

A glancing blow: five planetary stories

A response to “wiggling together, falling apart” a group exhibition curated by Lucy Meyle and Victoria Wynne-Jones at Michael Lett from 9 November – 10 December 2022. Featuring artworks by: Hany Armanious, Dan Arps, Emerita Baik, Renée Bevan, Wendelien Bakker, Heidi Brickell, Xin Cheng, Stella Corkery, Yana Dombrowsky-M'Baye, Claudia Dunes, Erika Holm, Yukari Kaihori, Lucy Lord Campana, Nicholas Mangan, Lucy Meyle, Te Ara Minhinnick, Kate Newby and Jenny Palmer.

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Te Whanganui-a-Tara
Wellington.

SUSAN BALLARD

The story of stone begins with a gift. Theia strikes the planet Earth with a glancing blow and then there is a moon, magma, anorthosite, basalt and later, life. Stability. A bell rings. Close to the surface of the planet is a colony of microscopic tardigrades known as the slow walkers. Their tough and flexible exoskeleton, their diet of freshwater mosses and lichens, and their ability to exist in a cryptobiotic state suggest they may survive the coming apocalypse.

Framing one body within the form of another means thinking carefully about relationships with the planet. Not so long ago humans believed that fossils grew inside the womb of the earth. Hidden virtues could nurture all forms of being, and yet the true scale of the living planet remained obscure. Tracing his way across a sea of islands, Kupe chased Te Wheke o Muturangi over the surface of Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa and found a habitable land mass filled with the sounds of birds. Before then, Abu-al-Hasan 'Ali al-Masudi had proposed an evolutionary natural history from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, and from animal to human. And not long after, observations of sudden planetary transformations lead Renaissance Christian writers to explain the presence of fossils through a great flood. In their eyes mountains formed through deluge, and afterwards vast middens of sea shells glinted on the horizon. We are jumping around in time, but humans have always done this. Before we can walk we are introduced to a natural philosophy populated by multicellular beings able to huff and puff and blow our house down.

The story of justice begins with a haunting sigh. Nothing is quite as stable as it seemed. Some life depends on oscillations of carbon and oxygen.

Other life forms don't rely on restrictive patterns of inhalation and expiration. They need sunlight. Some bodies grip tightly to the bars of gallery windows, neither inside nor outside, they leave traces of their earthly presence on the glass. One body finds itself freshly pressed into a canvas surface; a palimpsest overwritten with uncertain events that leave a guilty trace of dirt under our nails. Other bodies have sheltered unseen beneath the soil. After their subterranean spores have collaborated and drawn a cloak of earth and roots tight around their form, they have been unearthed. They cannot hide forever. There are dusty footprints on the floor of the gallery. Visitors are on their way.

The story of survival begins with a hug. At a time when the limits to growth seem unfathomable, molecules collide, and we make the decision to stay home. Screens become portals for connection. Genealogies worn on the body are suspended as metal warms against the skin. The planet begins to breathe a slow careful sigh. These are felt events. They form a natural bridge from one place to another: a fluorescent warning that bodies will always writhe with energy. They suggest that matter will continue to form at the edge of life. *Sometimes what's most striking is what doesn't happen.* Sometimes it feels like everything will fall apart. Sometime soon we will demand to be let out.

The story of life begins with a crowd. A bell rings. “Improvise, adapt, and overcome,” they shout in unison. But it is not that easy. No substance can be disentangled from the world. Even as we witness preparations for a yearly migration, we notice that there are less bodies around. Butterfly wings laid down in thin layers of chitin are particularly susceptible to these

changes in temperature. And any temperature below freezing means quilting another layer of earth onto our skin. Not everyone has the skills: pollution, adversity, and stress get in the way. And just like this, biochemical events become reduced to narratives.

It might be possible to recite a song and bring the cosmos into being, or recast a spell to demand a departure — the challenge is getting the scale right. As lava flows cut off access to our one reliable source of planetary CO2 monitoring, it might still be possible to form a pearl of knowledge from gum, DNA, and pigment. Irritating and yet iridescent. This too could become a monitoring device. Or here, where the graphite threads reach across the room and out through the windows. Or here, witness a salty body stretching towards the sky, its weight hovering like a ballerina on block tips warmed by the sun. There is a possibility that time can be spun into a new kind of story. A form of escape where those willing can *ride on these midnight skies*.

The story of one thing becoming another

begins with a splice, a neural nest balanced on the edge of a precipice. I know that art — as slippery and phenomenal as it is — should not be written about in this way. What we need now is close description. Elsewhere demands have been made for a new kind of ekphrasis suitable for our Anthropocene age, one that holds us at the surface of the work and allows the work to exist in words. We require a kind of art writing that reminds us to pay attention. To explain things. But right now I'm trying to make sense of irreversible environmental transformations that give away nothing except for an ever-accumulating terror, and I'm standing in a gallery filled with lively bodies, gestures of molecular motion, and ecologies that refuse my gaze. They are involved with their own story. So I have no choice but to balance on one foot and gasp as they unfurl in delicate tendrils.

There are other geographies occurring. Traces have been left by bodies that recently etched their paths through the gallery, bodies looking backwards in order to travel forwards. Some are drying out. Moisture is seeping from one body to another. Others scatter across the floor, giving away nothing. Movements are afoot. A dog walks through the gallery, castings, seeds and stones begin to scatter, slowly

at first, and then multiplying in the breeze, throwing their shadows hither and thither. Pressing their bodies into seams in the floor. Language loosens its tongue.

There is a dull hum. This is the moment when attention is paid: Acrylic, Aluminium, Ataata, Bead cord, Beeswax, Bicarbonate of soda, Bronze, Canvas, Cedar, Clay glaze, Compost, Copper, Cotton, Cyanoacrylate, Denim, Ebony, Egg yolk, Found glass, Glass, Gold wedding ring, Graphite, Gum, Hessian, Horoeka, Ink, Ivory, Kōhatu, Kūtai, Linseed, Mānuka, MDF, Mica, Newspaper, Nikau, Oil, Paint, Panel, Paper, Pebbles, Pewter, Pigment, Pipi, Plaster, Polymethyl methacrylate, Polymer clay, Polyurethane, Porcelain, Rākau, Recycled clay, Recycled molding clay, Recycled polyester filling, Resin, Rimurapa, Rocks, Sand, Sateen, Silk, Silver, Soil, Soda, Spray paint, Sterling silver, Stones, Stoneware, Tōtara, Tuangi, Twine, Uku, Vacuum-formed shrink wrap, Weeds, Wire, Wool — the materials of the universe.

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