

Painting encounters with environments: experiencing the territory of familiar places.

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Paintings and other symbolised image systems contribute to the way we see and understand the world, however accurate or flawed they may be. My research contributes to this conversation by investigating how to make paintings that allow environments to be creative protagonists rather than passive objects of representation. I do this by drawing from the painting practices of Julie Mehretu and Ingrid Calame to look at how their work registers the experience of place and use these findings to guide my practice based research, contextualised by ‘new materialist’ theory. The research shows how unpredictability in the process of painting allows the experience of place to be registered in ways that are responsive to materials and the site; how gesture is used to reveal something about the material and the immaterial world; and how the conversations happening between different levels of experience and modes of representation in the paintings, help to yield a dense and complex view of place. Through this study I have found that paintings can make manifest the relationships between process, gesture, environments and artists and in this way can reveal the experience of place in unexpected and multifarious ways.



Territories

This practice-based study investigates how environments participate in the making of paintings to register the experience of place, and it foregrounds the process of painting, particularly the gestural mark. We can describe landscapes, geographies and places by using mapping and other symbolised image systems to communicate our understandings of place. These ways of seeing the world, however accurate or flawed they may be, affect decisions that contribute to our social, political and environmental climates. My interest in the relationship we have with our material world led me to consider how this may be made manifest in contemporary painting, and how environments might be able to participate in the development of a body of paintings that explore understandings of place.

An interest in portraying places and landscapes has been a focus of inquiry for painters over many centuries. However, the focus of this study is not about pictures of place but rather how I can make paintings that yield a multi-faceted view of place by physically engaging with environments. I do this by drawing from the practices of contemporary American painters Julie Mehretu and Ingrid Calame, looking at how their work integrates different levels of experience or modes of representation, and by investigating how I can work in and with environments in ways that let them ‘participate’ in the making of my paintings. To do this I developed a way of painting outside in the natural environment by wrapping surfaces of the land with canvas and painting insitu. It required spending time in the landscape responding to occurrences and revisiting the areas multiple times over the duration of two years. The resulting canvases showed built-up layers of mark making which accumulated from painting over many days and locations and reflected the encounters I experienced while on-site. The research was presented as a body of paintings that were exhibited in a public exhibition at Ramp Gallery in Hamilton, New Zealand in February 2020 (figures 1-3).



Figure 1. Another completed painting. *The Mountain in Taranaki 2018 & 2019; and from Memories Since 1974 (2020)*, by Amanda Watson, ink, graphite, compressed pigment on canvas, 180x160cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Another completed painting. *Whaingaroa Raglan, April 2018 & March 2019; Near the Source of the Kapuni River, Taranaki June 2019; In My Studio in Hamilton 2019'*, (2020), by Amanda Watson, ink, acrylic and compressed pigment on canvas, 150x130cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Aspects of ‘new materialist’ theory and an understanding of the use of gesture and process in painting contextualise the research. Bruno Latour’s (2017) ‘actor-network’ theory suggests that everything exists in networks of relationships. 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 togetherness between actants is in constant flux without external forces making them into something, and in this way the network organises itself.

