

Looking Out, Looking In: Conor Clarke's *Ground Water Mirror*

My problematic relationship with sight has been summarised before by Edgar Allan Poe as seeing through the 'the veil of the soul', or the history of landscape representation. He suggests that we can 'at any time double the true beauty of an actual landscape by half closing our eyes as we look at it', that 'the naked senses sometimes see too little – but then again, they always see too much'.¹

New Zealand-born, Berlin-based artist Conor Clarke's exhibition *Ground Water Mirror* connects the waters of Berlin to those of Whanganui and Auckland. The title is a (mis) translation of *Grundwasserspiegel*, the German word for water table, the level below ground that is saturated with water. Laced with canals, rivers and lakes, Berlin has a high water table, its 'ground water mirror' never far beneath one's feet. Water also flows through a network of overhead pipes pumped across the city. From construction sites to waterways, the pipes are a further reminder of the connectedness of water, permeating environments and people's everyday lives.

Berlin nonetheless faces the challenges of maintaining water quality shared by large industrialised cities. In this context Clarke asks whether we seek out 'nature' in more remote environments in order to aestheticise them or as a means of self-reflection: offering provisional solutions to the conditions and anxieties of urban living. It follows that she is also interested in examining western concepts of nature as separate from ourselves – why we long for the kinds of freshwater we feel the need to travel to find.

Beginning in Berlin, *Ground Water Mirror* was further developed during Clarke's 2017 residency at Tylee Cottage in Whanganui courtesy of the Sarjeant Gallery. Half of the suite of photographs presented here were captured in Berlin and during a prior trip to Whanganui. The other half was shot during the residency, when Clarke extended and developed the project journeying upriver. On the one hand, the photographs represent a return to the familiarities of home. On the other, as an artist living and working abroad for almost nine years, the series represents a photographic examination of unfamiliar environments, particularly that of Whanganui and its surrounds: a traveller in one's own land. Speaking to her residency experience, Clarke notes:

The Whanganui river is an important part of the project, but I'm interested in freshwater in general, in all the waters that flow throughout daily life. I make no traditional views looking down on the river from a high viewpoint, I photograph the river from the river, or the ground from eye level, usually isolating subjects at close range. Any sweeping vistas I have made in the past have critiqued that quintessential, possessive view of land, water and people. I also want to challenge the categories that we put water into, like 'resource', or 'nature destination', and use these categories to talk about the connectedness of water, of nature. I am a romantic, but it's more romanticism as a subtle form of activism.²

Given her interest in the histories and politics of landscape representation, Clarke's conception of her own land could be more accurately seen as one of belonging and identification, rather than of possession. This finds an affinity with the Māori belief that the land owns you.³ Clarke, it appears, belongs to many places.

Romanticism evolved as a reaction to the industrial revolution and the alienation from nature that followed as urbanised societies in large cities developed. However, the movement eventually became a passive and commercialised commodity itself, less about active seeing and more a description of a prescribed type of experience framed

by formulaic imagery. In contrast Clarke's contemporary romanticism seeks to raise awareness, implying conscious experience and direct engagement. *Ground Water Mirror* is about our relationship with land and, particularly, with water, which has changed since industrialisation. It reflects on the western notion of human domination over water and the alienation from it which followed a dependence on its subjugation. The project explores our reasons for romanticizing the concept we have of nature, including the different ways it is perceived, packaged, categorised and consumed.

Clarke's project reflects on the ongoing preconceptions and expectations we bring to viewing the natural world. It references sublime, picturesque and romantic landscape genres, tourism, land surveying, natural resources, alongside the connection between surveying for profitability and the role of the photographer as cultural surveyor and romantic activist. In doing so, Clarke compares and contrasts the experience of locations worlds apart, from the Whanganui River to the 'romantic Rhine'; indeed, in the early days of paddle-steamer tourism the Whanganui was advertised as the 'Rhine of New Zealand'.

Artist and writer Holly Best says of Clarke's work: 'Our expectation of a place is often defined by images of other places, and our persistence to photograph the places we have seen affirms our perceived authority as consumers, owners, and in control of our own environments and nature.'⁴

As images these landscapes – from the Glenbrook Steel Mill in Auckland, near where Clarke grew up, to Berlin's Langer See lake, to St Joseph's Convent in Jerusalem (Hiruharama) in the central North Island – can operate as both general and specific, evoking personal associations and interpretations of the sites. For viewers the tension this project establishes between the familiar and unfamiliar is echoed in photography's unique ability to make strange, to at once evoke intimacy and distance, to reveal and conceal. Edgar Allan Poe's sentiments resonate with photography's capacity to activate, complement and extend the senses, its reframing of time and space allowing us to slow down and contemplate more deeply.

Looking out, looking in: in the mirrored surface of water the images also ask what we each might see of ourselves in its reflection. Noted environmental historian William Cronon put it well: 'As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.'⁵

– Emil McAvoy

1 Conor Clarke, quoted in Emil McAvoy, 'Ground Water Mirror', *PhotoForum*, February 2018, <https://www.photoforum-nz.org/blog/2018/3/18/ground-water-mirror-an-interview-with-conor-clarke>. Quotes from Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Veil of the Soul', in Raymond Foye (ed), *The Unknown Poe: An Anthology of Fugitive Writings*, City Lights Books, San Francisco CA, 1980, p 51.

2 Clarke, in McAvoy, 'Ground Water Mirror'.

3 Clarke also has Ngāi Tahu heritage.

4 Holly Best, 'Photographing Nature: The Slippery Topographics of Conor Clarke', *Art New Zealand*, 166 (Winter 2018): 176.

5 William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, WW Norton & Co, New York, 1995