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*Impossible Blue:
Photography, Loss and Longing*

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the post-graduate degree
of Master of Fine Arts at
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For Helen & Rosana
My Mother & My Lover

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Abstract

Impossible Blue: Photographs, Loss and Longing (2019-20) is a meditation on imagined utopias – based on the visions of past ‘outsider artists’, historical mythologies and current environmental issues. The research undertaken to produce this work unearthed parallels between the life cycle of the individual as well as the human species as a collective because of the loss and longing which we share: we are all separated from our origins at birth and long for a return that is seemingly impossible. This text suggests photography as an artistic means to bridge the gap – a portal through which we can touch the impossible, if for a moment. My work in *Impossible Blue* seeks to challenge the viewer regarding common concepts of male-centric utopias and projections of colonial mythologies throughout the landscape of Aotearoa, as well as by creating tension between fiction and reality.

Concepts of photography as a means to describe our personal and collective loss and longing were inspired by the ideas of renowned photographic theorists including Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Geoffrey Batchen (b.1956) who illuminated, for me, the intricate links between motherhood and photography. Specific works and artistic processes of female photographers, artists and Pre-Raphaelites spanning the 19th to 21st centuries are rich in this text as evidence to support these concepts. Other concepts included in this text, such as eco- and hydro-feminism, projected mythologies and the visualisation of fears and desires for the future, seek to discuss what a utopian ideal for the future could look like. These concepts are inspired by individual and grouped female artists from Aotearoa and abroad, as well as my own ancestral mythologies, including Baltic paganism.

Introduction

Impossible Blue: Photography, Loss and Longing explores, through different photographic processes and formats, tensions between aspects of contemporary culture and history. The research traverses staged fictionalised tableaux and fragments of lived experience, to explore key themes including the potency of water, in particular the ocean within the human psyche; paganism in the Baltic States; symbolism associated with female long hair; ways of thinking about the child/mother relationship and various yonic forms that reignite the deeply-rooted feeling of the loss of our first home; the potency of specific historical creative precedents, particularly female photographers working at a time of immense societal and technological change in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the theoretical writings of Roland Barthes, and the tension of colonial mythologies being projected upon landscapes, particularly in Aotearoa, as a way to have dominance over them.

In an attempt to unravel and interrogate these themes, I have created a pictorial reality in which fictionalised aspects meld and overlap with autobiographical references, as a means to make visible and attend to fears and desires which stem from personal experience, but which also have broader relevance within contemporary visual culture. The material processes I am working with here (including cyanotype on glass and fabric, digitally printed colour photographs, sculpture and clothing design) consciously speak to a lineage of photographic processes and contexts which span the 19th to the 21st centuries.

The utopian community depicted in my images is made up of a mixture of close friends, my lover and strangers. I conceive of them as the survivors of a fictional, unnamed ecological disaster. Within this constructed environment, they recreate old mythologies, portray the reality of their (and my) present-day world, and dramatise life during a fictional doomsday, acting out my fears for the future. The lifestyle pictured celebrates self-sufficiency and sees basic human needs being met in harmony with the natural coastal environment this community inhabits. Though this work flirts with time-travel and portals, physical aspects (including dress, piercings and tattoos and hairstyles) root my characters in the contemporary world and suggest the climate change crisis and current environmental issues as the catalyst for this apocalyptic disaster.

In late 2019, whilst this thesis was forming, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her sudden sickness catapulted me into action, into depicting post-apocalyptic spaces and the impending doom of an unlivable world. It would be impossible for me to explore my relationship with my mother and the thought of her failing health without considering in

tandem the failing health of ‘Mother Earth’, the ground we walk upon and the water from which we seek refuge and survive.

The processes of making the images that this text accompanies were always entwined with otherworldly and ocean-like spaces. Many times, creating cyanotypes in the darkroom felt like a return to the womb – a pre-birth silence, stillness and wetness – a concept that Sándor Ferenczi (one of the earliest psychoanalysts) considers as the collective drive of our human existence. The yonic spaces of caves and shells are explored and documented in this project. The exteriors of these objects are photographed, but the work intentionally withholds depiction of their interior realms, suggesting that these yonic spaces be considered as portals to realms humankind long to return to. Through this investigation I suggest we find this longing to be for our first home – not the womb, but the sea.

Within the womb-like space of the darkroom, images miraculously emerged from a concoction of liquids and light exposure: riverbanks, caves, swamps and members of an imaginary commune, cloaked in long hair. A myriad of shells also found their way from second-hand shops into the archive, smooth with folds that evoke the female form, jagged teeth on the outer alluding to threat. One photographed figure holds a shell to their ear, listening for the ocean, longing for home. A shell once holding a creature, now empty, now filled with dry, dark space – a coffin.

This text seeks to provide a foundation for, and an extrapolation of, the creative practice, citing primarily eco-feminist and hydro-feminist thinking, as well as a suite of autobiographical personal catalysts that have spurred my research.

1. Wade In

‘... the retention of head hair was due to the need of a free-floating baby to hang onto something particularly when it came time to suckle from the breast. The development of thicker hair during pregnancy adds weight to this idea.’

Cunnane, S. C. (1980). The Aquatic Ape Theory reconsidered. *Medical Hypotheses*, Volume 6, Issue 1, January 1980, p. 49-58.

In November, 2018, I flew to Lithuania as a pilgrimage to explore my matriarchal lineage. Lithuania is at the heart of the revival of paganism, following hundreds of years of forced abstinence from pagan practices. The founder of Romuva (the 20th century revival of the ancient pagan traditions and practices of Lithuanians), Jonas Trinkūnas, describes a short history of Lithuanian paganism at a conference about ancient traditions, held in Mumbai, India in 2003:

‘It was only in 1387 that the sacred fire was extinguished in Eastern, 1413 – in Western Lithuania... the conservative Lithuanian population maintained the traditions of their ancestors and secretly worshipped their gods for several centuries more... the Balts were the very last European Pagans’ (Trinkūnas, 2003).

I came to learn of the resilience and resurgence of paganism in the Baltics. Lithuania resisted Christianity for a long period – it was the last of all European countries to officially become Christian and, even then, this label seems to have been adopted largely for political reasons. As stated by Trinkūnas in the same 2003 address, ‘Lithuania was the only state in Europe who resisted the [Christian military aggression], but was constrained to accept Christianity in 1387 politically for surviving’. Even after this ‘acceptance’ of Christianity, paganism continued to survive in Lithuania, mostly in the countryside where ‘a large section of the peasantry, though nominally Catholic, kept alive their traditional pagan spirituality which was deeply ingrained in their everyday lives’ (Corban-Arthen, 2013).

During my stay in Lithuania, I participated in their annual long hair contest and took photographs of some of the contestants (figs. 1.1-1.4). Hair plays a starring role in the realms of paganism. In Russian paganism, St. Paraskeva Piatnitsa (‘St. Friday’), who was thought to aid in many practical aspects including spinning and weaving, fertility and defending her followers from various illnesses, is often portrayed as tall and thin with long tresses of hair hanging down, ‘for hair hanging loose, unbraided and uncovered, was thought to have magic power’ (Matossian, 1973).

Since participating in the long hair contest in Lithuania, I imagined holding my own in New Zealand. I made posters and displayed them around Wellington, and posted on the internet seeking people with an abundance of hair. In my photographic image of a grouping of long-haired people amongst the rockpools in New Zealand, I imagined this group as modern incarnations of mythological visions: nymphs, sirens and sprites, somewhere between human and fish, and a hark back to the ‘aquatic ape’. They are captured in their own discrete world, with tresses down their backs, hair often floating in front of their faces, entertaining an inner world outside of what the viewer is invited to witness.

Judy Darragh’s 1993 documentary, *Hair*, was an important starting place for my research into theories of human evolution regarding human hair, specifically on the bodies of women. Darragh considers the fascination with female body hair in Western culture, mostly directed by a male gaze. A decade before the release of this documentary, Professor of English at New York City’s John Jay College, Elisabeth G. Gitter, writes her paper titled *The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination* (1984), which demonstrates the magical abilities afforded to hair in literature, often paired with sexual connotations. She writes of a woman’s hair as being able to be ‘invested with independent energy: enchanting – and enchanted – her gleaming tresses both expressed her mythic power and were its source’ (Gitter, 1984). She continues, ‘The combing and displaying of hair, as suggested by the legends of alluring mermaids who sit on rocks singing and combing their beautiful hair (fig. 1.5) ... constitute a sexual exhibition’ and ‘the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display, for... the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality’ (Gitter, 1984).

