

Sophie Bannan and Daegan Wells Hut for a Sensuous Gold Miner

This exhibition has two points of departure; two sites, similar but distinct, upon which scenes of nation building, homemaking, and resource extraction have played out and continue to play out. The first is Waiuta, a century ago the location of the South Island's largest gold mine, now a ghost town. The other is an isolated dairy farm in coastal Southland. Together, Sophie Bannan and Daegan Wells use these sites to speculate upon methods of feeling through histories of place, and possibilities for inhabiting the present. The methods by which Bannan and Wells approach their respective objects of inquiry might be described as a kind of ethnography, as anthropologist Kathleen Stewart uses the term, as an attunement to the unfolding of things, to points of contact between humans and the world, to 'the spread of intensities between subjects, objects, institutions, laws, materialities, and species.'¹ In *Hut for a Sensuous Gold Miner*, the world is caught in motion, and dwelling in the places imagined by Bannan and Wells means dwelling

among the ghosts of settlement, of labour and its gendered divisions, of capital and the consequences of its abandonment.

In 1905, a gold-bearing quartz reef was discovered by prospecting party in the area that would go on to become Waiuta. Among the party was Bannan's great grandfather. Over the next four decades, Waiuta would grow into a thriving mining town. By the 1930s, its population was around 600, and the town was home to shops, community sports clubs, a pub, and a school.² Following the collapse of the mine shaft in 1951, the town steadily declined. Its population dwindled, and its buildings were left to decay. What's left of the town is now managed by the Department of Conservation. It's a tourist attraction, popular among hikers and strollers. Waiuta acts as a kind of 'test site' for Sophie Bannan for a methodology the artist terms 'ethnoarcheology,' a process which involves recreating historical objects as a means of making contact with the people who may have used them and the lives they may have lived.

Bannan's engagement with Waiuta weaves promiscuously between charting the autobiographical, ecological, economic, and ideological significance of this site; at times traversing between methodologies and approaches, drawing together what is empirical and what is speculative, what belongs within the historical record, and what belongs in the realm of an embodied experience of a time and place—without making a distinction in the relative value of these kinds of knowledges.

For *Hut for a Sensuous Gold Miner*, Bannan has taken ecological and geological field samples from Waiuta—gold, quartz, fungi and flora—and suspended them in candles. During the course of the show, these will burn down, changing form as they release fumes and scents, their structural integrity compromised as they melt away onto walls and floor of the gallery. Alongside these candles is a series of double-exposed photographs taken of Waiuta and the areas surrounding the town. Different views of Waiuta at different times of day are superimposed over each other, troubling the viewer's ability to locate these scenes within a linear timeline of the place. What's left of the town flirts with what has been, and, just out of view, what might still be of this place.

On one of the gallery's windows is a 'score' by Bannan which at once provides a set of instructions into experiencing the works in the gallery, and, quite literally, colours

our experience of them. Thick swirls of chalky pigment, applied with Bannan's hands provide a codex for entering the work, based upon Lawrence and Anna Halprin's writings around RSVP cycles. Their book, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*, describes a four-step process for collaboration: Resources, referring to whatever is at hand, materials, experiences, values; Scores, refers to sketches of a performance or action to take place; Valuation, an evaluation of what people are doing within a space, made without judgement; and Performance, the work in motion.³ In Bannan's practice, the 'score' acts as a means to distribute agency among objects in a space. Humans are not the only players here. The samples collected in the candles, the coloured light shining through the painted window, these things have lives of their own. Being in a space—whether Waiuta or a gallery—becomes less an exercise in mastering it, in knowing all there is to know about it, than a means of allowing oneself to be moved, shaped and reshaped.

At the beginning of 2018, Daegan Wells moved with his partner to an isolated farm at the bottom of the South Island, close to where Wells spent the first five years of his life. Along a densely forested hill bordering the farm is a trench, now barely visible among decades of vegetation growth. The trench was constructed by early Chinese gold miners in order to transfer water to the goldfields close by. It's a lasting scar of a now

expired project of resource extraction, altering the path of streams and rainwater runoff from the base of Mount Longwood, to the Roundhill Goldfields, around five kilometers away from the farm where Wells lives. The history of this landscape was imparted to Wells by his boyfriend's father during a dinner party. In Wells' work, history becomes a record of bodies meeting, transmission becomes a measure of contact between people and the world.

Hanging from the gallery's walls and the strange, bricked-up windows which punctuate the space are weavings, supported by ceramic hooks produced from clay from the farm. These were made on the same loom Wells' grandmother used. The same woman, Isabel Bates, who taught his grandmother recently taught Wells. Embedded in these weavings is a history of another kind. It's a history of domestic objects and the lives they've witnessed, as well as the tradition of a craft passed among intimates. It's an engagement with a medium long associated with women's work, and neglected from serious consideration because of its association with the feminine. Accessed through repetitive motion—the warp and weft of wool found in op shops or given to Wells by Bates—this history makes itself known through the body. And the body, in turn, will make itself known upon these objects, as they pick up smells and stains, as the patina of daily use becomes absorbed into them.⁴ These objects, then, take place in a dual temporal

register, they are at once a means for Wells to refamiliarise himself with a familiar place, to gesture back to the gestures made by his grandmother sitting at her loom and her forbears before her, and, as domestic objects, perhaps destined to line the walls or drape over the chairs in the farmhouse in Southland, they gesture towards an ongoing project of homemaking, to the means by which one must make oneself comfortable against rough weather, changing atmospheres, bad days.

Hut for a Sensuous Gold Miner amounts to a historical inquiry grounded in the body's experience of the world. In doing so, it gestures towards an expanded understanding of what counts as history, of what makes it onto the record, and how that record manifests itself. In part a slow, careful description of what appears and how it is thrown together, and in part a speculative exercise in imagining how things have been and how things could be, Bannan and Wells flirt with different methodologies for making the past felt in the present.

— Simon Gennard

(1) Kathleen Stewart, 'In the World Affect Proposed,' *Cultural Anthropology* 32:2, May 2017, p. 195.

(2) "Waiuta through the eyes of a mine," *NZ History*, updated 5 August 2014. Accessed 20 October 2018. nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/waiuta.

(3) Anna Halprin and Lawrence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (New York: G. Braziller, 1970).

(4) Maxine Bristow, 'Textile as Silent Witness,' in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (Oxford: Berg, 2012), p. 48.

Sophie Bannan and Daegan Wells
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