MEMORY OF PLACE TAKES FLIGHT

Fiona Van Oyen

Barely able to stand, I reel as the ground underfoot shakes, twists and jolts. Heaving up and down, panting breaths of distress, the land beneath me transforms into a gigantic anthropomorphic being. I glance over to see the river rise at a phenomenal rate. I see dust rise, then disperse to reveal collapsing buildings that make new dust. All occurring within seconds; momentarily everything optically turns white. Not dust that blinds me – this is white shock at the thought I am about to die.

Conceptually, white becomes a colour of significance as I process my embodied responses experienced during the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. My master's project, *Landskin*, and its subsequent supporting exhibition, *Memory of Place takes Flight*, are my response when memory and the certainty of place no longer exists.

Figure 1. Fiona Van Oyen, *Landskin,* Dunedin School of Art gallery, November 2017. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Between 1892 and 1894 Claude Monet painted 31 canvases of Rouen Cathedral, each portraying a different time of day, different lighting and weather effects, resulting in very different spatial effects. For example, what appears as concave in one work reads as convex in another, making them "a triumph of the optical over the physical."[1] In my master's show, *Landskin*, I too presented one image replicated, but in variations of whites and monotonal hues as I explored the optical *and* the physical. White and the marks I make become a means to compress pictorial space. The marks that I make in my printmaking process also require a level of physicality that, together with pictorial compression, helps to activate the haptic within me.

Discussing the concept of "society's body," Thomas J Csordas writes: "The haptic system, from the Greek term meaning 'able to lay hold of,' is according to [James] Gibson (1966:97), 'the sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to his body by the use of his body.' It is the apparatus through which information about both the body and the environment are gained."[2] In the hanging of *Landskin*, the relationship between each work, the placement one between the other in the gallery space, became crucial to avoid a reading predicated on a time, lighting or weather sequence, as Monet had done in his Rouen Cathedral series.

Figure 2. Fiona Van Oyen, *I think this is part of our garden (black)*, 2017, 5-piece linocut print on cotton paper, 2.5 × 1.2 m. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Referencing the anthropomorphic association I had felt with the land, the miniature marks in *I think this is part of our garden (black)*[3] that describe form, read as cellular anatomical structure. The human body is not only present in the drawn line, it is also there in the scale of the work. Each panel is the approximate width of the body that stands before it and, while the work is taller than the average person, hanging low on the wall helps to activate the sense of falling into the scene. The viewer becomes aware of his or her own physical scale before the work.

A second image, *Landskin,* from which my project took its name, presented variations of tonal white values emerging from nothingness as the image has been cut out and removed. The softer, raised emboss seen in the prints is literally cut right through the paper to reveal the supporting wall which now becomes part of the conversation.

The work achieves an interplay with the shadows it creates on the wall that supports it. In both instances, the paper-cut works *Landskin* and *When Memory of Place Takes Flight*, made a year later, move from the monumental print to the installation in terms of scale. Here the conversation becomes more about the relationship to the interior architectural space and the gallery wall, not just the haptic of the interior body, the external skin and the printed skin, as is the case with the printed works.

Where the walls of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture *House* are inverted and turned outward to expose the remnants of a typical private dwelling in a residential area long since gone, *Landskin* presents the remnants of a lost place where the scale of the work demands that the wall does not become a barrier between the viewer and what is outside. In this instance, the wall becomes a metaphor for inverted inversion. That is, the wall is put right. It is folded back as it should be, bringing the memory of outside place along with it.

