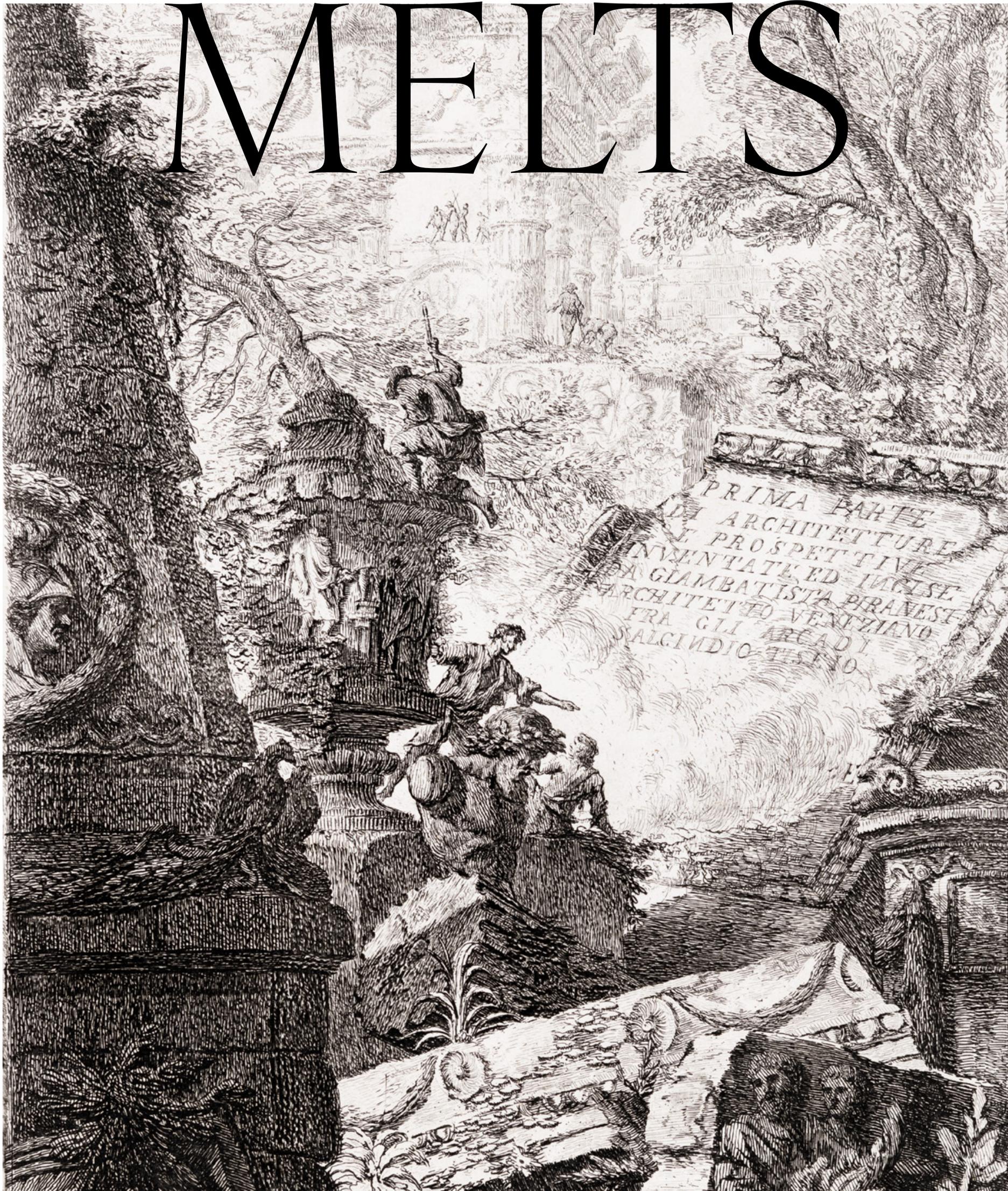


# ALL THAT WAS SOLID MELTS



Fiona Banner aka *The Vanity Press*,  
 Laurence Aberhart,  
 Sophie Anderson, Hélène Binet,  
 Charles Blomfield, Les Cleveland,  
 Kate Daw, Tacita Dean,  
 Gustave Doré, John James Fields,  
 James Ford, Marco Fusinato,  
 Max Gimblett, Douglas Gordon,  
 Ernst Haas, Bill Henson,  
 John Holmwood, Pierre Huyghe,  
 Juan de Juanes, Richard Lewer,  
 Mathew McWilliams, Julia Morison,  
 Callum Morton, John Nash,  
 Paul Nash, John Nixon,  
 Katie Paterson, Peter Peryer,  
 Giovanni Battista Piranesi,  
 Pipilotti Rist, Marie Shannon,  
 Charlie Sofo, Franz Sturtzkopf,  
 Greer Twiss, Tim Veling,  
 Bill Viola . . . and more

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 author and the artists  
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki  
 Corner Kitchener and Wellesley Streets  
 PO Box 5449, Victoria St West, Auckland 1142

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 (print), from: *Prima parte di architetture e prospettive*, etching,  
 Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,  
 bequest of Dr Walter Auburn, 1982

Back page: Pipilotti Rist, *Extremities (smooth, smooth)*,  
 (installation view), 1999, audio video installation, Musée d'Art  
 Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France. Photo: Marc Domage  
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# All That Was Solid Melts . . .

## A plague on all our houses

Isolation is something we have recently experienced. Like many generations before us we have felt the anxieties of being in the midst of a plague. We have sought ways to counter fear, apprehension, loneliness, separations and have been plunged into private diversions and distractions to wait out time. We have come to realise that all that was solid, everything we counted on, and took for granted – work, leisure, travel, society, even family – might melt away or fracture; that things are mutable, apt to change; that we must adapt if we are to thrive in these new circumstances.

But what of our title? Ah!, you say, that is a misquote. Surely it is meant to read ‘. . . all that is solid melts into air . . .’ as Karl Marx intended it when he wrote his manifesto on communism. A phrase that sometime later Marshall Berman worked into his thesis about anxieties of modernisation which became the celebrated book, *All that Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982) – an elaboration on modern life in the waning years of communism in which he incorporated ideas linked to Charles Baudelaire, Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s Faust and, of course, Marx.

## All by myself, don’t wanna be...

*‘Divine Contemplations require a Composure of Soul, uninterrupted by any extraordinary Motions or Disorders of the Passions; and this, I say, is much easier to be obtained and enjoy’d in the ordinary course of Life, than in Monkish Cell and forcible retreats.’* – Robinson Crusoe

Monkish solitariness as compared to a life, even a contemplative one, lived in company has been a much-debated proposition throughout time. Even before the thrusting of modernity and its clanging cacophony of industry, and the mental twisting blasts of war entering into urbanism from the fields and air, the idea of contemplative retreats and the mind space they provided was considered something to cultivate – especially if you were devoutly inclined or learned (and independently wealthy). Nevertheless, and as Daniel Defoe through his character Robinson Crusoe suggests such contemplations are ‘much easier to be obtained and enjoy’d in the ordinary course of Life, than in Monkish Cell and forcible retreats’. Enough of desert islands already! Although the allure and fantasy of being marooned was clearly profitable.

The forcibly reclusive John Milton wasn’t much in favour of solitude. He was suspicious of its evils – the perversions that are grown in a mind and body made febrile by the lack of companionship. In his interpretation of scripture, ‘marriage’ provided the ballast against the maladies of loneliness:

. . . the solitariness of man, which God had namely and principally ordered to prevent by marriage, hath no remedy, but lies under a worse condition than the loneliest single life; for in single life the

That’s true, but ‘. . . all that was solid melts . . .’ is a deliberate fragment, alluding to, but avoiding direct quotation. It is like a brick fallen from a greater structure that has gained a broken chip, then been repaired, not quite accurately. It has changed its meaning a little. Now it allows for those things before and after it in a free flow and undogmatic fashion. It is a title intended for our time *right now*, when we are still uncertain about what lies in front of us even while we consider things that have gone before.

. . . *All That Was Solid Melts* . . . takes us on a journey from isolation through the multiple anxieties of life and catastrophe, something New Zealanders are particularly familiar with, and along the way offers moments of historical sympathy, solace and discovery. When finally we step beyond the itinerary we will have travelled through metaphors and emotions, realising that we too are simply passing through time which is but a small moment in a longer plan; that we are but a spec in the cosmos; that things come before and will come after our moment; that we will be deconstructed in order to reconstruct ourselves.

absence and remoteness of a helper might inure him to expect his own comforts out of himself, or to seek with hope; but here the continual sight of his deluded thoughts without cure, must needs be to him, if especially his complexion incline him to melancholy, a daily trouble and pain of loss in some degree . . .<sup>2</sup>

Marriage was, however, not the be all and end all. While he favoured the union, Milton also controversially defended the concept of divorce, arguing it a private matter which should not be prevented by either religion or law. In fact, and heretically, he was also in favour of polygamy, so inclined was he to the avoidance of being alone. However, Milton himself was more a serialist than a taker of multiple wives. His third wife, Elizabeth, ‘3rd and Best’ according to his own description, followed two previous (Mary and Katherine) who both died from birthing complications.

Despite his efforts to avoid isolation, Milton’s life was one of obligatory solitariness from time to time. While attending the University of Cambridge he was ‘rusticated’ in 1625. Quite probably because of an epidemic which besieged the institution that year. Yet another contagion sent him to the countryside and his cottage away from the Great Plague of London in 1655



Douglas Gordon, *Private Passions*, 2011,  
 digital c-print, © Studio lost but found  
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### Douglas Gordon *Private Passions*

We begin our journey with Douglas Gordon’s *Private Passions*, 2011, a work that evokes ritual, religiosity, exuberance, pain, endurance, wantonness, self-punishment – excess. A kind of perversion of a piece that Milton might have found symptomatic of the isolationist malaise and corruption he cautioned against. And one that continues the tradition of agony and ecstasy within the visual canon of Western art.

As is the case with much of Gordon’s work, salvation and sinning are conjoined concepts in this photograph with its ejaculatory allusion. The molten wax – excruciatingly spilling itself on the clutching hand – must be suffered in order to keep the flame of faith aloft and burning.

The serenity and transcendent deliverance of the soft glowing candle – reminiscent of the ethereal, illuminated candle presences of German artist Gerhard Richter – has been debased and corrupted by Gordon who makes a deliberate double entendre with this work, too hot to handle.

and 1656 at the end of his life. Between these times he was frequently ostracised and driven into exile, sometimes self-chosen, as he toured the continent for inspiration and learning, or removed himself from persecution and threats of death during the Restoration. (The wives went with him.)

To some extent, we might surmise Milton knew something of the self-comforts he warned against. His struggle between Heaven and Hell, Good and Evil, Satan and God is the central premise of his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which he embodies Angels and gives them corporeal actions and lusty desires.

Much later, the convalescent, Virginia Woolf, also a forced recluse due to the Spanish Flu pandemic and other ailments, contemplated solitude in the bedroom and its onset of melancholia in which the ‘monster body’ with its pain ‘will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of wings, into raptures of transcendentalism’.



Franz Sturtzkopf,  
*The Hermit*, circa 1876,  
 oil on canvas, Auckland Art  
 Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of  
 Isidore Alexander, 1891

### Franz Sturtzkopf *The Hermit*

During the 19th century a struggle between hedonism and asceticism occupied the minds of German thinkers. Many literary figures and moral philosophers wrote polemics on the necessity of self-sacrifice – notably Arthur Schopenhauer, who looked to the teachings of the Desert Fathers of Christianity seeking deliverance through following the example of Jesus in the wilderness. Schopenhauer promoted the idea of a life lived by negated desire based on the premise that emotional and physical longings could never be fulfilled, so one must embrace life without them – enacting Stoicism.

