



Work on Paper
Emma Louise Pratt

Void, God & Atom

6 - 23 August 2019
Whitespace Contemporary Art
20 Monmouth St, Grey Lynn, Auckland
Aotearoa New Zealand

Preview: 6 Aug, 5.30pm,
Artist Talk: 8 Aug, 12pm
Emma will be at the gallery
in person 6 - 8 August.

Uprooted

After so many years in a dusty, built-up city southern European city, I now live on the outskirts of Cambridge, UK. I walk a lot in the woods near my home by the river Cam. It's a very simple walk in a green belt by Grantchester, hemmed in by the M11 and the sprawl of new housing that booming Cambridge desperately needs.

These are the ancient islands of Anglos, Saxons, Celts and Picts -the islands of my own ancestors. If you were to ask me where I come from, my passport says New Zealand. But my DNA is all north of Sheffield and North Wales out to the farthest islands of Scotland. I'm both from here and not. Like a dancing atom.

In Cambridge, I live among one of the most international communities I've ever known. They are trying to understand everything. They investigate dark matter and map neurons of a fly. They control masses of data. We will never stop wanting to understand these particles and spaces and combining glues. We are we from? Of what are we made? How does everything work? Why?

Human, as a word, comes from the Latin root "*humanus*". This word comes from "*humus*" which means "cultivated from the dirt".

A pervading binary view of earth versus sky has meant that Proto-Indo-Europeans (PIE) had a word to describe the "not from or of the earth": *dyew* or *deywóes*. In Sanskrit *deva*, in Welsh *duw*, Irish *día* and Latvian *dievs*. In Latin we had *deus*, which in Romantic languages survives today is French *dieu*, Spanish *dios*, Portuguese and Galician *deus*, Italian *dio*...

The ancient Greek word Theos (Θεός) is drawn from a different idea. Not location, but action. It's believed to have its roots in the PIE root word *dhēs-*. This word formed the base of religious concepts and to my understanding, refers to an ability to set in place or put or make – which I then see as referring to the being or entity as the setter, or maker...or creator. We get words like: atheism, monotheism, polytheism, theology, enthusiasm, fest...

We are beings made of the earth and dirt, the created. To inhumate us is to send us back to it, to bury us in the earth from whence we came. Dust to dust.

In the late 18th and throughout 19th century, my ancestors became part of a diaspora. What was carried to New Zealand with my family? What was handed down? What was lost when we got torn up from the earth that had raised us?

Tau Iwi

We think we live in challenging times, but when I think of the challenges faced by our families before us, I'm overwhelmed. I think of my families of the British diaspora and the challenge to their faith from science and new discoveries, mega riches built on slavery, war, capitalist markets, imperialism and industrial developments. The disenfranchised - uprooted, separated and drifting to the cities and into slums, or to gold fields and makeshift towns on the other side of the world. Then the high infant mortality, workplace death and disease, cruel punishments, enforced conformity, the deep cultural, psychological and emotional loss that accompanies migration. We know that the prevalence of alcohol was a way of deadening ourselves to these things. Finally, the dog-eat-dog survival mechanism that means that the down-trodden soon turn into the down treaders.



Here I acknowledge one of my ancestors concretely: My great-great grandfather, known as “Pater” to the family. He was Jersey Island born. He would have spoken English and local Jerrais, as well as learning German and French at school. He continued to study languages by himself after migrating with his family to the Australian goldfields. In New Zealand he became an enthusiastic scholar of the “Māori world”. Naturally with his own gaze, he contributed to the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. Being a teacher and proficient in Te Reo, he was given the job of Chief Inspector of Native Schools and spent 25 years between 1880 and about 1906 making his way around the country, speaking with community leaders setting up schools.

My great-great grandfather was a dreamer and a thinker. He suffered from poor mental health and had a break down early on in his life. Perhaps he had dared turn over the rock and see what was underneath his colonial existence.

Image: James Henry Pope, aka Te Popi, moon and star gazer. Here he is at home in Marama Crescent, Wellington. I love the name of this street - it wouldn't have been lost on him either.

Faith

Are you secured in the love of God by faith alone or by the process of achieving spiritual maturity or perfection? The great Calvin versus Wesley argument. Calvin and Wesleyan traditions were handed down our family from both sides. I worked very hard to strive for spiritual perfection. Nothing was ever enough. There was always more one could do, more one could sacrifice, a new vice to root out, name and shame. That was the world I lived in – God's world. The other was the world without – the forest, the un-Godded wild and dangerous world. The contaminated place.

