

# Submerge

## Edwina Cooper

# ACE ROSS

23 September – 4 October, 2017

Shipshaped  
Ash Tower

In her studio, Edwina Cooper tells me how this exhibition is a series of enquiries about her recent residency in Canada. Listening to her talk about the trip, Cooper's works could be described as 'ethnographic'<sup>1</sup>—they involve coming to terms with (but crucially, *translating*) cultural experience. Previously, her work has focussed on the sea and the use of the boat as an interface between human and ocean. Here, however, we depart from what Cooper describes as 'oceanic might' and arrive at Lac Phillippe and the Ottawa River. Canadian waters embody a culture vastly different to that of Australia, and by using water as her mediary, Cooper reflects on the stories she encounters on the expedition. The works in **Submerge** describe different vignettes of the journey, and through their stories, they also tell of their own struggle in a space of dis/location. The essay title 'shipshaped' here describes a nautical approximation; a sailor in uncharted waters, negotiating the cultural difference by looking for something familiar or 'of a kind/kind of' within the Canadian lakes and rivers.

Cultures are not only about nations. They can be also be about communities, practices, or jobs. *Let out your sheets* (2017) exists at the meeting of two technically embedded sailing cultures. The rigging for tall ships is different from dinghies (I'm told), and the knots presented on the shelf are an approximation. Recalling the prevalence of tall ships on the river, Cooper tries to recreate their knots from memory. The result, however, is not only a memory exercise, but a small means by which a dinghy sailor can make sense of tall ship sailing. Knots are an ancient practice embedded in the identity of different communities, and the names of knots (bowline, fisherman, reef, and thief) allude to their long history in seafaring (the roots of which are common to all ships). Here in *Let out your sheets* knotting becomes a boundary object; a practice common to both tall ship and dinghy sailing which allows Cooper passage between the techniques, and a means of making sense of the difference.

Cooper describes the Ottawa River as a site of diplomatic 'peacekeeping'—as the border between the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The river is transformed as a site of political mediation, where governance of the river is contested between provinces but ultimately presided over by the Riverkeeper; a nonpartisan figure who advocates for the health of the river. Following themes of vigilance and care, *45°28'31.1"N 76°14'18.8"W* (2017) recreates and presents us with a sample of the river's water. It is a knowing simulacrum, however; it makes no attempt to emulate the sediment or biomatter of the water. We are given a biochemical view of the river, mimicking the pH level, nitrates, and alkalinity of the water. The 'Ottawa' water is in fact Australian, altered to express the traits of the original. So often we resort to science to render the unfamiliar knowable, in the hope



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ACE Open respectfully acknowledges the traditional country of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains and pays respect to Elders past and present. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land. We acknowledge that they are of continuing importance to the Kaurna people living today.

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that the data it produces might yield a moment of familiarity or understanding. pH meters and titrators, however, cannot tell the stories of the river, and how those stories affect what the river means to its inhabitants.

These stories are found elsewhere, however. *Adieu, Pirate of Wakefield* (2017) tells the tale of Dennis, a shipwright on the river who builds 'pirate ships' from the boards of his barn. The proclaimed 'Wakefield pirate' has agitated the local council of La Pêche, Quebec who claim that his fleet of upcycled houseboats are drawing unwanted powerboats and motor traffic to the river. Cooper's shanty is a shonky mythology that plays host to ill-fitting metaphors. Shanties are meant for oceans, yet this one speaks of inland piracy, council legislation and building pirate ships, as they are, locked on the river between two dams.

*Stroke* (2017) articulates a relationship, again, between the culture of lake-faring and the experience of water as a phenomenon. Cooper tells me about canoeing on Lac Phillippe; she says that the eddies that form on the edge of a paddle-stroke signal the correct technique of stroke. The 'correct' performance of water is a curious idea, as correctness implies a system or scale against which one performs. I realise that this particular 'correctness' is borne of (and can only ever occur) at the mutual interaction of water and the human practice of canoeing. The eddy is a symptom a physical—but also technical—connection between water and paddle. As a result, Cooper's video work makes no claims to 'capture' this phenomenon; the lo-fi footage sketches the idea, as a suggestion, or diagram (or perhaps a postcard). Once again, we see Cooper observing the world through the water, learning canoeing through the form of the river. This recurs in *Shoreline* (2017) where Cooper recalls the preservation of fallen maple leaves on the riverbed. They can be seen collected at the bottom of the river, and Cooper describes how they seem to avoid decay and retain their colour and structure. We speculate as the reasons for this but cannot pin down an answer.

Cooper tells me that these works are responses to different stories encountered on her journey. This is true, but these works also describe different approaches to making sense of difference. They are tentative (but not clumsy) and in concert they describe how a river is not only made of water, but of people, laws, instruments, histories, and cultures. This essay opened with a comparison to ethnography, and it seems pertinent to close with a crucial remark about the practice: ethnographers are never in-between, but amongst. There is no island or neutral ground between cultures from which an ethnographer can observe. Ethnography is about being in, at the mingling of differences, and living with the tension of that position. It should be no surprise, then, that Cooper's work is a rough ship-shape; shipshape in its finish, and tentative in its being. The works in *Submerge* are beautiful approximations about making do, making meaning, and making sense.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ethnography' is a method employed by anthropologists that involves the empirical study of a culture from the perspective of a participant of that culture - put simply, watching and doing. It often involves living and participating in the communities which are the subject of the study. As a result, ethnographers often experience a kind of cultural drift between their ingrained and foreign experiences.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Edwina Cooper is an Adelaide based artist producing kinetic installation works. She completed her Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) at the Adelaide Central School of Art in 2015. In 2016, Edwina exhibited with Brunswick Street Gallery (Melbourne) in a group show, *Four Walls*. She was awarded the Adelaide Festival of Arts' Destination Art: Emirates Artist Development Opportunity, enabling her to travel to Marseille in May/June 2016 to undertake a residency at Dos Mares - the outcomes were presented at FELTspace. In July 2017, Edwina undertook a residency with Ayatana in Canada to further research human relationships with water.

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## LIST OF WORKS

**Shoreline** (2017), tinted acrylic, dyneema, sailcloth, stainless steel fixings, dimensions variable (acrylic disk 120 x 120 x 0.45 cm)

**Let out your sheets** (2017), 6mm double braid rope, marine ply, stainless steel fixings, dimensions variable

**Stroke** (2017), single channel video, continuous loop, filmed in conjunction with Ayatana Artists' Research Program, Ottawa, Canada

**Adieu, Pirate of Wakefield** (2017) vinyl cut text

**45°28'31.1"N 76°14'18.8"W** (2017), glass jar, RODI water, pH, Mg+2, N, kH buffering compounds

All artworks courtesy the artist.