

The Unknowability of Things

Esther Deans

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Abstract

My research explores ways in which the fragmentary aspects of memory, loss and uncertainty can be conveyed through representational painting. It began as an attempt to articulate visual memories of an old family home, damaged in the Christchurch earthquakes; I wanted to explore the fragile nature of these memories, and the nostalgia they evoked.

This thesis therefore examines how techniques of representational painting can be used to convey the ambiguous and shifting nature of memory and perception. In parallel with my painting practice, I explore the theoretical contexts of ruins and New Romanticism, and these provide a framework within which to situate my work. Broader concerns that I had around climate change, and readings in literature also filtered into my painted work. My methodology is wholly practice-led: individual paintings spark conversations or open new territories that lead to the next aesthetic or philosophical idea. As I painted, my concerns broadened to encompass social questions of the relation between built structures, nature, and time.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning

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Introduction

This project began in part with a family home, Morven, which was damaged in the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes. Morven was built near the beginning of the 20th century by my Great Grandfather, Alexander Deans. Alexander was killed in World War One, leaving his widow, Norna, and two small sons. Very little in the house was changed after his death, and even when I was young I felt there was a sadness at the heart of it; the pretty curtains and stags' heads, the impractical kitchen, even the hoarded stacks of National Geographic and old cereal boxes - all seemed acts of preservation against a kind of loneliness and the passing of time.

Seeing the house after the earthquakes, the furniture packed up in boxes and the wallpaper starting to curl, I wondered what it was that made this particular place important. So, this project began with the question of the symbolic role place can have in our personal lives, and what its loss can mean. As I painted, the concerns which had begun with this specific, domestic place, broadened to encompass loss, memory and the relationship between built structures and nature.

Throughout this development, my research has been led by the practice of painting itself. Completed paintings have led on to and suggested new territories, and new ideas or concepts have emerged through the act of making. I drew on the tradition of representational painting as taught to me by my grandfather (Austen Deans), and I became interested in the uncertainty and ambiguity latent within this craft.

My research explores ways in which the fragmentary aspects of memory, loss and uncertainty can be conveyed through painted images. This exegesis charts my development in relation to these themes through one and a half years of painting. Over this time, three distinct styles and approaches have emerged, and this exegesis will outline their evolution in three separate sections, roughly chronological. I would like to shape this writing as a series of moments; small insights or developments that have moved my painting practice forward in some way, or ideas that have fermented somewhere beneath the surface of my work. In order to reflect my painting experience, the methods, methodologies and critical contexts overlap and feed into one another. In each section I will address the key philosophical and artistic contexts, and give some analysis of works made and methods used. The paintings included as images in the exegesis are mine, unless otherwise stated. Works from other artists are detailed in the list of figures.

Section one

Morven



Figure 1 Gwen John, *Young Woman Holding a Black Cat*, 1920-5, Oil on Canvas

I was interested in the emotional and psychological influence of a place like Morven on my imaginative life; the images it forms in my dreams and memories, and how I could reflect the uncertainty of these images through painting. I wanted to explore the narrative potential of figuration, but also the dissolution and distortions that occur in translating a photographic or imagined image into a painting. I therefore started with photographs I had taken of the house and tried to combine them with memories or inventions to create composite images.



Figure 2 Edouard Vuillard, *The Flowered Dress*, 1891, Oil on Canvas

In Figure 4 and Figure 5, I incorporated photographs of scaffolding with those of the house, to allude to the processes of deconstruction and construction within a remembered interior. In Figure 4 I also added the chair and carpet – elements I seemed to remember but were not the actual ‘reality’ of the hallway, nor recorded items in the reference photograph. I looked to the works of Gwen John whose muted palettes corresponded to my memories of colours within Morven. I was also interested in the colour combinations and use of patterns in the interiors of Edouard Vuillard, and the dream-like qualities of the contemporary painter Adam Lee.



Figure 3 Adam Lee, *The Transfigured Self*, 2016, Oil and Synthetic Polymer Paint on Canvas



Figure 4 *Hallway*,
2018, Oil on Board,
460x495mm

Figure 5 *Dining Room*,
2018, Oil on Board,
355x455mm





Figure 6: *Untitled*, 2018, Oil on Board, 300x450mm

The ruin and nature

Thinking about Morven led me to the topic of ruins, and the fascination they long seem to have held in Western art.¹ In his essay, “The Ruin”, George Simmel explains this fascination as the interaction between ‘spirit’ and nature. The architectural structure began as a human conception, but used materials from the natural world, in an upward motion, often to conquer that world. However, when buildings are eroded and broken down by the forces of nature, this sets up a new relationship between the natural and the human.² I like his idea that there is something beautiful and satisfying in nature combining with the human to create a new structure, with its own aesthetic.

I was shocked by the ruination of this beloved family home, but, in Figure 6, I felt this shock turned into a kind of optimism. In painting it, I was thinking about Simmel’s idea of the intrusion of nature into a built environment, and the ultimately porous, corrodible nature of walls. That fed into ideas about the porous and illusionistic nature of representational painting; the tension between the free-flowing ground and the more carefully constructed, built, armature of mimetic illusion. The interaction between the built and the organic could be a source of tension, a fighting against the processes of time and ruination, and a melancholy for the loss of an important place. It could also, however, be a source of hope - the newness of a changed structure or a changed relation to the earth.

