

Living on the islands of the Pacific one of the models we share is that of life as a sea voyage. It encompasses the voyage out and the voyage home, the harbour and the foreign shore, anchorage and the sailing seas, storm and calm, distress at sea and shipwreck, barely surviving and looking on. This metaphor provides the outline of a whole composed of many conditions and possibilities; it also sets the limit of what is nearly impossible, and is destined to be recounted as a sailor's yarn. Andrew Barber's installation *Shipwreck* is a study of the seafaring metaphor as a paradigm, that is, a model open to multiple possible actualisations. One he fears is that we may all be heading towards is the shipwreck of climate change. The prospect of this shipwreck now looms ever on the horizon, and pursuing the project of human self-assertion in our present situation means being prepared to abandon whatever patched-up craft (fossil fuels and monocultural agriculture) is currently bearing us across the turbulent seas of existence, in order to leap into the waves and begin again the task of constructing a new vessel from the materials at hand—including, perhaps, the debris from earlier shipwrecks.

By tracing the pre- and post-colonial history of these actualisations Barber attempts to discern the changes past and future in our relation to what philosopher Edmund Husserl called the *Lebenswelt*, our life-world. One of the most pervasive actualisations of the life-as-a-sea-voyage metaphor includes the spectator who observes the distress of those at sea from the safety of dry land. In antiquity seafaring was seen as a transgression of natural boundaries that was likely to result in punishment. From the outset then it was associated with the human presumption that humans were not content with the human domain marked out by nature and sought to go beyond it. One of the fundamental results is that shipwreck is the price that has to be paid in order to achieve complete calming of the seas. Transgressive passions are compared to the indispensable winds that drive ships across the seas of life but may also drive them onto treacherous shoals.

Barber's installation made in situ over four days takes its starting point from a Roman paving technique, in which broken and discarded bricks from construction sites were redeployed as flooring tiles. Barber first encountered this in the *Domus dei Tappeti di Pietra* (House of the Stone Carpets) in Ravenna, a recently discovered archaeological site of Roman mosaics based on geometrical forms. Barber's composition takes this ancient and intuitive design process as a subject, exploring how the casual juxtaposition of forms across the floor can reactivate a mundane space into something bristling with energy and visual richness. The random 'pieces of wood' of his site-specific floor echo the original kauri floorboards of the Two Rooms Gallery, 'they are the same width of the existing floorboards in the space, with variable length, but around the size of small bricks.'¹ Replicating the Roman design, Barber first used masking tape, ripping it up and laying it in such a way as to resemble the patterns of discarded brick, but then he grounded them in a sea of red ochre paint. In so doing he plays with the metaphor of earth as floor and ground, and the ubiquitous presence of red oxide based on the mineral hematite from the Greek *hema* ('blood'). The floor is now no longer the dull and institutional surface of the modern built environment of the gallery but reclaimed here as a legitimate site *of*, not just *for*, art. Balanced over Barber's created 'pavement', the large painting of Swandri lumberjack check *Stiff Blanket (Monocultural Agriculture)* cuts abruptly into our real space, and hovers slightly menacingly attached to the ceiling above the viewers' heads, tucked inside a rectangular skylight. A small rectangular painting of a tennis court sits on the long empty gallery wall.

How do these diverse elements fit together? Andrew Barber's works engage directly with issues around land use and the difference between ownership and stewardship of place. His studio, situated within a regenerating forest in the Coromandel close to the sea, has a direct bearing on his works, which function in a sense as echoes of this personal terrain. In *Stiff Blanket (Monocultural Agriculture)*, an all-over

pattern evokes the green-and-black tartan of a classic Swandri, recontextualised as the grid of property boundaries that converted a continuous wild space into discrete parcels of capital under the colonial system. As he has explained: ‘We can think of the Swandri painting as a standing map of New Zealand, or indeed the world, divided into parcels of privately owned blocks of pasture and asphalt.’ⁱⁱ In his painting Barber documents the effects of the aggressive agricultural programme that characterised the first century of European settlement in New Zealand and the total and deliberate extermination of nature from our coastal plains and swamps. Barber here is drawing upon one of his heroes, ecological historian Geoff Park, who writes in the introduction to his extraordinary, groundbreaking—and now classic—history of New Zealand’s lowland forests and wetlands that are today destroyed and dense with agrarian diversification, *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life*:

Europeans first imagined New Zealand as ‘a garden and a pasture in which the best elements of British society might grow into an ideal nation’... When the smoke of their colonists’ fires cleared at the end of the 19th century, New Zealand had become a different country. Māori had lost their most precious life-support system. Only in the hilliest places did the forest still come down to the sea. Huge slices of the ancient ecosystem were missing, evicted and extinguished. Our histories, however, have had neither the sense of place nor ecological consciousness to explain what has happened.ⁱⁱⁱ

