

Overlook

Photography series

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How can Romantic aesthetics and contemporary digital photography challenge the Romantic fantasy of Aotearoa/New-Zealand as an untouched paradise?

When I first traveled from France to New-Zealand in 2019, I arrived with preconceived ideas of this place where the nature was untouched, preserving its pristine landscapes, and a harmonious society. Generally, I tend to romanticise my experiences and to cultivate an inner dreamy state where fantasies help me move through the complexities of life. I first traveled all around this country in a van accompanied by other backpackers from around the world. We dreamed and lived this Romantic way of life, and were all wearing rose-tinted glasses rendering us blind to the *other sides* of this place. I constituted a body of work, *Landscapes of New-Zealand*, a series of photographs highly influenced by Romantic paintings entirely focused on manifesting this fantasy of pristine landscapes. It took a long time before this myth of perfect New-Zealand started to erode. When I decided to stay in the country as these friends left, I opened my eyes and realised that the pristine nature we were exploring was only contained in small pockets called *reserves* which were surrounded by contaminated farmlands. As new backpackers entered the country and replicated the same behaviors, it appeared to me that our fantasised van-life was mostly a commodified touristic product. In November 2024, the hīkoi protesting against the Treaty Principles Bill exposed a fragmented society and fostered the need of educating myself on New-Zealand's colonial history. Romantic aesthetics, with its emphasis on emotional responses, have the power to forge perceptions of places. As I slowly became aware of its role in colonial propaganda and contemporary tourism strategies, I felt the need to evolve my artistic practice. Through this body of work, I aim at using the same Romantic aesthetics and themes to now interrogate, critique, and transform my perception of Aotearoa/New-Zealand's landscapes and place. As I transition from a tourist position to a more long-term situation, this series aims at proposing a transition from idealised representation to a more critical view of place.

Theoretical framework and background

Defining Romantic aesthetics and the Romantic sublime

The Romantic movement has shaped Western representations of nature and landscapes.

The movement emerged at the end of the 18th century as a reaction against the rationalism, order, and categorisations of the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution (Tarnas, 1991). It emphasised

emotion over reason, and subjective experience over

objective reality. As a reaction against industrialisation, the

Romantic movement also idealised nature as a wild and

untamed space. Before the 18th century, nature was only

depicted in paintings as a backdrop for mythological and

biblical episodes and was rarely the focus. The Romantic

movement pivoted that approach by developing an aesthetic

admiration for nature. Romantic approaches to

representations of landscapes were diverse, tending towards

the beautiful and the picturesque, but also depicting nature

as a wild place that would inspire both admiration and fear,

which would constitute the Romantic sublime. In 1757, Edmund Burke described the sublime as a

feeling combining awe and wonder, often provoked by terrifying aspects of nature (Burke, 1757).

The definition of the sublime was then refined later by Emmanuel Kant, who shifted the focus to

the subjective experience, describing the sublime as a feeling of both displeasure and pleasure

arising from our imagination's inadequacy to comprehend overwhelming phenomena (Kant, 1790).

In *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, (Friedrich, 1818), a wanderer observes a vast landscape

expanding towards the horizon. The painting evokes a tension when faced by the overwhelming

strength of nature. By not showing the face of the person, the painting also invites the audience into



FIGURE 1. FRIEDRICH, C. D. (1818).
*DER WANDERER ÜBER DEM
NEBELMEER* [PAINTING].

an identification, a subjective projection of the self into the scene. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* illustrates how Romantic aesthetics explores the sublime tension between man and nature in western culture of the 19th century. By understanding how Romanticism shaped the Western view on nature, we can understand how these codes were later used to portray New-Zealand as an untouched paradise.

Romantic aesthetics as a Colonising Tool

Romantic aesthetics have been part of the promotion of the colonisation of New-Zealand since early 19th century. The New-Zealand Company promoted a systematic colonisation of this “new” land.

Part of this promotion was the use of romantic paintings from painters such as William Fox to attract new settlers (Belich, 1996). Similarly, John Clarke Hoyte’s paintings from mid 19th century drew on Romantic aesthetics to depict idealised representations of Aotearoa. In *Whangaroa, n.d*,

(figure 2.) mountains and forests occupy most of the composition, while a tiny boat is dwarfed at the bottom left side of the frame. The boat can symbolise settlers arriving in this new land, while the use of scale reinforces a feeling of awe. The soft tones and colors created by the oil on



FIGURE 2. HOYTE, J. B. C. (N.D.). *WHANGAROA* [WATERCOLOUR]. MUTUALART.

canvas evoke peace and harmony, suggesting that

the *new* land, while revealing rough mountain peaks and mysterious forests, is still welcoming. The boat, by suggesting a projection of the audience into the painting, reinforces the Romantic idea of subjectivity and personal emotions.

While depicting the beauty of New-Zealand’s landscapes, this representation of place also

completely ignores indigenous Māori, and obscures contemporary social realities. Around the mid 19th century, multiple conflicts between Pakeha (European settlers) and Māori occurred. In 1858, Europeans outnumbered Māori for the first time, and the settlers realised that the promise of land in this “new garden of Eden” was deceiving, as most of the Waikato region, one of the most fertile region of the country, belonged to Māori. Tensions erupted in the Waikato wars in the 1860s, which ended by the invasion of the Waikato and the confiscation of one million acres from Māori (Radio New Zealand, 2021). Romantic aesthetics have forged the colonial idealisation of New-Zealand as an empty and idyllic land ready for settlement. This idealised portrayal definitely played a role in justifying colonial ambitions, resulting in conflicts and land confiscation.