One thread in Judy Darragh’s documentary spoke of a theory which mentions reasoning for the long hair attributed to women, in stark contrast to the sexualised version Elisabeth Gitter discusses. This was my introduction to the aquatic ape theory (AAT). The hypothesis, in the simplest of terms, stipulates that the hairlessness of modern-day humans (one of several physical changes) stemmed from a prehistoric period of semi-aquatic life in which humans waded into the water to avoid predators and to have access to a more plentiful source of food.

The AAT was first proposed by marine biologist Sir Alister Hardy in 1960 and was later championed by Elaine Morgan in her 1972 publication, *The Descent of Woman*, a direct feminist response to Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Elaine Morgan’s 1972 treatise on the aquatic ape theory was considered controversial because she was writing the voice of woman into history; she ‘referred to our ancestors as

“she”” (Brooks, 2003). Morgan insists that women and children as central to our evolution story, as survival depends predominantly upon reproduction for the continuation of the species. Morgan posits that the idea of wading into water would have been firstly to protect the child that clung to the mother’s hip and fur, and would have, in the water, clung to the long hair stemming from her head, which would have remained on her otherwise hairless body for this express purpose, it being above water.¹

The concepts that make up the aquatic ape theory intrigued me primarily because of this pragmatic reasoning for long head hair in women, rather than the many arguments for sexual selection which focus on women’s hair as a signal for their attractiveness to a mate. Women’s hair length and ‘quality’ is considered by some sources to be an indicator of youth and reproductive status (and, thus, desirability to a mate): ‘A woman who has physical constraints on reproduction (i.e., postmenopause, chronic illness, or pregnancy) should not be interested in attracting a mate for reproductive reasons and thus may have a shorter hairstyle’ (Hinz & Matz, 2001).

The roles of our female ancestors, the mystical symbolisation of their long head hair as well as practical reasoning all resonate with my research for this project and mostly stem from my reading of Elaine Morgan’s work.

¹ Many other aspects of the physicality of modern-day humans are considered by those of the aquatic ape school of thought as results of our past of temporary semi-aquatic living. Sir Alistair Hardy says these traits include bipedality (standing and walking on two legs), slight webbing between fingers and the layer of subcutaneous fat that we carry all over our body, which is substantially thicker than it is in other primates and would aid with buoyancy and warmth in water. We are also the only species of ‘land’ mammal that mates in a face-to-face position which, other than us, only aquatic mammals do.

List of Illustrations

1: Wade In

Figs. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4

McDonald, C. (2018). Long Hair Competition, Lithuania, 2018 [black and white 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 1.5

McDonald, C. (2019). *Hair brushing* [screenshot from moving image].



2. From the Deep Waters of Sleep

'Birth is regularly expressed in dreams by some connection with water: one falls into water or one comes out of the water...'

Freud, S. (1915-17). *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis and Dream Psychology*. Musicaicum Books: London.

'...the mother's body is at once camera, develop, and photographic darkroom. Giving birth to an image, the mother is another name for photography.'

Cadava, E. & Corbès-Rocca, P. 'Notes on Love and Photography', *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 105–140.

The ocean as home seems to make sense. Longing for a return to the womb, an idea which has been, and continues to be, explored at length by psychoanalysts, is considered by some as a symbolisation of our true longing, which is a return to our *first* home – the sea. One of the earliest to consider this longing, Sándor Ferenczi, characterises it as 'a nostalgia for some kind of pelagic origin, both for the species and for the individual consciousness' (Ferenczi, 1925).

In his work titled *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1924), Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933) expands upon his concept that the purpose of all human life is to return home, which is symbolised by our individual longing to return to the silent womb of our mother and 'the comfort of its amniotic fluids' (Ferenczi, 1924). According to Ferenczi, sex is linked to the concept of 'thalassal regression' meaning 'longing for the sea-life from which man emerged to primeval times' (ibid., p. 186). He posits that the identification between the male ego and the male genitalia is a sign that the act of sex is an attempt by the ego to return to the womb, and that the purpose of sex (to return to the womb) is in fact 'the purpose of this whole evolution' (Ferenczi, 1924).

Considering the microcosmic life cycle and desires of the individual alongside the macrocosm that is the evolutionary life cycle of the human species is a concept that my work seeks to mirror. The group of individuals that I assembled into my constructed narrative and photographed are, at once, depicting my personal fears and desires as well as speaking to collective fears for the future on a global scale. For instance, the photograph of my mother's body immediately prior to surgery to remove a cancerous tumour is connected to deeply personal fears surrounding a threat against her life yet, at the same time, in the context of this body of work as a whole, my mother is a character in a constructed narrative that speaks to the threat against survival we face as a species due to the environmental crisis we are in, as

elucidated by an overwhelming number of dependable resources (the NASA website alone sites climate change statements from eighteen scientific associations).

Longing to return to our first home and considering the vagina as a portal is echoed in many of my photographic images, which capture yonic shapes and other echoes of the womb, such as the photograph of what appears to be some kind of hybrid creature (fig. 2.1), perhaps an undine or mythological sea-human, swimming in amniotic waters, almost like viewing a foetus via sonogram. Human features are clearly present in this figure, though the arms and legs – their hard outlines morphed and made soft by waves – glide through the water like fins and flippers.

My large-scale cyanotype of the conch shell (figs. 2.2, 2.3) hangs floor-to-ceiling, the side of its opening fully exposed. There is no apology for such boldness, no veil. I wanted this piece to recall French 19th century painter Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *L'Origine du Monde* (*The Origin of the World*) (fig. 2.4), in which is depicted a front-on eye-level view of a vulva. The eroticism of the nature of this painting paired with its title, which speaks to creation and therefore the womb, fit the narrative of a longing to return 'home'. With this same concept in mind, my conch shell is constructed to be large enough to give the viewer the sense that they could walk right inside it. At about 8 feet tall, the scale to which the shell is exaggerated allows the image to become a portal: one can imagine stepping inside the lips of the shell as if into a cave, or back into the womb itself. The deep cyanotype blue is intended to place the portal somewhere in the deep, somewhere beyond the sea... perhaps all the way back to the silence and stillness of pre-life existence. The scale to which one grows once one exits the womb makes return impossible: the dimension to which I have created this figurative portal back to the womb allows for the impossible to rub up against reality.

'...by reproducing them, fragmenting them, by blowing them up to degrade the surface and lose any naturalistic detail, and exploiting a limited, unnatural colour palette in ways that present the photographic image as a simulacral surface...'

Riches, H. (2012). Projecting Touch: Francesca Woodman's Late "Blueprints". *Photographies*, Volume 5, 2012, Issue 2, p. 135-57.

Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), who was known for her small-scale black-and-white photographs, created ‘*Blueprint for a Temple*’ (1980) (fig. 2.5) a large-scale piece produced shortly before her death – a departure, in Woodman’s work and life. ‘*Blueprint for a Temple*’ is comprised of twenty-nine photographs which have been projected onto photosensitised paper and then developed with photographic chemicals (a process used by architects to make quick and cheap copies of construction drawings. This process is known as diazotype, whiteprint and blue-line process, respectively). Some photographs in this piece measure two metres tall – the use of a cheap medium seems to be the impetus for Woodman to have experimented with heroic scale for the first time.

British photographer and botanist Anna Atkins (1799-1871), who was an elected member of the London Botanical Society, known as the first person to produce a photobook (fig. 2.6) and one of the earliest to see photography as an effective tool to record scientific references, was influential in my work, in particular because of the vast collection of cyanotypes that she produced, as well as her pioneering enterprise in a realm mostly populated by men.

Interestingly, Francesca Woodman appears to offer a nod to Anna Atkins in a photograph from 1976 (fig. 2.7), which shows Woodman collecting as much seaweed in her dress as she could carry. A subsequent series of four images (fig. 2.8) shows Woodman, now in her studio, laying the collected specimens on a roll of white paper, which I interpret as another hat-tip to Atkins’ seaweed and other botanical collected treasures placed on the cyanotyped page. My large-scale cyanotype, printed on cotton bedsheets (fig. 2.9-2.11), of seaweed tumbling down my lover’s back, is my homage to Atkins, too. The seaweed is a stand-in for long head hair and, along with her nakedness, speaks to the supposed coastal living in our past.

