

THALLASIC

Lynn Taylor



Marguerite Mirabaud Last Days, 2006, digital invert (blue) and intaglio print (sepia), 10.5 x 15.5 cm each.

a high sea running
her broken back
a viridian cargo clock
canvas sails heavy with fog
a mast out of place
tar lined jackets drying on flax bushes
starboard in shadow
a flying fox
a road red with port wine
a lifeboat 'never to be seen again'
waterlogged rigging
and
ninety three flounders in the net

I have always known I was one of the crew of the *Marguerite Mirabaud* although I am at a loss to explain this except through my printmaking practice.¹ When I first saw a faded photograph of the *Marguerite Mirabaud* as a child I found myself not looking at the photograph but being in the photograph. In a rush my surroundings dissolved around me and I seemed to be up high in dense cloud, looking down on the shipwreck. There but not there, because although I felt cold I could see right through myself. Ringed by a hundred years of sea, memories of this shipwreck are repetitively rewritten and renewed through tidal erasure. For me now, these memories are unpeeling through my printmaking project *thalassic*, in a way not unlike the onions that marbled Chrystalls Beach in February 1907.

However, my printmaking project did not begin at this obvious point of magnetic attraction.² I started by undertaking oral histories³ of a selected group of people, fifty to eighty years of age, who were living within the radius of an old shed site. I knew I was listening for something, but as the recordings spooled my original project intent of translating between oral and printed cultures appeared too illustrative. While each recording was a rich voyeuristic experience, something else was scratching me inside, but how could I know what I was seeking when I couldn't name what 'it' was? ⁴ It became apparent that the purpose for listening was to witness processing patterns of remembering and forgetting. During the interviews I noticed that photograph albums always came out and I observed the collected images existing as multiple realities. People in photographs were remembered and then on the turn of a page their name interchanged with another person's, even themselves, or were forgotten with bemusement.

The realisation of my project's purpose coincided with the re-discovery of a box of glass photographic negatives,⁵ developed by Mr Alex Leslie, which intermittently document the twelve month dismantling of the *Marguerite Mirabaud* in the sea. The box of negatives was gifted by Alex's son, Jack Leslie, to my father because they were both, to use my mother's description, 'Gun Nuts', spending many hours in friendship looking at and talking about gun collections. I knew the slides were precious because they were stored in my father's secret cupboard, so while I was pleased to inherit the negatives after my father died I did not have the equipment to develop them and could not clearly read what the images were of. To create a parallel activity to that of Mr Alex Leslie making and developing photographic glass plate negatives one hundred years ago I translate the negatives directly into the medium of photopolymer intaglio etching.⁶ I place the negative directly on the photopolymer plate and expose the layers to the sun. This creates a plate of a plate, a recollection rather than a direct correspondence with the original, which I can print off. The result is a graphic surprise, my control is limited.



Sky Scratchings, 2006, intaglio print (sepia) and digital invert (blue), details from 10.5 x 15.5 cm each.



Marguerite Mirabaud Lifeboat, 2006, digital invert (blue) and intaglio print (sepia), 10.5 x 15.5 cm each.

In order to create the originally intended positive image I must invert the negative. I scan the *Marguerite Mirabaud* negatives digitally into Photoshop and my histories are becoming constructed, inverted, magnified, filtered, compressed and distorted. The computer screen reveals the accrued damage of time and poor preservation in peeling, indiscriminate scratches and thumbprints. Repeated magnification of these distressed surfaces reduces them to textures that come to resemble undocumented scenes of the ship with her masts and sails angled against the fog. In the presence of this echo I simultaneously yearn for and reject the possibility of seeing the details of the grey stains with more clarity. I stare with obsession at the face of a woman sitting on a lifeboat from the *Marguerite Mirabaud*. I look for her;⁷ seeking a better quality image. I enlarge her scanned face on the screen. I search for her in other photographs. Even if I could see her clearly, what if I could not recognise her?⁸ I recall a photo where the face of a boy was cut out to be treasured in a locket and react by deleting an entire tonal range with the magic wand tool. While people's main concern with oral histories was what they may have left out I wonder if it is possible to describe something more fully by removing some of its characteristic qualities.

