



Pukekura *en plein air*: The paintings of Amanda Watson, in the environment and in context

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The American artist Roni Horn, in describing her ongoing attachment to, and representation of, Iceland, replaces the noun, "place", with the verb, "to place", which suggests a reciprocal relationship: "The view is not separate from the viewer".¹ At Pukekura Park, Ngāmotu, Amanda Watson, of Aotearoa New Zealand, has consolidated a form of painting that is distinctive, even novel, something she has made her own. But it is also about connection and entanglement with things beyond herself. The artist hikes into tracts of native bush, taking lengths of canvas, setting them up on the ground, between trees, over rocks, pouring inks onto them to capture the contours and textures of the site, and typically taking them back to the studio to overlay further moments of memory and perception in largely abstracted, gestural marks and washes. On the one hand, then, the paintings are attributable to the artist: they register, through methods she has developed, refined and continues to extend, her experience of place and time. On the other hand, the paintings come into existence as part of a complex ecology, including the innumerable details and agencies of the environment that surrounds them and the materials that constitute them: these things leave an impression on the artist, shaping her actions, and on the picture, shaping its form, leaving indexical marks, going their own ways. In the current climate (physical and intellectual), this latter "hand" played by non-human phenomena is significant, because it suggests that Watson is alert to the historically anthropocentric (human-centred or dominated) basis of human action, and, within art specifically, of authorship. The tendency for human beings to promote their own interests ahead of other beings and things in the world they inhabit has of course proved not to be in their own interests at all, producing a world that is on the way to being uninhabit-

able. And the cult of the originality of the individual artist has more and more brought the supposedly "pure" and "creative" act of art making into line with capitalist individualism and economics. It would be foolish to suggest, though, that Watson's paintings are not her own, even while acknowledging that she is not an autonomous entity. And certainly she is attentive to the forces beyond her own movements, perceptions, feelings and sense of self that contribute to the making of her art—the nature of her process clearly indicates this. But her work has behind it a rich lineage of human makers of impressions and indexical traces—humans who immersed themselves in the very problem of getting to grips with non-human phenomena. The especially interesting thing about Watson's work (at least, in an overarching sense, beyond the many interesting features of the individual paintings themselves) is its particular negotiation of this tension between the artist and her materials and the environment she explores and represents, which is complex, but also goes back to a simple issue of time and representation associated with the emergence of painting *en plein air* (painting on the spot, out of doors) in late nineteenth-century French impressionist painting. There lies the origin, or most significant precedent, for Watson's distinctive and novel methods. The issue of time referred to here is the fact of successive moments of representation, a game of cat and mouse between the continually changing "referent" (the environment witnessed) and the continually changing representation (the painter painting); the moment represented and the moment of representation. Watson's work, it is suggested here, is a full-bodied, enlarged, reinvigorated and necessarily irregular form of painting *en plein air*.

Painting outdoors was not invented by the impressionists in the 1860s—plenty of artists had tried it before. But it was in their pictures, and especially in those of Claude Monet, that *plein air* principles and problems were most energetically and conspicuously pursued. They started with a dedication to truthfulness—the accurate representation of the perception of ready-to-hand realities in the landscape around Paris. To translate observed effects of light and atmosphere directly into paint on canvas, before the climatic conditions changed, demanded speed of execution, a sketch-like manner. Monet took this principle most to heart, almost to the point of dogma, insisting on the primacy of the eye—the painting as a record of what the eye registers, rather than what is known or thought to be there, conceptualised or reflected upon. Through the 1880s and 1890s, Monet ever more systematically adopted the habit of taking multiple canvases out to his painting site, working on them in turn as the conditions changed, capturing multiple moments in time over the course of a series. There were haystacks, poplar trees, cathedral facades, and ultimately the water lilies and pictures of his garden at Giverny. Yet as the system became more deliberate and elaborate, paradoxically it increasingly became unsystematic, even a pretext. From the first, the constant shuttling between looking and applying paint must have caused, in the artist, a sense of the incommensurability these things—at best, an awareness of human fallibility. And in amongst those hurried moments must surely have been judgements about the construction and formal values of the painting as a painting; getting a picture “right”, in this sense, invariably involves complicated decisions and a good deal of time, much more than the instant before a cloud passes in front of the sun.

The objectivity of light and colour hitting the eye was never—could never have been—a comprehensive objectivity, and the extent to which Monet's system slipped—the ruptures in its logic—became as, or more, significant than its integrity. Monet's late paintings register equally the subjective responses and the capricious faculty of memory, as he worked over the paintings repeatedly to capture...well, we know not, really—perhaps his memory of what he thought it looked like at the time, perhaps his expectations for what he thought it should have looked like, or perhaps his vision for what the painting should look like as a painting. The paint marks are immeasurably complex, layered and varied, as if he was inventing as many ways as he could of, simply, representing something. In the scale of the large water lily paintings too, such as those in the Orangerie, in Paris, one senses the body of the artist working manfully across the panels, in great sweeps and jabs. Watson has seen these first hand. And her pictures present an immensely varied vocabulary of vigorous marks or gestures, and embodied experience of place, with colour—the mainstay of Monet's light-filled vision—playing a comparative minor role, constrained by the range of inks that are appropriate to use in the natural environment. Although Monet did have a talented eye, his art was *not* merely ocular, and for a contemporary painter such as Watson, it opens up difficult and sustaining questions about how to represent place, or, in Horn's terms, how to place.