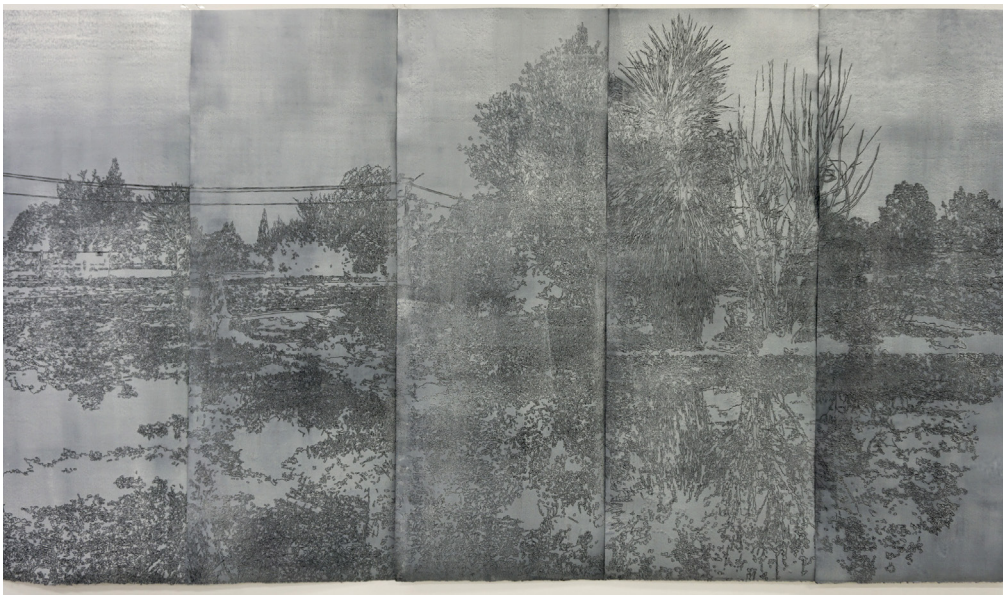

Figure 3. Fiona Van Oyen, *I think this is part of our garden (blue)*, 2017, 5-piece linocut print on cotton paper, 2.5 × 1.2 m
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

> Landskin – When the land is neither secure ground on which to stand, or a familiar feast for the eyes, one's sense of scale in place is felt as an internal conflict that comes to rest on the skin as something other.

In the printed works I employ matt against sheen; raw against heavily painted and inked paper; large sweeping cut lines juxtaposed against minute intricate cut lines; these are just some of the opposites used to activate the physical haptic. Looking at these elemental opposites in the surface 'skin' of the work, I begin to feel a physical response throughout my body. This is the physical haptic. Consciously creating a second skin on paper, the skin of the horizontal land on which I have stood is lifted from under my feet, vertically up onto the wall. Here, the two skins – my haptic bodily skin engages with the haptic paper skin of the prints, and anchor me.

Tracing photocopied enlargements or drawing selectively from projected overhead transparencies of the photographed scenes from which my phone protected and distanced me, the drawings that I make are larger than I am. I use old technologies to push my body as I draw, redraw to invert and transfer the image onto lino, to draw once again with a blade as I cut into the lino to make the linocut block from which I will print. In her book *On Longing,*

when considering the relationship of language to experience or, more specifically, the relationship of narrative to its objects, Susan Stewart asks, "what does exaggeration, as a mode of signification, exaggerate?"[4] Printmaking may be an old technology, but the exaggerated repetition and long, slow working required in the process becomes meditative. The lino becomes an extension of my body, warming to my own bodily temperature as I work with it.

> The notion of the haptic system, including the concept of haptic touch, implies its active nature:
>
> The haptic system, unlike the other perceptual systems, includes the whole body, most of its parts, and its entire surface. The extremities are exploratory sense systems but they are also performatory motor organs; that is to say, the equipment for feeling is anatomically the same as the equipment for doing. (James Gibson 1966).

Gibson's "feeling," of course, refers here to touch, rather than emotion.[5]

Figures 4 & 5. The centre linocut block for *The anthropomorphic garden* on display in the Ashburton Art Gallery as part of my exhibition *When Memory of Place Takes Flight*, March 2018. Photographs: Johannes Van Kan.

From the original drawings to the finished prints, my process is full of opposing extremes, considered both materially and physically. Materially, paper swollen with water, squeezed through the press, is moulded and embossed. Once dried it is sooted, burnt, painted and printed further. Physically and mentally, I push myself through long periods of work that is often repetitive and includes minute drawing that at times is tortuous. The viewer can imagine these aspects when looking at the work and in this way, by empathetically imagining, respond to the works' haptic potential.

