

TE ARAROA DRAWING EXPEDITION

Hannah Joynt



Figure 1. Hannah Joynt, selected drawings (2013), pencil on paper, 170 x 235 mm.

The Te Araroa Drawing Expedition was hatched in reaction to my experience of contemporary life. With the constant urgency and multitasking, visual, virtual and aural noise of the city, endless 'to do' lists and the technologically dependent state we find ourselves in, I longed for simplicity. In the summer of 2013, I spent five months travelling alone on foot. I walked from the top of New Zealand to the bottom following the Te Araroa ('the long pathway') Trail. I carried everything I need on my back, one foot in front of another, residing nightly in my tent. I documented my trip by drawing.

In the beginning, I romantically regarded my journey as a pilgrimage or 'quest,' a self-nominated rite of passage via an extreme endurance venture, or a search for an identity (of sorts) that might be realised through entering the liminal space/time/zone of thru-hiking.¹ This was naive pre-walk thinking. On reflection, I realised that the trip wasn't really about pilgrimage or soul searching, but about just being, uninterrupted (by inane contemporary distractions), in the landscape, experiencing total immersion in a subject.

My drawing kit consisted of a small (170 mm x 235 mm) 210gsm wet media sketchpad and a selection of watercolour pencils. Drawing often multiple times a day, I finished up with two hundred coloured sketches. I was not interested in topographic exactness, or realistic representation, but rather to let myself be as free on paper as I felt walking the trail. I endeavoured to capture the essence of experience, place, time and journey in a drawn format. Over time, I made no distinction between the act of drawing and the act of walking; they were one and the same.

The environmental and atmospheric conditions, as well as my physical and emotional state, affected what and how I drew. I developed various different drawing methods in response to the weather and geography. For example, at the top of mountain passes I would look behind me and draw where I had come from, then turn around and draw where I was going. Another technique was to denote perspective as a series of textures that are stacked vertically in the picture plane. Sometimes I had to draw at great speed with line only, due to deteriorating weather conditions or cold temperatures.

I would observe what was around me and mark it down like writing a story. The action of reading the landscape is translated through the treatment of line and mark-making. The marks became a text. I had a particular mark, squiggle or flick for each type of tree, grass, rock, river cascade, and so on. Thus I developed my own drawn language.

The drawings of the French artist Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) have been described in a similar way, as a language. Bonnard roamed the countryside and the area around his home, sketching the landscape. These sketches became starting points that were then enlarged and painted on canvas back in the studio. "Incredible detail is there but only if you look at the drawings as a whole ... a series of dots or ticks. The necessity to record on this scrap of paper everything that he would need later in his studio – to respond, and quickly to any quality he saw – resulted in a drawing 'language'.² Because Bonnard relied only on the drawings and his memory to paint from, these monochromatic pencil drawings became a 'code' representing a coloured reality, and Bonnard was obsessed with colour.

My emotions heightened by solitude, mountains and high country, I sometimes felt geographically isolated. Drawing helped me to make connections with and between places, and gave a somewhere-ness to the nowhere-ness. Huts and bridges were recurring subjects. They were destinations that gave me significant points of focus as a mark in the landscape: a bridge – a human-made line crossing a natural line; a hut – a cube, a flat vertical plane amid a heavily textured backdrop. These human interventions in the landscape reminded me that someone else had walked here before, but they also meant survival – a dry roof overhead or safe passage across water; an exact location for navigation.

I often found the colours in my views very seductive, and was surprised at how quickly the colours could change due to the time of day, altitude or geography. I submitted to these alluring hues and used colour in an oversaturated way, joyfully exaggerating my palette. I also developed a burnishing technique to mix colour and build layers. The process of burnishing begins by sketching down a fine layer of coloured pencil, followed by a heavy layer of white

pencil. Then more layers of colour and more burnishing with white. The layers build into a dense, waxy surface. Different colours can be layered up to make mixed hues, and the process is quite sympathetic to blending. This burnishing technique also creates a blurring effect which I found useful when drawing dappled forest light, or the distant hills with atmospheric perspective.



Figure 2. Hannah Joynt, selected drawings (2013), pencil on paper, 170 x 235 mm.