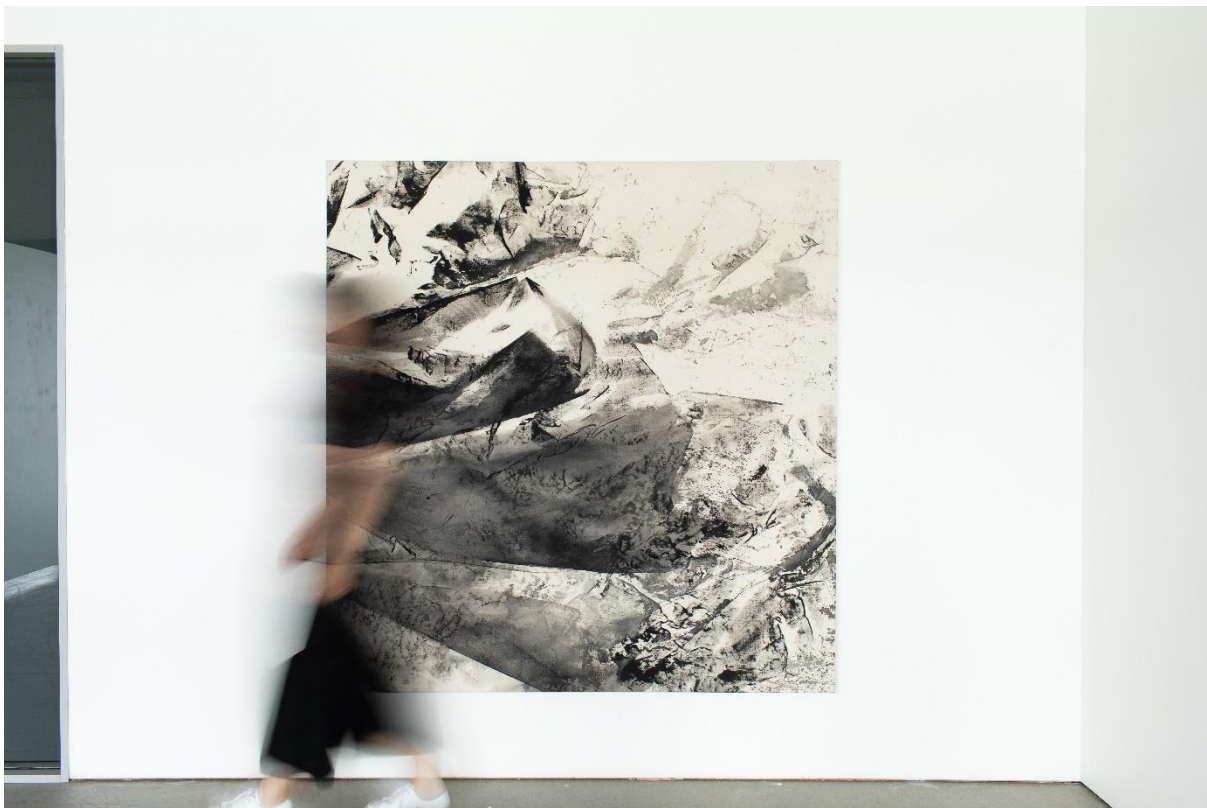


Figure 3. A photograph of a painting in the gallery. *Whaingaroa Raglan March & April 2019, and from 1998 onwards* (2020), by Amanda Watson, ink on canvas, 166x173cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

In particular, my understanding of materiality in the process of painting and experience of the land is informed by Jane Bennett’s ‘vital materialism’, where interactions between things can occur to create new understandings (Bennett 2010; Vera List Centre 2011), and Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘borderlands’ or ‘contact zones’ as places where the

push and pull of knowledge occur and new connections arise (Haraway 2016). Bennet explores the resistant force that things have to the meanings we interpret about them and place on them and suggests that they not only deflect these meanings but exert their own self-generated energy. Energy or ‘thing-power’ as she puts it comes from the interactions between things and these networks have vitality through their connection to each other. For Haraway the concept of ‘borderlands’ as productive places between zones that have their own widely accepted histories is a place of flourishing where knowledge is negotiated and where connections that seem important to you can be noticed and not weighed down by previously known narratives. Blurred edges in these borderlands allow free-floating, mingling and colliding, which enable new networks of connection to form.

This study suggests that the encounters between environments, materials and artist are where surprising understandings of place can occur. This approach to painting where I view myself as one of the actants instead of the only one frees the painting process up somewhat from previously known ideas about places, as it facilitates a kind of borderland described by Haraway and brings my attention to the vitality that may be occurring between things there.

Geographies

My research brings into play bodily perceptions of the world, alongside more conventional painting approaches, by working directly on-site to get a more ‘real’ experience and immediacy of place in the work.¹ I acknowledge the limitation of the term ‘real’ in the context of painting, and that what is deemed realistic is only a visual representation. However, the research aims to extend ideas of realism in painting beyond visual mimesis, to include multiple modes of representation and possibilities of recording the real. In this research I define ‘places’ or ‘environments’ in terms of specific geographical spaces that

I can physically spend time in and engage with, whether they be in the natural environment or in the studio space.

