

Conor Clarke
→ *Eau de Plume*, 2026

Eau de Plume is a new exhibition by Conor Clarke exploring the sensory landscape the Kaikōura Tītī (Hutton's Shearwater) navigate by.

The exhibition title, *Eau de Plume*, plays on an onomatopoeic assonance with 'odour plume', a term describing how DMS (dimethyl sulphide) plumes into the air when zooplankton—the seabirds' main food source—eat phytoplankton. These plumes not only guide seabirds towards food but also act as wayfinding markers, generating scent maps that reflect the seafloor below. Sensory ecologist Gabrielle Nevitt describes such maps as "[...] peaks and valleys of DMS over shelf breaks, seamounts, and other underwater features [...]", challenging the assumption of seabirds' experience of the ocean being 'featureless'.

In this exhibition, Clarke's photographs of seascapes (or "scentscapes", as the artist calls them) envision scent-led wayfinding, reflecting on seabirds' highly attuned olfactory and navigational abilities, as well as the process of foraging for knowledge and making art in response. The seascapes carry the scent of DMS, evoking these birds' ability to wayfind, forage, and migrate across the ocean, which is often described as 'vast', 'featureless', or 'void-like' due to an absence of visual landmarks. Tube-nosed seabirds such as shearwaters, petrels, and albatrosses, however, are known to rely on odour cues, 'scent maps', and memory to navigate at sea and to locate individual burrows when homing in the dark.

Eau de Plume also includes plastics previously ingested by tube-nosed seabirds, confronting us with the direct and devastating consequences of human waste on these sensitive and fascinating creatures. Research indicates that plastics are ingested not because they look like prey, but because they smell like it. Over time, many plastics accumulate phytoplankton on their surface, which is then eaten by zooplankton and therefore smells like food. In tracing these invisible scent trails, Clarke's work reveals how the systems that guide seabirds home are increasingly entangled with the by-products of human activity.

Artwork caption

Conor Clarke

Eau de Plume, 2026

cotton, reactive dyes, wire, Dimethyl Sulphide odour, plastics collected from deceased toanui/flesh-footed shearwater (*Ardenna carneipes*) chicks on Ohinau Island

courtesy of Wildlife Management International Ltd, with thanks to the Department of Conservation and Ngāti Hei

commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

Conor Clarke

Home, hone, homing (for Betsy Bang), 2026

1. 23:52, 14.02.24

2. 22:51, 14.02.24

3. 22:49, 14.02.24

4. 23:54, 14.02.24

5. 22:50, 14.02.24

silver gelatin handprints

commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

Conor Clarke

Holding (for Ted Howard), 2026

silver gelatin handprint, framed

commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

About the artist

Conor Clarke (Ngāi Tahu, Scottish, Welsh) graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 2005. Since graduating, Clarke has exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand, using the medium of photography to explore ecology, conceptions of nature, critical and post-colonial re-readings of Romanticism and the ongoing effects of industrialisation on land use and its representation. Clarke has spent the last decade based between Berlin and Aotearoa, amassing an impressive body of work that blends aspects of both conceptual and documentary photography.