Odysseus escapes the cyclops

Rethinking ways of seeing

by Zoe Crook

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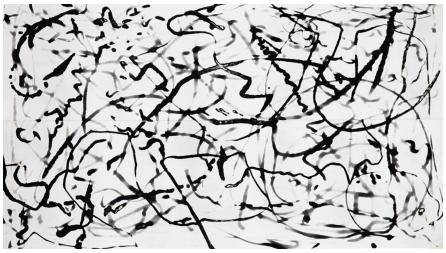
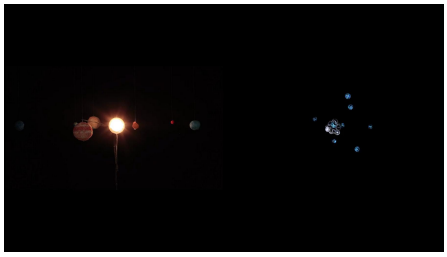
Jason O'Hara, *Invisible Descent*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Lisa Munnelly/Simon Eastwood, *Resurfacing: a study in transcience*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Cooper Holoweski, *As Above so Below,* 2017, Two-Channel Video Loop with Sound, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Jason O'Hara, *Invisible Descent*, installation view, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



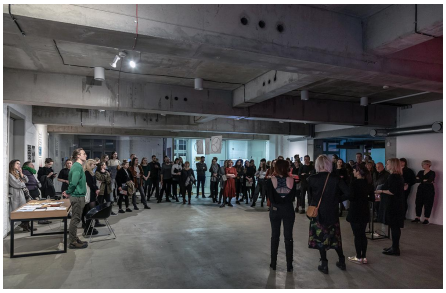
Zuzanna Dyrda, *Kindred*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.

Earlier this year, BWA Gallery in Wrocław, Poland presented *Invisible*, a travelling exhibition of twenty-one artists from the United States, New Zealand and Poland. Curated with the premise of building cooperation between Detroit's Cranbrook Academy of Art, Wellington's Massey University and Wrocław's Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design, *Invisible* will visit all three cities. The presentation in Wrocław from 14 February to 21 March 2020 marks the second iteration of the project, with Detroit being the first (15 June to 25 July 2019) and Wellington the last (currently planned for late 2020). Artists from the Aotearoa New Zealand contingent include Kerry Ann Lee, Simon Eastwood and Lisa Munnelly, Lee Jensen, Angela Kilford and Jason O'Hara. For each iteration, exhibiting artists associated with that locale will also act as curators. As the exhibition migrates, "home artists" have the

option of including their work from previous iterations of *Invisible*, or something different.

Something that is ‘invisible’ is defined as “incapable by nature of being seen”.[01] A foray into the unseen in all manners of the word, this travelling exhibition focuses on print and new media works that cultivate the invisible space between viewer and artwork, but can also evoke and question notions of visibility or lack thereof, vision and transparency.

Art critic John Berger's notion that “visuality” exists in the gap between knowing and seeing is critical to this exhibition.[02] Drawi ng on Odysseus’ escape from Polyphemus, (which beautifully plays with conceptual notions of visibility and with eye-related verbs) we can understand that this gap between knowing and seeing, if obstructed or misinterpreted, can subsequently leave one blind. The cyclops in Homer’s Odyssey sees Odysseus, but only understands him as “Nobody”, it is this misunderstanding that leaves Polyphemus physically blind and incapable of communicating Odysseus’ treachery to the other cyclops.



Invisible exhibition opening, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Be(e) installation by Sarah Epping and Aleksandra Trojanowska, *Invisible* exhibition view, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Invisible exhibition view, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



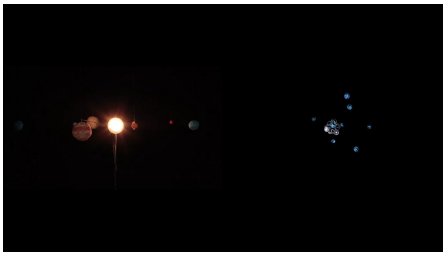
Curators Aleksandra Trojanowska and Sarah Epping, *Invisible* exhibition opening, BWA Gallery Studio, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.

