

John Holmwood (1910–1987)

New Zealand

Relics of the Forest 1956

oil on canvas

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

purchased with funds from the M A Serra Trust, 1987

The resilience of nature remains a constant theme in ruin art. Even as far back as ancient mosaics and Pompeii wall paintings we witness the depictions of cheeky foliage opportunistically recolonising the spaces of architecture and structure – an ever-constant reminder that humans are on borrowed turf and the natural world will reclaim its own domain. It is a generally optimistic and generative gesture, implying that the life cycle is in a continuum and that the calamities which befall empires and define epochs are but moments of time which too will pass. That life, in another formation of paradise, will prevail.

This theme of resurgent botany threads through works in this exhibition – Giovanni Battista Piranesi's prints, ruin genre paintings, the small paradise that emerges from the wrecked tree of environmental vandalism in John Holmwood's *Relics of the Forest*, 1956. (A tree reminiscent of Paul Nash's decimated trunk, which two decades earlier remained barren and ossified.) And even in the overgrowth appearances of weeds threatening to overwhelm an untended grave in the abandoned churchyard photographed by Les Cleveland show the tenacity of nature.

But there is a difference between the sweet melancholy and buoyant romanticism of pre-modernity and the harsher, more barren outcrops of a world struggling with the despondencies of modern malaise. Cleveland's *The View Looking North from Ross Cemetery*, 1957 is an unpromising garden. Dry, weed-strewn, unkempt and not decorative – no vines promising fruit or wine – it is a spoiled scene of neglect and abandonment. A place and symbolism left to crumble in the weathers of time.

The change from romantic optimism and the melancholy of rustic ruins to one of abandonment, neglect and forsakenness represents a shift from the pre-modern to the modern mindset. The events of World War I and II, the detachment and displacement from rural work and villages to the harsh conditions of urban slums enacted through the industrial revolution, the degradation of nature bulldozed and deforested by commerce, the new scientific knowledge which supported theories of evolution and brought doubt to the concept of God's intention of life, all rewired the modern psyche to see bleakness rather than the sweetness of time-ravaged sites.

It seems hardly coincidental that unkempt graveyards, evacuated church communities and forlorn country churches are perennial subject matter for the early and mid-century photographers seeking texture and metaphor in their wanderings. Faith has been tested and at times discarded during a century of accelerated upheaval. Sensing the shift from faith to scientific discovery and Darwin's evolutionary theories, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has his character Zarathustra foretell the 20th century's mentality of doubt and conflict: 'Could it be possible! This old saint has not heard in his forest that God is dead!'

Paul Nash (1889–1946)

England

Landscape of Bleached Objects circa 1934

oil on canvas

Mackelvie Trust Collection

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

purchased 1994

After painting his apocalyptic visions, for a period of time between wars Nash pursued a more pastoral surrealism. Debris – shells, bones, bleached things – took on a distracted, fractured yet almost decorative manifestation even while they hint at the destructions that have caused disintegration. Nash's works are invariably about the body in bits and pieces, as was the case for the many artists pursuing the formal aspects of British and continental Surrealism.

Nash became a wanderer, like the many before and after him who seek solace on windswept walks. The sea and its booty of flotsam and jetsam provided source materials for arrangements, such as *Landscape of Bleached Objects*, circa 1934, which he organised into suggestive juxtapositions of phallic and ovoid shapes. The phallus impotently hacked away at its tip and the ovular shapes – testicular or ovum – disengaged, threatening the possibility of any fertilisation.

On his walks Nash photographed. He left a potent portfolio of things found in the landscape. Discarded wrecked things – war planes abandoned to the elements in paddocks, remnant architecture, steps leading nowhere, sea bunkers, Dorset stones, uncanny nature – items which would provide source materials for his surrealist schemes of arranged objects placed in a backgrounded landscape.

