

JOHN LEECH GALLERY

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND ART



CNR KITCHENER & WELLESLEY STREETS, AUCKLAND CENTRAL
PO BOX 5441, WELLESLEY STREET, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
TELEPHONE: 64 9 303 9395 FACSIMILE: 64 9 303 9397
INFO@JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ, WWW.JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ

Histories Reprised from art and science

11 November – 4 December 2009

John Leech Gallery

John Keats wrote the revelatory sonnet *On first looking into Chapman's Homer* in October 1816, having been transfixed and excited by Chapman'sⁱⁱ translations of the Greek poet. Clearly, new worlds had been opened up to him as he reputedly stayed up all night reading Chapman and drafting the lines:

*'MUCH have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien'.ⁱ*

Homer lives in Greek antiquity. Chapman translates Homer, Keats cites Chapman and now Keats seems nearby when we look back from our current position at the other side of postmodernism. History here is being re-visited. Certainly, for the last twenty years we have viewed our actions - what we do, what we say and what we produce - as 'text', whose very reading is dependent on the past.

Let us begin with the Romantic Poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. In *Histories Reprised*, I am dipping back into Keats (his contemporaries and his predecessors) and the natural imagery and sense of wonder that he invoked. Their writing paralleled the rich visual imagery of the German Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich in the mid-nineteenth century.

In a 2008 research paper, I suggested that we revisit the period of The Enlightenment 'not to condemn ourselves to repeating these ages, to reliving these ages, but to carry the torch of their intentions'ⁱⁱⁱ. The 'reliving' is simply not possible, but to reprise the spirit of wonder that Cortez's men experienced at Darien^{iv} remains a possibility.

The new works for *Histories Reprised* breathe new life into the romantic cultural and scientific narratives through the currency of overlaid texts. This addition confirms a contemporary relevance in the painted resonant sunsets of the past, the low and fading light, or the mists of waterfalls. These

JOHN LEECH GALLERY

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND ART



CNR KITCHENER & WELLESLEY STREETS, AUCKLAND CENTRAL
PO BOX 5441, WELLESLEY STREET, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
TELEPHONE: 64 9 303 9395 FACSIMILE: 64 9 303 9397
INFO@JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ, WWW.JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ

things speak of the Romantic Sublime - not as something fearful or overpowering, but rather as something nostalgic and wondrous. Indeed, for humans, nostalgia is important: it acts as a metric of communication and memory of past experiences. We remember the moment that we stood before a landscape, transfixed by the awesome view: images of the sublime gently counterweight the frantic nature of our lives. As humans, we always pause and watch the sun set, as if we are hard wired to do so from the primeval cave. Sunset has always been a period of quiet contemplation, where we reflect on time passing. Paintings such as *Slipway piles at Pigeon Island, Dusky Bay*, or, *A view of Fivefingers Point, Dusky Bay*, capture transcendent sunsets along specifically New Zealand shorelines. Dusky Bay, which I visited by boat in 2005, may be regarded as one of the first armatures of European contact as James Cook stationed there on his voyages. These same journeys gave rise to the magnificent marine paintings of William Hodges that are now housed at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London. These paintings were greatly inflected with what the ship's company saw, and with trying to interpret what they saw from a mid-Enlightenment European perspective. Works such as *A View of Cape Stephens in Cook's Straits with Waterspout*, 1776, by William Hodges - a nod to the then currency of science - attempted to visually explain the manifestation of waterspouts that they encountered off the coast. In ways such as this, an enquiring Art History is linked to the enquiring mind of Science. This historic linking is referred to in the subtitle of the exhibition: *Histories Reprised from art and science*.