‘Through the image of the umbilical cord... [Roland] Barthes makes photography – taking the picture, developing it, printing and looking at it, reading it and writing about it – inherently familial and material, akin to the very process of life and death... And he defines loss – the cutting of that cord... as central to the experience of both family and photography’.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

As the womb can be understood as a portal to our collective past, so too can the photograph function a portal between the universal and the personal. The aperture of the camera itself allows light to pass through it, which then records and makes a copy of a

fleeting moment. Photographs capture much more than mere two-dimensional images: they hold within them an entire universe of emotion and can mentally transport the viewer to a place and time far removed from the present. In the 19th century, an idea central to the understanding of photography was that the processes of fixing a photograph to paper was not mechanical as such, but was in fact the discovery of nature's ability to illustrate itself. This led to the ethos that the camera possessed power and 'magic' beyond our comprehension. Photography pioneer, Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), stated, on sketching using a camera lucida: '...when the eye was removed from the prism—in which all looked beautiful—I found that the faithless pencil had only left traces on the paper melancholy to behold' (Daniel, 2004).

French theorist Roland Barthes' last book, *Camera Lucida* (1980), one of the key academic writings on photographic theory, is both a theoretical investigation of the emotional characteristics of photography and a eulogy to his deceased mother. As documented in this book, Barthes is searching for a photographic image to represent the loss of his mother. Kaila Howell writes, in the *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal*, that 'one's particular emotional response to a photograph is the trace of a deeper, universal experience that is constitutive of being human: the separation from the (M)other at birth' (Howell, 2015). Barthes' work considers the experience of the separation from the Mother after her death and the connection photography has to this feeling.

'...Photographs bring [the] past to the present by evoking an affective response that recalls the original separation from the (M)other, thereby reminding us of our constant striving—and failure—to reconnect with our mothers...' (Howell, 2015).

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes spends time observing Daniel Boudinet's *Polaroid* (1979) (fig. 2.12) which depicts a bed and window with curtains drawn, and which Barthes uses as the opening image for his book. My reading of the text is that Barthes is connecting losing his mother to losing his first home – the bed representing comfort, warmth, sleep, dreams, other realities and the window representing light, vision and the first photograph, amongst other things. The two large-scale cyanotypes I have made within this body of work are printed on bedsheets, which I and my lover had slept on in the past, and to which they offered us both warmth and comfort.

The photographic image of a person with long, loose hair (fig. 2.13), turned away from the camera, a shell suctioned to their ear, is, too me, reminiscent of Barthes' writing of Boudinet's bed. The figure wears a nightgown, placing them in an unreconciled space between dreaming and waking, listening to and mourning their first home from which they are now physically disconnected. The curtains as the backdrop reference Boudinet's photograph and also highlight the theatrical nature of this staged image, likewise enhanced by the lighting, which seems almost moonlit, by which the figure and the shell are illuminated. Does this character wish the shell (portal) were large enough for them to climb inside of? They are lost, having outgrown their home, wearing a nightgown that reaches the floor, covering the length of their body and giving no clue as to whether aquatic appendage or legs might lie beneath. Via the experiences of nostalgia and dreaming, the impossible desire to return home is made possible; As Barthes attributes Sigmund Freud to state of the mother's body, 'there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there' (Barthes, 1981, p. 40).

List of Illustrations

2: From the Deep Waters of Sleep

Fig. 2.1

McDonald, C. (2019). *Lover in Water* [black and white 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 2.2, 2.3

McDonald, C. (2019). *Conch Shell* [cyanotype on cotton bedsheets].



Fig. 2.4

Courbet, G. (1866). *The Origin of the World* [oil on canvas]. Musée d'Orsay, photograph by Hervé Lewandowski.

Retrieved from [https://www.musee-](https://www.musee-orsay.fr/typo3temp/zoom/tmp_24289c1bd2faa6ff22818c0510d81e74.gif)

[orsay.fr/typo3temp/zoom/tmp_24289c1bd2faa6ff22818c0510d81e74.gif](https://www.musee-orsay.fr/typo3temp/zoom/tmp_24289c1bd2faa6ff22818c0510d81e74.gif)



Fig. 2.5

Woodman, F. (1980). *Blueprint for a Temple* [diazotype]. 440cm × 282.4cm. Accession Number: 2001.737.

Retrieved from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284114>

Fig. 2.6

Atkins, A. (c.1854) Title page of *British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns* [cyanotype]. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Retrieved from <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73152/title-page-of-ibritish-and-photograph-atkins-anna/>

Fig. 2.7

Woodman, F. (1976). Untitled [silver photographic print]. Providence, Rhode Island.

Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17540763.2012.701598>

Fig. 2.8

Woodman, F. (1976). *Spring in Providence # 1–4* [silver photographic prints]. Providence, Rhode Island.

Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17540763.2012.701598>

Fig. 2.9

McDonald, C. (2019). *Seaweed Hair* [black and white 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 2.10

McDonald, C. (2019). *Seaweed Hair* [cyanotype on cotton bedsheets, before sewn together].



Fig. 2.11

McDonald, C. (2019). *Seaweed Hair* [cyanotype on cotton bedsheets].



Fig. 2.12

Boudinet, D. (1979). *Polaroid* [polaroid].

Retrieved from <https://valis79.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/daniel-baudinet-polaroid.jpg?w=940&zoom=2>



Fig. 2.13

McDonald, C. (2019). *Longing* [black and white 35mm photographic print].



3. Freshwater

‘According to [Julia Margaret] Cameron, each photograph used no less than “nine cans of fresh water from the well”’.

Ford, C. (2001-02). Hannah, Charlotte and... Julia. *The Rothschild Archive*, Annual Review of the Year April 2001 – March 2002.

Cyanotype’s inception was in 1842, just three years after the invention of photography. The mythology is that Sir John Herschel discovered that mixing ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide created a photosensitive emulsion that resulted in a deep blue print (Ware, 2014, p. 64). Cyanotype’s stability as a print was then widely recognised; many photographers, including Eadward Muybridge (1830-1904) (fig. 3.1), used the cyanotype printing process as a cheaper and more stable form of documentation (ibid. p. 150). The French painter and photographer, Henri Le Secq (1818-1882), printed his photographs as cyanotypes (fig. 3.2) because the existing silver printing processes (albumen, collodion and gelatin) did not have the longevity and preservation of imagery he desired (ibid. p. 155). Allegedly, Herschel also used cyanotype as a way to copy his handwritten notes multiple times.

‘The reason for the suppressant nature of the color [sic] blue is its relative absence in nature... As a result, the color [sic] blue does not have an automatic response towards our appetite.’

Hussaini, K. (2003). *The Relationship Between Food and Color*.

The sea and the sky are blue, though blue is not the most natural colour, per se (try finding food in nature that is both blue and safe to eat); bruises are blue and blued human skin can signify illness and death²; blue is the most colourfast of natural dyes, contributing to its popular usage in early photographic explorations.

The process of creating cyanotypes requires the use of a womb-like space. I spent many hours in the darkroom and my hands were consistently wet and stained a bruise-hued

² *‘Your doctor might inject a harmless blue dye into the area near the tumor. Your lymphatic system delivers the dye to the sentinel nodes, staining them bright blue. You might notice a change in your skin color at the injection site. This color usually disappears in time, but it can be permanent. You might also notice that your urine is blue for a brief time. The blue dye is typically injected just before the surgical procedure to remove the sentinel nodes.’*

Mayo Clinic Staff, (2019). *Biopsy: Types of biopsy procedures used to diagnose cancer*.

blue from applying chemicals to fabric and glass. It was quiet and dark during most of this process, but for the trickle of tap water washing over fresh prints.

The cyanotype printed directly onto a pane of glasshouse glass (fig. 3.3), purchased from an auction site, is in direct reference to a heavily-romanticised and enduring myth of 20th century photographic glass plate negatives being used as glasshouse panes. Geoffrey Batchen spoke of this in early 2018 at Massey University, whilst presenting research he had done for his lecture titled *Repetition and Difference: A Little History of the Negative* at the Photographer's Gallery, London in September of the same year. (This lecture was presented at a number of institutions and galleries worldwide, including Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Charleston, South Carolina, U.S.A.; Art Gallery of N.S.W., Sydney, Australia; and Dunedin School of Art, Dunedin, New Zealand).

This myth of photographic plate negatives being used in place of glasshouse panes is perpetuated by Ken Burns in his documentary of the American Civil War (1990-91). He mentions the story again in a piece he wrote for the New York Times in 1991, stating that:

‘... thousands [of glass plate negatives] were sold to greenhouses around the nation, not for their images but as replacement glass. In the years after ... the sun slowly burned the image of war from thousands of greenhouse panes’

(Burns, 1991).

Bob Zeller, the President of the Center for Civil War Photography, has since stated that all the negatives that were supposedly dispersed have been accounted for, apparently dismissing the story, though it still remains of interest as it is an example of myth rubbing up against reality.

