Jan Evelyn Simmons

An exegesis, submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Design Degree by Research in Painting, Unitec of New Zealand, 2011.
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Research Question

“A man must keep a little back shop where he can be himself without reserve. In solitude alone can he know true freedom” Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

“When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts drift too far off matters for some part of the time for some other part I lead them back again to the walk, the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, to myself” Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)¹

In what ways can non-illustrative images communicate a sensory experience of an environment and how far can I reduce and abstract imagery based on nature before it ceases to reference nature?
Abstract

The intention of the work has been to communicate an experience of nature through non-illustrative means. The cumulative effect of many fragments of images creates in the viewer a sensation of nature, rather than a description of a particular place. When we encounter the world visually, our experience takes in the peripheral as well as the focal point. The way we engage with nature’s visual elements is determined through this somewhat fragmented yet continuous way we see and observe. Through distance and proximity, the viewer experiences nature in varying ways. The work aims to investigate the formal abstract potential to communicate a poetic, sensual response to a place, rather than a topographical figurative description.

The project began with the making of several series of works that responded to spaces in nature. Through the journey of the research, it has arrived at a place where existing and new works, in particular watercolour paintings, have been used and modified as tools to evoke a sense of an environment. Four specific spaces have been used to resolve an installation strategy, developed as a means of communicating an experience and sensibility of nature.
Fig 1,2 Jan Simmons, Bush, McCahon House, 2011, Photograph
Fig 3,4 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, 2011, Photograph
Fig 5, 6 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, 2011, Photograph
Fig 7 Jan Simmons.
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Fig 8 Jan Simmons,
French Bay, 2011, Photograph
Fig 9,10 Jan Simmons, Bush, McCahon House, 2011, Photograph
A Sense of Place

“Among the many relationships that define the human condition, the individual’s connection to the environment is primary. The elemental background against which our activity is played out, nature is the biggest of the big pictures. Subject both of science and art, the landscape functions as a mirror and a lens; in it we see the space we occupy and ourselves as we occupy it. And we have consistently sought to connect on some level with the landscape. Humans have created forms in honour of the land and as an act of defiance against it. They have made objects to place within the sweeping vista and recreated its patterns in isolation from it; invented images variously designed to document, idealise and vilify the sometimes gentle, sometimes violent and always oblivious charms of the natural environment” Jeffrey Kastner, 1998.

A sense of place has in itself myriads and dimensions. Some of my own experience includes, being born in New Zealand and growing up in an East Auckland coastal community. Travelling to Australia, Thailand and various Pacific Islands, including Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, New Hebrides and New Caledonia. All of these experiences have had some influences on my sense of place.

This project started with a series of works that described the Kaipara, looking at the river, the harbour and the surrounding hills. Subsequently images were sourced from Titirangi beach, French bay, Bethells Beach, Shelly Beach, South Head, Helensville, Te Atatu South. The mix of wild, west coastline to more serene lakes, beaches and flowing rivers has been a long-time personal source of balance and rejuvenation. Seeking out silence and solitude in nature has been a life-long activity.

Having grown up the daughter of a professional Architect has no doubt influenced my relationship to spatial dynamics. Angles, triangles, sloping roofs, light, enclosed forms and the connections to the natural world would be a few of the features used to describe my father’s architectural style and a probable influence on my own aesthetic sensibilities.
Fig 11 www.helensville.health.co.nz, Kaipara River, Helensville, Photograph

Fig 12 Jan Simmons, Shelly Beach, South head, Kaipara Harbour, 2003, Photograph
Fig 13 www.Traq website, Waitakere Ranges, Arthur Lydiard marathon track, Photograph

Fig 14 www.tearara.govt.nz, Waiheke Island, Photograph
Indigenous cultures have always had close relations with the land and see it as a living entity as opposed to somewhere to merely occupy.

In Patricia Grace’s book, Potiki, one of the characters, Roimata, explains the perspective of her whanau towards the land in which her people live, comparing her peoples’ understanding of the land with that of the western world’s written history,

“The land and the sea and the shores are a book too, and we found ourselves there. They were our science and our sustenance. And they are our own universe about which there are stories of great deeds and relationships and magic and imaginings, love and terror, heroes, heroines, villains and fools. Enough for a lifetime of telling. We found our own universe to be as large and as extensive as any other universe that there is.”

Fig 15 Jan Simmons, Helensville Hills, 2007, Photograph
Fig 16,17 Jan Simmons,
Moon over Kaipara,
2006, Photograph
Roimata is referring to the nature of Maori oral history and stories, as opposed to the written stories and histories of western society. Land and a sense of place are intrinsic in the way they live and connect to their environment. The gifts from land and sea are respected and cultivated through an understanding of guardianship and respect.

A sense of place in today’s world denotes something slightly different to historic sense of place. Today’s global nature of society allows for a person’s sense of place to be connected to the land of origin or birth and its culture.

