

art & design 23:

November 2022

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1023026>

PAINTING WITH ŌTEPOTI DUNEDIN: ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

AT THE DUNEDIN SCHOOL OF ART

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of
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Figure 1. A painting being made in an area of native forest. Image courtesy of the artist.

My painting practice investigates how painting can open up unexpected ways of seeing the world, primarily by spending time in particular environments and seeing how painting materials, the place and myself as an artist can collaborate to make paintings. The way I work utilises a process of laying canvas over surfaces of the land and painting on it in a 'bunched-up' way (Figure 1), and then in the studio working into the canvas further by referencing drawings, photographs and memories of being there. In a nutshell, the paintings record my encounters with specific geographical sites, and so the thought of spending two months painting in Ōtepoti Dunedin as part of the Dunedin School of Art's Fred Staub Artist in Residence Programme truly excited me, and I wondered what might emerge from my time in the area.

French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-98) talks about how people experience a place differently depending on their perspective – each of us will think differently about the same place and, in this way, places are unknowable.¹ This idea that landscape exists outside of us and our understanding of it – paired with Jane Bennett's concept of "thing power," where things have the ability to affect us² – led me to wonder how much my work might be influenced by painting in specific places in Dunedin. If "things" such as the land, trees or painting materials might have some kind of

agency in the making of paintings, then my up-close encounters with places during the residency could bear witness to a kind of 'unknowing,' and these experiences could be materialised in the paintings that I was to make over these two months.

During the residency I lived on-site and worked in a studio alongside the students, as well as engaging with the wider artistic community. During my first week I gave a public presentation situating my painting practice within a theoretical and contemporary art context, as part of the Dunedin School of Art's public seminar programme. Connecting with the students and staff in this way at the start of my residency, along with being met at the airport and the early morning powhiri, made me feel warmly welcomed in this vibrant community.

In that first week I encountered work by two significant New Zealand artists who have a connection to the area, Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003), and Ralph Hōtere (Te Aupōuri, 1931-2013). Small intimate paintings by Joanna Margaret Paul had been uncovered in a church in Port Chalmers for the occasion of her retrospective exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, and on my second day I travelled to see them with two new friends who kindly invited me on their morning's excursion. I was struck by the bright sunny colours coming from the paintings themselves, and the light refracting through the stained-glass windows next to them. The 14 works, painted on plaster supports and placed around the walls, reminded me of frescoes³ with their chalk-like surfaces, and the intimacy of their small size compelled me to move up close to them.

Later that day in Port Chalmers we went to the Hōtere Garden Oputae situated on top of the hill overlooking the port. The first sculpture I came across was Ralph Hōtere's *Black Phoenix II* (1991), made from the wreckage of a hull of a fishing boat that had caught fire at a boat-building company's premises in Careys Bay. The charred and aged wood was imbued with character; and the light coming through the red pieces of glass reminded me of Joanna's paintings and the colourful windows we had just seen at the church. I think that my encounters with these works in situ had a subtle influence on the work that I made during my residency, particularly in terms of the aspect of light and because of their physical links to place.

My exploration of specific geographical sites in the area began with these two locations and spread out over the coming weeks. Over a weekend my husband and I spent time in the big hills overlooking the city, where unusually shaped octagonal rock formations look out over the area, and further afield to Aramoana and Waitati and back through the native forests on Mt Cargill. Closer to home, I explored green spaces within walking distance of my house, specifically in the Town Belt and the Dunedin Botanic Garden. I also tagged along with students and staff to see Esther Bosshard's exhibition at the RDS Gallery – where her luscious paintings filled the gallery with that familiar and comforting aroma of freshly made oil paintings – and Joe L'Estrange's beautifully delicate paintings of flowers and neighbourhoods at the Brett McDowell Gallery. I enjoyed the small scale of these paintings and the way the artists had responded to localities in the area.



Figures 2-4. A drawing made on-site.
Image courtesy of the artist.

CARVING OUT FAMILIAR PATHWAYS

As I began to explore locations closer to home, I took long walks to familiarise myself with the area. On one of these days I gravitated towards Māori Hill and came across a narrow tract of native forest near Newington Avenue. The mixture of forest and city, with the sounds of birds singing and vehicles going up and down the roads nearby, was somehow comforting. Along with 'wrapping' the land, I took photographs and moving-image records and made sketches to record my experience of being there. Back in the studio I developed drawings using paper and ink, paying attention to the edges and corners of the photographs that I was working from, and making other decisions from my memory of being there.



Figure 5-6. A reference photograph taken during my garden walks.
Image courtesy of the artist.

After two weeks of my stay in Dunedin, New Zealand entered a 'Covid-19 lockdown' and the pandemic-related restrictions meant that I did not venture too far from home. My usual way of working in tracts of uncultivated land on large canvases was disrupted and reinvented as I began to paint on a small scale in nearby gardens. As part of my strategy to counter the isolation I began a daily walk to the Dunedin Botanic Garden, a cultivated space that has its origins in colonial creativity.⁴ This daily walk became integral to the work that I was about to make and was made even more enjoyable when my daughter, who was studying in Dunedin, would join me.

