

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 30

August 2025

Article

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1030016>

WHAT WATER REMEMBERS: *JUST LIKE SILK VELVET*

Rachel Hope Allan

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors.

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

WHAT WATER REMEMBERS: *JUST LIKE SILK VELVET*

Rachel Hope Allan

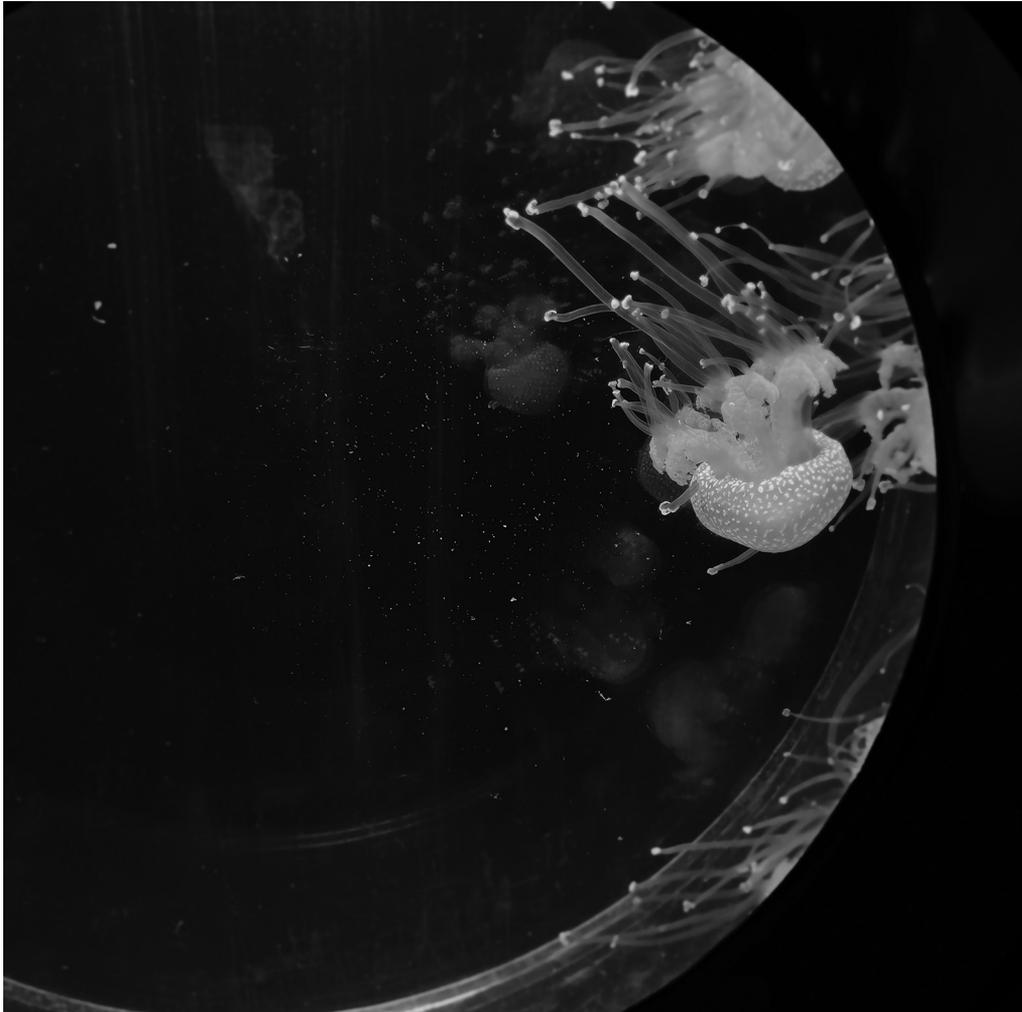


Figure 1. Rachel Hope Allan, *Fluther*, shot 2024, printed 2024, inkjet print on white polyester film, 500x500mm.



I am attracted to places where light filters strangely, where movement is slowed and the body is no longer entirely governed by gravity. I've always felt at home in the water. When I was young, I would scull in slow circles or dive to the bottom and lie very still. When you are submerged, even in a swimming pool, you feel less visible. You can listen differently. The pressure of the water against your skin is a kind of holding.

