

LIKE WATER BY WATER

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Curated by Amy Weng (The Physics Room) and Simon Palenski (Blue Oyster), held in partnership with the Aigantighe Art Gallery

A critical response by Joanna Osborne

Like water by water presents both expansive and localised premises: personal, geographical and geological concerns are considered in conjunction with the South Canterbury landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. I grew up in this landscape, and this was one of the elements that drew me to write about this show; what follows is a reflection on the individual and collective characteristics of art by Fiona Pardington, Dilohana Lekamge, Carol Anne Bauer and Suji Park in this context. What emerged for me, in the viewing experience and in the artworks themselves, were expressions of wonder and relatedness to place as both a concept and physical reality. In these works, the geological is geographical, and cultural and interior landscapes span across time and human emotion.

I turn first to Fiona Pardington's *Pouakai* (2006), an important work that brings the cultural contexts and deep histories of the local landscape into view. In 2006, Pardington photographed many of the rock art drawings in South Canterbury. One of these drawings is known to depict the pouākai or Haast's eagle (later classified as *Hieraetus moorei*).¹ The pouākai was a predator-scavenger bird, the largest of its kind, and became extinct about 500 years ago. The drawing of the pouākai in Pardington's photograph is located on the ceiling of a limestone cave in Maungati, South Canterbury, near the Pareora river. Pardington's description of the work offers a sense of the expansive quality of the rock drawings: 'They're a complete creation in themselves,' Pardington states. 'Seeing the huge eagle you get this picture of this enormous bird swooping down the valley—it's quite formidable. For me as an artist it's that kind of engagement with the minds of other creators that you can carry forward with you.'² For the artist, now living in the region, *Pouakai* marks an ongoing project.

1 Kate Evans, "Return of the Lost Birds," *New Zealand Geographic* 154 (November 2018): 30, <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/return-of-the-lost-birds/>

2 Fiona Pardington, in Sally Blundell, "Drawing Inspiration," *Te Karaka Anniversary Edition: About Ngāi Tahu. About New Zealand*. Kana/Spring (2008): 42. Viewed at <https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/assets/Documents/TeKaraka40.pdf>

Pouakai can also be interpreted within the context of Pardington's longstanding engagement with Kāi Tahu taoka and the artist's transformative approach to systems of classification in photographic works that celebrate and honour the inherent significance of taoka in museum holdings. Among this work sits *Mauria Mai, Tono Ano* (2001), a series of photographs of Kāi Tahu hei tiki from the Auckland War Memorial Museum, and *Moko* (1997), Pardington's earliest reference to her Kāi Tahu whakapapa.³

The image quality of *Pouakai* is deep and grainy. It was printed by way of the Fresson method, a type of pigment-based carbon print process, invented and shrouded in mystery by Théodore-Henri Fresson (1865–1951). Considered highly stable, with archival qualities, the print type is also known for its painterly quality. For curator Aaron Lister, Pardington's photography 'has always been open to the forces that connect material and immaterial realms, the past and the present.'⁴ The sensory experience of viewing this photograph conveys this quality, enabling us as viewers to share in a tradition of respectful engagement with these incredible taoka, where, as archaeologist Gerard O'Regan points out, questioning and wonderment is encouraged.⁵ *Pouakai* is a significant representative work, spanning decades of the artist's practice and anchoring the exhibition to a local context. I also look to *Pouakai* as a foundation from which to consider qualities of wonder in adjacent works.

Like Pardington, Dilohana Lekamge's *A softer limestone* (2023) and *A Different Ocean* (2021) index location and explore the concept of place across contexts. Both works are also narratively focused, with a spoken word audio, and they are both the outcome of a long-term research project on Rama Setu or Adam's Bridge, a partially submerged chain of rocky limestone shoals off the coast of Sri Lanka, the artist's home country. The moving image works, projected one after the other, include both cross-cultural connections with Aotearoa and surrounding geographies in Sri Lanka. Commissioned for the exhibition, *A softer limestone* was filmed in South Canterbury. The imagery tracks over the surface of limestone rock in Maungati and Kakahu, just south of Timaru. Celebrating the textural quality of the South Canterbury limestone, the narrative of this work concurrently speaks of Rama Setu. *A Different Ocean* is a two-channel work that includes found footage of Rama Setu and locations around Sri Lanka. Lekamge makes use of incidental footage and the imagery sometimes anticipates elements of the narrative sequence. Images linger on certain motifs (water, rock, the story of Rama Setu, for example) or alternate quickly, with some frames only remaining on screen for a few seconds.

