

UNBOUND THE EXHIBITION: PROJECT REPORT

Natalie Smith and Victoria Bell

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition *Unbound*¹ opened on Friday 21 September 2018 to launch “Unbound: Liberating Women,” a symposium organised in partnership with the Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand (CTANZ), the School of Design and the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic – Te Kura Matatini ki Otago.

This project report records a conversation between *Unbound* exhibition curators, Dr Natalie Smith and Victoria Bell, about the signature images for the symposium (21-24 September): the suffrage cartoon *Tearing Off the Bonds* by Lou Rogers (1912) and Christine Webster’s Cibachrome photograph of model Tamati James from her series *Black Carnival* (1993-97) – bookend dialogues about women’s liberation surveyed over the weekend of the symposium.

Tearing off the Bonds by Rogers was chosen to promote the symposium, which was themed around and timed to coincide with “Suffrage 125” – a Tier 1 commemorative event led by the Ministry for Women and supported by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage to mark the 125th anniversary of women’s suffrage in New Zealand. New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote in parliamentary elections when, on 19 September 1893, the Electoral Act 1893 was passed.² While we celebrate New Zealand’s progressive attainment of the vote for women, we didn’t get our first female MP, Elizabeth McCoombs, until 1933.³

In June 2017, Natalie Smith and Moira White, a member of the symposium organising committee, participated in “Curatorial Research: Telling Women’s Stories for Suffrage 125,” a workshop held at Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin, organised by National Services Te Paerangi, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Highlighting the diversity of New Zealanders who have made a contribution to progressing women’s rights was one idea to emerge from the workshop.⁴ There is a timeliness to “Suffrage 125” in light of the global voices demanding renewed resistance to patriarchal systems of power, such as #MeToo, despite the semblance of freedom and equality for all, as promoted in Western culture today.

In planning for “Unbound: Liberating Women,” Smith and Bell identified that a visual arts project that spoke to both individuals’ empowerment and the symposium’s goals would be an exciting opportunity to combine their experiences and expertise. Smith is evolving a curatorial practice and is a fashion scholar. Bell is an artist and arts educator with a specialisation in textiles. Their interests have naturally aligned around the themes of textiles, art and liberty for this endeavour.

Thus the curatorial premise of *Unbound*, derived after stimulating discussion and debate, was to invite artist responses to *Black Carnival* #48, 1995, from the series *Black Carnival* by Webster. Smith and Bell felt that the still dangerous image of Tamati James, partly veiled in a white wedding dress, body luminous in a black void, with smiling eyes, gazing at the viewer; blurred gender assumptions and notions of desire, and spoke to continuing debates on the fluidity of dress, bodies and sexualities – all relevant to the current moment of social rights activism today. While Webster’s image is from the early 1990s, in 2018 we find ourselves reiterating the goals of the suffragists and suffragettes⁵ for equality and equity. Although suffrage is associated strongly with women’s rights, we are interested in recalling the

wider search for equality and equity for vulnerable people. In the last 20 years, we have seen the impact of queer theory and the burgeoning recognition of the plurality of gender and sexual identity. We feel that *Unbound* (the exhibition) echoes the spirit of these early women and their courage to stand up for their values.

The following Q and A session explores the conversation between these two images – one from a past we were not present in and one we can more vividly and personally remember:

PART ONE: NATALIE SMITH INTERVIEWED BY VICTORIA BELL

Who is the artist?

American-born cartoonist Annie Lucaster Rogers (1879-1952) was arguably the most “prolific American suffrage artist.”⁶ She was known as “Lou” Rogers, a gender-ambiguous name reflecting a strategy adopted by other trailblazing women of the time working in male-dominated creative spheres. Paris-based American photographer and publicist Therese Bonney (1894-1978), for instance, called herself M Thérèse Bonney (Monsieur) or T Bonney; her clients were frequently surprised to discover she was a female photographer.⁷

Tearing off the Bonds is an iconic suffrage image, yet we don't automatically say “That's a Rogers,” in the same way we would recognise a Webster. This in part has to do with the nature of cartoons – we might remember the image, but we often don't remember the artist, or validate cartoonists as artists due to their high production output and publication in the popular and special interest press. Rogers' status as a woman places her in a further subordinate position, given the way that art history has been written to privilege men.

