



Figure 1. Thomas Lord, *Untitled Totara 3*, digital photograph.

TOTARA: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THOMAS LORD AND MARK BOLLAND, JUNE 2015

Mark: Thom, your new project has begun with photographs that isolate a single, giant totara, a tree in a tiny forest remnant in Pounaweia, in the Catlins. Do you consider this project to belong to that category of photography sometimes called 'monumentary'? I am thinking of the archives of Bernd and Hilla Becher, as being exemplary in this respect – they isolated individual industrial structures and photographed them as if they were sculptures, or, more precisely, monuments. Their monuments were testifying to industries that were disappearing from Europe and North America at that time. Yours are even more rare in New Zealand right now.

Thomas: Yes Mark, there are aspects of this project which could certainly fit into that category. Firstly, unlike the Bechers, I am not approaching this project adhering to a systematical composition; however, I do feel that there is a sculptural element to this photographic process and I'm not uncomfortable linking it to the 'monumentary.' When you consider the totara as a monument it connects us to histories and natural heritage, which then returns you to question the current situation and the lack of trees of this age throughout New Zealand. Old podocarps, such as totara, are relatively rare. The Catlins conservation park, which is located a little further south from Pounaweia, is one area where we can encounter these ancient trees. That park is an area that is one of the last patches of east coast forest that hasn't suffered from heavy deforestation. I feel in general that our endemic forests are quite often overlooked, but they are as unique as the birds that inhabit them.

M: On the one hand, the giant totara in these pictures is a synecdoche: a single tree standing in for a whole ecosystem. But also, the isolated matriarch or patriarch is a link to an ancient lineage, connecting us to an ancient world. Do you see these trees as exemplars or archetypes? Or perhaps they are more like portraits? They might be both of course – the sonnet that uses details to describe a lover's body is a kind of portrait, after all.

T: This is an important discussion. Of course they represent the whole ecosystem and this is something I've considered by including hints of other plants, usually just leaves, within the scene. However, by studying the totara from different angles I am looking for something different or unique to portray. I am aware of forest lore having meaning for different people throughout New Zealand, and by isolating the tree it is hard not to think of them as portraits. To answer your question, Mark, I feel that they are both portraits and exemplars, and I hope that as portraits they can engender thoughts of a wider context.

M: Certainly the portrait can function as an exemplar and archetype. It can be generic and specific at the same time. Think of the portraits that August Sander made of people in Germany in the 1920s and 30s, for example. One of Sander's books was called "The Face of Our Time" (*Antlitz der Zeit*, 1929). As you know, he was also an instigator of the methodical approach, a kind of taxonomical photography, adopted by the Bechers. That work was characterised by a certain 'flatness' or evenness of treatment – both Sander and the Bechers developed a pictorial style that equated to objectivity. They prioritised the subject over their own subjectivity. By introducing light that you control, you have departed from this mode significantly. The flash introduces not just subjectivity, but also a certain sense of drama to your pictures. It is important for you to dramatise the tree in the picture?

T: If, for example, I was to approach this series without a flash, Thomas Struth's *New Pictures from Paradise* (first exhibited in 1999) comes to mind. In this series Struth focuses on forests from different parts of the world. These very dense images make it difficult to isolate individual forms, as layers of plants prevent any certainty in determining



Figure 2. Thomas Lord, *Untitled Totara 2*, digital photograph.

the space. For me, as mentioned earlier, it is important to isolate the chosen tree from its surroundings. To find the trees that I'm looking for you usually have to navigate through smaller plants before you can encounter them. To approach this project with the same methodical approach as, say, the Bechers, I would need a clear path from a distance to enable me to depict the whole tree. Thankfully this isn't the case. By controlling the light around the tree with flash, I'm not only looking to isolate it but also do so in the most respectful and least destructive way possible. In dramatising the tree I want to picture it in a new light, literally, but also in a way which can resemble the awe that can be felt while being in its company. I think back to being 12 and experiencing what Goldie did with his portraits of kaumatua, and like Hayou Miyazaki does in his film *Princess Mononoke*, like I felt when I heard kiwi in the bush for the first time at Rakiura. I'm looking for a way to express those same feelings in the portraiture of trees.

