





Cover image:
Pink Terrace: After Valentiine 1010 x 1520mm oil on linen
Left: Studio March 2021



Echo oil on linen 800 x 1800 mm



The Velocity of Light (2017) oil on linen 2 panels: 920 x 2440mm



Longitude At Astronomer's Point (2017) oil on linen 620 x 920mm





over: *Selected Poems MMXVI* (2016) oil on texts 480 x 420 x 280mm



Martin Ball Echo

In the early morning of Thursday 10 June 1886, Auckland was rattled by the sounds of distant explosions, at first thought to be the guns of a vessel in distress. But news soon arrived of what that evening's newspaper would describe as a 'most disastrous outbreak of volcanic forces'. Reports from Rotorua and Tauranga described a scene of 'terrific grandeur' unparalleled in the colony's history, and recalling accounts of the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum.¹ The eruption of Mount Tarawera would last for six hours, spreading ruin and desolation, destroying and burying villages, and resulting in the death of some 120 people. The ejected mud and ash blanketed the landscape, obliterating – and presumably destroying – the hot springs known as the Pink and White Terraces.

Otukupuarangi (the fountain of the clouded sky) and Te Tarata (the tattooed rock) – otherwise known as the Pink and White Terraces – were hailed as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World', and all but defied description. One visitor claimed Te Tarata was 'divinely sublime, ethereal, fairy-like, and lovely - a structure chaste and grand enough to serve as steps to heaven.'² Pre-eruption, these unique geological marvels were immortalised by artists, most notably photographer George D. Valentine and painter Charles Blomfield. Some 130 years later, that

cataclysmic event was still causing reverberations, and now attracting the attention of another Auckland painter.

In the first instance, Martin Ball was following a family precedent. His English-born and Auckland-based great-grandfather, Thomas Ball (1833-1906), came to New Zealand in 1878 and exhibited with the Auckland Society of Arts, 1881-1897, and at the 1889-90 South Seas Exhibition in Dunedin. His landscapes included post-eruption paintings of the Pink and White Terraces, based on 1885 photographs by George Valentine. Two of these paintings were in the collection of Valentine's son Arnot and in 1973 were gifted from his estate to the Alexander Turnbull Library.³

Thomas Ball's terraces, based on black-and-white photographs, had the added dimension of colour, but his great-grandson's series of nine paintings on the subject, appropriately entitled *Echo*, would be decidedly monochrome. The liberal use of titanium white reflected the silica in the geothermal water which, over hundreds of years, had crystallised to form the terraces. Further, these images have a bleached quality, a ghostly spectral pallor, and are veiled as if to acknowledge the tragic events of 1886. The landscape, drained of life and colour, appears desolate

and melancholy, a memorial to Nature's power and unpredictability, in this case the destruction of a sight so sublime that no description could do it justice. Another writer asked readers to imagine the White Terrace made up of 'petrified snow, with the purest blue of the sky melted down into its cups, and illuminated in some supernaturally beautiful fashion from beneath.' It was suggested that if a human architect could create such a spectacle it would be irreverent to stand in his [sic] presence with one's hat on, for 'the glory of the vision filled one with a religious feeling that forty thousand religious meetings would have failed to awaken.'⁴

Much of the work in *Echo* is executed in shades of grey, suggestive of a graphite drawing. But these are not slavish copies; a comparison of the largest work in the series, *Pink Terrace: After Valentine*, and the 1885 photograph on which it was based, *Pink Terrace, L. Rotomahana*, reveals a process of simplification, especially in the treatment of the intricate stalactite-like accumulations of crystallised silica which rim the cascading geothermal pools. The viewer is therefore presented with a more generalised interpretation, one more concerned with memory and loss than with a detailed rendering of a long-departed landscape.

Years after they had disappeared beneath the 1886 eruption, the terraces continued to be reproduced. The best known of these images were those designed for the tourist trade by Charles Blomfield, who had witnessed first-hand the attractions' pristine glory in 1885. Among the 22 paintings by Blomfield held by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki are the oils Pink Terrace, Rotomahana and White Terraces, Rotomahana, pre-eruption views produced in 1893 and 1897 respectively.

As indicated by these images of the terraces, Martin Ball is attracted to the idea of painting something that no longer exists. And while the eruption of Tarawera continues to haunt the national imagination, another dimension has now materialised. In 2017, using reverse engineering and drawing on 19th-century geological surveys, two researchers believed they had found the burial site of the Pink and White Terraces. They further deduced that the terraces may well have survived the eruption, and called for a full archaeological investigation.⁵ While we await developments, Ball's moving tribute adds to the rich heritage of images of one of the more dramatic and romanticised events in this country's history.

Richard Wolfe
March 2021

1. Auckland Star, 10 June 1886.
2. Otago Daily Times, 18 October 1884.
3. 'Ball, Thomas, 1833-1906: Pink Terraces. After a photograph by Mr Valentine 1887', <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23085869>; 'Ball, Thomas, 1833-1906: Pink Terraces. After a photograph by Mr Valentine 1887', <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22811950>
4. 'The New Guide to the Lakes and Hot Springs', New Zealand Herald, 20 May 1882.
5. Hannah Martin, 'Researchers claim to have found the lost Pink and White Terraces', 10 June 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/93551910/researchers-claim-to-have-found-the-lost-pink-and-white-terraces>

Richard Wolfe is an Auckland based exhibition curator, lecturer, and freelance writer who has written or co-authored 38 books covering myriad aspects of New Zealand art, history and popular culture. Richard is a regular contributor to the quarterly Art New Zealand, and other journals. He was co-curator of the first major exhibition of Kiwiana, held at Auckland Museum in 1990.

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Credit: Photography by Sam Hartnett – who, coincidentally is Charles Blomfield's Great Grandson.

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Martin Ball
Echo

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