

JHANA MILLERS

Caroline McQuarrie

The New Sun

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The New Sun: new photographic and textile work by Caroline McQuarrie

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In places they are marked by signs or plaques, designating their place as ‘an historic site’, but predominantly they are hiding in plain sight. Landforms shaped by 19th century mining for gold and quartz. These undulations, channels and (now rarely) structures, are what tangibly remain from the brutal process of extraction of minerals from the land, that was fuelled by so many aspirations for prosperity. Brutal for the ecology of the land, brutal for the iwi and hapu who were displaced from the land through confiscation or ‘purchase’, and brutal for the miners engaged in such perilous and back-breaking activity.

Through photographs and embroidered textile works, *The New Sun* juxtaposes the ‘empirical’ finds of land trace (arguably the result of primarily male labour), with the more speculative imaginings of what life might have entailed for the women living with or alongside the male mining workforce within early settler-colonial Aotearoa.

The Gold Rush of 1850s-1870s features large in colonial-settler narratives, particularly pertaining to Te Waipounamu – Otago, Southland, Nelson/Marlborough and the West Coast, but also in Te Ika-a-Māui in the – Coromandel (the earliest), Bay of Plenty and Waikato. It is the earlier explorations, predominantly in search of alluvial gold through to early ‘hard rock’ quartz mining, that McQuarrie is focussing on. More industrialised mining came later, reliant on mechanical means of extraction, processing and refining, and was undertaken more by companies or consortia than individual prospectors.

The early mining settlements were rudimentary, make-shift and seldom home to women. As larger settlements grew quickly in support of areas of mining promise, more infrastructure and services grew, and the option of starting or bringing a family to the region became more common. There were also wives and families left behind to fend for themselves in areas around Aotearoa and offshore. Mining populations were deeply itinerant and the histories of all the mining areas are littered with accounts of townships that emerged and disappeared with the fortunes of the yield.

Grappling with colonial histories of settlement and interaction with land and Indigenous peoples occupies many citizens of Aotearoa with Pākehā ancestors. While genealogical tracking, through formal and informal means, has gripped folk for centuries, our ability to research and trace relatives and their livelihoods, trials and tribulations is readily enhanced by accessible online data and commodified research services. There is a palpable sense of reckoning, brought about through the often confronting process of unearthing the names and actions of one’s ancestors; their passages over ocean and land, their path within a process of colonisation, and the traces they have left behind. The process of figuring out who we are now, is deeply reliant on how we got here, and whose histories and legacies we

carry with us, in order to provide a platform of knowledge and awareness from which we might be able to situate our own place to stand. A place that centres the ways in which Indigenous, settler-colonial and subsequent waves of migrants' lives and narratives have interwoven and impacted one and other.

A challenge with pursuing traces, is the highly partial mechanisms of recording official or informal connections and experiences. In mid-late 19th century Aotearoa the records that were instigated and deemed valuable within the swiftly growing settler-colonial context were largely transactional; records of birth, marriage, death, property 'ownership', legal proceedings and latterly within gazettes and newspapers – items of community interest, reportage and advertising. These favoured those for whom aspects of legal title were predominantly accorded, namely men. Historic accounts of females working within or in support of mining communities are few and far between.

McQuarrie has long been exploring personal and familial histories and what role the photograph and the hand-crafted textile might play in representing or questioning these narratives. In earlier series the materiality and process of making of the textile component had a dominance, either in terms of their prominence within the works, or in terms of their means of production and the evocative associates driven by their materiality. In the series *No Town* (2014-2015) the union between stitch and image became less literal. Embroideries and photographs sat closely abutted to one and other. This series exemplifies a shift in focus within McQuarrie's work, one where the domestic and familial contexts become more latent, and the historical, ecological legacies of mining within the West Coast of Te Waipounamu (where McQuarrie was born and raised) are explored. Curiosity about what is tangible and what is intangible, what traces remain, and whose lived experiences are valued enough to be recorded are strong drivers for the practice. I sense a conscious resolve to reveal and make visible the lived experiences of working-class miners in the mid-late 19th century and early 20th century (pre more wide-scale industrialisation and mechanisation of mining processes) and a strong awareness of the paucity of record pertaining to female lived experience and labour contribution to these settlements.

The ecological and cultural impacts of mining remain key components in the work, increasingly so as the awareness of how mining supported and fuelled broader settler-colonial aspirations grows, and how this trajectory (along with parallel extraction processes) propelled us into the Anthropocene where so many legacies of land use and subjugation of ecosystems have resulted in a deeply worrying precarity for our survival.