Contemporary New-Zealand cultivates an illusion of a bicultural society but overlooks societal challenges. Māori culture gets represented as entire part of Aotearoa/New-Zealand culture such as Te Reo being one of the official language of the country, Matariki recently becoming a public holiday, or on more ordinary ways as the Haka during rugby games and the Black Fern on Air New Zealand airplanes. From an outsider perspective, these could hint that this country is equally bicultural. This narrowed vision overlooks important disparities between Pākehā and Māori. In reality, Māori have a lower survival rate, suffer increased poverty, are subject to high incarceration rates, and are disconnected from their native language (Ross, 2020. p.32). Land rights are also still subjects of dispute. In Raglan (Whāingaroa), the Raglan airfield land, originally known as Te Kōpua, belonged to the Tainui people until it was taken by the Crown in 1941 for wartime emergency landing purposes (Buchanan, 2023). After the land was taken, many Māori left the area, which scattered the community. Born in Te Kōpua, local activist Te Tuaiwa Hautai "Eva" Rickard fought multiple councils to have the land returned, and after years of fighting, the land is slowly returning to its people. However, challenges remain regarding the zone and the actual use of the land under its reserve status, and the process could take years. These examples show that

biculturalism is more a problematic idea rather than an actual equitable partnership.

This research on the historical background and the contemporary situation of New-Zealand acts as a work of conscientisation that would help my practice of landscape photography to present the landscape of Raglan in a different light. While my work approaches this discourse indirectly, I will be using recurring visual themes such as scale, pivoting point of views, and extended separation between figures to hint at these dilemmas.

The Romantic idea of New-Zealand in contemporary tourism.

Romantic sublime aesthetics are used by tourism companies in their advertising campaigns. Santos (2017) describes how Romantic themes profoundly shape contemporary tourism. Tourism “reflects a tendency to a (re)enchantment of the world, well-being and freedom” (2017, p.9.). The New-

Zealand 100% Pure New-Zealand Campaign

incarnates an engagement with “adventure, spectacular scenery, and our rich culture – highlighting the purely New Zealand experience that is unique to the rest of the world”, (Tourism New Zealand 2024). After the success of The Lord of The Rings trilogy, the 100% Middle Earth campaign was also created, which set New-Zealand’s landscapes as backdrops representing Middle Earth’s fantasy world. Visitors who come to New-Zealand expect to go, as Bilbo Baggins declares in the movie The Hobbit, “on an adventure”. Santos describes the Romantic ideals in tourism, such as

seeking intense emotions, imagining the perfect beauty, and drawing inspiration from the past.



FIGURE 3. BRAQUART, F. (2024). *BACK OF A RENTAL VAN IN RAGLAN* [PHOTOGRAPH].

Together, these ideals create fantasies and myths that shape the contemporary tourist experience. This photograph (figure 3) taken during the 2025 summer season in Raglan shows the back of a rental van. On it has been printed a large image of Roys Peak in the South Island. It is depicted as a dramatic landscape where a glacial lake is enclaved by snowy peaks. In the foreground, a lone figure stands at the summit with his arms spread triumphantly. The slogan reads: "Star in your own adventure". This image is clearly reminiscent of *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, by using the same composition and themes (a lone figure dominating a wild natural landscape) and therefore directly uses Romantic aesthetics to suggest strong feelings, such as awe and admiration in face of great natural elements, and reinforces the idea of the self triumphant over wild spaces. The landscape is vast and empty, which is a recurring theme in colonial and settler imagery, where land is imaged as waiting to be discovered and tamed. This image is an example of how Romantic sublime aesthetics are used for capitalistic tourism narratives in New-Zealand.

New-Zealand is branded as an untouched paradise, but the reality is hidden and often avoided. 100% Pure New-Zealand may promote this country as being Pure, but the reality is that New-Zealand has a waste problem. Only around 35% of its household waste is recycled or reused, which is one of the lowest recovery rates in the world (Te Waihangā, 2025). New-Zealand households also generate more solid waste than any other OECD country, draining the environment and the land used for disposal. In order to reduce landfill in the country, over 98000 tonnes of waste were exported offshore between January 2018 and March 2021. Half of it was sent to Malaysia and Thailand where illegal dumping and incineration near homes and schools caused serious health issues as well as environmental destruction (Greenpeace Aotearoa, 2024). While this is not directly related to tourism, it portrays how New-Zealand, by willing to keep its shiny fantasy alive, sometimes avoids dealing with a problem by pushing it out of sight.

Personal background and artistic practice influenced by Romanticism and tourism.

My photography practice was influenced by Romanticism, tourism, and Western views of the



FIGURE 4. BRAQUART, F. (2019). *TARANAKI FROM THREE SISTERS* [PHOTOGRAPH].

world. As a result, my previous photographic work presented New-Zealand as a mysterious and unknown place. During my time studying a Bachelor's degree in Humanities at The University of Rennes II, France, I learned about Western art theories such as the rules of composition in paintings, studied the classic movements from Antiquity to the Renaissance, and explored western philosophies. This degree, while giving me critical and analytical tools, was deeply rooted into western culture and traditions, and consequently shaped my view of the world. France has its colonial history, but while being taught about it, it was always from the perspective of the coloniser, which lacks nuance. French education often overlooks the

damages caused by colonisation while still trying to promote its good aspects (Lokmane, 2024). My photography practice evolved into a more advanced state as I applied the newly acquired theoretical knowledge to my artistic work. I then worked as a photographer for diverse companies, mostly in the tourism industry. Without being completely aware of it, I continually used Romantic aesthetics to promote destinations and experiences. In 2019, I embarked on a journey to New-Zealand, aiming at creating a photographic body of work of New-Zealand landscapes.

