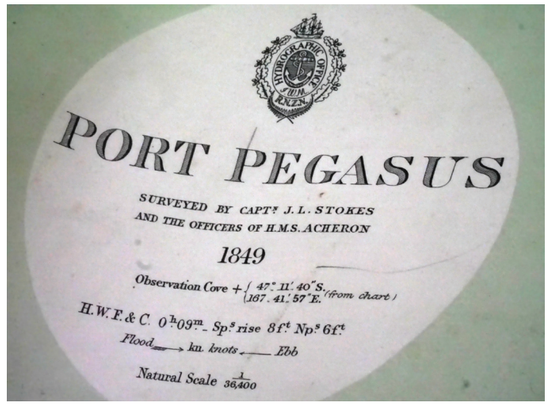

Opposite: Shelley Simpson setting up her video camera. All photos courtesy of Shelley Simpson
Clockwise from top left: Original map surveyed by Captain J L Stokes; a calm day, Cyanotypes of flora and fauna; remnants of an old tramway at Diprose Bay

The tin fields of Stewart Island

Shelley Simpson takes a hairy boat ride to visit the sites of the tin rush in Port Pegasus, Stewart Island, which she is using to explore the complexity of our relationship to the environment.

Stewart Island is huge, huge and remote, and the furthest south I have ever been. The only town, Oban, is home to about 300 people, but 92 percent of the island is the Rakiura National Park, an intense, temperate rain forest with no roads and the odd hunting or tramping hut.

I went to Stewart Island with the help of Creative New Zealand and the Department of Conservation (DOC) through a funding opportunity called Wild Creations, which offers artists the chance to experience DOC environments as inspiration for new art work. I wanted to explore the site of a tin mining rush at Port Pegasus, which was active in the 1880s and again during World War One — to see how the land had responded to the mining activity, what remained of it after a hundred years, to get a sense of what had gone on there.

I've been looking at mining as a way of exploring the complex relationships humans have with land and mineral resources. Port Pegasus interested me because of the remoteness of the place and the huge effort that had gone into exploring the area during the tin rush.

I had used a DOC study ("Pegasus tin Archaeological survey of the Pegasus tin field, southern Stewart Island/Rakiura") to research various archeological sites in the area, and had a plan of what I wanted to visit. I took a camera rig that records 360-degree video that can be made into Virtual Reality (VR). I also made cyanotypes, a camera-less photographic technique contemporaneous with the initial tin rush which produces deep blue and white colours, and which was traditionally used as a way of indexing plants. In one project I wanted to combine the VR environment with the cyanotypes. I also wanted to include photographs of both artefacts and plants in the VR worlds.

Stewart Island is not an easy place to explore alone, so I had two companions, my partner Joost Langeveld and our friend Lisa Coleman. We travelled to Port Pegasus on the adventure yacht Elwing, sleeping on board and exploring the area from the yacht. The captain, Arthur White, told us that the Elwing would take eight and a half hours to motor down the south-east coast from Oban to Port Pegasus.

We hugged the coast, but the boat rolled sickeningly from side to side and up and down. We passed by islands where mutton birders stay during the season. We saw seals sitting high above the waves crashing on the rocks. Mollymawk albatross shadowed the boat, observing us sternly with their hooded eyes. Dolphins raced the boat, rolling on their sides to look up at us.

I was terribly seasick. I would stand up the front of the boat gripping the rigging, the freezing wind distracting me from the intense nausea. Seasickness is impossible to really understand unless you have suffered it yourself – the nausea, the discombobulation, the lack of control, the helplessness! We travelled for five hours on the first day, anchoring for the night at Lords River where many sea-weary travelers have sheltered over time. It was beautifully calm, and I recovered by dinnertime. A big old sea lion came visiting. I felt a bit better on day two; I knew it was only another three and a half hours. A slice of fresh ginger, nibbled slowly, does wonders.

The morning routine on board the Elwing included a compulsory swim in the sea. The water was so cold it felt thick, as if it was on the verge of freezing. I could only manage the few seconds in it, although Arthur said it was warmer than he had ever experienced it. Stewart Island had had the hottest summer in memory – he'd smelt shellfish cooking in their shells on the beaches.