“Human agency is integral to a physical landscape that includes the land, the ocean and the sky. In pre-constitution Tonga, the concept of fonua ‘people of/and place’ described a local territorial entity that incorporated the land and natural surrounds associated with a chiefly title holding, and the people residing on that land...........Today “fonua is employed in a national/ political context. In contemporary Tonga, fonua embodies notions of Tongan nationhood and positive self-identification. Tongans use the word fonua to denote a connection between the place(s) and people of Tonga, wherever and whoever they might be.....

Fonua is “the embodiment of both local territorial belonging (an historicised rendering) and national self-identification (a contemporary rendering), simultaneously connecting Tongans to a mythological past and linking them with a globalised present.”
Today’s contemporary society allows for global connection across boundaries. Similar observations can be made in regards to contemporary art. Today’s artists are able to connect across boundaries in the physical and social world as well as across disciplines, theories and perspectives, still mindful of historical foundations.

In today’s global society, we are more inclined to consider where we are in relation to others as opposed to the past where a line was drawn across the land to show ‘ownership’. Indigenous peoples have usually considered their spatial proximity within space in relation to natural boundaries such as rivers, coastline, and mountains. This is different to the western or colonial practice of drawing a line across unnatural boundaries.

While in her description of the gifts of the sky, Roimata speaks of the waiters and the watchers. These can be deciphered as being those who can ‘see’ (watchers) and those who have patience and faith in the gifts of the land, sea and sky (waiters). People who live closely with the land, be it through where they choose to live, through their art, their gardening, or so forth, grow to learn the rhythms of land, sea and sky and become in tune with the timing of all things through seasons, sunrise, sunset, and so forth. This closeness to nature cultivates a faith and watchful patience to allow for abundance and growth and nourishment. Artists can be watchers and waiters, waiting for inspiration, watching for beautiful moments and cultivating the essence of their own experience into actuality.

Indigenous cultures, for example Aboriginal, Maori, Polynesian and North American Indian, believe in the land as a living breathing entity and that we live in the land not on it. Spiritual beliefs are tied up with this and spatial understanding is often about which way we are facing as opposed to purely topographical or ‘framed views’ of the land. Our own experiences are pre-determined or relative to our own cultural experiences, beliefs and personal experiences.

The research began with an interest in and love of the local environment. This connection to the natural environment has been one that enjoys the silence and solitude of such spaces. I have also always been aware of the rich indigenous connection with the whenua in New Zealand and how this may be viewed in opposition to the colonial, projected notion of history and landscape.
Fig 18, 19 Jan Simmons, Bush, McCahon House, 2011, Photograph
The aim of the project has been to explore new ways of representing a sensory experience of nature. A key reference is the work of New Zealand artists whose concerns have been in relation to the landscape and who have worked with concerns connected to modernist abstraction. Such artists have included Colin McCahon, Gordon Walters, Michael Smither and Toss Woollaston.

The New Zealand landscape has been variously described as rugged, unforgiving, oblivious, powerful, majestic, unapologetic, spiritual, nurturing and has a vastness of bush, forest, mountains, hills, rivers, and coastline.

New Zealand artists over time have experimented with conveying some or all of these qualities through their various preoccupations in painting.

The so named Nationalists/Regionalists of the 1930s-70s were concerned to connect a pictorial description of the landscape with an idea of national identity that was uniquely New Zealand. Artists who painted their environment found favour with New Zealanders wanting to overtly express a sense of their national identity. The prevailing ideology within New Zealand’s cultural production of the mid twentieth century supported the desire to seek a cultural expression that could be said to be unique to ‘place’ and ‘time’. Artists such as McCahon embraced an International modernism within his practice but did so in the service of depicting a unique New Zealand landscape.
Mc Cahon, during the late 50s and 60s, following a visit to America, experimented with the language of abstraction in his paintings and a newly found understanding of the communicative power of painterly expression. His titles alone were what gave the signature of place such as, *French Bay* and *Pohutukawa Tree - Tide out*.

Hamish Keith states, “Colin Mc Cahon, like Angus and Woollston, had his art firmly grounded in the landscape. Unlike them, however, landscape was never the subject of his painting, but rather a device for supporting a larger and different story.” Hamish Keith

McCahon’s exploration of the ‘high modernist’ canon prompted him to essentialise the landscape, reducing it to clear flat shapes and forms, stripped of much detail. His methods brought a new approach to the genre of landscape painting that, up until that point had been primarily concerned with more realist, illustrations of romantic / sublime views. McCahon’s landscapes were often devoid of human reference or occupation. His pictorial vastness was one of wilderness and the sublime, playing with differing viewpoints on the land.
Francis Pound speaks of “solitude, suffering and silence” in the chapter Three sublime forms in his book, The invention of New Zealand art and identity 1930-1970. He is describing the nationalist voice in this chapter at a time when artists and poets were communicating the lonely, empty, desolate landscape or the same landscape as a blissful respite and relief from the bustle of the city. New Zealand landscape has, over time, been depicted in all of these ways, often with a common thread of a sense of isolation from the ‘other’ or the rest of the world.