She was based in America and involved in the suffrage movement

She was part of an active group of prominent suffrage artists discussed in Alice Sheppard's book *Cartooning for Suffrage* (1994). While Sheppard has captured the lives of a number of women working in this media at the time, she acknowledges the difficulties of writing about these women's lives. A significant number of women suffrage cartoonists remain untraceable for various reasons, including changing their names through marriage, or because they used pseudonyms to publish.⁸ From diverse backgrounds, what these women had in common, aside from being American-born, was a white middle-class Protestant outlook. Many were also in their 30s to early 40s by the time they engaged in the women's movement. Growing up in the post-Civil War era, they came of age during the rise of the New Woman.

Did she go to art school?

Rogers initially trained as a teacher, but her passion for art saw her save to attend the Massachusetts Normal Art School, Boston, later moving to New York to be a cartoonist. In spite of workplace barriers – one male employer in a large newspaper told her that “newspapers had no use for women in this particular line of work and not much use for them in any other”⁹ – she persisted, and in 1908 realised her cartooning dreams. Her early work lacked a social justice message, but from 1911 she was producing work for the *New York Call* and the *Women's Journal*, and later *Women Voter*. In addition to drawing, she took part in suffrage lecture tours and as a “soap box orator in Times Square.”¹⁰ She later married the artist Howard Smith, produced work for the *Ladies Home Journal*, wrote two animal adventure books and hosted a weekly NBC radio programme aimed at children.¹¹

There is a hint of art school rebelliousness about Rogers. She did not remain long in Boston, detesting the curriculum at Massachusetts Normal Art School, which while progressive in opening up art education for women had a curriculum based on “plinths and dead white casts,” features of traditional art history. Rogers left the school and went on to teach herself. Fifteen years later she entered the Art Students League, New York, enrolling in George Bridgman's figure drawing class. This was an “egalitarian” institution which admitted female students and let them

attend classes with male students, with the exception of life drawing. The League also had women on the board.¹²

Tell us more about the image

Tearing off the Bonds depicts a woman in contemporary dress wrapped in a sash-like ribbon and thick rope. As the text on her hat suggests, this woman represents the "Spirit of 1,000,000 women voters." The sash, a feature of pageant culture borrowed by the suffragists to promote their cause, reads: "Politics is no place for women." Published in *Judge* magazine (1912), the cartoon is one of a number of similarly themed suffrage images which influenced the development of the Wonder Woman concept. Dr William Moulton Marston's original Wonder Woman concept, which debuted in *All-Star Comics* in 1941 and in 1942 on the cover of *Sensation Comics*, was inspired by the suffrage, feminism and birth control movements, each of which used "chains as a centrepiece of its iconography."¹³ Wonder Woman was the New Woman depicted in suffrage cartoons,¹⁴ who, free from bondage, "developed enormous physical and mental power."¹⁵

Freeing women from bondage, and thus freeing their mental and physical power, was a central tenet of the contemporaneous dress reform movement. Dress reformers promoted the release of women from the corset. Their motivation was two-fold. One, there was an interest in women's physical health – the corset compressed organs. Two, garments worn by women at the turn of the twentieth century were a product of middle-class Victorian womanhood, supporting the notion of separate spheres for men and women. The heavy padding of Victorian garments echoed the elaborate padded furnishings of Victorian interiors, the domestic sphere women were ideologically bonded to. In freeing women from the corset, dress reformers simultaneously allowed women more physical mobility and freed their minds.¹⁶

PART TWO: VICTORIA BELL INTERVIEWED BY NATALIE SMITH:

Who is the artist?

Christine Webster is a New Zealand-born (b. 1958), UK-based artist, who came to prominence in New Zealand in the late 1980s and early 1990s¹⁷ for her provocative photographic works. While Webster remains active internationally as an artist, for New Zealand audiences it is the lingering frisson of *Black Carnival* that remains prominent today. The photographic series consists of 60 linear metres of Cibachrome life-sized photographs, relating to masquerade, desire and gender, that countered the then still tightly bound Protestant moral landscape of antipodean society when first exhibited in 1994. The work has become an iconic project, especially evocative in Dunedin as Webster was the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago in 1991.

How did you come across Webster's work and how was it received?

I can't recall my first encounter with *Black Carnival*, but iterations of it had been exhibited in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (1994, 2000) and the Robert McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch (1995),¹⁸ cities I lived or visited in, in the 1990s. I remember being disturbed and compelled by Webster's imagery, and her protagonists are intermingled in my mind with the pageantry and exoticism of LGBT – lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender – pride events in Canterbury of the same era¹⁹, where the roleplays explored in Webster's works were performed in reality. At that time, there remained a sense of danger and transgression in both spaces, the gallery for showing Webster's works²⁰ and LGBT pride events that dared to celebrate queer identities, then still experienced as threatening due to the impact of AIDS and HIV. Nationally, Eve Van Graffhorst's²¹ life story and radiance challenged the assumptions that AIDS was a 'gay' disease – a biblical consequence of same-sex love. Internationally, Princess Diana transformed the leper-like treatment of HIV-positive people when, in 1987, she shook hands with an Aids patient without gloves in front of the world's media,²² thereby defying the belief that HIV/Aids was passed from person to person by touch. It was a time of fear and bravery.

