

Figure 1: *Second Empire (Pool)*, 2008, 90 × 125cm.

SECOND EMPIRE: SPOTS OF TIME

Gavin Hipkins

"Animals (birds, ants), children, and old men as collectors."
(Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, H4a,2)

"Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower."
(William Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*)

"Hiya! I'm headed for Camp Crystal Lake. Can you help me out?"
(Annie from *Friday the 13th*.)

I SECOND EMPIRE: DISTANT TRAVELS

In the 1880s, the London-based publishing house The Religious Tract Society produced a series of popular travel books carrying the common subtitle: *Drawn with Pen and Pencil*. Titles including *English Pictures*, *French Pictures*, and *Italian Pictures* feature line illustrations of landscapes and national landmarks from particular European nations, and are each accompanied by specific yet proverbial travel and historical commentary.¹ The majority of The Religious Tract Society's series charts historical sites, architectural features and landscape wonders from Europe including the Mediterranean, yet the string of books also comprises pictorial renderings of the new world such as *American Pictures*, *Canadian Pictures*, and closer to home, *Australian Pictures*.

My current body of work *Second Empire* takes its initial backdrops from this run of exquisitely produced books published in the late nineteenth century and digitally combines its plates with scanned patches that I have custom ordered. To date, with rare exception, the landscape backdrops in *Second Empire* are not only digitally inverted, but also rotated such that the landscapes appear upside down. With this device, I am interested in the imagining of landscapes literally 'from the other side of the world'. This somewhat 'dumb' strategy reflects on the childlike envisaging of a specific geographical location (moment and event) on the flip side of the globe, extending centrifugally out to space with trees, buildings, animals, people and debris fastened onto the earth, apparently upside-down.

Common to this series, as with precedents *Empire* (2007), and *Natural History* (2007-08), is the disruption of pictorial space with a centrally positioned and digitally scanned embroidered patch. With these elements, I am enticed by the formation of a hybridity and the tension between the patches and backdrops in the construction of narrative. In positioning these fused binary elements, I have called on Robert J C Young's timely evocation for postcolonial studies of Mikhail Bakhtin's persuasive argument that language "even within a single sentence" is frequently double-voiced.²

What is hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.³

Within single pictures then, stubborn pairings of late nineteenth-century etching plates with early twenty-first century embroidered patch design collide to produce a third meaning: a hybridity; digitally woven from an idiosyncratic charting (it would appear) of two discrete material elements, disparate times, conflated cultural and social meanings.

Once a work is complete, this time-travel-effect of borrowing scenes from the antiquarian section of the bookshop while adding a further layer both disrupts the pictorial plane and, at the same time, cements these two elements within an inseparable bind.

Following Bakhtin's line of questioning, how does the collision of these elements in the *Second Empire* series 'unmask' each other? Patches are generally worn by youth, they mark allegiances to packs and identify ideological leanings towards movements (hippydom, acid dance culture, death metal, hard core punk...), and at the same time, the very material act of wearing patches subscribes to a nostalgia for yesterday, at once evoking the counter culture movement or, at least, the fashions from previous decades.⁴ With *Empire* I bought such patches from local music stores and city markets. In *Second Empire* though, the current patches are significantly more rarefied. Chosen from an Asian-produced catalogue of some 1500 designs featuring animals, automobiles, and sports insignia – no band patches in this tome of a catalogue – they are more idiosyncratic in their selection.

Whereas patches for the earlier series were found in markets and boutique record shops, the location for buying patches used in *Second Empire* shifts to cleaner ground and embroidery kiosks stationed in ubiquitous shopping malls. The space between bohemian market and generic interior shopping street is akin to that now familiar flaneur's stroll in late-nineteenth century Paris when circumnavigating the old quarters to the new, bringing us to Walter Benjamin's beloved *ur-mall* of consumer culture: the arcade. Between my two coordinates – historical travel guide and contemporary embroidery – a portal is established which connects 1880s bookshops and early twenty-first century globalised shopping spectacle; amounting to the same thing in different forms: wish fulfilment.