Beginning with James Cook’s *Endeavour* party on the Hauraki Plains, and then the New Zealand Company’s arrival in the valley that became the Hutt, Park takes us through the river flatlands where the imperatives of colonial settlement transformed the original forests and swamps with ruthless efficiency. When Park wrote his introduction to his ground-breaking history *Ngā Uruora* he registered one of the first efforts to understand what had happened to our ‘groves of life’, and what irreparable loss we—tangata whenua and Pākehā—had suffered in the deliberate extermination of nature from New Zealand’s plains. With some grief and sorrow, but without a tendency to merely lament, Park sought to discover if ‘*anything* had survived’ and to uncover ‘the truths, often unpleasant, about ourselves and our attitudes and perceptions that the landscape divulges.’ For, as the introduction goes on to say, it is only by ‘looking intently at a landscape we live in or value to see what it reveals of systems of wisdom and warning.’ That is, to see land as community to which we belong, rather than a commodity we trade or a resource we exploit. In *Study (Bloodlines)*, painted with kokowai, red-ochre clay pigment from the land on which his studio sits, Barber deploys the linear forms of a tennis court to create an image of landscape as a site of competition rather than cooperation, where arbitrary rules and circumscribed movements are superimposed over the ground of primordial ochre he employs. Nevertheless, the past will always come back to haunt us and Barber knows that kokowai represents the blood of Ranginui and Papatūānuku when they were separated, and to apply kokowai is to render an object, artefact or structure tapu.

Barber’s *Shipwreck* is a defining visual statement of Park’s critique of colonial destruction by early settlers who felled, burned and milled vast tracts of coastal and inland forests, and deliberately or inadvertently destroyed countless (bird) species, to make way for the agricultural hinterland and monoculture that served Great Britain from its outpost of Empire. We still have to learn how not to allow what Park calls the ‘campaign against nature’ to stand for our human condition.^{iv} We have to detach ourselves from its myth of progress and, like Barber, personalise our imaginative reckoning with the morally-compromised past. The undertakings of Park’s interrogation seem painfully close to Barber’s reading of the landscape. Here are the final words of his introduction to *Ngā Uruora* expressed poignantly, and pointedly, in painterly terms: ‘In other words, the brush should sketch a life, since a life—like the landscape—is constituted by the traces left behind and imprints silently borne’.

Barber’s diverse painting practice is connected by an interest in light, used both as subject matter—orchestrated on the surface of his patchwork floor, diffused and shifting through the changing colours of his striped canvas—or, deployed as an external influence as it plays across these surfaces from the skylights above. There is no painting of Andrew Barber that is not touched by light. This is

not to say that every painting of Barber evokes the light explicitly, but rather to suggest that each of his paintings is touched by the successive changes in direction, the shifting and transitory movement, that we associate with the signature of light. Like light, Barber's painting moves and happens according to the rhythms and crises of its own subject matter. Like light, whose variable and unpredictable nature makes it difficult to circumscribe, the gestures of his painting—the diverse and contradictory use of their ground, the excesses and intuitions of their brushstrokes—resist, from the very beginning, all our efforts to bring together, or stabilise whatever we might call his enterprise. If his painting can never avoid its light it is because this has been his way of telling us what painting is.

This focus on light may help us account for Barber's obsession throughout his work with the relation between the permanent and the transitory, the destructive past and a redemptive future, the figure and its ground. Like daylight, whose cyclical and repetitive character is joined always to its unpredictability and constant alteration, his canvases work to trace the permanency of the infinite variability that makes nature nature. The transitoriness of both nature and our *Lebenswelt* can be said to be inscribed within the movement of Barber's own pictorial language. This can be read in terms of his wish to remain faithful to something that is always about to vanish or be destroyed, his desire to practice an art of perpetual retreating, in which figures are always in transit, always passing into something else, always emerging in order to only disappear. Barber's work can be read as both an effort to realise this transfer and a means of registering the consequences of such a transfer. The transitive character of his art belongs to the transit between the past and the present which means that we must always pass through our inheritance in order to invent our future. This is response to the shipwreck of climate change that we must now produce. The possibility of such transformation, however, involves a risk: the risk we all take when we borrow the language of the very structures we wish to overcome, the risk of having our critical position be appropriated and neutralised by the dominant culture we set out to question. It is the result of the desire which Park describes that aches in all neo-European cultures: the wish that our colonial conquests of the human and natural world finally at an end, we will find our way back to a more equitable set of relationships with all that we have subjugated.^v

As Barber knows we are already embarked, always already at sea, with no land or harbour in sight. Amid the shipwreck of our lives, we are reduced to clinging to a plank, one of those pieces of wood floating on his blood-red floor, but this piece of debris is precious to us, for it represents our best hope of rebuilding some frail raft that might yet carry us, if not safely into harbour, at least further on our endless voyage.

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ⁱ Andrew Barber, email to the author 29 August 2021

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Geoff Park, *Ngā Ururoa: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995), p. 9.

^{iv} Geoff Park, *Ngā Ururoa*, p. 306.

^v Geoff Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), p. 73. At the level of myth, of national self-consciousness, of imagined past, it is our fantasy relation to the struggle of colonisation—both the settler struggle and the devastating destruction—that both continues to give us and rob us of our identity.