

NEW EXPANDED EDITION

AN ODE TO MOANA OCEANIA

ALWAYS SONG IN THE WATER



GREGORY O'BRIEN

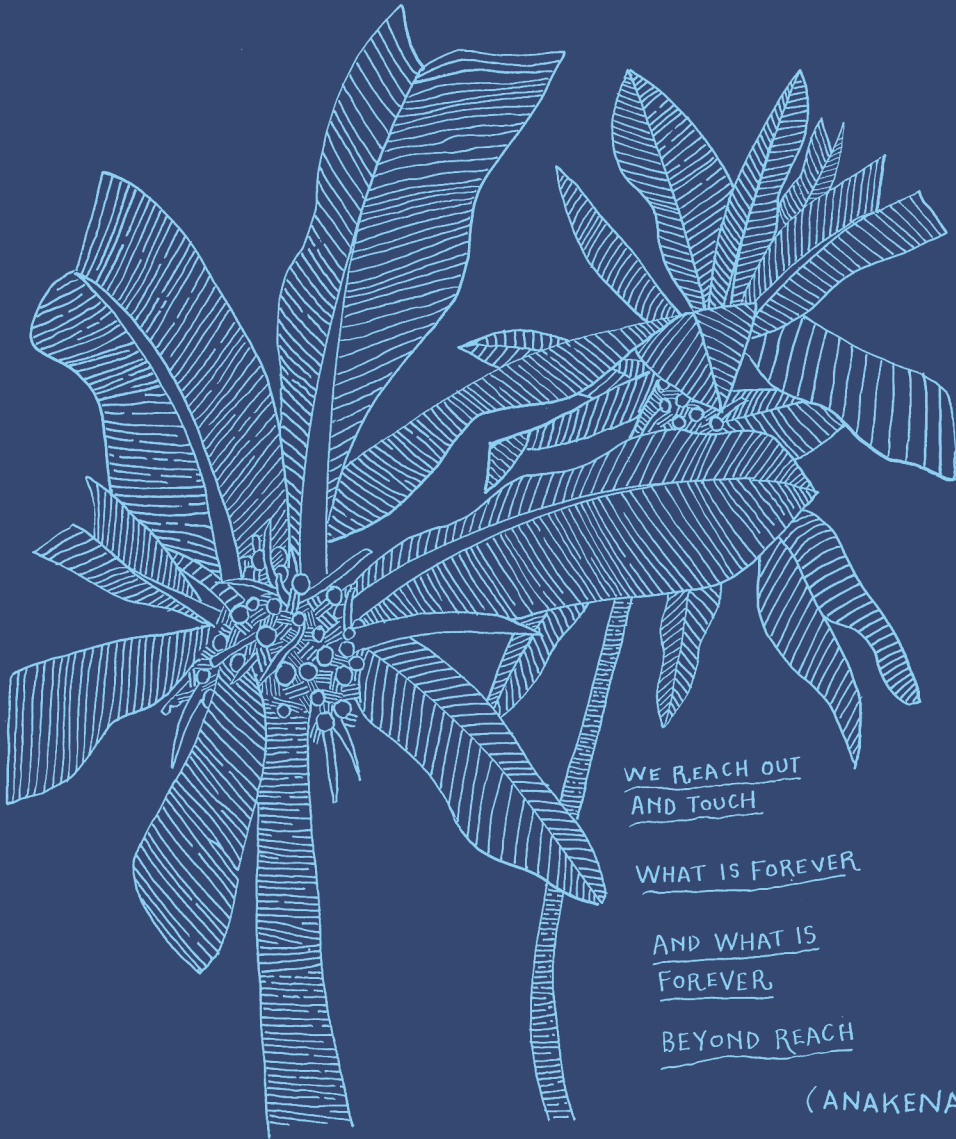


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WE REACH OUT
AND TOUCH

WHAT IS FOREVER

AND WHAT IS
FOREVER

BEYOND REACH

(ANAKENA)