With the rhythm of a story repeating many times, the same matrix is printed double over itself, trying to get to know itself. Repetitive looking back causes a jarring through the image registrations, anywhere from a slight shift to a complete reversal. Text notations are etched on the plate in both left to right construct and reverse, so that the printed words read backwards and forwards along a horizon. This reminds me of my disturbing obsession with the *Marguerite Mirabaud* being out of place, out of her intended function. Here too, these words slip from their function of recording knowledge and details into a visual culture.⁹ In another movement, my fingers run over the paper as it peels from the plate to read the dissolving surface of a ghost print. Normally an etching plate is inked up each time before being rolled through the press. However, if it is printed without being re-saturated in ink a phantom of the image is embedded. These processes examine the ever shifting, ever mutating nature of human consciousness and pose the question – if we can't trust our recollections what do we really know?

Mercurial, my printed 'works on paper' run through the press many times until layers of different texts, times, details, spaces and surfaces accumulate and melt through one another. I allow the shipwreck of the *Manuka* in.¹⁰ Another time, another shipwreck, another story but how can I resist my desire to stand among the oranges and onions which were washed ashore from the *Manuka* onto the beach when as a French sailor I suffered from scurvy?¹¹ As in remembering, each time a memory is reconstructed there are assimilations from different sources and changes, but the essence of the story is retained.¹² Changes can accumulate until the story becomes unrecognisable; however, when I push the imagery to a parallel point of abstraction I become dissatisfied and many saturated works are abandoned. Hybrid prints that quietly scratch at hidden secrets, unobserved realities and different perceptions through codes of displacement and fracturing survive.¹³ In exhibition this effect chooses to be echoed by pinning the prints up like paper clippings on a wall and inviting the viewers to mobilise them, thereby creating new juxtapositions and continuing the narrative.¹⁴



Marguerite Mirabaud Postcard, 2006, digital invert (blue) and intaglio print (sepia), 10.5 × 15.5 cm each.

striped arms singing
 scurvy hardened feet
 beer foaming waves
 lost bounty, unpaid tolls
 knives, forks, spoons and an iron ferrule
 an auction on the sails
 a compass unable to see the sun
 white on white satin stitch initials
 coiling traces of wagon wheels
 a triangular tent
 and
 one thousand tons of coal briquettes
 there and not there¹⁵

- 1 The *Marguerite Mirabaud* was built in Nantes, France, 1900. Under Captain J MTattevin she left La Rochelle, France in September 1906, bound for Tahiti. Amidst dense fog she ran into rocks and became shipwrecked at Chrystalls Beach, Akatore, South Otago, 1, 8000 miles off course. [Longitude: 2290967.0. Latitude: 5452493.0.] 17 -02-1907. French Braque Vessel ID: 5888882112. CWN Ingram, 1795 – 1975 *New Zealand Shipwrecks* (Wellington, 1977), 294-5.
- 2 Due to the high number of shipwrecks along the South Otago Coast there is some speculation as to the effect of the magnetic pull of the land on compass equipment and steel lined vessels.
- 3 I have undertaken interview and abstract training to comply with National Oral History Association of New Zealand standards. I discover that children within preliterate cultures were specially trained as oral historians and developed extraordinary memory skills known as eidetic or photographic memory. Oral History http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_History last visited 8 June 2006.
- 4 I experience paradoxical discord through the necessity of securing research funding that feels like a continual sliding back and forth across a tensioned tightrope. For me beginning a research project involves putting down survey pegs and intuitively following what is not yet known, but sensed. My first language is visual and 'things' may not be able to be articulated until after the moment of creation. However, historically, my successful funding applications have demonstrated research specifics, outputs, target audiences, benefits and an indication of logical practitioner process. Artists need to be active in ensuring that the models for arts funding keep evolving with recognition of the differences between our languages and towards creating a more ideal synergy.
- 5 This particular box of Imperial photographic glass negatives, coated with a light-sensitive gelatin emulsion, was developed by hobby photographer Mr Alexander Leslie while he was working on the family farm at Bull Creek, Akatore in 1907.