3 Fiona Pardington "Moko" (1997). Viewed at <https://fionapardington.blogspot.com/2011/05/moko-1997.html?view=sidebar>

4 Aaron Lister, "Love Never Faileth: The Shape of a Practice," in *Fiona Pardington: A Beautiful Hesitation* (Wellington: Victoria University Press and Baker+Douglas Publishing, 2016), 10-22.

5 Gerard O'Regan emphasises this point in "The First Language of Te Waipounamu," *Te Karaka: The Art Issue* Khuru/Autumn, (2015): 26-33. Viewed at https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our_stories/the-first-language-of-te-waipounamu/.

In *A Different Ocean*, Lekamge narrates from the Araṇya-Kāṇḍa, or the Forest Episode, from the Ramayana, a Sanskrit-language Hindu epic with origins in ancient India. The story begins with the character Surpanakha: she has been scorned by Rama, and convinces her brother Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, to abduct Rama's wife Sita. The Battle of Lanka ensues, where Hanuman builds the limestone Rama Setu in order to cross the strait to rescue Sita and kill Ravana. Concluding the narration of this origin story, Lekamge lingers with Sita and Surpanakha, imagining new lives for each of them with the earth or with water. Sita had been exiled after the Battle of Lanka, and known as the daughter of Bhumi (the earth), she returned to the womb of Earth at her death. Surpanakha receives no further mention in the original texts and it is said she died at sea.

In the second segment of *A Different Ocean*, Lekamge includes the nearby Sri Pada or Adam's Peak and emphasises the cross-cultural currents of the area: Sri Pada is venerated in multiple faith traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim): 'This site has imparted faith widely and without bias,' Lekamge narrates. For Buddhist traditions of the region, an imprint in the rock at the peak of this mountain is Buddha's footprint. In Sri Lankan Hindu tradition, this site has associations with Hanuman and Shiva. For some Islamic and Christian traditions of the region, this was the site where Adam, the first man, alighted upon the earth. Seeking to be reunited with estranged Eve after the banishment from Eden, Adam crosses the bridge of shoals on his way into the world. Lekamge pauses to critically reflect on the role of Eve in this narrative: 'perhaps Eve was praised, adored for her fundamental role in beginning human life' rather than 'blamed for the betrayals committed by all women?'

Lekamge's later work *A softer limestone*, is also narratively focused, with South Canterbury footage and found audio, including the bird life and trains associated with the site of Rama Setu. The opening narrative sequence draws on historical records of a cyclone that occurred in 1480 CE, destroying an original land bridge and partially submerging it. Lekamge creates a mytho-meteorological account of this event, with a battle between the weather and the limestone of Rama Setu. Presented in such a way, the weather and the rock become characters with agency. Creating a personal association, Lekamge goes on to tell a story of her great aunt and a 35 kilometre journey across Rama Setu from Sri Lanka in 1914. This narrative also recalls a prosperous landscape, before a cyclone in 1964 destroyed the train line and surrounding regions. The concluding segment of this work reflects on multiple associated geographical and geological realities of the site and the narrative arc is resolved when together the characters of weather and limestone foster the marine life that abounds there.

Lekamge acknowledges the complex contemporary and historical convergence points at the site of Rama Setu and her work attends to the multi-cultural, geographical and ecological contexts of its history. Lekamge also acknowledges the integrity of places that should be protected or left alone. Geomorphic parallels between Sri Lanka and Aotearoa are also evident. For both locations,

rock degradation and weather are key concerns, where changes in temperature, microclimates and atmospheric impurities, along with human-related impacts, all have an effect on the sustainability of an environment. In these ways, both Lekamge's and Pardington's works are conduits for thinking about place.

Lekamge and Pardington also contextualise my thinking on the work by Suji Park and Carol Anne Bauer. Park and Bauer both attend to the detail and wonder of geomorphic form, including the physics of light and optical effects. The attention to detail in their work is awe-inspiring and enchanting. This viewing experience, in connection with the exhibition as a whole, amplified a consideration of the land as complex, wonderful and environmentally troubled—the limestone sites of Timaru, specifically, and everywhere else, more generally.

Suji Park's work is representative of a process-driven approach that defines her wider practice. Park seeks out embodied connections between ideas, where sound, colour and the physical experience of language are synthesised in form and process. Her work also involves a personal response to and negotiation with being in the world and the experience of being a multilingual, migrant Korean-New Zealander.

