

Washing Day

Ruby Wilkinson

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With thanks to
SPA_CE Gallery,
Una Dubbelt-Leitch,
Awatea Randall,
Andy Hockey,
Millie Dunstall,
Liv Ward,
Christian Dimick
and all ocean
swimmers.

I think about all this as I wait for a load of washing to finish.

Ruby talks about ‘the sea floor and its relationship to the surface. Staring at each other day after day, night after night. Resenting each other, loving each other, being with each other.’ This is present in *Basket*, perceivable but barely discernible, capturing that notion of between the worlds. Her work is elemental in this sense, conveying a sensation of liquid translucence, and light. Dunking three times to constitute a swim is a ritual introduced to me by a friend, that I’ve passed on to those who’ll hear it – Ruby embraced the idea. The shock of the first is softened by the second, by the third time, body temperature reaches equilibrium, (numbing asf) probably sending dopamine straight to the head. *Three times under* speaks to this acquiescence and the tension connecting the ocean’s surface and its floor.

Of the group of Ruby’s friends who swam in December, Millie and Liv did so every day and shared their feelings during this process with me. Liv has recorded voice notes of them submerging themselves, usually alone, in the shores of lakes and depths of rivers of Te Wai Pounamu, many of which have been therapeutic, invigorating, though some haven’t. Their time (sometimes a whole hour) spent in the water during December served as a coping mechanism. Confrontation, and comfort are co-implicated in their relationship to water, as a queer body – swimming is a vulnerable duality of the familiar and the foreign.

For Millie, swimming in December was not always desired, often daunting, sometimes rewarding. She ‘started to understand the “cold plunge” endorphin theory,’ and deepened her relationship with place and the waters of Te Whanganui-a-Tara. *Sea Legs* is a work that is responsive to this resistance and acceptance. It’s a revisitation of *Swimmers’ wings’* ribs; now upturned and muted slightly. Once an activity of choice becomes a ritual, it can also become a chore. Just as getting into (and staying in) a hot bath can be unsettling, irritating, before shifting into a cleansing or purge of ailments and toxins from the body.

Body of
Waters

words
by Una
Dubbelt-
Leitch

Washing Day is an intuitive exploration at the interface between wet and dry; choice and chore; clean and dirty; hot and cold; sea and sky; solitary and communal; public and private; purity and pollution; body and mind. Ruby’s work activates a liminality within these binaries; through painting, washing, and swimming in an exploration of domesticity, of the body, all together, each in situ. It evokes the cyclical nature of household work, cleaning and laundering across centuries that contribute to collective identity, and the sharing of memories across generations. *Washing Day* absorbs and reflects parallel conflicts of tedious, numbing repetitive actions which become a familiar body-memory, that serve to release the mind.

Submerging her clothes in water weekly (all the time) and her body daily (during the month of December), Ruby’s practice tracks the circadian movement between water and land. *Mason’s ring* is a continuous form (though disjointed, nearly separated even), a barely interrupted cycle – the variation of stroke and tone creates a state of flow, letting the outside in and vice versa. This painting reminds me of a verse in Koch’s poem,

One bath
may hide another bath
As when, after bathing, one walks out into the rain.

It can be
important
To have waited at least a moment to see what was already
there. [1]

Ruby and I talked about the healing properties of cold bodies of water, cleansing the fog from our minds, and those hard case women who swim everyday year-round in Island Bay. We recalled the communal washing of clothes and bodies, now disjointed, and displaced from its original setting. This shift away in the West from collective living into an individually minded track, has left a gap that we attempt to fill with private rituals.

One December afternoon Ruby and I swam on the South Coast, between Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and Te Tai-o-Rēhua at the meeting of two seas – looking out to Taputeranga – we stayed in until we were aware of our bones. The water was unusually clear. The ocean on Christmas Day at Piha was, as the olds kept rightfully saying, ‘unseasonably warm (!!!)’ – an unsettling reminder of our changing waters, of the Anthropocene. The other day I woke up to devastating footage of a flooded Tāmaki Makaurau – Ruby and I have been sending each other clips and images of spots near where we grew up out West. Once buried by the built environment, Waihorotiu Stream has been resurfacing in the last couple of days.

This summer I’ve been listening to Erny Belle’s *Gone Fishing*, the visionary détournement of sorts that Mataaho Collective’s *Kiko Moana* shares – transcending stories of the rising, warming, toxic sea, of ritual and weaving. These are synthesised in *Singing Practice* – grounded in its repetitive motif, allowing for both stasis and hum. The surface skin (of the painting) carries an element of the salty ocean, of washing and its exposure to sun and light, out of the water and fabric forms in both *Sail/bed sheet* and in *Salt licked*, exists as a veil, or a skin, almost transparent and salt-caked, brittle as it dries.

It (usually) takes longer to become dry than to become wet. Our bodies, our fabrics, and the land we live on are constantly drying, never quite thoroughly dry, only to become wet again. We are as liquid as we are solid, constantly dancing between the two. I keep returning to the ocean being constantly with us, even if we are not in it. A cycle of wet to dry, we (sub)merge our bodies into water as much as we (e)merge from the water to the land. Water is with us from the start and is at our beckoning. I think of Tūwhare’s *Rain*, the ever-present ocean, a never-ceasing constancy of water.

You would still
define me
disperse me
wash over me
rain. [2]

1. Kenneth Koch, *One Train May Hide Another*, 1994.
2. Hone Tūwhare, *Rain*, 1992.



Mason's ring. 2022
Oil on canvas.
35cm x 40cm