



1. *Rocks* (detail), 2006, textiles, 30 x 60 cm.\*



2. *Interventions White* (detail), 2006, textiles, 110 x 145 cm.

## “SURFACE DISTURBANCE”

Jenny Bain

I walk in the forest listening to the stillness, feeling the silence which is broken only by the sighing of the wind as it travels through the trees. It seems to come from the mountains and you can hear it coming long before it reaches you. The undulations and scarring of the land are hidden beneath the layer of green provided by the trees. But, boulders, rocks and miniature mountains of gravel do emerge in a surreal scarred landscape to expose the mining that took place over one hundred years ago.

I stoop and pick up a stone, it gleams white with flecks of colour, and I wonder if it is gold-bearing quartz thrown up by volcanic activity around a hundred and thirty million years ago, or were land masses thrust upward as a result of tectonic plates colliding? I collect more stones; they are beautiful and I admire them for their shape and colour. They act as resources for my studio work and as an inspiration to me. Having read about the mining activity in the area of Central Otago (for example in *Gold Trails of Central Otago*) – where I collect most of my stones – and having visited mining sites there, I cannot help but wonder whether my desire to collect is comparable to that of those whose need to accumulate disturbed the land so long ago?

### Mining

Relics of the gold mining era still remain in isolated little pockets of the New Zealand countryside, and Naseby is the area to which I refer specifically in this work of and about surface disturbance. Early photographs from the Hocken Library show this part of the country as it was after mining ceased. It was barren and covered in rubble, devoid of any growth and looking like a scene of desolation. This land is now forested and clothed in green as nature claws back what once was hers.

One can only imagine the hardships that people must have experienced when gold was first discovered in the area in 1863. The local cemeteries tell stories of how difficult life was with many records of children and adults not surviving the rigorous and difficult conditions of life in the goldfields. *Gold Trails of Central Otago* explains that no sensational discoveries of gold were made in the Maniototo region, although more than five thousand people were working in the Hogburn Gully soon after the first discoveries were made there.<sup>1</sup>

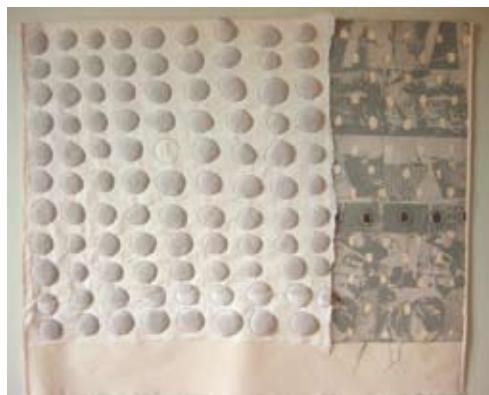
Although the focus of my attention has mainly been the Hogburn Gully area, I have also visited Macraes Mining at Hyde where interesting relics of past mining are still evident. This includes a stamping battery where the gold-bearing quartz was crushed to extrude the gold, as is still done today although using very different methods than in the past. The mine here today is open-cast, with work spread over an area of twenty-five kilometres. It is the largest hole in New Zealand, where

work continues twenty-four hours a day for seven days a week all year round, processing more than five million tons of ore per year to retrieve a single barrel of gold.

### Collecting

The stones that I have selected from the Hogburn Gully area attract me because of their shape and colour. But because I have selected them they no longer function as ordinary stones as I have given them a different kind of status by isolating them from their environment. They have become cultural objects through my intervention. I line them up on the fence so that I can admire them. They become objects pure and simple, divested of their original context, abstracted from any practical function, and thus they take on a strictly subjective status. They are the desired.<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard discusses 'desire' as a driving force in our acts of collecting. This desire never ceases since a collection is never complete. The desired objects thus collected share a destiny and this is to be the focus of our need to collect. My stones might once have been used for roading material, crushed as mining material or simply laid as nature had left them in the veld. But now, they are no longer defined by those functions and have become collected objects. Is there a difference between collecting and accumulating?

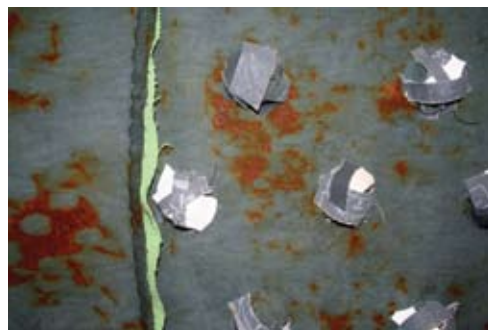
Accumulation suggests stashing items away or stockpiling and one reference in the *New Collins Concise English Dictionary* defines accumulation as "finance, the continuous growth of capital by retention of interest or earning"<sup>3</sup> – stashing or stockpiling again. Of course, accumulations are not always about wealth, are not necessarily on display, and can be quite secretive.