The places I walked through became familiar and I began to expect the twists and turns, the sounds and the visual signposts of the trees and plants. I was drawn to the rough pathways through native bush, and usually made it to the top of the Garden, surrounded by brightly coloured rhododendrons and cherry blossoms which appeared towards the middle of September. At particular places I would take out small pieces of prepared watercolour card that fitted nicely into my workbook and make drawings with ink pens and water (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

This act of repetition materialised in my work as I painted in my studio every afternoon from consolidated memories of these places, aided by drawings and photographs (Figures 5 and 6). These afternoons became a time of fleshing out my encounters with these places, and as I painted I retraced memories of my walks and performed repeated lines and shapes in the work, overlaying drawing marks with wrapping marks (Figure 7). I would make work inside and outside the studio, utilising the garden by the front door for making wrappings.



Figure 7. *At the Art House and walking in the gardens,*
Ōtepoti Dunedin,
 by Amanda Watson,
 ink on canvas, 910x830mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. *Walking through the trees,*
Ōtepoti Dunedin,
 by Amanda Watson,
 ink on canvas, 380x320mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. *At the Art House and walking in the gardens,*
Ōtepoti Dunedin 2,
 by Amanda Watson,
 ink on canvas, 510x405mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. *Early mornings in the gardens,*
Ōtepoti Dunedin 4,
 by Amanda Watson,
 ink on canvas, 500x440mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. [Detail] *At the Art House and walking in the gardens after the rain, Ōtepoti Dunedin III*, by Amanda Watson, ink on canvas, 610x480mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12. *Early mornings in the gardens, Ōtepoti Dunedin 3*, by Amanda Watson, ink on canvas, 500x440mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

I had been thinking about how to introduce colour to my work for some months and it seemed timely to start delving into this area of investigation, perhaps influenced by walking among the vibrant colours in the Botanic Garden and seeing the work of Joanna Margaret Paul. Perhaps also because of the many rich sunrises I experienced at the house – on one particular morning I happened to be up early and caught sight of a sky luminous with pink light.

The black ink that I typically use for this process has a wonderfully crisp finish to it, and I began to experiment with how this could be achieved with coloured ink. I made a multitude of test pieces with differing methods of application. The backs and edges of these tests became of interest to me as much as the faces as the ink soaked through and gathered on the edges. I used canvas and various types of card, inks and additives and pushed the boundaries with their application, and along with the myriad of duds there were some happy outcomes.

Although I did not achieve the consistency of colour that I was looking for, the process of experimentation allowed me to understand the nature of these inks and supports and how they could work together, and I began to investigate this result in multiple small-scale works (Figures 8, 9 and 10). Even though the paintings were small, they were evocative of my expansive walks in the gardens and were somehow intimate and close at the same time, almost like taking those brief glances up as you walk along a pathway. Some of the colours seemed to be like dimming evening light appearing through branches and leaves, or flashes of sunlight moving across coloured leaves.

The house became lined with paintings after many days and nights of working, and I was able to see them all together as I walked from room to room. By the fourth week of the residency, after hours of walking, looking and painting, I began to see how all these investigations could work together to tell a story about my encounters with these places. The methods of soaking canvases with colour, wrapping canvases, walking in the gardens, and the act of drawing formed the working process and functioned to bring together a body of work.

The paintings maintained their sculptural form even when installed on the wall, as the canvases remembered the creases and contours from when they were 'wrapped' over surfaces (Figure 11). This was mostly due to the small size and light weight of the canvas, that did not engage much of a gravitational pull downwards – a quality that the larger canvases I usually make struggle with. I liked the way this allowed for the edges and backs of the canvas to be somewhat visible and become part of the work for people to view.

A BROAD ECOLOGICAL ASSEMBLAGE

If I think about my time painting in Ōtepoti in the context of new materialist theory, I could say that the paintings all carry a kind of whispered trace of the interactions between the land, the painting process and myself. Jane Bennett's way of thinking about how the interactions between things can occur to create new understandings,⁵ and Donna Haraway's concept of "borderlands" as places where the push and pull of knowledge occur and new connections arise,⁶ make sense of my process of painting and experience of the land. These two concepts are underpinned by Bruno Latour's "actor-network" theory, where he suggests that everything exists in networks of relationships.⁷ He uses the term "actant" to describe both human and non-human agents or "things" involved in these relationships, and suggests that the shifting and changing bonding between actants is in constant flux, without external forces making them into something, and in this way the network organises itself.

Instead of focusing on painting pictorial scenes, I have worked with the land and the studio environment to create the paintings, letting the unpredictable take place on the canvas. This approach to painting – where I view myself as one of the actants involved, rather than the only one – frees the painting process from accepted ideas about places, as it facilitates the kind of borderland described by Haraway and brings my attention to the vitality that may be occurring between things there. I hope that this approach to painting has reduced my agency as artist slightly and increased the agency of the places themselves and the painting materials, with a view to seeing myself as part of the ensemble or of a broader ecological assemblage. It was in my encounters of these places in Ōtepoti as I painted that surprising understandings of these geographies occurred and were made visible in my paintings.

