

EYE CULTURE

Traces of time

BY JUSTIN PATON

The past is a foreign country, and Laurence Aberhart is one of many local artists who have been taking trips there lately. Since the late 70s, in fact, Aberhart has been the essential visual poet of New Zealand's past, both own and, unseen, using his old-fashioned 8x10 view camera to tap into photography's deepest secrets, while flushing ghost after ghost from the historical attic.

Part history lesson, part travelogue, part anatomy of melancholy, *All Gates Open* (organized and toured by the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga) is a 53-photo survey of Aberhart's past decade, and it takes his art to new places and a new plane. The transcending view of Aberhart's past, the unfeignably gravity of his subjects, the nearly surgical precision of his trionics, and the sense of lonely, unswerving conscience that his images emit—every click

of the shutter an ethical act—provide a touchstone show for anyone who cares for photography's local history or has, for that matter, eyes in their head.

That no major history exists is, of course, part of the personal problem with Photography. Aberhart, 49, is one of several major photographers stranded in a kind of institutional limbo. There was a lot of feeling about the medium's underlying status in the past discussion that opened this show, yet another of those "debates" in which art people get together to wonder why the world doesn't love them more (a little will respect, please), but *All Gates Open's* further effect—no demands any special pleading.

You would swear the show still glows when the lights go out at night. The richest news of *All Gates Open* is Aberhart's revival of hyper-responsive platinum printing, a process that grants form the burnished subjects the haunting power of a scene, and luminous, almost ballustratory clarity—like a dream of how the present will look at the past. You must see the original works, which feel less like windows onto a known world than

above: Dimboola, Victoria, 13 August, 1907; Right: "Interior (177)", Fort Takapuna, Auckland, 28 April, 1904.

reports from some slower, emptier, yearningly twilit place—a phantom, parallel universe that only Aberhart can access. If you complain that the world doesn't look like that, then you've missed his point, which is to struggle poetry and sorrow into the matter-of-fact language of 19th-century level photography.

Have tripod, will travel. Aberhart's old-time Kovee view camera is his version of a time machine, whisking us back to photography's split-tinted origins, when the new medium seemed to offer no end of revelations about how the real world felt and looked. He is the modern-day answer to last century's great globe-trotting photographers—Francis Fox Talbot's *Troiscent*, Maxime Du Camp—like a new, Ringo-style, who's begged their tanky equipment from Europe to Egypt, Australia and other faraway lands to capture souvenirs and specimens of foreignness: trophies in ink and silver.

Those journeys get repeated, but with a

potent twist. Aberhart plays out the great colonial photo-safari in reverse, as a melancholy return rather than an imperial quest—like an archaeologist pursuing stray fossils, or a detective tracing evidence of a crime. He lays out that evidence as 8x10 contact prints that brim with eye-boggling detail. Yet, in photo after photo, the sense that we're getting some proof or hard truth about the past never gives way to a nagging uncertainty.

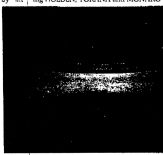
Some scenes are shadowed by an ominous black halo or corona, and others worry and blur at the fish-eyed edge of his lens—History fleeing the Sun.

Miles Kunder's definition of history—"the struggle of memory against forgetting"—fits Aberhart's enterprise perfectly. He is obsessed with the rumbling myths and legends of imperial Europe, and in Verdun, Mississippi, Petrona, Grenada, Broken Hill and elsewhere he finds the echoes and mongrel fragments of a distant classical culture. All those monuments, graves, castles and buildings seem grand, even grandiose, at first, but look closer

and they betray signs of slow-motion decay—hair-line cracks in the official facade. These are mug-shots, really, laying bare architecture's age-old pretensions in pompanosa. Elsewhere, his camera bunts abandoned spaces of ritual or belief—churches, factories, memorials, cemetery monuments, the weathered marble of exteriors—casting you as a lone stand-in for the crowds that once thronged those spaces.

At the dark heart of Aberhart's achievement is the insight, usually attributed to the French writer Roland Barthes, that all photos are bitter traces of a lost past—

memories of death. No surprise, then, that Aberhart's photos are known to be dauntingly bleak, full of those old Puritan extremes of light and dark (you half expect Sam "Cinema of Unseen" Neill to spill into view, wearing solemn about the brooding Kiwi psyche). But what that diagnosis misses is the streak of sardonic comedy that runs through this show, above all in his image of an abandoned Dimboola car-yard, where signs advertising HOLDEN, TORANA and MONARO



rise up like bargain-basement crucifixes: Golgotha in the outback. In the same vein of gallows humour are photos of cemeteries in (read the titles) Happy Valley, Hong Kong and Cut Off, Louisiana.

Yet the real feat of the last half-decade are photographs of uncanny tenderness, marvels of fine-gained detail in which Aberhart seems to weigh and sift light by the milligram. Like all major artists, Aberhart trusts a lot to silence, and the sense of still time in those images—the way they slow you down and shut up your gaze, much as he must have paused while

choosing the site and completing the long exposure—feels like an act of conscientious objection to a quick-fix, soundbite-happy culture. He records the flicker of sun over solemn funeral architecture, or the promise of light in a time-worn corridor and, increasingly, he ushers you into spaces of passage—bankers, tunnels, fogged-out horizons, all those nowhere zones that History has passed through and left vacant.

What emerges is a paradox: an album of absences, an open-ended chronicle of the historical ghosts that inhabit Western culture. One riveting photo places you inside Fort Takapuna, an echoing circular bunker lit from such a side by a bloom of cold light. This is, first of all, an image of buried or hidden war-time histories (What's a bunker? A monument gone underground), as well as a spooky view of everyone's final destination. But what makes the photograph profound rather than merely grim is the subliminal echo of the original "dark room" of photography—the camera obscura, Plato's cave.

Aberhart's primal scene.

At a moment when photography as we know it is being out-gunned on all sides by fresh new digital technologies, perhaps Aberhart is offering this tool-like space as a secret memorial to the fading history of his own medium. Well, *All Gates Open* proves one thing beyond a doubt. When the local version of that history gets written, Aberhart's sober, ghostly travelogue—these passages in platinum—will be among its defining records. ■

All GATES OPEN, Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, until September 13.

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