

Dissolving the storied earth

Essay by Dr Emily Cormack

Sometimes a memory lives in a place. Once situated, the smell of this memory materialises, as does the feeling of its atmosphere, which suddenly the skin remembers. Ineffable, and yet so pungent in its remembered state, the sensory associations of a memory deepen it, giving it form and substance. Memory then becomes the combination of story with site, always coloured by our own subjective perspective, and imbued with the sediment of our selves.

A located memory such as this in psychology is referred to as 'episodic'. Episodic memory recounts various details of an event, such as the objects or people involved, the spatial setting, and the temporal sequence in which the event unfolded. We do not remember the world in isolated snippets but as a totality within which sensory experience is integral. Just as a spoken word from our memory might correlate inexplicably with a smell or a movement, each element in the memory connects with the other, and they imprint on each other. From an evolutionary perspective, this has allowed us to create patterns that have established knowledge, and our hippocampus has evolved to remember stories as being specific to places, which has been instrumental in our survival as a species.

However, the Western conventions of history have typically sought to cleave story from site, excising memory from its place, enacting a kind of Cartesian split in the way we understand land and its stories. 'History' is told through the acts played out and the edifices built upon the Earth's surface, never existing *because* of it. This dislocation is particularly problematic when applied to oral histories. When an oral history is formalised in writing, the stories are stilled as they are detached from their ever-active, agential sites. Quieter, less dominant voices might trail at the edges, fading away into vapour trails or footnotes; a subtext in parentheses, admitted but dismissed. Once written, history becomes portable, it is easily moved from place to place, as a separate representational tool. The activity is held still by the verb, anchored in place without the mess of dirt or blood of battles. The facts are dictated with authority, dispelling doubt and the meddling vagaries of the senses.

The West has marked this authority' with cities and spires that sit atop layers of concrete and stone, separating us from the stories in the Earth's soil. Our great marches and battles cross her terrain, feet made small by her mass, as chunks are carved out and claimed. Historical success is measured through the ability to control and manage her, taming and trimming, or cutting and excavating into the wildness of our only habitat.

Yet are we served well by these historical processes? Do they tell the full story of our encounters with the Earth and our amblings upon her?

Just as oral history can be misplaced by its written retelling, and the Earth stilled by the map, so too does a monument obscure the many stories that go into history. A monument marks only one official version of events. But the Earth is not selective in which stories she tells, revealing all in her striated markings. What if we were to speak history again? To round it into words that contain breath and voice, so that it is as temporal as the weather or the movement of water. For proprioceptive beings, surely the temporal and the sensory are as significant as the intellectual? History exists best when it is attached to site, when it is perceived spatially. It is at the point where land connects with the power of story that the entirety of an event is felt. As voice is pressed into place the imprint is mutual. Geographical locations become mnemonic and place names toponymic, as the place that is spoken about speaks also.

Matt Arbuckle's practice occupies this conundrum. His work describes the activity of the earth - the way that it layers and stains, folds and presses, creating form through pressure and agitation. Yet he does not seek to contain or limit its expression. Instead, Arbuckle's paintings emulate the honesty of an earth unveiled - a cutting in the road or a bank exposed by a landslide, but he does not explain this entropic collapse or wall of soil. His work unfolds with the story of his site, allowing for the spread of grit and stain of paint, just as the earth permits the ebb and flow of sedimentary activity that gives it colour and texture. Because surely the grit from the studio floor and the twists in a fabric's surface tell a more resonant story than any description of them?

In this way Arbuckle's painting processes are an attempt to bring story and site together and allow one to imprint on the other. He has a tendency to work with his material laid flat upon the studio floor and to fold and drag it to manipulate the passage of paint. Often, he works with a semi-sheer polyester voile in place of traditional canvas or linen, laid flat and stained or painted on the ground. This allows for the debris from the studio floor to accumulate in pits and pock marks frothed from beneath into the surface. Each small fragment collected by the voile is annotated through clotted paint, or gritty and stubbled markings, complicating the otherwise aqueous washes of colour that typify his paintings.

