

# Wayne Barrar

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**Image credit:** Wayne Barrar, *Caution empty pass, Mount Isa, Australia* 2005, colour pigment print. Image courtesy of the artist.

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# Wayne Barrar

## About the artist

Wayne Barrar was born in Christchurch in 1957. He gained a Bachelor of Science from The University of Canterbury in 1979, a Post Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 1996 and a Masters in Design from Massey University in 2005. Throughout his career which spans over 30 years of intensive practice, Barrar has exhibited regularly in New Zealand and internationally. He has been awarded a number of international artist residencies and received an Arts Council grant in 1991 and 2002. A book surveying his work *Shifting Nature* was published by the University of Otago Press in 2001. Currently living in Wellington, Barrar is an Associate Professor at the School of Fine Arts, Massey University.

## About the exhibition

Wayne Barrar has maintained an interest in documenting the impact of human activity on the landscape, since viewing the 1975 exhibition *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* held at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York. In 2002, Barrar began working on a long term project to expand his fascination in what he calls the 'commodified subterra', a term which describes the meeting point between the human and the industrial-the natural and artificial.

*Wayne Barrar: An Expanding Subterra* showcases this investigation. Fifty-five photographs of varying formats document a range of underground mining spaces, specifically in Australia, the United States, France and New Zealand. Barrar's extended photographic series travels to these areas reveals retro-fitted facilities and living areas, although off-limits to the general public, are places that are inhabited and continuously used. Examples include highly industrialized areas where vast areas are taken up storing data and nuclear waste, places where multinational organizations operate 24/7, and teams of workers continue to prospect for rare materials.

Barrar's documentation of these unimaginable and otherworldly sites challenges notions of land use, place and borders and raises questions about the limits of human activity subterra or underground.

## Statement about the artist

*"...there is such a thing as 'a Wayne Barrar photograph', and it is commonly a landscape image. It has a sense of beauty too, if with a disturbing edge. We don't need people-in-the-landscape to discern that it's not nature that he's pointing the camera at—it's us at work on her, harnessing her power and being summarily humbled. If a human mark is not always evident, a human explanation for what you are seeing, is. The country in his picture has been entirely cleared of human beings, but humans are without doubt the reason that the country appears as it does. These are places we have 'settled', but in Barrar's images they are capable of unsettling us, were we to know the extent of our wounding of them. And the confidence with which we did it."*

Geoff Park, *Beyond the Beauty Spots of the Uninitiated*, *Shifting Nature: Photographs by Wayne Barrar*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2001, p.18.

## Discussion

1. Look at Wayne Barrar's photograph *Caution empty pass, Mount Isa, Australia*, 2005. What is the subject matter (what has been photographed)? Where do you think this photograph has been taken?
2. How would you describe the composition (layout) of this artwork?
3. Is this a close up, mid shot or long shot of this subject? Where would Wayne Barrar have been standing to take this photograph?
4. What do you think the sign 'Caution Empty Pass' means?
5. Where do you think the light source is coming from in the photograph?

6. How would you describe the light? Is it hard or soft?
7. What do the colours in this artwork remind you of?
8. How would you describe the mood or feeling of the artwork?
9. Do you like this artwork? What does it remind you of?

## Pre/post-visit activities

- Think of places that could be referred to as 'commodified terra'- these could be sites that exist both under and above ground. Using Barrar as an artist model, draw or photograph a series of these areas. Possible locations might be shopping malls, farmland, food courts, car parking or pine forests.
- Choose one of these places to create a drawing of. You might have shops, houses, flowers, etc on the top surface layer and below you might a carpark or miners at work in a cave surrounded by tree roots and stratum (layers of rock or soil) embedded with minerals, fossils and bones.
- New Zealand soldiers during World War One used New Zealand place names to navigate their way around the tunnels and caverns of the small town of Arras, France. 'Auckland' was north and 'Invercargill' was south. Play an orientation game where a student is blindfolded and has to navigate around a course using the suburbs of the city you live in.
- Barrar has photographed underground sites in Coober Peedy, Australia self-proclaimed 'Opal capital of the world'. In Coober Peedy, people live underground because it is cooler. Design a scientific experiment to find out if something stays cooler underground than above ground. For example take two bottles of water and leave one in the sun and bury the other one. Measure the temperature of the water after a couple of hours.
- This exhibition has particular relevance with the trapped miners in Chile and Pike River disaster. Think about what it might be like living underground for a long period of time. The miners had to regulate 'days' and periods of sleep because there is no sunshine to operate your body clock by. Investigate the importance of being exposed to natural light. How does looking out the window at the garden make you feel? We know that too much time in the sun can cause sunburn but what effect would no time in the sun have on your health?
- In the 1970s some countries had sections of their population living underground as a way of trying to ensure that some people survived a possible nuclear war. Imagine if you had to build your own shelter or bunker. What would it look like? What would you need to survive? What would you do for entertainment? How many people could fit inside?  
  
Draw a floor plan of your bunker and then construct a diorama (a 3D model) of it. Look at the New Zealand artist Brendan Wilkinson's work for ideas on how to construct a diorama.

## Related Artists

**Felix Nadar** (1820-1910) was one of the earliest photographers of subterra. Nadar's photographed underground sites in Paris such as the Paris catacombs and the city's complex networks of sewers.

**David Maisel** is an American photographer whose large-scale, unearthly photographs investigate the contemporary landscape and relationships between the natural world and human activity. Maisel's aerial images depict environmentally impacted areas such as open pit mines, pine forests and areas of water reclamation.

**Neil Pardington** is a Wellington based designer and photographer. His recent project *The Vault* explores spaces not usually open to the general public—the back-of-house areas of national art galleries and museums. Pardington's sharp, large scale and meticulously produced photographs put the spotlight on our national storehouses and the fascinating and sometimes disturbing range of cultural artefacts contained within them.