

WWW. WON- DER- LAND. CO. NZ.

From afar New Zealand Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand) has functioned as a repository of wonder – a distant, foreign, exotic land on to which a wealth of fictions have been projected – through film, literature and even in some cases ‘historical’ accounts. The imagery is often discordant and conflicting; at times it is a treacherous paradise, at others a safe and unspoilt ‘clean green’ place or an innocent country in some kind of halcyon time warp. Most dominant is its reputation as the breeding ground for rugby warriors of superhuman strength. In truth, it is all and none of these things. Further confusing the issue is the airtime the landscape has been receiving on big screens across the globe – home to hobbits and orcs (*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy), a giant gorilla (*King Kong*) and an icy kingdom (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*). Idyllic promotional campaigns (100% PURE) feature lush, verdant foliage, sweeping views of beaches and mountains populated only by smiling happy people. Collectively, these images give a very particular, cartoonish outline of the nation and its peoples, one that we ‘locals’ struggle to identify with. ‘Wonderland’ brings to Rome the work of nine New Zealand photographers involved in a more intimate, complex and revealing investigation of the cultural make-up of New Zealand. Some document moments, events and objects; others construct tableaux, but all are rooted very much in the specifics of this place – New Zealand, ranging chronologically from the 1970s through to the present day. **The timing of the first humans to reach New Zealand is a hotly-debated topic, with varying hypotheses charting different patterns and timeframes for Polynesian settlement from the East Pacific.¹ The oral histories of the peoples of the Pacific do not prioritise linear time, or make a distinct separation between the achievements of the gods or mortals; they are intertwined and ongoing. Colonial ‘discovery’ of these lands is documented empirically through ledgers, journals and drawings; chronological lineages of land acquisition, botanical, geographical and ethnographical ‘discoveries’ by the Dutch and British.² The make-up of contemporary New Zealand includes Maori (the indigenous people) and descendants of incomers from a broad range of countries who settled from c.1830s onwards, attracted by accounts of untouched lands, fertile and ready for settlement, and fortunes to be made in whaling and gold mining – Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales, China, former Yugoslavia, Holland and Italy. The 20th century brought waves of new arrivals from the Pacific Islands (Tonga, Cook Islands, Samoa and Fiji), Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Central Europe, Africa, USA, Canada, etc. **New Zealand is perceived as a very young country in comparison to Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia. Its history often thought as simpler, because of its relative youth. I would argue that, rather, the pace of development has been swifter leaving fresher wounds, troubles closer to the surface. The works in this exhibition acknowledge conflicts and chart progress in growing a collective understanding of self and places, and celebrating the richness brought by the mix of indigenous and incoming peoples.** We are acutely aware of our geographical distance from other places. There has been much celebration of the explosion of the ‘centre’/‘periphery’ axis – both in terms of geography and cultural sophistication (although I sense this detonation has been more readily accepted by those who used to be considered ‘fringe dwellers’). New Zealanders are rampant, intrepid travelers and effective researchers and networkers. The work in ‘Wonderland’ situates itself in the ‘local’ yet is alert to contemporary global discussions about photography and visual culture. Creative networks span the globe and the permeation of images and objects from New Zealand or by New Zealanders resident in other countries is increasing rapidly. This exhibition is one such initiative. **HARUHIKO SAMESHIMA examines the visual display of culture by making a record of its various manifestations in museums and tourist attractions. He assembles the images into an image library from which clusters can be selected to string together narrative fragments. While Sameshima’s practice echoes that of 19th century empirical models of collecting, this is a knowing trope. An awareness of the subjective and piecemeal nature of this project is central to Sameshima’s practice – that knowledge is accumulative, but tangential, that there is no single view, no solitary rendering of ‘the way it is’. ‘So there is a hopelessness in what I do, and a corresponding freedom from the burden of fidelity to one kind of truth’. ‘Wonderland’ includes a small sampling from the series ‘eco-Tourism’ (1990–present). Sameshima offers us images depicting icons of ‘New Zealandness’ collected from public sites in New Zealand, Hawaii and London. Central to which is evidence of resources/species lost or endangered: fossilised tree stumps and swamp Kauri (harking back to prehistoric native forests), a moa skeleton (a large, flightless bird, now extinct), images of the string of islands that comprise New Zealand sitting at the bottom of a globe and a mural (which remind us of the innumerable times the country actually has slipped off the bottom of maps). There is a noticeably strong contribution by immigrant photographers within New Zealand practice, reflected in the make-up of ‘Wonderland’ (Marti Friedlander came from England, via Israel in 1958; Haruhiko Sameshima from Japan and Dieneke Jansen from The Netherlands in the 1970s). **MARTI FRIEDLANDER has spent over forty years photographing New Zealand and its people. She was instrumental in documenting the changing nature of post-war New Zealand; activism and protest, shifts in gender roles, creeping urbanisation, changing patterns of poverty and want. The ten images in ‘Wonderland’ date from the 1970s and include images that have become iconographic expressions of New Zealandness; hanging at the beach (the kids and gulls), the car leaving tracks in the sand), cultural pride (two images of elderly Maori women with moko – customary facial tattoos – and a gathering of generations on the porch), pride in the new (the young girl in her party frock with balloon and handbag, the couple in front of their spic and span brick cottage complete with archetypal painted butterfly adornment). These images are joined by seminal landscape shots; an isolated shelter with lambs and a cow staring down a memorial of wars passed. Friedlander has continued to photograph both here and abroad with poignancy and an avoidance of the predictable, to reveal charged and telling emotional spaces.