In analysing the practices of Mehretu and Calame and the new imaginings of place in their work through the use of mark making, I have identified a historical lineage with the manifold kinds of marks in Claude Monet's (1840-1926) Impressionism, and then with the role of gesture in Abstract Expressionism. Monet built up the surfaces of his *Nymphéas* [*Water lilies*] paintings made between 1914 and 1926, with a complex network of divergent marks. From afar these marks make pictorial sense of a garden, but up close they look abstract (Kleeblatt 2018) and loosen themselves from an illusion of place. This untethering of mark making from representation paved the way for Abstract Expressionism in the USA in the 1940s, where gesture was understood by the critic Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) as an artist's emotional expression and the process of painting as a 'performance'.²

Rosenberg's existentialist view on process, where the identity or emotional mind of the artist was held to be formed and displayed through their encounter with paint and canvas, has certain limitations, not at least that it situates the 'content' of a painting entirely with the ego of the individual artist. It does, however, look forward to subsequent art movements, where process is more than just the means of making art but has also become a subject in its own right.³

If, for Rosenberg, the encounter between artist and materials could yield a revelation about the artist's inner self, contemporary new materialist theorists such as Bennett and Haraway see such encounters in less anthropocentric terms, as revealing something about a broader ecological assemblage. They seek insight into the relationships between the human *and* non-human. In view of this shift away from a human-centred perspective, and in the context of new materialist theory such as Bennett's and Haraway's, I am looking at how

gesture and process can recapture a sense of ‘directness’ and be shifted somewhat away from a solely human expression to reveal encounters between artist, land and materials.

Practice in context

The participation of environments and human-sized marks in Ingrid Calame’s work

To locate my work in a contemporary context of artists seeking to record place in ways that go beyond perspective-based styles of representation, I began my research by identifying Julie Mehretu, and Ingrid Calame as contemporary painters whose work gives a sense of not just perception, but the experience of place. I focused my inquiry by analysing Calame’s *#219 Tracing up to LA River* (2005, coloured pencil on mylar, 122x203cm) and Mehretu’s *Cairo* (2013, ink and acrylic on canvas, 304x731cm). The following discussion highlights some of the relevant analyses of these paintings that informed my practice-based research.

Ingrid Calame (born in 1965) is known for her complex map-like paintings that trace fragments of environments and human detritus. Her method of tracing means that the interaction of the body with the site is evident in the gestures made in her work. In *#219 Tracing up to LA River* (figure 4), Calame employed a team of assistants to trace surface marks on the Los Angeles riverbank onto large sheets of tracing paper. The painting documents the residue of people and things previously active on the site, but also the people Calame employed to trace them, linking gesture to the site itself. The communal aspect to process sets the work apart from modernist notions of gesture as a direct emotive trace of a unique individual.



Figure 4. #219 *Tracing up to LA River* (2005), by Ingrid Calame, coloured pencil on mylar, 122x203cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Copyright: Ingrid Calame.

To make the work Calame moved the tracings around on her studio floor to investigate compositions by overlaying drawings. Her approach has links to Surrealist Automatism, the work of American painter Mark Tobey (1890-1976), and Jackson Pollock's 'action paintings', in the way that conscious control of the artistic process is reduced in favour of chance, enlivening the connection between the body and gesture.

The process of overlaying multiple tracings from varied geographical places and times leaves remnants of lines and shapes where some parts are hidden and others more visible and suggests an illegibility, creating mystery and a compelling urge to want to decipher. The variety and invention of different sized and coloured marks are, like Mehretu's work, reminiscent of the broad range of marks in Monet's *Nymphs* [*Water lilies*] paintings, and as they merge and pulsate they make it impossible to read the work from a single point of

view. Small and complicated squiggles participate with larger more graphic and simple lines; the thickest lines seem to float above the rest of the marks because they are larger and seem further forward, and at the same time smaller more detailed marks give the impression of being far away. The overlaying of tracings interferes with a single perspective, and these multiple 'views' enable an ever-changing interpretation of place.

Thin and precise line drawings in the work are redolent of a mapping system or topography, evoking nautical maps or migration routes. Katharine Harmon (2010) writes about the paintings recording geographic details of places and times that are all mixed up, obliterating specificity and undermining our ability to grasp a single viewpoint. Calame's painting maps out territories of the Los Angeles riverbank in a way that lets the place be understood on several levels and challenges previous categorisations or perceptions of the site. The layering of map like imagery offers up a place that Haraway might describe as a 'borderland' or 'contact zone'. An understanding of the territory of the riverbank is shaped by accumulated and positioned indexical marks that together make unpredictable and unrecognisable landscapes (Schwabsky 2004).

Modes and levels of representation in Julie Mehretu's work

Julie Mehretu (born in Ethiopia in 1970) is well known for multi-layered abstracted landscapes that combine architectural drawings, geometric shapes and gestural marks that speak about geographies and histories. The painting *Cairo* (2013), uses the imagery of architectural drawings and maps of Tahrir Square and the city of Cairo and her own hand-drawn gestural marks and geometric shapes (figure 5). Multiple experiences of place, including memory, physical engagement and social-political associations, inform Mehretu's work and suggest that no one mode of representation is either sufficient in itself or more legitimate than others. The combination of these different modes produces a complex

experience of Cairo.