1 Brian Dillon, ed. *Ruins, Documents of Contemporary Art.*, London: Whitechapel Gallery (2011).

2 George Simmel, “The Ruin,” *The Hudson Review* Volume 11, number. 3 (1958).

Ruins and time

Another aspect of ruins that is fascinating and linked to my feelings about Morven, is their temporal ambiguity. In their survey of geography studies, “Reckoning with Ruins,” Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor explore what they consider something of a *Zeitgeist* - a contemporary fascination in culture and in scholarly literature with ruins. They argue that part of the broader fascination with ruins is the fact that they hold different temporal moments within them - their current ruined state, and the hints of what they were in the past, even of what they might be in the future.³ Their sense of history implies what Simmel calls an “immediately perceived presence,”⁴ a sort of ghostliness. There is uncertainty and intrigue in their ability to hold many moments at once, making them indeterminate and open to story-telling.



Figure 7 Austen
Deans, *Morven House*,
1939, Watercolour

It is this kind of uncertainty, and the idea of multi-temporality, that I felt my paintings of Morven conveyed. In the process of juxtaposing different images, and building up separate layers of textures, I felt that my methods corresponded both literally and figuratively to this idea of multiple histories existing within ruined architectural structures. Figure 10 contains several iterations as part of the final image. Initially, it was an idea of a remembered room, (Figure 8) and then a painting of the house, as it was painted by my grandfather in the 1930s (Figure 9). Neither of these seemed adequate to my needs, and so it was turned on its side and repainted again, this time as my cousin David contemplating the boxes of furniture while we emptied out the current, uninhabitable dining room. In each painting, the ‘story’ before has been obliterated, but there is some sense of that history remaining, and some indication of it in the final image. So the painting of David in a room is not just that, but also the feeling of the whole house, and also the feeling of its past.

3 Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor, “Reckoning with Ruins,”
Progress in Human Geography Volume 37, Issue. 4 (2012).

4 Simmel. p.385



Figure 8 *First Iteration - Blue Room*



Figure 9 *Second Iteration - Blue room with house*



Figure 10 *The Blue Room*, 2018, Oil on Board, 460x490mm

Ruins and the uncanny

The ordinary, domestic nature of our transience and mortality is moving, I think, in a particular way. The psychologist Ernst Jentsch linked the feeling of uncanniness to a sense of not being 'at home' in a place in which you ought to feel at home, of feeling a lack of orientation that gives one a fundamental, intellectual instability.⁵ Matthias Weischer is a contemporary painter whose images of interiors play with ideas of the domestic and the uncanny. They are also painted as multiple layers and seem to imply memory and dream, or multiple moments existing together. I was interested in his use of interior spaces, and the symbolic role that architecture plays in his work.

The idea and aesthetic of the uncanny resonated with my feelings on re-discovering Morven. I found the place, which was the source of many romantic and warm childhood memories, suddenly altered - empty, cold, decaying. It was familiar and yet eerily unfamiliar. In *Interior* (Figure 12), moments of clarity or familiarity are undercut by a kind of chaos. The palimpsest of the surface, along with the ambiguous presence of a figure or object in the foreground, lends the painting this feeling of uncanny strangeness.

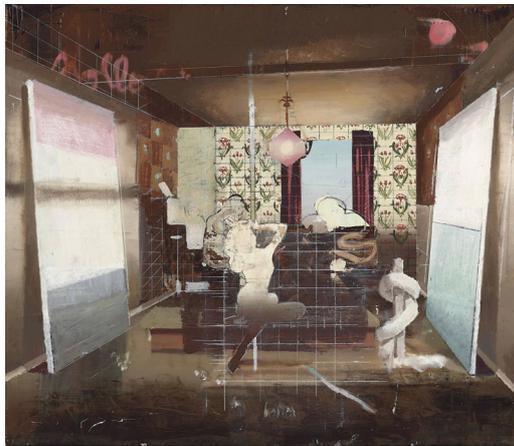


Figure 11 Matthias Weischer, *Striptease*, 2007, Oil on Canvas

5. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).



Figure 12 *Interior*, 2018, Oil on Board, 460x490mm

Collage

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Figure 13 David Hockney, *Gregory Reading in Kyoto*, 1983, Photocollage on Board

At this point in my project, I was very interested in the use of collage as a form of creating potential “ruins”. I looked at David Hockney’s photo collages, and the role of this method in Martin Golland’s painting practice. Hockney had developed his photo collages in part as a way of exploring visual perception. In looking at a scene, we often see details in small, disconnected moments, and our subconscious mind pieces these together into a coherent whole.⁶ I felt that this technique related to my own experience of remembering either the vague sense of a room, or its imperfect details, without being able to rely on the specifics of any one of those things.



Figure 14 Martin Golland, *Ship VI*, 2015, Mixed media on Paper

Martin Golland uses collages as reference points to build up paintings of imaginary architectural structures where invented places act as meeting points between built and natural environments. In *Platform* (Figure 15) there is a play between three-dimensional shapes, and the flatness and incongruity of planes. There is a sense in which what is depicted has begun as something ‘real’, but it is disrupted and made chaotic by a kind of irrational folding of elements, as if they were figures made of paper. This conflict between built representational structures and the chaotic nature of paint, the disintegration of the illusion, was important in thinking about what I wanted to achieve in my work.



Figure 15 Martin Golland, *Platform*, 2013, Acrylic On Canvas

6. Lawrence Weschler, “True to Life,” in *David Hockney; Camera-works*, ed. David Hockney (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).

With Golland and Hockney in mind, I made several photo collages of Morven, and another family home (owned by a cousin), Homebush. Homebush was completely and dramatically destroyed in the Christchurch earthquakes, and an architecturally designed home built on the same site to replace it. I was interested in layering these different temporal moments on top of one another, to create a kind of hybrid place; not so much a ruin as a continuation of disparate moments. (Figure 16)

However, paintings made from these drawings were, I felt, unsuccessful. The method of moving from collage to painting was somehow too distancing; I was relying perhaps too much on my imagination without enough of the concrete veracity or conviction provided by the physical act of observation.



