

power-plants: Ann Shelton's *the missionaries*

Uprooting the entangled histories of plants, colonisation and feminism in Aotearoa New Zealand, the botanical subjects of Ann Shelton's *the missionaries* reveal histories complex, conflicted and mobile. The photogenic ambassadors pictured here are introduced species sent out by settlers in order to remake Aotearoa into a familiar place: plants as envoys without clear knowledge of the impact of their arrival, colonists without a game plan.

Plants and seeds were brought by European and other immigrants for a variety of reasons: utilitarian, aesthetic, cultural, philanthropic, nostalgic, accidental. Some were stowaways, others intended as biological control.^[1] Some were brought by early missionaries prior to organised colonisation. Among an array of introduced species the implantation of blackberry, macrocarpa, gorse, broom, dock, wattle and pine left Aotearoa's ecology forever altered. They displaced native species in an open and ongoing experiment whose outcomes are still unfolding.

Border control as we know it did not exist. Pamphlets were produced informing immigrants how to effectively transport their specimens, and settlers went to elaborate ends to preserve them on long journeys across the seas. Some species did not survive the transplant, while many perished in their new host environment. The world, it appears, was a much wilder place.

Biosecurity's current position in the media spotlight reminds us of its ongoing centrality to New Zealand's environment, economy and identity. Recent plant and animal disease outbreaks requiring large-scale government intervention are a genuine concern for the country's long-term stability. This is a reality compounded by our already degraded ecology – a condition that is increasingly apparent. And yet we feel forced to continue to sell images of our environment which we no longer believe in. Shelton draws attention to photography's history as a colonising device, suggesting that idealised tourist-friendly imagery is the continued manifestation of the imperial project. Analogies can also be made with the collection and dispersion of botanical samples – historically the domain of male-dominated colonial exploration – with unpredictable results.

In this context Shelton might suggest we are in need of some biophilia. Her photographs imagine plants as unique female protagonists inhabiting these colonial landscapes, with titles such as *The Dowager*, *The Banshee*, *The Debutante*, *The Landgirl*, *The Governess*, *The Housekeeper*, *The Seamstress*, *The Suffragette*. Botanical epitaphs to women on a mission. As empowered feminised models in highly staged plant portraits, their carefully positioned bodies appear to strike elegant poses for the camera. They may be new in town but Shelton's power-plants aren't camera shy.

Intersectional feminism asserts that identity politics and power relations – particularly those relating to displacement and marginalisation – are more accurately understood as informed and influenced by a complex web of interwoven factors. Within this suite of photographs, the intersection of colonisation and feminism establishes a quiet yet potent reimagining of postcolonial tensions in Aotearoa, just as the plants themselves bear mute witness to history.

the missionaries borrows from western traditions of floristry, extending the visual language and context of Shelton's series *jane says*. First released within *Dark Matter*, her recent Auckland Art Gallery touring survey exhibition, *jane says* examined rich yet suppressed histories of plants used by women as ancient medicines to assist with

reproductive health or birth control. Across the globe women's reproductive rights are still a political issue.

jane says referenced the eastern style of floristry promoted by *Ikebana International* magazine – particularly in its heyday in the 1970s – complete with prominent studio lighting, minimalist composition and a palette of saturated backdrops. In doing so Shelton also drew attention to the ways in which the creative practices of women have been aesthetically and culturally positioned, along with feminist movements prominent during this period.

the missionaries reflects consistent concerns, yet its temporal and spatial investigation pulls focus. In his book *The Radicant*, French curator and theorist Nicholas Bourriaud adopts a botanical metaphor to describe strains of contemporary art practice operating in increasingly globalised geopolitical networks:^[2] Shelton's project can be seen as a kind of vine, growing ever outwards and upwards in search of new light.

True to its name *the missionaries* embeds new roots in an expanded field grounded in a critique of the colonial project. Its focus: the early waves of botanical immigration which transformed the landscapes of Aotearoa and ruptured the ecological systems used by Māori. At two ends of a continuum, Shelton's project looks backwards, yet it also addresses the consequences of these plant interventions in our present situation.

