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Rack and ruin

This eclectic meditation on ruin aesthetics lacks visual coherence, writes **Alexandra Harris**

Ruin Lust

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Tate Britain, London

Accompanying book by Brian Dillon

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In a gale one night in 1800 the soaring tower at Fonthill Abbey came crashing down. Its owner William Beckford (gothic novelist, traveller, antiquary, sensationalist) didn't mind too much about the loss. The real pity, he felt, was that he hadn't been there to see the drama: the sublime and expensive spectacle had been wasted on the empty night. That is one kind of ruin worship – hungry for the worst, thrilling to the high energy of disaster – though many feelings about ruins across the centuries have been less lustful, more contemplative, more concerned with long endurance than momentary cataclysm.

'Ruin Lust', Tate Britain's eclectic exhibition, makes a point of encompassing

many kinds of ruin and many kinds of feeling – so many, in fact, that although the show certainly has its fascinations, it ends by conveying little sense of melancholy, or lust, or anything very particular at all.

The strength of the exhibition is its ambition to trace ruin aesthetics into the present. Themed rooms are boldly devoted to the demolition of high-rise housing estates and to the detritus of modern warfare. Among the best of the contemporary works on offer are the glossily inflated photographs by Jane and Louise Wilson of derelict Nazi bunkers on the Normandy coast. Concrete will not rot back into nature, so these ungainly, graffitied monsters sit there on the open beach, unable to die. A giant photograph from 2006 of the gun battery at Azeville presents us with a huge black opening. It looks like the entrance to a cave in a man-made concrete cliff, or a dark screen in a military parody of a deco cinema. It looks like something at the end of the world (Fig. 1).

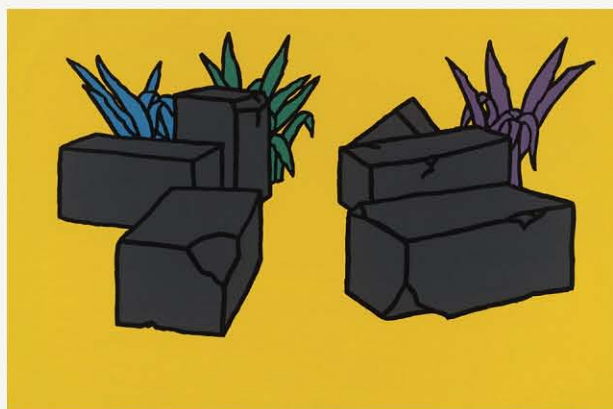
Much of the work on show, however, is not strong enough (or relevant enough) to deserve its prominence. Since the curators had so much ruin art to choose from, it is bizarre that they devoted space to work that is not clearly connected with ruins at all. Paul Nash's photograph of a hand waving from underneath a garden roller is English

surrealism turning on maximum charm (only a short step from here to Monty Python). But ruins? Tacita Dean's film *Kodak* (2006) is a long meditation on obsolescence, which is different from ruination. It is difficult to understand why Gerard Byrne has a gallery to himself for a bland video work about the past-ness of science fiction's futures, though the idea (if not the film itself) is intriguing enough.

The links between these disparate pieces are conceptual and intellectual rather than visual. The whole enterprise, one can't help feeling, might have been better as a book. The privileging of concept means that some poor quality art has made it onto the walls. Laura Oldfield Ford's *TQ3382: Tweed House, Teviot Street* (2012) is on a scale much larger than its capacity to interest (though she has done haunting work elsewhere); John Piper's beige and non-committal *Forum* (1961) gives little hint of the power he mustered in the flame-licked impasto palimpsests that had become defining images of the Blitz.

Ironically, this exhibition that really ought to be a book comes with less of a book than almost any recent show. The pocket-sized essay by guest curator Brian Dillon includes provocative things on every page that make one wish there had been a proper catalogue and a steadier explication of what this exhibition was meant to do.

- 1 *Azeville*, 2006
Jane and Louise Wilson
(b. 1967)
Photograph, gelatin silver print
on paper, mounted onto
aluminium, 180×290cm
Tate, London
© Jane and Louise Wilson
- 2 *Ruins*, 1964
Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005)
Screenprint on paper
50.8×76.2cm
Tate, London
© DACS 2013
- 3 *A Bird's-eye view of the Bank of England*, 1830
Joseph Gandy (1771–1843)
Watercolour on paper
84.5×140cm
Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, London



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The thematic approach has clear advantages: it allows for the illuminating juxtaposition of Second World War wreckage, for example, with Kurdish prisoner graffiti. Given that ruins are made by time, however, it is a shame that chronology gets so thoroughly lost. Dillon writes that 'the taste for ruins is a modern – that is, post-medieval – invention' and includes in his selection nothing earlier than the 18th century. How fascinating it would have been to ask what ruins looked like in earlier times, before they had been codified by the Picturesque. There is a fragmentary poem about ruins in the 10th-century *Exeter Book* in which the melancholy fascination

with crumbled worlds seems already to be fully formed. Shakespeare, in an age of fallen monasteries, writes of 'bare ruined choirs'; characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) listen to their voices in the echoing corridors of a derelict cloister. Are we really to believe that ruin lust began in the 1800s? Isn't the story longer and stranger than that?

The curators have determinedly avoided the most obvious kind of ruin show, which would have gathered the masterpieces of Romantic antiquarianism and let us feast on broken arches. We are allowed brief glimpses: Piranesi's obsessive etchings of the Colosseum and the Pyramid of Cestio, John Sell Cotman's Riveaulx, and a Francis Towne of Netley Abbey in 1809, in which the paint is laid like a fragile sheet of glass over bright paper.

Joseph Gandy's *Bird's-eye view of the Bank of England* (1830; Fig. 3) never fails in its appeal, inviting us to walk in imagination through derelict halls that might date from the Roman empire but belong instead to the projected future of busy, commercial, 19th-century London. John Soane had only just completed the building of the Bank but he commissioned Gandy to paint perspectives of future time. The picture usually lives in the Soane Museum, among the dimly lit lintels and sarcophagi where everything that catches the eye is an illicit discovery. In the bright galleries at Tate Britain it does not have the same powers of seduction. The partial recompense is that here it is juxtaposed with 20th-century and contemporary ruin visions that not even Soane could have predicted.

So the decaying Bank of England keeps company with Patrick Caulfield's brilliant Pop screenprint *Ruins* from 1964 (Fig. 2). Caulfield saw that ruins were a brand and could be simplified to poster catchiness. He jettisoned all the surface textures and subtle autumnal tints beloved of old in favour of a flat cartoon in perky, wipe-clean yellow and grey, infinitely reproducible: the ruin without an end. **A**

Alexandra Harris is author of Romantic Moderns (Thames and Hudson, 2010).

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