Speaking to the curators of the Polish edition, Sarah Epping and Aleksandra Trojanowska, it became very clear that the interplay between vision and society was important, bringing an interdisciplinary focus to the project. This can be seen in the selected works departing from scientific narratives to also cover philosophy, mathematics, love, mythology, ecology, technology, and communication.

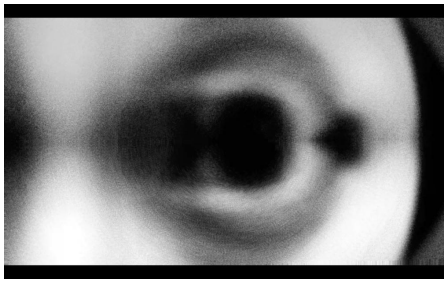
Approaching the invisible field with a sense of multiplicity and criticality, John Berger's statement that, 'The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled' speaks to many of the works in the exhibition.[03] The work of Polish artist Sebastian Łubiński's comes particularly to mind. *Initium* (2019) presents an infinite tension between recognition and vision. Encased in Petri dish-like resin casings, Łubiński's prints detail morphic shapes that are organic in design and anonymous in form. Evident of artistic process, the dark forms feature some lines (like those present in illustration) but not enough to fully represent an identifiable subject. As if motioning to this, the pseudo-petri dishes are propped up like photo frames with the quality of a mantlepiece to their arrangement. Above Łubiński's work, the curators have placed Angela Kilford's filmic depiction of the first moon phase of Matariki (Māori New Year), *Tangaroa* ā *mua* (2020). By posing the moon in its natural position "above" Łubiński's work, Lubinski's prints become both a stand-in representation for "life" as well as for earth itself. Presented as a projection, Kilford's work puts the viewer in a state of suspense, reiterating the transient nature of Matariki itself.[04] Assuming it's a film, the viewer waits for a flicker of wax or wane for reassurance that the earth is still turning, and that the new year is being ushered in. Unmoving, however, the moon stays forever on the crest of newness. The resistance to movement of Kilford's *Tangaroa* ā *mua* speaks to the uncanny. It marks a moment of the world's rhythm becoming undone, creating a sense of unease.



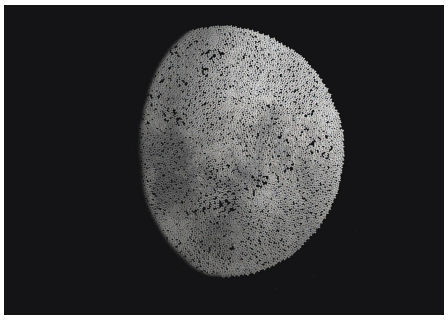
Sebastian Łubiński, *Novum ens XIV - 20*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



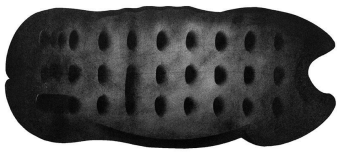
Cooper Holoweski, *As Above so Below*, 2017. Two-Channel Video Loop with Sound, 9min 12sec. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Jun Li, *Round 1-1 Ep1*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Angela Kilford, *Tangaroa* ā *mua*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.

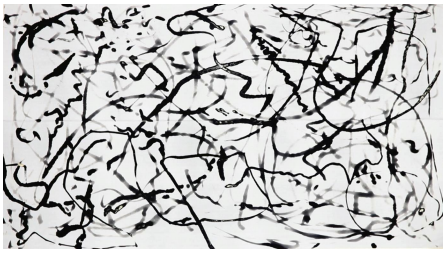


Sebastian Łubiński, *Initium*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.

