



Sites & Settings

By Thomasin Sleigh

Kate Woods, *Wairakei Stream, Smithson/Matta-Clark*, 2021, 636 x 950mm

I have been lucky to live for several years with *Whirlpool (Oppenheim, Whites Aviation)* (2007) by Kate Woods hanging on the wall of my lounge. The work shows crystalline forms creeping across the placid mountains and waters of a Whites Aviation photograph. Occasionally, I'll stop to look at it and think about the strata of media that Woods meticulously assembles: the actual mountains, the photograph of them, the hand-colouring of the photographic print, Woods' digital copy of the print, her painted cardboard forms laid onto it, the re-photographing, the digital editing, and the final print. Each layer displaces all those preceding it and distances the physical site.

'Displace' is a significant word for Woods' practice. She is interested in the over-familiarity of forests and mountains and romantic winding paths in hillsides and, in the case of her new works for *Sites & Settings*, the green foliage of Waititiko creek, near her house. Woods displaces these sites by the cardboard forms she overlays, the flowers she paints, and the alternate landscapes she inserts into gaps. Every place in her photography and moving image work is caught in a moment of transition, or self-doubt, as leaves ripple and replicate, or jewel-like shapes radiate out of the water. Her images are many places at once and therefore nowhere at all.

The American artist Robert Smithson has been influential on Woods, particularly his 'non-sites'. These are sculptures made of materials moved into the gallery from the world outside: rocks, sand, building materials. Smithson, in his collected writing, was fond of lists, so, inspired by this and the discussions Woods and I had about *Sites & Settings*, I have compiled a list of disorienting places—places of nowhere. As in Woods' images, these are sites where the physical world is distant.

A plane on a runway

Here, I am 'taxiing'. This is the only place where I hear this word. I picture it, with its troubling double 'i'. Nothing else 'taxis'. Not even a taxi. I do not know what to do with this verb, so I listen, happily, to the safety announcements and switch my phone to flight mode. When I depart, I look out the window and see the airport (with its queues and rows of perfume and hand dryers) receding: a low bunker, or a crystalline conglomeration of grey metal and glass, with many apertures for entrance and exit. When I arrive, the plane taxis into its allotted parking space and, through the restricted view of the oval window, I see a white man drive up beside the plane in a small cart. He has a large diamond earring in his left ear. I expect this new country to be hot—the tarmac looks black and hot. Is it hot outside? Inside, in the plane, in my numbered seat, the old air circulates, thrums, the temperature is consistent.

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Photoshop

Kate Woods once told me a story that went like this: She had spent the whole morning working on her art, moving and editing the painted cardboard triangles and cubes that overlay found photographs of mountains and lakes. She manipulates these on Photoshop; she piles triangles on top of each other, strings them together in a chain, or flattens them out. She takes other images and sneaks them into the gaps—sunsets inside mountains, lakes insides lakes. She had been working on her screen for several hours when, because it was a sunny day, she went outside to hang her washing on the line. She pegged up one sock but accidentally let its pair fall to the ground. Kate looked at the sock on the ground and thought, 'Ctrl + Z'. Not in the screen, not beside the washing line, not next to an autumnal lake, or cascading river, or a bush-clad bank—Kate Woods was nowhere.

Looking for the lost keys

Where are my keys? I just saw them on the bench. No, I saw them on the couch. No, I saw them on the bookshelf. No...wait, where are my keys? Ok, I'll picture where I was when I last saw them. Where was I? Let me think. I must have used them to come in through the front door and then I walked into the lounge and then I sat down on the couch and then I went into the bedroom and looked out the window and there was the woman from across the road, with the funny haircut, walking her dog, and...then what? Where did I go next? It was only a few moments ago and already I can't remember. How can that be? I had them in my hand. Now I'm standing here. Yes, now I'm here, next to the fridge. Here in the kitchen. My past self, standing next to me, lost the damn keys. Because they're not here. They're not on the bench. They're not anywhere.

In labour

This place is structured by the logic of the contractions. Their regularity prompts boring metaphors: they surge like a wave. And like a wave, they pull me down and inside myself, into a new place, a dark hyper-interior. It's not subconscious and it's not an internal monologue (there are very few words here) and it's not that place between dreams and wakefulness. It's not the inside of my mind but the inside of my body and I have to go there to withstand the contraction, to draw it in and contain it. Because if I let it out, the pain of it will destroy this bed and these walls and this entire hospital. It will decimate and lay waste to crops and livelihoods.

In the space between contractions I am vaguely aware of gripping someone's hands and the fluorescent light from the corridor outside, leaking into this dim room. Another contraction is in me and I am so *there*. So trapped in this horrible wrenched body while I create another body.

Later, they will say, 'You did so well! You kept breathing. You were so strong! Look what you made!' But who was that woman, lying there, on the bed, her eyes scrunched? I don't remember. A stranger. Then, where was I? If I wasn't there?

A staircase in an office block

I go to the clothing sale because discounts are promised. It is not in the usual shop but in an office block in town; the Facebook event says it's at number thirty-seven, but there is no number above the double glass doors I arrive at. I push one open anyway, and stand in the foyer and look at the directory of business names on the wall: *Harbourside Dentists, Black Cat Graphix, City Sports Physiotherapy*. The words are made up of individual white letters stuck to a black felt board, some are missing and others slant at steep angles; the words are drunk.

No one else is around and the foyer is quiet. Am I in the right place? To my left, a melancholic 'ding' announces the arrival of the lift. Its door opens to reveal a grey carpeted interior, even the ceiling has carpet. There is no one inside. The lift and I wait together. I do nothing. Am I in the right place? I watch the doors close and hear the lift whirring away from me, sucked up to the top of the building by an invisible requester.

I follow it, taking the stairs, which are also carpeted, but this time in a dingy brown. I slowly climb. The staircase feels as if it is in the absolute centre of the building; an internal organ, or a carpeted artery. There is no sound except the padded tread of my feet on the steps and my breath, growing thicker as I ascend. The walls are white. The lights above fluorescent. I keep going. I try to remember why I am in this office block because there is no evidence of the sale. There are no doors, only the eternal staircase, going up, going up, going on and on to nowhere.

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