Figure 16 *Homebush*,
2018, Photo Collage and
Watercolour, 210×297mm

Section Two

Fragments

Over the summer, and almost instinctively, I returned to painting from life, and painting the objects and places around me, almost as a way of verifying my own sight. Instead of remembered architecture, my subject matter became ordinary structures that I encountered in cycling through the city such as the stairs and street lamps of Figure 18 and Figure 19.

Initially, I thought of these as studies. I wanted to focus on the more formal properties of tone and colour, in order to explore what influence these had on the affective reading of a painting. I limited my tonal range, and often kept works monochromatic, finding that this lent the otherwise 'ordinary' subjects an enigmatic quality. In Figure 20 the subject matter itself has its own uncertainty – the scaffolding plastic shrouds the details of what is beneath, leaving it open to speculation and invention – and this is exacerbated by the muted light and restricted palette. In *Summer*, (Figure 17), an otherwise banal plastic bag I found stretched on a branch takes on an unfamiliar, totem-like quality.



Figure 17 *Summer*,
2018, Oil on Canvas
Panel, 228x303mm



Figure 19 *Street lamps*, 2019,
Oil on Board, 205x255mm

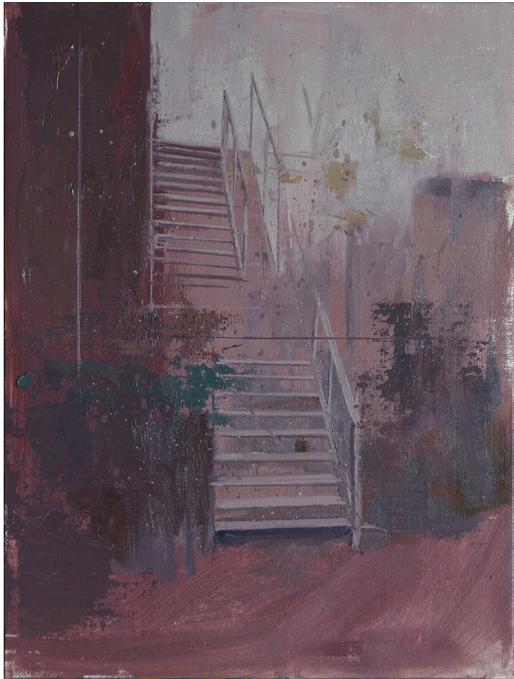


Figure 18 *Stairs*, 2018,
Oil on Canvas Panel,
300x250mm



Figure 20 *Exterior*, 2018,
Oil on Board, 300x280mm



Figure 21 Victor Man,
*Untitled (From The White
Shadow of His Talent)*
2011-2012, Oil on Panel
Mounted on Wood

The painting below (Figure 22) was inspired by a structure at the Waterview tunnel. I was intrigued by the strangeness of it; that it clearly had some utility but gave no information away about what this could be. Its geometric folds or facets of seemed to obfuscate rather than reveal its actual shape. When I first painted this building, I felt that the composition was not right, and so I subsequently repainted it, but left significant traces of the original behind, to keep the effect of a shifting, unsure perception. In these smaller works I became interested in the idea of an emerging (or disappearing) form, that was never fully realised or completely described. I wanted to leave room for the viewer to make their own interpretations of what the objects were, and so make their own personal connections to them.

I looked to the tonal and chromatic qualities of the contemporary Romanian painter, Victor Man, as part of this development. Man's narrow tonal range, often very dark, gives the sense of dusk - where objects become indeterminate and the light plays tricks. The dance between passages of definite, rendered detail and more abstract, ill-defined shapes is unsettling, and reminds me of dream states, or the shifting nature of memory.



Figure 22 *Waterview*, 2018,
Oil on Board, 250x300mm

Neo-Romanticism

The historical and theoretical context of New Romanticism provided a means for me to think about and articulate some of my concerns. According to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, there is a collection of contemporary artists who navigate between the impulses and rhetoric of Modernism and Post-Modernism. Acknowledging the irony and pastiche of Post-Modernism, while yearning for the certainty of purpose within Modernism, they hesitate between poles. This leads, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue, towards a contemporary neo-Romanticism. Vermeulen and van den Akker define Romanticism as a movement that also oscillated between extremes. “It is from this hesitation that the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem, aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence.”⁷

According to Isaiah Berlin, Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment belief that explanations for the world and all of human life *could*, theoretically, be found, using logic or divine reasoning. Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel, in contrast to this, believed that there was some fundamentally unknowable force that drives all life and creativity, existing beneath our conscious mind and beyond the grasp of logic.⁸

Vermeulen and van den Akker point to the work of artists such as Gregory Crewdson, David Lynch, Kaye Donachie and Armin Boehm, as veering towards mysticism and melodrama, playing with tropes of Romanticism, appearing earnest and sincere but perhaps with an awareness of the works' absurdity and pastiche. Martina Weinhart notes the tendency to work within a Romantic sensibility, while making use of Post-Modern themes or methods such as appropriation, irony, the use of archives, and paintings translated from mediated reference images.⁹



Figure 23 *Symonds St Cemetery*, 2019, Oil on Board, 250x305mm

⁷ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* Volume 2, Number 1, (2010): 5677, p.8.

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁹ Martina Weinhart, “The World Must Be Made Romantic: On the Rediscovery of an Attitude,” in *Ideal Worlds - New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, ed. Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2005).

The fragmentary and open



Figure 24 Timothy Wilson, *Waverly*, 2015, Oil on Canvas

In my work, Romantic tropes come out in my metaphors of built spaces, especially of my interiors and ruins - of things we have constructed out of a positive impulse, an expectation for order and stability, but which corrode or decay, through nature and the act of remembering. There is also a sense in my work of the “form and unformable,” a sense of the strangeness of the world and our relation to it. I can relate to that pull between wanting, needing, to create a forward-moving action, a recognition of steps that need to be taken to save the world as we have inherited it, and the apparent hopelessness of this situation.