Black Carnival, when shown at the Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton (1994), was received as pornographic in some quarters.²³ However, central to Webster's practice is her centering of feminine desire and a female gaze, at a time when the impact of Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975)²⁴ was informing discourses on contemporary art and visual culture, especially film studies. Webster is cognisant of the tension in her work related to the naked and taboo body, but rejects any connection with pornography. In her words, "Porn is all about power and these figures are in possession of their own sexuality – there is no passivity or exploitation."²⁵

What is it about this Webster image that inspires you?

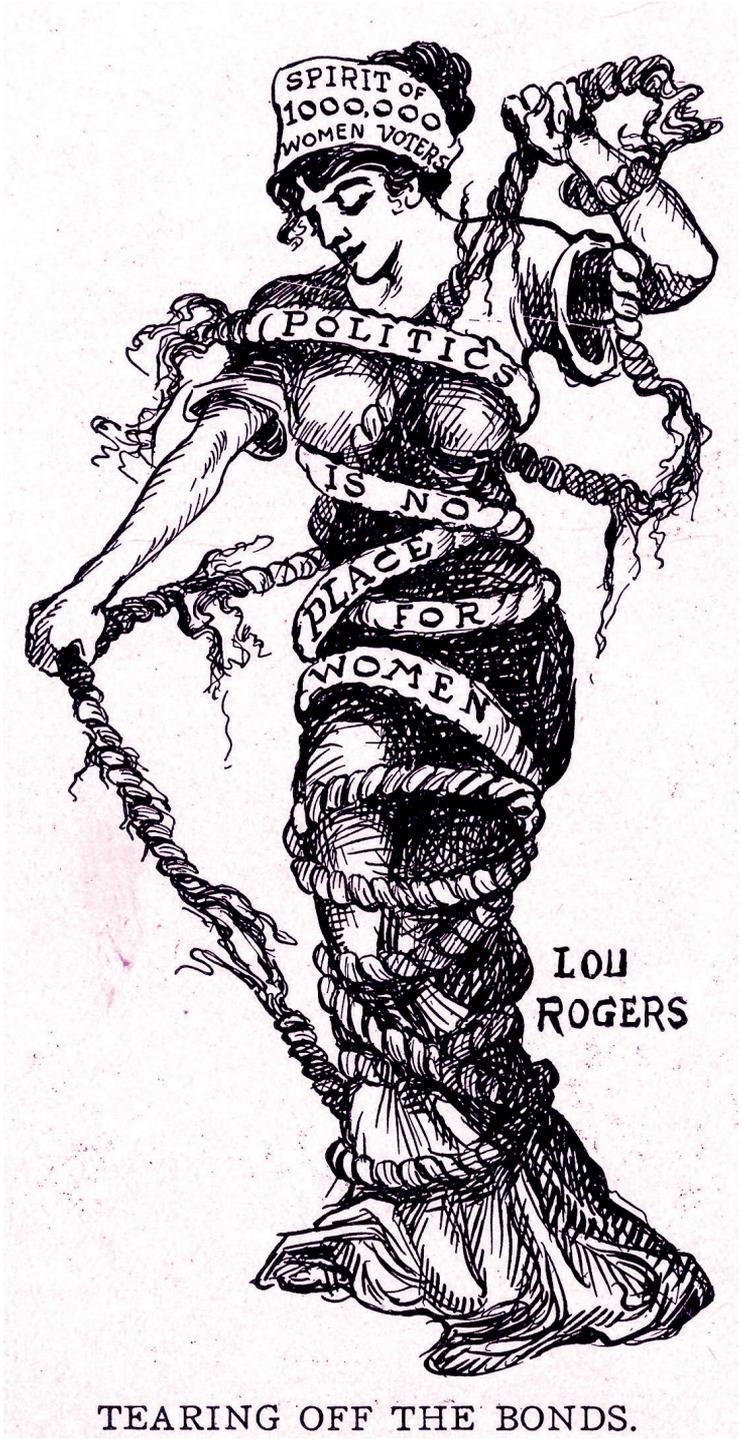
I love *Black Carnival #48* for its insolent play on sexual identity and the conventions of marriage, and for the joyous demeanor of the Tamati James character. The artwork predates the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act 2013, that allowed same-sex couples to marry in New Zealand, and may be read as a provocation on the limitations of heteronormative love solely recognised by church and state in 1995. James' incandescent smile counters the transgressive act – to clothe a man in pearls²⁶ and white tulle. The male figure disrupts the romantic construction of fairytale weddings, a trope so readily consumed by society and exemplified by the wedding of Lady Diana Spencer to Charles, Prince of Wales, in 1981. Lady Spencer, sheathed in her iconic wedding gown, designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel, has become the defining image of an immaculate bride. Despite the collapse of the Wales' union – a fairy tale with a tragic ending – the white wedding dress has lingering connotations of virginity, even today in increasingly secular British society and related Commonwealth states.²⁷