M: Yes, unlike Struth's series or even some of my own work, that both concentrate on the depiction of the ecosystem as a complex intertwining of elements, by bringing your own lighting and getting close up, you are getting decidedly *personal*, to create pictures that have more in common with a certain kind of dramatic studio portraiture or cinematography, than they do the 'documentary style.' Do you feel it is important for you to align the pictures with those kinds of fictions? Another way to put it might be to ask: do you feel that staying away from a certain kind of 'documentary' image is a way of staying away from a whole series of, what you might call, 'postcolonial problems,' as well as making the subject explicitly subjective? Not to suggest that you are avoiding something, but rather that not every photograph made in New Zealand has to treat it as a site of specific historical significance. It can still *become* something else, something new. Particularly in the forest where all kind of magic can still happen, especially with light.

T: It was during my time living in Japan where the idea for this project arrived. I experienced different kinds of



Figure 3. Thomas Lord, *Untitled Totara 1*, digital photograph.

tree ritual, tree tourism on a national scale and the idea of *shinrin-yoku* (literally, 'forest bathing' for stress relief and improved health). My thoughts then returned to New Zealand and how the ancient trees here do not necessarily receive the same attention. I'm hoping to make images that allow for contemplation and feel that the subject matter is beyond documentary. In terms of 'postcolonial problems,' I'm sure that most images made in New Zealand, whether they be documentary or in the studio, will have to at some point have that conversation and, for me, being aware of it is very important. It should come as no surprise that I'm fascinated and driven by the forest, its mysteries and the Māori lore it brings with it, and the fact that I'm using the forest as a temporary studio follows on from that. The forest where this totara stands also has my grandparents' ashes in it. Their spirit lives there now and I feel it when I'm back there. I am looking for ways to express a love and a respect for trees, and in a way that is similar to other cultures' love and respect for their ancestors. Many cultures also have trees in a lineage from their gods, and I respect that too. With that in mind, I will borrow some words from the painter Don Binney: I agree with his idea of "trying to re-celebrate the sacral and the mythopoetic."¹ Derek Jensen, the Pope, and so many other writers are currently writing about the need to go beyond 'us and them,' they are calling for a return of a spiritual relationship with nature. This is bigger than a discussion about postcolonial issues – this a post-postcolonial view that we can and should re-imagine ourselves as part of a larger worldview.

M: Agreed. I think it is well established, in ancient cultures and contemporary science, that nature is good for us. Literally. You already mentioned *shinrin-yoku*. I think that one of the great sacrifices of modernity has been to lose touch with 'the natural world' and with that feeling, and also with our ancestors. Trees such as this ancient totara represent a link to both those interconnected pasts. This is not so much a 'post colonial' problem as a 'post nature'

problem: The tree represents a link to the world before the anthropocene, before our relationship with the world around us changed so drastically. Is that what you are saying? And, perhaps, you are also suggesting that this is a pilgrimage for the twenty-first century, one we should all go on.

T: Yes, I'm interested in the disconnection we seem to have slipped into. A recent example of this was when I witnessed walkers shouting at korimako and other birds to be quiet on the Abel Tasman Track, an unconscious act of trying to get to the finish line without experiencing any part of the journey. I'm not suggesting that these images will catalyse any pilgrimages. However, they've become a vehicle for me to research, reconnect and re-celebrate more about my past as well as that of the country I live in and the current state of its ecosystems, something I look forward to continuing with as this project develops.

Thomas Lord is a technical teacher in the photography studio at the Dunedin School of Art. As well as photography, Thomas has held exhibitions in painting where nostalgia forms a common thread between the two media. He holds a BVA from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand.

Mark Bolland is an artist, writer and a lecturer in photography. He is a Senior Lecturer in Photography and electronic arts at the Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic.

1 Damian Skinner, *Don Binney: Nga Manu/Nga Motu – Birds/Islands* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), 35-6.