

CELEBRATING WOOD
BACK TO THE FUTURE

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Laurence Aberhart photographs accompanied by museum / gallery collection items
and scientific exhibits selected by the host venues in response to the photographs

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Introduction

Linda Tyler

In John Johns' aerial view of Kāingaroa State Forest being harvested in 1960, the trees form their own map over the wrinkled surface of the land. Scrupulous boundaries are observed where clear felling has occurred, quilting a patchwork from squares of green and brown seamed by forestry roads. Down at ground level, the plantations of *Pinus radiata* seem endless; trees are the whole world, but they are a world that is far from indigenous to this land.

Visiting New Zealand on board the *Endeavour* in 1769, the English botanist Joseph Banks joined Captain James Cook in exclaiming over the potential they saw in "the immense woods, lofty trees and the finest timber" of native forests. By 1840, fires had halved that verdant cover to clear space for Māori settlement. Soon, phalanxes of masted ships were tied to the shore in the Kaipara, encircling giant floating rafts of thousands of kauri logs destined to become gleaming floors in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Brisbane.

Now, less than a quarter of our

country's area remains forested with the species that Banks painstakingly depicted in his *Florilegium* and gloried in as "new to science" 250 years ago. As well as the excellent building material to be found by milling a kauri tree, kahikatea, rimu and totara were logged for their utility in construction, while rata and manuka fuelled the cooking and heating in every cottage and whare. These native timbers seemed to be a limitless resource for building New Zealand and keeping New Zealanders warm and fed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Climate change and disease now pose the biggest threat to forests. Gretel Boswijk of the University of Auckland Tree Laboratory outlines kauri's lacy melody of environments past in her essay for this catalogue on "Wood, kauri, tree rings" here while Ariane Craig-Smith and Chris McBride of The Kauri Project warn of the spread of the pathogen introduced in the 1950s causing kauri dieback in their page in this publication.

Reddish brown rimu succeeded its blonder brother as the favoured material



Carved headboard #1, Maraeroa, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, April 1982

for housing, deployed in framing, weatherboards, flooring, doors and panelling, with a peak in production reached just after the Second World War. For this publication, Catherine Kirby of the New Zealand Tree Project at the University of Waikato has crafted a paeon to the rimu of the region's Pureora Forest which was opened up for logging in 1946. Rimu furniture proliferated: the glacial interior of the stone-clad concrete Arts building for Auckland University College, (designed by Melburnians Roy Lippincott and Edward Billson and opened in March 1926), had its glacial interior warmed by the glow of locally manufactured rimu tables and chairs, laboratory benches and stools.

Katy Wallace, who rebuilds found furniture from this era to her own designs, titles her essay "Can't see the wood for the logs", suggesting that despite our timber tradition, we neglect our wooden heritage in favour of focussing on forests and their yield. Her writing is prefaced appositely by a colour photograph of one of Harlem Shine's carved and painted flotsam logs washed up on Ohope Beach.

Indeed, logging has long preoccupied New Zealanders. To supplement the dwindling supply



Exterior, 'Eripitana', Te Whaiti, Urewera, 18 June 1982



Interior, Shackleton's hut, Cape Royds, Ross Island, Antarctica, 1 December 2010

of natives, the Colonial Government experimented with economic botany in the Wellington Botanic Garden as early as 1865. Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) was confirmed as an ideal import for New Zealand conditions, maturing faster here than it did in its home of California. From 1899 it flourished in the volcanic plateau where acidic soils thwarted agriculture. Enthused, the government established the largest radiata plantation in the world at Kāingaroa – 188,000 hectares – and mills were built at Tokoroa (Kinleith) and Kawerau (Tasman).

Now wood products are chasing dairy and meat as New Zealand's third largest export earner with 1.8 million hectares or 7% of our land area given over to growing timber. In 1952, Waipoua Kauri Forest was made a sanctuary and since 2002, only sustainable logging of native trees has permitted on private land. New Zealand has good reason to celebrate wood: it propped us up in the past, and signposts our future, but we need to pay attention to what it represents.

As the photographer Laurence Aberhart astutely observes, wood wears its history proudly in this land. His essay here entitled (with a nod to Marcel Proust) "Remembrance of Things Past", dips into a Nelson childhood steeped in the scents, sights and sounds of old wooden buildings. These imprinted memories render his image of the scarred and lanolin-rubbed timbers of the 1889 woolshed at Kuriheka, with its plaques to the shearers who laboured there, redolent of a history shared with all New Zealanders.

