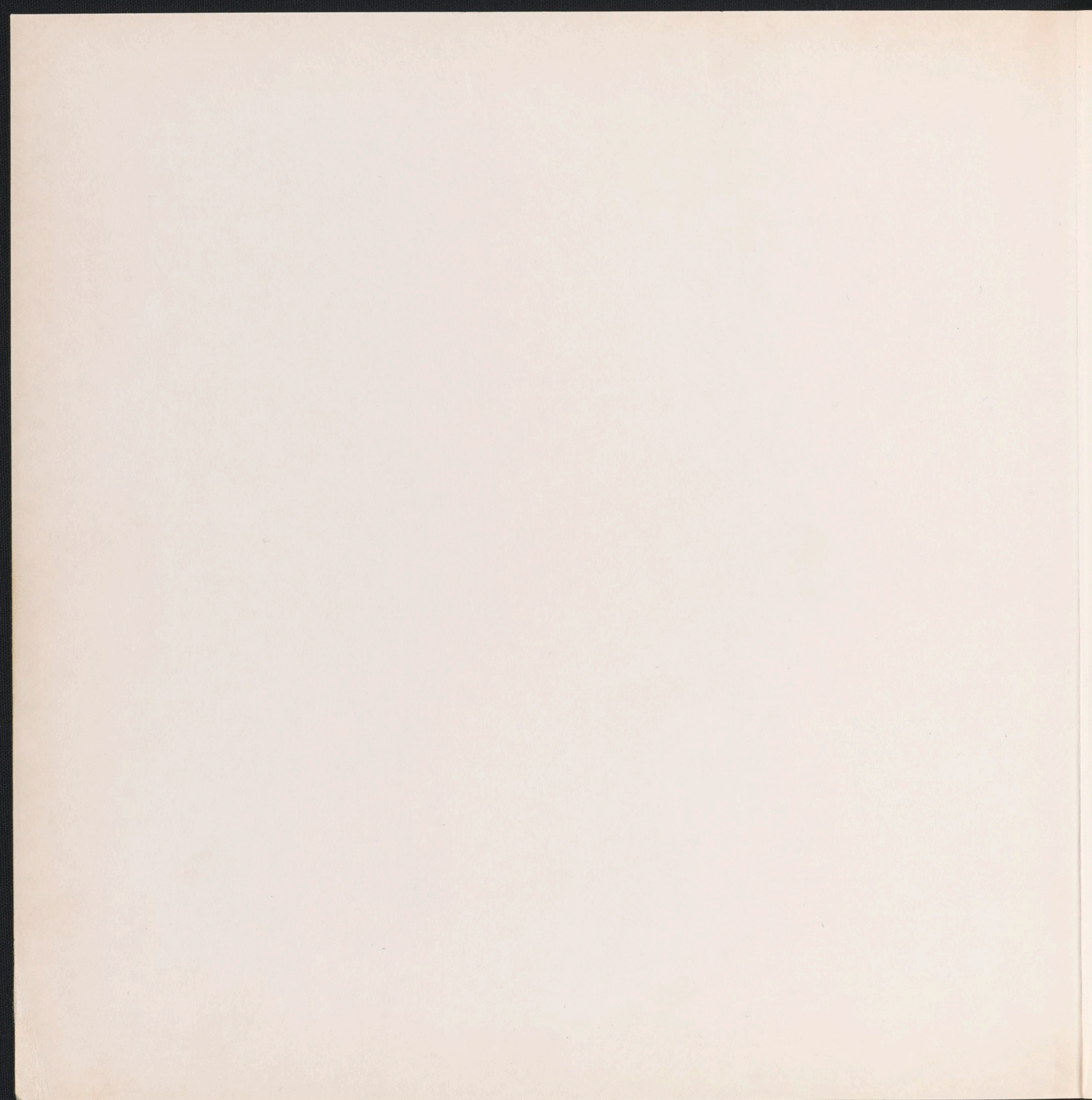


The Chelsea Project • New Zealand Sugar Centenary 1984



The Chelsea Project
New Zealand Sugar Centenary 1984

10 MAY 1991

RESEARCH LIBRARY
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

The Chelsea Project
New Zealand Sugar Centenary 1984

ISBN 0 86463 116 2

© 1984 Auckland City Art Gallery and New Zealand Sugar Company Limited. Published by the Auckland City Art Gallery on behalf of New Zealand Sugar Company Limited, with the financial assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand. Exhibition toured under the auspices of the Art Gallery Directors' Council.

Exhibition co-ordinator: John McCormack
Exhibition curator: T.L. Rodney Wilson

Photographs not to be reproduced without written permission.

Front cover photograph by Peter Peryer
Rear cover photograph by Anne Noble

Contents

Foreword	5
One hundred years at Chelsea	6
The Chelsea Project	10
The Photographers:	
Laurence Aberhart	13
Bruce Foster	27
Peter Peryer	37
Gillian Chaplin	49
Anne Noble	63
Biographies	78

Contents

Foreword	5
One hundred years in China	5
The Chinese People	10
The Photographs	15
Landscape Architecture	15
Public Parks	25
Public Buildings	25
Public Parks	25
Public Buildings	25
Public Parks	25
Public Buildings	25

Foreword

Chelsea sugar refinery is rich in visual images, even for those of us who see it as part of our everyday working lives.

The contrasts are quite striking — the old with the new, the heavy industry with its parklike surroundings.

As one of a number of events to mark one hundred years of sugar production for New Zealand, we wanted to share Chelsea with a wider audience and to gain some new perspectives on our environment.

Photography was seen as an ideal medium to capture Chelsea and this complemented the work in Australia of our parent company, CSR Limited, to support photography as an artform.

Working closely with John McCormack of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council and with Rodney Wilson of the Auckland City Art Gallery, we commissioned five top artists to photograph Chelsea.

The only restriction placed on the work of the artists was that the photographs should be taken at the Chelsea site at Birkenhead.

It's strange that many of us spend the greater part of our lives at work, yet regard art as being something very separate from the workplace. Here is a project which brought the two very much together.

We believe the project has created a diverse, interesting and stimulating collection of photographs.

We're well pleased with the results and we invite you to share these with us.

Alec Brennan
Managing Director
New Zealand Sugar Company Limited

One hundred years at Chelsea

The decision to build a sugar refinery at Birkenhead was made in early 1882. Sir Edward Knox, chairman of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), purchased the site, originally called Wawaroa, and then known as Duck Creek, and construction work began in March 1883. Three months later the first New Zealand Sugar Company was formed and refinery operations commenced in September 1884.

Prior to 1884 New Zealand had imported all its refined sugar, because of the ease and economy with which Australian refineries could supply the limited local market. However, by 1880, population growth in New Zealand and emergence of the Fijian sugar-cane industry made a local refinery feasible and desirable.

The Sydney-based CSR, which had supplied most of this country's sugar needs, made contact with a small group of Auckland businessmen. These two interested parties, together with the Victorian Sugar Company (in which CSR had a major interest), formed the New Zealand Sugar Company to own and operate the refinery. This company operated for just five years before a world slump in sugar prices forced it to amalgamate with CSR.

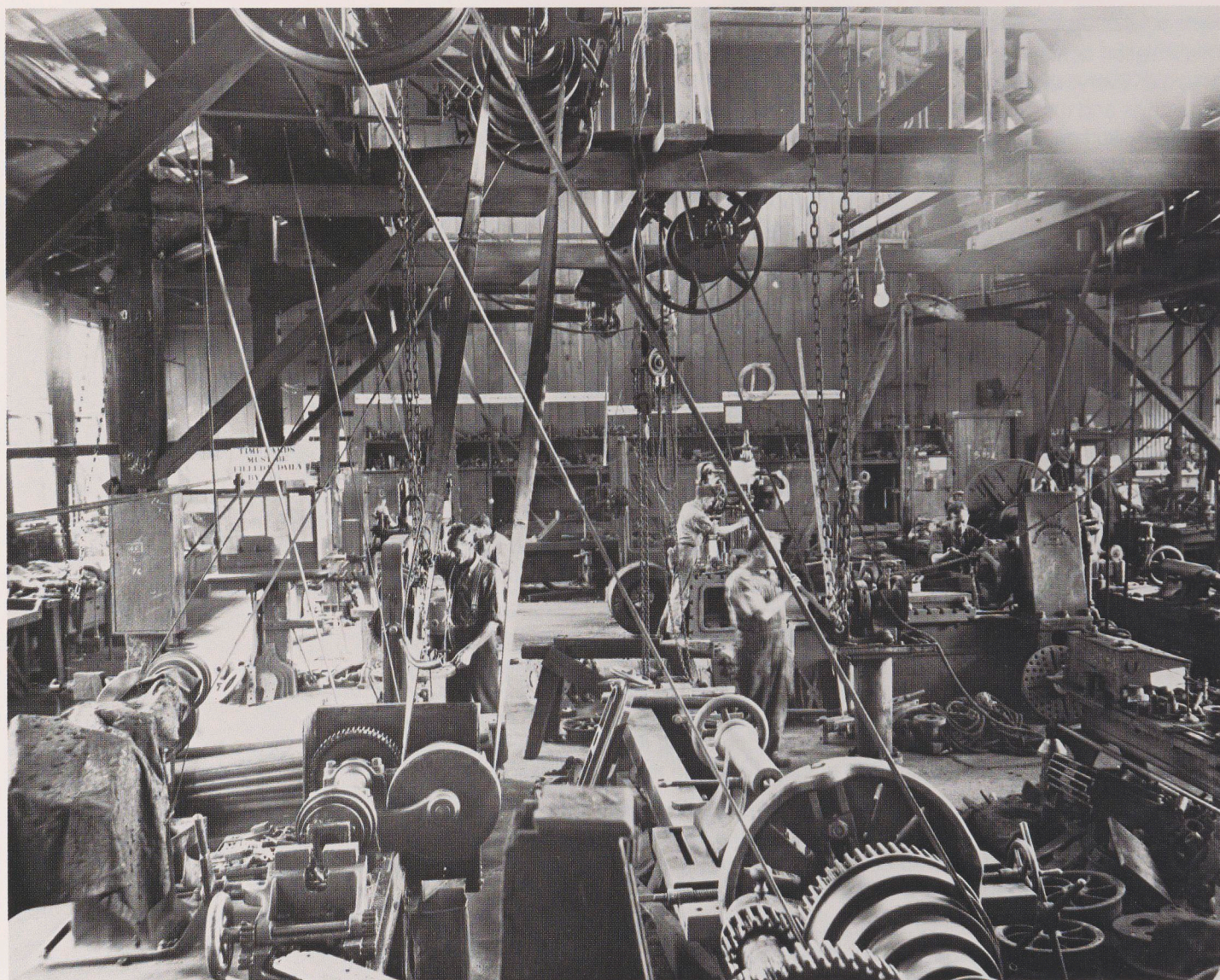
The choice of Duck Creek followed an inspection of other sites in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Yet only Duck Creek had the natural features essential for a sugar refinery. Just six kilometres from Auckland it offered sufficient land for refinery buildings and the fresh water needed for the refining process. Most importantly, raw sugar could be unloaded directly at Duck Creek where the Waitemata was at its deepest.