A major series of black and white photographs, Nash's *A Private World*, 1931–46 concentrated upon ancient trees whose timeless thickness has been pressured to bend, break and fall. Yet Nash imbues these with a curious vital life by virtue of a high level of detail which permits a study of the newly formed shapes and textures now exposed by force and tearing.

'There are places, just as there are people and objects . . . whose relationship of parts creates a mystery,' wrote Nash, and looking at his monster trees one is encouraged towards magical anthropomorphic thought as they take on personalities, the like which Tolkien might have suggested when he mentioned in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1971, that 'forests represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves'. Nash's trees, wounded though they are, seem to be wakened to new possibilities which a moment later might see them heave themselves up and forward to march on as a different life force. Or as Nash himself said: 'My love of the monstrous and magical lead me beyond the confines of natural appearances into unreal worlds . . .'

Gustave Doré (1832–1883)

France

The New Zealander in London: A Pilgrimage

1872

by Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold

printed book

Special Collections, University of Otago Library, Dunedin

If Piranesi tumbled his historical debris, then French artist, Gustave Doré was more inclined to cathedralise it. In his well-known illustration plate, *The New Zealander*, which features in the folio book, *London: A Pilgrimage* – a compendium of wood-engravings and writings on the capital – he provides a vision of London as a vertical place of crystalline uprights.

Vertical, but broken. The London imagined by Doré is based on the text by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who wrote prophesying a time in which a lone wanderer – a New Zealander – might sit upon the broken arch of London Bridge and sketch the ruins of St Paul's Cathedral. In Doré's image the capital is a set of gothic shards, like some towering crystal kingdom or Gotham of ancient times, now broken and mythologised.

It is an exaggerated, extravagant, fantastical resemblance to the London in which Doré or Macaulay might have meandered and predicts, somewhat uncannily, the fashion for the intensely vertical gothic revival 'perpendicular' ribbings of The Palace of Westminster in which the houses of Parliament sit, and the older Westminster Abby with which they are in concert. The Palace of Westminster was near completion when Doré engraved his image.

Nevertheless, it is the Vatican, Gian Lorenzo Bernini-inspired building of St Paul's, created by architect Christopher Wren that primarily occupies the traveller's gaze. Lit by the ethereal moonlight cracking through the fogged and rippled sky, it offers a ghostly apparition. Formed in the classical baroque style, the 'new' St Paul's represents one of many architectural iterations on the site; a sediment of structures that also indicates the evolutions of religion from Catholicism to Anglican Reformation, as well as the inherent promise of ruinology – of perpetual destruction and reconstruction – that faith and life go on.

During the early dark days of the Covid-19 pandemic, New Zealand and Australia watched with dismay the predicaments of the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries in the grip of the plague. Virginia Woolf's words concerning the torpor that comes upon the confined's imaginings – 'buildings would cease to rise, roads would peter out into grassy tracks; there would be an end to music and painting; one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair' – seems apt for the contemplation of a time in which the world has been made to stop. And somehow the image of the lone sojourner – a New Zealander – free from Covid and a citizen of a 'new world' happening upon the ghastly remains of a spent empire seems perversely appropriate.

Mathew McWilliams (born 1973)

Canada, Australia

Paper Works (variation) 1, Paper Works (variation) 4, Paper Works (variation) 5 2021

inkjet prints on Arches Velin BFK Rives paper

Courtesy of the artist and Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney

Not far from Piranesi's jumbles of history, Mathew McWilliam's prints synthesise the lessons of the ruinous and update them with a transcendent quality. Crumpled, ruffled, folded and rent, then reconstituted as a smooth yet varied surface, McWilliam's works show the optimistic and gentle beauty of the next, new life born of experience. These baroque minimalisms, like translucent marble things playing with depth, carry their life lightly, casting shadows and tints and nuanced textures that make their surfaces quixotic, various and delightful. They are the opposite of Julia Morison's mummified minimal sufferings trying to control the unmanageable matter of disaster. Instead, they beckon vivaciousness and want to indicate a matter in flux and evolution, viable and spirited.