The figure of the ‘hermit’ appeared as a character in German literature and poetry as an example of an extreme adherence to the ideals of asceticism framed by Schopenhauer’s notions. The character of the ‘hermit’ was also an ‘exhibit’ in the manufactured fantasy landscapes of the English aristocracy, which featured artificially created grottos with hired help sitting out their solitary and meditating days to the delight of wandering well-heeled visitors.

Franz Sturtzkopf’s hermit is less a sideshow character than an every-hermit: a quietly pensive character who has thrown away the trappings of a hedonistic or social life for one of seclusion,

Despite this Woolf also exalted the ‘moments of being’ afforded by the solitariness of illness and quarantining and wrote in an almost exuberant state:

Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin and Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with the bloom upon its wings.<sup>4</sup>

For Woolf, solitariness (and fevers) unleashed creativity in a rhapsodic flow. She felt a kindred spirit with the Miltons and Popes, the De Quinceys and Blakes who permit themselves to tempt sanity in pursuit of inspiration. (She was never shy to put herself in the male pantheon of genius nor pathos.)

Convalescence is one thing, and the euphoric

solitariness, study and sacrifice. He is accompanied by a skull – an object of the vanitas – which alludes to the unavoidable mortality of human existence. A mortality to be accepted as fated, divined by God.

Sturtzkopf paints in a realist manner, a style which had gained enthusiastic followers, especially in Düsseldorf where exposure to Gustave Courbet’s realist works caused excitement in the early 1800s. We see considerable skill in the handling of flesh, the corporeal sagging, the effects of age and privation in Sturtzkopf’s work. His textures of fur, cloth and ceramic are equally well-handled.

He was pleased with his effort and *The Hermit*, circa 1876 was sent to the Academy of Berlin in 1877. There it was met with considerable hostility, being described by one critic as an example of ‘atrocious realism’. With its mellow palette and sombre background *The Hermit* provides a mood of resignation rather than joy. To some this might seem an image of quiet, devotional contemplation. To others it could appear more like some form of puritanical purgatory and existential glumness – feelings with which those who have struggled during isolation might find sympathy and recognition.

seeking self-deprivations of the Hermit another. And as Woolf extemporises, adding solitudes to the burden of sympathies and the imaginings they elicit, the whole sickness enterprise was calamitous: ‘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’.<sup>5</sup> Yikes!

1. Daniel Defoe, *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: with his Vision of the Angelick World*, W Taylor, London, 1720, p 7.

2. John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), <https://bit.ly/3g6dAk0>, accessed 13 April 2021.

3. Virginia Woolf, ‘On Being III’, in *The New Criterion*, Faber & Gwyer, London, 1921, p 33.

4. As above, p 34.

5. As above, p 35.

## Kate Daw

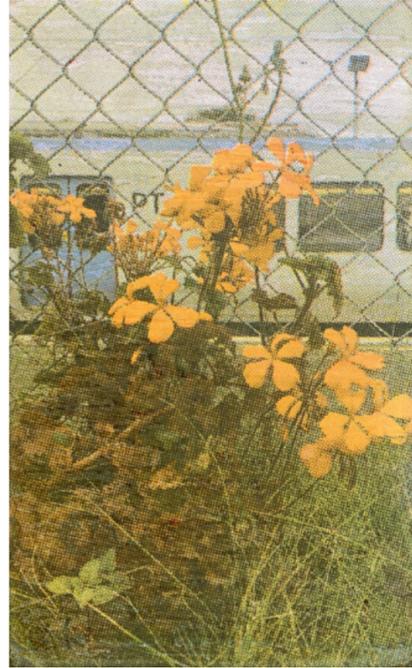
### *Love, Work (prelude, aftermath, everyday)*

Kate Daw's works exist in the in-between. Between text and image, painting and print, sculpture and object; between art and life. Hers was a practice open and porous to those things that drift into the midst of looking, thinking, reading and imagining.

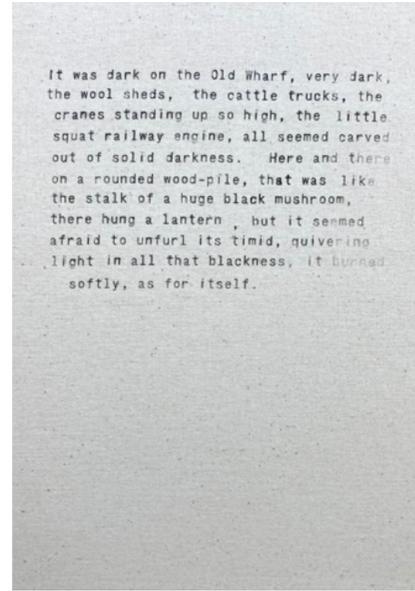
For many years Daw made her 'Voices' works – small novel-sized canvases with typewritten texts often coupled with a painted or printed image. In particular, but not exclusively, Daw used the voices of modern female writers. She was drawn to the worlds created by Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Zelda Fitzgerald and others. This collaboration is a knowing gesture of asserting the feminine unashamedly, giving value to that world of interiority and thought. Daw loved the details and things in between and to the side of something monumental – flowers, china, tapestry, chinz – the decorative things that creep from art into life. The little, incidental stories of domesticity.

In her works she was drawn to dining rooms, living spaces, domestic sites, gardens, flowers and the inner ruminations of protagonists who are poised at a moment. Invariably her works encounter the 'modern', an era Daw found useful in its exploration of a world in flux as it moves from the elaborate sensibility of Victorian times to the crisper, more experimental tautness of a world accelerating and fracturing across wars and places in which small occurrences and momentary thoughts quieten the pace.

Threaded through *All That Was Solid Melts* is Daw's last series of works. For this she enlisted the words of Katherine Mansfield, EM Forster, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, John le Carré and Virginia Woolf. Daw moves us from a place of embarkation and bomb sites, to places of cloister – caves and temples. She has us settle momentarily at a kitchen sink, wanders us through a blitzed house and contemplates the breaking of dawn. These are singular snippets, thoughts and moments accompanied by the ever-resilient blossom of that hardy domestic flower – the geranium – and a ruined castle. Daw's works, loving and luxuriating in the details, indicate the life ongoing, even while ruined and ravaged by circumstances.

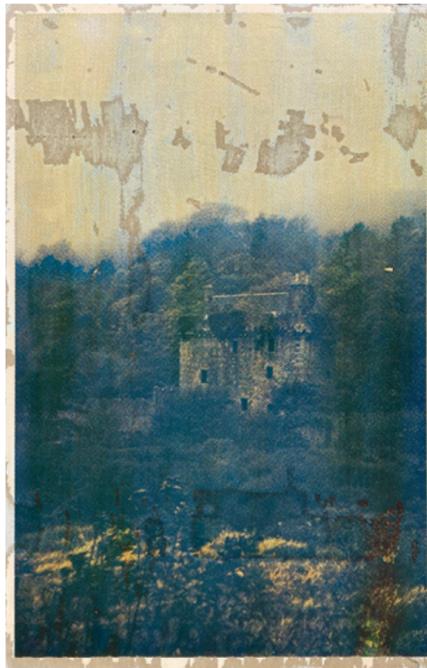


Kate Daw, *Katherine Mansfield The Voyage, 1921, 2020* from: *Love, Work (prelude, aftermath, everyday)*, water based pigment on found door panels and Indian calico, courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne

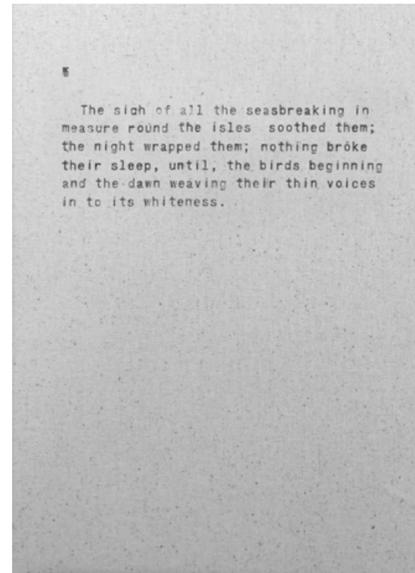


*'Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at closer view, the wallpapers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room above room. . .'*

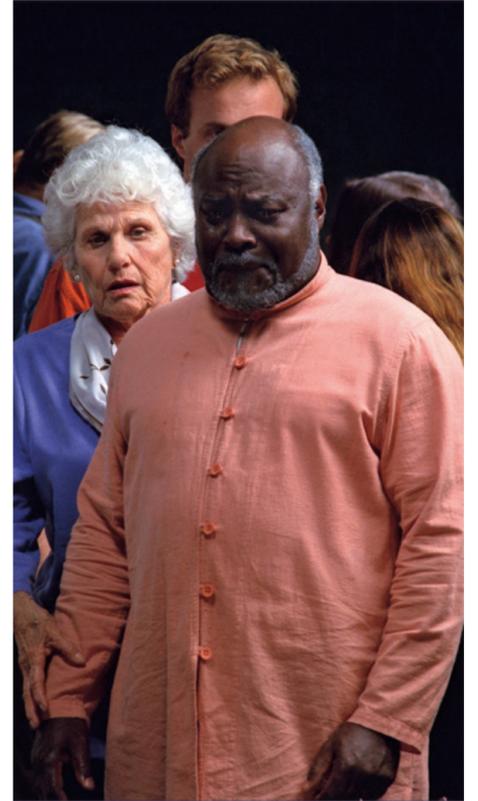
Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963)



Kate Daw, *Virginia Woolf To the Lighthouse, 1927, 2020*, from *Love, Work (prelude, aftermath, everyday)*, water based pigment on found door panels and Indian calico, courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne



Bill Viola, *Observance, 2002*, digital tape (betacam) shown as single-channel digital video, colour, silent, plasma screen, Art Gallery of New South Wales – Gift of the John Kaldor Family Collection 2011. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Photos: Kira Pervov © Bill Viola Studio



## Bill Viola

### *Observance*

Many artists are unforthcoming, even coy, about the biography attached to their themes and work. Bill Viola, by contrast, has been open about the links between his personal grieving, first for his mother and later his father, as well as his own moment of encountering mortality in a near-death drowning incident as a child. These experiences have driven his practice.

Viola's sense of loss, sadness and fatalism has led him to contemplate and depict sorrow, mourning and catharsis. Interested for some years in Eastern mysticisms, philosophies and religions, and their pathways to self-improvement through meditation and acceptance, he produced several series of video works exploring the body in states of ecstatic release, disappearance and transformation.

In 1998 he was invited to be a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute. The Getty, with its amazing holdings of medieval religious art, provided a new aspect of insight. Looking at devotional paintings and altarpieces brought Viola's attention to the way emotion and human expression were individuated in the rigid formulas of iconic framing and the formally strict bodies and figures in works of *trecento* masters such as Bernardo Daddi. Medieval artists worked to convey sentiment and feeling through attention to the countenance of a face, upturned eyes, downturned mouth, expressions of surprise or serenity which delivered an unexpected liveliness to otherwise stoical presentations.

In 2000 Viola embarked on a series – *The Passions* – which allowed him to fully explore Christian iconographies and, somewhat directly, the images and lessons learned from looking at the Getty artworks and others. He created a number of video works that update devotional painting through film technology which permits slow, slight movement and extra narrative action to be perceived. In scenes reminiscent of Masolino da Panicale's *Pietà*, 1421 Viola made *Emergence, 2002*, in which a number of actions and scene-within-the-scenes encompass a catalogue of the *Pietà* and Deposition formats in art history.

