

There is (no) Anthropocene

Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux with Colleen Coco Collins Janine Randerson and Arielle Walker Shelley Simpson Virginia Were

There is (no) Anthropocene responds to the controversial 2024 decision by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) not to classify the term Anthropocene as a formal geological epoch. Anthropocene is a broad term used to describe this era of accelerating human impacts on Earth, which are causing all five of our planet's systems to become dangerously unbalanced.

The decision came after more than a decade of research by the Anthropocene Working Group, which concluded that radioactive fallout from hydrogen bomb tests in 1952 was the best marker of humanity's profound impact on our planet. Other scientists disagreed on the start date. Despite the group's rejection of the term, it continues to be useful, widely used, and hotly debated – in the arts and humanities – as well as in the sciences.

Importantly, the decision raises questions about the complexity of defining when the Anthropocene began. Was it as recent as 1952? Was it much earlier – at the dawn of agriculture? Was it fossil-fuel-driven industrialisation? How do we consider humans as part of nature? What should define this moment?

With these questions in mind, the artists in this exhibition present new lens-based and sculptural works exploring the intersecting stories of two historic mining sites in the

northern hemisphere, the current government's push to reinvigorate petroleum and mineral exploration in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the impact of extreme weather on Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's west coast.

During the 1950s, atomic bomb testing caused what is now called 'the bomb spike,' an alteration of the chemical composition of Earth, which is evident in oceans, lake sediment, coral and teeth. People born in and after the 1950s have increased amounts of carbon-14 in their teeth. In *Gnash*, Shelley Simpson responds to this knowledge, using calcium carbonate extracted from eggshells to explore the way in which chemical bonds manifest and crystalline structures accrete through the process of evaporation. The thirty-two teeth in a human mouth are represented by the same number of small, ceramic discs holding calcium carbonate crystalline formations. In a large, suspended disc, the process occurs live over the course of the exhibition as the dry air in the gallery space encourages evaporation of calcium-rich liquid and crystal formation.

In Iceland, another form of calcium carbonate occurs as the very hard crystal, Iceland Spar, which was mined at the Helgustaðir mine in East Iceland from the 17th to the mid-20th century. Iceland Spar has the remarkable ability to split light into a double refraction, a property that led to polarised light microscopy, which advanced the study of the properties of materials. During a residency in Iceland in May 2025, Simpson made the work *Attempting double refraction* – a series of pinhole photographs, using a thin sliver of

Iceland Spar as the camera's lens.

Unboxing Vid, a video work by Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux with Colleen Coco Collins, travels through space and time to the mouth of the Petitcodiac river, within the Sikniktuk district of Mi'kma'ki – the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, also known as Albert County, New Brunswick, Canada. This is where, in 1838, geologist Abraham Gesner commercialised the mining of the bituminous hydrocarbon Albertite, used to produce kerosene through a distillation process that Gesner invented. The implications were profound – the whaling industry rapidly collapsed, affordable lighting transformed societies around the world, and paved the way for a fossil-fuelled future. Today, apples line the roads to the largely forgotten mine site.

Janine Randerson's video work *Critical Minerals*, in collaboration with Arielle Walker's poetic storying, and a sound composition by Rachel Shearer, was conceived as an artists' submission on the government's 2024 revised minerals strategy, which identified critical minerals to be targeted for extractive mining in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Slow, macro-lens video images of eleven critical minerals include a rock of phosphorous from Nauru, which stimulated large-scale mining of the island, and native arsenic from quartz in Coromandel. The minerals were filmed at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum with assistance from Marine Biology and Mineral collection curators Clinton Duffy and Lukas Phan-huy. The revolving images and Walker's words unbury other means of approaching these minerals

as historical remedies or poisons, offering names in te reo or ancient Greek. When the lives of elements are understood beyond their resource value, we may have a chance to avoid the damage caused by extractive mining. The work is projected on a screen made from bio-cellulose, designed and made by materials designer Claudine Nalesu.

Virginia Were's photograph *On the Escarpment* is a heartfelt response to the destruction caused by Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023 to Muriwai, a small settlement on Tāmaki Makaurau's west coast, near where she lives. In March 2025, Were began photographing empty sections in Muriwai where houses had been deconstructed and removed because they were designated as category three – unsafe to live in because of the risk of landslides during severe weather. This work belongs to a series, which documents the transformation of the land – from residential sections to a state of semi-wildness as these sites begin to merge with the native bush and other plants on the escarpment that defines Muriwai's landscape. After an extended buy out process, Auckland Council now owns most of the category three sites. These photographs seek to register the presence of the former owners by drawing attention to small, remaining traces of domesticity, imagination and care – the lush gardens of those who once lived there – while also reminding us of a wider sense of absence and loss – that what happened to Muriwai echoes similar weather-related events worldwide as Earth continues to absorb and respond to the impact of human-caused transformation.