the Waiapu, River through her

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<sup>13</sup> Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene.” In *Art in Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 251

<sup>15</sup> Natalie Robertson, *Discovered Thou Wert Lying there like a Gurnard, Hidden like a Fugitive in the Entangled Driftwood*, 2017, cyanotype on cotton squares, Te harau beach, East Cape.

Whakapapa, and so much of her work is also viewed as a form of protection of the river's life force. Similarly, my artmaking practice which engages with the Tāmaki estuary and those that dwell within it enables them to become present in academic and art spaces. This presence through collaboration encourages a reconfiguration of how we understand human-environmental relations; offering an alternate experience of a familiar place.



Figure 7.

Natalie Robertson. *Discovered Thou Wert Lying There like a Gurnard, Hidden like a Fugitive in the Entangled Driftwood (High Tide Line, Te Wharau Beach, East Cape)*. Cyanotype on cotton squares (2017).

## Aligning through time

The biggest obstacle that I encountered when forming my collaboration with the site was *time*. I became conscious of the fact that I would be visiting the Tāmaki estuary randomly – on my own terms and when it was convenient for me. The project was very much dictated by the 9-5 work week structure that we tend to live by. In an attempt to move away from this rigidity I asked “what kind of time does the estuary live by?” Because it certainly isn’t a 9-5 work week. Water does not go to bed at 10pm and sand cannot wear a watch. Once I thought to look, the answer was immediately clear; rather than existing within a world of minutes and hours, the life and ecology of the estuary is influenced largely by the rising of the sun and the coming and going of the tide - which seemed rather obvious when said out loud but had gone completely unconsidered in my life which was so far removed from it.

Morton states in *Ecology without Nature* “If we could not merely figure out but actually experience the fact that we are embedded in our world, then we are less likely to destroy it.”<sup>16</sup> So for 20 days in December I decided to embed myself in the Tāmaki estuary by realigning my sense of time with its own. I stopped using alarms to wake myself in the morning, letting the sun and my natural circadian rhythm take over instead. And rather than visiting the water randomly, I made a point of going down to the estuary at the first turn of the tide after I woke up and make a lumen print at the edge of the waves. The result was a collection of twenty unique prints – each one containing traces of different tides, weather conditions

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (London: Harvard University press, 2009), 64.

and human activity. Some were brought into existence at low tides on overcast days, while others were made on bright, sunny mornings at a high tide. They each speak back to their own moment of creation; inciting the idea that art, science and ecology are not rigidly bound fields, but are expanded and overlapping and capable of being used in collaboration with one another.

Figure 8: Emma Fromont. December lumen Calendar. Lumen prints (2021).



During this documentation period I kept a log book that I filled every time I took a lumen print. For the minute that the print was exposing, I would write down the little bits and pieces that I was thinking and experiencing in the moment – how cold the sea was when it splashed my legs, or whether I was working next to the same fisherman as the day before. By doing so, I was allowing myself to exist and be deeply present in the space for a period of time. An excerpt from December 3, 2021:

Turn of the tide: Low, 12.58pm. It is hot and sunny today. The beach is super busy. There is a different fisherman next to me today. Lots of people are walking past and looking at what I am doing. There's water going under the glass and pushing the paper around more than yesterday. The sun is nice and warm on my shoulder.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Log book entry December 3, 2021.



December 11, 2021

Turn of the tide: high, 2:07pm  
Overcast today. Choppy  
water. There's lots of debris  
floating around from the rain  
last night. Less people on  
the beach - maybe more  
seagulls - on this bit than  
normal.  
1 minute.

Figure 9  
Documentation of logbook, digital photograph (2022)

## The micro and the macro

Artist initiative and collective, *World of Matter*, employ similar forms of collaborative research and use of hybrid media to probe the ecological realities that surround us.<sup>18</sup> Their key concern is to suggest connections between different sites, materials, processes and attitudes; primarily, between the ways in which human and nonhuman things in the world matter. Member of the collective, Emily Eliza Scott, discusses how this cross-disciplinary research with the realm of aesthetics may insist a slowing down, an “attuning to the ways that the human and the nonhuman are inextricably entangled with one another, both historically and materially.”<sup>19</sup> Cross-disciplinary research draws attention to the wider connections that are at play, and the artworks that are produced as a result provide a space for a new form of ecological commonality; “within a single page, the temporal, the spatial, the human and the nonhuman, the local and the global congeal.”<sup>20</sup> I feel that this notion in particular is reflected within my own artworks, as they too are a point of congealment between various ecological elements of the estuary and human culture. The point of tracing, such as when creating lumen prints, is to record *everything* that occurs on the page.

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<sup>18</sup> Nabil Ahmed et al, *World of Matter* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 10

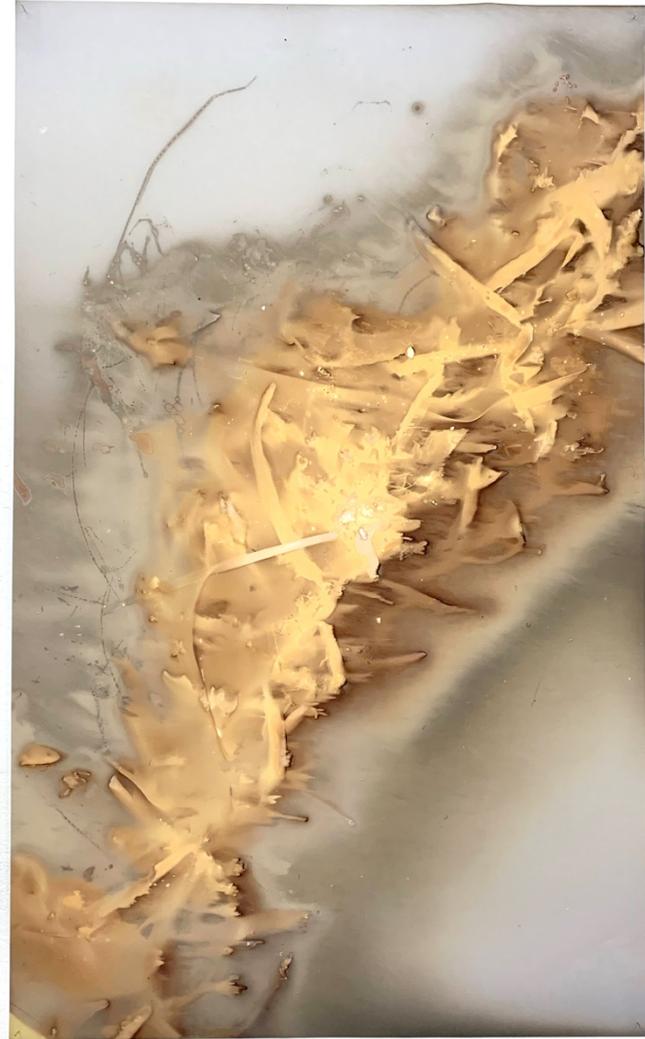
<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 9



Figure 10 (top)  
Emma Fromont. First lumen print series installed for talk  
week (2021).

Figure 11 (right)  
Emma Fromont. Seaweed. Lumen print (2021).



By bringing together such vast entities within the space of a single piece of paper, many of the works, such as the lumen prints, have a visual quality that appears to fluctuate between the micro and the macro. They are teeming with intricate details and patterns that have a resemblance to both something you would see through a microscope as well as images that NASA might take of the cosmos. However this fluctuation goes deeper than simply the aesthetic; by working in collaboration with the Tāmaki estuary I am documenting traces of the micro ecological systems that are in play at the estuary, while they are simultaneously operating as a part of the larger global processes that shape the earth. Artist Mark Dion's project, *Roundup*, also works closely with notions of micro/macro relations. Situated within the confines of an art museum, which is a space that is typically assumed to be devoid of organic life, the project consisted of Dion and a team of volunteers undertaking a 'bug hunt'. During their search they found an abundance of insect life such as eyelash mites, arthropods and silverfish, bringing into question the reality of the limits of human influence and control. Dion states that "by enhancing our limited vision through the advancement of optics in botany, geology, zoology and medicine, we have attempted to bring ourselves to a better understanding of nature. Ironically this also emphasises our separation from it."<sup>21</sup> In our attempts to make the invisible visible, we have consequently made strange of the everyday.

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Dion et al., *Ecologies: Mark Dion Artist Statement* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart museum of Art, 2001), 35.



Figure 12

Emma Fromont. *May Tides #2*. Lumen print (2022).

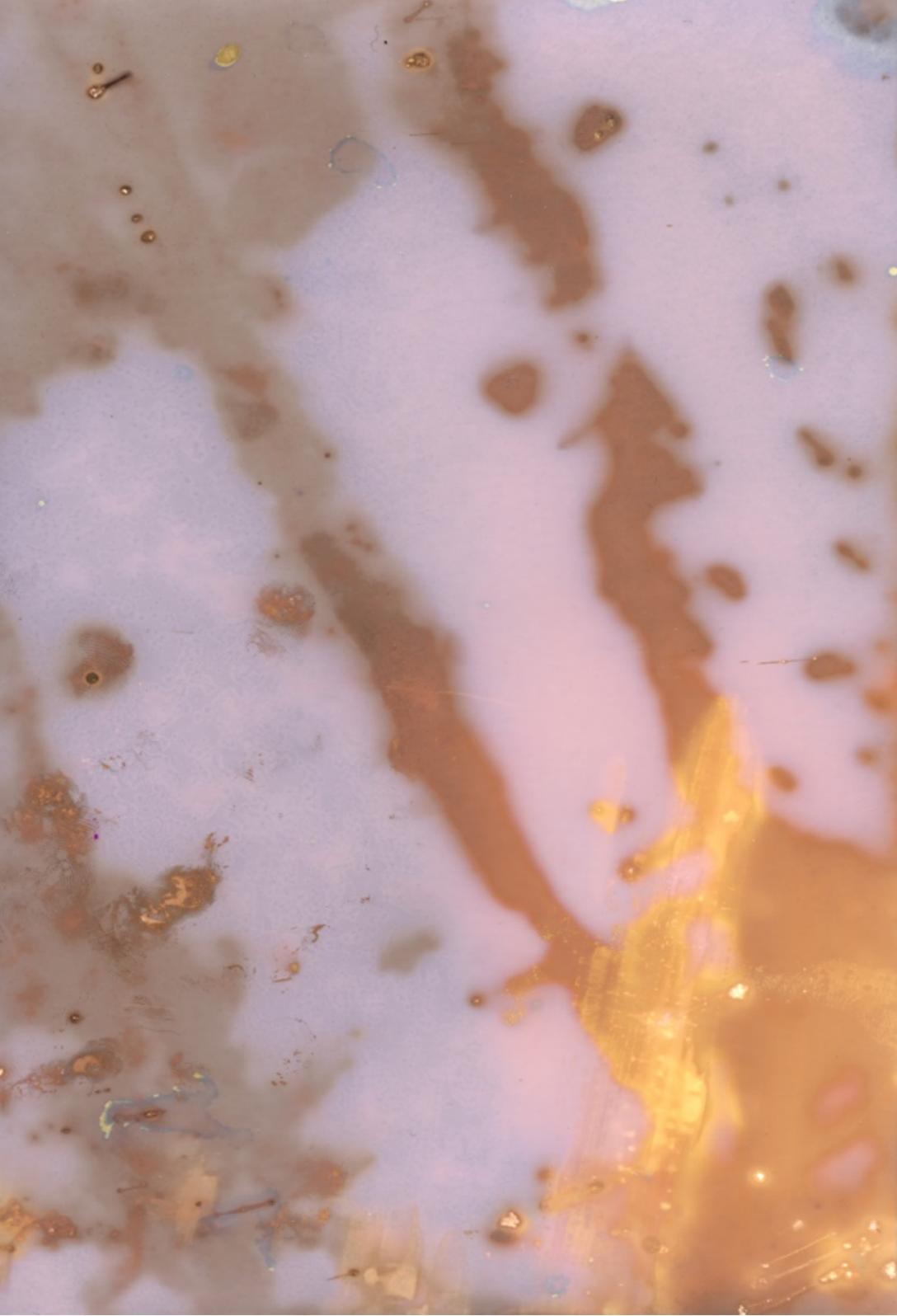


Figure 13  
Emma Fromont. December 20th print.  
Lumen print (2021)

