Thoughts on being an unsettled settler

GhostPaper
Thinking outloud

Words or images feel painfully inadequate when I even attempt to touch 170 years of colonisation and injustice in a land that my ancestors settled, found peace and a good life in, and where I’ve been nurtured on stolen land. It feels impossible to talk to the complex politics of my life here; Manuhiri five generations later, our familial stories, my structural privilege, my ‘whiteness’. Three generations under our roof watching me as I make images and write, I can hear them warning me against crushing our stories into a few small centimeters of text, or a simplified comment on the complexities and terror of colonisation. But impossible seems to be the territory here and if I don’t keep trying then I freeze. So in order to keep moving (or stumbling) here are some notes or thoughts out loud from a cacophony of conversations and journeys, at once not enough, and too much, that neither begin nor end with this art work sitting for a few weeks in a gallery.

I once read an article by Okwui Enwezor who talked about there being ‘No view from nowhere (for even the most scrupulously detached observer)’. When I read those words I experienced a sudden disorientation where everything I had known or thought I knew dissolved. It was like finding out as a child that Santa was not technically real which then lead to a terrible undoing where it seemed logical to question the existence of Jesus, my paternity, and most other knowns. I guess in a rural white town in North Canterbury there weren’t quite enough disjunctions at that point in my life, age nine, for me to question how I was ‘raced’. I think reading this article was the first time I really realised I was white, not just that other people ‘weren’t’. Perhaps I suddenly realised part of what being Pakeha really means - once you get past the Kiwiana, Irish pubs and buzzy bees. Until then, I had ingested dominant culture so thoroughly and had felt so ordinary (in that sense) my whole life that I never realised I ‘stood somewhere to look’; that I actually had a position. It was somehow like realising I had a skin that I inhabited, not just a skin that I wore.

This body of work began with me trying to find the origins of how I look. Not what I look like but how I look, how I watch, how I see. I wanted to investigate the parts of my ‘whiteness’ that put a kind of camera between me and the world. I wanted to explore that feeling of being haunted whenever I look at inky old photographs. Just smudges of jet black and burned out white. Forms that suggested impossibly
heavy oceans of black silk, the slump of a worn body, and a desperate ice-white stare. Or images of mountains like Taranaki, dark, with a white kiss of cloud smeared over its point. These photos unnerve me; eerie black and white smears from glass plate negatives that magically create faces and bodies. One smudge of emulsion can be enough to encode gender, race and class (or staged fibs about these things). Evocative smudges which translate into the deep stares of ancestors who look out from that ambiguous, tangible but intangible disowned time: The Past. Part of this project has been trying to understand that heady mix of romance and dread that makes my heart race when I look backwards into those photos, and what that feeling signals in my relationship to colonial looking.

As an artist my concern is around the lineage of my visual language. I want to understand the specificity of how I see; the ‘pakeha gaze’ that I operate within now, and that found its feet in that early colonial black and white photography. The ‘First contact’ photographs come from a nightmare period in time, where white men wielded cameras, swollen with romance, enamored with the possibility of what this new ‘eden’ could mean.

These men caught exquisite images, clearly falling in love with their Aotearoa muse (with all the raced and gendered connotations that relationship evokes), as their cameras stole the light and dark of land forms, seascapes and people. When I think of that time – and those ancestors of pakeha looking, I wonder how different my gaze is from theirs. Does my snow blindness mirror theirs? Is my love for this place any different from the largely abusive way they expressed their desire for ‘their’ muse - the same muse they betrayed with their lens? Did they think about what they risked, when they were always the lookers, when they always held the camera, and in doing so produced the official visual histories?

Over the last decade I have become fascinated with, and explored, the mediator-role of technology in image making, manipulation and editing. In this work however, I wanted to get out of my head and back into my skin. To stand in it, so the only technology (mediator) was my body, the rickety machine that it is - vaguely controllable: volatile, full of emotion, haunted, blessed. In this project I have tried to place myself between those old images and the camera that made them. I have turned the camera back on the
Installation details (charcoal on paper).
colonial body and question the black and white truth of those photographic images. Working initially with turn of the century photographs of anonymous and famous white people I have tried to re-member or re-imagine them from where I am now. I loved working with charcoal in this way because it’s like trying for a photograph, but is disrupted by the alchemy of my body. It shows the disjunction or arguments between my eye and my hand.

I found it useful to think in theatrical terms, specifically about casting and performativity. Once performances (of gender and race for example) become explicit or self-conscious, we are able to get a better sense of how they operate in the world, because there are no givens: no ‘natural’ (culturally invisible) behaviors. I cast myself in the role of the camera (in an attempt to ‘get inside’ how I see). My role was to push these old pakeha ghosts through the ‘lens’ of my body and out onto a page. As I drew, my hand became a slow, inaccurate camera, like the lingering minutes-long shutter speed of ‘colonial era’ photography freezing a one-truth out of so many moments of flux. What resulted were fictions with little ‘truth’ to the original image I worked from. I experienced my body being an impossible camera – disobedient and messy, with even more disobedient ghosts as I tried to draw them out in cinders.

