

On curating *Vespertine*,  
The swamp is active in the evening  
Rhea Lakhdhir & Kieran Trainor

On curating *Vespertine*  
Rhea

When thinking about *Vespertine*, the album, the word and the current show myself and Kieran have been working on, I think of rivers flowing under a sleeping city, music boxes, celestial objects in domestic life and flowers that bloom under the moon. *Vespertine* meaning “of the evening” suggests a turning over, the sun has left and the cold night has settled.

In preparation for writing this essay I listened to Bjork’s podcast *Bjork: Sonic Symbolism* where she discusses the making of her albums. While listening to the episode on *Vespertine* (2001) I found similarities between her process of music making and ours of curating. She talks about winter, introversion, autonomy and the magic of laptop computers.

Though this exhibition is a group show with two curators and four artists, the majority of the work was done alone. The artists in the current show; Rosie McBride, Emma Beth Richards, Rita Takeuchi, and Anneke Westra all described their art making processes as done in solitude or in partnership with the land (McBride). Two of the artists being from Tāmaki (Takeuchi and Richards) also meant that we never had an in-person meeting with all the artists. We met virtually a total of two times leading up to the show with of course many, many emails as correspondence. Bjork discusses how much of her album was made in her bedroom on her first ever laptop. She no longer had to venture outside to her recording studio and meet with her music producers, a system she described as patriarchal. This change in her process was freeing as it gave her a new found sense of autonomy. She could more accurately serve her creative and emotional needs at home. Listening to Bjork speak about her laptop as an instrument, made me appreciate the magic that is a laptop. Just as Bjork was able to create *Vespertine* on her laptop, we did too.

When considering art in relation to the digital world, I’m reminded of Rachael Rakena’s work *Rerehiko* (2003) and her term ‘toi rerehiko’ a combination of rorohiko (meaning computer or electric brain) and rere (to flow).<sup>1</sup> Rakena observes the similarities between the digital flow of knowledge and the connectedness which is inherent to water. Water is a central curatorial theme of *Vespertine* (2026). Kieran and I wanted to create a show that honoured the many streams and rivers on which the city of Wellington is built upon. There are an estimated 700km of culverted streams within the Wellington city region, only 60km are open streams.<sup>2</sup> The Kumutoto was the first stream to be culverted in Wellington during the late 1800s, before this, it was a large free flowing river. Today it runs through pipes under the motorway and central city streets before releasing into the harbour.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean for a capital city to be built upon so many flowing rivers? It is a repression of the land, in the case of Aotearoa, a colonial and patriarchal one.

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<sup>1</sup> “Toi rerehiko: Rachael Rakena” Rangahau - Research at Massey University, 04/26, <https://sites.massey.ac.nz/rangahau2020/our-research-stories/toi-rerehiko/>

<sup>2</sup> “The Water Under Our Feet” Inner city wellington, 04/26 <https://www.innercitywellington.nz/water-under-our-feet>

<sup>3</sup> Pokere Paewai, “The hidden river that shapes central Wellington” RNZ, 01/26 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihī/583265/the-hidden-river-that-shapes-central-wellington>

*Vespertine* - the swamp is active in the evening

Kieran

The river-fed land that European settlers first landed on in Pito-one was abundant in kahikatea forest and flax lowlands. Drawings of this land by The New Zealand Company depicted it as 'well-wooded, open plains' in fear that the swamp would not attract the thousands of settlers needed for the growing colony. When the settlers did indeed arrive, they were outraged by the sight of swamps bordering walls of forests growing from wet ground. William Wakefield, upon surveying the stated the land was 'at present unfit for the settler'<sup>4</sup> but encouraged his fellow colonisers that, through drainage, 'the swamps would be thrown out'<sup>5</sup>. The settlers demanded to Wakefield that something be done, and thus the planned settlement was moved across the harbour, to where you likely sit or stand, reading this writing.

The vision of the city that would drown the streams was realised and drain went from popular verb to popular noun - the sentences of our streets are punctuated with old drains that erupt with the rivers when it rains. Concrete and cement are not absolutes; as much as we pierce the sky with these materials, they will not cause it to forget its love for the land.

On wetlands and swamps, ecologist Geoff Park writes 'Ecologically, these were landscapes of interconnection and interaction, the antithesis of the boundary lines and the grid subdivision of the country into legally separated units desired by English land laws.'<sup>6</sup> Since there was no aspect of the colonial mindset that afforded ambiguity, these spaces were drained to accommodate the English colonial vision. These swamps became a victim of the patriarchy.

Ruled by linear logic, patriarchy is a long arm of the colonial project, and focuses on establishing binaries of dominance and submission across all aspects of life. It is enchanted by grids, efficiency and the seduction of the category. It is built on the perception of absolute truths, of solidness and rigidity. There is still, to this day, an inherent difficulty (and doubled-down commitment) in defining the difference between swamp, lake and river.

There is kinship in this existence — a swamp is a femme, Queer place.

What is done to the wetlands to push them into submission has been done to marginalized peoples. In order to justify violent extraction, the earth is defined, feminised, and thus, dominated. It is not a coincidence that the worldwide destruction of the environment through our current systems of colonial origin aligns with stories of social violence. Indigenous, Queer and Femme beings mirror the environment in a dance that is thousands of years older than even the oldest drain in the oldest city. It is this dance that is a threat to fragile systems of dominance.

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<sup>4</sup> William Wakefield, Journal, no 2, 1839-1842, typescript, New Zealand Company Papers 131/9, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

<sup>5</sup> William Wakefield, Journal.

<sup>6</sup> Park, Geoff. 2006. 'Swamps which might doubtless easily be drained'. Theatre Country.

'Vespertine' is defined as 'of, relating to, or occurring in the evening'. At night, swamps transform — becoming dark, wet spaces that are fertile with potential. Rosie, Emma, Rita, and Anneke's works come together as lights, beckoning the water table to rise in the stark white room of the gallery, our reimagined swamp. This glow illuminates the unseen, highlighting that which flows, night-ridden and swampy. They gather in a circle on the streets of Wellington, hold their ears to the concrete of empty roads and hear the streams still flowing.

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### *References*

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