As *The Passions* developed Viola explored more art with a particular concentration on emotions. To this he added knowledge from the studies of Charles Darwin and the artist Charles Le Brun. From this research developed works such as the *Quintet of the Astonished, 2000*, inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)*, circa 1510. In Viola's *Quintet* actors cluster horizontally and perform expressions of horror, disgust, pity and more. Viola's slow film process permits the audience to watch and travel through these emotional states.

*Observance*, made in 2002, extends this more abstract emotional encounter and takes on an additional load. Made directly after, although not specifically about, the events of 9/11, when the Twin Towers in New York City were attacked and the world bore witness to the dreadfulness of thousands of deaths in the inferno and collapse of the buildings, *Observance*

provides a vision of horror, fear, grieving and anxiety through the expressions of a group of people who move towards the viewer gazing upon an unseen thing that exists between them and us. Dislodged from Christian iconography and removed from any specific occurrence, *Observance* is free to attach to the viewer's inner psyche and find company with experiences of unsighted, unknowable, unthinkable distress.

*'Our early progenitors when suffering from grief or anxiety, would not have made their eyebrows oblique, or have drawn down the corners of their mouth, until they acquired the habit of endeavouring to restrain their screams.'*

Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872)



Callum Morton, *Cover Up*, 2021, ureol, courtesy of the artist

## Callum Morton *Cover Up*

Callum Morton has been making his 'Cover-Ups' for a number of years. Shrouding paintings, veiling statues and draping monument shapes, his objects indicate the hidden, occluded, clandestine, forbidden and censored. As objects of cancellation, they teasingly redact the horrors of culture as visibility, and representation as it is tested, modified, impeached and banished. You are free to imagine, associate and choose which infractions might be hidden. The title itself suggests some thoughts, from the geopolitical cesspool to the fallen-mighty or the mythic, religious and cultural taboo. Stuff that 'they' don't want you to know and see. The stuff various societies have discredited, or just things that need to be mothballed while norms and tolerances adjust and reformulate. Of course, one culture's cover-up might be another's disclosure.

However, Morton's 'Cover-Ups' will never be revealed. They are integrally, solidly swaddled to provide an ever-shifting possibility of guilt and suspicion. They offer a perpetual mourning for the hidden and repressed. Right now, we might imagine they shroud the political and economic machinations that have fuelled disparate and inadequate responses to the many interlocking crises we face – the Covid-19 pandemic, environmental degradation, the brutalities of civil wars, home-grown terrorism, misogyny – those things that divide all and bolster advantage for the few. With its appearance of a studio drip cloth, this work might allude to the mothballing of art and culture – a victim of the unequal economic distributions dished out during the current pandemic.

Using the aesthetics of modernism, in particular monochromatic minimalism which came to prominence in the Cold War era of the late 1950s to early 1960s – a smooth, clean symptom of post-World War II classical cleansing – Morton reminds us that the so-cool procedures of culture often mask hot cultural anxieties below the surface.

## Marco Fusinato *Rose #11*

In the years following the student protests of 1968 a new era of utopian thinking was shaped by race riots, student protests, anti-Vietnam War marches, the women's movement, environmentalism and other causes. Many institutions and their structures, including art schools and the art system, were scrutinised, critiqued and targeted to effect hierarchical change and embrace more democratic systems of representation. Art linked to society and actions was part of this tendency. Foremost in this atmosphere was the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, who established his actions for 'Direct Democracy' in the heady days of the early 1970s realpolitik environment.

During the *documenta 5* exhibition, Germany's gathering of contemporary art which surveyed a five-year artistic zeitgeist, Beuys established a series of performances, lectures, interactions – even a boxing match – under the banner of the 'Office for Direct Democracy by Referendum'. Beuys' instigation has had its effects in the acceptance of instructional pedagogic performance art as a perennial aspect of contemporary art, along with relational aesthetics and the concept of social sculpture which persists in various forms as part of the conceptual menu.

One of the remnant artefacts of Beuys' *Direct Democracy* moment is a multiple lithograph which shows the artist wearing his ubiquitous hunting hat, sitting at a table in dialogue with a visitor (one of the many he interacted with over a 100-day period). On the table rests a glass vessel with a long-stemmed rose settled in it. This 1972 lithograph, titled *Ohne die Rose tun wir's nicht, da können wir gar nicht mehr denken* (*We won't do it without the Rose, because we can no longer think*), pops up in various collections around the world.

A year later, a subsequent multiple was spawned from Beuys' *Democracy* event. *Rose for Direct Democracy*, 1973 – a long-stemmed rose now settled into a thinner glass cylinder with measurement marks and a handwritten inscription printed in sinuous verticality tracing the growth of the rose. It was Beuys' metaphor for the slow progression of the new democratic movement, from green bud to full-bloomed red flower.

In the lithographic image *Ohne die Rose tun wir's nicht, da können wir gar nicht mehr denken* there is



Marco Fusinato, *Rose #11*, 2006, from *A Dozen Roses*, 2006, digital c-type photograph on Fujicolor crystal archive paper, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

a charm, even a nostalgic hue. By 1973, in the next iteration, *Rose for Direct Democracy*, the charm has been replaced with a chilly commercialism and, perhaps most importantly, the original plain, unadorned glass container has become a clinical, somewhat medicinal flask – more calculated, more calibrated, harder. It is this variation that Marco Fusinato duplicates in his series, *A Dozen Roses*, 2006, from which *Rose #11* derives.

There is a lot of political and social space between 1972 and 2006. If Beuys thought things would inch, like his rose, towards a new blooming democratic era he might be disheartened at the turn of events in the 21st century. Democracy has been routinely tested and many new world orders have evolved since his domestic dialogue – not all of them reaching for equality.

Fusinato reiterates Beuys' 'rose' and its vessel to both acknowledge and test what such a gesture might mean now. In this exhibition it is shown with Callum Morton's political satire, *Cover Up*, and a bust, *Dante's Beatrice*, with downcast countenance. Together they make up a trinity of works that comment on the workings of contemporary governments.

Fusinato's newest iteration is a glossy number. A glamour icon in a sterile setting with all the allure of a pharmaceutical product shoot. The graduated flask seems altogether scientifically clinical, the rose hot-housed and incubated to perfection. Right now, it is impossible not to associate this singular stem as emblematic of democracy grown impotent – uber cultivated, genetically modified, cut away from its source of growth – the grass roots. Democracy in this instance has become a collectable, artistic appearance.

Fusinato's iteration has now collided with a grim reality. During the Covid-19 pandemic the failures of democracy in the United Kingdom, the United States, some South American and Asian nations, among others, exposed the stark inequalities and social discrepancies that incubated the ongoing disaster. Exacerbated by malfeasance in leadership that has contributed to over 3 million deaths through inept, and worse, indifferent governance, Fusinato's rose has taken on a mortuary aspect. The last flowering of a spent movement, or one held in artificial stasis by the fiction of direct democracy.



U Biagini, *Dante's Beatrice*, 1900, marble, Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, JA Redpath Bequest, 1975

## U Biagini *Dante's Beatrice*

For Dante Alighieri, writing in exile, banished from the feverish political environment of Florence in 1301, the states of limbo, purgatory and paradise which he recounts relate strongly to the circumstances of his contemporary situation. Florence, an independent state of the late Roman Empire, was torn between independence and the rule of the Papacy. Dante, of aristocratic lineage and a supporter of the return of the Emperor's reign, was banished, sent away as part of a purge enacted by Pope Boniface VIII and his supporters. Dante's major works – *The New Life* (1294) and *Divine Comedy* (1320) – were written in the shadow cast by this political environment.

When all around him seemed venal, corrupt and wrecked, Dante clung to the memory of his beloved muse – Beatrice Portinari – a young woman whom he had met only two times before her death at the early age of 25 from an unspecified illness. For Dante, Beatrice – who would never grow old nor corrupt – personified purity and all goodness. In his famous works she is the guide who leads Dante through the stages of life and through the *Inferno* of judgements.

Beatrice is here depicted by U Biagini, who has sculpted her as serene and eternal, her lowered eyes and swaddled head hinting at mortality. Her bust is supported by a pedestal with a base relief depicting the meeting between Dante and Beatrice as he enters Paradise and Purgatory.

In this setting Beatrice appears with Callum Morton's *Cover Up* and Marco Fusinato's *Rose* – a muse to higher thoughts and a prophesier of a life obtained after a journey through the stages of Hell.

*'The theme of Saint Sebastian offered a subject of pious yet erotic possibility.'*

## Juan de Juanes *Saint Sebastian*

Well before Giorgio Vasari commented upon the melting beauty and life-like reality of Fra Bartolomeo's painting of Saint Sebastian, an image apparently so alluring that it stirred both women and men alike to acts of profane worship; before Oscar Wilde set eyes upon the lovely boy with the divine, impassioned gaze lifted towards Eternal Beauty, pierced through with arrows to add agony to his ecstasy; before Yukio Mishima and sundry others deliqued at the sight of paintings and reproductions of the saint; in advance of Evelyn Waugh christening his Sebastian Flyte and Wilde transforming into Sebastian Melmoth; before the canonised figure was anointed anew as a gay icon – before all these accolades, stories and legends – Saint Sebastian was the patron saint of the plague.

When Italy was plunged into the Black Death from 1347 to 1351, it was to Saint Sebastian, Rome's third-ranking saint, whose body had absorbed and survived piercing arrows, whom the public turned for deliverance from disease and despair. With an estimated 25 million deaths accumulated during the plague, Saint Sebastian's efficacy is debateable, but it was from this time that the cult around him was established.

As much as anything, it was depictions in art, such as those encountered by Vasari and others, that kept the cult of the saint alive. The theme of Saint Sebastian tethered to a tree, torso exposed, arrows entering flesh, with his demeanour of transcendent pain, offered a subject of pious yet erotic possibility. As Susan Sontag noted in her 1964 *Notes on 'Camp'*: Saint Sebastian was an exemplary sufferer.

In visual art, one of the most famous depictions of the saint came to us from the hand of Guido Reni, whose masterstroke was to provide a none-too-subtle visual metaphor in the guise of a tag of loin cloth cleverly concealing yet revealing an impressive phallic shape. His Saint Sebastian qualifies as the go-to vision of youthful ecstatic glorification, pain morphed into pleasure situated in sexy *sfumato* surroundings. Auckland Art Gallery is fortunate to have one of the eight known variations by Reni, which attests to the heroic, homoerotic voluptuousness of the figure.

But here we have a rather more sober version by Spanish artist, Juan de Juanes, from the 16th century. In this Valencian variation, Saint Sebastian is presented as a mature, wearied figure, which is



Juan de Juanes, *Saint Sebastian*, 16th century, oil on panel, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Sir George Grey, 1887

in keeping with his actual biography as a soldier in Diocletian's army who embarked on Christian conversions of his men and prisoners – a mission that attracted the wrath of the emperor who committed him to death.

De Juanes' Sebastian is a devotional vision – pious, stoic and enduring – his quiet pain is suffered without histrionics of upturned eyes and sensuous writhing. He is not a vision to attract a lascivious or longing gaze, but to encourage patience and perseverance.

Saint Sebastian remains important in Spain, where his status was elevated during the 16th-century Great Plague of Seville. His namesake town, San Sebastián, was the first place to report the emergence of the Spanish Flu in 1918, which swept the world. While that is a neatly ironic detail, one new theory is that the pandemic might have instead originated in Kansas and travelled across the Atlantic.