Figure 25 Timothy Wilson, *Stoic*, 2016, Oil on Canvas

In his essay for the exhibition, “Romantic Conceptualism”, which in part helped to articulate this movement toward contemporary Romanticism, Jörg Heiser explained that Romanticism favours, “the fragmentary and the open over the systematic and the conclusive: allowing the mind to adjust to a contradictory reality instead of doing the opposite and fitting reality to its own parameters”¹⁰ Two artists whose work I am very moved by, exemplify this tendency to create a contradictory reality that is left “fragmentary and open.”

Timothy Wilson is a Romantic painter, whose works from observation tend to disintegrate, and feel poised on the point of collapse. They hover between something seen and experienced, and something only felt, or only glimpsed at the point of forgetting. Wilson talks about his observational works in terms of mortality - that in painting an object which exists in time, we also “die with it” as we observe it, recording that process of infinitesimal inching towards death.¹¹

It is this intimation, in part, that I am drawn to in Wilson’s work. There is a certainty and solidity, a conviction, to the act of observation but alongside that there exists a sense of inevitable mortality. I feel this relates to my own thinking about the unreliability of memory, the inevitability of decay and loss, and a sense of the mortality of things, ourselves among these. Wilson’s work also delights in the physicality of his materials and the chaotic potentials of paint. Like Man, his tonal range helps to create the sense of an idiosyncratic world and visual language, as well as linking him to earlier, 19th century landscape painting traditions.

10 Jörg Heiser, “A Romantic Measure,” in *Romantic Conceptualism*, ed. Jan Verwoert Collier Schorr Jörg Heiser, Susan Hiller (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2008). p.138

11 Justin Hopkins, “Death and Decay: In Conversation with Timothy Wilson”, podcast audio, *Artist Decoded*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.artistdecoded.com/podcast/timothywilson?rq=%2329>.

Born in 1891, Edwin Dickinson is another painter characterised as a Romantic by his contemporary curators,¹² although his work has been rather overlooked in the canon of 20th century painting. In Dickinson, the open and “contradictory reality” lies in the unexpected strangeness of his pictures. Often using ordinary subject matter, keenly observed, they give the feeling of a world seen through a fog and becoming less like a place we know. His muted colour palette and unusual perspectives give a melancholy sonority to his work, and sometimes, as Douglas Dreishpoon notes, “death hovers around these images in a spectral cloud.”¹³

When talking about his own work, Dickinson would refuse to be drawn into explaining the meaning or significance of any of his symbols. In discussing this, John Ashbery suggests that rather than asking an artist what their painting means, it is more helpful to think of the painting itself as an answer to a question. In the case of a particular work he is writing about, “that question might have been: ‘What is this strangeness I feel connected with an event from the distant past?’”¹⁴ I too like the idea of thinking of a painting as a question, rather than an answer.



Figure 26 Edwin Dickinson, *Francis Foley*, 1927, oil on Canvas



Figure 27 Edwin Dickinson, *Chair, Skowbegan I*, 1956, Oil on Panel



Figure 28 Edwin Dickinson, *Self Portrait in Gray Shirt*, 1943, Oil on Canvas

12 James Thrall Soby, “Romantic Painting in America,” ed. Museum of Modern Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943).

13 Douglas Dreishpoon, “Striking Memory,” in *Edwin Dickinson: Dreams and Realities*, ed. Douglas Dreishpoon (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002).

14 John Ashbery, “Edwin Dickinson,” in *Edwin Dickinson: Dreams and Realities*, ed. Douglas Dreishpoon (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002) p.94

The question of a painting



Figure 29 Photograph
of Still Life

On Friday March 15, an armed gun man opened fire on a congregation of men and women in two mosques in Christchurch. I was crushed by this. Shocked, appalled. I felt a deep grief but somehow as if this grief had nowhere to turn, no action to take, nothing that would be right to do. Some of the grief was the guilt of being part of the society from which the killer emerged, and an impotence about what I could do, or could have done, to prevent this kind of tragedy.

Coming in to the studio, I wrapped a little figurine in a shroud and felt that it represented something of how I was feeling. The grief itself, at least. A sadness that had not quite a definite object on which to rest, and that was also a part of remorse and shame.

Painting it from life stilled me, as it always does. Focusing on the tactile, the immediate, my perception of the textures of wood, cotton, wall, and the quality of the afternoon light through the tall windows. The act of concentrating itself is a kind of meditation for me. Following the soft and hard shadow edges, which complete a sort of dance, a sort of pattern, watching them closely enough to create, on the two dimensional surface, the illusion of depth. I knew it wasn't going to provide much solace for anyone, still less any kind of justice or political statement. I felt like painting it provided a kind of icon, though, an object on which to focus my grief, or in concentrating my gaze, to still my grief for a moment. It was a painting that I felt was a question, not any kind of answer.



Figure 30 *Shroud*, 2019, Oil on Board, 250x305mm

Figure 31 *Blue Shroud*, 2019, Oil on Board, 250x200mm



Like a porcupine



Figure 32 *Rosette*, 2019, Oil on Board, 200x250mm

Friedrich Schlegel, one of the founding thinkers of Romanticism, developed a whole ideological framework around literary fragments. His ideas had a curious parallel to my small observational works, which I began to think of as fragments from some unnamed or unknown whole – little moments caught alone but complete in themselves.

A fragment, says Schlegel, “like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine.”¹⁵ He believed a fragment needed to have a certain unity or internal coherence, but to be fragmentary in its individuality, and in opposition to other fragments.¹⁶ Like a ruin, Schlegel’s fragments intimate a past and future, a broader reality, while being themselves an intersection between moments.