A variety of different kinds of marks scatter themselves across the painted surface, and participate with each other in an energetic assembly as they collide, blend, sit on top of and hide beneath each other. Mehretu goes beyond the representation of the visual infinitude, or the sublimity of phenomena in the environment, to reveal a new kind of landscape through the ‘socialising’ of marks (Crystal Bridges 2019). The marks have relationships and conversations with each other and appear to build up structures among themselves on the canvas. In places, the different marks seem to jostle and wrestle with each other, as they appear to hover in rebellion above the architectural drawings. Elsewhere there is greater harmony, where blurred and smudged marks appear congruous with the construction diagrams as they follow a building’s plane, almost sinking into it and mimicking linear perspective, or giving the sense that they are leaping off the edge of a building.



Figure 5. *Cairo* (2013), by Julie Mehretu, ink and acrylic on canvas, 304.8x731.52cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo credit: Tome Powel Imaging. Copyright: Julie Mehretu *Cairo* (2013), by Julie Mehretu.

Retrievable human-scale marks reflect both small hand gestures and large swings of the arm, placing the viewer ‘in’ the work as it relates to real space, as do murals and frescoes.

The gestural marks hold information about how she has scribbled, swished, or painstakingly dabbed the brush on the canvas, and connote immediacy and freshness, as do the areas that show an erasure of parts of marks.

By relating and opposing different kinds of marks, Mehretu challenges the authority of any one mode of representation. A surprising image of place emerges from the intermingling of these layers of mark making (Louisiana Channel 2013), and in the context of Bennett's (2010) and Haraway's (2016) ideas of assemblages and encounters, the conversations between the layers represent a temporally and geographically complex 'view' of Cairo.

Historically, European landscape painting embodied political and social views of the dominant western culture (Pound 1983; Keith 2007), portraying the land as something to be owned (Schwabsky 2019) and traded. In New Zealand, early colonial artists made paintings that acted as 'windows' and claimed to record reality, but imposed European concepts on the land (Pound 1983). This viewpoint was problematic because it created a persuasive illusion of detached authenticity, positioning the viewer as an observer of an unquestioned reality.

Mehretu's conglomerate of architectural plans and gestural marks appears like some kind of landscape map, with indications of clearings, valleys, high ranges, pathways and horizons. Mehretu critiques western modes of representing place, including cartography and architecture and their illusion of objectivity and ownership, and by referring to them in her work she uncovers their limitations and highlights the way they construct 'reality'. She argues that 'maps have served as particular narratives of power and loss' (Biswas 2019), but that her paintings create new interpretations of history, using imagination and memory in the belief that they are just as legitimate as any other mode of registering place.

By making a painting of a landscape that traverses time and place, which Mehretu calls a 'no-place' (Crystal Bridges 2019), she exposes history as being a collection of stories

and perspectives that are not ‘set in concrete’ and can be reinterpreted. The process of building up a spatial quality through multifarious imagery is transformative because it creates new conceptual stories of place (Biwas 2019), as the painting itself shows by gathering and building its own ‘history’ through mark making. Distinctions between subjective and objective, cognition and emotion, and abstraction and realism are both highlighted and questioned. By combining cartographic imagery and gestural mark making, the painting maps out domains and reclaims understandings of them (Bradway 2019).

I feel it is fitting to refer also to the work of Simon Hantai (1922-2008) whose ‘folding’ paintings are particularly relevant to this study. Although his work is not so much investigations of place, he was curious about the use of gesture and the generative quality of process in painting (Armstrong and Lisbon, 2015) in similar material and bodily ways that Mehretu and Calame are. Hantai manipulated the canvas by folding, crumpling or rolling it up, then painting on it and opening it out to divulge an all-over patterned image, thereby engaging the material qualities of canvas and paint and the physical act of folding, and let those encounters be understood in the finished painting. The way that he distanced himself from having complete control over what was being painted by using the folding and unfolding technique opened his painting up to unpredictable mark making that favoured chance.