Figure 14  
Emma Fromont. December 17th print.  
Lumen print (2021)





Figure 15  
Emma Fromont. December 6th print. Lumen  
print (2021)

# Chapter Two

Trace



In light of the current state of the Tāmaki estuary, and out of respect of the mauri<sup>22</sup> of its waters and ecology, I actively employed a 'take nothing and leave nothing' methodology while working with the site. Manuka Henare describes the concept of Mauri as: "a concentration of life itself, like the centre of an energy source."<sup>23</sup> I'd had thoughts about smearing estuary mud on walls or using driftwood to hang a fabric cyanotype, but it felt inherently wrong to remove such bodies from their place of being, especially while making work about the intricate ecology that they are a part of. To remove them would be an act of displacement and disruption. In regards to this potential area of tension, my approach to documenting moments of ecology became feather-light, much like the gulls on the shore; touching down to place a sheet of paper here, or take a four minute pinhole photograph there. I simply aim to *trace* what is occurring in the time that I am in the estuary's presence.

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<sup>22</sup> Mauri (noun) is a complex term in Te Ao Maori but it is often defined as: life force or essence of a being, entity, or place. Sourced from Te Aka Maori Dictionary.

<sup>23</sup> Manuka Henare, *Tapu, Mana, Mauri, Hau, Wairua: A Maori Philosophy of Vitalism and Cosmos*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 208.

## Tracing a moment

Through this method of making, I discovered that temporal artworks were just as fluid to work with as the waters of the estuary. I discussed earlier the realignment of my sense of time through the December lumen calendar; a work through which I realised there are two ways in which I trace – tracing a moment, and tracing over time. Both reside close to one another, often weaving together at the edges. When making a cyanotype or lumen print, the flow of the water over the page, combined with the sunlight and how it is refracted through the water, is what creates the fluid textures that are seen within the prints. These types of works, although extended in comparison to a photograph, are considered as tracing a moment. By physically immersing the sheets of paper within the estuary, the flow and ebb of its waters have the agency to imprint upon the pages for a minute. Such is also the case with the pinhole photographs. In his book *Burning with Desire*, pioneer photographer Geoffrey Batchen writes about the shifting definitions between 'nature' and culture through photography. "...claimed, quite paradoxically, that the daguerreotype drew nature while allowing her to draw herself."<sup>24</sup> The analogue nature of the process situates the works closer to the site simply by being brought into existence by the very sunlight and refraction of light that touches the camera in the moment. However they are still only exposed for what is considered a short period of time – ranging from 10 seconds to four minutes. After which point the tracing stops, and the works are fixed in time.

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The conception of photography*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 177.

## Tracing over time

Tracing over time is inherent to the long-term exposures and unfixed prints which continue to age organically, like a shell washed up to bleach in the sun. They take the trace beyond the initial point of contact with the Tāmaki estuary. My first attempt at tracing over time was a long-term pinhole photograph that I left to expose for a series of days. I placed the milo tin-turned camera at the top of a hill that overlooks the larger mouth area of the estuary. After being left for four days to expose, the resulting photograph had surprisingly acquired a pinkish, coppery colour with edges that looked almost burnt. I suspect an effect from being left inside a metal tin in full sun. It is common knowledge that long term exposure photographs are generally unable to clearly record the more fleeting events – this can be seen in the smooth wave-less appearance of the water and the lack of boats which would have been moving too quickly for the camera. However I was curious to find out what it technically did 'record', even if it is not seen in the final photograph. On one of the mornings during this particular exposure I came across several posts on the local grapevine about two pods of orcas that had been spotted up the estuary. There had also been an impressive thunderstorm the day before and countless ferries and boats travelling over the water; all of which had been witnessed by my camera.

Figure 17

Emma Fromont. Raw long exposure  
pinhole. Pinhole photograph (2021).



Figure 18

Emma Fromont. Scanned and inverted long  
exposure pinhole. Pinhole photograph  
(2021).



The second major art work that carries trace over time is a living lumen calendar. Following the temporal discoveries of the December 2021 calendar, I decided to make another series, however this one would not be secured in place with darkroom chemicals like the first one. Rather, each print that is made periodically is left unfixed after the initial exposure. The result is a series of 'live' images that will continue to age and fade even while they are being shown on the wall; the first ones that were made being dull, almost blank sheets, while the most recent ones still retain a vibrancy that is full of intricate details. The resulting works are a reframing of light, movement and time. They form a bridge between the Tāmaki estuary and the spaces in which it is spoken about, as the light from two places melts into one on the surface of the ever-changing prints.



Figure 19  
Emma Fromont. Lumen print during creation  
(2022).



Figure 20  
Emma Fromont. Lumen print 4 hours post  
exposure (2022).



Figure 21  
Emma Fromont. Lumen print 2 days post  
exposure (2022).

## Parallel practices

This ecological and site-responsive methodology that my work is situated within runs parallel to that of artists Jonathon Kay and Kate van der Drift, both of whom have been influential to this research project. Like my own practice, their making often occurs within close proximity to more-than-human environs, driven by ecological concerns. In April 2021 I attended the opening of Kate van der Drift's solo show *Sweet and Sour*.<sup>25</sup> Her work in the show was made up of a series of photographs created by burying film negatives in the Piako river for four weeks, resulting in a unique alchemical, celestial-like quality that reflects the algae, sediment contamination and pollution in the water. The larger dialogue that Drift's show speaks to are the issues of colonisation and industrialisation in the Hauraki Plains – once a thriving forested wetland now drained for intense cultivation.

Like van der Drift, Jonathan Kay's practice engages with specific landscapes in a fieldwork type methodology. His 2020 project, *Ice Field*,<sup>26</sup> surveyed two glaciers in Aotearoa; Haupapa (Tasman Glacier) and Te Moeka o Tuawe (Fox Glacier). By engaging the process of his making with the real-world environment, his large-scale photograms became a physical embodiment of the reactions between water, ice and light that occurred at the time of their creation. It is this area of interaction, between art and the physical elements that surround it, that is the commonality between the artmaking of Van der Drift, Kay and myself. We strive

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<sup>25</sup> Kate van der Drift, *Sweet and Sour*, October 2020, chromogenic photographs, Auckland, <http://www.katevanderdrift.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Jonathon Kay, *Ice Field*, 2020, cyanotype photograms on cotton, <https://www.jonathan-kay.com/copy-of-fieldwork>

to accommodate the narratives of the more-than-human environs through our practices, embracing ecology's capacity for creation and giving agency to the more-than-human.



Figure 22  
Kate van der Drift. *Sweet and Sour*. Chromogenic photograph (2020).



Figure 23  
Jonathan Kay. *Ice Field #6 #1 #9*. Cyanotype photograph on cotton (2020).

The point of difference between my work and the works of these parallel practices is found in the temporality; the repeated, ongoing visitations to the estuary that has subsequently formed this relationship. By allowing the Tāmaki estuary to leave its own traces within my art works, this research project is consequently positioned as a shared practice. It encourages the idea that our actions are constructed by, and in turn construct the world around us. The art works that are produced as a result are of an indexical nature. They present the viewer with months of real traces of the estuary, inviting a 'here and now' experience of bodily presence with the site. There is a sensory immediacy of space and temporality, which exceeds the limits of traditional media such as painting or sculpture.<sup>27</sup> If my art works were to focus primarily on aesthetic purposes as traditional media does, they would be left isolated, severed from the spaces they speak for. By collaborating with the Tāmaki estuary and creating a space for it to leave its own traces, they strike a different balance between all the converging entities that are involved with both the making and the presenting of the project.

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<sup>27</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 12.



## Chapter Three

The more-than-human

## Human and nonhuman relations

As our world has evolved, so has our understandings and definitions of ecological matters. Author Barbara Matilsky proposes in her book *Fragile Ecologies*, that the marriage between art and ecology lies within the early communities of the world, rather than piggybacking on the relatively recent environmental art movement. She writes: "The emergence of ecological art may be understood as part of a long tradition of artists responding to the environment."<sup>28</sup> She states that many of the first works of art to have been discovered – in particular cave paintings of Indigenous populations in western Europe – depict harmonious, symbiotic relationships between people and animals. There is not yet a concept of the 'human' and 'nonhuman' sides of the coin we call life; rather, both are intimately linked, with the human forming a part of nature and vice versa.

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<sup>28</sup> Barbara C. Matilsky, and Art M. Queens, *Fragile ecologies: contemporary artists' interpretations and solutions*. (New York: Rizzoli International, 1992), 52.

