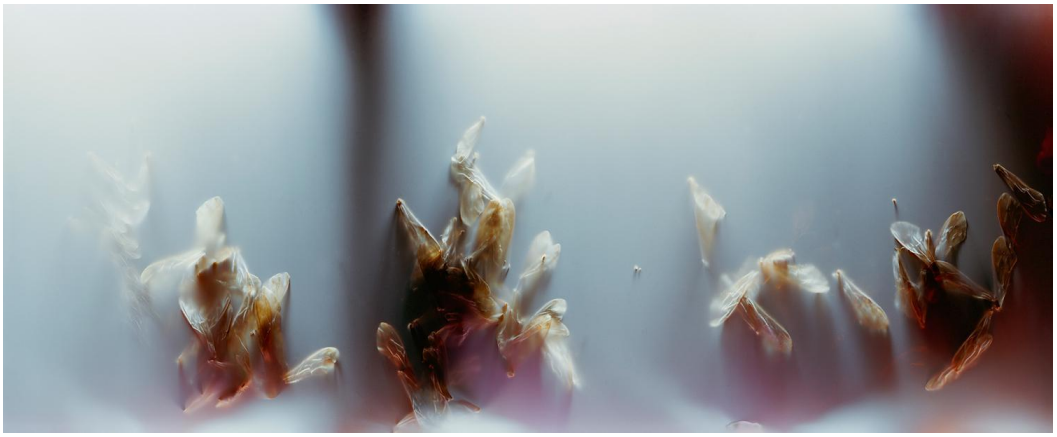
Singing with the Bees

by Pauline Autet

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The photographer Anne Noble, herself also a beekeeper, first encountered the Abbaye de Noirlac in 2014 when she accompanied apiculturist Jean-Pierre Martin on one of his visits to tend the abbey's beehives. The 12th century abbey near the French town of Bourges stands out as one of the best preserved, and extensively restored, historical monuments in a region where most stone buildings are much older than our celebrated Stone Store in one of my hometowns, Kerikeri, New Zealand. Now doubling as a cultural centre, Noirlac is more than a historic shell; it has an ambitious agenda that values and enables dialogue between the past and the contemporary.[01] It hosts numerous musical, artistic and literary events as well as the creative residency that Noble was granted in 2015 to develop new work and this year to complete and install her exhibition *Abeille*, presented at Noirlac from June to November 2016. The installation results from Noble's passion for bees and her sharp command of photographic processes paired with the interdisciplinary collaborations she undertook with Martin, the local apiculturist, and New Zealand jazz musician Hayden Chisholm who partook in the creation of soundtracks for the two video works on display.

Noble is a well established photographer in New Zealand and abroad, known for her direct approach to environmental realities and her ability to tell a story through subtle signifiers. While the honeybee and concerns of its potential disappearance hold centre stage in all the works presented at Noirlac, Noble continues to explore and experiment with the lens-based medium in this exhibition which includes video work, photograms, images made with a microscope and, the central element of the exhibition and culmination of her collaboration with Martin: a live colony of bees.

This is an unprecedented leap for Noble who has shown consistent interest for the social implications of her subjects, as she chooses to expand the possibilities of photography beyond flat, printed representations. Certain series on display were produced and previously shown elsewhere but the exhibition *Abeille* is unique for showing them together with new work; exposing a comprehensive overview of Noble's ongoing artistic experimentation, ecological concerns and romanticised fascination for bees.



Cloister of the Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Anne Noble, *Moonlight*, Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.