In Mehretu’s and Calame’s work, and similarly in Hantai’s practice, gesture was used not as an expression of personal emotions or mind-states, but to reveal something about the material as well as the immaterial world. Secondly, the analysis of the two paintings reveals that letting the unpredictable happen during the painting process allows the experience of place to be registered in ways that are responsive to materials and conditions; and, thirdly, a painting that incorporates different modes of experience and representation yields a dense, complex, and ever-changing sense of place. In these ways, their work can be

seen as being about a broad ecological assemblage, not only about their perceptions as artists, and the paintings become places where interactions between marks are like a ‘borderland’ where negotiation of knowledge occurs.

Process and investigations

The starting point

Having determined the theoretical and contemporary context for the research, I formulated these questions to guide my practice-based research: How can environments participate in the registering of the experience of place? How can gesture and process be used to record the experience of place? How can painting on-site, memory and visual recordings be used to register the experience of place? As the research developed, I set the following conditions: to paint in and with environments; to let the unexpected discoveries that occur during the painting process remain retrievable in the finished work; to experiment with a bodily connection in the making of gestural marks; to experiment with combining different modes of representation in a single painting.

As a preliminary experiment I set aside three days to spend on the mountain in Taranaki, in several places just off the main Department of Conservation tracks, to explore ways I could paint directly on-site. During this time I made walking-drawings⁴ and sketches, took photographs and moving-image footage, and painted using an easel (figure 3). Using these visual art conventions I was able to register my experience of being in there, but to push the idea of engaging with the spaces more, I began to work with unstretched canvas directly on the surfaces of the land. It felt awkward and unusual to work in this way because it was not conducive to conventional painting techniques, but the resulting paintings had a sense of not only the place but also my engagements with it. I developed this way of painting into a

method I called ‘wrapping’, which let environments participate during the process of painting, and allowed unexpected things take place between materials, processes and the site.

The wrapping method involved arranging a loose piece of canvas over surfaces of rock, parts of trees or other organic matter. This required me to physically push the canvas into small places and stretch it around things so that it bunched and spread out over the different surfaces. Once in place I then applied and removed ink, paint and water (figure 6).



Figure 6. Photograph of a painting in progress on-site. Image courtesy of the artist.

From these preliminary investigations of place, I realised that the wrapping methodology was producing a sense of immediacy in the gestural mark that expressed both the nature of the environment and my painting actions taken in it. This way of working let new materialist concepts, described earlier, take form in the process of painting by facilitating

interactions between the environments, painting materials and myself as actants. Through this approach I began to further investigate how environments and painting processes could act upon me as an artist as much as I acted upon them, in terms of Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of 'the call of things'. I observed how the constraints of working in confined and awkward spaces affected the marks that were made on the canvas. In one location I was required to paint in a crouched fashion because of a low overhanging bush canopy. I had to lean over the canvas, perform quicker actions than usual, and I could not labour over the ink application as I might have done in a studio environment. This excerpt from my journal describes this morning of painting in the bush:

11th June 2019, in the bush near the Lake Dive track, on the mountain in Taranaki: I took some canvases into the rainforest today and set up just off the track. I worked among mossy and lichened fallen trees where there wasn't enough space to stand up straight, so I crouched and climbed my way between my gear, the canvases and the canopy while painting. It was physically demanding and I could feel my body aching from all the strenuous movements. It was dark this deep in the forest, and everything was damp from earlier rain, but the sun often dappled through the foliage overhead creating fascinating light movements.

Without the environments, I could not have made the marks in my paintings, and in this way the environments become actants in my painting process. By paying attention to the places and materials as active forces in the making of paintings, and by using an iterative process of discovery during painting, I was able to work with variables as they presented themselves and let them remain evident and central in the finished paintings, rather than focusing on visually representing places using a specific predetermined set of pictorial landscape conventions.

Connecting with the environment in this way supported a way of looking for and listening to the network of relationships between things, as Bennett and Haraway might see it.

The spaces

The sites I chose were in geographical areas known to me as having points of access to remote areas of land, as this would easily allow me to return to them over the course of the research. They included sites in Whaingaroa Raglan near Ngarunui Beach, Bridal Veil Waireinga Falls, and on the south side of the mountain in Taranaki near the Kapuni river. The specific locations were a little off the main walking tracks, so there is a certain remoteness about the sites where the land is not cultivated or built up, although they are easily accessible from built up areas. Being off the main tracks also provided a defamiliarisation that deliberately puts me in a slightly foreign relationship with the land and helped to experience the place beyond pre-existing ways of seeing it – a kind of ‘deterritorialisation’ where there is a loosening between social conventions and place (Deleuze & Guattari 2004).

