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IMMERSED

Becky Cameron

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IMMERSED**Becky Cameron****IMMERSED: REFLECTIONS ON AN MFA PROJECT**

My final exhibition for my MFA was based on a lived engagement with the ecology of my suburban garden over a period of 18 months. Observational drawing, cyanotype and printmaking were used as a way of paying careful attention to what is here and now, and to produce multiple responses to my coexistence within a web of relationships. As I worked and drew in the garden, moving between reflecting and acting, I discovered and become part of some of the constantly evolving stories of the garden and the Anthropocene. The accumulation of individual works hung like an exploded sketchbook, suggesting multiple readings and connections. The strings left partly folded up pointed to the nature of the project as open-ended and unfinished.



Figure 1. Becky Cameron, *Immersed*, installation view, Dunedin School of Art gallery, March 2022. Photograph: Trisha Bennett.

EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

But this exhibited work is not somewhere that I knew I'd end up at all when I started this project. I began this MFA part time in 2018 and wanted to address how I could make work that reflected being present and involved in my environment, engaged rather than overwhelmed or escapist in my interactions with the more-than-human world that I'm a part of and care for. With a background in printmaking and drawing, I'd made numerous works exploring ideas around how we relate to our environment and investigating different tactics to break down the division between humans and nature in my work but wasn't satisfied with my results; the making was immersive but the object produced seemed to undermine that. I saw the master's study as a time to rethink my approach.

In the first semester produced drawings as a participant in the *Art+Oceans* project, experimenting with different mapping strategies, and drawings responding to sound and wind patterns. Some works were subjective and arbitrary, while others had more “ground truthing” to them. These drawings moved away from nature as a traditional landscape view, incorporating different perspectives and ways of responding to place that I have carried on into later work.

I began working for the Department of Conservation as a seasonal ranger in Aspiring national park and started to develop an art practice that combined my work with a drawing project, producing drawings in response to my interactions and observations as I went about my daily life. I chose subjects that were interesting to me in ways deeper than just the visual, responding to things that were thought provoking, where I was wanting to learn something, and elements that were morally and ecologically complex.

The first Covid19 lockdown, in March 2020, meant that I had to leave the national park and return to Dunedin. This re-acquaintance with my house and garden prompted a reconfiguring of my Masters, with my focus shifted from the grand and distant *Nature* of the national park, to the domestic *nature* of my own suburban garden. I'd come to realise that the national park didn't offer a way to really live in the natural world: I was kept at a distance by legislation, and by the colonial ideology of humans versus the pristine wilderness, and was reliant on food and supplies being helicoptered in. The garden on the other hand seemed to offer a way of learning and experimenting with how to live in relationship with my surroundings, a microcosm of how humans might best interact with the more than human world in the Anthropocene. Gardening and art can both be seen as ways of exploring interactions and effects between humans and other things in a conscious way. Both require paying careful attention to what is happening here and now. Climate change and biodiversity loss are cultural as much as scientific events, and art can play a role in exploring and debating the current climate crisis.¹



Figure 2. Shoreline mapping, 2018, ink on paper; 297x210mm.



Figure 3. A circumnavigation of Quarantine Island Kamau Taurua by kayak, 2018, ink on paper; approx. 700x500x220 mm.

Figure 4 (Below). Conservation means killing things (mice caught in the trap on my porch), 2018-9, ink on paper; approx A5.



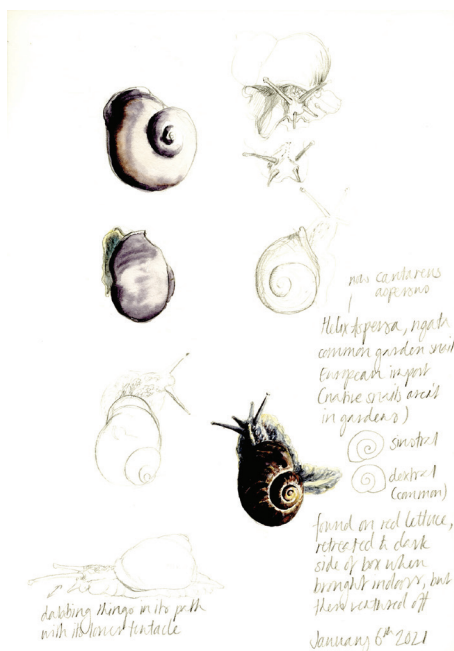


Figure 5. Garden Snail, 2021,
pencil, watercolour and embossing on paper, A4.