The architecture of the Abbaye de Noirlac, and its sombre stone constitution, inspires calm and self-reflection; a perfect setting for Noble's ghostly work. Finding the various parts of the exhibition in this immense estate demands time and inquisitiveness. Every murmur and footstep echoes here. With its internal spaces, openings and ceilings of expansive dimensions, the abbey seems to have been built to make a human feel small. When monks lived here, their time was divided into three parts: praying, working and the last third dedicated to basic life-essentials. Part of their work-time was spent tending crops, bees and with other manual labour but time was also assigned to intellectual work; reading and learning.[02] It is clear that Noble has spent considerable time here and absorbed the values and significance of the site. Her site-

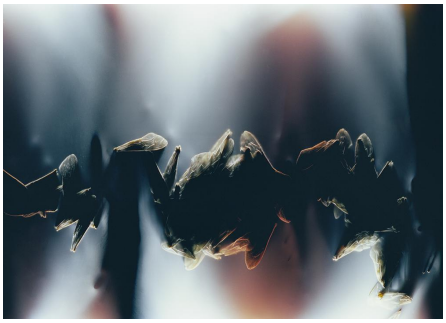
specific response is thoughtful, poetic and pedagogical; it offers moments for reflection and opportunities for learning. With no presumption of overshadowing the old with the new, the exhibition strives to be complementary to the site it occupies and reflect the monastic social values of silence and *conversatio*.[03] Silence in monastic terms was a form of listening attention that encouraged an awareness and respect towards ones surroundings. Noble's intention is to mark this silence while also prompting conversations relating to the welfare of bees and wider ecological concerns between artists, scientists, school kids and visitors of different backgrounds.[04]

Tucked up in one of the cloister's many alcoves, the first work I encountered at the Abbaye de Noirlac was *Moonlight*, a video work that begins with an out-of-focus image of bushy greens. It pays tribute to a French poem by Guillaume Apollinaire in which the stars are assimilated to bees. A buzzing sound in the musical soundtrack confirms the identity of the dots that whizz across the green background projected under the alcove. For a brief moment, the white silhouette of a tall figure in an old beekeeper's helmet appears on the wall and slowly spins around as if in search for something. The garment looks both vintage and futuristic; the apiculturist could well be walking on the moon or meeting Le Petit Prince on some fictional, romantic planet. This character is inspired from a 16th century drawing that Noble came across during her residency and serves as a nod to the abbey's past as a monastery when, for 500 years, monks lived here, farmed the bees that produced honey and the wax used to supply the vast premises with candlelight. A melancholic saxophone echoes in the room and can be heard faintly in the neighbouring cloister.

The second video *Rêverie* also bears a distinctive soundtrack paired with video footage of bees flying outside the abbey. A combination of bee-hum (recorded in the abbey's hive by Noble and Chisholm) and Georgics chants praising the natural environment; the sound composition is captivating and timeless. Throughout the exhibition, Noble engages the five senses but especially in these videos, sound plays the dominant part while the visuals stay mostly abstract, out-of-focus and evocative, encouraging a meditative and attentive behaviour from visitors.



Abeille photograms installation by Anne Noble, Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Anne Noble, *Bruissement*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

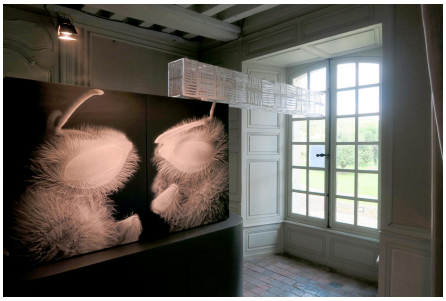
Continuing to wander through the stone building, I found on the first floor a long corridor lined on one side with stained glass windows and on the other with a dramatic series of Noble's large prints interrupted by doorways to monastic chambers. Two years ago, Noble found herself in the United States on a Senior Fulbright fellowship at Columbia College, Chicago at the same time as a toxic mix of parasites, pathogens, pests, starvation and the impact of pesticides was wiping out entire colonies of bees.[05] She collected bags of dead bees from devastated apiculturists and plucked their delicate wings to create the giant photograms. The high-contrast quality of these images is derived from the process used by Noble, mostly performed in the dark, who rolled the wings inside analogue colour film and, holding the roll in her hands, briefly exposed it to light. There is a powerful tension in these works; the red shadows that run vertically across the long prints, created by the light passing through Noble's fingers around the roll, feel warm and protective while the ghostly light that illuminates the dead insects is reminiscent, in this setting, of a heavenly light shining over (the living and) the dead.

