

## Sophie Anderson (1823–1898)

England

### *After the Earthquake* 1884

oil on canvas

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

gift of Viscount Leverhulme, 1924

The isle of Capri, just off the west coast of Southern Italy, was a beacon for artistic glitterati and their patrons during the mid-to-late 19th century. British romantic, neo-classicist artist, Frederic Leighton, for instance, became a habitué and painted dusty sunrise scenes and villa glimpses of its nestled villages set against an azure backdrop of the Mediterranean Sea. John Singer Sargent followed, as did others, turning Capri into an artistic colony with an international cohort of bohemians. Among them was the artist Sophie Gengembre Anderson. She lived and worked in Capri with her husband, fellow artist Walter Anderson, from 1871 until around 1894. Gengembre Anderson produced a volume of Neapolitan genre paintings, uncommon for a female artist, for which there was a market back in England and elsewhere.

During this time along the Italian Riviera, up through France and across and down the southern coast of Spain, there was considerable seismic activity. On 28 July 1883, one of the deadliest earthquakes – measuring 10 on the Mercalli scale, two short of total devastation – struck the isle of Ischia, another mecca for the rich and artistic and not far from Capri, which, along with Naples, would have experienced aftershocks and oceanic disturbance.

Perhaps because of its cache of rich, titled and influential tourists, including princes, counts and millionaires, and due to the rapid communications enabled by the expanding telegraph technology, news of the Ischia quake spread quickly and vividly. Newspaper coverage in Rome, London, New York, Paris – and as far away as Australia and New Zealand – conveyed the pitiful plight of those who had perished, and those who had survived only to then endure the horror of destruction and loss. Charity efforts were mobilised and help sent. But this was too late for the estimated 2300 people who lost their lives, for those left ‘fearfully mutilated’, and for others who had to fend for themselves amid the arid rubble.

A foreign correspondent reporting in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, provided a heartfelt account: ‘I shall never forget the voice in which a decently dressed woman, in reply to my question, said “Non ho più nessuno! Non ho più nessuno!” – all belonging to her had perished. Many of the survivors ramble about in an aimless way, and others have become insane. It is surprising how many old, decrepit men and women there are left.’

Painted in 1884, *After the Earthquake* resists the Romantic, Neo-classical melancholia of ‘ruin’ genre paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries. Instead, it delivers a stark, harsh aesthetic in a realist style. It is a surprising picture from Gengembre Anderson, whose earlier works were often sweet, dainty, detailed and could even be described as somewhat fussy in their adherence to a Victorian attention to precision. By contrast, she clearly found a robustness in her Neapolitan phase. Even so, *After the Earthquake* is especially graphic, perhaps indicating the nascent photographic realism happening contemporaneously. It certainly feels apt for the horror being depicted.

Gengembre Anderson delivers a scene of wreckage with rubble and stone debris sent to the front of the frame, overtaking most of the picture. We can pick out the debris of houses, and once-grand structures with balconies like the Hotel Piccola, where the rich and famous resorted. All is set against the same scintillating blue sea backdrop with a tiny sailing boat still gliding by.

But it is the figure in Gengembre Anderson’s scene that galvanises our attention. The well-dressed woman, stricken and in despair, lies amid the devastated architecture. A door fragment indicates the domesticity of the site. It is a particularly feminine perspective, and it operates in clear contradiction to the languid Neapolitan women, often the subjects of the male-artist imagination and gaze, which exemplified Southern Italian genre paintings. The wretchedness of the scene and the subject’s circumstances indicate neither nostalgia nor fantasy. Modernity – realism – obliterates the fanciful and replaces it with a simple veracity.

**Hélène Binet** (born 1959)

Switzerland, France

***Hadrian's Villa, Rome (1), Hadrian's Villa, Rome (2), Hadrian's Villa, Rome (3)*** 2019

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the artist and Large Glass, London

Ruin holes are lacuna of time – portals that enable the contemplation of history and that which has been transformed through the shifts impinging on empires and environments. They are evidence that nothing is solid nor certain; that time wears away at sureness. They show that time and its companions – catastrophe, neglect, attack, circumstance – will weather and work away at materials and the structures sculpted from them: symbolic of the evolution of civilisations, their aspirations and inevitable collapse.

Hélène Binet photographs the remains of Hadrian's Villa, full now of apertures formed from the crumbling away of walls, ceilings, rooms and canopies. She captures the remaining skeletal architecture as looming husks of dark matter through which the sky appears as if telescoping us to a farther epoch.

Using analogue processes, she emphasises the organicism of her subject, returning the well-made, carefully planned brickwork to stone and earth – emptied out pits of space formed from the framing of vestigial arches and wells. In contrast to paintings in which Hadrian's dwelling provides for bucolic settings of Italian pastoral life, a place where rural folk set up a picnic, or travellers clamber over rubble, Binet imbues her subject with a domineering foreboding. The ruin is no longer a dainty, sentimental grotto consigned to pretty history, cyclical evolution hinted at through verdant growth emerging from mortar cracks, but a barren oracle foretelling new lessons on temporality.

Binet's images avoid the romanticism of ruin-inspired melancholy, so much a part of the 17th and 18th-century psychology. Her abstracted forms – inverting inside and out, playing with the optical oscillation between bulk and void – create a spatial experience of stoic power. The certainty of the *gestalt* is punctured, confronting the viewer with a being and nothingness.