

## Swell energy

Abby Cunnane responds to  
Oliver Perkins' exhibition  
"The Reserve" at Michael  
Lett (1 February – 4 March,  
2023).

Friday 20 January, 2023  
Ōtautahi Christchurch

ABBY CUNNANE

I watched other people surfing for most of the summer, sitting on the black sand at Wainui Reserve. I focused on the ones who seemed amateur: I was also looking for courage. Laboriously propelling themselves out into the surf and then snapping upright like levers as the board met the wave's momentum. Trying to anticipate the moment when the board would dip into the downward arc, and become suddenly weightless. Sometimes just watching made the muscles in my arms and thighs tense, unconsciously mimicking the electric effort of standing up, then the slower work of maintaining balance, soles of your feet on the fibreglass and resin board, board on the wave.

Waves come in sets: single waves of different speeds join to arrive at the shore as a collective force. When the wind is constant, or continues for a long time, its energy transfers into big, bulky, set waves. Perhaps a fast-moving swell meets and engulfs other locally generated waves. The scale may be insignificant out in the deep water but increases as it nears the shore. As well as the wind, the ocean floor's contours, and the contrast of different depths influence the way sets form. I sit on the beach and watch them roll in heavy; shade my eyes. See the abrupt vertical of a surfer rising to stand, the diagonal line cut by the board's trajectory before it sinks back into the water or is erased by the glare of the sun.

Starting from the bleached-bright colours—"untenable chromatics," Oli called them at one point—moving through the canvas surfaces and their staccato transitions between light and shade, I associate the work in *The Reserve* with the coast. That is, with the sea-scoured surfaces of a board or with the snap of beach wind or light that makes you squint. With rainjackets and wetsuits and salt. Stripped back further, beyond texture or colour, I think this association stems from the contrasting forms of energy within each of these recent works. There is a sense that each represents or records

motion, and at the same time, relies on a form of resistance to that movement. These opposing elements could be understood through different metaphors—surfer/surf; sand/rock; geometry/gesture. For each pairing, there is loss implicit in the interaction: exhaustion or erosion or subtraction of some kind. But maybe this is why you can *watch* these works as well as look at them: the power balance is uncertain, the elements remain in restless motion.

Think of a work like *Tic* (2023). White circles wheel across a dark field, which is held in place with a belt of lupin blue. In this work and others the circular forms appear to be moving, perhaps moving through the phases of an eclipse. Or faster even: spare black marks on raw canvas in *Reserve* recall Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's gull, "back-peddling across the sky" in contrast with the hard break of a central vertical line.<sup>1</sup> A series of works, *Isles*, *Nimbus*, *Signal*, *Shadow* follow this compositional structure: a highly energised field of irregular marks on one canvas, bisected by verticals formed by a larger canvas. The former is a physical insertion into the latter; the result is something like a series of animated episodes within a larger whole. Or, like the roil and huff of churning surf, periodically met by a set wave which regulates it, bringing a solid line of calm so deep you can right stand up on it, leg muscles tense as it moves, massively, beneath you.

The layered or multiple structure of the works in *The Reserve* is partly a result of how they are made. Each is a composite, drawing on earlier works and materials or treatments including ink, watercolour, adhesives; waterblasting. So each work is also a by-product of a continuous process of making, of materials and energy held in reserve during the making of others. When these forms come into contact, new tensions inevitably arise. In the work *Freeway*, heavy red horizontals are shot through with a smaller canvas on which the colours resemble car lights on a wet road. Again, the sense of movement comes up

1 — Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, 'Burning Rubbish', *The collected poems of Alistair Te Ariki Campbell* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016).



Oliver Perkins  
*Tic*  
(ink, watercolour and size on canvas,  
400 x 400mm)  
2022

against a visual halt or resistance, or is held in check.

*Iris* and *Ratso* explode the formula. Do these works which stretch the surfing reference too far, break the metaphor altogether? Barthes' definition of writing, "To substitute a metaphor for the concept", comes to mind: what happens when the metaphor takes over?<sup>2</sup> Looking at *Iris* and *Ratso* I think, well, let it. In both works the canvas is breached, revealing the wall behind or their own internal structure. *Ratso* has a jagged cutout at its centre. *Iris*, bruise-coloured, blisters or peels back from itself. Rather than reaching equilibrium, the productive tension of opposing forces set up in many of the works in *The Reserve*, these two let it all out. These are the shark-attack works, the works where the established order is broken and adrenaline surges, heightening your attention to an acute point which is also a form of certainty.

Research continues to suggest that surfers experience less depression and anxiety than the general population, due to the opiate-like effects of endorphins released. The adrenaline too arrives in waves, with meditative stretches of time interrupted by the athleticism demanded of the body getting up on the board, or other fears as they arise. However, many surfers speak of a sense of fearlessness or ease when they are out on the water: "It is on land, not when I am on my board waiting for a wave, that fear grips. The irrationality encouraged by surfing isn't the disproportionate fear of a shark attack, but the feeling that, out there on the water, nothing really bad could ever happen."<sup>3</sup> I think of this while I look at the work, the madness of thinking that nothing bad could even happen, and also the relief of being able to believe that for even a second. Maybe that is the 'reserve' of the title too: these split-seconds of ecstasy, or clarity, to be drawn on when there is a need for courage.

Light fractures the sheer surfaces of the waves if you squint too long, bounces off the too-dark images on a phone screen and hurts your temples. Close my eyes and circles fly across the inside of my eyelids. It's only up close that you see, finally, the edges where the canvases meet the beach.

2 — Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

3 — Amia Srinivasan, 'Sharky Waters,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 40, no. 19, 11 October 2018.

**Abby Cunnane is a curator and writer, currently director of The Physics Room in Ōtautahi Christchurch. With artist Amy Howden-Chapman, she is co-editor of The Distance Plan, a journal that brings together artists, scientists, and writers to discuss climate change.**



Oliver Perkins  
*Iris*  
(ink, watercolour and size on canvas,  
500 x 600mm)  
2022



Oliver Perkins  
*Ratso*  
(ink, watercolour and size on canvas,  
450 x 500mm)  
2022

First published 2023  
by Michael Lett Publishing  
Text © Abby Cunnane  
All photography © Sam Hartnett  
Artworks © Oliver Perkins  
Edited by Michael Lett  
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may  
be reproduced in any form without  
permission in writing from the above  
publisher and copyright holders

Designed by Inhouse

Typeset in Helvetica Now Text

ISBN 978-1-99-117270-9



Oliver Perkins  
*Reserve*  
(ink, watercolour and size on canvas,  
500 x 700mm)  
2022