Park's selection of works on show were made on residency at the Factory of Contemporary Arts in Palbok, in the city of Jeonju in western South Korea, where the artist now resides. The ceramic vessels of the *Feverhead* (2022) series are open-minded and receptive, literally formed to loosely resemble faces with open heads. They conceptually mirror Park's interrogation of the embodiment of language and the physicality of language translation—their titles all begin with the letter O (*Oaah, Oori, Oya...*) as a reference to the mouth. In the two works from the *Beatdol* (2022) series on show, we also see evidence of Park's making process that involves breaking, remaking and refiring pieces, adding to already multi-composite work over time: clay, plastic, plaster, foam, resin and paint, for example. In these works, there are also direct associations to emergent geological issues: *plastiglomerate* is the scientific term for multi-composite rock, formed from what was once molten plastic.

Interpreting Park's work, anthropomorphic parallels can be made between geological process and personal brokenness: 'without the breakages I don't think things can connect,' the artist reflects, '...brokenness is almost the same as openness.'⁶ For Park, the making process and engagement with matter is implicitly personal. I cannot claim to know Park's direct experiences, but I try to listen for the artist's voice in her materials, as she herself drew upon the experience of listening as a conceptual mode of making. I recognise an immediate joy in the celebratory qualities of Park's work; they are colourful, courageous and full of fissures that absorb, reflect and refract light.

6 Suji Park in Sian van Dyk "When your mouth makes the shape of an o," *Suji Park: The Noise Collector*, The Dowse Art Museum 95 November 2022 – 2 April 2023, p.8.

Carol Anne Bauer's work also elicits a sense of enchantment and wonder. A defining feature of Bauer's work is an incredible attention to detail. On show are two paintings on Perspex and a selection of textile works, or stitcheries, as the artist preferred to call them. Both media were focal points for Bauer. The textile works, in this case, depict microscopic fossil shells and marine life and macroscopic imaginings of cosmic light. The paintings are interpretations of amino acid crystals seen through a stereoscopic microscope.

Bauer refers to a singular moment of elation when she first observed crystals through a microscope. Initially turning to microscopist photography and the use of polarising filters to capture distinct crystal formations against a dark background, Bauer then experimented with painting on layered Perspex. One of the paintings on show, *Sodium Citrate* (1982), resembles these photographs, but, for the artist, the double refraction or two-dimensional mirror effect produced by the two layers of Perspex, better approximated the dynamic experience of adjusting focal and refraction levels of a microscope to view multiple dimensions of crystal structures.⁷ There is also an embodied experience for the viewer, as the light source and angle of observation affects the visual refractive qualities and colour of the painting. Evident here is a quality and 'feeling for the reality of light' that was important for Bauer.⁸

Bauer's stitcheries are finely detailed compositions. The artist worked with deconstructed components of silk and nylon fibre and the colour and light reflective qualities of the fibre was also integral to the work. *Transmigration* (1979-80), silk thread on organza, has a nebulous base that recedes into a deep indigo and is flecked with cross hatching of blue and gold that catches the light and generates a shimmering effect. There is a cosmic quality to this work, as Bauer seems to approach an iconography of reincarnation in the stitched form of an optical halo or tunnel of light. Radiating from a single point is an expertly rendered circle with spherical qualities and iridescent rays of thread in uniform clusters of tiny branched trees.

This great attention to detail in Bauer's work speaks to the artist's view, simply put, that art 'was a way of passing love and beauty through time' and that 'both materials and intent' were important for its success.⁹ *Transmigration* is a more explicitly religious or spiritual example of Bauer's work on show, but I interpret this piece in conjunction with the exhibition's emphasis on a geological scale of time. Bauer's works also embody human experiences of love and wonder as more than experiential states. Instead, the sense of awe that is achieved in the experience of viewing Bauer's work encourages attentiveness.

7 Carol Anne Bauer, "Exhibition Proposal: Te Manawa Museum" (undated). Artist's papers.

8 Ibid.

9 Carol Anne Bauer, "Personal statement," 1987. Artist's papers.

Like water by water is titled after the scientific writings of John Hardcastle (1847–1927). Hardcastle, known as a pioneer of paleoclimatology, was an amateur geologist. His engaging descriptive observations of the geological make-up of the landscape in South Canterbury contextualise the exhibition. In *Like water by water*, there are multiple currents: geology meets a textual interpretation, and mytho-poetic and prehistoric scales of time intersect with empirical observation and human emotion.

Geological wonderment and the concept of place are defining thematic features of this exhibition as well as ongoing conversations on art and the Anthropocene. The individual perspectives present in the show collectively generate analogues for thinking about being in the world—where critical anthropomorphisms and a hopeful outlook are necessary ethical constituents.

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Blue Oyster art project space.

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