MICHAEL SHEPHERD

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Still Lies: 17 Paintings by Michael Shepherd 1992-1999

Tracking the Plenipotentiary's footsteps through the colourful Islands 1996, oil on linen
Private collection

False things are so much like the true... that the wise should not trust themselves upon the precipice.[1]

Meticulous and enigmatic, Michael Shepherd's paintings occupy a fertile region between past and present, fact and fiction, truth and illusion. The seventeen works selected for this exhibition take the form of maps, postcards, treaties and other official documents, charting the complex and intricate history of conflict, confusion and negotiation between colonised and coloniser in the post-colonial Pacific. Initiated within the genre of traditional still life painting, Shepherd's works extend beyond its conventional frontiers, becoming contradictory and challenging monuments to an elusive and compromised history.

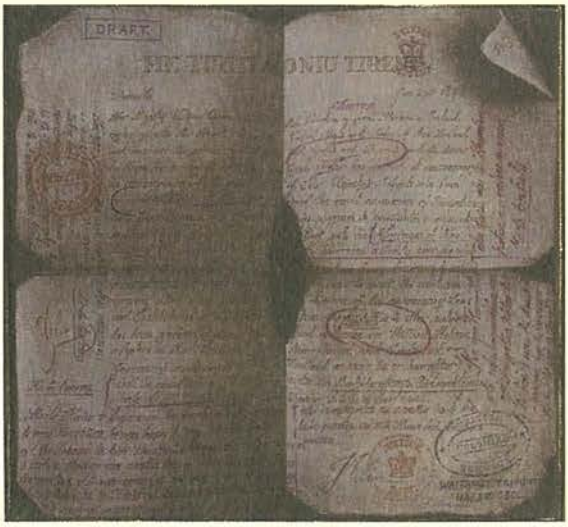
Although Shepherd attended the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland between 1974 and 1979, much of the calm potency of his work can be attributed to a previously established interest in the work of European artists such as Vermeer, Chardin and Morandi. Awarded a Queen Elizabeth Arts Council Travel Grant in 1982, Shepherd travelled to Europe to study the materials and methodology of 17th century Dutch painting at the Rijksmuseum's Central Research Laboratory in Amsterdam. The influence of this study, and his lifelong interest in the still life, can be clearly traced in Shepherd's early works, where a variety of familiar objects emerged from a painstakingly layered paint surface that seemed to threaten and envelop them. These works, with their strongly allegoric and narrative feel, revealed a close alliance with the still life genre, yet focussed on objects with peculiarly personal resonance, such as a Meccano crane, an ANZAC poppy or a cotton-reel 'tractor'. In this way, they differed from the conventional vanitas, in which the artist chose objects for their symbolic content to illustrate the transience of earthly life, rather than to provoke emotional associations and recollections.

[1] *Cicero (106 -43BC)*

The objects in Shepherd's first paintings were drawn from his childhood and family and, while they were treated realistically, they were often placed in isolation within an almost empty compositional field, with inexplicable and distorted shadows creating an atmosphere of disquiet and anxiety. Distinct from the confidently physical presence of the material possessions displayed in the conventional still life, these objects existed within a far less stable context, blurring the lines of experience, memory and imagination.

Long considered to be the lowest visual art genre of all, the still life has traditionally been isolated from, and unfavourably compared to, history painting. In works from the early 1990s, however, Shepherd seeks to combine the two, investigating early post-colonial history through meticulously replicated postcards and photographs. In *A Colonial Male's Colonial Mail (Inheritances)* (1993/4), Shepherd acknowledges the legacy left by his ancestors and considers more generally the development of a uniquely New Zealand male identity. A series of picture cards, each depicting a significant event in early New Zealand history, themselves become part of that narrative, as Shepherd 'mails' them to himself from his birthplace, Ngaruawahia, attempting to come to terms with his own connection to the area's past through the formative moments of its history. One panel, though 'posted' from Ngaruawahia, has travelled to Taranaki via New Plymouth - an unlikely journey which highlights the difficulty of gaining a valid sense of the past through second-hand sources and static two-dimensional images. This sense of frustration is reinforced through one of the handwritten 'addresses', which reads: "Michael Shepherd, /In vain pursuit/ Taranaki". The impediments to both human curiosity and academic research posed by the concealing palimpsest of history are acknowledged in the artist's lament that: "All I can do is echo history or accrete on history, but I can't reconstruct or bring the past alive, not for a second, not a moment". [2]

[2] *Contemporary New Zealand Art 2, Elizabeth Caughey and John Gow, Bateman, 1997 p.42*