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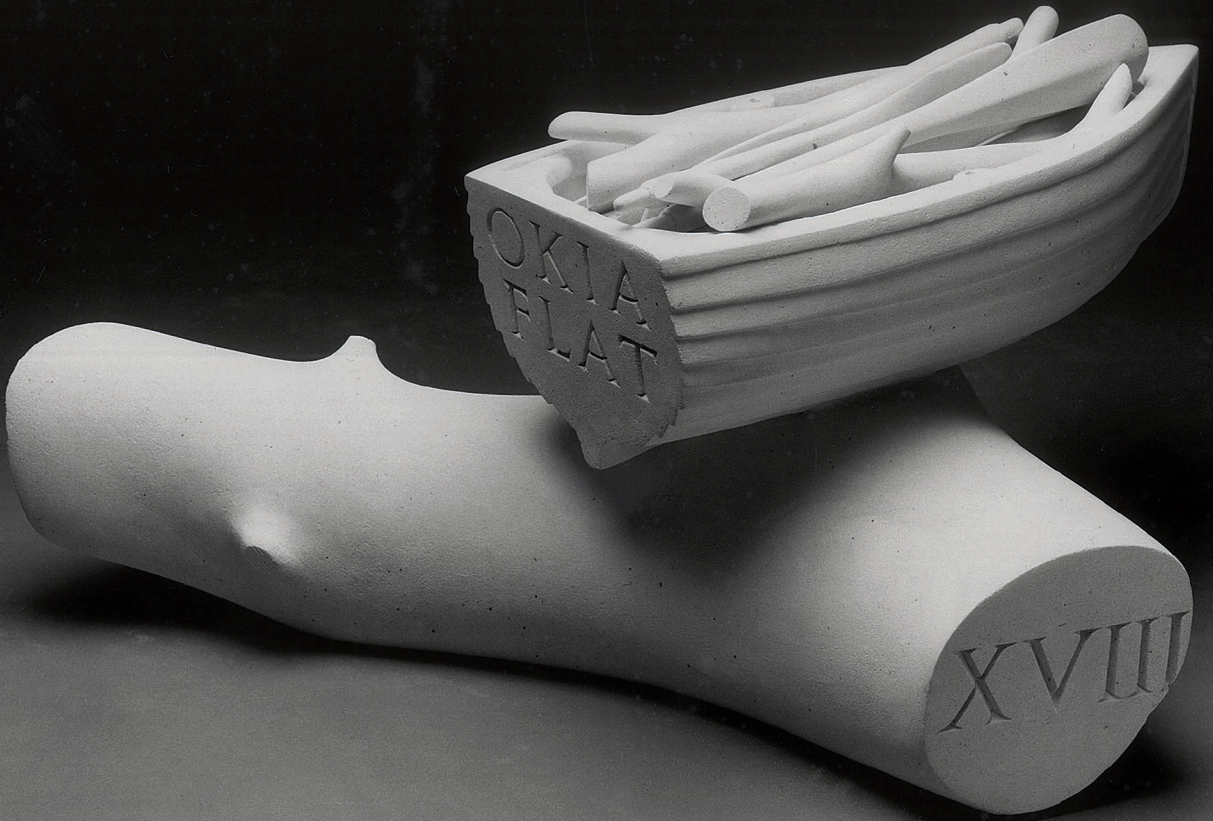
PART THREE

DAYS OF SAIL & DREAMS OF SANCTUARY

Such things the tapa notices
and records: common threads, each voyage
as it ends, and the dancing that will never stop—these
inexhaustible days of sail

as handed down to us—bright fabrics, swirling.

GREGORY O'BRIEN, FROM 'DAYS OF SAIL'



IN THE PLANETARY SWIM-OF-THINGS

June 2023. We had been rowing a dinghy down the years, the hours like strokes of an oar, each day a weighing of anchor. Each month we were rowing. Or else we were sailing. Or we were motoring. Rangitāhua Raoul Island remained not so much a far-flung destination but an idea, or an ideal, that we had in our sights. The Kermadecs had become many things in the minds of the group who voyaged there in 2011: weathervane, watershed, an indicator of future directions, a repository of imaginative potential, a symbol ... The island a meeting place of the known and unknown, of past, present and future. At the same time it was unfinished business.

Twelve years after the expedition, the artists – myself included – were still scanning the horizon for signs of movement in terms of the ever-elusive Kermadec Ocean Sanctuary. As years passed, it lingered as our Great White Whale – the glimpsed-at, but largely unsighted, object of our mind’s gaze. At the same time, we heard murmurings in the corridors of power – whispers or hints that maybe, just maybe, the New Zealand Government would declare the waters around the Kermadec Islands a sanctuary. During the past decade, the issue had appeared close to being resolved, as related earlier in this book, and then it had receded. It never quite seemed capable of keeping a rendezvous with itself.

