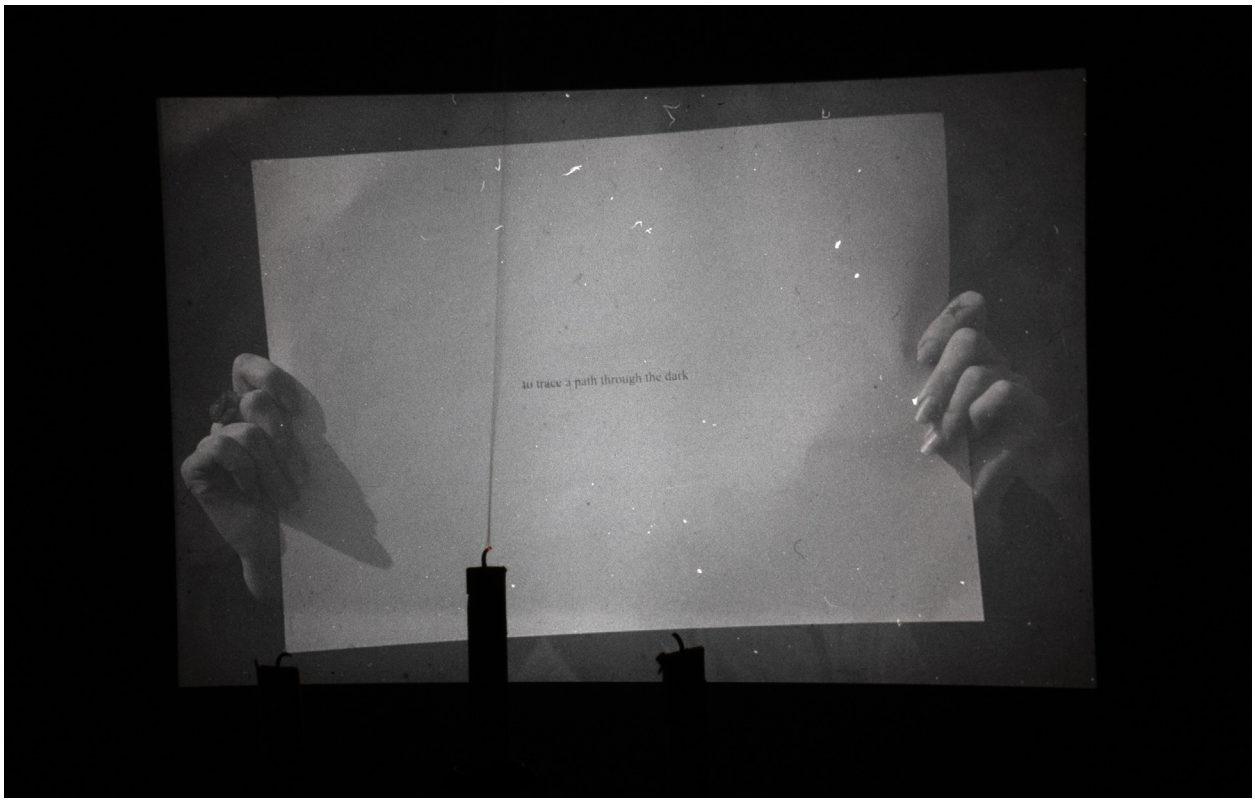
to trace a path through the dark

on forming bodies to see through, and be seen by.

an exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa, 2024.

by belinda whitta and the farm in the sky.



Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation by Lily Dowd, 2024.

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preface: the altar of your sacrifice

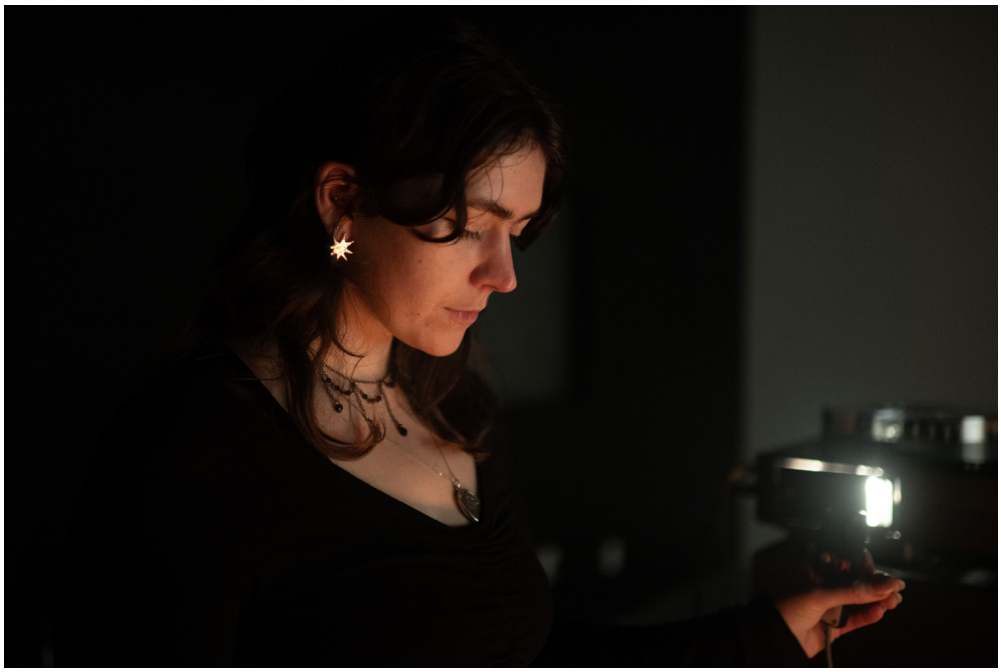
I have the privilege of writing this exegesis, because I made the decision to have an abortion when I fell pregnant halfway through my undergraduate study.

In many ways, it was that act of bodily-autonomy that has formed the work I am doing now, both internally, environmentally, and artistically. This opportunity is something I am deeply grateful for, not just for the right to autonomy over my own body, or the right to make that decision, but for the impact that that decision has had upon the development of my artistic practice.

Subsequently, there is a deep-rooted autobiographical aspect to my process, as I use my own experience to cultivate empathy for the earth. I heal my wounds through my connection to the earth, for it has been the land that has held and nurtured me during this time of healing. I have pried open my wounds, and it is the land that has reached out to heal them.

What began as an act of closure, to bring me closer to comfort, and a sense of healing, has become a ritual with a weighty spiritual power. My relationship with Earth has flourished in ways I could never expect. All because I yearned to bury the foetus of my aborted pregnancy in the ground.

Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation by Lily Dowd, October 2024.



Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation by Amber-Jayne Bain, 2024.

Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation, 2024.

introduction

Coming from a background of sustainable analogue photography, my art practice is grounded in more-than-human collaboration and reciprocal making. This is explored through my practice of witchcraft and druidism as nature-based religions. I use ritual in the burial of film, various photographic methodologies to image that ritual, then finally the ritual is echoed within the performance. Alongside ritual, these different *chapters* of my research are all steeped in darkness. Each process contains darkness in some form, either through photographic *requirements*, or to create an atmosphere in which to *receive* the performance.

to trace a path through the dark is a photographic performance incorporating two analogue slide projectors side by side, which I control manually standing between them. The left hand projector casts abstract, cameraless images produced through a ritual of burying photographic film in a hole in the ground at night. These *earthly portraits*[1] are projected alongside *haptic photographs*[2] which communicate my experiences of the ritual and my subsequent evolving relationship with land farmed by my settler-colonial ancestors.The performance occurs in a room darkened by mud applied onto the windows. I operate both the slide projectors with remotes attached to the projectors via cords, sequentially revealing the photographs, forming a conversation between the earthly portraits and haptic photographs. The performance is accompanied by a soundtrack composed of layered recordings made during the journey to the site where I bury film. Alongside the soundtrack is a periodic spoken word element inspired by experiences making the photographic work in the dark. My voice is amplified from behind the audience, who are facing towards the screens and the speakers that play the soundtrack forming another conversation that the audience are positioned within. *to trace a path through the dark* is a carefully collected set of experiences which, through performance, draw the audience into the rituals of my making.

[1] The ritual of burying and retrieving the film from the hole in the ground offered Earth the means to make self-portraits, so I've titled these films *earthly portraits.*

[2] I will expand on this later, but I use this term to define the photographs I make using alternative and sustainable analogue photography practices, applying a decolonial methodology.

positioning: speaking a spell into fruition

Throughout this research period I have called my spiritual practice *witchcraft*. But what I practise is more accurately a combination of witchcraft and druidism. I admire their honour of the cyclical ways our lives are affected by Earth, the moon, and the seasons. I am on a larger journey within my spirituality, searching for the archaic knowledge systems that were lost to the witch-hunts in the persecution of wise women.

More recently I have been communing with a group of druid women for each full moon. Initially I attended with the hope of gaining insight into the ways one might practise a ritual within a group. As I have come to really honour this ritual, and these women, I acknowledge the merging of my spiritual practice and my art practice. As my spiritual practice develops, so does the contextual knowledge that carries me through this research.[3] Growing from my spiritual awareness of Earth, I have organically come to the formation of a reciprocal relationship, through an inherent understanding that Earth is not an object, but a living being. This belief is *kinship*, the understanding that all the living beings we co-exist upon Earth with are our kin, our equals, and are just as worthy of being here as we are.