Figure 33 *Power box*, 2019, Oil on Board, 205x200mm

According to the critic Otabe Tanehisa, Schlegel’s use of fragments as a way of organising and recording his thoughts helped to usher in the uncertain, nebulous quality of Romantic theory as outlined by Isaiah Berlin above.¹⁷ Schlegel sees the perceptual and intellectual world not as a coherent whole, a totality, but a chaotic universality of opposing positions.

In the installation of my small observational works, my “fragments”, I found curious interchanges and interactions occurring between them as I set them up in different arrangements. Similarities in colour, paint application or content would open up dialogue between works. I was also interested to see a pattern in the subject matter between the hard lines of architectural structures, and the softer, more organic forms of drapery or human figures. In many, colour seemed as much a subject of the work as the actual depicted object.

15 Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). p.45

16 Rudolph Gasche, “Ideality in Fragmentation,” in *Philosophical Fragments by Friedrich Schlegel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1991

17 Tanehisa Otabe, “Friedrich Schlegel and the Idea of Fragment: A Contribution to Romantic Aesthetics,” *Aesthetics* 13 (2009).

I had begun this series wanting to verify my sight; instead, I found my own observation and perception as unreliable as my memory. Like Schlegel, I also feel there is a kind of chaos in things, an unknowability rather than some definite truth which can be discovered. So my images of 'reality' are diffused in some way, either in a murk of limited tonal ranges, in the use of fragmentary brushstrokes, or in the swipes and abrasions made to the literal image. My idea of a fragment had broadened beyond the remnants of a specific ruin, to become something stranger, more metaphorical, whose meaning was unknown even to me.

There is a sense I have sometimes that you cannot *know* what it is you see. Not just that it makes no sense, or that it is hard to understand, but that the world is somehow un-see-able, that it will shift away, beyond your gaze, always.



Examples of studio installations



Figure 34 *Air Shaft*,
2019, Oil on Canvas
Panel, 250x200mm



Figure 35 *Figure in
Red*, 2018, Oil on
Board, 150x305mm



Figure 35 *Garden Nocturne*, 2019, Oil on Board, 280x405mm



Figure 36 *Latter Days*, 2019, Oil on Board, 250x200mm

Section Three

A new place

By June, the heart of winter, I felt the need to move beyond what were quite personal, intimate works, to make something either thematically or literally ‘bigger’. I had been reading a lot about climate change and ecology, and these ideas started to filter through to my painting world. With this in the back of my mind, I went to the Winter Gardens in the Auckland Domain to make some sketches and take photos.

The Winter Gardens are immediately and obviously aesthetically appealing. I’m attracted to the patina of steamy mould on the glass windows and ceiling, and the arching curves of the exposed metal roofing. They are of a similar era to Morven, and the worn brick and late Victorian architecture conjure ideas of the picturesque, or of future ruins. I am also drawn to the virulent energy of those huge palms and ferns; it feels as if they could burst through the ceiling at any moment and they seem indomitable. Despite their strength, though, the glass structure confines them – paradoxically both protecting and restricting them. Rather than a fragmented, isolated unit (as the structures in Section Two had been), the gardens feel like a whole, encompassing *place*.

On returning to the studio to paint, I found that the sketches I had made in the gardens were less useful as references than as acts of memorizing or noticing. Instead I decided to go back to using collage. In my works of Morven, I had found that my collage drawings created too much distance between myself and that emotionally charged subject. For the Winter Garden works, however, the method allowed me to remove myself from the actual ‘reality’ of the gardens themselves, and to leave the reference gathering open-ended, and less specific.

While planning these paintings, I started to think about what the wider significance of the gardens might be, beyond their immediate aesthetic appeal. There is something about a “winter garden” that is emblematic of privilege – the ability to grow luxuriant plants in an environment to which they are not adapted requires money and a certain amount of leisure or, at least,

human labour. The notion itself - carrying tropical vegetation from one country to another for the purposes of pleasure - is an imperialist one. The gardens could be seen as symbolic of the colonial practice of introducing English flora and fauna to New Zealand itself, with often devastating consequences.

Auckland Domain is built on the extinct volcano, Pukekawa (meaning, Hill of bitter memories).¹⁸ The area also contains Pukekaroa, a pā site occupied and fought over by different iwi throughout the history of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland). The block was bought off Ngāti Whātua¹⁹ by Governor William Hobson in 1841 and developed into a public domain in 1845. The gardens themselves, one temperate and one heated, were built during World War One, influenced by English architecture.²⁰

There is something I found poignant in these small facts. The plants require constant human supervision and care in order to survive. The place itself is built upon the ruins of other homes, the places of habitation of local iwi. And the creation is a looking back, too, to an imagined or remembered 'home country'. I wanted to explore these uncomfortable juxtapositions; the aesthetic attractions of the gardens and their obvious appeal, alongside the darker history of which they are a part.



Figure 38, *Collage III*, 2019, Paper, 210x297mm



Figure 39, *Collage I*, 2019, Paper, 210x297mm

18 George Graham, *Maori Place Names of Auckland: Their Meaning and History* (Auckland: Auckland Institute and Museum, 1980).

19 The Māori iwi which had ownership of the land at that time.

20 Kerryn Pollock, "City Parks and Green Spaces," Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, March 11, 2010 <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/city-parks-and-green-spaces>; Margaret McClure, "Auckland Places - Auckland Central Business District," Te Ara, The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, August 5, 2016, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/auckland-places/page-10>

Questions of method



Figure 40 Hurvin Anderson,
Constructed View, 2010,
Oil On Canvas

I realised my closely rendered observational approach would not work for paintings which were more imagination-based, so I looked at contemporary artists making landscape paintings for ideas about how to approach this. In some ways, the subject matter of forest and foliage is common enough to have become a kind of trope within contemporary painting, being addressed by artists such as Peter Doig, Hurvin Anderson, Lu Song and Alex Kanevsky, to name a few.

