

Most people associate ‘Unchained Melody’ with the Righteous Brothers. The enduring popularity of their 1965 cover is due, in no small part, to the song’s use as the backdrop for Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore’s five minutes of ceramic-themed soft porn in the 1990 film *Ghost*. However, its lyrical themes of longing and separation belong neither to the impossible spectral distance between Moore and Swayze, nor to the emotional one between the Righteous Brothers and their unnamed sweetheart. These titular chains are much less metaphorical.

The song was written a decade before it hit the charts for a little-appreciated prison movie *Unchained*. The restraints separating the protagonist from his love, the chains that would take on figurative and even supernatural attributes, began as mundane, real cold iron. This same evolution, from material to emotional to fantastic, is at the centre of Conor Clarke’s *Unchained Melody*, a work that shares far more with this pop song and its changing meanings than just a title.

*Unchained Melody* emerges from a body of work in which Clarke has explored the ruptures that form between European Romantic fantasies of nature and the material realities of a changing natural world. Specifically, her works have demonstrated the lingering power that ideas formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still hold on contemporary attitudes towards nature. The Romantic notion of nature as a healing other to the physical and spiritual pollutants of urban living emerged in Europe from the same ideological crucible that promoted ethnic nationalism, imperialism and the colonial mission. Just as physical land in faraway places could be claimed by empires through the abstract delineations of property ownership, so too could the fantasy be transported to that land from old world to new.

With *Unchained Melody*, Clarke draws our attention to the chain as a tool that made possible the transformation of land from fantasy to property across the imperial globe. While property boundaries may be arbitrary barriers, the structure used to measure them – the standardised Imperial surveyor’s chain – was a very real, very physical object.

Clarke’s work offers two visions of the chain. In one a hand enclosed in a chain-link glove passes through the various flowing passages of a waterfall. The close and tightly framed image creates a false sense of natural ubiquity – this could be any waterfall in any place. These waters are, however, from a very specific source. Clarke’s gloved hand trails through a manufactured waterfall, a reproduction constructed in Berlin’s Viktoriapark in the late nineteenth century. Designed to imitate a waterfall from the picturesque Giant Mountains in the Polish and Czech borderlands, the reproduction waterfall is one of the more direct examples of the way ideas of nature as a wild and healing force can be confused with nature as something for humanity to own and control. The Viktoriapark construction is as fabricated as the chain glove, and both are as manufactured as a fantasy of the natural world the waterfall purports to represent.

The second vision of the chain is one entangled. Hands unravel five knotted lengths of chain, each adorned with a pendant. One bears a cross, the others miniature replicas of the marks that measure out equal distances along the length of the surveyor’s chain. Their entanglement plays out the dramatic intertwinement of virtuosity, productivity and faith in early colonial Aotearoa. But these chains can also gesture towards the mistaken coupling of the natural and the divine that has often accompanied Romantic conceptions of the non-human.

Both of Clarke’s images give direct representation to the haptic experience of nature, something often underprivileged in favour of the dominance of sight. These twin tactile

moments show what the fulfilment of the Romantic promise of nature requires. Its transference into a controlled and quantified commodity – officiated and sanctified by the laying of chains – belongs to the material world of touch, and not the fantasy realm of desire.

Ultimately these gestures are beset by contradiction. As soon as the Romantic eye and hand lays claim to nature, it loses its status as a wild and untamed other. The gloved hand passing through the constructed waterfall can never grasp what it actually desires: a mediation trails through a mediation. And when the hands separate the tangle of chains, do we get a clearer image of the natural world or just of the tools used to possess it?

The obvious choice for a pithy lyrical epigraph to accompany *Unchained Melody* would be, 'I've hungered for your touch'. It strikes at the longing and unfulfilled desire present in both the song and the ideologies summoned in Clarke's work. But there's another, perhaps more poignant option that speaks to the hands that have, for centuries, sought to claim the natural world and shape it in their own image: 'Are you still mine?'

– Lachlan Taylor