It took only 18 months to build Chelsea. One hundred and fifty works laboured to level part of a ridge between the harbour and Duck Creek. Some of the spoil was used for reclamations, but most was made into bricks for refinery buildings and dams. By September 1884 not only the refinery but two dams, two wharves and a workers' village had been constructed.

This was the first stage of Chelsea. Between 1884 and 1910 the refinery grew rapidly, and many of the buildings which are today regarded as 'original' actually date from this second-phase construction.

The need for this expansion can be seen in production figures. In 1890 175 workers produced each week five hundred tons of refined sugar. By 1910 300 workers were turning out 1000 tons a week, and by 1954 production had doubled and the work-force had risen to about 420.

Between 1884 and 1958 Chelsea developed a unique feeling and character. Not only the special nature of the sugar industry contributed to this, but also the refinery's



Unknown photographer
The engineers' workshop, Chelsea refinery c1937

semi-isolation at Birkenhead.

This isolation across the harbour forced Chelsea to become as self-sufficient as possible. Everything was manufactured at the refinery including the 70-pound sugarbags and the syrup tins in which sugar products were packed. Less than half of Chelsea's workers actually produced sugar: the rest comprised a 'who's who' of trades and skills.

Isolation also helped to shape a special relationship with Birkenhead. By financing over 130 houses for workers, the refinery contributed to the borough's growth. The refinery's wage packets stimulated the local economy, its whistle was a community clock, its smoke a community 'joke', and the Chelsea picnic was a community festival. Above all Chelsea was the only large employer in the Birkenhead area and it provided secure jobs even through the 1930s depression. As a result, long individual and family service became a feature of the 'sugar works'.

Chelsea's harbour position gave its four wharves special importance. Before 1959 these wharves were a busy, bustling and noisy focus of the refinery. Ships delivering at the coal wharf negotiated their way past the ferries at the end wharf, raw sugar ships at the sugar wharf and the steady traffic around the lighter wharf.

A fleet of six lighters and a tug carried Chelsea's products to Auckland. For 75 years, until the advent of the harbour bridge, they were a regular sight on the Waitemata. Typical of Chelsea, both lighters and tug were built by Chelsea shipwrights and manned by Chelsea sailors.

On the wharves themselves scores of wharfies and refinery workers had a variety of tasks. A refinery gang loaded the lighters, but it was wharfies from Auckland, up to 60, who slung the raw sugar sacks from the sugar ships and on to rakes, to be pulled by horses to the raw store. Between the ships and the raw store, these horses knew by heart the way past the refinery coopers' shop to the top of the wharf where the Chelsea office reflected the crucial role of the wharves in refinery operations.

These lighters and horses were institutions at Chelsea. But within the refinery also were aspects of work which were peculiar to Chelsea. Even the job designations and technical terms have an intriguing air — the 'char end' with its 'char spreaders', the 'pans' and 'fugals' and the 'sugar boilers' and 'liquor runners'.

Both the internal and external landscapes of Chelsea helped to shape its special character. The tall brick buildings around the char tower were designed to architecturally economise the different stages of the refining process. Within them an intricate system of belt-drives transmitted power from the engines of the power-house.

The jobs and conditions at the old 'sugar works' have acquired a mythology of their own among retired employees. The char end was well known for its heat and the thick char dust which decolorised sugar but blackened its workers. Before 1958 Chelsea was a curious mixture of rugged manual work and the skills of a pre-automotive

technology. Huge stacks of sugar sacks — up to 40 feet high — were raised in the raw store. Each sack, weighing between 150 and 300 pounds, was lifted by hydraulic jigger, then manhandled into position and interlocked with its neighbours, according to a ritualised formula of stability which dated back to the 1880s.

By the 1950s the inability of the older methods and techniques to keep pace with modern sugar demands was evident. A works' ballad in 1954 referred to 'the patches, the wire and bits of string' that held the straining factory together. At the same time the nature of the grocery trade was changing. The 70-pound sugarbag, so famous in New Zealand folklore, was an ideal medium for the corner grocer's trade, but ill-suited to modern supermarkets with their self-service and prepackaged goods. Finally, when the Auckland Harbour Bridge opened in 1959, both Chelsea and Birkenhead were integrated into Auckland's road transport system.

All three changes led to the disappearance of institutions at Chelsea which dated back to 1884. The sugar lighters were sold or scrapped by 1961 in favour of trucks and road access to Auckland. In 1958, the bulk handling of loose raw sugar replaced the wharfies, rakes and horses with a crane, grab and conveyor system. A new raw store is devoid of sugar-sack stacks, but offers the equally impressive spectacle of huge dunes of loose raw sugar.

Everywhere the old belt drives have disappeared and push-button technology has phased out the manual content of most jobs. Once, up to 40 workers made and filled the 70-pound sugarbags. Today machines can make and fill smaller paper bags with minimal human supervision. Chelsea can now produce twice as much sugar as in 1954, but with little more than half the workforce.

There are still continuities with the past at Chelsea. The char end remains imbued with a 19th-century atmosphere and, next door, the syrup-packing machines are date-stamped 1917. Elsewhere, the gleaming automation of 1984 stands within walls and roofs of 19th-century rafters and bricks.

Peter Luke
Historian

The Chelsea Project

I live opposite the Chelsea sugar works.

There it is, at the bottom of the garden, across the bay, each morning, every night. An unusual neighbour, an extraordinary architectural pile.

Chelsea is mediaeval, reminiscent of an Italian hill town, resplendent with turrets and campanile. Your fantasy has no difficulty in whipping up visions of a demonic workplace, fires flickering in cavernous architectural spaces, diminutive Piranesian figures toiling away.

Chelsea has got to be the most remarkable complex of industrial buildings in this country. New Zealand Sugar know that; they are aware of its special nature. It's they who have the courage — you might say the audacity — to dress it in chromium yellow, detailed with external plumbing in powder blue, accessories in burnt orange. Its colours sing, vibrate, headstanding in the waters of the upper harbour on which the whole confection appears so abruptly poised.

Mornings and evenings the waters are aflame with the colours of Chelsea. On stormy days a harsher sea, licked with tongues of wind-driven white, affords a more steely contrast. From time to time harbour mists roll in, enshrouding all in the softest of greys, and on those days Chelsea is a shimmering medley of silver and diffused gold. What a joy those buildings are, hemmed in between bush and water.

Six years ago New Zealand Sugar's parent company, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia, commissioned a number of photographers to celebrate their industry and their complex of buildings at Pyrmont on Sydney Harbour — Chelsea's twin. Now, in the year of Chelsea's centenary, New Zealand Sugar decided to duplicate the commission. A rerun of a successful project you might say. And so it is to some extent. But once the similarity of the project's intention, and the extraordinary similarity of the two building sites is past, the parallels stop, for the five New Zealand photographers chosen for the Chelsea project bear little resemblance to those who documented Pyrmont in 1978. This show is certainly not a Pyrmont rerun.

Five very individual sensibilities have been turned loose on a similar project. Five very individual interpretations have resulted.

The Company's brief was simple and very generous. The works site and the staff were the resource. From it the photographers were free to make what they would. The interpretation they chose to make was entirely theirs: no restraints, no constraints. The number of images they were required to produce was up to them. No limits, no requirements; and the only expectation, a portfolio of photographs of fine quality, a

portfolio in which the unique resource provided by a unique factory was translated into universal and enduring images. There are few opportunities for artists to respond to commissions as generous as these; and few patrons who have the confidence in the artists they have chosen to allow them total artistic freedom in the manner in which they choose to carry out their commissions.

The images reproduced in this book, and which make up the accompanying exhibition, are the product of that patronage. They are the Company's gift to itself to mark its hundredth birthday.

Each of the artists worked on the site off and on over a period of many weeks. They came and went, getting to know the staff, discovering the buildings. A rapport grew between each of them and their subject, but each worked in isolation, unaware of what the other were doing. Some were attracted to the same subjects; graffiti, an architectural form, the filters in the char room. But in the end each has produced a personal and independent interpretation, and if another five photographers were chosen, five more unique portfolios would be forthcoming.

Laurence Aberhart's detailed and richly toned photographs record with microscopic accuracy the appearance of the place. In doing so he responds to its special poetry, a magic which the sugar works undeniably has. His images, so reminiscent of vintage photography, carry messages about both the visual richness of Chelsea and this essential poetry.

Gillian Chaplin, too, in a series of haunting night photographs, dips into the Chelsea mystery. Vast piles of sugar, dwarfing human beings, piles that threaten to avalanche, glow under the sodium lights of the night. Filter cloths hang like altar drapes in front of a silent, erect stele-like figure. Silence and the black of night invades the watching figure, shroud the sugar, quieten the machines.

Peter Peryer, by contrast, has sought an order in the visual cacophony of shapes and forms. Through his viewfinder he has asserted structure; selecting, composing refining. The building, its machinery and its produce become elements in a constructive assemblage. For Peryer the project enabled him to add colour to his previously monochromatic vocabulary, retaining the form and geometry of his recent work but adding to it the new complexity of chromatic variations.

Anne Noble and Bruce Foster, by contrast, have focused upon the workers, the marks they leave, their tools and their work-stations.

It's a grim, almost Dickensian industrial world that Noble shows us. A world of harsh tonal contrast, of foreboding factory spaces where the workers' humanity is imposed in graffiti scrawled on the walls, or is left behind by the marks of tools, or can be recognised in the implements themselves, discarded, laid aside.

But where the residents of this unique piece of industrial archaeology are known

through their residue, their marks and implements in Noble's photographs, for Foster they form the subject itself. Leaving the factory, engaged in conversation, performing the actions of work, they are his concern. The speed of tins being sorted, the snatched moment of conversation, the pause of the washroom or the animated conclusion of the work-day; these are the changing tempos of a normal and universal work-day.

The Chelsea sugar works are both unique and commonplace; remarkable and universal. The factory has a spirit of its own; imposing the mysterious, yet a place in which people work, a place where the occupants assert their presence, leave their marks. These five photographers, each in his or her own way, has responded to that phenomenon. The Chelsea project is a record of that.

T. L. Rodney Wilson
Director
Auckland City Art Gallery

Laurence Aberhart

Statement

On visiting Chelsea I was struck by two things: the wonderful setting that the refinery is located in and the fact that in itself and in the best sense, parts of the refinery are actual working Victorian artefacts.

I have attempted to depict both.