In her book *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici outlines a period in the 17th Century, as the pinnacle cultural shift from when women were independent, valued members of society, to when they were viewed as property of their father or husband, as resources available for exploitation.[4] This shift in perspective, alongside the ancient feminisation of earth and nature, has formed an association between the body of the woman[5], and the body of the earth. Yet this period also marked the wide-spread adoption of Christianity in convergence with scientists of the time, who positioned humans as superior to all other living beings, especially Earth. This hierarchy became a permission slip for the industrialisation and commodification of natural resources, as "God had made people in his own image and given them dominion over the Earth".[6]

Prior to the introduction of Christianity, women held ancestral knowledge of their reproductive systems, using this knowledge to exercise bodily-autonomy. These wise women had the means to "quicken a woman's period, provoke an abortion, or create a condition of sterility."[7] With the rise of Christianity came the witch hunts, and the demonisation of female power, ancestral female knowledge, women in general, and particularly the midwives that performed these treatments.[8] Since the witch hunts and the persecution of these wise women, we have seen men control the reproductive rights of women. Contemporary Ecofeminism

[3] Each month as I lay on the ground in a circle with these women of all ages, and breathe my way through a guided meditation, I come to some realisation about a problem I am having within my research, or my life that ultimately impacts my research. My art is so utterly connected to me, the artist.

[4] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 203.

[5] Implication of the female body here is not meant to be descriptive of a cis-gender, heterosexual woman, instead this could also apply to queer, inter-sex, or non-binary bodies, trans men or women, or those with wombs. There is an inherent feminisation one aligns with before subscribing to Ecofeminism.

[6] Gameau, T*he story that shapes your relationship with nature.*

[7] Federici, *The Devaluation of Women's Labor,* 203.

[8] Rakusen, *Midwives and Healers*, 5:30-5:50.

proposes that this significant displacement of power over our bodily-autonomy has resulted in the overpopulation we are seeing today, because controlling a woman's reproductive system creates more people who can eventually enter the workforce, to serve capitalism.[9] Capitalism has directly instigated a catastrophic climate crisis, which is in turn creating suffering for under-developed[10] countries who were already exploited by Western capitalism in huge industries focused on extraction and profit, such as mining and material production.[11]

My artistic practice is grounded in photography, yet traditional means of photographing land are often disconnected to my reciprocal way of being with land. Traditional landscape photography positions the body of the photographer behind the camera; looking through a viewfinder, or ground glass, creating a physical separation between their body, and the land around them. This form of experiencing earth through the gaze of the camera, severs our body from earth, and prioritises the thinking mind over the feeling body. For me, this form of traditional landscape photography sacrifices the embodied methodologies I prioritise when making with a body of land.

Landscape photography within Aotearoa is grounded in a history of colonisation and surveyorship. Early photographers such as the Burton Brothers are representative of commercial photographers working in the late 19th Century. In their photographs, vast untamable landscapes became still and pristine, creating a tidy postcard perspective of this land and its people.

[9] The Book on Fire Podcast, *The World Needs a Jolt :: Caliban & The Witch, Chapter 1.*

[10] I want to reiterate Vandana Shiva's words here and remind the reader that this terminology of under-developed implies a standard of development that is set by Western civilisations, so this scale is subjective.

[11] Shiva, *Vandana Shiva | Ecofeminism and the decolonization of women, nature and the future.*

Mount De La Beche from the Tasman Glacier, 1893, Dunedin, by Burton Brothers, George Moodie, Muir & Moodie. Te Papa (O.000729)

The Burton Brothers were following the standards put in place by the photographers before them, such as Timothy O'Sullivan and Carlton Watkins. In his book *How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, Jarrod Hore explains that "these photographers were adjuncts to wider practices of categorising, delineating, and exploiting territory."[12] So, much like the photographers before them, these standards have been passed down through generations of photographers since the inception of colonial survey photography, thus contributing to the understanding of contemporary landscape photography. We see this history in the methodologies that are connected to our understanding of landscape photography, like the positionality of the camera in line with the human eye, that favours a human-centric perspective of the world which is deemed *neutral*.

[12] Hore, *How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, 41.

Instead, I believe a photographic approach that considers our one-ness with earth, makes time for observation, and sees earth as a collaborator, can heal this separation of Earth and humanity. In order to begin to achieve this within my own practice, I ground my use of sustainable, alternative, and cameraless analogue photographic processes within ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminism is the union of women and Earth in the face of *unlimitism*; the belief that anything is attainable and within their power to own.[13] In this context, Ecofeminism serves as a means to reposition this disconnection between Earth and humans by uplifting the rights of both women and Earth. Centred on the belief that our disconnect is a consequence of the patriarchal social structure that formed our modern world, in which we see a linked "devaluation of women and the earth."[14]

[13] You, *The Subversion of Male Unlimitism–an Eco-feminist Reading of A Thousand Splendid Suns,* 61.

[14] Gates, A *Root of Ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme,* 8.

Alternative, sustainable, and cameraless analogue photographic processes are like a venn diagram of non-traditional, earth-focused, and touch-based processes. These processes were born from the era of digital photography, when a sense of urgency for our climate crisis encouraged those hands-on makers to look to analogue photographic processes in a more connected and considered light. Sustainable photography does not disregard traditional photography, instead it attempts to create opportunities for low-toxic, *more* sustainable swaps that replace harsh chemicals. I frequently practise sustainable photography in the form of plant-based film developers, deepening my awareness of the power within plants, and growing closer to collaboratively making with the more-than-human world. Sustainability is not a tick-box achievement, it is a *process* of reducing the impact of waste emitted from one's practice with the intention of a low-impact, ever-lasting practice. Both alternative and cameraless photographic processes create outcomes that are unlike traditional photography. Cameraless analogue photography specifically sees the film or photographic material as a light sensitive substrate[15] which can be affected outside of a camera. I am particularly interested in what a more considered photographic methodology has to offer to the re-framing and decolonising of traditional landscape photography.

[15] Light sensitive substrates in this context are photographic materials such as film or darkroom paper.

I have spent my lifetime forming a spiritual awareness of the sentience of earth, this has informed my view of Earth as a collaborator. Recognising the bounds of our shared experiences, our positionality in the eyes of Western capitalism, and our biological

similarities, encourages me to challenge the formulas that traditional photography has taught me about seeing Earth, and instead learn to make photographs *with* Earth. Not to embark on attempting to *represent* a landscape through the eye of the human viewer, but instead open a visual conversation about the ways that Earth is already self-representing, and what that might look like.

Belinda Whitta, pinhole photograph from within hole, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

Belinda Whitta, photograph of the ground, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

what to call the earth?

I have spent most of the duration of my practice working with land that my settler colonial ancestors farmed on, lived on, and some even died on. My ancestors bought the farm in the 1860s, and called it *Sky Farm*.[16] It is now publicly accessible as a walkway and maintained by Wellington City Council, but was originally Te Atiawa land.[17] As these ancestors were English colonial-settlers, and bought this land from the *New Zealand Company,* they were the first Pākehā settlers to inhabit this land stolen from tangata whenua. There are accounts that show they are personally responsible for the deforestation of native bush when they cleared the land to farm.[18] This land is now a vast expanse of grassy hills, littered with introduced species like gorse and thistle, interrupted by occasional pine plantations. I carry my connection to my ancestors, and their actions, as a tension I am constantly navigating. I have spent years attempting to represent this relationship and its emotional baggage with respect and understanding. This inspired my use of sustainable analogue photographic processes; through this I have come to an understanding that Earth is capable of self-representation, if you are open to creating a dialogue.

Throughout this research, and the years leading up to it, I have grappled with the tension around working with land as tangata tiriti and a Pākehā person. Searching for the appropriate place to be, between upholding others' indigenous ways of being, and using māturanga Māori without the lived experience to inform it. I am learning to feel comfortable in the fact that there is no easy answer, because I know that instead, I can find a sense of steadiness in my positionality that will continue to shift as I grow. I have worked with gorse as a material and a muse to understand the discomfort of this positionality. I was angered by the abounding presence of gorse in this area I work with, whilst knowing it is due to colonial settlers, such as my ancestors, who introduced it. I was frustrated that they caused a problem I felt responsible for, but I did not know where to begin to fix. We tend to see gorse as an icon of settler colonisation, but it has made promising evolutions to support native trees and insects.[19] So, if gorse can use the space it takes up to make room for native saplings, and most importantly, to know when to step away and let them be seen, then we should too. From this realisation, my relationship with gorse has transformed. It became a symbol in the understanding of my Pākehā identity and my own capacity to grow in the right direction.

In his book *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh applies a term founded within science-fiction writing, *terraforming*, to speak of the settler colonial actions and effects of introduced species, deforestation and the re-creation of the landscape to fit into their European

[16] Withers, *Kilmister of Karori, Wellington 1841-present.*

[17] Love*, Māori History of Ohariu*, 1.

[18] Withers, *Kilmister of Karori, Wellington 1841-present.* "The history of Sky Farm & Otari Farm started out as one farm purchased by John Kilmister and his brother Henry for 10 shillings an acre in 1863 approx. They felled the bush, formed the road up from Parkvale Road and built two cottages where they raised their children."

