



*Oh let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet*¹ – Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1881

*Only in our flights of fancy can we still keep nature divorced from the human environment. Out in the real world, our tentacles entwine nature’s fabric*² – Menno Schilthuizen, 2018

Their natural edges are frayed, their architectural scaffolding disrupted by an incursion of microscopic lifeforms writ large on these drifting parcels of land. Unstill, unstable and precarious, these cloud-like configurations float through space in a mysterious conflation of built form and natural growth, human intent and irrepressible change.

Christchurch artist Ina Johann uses a German word, Durchlässig – meaning porous, permeable, open – to describe the potential inherent in this restless cycle of ecological transformation. As echoed in the title of this exhibition, the word refers to both a scientific measure, related to the constant permutations of land forms, and the poetic concept of allowing something to pass through, not just in a physical sense but also in an emotional sense. ‘It is that softening, or easing,’ says Johann. ‘It is an active thing – the complexity of something forming, creating a framework for new propositions.’³

This framework became evident during her slow, attentive explorations of the local urban environment during the 2020 lockdown. With her camera, Johann looked down, recording the intrusion of tiny weeds and fungi staking out new territory in the forgotten or broken corners of the suburban landscape. And up, to the lineal horizon of new urban architecture reaching into the sky. The resulting collage of images, animated through layers of photographic dyes and paints, explore the liminal spaces where the orderly plan of the city map unravels and opportunistic nature challenges the hegemony of the built environment.

Johann’s understanding of the precariousness of our boundaries and borders is informed by the specificity of place. Johann grew up in a landlocked corner of Germany, graduating as a printmaker from the Johannes Gutenberg Universitaet Mainz before immigrating to New Zealand, where she embarked on a decade-long collaborative project with fellow artist Dr. Victoria Edwards.

In this solo exhibition, Johann draws on the geographic and imaginative possibilities inherent in the experience of an island in the middle of a vast sea to give form to the relentless forces of change moulding and reshaping the natural and urban landscape. Calling on her skills as a printmaker, and her background as part of a family of architects, she conflates the lines of geological mapping with the lineal forms of structural design and the emergent forms of lichen, fungi and coral.

This is not ‘Nature’ as a static or distant phenomenon protected on reserves or constrained within wilderness parks. Nor is it ‘Nature’ plotted by urban designers to soften the built environment. This is a more unruly, assertive form of nature, the kind that expresses itself, writes US urban ecologist Daniel Phillips, ‘in moments of self-willed ecological poetry: emerging from the shadows and cracks of the sidewalk, or in tangled masses along transportation corridors, or peeking defiantly through the tattered remains of post-industrial ruins.’⁴

As in Giovanni Piranesi’s depictions of derelict Rome, these botanical forms claim space on the forgotten edges of our cities, undermining the assumed stability of our built environment while invite us to wonder at their strange beauty and the sheer persistence of nature. The resulting works float, island-like, across paper and along

the gallery walls, activating space through a progression of paint, graphite, light and Perspex. They are physical manifestations, static forms, but they are also shifting, mutable, metaphysical entities, their edges and boundaries made unstable in a suggested process of accretion and erosion, a pulling apart and a coming together.

Where colour in the photographic works are muted, the lines of waterways and geological fissures implicit in the drawings are brighter, reminiscent of fluorescent markers, strange light-emitting deep sea creatures or the thermal imaging used in spectral geology.

In their invitation to re-imagine, to look, to be open to new ways of seeing, these works also reveal the impermanence of the demarcations used to divide our urban, rural and conservation estates. Johann breaks down this compartmentalisation, proposing instead a new appreciation of our porous borders and the variability and instability of the natural world as it impacts on the built environment:

We are artificially creating boundaries and spaces – nature doesn’t do it like that. The idea of the land parcel is a representation of the way we handle land, but it is not always to its best advantage. If we look at the relationship of the urban and the natural, how do these two edges come together? How do they co-exist? In an urban environment, what does it mean if you allow more green flow? What about our curiosity for nature, for the small things growing on the sidewalk? It is about slowing down and taking your time, looking for that magic in our urban spaces, looking at the fringes and the edges of things.⁵

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References |

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Inversnaid’, Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Penguin 1953, p. 50

² Menno Schilthuizen, Darwin Comes to Town, Quercus 2018. Quoted in Phoebe Weston, ‘The bliss of a quiet period: lockdown is a unique chance to study the nature of cities’, Guardian 7 April 2020

³ Interview with writer, 19 January, 2021

⁴ Daniel Phillips, ‘Ecologies of Elsewhere: Giving Urban Weeds a “Third Glance”’. <https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2017/09/06/ecologies-elsewhere-giving-urban-weeds-third-glance/> Accessed 21 January 2021

⁵ Interview with writer, 19 January, 2021