

From the collection



Lisa Crowley, Untitled #6 from City of Earth series, 2008.

Lisa Crowley practises a peculiar type of landscape photography, one concerned with place, but place laden with human experience. She chooses politically charged sites with significant histories, yet her images offer little or no discernible evidence of locality, past events or current tension. Instead she invokes the conventions of romantic landscape painting and 19th century scenic photography, directly raising the question of the medium's real ability to document a place and expose its history. A picture of a heap of felled trees can be simply a picture of piled natural debris; its significance can only be materialised by human experience, she suggests.

This work is one of three from her series *City of Earth* 2008 which showed the effects of a commercial *Pinus radiata* harvest near Matauri Bay. With an average of 28 years from planting to cropping, this fast-growing softwood conifer is proof that money can grow on trees. The question of who profits, however, is one the artist is tacitly posing. Historically, the dominant exotic forestry owner in New Zealand was the government, but since the restructuring of the economy in 1984, the majority of the 1.7 million hectares of the New Zealand forest estate is now privately owned. While many find the economics behind the monoculture of the plantations themselves ugly enough, Crowley is compelled by what is left behind when they are

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felled, saying "I am interested in these ruined vistas, the way that these sites have been just left as ruins, the waste, the re-growth which turns into something generative."

A fascination with ruins delivers us to Romanticism. Romantic European and American landscape painters were concerned with representing the sublime in nature, an abstract notion perhaps most famously articulated by 18th-century political theorist Edmund Burke, who believed that a life of feeling and spirit depended on recognising harmony within the larger order of the universe. A state of mind conjured by natural beauty, the sublime transcends time and place. Romantic pictures were designed to produce a mixture of awe, respect and moral enlightenment, and to emphasise the power of God as reflected in His greatest creation, the natural world. The paintings are dramatically vast in scope, sometimes including a person dwarfed by the vast space, and are rich in tonalities and colours.

Formally similar to these Romantic works, Lisa Crowley's *City of Earth* landscapes are monochrome photographs, enriched by colour printing to become subtly beautiful dioramas of ruined grandeur. Notions of the sublime are qualified, however, or brought into tension with the recollection of the profit motive which results in the devastation of a modified landscape. Ultimately, the photographer is addressing the way in which the exploitation of natural resources in New Zealand is implicated in the formation of national identity.

Linda Tyler