This photograph (Figure 4) of Mount Taranaki between Three Sisters on the West coast of the Waikato, depicts a tiny figure right in the middle of the composition in a sublime interaction with nature. The colours are desaturated and muted, giving a painterly look. I took care of framing the

“perfect” view, as the landscape seems empty and pristine. Initially, there were three figures walking into that frame. I digitally erased two of them, and displaced the last one onto the exact centre of the composition. I wanted this photo to artificially be as perfect as possible. This image Romanticises the landscapes of New-Zealand and perpetuates the myth of an untouched paradise. It is an example of the very Romantic aesthetics and themes I now critique and intend to reuse to challenge and complicate these narratives.

The ambiguous nature of photography.

Photography is both objective and subjective, placing it at the point of connection between fantasy and reality. The epistemic and mechanical nature of photography gives this medium the capacity to show what reality is. The Orthodox view on photography insists on photographs as visual proofs of a subject produced by a machine independent of its operator’s inner beliefs (Abell, 2018). What makes photography special is that it presents something that happened. Photography reveals a reality “that has been” (Barthes, 1980). When Barthes finds and looks at a photograph of the Jardin d’Hiver, (on which he could observe the face of his recently deceased mother), a feeling emerged from it more real than if it was just a memory. At the same time, photography is also a subjective representation of reality, and this subjectivity resides in the framing of its subjects. What to show and not to show relies entirely on a photographer’s choices and decisions. The framing, digital modifications, and narratives proposed are choices that a photographer makes during the photographic process. Whereas documentary comes from an observable reality that comes outside the camera, the fictional aspect of photography comes from the subjective mind behind the machine, and as a result, a photograph is a representation created by the photographer, and a photograph cannot be neutral (Balsom, 2018). The photographic device, by its nature, has the capacity to record “what is”, but the photography itself is the result of a subjective intention. The combination of the two sets the act of photographing as the liminal point between objectivity and

subjectivity, between reality and fantasy. My *landscapes of New-Zealand* series portrayed idyllic spaces but I believe that by becoming conscious of the complex situations of a place and by interacting with it, it would allow my work to be more representative of its realities.

Methodology

Summary of process.

Proposing a transition from Romantic representation of landscapes to a more critical engagement with a place has made me rethink my photographic process through a more grounded engagement with a location, a focus on spontaneous moments, and diverse lights.

Location

In this project, I aimed at developing a more authentic and grounded connection with the Raglan coastline, which I see as a physical location and also as a personal “safe space” that holds emotional and mental significance. I first thought about going back to the places I already photographed during my previous landscape photography project. I wanted to see if I could pivot my point of view and propose a different representation of these landscapes. However, briefly visiting wouldn’t have allowed me to connect with a specific location on a deeper level and I wouldn’t have been able to see it evolve on a day-by day basis. The problem with that approach is that it would have kept me mentally and physically distant from the photographed places, and I would still be photographing a preconceived and distant idea of these places.

Aiming at a more grounded connection with a place that I want to eventually call Home pushed me to pick a more personal location. I visit Ngarunui beach and drive along the coastline of Raglan

multiple times a week. I go on long walks, and surf when the conditions are suitable. I used to spend time there with friends who like me were travelers. Time went by and most of these friends are back to their home country, and I now feel somehow disconnected from them and from the past we shared there. Despite this sense of disconnection, I want to be part of this place, Raglan, and Aotearoa/New-Zealand. To explore and create this connection, I photographed scenes from the same vantage points over time. I used a telephoto lens for most of my shots, which allowed me to photograph from a distance. While this approach could create a sense of disconnection from the subjects depicted, the lens also acts as a bridge to engage and becomes part of the environment and its local activities. Through this process, I am not portraying a location as an outsider like I used to, but the repeated act of photographing the same place becomes a path to connecting and slowly becoming a part of it.

Moments

I explored a shift in my photography practice where I moved away from staging every detail of a scene to let the place tell a more genuine story of its own. In my previous photographic projects, I always staged my photographs and asked people to move to the desired area in my compositions, or digitally modified the position of the subjects to the ideal spot. I had an image in mind I wanted to achieve and was using both the landscape as a backdrop and the persons as props. In contrast, this new body of work only features spontaneous moments where I patiently waited for random strangers to walk across the frame, or in the case of photographing the ocean, waited for the swell to create a frame where the figures would freely move onto.

By learning about some *realities* of New-Zealand, I hoped that my eye would focus on abstract representations of these contemporary social. For example, I would focus on capturing scenes that would describe points of tension between ideal and recreational interactions with place such as

capturing people being on their phone in a sublime nature, capturing the car tracks on the beach, etc. In order to explore themes of disconnection between fantasy and reality, I would focus on photographing people at great distance from each other. During long sessions of photoshoot from the same spot, I would reminisce about what I learned about contemporary New-Zealand, hoping that I would pick a detail, resulting in a photograph that would tell a form of “truth” about this place. I tried to photograph moments hinting at environmental issues, societal dilemmas, and the idea of a perfect country. In the end the body of work is not meant to pick up one issue and explore it thoroughly, but rather a means to evoke an overiewing sense of “*something feels off here*”.

Light

While exploring the impact of light during this project, I focused on shooting during the dramatic golden hours of sunset on Ngarunui beach, drawing on Romantic and sublime influences, while also challenging myself to photograph at other times of the day to embrace a broader experience of these places. Light is a key component of photography, and its qualities change dramatically throughout the day. I tend to shoot at sunrise and sunset to get the same dramatic light as depicted in Romantic paintings. Light at dawn and dusk creates situations where key elements are highly distinct, naturally enhancing contrasts and reinforcing depth of field. However, while I continued shooting at sunset as a reminiscence of my Romantic influences and as an echo of the sublime, I also pushed myself to shoot at different times of the day when the light wasn’t as pleasing, allowing me to engage with a wider range of scenes and situations. On the Raglan coastline, I shot and constituted a finalised body of work including a diverse range of lights, emphasising my intention of connecting with broader contemporary realities of New-Zealand.

Contextual analysis

The following section looks at how different artists interacted with and applied Romantic concepts, and how I drew inspiration from them as I was compiling this body of work.

