

Works by Wendelien Bakker 2012 – 2018

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1. Welcome Stranger

One weekend, when a small child I was strolling through the Melbourne museum. I stopped at a large knobby thing in a rectangular glass vitrine. “What’s that?” I asked my Dad and he replied:

“It’s a nugget.”

“What’s a nugget?”

“It’s a really big piece of gold.” The nugget is so big that it even has its own name: the Welcome Stranger. I’m not sure whether it’s still exhibited, but for me it was always one of the most impressive objects in the museum, right up there with the giant blue whale suspended from the ceiling and the diorama of a wedge-tail eagle on a cliff. ‘Welcome Stranger’ was found on 5 February 1869 by Cornish miner John Deason, in Bulldog Gully, near Moliagul in central Victoria.¹ Apparently he found it around the roots of a tree, just three centimetres below the surface. I’m quite dissatisfied with this fact, surely finding such a treasure would take weeks of hard labour slaving away deep beneath the earth’s surface with a small lantern and a heavily soiled face? The story goes that Deason hid the nugget until nightfall when he dug it out with his partner, Richard Oates. They had a party during which they revealed their find to the guests. I like this part of the story, I imagine a merry gathering beneath the tree, and the theatrical gesture of Deason and Oates pulling back a blanket to reveal the find.

When it was found ‘Welcome Stranger’ weighed 66kg, it was the world’s largest gold nugget. It had to be broken upon an anvil so that it could fit on the bank’s scales. A black and white image on the Melbourne Museum website shows the two pieces of the nugget safely encased in their vitrine, exactly as I saw them. I am sorry to see that the caption reads “gold nugget replica.” It was only a replica of the nugget I saw, a kind of ‘fool’s gold.’ Nevertheless it looms large in my memory.

All of these things came to mind when Wendelien Bakker told me about her gold panning trip. This durational performance, the artist explained, tied into her own girlhood dreams of wearing a helmet with a lamp on the front, wielding a pick axe and mining for gold, somewhat like the little people in Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). But in actuality it evolved from a conversation with her flatmate George. After finishing their Masters of Fine Arts at Elam they were discussing their employment opportunities and Wendelien joked "maybe I should get Creative New Zealand to fund me to go panning for gold. I could find some gold and get rich and then I wouldn't have to worry about finding a job?"²

2. Unfortunately, on this occasion your application has been unsuccessful...

In October 2017, in a group exhibition titled 'Hardly Working' at rm gallery, on Samoa House Lane, Wendelien exhibited her project proposal, together with a letter from Creative New Zealand telling her that her application for funding to go panning for gold in Otago had been unsuccessful. Her gold panning plate was also displayed on a plinth. I think this gesture - of making her rejection letter public, took a lot of courage. The combination of audacity with an admission of failure is a streak that runs through much of Wendelien's oeuvre. Before doing post-graduate study at Elam, Wendelien studied painting and film in the Netherlands, she tells me stories about doing stop animation and spending hours and hours moving objects in tiny increments only to create a few seconds of a film. I first encountered her practice when my friend George told me about 'the young woman who had built a pool in her backyard.' I think my first question was 'is it her own backyard? Or is she renting?'

Before photographs and a description of Wendelien's swimming pool were shown at George's exhibition *Vital Bodies* in Dunedin's Blue Oyster Art Gallery in 2015, it circulated as a kind of myth or anecdote from person to person. The story goes that one Spring, Wendelien decided to make herself a swimming pool in the backyard of her rental property. Using the cheapest and most beautiful spade that Mitre 10 could offer, she excavated soil in neatly cut squares and dragged it to the end of the backyard on a piece of plastic.³ Spring in Auckland is notoriously wet and for two months Wendelien continued to dig, slipping around in the muddy clay and bailing out water with an old bowl. She measured its depth with a series of sticks. The bottom of the pool was comprised of concrete and a layer of black sand, collected in plastic bags from West Coast beaches. Its sides were built up with bricks foraged from the neighbourhood and a demolition yard. A theme throughout Wendelien's description of the process is what my friend Anna refers to as 'tradey hysteria' professionals (all male) struggling to cope with the situation:

On Boxing Day I bought my first bag of mortar. The man at the store counter asked if he could help to put the bag in the car. I tell him I'm walking. It is 25kg. He tells me to have a lot of breaks. I decide not to have any breaks.⁴

Wendelien borrowed a friend's bike to wheel the bags of mortar home. She built a provisional tent to shield the construction site from the summer sun. A pool light was fashioned from a jam jar, an LED light and a cable that runs back to the house. Six bags of pool plaster in the shade of 'White Beach' were smoothed over the bricks. After borrowing a friend's hose to fill up the pool, Wendelien bought water testing strips to test its PH levels. She had night swims and mixed in pool salt by walking around in circles. She shocked the water with chlorine. The pool was measured to be just her size, so that she could swim freestyle on the spot. Wendelien's swimming pool was very loved, it has been posited by some as a somewhat esoteric instance of 'Feminist Land Art.' I think of it as a sort of architectural folly as it was somewhat foolish although it was neither entirely functionless nor was not built by a wealthy and eccentric landowner, though it did ornament the garden.⁵ For George's 30th birthday party the pool was cleaned especially for the occasion. It looked beautiful.