Ink and moving
light in the forest
2023

ink and pigment on card
320 × 230 × 90 mm

The “success” of Monet, we might say, was to fail to produce the faithful-to-the-eye *plein air* painting he set out to invent, but rather an infinitely inventive range of ways of putting paint on a surface. It is the impossibility of historical *plein air* painting, the unrealistic nature of the oft-repeated principles now well documented in art historical texts, that Watson takes up in her own way, candidly injecting body and memory and improvised mark-making into the equation. Impressionism to some extent concealed time, in purporting to capture a moment, though time is there in the gaps between looking and making. But in Watson's work, the passage of time, an expansive experience of place, is explicitly built into the work, foregrounded, even, and that experience begins well before ink hits canvas.

Watson chooses sites she feels connected to, has grown up with, or lived with, for some time; verdant and undeveloped, rather than built up or cultivated; usually hilly or mountainous and covered in native bush. She walks, sometimes for hours, sometimes through physically difficult terrain, carrying loose reams of (often large) canvas, eventually, settling on a spot, and placing the canvas, draping it between trees or over rocks, loosely sculpting it into a landscape of its own, with valleys and peaks, then pouring ink onto it such as to register, roughly, the shape of the land and its textures and details. At the conclusion of this painting “event”, Watson generally considers the work unfinished. Subsequent phases of painting take place in the studio, the canvas now unfurled, tacked to the wall, the artist working from memories, photographs and feelings. The process is a mixture, then, of indexical, figurative and abstracted representation, extending well beyond the in-person engagement with the subject.

Watson's methods manifestly do not depend largely on painting in the popular understanding of that verb. There are certainly passages of time in which the artist applies liquid pigment to canvas, initially by way of pouring, then by more directed mark-making. But these are simply the material manifestations of far more extensive reaches of experience and knowledge, which in turn are made up both of moments intentionally directed, or choreographed, by the artist with a view to making paintings, and moments in which she has other things on her mind but are nonetheless instrumental. In essence, Watson is a landscape painter. However, the act of looking at, and depicting, a place is just part of the process by which her landscapes get made.

The paintings are typically, as a result of all this, initially incoherent to the gaze that seeks the immediate presence of scene or subject. Light is another important factor. They present a rich chiaroscuro, the unpredictable massing of dark pictorial incident, sometimes documenting not just the observation of light and shadow playing amongst the trees but the way they fall on the canvas itself. There are varying dispersed densities of visual information, often impervious to being decoded as representation, and riven by the straightening out of the canvas after the initial folding and inking. Indeed, the work is as much sculpting, as it is painting, in the broad, “expanded field” sense of the word, where actions such as walking and climbing and moving around the site and the canvas are integral to the work, as well as, of course, the

shaping of the canvas, draping and twisting, scrunching and pleating. In the flattened, exhibited canvas, space and time are dispersed, eccentrically distributed, rather than logical, linear, cohesive or continuous. The folded canvas, tacked up at the site, causes a pour of ink, or a dragging of the brush, to traverse areas that are bunched together at the time but pulled apart when the canvas is flattened later. A moment of experience is therefore broken up and is experienced by the viewer in multiple places, at multiple moments, not altogether unlike cubism—an indexical cubism, perhaps. Sometimes the ink can be seen to have fallen down a canvas crevasse, spraying or spitting like a waterfall and collecting as a lake in a hollow of canvas below, eventually sinking and drying to form a flattened residue that merely hints at its former force and volume. The final output is clearly a discrete picture, rather than a sculpture or performance, though one that has a relationship to histories of environmental art—the artist's sensitivity to making as a process of give and take between person and place, and the artwork's direct imprint of stuff in the world, of life (of the human and non-human kind).