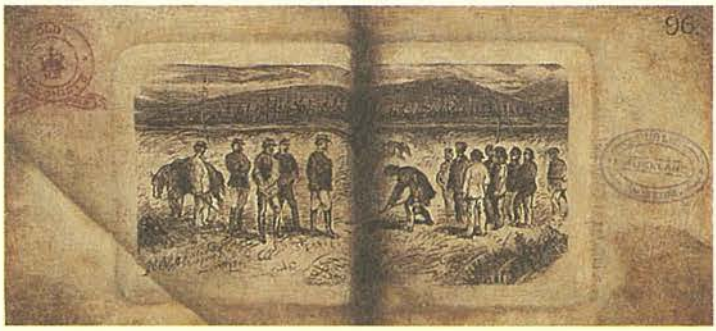
Founding Document 1996, oil on linen
Collection of the artist

Shepherd's use of the still life genre to translate the hazards of using inanimate objects to represent history is maintained in his latest works, in which seemingly 'authentic' documents purport to record a sealed and uncontestable past. In oblique references to the gradual loss of public memory about some of the most important moments in New Zealand's history- the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, the New Zealand, First and Second World Wars - these fragile, faded and forged documents highlight the increasing distance in terms of social consciousness between past and present. Difficulty of reading (when folds of paper or the false patina of age make the text illegible) becomes a metaphor for the increasing ignorance, either deliberate or unavoidable, of later generations about the historical events, often characterised by great personal sacrifice, that shaped this nation. In contrast to 17th century still lifes

which used allegory to assist Christians in gaining a higher moral understanding, Shepherd's strange relics cultivate a loss of faith, heightening our awareness that history, like truth, is " rarely pure and never simple"[3].

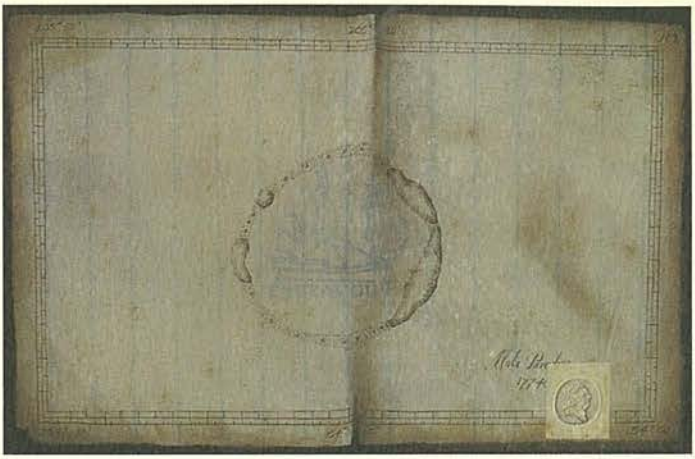
The fastidiousness with which Shepherd replicates the paper, stamps, seals and aged appearance of his painted 'documents' contrasts with, but ultimately reinforces, his central theme: that a single, definitive, 'true' story of the past can never be told, and has never, in fact, existed. By creating such illusory works, Shepherd plays with the fact that painting is essentially an exercise in translation, territory where 'truth' of any kind is ultimately elusive, despite the trappings of authenticity. The deception is double-fold: not only do his paintings 'pretend' to be objects, but the documents he has chosen (maps, treaties etc) involve us in a wider myth; that physical evidence, however genuine, can ever accurately represent history. Works such as *Treaty* (1996), in which apparently authoritative language is rendered illegible by the passage of time, and an official seal of the English Crown is revealed to be counterfeit, challenge the authenticity of all historical documents when faced by the rigours of time and changing social attitudes. *Foxing - Surrender of William Thompson* (1996) likens the gradual deterioration of paper over time to the mutation, and occasionally deliberate distortion, of historical 'facts' . Shepherd's composition is taken directly from an image in the 1865 'London Illustrative News', in which Tamehana (Thompson is the closest English transliteration) is shown laying down his taiaha in front of General Carey. Careful observation reveals that Tamehana lays the weapon down the wrong way round, suggesting a miscommunication between the original sketcher and the London illustrators. Reflecting the way attitudes can affect visual representations over time, the original artist portrayed the European figures as towering over the Maori in height, a hierarchical distortion subsequently 'corrected' by Shepherd.

[3] *Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 1, 1895*



Foxing - Surrender of William Thompson 1996, oil on linen
Collection of the artist

A more deliberate kind of deception is evident in *Agreement* (1996) in which a document has been drawn up for the sale of land, which is, in reality, located within a swamp. Despite the signatures and elaborate seals provided by both parties, the document is marked "Under Claim, Waitangi Tribunal", suggesting that its legality has been called into question. As a reminder that any agreement is only as good as the paper it is written on, Shepherd highlights the potential impotence of such a document when the parties in question do not act in good faith. This suggests that the integrity of any agreement lies in the honour of those who sign it (and those who follow after them), rather than in the diplomatic accoutrements of stamp, seal and signature.



