

wet_land

Lisa Clunie + Thorsten Hoppe

wet_land is an exploration of the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of the Hikurangi Swamp, otherwise known as wetland, repo, or floodplain.



New Zealand's landscape is a heavily contested palimpsest – rohe (food gathering place), tūrangawaewae (place to stand), and whakapapa (genealogy); stolen territory and new start, ecology and food factory, wilderness, raw materials, resting place of the dead, temple, taonga and vista. And that is barely scratching the surface of the narratives and viewpoints invested therein, but neither is the map the territory. Ngā repo (wetlands) are particularly charged places. For the tangata whenua these places were important sources

of food – plants, birds, fish, and tuna (eels) – and building and weaving resources like raupō, kuta and kōrari. In pre-Roman Europe they were regarded similarly, and as places of religious significance, but gradually grew into marginal places associated with outsiders, evil spirits, witches, corruption and contagion. By the time Europeans arrived in Aotearoa, they saw wetlands as something to drain and make into arable land. A reparative approach between these different communities is needed, and perhaps art offers a way to détente. The Australian art historian Susan Best has coined the phrase “reparative aesthetics” to describe art that creates a space for dialogue by defusing tensions and accusations with art's seductive qualities. Beauty sweetens the political pill. Emerging from the field of affect therapy, reparative aesthetics are adept at finding common ground and getting people to sit at the table.

Lisa Clunie and Thorsten Hoppe's wet_land arises out of this reparative impulse, specifically concentrating on the Hikurangi Wetlands near Whangārei. Even the area's name is complex. A common name is “the Hikurangi Swamp”. Others refer to it as wetland, repo or floodplains. Before upward of 96% of the area was drained, these were one of the largest wetlands in New Zealand. Clunie creates the visuals and Hoppe provides a sound

installation and soundscape. Clunie and Hoppe work together in gathering and editing photographs, interviews, and audio recordings. Their volunteering at the local Hikurangi Historical Museum is an important part of their research process, engaging directly with the local community rather than coming in from the outside with preconceived ideas and judgements.



In twenty-first century Aotearoa, wetlands are sources of conflict between those wishing to preserve their native, environmentally important ecologies and recognising their importance in flood management (“the kidneys of the earth”), and those who want to use or exploit those resources. Much kahikatea from the swamp ended up as butter boxes for places like the Hikurangi Dairy Factory, and the wetland drained and converted into agricultural land. Clunie and Hoppe want to show the Hikurangi Swamp and its transformation over time from the diverse

perspectives of those who live on, work in, or otherwise engage with its ecology and environment. This is an extensive community, despite their often-differing opinions about ecology and land/waterway use.

While there is a lot still to be done, there are farmers in Hikurangi working in a proactive way with local hapū and DOC, fencing waterways, controlling invasive species, putting part of their land into QEII reserves, and helping to release kiwi back into the habitat. Local hapū are replanting waterways and working with scientists to monitor tuna (eels) and native fish populations. Kaitiakitanga is a central concept developing increased holistic awareness for all in the care of the awa (river) and its many tributaries and ecological niches, its plants and animals.

Even when there is consensus over management, there still is disagreement, as in the Hikurangi Flood Management Scheme put in place in the late 1970s. Currently managed by the Whangārei District Council, its substantial ongoing cost is funded through rates targeting local farmers and residents whose land contributes to, or benefits from the Flood Management Scheme. The scheme’s purpose was to decrease the frequency of flooding and to get floodwater off pastureland faster, although these days its benefits are disputed. There are many different opinions about the scheme, how much it impacts the tuna (eel)

population and how effective it is at doing what it was intended to do. Multitudes of contributing factors come into play. The issue is both sensitive, emotionally charged and complex.

Divaricating shrubland, marshes and fens associated with the Wairua River provide a home for mallard, grey, paradise shelduck, pukeko, pheasant, quail, spoonbill, bittern, fernbird and banded rail. It harbours a large population of rare and shy black mudfish. Several highly threatened plants are found only there, including unnamed varieties of koromiko/hebe, a small, endangered blue orchid (*Thelymitra cyanea*) and the heart leafed kohuhu (*Pittosporum obcordatum*). It is an ecology under stress. Collaborating artists Clunie and Hoppe see this place as a metaphor for geological “deep time”, preserving the distant past in its oxygen-starved bogs, while connecting directly to the ecological concerns of the contemporary environmental movement.