In *The New Sun*, a cycle of photographs are combined in space with a smaller cycle of embroideries on linen. The photographs have an inherent taxonomy of structure or material. The importance of site and place within an historical framework and context is also important, but I am intrigued how through titling the works highlight the purpose or utility of what we are looking at within the process of mining e.g. *Flume trestles, Sluiced hills, Tailings, Water race, Tunnel* etc., all using terminology sourced from a historical account of Quartz-mining at Reefton, Waiuta and the Lyell¹. The photographs have been

¹ Darrell Latham, *The Golden Reefs – An Account of the Great Days of Quartz Mining at Reefton, Waiuta and the Lyell*, Nikau Press, January 1992 (2nd edition).

taken between 2013 and 2016, a period when McQuarrie was travelling regularly around Aotearoa photographing sites of former mining activity, and diving deep into place-based histories. This presentation of works does not prioritise a singular site, but rather seeks to offer a range of sites that help to make visible the processes involved in extraction, and the types of land-forms and water courses that are left as remnant or trace of this period of mining in Aotearoa.

There is a very resonant counterpoint to the tone and material process of the accompanying embroideries on linen. McQuarrie has written the texts, as a means of trying to understand or consider the female experience of immigrant women who were travelling from primarily Britain and Europe (but also from or via Australia, and a lesser degree at this stage, from China) to live in settlements that sprung up in relation to mining activity, or in bigger towns that served the mining industry². The traces in written or oral accounts, and in statistical historical data relating to female experiences of immigrant women aligned to this period of settler-colonial history, especially in relation to mining-affiliated communities, is thin on the ground.

McQuarrie, alongside historical research, has been researching her family accounts and narratives. This has led to a process of searching, and imagining the possible encounters, sensations and experiences of immigrant women who were involved with or adjacent to mining in Aotearoa during the 1860s-1890s. The texts have been written in second person, addressing the female subjects directly, but not by name.

On reading the texts it feels particular scenarios, or actions or conditions of experience are being channelled by McQuarrie, but that they are not anchored to specific biographical references. The women are not named, but their travails and hardships are imagined and felt, as much as one can, through time and distance. It is not a romantic lens, but there are wistfulness, perhaps edging towards admiration, for their resolve, their tenacity and their survival. I would argue that this sentiment is combined with a clear consciousness that these women were most-likely also part of and complicit with agendas of settler-colonial dominance over tangata whenua.

In many cases the risks they took to traverse oceans to arrive and forge their new lives in Aotearoa took immense courage, and would have meant leaving behind families and networks of connection. The published narratives of British and Irish settler-colonial women are harder to locate than those of male counterparts. How we attend to these personal familial histories within the scope of understanding the roles our Pākehā forefathers and

² Jock Phillips, History of immigration, Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/history-of-immigration/print> retrieved 19 January 2020.

Useful detail is provided by Historian Jock Phillips regarding patterns of migration around 1853-1870, including assisted package migration through either the New Zealand Company or through provincial councils/governments noted that there were more families, single women, ex-military settling in cities and towns (not aligned with mining). The population of miners during this earlier period was predominantly single males, some coming from the Victoria gold fields in Australia, many from England (including Cornwall), Scotland (including the Shetlands) and Ireland. There were some American-borne, and from Scandinavia and Germany, but the most significant new group were Chinese immigrants (mainly from the Guangdong province). The census of 1871 recorded 2,641 Chinese, "...the greatest of any non-British country. Virtually all were on the Otago goldfields, and there were only four females among them."

mothers played in a broader process of colonisation is pressing for many Pākehā/Tauīwi in Aotearoa today.

