

Huw Davies Gallery
8th April – 8th May 2021

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Super Sport Sunday

Thomas Lord

Working against popular representations of Ōtepoti/ Dunedin that construct the New Zealand locality as a series of dramatic vistas or settings for adventure activities, *Super Sport Sunday* presents an insider's view of the area's secret places.

Lord's meditative large format images, produced as darkroom prints, reference nineteenth century traditions of landscape photography. But they attend to the details rather than the views of these hidden spaces. Lord's 'long looks' at these sites invite contemplation of their Anthropocene-era complexities and their imagining as stages for human encounters.



Thomas Lord, *Whēki at Bull Creek*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin print

What Importance Tramples Underfoot

Ōtepoti/Dunedin lies at the end of Otago Harbour on the southeast coast of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of New Zealand. It presents itself and the wider area of Dunedin City as a rugged and spectacular landscape of beaches, wildlife, and volcanic topography. Thomas Lord's ongoing series of photographs, '*Super Sport Sunday*', offers a rather different view of Dunedin without surfers, sealions, or dramatic vistas.

Super Sport Sunday takes us around the Dunedin area, but it does not show us its public face. Instead, Lord's work is almost the antithesis: close up, monochrome, highly detailed examinations of small areas, features and textures replace wide views, highly saturated and generic images. This is not the landscape-as-adventure-playground of typical images, but something slower and smaller. It is both more modest and more ethical. It is also an insider's view of the hidden, the secret and the overlooked.

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These are not hastily grabbed snapshots, but meditations that can only be achieved over time, hewn out of experience, slowness, and old technology. Consequently, Lord's photographs give us a sense of the many qualities and experiences of the landscapes around Ōtepoti/Dunedin. The camera stares at liminal spaces as if entranced, gazing at and isolating a few details: a freshly mown lawn and strange concrete structure fringed by indigenous forest; windswept Kanuka trees with their feathery bark; the sun on a wire fence against a backdrop of plantation pines with haystack-like accumulations of needles. All are treated equally, and together they help to reveal something of the place: It is a fractured environment of in-between spaces, edges, and remnants. It is also, presumably, a landscape of various leisurely pursuits, but these are only implied, never revealed or dramatized.

Lord's photographs present us with the intricate details of Anthropocene-era ecosystems: Manufactured complexes of indigenous plants and introduced weeds tentatively supported by the local geology and littered with the utilitarian paraphernalia of settlement and division. However, they do so through a nineteenth century lens. As if Dunedin today were photographed by one of its first European settlers. These pictures strongly resemble images from the early days of photography when each negative required preparation, labour, and time. When photographing was a cumbersome, ponderous, and slow process, and each plate that was successfully produced had the capacity for wonder because of its uncanny ability to reveal "a multitude of minute details ... which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature".ⁱ

Such qualities are, of course, one of the main reasons why artists today sometimes return to archaic forms of photography. The cumbersome large format camera, granular detail of its negatives, and the subsequent hand-made prints, slow both photographer and viewer. Another reason to pursue such a methodology is that the process, the slowness, and the prints themselves imbue the images with an aura absent from those made with current technology, lending them the curiosity of ancient artifacts that 'cutting edge' images cannot achieve.

Photographers have known this for a long time, of course, and many have worked in deliberately anachronistic ways. Perhaps the most famous example can be found in the striking contrast between Eugene Atget's images of Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century and those of his younger neighbour Man Ray. Atget's images seem to be from a different era to Man Ray's, and their slowness, stillness and attention to detail prompted the suggestion that he worked as if each location were a crime scene.ⁱⁱ This implies that the viewer has some detective work to do and that the images' value is evidentiary. Here, some clues are provided by the titles: place and plant names, in an appropriate jumble of English and Te Reo Māori that tell us a lot about the cultures and histories of the area. Nonetheless, the pictures remain ambiguous: There is something unnerving about the long look, the empty stage, the wealth of detail that reveals little. It is this paradox -the absence of information despite enormous amounts of detail- that captivates us and reminds us that it is not evidentiary value, but the images' disclosive nature that is significant here.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lord's photographs of small areas around Dunedin disclose aspects of the landscape, but they are not landscapes. Their value resides both in their details, and accumulates across the series. Together they show the place in a way that a wide view of the landscape could not. Individually, they are sufficiently refined and restrained that we might better think of them as 'still life' pictures; excluding the human form, narrative interest and events in favour of an "exploration of what 'importance' tramples underfoot".^{iv}

Mark Bolland

Mark Bolland is Principal Lecturer in Photography at Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic. He divides his time between, teaching, writing and art practice. He has written essays for books and exhibition catalogues in New Zealand, Australia, and the UK as well as many articles for journals and magazines. He has exhibited photographs in both the UK and New Zealand.

End Notes

i. William Henry Fox Talbot accompanying text for Plate X, The Haystack from *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844

ii. See: David Company, 'Eugene Atget's Intelligent Documents', Atget: Photographe de Paris (1930) Errata Editions, 2009. Also: <https://davidcompany.com/atget-photographe-de-paris/>

iii. See: Kaja Silverman *The Miracle of Analogy*, Stanford University Press, 2015, pp7-10

iv. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Reaktion Books, 1990, p61

Thomas Lord | About

Thomas Lord is a technical teacher in the photography studio at the Dunedin School of Art. As well as photography, Thomas has held exhibitions in painting where nostalgia, ecology and the concept of home forms a common thread between the two media. Recent projects include a group show on the Isle of Lewis as part of the Hebridean Dark Skies Festival as well as his 2020 series *Summer Circuit* which focussed on the declining racing industry in rural Southland.

List of Works

16. Thomas Lord, *Wheki at Bull Creek*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 52.7 x 44.2 cm
17. Thomas Lord, *Leith Valley Clearing*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
18. Thomas Lord, *Pūrākaunui pine forest*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
19. Thomas Lord, *Whare werawera cave entrance*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
20. Thomas Lord, *Mowed lawn at Evansdale Glen*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
21. Thomas Lord, *T Intersection on Pikiwhara*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 130 x 84 cm
22. Thomas Lord, *Tōtara roots overlooking the Pacific Ocean*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
23. Thomas Lord, *Kanuka forest remnant near Allans Beach*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm
24. Thomas Lord, *Foxglove on a Surfer's track*, 2020, hand printed silver gelatin photograph, 82 x 66.1 cm

Sales

Exhibited hand printed darkroom prints are not for sale. However, inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle paper at 52.7 x 44.2 cm are available in an edition of 3 + AP for \$650 unframed for each work.

More Online

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Super Sport Sunday*.