Between March 2018 and November 2019 I spent time painting in the sites on multiple occasions to expand my experiences of them and to increase opportunities for interactions. Being physically engaged with the sites was an important part of the research, including getting to them and navigating around them with my painting gear to figure out which areas to work in. Factors that led to selecting surfaces to wrap were intuition or a feeling of a place, and somewhere that had a relatively flat spot nearby to lay my painting gear out on.

The unpredictable

The wrapping method let surprising marks occur on the canvas, and this unpredictability was a driving force in the success of the paintings. The process allowed for things like watery ink to sprinkle over the canvas as it was moved, ink to run down canvas folds, and areas of

canvas to remain unmarked where it had been tucked down into a crevasse, which together created a varied mark making repertoire. As I did not know how the canvases would turn out until I got them back into the studio to lay them out flat, there was an element of operating in the unknown as a painter. Another journal entry describes some of these unplanned occurrences during painting:

7th April 2019, in the native bush near Maungatawhiri Road, Whaingaroa Raglan: I was painting outside today, wrapping canvases that I had made on the mountain in Taranaki for a second and third time. It was peaceful out here today, lots of birds. When I poured water over the ink, it flowed down the folds of canvas like rivers and left stains where it had travelled, this was satisfying to watch. Then when I lifted the canvas, little droplets of watery pigment scattered themselves across the surface.

In one location by a steep riverbank where hard angular surfaces produced particular kinds of marks on the canvas, the rocks were slippery and I had to move slowly and take care while working. Because of this I was not able to spend much time at this location to paint. In another place that was sheltered from the sun and wind, I found it easy to be open to subtle things occurring both in my physical surroundings and in the paintwork as I relaxed in the temperate conditions. This journal entry explains how a slow pace of working allowed me to work in a contemplative attitude where the painting unfurled as I responded to things that I noticed:

5th October 2019, Whaingaroa, near Bridal Veil Wairenga Falls: I found a place just off the track on the way to the waterfall. It was cool in the shade of the forest on this sunny day, and I was thankful for the shelter. I wasn't so tired today and I sat down in the quiet a lot of the time in between painting just listening to the birdsong and the rustling leaves. I could hear people passing by on the track below me, their conversations muffled. There

was Supplejack vine, Ponga and different kinds of trees that were new to these paintings. Wrapping the vines made long sharp lines on the canvas as the ink grabbed thickly along the ridges. I liked the way these sharper lines seemed to contrast more textural marks that were made during previous wrappings on the mountain, so I made quite a few of these.

Alongside the wrapping process itself, working with large tracts of canvas in the limitations of site also influenced the kinds of marks that were made. The largest canvas I worked on was 3.2 x 2.4 metres and was heavy and difficult to manoeuvre on the rockface and shrubbery beside the waterfall (figure 7). I had to hunch over and reach across the surface as I positioned and painted the canvas. My whole body was engaged in moving ink, pouring water and wiping away residue. These movements were made evident in the large sweeps of pigment that marked the canvas, as well as the watery paint that dripped down onto lower areas. The journal entry from this day of painting describes my experience:

April 1st, 2018, on the south side of the mountain in Taranaki: It was cold today and this weird foggy rain-but-not-rain-cloud was sitting all over the valley. It was clinging close to the mountain where I was working, so I couldn't see the canvases that were laid out to dry further down the rockface. I've been wrapping rock, wet moss, and shrubs next to the waterfall, and it was tiring climbing up and down this section of mountain. I could hardly reach across the large area and I was mindful of not getting my muddy boots on the face of the canvas, so I gently knelt on it where I had to. I came here a lot as a kid with my family and friends, and the familiarity and memories of this place were comforting, but it was also a little disquieting being there alone for so many hours.



Figure 7. Preparing to add another layer of mark making to a canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

Unpredictability in the process meant that the experiences of place registered in the paintings were responsive to materials and conditions, and in this way process continued to be generative. This open approach, where environments ‘participated’ in the making of a painting, and where the role of the artist involved responding to things happening during the process, allowed for a holistic experience of place to be evident in the paintings. Working in this responsive way makes it possible for the artist’s dominant influence to lessen and the broader ecological assemblage to be involved and engaged in the making of a painting.

Multiple perspectives

To explore how to achieve multiple views of place on a single canvas, I tested ways to combine various approaches to mark making. Firstly I took the same canvas to several

different sites to paint on it using the wrapping method. As each canvas underwent multiple wrapping occasions in separate places and times, marks from different encounters began to build up and interact. The layered marks either resisted or communed with each other, but in each case they held ‘conversations’ as they gathered and established unpredictable movements in and out of the painting, which could be viewed when stretched out flat (figure 8). The canvas became a place where different geographical areas could in some way communicate with each other, acting like Haraway’s (2016) concept of a ‘borderland’ or ‘contact zone’.



