

# TROY BUTLER



*TOMORROW'S REALLY ONLY  
YESTERDAY*

**RDS Gallery  
2025**



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## TOMORROW'S REALLY ONLY YESTERDAY

An Essay on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
*Troy Butler: Tomorrow's Really Only Yesterday*, at  
RDS Gallery,  
6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
11 April–23 May 2025

Occasional Essays Series  
Editors  
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: Untitled [landscape], Troy Butler, 2024, monotype print on fabric, two layers, 525 x 680 mm [framed].

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Untitled [detail, eye], Troy Butler, 2024, monoprint on paper, 1130mm x 930mm.

# **Imaging Trauma: The Printmaking Art of Troy Butler**

*By Alistair Fox*

“Tomorrow’s Really Only Yesterday,” the title of Dunedin artist Troy Butler’s first solo exhibition, is an enigmatic phrase.<sup>1</sup> In this context, it has several layers of potential meaning. At one level, it could refer to Butler’s printmaking practice, which seeks to use innovative new ways of exploiting the older technique of lithographic printmaking to recreate the effects of early photography. At a deeper thematic level, it could also allude to traumatic events in the past that continue to haunt the artist in the present. Finally, and not coincidentally, the first letters of the words in the title of this exhibition spell “TROY,” thus affirming the existence of a personal element inherent in these works. Like the prints themselves, the majority of which consist of two layers of silk cloth, each printed with an identical image, the one superimposed upon the other, Butler’s art is multilayered, and more complex than it might seem at a casual glance.

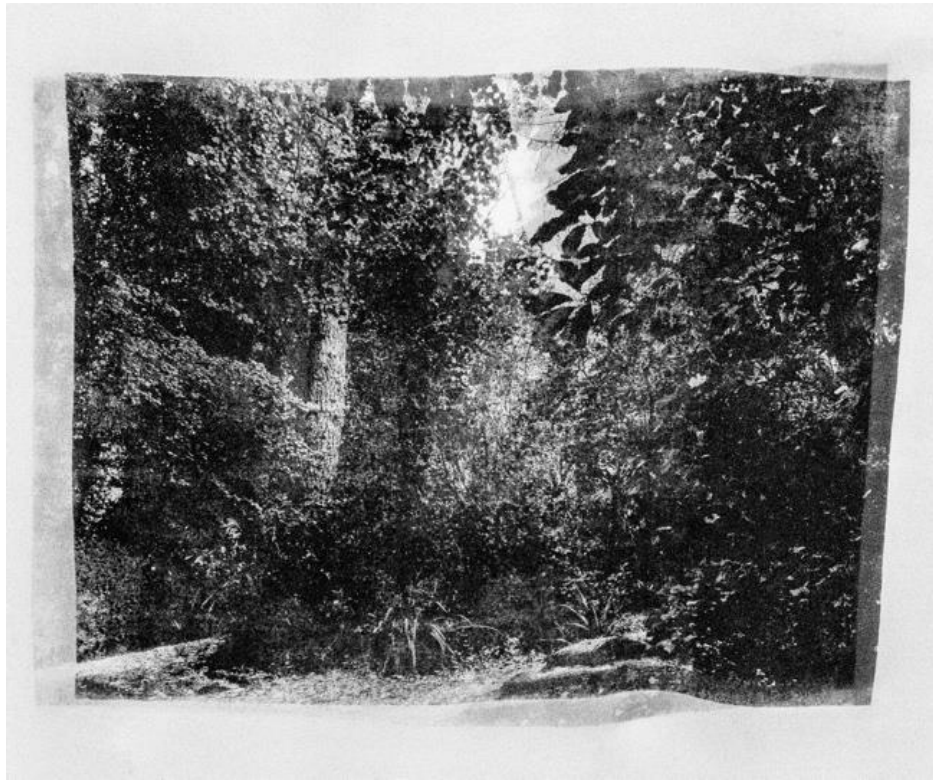
The exhibition consists of works drawn from three distinct series: the first a sequence of double-layered black and white prints showing a walk in the forest; the second comprising a cityscape contrasted

with a rural landscape; and the third depicting close up enlargements of the faces of old men. At first sight, these three sequences might appear to have little to do with one another, but in actuality, they all derive from the artist's desire to express a response to trauma.

### **“Like being in a darkroom”: The Forest Prints**

Troy Butler's preoccupation with creating prints originates from his time at Cashmere High School when he encountered “a fantastic teacher,” Fiona Van Oyen, who inspired him, especially in printmaking, which became his favourite art form. Butler was also attracted to photography, with a special fondness for photos from the time of the discovery of photography because of the way they are often “obscure and blurry,” an effect that he finds arresting on account of the mood it evokes. He particularly likes black and white photographs because the restriction of colour to monotone “adds more depth, quite often.” Above all, however, it is the expressive power of which black and white photos are capable that Butler values most highly. He finds them “moody and emotional,” capable of “screaming deep sorrowfulness and loss.” For him, combining photography with printmaking is a creative engagement that is deeply satisfying: “It's like being in a darkroom, exposing the film yourself, a similar process, of being able to create a negative with your own ink, and rolling the depth as you layer it on.” He enjoys the process as much as the outcome. In his words, “You're along for all those pieces and bits of the journey.”





