

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy

Light Language

Natasha Conland

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's Expanded Field

Laurence Simmons

A Text of Appearances

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's Expanded Field

Toward the center of the field there is a slight mound,
a swelling in the earth, which is the only warning
given for the presence of the work.

Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1979)

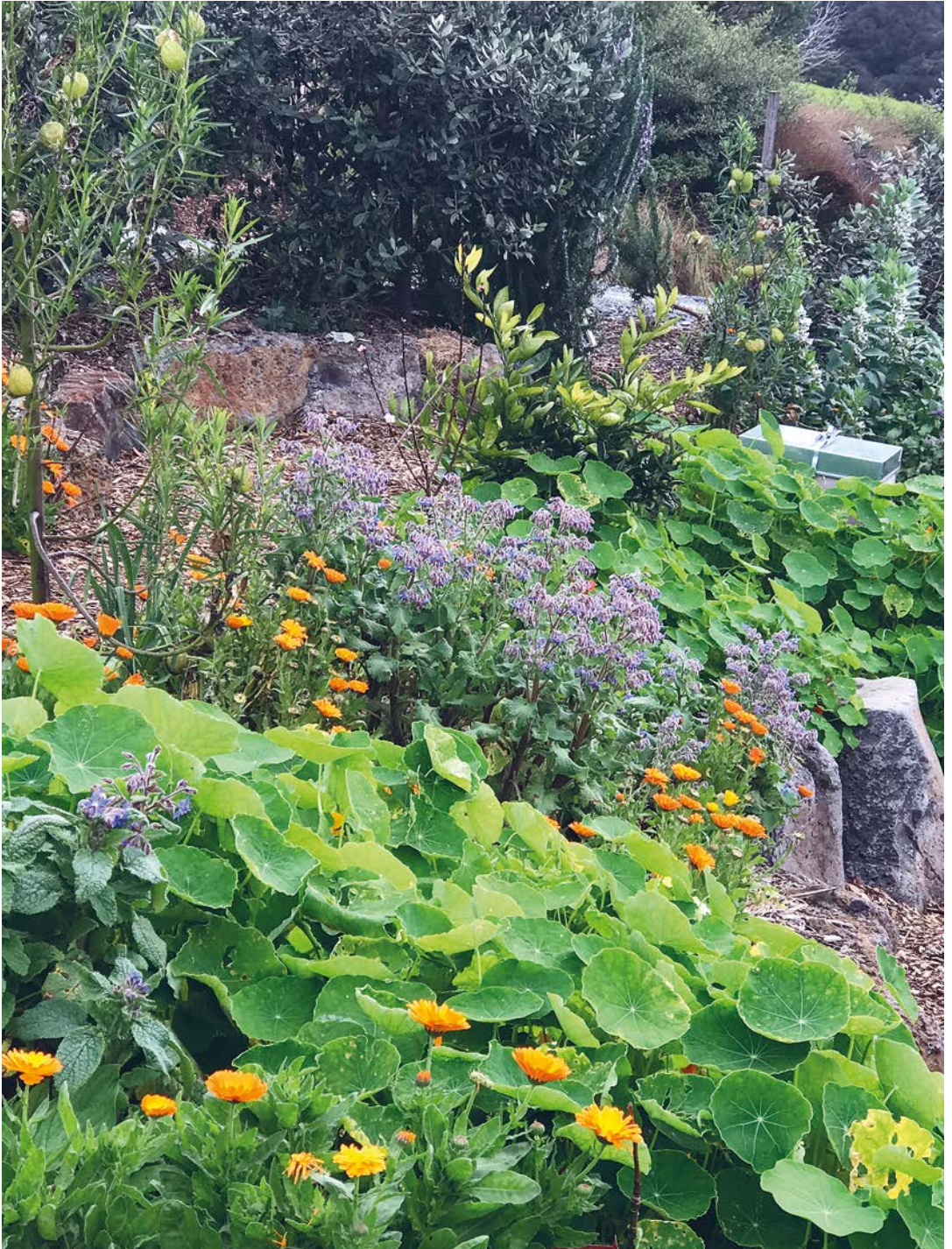
It's a wretched day for writers and their texts when we hold them to account for all those lives ahead of them. Those who have read and re-read their thinking – arguing against them for not anticipating a shift in terms, or a changed set of perceptions fresh for a new era. Almost forty years from its publication, American art historian Rosalind Krauss's text 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' reads like a case against the conservative indictment of the new art forms of the late 1960s – the cry that really anything could be art now. To do this Krauss labours her now familiar structuralist diagram to adjust the terms of reference, and create for the humanities a logical and orderly explanation for the diffusion of modern form, support, viewer, architectural and landscape relationships.

The Klein diagram seems even now to offer some security for art's expansion. If it is not this or that, then it is part of the field of terms established by their relationship in opposition. Yet most of these terms are known, even when they are read by their negative value, they are in, as Krauss writes, 'the outer limits of those terms of exclusion'. But Krauss's own terms could not have anticipated a kind of practice to lift off the field altogether as it were into the space of esoteric practice, where the 'field' is the unseen and unfamiliar field of energy – spiritual energy. A space where Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's garden might not just be landscape/not-landscape or architecture/not-architecture or sculpture/not sculpture, but a place to

work practically on that energy. How did we get out of the diagram? Or as Krauss might argue: is this a redeployment of the postmodern, in which we have reorganised the terms that are held in opposition within a new cultural situation. Esoteric practice arises when the logic of ‘sculpture’ let’s just say, even within the expanded field, follows a too-logical too-familiar course. As my dictionary says, the antonym of esoteric is *familiar*.

I might not have been thinking of Krauss even if I hadn’t been grappling with ‘the energetic field’, something Sarah Smuts-Kennedy has been working with since her completed postgraduate exhibition in 2012. So you see, even I am engaged in this dialectic, as I return the amorphous ‘energy field’, back to the frame of references established in this formative post-structuralist text. So we’ve expanded the field in the only place left – the *outer* outer limit. Yet how helpful is this route? The implication that the growth of interest in ‘mystical’ subject matter or, in this case, energy fields was not more than an exercise in the expansion of terms, is a too-reductive or even cynical evaluation of the genuine attempts on behalf of an artist to explore the ‘practical exercises that help extend our ability to perceive the nature of things. To help us pay attention to the subtle perceptions that we often ignore, yet which offer opening to a world of form, dynamic patterns and colour and more intimate relationships to our feelings, thoughts and impulses.’¹

In opening out her discussion Krauss begins with a description of a work made the year prior to her essay, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, 1978, by Mary Miss. Outlining the basic elements of the work as if from a distance, piecing together the scene in the landscape before closing in on definitions, Krauss names the work as ‘of course a sculpture or, more precisely, an earthwork.’ What I want to differentiate here for Smuts-Kennedy is how her own large garden north of Auckland, built using biodynamic processes, functions both outside of the work and as a basis for the sculptural work that would later emerge. The garden is not sculpture nor earthwork. It does not behave *as* her artistic practice, but *in relation to* her artistic practice; it is the means for exercising the ideas basic to her practice, which I might



Garden at Maunga Kereru

describe as the exploration of forms that have the potential to practically influence energy fields and systems for productive outcomes.