Romantic themes and photography

Romantic aesthetics can be present in photography as a tool to reinforce the fantasy of a place as seen in touristic campaigns. But the ideas diffused by the Romantic movement can also be used as reminiscence and critique of said fantasies.

Siri Hayes - *En plein Air*

Siri Hayes uses elements of the Romantic movement as a critique of contemporary tendency to romanticise experiences. In her series of photographs *En plein Air; 2008*, Siri Hayes explores themes of colonial history, human impact, and the legacy of Western's art influence on perceptions of the world. With the help of students and other collaborators, she sets scenes in the back country of Australia around the city of Melbourne. Some photos such as *Wanderer above a sea of images* (figure 5) are staged and the figures are acting under the direction of the artist during a residency at Monash University's Gippsland Center.

With humor, Hayes depicts the human impact on the land, and is a reminder of how Australia's representation has been built on western and Romantic ideas. In this photograph below, a figure stands in the landscape holding a phone and is taking images of the view. The environment is shaped by rolling hills covered by forests where most of the trees have been cut. The view expands in the distance where cities and cooling towers diffuse a white smoke that blends with the clouds.

The name *Wanderer above a sea of images and the image* is a direct reference to Friedrich,

emphasising the importance of the Romantic movement in the conception of place in western societies.



FIGURE 5. HAYES, S. (2008). *WANDERER ABOVE A SEA OF IMAGES* [PHOTOGRAPH].

Exploring the tension between fantasy and reality

My project led me to explore the tensions between the dream of a pristine environment versus the reality observable when looking at touristic interactions with a place. The project was based in Raglan, where the population increases ten times during the summer season (2200 persons lived in Raglan in 2018, and 22,000 persons a week visited the town during the peak season of that year. (Jackson, 2018)). Siri Hayes staged her photographs, and asked people to move to her desired spot. By doing so, she emphasises the disconnection we can develop with places, where genuine interactions with landscape have been replaced by a staged confirmation of a fantasy developed by touristic narratives. By contrast, I decided to photograph candid moments, and use the camera as a recording tool. By using the same techniques, but in a diametrically opposed way, I aim at exploring in a new light the same themes as Hayes.

This photograph (figure 6) was taken at dusk at Manu Bay in Raglan on the 13 March 2025 at 9pm.



FIGURE 6. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *MANU BAY* [PHOTOGRAPH].

Manu Bay is a worldwide famous surf spot which sometimes creates tensions with the local population. Surfing is an individual sport, as a wave can only be ridden by one surfer at a time. Surf spots such as Manu Bay are contested by many individuals and there's only as many waves as a swell can produce. Whereas surfing can be seen as a community driven practice where participants take care of each other in a dangerous environment, it can become the stage of arguments when a spot gets too crowded. Formally, this photographic work is the result of blending Friedrich's and Hayes's work into one image. The wave is a reminder of the mountain in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, and the time of day is reminiscent of Friedrich's work. Where Friedrich depicted one wanderer, this image shows many, and connects with contemporary realities of tourism. The dream of being alone in nature is now replaced by the reality of crowds. Siri Hayes' colour treatment is subtle and minimalist, grounded in reality. Hayes chose to shoot mostly during daytime, which is a contrasting take on Romanticism's tendency to depict scenes during dusk or dawn such as in Turner's *Slave ships*, 1840. As a counterpoint, I used colours and a formal treatment inspired by Romantic aesthetics.

Like Hayes, this work uses Romantic themes to challenge the representation of a place. Whereas she used natural colours and shot during daytime in order to connect her work to contemporary realities, I shot at dusk and used a treatment similar to Romantic paintings. Whereas Siri Hayes staged her photographs to humorously point out our fantasised contemporary relation to a place, I shot a candid moment revealing a reality of tourism. By creating this piece, my work creates a dialogue with Hayes by moving from staged critique to an observational reality, and from the fantasy of the lone wanderer to an encounter with crowds. In this way, I am proposing a piece that is both Romantic and critical, both aesthetically subjective and revealing of a contemporary reality.

The contemporary Sublime

I explored how the Romantic concept of sublime is now used in contemporary photography. The sublime in contemporary societies does now integrate, as Morley calls it in his Introduction, the Technological sublime which incorporates human excess in our contemporary world, “while technology looks at how to a large extent it is now the man-made world of machines that produces in us many of the kinds of emotional states once associated with nature” (Morley, 2010, p.20).

Structure and the complexities of modern life

Andreas Gursky

Contemporary photography works by Andreas Gursky have been often framed as part of the contemporary sublime, and explore the shift from the sublime in nature to human excess (Ohlin, 2002). Gursky’s work explores the technological advancements and the complexities of modern life.

Nha Trang, (Gursky, 2004) presents a multitude of people at work in a factory in Vietnam. From a



FIGURE 7. GURSKY, A. (2004). *NHA TRANG* [PHOTOGRAPH].

bird's eye view, he captured multiple photographs and digitally assembled them to create a highly structured and highly detailed image. The image is separated in multiple sections delimited by black electro-cables and creates an overwhelming sense of structure and confinement, while also rewarding closer inspection by being able to clearly depict every single person photographed. This digital manipulation allows the tension between the individual (micro) and the collective or systemic (macro), evoking awe and unease. This image also creates a sublime reaction because of its scale. It measures height: 295.7cm, width: 207cm: "if you get very close to them (the photographs),

they can be read down to the smallest detail. Seen from a distance, they become mega signs."