Figure 8. A completed painting before it is stretched, showing the nexus of marks. Image courtesy of the artist.

Secondly, I was interested to see if the use of varied and dissimilar modes of representation in a single painting might activate different kinds of conversations between marks to emerge, to register the experience of place. I tested this by working with canvases that already had some occasions of wrapping performed on them, proceeding in these ways: I took one back out on-site to draw on it; I stretched one onto a frame and took it back out into site to paint on it; I stretched one onto a frame and painted on it in the studio while referring to memory or photographs; and finally, I positioned one on the studio walls in a bunched up way and painted on it.

When drawing into the wrappings back out on-site, I used a blind-drawing technique which involved looking closely at things around me rather than at the canvas while drawing. The resulting marks are indicative of the character of the things I was looking at, but in a fractured way, and as they interacted with existing layers of wrapping marks they introduced additional information about the site. Painting outside on a stretched wrapping afforded an opportunity to press on a good surface to make intentional marks. I would lean the painting against a tree (Figure 9) and perform the blind drawings on it there as the sun came and went and moved shadows across the canvas. The way I painted was responsive to the shifting and changing environmental conditions and affected my choice of colour and mark making. The limitations of time and climatic conditions caused me to work more quickly and intuitively, as they did during the earlier wrapping process.



Figure 9. A stretched wrapping leaning against a tree, ready to paint on again. Image courtesy of the artist.

Painting on stretched wrappings in the studio, I brought into play further modes of representation such as memory and photographs of the places. If I allowed some paintings to be worked on in the studio environment in this manner, I could record further and different encounters between environments, materials and myself as an artist (figure 10).

Once I had established that connections between body, environments and mark-making produced the kind of interactions I was after, I revised the way I was using the studio environment. I wanted to see what would happen if I began to allow it a more active role as a 'participant' in the process of painting and mark making, just as I had done with the outside environments. Walls and floor provided sturdy surfaces for working with, along with controlled temperature and light, and easy access to materials. I arranged a wrapping on the

wall so it sat in a bunched up way, and then applied more paint. Working in a controlled studio environment allowed me to feel comfortable to be more liberal with pigment choice and application techniques, whereas in order to protect the land from paint run-off when working outside, I limited the type of paint and how I used it.

The conversations happening between different levels of experience and modes of representation in my paintings helped to yield a dense and complex view of place in most paintings, but this was not always the case. In some paintings the layering of marks disrupted or flattened the painting, particularly where the use of linear perspective in passages that referred to vines or dense bush seemed too prominent. And in some cases, a painting became swamped or overcomplicated with the dense coverage of marks so that the layers were not as retrievable.

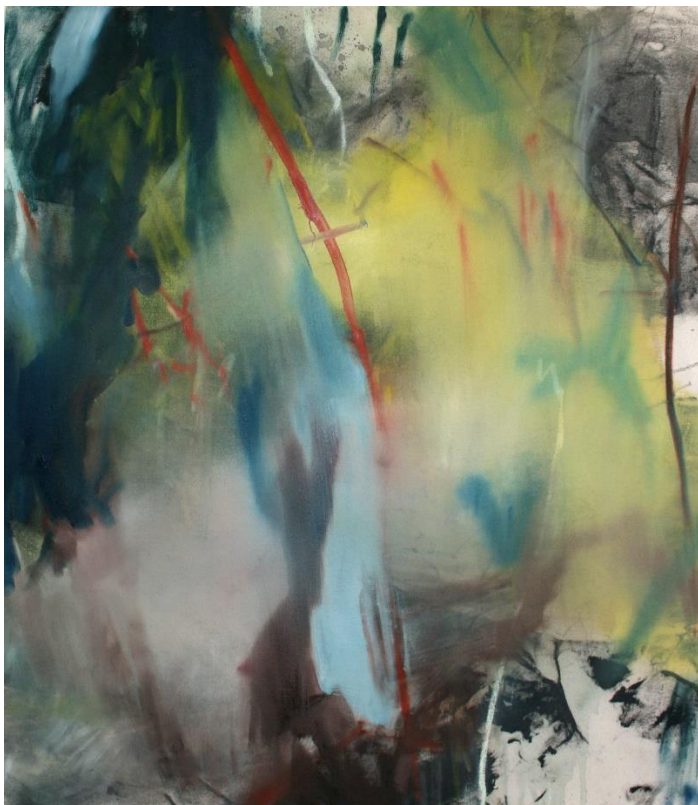


Figure 10. One of the completed paintings. *Changing Light, Cold Hands, That Little Spot by the Creek, Wainui, Whaingaroa* (2020), by Amanda Watson, ink and oil on canvas, 80x60cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Unearthing / Conclusion