Swimming, I often think about sea jellies,¹ their grace suspended between gravity and light. Jellies know that to endure is often to dissolve, to become diffuse and invisible but still to shimmer at the edge of perception. In their silent drift we discover what it is to float, to feel, to simply be. To capture them is almost impossible; to witness them is almost enough – a moment held, then released like a breath. To be adrift is not the same as to be lost. Adrift is a kind of direction too, although it may not satisfy the systems of navigation or extraction. To drift is to follow the body's own will through space, to go where you are pulled – if you are lucky, towards light. A breath. A tread.

These thoughts ripple through my practice, where water seeps into both subject and metaphor. Bodies (nonhuman) are suspended, rippling, tangled. Light and space are altered by viscosity, by movement, by containment. Here, water is not just a backdrop – it is a medium of experience, a record of longing, an archive of contact. Water both holds and hides. It remakes us.

The exhibition *Just Like Silk Velvet* debuted in July 2024 at the Art Attic Gallery, a unique artist-run space located in a heritage building in Invercargill, Waihōpai. *Just Like Silk Velvet* is not only a study of marine creatures contained behind glass, but also an inquiry into the nature of looking, recording and translating experiences through photography. It uncovers a profound symbiotic relationship between subject and maker, image and world, emerging from a personal search for some solace.

Jellies occupy a liminal territory between visibility and disappearance, between fragility and extraordinary endurance. They dwell in a luminous counter-world, just beneath the surface. They pulse, bloom and consume, unburdened by anatomical structures typically associated with agency or consciousness. Jellies are ancient survivors that have become potent symbols of intuition, mystery, and immortality – creatures that are as much metaphor as they are material reality. In this series, I explore the tensions between the ephemeral and the eternal, between what is seen and what resists capture. Through the photographic process, these creatures are both arrested and set adrift; light, lens and technology converge to render visible a fleeting, poetic kind of motion.

Figure 2. Rachel Hope Allan, *Just Like Silk Velvet*, 2024, inkjet print on Epson Hot Press Bright, 1080x4300mm.



Figure 3. Rachel Hope Allan, *Abbott*, shot 2024, printed 2024, inkjet print on Moab Slickrock Metallic paper, 900x900mm.

The Art Attic Gallery once housed one of New Zealand's earliest photographic studios. The space is rich with history and lovely light, each room feeling like a fishbowl. The centerpiece for *Just Like Silk Velvet* (the exhibition) was *Just Like Silk Velvet* (the print), measuring just over 4.3 metres and created to fit the longest wall in the gallery. This work is a photographic montage, a collapsing of multiple pictures, times and places, into a single immersive image. Here, observations of aquatic beings turned into reflections on myself – my own affinity for enclosed, watery spaces, my preference for solitude over the swarm. Each encounter with a creature behind glass revealed a little more about myself. The work infiltrated my dreams, accompanied my walks with my dog and surfaced in idle moments, such as waiting in line at the supermarket. It became an extension of my consciousness – pulsating, floating, hovering between waking and sleeping states. The jellies and I became one.



Figure 4. Rachel Hope Allan, *Costello*, shot 2024, printed 2024, inkjet print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, 250x250mm.

Sea Jellies are beautiful, alien, elusive creatures that challenge what we think we know about bodies, movement and survival. They are ecological indicators, barometers of a damaged world.² Their blooms have shut down nuclear powerplants,³ disrupted Beluga caviar production⁴ and temporarily disabled the *USS Ronald Reagan*.⁵ Their uncanny persistence points to an uncomfortable truth: that they may outlast us, surviving in the environments we have degraded beyond our own capacity to endure.⁶ Their silent, ancient resilience speaks volumes about the world we have created and the one we might leave behind. During the exhibition a swarm of people gathered around the *Just Like Silk Velvet* print, irresistibly drawn to its presence, their eyes, bodies and imaginations engaging with the work. They wanted to touch it, dance next to it. They spoke of poems, memories and dreams, all conjured by these enigmatic creatures without hearts, brains or bones but whose presence was undeniably felt.