4. Dr Steven Francis, People and Place in Tonga: The Social Construction of Fonua in Oceania, Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land, Australian National Universityypress: Acton, 2006, Chapter 15
Fig 22 Colin McCahon, North Otago Landscape, 1968, screenprint on paper, 560 x 760mm

Fig 23 Jan Simmons, Study of Kaipara and surrounding landscape, Helensville, 2008, ink on sugar paper, 590mm x 320mm
Distilling qualities from the local landscape

Fig 24, 25 Jan Simmons, Studies of Kaipara and surrounding landscape, 2008, ink & wash, 590mm x 420mm
The project began with studies of the local landscape, at the time this was the Kaipara River, harbour and surrounding area. An interest in how to visually show a sensation of the experience of being in the environment was explored in studies.

Studies developed into several series of works on paper. Each series dealt with a motif derived from the landscape environment, and investigated both the formal abstract potential of this motif, and in turn the potential for the images to use this abstract position to communicate a poetic, sensual response to place, rather than a topographical description.

The stick series were painted as studies of grasses and waterways in and around the Kaipara. The colours varied from blues to greens, looking at the different light at different times of the day.

A consciousness of keeping lines minimal and in juxtaposition to each allowed for a balanced composition. When editing the series, the most successful were those that used fewer lines and that the colours chosen to represent water and grasses contrasted with singular intensity.
The following images are from the Stick series
Fig 26, 27, 28 Jan
Simmons, Stick series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 300mm x 210mm, 300mm x 210mm, 350mm x 250mm
The water series used watercolour as the medium to capture the qualities of water. The following images are from the water series.

Fig 29,30 Jan Simmons, Water series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 300mm x 210mm, 480mm x 380mm
Fig 31 Jan Simmons, Water series, studio wall, 2009, dimensions variable
Michael Smither’s Hills series evoke rhythm and distance through the use of the repetitive shape of a hill. His use of repetition was pertinent earlier in my research as initially I was interested in rediscovering shapes and forms from nature, reinventing them using symmetry, rotation and pattern. Repetition is something used often in Maori art, such as in kowhaiwhai. Gordon Walters used the repetitive aspect in his Koru series, using his own personal vision and interpretation through the eyes of a pakeha New Zealander, never pretending to bring anything but his own cultural perspective when studying indigenous art forms.

Don Binney’s interpretation of coastal landscapes can be read within the framework of geometrical abstract concerns with his bold shapes, the almost mathematical division of the surface and with the use of strong flat colour.

The Hill series were painted in response to the landscape surrounding Helensville and the Kaipara area. The studies were made to show different tones, reflecting different times of the day. Experimenting with mixing warm and cool tones to create subtle and complementary relationships between colours on the surface, allowed for the hills to drip, roll and fold into each other.
Fig 32, 33 Jan Simmons, Hill series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 420mm x 300mm
**Fig 34, 35 Jan Simmons, Hill series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 420mm x 300mm**
Fig 36, 37 Jan Simmons, Hill series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 500mm x 400mm, 500mm x 400mm
Fig 38 Michael Smither, Motumahanga, 2005, screenprint, 585 x 130mm

Fig 39 Don Binney, Southern Journey, 1964, oil on board, 760mm x 985mm
The Daydream series was undertaken as a study in the perspective of looking up through trees. The soft, blurred haze of light that peaks and pierces through the foliage is achieved using the white of the paper to glow through the paint. Soft and subtle changes in colour of blues and greens helped to engage the feeling of foliage, touched by light.

Again the use of watercolour paints and generous amounts of water on soft brushes helped the manoeuvrability of the paint, showing subtle changes of direction in tone.
Fig 40 Jan Simmons,
Daydream Series, 2009,
watercolour on paper,
200mm x 250mm
Distilling qualities from the local landscape

Fig 41 Jan Simmons, Daydream series, 2009, watercolour on paper, 200mm x 250mm
The night sky series was painted in conjunction with the daydream series, where both series were interested in looking up.

A more intense palette was used, introducing deeper blues and soft yellows also exploring soft sunset variations in warm tones.
Fig 43 Jan Simmons, 
Night sky series, 2009, 
watercolour series, 400 x 
600mm
Kindred Spirits

“I’m not trying to describe anything. I’m looking for a perfect space.” - Agnes Martin