(Gursky, 2004)

Inspired by this approach to photographing crowds in a structured way, I went to my usual spot during the summer tourist season hoping to capture overwhelming crowds. However, while I personally felt the influx of tourists was immense, the visible reality only showed bearable numbers. This image (figure 8) taken on 12 December 2024 shows dozens of people enjoying the water and sun of Raglan summer. I waited for the swell to create parallel lines similar to the structure observed in *Nha Trang*. The lines could express that New-Zealand is now categorised and organised on Western standards, and is not a wild and empty space as depicted in the touristic guides. The contrast here with Gursky is that the structure is created by a natural phenomenon, and instead of having people working in almost a slavish way, the people on the beach are enjoying

their holidays.



FIGURE 8. BRAQUART, F. (2024).
NGARUNUI BEACH [PHOTOGRAPH].

By attempting a Gursky type of photography in the context of Aotearoa/New-Zealand, I am trying to express the idea that this country is not as empty as the Romantic paintings and propaganda were trying to promote. I had the feeling that this place was overcrowded, (accentuated by the heat of the air, the noise, the screams, and the sound of the waves), but when we are comparing this image to *Nha Trang*, we are forced to admit that my image does not look that busy and fails to evoke a sense of sublime. This country is not as crowded as Europe, where we can see

beaches submerged by tourists as depicted in other works of Gursky.

This image is important regardless, and has its place in the final series. After having stayed in New-Zealand for six years, and having experienced it when the borders were closed, I can see how the population fluctuates between seasons. This influx of people every summer is creating issues such as overflowing waste water, and housing saturated by Airbnbs causing people to struggle to find a home during peak season for example. By hinting at the overwhelming and chaotic world depicted by Gursky, I intend to warn what New-Zealand could become.

The Uncanny from the other side of the world.

The structure and sublime aspect of Gursky's work inspired me to explore a direction in my landscape photography practice where I would try to express the uncanny feeling arising from New-

Zealand landscapes. When I first came to New-Zealand, I was really surprised at how the landscapes of the Waikato were so similar to my home country in the North of France. These places can both be described as a succession of endless rolling green hills mostly constituted of farmlands and separated by hedges. I expected to drive through green native bushes as described by the touristic book guides, but I was disillusioned by this place that looked like the one I had just left. At that moment, I felt naive, deceived, and the hills I was looking at were giving me an uncanny feeling. How can this place, so far away from home, look so strangely familiar and yet feel so unsettlingly different ? In his introduction, Morley describes the uncanny as a form of sublime experience: “The Uncanny picks up on aspects of the terror-sublime, emphasising the conditions whereby in addressing the experience we are also confronting a strange and often unsettling otherness.” (Morley, 2010, p.20).



FIGURE 9. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *ROLLING HILLS* [PHOTOGRAPH].

After learning about the Waikato wars and the land confiscation during the 19th century, I partly realised why I felt this way.

Bushes and native trees have been replaced by cows and farms in an attempt to create a New Europe, while trying to undermine what was once existing before colonisation. This whole visible process anchored in a recent past gives to the New-Zealand landscape its unsettling, uncanny look. Not because it looks like Europe, but because it shows what is no longer.

This image (figure 9) is a combination of two images repeated symmetrically on the horizontal. It was taken at sunrise from the top of Mount Karioi in March 2025. The light gives a dramatic overall look to the image, and the structure of horizontal lines created by the hedges is reminiscent of Gursky's approach to composition.

My intention here by playing with this mirror effect is to work on multiple conceptual layers. New-Zealand is on the other side of the world of Europe, literally positioned upside down. Also, this is one of the most European looking landscapes I could find in New-Zealand, and reminds me not only of my home town, but also of some of the Romantic paintings of Italy, which works as double meaning. Lastly, the opposition and the upside-down effect is here used to create a destabilising and dazing effect on the viewer, reminiscent of the uncanny feeling I felt when I first arrived in New-Zealand.

After reflection and listening to feedback, this image does not fit into the series as it takes away from the other images. It is an outlier, and is too different from the other pieces of work as it is the only one that presents that type of digital manipulation, as well as being a bit too far away from the coastline. After reflection, I decided to exclude this piece, but I kept it aside as a potential start for a future new series exploring more in depth the concept of how the Uncanny could be visually represented in the context of Aotearoa/New-Zealand.

The Sublime and the ordinary

Contemporary artists such as New-Zealand photographer Anne Noble and US photographer Richard Misrach and have interacted with the concept of the sublime, both in challenging our perceptions of places and scenes.

Anne Noble - Antarctica

In an interview, Anne Noble declared: "Antarctica is known as the last great wilderness on Earth. So in one way it is perfectly true to describe Antarctica as wilderness because of its scale as a largely

uninhabited ice continent.” (Noble & Palmer Albers, 2014). Anne Noble has worked extensively in Antarctica and has been interested in the idea of landscape, wilderness, and contemporary interactions with places. On multiple trips to Antarctica, Anne Noble documented and proposed a pivoting view on the idea of wilderness. In 2008, she spent six weeks as a US National Science Foundation Arts Fellow, photographing a series named *Aurina*, featuring six photographs of *Piss Poles*.



FIGURE 10. NOBLE, A. (2008). *PISS POLES, ANTARTICA, AURINA #4*

Every photograph of the series shows a single pole in the middle of an immaculate snowscape. These poles were approved sites for pissing. Noble was drawn to the frozen yellow puddles of urine at the base of the poles. The large-scale photographs depicting a white landscape are reminiscent of our Romantic idea of a pristine and wild Antarctica, but Noble proposes a shift. The pole is representative of the practical and ordinary use we have of a place we consider pristine, sublime, and perfect, and is the metaphor for our intrusion into the landscape. Antarctica is “an environment that is on the one hand extraordinarily beautiful and at the same time incomprehensible” (Noble & Palmer Albers, 2014), and is also a place we are practically exploiting for potential scientific discoveries. Formally, Noble Romantically presents her work. The image itself, depicting an immaculate white contrasting with a golden tint in the middle of the composition, looks pristine. The name of the series *Aurina*, meaning the color of gold in vulgar Latin (and obviously urine) poetically connects her work to the root of western language, and gives a hint of Romantic nostalgia as well as an atemporal feel to the series.

