

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

A response to *A Wandering Thing* by Jasmine Gallagher

A Wandering Thing is a timely exhibition: the interest in maintaining both clean drinking water, as well as recreational and ecological resources like rivers and wetlands has, unsurprisingly, increased alongside the proliferation of media coverage relating to water pollution and its connections to dairy farming development in the wider Canterbury region. Ecocriticism is driven by the desire to address environmental problems, including global challenges like climate change and mass extinction, with ecocritical theorists such as Donna Haraway attributing the root of these environmental issues to the nature-culture dichotomy and the associated ideologies of colonialism and capitalism.¹ *A Wandering Thing* deals with this dichotomy from various angles, with Joshua Harris-Harding's contribution leaning towards a form of socio-technological critique and Sophie Bannan taking a more affect-based approach that draws upon her family history. These approaches complement each other, together embodying a Posthuman ecocritical stance that incorporates diverse forms of knowledge about how we relate to our environment.

Prominent ecofeminist academic Stacy Alaimo argues that the environmental humanities should contribute to sustainability by formulating complex Posthuman perspectives in which the human world is no longer seen as separate from the natural world.² She also critiques the objectivism of the scientific method for obscuring "power differentials, political differences, and cultural values".³ *A Wandering Thing* can be seen to embrace this Posthuman approach to breaking down the nature-culture dichotomy. In doing so, the show recognises links between environmental justice and social justice:

Questions of social justice, global capitalist rapacity, and unequal relations between the global North and the global South are invaluable for developing models of sustainability that do more than try to maintain the current, brutally unjust status quo.⁴

Dominant capitalist and colonial ideologies in New Zealand have resulted in the marginalization of indigenous Māori, non-European migrants, and women, not to mention the extinction of many native flora and fauna; Harris-Harding's three videos critique these colonial roots of the nature-culture dichotomy. Bannan's work supports this critique with a reimagined range of alternative affective relationships between humans and the landscape.

The videos that comprise Harris-Harding's contribution to the show overlap with Bannan's approach at times, through methods of precarity and trans-corporeality. However, the overall trajectory of both artists' work traces a view of nature that separates humans from their environment through time: from ancient Greece through the colonial era to late-capitalist Aotearoa. For example, in *Braided* by Harris-Harding we have what feels like a version of our 100% Pure New Zealand national trademark, with scenes of rural and wild landscapes like farms and rivers branded with superimposed slogans. Over an image of an irrigation waterway the phrase "LIKE AIR AND SUNLIGHT, ALL COMMON PROPERTY" is displayed with three animated green arrows circling around the text, suggesting recycling and reticulation in the process. A sublime mountainous scene has the slogan "GRASP EMPTINESS, AND EMPTINESS IS FORM"; views of pastoral cropland have phrases such as "EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY", and "I KNOW WHO I AM, AND I AM ENOUGH" hovering over them. A lake view is accompanied by the words "REDUCE YOUR COGNITIVE LOAD THROUGH ACCEPTANCE", while a braided river scene reads "FIND A WAY, OR MAKE ONE". The role of language here is clear, especially an ironically empty language—some found text, some created through Gregory Kan's text-manipulating app—that speaks clearly to the era of intensive dairy farming on the Canterbury plains and the negative impact this is having on the quality of waterways and drinking water. Collectively, the combination of such imagery and language is an effective satire on the "100% Pure" mythology in New Zealand.

Harris-Harding's *Where it goes* continues this angle of ecological critique by highlighting material forms of culture that separate us from nature. This is achieved via a 3D animated video that depicts milestones in the developmental structures of Western civilization and water management including: a divining rod made from the branch of a tree, a Greek column, a turbine, a light bulb, a ceiling rose, a roadside marker post, and a power box with cables coming out of it. While the structures and technologies these emblems represent are inherent to everyday life—roads, buildings, and the sourcing and dispersal of electricity and water resources—we don't usually think about how they direct the way we live our lives. For example, when we turn on the tap or a light, we don't think about all of the structures and systems that make this possible, despite the fact that they are both acts that are absolutely integral to our daily routines. And because we are separated from the sources that allow such actions to be possible, this means we do not have to think about related issues, such as water scarcity or pollution. By animating these inanimate objects the metaphor of technological somnambulism is enacted, and the way these objects have a form of agency in our society—an agency that we often do not notice or acknowledge—is brought to the surface.

Technological somnambulism is articulated more literally in another of Harris-Harding's videos, *Gates*. This film captures a hand pointing to a sequence of still images with text captions provided for each image. It is shown on a TV lying on the ground, rather than mounted like the other two, creating an odd sense of precariousness. In one instance a diagram of a tap, broken down into all of its different working parts, has text that conveys how this form of technology is "instrumental in the creation of cultural practices." Similarly, a map of the Christchurch city centre (previously a swamp that sits below sea level and was

drained in order to build the city) is accompanied by phrases that historicise the colonial values associated with different bodies of water and locate these in current water management strategies: "... dynamic, fast-moving, and productive waterways are healthy, / while wetlands are the 'nether regions' of water bodies. / Wetlands are places of moral and physical decay, an area which the coloniser / must correct and civilise, through draining or filling." Today, this colonial approach to water management seems particularly outdated because wetlands are now known to be a rich source of biodiversity and play a crucial role in the purification of water. However, wetlands are becoming increasingly scarce, having been drained for both urban and rural development, while both water quality and biodiversity continue to decline. There is an element of irony in this Christchurch map section of *Gates* and this irony continues into a section that addresses historical figures Alexander the Great and Dinocrates, an ancient Greek architect whose proposal to carve a giant sculpture of Alexander with a city in one hand and a water pitcher in the other into Mount Athos was never realized.