I came to regard walking and drawing as the same, an activity of total immersion and meditation. Sometimes I felt as though I was consciously outside of my body, watching myself walk or draw. Yet at the same time, I was totally aware and observant (I had to be – I was alone). I was merging into the landscape. In his article, "Walking and Reading in Landscape," Ben Jacks describes this state as one of "mergence": "Plunging into the immediate environment involves a heightened awareness of time and conscious presence as a special quality distinct from everyday life: our sense of time changes, we feel a sense of timelessness, and we become aware that we are noticing. Through merging we develop awareness of and sensitivity to the world ... akin to walking meditation."³



Figure 3. Hannah Joynt, selected drawings (2013), pencil on paper; 170 x 235 mm.

I entered states that may resemble such descriptions. I often lost myself in such states for days at a time – my legs seemed to walk by their own accord; similarly, when drawing, my hands just seemed to know what to do. I would go as far as to make a connection between my experience on the trail and a fugue (or partial fugue) state.

A fugue state – in formal terms, a dissociative fugue – is usually a short-lived state of amnesia (ranging from hours to days, but sometimes lasting months or longer) triggered by a stressful episode. The fugue state often involves

unplanned travel or wandering and is characterised by temporary loss of personal identity, memories, personality and other identifying characteristics of individuality. It can be – but is not always – accompanied by the establishment of a new identity during the state. After the fugue passes, one's previous identity is resumed (usually intact). Unlike amnesia – formally, retrograde amnesia – where someone forgets events that occurred prior to brain damage, the fugue state is not due to the direct effects of substance exposure, head trauma or other general medical condition.⁴

While I dismiss ideas of pilgrimage, there is a spiritual dimension to thru-hiking. In their essay "Wilderness Talk: Interpreting Remote Recreation Experience," social scientists Stephen Espiner, Harvey Perkins and Kerry Wray describe the spiritual dimension of hiking as a closeness to nature, or "nature on nature's terms." "It's a kind of spiritual feeling that you get through a wilderness experience and it doesn't have to be about religion or anything, just a realization that there's something greater than us out there ... There's just something and you know it when you've experienced it and it's something really special."⁵

The simplicity of what I was doing allowed me to have this 'close to nature,' holistic spiritual experience. Walking has a rhythm to it that became very meditative, and I saw this rhythm reflected back to me everywhere in the patterns of the landscape itself. As I walked, my body added to the definition of a line (the Te Araroa Trail) that was being etched into the earth's surface. The artist Paul Klee famously said, "A line is a dot that went for a walk." I was the dot.

Of the 200 drawings I completed, I chose 152 to exhibit in the Dunedin School of Art Gallery in 2015. Hung in a single horizontal line, in chronological order; the drawings occupied the whole gallery space. Viewers engaged with the work as both a series of individual moments and also as a singular work. The drawings were hung with the intention of embodying the sense of journey, and the scale of the drawings encouraged viewers to navigate their way around the walls.

By walking, navigating, drawing and living in the landscape, I became part of it in a deeper way, and from my expedition I recognised the disconnection we have with the landscape in contemporary city living. We don't live in the landscape but rather with it, as other, as a thing to visit. We see representations of landscape regularly on billboards, printed, painted, on screens, selling us carpet, cars and cheese. It occurred to me that all of these representations exemplify a disconnection we have with the actual landscape. I am continuing to explore ideas around the contemporary disconnection with the landscape in my current MFA project. The project, which I plan to complete by 2017, grew out of the Te Araroa Drawing Expedition.

Hannah Joynt teaches drawing, painting and illustration in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic, and is a candidate in the MFA programme at Otago Polytechnic. She has been exhibiting her work nationally in both solo and group exhibitions since 2008. In 2009 she was winner of the COCA Anthony Harper Award for Contemporary Art. Her practice is located in the disciplines of drawing and painting.

1 "Thru-hiking is hiking a long-distance trail end-to-end." See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thru-hiking>.

2 Sargy Mann, *Bonnard Drawings* (London: John Murray, 1991), 11.

3 Ben Jacks, "Walking and Reading in Landscape," *Landscape Journal*, 26:2 (2007), 270-86.

4 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

5 Stephen Espiner, Harvey Perkins and Kerry Wray, "Wilderness Talk: Interpreting Remote Recreation Experience," in *Wild Heart: The Possibility of Wilderness in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds Mick Abbott and Richard Reeve (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011), 137.