In works such as those created for exhibitions including *Triassic-Jurassic* (Daine Singer, 2023), and *Colour Vision* and *In the Echoes* (Two Rooms, 2022 and 2021), the imprint of life beneath the surface is evident in each artwork. In these bodies of work, Arbuckle has employed elements of Japanese shibori dyeing processes to create compositional stains which he then wraps, twists, folds and drapes, spreading the fabric over found surfaces and structures, allowing them to accumulate the marks from each action. The resulting horizontal planes and twisted, creased forms are evidence of his contact with the surface. As his hands wring the fabric or drag and fold it across studio surfaces, he establishes an innate connection between artwork and site.

The physical process of folding means that the imprints of each layer stain the next, evoking the appearance of the earth's sedimentary layers, and referencing the folding and buckling of the earth as it shifts. With each layer of Arbuckle's folded

paintings pressing onto the next, paint seeps and grit is collected, allowing for an imperfect topography of the studio. His topography draws us to the earth and creates a scale that is intimate, implying touch. Conversely, the stains that spread across the work's surface are often vast washes that remind us of dark ocean skies or Waitematā blues and greys, invoking expansiveness and duration. In the surface of Arbuckle's paintings, space is contorted, with distance measured through the senses and through units of impulse, in a push-pull between the intimate and the endless. The layers of voile shimmer, obfuscating depth, simultaneously attracting and reflecting so that the washes of paint feel both in and of the painting's substrate; existing because of each other.

Arbuckle's paintings are not a didactic retelling of a site, but are more akin to an oral history because they contain both map and terrain. His works oscillate between the materiality of a place and its description, the studio debris and applied markings telling a story of place. A diptych commissioned for One Queen Street, The Deloitte Centre, titled *Holding Terrain* (2023) and *Time can be told* (2023) speaks to a sited story of aukaha. 'Aukaha' is a Māori term for the binding that holds a canoe, or waka, together, ensuring the whole is stronger than its parts. One Queen Street is a development that sits atop reclaimed land - a geological aukaha - where the building bridges whenua and moana. Arbuckle's creative process follows a similar impulse, whereby each piece of fabric is stained and soaked and then folded together and stacked atop each other. This method establishes a consistent set of sedimentary lines or horizons across the two artworks, which are then separated, soaked and dyed again six to ten times. This process of convergence and connection ensures the works are linked yet individual, comprised of a shared substance and yet distinct. Arbuckle's works for One Queen Street explore the binding of place to story and how an artwork can articulate this moment of connection, embodying the layering and convergence of story and site.

Oral-history traditions bring body and site together. Breath is made audible for a moment and located in the place of telling. For example, the creation story of Mount Taranaki becomes more resonant when told beside the flowing waters of the Whanganui River - a river which Māori mythology describes as being caused by Taranaki as he fled to the coast. A story of battle is more felt than heard when standing in the dugout trenches and redoubts within which it occurred. Story and site imprint on each other, and when encountered in this way, as a located memory, they imprint on us with more impact.

For a series titled *Grog Paintings* (2021) that Arbuckle created during a residency at Driving Creek Pottery on Aotearoa's Coromandel Peninsula, he worked with memory and the land to create works that spoke directly to the site and its history. Driving Creek Pottery is a renowned pottery studio with a legacy of artists and makers, embodying an Aotearoa story of 1970s creative idealism. During his residency Arbuckle drew from this history by recycling fragments from previous failed pieces, or works left behind when people moved on, and grinding them up into 'grog'. He then mixed these fragments with a binder to make a coloured paste, drawing on the natural tones and textures direct from the site. This was then applied to found shop rags in irregular squares and tattered rectangles. These are

thick and impastoed colour-field works, with the terracotta of the whenua evident in bands or as solid planes, allowing intermittent slices of white or cream pigment. The pigment is applied in thick smears that crack as they dry, and the surface is alive with the dust and sand from the site. These site specific artworks speak directly to the distinctive terracotta clay of the location, and the rich creative history that has gathered there.