A periphery of expectation is also resplendent in Cooper Holoweski's work. Curator of the American edition along with Emmy Bright, he works with ideas of macro and micro, specifically looking at "man's" relationship to the universe. In his video work *A s above so below* (2017), situated perpendicular to the entry of the gallery, Holoweski's work does well to introduce the themes of the exhibition. Inspired by both Robert Fludd's idea of macro and micro and the Eames video *Powers of 10* (1979) made for IBM, Holoweski takes everyday materials such as duct tape and rubbish and allows them to assert their presence through magnification and the zooming action of the camera. From cosmic to subatomic, the dual-screen film shares much with the narrative of the Eames film. In *As above so below* Holoweski interchanges visibility with uncertainty, speaking to the idea that technology has allowed us to see the unseen, that the invisible is something that only becomes present with technology.

Lisa Munnelly and Simon Eastwood similarly play with technology's tricks of visibility. An ongoing collaboration that is typically performative, Munelly and Eastwood have incorporated an antagonism towards the idea of presence usually central to performance art, presenting a recorded artwork empty of human

presence. The camera frame of *Resurfacing: a study in transience* (2 019) is static, and as we are locked into viewing from this singular perspective, traces of movement appear in the form of mark-making. A traditional calligraphic brush laces across the surface of the paper in rhythm with a soundtrack created by Eastwood. However, just as the figure who makes the marks never appears, nor does the origin of the sound. Elsewhere in the exhibition we see alternate representations of anonymous mark-making in the work of Jason O'Hara. *Invisible Descent* (2019) follows an unseen diver as they navigate under the ice in Antarctica using a thin green line. The diver's identity is never exposed, though the soundtrack reveals a deep laboured breath that marks their presence. Isolated under an imposing roof of ice, traces of the diver's presence are revealed by the camera's viewfinder exposing the green line traced by the diver. Recalling lines of sight in perspective, green belts in cities and the unseen cables that lie beneath the surface of the ocean to deliver us the internet, O'Hara's video work speaks of alternative borders arising out of a sublime landscape. The definition of the word invisible has parallels with the sublime; the sublime too is a concept, man-made, alterior to a landscape. It is a word that describes the emotion resulting from a relationship where the typicalities of object and subject are flipped. *Invisible Descent* reconnects us with the feeling of vulnerability produced therein.



Lisa Munnelly/Simon Eastwood *Resurfacing: a study in transcience*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Jason O'Hara, *Invisible Descent*, installation view, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



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Lisa Munnelly/Simon Eastwood *Resurfacing: a study in transcience*, installation view, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020. Photo: Zoe Crook.

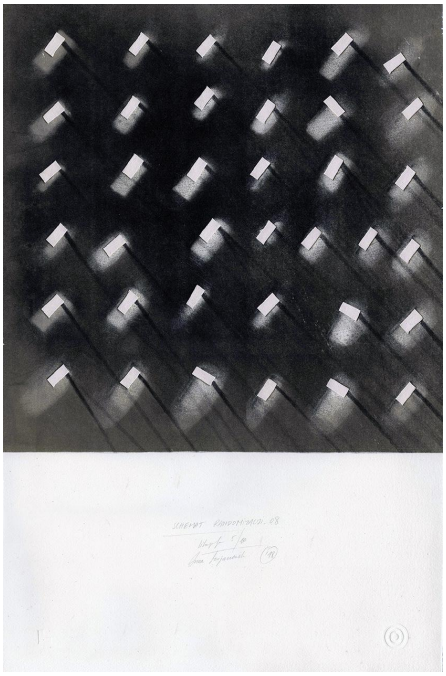
Lee Jensen's work *Emollient: Red - How does a smell look?* (2019) gestures similarly in the direction of alternative economies of cognition. Praising sensual understanding, Jensen's photograph alludes to a frustration with language. Depicting both cut flowers and commercial hygiene and cleaning products. Jensen's photograph ponders the power of the "fragrant object" when we cannot smell it. Perhaps alluding to Mark Rothko with the title, Jensen plays with the idea of this obstructed sensory perception. Rothko was infamous for proclaiming that his art embodied a Grecian sense of drama, particularly in the form of tragedy, ecstasy and doom. With *Emollient*, Jensen takes on a similarly Herculean task.