Sophie Anderson, *After the Earthquake*, 1884, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Viscount Leverhulme, 1924

## Sophie Anderson *After the Earthquake*

The isle of Capri, just off the west coast of Southern Italy, was a beacon for artistic glitterati and their patrons during the mid-to-late 19th century. British romantic, neo-classicist artist, Frederic Leighton, for instance, became a habitué and painted dusty sunrise scenes and villa glimpses of its nestled villages set against an azure backdrop of the Mediterranean Sea. John Singer Sargent followed, as did others, turning Capri into an artistic colony with an international cohort of bohemians. Among them was the artist Sophie Gengembre Anderson. She lived and worked in Capri with her husband, fellow artist Walter Anderson, from 1871 until around 1894. Gengembre Anderson produced a volume of Neapolitan genre paintings, uncommon for a female artist, for which there was a market back in England and elsewhere.

During this time along the Italian Riviera, up through France and across and down the southern coast of Spain, there was considerable seismic activity. On 28 July 1883, one of the deadliest earthquakes – measuring 10 on the Mercalli scale, two short of total devastation – struck the isle of Ischia, another mecca for the rich and artistic and not far from Capri, which, along with Naples, would have experienced aftershocks and oceanic disturbance.

Perhaps because of its cache of rich, titled and influential tourists, including princes, counts and millionaires, and due to the rapid communications enabled by the expanding telegraph technology, news of the Ischia quake spread quickly and vividly. Newspaper coverage in Rome, London, New York, Paris – and as far away as Australia and New Zealand – conveyed the pitiful plight of those who had perished,

and those who had survived only to then endure the horror of destruction and loss. Charity efforts were mobilised and help sent. But this was too late for the estimated 2300 people who lost their lives, for those left ‘fearfully mutilated’, and for others who had to fend for themselves amid the arid rubble.

A foreign correspondent reporting in the *Sydney Morning Herald* provided a heartfelt account: ‘I shall never forget the voice in which a decently dressed woman, in reply to my question, said “Non ho più nessuno! Non ho più nessuno!” – all belonging to her had perished. Many of the survivors ramble about in an aimless way, and others have become insane. It is surprising how many old, decrepit men and women there are left.’

Painted in 1884, *After the Earthquake* resists the Romantic, Neo-classical melancholia of ‘ruin’ genre paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries. Instead, it delivers a stark, harsh aesthetic in a realist style. It is a surprising picture from Gengembre Anderson, whose earlier works were often sweet, dainty, detailed and could even be described as somewhat fussy in their adherence to a Victorian attention to precision. By contrast, she clearly found a robustness in her Neapolitan phase. Even so, *After the Earthquake* is especially graphic, perhaps indicating the nascent photographic realism happening contemporaneously. It certainly feels apt for the horror being depicted.

Gengembre Anderson delivers a scene of wreckage with rubble and stone debris sent to the front of the frame, overtaking most of the picture. We can pick out the debris of houses, and once-grand structures with balconies like the Hotel Piccola, where the

rich and famous resorted. All is set against the same scintillating blue sea backdrop with a tiny sailing boat still gliding by.

But it is the figure in Gengembre Anderson’s scene that galvanises our attention. The well-dressed woman, stricken and in despair, lies amid the devastated architecture. A door fragment indicates the domesticity of the site. It is a particularly feminine perspective, and it operates in clear contradiction to the languid Neapolitan women, often the subjects of the male-artist imagination and gaze, which exemplified Southern Italian genre paintings. The wretchedness of the scene and the subject’s circumstances indicate neither nostalgia nor fantasy. Modernity – obliterates the fanciful and replaces it with a simple veracity.

*‘I shall never forget the voice in which a decently dressed woman, in reply to my question, said “Non ho più nessuno! Non ho più nessuno!” – all belonging to her had perished . . .’*

## ‘One hour of local exercise . . .’

Solitary walking became a ‘a thing’ – an antidote to the hustle and bustle of urban accelerations and crowding, a calming activity against the idle chitter-chatter of smart gatherings and the venal machinations of commerce and politics, the ‘sport of the rabble’.<sup>6</sup> Everyone was doing it. Swiss philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau made a cult of solitary walking – encouraging reveries in which he self-ruminated as he quested for ever-elusive tranquillity.

It was good to have things to walk through and around. Forests and gardens were great for the spirit and if one happened upon a ruined remnant from some bygone era, all the better. As William Hazlitt attested, ‘Monuments and Landmarks should not be the avowed goal but the accidental addition to the interest of a walk.’<sup>7</sup> Ruins were celebrated and musings upon them gave rise to thoughts about time and our triumph through and over it, as Denis Diderot explains:

Our glance lingers over the debris of a triumphal arch, a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat into ourselves; we contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter

the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground; in that moment solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more. Such is the first tenet of the poetics of ruins . . .<sup>8</sup>

The ‘poetic’ and the popularity of ruin paintings, the subsequent fashion in landscape design for grottos, temples and architectural fragments punctuating pastures and crafted gardens, the fixation upon empires ravaged by elements and time in Goethe’s Roman elegies, Friedrich Schiller and Hazlitt’s antiquity melancholia, the poetry of Lord Byron – to mention but a few examples – exemplify the culture of ruinous meditations that bewitched the 17th century.

In the contemplation and existence of ruins, as Diderot extolled, one finds oneself walking between two eternities – one that stretches back millennia and another that proceeds from the moment, as yet unknown and to be encountered. Like Piranesi’s small humans, minute and insignificant amidst the cultural rubble of time, the wanderer and connoisseur of ruins senses the grandeur of history and knows they are but

a mott in its making. For Diderot, even while a ruin might suggest death and destruction it is a comforting thought and situation nonetheless – one that frees him to be more himself and even contemplate enjoyments without anxiety in descriptions that hint at sexual frisson and liaison. A devil-may-care attitude encouraged by the certainty of that which will eventually crumble and set in train yet newer histories.

Ruin paintings hold to a formulaic convention of showing foliage and nature creeping through cracks, opportunistically finding the potential for regrowth and renewal. Arcadia reclaimed which helps the viewer to imagine possible new worlds and eras emerging from catastrophe and entropy. In contemplating deterioration, we can sigh with some certainty: this too will pass.

6. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, (anon trans), Project Gutenberg of Australia eBooks, <https://bit.ly/3dvvdYQ>, 1796, p 3.  
7. William Hazlitt quoted in Rebecca Solnit, ‘The Mind at Three Miles an Hour’ in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Penguin Books, New York, 2001, p 16.  
8. Denis Diderot quoted in Nathan Goldman, ‘Morbid Pleasures: On Our Obsession with Ruins’, *Lapham’s Quarterly*, <https://bit.ly/3n1pP2Q>, 26 March 2020.



Leonardo Coccorante, *Landscape with Roman Ruins and Figures*, date unknown, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1961



Richard Wilson, *Hadrian's Villa*, circa 1775, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1957



Andrea Locatelli, *A Classical Landscape*, date unknown, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1954



Hélène Binet, *Hadrian's Villa, Rome (1), Hadrian's Villa, Rome (2), Hadrian's Villa, Rome (3)*, 2019, gelatin silver prints, courtesy of Large Glass, London

## Hélène Binet *Hadrian's Villa*

Ruin holes are lacuna of time – portals that enable the contemplation of history and that which been transformed through the shifts impinging on empires and environments. They are evidence that nothing is solid nor certain; that time wears away at sureness. They show that time and its companions – catastrophe, neglect, attack, circumstance – will weather and work away at materials and the structures sculpted from them. They are symbolic of the evolution of civilisations, their aspirations and inevitable collapse.

Hélène Binet photographs the remains of Hadrian's Villa, full now of apertures formed from the crumbling away of walls, ceilings, rooms and canopies.

She captures the remaining skeletal architecture as looming husks of dark matter through which the sky appears as if telescoping us to a farther epoch.

Using analogue processes, she emphasises the organicism of her subject, returning the well-made, carefully planned brickwork to stone and earth – emptied-out pits of space formed from the framing of vestigial arches and wells. In contrast to paintings in which Hadrian's dwelling provides for bucolic settings of Italian pastoral life, a place where rural folk set up a picnic, or travellers clamber over rubble, Binet imbues her subject with a domineering foreboding. The ruin is no longer a dainty, sentimental grotto consigned to

pretty history, cyclical evolution hinted at through verdant growth emerging from mortar cracks, but a barren oracle foretelling new lessons on temporality.

Binet's images avoid the romanticism of ruin-inspired melancholy, so much a part of the 17th and 18th-century psychology. Her abstracted forms – inverting inside and out, playing with the optical oscillation between bulk and void – create a spatial experience of stoic power. The certainty of the gestalt is punctured, confronting the viewer with a being and nothingness.



## Bill Henson *Untitled*

It seems undoubtable that Bill Henson's suite of works from 1992 reference Denis Diderot's sexual frissons and love among the rubble. But, significantly, they draw upon the apocalyptic imaginings of JG Ballard. In particular, they seem to quite directly draw upon Ballard's novella *Crash*, with its premise of sexual pleasure derived from his protagonists fetishising the wreckage and mutilations of automobile accidents. Henson's works in this respect join with his precursor Andy Warhol, whose disaster series of car crashes, printed at history-painting scale and in repetition, obsessed upon and celebrated the domestic catastrophe of speed, celebrity and tabloid sensationalism.

Henson photographs his models in erotic and listless poses in the scenography of baroque wastelands made from car wrecks and rubbish dumps. Linking back to mythological and neo-classical salon painting which celebrated the nude in vague gestures towards mythology, Henson's postmodern variations suggest a culture come to its final point where sex and the machine have become blurred, bruised, debased and oddly libido-less.

Henson has zoomed in on the Piranesi-esque figures who lurk in the master's flamboyant cultural rubble, his dishevelled yet somehow tidy account of history. But Henson's *chiaroscuro* scenes indicate a twilight culture, one less sweetly nostalgic. His photographs exemplify the 'end game' that was much mooted in post-modern theory – the end of history, the end of culture, the sterile reproduction of simulacrum.

Bill Henson, *Untitled*, 1992–93, c-type print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1994

*'... the car crash is seen as a fertilizing rather than destructive experience, a liberation of sexual and machine libido, moderating the sexuality of those who have died with an erotic intensity impossible in any other form.'*

JG Ballard,  
*The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970)

## Giovanni Battista Piranesi *Visions of Architectural Downfall*

Because he was an architect many people think of Giovanni Battista Piranesi as a fantasy builder – in contemporary parlance a 'paper architect' – one who designs theoretically rather than with the expectation of actual construction. But in fact Piranesi was a great 'unbuilder' – a lover and depicter of the ruinous and all that is implied in detritus and dishevelled collapse. While some of his famous etching work is devoted to precise, highly detailed renditions of the various Roman monuments and architectural remains he felt bound to record, it is in his folios of *capriccios*, *veduta ideate* and *veduta di fantasia* that we find Piranesi unplugged – let loose to action the passing of time through fantastical visions that furnish us with metaphorical prompts.

Masonry, hole-ridden and fallen, crumbling upon itself – the once magnificent evidence of empires built with the vanity and expectation of an eternity of solid rule – are engulfed by Piranesi's feverish collage of tumbling temporality. From the cracks and destruction of such architectural downfall grow

trees, vines, verdant extravagance. Earth, and the nature it nurtures, reasserts itself to admonish the human arrogance that would assume to dominate the living world. Piranesi's tumble of artefacts amid these urban jungles – sculptures, relief pediments, urns and edifices – manifest an organicism of excess over and through which his tiny humanity must climb and carefully negotiate. They are precariously temporary in their dwarfed scale and quest to navigate and conquer.

Piranesi was devoted to the evaporative qualities of air and its mutable status. His skills as an engraver were perfected through experience to increasingly set his scenes in the ephemeral fleetingness of waspish, vague lines to give emphasis to the instability of things. His works are theatres of time in which he employs knowledge from his apprenticeship lessons in scenography and artificial, magical depth to the effect of illustrating a universe of culture constantly evolving, ever changing, receding and coming forward and resurrecting itself from shaken grounds.

