

Kate van der Drift
Spring 2021 Collaboration with Euro Restaurant & Osborne Shiwan
Text by Emil McAvoy

Kate van der Drift's photography occupies the threshold of land and sea. Her field work is primarily located in coastal wetlands which reflect the constant flux of local tidal and water systems, as she documents the transformation of these ecologically significant and often overlooked landscapes. Her images evoke a sense of the hidden or obscured – a subtle sense that beyond our current view there are histories embedded in the landscape.

Van der Drift returns to the Hauraki Plains in her research, developing an ongoing interest in its ecology and histories. This field work informs an intimate relationship with the region at a personal and artistic level. Of particular interest is the Kōpuatai Peat Dome, a freshwater wetland area covering 10,000 hectares. It is the largest unaltered restiad peat bog in Aotearoa, and also unique globally (restiads are a family of annual or perennial rush-like flowering plants native to the Southern Hemisphere). Surrounded by swampland and lagoons, it is integral to the flood management of the region, an important carbon sink, and contains a large stand of Kahikatea trees despite widespread logging.

European settlers' attempts to transform the Hauraki Plains into pasture through extensive drainage have dramatically altered both its appearance and delicate ecological balance, the result of a dominant and longstanding western industrialist approach to agriculture. Van der Drift's work attempts to bring these issues to light through an approach which blends documentary and art photography.

An example is her image *Four Birds* (2018), photographed within a human-made pond in the mineralised zone of the wetlands used by duck shooters. Certain isolated areas are only accessible by boat – a world hidden to most. The artist travels these old waterways – or their remnants – with a kayak, waders and a four wheel drive vehicle. In this photograph, shot with the assistance of local hunters, four birds traverse the soft lavender-hued skies above the pond and are reflected in its waters.

The artist's evocation of the hidden or obscured is perhaps most salient in the recurring motifs of fog and mist. In the photograph *Stopbank* (2017), a mound of verdant grass atop an embankment is cloaked in a fog which blends seamlessly into the dawn sky above. Stopbanks are employed to prevent the flooding of nearby farmland and local towns such as Ngātea. Surrounding drains and rivers have also been artificially straightened. Aerial views of these rivers appear like a grid. This process speeds up the flow of the river, and when there is a large amount of rain flooding can occur. Drainage has also impacted the resilience of this environment, as drying out the sponge-like form of the peat impedes its ability to absorb water, leaving the region more vulnerable.

Peatlands sequester two thirds of the world's carbon. Their largely unseen destruction is creating a potential environmental catastrophe of epic proportions. A member of mana whenua Ngāti Hako remarked to the artist that they believe, due to rising sea levels caused by climate change, this land may in time return to something more closely resembling its pre-colonial state.

In van der Drift's work, things are more complex than they first appear. The artist celebrates the natural splendour of this region, while documenting its transformation and drawing attention to its ongoing implications and effects. When the project is understood more deeply, audiences are denied a retreat into the reassuring, romanticised representations of the picturesque, and instead presented with images far more problematic and bittersweet.

The early morning light which suffuses much of van der Drift's imagery offers a counterpoint to the sombre situation her work addresses. Dawn offers a space to contemplate new beginnings, and foregrounds the possibilities of encounter and rediscovery. An example is *Turua Kahikatea, Waihou Valley* (2017), a stand of Kahikatea captured at dawn in the settlement of Turua on the

banks of the Waihou River, the trees a reminder of the past very much alive in the present. The place name Turua means “twice seen” referring to the reflections in the river. In Te Reo Māori, turua can also mean to be beautiful or exquisite. This concept speaks to her photographs’ ability to picture not only what is, but what has been, and what might be – to look again and see things anew.