



1. Kate Te Ao, *Before*, 2022.  
Carbonised karaka, pine, sequins, rope, paint.

2. Eleanor Cooper, (from front of room to back) *Alter Ego*, *Blackbird*, *Lilac-time*, *Singing Talk*, *Sophora*, all 2024.  
Carved birch plywood, gesso, watercolour, resin, wax.

3. Conor Clarke, *Night Writing*, 2024.  
Single-channel thermal video, 23:01 mins. Made in collaboration with Ted Howard (Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust).

# *A fire that blackened the rocks*

*Conor Clarke, Eleanor Cooper & Kate Te Ao*

Several geographical features around Whakatipu Waimāori reference pūrākau recounting how a young Kāti Māmoē woman named Hakitekura swam across the icy lake carrying dry kauati and bundle of raupō on her back, and set a fire on the far rocky shore to let people know of her feat. *A fire that blackened the rocks*, as a title, alludes to this pūrākau, and is an exhibition that considers what can be imperceptible or unknowable about experiences of the world around us. Conor Clarke, Eleanor Cooper and Kate Te Ao each articulate personal, political and collective histories, how language and environment intertwine and influence each other, and how new relationships are made through the sharing of, and receptiveness to, different kinds of knowledge.

Conor Clarke's *Night Writing* has developed from time volunteering with the Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust, a conservation organisation with the aim of population restoration for the endangered Kaikōura tītī. Unlike more southern species, and in fact, unlike any other seabird, Kaikōura tītī nest and breed in mountain burrows, thousands of metres above sea level. They fly far from their alpine home to feed during the day and return at night, navigating by way of stars, sometimes disoriented by the lights seeping up from the Kaikōura township.

Recounting a quiet nightfall following a day monitoring the hatching success of tītī, Clarke describes straining to hear any sounds that would indicate the birds were returning to their burrows. That nothing is audible though, does not mean nothing is present; with a thermal imaging device capable of turning electromagnetic radiation into visible light—that is, heat into image—the silence suddenly became hundreds of tītī swirling like dust or snow, or the stars they use to find their path.

Footage from this excursion comprises *Night Writing*. Clarke stays with the constellations of tītī long enough for them to flit in and out of the frame, intermittently coming into focus in a flash of white against the dark sky. These long takes resist a photographic vocabulary of 'taking' or 'capturing.' The lens alone could not follow the motion of the tītī. Instead, the warmth of these seabirds determined how the camera, and Clarke, were able to see. As Clarke writes, "in the absence of light...I could just be with the birds."

'Night writing' is a term used to describe an early form of tactile communication using raised dots that are 'read' through touch—a method that was influential in the development of Braille. Though recognised as having potential for the low vision community, it was also adopted for military purposes. Like photography then, night writing developed as an instrument that exploited its ability to record sensorial information for purposes closely linked to imperial objectives. In the lines of text that thread through *Night Writing*, Clarke contends with these ethical considerations and offers relationships between kupu Māori as resistance against the singularity of describing how we come into contact with things. Often simplified in translation to English as 'listen', the word 'whakarongo' is, more fully, a call to engage the senses but notably, with the exception of sight.

The silence of *Night Writing* sustains this invitation to pay closer attention and expresses a commitment to different ways of looking that draw us into better relationships with others.

Eleanor Cooper's sculptural bench seats *Alter Ego*, *Blackbird*, *Lilac-time*, *Singing Talk* and *Sophora* are covered with carved marks and drawings that reference flora and fauna recorded living around the Central Otago region, both in the present day and the distant past. Cooper has gathered fragments of information about these species from a range of sources: stories collected by the historian James Herries Beattie, scientific studies, shared conversations about local histories and her personal observations. Birds that were historically abundant throughout Central Otago but are now either scarce, locally extinct or completely vanished as a species, are referenced through spectrograms of their birdsong, chirps and cries. Some of these birds have been found as pieces of bone held in rock and buried within the fossil record. Others appear in oral and written histories, invoked through memory, speech and the written word.

Other animals that inhabited the ancient forest environments of the area thousands of years ago are part of this gathering, together with fauna observable today. Cooper noted the assortment of birds she spotted on a recent trip here, including blackbird, song thrush, European goldfinch and the kakarua South Island robin. A frog she read about but didn't see or hear also appears. Their spectrograms form a chorus with those animals from other times that are no longer as easily seen or heard. Spectrograms are used by scientists and naturalists to visually analyse and identify the dialects and calls of animals, including attempts to interpret frequency modulation—a way information is encoded in sound; in other words, how animals communicate between each other.

Extensive kōwhai woodland is thought to have covered the lower regions of Central Otago in the past, at least since the mid-late Holocene over 8,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> This unique former-ecosystem can be identified and seen through the study of buried vegetation matter collected by scientists from schist overhangs in the Cromwell, Kawarau and Roxburgh gorges. A safranin stain is then used to identify fragments of kōwhai leaves and seeds, a process that dyes them bright pink and reveals their distinct, microscopic patterns. Old limbs of kōwhai and other trees, scattered across an otherwise tree-less, tussocky landscape of Central Otago, were gathered by colonial gold miners and settlers for firewood—highly valuable in this cold and, for them, barren environment. Unwittingly, they were burning key evidence of how the region was forested in the past.