[19] Brockie, *Weeds of the bush - Trees and shrubs.*

understanding of land. This is colonisation of a landscape, a more inconspicuous effect, where different 'natures' (livestock, plants, insects and pathogens) colonise environments.[20]

Kinship is a term I was first introduced to by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she wrote about forming relationships with Earth and the other beings that live alongside us.[21] This allows us an opportunity to reposition our human-centric world view and see ourselves as equals to all the other living beings upon this Earth. That we are not inherently more worthy of being here than any other species. Now, I have come to understand that kinship also applies to rocks, hills, and water, rather than *just* animals.[22]

Central to practising kinship is actively engaging in acts of reciprocity. I have been working to form a relationship with the land I am collaborating with, which means we are in constant conversation about what I can take, and what I can give back. It feels impossible to have a conversation about creative collaboration with our more-than-human kin without acknowledging that this mahi[23] was guided by the determination of tangata whenua. In Aotearoa, we witnessed the first ever action of legal personhood, when the Whanganui river was granted the legal rights of a person in 2017. This concept of legal personhood is a common topic that arises alongside kinship and reciprocity. However it is important to be clear that this term *legal personhood* is not connected to humanness, instead it is descriptive of the belief that a being with personhood has agency which is deserving of respect and legal rights.[24] This is recognition of kinship. Nova Paul introduced me to the term *whanaungatanga*, a Te Reo Māori word that translates to *kinship*. Yet it also describes the reciprocal satisfaction one receives when caring for others.[25]

In recent years there has been a decline within the English dictionary of words about nature. Additionally, our existing vocabulary reduces our more-than-human kin to objects when we address them with the pronoun 'it'.[26] In his book *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane writes to preserve the vast, fading vocabulary of words used to describe nature in some form, he calls these *place-terms*. Macfarlane outlines the ways in which we can see the English language is developing away from containing the vocabulary to describe and teach reciprocal relationships with nature.[27] So how might we begin to correct this path towards a place where our language describes reciprocity and respect? I do not claim to have the answer, but I have made adjustments within my own vocabulary to ensure I am upholding my beliefs with the words I choose to use. For this reason, I have chosen not to prescribe Earth a pronoun, and instead write with the word *Earth* as a name.

I make the effort to personify Earth, to acknowledge the sentience and spiritual power of Earth, rather than to reduce Earth to an object with the use of 'it'. However, to apply an English pronoun when speaking of Earth - she/he/they - I believe is still reductive. This prescribes our Western understanding of gender onto Earth, whom I believe is greater than what can fit without the bounds of these classifications of gender. I have come to this conclusion after much contention and consideration on the common use of she/her pronouns

[20] Ghosh, *Being Seen and Unseen*

[21] Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass.*

[22] Van Horn*, The Kinship Project.*

[23] A Te Reo Māori term for *work*. *Te Aka Māori Dictionary,* s.v. "mahi".

[24] Van Horn, *Cultivating mutual reciprocities*, 4:11-4:22.

[25] *Te Aka Māori Dictionary,* s.v. "whanaungatanga".

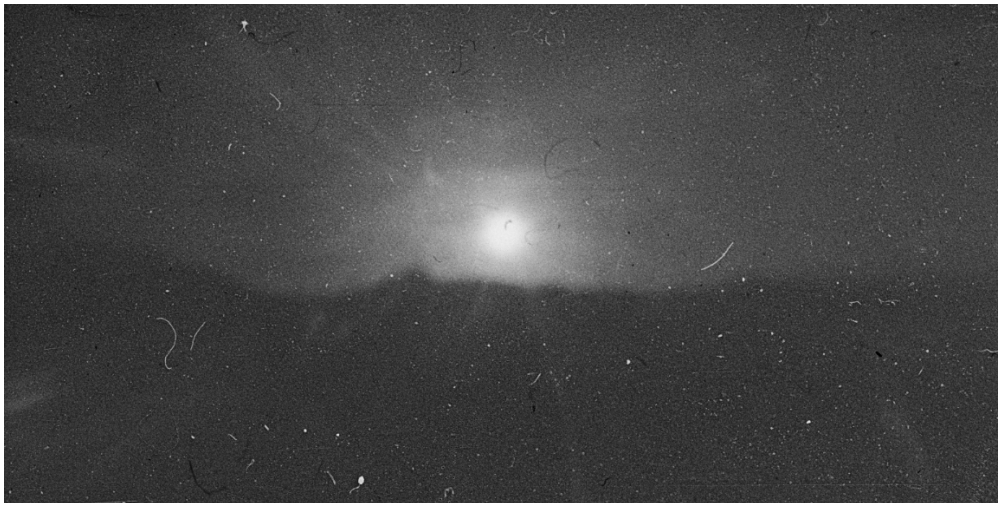
[26] Van Horn, *Cultivating mutual reciprocities,* 7:47-7:54.

[27] Macfarlane, *Landmarks,* 3-4.

for Earth, particularly within the realms of art, spirituality and ecology. Using she/her pronouns for Earth feels steeped in white feminist essentialism that reduces Earth to the trope *mother earth*.[28] I believe this prescription of a patriarchal gender role upon Earth is reductive. Instead I think of Earth as the more-than-human, bound-less, gender-less creator and host of all life.

I extended this awareness of language into my visual practice to address common photography terminologies that are steeped in colonisation and violence; shoot, take, capture, trigger, etc. This re-positions my photographic practice as one that is considered, filled with care, and actively *making* in collaboration with Earth.

[28] I want to acknowledge that within Aotearoa, Earth is often referred to using she/her pronouns to acknowledge the sentience of Papatūānuku and her role in the Te Ao Māori creation story. However this is separate to my argument.



Belinda Whitta, pinhole photograph of the sun setting, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

Belinda Whitta, photograph of the ground, documentation of projection, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

land seeing (earthly portraits)

This work began with a series of works made about the abortion I had partway through my undergraduate study. I documented my grief through burying the ashes of a letter I wrote about the experience into a hole in the ground. I wished I could have buried the remains of the abortion, but I disposed of them. From this desire to bury the remains, I became fascinated by the ritual of *burying*. I have used cameraless photography to explore this practice, the results forming the left-hand projection in the final performance. To peel away the auto-biographical tone, I buried a sheet of film in the same hole, focusing on burial as an act in search for a sense of closure. From here, I formed a ritual of burying and retrieving photographic film from this hole in the ground; but the location of that hole was specific too. The burial process has since shifted to be more about my relationship with the land this hole is within. Close to my ancestor's farm is a pocket of hillside that is now home to a scattering of wounds, residual marks from holes I dug to bury film. At the time of my abortion I lived close by, and would walk the tracks around those hills, curious about my ancestors who once lived there. This is how I first came to build my relationship with this land.

In an attempt to reveal something invisible within the burial process, I turned to photographic materiality[29] as a recording medium. To see the film as a body of acetate, with a light-sensitive skin; willing and able to retain marks, touch and traces. I was completely taken by the thinking of Laura Marks and Vicky Smith when they introduced me to the realm of tactile film-making. This is where I find the context for these buried photographs and their abstracted visual language, within the alternative film-making genre of tactile film. The abstract, non-narrative qualities of these films made by touch form a new sensorial, somatic language, separate to the traditional *visual* conventions of the process; whether that be filmmaking or photography. In the removal of the camera, along with any understanding of scale or subject, the touch becomes the most prominent element. The viewer experiences a full bodied, sensorial reaction to the image as the textured visuals embody the experience of this touch. So, photographic film becomes a light-sensitive *object* which we can affect and expand, by *touching*.

[29] Use of the word *materiality* here positions photographic film or paper as a physical material which is a more accessible approach to discuss the light-sensitivity of these substrates, disconnect their purpose as image-making tools.

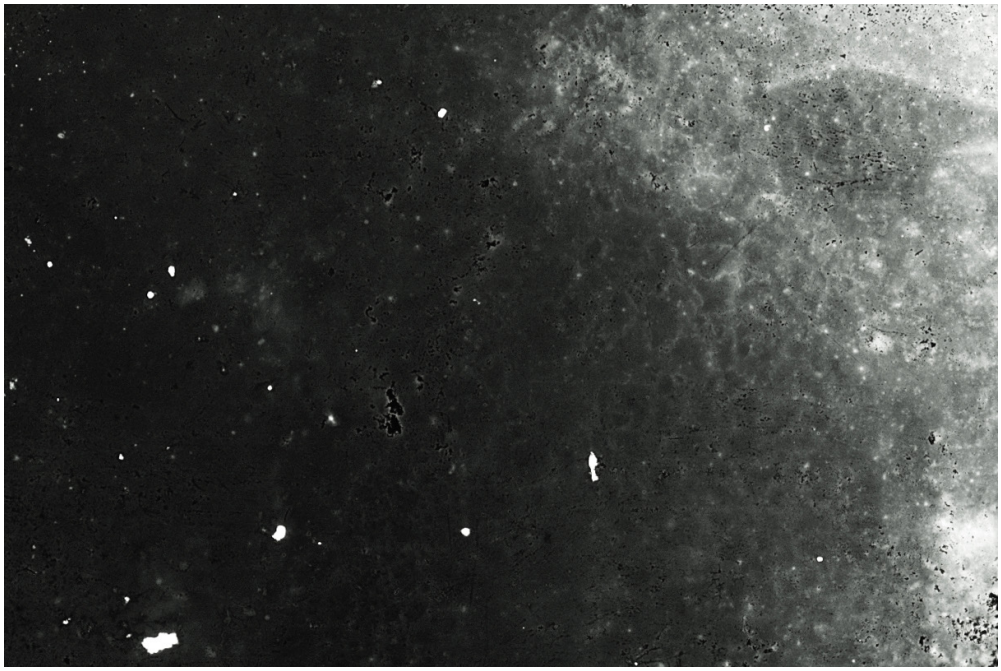
Making photographs that fit under the umbrella of tactile film goes against the *rules* of traditional photography, particularly in the invitation to *touch* the film. Traditional photography subscribes to an ideal of a *clean* negative, and therefore photograph; so the negative is protected from its own inherent gradual degradation, preserved in the archive. Touch is one of the many elements that would contaminate or corrode the life of the negative

within the archive.

Over a long period of time that I call my *ritual*, I successively bury single frames of 35mm film into a hole in the ground. The films stay there for three nights, creating a recording of this time underground, condensing it into a still image. It is the touch of Earth that is present upon the skin of the film. Where artists such as Emma Hart use film to document the surface of their body, protesting representation of the female body; I place film in the ground, allowing Earth to make marks which become documents of self-representation.[30]

[30] Smith, *Full Body Film,* 44.