Fold out





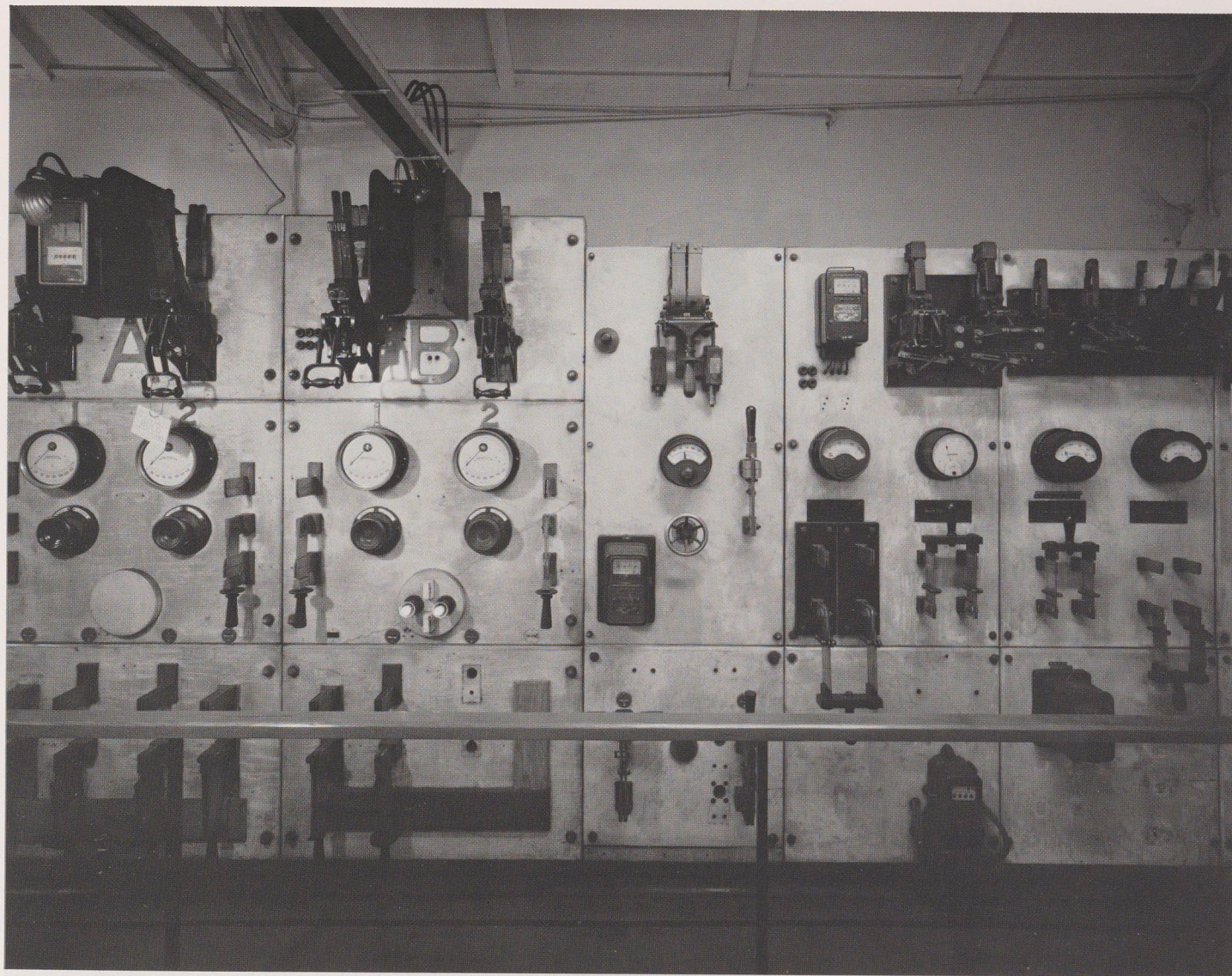




Fold out

















Bruce Foster

Statement

Syrup house, Chelsea sugar works

Dennis Baker, Laura Hiki, Val Cranston, Rita Donnelly, Eileen Brown and foreman Bill Hughes (left to right in the group portrait), work in the syrup house at the Chelsea sugar works.

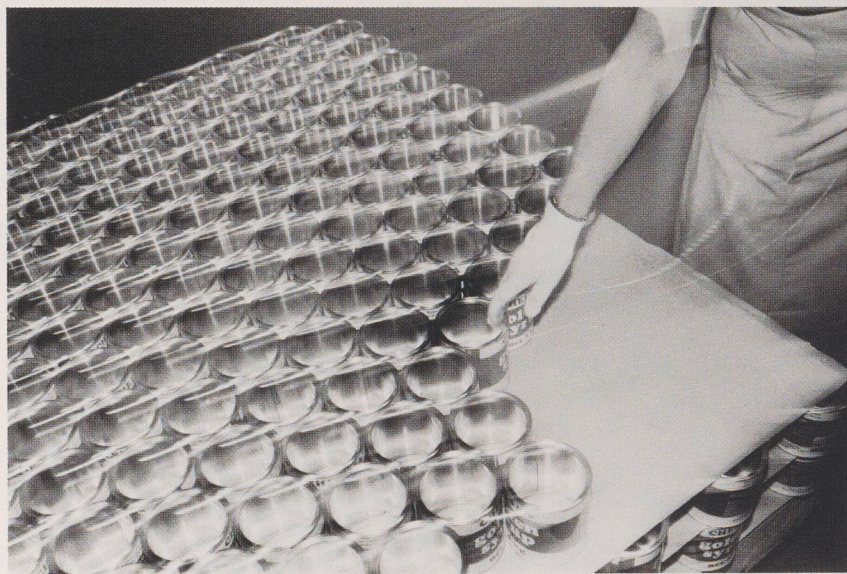
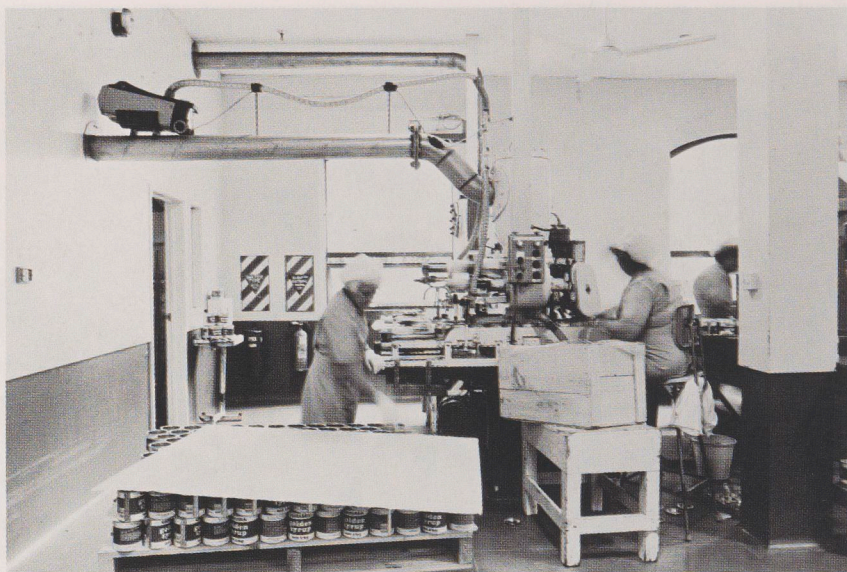
At 7.50 am each weekday they commence work. Laura, Val, Rita and Eileen take their places around the golden syrup filling machine. Empty cans are put on to the machine where they are filled, sealed, placed in cardboard trays and shrink-wrapped. The women regularly rotate places. Dennis stacks the trays of filled cans as they come out of the wrapping machine. Bill ensures continuity of supply of empty cans and syrup and removes filled pallets.

Crib-breaks are frequent. The women go to their cribroom to knit, sew, crochet, etc., Dennis joins other workers for card games and Bill usually catches up with bookwork. During the lunch-break Bill goes fishing.

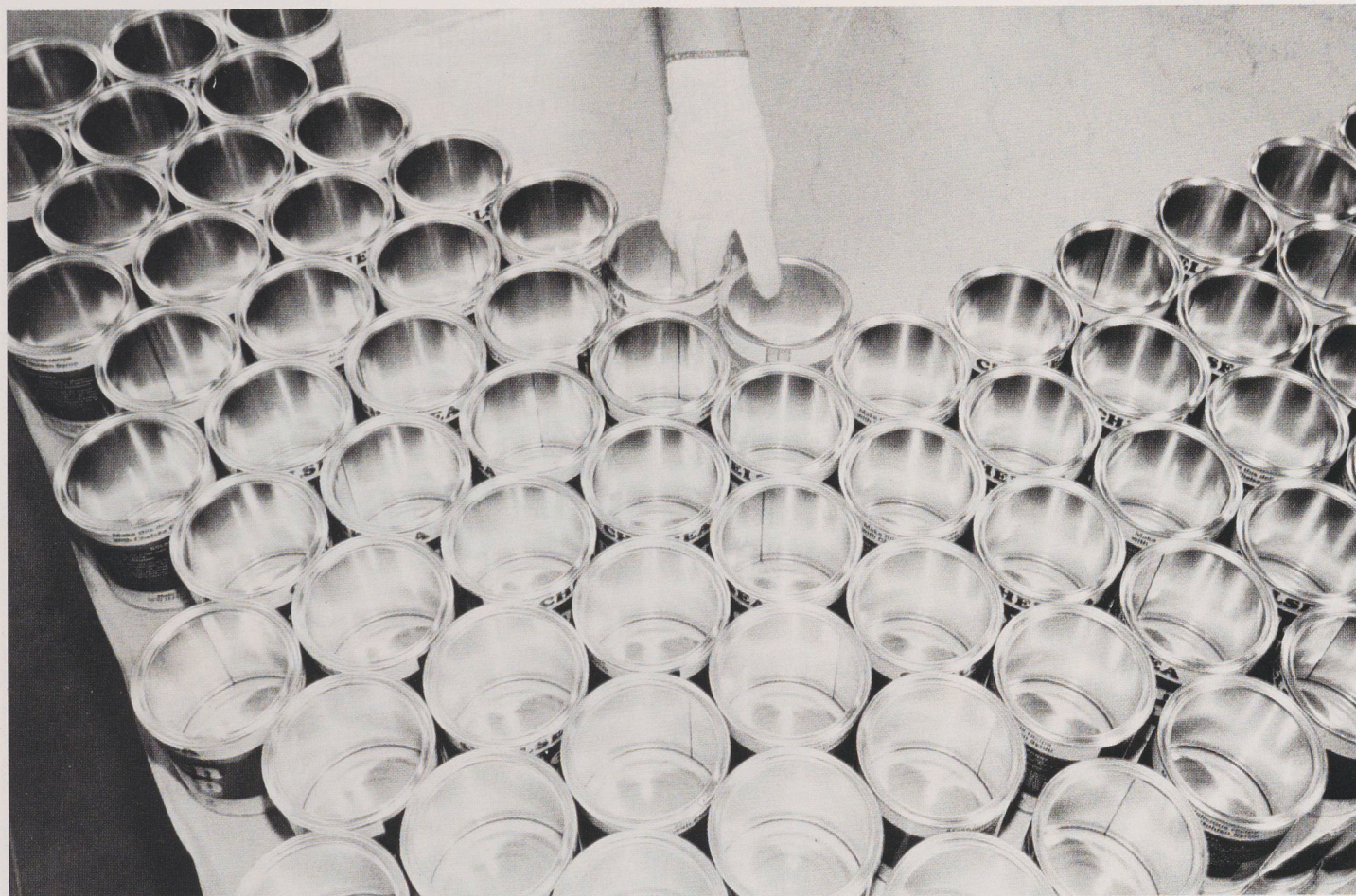
At 4.00 pm they cease work. The machine is cleaned, showers are taken and at 4.26 pm they head for the main gate to await the siren at 4.30 pm.