The situation was warming again in June 2023, with Minister for the Environment David Parker in negotiations with Te Ohu Kaimoana (representing iwi commercial fishing interests). The hoped-for agreement would acknowledge ‘hau kainga, partnership and indigenous frameworks’ while meeting conservation aims. Such an outcome would, as Bronwen Golder put it, ‘be good for the ocean, protecting its unique and vulnerable biodiversity while embracing mana whenua and iwi rights and interests’. There seemed to be good will on both sides of the discussion and, for a moment at least, the end was in sight.

OPPOSITE
Denis O'Connor, *Oarrest*, 1984, Maheno limestone; photograph by David Harris; Eastern Southland Art Gallery collection



ABOVE

Lianne Edwards, *March of the Crabs*, 2020 & 2022, tapa (feta'aki), aluminium armature, metal encased thermometers, inks; New Zealand Maritime Museum Hui Te Ananui a Tangaroa collection

for the first time. Surveying the arrivals, I noted both the urgency of the themes engaged with – the present global environmental predicament, chief among them – yet, in every case, there seemed a redemptive or regenerative note. In Lianne Edwards' meditations on the effects of climate change on oceanic life forms, the references to species depletion and global warming are augmented by a belief in the adaptability and brilliance, the sheer *inventiveness* of nature. Among the materials she incorporates into her art are paperbark, thermometers, plankton net and otoliths ('the inner ears of fish'). Intentionally or not, her works are a paean to Moana Oceania as a place of overlapping and interconnection, of things being washed together and apart, a song in many intricately interwoven parts.

I welcomed back Phil Dadson's *Fate of Things to Come* (*Conference of Stones*), a video-work I had seen when it was premiered as part of the 'Kermadec' exhibition in Santiago de Chile in 2013. Like the rolling of a stone, it had gained meaning and momentum with the passing of the years. Another creator of stone-works, Neke Moa also uses shells and fibres to articulate stories linking, by her definition, 'atua, tohunga and tangata'. Projecting well beyond the shores of



Tangler of twine and fishing wire, we
have woken more than once
to the sound of you—salt-eyed, krill-enriched
turtle-hungry—we have launched

our boats across your scarred
back, thrown our quivering lines
beyond your curved horizon...

FROM 'BOOK OF NUMBERED DAYS'

THE LONG NIGHT AND THE UNDERSEA

In dramatic contrast to Elizabeth Thomson's radiant *New Blueland*, her *Fearless Five Hundred* drops the viewer into deep aquatic space. In the dream-company of Thomson's shoal, we enter a half-asleep state – the endless night-time of the deep. The work takes me back to the 2011 voyage during which we were domiciled in a region of the HMNZS Otago known as 'District 9' (named after the early-2000s horror/sci-fi movie). It was always going to be a difficult night's sleep way below water-line and at the very front of the vessel. With sticky, salty condensation gathering on the inside of the steel hull and a red safety/security light blazing through the night, the claustrophobia was like nothing I had experienced before. All of it was stirred up and amplified by an insistent, Number Four head-sea.

Jammed in a top bunk, between mattress and ceiling, it was impossible to roll over and I managed only a few short passages of sleep. In this submarine-like, windowless interior, I intuited a darker aspect of Moana Oceania – a Gothic quality which I now find analogous with the oceanic ruminations of artists such as Joyce Campbell, Euan Macleod and Karl Fritsch. Yet even in the work of these artists, a note of hope is struck – in the weightless, almost balletic movements of Campbell's subjects and in the dark poetry of Fritsch's work (which brings to mind Odilon Redon, as it does the writings of Jules Verne and Arthur Rimbaud). The German-born jeweller's marine-inspired rings would be the perfect ornamentation for 'the stretched, white-fingered hand of the swelling sea', to quote Scottish poet W. S. Graham. And, for all the bleakness of Macleod's vision, his mythical human subject is essentially heroic – he is (to borrow a phrase from critic Peter Steele) 'the survivor, the wreck-clinger, the Odyssean expeditionary'.



