



Kate van der Drift

Listening to a Wet Land

Pah Homestead

November 3 - February 12 2023

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Cover image: *Waning Crescent to Waxing Gibbous, June, -37.429838, 175.510886 (detail),*
Chromogenic photograph from 4x5" negative.

To Locate

“To locate” is a primary methodology for Kate van der Drift’s research practice, and the predominant mode of the artistic output which proceeds from that method is achieved through ‘sampling’ the location. The record from where and when a sample was taken is of such importance that these notes often survive as titles for many of the final artworks.

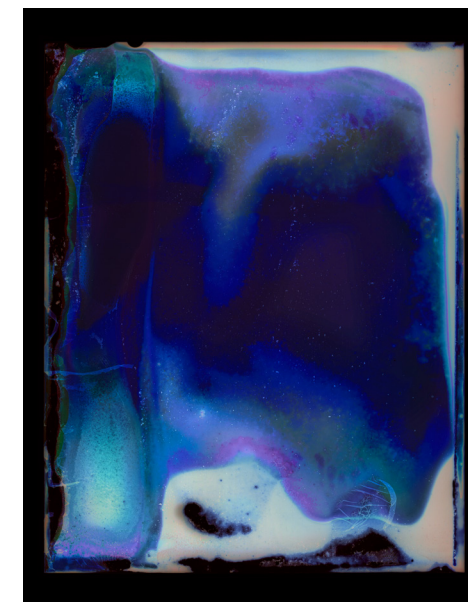
As a research component, the practice of sampling and labelling is fraught, prey to irony. Van der Drift is prepared to risk this, I believe, because it foregrounds the declaration that “[t]he Hauraki Plains are one of the places that defined New Zealand’s colonial destiny.” [3] She identifies the ethical stakes of her project to be “...a reflection on what can be done to help repair or dissolve separations within our minds and physical environments, between the human and more than human world” and, consequently, ask “...how [to] engage in collaboration with matter and place in an ethical and non-hierarchical way? If an entity such as a river already has a voice and is already representing itself, how do I amplify that voice so that it is heard more fully, with its own creativity and originality?” [2]

The major premise, the amplification of a ‘more-than-human voice’, is easily identified as a spiritual one; or, in particular, where an ecological ethics borders on ontology. This relatively new force in western art seeks to decentre perceptions and affections away from a humanistic referent. Van der Drift’s practice, which hopes to align with these ethics, involve interventions on (1) technique (with a minor tilt towards technologies), (2) a manipulation of scale and a (3) freeing and redeployment of time.

Perhaps the most audacious move van der Drift makes is to do photography without a lens and without narrative light. She makes what she terms ‘river exposures’ by submerging film plates in lightproof containers in a river environment and leaving them there for a period so that their photosensitive emulsions are ‘written on’ by biological, chemical and possibly radioactive interaction with the location. This sort of camera-less photography has rich heritage. However, here I wish to contextualise van der Drift’s technical innovation with the very broad sweep of western art as it arrived here in Aotearoa through painting.

The infrastructure needed for what would later be known as the colonial gaze in most recent art history is simply an easel and a palette. En plein air is the cliché method of western eyes. Rightly, much has been made out of the image of the artist (himself, a painter) in the landscape. One of the most violent (and heroic) breakdowns of mid-20th century artistic practice was the laying down of, or completely discarding, the vertically oriented easel. Abstract expressionism may be identified as the absolute break, where a loose canvas is rolled out on the floor, and where, again, ironies almost immediately abound.

The abstract expressionists certainly freed the canvas from the domination of the eye through coupling it with non-representative or de-coded gestures – painting does not describe figures or landscapes anymore, nothing representative is given a line or a volume, nothing



Left: *Waning Gibbous to Waxing Gibbous, September 2020*, Chromogenic photograph from 4x5” negative.

is inside or outside the painted line so that the whole surface becomes the tracked gestures of the artist. It is thereby something else is introduced to pictorial art: the time spent by the artist over the painted surface. This, then, is the irony of the reversal that abstract

expressionism achieves: rather than the eye being the judge in a figurative mastery or good representation the traces made by the artist become a totalising analogy with the particular duration of the artist’s soul shown by this painting – the more the canvas becomes a watery transversal surface the more gesture may ascend and descend from the canvas membrane to describe rhythms of a solute and emergent self.

