



Dane Mitchell's **Present Surface of Tell** can be seen as an illustration of a catastrophe. The work incorporates three distinct elements — drawn plans of the ruins of several national museums, plaster casts taken of the detritus from these ruins, and a series of drawings of organisational museum models that have been set into a diagram of the earth's strata. These three distinct elements are positioned as evidence of a past life form — a now defunct system of knowledge. With bland objectivity they suggest that the museum and all it entails has been relegated to little more than a historical curiosity.

The bas-relief plaster sculptures in **Present Surface of Tell** are reminiscent of casts commonly made by archaeologists investigating the traces of ancient civilisations. They are like the frozen-in-time citizen of ancient Pompeii whose plaster body now resides in the Pompeii Museum. Stopped silent by Mt. Vesuvius's massive ash fall and poisonous gases, the impression their body made in the hardened ash was cast in positive by twentieth century archaeologists, and now lies rigid behind glass. This plaster object is not of itself, but is instead a signifier of the exact moment the ash fell. The body's arms are held up before its face, defensively fending off the incessantly falling ash.

Despite the apparently ordinary nature of the objects entombed in Mitchell's bas-relief sculptures, they reference an event of equal drama. The object's immersion and partial obfuscation, drowned as they are in the thick whiteness of an imperfectly made plaster cast, is evidence of a sunken civilization, a by-gone era that appears to have ended catastrophically with all evidence of its existence submerged within the earth.

A closer inspection of the objects within Mitchell's mouldings provides some clues to the trauma that gave rise to these ruins. Decipherable within the plaster is a selection of objects useful in the day-to-day operations of the museum such as bubble wrap and measuring tapes.<sup>fig1+2</sup> However the majority of the objects are relics from the hey day of photographic reproduction, such as 35 mm cameras, slide projectors, slide carousels and slides<sup>fig3</sup> — the images being long lost and irrelevant. Defunct technologies superseded by digital innovations, these objects become signifiers of the era from which they derive.

The plaster casts are a mould of a moment, like the photographic imprints of human shadows burnt onto Hiroshima's streets by the massive light exposure of the nuclear bomb. The moment of catastrophic demise has been recorded with the same physical tactility as light on photographic paper. The moment is personally annotated with a sense of the drama of its passing.

Made from chrome, Bakelite and celluloid, the entombed photographic technologies pre-date complex plastic polymers, their function and feel are all distinctly twentieth-century. Mitchell's inclusion of these near-defunct objects implies that his sculptures refer to the mid-twentieth century crisis of materiality that was in part caused by photographic reproduction. Furthermore Mitchell has monumentalised these tomb-like objects by arranging the sculptures with a regimental symmetry in the gallery space. The gallery becomes a cemetery with the sculptures simultaneously honouring and muting this crisis in western art.

As Adorno states; "The German word museal [museum like] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. More than phonetic associations connect museum and mausoleum. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art."<sup>1</sup>

In these sculptures Mitchell is presenting photography, and all that it entails, as dead or at least in the process of dying. Photography's destructive qualities are well noted and in some ways photography can be considered to have bought about its own death, along with that of the materiality of the art object. It can be seen to have done this in two ways. Firstly, photography de-emphasised authenticity in an artwork by facilitating the rapid and prolific dissemination of reproductions of art works. Secondly, photography began to occupy a place beside the three-dimensional or painterly art object within the museum, which further encouraged an immense rethinking of the properties of the art object.

"The [photographic] image: it is the reflection of a profound reality;  
it masks and denatures a profound reality;  
it masks the absence of a profound reality;  
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."<sup>2</sup>

As a 'message without a code', photography rendered meaningless any notions of the 'aura' in an artwork.<sup>3</sup> Compounding this problem was photography's status as an art object within the museum where it counteracted the museum's goal of collecting and displaying a 'unity' of objects. In 'On the Museum's Ruins' Douglas Crimp outlines photography's double rupturing of the museum system, "...once photography itself enters, an object among others, heterogeneity is re-established at the heart of the museum; its pretensions of knowledge are doomed. Even photography cannot hypostatise style from a photograph."<sup>4</sup>

Mitchell illustrates the eventual result of photography's innate self-destructive tendencies through showing the tools of reproduction submerged in plaster swamps. The tools are deadened through their uniform whitening and denied functionality. Like architectural models, they refer to a functional object, yet are rendered mute through their role as merely signifiers.<sup>fig.4</sup>

Moreover, when Mitchell's sculptural forms are contemplated in the context of **Present Surface of Tell**, 'tell' refers to "an account of events or facts"<sup>5</sup>. Therefore the sculptural forms are indicators to the viewer that this technology, which served to cause the 'death' of materiality, is redundant, but that the implications of its reign of 'meaninglessness' are also at their end. Along with materiality's demise, Mitchell suggests that photography's role in the creation of post-modernism has effectively caused its own demise. As Douglas Crimp insists, reproductive



technologies allow post-modern art to dispense with the 'aura' of the artwork altogether, and so undermine values such as originality, authenticity and presence that are essential to the discourse of the museum.<sup>6</sup> By presenting 20<sup>th</sup> Century photographic technologies in the form of relics, indeed relics served up in the form of monuments, Mitchell highlights how photography has killed twice, with one of its victims being itself.

In proposing a world where photographic technology is relegated to the status of a relic, Mitchell suggests an end to all that these ruined and redundant objects entail or imply. His works are a mausoleum commemorating the end of modernist conditions such as geometric abstraction, Greenberg's emphasis on surface, and even post modernism. The sculptures approach these discussions with the objectivity of palaeontology — where objects that have been unearthed and the conditions that they signify are a mere curiosity. The tools archived within Mitchell's sculptures are relevant only as markers of a time past, the richness of discussion they once implied now drained of content, with plaster pumped in its place like formaldehyde.

