



chrysalis seed trust



Hidden places light water land

*'Waterfalls fell and raged and became still and silent falls of light for all time. I look back with joy on taking a brush of white paint and curving through the darkness with a line of white.'*¹

Art school experimentation: water

Discovering tiny lands of sparkling watery light refracted through the lens of my camera is something I look back on with joy from my art school years.

My photography grew out of a course of experimentation and encounter that began early in my second year at art school. I had an affinity with water, realizing it to be a

universally recognized metaphor, frequently mentioned in the Bible, and substantially displayed in art history. Searching for ways to visualize my faith, I began to investigate the use of water as a purifying agent, observing both its power and its beauty: firstly through painting, then alternative photography. My final two years at art school were devoted to a photographic project, experimenting with the actual substances of water and light. This developed

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Untitled II (from *Magnify* series),
Joanna Osborne, 2005, Colour transparency.

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**water is the sign of God,
common, indispensable,
easy to overlook**

***Hidden places* (continued from p 1)**

into a final presentation of enlarged and projected macro photographs of luminous water and landscape.

The illusion of vast spaces is a feature of this kind of macro photography. In *Untitled:Land* (2005) a paper ground is exposed in focus, revealing a shoreline of bright light, a direct reflection of a section of white that appears to hover above the land. A slice of golden beam emanates away from the land towards a white expanse. Foreground clusters of lights embedded in deep green are repeated in the background, emphasizing the sense of space. Darkness and light wrestle with each other. Bursting beads of light generate from the watery subject to replace the dark.

Origins

'For in you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.'² The image of God as light has ancient and universal foundations, from the Baal of Semitic paganism, the Egyptian Ra and Persian Mazda, to the Platonic 'Sun' of the Ideal. This image of God as light

then passed on to neo-Platonism and was affirmed in Christian tradition by Augustine. The medieval visionary Hildegard of Bingen writes of the Spirit: 'I am that living and fiery essence of the divine substance that glows in the beauty of the fields. I shine in the water, I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars.'³

The image of God as water is also understood in Christian tradition. Water, light and the land are fundamental and timeless metaphors of spirituality that have been employed throughout history and continue to be out-worked in a contemporary context.

Land and light as a metaphor

Photographer Stefan Roberts works under the cover of night to expose and disclose hidden worlds of light and colour. Ephemeral heavenly blues and beautiful seascapes are splashed with beams of light. The spirit is alluded to and the land is given a numinous quality that radiates a sense of mystery. By giving the land a sort of aura it directs the viewer to consider the otherworldly in a way that is not always overtly Christian. An ambiguity intrigues and enables the viewer to take their own stance, while some works make subtle hints to Christianity. This is seen in *Wandering Stock* (2005), where a country road sign alludes to the parable of the lost sheep. While the parallel is slightly amusing the photograph is solemn; a misty, dark and eerie land carries a road sign emphasized with intense luminosity.

Another artist who imbues landscapes with spiritual presence is Dunedin-based Claire Beynon. Spiritual aspirations are drawn onto the land with luminous marks. Doorways and horizons of light invite the viewer to approach the work in wonder as to what may lie beyond. In *Songs of Certainty & Doubt III* a skyline shimmers in white heat against dark sky and land, while tiny stars shoot up into black. Not having to rely on religious iconography⁴ to convey meaning, the land itself could act as a metaphor for God. It is light that gives life to the land, and light conveys hope, which is the essence of faith.

I have approached my photography with this view. *Untitled II: Magnify* is like the entrance to a gravelly road that leads to light on the horizon. The image gives an invitation, alluding to a space that one could perhaps enter and walk the upward path. Darker, with rich sombre tones of brown this image hardly recalls a fertile land, but offers a distant glimpse of something more.

I have been working with light as a way to convey hope in the God who reflects aspects of Himself in the land. Without specifically referencing religious symbolism, the works are made via a process that refers to transformation. This becomes a parable of the way God works unexpectedly - and always outside of the box in which religion often attempts to place Him. The work attempts to function as a demonstration of the capacity that God has to create and recreate, to order and re-order, to redeem, transform and transfigure. In *The Light of our eyes* from the series *Magnify* (see cover image - p 1), a curve of focus runs across a dense area of clay particles, each one reflecting an individual beam of light. Shooting beams of white-golden light leap off the surface of a deep blue, flying upward, extending heavenward. A photograph of an instant of movement, it reveals the reaction of light upon a clay-covered,



Untitled: Land (from *Magnify* series),
Joanna Osborne, 2005, Colour transparency.



Songs of Certainty & Doubt II
Claire Beynon, 2004, Pastel, 700 x 735 mm.



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Wandering Stock, Stefan Roberts, 2005, giclee on paper, 930 x 825mm.

reflective surface that causes the image to dance. This image is more suggestive of sky than land, a pure incident of light falling on water, magnified to record the detailed workings of reflection. Water flows and travels where it will, forming imagery that is not anticipated, but discovered. It is the work of light refracted through a lens, capturing reflection and those emanating beads of light, that brings the image to life.

Jesus as Light and Water

It was Jesus who used water and light as metaphors of life. 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.'⁵ Since Christ is God inherent in the world as its life, He is also its light - that is, He is the source of the knowledge of God. The light and life of the Word/Jesus are two major interconnected themes in the Gospel of John, in which knowledge is an important concept – a knowledge that is not merely intellectual, but is linked with faith, which leads to knowledge of God.

Image-making can attempt to convey this knowledge by connecting word and image, directing our attention through very natural and universally recognized metaphors to the source of knowledge.

' – water is the sign of God,
Common, indispensable, easy to overlook – ' ⁶

Water becomes a metaphor for Spirit, accentuated by the way it is infused with light. 'I am the light of the world, he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'⁷

Jesus made this statement at the Feast of the Tabernacles, an eight day autumn festival that marked the completion of the harvest and historically commemorated their Jewish ancestors' wanderings in the wilderness. His claim to be the 'light of the world' was particularly meaningful to His listeners. One of the ceremonies connected with the Festival was

the lighting, in the court of the women, of the four great candelabra: a branched and highly ornamental candle-stick. The ceremony was an illumination of the Temple. Jesus is presenting Himself as the fulfilment of this tradition, and as the Temple itself. He re-installed a living, direct and accessible way to connect with God.

Another ceremony connected with the Feast, was the fetching of water and its solemn libation: a pouring out of water in honour of God at the altar of the Tabernacle. Jesus made this statement about himself: "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the spirit of God.⁸

Joanna Osborne

- 1 Colin McCahon, *Colin McCahon / a survey exhibition*, Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972
- 2 Psalm 36:9, NIV
- 3 Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press, 1986, p 47)
- 4 Iconography means conventional symbolic representation
- 5 John 1:4-5, NIV
- 6 James K Baxter, *Winter Monologue* in *Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press, NZ 1979, p 496)
- 7 John 8:12, NIV
- 8 John 7:37-38, NIV