

*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^[1]

Michael Shepherd is compelled by 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.^[2] Shepherd is also an enthusiastic amateur botanist and spatial historian, and this informs his selection of the subjects and materials of his paintings, and his foregrounding of the finer details of our native ecologies.^[3]

This exhibition traverses the terrain of New Zealand history, masculinity and ecological imperialism.^[4] Shepherd’s interest in vital, yet often overlooked, ecologies manifests in his painted representations of insect and plant species that are threatened with extinction, depicting their forms as larger than life.

Some of the paintings also feature standing engines, machines that 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 sight and sound of these engines.^[5] He was entranced by the way the carburetor sucks in air and ‘spirit’ (an early 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, hissing and rumbling, cementing his youthful, mythic interpretation of the engine as a ‘spirit repository’.^[6]

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 Carburateur* (1919), and Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23); artworks in which machines are represented metaphorically as human bodies.^[7]

Shepherd’s paintings reflect on the generations of men who coveted these engines and whose identities were indelibly linked to them. Growing up in the 1950s, the artist was taught by his father, a World War II veteran, 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 of *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 grandfathers once heard. Within a contemporary framework these archaic, defunct engines also speak to the decline of the oil economy. They persist as remnants of historic environmental degradation, whose ongoing impacts are reaching a critical turning point in climate change. Hence, while once inspiring awe and the utopian promises of machine-assisted futures brought about by technological progress, now they 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’s poem speaks to the absurdity of championing spectacle over content and sensation over perception, and to the propensity for humankind to overreach, their endeavours pushing natural limits to the point of crisis and deflation.^[8] Though Stevens wrote ‘Owl’s Clover’ in the lead up to World War II, the poem also rings true in our contemporary environmental, economic and political situation, 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, yet all the while the passage of evolution never ceases.^[9]

[1] Wallace Stevens, 'Owl's Clover', 1937, excerpt from Stanza IV, in *Stevens' Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, Literacy Classics of the United States Inc, New York, 1997.

[2] The bees used in the painting died of the diseases varroa and foulbrood, which the artist links to their fragile ecological situation.

[3] This consideration even extends to the picture frames, designed by the artist and constructed in American oak by master craftsman Theo Findlayson.

[4] 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 led to major shifts in the ecology of colonised areas and contributed to population collapse in endemic peoples.

[5] Michael Shepherd, interview with Emil McAvoy, 5 November 2018.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Shepherd has also studied the Italian futurists' depictions of the automobile.

[8] Shepherd, interview.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.* Here the artist also reflects on and repurposes the philosophical thought of Gilles Deleuze.

