

WATERTABLE

JAMES GEURTS

ST ARNAUD STREET MUSEUM

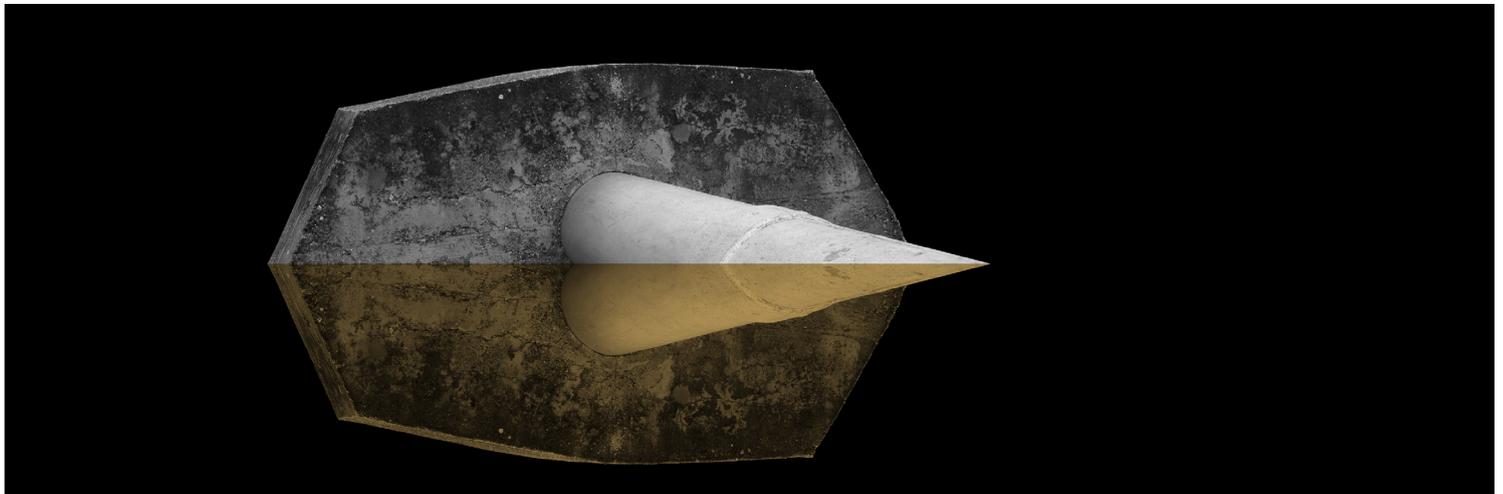
NAPIER STREET, ST ARNAUD

An initiative of the Northern Grampians Shire Council

The St Arnaud Civic Precinct Plan, commissioned by the Northern Grampians Shire Council, was developed by MvS Architects with SGS Economics & Planning and Maudie Palmer AO. It was presented in March 2014.

The Street Museum is a major component of the Plan, and will see Artists in Residence install works that have been completed during their stays in St Arnaud. The Street Museum will operate throughout 2015, occupying the shop fronts along Napier Street and one extensive brick wall. Different artists will be invited to reside in the township each season and explore different themes which will draw inspiration from the history and contemporary life of St Arnaud.

The first Artist in Residence James Geurts commenced his residency in September 2014 and his exhibition *Watertable* will be on display in the Street Museum from January until April 2015, curated by Maudie Palmer AO.



Pipeline, Photograph 1.2m x 2.2m, James Geurts 2015

ON THE LIQUIDITY OF HORIZONS...

JULIE LOUISE BACON

Think not of the gold of the markets of this world, but of the gold of the imagination that moves us through the matter of this world to its wonder and gift.

The events of the Gold Rush that ignited in Victoria in the 1850s, and which swept up the Wimmera region, have had a profound influence on the land and the minds of inhabitants. Over 150 years after gold was first discovered in the State, traces of the impact, development and decline of the boom can be seen and felt in the lie of the land, both explicitly and silently.

The Rush dramatically altered the earth and watercourses of the area, the shape and scale of its towns, and the contents of its folklore. Nascent settlements expanded exponentially into sprawling camp-towns, populations swelled like human rivers, and eventually the spoils of the trade led to the erecting of incongruously grand architecture on previously untouched valleys, woods and savannah plains.¹ The land claims of mining exploits followed closely on the heels of the aggressive expansion of

commercial farming ventures, which are distinct from the small to medium family-run holdings in the region's history² Whilst pioneering made the way for new beginnings and communities, this activity ratcheted up the degree of destruction of the natural setting.

