



Mareea Vegas is an Auckland-based photographer and musician. Each issue, she talks to a new photographer bringing interesting artistic ideas to the field of contemporary photography. Through these discussions, she hopes to inspire *D-Photo* readers to branch out in their photographic practice. Mareea's own work spans a variety of styles and formats, with her singular approach earning accolades and commissions from the likes of the Auckland Art Fair, the Auckland Festival of Photography, and Nikon New Zealand.

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Stormwater Reserve, from the series *Eventual Efflorescence*

A PLACE IN TIME

Exploring the notion of landscapes, and the impact of nature and of people on its alteration, Mareea Vegas talks to photographer Kate van der Drift about her eerie images and her plans during her overseas excursions

Constant change and a connection to landscapes are themes that postgrad Elam School of Fine Arts student Kate van der Drift canvasses in her eerily powerful images. It's her fascination with migration that inspired her short-term relocation to the Peruvian Amazon and which is also the motivation behind an upcoming move to Los Angeles. Guided by a genuine interest in how her place-specific concepts will translate in a new land, van der Drift believes that, while her practice may transform, her foundations in landscape work will always exist in some way. We caught up during the start of her Peruvian adventure to discuss her recent works and future plans for when she returns to civilization.

D-Photo: Your work has always examined ways of looking at New Zealand land- and waterscapes and how they merge. Could you talk about this focus in your work and the impact of colonization and industrialization?

Kate van der Drift: I've been interested in studying landscapes where the watery fluidity of the earth's surface has been replaced by solid ground, and

the conversations these transformations provoke. Moving water connects all places, interrelating with land in surprising and ambiguous ways. The borderlands are fundamentally in-between places that have effects far outside their boundaries. One person's wetland or wasteland is another's taonga. The inherited Pakeha way of viewing landscape is to look from a distance, to treat it as a separate entity according to its production or aesthetic value. An indigenous worldview sees people having an integrated relationship with nature that includes seas, lands, rivers, mountains, flora, and fauna. So, I'm interested in picturing landscapes and opening up dialogue around their histories, from precolonial to current state, as well as how they may be sustained and [may] 'look' in the future.

You have documented sites that seem timeless in appearance but, in reality, are culturally young. Do you feel a compulsion to document our land for future generations, as a snapshot of this moment?

Photography has a unique role in recording memories — individual and collective. Geoff Park



Everything Dissolves Eventually from the series Changing Shores of Shadow



Everything Returns to the Sea from the series Changing Shores of Shadow

and his writings in *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua* has been really influential for me when thinking about the New Zealand landscape and how to picture it. He writes: "Landscapes reveal how the past produces the present. They nourish us and show us who we are, and who, culturally, we have been. Landscapes live — are in constant flux, like all life systems. They disappear. They can be created, but only with great difficulty can they be recreated."

I wonder how people will look at their land and waterscapes in a century's time and what they will show future cultures of our present environmental concerns, demands, and aspirations. I do believe that an image, like a landscape, is never truly representative of a place, and [that it] asks to be questioned. The surface is always only a surface.

In making [the series] *Eventual Efflorescence*, I did feel a compulsion to reflect some current values of that place. Some of my family lives in Papamoa, so I spend a considerable amount of time [there] and did want to describe the social geography of this moment. Ideals and desires are constantly shifting with changes in awareness, so perhaps it will become a snapshot.

You are raising many important and serious discussions around imperialism and the erasure of history; though, in making your images, you take a far more poetic approach, almost ethereal. Could you talk about this juxtaposition?

After the conceptual context of the place, the formal elements of the image are the fundamental concern for me. Sometimes, it's a totally constructed field of representation, and, other times, it's a found scene. Many things can be lost through imperialism, with its ideology of 'improvement' of both land and people. I was thinking about this while photographing in [the] floodplains in Hauraki, the pre-settlement wetland of kahikatea forest is now unrecognizable. Within *Eventual Efflorescence*, there are no exterior indicators of place, no native flora and fauna, and the streets are named after various tropical places — all forms of cultural erasure. The addition of water contributes to its ethereal quality within some work, as it subtracts and covers the land, shrouding



Waitotara

it in mist or inundating by sea-level rise. Water's materiality and multivalence works as a metaphor, its transparency distorting or giving the potential to see through or behind.

