Desolation row

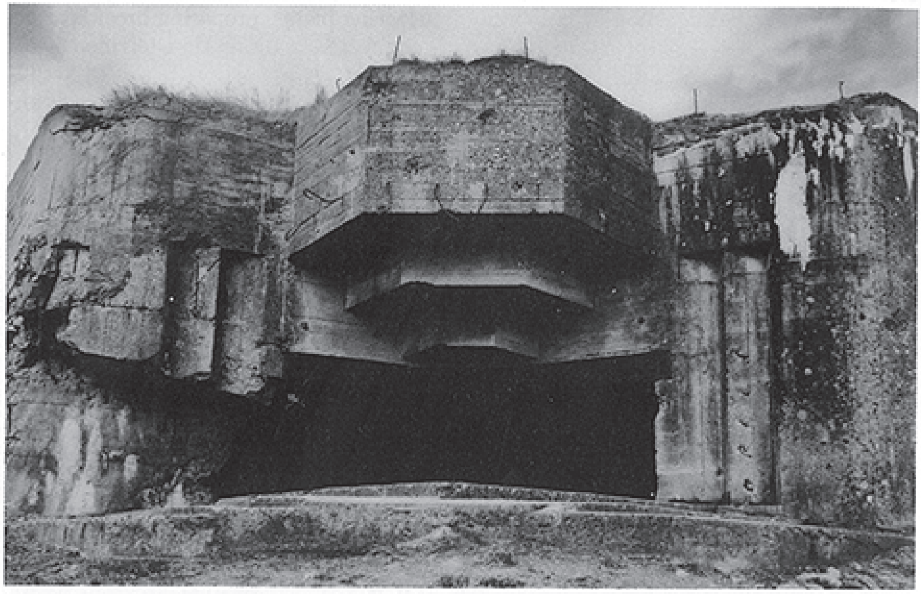
From the neo-gothic follies of 18th-century aristocrats to the blasted cityscapes of contemporary Detroit, ruins have long obsessed artists, says *Evelyn Toynton*

Ruin Lust
Tate Britain, until 18th May

Once upon a time, gazing at ruins was considered one of life's most exquisite pleasures. The parks designed by Capability Brown and William Kent for 18th-century aristocrats often featured a neo-gothic folly or crumbling mock-classical temple specially created to set off the surrounding landscape. Cultured travellers, meanwhile, went in search of real ruins in Britain and abroad, a trend that continued well into the 19th century. Ruined castles were a favourite destination, as were ruined abbeys set in beautiful landscapes: to satisfy the exacting requirements of the romantic sightseer, a ruin had to possess what John Constable called "melancholy grandeur." Henry James, a connoisseur of decay in all its guises, mocked his own zealous ruin tourism as a "heartless pastime" entailing "a note of perversity." Such perversity is nicely hinted at in the title Tate Britain has given its current exhibition of ruins in art: *Ruin Lust* (from the German *Ruinenlust*, although in German "lust" merely denotes joy or pleasure).

As the passion for ruins increased, so too did their appearance in the work of English artists. It was a time when the aesthetic doctrines of the Enlightenment—beauty as a matter of perfectly correct proportions, to be objectively appreciated by the rational mind—were being replaced, along with other Enlightenment doctrines, by a new philosophy of subjectivity. The emphasis on art's strictly formal properties gave way to the cult of sensibility, an aesthetic more concerned with art's power to evoke ideas and feelings and memories: associations, to borrow a term from David Hartley's influential theories of how the mind worked.

There can hardly be a subject richer in associations than ruins—nothing more likely to conjure up poignant reflections on loss, decline, the calamitous fate of past glory and equally of past grandiosity, as in Shelley's ruin-poem "Ozymandias." The very incompleteness of ruins allowed the imagination, a faculty beginning to be valued above reason, to roam freely, to envision what had once been and meditate on the passage of time and the victory of water and grass over marble and stone. Thus, in *The Stones of Venice*, published in the mid-19th century, John Ruskin celebrated ruins' "mediating power, between the old and the new, and between nature and culture."