I came to think about the hole in the ground as the body of a camera. It is a dark body, with an opening that can introduce light. This repositions the term *cameraless photography* for me. To suggest that a hole in the ground is a camera, and that these buried films are photographs, prompts the question, *what is being photographed?*



Belinda Whitta and the farm in the sky, buried film, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

When in 2023 my friend and Fulbright Scholar Madison Emond received pinhole photographs made with a camera she constructed with(in) the body of the kaiwharawhara awa[31], imaging the canopy above, we saw what looked like reflections on the surface of water. This sat with me as a reminder that the reflection on the surface of the awa[32], of the canopy that rests above it, could be the awa representing herself.[33]

[31] Madison formed a well-like structure within the flow of the awa with rocks and mud from her body. She used this as the body of the camera, and created a pinhole aperture that looked to the canopy about the trees. At night she would insert and retrieve photographic film.

[32] A Te Reo Māori term for *stream*. *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*, s.v. “awa”

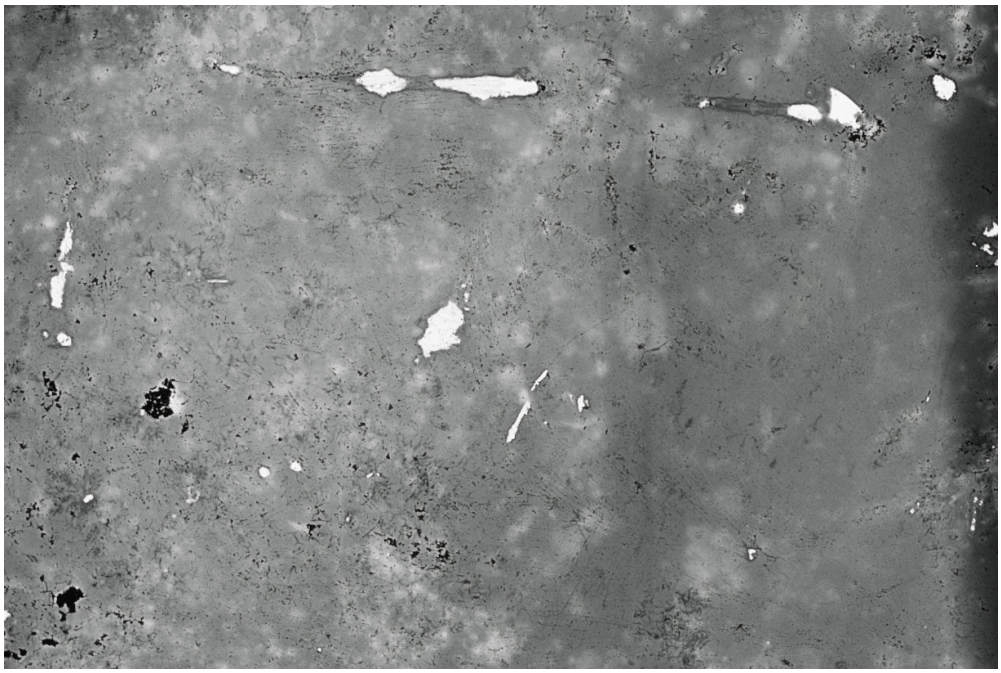
[33] Madison chose to use she/her pronouns for Kaiwharawhara as she believed the awa had a feminine presence. In her spirit I am echoing this sentiment, as my relationship with Kaiwharawhara was fostered by Madison’s.

In a line between two trees Anne Noble buried a whole roll of photographic film in the ground to document the happenings and communications of trees and their mycelium kin. These conversations are condensed into “the underground time of the film”, to form a still

image, a seven metre long book.[34] Since the Victorian era, the common connotation of space is *emptiness*, but if a space can be a line underground, spanning between two trees, there is definitely matter within that space.[35]

Where Noble is documenting systems we are aware of, but cannot see. I am interested in the underground realm that we cannot see and are only just beginning to understand. So, to employ photography to document these invisibilities is to understand that there are modes of seeing outside our ability, that perhaps light sensitive materials can image. My journeys to bury film are made in the evening as darkness falls, meaning that either side of the film's burial as well as the time spent underground is in darkness. So, even in the absence of light, the film is still recording traces of touch, the invisible transactions of energy, and transcribing them into a still image. The absence of a traditional photographic image makes these traces more acute as we witness them.

Photography has long since had a relationship with imaging the unseen.[36] I am contextually informed by spirit photography as a means to image the unseen, or the *veils* that subvert the human eye. *Veils* could be the visualisation of life and energy within the earth.[37] Spirit photography considers film a substrate in which spirits can affect with no light required.[38] If the earthly portraits are collecting documentation of the spirit of this land, when the film is developed and *realised* into an image, they become a translation of these marks.[39] With this context, it is clear the author of these marks is Earth. But I am the facilitator, the hands that enable the photographs, that bury, unearth, and develop the film. I maintain the rituals of creation for these earthly portraits, but I do not claim to make the energetic impressions upon the film.



Belinda Whitta and the farm in the sky, buried film, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

[34] Ferran, *Stewart Island, New Zealand – August, 2019.*

[35] Ashton, *Foreword*, 1-2.

[36] In the book The Invention of Hysteria, photographer Barduc retells an account of holding a piece of film close to a body, in the dark. What is revealed are auratic fields. Although more likely a residue of his touch, or a registration of the faint hues of light within the darkness, yet he claims these veils are documentation of the "light of the soul". Didi-Huberman, *Auras*, 92.

[37] Ibid. 94.

[38] Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Spirit Photography, Automatic Writing and Surrealist Phantasms,* 164.

[39] I have come to see details of this land reflected in the marks upon the film. I recognise the hill line, or the splash of water over rocks, and I realise, Earth is making a self-portrait.

Nova Paul (Te Uri Ro Roi, Te Parawhau/Ngāpuhi) is a Māori artist who is predominantly recognised for her Kaupapa Māori films. She also collaborates with the more-than-human world within her art. In her experimental films *Rākau* (2022) and *Hawaiki* (2022) she demonstrates use of a plant-based film developer that enables more-than human collaboration and authorship. Paul uses chlorophyll-based film developers to form whanaungatanga (kinship) between the process of image-making and ngahere (bush, forest). "If trees process sunlight to produce chlorophyll, here, chlorophyll produces images of light in order to communicate messages across species."[40] These methodologies are born of a Te Ao Māori lens, and mātauranga Māori, as ways of being in the world, and "reveals not only an image but the mauri (life force) of the tree" but it also enables the trees with the power to represent their own likeness.[41] I appreciate this process for its communication of the effect of the artist as a collaborator with the more-than-human world. Nova Paul does this by providing the opportunity for rākau (trees) to control their own imaging and representation.[42]

[40] Paul and Laird, *Ngā Pūrakau No Ngā Rākau: Stories from Trees*, 1.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Paul, *The DNA of Film.*

In 1978 Susan Griffin, a radical feminist writer, first published *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. Inside this book is her poem titled *LAND: her changing face,* where Griffin writes of a *he* that journeys through, upon, and within a body of land, seeking to know *her*, to reveal *her*.[43] Griffin's use of pronoun and personification to separate the body of the person (the *he*) and the body of the land (the *she*) reminds me that this endeavour to know this land is that, an *endeavour*, a colonial quest. Our Western ideas of intelligence are a colonial weapon. We seek to understand completely, to rationalise, but this dissolves any lingering magic that is held within the unknown. Instead, It is more aligned to a reciprocal, de-colonial way of being to take time to understand that this body of land is so profound, and deep, and wise. That we may never completely comprehend the bounds and intimacies of Earth.

[43] Griffin, *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her,* 47-48.

Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, 2022, 16mm film print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Nova Paul, *Rākau*, 2022, 16mm film print. Image courtesy of the artist.

In her Masters thesis, Kate van der Drift asked the question, “If an entity such as a river already has a voice and is already representing itself, how do I amplify that voice so that it is heard more fully, with its own creativity and originality?”[44] This question is foundational for artists like myself using camera-less photographic processes to commune with more-than-human bodies/beings. It is vital to recognise that by introducing ourselves into a space, and using our practice to wield marks from this body of water, or land, that we are merely creating yet another avenue for that more-than-human kin to self-represent.

[44] Wood, *To Locate*, 5.

in the light of a cave we are making ritual

Simply put, a ritual is a collection of actions, prompts, or words, acted or spoken with specificity and timing, a collection of carefully considered visual and somatic elements that come together to transport you. To ensure an authentic ritual, the creator must be carefully embodied in the elements of their ritual. I formed a ritual around the burying and retrieving of photographic film from the hole in the ground. The ritual often expanded as my relationship with the land grew and I made room for additional actions. Carrying out the ritual became a moment to cherish as I journeyed to the hole every three nights. But soon the ritual became an entity, there was power in my commitment to maintain it, my prioritisation of its *life*. This time that the ritual required, also offered me the chance to develop my relationship with this land, returning to conversations I had left there, and incorporating ways to greet the land into the ritual.

Barbara G. Walker is a prominent author in feminist spiritualism, she argues that as rituals are a human invention in which we prescribe meaning and purpose, that religion, which is simply a collection of rituals, is a human invention.[45] This breaking down of religion as ritual, can explain witchcraft and druidism as nature-based religion. Witchcraft and Druidism are a collection of rituals that honour Earth, a religion centred around caring for and living as one with Earth and our more-than-human kin.

[45] Walker, *Women's Rituals: A Sourcebook*, 3.

