

Wandering Amongst Urban Green Space

Exhibition response written by Eleanor Diaz Ritson

Urban Green Space | Loretta Riach | *play_station* 18/05/23 - 10/06/23

Loretta Riach's debut solo exhibition, *Urban Green Space*, presents a series of painted and sculptural works in which they encounter a vision of landscape as both primordial and volatile, turbulent and enduring. These dualities interlace when sediments of deep-time permeate urban ecology and environments. Motivated by their interest in local history and specific locations in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Riach uses their artmaking practice as a means of exploration to interpret and reimagine landscapes past, present, and future. *Urban Green Space* provides a setting where fossil concretions and metal objects co-exist with sensorial experiences of coursing water and reflected light, where analogy and motif access the archival force of deep-time, which we, as transient beings, don't readily perceive.

Riach introduces their work with *Storm Drain Eel World*, a landscape seemingly viewed from multiple perspectives at once. Although recognisable as a landscape painting, Riach includes illusory qualities of non-landscape in their watery use of tone and texture. We are shaken from our human bodies, imagining this scene as witnessed through a flash of glistening eel-vision. Bright cloud illuminations pour light into the subterranean eel world, semi-obscurating an ambiguous greenscape. Slinking upstream, we barely see the metal grating of the gutter above. A thematic allusion to water continues in *Dowser*, a water-seeking mobile sculpture in which Riach has suspended an assortment of future-fossils: hand-sculpted ceramics and various found-metal-objects. While the pseudoscientific practice of dowsing seeks to locate underground water and minerals, Riach's creation of technological fantasy, rigged with pendulum and bell-shaped weights, ironically dowses the air. As the little objects reach down in vain, searching for stream systems beneath Te Aro, *Dowser* seems to liken human ambition to jangling chimes in the wind, parodying our sense of mastery over nature.



Loretta Riach, *Storm Drain Eel World*. Acrylic and chalk pastel on canvas, 2023. 760mm x 760mm

Saturated, iron-rich rock seems to emerge from Riach's painting, *Red Rocks*, as we're transported across the city and relocated to the south coast of Te Whanganui-a-Tara. Dripping with salty spray, the muddy reds and browns merge in a faint horizon. Has Riach placed us above the land, looking down from afar at the jagged coastline? Or does *Red Rocks* observe volcanic rock becoming gradually embedded into the greywacke that spans this coast? These shifting perspectives, constantly expanding and contracting, mimic the geologic processes depicted in this work. Coupled with *Red Rocks* is *Greywacke Dream Horizon*, where perspective again seems to flit between a close and long view. Riach has us at once pressing forwards into the veined and gritty greywacke strata, while also being weightlessly guided across an ocean expanse of sandstone by lithic fossil-bodies, spectral in their dancing circle. This imagery realigns our human notion of 'the present' within a much larger time frame, readjusting our focus to unify our corporeal existence with such inhuman materials as rocks and minerals. Peering out from a shadowy corridor, Riach re-describes their multi-perspective motif in *One For Me, One For You*. The painting possesses an unassuming yet pervasive sense of impermanence while simultaneously reminding us that nothing disappears without leaving traces. Are Riach's pebble-forms truly solid objects? Are they shadows? Or are they primaevial stone-prints and indentations, recorded and revealed from within eroded strata? Riach manifests their awareness of endurance in the face of temporal fragility—a sort of path treading that we, as humans, are subject to. In one instance, we perceive ourselves and our individual lives as micro-eternities, each of us with our own sense of constancy. Yet we're fragile creatures, aware of our earthly brevity in comparison to other timescales.



Loretta Riach, *Red Rocks*. Acrylic on canvas, 2023. 300mm x 250mm / *Greywacke Dream Horizon*. Acrylic on canvas, 2023. 300mm x 250mm

While Riach doesn't restrict their paintings to a literal definition of 'landscape', they draw from Aotearoa's abundant history of landscape imagery, from painting and photography to topographic and geological maps. Their work diverges from direct representations of land, instead emerging as an ongoing response to place and earth-material in sensorial landscape impressions, suggested by

colour, texture, and symbolic form. A three-panelled, self-mirroring landscape scene, *Stepping In The Same River Twice* holds memories of cyclic repetition in a replenishing outpour of water becoming enriched by its passage through the land. Captured in this multifaceted recollection, the painting expresses that no single experience is ever quite like another. Riach continues to perceive time as both fleeting and eternal in *Another Bright Morning*, where they grasp a haze of glowing light, seen as if through bleary eyes. Brush-strokes create traces and re-envision stories of the past through flashes of reflection; they illuminate connections, casting an undefined radiance across different times and spaces.

Riach's second sculptural work of spectral technology, *YOU'VE GOT IT IN YOU*, consists of a palm-sized concretion containing a bivalve mollusc shell. Broken in two, the fossil halves are reunited with their cast aluminium counterparts and linked with wire-cable to form a strange communication device resembling a tin-can telephone. Riach forges associations between the haunted-fossil-objects, charged with archaic life-force, and the aluminium replicas in a mimicry of geologic temperature fluctuations and formations. In this way, the aluminium reproductions speak both to deep-time mineral processes as well as modern industry and mass production. The connecting wire-cable transforms *YOU'VE GOT IT IN YOU* into an ironic transmitter, facilitating metallic fossil echoes to become heard. Riach diminishes human command over these inhuman bodies, proffering them as possessors of an estranged narrative agency.



Loretta Riach, *YOU'VE GOT IT IN YOU*. Pliocene-era bivalve (mussel) fossil, from West Coast of South Island, likely 3–5Mil yrs. Aluminium cast of fossil, steel wire, recycled floorboards. 2021.

Dimensions variable.

In a return to imagined landscape painting, *Tide Chart* depicts the rising and ebbing of cool ocean waves, meeting in their fullest expression at a point of horizon. Above, tide-streaked sands are strewn with discarded remnants, swept in from the land by deep water flowing below. Seen alongside *Tide Chart* is *Phantasm Stream*, in which Riach strips back all representational form,

reimagining this tidal current passing somewhere underfoot. They reveal this hidden urban stream, glimmering with reflected light through cracks in the pavement. Riach's final message in *This Is The Place* is one of arrival and belonging. They combine the qualities of *Another Bright Morning's* ephemeral light shiftings with the stone-shaped navigators from *Red Rocks* and *Greywacke Dream Horizon* who guide us to this place. Here, the stones appear to have settled, marking our arrival. We've made the journey, and this is the place. However, this destination is, as Riach reminds us, only transitory. *Urban Green Space* sets us the task of reframing the ways in which we encounter and envision a land where the traces of deep-time past and future are ever present.

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