



## Turning Blue

In the Water with Cathy Carter

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What can be learnt from water? Cyclone Gabrielle brought its power to bear last year, inscribing the phrase 'atmospheric rivers' in our memories. Sea levels are rising, and as part of the Pacific Ocean, with

one of the longest coastlines in the world, we need to act. Artist Cathy Carter has been researching and working with water for over a decade. Her work is an exploration of how an engagement with this liquid medium might inform our political decisions and how we think about ourselves as humans on the planet.



(opposite) Cathy Carter's *Immersive Emergence*, at AUT, 2013. The installation occupied a space of 12 x 6.6 metres, and consisted of a 4 HD single-channel video & 42 sealed plastic tubes containing 295 litres of seawater collected from the Waitemata Harbour at six different tides

(right) CATHY CARTER *Ika-tere* 2014

Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag mounted on dibond, 725 x 1190 mm.

(below) CATHY CARTER *Drifting #1 Pataua* 2014

Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 2200 x 600 mm.

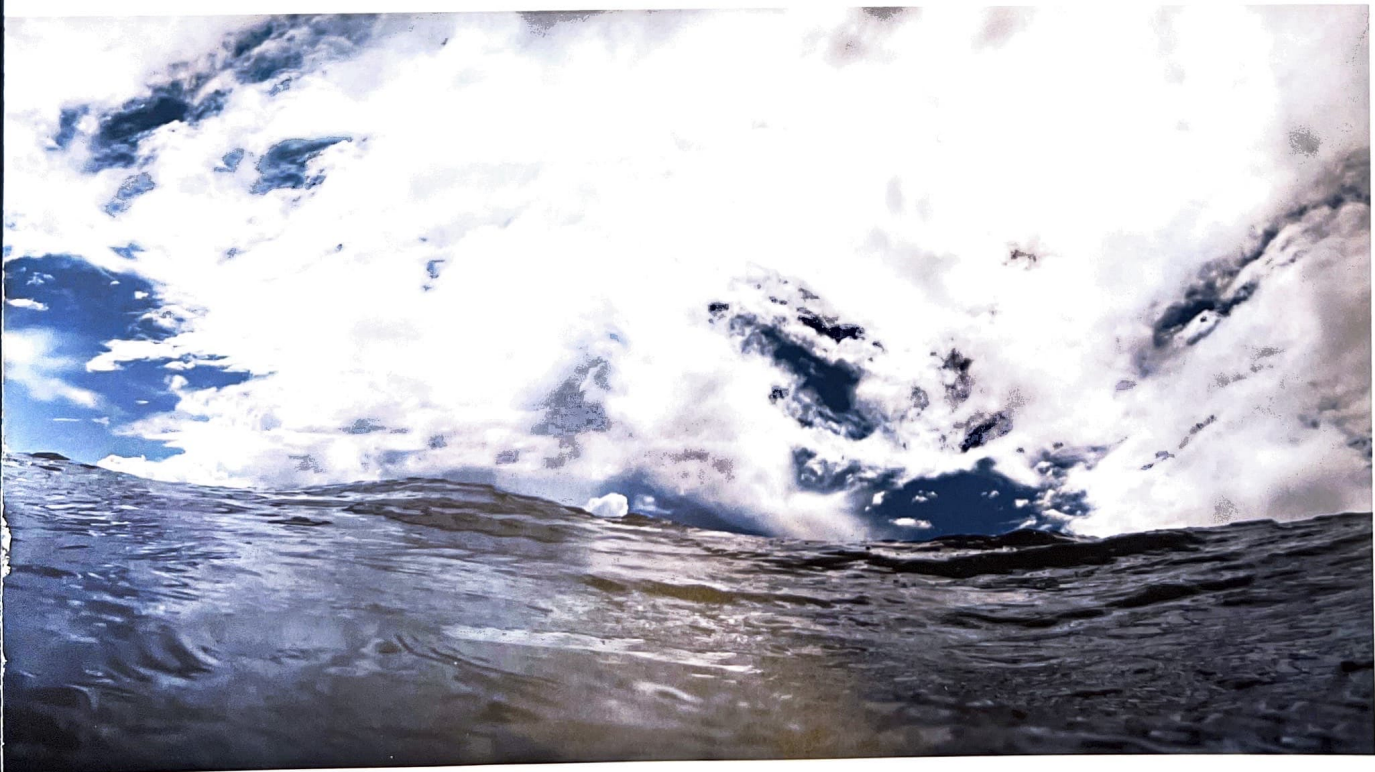
Carter is also a cold-water swimmer. Her own embodied engagement with the sea, often the Waitemata Harbour, is a powerful methodology for her art-making. It inspired her research for her Masters of Visual Arts presentation *Immersion and Emergence* at AUT in 2013 where 42 sealed plastic tubes filled with 295 litres of sea water collected from the Waitemata Harbour were suspended in the exhibition gallery, gently swinging. They filled the space with the smell of the sea, while four HD videos of the heaving waters were projected through the tubes to three surrounding walls and the entire floor. Naturally, the composition of the water filling the tubes was at issue. This project was timely then, and particularly apposite now, when recent contamination has led Aucklanders to worry more than ever about the health of its aquatic playground and food source.