There can be no better material process for Piranesi's inventions than etching itself. And as Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan suggested: the medium is the message. Over a period of years Piranesi worked and reworked his etching plates to alter, add, erase and invent more content. In this variation of *Frontispiece: Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive* (see cover detail), a print lifted from the final plate edition, we know that Piranesi has lightened his image, rubbed out portions of the tablet dedication to either acknowledge the death of his patron or to show the opportunity for a new one. He adds figures and removes items. Creates more depth by introducing further background detail and by obliterating other things that appear in previous editions. This final plate scene, if compared with its first iteration, is one of transformation and aging. The whole scene, like the theme of ruination that Piranesi set himself to explore, has literally changed over decades of making to mark the passing of time.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

1. *Arco di Druso alla Porta di Sebastiano in Roma* (Arch of Drusus at the Porta S Sebastiano in Rome), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

2. *Foro di Augusto* (Forum of Augustus), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

3. *Antichità Romane fuori di Roma disegnate ed incise da Giambatta Piranesi, Architetto Veneziano. Parte Seconda* (Roman Antiquities outside Rome Drawn and Etched by Giambatta Piranesi, Venetian Architect Part Two), 1756, from *Le Antichità Romane Vol IV*

4. *Rovescio del Tempio di Pola in Istria* (Rear View of the Temple of Pola in Istria), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

5. *Arco di Pola In Istria vicino alla Porta*. (Arch of Pola in Istria near the Gate), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

6. *Tempio di Clitumno tra Foligno e Spoletti ...* (Temple of Clitumnus between Foligno and Spoleto ...), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

7. *Sepolcro delle tre fratelli Curii in Albano* (Tomb of the Three Curii Brothers in Albano), 1765, from *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

8. *Veduta della fonte e delle spelonche d'Egeria fuor della Porta Capena or di S. Sebastiano* (The Fountain and Grotto of Egeria outside the Porta Capena), 1766, from *Vedute di Roma*

etchings, Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, bequest of Dr Walter Auburn, 1982



Charles Blomfield, *Rotomahana after the Eruption*, 1887, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, The Ilene and Laurence Dakin Bequest, purchased 2019

## Laurence Aberhart *Taranaki*

Laurence Aberhart has been drawn to Mount Taranaki, returning numerous times to capture its spectral, apparitional appearance. Using the photographic methodology of available light and time-lapse exposure, in his process Aberhart mimics the dormant yet evolving beauty of the living mountain. As Aberhart's photographs do, Mount Taranaki reveals itself over time. While captured as still and calm – *Too subtle to suspect* – like Emily Dickinson's volcano, one day the mountain may awaken from its slumber. The romanticism of its sentinel appearance will explode and become violent and deadly.

In his silver gelatin photographs, Aberhart shows a *chiaroscuro* image of Mount Taranaki that delivers both ethereal mystery and real trepidation. An anxiety well understood by New Zealanders and others who dwell at the edge of ocean basins and live with the prospect of geological disruption and its catastrophic outcomes. Aberhart's ghostly image of the mount – a small peak living on the horizon, misting the sky with light smoke – seems almost insignificant in the far distance, alluringly furtive in its shy, diminutive peeking.

Nevertheless, cities have been buried, mummified, lives lost, terrain rearranged, the earth heaved into new configurations as a result of volcanic eruptions, molten sculpting and tectonic movement. New lands – such as Zealandia, cleaved from Gondwana – carry remnants of this volatility. Volcanos are evidence and activities of an earth unquiet and evolving – shape shifting itself and thermally reacting. New Zealand occupies an active collision zone full of dynamic seismic events – earthquakes, rockslides and eruptions – themselves harbingers of tsunami and deluges. In Aberhart's image Mount Taranaki is surrounded by stillness, but it is merely the tip of a greater mass: a slumbering giant of potency.



Laurence Aberhart, *Taranaki (with smoke, undated)*, 1986, from *Taranaki 1986*, gelatin silver print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1998

## Charles Blomfield *Rotomahana after the Eruption*

Self-taught artist Charles Blomfield was convinced of his power of painted depictions over documentary photography, which was quickly overtaking the painter's role as chronicler of place. He was drawn to New Zealand's natural territories and made many expeditions to capture its wonder landscape *en plein air*. In this way he was able to produce numerous series of works that witnessed the changeability of light and mood as nature played upon itself. His style – realistic, detailed and topographical enabled – a legacy of many works that show New Zealand's amazing evolutionary geology. In particular, Blomfield was drawn to capture the extraordinary geology of the White and Pink Terraces at Rotomahana. These naturally formed lava steps, which captured light and sun interacting with mineral matter to produce pink and white hues of ethereal quality, were reproduced numerous times by the artist.

In his vast output before and after a volcanic eruption destroyed the terraces he created unique, beautiful and lasting pictures that continue to captivate the viewer. Blomfield brings vivid colouration to his views. The pinks, whites and blues 'like the Heaven on a clear day' of the naturally occurring crystalline pools, in variations of light, dusk and atmospheres astound our modern eye. Before the eruption Blomfield's pictures were the stuff of fantasy and utopianism.

Painted from sketches made in the area four months after the Mount Tarawera eruption in June 1886, this scene depicts the ominous steaming remains of Rotomahana – virtually apocalyptic. During the eruption it became the site of a vast hydrothermal blast, responsible for the thick mud that buried the surrounding countryside. As it was then, it is now: volcanos are evidence that New Zealand remains a volatile and geologically young land that is apt to blow.

# These are the voices of time

The second half of the 20th century, moving forward from the devastations of the World Wars and embracing the optimism of 'new-deal' regeneration and reconstruction saw a drift to futurist thinking. In Europe, in particular the Soviet republics, an aesthetic of 'space-age' architecture and design took over civic space, suggesting the expansionist frontierism of the era.

In the United Kingdom an emergent brutalist style of architecture hinted at beach gun emplacements but with a utilitarianism that referenced the factory and power plant – a bunker mentality joined with an emerging spirit of prehistoric ruinology and ideas of geothermal future energies. In brutalist design the romance of steamer-ship inspired, deco-streamlining was replaced with bulky, thickly encrusted surfaces of pebble mix and concrete, heavily materialist in matter.

While the Soviets were cosmonauting and Britons were bunkering down, the United States was pushing to the sky with glass wall 'international style' buildings migrating the ideas of émigré Bauhaus architects, such as Mies van der Rohe, and indicating a brash commercialism and confidence. To this buoyant atmosphere they also added their own variations of space-age design which saw exciting buildings like the Theme Building at Los Angeles Airport with its aerodynamic buttressing. Banks, service stations and motel architecture mushrooming along Route 66 and major highways across America took on a fantasy space-age appearance with Sputnik flourishes.

Space was all around. Scientists were debating Big Bang and Steady State theories to explain the universe. The Cold War, Soviet/US space race consolidated this far-gazing and the push to be the first to claim territory on the Moon gave rise to thoughts of far-off territories sculptured through time. The concept of deep time emerged as the vastness of the explorable galaxy expanded. This encouraged a twin effect – the consideration of the deep time imbedded in the Earth and its material, as well as speculations about past societies, possibly even from farther-away galaxies, which had visited and left Earth millennia ago.

In Britain, a different genre of sci-fi literature emerged in the 1950 and 60s. Dubbed 'New Wave', it abandoned the 'they-came-from-outta-space' paranoia-based, aliens-are-out-to-get-us approach of American fantasies in favour of more speculative ideas about society, the environment, and what life might mean on Earth. In many ways this followed in the vein of the dystopian work of the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin and England's own George Orwell.

Foremost in the New Wave stable was writer JG Ballard, whose childhood during World War II, including being held with other Allied civilians in an internment camp in Shanghai, provided the perfect incubation for the writing of speculation-literature laced with warped humanism, weird perversions and obsessions. Ballard rejected ideas that the lessons of the future might be learned by stargazing and instead suggested 'science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extra-terrestrial life forms, (and

galactic wars', adding, 'the biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that need to be explored'.<sup>9</sup>

Ballard's visions were often bleak, clinical and inclined towards a technological pornography in which fetishes were played out against a backdrop of accidents and in wastelands of sterile housing developments. Ballard's world is a dog-eat-dog environment of harsh expediency and calculations. To some extent these visions were produced from the circumstances of his own life.

Ballard's most popular work is undoubtedly *Empire of the Sun* (1984) which was made into a glossy, almost romantic boy's-own-adventure film in 1987 by Steven Spielberg. But his less popular novellas and stories, such as 'The Voices of Time' (1960) *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973, film 2004) and *High-Rise* (1975, film 2015), take readers on excursions around modern, alienated humanity grappling with anesthetised emotions and the distorting hold media has on populations. His prediction writing foresaw the advent of the digital generation and the narcissisms it produces in the realms of Facebook, YouTube and 'reality' television. His confronting equation for the future – *sex x technology = the future* – seems entirely apt.

<sup>9</sup> 'New Wave Science Fiction', <https://bit.ly/32bc9nt>, accessed 14 April 2021.



John Holmwood, *Relics of the Forest*, 1956, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased with funds from the MA Serra Trust, 1987



Paul Nash, 'Monster Field', Carswall's Farm, Newent, Gloucestershire, 1938, 1978 (reprint), from *A Private World, Photographs by Paul Nash*, photographic print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2014



Les Cleveland, *The View Looking North from Ross Cemetery*, 1957, gelatin silver print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1998

The resilience of nature remains a constant theme in ruin art. Even as far back as ancient mosaics and Pompei 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 – 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!'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, RJ Hollingdale (trans), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Penguin Classics, London, 1974, p 41.



Pierre Huyghe, *(Untitled) Human Mask* (still), 2014, single-channel video, colour, sound. © Pierre Huyghe/Societe Des Auteurs Dan Les Arts Graphiques Et Plastiques [ADAGP]. Copyright Agency, 2021. Courtesy of the artist; Hauser & Wirth, London; and Anna Lena Films, Paris.

## Pierre Huyghe *(Untitled) Human Mask,*

The worlds that French artist Pierre Huyghe invents are full of puzzles, conundrums and destabilisations. They perplex any sense of rationality or reason and yet captivate with their internal logic and plausibility. Huyghe creates scenarios, visions, environments in which things form a solipsistic relationship to the exclusion of external reality. His worlds make and take on their own sense of being and nothingness to replace the known world with one that provides gaps and speculations, hearsay and rumours, inversions and reorientations.

There is no point in deciphering the universes of Huyghe, and yet we are compelled to do so. Humans want to know; we are comforted by knowledge and sceptical of that which falls out of the pattern of certainty. We lie to ourselves that we control everything. The proof of this lie is found in the uncontrollable forces of nature, which Huyghe harnesses as part of his protagonist cast in realms which are submerged and swept away, which roam aimlessly, or are buried fathoms deep – ecosystems formed from civilisations in microcosmic life. For instance, his aquarium tank, *Zoodram 4, 2011 (After Sleeping Muse by Constantin Brancusi)*, 2011, in which Brâncuși's famous sculpted head becomes a monumental deity, toppled amid liquid viscosity. A lost civilisation, sunk to the bottom of a miniature ocean in which lives a colony of microbes and life forms – a lost world, or perhaps a world in waiting for the changes in circumstances that will find it the first inhabitants of a new world.

There is something of Jules Verne in the works of Huyghe – his exploratory fictional adventures of Earth containing endless hidden stories. But Huyghe's visions belong to the end of things, where Verne's are optimistic, man-conquering quests and discoveries. Huyghe's worlds are created from the circumstances of our world out of balance – environmentally brutalised by the carelessness of humans. He suggests alternative worlds, but also shows worlds so deranged as to be fatally tragic.

