

The work has to settle: a critical response by Conor Clarke

I AM A SALT LAKE

Ana Iti

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Curated by Abby Cunnane

I first encountered *I am a salt lake* at the opening event at The Physics Room in early September, 2023. It is a moving image work that revolves (swirls) between three visual components: words, landscape images, and marks drawn into condensation on a window. It was hard to appreciate the slow burn of it in a room crowded with people. Ana was there, her green fingernails distractingly ātaahua with silver spirals and ripples, and sparkly bits of pāua shell embedded in a hardened substance that was once liquid.

There is distance between us. Ana is in Heretaunga Hastings and I in Ōtautahi Christchurch. There is distance between Ana and Kapara te Hau—the salt lake—located just south of Blenheim where she grew up. There is distance between me and the work now too; the show ended six months ago and I'm only now finding the words. It is late summer and the lake is now low, deep pink, and ripe for harvest.

The camera covers a lot of ground in *I am a salt lake*, zooming by from what appears to be a car window with occasional moments of pause. The imagery gives me a sense of being there, revealing the land, water, wind, and sky particular to this arid place that makes salt farming possible. It also locates Ana at the site, operating the camera. Connecting to a place through a lens is always a paradox; I am both close and far away. The images push and pull at my focus—feigning proximity only to have the context fall away and the distance feel even greater. I think of camera lenses, to focus or look at one thing is to overlook everything else. There are limits to the visible.

*The work has to settle and then maybe I can see it for what it is.*¹

Light and sound both arrive in waves. To hear—or really, to listen—is to come towards something, to be touched. I remember the sound of salt crunching, crumbling, flaking through fingers and hands onto the ground, and the familiar pitch

1 Ana Iti, Zoom kōrero, October 2023.

of a finger rubbing, dragging, sliding along a surface wet with breath and longing. This is what I remember of the work, this is the residue left behind.

I Zoom call Ana to get to know her better. She's one of those people that feels more familiar than they actually are, like we've known each other before. She describes passing Kapara te Hau on regular bus trips between Blenheim and Ōtautahi where she studied fine arts as an undergrad student. She recalls looking out over the salt lake many times wondering about the colours. High in a seat with a view framed by bus windows, her memories are tainted with that queasy travel sickness feeling in the puku, urging her eyes to the horizon where the body of land meets the body of sky. These are the frames that remain.

Ana describes her parents as sedentary (sounds like sedimentary). Her Dad returned to Northland and lives in Kaikohe, an hour's drive from Te Rarawa takiwā where he (and Ana) descend from. Her Mum, of English ancestry, grew up in Waiharakeke Blenheim where she still lives and where Ana was raised. I know Blenheim a bit. We used to visit every summer on the annual family road trip ('Blenheim' has 'home' in it already—'heim' is 'home' in German).

I too am drawn to Kapara te Hau, to the mountains of salt that grow in late summer. They remind me of a salt mountain I've spent time with back in Germany, a spoil tip at a potash mine that towers high over the local town of Heringen, and looks like a snowy peak even at the height of summer. Despite the distance between these mountains, the difference between sea salt and rock salt is not so much their mineral composition as the process by which they've been extracted, brought into view, made visible.

Ana's time at Kapara te Hau was limited which meant that research had to be gathered elsewhere: internet, books, Papers Past, kōrero, iwi and hapū facebook posts. *I am trying to connect across two islands and a strait*—how to connect without being physically near?² How to look closely, listen carefully, zoom in, collapse the distance without obscuring the depth of field in-between, the middle-ground, the context?

While looking through a friend's Dad's NZ stamp collection recently, I discovered the salt lake among three 1959 Marlborough Centennial stamps. It is small and brown, and depicts two tiny figures dwarfed by a gigantic heap of salt. It's a strange blurring of romantic nature and a celebration of industry that could easily be mistaken for a sublime landscape, were it not for the salt conveyor belt. It's no coincidence that Kapara te Hau is also known as Lake Grassmere, presumably a reference to Lake Grasmere of Lake District fame thanks to William and Dorothy Wordsworth.

2 Italicised are words from Ana Iiti, *I am a salt lake*, 2023.

Below these I noticed the Hawkes Bay Centennial stamps. This places Ana's current home and the subject of this work together on the same page, a coincidence that had me alert to other possible connections. Depicted and memorialised here in six tiny frames stuck to gridded paper are the wool industry, a careening *Endeavour*, sheep shearers, gannets, and Pānia of the Reef. Pānia is the sea-based Ngāti Kahungunu ancestor who came ashore only at night, until she was betrayed by her human husband and returned to the sea forever.

I am a salt lake feels like a riddle that isn't meant to be solved, a spiral, or a series of concentric circles that radiate out before rippling back in on themselves. Is salt a product of the land or the sea? And what, or *who* is that salty voice?³ The landscape imagery provides an important anchor for the work, but the intimacy, vulnerability, and strangeness of the words is more expansive. Presented like subtitles on the screen, there seem to be a few voices speaking, like seeing through different lenses. Despite their brevity, they seem to dissolve that which is separated by distance or categorisation into a single entity—the salt lake is the sea is the wharf is the land is the saltworks is the salt is the artist is me is you. These words undo some of the distancing done by the camera.

When I speak to Ana online, I notice a blanket on the sofa in the background of the Zoom window (I recognised it because I have the same one at my house). She bought it as a housewarming gift for herself after settling in in her new home in Heretaunga. It's covered in spirals.

3 "What is that salty voice?" are words from Ana Iiti, *I am a salt lake*, 2023.

Conor Clarke (Waitaha, Ngāti Māmoe, Ngāi Tahu) is an artist, photographer, and educator at Ilam School of Fine Arts. She recently participated in a writing wānanga held by The Physics Room and Blue Oyster at Te Kiekie Mount Somers. Recently her interests have included mountains, the Kaikōura Tītī (Hutton's Shearwater), vision and blindness, the mechanism of the camera, and the politics of photography.

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