Swimming Pool (2014-2015) was a very immediate and visceral wrestling with the elements, whether they were the vast surface area of Auckland, soggy clay, rain, improvised construction materials, dodgy tools, or PH levels. There were also the vicissitudes of not being able to drive and the attitudes of neighbours, hardware store staff and professional pool-builders to contend with. The fact of the matter is that Wendelien's work is often rudimentary and elemental, involving her, as an artist using all of her energy and effrontery to bend elements to her will and to perform seemingly impossible tasks. Many of her works, like *Swimming Pool*, involve water. In *Sweeping Waves* (2012) Wendelien did just that, attempting to tidy up ocean waves by sweeping them backwards with a broom for about three hours. In *Wave Dissector* from the same year she attempted to image the inside of a wave with a strange sort of viewing contraption held over her head. *Salt water* (2013) was a saline mixture with salt taken from Blenheim's pink salt lakes. Exhibited at *Ozlyn* gallery on Karangahape Road, Wendelien played with the idea of a shop window as a space for advertising or displaying beauty products. Contained within a spray perfume bottle was a concoction that proportionally represented how much salt is in the average female body. *Evaporating off the Equator* (2013) was a film of the artist's wet silhouette evaporating at the side of a pool whilst on a residency in Jakarta. *Hole in Water* (2014) was a kind of water sculpture that was photographed so that a sheet of water appears to have a square-shaped hole in the middle of it. It was made with the aid of a long

Perspex container with cinder blocks and a pump in the bottom of it attached to car batteries on the shore. It required “the most silk smoothest surface of water.”⁶ It was finally executed in a little tidal creek on Banks Peninsula “less than half a minute of perfect satisfaction” recalls the artist. Collecting water from the depth of a rock is not an easy task, like the proverbial blood from stone. For *Water from Rock* (2016) in collaboration with the geology department of the University of Auckland Wendelien collected water extracted from rocks with glass equipment especially made by scientific glass blowers.

Additional works included *Attempt to catch movement of water* (2016) in which Wendelien used paper marbling techniques in order to print waves created by moving the watery medium around whilst printing. An account of *Moving the Horizon* (2016) is described by the artist: “I created my own mirage, dragging a gas tank and fire rod from beach to beach in an effort to move the horizon through a heat haze.”⁷ I see the horizon as wiggling more than moving. In *Searching for the Meteorite* Wendelien half-heartedly searched the Port Hills with the aid of a metal detector as part of an attempt to find a meteorite that flew across Governors Bay and Teddington Road on the 15 October 2005. And *Moon deed in Concrete* is just that, a land deed for an acre of moon land bought for USD \$29.99 from an online seller, encased in concrete. Feeling a desire to buy a piece of land, to feel ownership over it and unable to find another within her budget of \$4000 Wendelien bought her moon-land. The dissatisfying land deed was subsequently encased in lunar-coloured concrete in an attempt to create something more palpable and solid. In terms of water, Wendelien has worked with and against unpredictable currents and waves from the epic and the oceanic to something much smaller in scale. Yet she has also demonstrated a fascination for stones, rocks and minerals. Her own particular and finite embodied time and effort clashes with the sheer scale of geological deep-time. She has gathered salt, extracted water from stone, sought after a meteorite and attempted to buy land on the moon. This leads me to her most recent project, a trip to Otago to pan for gold.

3. It’s raining in my hot chocolate

The second time Wendelien applied for funding for the project, she was successful. In March of this year, Wendelien spent three weeks alone in a tent near Queenstown and Arrowtown doing an equivalent of eight hours a day panning for gold in the river. The following documents the notes from her gold-panning journal, they include remarks about the weather, her surroundings, sometimes they are a stream of consciousness. Written in the in-between times when not at the river, they fill up the gaps around the actual act of panning. The notes together read like a kind of novella documenting the artist’s process, her activities, achievements,

observations and reflections. There are questions to herself, plans, lists, phone numbers, addresses and to-do lists. At the beginning, Wendelien makes lots of notes about her surroundings, particularly the rocks and vegetation, the lichen, moss, toadstools, wild oregano. The bushes of rosehips, the gorse, bracken and broom. There are trees of eucalyptus and pine. She notes which of them are introduced. Extensive notes of weather forecasts are included. There are sunsets and sunrises in milky yellow, apricot, red or grey, pink, peach, purple as well as the 'non-sunrises' in grey.