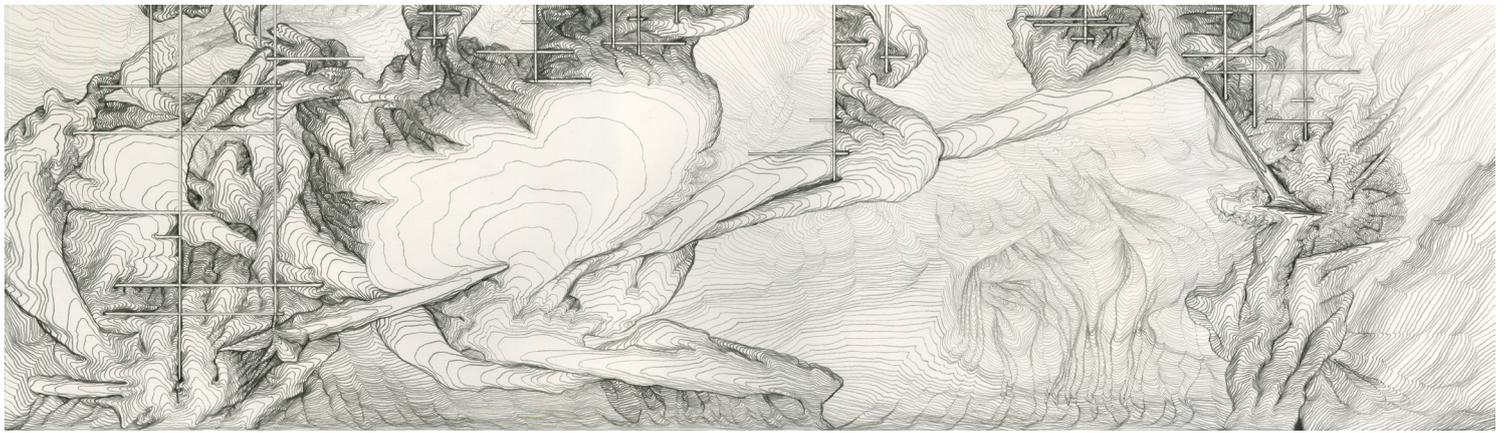
With such pursuits of fortune another entity immediately becomes pivotal, one on which all human projects depend: water.³ Water to turn the wheels of industry, to irrigate the land of opportunity, to sustain the people. Together, a great deal of the social, infrastructural and mythological shape of the Wimmera has been formed through projections of wealth, power and belief associated with gold and water.⁴ As the inaugural artist-in-residence in St Arnaud, James Geurts has chosen to concentrate on the unfolding reality of water in the geography and psyche of the town. The title of the project – *Watertable* – invites us to consider the connections that occur beneath the surface as well as above, buried in the

1 There is a notable contrast between the amenities in towns built with gold money, and the relatively modest layout of towns established on farming.

2 J.M. Powell's book *Watering the Garden State* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) collates a wealth of research and historical information that informs this essay, combined with commentary from local sources.

3 As Powell emphasizes, there is an "ancient relationship between water management and community development." *Ibid*, p.16.

4 It was not long before water was revealed to be of greater value than gold in the region, with water rights coveted, traded, and contested in law courts.



Drawing *WATERTABLE*, durational work on paper as mural, 10m x 3m, James Geurts 2015

earth and our imaginations. It touches on the role of water in mining, farming and the livelihood of the area as a whole. The residency is the initiative of curator Maudie Palmer, who is widely recognised for her contribution to the development of the arts in Victoria.⁵

In St Arnaud, Geurts continues the site-specific approach to art making and the focus on water themes, that has brought him prominence on the Australian and international art stages.⁶ Geurts' decision in the 1990s to focus his artistic research practice on the role that perception can play in a reimagining of our interaction with the environment has proven to be both innovative and prescient. In domains as specialised and contrasting as cognitive science and quantum physics there is an awareness of the power of the gestural on the shaping of our thoughts and the influence of micro-actions on macro-dynamics. The artist aligns the medium of water with modes of perceiving and envisages water's forms and fluxes as corollary to ways of thinking and acting. This approach exposes water as a connector of fields as apparently disparate as poetry and engineering, religion and technology. "Water is so intrinsic to the human that we cannot talk of 'human nature without considering the nature of water'.⁷ This statement by J.M. Powell in his insightful history, subtitled *Water, land and community in Victoria 1834-1988*, comes to the fore in Geurts' work.

