

IMAGINE THE PRESENT

Bjarki Bragason
Amy Howden-Chapman
Steve Kado
Nicholas Mangan
Natalie Robertson
Shannon Te Ao
George Watson

Curated by Abby Cunnane

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ST PAUL St Gallery
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Utopia has been yang. Utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip...Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot...What would a yin utopia be? It would be a dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold.¹

Ursula LeGuin imagines a counter utopia—a place where forms, species, ideas other than those that rely on the yang-dominant values of brightness, heat, progress—might exist. While they each have specific context and detail, the works in *Imagine the Present* might collectively be situated within LeGuin's alter-ecology of the speculative, non-linear, otherwise. They don't forecast future utopias. Rather, it's a circular present that these works occupy, within which the deep past is also held, still happening.

Projections of the future prevail in environmental discussions, particularly those around climate change. The image of the future is also a primary point of orientation in many discussions around contemporary art. This exhibition takes a shift in focus to the present, to a number of often invisible, suppressed or fantastical aspects of our current ecological situation.

Shannon Te Ao's video *Untitled* (epilogue) (2015) is shot in darkness. The potted plants which move across its frame don't seem reliant on photosynthesis but are artificially lit, which makes them appear as if they are in deep space, or deep under the sea. The voice, reading a poem by Noeline Arnott, is that of a

¹ Further on in the same essay LeGuin writes, "If utopia is a place that does not exist, then surely (...) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way. And in the same vein, the nature of the utopia I am trying to describe is such that if it is to come it must exist already." 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to be' [1982], *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 90, 93.

person dislocated by grief—it could be the end of the world or a bad day. As epilogue, the work is a kind of ending, but its darkness is also a place of possibility. Te Ao refers to Te Kore as both void and potentiality, the nothingness from which everything else emerged; as Moana Nepia has written: “Te Kore may articulate extreme states of emotion, and also the need for space or time to restore balance.”²

Bjarki Bragason’s *Perhaps that in which it* (2013) is a series of photographic images of plaster moulds, formed around a piece of shelf ice used by Reykjavik glaciologists in reconstruction modeling of historical climates. The artist found the ice discarded after a conference on his way home, and later made the moulds as a way of documenting its disappearance. A second work, *Ten Thousand and One Years (one year of emissions at 449,5 meters)*, (2016) looks at the CarbFix project, in which scientists are working with industry to mineralise CO₂ by pumping it into subterranean Basaltic rock in Iceland, accelerating carbon fossilisation that would otherwise take thousands of years. Documents of the resulting core samples, these photographs could also be read as ambivalent monuments to the nightmarish speculative reach of the ‘tech-fix.’

Amy Howden-Chapman’s *What you are about to see* (2016) also starts with a monument, a wall dedicated to Los Angeles petroleum industry pioneer Charles S. Jones for ‘community beautification’. A narrated video alongside looks at how transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau’s late nineteenth-century observations of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts are today used by biologist Richard Primark to track the local effects of climate warming. The two-part work contrasts different era’s understandings of environmentalism, grounding the often-abstract scientific rhetoric around climate change in simple observation of everyday change, and the voice of a persistent observer.

Nicholas Mangan’s *Dowiyogo’s Ancient Coral Coffee Table* (2010) is made of coral limestone, from a section of sculpture formerly

installed in front of the high-rise Nauru House in Melbourne. Originally this coral came from Nauru Island in the 1970s, at that time wealthy as a result of local phosphate (in the form of guano, fossilised bird droppings) mining by New Zealand, Australian and British companies. By 2003, the phosphate nearly all gone, Nauru President Bernhard Dowiyogo told an American reporter his plan to save the country from bankruptcy by selling ancient coral coffee tables. Completing this likely tongue-in-cheek proposal, the artist makes a lasting marker of the colonial exploitation that saw 80% of the island’s topsoil removed, leaving an inhospitable moon-like landscape. The work also de-emphasises human-centric time—capital and industry shrinks to something absurd relative to the geological timespan over which fossils form. The limestone here will outlast today’s conversations about the Anthropocene, likely by thousands of years.