At first, standing in Noirlac in total rural isolation, it felt as tough the all-encompassing silence, the absence of inhabitants and the eerie work presented by Noble, was both prompting bigger questions about the future of the world we live in while also expressing a resigned, desolated response. But in a room half way down the corridor is what initially appears to be an elevated block enveloped in a series of grayscale microscope images that Noble produced in Jean-Pierre Martin's laboratory. Dr Martin, a physicist, uses a method for bee observation through an electron-scanning microscope, something which prompted Noble's

photographic interest in 2014 after she acquired beehives in her garden and started to observe her bees more closely.[06]



Beehive Cabinet, installation by Anne Noble, Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Beehive Cabinet, installation by Anne Noble, Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Photographer Anne Noble with her beehive cabinet. Photo: Pauline Autet.

Noble worked in Martin's laboratory to make the series *No Vertical Song: Dead Bee Portraits* in which an electron beam is used to trace the surface of the dead bee rather than traversing it as light would. The outcome is similar to an x-ray, yet the absence of transparency makes the wings look as if covered in dust, still clinging to an insect deceased a long time ago. Noble thinks of these bee portraits, with individual bees set on a stage like a microscopic museum plinth, as 'images for a museum of the bee for a time when the bee no longer exists.' The portrait format of these images and the magnifying effect of tiny insects to human scale makes visible the fragility of bees. Since one third of our food is pollination-dependent and bees are doing the vast majority of the work, it is rather ominous to consider how our ecosystem would change without bees.[07] Through the magnified construction of her photographs, Noble shows the bee in direct relation of scale to humankind and exposes the importance of this relationship. The accompanying publication discusses these concerns more explicitly through an essay on bee consciousness written by the esteemed neuroscientist Martin Giurfa alongside correspondence between Noble and Martin entitled 'For the love of bees'.

While extinction and death are major probes of the show, these photographic works also introduce an ambitious interactive piece, which by contrast to the ghostly works on display, celebrates bee life and bee activity. Initially the only hint to what is inside the closed block are the bees which can be seen entering and leaving

through a perspex tunnel above it that connects to the exterior through a window. On one side of the block, two small outlets also allow visitors to smell and hear what lives inside, hopefully sparking the curiosity that would lead us to closer observation and enquiry. Twice a day there is an ‘opening’ of the beehive cabinet; a moment when doors are pulled apart on both sides to reveal a contemporary interpretation of a curiosity cabinet with scientific equipment embedded on each side and a lush red, velvet cushion in the centre (also a functional insulator for the bees) which is removed to uncover the living hive within, visible behind glass. This finely crafted timber object was commissioned by Noble in New Zealand and shipped by container to France earlier this year. When I visited, three weeks after the exhibition opening, the bees had worked through three quarters of the wax foundation and the activity inside the cabinet was in full swing. After weeks of rain and bad weather, the working bees were building and stocking while the queen, identifiable by a coloured mark on her back, laid eggs at an alarming speed. Another sensory amplifier, pairs of jewellers spectacles are available in the timber draws to experience the hive more intimately. Observing the bees’ various activities seems to be Noble’s delight particularly when groups of visitors or school groups are glued to the glass.



Beehives at Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.



Beehive Cabinet, installation by Anne Noble, Abbaye de Noirlac, France. Photo: Pauline Autet.