My use of glass as a surface for cyanotypes is also a reference to one of the earliest photographs in existence, taken by William Fox Talbot: an image of an oriel window at Lacock Abbey of Wiltshire, England, most probably taken in 1835 (fig. 3.4). Geoffery Batchen, in his paper *The Philosophical Window* (2002), plunges into William Fox Talbot's famed photogenic drawing negative which is a dark purple, almost bruised onto the paper. Batchen suggests a myriad of poetical meanings for this image – one example of such is that ‘the photograph ... is a window onto the world ... like a windowing of that world, a framing of it, an accounting of it...’ (p. 102). Batchen also philosophises the chosen methodology for creating the images of this oriel window, the fact that the camera was pointing straight into

the light ‘as if we are looking straight into the sun’ daring us to ‘look into the origins of all looking, into the source of light itself’ (p. 108).

Between 1843 and 1853, the British botanist and photographer Anna Atkins made up to ten thousand cyanotype photograms of varieties of seaweed (fig. 3.5), which she intended to be the plate volume to the *Manual of the British Algae* by William Henry Harvey, which was ultimately published unillustrated in 1841. The size of the print run of Atkins’ own independently created *Photographs of British Algae* (1843) (fig. 3.6) is unknown, but we do know that today there are fewer than twenty in existence today worldwide, each copy unique, as they were handmade by Atkins. Geoffrey Batchen states of Atkins’ work: ‘Lacking any hint of periodicity, these cyanotypes look as if they were made yesterday, offering a trace from the past that nevertheless always remains contemporary’ (Batchen, 2018). There is a fascinating intersection at which this aesthetic time-travelling falls apart – the contemporary and the historical no longer rubbing up against each other, rather, they seem to crash into each other head-first.

I find it equally interesting to include aesthetic markers or references that root my subjects in the contemporary; for example, blue jeans are a staple in the costuming of my subjects. My thought is to root this community in the contemporary world as a way to suggest current environmental issues as a cause for the unnamed ecological event that has occurred. My use of blue jeans also offers a nod to the ‘indigo river’ in China, referring to the part of the Pearl River that connects to the Xintang township, suffering run-off from the 200 million plus pairs of jeans it is said to produce annually.

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3. Freshwater

Fig. 3.1

Muybridge, E. (c.1872-85). Proofs for *Dancing* series [cyanotype]. Serial No. 340-350. Retrieved from https://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/img/jpgs/i_3_02_b.jpg



Fig. 3.2

Le Secq, H. (c.1850-70). *Chapiteaux* [cyanotype]. Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Retrieved from <https://madparis.fr/IMG/arton6355.jpg?1495111453>



Fig. 3.3

McDonald, C. (2019). *Water Burial* [cyanotype on glass].



Fig. 3.4

Fox Talbot, W. H. (c.1835). *The Oriel Window, South Gallery, Lacock Abbey* [paper negative]. The Rubel Collection, Purchase, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee and Anonymous Gifts, 1997. Accession Number: 1997.382.1.

Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h5/h5_1997.382.1.jpg

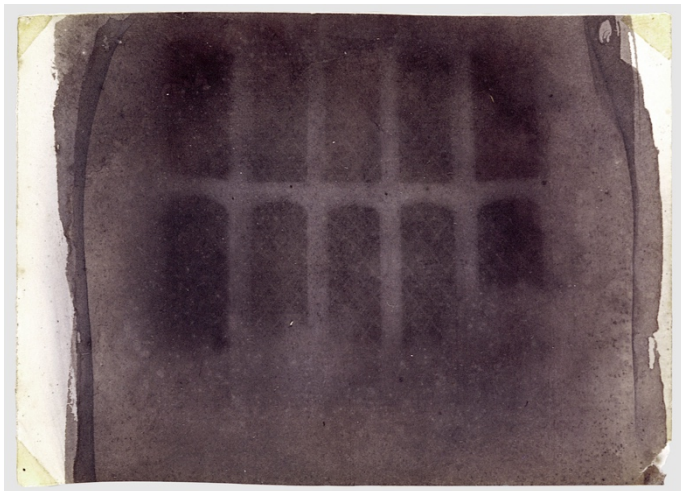


Fig. 3.5

Atkins, A. (1849-50). *Halysotis polypodioides* from Part XII of *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* [cyanotype]. Spencer Collection, the New York Public Library.

https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/2988/4982/products/rs-12693_1024x1024.jpg?v=1519034486



Fig. 3.6

Atkins, A. (1843). Page from *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* [cyanotype].

Retrieved from https://www.zuckerartbooks.com/exhibition/41/exhibition_works/3190

4. The Theatre of Myth

In both style and conception, my images for this work recall Pre-Raphaelite art works of the late 19th century. The seven youthful artists who made up the Pre-Raphaelites, who rebelled against what they considered to be an ‘artificial and mannered approach’ to the style of painting that was taught at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, desired for a return to the ‘simplicity and sincerity’ of the style found in earlier (medieval) art. As Dinah Roe (senior lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, England) aptly surmises: ‘Pre-Raphaelitism found itself paradoxically poised between nostalgia for the past and excitement about the future’ (Roe, 2014). In a similar vein, my work seeks to foster a contemporary vision of utopian community, imagining a harmonious relation between people and land, whilst referencing historical mythologies and a return to the past as far back as the womb (the desire of the individual) and even further back to a watery primeval existence (the desire of the human species).

Pre-Raphaelite paintings were most often influenced by biblical subject matter, medieval romances, Arthurian legends and writers including Chaucer and Shakespeare. John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851-52), as inspired by Shakespeare’s literary character, was a key influence for one of my photographs featuring a death scene in water, with a contemporised blue-jeans-wearing, short-haired Ophelia as my subject.

Julia Margaret Cameron’s work featured a recurring subject: the same Ophelia, who had been popular with Pre-Raphaelite painters. In Cameron’s work (1867), Ophelia is stripped of her usual signifiers – no water is she laying in, no elaborate dress is she wearing (fig. 4.1). She is cloaked in a black robe, out of which poke the heads of two small flowers. Both flowers are closed; one’s outer petals are wilting, and the other is tightly budded, alluding to Ophelia’s shortened life, due to suicide. Her gaze is distant, perhaps even existentialist.

In the same kind of world, in which her work, like the work of the Pre-Raphaelites ‘privileged atmosphere and mood over narrative’, Victorian-era photographer, Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865) produced hundreds of photographs during her brief life (Roe, 2014). Nearly all of these photographs featured her children (of which she had eight) staged in the confinement and isolation of their home in South Kensington, London (fig. 4.2). Hawarden was almost constantly pregnant during the time she was creating photographs; she had her first child in 1846 and her youngest daughter was born in May, 1864. She was known

for her compositions and mise-en-scène images, as well as her subjects – her adolescent daughters held theatrical poses in elaborate costumes that suggest the combined influence of Arthurian and Persian tales, Mozart's operas and pre-Raphaelite painting.

Carol Mavor writes, in her book *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (1999), that ‘Hawarden’s body [is] umbilically linked to her daughters as the photograph is to its referent’ and that the relationship between her and her camera is ‘as if the shutter cord were umbilicus’ (Mavor, 1999). The bond between family, specifically the mother and child, and photography is an aspect I have observed in my own work, specifically in my photograph of my mother’s chest and torso. I believe a kind of role-reversal can be suggested between my mother and I when I took this photo: I was the one connected to the camera, capturing, developing and producing an image of my mother, as (in an allegorical interpretation) she had done to birth me. I explore this role-reversal in more detail later in this thesis.

The genre of theatrical staged photography that Lady Hawarden is partaking in is often referred to as ‘tableau-vivant’, where a pictorial narrative is concentrated in a single frame, a pregnant moment which ‘transformed traditional representations of medieval legends, by taking up the challenge of adapting the realism of photography to fictional subject matters’. (Koudinoff, 2019, p. 12).

Both Julia Margaret Cameron and Lady Hawarden are widely known for their photographic tableaux vivants. A confinement of women (and girls) is evident in most of Hawarden’s photographs, they are made within the home and are of the children she bore. She bounced light off mirrors and glass, leaked shafts of light into emptied rooms and placed her characters within this stage; combining all these elements to create a choreographed scene. It appears Hawarden was playing with confinement and interiority, a melancholy entrapped state. During this same period in which Hawarden used photography as a means to explore her position within interior spaces, male photographers were typically using the medium to explore faraway places.

