

# The Gendered Lens

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Curators – Vanessa Jones & Lisa Wilkie

We all see the world through a gendered lens. Our experiences of the everyday are continually mediated by our gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious and political beliefs, cultural affiliations. We operate within a matrix of social practices and reproduce these same practices day after day, creating and re-creating a dominant narrative that we may not recognise as oppressive or inequitable. The photography in *The Gendered Lens* seeks to not only make visible other narratives but to resist and subvert hegemonic ways of being.

According to theorist Judith Butler, genders “can neither be true nor false, neither real or apparent”: gender is instead ‘performed’ in space and over time.<sup>1</sup> This performance references normative socio-cultural constructions, which construe gender as discrete, stable and (more often than not) binary. Butler argues that gender performances that do not conform to dominant social narratives may be punished and reviled, yet reveal the potential for resistance to and subversion of the normative cultural field.

The seven photographers whose work has been brought together in *The Gendered Lens* use their art practices to destabilise and disrupt embedded ways of seeing. The visual spaces they create provide viewers with the opportunity to analyse and challenge the status quo: they “bring light to power relations”.<sup>2</sup>

*The Gendered Lens* may be considered more prismatic than lens-like; rather than focussing on a single issue, it examines how multiple discourses intersect and overlap with one another. Three of these will be investigated in more detail here: constructions of place and time, the creation of the Other, performance of gender.

## Out of Place, Out of Time

Photography might be thought of as evidential proof of having been in a certain place at a certain moment in time, something Barthes calls the awareness of “*having-been there*”<sup>3</sup>. At the same time however, a photograph poses a paradox in that it is at once here in the present, but is also proof of an actual past moment. Space and time are elided between the here-and-now and the there-and-then, and the fluidity of this elision provides moments where disruption of the normative is possible.

Dutch immigrant Ans Westra occupies a position as both insider and outsider and has documented New Zealand’s private and public spaces for over 40 years. Her photographs are tied explicitly to a place and time and at first glance seem to depict a ‘slice of history’. Westra’s images however, are much more complex than they appear. Her choice of who and what to include (and exclude) within the frame

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal* 40, No. 4 (1988): 519-531.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault. “The Subject and Power”. *Critical Inquiry*, 8, No. 4 (1982): 777-795.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image”, in *Image Music Text*, selec. & trans. Stephen Heath. (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 32-51.

of her lens establishes a space where alternative discourses may take form and dominant narratives of class, race, or gender might be destabilised.

Westra invites us to consider who is occupying public space and how they do so. Through her shutter, the re-painting of a strip club mural becomes an exploration of a multi-generational male gaze and the power it has to objectify and commodify the (passive) female body. In Westra's image of anti-pornography protestors however, women fill the frame. They are agentic subjects whose occupation of physical, public, and political space disrupts traditional patriarchal power structures, while their age, androgyny, and uniform subverts binary and culturally restricted gender constructions.



l: Ans Westra. *Repainting the exterior of the Purple Onion striptease club after a fire, Vivian Street, Wellington* (1974)  
r: Ans Westra. *Women against pornography, demonstration outside Cinema Wellington* (1984)

Liminal spaces are also explored and re-created in the works of Anne Noble and Yuki Kihara. Noble's *Antarctica* series takes the viewer to the literal end of the earth, and Kihara's *Where do we come from...* series examines the enmeshed narratives in selected Samoan sites. Their photographs are embedded not only with the singular instances of *having-been-there*, but also with longer human and environmental histories.

Exploration of the ends of the Earth was an exercise in man's desire to confront, control, and colonise a wilderness beyond the limits of normal human existence. The concomitant documentation is evidence of a discursive colonisation by the male gaze. Noble's *Bitch in Slippers* should be considered within a larger schema of Antarctic imagery, which the artist links with narratives of British imperial expansionism and the "enduring legacy of the heroic age"<sup>4</sup> (it is worth noting that the discourse of the heroic seldom touches on heroines).

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Noble, "Bitch in Slippers" in *Broken: Environmental Photography*. (Art and Theory, 2014), 131-136.



Anne Noble. *Piss Poles, Antarctica, Aurina #1* (2008)

The implicitly masculinised nature of the Antarctic landscape is wryly captured by Noble in *Piss Poles*, which depict a literal marking of territory, one where the ease of use is maximised for male modern-day 'heroes'. If, as Foucault suggests, visibility is essential to power<sup>5</sup>, Noble's observations deconstruct the political and cultural power relations that have created a mythologised Antarctic. The landscape Noble portrays is not a sublime wilderness to be conquered and claimed, but one sporting the mundane necessities of day-to-day life on the frozen continent. Like heroines, public pissing spots rarely feature in epics.