All of this time spent making prints about ecological interactions lead me to begin questioning when the human and the nonhuman become exactly that - the 'human' and the 'nonhuman'? In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*<sup>29</sup>, Indigenous author and ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, of the Native American Potawatomi people, proposes that the drift between the two entities is rooted in the very beginnings of Western culture and religion. She compares two stories of creation; the first being the Native American story of Skywoman falling. Skywoman is a mother earth-like figure who, using mud brought to her by animals, made the earth and planted the sweetgrass from which all life evolved.<sup>30</sup> The second story is the story of Eve, who was banished from the Garden of Eden for eating an apple. Two cosmologies. Two creation stories about women. She furthers: "On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her."<sup>31</sup> Fast forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution era, and the evolution of these opposing cultural perspectives has manifested into some vastly different societal standards. Eve's side of the world, the Euro-American side, including the colonisers who settled Aotearoa, recognizes humans as being at the top of the hierarchy of beings. With science and technology leading the forefront of its progression, this side of the world rigorously

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

separates the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer.<sup>32</sup> “If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chainsaw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice.”<sup>33</sup> The questions being asked are characteristically objectifying and mechanistic, ‘what is it?’ rather than ‘who is it?’. My collaboration with the Tāmaki estuary has been significant in guiding me to move beyond these western ways of thinking. Through it, I am now inclined to see the world as a living, thriving, greater whole, to seek out the connecting threads rather than the points of divide.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 57

## Colonised environs

Contemporary art and ecology author T.J. Demos discusses how this objectification is the result of the colonization of the nonhuman. In his book *Decolonising Nature* he states that: “The height of European colonialism was not just the governing of peoples but also the structuring of nature.”<sup>34</sup> It situated the nonhuman world as passive and separate, divorcing it from social, political and technological processes. Through this, the birth of capitalism further estranged the parts of the earth that were not considered ‘human’, degrading the land and many of her inhabitants to mere resources to be exploited. Demos believes that what we need in order to decolonise our colonised environs, is a reconceptualization of our relations to nonhuman life forms. A dissolving of subject-object relations between environments. Art is a place within many cultures that is used to express things which are difficult to speak or understand elsewhere, and so it is through art that the promise is held of initiating shifts in perception, such as a retangling of human and more-than-human at the Tāmaki estuary.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 14

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

One of the first places that took this need for decolonisation of the nonhuman to the next level is the country of Ecuador. In 2008 the Ecuadoran government passed a National Constitution that placed Nature and other nonhuman beings alongside humans as subjects of the law.<sup>36</sup> Brazilian architect and urbanist, Paulo Tavares, discusses this topic in the *World of Matter* publication. He states that by passing such an ecocentric law, Ecuador is “challenging rigid borders between realms of nature and society, ecology and politics, projecting new universalism between humans and nonhumans.”<sup>37</sup> This shift towards viewing nonhuman entities as subjects rather than objects is a vital dissolving of boundaries. It grants agency to the seas, rainforests, rocks and rivers, and invites a principle of relationality – everything is interconnected, nothing is separate and everything has a life.<sup>38</sup> Similar leaps forward have also recently been taken in Aotearoa, with a bill being passed that grants the Whanganui River legal personhood.<sup>39</sup> By making the river a person in the eyes of the law, its relationship with the Whanganui iwi and its long term protection and restoration are greatly reinforced. Such a rejection of the conventional Eurocentric understanding of ecology and the more-than-human opens a new dialogue of commonality. It exceeds the anthropocentric and capitalistic frameworks that view the world as merely a manageable resource.

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<sup>36</sup> Nabil Ahmed et al, *World of Matter: Nonhuman Rights* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 50

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>39</sup> “Innovative bill protects Whanganui River with legal personhood,” New Zealand Parliament, March 28, 2017, <https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/features/innovative-bill-protects-whanganui-river-with-legal-personhood/>

In response to these question of subject and object dualism, I began to think of my own art as a blending/meshing of ecological entities that deliberately undoes colonising ideologies. By entangling elements of the Tāmaki estuary with the act of making art, I am revealing an inter-disciplinary field upon which differing entities may flow into one another. With these thoughts of more-than-human relations at the forefront of my mind, I was increasingly noticing moments that depicted such interactions. I turned to pinhole photography to capture these often fleeting collisions. Like the lumen prints, the direct nature of the pinhole process required a greater level of immersion within the site than that of digital photography. However it was quickly revealed that there was an irony to my working with this process. On the Half Moon Bay ferry terminal wharf, approximately 1km from where I usually document, there is a series of old photographs from the early 1900s. Depicting scenes of white colonial families enjoying a day at the beach, the photographs have an 'old-timey' quality that my own pinholes closely resembled. I was suddenly struck with the fact that here I was, a direct descendent from a coloniser family, employing a similar method to that which captured those 100 year old photos of other colonisers, yet I was using it as a method of unsettling colonialism.

On my next visit to the estuary after this revelation, following a week of howling wind, I was greeted with a boat that had been blown off of its mooring ball. Normally bobbing securely at 20 metres off shore, the vessel had been swept onto the shore of the beach. It looked starkly out of place, like an anomaly of sorts. While I was stood waiting for the pinhole to expose, it occurred to me how the scene in front of me might be viewed as a sort of eerie echo of the past, much like the photos on the ferry wharf. The resulting pinhole photograph has a quality that speaks back to notions of coloniser landings. Images of boats being dragged ashore are thrown into the mind, and there is a sense of wrongness and displacement that accompanies this beached stranger on the sand. With its belly exposed to the raw air one can only imagine the sort of violence and extreme force that was acted upon this boat by the weather, which was a far cry from the serene, picturesque afternoon in which I encountered it. There is a sense of awe that accompanies such a scene; an appreciation for the unpredictability and power that can be displayed by the more-than-human.



Figure 25

Emma Fromont. *Anomaly*. Pinhole photograph (2022).

## Myself in the work

Over the course of creating pinholes down at the estuary, I began to notice how I was picking and choosing what the object of my gaze was. I was subconsciously separating the human and the nonhuman in my mind by specifically removing any trace of myself from the works, and pointing the pinhole cameras at what I personally believed to look like ecology. It occurred to me how ironic it was to be creating artworks about continuous coexisting human and nonhuman epistemologies, while simultaneously going to lengths to remove my own human presence from my ecologically-driven works. After this hypocritical revelation, I decided to shift the object of my gaze towards embracing the little, accidental resonances of my human touch rather than observing them as flaws or 'human error'. I earlier mentioned a concept from the 100 atmospheres project about how space permeates those that dwell within it.<sup>40</sup> What if it goes the other way too? As my sense of self, my body and my work was being permeated by the Tāmaki estuary, my existence within the site was also creating acts of permeation. The scuffles I leave in the sand and the fingerprints that developed on the photographs revealed the porosity of the world that was becoming apparent in front of my eyes and on the surface of my work.

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Ballard et al., *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2019), 21.



Figure 26: Emma Fromont. *Permeation of Self 1*. Pinhole Photograph taken of the water with the camera pressed to my body, allowing my breath and bodily presence to be a part of the work. (2021).

Figure 27: Emma Fromont. *Permeation of Self 2*. Pinhole Photograph of the waves washing over my feet, allowing the tug of wind on my body to be captured. (2021).

Figure 28: Emma Fromont. *Permeation of Self 3*. Pinhole Photograph taken after a wave knock it up to face me, accidentally capturing my silhouette. (2021).

Another concept that Demos discusses in *Decolonising Nature* is 'multinaturalism,' drawing on philosopher Bruno Latour; the idea that human and non-human epistemologies are continuous, yet they have different meaning or ontologies for different beings or non-beings. He states that multinaturalism "de-centres human sovereignty over the environment by acknowledging the perspectives of other beings and diversifying the ontology of nature."<sup>41</sup> Demos examines this notion in contrast to multiculturalism; a multiple perspectives on a self-same nature.<sup>42</sup> Why should there be multiple human cultures but only one 'nature'? The earth is a complex, layered place of life, so it would be nonsensical to contain all that is not human into one single index. If reality is indeed a boundless mesh of interconnection as Morton states in *The Ecological Thought*, then would not all life-matter, human or nonhuman, simultaneously count as one nature and infinite natures? This also resonates with Mātauranga Māori concepts such as Mauri, to return to Manuka Henare:

"Māori people do not see themselves as separate from nature, humanity and the natural world, being direct descendants of Earth Mother. Thus, the resources of the earth do not belong to humankind; rather, humans belong to the earth."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 226

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Manuka Henare, *Tapu, Mana, Mauri, Hau, Wairua: A Maori Philosophy of Vitalism and Cosmos*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 202.

Taking these questions forward into my next stage of art making resulted in a turn (or rather return) towards cyanotype processes. I was drawn to this medium because of its likeness to lumen printing; as a direct photographic process it requires immersion within the site of the Tāmaki estuary to make a print. However, because the light-sensitive solution can be made easily and applied a wide range of surfaces, there is significantly more opportunity for developments in regards to scale and materiality. Having worked with cyanotype prints prior to this project, I was keen to apply it to my new research methodologies. Like the works of Jonathan Kay that were discussed earlier, I am drawn to the fluidity and malleability of using cyanotype with fabric. Retaining some of the temporality qualities from the lumen calendar, I departed on my cyanotype journey with the intention of making a number of fabric prints, periodically over the course of a few weeks. I first considered that I might make a series of prints to be hand sewn together after each one is made, so that the final product becomes a long strip of interconnected moments. I felt that sewing each one to the next by hand, I might allow my presence to take agency within the art works; positioning myself as the artist as a connecting force between the ecology of the Tāmaki estuary and human culture. But later I decided to keep the fabric as a whole, uninterrupted piece that would drape and flow across the shore of the Tāmaki during the process of its making.

## Conclusion

On ecological art, Timothy Morton states: “ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art isn’t just *about* something. Ecological art *is* something, or maybe it *does* something. Art is ecological insofar as it is made from materials and exists in the world.”<sup>44</sup> Through this direct photographic research project, I have created a body of ecological art that both draws and reveals connections between the various entities of the Tāmaki estuary and the wider frameworks that surround it. The indexical nature of the artworks document through trace the moments of interaction within the ecological mesh. They are a reframing of relations between the ecology of the estuary and human culture; encouraging a shift towards a more-than-human paradigm.

Through collaboration with the Tāmaki estuary, the artworks in this project aim to decolonise hegemonic settler-colonial ways of perceiving the more-than-human, and reposition the balance between place, artist and observer. Like the works of Jonathan Kay, Kate van der Drift and Natalie Robertson, this project exists as a form of hybrid media between tracing, ecology, art and site. The research creates a space of exchange in which these differing entities may meet and negotiate in a material encounter. Robin Wall Kimmerer asserts: “It is this dance of cross-pollination that can produce a new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world.”<sup>45</sup> By embracing the history of the Tāmaki estuary, and seeking

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<sup>44</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 47

guidance from Indigenous teachings and writers who wish to decolonise 'Nature', my artworks have also become a place of cross-pollination.

The concluding exhibition of this project anticipates that the works encountered in the show will consist of a series of large-scale lumen prints and a long fabric cyanotype print. The increase in scale of the lumen prints aims to create more of a full-bodied, immersive experience when face-to-face with them, as opposed to being contained within the small template sizes that I have been working with up to this point. The length of cyanotype fabric provides opportunity to bring the work off of the wall either by pooling on the ground or hanging suspended in the air, thus bringing the work into the space of the viewer.