Abbott and *Costello* were photographed at the Melbourne Aquarium in the summer of 2024. Their titles reference the floating cephalopod-like extraterrestrials in *Arrival*, the 2016 science fiction film directed by Denis

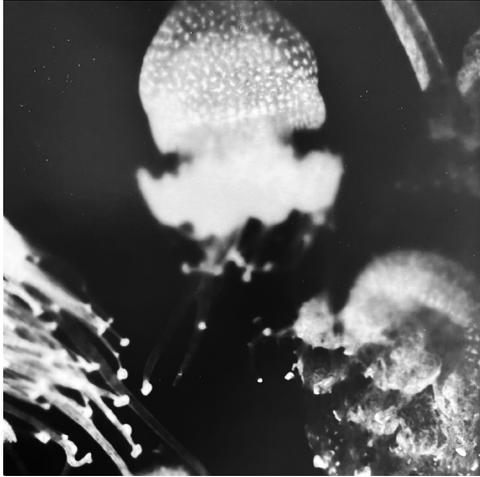


Figure 5. Rachel Hope Allan, *Osaka*, printed 2024, gelatin silver print on Vintage Tura, 350x230mm, unique photogram.



Figure 6. Rachel Hope Allan, *Tokyo*, printed 2024, gelatin silver print on Vintage Tura, 350x230mm, unique photogram.

Villeneuve, which drifts through my mind like a dream. In the film, the aliens hover not in water but in a thick, dark atmosphere, suspended, weightless, unknowable, utterly other. The narrative unfolds around ideas of translation, communication and the non-linear perception of time. The alien visitors are nicknamed “Abbott” and “Costello” by the human linguist and physicist tasked with decoding their looping, smoke-ring language.⁷ In *Arrival*, time folds back on itself, events are remembered before they occur and understanding arrives not through logic but through immersion, rhythm and return. While working on this series I thought about how memory loops and shutters, how perception flickers, how images surface from the depths of consciousness, like jellies rising into light.

Abbott and *Costello*, like their cinematic namesakes, inhabit a space beyond direct comprehension. They are gestures towards the unsayable: forms suspended in luminous darkness, pulsing quietly. They’re invitations to linger in ambiguity. They suggest a mode of being that is simultaneously familiar and unknowable, beautiful and unsettling. *Abbott* and *Costello*, like memory itself, exist somewhere between sensation and story. Where time dilates, folds and flows and where photography becomes not a record but a trace of something already slipping away.

The story of *Osaka* and *Smack* begins on the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto. Dressed in a 1950s cerulean blue frock, with my fox draped around my shoulders, I was unwrapping my egg sandwich when a hawk swooped down and scratched the back of my hand as it snatched at my Tamago Sando. The next day I felt sick, feverish even, so nursing what I jokingly dubbed “Kyoto bird flu” and a couple of Strong Zeros (portable thirst-quencher with no sugar, but 9% alcohol), I decided to stick to my plan and take a train to the world-renowned Osaka Aquarium Kaiyukan. I knew about their “Jellyfish Corner” – an immersive, darkened underground space where the jellies bloom overhead and are displayed in Perspex wheels that highlight their otherworldly movement and luminous translucence.

The experience within the aquarium was disorientating and hypnotic. In the low light, the jellies pulsed and floated, almost disembodied, recalling the weightlessness and alienness of Villeneuve’s heptapod aliens. Photographing them became an intuitive act, capturing not just their physical forms but also the sense of drifting between worlds, of slipping outside of time.

In *Smack*, storytelling, personal narrative and atmospheric image-making converge. The scratches on my hand, the lingering feverishness, the sensory overload of the neon-lit Osaka streets – all these elements infect the act of photographing. As a result, *Smack* functions not simply as a record of jellies but as a translation of a specific



Figure 7. Rachel Hope Allan, *Smack*, shot 2023, printed 2024, inkjet print on white polyester film, 500x500mm.

moment in time – one characterized by dislocation, wonder and a heightened awareness of the fragility and strangeness of perception itself. It is a fever dream made real, inviting viewers into a space where certainty dissolves and communication becomes gestural, ambiguous and fluid. They emerge out of the dark. Swarm and Bloom.