Reality and perception is further questioned in Polish artist Paweł Puzio's work, *Floating and Drowning* (2020). The photographic work features a man seemingly hovering, uncertain whether he is swimming or flying, over a sea or sky of data. The title of the digital print summons this uncertainty, as well as a darker reading of the depth of information below the anonymous man. Puzio's photograph playfully comments on Roland Barthes' notion of photography capturing "really being there", the artist having added

a random glitch to the image code.[05] Puzio's "touch" disturbs the image, denying the concept of the invisible artist's hand and drawing attention to the technology behind the work. Similarly, the human presence in Wrocław-based Zuzanna Dryda's works creates unease within the frame of the image. *Kindred* (2019) is a photographic compilation of twelve portraits. Lenticular prints, the images, hologram-like, have elements that change as the viewer moves from side to side. Portraits in a very traditional sense of the word, the frame of the image presents a typical head and shoulder shot. When the lenticular effect is activated the viewer sees the subject's arm move in an arc across their face. Simulating a form of verification used for facial recognition online, the subject appears to wave their hand, palm face-forward, across their face. The illusory nature of the prints plays directly with the title of the exhibition.



Zuzanna Dyrda, *Kindred*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Anna Trojanowska, *Schemat Randomizacji*. BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Kerry Ann Lee, *The Unavailable Memory of Gold Coin Café*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.



Kerry Ann Lee, *The Unavailable Memory of Gold Coin Café*, BWA Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. February, 2020.

Detroit-based American Jun Li's video piece *Round 1-1 Ep1* (2019) plays on the normalisation of clipped videos and short-form moving image (GIFS, Tiktok, Instagram stories). Asking us to monitor a system of relations, Li's video work eases us into a game of spot the difference. Where popcorn is posed against dimsum and ballet dancers against avatar-like cartoon figures, Li genty shuffles through found imagery and internet videos to make a subtle critique of racial stereotypes and typicalities of association. The

video's meaning is enhanced by its proximity to Kerry Ann Lee's installation. *The Unavailable Memory of Gold Coin Café* (2020) is an archival presentation of material from the café of the same name, which operated in Wellington from 1978-1986. A table is laid with a cassette player, images, a bank note, menu, diagrams, food wrappers, and letters, among other ephemera from this site of the artist's family's business and childhood home. Employing narratives of immigration and of integration, the image above the table of materials summarises the work well. Presented on thick paper, a laser-cut plastic image detailing a giant Chinese coin sits on its surface, uncertain of its adherence. The coin's vacated form reveals a filled *kete* (basket), a symbol of plenty. This cross-pollination of cultures interlaces social commentary with a great sense of care as it gently motions to New Zealand's multiculturalism, but also to the complexities of integration and rich microhistories present in urban settlements.

Invisible is not didactic; its purpose is neither to educate nor to moralise, but rather seeking to consider what it means to view art today. Thus aligning with curatorial practices of care and slowness, this travelling exhibition fits easily into the narrative of institution as ecology. The exhibition having a different curator each time questions institutional narrative-building, with an opportunity to highlight alternative perspectives and showcase other aspects of each artwork, or to bring in new artworks entirely. Mutual concerns shared by the three groups of artists about the struggle to find meaning in the world is what brought this event into being and gave the exhibition cohesion. Considering this framing, and the thematic qualities of the show itself, *Invisible* not only offers commentary upon the power of art, but speaks to a decidedly Homeric way of seeing.

Footnotes

01. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invisible.

02. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, London, 1973.

03. Berger, p. 7.

04. Matariki is a set of seven stars which briefly appear in New Zealand's sky during the shortest days of the year (typically in June-July).

05. Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang, New York, 1981.