By inserting herself into her *Where do we come from...* photographs as the black-gowned, Victorian-era Salome, Yuki Kihara occupies the space between artist and subject, disrupting constructions of time and place - contradicting Barthes' comment that "the photograph, although it can choose its subject...cannot interfere *within* the object".<sup>6</sup>



Yuki Kihara. *Aquatic Centre, Tuanaimato* (2013)

In character as Victorian-era Salome, Kihara physically occupies the sites she photographs (and therefore, also the photograph). Her presence disrupts the hegemony of sequential time and notions of forward, linear progress. Kihara privileges instead the Samoan concepts of Ta/time and Va/space, where Samoans walk forward into the past while walking back into the future.

Kihara "unpacks the myth"<sup>7</sup> of her country as an untouched Pacific paradise as seen through the eyes of past colonial powers and present-day

tourist photographs. Kihara/Salome does not fulfil the trope of the seductive 'dusky maiden' and the weedy, concrete expanse of the disused Aquatic Centre, funded by Chinese investors, is no South Seas idyll. The artist inhabits an interstitial space from which she bears physical and symbolic witness to the ways in which the effects of colonisation and neo-colonisation continue to shape Samoan socio-political, economic, and religious discourse.

<sup>5</sup> Neve Gordon, "On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault". *Human Studies*, 25 (2002): 125-145.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, "*Rhetoric of the Image*", 158.

<sup>7</sup> Yuki Kihara, Artist's Statement, January 2013.

## Power and Perspective

If Kihara occupies a place out of time and space, Ann Shelton's images of unoccupied rooms in the Salvation Army's former Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Facility on Rotoroa Island suggest a spatio-temporal *dis*-placement. The women who once inhabited these rooms are evoked in Shelton's *Room Room* series by their absence. At one point in time marginalised from their social and cultural everyday, they were also physically re-located to its physical edges. Their existence remains however, as a hidden narrative, hinted at by stained mattresses and ripped wallpaper.



Ann Shelton. *Phoenix block, room #55* (2008)

The convex distortion used by Shelton suggests a peep-hole and the viewer is uncomfortably sited in the position of voyeur. The cell-like interiority of the spaces speaks to Foucauldian concepts of the disciplinary panoptic gaze: the production and re-production of normative, oppressive power relations is made visible by the artist. The viewer is at once made aware of the power they wield as subject and the power to which they themselves are simultaneously subjected to, as object:

"He [sic] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power... he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection".<sup>8</sup>

It dawns on the viewer that it is not only the female patients who have been dislocated to the periphery: as the viewer realises their

complicity in reproducing the power relations that make this possible, they realise too the risk of their own dislocation.

Like Shelton's *Room Room* works, Christine Webster's *Therapies* photographs are also intimate explorations of female physical and psychological vulnerabilities. The images reveal a desolate, anguished beauty, the women in the images wear bruises and pallid skin. They do not directly acknowledge the camera but exhibit a sense of self-possession, as if they know they are being observed. Webster notes that the physical location became for the women "a safe place to experience liberty [...] or hell"<sup>9</sup>, a dichotomy that mirrors Butler's statement that "[g]ender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure".<sup>10</sup> Webster's photographs show bodies that are deliberately exposed or hidden

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault. "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison". In *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 202.

<sup>9</sup> Christine Webster cited in Nina Seja, "Refuge and Ritual Trust" *Art New Zealand* 150 (2014): 73.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 531.

amongst layers of cloth; unveiling, binding and entanglement illustrate visually the socio-cultural field within which these women operate.

With tacit acknowledgement of the traditions of the Romantic landscape, Webster's English countryside recalls the subtle tones and indistinct outlines of Whistler's Nocturnes or the veiled atmosphere of a late Turner painting. *Therapies* places the subjects in, and alongside, a landscape which "is not fecund and burgeoning with amplexness, but instead scarce, bleak and pared back to the essential dirt and mud"<sup>11</sup>. Webster re-imagines the age of the crone, barren in body and pushed to the outskirts of a society driven forward by youth and beauty.



Natalie Robertson *Rock Fishing, Port Awanui (2 of 4)* (2014)



Christine Webster *Therapies 4 (vii)* (2013)

Natalie Robertson's landscape photographs seem a world away from Shelton's *Room Room* interiors. From a distance the suite of *Port Awanui* works appear to be colour field studies; upon approaching, sea and sky materialise from the tonal greys and blues and as the viewer moves closer still, human figures appear in the centre of the images. Robertson has focussed on fluid, shifting spaces – in this case the physical intertidal regions between the sea and the land, the inconstant visual boundary of the horizon, the politically contested foreshore and seabed. The photographs capture not only Barthes' concept of the photographic image as a transitory moment which possesses simultaneously a past/present/future<sup>12</sup> but the whakatauki "*Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*" - I walk backwards into the future.