In contrast to the confined environment of Lady Hawarden’s work is the work of Anne Brigman, who stripped her women subjects of their identifiers and the trappings of civilisation, and melded them with the natural environment; women became trees (fig. 4.4) and melted into lakes, rock became skin and body. Brigman was a self-described pagan who ‘saw her photographic practice as an expression of her faith’ and said that her photographs ‘abstract the solemn majesty of the rocks, the weird trees ... to express the spiritual through

the material' (Waldroup, 2014, p. 450). She hiked into the mountains and photographically portrayed herself and her female friends as intrepid beings in the extreme conditions of nature. They were photographed immersed in various landforms and were undaunted by them; they climbed, ran and swam. The enacting of private rituals in sublime landscapes is epitomised in her first book, titled *Songs of a Pagan* (1949). In these scenes, women (often including herself) are nude in seemingly prehistoric landscapes, mostly photographed in the Sierra Nevada, America. She posed her models against rocky screes, twisted trees and pools of water. Her imagery, as noted by Lynda Jessup, envisages a 'longing for the types of physical or spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined pasts' (2001, p. 4).

Brigman's photographic work emerged during the international photographic movement of pictorialism (during the late 19th and early 20th centuries). This movement was in response to the notion that photography was too mechanical to be creative and taken seriously as art, and therefore self-consciously sought to include the artist's hand in the makings of their photographs. Pictorialists often favoured subject matter that had to do with allegory and emotion, rather than focusing on the specificities of time or place, to emphasise the photographic medium's capability as more than pure document (Ehrens, 1995).

In post-production, Brigman would scratch into her negatives to remove details she did not want, and mask whole areas out. In one example, *The Heart of the Storm* (1902) (fig. 4.5-4.8), an angelic figure consoles a cowering woman amongst a twisted treescape. In post-production, Brigman altered the image by hand, painting directing onto the negative to isolate the figures, and scratching a halo in. She often employed the use of pencils, paint and caustic chemicals to alter her negatives, sometimes sandwiching two or more negatives together to make a print in the darkroom (Evans, 2008).

Julia Margaret Cameron, (who was photographing until 10 years before Brigman's birth) scratched into her negatives and favoured blurred and out-of-focus frames (as did Anne Brigman). It is not uncommon to see technical flaws such as streaks of emulsion, swirls, and even fingerprints in both of their pieces.

In Carol Mavor's seminal text, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (1995), she writes of the unquestionable eroticism, and haptic nature, of Julia Margaret Cameron's hair and fingerprints left on her photographic plate. Cameron scratched into her negatives and favoured blurry and out-of-focus frames. It is not uncommon to see technical flaws such as streaks of emulsion, swirls, and fingerprints that are present in Cameron's pieces. She was known to print from damaged glass plate negatives, sometimes using broken glass plates. I also tend to appreciate the nature of printing onto

glass; it is a painstaking process that almost requires that you leave parts of yourself behind in their creation.

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4. The Theatre of Myth

Fig. 4.1

Cameron, J. M. (1867). *Ophelia Study* [albumen print]. 27cm x 33cm. George Eastman Museum.

Retrieved from <https://image.slidesharecdn.com/photography-120416173708-phpapp01/95/photography-7-728.jpg?cb=1334600899>



Fig. 4.2

Hawarden, C. (1863-64). *Isabella Grace and Clementina Maude Hawarden* [albumen print]. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Retrieved from

https://media.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collection_images/2008BT/2008BT8637_jpg_ds.jpg



Fig. 4.3

Brigman, A. (1906). *Soul of the Blasted Pine* [gelatin silver print].

Retrieved from <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/The-Soul-of-the-Blasted-Pine/BA01D7272177271E>



Fig. 4.4

Brigman, A. (1924). *Invictus* [gelatin silver print].

Retrieved from <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Invictus/9A5EF1546B7DB687>



Fig. 4.5

Brigman, A. (1902). The primary negative of *Heart of the Storm* (Guardian Angel figure protecting a frightened woman) showing no handwork [photographic negative].

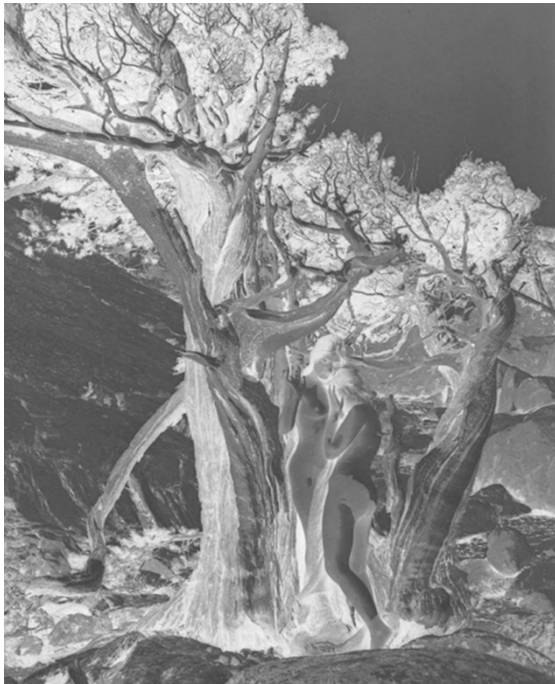


Fig. 4.6

Brigman, A. (1902). The primary negative digitally inverted to show a 'positive print' of *Heart of the Storm* (Guardian Angel figure protecting a frightened woman) showing no handwork [digital inversion photographic positive].



Fig. 4.7

Brigman, A. (1902). *Heart of the Storm (Guardian Angel figure protecting a frightened woman)* edited by Brigman using graphite, matte varnish, red opaque and scratching-out of emulsion. Photograph of the glass plate held by uncredited person.



Fig. 4.8

Brigman, A. (1902). *Heart of the Storm (Guardian Angel figure protecting a frightened woman)* edited by Brigman using graphite, matte varnish, red opaque and scratching-out of emulsion [gelatin silver print].

Retrieved from <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Heart-of-the-Storm--Guardian-Angel-figur/9FBB64D5CB1DAF00>



5. Maiden Voyage

‘The fantasy of masculinist knowledge, of control over the depths of the ocean, relies upon the projection of corporeality onto the womb-like submersibles with their umbilical-cord tethers.’

Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

*...When he passed the border of birth, I laid him at my breast,
Rocked him in my arms.*

(...)

A white body of a man, rocked in the arms of the waves,

Is very small too.

What are we in the infinity of ocean and sky?

A small baby at the breast of eternity.

Johanna Adriana Ader-Appels. *From the Deep Waters of Sleep* (1975). (Johanna is the mother of the late Bas Jan Ader. This poem was written after his death during his attempted solo crossing of the Atlantic Ocean as part of his performance artwork, *In Search of the Miraculous*.)

My early introduction to images of self-sufficient worlds was inspired through art history and familial mythology. Learning of (the American writer and artist) Henry Darger’s fictitious universe in which his ‘Vivian girls’ (fig. 5.1, 5.2) roamed freely and confidently through utopic landscapes was truly formative. This, his life’s work (created over six decades), spans fifteen volumes and is titled *In the Realms of the Unreal*. The book featured Darger himself as the protector of these children, the Vivian girls. He created a utopic universe, completely opposite to the reality he lived. Darger had been orphaned and abused as a child and was institutionalised in an asylum for children. In the world he constructed, the typically meek and most lowly class of people could be heroines and heroes – Darger embodied the desire for utopia, creating the universe as he would have liked it to be.

The life and dreams of another man, my maternal great-uncle Frank Forster (fig. 5.3), also inspired me to research self-sufficiency and concepts of utopia. In 1981, he packed his car with some clothes, tools and hundreds of books and illegally built a small hut near Raetihi, in Whanganui National Park. This is where he would reside alone, self-sufficiently, for eighteen years, living off the meat of trapped stoats and other animals. Occasionally, variety would be welcomed in the form of cans of vegetables, brought by my mother and her sisters, who were permitted to visit once a year in summer, for just one night. Some years later, Frank Forster died in a rest home after a relative made their annual visit and found him

with extremely deteriorated health. Utopia seemed unsustainable without community. This concept nudged me to make sure that the utopia I projected would be stabilised by a community of people – those people interweaving a variety of cultures to create a utopia designed by the minds of many, all with differing reference points. An image that speaks to this concept of community is my photograph of a group of young people who are lounging and sunbathing nude on an expanse of rock (fig. 5.4), perhaps even drying off from being in water. One of the figures is summiting the rockface and seems to be climbing to the other side – exploring, perhaps even longing, for something we cannot see.

Instances from my own past have greatly influenced the direction of my current research. In 2017, to collect empirical evidence regarding the invigorating concept of running away to an Edenic world, I stayed for a fortnight in a naturalist club, north of Ōtepoti in the South Island of New Zealand. It was situated near railway tracks which were historically used for passenger trains. The mythology is that many passengers threw their apple cores from the windows whilst passing by, resulting in the apple trees that sporadically lined both sides of the tracks. I walked with other club members down these tracks, all of us without clothes, picking apples from the trees. These apples were to be used for apple cider which was brewed by the club. For two weeks, I existed in a world of community; we foraged for berries and ate honey from a hive on a hill, built fires to boil our water and cooked the fish we had caught at the river. I was struck by how swiftly the utopia melted away when my new friends reluctantly put their clothes back on, got into their cars and drove back to their cities and office jobs. For a moment, we felt free and wild.

