

**Drawn Chorus: creation of embodied drawing processes
responsive to the detrimental impact of human-produced sound
on humpback whales**

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Fig. 1 Maria O'Toole, *How loud is too loud? No.6*, 2020. Conte chalks and water on black primer on canvas, 183 x 213 cm. Photo Harry Culy. Artwork © Maria O'Toole





Fig. 2 Maria O'Toole, 2017 (left) *Pressure Experiments*; (right) *pour and press*. Mixed media process drawings. Photos © Maria O'Toole

Sound is essential to humpback whales, *Megaptera novaeangliae*. It is their primary means of communication. Noise—unwanted sound—travels through the sea as *pressure*, and it travels further in the sea than in air. This practice-led research situates my drawing practice within the context of aesthetic developments arising from responses to environmental pollution that originates in human activity. The methodological investigations underpinning the research speculate on and imagine the humpback whale's experience of human created sound as it interferes with their oceanic waters. Through the development of an in-depth drawing research process that tunes into bodily, sensory and gestural responses to ocean acoustics, a visual language for the *unseen* sound forces experienced by whales has evolved. Relational encounters with science and 'nature' played a role in the production of this knowledge.

Fig. 3 (overleaf) Maria O'Toole, *How loud is too loud? No.4*, 2019. Conte chalk on black primer on canvas, 153 x 120 cm. Photo Harry Culy. Artwork © Maria O'Toole



From my engagement with NIWA Taihoro Nukurangi scientists researching the impact of human-generated underwater sounds in Cook Strait, Aotearoa, and my experiences of swimming with whales in their wilder waters in Tonga, along with aural and imagined responses to environmental stresses, I have evolved a multifaceted visual language for pressure. In short, I have intertwined the journey of a drawn line with the complexities of noise pressure experienced by whales in compromised marine ecologies.



Fig. 4 Maria O'Toole, Grid experiment for *How Loud is Too Loud?*, 2017. Chalk on black primer on Fabriano paper, 50 x 75 cm. Photo © Maria O'Toole

What knowledge does a methodological investigation amongst the thick-flesh of the world between the seer (artist) and seen (subject) reveal? I argue that my embodied drawing method inhabits a critical space to contribute to a broader understanding of the whale's felt experience. Here, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a useful conceptual and theoretical entry point to an embodied understanding of the space in-between the seer and the seen; my research takes place in the "chiasm" between artist and whale by speculating on and bodily imagining the latter's experience of marine noise (Moran 429). Merleau-Ponty's theories of "intertwining" are particularly resonant because they explore a crisscrossing or exchange between the sensing body and sensed 'thing' (Moran 429). Donna Haraway's concept of

Fig. 5 Maria O'Toole,
How loud is too loud?
No.5, 2019. Chalks and
wet media on
Fabriano paper, 240 x
135 cm. Photo Harry
Culy. Artwork © Maria
O'Toole





Fig. 6 Maria O’Toole, Installation view of the exhibition, *Drawn Chorus*, The Engine Room Gallery, 7–18 September 2020, Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University-Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Aotearoa New Zealand. Installation photography by Harry Culy, courtesy of Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University. Artwork © Maria O’Toole

“making-kin” is also crucial because it unfolds more contemporary thought on entering the troubled contact zone or troubled patterning between certain human and non-human lives—my focus area of Cook Strait in Aotearoa is such a zone.

Drawn Chorus introduces the term *embodied pressure* to describe a specific aspect of the processual drawing investigation that evolved over time through my art-led practice across disciplines—and species. The purpose of this research is to reorientate the whole (human) body as a site of cognition through a deeper dive into embodied knowledge making.

I am only 1.63 metres tall, so my whole body is engaged in the drawing process. With arms outstretched, the memories of swimming flood back into my body as the sound I recorded when swimming with humpback whales plays through the speakers in my studio.

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