Untitled [bush], Troy Butler, 2024, monoprint print on fabric, two layers, 525mm x 680mm [framed].

The sequence of prints showing scenes in a forest, however, involves much more than merely a fascination with method alone. They arise from the traumatic experience of having a close friend who killed himself. In Troy's words, the emotional impact of this tragedy "pushed me over the edge to start making art again" after a 13-year hiatus when he was immersed in the hospitality business. Realising that he needed to find a way of dealing with the shock of this tragic event, he sought to combine the expressive potentialities of photography and printmaking as a means of registering the moods he was feeling at the time.

All the pieces in the Forest Series make use of photographs that Butler took around 2–3 years ago while hiking up a bush track in the Leith Valley. As he puts it, “I was in a particularly dark space in my head while I was walking and taking the photos.” Walking in the forest gave him comfort: “It envelopes you. The track’s a little overgrown, too—you feel like you’re being swaddled by it from every side.”

### **The Cityscape/Landscape Series**

The forest was not the only setting in which Troy Butler could find solace. Another series of prints, one of which is displayed in this exhibition, derives from photographs taken in New York during his first solo travel by himself. The print captures a moment in time that brings him back to the emotions he was feeling. In Troy’s words, “It was pissing down with rain, dark and gloomy, I was wandering around by myself, lonely, isolated, I got quite homesick, and I was only there for two weeks ... It was a mixture of the heavy rain, and the reflections of everything, how I was feeling, the music I was listening to (something airy, and dreamy, and light). There was an element of homesickness in there as well.” The homesickness is reflected in the choice of subject he chose to photograph—a building that reminded Troy of the scale models his father builds, which “show the beauty in these old buildings.” Furthermore, Butler found that “being in New York was a similar feeling to being in a forest—it was overwhelming, in a positive and negative way.”

It is not just the feeling of being enclosed and swaddled that Butler finds comforting, but also the very opposite. This can be seen in the print of a photograph taken near Middlemarch (see the cover image), in which the beauty and vastness of the Central Otago landscape mirrored a different kind of emotion: “I couldn’t see any human-built objects around, it was almost timeless. It mirrored my emotions; made me feel smaller, and ... it’s like when I look at the stars and realise that I’m nothing compared with the rest ... I’m just a tiny drop ....” For Troy, registering the relative insignificance of human beings in the context of the vastness and timelessness of Nature is accompanied by “a feeling of not having to worry—we’re so insignificant in the context of this massive landscape of rolling hills.”

### **Faces: The Old Man Series**

The final series of prints in this exhibition consists of closeup, enlarged, and digitally altered faces of old men. Butler reveals that he finds images that depict sadness and despair very arresting. When he was growing up, he says, his father had a big stack of National Geographic magazines, in one of which Troy saw the famous photo of a woman in Afghanistan staring at the camera with piercing green eyes: “That image stayed with me,” Troy avers, fuelling his own impulse to represent emotions through the depiction of eyes. He was also inspired by his friend, Danny Brisbane, who was able to capture expressions of perturbed emotions in his drawings. Consequently, Butler, too, has sought in

these prints to show sadness and despair in the eyes of men who have had a really hard life. As the artist puts it, “They’re all linked to the feelings I have of existential unease—images linked to my friend killing himself.”

The prints in this exhibition, then, in one way or another, all harken back to this traumatising event and the impact it left on the artist’s psyche. In Troy Butler’s words, “What drew me to making these images was that they took me back to the mental health space I was at.” Cumulatively, therefore, while they may arise as a response to a deeply personal experience, these prints constitute a resonant commentary on some of the tragic aspects of the human condition at large. They are yet another illustration of the capacity of art, in the words of the seventeenth-century poet John Milton, “to allay the perturbations of the mind and set the affections [i.e. emotions] in right tune.”<sup>2</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on two interviews with Troy Butler conducted by the author on 19 March and 26 March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *The Reason of Church Government* (bk. 2), in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis; New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), 669.

## Contributors

**Troy Butler** is an Ōtepoti-based artist, who has a day job running the successful Morning Magpie Café. Leaving an earthquake-stricken city for Ōtepoti / Dunedin, he not only found solace, but an embracing community. After spending several years establishing himself as a local business owner with a view to supporting himself, he has recently returned to making art as his first love. In his practice, Troy explores a range of themes through photolithographic printmaking as his principal means of expression, deploying silk paper, mono-toned colours, and the superimposition of images through multilayering to evoke various emotional states. Thematically, much of his practice focuses on issues of identity, especially as these are affected by the experience of trauma.

**Alistair Fox**, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, began his career as a university lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 8 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English. His most recent book is *Peter Cleverley: Between Transience and Eternity* (Christchurch: Quentin Wilson, Publishing, 2025).



Untitled [bush], Troy Butler, 2024, monoprint print on fabric, two layers, 680 x 525 mm  
[framed] .