Dutch-born performance artist Bas Jan Ader's swansong, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1973-75) was envisioned as a three-stage work. The first, *In Search of the Miraculous (One night in Los Angeles)* (1973), was a series of high-contrast black and white photographs taken by Mary Sue Anderson, his wife, as she followed and photographed him walking, wearing full black attire and donning a flashlight, from a highway to a beach in Los Angeles (fig. 5.5). The namesake for his handmade boat ('Ocean Wave') (fig. 5.6) would become prevalent in the next part of the *Miraculous* works when, in 1975, Ader's photographs were exhibited at Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, and sea shanties were sung at the opening, including the shanty, 'A Life on the Ocean Wave' (1838). The second part to this work was to be a statement announcing Ader's arrival in the Netherlands, accompanied by a series of photographs. The third and final stage was to be the sea expedition, where Ader set off from Cape Cod, Massachusetts on July 9, 1975, and was due cross the Atlantic Ocean and arrive in the Netherlands, where Ader was to have an exhibition at the Groninger Museum. As Heather

Galbraith points out, in an essay titled *Leaving But Not Leaving*, for *Le Roy 2: Life and Death* (2015), Ader's journey by sea was not taken lightly and was not a frivolous attempt. The unresolved second and third parts of *In Search of the Miraculous* appear to suggest that Ader had every intention to complete the trip. Galbraith explains states that 'Ader was an experienced sailor' and that he had even 'crewed on a small boat from Europe to America' (Galbraith, 2015).

My raft recalls mythological demise and the romantic legacy that such deaths (death at sea, especially with the mystery of the absence of a body) can leave behind. Such romantic tragedies from history have since been projected upon land, as I have spoken about previously in this paper. For the decoration of this raft, I drew inspiration from a haunting creature of Scottish and Northern English folklore (of which my paternal ancestral lines are connected), the 'shellycoat' (so named because of the coat of shells these creatures are said to wear, which rattle upon movement). The driftwood logs that comprise the body of the raft are bound with flax fibre which was gifted to me by my maternal grandmother. The fibre was processed from flax by her grandparents in the Shetland Isles before they immigrated to New Zealand in the late 1800's.

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5. Maiden Voyage

Fig. 5.1

Darger, H. (mid 20th century). *At Battle Near McHollister Run* [watercolour and pencil on paper]. Collection of Robert A. Roth, photograph by Robert A. Roth.

Retrieved from <https://hyperallergic.com/387178/the-sexual-ambiguity-of-henry-dargers-vivian-girls/>

Fig. 5.2

Darger, H. (mid 20th century). *At second battle of Marcocino also escape from disasterous explosion during battle caused by glandelinians* [watercolour and pencil on paper].

Collection of Robert A. Roth, photograph by Robert A. Roth.

Retrieved from <https://hyperallergic.com/387178/the-sexual-ambiguity-of-henry-dargers-vivian-girls/>

Fig. 5.3

Photograph of Frank Forster, photographer unknown, date unknown. Family collection, image provided by Clare Holden, scanned August 2018.



Fig. 5.4

McDonald, C. (2019). *Reclining on Cliff* [colour 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 5.5

Ader, B. J. (1973). *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)* [18 black and white photographs with handwritten text in white ink]. Images scanned from *Art in America*, February 2004, Vol. 92, No. 2, Saunders, W., *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, p. 54-65. Retrieved from <https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/img-bas-jan-ader140552902643.jpg?w=681&h=383&crop=1>



Fig. 5.6

Ader, B. J. (1975). Ader's boat *Ocean Wave* [black and white photograph with handwritten text 'In Search of the Miraculous' in white ink, photolithography on paper]. Image scanned from centrefold of *Bulletin 89*, published by *Art & Project*, Amsterdam, August 1975. Retrieved from <https://withreferencetodeath.philippocock.net/blog/ader-bas-jan-in-search-for-the-miraculous-1975/>



6. After the Fall

‘When historical visual motifs are used in a contemporary photographic subject in this way, they act as a confirmation that contemporary life carries a degree of symbolism and cultural preoccupation parallel with other times in history, and art’s position of being a chronicler of contemporary fables is asserted.’

Cotton, C. (2004). *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. Second ed., p. 49-79.

‘I have used the morphology of the human female body choosing charged sites of hair, skin, vulva, brain, and found their architectural correspondences – gate, column, door, house – in order to differentiate between the biological body, the imaginary body and the socio-historical or symbolic.’

Lynn, V. Wall text, Vivian Lynn, *Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi*. 25 October 2008 – 15 March 2009.

When I reflect upon Bas Jan Ader’s evocative final work and related death, I am reminded of Arthur Hughes’ painting, *The Lady of Shalott* (1873) (fig. 6.1), based upon the poem by Alfred Tennyson (the first version of which was completed in 1833; the revised, or second, version was completed in 1842).

The painting depicts a single frame in the tale of the death of the (unnamed) Lady of Shalott, who has previously been imprisoned and cursed to die should she escape the confines of her prison. She ultimately decides to leave her life of solitude, longing for the freedom she knows lies outside her tower prison, even though she knows she will die in the process. The Lady of Shalott boards a fishing boat sails down the river to Camelot, knowing that she will meet her death before her destination. This entwinement of death and freedom is extremely poignant, paradoxical and uncomfortable.

In contemporary British painter Kaye Donachie’s small painting *‘The Epiphany’* (2002), a grouping of young people in varying states of dress huddle on rocks by a stream. They all look in the same direction, with hovering eye-contact. Donachie’s paintings typically tell of a life in harmonious relationship with nature. The poetic counter-world of *‘The Epiphany’* devises a new relationship between people and nature, a kind of yearning and reaching towards the idylls, yet muddied with mystery, threat and discomfort. Donachie’s paintings bask in a world of warm colour, lit by the moon, or fire, or the last sun and combine, seamlessly, abyss and idyll, utopia and melancholy. Like the figures in *‘The Epiphany’*, the figures in my photographic images appear seemingly removed from the context of time or place, embodying a community confronted with apocalypse, oscillating between action and confusion. These photos illuminate our fragility and vulnerability in a

world changed by an unnamed ecological disaster, but also lean hard toward a world where ritual is every-day, and through which a kind of utopia is formed or, at least, leaned towards.

In the largescale cyanotype of seaweed down the back of my lover, Rosana, this marrying of the dreamlike, the untamed and the mortal comes to the forefront. She is turned away from the camera and has become a mythological creature, returning to, or from, the sea.

Ritual plays a big part in the way my imagined community lives and in the way they express their connection with the land. The inspiration for the depiction of ritual-based ceremonies in this work stem from the mythology of my matriarchal lineage in the Baltic countries which has ties to paganism. As part of my research for this work, I travelled to the Baltics and had the great privilege to meet with the High Priestess (*krivė*) of Lithuanian paganism, Inija Trinkūnienė. The meeting was the starting point for exploration of Pagan rituals such as the pivotal Winter Solstice events which Inija Trinkūnienė invited us to.

Hair weaves itself through this narrative from beginning to end. A woman's hair is often seen as a physical representation of her power – many examples of this exist in stories throughout history where a woman's hair will be removed as a symbol of loss, one glaring example is the cutting of convicted 'witch's' hair before their trials or, more personally, watching my mother lose her hair during chemotherapy.

New Zealand artist Vivian Lynn (1931-2018) used a range of materials, methodologies and techniques in her long artistic career but was most notorious for her use of human and synthetic hair, most notably in her large-scale installation work '*Guarden Gates*' (1982). Vivian Lynn's exhibition ('*Guarden Gates*') consisted of seven wall-mounted steel cyclone gates which were arranged in an octagon, with the door one enters and leaves through being the remaining side. Each of the gates were titled, respectively: *Matrix*; *Daughter of the Father*; *Sacrifice*; *Processual Ground*; *Differentiation*; *Rebirth*; and *Eyes of Life, Eyes of Death*. Lynn used both real human hair and synthetic hair in these pieces, sparking a multifaceted interaction of contraries.

An essay, written by Christina Barton, introduces the book (which she also edited) '*I, HERE, NOW*' (2010) which accompanied the exhibition of the same name held at Victoria University's Adam Art Gallery (Te Pātaka Toi) during the period October 25, 2008 to March 15, 2009. In this essay, Barton announces 'Entwined with hair and other substances, *Guarden Gates* demonstrates Lynn's treatment of materials as generators of meaning' (p. 16, my italics).