Syrup house I



Syrup house II (top)
Syrup house II (bottom)



Syrup house III



Syrup house IV (top)
Syrup house IV (bottom)



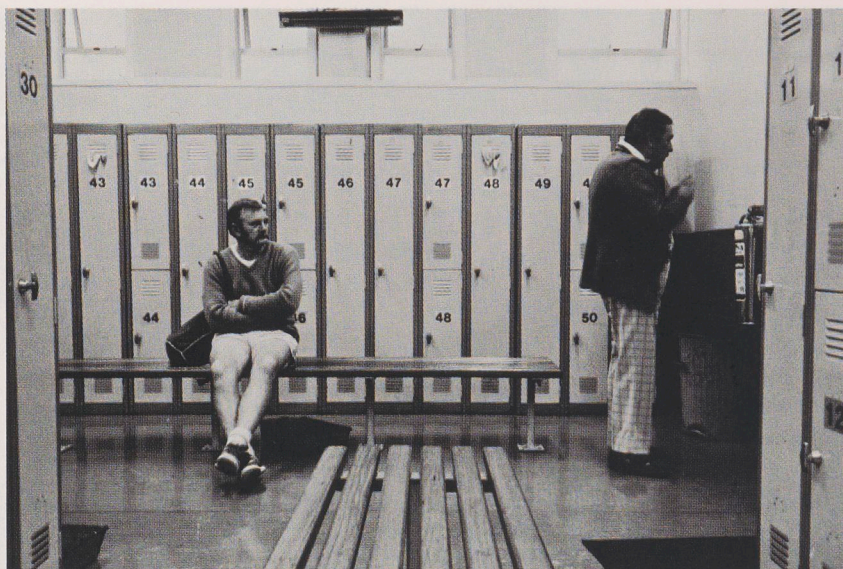
Syrup house V



Syrup house VI (top)
Syrup house VI (bottom)



Syrup house VII



Syrup house VIII (top)
Syrup house VIII (bottom)



Syrup house IX

Peter Peryer

Statement

The undertaking of this generous commission was my first exploration into the kingdom of colour, for over the last few years I have concentrated almost exclusively on black-and-white photography. This is not an abandoning of black-and-white but rather the adding of another instrument to the orchestra.