Van der Drift subjects the camera to a similar technical reversal. The technology of photography rapidly developed in the industrial age at the same time as it became parallel visual record of the generalised advance of mechanisation. Yet its predominant commercial and artistic use remained in portraiture well into the 20th century. Landscape and surveying photography became an important field through its military application, coupled with aviation and satellite technology – this then became important for the nascent pastoral economy which now dominates the Hauraki plains. The pastoral economy is part of vast industrialisation which stretches beyond national borders and now forms a part in the web of the international food system. Van der Drift responds to this history by discarding the lens of the land surveyor or the natural historian set atop a tripod. She tells us how she wants to listen to the repo (‘wetland’) and the whenua: “I wondered how a purely visual representation could somehow listen.? I also had a deep

desire to get closer to the river experientially. I found myself working in waist high water, camera submerged, yet still felt as though this type of representation and method was inadequate, there was still an apparatus between us, unable to communicate the vitality, ill-health and essence of magic I deeply feel in this place. For me, at that time, the camera felt like an intermediary or barrier.” [10]

In pursuit of this feeling van der Drift settles on making her ‘river exposures’, as a way to ‘listen’ to the history of ecological catastrophe on the Hauraki plains and, in particular, as perpetuated in the natural world of the repo. The self-distancing postures of the photo-journalist are found wanting in this pursuit, she instead lays her head against the river bank and submerges the photo-sensitive plates in the dark of the Piako river tributaries. The process of how these encounters are translated to van der Drift’s final prints is equally as critical.

The question over mechanical reproduction and its effects on art was initially linked to the image and the processes of image reproduction, therefore also being historically linked to the development of photographic technology. While literature and music, for example, have been subject to the same pressures, it was the visual field where a ‘moral problem’ (in aesthetic judgement) was posed. It was with portraiture that the problem really became critical: how does one pose the relationship between a close up on a subjects face and its setting? The problem goes through a number of permutations such that we may see the subjects face dissociated from set within a landscape to a setting which would entail a possibly unending re-production of the subject’s image, as in pop-art. The displacement of the moral problem of a face against a landscape to that of a face ‘in relief’ against the evidence of the work of mechanical reproduction itself is in analogy with a capitalist schema which converts extractive work into units of value. The over-coding of digital photography offers a further analogy making it possible to argue the extreme smoothing of any image may



Left: *New Moon to New Moon, August 2019*, Chromogenic photograph from 4x5” negative.

re-integrate the subject anywhere at any time, financialising all work as equivalent to data.

From her river exposed negatives van der Drift describes how she takes a contact print, commenting that at this point in the process

it is as if the marks fixed on the negative are as close as she can get to having the natural world directly touch the photographic medium of photosensitive paper. These contact prints then become like colour field and mark maps for enlargement in the final prints via digitisation. It is like the contact prints provide the code for the final magnificent and thoroughly alive prints. Van der Drift comments that the final prints “... display so much more detail than is able to be seen by the eye in a 4” x 5” or 8” x 10” contact print. The detail is important to me: watery microbial and bacterial writings can be recognised, and the scale maintains an immersive quality, an other-worldliness, portals to something unusually seen and beyond human experience.” [10]

The only point on which I would want to change van der Drift’s grammar here would be to state that rather than maintaining an immersive quality it is through this digital enlargement that the immersive quality is produced for the first time, the hues find the form of something reaching back at the viewer from the surface the larger prints, or create a void into which the viewer finds themselves drawn. Something is there and not there, and those blues and magentas are described in the washed lines which populate the prints with this presence and absence. Again, I would like to name the coloured forms active here as some sort of portraiture, they maintain a resemblance

to a personage, but produce it for the eye for the first time. What I believe we are seeing in these large prints are portraits of the sites' wairua as imparted during the period the negatives were submerged. However, it is the scale of the final digital prints which produces this resemblance, which is quite different from how the imprint of the wairua was imparted.

This resemblance to an affect in location via the non-resembling means of the print scale and the colours occupying the forms is startling. This 'final work' is an outcome which is continued through from the achievement of van der Drift's engagement with the territory and the local narratives populating the territory. The translation to the prints of the affects in location is the aesthetic achievement, but the preparatory achievement of the engagement itself may result in a strengthening and prolonging of the wairua engaged with beyond the aesthetic result.

Van der Drift's prints make clear an immanence of the affects, their power is described in terms of a duration and a territory. That the duration is referred to in the title of the prints through reference to moon cycles is appropriate given that this in turn indicates the Te Ao Māori aspect of the maramataka, which is certainly part of both the history of the region and, hopefully, can start to signal a return to some aspects of territorial engagement in order to start to 'heal' the whenua. This then answers to an irony which inheres from my reference to abstract expressionist practice: rather than constituting a portrait of the isolated artist in duration over the canvas the wairua portrayed by these works remains at its locale, as acts of community engagement and the possibility of another history to this whenua commencing. The prints offer hope inasmuch as hope comes from without: we may reach out to touch it from here in front of these prints, intuiting new rhythms from the still local wairua of

the whenua. These are portrayed affects of place which become a personage and are a call for engagement rather than being a mere resemblance through vision fixed within a frame.

All references to : Listening to a Wet Land MFA thesis essay by
Kate van der Drift (2022)

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