Just as waves of British immigrants were arriving in Aotearoa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain rebutted rising industrialism with an emphasis on the value of craft. Shelton connects its values and its resurgence of making with the pioneering spirit of industrious immigrants. The palette of the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly in the work of its primary proponent William Morris, is evident in the musty monochromes of Shelton's studio backdrops and the green hand-painted picture frames.

This palette is extended in the exhibition by a wall painted in a pastel hue, invoking a domestic interior and faintly reminiscent of a European's skin tone. This domestic setting is echoed in the subject of floral arrangement – traditionally practised by women, considered as craft and relegated to the domestic realm. The artist however celebrates these practices and places, reframing them in a contemporary critical context which problematises conceptions and asks the viewer to consider alternative perspectives.

The gallery context invites further associations of plants on public display, from floristry for ritual occasions to the functions of civic and botanic gardens, prompting a re-examination of the aestheticising relationship we have with plants. Cassandra Barnett describes this operation in Shelton's work as articulating a tension between seductive surface visuality and its dark depths, between control and the uncontrollable.^[3]

Within a contemporary art context the plants can also be seen to operate as sculptural material which the artist rearranges and re-presents. The carefully selected vases were sourced by the artist. Many are from the 1920s and are characterised by relief ornamentation and a restrained naturalistic palette, reflecting the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The photographic enlargement of these domestically scaled sculptures is closer to the size of a human body, imbuing them with a more personified quality reinforced by their low hang on the wall. *The Dowager*, a widow with a title and property derived from her late husband, is embodied by spiky *Pinus radiata*, a dominant species planted in orderly rows which blanket much of the country. A

cornerstone of New Zealand forestry, the imbalance prompted by its large-scale monocultural planting threatens the biodiversity crucial to our environmental sustainability. She appears to be too popular.

In Irish legend a banshee is a female spirit whose wailing warns of a death in the house. Here she materialises as golden wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*), a native of southeast Australia which was made that country's official floral emblem in 1988 and featured on its postal stamps. In New Zealand the golden wattle was originally planted for firewood or to provide fast-growing shelter, but is now considered a weed.

The Suffragette appears as a sprig of young blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*) complemented by a native leather fern (*Rumohra adiantiformis*) and Japanese andromeda (*Pieris japonica*), the cascading white bell-shaped flowers of which are often used in wedding bouquets. The politics of desire – both sexual desire and the longing for public and private freedoms during this highly patriarchal period – are placed front and centre here, the glass bead on the side of the vase resembling an eye which meets the viewer's gaze. The blackberry was brought over to make blackberry pies with clotted cream – a favourite British staple – yet, protected by its armoury of thorns, escaped into the wilderness.^[4] One might also imagine the thorny response the suffragettes first received in their protests for civil rights, but try getting rid of a blackberry bush.

Waves of early immigration to Aotearoa produced garden runaways which upset the delicate ecological balance of these remote islands evolved in relative isolation over millennia. It is fitting then that Shelton should also describe this suite of works as *bouquet garni*, a French term for a group of herbs bound with string and used to flavour soups and stocks: in this light, *the missionaries* may be experienced as full of sustenance and rich contrasting flavours, yet with a complex and potentially bittersweet aftertaste.

– Emil McAvoy

[1] Joan Druett, *Exotic Intruders: The Introduction of Plants and Animals into New Zealand*, Heinemann, Auckland, 1983, p 224.

[2] Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York, 2009.

[3] Cassandra Barnett, 'Ways of Loving: A Conversation Between Ann Shelton and Cassandra Barnett, 20 May 2016', in *Dark Matter: Ann Shelton*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, 2016, p 38.

[4] Massey University, 'Blackberry', in *Weeds Database*, <https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/learning/colleges/college-of-sciences/clinics-and-services/weeds-database/blackberry.cfm>