In the recently-published book, *New Zealand Art at Te Papa* (2018), Christina Barton, once again, wrote an essay on Lynn's work and suggested why hair is such a potent material within *Guarden Gates*. Barton states that 'hair is feared as the substance that, by growing from roots within the body ... transgresses the boundaries between interior and exterior'. This titillation between inside/outside; real/synthetic; mechanical/decorative; fear/seduction highlights, to me, the nature of hair as an emblem of female sexuality and power, evoking at once the denigrative action of shaving Joan of Arc's head (*Sacrifice*), and the (impossibly) long hair of sirens seducing sailors to drown them (*Differentiation*).

It is interesting to note that Lynn's ideal (and, to date, unfulfilled) installation of *Guarden Gates*, as written of in Barton's 2018 essay, would be in a permanent environmental structure, such as a cave, with a lantern hanging from the ceiling of the space and a pool of water below, and the gates on the walls.

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Fig. 6.1

Hughes, A. (1873). *The Lady of Shalott* [oil on canvas].

Retrieved from <https://www.wikiart.org/en/arthur-hughes/the-lady-of-shalott-1873>



Fig. 6.2

McDonald, C. (2019). *Water Burial* [colour 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 6.3

Donachie, K. (2002). *The Epiphany* [oil on canvas].

Retrieved from <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2013/05/timeline1975/>



Fig. 6.4

Lynn, V. (1982). *Sacrifice*, from the series *Guarden Gates*. [steel, human hair, wood, nylon, acrylic]. 26cm x 94.5cm x 187cm.

Retrieved from <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/39707>

7. Undercurrents

Eco-feminism, when coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne (one of the leading French feminists) in 1974, encapsulated a sensibility that encouraged a greater awareness of the degradation of the earth, by raising consciousness of the destructive dominance over nature by urban growth and over-use and reliance on resources such as dairy, lumber, oil and coal. This theory compares and likens the treatment of the land to the treatment of women (Scheffer, 1991). It is through frameworks such as Astrida Neimanis' (of the University of Sydney) marrying of our 'watery' bodies and bodies of water, such as lakes, oceans, raindrops and so on (which she has written about in the 2012 collection *Undutiful Daughters*) that we can begin to locate ourselves within, rather than against, the non-human world (p. 97). Our own watery bodies leak, weep, rupture. We are two-thirds "watery" (Neimanis, 2012, p. 96). We ingest lakes, lakes ingest rains, and so the cycle continues. It is within this cyclic structure that we can place ourselves.

Neimanis' writings on hydro-feminism are influenced by many feminist writers, including d'Eaubonne and Luce Irigaray, (the French feminist and linguistic psychoanalyst, born 1930). Irigaray has been highly influential in situating academic thinking about human-water relations; her 2004 pivotal conceptual framework connects human bodies to all bodies (bodies of water, bodies of animals) through being replenished by rains and 'elements moving through' the bodies (p. 106). Ultimately, Irigaray splinters the myth that our membrane (skin) is impervious, physically and conceptually, instead stipulating that this way of thinking, of connecting to other bodies, creates a new ethical responsibility for conscious ways of existing in the world.

As a child, I sat upon the shore of Lake Wanaka, where I have spent most summers and winters since I was born, watching my siblings disappear under the water and resurface. I was born with a bone condition, *osteogenesis imperfecta*, which resulted in seven broken arm injuries before I was twelve, and an arm often cast and unable to get wet. After my last break, at twelve, I was hospitalised and surgery was performed on my arm. My rehabilitation involved swimming twice a week for two months. I remember distinctly the overwhelming experience of (finally) being a body in water, without clearly defined boundaries. The movement of my weak muscles flowed freely. My body's failings had held me back from the water, and then aided my rehabilitation. To apply Irigaray's lens, the water passed through my pervious body or, in the words of Stacey Alaimo, there was a 'movement across bodies'

and ‘the substance of the human’ was ‘ultimately inseparable from the environment’ (2010, p. 2).

Tarpaulin is a compound word, combining ‘tar’ (dark liquid distilled from wood or coal, used to coat and preserve roads and timber) and ‘palling’ (a cloth that is spread over a coffin). The word first appears in writing in the early 17th century, referring to canvas covered in tar, used to protect objects on ships from getting wet. Since the 1970s, tarpaulin has been made from a three-layered, woven, rip-proof polyethylene, and producers have been following a consistent colour code of production and price: from blue to green to the most expensive (and heavy duty) brown. Evidently, the tarpaulin that is the cheapest to produce, blue, is the one that is most abundant. In Charlie Hailey’s text, *Camps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space* (2009) he writes briefly on the use of tarpaulin as a material and suggests that ‘blue is not an abundant colour in terrestrial landscapes, allowing aerial media reports to measure damage or hardship by blue wounds.’ Blue is the universal emergency solution, blue is the seal from the outside, blue tells us of transition, disaster, improvising.

Gabriela Salazar (b. 1981) created ‘*Matters in Shelter (and Place, Puerto Rico)*’ (2018) after Hurricane Maria ravaged through Puerto Rico in September, 2017, causing devastating damage such as the damage of 85% of the island's houses were damaged, 25% being completely destroyed, leading to the displacement of 50,000 of the 73,000 residents (Taguchi, 2017).

Salazar uses the visual motif of the blue tarpaulin, which was widely used for makeshift shelters post-hurricane, in her large-scale sculptural piece by shrouding a concrete-blocked structure in a tarp-iconic blue mesh. Salazar intentionally uses the useful, yet troubling, material (concrete blocks), as the manufacturing of concrete produces a significant amount of carbon emissions. Tarpaulin production is also an environmentally disruptive process due to its intensive use of non-renewable resources.

Four Māori women artists and activists from Aotearoa make up the Mata Aho Collective, who have been collaborating artistically on large-scale artworks since 2011. They used tarpaulin as a material for their 11m x 4m piece, *Kiko Moana* (2017), which is sixteen layers made from 60 tarpaulins, sewn on an angle and then slashed. The collective learnt the weaving skillset of, and wove with, Maureen Lander, an elder and respected artist and weaver who has exhibited and taught Māori art since 1986.

My work includes a photograph of a tarpaulin dress, made and designed by Eliza Baker and myself. The tarpaulin dress is designed to be worn to collect water, food and firewood and is a portable form of shelter and protection, tending to the basic human needs of water, food, shelter and warmth. The dress pattern was cut with minimal waste, and the accompanying apron was not cut all. The sound that the dress makes while one moves around in it recalls crashing waves and recalls the tarpaulins first usages at sea.

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7. Undercurrents

Fig. 7.1

Salazar, G. (2018). *Matters in Shelter (and Place, Puerto Rico)* [Coffee clay (used coffee grounds, flour, salt), concrete block, wood, and polypropylene mesh tarp]. 365.8cm x 487.7cm x 609.6 cm.

Retrieved from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kathryn-andrews-wheel-of-foot-in-mouth-no-5-game-of-twelve>



Fig. 7.3

Mata Aho Collective: Erena Baker (Te Atiawa, Ngāti Toarangatira, Ngāti Raukawa), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi), and Terri Te Tau (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne ki Wairarapa). (2017). *Kiko Moana* [Polyethene tarpaulin and cotton thread]. (2017). Photograph by Michael Nast. Retrieved from <https://www.mataahocollective.com/kiko-moana>



Fig. 7.2

McDonald, C & Baker, E. (2019). *Tarpaulin Collecting Dress* [tarpaulin, cotton ties].



8. Surface Tension

There is an undeniable tension between the kinds of sites depicted throughout this work. Each site carries its own socio-political context and elicits a certain reaction from the viewer. Throughout this work are juxtaposed many disparate landscapes; some of these feature archetypal characters, some include ancient or modern mythologies, others portray objects that belong in an entirely different part of the world - in a different climate and culture. Every landscape pictured is a particular group's mythology, projected upon the land – an ideal, a utopia, framed for a moment. The non-specificities of site in some images are felt as a dull, nostalgic ache – the feeling that the viewer may have been there before – a metaphorical hangover from the loss of our first home, perhaps. Consider, perhaps, the group nude photo, for example, which doesn't give much away in terms of landscape. Also the cave opening which also doesn't give much specificity of site.