Over the course of *Tracing the Tāmaki*, the extension beyond the familiar encouraged not only a shift in perspective directed towards the observer, but also within my own knowledge and thinking. Before I departed on this research journey, my natural inclination had been to look for places in which the human and the nonhuman diverge, in a cup half empty sort of view – places that I felt needed attention in order to bring back together. But now rather than seeking separation, I am more inclined to seek the relationships that form our world; the connecting threads and areas of confluence of which we are all a part.

# Appendix I

## Related works



Figure 29  
Emma Fromont. *Wave Tracing 1*. Cyanotype print on paper (2021).



Figure 30  
Emma Fromont. *Wave Tracing 2*. Cyanotype print on paper (2021).



Figure 31  
Emma Fromont. *Wave Tracing 3*. Cyanotype print on paper (2021).

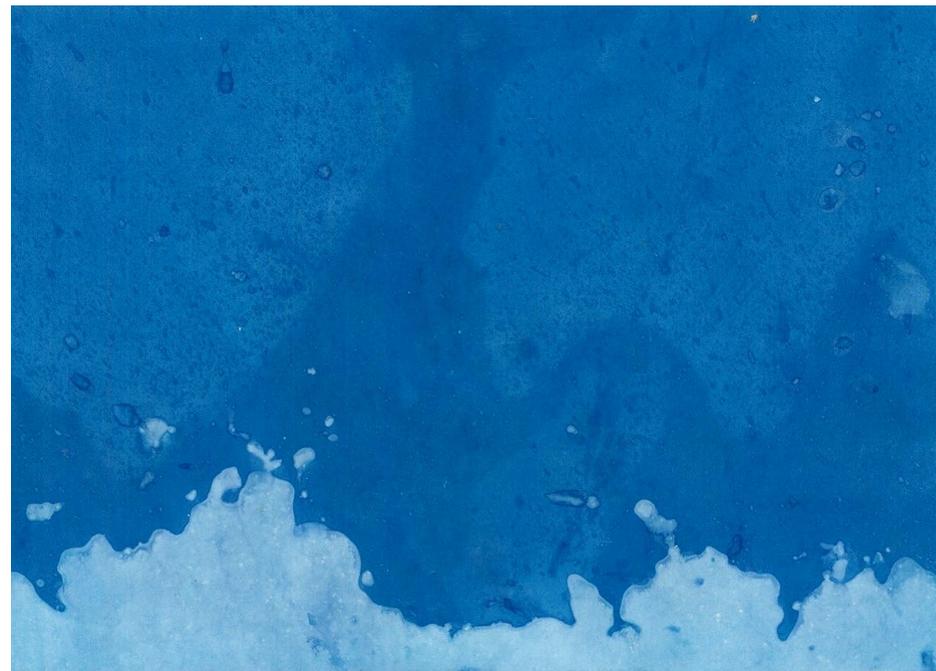


Figure 32  
Emma Fromont. *Wave Tracing 4*. Cyanotype print on paper (2021).



Video documentation of *Cyanotype of the Tāmaki*:

<https://vimeo.com/715836671>

<https://vimeo.com/716941825>

Figure 33

Emma Fromont. *Cyanotype of the Tāmaki*. Cyanotype print on fabric (2021).

## Appendix II

### Thesis works



Figure 34

Emma Fromont. *Seaweed*. Lumen print  
(2021).



Figure 35  
Emma Fromont. First lumen print series installed for talk week (2021).

Figure 36

Emma Fromont. *December*  
1<sup>st</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

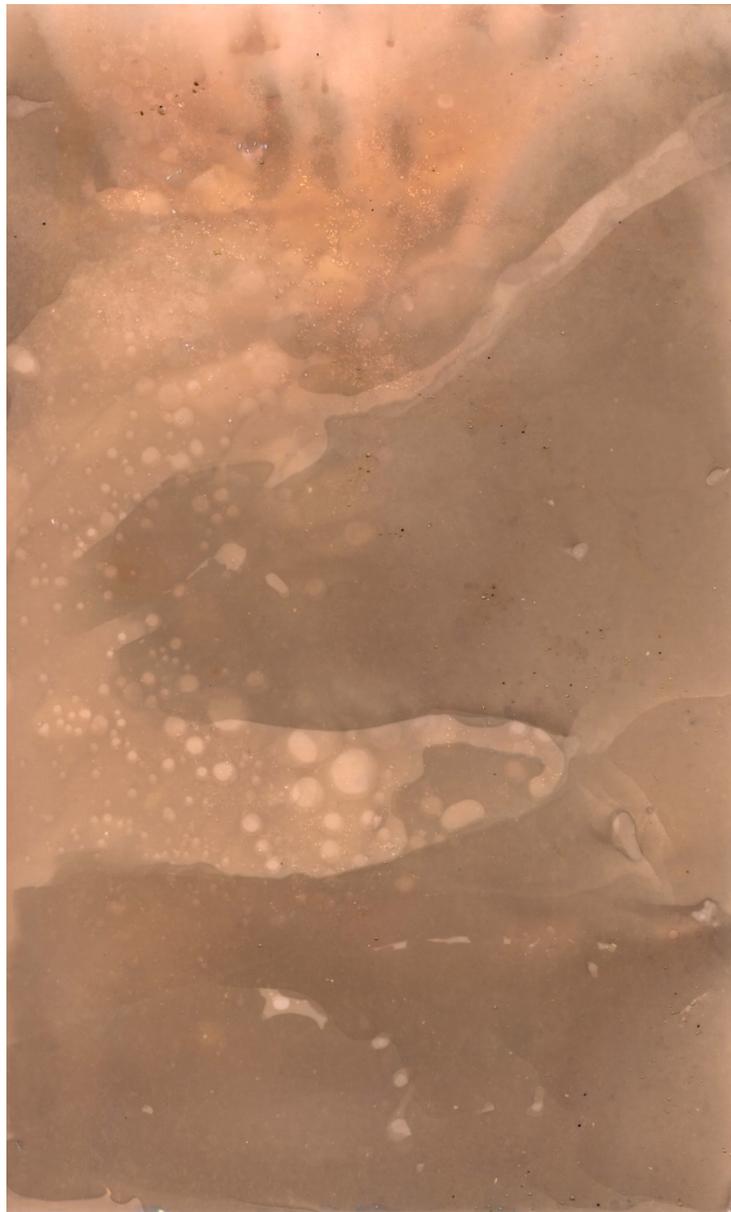


Figure 37

Emma Fromont. *December*  
2<sup>nd</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 38

Emma Fromont. *December*  
3<sup>rd</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

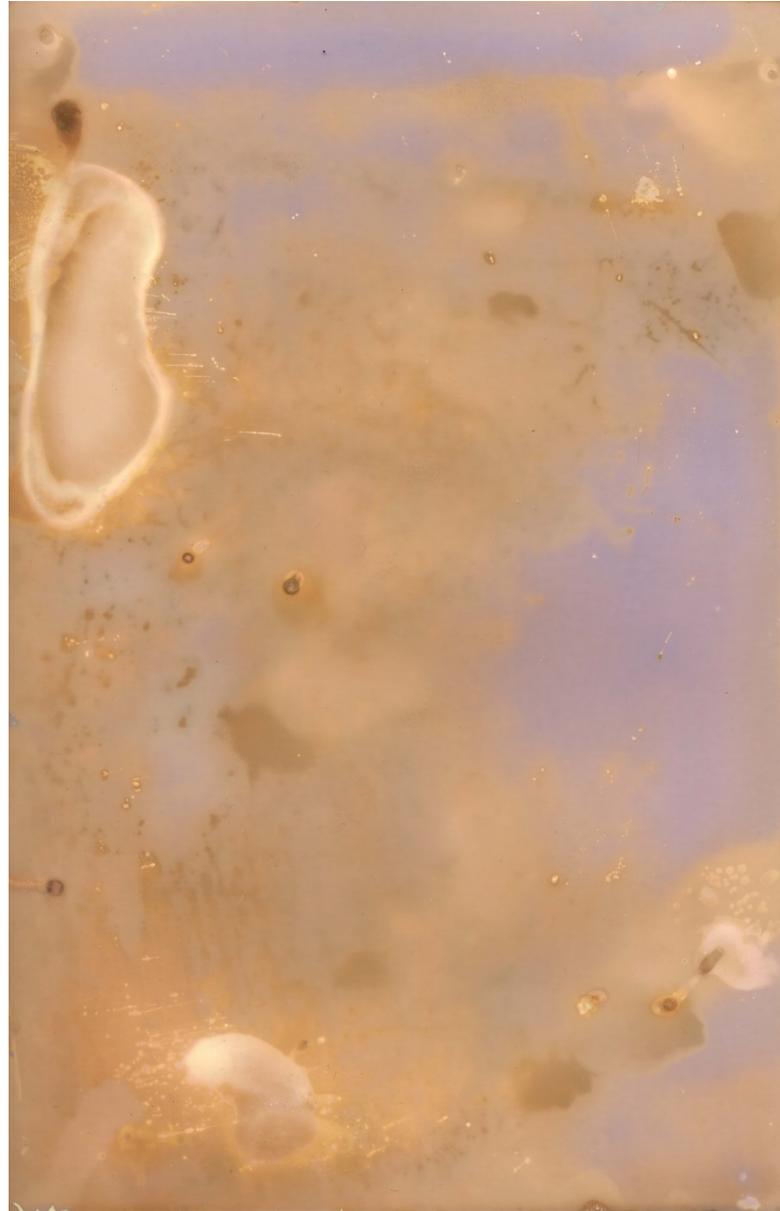


Figure 39

Emma Fromont. *December*  
4<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 40  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
5<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