Anne Noble's series is an example of how a practical use of the landscape can be depicted

Romantically to challenge the Romantic idea of a place. The white and gold might have pristine and perfect connotations, but Noble uses these ideas to disrupt our mental representation of place.

Richard Misrach - On the beach

Richard Misrach is an American photographer who worked with the concept of the sublime in a contemporary way by associating it with everyday life scenes of the beach. His *On the Beach, 2007* series particularly explores the tension between the fantasy of the beach and its reality as a recreational space. Misrach's work greatly inspired me to capture scenes of everyday life on the Raglan main beach.

In an interview, Richard Misrach's wife Myriam Weisang Misrach described how the series *On the Beach* started in Hawaii when Misrach photographed people on the beaches, "After the events of 9/11, he looked down to the water and saw these bodies." Later during that interview, Misrach declared "you see these small figures in this vast sublime ocean, and you realise how vulnerable we are" (Art 21., 2022). The events of 9/11 were traumatising particularly for American citizens, and Misrach's work definitely expressed the idea that the USA was not this untouchable superpower.



FIGURE 11. MISRACH, R. (2013).
UNTITLED [PHOTOGRAPH].

In this image (figure 11), a small figure is floating on the surface of the ocean, in almost a meditative state. The following image (figure 12), depicts an everyday life scene on the beach of Hawaii, where people seem to enjoy the sun and their holiday. Similarly to Gursky,

Misrach's images are printed on a large scale (159.4 × 209.6 cm), and are so “detailed you can read the headlines on a beachgoer's newspaper” (Fletcher, 2008).

The first image evokes a strong vulnerability and definitely gives a sense of the sublime, whereas in the second image, the multiplicity of the figures and their behavior disturb this sublime interpretation. Whereas the Romantic sublime emphasised an encounter with wild nature, Misrach's work mostly depicts his subjects in a passive state where they feel disconnected from their surroundings, and opens the way for a new look on the sublime in nature.



FIGURE 12. MISRACH, R. (2002).
UNTITLED [PHOTOGRAPH].

A shift in my photography practice

This image (figure 13) of Ngarunui beach was taken during the Raglan summer 2025 and depicts four people playing a ball game in the sand. While taking this photo, I was reminiscing about Noble's work, and tried to capture the beach as an empty space, almost out of the world. The desaturated silver tones of the sand contrast with the colorful figures. Anne Noble's *Piss Pole* was an anchor point in my photography practice where I tried to pivot my point of view away from idealised scenes. I started to capture marking on the sand as our intrusion into the landscape that we mostly think of as harmless. The composition and tones have also been inspired by Noble, but the

scale of the figures as well as their recreative interaction with the landscape is reminiscent of Misrach's series.

In previous work, I often tried to capture figures that seemed lost in nature, almost going on an adventure in a wild landscape. My early work *Wharariki Beach*, 2019 shows a figure walking on a pristine beach on the west coast of the South Island. The place looks wild and untouched, which is a lie. These rocks are renowned worldwide and have been widely photographed, even used as the Windows 10 default wallpaper. The image I created is giving a Romantic view of Wharariki by presenting an empty landscape, and also by depicting a tiny figure as an adventurer, a *wanderer*, suggesting a sublime interaction with the place.



FIGURE 14. BRAQUART, F. (2019). *WHARARIKI BEACH* [PHOTOGRAPH].

Romanticised scene associated with a fantasised treatment of Wharariki beach.



FIGURE 13. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *NGARUNUI BEACH* [PHOTOGRAPH].

Mundane scene on the Raglan beach treated dramatically

The more recent photo I took in Raglan acts as a counter take on my previous work, as it captures an everyday life scene instead of trying to create an idealised view of this place. Misrach proposed a take on the sublime where his images challenged the idea of an invulnerable nation, I then took this approach to challenge the sublime idea of New-Zealand as an untouched paradise. The subject depicted is appearing mundane at a first glance, but I am using a dramatic treatment to suggest that

this representation of the place might be more complicated than it looks. This artificial and dramatic alteration of mundane scenes is something I explored further later during the project.

A new approach to colour

Colour can draw attention and can help to create the kind of emotional reaction necessary to evoke a sense of the sublime, or at least to relate to the Romantic emphasis on emotion over reason. While constituting this body of work, I slowly realised that I was mostly using the same colour palette, and this reduced amount of colour intensity was limiting the emotional impact of the work on the viewer. After studying the work of Benjamin David Sherry, I then explored how I could integrate colours in a meaningful way.

Bold colours and landscape photography

American photographer David Benjamin Sherry explored how colour can help to change the perception of places. From 2013 to 2022, he photographed well known natural places in North America, but dramatically altered the colours of each image. By manipulating the colour balance and saturation of his images, Sherry created a series of images that changes our perception of these places.

Following the tradition of American landscape photographers such as Hansel Adams, Sherry photographed some of the most known views of the US National Parks such as Yosemite, Joshua Tree, Jumbo Rocks, etc. Living in the American West, Sherry was looking at ways to express “what is continuing to be done before our eyes”, and “what it means to see the land as a commodity.” (The Davis, 2021, 31:00). Sherry is also exploring his place on this land and his preoccupation to not repeat the same mistakes of the past.