ABOVE

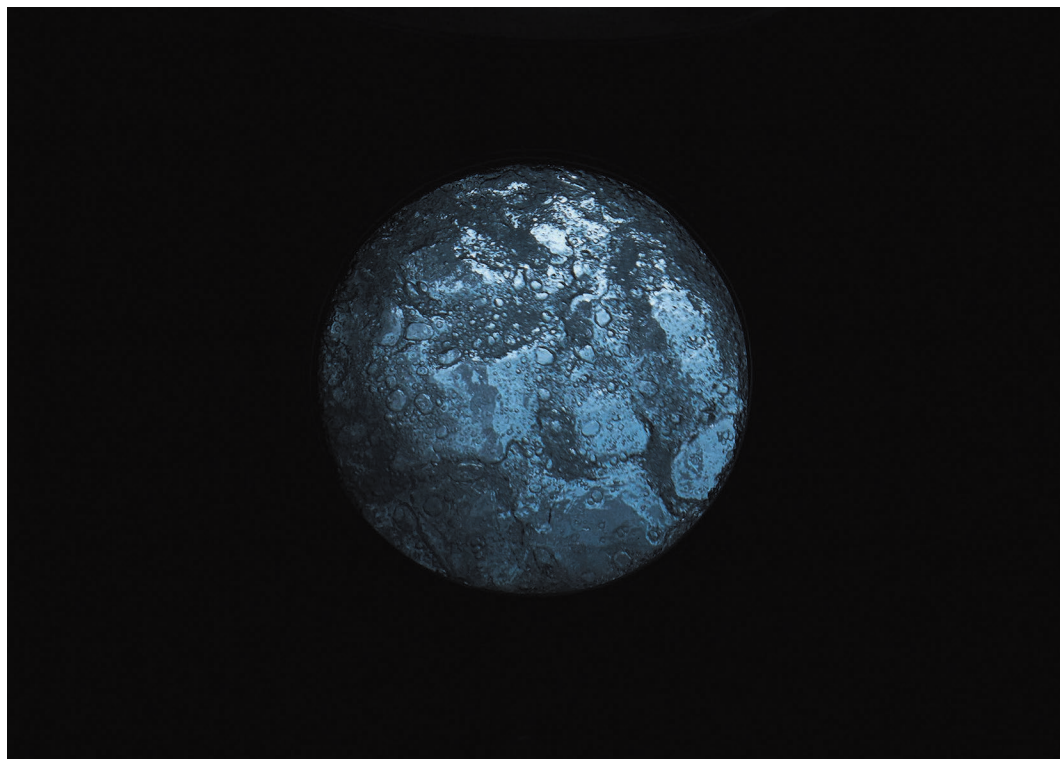
Karl Fritsch, rings, 2022 & 2018, sterling silver, carnelian, pounamu; photography Karl Fritsch

OPPOSITE

Elizabeth Thomson, *New Blueland*, 2014, cast vinyl film, optically clear epoxy resin, glass spheres and lacquer on panel; New Zealand Maritime Museum Hui Te Ananui a Tangaroa collection



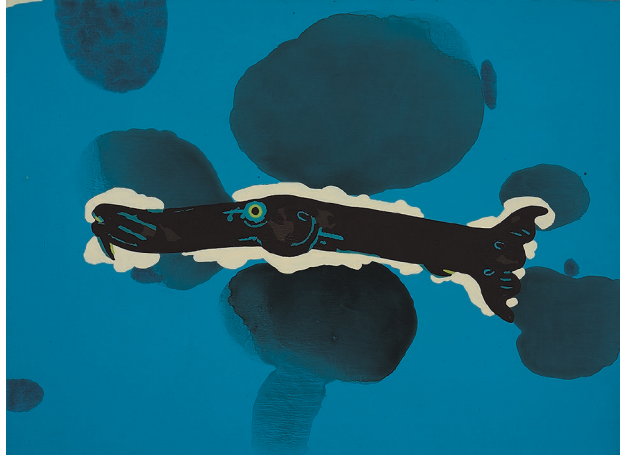
LEFT
Euan Macleod, *Boat Above Submerged Figure*,
2015, oil on canvas



Mark Smith's photograph of a sea-window, taken on the Greenpeace protest vessel *Rainbow Warrior*, comes close to my mind's-eye-view of the world as seen from the bowels of the windowless HMNZS *Otago*. The porthole, in Mark's photograph, is a single blue eye – or it might be the planet earth seen from space. It looks both ways. The ocean, with its narratives of drowning, inundation, of going down, down, down, can itself be a singer of some very dark songs – a point Jason O'Hara's photographic series, *The Deep*, reiterates. Another undersea vision, Angela Tiatia's *Lick* (2015) is at once a chilling reminder of sea level rise in the Pacific (particularly as it affects low-lying oceanic nations such as Tuvalu, where the video-work was made) yet, at the same time, it allows the movement of the human body in water its sensuality and reed-like sway – a one-person ballet for Moana Oceania.