Biographies



Angela Kilford is an artist based in Wellington. Kilford's inspiration comes from Māori concepts and knowledge. Her most recent works have explored the whakapapa of local ecology and the lesser known connections between living and nonliving entities. These ideas are examined and expressed through walking, performance, collaborative making, large scale public installations and writing. Following the completion of her MFA at Massey University in 2014, Kilford has presented a number of performative art works in Wellington including projects for; The Performance Arcade, Enjoy Gallery, a walk series and exhibition for Toi Poneke and a group project at Te Whare Hera Gallery. Performing Mobilities expanded Kilford's practice as she explored how the valuing of land of the first peoples of both Melbourne and Aotearoa New Zealand, disrupt Western narratives of place. In addition to her art practice, she has also written essays for the Mokopuna Island project and the *Puke Ahu Anthology*, which complements her non-fiction research published for the Memorial Park Alliance.



Jason O'Hara (b. 1968, Palmerston North) is a New Zealand contemporary artist, photographer and designer who graduated from Wellington Polytechnic School of Design in 1989. Although at times diverse, his work often draws on an interest in the New Zealand national psyche. In particular a new longterm project that he is exploring the effect New Zealand's geographic isolation has had on Kiwis in both a contemporary and historical context. His work has won numerous national and international awards and has been published internationally including *Art News New Zealand*, *Artist Profile* (Sydney) and *Graphis annuals*. In 2011 he was selected to join 8 of New Zealand's leading artists on a trip to the Kermadec Islands from which a touring exhibition was formed. He work has been shown exhibitions in New Zealand, Chile and Tonga and has been a judge in the New Zealand Best Design Awards. His work is held in public and private collections in New Zealand and internationally.



Kerry Ann Lee is a visual artist, designer and educator from Wellington who exhibits nationally and internationally. With a background in graphic art, she uses traditional and digital media to create socially engaged print and image-based works and installations. Her art meditates on themes of home, difference, and hybridity. It has also explored urban settlement and culture clash occurring in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Chinatowns.

In 2007, Lee was the recipient of the Asia New Zealand Emerging Researcher Award. In 2008, she created *Home Made*, an illustrated artist book and national touring art exhibition that presented an alternative cultural history of Chinese settlement in New Zealand. In 2009 she received a Fulbright Award to attend the Summer Residency Program at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, and she was an artist-in-residence at island6 Art Centre Shanghai through the WARE Programme. A survey of works created in Shanghai was shown at Toi Pōneke Gallery in Wellington in 2010. A work commissioned by The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa was shown for 18 months and featured on the covers of Art News New Zealand and Art Zone. Her artwork can be found in print, online, and in public spaces and private collections throughout New Zealand, Australia, Europe, USA and China.



Lee Jensen is a Wellington-based artist and designer with a Bachelor of Design from Victoria University and a Masters of Fine Arts from Massey University. His work investigates new relationships at the intersection of painting, ornamentation and the decorative arts, positioning historical sources with contemporary explorations of abstraction, pattern and site to produce paintings and wall drawings that activate complex semiotic references. Previous exhibitions include *Soliflore* at Toi Pōneke (2012); *L'abbondanza Della Strada* at Toi Pōneke (2012); *Five Treasures* with Kate Woods, at Michael Hirschfeld Gallery (2006); and *Red Ring* as part of *Satellite 06*, in Shanghai (2006). Jensen lectures in the School of Design and School of Art at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University.



Lisa Munnelly is a Wellington-based artist whose practice is a close and constant study of materiality, an examination of the relationship between mind, matter, action and form. Experiential methodologies of action, reflection and transformation underpin her performative installations. A signature of Munnelly's work is its embodiment of both economy and excess, formal constraints within the work contrast with the sheer scale and materiality of her drawings. In her recent series; *Dirty Edges and Clean Lines* the drawing develops as a play of folds. Folding/unfolding, enfolding/withholding, a procedural and perceptual movement of expansion and contraction that at once reveals and conceals.



Zoe Crook is an artist-writer based between Tāmaki Makaurau and Oslo.

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