Timber's properties are an excellent metaphor for the continuation of traditions of use themselves where the emphasis is on the product rather than the producers. Preferred by Māori carvers for waka and wharehau because it is lighter than kauri, the straight-grained tōtara is also stronger and more resistant to rot. Accordingly, the



Shearing stalls, Kuriheka Station, North Otago, 14 April 1989



Carvers, Motuti, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, 29 April 1982



Nature Morte (silence), Savage Club, Wanganui, 20 February 1986

Aberhart photograph entitled *Carvers, Motuti, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, 29 April 1982*, shows eight modern poupou posed centre stage illuminated by a single incandescent bulb, while the carvers themselves are hard to see, pushed to the sides, and silhouetted into darkness against the natural light admitted by the shed's windows. The vigour of the carvings themselves come to symbolise the revival of marae in the north.

The technology Aberhart uses to create his enduring black and white images is anchored in the past and cannot be deployed spontaneously like a modern hand held camera. His 8 x 10" format view camera perches on a tripod at head height, allowing the photographer to clamber under a black cloth to examine his subjects reflected from the lens onto a glass in front of him.

Carefully composed, and using only available light so that exposures can take hours, his photographs are a bulwark against forgetting. Each one is tagged in its title with the specificity of place and season down to the day, month and year just as each detail from the negative is passed on to the same-size contact print. Daylight embalms the scene, yet connotes the associative sound of seconds ticking by. Imagery in *Nature Morte (silence), Savage Club, Wanganui, 20 February 1986* suggests a stopped clock, while Aberhart's Frank Hurley-like photograph of the interior of Shackleton's hut at Cape Royds is a homage to the act of preservation itself where modern-day conservators have laboured to restore and replace the artefacts to re-create a moment in time.

An image such as Mere Paraki's tōtara grave marker becomes a memorial to both human and natural history. Leaning away from the prevailing wind at Maraeroa on the Hokianga Harbour, its carved lettering is partially masked by a sharply-lit cast shadow. In age and material as well as aspect, the carved headboard

chimes in with the hand-hewn tōtara fence posts behind: specific but also generically wooden. It belongs to the land and is of the land: a kohatu urupa for the tangata whenua. Aslant, the historic carved timber board asserts its character against the modernity of the featureless flat rectangular slab of concrete lying behind. This photograph accords respect to a Mere Paraki who lived and was loved, and believed in the promise of life after death of her Ratana faith (indicated by the five pointed star and crescent moon or whetū mārama tohu). Ultimately, however, like all of Aberhart's images, this one can be read as a memento mori, a reminder of our temporary tenure – the impermanence of human life itself – as well as the indifference of nature to attempts to immortalise our existence.

Remembrance of things past: Nelson c.1960

Laurence Aberhart

When I was around nine or ten I had a paper-delivery round. I delivered late afternoon, early evening, the route being the 'downtown' part of Nelson city. In some ways it was the best round possible; close to the pick up point at the press itself, pretty much all flat, and a lot of it paved. The downside being that the customers paid by account and were anonymous in terms of expectation of say, a Christmas tip.

My memories are of a wooden town, old in New Zealand terms, isolated and as such, preserved. The dusty, unpaved back lanes, which I grew to know intimately, were lined with high, wooden fences. My paper run ran a course, through the lanes, weaving a way up to the rear of the genteel nineteenth century shops and commercial buildings. My own small wooden wonderland, because after five o'clock the shops were shut, the men were in the pubs and the women were at home getting tea on. My wooden wonderland, that I somehow knew even then, was not of that world. It was all older, much older. There was the fantastic and gothic Nelson Provincial Council building (demolished 1969), then becoming increasingly derelict.

There were the lanes that ran down behind Hardy and Bridge Streets; you had to differentiate them, Bridge St was the street with no bridge and Hardy was the one with one, that bought you past the back of Mee's, the only Chinese green grocer in Nelson, to the high smelling, almost six o'clock closing time, public bar packed tight with predeodorant, getting-the-beer-down-as-fast-as-possible-before-six entirely male form of humanity Mitre Hotel at Four Sprints Corner, (two pubs, one church and a petrol station). The Mitre presented a stucco front to the street but from behind it was determinedly wooden and had once been wood around to the street itself.

