

Book review

Serious Photography and Committed Photographers: Some thoughts on *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*

By Craig McNab



Lara Strongman (ed.), *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*
(Auckland: Mountain View Publishing, 2005,
ISBN 0-473-10280-3, 183 pages, mostly illustrated,
Illustrative Category Winner, Montana New Zealand
Book Awards, 2006, image courtesy of the publisher).

"It is not just access to truth that is the issue, but the existence of the truth itself that has been discredited as a given." Gwynneth Porter²

With a number of reservations *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* is an excellent overview of the art-photography scene in this country today. It significantly extends the showcasing of local expressions of 'advanced' forms of the medium in the modern era, and along with the exhibition *The Active Eye*, from 1975, brackets the postmodern period represented by two other notable shows, *Views/Exposures* (1982) and *Imposing Narratives* (1989).³ Unsurprisingly for their field the spectre of modernist documentary haunts all four exhibitions and books⁴ and referring to William Main and John B Turner's history of New Zealand photography precisely locates the moment this form became accepted here to the 1940s in John Pascoe's startling image *Official VE (Victory in Europe) Celebrations at Government Buildings, Wellington, May 1945*.⁵

Pascoe belonged to a new group of photographers emphatic in their rejection of the camera club and photographic society aesthetic of pictorialism and of rule-based methodologies that had until then dominated popular photography in New Zealand.⁶ He made clear this position in 1947: "It is up to photographers to leave the darkroom and the retouching pen and to mix with the outside world...An interest in people related to their physical environment is more healthy than the ability to fake million-dollar clouds in skies that were grey when the photograph was taken".⁷ Thirty years later, with *The Active Eye* exhibition, the public engagements of artists such as Pascoe had given way to an intensely subjective documentary style that articulated

private spaces and private outlooks. By the 1982 *Views/Exposures* show, these portfolios had developed into a specifically project-based model, in part at least, loosely utilising the paradigm of conceptual art, which in its photographic form embraced the vernacular and banal. Over the following decade, as modernist photography was finally accepted as a genuinely marketable art-form, it was rigorously critiqued by semiotics and feminism simultaneously.⁸ In *Imposing Narratives* a number of new forms and styles reflect the local excesses of this passing moment when theory appeared to construct art. This trajectory – from public to subjective documentary to conceptual photography to postmodern theorising – was not unique to this country, but reflected global trends that have developed further, with the collapse of postmodernism, into the eclectic situation we have now. Today advanced photographic practice is informed by a wide variety of genres, none taking precedence over another.⁹ Through tertiary study, ready access to a world-wide network of resources and critical dialogue, and the availability of numerous productions from a number of art-book publishers, most current photographic artists are able to finely balance theoretical considerations with the practical. It is exactly this state of affairs that *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* successfully engages with and catalogues.

However, the volume is not without problems. When viewed with similar photography books published recently the overall design seems staid and the entries inconsistent. A reasonable point of comparison could be made with the exemplary model of *Blink* (2002) from Phaidon.¹⁰ Certainly (and

to be fair) this international survey is a more ambitious project – allowing ten curators to select world-wide one hundred significant contemporary photographers to present in the form of an exhibition-in-a-book – but it has an attention to detail through clear and interesting design that makes it both more informative and more aesthetically engaging. There is as much to be learnt about Gavin Hipkins over the four pages of his entry in *Blink*, as from the eight plus in *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*. The latter, then, is in a landscape format with approximately 8"×10" images on facing pages for virtually all entries. While this works for some, the majority could do with greater variations in sizing and positioning, if only to increase the number of images included.¹¹ Those entries where scale has been played with tend to be the more visually appealing, breaking up the relentless uniformity of the book. (The most striking spreads, with a wide range of picture sizes and numerous thumbnails, are at the start of the book in the Foreword and Introduction, and then again at the very end, in the entries on Ava Seymour and Darren Glass.)