University was in that place. I was among the first generation of our family to go to university (universities are full of over educated idiots). I was intimidated and excited beyond words. I never really felt I handled art school well, but then, it served the purpose of crashing me through the membrane that separated earth and sky. *Humanus et deus. Creātor et Creātus*. All was now called into question.

Next came decolonising discourse, which side-swiped me during my post-graduate at Massey University and first years working in museums. This was the first time I really came into contact with a Māori world view having had until now, an entirely Anglo-centric lens.

My great-great grandfather was a passionate educator and deeply believed what he was doing was right. I had been raised to be proud of his work. Now he was also a coloniser and imperialist pawn. Not only my faith, my identity, but my whole epistemology was now in question. I was coloniser, tau iwi, pākehā. The outsider – she-of-another-breath. Like a good Wesleyan girl, I bore these names like a new cross. Got to try harder.

Forastera

In 1998 I left New Zealand to travel. I sold my Vespa, packed a backpack with 10kg of things and bought a ticket to Spain. Of course, Spain, why not? I was taking Flamenco lessons at the time.

It was the next step in the reshuffling of the universe: to experience being surrounded by a language that I could not speak, in the biggest city I'd ever been in, on the other side of the world. I've always described this experience as being like having a cataract peeled off my eyes, but really, it was like having my hearing and reception recalibrated.

I've lived 13 years of my life in Spain. I've gained a good command of the language, the politics and the humour. There are nuances of culture and expressions about life that can only be said in the Spanish of Andalucia. They have joined Māori concepts, sounds and language as part my own enriched and very personal *trans-language*. Seville is one of my hometowns. My children were born there.

But still, I am, and always will be, a foreigner there too. I am an outsider, an *extranjera*, *forastera*.

PIE word: *d^hwer-. Cognates include Sanskrit द्वार (dvār), Latin foris, Old Armenian դուրն (durin) and Old English duru and dor (English door). Foris brings us fuera (Spanish for outside and beyond) and forestero (Spanish for outsider or outlander), as well as forest. In old English this word was employed to describe wild unknown and uncultivated places before it became associated with trees. With all that these associations conjure of the *outside*, the significance in many cultures of the door lintel or *pare* under which we enter to go *inside*, shouldn't escape us.



Detail. *River Series: III*. Emma Louise Pratt 2019 mixed media on paper. 80 x 40 cm approx.



*Impermanence Series: II & III. Emma Louise Pratt 2019 mixed media on paper. 90 x 120cm approx.
Notes on the drawing refer to ancient Islamic schools of thought about atomism.*

Community & Action

I am a foreigner in community of foreigners. I am no longer strange. The community around me presently is about 50% non-British. We're a migrant community. Nearly 36 languages are spoken in our local school. It is also 40% special needs (the whole spectrum: linguistic, social, financial, behavioural, academic etc). Naturally, the school is stretched to breaking point, struggling with basic reading writing and math levels on top of linguistic, behavioural and emotional issues. There is much to be done.

The work I've made over the last few years has born itself from my own struggles with cultural, ideological and linguistic isolation and uprootedness. I add to that the struggles many people face while raising a young family. Art making is my attempt to process it all. Being surrounded, as I am now, by people going through similar experiences has motivated me to act and I am currently advising on linguistic barriers and language learning for a local community project. I also decided to continue with what I had begun with a Spanish school and now forms part of my arts practice.

Re-Imagining “Artist”

“Because of what’s happening now, there’s a sense of urgency that overrides the individualist position that pervades so much of our society. All creative arts have the capacity to be totally trans-disciplinary and collective. How can we do collaborative and collective projects well? In that area, I think a background in kaupapa Māori is really useful. If you come from a Māori background, it’s collective from the beginning. With the protocols around how you hui, how you wānanga, you are inculcated in dynamic dialogue and how to build platforms to take that dialogue further. I do believe colleges and creative schools need to be encouraging the ability to work well in groups. That’s an important part of being a 21st-century citizen. It’s far removed from the model of the individual artist or designer creating products solely for consumption.”

– Dr Huhana Smith (Ngāti Tukorehe and Ngāti Raukawa), head of Massey University’s School of Art. From the article by Julian MacKinnon, Art New Zealand Magazine, Autumn 2018 Article Water Level Rising.

From October 2018 – July 2019 I went every Thursday into the local school and set up studio – a form of artist residency. I had an open space and kids came and went, seeing my work, asking me questions and at times picking up a tool and contributing to the marks.