In the initial stages of this project the artist Georgia O’Keeffe was a significant influence that informed the watercolour studies. O’Keeffe’s strong connection to the land and nature is present in her works that explore the flora and fauna and the underlying structures of the landscapes in which she lived at various times in her life. Hers was a spiritual and visual connection, which were never experienced as separate and she was able to understand this in its entirety without making concessions in her art making. Her later work that relied upon a more refined and simplified abstraction of form came at the time in her life when she was coming to terms with an understanding of the human condition and one’s interconnectedness with nature. Her choices and application of colour and form demonstrated the subtle evocation of the mystical or spiritual that gave her works that feeling of ‘otherworldliness’ while, at the same time, being recognisable as an experience one has had in a particular environment or landscape. Both the familiar and the mysterious could be represented in the same work.
Fig 44 Georgia O’Keeffe, 
Wave, Night, 1928, oil 
on canvas, 762mm x 914 
mm
Fig 45, 46 Jan Simmons, 
Water series, 2010, 
watercolour on paper, 
300 x 210mm, 350 x 
320mm
Fig 47, 48 Jan Simmons, Water series, 2010, watercolour on paper, 350 x 320mm
Fig 49 Georgia O’Keefe, 
Black door with red, 
1955, oil on canvas

Fig 50 Jan Simmons, Grid 
series, 2010, watercolour 
on paper, 420 x 260mm
Colour

A series of works were made as abstract studies in colours looking at sunrises and sunsets, using a modernist grid that was less rigid and more soft and subtle to affect a more natural approach. The play with colour became a paramount concern in these works. Several works began to evolve from the straight-out grid to more enveloped lines, collapsing over each other to form more cobweb-like forms on the surface. The use of the white of the paper as a colour and background layer helped to affect an atmospheric quality that made the grid move to the background and foreground, depending on viewpoint.
Fig 51, 52 Jan Simmons, Grid series, 2010, watercolour on paper, 420 x 260mm
Fig 53, 54 Jan Simmons, Grid series, 2010, watercolour series, 420 x 260mm
Fig 55, 56 Jan Simmons,
Grid series, 2010,
watercolour series, 420 x
260mm
Fig 57 Jan Simmons. Grid series, studio wall, 2010, dimensions variable

Fig 58 Jan Simmons, Grid series, 2010, watercolour on paper, 300 x 250mm
Fig 59, 60 Jan Simmons,
Grid series, 2010,
watercolour series, 420 x 260mm
Fig 61 Bridget Riley, High Sky 2, 1992, oil on canvas, approximately 8’ tall

Fig 62 Jan Simmons, Kaipara Mist, 2010, oil on canvas, each canvas 360 x 260mm
Fig 63 Jan Simmons,
Bethells Sunset, 2010, oil
on canvas, each canvas
360 x 260mm
An artist I feel an affinity with in terms of her approach to her subject and the formal aspects of her paintings is Bridget Riley. Riley speaks of her environment and nature through a personal language. Riley refers, in her paintings to the experience of nature-landscape-environment. Her work deals with such issues as colour and form as paramount concerns, allowing a formal framework free from description and function. By dealing directly with colour, line, pattern, she executed works that played with interiority through the activation of spatial dynamics, creating in the viewer unnerving sensations. Colours jumped off each other, strengthening, and at the same time, weakening their relationship to the frame, giving a volatile sense of space. Her works are both bold and subtle, demanding the viewer to contemplate while at the same time providing a sensory challenge through optical illusions. Riley’s works speak of an interior space that can be inhabited, taking the viewer on a journey to their own space through which they can stay as long as they wish and have their own personal sensory experience of landscape, nature, and environment. In a similar manner to Bridget Riley I am also intrigued by the more organic work of Mary Heilmann.

Mary Heilmann has been described as a painter’s painter, perhaps because of her straightforward, seemingly loose approach, often veiling a witty dialogue with connections to art historical moments. Heilmann’s work uses vibrant, lusty colours and a sense of movement and rhythm is evident. The freedom of abstraction combines with an element of autobiography. Heilmann’s practice links genres, styles, friends, locations, and histories.

Gregory O’Brien, discussing abstraction and figurative painting says, “The boundaries between figurative and abstract are no longer clearly defined - if they ever were - nor do they seem particularly relevant now, with so many artists commuting across such imagined borders. Arguments about modernism or post-modernism dissolved in a similar fashion, as did the nationalist/internationalist/regionalist debate...” Gregory, O’Brien 9
Fig 64 Mary Heilmann, To be someone exhibition, 2008, installation view, New Museum, US

Fig 65 Jan Simmons, Untitled, 2010, oil on canvas, each canvas 360 x 260mm
Fig 66, 67 Jan Simmons, 
Sunday Drive Nor’West, 
2010, oil on canvas, each 
canvas 360 x 260mm
Today’s artist is perhaps seemingly freer to explore varying methodologies and philosophies in their practice. This viewpoint is echoed by Kenneth Gergen;

“absorbing multiple voices- truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships.” Kenneth J. Gergen 10


“In a post-Nationalist art that signing a painting ‘New Zealand’ which was imperative under the Nationalist regime may now itself become the subject of painting, as it clearly does in Killeen’s ‘New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?’ 1971. This is a kind of meta-landscape which questions the whole national landscape notion.”

