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Contact: gala@gre.ac.uk

Ruin Lust Review

The ruin lies in ruins. Brian Dillon, co-curator of Tate Britain's *Ruin Lust* exhibition, admits as much at the start of his accompanying book: "It seems that the harder we think about destruction and decay [...] and the further we explore the very idea of ruin itself, the less the whole category holds together." So while book and exhibition offer numerous valuable thoughts on what the ruin can mean, why it rose to prominence in art and writing of the eighteenth century, and how it persists in the modern imagination, a systematic and unified appreciation of the topic is bound to remain out-of-reach. It is tempting to imagine that things were not always this way, and that for writers and artists of the late eighteenth century the signification of decay was an altogether simpler business. It is to the credit of this exhibition that it does not advance such a nostalgic narrative. If our current fascination with ruin is shown to be fraught with contradiction and irony, then the same was also true at the eighteenth-century inception of this distinctively modern infatuation.

This is an exhibition that has provoked a remarkable degree of critical controversy, perhaps precisely because it refuses to provide easy explanations for the ruin's endurance, but also because it does not privilege the past over the present in quite the way that certain visitors expect and demand. In a recent tirade against the gallery's director and direction, Waldemar Januszczak accuses Tate Britain of wanting to be Tate Modern, randomly showcasing contemporary art when it should be upholding its reputation as "a treasury of the nation's character". He singles out *Ruin Lust* as an exhibition without "thematic coherence" or a "proper sense of development". Not for Januszczak the argument that ruination *defies* both coherence and propriety. One senses that his own exploration of the theme would be an impeccably well-behaved affair, carefully sealing off the eighteenth-century works from any contact or dialogue with more recent art. And lust would get lost along the way, of course. There is little room for desire in Januszczak's vision of Tate Britain and its purpose.

There *are* desires – strange and compelling ones – brought to the surface throughout this exhibition. Not just the lust of the viewer for the ruined landscape, but the desire of the ruins themselves to mean more or less than they do, to bridge the gaps between their diverse inertias. The first room of the exhibition contains Jane and Louise Wilson's impressive photograph, *Azeville* (2006), a daunting black-and-white image of a Nazi bunker. It relates with a mixture of longing and chastisement to the works of nineteenth-century art on either

side of it. John Martin's *The Destruction of Pompei and Herculaneum* (1822) looks more flamboyant and fantastical than ever thanks to this juxtaposition; Constable's oil sketch for *Hadleigh Castle* (c. 1829) offers what the Wilsons' close-up firmly denies us: a natural world, of cloud and water, within which to view the ruin.

The next two rooms of the exhibition allow for further contrasts, some more obvious than others. Two views of Tintern Abbey, Turner's by daylight (1794) and Peter van Lerberghe's by moonlight (1802), emphasise the opposing pleasures to be derived from ruin tourism. The nocturnal image is actually the less melancholic and less solitary of the two, the abbey filled with visitors and gaining an almost festive atmosphere as several groups explore it. The significance of the tourist is further highlighted by the presence of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales* (1770), a book credited with the popularisation of Tintern Abbey as a picturesque destination and with the Romantic interest in ruins more generally. One could argue that this book is not incorporated within the exhibition very sensitively. Despite a modern response to it included several rooms later – Keith Arnatt's *A.O.N.B. (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty)* (1982-4) – it still occupies a rather too privileged space, both physically and figuratively. It seems too convenient to enshrine Gilpin as a prophet of ruin lust, and I would have liked to see the text and its influence interrogated further.

Moving on to Room 3, one finds Joseph Gandy's splendid *Aerial Cutaway View of the Bank of England from the South-East* (1830). It will be a familiar sight for frequent visitors to Sir John Soane's Museum, but it benefits from the additional space it is given here. Despite the wilderness at its fringes, its conversion of Soane's architecture into classical ruin is full of veneration and precision. These are qualities noticeably and purposefully absent in the contemporary work that dominates the opposite side of the room. Laura Oldfield Ford's *TQ3382: Tweed House, Teviot Street* (2012) portrays a squalid urban interior, all lurid pinks and littered floors, with two young women seated on a badly-made bed. It is not subtle in any sense, quite garish actually, but if one's first impulse is to turn back and find comfort in Gandy's more polite ruin, then one is likely to be frustrated. Again, the exhibition does not promote simple nostalgia of that sort. When you look back at Gandy's Bank of England, you notice that it too has peculiar hints of pink, that though detailed and respectful, it is likewise not a straightforwardly tasteful composition.

From this point in the exhibition onwards, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art gets left behind somewhat. A section devoted to the work of Tacita Dean encourages valuable reflection on the relationship between modern technology and decay. Photogravures from her series *The Russian Ending* depict shipwrecks, scenes of battle and other bleak historical moments. Each is hauntingly annotated with scribbled comments, often difficult to decipher, which expose both the artifice of these viewpoints and the futility of historical reconstruction. It seems that the ruin can only be ruined further through such processes of excavation, investigation and re-enactment.

There are some missed opportunities in the second half of the exhibition. Its rooms are the most thematically-focused spaces here – dedicated to topics like the ruination of war and the ruined city – but individual paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are made to carry too much historical weight within the exploration of these themes. Henry Gibbs's *Aeneas and his Family Fleeing Burning Troy* (1654) is enlisted as the only example of older 'war ruin' art; given that it predates most of the historical narrative delivered by the exhibition, its presence here and the lack of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century pieces seem difficult to justify. Similarly, in examining urban ruins, the exhibition offers Richard Wilson's *The Inner Temple after the Fire of 4 January 1737* (1737). It is an attractive and detailed painting, which interestingly might be seen as adopting a particular political stance through its depiction of Frederick, Prince of Wales in heroic leader mode. However, it does seem unfortunately isolated here, crowded out by photography from more recent years.

On the whole though, this is a wide-ranging and important exhibition, one which should not have to carry the whole reputation of Tate Britain on its shoulders but which makes a strong case for viewing the past and the present alongside each other. It does not provide simplistic explanations, nor does it seek to provide them. It gives its visitors a glimpse, at least, of those unruly and unpalatable lusts which drive great art to ruin.

Ruin Lust is at Tate Britain until May 18th. It is accompanied by Brian Dillon's publication, Ruin Lust: Artists' Fascination with Ruins, from Turner to the Present Day (Tate Publishing, 2014).