

Books

Renewing Acquaintances

All Gates Open: Photographs by Laurence Aberhart

Fisher Gallery & Laurence Aberhart, Pakuranga 1998

DAVID LANGMAN

In the late 1980s I worked in a large regional gallery in Australia. Amongst the collection were the works of a handful of Living Masters of Japanese ceramics. Looking at *All Gates Open: Photographs by Laurence Aberhart* reawakens the pleasurable sensation of looking at works by a master confident of his technique and what he wishes to convey in his chosen medium.

This book has been pressed into service as a catalogue for the large exhibition of 54 photographs at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga. The exhibition is co-sponsored by the Sarjeant Gallery and will be shown in Wanganui from October to December this year and the National Library from April to July 1999. In all other respects however the publication is that most unusual of things: a book devoted solely to photographs. Eschewing an essay, director's foreword and ditching an expensive hardback cover the publishers have produced a strong product. At \$34.95 this large paperback production (305 x 345 mm) runs to 51 pages and has 23 plates.

Relying solely on the power of original platinum or black-and-white photographs, images have been printed full size in duotone. The plates are one to a page and so as not to distract from their visual impact captions are on the facing page. This is a book that in its quality pays homage to nineteenth-century British fine art publications or those that we associate with twentieth-century American fine art photography publishers like Aperture.

An artistic and technical tour de force, this book takes its overall

cue from portfolios of Aberhart's photographs *View* (1980) and *Release* (1990) also designed by Brian Moss and containing ten and eight images respectively. A third portfolio *In the Southern States of America* (1990), following in the footsteps of Walker Evans, has been acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The satin Ambassador paper is beautiful to the touch. Essential elements of simplicity, precision and quality prevail. A plain dust cover suffices.

Of all the photographers working in New Zealand now Aberhart needs no introduction. Jacket notes succinctly chart his career and beguiling technique in obtaining these photographs. The motivation behind the publication is explained as is the nature of the photographic print so often overlooked. Lastly three paragraphs most importantly describe this book's considerable achievement; the transfer of the photographic print onto the printed page.

Almost 25 years of exhibiting has brought us face to face with dozens of Aberhart images which continue to resonate. Aberhart has on occasion wished he started 20

years earlier, which would have placed him somewhere alongside Les Cleveland. Aberhart has extended Cleveland's program and can be confident that his own formidable oeuvre will stand up well to future scrutiny.

Many works are not reproduced here, though they appear elsewhere, albeit too infrequently. So an initially quirky selection of images (23 of the 54 exhibited) is really an update. It is eight years since *Nature Morte*, the largest exhibition of any single New Zealand photographer to date, was shown in Shed 11 by the National Art Gallery. In contrast to that accomplished though low budget catalogue this book is somewhat luxurious and reflects the support by Creative New Zealand. Careful selection of images and choice of materials have contributed to a landmark publication.

A travel grant last year enabled Aberhart to travel to Australia and return with much booty. *Dimboola, Victoria, 13 August 1997* is an extraordinary image of a desolate car dealer's yard. Anyone who has had a passing acquaintance or even something

of a love/hate relationship with a car or ute of Australian origin will identify with the depiction of the mass desertion of the trusty Holden for the more dependable though less characterful conveyance of Oriental origin.

Are those truly Ionic (Iron/ironic) columns holding that tent-stripped verandah aloft beneath a roughcast facade in (*domestic architecture*) *Broken Hill, New South Wales, 10 August 1997*? I guess it is not surprising when you consider this is the town that made BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary Company) and Lord Leverhulme of Unilever wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. It makes you want to applaud the honesty of the humble rusted iron roof.

Aberhart gives us the sheer audacity of *Boroondara Cemetery, Melbourne, Victoria, 16 August 1997*. Looking more like Karnak or Thebes this dynastic piece of aggrandisement is more befitting a pharaoh than the prince of commerce who is commemorated. I have probably seen the actuality of *Last light, (ships at sea off Wollongong, New South Wales, 23 August 1997* too many times while living in coastal NSW to appreciate its reduction to photographic size but, like *Mediterranean, Spain, 19 November 1994* (in the exhibition) the image is quietly captivating.

There are numerous New Zealand, European and American images which ground Aberhart's practice in our own as well as

international photography. Two indigenous scenes are *Rotorua, 18 March 1993*, one of the most puzzling, while [*'517'*], *monumental grouping, Bolton Street Cemetery, Wellington, 13 January 1990* is an exterior foil to the Masonic lodge interiors that were illustrated in the 1985 *Views/Exposures*.