For a book claiming to survey the contemporary photographic scene in this country, the selection of images is often puzzling as it shifts between entries showing career overviews and others of solely current works. In the case of a younger artist like Fiona Amundsen the photographs shown are all excellent, but in limiting their selection to her series *Garden Place* (2003/4), we see no development from her equally engaging earlier work over the decade she has practiced. This observation holds true for Fiona Pardington, Yvonne Todd, Ann Shelton, Gavin Hipkins and

Darren Glass. On the other hand, if the reason was, say, to present only the most recent photographs then why include the work of so many “senior practitioners” (as the cover blurb tactfully puts it) and in a number of cases so many old images – one Marti Friedlander shot dates from 1957! Arguably this is the book’s underlying problem and dropping these well established and surveyed artists would have allowed a lot more space to expand on the remaining entries. To be sure some, like Anne Noble and Peter Peryer, are still producing exciting and important work, but others have particularly poor sections which detract from the publication’s apparent overall aims.¹² In the case of Boyd Webb, for instance, the introduction by Richard Cork barely mentions any of the work shown in the book and instead reads as though it has been lifted from an exhibition catalogue, of possibly two decades earlier, with an additional paragraph tacked on. Furthermore, it includes a statement so discordant with the aims of this project presenting his work, that it is unclear how a reader can reasonably connect Webb’s own practice to those of his fellow artists: “Photography, for [Webb], holds no inherent technical or aesthetic fascination. His interest is not held for long by the majority of work that photographers produce.”¹³ Okay.

Following a short Foreword framing the project and a rather longer Introduction outlining its context within the history of New Zealand photography, each artist’s section starts with a two-page overview. With this amount of text the book is as much a display of current writing on the medium in this country as of actual images. Some is of a very high standard and succinctly unpacks the work – Anthony Burt on Fiona Amundsen, Robert Leonard on

Yvonne Todd and Gwynneth Porter on Ann Shelton, for example. Some is not. Gregory O’Brien’s Introduction struggles to coherently tie such a wide-ranging project together but is particularly disappointing in its failure to link the photographers with contemporary global trends. However, the few interviews there are with the artists are an excellent feature and Fiona Pardington’s discussion with Megan Tamati-Quennell and Peter Shand stands out, effectively giving a better overview of the whole endeavour (and of photography itself) than the actual Introduction. Pardington’s incisive understanding of recent thinking on photography and her conflation of this with an indigenous world-view is one of the highlights of the book.

While the survey includes a glossary at the end and brief biographical details for the photographers, it unfortunately does not have a bibliography or list of artist’s websites. Further, given the notable shift of recent photographic exhibition practices away from uniformly sized, matted and framed images, to displays that engage their audiences as party to a form of public spectacle – where signification derives as much from the image’s physical presence as from what it represents – it would have been useful to have included more installation images. The few photographers who do offer such pictures in their introductions certainly increase the understanding of their work’s (partial) function as displayed objects.

Three specific aspects of *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* are noteworthy. Firstly, the reproduction of both black-and-white and colour images is exceptionally high and maintains a close fidelity to the original photograph. The quality of the printing in China

by Everbest allows the edition to be favourably compared with the finest art-book production in this country and in fact even holds up well against Photoforum's short-run special printing and photography project *Ink & Silver* from the mid-1990s.¹⁴ Secondly, the use of Yvonne Todd's image *Seriousness* (2004) for the front cover is an inspired choice that gestures toward a post-structuralist reading of the book's title. At the exact moment this design move creates a distinctive product placement in the clamour of the bookstore at Christmas, it also signals the slippage that occurs in the multiple discursive regimes that the image and title phrase bring to mind. For instance, in forcing plays of meaning the combination of picture and text deconstruct ideas of the contemporary (stasis, shift, nature, culture, determined, faltering), New Zealand (green, grey, empty, occupied, free, restrained, odd, bland, tall, stunted) and photography (real, false, straight, constructed, colour, monotone, perspective, flat). It speaks of scale, scale in all things. Finally, it is the photography itself that articulates these fluid positions. This is of course how it should be, and due in part to the expanding digital order, the nature of the 'real' itself continues to be the central theoretical focus of the medium. Work created by informed artists aware of contemporary and historical practice provokes robust debate while marking out new planes of critical interest. To illustrate this, three photographers stand out – Ben Cauchi, Ann Shelton and Yvonne Todd – who respectively utilise the play available in forms of the historic, the analogue and the digital modes of photography. From these positions they explore aspects of the medium's relationship to the unconscious, to nostalgia and to social horror:

Ben Cauchi recreates both the nineteenth century's photographic method of the ambrotype and the era's fascination with spirit photography and the occult. In these unique images – that seem to appear from an earlier time – the photographer makes a sort of double forgery that is both as real and not as real as an original past we desire to connect with. Like the surface of his images, memory is a darkened glass. And Ann Shelton, by photographing unmarked graves, murder scenes and disused psychiatric institutions, locates settings of private despair and public disquiet. In a doubling gesture she offers a print mirror-imaged to pair with the original and our eye oscillates in fascination and attraction between the two poles, positive-negative, negative-positive, never sure which is the primary. We want both to forget and to remember what has been witnessed in these scenes. But as we can never be sure of the image's veracity, this memory becomes impossible to grasp in either phase. Finally, Yvonne Todd creates images that seem peculiarly tainted – poisoned even – by colour shifts, distortions, blurrings, points of view, juxtapositions, erasures and even titles. They have the quality of dreams (or nightmares) where time lurches randomly around, corralling us toward apparitions and vistas we wish to avoid.¹⁵ These frames look like photographs – they are photographs – but what then of the reality they represent? When did it die? In the perfect ugliness of her images Todd manages to throw over the cloying nostalgia the photographic picture so often induces and in a direct counter to the words of Roland Barthes she extinguishes our desire to look into the eyes of the emperor.¹⁶ Long live the queen.