In 1924, Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic farming was already responding to complaints of soil degradation by farmers and landowners in Germany. In many respects early organic farming was established internationally in response to the effects and impact of industrialisation. So, despite the practices derived from the more esoteric ends of Steiner's early association with the Theosophical Society, the emergence of his theory of agriculture was based in the modern period and amongst its discontents.

It's not so much of a stretch to compare other artists who have exercised their creative eye within the garden, including that most famous example of Claude Monet, the French Impressionist whose paintings of his garden at Giverny emerged in the industrial era. Experimenting with colour relationships in nature while also cultivating his compositional interest in Japonism by way of the garden, Monet commented on the 'magic' of the garden, 'I had planted them for pleasure; I cultivated them without thinking of painting them. A landscape does not sink into you all at once. And then suddenly I had the revelation of the magic of my pond. I took up my palette. Since then I have hardly had another model.'² Here and elsewhere Monet describes what appears to be a symbiotic relationship between his cultivated landscape and the representation of it. But what to make of the presence of magic? The word occurs again at the end of the century in artist, filmmaker and writer Derek Jarman's thoughts on his garden at Dungeness, England, 'At first, people thought I was building a garden for magical purposes – a white witch out to get the nuclear power station. It did have magic – the magic of surprise, the treasure hunt.'³

2 Claude Monet cited in Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, *Claude Monet at the time of Giverny* (Paris: Centre culturel du Marais, 1983) p. 150.

3 Derek Jarman in *Derek Jarman's Garden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995) p. 65.

At face value Smuts-Kennedy's garden appears to function less as an aesthetic device and more as a tool or an instrument for exploring synergistic systems in biology. She herself has said, 'biodynamics is a practical way to practice working between energetic systems and biological systems.'⁴ Sitting somewhere between a commercial or market garden and a domestic-scaled garden bed, this garden is designed to feed (it's edible). Also it is in every sense hand-reared, the original site was formed on a dense clay bed over which Smuts-Kennedy has built up a thick fertile soil. Here the word energy could be exchanged with work. During the process of the garden's development and fertility Smuts-Kennedy was also undertaking postgraduate study focusing on the development of her sculptural form. In her first major exhibition in Auckland after graduation, *Shape Analysis*, 2013, she made highly polished bronze squares that hung elegantly from the ceiling on fine wire. Attached to each corner of the square frame, the wires made light and airy cube and rectangular structures from the suspended bronze squares, which from a distance looked like she was drawing volumes of air itself.

In the text for the exhibition Smuts-Kennedy wrote that the shapes were formed through the process of 'mapping the room's electro-magnetic field, such as telluric currents, man-made electrical currents and electro-magnetic radiation.'⁵ So the forms demarcate sites of electrical energy. These fields were identified with the help of a guide, but that assistant did not in any way designate or suggest the visual form for these invisible zones within the architecture of the gallery. In what might otherwise appear to be an extension of minimalist sculptural language, Smuts-Kennedy gave them a form but also a context within the field of art. Their sculptural ancestor appears to be closer to American Donald Judd than Robert Smithson and his great environmental works. Through his writing as much as his sculptural practice Judd still represents the height of sculptural Minimalism, despite his known resistance to the term. In an interview made the year after his first one-man show at the Green Gallery, New York, Judd commented in what now seems like quite general terms about

4 Sarah Smuts-Kennedy in conversation with the author, July 2017.

5 Sarah Smuts-Kennedy in <http://sarahsmutskennedy.com/project/shape-analysis-rm/> accessed 27 August, 2017.



Shape Analysis, brass, stainless steel wire, 2013. Installation detail: RM, Auckland

his intention towards a 'simplicity' that was also complex. Judd also defines simplicity by which it is not – it is non-naturalistic, non-imagistic and non-expressionist. As he saw it, the geometry in the work which included the free-standing cubic forms for which he has become most known, is also disassociated from 'Geometric art'. In fact Judd allowed for a kind of 'obscurity' in reading the work, something that was not so immediate for viewers, 'I think what I'm trying to deal with is something more long range...more obscure perhaps, more involved with things that happen over a longer time perhaps. At least it's another area of experience.'⁶ However he denies the association with Mondrian, and his 'orderliness' or what he perceives to be a moral guide underpinning the work. In this way one reads the work as distinctly American. Mondrian was well known for his interest in Steiner's anthroposophy and theosophical roots even in late-twentieth-century America. For Judd, at least, this was an alienating matter.

Following on from *Shape Analysis*, and her work with electromagnetic or energy fields, Smuts-Kennedy appeared to travel closer to Mondrian's concerns for the spiritual in art. In particular in her exhibition *Field Work* she introduced three-dimensional colour triangles and squares in overlapping geometrical forms. Taking the three dimensions available to sculptural and architectural space, Smuts-Kennedy appears to model diagrams or experimentations of Mondrian's theory of plasticity in which composition, colour and line are employed in the representation of essential harmonies. However, curiously Smuts-Kennedy, whilst using similar language, is not pointing towards harmony but in many respects to a kind of disharmony. While the work both in its sculptural form and simplified colour relationships describes this harmonising impulse it is set in relationship to a natural field which is troubled, either with toxicity or erosion. In recognising what parts are in play here, we realise that Smuts-Kennedy has subtly inverted the principles of early-twentieth-century spiritualist tradition. Here, rather than art providing a representation of the unseen, or universal harmony in nature and, let's just say 'spirit' for want of a better word, form and colour are used in an attempt to balance

or even heal a disrupted field. Therefore the 'art' is a tool that has an implicit job to do in relation to what we might more commonly call our environment. Included within that environment is not just the natural world but its less visible properties.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's work undergoes something of a transition through the course of her residency at the McCahon House which magnifies this inversion of classic spiritualist traditions in art. In her description of the residency outcomes she proposed using the esoteric practice of Agnihotra to experiment with the healing of the kauri trees surrounding the residency studio. These trees, the inspiration for some of artist Colin McCahon's most defining early Auckland works, are now widely known to be grievously in danger from a soil-borne disease. Smuts-Kennedy practiced the Vedic fire ceremony and its healing mantra at dawn and dusk in a real-world experiment to heal the kauri. Her actions were motivated not purely by Vedic science or spiritualism, but via the concerns of an artist operating with a fusion of healing systems as her resources.