The more bodily and sincere elements of *Gates* link into the accompanying works by Bannan, for example, an X-ray image of a tiny water flea is magnified to show the "fluorescent signature" of water in the belly of the flea: "Disintegrating vestiges of your little control proliferating through the biological order." Here the trans-corporeal body of the water flea is highlighted and water is addressed as something that is out of control and being lost; as something precious and precarious. Here the body of the water flea can also be seen to mimic the technology we use to manage water, hinting at the Posthumanist idea that humanity is not so different from the animal kingdom after all. Similarly, another image, this time of farmland seen from above, like a Google Maps view, is related to a vague memory of losing a shoe in a swamp. The text above the farmland suggests this was a false memory, yet the "vivid sensation of deep mud shucking the shoe from your foot, / and the way your family says 'leave it behind'" highlights how our feelings can so often override the objective evidence provided to us by others.

While they share the same subject matter with regards to articulating Posthuman relationships with nature, Bannan's approach differs significantly from Harris-Harding's. Rather than drawing attention to the socio-technological aspects of water management, she projects a deeply personal encounter with the natural world, shaped by sites embedded in her family history. An untitled series of seven double-exposed C-type print photographs communicate the rough natural beauty of Waiuta, a now abandoned gold-mining town on the West Coast of the South Island, where her paternal ancestors lived. Some of these images appeared in *Hut for a Sensuous Gold Miner*, with Daegan Wells at Meanwhile gallery in Wellington, in which Bannan's approach was described as a form of ethnoarcheology; "a process which involves recreating historical objects as a means of making contact with the people who may have used them and the lives they may have lived."⁵ Essentially a form of landscape photography, some images depict derelict elements of the ghost town that remain today, while others focus more on scrub and farmland. Because two different photographic images are superimposed on top of each other, this disrupts the notion of a linearity. As focus blurs in and out of the two images, questions are raised: "Which image was taken first?" or "How far from each other

were these sites?” These aspects of the photographs create a sense of mystery and intrigue that opposes the reason, certainty, or critique that is often associated with scientific knowledge.

Bannan’s film *Waiuta / Waiutu* is shot in the same area as the photographs and is accompanied by a soundtrack by Motte (Anita Clark). This soundtrack can be heard throughout the gallery, with noise bleeding into the experience of Harris-Harding’s silent video works. The reference to “Waiutu” in the title adds an element of the unknown and a sense of doubling that are both present in the photographic series. However, the emotive relation to place is accentuated much further, as the mood of the video and accompanying music changes from one of suspense that verges on psychological horror; a creepy abandoned house and eerie screeching violin tones punctuated by reverbed dripping sample sounds, to blissful serenity and a sense of being at home in the rugged rural landscape; a pregnant belly is pictured in one shot, while in another scene the outline of Bannan’s knees are lined up perfectly with the horizon behind them and there is a profound lightness of musical tone to match. This change in mood provides a sense of relief after the more fraught elements of the video, and this contrast heightens the feeling of homecoming in the brighter sections. Through the picturing of Bannan’s own naked pregnant body, an abandoned and derelict site of deep family history is projected into the future, and a mood of hopefulness seems to prevail.

Harris-Harding and Bannan take different approaches to their subject matter, and by highlighting how the technological and emotive ways we relate to nature differ from and rub up against each other, *A Wandering Thing* showcases the complex and diverse meanings and uses of natural resources such as water. The result is a holistic Posthuman approach that is both critical and affect-based, both rational and emotional; because not only the management of water resources, but also the variant meanings, feelings, and beliefs that we attach to nature are addressed. This combination of approaches avoids the pitfalls of ecocritical work that either focuses on emotions and beliefs at the cost of historical critique and vice versa. The colonial roots of our current water management systems are critiqued whilst the importance of the very human meanings we attach to place, landscape, and natural resources are highlighted. Collectively, these works offer the viewer something more than critique alone. In an era of daunting environmental challenges *A Wandering Thing* offers the viewer a much-needed sense of belief in and optimism for the future as well.

¹ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159-65.

² Stacy Alaimo, “Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures,” *PMLA* 127, no.3 (2012): 558-64, 563.

³ Alaimo, “Sustainable This, Sustainable That,” 560.

⁴ Alaimo, “Sustainable This, Sustainable That,” 562.

⁵ “Hut For A Sensuous Goldminer”, *Meanwhile Gallery*, <https://www.meanwhilegallery.com/hut-for-a-sensuous-gold-miner>.