

Water World by Matilda Fraser

*While you are reading this the liquids in you are surging electricity and yet you do not die from the equation.<sup>1</sup>*

We are always at the mercy of water. Things are changing for us. The sea levels are rising, and as the water draws nearer to us, there are things that we will have to face. The water wars are nearly upon us.

The sea brought us here: first by waka, navigating by the stars, then by steamships, leaving streams of coal fumes and churned water in their wake. Now, it carries to us the flows of transnational capital on container ships. As well as this – the detritus of human endeavour, endless archipelagos of plastic debris gathering, forming mass. Floating. Entangling with underwater structures, ecosystems, food sources.

The human body is a contained wet entity.<sup>2</sup> When we touch another thing, minute water droplets are transferred from thing to person, person to thing. This exchange of wetness means that we take on miniscule parts of the things we touch, and vice versa. What else is transmitted? When we touch the past, how much of it comes off on our fingertips?

Cellulose fibres, found in paper and plant material, are hygroscopic: meaning that they are always searching for equilibrium, always trying to come to the ambient temperature of a room by attracting and pulling in the water molecules from the space. This sympathy to water means that some of our most valuable taonga – woven decades or centuries ago from feathers, flax, grass – must be housed in carefully monitored conditions of humidity lest they draw in too much water from their environment, or lose too much to it, becoming friable, collapsing into dust.

When we reach Water World – and by that, I mean the full Dennis-Hopper-with-webbed-feet-fighting-pirates-for-a-handful-of-dirt fantasy, which is one of our probable futures – resources like paper are likely to be in short supply. As the ocean surrounds us, what it is likely to bring us (though it may not come in the forms we need it) is plastic, bobbing on the tides, washing up where we can reach it: snarled fishing nets, milk bottle lids, McDonalds toys ribbed with grime, drinking straws, twist ties, packing peanuts, trash bags, lost buoys, wrapping, packaging, particles of all sizes. Single-use water bottles everywhere, and not a drop to drink. Plastic is not sympathetic to water: it remains, for a long time, resolutely itself, even as it breaks down into smaller and smaller parts of itself. As artists, we will need to adapt to the materials available to us, the ones that persist in remaining – from spinning straw into gold to weaving pearls into nets. The sea has given us so much, brought us together, borne us up; perhaps if it could speak, it would ask us to take back what we have given it, and put that to use instead.

<sup>1</sup> Samuels, Lisa (2010). *Wet gaps, membranism and archipelago poetics*, in *Reading Room: Liquid State. Issue 4*. Auckland Art Gallery.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid