



**photo**forum

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# M o M e n t o

DYS/E/UTOPIA is an infinite statement of polemic intent that for an issue of twelve pages is suitably grand. Another musing from Haruhiko Sameshima and images from four compelling photographers glance through the infinitesimal corridors of ideal. Tell your friends to subscribe and get more pages next *MoMento*.

sada

## Dreamworks:

The Greek prefix *dys* signifies *ill, bad or abnormal*; Greek *topos* meaning *place*; and *ou-* meaning *not*. Thus, Utopia means *nowhere*, and is a pun on *Eutopia*, meaning *happy place* - the prefix *eu* meaning *well, or good*.

(<http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Dystopia>)

Imagining human habitats has been a favourite pursuit of art and whether as a backdrop, or subject in its own right, environments have featured in all forms of picture making. This is not restricted to any particular culture, era or medium but is widespread throughout art history. Within modernism, photography played a major role as the quintessential tool of choice for representing the environment in the landscape art tradition. *Momento 3* features photographs of habitats both found and imagined, made this side of the millennium in Aotearoa New Zealand, not so much as a grand art historical statement but more for making wry personal observations of various local manifestations of the scape.

\* \* \* \*

W.J.T Mitchell, in discussing landscape as an art genre, points out that the 'role call of major originating movements in landscape painting' seems to coincide with the period of prosperity in a society, preceded by imperial expansion. He goes on to examine the two ideas, *landscape* and *imperialism*, in depth 'not as a deductive model that can settle the meaning of either term, but as a provocation to an inquiry', examining sources as diverse as early colonial New Zealand and Israeli/Palestinian borders. 'Is it possible,' he speculates, 'that landscape, understood as the historical "invention" of a new visual/pictorial medium, is integrally connected with

imperialism? . . . At minimum we need to explore the possibility that the representation of landscape is not only a matter of internal politics and national or class ideology but also an international, global phenomenon, intimately bound up with the discourse of imperialism.'<sup>1</sup>

New and innovative ways of describing something (which has been one of the central pursuits of modernity) can be synonymous with giving that something new meanings – new identities that aspire to erase the old, like renaming a geographical location in another language. Yet as the settler history of a place like Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrates, this process is deeply unstable. As Mitchell suggests, 'Landscape might be seen more profitably as something like the "dreamwork" of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance.'<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \* \*

The recent blockbuster Pixar animation *WALL•E* (2008), released by Walt Disney as family entertainment, has enjoyed both critical acclaim and box office success. Within the genre of animation, it has surpassed *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) by taking in \$US532,506,889 world wide at the box office, making it the 58<sup>th</sup> highest grossing movie of all time.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the simple, affecting love story told in the classic Disney tradition, the movie's plot incorporates some well known religious iconographies: Noah's ark (complete with dove and olive branch); the fall of humanity and its redemption; the death and resurrection of the saviour, and so on. It also features one of the most sweeping visual depictions of 'after the fall' – a post-apocalyptic modern metropolis worthy of an Edward Burtynsky photograph of industrial wasteland. The film has spawned a plethora of internet discussions due also to its myriad references to iconic sci-fi movies which have been an influential medium for the diagnosis and prognosis of modernity's ills. It has underscoring green politics as setting for redemption after the 'fall', which is precipitated by the domination of the capitalist market economy by a single mega-corporation. Underlining the plots are the notions of 'ideal society' – the Utopian imagining at play.

It is almost ironic that the dystopian imaginings in the first half of *WALL•E* were produced by Disney, the corporation best known for Disneyland, *the* place synonymous with the Utopian playground of the ideal/perfect 'island' separated from our everyday reality. In his study of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and the subsequent theoretical implications of the term 'utopic', Louis Marin suggests that Disneyland is a 'degenerate utopia' where ideology is changed into the form of myth.<sup>4</sup>

Marin sees the play of the negative prefix 'u' and the 'topos' (actual place) of utopia, as a sign of neutrality – that is to say, a space which exists and does not exist, true nor false, neither one nor the other. In such neutral space, the contradictions can exist without being artificially resolved or hidden behind text; they are fully visible for their contradictoriness. A utopia becomes degenerate when, like Disneyland, fiction gives way to representation and becomes projected ideology. Disneyland becomes myth because it hides the narrative contradictions instead of allowing them to play, it presents 'a narrative that resolves formally a fundamental social contradiction.'<sup>5</sup>

What Marin identifies as the fundamental dynamics at play in Disneyland are the same forces that drive imperialism, making Disneyland our contemporary 'dreamwork'; a place that 'alienates the visitor by a distorted and fantasmatic representation of daily life, by a fascinating image of the past and the future, of what is estranged and what is familiar: comfort, welfare, consumption, scientific and technological progress, superpower, and morality. These are values obtained by violence and exploitation; here they are projected under the auspices of law and order.'<sup>6</sup>

Such forces are ever present in our everyday surroundings in these Pacific shores – the globally mediated media fantasies as well as the local architectural spaces of city planning or residential developments. Poetic, direct or directed observations by these photographers' images puncture the surface of contemporary mystifications and point our gaze to the cracks in the processes that shape our visual surroundings, thereby revealing some of their workings.

Haruhiko Sameshima

#### notes

- 1 W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Imperial landscape', in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.9.
- 2 Mitchell, *ibid.* p.10.
- 3 <http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide> Accessed 10 July 2009.
- 4 See chapter 12: 'Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland' in Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (trans. Robert A. Vollrath). United States: Humanities Press, 1984, pp.239-257.
- 5 Marin, *ibid.* p.239.
- 6 Marin, *ibid.* p.240.



Bella Lett *Untitled 1* 2008

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Cover: **Sam Hartnett** *Brynderwyn View* 2008

Right: Sam Hartnett  
*Palms* 2006

**Bella Lett**  
from *Escape from the Flatlands*

*“Slow water in the flat country. The sloughs by the roadside motionless and gray. The coastal plain rivers in leaden serpentine across the wasted farmland.”*

*“He kept constant watch behind him in the mirror. The only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash. They crossed the high concrete bridge over the river. A dock below. Small pleasureboats half sunken in the gray water. Tall stacks downriver dim in the soot.”*

*The Road* Cormac McCarthy

Bella Lett  
*Untitled 2* 2008











left: Sam Hartnett  
*Otorohanga 2006*

Bella Lett  
*Untitled 4 2007*



# Alexandra Cunningham.

## from *Pegasus Town Dream*

A proposed utopian suburbia for 5,000 people, Pegasus is to be built 25 kilometres north of Christchurch, New Zealand. It will be the largest fully-zoned, integrated town development of its kind in New Zealand. The complete cost of the town is in excess of \$1 billion, with construction taking place over the next 7 years.

It is formed around the developers pursuit of an ideal community based upon traditional Kiwi family values. The developers repetitively pitch Pegasus Town as “one of Canterbury’s truly remarkable environments renowned for it’s natural and unspoiled beauty”; this utopian ideal can only be achieved by razing the site from its original agrarian purpose. My photographic series highlights this contradiction by portraying the scarred landscape left behind in pursuit of the Pegasus Town dream.

2006

Alexandra Cunningham  
*Feature Lake* 10/08/06, 7:25 AM, 0° N







Alexandra Cunningham  
*Equestrian Center proposed site 10/08/06, 9:05AM, 330° NW*



Alexandra Cunningham  
Site 5 31/08/06 4:30PM 250°W

Right: Jenny Tomlin  
*Lion in The Window* June 2007

Back cover: Jenny Tomlin  
*Nirvana Park* July 2008

## Jenny Tomlin. from *Nirvana Park*

Nirvana - meaning from sanscrit - 'to blow' and the absorption of individuality into the divine spirit.

I came across Nirvana Park, a storm water catchment between a substation and the back of a housing development bordering Blockhouse Bay and Mt Roskill. The irony of a road going nowhere, fenced off before dropping over a bank. All the houses face away from the space. Although open ground, there is a strong sense of invisibility and surreality from its surroundings.

Dystopia to me is suburbia and sameness, a loss of diversity.

A lion bedspread looking out from a window. It can be a statement that reflects both public and private realms. Yet there remains a flow here, not of divine breath but the urban reverting to a wilder state.

We never really control nature. Its relentless anarchistic response to our tidying and trimming, - I'm interested in documenting these different rhythms interacting and questioning how we see our environment.