Chelsea I

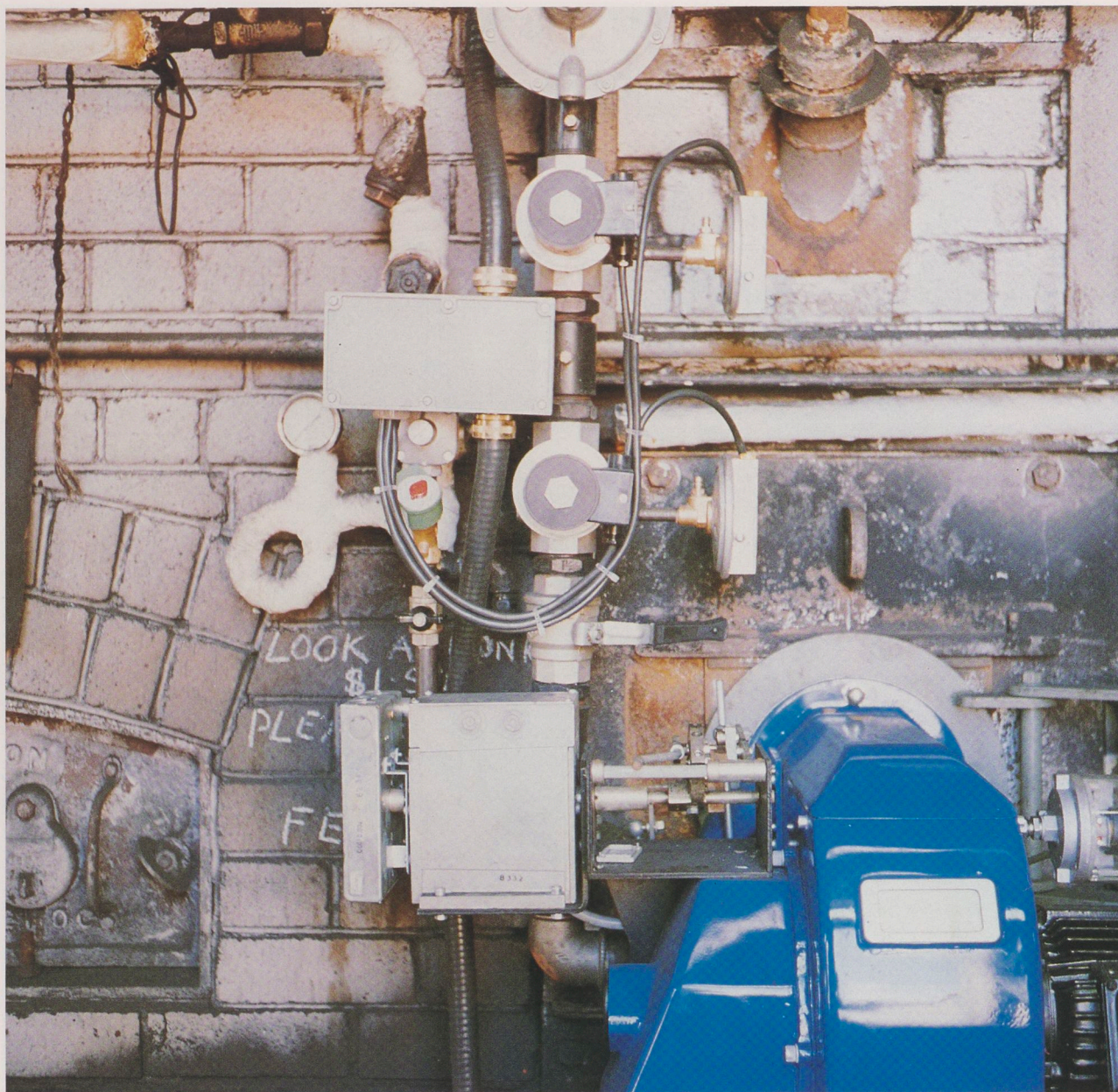


Chelsea II

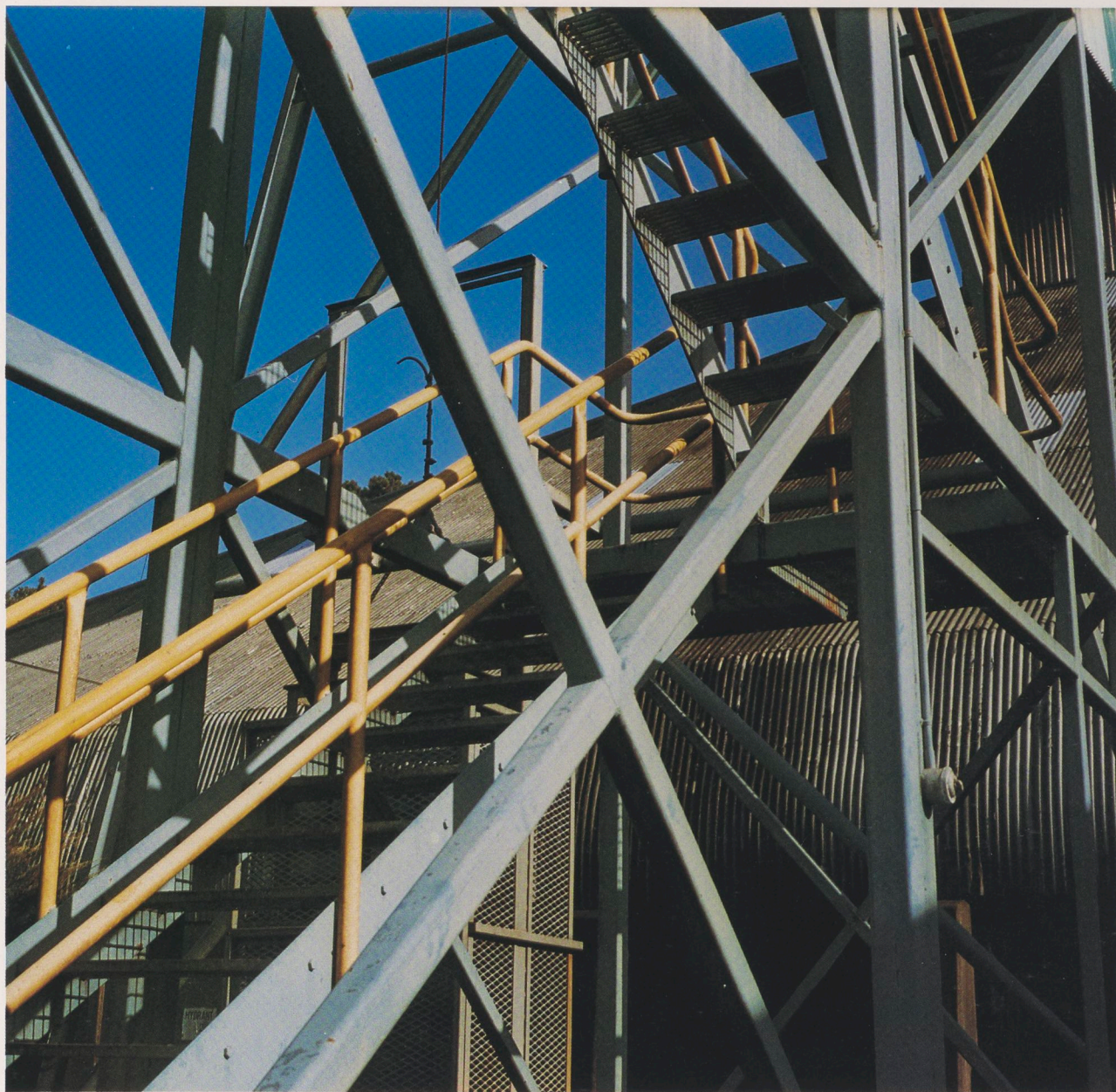


Chelsea III

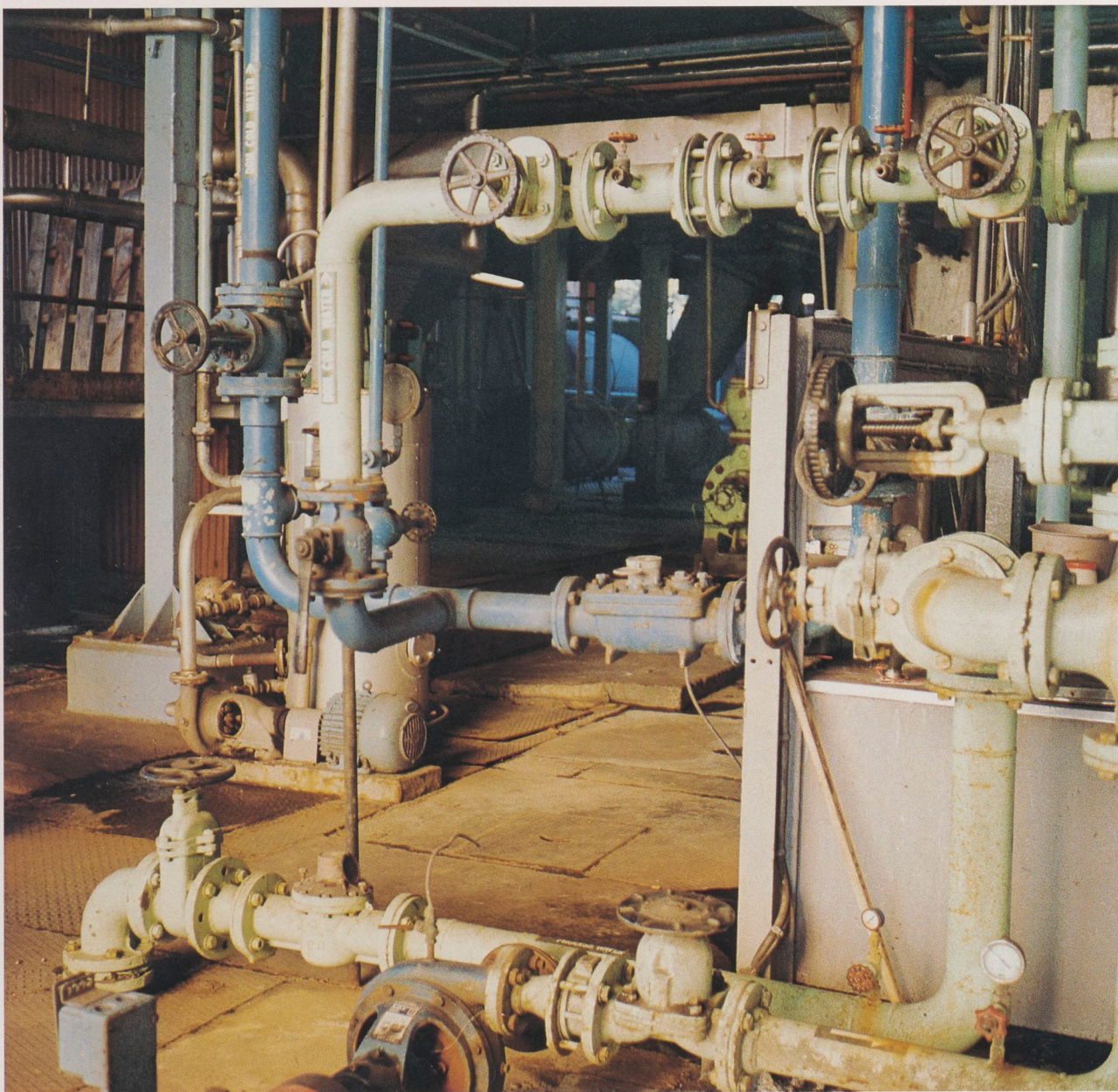




Chelsea V



Chelsea VI



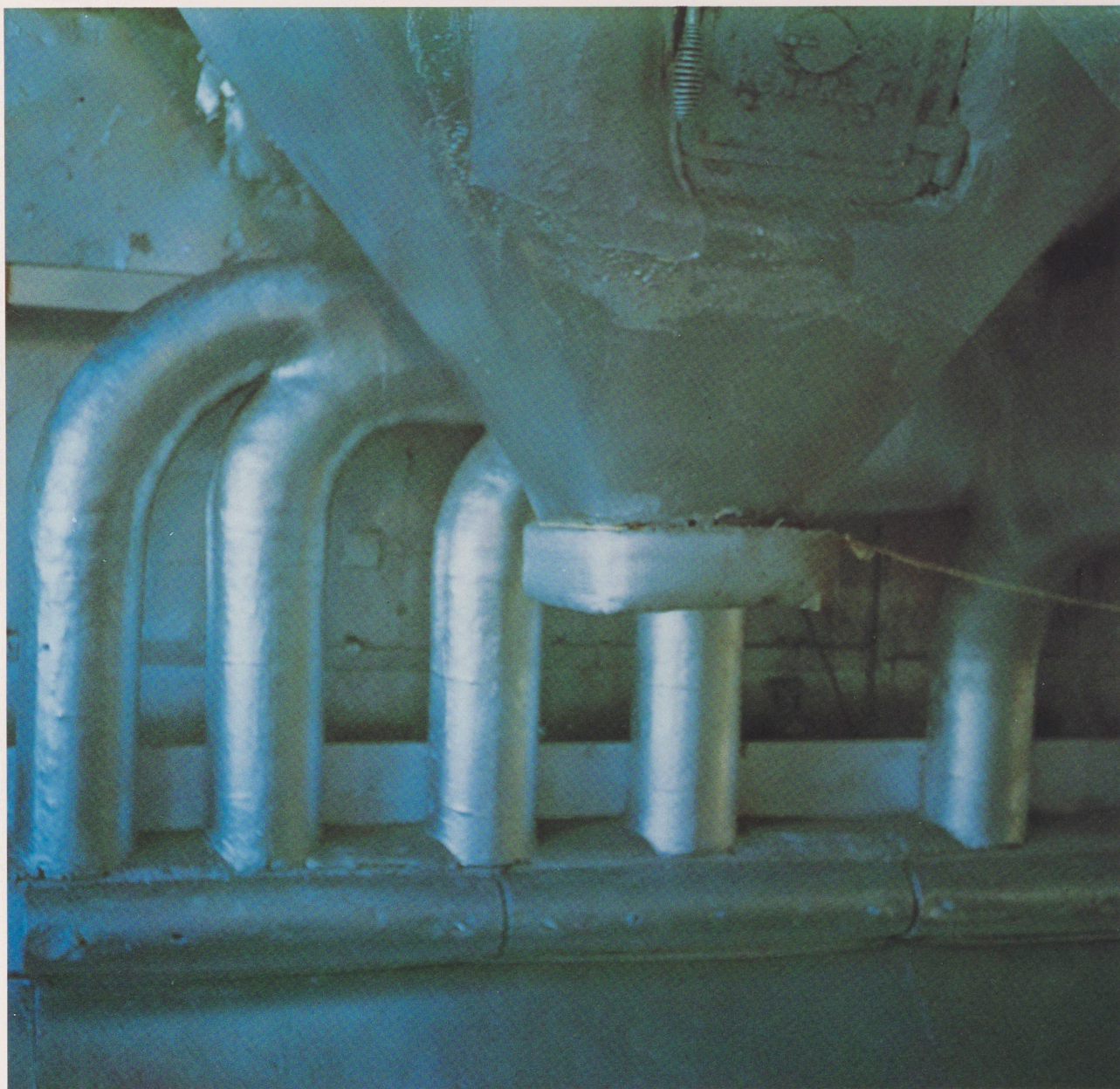
Chelsea VII



Chelsea VIII



Chelsea IX



Chelsea X



Chelsea XI

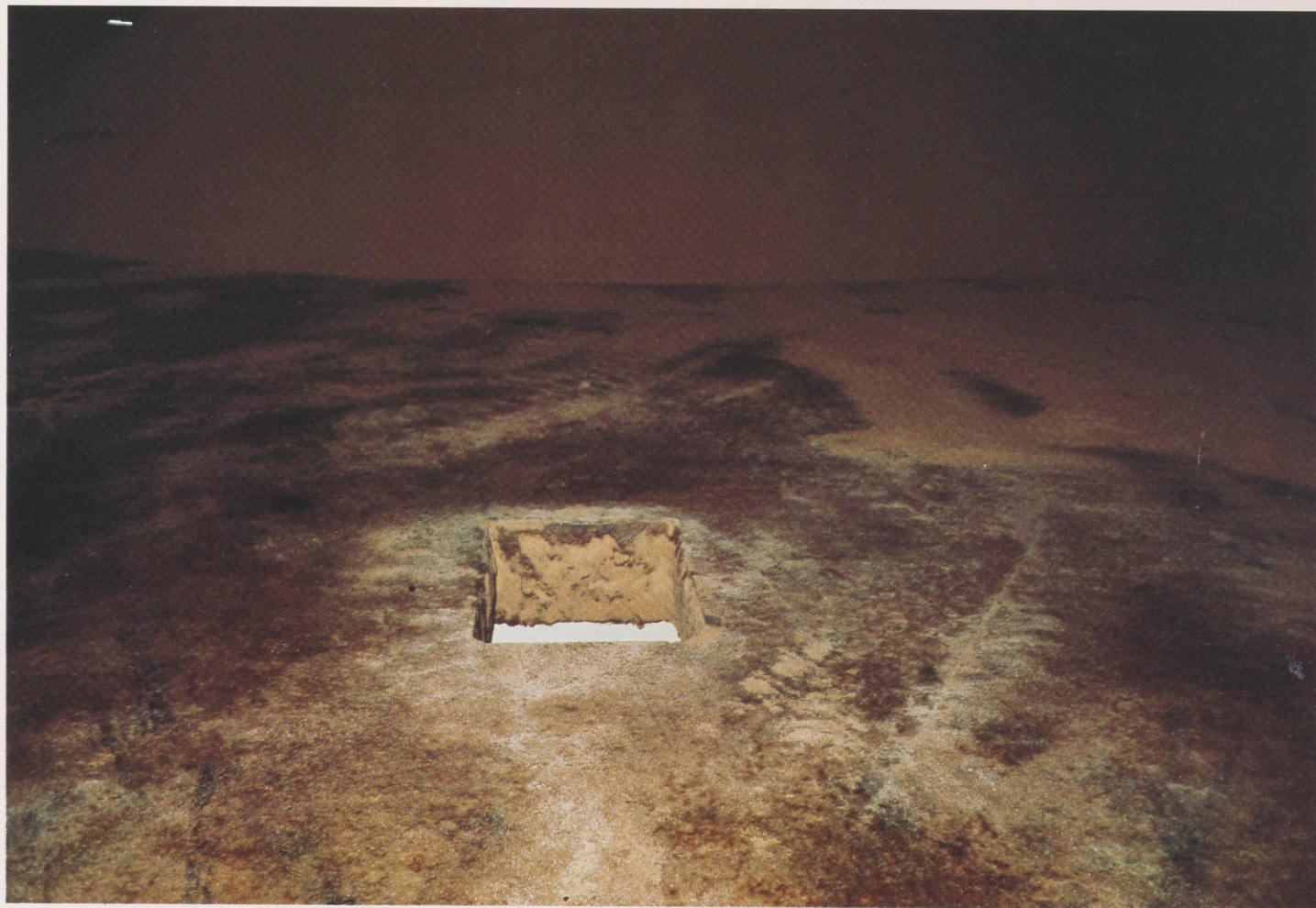
Gillian Chaplin

Statement

My involvement with the New Zealand sugar project has been particularly valuable because of the enlightened nature of the brief. I was able to continue to work with concerns that are evident in my previous work.



