

JHANA MILLERS

Caroline McQuarrie

This Blasted Heath

17 February – 20 March 2022

“But we always are and always have been name-callers, christeners. Words are grained into our landscapes, and landscapes grained into our words... We see in words: in webs of words, wefts of words, woods of words. The roots of individual words reach out and intermesh, their stems lean and criss-cross, and their outgrowths branch and clasp.”¹

Incorporating landscape photographs hand woven into fabric on a digital Jacquard loom, *This Blasted Heath* depicts small, overlooked sites in Te Waipounamu, Aotearoa.

Initially the sites were photographed on medium format black and white film and scanned. The digital files were then used to create hand woven textiles on a TC2 digital Jacquard loom. Why re-create a photograph as a piece of fabric? To ‘take’ a photo can be a quick, instinctive gesture, a moment’s attention captured. To re-make that image with a slow, hand-made process implies a closer paying attention. Making something by hand takes time, and care. Re-making these digitised images gives them a different context and opens our attention to them in a new way. In the weaving, the image loses fine detail found in the original photograph, yet we are drawn closer to the details in the weave. The closer we try to look, the less we see.

Invented in 1804 the Jacquard machine was an attachment for a weaving loom which enabled complex designs in fabric to be achieved. Punch cards directed which warp yarns to raise or lower as the weft yarns were thrown left and right to weave the fabric. The process revolutionised weaving and allowed significantly greater automation in production as well as more complex woven designs than had been previously possible. It is also regarded as a significant step towards the invention of computing, as the same punch card system was adapted by Charles Babbage in his Analytical Engine. Over 200 years later the TC2 digital Jacquard loom controls warp yarns via computer, while the operator manually passes the weft yarns left and right to weave the fabric. The warp yarns raise or lower depending on each pixel in a digital image file.

However, the process of translating a photograph into a weaving isn’t as simple as one pixel to one thread, the physicality of the weave also must be taken into consideration. The density of the weave, depending on the tonal values of the photograph, can vertically stretch or shrink the image and the three dimensionality of the weave changes the way the image appears. Perhaps the most striking effect is the way the ‘floats’ (long warp or weft threads that float over top of the weave) bring sections forward and push others back, complicating positive and negative space.

The colour of the weft thread was chosen to reference albumen prints, rich brown photographic prints invented in 1847 and the dominant form of photographic positive prints from 1855 to the early 1900s, with a peak in the 1860-90 period. Named ‘topographic’ photography, much of this type of imagery was taken by photographers who accompanied surveyors searching out parts of the ‘new’ world.

When Pākehā settled in Aotearoa, they attempted to find comfort in this new, wild, and strange land by re-naming every hill, river, forest and creek. At the time this was common practice and little effort was made to learn and incorporate the existing Māori names, which were much more descriptive of the land and what existed in the surrounding area. Many of the colonial names might have been

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meaningful to the individuals who chose them at the time — some were named for a place of origin, others for something you might find there (Homestead Creek, Bullock Creek), some to be useful (Due North Creek) and others still for something a little more desperate (Johnny Walker Creek, Mead Creek, Deadmans Creek). However, with the passing of time many of these names now feel as out of place and as lost in their environment as the sites themselves.

This Blasted Heath continues my interest in Pākehā histories of Te Waipounamu and the complexities inherent in being a Pākehā in a colonised country. As Alice Tappenden stated in 2018: “*McQuarrie’s practice is tinged with aspiration, resignation and sometimes desperation. Her images and works in other media rarely tell the whole story; indeed, McQuarrie is open to the fact that they cannot. They instead provoke us to ask questions... McQuarrie invites us to imagine, even as she shows us what’s right in front of our faces. Long after the other miners have left, she’s still looking.*”²

Caroline McQuarrie, February 2022

All rohe information sourced from: www.native-land.ca

1. ‘Landmarks’ Robert Macfarlane. Hamish Hamilton, 2015.

2. Alice Tappenden. ‘Prospecting the past’ Art News New Zealand, Summer, 2018

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