There were the wooden loading stages behind the hardware and general stores, 'Wilkins and Field' and 'Neale and Haddow', where wheat, oats and other grains were sold by the gill and bushel, in sacks. And then there was the genteel end of town around the upper end of Trafalgar Street where there were The Nelson Club, the offices for the Nelson College for Boys and the Nelson College for Girls, the Nelson Council and run of almost unaltered buildings that also incorporated the super

racy and very sixties, Chez Eelco. That end of Trafalgar Street terminated with the Cathedral Steps which incorporated the memorial to Nelson's early (white) settlers and next that, the WW1 soldier memorial, and hence the source of another of my afflictions.

We didn't have a car but about that time I was a harrier, a cross-country runner, and most Saturdays there was a drive to somewhere out in the country for a run, cars supplied by adult club members. On those for the first time I was able to glimpse the ancient dis-used hop kilns, the abandoned farm houses and collapsing barns; again, all wooden, that littered the countryside. The back of Nelson, the province, was withering away since the National government of the time stopped the last hope for a train line to connect Nelson through to 'the rest of the world'. This was regarded as Keith Holyoake's revenge for not being able to be elected as the local Member of Parliament.

All of this somehow became engraved in my memory to the degree that when I later became a photographer and began to realise my calling as that of being of one who was to notice change and record that which could be lost from collective memory, it was then that I thought back to that old Nelson.

Nelson and trips over to Marlborough, to Picton and up the Wairau River, where my grandparents, their neighbours such as the Heberleys and other relatives all seemed to have lived in *old* houses. Houses of shellacked tongue and groove walls, ringed with ancestral photographs of bearded men and women in black, permeated with the (much later realised) odours of borer dust and borer bombs, of death and the smell of untreatable cancer. It all had an effect. I try to re-discover that past through my images. Occasionally I get near to it again but oh, to have been alive and conscious with a camera, then.



G. Millar & Sons building, Hardy St., Nelson, New Year 1981

8 X 10" contact prints made on gelatin silver or gelatin silver POP (printing out paper) and toned with gold and/or selenium toners.



Oramahoe, Northland, 1970



Lesley, Kamala & Charlotte, hall, South Springston, Canterbury, October 1980



Interior, hall, St. Bathans, Central Otago, December 1980



Roadside WWI memorial (#6), between Otiake and Duntroon, North Otago, June 1981



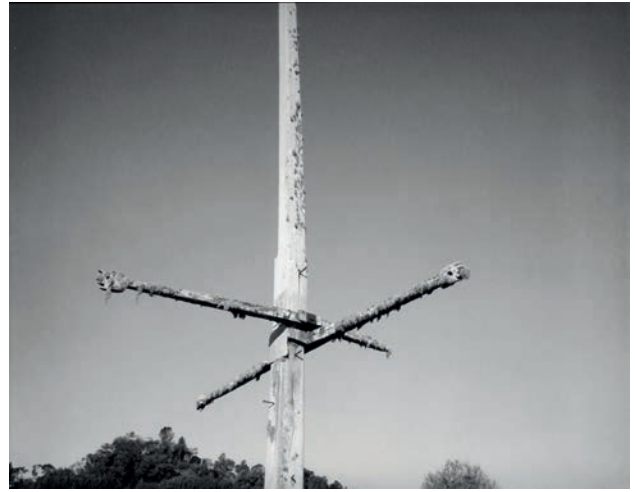
Interior #1, Lodge Unanimity #3, Lyttelton, December 1981



Interior #2, Lodge Unanimity #3, Lyttelton, December 1981



Interior, 'Station of the Cross', Kakahi, Central North Island, 7 April 1982



Hau Hau Pole (#3), Upper Wanganui River, 7 April 1982



Church, Maraeroa, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, 2 May 1982



Interior, church, Maraeroa, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, 2 May 1982



Interior, from upstairs gallery, Motukaraka Catholic church, Hokianga Harbour, Northland, 4 May 1982