The residency concept that Palmer devised in St Arnaud involves the creation of a 'street museum', a starting point that Geurts has developed into a series of six interventions across shop windows and walls of the town's main thoroughfare, Napier Street. The artist has connected the six 'stations' with a line that runs down the street beginning above eye-level and gradually sloping down. This line references a flood that occurred in the town, documented in a photograph that the artist unearthed in the local Historical Society.⁸ Geurts has amplified this phenomenon, transforming the absent floodline into a horizon and tracing it in gold. The effect of this is to merge the spectral memory of the flood and the fantasy of golden horizons, whilst connecting these with the 'underground horizon' of the watertable.

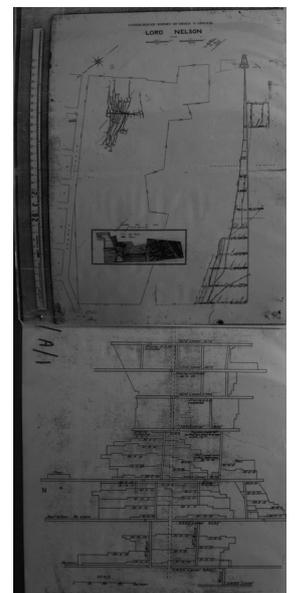
The golden-horizon water-line begins at the local IGA supermarket, down from the old Manchester

Arms – a once-decaying grand hotel that is now being creatively regenerated as Lamartine, and which serves as a base for the residency. The supermarket's generic advertising hoarding has gone, temporarily replaced by a large mural drawing by Geurts. The ways in which we create maps speaks of the values that we hold and the intentions that we bear just as much as they document 'reality'. After all, our means of measurement are themselves expressions of what we care to measure. In *Watertable*, the lines of the drawing suggest a map-making process that is seeking out the features of infrastructure (mining), intertwining with geological formations (water bodies and strata in the Earth's crust) in conversation with the contours of our imagining of all this. The substitution of branding for the potentiality of the abstract drawing, the replacing of a practical sign for an imaginary proposition, is beautiful.

There is a desire in the drawing to associate the conscious with the subconscious, to draw out the unseen and amorphous that lies embedded in the everyday as well as its manifest structures. The work reminds me of the ideas of the philosopher Blaise Pascal who, in the 17th century, posited two ways of knowing about the world. The 'spirit of geometry' involves the capacity to break things down, to analyze and calculate. The 'spirit of finesse' concerns those areas of human endeavor that do not lend themselves to measurement or calculation. Finesse is necessary to the apprehension of those things that can't be 'broken down', rearranged and improved through purely analytical methods.

The work of phenomenologists in the 19th and 20th centuries extended this thinking into a consideration of the correlation between elements of the mind and forms of matter. Poet-philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Gaston Bachelard were in fact challenging the limits of distinctions between the organic and inorganic, materiality and immateriality. Geurts' practice contributes to an arc of artistic and philosophical enquiry that shows up the contingency and pre-conditioned framing that separates the human from other presences - be they mineral, vegetable, or animal - and which seeks to emphasize our interdependency.

The discovery of the flood photograph and site drawing process reflect the research practice that



Lord Nelson gold mine, penetrating the watertable at 2405' deep.

⁵ Palmer's innovations include her role as Founding Director of both the Heide Park and Art Gallery (now the Heide Museum of Modern Art) and the TarraWarra Museum of Art.

⁶ In 2014, these included commissions in maritime regions of Holland (hotelmariakapel.com) and the UK (tonefestival.com), and a survey exhibition in Dallas at Zhulong Gallery. See www.jamesgeurts.com

⁷ Powell highlights, "The supreme importance of water resources to Australian society [...] Aridity or semi-aridity prevails over most of the country, annual rainfall totals show wild variations and evaporation rates are extremely high." Ibid, p.21.

⁸ Such floods were aggravated by excessive deforestation and the depletion of the underground water resources. It is an example of hubris that the destabilised ecology that mining and farming produced led to the flooding of many mines and the contamination of land.