Scientific techniques referenced by Cooper, such as spectrograms and safranin dyes, offer ways to communicate information that is otherwise indiscernible to human senses. This information is drawn together from across long passages of time, including what exists outside of human memory of this place. The bench seats act as innocuous structures for pause and conversation with others, or simply to sit for a moment to take in the exhibition. They appear silent, but accommodate many sounds at once. The multiple utterances of an ecosystem unfolding through time and what might be said between people sharing stories of their own form a dialogue shaped by how people perceive the noise and diversity of natural worlds.

The sequined poles of Kate Te Ao's artwork *Before* (2022) are described by the artist as “celestial matter, stars that stretch down to the ground, providing points to navigate by.” Stars offer a form of old knowledge, decentring language into other dimensions and other registers. However, they also remind us that this knowledge is not the right of everyone. As activist and academic Moana Jackson writes, “the swirling mass of Te Kore that hung beyond the stars was only a mystery we could tell in stories where the horizon pulled at the changing tides.”<sup>2</sup> Covered in sequins, a textile that can be as mesmerising as stars themselves, but also ostentatious in a way the stars would never be, the shoots of *Before* act as navigational conduits between metaphysical and physical worlds.

Interspersed amongst these celestial markers are charred trees, constructed from segments of machined pine posts and carbonised karaka. They are hybrids, combining the naturally twisted branches with a uniform, altered, version of itself. This aspect of the work emphasises how the most worthwhile connections are formed across different types of things, and asks us to find where their similarities are alongside these differences. Like rhizomes, which are able to form a network through connection from one point to any other, *Before* creates a series of connections through the gallery space that resist hierarchy. Rhizomes offer hope, because they are able to move through such conditions and toward new realities. Returning to Jackson, when relationships move with each other they become a series of never-ending beginnings.<sup>3</sup> *Before* presents multiple points of entry through ideas about colonisation and what is becoming through climate change, calling grief to be held alongside healing. There is a shared materiality between charred wood and the origin of carbon within stars. Burning simultaneously holds promise of destruction, regeneration, restoration and the formation of hybrid beings.

A fire that can blacken rocks has an intensity to it—it is able to be seen from a great distance before smouldering into an enduring signal. How this signal is perceived can be a matter of how people attend to their surroundings; how open they are to things that might not be so easily understood, or must remain unknowable. The word extinct shares a root with extinguish, as in to put out a fire, flame or light. *A fire that blackened the rocks* reflects on how incomprehension, of not seeing or being unable to generally sense something, can yet be valuable. These artworks share a belief in how translation should sometimes be withheld, and how different languages and vocabularies can co-exist at different registers.

*Simon Palenski (Blue Oyster, Ōtepoti) & Jane Wallace (The Physics Room, Ōtautahi)*

1. Mike Pole, 'A vanished ecosystem: *Sophora microphylla* (Kōwhai) dominated forest recorded in mid-late Holocene rock shelters in Central Otago, New Zealand', *Palaeontologia Electronica* (2021), <https://palaeo-electronica.org/content/2022/3503-vanished-ecosystem>

2. Moana Jackson, 'Where To Next? Decolonisation and the Stories in the Land', *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington: BWB Books, 2020), 138.

3. Jackson, 139.

**Conor Clarke** (Waitaha, Ngāti Māmoē, Ngāi Tahu - Ngāti Kurī, Pākehā) grew up in Tāmaki Makaurau and is an artist, photographer, MFA candidate and educator at Ilam School of Fine Arts in Ōtautahi. Her recent interests have included mountains in many forms, the endangered Kaikōura tītī, vision and blindness, the mechanism of the camera/lens and the ethics of photography. She is represented by Two Rooms and Jonathan Smart Gallery.

**Eleanor Cooper** is an artist and writer who likes wild places and their stories. Her work often explores natural and cultural history, ecology and language. Originally from Tāmaki Makaurau, she has lived for the past two years on a small yacht and has recently moved ashore in Porirua to plant a garden. She holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Auckland and an MFA from Elam School of Fine Arts. Recent exhibitions include *Shipwreck* at Paper Anniversary (2023), *They covered the house in stories* at Te Tuhi (2021), *Iteration #11* at Mothermother (2021), *The rustling wind reminds me of life on Earth* at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū (2021), *Greywater* at Mokopōpaki (2020), *Bouquet* at Blue Oyster (2020) and *Flows according to rocks* at Paludal (2020). Her recent writing has been shared on The Spinoff, and in the publications *Snacks* and *Huarere: Weather Eye, Weather Ear*, both published by Te Tuhi.

**Kate Te Ao** is an artist who lives and works in Te Whanganui-a-Tara with her husband and three children. She has an MFA from Toi Rauwharangi College of Creative Arts, Massey University, and her exhibition *Before* at The Engine Room (2022) was presented in partial fulfilment of this degree. Te Ao's exegesis entitled *Make it small, the house of the big idea* contends with colonial history, Pākehātanga, decolonisation and Moana Jackson's concept of restoration. She has also published writing in *Drain* magazine, and most recently exhibited *We drank the ocean, we ate the sun* at Twentysix Gallery (2024).