

# From the collection

Art

Although Wayne Barrar's ongoing exploration of the landscape is primarily executed through the lens of a camera, it is from the vantage point of both science and art that he pursues his ideas.

Barrar first graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the University of Canterbury in 1979 before later completing a Postgraduate Diploma of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts in 1996 and an MDes (2005) from Massey University.

He is currently associate professor and director of photography at Massey University's School of Fine Arts in Wellington but is also a frequent traveller, regularly undertaking residencies in such places as Iceland, Utah and New York State.

His works include remote scenic vistas, vast industrial sites, biosecurity case studies and subterranean cities, all questioning the relationship between nature and culture, people and the environment. What is unsettling about these images is the way enormous alien structures become an accepted, almost integrated feature of the landscape, making fences and dams seem as picturesque as cliffs and cathedrals. His ambivalent portrayal neither condemns nor celebrates industry.

In an *Art New Zealand* essay, Elam senior lecturer Gavin Hipkins has described Barrar's work as occupying an uneasy position in relation to the romantic landscape tradition that is so central to New Zealand art history. Instead, Barrar adopts the romantic legacy of entropy and abandoned ruins, of former glories and forgotten conquests.

Describing these humanised landscapes, Barrar states in his 2001 book *Shifting Nature*: "Land is a resource that must 'perform'. It is expected to produce food, electricity and timber,



Wayne Barrar (b.1957) *Across Spillway on Ohau Canal, 2002 (printed 2003)*  
Silver gelatin print 4/12, 662x835mm, The University of Auckland Art Collection.

to encourage tourism and to provide a venue for our leisure activities, while at the same time remaining stable and reliable in business terms."

Energy production is a recurring theme in Barrar's work so it is no surprise that his work features in the exhibition *AC/DC: The Art of Power*, at the Gus Fisher Gallery to 3 October. These works are from his 2006 show *The Machine Room*, which primarily documented underground power stations in New Zealand. The scenes depicted are from the coal mine that supplies the adjacent Huntly thermal station.

This links both his previous explorations of underground sites, including American and Australian underground dwellings, and his earlier

works which contrasted industrial and natural landscapes, including power stations in Iceland and Think Big hydro projects in the South Island. In 2003 The University of Auckland Art Collection purchased a suite of five works that fall into the latter category, contrasting New Zealand's much-promoted pristine South Island scenery with evidence of human occupation and adaptation. Whether it is the built walkways that allow us to admire Fiordland waterfalls or the canals and spillways that feed our hydro power systems, Barrar challenges us to reconsider the complexities of how we occupy our environment.

Andrew Clifford