> The haptic system must be seen as part of a dynamic and social process, for 'in social touch, the haptic system with all of its subsystems comes into full perceptual use.' The work on haptic touch is useful in developing a sense of the agency of the body in both individual and social existence, and may thus contribute to the elaboration of the model of embodied feeling central to the argument …[6]

As the title suggests, *When Memory of Place Takes Flight,* my show at the Ashburton Art Gallery during 3-31 March 2018, was the 'final act' of my master's examination show, *Landskin*. Both shows presented various interpretations of a single image. In *When Memory of Place Takes Flight*, the anthropomorphic aspect is magnified and made more explicit. The limbs of the tree appear skeletal, reminiscent of bone joints and muscular structure. The ground beneath the tree is 'alive' with cellular matter. Works from the Chinese Song dynasty that incorporate multiple views within flattened pictorial space are also heavy with anthropomorphic symbolism.[7]

Figure 6. Fiona Van Oyen, *The anthropomorphic garden (silver)*, 2018, linocut print on cotton paper, enamel paint and oil-based ink, 1.5 x 1.4 m (triptych). Photograph: Johannes Van Kan.

Figure7. Fiona Van Oyen, *The anthropomorphic garden (red)*, 2018, linocut print on cotton paper, enamel paint, watercolour paint and oil-based ink, 1.5 x 1.4 m (triptych). Photograph: Johannes Van Kan.

Figure. 8. Fiona Van Oyen, *The anthropomorphic garden (drawing)* (detail), 2018, emboss of linocut block on cotton paper, candle flame soot and burnt elements, 1.5 x 1.4 m (triptych). Photograph: Johannes Van Kan.

Figures 9-10. Fiona Van Oyen, *When Memory of Place Takes Flight,* 2018, hand-cut cotton paper, 8-piece installation, 3 x 1.5 m. Part of the exhibition *When Memory of Place Takes Flight*, The Ashburton Art Gallery, March 2018. Photographs: Johannes Van Kan.

The lack of 'skin' on the raw, exposed vulnerability of the paper in the sooted drawn work becomes an aesthetic bridge between the heavy materiality of the printed works and the white reduction of the paper-cut works.

Susan Stewart writes: "Whereas the miniature represents closure, interiority, the domestic, and the overly cultural, the gigantic represents infinity, exteriority, the public, and the overly natural."[8] The scale of *When Memory of Place Takes Flight* equals the height of the wall in the gallery, identifying it as architectural, exterior or outside of the body. However, while the work cannot be touched or held in the hand as Stewart describes the world of the miniature, on close inspection, as the viewer is drawn into the miniature-cut details in the gigantic work, evidence of the artist's hand in the hand-cut lines still references the internal bodily haptic. In this respect the hand-cut, rather than the machine laser-cut, is an important element in the reading of the work. Thus in both *Landskin* and *When Memory of Place takes Flight*, the haptic of touch and the physical meet and interpret memories of landscape, transforming these paper and printed works, bringing the unseen to the surface.

Fiona Van Oyen completed a Master of Fine Arts with distinction at the Dunedin School of Art in 2017. Fiona works as a visual arts teacher at Cashmere High School in Christchurch. Jonathan Smart at The Central Gallery in Christchurch represents her work.

1 Khan Academy, *Monet, Rouen Cathedral Series*, https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/avant-garde-france/impressionism/v/monet-rouen-cathedral-series-1892-4. Beth Harris and Steven Zucker discuss Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings.

2 *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. Thomas J Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61.

3 *I think this is part of our garden (black)* won ZAFAA17 (Zonta Ashburton Female emerging and mid-career Art Award, 2017). As well as a monetary reward, the award included a solo show, to take place the following year at the Ashburton Art Gallery as part of ZAFAA18. *When Memory of Place Takes Flight* was that subsequent show.

4 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), ix.

5 Csordas, *Embodiment and Experience*, 61.

6 Ibid.

7 "There was an ancient belief, founded on a cosmogonic myth, that rivers are the blood that irrigates the body of the earth, while mountains are the bones. The Chinese word for landscape is 'shansui,' which means 'mountains and waters'." Francois Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden,* trans. Graham Parkes (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 42-3.

8 Stewart, *On Longing*, 70.