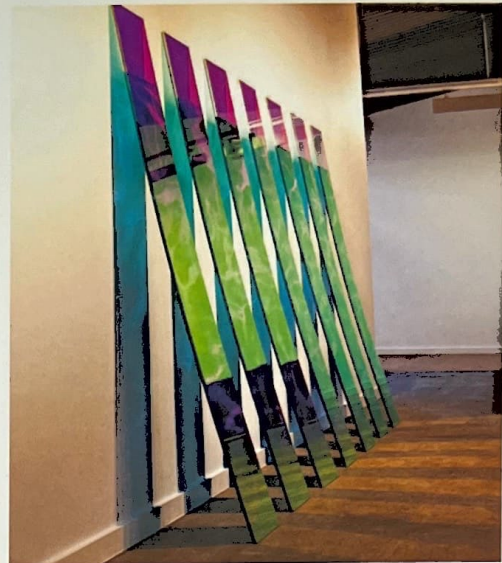
Carter's first solo exhibition on this theme, at Antoinette Godkin Gallery in 2014, combined digitally altered images of water surfaces and blurred lakes. It was titled *We Float*, and included a darkened dramatic view of a young man's torso, floating beneath the surface, submerged within the unseen, but sensed, water. By introducing a human figure to her suite of works, Carter was foregrounding our relationship with land and water, and alluding to the urgency of current ecological concerns. The waters shown in this



suite of works were wild and mysterious, and difficult to separate into their constituent sources of sea, lake and river.

Linking to this sensory approach, Carter pioneered a new way of working in 2014. As research for her practice, she experimented with surrendering herself to the ocean, observing how, if she stopped swimming, she would stay suspended in the water, slowly drifting out to sea, carried by the tide and currents. She photographed her aquatic observations as she floated, later stitching the photographs together digitally to create a sense of that immersive environment, with no land in sight. Here is the vastness of Nature, contemplated from the situation of an individual's insignificance: the sublime predicament. Yet, the effect is not intimidating but somehow reflective of Carter's own confidence; she is at home in the sea. For this artist, the sensation of floating in water, gazing at the clouds above, is purposeful rather than idle or associated with feelings of well-being. She is driven by what she terms 'kinaesthetic curiosity' as the ocean's caress disorients her sense of location.





Carter soon discovered that considering issues such as global warming and ocean rise when these surging waters were acting on her body produced a new consciousness. It is this kind of art which shows an awareness of aqueous reality which the Australian artist and curator Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris has dubbed as coming from a new Hydrocene era, and representative of a blue turn in contemporary art.<sup>1</sup>

Carter's personal discoveries in the ocean have led her to consider how waterborne entities have subsisted for centuries, alluring but unobtainable. Her *Oceanids* series were initially inspired by Greek mythology and then evolved to incorporate the Mātauranga Māori concept of the *taniwha* as *kaitiaki* of the waterways and shapeshifter. In *Idyia #2* (2016), she used her daughter Zazi as the model for a female supernatural creature/ecowarrior. By juxtaposing foam patterns digitally altered to form the shape of a butterfly's wings in the 2014 series *Oceanid Rising*, Carter was able to suggest subtly that immersion in water involves transformation. If we concentrate on the sensation, what is the water telling us about where we come from and where we are?

