

Primary Products

24 *Historic radiata pine tree near Porters Pass with DBH of two metres*

black and white photograph
294 × 251mm [Selwyn Plantation Board Ltd]

25 *Larch in Compt 12/3 after the August 1975 gale, Hanmer Forest, September 1975 1975*

black and white photograph
270 × 233mm [NZFS]

The curator would like to thank Bobby Johns and Paul McNamara in the selection of photographs for this exhibition.

John Johns

John Johns (1924–1999) was born in England and grew up on a farm in Devonshire where he developed a life-long appreciation for the outdoors. It was here that his love of photography was sparked after the discovery of a Kodak camera, an interest that quickly developed into a consuming pastime. After World War II, he trained in forestry at Dartington Hall in Devonshire before immigrating to New Zealand in 1951. His skills as a photographer were identified by Alex Entrican, the Director General of the New Zealand Forest Service at the time, and Johns' first employer, so that in 1954 he was appointed official photographer to the Service, a post he held until he retired in 1984. A key early project in this role was *Westland's Wealth* (1959) a publication commissioned by the Minister of Forests, Sir Eruera Tirikatene, which recorded the forests of Westland. Johns went on to publish many of his photographs in books on New Zealand's forest, animal and plant life. These include official Forest Service publications as well as reference texts such as *Wild Animals of New Zealand* (1974), *The Forest World of New Zealand* (1975), and more polemical publications designed to foreground the beneficial role of forests such as *The Story of Mangatu*, *The Forest which Healed the Land* (with F. Allsop, 1973) and *Tomorrow's Trees* (1997) by ardent forest advocate and previous Director General of the Forest Service, Lindsay Poole. All of the photographs he produced as an employee of the Forest Service are now held by Archives New Zealand and form a fascinating visual record of every aspect of the modern forestry industry in New Zealand.

John Johns saw himself as a passionate amateur who took photographs for a living, but his works demonstrate a distinctive formal sensibility that distinguishes them from other images of the same subject taken by foresters for the official record. What fascinates is the seamless blending of purpose: the combination of images that convey a wealth of visual information reinforced by often detailed captions, and the careful attention to framing, composition and fine printing. This exemplifies both the scientific gaze of the specialist who sees nature as an object for rational study and the eye of the artist seeking aesthetic order and finding it in the linear and textured patterns of his subject. Utility and beauty are here given equal weight.

It might be argued that Johns was able to indulge his artistic ambitions, even though he was employed to more prosaic ends, because the organisation he worked for saw its role as a holistic one; that is, in terms not only of forestry's economic but also its environmental, social and cultural benefits. The New Zealand Forest Service (established in 1949) gave Johns both the structure to scrupulously document every aspect of its operation, and the freedom to hone his craft and follow his creative impulses (even if at times it found him an irritant). Stories are rife about the seriousness with which the artist undertook his task: waiting hours for a cloud to move, or requiring workers to rearrange themselves for the camera.

The Service was charged with managing the Crown's timber production from both indigenous and exotic forests, balancing the requirements of industry with the needs for conservation, as well as providing the social infrastructure to support its large workforce and maintain forests as outdoor amenities for use by the New Zealand public. Johns' photographs not only canvas these wide-ranging roles but also manifest the ethics that underpin the Service's operations. The disestablishment of the Service (in 1985) and the splitting of its operations into more clearly demarcated production and conservation components, has meant the demise of a coordinated approach to forest administration. There are many consequences to this move, but the one that might be noted here is the end of a phase of cultural nationalism which saw a fascinating conjunction between industrial and artistic production. Here, the creation and management of modern forests is well-captured by an exemplary modernist photographer.

Despite Johns' self-professed amateur status, the photographer has been acknowledged by art historians for the quality of his vision. His work has been included in significant surveys of New Zealand art – *Pacific Parallels*, an exhibition that toured the USA between 1991 and 1993, which canvassed the history of landscape art in New Zealand as a model of colonial art history comparable to American representational traditions; and Roger Blackley's *Two Centuries of New Zealand Landscape Art* (Auckland, 1990) in particular – and is now collected by galleries and museums. While it is clear that his photographs perform within a larger history of landscape representation, his special contribution is to offer a thoroughly modernist approach to his subject that refuses any romantic return to primeval nature, just as it inserts something intensely personal into the managed manipulation of our natural world.