Watson's particular treatment of the canvas also recalls the work of the Hungarian-French artist Simon Hantai (1922–2008), who from about 1960 developed a method of “pliage”, folding the canvas, applying the paint while it was in its folded form, so that the final work, with the canvas unfolded, recorded a changed relationship between the original composition of marks and pools of paint. Like Watson, Hantai often worked with a reduced palette, sometimes black and white, and his paintings appear abstract, in keeping with the influence of American “action painting”, or the gestural arm of the 1940s–50s New York School—Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Franz Kline and others. But surrealist automatic drawing—the discovery of imagery and latent thoughts and desires in seemingly abstract form—also played a part, as it had with abstract expressionism, and Hantai, in the early part of his career, had been closely involved with the surrealists, including Andre Breton. More interesting still, in relation to Watson's work, is that Hantai, from 1966, lived in a small village in the forest of Fontainebleau, and painted a series of pliage works called “Les Meuns” that allude to the place, if not through depiction than through some kind of pictorial analogy for the experience, feelings or attachments, he felt there, while equally evoking the movements and desires of the human body. Hantai once referred to surrealism in terms of the imperative to “exalt as much as possible that obscure part that, in the human, begins to be human no more”,² which seems apt for Watson's realisation of the role of “non-human” phenomena in the making of her art.

While Watson seeks sites in which botanical and geological actants outnumber, or envelop, human ones, the precedents for the indexical process of her work tend, on the whole, to have been rooted to urban spaces and human endeavour. Hungarian-American artist Sari Dienes, working in New York in the 1950s, made a series of “Sidewalk Rubbings”, using a roller, or brayer, in the manner of a printmaker, to obtain ink traces of grills and manhole covers on large sheets of paper and fabric. Dienes, having emigrated to the United States from Europe, brought with her a knowledge of surrealism

(she was no doubt aware of Max Ernst's "grattage" technique, for example), while her New York rubbings coincided with the growing influence of abstract expressionist gestural mark-making (also seen as a form of indexical trace, less of the material world than of the artist's body and soul). Sometimes, younger artists, including Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg, would assist Dienes in her endeavour. Their own work too has a place in the tradition that Watson is extending Twombly for his twitchy, abstract, mark-making, and Rauschenberg for, in particular, making a print by means of a car wheel driven through ink. To the list of urban indexers, we can add the more recent figure of Ingrid Calame, who works with a team of assistants to record grungy and marginal sites, the tracings being subsequently translated, or indeed transformed, into abstract paintings that can appear far removed from their source.

The American artist Helen Mirra, who goes further afield than the city, with rubbings, prints and drawings derived from walking expeditions, has said that she aims to "resist idealised notions of nature".³ Likewise, Watson's pictures are not always instantly attractive, or even intelligible, not least because they combine layers of representation, translated through various phases, far removed in appearance from the place itself (if such a place exists). Perhaps the closest relation to Watson's art—to the balancing act between different experiences of a site, between representation and abstraction, indexical and gestural mark-making—is the work of Vivian Suter. Living in rural Guatemala since the early 1980s, Suter's approach to painting was profoundly affected by a 2005 hurricane that caused a mudslide through her studio, damaging a number of paintings—or enhancing them. For Suter came to accept the impacts of mud and detritus, and has subsequently adopted the method of working outside, where organic matter can attach itself to the work, and of leaving her canvases under the trees for extended periods of time to accrue further weathering and chance additions. In Suter's work, as in Watson's, there is almost a sense of the paintings themselves doing their own witnessing of the environment while the artist sleeps or does other things, and merely gathers together and structures what the environment and the materials provide.

Watson demonstrates care, risk and openness in her methods, aware that the environment she traverses and documents exerts an influence on her experiences and paintings, while seeking to minimise her own influence upon it. Those methods have, indeed, been in part shaped by post-humanist and new materialist critiques of anthropocentric behaviours put forward by such thinkers as Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway. Yet it is possible to overstate the extent to which such theory can be used to explain Watson's practice, located as it is as much within human-centred art historical traditions as it is in less obviously human-influenced environments, and within personal and spiritual desires to place, or ground, herself and her art. It is doubtful that one can ever get out of one's own way (and it is probably this that preserves the phenomenon of art and makes it endlessly interesting). Moreover, the time Watson puts into her process is important less for ecological reasons than for the sake of making paintings that invite us to spend time with them, finding

pleasure in the aesthetic density that is achieved when an artist grapples with the problems of representing the world as they experience it. Watson's paintings are, I have endeavoured to show, an extension of the tradition of *plein air* painting, full of time and sensory experience. If there remains, still, a tension between the moment represented and the moment of representing, it is a tension that prolongs our own experience of the paintings, tracing and lingering over the rifts and complexities of pictorial representation.

1_Roni Horn, interviewed by Artspace Editors, "Iceland Could Have Been Anywhere: Roni Horn on How to Be Present Amidst Shifting Landscapes", 14 July 2017, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/roni-horn-phaidon-54896.

2_Simon Hantai, quoted in Molly Warnock, "Engendering Pliage: Simon Hantai's *Meuns*", *Nonsite*, no. 6 (1 July 2012), https://nonsite.org/engendering-pilage-simon-hantais-meuns/#foot_src_14-4086.

3_Helen Mirra, quoted in Paul Scraton, "Out from the Studio—The Art of Helen Mirra", 5 January 2012, <https://underagreysky.com/2012/01/05/out-from-the-studio-the-art-of-helen-mirra/>.