Among the best-known *Oceanids* are the Pleiades, known as the Seven Sisters or Matariki, stars in the constellation of Taurus which Carter included in the exhibition through a set of acrylic panels covered with a dichroic film leaning against the wall. These astronomical *Oceanids* relate to navigation and agricultural seasons in many cultures. The acrylic, made from petroleum, provides the appearance of a reflective oil slick and refers to material formed at the end of the Devonian era around 400 million

years ago from collapsed coral reefs during Earth's fifth extinction event. The imagery on the panels references the 'age of the fishes' (as the Devonian era was known). Today, in the midst of the sixth great extinction, our unleashing of hydrocarbons threatens to return us to deep underwater.

Like the water nymph and siren, the watery grave has been a trope in literature and art. Moved by reports of New Zealand having the second highest rate of youth suicide in the OECD, and in particular Māori males being overrepresented in the statistics, Carter decided to make a work which addressed the issue. *Te Ara*—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand notes that drownings once accounted for 20 per cent of all suicides, so common that it was dubbed 'the New Zealand death'. In contrast to the Pre-Raphaelite painting on which it is modelled, Carter's *Ophelia* (2015) situates Shakespeare's tragic heroine as a young man, lying corpse-like in a glaciated wetland on Mt Ruapehu. The environment creates a richly textured orange palette to complement the reflected blue of the sky and heighten the pallid flesh of the figure. Although he was only lying in the freezing water briefly, the 22-year-old model evokes the idea of a dead body that has floated to the surface, still and lifeless, in contrast to the profusion of energetic growth around him. Water's own agency and power is recognised here—it can work as ice to carve out valleys and also become the steam rising from the volcanic crater in the distance.



(above left) CATHY CARTER *Idyia #2* 2016  
Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 110 x 150 mm.

(above right) CATHY CARTER *Seven Sisters of Matariki* 2019  
7 acrylic panels, inkjet photographic print & dichroic film,  
2200 x 2000 x 100 mm.

(left) CATHY CARTER *Motu-O-Kura Eventide* 2019  
Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Ultra Smooth paper,  
1420 x 850 mm.

(opposite above) CATHY CARTER *Icebergs #2* 2019  
Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Ultra Smooth paper,  
1600 x 700 mm.

(opposite below) CATHY CARTER *Ophelia* 2015  
Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 1200 x 700 mm.



*Wai Wai Wai*, exhibited at Föenander Galleries as part of the 2019 Festival of Photography, included images digitally collaged to create beach scenes crowded with bathers and surfers, in a horrifying demonstration of the concept of the Anthropocene era, in which humans have exploited and sought to dominate Nature. In one such work, *Icebergs #2*, the famous Bondi swimming pool is reinterpreted metaphorically and literally as an iceberg, adrift at sea. It is a human construction now cut off from the land by the effects of sea-level rise accelerated by global warming.

Only one of the photographs in this exhibition was empty of human presence, *Motu-O-Kura, Eventide* (2019) in which an island off the coast of the southern

Hawke's Bay beach of Waimarama appears, reflected in the water. On closer inspection, it is two images of the island, taken on the same evening and joined together horizontally to form a golden nugget afloat in a sea of blue. Here her visual reference was the zip paintings of American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman (1905–1970) in which a vertical band both connects and divides the sections of a painting to 'assert freedom' in the artist's words. Carter's works show how to think with and through water. As cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis argues, a reimagining of ourselves as hydrous figurations opens up humans to facing their impact on the planet. Neimanis argues how not only are we 'bodies of water', 'but we also reside within and as part of





a fragile global hydrocommons, where water—the lifeblood of humans and all other bodies on this planet—is increasingly contaminated, commodified and dangerously reorganised'.<sup>2</sup>

Occasioned by Carter's residency at Waimarama Beach in 2017, arranged by Havelock North's Muse Art Gallery which has represented the artist for seven-odd years, her images of Motu-O-Kura have become iconic. The island's name means 'moon over water' and Carter arranged her residency to coincide with a rare supermoon. While there, she met kaumātua Robert Macdonald and Ike Wallace who took her to the Hakikino fortress and told her about Hinengu, daughter of the god of the oceans Tangaroa. One image captures the moment of Hinengu's transformation from her giant squid form into a beautiful maiden, the black ink of the cephalopod still evident. Hinengu did this to win the heart of a young man, Rongomaipureora, son of Te Aomatarahi, a famous general of Ngāti Kahungunu in Waimarama.

Tangaroa had forbidden his daughter from consorting with humans and she was condemned to live in the depths of the oceans as a giant squid, with all her powers gone.