Yet realistically how much can we separate the artist from her spheres of interest, whether they are visible in the end result or not? Even Mondrian knew as much, when he reminded readers 'art is a duality of nature-and-man and not man alone'.⁷ In her interview with Radio New Zealand's notoriously sceptical Kim Hill, Smuts-Kennedy skilfully argued that, 'that's the great thing about art work, it allows us to test and play with things we wouldn't otherwise give credence to'.⁸ So in much the same way that Joseph Beuys framed up his form of 'social sculpture' influenced by Steiner's thinking, art might be deployed to mould society, even having a direct real-world positive outcome. Beuys stated for example that 'the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials

7 Piet Mondrian, 'Dialogue on the New Plastic', originally as 'Dialoog over de Nieuwe Beelding' in *De Stijl*, 1919, reprinted in *Art In Theory: 1900-1990* Charles Harrison and Paul Wood ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 285.

8 Sarah Smuts-Kennedy in conversation with Kim Hill, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/201852032/sarah-smuts-kennedy-kauri-and-mccahon> accessed 27 August, 2017.



Kauri trees with Agnihotra ash tree paste, McCahon House Residency, Auckland, 2016. Photo: Haru Sameshima

used by everyone. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change'.⁹ Beuys offers a model of art's relationship to society that interconnects esoteric thinking, something that has been mostly divorced from contemporary accounts of social sculpture. Following the residency Smuts-Kennedy also ran an Agnihotra workshop at Auckland's Artspace in association with her solo exhibition, which in the company of more-traditional gallery visitor programmes was categorised as something closer to an artist's performance. Far from the Titirangi trees now on Auckland's Karangahape Road, the action had less 'real-world' implementation, but it was nonetheless utilised much like a teaching tool, to open out discussion on the trees and the energy field itself.

Smuts-Kennedy ran with several streams of activity in the studio during her McCahon House residency. One of these was the series of rhythmic drawings made using colour pastels drumming against paper pinned to the wall, executed in an almost meditative state. As she describes it, the colour palette is selected by pendulum, and the almost hypnotic rhythm of the pastel's application takes precedence over the artist's conscious decision-making. They are clearly abstracts made in a state of abstraction, yet the 'high key', to use Van Gogh's phrase, and the patternation are heavily reminiscent of the Impressionist's relationship to the emerging science of colour. However these pastels are twenty-first-century tools and their colour range and capacity reflects the intricate developments in chemical colour, now long divorced from natural dyes and pigments. Yet the activity and integration of colours on the paper is highly active and intuitive. They are perhaps the most seductive of her works to date – why? Colour ... to steal from Michael Taussig who in turn borrows from William Burroughs ... appears to walk off the page. Whatever the mind/hand combination was that made these works, they seemed to know about the blending of light that occurs in certain colour adjacencies. In his essay 'What Colour is the Sacred', Taussig seeks to reinvigorate the investigations of early-

twentieth-century social anthropologist Michel Leiris. In the course of the text, understanding colour becomes analogous to understanding the bodily unconscious, ‘that which holds the future of the world in balance’.¹⁰ He writes ‘we need to catch up with the way that history turned the senses against themselves so as to control them. The mystery of colour lies in the fact that it evaded this fate because, while vital to human existence, it could never be understood.’¹¹ In the spectrum of examples he brings to bear on the problem of colour’s relationship to the sacred, Taussig nonetheless positions himself – if not his examples – firmly in the twenty-first-century’s problems and insights:

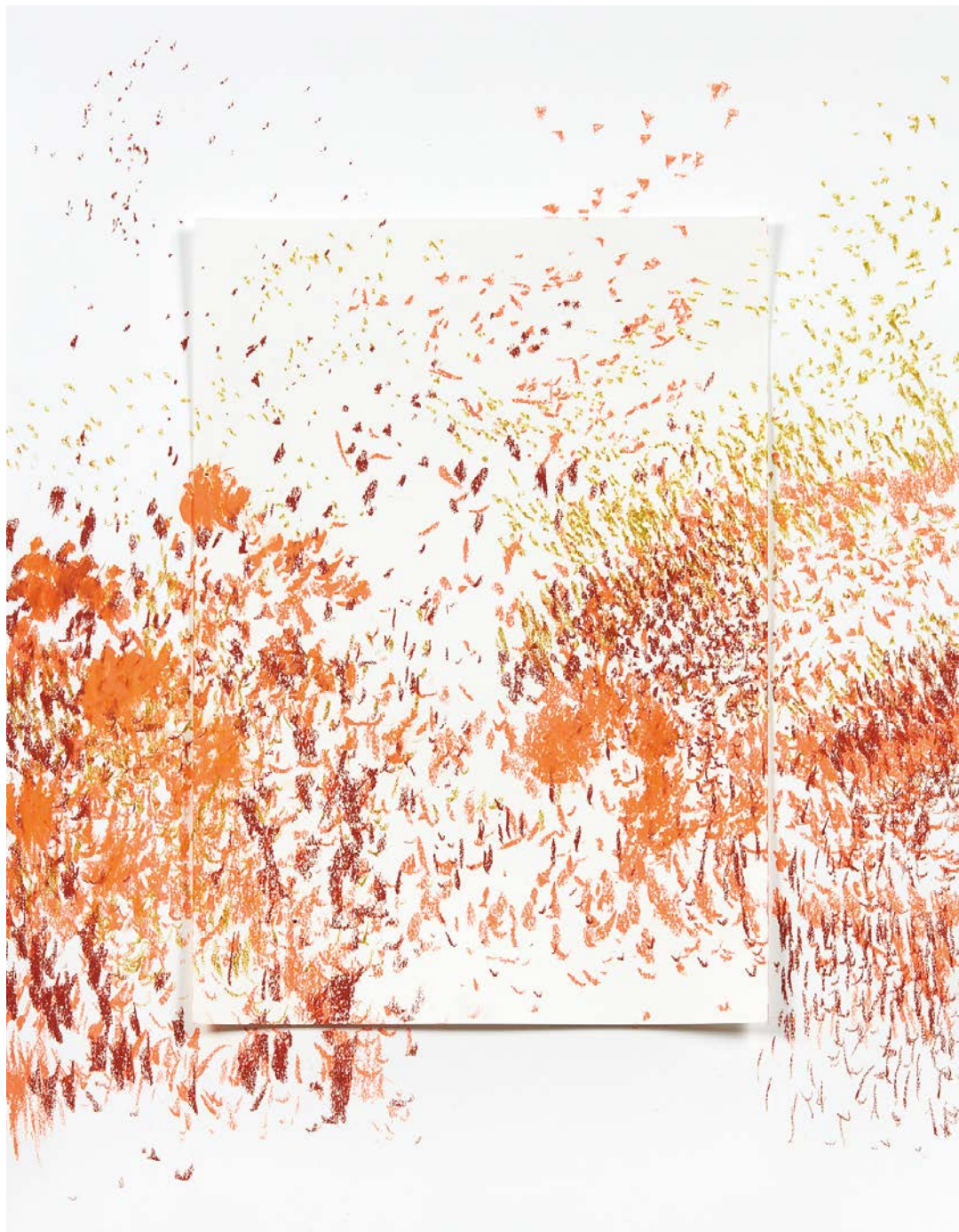
‘...the new nature of the new commodity world in which industry was gearing itself to fabricate cheap luxury goods. In mimicking nature, industry and most especially the chemical industry promised us utopias and fairylands beyond our wildest dreams, hence not merely colored, but magical, not merely colored, but poisonous. As the spirit of the gift, color is what sold and continues to sell modernity. As the gift that gives the commodity aura, color is both magical and poisonous, and this is perfectly in keeping with that view which sees color as both authentic and deceitful.’