Why this particular image as the basis for *Unbound* (the exhibition)?

Formally, the work is striking due to Webster's use of light (James' glowing body and iridescent, unfastened wedding gown), juxtaposed against an infinite, glossy, dark background. This play on black and white may be related to binaries – good and bad, male and female – and yet the image performs a blurring of these fixed positions; it questions our expectation of how we should act and move in the world. It allows a space for the rupture of societal conventions; a liberation of the self.

Furthermore, revisiting Webster's exploration of sexualities in the wider *Black Carnival* series is important as, today, discussions around sex remain heavily framed by the male gaze. Centering female desire, for example, in contemporary Western culture, a seemingly liberal context where anything goes, is vital, as women's perceived sexual (emotional, physical, intellectual and economic) liberation continues to be underpinned by constricted, if not outright dangerous, conditions. This is not limited to women, as LGBTQIA+ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual – people continue to experience discrimination and inequality. Yet they are collaborators too, in dialogues for change. The Me Too movement²⁸ (founded in 2006) galvanised global communities in 2017 to address and transform sexual violence narratives with the powerful #metoo viral hashtag. This timed with the allegations of sexual harassment against Harvey Weinstein²⁹ in late 2017 that heightened the visibility of sexual violence against women and an intolerance for the repetition of this kind of behaviour by a powerful man – by any perpetrator. The women who have accused Weinstein have risen up like David to Goliath and felled him in the court of public opinion³⁰. We are again in a time of fear and of bravery. To act in the face of subjection is to emancipate oneself from the bonds of patriarchy.

In another quarter, the 2017 Netflix TV series, *Hot Girls Wanted: Turned On*,³¹ examines the impact of technology, especially our accessibility to porn, and the ways that this is rewiring our experiences of intimate relationships. Screenplay writer, director, producer and author of adult entertainment (in which the seeking of female pleasure is prioritised), Erika Lust,³² states in one episode, "We can't ignore that porn today is sex education." Lust's stance on producing porn that centres on female pleasure echoes Webster's position that the figures in *Black Carnival* retain sovereignty over their bodies, and the continuing need to reframe how we see love, and sex, expressed in art and popular culture, as well as in life for everyone.



TEARING OFF THE BONDS.



CONCLUSION: WHAT LINKS THESE TWO IMAGES TOGETHER?

Elizabeth Wilson argues: "Dress is the cultural metaphor for the body, it is the material with which we 'write' or draw; a representation of the body into our cultural context."³³ Dress transcends time in its potential to speak of its cultural context because of its close relationship to the body, and with fashion which in itself is of the 'now' or cultural present. Today, we have the The Pussy Hat Project™, a social movement focused on solidarity, women's rights and social activism;³⁴ and the decision to wear black at the 2018 Oscars in support of #MeToo³⁵ as two recent examples of the power of dress to define the cultural moment.

While Rogers and Webster are geographically and historically of different places and different times, their practice is linked by an interest in identity, social justice and agency, expressed through the use of a sartorial metaphor. In depicting the trappings of pageant culture and Victorian fashion, Rogers simultaneously inscribes and critiques women's roles in early-twentieth-century Western society. At the same time, Webster's use of the white wedding dress on a male body celebrates and draws attention to societal tensions between the LGBT community and the upholders of so-called social norms, embodied in the metaphor of the white wedding which symbolises a heteronormative relationship and traditional family life. The performative dimension of both images highlights the social construction of gender and draws attention to the fluidity of identity.

