

Fascination is a fundamental underpinning of Michael Shepherd's work. This becomes readily apparent when conversing with Michael about memories of paintings or books that he studied decades prior, whilst it applies equally to contemporaneous research about the various fields that he explores within his work.

Over the last two decades, conservation has been a matter of growing interest to Shepherd, and during this period, his knowledge of Aotearoa's native flora and environmental histories has intensified through time spent in wild places, nurseries and his own gardens.

Reflecting on a recent plant conservation conference, Michael noted that the belief and "hyper-fixation" of individuals engaged in conservation is one aspect that draws him further into this realm. Put differently, there is no handbrake for the fascination expressed by renowned plantspeople such as Geoff Davidson and Terry Hatch towards the natural world.

During the many expeditions that Michael and I have undertaken throughout the country in search of botanical wonders (in addition to innumerable discussions within his studio), I have had a front-row seat for the evolution of his perspective on the relationship between plant communities, geology and people.

When he first commenced with this series, Michael explained that Goya's *Disasters of War* constituted a departure from traditional representations of war - a shift in focus. Goya's prints portrayed a multitude of acts and consequences enacted on (and by) people that did not fit within normal narratives of war. In Shepherd's case, he has taken aim at the anonymity of so many of our threatened species, many of which sit outside conventional dialogue about New Zealand landscapes (frequently associated with grandeur or profit).

Within his botanical capriccios, the ground plane has received deliberate treatment. In a similar vein to Goya, the earth acts as a stage for the diverse range of characters depicted in the series. However, terrain in Shepherd's paintings goes one step further; demonstrating the specificity of landscapes that drives the evolution of distinct species and forms. *Poa spania* resides on the cracked mantle of seasonally drought-prone limestone in the Waitaki Basin, whilst the character of the salt pan on which we observed *Myosotis brevis* near Alexandra is discernible beneath this tiny forget-me-not.

The ground itself has even made its way into the series, with sand from the erodable section of Marlborough coastline that *Carmichaelia muritai* inhabits physically ingrained within the painting. It is no coincidence that many threatened plants are found on bare ground. Their preference for open, dynamic habitats leaves many species susceptible to changes in land use and the encroachment of aggressive exotic weeds.

It is often surprising that anything survives at all amidst the homogenising influence of varying regimes of land use, yet the pulse of natural places like Mahaka Katia Reserve (near

Cromwell) continues in remnants. One of the most amusing paintings in the series shows *Lepidium solandri* refusing to stick to the confines of its caged enclosure at Mahaka Katia (like a brassica prison riot). The miniature landscapes-within-landscapes on the gravelly surface of this river terrace have only endured here due to the absence of 'improvement' in this reserve.

In landscape terms, 'improvement' acts as a *de facto* mode of aggression towards plant communities that have evolved in response to the combined effects of climate and geology for millennia. The last vestiges of the critically-endangered *Olearia adenocarpa* on the Canterbury Plains occur in places where the historically mobile river terraces of braided rivers (including a population adjacent to Christchurch Airport) have not been fundamentally altered by changing their hydrology.

Ephemeral wetlands have hijacked Michael's imagination over the years, including the story of *Pseudognaphalium ephemerum* (now provisionally included within *Pseudognaphalium lanatum*) – a rare member of the daisy family whose capitula (flowerheads) project forth like headlights within his painting. These fascinating, dynamic systems are defined by the balance between seasonal inundation and drying, and are vivid reminders that landscapes should be understood as processes (as much as places) – processes that can be readily interrupted by people and our biological entourage of pest plants and animals.

The first painting of the series, which Michael started in 2016, concerns one of the enigmas of the New Zealand flora – *Logania depressa*. This species was collected just once, by William Colenso in February 1847, from an ice-covered hollow in the Kaimanawa mountains. For Shepherd, there is something expressive about species like this and *Myosotis laingii*, both of which are known solely from herbarium specimens (like shadows within New Zealand botany).

In addition to these long-extinct species, the intriguing work 'Undescribed' opens us up to the inevitable presence of species that have not yet entered taxonomy (including many currently waiting to be described). Similar to *Logania depressa*, this invented herb (whose form is reminiscent of an *Epilobium* or *Vittadinia*) is thrown into shadow – an anonymous character whose story has been in motion for a long time, whether we know it or not.

Philip Smith, November 2024