The book closes with *Interior, Bishop's Palace, St. David's, Pembrokeshire, Dyfed, Wales, 1 November 1994*, one of Aberhart's most haunting photographs and a tribute to the great nineteenth-century photographers. The sinuous mystery of this subterranean chamber is a delight—a little darker in the plate than the original but perhaps tonally of a piece. It recalls Roger Fenton (1819-69) whose *Ely Cathedral from the South* (late 1850s) is a model for the delicacy of Aberhart's platinum print. Readers will perhaps recall seeing Aberhart's photograph at his 1995 exhibition *Mission Héliographique (dust & decay)* at McLeavey Gallery, Wellington or Aberhart North (Auckland). Like Edouard Baldus, Gustave Le Gray, Henri Le Secq and others in France, Aberhart in New Zealand was sent on 'missions héliographiques' to photograph Northland's interiors and churches.

Nothing of course can replace the experience of seeing these works in the flesh and I encourage you to take advantage of this rare opportunity to see so many at a

time. The book will be a valuable and valued souvenir of one's visit. Familiar will be photographs from Aberhart's first major show *Enamels & Cameos [Émaux et camées]: Photographs 1976-1996*, at Sue Crockford Gallery earlier this year. The title is taken from Théophile Gautier's final collection of poems printed in 1852—a clue, surely, to Aberhart's views on art and photography; that 'painstaking craftsmanship and not Romantic inspiration creates art'. Aberhart's photographs are finely honed life-like miniatures.

Aberhart is steeped in the international photographic history of the world's greatest practitioners and his work gains immeasurably by being able to stand alongside the achievements of his predecessors. Different images will resonate with different readers. For those interested in how good a book of photographs can look or for anyone who is a student of New Zealand culture within an international context, this book is indispensable as one to return to again and again with pleasure. I look forward to further updates.

The Observing Eye

Garth Tapper: New Zealand Painter

by William Tapper & Elva Bett Tapper Art

PETER SMITH

Garth Tapper has been painting since the early 1950s and his work has been exhibited from those early years until the present day. He is a colleague and friend of many artists and writers in New Zealand, and the respected tutor of many students who have since established substantial reputations. Hamish Keith said of his portraiture in 1965, 'It is remarkable that greater use is not made of his talents. Most New Zealand official portraits are commissioned from English "hacks".'

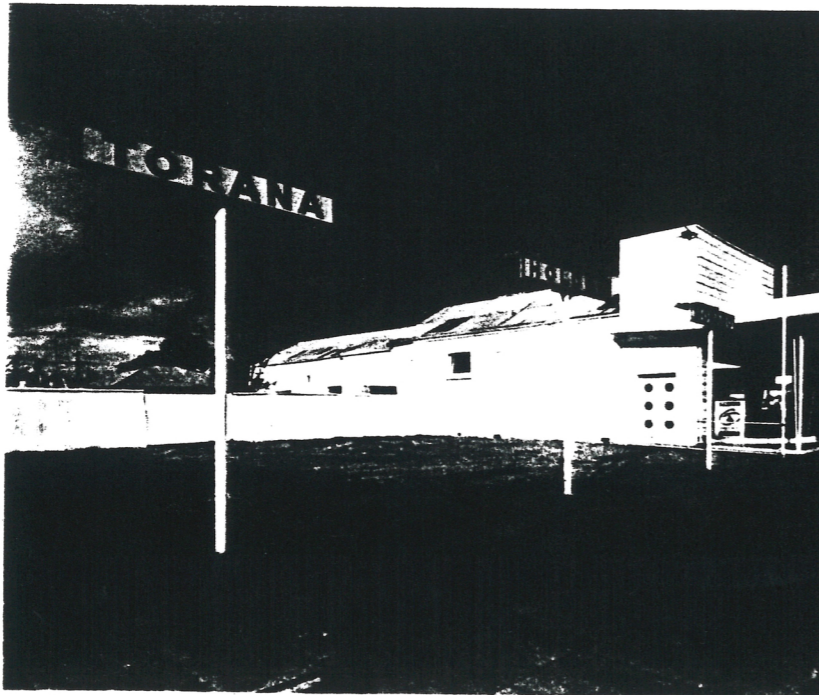
Later in 1975 Keith was to add, 'He is perhaps the only genuine social observer we have in New Zealand and should be cherished for that'.

Nevertheless, in terms of critical acclaim, Garth Tapper has received less attention than many of his contemporaries. As Keith puts it, in the same 1975 review, 'Tapper may well be outside the mainstream of New Zealand painting . . . Why is this?'

One would expect that the recent publication of *Garth Tapper: New Zealand Painter* by his son William Tapper, assisted in authorship by Elva Bett, even if it did not necessarily succeed in placing Tapper 'in the mainstream' would address this question. It does not do so. After

reading the book I was not aware of any significant analysis of Tapper's place within New Zealand painting. What was evident was that here was an affectionate testimony of a son for his father as family man, man at large and artist.

It is an attractive publication, both for its uncomplicated text which faithfully chronicles Tapper's life and career, and for its substantial collection of colour reproductions of his paintings which provides a very valuable overview of his development and his stylistic directions. A part of the value of the range of paintings and drawings included, which appear faithfully enough reproduced, is that it is an honest collection. It reveals



(left)
LAURENCE ABERHART
Dimboola, Victoria, 13 August 1997
Black-and-white photograph