The human mask that stoically, impassively, moves around a restaurant – empty, decimated, turned topsy-turvy, and abandoned to be a ghost place by the catastrophic Fukushima tsunami of 2011 – registers none of the weirdness that we observe. Instead, its serene countenance continues to deliver a silent service, not judging, nor admonishing, simply existing – playing its role as servant.

In the surreal colour of deep aqua, the white smoothed face hovers in space, supported by a form that only asserts itself gradually. Jerky, spasmodic movements live under the mask, a swift parry to the side alerts us to the life form – the furry body – that wears the human mask. We gradually come to understand we are witnessing a monkey whose face has been covered by Huyghe's styled disguise, one that suggests a legacy in manga comics and Japanese anime – perhaps even the geisha. We become immediately concerned for the monkey made to perform its service choreography. The mask hides any possibility we might have to observe its real expression, which as we know from Darwin's research, closely resembles that of the human animal to express emotions. How are we to know if the monkey, trained to perform the function of waiting on tables, is happy, sad or indifferent to its situation? We are not. We will anthropomorphise our thoughts onto the creature and we will make assumptions and judgments about the human intervention that creates this pantomime. We might also contemplate the wreckage of a world swept away, made bizarre and inhabitable now but by hybrid creatures such as Ballard predicted.

Huyghe's work is deliberately surreal and worrisome. It is open to any number of speculations. Some minds will drift to the tsunami and its causes linked to volcanos, seismic shifts, and wonder if Earth is fighting back against the ravages of human exploitations. This might be one of the things we think. Another thought might focus anguish on behalf of animals displaced and put in service to human entertainment, and, yes, art. Another might ponder our capacity to know with any certainty about the fulfillment of animals and whether being trained to work as a gimmicky restaurant stooge gives them satisfaction or causes them to feel trapped, living against their own nature.

Whatever we think, we are bound to register that this is an uncertain and perplexing scenario. One we cannot control and one that eludes our capacity for rational thought. We have been submerged into the serene turmoil of soundless deluge and float and move holding our breaths in this weird new world.

*'We have been submerged into the serene turmoil of soundless deluge and float and move holding our breaths in this weird new world.'*

## Tacita Dean *JG*

In April 1970, American land artist, Robert Smithson created his monumental earthwork, the *Spiral Jetty*, on the north arm of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Quite probably the most famous land-art project to have been created, *Spiral Jetty* has become a mythic entity, lying submerged for many years and only appearing when the water level of the lake drops sufficiently to reveal the jetty's approximately 1500 metres of rubbly groin.

For years British artist, Tacita Dean, has been attracted to locate *Spiral Jetty*. First making a pilgrimage, which she sound recorded, only to discover the work was unseeable. Later, to revisit and film it, resurfaced. Like Ballard, Smithson was also concerned with time, but more optimistically, he was creating a work that would ebb with the flow of time and tide and speak across millennia as ancient earth forms have done. Smithson found optimism in the entropy that Ballard found despairing and terminal. For Smithson 'The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art.'<sup>11</sup> Entropy and disorder were exciting and liberating:

One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid

consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched.<sup>12</sup>

Over a number of years Dean corresponded with Ballard. Originally she had hoped to film him as one of her artist 'Portraits', for which she is very well known. When he died this quest was halted, but Ballard's words lived on. Writing not long before his death he encouraged Dean to solve the mysteries of the *Spiral Jetty*.

Dean has brought Ballard's 'The Voices of Time' together with Smithson's jetty, seeing the clear links yet opposites between Whitby/Power's mandala and the earthwork, and understanding the twin artistic obsessions to explore time and matter. As she has written:

While Smithson's jetty spiralled downward in the artist's imagination through layers of sedimentation and prehistory, in ancient repetition of a mythical whirlpool, coiling beneath the surface of the lake to the origins of time in the core of the earth below, the mandala in 'The Voices of Time' is its virtual mirror, kaleidoscoping upwards into cosmic integration and the tail end of time.<sup>13</sup>

Using voice-over narration, provided by the British actor Jim Broadbent, and enlisting her own invention of inside-film-camera aperture gate masking to superimpose the spiral structure and shape into and onto footage, Dean's film *JG* moves backwards, forwards and intersperses time and content, studying in forensic details the minutiae, grandeur and formations of nature to produce a filmic thesis on life's intersecting patterns and reiterations, collapses and reformations.

With her inventive filming Dean examines glacial and cosmic time, sends our planet into a dance with other galactic matter; remains mesmerising with the slow drip of liquid time and spirals ever inwards and outwards in mimetic sympathy with her precursors and artistic collaborators across time. Dean's film is elegiac and a hymn for our Anthropocene age in which Ballard and Smithson's prophetic ideas resurface. All the while Broadbent's sonorous voice intones Ballard's mantra: 'These are the voices of time, and they're all saying goodbye to you... every particle in your body, every grain of sand, every galaxy carries the same signature. ...you know what the time is now, so what does the rest matter?'<sup>14</sup>

11. Robert Smithson, <https://bit.ly/3x2pGAH>, accessed 16 April 2021.

12. Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind', *Artforum*, vol 7, no 1, September 1968, <https://bit.ly/3wYg7mu>, accessed 16 April 2021.

13. Tacita Dean, '*JG*', <https://bit.ly/3d0l1bo>, accessed 16 April 2021.

14. Extract from JG Ballard, 'The Voices of Time' (1960) in Tacita Dean, *JG*, 2013.



Tacita Dean, *JG*, (still) 2013, 35mm colour and black & white anamorphic film, optical sound, courtesy of Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris



Katie Paterson, *Fossil Necklace*, 2013, 170 carved rounded fossils, strung on silk, courtesy of the artist. Photo © Paul Abbitt. Exhibition view Kettle's Yard

## Katie Paterson *Fossil Necklace*

Katie Paterson is fascinated by time. All kinds of time – evolutionary, geological, astrological, glacial, light speed. Time, in a variety of modes, is the material she organises in various ways to help an audience stuck in the ‘now’ consider the ineffable ‘then’ of the past and future.

One of Paterson’s most remarked-upon projects involves the planting of a forest on the outskirts of Oslo, Norway to create *Future Library*, 2014–2114. Right now, 1000 sapling spruce trees are growing, which in 2114 will be harvested to provide the pulp that will make the paper to print the books that are currently being commissioned and written. Speculation fiction writer, Margaret Atwood has written a text, so too fantasist, David Mitchell, as well as Elif Shafak, Sjóón, Han Kang and Karl Ove Knausgård. Each year another author will provide a story and submit it to the library, which will remain unread until the project has been completed. *Future Library* is an act of faith – neither artist nor many of the writers will see their work come to fruition. Even Paterson’s recently born child may not live to see the project’s outcome.

Paterson must believe that the Future Library Trust, established to care for the project, continues to be supported by the Norwegian government, community and writers – even have faith that the concept of paper printing will still be viable in the year 2114. That the forest will survive climate change.

That developers will not see a land-grab opportunity. That people are still interested in books and can read. There are many unknowns, huge possibilities, many fallibilities that one can imagine.

Paterson knows only too well that matter and time change. That what seems stable now may become the rubble of the future, that all that is solid melts into air and all that is certain might turn to dust. But she is also inspired by the resilience of material and its capacity to hold time.

As an embodiment of this thought, and acknowledgement of deep time, Paterson has made an object of epic, epochal and millennial dimensions. Paterson’s *Fossil Necklace*, 2013 has been 3.2 billion years in the making. It comprises 170 spherical beads carved from fossilised material strung on a single strand. Like small planets, each ball holds its own micro-system and geological history in its material. It spans time, evolution and extinction on Earth, from the first, single-cell life form, to multi-celled organisms. It presents our fragile, mutable planet as diverse, floating, drifting and part of an evolving DNA from Europe, Java, Africa, Alaska and more.

Contemplating such an object – ancient, intricate and so full of geo-DNA, strung together like a massive opera-strand of pearls – we are able to ruminate on the incredible diversity of life on Earth and the extraordinary drama of geological incidents that have

produced such beauty, colour and variations. Integral to the various orbs are evidence of volcanic disruptions, meteorite collisions, botanical emergence, continental drifts and zoological developments.

During the Covid-19 isolations there has been a boom in stargazing and the contemplation of the cosmos as people have sought a bigger picture and some comfort in seeing farther and future worlds. By contrast, Paterson’s necklace allows us to see time compressed into orbs which are awesome in their relative dimensions. At both ends of the time-space spectrum is the realisation that we exist in vast time and space and represent but a minute spec of life. Paterson’s necklace permits us the opportunity to understand, too, that life goes on, changes and evolves – cataclysmic events produce new life forms, shifts in landmass migrate nature, and sometimes things become extinct and reach their end of life.



Paul Nash, *‘Laocoon’*, Carswell’s Farm, Newent, Gloucestershire, 1941, 1978 (reprint), from *A Private World*, Photographs by Paul Nash, photographic print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2014



Paul Nash, *Dead Tree*, Romney Marsh, 1930–34, 1978 (reprint), from *A Private World*, Photographs by Paul Nash, photographic print, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2014

## Paul Nash *Bleached Objects*

In the collection of the Imperial War Museums there is an important and precursive painting by Paul Nash: *We Are Making a New World*, 1918. It is a vision of a ruined landscape. Decimated trees, devoid of growth, savagely attacked and delimited are shown as taut uprights in a terrain of lumpy, soddy earth. Rust-red, jaggedly-edged hills seen through the tree trunks lend an alien appearance of a scorched, toxic environment – uninhabitable, hostile to fertility.

This painting, and several others which emerged from Nash’s experiences as a war artist during World War I were brought together in an 1918 exhibition titled *Void of War* – a collective vision of a world emptied out, deleted life, of the nothingness and dread of endless trenches filled with corpses. The new world that war made filled Nash with a permanent horror. Trees, those stoic rooted entities, moored and unable to flee the devastations of attack, became symbolic for him. They occupied a place in his art perpetually.

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.



Paul Nash, *Landscape of Bleached Objects*, circa 1934, oil on canvas, Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1994

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 on 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 JRR 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 awakened 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 . . .’<sup>15</sup>

15. Paul Nash quoted in Anne Howeson, ‘Drawing and the Remembered City’, paper presented at ‘Shaping the View: Understanding Landscape through Illustration, The 7th International Illustration Research/Journal of Illustration Symposium, 10–11 November 2016, Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland, <https://bit.ly/3vc6U8t>, accessed 21 April 2021.



Tim Veling, *Sentinels*, 2018. *Halley Place, Avonside, Christchurch*, 2018, archival pigment prints on Canson Infinity Platine Fibre Rag paper, Tim J Veling, courtesy PG Gallery 192, Christchurch. Photo: courtesy of the artist

## Gustave Doré *The New Zealander*

If Piranesi tumbled historical debris, then French artist Gustave Doré was more inclined to cathedralise them. 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 ruined 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.<sup>16</sup> And somehow the image of the lone sojourner – a New Zealander – free from Covid and a citizen of a 'new world' happening upon the ghostly remains of a spent empire seems perversely appropriate.

16. Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p 35.



*The New Zealander* by Gustave Doré in Jerrold Blanchard (ed), *London: A Pilgrimage*, Grant & Co, London, 1872, Special Collections, University of Otago Library, Dunedin

## Tim Veling *Sentinels*

Configured like an 19th-century myriorama – a landscape made up of individual scenes that join to form a larger continuous vista – Tim Veling's photographs present a newly evolving Edenic scene. At first glance it may seem as if Veling is picturing an image of a planned and plotted grand garden, one perhaps formed in the style of English designer Capability Brown or the subsequent picturesque movement, which sought to create natural-looking plantings with variations in vistas – tall trees, shrubs and small clearings offering an informal arrangement. But Veling's is an altogether contemporary vision – an unexpected paradise reasserting nature's tenacity and opportunistic growth in the wake of seismic disruption.

