

Leonardo Coccorante
(1680–1750)
Italy

Landscape with Roman Ruins and Figures

oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1961

Unknown artist
Italy

Gaspard Dughet (1615–1675)
Italy

A Classical Landscape with Cascade

date unknown

oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of Sir George Grey, 1888

Hendrik Mommers (1623–1693)
Holland/Netherlands

Landscape with Peasants

oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1961

Andrea Locatelli (1695–1741)
Italy

A Classical Landscape

oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1954

Richard Wilson (circa 1713–1782)
Wales

Hadrian's Villa circa 1775

oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1957

The 'poetic' and the popularity of ruin paintings, the subsequent fashion in landscape design for grottos, temples and architectural fragments punctuating pastures and crafted gardens, the fixation upon empires ravaged by elements and time in Goethe's Roman elegies, Friedrich Schiller and Hazlitt's antiquity melancholia, the poetry of Lord Byron – to mention but a few examples – exemplify the culture of ruinous meditations that bewitched the 17th century.

In the contemplation and existence of ruins, one finds oneself walking between two eternities – one that stretches back millennia and another that proceeds from the moment, as yet unknown and to be encountered. Like Piranesi's small humans, minute and insignificant amidst the cultural rubble of time, the wanderer and connoisseur of ruins senses the grandeur of history and knows they are but a mott in its making. For Diderot, even while a ruin might suggest death and destruction it is a comforting thought and situation nonetheless – one that frees him to be more himself and even contemplate enjoyments without anxiety in descriptions that hint at sexual frisson and liaison. A devil-may-care attitude encouraged by the certainty of that which will eventually crumble and set in train yet newer histories.

Ruin paintings hold to a formulaic convention of showing foliage and nature creeping through cracks, opportunistically finding the potential for regrowth and renewal. Arcadia reclaimed which helps the viewer to imagine possible new worlds and eras emerging from catastrophe and entropy. In contemplating deterioration, we can sigh with some certainty: this too will pass.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778)

Italy

Veduta della fonte e delle spelonche d'Egeria fuor della Porta Capena or di S. Sebastiano (The Fountain and Grotto of Egeria outside the Porta Capena) 1766

from: *Vedute di Roma*

Sepolcro delle tre fratelli Curiati in Albano (Tomb of the Three Curiatii Brothers in Albano) 1765

Tempio di Clitumno tra Foligno e Spoletti . . . (Temple of Clitumnus between Foligno and Spoleto . . .) 1765

Arco di Pola In Istria vincino alla Porta. (Arch of Pola in Istria near the Gate) 1765

Arco di Druso alla Porta di Sebastiano in Roma (Arch of Drusus at the Porta S Sebastiano in Rome) 1765

Rovescio del Tempio di Pola in Istria (Rear View of the Temple of Pola in Istria) 1765

Foro di Augusto (Forum of Augustus) 1765

from: *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali*

Antichita Romane fuori di Roma disegnate ed incise da Giambatta Piranesi, Architetto Veneziano. Parte Seconda (Roman Antiquities outside Rome Drawn and Etched by Giambat'ta Piranesi, Venetian Architect Part Two) 1756

from: *Le Antichità Romane vol IV*

etchings

Mackelvie Trust Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

bequest of Dr Walter Auburn, 1982

Because he was an architect many people think of Giovanni Battista Piranesi as a fantasy builder – in contemporary parlance a ‘paper architect’ – one who designs theoretically rather than with the expectation of actual construction. But in fact Piranesi was s a great ‘unbuilder’ – a lover and depicter of the ruinous and all that is implied in detritus and dishevelled collapse. While some of his famous etching work is devoted to precise, highly detailed renditions of the various Roman monuments and architectural remains he felt bound to record it is in his folios of *capriccios*, *veduta ideate* and *veduta di fantasia* that we find Piranesi unplugged – let loose to action the passing of time through fantastical visions that furnish us with metaphorical prompts.

Masonry, hole-ridden and fallen, crumbling upon itself – the once magnificent evidence of empires built with the vanity and expectation of an eternity of solid rule – are engulfed by Piranesi’s feverish collage of tumbling temporality. From the cracks and destruction of such architectural downfall grow trees, vines, verdant extravagance. Earth, and the nature it nurtures, reasserts itself to admonish the human arrogance that would assume to dominate the living world. Piranesi’s tumble of artefacts amid these urban jungles – sculptures, relief pediments, urns and edifices – manifest an organicism of excess over and through which his tiny humanity must climb and carefully negotiate – precariously temporary in their dwarfed scale and quest to navigate and conquer.

Piranesi was devoted to the evaporative qualities of air and its mutable status. His skills as an engraver were perfected through experience to increasingly set his scenes in the ephemeral fleetingness of waspish, vague lines to give emphasis to the instability of things. His works are theatres of time in which he employs knowledge from his apprenticeship lessons in scenography and artificial, magical depth to the effect of illustrating a universe of culture constantly evolving, ever changing, receding and coming forward and resurrecting itself from shaken grounds.

There can be no better material process for Piranesi’s inventions than etching itself. And as Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan suggested, the medium *is* the message. Over a period of years Piranesi worked and reworked his etching plates to alter, add, erase and invent more content. In this variation of ***Frontispiece: Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive***, a print lifted from the final plate edition, we know that Piranesi has lightened his image, rubbed out portions of the tablet dedication to either acknowledge the death of his patron or to show the opportunity for a new one. He adds figures and removes items. Creates more depth by introducing further background detail and by obliterating other things that appear in previous editions. This final plate scene, if compared with its first iteration, is one of transformation and aging. The whole scene, like the theme of ruination that Piranesi set himself to explore, has literally changed over time to mark the passing of time.

Bill Henson (born 1955)

Australia

Untitled (4th D SH33 N29A) 1992–93

c-type photograph

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

purchased 1994

Bill Henson's suite of works from 1992 draw upon the apocalyptic imaginings of writer JG Ballard. In particular, they seem to quite directly draw upon Ballard's *Crash* with its premise of sexual pleasure derived from his protagonists fetishising the wreckage and mutilations of automobile accidents. Henson's works in this respect join with his precursor Andy Warhol, whose disaster series of car crashes, printed at history-painting scale and in repetition, obsessed upon and celebrated the domestic catastrophe of speed, celebrity and tabloid sensationalism.

Henson photographs his models in erotic and listless poses in the scenography of baroque wastelands made from car wrecks and rubbish dumps. Linking back to mythological and neo-classical salon painting which celebrated the nude in vague gestures towards mythology, Henson's postmodern variations suggest a culture come to its final point where sex and the machine have become blurred, bruised, debased and oddly libido-less.

Henson has zoomed in on the Piranesi-esque figures who lurk in the master's flamboyant cultural rubble, his dishevelled yet somehow tidy account of history. But Henson's chiaroscuro scenes indicate a twilight culture, one less sweetly nostalgic. His photographs exemplify the 'end game' that was much mooted in post-modern theory – the end of history, the end of culture, the sterile reproduction of simulacrum.