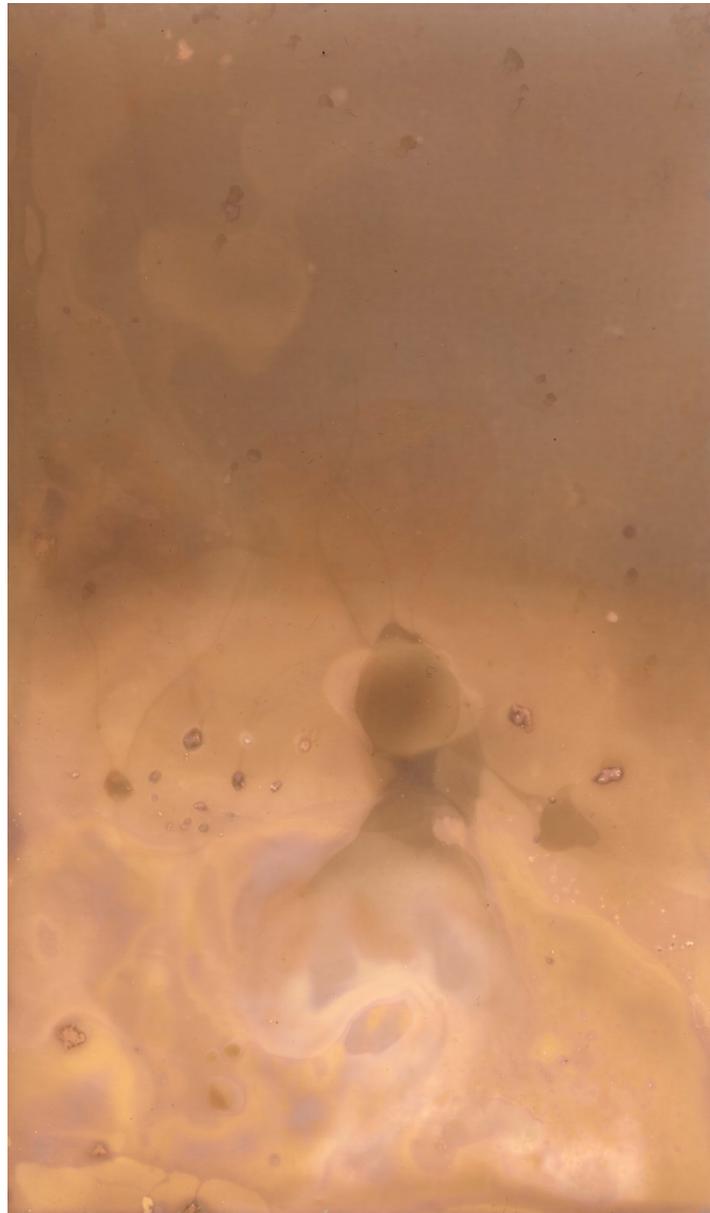


Figure 41  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
6<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

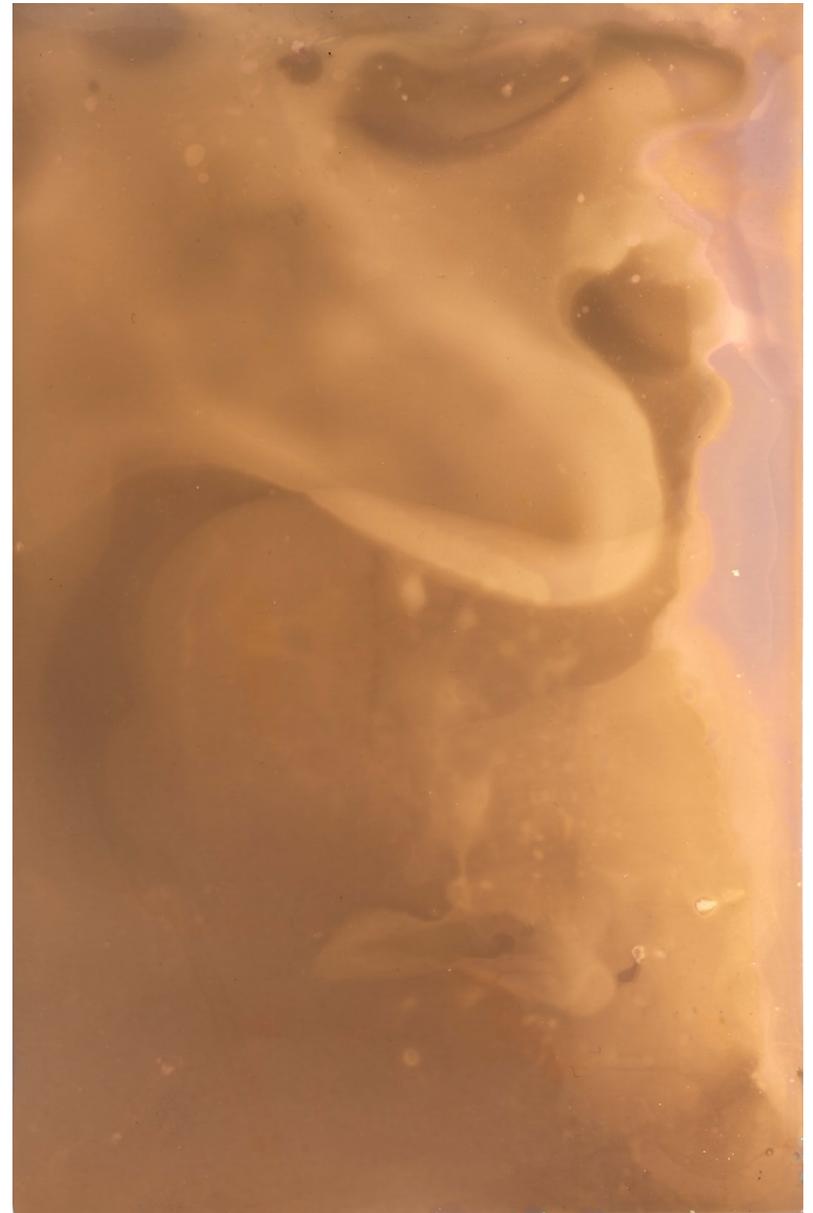


Figure 42  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
7<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

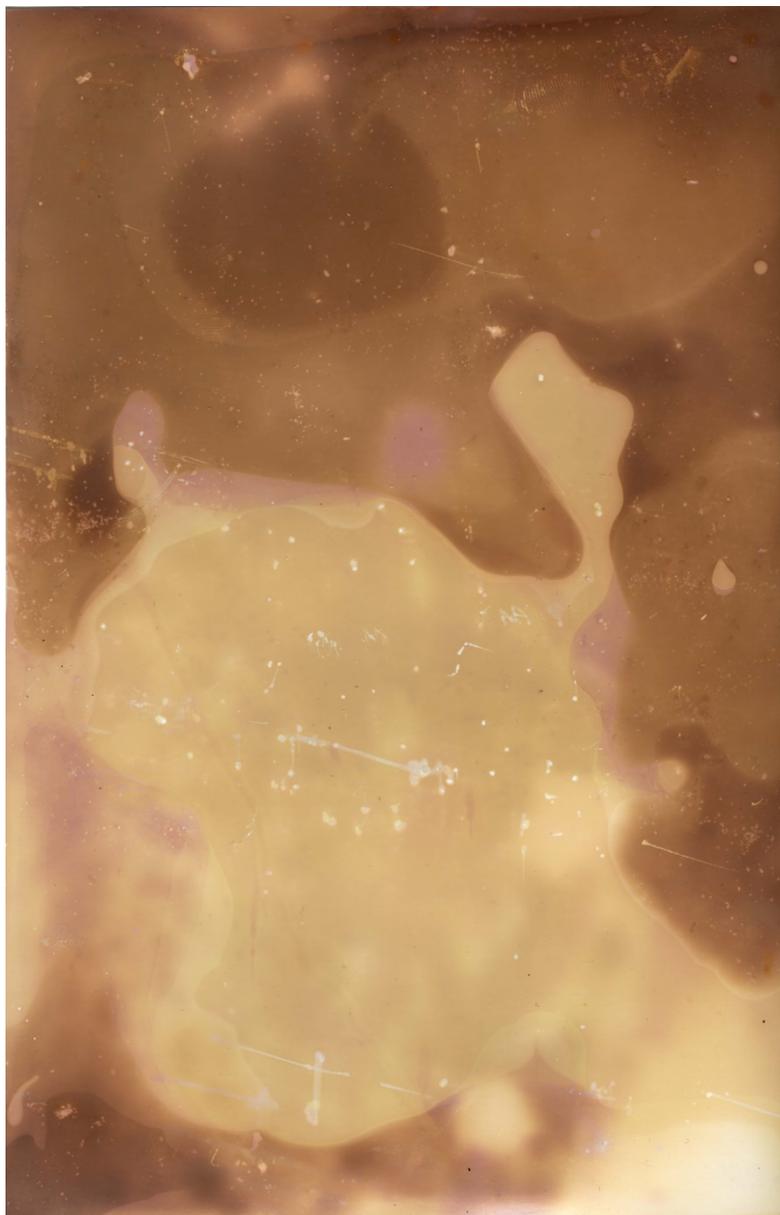


Figure 43  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
8<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 44  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
9<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 45  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
10<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 46  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
11<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

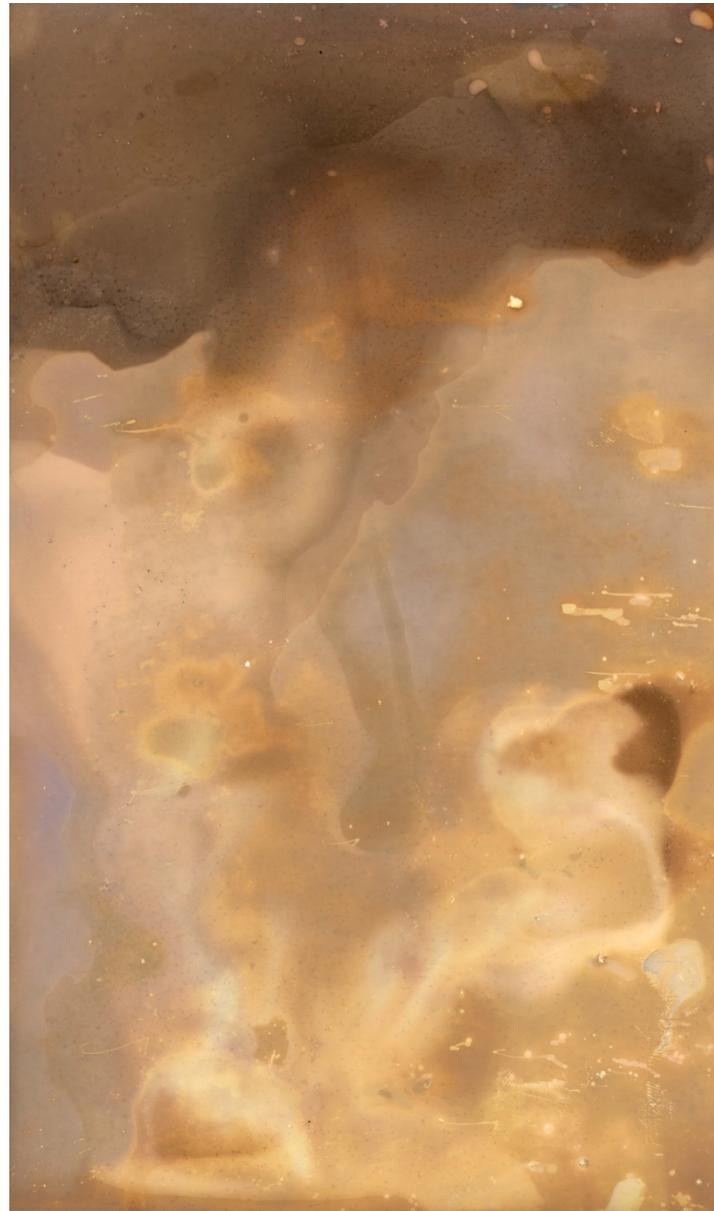


Figure 47  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
12<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