Richard Killeen’s titles hint at the New Zealand attachment to landscape, while seeking to question what this now meant. His work aesthetically sits comfortably beside works by the likes of Gordon Walters, where constructivist geometric shapes and grids are reminiscent of pacific motifs, while other works describe suburban life in New Zealand. Killeen’s work threw questions up as critique, questioning the nationalist rhetoric, exploring instead both nationalist and internationalist approaches.

Fig 68 Richard Killeen, Domestic, 1987, 73 pieces, dimensions variable, Chartwell collection, Auckland art gallery toi o Tamaki
Killeen’s later assemblages of recognisable motifs that are sometimes repeated and often seemingly randomly selected can be regarded as a commentary on what is relevant in cultural terms within the fabric of our lives. Whether that be urban suburban, national, or an attachment to nature. All are comments on environment, no matter what those environments are, and all are composed within complex installations made up of an assortment of related imagery.

Killeen’s strategy is relevant to this project in terms of the installation of clusters of texts that repeatedly explore common themes. Killeen is proficient at bringing together a range of symbolic associations and has developed these texts that are redeployed in many subsequent iterations. His works may explore one major idea, made up of parts of the whole work. There can be dual or many ideas explored in one work. This way he poses questions for the viewer, asking them to look closer for depth of understanding and acknowledging that there are many interpretations that can be brought to bear.

As a part of the contextual understanding that I have been developing within the project, I find Richard Rorty, instructive: “This playfulness is the product of the shared ability to appreciate the power of redescribing, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important; an appreciation which becomes possible only when one’s aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than one right description.”

This is an apt description of an artist’s method in that ‘clusters of texts’ (developed in this project) can be read as redescribing and expanding on ideas, extending clues and providing alternative descriptions of the same or similar texts.


“to decode nature to reveal the very rhythm of life.” Andre Breton, 1945

“For me Nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces - an event rather than an appearance - these forces can only be tackled by treating colour and form as ultimate identities, freeing them from all descriptive or functional roles” Bridget Riley, 1992

Fig 69 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, 2011, Photograph
Fig 70, 71 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, 2011, Photograph
Fig 72, 73 Jan Simmons, Shimmering, 2010, 2011, watercolour on paper, 35 fragments, each fragment 330 x 260mm
The aim has been to develop images that communicate a personal response to local environment and nature through non-illustrative means, being interested in constructing an independent language that preferences the reduced and abstracted over the pictorial and illustrative. An understanding developed of the way this language could be manipulated to communicate ideas about an environment beyond a visual description.

During the project decisions have been increasingly around colour, imagery and composition in building the works and less conscious of subject matter. What developed was a series of works that constructed an independent language interested in geometric configurations, juxtaposition of forms, the reduction into essential elements, exploring opacity versus translucency, contrasts between soft, blurry forms and sharp-edged forms and limited palettes.

Images were built using this language as opposed to making a ‘picture’ of something that already exists.

*Fig 74 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, March 2011, watercolour on paper, 25 fragments, each fragment 330 x 260mm*
In reference to Bridget Riley’s quote at the beginning of this chapter, and on reflection of my own work, I had become more aware over the duration of this project that the work has become more about interrogating the language that builds a painting and thereby distancing it from having to function as a description of subject.

I find this intriguing when I look at photos of my father’s architectural work and realise that my connection to architecture through my family has perhaps influenced my own interests in my work. I have grown up in architectural spaces and here in some of my paintings I seem to be creating my own spaces.

The project had developed into an exploration of pictorial devices such as colour, composition, economy of form, and application of media and how consideration of these procedures and processes can build a painting that reflects the essence of how we perceive what is landscape, place, environment, nature. These processes and procedures can stand as a communication of an idea that may equally be about something urban or emotional. While the emotional can be related to a desire to show a sensory response that has come from a strong engagement with a particular environment, the paintings had also developed a textual language that explore geometric shapes, in particular the triangle. By overlaying the triangle several times on a canvas, I found that a two dimensional spatial dynamic is created that allows the viewer to look through the canvas.
Fig 75, 76 Jan Simmons, Geometric series, 2010, oil on canvas, 360 x 260mm
The use of a more clean, abstract quality, interested in line and what happens when the brush is pulled through another colour, lead to some exploration with even more reduced shapes.

*Fig 77 Jan Simmons, Geometric series, 2010, watercolour on paper, 300 x 200mm*

*Fig 78 Jan Simmons, Geometric series, 2010, oil on canvas, 360 x 260mm*
Fig 79, 80 Jan Simmons, 
Kaipara Mist, 2010, detail, 
oil on canvas, 360 x 260mm

Experimenting with scale, medium and materials

The potential of these images to inform larger canvas paintings and acrylic on board paintings was then explored through a need to experiment further with the ideas in different mediums and scales. Images were selected that were deemed capable of standing independently from their original series, often combining two or more elements from the initial studies.