Steve Kado’s *AGPTL* (2016) video installation moves through a three-chapter observation of living spaces, leisure, travel, ‘nature’, and the development of symbiotic robotics. The voiceover provides a poetic pseudo-anthropological analysis of a contemporary class of globally mobile, identity-conscious consumers. For every image of pristine alpine landscape there is another of an air-conditioning unit, an iphone, an electric jug; ubiquitous forms that tell the everyday story of aestheticised resource consumption. The second screen measures time passing as melting ice in a glass, and the pace of the tide; like the mountain-scene billboard draped behind the video, it can be hard to tell which is digital wallpaper or background, where ‘real time’ experience begins.

In the front window space, George Watson’s *The world continues to infect /there is no perfect form* (2016) is a garden, or a compost of straw and salt, soapflakes and sago. Or a whole closed-system ecology which fuses the organic and inorganic—as her accompanying piece of writing has it: ‘it/me’. Originally made for an outdoor installation as part of *Autumn of Spit* at Canapé Canopy, an outdoor site, the work here is reconfigured for and by the indoor space, where it becomes an inhuman lifeform incubated under lights, even a whole new microcosmic planet, complete with its own artificial solar

2 Moana Nepia, *Te Kore—Exploring the Māori concept of void* (thesis, AUT, 2012), 24. See also Shannon, *Te Ao, Part Tree, Part Canoe* (thesis, Massey University of Wellington, 2015).

system. Gallery Two holds Natalie Robertson's work *Nought of the portion for Taho. Pohautea 1-4* (1996/2015) are photographs of the Waiapu Ngutu Awa (river mouth) on the East Coast, overlaid with the bones of trees after flooding caused by Cyclone Bola in 1988. This is part of a larger history of colonial deforestation since 1890. Printed for the first time nineteen years after they were taken, the photographs are also witness to that interval, the tons of silt that have washed out to sea, and the widening of the river mouth. The work is accompanied by a 19th century *mōteatea* (lament) by Hone Rongomaitu, *He Tangi Mo Pahoe*, re-interpreted, sung and recorded for the exhibition by Rhonda Tibble.

Voice is a strong component in this work, as many of the works in *Imagine the Present*. While looking, we are also hearing spoken or sung words that connect with what is not able to be seen, or is better understood in another form. In an essay relating to her work, Robertson has written:

There is a gap between what is real and what is imagined. If this gap could be measured, perhaps it would be similar to the distance between what is now, and what will be. If we measure in mass, our unit might be cubic meters or yards of earth stabilised. If we measure in volume, it could be the cubic feet of clear water free of suspended sediment...If we measure this gap in the current era of the Cenozoic geological timescale, it might be the wing-beat of a piwakawaka, a fantail.³

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Climate change puts pressure on conventional forms of representation, asking that we critically engage other senses, or other ways of measuring what is real. Jodi Dean has characterised climate change as locating us 'between the impossible and the inevitable', something we can't see directly because its symptoms are everywhere, and yet not quite here, yet.⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented that the

timescale of climate change is such that it's hard to think politically about, that we can only think politically on human timescales.⁵ Katherine Yusoff has written of climate change as both absent and present at the same time, and suggested that this often has to do with the absence from political discussion of the voices of those that are 'in' or directly experiencing effects of climate change.⁶

This raises a bigger question: who gets to sit around re-imagining utopia anyway? The answer could be, only those with the privilege of time on their hands. But it could also be argued that re-imagining the present, at a time of ecological crisis, is a political necessity. It is in this sense that the exhibition addresses climate change—as a social and psychological issue inseparable from our present, that quick wingbeat of time we are able to imagine.

3 Natalie Robertson, *Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning* (CA: C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California Davis, 2014), 11.

4 The full quote reads "Climate change tethers us to a perspective that oscillates between the impossible and the inevitable, already and not yet, everywhere but not here, not quite." Jodi Dean, 'The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change', e-flux 69:1 (2016), np.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Collective consciousness: a rountable', *Artforum*, Summer 2016, 275.

6 Kathryn Yusoff, 'Responding to the Unknowable and Planning for the Future', lecture, University of California, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcIUk1KrOg0>.