Figure 6. Bees on borage, 2020,
ink and dip pen with watercolour, A4.

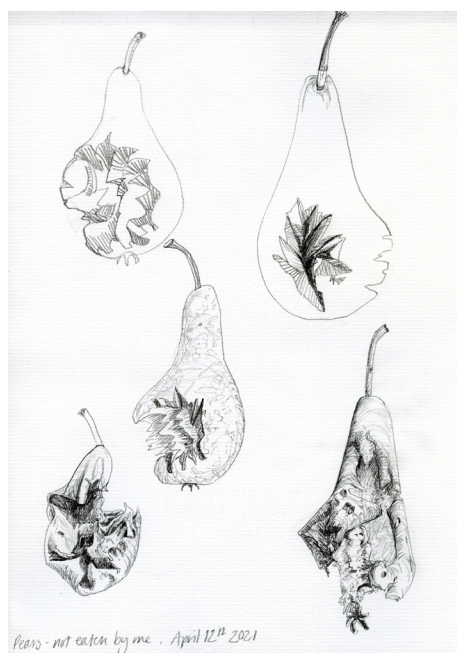


Figure 7. Pears not eaten by me, 2021,
graphite on paper, A4.

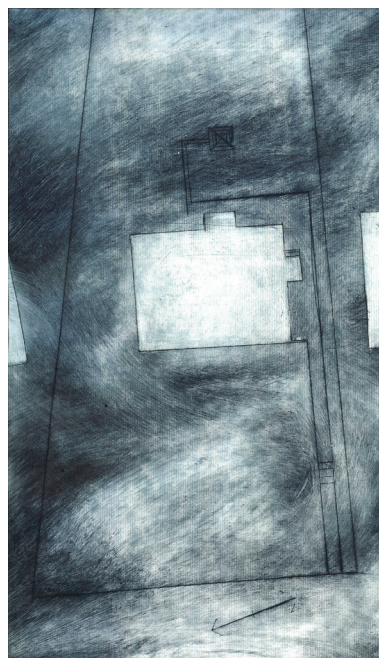


Figure 8. Windmap, Northwest, 2021,
drypoint and monprint on paper, 500 x 300mm.



Figure 9. *Self-portrait: daisies and kowhai*, 2020, cyanotype on paper; 400x600mm.



Figure 10. *Self-portrait: rhizomes*, 2020, cyanotype on paper; 400x600mm.

I made drawings in response to my lived experience as I worked and recreated in my home garden. The drawings could be prompted by aesthetic pleasure; by seeking to understand something; or a sense of disquiet at what I am noticing.

I drew on a variety of drawing methods such as botanical drawing, field studies, classification, and mapping, seeing what each could offer.

Cyanotype, first used for botanical guides, was used to record plants and gardening tools, and suggest my relationships to them. Printmaking lent itself to multiples, favouring methods that produced variation within the repetition, mimicking the processes of growth and evolution, and the repetitive but constantly varied tasks of the garden.

I assumed as I accumulated drawings and prints of my garden that I would include birds and other animals as subject matter at some point but found myself reluctant. My focus instead became the plants of my garden. Perhaps they were more intriguing as they didn't fit the idea of the autonomous, discrete modern subject. Plants can be seen as multiple, shape-changing, rooted but full of life energy and drive; an embodiment of an interconnected way of being in the world.

As I go about the garden, their scents stir feelings and memories beyond my conscious control. The defences of some break and sting my skin, or their pollen irritates my lungs. Others I appreciate by taking into my mouth and eating so that their nutrients become part of my cells, influencing my health and mood.