My work has long been preoccupied with the trauma of captivity, the ways in which animals glitch against the artificial worlds built to contain them. In zoos and aquariums alike I have documented these environments, simulations of nature, constructed for human spectatorship, where animals became unwilling actors.

This inquiry into enclosure, perception and aquatic life extended from jellies to penguins, because they occupy a threshold – adapted survivors yet visibly compromised. Penguins who in the wild feed on jellies seem almost to defy their captivity in water, and they appear to look back at you. I often imagine how similar they might feel to touch – smooth, yielding, just like silk velvet, shaped by their wet world.



Figure 8. Rachel Hope Allan, *Muscle Cramps*, shot 2024, printed 2024, inkjet print on Moab Entrada, 300x300mm.

But whereas the jellies appear entirely at ease within their synthetic oceans, the penguins cannot hide their dislocation. It isn't just that they are captive, it is that they seem conscious of their captivity. In their fluorescently lit glass enclosures, smeared and dripping with condensation, they are both hyper-visible and deeply obscured. What does it mean to look? What does it mean to be seen? How do we live with (and through) these layers of mediation?

An aquarium is a place for water. A place for what water holds. It is a place of artifice, but also a place for proximity. Despite being behind glass, we are close. The aquarium is a container, but it is also an interface – a threshold space in which two worlds can almost touch.

Perhaps that is what these photographs are, too. A place for water. A place for drift. A threshold.



Figure 9. Rachel Hope Allan, *Breathing Difficulties*, shot 2024, printed 2024, inkjet print on Moab Entrada, 300x300mm.

Water connects everything. It sustains these creatures, it shapes them, it isolates them. Like the jellies emerging into the light, my images emerge from the darkness of exposure, reliant on the fluid chemistry of development and, more recently, on the currents of digital processes. Yet the water we encounter in aquariums is not the open ocean. It is contained, regulated, fabricated substance, just as the environments are simulations. These artificial worlds are the meeting point of spectacle and artifice.

This series does not attempt to replicate reality. It acknowledges the artifice, the melancholy and the resilience. *Just Like Silk Velvet* conjures an aquarium both real and imagined – an architecture of water, memory and survival. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, “To inhabit the world well is to inhabit the borders, to be at the edge, to be touched across the membrane.”⁸ Perhaps, like the jellies themselves, this series offers a quiet resistance to enclosure – a counter world, a pulse, a bloom, a passage through a different kind of space just beyond reach, not able to be named, yet deeply felt.