The remoteness of Port Pegasus is a reality whether you are there in 2018, or as a tin miner in 1888. Arthur was very attentive to the weather, following Meri Leask of Bluff. She is in her 80s, and works as a volunteer, broadcasting the weather forecast and conditions on the marine radio every evening. She also checks in with each boat each morning and evening, to make sure everyone is safe and sound. Everyone on the boat would stop and listen to her broadcasts, even me, although I had little idea of what she was talking about.

The tin rush began in 1888 when gold miners in the area noticed that their equipment was being blocked with heavy black sand. The sand was tested in Dunedin, at the University of Dunedin Chemistry Department, and found to be cassiterite, or stream tin. Dozens of claims were lodged within weeks, and hundreds of miners made their way to the area. A hotel was built, a forge, houses, a store, a post office. Pits were dug, trails cut, tunnels blasted, racings stacked, pumps set up.

Professor James Gow Black, who had originally performed the analysis of the material, dug a 85-metre tunnel straight into the granite mountain side searching for the motherlode in 1888. But as it turned out, there was no motherlode, no rich veins of tin in the hills. The rush was over as quickly as it began, with the majority of the

Clockwise from top left: Remnants of earlier settlement

claims abandoned. Then, during World War One, the price of tin rose and interest in tin mining at Port Pegasus was renewed. Over £9000 was invested in the area; a tramway built up the side of the mountain, a quay installed. Two Clydesdale horses were brought in to the work the tramway. After two years the miners up and left, leaving behind their equipment, their huts, their wheelbarrows, the tramway and the two horses. One of the horses survived for years in the bush.

The weather cut our stay in Port Pegasus short by a day, but the time we had there was remarkably successful. We found the hotel site built in the late 19th century, including the brick fireplace, the cool store tunnel and brick steps. In the small cove below, we found dozens of ceramic and glass pieces, even entire bottles, probably 100 years old. The surfaces of these fragments were now colonised by beautiful marine algae and tiny barnacles. I photographed them in situ using a piece of white card and the afternoon light, putting them back where I found them. There is something beautiful about the way these remnants provide a direct link to the people who were there before, slowly integrated at a mineral level in to the environment, as the tide scrapes them along rocks and small growing things colonise their surfaces.

Hiking up Pegasus Creek, we found prospecting pits (big enough for a miner to wield a shovel) and a very long, straight trough, cut along the river's edge as a sluicing channel. Alluvial mining relies on running water to wash the mined material. We found a perfectly circular hole cut into the stone, about 400mm across and as deep – we think it was an anchor for the pumping equipment. Koura visited, nibbling moss from the rocks.

Our third site to visit was Diprose Bay and the tramway. This had been a settlement site, and the blacksmiths forge is still there. It seems likely this was where ore was smelted to extract the tin. A concrete fireplace marks the site of a hut. Bottles and glass litter the ground. An abandoned boot lay buried, sole up.

DOC has been maintaining the track in recent years, and the wooden cross bars of the tramway are still in place along much of the track. It was easy to imagine the noise of the mine company workers as they cleared the tramway track in 1912, felling trees, blasting rock, pick-axing their way slowly along. The tramway had been built in the belief that there had to be a motherlode of tin in the mountains. However again, this was found to not be the case, and the effort, the money, the time and the effect on the land itself resulted in very little reward.

The remoteness of the site has ensured the preservation of these archeological remains. There is no stock trampling things underfoot, only some deer and a few hunters and trampers. As the area is a national park, items can't be removed. And the bush is thick, with difficult access on shore. In Port Pegasus the bush comes right down to the water, with few spots for landing. It's a long way in and out.

Ultimately, it's estimated that only a single tonne of tin was squeezed from the land. In the beautiful little museum at Oban, the women working there showed me a brooch made from local tin with a gold centre; the tin carved with tiny flowers, and an amazing pressed tin 'trophy' with fern leaves fanning out around a central plaque which describes where the tin came from, 'Tuckers Claim'. In these pieces the tin is dull, but it can be polished to a high shine. Added to copper, it creates bronze, and a small amount of copper added to tin creates pewter.

The material I gathered on Stewart Island will have various outcomes. The trip has extended my practice, deepening and focusing my consideration of the complexity of our relationship to our environment. To survive in such a remote and challenging landscape requires respect and thoughtfulness about the power and agency of the environment, something an urban dweller like me is not faced with often. Despite the seasickness, I will be back!