List of Works

All works courtesy of the John H. G. Johns Estate and McNamara Gallery. Photographs produced for the NZ Forest Service, the negatives for which are now held by Archives New Zealand, are annotated with [NZFS].

From left to right:

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|--|--|--|--|
| 1 High pruning equipment invented by R.T. Morris, NZFS 1963 | black and white photograph
300 × 116mm [NZFS] | 12 Agro forestry, Peter Smail's property, Lynton, Hororata, March 1990 1990 | black and white photograph
162 × 200mm |
| 2 Douglas fir stand at Watson's Plantation, Coalgate, Canterbury 1961 | black and white photograph
210 × 150mm [NZFS] | 13 Gate and stockyard built by H.B. Bull on his property at Whareama 1963 | black and white photograph
160 × 208mm [NZFS] |
| 3 Pacific truck being loaded by air tong loader [Kaingaroa Forest] 1960 | black and white photograph
168 × 231mm [NZFS] | 14 [European] larch. Natural re-vegetation on roadside a few miles south of Mt Cook (near Glentanner Station). Many of the trees have a growth of over one metre in the present season 1990 | black and white photograph
1162 × 190mm |
| 4 Aerial view of Conical Hill Sawmill [near Tapanui] 1959 | black and white photograph
228 × 204mm [NZFS] | 15 Habitat of native orchids, avenue of Corsican pine, Hanmer Forest Park 1985 | black and white photograph
151 × 209mm |
| 5 Odlins Timber Yard, Petone 1963 | black and white photograph
157 × 225mm [NZFS] | 16/17 Larch grown on Mt Cook Station used in construction of the Unwin Hut, Mt Cook. An alpine hut designed by Paul Pascoe, October 1967 1967 | black and white photographs
155 × 153mm (left) [NZFS]
154 × 152mm (right) [NZFS] |
| 6/7 Cape Wrath carries the first major consignment of exotic sawn timber to the United Kingdom. It is the biggest timber cargo (7,000,000 board feet) ever shipped from New Zealand. Departed from Mt Maunganui 5.5.70 1970 | black and white photographs
243 × 297mm (left) [NZFS]
249 × 302mm (right) [NZFS] | 18 Pinus radiata, The Forest Walk, Hanmer 1987 | black and white photograph
197 × 159mm (top) |
| 8 Radiata pine creosoted railway sleepers in test use, Wellington, Johnsonville Line, January 1963 1963 | black and white photograph
300 × 228mm [NZFS] | 19 Poplar bark, Hanmer 1987 | black and white photograph
199 × 154mm (bottom) |
| 9 Woodside Douglas fir, Geraldine 1956 | black and white photograph
306 × 220mm [NZFS] | 20 Tree bark, Himalayan pine 1988 | black and white photograph
205 × 160mm (top) |
| 10 Aerial view of intensive beech management area in Alton Valley. Silver beech/podocarp (rimu, miro, totara) forest which has been selectively felled, October 1972 1972 | black and white photograph
154 × 207mm [NZFS] | 21 Stand of pinus radiata, Hanmer 1987 | black and white photograph
210 × 160mm (bottom) |
| 11 Plantation of Douglas fir and Corsican pine planted in 1983 on Ribbonwood Station near Omarama, altitude 700 ASL. This foothill plantation is an investment for future production of valuable timber & is already providing necessary shade and shelter for livestock 1990 | black and white photograph
162 × 208mm | 22 Forest of mixed species, Hanmer Forest showing Ponderosa pine (western yellow pine), larch, Douglas fir, radiata pine (Monterey pine) 1989 | black and white photograph
250 × 273mm |
| | | 23 Golden Downs Forest, Aerial view of pinus radiata stand, August 1959 1959 | black and white photograph
250 × 295mm [NZFS] |