In my reading in the New Materialisms, I was drawn to Serpil Oppermann's concept of "storied matter."² This adds to Bennett's idea of the "lively, agentic and generative"³ aspects of matter by positing that

...matter is endowed with meanings and is thick with stories, manifesting as "storied matter." In other words, there are multiple stories of cosmology, geology, history, ecology, and life embodied in every form of materiality.⁴

These stories can be read by humans, at least partly, and told but are also part of them:

...matter's stories emerge through humans, but at the same time humans themselves emerge through 'material agencies' that leave their traces in lives as well as stories.⁵

My role as an artist is to be open to the interconnected and constantly evolving stories that are around me and that I am a part of in the non-human elements of my garden. I create these stories in my art works and am created by them in turn. At their best, the artworks will contain more than I put into them and have their own thingness and agency. And the artwork-viewer interaction can share and add to these garden and Anthropocene stories.

At the start of my research, I included notes on indigenous ways of thinking about and acting in the world, thinking of them as a contrast to the dominant modern Western world view. But as the project progressed, again and again there was a striking correlation between indigenous thought and recent developments in Western thought such as ecology and the new materialisms. Both see the world and all in it as interconnected, formed of and by a web of relationships. Humans are inextricably part of their environment, in a relationship of reciprocity rather than dominance. There is no need for the modernist dualities of living versus non-living, as all things can be considered to have agency or *mauri*.

MAKING THE INDIVIDUAL PARTS INTO A WHOLE

By the end of the third semester, I had made around 150 works in response to my garden, very disparate in size, medium, and visual language. An unruly anarchive, or maybe a family album or scrap book of my garden, but not yet an exhibition.

I carried out a series of trial hangs, putting up works in grids or scattered groupings on the wall to assess the implications of these. None of the arrangements I made felt entirely right, but as I worked and thought through this process, I made several decisions as to how I wanted the work to move forward. I wanted it to all read as a whole, as a reflection of a whole loose ecology of the garden, and one with many possible readings. It also needed to be non-hierarchical, and so move away from linear or grid displays. I decided to unify it by making all works the same or similar size, by cropping or reprinting them, so that one element didn't read as more important than another. I also decided to include pretty much all the works I'd made for this same reason: all were valid responses.

A wall-based display began to seem too limited as any arrangement narrowed down the number of stories that could be told at one time. I started to think about taking the works off the wall into a more three-dimensional arrangement, and made a few scale models, experimenting with different materials and methods of hanging. Discovering draughting film solved the problem of the works on paper being one-sided; this material is translucent so images can be read from both sides, and light is let through. It can be drawn or painted onto directly, or digitally printed.

I made a scale drawing on graph paper of how I envisioned the gallery installation to take shape, and prepared linen bookbinding thread as the horizontal support, with domestic sewing thread as the vertical drops, wound onto scraps of newspaper to enable the rigging to be transported to the gallery space with minimal tangling. The pictures would be attached to the vertical threads with paper clips, in keeping with the ephemeral and domestic nature of the installation. This allowed them to be placed at different heights, so not in solely linear ways.



Figures 11 - 12. Installation of *Immersed* in the Dunedin School of Art gallery.

After the months working in an often solitary way, I really appreciated the assistance and company of friends who'd volunteered to help with for the installation of the lights and the grid of threads. Once these were in place and I started to put up works it was obvious that my carefully measured out plan wouldn't work – they needed to be grouped together more rather than evenly scattered. To get the work to function as a whole I would need to do a small area then work out from there, rather than trying to put everything up at once. I hung a small group up that had visual echoes in their theme and shape and built on from them, clustering the works around the light bulbs. For simplicity and visual appeal, I grouped works along a colour spectrum. The overall shape evolved organically in the space as I gradually added pieces.

I'd hung nearly all the art works when a horizontal line of thread pulled out of the wall, bringing the neighboring line down with it in a big tangle. I managed to untangle the vertical threads holding the artworks enough to put the main horizontal lines back up, but it wasn't possible to entirely unravel everything. I decided to leave some of this tangle, rather than cut away and re tie the threads. I realised that this was a fitting parallel to my work in the garden as well as the installation – my sporadic attempts to impose order and structure meeting randomness and chaos, and the agency of things other than myself. I might want neat rows of healthy vegetables, but what I got was also the caterpillars eating the broccoli seedlings, and the cooch grass drilling through the potatoes.