The Romantic Poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, although not scientists themselves, carried the cultural spirit of the scientific discovery of their Age. One can draw a timeline of Cook's second voyage to the south seas and track the career of his on-board astronomer William Wales (1734-1798), who, post-voyage, took the fantastical stories of albatross and tempests to his probable teaching of an impressionable Coleridge at Christ's Hospital School in London. In ways such as this, our great Pacific was able to virally re-infect enlightened thinking in Europe. The mid-nineteenth century was also a period when scientific study gathered momentum so that towards the end of The Enlightenment the era of the Industrial Revolution challenged and questioned an economic basis for our place in the world. This momentum produced considerable progress for all humankind. In 2009 we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and honour the importance of his theory of 'natural selection' in *The Origin of Species*.

The deep art historical interrogations of how the world works have been mentioned through the paintings of William Hodges. The history of science has always held a similarly deep quest for explanatory meaning in the world and the new works in *Histories Reprised* hold to this. Many paintings have bibliographic references inscribed and so honour the classical scientific research process of building the future incrementally from the past. The large three-panel painting *On writing mathematics* attempts to show the process - of thinking mathematics through, of discovery, of successful proof and of failed proof - using a congealed blackboard manner of erasures, until the text that remains demonstrates a resolved way through calculation to final result. This specific text arises out of my research as a mathematician in statistical modelling with censored data^v. I now, ironically, am applying this mathematics to my work in constructing art market indices. The painting is an attempt at mathematics as art—to capture Archimedes' eureka moment.

The process of painting is one of an active mode of applying paint to canvas. Such processes of painting and text overlay naturally extend to the surface of three dimensional objects. All things may

JOHN LEECH GALLERY

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND ART



CNR KITCHENER & WELLESLEY STREETS, AUCKLAND CENTRAL
PO BOX 5441, WELLESLEY STREET, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
TELEPHONE: 64 9 303 9395 FACSIMILE: 64 9 303 9397
INFO@JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ, WWW.JOHNLEECHGALLERY.CO.NZ

be painted upon, and in this exhibition many historical artefacts are painted on. It has been quite natural for me to engage my collecting interests - for porcelain, bottles, books, stamps, maps and historical artefacts - with my activity as a painter. These things first entered the studio as reference materials to quote from and to nail to the wall to be inspired by. Now, finally, they remain in the studio to be painted on, or called to the service of collage. They provide rich fibre, and in works such as *Rutherford's Library*, consisting of fourteen books placed flat to the wall in an over-painted visual display, the work itself, the process of its making, its open-endedness and its longitudinal nature allow for my continued engagement with it over time. This way of thinking about art-making is one of installation, of the same work in different spaces at different times, or of a work which changes with time as it is shown in different locations.

To be by definition a 'collector' is to harbour a museum aesthetic that involves the scientific recording and cataloguing of works. This impinges on how objects may be brought to the purpose of display with an audience in mind. This notion is sympathetic with the display of objects in an art gallery. Found objects, readymade objects, collected objects, and repainted objects are re-presented and brought to our attention by their very placement in a gallery space. Such objects from the past are re-introduced to the present, and through re-painting, their place re-written, their worth re-valued, their resonance re-empowered. This 'place re-written' is to say that by painting on a 300BC Greek Vase or 1920's Chinoiserie Porcelain, the object is not asphyxiated, but is rather tagged for a new revelatory life. The collector in me says: these things I have brought for you.

©Peter James Smith, 2009

ⁱ Quiller-Couch, Arthur Thomas, Sir. (1919), ed., *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, Oxford: Clarendon

ⁱⁱ George Chapman (1559-1634) wrote poetry and plays in the middle period of The Enlightenment.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, P.J. (2007). 'Rediscovering lines of Longitude—signs of "New Capture" for art practice at postmodernism's demise', in *Visual Animals—Crossovers, Evolution and New Aesthetics*, Ian North (ed), Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia.

^{iv} The Darien mountain range is in the current territory of Panama. Keats incorrectly ascribed the discovery of the Pacific Ocean to Cortez rather than Balboa—but he communicates well the excitement of discovery.

^v Smith, P.J. (2002). *The Analysis of Failure and Survival Data*, Chapman & Hall/CRC Press: Boca Raton