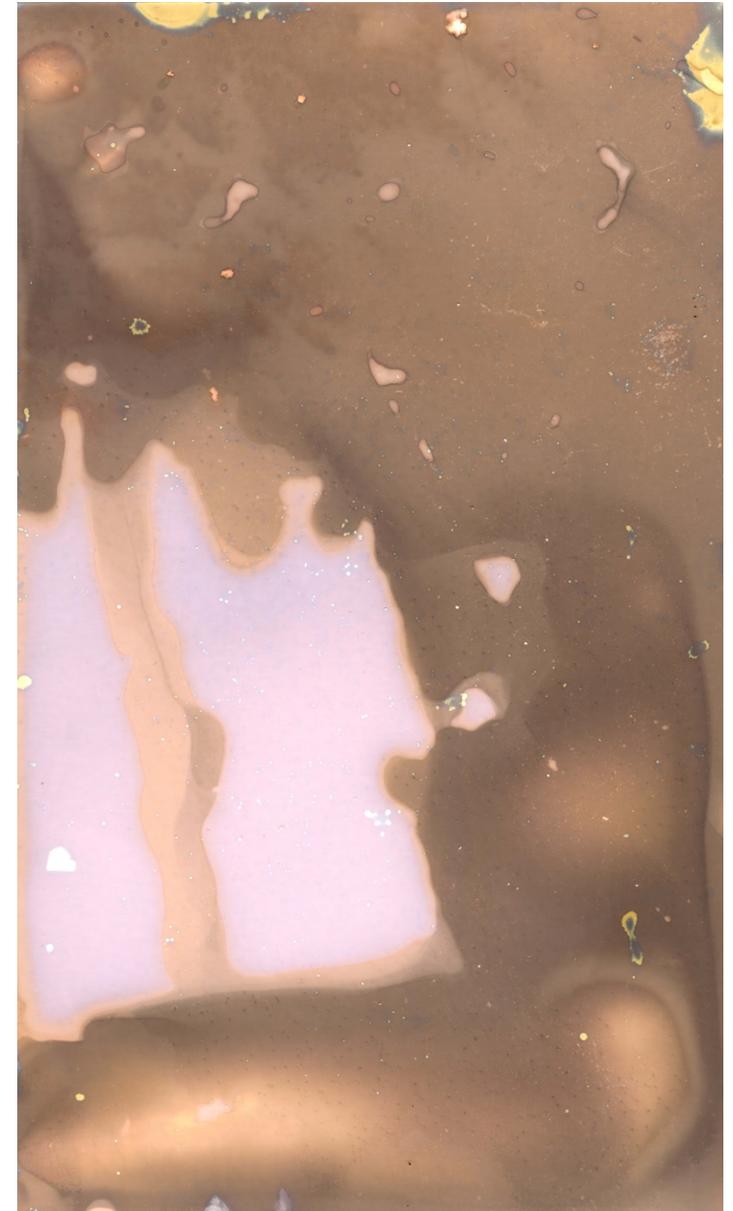


Figure 48  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
13<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

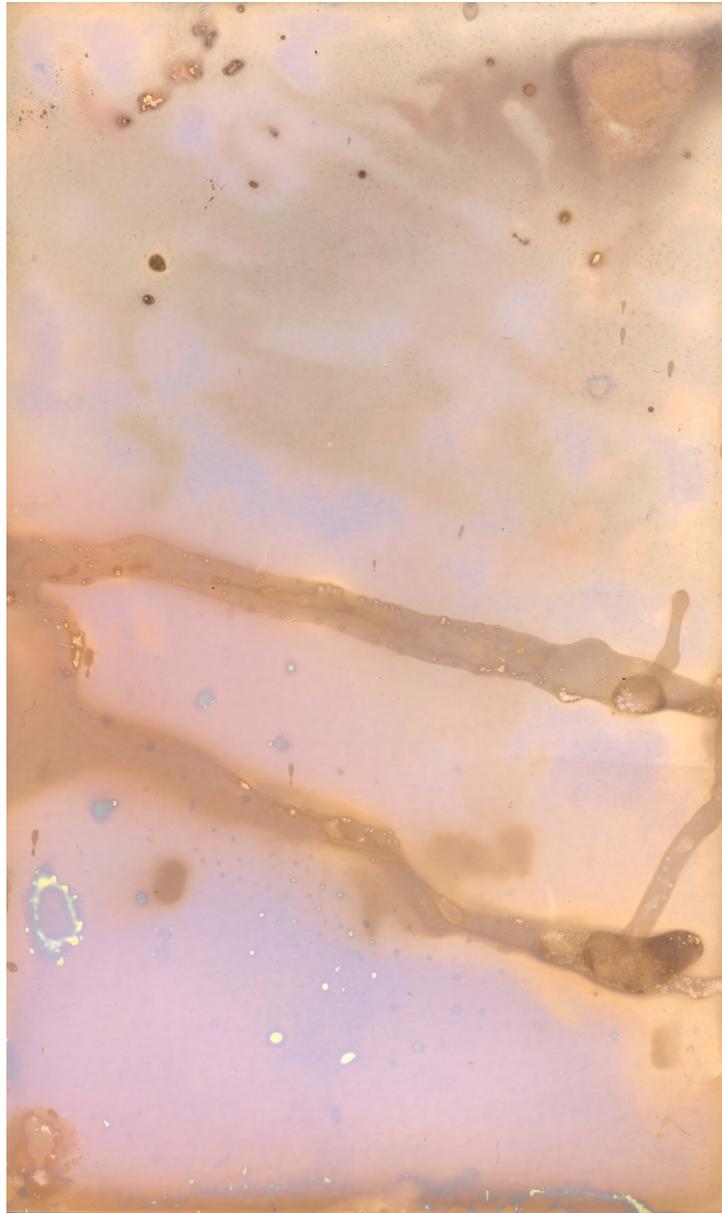


Figure 49  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
14<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

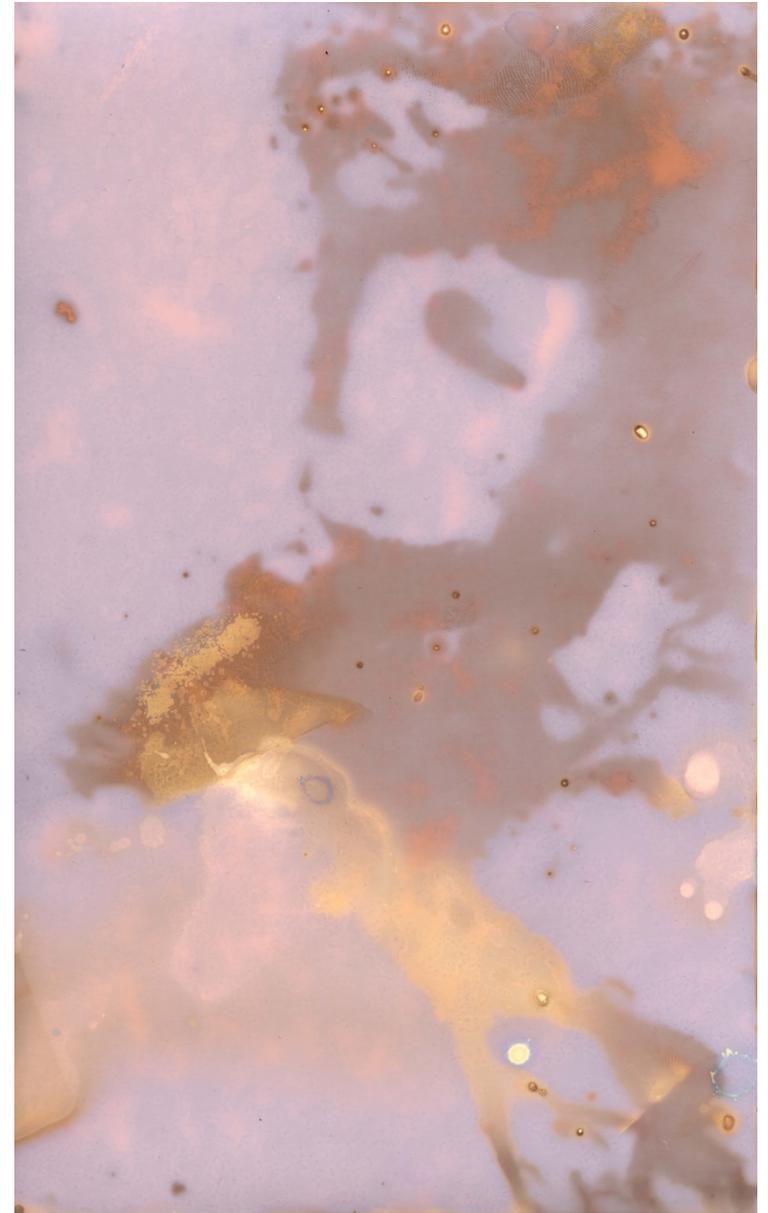


Figure 50  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
15<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

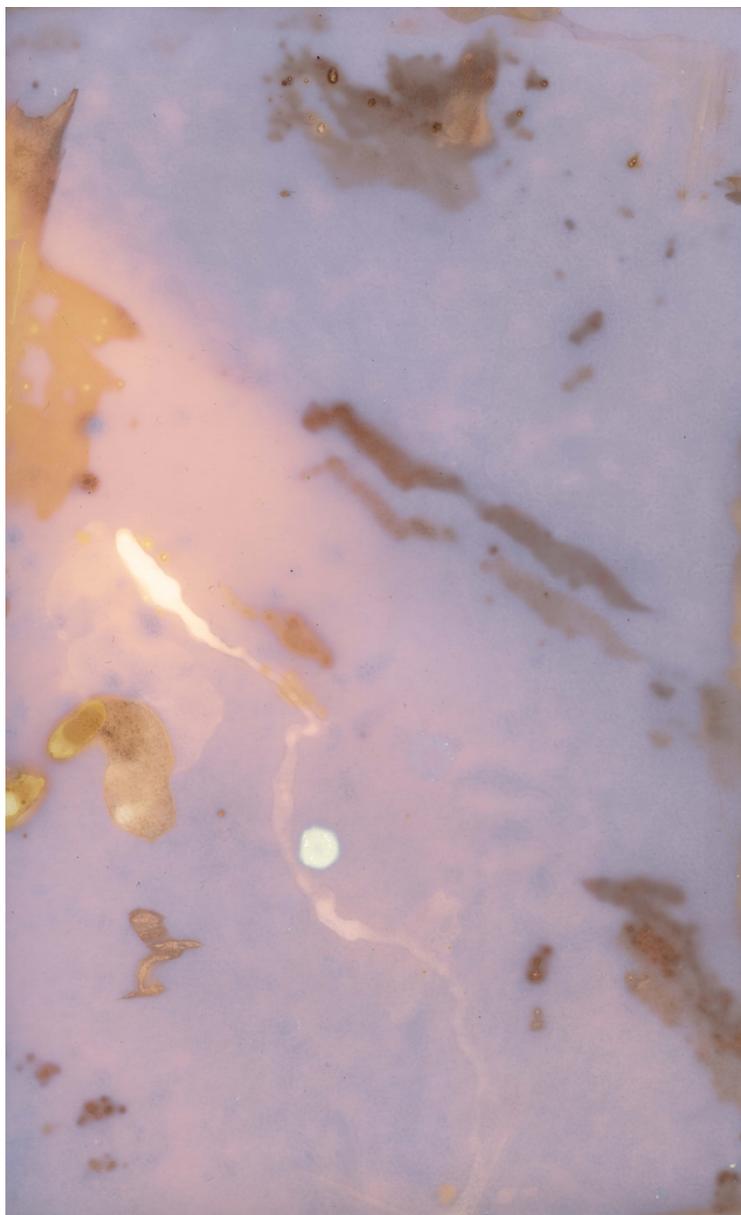


Figure 51  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
16<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