Aotearoa-based ritual-maker Juliet Batten uses meditation to amplify her intuition and morphic field[46], so she can create a somatic space in which she can receive or act out the ritual content or instructions. Perhaps one of the most well known witch and author, Starhawk, speaks of religion as poetry, inviting us to write ritual as we would poetry, to see it flow openly from within us, as we refrain from getting in the way.[47]

[46] *Morphic field* is the (invisible) field of energy that surrounds all living beings.

[47] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 2.

This method of *receiving* ritual from entities outside ourselves, or *invisible* forces like our intuition, often comes with criticism that it is invented and therefore not worthy of worship. In the wider context of religion, feminist witchcraft is unique in its open discourse on the methods of its constant self-invention and re-creation.[48] However, the participants' awareness of the ritual's *invented-ness* does not retract from their spiritual experience of the ritual, as they provide the ritual with its power, in their gift of belief.

[48] Rountree, *Ritual as Artefact,* 168.

It is vital to acknowledge that ritual-making is a practice invented upon what small amounts of lost knowledge we've retained, using intuition as a guide. Kathryn Rountree,

an anthropologist and author from Aotearoa, speaks of the criticism this sort of ritual practice receives, particularly because it is founded on borrowed, invented, and adapted knowledge. Tanya Luhrmann, an American anthropologist and the author of *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft,* makes a point "about English witches' incorporation of diverse mythologies and symbolisms within their magical practices, saying: 'They poach from the past in the interests of the present and plunder the world's mythology for their symbolic goods.'"[49]

[49] Ibid. 163.

The Goddess movement as a global collective is undoubtedly guilty of cultural theft, taking from indigenous cultures that have already suffered from colonisation and settler colonialism. Rountree suggests that feminist ritual-makers in Aotearoa are "hyper-sensitive" to their impact on the lives of tangata whenua, their own ancestral disconnection to this land, and their presence in Aotearoa as the result of settler colonisation.[50] Self-aware critical thought is satisfactory, but it requires action. There needs to be consideration when using land, rituals, and knowledge from cultures we do not belong to. As a descendant of European colonial settlers I completely understand and regularly experience a feeling of displacement from my own ancestral land. This is the repercussion of our ancestors leaving their families, their cultural practices, and their oral histories behind, to start anew. Though now, as we long for this knowledge we have been intergenerationally severed from, it is nowhere to be found. This "spiritual emptiness" equips Pākehā people in the position of "denial of the tangata whenua indigenous reality and justifies our control of resources".[51]

[50] Ibid. 167.

[51] Delahunty, *Flush and forget - Pākehā and Te Tiriti,* 40.

In the 1970-80's feminist art movement, performance art intersected with feminist ritual. Originating from the United States (particularly in New York City), the movement was informed by artists such as Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneemann, Nancy Spero, and Mary Beth Edelson. This art period influenced many aspects of my methodology, but particularly the performative portion. The ritual work of Mary Beth Edelson is particularly poignant for me, especially with her use of photography which she used to document her feminist ritual art. Edelson performed both in her studio and in the landscape, but in the documentation of her *private* performances, the only witness was the camera.

Mary Beth Edelson's private rituals, conducted alone, either in her studio, or outdoors in a remote environment, reached a crescendo upon her pilgrimage to a Goddess site. She underwent a pilgrimage to Yugoslavia (Old Europe) to find a neolithic cave that her body could become a part of.[52] Edelson's research on the site found multiple caves she could visit, but her attention was drawn to one in particular when the amalgamation of her research and intuition called her to it; *Grapčeva špilja*. This cave, and wider pilgrimage, inspired many works for Edleson, including the self-portrait and ritual-documentation piece *Grapceva Neolithic Cave See for Yourself*, 1977. Edelson took two dozen candles, and three flashlights to the dark, damp cave to allow enough light to make a photograph. This photograph marked the point in which Edleson would begin to use longer exposures. As a requirement of the low lighting condition, her shutter was open for the entire duration of the ritual which allowed the whole length of the ritual to be embedded onto the surface of the film, translating it

[52] Wentrack, *Mary Beth Edelson: Ritual Performances.*

Mary Beth Edelson, *Grapceva Neolithic Cave See for Yourself, 1977.*

to one still moment.[53] The starburst glow of the candles, and a trailing light likely used for navigation is burnt onto the surface of the film. Edelson's body doesn't emit light, but reflects it; a haze of her movements come to articulate the soft edges of her body.

[53] Edelson, *Pilgrimage/See for Yourself: A Journey to a Neolithic Goddess Cave, 1977. Grapceva, Hvar Island Yugoslavia.*

In 1980's Aotearoa there were a number of women - including Di French, Allie Eagle, Marian Evans, Juliet Batten and Bridie Lonie - working with a similar methodology of ritual documentation. Juliet Batten, who is now a predominant ritual-maker in Aotearoa, formed a private ritual practice that occurred on full moons or summer solstice. She dug a fan of channels in sand and watched as the tide dissolved them, resettling the sand. She speaks of the action; building and rebuilding channels as waves come in to flatten them, as a collaborative action between her and the sea. Two small actions that signify the coming together of two entities; Batten, and the sea.[54]

[54] Batten, *Power From Within: A Feminist Guide to Ritual-Making*, 3.

The particular ritual that occurred at Te Henga, on the 1982 summer solstice in December, was documented with photography. Although now, as the tide has swept over the sand, resetting all traces of her touch, only the photographic documentation survives. In this particular situation, we see a severing of the performance and the documentation as two separate entities, and only one can physically endure more than a fleeting moment. So, we see the photograph take the place of the performance as the *artwork*. *Performance documentation* becomes an oxymoron in this sense; a time-based, fleeting performance that is contained within a stagnant, stable form of representation.[55] This prompts the question of all the sensorial elements (smell, sound, temperature, etc.) that come together to articulate the experience of the performance. How can any medium contain enough sensorial language to document the traces of *evidence* of such an experience?

[55] Anne Marsh, P*erforming Photographs,* 218.

Juliet Batten, *Opening to the sea, summer solstice,* December 1982, image courtesy of the artist.

Juliet Batten, *Opening to the sea, summer solstice,* December 1982, image courtesy of the artist.

seeing land (haptic photography)

In her essay *Open Fields: Fieldwork as a Creative Process,* Kristen Sharp explains that conducting fieldwork is an "active encounter with place" and needs to include the formation or maintenance of a relationship with the place. *Doing* fieldwork is an active and fluid encounter, reflective of the maturing relationship.[56] This sets precedence for a care-oriented methodology of fieldwork. I use a camera to document the ritual of burying film, the journeying to and from, the growing awareness of the path, my sensorial navigation skills, the conversations, and intuitive guidance. The development of this methodology has seen my photographs slowly become non-descript, and often there is little direct representation of a *place*, and instead more of a feeling.

[56] Sharp, *Open Fields: Fieldwork as a Creative Process,* 50.

In the final performance work, on the right-hand screen, displayed using dual analogue slide projectors, are a series of photographs made with a camera. In order to begin to communicate my ever-growing relationship with this land, I have formed a language of what I call *haptic photography*. Spored from what Laura Marks has called *haptic visuality*,[57] or what Bridget Crone would call *turbid images*;[58] haptic photography is a visualisation of the tactility of a scene. Using sight to inspire the other senses' response, the viewer receives a somatic, sensory, full bodied reaction to the image. This is sparked by photographs that are visceral and often have debris on their surfaces. The photographs are made using a 35mm film camera. I often remove the lens to make a pinhole camera, make out-of-focus photographs, or open the shutter for such long periods of time that the scene is blurred. This actively dismantles lens-based hierarchies by choosing not to gaze through the viewfinder to *frame* the land. I spend a lot of my time with this land in the dark, so photographing into the darkness, where nothing is visible through the viewfinder, became a natural evolution. For this reason, I photograph into the darkness with my shutter wide open for seconds at a time, this is a *slow* process. I hold the camera to my body to steady it, or place it on the ground, or a fence post. This frequently creates blurred photographs of strangely composed scenes because I cannot neatly frame a scene to capture its likeness, but instead these *flaws* of the process are present and provocative so that they become part of the visual conversation. This methodology came from experimentation with pinhole cameras, where there is no sure way to see your *field of view*. Surrender is essential to the process, it requires an acceptance or *reception* of the land that then invites collaboration.

[57] Matheson, *Haptic visuality and the skin of the photograph,* 89-90.

[58] Crone, *Turbid Images and Bodies in the Field,* 492.

When making photographs in the darkness by blindly pointing the camera into the dark abyss in front of me, the photographs that I receive in return are foggy, with a ghostly presence. A heavy

Belinda Whitta, photograph of the hills covered in fog, *to trace a path though the dark,* 2024.

fog that loomed over the path one evening brought Bridget Crone's term *turbid images* to life for me. The Cambridge Dictionary defines turbid as "(of a liquid) not transparent because a lot of small pieces of matter are held in it", which sets the tone to expand on this sense of turbidity as a body opaque with matter and sediment.[59] But what if that body were around me, like an entity, and I am finding my way through it with a camera. As if this turbid body were the one making the scene foggy.

