

Geoffrey Notman

b.1961

Diploma Visual Communication: Wellington School of Arts

Although we don't see human figures in Geoffrey Notman's pictures, the V8s, caravans, Landrovers and backyard-built boats that furnish his scenes tell us that the gas-guzzling Kiwi family is about. More often than not they are at the beach or close to water. Kawhia is a fairly remote fishing settlement on a tidal harbour: a mix of permanent housing and pleasingly shabby holiday baches. Notman's project is to record this kind of everyman's beachscape that he grew up with and cherished, before it disappears.

Around New Zealand's coastline, vernacular or 'home-made' beach architecture is giving way to expensive, over-scaled housing. Even the egalitarian beach motor camp (once a guarantee of access to affordable beach holidays) is under threat, because the land is so valuable that it is being sold to developers.

Whether you call it destruction or development, it is happening fast. Given Notman's painstaking painting technique, he could not hope to keep pace. But because he works from photographs taken on extensive travels around the country he has a backlog of this kind of imagery that will see him working long after many of the places themselves have become unrecognisable. The paintings will be memorials to their subjects. Notman knows that his paintings probably can't change anything, but his images can help people remember and make them realise that something of value is being lost: heritage.

People are drawn to the realism of Notman's pictures and their obvious technical skilfulness. Because his paintings are so realistic and because he uses photographs as source material it is easy to assume that they are Photo-Realist pictures. But they differ from classical Photo-Realism and other contemporary practices – such as German, Gerhard Richter's – that explore the interplay between photography and painting. Photo-Realism deliberately incorporates the look of the photographic reproduction itself: the optical distortions and minute blurs that occur when a photograph is enlarged become an important part of the painting's form and significance. While Notman seeks to make his subject as realistic as possible, he does not try to make his painting 'look' like a photograph.

Notman's paintings are extraordinary in their stubborn ambition to 'represent' ordinariness. Their intensity comes from concentrated application of impersonal and efficient marks, made for no other purpose than to render the object. A background as an illustrator has given him a powerful visual vocabulary and a respect for the craft of realism, but Notman isn't expressing himself with paint; nor does he want to introduce any idea or irony between the viewer and the object. What you see is what you get. No-nonsense renderings they may be, but in Notman's hands unremarkable subjects can yield up the kind of strangeness that happens when something is looked at long enough.

Technical skill combined with accessible subject matter give Notman's art wide appeal. His paintings strike a chord well beyond the borders of the contemporary art world. However, Notman isn't motivated by a desire to please but, rather, by deep affection for coastal heritage, tinged with sadness at its slow fade from our culture.

Gerald Barnett

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Photo-Realism

Gerhard Richter