Above, Jane and Louise Wilson's photograph of a ruined German gun emplacement in Normandy, 2006. Right, JMW Turner's painting of Tintern Abbey, 1794

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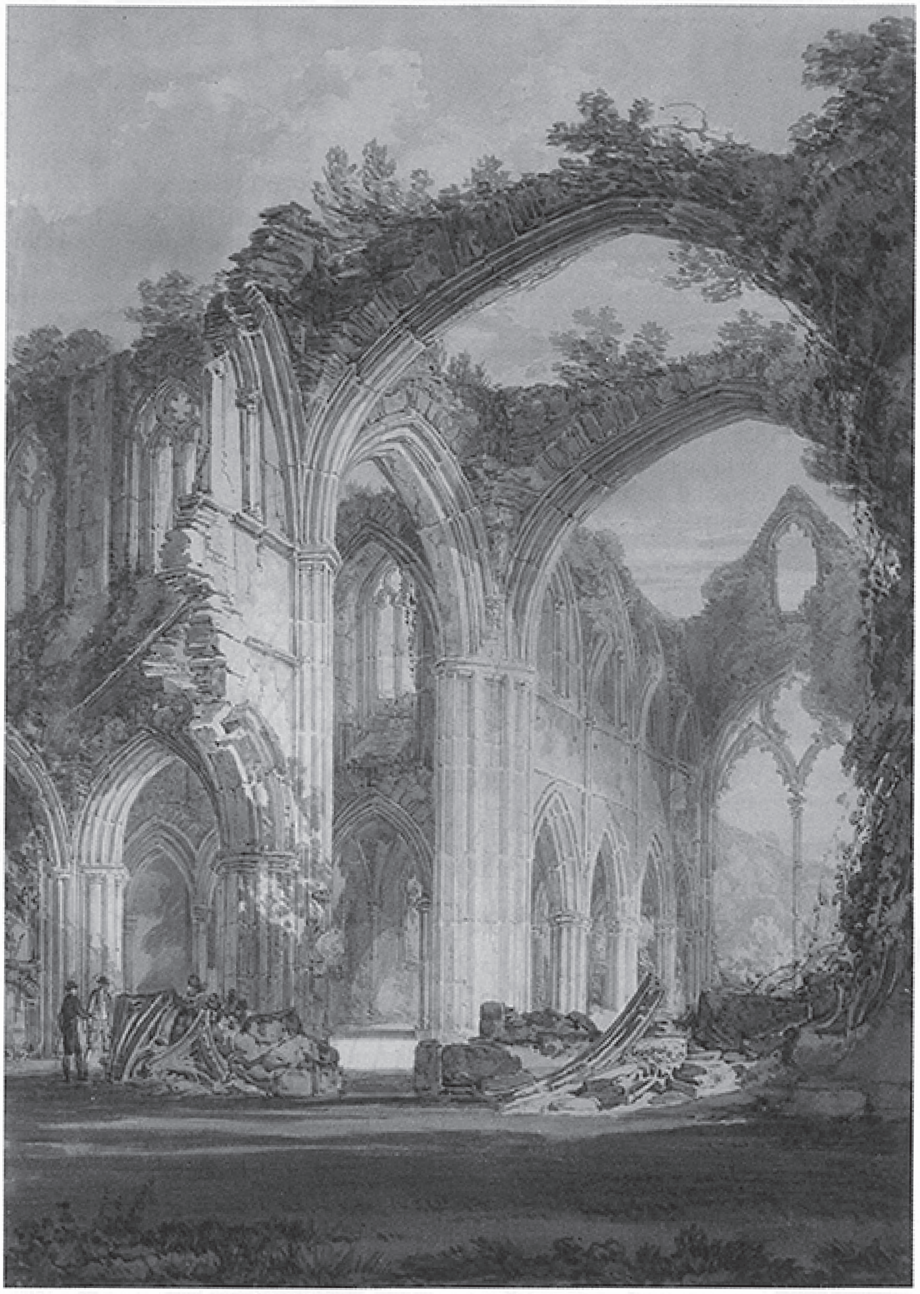
Ruskin's view is perfectly reflected in certain early works, on display at the Tate, by his hero JMW Turner. Turner's 1794 watercolour of the roofless ruins of Tintern Abbey, for example (a place later immortalised by Wordsworth in one of his greatest poems), shows the encroachment of nature in the form of thick foliage twining around the soaring stone arches. With its lovely dappled shadows, its muted colouring, it is a graceful exercise in the picturesque. But by 1834, when Turner painted the ruined temple of Poseidon, in Greece (which he had never actually visited), he had abandoned the middle ground of the picturesque and fully embraced the sublime, with its overtones of awe and terror. His depiction of the temple is one of wild desolation; the eerie light in the sky seems to hint at a disturbance to come, while the broken pillars and shattered friezes evoke the temple's history of conquest and violent destruction. The ruin appears precariously poised on its high cliff, as though it might be just about to fall into the sea below. We feel not only that something awful happened here, but also, however irrationally, that something awful may be about to happen.

Turner's painting suggests one way of categorising the diverse depictions of ruins in the Tate exhibition: there are those that evoke a pleasurable melancholy and those that conjure up a nightmarish future. Of course, every ruin is implicitly a reminder that all things are destined for oblivion, but some of the exhibition's works deliver that message in an elegiac spirit, while others arouse a more urgent sense of dread, or predict a catastrophe yet to come.