** Another senior New Zealand photographer in the exhibition is MARK ADAMS. He uses an 8 x 10” view camera and whether depicting landscape, people in domestic interiors or monuments, there is a linking thread – an engagement with, as writer and anthropologist Nicholas Thomas so eloquently writes, ‘the deep, artful, bloody and inextricably complicated histories of colonialism in the Pacific’.³ The two works exhibited here are from a series produced from 1978 onwards, of Samoan tattooing, predominantly in Auckland (which is both New Zealand’s largest city and home to the largest of its Pacific Island communities; Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Fijian, Niuean, etc.). The series focuses primarily on the practice of Suluape Paulo, the late, pre-eminent contemporary tatau practitioner. These images confront traditions of colonial and ethnographic photography. ‘For the first time, in any consistent treatment, tattoo ceases to be a disembodied, static spectacle; becoming instead a cultural affirmation on the part of its bearers.’⁴ These photographs are not clinical, they are warm and busy, and the lives represented are real. Beer bottles and cigarettes alert us to how time consuming and physically demanding traditional hand-tattooing is. Blood-stained cushions and rags tell of the very real rite of passage the practice involves. Included in this body of work (but not on display in the exhibition) are images of non-Samoan people who have received tattoos, both in New Zealand and much further afield, bringing into play questions about legitimacy, cultural appropriation, and dilution of cultural significance through distance from initial context and adaptation of forms and processes.⁵ Adams shows us these two contexts without judgment, but the juxtaposition is poignant. **HARVEY BENGE’s ‘Small Anarchies’ (2004–05) plays with image sequencing and contrast. The sixteen portrait images in two long rows of eight can be read as single images or split vertically into four cycles of four. Benge invites us to look, and look again at what we pass through and over as we go about daily life. Living between New Zealand and France, Benge travels widely and predominantly collects images from elsewhere for his shows in New Zealand. This series turns this on its head; his choice of images from New Zealand has been shaped by the knowledge that they will be shown in Europe. There are no glamorous or arche objects, just stuff picked up – flotsam and jetsam, shots taken in the garden and on walks. There are strong autobiographical elements, but the specifics of those are not made explicit to the viewer, nor do they need to be – almost all of these images could come from our own lives; a found dead bird, a baby praying mantis, a stile over which you hurl yourself to move from one paddock to the next (even the most urban of New Zealanders would have had to mount one of these at a beach, nature reserve or farm), the eponymous jandal (flip flop), a battered beer bottle top featuring the four stars of the Southern Cross (a telltale southern hemisphere star constellation). Other images are more universal; the sign showing us its back, the weed with impressive survival skills, the bereft yellow coat hangers. Bringing us back to a specific location is the image of dead wetas – a fearsome looking, but essentially harmless insect native to New Zealand. The remains, collected around a west coast beach, Karekare, are shown just prior to being put back into the 5 x 4” film box used for their storage. The next time the box was opened, one year later, the remains had reverted to a fine powdery dust. This ‘off camera’ episode imbued with a strong sense of memento mori seems fitting for this cycle of works. All are fleeting findings, moments solitary and shared, apart from the image top right – the ceramic head, marked with reflexology/acupuncture points which elude to treatment, to the release of harmful pressures and energy blockages, and to a restorative end which emphasises the beginning of another cycle.** ‘Home Beautiful’ (2005) is a suite of works that explores territory flipside to that of Benge. **INGRID BOBERG is captivated by the mannered (rather than happenstance) collation of objects, colour and texture at play in homes across the world; but in particular in those tableaux that are typified by a sense of anxiety, the desire to ‘get it right’, to express the kind of ‘individuality’ sanctioned by the plethora of house and garden magazines and house makeover television programmes. In her work this drive is crossbred with a strong strain of nostalgia and a fascination with the redemption of kitsch. While always of interiors, there are constant inclusions of depicted nature, of vistas and landscapes – a framed oval sea echoing the table cloth below on which swims a white china swan vase, the barren upright twig, below which sits a stuffed Bambi accompanied by a stag trophy head (frankly, they don’t look like they are getting on). These are silent places, sterile zones where objects sit and hum next to one another, but never collide or argue. Colours – duck egg blue, coral red and mint green – are reminiscent of the late 1950s, a real boom time in New Zealand, when home ownership and the acquisition of ‘luxury’ home items (refrigerators, televisions, lawn mowers, record players) with which to fill these new private spaces became within reach of the majority of the population. These small-scale ‘my house is my castle’ aspirations now seem quaint given the shifting goal posts of aspirational living. The current expectation has been ‘super sized’ – multiple dwellings (primary home, beach house, city bolt-hole), with the fanciest of trappings and furnishings, four-wheel drive top-of-the-range utility vehicles and even larger garages in which to house them. The scale of the current building boom is obscene in comparison with the weatherboard and brick and tile little houses so cherished fifty years ago. **Two other artists in the exhibition, DIENEKE JANSEN and Allan McDonald, mine similar