There can be no doubt that the drawings point us into nature, with or without the remembered history of Pointillism and Impressionism. Their likeness to colour in motion is most certainly of our world, they have wind and weather and seasons even. They move off the page like a living thing and motion towards the window. If there is deceit in this action, it is peaceful and accepting. The world has been wronged, we no longer trust or delight in rainbows, we’re thinking about pollution and pathogens in the atmosphere. Even as children are the last to delight in colourful magic within ancient intensity, they are taught about the ozone hole.

The drawings have been built in rapid development, and rather than essentialise colour relationships they are open to the viewer’s own perceptual movements. In the span of the artist’s practice they are also the most recent in a series of inversions within which she situates her three-

10 Michael Taussig, ‘What Color Is the Sacred?’ in *Critical Enquiry*, Autumn 2006, p. 32

11 Ibid., p. 32



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Light Language #12, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017*, pigment pastel on paper, 695 x 495mm

pronged hand – art, the healing tool, nature. This time one can't help feeling what we have in front of us is something like Monet's cosmic garden represented for us, to stimulate our own need for healing as it did for him at Giverny and for Jarman at Dungeness. However, they are not explicitly 'in nature', whilst our relative consciousness may situate us there, these are without doubt representations of the inexplicable. They are allegories of a hopeful state, whether in wo/man or nature. Our responses to them are remote from logic but somehow engage the space between science and art. The colour field depicted comes as close as Smuts-Kennedy has yet to the representation of that unfamiliar space – the field of spiritual energy. Yet what of the white page? Is it enough? My sense is that this artist will keep recasting her pyramid of intentions until she finds the balance of the bodily unconscious which directs her one way or another into art and life on the case of nature. Unlike the modernists she is under no illusion that we can escape the chemical pollution that has now altered our natural world and atmosphere. Instead, through social and formal mechanisms, she proposes that within art we might at least imagine it differently (which in this instance is analogous to imagining the unthinkable) in order to start productively affecting change.

A Text of Appearances

‘We who draw do so not only to make
something observed visible to others,
but also to accompany something invisible
to its incalculable destination.’

John Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*

*‘On mists in idleness’*¹

Sometime in 1973 Colin McCahon sat on the cliff at Muriwai looking out to sea and along the extended beach and sand dunes. He attempted to capture on sketchbook paper the mist and fog he saw rolling in from the Tasman Sea. He completed a series of twelve (possibly more) works on paper — a sequence of nine were later gifted by McCahon to his wife Anne — perhaps produced in a single sitting, and now known as the Fog Drawings. Their titles tell of the moment, and the mutability of the atmosphere and weather: *Fog Comes in over the Beach, Muriwai*; *Fog and Birds—Seaweed on the Beach, Muriwai*; *Birds and Mist, Muriwai*; *The Fishing Rock—Mist and Birds*; *Sea, Muriwai*; and *Oaia, Sea, Beach, Mist*. The last drawing, simply titled *A Fog Drawing*, contains the extended inscription ‘O Lovely / See what I mean’. The Fog Drawings are loose experimental exercises in mark-making — graphite flecks on sketchbook paper suffused with sea air, salt, sand and seaweed. These ghostly scribbles afloat on a horizonless sea depict an atmospheric dimension of experience that hovers at the edge between the visible and the invisible. What is at stake

1 See John Keats, ‘The Human Seasons’: ‘His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings/ He furlth close; contented so to look/ On mists in idleness.’

in McCahon's struggle to represent fog and mist is not simply infinity but the hinge between immediate apprehension and a constant postponement of closure. The Fog Drawings are, preeminently, images of restlessness and risk — the representation of a moment of uncertainty and possible transition. McCahon's drawings might be thought of as 'studies' made *of* the landscape, the lines on the papers are traces left behind by the artist's gaze that attempts to capture the enigma of what is before his eyes. But I want to suggest that McCahon's Fog Drawings are something different. Not 'studies' but 'visions' *into* which we may enter. For in viewing the nebulousness and opacity of fog with McCahon, what we see is the fragile process of viewing itself, the paradox of creating form within formlessness. Between 1997 and 2007 Sarah Smuts-Kennedy lived at Muriwai on the cliff above where McCahon once sat, and much later, from September to December in 2016, she was the McCahon House Artist in Residence at Titirangi. The triptych drawings she created there entitled *The Sound of Drawing* were produced at specific times and under specific conditions. Like McCahon's pencil marks, Smuts-Kennedy's pastel flecks — pockets of graphic turbulence — attempt to create form from formlessness, to take an image out of the emptied mind and put it on paper. Such drawings are 'discoveries' not drawn from life; yet they are autobiographical records of discoveries of events, seen, remembered, imagined. They are drawn with such verve and directness that every mark reminds you of the act of drawing and the pleasure of that act.