With electron-scanned images of dead bees on the outside and a world of wonder on the inside, this is the work that required the most attention and time to execute successfully. After months of collaboration with Martin and trials executed by both artist/beekeper and physicist/beekeper in New Zealand and France, the culminating result is the masterpiece of the show and, as Noble notes, it's also an experiment which is still in progress. The perspex tube that connects the hive to the exterior was initially only partly successful. Bees, with their compound eyes, were confused by the transparency of the perspex when they entered the tube from outside and were not able to fly through the 2.5m length of it, resorting instead to a slow crawl to reach the hive entrance at the other end. Further research into how bees see the world when flying at high speed and multiple trials later, the solution found was to cover the perspex in a pattern of vertical and horizontal lines in order to create orientation points for bees to see and fly through the tube. Visibly, bees now slow down at the entrance and fly most of the way to the hive entrance.

The site-specific installation *Abeille* draws correlation to the site of Noirlac and especially with the monastic way of life which advocates humility, hard-work and silent observation. Like monks in medieval times, the colony of bees at the core of Anne Noble's exhibition lead a life of continuous and organised work, confined to their closed quarters but with an exit to the sky. Like many other historic monuments in France, Noirlac had a complicated history after the French Revolution, changing ownership and used for different purposes.[08] Today monks have gone but the bees are still here, their singing can be heard while walking through the tall historic lime trees of the abbey's garden by those who listen.

A version of this essay was published in the Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture, Penn State University Press in December 2016.

Footnotes

01. www.abbayedenoirlac.fr/abbaye-de-noirlac-noirlac-centre-culturel-de-rencontre-58.html

02. www.abbayedenoirlac.fr/doc.php?ID=71

03. www.oblatespring.com/oblatespring0202conversatio.html

04. Anne Noble, conversation with Pauline Autet (Bruère-Allichamps, June 29, 2016).

05. Noble, *Conversation*, 2016

06. Kate Brettkelly-Chalmers, *A conversation with Anne Noble*, 2015. www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/anne-noble/

07. www.bbka.org.uk/learn/general_information/life_in_the_hive

08. www.abbayedenoirlac.fr/abbaye-de-noirlac-histoire-57.html

Biographies



Anne Noble (b. Whanganui, Aotearoa New Zealand) is one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most widely recognised and respected contemporary photographers. Noble has been at the forefront of photographic practice in New Zealand since first attracting attention in the early 1980s with her acclaimed photographs of the Wanganui River. Noble has since created bodies of work as 'essays' or 'narratives' that mark her sustained engagement with particular sites and species, most notably her decade-long project on Antarctica. Noble's images are renowned for their beauty, complexity and conceptual rigour and for their persistent inquiry into the methods through which we perceive and come to understand the natural world. Her more recent work has centred on the physiology and contemporary predicament of the honeybee and charts several projects in which Noble has collaborated with researchers and scientists to develop images that articulate the delicate majesty of these beings. The most recent iteration of this ongoing project, *Conversatio: A cabinet of wonder* was exhibited at The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at QAGOMA (2018-19). Anne Noble is Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts (Photography) at Massey University, Wellington and is the recipient of numerous awards including the 31st Higashikawa Overseas Photographer Award (2015), a Fulbright Fellowship at Columbia College, Chicago (2014), an Arts Foundation Laureate Award (2009), US National Science Foundation Artists and Writers Award (2008). She has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally and her work is held in collections throughout the world.



Pauline Autet is an independent editor, curator and project manager. Based in Paris since 2016, Pauline founded Contemporary HUM in collaboration with other art professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand based in Europe and beyond. She previously worked at City Gallery Wellington, 30upstairs Gallery and co-founded the nomadic gallery Elbowroom. Following her experience as attendant of the New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Biennale for Simon Denny's *Secret Power* exhibition in 2015, she thought something could be done to bridge the gap between Aotearoa and the wider art world and developed HUM. Since 2016 she has worked with the Aotearoa and French art scenes concurrently. She is in charge of the editorial platform *TextWork*, initiated by the Fondation Pernod Ricard and in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture. She is also Executive Director of Trampoline, a non-profit initiative created by a group of private organisations in France to support and raise the international profile of artists from the French art scene.