A series of middle and large-scale oil paintings on stretched canvases and acrylic on board paintings, adhering to a disciplined approach to painting from drawing, were produced.

*Fig 81 Jan Simmons, Untitled, 2009, oil on canvas, 600mm x 450mm*
Experimenting with scale, medium and materials

*Fig 82, 83 Jan Simmons, Untitled, 2009, oil on canvas, 600mm x 450mm*
Experimenting with scale, medium and materials

Fig 84, 85 Jan Simmons, Untitled, 2009, acrylic on board, 450mm x 300mm, 600mm x 500mm,
Fig 86, 87 Jan Simmons, Hidden treasures, 2009, oil on canvas, 600mm x 400mm,
Jan Simmons, Take a walk with me, 2009, oil on canvas, 600mm x 400mm
Experimenting with scale, medium and materials

Fig 88, 89 Jan Simmons, Delicate Kiss, 2009, oil on canvas, 600mm x 400mm.
Jan Simmons, Walls and Light, 2009, oil on canvas, 450mm x 300mm
Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language

Several possibilities were then explored as to how to install the individual paintings as whole works.

Whilst these paintings were somewhat successful in showing abstract qualities of nature through colour and composition, they lacked the fluidity and confidence of handling and technique of the works on paper. It was through this attempt at canvas painting that the value of the earlier works produced was discovered. At this point several crucial decisions on how to proceed were made. The formal language had been established as a ready resource from earlier studies, which could be developed with a more confident approach.

Returning to working smaller on paper with fluid acrylic and watercolour paint helped to cultivate a more confident technique and affinity to materials manifest in the first stage of the project.

By using a fluid medium that allows the natural properties of the materials to overwhelm the ability to precisely control them, the technique can act as metaphor for nature and natural processes.

Several series of works on paper were made, adhering to only two scales to allow for ease of working through ideas. This also increased the potential for the works to become easily interchangeable when installed.
Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language

Fig 90, 91 Jan Simmons, watercolour on paper, 33cm x 26cm, 2010
Fig 92 Jan Simmons, watercolour on paper, 33cm x 26cm, 2010

Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language
Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language.

*Fig 93, 94 Jan Simmons, watercolour on paper, 33cm x 26cm, 2010*
Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language

Fig 95, 96 Jan Simmons, watercolour on paper, 33cm x 26cm, 2010
Returning to the fluidity of watercolour and paper and building on the language

Fig 97, 98 Jan Simmons, watercolour on paper, 33cm x 26cm, 2010
Fig 99,100 Jan Simmons, *Tidal series*, studio wall, 2010, 260 x 170mm, 330 x 260mm
Returning to works on paper enabled a re-engagement with the creative process that uses time/duration as a key factor.

Working in series became not merely a generative exercise, but a way of creating large-scale modular works. By regarding each work on paper as part of a larger whole, the execution of more complex and ambitious works were made possible, without relinquishing the intimacies of individual works.
Macro-micro solutions

Fig 101,102 Jan Simmons, Shimmering, March 2011, watercolour on paper, 40 x fragments, each fragment 330 x 260mm, Shimmering, detail, March 2011, Unitec, NZ
Fig 103 Jan Simmons, Tide/Horizon, March 2011, each piece 260 x 170mm, Unitec, NZ
Working in multiples allowed for more ease of engagement with the intention to communicate an experience of nature through non-illustrative means. The cumulative effect of many fragments of images creates in the viewer a sensation of nature. The way we engage with nature’s visual elements is determined through this somewhat fragmented yet continuous way we see and observe. Through distance and proximity the viewer is seeing the subject/object in close-up focus as well as encountering visual stimulus on the periphery of their vision. When viewing these studies, the viewer is invited into the realm of tension between focal point and information lurking in the far reaches of peripheral sight. Secrets are revealed only when in close observation of an individual image, such as faint lines or lines that melt into another that are not visible from a distance. The cumulative and interchangeable effect of the installed individual fragments, when seen together, form an environment of their own. Amongst these large macro works, each individual piece has its own integrity, sensation and universe.

The works on paper were then installed, exploring again ways of presenting the individual works as one large work. This enabled critical decisions to be fully engaged throughout the making process with the final determination of how the work could be presented being constantly negotiated. This strategy provided a means of meeting an ambition to work on a larger scale and helped engage a process that emulated nature. Working in this way, where several works were made at a time, and working with the medium of watercolour, helped to engage in a process that allowed for changes in the material, medium and brushstroke. As nature changes constantly, the works changed subtly with each variation on a given theme. Works were pinned up on studio walls in various possibilities, some works becoming interchangeable within several installations.
Fig 104 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, March 2011, watercolour on paper, each work 330 x 260mm
Fig 105, 106 Jan Simmons, Titirangi Beach, March 2011, detail, watercolour on paper
**Fig 107 Jan Simmons,**
*Sunset, March 2011,*
watercolour on paper,
each work 330 x 260mm,
Unitec NZ
Fig 108 Jan Simmons, 
Sunset, detail, March 
2011, watercolour on 
paper, 330 x 260mm
Fig 109, 110 Jan
Simmons, Tide/Horizon series, March 2011, detail, watercolour on paper, 260mm x 170mm, Unitec NZ
The abstraction of imagery and related concerns has been stretched and extended and has arrived at a point where the installations fill the field of vision. The cumulative effect of the individual paintings, when seen together forms a type of environment in itself. The similarities and slight differences in the imagery and in the size of the paper has allowed an exploration of several possibilities for installing the works. This shows the language built up over the course of the project is interchangeable and can be coherent across several installations. Narrative emerges in the work through the repetitive nature of the imagery and the arrangements within the installations. A translation of nature’s repetitive patterns has entered not only the individual works, but across the body of work as a whole.