Colin McCahon, *Birds and Mist, Muriwai*, pencil on paper, 295 x 220mm, 1973

After nature

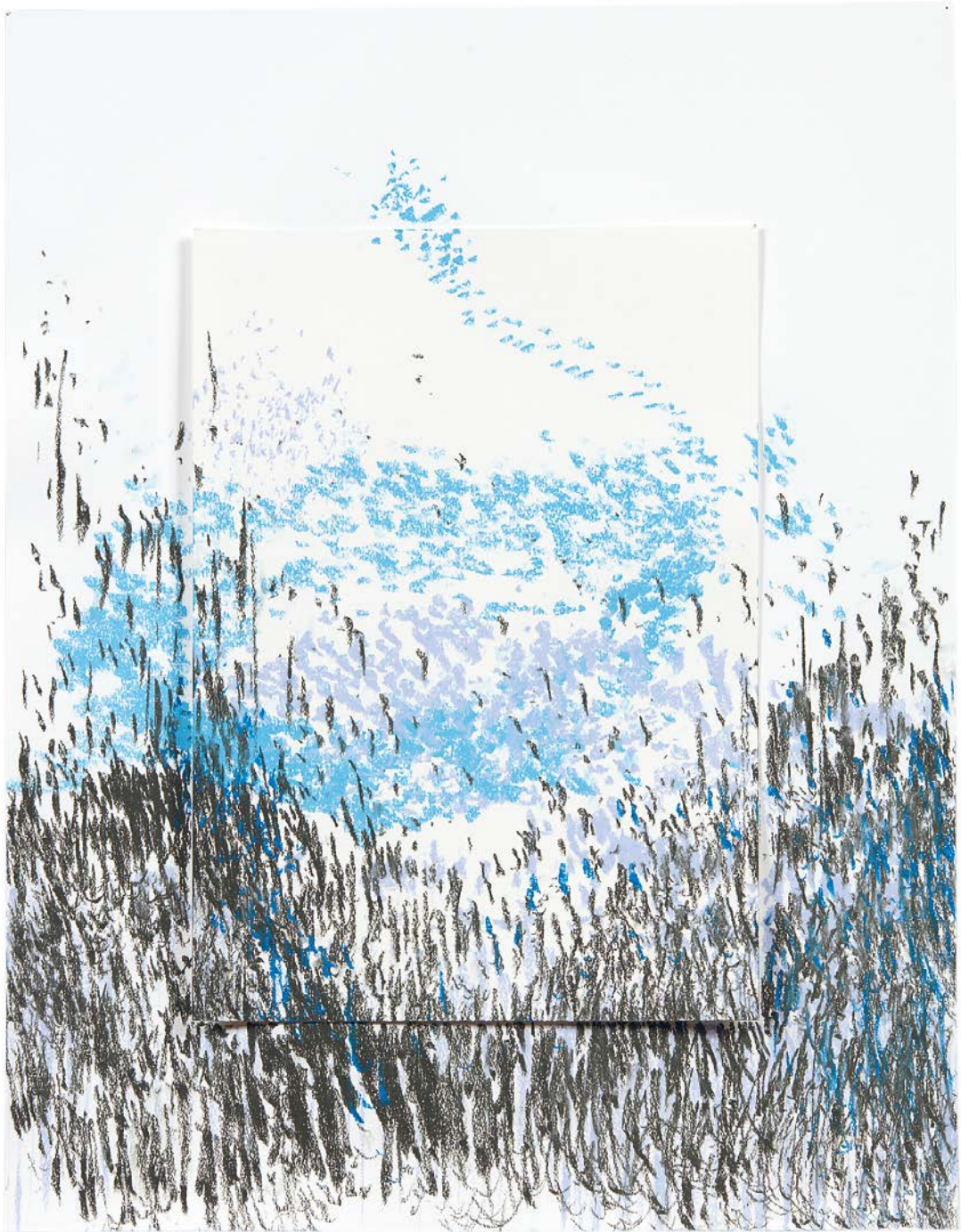
The term landscape when it began its useful life in the sixteenth century, first in Dutch, then in English, was a technical term that was applied only to painting. It took another fifty years before it was applied to stage scenery and then to scenery outdoors in general. The important point being that its reference to a way of organising and objectifying what we see, of ordering space within a framed painting, preceded its use as a descriptive term for what a painting might represent.² This tells us something about the extent to which our reading of a landscape, even now, might be determined by what we see in it of a picture, by the fact that we order it consciously or unconsciously within a frame. This is why of course, even though she may insist they are not, we read Smuts-Kennedy's triptych drawings made at the McCahon House, *The Sound of Drawing*, as landscapes. Take the following example: *The Sound of Drawing, McCahon House, December 4th 2016*.

2

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that various forms of 'landskip' and 'landschap' were adopted from Dutch in the 1590s. At that point, the art historian John Barrell indicates, the word and its variants was 'a piece of jargon specific to painting': *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 1.

