

Wednesday 2 March,
2022
Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland.

*There is no-one to tell me when the
ocean will begin*

- Adrienne Rich "Diving into the Wreck"

*How does it start the sea has
endless beginnings*

- Alice Oswald "Nobody: A Hymn to the
Sea"

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SELINA ERSHADI

It takes many attempts to write my way
into Anoushka Akel's new solo exhibition
Wet Contact. I straddle various forms
and perspectives in disparate strands:
a series of email threads, messages, a
trail of tabs, a spread of grubbied books
on the table. Much grows from long
conversations between Anoushka and
myself sprouted in the studio we share
at Samoa House on Karangahape Road.
Our dialogue circles writers, artists,
observations and questions that we orbit
over a destabilising two years since the
pandemic began.

That sprawling network of endless
beginnings nourishes this small body
of text. Like a root mass, perhaps, or
a polyped coral reef. Or maybe just
the quiet assurance of one wave after
another.

Part of the difficulty in committing black
marks to the screen is that Anoushka's
paintings resist and wrestle with
definition. Early on in our conversations,
Anoushka tells me her subject for this
body of work is the sea, and that she
has spent much of the last year trying
to figure out how water behaves. "Every
time I looked at it I couldn't order it, it was
completely out of my control visually" she
writes. Over the months that follow other
forms, figures, bodies, and forces began
to enter the works; the world around her
floods into the studio – which at multiple
points, during various lockdowns,
becomes her home.

She describes it as a feeling of being
hijacked, a porosity of being which, she
realises, she has to work with rather than
against. Her words call to my mind Ursula
Le Guin's hypnotic description of the
jellyfish drifting through the tidal abyss, a
vulnerable, spineless creature tugged in
all directions, entrusting its entire being
to the violence and power of the ocean;
*for in the deep sea there is no compass.*¹

Midway through 2020, the breakdown
of a long relationship has me feeling
similarly lost at sea, a metaphor
commonly drawn upon when the familiar
and familial fall apart. In such times,
the fear of drowning, of dissolution, of
becoming lost, is ever-present.

It is around this time that Anoushka
gifts me a painting. A rippling hint
at a figure composed of delicate red
capillaries floats out from the canvas,
grainy evidence that another canvas has
pressed up against it. It almost looks like
it's growing mould. The red is smeared
with ragged strips of thick, impasto layers
in fleshy grey-green tones. Beneath the
figure are fainter, ghostly lines – as if
indicating trails of subtle movement, the
visual refraction of limbs in water.

Anoushka tells me she wishes she
could salve the pain and that this gift is
her attempt to communicate her deep
care. The painting, she explains, was
made after observing her daughter
learn the starfish survival pose during a
swimming lesson; a position that requires
relinquishing the fight or flight response
to swim against the water and instead
be carried by its currents, arms and legs
spread out in a state of surrender. We
both wrestle against the welling up of
tears, but the water's pull is too strong;
we liquify.

1 — Ursula Le Guin, *The
Lathe of Heaven* (New
York: Scribner, 1971) 5.



Anoushka Akel
Wet Physics
2021
(oil, pastel and wax pencil on canvas,
1000 x 1500mm)

*There are moments in moist love where
heaven is jealous of what we on earth can
do*

- Hafiz

*I thought you were an anchor in the drift
of the world; but no: there isn't an anchor
anywhere.*

- William Bronk

2 — Alice Oswald, "An Interview with Water," Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/alice-oswald-professor-of-poetry-lecture-now-online>

3 — Lisa Samuels, "Membranism, Wet Gaps, Archipelago Poetics" in *Reading Room: Liquid States*, issue 4, 2010, 158. A text I was introduced to via Anoushka and through which she eventually arrived at the title *Wet Contact*.

4 — In an interview with Davida Naimon on *Between the Covers*, Oswald comments that it is very likely that Homer was more than one person, in which case *The Odyssey* is a chorus of oratory voices. Her 2019 work *Nobody: A Hymn to the Sea*, nods to a poet in *The Odyssey*, who is both more-than-one and no-one-body. The poet's collective body, shipwrecked on a barren island, is surrounded by the sea – again more-than-one and no-one-body. <https://tinhouse.com/podcast/alice-oswald-nobody/>

5 — Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," from *Diving into the Wreck: poems, 1971-72* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973).