- 6 A photosensitive resin-based plate used in the printmaking industry is also known as a solar plate and Torelief WS95H11. Like most photographic images, photopolymer is composed of two parts, the base and the light-sensitive emulsion. Credit for the initial development of this plate as an artistic medium largely goes to Dan Weldon. See Dan Weldon and Pauline Muir, *Printmaking in the Sun* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001).
- 7 In relation to the impact that this shipwreck had on the South Otago Coast I find the written and photographic documentation surprisingly scarce. Although the newspapers *The Bruce Herald* and *The Otago Witness*, February - March 1907 documented events at the time I cannot locate her on the internet or even in the Nantes Maritime University (CDMO) in France. To my dismay I hear the mast lies dismantled. However, traces of the ship may be located in the Otago Settlers Museum exhibition "Shipwrecked – Maritime Mishaps and Misadventure" (10th June – 24th September 2006), curated by Peter Read. The Hocken Collections have a rare image of the auction and The Tokomairiro Historical Society in Milton holds a quality collection of small photographs and artefacts. The irretrievability of the past is heightened as it becomes increasingly obvious that the contacts Bruce Collins made in 1995 for his book *Rocks, Reefs and Sandbars*, have now deceased. (See Bruce Collins. *Rocks, Reefs and Sandbars: A History of Otago Shipwrecks* (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1995), 111-116.
- 8 In postscript, a month after writing these artist's pages I have found 'her', on a post card in the private collection of Steven McLachlan, Shades Stamp Shop Ltd, Christchurch. It was too difficult to look, I had to slide the photographic postcard to the bottom of the pile because I was looking at myself.
- 9 The cultural shift in favour of visualising our existence "...marks a significant challenge to the notion of the world as a written text." See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 6-7.
- 10 Objects from the wreck of the *Manuka* at Long Point, South Otago on 16th December 1929 were collected by my father's family and these included my first 'action' toy - a bakelite model of a parachutist, a telescope and a small set of wooden drawers. But these objects were never just objects, they glowed with the aura of stories; in fact I do not think we children could ever open a wooden drawer without activating a mouth paying homage to the sea!
- 11 "Crew suffered from scurvy – lack of greens", recorded by R Leslie on the back of photograph F19-33, at The Tokomairiro Historical Society in Milton.
- 12 Daniel Schacter refers to memory network "connectionism" and explains "...when we remember, we complete a pattern with the best match available in memory; we do not shine a spotlight on a stored picture." See Daniel Schacter, *Searching For Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 71.
- 13 "The wave in popular understanding brings the depths to the surface, reverses concavity and convexity (always both), surfaces interiority." See Sarah Treadwell, "Weathering, Waves and Fabrications", in *Building Dwelling Drifting: Migrancy and the Limits of Architecture* (Proceedings of the 3rd International "Other Connections" Conference at the University of Melbourne: Melbourne, June 1997), 345.
- 14 The desire for creating viewer interaction is less about touch – on which my previous exhibition focus has been – and more about what the critic Nicolas Bourriaud has termed "relational aesthetics," a condition that manifests less in things than in their inter-human relationships. In my envisaged exhibition I am considering these relationships in layers. One layer comes from my simple premise that each print is a unit and fluidity of the visual order is necessary to parallel the differing sentence structures of the French and English languages utilised. Another layer works with the instability of memory combined with viewers influencing the interpretation and production of the work under the umbrella of Michel Foucault's theory that discourse offers "truth effects", *regards réflexif*, there being no absolute truth. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: les presse du réel, 1998); and Marcia Pointon, *History of Art: A Student's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1997), 97.
- 15 These lists are a pastiche of details and events that I have 'seen' from the *Marguerite Mirabaud* shipwreck.

Lynn Taylor is a print media artist who undertakes an interdisciplinary approach to the mapping of memory. She exhibits nationally and internationally; and has received a number of awards with her work held in many collections. She also positions her work within communities through residencies, Sister City exchanges and her role on the Anna and John Caselberg Trust. Taylor is a lecturer at Otago Polytechnic School of Art and Co-Director of Salisbury House Gallery www.salisburyhousegallery.com in Dunedin.