- 1 My title 'borrows' from earlier descriptions of New Zealand photographic practice put forward by Tom Hutchins and Peter Ireland respectively, as "serious photography" being taken by "committed photographers". Tom Hutchins, *The Active Eye – Contemporary New Zealand Photography* (Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1975), 6; and Peter Ireland, Peter, *Views/Exposures – 10 Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* (Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1982), 6.
- 2 Gwynneth Porter; "Ann Shelton", in Lara Strongman (ed.), *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* (Auckland: Mountain View Publishing, 2005), 120.
- 3 These shows each had a significant catalogue published: Tom Hutchins, *The Active Eye – Contemporary New Zealand Photography* (Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1975); Peter Ireland, *Views/Exposures – 10 Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* (Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1982); and Gregory Burke, *Imposing Narratives – Beyond the Documentary in Recent New Zealand Photography* (Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1989).
- 4 For instance: "Although, traditionally photography may have been considered an art-form in its own right, it has been separated from other visual arts fundamentally because of its transcriptive properties and its reproducibility." (Gregory Burke, *Imposing Narratives*, 8.) Employed in varying forms the 'documentary style' is the marker of modernist photography and the thing critiqued by postmodernist photographic theory. The parameters of this debate are covered by John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966) and Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).
- 5 William Main and John B Turner, *New Zealand Photography From the 1840s to the Present/Nga Whakaahua O Aotearoa Mai 1840 Ki Naiane* (Auckland: Photo-Forum, 1993), 47.
- 6 And arguably still do. Surprisingly this is one style of photography rarely critiqued by theorists and practitioners of the advanced art variety. From the New Zealand perspective Gavin Hipkins offers a possible explanation in *Folklore: The New Zealanders* (Auckland & Wanganui: Artspace & Sarjeant Galleries, 1998). Linking pictorialism with a form of documentary – "Pictorialism may have changed stylistically – less soft focus these days – but you can recognise it in its loyalty to wholesome imagery" (p.5) – he makes a convincing argument for (and warning about) one form of photography being the binary of the other in this country. He uses as a typical example one similarly noted by Gregory O'Brien (p.12) in his introduction to *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* ("The Camera is a Small Room", pp.9-15) – that of Brian Brake and Maurice Shadbolt's 1963 *New Zealand: Gift of the Sea* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs).
- 7 Further, in the banal subject matter of Yvonne Todd there is a passive muteness that nods toward (and deconstructs) the overtly composed and prescriptive imagery of the camera club or photographic society salon competitions. Except that, to quote O'Brien, her "landscapes are toxic waste dumps, presided over by a series of begowned darlings, all of them freshly baptised into some outlandish cult (echoes, here, of Len Wesley's classic 1972 photograph, *Baptism, Christchurch*)." (p.13) Wesley's photo featured in *The Active Eye* and Todd plays across Hipkin's fusion of the pictorial and documentary while simultaneously torching both. See particularly *Roba* (2004) and *Resulta* (2004) in *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* (pp.38-39).
- 8 A comment he originally made in John Pascoe, "Photography in New Zealand", *Landfall* no. 4, December 1947 and quoted in Janet Bayley and Athol McCredie, *Witness to Change – Life in New Zealand. Photographs 1940-1965* (Wellington: Photo-Forum, 1985), 11.
- 9 In the images of Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger; the images and theory of Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula and Victor Burgin; and most emphatically in the theory of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, which she collected in 1991 as *Photography at the Dock: essays on photographic history, institutions and practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). An overview of this discursive process is offered by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin D. Buchloch in *Art Since 1900 – Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) – particularly Krauss's "1977" pp. 580-583, Foster's "1980" pp. 586-589 and Buchloch's "1984a" pp. 590-595.
- 10 An account of these trends in the development of the current status of the medium is cogently argued in Lucy Souter, "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s", *Afterimage* 27, no.4 (January/February 2000), 9-12.
- 11 Antonia Carver (ed.) *Blink* (London: Phaidon, 2002). And in the last two years Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (New York: Aperture,

- 2005); William A Ewing, Nathalie Herschdorfer and Jean-Christophe Blaser, *Regeneration – 50 Photographers of Tomorrow, 2005-2025* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005); and Thomas Weski, Thomas (ed.), *Click Doubleclick: The Documentary Factor* (London:Thames and Hudson, 2006).
- 11 Unfortunately this is a common problem in photography books where incorrect image scale leads to a poor balance between white border and picture, making reading of the photograph difficult.
 - 12 For this reader the following statement made on the front cover flap seems rather disingenuous in its downplaying of editorial responsibility: "The construction of this book has involved a close working relationship with the contributing photographers, who have had substantial input into selecting images and in commissioning different writers to talk about their work..." An aside – a claim for Noble and Peryer as perhaps our most significant photographers can in part be made on their ability, in such a selection process, to present images that significantly advance their body of work while still drawing from it. Over careers spanning thirty plus years both still manage to produce refreshing 'new work' and therefore do in fact stay contemporary in a wider sense of the word.
 - 13 Richard Cork, "Boyd Webb", in Lara Strongman (ed.), *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* (Auckland: Mountain View Publishing, 2005), 40.
 - 14 John B Turner, *Ink & Silver*, Photoforum double issue 60 & 61, April 1995 (Auckland, Photoforum, 2005).
 - 15 The sort of world that Todd's work brings to mind is that of George Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Particularly the final moments when the hero – who has stayed more or less sane (and alive) because he insists on rationality as a counter to the absolute horrors of a night living through a zombie attack – is gunned down by the relieving white vigilantes simply because he is an African-American.
 - 16 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Flamingo, 1980/84), 3: "One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: *I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor.*"

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