

Approaches Seven photographers

By Peter Ireland

Photospace

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In New Zealand for a long time the notion of landscape has seemed like an itch crying out for scratching. For many, "New Zealand" means landscape. Press the "NZ" button in your head and a natural landscape automatically flips onto that inner screen. Can't help ourselves. It's an outcome of a complex - and site-specific - set of historical circumstances having their origin in 18th century European notions of "The Sublime", where a former belief in a supreme deity gradually became invested in the idea of Nature. Essentially though, it's a story about belief. The Romantic Movement of the 19th embedded this investment tendency - Wordsworth more or less said it all - and where the story starts getting a bit twisted is when it later intersected with the colonial project and the birth of photography.

The confluence of the notion of landscape being holy and redemptive with the medium of photography and colonialist notions of progress is another particular feature of New Zealand's history, and it's these inherent contradictions which partially explain the periodic urge to scratch the itch. Simply - and perhaps simplistically - the scenario goes something like this: landscape = the pure, the unspoiled, an inviolate God. Colonialism = violation, subjection, playing God. Documentary photography = objectivity, the truth, God's eye. Jeez Wayne, how do we grid this sucker up? Postmodern critics globally have expressed a certain unease as to photography's complicity in the colonial project, but in this country what debate there is on the subject has not been fuelled by academics, critics and curators but by photographers doing what they do best - making photographs. Approaches is a timely and deftly-curated scratch to the Postcolonial itch.

In more innocent days Auckland's pioneering Snaps Gallery put together a New Zealand Landscape show. It ran from 14 February until 5 March 1977, and was (wonderfully idiosyncratically) reviewed by Don Binney in *Photo-Forum 38*, June/July the same year, accompanied by four illustrations by three participants: Messrs Wesley, Foster and Aberhart. Other photographers were Tere Batham, Gillian Chaplin, Murray Hedwig, Ian Macdonald, Mick Smith and Larence Shustak. While Binney in his essay wrestled like a doomed Laocoon with the painterly tradition of landscape, the actual works either mirrored the Romantic myth - albeit in a cool Modernist way - or questioned the whole tradition.

Cheekily perhaps in terms of the show's theme, Aberhart included his pair of *Domestic architecture, Christchurch* images, on the one hand cocking a snook at the Romantic myth of landscape and on the other providing a typically acerbic comment on the featureless flatness of the Canterbury Plains. A two-storied Loos-like State house being as "feature" as you're gonna get in them there parts. The images perhaps suggesting an example of what Binney surmised: the cargo-cultists of New Forms have been clearing their landing strips for the coming urban realities. "What the?" Anyway, given the foregrounding of photography over the past decade it's probably increasingly difficult to remember just what a medium-at-the-margins it was in 1977, Snaps' modest show nevertheless registered a querying of the comfortable local notion of landscape more effectively than any other art form of the time - except perhaps the more intellectually acute work of conceptual sculptors such as Bruce Barber, Andrew Drummond and Phil Dadson.

Approaches is a generation and a half away from Snaps' New Zealand Landscape, and the only way the older contributors to the former could've seen the latter would've been from a push-chair. Tempus fugit indeed. In view of the theme, a casual visitor to the Snaps' show might've wondered Where's Milford Sound? A visitor to the Photospace show might've asked Where's New Zealand? At least in the 30 years separating these two shows the Romantic myth of landscape has become detached from the place, which may indicate some kind of progress towards a clearer understanding of the forces shaping this culture.

Not only are the specific local references less obvious in Approaches. Where the 1977 show still doffed its cap to the wholeness of a landscape - the kind of credibility inherent in a panorama - the images at Photospace unconsciously but collectively expressed a reticence about wide-angle, a disbelief in the notion and credibility of wholeness. And it wasn't as if the fragments were standing symbolically for a whole; they were insistently fragments and fragments only. The titles may have been site-specific - *Mahanga, Okari, Kaikoura, Muriwai, Oriti Beach* etc - but there was nothing picturesque-specific about the images: they were slivers of remembering, slices of dreams, in denial of any Wim Wenders-like grant narrative or any assumption of objective truth as it may relate to the photographic image.

Shaun Lawson's sole image, *Anima*, did for Approaches what Aberhart's State houses did for the Snaps' show. What used to be called the nigger in the woodpile. Although in colour (none of the works in the Photospace show was black and white) it had the same formal quality and a similar tongue-in-cheek approach to the theme. That little Mt Maunganui-like rock holding the door open has been house-trained as thoroughly as the land itself has been domesticated through Romantic notions of landscape. The scale may be different but both Mount and rock have their uses equally.

Scale's another cipher of difference between the 1977 and 2006 shows. The earlier exhibition was pretty much the apotheosis of 8 x 10, but in Approaches no two photographers are comparable in this respect. The range is from Dan Lucka's Polaroids to Andy Palmer's and Matt Grace's larger format work - although it must be remarked here that Palmer's reduced images feel less successful than those at an earlier Photospace show. Palmer, Approaches' curator, needs to be reminded that scale isn't strictly about size, it's about the relationship between the human physical dimension and the emotional content of the image. His reduced images are still dark, but not dark enough on that scale. They've become pictures to be observed, not images to envelop you.

Sharyn Jones' five photographs hang confidently together, but the scale is more diffident. They work as images in the abstract, but as objects they seem oxygen-deprived. Slightly under-scaled and somewhat over-framed they struggle for air, the gasping a distraction from productive reflection on her approach to the notion of landscape. Indeed, it is a rewarding reflection, her often twilight domestic vignettes suggesting perhaps how much "landscape" may now be performing as ad-breaks to the programme of Postmodern daily living.

Experiencing what passes for landscape seems to be at the core of Jodi Ruth Keet's and Dan Lucka's images rather than their being pictures of it. Both sets of work are more a testament to the fragility of perception and memory than to the certainty of the locations the geographic titles suggest. The slightly faded quality of Lucka's Polaroids adds poignantly to the fading that memory so ineffably entails. Although taken close up they feel like images made in outer space of time remembered.

The Snaps' show occurred before the advent of programmatic Postmodern appropriation and quotation. You really need to realise this in order to get to grips with Andrew Ivory's 5 images. Otherwise you might be gulled into thinking he'd strayed from the nearest Camera Club. (Although, given his - apparently intentional - shaking of the camera producing a slight double image, it's more likely he got kicked out rather than straying.) It's a fine line, but Ivory's clearly a man skilled in maintaining balance over a deep ravine. There's a lush improbability about his sea-scapes that makes you want to laugh. This guy's just got to be kidding. It's like he's pulled together every Pictorialist cliché, soaked it in fake Polaroid colour, then served it up brazenly with a po-face. Once you get over laughing though, the images begin to exert a strange power, by turns sobering and exhilarating. These works penetrate the Romantic mythology, own it straight up but honour the human need it served. Not even ironically.

Well, maybe not. The largest image - with a dinghy sunk on the foreground shore - pushes the boundaries further than Modernist theory might possibly have imagined. Except that Ivory could be pushing them the other way. He's too smart a cookie to be merely copying a standard Camera Club subject so abjectly. It just ain't pretty. But, this approach forces us back to basics in our reassessment of where we stand in relation to notions of landscape and the image-making contingent on it. Just as Approaches as a show forces us back to a reassessment of just where we stand.

Peter Ireland is NOT a photographer, but a Wanganui-based painter, photographic curator and critic.