Sugar store I



Sugar store II



Sugar store III



Sugar store IV



Sugar store V



Sugar store VI



Sugar store VII



Char end I



Char end II



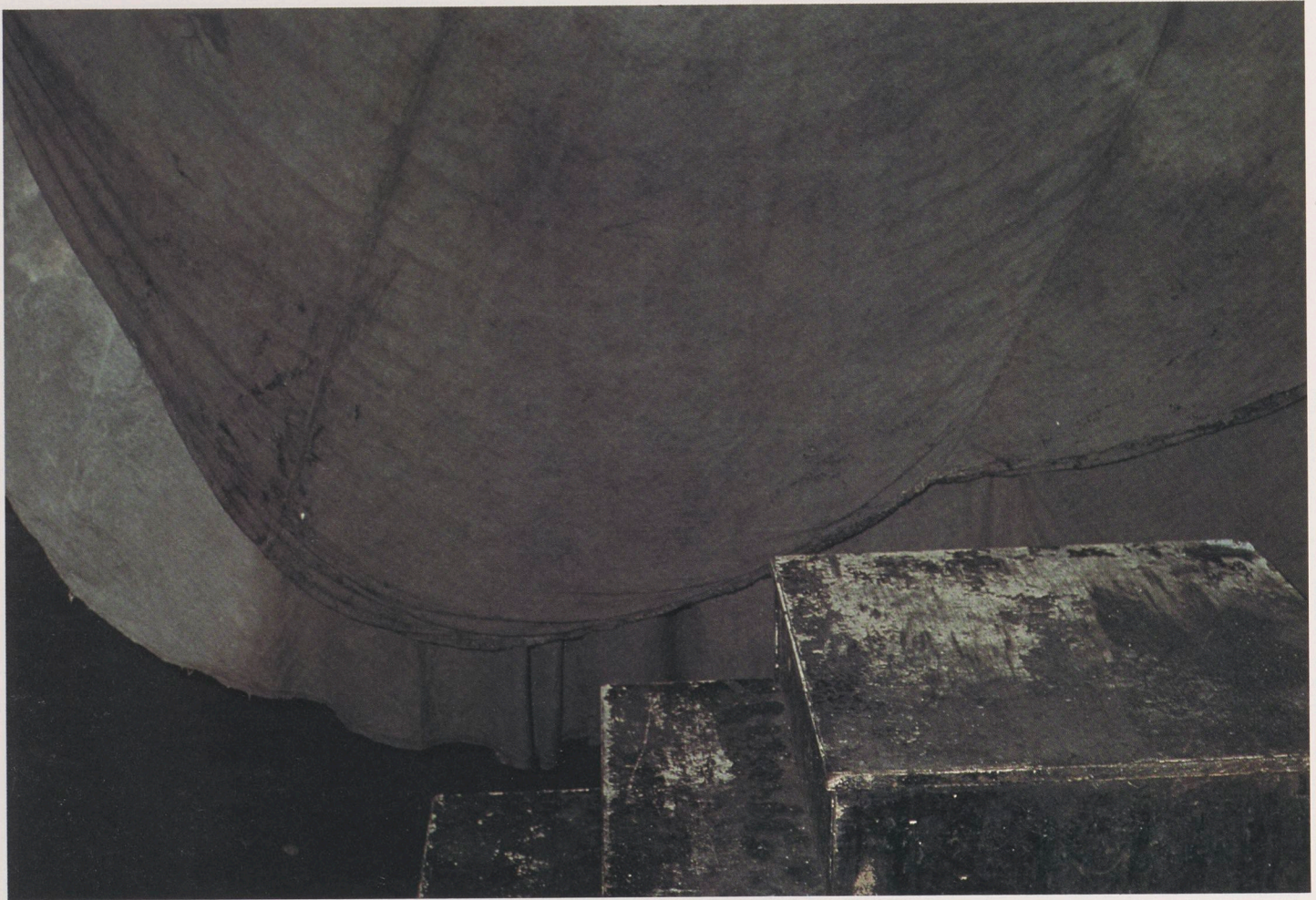
Char end III



Char end IV



Char end V



Char end VI

Anne Noble

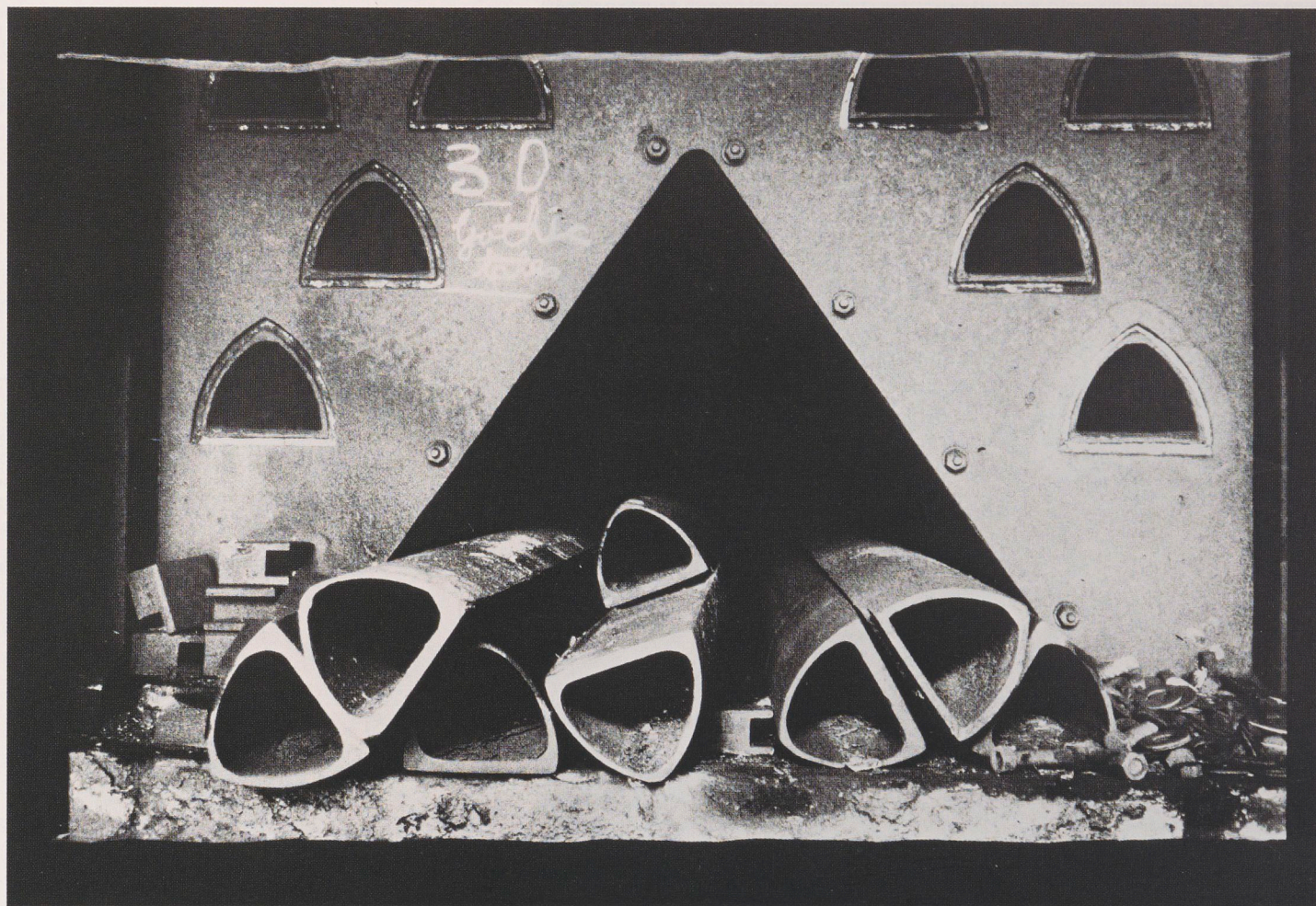
Statement

The first time I photographed the refinery was on the evening of the changeover from oil to gas. I recorded probably the last puff of smoke ever to waft towards Birkenhead from the Chelsea chimney. 'It's quite a sad night really,' a boilerman said, 'the end of an era. When we used oil it was hard physical work, and all the guys who put a lot of sweat into it had lost something, it's hard to say what. We've only fired oil for fifteen years, and now we're going to gas the physical element has been taken out one step further. . . .Next we'll be coming here in suits and ties.' When I discovered the char end, in contrast to the rest of the refinery it seemed strangely untouched by the changes and developments of the last one hundred years. Burnt animal bone (char) is still used to remove any discoloration from the sugar and some of the hardest physical work is done here. I photographed this environment, the markings I found on walls and machinery, and some of the men who work there.

The photographs were taken on Polaroid instant black-and-white transparency film; these were enlarged to make paper negatives, then contact prints were made from these.