In its treatment by Peter Doig and Hurvin Anderson, the lush foliage suggested by loose brushwork and often thinned, dripping paint, creates a dream-like atmosphere. These are whole worlds, thick with humidity and birdsong and their own ecosystem, set in a hallucinatory but definite place; perhaps places dreamt or remembered. (Anderson has Caribbean heritage; Doig lives in Trinidad). In Anderson's work, there is also an intrusion of constructed artifices. These often take the form of screens or fences, or the patterns of a bead curtain, that separate the images of nature and forest from the viewer - pointing (as in the title of the above painting, Figure 40) to the constructed nature of a view, and of the painting practice. These structures also perhaps allude to humanity's separation from the natural world, or of the sense of being an outsider, a visitor looking in. I was curious about the formal role of these structures as grids or demarcations in a compositional sense, but also the emotional and narrative effect of them. In relation to my work, the contrast of a sharp, 'constructed' line alluding to human-made structures against the loose, soft brushwork of the natural elements felt very relevant.

Figure 41 *Setting II*, 2019,
Oil on Canvas, 445x445mm



Figure 42 *Setting*, 2019, Oil
on Canvas, 345x445mm

There's no more nature

While making these works, I had been reading Samuel Beckett's plays, including *Endgame* and *Happy*. Their influence filtered into something of their staging, while resonating with themes such as decay and the combination of nature and human structures, that I had been contemplating throughout this project. Both *Endgame* and *Happy* are about human actions against the bleakness of existence or the inevitability of non-existence.

In *End Game*, despite the surreal set up, there is the sense that the world, society as we know it, has ended. The set is almost empty, with traces of decaying grandeur, or at least of the remnants of a class system, and the world beyond it is barely grasped through small windows.

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.²¹

The audience is unable to see through the windows but Clov, who looks through them, reports back to us only a grey nothingness, a desolation, "Light black from pole to pole."²² It is in part this wasteland and sense of climactic tragedy that I felt resonated with my preoccupations and perhaps with my work.

Greg Gerrard provides an interesting interpretation of *Endgame* from the vantage point of ecocriticism. In this reading, the four characters exist in the world after some apocalyptic event such as our current climate crisis.²³ He argues that nature in this world is dreamt of and imagined partially and nostalgically but never fully seen or grasped. It thus fits with our current era of anxiety about climate change, "which eludes both sensory apprehension and generic representation."²⁴ The concept of it is too big and slow-moving to grasp at once, to 'see' completely.

21 Samuel Beckett, "Endgame," in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986). p97. "Endgame" was first published in 1958.

22 Ibid. p.107

23 Although Samuel Beckett, writing in 1958, cannot have anticipated or intended this explicit reading of his work, and may, as Gerrard points out, have disliked such a literal interpretation, it is a play which leaves itself open to the filter of any *Zeitgeist* a reader may bring to it. Further, one can see 'nature' in the play as literally destroyed, without it also losing its symbolic significance.

24 Greg Garrard, "Endgame: Beckett's Ecological Thought," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* Volume 23, number. 1 (2012).p.383



Figure 43 *Garden Nocturne I*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 600x500mm

The other sense in which ‘nature’ no longer exists in the contemporary world, is the extent of human involvement in it. Now that humanity has entered geologic time as creators of the Anthropocene, and has altered the climate itself – what is left of nature that is not also artificial? Nature has lost its necessary autonomy, its *Naturleben*²⁵ and ‘otherness’. We have created, literally and figuratively, our own enclosed garden – an atmospheric ceiling that stifles not only us but the natural world we had begun to think we were distinct from. As in the Winter Gardens, too, there are species of plants and animals that, thanks to human destruction of habitat would, ironically, not survive without human intervention.

Although I had no desire to translate *Endgame* literally into an illustration, themes from the play found their way into the paintings. It is referenced by a new theatricality in my work. In some paintings, there is almost literally a ‘stage’ and the painted foliage has the feel of a set, or of artificial props (Figure 41 and Figure 42). The play resonated with my thinking about the conflict between the human and the natural, and the theme of domination over nature. The thought of nature as something constructed is reflected in the mediating role of photo-collage in translating my ‘real’ experience into an image, and the sense of nostalgia and dilapidation in my colours and structures reflects to some degree the psychological, social and physical ruins of *Endgame*.

The human and the natural

Timothy Morton argues that Western philosophy has tended to think about nature as ‘other’, as a ‘thing’ that is useful in so far as it is useful to us humans, as a species. This way of thinking of nature as separate from humans, or as the human species as superior to the natural world is fundamentally part of what has brought us to this place, of human-created planet-wide destruction.²⁶ The history of European art, too, tracks a problematic relationship with the natural world. Barry Schwabsky points out that many landscape painters today are struggling with this problem of what the relationship between humanity and nature can be, “what it means to be a thinking and perceiving subject in a world that may

25 This concept is explored more fully on page 37

26 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)



Figure 44 *There's No More Nature!* 2019, Oil on Canvas, 600x650mm

be indifferent to our thinking and perceiving.”²⁷ He contrasts this conscious struggle with the Western tradition of landscape painting between the classical period and the emergence of 19th century Romantic painting. In that tradition, the landscape, (‘nature’) is seen from a human vantage point as a mere setting or stage for human action and perception. The non-human world is depicted as a background and, therefore, as so much material to exploit.