Some days I found myself even teaching some small thing about drawing, other days it was quiet and the odd child would come and sit with me, simply wanting to contribute some marks to my work. You’ll see marks here and there in the river drawings – even a sun, up near the corner if you look carefully in River Drawings V. The aim was simply “to be with” the children, my work and their work.

On these days and at home, I explored my mark making and saw where my marks and personal iconography was taking me - where I and it wanted to go. No rules, no Wesleyan destinations of perfection. I’m currently working on paper with a mix of graphite, watercolour pens, markers, gouache, ink and pencil. I’ve moved this way because I’m drawn to “draw”, to return to the basics of drawing.

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/344804002>



Detail, River Drawings I. Emma Louise Pratt 2019 mixed media on paper (120 x 90cm approx.)

Old English *dragan* means "to drag, to protract", an act of pulling. I am trying to pull out from the world around me. And what I get are moments of almost obsessive, seemingly arbitrary but expressive marks. I still remember how they felt to make, what they sounded like. These are the river drawings and the

work I shared with children in its making. At other times, the work is carefully finished. In these drawings I've chosen to be meticulous and more representational, as it were.

Death

These more "careful" drawings have been made since the massacre in Christchurch. My work, I confess almost works to avoid the human figure and I find the darker aspects of us very hard to deal with directly and visually. However, facing such an event and thinking back over my lifetime and knowledge of our ongoing self-harm and destruction, I felt compelled to reach within myself and find humans -dig down to the *humus*. I want to really "see" every detail of the human event, to feel the vacuity, the despair and repugnance within myself. An earlier work, *Whakangaromia* from my show *Infinity Has No Centre* at Whitespace in 2017 was a precursor to this. Attending these events are my attempts at figures, which are becoming more like the impermanent swirling dust that we are.

Stars we are told, are like nuclear reactors. "They take a fuel and convert it to something else. Hydrogen is formed into helium, and helium is built into carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, iron and sulphur—everything we're made of. When stars get to the end of their lives, they swell up and fall together again, throwing off their outer layers."

"Everything we are and everything in the universe and on Earth originated from stardust, and it continually floats through us even today. It directly connects us to the universe, rebuilding our bodies over and over again over our lifetimes." - Simon Worrall, 2014 National Geographic.



Impermanence Series: I. Emma Louise Pratt 2019 mixed media on paper (90 x 120cm approx.)

The Residency Project

On a practical level, I can be mobile and agile with paper – working between home on the floor, on the table and in the temporary studio at the school, even in the meadow by my home. My work can roll up and go with me on my bike, which is how I get around. It means I also use very simple materials that kids can use as well.

The subject matter that I draw from also draws out conversations about the “wild” spaces around us. What is disappearing, what is right near where many of the children live, but never engage with. I want to raise awareness. I wanted to make my work in the school so children would have a chance to see an artist at work, see how my images develop, and be able to engage in conversation and mark making with me all the while referencing these humble wild spaces under threat.



Image left: Adjoa was a regular visitor. She enjoyed making marks and helping me with images I was working on. She was new to the school and came to see me every week. She speaks five languages - her family has moved around Europe a lot.

Image below: A Dutch bike makes a mobile artist's studio and child carrier.



To finish, I'd like to quote local Emmanuelle College lecturer and writer Robert Macfarlane, whom I had the pleasure of listening to when he launched his latest book *Underland* here in Cambridge in May 2019. He writes this about the Anthropocene, our current time:

“There is dangerous comfort to be drawn from deep time. An ethical lotus-eating beckons. What does our behaviour matter, when Homo Sapiens will have disappeared from the earth in the blink of a geological eye? Viewed from the perspective of a desert or an ocean, human morality looks absurd – crushed to irrelevance. Assertions of value seem futile. A flat ontology entices: all life is equally insignificant in the face of eventual ruin. The extinction of a species or an ecosystem scarcely matters in the context of the planet's cycles of erosion and repair.” [or that of a universe one can also argue].

Macfarlane urges us not to give up. “For to think in deep time can be a means not of escaping our troubled present, but rather of re-imagining it: countermanding its quick greeds and furies with older, slower stories of making and unmaking”.

And so, with this, I take my unshod feet and inhume them in the earth. I take my place. I accept that I am but dust, stardust if you like, but nevertheless, a thinking, acting kind of dust. And I will keep doing something with this stuff.

- Emma L Pratt, Trumpington Cambridge, UK, July 2019



Image: Liverpool, UK, April 2019: The room about to fill up for a drawing workshop with language teachers from all the world.



Image: Talking about the conversations and interactions around, in and on drawing work from my Artists in Schools Project.