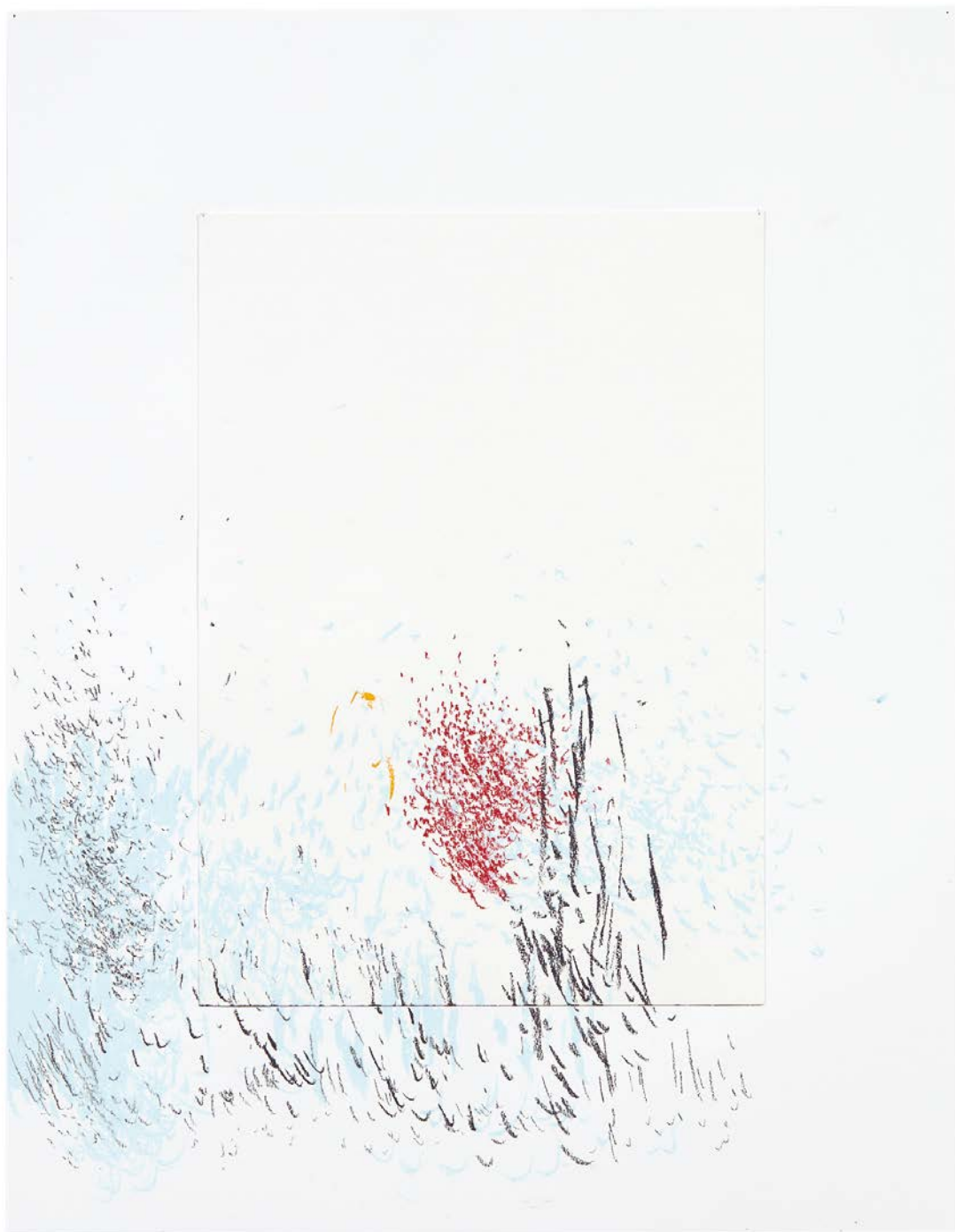


Our eyes caress and explore across the gaps between individual sheets just as the artist's hand once danced across them. The marvel lies in tonal modulation of strong colour: luminous orange and smouldering indigo, muted greens and browns, where the upreaching marks of the foliage of trees meet a white clouded-over sky. For this series is punctuated by colours that move beyond the holy trinity of the primaries. It is full of delicately modulated blues, pastel pinks and greys, ethereal washed-out violets, greens from celadon to the deeply bottled indigo, yellows from lemon to gold ochre. Contrapuntal, rhythmic, culmulative spell-binding, somehow these drawings preserve a relation with natural origin without merely describing it. The same 'aesthetic of landscape' can also be found in Smuts-Kennedy's subsequent suite of larger drawings, *Light Language*, produced in her studio space at the Pitt Street Methodist Church. This strong sense of landscape is again present even though this time their vertical format signals to us they are *not* landscapes in form. Take this shimmering presence: *Light Language #3, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017*.



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Light Language #3*, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017, pigment pastel on paper, 695 x 495mm

A dark kauri forest is furnished with a foreground *repoussoir* that directs your eye into a sky of vaporous blue. The floating sheet of paper at the centre is both a window (what we see around it is what we do not see through the window — for there it is a sort of ‘off-screen’ but of course it is brought ‘on-screen’ since we do see it, and see where it connects to our ‘window’), and it is also the *en abyme* of the drawing page, a composition superimposed upon a composition (the same composition...) on a drawing page. From a distance the floating sheet and the (frame) drawing resemble each other, that is they ‘match’. But closer up the page superimposed also stands apart, it is raised, its edges curl up slightly, it casts a slender shadow. From a distance the larger formations of the drawing emerge — the fact that it is one of a calibrated set of drawings that form a panorama of landscapes perhaps to be hung in a line. Curiously, the other (‘wrong’) format, the vertical portrait form extends an invitation for us to enter the private spaces of memory, it intimates the indexical traces of the artist’s hand, a one-ness to the physical act of drawing as she covers the surface with a dense rain of marks. All this commotion on the surface draws you in, and in front of the drawing itself you may even find yourself expressing this involuntarily by stepping in closer to it physically. It is the looseness but precision of Smuts-Kennedy’s process that enchants. The relationships and colours are formed by contiguity and not resemblance. Things in proximity grow on each other and begin to look alike to form patterns. So their contiguity breeds resemblance. The irrational mark acquires an aura of inevitability. Short straight flecks, tight curving jabs, straight vertical flicks: a tremor communicated through the body of the artist. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting under the view of its painter, than a curtain behind which her struggles, achievements and accidents take place. The most enigmatic of the series, for me, is this one: *Light Language #18, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017*.



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Light Language #18*, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017, pigment pastel on paper, 695 x 495mm

The upper half of white paper untouched, the vertical lines in black roughly dragged down, the small swarm of red, the way all the marks large and small seem to edge left across the page. Sweet, sad, frightening, yet attractive. For behind the curtain the landscape is not only geographical, a depiction of the actuality of terrain, but also biographical and personal. Despite the will to form, it is Smuts-Kennedy's emphasis on the materiality of her art — a 'being there' — that precedes and succeeds any secondary representational property. This is, then, an art of embodiment, of a corporeal presence transmitted via instrument (pastel stick, pencil) and matter (pastel, graphite) to surface. As Cézanne said of his repeated paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire's distinctive outline: 'The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness'.³

Flecks in fits and starts

In the late eighteenth century a British landscape painter, Alexander Cozens, devised a technique for generating landscape compositions on the basis of ink blots.⁴ He called them 'blot drawings' and their purpose was to unlock the imagination by suggesting random landscape shapes or forms. What was remarkable about Cozens' new method of blotting was that it not only recognised the stains or dark marks traced by the loaded brush but understood the blots were also defined by what was held in reserve, the unmarked parts of the paper. Cozens wrote that the true blot was 'an assemblage of accidental shapes', 'forms without lines from which ideas are presented to the mind'. This description might perfectly fit Smuts-Kennedy's methodology and landscapes of the imagination produced in both her series, *The Sound of Drawing* and *Light Language*.

3 Cited in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Galen Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 61.

4 Alexander Cozens, *New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (London, 1785). On Cozens see Jean-Claude Lebensztein, 'In Black and White' in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, Norman Bryson (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 131-53.