1. Chelsea refinery 13 April 1984



2. 30 gothic tales



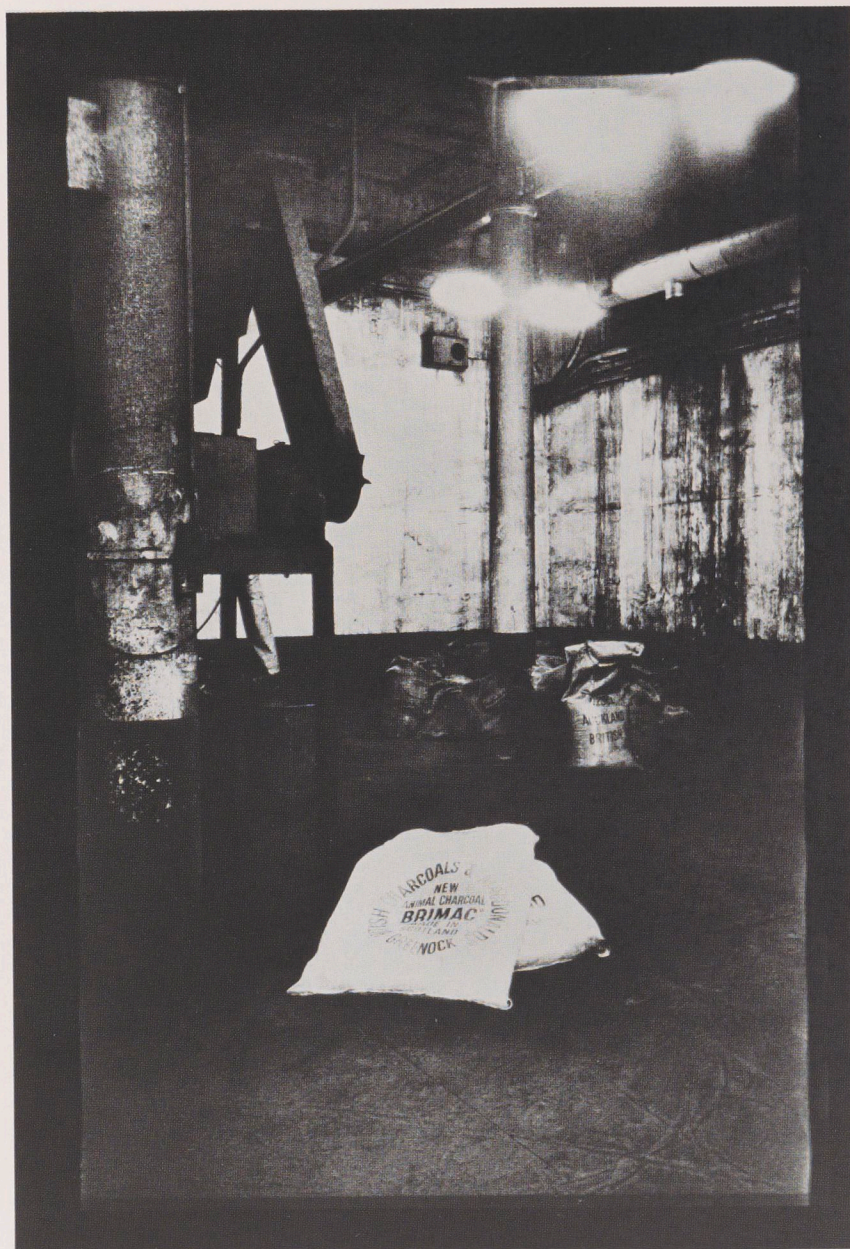
3. The dry char conveyor



4. Between the kilns



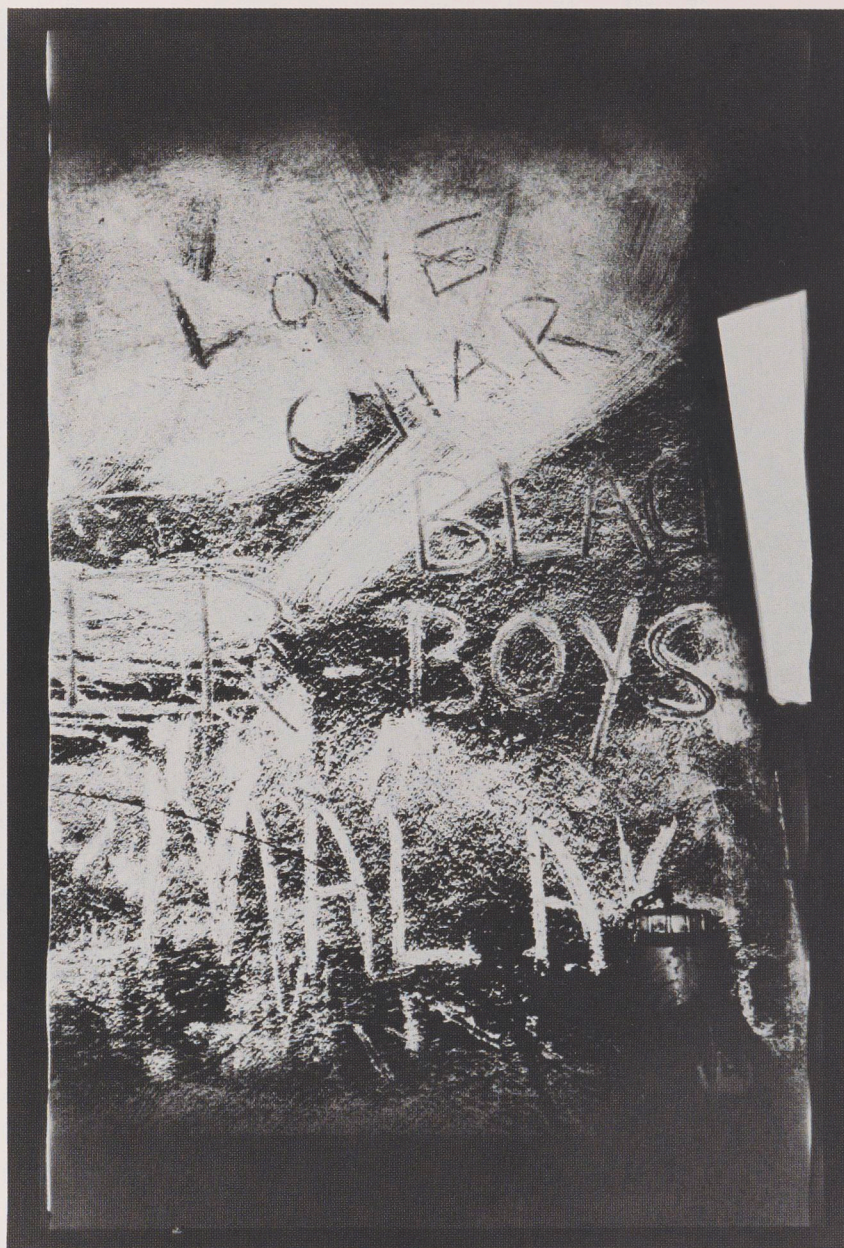
5. Gary Churchill, kiln fireman



6. Char bags, ground floor



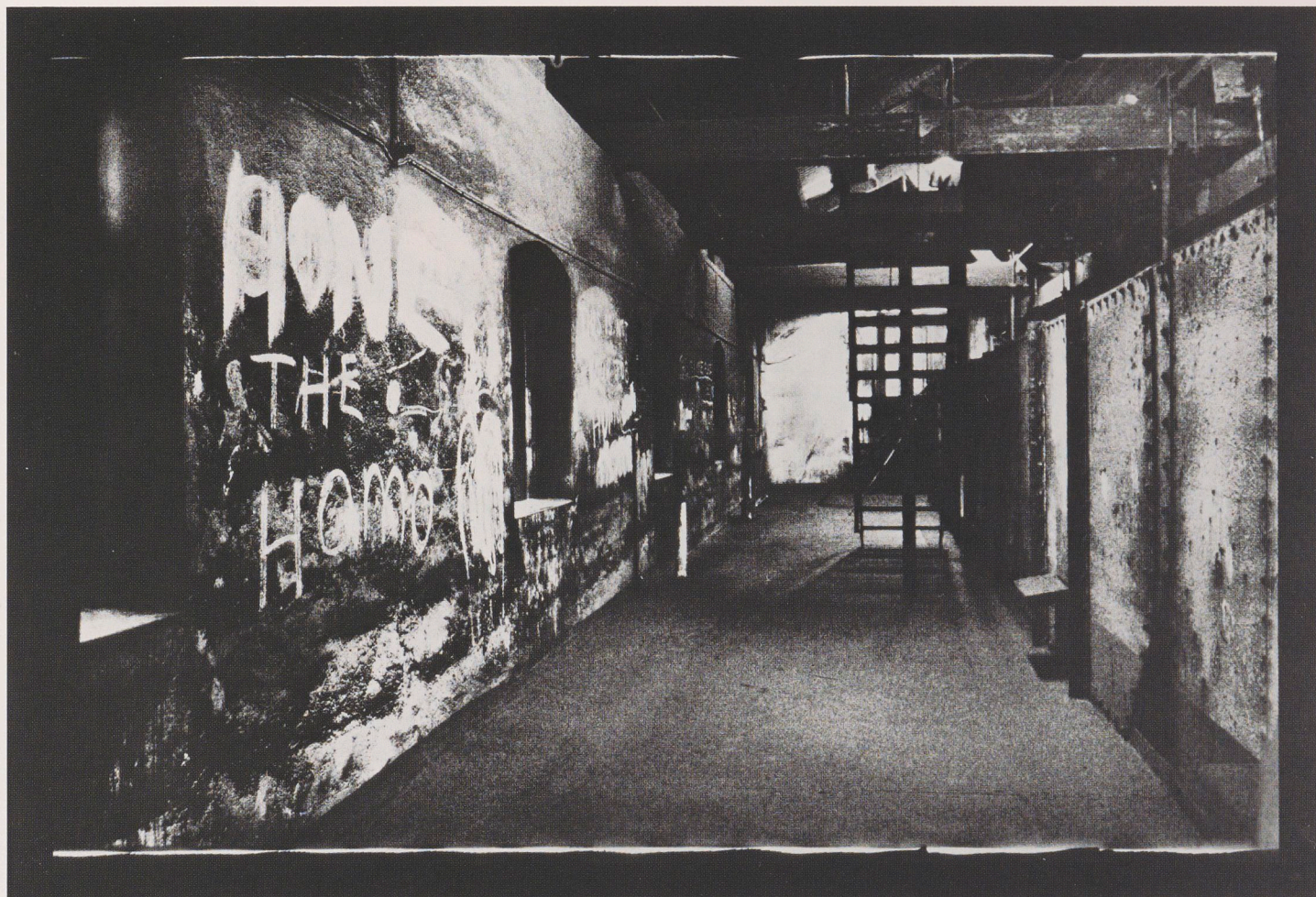
7. The day shift: George Smith, char puller; Peter Mitropoulos, char spreader;
Dennis Kingsford, kiln fireman; Joe Kingi, char attendant