Meeting House, Okoriki, Te Iringa, near Kaikohe, May 1982



Interior #2, 'Toi Te Hau Tahī', Waimana Valley, Bay of Plenty, 9 June 1982



Old meeting house, disused Ratana marae, Te Kuiti, June 1982



Hipango Monument, Korokota (Golgotha), Putiki, Wanganui, 31 January, 1986



Te Waiherehere, Koroniti, Wanganui River, 29 May 1986



Interior #2, "Awakaueroa", Kai Iwi, 13 September 1986



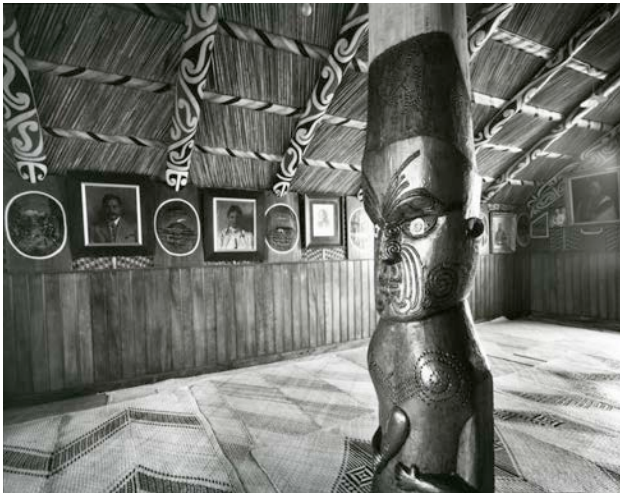
Wooden Building, Wanganui, 1986



The Blanche Triangle (#3), Beacon Point, Main Auckland Island,
1 December 1989



Roll of Honour (Korea), Rahotu Hall, Rahotu,
Taranaki, 2 August 1991



Interior, "Okahukura", Otukou, 18 January 1993



Interior, hall, Sherenden, Hawke's Bay, 22 September 1993



Huntly West, (20 seconds, evening) 17 February, 1994



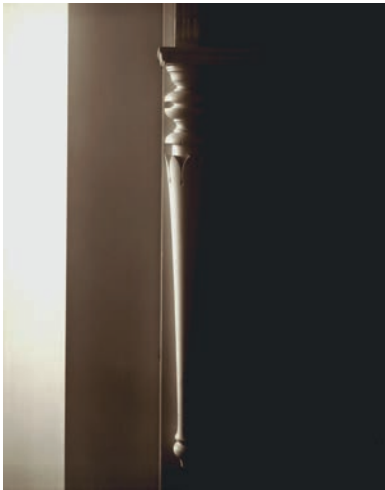
Trees, Generalif, The Alhambra, Grenada, Spain, 16 November 1994