Over the 11 years since the catastrophic earthquakes of Christchurch in 2010 and 2011, Veling has been visiting the area of Avonside. A settled community of some 3600 people and one of the oldest suburbs of the city, Avonside, with its pretty houses and garden plots, winding along and around the Avon river, was both close to the city and very much its own place. During the 2010 earthquake it suffered massive damage and the earth cracked open, producing tonnes of liquification. Foundations and land became unstable. The subsequent 2011 earthquake brought further damage, to such an extent that the government assessed the area as unliveable – a 'Red Zone' – and commenced plans for demolition and assisted relocations of the residents. People were ordered to move by 2013. While some held out, the majority of people accepted the government buyout and relocated elsewhere, leaving their houses in Avonside to be demolished. There are many stories about insurance, about resistance, about economics and futures – and about loss.

Over the past 10 years Avonside has transformed from an established, domesticated place to a wild space. Ghost domestic gardens – roses, exotic plantings, herbaceous borders – continue to mark the edges of plots upon which houses once stood, while around them unplanned nature has moved in to inhabit the fallow land now left vacant, providing small clearings and sinuous views from block to block. People come to walk their dogs, joggers run along the river, kids play games. Avonside has become a self-grown park; a desirable green oasis of the inner suburbs – a paradise regrown.

Veling's photographs memorialise that which has been lost but also document and celebrate this irrepressible place re-wilding and finding its balance with collapse. It is an optimistic project amongst much devastation and demonstrates that nature is quicker than governments or insurance agencies to deal with destruction and reconstruction.

## Julia Morison *Things/Relics I-IX*

In the chaos of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake a small and symbolic event occurred in the living-working space of artist Julia Morison. As well as most of her objects and art being shaken and dispossessed of their stability, a cabinet containing a collection of liqueurs smashed to the floor. The contents – crème de menthe, amaretto, black sambuca, grenadine – all manner of exotic syrups smashed and spilled, eventually co-mingling with the liquid muck oozing from the rent underworld, now animate like a horror-movie blob. There is something macabrely expressionist, perhaps even surreal – certainly science fictional – in this image of a potent, alcoholic cocktail meeting a B-grade movie purge, a disequilibrium, a heady intoxication coalescing.

What to do with such earth-shattering pandemonium? Morison's inclination in her art is towards a minimalism – one that often contains or tries to gather the oddments of non-classical, corporeal, untidy nature into an organised state or hermetic object. In the instance of the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, the artistic approach for Morison was to confront the primordial excessiveness created by the earth convulsing and cabinet spewing its contents, to smooth everything out, make stillness and sanity – logic – out of the catastrophe.

Here minimalism has its recuperative moment. A calming monochromatic appearance in which the hectic hangover of tremors and liquefactions is congealed and resolved in an unalarming grey. An undercoat colour, it is the foundation for a renewal, even while it masks the ordeal from which it is derived.

Looking more closely Morison's monochromes reveal an irksome surface. They are made of a kind of weird skin-textured material. In this way, while they inhabit the aesthetic cleanliness of minimalism, they retain the primitive symbolism and matter of the corporeal earth that has been unleashed to grotesquely reclaim cities, towns and places.

In addition to the monochrome works Morison also made a set of sculptures – *Things/Relics I-IX*. Like the soothing minimalism that her monochromes present, *Things/Relics* tidy up the mess and make solid again that which has melted and run amok. Morison gathers more liquification and tries to regulate the irregular, creating neat boxes of scooped stuff. Organised, stackable and set – specific objects in the mode of the 'new sculpture' of the 1970s by Donald Judd, Robert Morris and others whose works were also symptomatic of a need to contain and order the mess of atomic era.



Julia Morison, *Things/Relics I-IX* (installation view), 2011, liquefaction and cement in cardboard box, courtesy of the artist



Mathew McWilliams, *Paper Works (variation) 1, Paper Works (variation) 4, Paper Works (variation) 5*, 2021. inkjet prints on Arches Velin BFK Rives paper. Warren Macris © Mathew McWilliams. Courtesy Chalk Horse Gallery, Australia

## Mathew McWilliams *Paper Works*

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, rumped, 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.

## Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press *Phantom*

While Gustave Doré gave us one vision of London, as a dilapidated geometry of perpendicular 'future' ruins, Fiona Banner provides us with an altogether different view. Detailed, collaged and collected, it is a contemporary London of commerce, trade, politics and encounters that projects its own jungle of activity – one described in clandestine fragments and glimpses.

A camera drone – the Phantom – relentlessly chases down a book that is hurled and buffeted along city streets by the down draft of rotation blades. Its pages flip, it settles momentarily revealing images of men in suits going about business in the columns and edifices of commerce. The wind ruffles the pages once more, they turn erratically to produce an active collage – a hectic flip-book film that becomes surreal and unstable.

The book – a product of The Vanity Press (aka Fiona Banner) – is glossy, like a High Street magazine – a *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *GQ*. In it Banner has reprinted Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – the 1899 novella both celebrated and condemned for its commentary on the African people and the imperialism which dominated and exploited them. Central to the story is Conrad's proposition that there is little difference between the evils of the city and the dark heart of the Congo, where his narrator-protagonist takes the reader to encounter 'the horror'. He begins his story on the Thames River, the flow that has carried all manner of history and travellers – 'What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of the unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.'<sup>17</sup>

Banner brings these words together with images she has commissioned from Magnum photographer, Paolo Pellegrin, known for his contemporary conflict documentations about the Congo. She asked Pellegrin to hunt down and capture images of the city of London as if it were a danger zone. The text and images together produce a document that zooms in on the 'monstrous town' which 'marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars' as Conrad described it.<sup>18</sup> Banner/Pellegrin's London is another heart of darkness – one dressed in a polite pin-striped suit, but deadly all the same in its control of trade, money and lives.

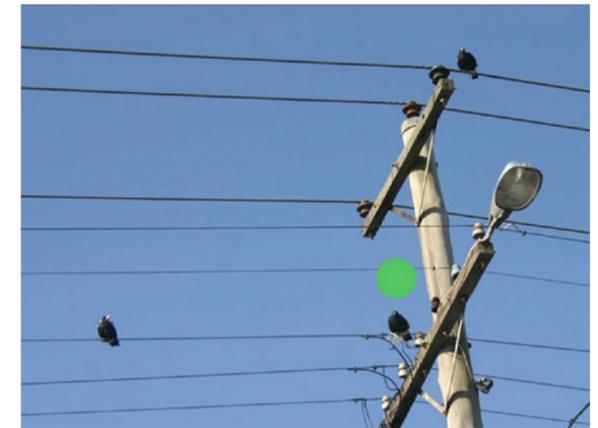
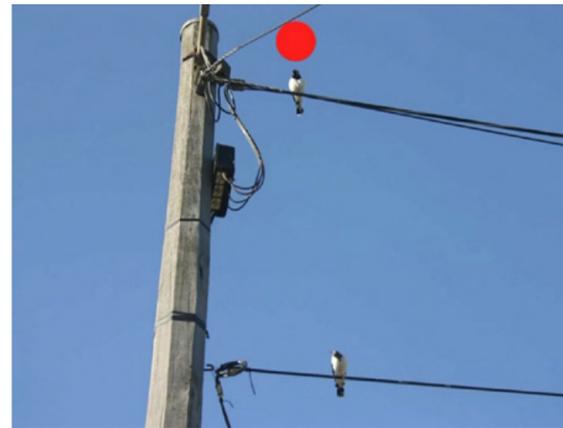
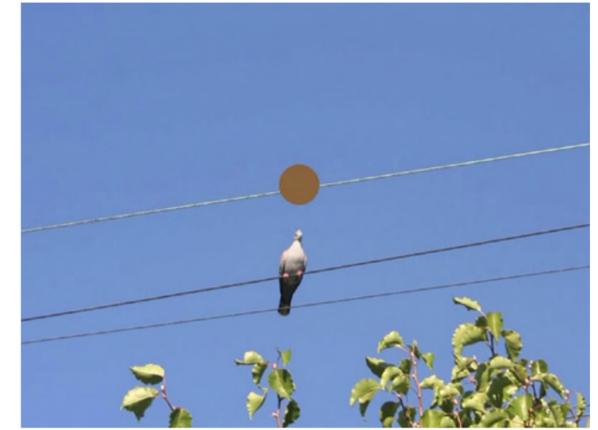
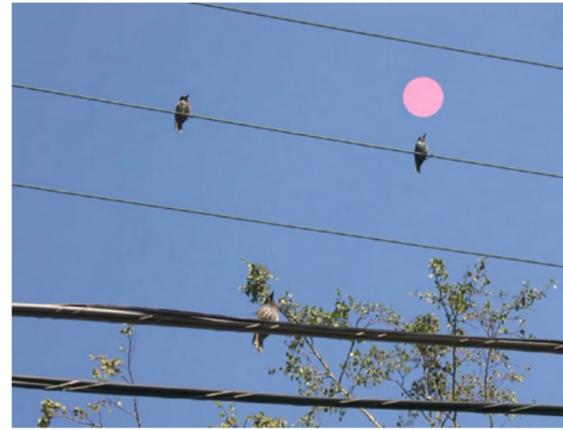
The Phantom drone, whirring above, its incessant sound akin to a battle helicopter or police surveillance apparatus, makes its business to scatter and render the city hectic and eventually ruined. The book, tumbled, flicked, battered collapses under stress – rips, tears, disassembles. It is a metaphor for the chaos of the financial heart of a city that is tenuously stitched together like a tailored suit – one whose business is still to exploit and brutalise the Other.

London is evacuated, windswept and vacant, small shreds of its finance life flit about its emptied streets, scurrying like rats in a plague-torn place. While *Phantom* was made in 2015, its ripped, trashed, glossy life, in the form of Banner's book, seems right now all too present.



Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press, *Phantom* (still), 2015, high-definition digital film, courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

17. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Books, London, 1981, p 7.  
18. As above, p 7.



Charlie Sofo, *Birds* (stills), 2008, single-channel video, standard definition (SD), 4:3, colour, stereo sound, 1:29 min, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2010

## Charlie Sofo *Birds*

'I spy with my little eye . . .' From an early age we are taught to observe and gather visual knowledge by putting things into categories (colour, type). The point of the 'I spy' game is to a) fill in time, b) hone looking skills, c) communicate with others, and d) win. The game is also about the quixotic nature of time. Things, especially seen from a moving vehicle, are fleeting and ephemeral. If the person guessing is not quick enough the reference will have disappeared – ha! Another travelling diversion, the number plate game – shouting out words that come quickly to mind ordered by the alphabetic prefixes – IRE, ZEA, TRD, et cetera – teaches quick linguistic skills and puzzle solving. There are so many opportunities for brain training in our everyday lives.

Charlie Sofo has retained this delight in observing and creating something from his environment. For years he has mined the everyday and found objects and things that map his time and place in the world. Groups, lists, collections, observations and navigations accumulate as an archive of place and space.

Cats, for instance. Sofo's camera zooms in on feline appearances during his neighbourhood walk – on a porch, sitting on a fence, snoozing under a car, sitting in a hedge. Sofo does surreptitious surveillance of cats who are being (they think, we think) surreptitious.