I also enjoy Lauren Greyson's⁸ rather positive perspective about looking at the present moment, or at the relationships that exist *now*, in order to help with finding solutions for future problems. In a similar way to Bennett⁹ and Haraway,¹⁰ she talks about "being attuned" or "recognising" things occurring between things. It is in this context that I like to think of my painting interactions with Dunedin gardens as something that might be opening up an opportunity to bring solutions in some small way in the future. I wonder if there are things that were subliminally "recognised" in the paintings as they were occurring that are now recorded in the finished works, things that perhaps were outside of my cognitive perception?

UNDERSTANDINGS OF ŌTEPOTI DUNEDIN

I have experienced Ōtepoti Dunedin in a close and local way, on foot in the geographical vicinity of the Dunedin School of Art, and in relative isolation, and I am in wonder of it.

During this time of investigating local environments, I have encountered cultivated spaces in local gardens in repetitive and meditative ways. I have witnessed a gradual unfolding of springtime in the colours and flowers on my walks, and these colours found their way into my paintings in bright blues, pinks and yellows. These daily walks added to my understanding of the area as I connected with the pathways I explored in a physically present manner. In the studio, I was able to outwork these observations through drawing and painting my experience and memory of these walks.

Because it was a bit colder than I was used to, I tended to keep my walks to between one and two hours, which is shorter than my usual working timeframe, and this influenced the types of marks I made, the support choice and the process of drawing. The marks became fluid and quick as I kept my drawing times short in order



Figure 13. *Early mornings in the gardens, Ōtepoti Dunedin 2*,
by Amanda Watson,
ink on canvas, 500x440mm.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14. *Light flickering through foliage and walking in the gardens, Ōtepoti Dunedin 1*,
by Amanda Watson,
ink on canvas, 950x785mm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

to keep warm, and in order to preserve energy as I stood while drawing.¹¹ I preferred small-sized, heavy card that could fit into my workbook to carry it there and back, and gravitated towards pen and ink because they were small and light and I could easily walk with them. These media accommodated themselves to rapid gestural work, and the drawings had a lovely sense of immediacy which I attempted to pick up in the paintings.

Working in local gardens was a new direction for me, as previously my practice had focused on off-the-grid locations. Because these gardens were just a short distance from my studio and easily accessible, I was able to return to them often and enjoy a high level of engagement with them, and this contributed to the large number of small-scale paintings that I produced. The sculptural paintings varied in size including five unstretched paintings (Figures 14 and 15) and five smaller sculptural paintings (Figures 10, 11, 12 and 13). There were also 25 small drawings made with ink pen and ink wash (Figures 2, 3 and 4), and eight small unstretched paintings (Figure 8) made with ink on gesso on canvas. As a result of the two months



Figure 15. *Light flickering through foliage and walking in the gardens, Ōtepoti Dunedin 3*,
by Amanda Watson,
ink on canvas, 1040x950mm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

set aside for the residency, with no other distractions, I was able to develop the work on a daily basis with a lot of thought and time. This contributed to a sense of flow and connection among the work.

What Lyotard,¹² Haraway,¹³ Bennett¹⁴ and Latour¹⁵ all point toward in their writing is the idea that the world contains more than the eye can see, and perhaps the time I spent painting in Dunedin has let the places I explored act as a creative protagonist in my work rather than merely being objects of observation, and perhaps this approach has given voice to some previously unseen things.

During the residency, I have enjoyed painting exchanges with Dunedin that were abundant and productive, where the gestural mark and the painting process recaptured a sense of directness to reveal my encounters with the land. I hope that these paintings give voice to the flourishing and life that these geographies bear witness to, and that they are enjoyed.

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- 1 Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Scapeland," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
- 2 Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things," in her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-19.
- 3 Fresco painting is a mural-making technique where pigment is pressed into wet plaster; it was used widely during the Italian Renaissance.
- 4 The native forest near Māori Hill was another one of these spaces. While in Dunedin I endeavoured to locate history and stories about these areas from a te ao Māori perspective, but found such material difficult to source. Hopefully in the future these doors might open to me.
- 5 Bennett, "Force of Things."
- 6 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in her *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 7 Bruno Latour, "On Actor-network Theory. A Few Clarifications, Plus More Than a Few Complications," *Philosophical Literary Journal Logos*, 27:1 (2017), 173-97.
- 8 Lauren Greyson, *Vital Reenchantments: Biophilia, Gaia, Cosmos, and the Affectively Ecological* (Earth, Milky Way: Punctum Books, 2019).
- 9 Bennett, "Force of Things."
- 10 Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto."
- 11 The ground was often wet so I would avoid sitting down. However, I found that drawing while standing was a tiring way to work for long anything longer than 30 minutes at a time.
- 12 Lyotard, "Scapeland."
- 13 Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto."
- 14 Bennett, "Force of Things."
- 15 Latour, "Actor-network Theory."