Wall, upper stand, Forbury Park, St. Clair, Dunedin, 9 February 1999



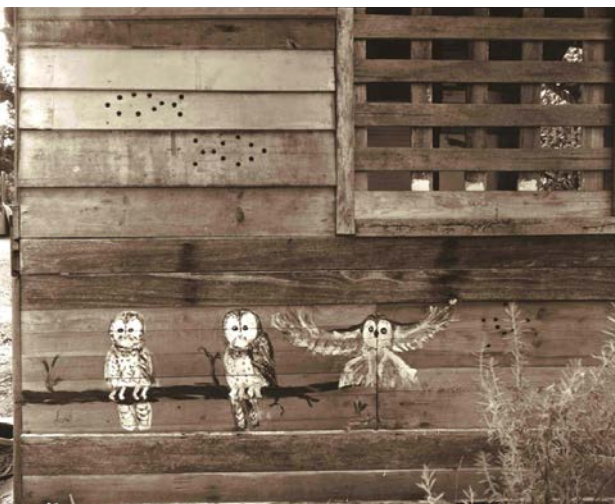
Riverton, Southland, 25 February 1999



Detail (Fripp and Goldsboro) house,
Parnell, Auckland, 6 April 1999



Interior, Hall, Katea near Owaka, Southland, 19 April 1999



'Rustic' (#1), New South Wales, 9 April 2000



Oramahoe, Northland, 5 February 2002



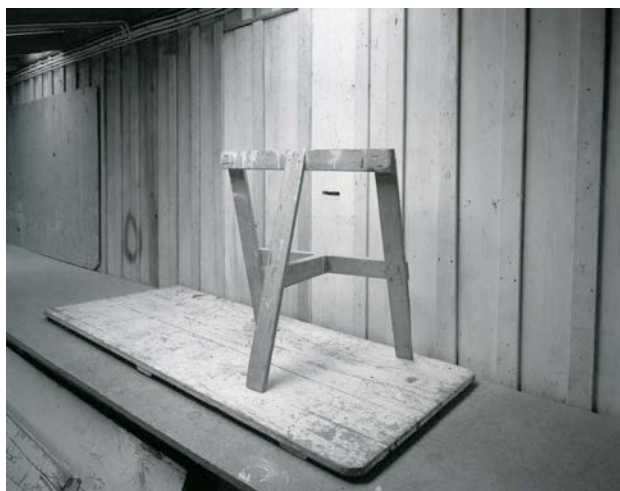
Horopito, Volcanic Plateau, 13 May 2005



Studio, Wanganui, 10 December 2005



Interior #5, Waimate North, Northland, 17 August 2006



Trestle, Waimate North, Northland, 17 August 2006



Polish barn, Rangiteiki Line, Palmerston North, 30 November 2008



Landscape #77, Mossburn, Southland, 24 June 2012

Wood, kauri, tree rings

Gretel Boswijk

School of Environment, The University of Auckland

Like Laurence Aberhart, I grew up in Nelson and, although my experiences are from a slightly later date, some of his remembrances of ‘old Nelson’ with its lanes, wooden buildings and ‘racy’ Chez Eelco ring true. I grew up in a big house on a hill overlooking the city. Like many New Zealand houses of a similar era, the house was mostly framed and clad in wood. It had decorative stickwork on the outside and polished wooden panelling on the inside. Given its age, it is probable that the rimu used to build and finish the house came from native forests in Nelson’s hinterland that were milled in the early 1900s and replaced by exotic pine and farmland.

As Aberhart’s photographs so beautifully show, wood was a common building material in ‘old New Zealand’ – used for framing, cladding, and furnishing buildings, and for other things too. Cutting trees for timber was part of the transformation of New Zealand that took place in the 1800s and into the 1900s, when forest was replaced by farmland. The kauri region of the upper North Island, was a particular focus of logging and timber milling. The timber was versatile and kauri was used widely for everything from churches and houses, to ships and boats, to headboards for graves and humble street paving blocks.

When polished, kauri wood has a golden glow that brings warmth to spaces enclosed and defined by the framing and cladding. The glow comes from the cellular composition of the wood. Viewed down a microscope, kauri cells look like lace, ‘stitched’ together during the growing season to form an annual ring. Depending on whether the season was favourable or poor, the rings may be wide or narrow. The width varies from year to year creating a pattern unique in time. But like a choir, kauri sing the same ‘song’ – the pitch may be different but a common ‘melody’ emerges from the rings of trees across the region, from the Bay of Plenty and Waikato all the way to the Far North.

The tree rings can tell us about past environments. By piecing together sections



Three kauri tree rings. The line of dark (thick walled) cells indicate the end of the growing season. Growth is from right to left.

of tree growth, overlapping the patterns from living trees and swamp kauri, as well as samples of timbers from our 19th and early 20th century buildings, we can build a record of tree growth – a chronology – which in the case of kauri goes back over 4000 years. From that chronology, we can tease out information on our climate and how it has changed through time. We can work out exactly the years when tree rings were laid down, and sometimes, we can even tell the year when a tree was cut down to be milled and turned into a building.

With this in mind, the structures depicted in this show, with their rich textures of wood, speak of multiple stories. There is the use of places for happy events, and solemn gatherings, for farm work, or to remember people long since gone. But the very fabric of the structures also contain stories about the making of these spaces, and about the wider environment in the past.

Kauri ki uta, kauri ki tai

Ariane Craig Smith

The story of kauri is deeply interwoven with the story of our country – indeed, it is safe to say that without kauri (*Agathis australis*), a tree species that has borne the brunt of human occupation and exploitation of the landscape, Aotearoa would look very different. A remnant of Gondwana, kauri have been a significant species in our forests for millions of years, forming a keystone to an utterly unique ecology. Favoured originally by Northland iwi for building their greatest waka taua, kauri's immense scale, strength and workability prompted British ships, seeking suitable timber for naval masts and spars, to make repeated trips half-way around the world. Once British interest shifted to settlement, the milling industry grew in earnest, supplying raw material to build the emerging nation's homesteads, towns and cities, and reshaping the landscape itself as forest was cleared for pasture. Northern Aotearoa, once one of the areas richest in food and resources for Māori, flourished as a region of trade, industry, and prospects for European settlers carving out a new life from the forests and the earth beneath them.

