

Stewart Island, New Zealand – August, 2019

I'm crouched on the ground on all fours. It's completely dark. Less than a metre away, on the other side of a tree fern, Anne Noble is digging a shallow trench in earth that's thickly layered with leaf litter. Above her, strapped to a tree and angled down, a motion-sensitive camera shoots video of the scene. Each time it's triggered, it records for 30 seconds before shutting itself off. The point of my being here is to count off each of the 30 second intervals, so Anne can time her digging to coincide with them. It's not working though, since the faint red light that indicates when the camera is shooting is invisible from where I am. Instead I concentrate on keeping still and out of the camera's eye.

Another night I'm inside the house, standing in the brightly lit rectangle of the kitchen window, looking out at the trees. Anne has been digging up film under the camera's intermittently watchful eye. The path between the house and the trench is well worn by now, the work is almost done, soon we will be leaving. I watch as, returning from the trench, she passes beneath the window. She has started to look like a forest animal – pullover beaded with rain, clothes and hands dirty, a dishevelment of grey hair. She doesn't look up, doesn't see me watching her.

The cameras (there are three) are at work every night. When there's no digging to observe, they record what is happening in the forest while we sleep. Each morning Anne reviews the previous night's footage. She is ever hopeful of a kiwi, or perhaps a deer, but most often it's a rat making its cautious way through the undergrowth, tiny eyes transformed into blank white circles by the infrared beam.

Working at night feels like returning to the familiarity of the photographic dark room. The differences are the sensation of a space around us that stretches to infinity and the pungent, earthy smell that comes up from the ground. It strikes me that there is also something of old photography in the actions of burying and unearthing film – 'the medium', as we used to call it, rising from the dead.

Burying film and unearthing it, however, have turned out to be just the start. The infrared cameras, initially acquired for documentation, now work overtime, monitoring the forest at night. In this way they extend the project, make it multi-dimensional. To the underground time of the film, measured by the slow accretion of minute changes, they add doses of surface time, sometimes known as 'real' time, measured in still frames and 30-second bursts.

On the last night we run around in the forest, hand-holding the infrared cameras, shooting till the batteries expire. Freed from the tree trunks they've been strapped to for several days, the cameras go a bit crazy (or perhaps it's us). In the photographs that result there is something of the wildness of the forest, the absurdity of the enterprise, and the irreducible joy of working when you don't know yet exactly what you are doing, or why.

ANNE FERRAN

Anne Ferran is a Sydney-based artist. In August 2019 she travelled to Stewart Island, where she helped Anne Noble with her nocturnal experiments.