Like Cozens' blots, if Smuts-Kennedy's accumulation of flecks is to succeed in representing (or suggesting) the first impression of a landscape, it is the totality of the representation that allows the landscape as a whole to be made visible, and not only the marked parts of the paper. And, like McCahon's Fog Drawings, her meaning, its very opacity, is not only to be read in the marks, but in the relations between the pencil or pastel marks and the areas held in reserve. The essence of the work is the process of its own making. Drawing blind, a hand moving with the eyes almost shut, the body twisted, exploring rhythmic dexterities that before they break up into packages of meaning become a disrupted raw chatter of strokes and hatching. This record is febrile, momentarily sensitive to fleeting sensations, each mark, a vibration, a shudder or a rapid pulse.⁵

5

Smuts-Kennedy describes her process as follows: 'The drawing project followed a very formal protocol initially occurring straight after sunrise Agnihotra. Three pieces of A4 paper were pinned to the wall approximately 50cm apart. Pastels were then chosen with the use of a pendulum, a process that would determine the colours, the order of colours and the number of colours. I would then work paper by paper from the left to the right. Letting feeling, without emotion or mind, move the body/hand to generate the mark-making. This tuning-in required a brand new form of listening. Impulses leading the hand, coming from a brand new experience of intelligence. Often rendered blind they became a form of daily meditation and a lesson in real time of the concept of "letting go". The rules of engagement were that I would move, pastel in hand before the paper mark making via this new listening until I could sense there were no more marks to be made. I would then begin with the next pastel until they all had been used. Always moving forward never looking back. The process beginning on the left and finishing on the right.' Personal communication with the author, August 15, 2017.



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Light Language #1*, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017, pigment pastel on paper, 695 x 495mm

In *Light Language #1, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017* the sky is sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. Ash grey and deep violet are the colours of its decay. We sense a world becoming particulate, everything airborne and efflorescent or friable, as if the drawing itself seems to release spores. These are compositions full of accidentals (flourishes, dashes, spaces, shadows), a mixing of warm and dark tones, the memory traces of thought processes, where every mark is the sensation of its own realisation. Rhythm and graphic practice cohabit. A stochastic element characterises Smuts-Kennedy's mark, a random variable with indeterminate outcomes, and yet there exists an imposed order. The drawing balances with a certain athleticism on a fine line between impulse and calculation for the essence of the work is the process of its own making.⁶

Roland Barthes writing about this mark in the work of Cy Twombly called it *gauche*: 'Anything that vacillates in its movements, that can't hold to a straight line or that is clumsy or embarrassed is generally called *gauche*'.⁷ The *gauche* destroys the connection between hand and eye for the *gaucher* is guided only by the desires of her hand. The eye is reason, evidence, everything that serves to control; whereas the hand liberates, presses, turns, halts, flows and tumbles like a fine rain. A sort of insistent, obstinate clumsiness as if made by the left hand of a right-hander, such *gaucherie* is conscious rejection of an elegant controlled hand. What we see working here is the hand alone as if under its own steam.

6 Interestingly, Colin McCahon wrote to his friend Ron O'Reilly of the profound change that the new Titirangi location brought to his process of painting: 'You may notice the lack of "composition" — I no longer compose, but let a picture grow from a core — the movement is a spiral rather than anything else', Colin McCahon to Ron O'Reilly, November 9, 1954, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: The Titirangi Years, 1953-1959* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007), p. 29.

7 Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly Works on Paper' in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), pp. 177-94.

Swarms and webs

I have suggested that Smuts-Kennedy's work is an invitation to reimagine: to see a landscape in different ways. Two further metaphors for her drawing may play a role in helping us shape a response. Sarah Smuts-Kennedy is also known as the ideator of *For the Love of Bees*, an art project that aims to create a safe inner city ecosystem for bees.⁸ She describes this work as as a social sculpture, a term first coined by artist Joseph Beuys in the 1960s to describe a type of art which alters the environment in which it is placed and has the potential to transform society. No surprise then that the metaphor of bees and their swarm pervades Smuts-Kennedy's drawings. Look, for example, at *The Sound of Drawing*, *McCabon House*, 27th November 2016.

