

# Floodlines

Kiran McKinnon

Water is life-bringing, essential. It makes possible the growth of plants and the sustenance of animals. Indeed, the existence of life on Earth is wholly reliant on it; if not for an abundance of water, it's unlikely life would ever have emerged on this planet. That water also holds devastating potential is glaringly apparent when one is confronted with hurricane, tsunami, or flood. Through drought and wildfire, devastation also resides in water's prolonged absence. For painter Kiran McKinnon, water is both a medium she employs in her artwork and a vehicle for layered considerations of self, place, and deeper resonance with the world around us. Her work is ostensibly colour field abstract painting, engaging in a time-honoured processual dialogue with materials. Yet, as tends to the case with such painting, broader contextual enquiries are activated. For McKinnon, that conceptual terrain is nature, the raw power of water, the enduring and inescapable effect the environment has on us. In her paintings, one could deduce something akin to aerial views of atolls or estuaries, or liken the flowing lines of colour to the wandering path of rivers or glaciers.

McKinnon's practice is intuitive and process-based, though water plays a central role as a vessel for pigment. Dilute paint runs across canvas, generating a delicate palette and a quality akin to conventional watercolour painting. This is deliberately 'Lo-fi' painting, with a choice of materials that are largely biodegradable: cotton duck canvas, dilute paint, and water. She says, "I see these works as collaborative pieces, records of the conversation between me and my efforts at composition, and the water itself. They are a mapping of the traces of thought, and the paths traced by pigment making its way across and into the canvas." The resultant paintings are immersive. They present amorphous fields of colour that invite comparison to natural phenomena associated with the water cycle: rain, mist, clouds, reflections that play on the surface of a body of water. Yet, for all this associative capacity, McKinnon's work remains abstract painting; it is not representational. Rather than depicting natural phenomena, a likeness to such arises from the qualities inherent to water itself. The flow and pooling of water on the surface of the canvas is captured in pigment as the water evaporates.

How abstract painting connects to larger themes in the world is a recurring theme within its development. In its earliest incarnation in the Western tradition, abstract painting of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century often attempted to create an aesthetic of utopia, presenting an art for a yet-to-emerge ideal social reality – mirroring the vast clash of ideas around social structure that took place at the time. Even in proto-abstract painting via the hand of JMW Turner or the Impressionists, one can access a discussion of the emerging effects of industrialism as it first stamped its mark on the world. To whatever extent abstract painting is a 'purely' visual pursuit, it always exists in a context – there is no such thing as a neutral aesthetic. All of this points to the fact that abstract painting is an excellent vehicle for consideration of larger issues that confront us. For McKinnon, her work speaks to perhaps the most pressing issue of the present – the increasingly evident effects of anthropogenic climate change.

The world has entered a phase in which the climate change is a reality, rather than an abstract concept of something likely to affect us decades in the future. It can be seen in increasingly devastating wildfires, more frequent and intense cyclones, and the slow but certain rising of the sea. These stark phenomena illustrate the vexed relationship between humans and our environment, especially as it pertains to water. In wildfires, hurricanes, super storms, and ice-melt, McKinnon finds cause to reflect on the tipping point we're at (or well past) with the environment, with potentially catastrophic consequences for humanity. She sources water for her work from various local waterways: the Waitematā harbour, the Tāmaki Estuary. In this, the fundamental relationship between people and water is addressed. "Water is our life's blood, we can't live without it but it also has the potential to destroy us. It's a matter of spiritual connection with place , perhaps in a way similar to how Māori reference their Awa. It's interesting to me that sea water has the same salinity as human blood, and a number of other similarities in its mineral composition," she says. It's through considering the potential menace of water in the present context that McKinnon has arrived at the title of this exhibition, *Floodlines*. These are the lines of a flood plain that are breached by hurricane, or tidal surge, by the hundred-year floods that now occur every year.

#### Words by Julian McKinnon

Kiran McKinnon is an abstract painter who lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau. She studied in London, UK and Auckland, NZ, gaining an MFA (1st class honours) from the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 2001. She has been a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2019, 2020 and was a finalist in the Estuary Art and Ecology Awards in 2018. She has works held by the University of Auckland Art Collection, The Wallace Arts Trust, and various private collections throughout New Zealand.

Dr Julian McKinnon is an artist and writer based in Auckland. He is the brother of Kiran McKinnon.