FIGURE 15. SHERRY, D. B. (2020). *SUNSET OF THE SIERRA DEL CARMEN MOUNTAINS ALONG THE RIO GRANDE, BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK, TEXAS.*

Sunset on the Sierra Del Carmen shows a view on a wide and wild landscape in Big Bend national park, Texas. This view can be seen as reminiscent of Ansel Adams's work *Sand Bar, Rio Grande, Big Bend National Park* photographed in 1947. It presents the river and forests emptied of human presence, and glorifies the magnificence of nature. Yet, instead of proposing a traditional black and white

photograph, Sherry proposed a colourful take on

this view. Colour is the space to process and think, and step back. Colour allows us to think about space as a mindset instead of a physical space “color is a conduit for me to convey and promote an emotional resonance for the landscape” (Sherry, n.d.). In other words, by putting colour as frontally as Sherry does, colour can help us understand that what we see is a constructed space. Sherry pushes us back from the depicted subject and, by going through the filter of colour, we allow ourselves to go further and think about what is shown before our eyes.

Rose tinted spectacles

In 1853, E.G. Wakefield described New-Zealand: “Everything was ultra *couleur de rose*, such land, such country, such crops, such vegetables! The carrots were not like ordinary carrots, they outcarroted carrots!” (Belich, 1996, p.301). This quote, coming from a document used as colonial propaganda, describes a feeling most tourists can feel (I did feel it too) once arrived in this place. These *rose* tinted glasses can last a long time, and is now also part of tourism agency strategies to sell New-Zealand as a destination around the world.

On the 18th of February, I photographed this scene (figure 16) from my habitual shooting location



FIGURE 16. BRAQUART, F. (2025).
NGARUNUI BEACH [PHOTOGRAPH].

in Raglan. It depicts a couple where a person is taking a photo of another one raising her arms to the sky while having her feet in the water. I separated the image in two parts (water and sand) and, following Shelly's approach, I dramatically altered the colours and saturation of each part, which gives the pink look to the overall image as a reminiscence of Wakefield's quote.

This image acts as a central point to my project, as it proposes an overview of my ideas. Firstly, the subjects reflect the contemporary realities of New-Zealand as a touristic destination. As discussed earlier, Raglan attracts travelers from all around the world. Secondly, following the Romantic tradition, I am using colors to create an emotional response to the piece, and to engage with the feelings of the viewer. My intention is that, following Friedrich's approach, the viewer would project himself into the image (I believe that everyone took a photo of their friends or themselves on the beach at some point in their life) and that the subjects, because of the scale and the distance rendering it unidentifiable, can act as projections of the self. I am hoping that this image would reveal our contemporary usage of a place, where we see the landscape as a backdrop. In this interaction with a place, what we see and what we engage with is often completely disconnected from reality to the point of putting the landscape, as Baudrillard calls it, a *simulacra*, an image disconnected from any kind of reality (Baudrillard, 1981). As Noble says, "photography renders us blind." When we take photographs of ourselves on the beach, are we seeing the place for what it is? Or do we see it how we imagined it the same way I Romanticised New-Zealand? "In trying to

make Antarctica a part of us”, Noble says, “we are actually alienating ourselves further from it” (Noble & Palmer, 2014). The pink sand is a way to integrate a *rose tinted glasses* visual representation of an idealised place. Obviously, as viewers, we know that the colour of the sand has been altered, and the colour is hinting that what we see is a constructed image. But because we know that the sand is not in reality pink, does it mean that, in real life, we are able to really see the true colour of the sand? When we open our eyes, do we really see what lies before us? Or do we only look out for what confirms our inner fantasies?