ABOVE
Mark Smith, *Rainbow Warrior*, undated, colour photograph; New Zealand Maritime Museum Hui Te Ananui a Tangaroa collection

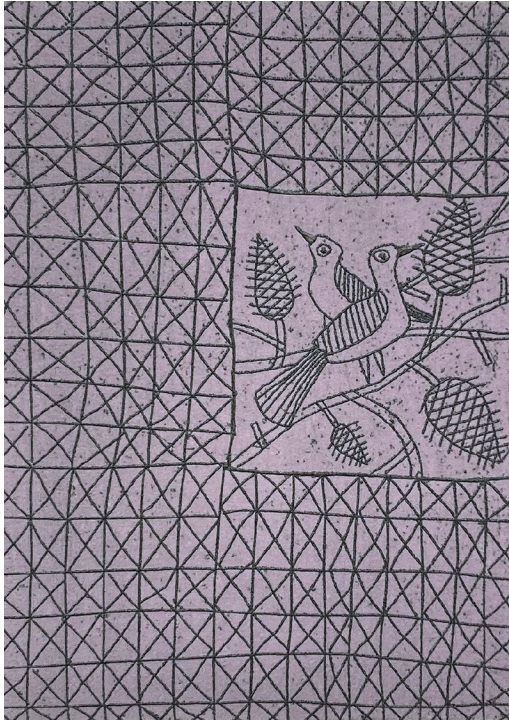
OPPOSITE
Jason O'Hara, from *The Deep*, 2011, black-and-white photographs



TOP LEFT
Noel McKenna, *Whale*, 2021, oil on plywood

TOP RIGHT
Denys Watkins, *Moorea I*, 2006, acrylic on linen

BOTTOM
John Walsh (Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti), *He Whanaunga*, 2014, intaglio etching and aquatint; New Zealand Maritime Museum Hui Te Ananui a Tangaroa collection



extinction during the twentieth century. Who is guarding whom? An etching on the same subject, which John Pule and I made in Niue during 2022, took its title from Gillian Whitehead's composition, 'Puhake ki te Rangi', which translates as 'spouting to the skies'. Gillian's composition – played by Robert Oliver's Palliser Viols with taongo puoro player Mahina-Ina Kingi-Kauai (and filmed by Bruce Foster) – is also part of what we bring to the island and its surrounding waters.

The most perfect visual embodiment of whale-song imaginable, Chris Charteris's series of carved whalebone works, 'Itutu', comprises a series of bone 'needles' which are arranged along the gallery wall like notes on a stave. More than simply a transcription of whale-song, the forms hint at the patterns of waves, tidal movements and ocean-currents. Or they could be an alphabet drawn from a distant or lost civilisation, a line of untranslatable poetry with its ghostly grammar and lilting cadences.

ABOVE LEFT
John Pule & Gregory O'Brien,
A Songbook a Sanctuary, 2023, etching

ABOVE RIGHT
John Pule & Gregory O'Brien,
Puhake ki te Rangi, 2023, etching
with aquatint

OPPOSITE
John Pule & Gregory O'Brien,
Days of Sail, 2023, etching with aquatint



ABOVE
Denys Watkins, *Vavau Reef*,
2006, acrylic on linen

Always Song in the Water is like a splendid tapa cloth left out to dry on the salt of Oceania. It admits all-comers into its wet and capacious tapestry – shoes, seabirds, icebergs, painters, whales, stranded pianos, poets, horses, ghostly containers, dinghies, oil spills, surfboards, reef knots and travelling saints – and so lays claim to a hospitality as vast and ancient as Oceania.

—**SUDESH MISHRA, UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC**

There is something languorously tidal in these travels, the sense of being buoyed along like a mangrove capsule bobbing in an obscure arm of a Northland harbour. Things that seem real but not quite real float past the drifter's eye, which misses nothing. No quirk left unnoticed, no encounter unremarked, a flotilla of moments and memories. We are touching something beyond flesh and blood here. 'We reach out and touch what is forever, and what is forever beyond reach.'

—**KENNEDY WARNE, NEW ZEALAND GEOGRAPHIC**



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