Such a complex, multi-layered and nuanced subject is a natural fit with a broad, holistic and multimedia approach. *Wet_land* encompasses drawing, photography, a collaborative audio-visual installation of Hoppe’s environmental recordings and Clunie’s photographs of the swamp. These are exhibited in conjunction with an evolving soundscape formed from audio interviews, and an interactive artwork that engages the community in a collaborative response to the psychogeography of the Hikurangi Wetlands. The installation of *wet_land* acts as a meeting space and educational resource – the art of witness. It seeks to bring local hapū, scientists, artists, conservation groups, farmers and others together in public events. The communal and communication aspect is central to the exhibition’s kaupapa, reaching out to a broader swamp community through workshops run by the artists.

At the heart of this project are four suites of photographic works by Clunie. Befitting the intricate, alchemical processes that take place in wetlands, these are largely produced by traditional analogue, pre-digital means. *Watershed* is a visual interpretation of the “lie of the land” around the Wairua River seen from geographical and industrial perspectives. Abstract three-dimensional photograms mounted on the wall evoke the scale and geomorphology of the 320 square kilometres that form the Hikurangi catchment. This is counterpointed by photograms suggesting the flatness of the lowlands and the flow of the Wairua (described by European settlers as “tortuous”) before and after the drainage schemes were introduced. Elements of early drainage maps narrate how engineers straightened the river from its natural course throughout the twentieth century.

The series Rain Studies uses the historical cliché verre technique of creating glass plate negatives, in what are a concrete record of droplets from rain falling in the Hikurangi area – the source of the wet in the land. They reference the processes of environmental change at the macro and micro scale in their coincidental resemblance to celestial bodies and microscopic organisms. In the nineteenth century many French painters including Corot, Millet, and Daubigny, used this method, taking flat pieces of glass, smoked them with a candle, and drawing in the soot. The glass would then be placed over photographic paper and allowed to develop. The slow emergence of the image is not unlike evolution of the swamp with human intervention.



But geographical change is only part of the story. Clunie's other major photographic component Complex Systems is a series of black and white photographs focusing on the unique and delicate ecology of the wetland. Introduced weeds contrast with native flora, wet balances dry. At the same time the artists are also interested in whether the dated infrastructure of the pump stations and related landworks – treated almost like romantic ruins of optimistic industrial expansion, can be understood as part of the ecosystem. The

artificial water management system built on top of the natural one. As much as humans attempt to control an environment, they are also assimilated by it, hence images of man-made structures- hunters' mai-mais, fences as well as the concrete pump stations.

Clunie's fourth component, The Measurement of Impossible Distances references the surveying of the land. These are abstract works combining line with the more organic and biomorphic qualities of cliché verre negatives. These works explore the western compulsion to "tidy up" the land, superimpose "order" on nature and break it up into manageable parcels.

Hoppe's contribution comes in the form of a sound work, Metamorphosis, and a soundscape, Re-Collection. The former is the carcass of a family piano from the Hikurangi Swamp area. Pianos are potent symbols for distant European culture in New Zealand – Samuel Butler dragging his up the Rangitata to Mesopotamia Station in the nineteenth century, that scene in the movie Utu (1983) and of course, The Piano (1993). Here it has become battered and eroded with time and adapted into a speaker to play ambient sounds

of the swamp, mingling with the thrumming piano strings. Content is continually added to the work. Occasionally the listener dimly perceives meaning as if being signalled from below the surface of scummy water, harmonising with the photographs, forming a complete experiential work.

The soundscape Re-Collection has the feeling of a dreaming archive, combining interviews with the swamp community gathered with Clunie and entangled with ambient recordings of the swamp. The voices of farmers, scientists, formal council workers, local hapū and townsfolk blend with the subtle sounds of river, pump stations, around bridges, in the wetland reserves, and in hunter's mai-mais. This tells the life of a much-storied river and wetland of many different memories and perspectives, heard while standing in a darkened room before a 1916 landscape painting of the swamp painted by Thomas L Drummond. This also will continue to evolve as more sound components are added. Also in this space which is as contemplative as the swamp itself, there is an interactive drawing work, one of the iconic butter boxes, and plant material from the swamp.

This intensive evocation of the spirit of place recalls German curator and critic Anselm Franke's take on animism as a special, transcendent and "undisciplined" form of knowledge well beyond its colonial, primitivist classification as a religious belief. According to this model, if capitalism reduces beings to things, animism understands things as beings. To some extent this has precedent in New Zealand law with the granting of person status and human rights to the Whanganui River in 2017. Clunie and Hoppe are giving the Hikurangi wetlands a similar degree of dignity and voice through art, which allows for a third space between science, culture and law.

Essay by Andrew Wood, commissioned by the Whangārei Art Museum.