Sofo makes notes, writes down observances, picks up found things, especially if they can form a taxonomy – lost spectacle lenses or fallen fruit. He catalogues instances – spelling mistakes, for example

– and makes sense of random things by giving them a community to live in. Like Dogs. Dogs waiting:

- Dogs waiting outside Savers
- Dogs waiting outside Abesha Restaurant
- Dogs waiting outside Woolworths
- Dogs waiting outside the Bank of Melbourne
- Dogs waiting outside Barkly Square
- Dogs waiting outside Tiba's Restaurant
- Dogs waiting outside Westgarth Fish & Chips
- Dogs waiting outside Aunt Maggies
- Dogs waiting outside Arts Project
- Dogs waiting outside Cibi Cafe
- Dogs waiting outside Liquorland
- Dogs waiting outside Hot Dollar

Sometimes Sofo brings his gatherings, observations, set-ups and thoughts together on platforms or as installations of videos, printed documents, items. At other times his work lives a life in blogs, books and readings. It is both a conceptual and affectionate practice. Knowingly part of and a continuation of the flâneur-esque, observational, anti-monumental approach of artists such as Richard Wentworth and informed by the ideas of philosophers, such as Michel de Certeau, who celebrates the 'Poetics of Everyday Life'. Sofo proves that observation adds charisma and order – meaning, if you like – to everyday activities. During our one hour of exercise in the lockdowns we became enlivened by opportunities to observe the small details of life – of nature and things.

We played mind games with ourselves, becoming super cataloguers of an environment slowed and, as a consequence, made more visible and audible.

Sometimes Sofo adds sound and music to his catalogues. Inspired by the ideas of John Cage and his 'chance music', Sofo assigns musical notes to his sightings. *Birds*, 2008 is such a case with its composition created from the event of birds landing on high wires. Each sighting has been assigned a coloured dot and a musical tone to create a visual and musical composition. A jaunty, pleasure-filled minute and 29 seconds, made all the more so for Sofo's kindly curation.

# Are we there yet?

'The emotional responses to plague in the late Middle Ages followed a four-step pattern: 1) a humbling realization of fragile humanity; 2) communal responses to this realization; 3) individual struggles for life after collective measures seemingly failed; 4) a temporary lapse into depravity when survival was assured. Though this pattern did not apply in every episode or locale, I feel evidence is sufficient to warrant generalization.'<sup>19</sup>

We have been travelling a meandering route along the trajectory of the four responses outlined by Young and Bolick. Isolation, horror, fear, anxieties, ruins, collective measures, depravities, struggles have all played their part, accompanied by the musings of artists, writers, philosophers who each try to navigate their way through a world in flux changed by contagions, catastrophes, wars, civic unrest, and the pressures of progress and its looping infinity. Along the way we have settled on moments of beauty and found comfort in the small details of things; we have taken heart from the resurrections we find in nature.

During the Covid lockdowns when the business of the city stopped – the incessant construction noises, traffic, sirens and the clang of commerce – a gift came to us in the form of birds and regrowth. No longer stressed by the competing noise of modernity, birds were able to quickly return to the sound making of their pre-1954 existence (before mass automobile travel and industrial clamour).

Scientists studying the suddenly audible and varied bird song discovered that birds were changing their calls: they became lower in tone – less shrill – yet were able to travel greater distances. Birds were adapting to a new opportunity, attracting new mates and being less hostile to other birds in their territory. The bird-eat-bird world of pre-Covid time was momentarily replaced by an avian paradise.

From San Francisco to New Delhi to New Zealand and beyond, newspapers were reporting the return of birds to the hostile environment of the urban landscape. Scientists suggested the birds were not so much returned as allowed to occupy their habitats free of the human nuisance. The beneficiaries – the lone walkers enjoying their allotted one hour of recreational exercise – were enlivened by the bird song which seemed to foretell a new ecological future full of hope and restoration.

Data showed that during the Covid lockdowns the carbon footprint dramatically reduced. Air mile accretion was curtailed, and the planet exhaled. People

reported new-found creativity. They took up baking, writing, drawing, and discovered working from home and zooming were good alternatives to a life in the battery-hen cubicles of the office. Communities were formed that suggested a viable new globalism, linked by common purpose – step 2 in the Young and Bolick pattern.

Unfortunately, according to their findings, we may be in for steps 3 and 4. The anti-vax protests, the failures in vaccination protocols, the uncertainty around efficacy, the malfunction of many governments will take their toll. New strains of the Covid virus exert pressure on the forward, positive movements gained over 2020.

Nevertheless, while we can let's smell the roses and delight in the birds; let's draw, bake, paint, be generative and gently mourn those caught in the maelstrom of mass fatalities and take pleasure in their legacies. All the while keeping our eyes on the ball and considering the helpful aphorism provided by James R Ford, *Reality Divided by Expectations*, and the beautiful words of Woolf when she wrote 'the birds beginning and the dawn weaving their thin voices into its whiteness. . .', which Kate Daw shows us.

19. John D Young and Larry Bolick, 'Emotional Response to Late Medieval Plague', *Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 19 February 2014, <https://bit.ly/3netfiE>.



Pipilotti Rist, *Extremities (smooth, smooth)*, (stills), 1999, audio video installation © Pipilotti Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine

Not everyone coped well during the lockdowns, though. Many people were left with lingering doubts about what the future might bring. Others have become timid in social circumstances, reluctant to emerge from the protective cocoons of their Covid bubbles. Still others have found the break in general operating to be the catalyst for big changes – divorce, a change of job, fitness programmes, entering cooking competitions – a new start.

Loved ones have been separated. Some have passed along – quietly, singularly travelling that final journey alone. And people have mourned. Some have found comforts in the solitary thoughts of religion or spiritualism, others have found community in TikTok and similar social platforms in which choirs were formed, concerts attended, art made and discussions flowed. Reasonably, people whose employment, businesses and therefore security have been hit by the prolonged downswing in commerce and trade have found it difficult to enjoy the upsides – the birds, the air, a life less harried.

The New Zealand and Australian economies have shown themselves to be elastic, bouncing back and even showing signs of exceeding pre-Covid predictions. Elsewhere, the world waits to see what unfolds as countries stagger into the 'new normal' and cases soar again. Let's hope steps 3 and 4 will be mild aberrations and the gains can be saved while the losses mitigated.

Time will tell, and if we have learned anything from this art journey, it is that time wears away at things to enable other things to grow. That all that was solid melts, but in so doing sends evaporations up into the air to renew the life cycle.

Masonry, rocks, earthquake rubble; tsunami, volcanic explosions; war, trauma, protest, social unrest; the inequalities of the system. These are heavy things to live under.

So please take your leave through the elixir of Pipilotti Rist's floating world where the body levitates in free space and joyously feels smooth and unworried; where we blend with and feel part of a larger cosmos joining the molecular material of millennia in symbiosis with the environment. Be kind to others and kind to yourselves. Be light.

In Memoriam

Kate Daw  
John Nixon

## Curator Acknowledgments

Making an international exhibition during the pandemic lockdown was possible because of the tremendous generosity and assistance of the many artists, living all over the world, who have provided unending support and guidance in addition to lending their wonderful works to the exhibition. Some have gone to the extra effort of preparing new works. And so I thank, in particular, all the artists. Thanks also to Martina Aschbacher in the Berlin studio of Douglas Gordon. At Frith Street Gallery, London: Ali MacGilp for Fiona Banner, Dale McFarland for Tacita Dean, and Ken Graham and John Lilley for technical assistance with Tacita Dean's *JG*. At Large Glass, London, Charlotte Schepke and in the studio, Jasmine Bruno for Hélène Binet. Our colleagues at the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū: Rebekkah Pickrill and Gina Irish for assistance with the lovely Beatrice sculpture. Collaborator Stewart Russell and friend Ruth Bain for Kate Daw. Carla Purdue, Matt Rayner and Ruby Moore at Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira for the BIRDS! Kate Knox and Donald Kerr at the University of Otago, Special Collections for Gustave Doré. Emily Fayet and Nicole White at Hauser & Wirth Gallery and Anne-Sophie Tisseyre and Sylvia Brandt for Pierre Huyghe. Siobhan Maguire for Katie Paterson. Warren Macris for Mathew McWilliams. Nike Dreyer and Käthe Walser for Pipilotti Rist. Brent Willison at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the Bill Viola loan and in the Bill Viola studio, Kira Perov and Gene Zazzaro.

Lockdown and circumstances meant a short guest stint turned into a longer commission here at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and I am extremely grateful to all my lovely colleagues who have provided their expertise, skills and knowledge to the exhibition. Special mention of Lizzie Baikie, Jason Lindsay, Charlotte Stace, Alice Tyler, Julia Waite and Georgina Whiteley needs to be made.

My gratitude also to editor Clare McIntosh who together with designer Aaron Richardson helped me create this publication; and to Paul Chapman and Jennifer French for photographing artworks and collating image files.

Thanks are also due to Director Kirsten Lacy who set all in motion, enabled and accommodated a number of shifts due to evolving circumstances; and to Dr Sarah Farrar who provided steady support during closures and schedule changes. And to Kay Campbell for coming on the journey, again!



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1. John Nash, *Flowers*, colour lithograph, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Rex Nan Kivell, 1953

2. John Nixon, *Maroon Cross*, date unknown, enamel on wood, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the artist, 2014. © John Nixon / Copyright Agency, 2021

3. John Nixon, *Block Painting: Cream Monochrome*, 1992, enamel on cardboard, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the artist, 2014. © John Nixon / Copyright Agency, 2021

4. James R Ford, *Reality Divided by Expectations*, 2018, oil paint and spray paint on canvas, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2018

5. Richard Lewer, *Its true Drawing saved me*, 2016, Langridge pigmented ink on sandpaper, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2016

6. E Mervyn Taylor, *Tui*, date unknown, wood engraving (ed 50), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1945

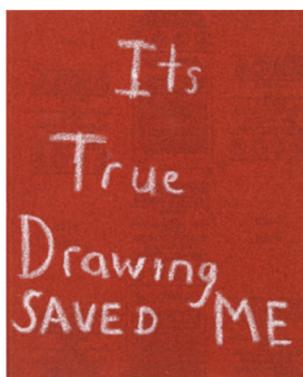
7. Richard Lewer, *Untitled*, 2016, acrylic on sandpaper, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2016

8. Trevor Lloyd, *Te tangi o te moa*, 1907, watercolour, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, bequest of Miss Connie Lloyd, 1983

9. Harry Rountree, *Sparrows*, 1925, watercolour, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1925



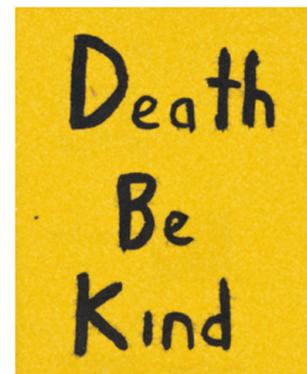
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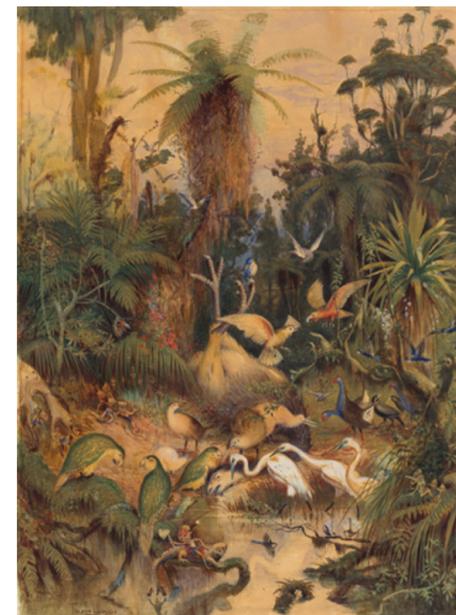
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