

## Two Rooms

Michael Shepherd

*Suppose the future fails*

30 November – 22 December 2018

*Suppose, instead of failing, it never comes,  
This future, although the elephants pass and the blare,  
Prolonged, repeated and once more prolonged,  
Goes off a little on the side and stops.  
Yet to think of the future is a genius,  
To think of the future is a thing and he  
That thinks of it is inscribed on walls and stands  
Complete in bronze on enormous pedestals.*

– Wallace Stevens, excerpt from Stanza IV, *Owl's Clover*, 1937<sup>1</sup>

Michael Shepherd investigates what academic Camille Paglia terms "the claytonic" – the earth beneath one's feet. Fittingly, his new paintings feature ironsand, native and introduced grass seed, granulated carbon, blessed thistle tea, muesli, dried alphabet soup and even dead bees embedded in their acrylic and polymer surfaces.<sup>2</sup> Shepherd is also an enthusiastic amateur botanist and spatial historian, informing his selection of these subjects and materials, and foregrounding the finer details of our native ecologies.<sup>3</sup>

This exhibition traverses the terrain of New Zealand history, masculinity and ecological imperialism.<sup>4</sup> Shepherd's interest in vital yet often overlooked ecologies manifests, for example, in his painted representations of threatened insect and plant species, depicted larger than life. These include an oversized grasshopper (invented by the artist from a combination of three different species) in *Maybe the future needs an orator*, and enlarged specimens of the endangered plant *Myosotis Colensoi* (named after the colonial botanist William Colenso) in *Suppose the future fails*, complete with Department of Conservation identification tags.

Some of the paintings also feature standing engines, machines which took on imaginary, anthropomorphised roles in Shepherd's childhood. Here they are placed back in the environments in which he first encountered them – excavated from a paddock, found under a lean-to, or under cloth inside a garage. As a child, Shepherd describes, "hallucinating" at the

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Owl's Clover," 1937, excerpt from Stanza IV, in *Stevens' Collected Poetry and Prose*, Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson eds. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1997).

<sup>2</sup> The bees used in the painting died of the diseases Varroa and Foulbrood, which the artist links to their fragile ecological situation.

<sup>3</sup> This consideration even extends to the picture frames, designed by the artist and constructed in American oak by master craftsman Theo Findlayson.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'ecological imperialism' was first coined by Alfred Crosby. His theory was that European settlers were successful in colonisation because of their introduction of animals, plants and diseases – accidentally or deliberately – which lead to major shifts in the ecology of colonised areas. This also contributed to population collapse in endemic peoples.

sight and sound of these engines.<sup>5</sup> The artist was entranced by the way the carburettor sucks in air and 'spirit' (a former term for petroleum) and combines them to create energy, perceiving this as a kind of magic. Deeply fascinated by the machines' cavities – their entrances and exits – he peered inside while his fingers traced their alien forms, a source of joy and terror. He read these cavities as portals to other worlds, their clicking and whirring, hiss and rumble, cementing his youthful, mythic interpretation of the engine as a "spirit repository."<sup>6</sup>

Shepherd's childhood vision of engines possessed by animating spirits found affinities with works from art history he later encountered. These include Francis Picabia's *L'enfant Carbueteur* (1919), and Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23), where machines are metaphorically represented as human bodies.<sup>7</sup>

Shepherd's paintings reflect on generations of men who coveted these engines and whose identities were indelibly linked to them. Growing up in the 1950's, the artist's father, a returned service WWII veteran, taught him how to run and repair engines. Fine tuning these machines was a ritualistic expression of masculinity, a kind of secret brotherhood. The workshop was a personal sanctum in which creativity could flow when freed from the demands of work and family life – much like an artist's studio. Whether four or six cylinder, two stroke or four, at the time they were an icon of manhood – a national fever. Understanding and operating these engines was also key to male indoctrination: induction, compression, ignition, exhaust.

The artist sees these engines as a kind *memento mori* – telling reminders of our own mortality. Indeed, in his experience, they were often kept running to keep the memories of their former owners alive. Generations of men would tinker tirelessly so they could continue listening to the sounds their grandparents once heard. Within a contemporary framework, these archaic, defunct engines also speak to the decline of the oil economy. They are persistent remnants of historic environmental degradation, yet whose ongoing impacts continue to compound and are reaching a critical turning point when manifested in climate change. Hence, while once inspiring awe and the utopian promises of machine-assisted futures brought about by technological progress, they now also embody tragedy and death.

Linked to these ambivalences, the exhibition title *Suppose the future fails* is a line borrowed from *Owl's Clover*, a Wallace Stevens poem which offers a critique of modernism and human hubris. For the artist, Stevens' poem speaks to the absurdity of championing spectacle over content, and sensation over perception; to the propensity for humankind to overreach, their endeavours pushing natural limits to the point of crisis and deflation.<sup>8</sup> Though Stevens wrote *Owl's Clover* in the lead up to WWII, the poem also rings true with our contemporary environmental, economic and political situations, a dull echo of those dark times.

And yet in spite of these pressing reminders of our mortality and the threatened ecosystems upon which we are precariously poised, the paintings remain forward looking and optimistic. For Shepherd, the past and future are strange constructs, while the passage of evolution never ceases.<sup>9</sup> Always 'down to earth', he notes that the future – and indeed the meaning of his work – "is always in the act of becoming."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Shepherd, interview by Emil McAvoy, November 5, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Shepherd has also studied the Italian Futurists' depictions of the automobile.

<sup>8</sup> Shepherd, interview.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Here the artist also reflects on and repurposes the philosophical thought of Gilles Deleuze.

## Biography

Michael Shepherd is a senior New Zealand artist with an extensive exhibition history. He was awarded a M.N.Z.M (Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit) for services to the Arts in 2008. A retrospective of his work will be mounted at the Waikato Museum of Art and History from February until June 2019.

Michael Shepherd was born in Hamilton in 1950 and graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours) from the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 1979. In 1982 he was awarded a Queen Elizabeth Arts Council travel grant, which he used to study 17th century Dutch painting materials and techniques in Amsterdam.

Shepherd has exhibited throughout New Zealand since his first solo show at the Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, in 1980. These exhibitions include: *Te Ahi Ka Roa, Te Ahi Katoro, Taranaki War 1860–2010* (2010), *Our legacy — Our challenge* (group exhibition), Puke Ariki, New Plymouth (2010); SCORE (Upon the electronic works of Douglas Lilburn) (2008); *Land Wars Part 2: Build* (group show), Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts (2008); *Traveller to an Antique Land - An aspect of war in North Africa*, Army Museum, Waikato (2007/2008); *Michael Shepherd The Early Years (1975-1991)*, shown at the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, Whangarei Art Museum and the Rotorua Museum of Art and History (2005/2006); *Main Trunk Lines*, National Library, Wellington (2005); *Small World Big Town – Contemporary Art from Te Papa*, City Gallery, Wellington (2005); *Bright Paradise - Exotic history and sublime artifice*, 1st Auckland Triennial, Auckland City Art Gallery (2001); *Still Lies - Paintings by Michael Shepherd*, Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch (2000), *Parihaka* (group exhibition), City Gallery, Wellington (1998), and *Dream Collectors - 100 years of New Zealand Art*, the opening exhibition at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington (1995).

In 2005, Giltedge published *Excavating the Past - Michael Shepherd artist* written by Claudia Bell.

Shepherd has been collected by private collections both within New Zealand and internationally, and by the major national public collections, including Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery and the Christchurch Art Gallery.