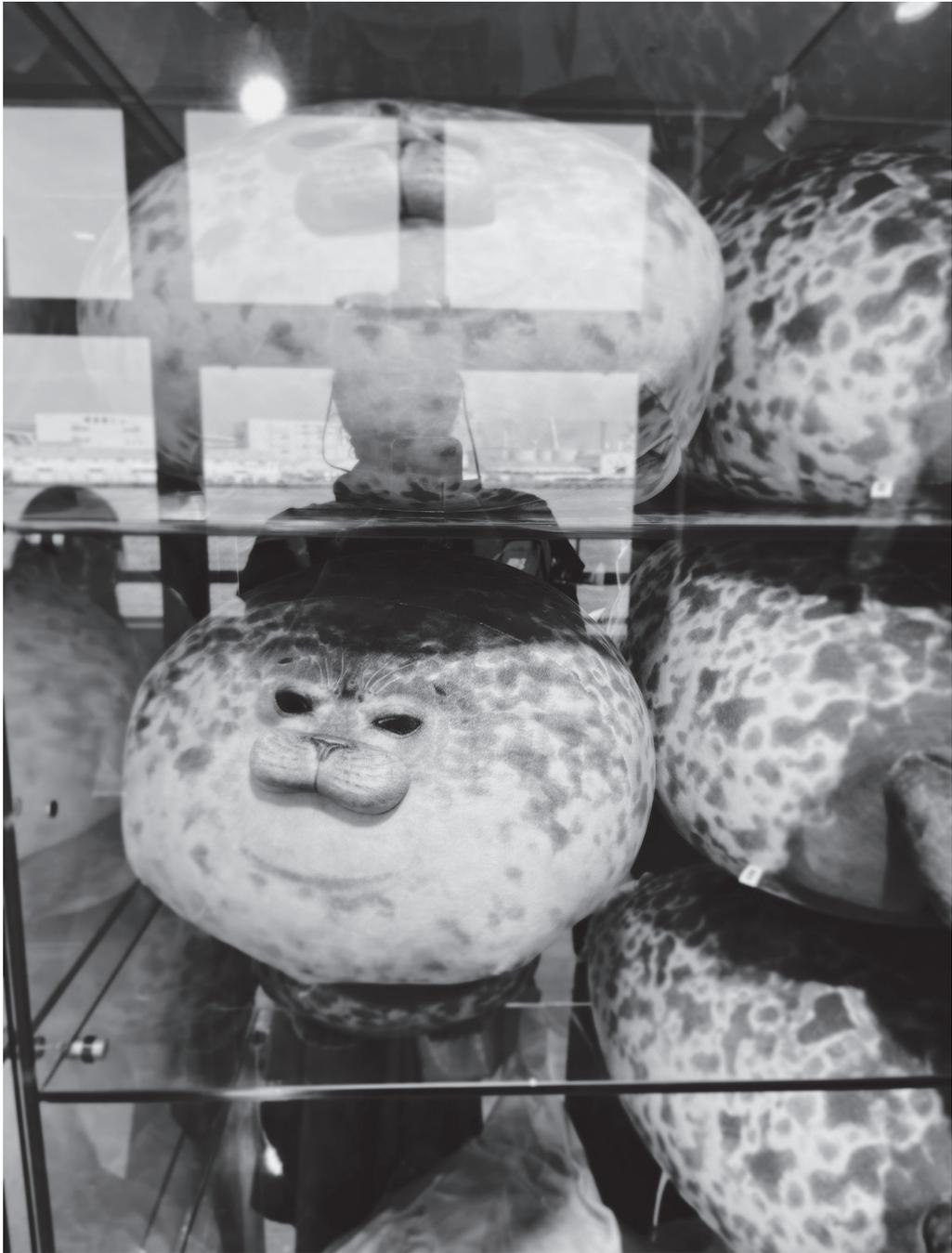


Figure 10. Rachel Hope Allan, *Self-portrait*: Osaka Aquarium Kaiyukan, 10 March 2023.

Rachel Hope Allan (ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1624-6457>) is an artist and writer from New Zealand currently based in Ōtepoti. She received her Master of Fine Arts with distinction from Dunedin School of Art, where she is currently a Principal lecturer in Photography.

- 1 Sea jellies is the preferred term used by marine biologists to avoid the association with fish. But not all jellies are jellyfish. "Explainer: Jelly vs. jellyfish: What's the difference?" *Science News Explores*, 1 April 2008, <https://www.snexplores.org/article/explainer-jelly-vs-jellyfish-whats-difference>.
- 2 "Warm Weather Brings Jellyfish Bloom to UK Seas," *The Guardian*, 30 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jul/30/warm-weather-jellyfish-bloom-uk>.
- 3 David Miller, "Jellyfish Force Torness Nuclear Reactor Shutdown," *BBC News*, 30 June 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-13971005>.
- 4 *Attack of the Killer Jellyfish*, Episode 1, hosted by Damond Benningfield, Marine Science Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, 15 October 2006, <https://utmsi.utexas.edu/science-and-the-sea/radio-program/attack-of-the-killer-jellyfish/>.
- 5 Ben Smee, "Jellyfish Would 'Inevitably' Force Nuclear Submarines into Shutdown if Fleet Based in Brisbane, Expert Says," *The Guardian*, 10 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/11/jellyfish-nuclear-submarine-emergency-reactor-shutdown-brisbane-base-moreton-bay-australia>.
- 6 Sean Fleming, "Jellyfish Are Taking Over the World – and Climate Change Could be to Blame," *World Economic Forum*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/01/how-an-explosion-of-jellyfish-is-wreaking-havoc/>
- 7 Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were a comedy duo famous for their circular, often absurd misunderstandings, such as the classic sketch "Who's On First?" "The Naughty Nineties: Who's On First? – Abbott and Costello," *Youtube*, accessed 22 June 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYOUFGfK4bU>.
- 8 Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 11.