I feel a real sense of stillness and solemnity when looking at your works. It's a welcome pause in a world that's rapidly speeding up. How do you capture a tranquil moment in an environment that's constantly in motion?

I usually only like to photograph when I am by myself, so [that] I can think carefully about what I'm doing. It will often take me 30 minutes to frame and take a picture, so perhaps some of the stillness occurs in part when I take the shot. Maybe I'm a little selfish, but a lot of the photographs I make are for myself; they are the photographs that I want to spend a lot of time looking at, and I need a certain amount of stillness. For example, [the photograph] *Trace* I used to live above my bed — it's a quiet meditative image with considerable detail at a large size. I've spent hours looking at it.

"Sand is time and time is sandy," New Zealand poet Joan Fleming said in her accompanying prose to your large-scale photo series *They Could Have Stayed Forever*. Time, movement, emptiness, and displacement are topics we can all relate to. How do these themes relate to you in a personal sense?

They Could Have Stayed Forever was one of my first series of works where I was intending to describe a poetic feeling. I was working on a super yacht while making it, which I think contributed to this sense of displacement,



Trace I



They Could Have Stayed Forever

emptiness, and placeless-ness. I had been ruminating on tourism and migration while working for someone who could live and move with absolute ease.

Is personal travel an important factor? Is discovery a driving force behind your works?

I have begun to make place-based projects on areas that have an interesting history or immediate event happening to them. Last year, I travelled to a few locations when I heard there were extreme weather events happening. I've spent a fair few nights sleeping in my station wagon when exploring sites and hoping to create work. As a visual person, I do love the diversity that comes with movement. Input often relates to output for me. It's a process of stimulation and inspiration I guess, keeping things flowing.

How do you think the physical change of environment, with your upcoming move to California, will translate in your works?

I'm not sure at this stage which direction my work will take. I'm always fascinated by environmental events and specific place-based politics, and I'm keen on working in more of a collaborative way. Undoubtedly, I'll meet some people and get to spend time in some interesting locations. I've been to the States briefly a few times, and it's a place of such immense spirit, but it's really anyone's guess what will emerge this time.

What format do you shoot on, and how important is this to your process?

Using medium-format film and a waist-level viewfinder improves my shooting. The process of slowing down through thinking about the reversed image helps the framing process, I think. Like I said earlier, it usually takes me a long time to take a shot with my medium-format camera. I sometimes use a digital camera [as well], but then I usually

work quickly, mostly when I'm unsure about what I'm doing, or experimenting.

How relevant is post-production to your work?

Within some projects, photographic manipulation is half of the image. For example, in the series *The Oasis* and *the Mirage*, post-production was used intentionally to contribute to a sense of uncertainty. This was important to me, because I was asking the viewer to look at the altered landscape and decipher whether it was manipulated by me or through human or natural interactions with the land's surface. Other works are completely un-manipulated and almost straight from camera. It depends on how the scans come out, but I usually grade my images in some way.

And, because we all want to know what you shoot with, what's currently in your camera bag?

I have a Hasselblad 500C/M at the moment, and I'm travelling with only two lenses — an 80mm and a 150mm. I would love to get a 4x5-inch [as well], but the portability of the 120 is great. Portra 400 is my favourite colour-negative film.

And, lastly, where would we find Kate at 8pm on a Monday night?

Earlier this year, I attended the Kingsize Scholarship class, so that is where I have been at 8pm on a Monday for the last three months. But, right now, I'm writing this from a village called Lamas, in Northern Peru, so for the next two Mondays I'll be off-grid in the Amazon jungle. Then next month I'm moving to LA, so who knows!



Kate van der Drift's images exhibited