In a shift away from this tradition, the Romantics saw the earth and universe not in this orderly, utilitarian function but, as Joseph Leo Koerner puts it, “mutated on a scale incommensurate with human life and human understanding.”²⁸ In his analysis of the work of Casper David Friedrich, Koerner argues that this quintessential Romantic painter’s work is full of the “tragedy of landscape;” the often turned away figures representing the gulf between humanity and nature. Against the Enlightenment ideas of nature as a series of objects for human use and observation, the Romantics were interested in the idea of *Naturleben* (life of nature) – nature as an autonomous, evolving and organic object with a life of its own. There was, according to Koerner, a “dawning sense of the world’s otherness that Enlightenment thinking believed could be eliminated through reason and technology.”²⁹

In the structural and formal properties of my work, I have tried to overlay these conflicting and conflicted ideas of nature and the human, suggesting them as different moments within a single image, or symbolically as different approaches to painting. One way to explain this is to think of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s idea of smooth and striated spaces.

27 Barry Schwabsky, “Painting with the Flow of the World,” in *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2019).p.24

28 Joseph Leo Koerner, “Casper David Friedrich: Earth Life Art,” in *Reset Modernity!* ed. Bruno Latour (Karlsruhe, Germany ZKM, Center for Art and Media).p68

29 Ibid. p76



Figure 45 *Garden Nocturne II*, 2019, oil on canvas, 440x600mm

In the book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, smooth space is explained as space which is open-ended, free-flowing, irregular, as opposed to striated space which is systematic, orderly, and structured. For example the ocean was, at first glance, the epitome of 'smooth' space – vast, untameable, organic and wild, until it was striated by navigational charts. Deleuze and Guattari argue that these spaces are not mutually exclusive, but rather cross over, reinvent each other – there are passages and transformations between the two.³⁰

My work could be seen in this context as a kind of dialogue and conflict between the 'smooth space,' of the natural – those broadly painted blocks of colour indicating trees – and the 'striation' of the grids, the perspective lines, and of the ordering and containing lines of the hot house roof. It could also be a way of understanding the tensions in my work more generally (in a way that links to the earlier works) between the constraints and rules of representation and the elements of chance and chaos brought in by the physical properties of paint. And finally, this provides a way of thinking about our need for the chaos and independent "otherness" of nature, alongside a persistent compulsion to contain and control.



Figure 46 *First landscape*,
2019, Oil on Board,
395x595mm

30 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).



Figure 47 *An Ending*, 2019, Oil on Board, 490x460mm

Installation and Exhibition

In selecting works for my final exhibition, I felt the need to balance several factors. On the one hand, I wanted to give a sense of the different concerns and approaches I had explored throughout my thesis year, as a way of summarising or contextualising the project itself. I wanted to choose paintings that would highlight particular ideas or significant moments while keeping in mind that most of the viewers would have no prior knowledge of my practice. However, I was also conscious that I needed to present a 'wall' that made sense on its own, and that formed a coherent, visually unified whole. For these reasons, I chose paintings that would complement and open dialogue between each other.

In the space between finishing my exegesis and exhibiting the work, I had completed a large painting, *Set III* (Figure 48), that I felt both opened new territories for me, and referred back to earlier ideas. As in the work from Morven, there is a sense of an empty space, the pink wall paper and hanging lampshade are both very reminiscent of that physical space. However, in the construction of the work, there is the sense that it is not a 'real' room – the perspective is not right, and there is the feeling of it being a constructed illusion, the idea of a room, rather than a specific, observed place. I feel that this work has taken my ideas and pushed them forward to something more conceptual or abstract.

I also completed two new paintings, based on a purple, monochromatic palette that I had first explored in *Exterior* (figure 20). Together, these three works seemed to form a kind of 'set', occupying a similar tonal or atmospheric territory. For this reason, they were framed and hung together in order to set them up as a complete unit, and allow passages and comparisons between them (figure 49 and figure 50).



Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 1

In contrast, many of my other observational works still seemed like isolated and discrete fragments. In my studio practice, I had used shelves to put these paintings up temporarily – a set-up that allowed me to experiment with the placement of peices, creating movement and a sense of provisionality between them. I liked the openness that these shelves provided, and so installed them in the gallery space. The works that I chose for these linked either through colour or approach with one another, while still being isolated fragments in themselves. *There's no more nature* (figure 44) was chosen as a representative of my winter garden paintings both because I felt it was the most successful of these works, and because it fitted well into the exhibited body of work. In hanging the paintings, I wanted to create a kind of rhythm between the larger, more solid pieces and the clusters of fragment paintings, while allowing some breathing space as a whole.