2 SECOND EMPIRE: PEN AND PENCIL

An unmasking need to also take a reflexive turn to production methodologies, and to modes of gathering images. Travel and tourisms have been common features of my growing archive of photos and exhibition output. Evident with the latest series is an apparent transition from my previous bodies of works whereby a traditional photographing in realist mode of an empirical world turns to one of flicking through books and selecting patches from bulky catalogues for sampling. In this manner, the collector stops archiving photos from outside and chooses to stay indoors; sourcing digital scans of elements for two-layered montage.

This shift of image gathering declares saturation, even boredom (albeit potentially temporal), with *photography* per se. Connected to this change of direction is a space of possible exhaustion for actual travel: a weariness of carrying camera to site in search of *something*. Consider then, for a moment, lassitude: a creeping sensation that finally engulfed the aristocratic Duc des Essintes in the 1880s and prevented him from boarding the train from Paris bound for London and his anticipated journey across the Channel. Here it is convenient to speculate on the prospect that Des Essintes had seen a copy of *London Drawn with Pen and Pencil*, or a similar travel guide, becoming as reader comfortably lethargic with an idea of London for the stay at home tourist.⁵

If *Second Empire* marks a shift from my earlier realist-based photographic series to appropriation-based camera-less image capture technologies and methodologies, then I need to remind myself that this is not the first time my practice has turned to strategies of borrowing and coupling. Among other projects, formative work emerging from art school in the early 1990s reflected its time and the full effect of postmodernism on a keen undergraduate student. My first one-person museum show *The Vision* (in 1995) brought together readymade door-size lush posters depicting waterfalls, sunsets, tigers, pantries, stable doors and life-size girlie pictures.⁶ This is how we worked under the tyranny of the shadow of Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author*; in the distant wake of defining practices by Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine: for then it seemed (as today), how else to make images but by sourcing and reframing?

In part, the cyclical return to an artist's box of tricks appeases current anxieties pertaining to recognition for the potential of my recent *modus operandi* being read as arriving squarely alongside mid-career status, and the common crisis frequently linked to the early stages of this period. Yet the new work distinguishes itself from formative practice by revisiting earlier avant-garde strategies of construction: simple cut and paste with the self-imposed constraint of two elements (playing with binaries), rather than playing with the laws of appropriation and a dutiful attitude to art history that distinguishes persuasive historical postmodern practice.



Figure 2: *Second Empire (Lake)*, 2008, 130 x 130cm.

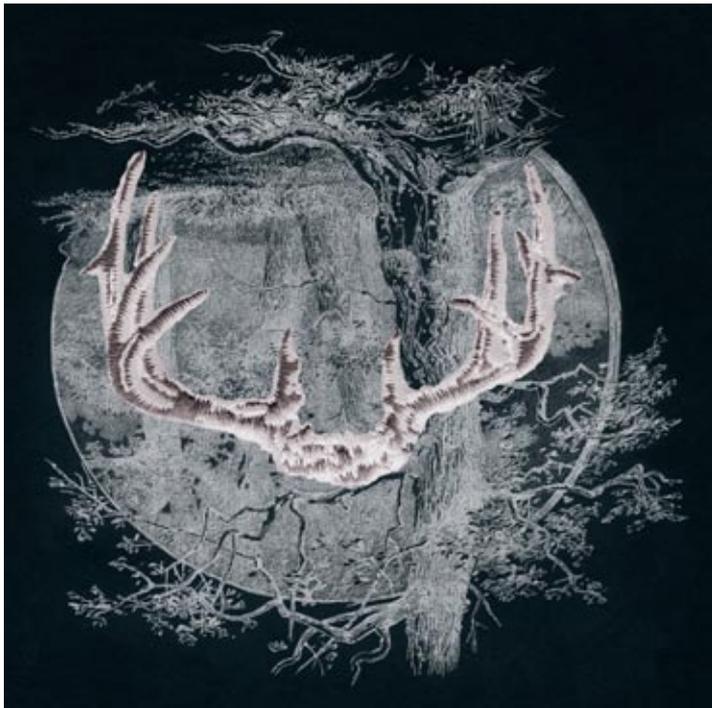


Figure 3: *Second Empire (Forest)*, 2008, 110 x 110cm.