During lockdown when swimming was prohibited and we were restricted to our backyards and neighbourhoods, Carter began to capture the effects of raindrops on manufactured surfaces in her garden. In this way, she was able to effectively continue her collaborations with water even while unable to swim. In so doing, she shows how the medium can offer sustenance even in restrictive circumstances. Using crumpled black polythene photographed close up with a macro lens, she abstracted her subject from its surroundings to record visually how water behaves on a repellent surface.

In her most recent exhibition, *Liminal Blue* at Föenander Galleries in October 2023, Carter included a pile of salt which has become a signature installation in her exhibitions, metaphorically including the ocean in the space without the water. The definition of liminal is of, relating to, or situated at a sensory threshold barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response, and in this exhibition the power and immensity of the ocean is contrasted with the comparative safety of a swimming pool.

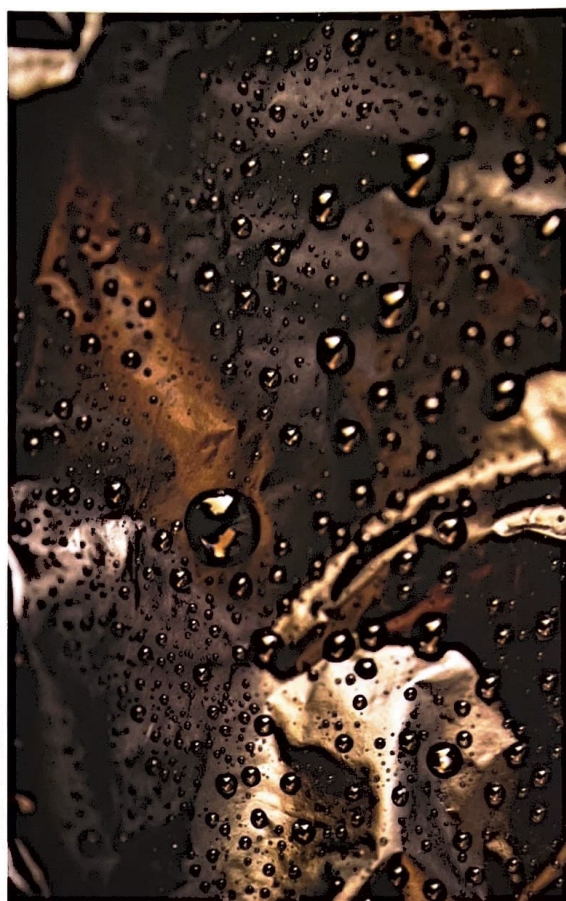
Ignoring the surging waves that mount outside their concreted confines, the replicated figures clustered around the edges of an oceanside pool in Sydney flourish pink scallop shells in a nod to Botticelli's *Venus*. This famous Quattrocento painting is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Jupiter



(opposite)  
 CATHY CARTER *Reflecting on Hinengu # 3, (shapeshifting)* 2018  
 Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 950 x 540 mm.  
 (right) CATHY CARTER *Opulent Incendiary* 2022  
 C-Type print on Crystal Flex mounted on dibond, 1240 x 930 mm.  
 (below) CATHY CARTER *Curl Curl Bathers, Echoes of Venus* 2023  
 Archival Giclée print on Hahnemühle Ultra Smooth paper,  
 1330 x 550 mm.

defeated and castrated Saturn and threw his genitals into the sea and from their foam emerged Venus. Botticelli has shown the goddess of love as the epitome of the Neoplatonic ideal of femininity, a pearl coasting to shore on the shell which has nurtured her whereas Carter's *Echoes of Venus* are hollow, a worn-out cliché which only serves to emphasise the self-centred obliviousness of humanity in the face of impending disaster.

The colour blue predominates in this exhibition, showing, in the artist's words, 'how water absorbs the longer wavelengths of other colours, while the shorter wavelength of blue dissipates to give the sea its blue appearance'. Blue offers us a respite from the busyness of our lives while Carter's imagery offers a dive into our subconscious need for water and our desire to be in it. By foregrounding embodiment in her practice, Cathy Carter shows how the liquidity, fluidity and relationality of water facilitates clarification and inspiration in thinking.



1. Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, 'Revealing the Hydrocene: Reflections on Watery Research', *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, vol. 2, no. 48, 2021, pp. 431–45.

2. Astrida Neimanis, 'Feminist Subjectivity, Watered', *Feminist Review*, vol. 103, no. 1, March 2013, <http://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2012>.