#### PRESENT SURFACE OF ORDER

Mitchell's drawings further compound the ideas highlighted by his sculptural forms through expanding the conceptual paradigm to include both the museum's architectural foundations and its organisational structure. Often these organisational structures are illustrated diagrammatically within professional curatorial manuals and it is these diagrams that Mitchell represents in one set of drawings in **Present Surface of Tell**.

Students of curatorship are typically given vast tomes of information explaining the role and ethics of the curator. Within these are diagrams that attempt to depict pictorially various interactions within the profession. Seminal references such as *Ethics of Curatorship* in the UK and ICOM's "Code of Professional Ethics" include diagrams replete with their numbered definitions, regulations, principles and problems annotated dilemmas such as 'Ethics of private collecting and dealing' and '5.1 Ethical obligations of members of the museum profession'. The informative diagrams show the curator standing, legs askance, slightly larger than the others in the flow chart, conducting various interactions with paper doll-like characters. In one particular diagram entitled "Figure 11.3 Hypothetical case of a curator who collects and authenticates privately", the curator is shown having undesirable





well, for it too is subject to seismic shifts in the form of radically overturned theoretical traditions, otherwise known as ‘movements’. Such ‘movements’ might include the profound affect that Duchamp’s Fountain had on the parameters of the art object, or the development of ‘New Museology’ in the 1970s. Both can be seen as examples of events that caused a dramatic re-ordering of art and museology, that when viewed within Mitchell’s metaphorical paradigm of geological stratifications, are like earthquakes or even landscape changing volcanoes.

When Mitchell’s drawings are considered as diagrams accompanying the bas-relief sculptures, which themselves indicate the constantly shifting nature of the museum’s organisation, they can be read as predictions of the end of the museum as we know it. An alternative meaning of the word ‘tell’ is ‘a mound or form made by the accumulated remains of ancient settlements’.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the drawings can be seen as analogous to the anthropologist’s interpretation of such ‘accumulated remains’ by an archaeological dig. The drawn up reports indicate that the museums organization into curators, directors, collection managers and so forth is also a thing of the past. In these drawings it is as if Mitchell imagines a world beyond the art institution, where its relics have been dug from the ground, the moulds cast, relics analysed, and the reports drawn up using the geological form of the earth, rather than the more traditional flow chart, to illustrate the slippery, volatile nature of the subject matter.

These ideas are reiterated in the second series of drawings in **Present Surface of Tell** where Mitchell has produced carefully fictionalised foundation drawings of the imagined ruins of, amongst others, Auckland War Memorial Museum<sup>fig.7</sup>, Christchurch Art Gallery and in a slight twist on the theme, the Te Papa Tongarewa logo is added to the series. The drawings precisely notate the rubble that now stands where once the buildings walls stood. There is no mention of the catastrophic blitz that annihilated these structures, only the carefully transcribed remains bear witness to their existence.

These drawings, with their carefully mapped stonework and detailed description of construction details, leave no doubt to Mitchell’s intention with **Present Surface of Tell**. All forms of the museum, from the neo-classical mausoleum style Auckland War Memorial Museum, to Te Papa Tongarewa’s ‘democratised’ new museological model, are presented as items from the past. However, Mitchell’s title, **Present Surface of Tell** implies that this museum-less future is now. It is the present surface of tell.



When all three elements of **Present Surface of Tell** are combined, the work becomes a ghostly projection of the alternative reality of the museum's trajectory. The bas-relief sculptures entomb the objects responsible for the demise of the materiality of the art object. His sedimentary drawings turn curators to dust and the board of trustees into greywacke, whilst his studies of the museum ruins reveal a detached objectivity about this well eroded knowledge system and its infrastructure.

However, rising from this post-museal apocalypse is a clue to the cause of this catastrophic finale. Phoenix-like, Mitchell has inserted a small lesson within all three elements of this exhibition. **Present Surface of Tell's** careful digging, drawing and pouring uncovers a thick interlinking thread; it reveals the museums continuing obsession with itself as it struggles to regain relevance.<sup>fig.9</sup> Prophetically, Mitchell appears to be warning that the museum's very attempt at self-reflexivity, is precisely what is condemning it to its very own mausoleum.

<sup>1</sup> Adorno, T. W. 'Valery, Proust Museum.' in **Prisms**, trans Samuel and Shierry Weber, Neville Spearman, London, 1967, p. 173–186.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, J. **Simulacra and Simulation**, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 6.

<sup>3</sup> A photograph is 'meaningless' in that it can only ever have an analogous relationship with that which it represents, and because of its mechanised nature it bears no 'aura' as would a painting or sculpture. For more information see Barthes. R. **Image, Music, Text**, Hill and Wang, 1977, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Crimp, D. "On the Museum's Ruins", **The Anti-Aesthetic**, ed. by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, 51

<sup>5</sup> **The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary**, Oxford University Press, 1973

<sup>6</sup> Crimp, D. "On the Museum's Ruins", **The Anti-Aesthetic**, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, 51

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, John.M.A. **Manual of curatorship, A Guide to Museum Practice**, Butterworth, London, 1984, p. 102–103

<sup>8</sup> IBID

<sup>9</sup> Smithson, R. 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects', **Smithson: Collected Writings**, ed. Jack Flam, 100.

<sup>10</sup> **The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary**, Oxford University Press, 1973