Refinement process and feedback

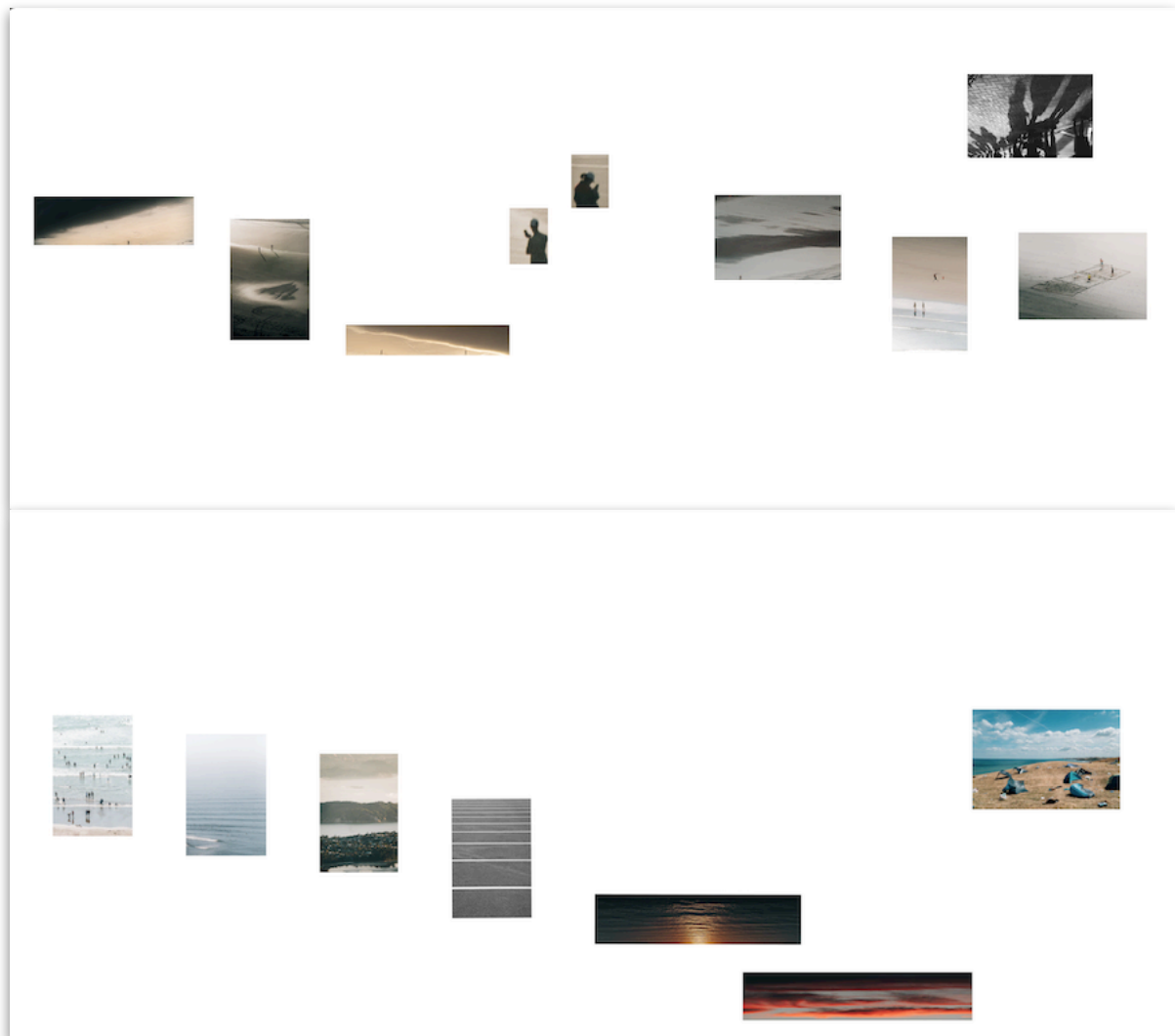


FIGURE 17. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *BLIND CRITIQUE CURATION IN X-BLOCK* [IMAGE].

In February 2025 (figure 17), a blind critique held in X block at Wintec discussed and helped refining aspects of the series. Peers noted my strong use of lines and visual layering. The upside-down images successfully suggested ambiguity while the painterly tones reinforced a dreamlike look. The curation was described as having a musical and hopeful flow, following a natural narrative from left to right, yet intentionally disturbed by references to environmental issues with

themes and colours becoming more saturated towards the end of the series. However, other feedback pointed the disparity of approaches and themes. At that point, I was experimenting with different type of subjects other than just landscapes. While the images gave together an overall flow to the series, I also realised that they individually lacked impact.



FIGURE 18. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *CURATION IN X-BLOCK* [PHOTOGRAPH].



FIGURE 19. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *CURATION IN X-BLOCK* [PHOTOGRAPH].



FIGURE 20. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *CURATION IN X-BLOCK* [PHOTOGRAPH].

From that stage on, I decided to focus my practice on the Raglan coastline and started experimenting more with colours. In June 2025 (figures 18 to 20), I printed and framed a series of nine photographs. The curation didn't have as much of a specific narrative order like the previous one and allowed each image to express its own idea. The main difficulty I faced during the selection

of works was to find a good balance between proposing Romantic images and maintaining an ambiguous tension throughout the series. The feedback was good overall, and suggestions were made regarding colours of frames and about the final selection of images. Peers commented that every photograph had a beautiful and satisfying look but that they could also feel something “weird” about them. While some were asking how real were the images and how much they were manipulated, others expressed that the series made them feel “human” and connected to a bigger whole. During my last experimentations, peers expressed a feeling mixed of both connection and disconnection, mentioning an impression of *void*.

For the final series (figures 21 to 26), I am planning on upscaling most of the images and print them on large format. The curation gives more space for each image to breathe, and the selection is now refined to incorporate a better balance between Romantic and ambiguous images.

Each image is named after the place it depicts - Toto Gorge, Manu Bay, Ngarunui beach - which follows the tradition of landscape photography. The name of the series - Overlook - came out as a result of long discussions with peers on how a title should express enough about the work without being didactic. The title should not primarily tell what the work is about, but express what the work does. Overlook tells what the work is - a series of images from vantage points (overlooks) on the beach and the ocean - but also expresses Romantic aesthetics’ effects of overlooking reality.



FIGURE 21. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].

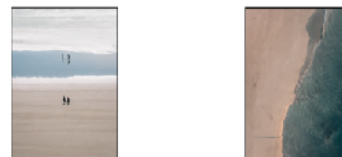


FIGURE 22. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].

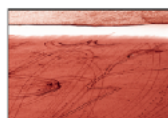


FIGURE 23. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].



FIGURE 24. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].



FIGURE 25. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].



FIGURE 26. BRAQUART, F. (2025). *FINALS* [IMAGE].

Conclusion

I came to Aotearoa/New Zealand having been sold the Romantic myth of an untouched paradise. As demonstrated by their usage in colonial propaganda and contemporary tourism, Romantic representations of places are misleading, and overlook damage caused by colonisation or environmental concerns. As a self-aware work, this series is the result of the need for a more critical engagement with artistic representations of the landscape. Photography by its technical nature and epistemic qualities sits between the objective world and subjective representations. By reshaping my understanding of New-Zealand landscapes through a deeper study of historical and contemporary social, I tried to express tensions and ambiguity by using the very aesthetic codes and themes that made me idealise this place. Scale, space, and colours are visual themes included that allow to step back, think of the landscape as a mindset, and reflect on our role in these places. Whereas the Romantic sublime as a structure of feeling depicts nature as an overwhelming force, the contemporary sublime integrates complex themes reflecting contemporary human conditions, which I both explored as a critical reflection on contemporary interactions with nature. Photographing the Raglan coastline over a year has helped me to connect with Raglan on a different level, by observing societal patterns and recreational interactions. I also developed an affection for the lines drawn by the waves on the sand, where mundanity and spectacular can occur at once. While it was often difficult to maintain ambiguity throughout the series, as the process involved producing Romantic images, reception and feedback have alluded to a feeling of connection and disconnection emanating from the images, which satisfies the aim of the work. As an aspiring resident of Aotearoa/New-Zealand, the work compiled here - like the metaphorical use of a telephoto lens - acts as a bridge to close a gap between my prior touristic Romanticisation of this place and my progressive critical engagement with its complex realities.

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