[59] *Cambridge English Dictionary*, online edition, s.v. "turbid"

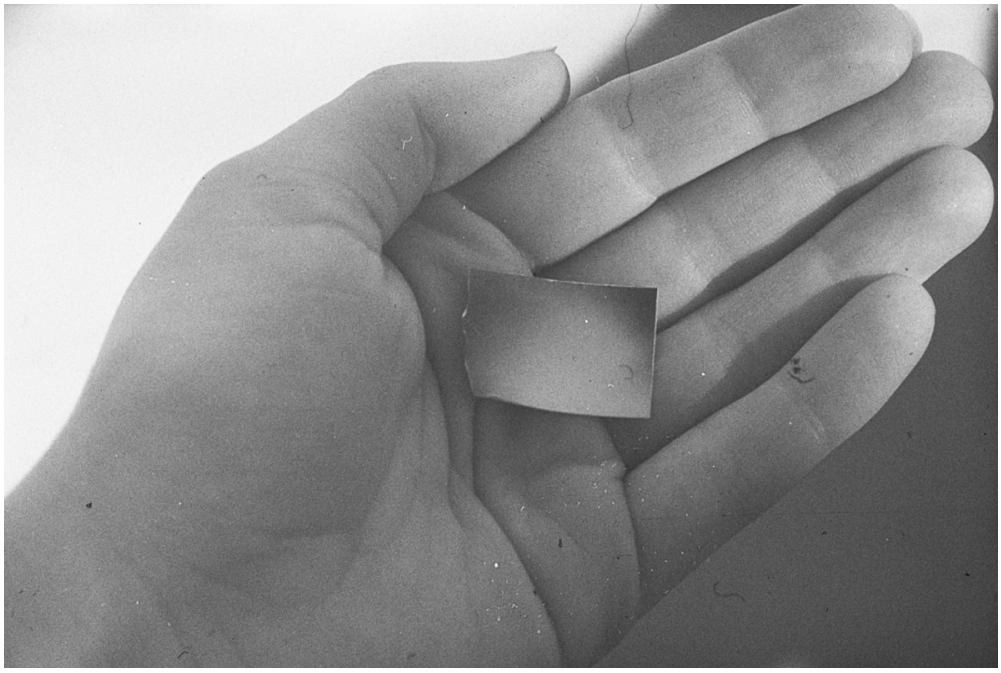
Dore Ashton, in her foreword for Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, suggests that "when we look through the lens of the camera, we are always looking at something, but we are also looking with something."[60] Prompting an awareness of the body of the camera, and of the energetic fields between the subject and the camera. This space is that *turbid* realm, or body, I photograph through. Perhaps it is the tangible union of the spirit of the land and my spirit, as we come to understand each other. It is the physical space that my relationship with this land exists in. So this body also holds the complex emotions that come with being tethered to my ancestors who stripped the indigenous environment from the body of the land, and therefore it also contains the *matter*[61] of my pākehā identity.

[60] Ashton, *Foreword*, 1.

[61] *Matter*, as in what is the *matter*, and also as in physical *matter*.

In photographing through and within this field I am creating the *poetic re-imagining* of this place.[62] I do not attempt to represent this place, not to tell the story of this land, but to photographically communicate my experiences from this land. To illustrate our relationship, and my growing understanding of this land. For this reason, not all the haptic photographs I have been making are made on this land. Using my darkroom practice to materialise the ideas that were inspired by the ways this land is teaching me, inspiring me, and provoking me.

[62] Sharp, *Open Fields: Fieldwork as a Creative Process,* 51.



Belinda Whitta, a photograph of a pinhole photograph made with my hands clasped together to form a pinhole camera, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

Anne Ferran, in her body of work *Lost to Worlds*, points her camera at the ground in search for what is missing; a tangible history of Australian convict women who worked tirelessly at factory benches. All the memory of their presence has been disintegrated with the crumbling ruins of the now non-existent factory. With the camera pointing down, Ferran draws our attention to this lack of artefact, prompting the thought that the only residue of this history is held within the memory of Earth.[63]

[63] Batchen, *Evocations: the art of Anne Ferran.*

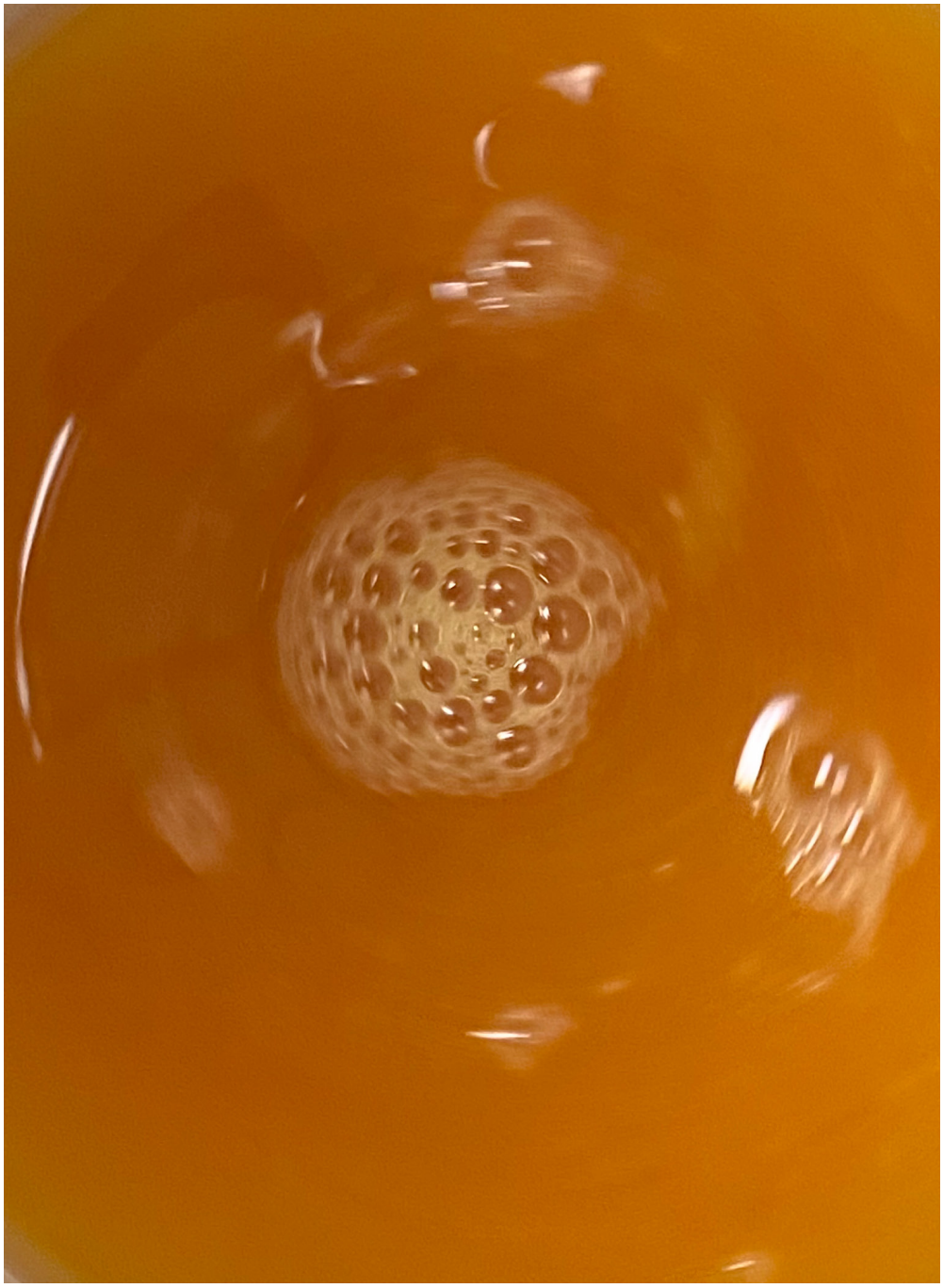
Crone states that turbidity is descriptive of both "conditions of perception" and the photo-making process itself. This speaks to both making photographs in the dark, with an understanding that my perception is different to that of the film within the camera.[64] However, within the development process I also *realise* the photographs with cloudy concoctions with grains of sediment, made from plants from the land. Working in collaboration with land has offered an opportunity to use plant materials from the landscape I am working within in the creation of a film developer, and therefore in the materialisation of the photographs. I formed a gorse flower film developer after noticing the abundant presence of gorse on this land. The developer itself is bright yellow in the end, but changes colours and opacity with the addition of different chemicals. The debris from particles like tiny bugs that had found home within the flowers become part of the developer, introducing a *risk* of these tiny bodies settling upon the film's body. So there is turbidity within the photo-realising process too. A further way to connect to the land has been through sustainable photography. This has taught me to see Earth as more than a collection of scenes to photograph, but a body of materials with powers, affect, and the ability to be self-referencial.

[64] Crone, *Turbid Images and Bodies in the Field,* 493.

Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds 03*, 2008, Digital print on aluminium, 120 x 120cm, Ed. of 3, Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.

My affinity for analogue specific aesthetics - the rounded edges of the slides, the vignette of the pinhole camera, the opportunity to make concoctions for developers - taught me to savour slowness, to use time while making to meditate upon the impact of my practice and processes, and how I can grow closer to Earth. This patience also requires surrender, which has formed a natural evolution towards the decolonisation of my traditional photography practice, into something that is able to be self-aware, considerate, and malleable. For me, this period of waiting within slowness opens the possibility for the *intervention* I now define as collaboration.

Having an analogue based practice, in a digital world, requires me to confront what I gain from this analogue way of working. I appreciate the tactility and slowness, but I have come to a description of my practice as conceptually informed by light sensitivity as a substrate. My haptic approach allows me the language to communicate what the touch within my process feels like, through a visual medium.