6 — Eva Hayward 'More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves,' *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, Trans- (Fall - Winter, 2008), The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 64-85.

7 — Oswald, "An Interview with Water."

8 — Sarah Hopkinson, "Learners" <https://hopkinsonmossman.com/exhibitions/anoushka-akel/>

9 — Samuels, "Membranism, Wet Gaps, Archipelago Poetics" 160-161.

applications to faintly reveal what remains beneath, then building it back up again. I think of her daughter's starfish shape, and of theorist Eva Hayward's figuring of the starfish as a lifeform of continual transformations. When a starfish ray is severed or detached, it may grow back; it is possible the severed ray itself may grow into a whole other being. This process of asexual reproduction is called fissioning, a word delightfully wet. Like Oswald's ocean, the starfish resists bodily definition or containment – it is in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, of flow.⁶

Like Oswald's ocean.

Oswald proposes that poetic simile offers infinite possibility for regeneration, whereas metaphor is a mode of totalising subsumption or consumption: "Instead of reducing one thing to another. It proliferates. It reverberates. Wherever there is simile, it is as if the poem sprouts a whole other poem. It is much more like pregnancy than nutrition."⁷ This mode of making ripples through Anoushka's paintings, each bears echoes of the other as though fissioned (fashioned) from the same root, from the same body of water. As suggested in the exhibition text for her show *Learners*: "often sharing a common ancestor, Akel's works are all like one another and yet utterly singular."⁸

We are all bodies of water

- Astrida Neimanis

In her lecture "An Interview with Water" poet, classicist and gardener Alice Oswald explores the uncanny relationship between grief and water, fascinated by the fact that "at our highest pitch of emotion we dissolve into water."² A thought echoed by writer Lisa Samuel's observation that "our most evidently wet selves are a matter of extremes."³ Water runs throughout Oswald's poetry. It mostly wades through the shallows of rivers, with the exception of her most recent work *Nobody*, where she finally takes on the formless and edgeless subject that has eluded her for years: the sea. What Oswald calls "the unfenced place."⁴ While a river has a beginning and an end – or at least an entry/exit: a 'mouth' – and a sense of velocity, gushing forth with a current of purpose, the sea utterly defies such notions of linearity. It is physically, perceptually and imaginatively beyond control. Therein lies its siren allure.

An early working title for Anoushka's germinating body of work was *Into the Hold*, borrowed from the poem "Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich. Anoushka was drawn to this poem in the unsettling early days of the pandemic for its sensory, visceral imagery; a body lowering itself backwards into unknown waters it cannot yet see, in search of the wreck, *the thing itself and not the myth*.⁵ Colours shift, from blue to bluer to green to black; processes of the body alter as it re-learns how to move and function in the unfamiliar environment.

Anoushka's process is a material engagement of layer, line and erasure that is both sensual and arduous; delicate yet crude. Pressing, sanding, scratching, rubbing, smearing, scraping, she applies layer upon layer (wave after wave) to the canvas, sometimes weathering away the surface from the outset or in between

Poetry revels in a decentred logic of loss and regeneration. Lisa Samuels considers the possibilities of language while making room for what is beyond lingual translation, suggested through breaks in the line, the spaces between: deemed *wet gaps*.⁹ Samuels posits that 'the gap' is not a blank break or a discontinuity with defined edges, but rather a wet conveyance; a membrane of continuity and connection. Through this lens, she asks us to consider reading "the areas across and amongst artistic inscriptions and images as liquid, instead of as air and space"; a cyclical transfer event between bodies that are always in moist contact despite the ocular deception of separation.



Anoushka Akel
Wet Contact
2022

It is these 'areas across' that Anoushka has long bore fascination with – bodies in relation, the visual effects and transformations of two surfaces meeting, and Samuels' wet gaps in between. She observes the way "small bodies of water interact with a human body, a container of water itself. First there is a chromatic transformation; red skin disappears, turning silver as red light waves are filtered. Hair flattens, spreads and curls. Skin spots and lines are magnified. Heads seem decapitated – something I noted after many months of looking at a book cover which pictures a portrayal of Marthe, Pierre Bonnard's wife in *The Bath*.