The embroideries nod to the tradition of stitching samplers of texts (biblical/motivational) for domestic use. The borders at the head and foot of the texts draw on aspects of the photographic images. They are abstracted, but often reference forms of the land or patterns apparent within the images, such as the wooden and steel tracks in *May Queen Incline*. (2016). The text for this image echoes the magnitude of the steep incline disappearing into the high distance. It speaks of the magnitude of sublimating or shunning sorrow and regret for what has been lost in the face of the all-preoccupying survival of self and family. “You do not have time for sorrow, for nostalgia, for regret. You chose to leave them behind and you choose now to busy your mind with the water, the soap, the flour, the milk and the eggs. The thread, the needle and the wool...” none of which would be easy things to source or foster. Within the nine photographs, we see a range of compositional modes. Some offering more expansive views of altered landforms (e.g. *Tailings*, *Water race*, *Tunnel* and *May Queen Incline*) but even when we are presented with the inclusion of a horizon or a foreground, emphasis remains on the named structures and their properties, what they are made of, how they sit in the landscape, how the regenerating bush has begun to reclaim them. The detail and richness of texture and tactility stretches through these images into those that offer no long view, instead we are invited to look closely and in detail at the material qualities of the black sand shaped in ripples by receding water, through which pebbles and larger stones hint at the process of atomisation that occurs to render this matter into microscopic grains.

McQuarrie is writing **to** these women (as individuals or to an un-named collective). The use of second person address, you, your... creates the impression of an (impossible) intimacy of accord. Bringing the text away from the specific, opens a space of speculation, and imagining of what kind of experiences, challenges, confrontations and freedoms early colonial-settler females might have had. In part this has been triggered by genealogical research McQuarrie has undertaken and finding out more about her great great grandmother who arrived in 1874 as a solo 16-year-old Irish female – landing from a ship onto Katiki beach in Otago to begin a new life in a strange and unforgiving environment.

How do we see and understand these human-made mining structures and landforms in 2021? Some form part of historic trails, designated reserves and places of special interest. Others are not accorded such status, and only become visible once you know what shapes and forms you are looking for; mountains of hard alluvial deposits creating new ridgelines, serpentine man-made waterways, remnants of aqueducts for getting water to where it was needed, piles of rock – middens of refuse post the process of extraction known as tailings. While the shaft or the tunnel are more identifiable as traces of mining, these other forms have had widespread impact on the land throughout mining areas. Settlements came and went and in many cases scant evidence of habitation remain.

While the 19th century Gold Rush in Aotearoa is considered ‘history’, our consumption of trace elements continues to burgeon at exponential and unsustainable rates. Mobile phones demand Copper, Europium (LCD screen colour – red), Gallium arsenide, Gold, Magnesium compounds, Neodymium, Palladium, Petroleum products, Platinum, Silver, Terbium (LCD

colour – green), and Tungsten³. Mining for minerals for power generation and metals and minerals for industrial production remains a massive, pervasive industry. E-waste is a global problem, and the growth of recycling programmes and facilities cannot keep up with consumption⁴. Therefore, we remain reliant on mining to keep pace with demand.

While much of the mining for minerals needed for contemporary life has been outsourced to the ‘developing’ world, our mining infrastructure in Aotearoa remains active, largely for coal extraction, but also for gold. Other active extractive processes relating to oil and gas are present particularly around Taranaki, with exploration around the Great South Basin, and offshore areas near Canterbury and Gisborne.

Key to sustaining life is water. It is imaged once in this body of works (*Water race*. (2016)), but it’s underpins all of these images. All gold fields required configurations of small dams and water races, to get water from creeks and rivers to where it was needed to help sluice, filter and separate the ‘valuable’ ore from the waste product (everything else). Water technologies developed and were amplified to increase yield (and speed of extraction). It’s potency harnessed for mining carved new shapes into the land. These are the more tangible traces of the labours of this period of work and life in Aotearoa. The intangible labours of women working alongside or in support of this work left few traces. The literature and the signage accompanying most mining-related tourist attractions seldom speak to the role and value of immigrant female labour, or Māori labour within mining communities, during this period of Aotearoa’s development. Chinese labour is *marginally* better represented, but the dominant narrative remains that of Pākehā male experience.

These works seek to offer a pertinent way into thinking about this period of our history, from a position where our feet are planted firmly in the present (with the myriad of current toxicities relating to inequality and ecological crisis), to enable a richer understanding of the legacies and traces threading between then and now, there and here.

The photographs in this exhibition have been made on the rohe of Ngāti Waewae, Kati Mahaki ki Makaawhio and Kati Huirapa ki Puketeraki (Ngāi Tahu) and Ngāti Hauā (Waikato Tainui).

³ <https://www.straterra.co.nz/mining-in-nz/importance-of-mining/everyone-uses-minerals/whats-in-my-mobile-phone/>

⁴ The ‘outsourcing’ of e-waste processing to developing countries has been attempted to be curtailed through the Basel Convention (on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal), 1992... apart from the non-signatories including the USA who continue to predominantly ship e-waste for processing to China.