This study looked at how painters can connect with environments to register their experience of place, and how environments can act as participants in the making of paintings. The Analysis of both Julie Mehretu and Ingrid Calame's paintings signposted how this occurred in their work, from which I developed a way of painting directly in and with environments to examine relationships between gesture and process.

The research focused on making an open-ended and everchanging view of place, where conversations between and among marks and phenomena occur through different modes of representation and levels of experience in the work, and the resulting paintings yield a dense, complex and multi-faceted 'view' that traverses time and place. I find this aspect of the research invigorating as I look at it through the lens of new materialist theory. The paintings are evidence of conversations and negotiations between unlikely actants, both during the process of painting on-site and on the finished painting's surface. The environments, painting materials and myself as the artist can all be viewed as actants, and it is in the interactions between us that new understandings of place are made visible. These never-before-seen negotiations that occur during painting occasions are detectable on the canvas for the viewer to see and offer a picture of place that is less encumbered by previously known narratives.

The environments themselves were active in making the paintings in the sense that without them I could not have made the work. The relationship is symbiotic because they acted upon me as much as I acted upon them, in the way that the physical characteristics of the sites influenced how I painted and the marks that were made. My agency as an artist – one of the actants in the network – became slightly lessened and the agency of the landscape increased, facilitated by the wrapping methodology which enabled it to be a creative protagonist rather than a passive object of representation. The paintings can be seen as places

that have let the land engage with meaning making, where there was less cause for resistance, in terms of Bennett's (2010) idea about things resisting the meanings we try to place on them, and where it has had opportunity to be active during the formation of the painting. The engagement of the land as one of the actants contributes to the vitality evidenced in the painting.

Each painting uniquely materialises the encounters I experienced, as incidents that happened over the duration of the painting process have been responded to. The intention was to produce a multi-faceted experience of place, not by elevating one mode of representation over another, but by using both chance and the intentional to let the work 'breathe' and unfold in the best way for each painting at the time. Haraway's (2016) concept that things are fluid and move into and out of each other can be seen in action here, as modes of representation interact on the canvas. The approach of wrapping the canvas blurs boundaries between what is being painted and what it represents, and situates the painting as part of a broader assemblage. The painting can be viewed as a contact zone where different layers of marks interact with each other and form a network that generates unforeseen understandings of place.

Going to sites, navigating around them while painting, wrapping objects and surfaces and working from memory and source imagery in the studio are all encounters that are revealed in the paintings. The human-scale-ness or 'nature-scale-ness' in my work, where textural and material marks found in the landscape sites are translated in actual size to the canvas, acts to place the viewer 'in' the work. Gesture has become indexical again, but not purely as self-expression, as it evidences my encounters with the land and materials, and the time spent in environments, in a bodily, rather than purely optical, way. The gestural mark, along with the process of painting, has become part of the network that works to reveal things about places.

I have found through this study that paintings can make manifest the relationships between process, gesture, environments and artists, and in this way can reveal the experience of place in unexpected and multifarious ways. In the ‘give and take’ process a painter submits themselves to, where ‘the life of things and the artist’s own can intertwine’ (Schwabsky 2019, 25), and it is conceivable that painting can contribute to finding new ways to ‘see’ the world.

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Notes

1. In this study I used the approach of painting outside, a method that has its roots in 19th century *plein air* painting. Groups of artists in France, Italy, and England - the Barbizon School, the Macchiaioli Group, and the Newlyn School respectively - are widely recognized as practicing in this type of painting.
2. Abstract Expressionism included the approach known as Action Painting - a term coined by Harold Rosenberg - where it was understood that an artist's emotional expression could be evident in the gestural marks, exemplified in the work of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Joan Mitchell (1925-1992), and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997).
3. While most obvious in Performance Art, this also pertains to the artists I am looking at in this research.
4. A walking-drawing is a method that involves looking at the place that you are walking around in while drawing, and not looking at your drawing surface much at all, like a blind-drawing.