

Charles Blomfield (1848–1926)

New Zealand

Rotomahana after the Eruption 1887

oil on canvas

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

The Ilene and Laurence Dakin Bequest, purchased 2019

Self-taught artist Charles Blomfield was convinced of his power of painted depictions over documentary photography, which was quickly overtaking the artist's role as chronicler of place. He was drawn to New Zealand's natural territories and made many expeditions to capture its wonder landscape *en plein air*. In this way he was able to produce numerous series of works that witnessed the changeability of light and mood as nature played upon itself. His style, realistic, detailed and topographical enabled a legacy of many works that show New Zealand's amazing evolutionary geology. In particular, Blomfield was drawn to capture the extraordinary geology of the White and Pink Terraces at Rotomahana. These naturally formed lava steps, which captured light and sun interacting with mineral matter to produce pink and white hues of ethereal quality, were reproduced numerous times by the artist.

In his vast output before and after a volcanic eruption destroyed the terraces he created unique, beautiful and lasting pictures that continue to captivate the viewer. Blomfield brings vivid colouration to his views. The pinks, whites and blues 'like the Heaven on a clear day' of the naturally occurring crystalline pools, in variations of light, dusk and atmospheres astound our modern eye. Before the earthquake Blomfield's pictures were the stuff of fantasy and utopianism.

Painted from the sketches made in the area four months after the Mount Tarawera eruption in June 1886, this scene depicts the ominous steaming remains of Rotomahana – virtually apocalyptic. During the eruption it became the site of a vast hydrothermal blast, responsible for the thick mud that buried the surrounding countryside. As it was then, it is now: volcanos are evidence that New Zealand remains volatile and shaping a geologically young land that is apt to blow.

Laurence Aberhart (born 1949)

New Zealand

Taranaki (with smoke, undated), 1986 1986

from: *Taranaki 1986*

gelatin silver print

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1998

Laurence Aberhart has been drawn to Mount Taranaki, returning numerous times to capture its spectral, apparitional appearance. Using the photographic methodology of available light and time-lapse exposure, in his process Aberhart mimics the dormant yet evolving beauty of the living mountain. As Aberhart's photographs do, Mount Taranaki reveals itself over time. While captured as still and calm – *Too subtle to suspect* – like Emily Dickinson's volcano, one day the mountain may awaken from its smouldering slumber. The romanticism of its sentinel appearance will explode and become violent and deadly.

In his silver gelatin photographs, Aberhart shows a chiaroscuro image of Mount Taranaki that delivers both ethereal mystery and real trepidation. An anxiety well understood by New Zealanders and others who dwell at the edge of ocean basins and live with the prospect of geological disruption and its catastrophic outcomes. Aberhart's ghostly image of the mount – a small peak living on the horizon, misting the sky with light smoke – seems almost insignificant in the far distance, alluringly furtive in its shy, diminutive peeking.

Nevertheless, cities have been buried, mummified, lives lost, terrain rearranged, the earth heaved into new configurations as a result of volcanic eruptions, molten sculpting and tectonic movement. New lands – such as Zealandia, cleaved from Gondwana – carry remnants of this volatility. Volcanos are evidence and activities of an earth unquiet and evolving – shape shifting itself and thermally reacting. New Zealand occupies an active collision zone full of dynamic seismic events – earthquakes, rockslides and eruptions – themselves harbingers of tsunami and deluges. In Aberhart's image Mount Taranaki is surrounded by stillness, but it is merely the tip of a greater mass: a slumbering giant of potency.

Julia Morison (born 1952)

New Zealand

Liqueurfaction I–IX 2011

from: *Monochromes in Liqueurfaction*

liquefaction and tiamaria on aluminium polyurethane laminate, aluminium frames

Courtesy of the artist

Things/Relics I–IX, 2011

from *Things/Relics I–IX*

liquefaction and cement in cardboard boxes

Courtesy of the artist

In the chaos of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake a small and symbolic event occurred in the living-working space of artist Julia Morison. As well as most of her objects and art being shaken and dispossessed of their stability, a cabinet containing a collection of liqueurs smashed to the floor. The contents – crème de menthe, amaretto, black sambuca, grenadine, and others – all manner of exotic syrups smashed and spilled, eventually co-mingling with the liquid muck oozing from the rent underworld, now animate like a horror-movie blob. There is something macabrely expressionist, perhaps even surreal – certainly science fictional – in this image of a potent, alcoholic cocktail meeting a B-grade movie purge, a disequilibrium, a heady intoxication coalescing.

What to do with such earth-shattering pandemonium? Morison's inclination in her art is towards a minimalism – one that often contains or tries to gather the oddments of non-classical, corporeal, untidy nature into an organised state or hermetic object. In the instance of the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, the artistic approach for Morison was to confront the primordial excessiveness created by the earth convulsing and cabinet spewing its contents, to smooth everything out, make stillness and sanity – logic – out of the catastrophe.

Here minimalism has its recuperative moment. A calming monochromatic appearance in which the hectic hangover of tremors and liquefactions is congealed and resolved in an unalarming grey. An undercoat colour, it is the foundation for a renewal, even while it masks the ordeal from which it is derived.

Looking more closely Morison's monochromes reveal an irksome surface. They are made of a kind of weird skin-textured material. In this way, while they inhabit the aesthetic cleanliness of minimalism, they retain the primitive symbolism and matter of the corporeal earth that has been unleashed to grotesquely reclaim cities, towns and places.

In addition to the monochrome works Morison also made a set of sculptures – *Things/Relics I–IX*. Like the soothing minimalism that her monochromes present, *Things/Relics* tidy up the mess and make solid again that which has melted and run amok. Morison gathers more liquefaction and tries to regulate the irregular, creating neat boxes of scooped stuff. Organised, stackable and set – specific objects in the mode of the 'new sculpture' of the 1970s by Donald Judd, Robert Morris and others whose works were also symptomatic of a need to contain and order the mess of atomic era.