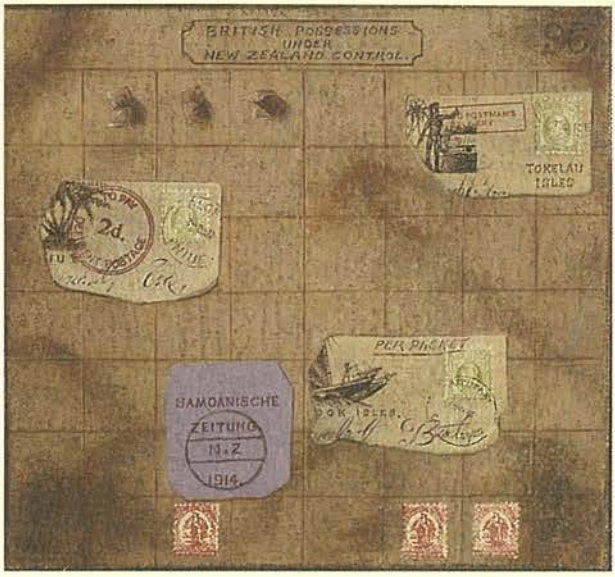
Blue Lagoon 1998, oil on linen
Collection of the artist

Further exploring this appearance of verity, Shepherd's *Watercolour* (1998) is a painting within a painting, recalling the Dutch bedriegertje, or 'little trickster'. By creating what appears to be an authentically aged painting, Shepherd highlights the layers of translation which occur within painting, and all acts of representation, tainting any attempts to describe reality, especially the past. This is reinforced by the fact that the painting's mount has been 'removed', revealing the artist's private daubings on the paper beneath. With the benefit of this privileged view, we discover that the colours which make up the ocean scene relate directly to three traditional colonising nations. 'English red', Prussian blue' and 'French ultramarine' allude to the territorial division

of land by colour on empirical maps and therefore the importance of the image, or 'national brand', in establishing and asserting ownership. The 'painting's' title, 'Sunset', and the looming red clouds on the horizon, lend these marks an ominous quality heralding, perhaps, the end of an era, whilst a prominent Foreign Office stamp suggests an ownership that extends beyond land into culture.
In *Blue Lagoon* (1998) the very paper a Pacific atoll is charted upon (and made a prospect for colonisation) bears the prominent watermark of Cook's Endeavour, a potent symbol of the prolific, and often damaging, carving up of the Pacific that occurred during the age of colonisation. The circular island group Shepherd has christened "Motu Paradiso" is, in fact, imaginary - an acerbic reference to both the rapacious hunger for new resources and the search for an exotic island paradise that characterised European navigation and colonisation in the Pacific from the 18th century onwards.

Throughout his paintings, Shepherd reminds us that the historical 'truth' we study and pass on has been written (and censored) by the victorious - the traditional image of History in baroque and medieval art was actually derived from the winged Victory, who recorded the victor's deeds on a shield.[4] A graphic illustration of cartography as colonizer can be seen in the painting *Old Values* (1997), in which Shepherd depicts a proposal (not taken up) to design the streets of Ngaruawahia in the form of the Union Jack. Stamped with the motto 'public trust', this document is a deft illustration of the crude (and often absurd) attempts by colonial leaders to impose European measures and standards upon a culture with existing traditions and values. Providing a counterpoint to this, Shepherd includes a bank note devised and issued by the Tainui tribe - an example of the willingness of some tribes to adapt and exploit the tools of Imperialism.

[4] *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art, James Hall, London, 1974, p.154*



Islands 1996, oil on linen
Private collection

Subverting and undermining conventional notions of authenticity, Shepherd's illusory paintings expose and explore the fabricated nature of history, recalling the observation by Edmond de Goncourt that "Historians tell stories of the past, novelists stories of the present"[5]. By combining the methodology and character of traditional still life painting with a contemporary mistrust of the integrity of historical 'truth', he invites us to look again, both at our past and at the 'evidence' that claims to represent it, in the hope of discovering what has been lost in the translation.

Felicity Milburn

[5] *Edmond de Goncourt, Journal.*

Bibliography

Michael Shepherd was born in Hamilton in 1950, and graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours) from Elam, University of Auckland in 1979. In 1982, he was awarded a Queen Elizabeth Arts Council Travel Grant, which he used to study 17th century Dutch painting materials and techniques in Amsterdam. He has exhibited throughout New Zealand since his first solo show at Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, in 1980. Shepherd's work has been purchased for private collections within New Zealand and internationally, and is held in most major national public collections, including those of Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

Selected Solo and Group Exhibitions

New Zealand Images of War, 1989
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North (national tour)

Souvenirs of Time, 1991
Contemporary Centre for Art, Hamilton & Rotorua Museum of Art and History, Rotorua

Signatures of Place - Paintings & Place-names, 1991
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Real Vision - Historical and Contemporary Realist Painters, 1993
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch

A Very Peculiar Practice, 1995
City Gallery, Wellington

The Nervous System, 1995
Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth & City Gallery, Wellington

Michael Shepherd, 1996/7
School of Fine Arts Gallery, University of Canterbury, Christchurch

Dream Collectors - One Hundred Years of New Zealand Art, 1998
Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington (national tour).

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