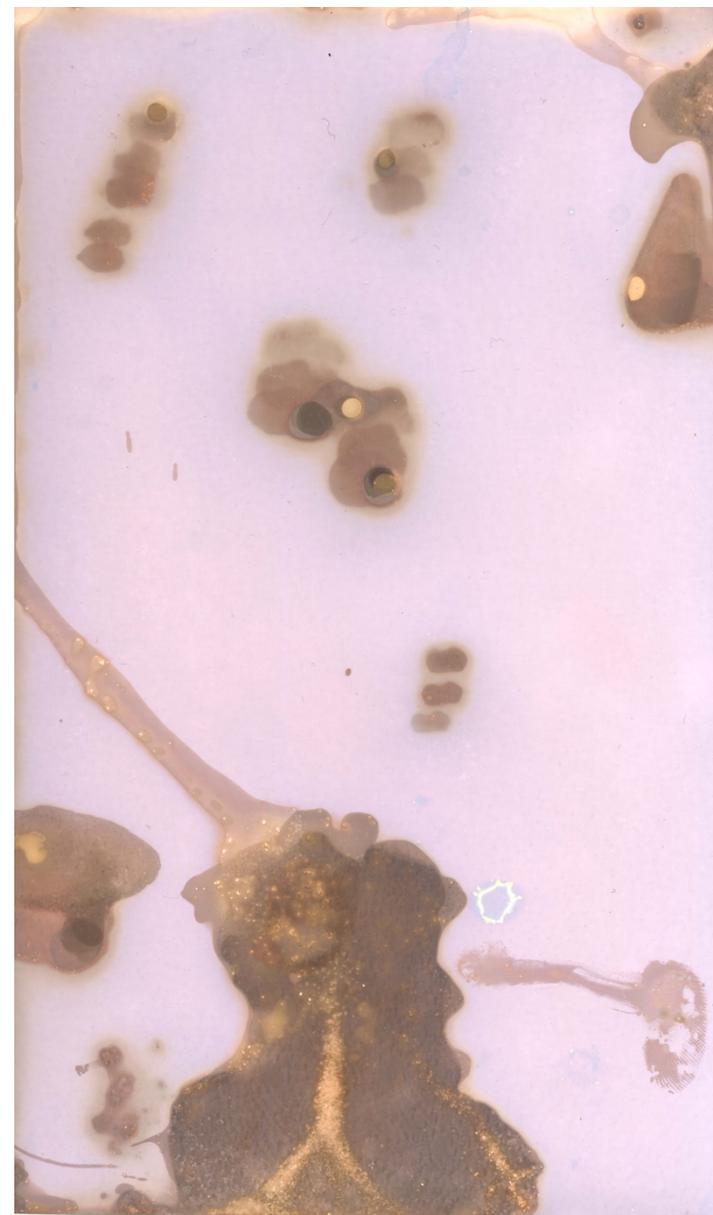


Figure 52  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
17<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 53  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
18<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

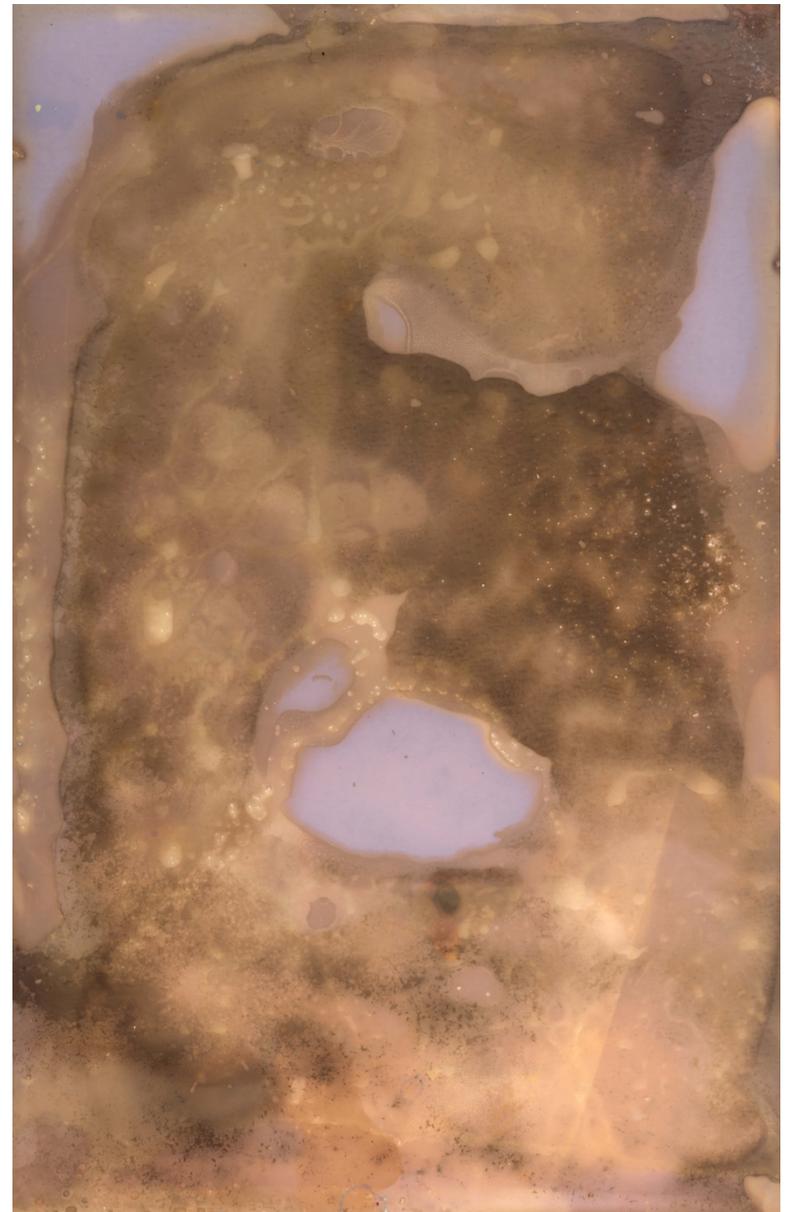


Figure 54  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
19<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).

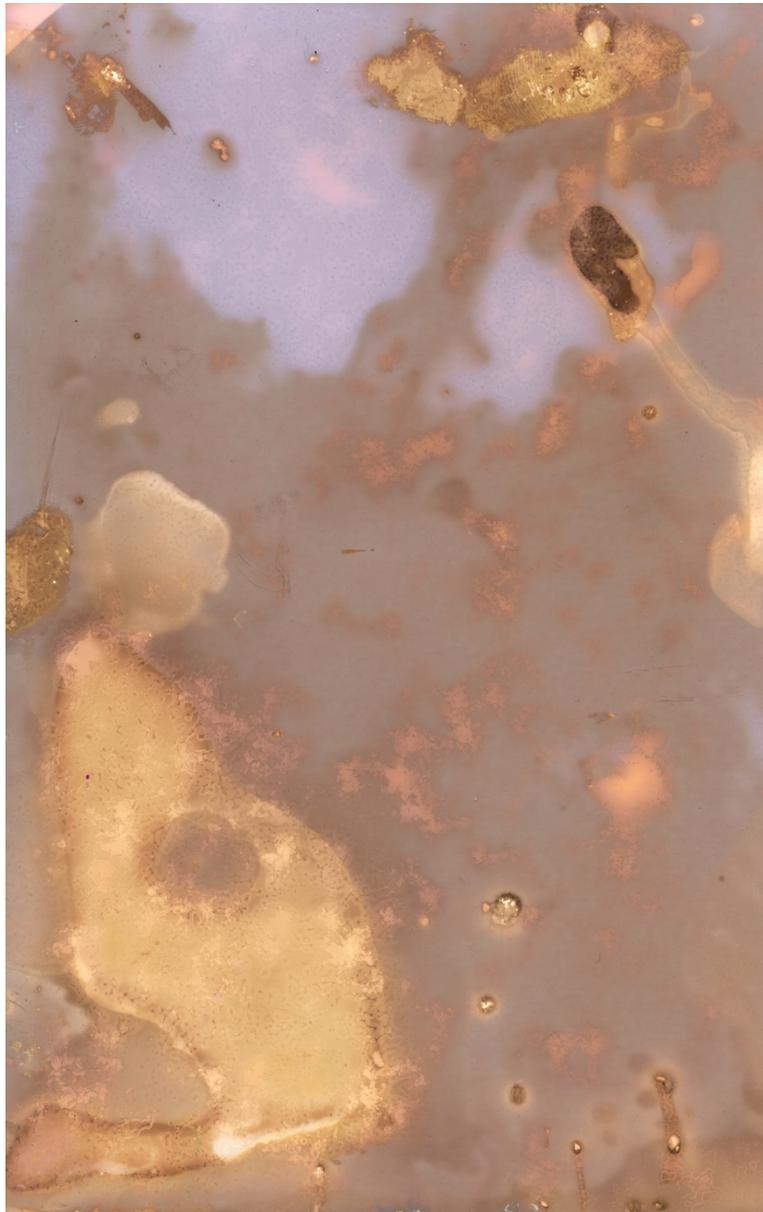


Figure 55  
Emma Fromont. *December*  
20<sup>th</sup>. Lumen print (2021).



Figure 56  
Emma Fromont. Partially  
fixed lumen print (2022).