3. *Surface Disturbance*, 2006, textiles, 80 x 95 cm.



4. *Collected*, 2006, textiles, 100 x 145 cm.



5. *Collected Grey*, 2006 textiles, 75 x 90 cm.

Collecting on the other hand is more about the exchange value of the object and also about the social ritual of display.<sup>4</sup> What makes a collection transcend mere accumulation is not only the fact of it being culturally complex but also its incompleteness, that it lacks something. It always needs that extra special piece to make it complete.

If a collection has intrinsic value associated with culture and the social ritual of display, how can an accumulation be valued? Can quality be activated by quantity? If there is a large amount of something does that make it more valuable? There are also questions to be asked about the value of commodities. If America, for example, wants to accumulate all the oil resources in the world, that desire is not only associated with accumulation but with the commodity value of oil. If an individual wants to accumulate all the known items of a particular type, that drive may also be connected to the commodity value of the collection. An example close to my personal act of collecting is Australian Peter Spearitt's extensive and valuable collection of items featuring the Sydney Harbour Bridge.<sup>5</sup>

Collecting and accumulating can become obsessive and I wonder why. Is this to do with wealth and power or is it a fear of letting go and releasing ownership?

## Cloth

My fascination and passion for cloth continues because I love the way it can be manipulated. It folds, joins, dyes, prints, and secretly seduces because it alludes to the body: "It can be shaped beyond the boundaries of origin and shifts from the potential to an actuality that has a myriad of shapes and a myriad of ways of moving, responding to the action of the individual who manipulates it."<sup>6</sup>

Cloth has always provided shelter and protection and has been exchange value for goods. There is a sense of history inherent in the warp and weft of cloth. It has served as adornment and sensual delight, as a symbol of wealth and power. For my new work, I have chosen the simplicity of canvas and its relationship to the tent.

I make this work about surface disturbance in relation to the land. I record evidence of disturbances on the surface of canvas cloth. I work in layers, each one recording information about the land in some way. The cloth layers become a metaphor for accumulation and for human activity. I make cloth stones and, surprisingly, it has become almost an obsession to accumulate them. I must make more, there are never enough. I mold the cloth over the stones with silicone so that the form is retained. *Rocks* (detail: image 1) is part of this obsessive work, with the whole comprising almost three hundred cloth stones. Some of these elements remain on the floor, while a larger proportion of them adhere to the gallery wall. The deceptively simple placement of rocks on a gallery wall is a direct reference to the landscape and questions the disturbances that occur through the obsessiveness of accumulation.

I cut, stitch, and use chemicals to burn out areas of cloth. The surfaces become raised as I cut behind a layer, stuffing the back of the work. The implications of accumulation and surface disturbance are considered and communicated through repetition of image and the minimal use of colour. The canvas in the work *Collected* (image 4) is covered with a series of marks similar to drawn

lines, and is divided into five sections. On the first of these, fine threads are interspersed through the surface of the cloth. The next area is disturbed by a series of deliberate cuts, some of which reveal dark interiors among a jumble of similarly dark threads. On the third section, larger holes which are raw around the edges as a result of chemical burnout expose the dark cloth underneath, while a repetitive series of raised bubble-like white extrusions emerge over the cloth surface on the fourth section of the work. Finally these raised bubbles repeat off the cloth and onto the wall surface, reflecting not only the order of collecting and disturbing but also the intrusive results of human intervention on the land.

When I go back to the Hogburn Gully, I rejoice that it is now undisturbed, covered again with a gentle mantle of vegetation, and I listen to the wind sighing through the trees. I will continue with this work because it is my language.

\* All artworks by the author and all photographs of artworks by Penny Smith.

- 1 JA Wood, *Gold Trails of Central Otago* (Auckland: AH and AW Reed, 1990).
- 2 See Jean Baudrillard, *The Systems of Collecting: The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).
- 3 *New Collins Concise English Dictionary* (Glasgow: Collins, 1991).
- 4 See Jean Baudrillard, *The Systems of Collecting: The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).
- 5 See Alex Landrigan, "The Majesty: Anatomy of a Collection", *Interior*, 2 (1), 1998: 46-48.
- 6 Mildred Constantine and Laurel Reuter, *John Ruskin Quotations: The Whole Cloth* (New York & London: Monacelli Press, 1997).

**Jenny Bain** is a textile artist who exhibits regularly in New Zealand and abroad. She is a senior lecturer in Textiles at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin; and has worked for many years to promote the textile arts in her country and internationally. "Surface Disturbance" was exhibited at the Peter Rae Gallery in Dunedin during 2006.