Geurts sustained throughout the residency. This has seen him investigate the visual language of place in the arrays of archives and junk stores. The artist has responded to chance observations and pursued studies in the landscape. This has led him to significant and often overlooked sights such as a sophisticated aboriginal water-container adapted from a naturally-eroded section of rock. In his explorations, Geurts has considered manmade structures and natural formations above and beneath ground. He has interacted with the community be it through presentations at schools, participation at cultural events or informal conversations.

In the course of the project photography, collecting, and drawing have come together in a process of gauging, allowing the waves of time created by visiting and revisiting places and people to cast up offerings. The art residency format seems ideally suited to the context of St. Arnaud, as it favours a subtle, engaged process, and facilitates an approach to place that involves research conducted at a human scale, radiating outwards, both across the surfaces and in the depths of things. The focus in *Watertable* is primarily on aesthetic concerns, on letting a sensing of place in and drawing the processes of observing, testing and reflecting out into the forms of the work.

Moving along Napier Street from the drawing, following the golden line, we encounter a photographic mural on the wall of a branch of the NAB bank, featuring the first element of the collection, a water-recycling pipeline. Whilst in contemporary times recycling has come to the fore of our collective consciousness in the over-developed West, its relevance here is intensified by the reality of the droughts that affect the region at regular intervals.⁹ Geurts has photographed the pipeline at an angle, creating an apex. He has also used the water-horizon line as a means of imagining and then creating a reflection of the pipeline, coloured in gold.

The series of four reworked shop windows that follow each feature sculptural casts of water vessels. These are suspended in front of photographic murals that depict larger-scale water apparatus on black backdrops. Continuing the doubling effect seen in the recycling pipeline, Geurts has cast each object twice, leaving the first raw plaster and painting the other gold, before suspending the raw plaster form above its gold counterpart. The mirroring effect reiterates the concerns of water and gold that visibly and invisibly shape and haunt the land. It is as though the innate psychological conditions of the place, buried within its physical and social reality, are being materialised.

The objects that are featured in the four displays, as prints and casts, are both contemporary and historical. In the routine of the day-to-day, the habit of perception tends to give rise to a rather flat way of seeing things, an expedient one that focuses overwhelmingly on function and instrumentality. Here the objects are taken aside from their daily life, reworked aesthetically and reframed. This gives the compressed resonances of objects time to come to life. And so we can reflect on the ways in which objects embody the duration of knowledge, of techniques passed on and emerging technologies: from hand-

held pumps to the recycling pipeline. They express the flow of ideas, tastes and needs taking shape in the network of personal and collective forms that we name culture: from the water trough to the water dispenser. Objects hold within them values that range from the ideological to the poetic: from the irrigation rig of industrial farming to the recreational diving board.

There is a clear shift in *Watertable* from the staging of the object as an illustration of a chronological history, to the installing of a conversation between connected moments, ideas, and timelines. Palmer's curatorial concept for the residency invites such a vision, and the approach is one that I have explored in museological projects based on the principle of mixity, rather than classes and taxonomy. Implicit in this strategy is the understanding that, "archivisation produces as much as it records,"¹⁰ in other words the way that we produce the past is a means of making the present.¹¹

As I walk along Napier Street, I am prompted to reflect on the ways in which our tools are part of us, how do they (we) behave, what do they (we) perform, using what energy (spirit)? A concept of the philosopher Michel Foucault comes to mind in the variety of the elements and conversations in *Watertable*: the 'heterotopia'. These are spaces of otherness, that are simultaneously mental and physical, non-hegemonic, existing in time but also out of time.

Watertable is a conversational, open-work,¹² showing up the intertwining of the psyche and geography. That said, it can be powerful to explore the economic, political and social through the realm of the aesthetic. Ideas take shape through sensations and impressions that are known and unknown to us. When we widen the scope for exploring and reflecting on the physicality and metaphysics of the world we also open up opportunities for less habitual experiences of time. The works in *Watertable* prompt double-takes, hold our gaze and create pauses, enabling both new social interactions and private musings.

The ways in which we pay attention, or choose not to, our capacity to focus, is of profound, poetic, political and philosophical significance. In his recent writings, the philosopher Bernard Stiegler has analysed the effects of the acceleration of change that arises from a combination of technology and economics. He has argued that our ability to pay attention to the world of which we are part is being impacted upon:

Attention [...] is the mental faculty of concentrating on an object [...]. This is why the destruction of attention is both the destruction of the psychical apparatus and the destruction of the social apparatus [...] to the extent that the later constitutes of system of care, given that to pay attention is also to take care.¹³

Conversations between the objects in *Watertable* resonate this insight. Take the system of care present in the canteen versus the 1.5L plastic water bottle: one is refillable and precious, the other is disposable, a pollutant. It is an irony that the most essential of things – water – is sold on the basis of its purity, whilst the plastics used to commodify it are highly toxic,

9 Droughts, like floods, have been exacerbated by the water extraction methods of the past. Powell highlights the, "rewards and sanctions [of the] alien rhythms of farming and grazing and the impact of residential expansion." Ibid, pp.29-31.