Figure 4: *Second Empire (Mountains)*, 2008, 115 x 115cm.



Figure 5: *Second Empire (Tree)*, 2008, 110 x 130cm.



Figure 6: *Second Empire (Woods)*, 2007, 120 x 165cm.



Figure 7: *Second Empire (River III)*, 2008, 125 x 170cm.

Despite these somewhat flippant – yet useful – historical references and negotiations, for me today though, *Second Empire* is more convincingly connected to pictorialism, faux symbolist imagery and aestheticism. The project empathetically leans towards an extraordinary, yet frequently overlooked, late-nineteenth century pastoralism pursued by pictorial photographers in search of a rural ideal.⁷ In this refined light, consider, for example, Peter Henry Emerson's genteel and best known photograph *Gathering Waterlilies* from 1886, dating from the same decade as The Religious Tract Society's series *Drawn with Pen and Pencil*. The common motifs from this genre of 'naturalistic photography' are revisited in *Second Empire* via, of course, reproductions of conventional peasant and rural scenes taken from the original travel publications published in the mid 1880s to early 1890s. Comparing the popular travel series with fine art prints from the period reminds us today of the key role photography played in the initial surveying and cross-medium rendering (mechanical and hand) of landscape in the late-nineteenth century. That The Religious Tract Society's series must be drawn in pre-industrial drawing tools of pen and pencil, as their titles testify, knowingly attempts to deny the plate's dependence on the camera at this time.

3 SECOND EMPIRE: LOST PICTURES

My ongoing body of work uses digital technologies to play with an ambiguity of medium: not quite painting, looking like etching, or woodcut, or perhaps embroidery... As unique-state stretched canvas though, the works take on the *status* of painting. I have yet to use the term photography to describe the medium of the pieces, preferring photomedia in defining the use of a flat-bed scanner as capture device of frontal surfaces including those of books and the fine thread of synthetic patch. With their medium ambiguity, these new works simply constitute 'pictures'. I like to think of these recent works as memories of photographs, alluding to the ubiquity of the landscape photograph and its exhaustion as stylised trope as well as to my own experiential and media-filtered travel experiences and dreamed memories.

In 2006 I completed an artist's residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York City. During this period, I became very interested in painting, or at least in the status of painting. It was everywhere. In Chelsea today, this return-to-the-same-in-a-different-form dominates audience and market horizons. Epitomising this figurative painting revival, The Saatchi Gallery launched the three-part mega-exhibition *The Triumph of Painting* in 2005. Comprising more than 350 canvases, and placed alongside related media rhetoric and a beast of a catalogue, this event provides the springboard for reflections on the status of painting in contemporary art vis-à-vis photography and its apparent miserable failings. In an introductory catalogue essay for the show, Bary Schwabsky claims: "For although it was photography that taught us the modern idea of the image, it is painting that allows us to internalise it".⁸ Adjoining Schwabsky's text, Alison Gingeras argues that photography's indexical nature to the world today is so debased that the mnemonic insufficiency of the photograph has opened up a certain image-space that contemporary painters have identified and claimed as their own.⁹

Memory, and the ability to recall moments of heightened lived experience and wonders of nature are at the heart of William Wordsworth's philosophical approach to poetry and the transformative powers he identified as "spots of time". Conjuring up invigorating moments of beauty and mountain crispness could help to escape the burden of city living and the mayhem of the everyday. Remembering Wordsworth, while attempting to resuscitate photomedia's "mnemonic insufficiency", with *Second Empire* I would like to form my own little spots of time, filtered scenes of nature blocked by a centrally positioned shield alluding to the medium's limits: an opaque and immovable adhesive becoming blind spot.

4 SECOND EMPIRE: EMPIRE OF THE MIND

I was raised in suburban Auckland in the 1970s by a Catholic mother and atheist father. This enduring tension, and at times outright conflict, is one of the key personal undercurrents in all my work and surfaces with more force in *Second Empire*. As a teenager, I was introduced to the movie horror genre during video screenings in the church hall on Sunday nights. The organisation and selection of projected videos by older teenagers at the church lent itself to religious perspective horrors including *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Sentinel* and other defining seventies and early eighties horror classics such as *Friday the 13th*, and *The Amityville Horror*. The popularity of the religious topic films during the seventies played on a guilt exaggerated by my Sunday evening sessions behind the local church; as film critic Alan Jones notes: "By playing on the theme of a lack of faith in godless times – the result of the



Figure 8: *Second Empire (Swamp)*, 2007, 120 x 110cm.