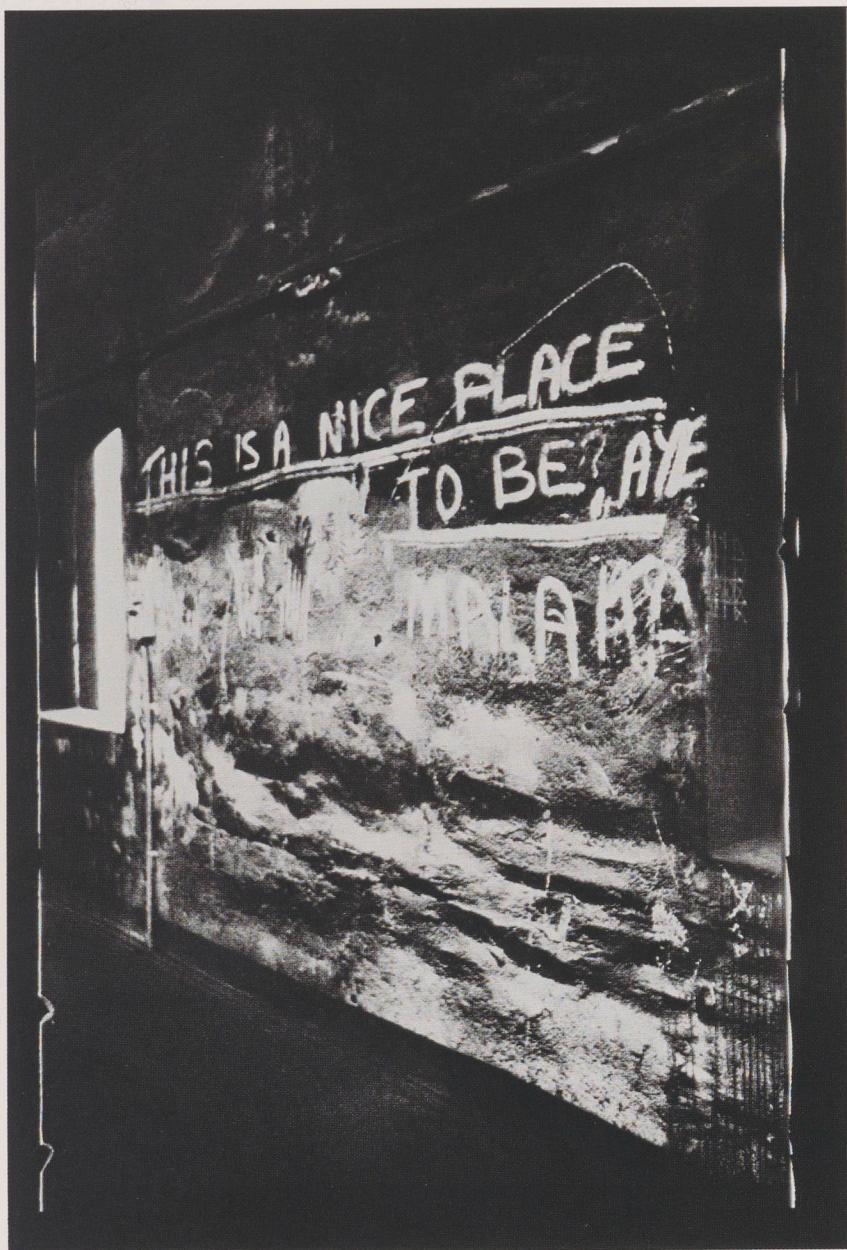
8. Love char



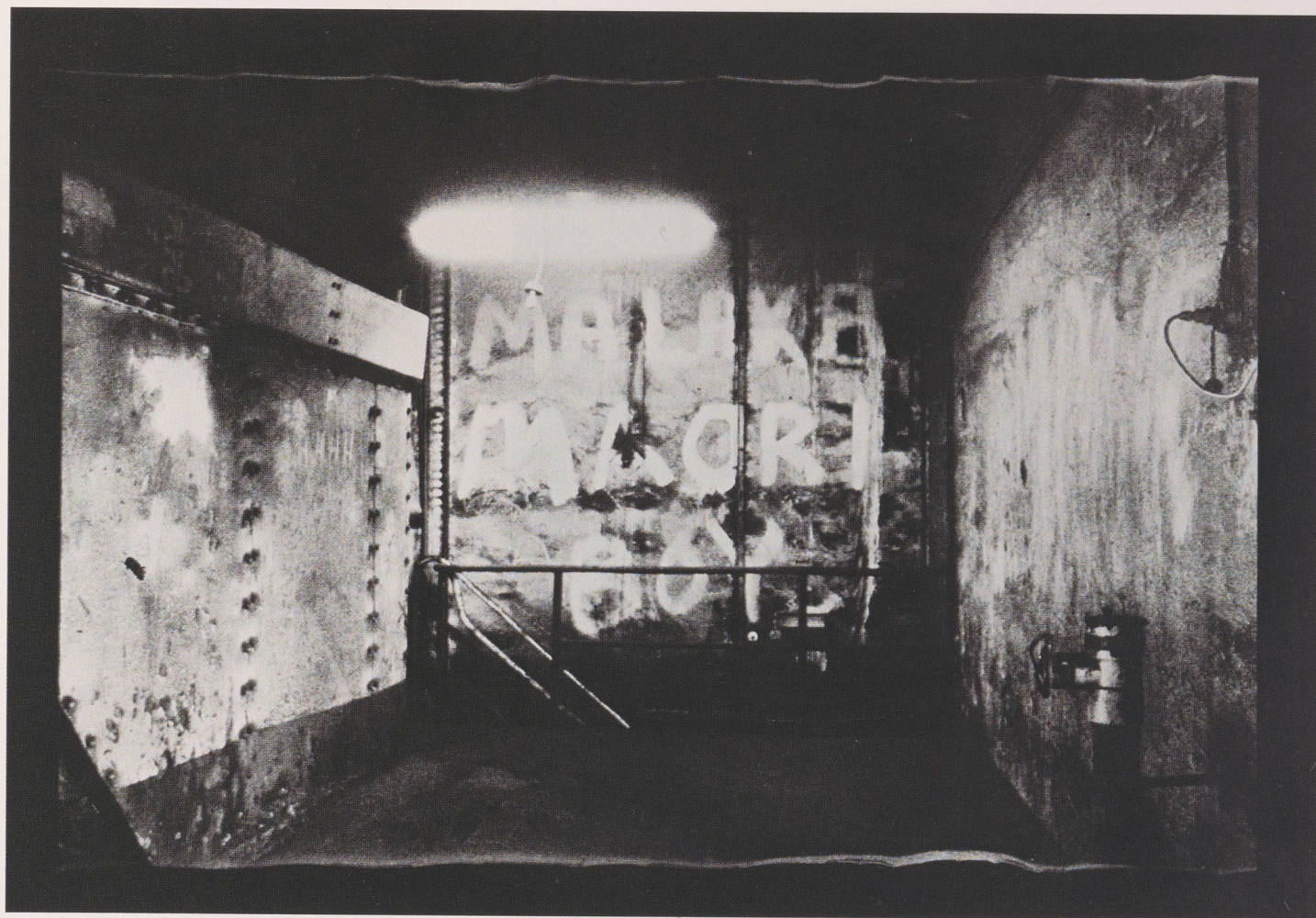
9. Asbestos removal, char cistern floor



10. The wet char hopper floor



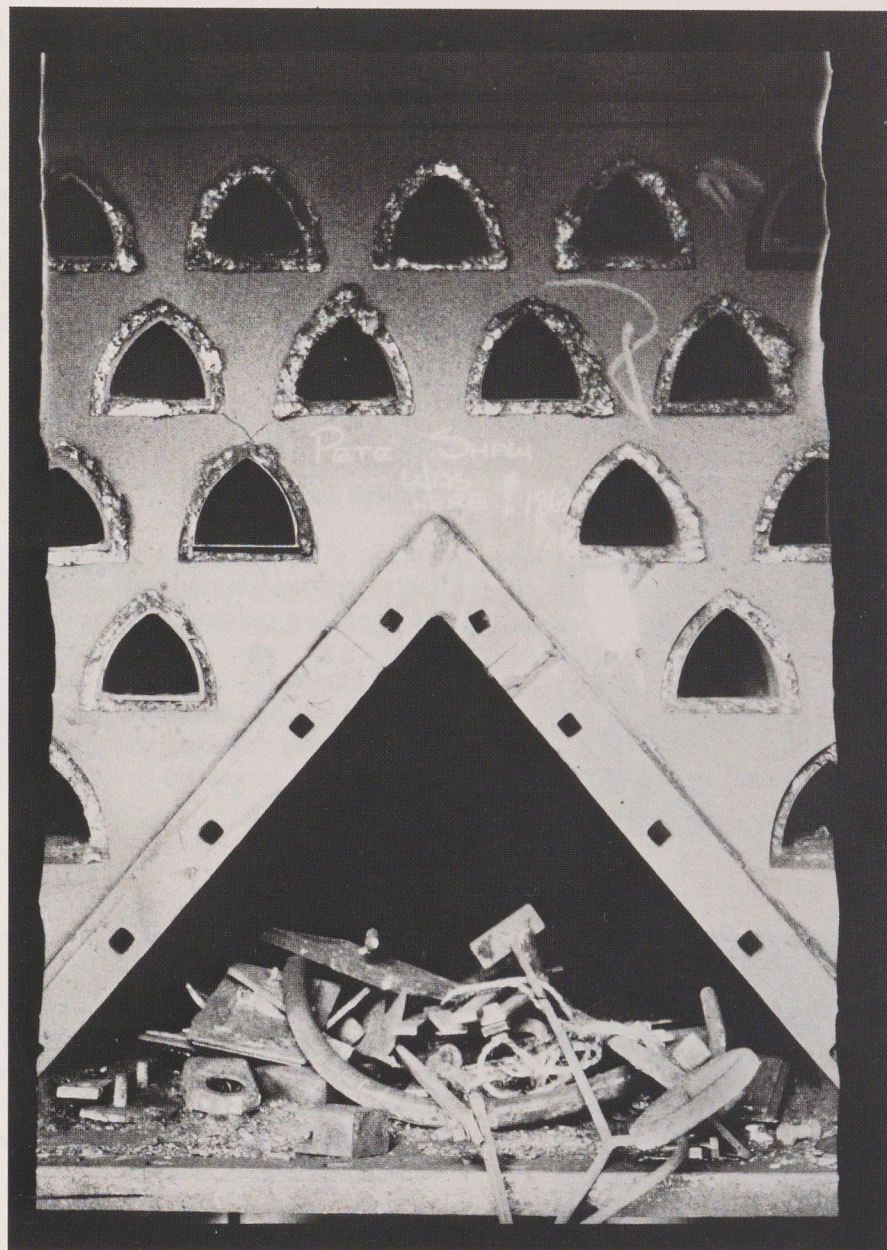
11. Nice Place



12. Malaka Maori Boy



13. Char pulling floor



14. Kiln drier

Biographies

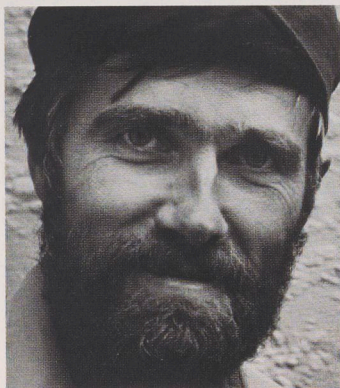
Laurence Aberhart

Born Nelson 1949 and educated there; has worked at a variety of jobs including teaching photography at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts 1977-1981; recipient of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand grants in 1982 and 1984; represented in a number of one-man and group exhibitions; currently living in Russell, Bay of Islands, and working more or less full time at photography.



Gillian Chaplin

Born South Africa 1948; arrived New Zealand 1961; graduated University of Auckland, Bachelor of Arts (History) and Master of Fine Arts (Photography); 1972-1982 exhibited in numerous one-person and group exhibitions, involved in free-lance and magazine photographic work; 1978-80 Director of Snaps Gallery, Auckland; 1981 recipient of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council grant; 1983 one-person exhibition and joint show Auckland City Art Gallery 'Double Doors' with Barbara Tuck; currently working on two books, 'The elegant shed', with David Mitchell, and 'Nga Moerehu', a second work with Judith Binney. Employed as Education Officer at the Auckland City Art Gallery.



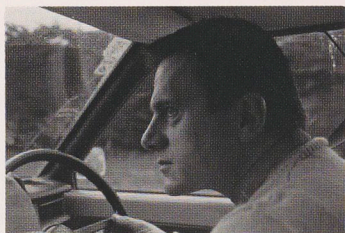
Bruce Foster

Born Wanganui 1948; University of Auckland, graduating Master of Fine Arts 1979; extensively exhibited and published since 1976; recipient of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council awards in 1978 and 1983; joined Tim Severin and photographed the Sinbad Voyage project in 1979; represented in a number of major New Zealand public collections; his first book, *Stockman Country*, published 1983; lives in Lyttelton and works as a freelance photographer.



Anne Noble

Born Wanganui 1954; University of Auckland Elam School of Fine Arts 1977-1980, graduating Bachelor of Fine Arts (Senior Scholar in Fine Arts); 1981 received Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand grant to enable her to photograph the Wanganui River; exhibited at the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, in September 1982. This collection of 65 photographs subsequently toured the country and was purchased for the Sarjeant Gallery collection with a grant from the W. McDuncan Trust. She is currently living in Auckland and working as a freelance photographer.



Peter Peryer

Born Auckland 1941; University of Auckland, graduating Master of Arts in Education 1972; self-taught, beginning drawing and photography in 1973; 1976 first one-person exhibition Snaps Gallery, Auckland; 1978 and 1982 recipient of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council awards, travelled in Europe and the USA; 1982 participated in the Fourth Biennale of Sydney; works reproduced in New Zealand and international photography journals; represented in a number of major New Zealand public and private collections; currently living in Auckland.



RESEARCH LIBRARY
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