territory, utilising very different visual vocabularies. Jansen makes digital photographic montages, set within the backyards of ex-state houses. Three works, ‘Stage 14’, ‘Stage 16’ and ‘Stage 18’, depict a woman (the artist) in various states of self-improvement and reflection. Often twinned or multiplied, these women occupy rough feral gardens with vegetable patches gone to seed and run-down glasshouses; sites which have never seen a landscape gardener or architect. These women meditate, peruse lifestyle magazines and examine their bodies – on the lookout for redeemable or treatable flaws. They appear out of kilter with their modest surroundings, the assortment of socks, underpants and old towels pegged on the washing line doesn’t chime with their white working clothes or their beaded slippers. We view the gardens and the women as if over a back fence, from an adjoining property. Spying, we catch them unawares in their time of contemplation and betterment. Yet, the picture plane is configured like a platform stage. There is a touch of theatre here. Are these figures in rehearsal for more public transformations? Exposed and uprooted houses – similar to those in Jansen’s constructions, in some form of structure-purgatory, are presented to us in ALLAN MCDONALD’s series ‘Relocations and Demolitions’. They have been, in most cases, stripped naked of their gardens and foundations. Now they sit, propped up on metal drums or bricks. Their porches barely stabilised by crossing timbers. Doors and windows become gaping voids, easily anthropomorphised into mouths and eyes. Yet the lasting impression is the muteness of these buildings. They sit at the outskirts of town, waiting to be relocated, slowly rotting and crumbling. Most will not make it to another site, and if they do, there is no guarantee they will be reclaimed by families. These sturdy timber houses built from the 1940s–60s are no longer fashionable, no longer large enough. Suburban domestic culture has moved on. It is not that everyone in New Zealand is very wealthy; rather, a disproportionate culture of borrowing has developed, supporting a fevered desire for material self-improvement. The idea of many generations of a family living in the same house, on the same plot of land has become quite alien. Accumulation of structure and stuff seems to take prominence over the building of community, over recognising and cherishing connections to the land and to each other. **A remarkable body of work that situates itself at the nexus between land and human occupation is ‘Muttonbirds – part of a story’ by BRUCE CONNEW. Muttonbirds are a migratory species (the sooty shearwater) that travel in their millions each year from the Arctic Circle to small islands at the very south of New Zealand to mate, lay an egg and rear their chick in burrows under the ground. The right to harvest the birds (muttonbirding) is reserved for those within a particular Maori tribe who have a proven birthright to do so. The birds are considered a delicacy and are shared among the tribe and also sold. There are culturally appropriate methods to harvest. Who has the right to harvest has been the subject of intense debate between different tribal factions and has involved many government agencies (including the Department of Conservation, the Maori Land Court and the Police). Even the representation of muttonbirding is contentious and the process for Connew to take and show these works has been somewhat fraught. The knowledge of birding practices is passed down through generations. The images speak of an incredibly demanding task in a harsh environment. Here, a dead and plucked muttonbird awaits collection. Connew has, for the last thirty years, been making work characterised by a driving interest in social issues and the lives of people exposed to conflict and struggle. He has travelled extensively and photographed in New Caledonia, South Africa, Kosovo, Burma and Fiji. ANN SHELTON is another photographer drawn to sites of conflict, trauma and transgression. Within Shelton’s work there is an emphasis on unpopulated places, our attention is directed to the trace or remnant of an event or action. During a recent residency in New Plymouth (a city bordered by the rugged west coast of the North Island on one side and the majestic Mount Taranaki on the other), Shelton discovered a staggering archive of one man’s obsessive information gathering. The museum, Puki Ariki, holds what remains of Frederick Butler’s library. For over sixty years Butler (who was considered at the time to be a local eccentric) clipped articles, advertisements and images from newspapers. He categorised them and pasted them on to the pages of upside down second-hand novels, annotated with their correct classification. Volumes upon volumes accumulated. Puki Ariki has 3,500 clippings books in their collection, the exact number that Butler produced sadly has been lost. He was a rampant collector in other areas too (antiques, china, rugs, photographs and clothing). He died in 1982. Fascinated by Butler’s eclectic vision and his self-appointed role as local archivist, Shelton returned to Puki Ariki to shoot further sections of their holdings. These images recreate the archive life-size, showing us the taxonomy Butler developed. The images continue Shelton’s investigations of place and of trace – Butler’s handiwork is an incredible, highly personalised record of sixty years of a town’s history. The subject headings and dates, the weighting of the volumes towards specific subject areas (crime, Maori and war have substantial holdings, while smaller volumes depict basketball, blood and bowls, Fitzroy motor camp, fluoridation and the gas company) give us clues to Butler’s preoccupations and the pressing concerns of the time. **This idea of the accumulative effect of subjective truths as a way of formulating a sense of what a country and its peoples are all about takes us back to Haruhiko Sameshima’s ‘eco-Tourism’ series. While all the artists in ‘Wonderland’ use very different working methods and employ a range of technical preferences within the medium of photography, they share the desire to formulate some form of visual reckoning that we can recognise ourselves in, warts and all; the good, the bad and the ugly. This is no seamless and picturesque potted history of New Zealand; rather it is a collection of divergent and occasionally overlapping visions which map our rich and volatile culture.************