To make a photographic film developer with gorse flowers, you begin by collecting 3 handfuls of gorse flowers and placing them in a jar. Pour 500ml of boiling water over the gorse flowers and allow it to steep for 24-60 hours. The gorse flower tea will be a bright yellow colour, this is the base of your developer. After the flowers have steeped for the recommended time, you can add the ingredients! Begin by straining the tea to separate the yellow liquid from the gorse flowers. Put the tea in a jug to ensure you have at least 400ml of water. Firstly, stir in 8 level tablespoons (100g) of washing soda (soda ash), stirring until all the granules are completely dissolved. Next stir in 3 level tablespoons (37.5g) of iodised salt until dissolved, this reduces base fogging in film, so is not necessary for paper development. Finally, stir in 2 level tablespoons (25g) of Ascorbic acid (vitamin C), the developer should foam up slightly, this is a good sign! The developer needs to be about 20 degrees C (can use a time/temp conversion chart) and can be topped up with water to 700ml. Develop black and white film only. Ilford's HP5 develops for 10 minutes, agitating quite regularly. Stop with water, washing all chemistry away, then fix and wash as usual.

Belinda Whitta, process documentation: gorse flower developer, 2023.

the darkroom, a dark room

I often wonder what our threshold for darkness is, at what point can we adjust no further? How does the range of the eye compare to that of film?

Crone's ideas of *turbid images* forms a physical way of seeing, "seeing from within [the scene's] murkiness (seeing underwater, seeing through smoke)" or seeing through darkness.[65] "Picturing from within (rather than a looking on)" from within darkness, submerged in darkness, surrounded by darkness.[66] This is suggestive of darkness being a body, or a shroud draped over the land, which is reminiscent of the body of Ranginui pressed against Papatūānuku. Between the embrace of these two lovers was darkness, then the spark of light that created the world.

[65] Crone, *Turbid Images and Bodies in the Field,* 506.

[66] Ibid.

Within my shallow understanding of Te Ao Māori, darkness is a state of being, *Te Pō* is the "perpetual night".[67] Yet it is also a framework we can use to address darkness that, "despite all inquiry" will remain *unknowable*.[68] This understanding forms the ground to speak of the spiritual or emotional darkness that lingers with a space. For me this darkness is in the ghosts of the trees that once grew here, and in the complex feelings of guilt that I inherited some of that responsibility and how I do not know how to heal it. Te Pō is also a physical atmospheric experience. I have witnessed the land change during twilight, almost coming alive. Darkness that is blinding and heavy like hands covering your eyes. The weight of darkness is near impossible to photograph just by pointing one's camera into the abyss.

[67] Chartwell, *Te Kore, Te Po, Te Ao Marama.*

[68] Paraha, *A choreopoetics of Te Pō,* 29.

There is also a tempting poetry between darkness and photography. Darkness is vital to the analogue photographic process, most notably within the darkroom. There is a term within darkroom photography that I find has an interesting position in this process; *safe*. It is used to determine the safety of light-sensitive materials from light; the success of their *hiding*.

I have come to notice that with varying practical uses, it is darkness that is consistent within my practice. Firstly within a photographic context, then within my fieldwork with the land, and finally in the performance of my work for an audience. I often wonder if I had not found safety in the darkness of the darkroom, if I would willingly venture into nature at night. Being a young woman, I have been taught to fear the dark, but these experiences have taught me that it is not what it is within the dark that we fear, it is the possibility of the unknown being dangerous.

Approaching darkness “triggers an age-old nocturnal change in the seep and flood of hormones that regulate our bodies, allowing us, in darkness, to adjust our eyesight, to calm, to draw closer to others, to be more primed to experience intimacy, to be softened and receptive to awe and emotion”.[69] I have used our physical reactions to darkness within the performance to soothe the audience into a state of open reception. Within the warmth of darkness, there is intimacy, and I believe that intimacy is also felt after an expression of vulnerability. When I show the work, there is vulnerability in that, and the audience can settle into an intimate, open, and warm environment.

[69] Lees, *After Dark*, 12.

Since the age of the Enlightenment, our Western society has been taught that darkness is the *lack of light*, but it is in the dark, with the absence of light, that spiritualism and feminine power comes to life.[70] This comes from a rich history of secret gatherings of women and spiritualists that Christianity has deemed *dark* or sinister, and thus has created a veil of privacy or secrecy.[71] However this implies that without light we are more attuned to notice the *invisible*, the spiritual. For these reasons, creating a darkened space to present the outcome of this research was fitting. The space settled the spirit upon entry, and the photographs emerged from darkness. I have been offered responses about the somatic effect of the work, people left in a calming, restorative state. It is warming that the work created the environment for rest and healing within the body, but from this, it equips the audience to heal intergeneration wounds, or hold conversations about their positionality as Pākehā or Tangata Tiriti.

[70] Marsh, *The Darkroom: Spirit Photography, Automatic Writing and Surrealist Phantasms*, 160.

[71] Edensor, *Introduction to geographies of darkness.*

Belinda Whitta, the hills photographed at night, *to trace a path through the dark*, 2024.

the coming together

to trace a path through the dark is the performance experience that concluded the making portion of my Masters research. It came together in a white cube gallery space, where I layered the huge windows with streaks of muddy water collected from the land I collaborate with. The mud came to have a life of itself as it changed with different lighting conditions. The slight transparency of the mud provided a warm glow of light during the day. The practical use of mud upon the windows was to reduce light from the street, to create darkness within the gallery, but the effect was greater than this.

Colombian artist Delcy Morelos frequently works with mud in her practice. Creating extensive installations with mud from around the world, the consistent reception to her exhibitions is the hug-like atmosphere that is created.[72] In my own installation, alongside the warmth of darkness, and the strong smell of dirt, the gallery space felt within the body of Earth, like being within a womb or perhaps lungs; a place of refuge within Earth.

[72] Morelos, Delcy Morelos with Gaby Collins-Fernández.

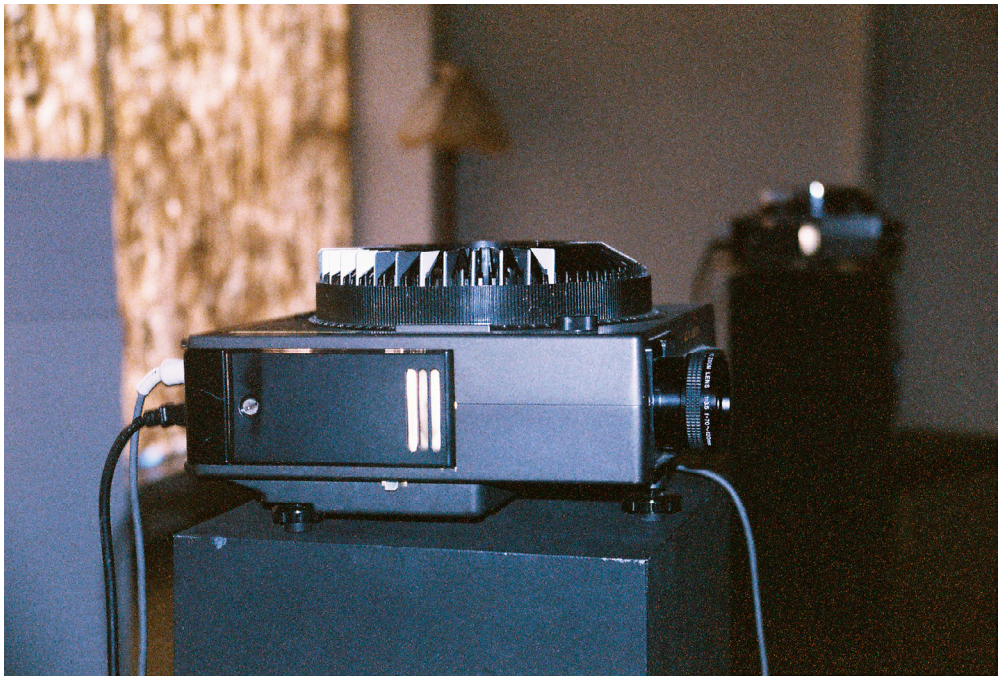
This warm atmosphere created the perfect stage for the altar and the performance. As the

Belinda Whitta, *to trace a path through the dark*, installation documentation, 2024.

lights sequentially went out, and the sound began to prickle in, the space became active with the performance. It began as I blew out the candles,[73] easing the room into darkness. The two projector screens reveal the photographs to the soundtrack of the space and the breath of the projectors, as they often overlapped and wove together. My haptic photographs trail along a loose narrative, as the buried photographs join them in conversation, creating a harmony between our voices.

The slide projector is known to our wider culture for its ability to show memories that would otherwise be placed in a box, forgotten to the archive. In a tighter circle, within our world of arts and academia, I have been told stories of the sensorial language of the slide projector being intrinsic to one's art history education. Within both these contexts the slide projector is used to present images of significance; slides are thoughtfully selected from an archive[74] and placed in the carousel to be shared. When we remove the personal storytelling methodologies from the connotations, we are left with an institutional tool of education, used to display an example of art history that is selective, biassed and sometimes discriminatory.

But there is also a power within the function of the slide projector as an apparatus, its ability to demand attention with the chu-chunk as it reveals the photograph. An early exploration within my masters, *If I was to pry open my wounds, would you hear them weep?*, had performative elements that expanded my previous understanding of how photography can be displayed. But this only came with the use of a medium format projector. I was required to operate the machine by hand, pushing the slide cartridge into view, and changing the slide between each movement through the sequence, so it became impossible[75] to see the work without me. At this point in the work's development, the autobiographical aspects were still



Belinda Whitta, *to trace a path through the dark*, installation documentation, 2024.

[73] The candelabra used in the performance once belonged to my maternal grandmother, the matches used to light it were her husband's, my grandfathers. I have received commentary about the reminiscent *Victorian* aesthetics, but I love that about it. The ancestors I am connecting with, and speaking to, were Victorians.

[74] An archive in this context is fluid and wide; I think of my grandmother's archive, scattered over the desk in her spare room in an order only discernible by those who are committed to prolong its survival.