Matt Arbuckle told me that as a child he visited the deep meandering caves of the Moanataiari Mine near Thames, also on the Coromandel Peninsula on Aotearoa's east coast. This vast gold mine operated more or less continuously from shortly after gold was discovered in the area in 1867 until the 1930s. This vast network of mines that interlaces the ranges surrounding Thames recorded a yield of 2,327,619 ounces of bullion with a value of \$845 million during its years of operation, creating a fervour that led to the establishment of the township of Thames. Today the tunnels are accessible for tourists as part of a 'Goldmine Experience', which takes you inside the hollowed-out caves and tunnels.

Arbuckle's adventures in these mines as a child may have exposed him to the many-hued sedimentary layers visible within the caves. The soft yellowish-grey of propylitised andesite, and black or violet-brown augite, or the pearly lustre of brown-green hypersthene. The earth's pigments striate the caves in deep threads of colour which crumble and bleed in bands across the hollowed-out tunnels. Each colour reveals a geological story of the deep-time drama of land formation, while also containing the more recent stories of the gold rush and its wealth and greed.

The first maps of the Thames area of the Coromandel Peninsula coincided with the discovery of gold, as Ferdinand Hochstetter and Julius Haast made the first systematic geological explorations from 1858. This land, subject to such speculation and fantasy by Pākehā, would have been known by Māori as part of Te Ao Mārama, with the whenua's undulations, ragged creeks and waterfalls holding creation stories, whakakpapa and atua. The tangata whenua 'map' would have been an 'episodic memory', recalled through an oral-history tradition linking place with the senses as well as its spatial arrangement, its relationship to the stars and its physical appearance.' The grids and annotations, detailed accounts of mineral deposits and waterways were only anchored in place by the surveyors' compass and chain, once gold was evident in the ragged caves. The drawing of the map equated with its 'value?', its key markers and annotations aligning with the story of gold's discovery, inscribing early colonial greed and need. Mining is another moment where the story meets the map.

Matt Arbuckle also has a practice of burying his work. For the series of works titled *Fenceline*, Arbuckle has created bronze casts using the gridded surface of hessian and fencing wire, placed atop an assemblage of timber and fence posts. These rectangular casts are like inverted surveyor's markings, or buried maps created from improvised objects. The fragments of derelict fences could be forgotten boundary markers or the half-buried architecture of long-lost gold mines. Arbuckle buries these bronze tablets in the damaged land that is left behind from mining processes in both Aotearoa and Australia. After a site has been mined it becomes rich with floods of sulphurous slurry and tailings, which can contain arsenic, lead,

mercury, petroleum byproducts and cyanide, each of which reacts with the surface of the bronze in a different way. In this process the bronze tablets are painted by the Anthropocene's unnaturally pigmented earth. Rather than revealing the natural metals and minerals present in the dirt, as with many of his folded paintings, Arbuckle inverts this process and instead uses the chemical agents in the damaged soil to 'paint' and stain his bronze artworks. Here he experiments with ideas of sited memory - listening to the land - and inviting its 'expression' on the surface of his bronze.

Painting is not a written history. In its essence it transmits a story of matter and material, and of expanse and intimacy. In Matt Arbuckle's works the past and the present are folded together, like the sediment of the earth, marking the moment when story hits substrate. In each of his paintings are the episodic memories of a child running fingers over the ragged layers of a cave's sediment, the crumbling of mineral under thumb; the discovery of fool's gold, and the tricks in the soil that tarnish new to old. His works evoke the hidden tide-lines of the earth and the vast unknowns of an imagined, aching, open seascape. The works capture the process of remembering, and the deep colours of a remembered feeling. They evoke the sound of stories as they hold to the place they were made, a site simultaneously remembered and felt. Art does not tell a story, but conveys it, evoking it in its texture, colour and surface. A painting tells of the push-pull of scale and time, and the compression of place into memory. It tells the whole story of a moment in time, as expressed through the filtered semantics of self.

1. "The Māori had great respect for the environment, especially for its visible expression as landscape. Furthermore, toponyms long associated with the landscape encapsulated much Māori traditional history that commemorated events and myth, both of which served as geographical mnemonics. Added to these mnemonics were names that suggested the appearance or shape of topographic features." Phillip Lionel Barton, "Māori Cartography and the European Encounter," in *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 3, Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, edited by David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 530.

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