This artwork was a test to  
see if parts of it could be  
fixed while other parts are  
left to age. Created by  
splashing the paper with  
the fixative chemical.





Figure 57  
Emma Fromont. *May Tides #1*  
Lumen print (2022).

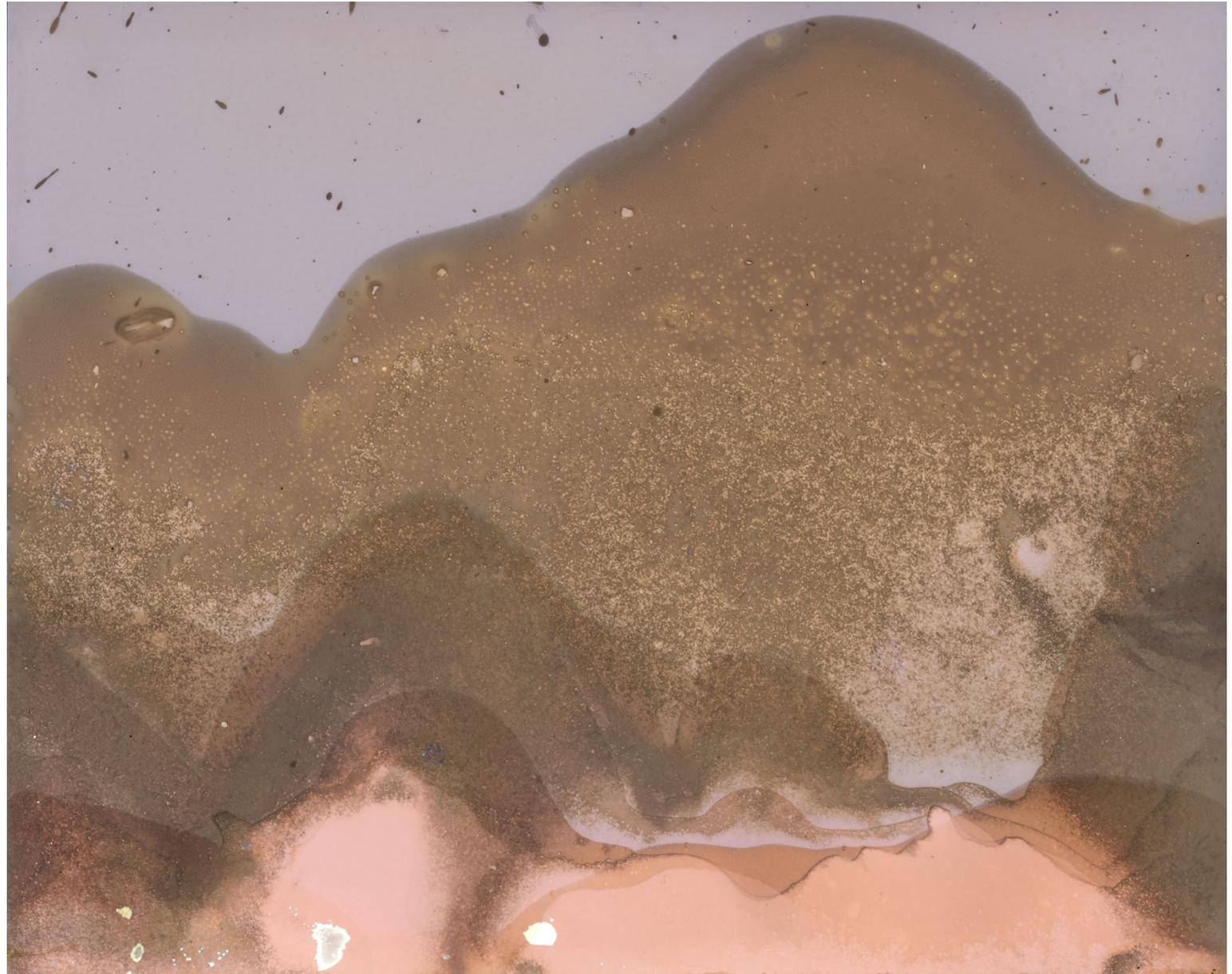


Figure 58  
Emma Fromont. *May Tides #3*  
Lumen print (2022).



Figure 59  
Emma Fromont. *May Tides #4*  
Lumen print (2022).

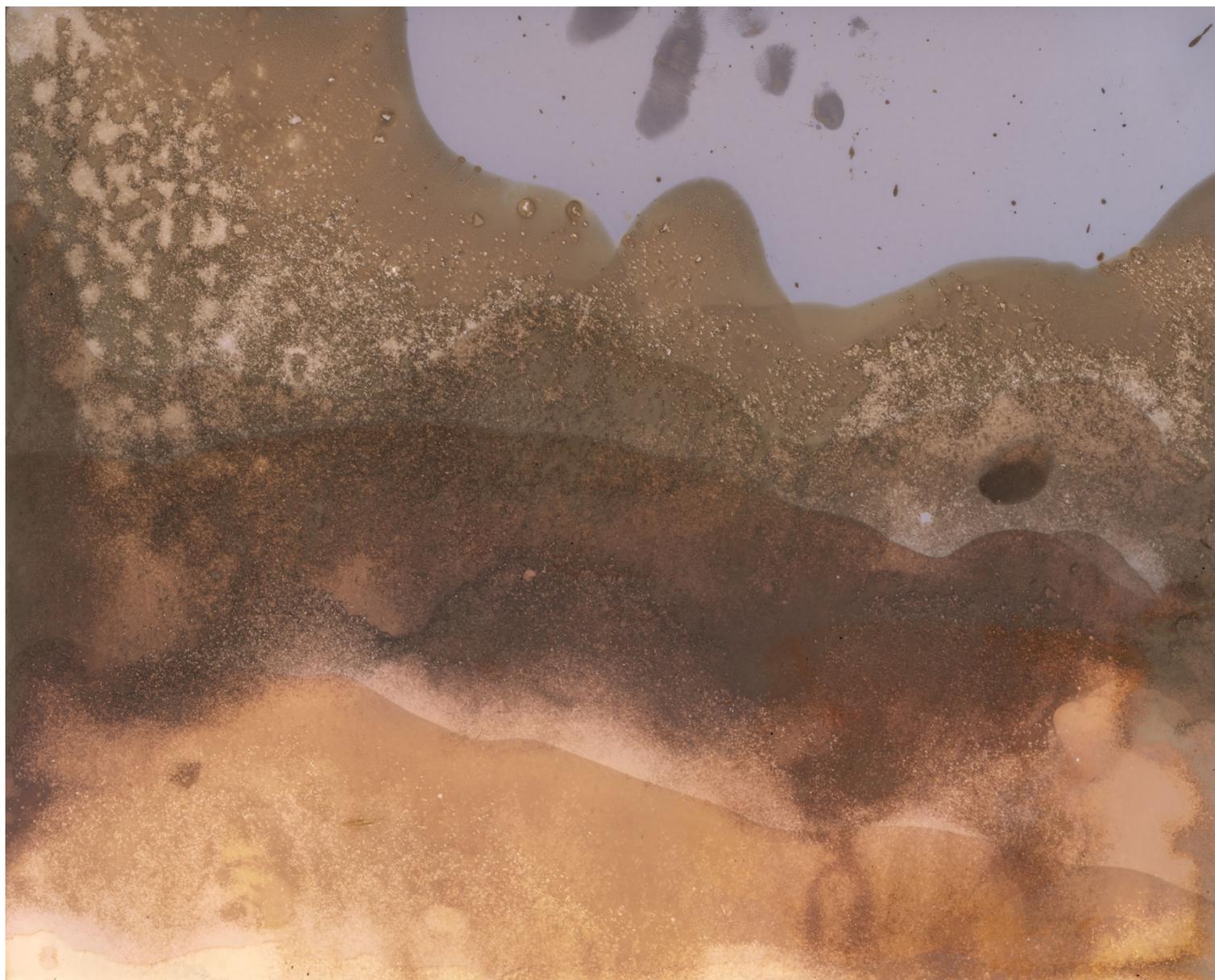


Figure 60  
Emma Fromont. *May Tides #5*  
Lumen print (2022).

Figure 61  
Emma Fromont. Fibre based paper test (2022).





Figure 62  
Emma Fromont. Fabric cyanotype test (2022).



Figure 63  
Emma Fromont. Fabric cyanotype test (2022).

## Appendix III

### Exhibition Documentation

Figure 64

Emma Fromont. *900 Waves*.

Cyanotype print on fabric (2022).





Figure 65

Emma Fromont. *June Series*. Lumen prints on photographic paper (2022).



Figure 66  
Emma Fromont. *900 Waves*.  
Cyanotype print on fabric (2022).



Figure 67  
Emma Fromont. Detail photo (2022).



Figure 68  
Emma Fromont. Detail photo (2022).

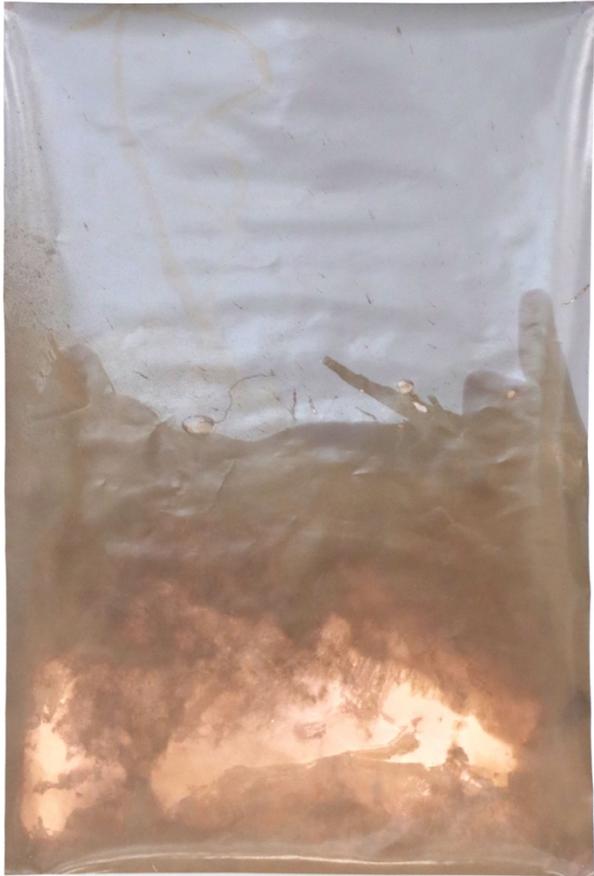


Figure 69  
Emma Fromont. *June Series #1*. Lumen print  
on photographic paper (2022).



Figure 70  
Emma Fromont. *June Series #2*. Lumen print  
on photographic paper (2022).



Figure 71  
Emma Fromont. *June Series #3*. Lumen print  
on photographic paper (2022).

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