As early as 1830, the eccentric architect Sir John Soane, having just finished rebuilding the Bank of England, commissioned a meticulous rendering of how it would look as a ruin—perhaps in one of his periodic fits of melancholy, or as an act of homage to the monumental classical ruins he revered. A century later, in 1933, the politically radical artist James Boswell created a group of lithographs, possibly for inclusion in a book predicting a fascist invasion of Britain, that he titled *The Fall of London*. Boswell, concerned less with the fate of buildings than of people, depicts scene after scene of bloodshed and human misery. Gunmen rush up the collapsing stairs of an unnamed museum, its landing heaped with corpses; a drowned body is washed up on the rubble-strewn bank of the Thames, while in the background smoke rises from burning buildings.

These are expressly prophetic works, but other images in the Tate show depict current realities—current ruins—in a manner that makes them too feel like foreshadowings. Among the best of these are Rachel Whiteread's photographs of the demolition of the Clapton Park Council Estate in London's East End. The sight of these tall buildings tottering and collapsing, almost blotted out by billows of smoke, summons up harrowing visions of both other, unsanctioned acts of destruction—most obviously, the World Trade Center—and all the devastation that may be visited on cities in the



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future. "Somehow we know by instinct," wrote WG Sebald, "that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins." Indeed, *Ruinenwort*—the idea that buildings should be conceived according to how they will look as ruins—was a preoccupation of Albert Speer, even of Hitler himself; the grandiose buildings planned for the Reich's new capital were explicitly designed to make for magnificent ruins.

But objects specific to the historical past can also convey a sense of menace. Jane and Louise Wilson's chilling photograph of a vast, ruined German gun emplacement in Normandy seems like a portent as well as a reminder; its hulking presence, its obvious capacity for destruction, even its sheer concrete ugliness (like a precursor of brutalist architecture), constitute a threat to our peace of mind if nothing else. Strangely, this is not the case in the depictions of the Blitz here, which might be expected to provide some of the show's most powerful and resonant works. There are only some disappointingly tame paintings of ruined churches by John Piper and John Armstrong—both of whom painted stronger images of ruins than this—and a slightly less anodyne one by Graham Sutherland, of rolls of burnt paper in a bombed warehouse. In sharp contrast to *Guernica*, Picasso's rageful depiction of the nightmare of aerial bombardment, there are not even any human figures in Piper's or Armstrong's or Sutherland's work to register the anguish.

Should there be different rules for portraying ruins created by violence, rather than gradual decay? Was it morally wrong of Piper to make a lovely, graceful painting of a bombed-out church? It's a question that has been raised in regard to a recent genre of photography, flourishing in the bankrupt and decaying city of Detroit in particular, which its detractors have dubbed "ruin porn." This genre has been criticised for its alleged voyeurism and exploitation of disaster, as when we see the sunlight falling gorgeously through the broken-down roof of an abandoned automobile plant or mental hospital.

Practitioners of the genre, such as Matthew Christopher, contend that by showing the deserted wreckage of a once-thriving industrial city, they not only provide a glimpse of the future of the planet but call attention to the effects of greed and heartless government policies. Yet these images—like those of Sutherland, Piper and Armstrong in the Tate show—rarely include any human figures in their scenes of urban desolation. Indeed, the absence of people is part of the striking, ghostly quality in their work. One can almost hear the silence echoing in those deserted buildings, which look so visually seductive that the images seem more like art for art's sake than any sort of political statement.

The same charge might be levelled at Tacita Dean, who has been given an entire room at the Tate. Dean has assembled a group of old postcards showing various scenes of devastation, including ravaged battlefields, and made photogravure prints of them, on which she's scribbled instructions about lighting, sound, and camera angles, such as a film director might write. These blurred, dreamlike images are some of the most bleakly beautiful in the exhibition, but their very beauty means that, despite their disturbing subject matter, they can aestheticise catastrophe to the point where it ceases to disturb. And the problem is compounded by the suggestion that they are part of a film, a further—and slightly precious—way of distancing both artist and viewer from the horror.

Irony is another artistic strategy that often serves as a distancing mechanism. But one of the most surprisingly effective works in the exhibition is also one of the most ironic. A photo by David Shrigley shows a row of tenements with an empty lot in the foreground; squatting in the bare dirt is a small white box into which a door-shaped hole has been cut and on which are written the words "Leisure Centre." Not a ruin exactly, it conjures up a whole gamut of blighted expectations. Though it is far from sublime, Shrigley's painful joke arouses a sense of unease, even of desolation, that is as apt a reminder as any of what a ruin can signify: not just loss, decay, the erosions of time, but the end of hope.

Evelyn Toynton's most recent book is "Jackson Pollock" (Yale University Press)