This utopian island yearning is best encapsulated by Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957) in which he states “childish passion for cabins and tents: to shut oneself up and set oneself up (s' encore et s'installer), such is the existential dream of childhood” p. 90. This quote conjures both the image of the large cyanotype shell (big enough to walk into – and settle) and the tent-like fabric of the tarpaulin dress which is also large and encompassing its sheer size. French philosopher George Bachelard's seminal text *The Poetic of Spaces* (1958) provides additional weight to this conversation, especially in relation to the shell. Bachelard writes, quoting Paul Valery, (1936) that the mollusk “exudes its shell” and “lets the building materials ‘seep through’ ... when the seeping starts the house is already completed” p. 10. The emptiness of the shell, therefore, invites you to climb in, project a utopian fantasy, fill it with light and stories. It is also interesting to draw links between the shell and hair, the way both grown from the inside out, both seeping through.

In light of current ecological happenings, including extreme wildfires in Australia from late 2019 to 2020, prevalent in my mind is the very real ecological threat of global warming in which water means safety. There is also the threat of various expressions of violence, in which people have no choice but to flee to new land, which makes the water a dangerous path to potential safety on other shores. The sea is at once peaceful and protective as well as unknown and threatening. These contradictions are portrayed throughout this narrative as the unsustainable nature of the utopian ideal is explored.

Many mythologies have been projected upon the landscape of colonial New Zealand. An example of this is the toponym 'Lover's Leap', of which there is one in Dunedin, photographed by New Zealand photographer Ann Shelton. This is an 18th century European legend of tragic romance (often a story of unrequited love, one lover or both jumping to their death) which has been projected onto a landscape that bears a resemblance to this mythological image. There are Lover's Leaps in many other parts of the world, where settlers have projected similar mythologies upon the new environment, in order to keep with them mythologies of their pasts. Quite poignantly, to my research, there is even a Leap dedicated to Sappho.

'...her hapless devotion to the disdainful Phaon and her fatal leap from the Leucadian promontory, a white rock stretching out into the Ionian sea. The promontory, now separated from the mainland, is the island now called Santa Maura; part of the cliff is still known as Sappho's Leap'

Pound, L. (1949). Nebraska Legends of Lovers' Leaps. *Western Folklore*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct., 1949), p. 304-313.

In my glass plate cyanotype, there is an obvious projection of the legend of one of Shakespeare's most well-known literary characters, Ophelia, and her death by drowning onto a landscape that bears none of the same history, though it topographically could fit this narrative. Such a strongly identifiable Western ideal (the eternal virgin, the romanticised idea of suicide for love) projected onto New Zealand water, soil and native flora creates enormous tension and harkens back to those initial colonial projections.

In its form as a large-scale cyanotype, however, the same conch shell is now a deep, mysterious blue and is almost not of the known world, especially because of its exaggerated scale and modified colour. This is reminiscent of Western myths of undocumented sea creatures, often of great size, including the Kraken (of Scandinavian folklore), the Loch Ness Monster (of Scottish folklore) and even the biblical tale of Jonah being swallowed by 'a huge fish'. These myths stem from a common fear of the unknown, the undiscovered, the undocumented. This fear is very obvious in the early days of European culture and the colonisation of massive tracts of land and groups of people.

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Fig. 8.1

Shelton, A. (2003). *Vault, Lovers Leap, Otago Peninsula* [c-print]. 75cm x 93cm.

Retrieved from <https://www.milfordgalleries.co.nz/dunedin/work/19506-Vault-Lovers-Leap-Otago-Peninsula>



Fig. 8.2

Lear, E. (1863). *Capo Ducato or Sappho's Leap* [lithograph with tint stone on paper]. 24cm x 36cm.

Retrieved from

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Capo_Ducato,_or_Sappho%27s_Leap_-_Santa_Maura_-_Lear_Edward_-_1863.jpg



9. Keepsake

As with location, there is an undercurrent of tension between aspects of staged narrative and reality in this work.

In my photograph of the late Ross Collins' dwelling in Breaker Bay, Wellington, fiction swims against the current of reality. Though this location is real one could assume that Collins projected his own fantasy of utopic solitude onto a topography that happened to fit his ideal; one could construe this separate-from-society dwelling as a preparation for a post-apocalyptic future.

'I saw a crack in the rock and I managed to back into it... I then got a hammer and coal chisel and went through 20 metres of rock. That has taken me about a year and a half

Ross Collins. (Reid, 2009).

The unnamed ecological disaster that lies at the crux of this work is, admittedly, fictional; however, age-old utopian ideals and mythologies, as well as the global ecological emergency we face currently, solidify belief in the fictional narrative as well as the whole collection of images and objects created for this work.

My portrait of Heather was taken amongst the plant-matter that surrounds her Taranaki home, which is aptly referred to as 'the ivy fortress'. Heather is imagined as the matriarch of the fictional community of survivors. She roots the group in reality, as she is aged enough to have lived through the wave of communal living and free love in the original hippie period of the '70s – a time which many remember wistfully as a utopic period. Heather stands with eyes closed, perhaps even dreaming of the time that came before. Her long hair is a keepsake of these freedom years and leans towards the idea of a freedom and feminine strength that continues. Her dress is also a nod to an earlier time when men and women alike wore flowing, shapeless, androgynous clothing – appropriated from garments seen in Eastern cultures for millennia (Palmer, 2018).

Entwined within these realms of truth and untruth lies my desire to portray my fears – perhaps in an effort to have a sense of power over them. Heather's physical appearance reminds me of my own and her aged skin and grey hair speaks to the uncertainty of my future and fear of the unknown.

*Mother is blued and watered
waters breaking,
waves of stretched skin.
Mother's nipple is blued with ink,
bruised with dye locating cancer cells.*

The image of my mother's chest the night before her mastectomy visualises the most deeply-rooted of all my fears – the loss of my mother. The cancer highlighted upon her left breast in a cyanotype blue is real, as is the reality that those breasts fed myself and my three siblings, and that stomach housed us all before we were born. Here is an image of a woman who has given birth; her skin sags in places, her breasts have been suckled by four babies – an entirely different universe to the fetishized anatomical view of the vagina of Courbet's 1866 painting – this is my origin of the world. Some of us can feel the mythological pull to go back to our primordial oceanic beginnings – some of us can believe the theory suggesting an early coastal existence by which we lost our hair and can, in this context, imagine my mum losing hers too – but, for me, this image of my mother brings everything into a more immediate perspective. Like the echoes of a seashell upon one's open ear, it is a call to return home.

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9. Keepsake

Fig. 9.1

McDonald, C. (2019). *Cave* [colour 35mm photographic print].



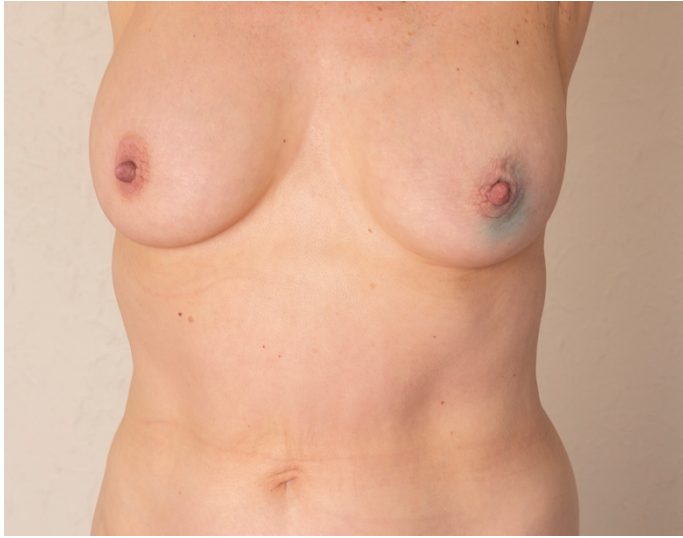
Fig. 9.2

McDonald, C. (2019). *Heather* [black and white 35mm photographic print].



Fig. 9.3

McDonald, C. (2019). *Night Before My Mother's Mastectomy* [colour 35mm photographic print].



Conclusion

Through the process of researching contemporary and historical notions of utopia, *Impossible Blue: Photography, Loss and Longing* visualises and gives weight to my fears and the fears of many for the future. The earliest photographic processes were pregnant with meaning for me as I explored the bonds between photography; the bonds between a mother and child; birth and death; loss and longing. The process of cyanotype – of an image appearing seemingly out of the blue – could hardly paint creation in a more mystical, poignant light.

A myriad of catalysts and anxieties have spurred this work – both autobiographical and universal. Deep undercurrents of discomfort and tension are unearthed, in order to consider the shortcomings of previous utopian idealisations. Like projected mythologies upon the landscape of Aotearoa, and many other landscapes that have been colonised previously and since, the (impossibly) blue conch shell hangs on the wall, furnishing the space with narrative and desire.

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