

Two Rooms

**Andrew Barber
Thin Atmosphere
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“The striking thinness of the atmosphere” ~ Frank White’s broad take from his interviews with astronauts for his 1987 book *“The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution”*. As these most modern colonists gazed back from their vantage orbiting the Earth, it is said they overwhelmingly reported feelings of kinship to all on Earth, and that they saw in that infinite depth of blackest space, how fragile Earth looked. This has alternately been called ‘The Overlord Effect’. If they headed further out in space and turned the James Webb Space Telescope or even the humble Hubble Telescope, back at Earth, they would have seen how the lands of Earth looked somewhat mathematical and homogeneous. Looking at Europe from way out there, they would see its sprawl of Industry, bordered by denuded unpopulated spaces, decorated with pasture and maybe a handful of species of mammals. Now looking around the globe, they can count thousands more spaces that look identical. Focusing on the lands of the South Pacific Ocean from there, they would see the same décor as Europe, but from that vantage absolutely upside-down to where it was designed.

Here in colonial New Zealand, we are prescribed by the English a life upside-down. We celebrate annual European milestones, such as the archaic religious festival of rebirth symbolising the thaw of winter and the rising of the sun’s arc to allow crops to be sown again, as our light and temperature are plunging in the opposite direction. Not only are the celebrated events at exactly the opposite time of year they were intended, but the entire calendar was designed to suit European Catholic Christendom. Our days and our months were designed and ordered by an adulterous lech from Bologna Italy, in 1582. Now, in 2023, as our scientists tell us our atmosphere is way overbalanced in Carbon due to human industry, we see unprecedented weather events somewhere on Earth every week. Our denuded lands of agriculture and the transport networks we have carved through them are failing, communities are losing everything they’ve worked hard to acquire in this supercharged Gregorian system. Be it wildfire, floodwater or gale we cannot prepare for the unprecedented, we can only adapt. It is worth noting here, we are yet to see the promised sea level rise that will occur as the globe’s ice melts.

In an exhibition I presented in February 2022 at Two Rooms titled “Shipwreck”, I made a trompe l’oeil painting on the floor. It depicted broken oak floorboards floating in liquid earth. A picture of destruction by flood. Here in “Thin Atmosphere”, I repeat the motif of liquid earth but this time on the walls. In media reports of the aftermath of flooding in the last few years, I noted how the floods leave datum lines on the walls of victims’ homes. If the victims survived the tragedy, their possessions were left irreparably tainted as, disturbingly, a flood event’s waters gather the community’s grey water and sewerage. Why am I recreating such horrors? Because without drastic policy change what has been visited thus far upon the unfortunate few, will be ahead of us all. The irony being a painted datum line was something developed to ease the maintenance of institutions.

“Thin Atmosphere” discusses flooding, but I have a terrible feeling the next exhibition I make might well look at charcoal. In 2019 I packed all my acquired possessions to a storage shed and relocated from the city to camp off the grid. When I’m not painting houses or making art to earn income to pay the costs of parenting and indeed simple existence, I spend my time frantically trying to re-establish biodiversity in my new locale. This work consumes me. In my work, I noticed the recent floods were not life-threatening to the flora & fauna I look after. In fact, the forest and bird endemic to Aotearoa positively thrived during the exceptional rainfall of the past La Niña event (barring shorebird species- they have not been able to breed for 3 seasons in my locale). It was the introduced mammals and monocultural cultivations that suffered as if the earth was dutifully removing that which didn’t belong in the first instance.

Andrew Barber, September 2023