Vietnam War, racial tension and the quest for alternative spiritual convictions – back-to-basics religious shockers eventually became front-runners”.¹⁰ No doubt, my memories of this weekly immersion in the horror genre are today heightened, coloured by an idea of the proximity between Hollywood church scene and actual churchyard setting. How can art approach this first experience of the horror genre, of *real* fright, of virtual haunting?

At once both a flippant thrill factor, and at the same time a legitimate haunting (unable to get to sleep after the films late at night or the recurring nightmares that, indeed, mimic the surreal awake/asleep dream sequences that Wes Craven brilliantly intersperses in his influential *A Nightmare on Elm Street* from 1984). For all my enthusiasm and recollection of the horror films from this period, *Second Empire* hardly constitutes horror scene or slasher film still. As I have mentioned, pictorialism is too prevalent a factor in these pictures and the patches ordered from a catalogue of existing designs play out an aestheticised dramaturgy of colliding styles, times, and functions. *Second Empire* extends my engagement in landscape discourses. With the filmic horror genre as psychoactive mnemonic backdrop for these works, landscape is kitsch, but creepy. I lie on the studio floor, and look towards the ceiling in search of a spot of time and I picture a Hollywood set of cardboard props and camera lights where hockey-masked Jason stalks through the woods near the reopened lakeside summer camp in *Friday the 13th*. Wordsworth's spots of time become location sites of media memories from dense forest, quiet river, and murky swamp.

Gavin Hipkins is an Auckland-based artist and writer. Recent exhibitions include: *Shifting Light*, Auckland Art Gallery (2008) and *Tell Me A Story: Narrative Photography Now*, San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts (2007). Hipkins was the artist-in-residence at The McCahon House in Auckland in 2007/08 where he developed the *Second Empire* series. He teaches at Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland.

Images: Unique state pigment prints on stretched canvas, courtesy of Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington; Kaliman Gallery, Sydney; Starkwhite, Auckland.

- 1 For example, a description from *English Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil* reads: “A bend in the river between Shepperton and Walton is of historic interest, as there Julius Caesar with his legions forced the passage of the Thames, and routed the British General Cassivelaunus”. Reverend Samuel Manning and Reverend S G Green, *English Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil* (London: The Religious Tract Society, c. 1890) 27.
- 2 Robert J.C Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) 20.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Daniel Palmer, “Gavin Hipkins: Empire and Other Children’s Stories”, in Gavin Hipkins, *Empire* (Auckland: Rim Books, 2008) 32-33.
- 5 Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2002) 9-11.
- 6 Athol McCredie, “Yearning for the Infinite”, in *Gavin Hipkins: The Vision* (Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1995). My other major projects that have turned to the camera as tool for borrowing and repositioning found published material includes *The Stall* and *The Gulf* (both 2000-01). See Trevor Mahovsky, “An Excessive Economy”, in *Gavin Hipkins: The Stall* (Hamilton: Waikato Museum of Art and History, 2001).
- 7 For a useful introductory overview of European pictorial photography at the end of the nineteenth century, see Anne Hammond, “Naturalistic Vision and Symbolist Image: The Pictorial Impulse”, in Michel Frizot (ed.), *A New History of Photography* (Cologne: Kronemann, 1998) 293-308.
- 8 Barry Schwabsky, “An Art that Eats its own Head: Painting in the Age of the Image”, in *The Triumph of Painting* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005) 8.
- 9 Alison M Gingeras, “The Mnemonic Function of the Painted Image”, from *The Triumph of Painting* (London: The Saatchi Gallery website, 2005) www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/current/essays.htm as last accessed on 25 October 2008.
- 10 Alan Jones, *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies* (London: Rough Guides, 2005) 38-39.