John Reynolds’ large installations were instrumental in providing a model for large installations of smaller works.

The naming of his work as Cloud is well suited for the reason that a cloud can be a part of a larger cloud and so on, reiterating the whole, as do smaller works making up a larger installation. John Pule described clouds thus; “Clouds understand the phenomena involved in earth movements, because they are nations in themselves.” Pule, John, 2006

When installing many fragments as large works, there is a consciousness of the idea and process of building works that can be described as environments in themselves.
When we encounter John Reynolds’ large installations we encounter works that hold a whole history of a vernacular language, yet we can also spend contemplative moments with individual works that hold a singular phrase.

The intention of the next step was to incorporate paintings from several of the series made during the last stage of the project. This work taking further the idea of creating an environment through the massing of paintings into an even larger installation, and making use of an increased range of motifs and colours. Changes to the composition were explored to increase the dynamic of the installation, in order to maintain variety and intensity across a larger area.

Fig 112 Jan Simmons, Dusk til Dawn, March 2011, watercolour on paper, installation, version 1, each work 330 x 260mm, Unitec, NZ
Fig 113 Jan Simmons, Jan Simmons, Dusk til Dawn, March 2011, watercolour on paper, installation, version 2, each work 330 x 260mm
Fig 114 Jan Simmons, Dusk til Dawn, March 2011, watercolour on paper, installation, final version, each work 330 x 260mm, Unitec NZ
Fig 115,116 Jan Simmons, Tide/Horizon, May 2011, watercolour on paper, each work 260 x 170mm, Titirangi Beach series, 21 works, each work 330 x 260mm, Unitec, NZ
FiFig 117, 118 Jan Simmons, Fragments series, May 2011, watercolour on paper, each work 330 x 260mm, Unitec, NZ
Response to space, using existing works

The decision to adhere to paper of only two scales allowed for the development of other possibilities of landscape watercolour painting on paper. A drawing sensibility has developed through several series of works on paper as well as an ability to engage inventively within these constraints by tearing, cutting, punching, gluing, clipping, installing. By not allowing too great an attachment to the preciousness of the individual works, they have been seen as components of a larger installation project.

To overcome the problem of the works appearing as merely large flat paintings when arranging them on walls, installations were made using the existing watercolours, in four separate enclosed spaces.

Installing in ‘cells’ has allowed for a response to the spaces, using existing works. Each cell has been treated as a separate space, taking into consideration the existing marks from previous occupiers of the space and the characteristics of the architecture and existing fixtures.

The viewer is invited ‘into’ the paintings. This has helped to communicate a sense of nature and spaces and the way they can be experienced varyingly. Some soothe, some warm, some are cool and fresh. The use of colour is paramount in the works as are the materials and marks and the occupation of the cells has helped to communicate this. In staying ‘true to materials’, responding to existing marks has opened up possibilities where a single work may relate to a mark on the wall, or holes have been punched into the painting to resemble the grill holes at the top of a cell wall. The work aims to invite the viewer to respond to the subtle responses within each space.
Red Room

In the Red room responses were made to the grid of the air vent, which had circular holes in a grid formation. Holes were punched from existing works and reassembled within the space, as a grid format pinned to the wall, thrown across a masking tape grid on the floor that responded to the metal grids across the window. The grid series of watercolours were used to echo the grid across the window. Paint marks left behind by a previous occupier of the space, when their work had been lifted from the wall, were responded to using cut and torn edges of existing works to repeat the shape, stepping up the wall. Use of the cut and torn edge and stepping up the wall was repeated on the opposite wall, helping a tension between cut and torn and soft and sharp. To continue with the almost stationery feeling to the room as it developed, and to show the files of works made during the project as series, files of works were bull-clipped and hung on the wall, as if waiting to be utilised within the space.