By privileging a Māori socio-cultural perspective in her practice, Robertson brings to light Māori knowledges and narratives subjugated in a colonised Aotearoa. Organic connections with place reverberate throughout whakapapa (genealogy) and whanaungatanga (kinship), and the literal and figurative sedimentation of land/whenua within Māori identity is evidenced in the linguistic iterations of

Māori society: whenua is both land and placenta; iwi can mean tribe or bone; hapū, sub-tribe or pregnancy; whānau signifies both family and womb. In Robertson's images the human figures are barely distinguishable from the land, sea, or sky; the men and woman in the photographs do not dominate their environment but are rather an integral part of it: consider in contrast the physical inscriptions of human power on the Antarctic landscape seen in Anne Noble's works. The images reveal

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<sup>11</sup> Christine Webster, Artist's Statement, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill & Wang 1980).

an alternate discursive terrain to the totalitarianising and individualising power of the modern Western state. The people are literally *tangata whenua* – both *from* the land and *of* it – and by resiting the locus of power relations, Roberston is able to oppose and refuse those forms of power which subjugate, dominate and that “imposes a law of truth on him [sic] which he must recognise”.<sup>13</sup>

### Who’s Looking at Whom?



Lisa Reihana *Diva* (2007)

Bedecked with crystals and silk, Lisa Reihana’s *Diva* challenges the traditional Māori conventions of ancestral visual narratives. From Reihana’s *Digital Marae* body of works, the portrait is lush with dense, saturated blacks, an array of textures, and a sinuous – and sensual – composition. Reihana nods to centuries of Western depictions of the Annunciation: here the glowing face of a modern-day, Māori Madonna stretches out her hand to receive the Holy Spirit – here a tui rather than an Italianate dove. The work’s title derives from the Italian *divina* (divine) and features takatapui (transgender) singer Ramon Te Wake.<sup>14</sup> It is one of two takatapui portraits Reihana created to reinforce the inclusiveness of her digital marae-space. The artist deliberately transgresses cultural boundaries in order to re-write mytho-histories for the changing discursive spaces of contemporary Māori cultures.

Reihana does not anchor the worlds of *Digital Marae* and *Pelt* in time or space. The fluid identities of her portrait subjects enable them to narrate stories of the past, inhabit those of the present, and presage those yet to be told.

Reihana’s *Pelt* series establishes spaces which exist somewhere and nowhere, the inhabitants of which seem of this world but also apart from it. The artist’s balancing of the familiar and the strange has the effect of drawing in and repelling the viewer: unnervingly beautiful, the longer the works are looked at, the harder it becomes to drag the gaze away. Like *Diva*, the subjects of *Pelt* control the discourse and reconfigure pre-conceptions of gender, sexuality, aesthetics, representation. Reihana has deliberately de-eroticised the naked female body and added to it animal elements of plumage and pelt, which introduce textural and visual contrast to the images as well as re-creating the women as chimeric, unsettling figures.

In a similar manner, Yuki Kihara’s *Black Velvet* and *Samoan Savage* series deliberately manipulates the erotic gaze and asks viewers to consider who has been re-packaged as an exotic Other. In *Maui Descending a Staircase (After Duchamp)*

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “Subject and Power”, 781.

<sup>14</sup> Megan Tamati-Quennell. “Extending the Whanau: Lisa Reihana’s *Digital Marae*”. *Art New Zealand* 123 (2008): 55.

the 'savage' commands the voyeuristic stare of the viewer and in doing so confronts the fetishisation of Pasifika peoples as sexually available bodies for general (Western) consumption. Kihara explores the intersections of race, politics, and social power relations and the way they constitute identity; her critiques articulate a space in which the identity of the Other becomes a question of perspective and the Savage asks who is civilised.



Yuki Kihara *Sina ma Tuna/Sina and her Eel* (2003)

In the *Black Velvet* series the artist is photographed as various characters from Samoan mythology. *Sina ma Tuna/Sina and Her Eel* tells the story of Sina and her eel lover, Tuna. After Tuna's death she cuts off and buries his head, from which the first coconut tree grows. In this work, Sina/Kihara is framed not only by the hibiscus flowers in her hair, but by the dead eel and its blood running down her arm. The visual metaphors of (sexually dominant) maiden and (bleeding, regenerative) phallus are *embodied* within a single framework, establishing a dissonance within normative binary gender configurations.

Kihara's interrogation of the gaze and the asymmetrical power relations it establishes between the viewer and the viewed is further underscored should the viewer realise that the artist herself is fa'afafine, which she describes as a 'third-sex' identity. In the Samoan context explains Kihara, harmony is found through dual male/female energies and those who identify as third-sex are able to live in the *va* or space between men and women.<sup>15</sup> She re-represents this liminal space as an agon, a space where narratives may be articulated and challenged, and where the resulting conflict may generate radical forms of pluralism.

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<sup>15</sup> Erika Wolf, "Shigeyuki Kihara's *Fa'afafine*; *In a Manner of a Woman*: The Photographic Theater of Cross-Cultural Encounter", *Pacific Arts* 10, No.2 (2011): 26.