

They say this island changes shape

Jasmine Gallagher

Through the use of found materials and forms of reproduction, Eleanor Cooper's installation *They say this island changes shape* responds to her time spent as a conservation worker on Raoul Island, in the Kermadec archipelago north-east of New Zealand. Foregrounding the natural environment of this place is a challenging task, because it is a place that most people have never, and will never, visit. Raoul Island is an imagined place in the minds of her audience. Yet, this distance gives the installation power. This distance enables a different kind of space to be interrogated. That of a place in time. That of the ideological, rather than just physical, space that we inhabit in contemporary New Zealand. As such, the possibility of foregrounding any sort of collective identification with the natural environment is shown to rely inevitably in hope, faith, and belief.

...

The effect of calm and quiet is evident as soon as one steps into the gallery space. Colour is minimal and the objects are placed in a way that provides ample space to move between them. Among these objects, certain themes emerge: nature, futility, hope, authenticity, replication, narrative, collective identity, the native, the introduced, history and the passage of time.

An endeavour at reproducing, mastering, or capturing an invisible or untamable force of nature, namely the wind, is prevalent. The framed photo, *proton room* shows some kites—toys we use in an attempt to harness the power of nature through play. These kites were made and displayed in the meteorological room on the island, somewhat like butterfly wings in a natural history museum. In another photograph, *attempts to photograph the wind*, the artist used a pinhole camera in a futile attempt to capture the wind in visual form. This hopeless task leaves a blurred black and white image reminiscent of crepuscular rays of light coming through clouds—a hopeful symbol if ever there was one.¹ And finally, *amokura feather*—a replica of the amokura feather crafted from an ostrich feather trimmed and dyed—alludes to how other sentient beings truly master the wind, in a way we cannot without the use of technology and imitation. The force of the wind at Raoul Island is shown to be one that humans have little control over, leaving a feeling of futility,

other-worldiness and alienation. However, the small rays of hope within are developed in other areas of the installation.

In her artist talk, Cooper explained how human settlement never went well at Raoul—no one had made a home there for more than 30 years. People never really belonged, it seems. However, juxtaposed with this mood of futility are more hopeful symbols. There are bronze casts of heirloom orange tree seeds placed on a DIY table. On a lower table, a single kowhai seed. These seeds suggest hope, regeneration and fresh life, while drawing attention to native and imported varieties, as well as ideas of the authentic and simulacra. Amongst the objects there are also two jandals that were washed ashore and allude to an ad-hoc / fragile collective identity via kiwiana. These worn rubber shoes hint at something out there beyond Raoul that the inhabitants know well. A home of sorts perhaps? A shiny butter knife (*Bess*) reminds me of colonial domesticity. And in *crake* (bird footprints created using an animal tracking tunnel), like *amokura feather*, the transient presence of other sentient beings is signified—beings who seem to belong more than humans do. However, while these objects have some symbolic power, the stories behind these objects, and the context through which they were chosen, gives them additional meaning. Narrative and the way we create or communicate meaning, especially through the use of reproduction and symbolism is central to the installation.

Stories of failed settlements in the past are present in the objects associated with the Bell family, who attempted to live on the island at the start of the Twentieth Century. *Orange seeds* are bronze cast seeds of heirloom oranges brought to the island, *Bess* the sharpened butter knife that stands in for the eponymous mother of the ten Bell children. Bess dressed her children impeccably, despite the lack of society to impress and her husband had to sharpen a butter knife to allow her to cut patterns. And then we have the story of the present conservation attempts, and the artist's participation in these.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ARTIST, CRITIC, AND AUDIENCE.
CONTEXT—POSTCOLONIALISM (CRITICAL HISTORICAL AWARENESS)
AND CONSERVATION (FAITH IN ACTION)

Cooper's time on the island involved 40-hour working weeks, primarily taken up with searching for and eradicating introduced plant species (it sometimes took many days to find a single weed) and tracking and trapping any introduced animal species such as rats. Human contact was limited to those participating in the Department of Conservation (DoC) project, and there are usually only seven people on the island, including rangers and volunteers. Due to this context of conservation, the installation can be seen as a response to an ideological place, as well as a physical site.