10 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p.7.

11 This body of museological and curatorial work is surveyed in Julie Louise Bacon, *Recollecting the Poetry and Politics of Archival Spaces: Performance and Installation Art in the Museum* (Ulster University: Belfast, 2006)

12 *Watertable* recalls the storytelling-semiotic Umberto Eco's idea of *The Open Work* (Harvard Uni. Press: 1989)

13 Bernard Stiegler, "Bernard Stiegler and Irit Rogoff Transindividuation" [<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/transindividuation/> Last accessed 06/01/2015]

threatening the oceans' ecosystems. The lack of care in the production of the object combines with an erosion of care in our attitude, as a social norm of destruction reappears in the guise of the disposability mindset.

The methods that Geurts has employed to produce *Watertable* do not seek definition but value proposition. It is interesting to consider the difference in atmosphere and character between this propositional mode and the drive of speculation that is central to the prospecting as a whole, and gold in particular. An economic timeline connects the Gold Rush, early land grabs and the contemporary stock markets. This connection is one of spirit – the drive for profit above all – and a bond of practice, in terms of attitudes to time, space and livelihood. Stiegler asserts that: [...] the tragedy of short-termism is in essence a rule of capitalist system. The gigantic financial crisis sending tremors all over the world is the disastrous result of the hegemony of the short term of which the destruction of attention is at once effect and cause.¹⁴

In contrast, a desire for duration translates as a concern for sustainability, whether duration means increasing the attention that we pay to things and the ways in which we perceive them, or exploring the symbolism of our thoughts and their relationship to our everyday actions and projects. A wheel of reckless fortune has clearly always been in play where rapacious prospecting is concerned. Now, abandoned mine shafts and a disproportionate number of beautiful old hotels and weathered buildings act as landmarks in the towns and environs of the Sunraysia Highway, as it makes its way through golden fields and across countless dry creek beds. For all extraordinarily rapid development there is an aftermath.

A growing body of thinking – from a community as diverse as geologists and philosophers – asserts that we are in a new age, that of 'the Anthropocene', "a geological epoch defined by our own massive impact on the planet."¹⁵ A fundament of this viewpoint holds that we cannot expect to precipitate extreme effects in the land and not feel them elsewhere. This proposition adds to an awareness of the interaction of the psychic, physical and social realms: they are not separate, rather they are produced through one another. Like water drops in webs, awareness evaporates and recondenses in the conversation between familiarity and renewal. *Watertable* offers a space to recapture, trace and reimagine atmospheres, impressions and sensations of this interdependent reality.

There is tension as well as poetry in the aesthetic decisions that Geurts has made: to float the photographic forms on a deep black void; to double the objects in plaster and gold; to unify the array of forms with a single golden-horizon water-line, which also eventually becomes a vanishing point. There is something of the alchemical here, where the banal is made strange and empowered through an intensification and transformation of mundane aesthetics. Looking at the works in the six stations one senses time congealed and time-travelling, the worldly and other-worldliness. In the act of taking care to reimagine, there is a reconfiguration of the extreme processes through which objects are habitually either

emptied of worth or heightened with meaning and sublimated into the special categories of artifact and archetype.

The openness of meaning that this creates – destabilising the object-sign-value relationship – precipitates an awareness of our social groups and bodies as vessels and conduits: we are conveying aspirations and transmitting values, and these are embodied in our interaction with the land, objects, and others. This prompts a reflection on the nature of what endures, of what will endure, and of which accidents and which designs? There is an alchemy of the everyday running through *Watertable*, and it is present in St. Arnaud, just as it is always to be found at the threshold between the knowledge that we gather from our experiences of life and our capacity for curiosity and wonder.

14 Ibid, Stiegler.

15 "Working Group on the Anthropocene" [<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/> Last accessed 05/01/2014]

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Water Bottle 1.5lt, plaster cast, 56cm x 18cm x 6cm, James Geurts 2015

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