[75] Without me there to operate the slide projector, all there would be to see is a room of only apparatus, slides and a projector, without their power or life.

Belinda Whitta, *to trace a path through the dark*, installation documentation, by Amber-Jaybe Bain, 2024.

very present. Tethering myself to the display of the work, in the *showing* of the work, so that it was not viewable without me, was important to maintain control of my vulnerability. Having such a fleeting display, leaves the audience with only a memory of the work.
As I have slowly peeled away the auto-biographical aspects I see this tethering to the work manifesting in a time-based performance. The performance introduces conversation around authorship by only allowing enough time to really glance upon the marks, never to truly know them.

Joe Sheehan's *Slide Show Carousel 2* presents a collection of slide-sized slivers of pounamu, lined up within the carousel. Light from the analogue slide projector beams through the thin pounamu and projects light through the pounamu on the wall, revealing the textures within the stone. The apparatus in which we use to see these slices of pounamu brings the material to life. This display method speaks to Sheehan's process of carving, of holding pounamu up to a light source and seeing the universe within it.[76] Often appearing like stretch marks on skin, or mossy rocks on a creek bed, these slivers of pounamu have the same abstracting effect that the buried films do.

[76] Sheehan, *Joe Sheehan discusses the sound of slide projectors, Damon Albarn and carving pounamu.*

The apparatus becomes an instrument in which to see through the density of the pounamu, see all that it contains. Much like my buried film which appears dark and flat upon inspection under normal lighting conditions, but when placed inside the analogue slide projector become *galaxies*.

Alongside the iconic clunking sounds of the projectors loading the next slide, the gallery was filled with sounds collected from the space, or instrumental sections played to the

Joe Sheehan, *Slide Show Carousel 2*, 2009, 80 jade and pounamu slides, slide projector, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2010.

cadence of the hills, and my voice. Kristen Sharp, in her essay *Open Fields: Fieldwork as a Creative Process*, suggests that the recording of environmental sounds is "a form of tacit understanding" as one is not constructing or designing the space for the imagination of the viewer.[77] I use the direct sounds of the space to transport the audience there, or a place reminiscent to them. Alongside these *place-sounds* are voice memos recorded during the ritual of burying and retrieving film. I am often speaking to Earth, or my ancestors, to process some of the thoughts arising. These moments have been layered and slightly distorted so my direct words are private, but there is a magic in knowing the sound is embedded with secrets. The spoken word element[78] wove throughout the sequence of the photographs to set the scene for the audience, prompt questions, or guide their awareness. These words are poeticised, edited versions of moments within voice memos recordings from experiences with the land.

[77] Sharp, *Open Fields: Fieldwork as a Creative Process,* 54.

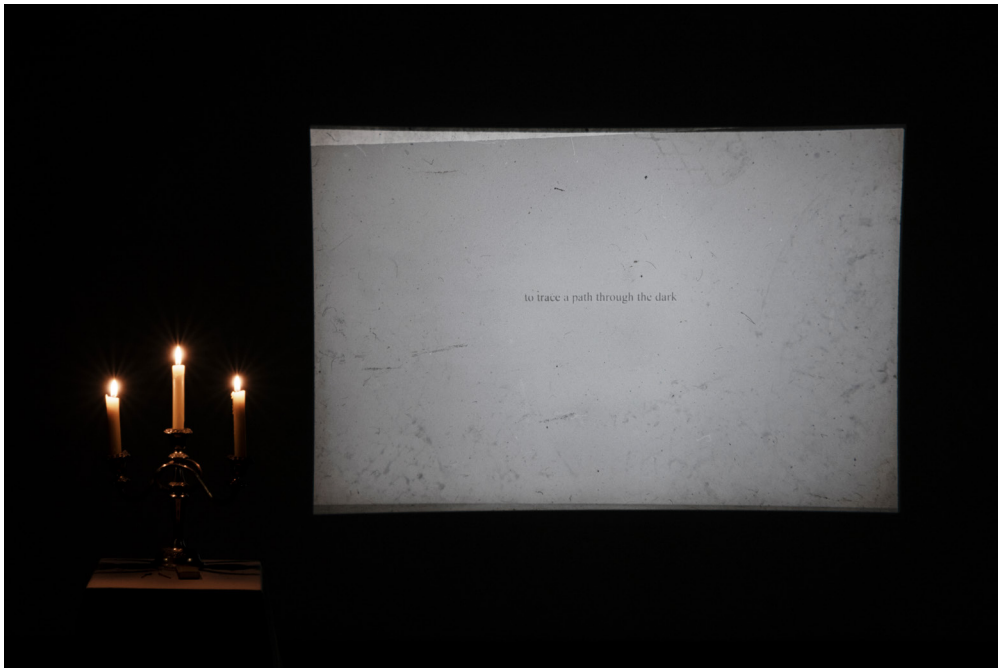
[78] *the script is as follows:*
It's dark and I can no longer feel the edges of my body.
I am seeping into the night.
—
When you follow a path in the dark, what is that guides you?
—
I feel so called, to put an ear to the ground.
To be a witness.
—
When I am digging around inside a hole in the ground,for a tiny piece of film, I get dirt underneath my fingernails.
Our bodies become inter-twined.

I have been reflecting on the life the performance has once it is concluded, alive within the memory of those who witnessed it. Matthew Reason writes about the documentation of performance to remind us of the fluidity within our own memory-based documentation; a representation that is alive.[79] What is remembered is decided by the culmination of events that lead to each person's reception of the performance.

[79] Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance,* 61.

To view performance documentation of *to trace a path through the dark*, please click here.

Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation,
by Lily Dowd 2024.



Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation,
by Lily Dowd 2024.

in conclusion

to trace a path through the dark is the culmination, documentation, and retelling of a set of experiences. Enlisting visual, audio and atmospheric elements to draw the audience into the rituals of my making. These themes of this work are rooted in the modes of creation, I visualise them as the long parts of a cobweb that form its structure. They are the practices of burying film, photography, ritual, and my relationship with this land. Woven around them are the intersecting ideas that carry thoughts from one corner of the web to another, contextualising and informing my positionality. There are darkness, feminisms, spirituality, and kinship. These intersections create the threads or through points that tie the research together to inform the creative outcome, the performance. Communicating the effect that forming alternative[80] ways of seeing (photographically) can impact, inspire and ignite our human relationship with Earth.

From the somatic effect of the space created by *to trace a path through the dark*, I hope that the calming, restorative state creates the means for the audience to begin the internal *work* of repositioning one's own relationship with Earth, their cultural identity, and their privileges. That these conversations become an extension of the performance's lasting effect.

Upon the thought of the *enduring life* of the performance, I conclude with poetry gifted to me, written in response to my performance, by my friends Neon and Somn.

[80] In a conversation with Nova Paul, she explained that the term alternative is only valid for those who are central to the capitalist, colonial way of being. As she is central to Te Ao Māori, her alternative is the capitalist, colonial Western society. So with my use of alternative here, I am acknowledging my positionality having grown up within Western culture, so these alternative ways of seeing are inherently anti capitalism and colonisation.

Invited
by a single candle
to a portal of land and glass
It says push.
The noise enters first
to this curated, dimly-lit
hole in the ground
I find a seat within the heart
of Papatuanuku

A duet
of blood and soul
A dance
between body and body of land
long lost
we are buried under gorse and thistle
and recovered by fingers
twice touched
awakened
by the scent of wax and oil
Ready
for our dance

Click click

A hand
barely visible, very enticing
coercing us into an abyss of clay
A voice
melancholic, healing in nature
A certain labour is required
to ritualise the words
that conduct tonights duet
A certain eye is required
to trace a path through the dark

Click click

The Earth murmurs and hums
a distant bird entertains the ear.
A whole world is in this whole in the ground

Click click

I see a path
A mountain?
It's almost familiar
I begin to forget my body
I become the Earth, just for a moment

Takerei (Neon) Porou,
What it's like to trace a path through the dark, 2024.

This is being buried
Not suffocated
Just packed densely into place
This is that cold dirt
Burial dirt
This is that moment
when the winter melt saturates the soil
And softens the earth
This is you and I,
Fragile things,
Cradled in the palm of her hand
This is the sacred moment
Quiet and breakable
This is a nascent moment
Something is born or something dies
We are changed by it
And she is that echo— ghost— guide

And it feels like watching the sun rise
And it's just you and this voice
On this the smallest planet
Maybe four meters in diameter
And the planet is made of cold wet earth
And worms
And roots
And the sun is warm on your skin as it peeks
over the horizon
And this planet of earth is full of bones
and history
And when you dig your fingers into the earth
your nails catch the mud
And this history reaches back to you

This is a ritual
This is everything deliberate and felt
And she is a medium
A psychopomp to guide us from the liminal
space of our world to this new sacred one
We are sitting in the between moment
We are ferried from this the gallery space to
the earth space
And we stand at the memorial of the ritual
Peeking through some antique glass display
At some remnant trace of history

Somn Martin, untilted poetic response to *to trace a path through the dark* by Belinda Whitta, 2024.

“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.”

Ferran, *Stewart Island, New Zealand – August.*

Belinda Whitta, *to trace a path through the dark*, installation documentation, by Samson Dell 2024.

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Belinda Whitta,
to trace a path through the dark, installation documentation,
by Samson Dell 2024.

With love and gratitude to Caroline, Jonathan, Lachy, Mum, Somn, Neon, Margo, Samson, Lily, Amber-Jayne, Alex, Caspian, Nova, Julieanna, Madison, and all those who showed up for this work, shared their time and knowledge with me, and who now hold a part of me and this land with them.

But most importantly, thank you to the hills, the holes, and the land for your companionship and ancient wisdom. Everything I do is for you.