Understandably, many of the notes deal with concrete details and logistics: getting rides, walking, choosing locations, moving around, her numbered lots at various campsites, speculating about where to go next. There is much discussion about equipment, a saggy tent, the lack of a chair, a solar phone charger, a dodgy spade. And an overwhelmingly large proportion of the notes deal with the physical nature of the task at hand. Sleeping patterns and whether or not they synch with the sun. There is the issue of hunger, the rationing of food, planning snacks, surprising combinations of flavours, heating meals and burning them too. At one point, it rains into her cup of hot chocolate. Temperatures get extreme and struggles to keep warm require multiple layers and waterproofing: burnt pink thermal underwear, socks, sandals, puffer jackets, plastic bags and gumboots. Through the notes one bears witness to Wendelien reckoning with the task at hand as it takes its toll physically and sometimes mentally too. There are the hours of boredom, fatigue and loneliness amidst the irregular rivers of cellphone reception and the welcome/unwelcome attention of those around her. Wendelien's notes also provide a fascinating glance into the subculture of prospectors and fossickers, whether met in person or on the online forum paydirt.co.nz. Goldenboy.98 seemed to do pretty well for himself.

Most illuminating are Wendelien's notes on the corporeal act of panning for gold and how this challenges the limitations of her own body. The artist deals with sandflies, cold, sitting and crouching on the ground for long periods of time, an aching back, a bruised knee. She gets welts on her calves from her gumboots, her hands are weathered and skinned, they start to react to the chemicals in her insect repellent. Then there is the rhythmic process of gold panning. Shovelling gravel and grit, washing big rocks off the pan, washing, pulling out roots and clay. Swivelling cold water, stones, sand and grit around and around. Removing pebbles, swivelling, washing, lapping, looking out for the yellow specks of gold. The repetitive process of panning harks back to many of Wendelien's earlier works as it concerns the elements of water and stone. The process can be considered to be sculptural with its aggregation, assembling and subtraction of materials. The artist wrests not only with water, mud, sand and stones but with her own physical strength and stamina. Just as with her earlier works, she

demonstrates a herculean amount of endurance and exertion, she is resilient, persevering with the almost impossible task. She demonstrates patience, perseverance, determination and above all obduracy. Maybe that's why she keeps making works about rocks and stone?

Prospecting is a very grand gesture, one that had every intention of being heroic, there was the possibility that Wendelien would find her golden nuggets and return to Auckland a triumph. The grandeur and scale is something shared with her previous works: the sweeping and dissecting of waves, hollowing water, extracting water from stone, excavating a backyard, purchasing property on the moon, locating a meteorite, altering the very horizon. *Prospecting* introduces an almost pioneering or colonial slant, though it is worth noting that aside from reflecting upon whether her own methods of gathering dust resemble those of the Chinese prospectors "back in the day" there is no mention of the Otago gold rush of the 1860s nor the history of human settlement in the area. The work is resolutely both ahistorical and contemporary.

The work takes its place within a broader pattern in Wendelien's oeuvre of desiring something, wanting to fulfil a wish, to realise an idea, to perform a specific task. It has a sense of capriciousness about it, perhaps even folly. Then, as with all of her works there is the matter of executing the concept or task she has set herself, working out the details, logistics, problems, pitfalls, workarounds and DIY solutions. It is a pattern of concept, the setting of an impossible task, research, strategy, experimentation, trial and error, adjustments, construction, ingenuity and either execution or failure. The space between an intention or idea and its realization is an intriguing one and this is where I situate Wendelien's gold panning journal.⁸ To read her notes is to witness a performance of the *almost* impossible, a great experiment, an audacious testing out of competence and capability.⁹ When I described the work to a friend he mused, cynically, that the chances of Wendelien getting lucky and striking gold are probably greater than the odds of becoming a successful artist with a sustainable livelihood. *Prospecting* is indeed an account of futility, failure, insecurity and doubt. Wendelien herself writes "This project is definitely about failure... But what's it got to do with art... gah I don't know anymore." A response might be found in art critic Christy Lang who argued "The process of meaningless work, or the execution of worthless tasks" has become "a medium, method, material and metaphor for artwork" itself.¹⁰ So perhaps, as an instance of labour and a lot of hard work, Wendelien's expedition is far from meaningless, though somewhat Sisyphean and absurd. It is important to note, however that it was not fruitless, she has the little gold specks to prove it.

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- ¹ Tout-Smith, D. (2010) Gold Nugget “Welcome Stranger” (1869) in Museums Victoria Collections <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/articles/3019> Accessed 23 May 2018.
- ² Bakker, W. Personal communication, 24 May 2018
- ³ Bakker, W. “Swimming Pool” in Geoghegan, C. Ed. *Blue Oyster 2015*. Blue Oyster Art Project Space: Dunedin: 2016; pp 35-39.
- ⁴ Bakker, W. “Swimming Pool” 2016.
- ⁵ Lucie-Smith, E. “Folly” in *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms, Second Edition*. Thames & Hudson: New York, 2003; 95.
- ⁶ Bakker, W. Personal communication, email. 11 June 2018.
- ⁷ Bakker, W. *Wendelien Bakker, Elam School of Fine Arts*, 2016, Auckland (unpublished portfolio).
- ⁸ Le Feuvre, L. “Introduction // Strive to Fail” in Le Feuvre, L. Ed. *Failure*. Whitechapel Gallery; The MIT Press: London; Cambridge: 2010; p 17.
- ⁹ Lang, C. “Bound to Fail // 2005” in Le Feuvre, L. Ed. p 133.
- ¹⁰ Lang, C. p 132.