ENDNOTES

¹ Historian Michael King in *The Penguin History of New Zealand* looks at a range of observations and historical assumptions, concluding that multiple landings of canoes (waka) from East Polynesia occurred in the 13th century. The development of an indigenous culture and society – Te Ao Māori – linked to both ancestry and place, occurred during the 14th and 15th centuries. The first European contact was in December 1642, an expedition led by Abel Janszoon Tasman, which observed Maori and nearby islands and sailed past the ships, but didn’t set foot ashore. The next (more lengthy) contact was led by Lieutenant James Cook, on behalf of the British Royal Navy in 1769, from East Polynesia. Cook’s first visit was followed closely by that of Jean de Surville, a French explorer. Errant whalers, sealers, traders and missionaries started arriving in the late 1790s, setting up small shore stations in the 1820s. Commercial interests became a strong impetus for European settlement and numbers increased steadily through the 1830s and 1840s leading to the beginning of conflict over land use and ownership.

² James Cook undertook three expeditions (and four visits) to New Zealand, with scientists and artists on board to record the land, peoples, flora and fauna. The drawings, journals and samples were archived and returned to Britain.

³ Nicholas Thomas, ‘Mark Adams’, *Contemporary New Zealand Photography*, Auckland, New Zealand, 2005, p.136

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.137

⁵ There is an image in this series 22.11.2000 ‘Authentic Tribal Arts’, Spiegegracht, Amsterdam, Michel Thieme. Tufuga Ta Tatau: Suluape Paulo II where a young white man with full legs, buttock and torso tattoos – joined by other different ethnographic tattoo styles across his arms, shoulder, lower legs and chest, stands, legs apart, looking straight at the camera. He wields a wooden weapon and wears a loincloth of printed Pacific pattern (it looks like a Fijian tapa pattern). Surrounding him are masks, statues, paddles, weapons and ceremonial objects from a range of cultures, neatly laid out for study, spot lit by halogens, he shows us himself and his collection. This is a million miles away from the Auckland lounges of a Samoan family. The tension between the two sites is immense and uncomfortable.