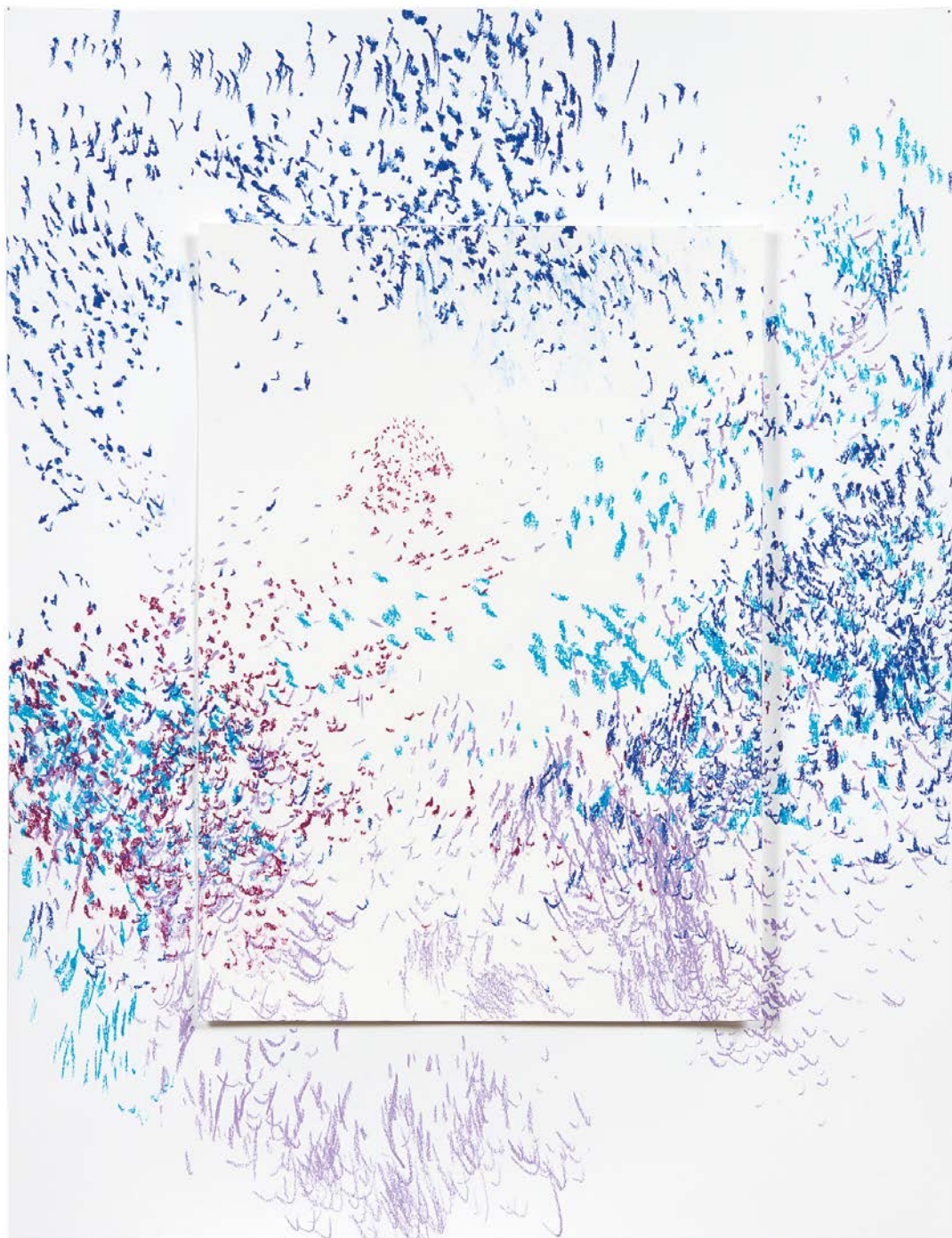


Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *The Sound of Drawing*, *McCabon House*, 27th November 2016, pigment pastel on paper, 295 x 650mm

The sky of the left and central panels is a swarm of birds or insects in the air. We have all noticed at dusk how a dark flock of starlings sprints straight over a city park — until a predator appears and they all veer at the same moment, rearranging their group into an hourglass shape with shocking swiftness. A distant murmuration of starlings — that really is the marvellous term for a group of these birds — who coalesce in their thousands and form dense spheres, ellipses, columns, and undulating lines, sequentially changing the shape of their flocks within moments. In the light of her description of it, we might also describe Smuts-Kennedy's practice and her work as the result of 'swarming'. This concept was frequently used by theologians during the Reformation in Germany, especially by Lutherans. The concept comes from the German word *Schwarm* (swarm in English), as in a swarm of bees. When bees, birds or insects swarm, they are engaged in excessive behavior. Thus, theologians used the term *Schwärmerei* to describe excessive, perhaps unbridled, sentiment or beliefs on the part of given individuals or groups in regard to some of their theological beliefs. Those who engaged in *Schwärmerei* were called *Schwärmer*; the former is commonly translated as 'enthusiasm', 'exaltation' or 'rapture' and the latter as 'enthusiasts' or even 'mystics' in English.

My second metaphor is that of the web which may at first sight appear to be the very opposite of the swarm. But what is the essence of a swarm if not its formal geometries. Text (thus also *texture* and *textile*) derives from the Latin *textum*: a web. Smuts-Kennedy's drawings as texts (of appearance) have a power of attraction, they entrap our gaze. As critical theorist Theodor Adorno writes of the text: 'Properly written texts are like spiders' webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm. They draw into themselves all the creatures of the air. Metaphors flitting hastily through them become their nourishing prey. Subject matter comes winging towards them'.⁹

In *Light Language #13, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017* Smuts-Kennedy's drawing as text holds all it captures in a delicate, yet also mortal tension.



Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Light Language #13, Methodist Church, Pitt Street 2017*, pigment pastel on paper, 695 x 495mm

Its web is a means, a tool, not a finished work. Filled with all manner of heterogeneity, it is a container for all airborne things, and its maker must wait vigilantly for the right prey to come along.

The Sound of Drawing

Why has Smuts-Kennedy titled her McCahon House drawing sequence *The Sound of Drawing*? This seems a paradox. How can a drawing utter or even contain sound? What would it mean to represent sound in drawing? How is that possible? Once again the counterintuitive clue in Smuts-Kennedy's title leads us back to Colin McCahon. In 1958 McCahon completed his largest word painting, sixteen panels on unstretched canvas, dominated by the words of a cycle of poems by his friend John Caselberg, commemorating the death of the poet's Great Dane, and interspersed with depictions of the young kauri trunks that surrounded his house. At the McCahon House Smuts-Kennedy was drawn to this work, in part by the fact that McCahon had painted it in his Titirangi sitting room draped and folded over the back of a couch. Her residency project, she has declared, 'took its lead from McCahon's *The Wake* (1958) which was the last painting he did that included kauri trees'.¹⁰ She was drawn, too, by the general appearance of language in McCahon's work. In borrowing lines from Caselberg, McCahon was not interested in inhabiting another voice from a safe distance, he was also not wanting his spectator to relate to the words used in any ironic or second-hand way. Rather he was, as he said, interested in 'the sound of painting', which we might understand first of all as the voice before any origin, authorship or even meaning is attributed to it. He instructed of another painting *The Lark's Song* (a poem by Matire Kereama) where the words are entirely in te reo Māori: 'The words must be read for their sound, they are the signs for the lark's song. This whole series of paintings gave me great joy. Please don't give yourself the pain of worrying out a translation of the words but try for the sound of the painting'.¹¹ Of course, there is already a long history of the attempt to

represent the voice and human sound in Western art, from the theme of the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel hails Mary and tells her she is to bear the Son of God to the embodied scream of Edvard Munch. Painters have sought to find a way to represent the word; in the visible depiction of this invisible word they were faced with the problem of transforming the word into flesh in a kind of Incarnation. And we might say that it is this problem that McCahon grapples with throughout his whole career.¹¹ The voice and its sound appears as a kind of accent or phrasing in Smuts-Kennedy's drawings. It is something like the breath or rhythm with which her marks are inscribed, the register of the grain of her particular drawing hand. It is not the case of a simple verbal message or even of how to transfer this message into visual form. When she asks us through her title to try for 'the sound' of her drawings Smuts-Kennedy provides for a certain performative role for her spectator, and it is this voice that interpellates us into the drawing, so that we might identify with it, and make it our own.

11 Colin McCahon, *Colin McCahon/ A Survey Exhibition*, p. 36.

12 See Rex Butler and Laurence Simmons, "'The Sound of Painting': Colin McCahon", in *Art, Word and Image: Two Thousand Years of Visual/Textual Interaction*, John Dixon Hunt, David Lomas and Michael Corris (eds) (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), pp. 329-45.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy was artist in residence at McCahon House from September – December 2016. The exhibition *Light Language*, was presented at Te Uru, Auckland from 2 September – 29 October 2017.