Fig 119 Jan Simmons, Red room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 120,121 Jan
Simmons, Red room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec, NZ
Fig 122,123 Jan
Simmons, Red room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec, NZ
Fig 124, 125 Jan
Simmons, Red room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec, NZ
Fig 126 Jan Simmons, Red room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 127, 128 Jan
Simmons, Red room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec, NZ
Response to space, using existing works

Fig 129, 130 Jan
Simmons, Red room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec, NZ
Tidal imprints room

In the *Tidal Imprints room* attention was again given to the grid, this time focusing more on the circular holes. Existing works that had studied tidal imprints were used, punching varying sizes of holes in response to the grid and also to the hole above the door-way. Both negative and positive aspects were given equal attention. The square grid across the window was responded to with three works showing varying ways of responding - a rectangle cut from an existing work, a rectangle made from masking tape and a work showing spatial qualities, painted on a rectangular piece of paper. Three small squares higher up in a corner of the space were responded to as frames for three small squares cut from existing works. This has been echoed with three small squares placed in a vertical line on another wall. The smallest dots, punched from existing works, were placed on a wall to echo the tidal imprints studied in the works used, projecting this onto a larger scale. These were then painted over with white paint, leaving only a few in the original blue colours. This gave a tactile quality to the work in that particular area, inviting the viewer closer. Larger holes were punched from one work that was of similar scale to the air vent grid and placed on the opposite wall. The holes from that work were arranged across the adjacent wall, as if floating across it.
The images that follow are from the Tidal imprints room.

Fig 131, 132 Jan Simmons, Tidal imprints room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 133, 134 Jan Simmons, Tidal imprints room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 135, 136 Jan
Simmons, Tidal imprints
room, 2011, installation,
Unitec NZ
Fig 137, 138 Jan Simmons, Tidal imprints room, 2011, installation, Unitec NZ
Fig 139, 140 Jan
Simmons, Tidal imprints
room, 2011, detail,
installation, Unitec NZ
Fig 141, 142 Jan Simmons, Tidal imprints room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec NZ
Fig 143, 144 Jan
Simmons, Tidal imprints
room, 2011, detail,
installation, Unitec NZ
Blue and Yellow room

In the Blue and Yellow room, attention was given to the white board panels. The art works were used in response to these, giving the panels dominance in the space, as if pushing and squashing the works out of their way. The works used were from a series painted in response to Titirangi beach. These works were originally in predominantly blues and yellows. When arranging them in the space a decision was made to intensify the colours, applying more paint to strengthen the effect of the yellows glowing through against the blues and in contrast with the white of the panels. The room has taken on an almost ‘gallery’ feel, where the panels are the ‘artworks’ and the paintings are the ‘frames’.

Fig 145 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 146, 147 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 148, 149 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 150, 151 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 152, 153 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 154, 155 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Fig 156 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
Response to space, using existing works

Fig 157, 158 Jan Simmons, Blue and yellow room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec, NZ
The Water room

In the water room paintings were first put up in the space and then responded to by painting directly onto the wall. An editing process then took place, removing paintings and painting out some responses until the space felt in balance. In this room, it was time to pay attention to the power points that had largely been ignored in the other spaces. Two extension cords were placed and arranged from each of the points on opposite walls, to emulate water and also the lines in the paintings. The narrow window in one corner of the space was painted blue to reflect the calmness of the room.

Fig 159 Jan Simmons, Water room, 2011, installation, Unitec NZ
Response to space, using existing works

Fig 160, 161 Jan
Simmons, Water room, 2011, detail, installation, Unitec NZ
Fig 162, 163 Jan
Simmons, Water room,
2011, detail, installation,
Unitec NZ
Fig 164, 165 Jan
Simmons, Water room, 2011, installation, Unitec NZ
Summary

“The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.” Hans Hoffman (1880-1966) 16

This quote helps to describe the journey made during this project. Discoveries, eliminations, reductions, explorations and experimentations have resulted in the development of a language that can build and has built on itself, morphing into various states and filling spaces. The painting process has sought, over the course of the project, to find the voice that speaks most clearly of the concerns at the focus of the research. The development of the works into series helped an understanding of the subject of nature, where several works being worked on at a time, allowed for subtle changes, as happens in nature. The use of watercolour as a medium also helped to understand and make a connection with nature during the painting process.

Installing the works in the cells has allowed a response to spaces, using existing works built during the project. This has extended the project from originally responding to the natural environment to responding, using the works made in these responses, to spaces in a built environment.

The ‘file’ of resources, the individual works and imagery, can be built on further and move into new spaces. There is scope for future installations, building on new works in different environments. The work has potential to grow or reduce in scale. To be installed in public (light boxes, shop/ gallery windows) or private (interior) spaces. The project has produced a wealth of resource, in the language built over its course, that allows a fluidity and immediate response to materiality, and through this, nature.

The concerns of colour, paint medium and composition have been identified as paramount in the making of the works and the relationship between these has helped to conceive larger scale installations. Working in series has enabled the contemplation of nature as a metaphor - it is a universal human characteristic to respond to spaces. This work aims to invite the viewer to respond to the subtle responses within each space and in doing so, contemplate their own relationship to the natural/physical world.

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