There are so many potential variables in how it could be installed, with different lighting, space, or configuration, without the newspaper and empty threads. There's no one right answer to it, and I had to accept that like a garden it's never really finished. I decided in this case to leave the scraps of newsprint, as a record of the process and labour of installation, and part of the ephemera and detritus of everyday life. They reminded me of chrysalises, potential drawings that haven't been done yet. The empty threads seemed like ghosts of what's gone already from the land, such as the majestic podocarps that gave Pine Hill its name.

I'd decided to light the work from within, using hanging domestic light bulbs, the different color temperatures giving a sense of different seasons or times of day.

The work is somewhat dimly lit, suggesting autumn, end of day, or indeed end of days; but also, less pessimistically, that dusk and autumn are times of change, are liminal. And maybe that slightly melancholy feel fits with an allegory of the role of art and gardening: all that work and striving but still I hardly know anything, there are so many gaps in the relationship. This also reflects my ambiguous relationship with my garden, which is sometimes a pleasure and sustenance, but at other times feels isolating and labourious. The work cast striking shadows across the walls and floor of the gallery, extending the work beyond the limits of my small garden, and suggesting memories of past gardens.

The work had evolved considerably from a pile of flat images. It had become a sculpture, and as you move in to see one bit, you lose sight of another section, with individual pieces shifting into focus and then out again as they twist round on their threads against the lights. This helps suggest multiple stories in the work, of things learnt, enjoyed, struggled with, of triumph and failure on a minute scale. Stories of co-habitation and the everyday moral dilemmas of cabbage whites, caterpillars, and snails. It feels like an elusive, changing work, embodying an ecological perspective that views the world not as an object to be depicted but as a set of relations to be worked with. How things function in assemblages, with complex and shifting interactions, rather than as individual entities, is the key factor.

CONCLUSION

The result functions as a metaphor for, rather than a straightforward depiction of, the processes of gardening and of art. Both are ongoing and never finished processes, with multiple possible stories and outcomes. There is an interplay of intention and chance, with multiple agents having an affect. Many repeated small actions move the work forward, without there necessarily being a clear outcome.

This is a new type of artwork for me, and it's not totally resolved, or a closed book. It's only as I've been looking back that I've seen any sort of clear progression. A lot of the time I was struggling as I felt I was repeating what I could already do, making images through the traditional mediums of drawing and printmaking, and found it hard to trust the artistic process, to be in that interplay between planning and chance, letting things evolve. But this way of working fits a need in me to search for the big picture while also being drawn to the details. It forms a way of being able to keep working away in a persistent, small-scale way that's part of my daily life; and see that accumulate into something new and interesting.



Figure 13. *Immersed*, 2022, detail of newspaper bundle.

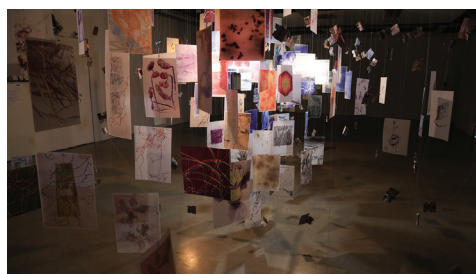


Figure 14. *Immersed*, shadows, installation view, Dunedin School of Art gallery, March 2022.



Figure 15. *Immersed*, 2022, detail of installation, Dunedin School of Art gallery, March 2022.

My art practice forms part of my reflection on my actions and interactions, and this reflection then feeds back into by art practice and my other actions. I think maybe the biggest outcome of this project for me has been a stronger grasp of this praxis. Working in this integrated way has helped me break down a binary that is often existed in my own life, of art versus being in the hills, or art versus a practical engagement with the world. Yet, in concentrating on my own separate garden, I've felt the negative effects of the individualistic way of dividing up land and of working that came with colonization. I've been in danger of having an anti-social art practice and will keep developing how working and art making and reflecting and learning can all be part of a sustainable and vital way of living for me. The activities of reflecting and drawing are enmeshed with my everyday life, overlapping with the practice of gardening. I need to remember that all are provisional, process based, inevitably subjective, and embrace this uncertainty as I carry on to future projects.

Becky Cameron uses drawing as her main tool to explore themes of ecology, memory and belonging, seeking to develop a sustainable practice that enmeshes art with daily life. She graduated from the Dunedin School of Art with a BVA Honours in 2013 and has just completed her MFA there.

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