Figure 48. *Set III*, 2019, Oil on board, 1000x800mm



Installation view, St Paul st gallery 1, 2019



Figure 49. *Crash*, 2019, Oil on board, 2019, 305x250mm

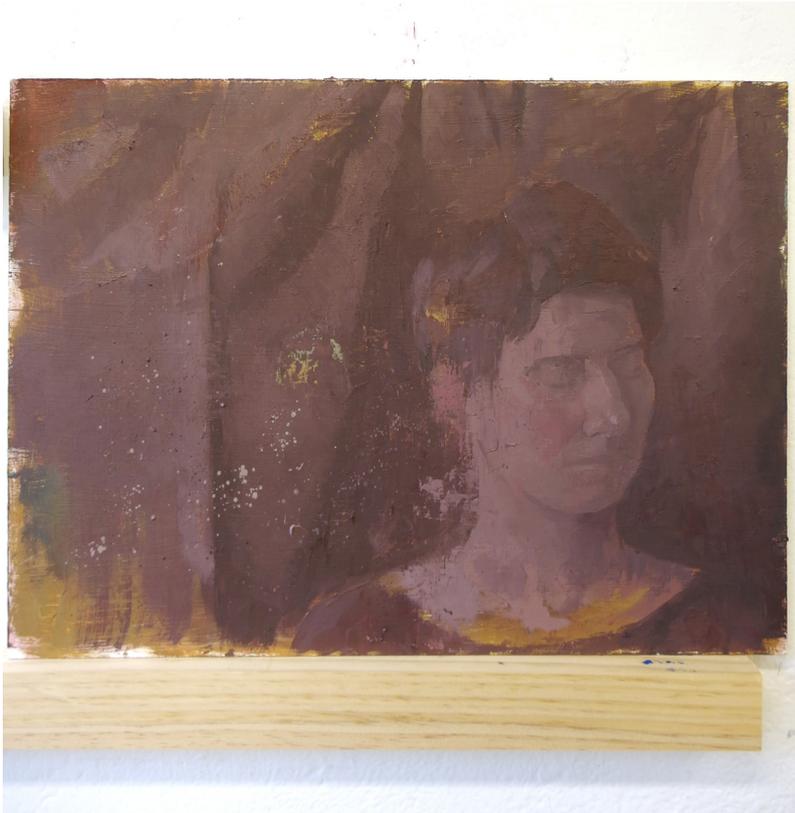


Figure 50, *Leab*, 2019, Oil on board, 300x400mm



Figure 51, *Cain and Abel*, 2019, Oil on board, 280x355mm



Installation view, St Paul st gallery, 2019

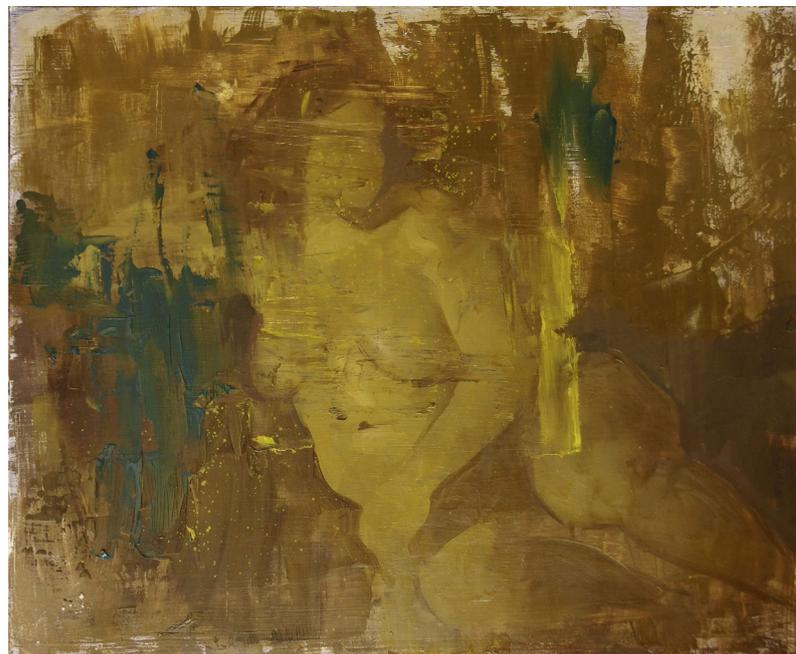


Figure 52. *Movement*, 2019,
Oil on board, 250x300mm

Conclusion

I began this project with the intention of exploring my memories and feelings around the personal loss of Morven. Morven is becoming a ruin both literally, through the slow process of erosion and geology that fragments it, and figuratively through the processes of my memory. A ruin implies a conflict between the intention of human-made structures and the forces of nature and time. It also suggests ideas of temporality - offering different moments and narratives within one architectural structure and giving hints of its past or gestures towards a future disintegration. As George Simmel says, a ruin gives the sense of a past that is “gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present.”³¹ It is this idea of an “aesthetically perceptible present,” - something tangible we can discern that also carries with it all of its past and potential futures - that continues into my fragment paintings and even, in a different sense, into my Winter Garden paintings.

There is an uncanny gap between our expectations of reality, of what we think an object looks like, and its represented image. This is reflected in the physical problems of perception itself: the way our minds piece together information from fractured images to form a meaningful whole, when this whole is in fact a kind of illusion. My research was a constant play between the rules and structures of representation, and the moments where that act of illusion became apparent. My observational works from Section Two are concerned with fragmentation in the act of seeing, and knowing through seeing. Although they begin deeply rooted in the observed world, as images these paintings form and reform and are manoeuvrable in what they represent, or what the viewer interprets of them.

³¹ Simmel, p.385

My paintings from the Auckland Winter Gardens were more explicit in the world that they present to the viewer, than those smaller observational works. In many ways, they broadened the scope of my research focus. Ideas of loss, memory and uncertainty linger within these paintings, but are no longer tied to a personal loss or to places of personal significance. Themes of nature and ruins moved beyond the specific to suggest wider social concerns, including the processes of grief and alienation that exist within climate change.

Reflecting on this project, I feel that the questions of perceptual uncertainty raised by the small observational works add a nuance to the larger Winter Gardens paintings that they don't necessarily carry on their own. For this reason, the two bodies of work are installed alongside one another. The parallel lines of thought and approach (of observation and invention) can contrast with and inform one another, opening room for dialogue between them.

Throughout the project there has been an overarching sense of the unknowability of the material world. This relates to the "tragedy of landscape" within Casper David Friedrich – the gap between the human and the natural world. It relates to Schlegel's fragmentation in our understanding of reality. It is also in Edwin Dickinson's paintings that are questions and not answers, and in what I think of as the unreliability of our perception. In the end representational painting is a kind of trick, made of rules but an illusion, just as our certainties about what we remember or of our perception of the world can be a kind of trick our mind plays on us. And yet, despite this, there is something deeply grounding for me in the meditative act of observational painting. The important slowness of really looking at, really trying to see the world of physical things, is what keeps me at home within it.

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