Much of Northland is now a landscape bereft (of forests, of wealth, increasingly of its people) and in large swathes of what was kauri country these trees are now just legend, a ghost represented on signage and postcards, in colonial-era buildings – town halls, churches, houses, in beautifully crafted furniture and boats, and bones being exhumed – swamp kauri logs hauled from the earth to be turned to souvenirs and high-end detailing on luxury goods. Kauri forest has been regenerating however, assisted in areas by dedicated groups and individuals determined that living kauri should again form a major part of our landscape. Kauri dieback disease has emerged as a significant threat to that goal.

The soil-borne pathogen causing dieback in kauri, *Phytophthora agathadacidia* was only formally identified in 2008, when it had already been quietly killing kauri for several decades and had spread to infect pockets of most of the major kauri forest areas. Accidentally introduced to New Zealand, probably in the 1950s, and transported through soil movement, the microscopic, fungus-like organism burrows into the roots of kauri and spreads up into the lower part of the trunk, fatally affecting the tree's ability to take up water and nutrients. As yet incurable, the disease presents a very real threat to the remnant population of kauri.

As curators and arts managers with a deep concern for our environment, a strong belief in the ability of art to connect people and effect change, and an interest in the legacy of connection between New Zealand artists, landscape and activism, we recognised the potential for a long-term programme of activity. Emphasising the links between art, science and mātauranga Māori, The Kauri Project was initiated to research and develop exhibitions, events and other community engagement activities, using art as a tool (alongside science and other cultural activity and knowledge) to promote awareness of kauri dieback, knowledge of kauri forest biodiversity and of the significant role of kauri in the ecology, history, economy and cultural landscape of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

*Ki uta, ki tai means 'from mountain to sea' in te reo Māori. Our insertion of kauri in this phrasing is both to acknowledge that kauri was once widespread across the landscape of Northern Aotearoa, and a call of intention for kauri to flourish again, along with the ecological wealth of healthy kauri forest.



Steven Pearce: Rimu Portrait – New Zealand Tree Project – 4m x 2m

Rimu portrait – New Zealand tree project

Catherine Kirby

Post-war New Zealand was a fast-changing and industrious place. The growing human population demanded wood to build places like Laurence Aberhart's "wooden wonderland" in Nelson as well as farm fences, woolsheds and country homesteads. This high demand for timber was met by logging operations in native forests across the country. Kauri, totara and rimu were key targets because of their strong and versatile timber but many different species were cleared for timber and to provide access to the inner forest depths. The logging industry thrived. Many communities were centred on logging and milling operations and multiple generations worked very hard to harvest the bush.

Entire landscapes were cleared of their indigenous cover, making room for settlement, agriculture and exotic forestry. This landuse change was celebrated as progress but it was not without its costs. Removing the bush meant the loss of many endemic and interesting birds, frogs, lizards, insects and bats. For those that could cling on in a fast-changing environment, their new predatory neighbours (rats, cats, stoats, possums and more) often tipped these native species over the edge and into local or national extinction.

By 1978, many New Zealanders felt that enough forest had been destroyed. A small group decided that action was needed to save the last fragments of the unique Pureora rainforests (central North Island), so a handful of dedicated individuals climbed trees in the direct line of the chainsaws and bulldozers as a quiet protest. This determined and risky action attracted media attention and raised public support from across the country. As a result of this action, politicians listened, and logging ceased in this area soon afterwards. A halt was eventually called to native forest logging on public lands in the mid 1990s.

The colourful story of native forest management in New Zealand has resulted in an opportunity to appreciate native trees on many levels. Native trees are adored for the beautiful and versatile wood that is shown in Laurence Aberhart's exhibition, but thanks to the actions and decisions that began in the late 1970s we can also connect to and appreciate these trees in their more dynamic, full living form.

In a celebration of the living majesty of native trees, the New Zealand Tree Project has created the towering Rimu Portrait. This image is blended from 65 specially-selected photographs that were captured in Pureora Forest during March of 2015. The portrait is intended to show the beauty of rimu trees from a never-seen-before, undistorted perspective. These forest giants are an important component of the bush throughout New Zealand, providing shelter, food and homes for many different native plants, birds, insects and even bats!

This Rimu Portrait is touring as part of an exhibition by the New Zealand Tree Project that includes the history of Pureora and stunning images of its rainforests. More information can be found at www.nztreeproject.com.



Carving on Ohope Beach - 2015

Can't see the wood for the logs

Katy Wallace

Guest curator, Tairāwhiti Museum

The industry of wood exemplified by the contrasts in a hundred years of progress appears to have come a lot further than time could grant it. But in other ways the presence of wood has receded, with specialised timber crafts and skills having declined, and the status of wood as prized material having moved aside for other materials.