The ideological place the installation responds to is a postcolonial one. It engages with colonial history by highlighting the destructive effects of modernity on the natural environment via a process of 'development'. By situating the work in a context of environmentalism, made possible through DoC, themes related to the history of the nation-state, modernity, citizenship, and political economy are hard to ignore. And as the installation is primarily made in response to the environment of Raoul Island, a central trope of New Zealand's national identity—that of the isolated, harsh, and wild landscape—is foregrounded. However, Cooper offers a new, more sincere, way of engaging with New Zealand's tradition of landscape mythology than previous generations of artists, who arguably either succumbed to (post)colonial sentimentalism or postmodern irony and cynicism.

This installation resonates a sense of critical sincerity, rather than sentimentalism, cynicism, or irony for three reasons: the installation comes from a place of radical action (conservation); it engages critically with New Zealand's colonial history; and it resists the current late-modern 'ideology of cynicism'.ⁱⁱ So, firstly, because participation in a conservation programme was the immediate context within which the installation was created, this allows the installation to emerge with a certain sincerity in its conceptual relation to the contemporary world. Cooper's attempt at artistic representation was not the only driver for her visit to the island, and this context inevitably shapes the work in a way that provides additional meaning. Likewise, the materials she could draw upon for the exhibition were limited to 'foreign' found objects washed up on the beach or re-productions by the environmentalist restrictions which prohibited removal of 'native' objects from the island. It is from this motivation of conservation and within these strict environmentalist limits that other themes emerge: the other objects collected on the island allow us to see how a more hopeful relation to New Zealand's modern history might be constructed.

Facing, rather than ignoring, colonial history is a crucial aspect of the installation which can be seen through the juxtaposition of the authentic and the reproduced, the native and the introduced, as well as the inclusion of the jandals and the butter knife. These objects and symbols make it impossible to turn a blind eye to national identity and colonialism: the colonial history of New Zealand, and its present occupation are not ignored, as was the case with much of the cultural nationalist oeuvre. Yet, despite this history; a destructive history which is the reason for the conservation programme itself, the tone is not reduced to irony or cynicism. Rather, symbols of faith, hope, and belief belie these themes of national history and conservationism (as seen in the seeds and *attempts to photograph the wind*).

They say this island changes shape is both refreshing and hopeful in the wake of a postmodern irony that saw landscape as an unfashionable subject for contemporary New Zealand artists. In an age where the modern world has been characterised by

an 'ideology of cynicism', we not only need a critical awareness of our history, and an ability to act accordingly; we need a heretical faith that this action will not be futile.

.....

In a 1961 essay by the writer and critic C.K. Stead, he stated that:

... remoteness is not something our writers should deny or regret, but something to be acknowledged, and exploited as an analogue for the immovable tensions which are universal in human experience.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here, Stead suggests that isolation has critical potential because our human experience can never be separated from isolation. In a way, both Stead and Cooper offer us a similar call to faith. This is a call to faith in our ability to communicate and develop a collective identity, despite the fact that this will always be founded in a certain sense of futility or isolation. It is a call to faith in our ability to foreground place, the natural environment, and the material world we all inhabit, in order to develop a collective belief that we can create meaningful change.

This is the central aspect of the installation that rings true to me. Without a faith in the value of the conservation project at Raoul Island, the exhibition would lose the sincerity that gives it power. While the project is small in scale, it goes ahead because those participating believe in the value of smaller, localised, conservation efforts in a now global society. In the wake of an abandoned nationalist cultural project and a postmodern cynicism that deemed attempts at building a collective identity founded in place either futile or uncritical of colonial history, and therefore destructive, we are left with an echo that is emerging in New Zealand art right now. An echo that tells us that maybe we can, and should, try again. And through this *attempt* at communicating a place, a home, a collective identity that is both sincere (founded in a belief in meaningful action) and critical (historically aware – particularly in the New Zealand case of colonialism) there is a quiet, calm and resilient hope.

i Crepuscular rays are sometimes referred to using a myriad of terms linked to religious or mythic fervour, such as Fingers of God or Jesus Rays in the Christian tradition, and Ropes of Maui in Maori culture.

ii Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (London: MIT Press, 2003), 7.

iii C.K Stead, "For the Hulk of the World's Between" in *Distance Looks Our Way: The Effects of Remoteness on New Zealand*, edited by Keith Sinclair (Auckland: Paul's Book Arcade for the University of Auckland, 1961), 79-96.