If poetry is invested in the newness words might attain when pressed against one another, painting has taken on a similar procedure for Anoushka in her experimentation with monotype printing in her practice. She writes: "The process of pressing one painting's surface or structure against another, and seeing them receive and have an effect on each other ("the irreducible essence of printmaking is the embrace, one body pressed against another"¹⁰) seems to satisfy so much of my thinking about, and observing, of human nature and nurture. The pressing action and its subsequent reaction can be tender or forceful."¹¹

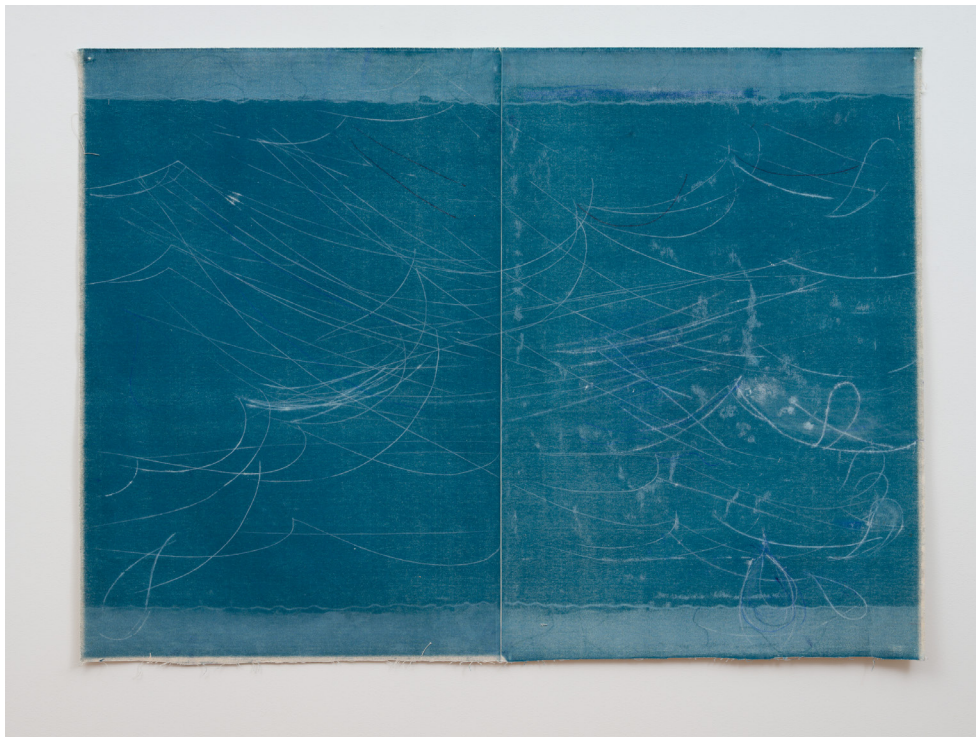
This gesture is not meant to transmit cleanly from one to the other: like that shifting and uncontrollable sea, the often distorted signals of these pressings have become essential to Anoushka's work. Many of the paintings in *Wet Contact*, she says, contain "the residue of moving something from one place to another. A line is painted on one surface; canvas, lithographic stone, plastic or cardboard plate, and then pressed against another stretched or unstretched canvas. I've become increasingly comfortable with the idea that the copy or translation is never as good, but the residue...or the things that the copy generates, have their own very separate agency." In this sense, printmaking – traditionally a tool for exact reproduction – becomes a storied record of transformation, exchange and proliferation. Each residual mark ripples beyond its final surface to the ones left behind, remembering them like severed rays of a starfish, every gap a gesture. An endless sprouting, an extended simile.

Like wave after wave.

Selina Ershadi is an Iranian born, Tāmaki-based interdisciplinary artist who works primarily within experimental poetic film forms. She received an MFA from the Elam School of Fine Arts and a BA with a major in English Literature from The University of Auckland. She currently teaches at The School of Architecture and Future Environments at AUT.

10 — Ruth Weisberg
,"Syntax of the Print: In
Search of an Aesthetic
Context," *Tamarind
Papers*, Volume 9, 52-60,
1984. Anoushka came
to this quote through her
conversations with Luca
Nicholas in the AUT print
labs.

11 — From an ongoing
correspondence between
Anoushka and writer
and psychoanalyst Alex
Davidson.



Anoushka Akel
The Sea is Another Story
2022
(lithographic ink and oil on un-stretched canvas,
1070 x 1440mm)

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