New Zealand has a long and enduring relationship with timber as industry. Native felling has been replaced by an exotic monoculture which has seen the industry speed up and size up. No longer hand hewn and man manoeuvred, the forestry machine is mechanized and monolithic. The trees grow fast, the timber is culled and hauled in a constant stream of giant trucks, feeding a gargantuan ship, feeding an insatiable appetite across the other side of the world.

The timber industry has been honed into a mass produced raw material, processed into a variety of industrial building materials and paper products. Not much of the natural identity of timber remains when you compare the completely match lined interiors, structures and environments captured in Aberhart's images to the buildings and structures commonly produced today.

Looking into the museum's collection you are reminded that wood as a material reigned supreme. Machines were made of wood, domestic items, cameras, wheels, sporting equipment, toys, trophies, containers, buckets, cotton reels were all made of wood. There is even a wooden pipe lurking deep within the archives. It was the material of the time, ready and at hand.

Now we treasure these objects, seeming more valuable than today's equivalents due to the materials, workmanship, and detailing that went into their making. Hand made wooden carpet sweepers and finger jointed wooden cameras are definitely not a viable part of today's consumer environment.

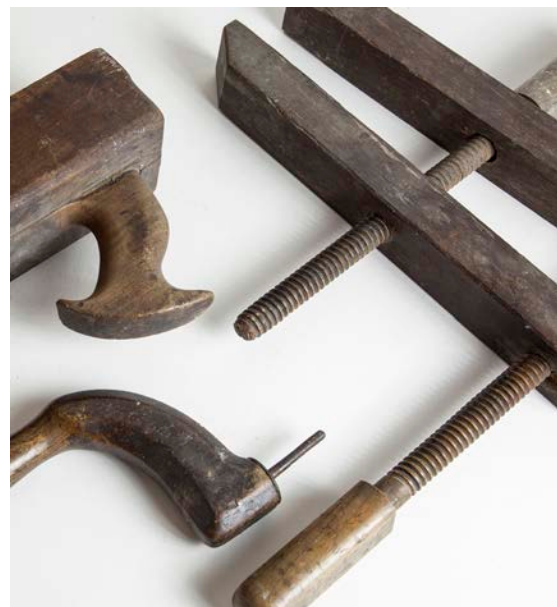
Aberhart's photographic collection demonstrates the totality of wood in our history, culture, and our environments as does a look back through the collection. Our wooden vernacular is represented in utility buildings, halls, churches, wharehau. Wood as a single material in Aberhart's photographs traverses between basic necessity and symbolic objects and gives a clear impression of its encompassing role in the past.

The wood working tools on display at Tairāwhiti Museum exemplify the shift in how we perceived wood then and now. Each tool is beautifully crafted by a carpenter for a carpenter, the wood carefully shaped to fit the hand. The role of the tool in the transformation of wood into timber and object was very directly connected to the hand and the material. The intensive process required to transform tree into architecture or artefact a hundred years ago using hand tools, in itself imbues the finished product with a sense of legacy, quality and historic value.

Have we taken wood for granted today? It certainly doesn't hold the prestige it once had, but it is still thoroughly saturated throughout our environments. There are many other material choices possible today, though I believe wood is still king of materials. Perhaps king because of its sheer scale on our regional landscape and economy, but also as an abundant natural resource.

I came across a washed up weathered tree trunk this summer, embedded in the sand on Ohope beach. A common sight, often seen as a blight on our beaches, although this trunk was being transformed by the hand of an anonymous craftsman into an artwork. A timely reminder of how wood will never lose the ability to be transformed into something special with the connection of the hand, tool, and craftsman.

Perhaps the timber craft revival is just around the corner.



Dudley L. Meadows, Tool Wall (detail),
Tairāwhiti Museum, 2016

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27 May – 2 July 2016
Host venue curator: Linda Tyler.
Exhibition opening address: Gael Newton, Foundation
Photography Curator Art Gallery of NSW and former
Senior Curator of Photography National Gallery of Australia.

Tairāwhiti Museum, Gisborne
15 July – 30 October 2016
Host venue curator: Katy Wallace.

Whakatāne Museum & Gallery
13 November 2016 – 23 January 2017
Host venue curator: Hamish Pettengell.

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SCIENCE