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Victoria Bell's art is concerned with postcolonial theory, cultural tourism, feminism and animal ethics. Known for her soft sculpture works, her practice is founded on a textile sensibility which draws on both fine art and craft histories. Bell has a B.Des. from Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology and an MFA from Otago Polytechnic. She is also an arts educator and has taught at the Dunedin School of Art since 2007.

Natalie Smith holds a PhD in art history and theory; her primary area of research interest is the art/fashion nexus, fashion design history and theory, and New Zealand visual culture. Recent work includes the co-curated exhibition (with Lucy Hammonds) "When Dreams Turn to Gold: The Benson & Hedges and Fashion Design Awards 1964-1998," Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, 18 March – 25 June 2017. She is a teaching fellow in the Department of Sociology, Gender and Social Work at the University of Otago.

1 Artists selected through a peer review process for *Unbound* (the exhibition): Margo Barton, Anita De Soto, Edwards + Johann, Steve Lovett, Michelle Mayn, Dylan McCutcheon-Peat and Simon Swale. Victoria McIntosh, Marie Strauss and Susan Videler. *Unbound* was exhibited at the Dunedin School of Art Gallery at the DSA, Otago Polytechnic, 21 September – 18 October 2018, and was an Otago Polytechnic Research Contestable Fund 2017-2018 Approved Project.

2 See <https://mch.govt.nz/suffrage-125>.

3 New Zealand women gained the right to vote in 1893, but it was not until 1919 that they were able to stand for parliament. See <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/elizabeth-mccombs-elected-as-nzs-first-woman-mp>.

4 "Curatorial Research: Telling Women's Stories for Suffrage 125," a workshop hosted by Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin, and organised by National Services Te Paerangi, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 20 June 2017.

5 While the suffragists were peaceful campaigners, the suffragettes were militant, direct-action campaigners who emerged after progress had stalled. See "What is the Difference between the Suffragists and the Suffragettes," *British Library*, 6 February 2018, <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/suffragists-and-suffragettes>.

6 Alice Sheppard, *Cartooning for Suffrage* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 99, 106.

7 See Lisa Schlansker Kolosek, *The Invention of Chic: Thérèse Bonney and the Paris Moderne* (New York: Thames & Hudson in association with Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 2002).

- 8 Sheppard, *Cartooning for Suffrage*, 99.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 106-7.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 110-111.
- 13 See <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710>.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 See "Feminist Dress Reform," in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, ed. Daniel Leonhard Purdy (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 109-116; and Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, OH: The Kent State Univ. Press, 2003).
- 17 See Anne Kirker, "Recurring Undercurrents," 2010, <http://www.christinewebster.co.uk/texts/text13.html>.
- 18 *Black Carnival* has been shown in New Zealand and internationally including Australia and Scotland. See <http://www.christinewebster.co.uk/texts/cv2.html>.
- 19 See http://www.pridenz.com/historical_events_individual_events.html for a history of Pride events in New Zealand, 1933-2018.
- 20 See: Jenny Harper, "Art is Not Above the Law," *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, 14 (2011), <http://www.junctures.org/index.php/junctures/article/view/211/281>.
- 21 Eve Van Grafhorst, b. 1982 Australia, d. 1993 New Zealand.
- 22 See: <http://www.thisisinsider.com/photo-princess-diana-shaking-hand-aids-patient-1987-2017-8>.
- 23 See Harper, "Art is Not Above the Law."
- 24 See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 833-44, http://www.composingdigitalmedia.org/f15_mca/mca_reads/mulvey.pdf.
- 25 See Harper, "Art is Not Above the Law."
- 26 The wearing of a pearl necklace by James in *Black Carnival #48* may be read as a double-coded action: pearls are both a sign of class and timeless elegance and "a pearl necklace" is a slang term for a sex act in which a man ejaculates semen on or near the neck, chest of breasts of another person. See <http://www.yourdictionary.com/pearl-necklace>.
- 27 Edwina Ehrman, *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashions* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011).
- 28 See <https://metoomvmt.org>.
- 29 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>.
- 30 See <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/25/harvey-weinstein-surrenders-over-sexual-misconduct-charges>.
- 31 *Hot Girls Wanted: Turned On*, dir. Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus (Two to Tangle Productions, 2017).
- 32 Born in 1977 in Stockholm, Sweden, Erika Lust (born Erika Hallqvist) studied human rights and feminism at the University of Lund, graduating with a degree in political science. See https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2848796/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.
- 33 Elizabeth Wilson, "Fashion and the Postmodern Body", in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, eds Julie Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 6.
- 34 See <https://www.pussyhatproject.com>.
- 35 See <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/why-wearing-black-oscar-2018-12116680>.