I decided not to cast/draw my blood ancestors in this project because that would make my story specific. Dominant culture has an obsession with individuality and tends to use a ‘liberating’ concept of the individual as a way to skirt personal accountability or relationships to power.

I wanted to be clear that my experience of white privilege can co-exist with, or not be explained away by the funny, beautiful and heartbreaking stories of my Scots and Irish ancestors, many of whom came because they were starving where they were.

So I scavenged: gathering faces from newspaper clippings, art books, magazines, the internet and the archives. Casting these faces as my ‘structural’ ancestors, I created a kind of collective ‘caucasian’ lineage, a flimsy sharing of ethnicity, but strong enough to trace back my access to privilege. Starting in an empty studio (a terra nullius, an empty eden of possibility) I slowly made myself a paper forest of ghosts. These ancestors belong to me culturally if not by blood.

“I loved working with charcoal in this way because it’s like trying for a photograph, but is disrupted by my the alchemy of my own body”
I tried to find a way to draw out the bodies/stories/lives between me, now, and them, ‘then’. This was an attempt to people the space and time between my being ‘born innocent’ and the somehow ambiguous time of the ‘collective pakeha ancestors’ who stole the land and attempted to erase Maori language, memory, culture and pride. The time of old growth forests being cleared and in places, napalmed - leaving the sooty burned landscape of charcoal that I’ve been drawing with.

My hope is that the performative elements of the charcoaling process can still be read in the work. The mess left behind suggests faces found by frustrated, sometimes capable, sometimes incapable hands. The acts of marking and erasing embodied my process of looking for these ghosts, a struggle between speaking and silences. In making the work I became covered in charcoal dust, and could feel it in my lungs like I had ingested stray bits of ghost. My hands left fingerprints behind in the images, implicating me, reducing the space between me and them, proof of my lineage, forming a direct link back to the genetic makeup of the “looker”. I found myself thinking a lot about ‘proof’ during this process. Charcoal is proof of heat, it can’t exist without fire so it reads as a kind of evidence of where the flame was. Its occupies the “empty” space after a fire has licked over a forest. The (powder) marks left after sudden change, like trauma, holding fast long after the ash has dissipated.

**Thinking in the space**

We can track the paper trail of colonisation to the ‘Founding Documents’ of this place: to contested paper (mis)used to prop up myths of ceded sovereignty. However when we track the embodied trail of colonisation, it runs straight back to my body.

I wanted to work with split-imagery that echoed binaries in public discourse around post/colonial settler culture, as well as the two versions of the Treaty/Tiriti. Two lines of paper bodies – more a 2D plantation than a forest, two strips off a ‘family’ tree grown from peculiar couplings, ‘reproducing the nation’. By working in black and white/simplified visual language, I was reminded that the price of upholding any binary is that someone’s body will always be cut through. Lost in the grey, lost in the colour, are multiple truths, multiple memories. There’s sadness in this, in the sickness of the legacy of Pakeha relationships to this place.
Image from developmental series in collaboration with Madeline MacNamara (still photograph).
Land (under my feet reminding me where I stand) and grass (shallow turf) that won’t take root in a white box gallery; a venue perfectly mimicking the invisible (white) structures that signal ‘neutral’ space in dominant (colonial) culture. Clean green domestic monocultures of flawless lawn that starts to stink as it decomposes with nowhere to grip. There goes that sadness again, and dis-ease. The walkway of grass, rolling out as a regal (un)red carpet of dislocation and affection. The long solitary stroll flanked by a forest of ghosts drawn (out) with burnt wood, leading to a black and white illusion of the sea, the ‘Tasman’ ocean, hauling itself back off the shore. Reversing the irreversible? Waves of regret and impossible, half hearted fantasies of return (to a place only tangible in stories and familial memory)

Thinking here

This project has been part of an ongoing attempt to find and make sense of where I’m standing. In an effort to locate myself and my (personal, spiritual, structural, creative) relationships to this place - and to the realities of historic and current forms of colonisation here - I find myself faced with simultaneously complex yet simple stories, disjunctures, nightmares and hopes.

“A hope to re-people colonial visual history with (our) pakeha bodies that have somehow done disappearing act”

A hope to re-people colonial visual history with (our) pakeha bodies that have somehow done a disappearing act. A hope to move beyond (public) national pakeha pride and occasional (private) coldsweats of guilt.

A hope that as Pakeha we can continue to cultivate suppleness, that we learn not to freeze when we feel bad, and that we remember the conditions that we are welcome here on.
Installation shots from Ghostpaper.
Cover and back image from developmental series, in collaboration with Claire Lissaman (still photograph).

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Toi Poneke Gallery
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Opening hours
M – F 9am – 7:30pm

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