

Wayne Barrar

b.1957

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We look into a mountain landscape, shrouded in mist and cloud. Where are we? This could be an image from an advertisement for the ‘great New Zealand wilderness’ or a scene from Peter Jackson’s *Lord Of The Rings*.

But take a closer look: this is no untouched wilderness. The wooden boardwalk that slices through the bush floor dominates the photograph. It reminds us this is a landscape inhabited by human beings – a landscape tamed and domesticated for the tourist industry.

Wayne Barrar’s subject as a photographer is the New Zealand landscape. But he’s not concerned with the glories of nature, although his images are often very beautiful. Instead, he’s interested in the relationship between culture and nature, and in particular, the marks human beings make on the landscape.

This photograph shows one of the most famous tourist spots in New Zealand, in Fiordland National Park in the South Island. It is a view 19th century painters returned to: artists such as John Gully and Eugene von Guerard. But photographers also made images of the region. In fact, the late 19th century was a time when photography was starting to do the job that traditionally belonged to painting – the job of recording a beautiful landscape for reproduction in books, prints and souvenirs.

This is a history that interests Barrar. When he looks at the work of 19th century New Zealand photographers, such as Daniel Louis Mundy and the Burton Brothers, he sees a landscape in the process of transition – a landscape in the process of being converted from an unknown wilderness to a humanised space, with signs of industry, business and transportation. It’s this same transition in land usage that he documents in his own work.

So what does Barrar do when he comes to photograph a famous landscape in Fiordland? He puts us as viewers squarely in the role of the tourist, about to step forward onto the wooden boardwalk. We have one foot in ‘civilisation’, but we look out to the ‘untouched nature’ that is touted in ads and slogans about New Zealand.

Beneath Bowen Falls To Mitre Peak, Fiordland 2000 is from Barrar’s series, *Landscape Of Change*. In other images we see Mount Ngāuruhoe, glimpsed through a humble farm fence, and the Mōhaka forest, bisected by the grid of a pylon. We admire a stunning waterfall, which just happens to be a spillway from a power station. We never see people in Barrar’s photographs, but their presence is implied by what he shows us. His is a landscape harnessed to serve human needs and demands.

Barrar’s work is motivated, in part, by his concern for an environment which has been a dumping ground for waste or toxic leakage from industrial use. He says, “There is a margin around most of our towns, and along most of our rivers and coasts – a border zone where, until recently, few regulations were enforced and little responsibility was taken”. In his hands, photography is a subtle yet effective tool which encourages us to think about our environment.

Jill Trevelyan

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www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
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Articles:

Strongman, L. (2005). *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, Mountain View Publishing, Auckland, pp. 88–95.

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Web search:

Burton Brothers
John Gully
Peter Jackson
Daniel Louis Mundy
Eugene von Guerard

